

## The Imagination and Beyond: Toward a Method of Evaluating Socially Engaged Art

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Because you have imagined love, you have not loved; merely because you have imagined brotherhood, you have not made brotherhood. You may feel as though you had, but you have not.

—Muriel Rukeyser

This essay is about evaluating art that aspires to *affect*, rather than be about, the social issue it addresses. It is about artists who create a process, environment, or event that they put directly into social situations, unconstrained by the parameters of galleries and performance spaces. I have been zealous in wanting such art to be more valued than it typically is, and to be held to criteria that fit its purposes rather than to purely formal or financial metrics of art, yet such art is tricky to evaluate. Indeed, it is often difficult to recognize as art. It is less about an object than a relationship, and rather than intended as a complete manifestation of an artist's imagination, it is purposely incomplete, requiring social interaction to reach fullness.

The first part of this essay describes principles of evaluating socially engaged art and how I came to them, initially drawing on my experience making socially engaged performance. In the second part, I provide examples of these principles in practice, drawn from evaluating the socially engaged art projects funded in 2014-15 by A Blade of Grass.

### Principles

My evaluation process is rooted in having been part of socially engaged performances, and eventually having written about them. The constant in socially engaged art is a palpable aesthetic experience—the joy, bursts of imagination, self-knowledge, insight beyond surfaces, and temporary experience of what anthropologist Victor Turner called *communitas*, a connecting spirit that transcends hierarchy. But equally fundamental to socially engaged art are principles that I learned first through experience:

#### 1. *An active relationship with those who would otherwise be strictly an audience contributes to social purpose.*

When I was 17, I toured with a theater company in New Hampshire's White Mountains. A federal grant covered half the cost of our shows. A group from a small community proposed hosting a potluck dinner before the performance whose proceeds, they assured us, would cover their half. We accepted. We were not only treated to a savory meal, but the proactive stance their preparation entailed, and our informal conversation over the meal, connected us more directly than just seeing a play allows. Theorist Richard Schechner's 1973 articulation of an entertainment/efficacy continuum, with "spectators" characteristic of the former and "participants" of the latter, further suggests why an active relationship is needed in socially engaged work.

*2. A participatory art-making process is often more useful in social contexts than finished work.*

I co-facilitated a theater workshop in a maximum security prison, providing the participants with the means of self-representation, communication around issues of concern, and dialogue with people of multiple points of view. The workshop met weekly for a year, enough time to have a social impact, such as community building among participants—something that strictly seeing art, though valuable, could not provide.

*3. Partnering with people whose expertise is related to the social context brings in what the artists do not know.*

I was working with drama students on a play advocating for endangered community gardens in New York City. Wanting not only to express the value of the gardens but also to help protect them, we needed additional skills that are not taught in art schools. We depended on organizers to strategize how our advocacy could be applied politically, and gardeners who knew from experience the individual and collective value of their activities. When the goals are not purely aesthetic, it's unlikely the means will be either.

*4. Identifying impact from the points of view of all the key partners is in keeping with socially engaged art's goals.*

A few years ago, I was the evaluator of smARTpower, a collaborative cultural diplomacy program designed by Sergio Bessa, Director of Curatorial and Educational Programs at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and funded by the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The program intended for US artists to meaningfully partner with people and organizations in each of 15 countries where the projects took place, and in so doing to positively impact perception of the US. Assessment thus required responses from multiple layers of participants. These included the State Department funding us from Washington, the Embassy in each participating country, the artists, the workshop participants, and the host cultural organizations—sometimes responding in contradictory ways, which was most instructive.

I would be remiss not to mention a criterion for the evaluator: writing in a way that is accessible to everyone who has been part of the project, whatever their profession or education. Theorists sometimes undervalue such writing but accessibility and depth of thought are not mutually exclusive.

My evaluation principles proved compatible with A Blade of Grass's values. ABOG foregrounds: 1) **Artistic excellence**. To me this means identifying what the ABOG artists create in addition to objects and how they apply aesthetic knowledge in social contexts. 2) **Artists in leadership roles to promote social change**. Here I focus on how the artist situates the work to have societal impact, including gathering partners and publics to partake in the vision-in-action. 3) **Relevance to the participating communities**. This is evidenced through observation, interviews, and conversations with people in the intended communities, be they geographic, circumstantial (e.g., people

struggling with the same issue like homelessness), tradition-based (e.g., sharing a religious or cultural orientation), or aligned by spirit (e.g., a similar philosophical or political base).

The 2014-15 ABOG projects were centered in the following venues and activities (detailed elsewhere in this book):

- At homeless shelters, Jody Wood's refitted truck functioned as a mobile hair salon for residents;
- At meetings of political activists of all kinds, Fran Ilich provided full-bodied Zapatista-grown coffee to energize work in a kindred, collective spirit;
- In a Brooklyn College lab, Jan Mun experimented with a particular mushroom's soil remediation potential;
- At a public international high school, Liz Slagus and Norene Leddy taught students in two sex education classes through a process of making t-shirts about consent;
- In a pop-up Spanish language used bookstore in Red Hook, Brooklyn, Pablo Helguera celebrated Spanish language and intellectual life;
- In DeFremery Park in Oakland, California, alongside healing workshops at the Life is Living festival, Brett Cook displayed portraits of local healers, and also brought the images to the Oakland Museum;
- In Illinois living rooms, Laurie Jo Reynolds gathered families of people formerly incarcerated in Tamms Correctional Center, the notorious supermax prison designed for sensory deprivation, which they helped close, and which now risks reopening, to plan the next art-informed campaign;
- In elementary schools, children at risk of lead poisoning drew "Fundreds," their interpretation of hundred dollar bills, which, Mel Chin writes, "represent the tangible voices of millions speaking to those with the power to end this national problem."

I evaluated the New York City-based projects and was point person for the field researchers evaluating projects happening elsewhere. What do these projects tell us about socially engaged art's many forms, diverse participants, intended benefits, and array of locations? What can they achieve in a social dimension? How do these artists' aesthetic orientation, training, and vision propel their social contribution? Responses to these questions, as perceived not by only the artist but also by the range of people intended to experience each project's impact, informed my evaluation and suggested metrics by which to assess the value of art whose purpose is as much social as aesthetic.

### **Evaluation in Practice**

I try to position myself as a supportive witness who shares what I observe with the artist along the way. I do not wait until the project ends to let the artist know about a concern, or a desire to do more of something, that a participant voices to me. This stance aligns with ABOG's framing of evaluation as one of the ways they support artists, rather than, as artists have sometimes experienced, something punitive or secretive.

I began by reading the artists' proposals, and then discussing with them how their projects evolved in the months since submitting them or from their original conception. It was important to know, for example, that Helguera's pop-up, Spanish language used bookstore had begun some years earlier as an art installation in a gallery, and now was an actual bookstore. While still a careful reproduction of his mother's library in his childhood home, with comfy armchairs, soft lighting, and a warm rug, where he had developed a love of reading, it was now also a shop where people could buy one book at a time, for a contribution of at least one dollar. The store format made it available to a broader constituency than frequents galleries.

Given the process orientation of socially engaged art, my approach to evaluating it is ethnographic, requiring that I (or the field researcher) go to the project sites multiple times and observe, and in some cases participate in, artist-generated activities. Our reports feature a lot of thick description and interpretation of what we've seen. We request dates, times, and places where the project will happen. We sit in on meetings where activities are set up, to see how all the partners' goals are included in the unfolding design. For example, Slagus and Leddy met with the teacher in whose sex-ed class they would be designing t-shirts with the students, and at her request included more handouts of the art terms they would be using so they could double as vocabulary words.

As the partners join in, I observe relationships being built. Indeed, the center of gravity for socially engaged art is less an object and more what Mel Chin calls a "sustained cultivation of relationships" to bring a project to fruition. In the Cincinnati iteration of Chin's *Operation Paydirt*, the desired outcome was to "prove the concept" of local engagement, action, and transfer of ownership of lead removal efforts to local artists, educators and healthcare professionals, city by city. Local stakeholders already involved in the effort separately were drawn together by the freshness of Chin's tactics, such as children at risk of lead poisoning drawing "fundred" dollar bills, representing, in Chin's words, "the value of informed public voice, to be exchanged for real resources to leverage 100% prevention."

I look for how aesthetics is manifested in the projects. Sometimes the forms are recognizable as art, like Brett Cook's ABOG project portraits of people that in some way play a healing role in their communities. He exhibited the portraits, which also feature the subjects' words, as a form of acknowledgement in the Life is Living festival in an Oakland park. His skill in portraiture is part of what must be evaluated because the beauty and energy of the portraits show his respect for the subjects.

Sometimes art training shapes the project in more subtle ways. Jan Mun, for example, was trained in documentary photography but found it too small a world. She explains: "When I went sailing, I wanted to photograph the wind and not the effect of wind." She integrates an artist's curiosity, capacity for observation, and communication skills with her concrete efforts as an amateur scientist in order to make a social impact. Mun's colleagues said that her

curiosity is infectious, piquing their interest in the world around them. Her capacity for observation is crucial in her roles of both artist and scientist. Her communication skills build public engagement into soil remediation efforts. She reaches both those people who come to neighborhood meetings out of concern about their local environment, and art audiences.

Some projects have both more and less recognizable aesthetic components. *Operation Paydirt* in Houston featured “Mel Chin: Rematch,” a major retrospective of his work, jointly presented by Blaffer Art Museum, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Asia Society Texas Center, and the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, from January through March 2015. As Sixto Wagan pointed out in his evaluation, Chin extended his art activities during that period into community-based processes to further lead removal from the soil, manifesting art as “not just the product, but a catalyzer of conversations and instrument for education and synthesis.”

Art often manifests itself as the capacity to imagine something other than what exists. Community development specialist Doug Reeler writes that an obstacle to social action is “finding the will to actually change... [and] working with resistance to change, most commonly rooted in fear of what might be lost, of doubt or self-doubt as to whether there is any real alternative that can be embraced” (2007, p. 23).<sup>1</sup> As Brett Cook said to field researcher Brian Edgar, “I start thinking more about what I want in the world. If I want it to be more inclusive, let me make things that are inclusive. If I want the world to be peaceful, let me make things that are peaceful. If I want to see multi-gendered, multiethnic, multicultural, queer, whatever images in the world, let me make them and then they exist and then I am changing the world. I've realized that my experience, my choices define my world.”

Artists working in social contexts play a range of roles, corresponding to their diverse goals. Slagus and Leddy are educators, integrating making things into learning, especially attractive in contrast to the many hours students spend sitting in classrooms. Laurie Jo Reynolds is a community builder, having brought together the families of incarcerated people through her art-infused, volunteer, grassroots legislative campaign that contributed to the closing of Tamms Correctional Center. Approaching Chin’s *Operation Paydirt*, field researcher Pat Clifford drew on the Walker Art Center’s “town square” framework for art and civic engagement that includes the artist in four roles: container, convener, connector, and catalyst (2015). The *Operation Paydirt* production team sees itself as a “catalyst”—bringing attention to toxins in the soil—and “connector”—bringing together artists, educators and health workers. It is a temporary “container” for cross sector activities. However, Chin and his team are not long-term “conveners,” a role they believe is more appropriately filled by local participants for the sake of sustainability.

While more qualitative than quantitative, our assessment includes numeric measures valuable to the artist; for example, Slagus and Leddy cared about the number of students who tested their *SexEd* curriculum. We do not assume that the scale of the project is a metric for all ABOG Fellows. Some depend on the multiplier effect and

need more than the fellowship year to reach their intended impact. Fran Ilich described his project “as ambitious and quixotic,” more about influencing a handful of people who will in turn influence others than about reaching many people directly. Ilich serving Zapatista-grown coffee at political meetings in New York City is symbolically valuable, providing a glimpse of a world animated by collectivity, meeting everyone’s basic needs, and connecting idealistic aspirations across national borders. Evidence of the power of his message was the standing-room-only crowd of mostly young artists at an ABOG presentation he gave.

A large part of my task is drawing out the experiences of people the project is meant to engage and benefit. In Jody Wood’s *Beauty in Transition*, this included the homeless women who got their hair done, shelter staff, and volunteer stylists. A number of shelter residents indicated that their treatment by the mobile salon personnel was as important as the free hairdo. A client getting her hair washed said she went to a salon recently but because she is homeless the stylist just wet her hair down to limit physical contact—quite unlike the care she received from the mobile salon stylist.

Several shelter staffers noted that the mobile salon facilitated their work by raising the women’s sense of worth, if temporarily. A recreation assistant at a Bushwick shelter said, “A lot of the residents have lost their way and to have this pick-you-up has been great for them. One who always has her head down got her hair done and it’s the first time I saw her smile. And she put her head up.”

Stylists participated for a range of reasons from “doing a good deed” to doing something in line with their already-established social commitments, to personal identification with the lot of the homeless. One stylist often interacts with homeless people through her church, giving old clothes and serving food at holidays. But she never before had an opportunity to do so through her profession, and was very pleased that she did now. She said, “When people are going through changes like these women are, hair helps that process. Being able to *see* themselves in good shape on the outside again helps them believe it can also happen on the inside.”

### **Persistent Questions**

How do evaluators deal with the slow pace of social change? Community-based projects evaluator Chris Dwyer (2012) has noted indicators in cases when the full value of the work may not emerge for years:

- New relationships that are formed and existing ones that are strengthened, especially from boundary-crossing opportunities that the arts nurture so well;
- Overt recognition of stories and painful episodes previously unspoken;
- Public policy openings, even when not successful;
- New roles assumed by key players, whether formal or informal;

- Subtle shifts in power; and
- Involvement of the next circle of artists who can spark subsequent engagements with future issues.

How does one evaluate a project whose manifestation changed radically from its original design? One fruitful approach, called Outcome Harvesting, begins with what actually happened and works backwards to identify what led to those results.

How much must socially engaged artists know about the social context, issue, and basic organizing principles to be effective? So long as someone core to a project is knowledgeable about the social issue, the artist has some time to develop direct understanding. As field researcher Arnold Aprill pointed out, Reynolds' partners in her prison project include the incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and their families; prison administrations and staff; legislators and their staffs; curators of exhibitions and conferences; and socially engaged and prison reform activists.

Where is a socially engaged project's spectatorial opportunity if it is fully inserted in everyday life? That is, how can the public experience a kind of art that they can't hang on their wall or see in an aesthetically marked venue? Some projects, like Helguera's bookstore and Cook's exhibits and clinics, issue public invitations. Sometimes a whole phase of a project is political activity, with no art produced. How can such work nonetheless be recognized as art? Appreciating the long time frame of much social practice is essential, but more thinking needs to be done around this question.

While some artists, like Reynolds, work on the same social issue in the same place for many years, other artists change focus or location. Is continuity of theme or place necessary for social change? Wood noted that her satisfaction is seeing the relationships between clients and stylists. She cares most that it be an experience of physical care, not a "social service." Though successful in terms of numbers of people reached in its time frame and level of meaningfulness of the experience, Wood recognizes a tension in *Beauty in Transition* between the project as art and as social impact. If it becomes regularized to fit into schedules, it loses some of its power as art, which Wood described as a sense of "renewed energy in the unexpected."

Helguera's bookstore drew attendees who found meaning in a place celebrating the Spanish language and in participatory events shaped by artists around the books. It closed, as planned, after six weeks. Perhaps someone else could revive it, though as one of Helguera's assistants said, the bookstore is much better when he's there because of his knowledge of and love for the books. Significantly, Helguera plans to open a bookstore in Chicago; other iterations of the bookstore took place in Phoenix, Miami, and San Francisco. He is manifesting the vision across the country, emphasizing range of places rather than duration.

Can initiatives like ABOG remove prejudice based on where art takes place? Too often, art outside aesthetic spaces and art districts of urban centers is categorically assumed to be of lesser worth. As Rosalba Rolon, artistic director

of Pregones Theater, said about their 2014 extension from their home base in the south Bronx to a theater space in midtown Manhattan, many assumed the move was a step up. Yet to Rolon and her colleagues, it was a lateral move; they could expand their audiences but had no intention of forsaking their base community (2015). When the money that changes hands around art, the people it engages, and its location underpin assumptions of worth, we miss out on some of the most imaginative and useful expressivity around us.

Does it matter if participants know that the initiator is doing an art project? On the one hand, no. What matters are the social impact and the quality of the work, the experience for participants, and the relationships that develop. On the other hand, knowing that such projects are art stretches understanding of its scope, for other artists, funders, policy makers, and the general public. That is where the contribution of appropriate evaluation may have the largest impact.

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#### **Note**



<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Pam Korza, Sylvia Gale, and the Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship collaboratory of Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, for bringing Reeler and other assessment models to my attention. For more on their excellent work about evaluating socially engaged art, in their case with higher education partners, see <http://imaginingamerica.org/research/assessment/>.