Good Works: The Impetus of Ethics (2013)

by Suzaan Boettger

In 2005, Rirkrit Tiravanija, speaking of "the land," a compound that he and others built in northern Thailand to facilitate village dialogue and communal and individual growth, said, "We're not interested in a sculpture park. We're much more interested in the conditions of living."[1] To observers of current art, Tiravanija's renouncement of the specular experience of the sculpture park format—displays of untouchable art objects sequestered in an arboreal setting—in favor of social relations, is not surprising. Even so, his reductive dichotomy articulates an unusually succinct statement of values, particularly

Francis Alÿs, with Cuauhtémoc Medina and Rafael Ortega, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002. Photographic documentation of action in Lima, Peru.

among artist-originated public works. Despite being designed by persons whose primary identity is "visual artist," such work does not derive its impact from its material manifestation of the artist's sensory attention—its aesthetics. The land's mixed-use buildings and site offer little to sustain one's scrutiny. Instead, the instigation of this work is subject matter, or more specifically, social matters, as determined by the artist's decision (often, as here, in collaboration with others) to address community and environmental well-being. To that end, the construction is directly functional. Without visual enrichment or symbolic form, it provides a place to gather. In art in the public arena, this is an increasingly common way of making good work: driven by an altruistic spirit toward the greater communal and/or environmental benefit, that is, by doing good works.

This is "public art" that you won't be seeing in all the old familiar places—the urban plaza, the park across the way, the transit hub—but in sites accessible to community members (though they may be unusual platforms for art). For *HighWaterLine* (2007), New Yorker Eve Mosher visited many such sites. She spent a few months of weekends pushing a line-making machine filled with powdered chalk to demarcate the perimeter of an increasingly likely extreme flood zone in Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. Over the course of the project, Mosher traversed many neighborhoods and struck up environmental-consciousness-raising conversations among curious passersby. This was an artist-instigated project not produced under institutional auspices. Conversely, the Belgian-born, Mexico City resident Francis Alÿs rounded up 500 volunteers outside Lima, Peru, to form a line spanning a sand dune. Shoulder-to-shoulder, they shoveled its crest a minuscule distance. *When Faith Moves Mountains,* organized for the Lima Biennial in 2002, enacts an encouraging metaphor of collective activism or a dramatic allusion to the futility of faith—it provocatively illustrates both. In either case, Alÿs's action, in the context of Peru's difficult development of democracy after the ambiguous exit of President Alberto Fujimori two years earlier, implicitly acknowledged the need for "mountains" of poverty and governmental corruption to be "moved" by society.

A large contingent of artists involved with ecology extend engagement with social problems into actual environmental repair, eroding traditional distinctions between fine art and design or craft utility. While works of art will not change the world as directly as political advocacy and legislation, these projects fix one local problem at a time. A good example of an independently originated solution by an individual is Lillian Ball's *Waterwash* (2009) on Mattituck Inlet, Long Island, which controls the regular flooding of a public boat ramp during storms. After obtaining permits and various forms of local support, she managed a construction crew that replaced asphalt paving with a graded and attractively curved permeable pavement framed by native grasses, wetland plants, seating, and explanatory signage. The project is decidedly cross-disciplinary, drawing on her training and experience as a sculptor, her administrative and negotiation skills with planning departments and school volunteers, and others' scientific knowledge of hydrology and climate, landscape design, construction materials, and procedures. As such, this work demonstrates the substantial heterogeneity of such public work by artists, both in its sources and its position as "art."

Such practices imply a rejection of the commercial seductions that Guy Debord described in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967; in English, 1970) and a revulsion against materialism and essentially trivial art-market *objets* in favor of humanitarian engagement toward the social good. More direct stylistic predecessors are the post-conceptual, non-object, activist social engagement from the 1970s that Joseph Beuys termed "social sculpture" and which in the 1990s Suzanne Lacy grouped as socially engaged "new genre" public art.[2]

WochenKlausur, *Home Improvement Service*, 2012. Artist-performed apartment renovations in the Jessy Cohen neighborhood in Holon, Israel, at no cost to residents.

Curator Nicolas Bourriaud has described the model of sociability central to relational aesthetics as "learning to inhabit the world in a better way, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution [of artistic style]."[3] Such idealism is not customarily associated with the convivial mode of relational aesthetics, but the Alÿs project certainly qualifies. More direct affinities can be found in the local, community-based, interactive projects that Grant Kester advocates as "dialogic" and Claire Bishop ambivalently analyzes as "participatory." A few years ago, Bishop was influential in describing the "social turn" of contemporary art.[4] However, since such "social practice" works, as they are now commonly called, often go beyond socializing to enact a sense of responsibility for others, Bishop's recent reference to them as "Christian" is more pertinent, in the sense of the idiom "Christian *caritas*" or selfless charity. (Of course, this concept of spiritual generosity is fundamental to moral goodness across religions—the Hebrew phrase is *Tikkun olam*, to "repair the world"—and the idea pertains irrespective of religious affiliation.) As the Viennese artist group WochenKlausur, whose work consists of projects such as a three-week *Home Improvement Service* (2012) in a debilitated neighborhood of Holon, Israel, puts it, they "develop concrete proposals aimed at small, but nevertheless effective improvements to socio-political deficiencies…translating these proposals into action, artistic creativity is no longer seen as a formal act but as an intervention into society."[5] These artists are not merely doing good deeds for a specific need: social practice, as well as environmental, artists think of themselves as agents of change, enacting a stewardship ethic for the greater societal good.

The designation that unites social practice and eco or environmentalist art both in terms of their ameliorative approaches and complementary absence of attention to sensory and aestheticized object-making is "ethical." Analyzing the "ethical turn of aesthetics and politics," philosopher Jacques

Rancière provides an apt definition: "Before signifying a norm or a way of being, the word 'ethos' signifies two things: ethos is the dwelling and the way of being, the way of life corresponding to this dwelling. Ethics, then, is the kind of thinking which establishes the identity between an environment, a way of being, and a principle of action."[6] Applied to projects in the community or environmental realms, this is not about an intra-artwork ethics—procedures in the process of producing the work, acquiring the materials, professional relations to staff, dealers, and clients. Those professional ethics are a given. Nor does this attribute of ethics imply, at other extremes, a stance of moralizing denunciation or direct advocacy of an action or political activism—though this work has political implications and may even compensate for inadequate governmental policies.

Rather, this designation of a public art project as being driven by an ethical position is very much about a conception of what it means to be an artist in relation to the world. Although in conversations and statements, these artists strongly identify as "artists" per se, they do not perform that role by creating a distinctive form that dialogues with the art world about art's formal and ontological identity or evokes an emotional resonance in relation to the greater life/world. Instead, their work in the public domain displays a strong ethical commitment to improving the situations and elements of our "dwellings," however they are conceived.

Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn pointedly emphasized the connection between his public art and ethics in the title of his 2009 project for Street of Sculptures, a two-month publicly and privately funded festival in Bijlmer, in southeast Amsterdam. Named for the locally born philosopher Baruch Spinoza, *The*

Thomas Hirschhorn, "Running Events: Dichters concours," from *The Bijlmer Spinoza Festival*, Amsterdam, 2009.

Bijlmer Spinoza Festival celebrated the classic 1677 text *Ethics*, which argues that everything in nature (the world, the universe) is one reality, of which everyone is a part, and everything/one is subject to only one set of rules. Bijlmer's population consists mainly of Christian and Muslim immigrants from the former Dutch colony of Suriname, most of whom live in public housing. Hirschhorn used his characteristic materials of cheap wood, cardboard, and duct tape to construct, along with 12 paid residents, a pavilion with areas for exhibitions on Spinoza and Bijlmer, a library, and places for lectures, seminars, performers, computers, a bar and snack bar run by locals, and a work bench. His primary creations were events and encounters. Visiting scholars lectured on Spinoza and on art history, helped produce a newsletter, and wrote a play performed several times by residents. Twenty events, including poetry readings, debates, art presentations, and performances, were proposed by local residents.

Hirschhorn has noted that "during the festival, the spectators became actors, the audience became performers, and there was no depth [separation] between the platform and public space. I have always wanted to work for a non-exclusive audience."[7] The egalitarian spirit of this project is overt, turning customarily passive art viewers into active participants and even creators. The model of proactive engagement that can be continued in everyday experience is clear.

This widespread ethical basis of art in the public realm corresponds to what has been termed a broad "ethical turn" in society. A *New York Times* "Ethicist" columnist, for example, recently exulted that "ethics may be having a moment"; the newspaper also reported that prominent business support of ethical nonprofits has become a marketing tool.[8] In academia, Americans and Europeans recognized this ethical phase two decades ago as a corollary of increased interest in human rights and environmental justice. German scholar Hubert Zapf has aptly described a "return of ethics in literature and literary studies" as "a shift from a self-referential to a more pragmatic conception of cultural signification processes…[e.g.,] from text to life."[9]

Indeed, the very profusion of social practice art suggests that, for many observers, art's protective autonomy—its detachment from social and environment exigencies—is no longer an adequate response to worldwide social and environmental degradations. Kelly Baum, an art historian and curator, has incisively stated, "Put simply, art is now defined by its dis-identification with the discipline of art…Contemporary art seems desperately to want to exceed the parameters that formerly set it apart as a specialized endeavor and to shed many of the attributes that make it recognizable as art." Similarly, Kester argues that "contemporary collaborative practices [productively] complicate conventional notions of aesthetic autonomy" such that "some of the most challenging new collaborative art projects are located on a continuum with forms of cultural activism."[10] As an illustration of this, the Web site for Documenta XIII, at least nominally a gigantic "exhibition" of art, lists everyone involved in the programs, including the artists, as "participants."[11] Yet Bishop persuasively resists this sort of leveling as what she terms a "slide into sociological discourse," mediating the ethics/aesthetics dialectic by stating, "Participatory art demands that we find new ways of analyzing art that are no longer linked solely to visuality, even though *form* remains a crucial vessel for communicating meaning." Bishop distinguishes herself among art world theoreticians by insisting that "the discursive criteria of participatory and socially engaged art [is based on] an ethical reasoning that fails to accommodate the aesthetic or to understand it as an autonomous realm of experience."[12]

Ethics or aesthetics: Must we choose? As alternative forms of art in public places, social practice and eco art play on the borders of fine art and non-art social utility, of personal creativity and communal projects, and of contemporary aesthetics and social ethics. Much of the strongest art—

Thomas Hirschhorn, "Running Events: Jam Session," from *The Bijlmer Spinoza-festival*, Amsterdam, 2009.

frequently discussed and illustrated in publications—leaves that line fluid. Patricia Johanson designs her remediation and functional habitats around repeated shapes and diverse representations of local flora and fauna—for instance, the San Francisco garter snake is the motif of her baywalk *Endangered Garden* located above the city's sewage treatment plant (which she also co-designed). Likewise, the large blue circles affixed to tree trunks and building façades throughout Boulder, Colorado, in Mary Miss's *Connect the Dots: Mapping the Highwater Hazards and History of Boulder Creek* (2007) combined the concision of a signal and the allusiveness of abstraction to call up water and stimulate visceral apprehension about the height of a potential extreme flood. And a main reason that Allora & Calzadilla's projects related to U.S. Navy weapons testing on the island of Vieques are so well-known is the stirring beauty of their "documentary" images, particularly the mesmerizing close-up of an upside-down table—legs projecting into air—affixed with an outboard motor being piloted on a turquoise sea (*Under Discussion*, 2005).

The prominence of ethical positions as a source of new forms of art in public places, particularly those originated directly by artists, suggests a need for attention not met in other domains of society. For many social and environmental problems, what is lacking is not scientific research or technical knowledge, it is social imagination and the ethical will to envision and enact changes in our ways of living. While this work's conceptions of the object, and objective, of art in relation to history and present-day society are unsettled, and thus unsettling, that in itself is productive, prompting engagement and reflection on both the status of art and crucial issues of our times.

Notes

1 Paul Schmelzer, “the land, Paul Schmelzer Interviews Rirkrit Tiravanija,” in Max Andrews, ed., *Land Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook* (London: RSA, 2006), p. 53. Tiravanija and co-founder Kamin Lertchaiprasert do not capitalize the land—“it’s a kind of ‘un-name.’” See p. 61.

2 “Implicit or explicit in the artists’ references to a larger social agenda is their desire for a more connected role for artists.” See Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p. 32.

3 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, (Paris: Les Presses du Reél, 2002), p. 13.

4 See Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004) and *The One and the Many, Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London, New York: Verso, 2012), pp. 11–40. An earlier version of this essay was published in *Artforum,* February 2006: pp. 178–83; a critical response from Kester, with Bishop’s reply appeared in the May 2006 issue, p. 22. Their critiques of each other’s positions continue in their most recent books.

5 From the group’s Web site <www.wochenklausur.at/methode.php?lang=en>. Under the FAQ section, the group has the confidence and eloquence to directly confront the question “What do WochenKlausur’s projects have to do with art?”

6 Jacques Rancière,“The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics,” *Critical Horizons,* 7:1, 2006: p. 2.

7 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1gZaI6tY78>.

8 See Ariel Kaminer, *New York Times*, April 27, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/magazine/so-long-farewell.html_r=1>. On ethics as a selling point, see <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/09/shopping-for-a-better-world/?hp>.

9 Hubert Zapf, “Narrative, Ethics, and Postmodern Art in Siri Hustvedt’s *What I Loved*,” in Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds., *The Turn to Ethics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000). By “return,” Zapf undoubtedly refers to the early 20th-century and postwar Modernist periods when abstraction as a rejection of more easily consumed representational styles signified an ethical affiliation with art’s autonomous value as a manifestation of progressivism, a rejection of “commodity culture,” and an expression of personal freedom. See, for example, Meyer Schapiro, “The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art,” *Art News*, Summer 1957: pp. 36–42, reprinted as “Recent Abstract Painting” in Schapiro’s *Modern Art,* 1978, pp. 213–232. See also David Parker, “The Turn to Ethics in the 1990s,” *Critical Review*, 1993: pp. 3–14; and Astrid Erl, Herbert Grabes, and Ansgar Nünning, *Ethics in Culture, The Dissemination of Values Through Literature and Other Media* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

10 Kelly Baum, in Hal Foster, ed., “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary,’” *October* (Fall 2009), p. 95. Kester, *One and the Many,* op. cit., pp. 9–10 and 37.

11 <http://d13.documenta.de/#/participants/participants/?tx_participants_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=9>.

12 Bishop, *Hells*, op. cit., pp. 17, 7, 39, and 284. Underlying this last point is the concern that prominent attention to ethical matters, an aspect of rising engagement in human rights, could shift the responsibility for social change to individual accountability and nongovernmental agencies, displacing citizens’ demands of the state and responsibility toward collective political change. WochenKlausur addresses this point at <http://www.wochenklausur.at/faq_detail.php?lang=en&id=21>.