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What Can Art Do Now:
A Conversation Between Shaun Leonardo, Brett Cook, Martha Wilson, and Pablo Helguera

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Carlos Martiel, *Expulsion,* 2015. Carlos Martiel, Expulsion 2015, Thessaloniki Performance Festival, Greece. Courtesy of the artist.

Belkis Ayón, *Sin título (Figura negra que carga una blanca)Untitled (Black Figure Carrying a White One),* 1996. Courtesy the Belkis Ayón Estate; Photo by José A. Figueroa.

When a bunch of American artists, activists, and cultural producers get together to reflect on what art can best give in the United States to this moment, a whole lot of ideas erupt. From questioning the seismic changes social justice has had on contemporary art to the ongoing impact socially-engaged practices can have on society at large.

Shaun Leonardo, *Eric Garner* (drawings 1-6), 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

How has the meaning and impact of art changed over the last ten to twenty years?

Shaun Leonardo: What is most palpable to me is the way conversations have shifted around defining social practice. I think it is no accident that many practitioners have adopted the term 'socially engaged' as it implies a certain level of accountability to the participants called into the work. Over the last ten years, artists have become more attuned to the inherent power dynamics at play in works that involve cooperation versus participation – forwarding a particular agenda meant to be fulfilled by actors, rather than a framework that allows for co-design and co-authorship. The question of ethics is (and should be), therefore, much more at the forefront, with an understanding that without an assessment of the flow of power, even the most well-intentioned projects may cause harm to the communities they purport to support and uplift.

Martha Wilson: I am an old white lady, so my perspective will reflect that. Artists witnessing and picturing horror has been going on a long time – think of Goya's *Disasters of War* prints; Otto Dix's *War Cripples* drypoint etchings, and Pablo Picasso's painting, *Guernica*. For these artists, the function of art was to depict these horrors, in the hope that people seeing the images would also be horrified, and moved to action.

The artists' books movement of the 1970s took deliberate aim at regular people beyond the art world. Artists' books by women examined sexual assault, rape, and forced sterilization, among other phenomena affecting everyone, like nuclear radiation. Franklin Furnace, founded in 1976, staged *Window Works*, a series of installations that used the storefront window at 112 Franklin Street in Manhatten to present *Truisms* by Jenny Holzer in 1978, and Willie Cole's *Ten Thousand Mandelas* in 1988, which consisted of xeroxed images of Nelson Mandela, barbed-wired to the outside of the window, including an audiotape of his voice chanting, “Mandela, Mandela, Mandela.” At the time, artists were postering on the streets of New York to reach regular people; and doing “street works” of performance art for an audience of people going to work, again, in an effort to break out of the confines of the art world. Could this not be called early ‘social practice’? The subjects may have evolved during the last half-century, but the intention of artists to affect regular people has not.

Pablo Helguera: To me, this question seems unanswerable without writing a long essay or book on the subject, but I will do my best to compress my thoughts in a few paragraphs.

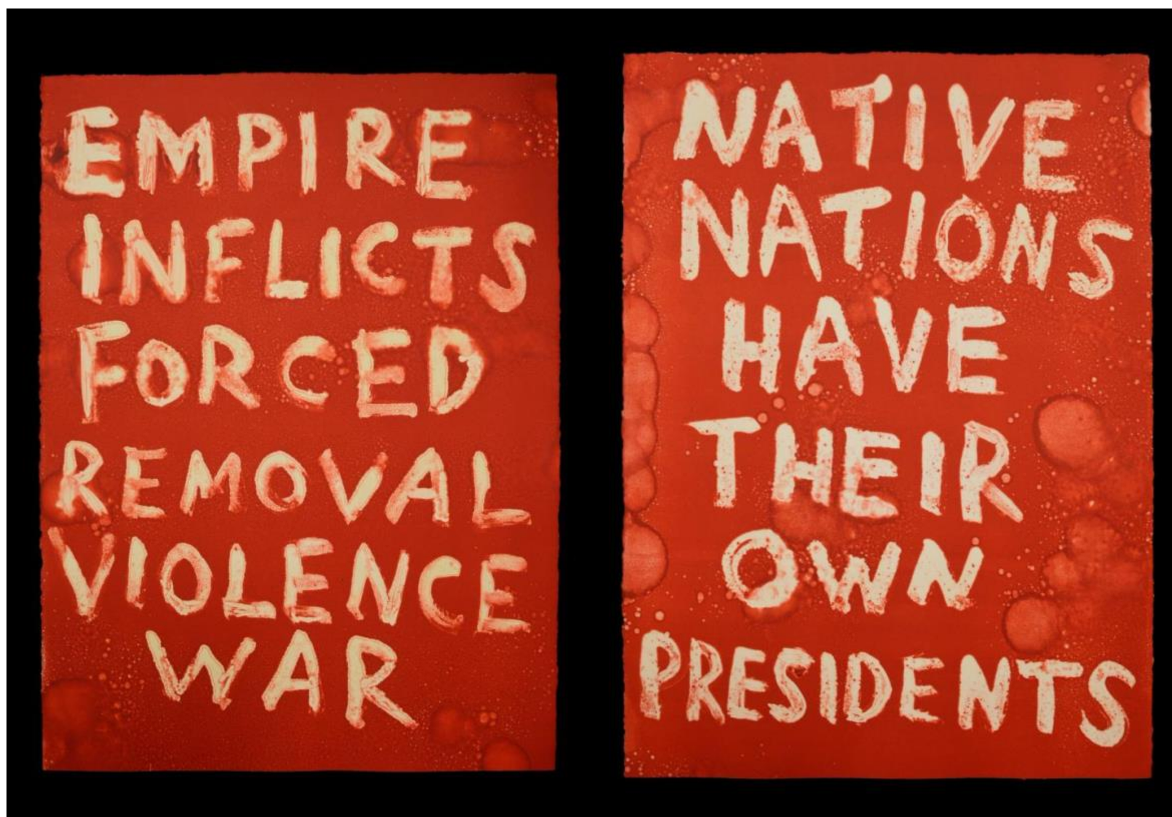
Every generation of artists has regarded their arrival as a watershed, and as a moment where the old paradigms were broken and reimagined (by them). This is, of course, a biased perception. The promotion and dominance of that generational outlook perhaps distracts from the fact that there are slower, longer-term changes in art making and its forms of validation that must be understood.

From my perspective, I can argue that the defining moment of my generation was the emergence of socially-engaged art, or rather, the reconfiguration of political art, feminist art, public and community art into this new version of what Jean-Paul Sartre once defined for writing as *littérature engage.* I tend to place this moment for myself and my peers around 9/11 and the rise of the Bush Doctrine. Parallel to that, and generally obscured but not less significant, is the collapse of the dotcom bubble, which marked, in my view, the beginning of a string of bubble effects on the American economy. Back in 2000/2001, I was already skeptical of the influence of neoliberal thinking on the art world and the way in which artists, like court jesters, performed a play of political critique for collectors and sponsors to enjoy, for example, the Koch brothers' funding of Lincoln Center. It seemed unacceptable to me that artists should make art about metaphors of injustice, instead of dispensing with metaphors and actually making art that acted on the world. That, to me, was the seed of socially-engaged art, at least in the way we understand it now.

The next pivotal moment, which defines the practice right now, I place in 2007-2008 with the bursting of the housing bubble and the beginning of the Great Recession. The financial crisis triggered both left and right wing populist responses (Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party movement, respectively) that foregrounded social and racial grievances (Black Lives Matter for the left, Make America Great Again for the right). In the United States we are still living the impact of those years, and in particular the after-effects of the Trump presidency. It is clear to all of us in the U.S. that while we escaped

a catastrophic event with the narrow loss of a second term for Trump, culture wars in this country are alive and well. We are living through them now, with George Floyd and the pandemic of police brutality and gun violence. In addition, artists have to make work in an environment where the primary supporters of the arts (read: art museums) are entwined with individuals who maintain conservative politics (many of them Republican) and unethical practices – e.g. investing in the for-profit prison industry, or in companies that produce military equipment used against migrants at the border, all of which is generally termed "toxic philanthropy."

So, whoever writes the history of art making over the last ten to twenty years will inevitably have to look at the decline of the global economy, the rise of populism, authoritarianism and the hard right, and the way in which the latter two have impacted the support platforms for art making.



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, *Empire Inflicts Forced Removal Violence War,* 2020. From the suite: *Native Survival Inspite of Empire.* Courtesy of the artist.

Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, *Native Nations Have Their Own Presidents,* 2020, From the suite: *Native Survival Inspite of Empire.* Courtesy of the artist.

Brett Cook: I don't know if the meaning and impact of art has changed in the last ten or twenty years as much as the institutional art world has become more receptive to considering art's impact in new ways. In 2003, The Collaboration Workshop came out of Wendy Ewald and my own efforts to make the discourse about our work more inclusive

– across disciplines, communities, constituencies, and the context of the art institution. Wendy and I found each other in the late nineties on a panel at Teachers College, and bonded over the lack of the art establishment's ability to understand the social impact of our work. We developed a two-event series through the New School's Vera List Center for Art and Politics and my studio space in Harlem. There were other people working collaboratively to whom we had a kinship – though they worked in different settings within the art world – so we brought them together to explore our commonalities and differences.

We were asking: What IS collaboration? What are the elements that make a working relationship a collaboration? What are the elements required for a successful collaboration? How does time and the duration of a collaboration influence conceptual models, strategies, tactics, and critical perspectives? How do we begin to develop a critical language, as well as an expanded idea of aesthetics to examine collaborative work? What are the social/political implications of creating collaboratively? What role does the audience have? How does one judge quality or success? What is the intersection of the process and product? How has working within the educational context influenced our practice? How do we show policy makers, educators, art institutions, and our social community the value of integrated creative practices?

Tom Finkelpearl's book *What We Made* came out of this convening, but the gathering wasn't trying to canonize or brand "Social Practice" – that nomenclature was still a year or two away – we were really just trying to understand the intersectionality between practices, and how could we inspire the art world to recognize collaborative work for its broad array of impacts.

I knew that our work lived in the art world, but it was also not made for the museum alone, and it definitely had a social agenda that was as important as form in determining its success. By the time A Blade of Grass, Creative Time, Open Engagement, and the blossoming of social practice programs made the social practice "field," I came to a broad personal understanding of art's meaning and impact in the world. The Collaboration Workshop convening suggested a critical mass of activity, that for some had already been happening for decades. Even twenty years ago, we knew there were antecedents to the work we were doing in community arts and social justice movements. The task was not to change the meaning or impact of our work, but the degrees to which that meaning and impact was more broadly understood.

Frank Martínez, *Auto-reverse, 2014.* Courtesy of the artist.

How has social justice changed in relation to art over the last few decades? What is the effect of the cultural sector's increased interest in social justice?

SL: I would argue that there is not an increased desire nor an interest among art spaces in engaging social justice issues, but rather an increased demand that art spaces do so. What artists and administrators, particularly Black and brown individuals, wish to point out is the inherent hypocrisy of institutions that project, on the surface, democratic values of equal justice and inclusion, yet do not hold these same values as necessary in their inner-workings. In the day-to-day operations of such institutions, those contradictions of 'what we want to see in the world' versus 'who we are in the world' play out in often subtle – yet insidious – ways, with equity, care and accountability taking a back seat to financial gain and the maintaining of hierarchical power.

MW: The big difference in my view between art making in the last 100 years and art making in the last couple of decades is that artists are now engaged in both the protest and the solution. This may have started during the AIDS crisis, when a well-dressed man handcuffed himself to a radiator in the Burroughs-Wellcome building. After the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s, which – to the outrage of legislators and religious leaders – took sexuality to be a legitimate subject of contemporary art, artists started to see surveillance and the police state as a new threat to freedom of expression. In 2004, Franklin Furnace supported an artist duo, Yuri Gitman and Joshua Kinberg, to produce *Bikes Against Bush*, which marked the convergence of the body and

technology. Their Magicbike was a mobile WiFi hotspot that provided free Internet access wherever it traveled. A custom-designed printing device mounted on the back of the bike printed spray-chalk text messages from web users onto the surface of the street, overlapping public art with techno-activism by creating a montage of the community wireless movement, bicycle culture, street demonstrations, and contemporary art.

PH: Social justice has now taken the place that social practice had a decade ago. This is forcing arts organizations to grapple with supporting artistic practices that question the very structures of power upon which they are built.

BC: Earlier in my professional career, social justice almost exclusively meant the integration of new bodies and forms of appearance, without cultural understanding, social responsibility, or structural transformation. If art, and art institutions, had images that looked different from the hegemonic norm, or showcased "under-represented" communities, then they believed they were exemplifying social justice.

Over the last few decades, popular definitions of social justice and its actions have evolved. Just as "White Supremacy" and "Defund the Police" have moved from progressive margins to popular discourse, social justice in art has moved beyond obscure public panels to primary programing. With the broadening dialogue about social justice, the cultural sector is destined to exemplify this larger cultural literacy.

We are emerging into the understanding that social justice means structural change, where art's action requires more than to look right, but has to "be" right. Seph Rodney wrote about it well in *Hyperallergic* when he said, "We love representation, the power of signifying, and the incisiveness of well-argued critique. For us these tools are so robust that we come to imagine they are the demiurges of the world. They are not. And by themselves they won't effect structural change. Representation alone will not save us." We are still far from the place where institutions are concerned with being good as much – if not more – than they and their publicity departments are interested in looking good. However, the challenge of having our actions align with our intentions is not just a challenge for art institutions, but a challenge for us all.

"The big difference in my view between art making in the last 100 years and art making in the last couple of decades is that artists are now engaged in both the protest and the solution."— MARTHA WILSON

José Ángel Toirac, *La Inmortalidad, del portafolio Contemporary Prints from Cuba (Immortality,* from the portfolio *Contemporary Prints from Cuba)*, 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

José Ángel Toirac, *Pantócrator (Pantocrator)*, 2012, Courtesy of the artist.

To what extent can art spaces and nonprofits nurture artistic practices, and operate as sites for organizing and activism?

SL: It has always been, and remains, simple: artists need time and space. Alternative and nonprofit art spaces can be sites of both experimentation and care. What does it mean to partner with artists to build a more just and equitable creative community? At Recess, it is in our mission to welcome radical thinkers to imagine networks of community resilience and safety. It is with time for collective imagination, and space for a collective sense of belonging, that we are offered an environment in which we can visualize the necessary steps toward an abolitionist horizon. It is with space that artists can join organizing efforts to respond to sociopolitical urgencies. It is with time that artists can commit to the longer work of narrative revision to impact culture.

MW: In recent years, we have seen artists address stark social realities like police violence against Black and brown bodies. Shaun's 2015 Franklin Furnace Fund performance, *Assembly Diversion Program*, took place in January 2017, when the artist and the organization Recess launched a nine-month program in a satellite space at 370 Schermerhorn Street. Diversion programs present alternatives to incarceration and other adult sanctions for court-involved youth (who are treated as adults by the New York State Criminal Court). Recess partnered with Brooklyn Justice Initiatives to recruit participants at the court level to take part in arts programs organized by Recess, which were designed and led by teaching artist Shaun Leonardo. When participants completed the program, prosecutors could close and seal their cases.

PH: The greatest opportunity and challenge for alternative spaces and nonprofits is to create new frameworks of support and sustainability, that successfully model the principles and values of artists today. I believe that a business model dependent on tourists, or passive consumers of art, is no longer sustainable in the long-term. Museums need to address the challenges they now face regarding the incompatibility of their role as archivists and custodians of art from the past, and their need to be actively engaged in supporting current and new dialogues. Alternative spaces and nonprofits can model new behaviors that larger organizations can learn from.

BC: The most inspirational examples of alternate and nonprofit spaces support artistic practices that also model social justice in terms of intention and action. [The Laundromat Project] warms my heart with the way they have opened their leadership structure to integrate artists from their program history. The nurturing comes through personal relationships and reciprocity, versus a transactional relationship mandated out of the conventions of the nonprofit art industrial complex. I am reminded of what Darren Walker said on *60 Minutes*, that philanthropy should not be solely about the donor, but instead how the recipient is scaffolded and how its mission should be focused on justice. I think the most inspirational spaces are trying to live with more responsibility in their ecosystem, addressing the conditions that sustain those relationships over time.

María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Freedom Trap,* 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

With this conversation taking place after the COVID-19 lockdowns, do you consider the value of art to have changed in your own practice, or that of your

community? How do you think the value of art and art spaces has changed as we begin to recover from the pandemic?

SL: I have a stronger conviction in the value of my work, and that of art generally. Art provides a space, even momentarily, for a person to contemplate their everyday existence — to gather meaning. Art remains the only thing that offers a person the complexity of experience that is both respite and resistance, both a processing and recovery. The objectives of my work have shifted. It will be the task of social practitioners, in particular, to create new pathways toward a sense of belonging: to engage our fears and anxieties of sharing space, engage the politics of public space, and to retrain us in being together.

MW: When the COVID crisis hit New York in the spring of 2020, multiple recipients of Franklin Furnace Fund grants were suddenly unable to present their work to the public because venues had closed, or because travel became impossible. As a result of this, Arantxa Araujo, our Program Manager, designed and built the Franklin Furnace Digital LOFT. During the past year we presented performance art presentations, exhibitions, and even a birthday party to celebrate the organization's 45 years of making the world safe for *avant-garde* art, on this online platform. In the coming months, in order to take advantage of the Zoom world we all now inhabit, we plan to launch our new website, continuing to provide online accessibility to our event archive. Change being the only constant, this is the "new normal."

PH: I am afraid I will sound a bit pessimistic, but as significant as the pandemic has been in our lives, I don't anticipate it having a long-term impact on artistic practice. I fear that we will revert to the same practices and models we were engaged with 2 years ago (art fairs, etc.), and in fact with renewed energy. However, the introspective reckoning that the pandemic caused amongst artists is significant. I believe one of its legacies will be a renewed consideration of the local, as I tried to articulate in a recent video essay, where I put forth the term "radical domesticity."

Dread Scott, *#WhileBlack*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Are there any recent collective, individual, or community-based efforts that exemplify the power of art in times of uncertainty?

SL: I could certainly speak to my practice at Assembly – an arts-based diversion program I co-founded at Recess, 6 years ago – as an intervention in the criminal justice system. But instead, I will use this space to amplify our current efforts at Recess, as they point to the ways in which care has become central to how we hold up our majority-Black staff, artists, and system-involved participants in this era of overlapping crises. Through a process of rigorous reflection, our staff and board created an abolitionist framework and applied it to programs and operations. Our mission works toward the removal of interlocking systems that cause harm, with a simultaneous investment in networks of community resilience and safety. Our youth offers the program to their peers from a place of care, rather than a fear of carceral consequences. We are building a rubric for youth-driven community safety, without police, that likewise stems from a place of respect and trust.

We are also honing internal operations to support similar artist-led processes of accountability with external partners. We, therefore, continue to build structures that do not rely on existing models designed to preserve white supremacy. This methodology implies caring for artists and staff with the same rigor we use to build programs and provide for participants — instating universal starting salaries and health benefits, as well as care and mental health services. We believe in artistic leadership and vision, and so, look at the organization like an arts project.

We believe artists are uniquely situated to address social injustice due to the creative toolkit they possess and their ability to offer nuanced perspectives. To operate as an artist gives Recess permission to continuously ask difficult questions of itself—to never be fixed in its behaviors and functions and, therefore, meet uncertainty with possibility.

MW: In order to answer this question, I would change “the power of art” to “the power of artists.” A Franklin Furnace Fund recipient, Guadalupe Maravilla, fled civil war in his native El Salvador, arriving in America as an unaccompanied eight-year-old, in 1984. Later, he was diagnosed with and survived colon cancer. He openly discusses these experiences in his performance art processions and presentations, which may involve fifty or so other individuals. When COVID hit, Maravilla's performance was one of the events that was cancelled – his band from Mexico was unable to travel to the United States – so he became a community activist. In collaboration with a minister in Red Hook, he raised $40,000 to support other undocumented aliens, and performed “Sound Bath” performances of his sculpture, which can be played for people with the intention of spreading calmness. According to a review by Andrea Scott in *The New Yorker*, “...even alternative-medicine skeptics will admire the formal ingenuity of Maravilla's polyphonic ‘healing machines,’ whose extended family includes Nick Cave's 'sound suits' and the Aztec god Quetsalcoatl.”

PH: I am very inspired by the work of Sally Tallant, the new Executive Director of the Queens Museum, who is leading its program, *A Year of Uncertainty*. I see her approach as visionary, and a true reconsideration of the work both museums and artists can produce to create meaningful change.

BC: The power of art in uncertain times is exemplified in the San Francisco Bay Area by choreographer and performance artist Amara Tabor-Smith, theater artist Margo Hall, and the People's Kitchen Collective. As three inaugural recipients of the Rainin Fellowship, administered by United States Artists, their work and its support give me hope. The fellowship award is significant, with unrestricted grants, as well as supplemental support tailored to address each fellow's specific needs and goals. The layers of institutional partnership to support this work are also meaningful, as a philanthropic model in service to the power of creativity and change.

During these uncertain times Yerba Buena Center for the Arts has also impressed me by launching a Guaranteed Income Pilot program for San Francisco-based artists. With this Pilot, YBCA is working with artists and community members to design and execute an accessible process to provide 130 BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ artists with $1000 a month for 6 months, no strings attached.

YBCA is also launching a process to support 40-60 artist-driven convenings and gatherings in the Bay Area Region over 2021 and 2022. The aim is to shift resources directly to artists, particularly BIPOC artists, to design conversations illuminating their collective strength, needs and opportunities. While many art spaces flounder to create public offerings similar to the pre-pandemic past, it has been refreshing to see this organization work to change their programing – as well as internal structures and board – toward deeper partnerships that shift our ways of thinking about how to invest in the arts.

MW: In sum, artists can be relied upon to consistently adapt to current conditions, anticipate future circumstances, and develop innovative ways to change the meaning and impact of art.

This conversation originally appeared in a new publication, *An Incomplete Archive of Activist Art* published by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation. Reflecting on the Foundation's art and social justice initiatives, the two-volume publication features thematic essays, roundtable discussions, newly commissioned artworks and documentation of visual art exhibitions.

Coinciding with the publication is a new exhibition: ARTICULATING ACTIVISM: WORKS FROM THE SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN PRIVATE COLLECTION running March 3 – June 18, 2022 at The 8th Floor gallery in New York.

María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Songs of Freedom*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

elcleonardo.com
ybca.org
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