

# SOCIAL WORKS

Performing Art, Supporting Publics

*Shannon Jackson*

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installs systems for managing duration and relationality whose consequences cannot be fully foreseen. It anticipates a future that cannot be known but on whose unfolding its identity depends. Performance promises to accommodate within limits collaborating groups of people who do not always know each other and commits to being inconvenienced by the claims that they bring. It endures the conflicts of these commitments of resources. As such, performance processes, like human welfare processes, create sites that know the paradox of such systems—that sustaining support can simultaneously be felt as constraining. Performance experimentation is, to some degree, the management of competing claims of inconvenience (it is often “in the way” of the person who makes it). At the same time, to work in performance is to remember, and then to forget and to remember again, that such inconvenience is the price paid for being supported. Because so many relational art practices and so many new social models debate their willingness to ride that paradox, it seems important to ask what we can learn by foregrounding performance as a series of supporting relations, relations that sustain entities that are, for all intents and purposes, living.



Figure 1.2 WochenKlausur, *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women* (1994), an eight-week intervention in collaboration with the Verein Shedhalle Zürich, Switzerland

Source: Courtesy of WochenKlausur.

## 2

### QUALITY TIME

#### Social Practice Debates in Contemporary Art

Touchable Stories began in 1996 with idea of using the talents of contemporary artists to help individual communities define their own voice and give it public expression.

Shannon Flattery, Touchable Stories website<sup>1</sup>

In my innermost heart I am a Minimalist with a guilt complex.

Santiago Sierra<sup>2</sup>

By a certain metric, both Shannon Flattery and Santiago Sierra work in the art of social practice. Both have created projects that broach issues of immigration, labor, race, poverty, exile, and environmental degradation. Both have created projects with large groups of people that require significant infrastructural commitments from art, community, and civic organizations. Both were trained in sculpture before “expanding” into the arena of social practice. Soon, however, the parallels start to unravel, as the structures and sensibilities that propel the works of each differ enormously. Flattery’s projects are created under the umbrella of Touchable Stories, a Boston-based US non-profit that relies on donor contributions, foundation grants, and under-funded civic commissioning bodies. Santiago Sierra’s projects are created under the umbrella of his authorial name, one that receives artistic commissions, fees, and royalties from an artworld network of biennial, public art commissioning, museum, and gallery-collector systems. Whereas the language of community voice appears ubiquitously in the descriptions of Touchable Stories, the concept of “voice” is eclipsed in both the descriptions and practices of Santiago Sierra. Whereas the language of Minimalism serves as a touchstone for Sierra’s formal expansions, it is never cited as a resource by Shannon Flattery, who in fact expresses a degree of bafflement at such references.



Such eclipses and bafflements have their parallel in the critical discourses that surround Touchable Stories, Santiago Sierra, and the thousands of artists and art organizations who self-consciously engage “the social” in their work. For those who measure a work’s success on its degree of community “self-definition,” its efficacy is measured in its outreach strategies, its means for providing access, the representational demographics of its participants, and its identifiable social outcomes. Such critical barometers also worry about the mediating role of the artist, about whether an artistic vision enables or neutralizes community voices.<sup>3</sup> But other critical frameworks question the concept of artist-as-community-helpmate on different terms; indeed, for some, a critical barometer starts by questioning the concept of community on which such work relies. To what does a term like community refer? Does it pursue or enforce visions of harmony and consensus? Should a work seek to represent under-represented voices or provide a shared forum for all? Does the helpmate model obscure other goals of artistic work that might use the language of critique rather than the language of consensus?<sup>4</sup>

A related conflict emerges from quarters where questions of aesthetic form remain primary. In this domain, we find critics couching “the social” within a post-Minimalist trajectory of artistic innovation. This trajectory concerns itself with the precarious boundaries of the aesthetic object, questioning the logic that would divide the inside of the art object from the outside of the material, institutional, and social relations on which the art object relies. The turn to the social thus proceeds from a formal questioning of artistic form and its embedded support systems. In such a domain, heretofore exteriorized processes—the labor of installation, curating, and spectating—are themselves conceived as the material of an art event whose boundaries can be extended ad infinitum. New critical questions then respond to art projects that proceed from this trajectory. Is such a formal pursuit in fact a “guilty Minimalism”? If so, is it adequate to the task of social engagement? Do such social practices break institutional boundaries or set the scene for the recuperation of sociality by a service economy hungry for de-materialized encounters? If sociality is the new substrate of contemporary art, where, if anywhere, do questions about access, diversity, and representation fit into the equation?

In this chapter, I turn to these and other themes while placing different disciplinary debates around community art, relational aesthetics, and social practice into conversation with each other. I return later to the work of Touchable Stories and Santiago Sierra in order to consider how languages from different domains might provoke new reflections on the formal and social innovations of such experimentation.

Throughout, the chapter considers several other artists who have served as touchstones for debate around terms such as community, activism, public art, intervention, autonomy, heteronomy, relationality, and social antagonism. Along the way, I try to unsettle some of the binary frames that many use to judge both social efficacy and aesthetic legitimacy. I suggest that the “social turn” might be given more weight and traction when it provokes an awareness of our enmeshment in systems of support, be they systems of labor, immigration, urban planning, or environmental degradation.

### Social Art and its Discontents

Published originally in France in 1998, *Relational Aesthetics* was curator Nicolas Bourriaud’s rapid attempt to come to terms with a heterogeneous array of contemporary art practices. Many of his examples are taken from the exhibition Traffic, which he curated at the CAPC, the Bordeaux museum of contemporary art, in 1996. In brief, serial descriptions, Bourriaud gathered artists such as Christine Hill, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Vanessa Beecroft, Carsten Höller, Fareed Armaly, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres into his articulation of a shared relational practice in contemporary art. Resisting not only pictoriality but objecthood as such, relational aesthetics pushed Minimalist and time-based art to create aesthetic spheres of inter-subjective exchange. For Bourriaud, rather than paint, clay, or canvas, “intersubjectivity” is itself the “substrate” of the art event.<sup>5</sup> To exemplify his argument—and anticipate some of the critical response—let me offer one emblematic moment toward the beginning of the book. Bourriaud lingers a good deal on the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, an artist whom he sees as a central figure in the relational art movement. One of Gonzales-Torres’s stack pieces appeared in Traffic, a form that the artist re-used in other commissions in which stacks of paper or stacks of candy appeared in piles on the gallery floor. This is how Bourriaud describes it:

In Gonzalez-Torres’ *Stacks* and piles of sweets, for example, the visitor was authorized to take away something from the piece (a sweet, a sheet of paper), but it would purely and simply disappear if every visitor exercised this right: the artist thus appealed to the visitor’s sense of responsibility, and the visitor had to understand that this gesture was contributing to the break-up of the work. What position should be adopted when looking at a work that hands out its component parts while trying to hang on to its structure?<sup>6</sup>



This passage is notable because it is one of the only places in the book when Bourriaud uses the word “responsibility” positively, that is, as a term that enhances rather than dilutes the aesthetic impact of a work. Bourriaud here offers a window into the durational projections of this piece, for *Stacks* propels us to imagine our relation both to others in the gallery and to those whom we will never encounter. What, the piece provokes us to ask, is our relation to those who took a piece before us? What is our relation to those who will not have a piece to take away after us? Despite this meditation, however, most of Bourriaud’s book questions the frame of responsibility in relational art. He admits that relational interactions would seem to invoke Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of the face, defined by Levinas as “the bond with others only made as responsibility.”<sup>7</sup> But, Bourriaud asks instead, “don’t ethics have a horizon other than this humanism which reduces inter-subjectivity to a kind of inter-servility?” Rather than a responsibly “servile” exchange, Bourriaud argues for a less obligating paradigm: “[p]roducing a form is to invent possible encounters; receiving a form is to create the conditions for an exchange, the way you return a service in a game of tennis.”<sup>8</sup> If Levinas’s ethical paradigm emphasizes a relationality with an Other that we do not choose, one to which we must respond and whose claims are not alterable by us, Bourriaud proposes a relationality that is perpetually revisable.

The tennis game analogy, like other moments throughout the book, seems to be drawn in a frictionless environment, unencumbered by the claims of responsibility. While Bourriaud makes an important intervention in the discourse on ethics in art practice, it is still hard to imagine that this playful exchange could occur without other responsible (or servile) parties. If sociality is a tennis game, do players call the lines themselves? Do they pick up their own tennis balls? Or are relational players in fact relying implicitly on a crew of ball-boys and umpires to keep the exchange both just and aloft? In fact, if we add an awareness of parallel support systems to our understanding of relational art, a different view comes forward. What if we remember another central component of the piece, which is that Gonzalez-Torres contractually specified that his pieces would be replenished by the exhibitors and collectors who presented and purchased them? The threat of the ephemeral—“it would purely and simply disappear”—is thus less an ontological reality than a potent effect sustained by a steady operation of support and maintenance. The resonance of this relational work thus lies in the fact that it both required and indexed a supporting system—one that was material, spatial, temporal, and too formally intriguing to dismiss as “servile.”<sup>9</sup>

Visual art critic Claire Bishop’s 2004 *October* essay “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” was an attempt to critique the perceived

weightlessness of Bourriaud’s paradigms. In so doing, she set off a great deal of discussion in the experimental art world, not always to defend Bourriaud but to respond to the new paradigms she offered in the process. Bishop’s continued reflection appeared subsequently in *Artforum*, along with a variety of explicit and implicit responses in that journal and others.<sup>10</sup> The concerns of this debate are symptomatic of the kind of discourse and confusion that often emerges when a discussion of politics and aesthetics is under way. Claire Bishop’s *October* essay and her *Artforum* piece expressed themselves in slightly different terms, but together they created oppositions among different critical paradigms and art movements. Most generally, Bishop argued for what she called the “antagonist” possibilities of art practice. Antagonism is the term for a criticality and a resistance to intelligibility that is, in her view, both necessary for aesthetics and neutralized when art starts to tread into socially ameliorative territory. Art practices that seek to create a harmonious space of inter-subjective encounter—i.e., those that “feel good”—risk neutralizing the capacity of critical reflection. Furthermore, art practices that seek to correct social ills—i.e., those that “do good”—risk becoming overly instrumentalized, banalizing the formal complexities and interrogative possibilities of art under the homogenizing umbrella of a social goal. As her argument unfolded, certain artists—such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick—ended up on the “bad,” feel-good side of her critical equation; Tiravanija’s renowned use of gallery space as a site for food preparation and festive circulation did not leave room for a critical antagonism. Meanwhile, the “do-gooding” impulses of other social practices in Liverpool, Los Angeles, San Sebastian, Rotterdam, and Istanbul were critiqued for their uncritical gestures of “responsibility.” Bishop’s concerns were leveled most heavily on Oda Projesi, a Turkish artist collective that moved into a three-room apartment in Istanbul and extended invitations to their neighbors, eventually sponsoring children’s workshops, parades, potlucks, and other events that created a context for dialogue and exchange. At the same time, other artists such as Santiago Sierra, Thomas Hirschhorn, Francis Aliş, and Alessandra Mir ended up on the “good,” antagonistic side of Bishop’s critical equation. She reconsidered Thomas Hirschhorn’s well-publicized contribution to Documenta XI in 2002, *Bataille Monument*, a piece that was sited in a local bar and on the lawn shared by two housing projects in Norstadt, a suburb kilometers away from the Documenta venue in Kassel. Defending against accusations that Hirschhorn appropriated a local space without gaining a sufficiently deep understanding of its politics, Bishop foregrounded the degree to which Hirschhorn’s decisions and structures created a space of disorientation for Documenta spectators,



one that disallowed any notion of “community identity” to form and, in so doing, “re-admitted a degree of autonomy to art.”<sup>11</sup>

In creating a critical barometer for making these determinations, Bishop invoked the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as well as that of Jacques Rancière. She cited Laclau and Mouffe’s arguments on the necessity of antagonizing boundaries within and between large-scale and small-scale social sectors. She implicitly aligned the antagonistic gesture also with Rancière’s language of “rupture” in his aesthetic and democratic theories of radical equality. Bishop thereby equated (post-) socialist theories of antagonism and rupture with the felt discomfort of a spectator’s encounter with appropriately edgy art material.<sup>12</sup> By opposing antagonistic and non-antagonistic art, Bishop sought to foreground the extent to which “ethical judgments” and a “generalized set of moral precepts” govern the goals and analysis of such work in lieu of aesthetic criteria.<sup>13</sup> In her view, the social mission of social art over-determined its structure, creating a desire for functionality and efficacy that neutralized art’s capacity to remain outside the instrumentalist prescriptions of the social. While Bishop’s arguments were not exactly the same—sometimes Bishop did not like art that was feeling good and sometimes she did not like art that was doing good—together, the essays re-assembled a familiar lexicon for evaluating a committed art practice. Such a critical barometer measured an artwork’s place among a number of polarizations: (1) social celebration versus social antagonism; (2) legibility versus illegibility; (3) radical functionality versus radical unfunctionality; and (4) artistic heteronomy versus artistic autonomy. The thrust of Bishop’s “discontent” was that “the social turn” in art practice was in danger of emphasizing the first terms in this series of pairings over the critical, illegible, useless, and autonomous domains that art must necessarily inhabit in order to be itself. With references that are easily consumed and accessible, with social goals that aspire to effective social change, with collaborative turns that overly invest in a “Christian ideal of self sacrifice” to “renounce authorial presence” before the will of communities, Bishop drew some new lines in the sand in some old debates about aesthetics and politics.<sup>14</sup> “The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address this contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work *and* in the conditions of its reception.”<sup>15</sup> Interestingly too, her criticisms also turned to a theatrical language to characterize such works’ capitulations, whether in their mimicking of the “staged experiences” of a service economy, in relational art curators receiving undue credit for their “stage-managing,” or in Liam Gillick’s compromised “backdrops” and “scenario-thinking.”<sup>16</sup>

For anyone with any allegiance to the Adornoian vision of aesthetic commitment sounded in Bishop’s language of antimony, it is hard not to argue with some of her conclusions. Indeed, the fact that Bishop also advocated art practices that “attempt to think the aesthetic and the social/political *together*, rather than subsuming both within the ethical” seems to dovetail with the kind of coincidence between the social and the aesthetic that scores of contemporary artists and critics perpetually seek.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, we might wonder about the terms by which such antimonies are formed. By what logic are artistic autonomy and social intervention made “contradictory” in the first place? Where have terms such as intelligibility and unintelligibility become polarized? Why is the other-directed work of social art cast as a capitulation to the “Christian ethic of the good soul” (a religious equation that is surely the fastest route to damnation in critical humanities circles)? Finally, what does it mean to reinvolve divisions between autonomy and heteronomy in a domain of practice that unsettles the discrete boundaries of the art event?

If we go back to those classic debates among Theodor Adorno, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin, we are reminded both of the political stakes behind such terms as well as the variation in interpretation about what they might mean. Adorno roundly criticized Bertolt Brecht’s “didacticism” and argued that the playwright’s desire to be socially engaged had in fact blunted his efficacy.<sup>18</sup> Brecht’s desire to be useful had produced an instrumentalization of aesthetics. Brecht’s desire to be accessible had produced a legibility of plot and character that only “trivialized” politics into easy good and bad oppositions.<sup>19</sup> For Adorno, Brecht’s entire “oeuvre” was a capitulation to the “crudely heteronomous demands” of the social that ultimately divested aesthetics of its reason for being. But it is also important to note that Adorno—and Brecht—were just as likely to encounter critics who argued the opposite. Contra Adorno, Georg Lukács—as well as a variety of leftist comrades—did not find Brecht’s work “too intelligible”; rather they found it to be not intelligible *enough* to be of social use. Meanwhile, Walter Benjamin argued that Brecht was the ur-example of an aesthetic practice that was at once socially engaged and formally innovative, not simply an instrumentalization of aesthetics. This variation in interpretation notwithstanding, it is intriguing to consider the degree to which Bishop’s concerns parallel Adorno’s defense of autonomy. Adorno was concerned with how much the call for socially intelligible art rationalized intellectual closure:

Today the curmudgeons whom no bombs could demolish have allied themselves with the philistines who rage against the



alleged incomprehensibility of the new art. . . . This is why today autonomous rather than committed works of art should be encouraged in Germany. Committed works all too readily credit themselves with every noble value, and then manipulate them at their ease.<sup>20</sup>

For Adorno, aesthetic autonomy was important to preserve a space of criticality, a question mark amid the piety, righteousness, and neat dualisms of "committed" art. "Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden 'it should be otherwise.'"<sup>21</sup> This willingness to occupy a place of refusal was for Adorno the most important goal of aesthetic practice. It meant questioning the social pull to "accommodate the world"—refusing social conventions of intelligibility and utility, however well-intentioned and morally just their causes seemed. While Adorno's legacy in modernist aesthetics has been qualified and even repudiated in the last half of the twentieth century, his language still echoes in a variety of critical circles. At the same time, it remains a question whether Adornoian criticality can be equated with Laclau and Mouffe's "antagonism," or whether both are equal to Rancièrian "rupture." (Meanwhile, all varieties of theatre scholars will wonder why these defamiliarizing terms cannot just as easily align with Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*.) It might not seem appropriate to ask artists and art critics to debate the finer points of twentieth and twenty-first century changes in social theory—even in a field such as social practice. But it does seem worth reviewing some of this literature in order both to understand why such philosophy provides a resource for artists and to plot our way out of certain stalemates produced by selective readings.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe first published *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in 1985 to reconsolidate a left politics. Their project was a response to the conservative economic and social developments that would underwrite neoliberalism; it was also one that integrated concepts drawn from psychoanalytic and critical theories of representation, discourse, and subjectivity to unsettle Marxist determinisms. The concept of "antagonism" was one that they carefully distinguished from other social theorizations such as "contradiction" or "opposition" to delineate a more fundamental space of epistemological contingency. For Laclau and Mouffe, the problem with "contradiction or opposition" was that such terms defined struggle as a clash between objective relations:

There is nothing antagonistic in a crash between two vehicles: it is a material fact obeying positive physical laws. To apply the same principle to this social terrain would be tantamount to

saying that what is antagonistic in class struggle is the physical act by which a policeman hits a worker militant, or the shouts of a group in Parliament which prevent a member of an opposing sector from speaking. "Opposition" is here a concept of the physical world which has been metaphorically extended to the social world.<sup>22</sup>

With a term such as antagonism, however, they sought to delineate not a relation among objective forces but instead the constitutive "limits to every objectivity":<sup>23</sup>

Antagonism, far from being an objective relation, is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are shown . . . if, as we have demonstrated, the social only exists as a partial effort for constructing society—that is, an objective and closed system of differences—antagonism, as a witness of the impossibility of a final suture, is the "experience" of the limits of the social . . . Antagonisms . . . constitute the limits of society, the latter's impossibility of fully constituting itself.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to the opposed relation of physical forces, antagonism exposed the precarity of socially defined roles:

It is because a physical force *is* a physical force that another identical and countervailing force leads to rest; in contrast, it is because a peasant *cannot be* a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner expelling him from his land.<sup>25</sup>

While an analogy between the physical and social world would, for example, define the relation between "landowner" and "peasant" as an opposition, an antagonistic relation would focus on the fact of the peasant's non-identity with her assumed social role, dismantling the presumed objectivity and givenness of her position. If Laclau and Mouffe worked to integrate a discursive theory of representation into an analysis of society, their sense of the non-objectivity of relationally defined social sectors did not mean to discount the weight of their effects. Benveniste's reminder that relational definition does not mean airless relativism proved helpful:

To say that values are "relative" means that they are relative to each other. Now, is that not precisely the proof of their necessity? . . . Everything is so necessary in it that modifications



of the whole and of the details reciprocally condition one another. The relativity of values is the best proof that they depend closely upon one another in the synchrony of a system which is always being threatened, always restored.<sup>26</sup>

As they wrote in the preface to the 2000 edition, Laclau and Mouffe viewed the subsequent “post-1989” responses from the left—declarations of the undoing of separations between the right and left, calls for “third ways” or “radical centers”—with a degree of dismay.<sup>27</sup> By revivifying Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and complicating a notion of antagonism, they had hoped to give new life to democratic political articulation:

We never thought, though, that discarding the Jacobin friend/enemy model of politics as an adequate paradigm for democratic politics should lead to the adoption of the liberal one, which envisages democracy as simple competition among interests taking place in a neutral terrain—even if the accent is put on the “dialogic” dimension.<sup>28</sup>

A non-objective and partial model of society’s constitution was not meant to discount the vital interdependence and “non-neutral” asymmetries of such processes—or to support a vision of a new, frictionless world of relational tennis games.

One can see why this conception of antagonism has a certain appeal to artistic sensibilities. This brand of social theory is notable not only because of its commitments to democracy and political articulation but also because of its conceptual and perceptual unhinging of the givenness of the social world. It finds a politics in an orientation that questions the ontological match between social roles and living beings as well as the ontological division between precariously differentiated social sectors. By a certain logic, then, the fundamental pursuit of contemporary conceptual art is in fact the disclosure of antagonistic relations. The terms of such a pursuit receive related if slightly different treatment in the hands of Jacques Rancière whose aesthetic and social theory shares interlocutors with Laclau and Mouffe—and is also ubiquitously invoked by contemporary art critics and artists. Rancière elaborates politicized perception as a radically equalizing incarnation of a genuine democracy. For Rancière, the experience of rupture occurs in moments of categorical crisis that no longer uphold social hierarchies, on the one hand, or aesthetic divisions, on the other. Pupil and student, peasant and land-owner, the philosopher and the poor, the governing and the governed,

all occupy the same lateral plane. In such a world, governing relations might be redistributed not by seniority, class, or education but by unanticipated exchanges in fields of mutual ignorance and knowledge, sometimes even by the “drawing of lots” that, Rancière reminds us, was the Athenian “democratic procedure by which a people of equals decides the distribution of places.”<sup>29</sup> Rancière brings this same radically equalizing vision to an aesthetic domain, to argue not only for its perceptual potential but also for the necessity of questioning the categorical divisions and binary oppositions that govern an aesthetic “distribution of the sensible.” A radically equalizing vision dismantles analytic polarities that divide activity from passivity, stasis from duration, use from contemplation, image from reality, artist from audience, object from surround, individual from community.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in *The Emancipated Spectator* (*Le Spectateur émancipé*), previewed in an English translation in a 2007 issue of *Artforum*, Rancière uses the site of the theatre to argue against such polarizing distributions in a wider discourse on relational, interactive, and “open-ended” art. More precisely, he questions discourses that risk reinstating such distributions in the call to overcome them:

Why not think, in this case too, that it is precisely the attempt at suppressing the distance that constitutes the distance itself? Why identify the fact of being seated motionless with inactivity, if not by the presupposition of a radical gap between activity and inactivity? Why identify “looking” with “passivity” if not by the presupposition that looking means looking at the image or the appearance of, that it means being separated from the reality that is always behind the image?<sup>31</sup>

The logic that calls for the overcoming of differentiation thus misrecognizes the fundamental equality that is already there, consigning theatrical and other relational art discourses to a state of “self-suppressing mediation.”<sup>32</sup>

While it is perilous to imagine such rich and wide-ranging theory as frames “to be applied” by contemporary artists, we can still see why such thinking has been a provocative resource in the world of contemporary art and performance. Though the vocabulary and direction of the Laclau/Mouffe project differs from that of Rancière, their articulations chime with an art context that is grappling with the categorical legacies of medium specificity in the same moment that new relationships between aesthetics and politics are being tested. Paradoxically, though, we also find artists and critics invoking such social theory to create new



differentiations and exclusions about the direction of contemporary art. This seems odd for a social theory that critiques the impulse to differentiate. To return to its implications for social practice in art, the issue is whether an art critical invocation of antagonism operates with the kind of logic articulated in contemporary social theory. Bishop's exchanges with Bourriaud, Kester, Gillick, and others provide helpful places to consider such a question and to understand the difficulties of maintaining reliable barometers in such highly expanded fields. For instance, Bishop critiques Tiravanija for valuing "use over contemplation," but her other critiques of the role "festivity" in his projects suggest that utility is not their primary value.<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere, she critiques Liam Gillick for not offering "clear recipes" and "remaining abstract on the issue of articulating a specific position" but later defends "illegible" practices whose rigorous abstraction refuses to sacrifice itself to the "altar of social change."<sup>34</sup> The "cozy situation" of Tiravanija and Gillick's status as "perennial favorites of a few curators" provokes concern about the reach and limits of their work, whereas the "high visibility" of Sierra and Hirschhorn "on the blockbuster art circuit" apparently does not.<sup>35</sup> Finally, Bishop's mistrust of the "quality of these relationships" in "feel-good" projects does not stop her from criticizing the pursuit of quality relationships in "do-gooding" projects. She characterizes involvement in long-term community research as modeling "a Christian ideal of self-sacrifice," as being motivated by the "incapacitating restrictions of guilt," and as capitulating to "the predictable formulas of workshops, discussions, meals, film screenings, and walks."<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*, which organized a large-scale community re-enactment of the 1984 miners' strike in Great Britain, is redeemed not because of Deller's research or knowledge of community history but because it was "utterly pointless."<sup>37</sup>

Several critics have accused Bishop of doing what, frankly, many critics do, that is, finding a way to celebrate the artwork that we happen to like. Whether supported by a language of antagonism or of Rancièrian rupture, Bishop's work can be read as a plea not to repeat the "self-suppressing mediations" of social art projects that seek to "overcome" their own aestheticism. At the same time, her important intervention can be diluted by the impulse to reinstate those hierarchies and divisions, to re-value "contemplation" *over* use, "unintelligibility" *over* intelligibility, objectification *over* durationality. In such an analytic quagmire, the goals of sustaining antinomies or of "thinking the social and the aesthetic together" slide all too easily into the re-valuing of a devalued side. In the process, some of the antagonistic aspirations of community art practice are sidelined as well; as Grant Kester argues in his own

frustrated comeback, they are equated with the "identity politics" of a "community arts tradition" that, for Bishop, occupies "the lowest circle of hell."<sup>38</sup> In the antimony between individual artist and social community, Bishop values "highly-authored" projects over a consensual collaboration, missing the chance to question formally the individuated author's social role.<sup>39</sup> Social practices might in fact provoke their most intriguing experiences of antagonism in their recognition that, like the peasant, an author "cannot be" an author. There are other telling conceptual trade-offs in the texts, including the degree to which Bishop's concern about community identification derives from her suspicion of "government" involvement in the arts. As anticipated in my introduction, she applauds projects that ensure "their remoteness from the socially engaged public art projects that have sprung up since the 1980s under the aegis of 'new genre public art'" and critiques those that collude with a New Labour "government [that] prioritizes social effect over considerations of artistic quality."<sup>40</sup> Importantly, Bishop notes that such projects can be "a cost-effective way of justifying public spending on the arts while diverting attention away from the structural causes of decreased social participation, which are political and economic (welfare, transport, education, healthcare, etc.)."<sup>41</sup> Intriguingly then, Bishop gestures to the importance of maintaining public infrastructures and critiques the burden placed on artists to do the work of maintenance. Such an importance critique underpins her desire to renew the value of aesthetic autonomy. Interestingly, though, she decides to find that autonomy in the "relatively neutral space of the gallery."<sup>42</sup> When asked directly whether it is worse to be instrumentalized by the state or by the market, she conceded, "I'm afraid I think it is the former."<sup>43</sup> Such comments show how an interest in antagonizing one social register ("the state") can leave others untouched ("the market"); recalling Laclau and Mouffe's dismayed reaction to misuses of their work, the economically fettered space of the gallery system ends up positioned as "neutral terrain." The historical compromises of British governance notwithstanding, Bishop's relative disdain for public funding processes and relative tolerance for the foibles of a private art market ring strangely in a text that allies itself with a book on "socialist strategy."

We do find more consistency from Bishop in the language she uses to describe the projects she favors. Most of the descriptive terms used—whether dramatizing Hirschhorn or Sierra, Phil Collins, Artur Zmijewski, or others—have a similar ring. They are "tougher, more disruptive"; they create "difficult—sometimes excruciating—situations"; they provoke "discomfort and frustration." They may appear "uncomfortable and exploitive"; they "sustain tension" and are sometimes "staggeringly



hard.”<sup>44</sup> Importantly, such language counters the “feel-good” spin she finds in Bourriaud’s relational paradigms as well as the do-gooding she finds in texts such as Grant Kester’s *Conversation Pieces*, a book that she feels “seems perfectly content to allow that a socially collaborative art project could be deemed a success if it works on the level of social intervention even though it founders on the level of art.”<sup>45</sup> But the combative language of disruption also re-animates quite familiar modernist, oppositional languages in both aesthetics and politics. Despite Bishop’s own careful attention to the distinctions Laclau and Mouffe make between a physical concept of opposition (the “car crash model”) and a social concept of antagonism, the routine celebration of the “tough” and “excruciating” risks forgetting these nuances. The “discomfort” between art and receiver becomes the force worthy of critical interest; if such an encounter does produce an antagonistic experience of “the limits of objectivity,” that effect is sidelined by her language’s oppositional fixation on whether it is “staggeringly hard.” Such a concern seems to underwrite Liam Gillick’s own response to Bishop’s critique of his work, arguing that “Mouffe is not calling for more friction within some of the structures proposed within such a context, but is elaborating an argument against the kind of social structuring that would produce a recognizable art ‘world’ in the first place.”<sup>46</sup> Gillick continues:

The implication that Hirschhorn and Sierra upset more people than Tiravanija and I do does not mean that they are closer to Mouffe’s notion of antagonism; rather, all four of us are, at best, engaged in an ongoing sequence of arguments in relation to one another and the broader culture that, when taken as a whole, is a limited yet effective demonstration of the potential of a new recognition of tensions within established models of social relations.<sup>47</sup>

Despite a call to re-embrace modernist unintelligibility, the focus on a hyperbolic toughness risks framing antagonism as a quite intelligible—and marketable—crash between two opposing forces. For Gillick, such a focus also enables “the right degree of verbal commodity exchange” to sustain the blockbuster artistic careers of Sierra and Hirschhorn:

Regardless of the complex ideology behind the work, “Have you seen the blocked-up pavilion?” “Have you been to the Bataille bar?” or “Have you seen the tattooed and humiliated workers?” is far easier to share than, “Have you seen the thing

that was the backdrop for the writing of a book that exists only in parallel to the structure here yet attempts to decode the way ethical traces find form in the built world?”<sup>48</sup>

This kind of debate might be unique to a certain brand of artworld discourse, and yet it does find its echo in other discourses as well. Theatre and performance studies scholar Sonja Kufinec has argued for the need to address “the image problem” of community theatre, paralleling Grant Kester’s attempts to legitimate the theoretical ballast of public art’s “conversation pieces.”<sup>49</sup> Perhaps the specificity—even the peculiarity—of this artworld debate comes into higher relief by briefly comparing its contours to another debate on the limits and radicality of social art. Preceding Bishop’s article by four years, Sara Brady published an analysis of Touchstone Theatre’s adaptation of *Prometheus Bound* in the former steel town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in the United States.<sup>50</sup> Entitled *Steelbound*, the production came about after a year of research and interviews with city inhabitants and former employees of Bethlehem Steel, which had closed its century-old plant in the late 1990s, leaving the inhabitants and economy of Bethlehem to founder. Appearing in *The Drama Review* in 2000, Brady’s article tracked Touchstone members’ processes of discussion and research, their town hall meetings and interviews, their collaboration with Cornerstone Theatre in the re-writing of the script, their outreach campaign in the audition process, rehearsals, performances, and feedback sessions along the way. Brady’s conclusions were anticipated in the title of her text, “Welded to the Ladle: *Steelbound* and Non-Radicality in Community-based Theatre.” What happens when we compare and contrast the terms by which this “non-radicality” was measured? Like Bishop’s concerns about public funding, Brady suggested that “big-budget projects of late have operated less by the principles of the company and more by the demands of governmental funding agendas.”<sup>51</sup> She also had a concern about other agendas. Touchstone went through a request process to receive permission to perform on the site of Bethlehem Steel’s grounds; it also received permission from the Parks Commission to authorize their public congregation. Brady critiqued both this private and public collusion as an eclipse of a genuine grassroots project. “Hopes of the organically developed ‘community art-making’ that grassroots artists prioritize were clouded over by the reality of Bethlehem’s actual centers of power.”<sup>52</sup> She cited Baz Kershaw’s analysis of Welfare State International’s *Town Hall Tattoo* as a resource for lodging a critique of practices that include “very little radicality” when companies are “operating too close to the heart of local power to take any really significant ideological risks.”<sup>53</sup>



While Brady lauded Touchstone's devotion "to school residencies, summer workshops, and local community-organization partners, bringing Touchstone company members off-site out of the theatre and into the neighborhood," she felt they needed to be more aware of the situatedness of their involvement.<sup>54</sup> Bethlehem's community voices were not transparently presented but were "community stories *as told to, as mediated by* a professional playwright"; she argued that community theatre projects had not come to terms with the impurity of this position.<sup>55</sup> Measuring the project's distance from a "Matrix Articulating the Principles of Grassroots Theatre" developed by the Community Arts Network in 1992, Brady concluded that *Steelbound* "falls short" in terms of its lack of comprehensive inclusion (she did not find a Latino member of the cast) and the rhetoric of "celebration," "closure," "moving on," and "hunger for healing" that seemed to motivate its dramaturgy.<sup>56</sup> For Brady, non-radicality was confirmed by the fact that *Steelbound* did not make a direct appeal for industry accountability or reparation; "never did the script ask the company to answer for the shut-downs, for the failure of the company to keep up with other mills in the U.S. and internationally."<sup>57</sup> *Steelbound* might have felt good but did not do good. Much like the heated response elicited by Bishop's *October* and *Artforum* interventions, Brady's essay prompted a storm of letters to the *The Drama Review*; the letters critiqued her vision and questioned the terms of her analysis.

Both Bishop and Brady thus argued that community art projects were insufficiently radical, but there the comparison ends and the contrast begins. Whereas Bishop worried about the sacrifice of authorial vision to the collaborative ethos, Brady worried that the mediating function of aesthetics was still too strong. For Brady, a document such as the "Matrix Articulating the Principles of Grassroots Theatre" was an ideal only partially reached; for Bishop, such a matrix—involving as it does "workshops," "meals," and no doubt quite a few "walks"—would certainly have been deemed "a predictable formula." For Brady, the lack of a directly legible appeal was non-radical; for Bishop, such illegibility was the place where radicality might have had a chance of residing. In analyzing the labor performance of Jeremy Deller, Bishop celebrated the fact that it was both "politically legible" and "utterly pointless;" for Brady, *Steelbound* was not pointed enough. What these critiques shared was a mistrust of "feel-good" collaboration—whether manifested in festive situations or in gestures of "healing." Neither seemed to feel that the experience of social antagonism was possible in a context that felt good. But they located the needed antidote in places diametrically opposed. For Bishop, a diluted form of consensus would be combated

by a re-commitment to autonomous aesthetic forms, unfettered by heteronomous social claims. For Brady, a diluted consensus would be combated by a deeper commitment to the social claims of a community, removing itself further from the specious autonomy of aesthetics.

### Infrastructural Avowal in Two Acts

It can be argued that a certain kind of detached antagonism is perhaps less prevalent in a theatre context than in an artworld context, where critics more explicitly reckon with the legacies of Adorno's negative dialectics and with the inherited formalisms of modernist art criticism. By contrast, it can also be argued that a kind of activist antagonism is more prevalent in a theatre context where the collaborative necessity of its collective form seems more clearly aligned with the performative politics of protest and direct action. But it is important not to engage in another brand of medium-specific exceptionalism; a divide between ambiguous visual radicality and unambiguous theatrical radicality would only play back into the hands of those who equate theatricality with culinary spectacle or unsophisticated literalism. Many of the most renowned experimental theatre companies are just as skeptical of politically explicit calls for social change; The Wooster Group might be well matched to Bishop's critical paradigm, not only because of its artworld street credentials but also because of its refusal to announce its political allegiances.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the ambiguous, dissonant juxtaposition of forms and themes found in much post-dramatic, post-Brechtian playwriting makes a point of resisting overt political intelligibility, which to many is in fact the point of Brecht's concepts of estrangement and defamiliarization. Theatre scholars such as Alan Read, Nicholas Ridout, and Joe Kelleher have recently argued that an instrumentalizing pull in "theatre for social change" can compromise the more complex social antagonisms that exist within the theatrical aesthetic.<sup>59</sup>

In order to concretize this conversation without falling back on a visual versus theatrical binary, let me return to the two artists who I said were "very different." Both incorporate the registers of performance in their work, and both began such incorporations as an extension of visual art practice. As noted earlier, Santiago Sierra, a Spanish-born artist currently based in Mexico City, has an international reputation in the contemporary art world. He has participated in annual festivals and biennials and received major commissions from a range of art organizations in both elite cosmopolitan cities and in more locally engaged galleries and museums in Latin and South America. Shannon Flattery is the founder and artistic director of Touchable Stories, a Boston-based community



arts group that creates multi-year, interactive, site-specific oral history installations in neighborhood community spaces. According to their curators, spectators, and reviewers, both artists address issues of social marginalization, especially around poverty, labor, immigration, exile, urbanization, and environmental injustice. However, to compare one artist who calls himself “a Minimalist with a guilt complex” to another who seeks to give marginal sectors of society the opportunity to “define their own voice” is to compare different artistic methods of social engagement. Sierra already occupies a favored place in Bishop’s critical paradigm, one that would critique Touchable Stories in terms akin to those directed at Oda Projesi. Meanwhile, Touchable Stories would find a relatively secure place under “Grassroots Matrix” barometers, one that would judge Sierra’s practices to be cynically colluding and transparently exploitative.

Rather than choosing between polarized critical and artistic allegiances, I would like to experiment with the language that we use to analyze them. My sense is that both of these forms of artistic work produce a consciousness of artistic heteronomy and social interdependence *together*, though the techniques by which they achieve such a coincidence differ. While Flattery’s practice exemplifies an ethic of critical ethnography in its methods of extended collaboration and inter-media incorporation, Sierra’s social engagements are in some ways “anti-social,” exposing the reductive operations of social inequity by mimicking their forms. At the same time, both artists cultivate an awareness in spectators of their systemic relation to the social issues addressed and to the durational, spatial, and embodied structures in which that address occurs. Both artists have different ways of exposing the aesthetic infrastructures of the art object to highlight the social infrastructures on which sentient beings wittingly and unwittingly depend. I would also suggest that the experience of antagonism—as a recognition of the limits of the objective constitution of society—are possible in both domains. An analytic sense of such a possibility, however, can only emerge with a variable sense of its conditions, that is, with a willingness to release from the sense that a radically antagonistic art exists *either* in an extra-aesthetic space of community action *or* in an aesthetically protected space of ambiguous discomfort. As a first step, then, I would like to compare some of the forms and techniques we find in these works, considering in particular how a post-Minimalist formal language offers critical traction in reckoning with these expanded performances.

Santiago Sierra impertinently reworks Minimalist forms such as the cube, the line, and the parallelepiped, a reworking that often involves the incorporation of wage laborers. In his 2000 *Workers Who Cannot*

*Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, the exhibition space of Berlin’s Kunst-Werke was scattered with vertically poised cardboard boxes just large enough to enclose Chechnyan refugees hired to remain inside. It was a structure repeated in similar projects in Havana, Guatemala City (see Figure 2.1) and other sites where the imagery of boxed people both metaphorized and literalized local refugee and labor politics. In a piece that seemed to comment on both the Minimalist form and on the desire to “do good,” Sierra’s *90 cm Bread Cube* (2003) was a solid bread cube baked in specific dimensions and offered as food in a shelter for homeless people in Mexico City. Documentation shows people gathered around to slice off parts of the cube onto paper plates, the geometry of the cube undone by the claims of its marginalized consumers. These and many other projects re-engage Minimalist geometry as well as the anxieties invoked by these experiments. *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid* recalled Tony Smith’s *Die*, the large vertical block that was the object of Michael Fried notorious projection as a “silent presence of another person.”<sup>60</sup> The inclusion of living bodies as material within these geometries thus literalizes Minimalism’s threatening anthropomorphism. But the bodies also engage and push farther some of the fundamental perceptual challenges of Minimalism, something

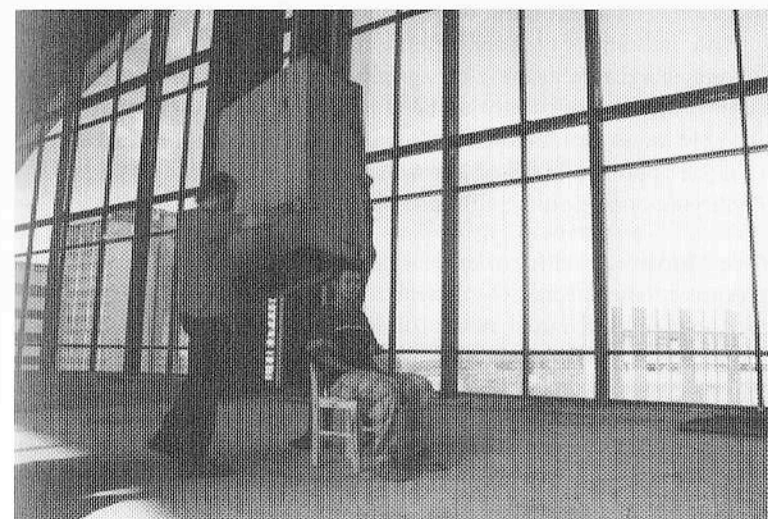


Figure 2.1 Santiago Sierra, *8 People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes* (August 1999), G & T Building, Guatemala City, Guatemala

Source: Courtesy of Santiago Sierra.



made apparent when we look again at the early challenge of "Specific Objects." As noted by sculptors such as Donald Judd, Tony Smith, and Robert Morris, such a reductive sculptural vocabulary—one that rejected both figuration and abstraction to utilize specific geometrical forms and their serial repetition—exposed the conditions of viewing to the spectator who received them. As legions of critics have noted subsequently, Michael Fried's impulse to call such techniques "theatrical" had to do with his discomfort with such self-aware forms of spectatorship and with the durational experience they produced. For example,

[L]iteralist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work . . . the experience of literalist art is of an object in a *situation*—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*.<sup>61</sup>

Fried then went on to quote sculptor Robert Morris's "Notes on Sculpture," to comment on the artist's desire to turn aesthetic experience into a self-consciously spatialized experience for the spectator:

The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relations as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.<sup>62</sup>

While Morris wanted to make clear the degree to which such situations de-centered the spectator—"I wish to emphasize that things are in a space with oneself, rather than . . . [that] one is in a space surrounded by things"—Fried refused to accept the importance of the distinction:

Again, there is no clear or hard distinction between the two states of affairs: one is, after all, *always* surrounded by things. But the things that are literalist works of art must somehow *confront* the beholder—they must, one might always say be placed not just in his space but in his *way*. [. . .] It is, I think, worth remarking that "the entire situation" means exactly that: *all* of it—including it seems the beholder's *body*. . . Everything counts—not as part of the object, but as part of the situation

in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends.<sup>63</sup>

Neither Fried nor Morris used a language of antagonism in 1967, but we could say that both were coming to terms with the jostling of perceptual boundaries that such work provoked. What is striking is Fried's degree of discomfort with the externally derived claims of the "situation," claims that placed demands of an external order that could only be experienced as confrontation or inconvenience ("*in his way*"). The "everything" that "counts" saturated the viewing experience, provoking not only an awareness of a new medium—the *body* of the beholder—but also an awareness of the art object as "dependent." The interdependence of art and spectator, art object and situation, thus disallowed an experience of aesthetic autonomy; or, to use Mouffe and Laclau's language, it provoked an experience of the limits of its objective self-constitution. The revelation of the non-objective given-ness of both an artwork and a social subject came when their systemic inter-dependence was exposed.

If Minimalism sought to provoke an awareness of the supporting apparatus of the larger viewing situation, then Sierra seems to push both the aspirations and the anxieties that accompanied such a gesture. Consider, for instance, Sierra's reconsideration of the Minimalist desire to avow the force of gravity; indeed, Sierra's work can be placed in a genealogy with Minimalism's emphasis on sculpture over painting and the tendency in that movement to privilege artworks that oriented themselves toward the ground plane of the floor rather than the anti-gravitational plane of the wall. Orientation toward the floor—without a pedestal—was seen as an avowal of the art object's relationship to the natural external rule of gravity—opposing itself to painting's attempt to overcome gravity with hidden hooks and wires on a wall. In pieces such as *Object Measuring 600 × 57 × 52 cm Constructed to be Held Horizontally to a Wall* or *24 Blocks of Concrete Constantly Moved During a Day's Work by Paid Workers*, Sierra evokes the Minimalist impulse toward gravitational avowal as inherited from the large, heavy geometrical installations of Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra, and others. However, Sierra's engagement with the social politics of gravity is different; indeed, by hiring workers to move such large, heavy Minimalist forms, Sierra exposes the anti-gravitational labor required to install a gravitational aesthetic. The Minimalist debate on material support must now reckon with its relationship to the asymmetrical supporting apparatus of physical labor. Here, the gravitational has a class basis, forcing an acknowledgement of the long classed history that governs the social management of physical weight. Gravity has always been readily avowed by the class historically hired to do the most heavy lifting. We can see



a similar relationship of re-use and revision when it comes to another Minimalist trope: seriality. As a term that exposes the steady operation of time and that uses repetition to question the myth of originality, the serial reproduction of similar forms appears throughout Sierra's work; once again, however, the "moved constantly" of such repetitions exposes seriality as enmeshed in the repetitive forms of labor that were never given the status of "original" in the first place.

Finding such Minimalist redefinition in the practice of Touchable Stories would require a reorientation and a willingness to look in different places for an engagement with gravity, seriality, futility, and the limits of the intelligible. It might begin with a form—the suspended collection of glass jars—that has become a recurrent motif in all Touchable Stories projects (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3). Jars hang at slightly different eye levels in a series; inside, viewers find miniature photographs of old buildings transferred to translucent paper, usually illuminated through the backlight of a nearby wall. While listening to stories of neighborhood spaces that have since been destroyed, visitors linger before the jars,

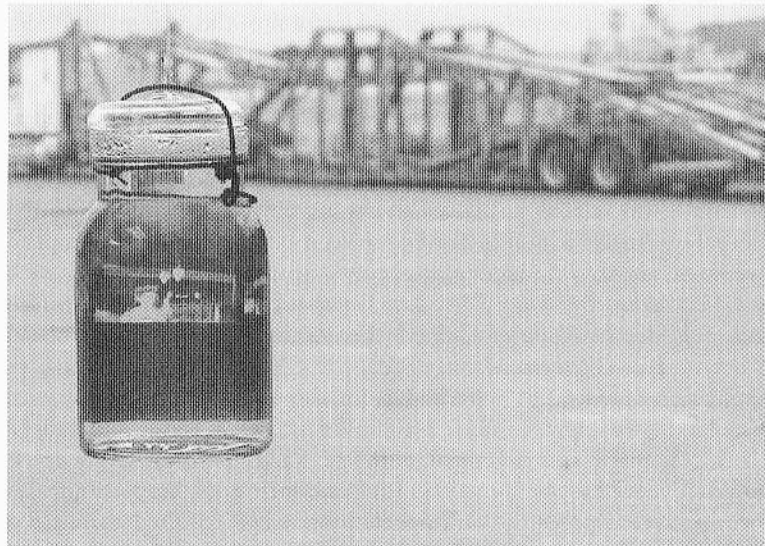


Figure 2.2 Touchable Stories, from *Richmond—An Introduction*, November 2005–May 2007, Touchable Stories in collaboration with The Arts Research Center at The University of California Berkeley and The City of Richmond

Source: Courtesy of Shannon Flattery and Touchable Stories.

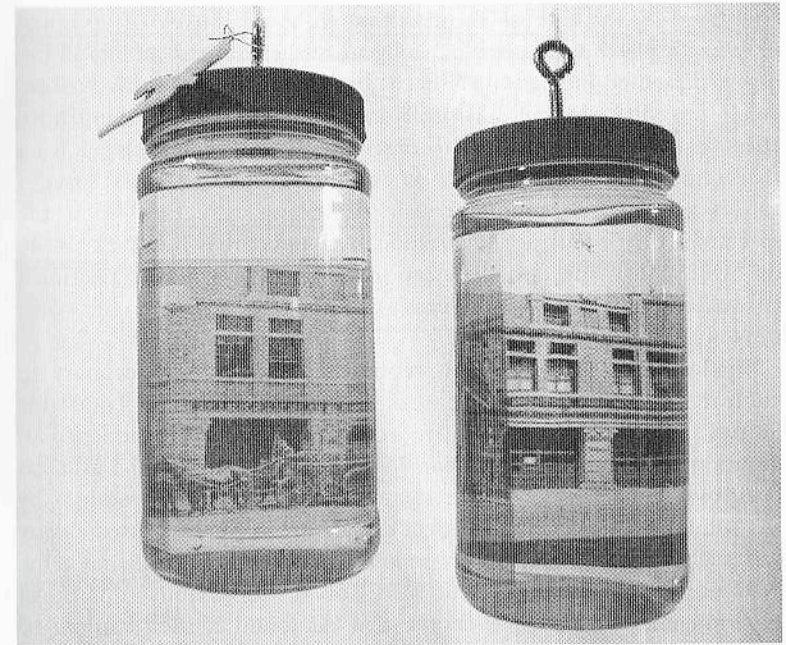


Figure 2.3 Touchable Stories, *Fire Museum then and now*, detail, "History." Installation by artist/founding director Shannon Flattery. Two of approximately sixty paired jars contrasting images of the Fort Point Boston neighborhood from the early 1900s and the present day. Jars are filled with water; immersed Xeroxed acetates give the images a 3-D effect. Also used prominently in *Allston*

Source: Photo by Lolita Parker Jr., London Parker-McWhorter, and Anthony Feradino; historical photos courtesy of The Boston Wharf Co. Touchable Stories: Fort Point, 2001–2003.

holding them to identify the doorframes, signposts, and other features that tell them which disappeared building they are viewing. The installation functions at many levels. It evokes the rhythms of encounter found in a gallery or museum, calling forth the steady flow of people as they move from one image to the next in a row. However, the images are suspended from the ceiling, allowing circular movement around the image as one might encounter a sculpture. The anti-gravitational suspension from on high emphasizes the airspace underneath and allows for another kind of interaction—touch, the careful holding of the object itself. Meanwhile, that formal suspension sets off and is set off by the contents inside; the seeming weight and immobility of the building is



countered by the ease of its uprooting. A social history of uprooted urbanization is thus made palpable by an aesthetic form that lifts all too easily, presented in a glass jar that is both precious and easily broken. While this kind of seriality is surely a sentimental one, the cumulative effect creates a heightened spatial consciousness on several levels, allowing the boundaries of the art object to extend into the spectators' space—in *his way?*—while simultaneously provoking reflection upon the spectators' own infrastructural location in a longer urban history, a history on which that spectatorial location "depends." Such a relational encounter thus requires and indexes a wider systemic sphere; in the words of Neil Smith, it "jumps scales."<sup>64</sup>

Similar kinds of exercises in reorientation would be necessary to compare other elements in the work of Santiago Sierra and *Touchable Stories*. As another exercise, we could consider the experience of duration, as it came forward from Minimalist experiments and as it has been re-worked by Sierra. The durational consciousness produced by the Minimalist object was an effect disparaged in Michael Fried's essay and celebrated by Minimalist proponents. Whereas Fried condemned the "endlessness" of Minimalist sculpture, Robert Morris lauded durational experimentation to such a degree that he found himself turning to collaboration with time-based artists of performance and even adding another signature essay "Notes on Dance" to his critical writing. In this essay, Morris emphasized the structural nature of time. Duration was less something to be manipulated than a structure to be exposed; pauses were used not so much as "punctuations" but "to make duration itself palpable."<sup>65</sup> Santiago Sierra utilizes duration in a way that both extends Minimalist technique and calls its bluff. Consider, for instance, Santiago Sierra's 1999 piece *465 Paid People*, created for the Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico. Here, 465 people were hired to stand over the entire floor space of the museum's primary display area (five persons per square meter). As the crowd of people stood, expecting to receive an hourly minimum wage for their effort, spectators came to watch the still bodies who endured the ticking of time. The basic structure of the piece thus addresses the conventions by which labor is organized under the logic of "time and materials." In a structure where the only material is the hired worker's body, the notion of time as something bought comes more startlingly into view. But it also shows the degree to which the Minimalist interest in "time's palpability" has a class basis, paralleling the classed management of gravity. The piece exposed the degree to which time is already quite palpable to those who watch the clock for a living. Thus, the piece not only avowed duration as a structuring influence on the artwork but also exposed duration as

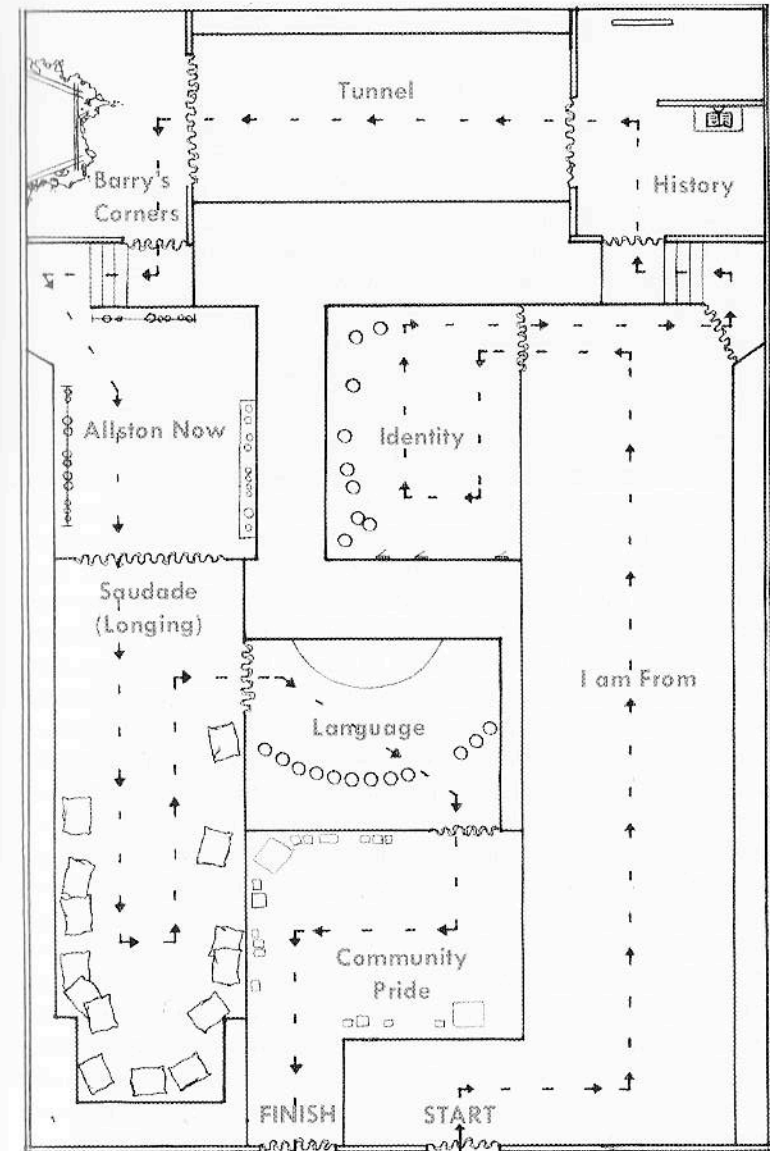


Figure 2.4 *Touchable Stories*, Allston (1997), "Map of Living Maze," Allston, Massachusetts, USA

Source: Courtesy of Shannon Flattery and *Touchable Stories*.



itself governed by the “external rules” of the wage-system. Subsequent pieces such as *Eight People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes* (Guatemala City, 1999) (Figure 2.1), *A Person Paid for 360 Continuous Working Hours* (New York, 2000), or *430 People Paid 30 Soles* (Lima, 2001) re-used a similar basic structure. Indeed, in Sierra’s explicit use of hired labor as the foundation for his pieces, time emerges not only as a natural force that the artwork can no longer transcend (à la Minimalism) but also as a social force heteronomously dependent upon the asymmetries of capitalist economics. Duration is all the more palpable when it is exchanged for a wage.

The reduction—indeed, some would say, the replicated de-humanization—of Santiago Sierra’s practice seems nearly the opposite of the kind of re-humanizing impulses at work in pieces by Touchable Stories. Whereas Sierra’s pieces transform “collaboration” into a hiring relationship and make little mention of the histories of participants—and never their names—Touchable Stories conducts roughly eighteen months of research—meeting neighbors, attending civic meetings, holding community dinners, and collecting hundreds of hours of oral histories to serve as both the inspiration for an exhibit and as the aural medium in an installation. The process of living among the people they seek to represent supports the creation of large site-specific installations that are called “living mazes,” sited in church basements, community centers, and former retail spaces donated for two years by individuals and groups living in the marginalized neighborhoods of Dorchester, Central Square, and Allston in Massachusetts, in Richmond, California, and in the city of Birmingham in Great Britain where they worked with Friction Arts (see Figures 2.2 and 2.4).<sup>66</sup> In each of its “living mazes,” small groups move through interactive installations, listening to the voices of taped oral histories as they open drawers, turn knobs, pull curtains, and relax on pillows to hear stories of migration, relocation, gentrification, violence, and loss.

As different as this gesture is from the work of Sierra, we could say that “duration” is still an integral structure to the Touchable Stories practice. However, understanding its durational investments requires that we look in different places. Indeed, “time” is a word that repeatedly emerges in much Touchable Stories documentation, but here the emphasis is on the artists’ and neighbors’ willingness to spend the time to understand issues and worlds with more complexity. The durational commitment to shared time and space is in fact the underlying structure of the practice of Touchable Stories, a willingness to commit time—indeed, to commit, as Shannon Flattery does, to self-relocation in a new neighborhood space for years. This temporal commitment allows



Figure 2.5 Touchable Stories, *Irish Pub* (Spring 2009); Mary Taylor and friends from St. Eugenes with telephones from “Echoes from the Edge” exhibit; Birmingham, England

Source: Touchable Stories in collaboration with Friction Arts. Photo by Chris Keenan.

a pre-determined sense of the issues to change and seeks a provisional degree of community trust. As such, Touchable Stories shares in a “grassroots” ethic of participatory ethnography as so many of its practitioners have theorized it, committing to a degree of sensuous knowing over time. Of course, in this durational and spatial commitment, Bishop might only find “predictable formulas.” Adorno too might well have found a capitulation to the “crudely heteronomous demands” of the social.<sup>67</sup> But it seems to me that the challenge here is to allow duration to have a different kind of aesthetic palpability. Even if Shannon Flattery’s ethic of participation can be analogized to the practices of the ethnographer or social worker, it seems important to notice the specificity of her desire to do so under her self-identification as an artist. While her attempt to know others with more complexity and intimacy might read as an instrumentalization of the art process to some, we might also note the degree to which this form of participation is differently “endless” in a Touchable Stories project. Just as we might analyze the experimental, durational structures of the endurance performances of Marina Abramovic or Linda Montano, we might notice that the durational commitment to shared time-space is a *technique* of the social artist, that



it is a commitment made whose consequences are unforeseen and—by virtue of an implicit social contract—will redefine the work's process and structure. Moreover, such an experience of duration is part of a larger gesture of collaboration that is not only an "authorial self-sacrifice" but a more radical experiment in authorial release to the external claims of others, one that might be asking a conceptual question about how far the avowal of aesthetic heteronomy can be pursued. With this kind of frame, collaborative authorship is not simply a rejection of aesthetic form but its own kind of formal experiment.

### Context Art's Contexts

Having lingered on the role of aesthetic frames in the analysis of social practice, let me conclude by turning back to the question of the role of social theory's frames in the analysis of extended art practice. If such a frame is preoccupied with the *limits* of social constitution, then we might find the thorniest puzzles when we examine contemporary art's processes of *extension*. The questions that continue to remain are twofold: (1) whether some explorations of society's limits are themselves foreclosed by a collusion with social processes, be they "community" or "bureaucratic," be they instrumentalized do-gooding or ameliorative feel-gooding; and, from the other direction, (2) whether some explorations of society's limits are themselves foreclosed by the protections of aesthetic categories and art market processes, be they elitist, speculative, hierarchical, or individuating. But in all of these domains, the puzzles that brew in the midst of the extensive gesture seem to be rich spaces of possibility, even when the language of consensus or healing describes it, even when a curator or blockbuster artist has stage-managed it.

Some of those puzzles come forward from the very particularity of the contexts in which they occur. Such a project not only would track the ways that Sierra's propositions vary in different national contexts but also would take the lead from Andrea Giunta and Alexander Alberro to show Sierra's relation to the complex historical use of human exhibition in avant-garde contexts throughout Mexico, Central, and South America.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, Sierra's own discourse about his projects can be frustratingly self-exempting: "The problem is the existence of social conditions that allow me to make this work."<sup>69</sup> Social extension gets more interesting in moments when social conditions change, and his bluff is called. Consider the documentation of how social conditions changed during a minor strike at the Deitch gallery in New York. Deitch reported:

We were finally able to get the 18 required people to come and do this. Everyone was there for the opening, and they started in with them holding these beams against the wall, and then suddenly a number of the guys dropped the beams and there was this conference in the middle of the room, and this older, distinguished African American man is leading the discussion about "Why are we being paid to do this demeaning thing?" They thought it was beneath their dignity to be there as props in an artwork, and they walked off the job.<sup>70</sup>

At such a moment, the human materials positioned as support for the art object refused their undermounted position; using the time-based capacity for alternative action, they altered the social situation by walking out of it and, in so doing, questioned the givenness of "social conditions that allow [Sierra] to make his work" (see Figure 2.6).

More intriguing questions occur when we take seriously the processes of stage management necessary to support weighty relational acts. Such a project means questioning the tendency routinely to define systemic engagement as institutional capitulation. Take, for example, Sara Brady's

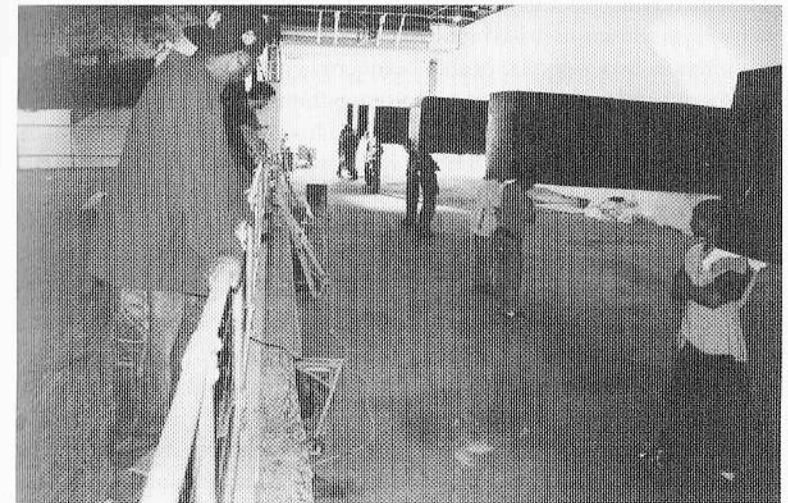


Figure 2.6 Santiago Sierra, *9 Forms of 100 × 100 × 600 cm Each, Constructed to Be Supported Perpendicular to a Wall* (June 2002), Deitch Projects, New York, USA

Source: Courtesy of Santiago Sierra.



concern about Touchstone's permits to create a site-specific production on the grounds of Bethlehem Steel, one she invoked within a larger concern that community art projects often "suck up" to sites of institutional power.<sup>71</sup> So too, Bishop expressed a similar sentiment when she critiqued Liam Gillick's non-antagonism, citing the fact that some of his conceptual work has led to new design systems for urban traffic or intercom systems for housing projects. She read such aspirations as directed toward "the middle ground . . . the compromise is what interests him most."<sup>72</sup> In both of these critiques, certain forms of civic collaboration make unpalatable alliances. But we might look again at these extensive processes not simply as degraded forms of stage-management but as opportunities to ask what comes forward when artists mimic and engage bureaucratic or institutional processes. For Gillick, it is exactly here that social practice has a chance of coinciding with the complex goals of social theory:

Things get truly interesting when art goes beyond a reflection of the rejected choices of the dominant culture and attempts to address the actual processes that shape our contemporary environment. This is the true nature of Mouffe's plea for a more sophisticated understanding of the paradox of liberal democracy, which concerns the recognition of the antagonism suppressed within consensus-based models of social democracy, not merely a simple two-way relationship between the existing sociopolitical model and an enlightened demonstration of its failings.<sup>73</sup>

Gillick suggests here that the antagonistic potential of the aesthetic gesture might occur in a moment of institutional engagement. To recast Bishop's own phrases, they might "divert attention" *back to* "the structural causes of decreased social participation, which are political and economic (welfare, transport, education, health care, etc.)."<sup>74</sup> Such an orientation proposes that an aesthetic intervention in civic and state processes might be its own act of estrangement or redirection, not perhaps institutional opposition but something more like infrastructural antagonism. We could take this sensibility back to the question of institutional engagement in *Steelbound*, including the civic bureaucratic process that allowed the production its site permit. While impure in its alliances, a sense of infrastructural engagement might notice that families and former employees had not been allowed onto the plant's grounds since its opening, a prohibition that was over-ridden by the mounting of a permitted, site-specific performance. While instated within the hierarchical social mechanism of an approval process, the plant had to

rethink its policies, and the art process "enabled families to step on the ground where their loved ones had worked and in some cases died."<sup>75</sup> At such complicated moments of bureaucratic re-imagining, we find an embedded antagonism within the processes that shape our contemporary environment. I think too of Shannon Flattery's arduous process of negotiation to secure site approval in the 2007 project by Touchable Stories in Richmond, California. Creating an installation that addressed the inequities of gentrification in this California town, the project site was continually uprooted by the social force it tried to address. Landlords who had been in support of donating empty, unrented urban sites withdrew throughout the process, tempted by the speculative offers of prospective condominium developers. It took intervention at the level of the mayoral office to secure the time and space needed for a durational and environmental work. It was thus at once a collusion with a site of institutional power *and* an act that forced civic leaders to redefine civic renewal with something other than a market logic. Success in securing these sites no doubt "felt good" for both Touchstone and Touchable Stories, and no doubt the word "consensus" might have been used to describe their processes of deliberation. But it seems important to notice the provisional antagonism experienced by these collaborative gestures as well, one where the objective givenness of urban policies and gentrifying markets was challenged by an aesthetic suggestion that they "could be otherwise." To recall Fred Moten's discussion of the *parergon*, such heteronomous engagement is not simply a compromising encroachment from the outside but in fact revelatory of "the exteriority that interiority can't do without, the co-operator."<sup>76</sup>

Finally, having offered some sample readings of the work of artists who are legitimated and delegitimated by competing art critical discourses, it is simultaneously important to notice how "different" such readings could be. To emphasize this fact is not simply to withdraw into a generalized relativism as a critic but to foreground the different kinds of precedents and object histories that structure an encounter with a social practice. Such variation seems to affect and afflict practices that seek to think "aesthetics and politics together," and the classed tastes and sensibilities that surround community art installation and gallery art installation certainly structure the perception of formal innovation. Just as Bertolt Brecht became a figure who received contradictory forms of critique, so the work of both Touchable Stories and Santiago Sierra have both endured all varieties of response, ranging from every position on the poles to which I referred above: social celebration/social antagonism, radically unfunctional/radically functional, unintelligible/intelligible, autonomous/heteronomous. For some, the slicing up and doling out



of Sierra's *90 cm Bread Cube* was an attempt to be functional; for others, it was a parody of such a gesture. The contrast begs the question of how we might compare such a meal with the kind of "community dinners" Touchable Stories sponsors as part of its process. For some, the glass jar displays by Touchable Stories are overly explicit histories of a neighborhood. For others, however, the miniaturization and absent didactics do not convey *enough* information. Too intelligible? Too unintelligible? For some, Sierra is an advocate for the poor; for others, he is simply a cynic. For some, Touchable Stories instrumentalizes aesthetics in service of social progress; for others, its desire to maintain an aesthetic space over two years in a site that could be put to "real use" is further evidence of aesthetic futility. Such differences demonstrate the very different metrics and barometers critics and viewers bring to bear on social practice. But such differences might also be the occupational hazard of social practice as well. In this conjunction, there are numerous ways that the avowal of heteronomy can be both aesthetically precise and socially effective, and our awareness of some of them might not mean that we are fully able to see the antagonisms or presumed neutralities of all them. Such an approach, however, means deciding to believe that an awareness of interdependency can yield forms that are both aesthetically and socially innovative. And it means acknowledging the degree to which art worlds and social worlds are not autonomously "self-governing."

## 3

## HIGH MAINTENANCE

The Sanitation Aesthetics of  
Mierle Laderman Ukeles

While feminism is a broader initiative encompassing all levels of cultural experience, its insights have become so central to our understanding of the world that it informs most modes of visual culture analysis at this point, whether its dependence is acknowledged or not.

Amelia Jones<sup>1</sup>

I loved it because it was very clear thinking; also because I felt that I was reordering every social relationship.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles<sup>2</sup>

In the 2008 Pixar movie *WALL-E* we find the title character in a projected future overwhelmed by the effects of a few centuries of human garbage habits. WALL-E is a curiously low-tech robot assembly of belts, cranks, binoculars, and gears who trolls his way through a larger-than-life heap of human discard. He lives alone in a dump left by a world-wide and world-containing mega-box store, one whose incapacity to contain the unstoppable pile of refuse prompted Earth's remaining human inhabitants to evacuate into space. WALL-E moves endearingly and deliberately through the hills and valleys of garbage, picking up, sorting, shelving, and labeling the items he finds: dolls, videos, tools, containers. In so doing, he distinguishes and defines the indiscriminate piling system that has turned discrete objects into generalized garbage, transforming those items through re-use into new, careful, and discriminating categories. Indeed, in *WALL-E*, de-garbagification requires categorical re-discrimination, the willingness to decide that the homogenized object world that we call "garbage" deserves to be internally differentiated once again. Encountering WALL-E's tricked-out collector space brings to mind a storage room for theatrical properties. Those spaces too are filled