CONTENTS

2 Preface
   Geir Haraldseth

4 Introduction
   Michael Birchall

8 Good
   Marc James Léger

18 Towards an Anthropological Practice
   HAIKing as Research and (Post-) Artistic Practice
   Charlotte Bik Bandlien

31 The collective Bad
   Gregory Sholette

40 A Dialogical Aesthetic?: On Form and Social Practice
   Harry Weeks
Collective Good is complicated. Especially when it comes to art, which has a history of individual men, and a few women, who have been singled out as heroes, and the occasional heroine. In contemporary society, the heroes are still here, but there is a greater understanding of the context in which an artwork is seen and distributed, an exhibition is compiled and mediated, or an artist is working in. This book highlights how one institution has dealt with the collective, as a starting point for thinking differently about the institution’s function in society, and what possible good it can do.

Even though the topic is complicated, this book has just two halves. Our thick red friend tells the story of Rogaland Kunstsenter over the span of four years, through selected exhibitions, events and other programming that feed into this narrative. The list of exhibitions and events is not exhaustive; a selection has been made, which leaves the individual heroes and their solo exhibitions by the wayside for a moment. This programme has been loosely featured under the umbrella of Collective Good/Collaborative Effort, an effort to examine collective artistic processes and to see how a contemporary art institution can work in order to achieve a collective good.

Our skinny green friend is an alien to the institution, an attempt to grasp some of the complexities in the discussion around the collective good by inviting authors to fill in some of the blanks outside the projects that happened at the Kunstsenter. Together these two volumes form a vision of the Kunstsenter and its contribution to different collectives, whether that be the artists’ unions, which formed the Kunstsenter 40 years ago, the city of Stavanger, which hosts the Kunstsenter, or the region of Rogaland. And how does this institution fit in to the art world at large; a world that voraciously devours anything deemed valuable in its path and makes it part of its market?

Rogaland Kunstsenter was founded in 1978 as a collective vision by the artists in the region. The artists needed a space to show their work, meet, organise and network. This vision can be seen in light of the actions of 1974, when Norwegian artists united to secure a greater investment from the state to improve the artists’ economies and their standing in society. Artists proved they were stronger together and the national artists’ unions in Norway are still responsible for securing the financial privileges that the social democratic state offers its artists. Similar organisations to the Kunstsenter in Rogaland popped up around the same time, and nowadays there are 15 kunstsenters all over Norway. This mirrored the emergence of artist-run spaces in Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s. Collective work has been the founding principle of the Kunstsenter, and it makes sense to retrace some steps from the counter cultural movements and the collective agency of the 1960s to today.

In this myriad of possible collaborations, forms and desires, the commissioned texts in this book, commissioned for the publication by my co-editor Michael Birchall, and one selection from previously published material, together with the documentation in the red book, provide a case study for this institution. Collective Good, Collaborative Efforts, the programme featured in these two volumes, and the volumes themselves, have been supported by the Arts Council Norway. Our supporters, Stavanger kommune and Rogaland Fylkeskommune, are greatly appreciated as we move through the years with new ideas and attempts to be seen, and also remain experimental and relevant. Stavanger kommune has also contributed generously to the making of this book. I would also like to thank the staff at the Kunstsenter, Torunn Larsen, Kristel Talv, and Lisa Hognestad, our interns, Anna Tuvike, Juste Druskinienė, Ananda Sernø, and Alen Ksoll, and our partners BKFR and NKVN-R. The book is designed by Bjørnar Pedersen and Morteza Vaseghi, another exciting collaboration. This is a Collaborative Effort.
One of the reasons why new models of collaborative practices have come to play such a significant cultural role is its revived engagement with questions, out of philosophy and ethnography, concerning the role of the representor in a world of abiding inequality between those represented and those doing the representing. As Hal Foster acknowledged in the 1990s, the artist-as-representor working in a given locale or community, easily internalises the role of the ethnographer in a desire to explain what he or she sees and experiences, just as, by extension, the curator embedded in given sites, as a socially transformative agent, is susceptible to going ‘native’, so to speak, by speaking in the language and idiom of those with whom he or she is working. This can be observed in the practices at the Rogaland Kunstsenter and the Collective Good programme, whereby a range of social and collective practices manifested in a given locale over a four-year period. However, this is why the ‘social turn’ in art may have been re-imagined through various taxonomies, of relational art, post-relational art, community art, and participatory art, but the same questions surrounding the power-relations of representation have remained immanent to practice.

The delegate is thus the signifier of a referential community, constituency, or party— in this publication, 2017. Thus, in the light of the debate between Deleuze and Foucault on representation on representation and anti-representationalism in 1972, there are still issues that need to be confronted about how and under what conditions the artist or curator speaks, in relation to the art practices of today. How might the socially engaged artist avoid or undermine the tendency of the artist-activist, the artist-collaborator and increasingly the socially engaged curator to seek to speak in the same manner as those they seek to represent? Throughout the essays presented in this publication these issues are questioned and debated, and can be read in relation to the Collective Good programme, particularly in how a collective range of practices can coexist in the context of a kunstsenter.

Grant Kester extends this form of argument with reference to Pierre Bourdieu. Under these conditions a ‘problematic relationship’— pertains between a given community and the ‘delegate’ who chooses or is chosen to speak on its behalf. He goes on to say, ‘This relationship is conceived in terms of a kind of political semiotics. The delegate is thus the signifier of a referential community, constituency, or party—in political negotiations the delegate ‘stands for’ the absent community (as Bourdieu writes the delegate functions ‘as a sign in place of the totality of the group’).’ Bourdieu views this as challenging the naturalness of the signifying relationship between a delegate— in this case the artist— who chooses to speak on behalf of the community. Despite the social limitations of this notion of ‘sociability’, Bourdieu’s Relational Aesthetics since the late 1990s has had an impact on any artwork that appears to include any social dimension. These practices, invariably, differ enormously from Bourdieu’s initial theory, for example off-site projects, pedagogical projects, neo-activist strategies and art/architecture collaborative groups. Art institutions— galleries, museums, kunsthalle— is more situated as sites of viewing and consumption for the art going public, but increasingly these centres are becoming sites of production, in the form of collaborative practices. This is evident in the experimental summer school programme at Rogaland Kunstsenter, and through
the manifestation of the exhibition programme. The Kunstsenter becomes part of the production process, instead of merely exhibiting finalised works. This is how Alfred Barr considered the art museum in the 1930s as a “laboratory, in its experiments, (where) the public is invited to participate.” The new knowledge-worker may operate in a system that is beyond the factory model, yet, museums wish to replace this model as a site of activity, and ultimately production. It is in this field where we begin to see presentations of artist providing services to the local community; generating projects about the local context, and create opportunities for non-artists to learn.

Socially engaged artists may produce projects for their local communities in the form of practical services, such as libraries, baking courses, community gardens, and choirs. As an extension of this curators become part of this dialogue by inviting artists into their institutions to produce such projects as they realise the generative effect they have on providing a service to the local community. Thus, the rationale for a summer school programme in Stavanger enabled a dialogue between the local artistic audience and visiting artists who would promote a series of projects and activities and encourage debate on contemporary art and art education. Although these practices may begin on a local level, it becomes necessary for curators to expand this into global concerns.6 At the other end of the spectrum, the art market, the fairs, exhibits, and galleries that present the same sort of contemporary art, in places such as New York, London, Berlin and Zurich, has to some degree been able to capture some of the ‘do-good’ mentality within which socially engaged art operates. This takes the form of short-term events, one-off evenings or happenings that take place within galleries – or sometimes nearby – offering visitors a unique experience. Yet, these projects have little social value beyond the art world; they co-exist in the system of art as small pockets of activity to increase the galleries’ stake in the art world.

The essays included in this publication capture four distinct areas in which collaborative practices are situated beyond Rogaland Kunstsenter: instructional practice (Charlotte Bik Bandlien), art activism (Gregory Sholette), art education (Marc James Léger), and the relationship collaborative practices have with anthropology (Charlotte Bik Bandlien). These contributions form the basis of a conversation about collaboration, in extension of the Collective Good projects initiated at the Kunstsenter between 2013 and 2016.

The ‘social turn in art’ has enabled a variety of practices to emerge that are largely dependent on the project-based model, that is largely devoid of the art object. However, as Weeks observes, “a recognisable and legible lexicon of material forms has now emerged to serve as signifiers of the social intentions: from the ubiquitous use of plywood, to the widespread orientation of projects around the garden and the kitchen.” Throughout his essay a dialogical aesthetic is traced and analysed, with particular emphasis on the institutionalisation of these practices. As discussed in the preface by Haraldseth, the methods and mechanisms for collaboration in art have existed largely since the 1960s with collectives such as Group Material. This is, in part, due to a shift in cultural production which has emerged out of public art, community art and latterly, relational aesthetics in the 1980s and 1990s. As Léger rightly points out, the recent art activism – social practice of the 2000s – corresponds to a new set of social, economic and political conditions of precarisation and flexibility, particularly with regards to the new models of privatisation of post-Fordist globalisation. Of particular note is the role of the artist who under these conditions becomes a model of flexible work in today’s knowledge economy.

Unlike other areas of the cultural sector, it is predominantly in the visual arts where a preoccupation exist with artistic labour and in particular the autonomy of the figure of the artist. As Sholette observes, “social practice art, which is dependent on the collapse of traditional artistic autonomy and the full-on aestheticisation of society, exists in an arena where it might have a ‘utilitarian ethos that spurred individual acts of expression, or avant-garde efforts at shocking its audience, while favouring instead practices that involve cooperation, group conversation, and efforts to remedy social ailments.” Thus, Sholette considers the role of the artist-activist who may become involved in activities that challenge the technocratic functions of the art world, and beyond.

The final essay in this collection discusses the author’s collaboration with the fashion label HAIKw/, who created a series of multi-faceted conceptual works at the intersection between art and fashion, at the Rogaland Kunstsenter in 2013. Bik Bandlien reflects on epistemological issues related to forms of “interdisciplinary practice” at the intersection between art, design and anthropology, as it is in this arena where methodologies of co-production in collaborative practice are often challenged.

Consequently, collaborative practices and socially engaged art require that artists interact with others in order to produce tangible social outcomes. This has encouraged art activism (Gregory Sholette), art education (Marc James Léger), art activism and relational aesthetics (Léger). As Sholette suggests, “social practice art” may manifest in exhibitions, long-term projects and residencies. Social engagement is defined by its willingness to relate to marginal or oppressed groups on the edge of society. Dialogue and interaction, therefore, are premised on learning from those with whom the artist in dialogue, as adopted by Paulo Freire. This kind of creative interaction and participation is mediated through public institutions such as schools, community centres and housing projects. Ultimately these projects become internally structured around the needs of the community and the participating artists and curators. In Stavanger this has led to the establishment of an Independent Study Programme benefitting the local community of artists, which can work in tandem with already existing programmes at the local art school, the university and the potential Bachelor Degree in Visual Art Practice.
Good. This is what says Grumpy Cat, an overexposed cat meme perhaps but nevertheless the way one might respond to the idea that art is not what it used to be in the postmodern eighties. The end of ideology and meta-narratives proposed by bungee jumping philosophers like Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard reached their breaking point as global humanity returns to eighteenth-century levels of wealth inequality, perpetuates endless wars for regime change and faces mass species extinction. Welcome back the new world of leftist politicalisation and its reactionary aversions. In the art world, things have been shifting for the better since at least the late 1990s, largely in conjunction with the rise of new social movements, anti-globalisation protest and the more recent movements of the squares and occupations.

Collaborative work, cooperation, participation and collectivisation have become recognised ways of working, if not the predominant zeitgeist in the progressive art world since the new millennium. The shift in cultural production has been from the public art, more specifically social or political aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s to the more recent art activism, social practice art and socially engaged art of the 2000s.1 This phase change corresponds roughly to the predominant social, political and economic conditions of precarisation and flexibilisation under the new privatisation regimes and information economy of post-Fordist globalisation. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have argued, the way one might respond to the idea that art is not what it used to be in the postmodern eighties is indexed to biocapitalist integration and social control. It would seem clear enough that collective good and collaborative effort are preferable to their structural opposite: private vice and selfish laziness. Put this way, one might think that we are far from something like Paul Lafargue’s semi-utopian Right to Laziness—or Karl Marx’s promise of communism as a world where one can ‘hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner’ all the while being defined rearguard of these insofar, as Marx says, ‘I have a mind’ – and closer to the bourgeois social and cultural reformism whose concerns have always been for the mindless indigent to lift themselves by their bootstraps as a mercenary force battling for the wealth of nations.2

Of course, socially engaged art, with its focus on social justice, the critique of various forms of oppression and capitalist work conditions, is not the only kind of political art in existence, not to mention the only kind of art. Terry Smith, for instance, considers that socially engaged art is only one of three main tendencies in contemporary art, including relational practices as well as postcolonial trajectories.3 One could also think, for instance, of the kinds of museum art discussed by critics like Nicolas Bourriaud, Charles Esche and Peter Weibel, or the more obscure aspects of aesthetics discussed by philosophers like Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière. As even Marxist aesthetics proposes, art and culture need not be reduced to questions of necessity and social reality. On the other hand, as the Canadian cultural theorist Imre Szeman argues, culture in the era of globalisation is undeniably connected to the neoliberal political project. Globalisation is not postmodernism but a new reality that has little to do with aesthetics. There is no ‘globalist’ cultural formation, he argues, in the way that there was a ‘postmodernist’ one. Rather, globalisation suspends the category of representation that was instrumental to the cultural studies project and compels us to see culture in relation to exchange relations, or to what Gene Ray refers to as UAC (Art Under Capitalism).4

In light of this, and after the world-shaking 2008 banking crisis, artists Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler proposed in their exhibition and catalogue that ‘1 is the political economy, stupid’, paradoxically calling on artists begin to disable capitalist ‘econospeak’.5 Their point is that not culture is reducible to economy, but that economy has become inseparable within the realm of the cultural superstructure. Marxist political economy is thus presented as a first line of defence against neoliberal austerity. The emphasis on social relations of production and mode of production, however, as proposed most forcefully by autonomist Marxism, does not solve all of our problems. Indeed, it is not obvious what kinds of genuine social emancipation can be invented under the conditions of the real subsumption of labour, wherein cultural production is indexed to biocapitalist integration and social control, and would seem to resist any idea of offensive or defensive production or efforts to transform production relations, for the simple reason that collective good and collaborative effort are preferable to their structural opposite: private vice and selfish laziness. Put this way, one might think that we are far from something like Paul Lafargue’s semi-utopian Right to Laziness—or Karl Marx’s promise of communism as a world where one can ‘hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner’ all the while being defined rearguard of these insofar, as Marx says, ‘I have a mind’ — and closer to the bourgeois social and cultural reformism whose concerns have always been for the mindless indigent to lift themselves by their bootstraps as a mercenary force battling for the wealth of nations. Such bourgeois and social democratic ideology have been materialised through the permanent threat of strikes and riots by the exploited classes.6


3. Of course, socially engaged art, with its focus on social justice, the critique of various forms of oppression and capitalist work conditions, is not the only kind of political art in existence, not to mention the only kind of art. Terry Smith, for instance, considers that socially engaged art is only one of three main tendencies in contemporary art, including relational practices as well as postcolonial trajectories. One could also think, for instance, of the kinds of museum art discussed by critics like Nicolas Bourriaud, Charles Esche and Peter Weibel, or the more obscure aspects of aesthetics discussed by philosophers like Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière. As even Marxist aesthetics proposes, art and culture need not be reduced to questions of necessity and social reality. On the other hand, as the Canadian cultural theorist Imre Szeman argues, culture in the era of globalisation is undeniably connected to the neoliberal political project. Globalisation is not postmodernism but a new reality that has little to do with aesthetics. There is no ‘globalist’ cultural formation, he argues, in the way that there was a ‘postmodernist’ one.

4. Rather, globalisation suspends the category of representation that was instrumental to the cultural studies project and compels us to see culture in relation to exchange relations, or to what Gene Ray refers to as UAC (Art Under Capitalism).

5. In light of this, and after the world-shaking 2008 banking crisis, artists Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler proposed in their exhibition and catalogue that ‘1 is the political economy, stupid’, paradoxically calling on artists begin to disable capitalist ‘econospeak’. Their point is that not culture is reducible to economy, but that economy has become inseparable within the realm of the cultural superstructure. Marxist political economy is thus presented as a first line of defence against neoliberal austerity. The emphasis on social relations of production and mode of production, however, as proposed most forcefully by autonomist Marxism, does not solve all of our problems. Indeed, it is not obvious what kinds of genuine social emancipation can be invented under the conditions of the real subsumption of labour, wherein cultural production is indexed to biocapitalist integration and social control, and would seem to resist any idea of offensive or defensive production or efforts to transform production relations, for the simple reason that collective good and collaborative effort are preferable to their structural opposite: private vice and selfish laziness. Put this way, one might think that we are far from something like Paul Lafargue’s semi-utopian Right to Laziness—or Karl Marx’s promise of communism as a world where one can ‘hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner’ all the while being defined rearguard of these insofar, as Marx says, ‘I have a mind’ — and closer to the bourgeois social and cultural reformism whose concerns have always been for the mindless indigent to lift themselves by their bootstraps as a mercenary force battling for the wealth of nations. Such bourgeois and social democratic ideology have been materialised through the permanent threat of strikes and riots by the exploited classes.
In the context of today’s post-Fordist information and culture economy, the new spirit of capitalism is shadowed by the forms of collective action in which the workers, the unemployed, the impoverished and the dispossessed represent the impossibility of social reproduction in conditions of capitalist crisis – or in other words, a kind of evil that must be disciplined and controlled, most often by being treated as individual maladaptation. With this in mind, the critique of the artist’s withdrawal into the traditional habit of individual practice simply accepts as a fait accompli the disengagement of the ‘institution art’, as Peter Bürger defined it, but having done so now confronts the problem of its replacement by an even more demanding and exploitative neoliberal creative industry. Not only do the new collectives and their concerns allow the art system to reinvent itself with projects, symposia and publications, but a more radical step is introduced as Lane Reyra puts it in Your Everyday Art World, 

...the replacement of hierarchical, restrictive, and summarizing models of culture whether spectacular or canonical, with new, more horizontal and networked economies enhanced by better connectivities and intensified control. As a new subject, no longer the individual as distillation essence of a centered culture, whether high culture’s elitist snob or mass culture’s brainwashed couch potato, but rather a more spread-out and decentralized actor, what sociologists studying this new type of subjectivity call the ‘omnivore’.

For Reyra, the new managerial styles and technological infrastructures contribute to new art practices in which singular and isolated objects, events and artists are replaced by the connectivity and distribution of projects, residencies and commissions that are performative, externalised, collective, communicational, networked, as well as from the ‘missing 6th chapter’ of Capital derived from a chapter in Marx’s 1858 Capital, which revolves around Marx’s notion of the real subsumption of labour and the new modes of production since the postwar era. The basic premises of autonomist Marxism are best that comes from individual effort and leave out the worst that comes from romantic notion of “capitalist communism”, see Christian Fuchs, Digital Labour and Kurzform (London: Routledge, 2014).

For a critique of the autonomist notion of “capitalist communism”, see Christian Fuchs, Digital Labour and Kurzform (London: Routledge, 2014).


For Reyla, the new managerial styles and technological infrastructures contribute to new art practices in which singular and isolated objects, events and artists are replaced by the connectivity and distribution of projects, residencies and commissions that are performative, externalised, collective, communicational, networked, as well as from the ‘missing 6th chapter’ of Capital derived from a chapter in Marx’s 1858 Capital, which revolves around Marx’s notion of the real subsumption of labour and the new modes of production since the postwar era. The basic premises of autonomist Marxism are best that comes from individual effort and leave out the worst that comes from romantic notion of “capitalist communism”, see Christian Fuchs, Digital Labour and Kurzform (London: Routledge, 2014).


In order to compensate for this situation in which labour has been replaced by
innovation, capitalism looks to the growth of the tertiary sector, with new services made available in education, culture, leisure, advertising, health, administration, social welfare, and advertising accompanied the rise of new class compositions, from lumpen youth subcultures, gender, racial and sexual minorities to non-communist workers, and advertising.

The social factory, writing: At the highest level of capitalist development social relations become moments of the relations of production, and the whole society becomes an articulation of production. In short, all of society lives as a factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over all of society.24

Notwithstanding the ways in which the autonomists are said to have misinterpreted Marx’s theory of the mass worker, it is a commonplace for autonomists to conclude that the social factory has no use for the individual worker.25 It is easy enough to see how the post-Fordist machine causes people to turn to colectivism, collective, identity groups and gangsterism as ways to gain value within a system that programmatically undermines the worth of individual labour powers. The postwar recomposition of capital away from factory production and towards consumerism is refigured as a mode of production which incorporates “cooperative” humanity as a whole into complex machines. In the capitalist mode of production, the worker’s skill-based autonomy is replaced by management and planning, which consolidates the centrality of machine automation in both large-scale industry and the new service and information economies. Under subsumption, all work is organised according to the needs and rhythms of capital, which come to define social relations. In 1962, the autonomist thinker Mario Tronti formalised the notion of the social factory, writing:

The Art World Strikes Back
By the 2000s neoliberal and creative industries policies had transformed culture in such a way that artists and intellectuals began to reconsiderate their practices in terms of cultural entrepreneurialism. Reacting to neoconservative backlash, they put forward a new cultural politics of representation that struggled according to a mostly suprastructural definition of culture. Today, this entrepreneurial model reaches a limit. Sven Lütticken gives an example of this: the culture of permanent auditing and volunteering in which, in 2013, 1,600 people applied for a cloakroom job at the Rijksmuseum and 19,000 people applied for a few posts as attendants in the Prado.26 I myself reported in 2007 that a job posting at the Art Gallery of Ontario required a community arts facilitator whose portfolio qualifications were practically unlimited but whose employment was to be part-time and temporary.27 Such precarious contracts and project work becomes the norm for people working in what John Roberts refers to as a ‘secondary economy’. Whereas the primary economy involves auction houses, museums and commercial galleries, according to Roberts the secondary economy represents the global political economy of art where the vast majority of artists today labour.28 As with Paul Mason’s idea of the ‘jacobin with a laptop’, or Gregory Sholette’s notion of ‘dark matter’, the secondary economy is created by the rise of underemployment and the widespread availability of new technologies. A newly produced reserve army of educated, amateur, occasional and professional artists now has the potential of becoming the primary economy, mixing their allegiances between aesthetic values and radical political consciousness.

Insofar as people refuse to identify along ideological lines as a class, but rather as a multitude or indigent crowd, revolutionary prospects are replaced by the current forms of collaboration and self-organization like Occupy Wall Street that are comprised of lumpenfreelancers, artists and intellectuals, and rely on a narrow class identification that, in Lütticken’s estimation, organises itself as an assemblage or montage of lumpenfreelancers, a network of new classes and alliances, as opposed to the formalising privatisation of economic capital in the hands of the upper class. Small and informal counter-institutions that are concerned with sustainable forms of interaction are nevertheless operating in a situation in which they exploit themselves to an even higher degree than in the past and act as innovators of an informational primitive accumulation. One example of a tactical break from the inevitability of social factory exploitation is the ‘post-ontological’ art of Strike Debt, as defined and described by the neo-anarchist activist and theorist Yates McKee.29 In his analysis of what he terms the ‘revolutionary struggle’ of Strike Debt, McKee follows Peter Bürger’s well-known formula that the goal of the historical avant-gardes was the sublation of art into life.30 In Strike Debt gatherings, ‘witness testimonies’ and ‘conversion narratives’ describe the shared
experience of crippling student, credit card, health care and mortgage debt. Strike Debt builds an affective space of care against the predatory practices of Wall Street and large banks that is based on mutual concern and that raises the spectre of an invisible Army of Defaulters’ which could act cohesively and against the corruption of moneyped interests, thereby prefiguring noncapitalist social bonds. McKee considers that the work of Strike Debt represents an altogether ‘new’ programme of politicised art.44

Given the fact that such activist work as Strike Debt is being produced on this side of the anti-globalisation movement and after 9/11, the war on terror and a widespread awareness of workerist concepts in the cultural field, one could refer to this kind of practice as not simply ‘activist’, but more complexly as ‘post-political bio-activism’. This point of this kind of grassroots community art is to be effective in real life and not to waste time with too much concern for theory or art world consecration. This effort to escape art and theory into politics is in many ways, a strength, especially for the artists themselves. It is a weakness, however, insofar as this kind of work is limited to what Marx and Engels defined in the nineteenth century as utopian socialism and Proudhonism. One might wonder where the vanguardism comes in exactly if the most effective tactic of Strike Debt has been to make socially progressive use of the debt crisis debt market, an idea put forward by the artist and theorist Alex Gokie.45 For McKee, however, the main innovative principle of postcontemporary art is not the Rolling Jubilee itself – the raising of funds as an example of ‘microtopian’ alternative economies – but the conceptualisation of the artist as an organiser, someone who facilitates assemblies, devises strategies and tactics, designs propaganda, stages performances, delivers workshops, cultivates alliances and administers media platforms.46 None of these practices would, in, and of themselves, be considered artistically relevant if it was not for the fact that, in the case of both Occupy Wall Street and Strike Debt, a large number of organisations also happen to be artists, whose creativity is essential to the movement. Such artists may be supported by institutions, but they take their cues from the new forms of political subjectivity.

To Network or Not to Network

While the leftist cultural world has been trying to shift away from piecemeal activism and attempting to move towards greater organisational capacity, as exemplified by McKee’s studies of Occupy Wall Street and Strike Debt, we have also heard a great deal about the creation of sustainable infrastructures, if not as an alternative to project work, then at least as an alternative to traditional trade unionism and political party organisation. The discussions on organisation as well as leadership have been highly conditioned by the new digital and networked tools of organisation.47 Which seem to be a solution to the impasse of neoliberal deterriorisation but also consistent with it.48 Ignoring here the various proponents of techno-optimism, which more or less conform to the libertarian principles and Cold War logic that built the Internet in the first place, the more critical approaches, whether we are dealing with the work of Steven Shaviro, Tiziana Terranova, Galloway and Thacker, Jodi Dean, Evgeny Morozov, Franco Bera or The Invisible Committee, find that life in the age of networks is not altogether a place of convivial social interaction.49 Cybernetic capitalism sometimes proposes a capitalism from below, as in the 1975 Ten Commandments for a New Economy, for which collective intelligence would preserve biodiversity and multicultural difference, increasing complexity as well as containment. According to Tiqqun, the new ‘third way’ alliance between capitalism and socialism that was developed through cybernetics in the 1970s corresponds to the social regulation ethos of the anti-globalisation movement and biocapitalist protest, with its critique of authority and political representation. They write:

Everywhere there is only horizontality of relations, and participation in projects that are to replace the dusty old hierarchical and bureaucratic authority, counter-power and decentralization that is supposed to defeat monopolies and secrecy. Thus the chains of social interdependence can extend and tighten, chains which are sometimes made of surveillance, and sometimes against which they otherwise propose, not unlike Thacker and Galloway, experimenting alongside cybercapitalism with a panoply of tactics: random manipulation, interference fog, insinuation, redesigning protocols for experimentation, escaping representation, causing panic situations and inefficient collective behaviour,
producing a heterogeneous ensemble of noises, information spamming, bifurcation, non-conforming acts, secrecy as a means to modulate force, luddite sabotage, deliberate slowdown, encounters, extending background interference, establishing zones of opacity, spontaneous subversions and reaching critical mass.

Tiqqu’s ecstatic politics of escape return us to Foucauldian notions of power and resistance, generating a creative chaos they believe will irreversibly disrupt cybernetic equilibrium from within. From a more mundane point of view, one can ask a simple question like whether or not a Bernie Sanders presidency would have been more of an interference to neoliberal hegemony than al-Qaeda or ISIS, who are just as often the beneficiaries of the Pentagon than its ostensible enemy. To consider the collective good, in my estimation, is to address the question of how the left might overcome the false choice between so-called Old Left communist parties and resistant networked anarchism. The recent death of Fidel Castro has caused Salvož Zizek to speculate on what might be possible today for Cuba: to preserve the Communist party regime and make pragmatic concessions to free market capitalism; to follow the Chinese model and make the Communist party responsible for managing a free market system; or to abandon communism altogether. The problem of the left, however, is not simply the problem of the last redoubts of communist party rule, but of all who suffer and resist the depredations of global capitalism. Some consider that capitalism’s productive forces this time will lead to its own demise, as automation and gift economies create irrevocable changes to the way we do things. Leftists say this cannot happen without greater class consciousness and political struggle, insisting that capitalism will inevitably seek ways to recoup surpluses that have been distributed and extend capitalist relations throughout the new spaces of the networked social factory. Artists and art institutions in these circumstances often have the function of humanising and culturalising capitalist transformation. In my view the least that artists and art institutions can do today is be less relational and benignly collaborative and get in touch with their inner Grumpy Cat. Whether as an individual or as a collectivity, and as clichéd as this sounds, this means to challenge the status quo with ideas and practices that can scale up, and prepare the revolutionary forces of tomorrow.
This text’s point of departure is the author’s collaboration with the conceptual fashion label HAiKw/. An exploration of hybrid practices at the intersection of research and artistic practice constitutes the empirical backdrop for theoretical reflections on epistemological issues related to forms of interdisciplinarity at the intersection between art and anthropology. The collaboration also covers theory and practice, and ontological issues related to so-called post-artistic practices – towards an anthropological practice framed as (post-) artistic research.

HAiKw/ consists of Ida Falck Øien, Harald Lunde Helgesen and Siv Støldal, three Norwegian designers who, since establishing their label in 2011, have created multi-faced conceptual works at the intersection between art and fashion. The group draws on a diverse network of artists, scholars, producers, friends and family, who ‘hitchhike’ together, as temporary constellations of collaborative partners. ‘HAiKing’ in the text’s subtitle should thus be understood as a metaphor for the author’s participation in some of these temporary collaborative constellations with HAiKw/.

The title of this text points to the aim of identifying one possible anthropological practice, in the sense of one of several – namely, the author’s own. The aim is neither to outline an anthropological practice that sets a precedent for academic anthropologists of these temporary collaborative constellations with HAiKw/ nor for applied anthropology, nor for those anthropologists who work with art, but rather to point to a position with a distinct — a reconfiguration of artistic practice. The subtitle also alludes to the notion that this hitchhiking with HAiKw/ — lies at the intersection between research and artistic practice, where the collaborative constellation jointly can be said to conduct artistic research. It is further argued that these hybrid practices (in which both HAiKw/ and the author engage) can be understood both through anthropology and as anthropological practice, particularly in light of the post-artistic aspects of this practice.

The term ‘post-artistic practice’ points to ranges of tendencies in the contemporary art field that primarily relate to a renewed interest in, and new expressions of, avant-gardist attempts to integrate art and life. The concept of use or usership, is also central here, being reflected in many initiatives in recent years, for example ‘Useless Uses’ at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm,* ‘Making Use: Life in Post-Artistic Times’ at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw* and the ‘Department of Usership’ at Oslo National Academy of the Arts. Key words for this direction are agency, effect in the everyday world and transgression.

With these key words in mind, it should be clear that the design field – in our case, the critical design field, where agency and effect in the world are integral — has clear links to post-artistic practices. HAiKw/ operates precisely at this intersection: within the field of autonomous art, but first and foremost beyond it, as goods, even consumer goods, and as a brand. Furthermore, the field of design includes anthropology as an integrated part of its theoretical framework, precisely because agency, effect in the world and transgressive practices are anthropology’s speciality.

Over time, art discourse has also absorbed and appropriated anthropological perspectives, as a consequence of the ‘material’ turn in the field of art, the dominance of market logic, and post-artistic attempts, which enable new spaces of opportunity within the field of autonomous art, but first and foremost beyond it, as goods, even consumer goods, and as a brand. Furthermore, the field of design includes anthropology as an integrated part of its theoretical framework, precisely because agency, effect in the world and transgressive practices are anthropology’s speciality.

The reflections presented result from a process of realisation that emerged in the dialectic between theory and practice, between an interdisciplinary theoretical orientation (i.e. contemporary art discourse) and an experience of degrees of overlap between ‘lifeworlds’ (*lebenswelten*) at the intersection between contemporary art and anthropology. Seeking to contribute to tracing such cross-pollications and the frameworks and movements that are their preconditions, this text therefore gives a selected literary overview, where the evaluation of the literature’s relevance is informed by the collaboration with HAiKw/.

*The term ‘post-artistic practice’ points to ranges of tendencies in the contemporary art field that primarily relate to a renewed interest in, and new expressions of, avant-gardist attempts to integrate art and life. The concept of use or usership, is also central here, being reflected in many initiatives in recent years, for example ‘Useless Uses’ at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm,* ‘Making Use: Life in Post-Artistic Times’ at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw* and the ‘Department of Usership’ at Oslo National Academy of the Arts. Key words for this direction are agency, effect in the everyday world and transgression.
Anthropology and Method

The HAiKw/collaboration came about through a shared interest in anthropological methods. The author’s work as an anthropologist has gravitated towards exploring what an anthropological practice can be—or, more precisely, developing new methods for doing anthropology—most recently within art and design. HAiKw’s members, for their part, utilize what they describe as ‘quasi-anthropological and sociological methods’ in their work.

So what exactly is anthropological methodology? Chiefly, it involves fieldwork and participative observation—being personally engaged in a socio-cultural ‘field’ in time and space—a qualitative approach developed to capture contemporary conditions. The demarcation of this field of study is developed simultaneously with the process of identifying which factors prove relevant and hence cannot be done in advance. The anthropological method is therefore abductive, characterised by a love of serendipity or by an ‘intention of the unintended’, as is as the case within several artistic traditions.

The empirical material that is collected results from detailed field notes generating so-called ‘thick descriptions’—a combination of continuous reporting and interpretation. The term ‘ethnography’ points not only to this method, but also to a more finished textual construction of value which called for more transparency and new modes of conducting anthropological research. Contemporary art’s dealings in ethnography, as reflected in Hal Foster’s essay ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, is a reflection of what is known as the ‘ethnographic turn’ in contemporary art, on one hand, and the critical theory and certain artistic traditions, it is nevertheless a matter of critique with an empirical anchoring. Furthermore, the very purpose of anthropology is to enable cultural critique, via researchers situating themselves within contexts different from their own, in order to generate reflexivity in the encounter with their own cultural configurations. While anthropology shares this goal with both critical theory and certain artistic traditions, it is nevertheless a matter of critique from two different angles, and what an anthropological practice can be—what an anthropological practice of the 1990s where scholars tried to go beyond the reductionists of writing culture, as formulated in the seminal book Writing Culture, which called for more transparency and new modes of conducting anthropological research. Contemporary art’s dealings in ethnography, as reflected in Hal Foster’s essay ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, is well-known, in contrast to the representation crisis in anthropology.

Design Theory and Material Culture

CultureWithin design research—which sprang from art history—anthropology was included in what is often termed the ‘second wave’, where production was replaced by consumption as the reigning paradigm. With this, there came recognition of anthropology’s substantial contribution to the field of consumer research.

Anthropology would also be of utmost significance to the ‘third wave’—sometimes referred to as ‘mediation of design’—which sought to understand the social construction of value. (There is, however, still unattapped potential in integrating anthropological concepts with those developed in the fields of design studies and design theory—expansions of the discipline of design history)—that have tried to capture socio-cultural processes by expanding their own concepts—at least in anthropologists’ eyes—out of shape.) Within the domain of what is known as ‘design anthropology’, the critical perspectives described by, for example, Alison J. Clarke are the most relevant in this context, rather than the more applied, user-oriented approaches that are perhaps most often associated with this division of applied anthropology.

The design field needed analysis based on a synthesised theoretical approach precisely because agency and effect in the world were essential for understanding the object of study. These attempts at synthesis have also given birth to a series of forms such as ‘critical cultural studies’, ‘social art history’ and ‘interdisciplinary aesthetics’ or the ‘fashion of art history and material culture studies’—all of which represent nuances of approaches with varying degrees of overlap. Fashion theory is a much newer discipline, established with interdisciplinary as the starting point, separate from the more object-oriented design theory.

There is the feeling that is the moment in which understanding culture, something central to humanity, its past and future, is being achieved at a level beyond anything that had previously been imagined’, wrote the anthropologist Daniel Miller, perhaps the most central figure within so-called ‘material culture studies’. In his subsequent book, of which characterised newer tendencies in the humanities and social sciences was fruitful on several levels:

For art historians, the frameworks of material and visual culture not only enlarge the field of objects but also disrupt long-standing hierarchies of fine and applied arts and bring renewed attention to the material properties of works of art. For anthropologists, the renewal of interest in material culture

16. Represented by theorists such as David Miller, Alain Appelbaid, Pierre Bourdieu and Marc Augé.
18. The social construction of value was the main theme in the author’s thesis. See Charlotte Bik.
19. Production-Consumption-Translation.
20. The social construction of value was the main theme in the author’s thesis. See Charlotte Bik.
21. This stage in the research process is what many people associate with anthropology—that is, anthropology understood as a mere descriptive discipline. Ethnography, however, only forms the starting point for cross-cultural comparison, in which, in turn, gives birth to anthropology—perhaps best understood as philosophy with an empirical anchoring. Furthermore, the very purpose of anthropology is to enable cultural critique, via researchers situating themselves within contexts completely different from their own, in order to generate reflexivity in the encounter with their own cultural configurations. While anthropology shares this goal with both critical theory and certain artistic traditions, it is nevertheless a matter of critique from two different angles, and what an anthropological practice can be—what an anthropological practice of the 1990s where scholars tried to go beyond the reductionists of writing culture, as formulated in the seminal book Writing Culture, which called for more transparency and new modes of conducting anthropological research. Contemporary art’s dealings in ethnography, as reflected in Hal Foster’s essay ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, is well-known, in contrast to the representation crisis in anthropology.
23. The journal Fashion Theory was established in 1997. It’s theme was an intersection between sociology, anthropology, material culture and anthropology.
24. Design theory, of course, essentially covers a much wider range of design than mere ideas.
25. Paradoxically enough, another theoretical tradition focusing on materiality, namely architectural theory, has shown itself to be similar approach—flaunts an interest in cultural aspects of the material. Venturi et al. (1972) should, however, be treated with measured suspicion. They characterised architecture as a ‘metaphor for society’, relying on “Materiality and Cultural Translation”.
26. The discipline includes industry design, cultural anthropology, archaeology, and translation studies.

has led to new theorizations of the anthropology of art and visual anthropology, and supports work on consumption in contemporary societies and critical analyses of museum representation.

The development of theory that expanded the interest in materiality and physicality eventually led towards the affective, and towards sensory and bodily dimensions of knowledge production, reflecting an interest in what Maurice Merleau-Ponty referred to as the ‘pre-reflective’. Those who engage in artistic practice relate to sensations, impulses and emotions in order to translate experiences and interpretations into their works, but what this, in fact, means epistemologically is by no means sufficiently explored.

The anthropologists Paul Rabinow and George E. Marcus, in Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary, argue that through tracing and appropriating the affective terrain which designers and artists traverse, anthropology’s critical potential could be renewed by being more amenable, forward-thinking or speculative. (Speaking of this affective focus, it is also worth mentioning the design theorist Benjamin Bratton, and his prediction that it will be necessary to reconfigure the entire aesthetic concept as it has been developed and understood so far, given that he believes the future will bring entirely new sensory experiences through what is still referred to as virtual reality.)

Theory and Practice

Research by design is a concept introduced in schools of architecture and design, pertaining to that which referred to as artistic research within the art school sector; the development of what can and should be in its infancy. There are numerous despairing about the future of art critical research; the development of what it can and should be is still in its infancy. There are numerous instances of what is referred to as artistic research within the art school sector;

The anthropologists Paul Rabinow and George E. Marcus, in Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary, argue that through tracing and appropriating the affective terrain which designers and artists traverse, anthropology’s critical potential could be renewed by being more amenable, forward-thinking or speculative. (Speaking of this affective focus, it is also worth mentioning the design theorist Benjamin Bratton, and his prediction that it will be necessary to reconfigure the entire aesthetic concept as it has been developed and understood so far, given that he believes the future will bring entirely new sensory experiences through what is still referred to as virtual reality.)

Theory and Practice

Research by design is a concept introduced in schools of architecture and design, pertaining to that which referred to as artistic research within the art school sector; the development of what can and should be in its infancy. There are numerous instances of what is referred to as artistic research within the art school sector;...
anthropology and contemporary art. This anthropologist was invited to participate with her artist collaboration for the exhibition 'Exhibition as Residency', along with six other projects and our project Self Repair was an expansion on the repair concept from HAiKW/RKS.

In HAiKW/RKS, the author was asked to develop the quasi-anthropological method for the planned experiments in Stavanger on the repair of clothing. In line with the material turn and the affective tendencies described above, a brand new methodology from the field of clothing research was employed – a methodology developed to capture the unarticulated, tacit and embodied aspects of people's relationships to their clothing. The operationalisation of the method was both performative and real at the same time, with, amongst other things, structured interviews held at the kunstneter, where the public were invited to bring their own self-repaired garments for registration. Hurum made 'interview furniture' for this part of the project, as well as 'archiving furniture' for the collected data, which supported the performative dimension and added touch of caricatured staged research – referencing both the film Kitchen Stories, (2003) and zeitgeisty archival fetishism.

The ambition for HAiKW/ET was to attempt a more integrated project – inspired by the artist and 'apostate' anthropologist Susan Hiller (who has exhibited her works within the ET-platform) and to study similarities between anthropological and artistic methods – both in terms of using ourselves as 'apparatuses', through participative observation from anthropology, and through artistic interpretation. Over three very intensive days in Chicago, Falk Gilén and the author subjected themselves to various alternative treatments. This 'fieldwork' was then 'transcribed' in the gallery with the aid of watercolour painting – inspired by amateurish art therapy – resulting in more or less abstract representations of the bodily experiences undergone.

Both projects – HAiKW/RKS and HAiKW/ET – were hybrid processes in which participants sought to integrate not only the anthropological and art methodologies, but also different ways of thinking about analysis and representation. HAiKW/RKS unfolded in the context of contemporary art, HAiKW/ET in the context of anthropology. Both projects were organised as exhibition projects, and both were collaborative. Both took the affective and tacit or neo-phenomenological perspective as a starting point, and both were so-called site-specific. While HAiKW/RKS could be seen as a kind of demonstration of the ethnographic turn in contemporary art, HAiKW/ET was closer to a demonstration of the art and design corresponding to the intersection between anthropology and contemporary art. The juggling of perspectives felt like a constant changing of spectacles, each with a different lens, while attempting to safeguard clear vision. But what is a valid path to insight? And what is it interesting to know something about? When and for whom and in what way? How important is it that collaborators see the same thing in the same way? To experience degrees of overlap involves both frustration and small steps of reconfiguration: of new 'life worlds' opening up.

In his article 'Towards a New Hermeneutics of Art and Anthropology', Ård Schøning discusses the concept of the avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s – and to Paul Ricœur’s perspectives on hermeneutics and anthropology that Schøning believes can be beneficial when discussing how contemporary art and anthropology have appropriated each other’s methods. Schöning summarises Ricœur as follows: “It’s its function does not mean taking simple possession of the other. To the contrary, the term’s history in the first instance to dispossess oneself of the narcissistic ego, in order to engender a new self-understanding, not a mere congeniality with the other. Schôning claims that a successful integrated practice at the intersection between disciplines must be established carefully and dialektically from project to project. Only then can new epistemological horizons be possible. This parallels Rit Rogoff’s notion of criticality, in contrast to critique: Critically as I perceive it is precisely in the operations of recognising the limitations of one’s thoughts for one does not learn something new until one unlearns something old, otherwise one is simply adding information rather than rethinking a structure.
Critical and Speculative Design

The term ‘critical design’ often appears in connection with projects at the intersection between art and design. The term was popularised by Dunne & Raby in the late 1990s and represents an approach to design via critical theory.46 (Design as critique, however, did not arise with the term; the Italian Radical Design-wave in the 1960s and 1970s exemplifies a design-critical approach to both reigning social values as well as to design ideologies.)47 Critical design must not be confused with socially oriented design, though, as critical design, for its part, advocates that design has possibilities extending beyond merely solving problems. Critical design instead uses fictive design suggestions, in order to challenge ideas about social, cultural or political paradigms. The Norwegian artist Matias Faldbakken commented on this millennial phenomenon in his 2001 novel Cocka Hola Company:

...the fucking design has become an educator now all of a sudden, and the fucking designer-cunts talk about morals and love and humanity, and I don't fucking know what kind of smut they're not talking about, and it naturally leads to what's even worse, and that is that the fucking cunt-heads who are trying to follow the modernist model of critique from the outside as critique was the hottest ideology.)

It is useful to think about HAiKw/ within a ‘both-and’ interpretive framework, that is, a kind with a kind of duality. This duality is perhaps most obviously found in the aforementioned artist collective Bernadette Corporation. Established in 1994 in the midst of the critical theory wave, they, in contrast to many of their contemporaries, chose a kind of imploding strategy for criticism: …it made no sense for BC in the 1990s to follow the modernist model of critique from the outside as critique was the hottest commodity going; BC began modelling itself after the secret stars of business – the producers, agents and captains of the worldwide image machines.48 The art writer and theorist Stephen has been developing a new vocabulary suitable for capturing the many post-artistic attempts that have emerged, and in fact written a lexicon presented as a ‘hot-or-not’ list of terms and concepts, which judges their relevance in light of these new movements. Among the relevant terms on his list are so-called 1:1 practices, explained as follows:

1:1-Scale-Practice

It is useful to think about HAiKw/ within a ‘both-and’ interpretive framework, that is, a kind with a kind of duality. This duality is perhaps most obviously found in the aforementioned artist collective Bernadette Corporation. Established in 1994 in the midst of the critical theory wave, they, in contrast to many of their contemporaries, chose a kind of imploding strategy for criticism:…it made no sense for BC in the 1990s to follow the modernist model of critique from the outside as critique was the hottest commodity going; BC began modelling itself after the secret stars of business – the producers, agents and captains of the worldwide image machines.48 The art writer and theorist Stephen has been developing a new vocabulary suitable for capturing the many post-artistic attempts that have emerged, and in fact written a lexicon presented as a ‘hot-or-not’ list of terms and concepts, which judges their relevance in light of these new movements. Among the relevant terms on his list are so-called 1:1 practices, explained as follows:

Well, critical design as a term has perhaps played out its role, and even Dunne & Raby are now trend-sensitively enough onto the term ‘speculative design’, in accordance with currents in contemporary art discourse, as is the aforementioned Bratton.49 But, given that the distinction between art and design is currently quite unclear, the relevance of the concept of critical design is perhaps renewed – just think of the DIS collective as curators for the 9th Berlin Biennal. They proclaimed: ‘Let’s give a body to the problems of the present where they occur, so as to make them a matter of agency not spectatorship.’49 The curator Maria Lind now regards the exhibition primarily as a space for experiments with social structures and art as a prototype for social models. She thus shares an affinity with the anthropologist Jamer Hunt,49 who, in the article ‘Prototyping the Social’, situates anthropology’s potential within the speculative perspectives in design, like Rabinow and Marcus.
intersection between art, fashion, architecture and marketing — and the problems related to new forms of alliance that challenge the dialectic between criticality and commercialism. Integrated phenomena are anthropology’s forte, given that the anthropological conceptual apparatus is rooted in cultures with foreign (to so-called Western culture) classifications and configurations, which thus constitutes a great potential vis-à-vis the new forms of post-artistic transgressive attempts, represented by initiatives such as HAiKw/.

Kula Revisited

HAiKw/ may primarily represent a conceptual approach, but it undoubtedly also represents the network of people involved — both on the production side and on the consumer or ‘usership’ side of the collections. This has relevance far beyond the cultural-marker perspective, which was so symptomatic of the semiologic interpretation epoch, now long superseded by more holistic (i.e. anthropological) perspectives that emerged in the wake of the material turn. The ‘kula’-exchange system in the Western Pacific (where shell-bracelets…) has become a well-known classic anthropological case far beyond the bounds of anthropology (where shell-bracelets and necklaces circulate between islands, their value closely related to the people who exchange them), and it is often used to point out that status and distinction are important universal aspects, relevant in all types of societies.

But the kula phenomenon also contains other dimensions that perhaps sound more musical to today’s updated ears, for instance the idea that the object itself has a kind of personality, a power over and above the purely material (absolutely central to, amongst others, Alfred Gell’s art theories). The key here is the integration between people and things, perhaps best explained by the aforementioned Miller, in his Stuff from 2010.59 Miller’s goal was to produce a theory about things in a way that did not reduce them to representing social relations (the legacy from Durkheim and his successors); instead, Miller was interested in how things create people in a far more essentialist way than is normally associated with the idiom ‘clothes make the man’.

Now that fashion has been through a late-1990s revival, where cultural-marking perspectives paradoxically enough gained a breath of renewed relevance along with a new round of logo-bonanza, with the HAiKw/-logo’s ‘it-factor’ undoubtedly accelerating, the most interesting aspect is nonetheless the dialectics between people and things, as also pointed out by art historian Ina Blom in Texte Zur Kunst, on Elmgreen & Dragset’s contribution to the Venice Biennale in 2009: If modern society is a place where differences are to a large extent expressed by monumentalising ever more peculiar sensibilities, we may of course think that we know what we want with the objects that make up these monuments. But this social portraiture project seems to put the question differently: Do we know what these objects want with us? And can we really know what it is that they do to us?60

The integration between people and things, a leitmotif in both anthropology and the theory of material culture, undoubtedly finds increasingly wider resonance and HAiKw/’s expressed fascination for a thing’s potentially inherent agency is an example of this (can the ‘Heal it’ collection actually have healing capacity?).

Commodities, Gifts and Animism

Of things, there is no way of getting around the basic concepts of commodity and gift — and animism. To begin with the first concept, Bernadette Corporation’s work has been analysed with precision in light of the commodity concept: Their approach is to deconstruct the logic of the market, both subverting and expressing the forms of flexible adaption that are at stake. As Stephan Geene writes, BC is taking as a raw material what Karl Marx was trying to exorcise from commodity: its false pretense.61

The anthropologist Igor Kopytoff, renowned for his perspectivism on the cultural biography of things, has claimed that commodities which absorb ‘the other kind of worth, one that is nonmonetary and goes beyond exchange worth’, can be what constitute ‘the missing non-economic side of what Marx called commodity fetishism’.62 Marcel Mauss’s substantial 1925 contribution on the universal nature of the gift and the concept hau, about the social commitment — often delayed — to reciprocate for ‘things’ that are given, has proven to be key.63

The editor of Texte Zur Kunst, Isabelle Graw, in the issue ‘The Question of Value’ from 2012, sees works of art as commodities in the sense of precisely Marx and Mauss. She describes the art commodity as a synthesis between a commodity and a gift.64 Graw also emphasizes the transaction point as central: The difference of perspective between them notwithstanding, Mauss and Marx agree that the blending of persons and things is a distinguishing feature of exchange.65 Further, Graw links the dialectic between the commodity and the gift to animism — another favourite (anthropological) theme in the recent field of contemporary art:

...Both the Marxian commodity economy and the Maussian society exchange are moreover distinguished by the prominent involvement of animistic conceptions: they revolve around a good — be it the commodity, be it the gift — whose value consists in being a hybrid of the animate and the inanimate.
So as Bruno Latour has emphasized, animism, far from being an extra-European mindset of ahistorical ‘indigenous peoples’, appears at the very center of modern thought.66 In contrast to the common perception of animism as both foreign and exotic, animism is in fact not (foreign and exotic) and Graw concludes as follows: ‘Animism is not provocative; on the contrary, it is directly associated with the dimension of value…’67 Graw is quoted at length here not because this is news (in any case not to anthropologists) but because it is of significance that the perspectives are cemented as part of contemporary art discourse via Texte Zur Kunst. As Clarke has pointed out: ‘…anthropology was arguably the first discipline to take the consumption of things and the agency of artefacts seriously…’. This integration of anthropological perspectives in art discourse is of relevance for newer theoretical directions such as object-orientated ontology,69 and, not least, post-artisanic practices like HAiKW/.

Mutual Intentions

The encirclement of a distinct anthropological practice at the intersection of (post-) artistic research is an ongoing process. Wright’s aforementioned lexicon of usership points to a concept that may prove interesting to investigate further. Wright claims that intention is a central (classificatory) premise for post-artisanic practice: ‘informed by artistic self-understanding, not framed as art’.70 This brings to mind the ‘everything is…’-wave that has washed over many of the design disciplines in recent decades (Everything is architecture!71 Everything can be graphic design!72 Everything can be fashion!73), in the wake of the art field that has long allowed itself such a discursive slippage. Everything can now apparently be anything. It is the approach, not the practice that is important. Wright further refers to Marcel Duchamp and the idea of a ‘coefficient of art’ – that is, the discrepancy in every artistic suggestion that lies between the intention and the actual realisation of the idea. Wright thus defines post-artisanic practice as a kind of un-expressed potential: ‘It is a radically deontological conception of art – as socialised competence, rather than performed works’.74 The challenge then is to identify the anthropological aspect of such a competence in light of a collective post-artisanic practice, where different actors are involved in the same practice (or not involved according to Wright) – a form of post-disciplinary approach with mutual intentions.

The Collective Bad

In as much as the Vendôme Column is a monument devoid of all artistic value, tending to perpetuate by its expression the ideas of war and conquest of the past imperial dynasty, which are reproved by a republican nation’s sentiment, citizen Courbet expresses the wish that the National Defense government will authorize him to disassemble this column.


A few months after Courbet wrote these words, his wish was granted when the newly instated Executive Committee of the Paris Commune “deconstructed” this monument to war and patriarchy. Grainy photographs, taken in April 1871 show the toppled column in pieces with the massive statue of Napoleon, adorned in a laurel wreath and a toga, lying shattered on the ground. Unfortunately, when the Paris Commune was itself destroyed shortly afterwards, Courbet was arrested and charged with vandalising French property, though he escaped a death sentence. Executed by firing squads, other Communards fared worse. Nonetheless, such ‘Bad deeds’ have a long history amongst artists that continues today.

Seven months before the recent US presidential elections, a 190 KG marble tombstone appeared overnight in New York City’s Central Park. Engraved directly below the marker’s standard crucifix and decorative motif was written, ‘TRUMP, DONALD J., 1946–’, with no end date indicated. Carved into the bottom of the ersatz memorial was the ironic tribute, ‘MADE AMERICA HATE AGAIN’, removed within a day, the guerrilla headstone fabricator was soon after targeted by Secret Service agents for investigation.
990 Km due West, a pair of graffiti writers known as the Raiz Up Collective were charged with Felony, Malicious Destruction of Property and Trespassing for climbing a water tower 1700 Km due West, a pair of graffiti writers known as the Raiz Up Collective were charged with Felony, Malicious Destruction of Property and Trespassing for climbing a water tower in Detroit and painting the words ‘Free The Water’, followed by a graphic of a chiseled-flint-black-power-salute. The graffiti message was intended as a protest against widespread lead contamination of Flint Michigan’s drinking water after its bankruptcy city government drew supplies from nearby Lake Huron through corroded pipes in an economising measure.

In fact, so far, the 21st century is rich with bad deeds. From 2004, Critical Art Ensemble member Steve Kurtz spent almost two decades in a federal prison after the US Justice Department sought charges of bioterrorism against him for purchasing harmless bacteria that the artist planned to use to illuminate the hidden history of American biological weapons research. Following the 2008 financial collapse artist Dread Scott received a summons for ‘disturbing the peace’ after burning US dollars on Wall Street to protest capitalist economic policy. In February of 2012 the anarcho-feminist group Pussy Riot entered Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior where they performed a ‘Punk Prayer’ calling for the elimination of Russian president Vladimir Putin. The group’s ‘bad deeds’ led to the arrest, trial, and incarceration of two band members who spent time in a Siberian prison on charges of hooliganism and undermining the ‘moral foundations of the nation’. A year or so earlier, another Russian-based artists’ collective known as Voina staged an environmental consciousness-raising art intervention inside the lobby of a JP Morgan Chase Bank. The performance involved several choral singers denouncing the bank’s financial links to the petrochemical industry. Two members of Squatting America engaged in a ‘Punk Prayer’ led by a worker of Squatting America. They then also qualify as an aesthetic practice, perhaps even a form of art? If so, do such acts of protest and societal destruction not also serve the collective good? If so, do they then also qualify as an aesthetic practice, perhaps even a form of art?

**Artist as Anti-Citizen**

To call oneself an artist is to stake a particular claim to the word freedom. A claim equated, above all, with taking risks of a personal, social, economic and/or political nature. An artist’s annoy, indulge, shock and invent. Sometimes their activities display an outright disregard for broader social consequences, thus compromising, or even subverting, the collective good. What does the public receive in exchange? Art is typically considered one of the most autonomous, unencumbered types of labour humans can engage, while nonetheless still remaining part of a given society, even if sometimes only marginally so. This is the role dissident ideals play within the frame of work collective good, as an internal check on the danger of institutionalised unfreedom. If, however, under certain conditions the truest artistic acts amount to anti-social actions and lawbreaking, then in an unjust society we must conclude that aesthetics is likewise criminalised.

This is not a novel hypotheses. It has been a central theme within much anarchist theory, as well as artistic practice, from Mikhail Bakunin, who described destruction as a form of creative passion, to Hakim Bey’s ‘Temporary Autonomous Zones’ where artistic sabotage serves neither state nor party but only: ‘consciousness, attentiveness, awareness’. Today, the premise is taking on a new urgency, first as a result of the politisation that followed widespread unemployment and austerity measures in the aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse. The so-called Arab Spring, Movement of Squares and Occupy Wall Street are amongst the most visible aspects of this popular response. And second, even more acutely, thanks to the rise of Right-wing populist nationalism sweeping across the globe, but especially visible following recent events in the UK and US, we are witnessing a combination of economic, and simple and sometimes national security restraints transforming acts of protest into quasi-illegal, or even criminal behavior. The question I wish to raise with this essay is this: do such acts of protest and societal destruction not also serve the collective good? If so, do they then also qualify as an aesthetic practice, perhaps even a form of art?

**Emirates (UAE) amongst others, national artists have run afoul of the law following recent events in the UK and US, we are witnessing a combination of economic, and simple and sometimes national security restraints transforming acts of protest into quasi-illegal, or even criminal behavior. The question I wish to raise with this essay is this: do such acts of protest and societal destruction not also serve the collective good? If so, do they then also qualify as an aesthetic practice, perhaps even a form of art?**
One of the reasons cited by Armstrong and the museum for discontinuing these deliberations GLC’s alleged shift of demands over time, and I am a core member of GLC). One of the reasons cited by Armstrong and the museum for discontinuing these deliberations GLC’s alleged shift of demands over time, and the group’s purported publicising of ‘deliberate falsehoods’ about the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. And yet substantial evidence exists underscoring GLC’s claims that are underscored by the group’s NGO partners. Therefore, a more likely source of Armstrong’s chagrin is GLC’s ability to humiliate the museum, thanks to the group’s NGOs. Nonetheless, the Guggenheim Museum, including Armstrong, publicly rejected working with HRW and other human rights groups in order to guarantee their project meets the labor standards championed by Western nations.

In April 2016, Armstrong along with the Guggenheim trustees, walked away from six years of negotiation and public pressure aimed at making their proposed museum in Abu Dhabi a regional model of fair labour practices. A couple of months earlier, Gulf Labor Coalition (GLC) arranged to have members of the Building and Woodworkers’ International, Human Rights Watch, International Trade Union Confederation, and Society for Labor and Development to meet with the museum’s management and trustees in order to work together to create just working conditions to guide the construction of the UAE’s new cultural facility. GLC is an international group of artists seeking to ensure that migrant workers’ rights are protected during the opening of the Venice Biennale GULF, together with SaLE Docs cultural space, orchestrated a marine landing onto the loading dock of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Before the end of the day, GLC was promised high-level discussions with the museum’s trustees. Despite several hours of talks involving not only the artists’ group, but members of several prominent NGOs with expertise in drafting workable labour contracts that met proper human rights standards, Armstrong and the trustees of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, abruptly withdrew from further participation. More than a year later, the situation remains unresolved.

Tactical Media and Artistic Dark Matter

The alt-globalisation or counter-globalisation movement of 1990s was, prior to Occupy Wall Street, the last significant moment when urban activism tightly meshed with creative, cultural dissent, in this case inspired by the Situationist Déroulement and taking the form of Tactical Media (TM). As Geert Lovink and David García elaborated, Tactical Media are what happens when: The cheap ‘do it yourself’ media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture. Tactical media do not just report events, as they are never impartial they always participate and it is this that more than anything separates them from mainstream media. TM was born out of the theories and practices developed decades earlier by Walter Benjamin, John Heartfield, Bertolt Brecht, Guy Debord and in the 1980s by Michel De Certeau’s breakdown 1980 thesis, The Practice of Everyday Life. But it was also made possible thanks to the onward pace of capitalism’s endless search for new ways to save time and labour costs. The internet is one example of this process. Not only did the internet allow tactical media practitioners to engage in new types of activist, or, better yet, hacktivist activity, these same networked infrastructures have also made all
sorts of previously hidden, isolated, fantastical and suppressed imaginative labour gain visibility, both to themselves and to others. Although, as recent political events indicate, that outcome has not always been progressive, which is a point I will return to below.

It is accurate to observe that today there exists an ever-more accessible and sophisticated technology for manufacturing, copying, documenting and distributing ‘home-made’ or informal art. This reality has dramatically ended the isolation of creative labour previously quarantined from high culture as naive, romantic or amateur. It is now impossible to escape the spread of this informal, heterogeneous, art-like activity as it radiates from homes and offices, schools and streets, community centers and in cyberspace. As Boris Groys comments ‘everyone is now on stage’. This bottom-up artistic groundswell is typically made up of fantasies drawn from popular entertainment and comic books as well as personal trivia and sentimental nostalgia. Its form may can range from the whimsical to the banal, from the absurd to the obscene. It represents a qualitative shift that is unique to the last ten years. It is certainly and decisively post-Greenbergian and anti-formalist. However, as much as this previously hidden dark-matter creativity has emerged into visibility thanks, in part, to the very same networked communication technology required by post-Fordism and global financial markets – it is also being illuminated by the ravenous needs of capitalism itself. Confronted with falling profits from traditional manufacturing and the increasing use of automation as opposed to living labor, capital has turned to extracting every iota of potential value from what Mario Tronti once called the social factory. Even if that quarrying that region has also uncovered the most shadowed, disobedient, fantastical and resentful affects of individuals and communities (think of the US Militia Movement and Alt-Right, the Golden Dawn of Greece or the National Front in France amongst many other previously isolated and communities of Nietzschean Resentment). The potentially disruptive capacity of this new force was, for both better and for worse, emerging in the form of dark matter creativity. A networked form of resentment was, therefore, completely predictable once the visualising power of the Internet was conjured with the monetisation of everyday life. And this dark matter force, in turn, would not only interrupt art world norms but also previously dominant models of business and politics. One outcome of this disruption is now all too conspicuous, and that is the result of the 2016 US presidential elections. However, before clarifying what by this, I must add one more link in the theoretical sequence started in 1934 by Benjamin with regards to the dangers of aestheticising politics, as opposed to politicising art.
insofar as a specific quantity of investable capital is received in exchange for what is (presumably) an underperforming or lower-valued financial investment. In other words, the immediate benefit of the takeover to the shareholder is something tangible, as well as spendable, or bankable.

If this analogy has any virtue, therefore, it would seem that for the mostly white, middle-class ‘shareholders’ of the recently hacked American political party, the payoff would be best described as blackmail; that is to say, as ideological compensation for their diminishing economic privilege and a general loss of control over their lives. According to political scientist Kathy Cramer – who has interviewed rural, white voters in the American Midwest for over a decade – a politics of resentment is the reason so many voted to elect a man with no political experience. And this resentment is, in turn grounded in the same voters’ imaginary self-constructed identity based on ‘the perceptions that people have about their reality’, as opposed to facts or data, both of which belong to educated elites, the very people that the 2016 insurgent election was intended to punish.  

Another way to explain the mobilisation of resentment is to view it as part of a broader aestheticisation of politics, a process made all the more compelling by the flagrant mixing of verifiable truths with speculation, outright fiction and even menacing conspiratorial fantasies, bringing us to reflect on the growing field of social practice art, which is dependent on the collapse of traditional artistic autonomy and the full-on aestheticisation of society. Social practice art might best be described as having a utilitarian ethos that spurns individual acts of expression, or avant-garde efforts at shocking its audience, while favouring instead practices that involve cooperation, group conversation and efforts to remedy social ailments. There is an implicit hope that reason and dialogue will ultimately prevail over repression and disorder, not only when the artist is engaged with other artists or friends or community members but also when a project’s participants include prison guards or the police. What then becomes of the desire to disobey, to dissent, or create trouble, all well-known staples of avant-garde art? Under what circumstances is such dissonance more than mere shock, and should it factor into conversation and efforts to remedy social ailments. There is an implicit hope that reason and dialogue will ultimately prevail over repression and disorder, not only when the artist is engaged with other artists or friends or community members but also when a project’s participants include prison guards or the police. What then becomes of the desire to disobey, to dissent, or create trouble, all well-known staples of avant-garde art? Under what circumstances is such dissonance more than mere shock, and should it factor into any discussion about the ethos of social practice art?

Bad Deeds

When confronted with dissent, the initial impulse is that the state seeks an immediate return to normalcy. After the Paris Commune was crushed, the French government reconstructed the Vendôme Column and even forced poor Courbet to finance the project, a task he almost carried out before dying penniless at the age of 58. More recently, five members (thus far) of Gulf Labor Coalition have been placed on travel entry bans into the UAE as retribution by princely authorities for the group’s activism on behalf of migrant workers. These actions appear, in retrospect, to have anticipated things to come, as the Republican presidential candidate made good his campaign promises to greatly expand travel restrictions on people from certain nations, while building a 1,900-mile-long border wall (3,200 km) between the US and Mexico. Since the elections Green Card holders and even some US citizens have been detained and questioned by custom agents. On Thursday, February 23, 2017 the artist Aaron Gach, (aka ‘Center for Tactical Magic’), was subjected to an hour-long interrogation upon re-entering the US in San Francisco from Belgium, where he had been invited to install an art project. The artist is an American-born citizen, who was travelling on a US passport and has no criminal convictions. Amongst the questions Gach was asked were ‘How often do you travel for your art? How many times a year? Where else have you been in the last year? Also for art? The assessor also asked why he goes by the name ‘Center For Tactical Magic’, instead of his own name. Ultimately, they insisted he unlock his smartphone for them to examine, which, reluctantly, Gach did, before finally being released.

Of course, many individuals have been treated just as badly, or considerably worse, by US border agents, and for many years before the new administration took office. Gach also acknowledges his privileges, writing that these kinds of interrogations place an ‘unfair burden on people, especially if they are of colour or targeted communities’. Suddenly, we have exited capitalism’s thirty-seven year infatuation with globalisation and relatively open trade and travel barriers and now enter a world of reinforced frontiers and spreading borders, material as well as immaterial, the latter taking the form of omnipresent electronic surveillance. As activist and theorist Cornell West expressed immediately after the results were in, the neoliberal era in the US ended with a neofascist bang. The political triumph of Donald Trump shattered the establishments in the Democratic and Republican parties – both wowed to the rule of Big Money and to the reign of meretricious politicians. When unfreedom becomes law, injustice is transformed into a system of control. Stills, when ‘bad deeds’ are carried out in the name of art, might we describe this practice as a form of insurgent beauty that operates outside the reach of the art world’s control. The desire to disobey, to dissent, to engage in social misconduct and political protest rests on the belief that when a society turns bad, acting ‘badly’ is a logical, even necessary response, and if law hampers freedom, then law breaking becomes freeing. Even a seriously playful act of disobedience can inspire hope, and, as we have seen, it can also stimulate state suppression. But if anarchist activist Emma Goldman once stated that, ‘every society has the criminals it deserves’, then perhaps it is time that we art activists and social practice artists take up the mantle of society’s scoundrels, blackguards and criminals. After all, this may very well be exactly what the collective good today actually requires.
In his review of Marc James Léger’s study of social practice, Brave New Avant Garde, art historian Bill Roberts notes that activist and community-engaged practices have become “the officially sanctioned art of the social-democratic left.” The matter-of-factness of the claim does little to hide its deeply sardonic subtexts. In 2013, art historian Bill Roberts notes that activist and community-engaged practices have become “the officially sanctioned art of the social-democratic left.” In his review of Marc James Léger’s study of social practice, Brave New Avant Garde, art historian Bill Roberts notes that activist and community-engaged practices have become “the officially sanctioned art of the social-democratic left.” The matter-of-factness of the claim does little to hide its deeply sardonic subtexts. In 2013, art historian Bill Roberts notes that activist and community-engaged practices have become “the officially sanctioned art of the social-democratic left.” In his review of Marc James Léger’s study of social practice, Brave New Avant Garde, art historian Bill Roberts notes that activist and community-engaged practices have become “the officially sanctioned art of the social-democratic left.” The matter-of-factness of the claim does little to hide its deeply sardonic subtexts. In 2013, art historian Bill Roberts notes that activist and community-engaged practices have become “the officially sanctioned art of the social-democratic left.” In his review of Marc James Léger’s study of social practice, Brave New Avant Garde, art historian Bill Roberts notes that activist and community-engaged practices have become “the officially sanctioned art of the social-democratic left.” The matter-of-factness of the claim does little to hide its deeply sardonic subtexts. In 2013, art historian Bill Roberts notes that activist and community-engaged practices have become “the officially sanctioned art of the social-democratic left.”
Form and Social Practice

Although the social turn seemed to constitute a move away from formal concerns in “art practice, favouring immateriality over objecthood and process over product, Form has in fact played a central role in its theorisation. Nicolas Bourriaud referred to his concept of relational aesthetics as a ‘theory of form’, while art historian Claire Bishop chose to use the term ‘participatory art’ in her 2012 book Artificial Hells because it:...connotes the involvement of many people and avoids the ambiguities of ‘social engagement’, which might refer to a wide range of work, from engaged painting to interventionist actions in mass media.

The distinction she draws here is precisely one between a cohesive set of practices united in their implication of the formal device of participation, and a field of formally diverse practices, linked by a shared concern with the social. Kester’s theory of ‘diagonal art’ outwardly disavows form, and yet the practices he draws upon are selected on the basis of their shared use of particular forms of human interaction, namely conversation and dialogue.

As Creative Time curator Nato Thompson noted in the catalogue to his aptly titled 2011 exhibition Living as Form, ‘people coming together possess forms as well.’

The relationship between ‘art’ and ‘social form’ is no mere spasm in itself. Art’s engagement with the social has gone through a number of forms, from the ‘creative’ commitment, famously exemplified by Anthony Caro, to what could be termed the ‘artistic form’ and ‘social form’ to designate a similar distinction. Peter Osborne uses the terms ‘artistic form’ and ‘social form’ to designate a similar distinction. Peter Osborne uses the terms ‘artistic form’ and ‘social form’ to designate a similar distinction.

In recent years, the emphasis on the signifier over the signified has In recent years, the emphasis on the signifier over the signified has

In recent years, the emphasis on the signifier over the signified has

In recent years, the emphasis on the signifier over the signified has

In recent years, the emphasis on the signifier over the signified has
An Aesthetic of Social Practice

The emergence of an aesthetic of social practice is heavily imbriated within the much-discussed institutionalisation of social practice that, at least in the UK, can largely be traced back to shifts in cultural policy enacted by New Labour in the wake of their election victory of 1997. Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport from 1997 to 2001, initiated a sea change in the way in which the arts were supported in the UK, informed by the mantra: ‘start talking about what the arts can do for society, rather than what society can do for the arts’. Increased funding and support for the arts would be contingent on the ability of institutions to demonstrate their efficacy in enhancing social cohesion, promoting urban regeneration and engaging local communities. This instrumentalism was administered and enforced by the implementation of New Public Management, bureaucratic structures borrowed from the private sector and engineered towards efficiency and answerability. The community arts tradition, having long endured outside of art’s mainstream, was now welcomed into the fold by institutions that rapidly had to adapt to the new demands placed upon them, and saw community art (and its offspring: social practice) as an expedient means of meeting them. Funding may since have subsided, but the demands persist, and, accordingly, social practice’s position within the institutional landscape of art has been consolidated.

This rather neat narrative is often used as something of a stick to beat institutions with – however this denies the exigencies of institutional sustainability in an environment in which under- or informally staffed institutions must rapidly and quantifiably demonstrate their participatory and engaged credentials. Institutional engagement strategies have thus tended to borrow from tried-and-tested formulae, serving to reinforce the Żmijewski brand.

Nonetheless, two factors conspire to sever the signifier of the garden from the significate. Firstly, reflexivity has long been a methodological rigour on the sciences. Arguably, art’s move towards a methodological turn in the social sciences. Arguably, art’s move to an environment in which under- or informally staffed institutions must rapidly and quantifiably demonstrate their participatory and engaged credentials. Institutional engagement strategies have thus tended to borrow from tried-and-tested formulae, serving to reinforce the Żmijewski brand.

The publication of Bourriaud’s manifesto-like ‘Art in the Age of Relational Aesthetics’ in 1998 inaugurated a vibrant written discourse on the topic recognises. Secondly, the sheer ubiquity of a particularly recurrent form such as the garden creates a disinterested mass in which local and historical specificity is quashed. While the first point neutralises the signifying power of the garden at a phenomenological level, the second does so from a more conceptual perspective. In both cases the garden becomes a floating signifier, wrenched from its signified and presenting as the tokenistic and ‘superficial’ form of institutional social engagement critiqued by Kester, regardless of the often good intentions and political sophistication of the younger generation of art-workers who tend to serve as public engagement curators for larger institutions.

A similar fate has befallen the successful socially engaged artist, whose practice, become coveted by institutions seeking to emulate their participatory and collaborative successes elsewhere. In an essay on one of the many texts of social practice, Artur Żmijewski, curator Lesley Young quotes the artist self-identifying as an ‘artist for hire’, whilst in a talk delivered as part of an event on the legacies of community arts organised by the Liverpool Biennial in 2015, Sonia Boyce wryly introduced herself as ‘one of those artists who is parachuted in’. Socially engaged practitioners, more so than any other flavour of artist, tend to become typecast and commissioned with a tighter and more instrumental brief. This places pressure on the artist to perform and reproduce their brand of practice for a new public. Young notes of Żmijewski that, while his practice has historically displayed considerable diversity, those projects which do not conform to his antagonistic reputation ‘grab fewer headlines’. Accordingly his work becomes increasingly funnelled down a narrow path as commission after commission serves to reinforce the Żmijewski brand.

Thus the forces of institutionalisation have pressured both institutional social engagement, and socially engaged practitioners towards the reproduction of recognisable forms of social practice. As artists circulate under the weight of expectation that they will do their thing, and institutions are hemmed in by the constraints of point scoring, task and engagement prograning, the reasoning behind the ‘work that suits our brand’ becomes more broadly similar. Tate Modern cites its garden as a ‘resource for the local community’, whilst the Whitworth’s garden – part of its 2016 renovation – is intended to create ‘a nurturing sense of community’. The formal device of the garden creates an undifferentiated mass in which local and historical specificity is quashed. However, whilst commentaries on this institutionalisation tend to direct their gaze towards exhibitionary institutions as solely responsible for any ‘banalisation’ that might occur, I would like to address the significant role that written discourses on social practice in the overlapping fields of art history and art theory have played.

Art History and the Documentation of Social Practice

The publication of Bourriaud’s manifesto-like Relational Aesthetics in 1998 inaugurated a vibrant written discourse around the social turn in contemporary art. While Bourriaud’s early readership were primarily members of the core art world – artists and the newly emergent curator – Miwon Kwon’s 2002 One Place after Another: Site-specific
significant in privileging material and visual form and thus contributing to the emergence of a theory of form, and thus this compartmentalisation and clustering is also formal. However, it is a particular (formal) quality of the book and the journal article, the antagonism which sits at the heart of her argument also determines the form taken by her texts, and indeed has come to characterise the field of discourse as a whole. This antagonism has brought to the fore the programmatism of the discourse surrounding the social turn, which has been notable for its population by ‘critic-champion[s] of a particular kind of art’. Each advocates for their own brand of social practice, and calls upon a coterie of artists conforming to that brand to corroborate their claims, usually accompanied by a new name for the kind of practice at stake (dialogical art, relational art, participatory art, etc.). Kester’s dialogical cabal of Suzanne Lacy, Park Fiction and WochenKlausur are pitted against Bishop’s antagonistic ‘bad-boys’, Thomas Hirschhorn. Bourriaud on the grounds of his supposedly apolitical fetishisation of human interaction as inherently democratic and ‘good’, while a similar, if more acerbic, critique was levelled at Kester and curator Maria Lind in ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’ (2006). Both articles roughly follow a similar, rather illuminating, structure. Bishop first summarises her target’s argument through the discussion of a selection of artists cited as Bourriaud’s original text (Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick in the case of ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’). She then presents her political disagreements with both the practices and the models of art to which they are yoked. Finally, she proffers some practices that she claims, deal in similar currencies, whilst avoiding the political pitfalls she had previously delineated (Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn). The antagonism which sits at the heart of her argument also determines the form taken by her texts, and indeed has come to characterise the field of discourse as a whole. This antagonism has brought to the fore the programmatism of the discourse surrounding the social turn, which has been notable for its population by ‘critic-champion[s] of a particular kind of art’. Each advocates for their own brand of social practice, and calls upon a coterie of artists conforming to that brand to corroborate their claims, usually accompanied by a new name for the kind of practice at stake (dialogical art, relational art, participatory art, etc.). Kester’s dialogical cabal of Suzanne Lacy, Park Fiction and WochenKlausur are pitted against Bishop’s antagonistic ‘bad-boys’, Thomas Hirschhorn, Santiago Sierra and Artur Zmijewski. The upshot of this programmatic and prescriptive art history and art theory has been a compartmentalisation of the diverse field of social practice into coherent and homogenous clusters. The nuances of particular practices are lost as the aspect of each practice that unites it with others in its cluster becomes dominant. In a sense, Bishop, Bourriaud, Kester, et al. have become the ‘master discourses’ that Kester has himself been so critical of.

As noted above, each of these theorisations of the social turn is, to an extent, a theory of form, and thus this compartmentalisation and clustering is also formal. However, it is a particular (formal) quality of the book and the journal article, the predominant means of dissemination of these theories of art, that has been particularly significant in privileging material and visual form and thus contributing to the emergence of an aesthetic of social practice: that is, their reliance on photographic documentation accompanying the body text. As was the case with land art, performance art, body art and other ephemeral practices, social practice depends upon its documentation to allow exposure to the far greater ‘secondary’ audience that exists beyond those who encounter a work first-hand.

As was the case with land art, performance art, body art and other ephemeral practices, social practice depends upon its documentation to allow exposure to the far greater ‘secondary’ audience that exists beyond those who encounter a work first-hand. And, whilst not diminishing the reception of social practice through documentation, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that the experience is clearly different to first-hand phenomenological encounter. There is a fundamental irreconcilability between durational, experiential, site-specific social practice and the two-dimensional projections of the globe, distortions and compromises inevitably arise when the former is translated into the latter. The image freezes time, encloses space and reduces the complexity of the project down to a simple snapshot. Most significantly, the image re-presents an experiential practice, in which the visual may only be of cursory significance, entirely through visual means. As such, documentation is unable to convey social relations without recourse to the use of formal visual signifiers that the reader might easily decode as connoting this or that signified social relation.

For this reason, significant attention is paid to the selection of images used to document a particular practice, and this selection process, schematically outlined here, passes through the hands of a number of actors on its way to publication. Firstly, the artist(s) themselves document their project, and from the vast array of documentary images taken, select a handful that will reside on their website as artefacts. Secondly, the artist, in collaboration with a curator, might use these images, alongside other corroborating documents, as the art documentation installation that has emerged as the archetypal mode of display for social practice within the white cube exhibition. Finally, the writer, alongside their editor and publisher, will select images from a publicly available pool, or will ask the artist to supply images, that will illustrate a book or journal article. At each stage, there is a process of selective curating and refinement, through which the most visually concise and legible images will rise to the surface for use in publication. These demands lend themselves to the selection of recognisable forms that a readership, through the training process of reading other texts on the subject, and of seeing art documentation in gallery contexts, is capable of translating from signifier to signified. In the case of a book, the image deemed most concise and legible may even appear on the cover. It is the mounted police and audience of Bruguera’s Tatlin’s Whisper that adorn the cover of Artificial Hells. Social relations are only present through their signification.

The most widely discussed stage in this process of documentation has been the moment of exhibition. Boris Groys’ Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation (2002) and Angela Dimitrakaki’s Art, Globalisation and the Exhibition Form: What is the Case, What is the Challenge? (2012) pay significant attention to

Art and Locational Identity and Kester’s 2004 Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art shifted the debate into more traditional academic contexts, signalling social practice as a viable subject for art-historical study. Despite this shift towards the academy – and its avowed tastes for description over prescription – the programmatic character of Bourriaud’s text persisted, particularly in Kester’s case. This programmatism was exacerbated by two decisive interventions into the discourse by Claire Bishop in the mid-2000s. ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’ (2004) attacked Bourriaud on the grounds of his supposedly apolitical fetishisation of human interaction as inherently democratic and ‘good’, while a similar, if more acerbic, critique was levelled at Kester and curator Maria Lind in ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’ (2006). Both articles roughly follow a similar, rather illuminating, structure. Bishop first summarises her target’s argument through the discussion of a selection of artists cited as Bourriaud’s original text (Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick in the case of ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’). She then presents her political disagreements with both the practices and the models of art to which they are yoked. Finally, she proffers some practices that she claims, deal in similar currencies, whilst avoiding the political pitfalls she had previously delineated (Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn). The antagonism which sits at the heart of her argument also determines the form taken by her texts, and indeed has come to characterise the field of discourse as a whole. This antagonism has brought to the fore the programmatism of the discourse surrounding the social turn, which has been notable for its population by ‘critic-champion[s] of a particular kind of art’. Each advocates for their own brand of social practice, and calls upon a coterie of artists conforming to that brand to corroborate their claims, usually accompanied by a new name for the kind of practice at stake (dialogical art, relational art, participatory art, etc.). Kester’s dialogical cabal of Suzanne Lacy, Park Fiction and WochenKlausur are pitted against Bishop’s antagonistic ‘bad-boys’, Thomas Hirschhorn, Santiago Sierra and Artur Zmijewski. The upshot of this programmatic and prescriptive art history and art theory has been a compartmentalisation of the diverse field of social practice into coherent and homogenous clusters. The nuances of particular practices are lost as the aspect of each practice that unites it with others in its cluster becomes dominant. In a sense, Bishop, Bourriaud, Kester, et al. have become the ‘master discourses’ that Kester has himself been so critical of.

As noted above, each of these theorisations of the social turn is, to an extent, a theory of form, and thus this compartmentalisation and clustering is also formal. However, it is a particular (formal) quality of the book and the journal article, the predominant means of dissemination of these theories of art, that has been particularly significant in privileging material and visual form and thus contributing to the emergence of an aesthetic of social practice: that is, their reliance on photographic documentation accompanying the body text. As was the case with land art, performance art, body art and other ephemeral practices, social practice depends upon its documentation to allow exposure to the far greater ‘secondary’ audience that exists beyond those who encounter a work first-hand. And, whilst not diminishing the reception of social practice through documentation, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that the experience is clearly different to first-hand phenomenological encounter. There is a fundamental irreconcilability between durational, experiential, site-specific social practice and the two-dimensional projections of the globe, distortions and compromises inevitably arise when the former is translated into the latter. The image freezes time, encloses space and reduces the complexity of the project down to a simple snapshot. Most significantly, the image re-presents an experiential practice, in which the visual may only be of cursory significance, entirely through visual means. As such, documentation is unable to convey social relations without recourse to the use of formal visual signifiers that the reader might easily decode as connoting this or that signified social relation.

For this reason, significant attention is paid to the selection of images used to document a particular practice, and this selection process, schematically outlined here, passes through the hands of a number of actors on its way to publication. Firstly, the artist(s) themselves document their project, and from the vast array of documentary images taken, select a handful that will reside on their website as artefacts. Secondly, the artist, in collaboration with a curator, might use these images, alongside other corroborating documents, as the art documentation installation that has emerged as the archetypal mode of display for social practice within the white cube exhibition. Finally, the writer, alongside their editor and publisher, will select images from a publicly available pool, or will ask the artist to supply images, that will illustrate a book or journal article. At each stage, there is a process of selective curating and refinement, through which the most visually concise and legible images will rise to the surface for use in publication. These demands lend themselves to the selection of recognisable forms that a readership, through the training process of reading other texts on the subject, and of seeing art documentation in gallery contexts, is capable of translating from signifier to signified. In the case of a book, the image deemed most concise and legible may even appear on the cover. It is the mounted police and audience of Bruguera’s Tatlin’s Whisper that adorn the cover of Artificial Hells. Social relations are only present through their signification.

The most widely discussed stage in this process of documentation has been the moment of exhibition. Boris Groys’ Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation (2002) and Angela Dimitrakaki’s Art, Globalisation and the Exhibition Form: What is the Case, What is the Challenge? (2012) pay significant attention to
permutations of the mediation of social practice through the exhibition form. However, whilst the exhibition opens up social practice to a considerably larger public than the ‘primary’ audience, this pales in comparison to the size of the public who encounter social practice through its documentation and discussion in literature. Similarly, to disregard the documentation of social practice in books and journal articles would be to overlook the influence of this literature and its attendant documentation on exhibitionary practices. Books by Bishop, Bourriaud, Kester, et al. adorn the tables of curated reading rooms and gallery bookshops accompanying exhibitions of social practice worldwide, reflecting the extent to which a younger generation of discourse-aware socially engaged curators has been informed by the literature. Alongside *Artificial Hells* and *Conversation Pieces*, one might find the political philosophy of Bakhtin, Levinas, Mouffe, Nancy and Rancière, names etched into the art world’s consciousness in no small part due to their citation by the ‘critic-champions’ of social practice. This influence can be felt in the academy too, where for over a decade Bishop, Bourriaud and Kester have been mainstays of art school syllabi, required reading for the aspirant social practitioner. This is a point little acknowledged in the literature itself, which has largely lacked reflexivity with regard to its own significant agency in the field and (implicitly) rests on a rather outdated assumption of remove from its object of study. It is precisely this agency, however, in combination with the programmatic character of the discourse and the necessary privileging of the visual through art documentation, that has positioned art history and art theory as key players in the crystallisation of a formal aesthetic of social practice.

**Conclusion**

Returning to Kester’s two arguments concerning the institutionalisation of art – that engagement is superficial, and that the discourse is guilty of an overreliance on the crutch of theory – it is now clearer how they interact, and how this interaction has resulted in a banalisation of form in the contexts of social practice. Conditions and tendencies specific to art’s exhibitionary institutions (the exigencies of funding, policy and means) and it’s attendant discourses (programmatism, antagonism and formal constraint) both tend towards the simplification of the broad and variegated field of social practice into more manageable and homogenous types. The tendency towards the use of art documentation, shared by both exhibitionary practice and the literature, inherently and necessarily reduces social signifieds to material and visual signifiers. In all cases, social practice becomes formalised. The cyclical relationship between exhibition and discourse – each informing the other in a perpetual back-forth-relationship – ensures that this formalisation is continually heightened to the extent that a recognisable set of signifiers predominates. Whilst Kester and Bourriaud used the abstract and pluralised term ‘aesthetics’ in their theories of social practice, it might now be more apt to speak of a singular aesthetic of social practice.

Three points must be taken from this. Firstly, the extent to which this aesthetic is coded and entangled into every moment in the production, exhibition, reception and exegesis of social practice means that it is particularly stubborn. It is difficult, if not impossible, to envisage how this aesthetic and the attendant danger of superficiality and tokenism might be transcended. Secondly, responsibility cannot be lain simply at the door of one or another of the many actors and factors contributing to the field of social practice, given that this aesthetic has emerged from their convergence and interrelation. Thus, squarely blaming instrumentalism or institutionalisation is insufficient, and art history and art theory must more adequately factor in their own embeddedness. Thirdly, and finally, the dangers of superficiality and tokenism must be virulently resisted, particularly given the political urgency of our current moment. In times of crisis it is inevitably those most marginalised communities that suffer first and most severely, and these have tended to be the communities receiving most benefit from the interventions of social practitioners. For art to continue to offer social benefit in times of utmost need, it must resist formalisation and reduction to an easily consumable aesthetic.
Harry Weeks

Harry Weeks is a Teaching Fellow in History of Art at Edinburgh College of Art, The University of Edinburgh, where he is also Co-convener of The Global Contemporary Research Group. He was previously a Postdoctoral Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh (2015-16). His PhD was awarded by The University of Edinburgh in 2014 for a thesis entitled “A Unique Epochal Knot”: Negotiations of Community in Contemporary Art’, which examined how art practices since 1989 have contributed to a rethinking of the concept of community. He is currently working towards a book based on his doctoral research, tentatively titled ‘Community and Art after Community Art’.

Marc James Léger


Michael Birchall

Michael Birchall is curator of public practice at Tate Liverpool and Senior Lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University in Exhibition Studies. Previously he has held curatorial appointments at The Western Front (Vancouver, Canada), The Walter Phillips Gallery at The Banff Centre (Canada), Künstlerhaus Stuttgart (Germany); and has lectured at Zurich University of the Arts. His writing has appeared in Corridor 8, Frieze, Frieze d/e, ARKEN Bulletin, On Curating, Modern Painters, C-Magazine, Art & the Public Sphere, and various catalogues and monographs.

Gregory Sholette

Gregory Sholette is a New York-based artist, writer and activist. His recent projects include the exhibition DÄRKER at Station Independent Projects NYC consisting of large ink wash drawings addressing current political conditions. He is active with Gulf Labor Coalition and was a co-founder of the collectives Political Art Documentation/ Distribution (PAD/D: 1980-1988), and REPOhistory (1989-2000). A former Mellon Fellow at the CUNY Center for the Humanities he is on the editorial board of FIELD, a new online journal focused on socially-engaged art criticism, and his most recent publications include Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism, (Pluto/Chicago Press 2017), and Dark Matter: Art and Politics in an Age of Enterprise Culture (Pluto Press: 2010). Sholette holds a PhD in History and Memory Studies from the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands (2017), he is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program in Critical Theory (1996), Graduate of University of California Sand Diego (1995), and The Cooper Union School of Art (1979), and teaches studio art and co-directs the new Social Practice Queens MFA concentration at Queens College CUNY, and is an associate of the Art, Design and the Public Domain program of Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design.

Charlotte Bik Bandlien

Charlotte Bik Bandlien is an Oslo-based anthropologist, specialized in visual and material culture. Her work has been presented at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Theaster Gates’ Arts Incubator in Chicago, the Material Culture hub at UCL, Parsons NYC, AAA and CAA among others. Her research is conducted through collaborative practice, curating and critique, and recent works include the artistic research project ‘Department of Usership’ (2015-16), a special issue on art and anthropology for the Norwegian art history journal (2016), and a catalogue text for the exhibition HAiK w/Torill Johannessen. Bandlien has previously held positions as strategic brand planner and as researcher, and is currently assistant professor of theory and methodology at Oslo National Academy of the Arts, Department of Design.
This book is published with generous support from
Arts Council Norway and Stavanger kommune
Rogaland Kunstsenter receives generous support from
Rogaland Fylkeskommune and Stavanger kommune

Published by:
Rogaland Kunstsenter, Stavanger, Norway in 2017

Edited by
Michael Birchall and Geir Haraldseth

Designed by:
Bjørnar Pedersen and Morteza Vaseghi with Anna Mikkola

Printed by:
Livonia Print SIA, Latvia

Paper:
100g Galerie Art Silk

Type:
Titles: Asfalt, courtesy of ABCDinamo
Body text: Noua Haas Grotesk

Translation of Charlotte Bik Bandlien’s text by:
Arlyne Moi

Translation of texts in the red book by:
Elias Daniel Pittenger

All materials are copyright Rogaland Kunstsenter,
the authors and the artists
ISBN 978-82-999281-1-3