Social Practice Art and Constructivist Education

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Art and Ideas: What is Social Practice Art?

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In this essay, I will examine the parallel philosophies behind social practice art, and constructivist epistemology in education. Both these philosophies involve the participants acting as a collective for meaning-making, rather than the traditional, passive models in art and education of knowledge consumers. Both philosophies, in practice, create a vehicle for the exchange and construction of knowledge through dialogue. I will discuss the contemporary art practices of social practice art, and curriculum of constructivist education. I will evaluate if these notions of learning and interaction are effective in accomplishing potential goals in art and education.

Social practice art is a genre of art that highlights human interaction. Artists who create social practice pieces often involve the public, or a group of individuals from the public to dissect a current issue. Through this participatory art style, these artists are transforming the idea of art by using conversation and social engagement as their medium, rather than tangible materials. These organized encounters, referred to as social practice artworks, largely became a significant genre of art in the late 1990s, and is seen as "new genre public art," according to Suzanne Lacy. In her article, "Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art," Lacy argues that new genre public art is "visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives… [and] is based on engagement" (Lacey, 1996, pp. 19) Compared to public art known as "plop art," or large contemporary sculptures plopped in public spaces granting no interaction or relation to the surrounding space, Lacy's definition of new genre public art calls for social engagement and ultimately social intervention. This attempt at social intervention through social practice art pushes concepts toward the political. Nato Thompson, the artistic director and chief curator of Creative Time, claims that art focused on the social is a response to globalization and

heightened skepticism regarding media and visual culture (Thompson, 2016, pp. 17).

Globalization created mainstream representations of culture, and acts as a dominant, mass

produced force of social discourse through the media. Artists desire to counteract media-

dominated notions of culture by revealing their own current social, oftentimes political, issues

through their art. These interactive social concepts in art also emerged in contradiction to the

broader tendency toward antidiscursivity in modern art and art theory, prior to the 1990s (Kester,

2014, pp. 87). Modern art is a genre of conceptual, visual abstractions usually displayed in

museums and galleries. These pieces leave little room for social interaction, discursive dialogue,

or reasoning. Therefore, social practice art directly contradicts Modernism.

I would like to focus on social practice art that is defined as dialogical. In the context of

dialogical aesthetics, the artist organizes people for the sake of conversation around a specific

issue. This issue is often political. For example, the art collective, WochenKlausur, created a

work entitled *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women* (1994-95). This collective organized

groups of politicians, journalists, sex workers, and activists from the city of Zurich (Kester,

2014, pp. 1). Every day four of these individuals were sent out on Lake Zurich in a boat to

discuss their views on the issue of drug-addicted prostitutes in Zurich. These conversations,

known as "boat talks," reevaluated drug policy, and in response, provided a place to sleep for

women who relied on prostitution to support their habit. These boat talks are WochenKlausur's

form of art and conversation is their medium to explore drug policies, rather than a painting or

sculpture representing the issue. This social practice piece is both political and dialogical because

the artist organized a group of people to have a conversation about drug policies.

The philosophy behind social practice art brings to mind the philosophy of constructivist

epistemology in education. Constructivist epistemology and positivist epistemology are the two

primary conceptions or definitions of knowledge in education. Patricia Hinchey differentiates the

two in her article, "Finding Freedom in the Classroom," and says "Positivist

epistemology…provides the foundation for traditional practice and is central to the standards and

accountability movement" (Hinchey, 2010, pp. 35). Positivist epistemology is the most common

approach in schools because they teach concepts that can be measured through testing by the

district and/or state. In positivist epistemology, we can use the terms *knowledge* and *information*

interchangeably. Traditionally, students go to school to memorize information and regurgitate it

when asked by the teacher. Paulo Freire refers to positivist epistemology as a banking system:

"Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the

teacher is the depositor…the teacher makes deposits which the students patiently receive,

memorize, and repeat" (Freire 72). The teacher is identified as a vessel of knowledge for the

students. This is similar to how we think of the artist as the isolated genius who communicates

his abundance of knowledge through his artwork. On the other hand, constructivist epistemology

"lies at the core of critical theory and is central to a conception of an alternative vision of

schooling" (Hinchey, 2010, pp. 35). In constructivist epistemology, knowledge is not defined as

facts, but it is the meaning behind facts, rather than the facts themselves. Knowledge is

constructed by the learners when they assign meaning to facts (Hinchey, 2010, pp. 40-41).

Through conversation operated by the teacher, learners evaluate facts through a historical and

critical lens. The teacher and students both act as learners and teachers, and knowledge is formed

through a basis of prior knowledge, or mental constructs. It is likely that students will be more

engaged in the constructivist approach to education because these previously established mental

constructs act as a connection to the student and topic, and may spark engagement through

personal interests. Not only is the teacher building knowledge upon an already established

foundation in constructivism, but he is doing so by connecting to the student on a personal level. John Dewey, an influential progressive educational philosopher and reformer, argues that "[Interests] represent dawning capacities. Accordingly the constant and careful observation of interests is of the utmost importance for the educator" (Dewey, 1929). Dewey urges teachers to tap into these dawning capacities by constructing knowledge around the interests and experiences of the student.

In constructivist education, learners become a collective for producing knowledge and meaning-making, similar to the participants of social practice art. In both cases, participants produce knowledge through dialogue. For this reason, I believe that social practice art, and constructivist epistemology in education, are parallel philosophies that create a vehicle for the exchange and construction of knowledge. Just as students require an active, collaborative, and dynamic learning environment, so too do social practice art participants when identifying issues and pursuing resolution. Both the artist and the teacher do not act as vessels of knowledge, but rather the artist and the teacher are *context* providers, rather than *content* providers, in the words of artist Peter Dunn (Kester, 2014, pp. 1). Artists form their work around an issue and provide a set of circumstances or facts surrounding that issue. Artists do not assign meaning to the issue, rather the participants develop this content. In the same way, teachers provide background information around a topic, but the students evaluate the context to develop the content and make meaning of a topic. Artists and teachers as context providers help the participants and students build content through inquiry-based learning. Inquiry-based learning is structured around posed questions. I have witnessed and facilitated inquiry-based learning first-hand in informal educational environments, including children's museums. As an educator, I have noticed exponential growth trends in children's development of knowledge and craft during one

encounter using inquiry-based learning. Niel Postman and Charles Weingartner heavily discuss inquiry-based learning in the article "What's Worth Knowing?" (1972). They propose an entire curriculum consisting only of questions, where each question is meant to help students develop and internalize concepts to survive an ever-changing world. They politely remind us that the word "educate" is related to the term "educe," which means drawing something potential out of a person. After all, we can only learn in relation to what we already know, and asking questions is the first step in the knowledge construction process. (Postman and Weingartner 59-62).

Both social practice art and constructivist education involve critical thinking by learners and participants. Critical thinking skills are reasoning skills involving rationality and the drive to seek reasons and evidence. Critical thinkers look at the world through a critical lens, "recognizing faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous or obscure concepts, and so forth" (Burbules and Berk, 1990, pp. 46). Many social practice art pieces have the primary purpose to reveal social injustice and pursue change toward undemocratic, or oppressive social relations or institutions. For example, Suzanne Lacy, along with Annice Jacoby and Chris Johnson, organized the dialogical project, *The Roof is on Fire* (1994), involving over two hundred high school students staging their own conversations on a parking garage rooftop in Oakland, California. Students sat in parked cars while enacting a "series of improvisational dialogues on the problems faced by young people of color in California: media stereotypes, racial profiling, underfunded public schools, and so on" (Kester, 2014, pp. 4). Over a thousand Oakland residents, and local and national news media were invited to hear these conversations. The rooftop acted as a stage for young teens of color to speak about the issues that affect their lives. Youth of color were being portrayed as superpredators, or teenage criminals, in the media. In reaction, these teens were

given a chance to have their voice heard by surrounding police officers, which contradicted their lack of voice in the media. In this piece, Lacy is organizing an event for conversation where the participants are involved in critical thinking. They are analyzing and critiquing the world around them, and dissecting power structures in their city.

James Baldwin states in his article, *The Creative Process* (1962), that "the precise role of the artist…is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more humane dwelling place" (Baldwin, 1962, pp. 669). Baldwin argues the sole purpose of art is to produce change for the better. Rather than using art as a narrative, craft, or seeing art for art's sake, contemporary artists have an innate goal to use their art to promote change. Social practice art is a type of contemporary art that uses discussion as a vehicle for change. This art form is effective because it gathers multiple individuals to develop knowledge around an issue. This type of dialogue is multi-dimensional because various participants evaluate a variety of stances on an issue, as opposed to one in the postmodern view of art. In the postmodern model, the viewer and the artwork exchange an intimate conversation, usually in the context of the infamous "white cube." The artwork is acting as the teacher and the viewer is acting as the learner or interpreter. This interaction is a passive, one-dimensional conversation between the viewer and the artwork, with the artwork speaking as a voice for the artist. The viewer may "learn" from either the artwork or the corresponding label, but will the viewer continue this inherent discussion when leaving the artwork, or the museum? It is hard to say. If the goal of the artist is to promote change for the better, will the viewer go on to change this issue alone? It is unlikely. In social practice art, everyone is acting as a teacher and everyone is acting as a learner. It is highly likely that knowledge will be exchanged and change will occur in social practice art due to the high

volume of interest and participation. Evaluating an issue with a group of people not only constructs knowledge, but this group can devise future plans for intervention. This is seen in WochenKlausur's *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women* because the conversationalists constructed knowledge around the issue of drug policies and were able to a create a boardinghouse for drug-addicted sex workers.

Although social practice art and constructivist education philosophies directly engage participants in meaning-making and the construction of knowledge through dialogue, it is more likely that participants in social practice art will create change in the world. Pursuing change is more fundamental to art than it is in education. Much of contemporary art, including social practice art, is a rebellious instrument whereas education still follows strict compliance with state and governmental ideals. It is possible that students in a classroom can promote change on a smaller scale, either in their school or community, but art tends to push boundaries of society with more visibility. It is also apparent that social practice art leans toward the political, and constructivist education does not. Political issues are innate characteristics of social practice art, whereas educational institutions tend to stay neutral or uninvolved with political issues, due to their nature and foundation of state-mandated and governmental policies.

We have to remember that social practice art and constructivist epistemology can look very different in various artworks and classrooms. In social practice art, each artwork is different in approach and content. With that said, every audience varies from artwork to artwork, just as students vary in classrooms. Some audiences may possess much interest in a concept while others may not. Some audiences may have similar viewpoints whereas some may indulge in controversial debate. Even though each artwork or classroom may vary and have different conversations, social practice art and constructivist education have the same approach using

dialogue. The job of the artist or teacher is not to instill his own personal opinion in the group, but to act as a facilitator of conversation who leads through inquiry rather than statements. In conclusion, the philosophies behind social practice art and constructivist epistemology push their participants toward critical thinking in hopes that they become active citizens. It is the job of educators to prepare students to rethink what happens every day in this world. No longer do we need citizens filled with encyclopedic knowledge, but rather we need humans who will assess the present state of our society in order to advance it.

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