

**An Incomplete
and Subjective List
of Terms and Topics
Related to Art and
Social Practice
Volume One**

Harrell Fletcher

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Each week in the Art and Social Practice MFA Program at Portland State University we have an hour of what we call “topical discussion.” During that hour we explore a term or topic related to art and social practice. Some of the terms and topics are very basic, like collaboration, and site-specificity, but there are also less common terms like a touch of evil which we heard about from Pedro Reyes when we were visiting him in Mexico City a few years ago.

Many of the ideas we discuss are not specific to socially engaged art, but we are looking at them from a socially engaged art perspective. Several of the concepts are ones that I have used in my own work but until recently hadn't named what they were or detailed how they could be used as strategies when developing or analyzing a project. I hope that the list might be useful to people interested in socially engaged art. I started with about sixty terms and topics that I wrote about in 2019, and now I have added an additional forty or so. I'm already working on several new ones for a second volume.

Harrell Fletcher
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Adequacy

I ran across this term in relationship to art from the artist Charles Goldman. The way he explained it to me was the idea of making art that barely passes the threshold of being art. He likes that tension of just crossing the line with art, and it is evident in a lot of his work. I've expanded that idea when I talk to my students to also include an artist's whole practice. Consider what you need as opposed to what you might want. Do you need to have art world fame or just neighborhood fame? Do you need to do super elaborate and expensive projects, or will more basic ones be satisfactory? It's a question to pose in all aspects of what an artist engages in, and what's interesting is that often the more modest a project or practice, the more beautiful it is.

Announcing

Making work through the act of publicly announcing that something is going to happen, even if the something is not accessible to an audience. The announcement could take the form of a poster, email, web posting, word of mouth, etc. The activity being announced might be something that would already be happening without it being formalized as art, for instance the activity occurring in a public grade school classroom (with teacher consent) over a school year. But the announcement itself formalizes that activity so that it can be claimed as an artwork or art project including on CVs, etc.

Archiving

This is the creation of an archive, or the augmentation of an existing archive, as the framework and content of an art project.

Art institutions

There are various advantages to working with arts organizations and some downsides. Contemporary art institutions know about and understand contemporary art and are open to the idea that artists will do unorthodox things and are supportive of that kind of activity. But doing socially engaged project work is sometimes hard to accommodate for organizations that are primarily used to putting on exhibitions of objects. Additionally, arts organizations (especially smaller ones) tend to attract only art audiences, which can be limiting.

Audience

In regards to social practice projects, I like to think in terms of three different audiences: the first are people who actually participate in a project directly and also experience it (including the artist or artists); the second are people who experience the project directly but didn't participate in the development or construction of the project; and the tertiary audience are people who experience the project through documentation or any kind of mediation including photographs, video, written descriptions, word of mouth, etc.

Augmentation

The process of adding onto something that already exists as a project. That could be an art related institution, event, publication, non-art organization, or activity like a library, small business, a festival, etc. The idea is that you are taking something that functions normally and then are adding to that in some way that changes the existing something.

Becoming an audience to your own work

I think Tania Bruguera was the first person to formalize this idea, which is a way of working so that an artist creates a structure for a project that participants fill in or complete in such a way that the artist does not know in advance what the final artwork will be and can in that way become an audience to their own work.

Brainstorming/Critiques (“Crits”)

In typical MFA studio critiques, the idea is generally to discuss work after it has been already made and to largely talk about formal qualities. It is also assumed that the work has been produced for a gallery context and that ideally, that is where it would be presented. In fact, the whole commercial gallery paradigm is generally understood to be the context and structure that the work is to be assessed within. This of course has implications for the type of work being made and the ways students understand the role artists have in society.

When it comes to a version of the crit for socially engaged project-based work, it makes more sense to avoid the status quo approach. Instead, it is better to think of it like a group brainstorming session about work that has not yet been produced or is in process. There should not be any assumption about the ideal context for the work to be made or presented, and instead, questions about audience, participation, site-specificity, function, viability, etc., should be included.

In the PSU Art and Social Practice MFA program we call our equivalent to crits “student time” and encourage the students to describe a single project they are working on in just enough detail so that everyone in the class is on the same page, and then to receive questions and feedback that should help in refining and optimizing the project.

Claiming

This is the basic Duchamp readymade approach, except it can function not just through re-contextualizing non-art objects into art contexts, but can expand that strategy by suggesting that non-art objects, organizations, activities, etc., can be artworks without physically putting them into an art context. Instead, through the use of framing devices, it is possible to achieve the perception that the claimed subject is an artwork. Those devices could include using a title, location, date, etc., in the context of a publication, website, lecture, or listing it as part of a larger art exhibition.

Claiming a museum (or park or business) is something other than a museum

As a project, an artist could say that a museum or gallery (or anything else really) wasn't what it was normally thought to be and instead was something else. So, for instance, you could say that a museum was a philosophy club and then make advertisements for it using the location of the museum, but otherwise the museum would remain the same as it was usually.

Collaboration/Participation

As in working on a project with more than one person and/or designing a project so that other people can participate in it. There are a range of ways that people can collaborate on and participate in social practice projects. If we start with passive viewership as the least involved way that someone can engage in an artwork, we then move on to simple interactions where the people involved are not significant as individuals but are necessary to push a button or eat some food, then into more involved types of participation where the participants are important as individuals and have agency in the content of the project, and eventually onto partial collaboration with greater agency and involvement, and ending with full collaboration in which the project is totally conceived of, developed, and produced by two or more people. Collaborations can happen with artists and non-artists as well.

Collections

A big part of typical art world success is based on the museum and private collections that an artist's work has been acquired by. But what if, as an artist, you don't make objects that are easily bought and sold and shipped and collected? If your work is project-based and possibly ephemeral or site-specific, it might not be able to be collected in a typical manner, and that reduces the status (and funding) that an artist can receive. But there are examples of artist's works that have somehow made their way into art collections while not being object-based. Roman Ondak's piece "Good Feelings in Good Times," which is owned by the Tate Modern in London, is a good example. The project is a set of instructions detailing how a group of actors should be hired to stand in a queue attracting members of the public to line up behind them until they disperse and reassemble somewhere else to repeat the process. Apparently, the work operates in the collection in a similar way to a painting: it was purchased, it is listed as belonging to the Tate, it can be borrowed by other institutions, etc.

So, making instruction-based work is one approach to use for entering into the arena of a museum collection—and you would think in the case of the Ondak piece, that the Tate would be very happy with it because of the lack of need for storage when it is not in use—but there are other methods as well. Documentation and artifacts from a socially engaged project can also be collected, and if a curator is open to it, a project could be designed by an artist specifically to function as part of the museum’s collection. When artists who have different kinds of practices are treated equitably by art world powers, then it will be more likely that artists will be able to choose the ways that they want to work without systemic structural pressure and conditioning determining those ways for them.

Conceptual art

Without the formalization and validation of conceptual art methods, it would be hard to imagine how current socially engaged art would be possible since that type of project-based work relies on the development of ideas in ways that status quo studio/gallery work does not need to necessarily.

Conceptual twist

In comedy they call this “misdirection.” It’s the element in a project that in some way breaks from expectation or logic. The whole project can be constructed as a conceptual twist or it can be added-in as an element somewhere.

Consulting

The act of discussing, brainstorming, and working on the concept of a project with another artist or an organization as an artwork in and of itself. This is related to something that Lee Walton has discussed, the idea of an “artist assist” being something that should be valued and credited in the way that an “assist” in basketball (and maybe some other sports?) gives credit to the activity of one player helping another player to score a point. It’s interesting that this kind of consulting is highly valued in other occupations, but in art there is no existing formal crediting system for even acknowledging when an artist assists through consultation.

Context

The context is the place where a project is developed and produced in, which includes not just the physical elements of the place, but also its history, current and future dynamics, and emotional/psychological elements.

Crediting

As in the case of films or plays or musical recordings, it is important to credit the people involved with art projects. It is also an opportunity to counter the status quo idea that artists need to work solo and in proprietary ways.

Curation

The use of curatorial strategies as an artwork or art practice, so that the artist may function in some ways like a curator selecting and presenting work but doing that while still seeing themselves as artists and not traditional curators.

Delegation

Or the “delegated model” where the artist conceives of an idea for a project and then asks a set of other artists (or non-artists) to create an aspect of the project. Then, when all of the pieces are put together into a single exhibition, event, publication, etc., the small, delegated parts become a larger whole. It is important in delegated projects, as with all social practice projects, to credit each participant for the role that they have played in the project and to pay them if funding is available. In this approach, the primary artist is likely creating the structure that the other people are then filling content into.

Design

Social practice type projects often involve publications, posters, and other design related materials, so it can be very useful to either develop good design skills or to cultivate good relationships and collaborations with designers.

Distance projects

The idea here is that the artist constructs a project that takes place remotely from where the artist is existing. This could be done with an initial site visit to the location where the project is going to take place or potentially without ever going to that place. Instead, the project is produced by people in the location where the project is taking place through instructions that the artist has created for that place. The people on the ground in the project location can be thought of as collaborators and should be credited for their role in the project.

Documentation

Because social practice projects don't always involve objects that can be transported and re-presented and instead might be totally ephemeral or totally permanent and unmoveable, documentation is important for a tertiary audience to experience the work. This can happen in traditional forms like photographs, video, etc., and can be shown on the web, in publications, and as part of lectures. But documentation can also be done in less orthodox ways like through re-creations, drawings, rumors, etc.

Duration

The amount of time spent working on a project is one way of looking at the duration of the project, though it could also be referring to how long the project is active, too, or both of those two together. There is a sort of knee-jerk idea that when it comes to socially engaged work, long duration equates to being better, and short duration is less good or even bad. I've always felt that this was not an accurate assumption, and as I have said many times, if a bad project lasts a long time, it doesn't make it better, it just means it is bad for longer. Instead, my feeling is that duration is just another factor in determining the best way to approach and develop any given project. Some projects—based on resources available, circumstances, etc.—are best when they are very short term. There are ways to avoid the problems that come when an artist is “parachuted” into a project, primarily by setting up the work so that the artist allows local people to present content, creating a situation in which the artist becomes an audience to the project that they have conceived of and or facilitated.

Editing/Publishing

Artists can edit or publish work by other people and consider that their own artistic practice.

I knew a person who had a small publishing company which happened to have a few books that sold well enough so that it allowed him to pursue very obscure topics for publications as well. He would approach restaurants that he liked to eat at and offer them the chance to produce a recipe book just so he could talk to the cooks and get access to the kitchen. He would also look up baseball players that he was a fan of when he was a kid and ask them if they would like to publish their autobiography with him so that he could spend time getting to know them personally. He wasn't claiming any of that was an art project, but if he had, I think it would have been a pretty good one.

Education

Many socially engaged projects have educational components built into them. One of the advantages of project-based work is the opportunity to use the process as a way to learn about topics that the artist is interested in from experiential, direct, and indirect approaches. I like to position myself—when working on a project in a place that I am not familiar with—as the one who is learning from the people who I meet and interact with, often creating project structures that allow those local and more knowledgeable people to be the ones providing content and leading the education process.

Enigma

As Emily Dickinson said, “tell the truth, but tell it slant” or something like that. Just because it is socially engaged art, doesn’t mean that the work can’t have mystery! It’s just a careful balance because too much enigma can make work inaccessible, but not enough can make it dull.

Ethics

In general, it is important to be able to determine how to behave and operate in life so that you are functioning within both personal and societal ethical practices. There are, of course, constructed laws that we each need to decide if we will follow or not follow and in what ways. This might be partially considered from the point of view of self-interest, familial interests, societal interests, and based on if the laws make sense in any particular situational circumstances or not, though some people prefer to use precedent and generalized moral codes instead of having to make ethical decisions based on each issue and experience that they encounter. There are pluses and minuses for both approaches, but I favor the situational ethics one, even though it requires a lot more work.

Artists also need to figure out their own ethical ideas, methods, and value systems and then try to apply them as they do their work. I tend to think that common sense and following basic social contracts of not harming others (or annoying them too much) is the best approach,

but it could be that many artists are not aware of the potential harm they might cause through their work and so need to educate themselves to have greater understanding of their own biases, privileges, power, etc., so that they can effectively do the work that they want to do in meaningful and useful ways.

I have encountered the idea that social practice artists need to be especially conscious of their ethical responsibilities because of the social nature of their work, but I have always contended that everyone (including studio/gallery artists) should be engaged with understanding their impacts on other people, the environment, wealth distribution, hierarchies, etc., and that artists who are interested in socially engaged practices are generally at least already somewhat aware of these dynamics. On the other hand, non-socially engaged artists often times are less conscious of the ways they are making impacts with their work from ethical perspectives. Also, when faced with this question, I often ask for an example of a socially engaged art project that has had a negative

ethical social impact and have not yet been given a good suggestion, though I'm sure there are a few out there.

Considering a socially engaged project to just not be very good from a subjective point of view doesn't qualify. There are lots and lots of "bad" art being made out there (and because there are a lot more paintings and sculptures than socially engaged projects that means there are also a lot more "bad" paintings and sculptures than there are "bad" socially engaged art projects) but that is no reason for artists to stop doing work, at least not from an ethical point of view.

Exhibitions

Typically, it is assumed that artists want to primarily show their work as part of exhibitions, but in the case of socially engaged projects, an exhibition might not be the best platform for the work. Sometimes an opportunity for an artist is tied to doing an exhibition even if that is not the primary interest of the artist. In that case, the exhibition can be seen as a resource for the project that can also include non-exhibition work like workshops, public art, performances, websites, publications, etc., which happen both inside and outside of the exhibiting institution.

Existing forms

Inhabiting existing forms can sometimes be more effective and efficient than trying to always create new ones. That's partly why painters continue to use canvas and oil paint over and over again. But when it comes to project-based work, sometimes there is a sense that the form needs to be different for each project. I don't think that's necessarily true; project structures can be reused in different circumstances to create very new content. Also, you can use non-art existing forms like a cafe, library, making furniture or clothes, offering counseling or education, etc., as your art project.

Expanding crediting on a status quo activity to include everyone involved

In the case of an exhibition of a series of paintings taking place in a standard museum or gallery, the artist would normally be the only person given credit for the work. There might be a list thanking a few people somewhere, but that's about it, often times even the curator is not credited. An interesting tweak would be to do everything as usual, but instead of only crediting the artists, list and credit every person who made the work and the show possible, including the people who made the canvases and paint and brushes, sold the canvases, paints and brushes, any assistants who were involved, anyone who transported and installed the work, etc. It would be a way of using a status quo set up and through crediting alone, transforming it into a socially engaged work of art.

Extreme reversing

The act of completely flipping a situation as an art project. For instance, starting with a place that doesn't have a museum and then, through claiming, reframing, augmenting, announcing, etc., creating the largest museum in the world. Or, by creating a collection of something that isn't usually collected, an example could be convincing an organization that doesn't normally collect art to start collecting non-object based art, which can be inexpensive and does not require storage, insurance, etc., so that the organization soon has the largest collection of non-object based art in the world.

Framing

This is in reference to an artist deciding the parameters for a project. In the conventional approach, the object (painting, sculpture, photograph, etc.) is the artwork that an artist makes and nothing else is art. But in a social practice project, the artist can decide that the artwork includes the process as well as various tangential elements including publications, events, posters, documentation, etc. It also allows the artist to collaborate in various ways and to validate co-authorship as part of a project.

Frequency (as in track record, public exposure, and frequency)

If artists are interested in increasing their chances of being given opportunities and resources to continue their work, one thing to consider is how often their projects are made available to the public. The greater the frequency (along with the work being seen as “good” and “interesting,” etc.) the more likely people will encounter the work who have the ability to support it. As they say, “you miss 100% of the shots you don’t take.” Along with creating a track record and having public exposure, frequency is an important factor in the process of creating a sustainable artistic practice.

Friction problem

When conceiving of a project it is useful to evaluate its feasibility in terms of “friction”—aspects of the project that make it difficult to complete. Friction is situational, so, for instance, in the case of someone with access to a large budget, cost won’t be friction. But for someone with a small budget or no budget, if the project they want to do will cost a lot to produce then that will cause friction. Project friction can also be a factor in terms of time, labor, access to space, collaboration, participation needs, etc. My general suggestion for artists working on developing projects is to assess the potential friction which may make the project difficult or impossible to produce and then to see if modifications are possible—basically can it be done more cheaply, involving less people, in a space that is not rarefied and hard to gain access to, etc.? This might seem like compromising the quality or expansiveness of the work, but from my experience with both my own projects and other peoples’, the biggest budgets, most laborious and time-consuming work, and involvement of large numbers of people does

not necessarily make the work better. Some of the most impactful projects I have done and experienced have been inexpensive, non-laborious, quickly produced, and made for a limited audience.

Funding

In the U.S., the typical ways that artists fund themselves are through commercial sales, teaching, and/or arts grants. In reality, most people who think of themselves as artists don't receive any funding at all for their art practice, and probably most of those artists don't even bother trying to get funding. There is a big disparity between the number of artists and the capacity of commercial galleries to show and sell those people's work, as well as a limited number of art teaching possibilities and arts grant opportunities. Those options are all available to project-based socially engaged artists, but there are other ways to fund that kind of work as well. Working on commissions from arts and non-arts organizations is one example. Sometimes the commission can be for a project that does not interfere with regular exhibition and other programming at the institution, which makes it more likely to be able to happen and increases the number of possibilities, such as in the case of temporary event-based projects or exhibitions in non-gallery parts of museums like cafes and bookstores, for instance.

Another approach is to create projects that function as self-initiated institutions or artist residencies within existing organizations like schools, libraries, park systems, or sanitation departments (Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work is a great example) and to apply for funding that is not normally available to individual artists through those entities. A small business model is another option. It is important to see funding approaches as part of projects and not just as the support system for them.

Hanging out method

A process which can be used during a site-visit or during the research phase of any project in which the artist wanders around, talks to local people, and spends time casually observing in the location where they will be developing a project in order to come up with ideas for the concept of the project and to make connections with potential local participants.

Hierarchy

The art world system is built on status and hierarchy, but artists can deviate from that approach if they want to. That can include not going along with the idea that you can only go up the steps of “art world success” which would dictate that once you move from showing in alternative spaces to commercial galleries, to fancier commercial galleries, to museums, that you cannot move backwards for fear that your value as an artist will go down. Instead, if artists showed their work based on what they actually thought was interesting, that could mean that they worked with a whole range of different status level organizations (alternative spaces, community college galleries, museums, etc.) in different places—not just art world hubs like NYC and LA—and as part of socially engaged projects that might take place at schools, prisons, hospitals, the list goes on. If artists make it clear that they don’t want to be limited to art world status conventions and hierarchies, then the system can change, but examples need to be made by artists in power to correct that situation.

Artists can also use their agency to dissolve or diminish hierarchy through collaborating with people who have less art world status such as kids, non-artists, artists with little or no art world connections, etc., and can also alter audience hierarchy by privileging and creating access for local audiences and people who are generally given less value by the art world system.

Humor

Making projects that have funny elements is one way of making them more accessible. Personally, I like my humor pretty dry.

Ideal situations

Artists have the chance to construct situations in the way that they would like them to be, as opposed to the way that they might normally exist. For instance, just because kids are not normally included in the art world—at least not positions of agency—it is still possible for artists to create projects that allow kids to take those kinds of roles. That same approach can apply to anything else that an artist would like to see happen within the small-scale realm of possibilities that they have control over when producing a project.

Including things that already exist as part of a project

An artist can include and claim pre-existing elements into a project expanding on Duchamp's readymade approach. For instance, a public project could have a combination of things that the artist made, commissioned works from other people, and potentially something that was made previously that already exists, such as a sign, park, library, school, tree, etc. Additionally, something could be included like an event that happens during the time of the project but that was not created for the project like a parade, public meeting, lecture, play, etc. The artists creating the project can ask for consent to include those things within the framing of the project, just like a curator would include works of art from an artist's studio in a gallery exhibition.

Inclusion

Within a socially engaged art project, the artist has the opportunity to be as inclusive as they would like to be in various ways. That could mean who the collaborators and participants are, how accessible the project is to local and diverse audiences, and in what ways the project is made available in documentation form, which could include free publications distributed publicly, etc., to allow the project to be known by people who might not normally go to a contemporary art venue or presentation.

Individualized situational optimization

The act of evaluating a situation or maybe an opportunity, such as the offer to do an exhibition at a gallery, and then adjusting what an artist does to make that fit with their individual and situational interests. So, instead of exhibiting an artist's own work maybe they show other people's work; instead of having a normal opening, they could organize a debate; and instead of having the sales of the work only go to the gallery and artists, they could ask that a percentage goes to a local school to pay to bring in artists to do projects with the kids. But those are just a few examples; the optimization can be done with anything, like class assignments, jobs, relationships, writing an artist statement, etc.

Instructions

The use of instructions, prompts, scores, or assignments as part of a participatory art project. In many cases, the artist comes up with the instructions and others—who should receive credit for their roles—respond by producing whatever the instructions suggest. This can be used as part of “distance projects” but the artist really has to be careful about who is on the other end facilitating the instructions, because if they don’t know what they are doing or deviate from the specific instructions without consultation with the artist, things can fall apart or turn into something undesirable.

Interdisciplinarity

The use of various disciplines, media, and approaches as an artist in any project, as opposed to functioning as an artist who only works in one medium.

Interlocutors

It's always a good idea when working on a project in a community that an artist doesn't belong to (whether that is in a place where the artist doesn't live or in their own city or town but with a group they don't normally interact with) to collaborate with a person who is from that community so that they can help guide and translate (not just language, but culture, etc.) for the artist, and so that people who might potentially participate in an artist's project have someone that is familiar to them introducing ideas and asking questions.

Intimate projects

This involves making projects that the artist has a personal connection to as a starting point for something that could then be made of interest through participation and other involvements by a wider audience. An alum of PSU's Art and Social Practice MFA program, Xi Jie Ng, created several projects that operate in this way. One was based on her interest in her grandmother's bunions, and another was about the apartment complex where she lived. Xi Jie suggested this term as one that should be added to this list after I described a project that I was working on that had to do with my grandfather and his work as a farm manager at a university in California.

Another example is The Quiet Music Festival, a project that Chris Johanson created because of his own hearing issues and his desire to attend a musical event that was specifically designed for very quiet music.

Learning

As I mentioned in the “education” topic, an artist can position themselves as someone who is given an opportunity to learn through the process of creating a project. That could include anything from learning a new media to learning about the culture and history of a project location. The shift is that in normal conditions, it is the artist that is supposedly offering up culture and education to the public and in this scenario, the artist is instead learning about existing culture and knowledge from local people and then helping to make that knowledge more accessible to a wider audience.

Local audience engagement

Constructing projects so that wherever they take place, the local audience feels interested and invested in the project. This can be done at both art and non-art venues by exploring who lives, works, hangs out at or near the location that the project is being presented, and to then make work that those people can have a role in or is at least of interest to them.

Making friends with your audience

When I was an undergrad student at Humboldt State University, I noticed something interesting: I was friends with all the students making the best art. At first, I thought I was just lucky, or that good artists were attracted to being friends with me, but then I realized the reason I thought my friends' art was the best was because I had access to the back stories of why and how they made the art, my extra knowledge about the artist informed how I understood the art itself. That led me to want to find out more about the lives of professional artists, so I read biographies about them, went to every lecture I had access to, watched documentaries about artists, etc. (This was pre-internet, so my sources were limited). At some point it occurred to me that most people were not bothering to do the research that I was doing and had to just contend with whatever was available in the artwork itself. So, I decided that I should add as much context as possible to my own work. Instead of making obscure and abstract art, I tried to make work that was very literal, often including commentary directly on the art or at

least by adding explicit gallery guides and labels.
I think what I was trying to do was make friends
with my audience.

Making the things you would like to see existing in the world

Artists have the opportunity to use their work as a way to realize—often just in small ways—the kinds of things they would like to have exist in the world. That can include social dynamics, histories, personal stories, economic systems, alternative educational opportunities, etc. But unfortunately, more often than not, artists instead just spend their time in isolated studios trying to make objects that rich people would like to buy, reinforcing and magnifying our existing capitalist system.

Mixed combo (combining two or more things that don't normally go together)

I once saw a store advertising “Indian spices and computer repair.” I’ve encountered unlimited stores that I don’t recall because they conformed to expectation and didn’t stand out in anyway, but I remember the spice and computer repair store because it broke from my assumptions. Artists have the ability to do that with their work in a variety of ways, but one way that can be very impactful is to just combine two subjects that don’t normally go together. For instance, years ago I created a project in Indianapolis at an international grocery store where I worked with customers who had immigrated from various places around the globe to present information about the places they had come from as little lectures at the front of food aisles representing those places. It was kind of like a science fair, but about global culture and history presented in a grocery store context.

Multiple points of access

Having various entry points or interest areas within a project, so that some people might be engaged in one aspect of the project and other people might be engaged in another. This could also apply to how a project can function for a non-art audience in certain ways, while having elements that might be interesting from an art world perspective at the same time.

Non-art institutions

There are various advantages to working with non-arts organizations, and some downsides. Non-arts institutions have access to non-art audiences of various sorts depending on what kind of organization they are and where they are located, and they have resources that are sometimes more interesting than arts organizations have depending on the kind of work that they do. But non-arts organizations are not necessarily familiar with contemporary art and may not be supportive of the weird ideas that artists want to do with them. They also might have pre-conceived concepts of the ways they think art might be useful to their organization, which may not be of interest to artists.

Non-fiction art

In literature there is fiction and non-fiction, in film there are features and documentaries, but what is “non-fiction art?” For me, the question itself is an interesting one to consider and I don’t feel like I have an absolute answer, but one way of considering the idea is to think about the difference between art that is made in a studio and is based only on the artist’s ideas and imagination, as opposed to art that is made in the public that addresses real world histories, issues, biographies, and current societal dynamics. It’s not a totally clean delineation, and there are lots of examples of exceptions in either approach. Photography has always ridden a line between fiction and non-fiction, but it is pretty easy in some cases to see a difference between what I would call the “fictional” photography of Cindy Sherman, and the “non-fiction” photography of someone like Wendy Ewald, even when Wendy includes imaginary elements that her collaborators and participants provide for making the image.

Non-fictionalizing

Adding non-fiction elements to something that is fictional or abstract. For instance, I once worked with a dancer who was performing what appeared to be a fairly abstract performance, but she allowed me to create breaks during the dance when the lights would come up and the music would stop so that I could ask her questions about her life and work. Another possible example would be to start with a fictional film or book and re-edit it to include documentary scenes related to the original work.

Non-object-based art for sale

Because the art world is largely structured around the studio/gallery model and the production and presentation of objects for sale, artists whose work is non-object-based are at a considerable disadvantage. Part of the way artists are valued and gain status is by having their work collected in museums, and again, if an artist doesn't have objects for sale, then they will generally be left out of that hierarchical system. But there are precedents and possible ways that artists who don't make objects can still have work collected in museums. For instance, by selling instruction-based work or ephemera from previously produced public projects.

Parameter adjustment

When faced with a problem on an art project, one way to address the situation is to adjust the parameters. By increasing the size of the project, the problem becomes smaller. Alternately, if an aspect of the project is working well, but other parts are not, the artist can decrease the scope of the project and just focus on the part that is working to reduce the problems.

Phantoms

Any inaccurate ideas, fears, mental obstacles, etc., that prevent an artist (or anyone else) from producing a project or being open to learning something, etc. What can be a real obstacle for one person or one situation, might not be an obstacle for another person or situation, so frequent individual evaluation is necessary to make sure phantoms are not getting in the way of an artist's development and success.

Piggybacking

Combining two or more projects, presentations, opportunities, etc., into one. For instance, if two organizations ask an artist to do projects in the same city around the same time, the artist could choose to combine the two, share the resources that they both offer, and come up with one larger project. By doing that, the artist can potentially satisfy the interests of both organizations while at the same time bringing their audiences together in a way that may not normally happen.

Pitching

This is when an artist comes up with a project idea and proposes it to a person who has the ability to help facilitate the production of the project. This could be directed to a curator or other art professional, but it could also be a non-art person, someone who works for a city agency, a librarian, a business owner, or non-profit director, etc. The pitch should be simple and easy to understand so that it doesn't take up much time and energy before an agreement has been made. In most cases an email with a description of the project idea and the potential resources needed is a good starting pitch. Having some kind of "in" with the person is always helpful but is not totally necessary. One extra related idea is that when it comes to traditional art venues, a social practice type project proposal can be to do work that takes place not in the galleries (which are less likely to be available) and instead in an unorthodox place like the lobby, cafe, bookstore, or outside but in proximity to the art institution.

Platforms

The platform is the structure that the project takes place in or on, so that in the case of most object-based artwork, the platform is a gallery or museum or quasi-version of those things like an alternative space in a garage or a cafe, etc. In the case of social practice projects and other non-object-based work, the platform can be a school, a library, a food cart, a radio program, the web, clothes, a podcast, etc.

Practical projects

Artists can create what appears to be totally practical, utilitarian projects by working to have a city crosswalk installed, creating a park in a vacant lot, adding a bench to a view spot, painting someone's house, building a skateboard park, etc., and calling it an artwork.

Project lists

For my own practice, making lists of possible projects has been very important. I write both general project ideas, and ones that are specific to places where I've been commissioned to create a project. In both cases, I have always had more ideas than I ended up realizing. I think there is a value to the unproduced ideas. They give me alternatives if an idea I'm pursuing isn't working out and they help lead to other ideas that I might actually produce. Also, they have a value in their own right—almost like poems—but from the angle of thought experiments about tweaking existing situations into formalizations that can be understood as artworks. I have published ideas in various forms over the years to be valued just as ideas, as opposed to seeing them strictly as descriptions of projects I might make. Years ago, Miranda July and I created a participatory online art project called “Learning to Love You More” that used many of our project ideas as prompts for other people to realize and report back the results on the website.

Project producer

This is the idea that, like a movie producer or other kinds of producers who handle logistics for a director or team of people working on a film, etc., there could also be producers for socially engaged art projects that are not the main artist or artists and not a participant of the project, but instead help to produce the project by handling budgets, scheduling, paperwork, brainstorming ideas, etc. It would be interesting if artists took this role for other artists. I have not run across any formalized version of that in the U.S., but have encountered something like that in Canada and parts of Europe for some public art projects, but in those cases the “producers” were not artists and instead were administrators or curators of one kind or another and the processes they were involved with were not considered part of the art.

Project work

Instead of working on an object, the artist works on a project, which most likely would happen outside of a studio and could have multiple elements and not be designed to be purchased in the traditional sense of an object being bought and sold but could instead be commissioned. In this way, instead of the artist making objects and then hoping that they will be sold, the artist is commissioned in advance and then produces work to fill that commission.

Projects as research

There are ways to do research while also producing a project at the same time. Instead of conducting interviews privately on a subject or in a place and then using information from that process to create a project, the interviews could be done publicly as part of a radio show or podcast, or they could be transcribed and put into a publication. Partly, it is a matter of re-evaluating what can be considered “research.” In the past, I have done a project where I would walk around with a local person, and they would select and pick up random small objects they found on the ground, and I would shoot videos of them opening up their hand to reveal the object. I would then show the video which was made up of hundreds of short moments during that process. It was visually interesting but making the video was also a form of research for me because it allowed me to spend time talking with a local person, walking around the neighborhood where I was working, and learning about what could be commonly found on the ground, which ranged from natural materials like leaves, to various kinds of trash, toys, food, etc.

Projects with “legs”

Some projects can lead to other opportunities to expand on the original work in new contexts and/or in different forms. I collaboratively published a zine with Elizabeth Meyer in the 90’s of a list of fears written by artist Michael Loggins (*Fears of Your Life*). It went on to be reprinted in *The Sun* and *Harper’s Magazine*, read on *This American Life*, included in a film by Miranda July (*Nest of Tens*), turned into a dance performance, and published as a book (by Manic D Press). The original zine had a limited audience, but it was inexpensive and easy to transport and share in the public realm, and it also was based on very compelling content.

If you want to create a project that has the possibility of developing “legs” then those two things seem important: easy access and great work. What are other factors? In the case of the zine, it was something that could be easily adapted to other forms like being reprinted and read on the radio, and it was unusual in various ways. Some projects are not going to have all those qualities for various reasons,

but if additional opportunities are desired, it's useful to contemplate if at least some aspect of a project can be designed so that "legs" are more likely.

Public art

Public art has typically been thought of as permanent sculptures or mural-type projects that are funded by government “percent for art” programs or corporate entities. There are several alternatives that could also be thought of as public art, including non-sanctioned street art of various kinds, temporary public art in the form of fliers, posters, performances, or interventions, and site-specific participatory projects. Over the last couple of decades, there has been a slow but promising shift towards using “percent for art” government funding to support less orthodox ideas of public art; social practice seems to be included in that development.

Publications

Social practice people seem to really like publications. It makes sense for a few reasons, one of which is that since there are not always objects made during social practice projects, publications can function as a tangible object that represent what happened. Also, depending on the way the publication is produced—newspaper printing is a good example—it can be done cheaply and in large quantities so that the publication can be given away for free. And again, because objects aren't always primary in social practice projects, documentation is important, and publications can serve as one approach to creating mediated forms for tertiary audiences to experience.

Radical potential of conceptual art

Conceptual art was very radical when it was first introduced and formalized as an artistic approach in the 1960's and 70's, but it largely wound-up operating within the insularity of the art world. Many conceptual art techniques can be of use in places and situations outside of the art world, especially when resources are slim. In a prison context for instance, it is difficult to acquire art materials and equipment, and there are usually few, if any, platforms for presenting work, but conceptual art doesn't require those things. Someone who is incarcerated in a prison setting could use conceptual methods to create a whole body of work that just relies on language and perception. This could result in a long list of work examples for professional artistic purposes like a CV, and potentially a publication and website. The primary obstacle preventing that from happening is knowledge of and validation of conceptual art outside of rarified art contexts. If conceptual art can be made more accessible, understood, and relevant, then it will have a greater chance of being used by people outside of the art world.

Re-creation

Replicating a pre-existing project, event, exhibition, etc., as an art project. The re-contextualization of the original project is what makes the new version of interest to do. Crediting the original project and producers of that project is important and if possible, asking their approval to do the re-creation.

Renaming

An approach to making work that very literally just renames existing things in the world.

That could include existing buildings, streets, geographic areas, monuments, everyday objects, systems, jobs, activities, etc. This could be done officially or unofficially.

Re-curating

When an artist is given an opportunity to present their work, they can use their own agency to re-curate or sub-curate other artists' work into the exhibition, public art project, publication, etc.

Recycling work instead of making new work

Sometimes, especially for folks who have been at it a long time, it is better to just re-evaluate (and possibly re-form) old work than it is to just keep making new work. For instance, photographers could take a look at old images that they never did anything with and use them to create a book. Or maybe it makes more sense to spend time archiving and making accessible in some form, work from the past (like donating ephemera to a library's special collection) than it does to make new work to add to the pile of already existing work.

Reframing a job description or funding system

Thinking of my job as a professor at PSU not only within the framework of PSU (classes, terms, grades, etc.) but instead, as being funded by the state to work with emerging artists to develop their practices. As part of that reframing, I don't have to think of my work fitting into contract dates, classes, and grading periods, etc. Instead, for instance, I continue to do my work during the summer when I'm not officially compensated but I also can think of my official time in looser ways than people with standard nine-to-five type jobs. This could be applied to projects, too, that are worked on during job hours or use resources that are available as part of a job; for example, a person working as a librarian could also see themselves as an artist-in-residence at the library and curate and program various things that go beyond their job description, while still fulfilling the requirements of their job.

Refusal

I'm not totally sure what I had in mind when I noted this term in my notebook and it could be interpreted in various ways. I might have been thinking of the idea that an artist could formalize refusing to do something, maybe a request to fulfill some kind of requirement, like filling out a contract, or providing an image in advance of producing a project, or filling an exhibition space with work, etc., as a work in and of itself. Basically, claiming the refusal as a work of art.

Re-granting

When an artist is given a grant, they can use part or all of the funds to give their own grants to other people, projects, or organizations.

Removing

Using the action of taking away something that exists somewhere, but in some way making the erasure evident as the art project. For instance, removing a Confederate Civil War general's monument but replacing it with a plaque that explains the reasons for the removal.

Replacement

Or in its more explanatory but cumbersome term, “system segment replacement.” This is an idea I stumbled on while thinking about a possible project and then realizing that it applied to a lot of my past work as well. The way it works is that the artist takes an existing system (any one will do) and leaves the start and end points but takes out and replaces some part of the middle. In many cases, that might mean creating a less efficient system from the point of view of time or costs, but the qualities that can be created are potentially much more interesting.

Repositioning (moving out of the spotlight and bringing someone else into it)

What I call “repositioning” is a basic move in socially engaged art where the artist takes an opportunity that is presented to them and invites someone else to use it, often with the support of the artist. Examples are accepting an offer to have an exhibition or publish a book or do a performance, etc., but instead, presenting someone else’s work along with contextualizing information about why the repositioning was done, which might be because the other person or people don’t normally have the chance to show what they do in an art context, or because it makes more sense to show the work of a local person, or some other reason.

Residency

More precisely this could be called the self-initiated residency model. For this approach, the artist creates (generally with approval) an artist-in-residence position for themselves (or others) at an organization that doesn't normally have an artist-in-residence program or position. This could be at a school, a business, a library, a park, etc. Once the "residency" is established—which can be formalized by being listed on the organization's website, through establishing a space for the residency within the organization, physical signage, business cards, etc.—then the artist can work within that context to develop work that is relevant to the people who exist in that place.

Resource/Project matching

When an artist finds themselves with a given resource, such as a project budget, a presentation platform, a chance to be included in a publication, or even just the existing resources that an artist has themselves—time, energy, space, interest, personal funds, etc.—there can be a tendency to overshoot the resource and attempt to create work that not only exhausts what is available but goes beyond in a way that makes the work not possible or laborious, unpleasant, etc. Instead, I suggest creatively trying to match the project with the resources that are available to make the best possible work comfortably within the parameters that exist.

Retroactive claiming

An artist can retroactively claim elements of the past as artworks. That could apply to both object-based things—like photographs or a garden—and experiences—like going on a walk or having a discussion. To formalize retroactive claiming as an artwork, an artist can reframe it by giving the object or experience (or even a thought) a title, date, location, description, and potentially documentation, that could be from the time it occurred in the form of a photo from a walk or garden, etc., or through reconstructing the activity by taking a photo now that represented the earlier activity or by making a drawing, re-performing the activity publicly, etc., though documentation (other than a title, etc.) of the retroactive project isn't actually necessary. The artist can then add that “project” to their resume and website, create publications based on retroactively claimed works, talk about them in lectures, and apply for funding to retroactively reframe more projects or work with others to select and formalize their own retroactive artworks. I can imagine skeptics saying that without initial intention, the past

activities can't be reframed as art, but why should we be concerned about when the activities happened? Eventually, everything becomes a part of the past, and there is still intention, it's just intention to retroactively reframe rather than intention to do something at a future point.

Revealing

Constructing a project that shows something that is normally hidden or not focused on; it could be a system, a history, a person's activities, a place, etc.

Reviewing (puddle reviewer)

An artist could create a practice based on reviewing existing things, but they are not limited to subjects that are traditionally reviewed like books, films, and food. Instead, they could become reviewers of public restrooms, puddles, or playgrounds, etc.

Self-repairing projects

This idea is related to using the delegated model but could be done with other structures as well. The way it works is that when designing a project, the artist constructs it in such a way so that if any one—or potentially more than one—part or participant doesn't work out, the rest of the project still happens and is not adversely impacted. One potential opposite version of this approach would be to base the entire project on one or just a couple of people, so that if they don't follow through on their end of the project the whole thing is no longer possible to complete. In some cases that is necessary for a particular project (I've personally done many projects with just one person), but it does require greater trust and accountability than projects with the potential for self-repair.

Self-initiated institutions

The creation—as an art project—of an “institution.” It could be ongoing or temporary, for instance, a contemporary art museum in a school, artist residency in a prison, small personal library inside of a college library, etc. Various formalizations can be employed to enhance the sense that the self-initiated institution is real, like a website, signage, staff positions, etc.

Services for sale

Project-based artists can create services that they sell in a similar way that studio artists make objects for sale. Examples could be rearranging a collector's furniture, planting something in a collector's garden, organizing a collector's closet, etc.

Shticks

In general, the idea of a shtick in art is frowned upon, and in cases of cheesy superficial shticks, I can understand why. But I think there are ways that a shtick can be used in meaningful ways. The artist could think of a shtick as an idiosyncratic characteristic of an artist's practice that helps define, focus, and create recognition for the work they do. The shtick can be either the subject of the work or a structural element that frames the work, and it doesn't necessarily need to apply to the artist's whole practice; it could just be an aspect of what the artist does. For instance, an artist could be known for working with children, or on projects related to farming, or for working with books and libraries, etc. I've always thought that an interesting shtick strategy for an artist could be that they only exhibit in community college galleries. There are a few different advantages to doing that, and it could work for almost any kind of artist, not just artists doing socially engaged project work. There are lots of community college galleries, they are not as hard to get exhibitions in as many

other kinds of galleries, they are located in interesting contexts focused on learning, and the students and faculty who would be the primary audiences tend to be diverse and engaged. As part of the shtick, the artist could even mandate that if they were given an opportunity to show at a more prestigious location, that they will do the exhibition for that institution and take funding support and marketing from them, but that the actual work still needs to happen at the community college in the form of a satellite project. So, for instance, the artist might be doing a show for MoMA, but the art would be presented at the Borough of Manhattan Community College's Shirley Fiterman Art Center. For artists doing socially engaged work, the context of a community college would be incredibly rich for creating site specific projects with people and resources that could be found there.

Site-specificity

Making work that is responsive to the specific location, including the physical elements of the space, but also the broader contextual elements as well—the history, social dynamics, resources, etc. This could also be called “context-specific” or “circumstance-specific.”

Site-visit

Going to a place where a project will be happening to have a personal experience evaluating the nature of the place and the type of project that would be interesting to develop there based on resources, social dynamics, histories, chance encounters, etc.

Social justice

There is often a confusion that social practice work inherently needs to be about social justice issues. I don't think that's the case; if it were, it would be called "Art and Social Justice" not "Art and Social Practice." Many artists doing socially engaged work are interested in and engaged with social justice issues, and that can, of course, be the subject and purpose of their work if that is what they want to do, but social practice work could also be about non-political, non-social justice type topics, and/or can be indirectly addressing social/political issues in various ways.

Squeezing many projects out of one opportunity

Artists can add extra projects, presentations, publications, film screenings, activities, etc., when given an opportunity to do something that came with a singular expectation. For example, if a museum asked an artist to make an exhibition, they could do that and add additional elements—like the ones listed above—and have those extra elements supported and promoted as part of the primary objective.

Status quo

I have realized over the years that much of my work is based on creating alternatives to various status quo situations that I run across in society. You could say that “conceptual twists” use similar dynamics—taking something that has a normal way of operating and then tweaking it into some alternative form so that it breaks from our status quo understanding. This has made me think that it is important to understand and recognize the status quo in various situations so that an artist can then contemplate deviating from whatever that is to create an interesting project. The status quo is not always bad and a twist on the status quo is not always good, so just making an alternative is not necessarily the right thing to do in every situation, but it is usually useful to understand the status quo of a given situation and to critically evaluate it when working on socially engaged projects.

Strategies for parachuting

Socially engaged, project-based artists are often criticized for “parachuting” into communities that they are not connected to normally. One critique is something I’ve addressed in a previous topic about duration, the idea is that artists have to work on socially engaged projects for a long time and be totally embedded in a community to create meaningful and ethical work, but my feeling based on experience and observation is that is not always the case. Sometimes a project can be done quickly and still be very impactful and produced in an ethical way. Alternately, some long-term projects are not significant or interesting, can be done unethically, and also last longer than short-term ones.

Another critique is that if an artist is not from a community that they might make work that is misrepresentative or insensitive, and that is of course possible. But I think that can be avoided if the artist approaches the situation with openness and a willingness to learn. So, instead of arriving in a new place with a fully formed project already in mind, the artist can create

a site-specific and context-responsive work that offers a structure and platform for local people to provide content and potentially to collaborate in more involved ways. This approach requires the artist to operate in a way that is almost the opposite of how we normally think about artists; instead of working in isolation on their own interests, the artist would work in public and focus on the interests of the people they encountered. Instead of repeatedly using the same media and aesthetics as is done for the studio/gallery model, the artist would work in interdisciplinary ways to determine the media, forms, and aesthetics that are best suited for the project's localized situation and context. Additionally, of course, instead of only crediting themselves, the artist would go out of their way to credit everyone involved for their contributions the project.

Success addiction

Success sometimes brings with it unexpected problems, one of which I think of almost as an addiction created in part by a system that gives more and more opportunities to some small set of artists while giving few or none to most of them. As an artist becomes successful (in the sense of receiving opportunities) their tolerance for what they have gets altered and they want more and more while losing their ability to appreciate what they have already and even for what they actually want.

An adequate level of “success” that is fulfilling and sustaining while not having detrimental effects on stress levels, social relationships, time for enjoying other things, etc., seems desirable, but when the opportunity becomes available for more projects, lectures, interviews, etc., it can become hard to say “no.” Finding a balance that can be long-lasting is important and will most likely combine engaged activities and the setting of boundaries. The art world operates on a star system, but artists don’t have to agree to follow along with that if they don’t want to, though there are possible emotional

and professional impacts. Admittedly, this will only be a real issue for a very small number of people, but like the “studio/gallery model,” even though it doesn’t apply to most artists they often still behave as if it does, and artists often compromise their values, time, and energy in an attempt to conform.

Tangent projects

When an artist is offered the opportunity to present an exhibition or other form of project, there is always the chance to add another work that takes another form onto whatever the original project was going to be. That could be something like substituting a performance or participatory activity instead of a traditional opening, creating a public project like a poster series to go along with and advertise an exhibition, or producing a publication that people can take with them from an exhibition.

That's what can happen when you make things public

When artists make projects that occur in public places, as opposed to the isolation of a studio, then unexpected opportunities can happen that may lead to increased resources and support for the artist's practice.

Theory

I have a resistance to reading and giving legitimacy to theory in its typically canonized forms. I always found comfort in the (supposedly) Yogi Berra quote, “In theory there is no difference between theory and practice, in practice there is.” Finding in that assessment, a very true statement—from my experience and perspective—that makes it hard for me to value totally abstracted theoretical ideas—in terms of art—that have no applied, concrete elements to them. But it could be that my aversion to theory has also led me towards an unnecessary bias that could be more nuanced and less polarized. I have read and appreciated lots of “theory” that is related to direct experience on topics including alternative education, farming, politics, ethics, etc. I also realize, especially as I have been writing these term and topic definitions, as well as earlier writing of various kinds, that I have been, in some ways, creating a kind of theory, but one that is based on my thoughts, conversations, and readings, coupled with applied experiences of producing socially engaged art projects for over half of my life. It could be that like many other

examples of redefining for myself what I consider to be valid forms of various things—education, art, history, etc.—that I also just need to think of theory differently, allowing it to be another resource that I can tap into, in ways and at times, that I find useful.

Titles, sub-titles, descriptions

Finding ways for people to quickly understand and engage with project-based artworks is very important. Beyond the work itself, the title, potential sub-title, and project description can be crucial in creating engagement with audiences. In fact, those elements can be seen as part of the artwork and for that reason they can be addressed creatively and as significant parts of a project. A direct descriptive title is often a good choice, like in the case of Nolan Hanson's "Trans Boxing" project, which is automatically intriguing right off the bat. Alternately, the use of an evocative poetic title can sometimes work well, but in that case, it is useful to add a very concrete sub-title that clues folks into what is actually going on with the project. Beyond the title and potential sub-title, a very straightforward description with all of the key elements of the project detailed out is also very necessary. The titles and description can be used both during the process of a project and afterwards as part of a website or publication that presents the work.

Total works of art (rethought)

There is an interesting German word that means something like a “total work of art” which is “gesamtkunstwerk.” An art historical example is the Matisse Chapel (or Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence) in the South of France. In that case, Matisse worked on the design and all the decorations for the chapel including the stain-glass windows and the priests’ vestments. That kind of total work of art requires a lot of resources and support and would be difficult for most artists to pull off, but if we rethink the contexts that a total work of art could be applied to, it becomes much more achievable. Imagine instead of a chapel, if an artist (or collaboration between multiple artists) remodeled and decorated a school classroom, or a relative’s house, a farm stand, or even a tree house and thought about it as a total work of art. In fact, it doesn’t have to be a focused on a building, an artist could do a total work of art website, dinner party, or parade. It’s just a different framing device to use for making work and it might offer an interesting perspective or motivation for doing a project.

Touch of evil

I'm just going off what I understood Pedro Reyes meant by this, but my recollection of what he said is that it is an element in a project that could come across as challenging, negative, edgy, messed up, etc., but at the same time, adds complexity. There is a critique of social practice that it is about trying to "do good" and in fact, many socially engaged projects might have an intention of making some sort of positive impact on society. But if the artist can throw in a "touch of evil," then it makes the project more complicated and less easy to write-off as only trying (most likely, unsuccessfully) to "do good."

Transient privilege

In society there is both structural privilege and transient privilege operating at the same time. Structural privilege stays in place longer and is difficult to alter; transient privilege can change more rapidly and is also more contextual and situational. There can be pockets of transient privilege occurring even in places where structural privilege is dominant, and the two can be opposite. Over time, transient privilege can impact and transform structural privilege. Understanding the forces and complexities of privilege is important when creating projects that are intended to offer alternatives to status quo.

Translation

Projects that take the form of translating in a variety of ways. But in the simplest form, this means just translating existing documents, signage, and other writing from one language to another so that it becomes accessible to a set of people that it wasn't initially intended for but who would benefit from having the ability to read it.

Variable practice

There has been a pervasive idea in the past that artists were supposed to pick a medium and develop a style for their art and work on that for the rest of their lives. There has always been lots of deviation from this approach, but it persists as a concept that is often taught to art students. The primary benefit of artists working in that way is to be able to deliver consistent products for the commercial gallery system and all the other art world elements that rely on that system. Artists, on the other hand, rarely only want to work with just one medium and style and have to be conditioned into finding value in that approach. Any kind of artist can free themselves from that way of thinking and create a more interesting, varied practice for themselves, but socially engaged artists are particularly well situated to work in that way because they are generally not directly connected to the commercial gallery system and work on different kinds of projects that can be situationally determined, so that in one case, the artist might use photography in an exhibition form, and in another, creates participatory sculpture for

a public context, or mixes up multiple mediums and styles in one project. Anything is possible when the artist has a variable practice.

Vividness

Project-based work usually doesn't have visual objects to represent itself the way that studio/gallery art does. For that reason, it is important for the project concept (and title in some cases) to be very vivid so that people can understand quickly why they might want to give it their attention. For example, Michael Rakowitz's project "Enemy Kitchen" quickly conjures an intriguing idea because of its contradictory nature—we generally don't associate enemies with food. When creating a project-based work it is useful to have some easily understood, compelling elements that can engage people to want to learn more. On the other hand, a murky or opaque project concept can cause lead to rapid disengagement.

Walking

Many socially engaged projects have featured walking as a primary element, including several of my own. There are some reasons why walking is appreciated from a social practice angle. Walking is something that is free and available to most people in some form or other and does not require special skills to do. It provides an opportunity to get exercise while holding conversations, examining the environment that is being walked through, and providing self-transportation. Walking can easily be combined with other activities like presentations, readings, and performances. I also just really enjoy walking, so when given the opportunity to do any kind of project that I want to do I often choose to include walking as some part of it.

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Harrell Fletcher is the founder and co-director of the Portland State University Art and Social Practice MFA Program. He likes to go on long walks, look for edible plants, and swim in rivers and lakes.

Design by Laura Glazer.

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