

Does Public Art Have to Be Bad Art?

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Assessing the Intellectual Value of New Genre Public Art

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Abstract: Suzanne Lacy introduced the term ‘New Genre Public Art’ (NGPA) to refer to art practices that depart from those traditional of public art (such as installing works in parks and plazas) and focus instead on the direct engagement of artists with audiences to deal with pressing socio-political issues. In this paper, I argue that some works of NGPA should be valued for the intellectual value grounded in their artistic features, not dissimilarly to works of conceptual art. In developing my argument, I take distance from Vid Simoniti’s recent account of ‘Socially Engaged Art’, offer a thorough analysis of Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Bataille Monument* (2002) and Kathrin Böhm’s and Stefan Saffer’s *Mobile Porch* (1999), and submit that both such works qualify as good works of NGPA.

Keywords: aesthetics; philosophy; art in the public sphere; public art; dialogic art; public sphere; public engagement; temporary art; durational approaches to public art; Habermas

In a 1994 publication, Suzanne Lacy introduced the term ‘New Genre Public Art’ (NGPA) to refer to art practices that depart from those traditional of public art (such as installing works in parks and plazas) and focus instead on the direct engagement of artists with audiences to deal with pressing socio-political issues.¹ Lacy’s own participatory artwork *The Crystal Quilt* (1985-1987), for instance, involved over 400 aging women from Minnesota, seeking to give a voice to individuals who are often marginalized in contemporary societies. In a recent paper, Vid Simoniti argues that some works by Lacy, as well as by e.g. Theaster Gates, Jeremy Deller, Marjetica Potrč, Vik Muniz, Olafur Eliasson, Jud and Wachter, and the Voina collective – works he collectively calls ‘Socially Engaged Art’ (SEA) – should be valued, qua artworks, not because of the values they realize “through characteristically artistic features” but rather because of their “positive political, cognitive, or ethical impact”.² However, Simoniti maintains, not many works of SEA have a *significant* impact of such kind: good works of SEA, then, are quite rare.³ Simoniti stresses that works of SEA are a “cross section” of works of NGPA, constituted by works that share these two features: (a) their “intended value [...] is coextensive with [...] [their] *social and political impact*”; (b) their social and political impact is produced through methods that “bear close resemblance to nonartistic forms of political and social activism”.⁴

Simoniti’s argument applies to a limited sub-set of NGPA – as he himself acknowledges.⁵ In this paper, I shall focus on some works of NGPA that satisfy Simoniti’s requirement (b), but don’t satisfy requirement (a), and sketch out an account of the assessment of such artworks focused on their artistic features. In particular, I shall argue that some works of NGPA should be valued for the intellectual value grounded in their artistic

¹ Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*.

² Simoniti, “Assessing”, 76.

³ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 72, 80.

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features, not dissimilarly to works of conceptual art. As it shall emerge from my analyses, understanding whether a work meets requirement (a) isn't always easy. As a consequence, one might mistakenly categorize a work as a work of SEA and, following Simoniti, give a negative assessment of its value, noticing that the work doesn't really have much "positive political, cognitive, or ethical impact". In what follows, I show that two works that might prima facie appear to be works of SEA are better understood as works of NGPA that don't meet Simoniti's requirement (a) and that such works possess intellectual value.

In the first section of the paper, I introduce Simoniti's criticisms of the view that works of SEA should be valued as art because of the values they realize "through characteristically artistic features". In the second section, I put forward my proposal concerning the assessment of some works of NGPA that don't meet Simoniti's requirement (a), using Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* (2002) as a case-study. In the third section, I show how my proposal also applies to Kathrin Böhm and Stefan Saffer's *Mobile Porch* (1999). The fourth section concludes with some remarks on the good quality of both works as works of NGPA.

1 Why aestheticism and pluralism cannot account for SEA's value as art

In this section, I introduce Simoniti's criticisms of the view that works of SEA should be valued as art because of the values they realize "through characteristically artistic features". Here's how Simoniti describes the structure of his argument for the validity of his account of the artistic value of SEA (which he calls 'the pragmatic view'):

1. Socially engaged artworks are works of art.
2. Some socially engaged artworks are good art.
3. Aestheticism and pluralism cannot explain how socially engaged artworks can be good art.
4. The pragmatic view of artistic value can explain how socially engaged artworks can be good art.
5. Therefore, the pragmatic view is a valid account of artistic value.⁶

Aestheticism is characterized as "the view that only aesthetic values [realized through characteristically artistic features of a work] can contribute to a work's artistic value"⁷, and pluralism as "the view that artistic value encompasses a variety of values, realizable *through* recognizable artistic features"⁸, such as cognitive value, moral value, aesthetic value, and so on. Simoniti claims that the goal of works of SEA isn't to produce aesthetically remarkable experiences for participants through their artistic features and that therefore *aestheticism* cannot account for their value; Simoniti's further claim is that even for *pluralism* it is difficult to account for the value of works of SEA.⁹ Simoniti criticizes the pluralistic account that appears to emerge from Claire Bishop's (2012) analysis of works of SEA. In a nutshell, Bishop's view is that such works should be assessed focusing on their *artistic aspects*, such as their being pieces of performance art that also resemble history paintings (as is the case in Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* – a reenactment of the confrontation between striking miners and the police that occurred at the Orgreave Coking Plant in Yorkshire on 18 June 1984), or their being portraits (as is the case in Vik Muniz's *Pictures of Garbage* – a series of portraits of Brazilian garbage pickers, who also provided the garbage used to realize the works).¹⁰ Against this view, Simoniti observes that

Deller's project might indeed be appreciated as a kind of tableau vivant by an onlooker in the art context, for example, when the video documentation of the work is presented in galleries. However, pace Bishop, Deller's primary goal appears to have been to make a difference to the original participants, who were possibly quite unconcerned with the work's art-world status

⁶ Ibid., 77.

⁷ Ibid., 74-75.

⁸ Ibid., 79.

⁹ Ibid., 78-80.

¹⁰ See Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 13, 17, 22, 30-37; Simoniti, "Assessing", 79.

and that

The portraits made by Muniz are ingenious, but as is made clear in the *Waste Land* documentary, Muniz's main goal was to lend his skills, fame, and whatever else was required to improve the lot of the people he worked with. The success of these works as portraits appeared to be a secondary concern.¹¹

More generally, Simoniti observes that pluralists encounter the following difficulties in explaining the value of works of SEA:

First, in socially engaged art traditional artistic features (such as the production of portraits by Vik Muniz) may be present, but they are used as an interchangeable means to an end (they fund social projects or bring a community together), rather than as a means through which a value is realized. [...] Second, any such traditional artistic features are always accompanied by features that are commonly found outside the sphere of art, such as organizing a protest, creating an archive, or rebuilding a neighborhood. It is the values realized through such means that pluralist accounts will have trouble accommodating. Third, the features that allow us to classify socially engaged art as art – such as their institutional acceptance as art – are, interestingly, not the features essential to the realization of their value. Socially engaged artworks are certainly discussed in art magazines and appreciated when documented in museums, and these venues may be used to publicize the political message. However, the bulk of these works' achievement is based on the difference they make to constituencies outside of these contexts: to the former mining community (Deller) or to the garbage pickers (Muniz).¹²

I think Simoniti rightly points out the problems aestheticists and pluralists face when seeking to account for the value of works of SEA. However, as already stressed, works of SEA are only a sub-category of works of NGPA. In particular, there are works of NGPA that meet Simoniti's requirement (b) – since their social and political impact is produced through methods that “bear close resemblance to nonartistic forms of political and social activism” – but don't meet requirement (a) – since their “intended value” isn't coextensive with their “social and political impact”. In what follows, I shall show that some of such works should be valued for the *intellectual value* they realize through their artistic features, not dissimilarly to what is the case for works of conceptual art.¹³

2 Why pluralism can account for some works of NGPA's value as art: the case of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument*

My view is grounded on an argument that can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Some works of NGPA (that are not works of SEA) realize intellectual value.
- (2) They realize such value essentially through their artistic features.
- (3) The intellectual value thus realized explains the role of the non-artistic features of such works.
- (4) Therefore, such works should be valued as art for the intellectual value they realize through their artistic features.

To put forward my proposal, I shall analyze *Bataille Monument* (2002), a work by Thomas Hirschhorn, installed during the *Documenta 11* exhibition in Kassel, Germany. When confronted with the work, one encountered various objects and events built and managed by some residents of the Friedrich-Wöhler-Siedlung, a mixed Turkish-German housing complex in Kassel, who were recruited, coordinated, and paid by Hirschhorn. As the artist explains, there were “eight elements: a shuttle service [for *Documenta* visitors coming from downtown Kassel], a library [with no publications by the philosopher Georges Bataille,

¹¹ Ibid., 79.

¹² Ibid., 79-80.

¹³ As it shall emerge from my analysis, the works of NGPA I consider are not works of participatory art that, as Simoniti remarks, “include interaction with audience members or local communities, but the primary goal of which is to create a remarkable aesthetic experience for the participants” (Simoniti, “Assessing”, 78). Simoniti mentions Tino Sehgal, Kateřina Šedá, Marina Abramović, and Rirkrit Tiravanija as authors of works of such kind.

but various books on subjects discussed by Bataille in his work], an exhibition [about Bataille's life and work], a snack bar, a TV studio [to produce reports about what was going on in the work's site], workshops [involving residents of the housing complex], four web cams and a sculpture".¹⁴ The artist explains that "The sculpture was supposed to be only the sculpture of the monument and not the monument itself" and that it didn't matter what it looked like.¹⁵ The artist also stresses that *Bataille Monument* was not a contextual work that could only function in the Friedrich-Wöhler-Siedlung and that the reason why it had to do with Georges Bataille was that "Bataille explored and developed the principles of loss, of overexertion, of the gift, and of excess. Choosing Bataille meant opening up a broad and complex field between economy, politics, literature, art, erotica, and archaeology".¹⁶

I submit that *Bataille Monument* met Simoniti's requirement (b), since it was similar to a form of social activism: the work saw the direct engagement of the artist with an audience, to deal with a wide range of socio-political issues – some of which discussed in Bataille's writings – such as establishing a point of contact between the *Documenta* people and residents of an area of Kassel that is usually ignored by organizers of the art event and creating connections among residents of the housing complex who contributed to the project. From the analysis I shall put forward below, it shall emerge why the work didn't meet Simoniti's requirement (a) and that the work, then, was a work of NGPA, but not a work of SEA.

Interestingly, Hirschhorn writes:

On the opening day, I realized that earlier – during planning, preparations, and set-up – I had never thought the *Bataille Monument* could be discussed and criticized as a social art project. However, I do think social issues can be raised through an art project. It is a question of the surroundings, the environment, the reality. That is a goal of my work. [...] But one thing has always been clear for me: I am an artist and not a social worker. My project is an art project that aims to assert its autonomy as an art project. This was the starting point and cornerstone of all discussions I had with people working on the project as well as the visitors. Precisely because the *Bataille Monument* is an art project, it was not possible to exclude anyone from working on it. My guideline was: as the artist, I am not asking, can I help you? What can I do for you? Instead, as the artist, I am asking, can you and do you want to help me complete my project?¹⁷

It seems that Hirschhorn accepted the view that his work could be considered a 'social art project', although he stressed that the work retained its autonomy as an artwork and that he was not casting himself in the role of the social worker. In what follows, I shall show that Hirschhorn's view of his work is plausible, and I shall argue for the validity of my claims (1), (2) and (3) above, relying on an analysis of the work.

According to claim (1), some works of NGPA (that are not works of SEA) realize intellectual value. My view is that Hirschhorn's was one such work. Hirschhorn's project had *some* social impact, because the artist paid the participants, contributing to their income, because he created a place where they could network as members of the same community, and also because he offered participants the opportunity to share a goal (the project's completion) with each other and with himself – an experience that can contribute to the well-being of individuals. *Prima facie*, then, it seems that one could claim, following Simoniti, that *Bataille Monument* was to be valued as art focusing on its social impact, and that the work didn't realize its social impact through its artistic features, since neither paying participants, nor creating a place where members of a community can network with each other, nor offering people the opportunity to share a goal with others count as artistic activities. *Bataille Monument*, then, might look as a good example of a work of SEA, which met Simoniti's requirement (a) because its value was to be identified with that of its social impact, not realized through its artistic features, and which didn't possess such value in a high degree, because it could hardly be claimed that its impact on the Friedrich-Wöhler-Siedlung's residents was lasting and game-changing. I believe, however, that this account of the value of *Bataille Monument* is wrong and that it relies on a misunderstanding of the point of the work. As stressed in the passage quoted above, Hirschhorn was more preoccupied with offering residents of the Friedrich-Wöhler-Siedlung a chance to contribute to the completion of his project and with asserting the work's "autonomy as an art project", than

¹⁴ Hirschhorn, "Bataille", 135.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

with the social impact of his project. To understand what the work was about, then, we should focus on aspects of the residents' participation into the work other than the impact the work had on their lives at the socio-economical level. My hypothesis, in particular, is that Hirschhorn's goal was to cast light on a specific kind of experience through his work, by means of offering the work's participants the opportunity to have an experience of such kind. By choosing to participate into Hirschhorn's project, residents of the Friedrich-Wöhler-Siedlung choose to make his project their own, to share it with him. This provided an occasion for them to feel a link with the artist, to feel that they and the artist cared about the same thing. The experience that the project's participants could enjoy was not dissimilar in its potential impact on the participants from the experience one might have, for instance, while gazing at the faces of the mourners in Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (ca. 1443), noticing that one can easily recognize and relate to their expressions, which manifest various nuances of sorrow: such experience is one that might arouse a feeling of connection with the painter's sensitivity, despite the fact that the work was painted almost six hundred years ago. My view, then, is that Hirschhorn's intention was that the experience had by *Bataille Monument*'s participants (that of having a chance to feel a connection with an artist by means of helping him complete his project) be seen as exemplifying an experience that the art public can often enjoy in the presence of good artworks (that of having a chance to feel a connection with an artist by means of paying attention to his/her work). According to my reasoning, *Bataille Monument* was quite similar to a work of conceptual art like Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969). *Following Piece* was an event during which Acconci followed various people unknown to him, randomly chosen in the street, until they reached their destination. In so doing, Acconci exemplified an action of surveillance, thereby drawing attention to the problems that surveillance poses to individuals and society.

An account of the appreciation of Acconci's performance can illuminate also the appreciation of Hirschhorn's work. What we are supposed to appreciate about *Following Piece* is that it put under the spotlight the objectionable character of surveillance mechanisms. This is a form of intellectual appreciation: the work is appreciated because it gives access to a view about surveillance mechanisms that is intellectually interesting. Similarly, Hirschhorn's public was supposed to appreciate the fact that his work cast light on an aspect of the experience of art that is usually highly valued, by means of having the resident's participation into Hirschhorn's project exemplify such experience (i.e. an experience of commonality with the artist). This was a form of intellectual appreciation: the work was appreciated because it allowed the public to grasp an aspect of the experience of art and meditate on it. *Bataille Monument*, then, was a work of NGPA, that was not a work of SEA, and that realized intellectual value.

According to my claim (2), some works of NGPA (that are not works of SEA) realize intellectual value essentially through their artistic features. This was the case for *Bataille Monument*: this was a work of participatory performance, consisting in a series of events originating in the actions of participants. As I have explained, the intellectual value of the work was grounded in the actions of its participants, since it was the participants' participation into the work that was intended to be seen as exemplifying the experience of commonality with an artist the art public can sometimes feel when confronted with an artwork and since it was the intellectual insights about the experience of art available through such exemplification that the public was supposed to value when assessing *Bataille Monument* as an artwork. Given that the actions of the work's participants counted as artistic features of the work, because this was a work of performance, and given that the intellectual value of the work was grounded in such actions, it follows that the work's value was realized through its artistic features. Furthermore, the value of *Bataille Monument* was realized *essentially* through such features: if the participant's actions hadn't been a result of their having accepted to collaborate to Hirschhorn's project, the work wouldn't have been the same and it wouldn't have had the same value.

According to claim (3), the intellectual value realized by works of NGPA that are not works of SEA explains the role of the non-artistic features of such works. This is true of *Bataille Monument*: assessing the work as intellectually valuable, as we have seen, requires understanding the role of the participants' in Hirschhorn's project, i.e. understanding that the main reason why participants were recruited was not to give them a temporary job and an opportunity for networking, but rather to offer them the opportunity

to collaborate with Hirschhorn at the completion of his project – an experience that the artist used to exemplify another experience, as I have explained, and that plays a key role in the constitution of the artwork's intellectual value.

Through the analysis of Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument*, I have shown that my claims (1), (2), and (3) appropriately describe what goes on with this work. If my argument above is correct, it follows that (4) is also true of this work: Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* should be valued as art for the intellectual value it realizes through its artistic features.

3 Why pluralism can account for some works of NGPA's value as art: the case of Kathrin Böhm and Stefan Saffer's *Mobile Porch*

I believe my analysis of how Hirschhorn's work should be properly assessed as art applies also to other works of NGPA that are not works of SEA. In an essay titled *Public Works*, artist Kathrin Böhm claims about the principles guiding the works she creates with her team:

We argue for art to be involved in non-art processes as a way to develop criteria for decisions which don't have to be based on functional, commercial or efficiency basis. The appliance doesn't lie within a functionalization of art but in linking the experience and knowledge gained through it, to other processes.¹⁸

Mobile Porch (1999, by Böhm and Stefan Saffer) was an "object for a public sphere" that could be "a shed, a reception desk, a stage, a bench, a lamp, a screen, a workshop, a vehicle, etc." and that was "used by a large number of people to create short-term activities, to organize social events or to drop ideas to further projects on site".¹⁹ *Mobile Porch* certainly looked like a work of SEA: it looked like a work that (a) had non-artistic features, since it could be described as a multi-functional tool, (b) had a social impact in virtue of such features, since it allowed for people to engage in a number of activities in the public space, and (c) was meant to be valued as art because of its positive ethical impact, because it enhanced the freedom of expression of participants. Adopting this reading of *Mobile Porch*, however, contrasts with Böhm's characterization of her views about making art: as we have seen, she stresses that the goal of her works doesn't have to do with the "functionalization of art" and that what matters is "linking the experience and knowledge gained through [...] [them] to other processes".

I submit, then, that *Mobile Porch* wasn't meant to be appreciated for its ethical impact because it helped people engage in various activities in public areas, while it was meant to be appreciated as a device that illustrated a certain view of the relationship between people and public space: in Böhm's own words, it was "a way of suggesting a more playful and spontaneous and less programmed approach to public space".²⁰ *Mobile Porch*, then, was meant to be appreciated intellectually because of the goodness of the idea of the use of public space it allowed its public to access. The work, then, realized intellectual value, and was to be appreciated for its possession of such value.

I also claim that *Mobile Porch* realized its intellectual value essentially through its artistic features: the work was a work of conceptual art, presenting the public with an everyday object, which conveyed a certain idea about the use of public space – an idea that was intended to be its focus of appreciation.²¹ The everyday object, then, was the artwork: the features of the everyday object were the artistic features of the artwork. Since *Mobile Porch*'s intellectual value was realized through the features of the object (because the object illustrated a certain idea of the use of public space, to whom intellectual value was attributed), and since the object was the artwork, it follows that the work's intellectual value was realized through its artistic features.

¹⁸ Böhm, "Public Works", 167.

¹⁹ Ibid., 162.

²⁰ Ibid., 163.

²¹ On the centrality of ideas for the appreciation of conceptual art see e.g. Goldie & Schellekens, *Who is Afraid*; Cray, "Conceptual Art"; Dodd, "The Ontology".

Finally, I claim that the work's intellectual value also explained the role of its non-artistic features: the work allowed people to perform non-artistic activities, in order to illustrate a view about the use of public space – which was meant to be appreciated for its intellectual value.

4 Why *Bataille Monument* and *Mobile Porch* are good works of NGPA

Can works of NGPA be good works of art? Simoniti claims that many works of SEA (a sub-set of works of NGPA) haven't so far been very effective works of NGPA, since their political, social, or ethical impact has seldom been significant.²² In this paper, I have argued that some works of NGPA, that are not works of SEA, should be appreciated as art because of the intellectual value they realize through their artistic features. To conclude, I would like to consider the issue whether such works also qualify as good works of NGPA. NGPA is an art genre, like comedy, or tragedy. Adopting a teleological view on art genres, we could define it as the genre of artworks that aim at dealing with pressing socio-political issues, by means of direct engagement of artists with audiences.²³ It follows that a good work of NGPA is a work that is successful in dealing with pressing socio-political issues by means of direct engagement of artists with audiences.

As I have claimed, Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* was a work that realized intellectual value, since it allowed the public to grasp an aspect of the experience of art and meditate on it. Basing on this characterization of the work, one could doubt that it was a work of NGPA, since it is not immediately clear in how far the work dealt with socio-political issues. I submit, however, that *Bataille Monument* was a work of NGPA. The work qualified as NGPA because: (1) it saw the direct engagement of the artist with an audience to deal with socio-political issues such as establishing a point of contact between the *Documenta* people and residents of the housing complex who contributed to the project and creating connections among residents of the housing complex; (2) it focused on an aspect of the experience of certain artworks that can make it particularly valuable for the public (i.e. the feeling of commonality with the artist that might arise in the presence of certain works of art), thereby addressing the issue of why art matters to us – a social issue. What about the goodness of *Bataille Monument*? Was it a good work of NGPA? Did it deal with the socio-political issues it addressed successfully? I'm inclined to think that it did: the work established a respectful contact between the artist and participants (who where paid for the time and energy they lent to Hirschhorn's project), and it explored the view that art matters to us when we feel a sense of commonality with artists by means of experiencing their work, thereby addressing the issue of what art can do for the public. It seems to me that the view Hirschhorn put forward with *Bataille Monument* is that, to establish a positive relationship with the public, artists shouldn't cast themselves in the role of social workers, while they should rather focus on what they can do best: produce works that bring people together on the basis of the feelings they arise.

What about *Mobile Porch*? As I have claimed, the work was intended to be valued intellectually because of the view on how public space could be used it embodied. Was it a good work of NGPA? Again, I think we can answer in the positive. The work addressed the issue of how public space can be used successfully because, rather than amplifying the voice of the artists, it amplified that of the public: the view on the use of public space it exemplified was the view that emerged from how the public freely decided to use the tool provided by the artists.

²² Simoniti, "Assessing", 80-81. He writes: "Perhaps works such as those by Suzanne Lacy, Theaster Gates, or the Voina collective may be looked to as models, given that they seem to constitute a genuine political challenge to the authorities or a genuine improvement in the lives of the communities in which they intervene" (81).

²³ See Abell, "Genre".

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