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## **Assessing Socially Engaged Art**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The last twenty-five years have seen a radical shift in the work of politically committed artists. No longer content to merely represent social reality, a new generation of artists has sought to change it, blending art with activism, social regeneration projects, and even violent political action. I assess how this form of contemporary art should lead us to rethink theories of artistic value and argue that these works make a convincing case for an often-dismissed position, namely, the pragmatic view of artistic value. However, the pragmatic view, when properly applied, sets the bar high indeed—art that tries to change society should be considered good art only when it succeeds in making a tangible difference.

### **I. SOCIALLY USEFUL ARTWORKS**

Theaster Gates's artwork *Dorchester Projects* (2009–) began with a house. In 2009, Gates bought a rundown bungalow in Chicago's impoverished South Side and re-created it using repurposed materials, including timbers from defunct Chicago factories and wood from disused barns. By 2009, it would not have been unusual to make an artwork out of a house. Robert Smithson partially buried a woodshed in 1970 (*Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970); in 1993, Rachel Whiteread created a negative concrete imprint of a condemned house (*House*, 1993); and Christo wrapped the German Reichstag in fabric in 1995 (*Wrapped Reichstag*, 1995). Gates's modification of his house, however, was significant in that the work centered not on physical but social change. The rebuilt *Dorchester Projects* host a community center, a library, and a kitchen, all designed to enliven the neighborhood and affirm its self-image. It is this living, socially transformative aspect that marks out the identity of Gates's house as a work of art (Wei 2011; Gates 2012; Adams 2015).

Insisting that the social impact is the defining feature of his artworks, Gates's artistic practice is typical of contemporary socially engaged artists. The feminist artist Suzanne Lacy is perhaps the best-known pioneer of such project-based art. In one of her earlier works, *The Crystal Quilt* (1985–1987), Lacy brought together over 400 older women in Minnesota for a mass performance, but the real purpose of the project was in the reactivation of this socially marginalized group, through the two-year period of research and workshops, which led up to the event. Today, a socially engaged artist might work with a group of miners to reenact a strike action that had been brutally suppressed by the police (Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001); she might mount a wind turbine on top of a railway bridge to demonstrate its benefits to an eco-reluctant community (Marjetica Potrč, *The Wind Lift*, 2014); or she might collaborate with a group of garbage collectors to create self-portraits, financing local

community projects with the proceeds (Vik Muniz's *Pictures of Garbage* series of works, 2008). An artwork might be a new sun-powered reading light intended for off-grid areas of the world (Olafur Eliasson's *Little Sun*, 2012), a piece of software designed to elude online censorship in Iran and China (Jud and Wachter's *picidae*, 2007), or even a violent political action, such as the destruction of a police vehicle (the Voina collective's *Cop's Auto-da-fé, or Fucking Prometheus*, 2011).

Works like these have been the subject of much discussion in recent art theory and have been theorized under several designations, such as “the social turn,” “relational aesthetics,” “project-based art,” “community-based art,” “new public art,” “site-specific art,” “social practice,” “useful art,” and “participatory art” (Lacy 1995; Bourriaud 2002; Kwon 2002; Kester 2004; Jackson 2011; Bishop 2012; Doherty 2015). The present investigation will focus on a certain cross section of these practices, which share two characteristics: (1) the intended value of the art project is coextensive with its *social and political impact*, and (2) the *methods* utilized to produce that impact bear close resemblance to nonartistic forms of political and social activism. For convenience's sake, I use the term “socially engaged art” to refer to this group of artworks.

Socially engaged art, I argue, poses a problem to philosophical accounts of artistic value, a problem at least as challenging as that posed by the ready-mades to philosophers of art in the 1960s (Danto 1964; Dickie 1969). One among several difficulties posed by the ready-mades was that they were not beautiful, or, at least, they were no more beautiful than their nonart counterparts. Therefore, old theories conflating artistic value with aesthetic value could not accommodate such works (compare Stecker 2012, 355–356). Socially engaged art presents a new challenge. Unlike ready-mades, these works worryingly disregard the confines of the artworld and aim to be judged for their social usefulness. As I argue, this upsets the broadly held assumption that artistic value is something we assess from within the sphere of art.

First, I offer a brief history of socially engaged art within the context of recent advanced art practices. I argue for a synthesis of two historical narratives—Miwon Kwon's and Jason Gaiger's—that I think crucial for understanding the appeal of this kind of art and its linkage to art of previous eras. I then consider two broad accounts of artistic value in Anglophone philosophy—aestheticism and pluralism—and argue that socially engaged art presents a challenge to both accounts. Instead, I offer an account of artistic value usually dismissed as untenable—the pragmatic view—as a way of accounting for this kind of art. After considering objections that socially engaged art is not art, or is bad art, I conclude that such art indeed suggests we should expand our conception of what artistic value can be.

## II. HOW WE GOT TO SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

In the opening chapter of *One Place After Another*, Miwon Kwon offers a short genealogy of the project-based, socially engaged art (Kwon 2002, 11–33). This trajectory covers the period between the 1960s and the 1990s and charts the way in which artists responded to the Western (and especially New York-based) conception of advanced art as modernist abstraction. Certainly, this story only partially accounts for the social turn. In today's globalized artworld one should also take stock of the histories of socially engaged art in the former Eastern bloc and in the global South (see Bishop 2012 for a more comprehensive history). However, since New York has undeniably dominated the Western art production during the Cold War, this is one relevant story to tell here. Western socially engaged art in

this period, therefore, did not merely have the task of commenting on pertinent social problems but also had to justify its status as art in relation to the New York modernist paradigm: in relation to the idea that the truly progressive art constantly interrogates the conventions of artistic practice itself. For Kwon, the crucial notion linking socially engaged art to preceding advanced art movements is the artists' interrogation of the artwork's physical location and its manner of display: its 'site.'

The first stage of the investigation of the work's site was, as Kwon puts it, "phenomenological," and she identifies it with post-object art such as Minimalist, land art, and Conceptual art practices of the 1960s (Kwon 2002, 12–13). Artists such as Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Eva Hesse challenged the modernist, white cube gallery model of art display of the 1950s, according to which aesthetic experience was supposed to occur in an uninterrupted interaction between the viewer and the colossal, self-contained abstract canvasses and sculptures. Instead, these artists emphasized dynamic ways in which the work can interact with its environment. Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, mentioned above, is typical. Unlike a sculpture on a pedestal, no viewer can experience Smithson's shed in isolation from its challenging and changing environment.

The next generation of artists, now known under the label "institutional critique," took the engagement with the work's site a step further. They came to query the social and political, rather than merely aesthetic, conditions for the work's display (Kwon 2002, 14–24). In this way, Mierle Laderman Ukeles's pieces often drew attention to the (gendered) labor relations that allowed the display of art in the first place. For example, in her "Maintenance Art" performances (1973), Ukeles presented the cleaning of the museum as an artwork in itself. Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser, Marcel Broodthaers, Christo, and others associated with institutional critique—which flourished in the more politically activated artworld of the 1970s—often attempted similar artistic exposés of the political conditions of the work's site.

This leads Kwon to explain how socially engaged art, taking off in the early 1990s, came to become so readily accepted in the contemporary art world. One of her case studies is the 1993 "Culture in Action" program by the Sculpture Chicago organization, for which curator Mary Jane Jacob, instead of displaying conventional sculptures, commissioned artists to team up with communities to tackle local issues, organize workshops, and put on political marches (Kwon 2002, 28–29, 101–137). Works included the HaHa Collective growing food for AIDS patients (*Flood*, 1993); Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio collaborating with a candy factory workers' union to create and market a chocolate bar (*The Workforce Makes the Candy of Their Dreams*, 1993); and Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's *Tele-Vecindario* (1992–1993), a project teaching teenagers how to make videos. For Kwon, such works again engage their site. The difference is that permissible sites for contemporary work now include not just the gallery but its nonartistic context as well, whether this be the local community or a broader political effort. Though Kwon does not specifically use the term "social engagement," but prefers to discuss this art under the label "site-specificity," her third paradigm—the primary focus of her book—clearly extends to socially engaged art mentioned above.

Jason Gaiger offers an alternative narrative to Kwon's three stages. He agrees that there is an interesting trajectory uniting the successive movements of post-object art, institutional critique, and the project-based socially engaged artworks but applies critical pressure on Kwon's usage of the term 'site' (Gaiger 2009, 49–54). Gaiger takes issue with Kwon

describing socially engaged art as active within a “*discursively* determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate” (Kwon 2002, 26). These works, for Kwon, no longer react only to the specific site of the gallery but contribute to broader political efforts and debates. However, Gaiger complains, to characterize the site of such art as ‘discourse’ is to provide too imprecise a criterion. As he persuasively argues, even premodernist figurative art could be plausibly construed as engaging the work's site in Kwon's terms, since much of that art was engaged in a wider field of discourse. Think of Hogarth, Goya, Courbet, or Manet: their work undoubtedly participated in some broader political and cultural debate. So, by Kwon's characterization, they too should count as engaging their ‘site’ in the discursive sense.

Gaiger is therefore led to unstitch Kwon's trajectory from Minimalism to socially engaged art along different seams. The useful concept for describing this shift, he claims, is not according to the work's site but rather as a shift away from the demands of artistic *autonomy* (Gaiger 2009, 52). Artistic autonomy (self-governance) is a normative doctrine about artistic value. One way of stating the doctrine would be to say that art is intrinsically valuable and should therefore not be held accountable to some *external standard*, such as the demands of a political movement, state, religion, or field of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Gaiger suggests that this doctrine has, over the past fifty years, been gradually revised in the world of Western advanced art and that this can be seen in the trajectory leading up to the social turn.

The post-object Minimalists and Conceptual artists of the 1960s reacted specifically against the dogma of artistic autonomy as theorized by Clement Greenberg in his account of modernism. For Greenberg and the critics he influenced, artistic value was based on the viewer's absorption in the formal, medium-specific features of the work itself. Greenberg's analysis of New York school abstract painters like Jackson Pollock is typical in this regard: what Greenberg appreciated was the sense of dynamism and energy created purely by consideration of the relations between the shapes on the flat canvas (Greenberg 1986–1993, 72–74, 200–202, vol. 2; 106–107, 217–235, vol. 3). Post-object artists, such as Minimalists and Conceptualists, and Robert Rauschenberg in the example above, are crucial because they chip away at this scheme by canceling the importance of the work's intrinsic features. While the main concern of their work was still broadly speaking with the aesthetic experience, post-object art facilitated the experience through means external to the work: the location, the viewer's body, the relations between the two. Once this step is taken, however, artistic autonomy can be further enervated. The next assumption under pressure is the thought that artistic value is chiefly based on the work's aesthetic interest. In the 1960s and later, Western advanced artists opened art to institutional critique and to broader political commentary, and, as Gaiger argues, this development further depreciates artistic autonomy. By the 1990s, advanced art practices are clearly no longer evaluated merely on aesthetic terms but in terms of their contribution to live political and cultural debates. As Gaiger puts it:

In short, it is opposition to the modernist conception of aesthetic autonomy—rather than the increasingly tenuous conception of a ‘site’—that links the different parts of Kwon's account together and which establishes a line of continuity between the minimalist and post-minimalist practices of the 1960s and contemporary project-based art. (Gaiger 2009, 53–54)

Kwon and Gaiger, then, both offer narratives that show how the recent social turn is continuous with central concerns in the history of Western advanced art after World War II. I

do not so much wish to assess who of the two provides a better theoretical framework as to suggest that they should be combined.

Gaiger usefully inscribes Kwon's trajectory within the broader theme of artistic autonomy, which has been more central to art historical narratives of the twentieth century than the category of site.<sup>2</sup> However, there is a danger, in Gaiger's account, in bringing recent history of art full circle. Gaiger considers contemporary project-based art to be a “partial restitution” of previous politically committed art movements, such as naturalism and realism at the end of the nineteenth century and Russian Constructivism and Dada at the beginning of the twentieth (Gaiger 2009, 51, 55). This suggestion overlooks an important point about the recent social turn, implicit in Kwon's claim that the site of these works is broader political discourse and action. The “dominant drive,” as she puts it, of these works is “a pursuit of a more intense engagement with the outside world and everyday life,” in a way that treats “aesthetic and art historical concerns as secondary issues” (Kwon 2002, 24). The project-based works by Theaster Gates, Marjetica Potrč, Vik Muniz, and others do not (merely) comment on politics through an artistic medium, as realist painters have done. And while they may be following in the footsteps of the historical avant-gardes, like the Dadaists who attempted to “merge” art and life (compare Bürger 1984, 49–50), socially engaged artists do not do so through anti-rational, experimental performances. Instead, these artists dedicate themselves pragmatically to measurable impact, aligning their art with social work, activism, or technology development.

I would therefore like to suggest a synthesis of Kwon's and Gaiger's accounts. Gaiger adds to Kwon's account by plausibly mapping it onto a shift in *critical evaluation* of art. This is a shift from artistic autonomy—the principle of art being evaluated by its own standards—to what we might call artistic heteronomy, or the principle that art should be evaluated by standards of other fields, such as politics, religion, ethics, and knowledge. What Kwon's analysis shows, however, is that the result has been more radical than Gaiger allows for. Attempting to directly engage its political context, socially engaged art aligns artistic activity with political action to a level virtually without precedent. I now turn to the challenge that this presents to the philosophical definition of artistic value.

### III. SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART AND ARTISTIC VALUE

The majority of philosophical positions on what artistic value is can be classified as belonging to two broad camps. Aestheticism is united on the view that only aesthetic values can contribute to a work's artistic value (for example, Beardsley 1958; Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Budd 1996; Zangwill 2007; Scruton 2009). Pluralism, by contrast, allows artistic value to comprise a wider variety of values, including aesthetic, epistemic, ethical, political, and more (for example, Nussbaum 1990; Stecker 1997; Kieran 2005a; Robinson 2005; Gaut 2007). It should be noted these two camps do not exhaust the logical space of possible views. Outside of the present scope, we find nihilism about artistic value (artistic value is never realized) or nonaesthetic monism (the view that only one nonaesthetic kind of value contributes to artistic value). However, aestheticism and pluralism do draw the lines of most of the recent debates.

Louise Hanson recently offered what I think is the clearest *neutral* definition of artistic value, one that should be agreed by all the above positions. Artistic value, Hanson says, is “the thing that by definition, artworks have just to the extent that they are good art” (2013, 502). What

this captures is that when we talk about artworks, we talk about them as good or bad art, and often compare their merits as better or worse. The dispute between available substantive positions is, then, a dispute about what kinds of value contribute to artistic value, and under what conditions (compare Hanson 2013, 504, 507–508). I will accept Hanson's claim, and I will additionally take it that any substantive position on artistic value should therefore follow some form like this:

**(Artistic value)** Value  $V$ , possessed by artwork  $X$ , is an artistic value  $\longleftrightarrow V$  is a value of the kind  $Y$ , and  $V$  is realized under conditions  $Z$ .

While aestheticism insists that  $Y$  be aesthetic value narrowly construed, pluralism is more liberal as to what kinds of value can count as  $V$ . I now wish to suggest that proponents of aestheticism and pluralism have tended to agree on a further interesting point.

This point pertains to the *conditions*  $Z$  under which artistic values must be realized. Namely, for pluralists and aestheticists alike, artistic values are not the values that artworks have *simpliciter*, but only the values that are realized *through* characteristically artistic features, specific to the work's medium, genre, theme, technique, mode of display, or art kind. For example, among aestheticists, Monroe Beardsley's analysis shows how aesthetic values in painting are achieved through, *inter alia*, the use of color, representation of depth, rules of composition, and the relationship between depicted objects and the shape of the canvas (Beardsley 1958, 168–173, 92–96, 205–209). Among pluralists, Robert Stecker considers as characteristically artistic “[the] sort of exploration of its subject matter [the work] provides”; “what it requires its audience to imagine and to feel,” and—in the case of literature—how it succeeds in doing so “*in virtue of its literary properties such as vivid description*” (Stecker 2012, 358; original emphasis). Sometimes such restrictions on artistic value are described as the value something has *as art*. Malcolm Budd, an aestheticist, discusses the “value *as art*” as the value of the experience, which is arrived at through an appropriate understanding of the work. Here, “proper” understanding seems to rely on appreciation of features such as a painting's tonality, symbolism, and formal arrangement (Budd 1996, 1–8, 14–16, 41–43). Berys Gaut, a pluralist who discusses ethical and cognitive value, aligns “value *qua art*” with those properties we attend to in art-critical discourse (Gaut 2007, 34–37, 95ff, 166f). In Gaut's analysis of two treatments of the *Bath of Bathsheba* from Rembrandt's workshop, this includes attending to the theme of the sitter's inner life as achieved through features such as tonal harmony and expressive brushwork (Gaut 2007, 87–89). Similarly, pluralists who defend the cognitive value of literature customarily specify that their arguments must show how such value is arrived at in virtue of specifically literary features of the work: those that distinguish literature from prosaic modes of description (compare John 2013, 384–385).

All these writers, then, despite significant differences in their theories, tend to agree that a value realized by a work of art counts toward its artistic value under such limited conditions. This point is also often expressed by distinguishing between the work's artistic and pragmatic value (Lamarque 2013, 56; compare Lopes 2011, 521). For example, a novel may be ethically and cognitively valuable because it happens to contain a folk recipe for a medicine, or a painting may be aesthetically valuable because it conceals a hideous scene previously painted on the canvas. Such values do not make the work good art, since they are not realized in virtue of such artistic features as we saw enumerated above.

In short, I would like to describe the view shared by pluralists and aestheticists as the demand for the following condition: that only the values that a work realizes *as art*—that is, through recognizably artistic features—count toward artistic value. Until recently, such a contention would have perhaps seemed unremarkable. However, not long ago, Dominic Lopes challenged the view that artistic value is value “as art” (Lopes 2014, Chapter 5, especially 90–100).<sup>3</sup>Lopes argues that “as art” is too broad a category to be useful and that only individual arts, on the basis of their specific medium profiles, are restrictive enough to allow us to measure achievement (Lopes 2014, 103). For Lopes, there is therefore only musical, painterly, literary (and so on) value, and “artistic value” is merely a disjunctive term encompassing all of these.

Personally, I am not sure whether Lopes's is a new position or rather a more explicit statement of something that has already been accepted by pluralists and aestheticists alike. It seems that most writers acknowledge that what we count among the work's artistic features is going to depend considerably—though not exclusively—on the medium-specific art kind in question (for example, Gaut 2007, 88). Therefore, the disagreement seems to be one of emphasis. Lopes seems to think, somewhat like Clement Greenberg used to, that the relevant artistic features gather around the medium profile of one of the arts (Lopes 2014, 159–162); other philosophers might allow that some artistic features, such as themes and genre-specific features, may be shared between various arts.

My point for now, then, is that all these philosophically diverse accounts of artistic value place *some* “as art” restriction on the realization of artistic value. One might describe this “value as art” consensus, adhered to by both aestheticism and pluralism, as filling in the conditions Z in (**Artistic value**), above, as follows:

**(Value as art)** Value  $V$ , possessed by artwork  $X$ , is an artistic value  $\longleftrightarrow V$  is a value of the kind  $Y$ , and  $V$  is realized through features specific to the work's medium, genre, theme, technique, modes of display, art kind, or other artistic features.

What follows from Lopes's discussion is that it is certainly difficult to point out which features count as properly “artistic” and that one might debate as to whether the work's medium should hold some privileged position among them. Indeed, as the arts evolve and the borders between them change, these issues have been much disputed. A case in point is ready-mades, which retain little that is recognizably artistic other than the mode of display in the gallery and the “atmosphere” of art interpretation that goes with it (compare Danto 1964, 579–581).

This formulation of the consensus, however, enables us to see clearly the extent to which socially engaged artworks present us with a new and deep-going philosophical challenge. By assimilating themselves to the “site” of political action and discourse and by radically departing from claims of artistic autonomy (to combine Kwon's and Gaiger's terms), these works have controversially dispensed with the idea that what makes something good art should be realized through *any* features specific to the sphere of art. Instead, it seems, these works embrace a pragmatic view about art, a position that we might describe as follows:<sup>4</sup>

**(Pragmatic view)** Value  $V$ , possessed by artwork  $X$ , is an artistic value  $\longleftrightarrow V$  is the positive political, cognitive, or ethical impact of  $X$ .

Where the pragmatic view differs from aestheticism is in the kind of value it takes artistic value to be. Where the pragmatic view differs from both aestheticism and pluralism is in omitting the demand that artistic values should be realized through characteristically artistic features. In Suzanne Lacy's, Theaster Gates's, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's, or Vik Muniz's project-based works discussed above, their claim to being good artworks is based on the social strengthening of the communities they engage with. In the technological artworks of Olafur Eliasson, Marjetica Potrč, or Jud and Wachter, their claim to being good artworks is based on the impact their artworks have for the people who use them. Can such a position, and thereby the status of socially engaged artworks as good art, be made philosophically respectable?

#### IV. SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART DEFENDED

Above, I stated that socially engaged art “embraces” the pragmatic view. To put this point more clearly, I now argue that the existence of good socially engaged artworks favors the pragmatic view, since only this view can explain their artistic value. Similarly, the existence of artistically good but nonaesthetic works of art favors pluralism over aestheticism, since aestheticism cannot explain the value of such works. Here I do not mean to argue that the pragmatic view is the correct position to take with regard to the artistic value of *all* artworks (nor do I think that would be a sensible position). However, I want to show that it can be sensibly applied to socially engaged art. The structure of my argument is simple:

- 1. Socially engaged artworks are works of art.
- 2. Some socially engaged artworks are good art.
- 3. Aestheticism and pluralism cannot explain how socially engaged artworks can be good art.
- 4. The pragmatic view of artistic value can explain how socially engaged artworks can be good art.
- 5. Therefore, the pragmatic view is a valid account of artistic value.

I now defend premises (1)–(4) and then offer some qualifications on what has been achieved.

First, one might object to premise (1). Socially engaged artworks, the objection goes, no longer appear to be art in any meaningful sense. Instead, they have fully assimilated themselves into nonart fields of activity. Therefore, philosophical accounts of artistic value need not take notice of them.

This objection points to the definitional issue of what it is for something to be a work of art. It should be noted that aestheticist definitions of art, which define art as human artifacts intended to realize aesthetic value, would likely reject socially engaged art altogether (compare Beardsley 1982, 299). However, this point is dialectically moot. One cannot espouse a value-based definition of art to argue against a rival, pragmatic theory of artistic value without begging the question. We must therefore look to value-neutral definitions of art, such as historical and institutional definitions, to adjudicate on this issue.

For example, according to Jerrold Levinson's historical definition of art, something is an artwork if it is intended to be regarded in some way in which artworks of the past were standardly regarded (Levinson 1979). Here, Kwon's analysis is pertinent, since it explains



that socially engaged art is regarded as engaging with its site. In this respect, these works are continuous with post-object works such as Minimalist sculpture, which dominated the production of advanced art in the 1960s. Gaiger's analysis places socially engaged art within an even longer trajectory of heteronomous art. Even though I argued that the most recent social turn represents a radical outcome of that lineage, it would be correct to say that these works are intended to be regarded as contributing to political outcomes, much as French realist works did in the mid-nineteenth century or Russian Constructivism in the early twentieth. Other genealogies of socially engaged art emphasize the collaborative and participatory element of these works, which can be traced to the Situationist International in the 1950s, happenings in the 1960s, and feminist participatory practices in the 1970s (Kester 2004; Bishop 2012). Therefore, to the extent that the historical definitions of art aim to accommodate continuity as well as innovation, these are precisely the criteria that socially engaged works fulfill.

On the other hand, the institutional definitions of art—of which George Dickie is a well-known exponent—claim that something is art if it is accepted as such by members of art institutions (Dickie 1969). Though the early socially engaged works were experimental and marginal, this kind of work has been since thoroughly embraced by the art establishment: Theaster Gates is represented by high-profile commercial galleries; international exhibitions like *documenta* routinely feature socially engaged work; projects like Eliasson's *Little Sun* are enthusiastically embraced by museums like Tate Modern. True, these project-based works do exit the artworld in the sense that they take place in the broader political sphere rather than in the gallery. Nevertheless, they are validated as art by artworld participants both through art discourse and by showing documentation of social projects in traditional gallery spaces.

One might reply to both lines of defense that we resist categorizing socially engaged works as art not because of their *novelty* but because of their success as members of another, nonart category. Imagine a cook experimenting with sweet appetizers. Her cocoa-coated spicy carrots may still just about qualify as an appetizer, but if she ends up making a full-blown carrot cake, it seems she has failed in producing an appetizer *because she produced a dessert*. Similarly, we might resist accepting socially engaged artworks as art because they are something else: social projects or works of activism. These works migrated into another, nonart sphere entirely.

On reflection, however, I do not think this objection works. Things can belong to multiple categories: something might be a religious object and art, a piece of erotica and art, or a piece of plumbing and art (as with Duchamp's *Fountain*). What is wrong with carrot cake as an appetizer, among other things, is that it is both institutionally and historically an aberration among appetizers, *not* that it is a lovely dessert. Just think of sliced melon, which can be both. What matters for categorizing socially engaged artworks as art, then, is that they are historically and institutionally enmeshed with the artworld, not whether they also succeed as social projects.

On at least some respectable definitions of art, then, socially engaged artworks are art, and should be included in discussions about artistic value. Another way to defuse the motivation for the pragmatic view would be to maintain that these works—while art—are simply not good art: these works are marginal and eye-rollingly awful attempts at social do-goodery created by deeply confused individuals. If one feels this way, then aestheticism and pluralism,

and any view subscribing to the “as art” consensus, can conveniently explain why that is. These works are bad because they fail to realize any value by distinctly artistic means.

Dialectically, this objection leads to a stalemate. Different accounts of artistic value are supposed to account for *good* works of art; a contest between them presupposes that we agree on which works are good. To move beyond the stalemate, one could motivate the case for socially engaged art in two ways.

First, one can point to the growing popularity of such works. Though several of the cases discussed in the literature have indeed appeared in relatively marginal festivals with little broad popularity, other cases of socially engaged art have been more widely appreciated. Theaster Gates's housing projects have, for example, received broad exposure in the media, and Vik Muniz's *Pictures of Garbage* series was the subject of an acclaimed documentary, *Waste Land* (2010).

Second, one could point to the fact that enthusiasm for direct political efficacy has in fact spread from socially engaged art to many corners of contemporary art. Consider Ai Weiwei's *Fairytales* (2007) performance for Documenta 12: the work consisted of the artist bringing one thousand and one Chinese citizens, selected from over three thousand applicants, to Kassel. This performance was rich with symbolic resonances. The documentation of the journeys referenced the magical journeys found in the fairy tales of the brothers Grimm, who spent their formative years in Kassel; the exhibition included a display of a thousand and one wooden chairs, which signified the ‘invisible’ presence of Chinese migrants who anonymously intermingled with the visitors. Ai also showed a companion piece: a large structure made of Qing and Ming dynasty doors, taken from buildings that had to be destroyed to make way for new constructions (*Template*, 2007). It would certainly be possible to appreciate *Fairytales* as a complex piece of participatory performance and installation. However, for all these nods to artistic autonomy, the *documenta* catalogue also described the work as simply facilitating a cultural exchange program, enabling one thousand and one people to experience Europe's culture and political system (*documenta 12 catalogue*, 2008).

Thus, if one wants to dismiss socially engaged artworks as marginal and claim they are therefore not candidates for good art, one will still find that a kindred desire for direct social relevance underpins even the more mainstream contemporary works, such as Ai's. Socially engaged art can, then, be thought of as a limiting case that most clearly outlines a new, pragmatic view of artistic value. However, such a view also underlies other contemporary artists' thinking about what makes a work of art good or worthwhile.

Finally, one could deny the third premise: socially engaged art is capable of being good art, but either aestheticism or pluralism can explain its value. Here we should first note that there are some works of *participatory art*, which also include interaction with audience members or local communities, but the primary goal of which is to create a remarkable aesthetic experience for the participants; some works by Tino Sehgal, Kateřina Šedá, Marina Abramović, and Rirkrit Tiravanija are like this. Some version of aestheticism or pluralism may well be appropriate for considering this important genre (see Hegenbart **2016**). However, even though such participatory practices do overlap with socially engaged art in terms of how they are displayed and curated, we should at least in principle distinguish between aesthetically minded participatory works and the socially activist works that have been my

focus here. The goal of the latter is not necessarily to intensify the participants' aesthetic experience but to generate measurable social change.

Turning now to the socially activist works under discussion, it therefore seems clear that aestheticism cannot account for their value. However, perhaps pluralism can, and the art historian Claire Bishop seems to suggest the beginnings of a pluralist approach. Though Bishop is sympathetic to socially engaged art, she criticizes curators Charles Esche and Maria Lind for assessing artistic community projects only according to their political efficacy, but not also "*as art*." Rather than simply assessing socially engaged art as politics, "[it] is also crucial," Bishop suggests, "to discuss, analyse and compare this work critically *as art*, since this is the institutional field in which it is endorsed and disseminated." Accordingly, Bishop praises the "*artistic work*" in the case of Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* (2012, 13, 17, 22, 33; original emphases). Deller's project involved gathering oral accounts of police brutality to create a historical archive told from the miners' perspective, but its central piece was a large-scale reenactment of the confrontation between the striking miners and the police, using some of those originally affected by the strike as performers. As well as socially relevant, Bishop suggests that Deller's work can therefore be considered as a sort of hybrid between a piece of performance art and a history painting (30–37). To give another example, Vik Muniz's collaboration with the garbage pickers of Rio de Janeiro, *Pictures of Garbage*, incorporated traditional artistic tools even more explicitly and so perhaps provides an even stronger case in point. Muniz assembled rubbish into portraits that recalled art historical references; for example, *Marat (Sebastião)* is a portrait of a garbage picker that recalls Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793). Photographs of these assemblages were then sold, as high-end gallery art, and the money was distributed to the garbage pickers to finance various community projects.

Even, though it is possible to detect elements of performance, installation, or even portraiture in socially engaged work (works of Suzanne Lacy, Tania Bruguera, and Thomas Hirschhorn could furnish us with further examples), it is important to discern the *manner* in which these features are exploited. The portraits made by Muniz are ingenious, but as is made clear in the *Waste Land* documentary, Muniz's main goal was to lend his skills, fame, and whatever else was required to improve the lot of the people he worked with. The success of these works *as portraits* appeared to be a secondary concern; Muniz's primary goal appeared to be to create *anything likeable* that would raise as much money as possible. Theaster Gates's attitude toward his sculptural output is even more pragmatic, indeed cynical: the sale of his art objects to affluent collectors simply finances his social projects (Adams 2015). Deller's project might indeed be appreciated as a kind of *tableau vivant* by an onlooker in the art context, for example, when the video documentation of the work is presented in galleries. However, *pace* Bishop, Deller's primary goal appears to have been to make a difference to the original participants, who were possibly quite unconcerned with the work's artworld status. That is even more obviously the case with the "Culture in Action" works discussed by Kwon.

To map this discussion onto my argument, recall that pluralism is the view that artistic value encompasses a variety of values, realized *through* recognizably artistic features. Now, pluralism is a broad church of views, so I am willing to concede that some pluralists might find resources to accommodate socially engaged art. However, the discussion shows at least three reasons why this is difficult; it is important to note these, because it is important to

understand just how radical a break these works represent. First, in socially engaged art traditional artistic features (such as the production of portraits by Vik Muniz) may be present, but they are used as an interchangeable means to an end (they fund social projects or bring a community together), rather than as a means *through* which a value is realized. It is as if we used a heavy statue to hit an opponent on the head, rather than expressed dissent through the medium of sculpture. The procedure here is therefore quite different from the way in which pluralists usually discuss artistic value as arising through artistic work. Second, any such traditional artistic features are always accompanied by features that are commonly found outside the sphere of art, such as organizing a protest, creating an archive, or rebuilding a neighborhood. It is the values realized through such means that pluralist accounts will have trouble accommodating. Third, the features that allow us to classify socially engaged art as art—such as their institutional acceptance as art—are, interestingly, not the features essential to the realization of their value. Socially engaged artworks are certainly discussed in art magazines and appreciated when documented in museums, and these venues may be used to publicize the political message. However, the bulk of these works' achievement is based on the difference they make to constituencies *outside* of these contexts: to the former mining community (Deller) or to the garbage pickers (Muniz). Note that the challenge here is different to ready-mades. With Duchamp's *Fountain*, the institutional context was essential to realizing its humor and message; that gallery context is mostly irrelevant to the difference socially engaged works made to their users. This is precisely what their democratic appeal consists in.

To sum up, given the popularity and acclaim achieved by socially engaged art over the last few decades, I propose that philosophical theories of artistic value cannot dismiss such work as “not art” or “bad art.” Moreover, if we take seriously the intent of these art practices to make a difference to the political process, then the value of these works ought to be assessed pragmatically: a socially engaged artwork is good art simply to the extent that it realizes a politically valuable end, regardless of the means the work employs.

## V. QUALIFICATIONS AND THE PRAGMATIC VIEW IN PRACTICE

A theory of artistic value can make a claim to universal validity, or it can limit itself to a subsection of art. Thus, one and the same person might argue for pluralism in relation to literature but aestheticism in relation to absolute music (compare Kieran 2005b, 298). My goal here has been to show how one vital strand of contemporary art legitimizes the pragmatic conception of artistic value. My claim is not, of course, that this renders the pragmatic view an acceptable theory of all art. As I noted, even among contemporary participatory practices there are some more aestheticized works (Sehgal, Abramović, Šedá, Tiravanija). The value of these is either aesthetic or else resides in that hybrid aesthetic–ethical realm, traced by some pluralists. That is all perfectly all right; I merely want to suggest that in a significant subsection of our artistic production we have also come to think about artistic value pragmatically, in terms of the work's tangible social impact. These distinctions, I hope, should be illuminative for philosophers of art but also for those in the contemporary artworld who want to characterize more precisely what is at stake in these new art forms.

In this respect, I want to now illustrate the consequences of this philosophical discussion for art criticism. When properly taken on board, the pragmatic view is in fact a highly demanding

system for assessing artistic value. 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. Here we may detect a certain malpractice, or even a kind of hypocrisy, which appears to be rife in contemporary art. Curators and critics routinely praise socially engaged artworks *as if their commitment to social progress alone* already constituted an accomplishment. Elsewhere, they occupy a kind of halfway position, reverting to aesthetic criteria when a socially engaged work fails politically. Claire Bishop rightly complains when she writes: “The aspiration is always to move beyond art, but never to the point of comparison with comparable projects in the social domain” (Bishop 2012, 19). Bishop's own solution is to search for artistic features in socially engaged artworks, but my alternative (and perhaps more radical) pragmatic proposal is precisely to insist that *for this subset of artistic production* we should evaluate art by means of its impact, that is, by comparing it with “nonart” political initiatives.

Once such a comparison is made, it can become clearer to what extent and which socially engaged artworks have been effective. For example, though many of the works presented at the Culture in Action program were pioneering, most were woefully inefficient, with the artists lacking the infrastructure and expertise necessary to carry out their ideas in a sustained and impactful way. Only one project, Manglano-Ovalle's video workshops with local youth gang members, *Tele-Vecindario*, appears to have made any lasting difference to the community with which it engaged (Kwon 2002, 101–137; Kester 2004, 117; Bishop 2012, 205–206). More recently, when Olafur Eliasson—one of the best-known contemporary installation artists working with light—presented his *Little Sun*, a handheld torch intended for off-grid areas, this was met with much fanfare. One reviewer gushed: “If Olafur Eliasson can enlighten those of us who have time and resources to devote to art, well and good; but if he can literally enlighten places of darkness, that must be more valuable” (Flanders 2012). But are we certain that this work is making a significant difference? Possibly; but I was unable to find any reviews that tried to assess the project more systematically. For example, Alfredo Moser, a Brazilian mechanic, invented an ingenious bleach-based “bottled light,” which can be easily installed in corrugated roofs and provides indoor light in off-grid areas (Zobel 2013). An NGO called *Liter of Light* has since then been installing these lights worldwide. Eliasson's project might very well be worthwhile, but a critical assessment of socially engaged art should include comparisons with such nonart enterprises and an empirical assessment of the work's impact. Further, Vik Muniz's portraits of the garbage pickers of Rio are certainly heartwarming, as the film critics reviewing the Oscar-nominated documentary about it noted. As a social project, however, one might worry that the project amounted to little more than an arbitrary, Santa-Claus-style charity event: some of the workers Muniz collaborated with received huge amounts of money, but it is not clear what long-term difference this made to the community. Before we get too enthusiastic about the “transformative power” of art, as the advertising copy for the film about Muniz's work suggests, we should think seriously about each social artwork's actual political and ethical impact.

One consequence of the pragmatic view, then, is to call for a more rigorous practice in art criticism of socially engaged art. We have entered a paradigm whereby artistic resources can be freely marshaled in support of political ends, and that is good; however, I suspect much socially engaged work currently fêted at biennales would not stand up to the kind of scrutiny

we subject nonart social projects to. Perhaps works such as those by Suzanne Lacy, Theaster Gates, or the Voina collective may be looked to as models, given that they seem to constitute a genuine political challenge to the authorities or a genuine improvement in the lives of the communities in which they intervene. If socially engaged artworks are to be good art, they ought to make a real difference.

## Notes

1.

Gaiger (2009, 52) calls this view *aesthetic* autonomy. Given that I discuss aestheticism below, under a slightly different definition, I shall here omit this designation. See also Gaiger (2013).

2.

See especially Peter Bürger's analysis of the avant-gardes (1984, 35–37, 46–47, 54) and responses to it (for example, Foster 1996, 1–34).

3.

For an earlier paper and debate see Lopes (2011), Stecker (2012), and Hanson (2013).

4.

Note that my usage of ‘pragmatic’ here has nothing to do with the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism. Also note that it might also be possible to formulate a pragmatic position for other kinds of value (prurient? commercial? aesthetic?), but for now I will stay with the formulation that traces political, cognitive, and ethical values central to socially engaged art.

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