

# Activist Imaginaries: Art and Curatorial Practice as Collaborative Endeavour - Editorial

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This special themed issue of REGAC deals with recent developments in the field of socially engaged art and curatorship. One of the main characteristics of the projects featured in this volume is collaboration. The collaborative impulse is by no means a novelty in the field of art production. It pertains to a series of numerous attempts throughout modern and contemporary art history to *rethink art collectively* (Bishop, 2012) by transcending individual authorship, redefining artistic autonomy and democratizing access to the practice and fruition of the arts. A significant body of literature has delved into its different manifestations and denominations in the contemporary art scene (*socially engaged art, collaborative art, dialogical aesthetics*, among others) as well as its potential to question established modes of cultural production, often embedded in the neoliberal system.<sup>1</sup> Collaborative

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others: Grant Kester (2024), *Beyond the Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Avant-Garde to Socially Engaged Art*; Florian Malzacher (2023), *The Art of*

artistic processes, frequently adopting a context specific approach and intersecting activist practices, contribute to *pre-enact* other ways of being and acting collectively (Malzacher et al., 2022), outside of the capitalist logic. In a sociopolitical context marked by polycrisis (Morin & Kern, 1999) and within a cultural sphere dominated by precariousness, competition and market speculation, these art expressions generate and sustain, through solidarity-based creativity, spaces and communities of aesthetic experimentation, knowledge co-creation, political resistance and care.

Moving from marginal contexts to mainstream, the *social turn* has achieved significant recognition and visibility in the last two decades, both in museum and academic settings. Documenta 15 (2022) is evidence of the inclusion of social praxis in the circuit of art biennials. Directed by Indonesian collective ruangrupa, this expansive survey exhibition employed a decentered curatorial approach, drawing on ideas of commoning and collectivity. It featured a diverse array of interdisciplinary projects by collectives and artist-led organizations, primarily from the Global South, addressing topics like social and environmental justice, anticolonial struggles and geopolitical conflicts. Although this edition of Documenta served as a platform to examine the material and relational conditions enabling art production and to amplify emancipatory visions through collective cultural work, the integration of these practices into the global art system risks their fetishization and institutionalization, potentially undermining their transformative value (Demos, 2023). Therefore, despite opening art and curation to multiple agencies, collaborative practices, as contemporary scholarship suggests, also reveal inconsistencies and points of tension (Lind, 2009). While challenging the traditional roles of artists, curators

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*Assembly. Political Theatre Today*; Persinger & Rejaie (2021), *Socially Engaged Art History and Beyond*; Tom Finkerpearl (2013), *What We Made. Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*; Claire Bishop (2012), *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*; Grant Kester (2010), *The One and the Many. Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*; Aida Sánchez de Serdio (2010), Sánchez de Serdio, A. (2010) Políticas de lo concreto: producción cultural colaborativa y modos de organización; Maria Lind (2007), *The Collaborative Turn*; Grant Kester (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*; Paloma Blanco et al. (2001), *Modos de hacer. Arte crítico, esfera pública y acción directa*.

and audiences, these cultural proposals may reinstate and even reinforce power hierarchies and modes of commodification of creative processes, ultimately neutralizing their oppositional potential (Hartnoll, 2022).

Given these ambivalences, here are some of the main questions authors included in this volume reflect upon: how can art create alliances to complement and sustain political action without appropriating collective struggles and experiences? In what ways do socially engaged initiatives contribute to transforming structures of cultural production and challenge systems of oppression? How do artists, collectives and curators address problematic power asymmetries within their own creative process and avoid *capture mechanisms* (Gallisá Muriente et al., 2023), such as forms of cognitive extractivism? What contradictions emerge in light of the growing institutional and academic acceptance of these art manifestations? Can mainstream exposure play a part in diluting the political and contentious dimension of these collective art practices as well as reintroduce them in the conventional art circuits and value-generating systems? How can theoretical reflection on these cultural expressions be decolonized through non-Western-centric conceptualizations and research?

This bilingual issue of REGAC Journal includes ten original contributions exploring these matters. Eight articles were selected through a call for papers launched in January 2024 and a blind peer review process. The opening essay by Line Ellegard deals with the potential as well as the contradictions of decentering curatorial action by opening it to the contribution of other practitioners, activists and citizens. Through an in-depth analysis of the exhibition *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts* by Kuratorisk Aktion (2006), the author emphasizes the historic significance of this curatorial project in creating a platform for collaborative reflection on colonial heritage in the Nordic countries, facilitated through the practice of *listening* (Lacey, 2013). However, Ellegard also critically analyzes the unbalances related to the notions of authorship and privilege within the framework of this exhibition.

Ignacio Acosta and May-Britt Öhman also examine colonial legacies in Northern Europe presenting some of the results of a collaborative arts-led research project revolving around Sámi traditional ecological

knowledge about forest fires and land use. Their work is an example of *supradisciplinary* practice in response to ecosocial issues related to the current climate crisis. While reflecting on the role of audio-visual documentation as a potential tool to preserve sustainable Indigenous practices, the authors also focus on the ethical responsibilities in collaborative research by promoting an *ethics of care* rooted in decolonial and feminist values.

*SILVER RIGHTS* is an art project arising from a long-term collaboration between artist Elena Mazzi, Mapuche silver artist Mauro Millán, Argentinan artist Eduardo Molinari, the association Ya Basta! Êdî Bese! and curator Emanuele Guidi (ar/ge kunst), among other agents and institutions. In their article, Mazzi and Guidi explore the possibility to intertwine art practice, activism and curatorship with the aim of generating alliances and forms of co-authorship as a strategy of political and cultural resistance to colonial violence, historical omissions and economic or academic extractivism.

Tobias Ertl critically examines the tendency to incorporate political and social activism within mainstream art institutions. By underlining the connection between activist art and the ideologies of labor and productivism in capitalist societies, the author argues that socially engaged art, while questioning many facets of the capitalist system, still participates in the drive for self-realization through production and activity that lies at its core. In a context where different forms of activism are widely present and recognized in the art world, Ertl proposes artistic inactivism as a poetic alternative to problematize capitalist notions of work and explore non-productivistic temporalities.

Alessio Mazzaro and Alessandra Faccini employ conversation as a research tool to delve into issues such as temporality and prefiguration in socially engaged art. They discuss some ethical conundrums artists and cultural practitioners face while engaging with communities and territories other than their own. Drawing on their respective experience as an artist and a curator, the authors propose possible constructive approaches to these problems based on sustained dialogue with

communities and the inclusion of the *afterlife* dimension of a project in the ideation and planning of artistic interventions.

Gerald Schröder provides a detailed analysis of *The Counterfeit Crochet Project* by artist Stephanie Syjuco (2008), illustrating how participatory initiatives can critically address contemporary art's problematic tendency to reproduce post-Fordist work dynamics and values. His essay also considers the activist dimension of Syjuco's work by analyzing the artist's craftivist practice from a feminist perspective.

Óscar Moreno Escárraga describes the collective creative processes leading to the constellation of artworks exhibited in the show *El Nido de los Pájaros: Micropolítica, Memoria e Imágenes de la Migración Forzosa*<sup>2</sup> (Bogotá, 2023). The author addresses issues of displacement, memory and cultural loss in the context of the war in Colombia through the dialogue between artistic gestures, social studies and local cultural practices, emphasizing the importance of gatherings, conversations and affects in this poetic effort.

Olga Sureda's essay surveys the proliferation of initiatives conflating collective creative practice and agriculture in contemporary art. Starting from the analysis of the work of precursors such as Bonnie Ora Sherk and Gianfranco Baruchello, the author then analyses recent curatorial projects addressing the rural/urban divide, in which the combination between agricultural knowledge and artistic practice functions not only as a means of expression but also a vehicle of social and political criticism.

This themed issue also includes an interview between artist and researcher Chiara Sgaramella and artist Francisco Rubio. The conversation revolves around the longstanding work of the art collective LaFundició. Based in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, the collective promotes situated processes to institute shared material and symbolic practices and promote non-capitalist forms of relationship and knowledge. The dialogue investigates the motivations and creative initiatives of the collective as well as the

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<sup>2</sup> *The Birds' Nest: Micropolitics, Memory and Images of Forced Migration*, author's translation.

influence of ecofeminist values and commoning in their cultural production.

Finally, curator and scholar Alessandra Saviotti provides a review of the recent publication *Arts as Policies of Care* (2024), edited by Martina Angelotti, Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander. The book compiles over forty long-term art projects that embed art practice in the social sphere, to address political and ecosocial matters. Saviotti highlights the innovative methodological approach adopted by the authors to challenge traditional paradigms and offer new analytical tools. In so doing, the publication aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, exploring the evolving intersections of art, community, and activism.

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