
Socially engaged art, participatory art, social practice, relational aesthetics, social justice art, community art, relational art, activist art—all are terms used to describe an art which takes its form from artistic practice within the context of human interaction and social spaces. This trend of social engagement as an art form began in the early nineties, growing quietly in multiple directions including everything from performance to urban renewal projects and community building. Living in Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011 is part of a multi-pronged effort to examine the dimensions of this movement over the past twenty years.

A large scale survey of social justice art projects presented in New York’s historic Essex Street Market by Nato Thompson, chief curator at Creative Time, is the eponymous source for this publication as well as nine site-specific commissions, a database of more than 350 examples of social practice art projects, and a “nomadic version” of the exhibition in which fifty additional projects were presented around the globe. With such a grand scope it is fortunate that the book is limited to 100 artists (or artists’ collaborators) and their projects. Supporting this survey are essays by Thompson and six prominent scholars.

The greater bulk of this book is the presentation of 100 participatory art projects, each presented with a brief description and several photographs. Artists are arranged alphabetically and referenced in the table of contents. Each project is covered in two pages or less. In his effort to represent the enormous variety in social practice, Thompson has perhaps further confused the scope and scale of the movement. While many of the projects represented are excellent selections, some are dubious as works of art. Ai Weiwei’s “Fairytales: 1,001 Chinese Visitors,” Barefoot Artists’ “Rwanda Healing Project,” and SUPERFLEX’s “Guaraná Power” are fantastic examples of action, intervention, and engagement as form. However, “Tahrir Square” and “Election night in Harlem, 2008” are, without any artistic intention, planned direction, or aesthetic agenda, difficult to accept as art works even within the broad strokes used to define activist art.

After twenty years of social practice, Living in Form joins a surprisingly small list of books on this topic, and it is important as much for the effort to define the movement as for the ambitious list of artists engaged in activist art. Claire Bishop, who contributed an essay to this effort, has also just released her own title, Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. The Art of Engagement: Culture, Collaboration, Innovation by Elaine Lally, Ien Ang and Kay Anderson is another new publication (2011) that will interest readers. Living in Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011 is suitable for any collection but especially recommended for academic libraries supporting studio art departments and/or contemporary art research.

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