

ART & DESIGN

Outside the Citadel, Social Practice Art Is Intended to Nurture

By RANDY KENNEDY MARCH 20, 2013

In Detroit a contemporary-art museum is completing a monument to an influential artist that will not feature his work but will instead provide food, haircuts, education programs and other social services to the general public.

In New York an art organization that commissions public installations has been dispatching a journalist to politically precarious places around the world where she enlists artists and activists — often one and the same — to write for a Web site that can read more like a policy journal than an art portal. And in St. Louis an art institution known primarily for its monumental Richard Serra sculpture is turning itself into a hub of social activism, recently organizing a town-hall meeting where 350 people crowded in to talk about de facto segregation, one of the city's most intractable problems.

If none of these projects sound much like art — or the art you are used to seeing in museums — that is precisely the point. As the commercial art world in America rides a boom unlike any it has ever experienced, another kind of art world growing rapidly in its shadows is beginning to assert itself. And art institutions around the country are grappling with how to bring it within museum walls and make the case that it can be appreciated along with paintings, sculpture and other more tangible works.

Known primarily as social practice, its practitioners freely blur the lines

among object making, performance, political activism, community organizing, environmentalism and investigative journalism, creating a deeply participatory art that often flourishes outside the gallery and museum system. And in so doing, they push an old question — “Why is it art?” — as close to the breaking point as contemporary art ever has.

Leading museums have largely ignored it. But many smaller art institutions see it as a new frontier for a movement whose roots stretch back to the 1960s but has picked up fervor through Occupy Wall Street and the rise of social activism among young artists.

“Say what you will, this stuff is happening, and you might want to put your head in the sand and say, ‘I wish it was 40 years ago and it was different and art was more straightforward,’ but it’s not,” said Nato Thompson, the chief curator of Creative Time, a New York nonprofit that is known mostly for temporary public art installations but has been delving deeply into the movement.

Works can be as wildly varied as a community development project in Houston that provides both artists’ studios and low-income housing, summer camps and workshops for teenagers run by an artist collective near Los Angeles or a program in San Francisco founded by artists and financed by the city that helps turn yards, vacant lots and rooftops into organic gardens.

Art of this kind has thrived for decades outside the United States, mostly in Europe and South America, but has recently caught fire with a new generation of American artists in what is partly a reaction to the art market’s distorting power, fueled by a concentration of international wealth. Many artists, however, say the motivation is much broader: to make a difference in the world that is more than aesthetic.

“The boundary lines about how art is being made are becoming much blurrier,” said Laura Raicovich, who was hired last year by Creative Time as its director of global initiatives and to run a Web site called Creative Time Reports.

The site’s recent pieces include a video by an Egyptian-Lebanese artist about

Tahrir Square, the locus of the Egyptian uprising two years ago, and a short film about family debt in America made by a self-described “debt resistance” art collective with roots in the Occupy Wall Street movement.

“We’re not trying to do what journalism does,” Ms. Raicovich said. “But we think artists can supplement and complement it through a different lens. And what they’re doing is art.”

Social-practice programs are popping up in academia and seem to thrive in the interdisciplinary world of the campus. (The first dedicated master of fine arts program in the field was founded in 2005 at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco, and today there are more than half a dozen.) But for art institutions the problems are trickier: How can you present art that is rarely conceived with a museum or exhibition in mind, for example community projects, often run by collaboratives, that might go on for years, inviting participation more than traditional art appreciation?

At the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, a private institution founded by the collector and philanthropist Emily Rauh Pulitzer that opened in St. Louis in 2001, the staff for many years included two full-time social workers who helped former prison inmates and homeless veterans as part of the curatorial program. And in December the foundation, responding to a 2012 BBC report about racial and economic disparities in St. Louis, held a town-hall meeting on the issue. The goal was to open a dialogue with people who live near the institution, which sits near a stark north-south divide between mostly white and African-American neighborhoods.

“We hoped maybe 100 people would show up, and more than 350 did,” said Kristina Van Dyke, the foundation’s director, who collaborated with the Missouri History Museum in organizing the event. As the foundation approached its 10th anniversary, she said, “we wanted to start envisioning art more broadly, as a place where ideas can happen and action might be able to take place.”

“The question became: Could we effect social change through art, plain and

simple?” she said, adding that the foundation is now exploring ways to orient its programming toward design projects that would help the poor, for example. “To me art is elastic. It can respond to many different demands made on it. At the same time I have to say that I don’t believe all institutions have to do these kinds of things, or should.”

Some in the art world feel that all institutions (and artists) should resist the urge completely. Maureen Mullarkey, a New York painter, wrote on her blog, *Studio Matters*, that such work only confirmed her belief “that art is increasingly not about art at all.” Instead, she argued, it is “fast becoming a variant of community organizing by soi-disant promoters of their own notions of the common good.”

But many institutions, especially those in cities and neighborhoods with pressing social problems, see the need to extend their reach.

The Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, for example, is constructing a final work by the artist Mike Kelley, who committed suicide last year, that will function as a kind of perpetual social-practice experiment. Although Kelley was never identified with the movement, he specified before his death that the work, “*Mobile Homestead*” — a faithful re-creation of his childhood ranch-style home that will sit in a once-vacant lot behind the museum — should not be an art location in any traditional sense but a small social-services site, with possible additional roles as space for music and the museum’s education programs. Whether visitors will understand that the house is a work of art and a continuing performance is an open question. Smaller institutions like the Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Queens Museum of Art, which is acknowledged as a pioneer of social-practice programming, have also begun bringing the movement into the spotlight. (Tania Bruguera, a New York artist who is known for helping immigrants and has been supported by the Queens Museum and Creative Time, sometimes explains social-practice art with an anti-Modernist call to arms: “It’s time to restore Marcel Duchamp’s urinal to the bathroom.”)

Still, the political nature of the movement propels it into territory that is unfamiliar to many artists and art institutions. Last year, for example, a group of artists boycotted a summit meeting that has been held annually by Creative Time since 2009, saying they objected to the participation of a digital art center supported by the Israeli government. (Creative Time later made clear that the meeting received no funds from the organization or the Israeli government.)

Mr. Thompson of Creative Time said that many of the most dedicated social-practice artists see a huge divide between themselves and the commercial art world. “There are artists who don’t want to be the entertainment,” he said. “During a crisis of vast inequity they don’t want to be the sideshow, off to the side juggling.”

Caroline Woolard, a 29-year-old Brooklyn artist whose projects include collaborating on temporary “trade schools” where classes are paid for through bartering, said she became a social-practice artist not because she objected to the commercial or institutional art sectors but because she felt that the art world was too isolated.

“It was the realization that the types of people who went to cultural institutions — museums or galleries — were such a small section of any possible public for the kind of work I was interested in,” she said. She added, though, that she believed the movement would only broaden, and that museums and even the commercial art world would have to find a way to get involved.

“I do think that there will be ways for new kinds of collectors to emerge who will support these kinds of long-term projects as works of art,” said Ms. Woolard, who was recently asked by the Museum of Modern Art’s education department to take part in a social-practice program, “Artists as Houseguests: Artists Experiment at MoMA,” over the next few months.

Pablo Helguera, who is organizing the experiment as the director of adult and academic programs in MoMA’s education department, said that departments like his, as opposed to curatorial ones, are often the doors through which social-practice artists enter the museum world.

“There have always been artists working this way, but we started seeing more and more of them,” Mr. Helguera said. “My theory is that the shift began happening sometime after 9/11. I think it was the question ‘What is the meaning of making art in the world like it is today?’ ”

Mr. Helguera, who has written a book on the subject, “Education for Socially Engaged Art,” added that galleries and museums are only now beginning to scope out the movement’s contours. “The art world has these expectations,” he said. “It’s like you’re supposed to deliver your fall collection and your spring collection, and then what are you doing for the summer, for the art fairs and the biennials?”

“But this kind of work doesn’t operate according to that calendar,” he said. “It might mean a connection with some community or group of people for years, maybe some artist’s whole life. It’s hard to bring to the public. Sometimes it’s hard to define.”

Even those who live in the world of socially engaged art sometimes need help defining it. Justin Langlois, a Canadian artist, recently wrote a wry David-Letterman-style list of questions that artists can pose to themselves to determine whether they are indeed practicing social practice. Question No. 19 was “Can your work be critiqued by a painter?” Question No. 22: “If your project was a math equation, did the sum always end up as a critique of capitalism?” And the final question: “Were you asked to explain the reason you think your project is art?”

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