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Transforming the Self and the Social: An Interview with Grant Kester

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As editors of this special issue, we chose to interview Grant Kester because, despite the absence of Italian translations of his major works, he remains a central figure in the international critical debate on socially engaged art practices. Kester was among the first scholars to approach the relationship between art and the social context in a nuanced and non-reductionist manner, moving beyond the traditional dichotomy between ethics and aesthetics that has long shaped critical discourse on these practices. His theoretical contribution – beginning with seminal publications such as Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art (2004), The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context (2011), and most recently The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde (2023), which also forms the starting point of this interview – highlights the need for a new methodological approach capable of engaging with complex phenomena that cannot be fully addressed through formal or aesthetic analysis alone. Kester is also the founding editor of FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism (2015), which has emerged as one of the leading international platforms for theoretical debate and critical analysis in the field of socially engaged art.

Notes on Italian Translation Grant Kester often uses the term “engaged art practices”, which I have decided to translate in *pratiche artistiche impegnate* as it does not represent a specific “style” or an institutionally defined prac-

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tice like socially engaged art. The latter, however, I have kept in its original English version, as it embodies a particular socio-political context and an international critical discourse that, in my view, is difficult to render through a literal translation. While the translation "*arte socialmente impegnata*"(socially engaged art) is used in Italian critical discourse – and I myself have used it in the past – I now find this translation increasingly problematic, especially when viewed in relation to Italy's rich tradition of socially engaged artistic practices, particularly in the 1970s. Above all, I feel that a literal translation risks detaching the term from its specific social and political context, potentially reducing it to a sphere of artistic self-referentiality, thereby neglecting the focus on social change that many of these practices aim to achieve. This issue is addressed in the dialogue with Kester, where we explore the difficulty of ascribing the same value to the term "socially" in two different contexts, such as the United States and Italy. In agreement with Grant Kester, I have chosen to translate the term work as "*lavoro*" rather than "*opera*", the term more commonly used within the field of art criticism and art history. Translating it as "*lavoro*", which aligns more closely with the English labour, is intended to convey a stronger sense of commitment and physical presence. Using "*opera*" would have diluted this meaning, redirecting the terminology back into the predefined semantic and practical framework of the art system[1].

Grant Kester is a Professor of Art History in the Visual Arts department at the University of California at San Diego and the founding editor of *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism* (field-journal.com). His publications include *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Duke University Press, 1998), *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2004),*The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Duke University Press, 2011), *Collective Situations: Readings in Contemporary Latin American Art 1995-2010*, co-edited with Bill Kelley Jr. (Duke University Press, 2017), *The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic*

[1] Technical note: The interview was originally conducted in English; all translations of Kester's responses and the cited quotations have been carried out by the author. The interview took place online on 10 October 2024 and was subsequently subjected to a review process, during which certain sections were revised and expanded through a collaborative writing process This process continued until March 2025

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Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde (Duke University Press, 2023) and *Beyond the Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Avant-Garde to Socially Engaged Art* (Duke University Press, 2023)

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Emanuele R.Meschini – Let's begin with a general perspective, and then move toward a more specific exploration of the methodological and theoretical shifts introduced by socially engaged, participatory, and community-based practices. Can we still discuss an art history that remains hierarchical, focused on aesthetics rather than on the construction of images and their experience in the world? Your book, in a sense, traces the disconnection between experience, knowledge, and the construction of what we now understand as aesthetics. From a methodological standpoint, you write in your book: «Here I should note a final proviso. While this book will offer some description of specific projects, it is not intended to provide survey of recent socially engaged art. There are a number of excellent books that fulfill that role, within an increasingly global context. I will address some newer projects, as well as some older projects, but not in a comprehensive or synoptic manner. I do so not because these projects exemplify specific theoretical or analytic themes developed in the book as a whole. My concern, in short, is not with the most current expression of socially engaged art but with identifying certain continuities in its broader evolution over the preceding decades»[2]. What type of relationship have these practices established with art history and criticism?

Grant Kester – I had an interesting conversation with a student recently that might be a good starting point. He has an engaged art practice and one of his colleagues had said to him, you know, I don't see why you feel the need to

[2] G.H. Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Avant-garde to Socially Engaged Art*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2024, p.18. The book *Beyond the Sovereign Self* was awarded the 2025 Frank Jewett Mather Award by the College Art Association.

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call this work "art". I've encountered this question repeatedly for the past thirty-five years. There is an ontological issue here, having to do with the nature of art, which I've addressed more fully in my last two books[3]. But there is also the simple empirical fact that almost every project that I've written about over the years has been presented as a form of art, by individuals who identify as artists. I'm not saying that there aren't liminal zones between what they're doing and forms of activism that don't identify as art, and in many cases I've written about collectives which include artists and activists along with people from other backgrounds. To me, that's a really generative space, that space where practice is not so sure of itself; where it is not quite one thing and not quite the other. It's what Tania Bruguera has called an «insecure place»[4]. So, most of the projects I write about have been developed by people who are artists, and these practices incorporate what I would consider to be an aesthetic dimension. Of course, my understanding of the term "aesthetic" differs considerably from that of many art historians, who often ignore its complex historical genealogy, and treat it simply as a metonym for "art" or visual appearance. I feel that it's my obligation, as an art historian, to not reactively dismiss this work just because it doesn't conform to my pre-existing definition of art. Rather, I have to consider the possibility that my own understanding needs to be challenged and expanded, as art practice itself evolves over time, and in conjunction with transformations in the nature of modernity more generally. Maybe I'm missing something, maybe my training, maybe the way I've been taught to look at art, needs to be modified somehow? It is in the nature of modern art to change or evolve over time, right? At those moments the discipline of art history has to catch up. So, there's an emergent aesthetic paradigm, a shift of some kind, that I'm trying to account for. But at the same time, you still encounter this stubborn refusal in the field to accept this shift, and a tendency to dismiss this work as art, because it ostensibly "collapses" art into activism, or the aesthetic into the ethical and so on. This work can make conventionally trained critics and historians uneasy, often

[3] G. H. Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self. cit.;* G. H. Kester, *The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-garde*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2023.

[4] T.Bruguera, *Talking to Power/Hablándole al Poder*, edited by L. Sanromán, S. Kantor, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Yerba Buena, CA, 2018, p.133.

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for reasons they don't fully understand. I wrote the *Sovereign Self* books, in part, to identify the historical origins of that uneasiness.

ERM – This is intriguing because, in discussing practices, what is implicitly affirmed is their enactment. Much of this, it seems to me, revolves around interpretive obstacles and disciplinary *a priori* assumptions that prevent us from moving toward ontology. Instead, these constraints keep us on a level of historical prescription, certifying the masterpiece as the sole focus of our attention.

GK – Yeah, I had this experience when I was writing one of my earlier books called *The One and the Many*. There's a discussion of a project that this group called Dialogue created in central India, in Kondagaon specifically. I went there to learn about the project, and interview people in a village outside Kondagaon. Navjot Altaf, who was the one of the artists developing the project, introduced me to the other members of Dialogue[5]. Her previous artistic practice was as a sculptor and installation artist. She came to this village to study bell metal casting, but once she was there her practice took her in a very different direction. This was an Adivasi village. The Adivasi are the indigenous people of India and are lower caste and subject to many forms of discrimination by the Hindu majority[6]. At any rate, over the course of several months in dialogue with Adivasi artists and crafts people in the village Navjot's understanding of her practice began to shift. She began to see the village, not just as a place to learn a new casting technique, but rather, as a complex social assemblage, defined by material and immaterial vectors of power and agency. The spatial organization and the power relationships in the village were largely structured around gender, with

[5] G.H.Kester, *The One and the Many. Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context,* Duke University Press, Durham-London, 2011. In particular, see Chapter II, *The Genius of the Place.*

[6] The Adivasis constitute a significant portion of the Indigenous population in India, predominantly concentrated in the central, eastern, and northern regions, often in rural or remote areas. For further discussion, see: A. Tilche, *Adivasi Art and Activism: Curation in a Nationalist Age*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2022

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women subordinate to men. Navjot and her colleagues became really attuned to the social totality of the village, and to understanding how the various spatial systems of the village worked to reinforce patriarchal domination. This unfolded through an ongoing series of conversations and research-based perambulations around the village, which eventually led to a series of physical interventions, including a set of water pump enclosures that allowed women to talk together without being observed by men in the village. Anyway, I was able to see how Navjot's understanding of her artistic practice, and that of her collaborators, was materially transformed, expanded and complicated by this experience. I can remember thinking that there was something really important going on there. Yes, the project was localized and specific, but it suggested a model for how consciousness is transformed that was quite different from the conventional model we encounter in art theory and criticism. The transformation of consciousness, and the facilitation of a reflective self-awareness, is, after all, a central function of the aesthetic in the European tradition. Of course, this was just one example of a much broader range of practices. It sounds hyperbolic, but you could easily spend a year in a single village, observing the subtle forms of interaction and social coding, and the potential for resistance and criticality. Even the simplest thing, when looked at with a certain level of attention, becomes infinitely complex. I think this is what Navjot and her colleagues discovered. It just confirmed for me that there was something significant going on in contemporary art practice that requires me to draw on other sources, not just within art history, but within sociology, psychology, political theory and other related disciplines. It's not just a matter of flying to the Venice Biennale, seeing an exhibition in the Arsenale, and writing about it. The rules for that process were written long ago; the modes of textual and symbolic analysis, the implicit assumptions regarding formal or compositional gestures or the implied viewer, the theoretical models and so on. We have a great set of tools for doing that kind of work as art historians and critics. The analytic tools I needed in order to understand Dialogue's work in India were very different. Not because there were no formal or symbolic elements at play in Dialogue's work. Rather it was the reverse, the projects they developed were full of complex symbolic and formal meaning. However, there was a whole other layer of meaning that existed over, or perhaps, under this formal and compositional dimension, inflecting it and complicating it as the work came into contact with a complex

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mix of observers, interlocutors and participants in the village community, whose reactions were then used to create further permutations of the work itself. It was, in part, this embodied, intersubjective dimension that led me to re-consider the nature of the aesthetic, and aesthetic experience, at a more foundational level.

ERM – I would like to stay on this topic, as it touches on the shift in perspective that a socially engaged or community-based practice can offer. A crucial criterion seems to lie in commitment, which can be defined as *urgency* and *agency* (in two distinct phases of the process). It is precisely this commitment that drives a complete change in perspective. The starting point is not a theory to be confirmed, as often happens, since practice frequently diverges from the initial theoretical framework. This requires a rethinking of the model, and because we are art historians – trained as art historians – we risk failing to open ourselves to new competencies or knowledge. Instead, we tend to perpetuate the paradigms of our comfort zone, as if we were within that historical enclosure Arthur Danto wrote about (*The End of the History of Art* and *The Pale of Art History*)[7]. These boundaries are ones we cannot see because we are deeply rooted in this type of discipline. Yet, at the same time, it is precisely what keeps us from accessing knowledge through a different approach.

GK – Yeah, absolutely. I feel like there is so much to talk about here, and it would be nice to be together in person and talk this over with some coffee. Should I respond to some of the questions you sent me earlier?[8]

ERM – Certainly, you may begin with the question you prefer.

[7] A.C. Danto, *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.
[8] The questions referenced by Kester primarily served as a starting point for our conversation, without directing its course. The questions are included in the appendix.

GK – OK, you'd asked me about what's changed in the field since the "Aesthetic Evangelists" essay came out, which was, I think, in 1995 in *Afterimage.* I was the editor of *Afterimage* at the time, which was published in upstate New York[9]. When that essay was published it got a lot of criticism from people in the community art field. They complained that the analysis developed in the essay, which was in part a critique of certain forms of community art practice, was unfair to them. They would argue that they were very self-reflective, and that their projects could generate many positive effects. All of that is true, and I wouldn't disagree with it, but my point in the essay was never to simply dismiss community art tout court. It was simply to say that, notwithstanding these localized effects, if the artist is insufficiently aware of the political and social totality within which a given project is situated, they can inadvertently reinforce certain macro political, ideological tendencies which were antithetical to the goals of the original project. At the time, these were drawn from what were called "neo-conservative" cultural arguments about the moral depravity of poor and working-class African Americans. They were poor, the argument went, not because of systematic forms of racism and segregation, but because their culture is corrupt. All of this goes back to the 1960s and '70s and figures like Daniel Patrick Moynihan and his noxious report on the "Negro Family"[10]. My feeling was, if you're going to intervene in the complex field of black poverty, especially as a white, middle-class artist, it behooves you to learn a little bit about the broader ideological framing of poverty and race in the United States at that time. And if you don't, you risk reinforcing some of the most pernicious and repressive components of the messaging of the Republican Party at the time.

My point was never that localized changes or improvements aren't important, it was that there is always a relationship *between* the local or micro-political and the macro-political dimension that we need to be mindful of. And this goes to the question of scalar complexity, right? There's always a potential relationship between a localized action and a larger social or political totality. One of my main questions as a writer is to try to understand how localized

[9] G.H. Kester, *Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art*, "Afterimage", Rochester, NY, vol. 22, no. 7-8, January 1995.

[10] For further details, see: https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan, last accessed November 19, 2024.

gestures might aggregate in such a way that they can facilitate a more systemic form of critique. How can they draw in other constituencies, other sites of practice and resistance, and broaden themselves? The other response to that essay came from conventional art historians and critics who were delighted to have another reason to disparage art practices that operate outside the institutional artworld. "Community art" had become a term of ridicule or contempt. They needed a kind of reified foil, against which they could define conventional avant-garde practices as more critical or more transgressive. But the curious thing is, the "Aesthetic Evangelists" essay was written only a year after a previous essay in *Afterimage*, called "Rhetorical Questions"[11]. They were really companion pieces. And the "Rhetorical Questions" essay developed a very similar analysis to the one I employed in "Aesthetic Evangelists," but it was directed at the institutional art world, and the belief that someone can magically transcend their own class privilege, simply by declaring themselves an "artist". The same problematic concept of individual sovereignty and class transcendence can be found in both community- and artworld-based practices. Moreover, each group, the bourgeois artist operating in the institutional artworld and the community-based artist operating outside of it, held a piece of a larger truth. Yes, we can and must learn from praxis, even at a localized scale, but we also need to preserve an awareness of how that localized action is affected, or can affect, a larger social totality, defined as capitalism.

ERM – This attitude, as you have emphasized from the very titles of your books, represents a form of self-determination – or, conversely, a form of determination if we consider that this way of thinking and operating belongs more significantly to those who are not typically represented. Adding "self" before "sovereign" serves precisely to convey this notion of a sovereignty rooted in a particular way of thinking.

GK – Exactly. That's why my last two books focus on the notion of artistic subjectivity so much, because questions of individual autonomy are at the center of the modernist tradition. And it's not just the autonomy and transcendence

[11] G.H. Kester, *Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public,* "Afterimage", Rochester, NY, vol. 20, no. 6, January 1993.

of the self, but rather, autonomy as a broader ontological paradigm centered on divisions between self and other, the artworld and the profane world beyond the gallery walls, art and activism and so on. This was around the time that Hal Foster introduced the concept of a "neo" avant-garde, to re-vitalize the political credentials of avant-garde discourse, in conjunction with "institutional critique" practices which were, ironically enough, being embraced by the very institutions they sought to critique. For Foster, a self-reflexive critique of artworld institutions and ideologies offered the only meaningful way for art to preserve its radical potential, by offering a decanted critique of the capitalist system as a whole. In this view, practices that sought to identity an audience outside the institutional artworld, or to develop forms of critique directed at broader structures of domination, would inevitably fail or be co-opted, precisely because no real political change is possible today («Our present is bereft of this sense of imminent revolution» is how Foster expressed it)[12]. I was really curious about the origins of this belief system within modernism and how it evolved. Look, if people want to make paintings or sculptures and sell them, that's fine. There will always be rich people to buy them. That's the art world. What was odd to me was the insistence that *only* work produced in the context of this market, for this audience, could preserve a meaningful form of critique. Why would you assume that artists who operate in this discursive universe are singularly equipped to diagnose the nature of contemporary capitalist oppression, while artists working in the context of ongoing social movements are entirely deluded and naïve? The people furthest from the material experience of resistance are actually the ones with the most heightened or advanced forms of insight into the nature of resistance, as well as its limitations? That question has been in the back of my mind for years, so in a way the two new books were part of my attempt to answer it.

ERM – This is a particularly significant point addressed in your research on the sovereign self, as it represents the continuity that, ultimately, has polarized the historical-critical discourse on the social value of art. The notion of im-

[12] H. Foster, *What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde*, "October", no.70, Fall 1994, p. 26.

possible change, the persistent need for mediation, and, consequently, the inherent impossibility of direct action – viewed as a corrupting force against aesthetics[13].

GK – Yes, the argument, both then and now, is that we live in a counter-revolutionary moment. All we can hope to do is withdraw from the contaminating sphere of political or social action, which will only ever fail, into the quasi-protected sphere of the institutional artworld, where the privilege assigned to fine art and "free" expression by the bourgeoise provides a paradoxical refuge for revolutionary consciousness. We preserve this consciousness in the form of artworks that are devoted to critiquing the immanent ideological and institutional structures of the art-world itself. In that manner we can salvage some remnant of truly radical thought for a future revolutionary moment, when the masses will rise again. When that day comes it will be like, «Hooray! We've preserved revolutionary consciousness in this Beckett play or this Santiago Sierra installation. Here you go proletarians, desublimate it into praxis and you can finally overthrow capitalism». This is Adorno's notion of art or critical theory as a «message in a bottle».[14] I can remember reading this argument and thinking that it was wildly improbable. There's a lot to be said for practices that critique the institutional artworld, but I honestly can't understand the contention that this specific mode of critique somehow carries within itself the ur-form of all other forms of criticality, including those directed at political emancipation. I can think of a lot of reasons to like modern art, but that's not one of them, right? That was the question that was opened up for me all those years ago, in the two *Afterimage* essays. So, you ask "what has changed" since then in terms of art history and theory? And the answer is, not that much. That same paradigm still exists today, right? On the one hand you still have people arguing that artworld-based practices carry out some sort of "agonistic" assault on the imposed consensus of neo-liberal capitalism. A lot of that comes out of the appro-

[13] While following a different line of research but with a similar trajectory of meaning, see: E. Traverso, La tirannide dell'io. Scrivere il passato in prima persona, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2022. The work, originally titled Passés singuliers. Le "je" dans l'écriture de l'histoire (Lux Editeur, Montreal, 2020), specifically addresses the subjectivist turn in historiography. However, a certain resonance between the two texts can be observed regarding the themes of authorship challenged by neoliberal society.

[14] T. Adorno, M Horkheimer, Towards a New Manifesto?, "New Left Review", no. 65, 2010, pp.33-61.

priation of Chantal Mouffe's writing by art critics, but Mouffe is essentially a parliamentarian, who simply wants to encourage more conflictual forms of thinking in European political systems[15]. She's very much opposed to extra-parliamentary action. When these arguments are transplanted into debates over contemporary art, the concept of agonism, as a shared capacity for dissent, is simply collapsed into preexisting avant-garde notions of the artist as a subversive provocateur. That subject position, and the broader social architecture that validates it, are never questioned or thematized in any meaningful way. At the same time, the forms of social and political solidarity and collectivity that are the precondition for any meaningfully "agonistic" intervention, have been relentlessly critiqued in art-world contexts. None of this is especially novel, and all of it assumes, yet again, the partitioning off of artistic transgression into galleries and biennials; the only spaces where "real" critique is possible, and where you have a captive pool of bourgeois viewers to ritualistically assault. You also have a kind of neo-Adorno-ian discourse, associated with figures like Walter Benn Michaels or Nicholas Brown in the U.S., who argue that the only real political potential left to art is to demurely interrogate its own ideological status, thus modelling an ideal form of critical self-reflexivity for the rest of us to emulate. Typically, this involves subjecting the viewer to some form of ontic destabilization that will, ostensibly, inculcate a therapeutic sense of cognitive indeterminance (deconstructing the division between autonomy and heteronomy, art and politics, etc.). However, this entire process is itself recaptured under the auspices of a conventional notion of detached aesthetic contemplation that depends precisely on the maintenance of these same divisions at the material level. If no "real" change is possible then all that remains for us is to preserve some vestigial trace of criticality in the protected space of the institutional artworld. In this manner, artworks which embrace their commodification, but refuse any engagement with ongoing processes of social or political struggle, become, paradoxically, the very «precondition for any politics at all other than the politics of acquiescence to the status quo», as Brown writes[16]. Yet again, authentic criticality can only be sustained within the context of bourgeois cultural markets, since any attempt to develop "counter-institutional" forces outside the market is doomed to fail-

[15] For further details: C. Mouffe, Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces, "Art & Research", vol. 1, no.2, 2007.
[16] N. Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2019.

ure. This is, by now, an almost entirely orthodox view in art theory, reinforced repeatedly over the decades since Adorno first formulated it in the 1960s. So, in that sense, not much has changed in terms of art history and theory. The important changes have mostly occurred on the margins of our discipline, in those forms of research that open out to other fields, like participatory action research, black studies, cultural anthropology, experimental forms of sociology or political theory. There are scholars, like Asad Haider in the U.S., Rodrigo Nunes in Brazil or Ana Cecilia Dinerstein in England, who are doing interesting work along these lines. Not surprisingly these connections are often coming from researchers who have some relationship to actual social movements, and their work overlaps with questions that come up in debates around engaged art practice[17]. We're publishing one of Rodrigo Nunes's essays in the next issue of *FIELD.* He's a political theorist, but he is also very attuned to questions of activist artistic and cultural production, and the aesthetic understood more broadly[18]. This kind of research is extremely important. One of the most significant and alarming political shifts of the past 10 or 15 years involves the global expansion of neofascist and white supremacist movements, evident in the U.S. in the recent re-election of Donald Trump. These movements have been building in strength over the preceding decades. In many ways, their success has been predicated on new forms of cultural action and intervention. How do we challenge these movements? What countercultural forms would be most effective in facilitating resistance to them? These are questions that engaged art practice and scholarship really need to address[19].

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[17] With regard to the authors referenced by Kester, see: R. Nunes, *Organisation of the Organisationless: Collective Action After Network*s, Mute Publishing, London, 2014; A. Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Mass Movements and Racial Ideology*, Verso Books, London, 2018; A. C. Dinerstein, *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The Art of Organising Hope*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015.

[18] R. Nunes, *For a Political Economy of Counterpimping,* "FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism", Issue 28 (Fall 2024). https://field-journal.com/issue-28/8238/, last accessed January 26, 2025.

[19] This final passage, which references the re-election of Donald Trump, was added by Kester during our most recent revision on March 21, 2025. On this topic see, for example: G. Sholette, *Global Update*, "FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art History and Theory", Issue 29 (Winter 2025): https://field-journal.com/issue-29-winter-2025/2025-global-update/, last accessed March 21, 2025.

ERM – And here we return to the theme of practice which, as an experience, represents a vital point of contact with the real – functional both to the production of knowledge and, more simply, to understanding what "change" truly means in relation to the contexts in which it takes place. Practice is the reversal, the incipit of that shift in meaning we have been discussing. You mentioned how many of the researchers and students involved in these practices – those you have encountered over the course of your work – are connected to social movements or to some external "social" point of reference. It is precisely that extra-artistic relationship which became their object of study, and in attempting to integrate it with visual art, they developed a polydisciplinary approach that generated something new[20]. Within academic curricula focused on art history – in Italy, but not only – the predominance of historical frameworks often leaves little space for practice. I would even say that it rarely fosters genuine interest in practice. It is difficult – though not impossible – to break away from this model and discover something else. Once again, much of this stems from a lack of embodiment, from the preconceived notion that teaching should remain theoretically and historically grounded, with limited or no room for practical experimentation. I find your reading of the concept of aesthetics as a process of institutionalising the rejection of direct experience particularly compelling. It offers a perspective clearly at odds with the markedly experiential approach of John Dewey's *Art as Experience*. In this regard, it is not surprising that a philosopher such as Rancière has been widely adopted as a critical reference by scholars and art historians working on socially engaged or community-based practices. Similarly, the renewed attention to Adorno can be understood. While I regard him as a thinker of considerable depth and intellectual appeal, I have always perceived him as a profoundly conceptual philosopher – almost disembodied, a kind of extraordinary machine of thought.

GK – You know, I think I referenced this in one of my recent books, but there's an interesting quote from Angela Davis, talking about her time studying with members of the Frankfurt School during the late 1960s. She worked with

[20] For the concept of polydisciplinarity, and in particular polydisciplinamory, see: N. Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2019.

Marcuse when she was here at UCSD getting her Ph.D. And at some point she travelled to Germany to meet with Adorno[21]. She told him that she was planning on returning to California to join the Black Panthers, and to try to put her theoretical research into practice. And his response was to tell her that this didn't make any sense, it was like a media studies scholar wanting to learn how to be a radio operator, or something like that[22]. There is nothing to be learned, experientially or theoretically, from practice itself. Rather, theory comes first and dictates practice. There can never be a process of reciprocal elucidation between theory and practice. But isn't that what Marxism, and the traditions of dialectical materialism, are supposed to be about? That theory and practice, or even praxis, can enrich and transform each other? It's only in conjunction with the melancholic belief that real change is impossible that this hermetic, recursive notion of critique, uncoupled from praxis, becomes normalized in art theory.

ERM – All things considered, we begin to walk without any manual, just as we begin to love without having read or taken lessons on what love is. Yet, when it comes to acquiring knowledge, it seems that physically engaging with the world is deemed unnecessary; instead, we must read and study it. Much of your research, after all, is grounded in the necessity – and I would say the evidence – of a dialogical interdependence, which forms the foundation of many generative theories, such as socially engaged art. However, when it comes to describing or interpreting these practices, there is often a tendency to adopt an eminently historicist approach, albeit without a proper historical research methodology. As a result, this often devolves into a form of value-laden historicism.

[21] For the correspondence between Marcuse and Adorno in 1969, see: *Correspondence on the German Student Movement*, in "FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism", no. 5, Fall 2016: https://field-journal.com/editorial/theodor-adorno-and-herbert-marcuse-correspondence-on-the-german-student-movement/, last accessed November 25, 2024.

[22] Angela Y. Davis, "Marcuse's Legacy," *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, edited by John Abromeit and Mark W. Cobb (London: Routledge, 2003), p.47.

GK - Yes, absolutely. There's lots to talk about here. Let me drop this into the conversation, in response to your second question, about how the field has changed. We already talked a bit about the disembodiment of theory. As I argue in the *Sovereign Self* books, in the Marxist tradition the division between theory and practice or mind and body gets mapped onto the relationship between the vanguard intellectual, or "theoretical communist," in Marx's terms, and the worker, or "practical communist." In this view the proletariat possess a kind of kinetic bodily energy that can be regulated and directed by the vanguard intellectual, but it doesn't have the capacity to generate autonomous theoretical insight on its own[23]. There are so many complex transpositions and projections in that schema, but let me bring it back to art. At a broader historical level, we can observe the displacement of the figure of the vanguard intellectual into the subject position of the avant-garde artist. In my research I'm really charting a shift in the political imaginary of contemporary art that coincides with a more general challenge to that subject position. It's a shift from a conventional aesthetic paradigm, based on Adorno's notion of art as «taking an advance on praxis that has not yet begun», to a form of art based on the belief that the potential for «transformative action exists now or not at all», as Colectivo Situaciones, writes[24]. These represent two very different narratives, two different stories, about the meaning of art. There are any number of reasons to question either of these approaches, so each of them involves an act of faith. For myself, I think meaningful work can be produced in both settings, in the context of the institutional artworld, and in the context of engaged art practices. Moreover, the institutional artworld itself is not monolithic and there are potentially productive liminal zones within it where challenging work can be produced. I'm not arguing that *only* engaged art practice are legitimately critical. This is the difference between my approach and that of critics who believe that they can only justify artworld-based practices by insisting that there are literally

[23] The concepts referenced by Kester have occupied much of Marx's philosophical trajectory and can be found in some of his key texts, such as: K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology,* edited by C.J. Arthur, International Publishers, New York, 1970; K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, translated by B. Fowkes, Penguin Books, London, 1990.

[24] Colectivo Situaciones, *Genocide in the Neighborhood*, edited by Brian Whitener, translated by Brian Whitener, Daniel Borzutzky, and Fernando Fuentes, Chainlinks Press, Oakland, 2009, p.44.

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no other options, no other way, to articulate the political potential of art, and that literally every form of oppositional art produced outside the institutional artworld is destined in advance to «turn into a consumable sign of opposition», as Nicholas Brown contends[25]. To me this suggests a certain level of insecurity among critics and historians who fully realize the ideological complicity of market-based artistic production, but can't come up with a more compelling theoretical justification for the critical potential of this work, notwithstanding this complicity. I tell my students, before you begin writing about engaged art practice, you first need to have a clear model for what meaningful political change looks like. You need to really work that through in your own mind. Don't just accept the paradigm that is implicit in whatever theorist happens to be in vogue at a given moment. You need to drill down into a given theoretical framework and figure out for yourself what a priori assumptions it carries about political change. For myself, I don't agree that meaningful change is impossible. I also don't believe that the only legitimate form of change is some sort of immediate, and all-encompassing transformation, like the October Revolution. The October Revolution certainly levelled income inequality in Russia, but it also resulted in a huge number of deaths, and the establishment of an authoritarian regime whose aftereffects still dominate Russian political life today. There's a price to be paid for that notion of revolutionary simultaneity, of a single convulsive overturning directed by an individual, visionary leader who imposes hierarchical control on everyone beneath them. We see this playing out in Bogdanov's debates with Lenin, and his insistence that it's necessary for a political revolution to unfold in conjunction with a cultural revolution among the working class, so that their vision, their capacities, are liberated, and play a central role in the creation of a new social order. Lenin, of course, is entirely dismissive of the creative or generative potential of the Russian working class, and Bogdanov's efforts to encourage working class cultural development. «Put all the theaters in coffins», he writes, as he's working to dismantle the Proletkult system[26]. Bogdanov, for his part, argues that you can't have a revolution that is entirely dominated by the hierarchical control of the party,

[25] N. Brown,*cit*., p.182.

[26] For the relationship between Bogdanov and Lenin, see: J.E. Rabinowitch, *Prequel to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising,* Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991.

the suspension of all due process and the ruthless and indiscriminate violence of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and expect that the resulting society will be based on a spirit of utopian conviviality and tolerance. There's another model of political transformation that might, dare I say it, be more gradual, that from the beginning incorporates prefigurative elements, and that doesn't collapse all forms of resistance into a simple exercise in mercenary calculation. It would be a form of political change that encourages and experiments with new social forms in the process of change itself. In this case you are obliged to consider a very different aesthetic paradigm. In place of the catastrophic fatalism that says, nothing can be done, so I might as well remain in my loft studio making art about how awful capitalism is, or seeking to discomfit art tourists through whatever form of symbolic provocation is in style, you have an aesthetic which embraces prefigurative elements, new social forms and so on, in the act of resistance. In the conventional aesthetic paradigm, the work of art preserves its latent political power through a particular form of mediation. According to Adorno, when Schoenberg challenges traditional musical composition with his twelve-tone system he's indirectly challenging the reified structures of capitalist domination, but his critique remains "safe" from cooption because it is segregated in the sphere of bourgeois high art. I would argue, however, that distance or disengagement is not the same as mediation. Engaged art practices, for their part, always rely on complex forms of mediation – symbolic, physical, ideological and otherwise – but these are held in productive tension with the pragmatic forms of knowledge generated by praxis itself, in the act of resistance. There's a whole revolutionary tradition built around this idea. It's not just in the arts. Think of Gramsci's "Common School" proposals, and things like that[27]. So, in engaged art there's mediation between the prefigurative and the practical, between localized action and systemic forms of change, between the individual and collective, and so on. That takes us back to the question of scalar complexity and the relationship between transformations in individual subjectivity and broader social or collective consciousness, right? Because the aesthetic has always been about the transformation of consciousness, and our relationship to a larger social body. That's what Kant writes about in the *Third Critique*.

[27] For the concept of the Common School, see: A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by J.A. Buttigieg, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992-2007.

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When you have an aesthetic experience you are intuiting your identification, your solidarity, with a broader collective, via the sensus communis, but it's all occurring in the confines of your own mind via apperception[28]. In the Marxist tradition, however, this aesthetic process is desublimated. Here the «changing of circumstances coincides with the changing of self» as Marx writes[29]. So, when you engage in practice, in acts of collective resistance, you also change the nature of the self in ways that can be creative and emancipatory. In this manner, mediation is carried forward, but in a different form, associated with Marx's concept of social labor. For me that's a key foundation for understanding an alternative aesthetic paradigm. If you accept the idea that meaningful change can happen here and now, and that it can be both pragmatic and autopoietic, then this opens up a whole other trajectory of thought about what art can do.

ERM – In some respects, you are anticipating the question I wanted to ask about the gentrification of activism, and to some extent, you've already addressed it by describing the choice to use older models. Building on your words, I would like to further complicate this idea: are we not at risk of gentrifying today's artistic activism? Or perhaps, are we instead incorporating into today's activism the ideas of other thinkers and contexts – contingent products of the specific urgencies of their time – such as those of Bogdanov and the Proletkult? This tendency toward citation has led to a form of fetishism in activism which, by its very nature as a fetish, prevents us from transcending the convictions that originally shaped it.

GK – Yes, the gentrification example is really an important one. We had an article in *FIELD* a few years ago, in a special issue on the documenta that was in Athens in 2017. It was a really interesting article by Grigoris Gkougkousis about a Rasheed Araeen's project called *Shamiyaana–Food for Thought: Thought for Change* which is a reference to a

[28] I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by W.S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 1987.
[29] To further clarify this point, see: P. Thomas, Karl Marx and the Anarchists (London: Routledge, 1980, pp.112-113.

Pakistani tradition of collective meals[30]. And so, you know, people could go to Kotzia Square and eat at a kind of pop-up café that Araeen set up. Kotzia Square is close to an area of Athens with a sizable unhoused population. The city is also struggling with a large refugee population, as well as gentrification. So Kotzia Square is not a gallery or museum space, right? It is riven with pre-existing social, political and economic tensions. The artist set up this café and you were supposed to come and eat free meals served by an NGO. It was meant to foreground the emancipatory potential of Mediterranean traditions of collective eating, as a counterpoint to neoliberal capitalism and commodified art production. These are all great ideas, of course, but there are often problems when artists who are attuned to the mindset of the gallery or biennial, and to the creation of purely symbolic gestures intended for a self-selecting artworld audience, venture into non-artworld spaces and contexts.

ERM – This project is well known and has also been at the center of scholarly debate.

GK – So, you know, there were a number of unhoused people not far from Kotzia Square who could really use a meal and were drawn to the project. The author of this essay noticed that the cafe stopped giving out tickets for the free meals to everyone, and began to limit the access of the unhoused folks. So, what was meant to be a benign gesture of inclusivity and generosity, the sharing of a free meal, ended up being tightly policed by the documenta staff, so that they could ensure that the hungry homeless people didn't overwhelm the art tourists. I thought that was such a poignant example of the interference patterns that occur between two models of art making. A symbolic, gallery-based approach has its value, of course, but when you attempt to actualize the implicit utopian promise of the symbolic armature, to give it practical form in a complex social space like that, the disjunctions are really striking. I'd just recall my discussion of Navjot Altaf's work with Dialogue, in which the physical interventions were preceded by a very lengthy process of experiential learning and a really fine-grained analysis or understanding of

[30] To further explore the project, see: https://field-journal.com/issue-18-19/on-politics-of-visibility-documentation-and-the-claim-of-commoning-the-artwork-critical-notes-on-shamiyaana-food-for-thought-thought-for-change/, last accessed on January 26, 2025.

the site. Biennials don't operate on that time scale. They think about how things look, how they can be photographed or documented for their funders and art critics, and a broader artworld audience. They have no interest in establishing any kind of extended reciprocal relationship to a specific site. Rather, their commissioning process generally privileges a relatively superficial, even instrumentalizing, attitude towards site. Avoiding those complex entanglements is precisely how you preserve the freedom and autonomy of advanced art, and forestall its subordination to the "utilitarian" demands of actual social change. Once you engage, honestly and deeply, with the social reality of a space outside the art gallery, then you need a very different kind of art. You ask about Ruangrupa, right?[31] That's another great example. Documenta decided to outsource curatorial leadership to Ruangrupa and they, in turn, delegated decision-making to a number of other collectives. The result was a massive set of installations, exhibitions and so on created by dozens of different groups and individuals. All of this material was clearly intended to represent some sort of antithesis to the kinds of institutional art practices that typically populate biennials. It included work by dozens of collectives from all over the world, each coming from their own unique and complex contexts, culturally, politically and so on. But the sheer uncoordinated sprawl of the exhibit meant that these complexities could never be openly thematized or addressed within the practice itself. In the absence of the already established, and implicit, contextual framing that conventional artworld practices carry with them – recognizable references, formal moves, prescribed models of transgression, and so on – any single project was easily enough reduced to a romanticized emblem of non-western authenticity. The presence of a single example of antisemitic imagery within this vast, inchoate collection isn't entirely surprising, especially given the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Indonesia, but to understand that context would have required a very different curatorial approach; one predicated on depth rather than breadth[32]. It's interesting to me that these decisions were made by a collective that

[31] The reference is to question number 4 included in the appendix.

[32] In this specific case, Kester refers to the work of the collective Taring Padi, particularly their piece *People's Justice*, originally created in 2002. The work consists of multiple painted banners, measuring a total of 8 x 12 meters, mounted on a tall scaffolding structure resembling the wall of a building. This piece, which recounts the protests of the late 1990s and early 2000s against the Indonesian dictator Suharto, contains imagery that

is committed to alternative understandings of art, but it's also not entirely surprising. I suspect that they thought they could simply transfer the relatively straightforward cultural dynamic of a localized, horizontal art practice, via this generous disavowal of curatorial authority, into the space of documenta. But they clearly miscalculated the ideological complexities imposed by a global art institution which generates millions of Euros in tourist income, and which has a complex relationship to Germany's international public image. This represents, in way, another failure of scalar mediation, between a localized practice and a global art audience.

ERM – The themes of instrumentalization, co-optation, and compromise are, after all, inevitable when discussing practices rooted in social dynamics which, by definition, are always in flux. It is within this field of tensions that you describe – and implement – a new methodology, particularly in relation to fieldwork and the necessity of dedicating time and becoming, in some way, deeply engaged with and within one's research. However, this methodology does not seem to align at all with the concept of an object-based approach. In some respects, it feels as though we are speaking two entirely different languages, and fields, especially in relation to the academic world.

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some have deemed antisemitic. Among these is a caricatured figure with traits associated with antisemitic stereotypes from Nazi-Fascist propaganda – such as a prominent nose and sharp teeth – wearing a hat inscribed with "SS" and a Star of David. Other figures considered antisemitic include soldiers wearing bandanas with the Star of David and a pig with a helmet labeled "Mossad." The presentation of this painted banner at documenta fifteen sparked an immediate wave of criticism, particularly from German politicians, Jewish organizations, and international observers. In Germany, where antisemitism is a particularly sensitive issue due to historical reasons, the controversy gained significant traction, leading first to the covering and then the removal of the work. Below is the statement issued by the collective, in which they denied accusations of antisemitism and contextualized their work within its historical and social dimensions: https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/statement-by-taring-padi-on-dismantling-peoples-justice/, last accessed November 22, 2024.
Here is the statement published by Sabine Schormann, the curator of *documenta fifteen*, who was dismissed following the incident (the accusations of antisemitism were not limited to the work of Taring Padi alone): https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/on-the-concealment-of-a-work-by-taring-padi-at-documenta-fifteen/, last accessed November 22, 2024.
For further context and an auto-narration of the work by the collective Taring Padi, see: https://www.taringpadi.com/?lang=en, last accessed November 22, 2024.

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GK – I suppose that the biggest change that has occurred in art practice since I began writing in the mid-1980s has been a dramatic expansion of what is often referred to as "social art" practice, which usually refers to artists who come from a conventional art institutional background but who chose to work in non-artworld sites or locations. Thomas Hirschhorn is a good example of this, albeit a problematic one, or the *Shamiyaana* project in Athens. Over time the institutional artworld has started to pay attention to a broader range of practices. You even have major museums like the Guggenheim and others promoting "social practice" through funding and commissions and so on. This has expanded opportunities for artists, but it also comes at a price, which has to do with the way in which mainstream art institutions try to package this work. You'll recall the controversy several years ago over efforts by documenta 13 and the Berlin Biennial to "exhibit" elements of the Occupy movement[33]. Speaking for myself, the most interesting practices that I encounter aren't "curated" or "commissioned" in the first place. Rather, they evolve from something outside the patronage system of the art world. In that context you can be as a critical as you want, so long as your critique doesn't extend to the actual economic foundations of the artworld itself, such as the class backgrounds of museum board members and so on. That was the lesson of Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et. al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings* all those years ago[34]. In this sense class is a kind of third rail for institutional critique practices. There's a more recent example of this, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona (MACBA). This was in 2001 and the director of MACBA, Manuel J. Borja-Villel had the idea to create a multi-faceted intervention that would turn the museum into a kind of support system for ongoing anti-globalization protests in the city[35]. They es-

[33] J. Miller, *Activism vs. Antagonism: Socially Engaged Art from Bourriaud to Bishop and Beyond*, "FIELD. A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism", no. 3, Winter 2016.

[34] With regard to this, see: https://whitney.org/collection/works/29487, last accessed January 26, 2025.

[35] This specifically refers to the World Bank Summit scheduled for June 2001 in Barcelona. The meeting was canceled due to both the organization of Catalan movements and the protests and clashes that had occurred at previous counter-summits, such as those in Prague and Seattle (1999). However, the alter-globalization movements organized a march on June 24, 2001. The clashes mentioned later in the interview refer to this march. This moment of protest would culminate in the G8 in Genoa and the killing of Carlo Giuliani (July 20, 2001). On this topic, see Giaco-

tablished a media office and had photographers documenting the protests, and they also commissioned Krzysztof Wodiczko and Allan Sekula to design bespoke protest clothes for the demonstrators to wear, as absurd as that sounds. It was very much in line with what you'd expect a curator at a major art institution would think of as a "political" gesture. So, they do all of this, and violence breaks out during the protests and the police invade the museum because it had become a refuge for demonstrators. They destroyed the museum bar and beat up protestors, arresting most of the activists, who ended up in jail[36]. There was some momentary concern that the museum director might lose his job, but that came to nothing. He kept his job and eventually moved on to an even more prestigious position, as director of the Museo Reina Sofía[37]. His cultural capital, after this event, was actually enhanced. So, the art world continues on, right? I think it's hard for the institutional art world to really engage with activist practices, because this is a world that is dependent, at the end of the day, on the taste patterns of wealthy collectors and board members. It's just not in their professional interest to do anything that would disturb the sensibilities of their

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mo Verde's documentary *Solo Limoni*, which recounts the challenging days in Genoa: https://www.verdegiac.org/sololimoni/, last accessed January 24, 2025. See also the blog post at https://dialoghiresistenti.wordpress.com/2015/07/04/giacomo-verde/ for an interview with Giacomo Verde, in which he recounts the notorious events at the Diaz schools in Genoa – used during those days as the press center for the Genoa Social Forum Coordination. Below is a previously unpublished video excerpt filmed by Verde on the afternoon of 21 July, just a few hours before the assault carried out by the Carabinieri and the Reparti Mobili della Polizia di Stato (State Police special units) in the school complex: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UpvsVGN3co.

With thanks to Tommaso Verde and the Giacomo Verde Archive for their kind permission.

[36] With regard to the description and interpretation of what Las Agencias represented in the context of new counter-institutional practices, see: E. Mahony, *The Uneasy Relationship of Self-Critique in the Public Art Institution*, in "Curator", vol. 59, no. 3, 2016, pp. 219–238. As the author notes, the difficulty of "placement" and, above all, the public outcome of Las Agencias has resulted in the event being absent from the MACBA's online archive. This absence was confirmed through an online search in the museum's archive as well as the museum's "non-response" to a request for information and materials. Over the years, various reconstructions and narratives of Las Agencias have been offered from specific perspectives. Below, as Mahony also mentions, is the article written by Jorge Ribalta, who was the curator of the event at the time: https://transversal.at/transversal/0504/ribalta/en, last accessed January 3, 2025.

[37] Manuel J. Borja-Villel served as the director of the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid from 2008 to 2023.

patrons is any meaningful way, or suggest a fundamental reconfiguration of their own institutional protocols. Of course, they need to be seen as transgressive and up to date, since that's central to the cultural marketability of contemporary art, but their efforts to identify or appropriate sources of social or political authenticity, to re-package and promote them, generally have this vampiric quality.

ERM – You are introducing a new element concerning the ethics of research, extending beyond the traditional debate between ethics and aesthetics within the realm of critique. The themes and examples you have presented highlight the divide between the self-referential world of art that is only formally engaged and an ethics of responsibility – one that civil society demands, navigating the consequences of choices and, most importantly, their negotiation and dialogue.

GK - Absolutely. I do think there's a correlation between that notion of ethics and a dialogical concept of the aesthetic, because an ethical question implies a reciprocal relationship, a relationship of mutual or shared risk as well as a shared potential for solidarity. There is a dialogical relationship, if you will, of vulnerability and interdependence. If the director of MACBA had said, «take me to jail too», or if he'd resigned from the museum, that would have conveyed that he's aware that what transpired in the museum wasn't simply a symbolic appropriation of protest, but had real consequences. There would be a degree of institutional risk, in the same way that the protesters took a risk that they were going to get bludgeoned by the police. But the artworld mentality is always centered on a carefully calibrated separation from risk or consequence, and the displacement of real-world conflict into symbolic forms of critique, like hiring famous artists to design protest clothes. Praxis is almost always unruly and disordered, and almost always entails real risk and consequence. I don't blame the museum director for making of this situation what he could. They are creatures of their institutions, but it does make it difficult for these two genres of practice to be synthesized in any meaningful way.

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ERM – Reflecting on this, if I were to identify a point of responsibility, I would attribute it to those who conflate these two distinct levels. And it is precisely this issue that proves most striking: the – at times forced –attempt to replicate a system to which one does not, in fact, belong. I believe that today anyone wishing to undertake research of this kind must be deeply engaged with their object of study, as your own trajectory clearly demonstrates: you began writing about community-based and socially engaged practices more than thirty years ago, and your interest in these themes has remained constant, despite your background as an art historian. This is not so much a question of rigidity or exclusion, but rather of having a clear and defined positionality. From a personal standpoint, I can say that since encountering socially engaged art practices, they have become the core of my research and intellectual focus. It is a direction I chose deliberately and one I continue to follow with conviction. Perhaps along the way I have set aside other opportunities, but I do not view that as a loss; rather, it has been – and continues to be – a conscious and situated choice.

GK – That makes a lot of sense to me. I came into the art world indirectly. I mean, I didn't really have friends in high school that went to art school. I didn't even consider that as a possible path. I went to a two-year community college after high school and dropped out to work in commercial photography for a while, because I like taking pictures. Long before I went to school for art or art history I started writing about art more or less spontaneously. I had seen an exhibition of a photographer in Atlanta whose work reproduced what I felt were troubling, stereotypical images of poor southern folks, both black and white. I felt that they were offensive, so I wrote about them in order to clarify my thoughts. I sent my review to a local art publication, and they actually published it. I think, from the beginning, I had a sense that art, images, have real world consequences, that they can be used as a tool of domination, as well as emancipation. So, one thing led to another, and I eventually ended up going to art school in Baltimore. But I've always had an ambivalent relationship to the art world, and to the discipline of art history. There is obviously a lot that I enjoy about the discipline, and I've taught art history for many years. In fact, I only occasionally teach on the history and theory of engaged art since there isn't that much of a demand for it. I do one regular class on that topic

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in our department[38]. Most of my teaching is modern art history surveys, or history of photography courses. I'd love to be in a program where I could be in dialogue with people working across many different fields, art history, cultural studies, sociology, political theory, social movement studies and so on, in order to expand and reinvent the discipline. But I also have to earn a living, and the work that I write about has always been marginalized in the field as a whole. I've often felt that I lacked a real intellectual home, so I identify with what you're saying, because it's the same thing I've experienced. This is true even in the case of Left-oriented scholarship. *New Left Review* and Verso are a great example of this in the Anglophone context. They publish really important work in political theory and analysis, but their understanding of contemporary art is remarkably hidebound. Recall that for many years Arthur Danto was the chief art critic at *The Nation*. I can remember this conservatism from when I was writing book reviews for them back in the 1990s, and their arts coverage today really hasn't changed much. There is a fear, I think, on the traditional Left of appearing too much like Zhadonovites to their middle-class readers, so they simply carry forward a kind of Greenberg-ian *Partisan Review* sensibility in contemporary form, epitomized by journals like *October* or figures like Hal Foster. As a result, there really hasn't been much space on Left or Marxist platforms for asking these important questions about the changing nature of contemporary art practice and its relationship to political transformation. They're too busy providing coverage of the Venice Biennale and Francis Ford Coppola films. As I tell my students, the smart move for an art historian, from a career perspective, is to provide intellectual validation for art practices that are already highly monetized and institutionally accepted, or which are clearly produced with this goal in mind. Your job is to show collectors and curators that these works are not simply vulgar commodities, like a Maserati or a Gulfstream, but subversive time-bombs that carry some sort of faint, quasi-revolutionary aura. That way you can enjoy the material benefits of wealth, as well as the cultural cachet that comes along with seeing yourself as a rebellious outsider.

[38] Kester refers to the Visual Arts Department, UC San Diego: https://visarts.ucsd.edu/, last accessed January 3, 2025.

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ERM – In many ways, these practices have opened up and represent a new sense of belonging: being at the intersection of multiple disciplines, experiencing them as if you had no single allegiance, moving through them as if entering through a backdoor. I believe this is precisely what draws different researchers to this kind of theory, which ultimately requires a certain degree of autodidacticism and empiricism. You build it on your own, piecing it together yourself, engaging in conversations, involving yourself with people, but without belonging to something that provides security or a sense of comfort through ownership of knowledge. Perhaps this is the best part, or at least I think so – when you find a balance between real life and what you truly want to do.

GK – I would agree with that. In some sense, the most generative place to be is precisely at the margins of different fields, because the closer you are to the center, the more dependent you are on normative models of knowledge. And it's at the margins where the growth occurs, in dialogue with other disciplines. So, situating yourself "between" is not necessarily a bad thing. As I'm sure you know, the way that art history used to be taught, and often still is, entails a standardized "theory" seminar where you'd read, back in the day, Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*, or Lacan, or Butler, or Deleuze, or Kristeva, or Zizek or Ranciére; the usual suspects[39]. And the students, who often have little or no background in philosophy, plow through these sources and glean some sound bites about the parergon or desire or the "distribution of the sensible," or what have you[40]. And they're taught to project those onto specific artworks or practices, usually in a fairly schematic manner that serves to simply provide a theoretical justification for their pre-existing interpretations. It can become very catechistic because they are seldom in a position to actually interrogate the original theory, to question it, or say «you know what? There are aspects of this that don't really

[39] J. Deridda, *The Truth in the Painting*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1987 [First published as La verite en peinture, Flammarion, Paris, 1978].
40 The concept of paraergon, meaning something that stands "beside the work" (para = beside, ergon = work), is used by Derrida in *The Truth in Painting* (cit.). For the concept of "the distribution of the sensible," see: J. Rancière, *The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics*, Continuum, London, 2004 [originally published as *Le Partage du sensible*, La Fabrique, 2000]. Regarding the concept of desire, within the extensive bibliography on the topic, one can refer to: G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987 [originally published as Mille Plateaux, Éditions de Minuit, 1980].

make sense to me». Instead, you just passively absorb theoretical insights from the masters in a kind of "banking style" of education, as Freire called it[41]. Students are seldom encouraged to test those axioms against what they actually think and feel about art, and the world around them. But this testing process is, I think, essential; to be able to cobble together your own theoretical paradigm through reading, experiential learning and observation. That's how learning advances. Anyway, what you said just resonated a lot with the things I think about.

ERM – After all, this resonance also stems from the fact that my initial self-directed education in socially engaged art – this autodidacticism mentioned earlier – was shaped precisely through your writings. However, I'd like to pose a question now, a critical reflection that may initially sound dissonant, concerning a certain "terminological colonialism" tied to the definition of socially engaged art. Although, as has been mentioned repeatedly, socially engaged art is a global phenomenon deeply rooted in local traditions – due to the importance of the specific contexts in which it emerges and responds – it seems exceedingly difficult to redefine this term and its associated practices according to the context of action. In the specific case of the Italian context, I believe this occurs for two primary reasons. The first is related to a limited presence in the international critical debate on the subject, leading to a lack of connections (to which, of course, the specificities of the context itself also play a crucial role). The second, more general reason concerns the tendency to adopt the most widespread, or at least institutionally accepted, version without critically questioning it. We have developed a form of cultural colonialism that makes it quite challenging to find an appropriate translation or re-semantization of the term socially engaged art. This difficulty arises because the term *socially* (socialmente) carries with it a host of complex meanings. In Italy in particular, we have a rich history of social and political practices outside parliamentary frameworks, which, as early as the 1970s, engaged with the idea of the *social* in such a dense and exhaustive way that one might say it nearly saturated the concept. During those years, which were germinal for the diffusion of the aesthetic sense of the social, the terms *art* and *sociale* – even when di-

[41] For the concept of the "banking model of education," see: P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2018 [originally published in 1970].

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rected toward the same political effort – were kept separate. I think of the work of a critic like Enrico Crispolti, who in 1977 compiled many of his writings in a book titled *Arti Visive e Partecipazione Sociale* (*Visual Arts and Social Participation*)[42], as well as Piero Gilardi's decision to split from the art world in favor of political engagement. At the same time, outside the artistic context, the example of the *Indiani Metropolitani* – the creative wing of the Movement of 1977 – underscored the necessity of a creative approach to political and social issues, but not from a starting point that was explicitly recognized as artistic. Due to these internal challenges, I personally tend to use the English term *socially engaged art* without translating it, attempting to create a sort of scalar complexity around the definition. When attempting to translate it, I tend to favour expressions such as "artistic practices in the social sphere", although I recognise that, outside the critical-artistic context, this definition resonates more strongly within sociological discourse on cultural welfare or within the field of civic action in urban planning. Increasingly, I find myself questioning whether socially engaged art – if it can truly be translated – can only exist within extra-artistic contexts, where the "social" dimension is effectively upheld and sustained by the presence of institutional policies and instruments. My concern is that we are incapable – ontologically incapable, in a sense – of developing an adequate theory because we do not share the same social contexts as the United States, even though we are part of the same sphere of cultural consumption. And this, for me at least, creates a dissonance. After all, we are discussing a practice rooted in contextual experience. It is not something comparable or replicable, like a painting that can be reproduced. So, this is the issue. I'm not even sure if it constitutes a proper question, but rather a way of reflecting on how we can "engage" with the entire theoretical framework of this field as it has been constructed in the U.S. context.

GK – That's a good question. And I think what you've already described is great, which is to invent, for your situation, in your context, the terminology that makes sense for you. I don't have a proprietary relationship to the terminology of socially engaged art. That term did evolve, primarily, in a North American, and to some extent, UK, con-

[42] E. Crispolti, *Arti Visive e Partecipazione Sociale,* De Donato, Bari, 1977.

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text, beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It's problematic in its own ways. The obvious response from traditional art historians is usually something like «well, isn't *all* art "engaged" with the social?». So that leads, in turn, to a discussion of what they mean by the "social" and what I might mean, which is generally quite different. So, sure, I can come up with a way to justify the term theoretically, but I'm not overly attached to it and have often struggled with it in the past. Is there even an internally coherent, or ontologically unified "thing" called engaged art practice in the first place? And if there is, what else do you call it? Activist art? Political art? Dialogical art? All these terms have their own value and their own limitations. It's probably more productive for people to construct their own terms, suitable to their particular context, through a kind of crowd sourcing process. Over time something more appropriate will probably distill out of this ongoing conversation. Okay, so this goes back to the bigger question. To whatever extent North American discourse on socially engaged art, including my own work, has become oppressive in some way, like force feeding students Derrida, Ranciére, Butler and Deleuze in art history seminars because that's what you were taught twenty years before, then it needs to be challenged, right? You need to say, there are things that we know in an Italian context that unsettle some of these assumptions. Let's have that conversation. I feel like that's the only way the field is going to grow. I can say that I've had similar conversation with scholars working in Asia, Latin America and Africa. My hope is that this Eurocentric parochialism is beginning to break down. I'm aware of a number of younger scholars and researchers who are doing really interesting work in other parts of the world, and they are changing the nature of the discourse around engaged art in meaningful ways. That's what should happen. As much as the existing literature is still largely Eurocentric the actual field of practice is intensely global and diverse. That's an issue that I tried to raise in my Oxford Bibliography and in my recent books[43]. That's why I talk about the Minjung movement in Korea, or Gandhi's work in India with the spinning wheel and the symbolic politics of craft. Or you can look at C.L.R. James's writing on the cultural politics of cricket[44]. These liminal zones between

[43] For Kester's definition of Activist and Socially Engaged Art, see: https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199920105/obo-9780199920105-0160.xml, last accessed November 23, 2024.
[44] C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary,* Stanley Paul, London, 1963.

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art, popular culture and performative social action are really important. This aesthetic dimension has always been there in movements for social change. You see it in Emory Douglas's work for the Panther Party or the work of Taller de Gráfica Popular in Mexico[45]. Long before engaged art was a recognized term it existed as a form of cultural production, and it was consistently marginalized and left out of art history books. That's the other piece of it, for me, to look back at our history, and to the various ways in which past movements have developed aesthetic strategies of various kinds, to broaden our sense of the field. It obviously far exceeds what is conventionally understood as engaged art in a North American context. That has only ever been a narrow slice of a much larger field of cultural production.

ERM – This global aspect, combined with the intent to reformulate and redefine within specific contexts, is integral to the work you are developing with the journal *FIELD*.

GK – Yeah, that's why, as much as possible, we try to cover a really broad geographic range in *FIELD*. We've had special issues on work in China, Japan, Africa, Japan, Latin America and so on. We don't always succeed, but that is one of our primary goals. The work is out there, the writers are out there, and the field is really beginning to change and grow more interconnected, at least that's my sense of it.

APPENDIX

[45] Regarding the work of Emory Douglas, see: M. Duncan, *Emory Douglas and the Art of the Black Panther Party,* "Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men", vol. 5, no. 1, Fall 2016, pp. 117–135. For the Taller de Gráfica Popular, see: H. Musacchio, *Taller de Gráfica Popular*, Fondo de Cultura Económica (Tezontle), Mexico City, 2007.

To complete the interview, the questions sent to Kester during the preparation phase are provided below. These questions, written and shared via email, were formulated directly in English.

1) I would like to start with a first question, which is more of an overview regarding socially engaged practices, their reception, and critique. In your opinion, what has changed the most in these 30 years of socially engaged art, from when you wrote about aesthetic evangelism to today, where you talk about the sovereignty of the self (and its overcoming)?

2) Before delving into the core of the aesthetic issue, while still staying on a methodological overview, I wanted to ask you: from an internal perspective, how our university teachings has changed? How has the discipline of art history and criticism evolved, and how has the research method changed?

3) Part of the critique and practice of socially engaged art – as you also point out– seems to have emerged from a concept of emancipatory art that educates the masses. Yet this notion, which you articulated well from the start of your theorization on community-based art, has since been intertwined with a kind of fetishization of the proletariat typical of certain left-wing critiques (and this is reflected in Rancière). The fundamental issue lies in the continued belief in categories such as the "proletariat" or "working class", and thus in the idea that art should serve as a form of enlightened Proletkult. In my view, this has led to the creation of a new fetish – despite original intentions – a new ideology: that of post-2000 anti-globalist activism. Many of the movements that have emerged over the past 20 years seem to align with Rancière not only in their concept of art but also in the moralistic educational approach embedded in their actions. This sovereignty of moralism is a direct consequence of the sovereignty of the self, meaning the self-celebration of one's own thought process, conducted in isolation without any dialogical construction with others or their contexts. I agree with you when you write that, unlike modernist aesthetics, socially engaged art practices do not view every attempt as co-optable or subject to judgments of "corruption". Since they

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don't operate in an apophatic or dichotomous manner, they acknowledge the multiple levels of complexity inherent in creative negotiation with a neoliberal system. However, despite the necessary convergence of struggles, haven't we inadvertently led to the gentrification of activism?

4)Regarding this very point, I wanted to ask: what differences do you see between the stance of the GAC in rejecting the 2003 Biennale and that of a group like RuanGrupa, which effectively organized the entire Documenta in 2022? Is this perhaps symptomatic of the fact that, over the span of 20 years, the mechanism of co-optation has been so internalized by the artists themselves that they no longer perceive any inconsistency in such a choice? Or does it suggest something else? Or probably this question – I wonder and I think about after your book – reveal how my studies in art history remain deeply imbued with the aesthetic tensions of modernism?

5) There are a few terms I'd like to discuss freely, without framing them as direct questions, because I believe they represent new elements to be added to the tools of criticism discourse. The terms are: incommensurability, answerability, scalar complexity, expanded continuum, interdependence.

6)Through the creation of a journal like *FIELD*, you succeeded in expanding the critical horizon of
socially engaged practices, exploring the concept beyond the "simple" artistic practice and situating it within respective national contexts and policies. In the end, while some practices may resemble each other in their final outcomes, I believe these contexts are the real differentiator for this type of work. From what need/urgency did the journal arise, how does it operate today, and what does it aim to convey?

7) However, I wanted to ask you: socially engaged art, particularly in its criticism and theorization as we know it today, is largely a North American phenomenon. In its translation – both in terms of theory and practice (artists, critics and institutions) – into different social and political contexts, there are specific variations that, nonetheless, always

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seem to be reduced and resolved through the lens of the American model. In the Italian context, for instance – as I wrote in an article published in *FIELD* – I find it difficult, if not semantically incorrect, to translate the "socially" in socially engaged art as "socialmente" (the literal translation being "*arte socialmente impegnata*"). This is because, in Italy, as well as in other contexts, the meaning of social engagement has deep and historic roots (I am thinking, for example, of Movimento Operaio, or the moment of Indiani Metropolitani in the 1970s). Today, in the absence of a strong political framework, it seems more appropriate to speak of "civil action", but even here, the original definition has become determinant for later translations. How do you see this terminological "constraint" being translated into other contexts? And, more importantly, do you think this definition can become limiting?

8) From reading your *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, it becomes evident that we must renegotiate new forms of knowledge in the face of a global context that is now so distant and different from when the concepts of autonomy and aesthetics were first formulated. How can we punt into critique this reformulation and renegotiation? Or rather, given the evident nature of these practices (which in many cases are extremely contingent and fugitive), is it still worthwhile to construct or attempt to construct a theoretical framework that encompasses them?

9) In this text of yours, you also discuss the reversal of counterculture and the theme of dissent, which now seems to be the preserve of right-wing cultural policies. In fact, thanks to this reversal, I would almost dare to say, the right has been able to create a contemporary cultural policy where the message of hate seems to be diluted into a series of tactics and attitudes typical of anarchist or leftist countercultural movements. Social commitment and attention to the local community have become the mantra of many xenophobic policies.The community has become a politically instrumental buzzword. Just as you have researched and redefined the concept of aesthetics based on a dichotomous modernist vision, should we perhaps also work on the demythologization and deconstruction of the community.

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