

Socially Engaged Art, Post-Truth and the Monumentalising of Democracy

Sozial engagierte Kunst, Post-Truth und die Monumentalisierung der Demokratie

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Abstract

In 2021, for the first time, all the nominees for the Turner Prize were socially engaged art (SEA) collectives. The groups all 'democratised' their practices by relinquishing their authorial control to non-artists. Framed by the prestige of the Turner Prize, this relinquishing of control, through collaborative actions with various communities, was lauded as ethically meritorious, because of its egalitarian and non-hierarchical nature. We argue that behind the growing institutional success of SEA lies a tension between its 'goodness' as a necessity based on a model of authentic practice, and the context of 'post-truth' that informs its rejection of 'artistic expertise' in favour of egalitarian processes. However, we contend that it is not the processes themselves, but the *monumentalising* of democracy and equality that brings SEA into the domain of post-truth. We conclude that SEA must retain a dialectical tension between equality and the production of truth as a cultural value: a dialectic which involves the careful reinstatement of artistic authorship and a sincerer vision of its political ambitions and signification.

2021 waren erstmals ausschließlich Kunstkollektive für den Turner Prize nominiert. So wurde Autorschaft gleichsam 'demokratisiert', indem die Kontrolle über die künstlerische Arbeit an Nicht-Künstler abgegeben hatten. Gerade bei einem derart prestigeträchtigen Preis wie dem Turner Prize wurde dieser erklärte Kontrollverzicht, den das kollektive Arbeiten mit unterschiedlichen Gruppierungen mit sich bringt, als ethisch wertvoll erachtet. Gilt der Kontrollverzicht doch als egalitär und nicht hierarchisch. Wir argumentieren dagegen, dass der wachsende institutionelle Erfolg von sozial engagierter Kunst ein Spannungsverhältnis erzeugt zwischen der Notwendigkeit ethisch Gutes zu tun, und zwar auf möglichst authentische Weise, und einer gewissen Unaufrichtigkeit, die Projekten innewohnt, die künstlerische Expertise angeblich zugunsten egalitärer Prozesse aufzugeben. Wir möchten zeigen, dass es nicht primär die kollektiven Prozesse selbst sind, die sozial engagierte Kunst in den Bereich des Postfaktischen drängen, verantwortlich hierfür ist vielmehr die allgemeine Überhöhung von Demokratie und Gleichheit. Dabei kommen wir zu dem Schluss, dass sozial engagierte Kunst eine dialektische Spannung zwischen Vorstellungen von Gleichheit und der Produktion von Wahrheit als kulturellem Wert beibehalten muss: eine Dialektik, die die behutsame Wiederherstellung künstlerischer Autorschaft und eine ehrlichere Vision politischer Ambitionen und Bedeutungen verbindet.

Keywords

Sozial engagierte Kunst/Socially engaged art, Postfaktische Politik/Post-truth politics, Monumentalisieren/Monumentalising, Demokratie/Democracy, Kuratieren/curating, Soziokultur/community arts, gesellschaftlicher Wandel/social change.

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Introduction

In 2021, for the first time in its history, all the nominees for The Turner Prize (Britain's premier prize for contemporary art) were socially engaged art collectives. The jury lauded all five nominees for "their socially engaged artworks, and how they work closely and creatively with communities across the breadth of the UK" (TATE 2021). For example, Project Art Works run art workshops for people with complex support needs and then display the resulting work as a collaborative art practice at the intersection of art and care; Gentle/Radical are composed of "activists, conflict resolution trainers, faith ministers, equalities practitioners, youth workers, performers, writers, teachers—and [even] artists" (JANUSZCZAK 2021: 16) who create pop-up events including film screenings, walks, talks, meals and other actions that bring people together. The prize winners, the Array collective, campaign for women's rights, language rights and LGBT rights. These forms of socially engaged art are not new, of course, but the growing shift towards the institutional celebration of collectivised and communal practice (also prevalent in the British Art Show 2021 and documenta fifteen, 2022) is.

Before 2015, when Assemble won the Turner Prize, there had been no art collectives shortlisted for the prize. Although there had been some notable artist duos (Gilbert and George, Art & Language, the Wilson twins, the Chapman brothers, Langlands and Bell, the Otolith Group), they operated in the same cast as individual artists—that is, they were the sole creators of their artworks. All that changed after Assemble broke the mould. Gregory Sholette explains how the decision to award the prize to a collective "highlighted differences of opinion among artists" and he argues that this showed that the so-called social turn that Claire Bishop (2017: 131) pronounced a decade before had now reached the mainstream. In 2018, another high-profile collective was nominated (Forensic Architecture). In 2019 all four individual nominees declared themselves to be a collective and decided to share the prize equally between them. This might demonstrate that the current move towards collectivisation is broader than a trend directed by the Turner Prize. One could argue that the artists contested the competitive and implicitly individualist logic of prize-giving, indeed, going *against* the Turner Prize. Or maybe it demonstrated how artists are now expected to behave: the Turner Prize readily accepted their proposal to share the prize (and to much media pomp). There was no Turner Prize in 2020 because of the coronavirus

pandemic. Instead, it was collectivised, by redistributing the prize money to ten artists in the form of Turner bursaries.

As perhaps a natural progression, the groups shortlisted for 2021 went beyond collectivising their practice or collaborating with other artists, to also relinquish their authorial control to non-artist participants—a move so common in contemporary forms of participatory and socially engaged art that it is usually considered unremarkable. Framed by the prestige of the Turner Prize, collaborative actions, such as working as a collective with various communities, are celebrated as egalitarian and non-hierarchical. As J.J. Charlesworth explains, “Social change through art, and artists working as collectives, have become pet interests for the Turner Prize and for the Tate as an institution, and this year’s collective-fest suggests the prize is doubling down on the virtues of togetherness, anti-individualism and art as social activism.” (CHARLESWORTH 2021) In such a context, it has become commonplace to view artists who insist on owning the authorship of their works, and in doing so aligning it with an individual viewpoint or didactic position, as increasingly culturally aloof, somewhat antiquated or even modernist. “Collectivism after modernism”, as Sholette (2017: 132) terms the phenomenon, appears to have become a prerequisite for art to be authentically engaged.

Is this collectivisation a success for art, a realisation of its radical potential to undermine the institutions of authority and challenge conventional perspectives on value and meaning? Perhaps. But there is also an unease with what Sholette (2017: 132) terms “whatever collectivism”. Social engagement has been framed by a particular way of seeing, where non-hierarchical collaboration with laypeople is seen as necessarily good. In this article, we argue that the success of social engagement within established art institutions often rests on a tension between, on the one hand, its benefits as a model of necessity, based on a model of authentic practice—which is to say, how art, social or not, engages with the world—and, on the other hand, the context of post-truth that feeds off the fragmentation of public and cultural spheres. We will argue that, at first sight, it seems that the necessity of goodness can easily become an example for, or performance of, the post-truth context by virtue of the relationship between democratising art, the celebration of everydayness, and subsequent critique of exceptionalism in artistic production. At a second look, however, we suggest that the tension is often complicated via a certain *monumentalising* of particular aspects of practice (such as democratic and egalitarian processes), and it is not the practices themselves but the monumentalising act that brings socially engaged art into

the domain of post-truth. Indeed, a problem with post-truth itself may be rooted in this work of monumentalising and to address this, there is a need to consider what is at stake in the institutional validation of socially engaged art.

Post-Truth and the Ordinarity of Subversion

As a politico-epistemological context, post-truth is (perhaps purposefully) ill-defined (VOGELMANN 2018). While its symptoms include a disregard for objective fact and the shifting of arguments with little awareness of previous premises, the post-truth context provides a challenge to expertise precisely *because* it remains so elusive for experts to define. As Tom Grimwood argues:

the 'era' of post-truth is effectively a fable, given its lack of any clear starting point, and its tendency to invoke rather worn 'enemies' at the core of its apparent structure: postmodernists, feminists, the irrational and the easily led. Nevertheless, it remains powerful as a fable, or, as I have termed it, an exercising in curating cultural memory in order to establish accounts that are not quite as complete as narratives or propositional arguments, but nevertheless retain a bank of stock figures and metaphors that are by now easily recognised. (GRIMWOOD 2022: 43)

As such, the characteristics of post-truth provide an important context for the progress of, on the one hand, social activism (be it left wing, right wing or other), and on the other a dissatisfaction with traditional models and institutions of authority. Key to this is a tension between the artist as an expert in their practice and the potentially radical politics of collective production. Purveyors of socially engaged art have not been slow to pick up on this. The former half of this tension pertains to a history of artistic exceptionalism that runs up to Modernism. In this history, a particular expertise in the facilitation of art dominates. The tendency to collectivise and democratise artistic practice (by opening it up to non-artists outside the collective) that we see today in socially engaged art stems from a foundational problem for art since Modernism: that of a lack of stable criteria by which to assess art. Debates on deskilling, from Ian Burn's reflection on art of the Sixties (1981/1999) to John Roberts' *Intangibilities of Form* (2007), have all but eradicated the expectation that contemporary artists should display craft expertise, but the demise of the artist as expert in their practice goes beyond this. Successive waves of art have undermined any criteria for aesthetic assessment with the result that any notion of artistic expertise remains elusive and, in some

cases, even manifested as a counter-authority pitched against conventional models of the expert.

The latter half of the tension is equally problematic. While such a contrast may be initially enticing, there is also reason to question how readily the radical nature of socially engaged art's subversive tendencies are. Indeed, after several decades of socially engaged practice, the Turner Prize's recognition may well be less an acknowledgement of artistic prowess, and more related to broader socio-cultural moves towards the democratisation of research. This is not just limited to the requirement of funded art practices to demonstrate their social value; co-production and shared decision-making in local cultural, social and economic activities has become the norm for funding bodies across health, social science and the humanities. In this way, far from subverting, socially engaged art can end up being complicit with the same institutions it was designed to challenge.

Far from creating spheres of public dialogue free from the assumed hierarchy and elitism of the gallery space, it can drive a dysfunctional model of cultural value and, consequently, contribute to, rather than challenge, instabilities around social identities and fuel cultural tensions. This is what the Dutch research collective BAVO (founded 2001) termed "NGO-art" (2007). More recently, Marc James Léger (2019: 16) has described socially engaged art as a kind of "unofficial official art", a symptom of the political economy of global capitalism that has become synonymous with "victim politics" and "self-culpabilisation" (LÉGER 2019: 26).

Given that our focus is on the tensions inherent to the newfound institutional success of socially engaged art, we must explore the main components of this new context. The place of socially engaged art in the context of a post-truth narrative can be considered in terms of both content, with its suspicion of expertise, and form.

First, content. According to Boris Groys, philosophers and artists of yesteryear had something to say due the particular exceptionalism mentioned above. We might say that up to Modernism, when artists began to question what qualifies as skill or authorial expertise, artists believed they had artistic expertise, (even if this included a rejection of dominant models of expertise). Today, Groys (2016) tells us, theorists and artists just want to be like everybody else—ordinary. This condition is not without its historical antecedents, of course. The exhibition *The Painting of Everyday Life*, curated by Ralph Rugoff at London's Hayward Gallery (2008) focussed on instances since 1960. In the same year, the Whitechapel Gallery added *The Everyday* (JOHNSTONE 2008) to its Documents

of Contemporary Art series. This edited collection traces the origins of artists' fascination with the everyday to Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus and conceptual and feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s. We might add Pop Art to the list. Groys, however, uses the example of how Rirkrit Tiravanija cooked food (like everybody else does), as an illustration of the everyday as an ethically meritorious topic choice for artists, precisely because no expertise is required to participate. The relationship between the artist-facilitator and the non-artist participant is horizontal and egalitarian. Arguably unlike previous incarnations of creative challenges to institutional authority, the interest in 'the everyday' is not so much a promotion of counter-cultural norms, or a deconstruction of the rituals of authority, as a simple enactment of the mundane: less a celebration of triviality than a trivialising of celebration.

While Tiravanija is usually considered in terms of relational aesthetics, the principle is also applicable to socially engaged art. Conflict Kitchen (2010-2017) only served food from countries that were in military or political conflict with America. It was conceived by artists Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski. It is often discussed as a piece of socially engaged art and it was a finalist for the second International Award for Public Art. Sholette (2017: 139) describes how it forced customers "into an intimate encounter with their alleged enemies" and this "mischievous, even ironic dimension" is what made the project as a work of art. Yet it was a kitchen that prepared and sold food: just like any restaurant does. As with Tiravanija's *Pad Thai* (Paula Allen Gallery, New York 1990), no special artistic training was needed to produce the work. Groys (2016: 39) observes that these kinds of socially engaged art are a type of "activity in which everyone can participate, one that is all-inclusive and truly egalitarian" and that today the discussion of art is open to everybody precisely because "no one can be a specialist in art, only a dilettante".

Groys's (2021: 25) prognosis illustrates what Martin Lang terms the "democratisation of art": where the most democratic forms of socially engaged art completely relinquish authority to non-artist participant-collaborators. Take Anthony Gormley's *One & Other* (2009). This artwork was a prestigious commission for Trafalgar Square's 'fourth plinth' (London). The plinth had stood empty since 1841, when funds precluded erecting a statue on it, just as had been done with the three other plinths placed at each corner of the Square. Gormley invited volunteers to occupy the plinth for one hour and do whatever they liked. The work was so egalitarian that no criteria were used to select the applicants, who were randomly selected by a computer instead. Gormley

himself applied, but his application was unsuccessful, seemingly proving the work's egalitarian credentials. Gormley (2018) himself has described *One & Other* as a kind of social sculpture. Indeed, it is no real stretch to understand the project as a socially engaged artwork where the artist gave up his voice and position of privilege so that others might speak. (see Hans Ulrich Obrist in Gormley 2010, for example) The volunteers can be conceptualised as collaborators, or co-authors in the production of the work. It is not Gormley's fault if their contributions amount to nothing more than boring, tedious and uninspiring artwork, as he has delegated responsibility for the artwork to the community (the, mostly, non-artist volunteers). Furthermore, by doing so he takes an ethical stand, proving his moral worth and thereby creating a successful socially engaged artwork—one that cannot fail by any stuffy or authoritarian old aesthetic criteria: he has democratised the artwork and this is what counts.

On the other hand, if the volunteers produce some kind of profound statement or poetic gesture Gormley can claim their actions as his own. In this case Gormley acts as a sole artist-director, framing the actions of others, and the artwork ceases to be egalitarian or socially engaged. Paradoxically then, if the volunteers produce something interesting, the project fails as a work of socially engaged art, while if nothing interesting happens this is proof of its success on a social level. The greater the democratisation, the farther towards collaboration or co-authorship the work drifts, the more egalitarian, and therefore artistically worthy, the artwork is deemed to be.

There is a double edge to this distrust of artistic authorship. On the one hand, it drives the engagement of the socially engaged artists who eschew the elitism of the gallery. On the other, it displays an uncomfortable relationship with broader societal trends such as post-truth, as evidenced in the Brexit campaign, where (British Member of Parliament) Michael Gove famously declared that Britain “has had enough of experts” (MANCE 2016). Whether this was hostility to expertise, or just to the expert as a figure or personality is still in some dispute (GRIMWOOD 2021). Indeed, the advent of post-truth is typically heralded as the ultimate threat to intellectual civilisation, embedded in the rise of the alt-right, left-wing populism, alternative facts, and fake news. Rather than take the reactive, scientific position (seen in the work of, for example, Lee McIntyre or Matthew d'Ancona), which demands an unmitigated return to clear boundaries between the true and the false, the democratic principles of socially engaged art instead seek to renegotiate those boundaries.

Bracketing the question of artistic expertise allows so-called truth to be released from the hierarchies of institutional elitism and prestige, and into the hands of collective and heterogeneous voices in the name of a new, reinvigorated authenticity.

How did we end up in this series of tensions between expertise and equality; subversion and institutional recognition that characterise socially engaged art in the post-truth world? Rather than present a metanarrative, it is important to consider this as something of a dialectical struggle between competing interpretations, both of which are embedded in particular institutional practices. First, the tensions can be understood in terms of foci of the artistic works themselves, which render socially engaged art complicit with the politics of post-truth. Second, the valorisation of objectivity and truth in the first narrative can be read as a form of monumentalising which drives a dysfunctional model of cultural value, and consequently contributes to instabilities around social identities and fuels cultural tensions. In the following two sections, we shall describe how this monumentalising drives the form of socially engaged art in the context of a post-truth narrative.

The Post-Truth Condition as a Driver for the Democratic Collectivisation of Socially Engaged Art

Writing in 2011, Grant Kester asserted that poststructuralist discourse had attained a canonical status in European, American and Latin American academia. He describes how it first becoming a popular strand within critical theory, before becoming essentially synonymous *with* critical theory, such that today it “constitutes a kind of globalized theoretical *lingua franca* in the arts and humanities” (KESTER 2011: 54—italics in original). While he uses the term poststructuralism, he takes a rather liberal approach to categorising a range of philosophers in doing so, lumping Agamben, Nancy, Rancière and Badiou in with Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Deleuze. What links them, for Kester, is their shared set of characteristics, that includes:

privileging dissensus over consensus, rupture and immediacy over continuity and duration, and distance over proximity, intimacy, or integration [...] extreme skepticism about organized political action and a hyper-vigilance regarding the dangers of co-optation and compromise entailed by such action, the ethical normalization of desire and somatic or sensual experience, and the recoding of political transformation into a form of ontic disruption directed at any coherent system of belief, agency, or identity (KESTER 2011: 54).

Kester asserts that art criticism promulgated a hermeneutic system, based on the act of “reading” the image, which was largely drawn from the canon of structuralist and post-structuralist literary theory (KESTER 2011: 55). According to him, deconstruction of texts, images and meaning coupled with a postmodern tendency toward appropriation served to “undermine the status of the artist as author” (KESTER 2011: 55). We agree, but while for Kester the role of the artist came “to destabilize the viewer [...] through an essentially individual hermeneutic engagement” (KESTER 2011: 54), we contend that the demise of artistic authorship accounts for the contemporary popularity of art collectives: the *form* of socially engaged art.

If one consequence of democratically collectivised art is that artists lose their voices to assemblages of temporally passing collaborations and communities, another is that they are denigrated below the curator-star. Since artistic authority has been destabilised, it seems that artworks can be curated and used by others however they like. Claire Bishop argues that curators at the turn of the millennium (including Nicolas Bourriaud, Maria Lind, Hans Ulrich Obrist and others) encouraged art that was not only collaborative, participatory and interactive, but also open-ended and resistant to closure (all socially engaged traits). Hal Foster predicted this situation, writing in the mid-nineties that “the institution may shadow the work that it otherwise highlights: it becomes the spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the star” (FOSTER 1996: 198). Bishop notes how this trend seemed to “derive from a creative misreading of poststructuralist theory where, rather than the *interpretations* of a work of art being open to continual reassessment, the work of art *itself* is argued to be in perpetual flux” (BISHOP 2004: 52—*Italics in original*). This further undermined the status of the artist as author. If the artwork itself is in flux, it has no fixed meaning and so becomes an empty signifier onto which anybody can place any meaning. If meaning will be socially constructed by future publics, why not collaborate with the public to make the artwork in the first place, in the manner that Gormley did? Such creative misreadings of poststructuralism produce an assumption that the artist’s intention does not matter, as experience is subjective and interpretation is relative. This explains why artists cede authorial control to become mere facilitators of collaboration with the general public (whose input is considered equally valid to that of trained artists). Indeed, one can suggest a correlation between this approach to artmaking and the shifts in journalistic practices towards user-generated content, if not the more

recent use of focus groups to determine which political policy to pursue (WRING 2009).

Curators and artists almost seemed to have colluded to create a situation where poststructuralist theory—as a broadly construed term, rather than a clearly outlined position—became not only the inspiration behind contemporary art, but also the criteria by which to judge it, creating a kind of self-congratulatory feedback loop. Kester describes how such theorists became often-quoted in “catalog essays, artist’s statements, reviews, course reading lists, and dissertations” (KESTER 2011: 54). Artists cited poststructuralists as their inspiration or even as the basis of their work (think of Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Deleuze Monument*, 2000 and *24-Hour Foucault*, 2004; or Henry Bond’s book *Lacan at the Scene*, 2009). These artworks were then selected by curators and praised by critics and theorists who themselves were inspired by and used poststructuralist thought as their standards for critique and judgement. This is part of the broader move towards artists relinquishing their status as distinct from the non-artist.

Artur Żmijewski’s curation of the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012) is a clear example of a curator-star overshadowing artists. Żmijewski famously invited representatives from the Occupy and Indignados movements to use the main central space for activist planning and discussion. Critics felt that he had created a human zoo that was difficult not to read as an artwork, with the activists comprising the pieces of his composition (FOWKES/FOWKES 2012; LOEWE 2015; MCKEE 2016). The situation is further complicated because Żmijewski is not a curator, but an artist. Using his position as an artist-curator, he traded on the cultural capital in social movements by associating his work with their ethically meritorious political positions: these factors determined the form of the biennial.

In this interpretation, the institutional celebration of socially engaged art is not only the embodiment of a particular theoretical tradition’s grip on artistic critique, but also a performance of post-truth. Art can reveal no truths, because truth itself is just a social construct and any notion of objective truth is equated with authoritarianism. What is post-truth if not the impossibility of truth claims? We have already argued that there are formal similarities between socially engaged art and the deep suspicion of expert elites associated with the post-truth era. After it establishes this moral code as aesthetic value, socially engaged art attempts to re-introduce these values back into society by collaborating with various publics. However, the ethically commendable position of recognising every person’s moral worth becomes perverted into a situation

where all opinions are viewed as having equal value. This conflates ethics with aesthetics, such that “the artworks created often [hold] equal or less importance to the collaborative act of creating them” (TATE n.d.).

Or the Monumentalising of Democracy, Equality and Collaboration as the Post-Truth Basis of Socially Engaged Art?

The problem with the first narrative is straightforward. While it helpfully explains the demise of expertise and the problems inherent to the authenticity seeking to fill its place, it also seems to lead us back to the starting point. If such a thesis simply returns us to singular truths held by institutional authorities, with the dominance of democratised art in the Turner Prize acting as a form of validation for success, then we are simply following the diluted responses to post-truth and their view of poststructuralism as a monolithic force for relativism. In doing so, it removes the significance of socially engaged art to the problematic context of post-truth.

To redress this, we can consider an alternative narrative that stands as an antithesis. Dave Beech (2008: 4) rightly raised the problem of the way that many artworks aiming for collaborative and co-produced practice ended up “neutralising differences” in the name of agreement. In other words, the principle of democratic art ends up as consensus, which leads to reproducing the same structures of authority that social engaged art was intended to dismantle. Beech’s observation points us to the ways in which the democratisation of art involves an initial set of chance encounters: nobody knows, at first, who is going to enter the space of socially engaged art; nobody knows who is going to participate. If forms of communal creativity did not have these elements of chance, then there would be no point in conducting them—we would already know what we were aiming to produce. The problem that Beech alerts us to is the fact that such chance encounters, inherent to any democratic form of artistic practice, are all-too-often obscured by the artist’s fixation on particular aspects of the work: namely, its success on the social level. This fixation on the success of the work, and its consequent social value, leads to a heavy emphasis on consensus and a lack of attention to the mechanisms by which participants are vetted and filtered: whether intentionally (by the artist or curator purposefully inviting them) or practically (by the fact that only certain types of audience will attend certain types of artistic performance).

This points us to the fault in the celebration of the ordinary and the egalitarian that Groys described earlier, which is not so much about the truth or authenticity of the content of socially engaged art, but rather the value attributed to it. For Groys, every cultural work—be it a book, a film, an artwork or even an act of protest—is an attempt to reassess values. This is done by engaging the concerns of what is excluded from the cultural archives (what Groys terms “the profane” (2014: 64)), and what is stored within them, and therefore maintained beyond their original use (the “sacred” (GROYS 2014: 116)). It follows that this distinction between the profane and the sacred is necessary for anything new to be created, because the new is defined as something that is different from what already exists in the archive. In this way, “cultural values are nothing more than archived memories of events in the history of the revaluation of values” (GROYS 2014: 70). The problem with the artistic turn to the ordinary emerges. It proposes a move away from the elite archives of the museum towards a more democratic and open access archiving system where the threshold is managed by users rather than traditional expert guardrails (think of the short-lived Occupy libraries, for example). However, the economy of value is still maintained: such that, while socially engaged art celebrates certain differences from more traditional works (such as its collaborative or democratic content), it overlooks the ways in which it potentially reproduces the same forms of value and meaning. The celebration of certain differences over others is not raised as a critique in and of itself here, though, but rather a key symptom of the post-truth age.

In his essay on ‘The Paradoxes of Political Art’, Jacques Rancière (2012: 148) uses the term “monumentalising” to describe a particular process in which artistic interventions in traditional exhibition spaces are judged as successfully subverting the social order. Monumentalising, Rancière suggests, involves a particular form of self-evident representation (a “sculptural presence” combined with rhetorical demonstration) which anticipates and enables the effects of democratised art on the gallery or institution:

The more art fills rooms of exhibitions with monumentalized reproductions of the objects and icons of everyday life and commodity culture, the more it goes into the streets and professes to be engaging in a form of social intervention, and the more anticipates and mimics its own efforts. Art thus risks becoming a parody of its alleged efficacy (RANCIÈRE 2012: 148).

Monumentalising is thus key to the relationship between the sacred space of the gallery (in Groys’s terms) and the production of subversion. It is not limited to artistic performance, but to the circulation of key

terms such as the collective, the democratic and the socially engaged. As Manuel DeLanda (2016) argues, material, human and theoretical assemblages—including the practices and democratic events inherent to socially engaged art—are typically described in terms of organismic metaphors: the body of the community, the voice of the people, and so on. This enables a line to be drawn between the gallery space and the real world, but such metaphors are also problematic precisely because they link together otherwise disparate entities that risk either reducing the whole to the sum of its parts (the art is simply an aggregate of the contributors involved), or the parts are effectively created by the whole (the art transforms everyday life into a work of art). Both instances, DeLanda argues, overlook the chance element of any collaborative or participatory encounter in the name of identifying it as a thing in and of itself, or at least a thing that can be adequately represented within the economy of the archive.

In the Marxist tradition of thought, and particularly the work of the Hungarian philosopher György Lukács (1885–1971), this might be termed reification: “the moment that a process or relation is generalised into an abstraction, and thereby turned into a thing” (BEWES 2002: 3). For Lukács, reification contributes to a problem of immediacy: focusing on the immediate world—the reified world—obscures the multiple mediations that enabled capitalist systems to manipulate its populations (LUKÁCS 1971: 168).

In the case of democratised art, there is a double play here which Rancière alerts us to. For, in the assessment of the democratising of the Turner Prize, certain theories, names and approaches do appear set in stone, with a history and trajectory ascribed to them. Conversely, these are not simply lazy or reductive phraseology—as in the work of McIntyre or D’Ancona, for example—but rather an anticipatory aspect of the democratising activities. This, as Rancière (2012: 148) points out, “short-circuits reflection on the powers of artistic practices”.

Take, for example, the unanimous decision to select the Jakarta-based *ruangrupa* (stylised uncapitalised) to curate *documenta fifteen* (2022). We argue that it was their reification of equality that led the organisers to choose the Indonesian collective. How radically egalitarian, they must have thought, to put a non-Western collective in curatorial control. *ruangrupa* curated the *documenta* around the theme of the *lumbung*—a store for collectively produced rice. According to the *documenta* website, “principles of collectivity, resource building and equitable distribution are pivotal to the curatorial work and impact the

entire process—the structure, self-image and appearance of documenta fifteen” (DOCUMENTA 2022). The idea was to think of the exhibition as a resource pot from which visitors could take whatever they needed to heal “today’s injuries, especially ones rooted in colonialism, capitalism, or patriarchal structures” (NGUYEN 2022: 24). This is precisely what we mean by how the monumentalising (might we say, reification?) of certain values (principles in ruangrupa’s terminology) drive the form (the structure, or appearance in their terms) of socially engaged art.

Until 2022, documenta had been “the ultimate curator-led, thesis-driven exhibition” (FARAGO 2022), but in 2022 it collectivised curatorial decision-making by putting a collective in charge who invited dozens of other collectives to each invite yet more collectives. The reification of equality was supposed to guarantee ethically meritorious work. Unfortunately, ruangrupa’s decision to include an unmistakably antisemitic mural (*People’s Justice*, 2002) by fellow Indonesian collective Taring Padi (established in 1998 with inclusivity and a militant belief in art’s potential for social change as their core values) dominated the discussions about the documenta. Then there were other controversies. A newly appointed advisory committee suggested to remove a set of Palestinian propaganda short films (the Tokyo Reels) from the show: so much for equality of opinion; when the ruangrupa ‘got it wrong’ they were overruled. In response, ruangrupa and many artists in the exhibition accused the press and the committee of racism and the *Tokyo Reels* remained on display.

The monumentalising of equality above authoritarian aesthetic criteria lies at the heart of a controversy that even led the *New York Times* to report that the debacle might signal the end for “the world’s most prestigious art exhibition” (FARAGO 2022). In this sense, it might be possible to cast the narrative of post-truth as a problem of monumentalising. This problem of monumentalising is precisely what socially engaged art must address if it is to avoid perpetuating the fables of post-truth.

Monuments to Critique

We have already outlined how this monumentalising takes place within Kester’s thesis on poststructuralism and its relationship to socially engaged art. Terms such as ‘participation’, or ‘equality’—so often associated with the critique of socially engaged art—(THOMPSON 2012) are necessarily temporary denominations that become rigid and consolidated through research papers, teaching curricula and references in public

debate. This is precisely how they are embedded within the institutions of authority and expertise as much as they critique them. To paraphrase Rancière, the process of rigidifying anticipates their effect.

What if it is not the democratic collectivisation of socially engaged art *per se*, but this monumentalising process (which seems necessary for an engagement between radical critique and established practice) that forms the basis of post-truth? This would help to explain how the term ‘post-truth’ has become, amid the genuine concerns over its political and cultural effects, a *de facto* victory of a positivistic certainty. Accompanying this victory is an industry of conferences, academic papers, and even research centres that have arisen in its wake. But within this response, post-truth rather too quickly becomes merely non-truth, and the complexity of the ‘post’ prefix is lost. Too quickly, post-truth is shaped into a shorthand strawman figure to be bested by conservative epistemological mantra, a figure uncannily like older enemies of that same mantra, such as radical feminism, postmodernism, or the hermeneutics of suspicion (HAACK 2019). Too quickly, the complexities of post-truth become a cipher for nothing other than a yearning for an ideal model of academic institutions of truth and readily graspable—and reified—facts. Rather than displacing the monuments to hegemonic pasts, this simply leads to erecting more statues.

Socially engaged art would then stand in a particularly salient relationship to post-truth—not in terms of the truth or authenticity claims of its collaborators, but rather in its utilisation of reified or monumentalised figures. It is, in effect, a little too easy, or (channelling Lukács) a little too immediate, to celebrate artistic interventions as highlighting the mediations of the gallery or the institution as effective critical performances at work in settings such as the Turner Prize. The importance of artworks that incorporate public engagement lies not in the truth claims that they make—that they have changed the world, that they have brought down the gallery system and so on. Such claims are simply more monuments to defend and this overlooks the immediacies such celebrations are based on. The question should instead be how such claims are curated, stored, kept on display, and the institutions of power which enable this to be persuasive.

Similarly in this sense, post-truth is only the natural undoing of a society that loses touch with this curatorial aspect which is fundamental to culture itself. The motifs employed by those defending truth (in the context of post-truth) work well to pitch the expert against the foolish, and the intellectual against the masses, but only because they are too general,

too clichéd, too monumentalised, to do justice to the micro-engagements which constitute new media. One need not look to poststructuralism to explain the rise of post-truth, and indeed the constant invocation as statues to be destroyed serves only to progress the process rather than halt it.

A Dialectical Tension Between Equality and the Production of Truth as a Cultural Value

What, then, are we to make of the institutional reception of democratic collectivisation of art evidenced in the Turner Prize 2021, The British Art Show 2022 and documenta fifteen? It is, for sure, tempting to see this as a success for subverting the expectations of artistic merit, allowing democratic principles to finally take root in the elite institutions. At the same time, conversely, it is equally plausible to see it as the final victory of a relativistic, anti-intellectual paradigm in contemporary art infecting the sacred halls of the gallery or the biennial (or quinquennial). Our analysis suggests that there is something more at work in the creation of value of the democratic and participatory aspects of socially engaged art practice that need to be attended to. Socially engaged art is concerned with art's relationship with the public (community, or society). More than that, it uses the public as an integral part of its practice, almost as the material of its practice. In doing so, it purports to place itself in stark contrast with more traditional forms of public art that include permanent murals, statues, memorials and monuments. However, we suggest that the varieties of socially engaged art that we have critiqued in this text are monumental in their reification of particular aspects of their practice, (democracy, equality and collaboration) which ironically remove their subversive value. It is this monumentalising process, rather than democratic collectivisation *per se*, that aligns socially engaged art with the hallmarks of post-truth, and in doing so produces, at best, forms of relativism, and at worst, cynicism.

Consequently, we call for art to retain a dialectical tension between equality and the production of truth as a cultural value; a dialectic which involves the careful reinstatement of artistic authorship and a more sincere vision of socially engaged art's political ambitions and signification. In doing so, the terms by which that authority and expertise is reinstated—including the chance assemblages it depends upon—need to be brought sharply into focus. Doing so would prove far more subversive to institutions such as the Turner Prize and documenta;

they would also subvert many of the assumptions of what allows art to call itself socially engaged.

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