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Benefit-oriented Socially Engaged Art: Two Cases of Social Work Experiment

Yang Jing | 30.12.2015 klo 13.02 | Väitökset | TAHITI 04/2015

Lectio praecursoria. More than 20 years ago, I was studying at an art school in China. My school was located in Chongqing, a mountainous industrial city up Yangtze River. My classmates and I used to go to make sketches of shacks at the nearby squatter areas where many low-income people lived. When I was painting and drawing those shacks, I started to think of those people who lived inside. Lacking of running water and basic sanitation equipment, how would they live their daily life? Naturally, I started to think of why drawing or painting a slum is art, but making practical change to solve a social problem is not? Eventually, what decides whether a human action is or is not art and where is the boundary between them? That was maybe my initial seed of insight about the definition of art, the relationship between art and society, and the role of artists.

Today, socially engaged art has become a ubiquitous as well as ambiguous existence. It is ubiquitous because the term socially engaged art (SEA) has become a prevalent term, seen in tenets of various arts and cultural funding programs, in introductions of different arts workshops, in goal setting of social service organizations, and in course descriptions of Bachelor or Master Degree programs in arts colleges and universities. It is ambiguous because under the loose shelter of socially engaged art, there are many projects which vary in their goals, mechanisms and results. The complexity and the variety of forms of art's social engagement still lack, as well as deserve, further exploration.

In my dissertation "Benefit-oriented Socially Engaged Art: Two Cases of Social Work Experiment", I discuss a special type of socially engaged art—the artists and art educators engaging in social work experiments. These projects aim to propose concrete solutions for a specific social problem, focus on bringing benefits to the participants through providing them with art-based services. The mechanisms of these projects are epitomized by non-profit activities, targeted service users, long-term and sustainable operation, multi and cross-disciplinary cooperation, and concerted and collaborative approaches.

Firstly, my dissertation outlines the history of interaction of art and social work. It includes a constellation of art historians, curators and artists' ideas of social engagement in contemporary art on one hand; and a number of social work researchers' perception of artistic attributes in social work field and various artistic methods social workers apply on the other hand. Secondly, my dissertation explores how artists and art educators engage in social work through providing art-based service to marginalized individuals and groups. My dissertation is based on investigation of two projects, one in China and the other in Finland. The investigation includes a set of issues, such as the conceptions, mechanisms and effects of the two projects with a specific focus on the participants' experiences and the artists' roles. The investigation explores the participants' participation experience instead of only listing their benefits as the outcome. It also explores the artists' roles, how they consider their projects and combine their own aims and interests with the participants' needs. Last, and most significantly, my dissertation discusses the aesthetic value of these artists' involvement in social work. This research provides new insights into the understanding of how art can integrate into social work to benefit socially disadvantaged people and contributes to our understanding of the relation between art and social work, the definition of art, and the roles of artists.

The Chinese project, the Art for the Disabled Scheme, was initiated after a devastating earthquake that occurred in Sichuan on the 12th May, 2008. The earthquake caused more than 7,000 disabled; among them were many adolescents. After the earthquake, Chinese artist Zhou Chunya and his friends decided to establish a non-profit foundation, the 5Colours Foundation, to help the disabled students. Under the supervision and patronage of the foundation, the Art for the Disabled Scheme has been working as a long-term project for helping disabled young people through the integration of extracurricular art instruction and philanthropy. This project currently provides assistance to over 100 limb-disabled students. It won a Special Contribution Award in the selection of the 8th Award of Art China in 2013. However, although the Art for the Disabled Scheme has been the subject of massive Chinese media coverage, there has not been any previous attention from academia. The study of this project explores how a small group of limb-disabled students enhanced their social inclusion through participation in this project. This study identified five themes: obtaining financial and material support, improving mental well-being, promoting personal development, building positive self and group identity, and enhancing social development. The articulation of the five themes provides a comprehensive understanding of those disabled students' participation experience, centring on the occurrence of positive changes in relation to the generation of considerable economic capital, human capital and social capital. Subsequently, it discusses three issues relating to the mechanism of this project: sustainability and efficient implementation, the multifaceted nature with respect to the integration of various resources, and the unique roles played by artists. The findings demonstrate that the cooperation of philanthropy and art in the mechanism of this project formed a very empowering whole and effectively facilitated the disabled students' overall social participation.

The Finnish project, the Art and Culture Companions, was launched by Jyväskylä Art Museum in 2006. The basic concept of this project is training museum volunteers for providing low-threshold access to cultural activities for social groups in need—such as the elderly, the disabled, chronic or mental patients, and individuals who are not familiar with the cultural services. This project has fuelled the development of similar projects in different cities in Finland. The study of this project explores a small group of Finnish art museum volunteers' involvement as mixed serious leisure enthusiasts. In accordance to their primary involvement, this study defined three types of mixed serious leisure enthusiasts: volunteer/hobbyist, amateur/volunteer and balanced participant. The first type primarily undertakes volunteer work, while as a secondary activity they pursue their own hobbies in the arts; the second type participates in this project mainly as amateur artists but occasionally doing volunteer work; the third type balances arts hobbies and voluntary work and had no obvious participation inclination. The articulation of the three types of participants reveals how the museum volunteers integrate their volunteer mission with their enthusiasm for the arts. This project highlights the integration of museum volunteerism and community arts participation as a creative solution for enhancing more people's participation in art and cultural activities. Rather than only escorting people in museums and introducing artwork, the participants facilitated conversation among different people, presented artwork to socially marginalized groups, made art with them, and even inspired them to host their own exhibitions. They effectively benefited themselves, their service users, the museum, and the whole community. In a sense, this project is a community art project that is operated within the framework of museum volunteering. It is also a museum volunteering project that has expanded the meaning of museum volunteering—moving toward the people beyond the walls of the museum and using artistic activities as a way to undertake social service.

Based on an investigation of the two projects, this dissertation sets forth the concept of “benefit-oriented socially engaged art” and attempts to reveal the meaning of benefit-oriented socially engaged art practices and their position within contemporary art and culture as a whole. The most debatable issue within the field of socially engaged art centres on the contradiction between social acclaim and aesthetic value, which reflect a dichotomist

stance between art and social scientific field, and spotlighting the confusion between art's autonomy referring to its position independent from instrumental justification and heteronomy referring the blurring of art and life.

Claire Bishop points out that the critique of socially engaged art is framed by two judgments: social judgment and artistic judgment—which need “different criteria”.^[1] French philosopher Rancière's argument about the politics of aesthetics is significant for the critique of socially engaged art. According to Rancière, aesthetics means “the infinite openness of the field of art”, which ultimately leads to the elimination of the boundaries “between art and non-art, between artistic creation and anonymous life”.^[2] Aesthetics itself has two politics. One is the politics of “art becoming life”, in which the aesthetic experience resembles other forms of experiences and leads to art's self-elimination. The other is the politics of the “resistant form”, in which the aesthetic experience derives from the separation of art from other forms of activity and resists any transformation into a form of life. These two politics of aesthetics, although opposite, exist in tension with one another.^[3]

Due to the point that the claim of benefit-oriented practices for efficacy is more prominent and convincing than their claim for aesthetic values, these projects are included in art discourses at a very debatable position. This dissertation argues that benefit-oriented practices still embody aesthetic tension, which draws these projects from other ameliorative social actions. The articulation of aesthetic tension of benefit-oriented socially engaged art is scrutinized from three pairs of contradicting norms, values and perspectives: practical and symbolic social action, the artworld and the non-artworld, and professionalism and amateurism.

Even though the functional purpose of benefit-oriented socially engaged art evidently overpasses their symbolic purpose, benefit-oriented practices still have symbolic significance. In reality, these projects are more like creative and empathetic gestures and encouraging examples to highlight social issues and show the possibility of solutions. These practices may not work in typical traditional art institutions, but they keep up with the continuously changing artworld, and enlarge the understanding of art and aesthetics through stirring debates within the artworld. The artists and art educators' engagement in social work experiments also questions the conventional notion of professional and amateur, not only in the art field but also in social fields.

From one perspective, benefit-oriented socially engaged art further eliminates the border between art and non-art, and between art and society. When art expands into society, everyday life and other disciplines, aesthetic tension continuously challenges the understanding of what art is and what good art is, as well as reveals the openness and flexibility of the “artworld” concept.^[4] While from another perspective, the existing tension reveals that the full fusion of art and non-art is impossible. Though having an expanding boundary, art still draws itself from the other aspects of life.

Nowadays, more and more critics incline to develop a more holistic perspective on socially engaged art, a pragmatic and inclusive attitude to these practices. Many non-profit projects, whether they are artist-initiated or non-artist initiated, are included into socially engaged art, which shakes up foundations of art discourse. In this changing world, creativity is far more crucial to our survival and wellbeing. Because of its unbounded imagination and expression, artistic creativity is able to transcend the boundaries between different domains.^[5] Artists, due to their capability of synthesizing different knowledge fields, integrating various social sectors and institutions, and mobilizing expertises from different disciplines, can often provide holistic solutions for problems confronting human societies. The artists engaging in social work, through integrating their skills and knowledge into the leadership over these projects, are actively changing the world at the grassroots level.

Yang Jing (Ph.D.) is an art researcher from China. After graduating from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute with a Master Degree in Art, she has been teaching at Fine Arts College of Sichuan Normal University. From 2009 to 2015, Yang Jing was studying at Department of Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä. In February 2015, she was awarded the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Art History) by University of Jyväskylä. Her research fields include socially engaged art and ecological art.

Yang Jing's doctoral dissertation "Benefit-oriented Socially Engaged Art: Two cases of Social Work Experiment" was publicly discussed at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Jyväskylä, in building Agora, auditorium AgD211, on January 15, 2015. Opponent: Prof. Qingsheng Zhu (Peking University). Available: <https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/45094>

[1] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 275.

[2] Jacques Rancière, "Transformations of Critical Art Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics," in *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, B. Hinderliter and others, eds., (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 36-37.

[3] Jacques Rancière, "Problems and Transformations of Critical Art," In *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, S. Corcoran, trans., (London: Polity Press, 2009), 46.

[4] See Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

[5] William Cleveland, and Patricia Allen Shifferd, *Between Grace and Fear: The Role of the Arts in a Time of Change* (Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing, 2010), 2.

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