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

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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.

Keywords

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;

41 Gentle/Radical are composed of "activists, conflict resolution trainers, faith
42 ministers, equalities practitioners, youth workers, performers, writers, teachers –
43 and [even] artists" (JANUSZCZAK 2021: 16) who create pop-up events
44 including film screenings, walks, talks, meals and other actions that bring people
45 together. The prize winners, the Array collective, campaign for women's rights,
46 language rights and LGBT rights. These forms of socially engaged art are not
47 new, of course, but the growing shift towards the institutional celebration of
48 collectivised and communal practice (also prevalent in the British Art Show
49 2021 and Documenta 15, 2022) is.
50
51 Before 2015, when Assemble won the Turner Prize, there had been no art
52 collectives shortlisted for the prize. Although there had been some notable artist
53 duos (Gilbert and George, Art & Language, the Wilson twins, the Chapman
54 brothers, Langlands and Bell, the Otolith Group), they operated in the same cast
55 as individual artists – that is, they were the sole creators of their artworks. All
56 that changed after Assemble broke the mould. Gregory Sholette explains how
57 the decision to award the prize to a collective "highlighted differences of
58 opinion among artists" and showed that the so-called 'social turn' that Claire
59 Bishop pronounced a decade before had now reached the mainstream. (2017:
60 131) In 2018, another high-profile collective was nominated (Forensic
61 Architecture). In 2019 all four individual nominees declared themselves to be a
62 collective and decided to share the prize equally between them. This might
63 demonstrate that the current move towards collectivisation is broader than a
64 trend directed by the Turner Prize. One could argue that the artists contested the
65 competitive and implicitly individualist logic of prize-giving, indeed, going
66 *against* the Turner Prize. Or maybe it demonstrated how artists are now
67 expected to behave: the Turner Prize readily accepted their proposal to share the
68 prize (and to much media pomp). There was no Turner Prize in 2020 because of
69 the coronavirus pandemic. Instead, it was 'collectivised', by redistributing the
70 prize money to ten artists in the form of 'Turner bursaries'.
71
72 As perhaps a natural progression, the groups shortlisted for 2021 went beyond
73 collectivising their practice or collaborating with other artists, to also relinquish
74 their authorial control to non-artist participants – a move so common in
75 contemporary forms of participatory and socially engaged art that it is usually
76 considered unremarkable. Framed by the prestige of the Turner Prize,
77 'collaborative actions', such as working as a collective with various
78 communities, are celebrated as egalitarian and non-hierarchical. As J.J.
79 Charlesworth explains, "Social change through art, and artists working as

80   collectives, have become pet interests for the Turner Prize and for the Tate as an
81   institution, and this year's collective-fest suggests the prize is doubling down on
82   the virtues of togetherness, anti-individualism and art as social activism".
83   (CHARLESWORTH 2021) In such a context, it has become commonplace to
84   view artists who insist on owning the authorship of their works, and in doing so
85   aligning it with an individual viewpoint or didactic position, as increasingly
86   culturally aloof, somewhat antiquated or even 'modernist'. "Collectivism after
87   modernism", as Sholette terms the phenomenon, (2017: 132) appears to have
88   become a prerequisite for art to be authentically 'engaged'.

89

90   Is this collectivisation a success for art, a realisation of its radical potential to
91   undermine the institutions of authority and challenge conventional perspectives
92   on value and meaning? Perhaps. But there is also an unease with what Sholette
93   terms "whatever collectivism". (2017: 132) Social engagement has been framed
94   by a particular way of seeing, where non-hierarchical collaboration with
95   laypeople is seen as necessarily good. In this article, we argue that the success of
96   social engagement within established art institutions often rests on a tension
97   between, on the one hand, its 'goodness' as a necessity, based on a model of
98   authentic practice – which is to say, how art, social or not, engages with the
99   world – and, on the other hand, the context of 'post-truth' that feeds off the
100   fragmentation of public and cultural spheres. We will argue that, at first sight, it
101   seems that the necessity of goodness can easily become an example for, or
102   performance of, the post-truth context by virtue of the relationship between
103   democratising art, the celebration of everydayness, and subsequent critique of
104   exceptionalism in artistic production. At a second look, however, we suggest
105   that the tension is often complicated via a certain *monumentalising* of particular
106   aspects of practice (such as democratic and egalitarian processes), and it is not
107   the practices themselves but the monumentalising act that brings socially
108   engaged art into the domain of post-truth. Indeed, a problem with post-truth
109   itself may be rooted in this work of monumentalising and to address this, there is
110   a need to consider what is at stake in the institutional validation of socially
111   engaged art.

112

113   ## Post-Truth and the Ordinariness of Subversion

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

119

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

126

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

146

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

158 Far from creating spheres of public dialogue free from the assumed hierarchy
159 and elitism of the gallery space, it can drive a dysfunctional model of cultural
160 value and, consequently, contribute to, rather than challenge, instabilities around
161 social identities and fuel cultural tensions. This is what the Dutch research
162 collective BAVO (founded 2001) termed "NGO-art". (2007) More recently,
163 Marc James Léger has described socially engaged art as a kind of 'unofficial
164 official art', a symptom of the political economy of global capitalism (2019: 16)
165 that has become synonymous with 'victim politics' and 'self-culpabilisation'.
166 (2019: 26)
167
168 Given that our focus is on the tensions inherent to the newfound institutional
169 success of socially engaged art, we must explore the main components of this
170 new context. The place of socially engaged art in the context of a post-truth
171 narrative can be considered in terms of both content, with its suspicion of
172 expertise, and form.
173
174 First, content. According to Boris Groys, philosophers and artists of yesteryear
175 had something to say due the particular exceptionalism mentioned above. We
176 might say that up to Modernism, when artists began to question what qualifies as
177 skill or authorial expertise, artists believed they had artistic expertise, (even if
178 this included a rejection of dominant models of expertise). Today, Groys tells
179 us, theorists and artists just want to be like everybody else – ordinary. (GROYS
180 2016: 37) This condition is not without is historical antecedents, of course. The
181 exhibition *The Painting of Everyday Life*, curated by Ralph Rugoff at London's
182 Hayward Gallery (2008) focussed on instances since 1960. In the same year, the
183 Whitechapel Gallery added *The Everyday* (JOHNSTONE 2008) to its
184 Documents of Contemporary Art series. This edited collection traces the origins
185 of artists' fascination with the everyday to Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus and
186 conceptual and feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s. We might add Pop Art to
187 the list. Groys, however, uses the example of how Rirkrit Tiravanija cooked
188 food (like everybody else does) as an illustration of the everyday as an ethically
189 meritorious topic choice for artists, precisely because no expertise is required to
190 participate. The relationship between the artist-facilitator and the non-artist
191 participant is horizontal and egalitarian. Arguably unlike previous incarnations
192 of creative challenges to institutional authority, the interest in 'the everyday'
193 here is not so much a promotion of counter-cultural norms, or a deconstruction
194 of the rituals of authority, as a simple enactment of the mundane: less a
195 celebration of triviality than a trivialising of celebration.
196

197   While Tiravanija is usually considered in terms of relational aesthetics, the
198   principle is also applicable to socially engaged art. Conflict Kitchen (2010-
199   2017) only served food from countries that were in military or political conflict
200   with America. It was conceived by artists Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski. It is
201   often discussed as a piece of socially engaged art and it was a finalist for the
202   second International Award for Public Art. Sholette describes how it forced
203   customers "into an intimate encounter with their alleged enemies" and this
204   "mischievous, even ironic dimension" is what made the project as a work of art.
205   (2017: 139) Yet it was a kitchen that prepared and sold food: just like any
206   restaurant does. As with Tiravanija's *Pad Thai* (Paula Allen Gallery, New York,
207   1990), as it was called, no special artistic training was needed to produce the
208   work. Groys observes that these kinds of socially engaged art are a type of
209   "activity in which everyone can participate, one that is all-inclusive and truly
210   egalitarian" and that today the discussion of art is open to everybody precisely
211   because "no one can be a specialist in art, only a dilettante". (2016: 39)
212
213   Groys's prognosis illustrates what Martin Lang terms the "democratisation of
214   art" (2021): where the most democratic forms of socially engaged art completely
215   relinquish authority to non-artist participant-collaborators. Take Anthony
216   Gormley's *One & Other* (2009). This artwork was a prestigious commission for
217   Trafalgar Square's 'fourth plinth' (London). Gormley invited volunteers to
218   occupy the plinth for one hour and do whatever they liked. The work was so
219   egalitarian that no criteria were used to select the applicants, who were
220   randomly selected by a computer instead. Gormley himself applied, but his
221   application was unsuccessful, seemingly proving the work's egalitarian
222   credentials. Gormley himself has described *One & Other* as a kind of social
223   sculpture. (2018) Indeed, it is no real stretch to understand the project as a
224   socially engaged artwork where the artist gave up his voice and position of
225   privilege so that others might speak. (see Hans Ulrich Obrist in Gormley 2010,
226   for example) The volunteers can be conceptualised as collaborators, or co-
227   authors in the production of the work. It is not Gormley's fault if their
228   contribution amounts to nothing more than a boring, tedious and uninspiring
229   artwork, as he has delegated responsibility for the artwork to the community
230   (the, mostly, non-artist volunteers). Furthermore, by doing so he takes an ethical
231   stand, proving his moral worth and thereby creating a successful socially
232   engaged artwork - one that cannot fail by any 'stuffy' or 'authoritarian' old
233   aesthetic criteria: he has *democratised* the artwork and this is what counts.
234   On the other hand, if the volunteers produce some kind of profound statement or
235   poetic gesture Gormley can claim their actions as his own. In this case Gormley

236 acts as a sole 'artist-director', framing the actions of others, and the artwork
237 ceases to be egalitarian or socially engaged. Paradoxically then, if the volunteers
238 produce something interesting, the project fails as a work of socially engaged
239 art, while if nothing interesting happens this is proof of its success on a social
240 level. The greater the democratisation, the farther towards collaboration or co-
241 authorship the work drifts, the more egalitarian, and therefore artistically
242 worthy, the artwork is deemed to be.
243
244 There is a double edge to this distrust of artistic authorship. On the one hand, it
245 drives the 'engagement' of the socially engaged artists who eschew the elitism
246 of the gallery. On the other, it displays an uncomfortable relationship with
247 broader societal trends such as 'post-truth', as evidenced in the Brexit campaign,
248 where (British Member of Parliament) Michael Gove infamously declared that
249 Britain "has had enough of experts". (MANCE 2016) Whether this was hostility
250 to expertise, or just to the expert as a figure or personality is still in some
251 dispute. (see GRIMWOOD 2021: 167-174) Indeed, the advent of post-truth is
252 typically heralded as the ultimate threat to intellectual civilisation, embedded in
253 the rise of the alt-right, left-wing populism, alternative facts, and fake news.
254 Rather than take the reactive, scientistic position (seen in the work of, for
255 example, Lee McIntyre or Matthew d'Ancona), which demands an unmitigated
256 return to clear boundaries between the true and the false, the democratic
257 principles of socially engaged art instead seek to renegotiate those boundaries.
258 Bracketing the question of artistic expertise allows 'truth' to be released from
259 the hierarchies of institutional elitism and prestige, and into the hands of
260 collective and heterogeneous voices in the name of a new, reinvigorated
261 authenticity.
262
263 How did we end up in this series of tensions between expertise and equality;
264 subversion and institutional recognition that characterise socially engaged art in
265 the post-truth world? Rather than present a metanarrative, it is important to
266 consider this as something of a dialectical struggle between competing
267 interpretations, both of which are embedded in particular institutional practices.
268 First, the tensions can be understood in terms of foci of the artistic works
269 themselves, which render socially engaged art complicit with the politics of
270 post-truth. Second, the valorisation of objectivity and truth in the first narrative
271 can be read as a form of 'monumentalising' which drives a dysfunctional model
272 of cultural value, and consequently contributes to instabilities around social
273 identities and fuels cultural tensions. In the following two sections, we shall

274 describe how this 'monumentalising' drives the form of socially engaged art in
275 the context of a post-truth narrative.
276
277 **The Post-Truth Condition as a Driver for the Democratic Collectivisation**
278   **of Socially Engaged Art…**

279 Writing in 2011, Grant Kester asserted that poststructuralist discourse had
280 attained a canonical status in European, American and Latin American
281 academia. He describes how it first becoming a popular strand *within* critical
282 theory, before becoming essentially *synonymous with* critical theory, such that
283 today it "constitutes a kind of globalized theoretical *lingua franca* in the arts and
284 humanities". (KESTER 2011: 54 – italics in original) While he uses the term
285 "poststructuralism", he takes a rather liberal approach to categorising a range of
286 philosophers in doing so, lumping Agamben, Nancy, Rancière and Badiou in
287 with Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Deleuze. What links them, for Kester, is
288 their shared set of characteristics, that includes:
289
290 privileging dissensus over consensus, rupture and immediacy over continuity and duration, and
291 distance over proximity, intimacy, or integration […] extreme skepticism about organized
292 political action and a hyper-vigilance regarding the dangers of co-option and compromise
293 entailed by such action, the ethical normalization of desire and somatic or sensual experience,
294 and the recoding of political transformation into a form of ontic disruption directed at any
295 coherent system of belief, agency, or identity. (2011: 54)
296
297 Kester asserts that art criticism promulgated a hermeneutic system, based on the
298 act of "reading" the image, which was largely drawn from the canon of
299 structuralist and post-structuralist literary theory. (2011: 55) According to him,
300 deconstruction of texts, images and meaning coupled with a postmodern
301 tendency toward appropriation served to "undermine the status of the artist as
302 author". (2011: 55) We agree, but while for Kester the role of the artist came "to
303 destabilize the viewer […] through an essentially individual hermeneutic
304 engagement" (2011: 54), we contend that the demise of artistic authorship
305 accounts for the contemporary popularity of art collectives: the *form* of socially
306 engaged art.
307
308 If one consequence of democratically collectivised art is that artists lose their
309 voices to assemblages of temporally passing collaborations and communities,
310 another is that they are denigrated below the curator-star. Since artistic authority
311 has been destabilised, it seems that artworks can be curated and used by others
312 however they like. Claire Bishop argues that curators at the turn of the

313   millennium (including Nicolas Bourriaud, Maria Lind, Hans Ulrich Obrist and
314   others) encouraged art that was not only collaborative, participatory and
315   interactive, but also open-ended and resistant to closure (all socially engaged
316   traits). Hal Foster predicted this situation, writing in the mid-nineties that "the
317   institution may shadow the work that it otherwise highlights: it becomes the
318   spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the
319   star". (FOSTER 1996: 198) Bishop notes how this trend seemed to "derive from
320   a creative misreading of poststructuralist theory where, rather than the
321   *interpretations* of a work of art being open to continual reassessment, the work
322   of art *itself* is argued to be in perpetual flux". (BISHOP 2004: 52 - italics in
323   original) This further undermined the status of the artist as author. If the artwork
324   itself is in flux, it has no fixed meaning and so becomes an empty signifier onto
325   which anybody can place any meaning. If meaning will be socially constructed
326   by future publics, why not collaborate with the public to make the artwork in the
327   first place, in the manner that Gormley did? Such 'creative misreadings' of
328   poststructuralism produce an assumption that the artist's intention does not
329   matter, as experience is subjective and interpretation is relative. This explains
330   why artists cede authorial control to become mere facilitators of collaboration
331   with the general public (whose input is considered equally valid to that of
332   trained artists). Indeed, one can suggest a correlation between this approach to
333   artmaking and the shifts in journalistic practices towards user-generated content,
334   if not the more recent use of focus groups to determine which political policy to
335   pursue. (WRING 2009)
336
337   Curators and artists almost seemed to have colluded to create a situation where
338   poststructuralist theory – as a broadly construed term, rather than a clearly
339   outlined position – became not only the inspiration behind contemporary art, but
340   also the criteria by which to judge it – creating a kind of self-congratulatory
341   feedback loop. Kester describes how such theorists became often-quoted in
342   "catalog essays, artist's statements, reviews, course reading lists, and
343   dissertations". (2011: 54) Artists cited poststructuralists as their inspiration or
344   even as the basis of their work (think of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Deleuze*
345   *Monument*, 2000 and *24-Hour Foucault*, 2004; or Henry Bond's book *Lacan at*
346   *the Scene*, 2009). These artworks were then selected by curators and praised by
347   critics and theorists who themselves were inspired by and used poststructuralist
348   thought as their standards for critique and judgement. This is part of the broader
349   move towards artists relinquishing their status as distinct from the non-artist.
350   Artur Żmijewski's curation of the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012) is a clear example
351   of a curator-star overshadowing artists. Żmijewski famously invited

352 representatives from the Occupy and Indignados movements to use the main
353 central space for activist planning and discussion. Critics felt that he had created
354 a human zoo that was difficult not to read as an artwork, with the activists
355 comprising the pieces of his composition. (FOWKES/FOWKES 2012; LOEWE
356 2015; MCKEE 2016) The situation is further complicated because Żmijewski is
357 not a curator, but an artist. Using his position as an artist-curator, he traded off
358 the cultural capital in social movements by associating his work with their
359 ethically meritorious political positions: these factors determined the form of the
360 biennial.
361
362 In this interpretation, the institutional celebration of socially engaged art is not
363 only the embodiment of a particular theoretical tradition's grip on artistic
364 critique, but also a *performance* of post-truth. Art can reveal no truths, because
365 truth itself is just a social construct and any notion of objective truth is equated
366 with authoritarianism. What is post-truth if not the impossibility of truth claims?
367 We have already argued that there are formal similarities between socially
368 engaged art and the deep suspicion of expert elites associated with the post-truth
369 era. After it establishes this moral code as aesthetic value, socially engaged art
370 attempts to re-introduce these values back into society by collaborating with
371 various publics. However, the ethically commendable position of recognising
372 every person's moral worth becomes perverted into a situation where all
373 opinions are viewed as having equal value. This conflates ethics with aesthetics,
374 such that "the artworks created often [hold] equal or less importance to the
375 collaborative act of creating them". (TATE n.d.)
376

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

379 The problem with this first narrative is straightforward. While it helpfully
380 explains the demise of expertise and the problems inherent to the authenticity
381 seeking to fill its place, it also seems to lead us back to the starting point. If such
382 a thesis simply returns us to singular truths held by institutional authorities, with
383 the dominance of democratised art in the Turner Prize acting as a form of
384 validation for success, then we are simply following the diluted responses to
385 post-truth and their view of poststructuralism as a monolithic force for
386 relativism. In doing so, it removes the significance of socially engaged art to the
387 problematic context of post-truth.
388
389 To redress this, we can consider an alternative narrative that stands as an
390 antithesis. Dave Beech rightly raised the problem of how many artworks that

391 aimed for collaborative and co-produced practice ended up "neutralising
392 differences" in the name of agreement. (2008: 4) In other words, the principle of
393 democratic art ends up as *consensus*, which leads to reproducing the same
394 structures of authority that social engaged art was intended to dismantle.
395 Beech's observation points us to the ways in which the democratisation of art
396 involves an initial set of chance encounters: nobody knows, at first, who is going
397 to enter the space of socially engaged art; nobody knows who is going to
398 participate. If forms of communal creativity did not have these elements of
399 chance, then there would be no point in conducting them – we would already
400 know what we were aiming to produce. The problem that Beech alerts us to is
401 the fact that such chance encounters, inherent to any democratic form of artistic
402 practice, are all-too-often obscured by the artist's fixation on particular aspects
403 of the work: namely, its success on the social level. This fixation on the success
404 of the work, and its consequent social value, leads to a heavy emphasis on
405 consensus and a lack of attention to the mechanisms by which participants are
406 vetted and filtered: whether intentionally (by the artist or curator purposefully
407 inviting them) or practically (by the fact that only certain types of audience will
408 attend certain types of artistic performance).
409
410 This points us to the fault in the celebration of the ordinary and the egalitarian
411 that Groys described earlier, which is not so much about the truth or authenticity
412 of the content of socially engaged art, but rather the value attributed to it. For
413 Groys, every cultural work – be it a book, a film, an artwork or even an act of
414 protest – is an attempt to reassess values. This is done by engaging the concerns
415 of what is excluded from the cultural archives (what Groys terms the 'profane'),
416 and what is stored within them, and therefore maintained beyond their original
417 use (the 'sacred'). It follows that this distinction between the profane and the
418 sacred is necessary for anything new to be created, because the new is defined as
419 something that is different from what already exists in the archive. In this way,
420 "cultural values are nothing more than archived memories of events in the
421 history of the revaluation of values". (2014: 70) The problem with the artistic
422 turn to the ordinary emerges. It proposes a move away from the elite archives of
423 the museum towards a more democratic and open access archiving system
424 where the threshold is managed by users rather than traditional 'expert'
425 guardrails (think of the short-lived Occupy libraries, for example). However, the
426 economy of value is still maintained: such that, while socially engaged art
427 celebrates certain differences from more traditional works (such as its
428 collaborative or democratic content), it overlooks the ways in which it
429 potentially *reproduces* the same forms of value and meaning. The celebration of

430 certain differences over others is not raised as a critique in and of itself here,
431 though, but rather a key *symptom* of the post-truth age.
432
433 In his essay on 'The Paradoxes of Political Art', Jacques Rancière uses the term
434 "monumentalising" to describe a particular process in which artistic
435 interventions in traditional exhibition spaces are judged as successfully
436 subverting the social order. (2012) Monumentalising, Rancière suggests,
437 involves a particular form of self-evident representation (a "sculptural presence"
438 combined with rhetorical demonstration) which anticipates and enables the
439 effects of democratised art on the gallery or institution:
440
441 The more art fills rooms of exhibitions with monumentalized reproductions of the objects and
442 icons of everyday life and commodity culture, the more it goes into the streets and professes
443 to be engaging in a form of social intervention, and the more anticipates and mimics its own
444 efforts. Art thus risks becoming a parody of its alleged efficacy. (RANCIÈRE 2012: 148)
445
446 Monumentalising is thus key to the relationship between the sacred space of the
447 gallery (in Groys's terms) and the production of subversion. It is not limited to
448 artistic performance, but to the circulation of key terms such as the collective,
449 the democratic and the socially engaged. As Manuel DeLanda argues, material,
450 human and theoretical assemblages – including the practices and democratic
451 events inherent to socially engaged art – are typically described in terms of
452 organismic metaphors: the body of the community, the voice of the people, and
453 so on. This enables a line to be drawn between the gallery space and the 'real
454 world', but such metaphors are also problematic precisely because they link
455 together otherwise disparate entities that risk either reducing the whole to the
456 sum of its parts (the 'art' is simply an aggregate of the contributors involved), or
457 the parts are effectively created by the whole (the 'art' transforms everyday life
458 into a work of art). Both instances, DeLanda argues, overlook the chance
459 element of any collaborative or participatory encounter in the name of
460 identifying it as a 'thing' in and of itself, or at least a thing that can be
461 adequately represented within the economy of the archive.
462
463 In the Marxist tradition of thought, and particularly the work of the Hungarian
464 philosopher György Lukács (1885-1971), this might be termed 'reification': "the
465 moment that a process or relation is generalised into an abstraction, and thereby
466 turned into a 'thing'." (BEWES 2002: 3) For Lukács, reification contributes to a
467 problem of *immediacy*: focusing on the immediate world – the reified world –

468 obscures the multiple mediations that enabled capitalist systems to manipulate
469 its populations. (LUKÁCS 1971: 168)
470
471 In the case of democratised art, there is a double play here which Rancière alerts
472 us to. For, in the assessment of the democratising of the Turner Prize, certain
473 theories, names and approaches do appear set in stone, with a history and
474 trajectory ascribed to them. Conversely, these are not simply lazy or reductive
475 phraseology – as in the work of McIntyre or D'Ancona, for example – but rather
476 an anticipatory aspect of the democratising activities. This, as Rancière points
477 out, "short-circuits reflection on the powers of artistic practices". (2012: 148)
478
479 Take, for example, the unanimous decision to select the Jakarta-based ruangrupa
480 (stylised uncapitalised) to curate Documenta 15 (2022). We argue that it was
481 their reification of equality that led the organisers to choose the Indonesian
482 collective. How radically egalitarian, they must have thought, to put a non-
483 Western collective in curatorial control. ruangrupa curated the Documenta
484 around the theme of the *lumbung* – a store for collectively produced rice.
485 According to the Documenta website, "principles of collectivity, resource
486 building and equitable distribution are pivotal to the curatorial work and impact
487 the entire process—the structure, self-image and appearance of documenta
488 fifteen". (DOCUMENTA 2022) The idea was to think of the exhibition as a
489 resource pot from which visitors could take whatever they needed to heal
490 "today's injuries, especially ones rooted in colonialism, capitalism, or
491 patriarchal structures". (NGUYEN 2022: 24) This is precisely what we mean by
492 how the monumentalising (might we say, 'reification'?) of certain values
493 (principles in ruangrupa's terminology) drive the form (the structure, or
494 appearance in their terms) of socially engaged art.
495
496 Until 2022, Documenta had been "the ultimate curator-led, thesis-driven
497 exhibition", (FARAGO 2022) but in 2022 it collectivised curatorial decision-
498 making by putting a collective in charge who invited dozens of other collectives
499 to each invite yet more collectives. The reification of equality was supposed to
500 guarantee ethically meritorious work. Unfortunately, ruangrupa's decision to
501 include an unmistakably antisemitic mural (*People's Justice,* 2002) by fellow
502 Indonesian collective Taring Padi (established in 1998 with inclusivity and a
503 militant belief in art's potential for social change as their core values) dominated
504 the discussions about the Documenta. Then there were other controversies. A set
505 of Palestinian propaganda short films was removed from the show by a newly
506 appointed 'advisory committee': so much for equality of opinion; when the

507 ruangrupa 'got it wrong' they were overruled. In response, ruangrupa and many
508 artists in the exhibition accused the Documenta of racism and the 'Tokyo Reels'
509 remained on display.
510
511 The monumentalising of equality above 'authoritarian' aesthetic criteria lies at
512 the heart of a controversy that even led the *New York Times* to report that the
513 debacle might signal the end for "the world's most prestigious art exhibition".
514 (FARAGO 2022) In this sense, it might be possible to cast the narrative of post-
515 truth as a problem of monumentalising. This problem of monumentalising is
516 precisely what socially engaged art must address if it is to avoid perpetuating the
517 fables of post-truth.
518

519 ## Monuments to Critique

520 We have already outlined how this 'monumentalising' takes place within
521 Kester's thesis on poststructuralism and its relationship to socially engaged art.
522 Terms such as 'participation', or 'equality' – so often associated with the
523 critique of socially engaged art – (see, for example, THOMPSON 2012) are
524 necessarily temporary denominations that become rigid and consolidated
525 through research papers, teaching curricula and references in public debate. This
526 is precisely how they are embedded within the institutions of authority and
527 expertise as much as they critique them. To paraphrase Rancière, the process of
528 rigidifying anticipates their effect.
529

530 What if it is not the democratic collectivisation of socially engaged art *per se*,
531 but this monumentalising process (which seems necessary for an engagement
532 between radical critique and established practice) that forms the basis of post-
533 truth? This would help to explain how the term 'post-truth' has become, amid
534 the genuine concerns over its political and cultural effects, a de facto victory of a
535 positivistic certainty; and accompanying this victory is an industry of
536 conferences, academic papers, and even research centres that have arisen in its
537 wake. But within this response, 'post-truth' rather too quickly becomes merely
538 'non-truth', and the complexity of the 'post' prefix is lost. Too quickly, post-
539 truth is shaped into a shorthand strawman figure to be bested by conservative
540 epistemological mantra, a figure uncannily like older enemies of that same
541 mantra, such as radical feminism, postmodernism, or the hermeneutics of
542 suspicion (see, for example, HAACK 2019). Too quickly, the complexities of
543 'post-truth' becomes a cipher for nothing other than a yearning for an ideal
544 model of academic institutions of truth and readily graspable – and reified –

545 'facts'. Rather than displacing the monuments to hegemonic pasts, this simply
546 leads to erecting more 'statues'.

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

562 Similarly in this sense, post-truth is only the natural undoing of a society that
563 loses touch with this curatorial aspect which is fundamental to culture itself. The
564 motifs employed by those defending 'truth' (in the context of post-truth) work
565 well to pitch the expert against the foolish, and the intellectual against the
566 masses, but only because they are too general, too clichéd, too *monumentalised*,
567 to do justice to the micro-engagements which constitute new media. One need
568 not look to poststructuralism to explain the rise of post-truth, and indeed the
569 constant invocation as statues to be destroyed serve only to progress the process
570 rather than halt it.

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

574 What, then, are we to make of the institutional reception of democratic
575 collectivisation of art evidenced in the Turner Prize 2021, The British Art Show
576 2022 and Documenta 15? It is, for sure, tempting to see this as a success for
577 subverting the expectations of artistic merit, allowing democratic principles to
578 finally take root in the elite institutions. At the same time, conversely, it is
579 equally plausible to see it as the final victory of a relativistic, anti-intellectual
580 paradigm in contemporary art infecting the sacred halls of the gallery or the
581 biennial (or quinquennial). Our analysis suggests that there is something more at
582 work in the creation of value of the democratic and participatory aspects of
583 socially engaged art practice that need to be attended to. Socially engaged art is

584   concerned with art's relationship with the public (community, or society). More
585   than that, it *uses* the public as an integral part of its practice, almost as the
586   materials of its practice. In doing so, it purports to place itself in stark contrast
587   with more traditional forms of public art that include permanent murals, statues,
588   memorials and monuments. However, we suggest that the varieties of socially
589   engaged art that we have critiqued in this text are *monumental* in their reification
590   of particular aspects of their practice, (democracy, equality and collaboration)
591   which ironically remove their subversive value. It is this monumentalising
592   process, rather than democratic collectivisation *per se*, that aligns socially
593   engaged art with the hallmarks of post-truth, and in doing so produces, at best,
594   forms of relativism, and at worst, cynicism.
595
596   Consequently, we call for art to retain a dialectical tension between equality and
597   the production of truth as a cultural value; a dialectic which involves the careful
598   reinstatement of artistic authorship and a more sincere vision of socially
599   engaged art's political ambitions and signification. In doing so, the terms by
600   which that authority and expertise is reinstated – including the chance
601   assemblages it depends upon – need to be brought sharply into focus. Doing so
602   would prove far more subversive to institutions such as the Turner Prize and
603   Documenta; they would also subvert many of the assumptions of what allows art
604   to call itself 'socially engaged'.
605

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