

What Can Art Do? *Visible: Art As Policies for Care. Socially Engaged Art (2010-ongoing)*

<https://doi.org/10.1344/regac2024.10.48462>

Alessandra Saviotti

Independent Researcher

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3551-6544>

alessandra.saviotti@gmail.com

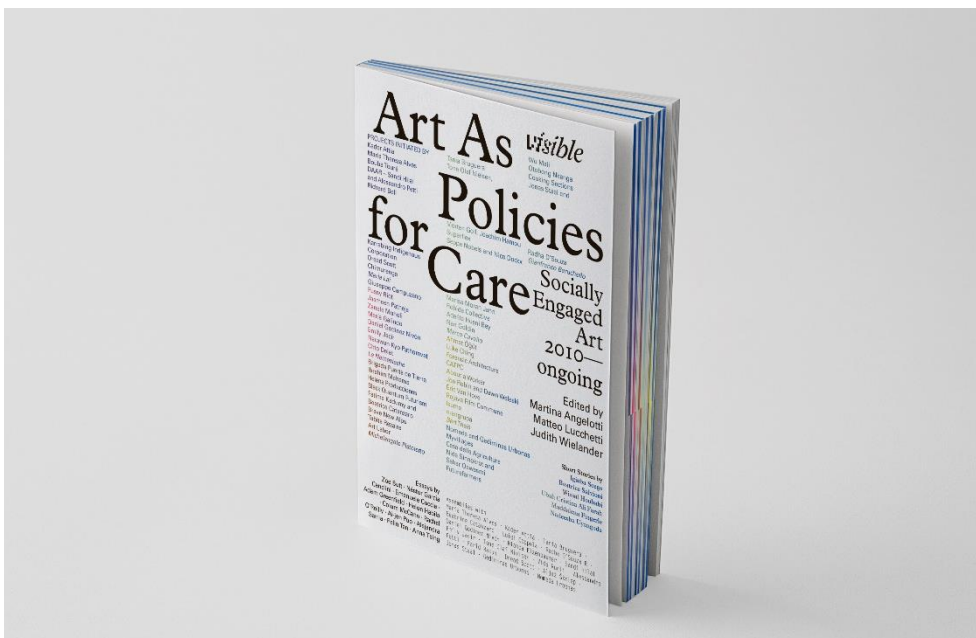
Book review

Martina Angelotti, Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander (Eds.) (2024). *Visible: Art as Policies for Care. Socially Engaged Art (2010–Ongoing)*. Nero Editions. ISBN: 978-88-8056-281-8.

Visible: Art as Policies for Care. Socially Engaged Art (2010—ongoing), edited by Martina Angelotti, Matteo Lucchetti, and Judith Wielander, investigates the evolution and transformative potential of socially engaged art practices over the past fourteen years. This publication represents the latest editorial initiative under *Visible*¹, a program created by Cittadellarte–Fondazione Pistoletto and Fondazione Zegna to explore

¹ The complete overview of the projects, programmes and network developed by Visible since 2010 are available on <https://www.visibleproject.org/>

how art can drive responsible social transformation. Spanning 334 pages and elegantly designed by Irma Boom and Julia Neller, the book offers a global overview of diverse practices. It provides insights from artists, activists, community leaders and constituencies on how art can envision and materialize new ways of existing on this planet. Even the cover itself embodies the collective ethos of socially engaged art, featuring the names of all contributors arranged by sections. This design choice serves as both a symbolic and functional portal into a hopeful and equitable world—a particularly compelling message given the current global crises of genocide, war, and escalating climate emergencies.



[Fig. 1]. Angelotti et al. (Eds.) (2024). *Visible: Art as Policies for Care. Socially Engaged Art (2010–Ongoing)*. Book cover. Designed by Studio Irma Boom and Julia Neller. Courtesy of the artists.

The book is meticulously structured into five distinct sections, each offering a unique lens to examine socially engaged art:

Insights explores how socially engaged art addresses contemporary challenges, drawing from fourteen years of research at Visible. This

section highlights the artists' evolving visions, practices, and the community impacts of their projects, presented through responses to a unified set of questions posed by the editors.

Outlooks expands the discussion, offering essays from experts across disciplines that provide transdisciplinary perspectives on how these practices intersect with politics, society, and culture. These essays investigate how socially engaged art addresses urgent global issues while fostering transformative cultural and social change.

Assemblies captures the spirit of collaborative roundtable discussions. Here, artists and initiators reflect on methodologies of solidarity and care, responses to current crises, and institutional transformations, drawing inspiration from the collective learning framework of Visible's Temporary Parliaments.

Stories shifts into a literary dimension, featuring short fiction commissioned to six Italian authors. These narratives blend imagination and reality to explore themes of socially engaged art, offering a creative lens on geopolitical and environmental challenges while inspiring readers to envision alternative futures.

Archives provides a retrospective of the history and evolution of socially engaged art in Italy. It traces Visible's journey from 2010 to 2024, incorporates philosophical reflections on the future, and revisits pioneering historic projects. This section is enriched with a detailed chronology of assemblies and democratic political models, contextualizing the broader scope of these practices.

Additionally, the book incorporates six dialogical strands—*difficult heritage and ancestral knowledge, commoning communities, bodies of care, loopholing justice, climate struggles, and radical ruralism*—which serve as thematic keywords, enriching the text with a meta-layer of interpretation and analysis. Visual documentation throughout the book further enhances accessibility, with images that rarely center on individuals, instead emphasizing the collective nature of socially engaged art. These visuals include not only humans but also animals, plants, and other living entities, underscoring the interdisciplinary and interspecies approach of many projects.

One of the book’s most distinctive features is its methodological reliance on storytelling, drawing on personal narratives, anecdotes, and subjective perspectives. This approach aligns more closely with autoethnographic writing (Witkin, 2022) than with traditional art critique. Such a methodology signifies a radical departure from modernist conceptions of art, where the artist is often idealised as a solitary genius producing works seen as incontrovertible truths. In contrast, socially engaged art highlighted here emerges as a collaborative process, created by collectives of artists and constituencies who connect their subjectivities to produce new frameworks for collective existence.

Throughout the book, readers will also observe a significant evolution in the lexicon used to describe these projects and practices. Terms such as *impact*, *users*, *constituencies*, *urgencies*, *tool*, *toolkit*, and *long-term approach* might be considered anathema by those adhering to traditional artistic frameworks. However, these terms reflect an evolving vocabulary that adapts alongside the transformation of socially engaged art practices.



[Fig. 2]. Angelotti et al. (Eds.) (2024). *Visible: Art as Policies for Care. Socially Engaged Art (2010–Ongoing)*. Inner pages. Designed by Studio Irma Boom and Julia Neller. Courtesy of the artists.

In particular, the *Archives* section contextualizes this evolution within a broader historical trajectory. During the 1980s, a political and cultural crisis gave rise to a transnational and transdisciplinary movement advocating for radical transformation. Like other societal domains, art was compelled to reconsider its form, purpose, and significance in response to these changes. Socially engaged art emerged within this framework as an experimental and intersectional tool, blending innovative methodologies with political and cultural perspectives. Over time, these projects have addressed an expansive range of issues—from reforming art institutions to broader societal concerns—frequently adopting a *glocal* approach that balances global aspirations with local contexts (Saviotti and Fiocco, 2021).

The projects featured in the book represent a direct counterpoint to Claire Bishop's critique of socially engaged art as a mere neoliberal construct (2012). Bishop contends that socially engaged art often aligns with neoliberal ideologies by shifting responsibility for systemic issues onto individuals and communities rather than addressing their structural roots. While this critique may apply to certain cases, it does not hold true for the majority of projects in this volume. Instead, many of these initiatives underscore the urgency of creating art at a *1:1 scale* (Wright, 2013), generating works that transcend art's conventional boundaries to offer new frameworks for collective living. Furthermore, the inclusion of voices from marginalised communities, particularly those outside the West, challenges Bishop's critique by emphasising cultural specificity and resisting economic reductionism (Saloni, 2020).

One critical aspect that the book does not extensively address is the aftermath of policy transformation. Policies inherently involve a select group of individuals tasked with drafting new frameworks or guidelines, which are subsequently implemented as standardised models for broader application. This centralised approach suggested by the idea of *policy* seems at odds with the objectives articulated in the research, as the case studies presented in the book emphasise methodologies as flexible starting points, designed to be adapted to specific socio-political contexts by the users themselves. Drawing on David Graeber's (2018) reflections, it would be important to explore further whether the initiators of these projects envisioned themselves as ultimate decision-

makers or instead sought to align with existing grassroots movements already working toward addressing these issues and formulating their own solutions. This distinction is crucial for examining the compatibility of socially engaged art with decentralised and participatory paradigms of social change

In essence, the book operates as both an analytical tool and a practical guide. It invites readers to consider socially engaged art through localized contexts, illustrating how it functions as a nuanced form of resistance within diverse socio-political landscapes. By doing so, it offers a manual for imagining and constructing alternative worlds—ones rooted in care, solidarity, and collective coexistence.

In conclusion, *Visible: Art as Policies for Care* envisions the kind of world many aspire to create. It is a guide for radical reimagining and practical intervention, demonstrating how art can profoundly reshape the ways humans and non-humans coexist and care for one another on this shared planet.

References

Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial hells: Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. Verso Books.

Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit Jobs. A theory*. Simon & Schuster.

Saloni, M. (2020). Ends and Means: A Conversation with Geeta Kapur. *October* (171), 115–138. https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00380

Saviotti, A. and Fiocco, F. (2021) The 'usological turn' and the intersection of macrocosm with microcosm. *dpe.tools* https://dpe.tools/resources/the-usological-turn-and-the-intersection-of-macrocosm-with-microcosm?preview_id=428&preview=true

Witkin, S. (2022). Autoethnography and social work: Strange bedfellows or complementary partners? *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, 23(2), 19-35. <https://doi.org/10.1921/swssr.v23i2.2030>

Wright, S. (2013) *Toward a lexicon of Usership*. Van Abbemuseum.