



# a blade of grass

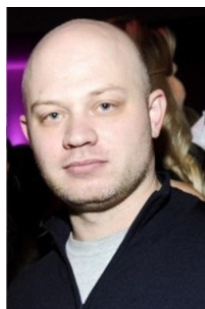
nurtures socially engaged art

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## GROWING DIALOGUE

**Growing Dialogue** is a series of moderated online debates among thought leaders in social practice.



by Ben Davis

October 21, 2013

### Growing Dialogue: What is the Effectiveness of Socially Engaged Art?

#### Round 2: The Ontological Question

After Round 1 of this discussion, we all felt that we had arrived at a kind of consensus. That seems to me to be a positive development, as I think we all want a lot of the same things. But as I read back over the contributions again, I am also wondering if our consensus stems from

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the fact that the stakes of what we have arrived at are so low — basically, that forms of artistic activism might be complementary to non-artistic activism, or they might not be. And I wonder whether the idea of Socially Engaged Art (SEA) itself might be partly to blame for diffusing the stakes of the discussion. So in Round 2 I want to ask what this term really means, and whether it is actually useful. I tend to think not.

In [his reply](#), Tom Finkelpearl thinks that the target of my critique is “too broad.” Possibly — but I didn’t invent the category of “social practice,” and part of my original argument was precisely that it lumped together very unlike things, seemingly by design. So, leaving aside the virtues of specifically worthy individual projects, can we better specify what we are actually talking about, politically or artistically?

As it is being canonized, I see the concept of SEA contributing to confusion rather than clarifying stakes, by creating a hybrid category of art-politics. Lowe [points out](#) the need to define an “ethical agenda” for SEA, lest it become divorced from any tangible social mission; Fisher [replies](#) that A Blade of Grass doesn’t “currently declare that we have a specifically progressive agenda” because the organization wants “to be open to projects that have a lot of very obtuse angles, or are taking an indirect course, or that perhaps don’t quite know what they are doing, or are operating very responsively.” If the demands of being open to artistic language are such that they diffuse even our ability to define ourselves in relation to something as general as a “progressive agenda,” then I think we may have a looming problem.

Thompson’s “Living As Form” show was a landmark, and helped crystalize my own thoughts on “social practice.” That show deliberately expanded beyond the world of professional art, presenting Allora & Calzadilla’s participatory public art project *Tisa* alongside the sit-ins in Tahrir Square, the Fallen Fruit collective’s museum jam-making workshops alongside WikiLeaks, Paul Chan’s *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* alongside the celebrations of Barack Obama’s 2008 election in Harlem. This dizzying assortment of things is linked by the potency with which they mobilize symbolic discourse in public space. And yet I don’t know what they have to do with one another as political phenomena. That’s worrying, considering that the whole terms of the discussion imply that we are trying to escape the insularity and formalism of traditional art practice to enter into meaningful dialogue about how to change the

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world. It seems to me we are being recaptured by the art world's vagueness — its sneaky habit of transforming politics into a motif or talking point — in the very act of trying to escape it.

At the very same time, discussion of SEA seems defined by (largely unstated) *political* exclusions, seemingly to preserve the illusion of consensus about the progressive political value of the term. Once we include more challenging examples, it becomes clear that, without defining more specifically what we mean by “socially engaged,” the category of “Socially Engaged Art” becomes a meaningless abstraction, easily abused. The conservative activist James O’Keefe’s infamous stunt, dressing as an outlandish pimp and tricking ACORN workers into embarrassing the agency on (heavily edited) film, is basically textbook Yes Men-style “tactical media” intervention. In fact, O’Keefe’s prank would place very high in the annals of SEA “effectiveness” — ACORN is no more, while the Bhopal gas victims that the Yes Men famously champion still await some modest justice from Dow Chemical.

I definitely agree with Nato Thompson that one shouldn’t take a one-size-fits-all approach to social change, and that there’s plenty of room to challenge power on a lot of levels. But anything with real political stakes *should* inspire real political debate, and the false consensus implied by a vague term doesn’t help. Recently the Occupy Money Cooperative unveiled the plans for an Occupy Debit Card, powered by Visa. That has touched off a lot of anger among other activists affiliated with OWS: “This is a very odd fit, and for the project’s sake and Occupy’s sake, they ought to go on separate paths,” one activist told the *New York Times*. If an experiment in alternative economies like Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda’s *Time Bank* can be taken as a SEA initiative, so too could the Occupy Debit Card. But what would this inclusion do except route a live debate about models of change through a conversation that originated in the art world, exactly the space we are trying to escape?

Maybe SEA does have “the potential... to be a movement, with a progressive agenda and maybe even shared goals.” But building a political movement — or in this case an artistic-political movement — is different than building an art movement. Degas was a conservative who opposed social reform, while Pissarro was a convinced anarchist; that doesn’t trouble our

ability to call them both Impressionists, but they certainly represent very different social visions. So what function can the idea of SEA serve? It has, of course, given us a common basis to have this discussion — but I get the feeling that we might not be able to define what that common basis is without causing our carefully constructed consensus to vanish. That doesn't seem like the foundation of a healthy field.

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### Read more from Growing Dialogue: What is the Effectiveness of Socially Engaged Art?

“What is the Effectiveness of Socially Engaged Art?” – September 18, 2013

“Ben Davis Responds” by Ben Davis – September 18, 2013

“Spaces of Possibility” by Nato Thompson – September 23, 2013

“#DoWeHaveThis?” by Tom Finkelpearl – September 24, 2013

“Working Towards Justice” by Rick Lowe – September 24, 2013

“On Bullshit” by Deborah Fisher – September 26, 2013

“Round 2: The Ontological Question” by Ben Davis – October 21, 2013

“The Ethically Neutral Dilemma of SEA” by Nato Thompson – October 23, 2013

“A Belated Conclusion” by Ben Davis – November 26, 2013

“The Name Game” by Louisa McCall – January 11, 2014



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