

Chapter 26

Art and Sustainability

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The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.

(Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 2002, p. 13)

A more functional relationship between art and the everyday is urgently needed, through which artists can act as interlocutors...intervening in the debate itself and mediating new forms of acting and living.

(Teddy Cruz in Thompson, *Living as Form*, 2012, p. 58)

Artists cannot change the world...alone. But when they make a concerted effort, they collaborate with life itself, working with and between other disciplines and audiences, and given the chance to be seriously considered outside the rather narrow world of art, they can offer visual jolts and subtle nudges to conventional knowledge.

(Lippard, *Weather Report*, 2007, p. 6)

Abstract Over the past four decades, approaches to persistent and complex sustainability challenges have relied on solutions developed through scientific problem analysis and subsequent decision-making. Recently, this assumption has been exposed to various criticisms pointing out flaws and a lack of success. Art occupies a different intellectual, creative, and social space that can allow for surprising and promising perspectives and outcomes, offering innovative approaches to address sustainability problems. Since the 1990s, there has been a surge in interest among artists, curators, and theorists in collaborative art practice. Engaging directly with specific audiences and with pressing issues, the artists produce works that range in

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their intent from encouraging reflection, conversation, and learning to developing concrete solutions. This chapter focuses on the confluence of our heightened sustainability challenges with an increasing willingness among artists to address them and socially engaged practice as a particularly conducive art form. We focus on visual art and artists, although the most successful projects span disciplines and engage constituencies to challenge existing assumptions and propose new models.

Keywords Relational aesthetics • Social practice • Socially engaged art • Art and sustainability • Art and environment

1 Introduction

Today, we are confronted with complex, urgent, and persistent sustainability challenges that threaten the viability and integrity of societies across the world. Over the past four decades, approaches to these challenges have relied on a one-dimensional knowledge-to-action assumption, which suggests that solutions are best developed through scientific problem analysis and subsequent decision-making. Recently, this assumption has been exposed to various criticisms pointing out flaws and a lack of success, as well as suggesting alternatives and often more effective ways of developing robust solutions to sustainability challenges, including, among others, experimentation with alternative practices and rapid trial and error procedures (Sarewitz et al. 2012; Lang et al. 2012; Wiek et al. 2012). Among these, we are now recognizing that art offers innovative approaches for addressing sustainability problems and facilitates collective deliberation, learning, and transformation (Benessia et al. 2012; Lineberry et al. 2010; Kagan and Kirchberg 2008; Smith 2005).

Art occupies a different intellectual and creative space—more open-ended, somewhat outside of existing behavioral patterns, and often subversive—that can allow for surprising and promising perspectives and outcomes. It has the ability to engage the mind and the body, the imaginative and cognitive, the individual and the community with complex ideas, vivid representations, and experiences. Making us more conscious of accepted systems, it can facilitate deep collaboration across disciplines and social groups to deconstruct existing power structures and propose new paradigms.

Since the 1990s, there has been a surge in interest among artists, curators, and theorists in collaborative art practice, called by a variety of names, including “social practice,” “new genre public art,” “relational aesthetics,” “participatory art,” and “dialogic art.” Engaging directly with specific audiences and with pressing issues, the artist or artist collectives produce works that range in their intent from encouraging reflection, conversation, and learning to developing concrete solutions by means of new objects, services, and practices. Consequently, their artworks can take the form of social events, gathering spaces, marketing campaigns, publications, workshops, websites, meetings, and performances.

This chapter focuses on the confluence of our heightened sustainability challenges with an increasing willingness among artists to address them and social

practice as a particularly conducive art form. We will focus on visual art and artists, although socially engaged practice can be found in theater, dance, music, design, and architecture. The most successful artists draw upon methods and theories from a range of fields—performance, sociology, linguistics, urban planning, collaborative dynamics, and community organizing—and upon their experiences and resulting social intelligences. The best work spans disciplines and engages constituencies to, as the Danish art collective Superflex states, challenge existing models and propose new ones.

2 Precedents in Art, Social Practice, and Sustainability

Social practice is a complex and diverse field with no single definition and no linear trajectory, but rather a web of art influences and precedents paralleling broader social and cultural shifts. Since the 1960s, contemporary international art has operated in what influential critic Rosalind Krauss describes as the expanded field, “beyond the modernist demand for the purity and separateness of the various mediums” (Krauss in October, p. 42). Artists began exploring and combining new media and processes, leaving behind the discrete object and working instead in video, performance, language, and environmental installations. They often worked outside of the rarified space of art institutions (museums, galleries, etc.) and strove to avoid the influence of the art market. Land artists sculpted the very earth in remote locations, and conceptual artists prioritized idea over materiality. The international movement Fluxus and the Tropicalia artists in Brazil emphasized interactivity and spectator involvement in performances and performative spaces. Joseph Beuys considered public discourse and teaching to be at the center of his art practice and advocated for a radically expanded notion of art. Art activists championed racial equality and feminism, lobbied for gay rights, and raised awareness of the AIDS pandemic. New genre public art engaged diverse, urban communities around pressing social, economic, and political concerns with traditional and nontraditional media. In general, there has been a drive to have greater agency and impact, which was limited within the existing traditions and systems. Together, these artists and movements, and others, laid the groundwork for emphasis on the idea, the public realm, and the social—and the desire to merge art and life.

Art focusing on the environment and ecological systems also surged in the late 1960s and 1970s. Paralleling activism of the time, artists such as Agnes Denes, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, Hans Haacke, and Alan Sonfist tended to present nature as a separate sphere needing conservation and protection from the human impact of pollution and industrial destruction. Sonfist’s stated goal with his work *Time Landscape* was “to elevate disappearing native landscapes to the status of historical monuments...” Although they brought much needed attention to neglected problems and started to change the conversation, the work of these eco-art pioneers often presented utopian myths of the natural, objectified nature or offered a closed response (see Demos in *Radical Nature*, 2009). Other and more recent

artists, such as Mel Chin and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, move beyond objectifying nature and address the web of ecological, social, political, and economic issues. Ukeles and Chin are bridging figures, exemplars of successful collaborations across disciplines and communities, and offer interventions into stalled or dysfunctional processes.

Over a period of 11 months, Ukeles shook hands with and personally thanked all 8500 New York City sanitation workers, saying, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.” This text, image, video, and durational performance piece, called *Touch Sanitation* (1977–1980), strove to recognize the stigmatized and anonymous service workers who make our cities habitable. The first artist-in-residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation, with an office in their headquarters, Ukeles has created a powerful series demanding a complete shift toward viewing waste management as the primary maintenance system of our cities. *Flow City* (1985) established a visitor center at the 59th Street Marine Transfer Station, providing an on-site look at the process of treating urban waste water and recyclable materials. Ukeles’ work has been called “exercises in outreach” (Thompson, p. 233) and makes visible the range of social, ecological, and economic forces in urban waste management.

Hyperaccumulators are plants that leach heavy metals from contaminated soil, and artist Mel Chin considers both the plants and toxic earth as his material to “sculpt a site’s ecology.” His installation *Revival Field* (1991–ongoing) was created in collaboration with US Department of Agriculture scientist Dr. Rufus Chaney. The process behind the piece included building his own knowledge of the science, building trust with Dr. Chaney, working with the sponsoring art museum, and negotiating with various government agencies for funding and site approval on the Pig’s Eye Landfill in St. Paul, Minnesota. The work consisted of a 60-square-foot enclosure planted with six types of plants. After the second year of planting, the test results indicated enough success to inspire an international work group at the US Department of Energy. Dr. Chaney has said that it took an artist and an artwork to further the research on hyperaccumulators, which had been stalled due to politics and the resulting lack of funding (Finkelpearl, pp. 385–417).

Chin has gone on to address soil contamination in the ambitious and expansive project *Operation Paydirt/Fundred Dollar Bill Project* (2006–ongoing). Working with teams of scientists, volunteers, activists, teachers, and school children, Chin seeks to support a solution to lead-contaminated soil in post-Katrina New Orleans and help end this form of childhood lead poisoning. With a media campaign, scientific studies, and a nationwide participatory art project—drawing Fundred dollar bills to present to Congress to “pay” for treating the soil—Chin brings attention to the politics behind the refusal to act in low income and racially diverse areas and the social and economic impact on societies of lead contamination on young minds and bodies.

Touch Sanitation, *Revival Field*, and *Operation Paydirt* address the interrelatedness of social, economic, political, and ecological processes. The artists take on local and global topics of immediate and future concern and examine them critically and ethically. As such, they meet theorist Sacha Kagan’s indicators for sustainabil-

ity in the arts (Kagan and Kirchberg, pp. 17–18). We propose that they are also examples of artists exploring new collaborative methods, across disciplines and communities, to bring about changes in values and behaviors.

3 Today and Tomorrow, Here and There

In the boxes below, we present five recent projects by artists utilizing a variety of social practice methodologies to address sustainability challenges (for a comprehensive listing, see Thomson 2012). The projects range widely in scale, content, implementation, and intent, from the largely symbolic to the practical. They have been called micro-utopias or hands-on utopias, connecting forcefully to our challenges and offering new and surprising perspectives. Cuban artist Tania Bruguera calls for *arte útil* or “useful art” in her *Immigration Movement International Project* in Queens, New York. The art collective Superflex refers to their projects as “tools” for exploring new socioeconomic models.

Social practice projects can be durational, embedded in specific communities and tied to locations, or brief interventions that may not continue beyond an artist’s temporary residency. They can be open to unlimited discussion and participant input or directed by the artist and key agents. Often commissioned and supported by art institutions or cultural agencies, they begin with a central question or problem which morphs through the participatory process and the impact of the location and context. They are social experiments that strive to build connections and dialogue and open up new, previously unforeseen pathways for societal development.

- **Tasks** : *Within the art field, there is much debate on social practice, and the challenges are only amplified when viewed from sustainability fields. Reflect on the following questions:*
 1. *When does the project become social service, political activism, or scientific experimentation as opposed to art (for a delineation of this debate, see Bishop 2006)?*
 2. *Is it more effective or appropriate for art to visualize and occupy problems or to propose practical solutions?*
 3. *Is it possible to accomplish change through short-term art projects or intense engagement with small groups?*
 4. *How legitimate is the change proposed in social practice projects?*
 5. *How can we measure the success of these projects and based on what criteria (aesthetics, awareness, social change)?*
 6. *How sustainable are the solutions proposed?*
 7. *Finally, artists are often viewed by the sciences as the communicators, illustrating complex ideas for a broad public, rather than bringing new knowledge and strategies to the research process. What is necessary for true collaboration between artists and sustainability scientists?*

4 Conclusions

Social practice has become a powerful approach for addressing sustainability challenges societies face around the world. Unlike conventional forms of problem-solving, social practice engages stakeholders, ranging from government and businesses to nonprofit organizations and civil society, in exploring and experimenting with alternative practices that pursue sustaining the viability and integrity of our societies and natural environments. These projects create often uncomfortable, subversive, and potent spaces for novel experiences that challenge conventions, habitual practices, and the preference to sustain the status quo. There is a significant overlap in intentions between social practice and transformational sustainability science efforts; synergies could emerge from combining and integrating both approaches. They could fulfill different roles while pursuing the same objectives of sustainability. Transformational sustainability research is uniquely positioned to partner in social practice projects with evidence-based proposals, project components, or actor networks; through monitoring and evaluating impacts of social practice projects, including distribution of benefits, as well as unintended consequences; and, finally, through support in improving social practice projects, based on evidence and best practices derived from comparative evaluative studies. Both fields have a track record in interdisciplinary cooperation, which could serve as a solid fundament for such synergistic efforts.

Future challenges will pertain less to definitions and demarcations concerned with questions such as: is social practice still art, or is transformational sustainability research a basic science endeavor? In fact, both fields often substitute such academic debates with a pragmatic attitude that focuses on: whatever is needed, whatever works, and whatever art and science can contribute to sustainability transformations. The key challenge, however, will remain the degree of real progress toward sustainability, in all its forms and facets, that can emerge from novel alliances between art and sustainability science.

Edible Park by Nils Norman

2010–ongoing

The Hague, Netherlands

Commissioning agent/collaborator: Stroom den Haag, Foodprint project

Norman considers his practice to be critical public art, investigating the possibility of creating change through disruptive and experimental models and methodologies in urban environments. For *Edible Park*, the British artist collaborated with a range of art, architecture, gardening and food activist organizations, and community volunteers to experiment with socio-ecological permaculture ideas and gardening methods in a public green space. The project is conceived as an experiment with a sustainable alternative to the current

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way of treating such urban spaces and partially as a response to a grandiose development plan by architect Rem Koolhaas for a high-impact “spontaneous city” that would have included an amusement park, beach, skyscrapers, and a Formula 1 race track. *Edible Park* functions as a gathering space for the neighborhood residents, visitors, and schools, with a pavilion, playground, educational demonstrations, and shared work space managed by a local gardening association. Under their auspices, the garden has begun to grow into surrounding areas.

Find more information in: Nils Norman, Peter de Rooden, Taco de Neef (eds), Nils Norman: *Edible Park* (Valiz and Idea Books: Amsterdam, 2012)

Superkilen by Superflex

2012–ongoing

Copenhagen, Denmark

Commissioning agent: City of Copenhagen and Realdania

The work of the Danish art collective Superflex examines underlying structures, reconfigures spaces and expectations, and stands back to see what happens. The *Superkilen* urban park has a series of 100 objects and pieces of furniture proposed by people representing more than 50 nationalities in the surrounding neighborhoods.¹ The artists called for submissions, selected five proposals, and then traveled to Palestine, Spain, Thailand, Texas, and Jamaica to acquire the specific objects or plan their design. Commissioned by the City of Copenhagen, in collaboration with architectural firms, the artists proposed and implemented a new system of community input in urban planning and completely reinvented the approved furniture for city parks.

Find more information at www.superflex.net.

¹The Danish word “kilen” means “wedge” in English.



Superflex
Superkilen/Swing from Baghdad, Iraq, 2012
Nørrebro, Copenhagen, Denmark
Photo: Torben Eskerod



Superflex
Superkilen/Octopus from Tokyo, Japan, 2012
Nørrebro, Copenhagen, Denmark
Photo: Iwan Baan

Guaraná Power by Superflex

2004–ongoing

Maués, Brazil

Guaraná Power was a collaboration initiated by Superflex with the guaraná farmers' cooperative in the Brazilian Amazon. Responding to a cartel monopoly that controlled the use of guaraná berries in energy drinks and drove prices for the crop down by 80 %, Superflex worked with the farmers to organize and develop their own alternate product. Guaraná Power included package design, marketing campaigns, and distribution venues. The product is currently sold in convenience stores in Denmark and exhibited in art museums.

Find more information at www.superflex.net.



Superflex
 Guaraná Power, 2003
 Production/Bar at the Venice Biennale
 Bottling and sales of Guaraná Power
 Photo: Superflex

The Land by Rirkrit Tiravanija and Land Foundation

1998–ongoing

Chiang Mai, Thailand

Imagine visiting a contemporary art gallery in New York or London and being invited to sit down to a meal of Pad Thai prepared and served in the middle of the gallery by an artist or curator. Rirkrit Tiravanija is considered a pioneer in social practice for staging such gatherings in high art venues and encouraging visitor engagement and participation to an unusual degree. In the late 1990s, he expanded his experiments in building social connectivity by purchasing a faltering rice farm in Chang Mai with artist Kamin Lertchaiprasert. The area had been plagued by floods and high water and threatened with development. The project is conceived as an ongoing lab for a self-sustaining community centered around discussion and experimentation. In collaboration with University of Chiang Mai students, they have experimented with a year-round rice crop. The harvest is distributed among participants, as well as to families impacted by HIV/AIDS. Other projects led by international artists, like Superflex, Tobias Rehberger, and Arthur Meyer, have worked with community members, schools, and students to experiment with biogas and solar systems.

Find more information at thelandfoundation.org.

It's Not Just Black and White by Gregory Sale

2011

Tempe, Arizona

Commissioning agent: Arizona State University Art Museum

In the USA, more than seven million citizens are incarcerated or under the jurisdiction of the justice system, and the country spends \$80 billion to keep them there. Gregory Sale's project, *It's not just black and white*, built a charged but safe and welcoming gathering place where inmates, crime victims, their families, corrections and law enforcement officers, activists, academics, and the general public could gather to examine the underlying cycles of poverty, racism, and politics in incarceration. He staged his project in an art museum in Arizona, home to the internationally known Sheriff Joe Arpaio and boot camp-style prisons with black and white striped uniforms, tent housing, and chain gangs. Through a long process of negotiation and trust building, the artist received approval for jail inmates to visit the museum, with their armed guards, to work with him in the gallery to create a powerful, black and white striped setting for 52 meetings, workshops, and talks on this pressing issue. Participants ranged from Sheriff Joe to activist and former Black Panther member Angela Davis. *It's not just black and white* is an example of a social practice project, the public form of which is short—3 months—but which develops out of extensive work with diverse communities and

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stakeholders. The artist has gone on to do additional work in Arizona and beyond that addresses the broader forces in incarceration.

Find more information at <http://asuartmuseum.org/socialstudies-projects/5/Gregory-Sale-It-s-not-just-black-and-white.html>.



Gregory Sale

It's not just black and white, 2011, Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe, AZ

Artist-in-residence and social art project with 18 individual and 37 institutional collaborators including Arizona State University Humanities Project, AZ Common Ground, Gina's Team, Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, University of Arizona Poetry Center, Elizabeth Johnson and others (Curator: John Spiak, ASU Art Museum)

Photo: Stephen Gittins

Immigrant Movement International (IM) by Tania Bruguera

2011–ongoing

Corona, Queens, New York

Commissioning agents: Queens Museum of Art and Creative Time

Cuban artist Tania Bruguera conceived of Immigrant Movement International as an art project in the form of an artist-initiated sociopolitical movement. The IM headquarters is a flexible community space in a multinational neighborhood where 167 languages are spoken. Working with residents, social service organizations, elected officials, and artists, the project focuses on issues of immigration reform, as well as the daily needs of immigrants. “As migration

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becomes a more central element of contemporary existence, the status and identity of those who live outside their place of origin increasingly become defined not by sharing a common language, class, culture, or race, but instead by their condition as immigrants,” states the project’s mission, citing the need to recognize and redefine the immigrant as the new global citizen. Activities range from a transdisciplinary convening that generated the Migrant Manifesto to legal services, slogan writing workshops, youth music lessons, and a women’s health program. After the first year, the initial funding came to an end, yet the community rallied to keep the center open. In 2012, a sister organization was opened in Mexico City, el Partido del Pueblo Migrante (PPM), and the artist hopes to open other locations around the world. Bruguera is well known for her concept of *arte útil*, or “useful art”, which takes on social and political challenges through direct engagement in people’s lives.

Find more information at <http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress> or <http://www.taniabruquera.com>.



Tania Bruguera

Immigrant Movement International, 2011

A class from the Paper Orchestra

<http://immigrant-movement.us/>

Photo: Tania Bruguera



Tania Bruguera
 Immigrant Movement International, 2010–2015
 Corona, Queens, New York, USA
<http://immigrant-movement.us/>
 Photo: Tania Bruguera

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