

Research Article

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Ordinary Situations and Artworld Declarations

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Abstract: Socially engaged art presents social situations to be understood, experienced, and evaluated as works of art while they simultaneously retain everyday non-art functionality. This article begins with an account of the definitional and evaluative concerns that socially engaged art engenders, outlining the debates around the relative importance of ethical and aesthetic values that result from this unsettled relationship between art and non-art. Based on this account, I argue that all socially engaged art requires successful performative bids that declare the work to be art and that it is possible to identify the felicity conditions in which these bids are likely to be successful, as well as the perlocutionary effects that occur when a situation is categorized as art. I apply this analytic framework in a discussion and comparison of pieces by Santiago Sierra and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, demonstrating how this framework facilitates assessments that account for the works as art, while interrogating and evaluating the ethics of their categorization as art.

Keywords: socially engaged art, aesthetics, performative speech acts, ordinary language, social practice

In 1990, Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija turned the Paula Allen Gallery in New York into a kitchen where he served free pad thai to visitors. In 1993, Rick Lowe and six other African-American artists arranged for the purchase and restoration of a block of derelict row houses in Houston to be turned into housing for single mothers. Six years later in Havana, Cuba, the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra hired six unemployed laborers to stand silently, shoulder to shoulder, and have a 250 cm line tattooed across their backs. He paid them \$30 each, their average daily wages. These three examples illustrate a field in the arts that has alternatively been referred to as relational aesthetics,¹ littoral art,² social practice, participatory art,³ and socially engaged art,⁴ wherein the focus of artistic intent is the set of social interactions, relationships, and encounters that are produced amongst the participants in the event.

A unique characteristic of these works is that they operate simultaneously as artworks and as activated relationships, dynamics, and situations that are instrumental in real-world contexts. Tiravanija's work offers a space for people to meet strangers or catch up over a meal. Lowe's participants are meeting basic housing needs. Santiago emphasizes the transactional economics that are central to these "delegated performances." As works of art, these pieces produce extraordinary situations, but the social relations invoked within these situations (eating dinner, renting a house, and negotiating the cost of labor) remain pragmatic and functional.⁵

¹ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 5.

² Léger, "Squatting on Shifting Grounds."

³ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 1.

⁴ Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 1.

⁵ In this way, socially engaged art has the potential to simultaneously occupy different areas of the spectrum between ordinary and extraordinary that Leddy, "A Deweyan Approach to the Dilemma of Everyday Aesthetics," identifies.

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Through this dual status, socially engaged art produces new questions around the definition and evaluation of art, which center on the relationship between art and ordinary social interactions. These works force us to ask: what does it mean to assign an object or occurrence to the category of “art” *without* stripping it of all of its everyday attributes, purposes, and impacts? Furthermore, as these works produce and center social situations, relationships, and interactions, questions around value are inherently ethical, and any change in valuation that occurs through the category of art must be interrogated through that lens.

This article proposes a novel approach for analyzing these relationships between art and the ordinary by examining the conditions in which people successfully declare situations to be art and the actual impacts of these declarations. First, I will offer a contextual background regarding the definition and history of socially engaged art and debates around its evaluation, drawing upon Arthur Danto’s indiscernibility problem as a reference point for the categorization of art since the 1980s. Then, I argue that socially engaged art becomes art through a series of utterances, gestures, and bids, aimed at establishing its resemblance to things already categorized as art. By understanding these acts as performative rather than constative, we can ask two questions that get us closer to understanding how the category of art operates in the world:

1. What are the felicity conditions for these art declarations? What needs to be the case for an occurrence to be experienced as art?
2. What are the perlocutionary effects of these declarations? What actually changes when something is experienced as art as opposed to non-art?

This understanding of the ways that individuals convince others to experience, interpret, and evaluate situations as works of art and the outcomes of these efforts reframes the relationship between ethical and aesthetic criteria in the evaluation of socially engaged art specifically and offers new tools for analyzing the relationship between the mutually constitutive categories of art and the ordinary more broadly. Veena Das discusses the way that the extraordinary can surface the hidden contours of the ordinary, writing “that its very ordinariness makes it difficult for us to see what is before our eyes. Hence, we need to imagine the shape that the ordinary takes in order to find it.”⁶ This inquiry examines the act of rendering a certain shape and visibility to everyday social relations and situations by declaring them to be art.

1 Defining Socially Engaged Art

As mentioned earlier, theorists, critics, and artists have applied a variety of labels to this artistic field that centers the interactions, encounters, and relationships that are produced through an artistic project. Throughout this article, I use Pablo Helguera’s term “socially engaged art” to refer to this relational subcategory of artistic practice as opposed to terms like “social practice.” This is largely because of the way that Helguera’s term explicitly identifies these practices as a subcategory of art, without presupposing a specific political or social agenda for the work. The body of works Helguera and others refer to as socially engaged art overlaps with the works Nicholas Bourriaud analyzes through the lens of *relational aesthetics*⁷ and that Claire Bishop describes as *participatory art*.⁸ Each of these theorists describes the way that pieces within this extended field operate as artworks while simultaneously incorporating and producing dynamics and outcomes that extend beyond the category of art. In this section, I offer an overview of some of these overlapping discussions and synthesize these into a concise definition that clarifies my use of the term throughout this article.

In his 2011 text, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, Helguera acknowledges that all art involves forms of social engagement. He defines socially engaged art as “a subset

⁶ Das, *Textures of the Ordinary*, 15.

⁷ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 5.

⁸ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 1.

of artworks that feature the experience of their own creation as a central element,” in which social interaction is a central and inextricable aspect of that creation.⁹ Instead of limiting the category of socially engaged art to specific forms of interaction, he offers schemata for determining different modes and levels of participation. Throughout this analysis, Helguera argues that socially engaged art operates on three different registers: the immediate group of participants, the critical reception of an artworld, and the larger social sphere of media, government, and social infrastructure.¹⁰ He argues that:

Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines.¹¹

Operating simultaneously within the institutions, narratives, and discursive parameters of art as well as external understandings of social utility, socially engaged art is “a hybrid, multi-disciplinary activity that exists somewhere between art and non-art, and its state may be permanently unresolved.”¹² This aligns with Nicholas Bourriaud’s idea of “operative realism” wherein “the artist works in the real field of production of goods and services and aims to set up a certain ambiguity within the space of his activity, between the utilitarian function of the objects he is presenting, and their aesthetic function,”¹³ which Bourriaud describes in his seminal work on relational aesthetics. Claire Bishop uses the term “participatory art” to refer to this field of practice which she identifies as “both embedded in the world and at one remove from it.”¹⁴ and argues that this extended field demands new interdisciplinary approaches to the question of artistic quality.

Socially engaged art builds upon questions about the relationship between art and non-art that were introduced by the readymade and have been further explored through concept art, site-specific art, and performance art. Responding to Miwon Kwon’s three paradigms of site-specific art,¹⁵ Jason Gaiger identifies a trajectory away from the idea of social and aesthetic autonomy outlined in Clement Greenberg’s theorization of modern art and toward a situation wherein “project-based artists take it as given that it is possible to intervene in real-world social issues while maintaining a position in the vanguard of contemporary art.”¹⁶ In response to the historical emergence of art objects that are visually indistinguishable from non-art objects (e.g., Duchamp’s readymades and Warhol’s Brillo Boxes), Arthur Danto identifies the question: “what makes the difference between a work of art and something not a work of art when there is no interesting perceptual difference between them?”¹⁷ as the fundamental and even inaugural question of a philosophy of art once “an artwork can consist of any object whatsoever that is enfranchised as art.”¹⁸

Socially engaged art extends the issue of indiscernibility that was introduced by the readymade. Whereas the shovel in Duchamp’s “Prelude to a Broken Arm” (1915) is no longer used to shovel snow, and Warhol’s Brillo Boxes do not participate in the sale and distribution of Brillo pads, Rick Lowe’s row houses do not abdicate their function as legal and functional residences in order to become artworks. In socially engaged art, objects and occurrences simultaneously operate as artworks and aspects of non-art systems with pragmatic goals and outcomes.

Based on these descriptions, I propose the following definition: *Socially engaged art is a field of art in which social situations are presented in and as artworks, while retaining their ordinary function in other non-art domains.* I will go on to argue that this dual status requires intentional efforts to declare these works as art, aimed at multiple different audiences. Moreover, since socially engaged art incorporates relationships,

⁹ Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22–3.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² Ibid., 8.

¹³ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 15.

¹⁴ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 7.

¹⁵ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 3.

¹⁶ Gaiger, “Dismantling the Frame,” 54.

¹⁷ Danto, *After the End of Art*, 84.

¹⁸ Ibid., 134.

interactions, and participatory encounters within these works, there is more at stake. Including these relational interactions within works of art invites different sets of evaluative criteria that can produce conflicting ethical, aesthetic, and political assessments. Typically, these debates have occurred within the field of aesthetics and philosophy of art, giving priority to the ways that socially engaged art troubles and extends longstanding definitional and aesthetic discourses within the arts. These debates, however, say as much about art's constitutive outside, about the criteria that are included and excluded in our everyday evaluations of non-art occurrences, and about the tools that are or are not available for troubling the categorical margins of art in our everyday lives.

2 Value and Assessment of Socially Engaged Art

Helguera argues that socially engaged art operates by attaching itself to problems from other disciplines and bringing new insights into these problems through the use of ambiguity. Accordingly, the field has engendered questions as to whether these works should be assessed in terms of the efficacy of those insights in solving problems that impact the material conditions of people, the ethics of the situations that these works produce among participants, or the aesthetic and affective qualities of the “space of ambiguity” that such works produce. In view of the three registers of audience that Helguera identifies, how should we navigate between an ethical responsibility to the participants themselves, the artistic freedom, autonomy, and ambiguity prioritized by the artworld, and the concrete material results expected by the external sphere of media, government, and social infrastructure? In this section, I discuss the argument that socially engaged art should be assessed in terms of its material impacts and arguments for an aesthetic evaluation of socially engaged art that prioritizes ambiguity and artistic autonomy. I argue that the former is insufficient insofar as it does not account for the status of these projects as artworks and that the latter is insufficient because it presumes and prioritizes the experience of viewers who identify themselves as members of an artworld, disregarding the impacts upon other populations the work engages. These weaknesses can be addressed through an analysis of the processes and speech acts through which these projects and situations declare themselves to be art, the contexts and conditions in which these efforts are successful, and the effects of these efforts on all impacted groups.

Some theories strive to embed ethical priorities into socially engaged art by putting definitional constraints on the artistic discipline that limit or prescribe the intent of the artist. The Helicon Collaborative's 2017 report “Mapping the Landscape of Socially Engaged Artistic Practice,” for example, offers a “working definition” of socially engaged art as “artistic or creative practice that aims to improve conditions in a particular community or in the world at large.”¹⁹ If the field is defined in terms of these artist's “aims,” then an evaluation of concrete outcomes is consistent with an assessment that is based on the artist's success in achieving their own goals.

In defining *Arte Útil* or (Useful Art), Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera goes beyond the idea of the artist's intent to focus on concrete outcomes. She takes a more consequentialist position, requiring that the artistic practice actually “offers the people a clearly beneficial result” upon completion. She writes: “If the project fails, it is not *Arte Útil*. Artists have the challenge of finding forms in which their proposal may actually work.”²⁰ In line with these priorities, Vid Simoniti advocates for a pragmatic evaluation of socially engaged art based on its sustained real-world impact, comparing them against other non-art efforts toward social and political improvement. He writes, “if socially engaged artists intend to bring about a certain positive sociopolitical change, then we should judge their work not only in comparison to other artworks but within a broader context of political activity.”²¹ While Simoniti goes to great lengths to show that socially engaged art is

¹⁹ Franz and Sidford, “Mapping the Landscape.”

²⁰ Bruguera, “Reflections on *Arte Útil*,” 102.

²¹ Simoniti, “Assessing Socially Engaged Art.”

in fact artwork, the pragmatic criteria that Simoniti and Bruguera arrive at do not speak to the role that the status of these works as art plays in their concrete outcomes.

In contrast to these standards for evaluation, Pablo Helguera is explicit in arguing that the benefit to impacted communities should not be seen as either a necessary characteristic or evaluative criterion for socially engaged art and that an ethical assessment of the artist's choices must not supplant an evaluation of the artistic merits of the work. He writes: "To argue, for instance, that good socially engaged art creates constructive personal relationships is wrong: an artist's successful project could consist of deliberate miscommunication, in upsetting social relations, or in simply being hostile to the public. This debate belongs to the field of art criticism."²²

By explicitly including these artistic intentions that are not centered on improvement or benefit for the participants or communities involved, Helguera prioritizes the values of that middle tier, the artworld, over those of the participants or the broader political society. In defense of antagonistic and controversial work like the Santiago Sierra piece briefly mentioned above and discussed further in Section 4, he even goes so far as to say, "unethical artistic actions, while crossing the line of acceptability and even legality in some cases, are part of the role that art plays in challenging assumptions in society, and for that reason freedom of expression must always be defended."²³

Bishop similarly argues that we need to center aesthetic criteria to assess this work since "[art] is the institutional field in which it is endorsed and disseminated,"²⁴ and she condemns the ethical turn in art criticism: "[T]he tendency is always to compare artists' projects with other artists on the basis of ethical one-upmanship – the degree to which artists supply a good or bad model of collaboration – and to criticise them for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to 'fully' represent their subjects (as if such a thing were possible)."²⁵

She is concerned that a puritanical ethics of accountability and praxis undermines the ability of these projects to actually operate as artworks, to leverage the ambiguity and affective power that is unique to the aesthetic "as an autonomous realm of experience." She clarifies that this requires freedom not only from external forms of censorship, but also from artists' internal submission to ethical moralism, which she associates with a conflation of anticapitalism and "the Christian 'good soul'."²⁶ On the contrary, she claims: "The most striking, moving, and memorable forms of participation are produced when artists act upon a gnawing social curiosity without the incapacitating restrictions of guilt."²⁷

Bishop's understanding of the aesthetic as "an autonomous realm of experience" draws heavily upon Jacques Rancière's arguments against the ethical turn in the arts. In particular, she draws upon Rancière's framing of the relationship between autonomy and heteronomy in the category of art, as well as his distinction between the ethical and the political in their relationship to aesthetics. Rancière identifies an inherently unsettled relationship between art and non-art wherein aesthetic experience does not occur within a bracketed sphere outside of life, but in the inherent instability of that boundary: "The key formula of the aesthetic regime of art is that art is an autonomous form of life. This is a formula, however, that can be read in two different ways: autonomy can be stressed over life, or life over autonomy - and these lines of interpretation can be opposed, or they can intersect."²⁸

This aligns with Helguera's characterization of socially engaged art in terms of a permanently unresolved relationship between art and non-art. In her critique of the ethical evaluation of artwork, Bishop draws upon a distinction that Rancière makes between the political, which Rancière understands in terms of dissensus, and the ethical, which implicitly presupposes consensus-based norm.²⁹ Rancière identifies the ethical as a

²² Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, xiv.

²³ *Ibid.*, xi.

²⁴ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁸ Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution," 20.

²⁹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 28.

non-revolutionary orientation toward past trauma, writing, “in the ethical turn, that orientation of times was reversed. History is no more cut by the promise of a revolution ahead of us; it is cut by the event of Extermination that lies behind us, an event which stands for the endless disaster, debarring any process of emancipation.”³⁰

Rancière argues that the ethical acts to constrain possibility instead of inviting the dissensus that produces it. Devin Zane Shaw makes a distinction between Rancière’s politics and aesthetics in terms of the scale on which they operate, arguing that “aesthetics are politically transformative when the micropolitics of misunderstanding interrupts those percepts and affects that bind the units – words, images, bodies, and meanings – of a given distribution of the sensible.”³¹ This explanation of the micropolitical and even revolutionary capacity of the aesthetic does not resolve or overdetermine the relationship between art and non-art, but outlines the way that an unstable and dynamic relationship with the autonomy is a mechanism capable of producing broader social change. In view of Helguera’s tripartite division of registers, this theorization addresses the unsettled relationship between the artworld (the aesthetic domain) and the register of media, government, and society (the political), but it does not adequately address the register of the participants themselves.

Rancière’s arguments about the unsettled relationship between art and life are predicated on the subject’s engagement with “art” as a discursive category that emerged in eighteenth-century European thought, via Schiller. The artists mentioned before, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Rick Lowe, and Santiago Sierra, all locate themselves within that discourse, as do their artworld audiences. The participants in their projects, however, vary in the extent to which they experience these events through that discursive category. The result is the situation, most explicitly demonstrated in Sierra’s work, wherein participants are engaged in a purely transactional relationship with the artist in order to produce an aesthetic experience for the secondary artworld audience and a critical commentary on exploitation for the gaze of the tertiary social audience.

Helguera is clear that “Audiences are never ‘others’ – they are always very concrete selves.”³² The artist also always already exists in a network of pre-established social relationships with the other participants. While the micropolitics of the aesthetic domain has an abstract potential to disrupt the units that constitute these relationships, insofar as participants are aesthetically engaged, the work is equally capable of re-inscribing these relationships and perpetuating the violence that they produce. This valorization of ambiguity over the ethical is insufficient to guard against the incorporation of socially engaged art into a micropolitics of dehumanization, wherein an aesthetic experience for some is achieved through the non-art exploitation of others. Moreover, this abstraction does not adequately describe the means by which and the conditions within which transformative micropolitics is successfully produced for the specific participants engaged.

Bruguera and Simoniti both propose an evaluative schema that is largely indifferent to the categorization of these works as works of art. Bishop, Helguera, and Rancière suggest evaluative criteria that presume a generative ambiguity between art discourse and non-art relationality, but their assertions about how this ambiguity is produced tacitly privilege an initiated artworld perspective, even as the works themselves explicitly engage audiences outside of the artworld and, in the case of Sierra’s work, highlight the paid participants’ lack of agency within the artworld.

I propose that further debate on the evaluation of socially engaged art requires a more precise understanding of how situations, occurrences, and encounters become categorized as artworks even as they retain their non-art functionality in the world and that this can be best accomplished by looking at ways we use language to declare that things are art, the conditions in which these declarations are successful, and the ways in which they act upon our understanding, experience, and evaluation of the situations they refer to.

³⁰ Rancière, “From Politics to Aesthetics?” 23.

³¹ Shaw, *Egalitarian Moments*, 156.

³² Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 23.

3 Declarative Artworld Bids

The historical emergence of the perceptual indiscernibility of art and non-art as a feature in the creation and reception of contemporary art has created a need for artists and other artworld participants to indicate that certain objects and encounters should be categorized and experienced as art. Famously, the urinal in Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) was titled, signed, entered into an exhibition in the category of sculpture, staged, and photographed by an established photographer. Each of these moves was a deliberate decision to make this urinal resemble objects already categorized as art. Throughout this article, I will refer to these moves as *bids*, since they could be utterances or gestures or other deliberate choices that operate simultaneously as offers, claims, and efforts to achieve something. Like other forms of bidding (e.g., the contractor bidding on a job), multiple efforts are often combined in ongoing negotiated attempts. When these bids are successful or felicitous, they cause a situation, object, or occurrence to be categorized as a work of art. These bids are inherently concerned with the work's status as a work of art, but they are also performative acts undertaken within social, economic, and institutional contexts, and as such are subject to ethical scrutiny and assessment.

While these bids include both utterances and unspoken gestures, they are aligned with John Searle's category of declarations insofar as they "bring about some alternation in the status or condition of the referred to object or objects solely in virtue of the fact that the declaration has been successfully performed."³³ When successful, these bids act upon the status of the situation, object, or occurrence under consideration at the same time that they describe or represent it, producing a bidirectional world-to-word and word-to-world fit, and both producing and leveraging forms of resemblance between the situation or object being declared art and other things already included in that category. Searle argues that declarations "involve an extra-linguistic institution, a system of constitutive rules in addition to the constitutive rules of language, in order that the declaration may be successfully performed."³⁴ The nature of the artworld as an institutional system is an important consideration in the face of works that engage publics with varied relationships to this system.

In the 1983 version of his Institutional Theory of Art, Dickie writes that "A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public."³⁵ He explicitly acknowledges the inherent circularity that exists between definitions of art and artworlds and artworld publics, claiming that this definitional circularity is indicative of the complex, dynamic, and co-relational nature of artworlds themselves. In his description of an artworld he asserts that "what is primary is the understanding shared by all involved that they are engaged in an established activity or practice within which there is a variety of roles: artist roles, public roles, critic roles, director roles, curator roles, and so on."³⁶

The description of socially engaged art above indicates that these pieces are created to be presented to artworld publics (the second register of Helguera's tripartite division of audience), but that they are created to be presented to other publics as well, and in many cases, these publics do not necessarily share the understanding that they are engaged in the established activity of an artworld. In the case of Lowe's Project Row Houses, there are studio spaces and artist residency spaces in the complex, but the participants seeking affordable housing through the Young Mothers Project are not necessarily engaging with this affordable housing project as an artwork. In the case of Sierra's *250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People* (1999), the work hinges on the fact that these participants are laborers being paid at market rates for physical labor and do not self-identify as having a role within an artworld. It would be a fundamentally different piece if the paid participants were art students eager to participate in the work as a work of art. Dickie's Institutional Theory offers a broad definition that is inclusive of the works of socially engaged art mentioned above and the general field of socially engaged art as outlined by Helguera et al. When we are dealing with situations that can be interpreted and experienced as art or as non-art, however, Dickie's theory – which bases the artwork's

³³ Searle, "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts," 358.

³⁴ Ibid., 359.

³⁵ Dickie, "The New Institutional Theory of Art," 53.

³⁶ Ibid., 52.

status on the intention of the creator – is not sufficient to tell us whether a particular audience (or any audience) will in fact experience that situation as a work of art.

These questions around the experiences of multiple publics, audiences, or registers can be addressed by outlining the conditions and circumstances in which artworld bids – efforts to declare or imply that situations are artworks – are likely to be felicitous. J. L. Austin argues that the felicity or success of a performative utterance depends in part upon the existence of conventional procedures, and the “appropriateness of the particular persons and circumstances in a given case for the particular procedure involved.”³⁷ Different publics or audiences share a basic understanding that the category of art exists and that institutions and their members play a role in enfranchising work within that category (these could be understood as conditions of competence for using the word “art” in language) but might have different understandings of what the conventional procedures for this categorization are. In particular, the question of what particular persons and circumstances are appropriate to the procedure of creating art or endorsing a work as art is important to consider in conversations about the ethical and political aspects of socially engaged art. Wittgenstein’s idea of “family resemblance” can be a useful tool, as a way of understanding how participant’s idea of the appropriateness of the persons and circumstances to the act of art-making is based on existing familiarity with things already categorized as art.

Regarding the persons making artworld declarations, art institutions (universities, galleries, museums, publications, etc.) play a role here, in producing credentials and circumstances through which artists and critics are deemed appropriate to declare objects and occurrences as works of art. The legitimizing role of these institutions is just one factor in the success or failure of artworld declarations, however, and does not adequately describe the reception of art across diverse audience groups. The role of resemblance also produces conditions for bias and structural exclusion insofar as it privileges those people who share social or group identity with established or canonical artists. Beyond the status of the creator declaring their work to be art, and the status of any secondary claimants (e.g., critics, curators) supporting that bid, the nature of that work and the ways in which it is presented to an audience also include bids that can position that work within the category of art.

The inclusion of established art techniques, methods, and materials is one straightforward bid that has a high likelihood of declaring a work as art, but site, audience, presentation, and documentation are also impactful. An artist may or may not choose to show their work in an established venue associated with the presentation of art, to advertise it via outreach to art patrons, to title and label their work and present it with an artist statement or catalog, and to document their work in ways that can be further distributed among an artworld public. Each of these bids marks a deliberate choice to declare the work as art and requires some form of access or investment. Taken independently, each bid is more likely to be felicitous to the extent that it bears resemblance to other artworld bids that have already been successful. Taken together, significant resemblance to established artworld norms and reference points in some domains (e.g., the venue, audience, and documentation) can be sufficient to allow an object or occurrence that does not resemble existing artworks in its materials and techniques to be successfully declared to be art.

Aside from the credentials of the artist and/or any critics or reviewers making bids on behalf of that work, the factors listed earlier are the result of deliberate choices which seek to position a situation, object, or encounter as a work of art. They operationalize the creator’s intention for the work to be presented to an artworld public. Many socially engaged artists state that their work is intended to serve pragmatic goals outside of the arts and make choices that defy the conventions and norms associated with art. Even in these cases, the categorization of their work as art is also the outcome of intentional and deliberate bids to have the work interpreted as such, regardless of whether these intentions are stated. In the case of Tiravanija’s *pad thai* (1990), for example, the decision to host an ongoing free communal dinner was, at that time, unconventional for an art installation. There were many other decisions that endeavored to have this piece categorized as art: he cooked food for people in the Paula Allen Gallery instead of his home, a restaurant, or a soup kitchen; the gallery’s outreach advertised the work as art and to an artworld audience; the event was documented in large

³⁷ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 14–5.

format black and white photos, etc. A purely pragmatic evaluation of those works in terms of their material impacts on effected communities cannot therefore fully account for the efficacy of the effort that went into the creation and presentation of that work *as art*.

To understand how these works operate simultaneously as artworks and as non-art, we also need to outline the perlocutionary effects or aims of these bids. What is altered when an object, occurrence, or encounter is successfully categorized as an artwork? I propose that at the very least, three things occur: 1) The situation, object, or occurrence is included within art narratives and interpreted in reference to other things that have been categorized as art. 2) Those engaging with this situation, object, or occurrence invoke modes of attention, perception, and experience associated with their understanding of art. 3) The situation, object, or occurrence enters into those economic, institutional, and social systems associated with the distribution, exchange, and preservation of things categorized as art.

The first of these outcomes draws upon Noël Carroll's narrative approach to the identification and definition of art.³⁸ In discussions of evaluative schema for socially engaged art, one important facet of the inclusion of new works into existing art narratives is the impact that they have upon those narratives and the possibilities that each new accession permits or forecloses. The conventions and felicity conditions that make it likely for a new work to be categorized as art are shaped by the examples, reference points, and trajectories outlined in existing art narratives. The inclusion, for example, of Project Row House into art narratives creates new reference points for a range of community-based organizers to declare their work art.

The second outcome invokes the discussion of aesthetics that Bishop and Rancière offer above. Without presupposing the importance of aesthetic judgment as an evaluative criterion, we can identify certain modes of attention and perception that are associated with the concept of art as it has evolved historically in a Western context. Drawing upon the field of aesthetics as well as cognitive science Bence Nanay highlights the act of simultaneously observing multiple properties of a single object or bracketed set of objects in many instances of aesthetic engagement. He writes, "in the case of some paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience, we attend in a distributed and at the same time focused manner: our attention is focused on one perceptual object, but it is distributed among a large number of this object's properties."³⁹

This mode of attention allows a viewer to decouple aspects of an experience (e.g., the color and shape of an object, the location and gesture of a dancer, etc.) and observe otherwise obscured relationships and formal characteristics of the constituent parts contained within the situational frame of the artwork. This mode of aesthetic attention, that is both bracketed and distributed, also includes the audience member's internal observations of their own affective response to the work. In the context of socially engaged artwork, this mode of attention ideally leads a participant to bracket the situation from analogous non-art occurrences and observe dynamics that would otherwise be ignored. For example, a participant attending Tiravanija's *pad thai* (1990) is likely to observe the phenomenon of strangers eating together and their own felt experience of receiving food in ways that they do not experience while eating out at a Thai restaurant. Referring back to Rancière's discussion of aesthetics above, this combination of aesthetic attention and reflexive awareness achieves the type of defamiliarization capable of interrupting the fixed associations inscribed within a given "distribution of the sensible." My intention in this brief characterization is not to identify a single essential structure for aesthetic attention or experience, but to offer a paradigmatic example of the type of attention an observer or participant might deploy if they believe themselves to be experiencing art. As mentioned previously, the associations and normative modes that a specific observer has for experiencing art are socially and culturally constructed, but the idea that there exist distinct modes of attention appropriate to the category of art is concomitant with the category itself.

Finally, in pragmatic and material terms, the classification of an object, occurrence, or encounter as an artwork impacts its role in the economic and institutional systems of the artworld. When successfully declared as art, a banana duct-taped to a wall can be sold for \$120,000.⁴⁰ Even when the artwork resists

³⁸ Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, 75.

³⁹ Nanay, "Aesthetic Attention," 97.

⁴⁰ Elbaor, "Buyers of Maurizio Cattelan's \$120,000 Banana."

commodification, its successful classification impacts the credentials and career of the artist and their ability to receive money for future projects. An argument in defense of socially engaged art like Project Row House is that it shifts funding that would otherwise be contained within the artworld in ways that directly benefit people in need.⁴¹ The overlay of art economies and non-art economies in socially engaged art also produces conditions where unwaged artistic labor enters into the art market in new ways. Leigh Claire La Berge has written extensively on the decommodified labor that occurs within socially engaged art:

[H]istorically we know that art very much participates in commodity circuits. Artworks are sold; artistic labor is sold. And yet, as the possibilities to conceive of oneself as one who has artistic labor to sell have multiplied through various schemes of professionalization, labor's share of value has been decimated.⁴²

The intricacies of art economies are beyond the scope of this article, but La Berge (2019), Bishop (2012), Sianne Ngai (2020), and others offer robust accounts of the ways that art generally and socially engaged art specifically enter into economic relations specific to the category of art.

I argue that works of socially engaged art, insofar as they simultaneously operate as works of art and as non-art situations, require the artist and other artworld participants to make intentional bids declaring these works as art. When these performative bids are successful or felicitous, they have the illocutive force to place the work within the category of art and have a set of perlocutionary effects impacting the way that the work is understood, experienced, and valued. The felicity conditions of artworld bids can be identified and work in combination; they include the content, audience, site, presentation, and documentation of the work as well as the status or institutional credentials of the person making the bid. The perlocutionary effects include the inclusion of the work within art narratives, the invocation of modes of attention and perception associated with art, and the inclusion of the work within economic and institutional systems for the distribution, exchange, and preservation of art. Neither these felicity conditions nor the perlocutionary effects are specific to a particular medium or theory of aesthetic value but are tied to the use of the word “art” within social and cultural contexts where some conventional category of art exists. Because these performative bids are an essential aspect of socially engaged art and its creation, the assessment of socially engaged artworks can and should take into account the extent to which the work's categorization as a work of art operates in service of its goals, even if the stated goals are external to aesthetics or evaluative criteria unique to the arts. Moreover, insofar as these bids, these efforts to have a thing categorized as an artwork are themselves illocutive acts akin to other forms of declaration, they can be assessed through ethical and political criteria that are not specific to aesthetic judgment or the evaluation of artworks.

In response to the tension outlined in Section 2, between the ethical evaluative schemata offered by Simoniti and Bruguera, which prioritize the social and political impact of socially engaged art, at the expense of its status as art, and the evaluative criteria of Bishop, Helguera, and Rancière, that explicitly privilege aesthetic ambiguity and the autonomy of the artist over ethical concerns, this analysis offers an innovative approach. An examination of the felicity conditions and perlocutionary effects of the declarations through which artists bid to have their work categorized as art permits an ethical assessment of these bids themselves, one based on the question: “what happens when this situation is categorized as art?”

4 Application: Comparing the Work of Sierra and Ukeles

As an application of this schema for understanding art, I will compare two works that involve the delegated performance of working people, Santiago Sierra's *250 cm line tattooed on 6 paid people* (1999), described above, and the earlier work *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* (1976) by Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Ukeles' piece precedes the emergence of socially engaged art as a discursive category in the 1990s and is therefore not

⁴¹ Simoniti, “Assessing Socially Engaged Art.”

⁴² La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork*, 16.

included as an example above, however, the similarities and differences in terms of the use of delegated performance and documentation to engage the relationship between artistic value and ordinary labor offer a useful comparison for applying the schema described above.

In Sierra's work, six unemployed young men were paid \$30 each to stand side-by-side to have a 250 cm line permanently tattooed across their backs at Espacio Aglutinador, an independent gallery in Havana, Cuba. They stand awkwardly for a considerable period of time, facing a wall as they are photographed and filmed, and a man tattoos a pre-marked line onto them. Sierra's decisions in terms of the site (an established art gallery), presentation (title, description), and documentation (large format black and white pictures and black and white video) clearly declare this situation to be a work of art. The content of the work is innovative in its use of delegated performance and the production of visual artifacts (tattooed lines) that leave the site with those paid participants, and also bears resemblance to established artworks such as Yves Klein's *Antropométries* (1960) and Piero Manzoni's *Living Sculpture* (1961).

In terms of the definition offered above, Sierra is also clear that his work operates within the non-art domain of capitalist transaction. In this work, and others that involve tattoos on paid participants, Sierra seeks out people who have no tattoos, no desire for a tattoo, and economic circumstances that make them willing to be tattooed for a relatively low cost (e.g., unemployed people, sex workers, etc.). In describing his criteria for selecting paid participants, Sierra has said: "The criterion of selection or the type of people that I look for are those that will accept to do whatever I say with the offered payment, nothing extravagant."⁴³ Regarding how he arrives at the amount that he pays his participants, he says: "I negotiate like anyone would do it; I try to spend the minimum."⁴⁴ Sierra is also quite clear that he sees himself as a manufacturer and salesman of luxury goods.⁴⁵ Sierra's transactional treatment of paid persons operates to keep them outside of shared identification with artmaking and locates them within a simple exchange of money for the use of their bodies. While they are aware of the audience and the artworld context in which this event is occurring, they are denied agency as art-makers.

In this work, Sierra has effectively deployed a set of performative bids to declare the economic transaction of paying unemployed young men to receive a tattoo to be a work of art. Based on the above discussion of perlocutionary results, we can identify outcomes of the inclusion of this work within the category of art:

This work is included in art narratives. It draws upon its resemblance to earlier models (e.g., Klein's *Antropométries*) and places a model into artworld discourse such that other works might engage with or build upon the bids undertaken in *250 cm Line*. It enters into discussions of the philosophy of art and arts pedagogy as a reference point for the concept of "delegated performance"⁴⁶ and debates around ethical concerns.⁴⁷ In terms of the possibilities that the work produces and forecloses through the conventions that it promulgates, the piece does not broaden a conception of which particular persons might be considered appropriate to make successful artworld bids but affirms the authority of the credentialed artist in determining all aspects of the piece. It does however create a precedent for the use of participants as a medium to be objectified and exploited as spectacle within the confines of capitalist exchange.⁴⁸

This work is experienced through frameworks of attention and perception associated with art and aesthetic judgment. For the audience positioned to view this work as art, either as an audience present at Espacio Aglutinador or as a secondary audience viewing the documentation, the emphasis on payment in the title of the work directs the attention to the awkward unease of the participants and the calculated intention of the tattoo artist at the same time that it draws attention to the internal experience of voyeurism and complicity. This aesthetic experience is evidenced in Bishop's account of the work as a member of this secondary audience, when she writes that Sierra's work offers "a grim meditation on the social and political conditions that permit disparities in people's 'prices' to emerge"⁴⁹ and argues that this work exposes uncomfortable social

⁴³ Keser, "Santiago Sierra," 76.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁶ Bishop, "Delegated Performance."

⁴⁷ Throughout Helguera's, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*; Bishop's, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics."

⁴⁸ Kim, "Neoliberal Aesthetics."

⁴⁹ Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 70.

realities that are otherwise repressed and “thereby provide[s] a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other.”⁵⁰ The film of the event suggests that the paid participants, who face a wall with their backs to the space, shifting awkwardly for an extended period of time, are not engaged in the forms of distributed and focused, disinterested attention, or considerations of formal coherence that are unique to aesthetic attention. Certainly, there is no indication in the presentation or documentation of the work that the aesthetic experience of the paid participants is intended, facilitated, or achieved.

The work enters into economic and institutional systems of the artworld. In the creation of this work, Sierra distributes a total of \$180 to unemployed workers. Sierra is clear that there is no philanthropic intention, but a simple capitalist transaction where he pays the minimum price that he can negotiate in order to create a luxury good that can be sold within the artworld.

This critique aims to demonstrate that, insofar as socially engaged artwork necessarily involves deliberate efforts to categorize situations, occurrences, and encounters as artworks, these efforts can be subjected to ethical and political scrutiny. This approach fully takes into account the status of the work as art, but also understands art-making and the re-classification of ordinary situations as works of art to be something that occurs in the everyday world.

A consideration of this work *as art* requires that we place Bishop’s argument that Sierra’s “ethnographic realism”⁵¹ offers an artworld audience “concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world,” must be placed alongside the fact that Sierra’s work actively enacts exactly the sort of capitalist exploitation that it illuminates and that its contribution to art narratives is to offer a model by which future artists might create work that treats paid persons as objects, included in the art but excluded from any agency within an artworld. The capacity of an artwork to illuminate a reality in striking, moving, and memorable ways for those people that apprehend and experience it as an artwork is an important facet of that work, but always exists in relationship to the impacts that the artwork has on the category of art itself and who has access to that category, as well as the material impacts of artworld economic systems on those people impacted by the artwork.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ piece, *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* (1976) deploys many very similar bids to create a work where maintenance workers were simultaneously engaged in transactional labor and artwork. In this work, she asked 300 workers at 55 Water Street, a building in New York City’s financial district that housed the Whitney Extension, to choose one hour of their workday, where they interpreted their activity as “maintenance art” instead of simply “maintenance work” and to wear a pin signaling their participation in the piece. Ukeles then moved throughout the building taking 720 Polaroid photos of the participants and asking whether the image captured them performing maintenance art or maintenance work. All the photos of both maintenance work and maintenance art were installed on a wall in this building, organized to show these two categories. Ukeles has described it as, “a grid of voices of the people who didn’t have a way for their choices to have a cultural venue. That was the function of my piece in the museum-700 choices whether or not to call their activity art-part of the culture.”⁵²

This piece employed similar bids as Sierra’s piece in its documentation and presentation to the artworld via the Whitney Museum’s exhibition *Art World* (1976). Ukeles has also made explicit declarations of her work’s status as art, writing in her *Maintenance Art Manifesto* (1969), “Everything I say is Art is Art. Everything I do is Art is Art.” In terms of the perlocutionary effects listed above, Ukeles’ work is quite distinct from Sierra’s. Through its inclusion in art narratives, this work offers a reference point for an expanded concept of which persons are appropriate to participate in the artworld and to make art declarations. While Ukeles employs her own status in the artworld to endorse the declarations of her participants, she places them in a position to understand their own activity as part of an artworld system.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁵¹ Ibid., 70.

⁵² Finkelpearl, “Interview: Mierle Laderman Ukeles.”

In terms of the modes of attention and perception associated with the interpretation of this maintenance work as art, the participants themselves are asked to bring these modes of attention to their own ordinary activities. Insofar as they are asked to choose a single hour of their day when they consider their maintenance work to be a form of art-making, they are given the opportunity and responsibility to perceive their everyday activities through the lenses of aesthetic judgment, affective experience, and personal expression in order to identify that distinction internally. A secondary audience is also invited to view maintenance work and maintenance workers as artworld participants, viewing each worker's self-identified maintenance art in relationship to a larger a broader portrayal of the invisible work occurring in the building. The arrangement of the snapshots decouples these moments from the everyday experience of labor and places them into a formal relationship to each other. The final grid of images is also available to the participants as it is on a public wall in the building where they already work. In terms of the artworld economic and institutional systems that this piece engages, the workers did not receive compensation for their participation in this piece. Their participation was entirely voluntary and occurred during their regular paid hours with minimal disruption. Ukeles' focus on "maintenance art" came from her experience of the non-economic labor of motherhood and caring for a child. In her own career, this piece led to her unpaid appointment as artist-in-residence of the New York Sanitation Department, offering an example of socially engaged art's participation in what La Berge refers to as the decommodification of artistic labor.

5 Conclusion: Assessing Declarative Bids

This article proposes a set of tools for analyzing and assessing socially engaged art by considering what happens when everyday situations become categorized as art. By looking at the efforts to declare a situation to be art as intentional bids undertaken within social, economic, and institutional contexts, we can subject these efforts to ethical scrutiny in ways that account for the work's status as art but are not contained by the rarified evaluative criteria of art criticism and aesthetic judgment.

Socially engaged art has effectively established a conventional avenue for situations to be categorized as works of art, even as they retain their non-art social function. As seen in the comparison between the pieces of Sierra and Ukeles above, this recategorization can either serve to expand conventional understandings of what persons and circumstances are appropriate to the category of art in ways that create greater access to and agency in artworlds, or it can normalize exploitation and dehumanization as means of creating "striking, moving, and memorable" aesthetic experiences for exclusive artworld audiences. In either case, works of socially engaged art act upon art narratives, impacting the felicity conditions for future artworld bids at the same time that they act upon the attention and experience of participants, and situate these participants within the economic and institutional relations of artworlds.

A pragmatic analysis of these two works, grounded in the material impacts upon participants and indifferent to the ways in which the category of art is deployed and impacted, does not produce a meaningful distinction between the two forms of consensual agreement that engage delegated performers in Sierra and Ukeles' respective pieces. An aesthetic evaluation of the resulting work that prioritizes artistic autonomy, ambiguity, and artworld reception easily valorizes and defends Sierra's "grim meditation on... social and political conditions." It is through an analysis of the bids through which these two works position themselves as art that we can identify the significant differences in the ways that these two works deploy and act upon the category of art. Sierra reinforces existing precedents wherein the spectacle of objectification is central to the artistic work, positioning himself as a canonical figure in the introduction of "delegated performance." Ukeles asks maintenance workers to determine for themselves when their activities constitute art, explicitly extending notions of who is capable of making artworld declarations. The distinction is ethical,⁵³ but in a way that is inherently concerned with these situations' status as artworks.

⁵³ It is beyond the scope of this article to detail the modes of ethical scrutiny best suited to this project, though an ethics of care is clearly aligned with the distinctions surfaced through these examples.

By understanding art, not as an extraordinary and autonomous realm, but as a social category that is invoked through ordinary language, and continuously reshaped by successful declarative bids, it is possible to determine the extent to which socially engaged artworks render this category more accessible and humane or more exclusive, hierarchical, and dehumanizing. This meets an urgent need as socially engaged art extends the field of situations that could potentially be declared art.

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