



Routledge Research in Arts Education

CREATIVITY, SOCIETY, AND THE ROLE OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN HIGHER ARTS EDUCATION

Kai Lehikoinen



“Lehikoinen offers powerful insights into the ways in which socially engaged arts practice can challenge societal norms, foster connection, and generate a sense of shared purpose among individuals and communities. A form of practice much-needed in these fractured times.”

—**Allan Owens**, *Emeritus Professor, University of Chester, UK;*
Honorary Fellow, University of Liverpool, UK;
National Teaching Fellow, UK; and
Visiting Professor, LUT University, Finland



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Creativity, Society, and the Role of Socially Engaged Art in Higher Arts Education

This interdisciplinary book explores socially engaged art as a subject of study and its relevance in higher arts education institutions' third mission—giving back to society and engaging with the community—to build a sustainable higher arts education for the future.

Drawing on data from two large-scale EU-funded projects—supplemented by interviews, educational document analysis, and secondary data—this book explores emerging trends in the arts sector and the role of arts universities in cross-sector collaboration, innovation, and actions towards social and environmental responsibility. Chapters posit theoretical analysis, case studies and practically orientated examples from countries including the United States, Ghana, Indonesia, and from across Europe to explore the growing demands for the positive societal impact of higher arts education. Located at the interface between the sociology of higher arts education and community engagement, the book explores a richness of international contexts including activism, churches, refugee work, eldercare, gender politics, prisons and many others.

This timely volume responds to the urgent need to investigate the full potential of socially engaged art in higher arts education. As such, it will appeal foremost to scholars, researchers, postgraduate students, and teachers in higher arts education and the sociology of education. Practitioners working in arts curriculum design, university-society partnerships, and those focused on creating inclusive and respectful spaces in higher arts education and research, will also find the volume of use.

Kai Lehtikainen is a University Researcher at the University of the Arts Helsinki's Research Institute, Finland, and a Representative Board Member of ELIA, a globally connected European network for higher arts education.

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Preface

In this book, I explore how socially engaged art, deeply intertwined with personal and collective experience, offers critical insights into shaping the futures of higher arts education. Drawing from my two-decade-long journey in the arts and society, particularly in socially engaged arts, I examine the specificity of this practice as an academic subject and its potential to contribute to the “third mission” of higher arts education institutions. My aim is to offer perspectives that can influence the development of higher arts education.

While my background is in dance pedagogy and dance studies, my research and involvement have expanded into initiatives such as *Kreativ personcentrerad vårdkonst* [Creative Person-Centred Care Art] (2021–2024), *Artwork – A Better Future for All Through Creativity* (2021–2023), *Arts as Public Service: Strategic Steps towards Equality* (ArtsEqual) (2015–2021), *Training Artists for Innovation* (TAFI) (2011–2013), and *Quality of Life: Creative Pathways for Family Learning* (2009–2013). These projects, spanning diverse contexts from eldercare to innovation, have deepened my understanding of how socially engaged art is transforming and expanding professional artistic practices.

As a researcher, educator, and active participant in the evolving landscape of socially engaged arts practice, I have seen first-hand how artistic competence transcends full-time professional practice, contributing meaningfully to a variety of sectors, even beyond the arts. This highlights the importance of educating arts professionals to develop the competencies needed to contribute in diverse roles—whether as practitioners, educators, or researchers.

My engagement with ELIA, a globally connected European network of higher arts education institutions, has included active involvement in the EU-funded NXT Making a Living from the Arts project and the Careers in the Arts working group. These experiences have deepened my understanding of the intersection between socially engaged art and the futures of higher arts education. Additionally, my work within ELIA has reinforced my understanding of the politics of higher arts education and deepened my interest in how socially engaged art can enhance institutions’ third mission—contributing to society and fostering social innovations for a better life for all, including non-human species and the planet.

In collaboration with the FAST45 project (2020–2023), which explored possible futures for higher arts education, I learned that future generations of artists will need to strengthen their relationship with society. Arts institutions will play an increasingly central role in addressing global challenges by fostering authentic community dialogues and cross-sector collaborations. This book thus reflects on how socially engaged art can reshape higher arts education and help institutions meet these growing demands.

My personal journey—from teaching, making, and analysing dances to exploring the broader societal role of the arts—has deeply influenced my perspective. For nearly four decades, I have witnessed the profound impact of the arts on individuals and communities, shaping my belief in the transformative power of creativity and critical reflection in artistic practices, as well as their potential to address complex societal challenges.

Last year, during the EU’s Research & Innovation Week in Brussels, discussions underscored the importance of collaborative efforts across research, education, and policy to foster societal resilience. Key takeaways included the need for forward-thinking strategies to address emerging social challenges, the value of interdisciplinary approaches, and the crucial role of SHAPE disciplines (social sciences, humanities, and the arts) in shaping sustainable and inclusive futures.

Socially engaged arts in higher education are uniquely positioned to leverage artistic thinking alongside SHAPE expertise to address critical issues such as inequality, migration, education, and the environment. However, long-term, theme-based transdisciplinary collaboration, paired with phenomenon-based R&I budgeting, is essential to prioritize partnerships, foster inclusive innovation, and ensure the sustainable development of these research areas. Equally important are sustainable partnerships with civil society organizations, which ground research and development in real-world community needs.

In an age where a small number of individuals wield disproportionate power through vast concentrations of wealth, increasingly shaping political and economic decisions, it is vital to engage civil society in co-reflecting on challenges and imagining tangible solutions. Such efforts can foster meaningful initiatives, inclusivity, and strengthen democratic resilience, counteracting the narrowing of public discourse and ensuring that all voices are heard in shaping our collective future.

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I would also like to acknowledge the broader community of artists and scholars whose work I have drawn upon through literature, websites, and other secondary sources. Though I have not interacted with you personally, your contributions to the field have significantly influenced my thinking and the content of this book. Thank you for your dedication and vision.

My research has been under the auspices of Uniarts Helsinki’s Research Institute and its cERAda is a research centre established in 2013, now operating as a network. At cERAda, our research focuses on art education and pedagogy, higher education in the arts, and professionalism within the artistic fields. I would like to thank all my colleagues for support. Special thanks to Jaana Erkkilä-Hill, who encouraged me to undertake this book project, and to my friend and colleague Anne Makkonen, who kindly reviewed the manuscript and provided thoughtful suggestions for its improvement.

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Introduction

Socially engaged art has been the subject of scholarly exploration across multiple disciplines. Scholars such as Claire Bishop (2012), Tom Finkelpearl (2013), Grant Kester (2011), Miwon Kwon (2004), and Shannon Jackson (2011) have examined its various practices in addressing social challenges. Recent anthologies offer diverse case studies of socially engaged creative practices aimed at fostering social change (e.g., Kárpáti, 2024; Moriarty & Aughterson, 2024). Some scholars, including Susan Cipolle (2010) and Amanda Alexander and Ross Schlemmer (2017), recognise the transformative potential of integrating socially engaged art with education. Building on this, Alexander and Schlemmer (2017) and Schlemmer (2017) advocate for reimagining arts education by introducing socially engaged art education that promotes community-based practices centred on relational aesthetics, participatory pedagogy, and socially engaged art. This approach underscores a socially responsible and ethically grounded framework that transcends aesthetic quality to enhance the quality of life.

However, much of the existing work overlooks socially engaged art as an autonomous field of study and its contribution to the broader societal role of higher arts education. Ann Lyons (2020) highlights a gap in understanding socially engaged art, emphasising the need to situate it within its historical context and establish its legitimacy. In this book, *Creativity, Society, and the Role of Socially Engaged Art in Higher Arts Education*, I strive to help fill that gap by investigating socially engaged art as both an academic discipline and a future asset for institutions of higher arts education. It invites readers to consider the field from a broader educational perspective than is often explored.

Recent research (Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, 2023) highlights the relatively marginal position of socially engaged arts within higher arts education institutions, underscoring the need to argue for its inclusion alongside traditional disciplines such as dance, design, music, theatre, and visual arts. Acknowledging the expanding professionalism in the arts (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2021) and the societal significance of artistic thinking and creativity, this book makes the case for recognising socially engaged art as an autonomous field of study in higher education. Achieving this recognition requires rigorous research and critical inquiry to cultivate a deep understanding of socially engaged art—its

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capacity to engage communities in collaborative reflection, and its potential to foster co-creativity and knowledge production within higher arts education.

The book approaches “socially engaged art” and “socially engaged arts” as interchangeable umbrella concepts for a wide range of artistic practices, encompassing distinct terminology, interests, and principles, and demanding from its practitioners a complex set of competences. Drawing on examples from a range of contexts, including Europe, the United States, Ghana, and Indonesia, it explores the cross-cultural principles and adaptability of socially engaged art. While rooted in a Western framework, this book underscores the need for contextualised understandings and respects the definitions of non-Western artists by incorporating their perspectives directly into the discourse.

Going beyond explicating the historical developments and discursive underpinnings of socially engaged art, this book asks: What is the value of socially engaged art in knowledge production, professional training, and societal engagement within higher arts education? It argues that socially engaged art is beneficial for preparing artists to navigate the expanding scope of their professionalism. Additionally, it highlights the importance of socially engaged art for the futures of higher education institutions as they adapt to rapidly changing operational landscapes and respond to growing stakeholder demands for a more active role in addressing both local and global challenges, including identity politics, social exclusion, poverty, climate crises, biodiversity loss, political polarisation, and both natural and humanitarian disasters.

Responding to these challenges requires the active engagement of diverse demographic groups, fostering interdisciplinarity, and breaking down occupational silos—areas where the arts, artistic thinking, and creativity can play a pivotal role in driving collaboration and innovation. Socially engaged art’s potential to create “third spaces” for dialogue and collaboration further underscores its relevance for higher education. These hybrid spaces, where diverse perspectives and cultural understandings intersect, can provide unique opportunities to generate fresh insights that drive social innovation and foster social cohesion (Hulme et al., 2009). By engaging communities in co-creation and reflection, socially engaged art can meaningfully contribute not only to human development but also to planetary well-being.

On methodology

This book is informed by Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges” (1988, p. 581), which asserts that all narratives are inherently partial and shaped by the specific social, historical, and cultural contexts of their creators. In this light, I acknowledge that my interpretation of socially engaged art is influenced by my positionality as a Western-educated scholar and by the intentional decisions made regarding the inclusion and exclusion of certain perspectives. Thus, this work represents a partial exploration, shaped by my own experiences and viewpoints, while striving to present a range of diverse perspectives.

Utilising “purposive sampling” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61), my methodology integrates semi-structured interviews (N = 9) with practitioners, programme documents (N = 24), personal reflections from my nineteen years of involvement in socially engaged arts, and secondary literature. Relevant literature was gathered through online searches on Google Scholar, using the keyword “socially engaged art” and related terms such as “applied theatre” and “community arts.” Additional sources were identified by reviewing the references cited in key texts. Nine semi-structured interviews, each lasting 1–1.5 hours, were conducted with practitioners and educators from a diverse range of artistic disciplines, including dance, drama, music, and visual arts. The interviews—six conducted in English and three in Finnish—were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English when necessary.

In this book, I aim primarily to introduce perspectives that demonstrate the qualities of socially engaged arts, argue for its legitimacy as a subject of study in higher arts education, and explore its potential to contribute meaningfully to the “Third Mission” of higher arts education institutions. The book incorporates case examples from diverse cultural contexts, framed through my Nordic perspective, to demonstrate how socially engaged art adapts to varying cultural settings. Rather than making universal claims, I seek to inspire further exploration and documentation of professional practices in the field while acknowledging the book’s inability to fully capture the breadth or provide detailed contextualisation of every example. In doing so, I recognise the book’s limitations in scope while striving to contribute to the field through this focused approach.

Building upon and extending the recent competence analysis by Eeva Siljamäki and myself (2023), which reviewed 13 curricula in socially engaged arts programmes, this study explores the current landscape of socially engaged arts in higher arts education. I broaden our earlier investigation by analysing 24 educational programmes, including BA, MA, and MFA levels, as well as postgraduate specialisation programmes, short courses, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) across regions such as Asia, Europe, the UK, North America, and Oceania.

An abductive qualitative approach (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) was employed, combining pre-existing concepts from Pring (1976) with emergent themes from the data. This hybrid approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of socially engaged art, encompassing its central interests, concepts, principles of practice, and success criteria. The data were further analysed using constant comparison (Mills et al., 2006) and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To enhance validity, interviewees were invited to review and provide feedback on the findings concerning the analysis of their accounts. The final manuscript was also reviewed by an experienced scholar, whose comments and insights were taken into consideration when finalising the text.

By combining these elements, I aim to explore the historical trajectories, contemporary relevance, and future potential of socially engaged art in higher

arts education. This multidisciplinary approach underscores the importance of socially engaged art not only within artistic practice but also as a subject of study in higher arts education, where it can foster meaningful interactions with society and contribute to social transformation. As I developed the book, I expanded my focus from socially engaged art to activism within higher arts education contexts in order to address—in Chapters 9 and 10—the complexities and considerations relevant to introducing socially engaged practices in these settings.

In this book, individuals are typically referred to by their last names after their full names are introduced. However, Kai Mata, one of the interviewees, is referred to by her full stage name throughout, in accordance with her preference and public identity as an artist. This reflects a broader commitment to respecting participants' chosen modes of identification and public engagement, as most interviewees preferred open disclosure of their names and identities given their public-facing roles as socially engaged artists.

The examples and interviewee accounts underscore the diversity, richness, and variability of socially engaged arts practices, revealing how facilitation, participation, creativity, art, critical reflection, learning, and transformation take shape across various contexts. As an introduction, they invite deeper and more systematic inquiry. While this analysis incorporates concepts rooted in Western understandings of socially engaged arts—terms with which the non-Western interviewees were comfortable—it does not attempt to critically interrogate hegemonic structures of knowledge production. Such an inquiry—including the application of a (self-)critical multicultural lens to scrutinise power relations and dismantle hegemonic knowledge structures—is essential for addressing social and cultural phenomena beyond Nordic and Western contexts. However, such an approach lies beyond the scope of this book and would require a different methodological framework.

Central to this inquiry is the concept of subject position,—how individuals define themselves or are defined within specific social practices. This lens foregrounds the power dynamics and social inequalities that shape knowledge production. By recognising the multiplicity of perspectives and the limitations of any single viewpoint, the book seeks to enrich discourse within higher arts education and foster a global dialogue that situates socially engaged art within diverse cultural and institutional frameworks.

The research underpinning this book adhered to the ethical guidelines of the University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland. No prior ethical review was required for the research design. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the privacy notice detailing the processing of personal data. Given the nature of the study, which benefits from contextualising practitioners in socially engaged arts—particularly those with activist interests related to identity politics—participants preferred to have their names and identities openly disclosed, as they typically share their identities publicly when engaging as artists with society.

Building on the exploration of subject positions and cultural contexts, I have faced challenges in maintaining a balance between presenting ideas from diverse perspectives and remaining mindful of the broader implications of these views. For instance, in Chapters 9 and 10, which address the intersections of activism, freedom of speech, artistic freedom, academic freedom, and safer spaces, I navigate my support for activism and social change alongside a firm belief in the essential role of free expression and inquiry in democratic societies. While I advocate for activism that seeks to create a safer, more sustainable world for all, including non-human species, I also argue that true progress in art, science, and democracy requires engaging with diverse and sometimes conflicting values. This process is difficult but crucial for intellectual and social evolution.

Through this lens, this book seeks to deepen our understanding of socially engaged art's potential to transform higher arts education and help institutions of higher arts education to contribute meaningfully towards societal change. By fostering a dialogue that acknowledges the cultural specificities of this practice, it aims to move beyond a singular cultural perspective and enrich the collective appreciation of socially engaged art.

The organisation of the book

The book begins with Chapter 1, presenting a diverse range of case studies exploring the growing significance of socially engaged art. These case studies showcase how artists worldwide are using the arts to address pressing social issues, from LGBTIQ+ advocacy in Indonesia to ecological education in Finland. By adopting various methodologies such as theatre, participatory narratives, and urban games, these examples highlight the evolving role of artists not just as creators but as facilitators of dialogue and community empowerment, shifting the focus from individual expression to collaborative transformation.

Building on this foundation, Chapter 2 delves into the complexities of socially engaged art. It explores the challenges of defining and understanding this dynamic field, considering its conceptual intricacies and cultural specificity. Drawing from case studies, the chapter situates socially engaged art within broader socially engaged practices, suggesting it as an umbrella concept that encompasses diverse approaches. It argues that, while such practices share common features—art, social engagement, creativity, and transformative aspirations—they evolve in a decentralised, adaptable manner that responds to the unique needs of each cultural context.

The exploration continues in Chapter 3, which focuses on participation, a central theme in socially engaged art. This chapter emphasises the vital role that participation plays in fostering democratic ideals and collective agency. Through practitioner narratives and sociological analysis, it reveals how participatory practices challenge traditional hierarchies, empower marginalised voices, and promote inclusivity. The integration of theoretical perspectives,

such as Freirean pedagogy and feminist theory, illustrates how participatory art practices facilitate co-constructed knowledge and respectful dialogue, deepening emotional connections and fostering solidarity for social change.

Next, Chapter 4 introduces new case studies while periodically revisiting interviewee narratives, deepening the exploration of how these concepts manifest in practice and focusing on the possibilities for learning within socially engaged arts. It also examines how socially engaged art fosters critical awareness and social empowerment. Drawing from emancipatory and critical pedagogy, this chapter highlights how participatory, co-creative processes in socially engaged art create transformative learning environments. In these spaces, participants challenge societal norms, engage in collective meaning-making, and develop the agency necessary to drive social change. This sets the stage for understanding how these practices facilitate broader social transformation, which is further explored in the subsequent chapter.

In Chapter 5, the transformative potential of socially engaged art is examined, highlighting its capacity to catalyse social change and empower communities. By contrasting socially engaged art with the commodified art world, this chapter underscores how art can function as a means of reclaiming identity, resisting oppression, and cultivating critical consciousness. Drawing on critical theories, such as Marxism and Freirean pedagogy, it explores the role of socially engaged art in fostering collective action and societal transformation, while also examining additional case studies to illustrate these concepts in action.

Shifting to the academic landscape, Chapter 6 examines the growing integration of socially engaged art within higher education in different parts of the world. It highlights the diversity of educational programmes, from BA to postgraduate courses, as well as short-term and online programmes, that prepare students to tackle complex global challenges. These initiatives celebrate interdisciplinary learning and the development of critical, analytical, and reflective skills. The chapter also discusses the gaps in research-oriented education, underscoring the need for systematic studies to further establish socially engaged art as an academic field.

Numerous case examples and discussions in this book demonstrate the complexity of how socially engaged art exists in diverse settings and its relational ties to concepts and phenomena such as participation, learning, and transformation. This relational ontology not only informs how socially engaged art operates in practice but also underpins the unique ways of knowing and investigating such practices. These epistemologies and methodologies highlight the interplay between artistic creation and social transformation, emphasising the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of knowledge production in socially engaged art. Thus, in Chapter 7, the discussion turns to the unique epistemologies and methodologies that define socially engaged art. This chapter argues for the recognition of socially engaged art as a distinct subject of study in higher arts education, requiring a comprehensive and interdisciplinary

approach. By advocating for the development of specific academic criteria, it aims to legitimise socially engaged art's contributions to both artistic practice and societal transformation, positioning it as a key area for further academic inquiry.

Chapter 8 applies Richard Pring's framework to validate socially engaged art as an academic discipline, focusing on its core concepts, principles, criteria for success, and required competencies. Themes like social justice and community empowerment guide its methodology and impact, while shared concerns serve as a structuring framework. The chapter highlights the balance between structured norms and adaptability, emphasising ethical rigour, collaboration, and transformative outcomes, reinforcing socially engaged art's significance within higher education.

Turning to the intersection of activism and socially engaged art, Chapter 9 examines how these practices intersect with political, social, and identity-based movements. Drawing on case studies from student movements across Europe and North America, the chapter explores how activism within higher arts education fosters critical dialogue, inclusivity, and creativity. It also addresses the challenges of polarisation and cancel culture, advocating for an approach that values diversity and individual expression while maintaining academic freedom.

Chapter 10 examines the role of socially engaged art in addressing societal inequities, emphasising the need for inclusive spaces where diverse perspectives can engage in meaningful dialogue. It draws on feminist epistemologies to challenge dominant narratives and enrich understanding of complex issues. The chapter advocates for a balanced approach to activism, arguing that while social justice and activism are crucial, higher arts education institutions must also preserve intellectual rigour and open inquiry to maintain their transformative potential.

Looking ahead, Chapter 11 envisions the possible futures of socially engaged art within higher education. Building on recent scenarios, it addresses how these practices can inspire transformative action, foster collaboration, and drive positive social and environmental change in educational contexts. By considering the evolving political, economic, and technological landscapes, the chapter stresses the urgency of integrating socially engaged art into higher education, positioning it as a powerful means for fulfilling institutions' societal missions and adapting to an uncertain future.

Finally, the coda in Chapter 12 weaves together the key insights from previous chapters, underscoring the transformative potential of socially engaged art in higher education. It highlights how these practices support institutions in fulfilling their "Third Mission" of societal contribution, fostering collaboration, empathy, and interdisciplinary dialogue to address global challenges. The chapter emphasises socially engaged art's ability to inspire human development, planetary well-being, and a more inclusive, resilient society, positioning higher arts education as a dynamic force for positive transformation.

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1 Ten case studies

Addressing the “social turn” in the arts

Socially engaged art manifests in diverse forms and fulfils various functions across cultures and communities, adapting to different contexts. In this chapter, I introduce practitioners from a range of cultural contexts applying arts-based participatory approaches in working with different communities and collaborating with individuals with different expertise. Their work involves socially engaged arts practices, but their aims vary: Fostering collective creativity and community cohesion; humanising the refugee crisis and fostering empathy; exploring under-researched local female heritage; fighting for LGBTIQ+ rights; challenging liturgical practices; cultivating empathy and ethical care; breaking down social barriers and fostering inclusion; challenging cultural stereotypes and provoking critical reflection; and fostering environmental awareness and personal connections to nature.

Socially engaged art is a multiply defined concept, and some of these definitions are discussed in-depth in Chapter 2. Here, it suffices to introduce one definition that captures much of what this strand of artistic practice entails. Jo Parkes, a British dance artist, facilitator, and educator—whose perspectives on socially engaged art in higher arts education will be discussed in Chapter 6—describes socially engaged art as a process aimed at building sustainable social structures that address specific challenges or questions within a group. She notes that socially engaged art facilitates collective problem-solving through creative processes, ultimately co-creating “knowledge about how to live better together” (J. Parkes, personal communication, December 18, 2024).

Ten case studies

In this chapter, I present ten case studies that highlight the rich diversity of socially engaged art practices, illustrating how artists engage with communities to address pressing social issues. These approaches range from community arts and artistic interventions in organisations to music and performance in activism, arts-based environmental education, and urban gaming. Through these case studies, my aim is to demonstrate the unique approaches employed by each artist and to examine how their practices reflect the cultural landscapes and specific needs of the communities they work with.

These examples not only underscore the evolving role of the artist as a facilitator of dialogue and transformation but also contribute to a broader understanding of the “social turn” in the arts. By analysing these varied approaches, we can gain insight into how socially engaged art fosters collective empowerment and encourages critical reflection on societal constructs.

Fostering collective creativity: Community engagement at Saari Residence

Pia Bartsch has served as a committed community artist at the Kone Foundation’s Saari Residence in Mietoinen, Finland, since 2012.¹ Over the course of her 12-year tenure, she has collaborated with a wide range of individuals and groups, working on projects that vary from small-scale initiatives to extensive, long-term partnerships. Her primary goal is to seamlessly integrate art and culture into the local community, ensuring that the Saari Residence remains an active, vibrant part of the rural area, rather than a remote artistic enclave. Bartsch’s work includes organising workshops, performances, and creating open spaces where community members can actively engage in artistic activities. She emphasises fostering sustainability and building mutual trust through long-term relationships within the community (P. Bartsch, personal communication, April 2, 2024).

Bartsch views socially engaged art as a practice grounded in collective collaboration rather than individual involvement. As she puts it, “community is the focus, not the individual” (P. Bartsch, personal communication, April 2, 2024), signalling her commitment to fostering group dynamics and co-creation within a community context. Her approach echoes the ethos of the English-speaking community art movement of the 1960s and 70s, which prioritised collective artistic engagement, distinguishing it from more recent participatory art practices that centre on individual contributions.

Mynä-Mynä-Maa [Mynä-Mynä-Land] (2022–2023) is a project that exemplifies Bartsch’s work at the Saari Residence. Created in collaboration with the municipality of Mynämäki, Finland, it brought together over 250 participants to transform a former care facility, slated for demolition, into a vibrant community art installation. The project featured 72 artworks, including sculptures, wall paintings, and installations, mostly made from recycled materials (see Figure 1.1 for an example). It spanned a journey through time, from the age of dinosaurs to the year 2100 (Kone Foundation, 2025). By underscoring equal collaboration, Bartsch ensured that participants, many of whom had no formal artistic training, were actively engaged as “creators.” The project fostered a strong sense of community, attracting over 10,000 visitors and leaving a lasting impact on local residents who embraced the work as their own (P. Bartsch, personal communication, April 2, 2024).

Bartsch’s work at the Saari Residence exemplifies the transformative power of socially engaged art in creating lasting connections between artists and local communities, emphasising the value of collective action and shared cultural



Figure 1.1 One of the installations produced as part of the Mynä-Mynä-Maa project in Mynämäki, Finland. Photograph by Jussi Virkkumaa.

expression. This collaborative and inclusive approach reflects Bartsch's commitment to socially engaged art as a collective process.

Dancing across borders: Embodied narratives of asylum seekers from Calais

In 2016, the artistic collective Instant Dissidence, led by choreographer Rita Marcalo, filmmaker Lucy Barker, and a humanitarian worker Ifty Patel, partnered with The People's Street Kitchen to create an art intervention in The Jungle, a refugee camp near Calais, as the camp was being demolished by French authorities. Many of the 6,400 persons seeking asylum in the camp hoped to reach the UK. Over ten days, Instant Dissidence offered free group dance workshops for the camp's residents, providing a rare opportunity for creative expression amidst the trauma of displacement (Marcalo, n.d.).

A smaller group of four residents—Yodite Melku from Eritrea, Abdul Rehman from Afghanistan, Johnoy Miller from Pakistan, and Addisu Tariku from Ethiopia—participated in individual sessions, developing physical duets and audio stories that explored their identities, journeys to Calais, and hopes for the future. This collaboration resulted in *Dancing With Strangers: From Calais to England*, a performance project designed to amplify refugee voices and offer audiences an embodied understanding of migrants' experiences (Marcalo, n.d.).

In public spaces across England and at a conference in Finland, Marcalo invited bystanders to dance with her, acting as a proxy for the persons seeking

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asylum, each of whom had choreographed movements for the duets (see Figure 1.2). Wearing a t-shirt that read “Dance With Me,” she extended her arms, inviting participants to perform these duets while listening to the asylum seekers’ stories through headphones. The performances were filmed and shared with the original participants, creating a two-way exchange (Marcalo, n.d.). This initiative bridged physical and emotional distances, allowing the participants in England and Finland to connect intimately with the asylum seekers’ narratives and fostering empathy through movement and storytelling across borders. By facilitating these personal interactions, Instant Dissidence highlighted the power of socially engaged art to humanise the refugee crisis, enabling deeper, more empathetic engagement with the global displacement issue.

Exploring female heritage in Austria

Edith Draxl is a theatre director and advocate for socially engaged art based in Graz, Austria. With degrees in German Studies, Psychology, and Theology, she founded the uniT in 2000: “a cultural initiative for the promotion of young art and young artists, innovative positions and programmes” (uniT, 2024). The organisation now hosts two initiatives, the Drama Forum to promote the development of contemporary Austrian playwrights and Kunstlabor



Figure 1.2 A participatory moment in *Dancing With Strangers: From Calais to England*. Photograph by Mahvash Tariq.

Courtesy of Rita Marcalo.

Graz that focuses on community involvement and collaborative projects that engage marginalised groups. As Kunstlabor's artistic director, Draxl believes in the transformative power of participatory practices, emphasising art as a means of communication and a catalyst for social change through authentic relationships and collective storytelling (E. Draxl, personal communication, November 27, 2023).

Draxl's recent project on female heritage takes place in Bad Ischl and Ramsau, in the rural inner Alpine region of Salzkammergut in Austria, designated as the European Capital of Culture 2024. This collaborative initiative with director Neda Sokolovska, explores and documents the stories of women in a culturally rich yet often overlooked region comprising several smaller villages with distinct histories and cultural narratives (see Figure 1.3). Draxl's project engages local women, particularly younger generations, to reflect on their perspectives on the heritage passed down to them, addressing the influence of traditional roles in shaping women's identities (E. Draxl, personal communication, November 27, 2023).

Employing an ethnographic approach, Draxl and her team conduct field research to identify key figures within the community. Conversations with local residents, including curators from village museums, help uncover stories and connect with individuals willing to share their experiences. This step-by-step process builds trust and broadens participation through a snowball effect, where one interaction leads to another. Draxl emphasises creating a space for meaningful exchanges and actively listening to women's stories to ensure their voices are integral to the project. By involving younger women,



Figure 1.3 Local residents Kerstin Gruber and Regina Stocker participating in the Female Heritage Project in Austria. Photograph by Ofer Mayer.

the initiative seeks to bridge generational gaps and underscore the evolving nature of female heritage in the region (E. Draxl, personal communication, November 27, 2023).

Central to the project is a culminating performance that employs the technique of Verbatim Theatre. This method involves editing recorded interviews without altering their content and presenting them through performers who listen to the recordings via in-ear technology and repeat them verbatim. This approach amplifies the participants' stories while maintaining their privacy. Draxl notes that the performance was warmly received, highlighting the importance of addressing the future of women's lives in the region. This success has led to the continuation of the project (E. Draxl, personal communication, December 15, 2024).

Though still in its early stages, when Draxl was first interviewed for this book, the project strives to document the rich tapestry of female experiences in Salzkammergut while helping the participants empower themselves to reclaim and celebrate their heritage. The collaborative nature of the initiative ensures that the final presentation—whether an installation, performance, or another medium—reflects the collective input and creativity of the community.

This project on female heritage exemplifies how socially engaged art can foster dialogue, strengthen community connections, and promote social awareness. By prioritising participation and inclusivity, Draxl and her team not only enrich the artistic landscape of the Salzkammergut region but also contribute to its cultural narrative, ensuring that women's voices are both heard and valued.

Christlike activism: Fighting for queer rights in Ghana

Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi, known as craziniST artisT, is a Ghanaian multidisciplinary artist, transgender woman, former priest, and founder of perfocraZe International Artists Residency (pIAR). Her work blends performance art with LGBTIQ+ activism, creating a collaborative space for artists, activists, researchers, and curators. In Ghana's conservative, often anti-gay context, her art confronts societal norms and sparks dialogue about marginalised communities. As Fiatsi explains, her activism often feels "Christlike," standing in stark contrast to the "Christianity that ... promotes hate and violence towards marginalised people" (V.-B. E. Fiatsi, personal communication, April 13, 2024).

In a country where homosexuality faces intense stigma and the influence of American fundamentalist Christian groups has led to the formal criminalisation of queer identities, Fiatsi's platform serves as a powerful advocacy tool. The introduction of Ghana's anti-LGBTIQ+ bill in 2021 marked an escalation of anti-queer sentiment, yet Fiatsi continues to push back with performance happenings and communal events such as the LOVE fEAST (see Chapter 5).

With her activism, Fiatsi fosters compassion and understanding, challenging prevailing anti-gay narratives. Her performances highlight the struggles

of marginalised individuals and encourage critical reflection on identity and acceptance.

Theatre meets theology: Reimagining of the Lutheran Mass

In Finland, theatre director Miira Sippola, drawing on her background in theology and theatre, led an innovative artistic intervention at Kallio Church in Helsinki that exemplifies both socially engaged art within a religious institutional setting and professional competence development through arts-based learning. Exploring meanings in the church space together with priests and deacons (see Figure 1.4 for an example), Sippola reimagined the Lutheran Mass as a performative and embodied experience, merging theatre and theology to enhance its spiritual depth. Recognising the inherent dramatic elements of the Mass—such as the priest’s role, congregational participation, and symbolic gestures—she collaborated with Kallio parish to treat the Mass as a structured drama, focusing on liturgical performance while fostering professional growth for those involved in the project (Sippola, 2016).

Through collaborative sessions with clergy, she applied theatre techniques to improve their physical presence, timing, and engagement, culminating in a collective Mass delivered in unison. This synchronised performance deepened the ritual’s connection with the congregation and demonstrated how socially



Figure 1.4 Exploring meanings in the church space: A priest participating in an artistic intervention at Kallio Church, Helsinki, Finland. Photograph by Miira Sippola.

engaged art can transform organisational practices by fostering new perspectives and participatory experiences (Sippola, 2016).

Cultivating empathy and ethical care through artistic intervention in Sweden

In 2009, Swedish conceptual artist Malin Bellman was invited to lead an innovative artistic intervention at Östra Sjukhuset hospital in Gothenburg. Unlike conventional art projects that prioritise the artist's vision, this year-long initiative focused on reshaping the emergency ward employees' perspectives on their work, aiming to enhance their ethical attitudes towards patient care. Titled 100 Hours, the project involved a series of workshops where employees immersed themselves in the patient experience (Tafi & ArtLab, 2013).

Each participant spent one hour lying on a stretcher in the hospital hallway, observing the daily operations from a patient's perspective (see Figure 1.5). Over the course of 100 Hours, participants recorded their insights in a log-book, which later served as a foundation for suggesting improvements to hospital procedures and workflows (Hederberg, 2010). This experiential learning process offered the employees profound insights into how hospital routines affected patients, fostering empathy and an ethically attuned approach to their professional roles.

By inviting staff to momentarily inhabit the patient's world, 100 Hours demonstrated the potential of socially engaged art to instil a deeper understanding



Figure 1.5 An emergency ward employee participating in Malin Bellman's 100 Hours project at Södra Sjukhuset hospital in Gothenburg, Sweden. Photograph by Anna Rehnberg.

of healthcare environments, leading to more compassionate and ethically mindful practices.

Dancing with the public

Pia Lindy is a contemporary dance artist and educator in Finland known for her innovative approach to socially engaged art. Drawing on her background in sociology, she explores how art can intersect with community engagement and social consciousness. Lindy's work emphasises inclusivity, accessibility, and the role of art in fostering dialogue around pressing social and environmental issues. Her projects are deeply rooted in the contexts in which she works, aiming to break down barriers and bring dance into everyday spaces. Throughout her career, she has remained committed to creating sustainable projects that have a lasting impact, encouraging active participation and reflection.

One of Lindy's most notable projects is Joku Kohta Tanssii [About to Dance], which she began in 2001. This project exemplifies Lindy's commitment to making dance accessible to a broader audience and creating a dialogue between the artist and the public. In Joku Kohta Tanssii, Lindy and her collaborators conducted street interviews, asking participants to express their thoughts on life and dance through movement. Filmed in various public settings across Finland and other countries, this approach highlighted that dance can be an accessible form of expression, open to people from all backgrounds, not just professionals. The project documented participants' movements and personal stories, blending performance with community-driven narratives and creating an archive of everyday people's contributions to dance (P. Lindy, personal communication, March 26, 2024).

Joku Kohta Tanssii expanded into About to Dance—Connecting between 2011 and 2016, further exploring with different collaborators the relationship between art, care, and society. This phase of the project questioned the role of art and artists in mediating care and fostering connections. It also examined how art could communicate messages from individuals to politicians and officials, exploring the potential for art to serve as a bridge in social discourse (see Figure 1.6). The project took various forms, including work-in-progress showings, site-specific actions, installations, open dance workshops, and discussions, all of which focused on creating space for dialogue and collaboration (P. Lindy, personal communication, March 26, 2024).

A significant part of About to Dance—Connecting was the 3 Duets About Care project, which brought together professional dancers and individuals with little or no background in dance to explore themes of care. Through this process-based work, Lindy highlighted the importance of the evolving relationships between participants, emphasising that the collaborative journey was as valuable as the final performance. These encounters blended dance, photography, sound, and dialogue, offering multiple ways to engage with the theme of care and create a shared understanding of the artistic process (P. Lindy, personal communication, March 26, 2024).



Figure 1.6 Municipal councillor and member of the European Parliament Merja Kyllönen dancing with Pia Lindy in the socially engaged dance project Joku kohta tanssii [About to Dance]. Photograph by Suvi-Tuuli Kankaanpää.

Lindy's Joku Kohta Tanssii exemplifies her belief in socially engaged art as a tool for fostering meaningful connections and reflection on social themes. By inviting public participation and encouraging dialogue through movement, she challenged conventional ideas about who can engage in art, showing that even everyday encounters can become moments of artistic expression. In transforming public spaces into stages for shared experiences, Lindy expanded the boundaries of dance, demonstrating that it can connect people, address social issues, and promote inclusivity while engaging with the complexities of care and community.

Music for LGBTIQ+ rights and environmental justice in Indonesia

Kai Mata, an Indonesian singer-songwriter, and activist has emerged as a prominent figure in the fight for LGBTIQ+ rights and environmental advocacy in her home country. As one of the few openly LGBTIQ+ musicians in a country where queer identities face significant social stigma, she uses her platform to challenge discrimination through her art. Kai Mata's work merges personal narratives with collective experiences, creating powerful themes of queer liberation, pride, and resistance. Her music fosters empathy, empowering individuals to engage with and advocate for LGBTIQ+ rights.

Kai Mata is not only a leading voice for queer rights but also integrates environmental concerns into her artistic practice. She collaborates with initiatives

like Music Declares Emergency, which encourages artists to adopt sustainable practices and raise awareness about pressing environmental issues. By performing at protests and community events, Kai Mata demonstrates how socially engaged music can galvanise support for both human rights and ecological sustainability. Her slogan, “No music on a dead planet” (K. Mata, personal communication, 12.4.2024), encapsulates her commitment to integrating environmental consciousness into her advocacy.

Through her activism, Kai Mata sparks crucial conversations that inspire action and bridge the gap between marginalised communities and the wider public. Her artistic work embodies themes such as “pride as protest [and] celebration as rebellion” (K. Mata, personal communication, 12.4.2024), utilising music and storytelling to promote inclusivity and challenge societal norms. With a rich collaboration history that includes Grammy-winning artist Kipper Eldridge and performances across three continents, she continually uplifts LGBTIQ+ narratives. Recently honoured with the 2024–2025 Joint Engaged Artist Award, Kai Mata has solidified her role as a key figure in Indonesia’s queer liberation movement, particularly after her vocal opposition to a 2020 bill advocating conversion therapy for LGBTIQ+ individuals. This act of defiance, coupled with her powerful song *Her*, has enabled Kai Mata to speak and perform on global platforms, transforming negative commentary into celebratory anthems that weave together Indonesia’s queer history and contemporary discrimination (see Figure 1.7).

Kai Mata’s artistic work is deeply rooted in Indonesia’s cultural context, incorporating local narratives and histories that resonate with her audience. She actively participates in community events, such as women’s marches, where she engages with audiences to raise awareness and inspire collective action. Through her work, she connects with her listeners by underscoring the importance of personal storytelling, stating, “creating personal narrative is one of the strongest ways we can immediately establish a bridge of empathy and connection to an audience” (personal communication, 12.4.2024). Kai Mata’s multifaceted approach exemplifies socially engaged arts, showcasing how music can serve as a powerful medium for advocacy and change. By intertwining themes of environmental and queer liberation, she effectively raises awareness, fosters community engagement, and inspires action, making significant contributions to the realm of socially conscious art in Indonesia.

Urban game: Exploring migration and identity in Vienna’s public spaces

Charlotta Ruth, a Vienna-based artist and researcher with a PhD in Arts from the University of Applied Arts Vienna (Die Angewandte), specialises in performance art, choreographic systems, and socially engaged practices. Her work explores themes such as asynchronous communication, performance documentation, and the interplay between digital and physical spaces. Ruth’s contributions span stage performances, public interventions, institutional projects, and online platforms. She currently holds a working grant from the City of Vienna



Figure 1.7 Kai Mata performing to her audiences at Tehdas Teatteri's Joki Studio in Turku, during her residency in Finland. Photograph by the author.

for her project *Choreografische Spuren & Kettenkreationen* [Choreographic Traces & Chain Creations] and is involved in the *Angewandte Performance Laboratory*. Her research and artistic contributions have been presented internationally, where she continues to influence discussions on participatory art and its social impact (C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024).

In September 2019, Ruth collaborated with City Games Vienna—Austria's first urban game design studio, founded by Tamer Aslan, Philipp Ehmann, and Simon Schwaighofer—to create the scratch-card-based game, *Good Turk*. Aslan, one of the founders, brought his Turkish heritage to the project,

contributing a personal perspective to the game's concept. City Games Vienna specialises in producing interactive urban games that encourage players to engage with cityscapes in innovative ways. Blending historical narratives with contemporary urban experiences, the studio uses public spaces as platforms for exploring culture, identity, and social dynamics. Their games merge traditional production techniques with new technologies, offering both analogue and digital experiences that guide players through hidden stories embedded in the city. Notably, the studio also devised the title *Good Turk* (C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024).

Commissioned as the game designer for *Good Turk*, Ruth developed a public space game aimed at revealing the historical influence of Turkish culture on Vienna's landscape. Her design process involved scouting locations, choreographing the journey through the city, and weaving the narrative into the physical spaces. The narrative, which she co-authored with a writer, carefully balanced historical storytelling with player engagement. Building on the scratch-card mechanics of earlier City Games releases like *1918* and *Paradise Lost*, *Good Turk* focused on uncovering Ottoman influences within the city's cultural identity. The game spanned two contrasting districts—Ottakring (16th district) and Währing (18th district)—connected by tram line nine. Ottakring is known for its vibrant cultural diversity, with Yppenplatz and the Brunnenmarkt merging immigrant traditions, local markets, and a strong community spirit. Währing, in contrast, is a more affluent area with historical ties to the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, including Türkenschantzpark, a former military fortification that underscores the city's Ottoman history (Ruth, 2024).

Good Turk invited players to challenge stereotypes surrounding Turkish influence in Vienna by exploring these public spaces and solving puzzles. The game highlighted Turkish contributions to Vienna's cultural fabric, from cuisine to architecture, while dismantling binary notions of "friend" and "foe" in Ottoman-Viennese relations. By blending moments of everyday magic with historical facts, Ruth encouraged participants to reflect on how migration and intercultural exchange have shaped the city's identity.

As a socially engaged art practice, *Good Turk* went beyond entertainment, aiming to provoke critical reflection on national identity and cultural integration. Players were encouraged to engage physically and emotionally with the city, using the game as a platform to learn about the past and become more aware of present-day cultural dynamics. This aligns with Ruth's broader commitment to socially engaged art, which emphasises collaboration, participation, and mutual learning between artists and communities (C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024).

Ruth's work on *Good Turk* exemplifies how urban games can serve as a medium for socially engaged art. By transforming public spaces into a canvas for historical exploration and social dialogue, the game invited participants to reconsider their understanding of Vienna's cultural evolution through migration. Rooted in participation, collaboration, and social reflection, Ruth's

approach demonstrates the power of art to engage people in critical conversations about history and its enduring influence on contemporary society.

Embodied ecology: Arts-based environmental education in Finland

Anne Pässilä, a Senior Researcher at Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology LUT in Finland, specialises in applied theatre, drama, and arts-based transformative processes. With a background in arts and cultural studies, her work focuses on enhancing human potential, especially within organisational contexts. Her research, particularly her doctoral dissertation on research-based theatre (Pässilä, 2012), provides a foundation for her innovative approaches in socially engaged arts practices. Pässilä's current projects target sustainable service design, social engagement, and transprofessional collaboration, combining socio-cultural systems, equality mechanisms, and arts-based methodologies.

In her recent work, Pässilä led a participatory educational project under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research programme, Participatory Communication of Science (ParCos). The LUT-led case study in Finland focused on engaging youth in understanding water quality through data comics and data drama, using the story of Vesijärvi, a lake in Lahti.

As part of this effort, the Veden Armoilla [At the Water's Mercy] data drama event brought together local high school and vocational students, teachers, art educators, and ParCos researchers. This event, blending arts-based framing with data comics, provided an immersive experience that helped the participants quickly grasp complex information while fostering collaboration and ideation. The case study highlights the effectiveness of data comics and data drama in engaging non-experts, underscoring the potential of ParCos tools in participatory science storytelling (A. Pässilä, personal communication, December 5, 2024).

Further, the project introduced vocational students as peer facilitators, training them to lead participatory processes for high school students. The vocational students acted as assistant facilitators in arts-based workshops that featured high schoolers and young people interested in visual arts, with some social service students and teachers joining to observe and contribute.

A key element of Pässilä's approach involved using artistic and theatrical elements to deepen participants' connections to nature and their environments. One activity around data drama featured the Näkkitär character, a reimagined version of Näkki from Finnish mythology, as a prompt to explore nature-related themes. Näkki, a water spirit associated with lakes and the mystery of nature, traditionally appears as a cautionary figure luring people to the water. By feminising the name to Näkkitär, the project highlights nurturing, socially assumed female qualities of the myth, using this character to invite reflection on nature and human connections. In the activity, participants imagined themselves as more-than-human organisms—such as water, lakes, shores, air, plants, and animals—or mythological creatures. They drew these entities, shared facts about them,



Figure 1.8 Data Drama: Participants co-creating future visions by painting with the Näkkitär character. Photograph by Lasse Kantola.

and role-played as their chosen characters, fostering a deeper connection to the natural surroundings (A. Pässilä, personal communication, December 5, 2024).

The silent, mystical portrayal of Näkkitär by young amateur actress Pihla Karhu, under arts educator from SDO Theatrum Olga Lasse Kantola's direction, helped set an immersive tone for the workshop (see Figure 1.8). By removing spoken lines, Pässilä and her team fostered a cohesive, uninterrupted atmosphere, allowing participants to fully engage with the setting. Pässilä often uses theatre techniques such as sound, light, and narrative elements to move beyond conventional science education classroom environments, creating immersive spaces that prompt self-reflection, imagination, and collective engagement (A. Pässilä, personal communication, December 5, 2024).

Pässilä's work thus exemplifies an innovative, socially engaged educational practice, where students collaboratively explore personal and environmental connections. This blend of experiential learning and creative engagement not only fosters deeper understanding but also underscores each participant's expertise in their own lived experience, bridging art, science, mythology, and education through a transformative, participatory approach.

Paradigm shift in the arts

The ten case examples above demonstrate a rich diversity of socially engaged art, showcasing various contexts, practices, modes of engagement, and

functions that artists employ to address pressing social issues. From Kai Mata's advocacy for LGBTIQ+ rights and environmental justice in Indonesia to Draxl's focus on underexplored female heritage in Austria, each artist employs unique methodologies that reflect their cultural landscapes and the specific communities they engage with.

Thomas Kuhn's concept of a paradigm shift describes how established frameworks in scientific fields undergo revolutionary changes when anomalies arise, prompting a re-evaluation of existing norms (Kuhn, 2012/1962). Similarly, in the realm of contemporary art, the evolution of socially engaged art exemplifies a paradigm shift, where traditional understandings of artistic practice are disrupted. As the case studies in this book demonstrate, socially engaged art challenges long-standing notions of art, highlighting collective empowerment and social responsibility over individual expression. This shift redefines the artist's role, moving from one of personal self-expression—a concept central to the Western tradition of art—to that of a facilitator who nurtures and gives form to participants' expressions, addressing social, political, or ecological concerns.

Claire Bishop identifies this shift as “the social turn in contemporary art” (2007, p. 61), which redefines art's purpose and its relationship with society. Socially engaged art transcends the boundaries of the artistic and non-artistic realms, thriving on genuine social interaction and real-world connections, as noted by Helguera (2011). This form of art emphasises collaborative dialogue with communities, reinforcing democratic principles and fostering civic participation (Cartiere & Zebracki, 2016; Burrough & Walgren, 2022). For instance, the diverse practices highlighted in the case studies illustrate the adaptability of socially engaged art to meet specific community needs while addressing pressing social issues.

Beverly Naidus (2009) argues that the essence of socially engaged art lies in its diversity and its ability to spark meaningful dialogue. The adaptability of methodologies, such as workshops and community events, emphasises the inclusive nature of socially engaged art and its role in fostering collective empowerment and social responsibility.

Central to this evolution is the concept of embodied experience, which highlights the interconnectedness of art and social dynamics. Suzi Gablik (1992) argues that vision is not solely a matter of cognitive or aesthetic perception; rather, it functions as a social practice. This perspective, highlighting the interconnectedness of sensing with societal interactions and cultural contexts, is reinforced by the work of artists like Lindy and Marcalo, who employ dance as a means of social engagement, creating spaces for dialogue and interaction that emphasise physical presence and shared experiences. Their dance-based practices invite participants to engage in the bodily dynamics of movement, enabling them to explore social relationships and challenge prevailing narratives through embodied expression.

Bellman's bodily experiment with the stretcher further exemplifies this notion of embodied experience. By encouraging participants to physically

recline on the stretcher placed in the emergency ward's hallway as a medium, Bellman creates a participatory environment that emphasises the relational aspects of not only artmaking but also sense-making. This practice underscores how our understanding of the world is socially constructed, as noted by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2005), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991), and Michel Foucault (1972). Through these participatory practices, artists and participants engage in co-reflecting and co-creating social realities, enabling individuals to identify, critically reflect on, and reimagine the social constructs that shape their lives.

In this evolving landscape, artists view their practice as a vocation (Bishop, 2012), recognising their potential to drive social change beyond traditional institutions (Biesta, 2017; Dewey, 2005; Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995). The democratisation of art blurs the boundaries between artist and audience, challenging long-standing hierarchies and redefining the artist's identity. This evolution invites a shift from the liberal humanist conception of the artist as a solitary genius to a model centred on community experiences and co-creation.

Moreover, the concept of the “dialogical self” (Lehikoinen et al., 2021, p. 77) emphasises that the artist's professional identity is dynamic, socially embedded, and discursively constructed rather than stable or coherent.² Through interactions with community members, artists' identities are shaped by evolving narratives and spatial positioning among multiple voices. This recognition reinforces the notion that socially engaged art is not merely a genre but a transformative practice that cultivates dialogue, fosters social responsibility, and empowers communities.

Chapter reflections

To sum up this chapter, the case studies vividly illustrate a paradigm shift in the arts, where socially engaged practices redefine the roles of artists and the function of art within society. These practices reveal their transformative potential, enriching the discourse surrounding artistic practice and confronting urgent social issues, fostering a more democratic and participatory society. These insights advocate for a reimagined understanding of art's potential, urging both artists and communities to embrace their roles in co-creating a more just and inclusive world. By emphasising the dynamic relationship between theory and real-world application, the next chapter reflects on these case studies to address conceptual complexities in socially engaged arts practices.

Notes

- 1 Established in 1956, Kone Foundation, one of the largest private foundations in Finland, is an independent organisation working to improve the world by supporting free science and art. In 2024, it awarded grants, prizes, and donations totalling over 56 million euros. The Foundation also runs the Saari Residence, which, since 2008, has provided a peaceful, ecologically sustainable retreat for artists and

researchers. Located in a rural area near Turku in Southwest Finland, the residence encourages slow-paced, insightful work and collaboration (Kone Foundation, 2025).

2 For dialogical self, see also Hermans (2001, p. 243).

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2 Socially engaged art

Definitions, complexities, and cultural contexts

In this chapter, I delve into the multifaceted realm of socially engaged art, beginning with a review of the case studies introduced in the previous chapter, which illustrate its various manifestations. These case studies provide a lens through which I aim to show how artists navigate complex social landscapes, addressing societal issues and fostering community engagement through their creative practices.

The discourse surrounding socially engaged art is further enriched by an investigation into its conceptual complexity. This chapter explores a range of frameworks—such as applied theatre, artistic activism, artistic interventions in organisations, community art, dialogical aesthetics, participatory art, public art, and relational art—each rooted in distinct historical, cultural, and political conditions, and offering a uniqueness through which socially engaged art is practiced and understood.

Finally, I briefly address the cultural contexts that shape socially engaged art. Understanding these contexts is vital for appreciating the nuanced ways in which artists and communities interact, as well as for recognising the importance of cultural specificity in defining the goals and outcomes of socially engaged initiatives. By weaving together insights from practice, conceptual frameworks, and cultural considerations, this chapter aims to present a comprehensive understanding of socially engaged art as a dynamic and context-sensitive field.

Reflecting on the case studies

The socially engaged arts practices illustrated by the case studies in Chapter 1 underscore the remarkable capacity of art to foster social transformation across diverse cultural and institutional landscapes. Moving beyond the traditional notion of the artist as a solitary creator, these practices prioritise collaboration, participation, and shared experience, transforming perceptions of identity, community, and social justice. Addressing issues as wide-ranging as human rights, environmental sustainability, and institutional reform, socially engaged art creates spaces where individuals and communities can examine

and challenge deeply embedded societal structures, inviting new forms of engagement and awareness.

The cases of Kai Mata's advocacy in Indonesia and Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi's work in Ghana demonstrate how socially engaged artists actively contest systems of oppression by initiating dialogues and promoting empathy within environments often hostile to marginalised groups. Both artists explore themes of identity, with Kai Mata addressing the intersections of queer liberation and environmental activism through her music, and Fiatsi challenging anti-LGBTIQ+ legislation through radical performances and communal feasts. Each artist uses their creative platform to dismantle barriers, foster self-expression, and mobilise collective action, encouraging audiences to re-examine societal prejudices and consider alternative, inclusive viewpoints. Similarly, Rita Marcalo's *Dancing with Strangers* humanises the refugee experience by involving participants in embodied, empathetic practices that reflect the emotional and physical realities of displacement. These projects demonstrate socially engaged art's potential to evoke deep emotional connections, allowing audiences to engage with complex social issues on a more personal, experiential level.

Several case studies also illustrate how socially engaged art can reshape traditional institutions by introducing an artistic lens to professions that often operate within strict procedural frameworks. Miira Sippola's reimagining of the Lutheran Mass through participatory theatre practices and Malin Bellman's artistic intervention in a Swedish hospital both invite professionals—clergy members in one case and healthcare workers in the other—to critically reflect on their roles within the community, enhancing their ethical and relational engagement. Similarly, Pia Bartsch's long-term community project at the Saari Residence reveals how sustained, collective creativity can establish enduring cultural practices that benefit both the artistic and local communities. Such initiatives highlight the transformative potential of socially engaged art to inspire professionals in institutional contexts to view their roles as more interconnected with the needs and identities of their communities.

These case studies, taken together, showcase the diversity of socially engaged art's impact, illustrating how it can not only address pressing social issues but also foster empathy, confront societal norms, and achieve lasting social influence through creative collaboration and collective action. This bridging of artistic and social divides is increasingly critical in a polarised world, demonstrating how socially engaged arts hold the potential to cultivate dialogue, promote mutual understanding, and empower communities.

A key theme that emerges across these case studies is the contextual sensitivity of socially engaged arts practices, revealing a landscape shaped by each artist's unique cultural and social environment. For example, Kai Mata's activism within Indonesia's socio-political climate addresses the intersecting issues of LGBTIQ+ rights and environmental justice, advocating for social equity and ecological responsibility within her community. In Ghana, Fiatsi's performance work challenges anti-queer narratives in a predominantly conservative society, utilising performance art to provoke critical discussion around

LGBTIQ+ rights. These projects underscore how socially engaged art practitioners carefully navigate their local contexts, adapting their approaches to resonate with community values and social realities.

The functions of socially engaged art are as varied as the contexts in which they emerge. For some artists, it is a means of advocacy and awareness-raising. Kai Mata and Fiatsi, for instance, use their platforms to amplify the voices of marginalised communities—Kai Mata’s music serves as both celebration and protest, while Fiatsi’s performances confront societal norms, sparking dialogue on anti-LGBTIQ+ discrimination. The practice also facilitates collective empowerment and community cohesion, as seen in Bartsch’s work at the Saari Residence, where she cultivates long-term relationships with residents, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support. Similarly, Edith Draxl’s project on female heritage engages local women in preserving their narratives, strengthening community ties, and promoting intergenerational dialogue.

The therapeutic potential of socially engaged art emerges as another noteworthy function. Marcalo’s dance workshops in Calais, for example, offer people seeking for asylum a creative outlet to process and articulate their experiences, promoting emotional resilience and shared expression within a supportive setting. The power of socially engaged art to facilitate healing and restore agency to marginalised voices is a recurring theme across these case studies, illustrating its significance in contexts of trauma and displacement.

In addition to these functions, socially engaged art opens pathways for critical reflection, education, and recreation. Projects like Charlotta Ruth’s *Good Turk* game in Vienna invite participants to explore cultural history, identity, and migration by challenging stereotypes and engaging players in the city’s cultural narrative in a reflective, interactive way. Such initiatives enrich public understanding of complex social issues, creating opportunities for participants to explore and discuss cultural identities and the forces that shape them.

Finally, socially engaged art offers a platform for celebration and resistance, reimagining negative narratives as sources of empowerment. Kai Mata’s music, for example, embodies themes of pride and liberation, reframing stigmatised identities as expressions of resilience. Fiatsi’s annual feast of queer solidarity transforms communal dining into an act of protest, using collective celebration as a form of resistance against intolerance. Through these diverse applications, socially engaged art reinforces the agency of both the artist and community, challenging the boundaries of traditional art forms and bridging cultural divides.

In summary, these case studies illustrate the transformative potential of socially engaged art, showing how artists effectively navigate cultural, political, and social challenges to promote healing, social justice, and community involvement. Through their innovative approaches, they not only address immediate social issues but also catalyse broader conversations around identity, resilience, and collective empowerment. These reflections on the diversity of socially engaged art practices create a bridge to the next section in this chapter, which will explore the conceptual complexity inherent in these

practices, addressing socially engaged art's evolving role within higher arts education. Later chapters will discuss socially engaged art as an autonomous field of study, suggesting how higher arts institutions might engage with society through socially engaged art, fulfilling their third mission of societal outreach and service.

Defining socially engaged art: Insights from practice

The case studies, introduced in Chapter 1, exemplify the diverse approaches to socially engaged art, each shaped by specific cultural contexts and objectives. This plurality, encompassing concepts such as applied art, art activism, social practice, artistic interventions in organisations, community art, dialogical aesthetics, participatory art, relational aesthetics, and public art, highlights the complexity of the field. These varied practices challenge the notion of socially engaged art as a cohesive discipline, emphasising its multifaceted and context-dependent nature.

The interviewed practitioners offer a range of insights into what socially engaged art entails, highlighting its core principles, processes, and ethical considerations. While each interviewee provides a unique perspective, several common themes emerge, painting a cohesive picture of how socially engaged art is understood and practised. Central to their definitions are the notions of participation, social consciousness, collaboration, participant agency, ethical responsibility, community engagement, and the primacy of the creative process over the final product.

Social consciousness emerges as a defining theme in the interviewees' understandings of socially engaged art. It reflects a deep awareness of social, cultural, and historical contexts, shaping how artists engage with participants, communities, and the societal issues their art seeks to address. This consciousness is approached through various interrelated themes, including collaboration, participant agency and empowerment, community and cultural resonance, process over product, and ethics and responsibility. Together, these themes reflect a practice that is attuned to the needs and experiences of the people it engages, aiming to foster mutual learning, ethical reflection, and empowerment.

Collaboration at the core

Collaboration stands as the foundation of socially engaged art, where the creative process is shared with people, rather than imposed upon them. The interviewees underline the importance of engaging people directly in the process, rather than positioning them as subjects of the work, reinforcing a genuinely participatory approach. Pia Lindy, for instance, emphasises that social consciousness involves bringing art to new audiences and including them in the creative process, fostering deeper connections between the artist and community. Draxl reinforces this view by stating, "It's not about people, it's with people" (E. Draxl, personal communication, November 27, 2023). For Ruth, collaboration is essential for generating meaningful social engagement, making

it a non-negotiable element in socially conscious art (C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024).

Fiatsi extends this understanding by stressing the integration of the community's cultural experiences into the art, asserting, "Art for the people, art with the people, art by the people" (V.-B. E. Fiatsi, personal communication, April 13, 2024). Through collaboration, socially engaged art embeds social consciousness into the heart of the artmaking process, ensuring that the work resonates with those it seeks to engage.

Participant agency and empowerment

Participant agency and empowerment are central to socially engaged art, which shifts participants from passive spectators to active co-creators. Lindy views this approach as a means to create spaces for reflection and dialogue, allowing participants to assume significant roles in shaping the project. Ruth underscores the importance of empowering participants to influence the direction of the work, thus enhancing their sense of ownership and agency. She expresses this clearly, stating, "A higher degree of agency is for me somehow an important factor to discuss in socially engaged practice" (C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024). Ruth's emphasis on participant agency reflects her commitment to ensuring that everyone not only feels involved but also has a hand in determining the project's trajectory, which, in turn, fosters a sense of personal investment and empowerment.

Similarly, Kai Mata, whose work challenges the marginalisation of queer identities in Indonesia, describes her practice as a form of "creative confrontation." She emphasises the importance of "establishing an issue or crisis clearly in the public's mind to bring about firstly a conversation and then a sense of agency within an individual to create change" (personal communication, April 12, 2024). For Kai Mata, agency emerges as participants and audiences come to recognise their own potential to initiate change. This sense of empowerment is further amplified by her focus on identity, as she uses her platform to help individuals understand that their worth extends beyond the hardships they have endured. By reframing participants' self-perceptions beyond their struggles, Kai Mata's work inspires participants to redefine themselves as active agents capable of societal influence.

Draxl adds that socially engaged art "supports both individual and group development, ultimately aiming to create something impactful" (E. Draxl, personal communication, November 27, 2023). Her perspective emphasises the dual purpose of fostering personal growth and facilitating collective transformation. Draxl's approach suggests that socially engaged art not only empowers individuals within the project framework but also contributes to shared group goals, encouraging a sense of community and joint purpose. Her work underscores the collective empowerment that can arise when individuals engage collaboratively to address common social issues.

Fiatsi, whose work confronts social stigmas in Ghana, provides another layer of perspective by highlighting the role of art in prompting self-reflection and social awareness. She explains that her work is designed “to confront ordinary Ghanaians and encourage them to reflect and contemplate” (V. Fiatsi, personal communication, April 13, 2024). For Fiatsi, agency arises from critical self-awareness, as participants are invited to question social norms and reflect on their own roles within these frameworks. By fostering contemplation and dialogue around entrenched societal issues, her art empowers participants to challenge the status quo and recognise their capacity for advocacy and change.

Collectively, these insights highlight how socially engaged art can foster participant agency through various approaches—whether by involving participants as co-creators, reframing their identities, facilitating collaborative growth, or encouraging critical reflection. Through empowering participants in these ways, socially engaged art not only inspires personal transformation but also equips individuals to become active agents of broader social change.

Community and cultural resonance

For socially engaged art to be truly socially conscious, it must resonate with the lived experiences and cultural realities of the communities it engages. Fiatsi articulates this clearly, emphasising that “the art cannot be removed from the culture of the people, and the art cannot be in denial of the experience of the people” (V.-B. E. Fiatsi, personal communication, April 13, 2024). Socially engaged art, then, is generally responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which it operates, ensuring that the work is relevant and meaningful to the people involved.

Kai Mata also highlights the importance of understanding these cultural and historical contexts, particularly in her work on queer identities in Indonesia. She states, “Utilising media and materials that are still available... to allow us Indonesians to see our identity as queer people has historically been a part of the fabric of what makes Indonesia this country” (personal communication, April 12, 2024). Kai Mata’s emphasis on the historical integration of marginalised identities within national narratives demonstrates how socially engaged art can foster a deeper connection between communities and their cultural heritage. Lindy similarly underscores the importance of engaging with both local and global social realities. For Lindy, social consciousness requires considering the broader social, political, and historical contexts that affect communities. Through this deep engagement with community and culture, socially engaged art can foster reflection on both individual and collective identities, helping participants connect their personal experiences to larger societal issues.

Process over product

The process of creation in socially engaged art is often more significant than the final product. The interviewees emphasise that socially engaged art prioritises the collaborative journey over producing a polished work. Lindy underscores

the experiential nature of this practice, where the value lies in the learning and growth that occur through participation. Draxl reinforces this idea, stating that her focus is on “describing the process rather than the final outcome” (E. Draxl, personal communication, November 27, 2023).

Kai Mata further emphasises the ripple effect that socially conscious art can create, explaining that “the impact doesn’t stop from my music. It continuously keeps going with the people that listen, that feel inspired, that spark conversations” (personal communication, April 12, 2024). This highlights how the process of engaging participants and audiences can lead to lasting social impact that extends beyond the immediate scope of the artwork. The process, then, becomes a means of deepening social engagement, fostering ongoing dialogues, and building stronger communities, aligning with the ethical and reflective goals of socially conscious art.

Ethics and responsibility

Ethical considerations are at the heart of socially engaged art, as it involves working with communities and individuals, often in vulnerable or marginalised positions. Artists like Draxl and Lindy stress the need for transparency and responsibility throughout the process. Lindy discusses the ethical responsibility that comes with social consciousness, which includes representing communities authentically and respectfully. Draxl echoes this, emphasising the importance of being “very clear about your values from the beginning” to avoid exploiting participants (E. Draxl, personal communication, November 27, 2023).

Ruth adds that transparency is crucial in ensuring participants understand the scope of their involvement and contributions (C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024). Fiatsi extends the ethical dimension by discussing the artist’s awareness of their positionality—whether privileged or marginalised—and how it impacts the relationships within the project (V.-B. E. Fiatsi, personal communication, April 13, 2024). This reflexive awareness is key to maintaining ethical integrity in socially engaged art, ensuring that social consciousness is upheld throughout the collaborative process.

In summary, social consciousness forms the core of socially engaged art, as reflected in the interviewees’ diverse perspectives on collaboration, participant empowerment, community and cultural resonance, process-driven approaches, and ethics and responsibility. Together, these interconnected themes frame socially engaged art as a practice that fosters meaningful dialogue, collective agency, and cultural awareness. By emphasising ethical engagement, participant agency, and community connection, socially engaged art nurtures profound social reflection, transformation, and empowerment.

Conceptual complexity

The diverse conceptual frameworks of applied theatre, artistic activism, artistic interventions in organisations, community art, dialogical aesthetics,

participatory art, public art, and relational art each possess unique historical, cultural, and political foundations. These frameworks resonate closely with the earlier discussed case studies and insights from the practitioners interviewed. To better understand the multifaceted nature of socially engaged art, I conceptualise it as an umbrella term functioning as a hyponym—an approach previously articulated in a co-authored article (Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, 2023)—encompassing various artistic forms shaped by a multitude of discourses, all subsumed under the broader hypernym of art.

As illustrated in Table 2.1, this framework accommodates a wide array of terms and definitions articulated by practitioners and captured in scholarly literature. These artistic practices exhibit what Ludwig Wittgenstein refers to as “family resemblances,” (2009, p. 36), indicating that they share a fundamental characteristic: They are all forms of art. Furthermore, they often reveal overlapping traits, such as community engagement, participatory practice, and social transformation, highlighting the intricate connections that define socially engaged art. However, not all socially engaged initiatives pursue the same goals, which may include aims such as empowerment, fostering innovation, raising awareness, promoting social change, building community, enhancing health and well-being, encouraging dialogue, and preserving cultural heritage, or even enhancing individual well-being within care ethics and improving work practices in organisational settings (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013; Daykin, 2020; Pässilä, 2012).

Also, as the case studies in Chapter 1 suggest, these categories are not rigid; artists often blend different approaches to fit their specific projects (see also Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, 2023). This adaptability illustrates the rhizomatic nature of socially engaged art, representing a decentralised, networked mode of growth and connection (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Like a rhizome, socially engaged practices expand in multiple directions, creating networks of influence rather than adhering to a single path or fixed structure.

While a deeper exploration of each of these practices lies beyond this book’s scope, the focus here is on socially engaged art as a multifaceted professional practice that occupies a unique space between the arts and other fields. Its presence in this liminal space emphasises the value of socially engaged art as a dynamic area of professional and academic inquiry, particularly within higher arts education. Recognising the flexibility and diversity of these forms is not only essential for understanding their potential but also underscores the need for socially engaged art to be studied in its own right—as a legitimate and autonomous subject within academic and artistic curricula.

Cultural contexts of socially engaged art

Considering the case studies discussed above, it becomes evident that socially engaged art arises from a rich tapestry of cultural contexts, each characterised by its unique histories and guiding principles. For instance, Tin Shui Yeung observes a significant distinction in terminology: While international scholars

Table 2.1 Characterising the different forms of socially engaged arts practices

Form	Description	Key features	Example practices
Applied theatre	“usually works in contexts where the work created and performed has a specific resonance with its participants and its audiences and often, to different degrees, involves them in it” (Prentki & Preston, 2009, p. 9).	Collaboration, participant agency, ethical responsibility, for /with/by a community.	Community-based performances, theatre of the oppressed, forum theatre, playback theatre.
Artistic activism	“a practice aimed at generating Æffect: emotionally resonant experiences that lead to measurable shifts in power” (Duncombe & Lambert, 2018, para. 5). “using agitation and protest as an artistic medium ... collectively, working with other artists, but also in collaboration with ‘non-art’ political activists ... to bring about a degree of positive societal change” (Scholette, 2022, p. 12).	Advocacy, political engagement, community mobilisation, combination of affect and effect, surprising and accessible, creativity and engagement, aims at creating lasting cultural change by shifting values, beliefs, and behaviours, peaceful and persuasive.	Activist songs, dramatised slogans, protest art, street art, performance activism.
Artistic interventions in organisations	“Bringing people, processes, and products from the world of the arts into organizations ... [to help] members of the organization ... become aware of the distinctive features of their language, perspectives, and practices, and have the opportunity to generate variations in ways of seeing and doing things from which to choose in the future” (Berthoin Antal 2009, p. 4).	Collaboration, unexpectedness, trusting the open process, stakeholder engagement, creating “interspaces” (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013, p. 33).	Identifying development needs, fostering positive change, developing better practices, and enhancing creative innovation through collective, artist-led processes
Arts-based initiatives	“the planned managerial use of art forms to address management challenges and business problems with the aim of developing employees and infrastructure that affects the organisational value-creation capacity” (Schiuma, 2011, p. 2).	Inspiration, catalyst for change, value creation, emotional engagement, self-reflection, creative problem-solving.	Arts-based collaborative reflection, organisation culture, atmosphere, and environment development, brand, and reputation development.

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

Form	Description	Key features	Example practices
Community art	“Community art is the creation of art as a human right, by professional and non-professional artists, co-operating as equals, for purposes and to standards they set together, and whose processes, products and outcomes cannot be known in advance” (Matarasso, 2019, p. 51). “explicitly democratic, experimental, and inclusive” (Aughterson & Moriarty, 2024, p. 1).	Human right, democracy, local engagement, collaboration, artistic creation, unpredictable, inclusion, reciprocity, equal relationships, emancipatory aspiration.	Community murals, neighbourhood art projects, community dance and theatre projects.
Cultural well-being activities	“meaningful actions at the intersection of art, culture, and well-being, involving art and culture-based activities aimed at promoting the health and overall well-being of individuals or communities, and services provided by various professionals in diverse, multi-channel ways (Kippo et al., 2023, p. 15).	Active participation, health, and well-being benefits, explicit well-being goal or service promise.	Dance ambassadors leading movement activities in eldercare to enhance physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being, fostering social connection and creativity; Hospital clowns visiting paediatric wards, to bring laughter, joy, and emotional relief to patients and their parents.
Dialogical aesthetics	“A dialogical aesthetic suggests a very different image of the artist; one defined in terms of open-ness, of listening and a willingness to accept dependence and intersubjective vulnerability. The semantic productivity of these works occurs in the interstices between the artist and the collaborator” (Kester, 2012, p. 158).	Inter-subjective exchange, collaborative process, provisional knowledge, discourse to shape subjectivity, focus on process, emphasis on listening and openness.	Collaborative art projects, participatory installations, artist-facilitated workshops and dialogues, public art initiatives encouraging community engagement, art as a platform for dialogue.

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

<i>Form</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Key features</i>	<i>Example practices</i>
Participatory art	“Participatory art is the creation of art by professional artists and non-professional artists ... defining characteristic of participatory art is the recognition that everyone involved in the artistic act is an artist... It reinforces that hybridity by crossing disciplinary boundaries” (Matarasso, 2019, pp. 48, 49, 50).	people as the medium and material, co-creation, democratic space, ethical considerations, social and political engagement, focus on process, cultural and social impact.	Collaborative mural projects, applied dance and theatre projects, collaborative public art installations, interactive art-making events, community participation in creating temporary artworks or performances to transform public spaces for engagement and celebration.
Public art	“connotes the involvement of many people ... participation in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance” (Bishop, 2012, 1–2). “sculpture and installations sited in public places” (Lacy, 1995, p. 19). “new genre public art is not built on a typology of materials, spaces, or artistic media, but rather on concepts of audience, relationship, communication, and political intention” (Lacy, 1995, p. 28).	Traditional public art: medium and form, aesthetic focus, limited interaction, static placement. New genre public art: engagement and interaction, diverse media, social and political context, dynamic and evolving, seeks to foster dialogue about contemporary issues.	Traditional public art: sculptures and installations in public places New genre public art: murals intervening in social issues, political performance art with public engagement.

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

<i>Form</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Key features</i>	<i>Example practices</i>
Relational art	“a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 113).	Social interaction and relationships, audience participation, contextuality, ephemerality, focus on process, democratic and inclusive, promoting dialogue.	Installations inviting participation and social interaction; transforming vacant buildings into cultural spaces, fostering community engagement and participation through art, music, and dialogue; performances engaging the audience in discussions about socially relevant topics.

refer to Japanese art linked to social interaction as “socially engaged art,” practitioners in Japan commonly refer to these initiatives as “art projects.” He asks, “is Japan’s ‘art project’ synonymous with ‘socially engaged art’? And even if not, should it be considered as such?” (Yeung, 2019, para 2). This divergence underscores ongoing debates regarding the alignment of these Japanese initiatives with the broader concept of socially engaged art.

The notion of art projects in Japan is a relatively recent phenomenon, with its roots tracing back to outdoor exhibitions in the 1950s. These projects gained prominence in the 1990s and are defined as “art-related initiatives held outside traditional museum and gallery spaces” (Kumakura & Nagatsu, 2015, p. 3). Unlike conventional exhibitions, these initiatives prioritise societal engagement, aiming to create new social contexts rather than merely showcasing artworks. Often framed as instruments for regional revitalisation, they address specific societal phenomena. However, scholars such as Kumakura, Kikuchi, and Nagatsu argue that despite their social focus, these projects frequently lack a critical stance towards political and societal issues, which sets them apart from their American and European counterparts (Yeung, 2019; Kumakura, Kikuchi, & Nagatsu, 2014).

To fully appreciate the cultural contexts surrounding socially engaged art, it is essential to integrate various theoretical frameworks that acknowledge the cultural specificity of these practices. Claire Bishop (2012) emphasises the global dimensions of participatory art, advocating for the grounding of these practices within local cultural and social frameworks. Her insights encourage a critical examination of how art can resonate with specific communities. Similarly, Grant Kester (2013) highlights the dialogical nature of socially engaged art, asserting the importance of dialogue and collaboration between artists and communities. Kester’s work stresses that cultural sensitivity and adaptability are vital in varying contexts, ensuring that initiatives are relevant and impactful. Suzanne Lacy (1995) further enriches this discourse by advocating for a nuanced understanding of public art. She urges practitioners to consider diverse community definitions and needs across cultures, emphasising that what may be deemed successful engagement can vary widely depending on local contexts.

These theoretical perspectives collectively reveal the cultural specificity inherent in socially engaged art practices. While fostering social change and community engagement may serve as universal objectives, the approaches and meanings constructed in these processes can differ dramatically across cultural landscapes. Therefore, an approach that is sensitive to local histories, values, and social dynamics is not only beneficial but also essential for the effectiveness and resonance of socially engaged art initiatives. By acknowledging these cultural contexts, artists and scholars can better tailor their work and research to address the unique challenges and opportunities present in each community they engage with.

Chapter reflections

The analysis of case studies, insights from interviewed practitioners, and literature references demonstrate a paradigm shift from individual artistic expression

to collective empowerment and social responsibility in the arts, emphasising participation, collaboration, and ethical considerations. I define socially engaged art in this book as a collaborative, process-oriented set of creative and reflective practices that prioritise participant agency, ethical responsibility, and mutual learning. By engaging communities in culturally relevant ways, socially engaged art creates spaces for individuals and groups to collectively explore and affirm their own power.

These practices exhibit a rhizomatic quality, evolving in a non-linear and decentralised manner. Just as artists blend various approaches to meet specific project needs, socially engaged arts practices branch out in multiple directions, forming dynamic networks of influence rather than adhering to rigid structures. Despite their diversity, these practices share family resemblances, underpinned by core values such as social engagement, creativity, and transformative aspirations.

The case studies illustrate how socially engaged art can effectively address societal issues, fosters empathy, and inspires collective action. Practitioners emphasise that the engagement process often outweighs the final product, reinforcing the importance of sustained dialogue and interaction. Discussions in this chapter not only highlight the crucial role of context in shaping artistic practices; they also emphasise the necessity of cultural sensitivity and adaptability in socially engaged art. Recognising the unique histories and guiding principles of different communities enhances the relevance and impact of these initiatives.

This exploration lays the groundwork for understanding the participatory potential of socially engaged art, a theme explored further in the next chapter. By bridging divides and promoting inclusivity, socially engaged art emerges as a catalyst for meaningful social engagement. It transcends traditional artistic boundaries by embracing community involvement and fostering critical reflection, connection, and empowerment within diverse communities.

Insights presented in this chapter also prepare the ground to argue for the significance of socially engaged art as a field of study, a discussion that will be addressed in greater depth in Chapters 7 and 8. Through its unique capacity to merge creativity with social engagement, socially engaged art affirms its role as a vital force for addressing pressing societal challenges.

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3 Participatory potential

As discussed in Chapter 1, socially engaged art marks a paradigm shift in the arts, redefining the roles of both art and the artist in society. It shifts the focus from aesthetic concerns to social impact, from universal themes to site-specificity, and from individual vision to collaborative meaning-making. This approach invites a re-evaluation of art's capacity to foster social change, highlighting its potential to address pressing issues such as inclusivity, sustainability, and improved working conditions (Kester, 2011). Central to this practice is the creation of participatory spaces where diverse voices collaboratively shape artistic processes and outcomes, challenging traditional power dynamics and fostering a shared sense of agency.

Participation, a cornerstone of socially engaged art, is both a multifaceted approach and a guiding philosophy. It encompasses a wide spectrum of practices, from formal mechanisms of political engagement to informal community involvement, and is deeply rooted in democratic ideals (Bishop & Davis, 2002; Cornwall, 2008; Putnam, 2000; Renn & Rohrmann, 2000). As a sociological concept, participation underscores individuals' rights and responsibilities in shaping the social, political, and economic frameworks that affect their lives, promoting both collective action and personal empowerment (Dahl, 1989; Fung, 2006). Within the context of socially engaged art, participant involvement brings diverse perspectives to the creative process, generating emotional resonance and nuanced insights that align with Bishop's (2012) observation of participatory experiences as powerful catalysts for emotional and cognitive engagement.

By positioning participants as co-creators, socially engaged art encourages collective imagination and critical reflection, acting as a medium for dialogue and potential societal change (Helguera, 2011). However, the concept of participation within these practices is complex and context-dependent, raising important questions about its definition, scope, and impact. Through workshops and interviews with practitioners, I have observed how participation in socially engaged art reshapes relationships, challenges societal norms, and fosters a sense of connection and shared purpose among individuals and communities.

In this chapter, my aim is to explore the historical and theoretical foundations of participation in socially engaged arts, examining how these practices evoke affect, challenge societal norms, and foster deeper connections within communities. By analysing practitioner narratives and integrating sociological frameworks, I investigate how participation reshapes power dynamics, fosters authentic identities, and cultivates agency for social change. In doing so, I complement the voices of earlier interviewees with insights from Allan Owens, Emeritus Professor at the University of Chester, UK. With a background in drama practice and a specialisation in creating spaces for understanding through pretexts, arts-based learning, and research, Owens brings substantial practical experience to his academic work on socially engaged art.

Historical underpinnings of participation in the arts

Art, whether in the form of music, dance, theatre, visual arts, film, or literature, exists as a unique human activity valued for its intrinsic qualities and its capacity to evoke emotions, facilitate creativity, and explore human experiences in ways that other forms of communication cannot replicate. Throughout history, art has played a vital role in helping us understand ourselves and the world, challenging prevailing norms, values, and power dynamics. This is particularly evident in socially engaged arts that emphasise participatory practices of co-creation and co-reflection.

Building on this context, Claire Bishop (2012) traces the historical foundations of participation in the arts through three pivotal moments in the avant-garde: Italian Futurism, post-revolutionary Russian culture, and Paris Dada. Italian Futurism challenges traditional spectatorship by using performance to engage mass audiences and promote political agendas through provocative gestures. Proletkult theatre and mass spectacles in post-1917 Russian culture embody themes of collective authorship and working-class expression, highlighting the link between audience participation and state ideology. Dadaism evolves from combative performances to participatory events, focusing on audience engagement amidst political discourse. Bishop suggests these moments illustrate the complex interplay between participation, artistic expression, and political commitment, offering significant insights for contemporary socially engaged practices.

Furthermore, she contends that the artistic focus on social engagement in the 1990s universally aimed to disrupt conventional dynamics among artwork, creator, and audience:

The artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience,

previously conceived as a “viewer” or “beholder,” is now repositioned as a co-producer or *participant*.

(Bishop, 2012, p. 2)

In this framework, Bishop identifies participation as a multifaceted concept essential to socially engaged arts practices. She posits that in this context, participation serves as “the central artistic medium and material in the manner of theatre and performance” (Bishop, 2012, p. 2), contrasting with traditional forms where the artist’s vision predominates. In participatory settings, participant involvement is crucial for both the creation and interpretation of artwork. Additionally, she distinguishes between participation and collaboration: the former occurs within parameters set by the artist, while the latter implies a more equitable partnership, with participants playing significant roles in the creative process. This distinction reveals varying degrees of agency among participants, challenging the notion of the artist as the sole creator.

Moreover, Bishop (2012) notes the various terms describing participatory practices—such as socially engaged art, community-based art, and dialogic art—reflect the diverse contexts and intentions behind these projects. This diversity suggests that participation can take multiple forms based on specific goals and settings. Bishop contextualises participation within social and political frameworks, acknowledging that its political implications can vary widely according to the historical and cultural contexts of the artwork. She recognises that participation can be seen as a means of empowerment in some contexts, while in others, it may serve as a tool for social control.

In addition to these insights, Bishop critiques the potential co-optation of participatory art for political agendas, referring to such practices as forms of “soft social engineering” (2012, p. 5). She also highlights the tenuous relationship between participatory art and genuine democratic practices, suggesting that while participatory art can model democratic engagement, it often lacks a direct connection to authentic democratic processes, raising questions about the effectiveness of participation.

In conclusion, Bishop’s reflections illuminate the complexities of participation in art, emphasising its relational, social, and political dimensions. Her work invites a critical examination of how artists articulate participation within their socially engaged art processes.

Perspectives on participation in socially engaged arts practices

As demonstrated by Bishop’s perspective above, the concept of participation in socially engaged arts practices is multifaceted. This complexity is further illustrated by the accounts of the interviewees in my research. Despite variations in emphasis and terminology, common themes emerge, revealing a shared understanding of participation as a dynamic and inclusive process.

Active involvement and co-creation

A foundational aspect of participation is active involvement and co-creation. Pia Bartsch notes that “participation is about actively involving people in the process, not just having them as passive recipients” (personal communication, April 2, 2024). This perspective resonates with Charlotta Ruth’s assertion that participation includes collaboration where “the outcome is not too controlled by the artist” (personal communication, February 15, 2024). Such insights highlight the significance of shared ownership in the creative process, fostering a deeper connection between participants and the artwork. Anne Pässilä reinforces this notion by declaring, “The first principle is participatory practices” (personal communication, November 29, 2024), positioning active engagement as essential for a successful participatory framework.

Empowerment

Empowerment emerges as a crucial theme across the interviews. Bartsch notes that participation allows individuals to express their narratives: “It’s about empowering individuals to express their own voices and share their stories” (personal communication, April 2, 2024). Ruth emphasises the necessity of agency, stating that “a higher degree of agency is for me somehow an important factor to discuss” (personal communication, February 15, 2024). These notions echo the sentiments of Kai Mata, who aims to instil agency in her audience, asserting, “It is to showcase that our identities are inherently human and that we are more than the suffering imposed on us” (personal communication, April 12, 2024). Pässilä adds depth to this understanding by stating that “the projects have explored ways to amplify their voices and experiences” (personal communication, November 29, 2024), illustrating how participatory practices can transform individual narratives into collective empowerment.

Inclusion

Inclusivity is a shared priority among the interviewees, emphasising the importance of representing diverse voices within the participatory framework. Pia Lindy expresses her commitment to accessibility, stating, “I want to create situations where people can feel invited” (personal communication, March 26, 2024). This commitment aligns with Bartsch’s assertion that it is “crucial to ensure that diverse voices are included in the process, making the work representative of the community” (personal communication, April 2, 2024). Additionally, Bartsch highlights the sense of belonging fostered through socially engaged art, noting, “One important point is the sense of belonging. People feel they are part of a larger whole, rather than focusing on a me-me-meme mindset” (P. Bartsch, personal communication, January 21, 2025), referring to the hyper-individualism typical of this era in Western societies.

Edith Draxl further underscores the necessity for facilitators who can connect with all participants, including those who may be more challenging to

engage (personal communication, November 27, 2023). Supporting this notion, Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi acknowledges that different forms of participation can activate varied dynamics, allowing for a broader range of voices and experiences. She notes:

I think it depends on which form of participation. Okay. So, there are ways that audience are invited into the space. And it activates different forms of participation ... the audience might not only be witnesses, but people who are also involved ... they become part of the piece. Yeah. And they gradually develop a different kind of feeling, emotion, towards the piece. For being part of it.

(V.-B. E. Fiatsi, personal communication,
April 13, 2024)

This emphasis on inclusivity suggests that socially engaged arts practices strive to resonate with the community and address its diverse needs. Collectively, these insights underscore the critical role of inclusivity in fostering engagement and connection within socially engaged arts practices.

Fostering relationships through ethical facilitation

“Participation fosters relationships and connections among community members, creating a sense of belonging” (P. Bartsch, personal communication, April 2, 2024). This relational aspect is vital, as it helps strengthen community ties. Kai Mata echoes Bartsch’s sentiment, emphasising the importance of community involvement, particularly in contexts that promote social change.

Draxl underscores that building “safe spaces for participants” requires time and should be “free from pressure or deadlines” (personal communication, November 27, 2023). In this context, Pässilä’s approach to establishing a “working agreement” (personal communication, November 29, 2024) in every session exemplifies the ethical responsibility artists have in facilitating environments that prioritise participants’ safety and comfort. Such agreements can help outline expectations and create a collaborative atmosphere that enhances participant engagement.

Furthermore, Ruth articulates the necessity for artists to thoughtfully consider the facilitation process itself, ensuring transparency regarding participants’ roles and what they can gain from the experience:

I think it is very important for socially engaged art to consider how it is facilitated and that it is inviting to a space where participants gain agency and have a reason that is also transparent enough for them ... like why they are there and what they can get out of this situation ... I think that artists need to be aware of their responsibilities towards participants and the communities they engage with.

(C. Ruth, personal communication, February
15, 2024)

Together, these insights emphasise that fostering relationships and creating safe spaces—a concept that will be introduced and discussed further in Chapter 10—are essential components of effective participatory practices, ultimately enhancing the overall experience for all involved.

Reaching beyond and embracing democracy

Expanding on the inclusive and relational aspects of participation discussed earlier, Allan Owens emphasises the importance of transcending traditional boundaries—not only within specific communities but also across professional and disciplinary silos. He defines socially engaged art as “art that allows for participation” (A. Owens, personal communication, January 6, 2025), highlighting that this participation should extend beyond the immediate confines of a specific group or institution, such as a university. Further, he envisions socially engaged art as fostering connections both within groups and across broader communities, stating, “It could be between groups in the university. Then it could be beyond there as well” (personal communication, January 6, 2025).

This perspective aligns with the broader focus on inclusion and building relationships, emphasising the need to bridge gaps and challenge siloed approaches. Owens believes that participation can foster transprofessional encounters, facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration and the sharing of expertise: “It’s about coming to know people in different professions and their work and how do we bring our skills and knowledge alongside theirs” (personal communication, January 6, 2025).

Owens also conceptualises participation as existing on a continuum, acknowledging its varying degrees and forms. Drawing from Raymond Williams’ (2011) assertion that the closest synonym to democracy is participation, he underscores the democratic ethos inherent in socially engaged art. This vision resonates with earlier discussions on empowerment and agency but introduces a critical nuance: Owens stresses that the value of participation depends on its purpose and impact. He asks, “To what end do we want that participation?” challenging assumptions about its inherent goodness and noting, “Is creativity good? Is it bad? No, it’s neutral, perhaps. Depends on what we do with it” (A. Owens, personal communication, January 6, 2025).

Unpredictability and complexity

Participation often involves navigating complex social dynamics. Ruth notes that artists need to be aware of the social context and the relationships at play, which can affect how participation unfolds (personal communication, February 15, 2024). That requires sensitivity to the needs and backgrounds of participants. By prioritising relationship-building, the interviewees collectively advocate for a participatory approach that values interpersonal connections as central to the artistic process.

As soon as you confront let's say like spontaneous audiences, citizens, it already starts to be a bit more socially engaged... reacting and receiving on a societal level.

(C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024)

Ruth's observation underscores her view of participation as an open, dialogical space characterised by an element of not-yet-knowing, which invites improvisation and spontaneity. This quality of unpredictability fosters a socially engaged atmosphere activated through real-time interactions. According to Ruth, "participation can be unpredictable and varies greatly depending on the participants and context" (personal communication, February 15, 2024). This openness to diverse responses helps the artist and audience to co-create a shared experience, reinforcing the idea that participation is an evolving process where both parties continuously influence one another.

Ruth's notion of participation emphasises that socially engaged art's impact may lie in its openness to a wide range of responses, as the artist and the participants co-create a shared experience. This setup embraces unpredictability as a strength, allowing the real-time perspectives and backgrounds of participants to shape the experience. By focusing on the fluid and responsive nature of such encounters, Ruth sees participation as an evolving process where the artist and the participants continuously influence one another.

Tensions, confrontations, and flexibility

The unpredictability of participatory exchanges can also lead to tensions, as diverse perspectives may introduce friction. Ruth acknowledges that these moments of conflict can enhance the participatory process by reflecting the nuances of social interaction. Navigating these dynamics carefully, artists can catalyse deeper engagement and reflection. The need for flexibility and adaptability is echoed by several interviewees, with Ruth stating that "artists need to be adaptable and flexible in their approach, ready to respond to the needs and dynamics of the group" (personal communication, February 15, 2024). Kai Mata adds that "creative confrontation" can establish critical issues clearly, provoking necessary conversations (personal communication, April 12, 2024).

Ruth's observation makes me recall that these unpredictable exchanges can also become contentious, as diverse perspectives may lead to moments of friction or even hostility. The range of participant experiences and backgrounds inevitably brings a plurality of viewpoints and emotions, which can challenge the flow of dialogue and introduce moments of tension that can be valuable when embraced with care. In this sense, participation in socially engaged arts can often involve navigating complex social dynamics, where moments of conflict may catalyse deeper engagement or reflection. These moments of disagreement, rather than detracting from the participatory process, enhance

the potential of these practices to reflect and respond to the nuances of social interaction.

Reflections on interviewees' accounts on participation

The interviewees' perspectives on participation in socially engaged arts practices generally align with Claire Bishop's (2012) emphasis on its centrality but diverge in their more optimistic interpretations. This analysis explores these similarities and differences to deepen our understanding of participation's role in socially engaged art.

A common emphasis on active involvement and co-creation emerges as Bartsch underscores the importance of engaging individuals in the process rather than treating them as passive recipients. This aligns with Bishop's (2012) view of participation as integral to the artistic medium. However, Bartsch's focus on agency implies an egalitarian model of co-creation, while Ruth emphasises the necessity of defining the limits of collaboration. Ruth's acknowledgement of the need for clarity regarding where participant influence ends and the artist's vision begins aligns with Bishop's caution that varying degrees of participant agency depends on the parameters set by the artist. This perspective supports Bishop's call for transparency about participant agency and the transition from collective input to the artist's direction. Rather than undermining participation, such boundaries provide a framework that helps participants understand their influence and its limitations.

Empowerment is another key theme, with Bartsch highlighting the transformative potential of participation for narrative sharing. This sense of empowerment aligns with Bishop's (2012) emphasis on elevating participant voices; however, Bishop also highlights the danger of repurposing empowerment to serve social agendas, which could inadvertently transform it into a subtle tool for social control. While the interviewees may maintain a somewhat idealistic view of empowerment, Bishop's perspective raises concerns about losing authenticity when empowerment serves external motives. Her ambivalence underscores the delicate balance between genuinely empowering participants and using that empowerment to further institutional interests.

The interviewees also call attention to inclusivity as essential for representing diverse voices, which aligns with Bishop's (2012) acknowledgement of its significance. Lindy's dedication to accessibility reflects a commitment to engaging a broad range of perspectives. However, Bishop warns that inclusivity can become superficial when driven by external agendas, contrasting with the interviewees' more idealistic views. She stresses that inclusivity must foster genuine engagement rather than serving as a mere checkbox exercise.

Owens' perspective further enriches this analysis by broadening the concept of participation to include connections that transcend traditional community boundaries and disciplinary silos. He highlights the importance of dismantling institutional and professional barriers to foster interdisciplinary collaboration and more inclusive engagement. While the democratic potential

of participation remains central, Owens raises critical questions about its ethical dimensions, urging clarity about its underlying motivations and outcomes. This perspective challenges assumptions of participation as inherently positive, encouraging a more reflective approach to its purpose and impact. By linking this to the broader risks of co-option for institutional agendas, as Bishop (2012) highlights, Owens invites a re-evaluation of how participatory practices can balance inclusion with ethical integrity.

Both the interviewees and Bishop (2012) recognise the importance of building relationships and creating safe spaces in participatory practices, yet their focuses diverge regarding the challenges involved. The interviewees highlight the positive potential of safe spaces for open expression, while Bishop underscores the complexities of these dynamics, including power imbalances and the artist's responsibility. Although Draxl and Kai Mata describe safe spaces as environments free from external pressures, Bishop points out that the artist's structural authority can inadvertently affect participant expression. Thus, the interviewees' more straightforward view of relationship-building may oversimplify Bishop's nuanced analysis.

While the interviewees' reflections resonate with Bishop's (2012) core ideas, they present a more idealised vision that may overlook her critical exploration of the complexities, contradictions, and power dynamics in participatory practices. Owens' reflections on ethics and transdisciplinary collaboration add a complementary layer to this discourse, bridging the optimistic perspectives of the interviewees and Bishop's critical examination. Bishop's nuanced perspective encourages a deeper examination of the structures underlying participatory art, challenging practitioners to consider the implications of agency, empowerment, and inclusivity within broader socio-political contexts.

Perspectives: Reading socially engaged arts narratives through sociological lenses

Next, I move to examine the transformative power and social implications of socially engaged arts practices by applying a sociological lens that intersects with theories of social capital, collective experience, and critical frameworks from Freirean pedagogy, Marxism, feminist theory, queer theory, and post-colonial perspectives. Through the narratives of interviewees, this sub-chapter strives to illuminate how these arts practices foster community cohesion, empower individuals, and challenge power dynamics by deconstructing societal norms related to identity, agency, and inclusivity. By situating these narratives within broader theoretical contexts, I aim to demonstrate how socially engaged arts practices are committed to building trust, mutual respect, and a sense of collective belonging within communities.

Social capital and collective effervescence

Bartsch reflects that "communication and interaction were very tight" (personal communication, April 2, 2024), highlighting the role of social engagement

in fostering deep-rooted community connections in her project. Her insight resonates with Robert Putnam's (2000) assertion that such engagement cultivates networks of trust and cooperation, essential elements of social capital vital for the functioning of democracy. Bartsch views participation in the arts as a crucial means of building community, aligning with Putnam's perspective that consistent social interaction nurtures trust and collaboration.

Bartsch also emphasises empowerment, describing her art projects as platforms for individuals to cultivate respect and humility, as "art emerges in interaction and from different perspectives" (personal communication, April 2, 2024). This aligns with the belief that social engagement must respect diverse viewpoints, thereby strengthening interpersonal and community bonds (Putnam, 2000). Moreover, Bartsch highlights the lasting impacts of participation, explaining that even those who did not directly participate felt ownership of the project, contributing to a broader sense of community cohesion. Additionally, she identifies dialogue as vital to her projects, reflecting Putnam's emphasis on civic participation as a catalyst for cooperative dialogue. She states that the artwork "stimulates discussion and affects identity" (personal communication, April 2, 2024), reinforcing the idea that democratic vitality relies on active citizen participation and meaningful conversations. Bartsch's narrative illustrates how socially engaged art fosters connections, empowers individuals, and cultivates collective ownership, all contributing to the health of democratic processes.

Émile Durkheim's (1912/1995) theory that collective activities strengthen social solidarity is reflected in both Bartsch's and Ruth's accounts, suggesting that co-creative art processes enhance participant bonds. Ruth, for example, highlights the shared learning and exchange that occur during participatory art practices, noting that "both the group and the artists had an exchange and learned something from it" (personal communication, February 15, 2024). This underscores how such processes foster a sense of collective consciousness, where participants experience a deep engagement with one another. By promoting mutual understanding and shared experiences, these practices align with Durkheim's concept of social solidarity, which emphasises the role of collective activities in cultivating social cohesion and a sense of belonging.

Ruth also highlights the importance of facilitation, noting that an inviting environment where participants "gain agency" (personal communication, February 15, 2024) is crucial. This aligns with Durkheim's (1912/1995) idea of suspending normal routines to create unifying experiences. In such spaces, participants connect more deeply, developing a shared identity and collective agency that transcends their everyday roles.

The theme of agency and ownership is central to Ruth's account, where she describes how participation fosters a sense of belonging to something larger. This ownership reflects Durkheim's (1912/1995) concept of individuals feeling part of a transformative purpose. Furthermore, Ruth notes that socially engaged art often occurs in unconventional settings, allowing participants to step outside their normal lives and identities, fostering profound community connections.

Finally, Ruth's emphasis on collaboration underscores how collective efforts can engender a deep sense of unity, mirroring Durkheim's (1912/1995) concept of collective effervescence, where shared creative endeavours enhance social cohesion and generate a collective identity that is both empowering and transformative. Together, the reflections of Bartsch and Ruth illustrate how co-creative, participatory art practices foster social bonds and shared experiences, resonating strongly with Durkheim's theories on collective unity and power.

Dialogue and co-construction of knowledge

At the core of Paulo Freire's (1970/2005) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* lies the principle of dialogue as a means of liberation and empowerment. Freire argues that education should be a collaborative process, wherein teachers and learners engage in critical discussions that challenge existing norms. Draxl encapsulates this pedagogical ethos, stating, "It's not about people, it's with people. We explore topics with them and try to engage in communication with different groups, helping them express what they want to share with others" (personal communication, November 27, 2023). By prioritising participant voices and fostering mutual respect, Draxl's approach aligns with Freire's vision of education as a dialogical practice that stresses the co-construction of knowledge.

Pässilä further reinforces this dialogue-centric approach by highlighting the importance of establishing a safe space for collaboration. She notes, "I always have a working agreement as part of setting a safe space in every session" (A. Pässilä, personal communication, November 29, 2024). This practice mirrors Freirean pedagogy, creating an environment where participants feel empowered to share their experiences without fear of judgement. By prioritising collective agreements, Pässilä brings attention to the necessity of fostering respectful and inclusive environments, reflecting feminist principles of consent and mutual respect.

Additionally, Pässilä's concept of "experiential expertise," which recognises participants as experts in their own lives, aligns with the co-construction of knowledge. She asserts, "I emphasise the importance of experiential expertise—people sharing knowledge rooted in their lives" (A. Pässilä, personal communication, November 29, 2024). This perspective reinforces Freire's (1970/2005) notion of dialogue as a liberating force, empowering participants to take ownership of their narratives and contribute to a collective understanding of shared issues.

Draxl's emphasis on process over outcome, evident in her statement, "For us, the process, participation, and what emerges from that are key" (personal communication, November 27, 2023), reflects core Freirean principles. Freire (1970/2005) critiques traditional educational models that prioritise fixed outcomes, advocating instead for an experiential learning approach that values engagement's journey. This focus on process is crucial in socially engaged art, where participation itself can lead to transformation and empowerment.

Draxl's work is also informed by feminist theories advocating for empowerment and recognition of diverse experiences. bell hooks (1989) underscores the importance of dialogue in feminist pedagogy, arguing that empowering women requires reshaping societal narratives and fostering critical conversations that challenge traditional gender roles. Draxl's observation that "the conversations these women have within the community start to influence traditional views about family and gender roles" (personal communication, November 27, 2023) echoes hooks' assertion that dialogue can be a powerful vehicle for social change.

Furthermore, Draxl acknowledges the constraints women face, noting, "The study revealed how women felt constrained by traditional roles, which was fascinating to me" (personal communication, November 27, 2023). This recognition aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) exploration of gender as a socially constructed identity, emphasising the need to deconstruct these roles to understand the complexities of gendered experiences. Draxl's acknowledgement of these constraints highlights the systemic issues women confront and reinforces the necessity of engaging with diverse narratives to foster empowerment.

Collaboration and power dynamics in relationship-building

Feminist pedagogies underline collaboration and the importance of building relationships based on trust and mutual respect. Draxl's statement, "You have to meet people who are truly willing to work with you, not force them into it" (personal communication, November 27, 2023), underscores the feminist principle of consent and the necessity of establishing genuine connections in collaborative work. This aligns with Sara Ahmed's (2017) discussion on the importance of relationships in feminist practices, highlighting how trust and understanding are crucial for meaningful engagement.

Owens similarly underscores the significance of relationships formed through socially engaged arts practices, focusing not only on the participants but also on the broader community, including those who work within the environments where the art is being practised. Reflecting on his experiences in prisons, he highlights the importance of supporting "those who stay in those situations" (A. Owens, personal communication, January 6, 2025), such as prison staff and educators. This perspective broadens the relational dynamics at play, underscoring the need to consider how collaborative efforts affect all stakeholders within a given context. Owens' emphasis on these overlooked relational aspects complements Draxl's and Ahmed's (2017) focus on trust and mutual respect, extending the principles of collaboration to include the broader ecosystem surrounding participatory projects.

Päsilä's insights further enrich this theme by addressing the complexities of power dynamics within participatory practices. She states, "Understanding your role and power as an artist or researcher within these processes is critical" (A. Päsilä, personal communication, November 29, 2024). This reflection on

power dynamics adds depth to the discussion of feminist and queer theories, acknowledging the need for artists to navigate their positionality and privilege to create genuinely inclusive spaces. By recognising the potential for over-direction or control, Pässilä advocates for a reflexive approach that prioritises listening and genuine engagement, which is essential for fostering authentic collaboration.

Draxl's concept of collective creation, as expressed in the quote, "The playwright provided the structure, but the text belonged to everyone" (personal communication, November 27, 2023) resonates with Héléne Cixous' advocacy for shared authorship in feminist literature. Cixous (1976) argues that women's voices must be amplified through collective narratives that challenge patriarchal structures. Draxl's emphasis on collaborative authorship embodies this principle, illustrating how knowledge and creativity can emerge from community participation in socially engaged arts practices.

Power and agency in socially engaged art

The narratives of Ruth, Kai Mata, and Fiatsi, examined through Marxist, feminist, and queer theoretical lenses, illuminate themes of power and agency in socially engaged art. Their reflections on participatory practices, community engagement, and identity reveal how their work challenges traditional hierarchies, promotes inclusivity, and empowers marginalised voices. This multi-theoretical framework enriches our understanding of their contributions within broader discussions of social justice and the political nature of artistic participation.

Ruth highlights the importance of facilitation in participatory spaces, stating, "I think that very important for socially engaged art is how it is facilitated and that it is inviting to a space where participants gain agency" (C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024). This aligns with Karl Marx's (1867/1976) assertion that social engagement allows individuals to reclaim agency, countering the alienation often present in capitalist societies. Ruth's focus on facilitation demonstrates how socially engaged art can disrupt hierarchies and amplify marginalised voices.

Kai Mata shares a similar awareness of power dynamics, noting, "For me, it's how do we create a bridge between academia and mainstream audiences... There can be a bit of a disconnect and a learning curve for navigating research" (personal communication, April 12, 2024). This recognition of institutional and communicative barriers resonates with Louis Althusser's (1971) concept of interpellation, which describes how societal structures influence identity. Kai Mata's commitment to bridging these gaps underscores the necessity of inclusivity and aligns with Marxist calls for egalitarian engagement in artistic practices.

Fiatsi criticises colonial identity, stating, "I thought there is nothing like Ghana. Ghana has never existed until independence... So, the concept of Ghana ... is colonial" (personal communication, April 13, 2024). This perspective reflects Marxist examinations of how colonial narratives shape social class

and power structures, echoing Marx and Engels (1848/2022) on the global division of labour and Lenin's (1917/2011) arguments regarding imperialism and economic exploitation. Fiatsi's critique aligns with post-colonial criticism, emphasising the need to deconstruct colonial legacies to reclaim and redefine identity. Frantz Fanon (1952/1986) argues that the psychological effects of colonialism necessitate identity reclamation, while Homi K. Bhabha (1994) advocates for hybrid identities emerging from the coloniser-colonised interplay. By questioning what it means to be Ghanaian, Fiatsi highlights the need to dismantle colonial narratives for a more authentic understanding of contemporary identity.

Ruth and Kai Mata's narratives align with feminist theories emphasising agency and inclusivity. Ruth notes a significant power shift, stating, "the participants really become the situation and take over" (personal communication, February 15, 2024). This reflects feminist principles advocating for collective empowerment and challenging traditional hierarchies in art. bell hooks (1989) call attention to storytelling as a transformative tool for marginalised individuals to reclaim their identities, aligning with Ruth's focus on participant ownership as a means for social change. Kai Mata echoes this commitment, stating, "My work aims at creating little pockets of agency within each individual. Whether it's providing them more tools to understand who they are" (personal communication, April 12, 2024). This dedication to individual empowerment resonates with Nancy Fraser's (1990) concept of participatory parity, advocating for equal access to social practices. Kai Mata's approach challenges power dynamics that silence marginalised voices, reflecting feminist ideals of equity and social justice.

Additionally, Kai Mata brings to the fore community engagement, noting, "When I perform, we do a lot of work... we're on the streets and we're performing" (personal communication, April 12, 2024). This underscores the importance of collective action, a core tenet of feminist pedagogy. Judith Butler (1990) argues for creating spaces where diverse identities can flourish. Kai Mata's public performances amplify under-represented voices, fostering community and solidarity in line with feminist ideals. Fiatsi's recognition that "Ghana is made up of several identities, and that is the rainbow" (personal communication, April 13, 2024) further highlights the intersectionality of identity and community solidarity, aligning with feminist frameworks that celebrate diversity within collective contexts.

Queer theory insights on identity and resistance

Kai Mata, Ruth, and Fiatsi's reflections above resonate also with queer theory, particularly in their exploration of identity fluidity and diversity. Kai Mata emphasises the power of personal narrative, stating, "Creating personal narrative is one of the strongest ways we can immediately establish a bridge of empathy and connection to an audience" (personal communication, April 12, 2024). This focus on storytelling aligns with queer theory's advocacy

for individual narratives that challenge dominant discourses. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) underscores how personal experiences in subverting normative identity understandings, and Kai Mata's encouragement for participants to share their stories exemplifies how such personal narratives can cultivate empathy and connection.

Ruth also highlights the significance of participant ownership, asserting, "It is an ownership that is created" (C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024). This emphasis on co-created agency reflects queer theory's commitment to identity as dynamic and non-essentialist. David Halperin (1995) argues that queer identities should be seen as fluid rather than fixed, and Ruth's focus on participant agency reflects an understanding of identity's complexities, challenging normative definitions and promoting inclusivity in art.

Additionally, Kai Mata states, "Utilising media and materials that are still available... to allow us Indonesians to see our identity as queer people has historically been a part of the fabric of what makes Indonesia this country" (personal communication, April 12, 2024). This commitment to reclaiming diverse histories aligns with queer theory's rejection of erasure and advocacy for marginalised identities. Michel Foucault (1978) discusses how power operates through societal norms, suggesting that resistance can disrupt these norms. Kai Mata's work challenges the erasure of queer identities, fostering a broader understanding of identity within the Indonesian cultural context.

Chapter reflections

In this chapter, I have examined socially engaged art as a medium for collective participation and reflection, emphasising its capacity to evoke emotional responses and challenge societal norms. Practitioner narratives vividly illustrate the participatory dimensions of socially engaged art, showcasing its potential to transform community dynamics, foster authentic identities, and disrupt entrenched power structures. By analysing these narratives through sociological frameworks, I have illuminated their profound impact on individual empowerment and social relationships. This exploration underscores the transformative possibilities of participation, a theme that will be explored further in Chapter 5. Integrating theoretical perspectives such as social capital, Freirean pedagogy, and feminist and queer theories, the analysis demonstrates how socially engaged art initiatives can facilitate dialogue, co-create knowledge, and subvert traditional power hierarchies.

Moreover, the interviewees' reflections illuminate the complexities of identity and agency within socially engaged arts practices, highlighting how collective experiences can move beyond the confines of Western individualist narratives, fostering a deeper sense of belonging and solidarity. This exploration emphasises that socially engaged art can embody agency for social change, challenging societal norms and cultivating a more inclusive and cohesive community. Ultimately, the interplay of theory and practice articulated in this chapter reinforces the importance of recognising the multifaceted roles that

socially engaged arts practices can play in shaping our social landscape, fostering deeper connections, and empowering marginalised voices.

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4 Possibilities of learning

According to Juha Varto (2008), artistic thinking is a multifaceted, open-ended process requiring freedom, independence, and courage. It goes beyond technical skills or traditional practices, focusing instead on engaging with ideas in relation to both historical and contemporary contexts. Varto highlights that artistic thinking involves an active commitment to experience, where individuals open themselves to their own sensibilities and the world to uncover and create new meanings. This process challenges habitual approaches to form and material, encouraging reinterpretation and new perspectives. Artistic thinking is deeply tied to its time and culture, requiring an ongoing dialogue between the past and the present to make sense of human experiences and create meaningful works. For me, this idea of artistic thinking aligns with intertextuality, as it acknowledges the interconnectedness of ideas, forms, and cultural narratives (Frow, 1990; Allen, 2000; Lehtikoinen, 2023; Lehtikoinen & Tuittila, 2023). By engaging in this dialogic process, individuals interpret their experiences of the world by drawing on historical and cultural elements, allowing them to resonate in new and meaningful ways in the present.

Socially engaged art, merging artistic thinking and creativity with social action and community involvement, transcends traditional aesthetics to serve as a powerful vehicle for social transformation and collective learning. Grounded in the frameworks of emancipatory pedagogy, critical pedagogy, collaborative learning, and transformative learning, this chapter aims to examine how socially engaged art fosters critical consciousness, collective meaning-making, and shared agency among participants.

Drawing on Paulo Freire's (1970/2005) concept of emancipatory pedagogy and extending it through critical pedagogy, I explore how socially engaged art cultivates critical awareness by enabling individuals to question and resist oppressive social conditions. Building on Freire's ideas, Henry Giroux (1988) emphasises the role of critical pedagogy in challenging power structures and fostering active social agency. Thus, in this chapter, I investigate how these principles align with the practices of socially engaged art, drawing from practitioner interviews and real-world case studies. I introduce new case studies while periodically referring back to the interviewee's narratives to deepen the exploration of how these concepts are enacted in practice.

Understanding collective and collaborative learning in socially engaged art

“This kind of collaborative work involves much more than making art. It includes the idea of growing together, which is important both for me personally and for many participants” (P. Bartsch, 21.1.2025). Pia Bartsch’s insight highlights the centrality of collective learning and shared authorship in socially engaged art projects, a theme that resonates strongly in the reflections of interviewed practitioners. This aligns with Freire’s (1970/2005) vision of education as a mutual, dialogical process and the principles of critical pedagogy.

This participatory ethos is further echoed in bell hooks’ (1994) emphasis on inclusive, dialogic engagement, which creates space for diverse voices in co-creative processes. Anne Pässilä underscores the systematic nature of meaning-making within these practices, noting that “meaning-making is central to these processes, and it should be approached systematically” (personal communication, November 29, 2024). Similarly, Edith Draxl emphasises the collaborative and inclusive nature of socially engaged art, asserting that it is a process of working alongside participants rather than treating them as passive subjects (personal communication, November 27, 2023). Draxl’s female heritage project, introduced in Chapter 1, also entails potential for intergenerational learning, fostering connections and the exchange of knowledge between different generations, further enriching the collaborative nature of the work.¹ Together, these insights reinforce how socially engaged art fosters critical awareness and positions participants as agents of social change.

Building on these reflections, additional perspectives from practitioners further underscore the transformative potential of art as a tool for social awareness and collective empowerment. For instance, Charlotta Ruth draws attention to the role of embodied learning, noting how bodily knowledge facilitates insights that extend beyond intellectual comprehension (C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024). This perspective complements Freire’s (1970/2005) emphasis on engaging multiple dimensions of experience in learning.

Catalysts for transformation: Social objects and trialogues

According to Nina Simon (2010), social objects facilitate exchanges by becoming focal points around which interactions and conversations revolve. These objects invite participation—through their provocative or relational nature—and foster multivoiced dialogues, where diverse individuals interpret, respond to, and critique them from their personal perspectives. Simon’s idea of social objects aligns with Kai Hakkarainen, Sami Paavola, Kaiju Kangas, and Pirita Seitamaa-Hakkarainen’s (2013) concept of trialogues, a framework for collaborative learning that extends beyond traditional dialogues by incorporating a third component: the shared object and its agency in the collaborative process. In trialogues, participants engage not only with each other but also through the shared object, such as an artwork, document, or artefact, which

mediates and anchors the learning process. According to scholars, these interactions promote “multivoiced and heterogeneous” (Hakkarainen et al., 2013, p. 71) exchanges, enabling diverse perspectives to converge and coalesce in a collaborative exploration of meaning.

The case studies of Harlan County, Pablo Helguera’s migration project, and Mural Arts Philadelphia provide concrete examples of how socially engaged art catalyses collaborative learning and critical reflection through participatory processes. These projects highlight how shared objects, such as murals, performances, and interactive sculptures, facilitate dialogues that deepen collaborative learning and encourage co-creation.

Case Studies in collaborative learning: Harlan County, Helguera’s Migration Project, and Mural Arts Philadelphia

The Harlan County project in Kentucky, the United States, exemplifies the transformative potential of collaborative learning in socially engaged art. Arlene Goldbard (2006) describes how this three-year initiative brought together over 2,000 community members, artists, and organisations to address pressing social, economic, and environmental issues. Set in a region with a long history of coal mining and labour conflict, particularly the 1973 miners’ strike, the project explored the ongoing impacts of these challenges on the community’s identity and social fabric. With issues like coal industry decline, high unemployment, and prescription drug abuse at the forefront, the project engaged participants in storytelling, oral histories, and arts-based activities. A key element was the collection of nearly 200 oral histories, which served as the foundation for creative works such as the play *Higher Ground*, community photography exhibits, and tile mosaic murals. These projects enabled participants to co-create narratives that expressed their struggles, hopes, and aspirations, underscoring the power of collaborative artmaking to foster critical reflection, shared agency, and social change.

Helguera’s (2011) migration project similarly demonstrates the power of collaborative learning in socially engaged art. Held at the Gran Hotel Ciudad de México, this project took the form of a public conference on cultural policy designed to appear as a formal policy discussion, rather than an art event. The conference featured both real and scripted presentations—six real papers selected through an open call for submissions and six fictional ones performed by actors. The fictional presentations, which introduced provocative ideas like abolishing national arts funding, invited the audience to critically reflect on the complexities of cultural policy and identity. By blending real and fictional narratives, Helguera created a space for participants to challenge their assumptions and engage in a process of collaborative meaning-making, thus fostering deeper reflection on societal and political issues. This format aligns with Freire’s (1970/2005) principles of dialogic learning and Hakkarainen et al.’s (2013) focus on collaborative meaning-making, as participants co-constructed knowledge through a dynamic interplay of perspectives.

The Mural Arts Philadelphia offers another example of how socially engaged art promotes collaborative learning. In this initiative, community members and artists collaborate to create murals that reflect shared local histories, values, and concerns. Jane Golden, David Scobey, Robin Rice, and Monica Kinney (2002) note that these murals become collective narratives, embedding the voices and insights of participants directly into the artwork. This collaborative process fosters a strong sense of ownership and pride within the community, as individuals contribute to a shared creation that reflects their collective identity and experiences. This resonates with Ruth's (personal communication, February 15, 2024) concept of "reciprocal exchange," where learning involves not just sharing knowledge, but also validating each participant's unique experience. By creating these murals, the community engages in collective reflection, critical dialogue, and co-creation, further illustrating how socially engaged art can facilitate transformative learning and deepen connections to both personal and shared histories.

Collective reflection and co-creation in socially engaged art

These three case studies—Harlan County, Helguera's migration project, and Mural Arts Philadelphia—illustrate how socially engaged art can foster collaborative learning, critical reflection, and collective action. In each project, participants co-create narratives that reflect their community's values, struggles, and aspirations while also challenging existing norms and cultivating a shared commitment to social change. These initiatives highlight how art can create spaces for dialogue, knowledge co-creation, and social transformation, reinforcing the potential of collaborative learning to drive both individual and collective growth.

The dynamic interplay between participants and shared objects is essential in facilitating this transformation. Shared objects, such as interactive sculptures, community murals, and installations addressing social issues, serve as focal points for participants to express diverse viewpoints and engage in collective reflection. By engaging with these objects, participants transcend individual expression and enter a collective dialogue that embraces both unity and diversity. This process aligns with Hakkarainen et al.'s (2013) concept of "trialogues," where interactions occur not only between participants but also through shared objects, driving both reflective learning and the co-creation of knowledge.

Engaging participants as co-creators in socially engaged art

In socially engaged arts practice, critical awareness, collaborative learning, and active engagement are interconnected and mutually reinforcing dimensions that shape participants' experiences. Critical awareness encourages participants to question social structures and their personal perspectives, while collaborative learning fosters shared knowledge and empathy by uniting diverse voices in a collective process. Together, these elements create the foundation for active

engagement, where participants transition from passive observers to active co-creators and co-learners, contributing to the exploratory and creative journey.

Through active engagement, participants do more than experience art; they actively shape and reflect upon it. By engaging in hands-on activities, creative experimentation, and personal investment, participants co-create and critically examine meanings in the art and outcomes they produce. This active involvement strengthens their sense of agency, deepens their understanding of community issues, and cultivates collaborative bonds essential to socially engaged arts practices. The case studies discussed below exemplify how active engagement enables participants to collaboratively address social and environmental issues through art, emphasising both the process and the outcomes of their involvement.

Active engagement and participatory agency in learning in socially engaged art

Melanie Buffington, Elizabeth Cramer, Kate Agnelli, and Jessica Norris (2015) report on a semester-long initiative aimed at engaging youth in Richmond, Virginia, USA, through a combination of art, cooking, and community service. The Food Landscapes project, supported by a Community Engagement Grant from Virginia Commonwealth University, sought to address issues of food justice and access while also fostering connections between young participants and adults with disabilities.

The project encouraged youth to actively engage in the learning process, particularly in video production, where they explored journalism and documentary art as forms of social activism. Buffington et al. (2015) describe how participants were not only involved in the production, editing, and dissemination of video content but were also empowered to create knowledge rather than simply consume it. This hands-on engagement enabled participants to express their perspectives both creatively and critically, fostering a deeper sense of agency. Moreover, the project emphasised the development of communication skills, with participants demonstrating increased awareness of these skills through specific activities. As they reflected on their interactions, participants gained confidence in articulating their thoughts and feelings within the community.

Upon completion, the participants expressed a transformed understanding of community engagement, which they now viewed through the lens of communication and empathy (Buffington et al., 2015). This shift—from focusing on civic duties to appreciating interpersonal relationships—demonstrates their growth and active involvement in the learning process. It highlights how the project fostered not only social responsibility but also deeper connections among participants, showcasing their agency in re-envisioning their roles within the community.

The youth also engaged in collaborative learning by digitally recording their cooking, artmaking, and museum-based activities, along with their reflections

about the programme (Buffington et al., 2015). This digital documentation served as a valuable means for social interaction, allowing participants to build a sense of community and collective identity, which is crucial for effective engagement. Before volunteering, the youth participated in a disability awareness session, which equipped them with strategies to communicate effectively with individuals with varying abilities. This emphasis on fostering social interaction underlines the project's broader goal of promoting understanding and inclusivity within the community.

The project culminated in a community celebration, where participants showcased their learning and reinforced the relationships they had built throughout the project. Through their involvement in volunteer activities, group work, and creative engagement, participants gained a deeper understanding of thoughtful communication as essential to community engagement. As the researchers note:

The participants' involvement in volunteer activities with individuals with disabilities; the building of interpersonal relationships through group work; and critical, creative engagement with the community resulted in an understanding of thoughtful communication as a means of community engagement.

(Buffington et al., 2015, p. 44)

In summary, the Food Landscapes project exemplifies active engagement and participant agency through hands-on learning, reflection, and the development of communication skills. The emphasis on social interaction played an important role in fostering community engagement, as participants collaborated, learnt from one another, and built meaningful relationships within their community. This case study demonstrates how socially engaged arts projects can foster both personal and collective development, tackling social issues while enabling participants to take on active roles in their communities. The project created a platform for youth to explore their roles, develop new skills, and express creativity through socially engaged art.

Social interaction in community engagement

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of arts participation in supporting healthy ageing, particularly regarding the well-being of older adults (Rena et al., 2023; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). This case study focuses on the Arts, Health, and Seniors (AHS), initiated in 2006 through a partnership between the Regional Health Authority and the City Board of Parks and Recreation in Vancouver, Canada. The programme aims to foster strong, healthy communities by actively engaging seniors in arts programming that supports their health and well-being.

Elaine Moody and Alison Phinney (2012) describe the AHS Programme as one that brings together professional artists and older adults to collaboratively

explore artistic expression while addressing relevant community issues. The programme consists of workshops and projects, providing participants with hands-on opportunities to engage in creative activities. These activities not only allow seniors to develop new artistic skills but also encourage the formation of supportive social networks, which are essential for enhancing social inclusion and combating isolation.

A central component of the programme's success seems to be its emphasis on active participation. Seniors are not passive consumers of art but active participants in the creative process. Through collaborative artmaking, they engage in discussions about their experiences and perspectives, fostering a sense of agency and ownership over their creative expressions. This interactive environment facilitates social interaction, enabling participants to connect, share stories, and build relationships based on mutual support and understanding.

Moody and Phinney (2012) note that the workshops often address themes relevant to seniors' lives and the wider community, prompting discussions that go beyond the artistic process itself. Topics such as ageing, identity, and community issues are explored, enriching participants' understanding of both art and their social contexts. This dialogue deepens their engagement with the artwork and promotes critical reflection on their experiences, thus strengthening their connection to the creative process and enhancing their learning.

The programme culminates in public exhibitions and performances, providing seniors with a platform to showcase their work and share their stories with the broader community. This public engagement not only elevates the visibility of older adults but it can also reinforce their sense of belonging. By presenting their artwork publicly, participants reclaim their narratives and challenge societal stereotypes about ageing, asserting their role as vibrant, active members of the community.

Creativity and critical reflection in socially engaged art

Creativity is recognised as a universal human capacity that extends beyond the arts, manifesting across various fields such as scientific research, urban planning, and daily problem-solving (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). It is commonly defined as the generation of ideas or artefacts that are both novel and relevant, with Dean Simonton adding a third criterion of "nonobviousness, or what we have less awkwardly referred to as surprise" (2012, p. 103), emphasising that creativity encourages fresh insights into problems. Elliot Paul and Dustin Stokes (2024) highlight the conditions that foster creativity, including intrinsic motivation, diverse perspectives, and risk-tolerant environments, while factors like openness, resilience, and available resources also play key roles.

Historically, creativity has been associated with divergent thinking, a concept introduced by Joy Guilford (1950, 1968), which foregrounds exploring multiple solutions rather than converging on a single answer. This approach

underscores creativity's spontaneous, playful, and exploratory dimensions (Liberman, 1965). However, as Mark Runco and Garrett Jaeger (2012) as well as Robert Sternberg (2006) note, effective creativity also involves critical evaluation to determine which ideas are feasible and meaningful within a particular context. In socially engaged arts, this combination of open exploration with critical reflection and practical planning helps artists and participants realise ideas together in diverse forms, from community art projects to environmental initiatives.

This understanding of creativity is particularly relevant to socially engaged arts practice, which not only produces novel outcomes but actively engages communities in reimagining social realities and challenging norms. These practices often adopt a form of emancipatory pedagogy that is saturated with Freire's (1970/2005) ideas about love, hope, critical awareness, and freedom in fostering environments where participants critically examine societal structures and empower themselves as agents of change. Creative imagination, therefore, is not just a means of artistic expression but an integral part of the learning process, enabling individuals to envision and enact social transformation.

The shift to collective creativity

In the practitioner narratives on socially engaged art, a common theme is the shift from viewing creativity as an individual endeavour to seeing it as an inclusive and collective process. Pia Lindy draws attention to this shift by recognising creativity as "a shared act," where participants are active contributors rather than passive audience members (personal communication, March 26, 2024). Bartsch similarly stresses the significance of collective contribution, referring to participants as "creators" (personal communication, April 2, 2024) and acknowledging that their input enriches the project. This perspective is echoed by Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi, who views creativity as a communal expression, reinforced through phrases like "art by the people" (personal communication, April 13, 2024).

Beyond individual creativity, complex challenges such as climate change and social inequities require interdisciplinary collaboration to generate innovative solutions. In socially engaged arts, this collaboration can foster trans-professional reflection, enabling participants from diverse backgrounds to contribute their unique perspectives towards systemic change. In Japan, the Art Project Research Group distinguishes co-creative practices from traditional, individualistic approaches to art, where the artist is seen as possessing rare talent. In contrast, co-creativity views creativity as a universal trait, encouraging participants to collectively generate outcomes that surpass individual contributions. This model challenges the typical "one-way relationship" (Kumakura, 2015, p. 29), centred on the artist, by promoting equal contributions and merging diverse viewpoints for richer, more inclusive artmaking.

These co-creative practices, where participants engage in self-reflection and critique of societal norms, resonate with Freire's (1970/2005) concept of "conscientização"—critical awareness that empowers individuals to recognise and challenge dominant ideologies and power structures. Through this reflective process, creativity becomes more than artistic expression; it becomes a means for social transformation, fostering both personal growth and collective change. By blending critical reflection with creative collaboration, co-creativity encourages participants to question conventional norms and imagine new possibilities, driving progress on both an individual and societal level.

In the 21st century, Augusto Boal's ideas—strongly informed by Freire's work—have been adapted beyond the context of Boal's (2008/1974) *Theatre of the Oppressed* into organisational development. This post-Boalian approach emphasises collaboration, reflection, and problem-solving in organisational contexts, adjusting Boal's principles to foster deeper understanding through arts-based, inquiry-driven processes. Research-based theatre, for example, builds on Boal's foundational work while distinguishing itself from his revolutionary aims by focusing on inquiry and nuanced reflection within organisations (Päsilä et al., 2015).

This adaptation of co-creativity aligns closely with Peter Senge's (2006) concept of a learning organisation. In a learning organisation, collective intelligence and team learning are vital for innovation and adaptability in dynamic environments. Similar to Boal's (2008/1974) ideas, where critical insights thrive through dialogue and creative collective action, a learning organisation is rooted in shared inquiry, where participants—whether artists, social workers, organisational leaders, or citizens as service users—engage in ongoing reflection and collaborative exploration. This dynamic process leads to new insights, overcoming the limitations of individual contributions.

Both co-creativity in the arts and learning organisations rely on dialogue, reflection, and the collective questioning of assumptions to discover innovative solutions and drive continuous improvement. These processes are central to socially engaged arts practices, particularly in organisational contexts, such as arts-based initiatives, artistic interventions, and research-based theatre (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013; Päsilä, 2012; Schiuma, 2011). By fostering environments where participants challenge the status quo and co-create meaning together, both socially engaged arts and learning organisations cultivate a culture of innovation and resilience, committed to transformative outcomes that address complex challenges.

Creativity as experiential and communal learning in socially engaged arts

By applying creativity to collective learning experiences, participants can experiment, take risks, and imagine possibilities, leading to deeper and more meaningful learning outcomes. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell (2008) describe a Youth Participatory Action Research project in which students used hip-hop music to explore and express their experiences with social injustice.

Through this project, students engaged as active researchers, analysing social issues that impacted their lives and communities. Hip-hop provided a creative medium for students to articulate personal and communal realities, empowering them to raise awareness and advocate for change through their lyrics and performances. This approach connected deeply with their lived experiences, as the authors observed that students became more engaged in complex learning when it resonated with their personal lives.

Beyond self-expression, the project also fostered artistic and intellectual growth (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Writing and performing hip-hop involved mastering rhythm, flow, and lyrical composition, enhancing students' artistic skills while they examined and expressed their social critiques. The process of presenting their music to peers and the wider community further solidified their roles as advocates, positioning them as informed scholars and activists. By sharing their voices, students not only honed their craft but also assumed agency in challenging systemic injustices, illustrating the powerful role of creative action in youth empowerment and social change.

Another compelling example of the role of creativity in learning within socially engaged arts practice is the Investigating Where We Live project at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC. This long-standing collaborative initiative invites local teenagers to work alongside museum staff to create a temporary exhibition that features their photographs and creative writing about a selected DC neighbourhood. While the museum provides the necessary structure—such as space, instructional guidance, and resources—the creative agency is largely vested in the participants, who are responsible for the exhibition's content, design, and implementation (Simon, 2010).

This balance between institutional support and participant autonomy fosters a rich environment for creative engagement, where young people are encouraged to explore their community and express their perspectives. As they collaborate on the project, the teens develop essential skills in teamwork, communication, and leadership while honing their artistic talents. This collaborative process also blurs traditional boundaries between staff and students, creating an inclusive atmosphere that values diverse voices and contributions (Simon, 2010).

James Brown's experience exemplifies the transformative power of this project. Initially a participant, Brown returned as a teen assistant, reflecting on the programme's repetitive structure but recognising its value in skill development and community engagement (Simon, 2010). His journey illustrates how such projects offer evolving educational experiences that empower youth to reflect on their identities and environments creatively.

Through creative action, the project Investigating Where We Live not only facilitates self-expression but also enhances participants' understanding of their community and their role within it. By engaging in meaningful dialogue and collaborative storytelling, teens gain insights into social issues and learn to advocate for their perspectives. This project exemplifies how creativity in socially engaged arts can cultivate environments for learning that emphasise

collective inquiry, critical reflection, and community involvement, reinforcing the notion that creativity is a powerful catalyst for both personal and social transformation.

Creativity as a catalyst for transformative learning

Jack Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory underscores the crucial role of reflection in fostering profound personal and societal change. This perspective resonates with many practitioner narratives, where creativity is highlighted as an inherently dialogic and reflective process. Such a view aligns with Mezirow's idea that transformative learning unfolds when individuals critically assess their assumptions, leading to shifts in perspective.

For instance, Lindy describes creativity as a "dynamic dialogue" (personal communication, March 26, 2024), while Ruth stresses the importance of ongoing conversations in refining ideas (C. Ruth, personal communication, February 15, 2024). Similarly, Bartsch highlights how creating art from recycled materials transforms participants' ecological perspectives by challenging the notion that everything must come new from shop shelves. She notes that "it liberates creativity when people come up with solutions themselves instead of purchasing them ready-made" (P. Bartsch, personal communication, January 21, 2025). This process not only stimulates creative imagination but also encourages participants to reassess consumerist habits and consider alternative approaches to problem-solving.

The examples above demonstrate that creativity in socially engaged art is not merely an individual process but a shared, communal experience. Through sustained interactions and revisiting of ideas, artists and participants collaboratively reshape perspectives—a process Mezirow (1991) considers central to transformative learning.

In this context, creativity becomes a powerful catalyst, fostering an environment where participants can reframe worldviews, develop fresh insights, and tackle challenges imaginatively. This creative approach not only builds new skills but also cultivates critical awareness and social engagement, empowering individuals to contribute to collective problem-solving efforts. Additionally, Fiatsi's use of collective creativity as social commentary (personal communication, April 13, 2024) exemplifies how socially engaged art can challenge dominant ideologies and invite communities into critical discourse. Thus, the practitioner narratives, discussed above, illustrate how creativity within socially engaged art enables participants to recognise, question, and address social inequalities, fostering spaces for transformation that align with Mezirow's (1991) theoretical framework.

Pascal Gielen's (2012) assertion that culture is both a unifying and potentially resistant force highlights the importance of creativity as a means for questioning and transforming cultural conventions. For practitioners like Fiatsi in Ghana and Kai Mata in Indonesia, creativity in socially engaged art offers an approach to resist and reframe deeply embedded societal norms such as

homophobia, which operate to limit individual and collective expression. By blending art with LGBTIQ+ activism, both practitioners disrupt the cultural assumptions that uphold homophobia and, in doing so, cultivate spaces for inclusive social change. Creativity thus becomes a means not only of artistic expression but of critical, communal learning, where traditional norms are examined and reimaged.

In Fiatsi's work, socially engaged art actively fosters communal learning and dialogue as a means of resisting anti-queer sentiment in Ghana. Through her annual communal feast, held at her residency, she brings together local community members to share a meal, interact, and celebrate alongside people from the LGBTIQ+ community. This shared gathering creates a space where participants are encouraged to question prevailing norms and reflect on diverse identities, fostering a deeper understanding and empathy. As Fiatsi describes it, the feast is "a statement of resistance and solidarity" (personal communication, April 13, 2024), challenging exclusionary narratives by promoting inclusivity through lived experience. Her approach demonstrates how collective acts of creativity in socially engaged arts can critique oppressive structures and serve as a model for reimagining the community. By engaging in this experience, participants gain insight into alternative ways of understanding community, sparking critical reflection on entrenched social attitudes and encouraging a more compassionate, inclusive perspective.

Similarly, Kai Mata's integration of personal storytelling and music offers a platform for marginalised voices within Indonesia's conservative society. Her work with themes like "pride as protest" and "celebration as rebellion" (personal communication, 12.4.2024) demonstrates how socially engaged art can catalyse empathy and collective awareness by bridging the gap between queer narratives and the broader public. Through songs that incorporate Indonesian history and contemporary issues, Kai Mata connects with her audience, creating a shared space for reflection and emotional engagement. By fostering empathy through personal narrative, she activates creativity as a powerful educational tool, transforming music into a medium that encourages cultural understanding and advocacy.

In both cases, socially engaged creativity contributes towards a meaningful learning process, enabling practitioners and audiences to explore, question, and reshape cultural norms. As Gielen (2012) suggests, such acts of creativity hold political significance, offering a path towards meaningful social transformation that challenges established boundaries, fosters critical reflection, and imagines inclusive possibilities. Through their art, Fiatsi and Kai Mata reveal how socially engaged creativity can cultivate critical awareness, embrace diversity and inclusivity, and inspire collective agency, thus opening pathways for broader cultural change.

Critical creativity and reflection

Peter Sloterdijk's metaphor of "standing on the bank beside the river" (quoted in Gielen, 2012, p. 73) finds resonance in the practitioners' experiences.

Framing co-creativity as a mutual exchange and a source of learning from others, Lindy and Bartsch illustrate how stepping outside one's personal perspective—essentially standing on the bank, observing the river flow by—enables artists and participants to critically engage with one another's experiences. This creative distance fosters critical awareness and encourages the kind of broader, collective reflection Gielen (2012) finds necessary for cultural transformation.

Critical reflection is fundamental in socially engaged art, as it cultivates critical awareness central to emancipatory and critical pedagogy. Violet Ellis (2016) asserts that critical dialogue in collaborative learning is essential to fostering creativity by allowing participants to reflect on diverse viewpoints and build shared understanding. Similarly, Jeff Adams and Allan Owens introduce “critical creativity,” aligning creativity with democracy at the “intersection between the imaginary and the political” (2016, p. 20). They emphasise that engagement, rather than resolution, is the primary aim, with criticism serving to situate imaginative impulses within their social context, challenging and probing those contexts.

For instance, Yvonne Rainer (2012) describes a community theatre project where participants engaged in reflective discussions after each performance to assess the social impact of their work. These post-performance reflections allowed them to critically examine the effect of their creative choices on their community and better understand the social implications of their art. Similarly, Orlando Fals-Borda's (1987) work in participatory action research advocates for group reflection, emphasising how collective introspection—such as in the Creative Cities project (Landry, 2006)—refines creative strategies and enhances social impact. Reflection enables participants to scrutinise their assumptions and beliefs, contributing to a deeper understanding of the social and cultural contexts shaping their lives.

In socially engaged art, reflective practices—such as journaling, group discussions, and artistic responses—enable participants to internalise learning, connect it to personal experiences, and apply it to effect change (McNiff, 2013; Leavy, 2009). One such resource for facilitating critical reflection is the aesthetic diary, which I have previously explored as a dynamic, multi-modal approach that supports the artist's professional development in socially engaged arts (Lehikoinen, 2023). Practitioners such as Draxl strongly encourage its use, and it is through her activities that I have come to investigate its application. By engaging with text, images, sound, and gestures, the aesthetic diary enables artists to critically examine their actions and collaborations, creating meaningful connections and insights. This flexible, self-directed approach supports reflection and helps refine artistic practices while planning future actions.

Beyond personal introspection, the aesthetic diary also fosters empowerment and transformation. It can challenge artists to confront difficult perspectives, acknowledge mistakes, and question deeply held beliefs. In doing so, it enhances self-awareness and promotes a proactive approach to change, using

insights gained from reflection to guide future actions within the artist's practice, their community, or broader societal contexts. Ultimately, the aesthetic diary can help identify emerging signals of change, offering a way to anticipate and influence developments within both practice and the social environment (Lehikoinen, 2023).

In sum, the examples above demonstrate that creativity in socially engaged art extends far beyond individual expression, emerging as a collaborative process that fosters critical dialogue, reflection, and a reimagining of societal structures. By emphasising inclusive participation and shared meaning-making, socially engaged art cultivates environments where participants can question, reflect, and address complex social issues in ways that traditional learning methods may not achieve. Ultimately, this section reveals how creativity, combined with critical reflection within socially engaged art, can catalyse social transformation, empowering individuals and communities to envision and pursue meaningful societal change.

Chapter reflections

Informed by Freire's (1970/2005) "conscientização" and the broader principles of critical pedagogy, socially engaged art emerges as a dynamic means for fostering critical awareness, collective meaning-making, and social empowerment. By emphasising dialogical learning and the co-creation of knowledge, these practices allow participants to engage critically with social structures, moving from passive spectators to empowered agents of change.

In this chapter, I have argued that central to the learning process in socially engaged art is the shift towards collective learning and shared authorship. This approach, deeply aligned with Freire's (1970/2005) vision of education as a mutual, dialogical process, emphasises the co-creation of knowledge and prioritises mutual understanding. By engaging in collaborative exploration, participants can challenge traditional norms, recognise oppressive structures, and embark on a journey of discovery that fosters critical perspectives. This collective engagement not only enhances participants' critical awareness but also strengthens social bonds, empowering communities to reimagine their realities together.

A significant theme throughout this chapter has been the integration of creativity and critical reflection in socially engaged arts to foster collective learning essential for social transformation. This integration makes complex cultural phenomena and societal issues more accessible and relevant, fostering engagement with pressing social challenges in tangible ways. It creates a context where participants not only gain critical insights but also develop practical strategies for addressing real-world concerns.

Collaborative reflection, essential to fostering "conscientização" in socially engaged art, integrates arts-based creativity with critical analysis, enabling participants to question their assumptions, lived experiences, and societal contexts. This combination of creative exploration and critique allows participants

to think critically while imagining alternative possibilities, making the learning process deeply transformative. Thus, it can be argued that by grounding their engagement in both personal and collective critique, participants not only deepen their understanding but also strengthen their sense of agency, empowering them to challenge and reimagine the structures that shape their lives.

The empowerment of participant agency is a consistent outcome across socially engaged arts practices. These practices provide individuals with the skills, insights, and social connections necessary to act as catalysts for change. By centring creative collaboration around shared social realities, socially engaged arts practices cultivate empathy, resilience, and a sense of ownership among participants. Involving community voices not only enriches the creative process but also nurtures social cohesion, reinforcing the role of art as a driver of inclusive, community-centred learning.

To conclude, in this chapter, I have demonstrated how socially engaged art redefines learning in and through the arts as an inclusive, dynamic, and community-centred process. By fostering critical reflection, collaborative creation, and social agency, socially engaged arts practices can transform participants' perceptions of their capacities, inviting them into a co-creative dialogue with their communities. These insights highlight the profound possibilities of socially engaged art as a vehicle for personal growth, social awareness, and collective empowerment, where learning and transformation converge to inspire both individual and societal change.

Note

- 1 In reviewing this book, my colleague Anne Makkonen highlighted the social and cultural construction of age groups in socially engaged arts projects, pointing out that while age-specific activities can be important, fostering collaboration across generations is necessary for deeper social engagement and intergenerational learning for both artists and participants.

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5 Transformative prospects

Suzi Gablik (1992) critiques the commodification of Western art, arguing that prioritising marketable objects over socially engaged practices diminishes art's capacity to transform society. She calls for reconnecting art with life, emphasising its potential to enrich daily experiences and act as a force for social change rather than a product for consumption.

This critique resonates with the long history of socially critical literature and drama, from Greek tragedies to modern works like Tony Kushner's remarkable *Angels in America*, which challenge societal norms and provoke reflection. However, even socially critical works often risk commodification within capitalist systems, which can dilute their transformative impact. For instance, while the adaptation of *Angels in America* into a miniseries expanded its reach, it also underscored tensions between art as a catalyst for change and art as a marketable product.¹

Gablik's (1992) critique highlights the need to reclaim art as a participatory practice, emphasising its power to challenge oppressive structures and contribute to societal transformation over its role as a consumable commodity. Building on Chapter 4, where I explored how socially engaged art reimagines learning as a collaborative, community-centred process that fosters creativity, critical reflection, social agency, and collective empowerment for personal and societal transformation, in this chapter, I examine how socially engaged art incites collective action and empowers communities, demonstrating its potential as a catalyst for social change.

Art as activism: Harnessing creativity for social transformation

In an era marked by increasing social inequities, political tensions, global environmental crises, and violent conflicts, the role of art as a force for societal transformation has gained renewed importance. Socially engaged arts, often characterised by their participatory nature and commitment to addressing social themes, are inherently concerned with the possibilities of social change. Unlike traditional art forms that often prioritise artistic, aesthetic, or commercial values, socially engaged arts practices aim to intervene directly in the social fabric. They

investigate local situations, challenge existing power structures, and address pressing societal issues through collective action, dialogue, and reflection.

In her famous article, art critic Lucy Lippard (1984) suggests that the Trojan Horse may have been the first piece of activist art, arguing that this form of art operates both within and beyond the traditional art world, emphasising its role in subversion and empowerment. Lippard notes that activist art is not necessarily a new form but rather a “massing of energies” (1984, p. 341) that offers artists new ways to connect with their experiences. What characterises art as activism is its refusal to merely make social grievances and political views visible. Instead, as Gregory Sholette notes, it seeks to “focus on agitation and protest as an artistic medium” (2022, p. 12). However, there is also a need to go beyond protest. As Mary Jo Agerstoun writes, “activist art, like other ‘oppositional’ discursive elements, not only reveals the structures of control in society but also acts upon them in transformative ways” (2004, p. 439).

Such an approach to artmaking often—explicitly or implicitly—draws upon theoretical frameworks that emphasise the intersection of art and social activism. One such framework is the Marxist tradition, which critiques capitalist structures and advocates for revolutionary praxis. At its core, Marxist theory identifies capitalism’s inherent inequalities as the root cause of social injustice, emphasising the exploitative dynamics between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Marx, 1909). These critiques provide a lens through which socially engaged art can be understood, as such practices often aim to expose and challenge these same inequalities. Walter Benjamin (1934/2005) and Antonio Gramsci (1971) further extend this connection by illustrating how art can resist cultural hegemony and challenge the commodification of culture. Socially engaged art, therefore, becomes a form of praxis—a process by which theory is enacted through action—empowering marginalised communities and advocating for systemic change.

Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 4, Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on “conscientização” or the process of developing critical awareness, offers a robust framework for understanding socially engaged art as a tool for raising consciousness and nurturing empowerment (Freire, 1970/2005). Freire’s work highlights the transformative potential of dialogue and collective reflection, both of which are central to many socially engaged art practices. By engaging communities in creative processes that critique and resist oppressive systems, socially engaged artists embody the call for revolutionary action and social transformation, blending the ideological underpinnings of Marxist thought and Freirean pedagogy into their work.

This theoretical framing underpins the potential of socially engaged art as a catalyst for societal change, which lies not only in its ability to provoke thought but also in its capacity to mobilise communities. Below, case studies such as the Park Fiction project in Hamburg, Suzanne Lacy’s The Oakland Projects, and the work of the artist collective Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) in Argentina, exemplify how socially engaged art can facilitate transformative

action. These projects demonstrate that art is not merely a reflection of society but an active agent in influencing and reshaping it.

Park Fiction: A community-driven art project

Park Fiction, situated along Hafenstrasse in Hamburg's St. Pauli district, is more than just a public park. It is an art project deeply rooted in the community and urban resistance, symbolising local self-determination. Located near the city's upscale harbour promenade and the bustling fish market, the park challenges gentrification and urban redevelopment, serving as a space for social activism.

The Park Fiction project exemplifies collective artistic engagement in urban resistance, drawing from Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theories on the production of space. Lefebvre argues that urban spaces are not merely physical entities but are socially constructed and shaped by the people who inhabit them. He asserts that these individuals should play a central role in the production and transformation of urban spaces. Park Fiction embodies this theory by challenging the top-down planning imposed by developers and city authorities, who often prioritise economic interests over community needs.

Initiated in 1994, Park Fiction emerged as a response to the gentrification pressures in St. Pauli, a district experiencing intense housing market competition. In the face of efforts to demolish historic buildings and construct luxury apartments, residents, artists, and activists united to create a public space that would reflect their community's needs and resist the forces of urban change (Rüse, 2014). The community aimed to preserve harbour views, prevent the closure of the Golden Pudel Club, and establish a green refuge in an increasingly industrialised area (Arte Útil, 2025). Their collective effort sought to create a self-managed space at the heart of a rapidly evolving neighbourhood.

Drawing inspiration from Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture (Ulster Museum, 2025), the creators of Park Fiction saw urban space as a medium for social transformation. Social sculpture emphasises the potential of art to shape society through collective creation, positioning it as a form of activism. Through this project, the community not only transformed the physical environment but also asserted their right to shape their surroundings, making the park a symbol of resistance and local empowerment.

A key aspect of Park Fiction was its emphasis on inclusivity. The project's creators prioritised community participation, ensuring that as many voices and ideas as possible contributed to the planning process. Creative brainstorming sessions were designed to encourage openness and playfulness, allowing for collective decision-making. This participatory approach led to significant changes in the city's development plans, resulting in the transformation of the area into a vibrant public space. By doing so, Park Fiction became not only a recreational area but also a statement about the importance of community involvement in urban development (Arte Útil, 2025; Rüse, 2014; Wicczorek, 2005).

Although it took nearly a decade to complete, the persistence and activism of the community were crucial in preserving the vision for the park. Park Fiction has since become an enduring symbol of community resilience and has influenced similar initiatives in other cities. In 2002, the project was even featured at the Documenta 11 art exhibition in Kassel, Germany (Rüse, 2014). Today, Park Fiction continues to serve as a popular gathering space for locals and visitors alike. Its whimsical design, including a lawn resembling a magic carpet and year-round greenery provided by plastic palm trees, makes it a unique and welcoming space. The park stands as a testament to the power of collective action in the face of gentrification, offering a place for reflection, relaxation, and solidarity against urban redevelopment pressures.

In the final analysis, Park Fiction demonstrates how art can resist the commodification of urban spaces and assert the rights of communities facing gentrification. It continues to serve as a model of participatory urbanism, where art, activism, and community engagement intersect to create a lasting social impact.

Empowering youth narratives: Suzanne Lacy's The Oakland Projects

Suzanne Lacy's The Oakland Projects (1991–2001) were a series of community-based art initiatives aimed at addressing social issues in Oakland, California. Collaborating with local youth, educators, artists, and media makers under the acronym TEAM (teens, educators, artists, media makers), Lacy facilitated dialogues and performances to tackle topics such as police brutality, social injustice, and educational disparities. These projects utilised various media, including television broadcasts, lectures, gallery exhibitions, and documentary videos, to engage the broader community and influence public policy (Lacy, n.d., a).

In 1994, as part of The Oakland Projects, Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacoby, and Chris Johnson launched The Roof is On Fire, an unconventional performance art event. Responding to media portrayals of youth, particularly after a police-escalated riot at a local festival, the project aimed to give young people control over their narrative (Lacy, n.d., b). Held on the rooftop of a parking garage, the event featured 220 high school students engaging in unscripted conversations on topics such as family, sexuality, drugs, and their future. The students sat in 100 parked cars as audience members moved between vehicles, listening to their stories. Unlike sensationalised media portrayals, this event allowed youth to represent themselves authentically. The performance was documented as a one-hour programme aired on the Bay Area's NBC affiliate and covered nationally by CNN (Lacy, n.d., b).

The project evolved from a media literacy curriculum developed by Lacy and Johnson at Oakland Technical High School. Over a year, students explored the influence of mass media on teen identity and culminated in *Teen Age Living Room*, a smaller-scale performance that inspired the project The Roof is On Fire. In preparation for the larger event, 15 teachers from eight

Oakland schools participated in a professional development programme, integrating media literacy into their classrooms. These educators later involved 40 students in weekly after-school planning sessions, with a Youth Steering Committee of 15 students taking on leadership roles in production and media coverage (Lacy, n.d., b).

Art as praxis: The revolutionary engagement of Grupo de Arte Callejero in Argentina

Socially engaged art often seeks to expose and challenge the capitalist systems that perpetuate inequality. This can be seen in projects that highlight the exploitation of labour, the commodification of culture, or the disenfranchisement of marginalised communities. In such practices, art is not merely a reflection of the world but a form of praxis—a Marxist term referring to “a dialectical synthesis of theory and practice oriented toward transforming extant social relations” (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale et al., 2018, p. 550). By engaging communities in creative processes that critique and resist oppressive systems, socially engaged artists embody the Marxist call for revolutionary action.

One prominent example of socially engaged art is the work of the artist collective Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) in Argentina. Emerging during the economic crisis of the early 2000s, GAC—short for street art group—used public interventions to critique neoliberal policies and the impact of global capitalism on the working class (Longoni, 2010). From the outset, GAC deliberately chose to operate outside traditional exhibition spaces, focusing on appropriating public spaces to address local, social, and cultural issues in their physical, social, and cultural dimensions. Their work blurs the boundaries between art and activism, prioritising confrontational tactics over traditional artistic objects. This approach allowed them to draw attention to pressing issues such as police violence, political corruption, and labour exploitation (Grupo de Arte Callejero, 2019).

By employing street art and guerrilla communication tactics, GAC disrupted the visual and political landscape of Buenos Aires, offering powerful commentary on the socio-economic conditions affecting Argentina at the time (Gómez-Barris, 2018). Their interventions primarily centred on denouncing the crimes against humanity committed by Argentina’s last military dictatorship and opposing the neoliberal policies of the 1990s and their detrimental effects. As such, GAC’s work exemplifies how art can be mobilised as a form of resistance against oppressive systems, resonating with broader movements of socially engaged art across Latin America (Helguera, 2011).

Empowering change: The praxis of socially engaged art and its transformative potential

Socially engaged art transcends its traditional aesthetic functions, reshaping itself into a catalyst for societal transformation. As demonstrated by Park

Fiction, The Oakland Projects, and Grupo de Arte Callejero, these endeavours not only address systemic inequities but also inspire action by reimagining the roles of artist, audience, and the creative process itself. Rooted in theories of critical pedagogy, collective resistance, and Marxist thought, socially engaged art bridges the gap between representation and action, challenging entrenched power structures and sparking grassroots change. Through public interventions and collective creative practices, artists such as those in GAC have shown that art can become a direct response to economic and political crises, confronting neoliberal policies and advocating for revolutionary change.

Freire's influence is evident in practices that prioritise collaboration, dialogue, and empowerment, where participants are co-creators rather than passive recipients. This aligns with the concept of "problem-posing education" (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 79), which eliminates hierarchies, fostering mutual learning and knowledge production through dialogue, where both teacher and student learn from one another. Suzanne Lacy's The Oakland Projects serves as a compelling example of this pedagogical approach in action, with Lacy engaging youth in Oakland to explore and address systemic issues such as racism and violence. Similarly, Park Fiction illustrates how participatory art-making stimulates critical reflection and political education, empowering residents to resist gentrification and shape their urban environment.

By incorporating these Freirean principles, socially engaged art not only critiques and resists oppressive systems but also cultivates the critical awareness and collective action necessary for societal transformation. The case studies collectively demonstrate how art can move beyond representation to actively engage marginalised communities in the process of creating change. However, the broader realisation of art's transformative potential often involves navigating a series of practical, political, and institutional challenges that can influence its success and impact. Yet, despite these obstacles, socially engaged art continues to challenge the status quo, demonstrating its capacity to spark real-world transformation, empower communities, and contribute to a more equitable and just future.

Community empowerment and liberation

Integrating Freirean ideas into feminist theory, post-colonial theory, and critical race theory, which collectively critique patriarchal structures, address the impacts of colonialism, and examine the intersections of race, class, and gender, bell hooks provides a rich framework for scrutinising the art world and articulating the transformative potential of socially engaged arts. In *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, she (1995) argues that art serves as a powerful means for engaging communities in critical reflection and dialogue about their experiences, identities, and social realities. This perspective underscores how art can express overlooked experiences and histories, thereby disrupting dominant narratives and empowering individuals to assert their identities.

Aligning her views with Freirean critical pedagogy, hooks (1995) emphasises the importance of dialogue and critical consciousness in furthering empowerment and social change. She draws on Trinh T. Minh-ha's assertion that "to challenge the regimes of representation that govern a society is to conceive of how a politics can transform reality rather than merely ideologize it" (Trinh, 1991, p. 2), highlighting the transformative potential of art and representation. For hooks, artmaking and public engagement with art are "essential to any practice of freedom" (1995, p. 4), serving as a means of liberation that inspires communities to unleash their imagination and recognise the importance of creative expression.

Having established hooks' critical engagement with socially engaged art as a transformative tool for community empowerment, identity reclamation, and social change, the following four case studies illustrate how these principles play out in practice. These examples demonstrate how art can act as a catalyst for social transformation, challenging oppressive structures and fostering critical consciousness through creative expression. Each case study underscores the potential of art to disrupt dominant narratives, reclaim marginalised identities, and support community-driven liberation efforts.

Project Row Houses, Houston, Texas

A compelling example of these ideas in practice is Project Row Houses (PRH) in Houston, Texas. Founded in 1993 by artist Rick Lowe and a group of African American artists and community organisers, PRH transforms dilapidated shotgun houses in Houston's historically Black Third Ward into spaces for art, education, and community development (Lowe, 2011). This initiative aligns with hooks' (1995) vision by actively involving community members in shaping the narratives and visual expressions of their lived experiences, nurturing a sense of ownership and empowerment.

PRH challenges dominant narratives of neglect and marginalisation, reflecting hooks' belief that art can disrupt oppressive structures and serve as a tool for liberation, much like Freirean pedagogy aims to awaken critical consciousness (Thompson, 2012). By transforming physical spaces and encouraging community engagement, PRH illustrates the vital role of socially engaged art in promoting personal and societal transformation, aligning with hooks' assertion that such practices are crucial for challenging oppression and advancing social change (Felshin, 1995; Kwon, 2002). Ultimately, hooks asserts that "socially engaged arts are vital for personal and societal transformation, as they challenge oppression and promote social change" (1995, p. 138). PRH stands as a powerful testament to this vision, embodying the potential of art to reclaim identity, challenge systemic injustices, and build empowered communities.

Similar successful examples of socially engaged art projects that align with hooks' ideas on art as a means for reclaiming identity, challenging oppression, and strengthening community include, for instance, RAPtivism (rap activism or hip-hop activism), led by South African artist and activist Nomsa Mazwai.

According to Haupt (2008; 2012), this activist movement uses hip-hop as a tool for social change. This initiative engages with youth in marginalised communities, encouraging them to express their struggles and aspirations through rap and poetry. The project cultivates critical consciousness by addressing issues such as racism, poverty, and gender inequality, aligning with hooks' (1995) emphasis on art as a means of liberation and empowerment. RAPtivism provides a platform for young people to reclaim their identities and challenge systemic oppression, much like hooks advocates for art as a tool for transformative social change.

Casa Loma, Medellín, Colombia

Casa Loma is a community-driven art collective in Medellín, Colombia, that has been working since 2013 to provide an alternative to violence for young people in the marginalised neighbourhood of La Loma, near Commune 13. As noted by Sebastian Forero Rueda (2020), this area has a history of conflict, serving as a focal point for military and paramilitary operations during the early 2000s, which left deep scars on the community. To address these issues, Casa Loma engages local youth, including displaced individuals and Venezuelan migrants, in a variety of art and cultural activities. According to Sandra Flórez (2022), these activities are not only creative outlets but also integral to the psychosocial development of the participants.

Casa Loma's programmes, which include free classes in photography, graffiti, music, and theatre, are designed to foster critical thinking and empower youth to envision and pursue alternative life paths. This approach is deeply resonant with Freire's (1970/2005) pedagogy of critical consciousness, where education is seen as a means to develop an awareness of social injustices and the capacity to challenge them. By engaging in these creative practices, the youth are encouraged to critically reflect on their social conditions, dialogue with their peers, and actively participate in the transformation of their community. Through these opportunities, Casa Loma helps young people resist the lure of armed groups that continue to operate in the region, enabling them to reclaim their identity and assert control over their futures, thereby breaking the cycles of violence that have long plagued their community (Rueda, 2020; Flórez, 2022). This aligns with hooks' view of art to disrupt oppressive structures and assert collective identity, and it also embodies Freirean principles by cultivating critical consciousness and empowerment among marginalised youth.

Casa do Hip-Hop, Diadema, São Paulo, Brazil

Casa do Hip-Hop, a cultural centre founded in 1999, serves as a vibrant hub for hip-hop culture in Diadema, São Paulo, Brazil. Derek Pardue (2011) describes how the centre provides a space for youth from impoverished neighbourhoods to develop their artistic talents by offering workshops in break-dancing, graffiti, DJing, and rap, while also engaging in discussions about

social issues such as police violence, racism, and poverty. The centre promotes critical consciousness and empowerment, aligning with hooks' ideas about the role of art in fostering dialogue and social change. By providing a platform for creative expression and community engagement, Casa do Hip-Hop helps young people reclaim their identities and challenge systemic injustices (Pardue, 2011).

crazinsT artisT, Kumasi, Ghana

A compelling example of socially engaged art as a force for social transformation is the work of Ghanaian multidisciplinary artist Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi, also known as crazinisT artisT, briefly introduced in Chapter 1. As a transgender woman and former priest working in Ghana, Fiatsi navigates a hostile environment for LGBTIQ+ individuals, where colonial-era laws criminalise same-sex acts, and the *Human Sexual Rights and Family Values Bill*, passed by parliament in 2024, threatens to intensify discrimination. This bill, one of the strictest anti-LGBTIQ+ measures in Africa, would extend penalties for same-sex relations, criminalise identifying as LGBTIQ+ or supporting LGBTIQ+ rights, and deny access to jobs, healthcare, and housing for queer individuals. Though former President Nana Akufo-Addo left the bill unsigned due to ongoing legal challenges, newly elected President John Mahama, under pressure from Catholic bishops, is expected to sign it into law despite international financial risks (Adom, 2025; Parliamentarians for Global Action, 2024; Salako, 2025). This context is compounded by the influence of US evangelical fundamentalist churches, which promote anti-gay sentiments across Africa, exacerbating societal hostility (Schwikowski, 2024). Amidst these challenges, Fiatsi's art directly confronts systemic oppression, blending performance, activism, and social engagement to challenge societal norms and foster critical dialogue around gender and sexuality.

Fiatsi's performances, often held in public spaces, use her body as a powerful medium to provoke reflection on queerness, identity politics, and prejudice. Her approach incorporates ritualistic elements to disrupt normalcy, confront taboos, and engage audiences in uncomfortable but necessary conversations. This work carries serious personal risk, but Fiatsi embraces the dangers as essential to her mission of raising awareness and challenging societal boundaries (Fiatsi, personal communication, April 13, 2024).

The nature of Fiatsi's work exposes her to threats, particularly in Ghana's socio-political climate, where mob justice is a frequent and violent occurrence. She acknowledges these dangers, stating, "I really assess the situation, but just can't guarantee myself any safety" (personal communication, April 13, 2024). Her performances in public spaces put her at considerable risk of violent backlash, including the threat of attack by large crowds. "If I am attacked by a huge crowd mob because the mob justice in Ghana can be so wild," she explains, stressing the severity of these threats (Fiatsi, personal communication, April 13, 2024).

To prepare for these risks, Fiatsi adopts meticulous precautions. She instructs her team, particularly those documenting her performances, to avoid intervening if violence occurs. “I caution them not to intervene in case there is an attack,” she says, emphasising the importance of preserving their safety while ensuring any incidents are recorded. This documentation serves as critical evidence of the realities she faces: “If I should die, I should die alone... Otherwise, we also lose any evidence to what happened there” (Fiatsi, personal communication, April 13, 2024).

Despite the dangers, Fiatsi’s commitment to her art remains unwavering. She endures the risks as an inherent part of her practice, stating, “Acceptance of my death is the first step towards those works” (personal communication, April 13, 2024). This profound resilience underscores the courage required to engage in societal critique through an artistic practice in a hostile environment.

In addition to her performances, Fiatsi founded the perfocraZe International Artists Residency (pIAR) in Kumasi, Ghana, which serves as both a sanctuary for LGBTIQ+ artists and a platform for socially engaged art and activism. The residency nurtures collaboration among local and international artists, encouraging work that critiques societal norms and explores themes of gender, sexuality, and justice. To bridge divides with the broader community, Fiatsi initiated the LOVE fEAST, a communal event designed to build understanding through dialogue and shared meals (see Figure 5.1). Over time, the Feast has grown into a significant gathering, fostering compassion, and reducing hostility. Fiatsi notes that the LOVE fEAST, initially a small event, has evolved



Figure 5.1 The LOVE fEAST at craziniST artisT studiO in Kumasi, Ghana. Photographer unknown. Photograph courtesy of Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi.

into a large gathering with hundreds of participants, reflecting gradual shifts in community attitudes (Fiatsi, personal communication, April 13, 2024).

Fiatsi's practice exemplifies the transformative potential of socially engaged art in addressing local issues within broader global frameworks of justice and liberation. Her ability to navigate Ghana's societal complexities while advocating for change through art demonstrates how socially engaged practices can empower communities, inspire dialogue, and drive social transformation even in repressive environments.

The four case studies above demonstrate how art, grounded in the principles of hooks' (1995) vision of socially engaged practice, can disrupt oppressive narratives and foster community agency. From the revitalisation of neighbourhoods to the reclamation of marginalised identities, these projects illustrate art's transformative potential in addressing systemic issues of race, gender, and class. Through collaborative processes, these initiatives encourage critical consciousness, providing avenues for dialogue and empowerment in communities. In alignment with hooks' belief that art can be a tool for liberation, these examples showcase how creative expression contributes to both personal and collective liberation, offering powerful responses to colonial legacies and contemporary struggles for justice.

Socially engaged art amidst political and institutional hurdles

Ultimately, socially engaged art transcends art's traditional aesthetic functions, reshaping itself into a catalyst for societal transformation. As demonstrated by Park Fiction and The Oakland Projects, these endeavours not only address systemic inequities but also inspire action by reimagining the roles of artist, audience, and the creative process itself. Rooted in theories of critical pedagogy and collective resistance, socially engaged art bridges the gap between representation and action, challenging entrenched power structures and sparking grassroots change. This reframing of art as a medium of empowerment and solidarity underscores its enduring value as an approach for social transformation, offering pathways towards a more equitable and just future.

As the case studies above demonstrate, socially engaged art holds the potential to create meaningful change by challenging entrenched power structures and empowering marginalised communities. These projects demonstrate how art can go beyond traditional aesthetic functions, becoming a catalyst for social transformation through collective action and participation. However, as previously discussed, fully realising art's potential to drive social change often requires confronting a range of practical, political, and institutional barriers that shape its effectiveness and reach.

This brings us to a case study that exemplifies both the promise and the limitations of socially engaged art within a complex political and institutional framework: The Palestine Project. The project sheds light on the long-term commitment of a university to contribute to social transformation through artistic and educational collaboration in politically sensitive regions. Also, it

illuminates the institutional perplexity that may hinder the true potential of socially engaged art.

The Palestine Project: Navigating success and political intricacies

Initiated in 1995, the Palestine Project (Adams & Owens, 2016) exemplifies a university's long-term commitment to its Third Mission: contributing to society beyond education and research. The project—situated in the Centre for Research into Education, Creativity and the Arts through Practice (RECAP) at the University of Chester in the UK and involving partners such as the Palestinian Ministry of Education—began with collaborations between educators and artists in Gaza and the West Bank, aiming to enhance creative and educational development in one of the world's most politically and socially complex regions.

Building on the initial focus on creative and educational development, the project adopted a unique methodological approach to navigate the complexities of working in such a politically sensitive environment. Considering the cultural differences between the English and Palestinian educational systems, and collaborating with local long-term partners, the project employed a dramaturgical approach grounded in the drama in education tradition to help develop local educational systems and learning environments. This method encouraged “self-other imagining” (Adams & Owens, 2016, p. 51), enabling participants to engage with and reflect on social realities through drama. The approach fostered an immersive yet critical engagement, where participants alternated between action and reflection, allowing them to examine their own narratives in relation to others. Attention was paid to the notion of “*Othering*” as shorthand for the process whereby certain people are de-humanised as they are exploited by those who say they are ‘civilising’ those they believe to be inferior” (Adams & Owens, 2016, p. 51, emphasis in original).

While this innovative methodological framework contributed to the success of the project in encouraging dialogue and self-reflection, it was not without its challenges. Working in the Occupied Palestinian Territories brought significant sensitivities, and as the project developed, it became clear that “the political context is inextricably and overtly woven into almost every conversation and discourse, including education” (Adams & Owens, 2016, p. 41).

Despite these challenges, over the years, the project won trust and expanded, achieving milestones such as a memorandum of cooperation in 2008 and recognition as a successful model of university engagement. The project demonstrated the university's capacity to engage meaningfully with global challenges, helping communities in developing their education through the applications of drama. As Allan Owens (personal communication, January 6, 2025) notes, it contributed to the professional development of educators and artists in Palestine, offering frameworks for fostering creativity under challenging circumstances. The collaboration exemplified how higher education

institutions can address real-world issues, embodying the university's commitment to social transformation and international solidarity.

However, these successes also revealed the complexities and limitations of socially engaged art in politically sensitive contexts. While its achievements were undeniable, the university's leadership displayed growing hesitancy in openly celebrating the project, reflecting broader institutional tensions. According to Owens (personal communication, January 6, 2025), this hesitancy was shaped by the evolving neoliberal climate of higher education, where universities not wanting to run the risk of adverse media attention "fall silent" rather than taking a stance, wary of political backlash. Owens tells of the article written for the *University News* publication celebrating 30 years of solidarity with Palestinian colleagues enduring ongoing military occupation. He withdrew this in protest after it was published with text changes removing the word "solidarity" and all references to conflict. "It was tantamount to saying 'don't mention the war, don't speak about what is going on'" (Owens, personal communication, January 6, 2025). Yet, as Adams and Owens argue, the reality is that "occupation is brutalising and dehumanising in military, economic, and social terms, and cannot be air-brushed out of any discussion about education in Palestine" (2016, p. 44).

These requests to silence crucial aspects of the project reflect the broader tensions at play. Ostensibly aimed at avoiding accusations of political bias or inciting hatred, the university's actions underscore the fraught intersection of academic freedom, political sensitivity, and economic pragmatism in an institution navigating neoliberal pressures. Reflecting on his experiences, Owens notes, "This veil of silence that is currently in universities really touched me and made me reflect on these 30 years of work with the institution, and the Third Mission of our university" (personal communication, January 6, 2025). His request to meet with those involved in the decision-making process about the article has not been answered. This context raises questions about the tension between the university's idealistic vision of contributing to society and the pragmatic realities of institutional survival in a neoliberal environment. While Owens highlights the impact of these external pressures, it is important to consider how such dependencies may shift institutional priorities, potentially aligning them more closely with the interests of external stakeholders rather than the pursuit of social transformation.

Owens critiques this higher education environment, noting how the institutional focus on initiatives like "citizen student," which he regards as "a huge neoliberal concoction," often prioritises producing compliant graduates for the voluntary and charitable sectors rather than fostering critical, disobedient citizens capable of challenging societal injustices (personal communication, January 6, 2025). This dynamic, he argues, risks undermining the transformative potential of university-led socially engaged art. Nevertheless, the Palestine Project stands as both a testament to the potential of socially engaged art and a cautionary tale, highlighting the tension in universities between balancing their social responsibilities and the pressures of political and economic realities.

Thus, the Palestine Project serves as both a success story and a cautionary tale for universities striving to fulfil their Third Mission. It demonstrates the importance of engaging with global challenges while drawing attention to the political and economic pressures that can stifle such efforts. As Owens' narrative illustrates, maintaining the integrity of socially engaged initiatives requires universities to critically examine their priorities and reaffirm their commitment to academic freedom and social justice, even in the face of adversity.

Chapter reflections

In this chapter, I have explored the transformative potential of socially engaged art in catalysing social change and community empowerment. Drawing on Marxist thought, Freirean pedagogy, and critical theories, the chapter has shown how art can reclaim identity, resist oppression, and cultivate critical consciousness, offering a counterpoint to art's commodification in Western society.

Examples like Park Fiction, The Oakland Projects, and Grupo de Arte Callejero highlight how art can challenge dominant narratives, mobilise collective action, and nurture critical awareness, while case studies such as Project Row Houses and Casa Loma demonstrate how art can empower marginalised voices to assert identities and resist systemic injustices. These examples show how socially engaged art goes beyond aesthetic expression to become a means of activism.

Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi's work provides a powerful example of socially engaged art confronting homo- and transphobia, showing how such practices can drive community transformation and foster critical dialogue in repressive socio-political contexts. This insight reinforces the argument that socially engaged art, while often facing political and institutional challenges, remains a potent force for social change.

I also reflected on the political and institutional complexities of socially engaged art, particularly within higher education, and the need for universities to reconcile their social responsibilities with economic and political pressures. These insights reveal the challenges that socially engaged frameworks can face in navigating these dynamics while suggesting potential adaptations for organisational settings.

A further critical perspective, beyond the scope of this chapter, is the adaptability of frameworks underpinning socially engaged art, particularly when applied beyond traditional artistic contexts, such as in organisational development. Foundational theories from Marxism, Freirean pedagogy, and bell hooks' feminist and post-colonial insights have been extended into various fields to promote collaborative creation and reflection. For instance, Augusto Boal's theatre practices, emphasising communal participation, democracy, and solidarity, have been adapted for organisational settings, as seen in Anne Pässilä's work in Finland. Pässilä (2012) builds on Boal's ideas to facilitate workplace reflection through a research-based theatre model, fostering a

deeper understanding of personal and societal processes. Her post-Boalian approach reframes theatre not as a tool for class struggle but as an epistemology for navigating a fragmented world, emphasising the intersection of learning, development, and social change. This broader application reveals that socially engaged art frameworks can influence not only social movements but also institutional and corporate environments as the two case studies of artistic interventions in organisations demonstrate (see Chapter 1).

To sum up, this chapter asserts that socially engaged art has significant potential to catalyse social transformation. While this potential is evident in real-world applications, a critical examination of the political and institutional factors that shape its materialisation is necessary. Socially engaged art provides a powerful means to challenge oppressive structures and build empowered communities, but it requires a commitment to social responsibility that can withstand external pressures. Moreover, as demonstrated by its extension into organisational development contexts, these practices hold considerable potential for fostering reflexive, participatory processes across various societal spheres. Ultimately, the transformative potential of socially engaged art depends on the collective commitment of institutions and practitioners to safeguard its integrity and adaptability, ensuring its relevance in diverse societal contexts.

Note

- 1 For critical perspectives on the commodification of art and its impact on social critique, see David Foster Wallace's (1997) discussion of the commercialisation of high art, Richard Hoggart's (2009) analysis of the media's role in reducing complex works into mass-market content, and Arjun Appadurai's (1996) exploration of how global capitalism reconfigures culture, sometimes at the cost of its transformative potential.

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6 Socially engaged art in higher arts education

In recent decades, socially engaged arts have emerged not only as a significant set of artistic practices but also as an expanding field of academic inquiry. Reflecting a broader recognition of art's potential to address pressing social, political, cultural, and environmental challenges, socially engaged arts move beyond personal creativity to focus on community engagement and societal transformation through the arts. This growing recognition has led higher education institutions to establish degree programmes that prepare artists to navigate complex global issues with immersive, collaborative, and reflective approaches.

Artists, scholars, and educators have long acknowledged the transformative role of art in human life. Ellen Dissanayake (1995, 2000) emphasises art as a universal human behaviour crucial for emotional and social development, while David Darts (2006, 2011) stresses the importance of a culturally aware and critical pedagogy that challenges traditional notions of art's societal role. Suzi Gablik (1992) advocates for art practices that address environmental and community concerns, and Beverly Naidus (2009) highlights the value of inclusivity and participatory artmaking. These perspectives align with Karen Lee Carroll's (2007) assertion that the arts fulfil profound social and cultural functions, deepening engagement with creative practices and promoting personal development, well-being, and the common good (Lehikoinen, 2021, 2024).

In the context of higher education, scholars such as Ross Schlemmer et al. (2017) emphasise the value of socially engaged art within art education. They argue that such practices cultivate students' awareness of societal issues by fostering active community engagement. However, they do not advocate for socially engaged art as a separate discipline. Instead, they view it as an integral component of broader pedagogical practices and social justice initiatives. While this perspective underscores the importance of integrating socially engaged art into educational frameworks, I contend that it warrants recognition as a distinct field of study, particularly due to its capacity to challenge traditional conceptions of the artist's role and its potential for fostering meaningful societal engagement.

The development of art teacher education at the University of Lapland, Finland, provides a notable example of how socially engaged art can be

meaningfully integrated into educational frameworks. Mirja Hiltunen (2009) emphasises the socio-cultural role of community-based art education in helping communities address contemporary issues, highlight marginalised concerns, and transform traditions. Maria Huhmarniemi et al. (2021) point to the unique natural environment of Lapland as central to shaping the programme. This case illustrates the integration of theories like new materialism and post-humanism into socially engaged art practices, while also foregrounding local particularities, such as the region's deep connection with nature. The programme merges socially engaged art with environmental education, encouraging students to engage with Lapland's natural resources and Indigenous Sámi knowledge. By linking art and the environment, it addresses ecological challenges through a post-humanist perspective, recognising the agency of nature and the interconnectedness of all living beings.

While the development of this programme primarily focuses on art teacher education, it is important to note that socially engaged art is also actively addressed in the University of Lapland's ambitious BA and MA programmes in applied art, which will be discussed later in the chapter. The integration of socially engaged art into these degree programmes enriches the teaching of creativity, critical thinking, and ecological awareness, thus preparing future educators and artists for transformative social roles. This approach not only illustrates how socially engaged art can be embedded within teacher education but also highlights its potential for societal impact across various disciplines, warranting further exploration as a distinct field of study. This broader impact is especially significant when considering the theories, principles, and practices that define socially engaged art, which will be elaborated upon in Chapters 7 and 8.

Despite its growing prominence, research on socially engaged art in higher education remains limited. In her doctoral dissertation, Ann Lyons (2020) explores its integration within academic institutions and highlights tensions arising from its location in non-art faculties, its dual focus on artistic and educational qualifications, and the broader challenges neoliberal educational policies pose. Lyons emphasises that socially engaged art expands the boundaries of traditional art practices but warns that institutionalisation can risk undermining its inherent openness and adaptability.

These insights underscore the need for dedicated programmes in socially engaged art that cultivate not only artistic identity but also the analytical and reflective skills necessary to address societal challenges. By equipping students to investigate the complexities of social interactions, such programmes prepare them to critically engage with art's role in society and challenge conventional artistic paradigms. To meet this growing demand, higher education institutions worldwide have developed a variety of educational pathways that allow students to explore and specialise in socially engaged art.

Building on recent curriculum analyses (Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, 2023), this chapter reviews socially engaged arts programmes across Asia, Europe, the UK, North America, and Oceania, including collaborative international efforts (see Table 6.1 for an overview of the courses reviewed). I examine programmes

Table 6.1 Overview of courses reviewed

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
Goldsmiths, University of London, UK	BA (Hons) Drama: Applied Theatre and Community Performance	3 years full- time or 6 years part-time	Socially engaged theatre, community performance, participatory arts, political activism	- Foster social, political, and personal change through theatre	- Emphasis on socially engaged practice
				- Equip students with skills in applied theatre, community engagement, and facilitation	- Focus on political and social change - Practical application in social care, prisons, community centres - Strong industry connections with leading organisations like Young Vic and Theatre Royal Stratford East
University of Lapland, Finland	BA Applied Arts	3 years full-time	Societal and environmental issues through artistic practices in visual arts	- Foster interdisciplinary collaboration and art-based services in public/private sectors	- Combines applied art studies with shared courses in art, design, and culture from design programmes
				- Develop skills in project planning, organisation, marketing, and documentation	- Includes mandatory courses in visual arts as a minor - Additional studies in language, communication, and research - Emphasis on artist identity, practical skills, and professional development
				- Integrate research on community, environmental, and sustainable art practices	- Research courses on art, well- being, sustainability, and urban planning

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
University of Melbourne, Australia	BFA (Hons) Social Practice and Community Engagement	1 year full-time	Social practice, community engagement, practice-led research, socially engaged artistic practice	- Prepare for roles like community artist, environmental artist, and art facilitator - Build professional networks with employers and art clients - Engage in independent research under the guidance of a supervisor - Develop practice-led research skills - Produce a major project and related research paper - Equip students for professional artistic practice and research degrees	- Electives for specialisation and broader career pathways - For students who have completed a bachelor's degree in the creative arts and wish to enhance their research skills while expanding their creative practice through community engagement beyond the conventional art scene - Emphasises practice-led research methodologies and includes significant components such as a major independent project, a research paper, and fieldwork intensives. - Direct entry pathway to a PhD

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
The University of Leicester, UK	MA/MSc Engaged Practice in Museums and Galleries	2 years part-time	Social justice and inclusivity; anti-racism and accessibility; ethical frameworks in museum practices; cultural transformation	- Equip professionals to address societal issues through museums - Foster ethical, inclusive, and transformative cultural practices	- Flexible, part-time delivery - Practice-based projects integrated into core and optional modules - Emphasis on real-world application in the museum and gallery sector - Access to global case studies and expert tutors
	MA in Socially Engaged Art	1 year full-time	Studying community engagement through the arts	- Prepares students to administer, organise, and facilitate socially engaged art experiences	- Bring together artists and organisers in a shared environment to explore the dialogues and practices surrounding art's connection critically and practically regarding place, collaboration, ethics, materials, and interdisciplinary research

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
University of Lapland, Finland	MA Applied Arts	2 years full-time	Community and public space art, research methodologies, and advanced applied arts practices	- Develop skills in independent knowledge acquisition, creative problem-solving, scientific thinking, and research methodology - Enable students to produce a thesis connected to applied arts, optionally including an artistic component	- Emphasises practice-oriented and artistic research - Integration of Arctic and cultural contexts - Includes joint courses with the Art Education programme, as well as shared studies with the Sustainable Art and Design and Art Expertise programmes
London Contemporary Dance School, (the programme is validated by University of the Arts), UK	MA Dance: Participation, Communities, Activism	1 year full-time; 2 years part-time	Participatory dance, community engagement, social justice, activism, cultural transformation	- Develop socially engaged dance practices - Empower communities through dance - Address societal challenges through artistic methods - Ethical relationship-building and collective care	- Global reach with flexible study mode - Scholarships for students from the Global South - Mentorship for tailored project development - Culminates in a student-led international symposium

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
University of Salford, UK	MA Socially Engaged Arts Practice	1 year full-time, 2 years part-time	Socially engaged art, community arts, co-creation, interdisciplinary collaboration, societal issues such as inclusion, mental health, homelessness, and sustainability	- Empower communities through participatory art - Develop co-authorship, co-curation, and project management skills - Provide real-world experience in social art projects and placements - Foster interdisciplinary collaboration - Create a strong portfolio of socially engaged art	- Emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration with students from various artistic backgrounds - Real-world placements and live projects with a focus on contemporary social issues - Major project with public exhibition, showcasing the integration of research and creative practice
Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, Finland	Master of Culture and Arts / Master of Health Care and/or Social Services: Creativity and Arts in Social and Health Fields (CRASH)	1 year full-time, 2 years part-time	Arts-based interventions in health and social sectors, well-being, inclusion, co-creation, multidisciplinary collaboration	- Promote well-being and inclusion through creative practices - Implement evidence-based strategies in arts and health - Lead and innovate professional practices in the social, cultural, and health sectors - Manage co-creation processes and foster interdisciplinary collaboration	- Interdisciplinary collaboration across cultural, social, and health fields - Blended learning approach offering flexibility - Partnerships with organisations such as Uniarts Helsinki and international stakeholders - Emphasis on research-driven methodologies and real-world applications

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
University of Warwick, UK	MA in Applied Theatre: Arts, Action, Change	1 year full-time	Socially engaged theatre and performance, arts for social change, applied theatre in diverse settings (e.g., criminal justice, homelessness, healthcare, education), theatre for development and community work	- Develop practical skills in applied theatre - Enhance research skills in applied and socially engaged theatre - Design, manage, and evaluate social change projects - Understand the ethical and political implications of applied theatre - Engage in professional practice and development	- Researching performance/performing research - Socially engaged performance: Interventions and Provocations - Close collaboration with professional applied theatre companies - Flexible final project (written or practical) - Emphasis on practical skills development alongside theoretical understanding
University of Limerick, Ireland	MA Community Music	1 year full-time	Comprehensive grounding in community music, facilitation, project design, delivery, and evaluation, reflective practice in diverse settings	- Equip students with a professional qualification in Community Music - Develop workshop and facilitation skills - Contribute to the academic and practical development of community music - Promote access to participatory music making	- Focus on practical, hands-on experience through workshops, site visits, and community-based projects - Development of ensemble skills and teaching techniques - Research-based approach contributing to community music development in Ireland

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
Danish National School of Performing Arts	MFA in Dance and Participation	2 years full-time	Dance, participation, and choreography in artistic and social contexts	- Engage participants in co-creation - Interdisciplinary collaboration	- Pedagogy, contextualisation, performance projects, artistic inquiry - Emphasis on interdisciplinary and entrepreneurial skills
	MFA in Art + Social Practice	3 years flexible structure	Art, social engagement, and community-focused practices	- Integrate art with community problem-solving and critical practice	- Emphasis on global engagement and socially engaged art - Research trips abroad, community partnerships, hands-on projects
Portland State University, USA					
Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), University of the Arts Singapore	MFA Fine Art Studio Programme	2 years full-time, 3 years part-time	Interdisciplinary art practice, critical inquiry, cultural research in Southeast Asia, regional art issues	- Develop interdisciplinary, critical, and regionally grounded art practice - Conduct research on Southeast Asian art, culture, and heritage	- Proposal-driven and self-directed studio practice with a regional focus and global engagement
				- Address contemporary socio-cultural issues through creative practice - Contribute to the creative economy and global art discourse	

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
Moore College of Art & Philadelphia, USA	MFA in Socially Engaged Studio Art		Socially engaged art practices, community engagement and collaboration, interdisciplinary arts, research, ethics	- Train artists to critically address social and community issues. - Promote interdisciplinary, socially engaged practices - Provide hands-on community collaboration opportunities.	- Emphasises special populations in art education - Accelerated 4+1 pathway for BFA students
Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences, Finland	Specialisation Programme in Community Musician (30 ECTS credits)	1 year full-time, 2 years part-time	Cultural well-being, community art, music therapy, group music facilitation, creativity, arts-based methods	- Apply music therapy and community arts methods in diverse settings - Facilitate group music-making, improvisation, and composition - Promote well-being and inclusion through music - Design and lead music-based activities in social and healthcare contexts - Engage in multidisciplinary collaboration for community well-being	- Focus on applying music in social and healthcare contexts - Integrates music therapy, community art, and group facilitation - Provides opportunities to specialise in cultural well-being and creative music practices for diverse populations - Targeted at graduates with a background in music or other related fields who wish to deepen their expertise in community music - A collaborative initiative coordinated by Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences, involving eight universities of applied sciences as partners

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland	Expert in Applied and Participatory Arts Specialisation Programme	1.5 years	Applied and participatory arts, community arts, art for social change, cultural policy, sustainability in the arts, ethics	- Develop multidisciplinary expertise in applied and participatory arts - Train professionals for roles in artistic, pedagogical, and community-based contexts - Enhance skills in creating art-based service concepts - Foster research-informed practice and ethical decision-making in participatory art	- Includes service design and entrepreneurship in the arts as well as cultural policy, sustainability, and international collaboration in the arts - A collaborative initiative coordinated by Uniarts Helsinki, involving Aalto University, University of Lapland, University of Tampere as partners
The Ohio State University, USA	Community Arts University Without Walls (CAUWW) – Puerto Rico 2017	short-term	Community arts, cultural policy, arts management, social justice, activism, Caribbean culture	- To engage students in immersive learning about community arts and cultural activism in Puerto Rico - To foster critical understanding of the intersection between art, culture, and social change - To develop practical and reflective skills in community engagement and arts-based initiatives	- Immersive short-term programme with pre-trip, in-country, and post-trip components - Integration of academic studies with real-world cultural and social contexts - Opportunities to explore Puerto Rican heritage and engage directly with local communities and leaders - Partnership with the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
School of Art and Design, Australian National University (ANU), Australia	Socially Engaged Art Practice: Authorship, Dialogue and Community	12 weeks	Social practice and social sculpture, politics of participation and authorship in contemporary art, community engagement and dialogue in art	- Create and discuss social practice methods in contemporary art - Make artworks that critically engage with politics of participation and authorship - Conduct research and apply findings to specific contexts in art production. - Substantiate artistic outcomes with research and rationale	- Focus on student-led, experimental, and context-specific projects - Incorporation of research into art production
University of New South Wales, Australia	Art and Activism	Standard delivery format – 4hoursper week	- Socially engaged art, activist art, artistic forms of resistance, campaign, intervention, advocacy, and protest, social practice, participatory art, institutional critique	- Trace the emergence of socially engaged art as a post-relational response to contemporary urgencies - Examine activist art's role in addressing social, cultural, political, and environmental issues - Consider the complexities of how art engages with audiences, publics, and communities. - Understand art's potential to drive social change	- Focus on artistic activism, resistance, and protest - Engagement with both historical and contemporary forms of activist art - General education course, allowing students from various disciplines to participate - In-person delivery, standard weekly, or fortnightly format

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
London Contemporary Dance School, (the programme is validated by University of the Arts), UK	Outside Encounters, Unit 6 in BA (Hons) Contemporary Dance	One term and a half	Community and education dance practices, co-creation and collaboration, participation and access, social and cultural implications, professional practice and ethics, critical reflection and self-evaluation, safeguarding and safe dance practices, real-world experience in dance	- Develop and apply knowledge and skills as a dance artist, teacher, and/or maker in community and education sectors - Gain understanding of participation, access, identity, community, and co-creation - Work with external partners under the support of The Place staff - Apply safe dance practice and safeguarding principles - Equip students with practical, theoretical, and professional expertise needed to work effectively in the field of community and participatory dance	- Participatory projects with external partners (schools and community organisations), studio-based learning, lectures, seminars, workshops, on-site or online facilitation - Self-evaluation log with weekly posts enriched with multimedia content. - Video excerpts and feedback from participants used for reflection

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Key features</i>
Artwork project consortium, EU	Socially Engaged Arts (SEA) Practices	Self-paced online course with multiple modules	Socially engaged arts, collaborative learning, leadership, entrepreneurship, creative facilitation, aesthetic evaluation, community impact	- Equip artists, cultural workers, and educators with SEA skills - Foster collaborative learning and leadership in arts-based social change initiatives - Provide practical tools and theoretical frameworks for SEA project design and evaluation	- Free online MOOC open to artists, cultural practitioners, and educators worldwide - Offers extensive online resources, including manuals, guidelines, and case studies - Non-credit course, but provides extensive resources and certifications of learning success (optional quizzes and self-reflection units) - Co-funded by the European Union
AMASS project consortium, EU	Introduction to Socially Engaged Arts: Diverse Approaches for Mitigating Societal Challenges through Arts-Based Initiatives	108 hours of self-paced learning	Socially engaged arts, arts-based methods for social change and community engagement, design-driven participatory processes, empowerment of marginalised communities through arts	- Understanding the principles, ethics, and methodologies of SEA - Engage with marginalised communities using arts-based, dialogical, and pedagogical approaches - Implement arts and design initiatives in social and cultural contexts - Explore participatory, dialogical, and pedagogical SEA approaches	- Free online MOOC - Eight lessons from eight European countries - Flexible, self-paced - Certification awarded upon successful completion of all lessons and quizzes - Collaboration with eight European countries on real-world SEA projects - Co-funded by the European Union

at the Bachelor's (BA), Master's (MA), and Master of Fine Arts (MFA) levels, as well as postgraduate specialisation programmes, short courses, and massive open online courses (MOOCs). The diversity of these educational formats highlights the widespread integration of socially engaged art into academic structures, addressing a range of career aspirations—from foundational learning at the undergraduate level to advanced practice and research at the postgraduate level. These varied pathways underscore the growing significance of socially engaged arts in both academic and professional contexts.

Degree programmes in socially engaged art

Offered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, socially engaged arts programmes cater to diverse career aspirations—from community art facilitation and political activism to academic research and leadership in cultural innovation. Each level offers complementary opportunities for learning, practice, and specialisation, reflecting the growing importance of the arts in addressing contemporary global issues. However, comparisons between programmes are complicated by national and institutional differences in how these degrees are structured and understood, with some overlap, especially between MA and MFA levels. While I am noting regional differences in my analysis, it is important to approach these observations with caution, as the sample in my study is limited.

BA programmes

At the undergraduate level, socially engaged art is often approached from a broad, foundational perspective. The University of Lapland's Study Programme in Applied Arts is a prime example, where students gain an understanding of community, environmental, and participatory art while fostering skills in arts-based research methods. The programme integrates environmental and community engagement with sustainable artistic practices, giving students the ability to navigate contemporary social issues through art. As part of the BA programme, students engage in workplace-oriented learning, with practical projects and workshops that contribute to both the local and global cultural landscape (University of Lapland, 2021a, 2021b).

Undergraduate programmes in socially engaged arts generally emphasise the development of artistic and conceptual skills, community engagement, and sustainability. Students are encouraged to approach art through interdisciplinary frameworks, often collaborating with external partners such as local cultural organisations. This learning process can be understood as transformative, fostering empathy, critical thinking, and practical skills.

Allan Owens, with 40 years of experience in teaching applied theatre, highlights the importance of cultivating a deep understanding of these concepts. He explains that his primary goal as a teacher is to help students develop a nuanced comprehension of the concept of "understanding" itself. He believes that it is crucial for students to engage with the complexities of meaning-making and

to recognise the significance of different perspectives, particularly in the context of socially engaged art. As Owens notes, “we spend a lot of time looking at... the difference between what do we understand by understanding? And why might that be important today?” (A. Owens, personal communication, January 6, 2025).

For Owens, this focus on understanding extends beyond traditional artistic practices. It is particularly evident in his engagement with diverse communities, such as people in prison. Owens reflects on how transformative these interactions can be: “the most valuable lessons to me have been when somebody has come in and said, I just didn’t know that people...” (personal communication, January 6, 2025). These moments, he suggests, challenge assumptions and broaden perspectives, ultimately driving both personal and professional growth.

The BA programmes generally stress the importance of fostering the foundational skills required for practical artmaking, theoretical reflection, and ethical engagement, which are crucial for later building a socially engaged practice. While the BA level introduces socially engaged art as a concept, the application remains relatively general. Students are exposed to community involvement, but the focus on in-depth, critical reflection on social justice or the ethical implications of these practices is often more limited than in postgraduate programmes, where one of the main aims is for students to learn to use their art forms to foster participation and dialogue within diverse communities. As Owens notes, “they do use that in many different contexts” (personal communication, January 6, 2025), illustrating the transferability of these skills. Additionally, he stresses the importance of reflecting on the complexities of meaning-making, as students explore what understanding in socially engaged arts entails and why it matters in today’s world.

MA programmes

The transition to the master’s level marks a shift in how socially engaged art is taught, with programmes deepening the community involvement’s theoretical and practical aspects. For instance, the University of Salford’s MA in Socially Engaged Arts Practice provides students with an opportunity to develop co-authorship, co-curation, and project management skills through interdisciplinary collaborations and real-world community-based projects. Through modules such as “Applied Practice” with live projects and “Real World Context” involving a job placement, the MA curriculum emphasises practical, hands-on experiences, where students are expected to design, implement, and evaluate socially engaged projects (University of Salford, 2025).

At this level, programmes like Salford’s aim to equip students with the tools to address contemporary social issues such as mental health, homelessness, and sustainability through art. The MA is distinguished by its emphasis on community empowerment and co-creation, encouraging students to see art as a tool for social transformation. Students not only learn about the practice

of socially engaged art but are also expected to develop research skills and a reflective understanding of how their work intersects with cultural policies and societal needs.

London Contemporary Dance School's MA Dance: Participation, Communities, Activism demonstrates the engagement of the arts in addressing social justice through dance. This programme focuses on participatory dance practices, empowerment through movement, and activism that can take many forms but largely involves bodies in space (The Place, London Contemporary Dance School, 2025). It is a clear example of how the MA level builds on foundational knowledge to create opportunities for direct intervention in social issues. Students come from all over the world and undertake independent artistic research situated in their individual contexts, co-create community projects, and present findings through online symposia that emphasise their role in global social movements.

In an interview with course leader Jo Parkes, she highlights several key elements essential for educating students in socially engaged arts practice. First, she emphasises the importance of experiential learning, where students engage directly with communities through co-creative processes rather than working in isolation. This is paired with developing a deep understanding of community engagement, enabling students to explore art's role beyond traditional performance settings. Critical thinking and reflection are also key components; students enter the programme as established artists in their fields, and encouraging them to assess their experiences is a core part of what drives their practice forward into the socially engaged field. Ethical considerations are integral, as students must navigate diverse cultural contexts and develop an understanding of ethical practices in community work. For example, what might be considered activism for a student in the UK could lead to arrest for a student working in Mexico. These discussions foster dialogue and help build an internationally aware cohort.

Parkes also stresses the value of co-creation and collaboration, teaching students the principles of collective decision-making and shared ownership. Furthermore, she advocates for an interdisciplinary approach, allowing students to draw connections between different art forms to support their desire to highlight and engage with social issues. Lastly, developing soft skills—such as empathy, communication, and adaptability—is crucial for effective community engagement and navigating the complexities of socially engaged art (J. Parkes, personal communication, December 18, 2024).

As these examples show, master's programmes tend to integrate theory and practice in a way that is deeply connected to the societal contexts in which students operate. The team of MA Dance: Participation, Communities, Activism supports students in developing a meaningful artistic practice that creates real-world social impact. This is achieved through co-creation with communities,

focusing on the interactions between individual bodies within their social context, and bringing the insights gained to decision-makers in those contexts.

Socially engaged art at the MFA level

In the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) level, programmes in socially engaged art practice emphasise artistic innovation, leadership, and collaboration at the professional level. Like the MA Dance: Participation, Communities, Activism, the MFA in Socially Engaged Studio Art at Moore College of Art & Design trains students to engage in critical dialogue with their communities, combining art-making with social activism. The programme focuses on fostering the skills necessary for leading community art initiatives and critically engaging with complex social issues. Students are encouraged to develop a major creative project that challenges the boundaries of art and its role in addressing pressing societal concerns (Keystone Masterstudies, 2024; e-flux Education, 2021).

The MFA programmes, in contrast to the undergraduate and some MAs, often provide students with a great deal of autonomy in their projects. Students are expected to push the limits of interdisciplinary practice while addressing real-world issues through complex, community-driven art projects. The MFA, especially in programmes such as the one at Moore College, becomes a platform for professionalisation in the socially engaged art sector, positioning students as future leaders in the field.

Another example is the University of Warwick's MA in Applied Theatre: Arts, Action, Change, which—like the MA in Dance: Participation, Communities, Activism—shares leadership qualities typically associated with MFA programmes. It focuses on developing research and facilitation skills for those interested in social change through performance. The programme's practical emphasis on creating interventions in the criminal justice system, homelessness, healthcare, and education gives students the tools to design and manage projects that create lasting social impact (University of Warwick, 2024).

Key differences between degree levels

Degree programmes in socially engaged art reflect the evolving role of the arts in addressing contemporary global challenges. BA programmes offer foundational knowledge and practical engagement, preparing students for further study or entry-level positions in the arts. MA programmes deepen theoretical and interdisciplinary understanding, equipping graduates for roles in cultural leadership and advocacy. MFA programmes and some novel MAs prioritise professional practice and artistic excellence, producing graduates who lead innovative projects and shape the future of socially engaged art.

Degree programmes in socially engaged art reflect the evolving role of the arts in addressing contemporary global challenges. BA programmes offer foundational knowledge and practical engagement, preparing students for further study or entry-level positions in the arts. MA programmes deepen theoretical and interdisciplinary understanding, equipping graduates for roles in cultural

leadership and advocacy. Many MFA programmes, along with some groundbreaking MAs, emphasise professional practice and artistic excellence, producing graduates who lead innovative projects and shape the future of socially engaged art.

As the brief analysis above shows, despite some overlap, each programme type plays a complementary role in training professionals for the socially engaged field, blending professional practice, critical inquiry, and leadership. Together, these pathways highlight the importance of nurturing professionals who are specialised not only in fostering creativity, addressing societal issues, and promoting meaningful community engagement through carefully devised arts initiatives but also in critically investigating these practices within diverse contexts.

The most significant distinctions between BA, MA, and MFA programmes in socially engaged art lie in their depth, focus, and level of autonomy. Each programme type is designed to cater to different stages of a student's artistic and professional development, reflecting the unique demands of socially engaged art as a field of study and practice.

At the BA level, students are introduced to the foundational concepts of socially engaged art, emphasising the development of artistic skills, basic research methods, and an understanding of community contexts. These programmes serve as an entry point for students to explore how art intersects with societal and cultural issues, laying the groundwork for future specialisation.

At the MA level, the focus shifts to interdisciplinary collaboration, theoretical depth, and critical engagement. The majority of MA programmes emphasise research-oriented approaches and practical application, encouraging students to address societal challenges through arts-based projects. This level provides the analytical and methodological tools necessary for those interested in leadership roles, cultural policy, or advocacy, as well as developing their individual artistic practises.

The MFA level offers the most intensive and practice-based education, often spanning 2–3 years. MFA programmes often prioritise artistic mastery and leadership, equipping students with the skills to innovate within the field and lead community-focused initiatives. The culmination of these programmes is typically a major creative project, often accompanied by a publication or public presentation, signifying a professional-level contribution to socially engaged art.

National differences in the understanding of MA and MFA programmes in socially engaged art reflect diverse educational traditions and professional expectations across regions. In the US, the MFA is widely recognised as the terminal degree for artists, emphasising studio-based practice, innovation, and the completion of significant creative projects. In contrast, MA programmes are less common in the US, typically focusing more on theoretical research and interdisciplinary applications, though there are exceptions depending on the institution. In Europe and the UK, MA programmes are more prevalent, generally striking a balance between theoretical and practical components, with

a relatively strong emphasis on research. While MFAs in the UK and Europe share similarities with their US counterparts, they are often shorter and more focused on professional practice, sometimes with less emphasis on theoretical exploration. In Australia, some MFA programmes emphasise practice-led innovation, while MAs cater to professionals seeking to integrate socially engaged practices into broader fields such as education or cultural management.

Across all regions, MA degrees are generally research-oriented and interdisciplinary, preparing students for diverse professional arts careers, including roles in practice, leadership, and policy, whereas MFAs prioritise professional practice, primarily catering to those pursuing careers as practising artists. These differences reveal how cultural and institutional contexts shape the roles and expectations of MA and MFA degrees globally. While ethical considerations—core to socially engaged art—are present in many programmes, Nordic programmes, such as the University of Lapland's BA and MA Applied Arts programmes, are particularly recognised for their integration of sustainability and environmental responsibility within their curricula.

It is important to note that the differences described above are only indicative and may vary between institutions and countries. In some programmes, the boundaries between these qualifications may become blurred.

Other study options

Besides full degree programmes, socially engaged art is taught through a variety of alternative educational formats that cater to diverse learning needs and professional development goals. These include short courses, which offer intensive, focused learning on specific aspects of socially engaged art, and individual units within broader degree programmes, allowing students to specialise in this area while pursuing other fields of study. MOOCs provide flexible, accessible options for learners worldwide, offering a range of introductory to advanced content on socially engaged practices. Additionally, professional specialisation programmes offer tailored education for practitioners seeking to deepen their expertise and advance in community-based arts or cultural management. These varied options complement traditional degree paths, providing opportunities for both personal and professional growth in the field of socially engaged art.

Short courses and programme units

Short courses in socially engaged art, offered by institutions such as The Ohio State University (OSU), Australian National University (ANU), University of New South Wales (UNSW), and London Contemporary Dance School (LCDS), provide valuable opportunities for students and practitioners to delve into specific aspects of art's role in social contexts. These courses offer flexible, condensed learning pathways that either complement degree-level education or serve as standalone professional training.

Typically, short courses focus on specific thematic areas such as cultural activism (OSU), authorship and participation in social practice (ANU), artistic activism (UNSW), or participatory dance in community settings (LCDS). Unlike comprehensive degree programmes, these courses concentrate on distinct practices, theories, or methodologies, allowing participants to gain in-depth knowledge quickly. This focused approach enables students to acquire specialised expertise without the broader curricular commitments of full degree programmes.

Experiential learning is often a key component of these short courses, linking theoretical knowledge to real-world applications. For instance, OSU's course Community Arts University Without Walls incorporates immersive fieldwork and community engagement in Puerto Rico (Ohio State University, 2017), while LCDS's Outside Encounters emphasises collaborative dance in community contexts (The Place, London Contemporary Dance School, 2024). Such hands-on experiences help bridge the gap between academic learning and community-based practice, offering participants valuable insights into the practicalities of socially engaged art.

Another key advantage of short courses is their accessibility, as they attract participants from diverse academic, professional, and cultural backgrounds. Programmes like UNSW's Art and Activism and ANU's Socially Engaged Art Practice: Authorship, Dialogue and Community cater to students from various disciplines, offering flexible learning options that appeal to lifelong learners, practising artists, and professionals seeking to enhance their skills without committing to full degree programmes (Australian National University, 2022; UNSW Sydney, 2024).

Some short courses also form part of degree curricula, enriching the learning experience with practice-based modules alongside broader academic study. For example, at LCDS, Outside Encounters is integrated into the BA (Hons) Contemporary Dance programme, enabling students to engage in focused exploration while pursuing their degree (see the case study below).

Short courses in socially engaged art often emphasise professional outcomes, aligning closely with career development goals. OSU's course, for instance, prepares participants for roles in cultural policy and arts administration, while LCDS's Outside Encounters equips individuals for careers in community dance and education. These targeted programmes offer clear pathways to professional practice, making them particularly attractive to those with specific career aspirations.

To sum up, short courses play a relevant role in socially engaged art education. They offer specialised, flexible, and interdisciplinary learning opportunities that complement degree-level programmes. Also, they provide an intensive way for students and professionals to deepen their expertise and apply their knowledge in real-world contexts, further advancing the field's capacity to drive social change.

Case study: Introducing social engagement to BA students at London Contemporary Dance School

At London Contemporary Dance School (LCDS), the BA (Hons) Contemporary Dance programme's 18-week Outside Encounters unit provides students with a unique opportunity to develop their practice as socially engaged artists. This 40-credit (20 ECTS) unit focuses on building critical and practical skills in community and educational dance, preparing students to work with diverse groups and in various social contexts outside the school setting (The Place, London Contemporary Dance School, 2024).

One of the core ways LCDS introduces social engagement is through its collaborative, co-creative approach to learning. Students are placed in real-world environments where they work with external partners—such as schools and community organisations—to work on co-create dance projects. These projects allow students to directly interact with participants, using dance as a medium to promote community building, access, and participation. According to Baptiste Bourgougnon, director of the undergraduate course and international development at LCDS, students often join existing community groups that have been working with a lead artist experienced in participatory practice. These lead artists and community groups are commissioned to ensure that the projects are supported and adequately resourced, ensuring that the involvement of these groups and artists is not an additional burden without remuneration. To succeed, the students need to deeply embed themselves within the group, participating not only in the dance project but also in the group's social activities and rituals (P. Bourgougnon, personal communication, 20.1.2025). This holistic engagement provides students with invaluable experience in working alongside individuals from diverse social, cultural, and demographic backgrounds.

As noted in the unit guide and assessment brief (The Place, London Contemporary Dance School, 2024), the course is built around four key learning outcomes:

1. Understanding the value and career possibilities within dance education and community practice.
2. Applying appropriate approaches for sharing and co-creating dance with participants.
3. Demonstrating professionalism as a dance artist in educational or participatory contexts.
4. Critically analysing the social and cultural implications of participation in dance practices.

These outcomes emphasise the importance of critical reflection and professionalism, both of which are central to social engagement. Students maintain a self-evaluation log, documenting their learning experiences and reflections throughout the term. This log is complemented by a written reflective analysis,

where students assess their development as socially engaged artists, the effectiveness of their projects, and the broader social implications of their work. This process of self-reflection is key to fostering a deeper understanding of dance's role in society.

Students also receive guidance on safe dance practice and safeguarding, ensuring that their work with community members is conducted ethically and responsibly. The unit prepares students to take on professional roles in the dance sector, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to navigate the complexities of collaborative practice, social responsibility, and cultural sensitivity (The Place, London Contemporary Dance School, 2024).

Furthermore, this ambitious unit bridges the BA (Hons) Contemporary Dance with the MA Dance: Participation, Communities, Activism programme at LCDS. The MA programme delves deeply into participatory dance, community engagement, social justice, activism, and cultural change, allowing students to build on the foundations established in the Outside Encounters unit. This progression highlights the school's commitment to cultivating artists who are not only proficient in their craft but also socially conscious and dedicated to the transformative potential of dance in society.

Through this immersive and comprehensive approach, LCDS ensures that its students become not only skilled dancers but also socially conscious artists capable of making meaningful contributions to the communities they engage with. The Outside Encounters unit bridges the gap between artistic practice and social impact, offering students a robust platform to explore the intersection of dance and social engagement.

MOOCs

In recent years, advancements in digital technology have significantly transformed the educational landscape. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have emerged as an innovative form of distance education, offering learners worldwide access to a wide range of courses provided by universities and institutions (Rulinawaty et al., 2023; Haleem et al., 2022). These online courses have facilitated collaborative international efforts to launch accessible introductory programmes in socially engaged art for self-paced learning.

Socially Engaged Arts (SEA) Practices is a MOOC course designed by the Artwork project (2021–2023), which aimed to broaden career opportunities for artists and raise awareness of the role of artistic methods in education and social initiatives. Co-financed by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ programme, the project received special funding to support artists' employment in education and social work, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was led by project coordinator uniT GmbH (Austria) with partners from Uniarts Helsinki (Finland), Verein Niedersächsischer Bildungsinitiativen e.V. (Germany), Tartu Centre for Creative Industries (Estonia), and MHT CONSULT APS (Denmark) (Artwork, 2023).

Introduction to Socially Engaged Arts is a MOOC course designed by the EU Horizon 2020-funded initiative Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture (AMASS) (2020–2023), which explored arts-based approaches in addressing societal challenges. The initiative brought together a diverse consortium of academic and creative institutions from across Europe, aiming to advance the role of the arts in social transformation. Led by the University of Lapland (Finland), joint applicants included APECV (Portugal), Univerzita Karlova (Czech Republic), Università ta Malta (Malta), the Swedish School of Library and Information Science (Sweden), Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem (Hungary), PACO Design Collaborative (Italy), and the University of Leeds (UK) (University of Lapland, 2020).

While both courses share a common goal of training arts professionals in socially engaged arts, they differ in structure, focus areas, and target outcomes. The Artwork course is highly flexible, offering self-paced modules with no fixed duration, suitable for learners seeking shorter, modular engagements. In contrast, the AMASS course is more structured, requiring approximately 108 hours and providing 4 ECTS credits, appealing to those seeking academic recognition.

Artwork emphasises practical skills such as leadership, entrepreneurship, and aesthetic evaluation, incorporating tools like the “Aesthetic Diary” for reflection. It focuses on group facilitation, collaboration, and creative leadership, offering resources for practitioners in socially engaged arts. AMASS, on the other hand, takes a research-driven, case-study approach, using projects from eight European countries to explore participatory, dialogical, and design-driven methods aimed at empowering marginalised communities and influencing European cultural policy.

Both courses aim to develop core skills necessary in socially engaged arts, but their emphases differ:

1. Artwork prioritises practical facilitation, collaborative leadership, and project design tools for cultural practitioners and educators.
2. AMASS offers a deeper understanding of methodologies and ethics in socially engaged arts, with a focus on community empowerment through inclusive, dialogical arts practices.

While both courses provide real-world examples, Artwork incorporates hands-on tasks and reflection tools like the aesthetic diary, fostering individual exploration. AMASS, in contrast, delivers comprehensive case studies from multiple socially engaged art projects across Europe, offering a broader international perspective.

In terms of certification, Artwork offers optional certificates but no academic credits, aligning with informal professional development. AMASS, however, awards 4 ECTS credits, which are valuable for those seeking academic or research-focused career progression. Both programmes support roles

in community arts, cultural facilitation, and arts-based education, but Artwork is more suited for immediate, practical application, while AMASS provides deeper theoretical insights and strategies for community empowerment, ideal for policy or research-driven socially engaged arts practice. These courses cater to diverse professional needs, reflecting the varied applications of socially engaged arts.

Specialisation programmes

In Finland, specialisation programmes in socially engaged arts are part of the broader national initiative, professional specialisation education for post-graduates, aimed at addressing workforce demands and fostering collaboration between academia and industry in critical labour market areas since 2015 (Kallunki & Seppälä, 2016). Designed for individuals already in the workforce, these programmes bridge the gap between degree-based education and short-term training, offering expertise in areas where market-driven options are lacking (Rauhala & Urponen, 2019). They promote interdisciplinary cooperation by combining academic research with practical application, contributing to educational innovation and addressing societal challenges.

Among these programmes, the Specialisation Programme in Community Musician and the Specialisation Programme in Applied and Participatory Arts stand out as exemplary courses addressing the evolving skill needs driven by a paradigm shift in the arts. Both are designed to develop advanced competencies in socially engaged arts while addressing specific professional contexts within their respective fields.

The Specialisation Programme in Community Musician (30 ECTS), coordinated by Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences and offered by six universities of applied sciences across Finland, is distinctive for its focus on music's therapeutic and community-building potential. This one-year full-time (or two-year part-time) programme combines music therapy, group facilitation, and project management, equipping participants to design and implement music-based interventions in healthcare, social services, and other community settings. Through experiential learning and hands-on community projects, participants apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts (Pantsu, 2019; Ruippo, 2019).

The programme's strengths lie in its practical focus on group music-making, the integration of multidisciplinary practices, and its alignment with career opportunities in health and social care. It is particularly suited for music professionals seeking to specialise in cultural well-being or expand their practice into therapeutic and community settings.

The Specialisation Programme in Applied and Participatory Arts (2018–2020), jointly offered by Uniarts Helsinki, Aalto University, the University of Lapland, and Tampere University, provides an interdisciplinary approach to the transformative potential of participatory arts. The programme equips participants with expertise in service design, entrepreneurship, and cultural

policy, underpinned by ethical considerations, sustainability, and research-driven practices. Through collaborative learning methods, mentorship, and real-world projects, participants gain the skills to implement socially engaged and community-based arts initiatives. The curriculum highlights the role of art as a catalyst for sustainability, social justice, and accessibility, integrating arts-based research and innovation to empower participants to design, evaluate, and lead impactful projects across diverse sectors, including education, healthcare, and cultural organisations (Uniarts Helsinki, 2018).

Key strengths include its collaborative, sustainability-focused curriculum and its commitment to developing innovative, arts-based service concepts. This programme is ideal for artists, educators, and cultural professionals seeking to advance their leadership and practice in socially engaged and participatory arts.

While both programmes address socially engaged arts, their distinctions highlight diverse pathways:

1. *Practical vs. strategic focus*: The Community Musician programme prioritises hands-on, music-based interventions, whereas the Applied and Participatory Arts programme takes a more strategic perspective, addressing broader themes such as cultural policy and service design.
2. *Specialisation vs. interdisciplinary scope*: The former caters specifically to music professionals, while the latter adopts a multidisciplinary approach, appealing to a broader audience of artist-practitioners.
3. *Career preparation*: Both programmes prepare participants for impactful careers, but their pathways differ. Community musicians often work in healthcare and social services, while participatory arts specialists find roles in arts-based service design, policymaking, and community leadership.

Post-degree specialisation programmes in socially engaged arts serve a crucial role in equipping arts professionals with advanced, practical, and ethical competencies necessary for socially engaged contexts. By focusing on professional development and specialisation, these programmes enable students to build expertise without the need to complete a second MA. However, they do not necessarily prepare students for entry into doctoral studies or research careers in socially engaged arts. By offering both focused training, as in the Community Musician programme, and interdisciplinary frameworks, as in the Applied and Participatory Arts programme, these courses connect academic knowledge and artistic mindsets with meaningful engagement in real-world contexts. They exemplify the potential of targeted professional development to foster the arts as meaningful ways of contributing to community engagement, well-being, and social transformation.

Chapter reflections

In recent years, socially engaged art has gained considerable academic recognition and is increasingly being incorporated into higher education institutions

worldwide. However, despite the wide range of universities offering arts degree courses, only a few currently offer programmes specifically focused on socially engaged art. This number has grown in recent years, especially in the UK, where community arts have a long-standing tradition.

The evolving field of socially engaged art requires both practical and academic approaches to address its complexities. The current array of degree programmes, short courses, and MOOCs provides a robust foundation for training artists and practitioners in this emerging field. Each educational level and format offers unique strengths and weaknesses that highlight the need for further systematic study of socially engaged art. This could both solidify its status as a distinct artistic practice and establish it as a professional career path.

At the BA level, socially engaged art is typically introduced through foundational concepts, where students develop basic artistic and theoretical skills while learning about community engagement, environmental concerns, and sustainability. Programmes like the University of Lapland's BA in Applied Arts offer broad overviews. While these BA programmes lay the groundwork for future artistic practitioners, they are often more general and do not fully prepare students to handle the complexities of social justice and the diverse ethical challenges involved in community-based art practices. Additionally, at this level, the programmes tend to be more practice-oriented, focusing on developing artistic skills rather than academic research or preparation for later research careers in socially engaged arts.

The transition to the MA level represents a deeper integration of theory and practice, where students are expected to engage in critical reflections and apply their skills to real-world community issues. Programmes such as the University of Salford's MA in Socially Engaged Arts Practice focus on equipping students with practical project management and collaboration skills while emphasising community empowerment and social transformation through art. These programmes delve deeper into socially engaged art's ethical and methodological aspects. Yet, they may fail to prepare students for leadership roles that demand advanced innovation and professional engagement. The MA programmes also emphasise community-based projects, though they focus more on the immediate, practical application of art in solving societal issues.

At the MFA level, socially engaged art programmes offer a more autonomous, professional platform for students to engage in socially transformative projects. Programmes such as the MFA in Socially Engaged Studio Art at Moore College of Art & Design focus on fostering leadership in the field, empowering students to undertake complex art projects that engage communities directly. These programmes, by emphasising advanced skills and critical thought, prepare students to become leaders in the socially engaged art field. However, their focus on individual projects may lack the collaborative nature emphasised in lower-level degrees, which is essential for ensuring sustainable social change.

Short courses and MOOCs provide complementary opportunities for professionals and students who wish to specialise in specific aspects of socially

engaged art. While short courses offer flexibility and targeted training, such as UNSW's course's emphasis on cultural activism, they are understandably less comprehensive than complete degree programmes. MOOCs, like those from the *Artwork* and *AMASS* projects, allow for international and flexible learning, offering practical tools for collaboration and leadership. However, the lack of formal academic structure in some MOOCs may hinder deeper academic engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of socially engaged art.

The post-degree specialisation programmes in socially engaged art, such as the Community Musician programme in Finland, offer targeted professional development, providing individuals with the practical skills needed for working in healthcare, social services, and community settings. These programmes are well-aligned with the workforce's demand for socially engaged artists but may be more narrowly focused compared to broader postgraduate programmes. While the specialist training in Applied and Participatory Arts offers a more interdisciplinary approach, equipping participants with the expertise to lead across multiple areas of social change, this may not necessarily lead to the same depth of specialisation in a single art form. A significant challenge, though, lies in the potentially short lifespan of these programmes, which renders them unsustainable. On one hand, this limits the long-term impact of the collaborative efforts invested in designing these programmes. On the other hand, it hampers their ability to systematically contribute to knowledge production in the field of socially engaged art, undermining their potential to establish a robust foundation for future research and practice.

While socially engaged art education at higher levels (particularly MA and MFA) provides opportunities for students to engage with research methods and create knowledge through practice-based work, the explicit focus on educating researchers and producing new knowledge in socially engaged art is more limited. Most programmes emphasise practice, professional development, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Research, if integrated, tends to be more applied in nature, focusing on addressing real-world societal challenges through artistic practice rather than generating scholarly knowledge in more conventional academic frameworks. Therefore, there is evidence of research-oriented education in socially engaged arts, but the commitment to systematically advancing knowledge production in the field is still developing and not as central as other aspects such as professional practice and community engagement.

While the existing educational offerings in socially engaged art provide a rich variety of opportunities for students and practitioners, they underscore the need for a more systematic study of the field. As socially engaged art continues to evolve, it is crucial to train artist-practitioners to work effectively in these diverse and rapidly shifting contexts and establish a robust knowledge base that distinguishes socially engaged art as a professional field and subject of study. Research into the methodologies, ethics, and impact of socially engaged art can inform both practice and policy, enabling artists to use their work as a tool for lasting social transformation while developing the professional frameworks necessary for sustainable careers in the sector.

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7 Towards an academic framework for socially engaged art

In recent decades, the diversification of artistic practices and narratives has reshaped the arts landscape (Gielen, 2015). Central to this evolution is the social turn, discussed in Chapter 1, which has redefined the relationship between the artist, the audience, and the art object (Bishop, 2007, 2012). This shift, alongside pedagogical and ethical developments (e.g., Lacy, 1995; O'Neill & Wilson, 2010; Rogoff, 2008), calls for a reimagining of arts education. Moving beyond technical training and rigid disciplinary boundaries, higher arts education stands to benefit from addressing the complexities of contemporary society and contributing to broader societal transformation (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2022; Westerlund et al., 2021). In this context, socially engaged art emerges as a fitting response, fostering collaboration and addressing pressing community concerns.

In this chapter, I aim to lay the foundations for understanding socially engaged art as both an artistic practice and a subject of academic inquiry in its own right. Helguera argues that “socially engaged art can’t be produced inside a knowledge vacuum” (2011, p. xiii), emphasising the value of interdisciplinary insights for practitioners. Addressing the complex issues inherent to socially engaged art often requires contributions from fields such as sociology, ethnography, social psychology, cognitive studies, environmental studies, urban planning, anthropology, political science, education, cultural studies, public health, gender studies, philosophy, economics, and law. By integrating these and other disciplines, artists and scholars can draw on diverse frameworks to investigate power dynamics, community relationships, social behaviours, environmental impacts, and ethical considerations. This interdisciplinary approach deepens artistic inquiry, enhances contextual sensitivity, and supports socially responsive practices capable of fostering critical engagement and meaningful change. However, while interdisciplinarity offers valuable perspectives, discipline-specific approaches are essential for advancing the field’s unique epistemologies, methodologies, and competences. Such insider expertise deepens the discipline’s self-understanding and contributes to its academic and professional development.

There is a crucial difference between scholars specialising in socially engaged art—who approach the practice from within while applying concepts

from sociology, social psychology, or ethnography as needed—and sociologists, social psychologists, or ethnographers who study socially engaged art for their own scholarly purposes. External perspectives, while valuable, often prioritise the interests of their respective disciplines over the development of socially engaged art itself. Recognising socially engaged art as a distinct domain requiring rigorous study within higher arts education ensures the field remains dynamic and grounded in its evolving traditions. At the same time, interdisciplinary collaboration provides opportunities to address the multifaceted phenomena that socially engaged art entails.

The increasing relevance of socially engaged art in different cultural contexts makes this inquiry particularly timely. In a world marked by social and political challenges, this art form catalyses critical thought, participatory engagement, and societal change. Its emphasis on collaboration, inclusivity, and ethical reflection provides a compelling model for addressing contemporary concerns through the arts.

This chapter unfolds in two sections. First, I introduce the forms of knowledge characteristic of socially engaged art, emphasising its experiential, reflective, practical, and contextual dimensions. Then, I explore the interdisciplinary nature of socially engaged art, highlighting its distinct methodologies, ethical implications, and transformative potential, while critically engaging with the challenges of positioning it as a legitimate subject of study within higher arts education.

Forms of knowledge in socially engaged art

The concept of knowledge is indispensable when considering socially engaged art as a subject of study in higher arts education. Educational philosophers may differ on the nature of knowledge, but its central role in teaching and learning is uncontested. As David Best observes, “the question whether reason has a place in the arts is the question whether the arts necessarily involve cognition or knowledge. And... the question of whether knowledge is possible is the question of whether there can be learning and teaching” (Best, 1992, p. 29). This highlights the essential relationship between knowledge, learning, and the arts. In the context of socially engaged art, knowledge manifests in multiple forms, as implied by practitioner interviews and case examples in previous chapters, including artistic, bodily, contextual, emotional, ethical, experiential, practical, professional, propositional, reflective, sensual, and tacit dimensions.

Artistic thinking—discussed in Chapter 4—and practices involve artistic knowledge that encompasses a broad spectrum of creative capabilities, from the intuitive generation of ideas to the ability to respond to and shape meaning through artistic processes. It is a form of knowledge that artists both use and produce as they engage with their practice and the world around them. This type of knowledge aligns with Donald Schön’s (1983) concept of “knowing-in-action,” where artists learn through the act of creating—reflecting on their practice in real time. Additionally, as Goodman (1976) suggests, art provides

a way of knowing the world through its transformative capacities, allowing artists to shape and reinterpret experiences through their work. Artistic knowledge is often underpinned by uncertainty, especially in socially engaged art, where artists collaborate with community groups and participants to co-reflect on themes of personal relevance. These collaborative, arts-based processes generally yield co-created outputs, such as performances, artefacts, or visual works, shaped through interaction and shared experiences.

Embracing not-knowing—the ability to tolerate ambiguity and remain open to unexpected developments—is central to these processes, where outcomes are not predetermined. Art, like religion, encompasses realms of the unknown and the not-yet-understood, while also holding the potential to reinterpret and expand our understanding of knowledge.¹ As Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum (2014) point out, not knowing in the arts is not something to be overcome. Instead, it can be approached as a “liminal space ... [to be] sought, explored, and savoured; where failure, boredom, frustration, and getting lost are constructively deployed alongside wonder, secrets, and play” (Fisher & Fortnum, 2014, p. 7). Thus, artistic knowing in socially engaged art requires patience and openness to the unknown, the unanticipated, and the emergent. This willingness to engage with uncertainty is vital in socially engaged art, where diverse participants and evolving contexts lead to constantly shifting dynamics and meanings. In such contexts, artistic knowledge involves not only a sensitivity to the fluidity of the creative process but also an understanding that meaning and experience are co-created through collaboration and dialogue—a dynamic that adds to the richness and complexity of socially engaged art.

Bodily knowledge, an experiential and tacit form of knowing, rooted in physical engagement, awareness, kinaesthetic empathy, and reflective practice (Parviainen, 2002), not only enables artists in socially engaged art to connect with participants, but also enhances their attunement to the emotional, spatial, and relational dynamics of the social contexts they work within. It informs how artists navigate power relations, adapt to unpredictable interactions, and cultivate trust, responsiveness, and presence—qualities essential to collaborative, community-based artistic processes.

Kinaesthetic empathy, understood as an instinctive response to others' movements (Strukus, 2011), facilitates understanding and fosters trust, particularly when working in unfamiliar cultural contexts. This embodied sensitivity helps artists adapt to group dynamics and supports the creation of inclusive, co-creative processes.

Professional knowledge in socially engaged art is a dynamic blend of theoretical, practical, and contextual insights, informed by both codified knowledge and lived experience (Smeby, 2007). Within this blend, intertwined with bodily and tacit knowledge, practical knowledge underpins the technical skills necessary for artmaking, facilitation, and community collaboration. This knowledge, often implicit, develops through experience and action (Polanyi, 1966), integrating cognitive and social dimensions (Guzman, 2009) as artists apply rules and concepts in context.

As for practical knowledge, Ruhi Tyson (2019) challenges the notion that it is purely tacit or context-dependent. Instead, he argues that it can be systematically practised and informed by a substantial body of theory. Tyson also emphasises that proven experience in a given field, such as carpentry, is collective rather than individual. Similarly, in socially engaged art, the knowledge and expertise that shape the practice are shared across a community of practitioners. This collective quality underscores the importance of communal exchange and shared understanding in addressing social issues through art. Furthermore, such knowledge cannot be attributed to the individual artist alone but is co-created within the broader context of collaborative practice and social engagement. This process relies on structured approaches and theoretical underpinnings to inform and guide co-creative and co-reflective undertakings. Ultimately, the interaction between individual and collective knowledge is central to effective practice, involving a continuous negotiation of meaning and action.

Reflective knowledge, defined as “the achievement of an epistemic meta-competence ... to evaluate aptly the agent’s epistemic position and her circumstances of knowing” (Broncano, 2014, p. 54), is central to socially engaged art, requiring the ability to critically analyse and learn from one’s experiences, particularly in complex and dynamic community settings. Artists often reflect on their collaborative work’s interactions, challenges, and outcomes, adjusting their approaches based on ongoing insights. Reflection enables artists to gain a deeper understanding of their practice’s social, ethical, and personal implications, helping them refine their approaches and foster more meaningful engagements with participants. This reflective process is essential for artists to navigate the complexities of socially engaged art, ensuring that their practice evolves and responds to both the immediate context and the broader societal issues it addresses. Reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) plays a particularly crucial role, allowing artists to adapt their approach in real time, refining their practice based on ongoing dynamics and challenges.

Contextual knowledge is also essential, as artists navigate cultural, political, and social dynamics, ensuring their work is relevant and responsive to local histories and power structures. Theorists like Pierre Bourdieu (1990), Clifford Geertz (1973), Michel Foucault (1977), and Howard Becker (1982) emphasise the importance of context in shaping knowledge and practice, ensuring that socially engaged art is grounded in its specific social and cultural milieu.

Finally, ethical knowledge addresses the moral responsibilities inherent in socially engaged art, particularly regarding power dynamics, diversity, inclusion, and participant agency. As Lea Kantonen and Sari Karttunen (2021) argue, ethical knowledge ensures that artists balance artistic intent with the well-being and agency of participants. This knowledge extends to microethics (Karttunen, 2020), guiding artists in everyday ethical decisions and ensuring integrity in collaborative processes.

These forms of knowledge often intertwine in practice. For instance, an artist facilitating a community mural project may draw on bodily knowledge to

connect with participants while using propositional knowledge of art history to contextualise the project. Ethical knowledge guides decisions on representation and power dynamics, while practical and professional knowledge helps manage the logistics and sustain the project's success. Integrating these diverse forms of knowledge fosters a deeper understanding of socially engaged art, blending embodied practices with intellectual inquiry.

Subject of study

The concept of discipline in educational philosophy, extensively discussed by scholars like Paul Hirst and Richard Peters, emphasises organising educational content into distinct disciplines. Hirst's framework underscores the role of disciplines in structuring knowledge and understanding the world (Hirst & Peters, 1970).

When discussing socially engaged art as a discipline, it is necessary to acknowledge the critique of structuralism, challenging its perceived rigidity in understanding social and intellectual structures, including disciplinary boundaries (Foucault, 1972; Bourdieu, 1988). In addition, critical pedagogy advocates for questioning dominant knowledge systems and empowering learners (Freire, 1970/2005; Giroux, 2001). Feminist pedagogies, represented by scholars like bell hooks (1994), promote inclusivity and diversity in knowledge production. Furthermore, epistemological pluralists like Sandra Harding (1991) and Donna Haraway (1988) argue against a single, universal truth, and poststructuralist theorists such as Jacques Derrida (1976) and Judith Butler (1990) highlight language's role in shaping knowledge. Moreover, advocates for interdisciplinary approaches like Edgar Morin (2008) and Jürgen Habermas (1984) stress the importance of integrating diverse perspectives, and more recently, Rosi Braidotti (2022) and Karen Barad (2007) have addressed the fluidity of subjectivity and the relational nature of knowledge production. These diverse perspectives and takes on knowledge underscore the complexities faced when defining socially engaged art as a subject of study within higher arts education. Positions and perspectives vary. Yet, compelling reasons exist to regard socially engaged art as a subject of study in its own right.

Socially engaged art has its unique histories, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies—such as relational aesthetics, community arts, participatory art, and artistic interventions in organisations—that provide means to devise and facilitate participatory projects for diverse contexts, primarily outside art institutions. To tackle issues like inequality and environmental degradation, socially engaged art applies distinct methodologies, ethics, and aims, notably fostering social change.

Its interdisciplinary nature enriches the understanding of societal issues, facilitating the analysis of power dynamics and cultural contexts. While intersecting with various disciplines, including sociology and cultural studies, socially engaged art maintains its own distinct characteristics and contributions. Studies in socially engaged art help students delve deeper into its specificities while

drawing connections to broader interdisciplinary frames of reference can help them better understand complexities related to, for example, power dynamics, community dynamics, and cultural contexts, enriching their analysis and fostering a holistic understanding of societal issues and the role of art within them.

Balancing skills and knowledge

In today's era of supercomplexity, marked by competing frameworks and global uncertainties, Western universities face increasing challenges to their claims of universality and progressive ideals, as they grapple with profound shifts reshaping their purpose (Barnett, 2000). The growing need to address societal diversity and technological shifts further underscores higher education's need to adapt flexible and critical frameworks to tackle intersecting intellectual and social complexities (Peseta et al., 2022). Additionally, the neoliberal shift has accelerated the massification, vocationalisation, and marketisation of higher education, prioritising economic outcomes and instrumentalist goals over traditional academic values (Giroux, 2014). These pressures, coupled with innovations in hybrid and modular learning models, increasingly demand that universities blend theoretical orientations with market-driven imperatives to remain relevant in a rapidly evolving landscape (Del Cerro Santamaría, 2023). These shifts significantly impact higher education's role and function in society, blending theoretical orientations with practical realities also in higher arts education.

Traditionally rooted in the pre-industrial master-apprentice model, the hands-on vocational perspective has been central to arts education (Dewey, 2005; Eisner, 2002; Greene, 2000). This approach emphasises artists acquiring practical skills from more experienced practitioners, ensuring they are professionally equipped to enter the arts field. Vocational training remains indispensable in fostering the technical and practical capabilities essential for artistic practice. Critics such as Gerald Klickenstein (2013), however, have questioned the sufficiency of this model in addressing the demands of today's rapidly evolving cultural and technological landscape, where emerging artists need to navigate challenges and opportunities beyond those faced by previous generations. Similarly, Roland Barnett highlights the importance of nurturing students' ability to cope with supercomplexity in a world where "we are conceptually challenged and continually so" (2000, p. 409).

Recent political initiatives in Europe, such as the New European Innovation Agenda and the Creative Pact for Skills Manifesto, reflect a renewed focus on vocational skill-building (European Commission, 2024; Pact 4 Skills CCI Partnership, 2024). These initiatives aim to enhance the competitiveness of the Cultural and Creative Industries ecosystem by fostering collaboration and investing in skills development, highlighting the continued relevance of vocational education.

While vocational skills are undeniably vital for practical application, the broader mission of higher education—knowledge generation—is

indispensable, as it forms the essential research-informed foundation that justifies the institution's very *raison d'être*. Without this commitment to creating and advancing knowledge, higher education cannot sustain its critical role in shaping research-informed, innovative, and reflective practices across disciplines, including the arts. This mission underpins the approach in this book to develop socially engaged art as a distinct subject of study. Such study transcends vocational training, exploring theories, practices, and social impacts in ways that inform and enrich practical applications.

Vocational training alone, however, would be insufficient to prepare students for the complexities of societal engagement and transformation and for justifying, critically reflecting upon, and articulating their practice. It is essential for practitioners to inquire into participant experiences and demonstrate the impact of their endeavours at any depth. Limiting the focus merely on artistic skills risks stifling critical knowledge production and undermines establishing a robust research-informed foundation for instruction.

In addition, following Biesta's post-humanist perspective on educational theory, it can be argued that higher arts education needs to extend beyond skill acquisition to nurture "opportunities for human beings to come into the world, find their own voice, to constitute themselves as unique, singular beings" (Biesta, 2006, p. 70). This process requires us, as practitioners, to "take upon us the responsibility that is waiting for us, to expose ourselves to what is other and different" (Biesta, 2006, p. 71)—a condition that is pre-eminent in engaging successfully with diverse communities and cultures in socially engaged arts. Such an educational focus encompasses "a concern and responsibility for the worldliness of the world, a concern for the creation of worldly spaces, spaces of plurality and difference" (Biesta, 2006, p. 149), a prerequisite for both students and practitioners to meaningfully engage with the social dimensions of their work, while the choice to engage always remains theirs. These qualities demand an educational framework that integrates practical skills with critical and reflective understanding, equipping students to respond effectively to socially engaged art's complex, relational challenges.

A balanced approach is necessary to advance socially engaged art as a subject of study. This approach ensures students gain both practical skills and a scholarly understanding across diverse contexts of practice. In my view, this approach must be anchored in a solid understanding of socially engaged art as a subject of study, not merely as a professional practice in the arts.

Navigating super complexity

The various standpoints described above contribute to conceptual overload and a multitude of frameworks that characterise a supercomplex world (Barnett, 2012). This condition challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries and knowledge hierarchies, creating uncertainty about which frameworks to follow. The collision of competing perspectives complicates efforts to impose structural order, raising the possibility that such order may not exist in the

rapidly evolving global landscape (Barnett & Standish, 2003). From a post-modern perspective, it becomes evident that attempting to systematise socially engaged art into a singular, universal framework risks perpetuating “the modernist fallacy of unitary truth or universal knowledge” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 8). Instead, embracing the plurality inherent in supercomplexity invites us to recognise diverse ways of knowing and understanding cultural phenomena, including socially engaged art.

This approach aligns with postmodern notions of knowledge as fragmented and contingent, resisting the imposition of singular narratives or rigid hierarchies. In the context of socially engaged art, embracing plurality allows multiple voices, experiences, and interpretations to emerge. This inclusivity fosters a dynamic dialogue that reflects the complexity of contemporary society, encouraging a deeper and more nuanced understanding of socially engaged art and its manifestations in diverse contexts.

However, embracing such diversity does not necessarily lead to what Kvale refers to as “a rampant relativism” (1992, p. 8), where all perspectives are treated as equally valid. To avoid the pitfalls of “nihilism and social anomie” (Kvale, 1992, p. 8), it is crucial to distinguish between studying socially engaged art from within—addressing questions and practices intrinsic to the art form—and examining it as a phenomenon to answer external disciplinary questions. While interdisciplinary perspectives can enrich our understanding of socially engaged art, this form of art—just like any other art form—must first be studied on its own terms. This entails engaging deeply with its specificity, internal complexity, local particularity, and historicity.

By prioritising socially engaged art as a subject in its own right, we can address its inherent questions in ways that resonate with its practice, transformative societal aspirations, and pedagogical implications within higher arts education. This approach ensures that socially engaged art is neither reduced to an auxiliary of other disciplines nor confined by overly rigid paradigms, but rather appreciated for its intellectual and practical richness.

Finally, while socially engaged art can be approached from diverse perspectives, it is essential to consider its transformative and political aspirations. Adopting a relativist stance may undermine these aims: “if truth is relative to discursive practices, then there seem to be no grounds for fighting injustice and oppression” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 20). Drawing from feminist thinking and social constructionism, Robin Usher and Richard Edwards (1994) propose that acknowledging multiple viewpoints does not require treating them all as equally valid. Ethical action and advocacy, they argue, are possible within the context of everyday experiences and struggles, without relying on appeals to fixed, universal values. This balance enables a critical yet actionable approach for socially engaged art that reflects its multifaceted and aspirational nature.

Embracing with love

Max van Manen (2015) suggests that understanding a subject entails more than just grasping its inquiries but also embracing its “knowledge in a way that shows that it is loved and respected for what it is and the way it lets itself be known” (van Manen, 2015, p. 134). Similarly, in educational theory, Richard Pring notes, “It is the choice of paradigm which determines how the form of knowledge is to be characterized” (1976, p. 40). This highlights the importance of paradigm choice in shaping the characterisation and understanding of knowledge.

Practitioner-researchers in the socially engaged arts field would argue that framing their research as merely a lesser version of the knowledge produced in more traditional art fields—or their artistic work as a diminished art form—fundamentally misrepresents their contributions. This critique challenges hierarchical assumptions that undervalue creative practices diverging from established norms, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of artistic and intellectual production instead.

The artistic outputs and knowledge generated within socially engaged arts often emerge from deeply embedded, practice-oriented engagements with communities, offering insights that traditional paradigms may overlook. Similarly, artistic practices in socially engaged contexts prioritise social impact, dialogue, and collaboration, redefining artistic value beyond conventional aesthetic or formal criteria. While different art forms represent distinct disciplines guided by their methodologies and epistemologies, their shared conceptual elements provide a foundation for interdisciplinary dialogue and mutual understanding, enriching the broader arts and humanities field. However, careful attention to the systemic understanding of ontological, epistemological, and ethical preconceptions is essential to facilitate a fruitful dialogue between socially engaged art and other arts disciplines.

The diversity of socially engaged arts practices, as discussed earlier in this book, presents a significant challenge for educating artists to work in this field. Practitioners’ experiences vary widely, and few, if any, possess comprehensive hands-on experience across all approaches, contexts, and participant groups. Most practitioners have in-depth expertise in specific areas, yet opportunities for systematic and critical reflection on these experiences are rare. To address this, there is a pressing need to develop systematic case studies of socially engaged arts practices. Such case studies can serve as valuable resources for students, experienced practitioners, and teachers, enabling them to critically assess their existing knowledge and broaden their understanding of socially engaged art as both an art form and a professional practice.

Tyson (2019) underscores the importance of examples and case studies as essential tools for both inspiration and understanding in professional education. Drawing on Schön’s concept of the “*repertoire* of examples, images, understandings, and actions” (1983, p. 138) that professionals cultivate, Tyson stresses the significance of expanding this repertoire as a core element

of professional competence. By publishing case studies, socially engaged arts practitioners can contribute to this process, enriching the knowledge base and advancing the recognition and development of socially engaged arts as a professional practice.

The following question is what can be considered “good enough” understanding of socially engaged art as a subject of study? Following Kenneth Gergen’s (1999) social constructionist perspective, it would not make sense to make claims about “authenticity” that studying socially engaged art in its own right would reveal. Instead, the aim is to approach it comprehensively, recognising its unique characteristics, methodologies, and contexts, all of which require dedicated inquiry. By grounding the study of socially engaged art within its own framework and incorporating its case studies, we can develop a deeper understanding of its complexities and nuances. This allows us to integrate interdisciplinary perspectives when necessary. Ultimately, this approach fosters a more holistic engagement with the subject matter—one that combines a thorough understanding of socially engaged art’s central organising concepts, principles, and theories with an appreciation of its real-world applications, practices, and societal impacts.

Chapter reflections

In concluding the chapter, it is evident that prioritising an insider’s perspective in the study of socially engaged art is essential to acknowledging its distinct epistemologies and methodologies. This focus not only allows for a deeper understanding of how socially engaged art functions both as a creative practice and as a critical inquiry but also highlights the necessity of seeing it through the lens of lived experience, rather than merely through external analysis. Socially engaged art, with its emphasis on relational practices and community engagement, pushes the boundaries of more traditional disciplines in the arts, requiring an approach that values, in addition to artistic creativity, social engagement, transformative endeavours, and knowledge creation.

The chapter also underscores the importance of integrating various forms of knowledge, including propositional, practical, and embodied knowledge, in the study of socially engaged art. Each of these knowledge forms brings its own set of values and processes to the field, enriching both practice and scholarship. This integration challenges the notion that academic disciplines should be confined to rigid boundaries and instead advocates for an interdisciplinary, fluid approach that accounts for the complexities of knowledge in socially engaged art. It suggests that art education should move beyond a focus on technical expertise to critically examine art’s role in societal change, thereby fostering a generation of artists who can engage meaningfully with pressing social issues. Furthermore, this new generation of artists benefits from learning how to approach these issues, their professional practice, and the complex phenomena their practice deals with and generates, with a critical mindset that involves both reflection and reflexivity. This critical approach encourages

artists to not only evaluate their own work but also consider the broader social, ethical, and political dimensions of their practice, enabling them to respond effectively to the shifting dynamics of contemporary society (Foucault, 1972; Freire, 1970/2005; hooks, 1994).

Furthermore, the chapter emphasises that the future academic recognition of socially engaged art requires identifying its distinct methodologies and the establishment of criteria that define its practice and evaluation. In this sense, the next chapter, which builds on Pring's (1976) framework for academic disciplines, will be useful in further solidifying socially engaged art's legitimacy as a subject of study. Expanding Pring's framework with a focus on competences will provide a more nuanced understanding of the practical, ethical, and intellectual dimensions of socially engaged art as a subject of study, strengthening its case for institutional support and academic acknowledgement.

In sum, this chapter contributes to the growing discourse surrounding socially engaged art by advocating for an insider's perspective, embracing a broad conception of knowledge, and calling for the development of specific academic criteria that reflect the unique qualities of this art form. These steps are critical for ensuring that socially engaged art not only survives within higher education but thrives as a transformative force that contributes to the broader social and cultural landscape, including the "Third Mission" of universities, often referred to as a "contribution to society" (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020, p. 1).

Note

- 1 I wish to thank my colleague Anne Makkonen for pointing this out while reviewing this chapter. She reminded me of the importance of acknowledging the potential of the unconscious and the unarticulated sensory knowledge inherent in art and religion.

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8 Socially engaged art as a subject of study

Socially engaged art encompasses a range of practices, typically shaped by or resonating with diverse theoretical perspectives, as explored in earlier chapters. Building on these discussions, in this chapter, I apply Richard Pring's (1976) conception of disciplines to socially engaged art, focusing on organising concepts, principles of procedure, criteria for success, and enduring questions and concerns. Pring's framework, while developed decades ago, remains highly relevant for structuring and understanding emerging fields within higher education. By extending the framework to include a discussion of competences, I aim to provide a comprehensive approach to framing socially engaged art as a distinct academic discipline, supporting its development as a rigorous and meaningful area of inquiry.

Focusing on the activity itself

In focusing on "the activity itself," Janet Adshead (1981, p. xiv), drawing upon Richard Pring's conception of disciplines, offers an approach I find useful for addressing socially engaged art as a subject of study.¹ Pring (1976) perceives disciplines not merely as systematically structured fields of inquiry but as "disciplined ways of setting about various tasks ... [involving] learning how to do something, to solve a problem, to create something of value, or to produce what is wanted" (Pring, 1976, p. 25).

Adopting a disciplined approach, as described by Pring, does not imply a strict adherence to rules that could inhibit artistic inquiry. Rather, the disciplined way of doing things involves expressing "ways of behaving that have been developed by groups of people, that can be learned, and that can be followed with greater or lesser skill, more or less habitually, with varying degrees of fidelity" (Pring, 1976, p. 26).

What is of interest here is that Pring identifies four essential features of disciplined activity: "central organising concepts," "principles of procedure," "criteria of success," and "problems and interest" (Pring, 1976, pp. 30–34). Focusing on these features, I apply Pring's framework to socially engaged art, which will allow us to identify its unique characteristics and demonstrate how it functions as a distinct subject of study, grounded in specific organising

concepts and practices. Also, I extend Pring's model to discuss competences needed in practising socially engaged art.

Interests central to socially engaged art

In socially engaged art, collective activity is often driven by shared concerns or mutual interests that both artists and participants aim to address together. According to Pring (1976), the issues identified or the goals pursued by a group provide a framework that grounds their efforts and gives them relevance, guiding their direction and purpose. When these shared interests are approached collectively, they play a significant role in shaping socially engaged art as a discipline. This collective pursuit fosters common practices and contributes to a growing body of literature that supports structured activities, helping new practitioners deepen their engagement with these interests or address challenges more effectively. Within socially engaged art, this process translates into a dynamic interplay between theory and practice, grounded in exploring themes and challenges that resonate with the artists and participants' lived experiences.

Building on this theoretical foundation, socially engaged art encompasses a range of interests, as addressed earlier in this book. Here, it suffices to recap that its overarching focus lies in how artists, in collaboration with non-artists, investigate themes relevant to participants through arts-based processes of creativity and critical reflection. As demonstrated by the case studies in this book, these collaborative inquiries aim to generate outputs with transformative potential at various levels.

Examples in this book illustrate the diversity of socially engaged art's impact. For instance, Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi's work in Ghana and Kai Mata's projects in Indonesia empower marginalised queer communities. Similarly, Bartsch's initiatives in Finland foster social inclusion and collective creativity in neighbourhoods, while Malin Bellman's work in a Swedish hospital reshapes workplace culture and well-being. Charlotta Ruth's efforts in Vienna challenge cultural stereotypes in urban settings. In addition, there are research projects using socially engaged arts methodologies to address global environmental challenges, striving to enhance local benefits and community engagement. For example, the My Mabopane Photovoice Project in Tshwane, South Africa, aims to explore how photovoice can serve as a tool for improving the benefits local communities derive from urban green spaces, focusing on the Mabopane River Corridor (Knudsen et al., 2023).

Thus, shared interests in socially engaged art often align with broader social and environmental concerns, which influence the practice's themes and methodologies. For example, community and civic engagement initiatives empower participants to contribute to societal narratives, promote democratic values, and encourage active civic participation. Similarly, projects rooted in environmental activism address ecological issues and advocate for sustainable practices.

Socially engaged art also embraces interdisciplinary approaches, which introduce unique challenges and opportunities. For example, forum theatre employs interactive performances to explore social and political issues, fostering critical dialogue and empowering participants to strategise for social change (Boal, 2008). Community art projects often focus on strengthening community cohesion and identity through collaborative processes, addressing local aspirations, and fostering cross-cultural understanding (Goldbard, 2006; Schlemmer, 2016).

Identifying and articulating these central concerns is vital for positioning socially engaged art as a recognised field of study. By examining these interests, practitioners and scholars can develop theoretical frameworks, artistic approaches, and pedagogical methodologies that enrich both the study and practice of socially engaged art. Artistic approaches such as participatory installations, community-based performances, and dialogical art practices not only provide innovative ways to engage with social issues but also actively shape the relationships between participants and their contexts. These methodologies integrate creative processes with theoretical insights, fostering a deeper understanding of the interplay between art and society while equipping practitioners with tools to address complex, real-world challenges.

On organising concepts

Practising socially engaged art encompasses a range of interconnected activities—such as planning, facilitating, participating, creating, sharing, performing, exhibiting, reflecting on, and theorising—that engage with artistic processes and creative outputs, while also addressing the social and activist aspirations that underpin meaningful collaboration and drive societal transformation. Reflective accounts of these activities are deeply cognitive, involving sense-making and understanding through experience, the senses, thought, and imagination. As Pring asserts, engaging in these processes “requires the acquisition and use of concepts” (1976, p. 30).

In my analysis, the core organising concepts of socially engaged art centre on six interconnected and partly overlapping themes—artmaking, social engagement, sharing, aspiration, transformation, and appreciation (see Figure 8.1). The relative importance of each concept shifts depending on the context, the perspectives of those involved, and the specific stage of the process being considered.

Artmaking

Artmaking in socially engaged art is central to the practice, involving artistic thinking, imagination, and creativity, often through collaborative processes. Artists and participants work together to explore socially relevant themes, with Pässilä’s concept of “speculative imagination” (personal communication,

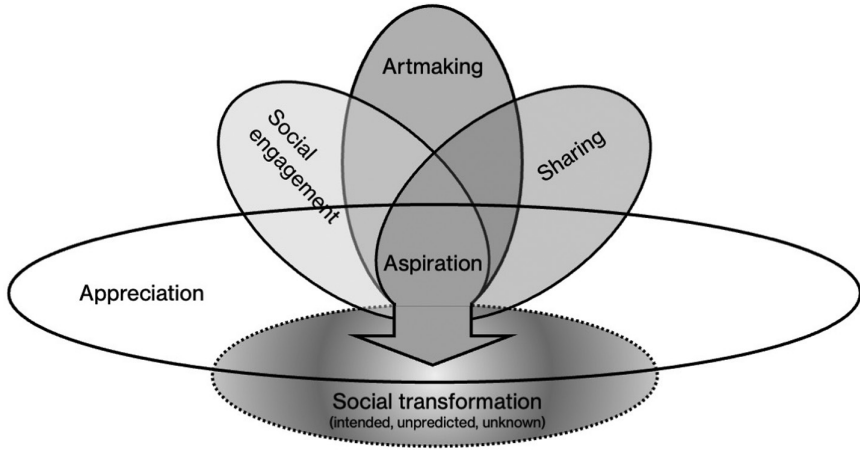


Figure 8.1 Central organising concepts in socially engaged art.

November 29, 2024), being crucial in generating new ideas and fostering social change.

What sets socially engaged art apart from traditional art forms is its emphasis on process over final outputs. While traditional art focuses on individual creation, socially engaged art embraces a range of approaches—from tangible works, such as murals and performances, to participatory situations that employ artistic theories, improvisation, and games. These situations foster co-creation, reflection, dialogue, and shared meaning-making. In this context, the participatory situations and their outcomes can themselves be considered the artwork, communal in nature and intentionally free from a singular, authorial Artist “God.” Instead, collective authorship takes precedence, with the artist shifting from creator to facilitator of dialogical, arts-based processes. This shift highlights the practice’s focus on collaboration, dialogue, and shared meaning-making over the production of tangible artistic outputs. Through its relational and democratic approach, socially engaged art creates outputs that are deeply responsive to their social contexts.

By prioritising process and collaboration, socially engaged art bridges the personal and societal, challenging traditional notions of authorship while striving to inspire transformative social engagement.

Social engagement

Engagement in socially engaged art is defined by two orientations towards society. First, the focus on participation, inclusion, and collaboration highlights the relational, inclusive, and democratic nature of the practice. Second, engagement with subject matter that holds social or environmental relevance, approached from a critical perspective, further strengthens this orientation.

This focus on societal engagement naturally leads to the importance of sharing, as it enables collaboration and contributes to the broader goal of social change.

Sharing

The concept of sharing holds particular significance in socially engaged art, both within co-creative artmaking processes and in social engagement more broadly. Sharing ideas and embracing a dialogical mindset are essential for fostering trust in co-reflection, both during the artmaking process and in the collaborative evaluation of its outcomes. Moreover, sharing the outputs and insights generated by these processes with the public plays a crucial role in raising awareness, which is foundational to driving social change.

Aspiration and transformation

In the context of socially engaged art, aspiration refers to the will and determination to address social or environmental themes through a co-creative and critically reflective mindset, driven by a transformative wish or urge. The scope and quality of this aspiration may vary depending on the context and the personal commitment of each participant, yet it remains a central aspect of the process.

At its core, socially engaged art is geared towards transformation. The aspiration to raise awareness and bring about societal change—whether at a local or global scale, and on a modest or ambitious level—is a driving force that connects the practices of artmaking, social engagement, and sharing in socially engaged art projects. While these projects often have explicitly intended and consciously agreed-upon impact objectives, they may also lead to unintended, unforeseen, and unknown outcomes. This is an intrinsic quality of art, which thrives on unpredictability and uncertainty, resisting confinement to producing only desired or preferable effects.

The extent to which a project achieves its transformative objectives often remains uncertain and requires careful evaluation. While these projects often yield new insights that contribute to an expanded understanding and heightened awareness among participants during the project, the larger societal impacts and transformations may materialise much later, long after the project has ended. This uncertainty also extends to the quality, scope, and endurance of the impact, which may not be fully realised or identifiable in the short term. Implementing insights from these projects into broader real-life contexts calls for carefully thought-out dissemination, networking, and after-care, with clear ownership taken by individuals or groups to ensure that the ideas are actively brought into action after the project has closed—particularly if the goal is to inform policymaking and contribute to structural change.

Appreciation as a transversal dimension

In socially engaged art, appreciation functions as a transversal dimension that intersects with the core organising concepts of artmaking, social engagement, sharing, aspiration, and transformation. It involves recognising, valuing, and reflecting on the artistic, social, and ethical significance of projects and their outputs. This process of appreciation is not limited to acknowledging final outcomes but permeates the entire creative journey, shaping both the practice and its impact.

Appreciation in this context transcends measurement, focusing on interpreting, understanding, and evaluating the intrinsic qualities of socially engaged art and its relational dynamics within society. It encompasses an exploration of the socio-cultural background and context of individual projects, the form-specific approaches employed, and the subject matter addressed. This process includes characterising the project and its distinctive qualities, ascribing meanings to its processes and outputs, and understanding its function and underlying aspirations.

At the artistic level, it involves recognising the creativity, imagination, and originality embedded in the process and its outputs, and understanding how these elements relate to other projects within similar contexts, as well as to similar projects in different contexts or developments within particular approaches in socially engaged arts. At the social level, appreciation extends to the connections formed, the shared experiences fostered, and the relevance of the project to participants' lives and societal concerns. Ethical considerations, such as inclusivity, respect, and fairness, are also central to an appreciative lens, ensuring that the collaborative nature of the practice is honoured.

While appreciation is distinct from evaluation, the two are closely interconnected. Evaluation often draws on appreciation to assess the merits, significance, and potential impact of a project. Similarly, participatory approaches in socially engaged art invite artists, participants, and stakeholders to share reflections, integrating appreciation into collective processes of sense-making and co-reflection. This alignment with the relational and democratic ethos of the practice allows appreciation to deepen understanding and foster meaningful dialogue about the work.

By operating as a transversal dimension, appreciation enriches the practice of socially engaged art, encouraging a reflective and inclusive approach that bridges artistic creativity with societal relevance. It contributes to the evolving knowledge of the field, offering insights that celebrate the unique qualities and transformative potential of socially engaged art.

Genre-specific concepts

In addition to the central organising concepts, socially engaged art practices also make use of everyday concepts, as well as terminology and definitions that are specific to particular genres. As Max van Manen observes, "concepts can reveal how human beings understand their world" (2014, p. 323).

Understanding the contextual use of these concepts is crucial for generating knowledge in socially engaged art.

A form-specific example is the concept of the “spect-actor” in forum theatre, which epitomises the interplay of collaboration, co-creation, and participation. In this practice, passive spectators are transformed into active participants who can intervene in the performance by proposing alternative actions. This shift allows participants to become co-authors of the narrative, exploring solutions to real-world issues while highlighting the ethical responsibility of creating a safe and equitable space for dialogue and expression (Boal, 2008). In this way, forum theatre mirrors the broader goals of socially engaged art: Fostering inclusivity, respect, and fairness in collaboration.

On principles of procedure in socially engaged art

The case studies introduced earlier in this book illustrate diverse examples of socially engaged art practices as structured activities. These activities involve arts-based inquiry on themes relevant to the groups participating in the process, with a co-creative and co-reflective mindset often underpinned by a transformative orientation. These structured activities are based on general rules—principles of practice—which distinguish socially engaged art from other art forms.

As Pring (1976) notes, these principles are not simply propositions to be memorised and repeated; they reflect group-developed ways of acting that can be internalised, practiced with varying skill and consistency, and followed to different degrees of adherence. In this context, the principle of procedure refers to the structured and often flexible ways of engaging with participants in a collaborative, ethical, and contextually responsive manner.

Form-specific rules of participation

The *spect-actor* concept in forum theatre, as discussed earlier, offers a clear example of a form-specific principle of procedure. Its emphasis on active participation, dialogue, and co-creation underscores the structured nature of forum theatre, which encourages participants to collaborate on resolving social issues portrayed in the performance (Boal, 2008). In contrast, other socially engaged art forms, such as community dance, may involve more flexible approaches, focusing on improvisation and movement rather than direct intervention. These variations highlight the adaptable nature of principles of procedure across different practices, from the defined rules of forum theatre to the fluid structures of community dance.

Context, collaboration, and flexibility

Despite these form-specific differences, the principles of procedure in socially engaged art share a common emphasis on responsiveness to the needs and

interests of participants. As noted by Charlotta Ruth, socially engaged art is inherently collaborative, with an outcome that is not overly controlled by the artist (personal communication, February 15, 2024). Similarly, Pia Bartsch articulates that the aim of socially engaged art is “to interact, discuss, and find solutions together, also in the finished artistic work” (personal communication, April 2, 2024). This democratic, participant-driven orientation forms a central principle of procedure in socially engaged art, ensuring that the artistic process remains responsive, equitable, and inclusive, treating participants as equals in both creation and reflection. Pia Lindy further highlights this principle, stating, “I am committed to thinking of all people as individuals and as equals” (personal communication, March 26, 2024).

In addition to this commitment to equality and inclusivity, artists must also possess a strong contextual understanding—recognising the social, cultural, and political environments that shape their work. Understanding the existing structures and conditions influencing the artistic process ensures that the work resonates meaningfully with participants and the broader community (A. Pässilä, personal communication, November 29, 2024). This contextual awareness enhances socially engaged art’s responsiveness, making it both socially transformative and attuned to the needs of the people and environment it seeks to engage. Gablik (1992) distinguishes socially engaged art from traditional activism, arguing that it fosters a relational practice that moves beyond the ego-self to embrace interconnectedness and collective understanding.

Critical engagement and reflection

Reflection, learning, and critical awareness are central principles in socially engaged art. They emphasise the cognitive and emotional dimensions of participation, fostering intellectual and personal growth. As discussed in Chapter 4, reflection serves as a cornerstone of socially engaged art, enabling both artists and participants to critically assess their experiences. By integrating reflective practices, participants deepen their understanding of the artistic process, align more closely with its objectives, and learn from one another’s perspectives.

Reflection plays a dual role: It supports personal learning while enriching collective understanding. As Charlotta Ruth notes, reflection “informs and deepens understandings” (personal communication, February 15, 2024), while Pia Lindy highlights its role in facilitating “learning from others” (personal communication, March 26, 2024). This cognitive sense-making process enables participants to develop a more nuanced comprehension of their experiences, strengthening critical thinking—a key underpinning of socially engaged art’s potential for addressing complex social issues and fostering transformative social change.

Ethical practices and social change

The concepts of ethics, transparency, and social responsibility are central to the broader principles informing socially engaged arts practices. These principles

underscore the need for responsible engagement with both communities and the wider social environment, emphasising the ethical challenges artists must navigate. Key concerns include ensuring transparency, fair representation of participants, and using art as a catalyst for social change.

This cluster highlights the artist's responsibility in managing their collaborative role and understanding the broader impact of their work on individuals and communities. Ethics and transparency: Artists are encouraged to adopt transparent practices that respect participants and acknowledge their contributions. Ruth and Draxl both emphasise the importance of transparency, particularly regarding how participants are acknowledged and how the artistic process is conducted. For Ruth, this includes being "careful in... how those who have contributed are mentioned" (personal communication, February 15, 2024), while Draxl stresses the importance of respecting participants within the collaborative process.

Owens also highlights the ethical considerations in socially engaged arts, particularly questioning the motivations behind participation and the impact of the work. He underscores the importance of understanding the ethics that drive participation, stating, "what drives it and what are the ethics that drive that? And for me, that's always been core" (A. Owens, personal communication, January 6, 2025). By acknowledging these ethical dimensions, artists can ensure that their practices not only respect the contributions of participants but also address the deeper questions of intention and impact that shape socially engaged art.

Socially engaged art often carries an activist ethos, aiming to challenge societal norms and advocate for change. Works by artists like Kai Mata and Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi exemplify this activist component, addressing pressing social issues through their art. Pia Lindy similarly emphasises the importance of "creating sustainable projects that have a lasting impact" (personal communication, March 26, 2024). However, the potential for art to instigate meaningful social change depends on ethical transparency and fairness in collaborative artmaking. Without trust and mutual respect, the outcomes are unlikely to have lasting effects on societal norms.

Relational dynamics and empathy

The relational dynamics at the heart of socially engaged art are central to fostering deeper connections and creating environments for empathy and shared purpose. Owens emphasises the importance of these environments, stating that one of the key interests in socially engaged art is "creating this space for understanding" (A. Owens, personal communication, January 6, 2025). This relational principle enables participants to engage in meaningful dialogue, addressing social issues through mutual respect and understanding. By fostering such spaces, socially engaged art ensures that the process remains inclusive, empathetic, and collectively purposeful.

These principles of procedure—collaboration, inclusivity, empathy, ethical practices, critical engagement, contextual responsiveness, and a commitment

to reflection and learning—guide the artist’s approach and ensure that the art produced is relevant to the participant group while contributing to broader societal reflection and transformation.

Learning the principles of procedure

Learning these and other relevant principles that inform socially engaged arts practices requires deep engagement with other practitioners and case studies, often through active participation, observation, reflection, and the exchange of ideas. As Pring (1976) notes, such principles are not always learnt consciously but often through practice and experience. In the arts, especially socially engaged art, learning by doing is a common way of developing skills and understanding. However, to deepen one’s professionalism and teach socially engaged art, a solid understanding of its principles of procedure is essential. This knowledge ensures that practices are ethically sound, contextually relevant, and aligned with the transformative goals inherent to the discipline.

In conclusion, the principles of procedure in socially engaged art are dynamic and adaptable, shaped by the context, the participants, and the form of artistic practice. While some principles, like the structure of forum theatre, offer more fixed rules, others, such as those found in community dance or other participatory practices, allow for greater flexibility and improvisation. At the core of these principles is a commitment to collaboration, inclusivity, ethical practice, critical engagement, and empathy, ensuring that socially engaged art remains relevant, responsive, and capable of fostering meaningful social change.

Criteria of success

Pring’s assertion that “part of the structure of an activity (what gives it identity and form) is the implicit reference to certain standards which such an activity seeks to come up to” (1976, p. 33) clarifies how success in socially engaged art can be determined. Following Pring, it can be argued that every structured activity, including socially engaged art, operates with implicit standards or benchmarks that guide its form and identity. While these criteria may not always be explicitly stated, they help to define what constitutes success in these practices.

In socially engaged art, the primary focus shifts from the artistic quality of the final product to the depth of engagement, the meaningfulness of interactions with the community, and the potential societal impact of the activity. Therefore, success is not determined by artistic achievement or aesthetic quality alone but by how well the practice contributes to societal change, fosters dialogue, and promotes collective participation. By examining these criteria, we gain insight into how socially engaged art defines and understands its merit and significance in relation to its participants and the broader community.

Close examination of the practitioner narratives reveals that the criteria for success in socially engaged art are multifaceted and context-dependent. Success is not universally defined but is shaped by the specific goals set in collaboration with participants and the context in which the practice occurs. These context-specific goals may include empowering participants, promoting social justice, fostering meaningful dialogue, or contributing to social or cultural change. Success is evaluated based on how these elements align, demonstrating the interdependent relationship between the artist's objectives and the community's needs.

Level of engagement and participation

A core indicator of success in socially engaged art is the community's level of engagement and participation. As practitioners such as Charlotta Ruth and Pia Bartsch suggest, the depth of community involvement is crucial in determining success. Ruth emphasises the importance of participant agency and empowerment, arguing that when participants feel they have control over the process, the project is more likely to succeed (personal communication, February 15, 2024). Bartsch adds that success is also measured by the degree to which participants take ownership of the project, feeling pride in their contributions and seeing themselves as integral to the process (personal communication, April 2, 2024).

In her interview, Ruth pointed out that success can also be understood as fostering mutual learning between artists and participants, with both parties benefiting from the exchange. This reciprocal relationship ensures ethical engagement, where participants are respected, acknowledged, and their contributions valued. Bartsch noted that inclusivity, diversity, and the representation of marginalised voices are critical in determining the ethical success of a project.

Impact and sustainability

The impact of socially engaged art extends beyond its immediate effects and incorporates considerations of sustainability. For a project to be considered successful, its effects ought to endure over time. In her interview, Bartsch notes that this could include continued community involvement, the formation of new networks, or sustained dialogue (personal communication, April 2, 2024). Meanwhile, Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi emphasises that the social change initiated by the work is a key criterion for success. Success is determined by how well the project challenges norms, raises awareness, or fosters activism (V.-B. E. Fiatsi, personal communication, April 13, 2024). Bartsch points out that projects that encourage long-term engagement and continue influencing community activities after the initial intervention are often seen as more successful.

Sustainability also refers to the ongoing visibility of the project's impact. Ruth notes that creating opportunities for continued involvement in community-based activities is integral to success (personal communication,

February 15, 2024). This ensures that the project leaves a legacy beyond its immediate duration.

Contextual relevance and reflexivity

A central feature of success in socially engaged art is its contextual relevance. As Anne Pässilä mentions, the success of a project is often contingent on how well it resonates with the specific context in which it occurs (personal communication, November 29, 2024). Projects need to consider the community's cultural, social, and political realities to ensure that they are meaningful and impactful. In her interview, Pässilä notes that reflexivity is also crucial, as practitioners must critically reflect on power dynamics and how these dynamics shape the process and outcomes of socially engaged art. Critical self-awareness ensures that the work aligns with the goals and aspirations of the community, making the project more relevant and responsive to local needs.

Form-specific criteria

The criteria for success in socially engaged art vary depending on the specific practice. For example, forum theatre is often evaluated based on its ability to empower participants to address social issues and stimulate dialogue that leads to alternative solutions (Boal, 2008). In community-based initiatives, success is more complex and challenging to assess due to the intangible nature of many outcomes. Newman et al. (2003) argue that community arts evaluations should move beyond anecdotal evidence and rely on clear methodological criteria. They stress that success is often measured by social capital impacts, such as improvements in health, crime reduction, and job prospects but note that many studies lack rigorous methods, undermining claims of success. The authors advocate for a community-driven approach, where local indicators of success are identified, ensuring a more sensitive and accurate evaluation of the collective impact.

Owens reflects on success as a nuanced and context-dependent outcome, questioning whether the ambitious goals set by institutions or communities—such as challenging behaviours in prisons—are always achievable. While institutions may define success by measurable outcomes, such as presenting alternative worldviews, he suggests that success should be more grounded in participant insights (A. Owens, personal communication, January 6, 2025). For example, in the prison context, Owens believes success is achieved when participants, like students, gain a more profound understanding of the people they are working with, particularly in recognising the systemic issues that influence individuals' lives. Thus, Owens emphasises that the true measure of success lies in the deeper connections and reflections that emerge, rather than solely meeting institutional expectations.

While the above examples are not exhaustive, they illustrate the complexity of the criteria for success in socially engaged art. Ultimately, the requirements for success in socially engaged art combine overarching standards and

context-specific factors, such as the nature of the collaboration, the goals set with participants, and the social issues being addressed. These criteria serve as benchmarks for evaluating success; understanding them is essential to assessing the value of socially engaged art practices. By considering criteria such as engagement, ethical participation, impact, and sustainability, we develop a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes success in socially engaged art, extending beyond the focus on artistic quality and value typically associated with more traditional art forms. This approach recognises socially engaged art's potential to foster social transformation, dialogue, and community empowerment.

Competence areas

As the case studies in this book show, socially engaged art operates across diverse contexts and functions, requiring practitioners to adopt an expansive set of skills and knowledge that transcend traditional artistic expertise. Reflecting the notion of expanded professionalism in the arts (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2021), socially engaged art calls for competences that help the practitioner deal with its complex, interdisciplinary, and socially embedded nature (Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, 2023; Lehikoinen, 2013; Vondracek, 2013).

The concept of competence, often defined as an individual's ability to effectively perform specific tasks (Lester, 2014), encompasses both behavioural and cognitive dimensions. Within the arts, competence is viewed holistically, integrating knowledge, skills, and autonomy in practice (Mulder, 2021). This multidimensional understanding aligns with the intricate demands of socially engaged art, where adaptability and ethical engagement are paramount.

Building on insights from the *Training Artists for Innovation* project (2011–2013) and subsequent research (Lehikoinen, 2013; Vondracek, 2013; Hempel & Rysgaard, 2013; Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, 2023), eight interrelated competence areas have been identified as essential for practitioners of socially engaged art. These areas form a dynamic framework adaptable to the varied requirements of individual work engagements:

1. *Artistic Competence*: The foundational skills and creative capacities necessary for artistic thinking and expression. This serves as the core upon which other competences are developed.
2. *Social Competence*: The ability to engage with communities, foster relationships, and navigate social dynamics. Effective collaboration and communication are central to this area.
3. *Ethical Competence*: Practitioners need to address ethical considerations, ensuring artistic interventions respect participants' dignity and agency. This includes navigating the implications of the work and maintaining integrity in relationships.
4. *Pedagogical Competence*: Skills in pedagogy and facilitation, enabling practitioners to create inclusive, participatory environments that encourage learning and dialogue.

5. *Contextual Competence*: An awareness of the cultural, social, and political factors that shape the specific context of each socially engaged art project, informing decision-making and practice.
6. *Research Competence*: The capacity for critical reflection and inquiry to inform practice. Building on Bolton (2009), this involves examining assumptions and frameworks that shape thinking and exploring alternative possibilities. Practitioners also analyse, or help the participant analyse, artistic and conversational outputs, interpreting them through relevant theoretical and contextual lenses (Lehikoinen & Tuittila, 2024).
7. *Development Competence*: The motivation and capability to innovate, adapt, and improve one's professional practice and contribute towards the critical evolution of the socially engaged art field. This includes fostering professional growth and staying actively connected to the communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in socially engaged art.
8. *Entrepreneurial Competence*: Project management, financial planning, and sustainable practice development skills. This includes the ability to craft viable proposals and navigate the economic aspects of socially engaged work.

These competence areas emphasise the interdisciplinary and adaptable nature of socially engaged arts practice, underscoring its complexity as a professional practice. They are not static but evolve to meet the specific demands of each project, highlighting the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in this field of artistic work. This framework, which has been explained in detail elsewhere (Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, 2023), advocates for the recognition of socially engaged art as a professional discipline requiring structured educational support. By fostering these competences, practitioners can more effectively address the multifaceted challenges of socially engaged art, contributing to its broader impact on society and professionalisation within academic and artistic contexts.

Chapter reflections

In this chapter, I have expanded Pring's (1976) framework of academic disciplines, incorporating relevant competences to establish socially engaged art as a distinct subject of study. By adopting a disciplined approach that encompasses specific interests, central concepts, principles of procedure, criteria of success, and professional competences, students and researchers can navigate its complexities and contribute to its evolution as an autonomous field.

My analysis suggests that central themes such as social justice, community empowerment, and civic engagement provide a foundation for studying and practising socially engaged art in higher education. These themes shape theoretical frameworks and methodologies, offering tools to address diverse social and environmental challenges through participatory approaches. Shared

concerns within the discipline act as a guiding framework, connecting theory with practice and organising its methods and goals.

In addition, the organising concepts of socially engaged art—artmaking, social engagement, sharing, aspiration, appreciation, and social transformation—capture its multifaceted nature. These concepts bridge creative collaboration, societal engagement, and the dissemination of insights to foster social awareness and change. Genre-specific terms, like the “spect-actor” in forum theatre, further illustrate its adaptive terminology. Together, these elements form a scaffolding that links artistic imagination with societal transformation.

Furthermore, principles of procedure, such as community participation, ethical practices, and sustainability, highlight the interdisciplinary and participant-centred nature of socially engaged art. These principles balance structure with flexibility, as seen in the contrasting approaches of forum theatre and community dance. Criteria of success, including fostering dialogue, empowering participants, and promoting sustainable change, reflect the nuanced evaluation required in this field.

Finally, practitioners require a diverse skill set, including artistic and ethical competence, social and pedagogical skills, contextual awareness, and entrepreneurial expertise. Structured training and professional development are vital to aligning practices with the transformative goals of the discipline.

In exploring these core elements, socially engaged art emerges as a distinct and dynamic field. Its ethical rigour, collaborative processes, and contextually relevant outcomes position it at the intersection of artistic exploration, critical inquiry, and societal needs.

Note

- 1 I adapt Adshead’s argument from dance studies, where she writes, “...in order for study to be meaningful, it must have its referents in the activity itself. Its structure, content, etc., are only valid if they relate to actual dancers” (1981, p. xiv). In the context of socially engaged arts, this argument extends to artist-practitioners and participants, with the study needing to be rooted in their actual practices and experiences.

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9 Political and social awareness in higher arts education

On September 28, 2023, I attended a meeting at the Theatre Academy in Helsinki, Finland. Approaching the main entrance, I saw two banners: one announcing occupation and support for all students, the other demanding that the government be thrown onto the street. Days earlier, students from Aalto University, Uniarts Helsinki's Theatre Academy, and the University of Lapland's Faculty of Arts and Design had occupied university spaces to protest the right-wing government's massive cuts to social welfare. They demanded the university to speak out against the government's racist immigration policies, which further worsen the situation for international students.

In the Theatre Academy's lobby, students camped in tents surrounded by handmade posters expressing frustration and strong opposition to proposed budget cuts and social welfare reductions. While the atmosphere was convivial and communal, the posters conveyed clear messages of resistance. Some stress the erosion of student support systems, particularly for international students disproportionately affected by tuition fees and discriminatory immigration policies. Other messages criticised the government for prioritising tax breaks for the wealthy while neglecting essential student needs such as food and housing. Statements like "Fuck the racist government" and "Stop with the lies, Prime Minister" revealed raw anger and distrust towards political leaders. One particularly striking poster read, "Hallitus, älkää juosko saksien kanssa" [Government, don't run with scissors], combining dry humour with a serious critique of a recent, controversial photo of Riikka Purra, the minister for finance from the populist right-wing party, The Finns, holding large scissors in her hand and ready to cut, with a vicious smile on her face. Through this blend of humour, blunt statements, and appeals for equality, students expressed a collective sense of urgency and a demand for change in response to policies they viewed as detrimental to their future and to Finland.

Uniarts Helsinki's response was commendable, as the university expressed full support for the students' demands. Rector Kaarlo Hildén stressed the necessity for students to focus on their studies without financial concerns and criticised the government's planned cuts to student financial aid, arguing that such measures undermine higher education (Uniarts Helsinki, 2023). Additionally, the university recognised the occupation as an educational

opportunity, establishing an elective course on its dramaturgy, allowing students to earn academic credits (Herlin, 2023). Similarly, the University of Lapland embraced the student occupation not only as a well-organised solidarity movement but also as a learning experience. Students could earn credits by participating in a course titled *Dramaturgies of Occupation and Civic Engagement*, which examined the organisation of occupations, forms of civic engagement, and the relationship between art and activism (Juntti, 2023).

A year later, as I am writing this chapter, a news headline pops up on my screen. The Finnish News Agency STT informs that our students, together with other student bodies from the Helsinki metropolitan area, are joining forces, collectively representing more than 180,000 students at the Senate Square in Helsinki, to protest once again the right-wing government's massive cuts to social welfare. Their key demand is peace of mind to focus on their studies, emphasising the need to invest in students to build Finland's future on expertise (Suomen Tietotoimisto, 2024). This display of unity and activism underscores the importance of public protest as a collective response to policies that threaten the well-being of people—students, in this case. Activism, in this context, serves as a crucial means of opposing detrimental changes and defending the future of education and social welfare, acting as a vital force for progress and justice.

Activism underpins much of socially engaged arts practices, although not always. In earlier chapters, I have discussed artistic interventions in organisations that are often void of explicit activist aspirations although, in many instances, they may strive to improve processes or organisational culture. Nevertheless, the transformative aspirations of socially engaged art projects are often closely linked to various forms of activism, striving to enhance political, social, environmental, and identity-based awareness in diverse contexts.

In this chapter, I shift my focus to the role of activism within higher arts education by examining recent student movements in Finland, Denmark, and Norway as a lens to explore broader trends in social engagement. Through three case studies, I delve into the new wave of activism centred on identity politics in higher arts education. This analysis highlights both the educational potential of such activism in fostering critical dialogue and creativity, as well as the challenges posed by polarisation and the fundamentalist ideologies that can sometimes lead to cancel culture.

Ultimately, I seek to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how activism shapes artistic practices and educational frameworks, encouraging students and educators to navigate the complexities of contemporary social issues while fostering open dialogue and creative exploration.

On activism

Activism involves organised efforts to enact social, political, cultural, or environmental change, engaging strategically with power dynamics (Alinsky,

1971). Angela Davis (1981) emphasises activism as resistance to systemic oppression, shaped by intersections of race, gender, and class, while Foucault (1979) frames it as resistance against disciplinary power and established norms. Piven and Cloward (1977) explore grassroots movements' capacity to disrupt and reshape political landscapes, and Mouffe (2005) underscores conflict as essential to democracy, situating activism as a critical element of political engagement. Fraser (2000) calls attention to activism's transformative role in addressing systemic inequalities.

Carmen Häisan (2020) extends this understanding through the lens of theatre, emphasising that activism transcends protest to encompass nuanced engagements with societal systems. She notes that action—or inaction—shapes these systems, with passive agreement or silence often reinforcing the status quo. In activist arts, including theatre, visual art, and music, these dynamics manifest through critical engagement and imaginative alternatives that challenge norms and inspire change. Conversely, silence in artistic expression on pressing issues risks perpetuating existing inequalities. Engaging with activist arts thus deepens awareness of individual and collective responsibilities in reshaping cultural and political landscapes.

Activism in higher arts education

Universities and arts institutions have historically served as centres of dissent, with the 20th century marking the rise of activism in areas such as civil rights, gender equality, and anti-war movements, often deeply tied to artistic expression. Movements like Dadaism and Surrealism epitomised this fusion. Emerging after World War I, Dada critiqued nationalism and bourgeois values through absurdity and anti-art strategies, with Marcel Duchamp's ready-made challenging art's commodification (Lippard, 1984). Similarly, André Breton's Surrealism combined leftist politics and art to inspire personal and societal transformation.

The 1960s saw art students central to global protests. Berkeley's Free Speech Movement employed murals and posters as symbols of resistance (Cohen, 2009), while Paris's May 1968 protests turned public spaces into revolutionary canvases (Seidman, 2004). By the 1980s, artistic activism expanded to address apartheid, exemplified by South African artist William Kentridge's critiques of systemic racism and international student-led exhibitions advocating for divestment (Davidson, 2021). These movements reveal how art serves not only as protest but as a medium for dialogue and change, shaping education as a space for reimagining societal norms and pursuing equity.

Recent years have seen higher arts education institutions embrace activist themes. The 2017 symposium at Kunstmuseum Basel and the Summer Academy at Zurich University of the Arts focused on decolonising art institutions, addressing the colonial legacies shaping museum practices and advocating for systemic equity in the arts (Richter & Kolb, 2017). Similarly, Central Saint Martins' 2019 Climate Emergency Assembly provided a forum for

institutional reforms, emphasising environmental responsibility and collective action on climate breakdown (Lloyd-Jones, 2019).

At the Rhode Island School of Design, a 2019 initiative addressing gun violence included Scott Lapham's One Gun Gone project, which repurposed a confiscated firearm into art to support gun buyback programmes. This initiative engaged youth from impacted communities, promoting creative expression and social change, with the resulting works displayed in the Repair and Design Futures exhibition to raise awareness of legislative efforts for safer neighbourhoods (e-flux Education, 2019).

Activism and cancel culture in higher arts education

Students in higher arts education remain deeply involved in activism, using their creative skills to engage with pressing social issues. Along with the new wave of activism centred on identity politics, cancel culture has entered higher arts education institutions, as denoted by the case studies below.

Cancel culture refers to the social phenomenon of publicly shaming or boycotting individuals, particularly on social media, in response to controversial actions or statements. It often involves calls for individuals to be "cancelled" or removed from positions of influence. While cancel culture is often framed as a means of holding people accountable for harmful behaviours, it can also suppress free speech and stifle open, critical discourse (Senior, 2017). Jennifer Senior (2017) observes that universities, in their hypervigilance to protect students from potentially offensive or traumatising ideas, may contribute to intellectual rigidity. Kipnis (2017) warns that this form of protectionism not only limits the free exchange of ideas but undermines the university's role as a space for complex thought and academic debate.

Representation and resistance: Identity politics in higher arts education in Norway

Vanessa Beecroft, an Italian-born American performance artist, is known for large-scale installations featuring nude or minimally clothed models. One such performance, *VB48*, took place in 2001 at Genoa's Palazzo Ducale. In it, undocumented African migrant women were posed as living statues, dressed in minimal black bikini bottoms with golden strings and thin black straps covering their breasts, contrasting sharply with the opulent setting. The performance called attention to societal inequalities, juxtaposing the wealth and power symbolised by the palace with the precarious lives of the marginalised women. This piece, contextualised by the 2001 G8 summit protests, critiqued global inequality and the exploitation of vulnerable groups, subverting traditional representations of the female body (Perrin, 2022).

Beecroft's work sparked debates on race, class, and the ethical representation of marginalised subjects in art. A photograph from *VB48*, titled *vb.48 721*, acquired by the Oslo National Academy of the Arts (KHiO), was condemned in 2020 by doctoral students for being racist and sexist. This critique

led to calls for institutional decolonisation (Flom, 2020). In response, KHiO's Rector Måns Wrangé introduced an inclusion and anti-discrimination plan, drawing on the American tradition of expanding art education to include diverse perspectives. Wrangé's appointment of Sarah Lookofsky as the new dean reflected this commitment (Flom, 2020).

However, Wrangé's initiatives provoked resistance from a faction of students, who argued that identity politics was undermining academic freedom. They contended that the focus on critical race theory, feminism, and post-colonialism replaced genuine artistic inquiry with ideological indoctrination (Pedersen et al., 2020). This critique echoed Professor Torkel Brekke's (2020) concerns that the rise of identity politics mirrored a fundamentalist activism, potentially stifling open discourse and artistic freedom.

In contrast, another group of students defended the push for anti-racism and structural change, arguing that KHiO must embrace diversity to stay relevant. They emphasised that art education must reflect the societal issues it engages with, asserting that racism and sexism are not mere trends but deeply ingrained issues that require urgent attention (Ablett et al., 2020).

The resulting tensions between inclusion and artistic freedom led to public debates, promulgated by Norwegian media outlets like *Morgenbladet* and *Klassekampen* (Rosness, 2020). In October 2020, Rector Wrangé resigned, citing accusations of bias and the challenges of remaining neutral in a politically charged environment (Rosness, 2020).

While the rapid spread of ideologies in our digitalised world plays a role, resistance to Beecroft's work at KHiO cannot be solely attributed to the third-wave anti-racism ideologies from the United States (Brekke, 2021; Douthat, 2020; McWhorter, 2021). It needs to be understood also as part of a broader context of the global #MeToo movement and KHiO's institutional history, including the 2018 sexual harassment allegations against staff (see Sætre & Dybvig, 2018). It could be suggested that these events prompted an external review and heightened awareness of power dynamics, which likely influenced the critical reception of artworks like *vb.48 721*. In this context, students and faculty may have felt empowered to challenge representations they perceived as problematic or reflective of systemic inequalities. The fallout from the allegations fostered an environment where discussions about consent, representation, and the implications of artistic expression have become more pronounced. Yet, this case study also reveals a significant clash between identity politics and artistic freedom, prompting vital questions about the role of art in addressing societal issues and the potential consequences of prioritising ideological commitments over creative expression.

Activism and authority: The controversy at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts

In November 2020, the artist collective Anonymous Artists removed a plaster bust of King Frederik V, founder of the Royal Danish Academy of

Fine Arts and a colonial figure, from the Academy's Assembly Hall and submerged it in the Copenhagen harbour. This symbolic protest, aiming to draw attention to Denmark's colonial past, sparked media reactions and led to widespread criticism, with conservative artists, journalists, and police scrutinising those involved (Nikolajsen, 2021; Storgaard, 2021; Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2022).

Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, the Academy's Head of Department, took responsibility for the act, emphasising its intent to reveal the ongoing effects of colonialism on marginalised people in Denmark's cultural institutions (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2022). In response, Academy director Kirsten Langkilde dismissed her, calling the removal a criminal act and stressing that, while the Academy welcomed diverse views, it could not condone actions that stifle open debate (Langkilde, 2020).

Langkilde's decision drew support for Dirckinck-Holmfeld and brought attention to broader issues at the Academy. The Danish Minister of Culture expressed no confidence in Langkilde, leading to her resignation and an external investigation of the Academy's internal environment (Nikolajsen, 2021; Busted, 2021). The report found no fundamental crisis at the Academy but mentioned isolated incidents of bullying and marginalisation related to identity politics. It pointed to a leadership vacuum and recommended restructuring the Academy to improve conflict management and foster a more productive environment (Molin & Tangkjær, 2021).

This controversy illustrates the tension between activism and institutional authority in educational settings. Dirckinck-Holmfeld's protest, while aiming to critique colonialism, revealed deeper issues regarding governance and the challenges of managing dissent. Langkilde's dismissal of Dirckinck-Holmfeld featured the conflict between supporting social justice through artistic expression and maintaining institutional norms. The backlash exposed the Academy to significant scrutiny, underscoring the complexities of balancing activism with effective leadership.

The investigation report further complicates the situation, showing that the uproar stemmed not only from the protest but also from broader governance issues, such as poor conflict management. While acknowledging incidents of bullying tied to identity politics, the report refrains from condemning them, recognising their relevance to contemporary art education. Instead, it emphasises the need for transparent leadership to navigate such challenges effectively (Molin & Tangkjær, 2021).

Langkilde's resignation underscores the risks of unmediated activism in higher arts education. While Dirckinck-Holmfeld's protest aimed to challenge colonial narratives, the aftermath illustrates how activism can destabilise institutions when it clashes with governance structures. The case accentuates the importance of balancing activism with institutional integrity to maintain an environment that fosters open dialogue rather than one marked by ideological polarisation.

Student activism and the new wave of identity politics at Uniarts Helsinki's Theatre Academy

In June 2020, Finnish art school students launched a petition advocating for the integration of anti-racist education into higher arts education. Catalysed by global movements such as Black Lives Matter, the petition, titled Anti-racist strategies into the curriculum, received over 1,300 signatures from students and alumni within two weeks. It called for urgent reforms in Finnish higher arts education to address systemic racism, decolonisation, cultural appropriation, and the marginalisation of Sámi and Roma communities, among others (Anti-racist strategies into the curriculum, 2020). The petition also demanded that the curricula in these institutions reflect Finland's diverse ethnic realities and argued that ignoring these issues tacitly perpetuates discrimination within the educational system.

Uniarts Helsinki's leadership supported the petition, committing to dismantling structural racism and integrating anti-racist perspectives across curricula. They pledged to review recruitment policies and hold workshops on inclusivity and curriculum development (Perkiömäki et al., 2020). Aurora Rämö (2020) reports how this movement led to wider debates within the Theatre Academy, particularly regarding how classical texts like Shakespeare should be approached. Some students argued these works perpetuated violence and oppression, raising tensions between artistic tradition and contemporary demands for safe, inclusive spaces. Educators such as Mikko Viljanen and Pauliina Hulkko discussed the challenges of balancing students' emotional sensitivities with the need to address difficult materials, like violent scenes and controversial language (Rämö, 2020).

The debate drew commentary from Saska Saarikoski, Head of the Editorial and Opinion Department at *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland's largest subscription newspaper. Saarikoski compared the current wave of activism to past ideological movements at the Theatre Academy and warned against the influence of US-originated cancel culture, highlighting its potential to suppress dissent (Saarikoski, 2020). In response, students, including Suvi Tuominen, clarified that their aim was not to censor but to critically engage with the context and authorship of classical works (Tuominen, 2020). Students voiced frustration with media portrayals of their activism, asserting their desire for a nuanced curriculum that encourages critical engagement with diverse perspectives (Kamero & Vilkman, 2020).

Despite broad support, some critiques emerged. Author Ilja Lehtinen (2020) cautioned that mandatory inclusivity training could stifle open dialogue and creativity, warning against over-regulation in arts education. Similarly, student Liila Jokelin (2021) shared her conflicted experience, feeling pressured to conform to ideological stances while struggling to be socially conscious and maintain creative autonomy in a politically charged environment.

Feminist commentator Tiina Tuppurainen (2020) critiqued the self-centredness of identity politics, suggesting it could overshadow collective

struggles and advocating for a broader focus on solidarity. Hanna Helavuori (2021a) connected the activism at the Theatre Academy to the influence of social media on identity formation, highlighting the pressures students face in balancing authentic public personas with activism. She also called for a more inclusive curriculum and pedagogical approaches that reflect diverse experiences (Helavuori, 2021b).

The activism at Uniarts Helsinki calls attention to the complex integration of identity politics in arts education. While the petition sparked important conversations about racism and inclusivity, it also raised critical questions about balancing social justice with artistic and academic freedom. While many supported the movement, critics like Lehtinen and Jokelin emphasised the risks of ideological conformity and the suppression of dissenting voices, echoing broader concerns about cancel culture. The activism inadvertently created new hierarchies within the institution, where dissent faced social pressure. This dynamic underscores the challenge of fostering inclusivity while preserving open discourse and artistic exploration. The case study illustrates the need for institutions to balance urgent calls for reform with the preservation of spaces for diverse viewpoints and controversial ideas, ensuring that both activism and creative freedom can coexist.

Navigating culture wars and cancel culture

The interplay between activism, culture wars, and cancel culture significantly influences the dynamics of higher arts education. While activism addresses systemic inequities and amplifies marginalised voices, the rise of culture wars and cancel culture presents challenges to open dialogue, academic freedom, and creative exploration. This is particularly important to consider when examining the role of socially engaged art in higher arts education institutions.

As Robert Samuels observes, culture wars represent “a mode of displacement and substitution” that shifts focus from economic exploitation to competing cultural identities (Samuels, 2024, p. 1). Pippa Norris defines cancel culture as “collective strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds” (Norris, 2023, p. 148). These dynamics, though empowering in holding individuals accountable (Dy, 2021), often intensify polarisation and self-censorship, as illustrated by the Nordic case studies above.

Cancel culture’s impact on higher arts education is particularly concerning because it can stifle dissent, fetter artistic creativity, and limit learning. York (2021) and Heinze (2021) note how fear of social repercussions can lead students and educators to self-censor, disrupting the socioemotional dynamics crucial for collaborative and performance-based disciplines like music, theatre, and dance. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) concept of the flow state, essential for creativity, is undermined when students are preoccupied with fears of ostracism. This shift from creative risk-taking to social conformity can hinder

artistic identity and innovation, particularly in environments where vulnerability, experimentation, and not-yet-knowing are central to learning.

Social media exacerbates these challenges. Scholars such as Galpin (2021) and Cruickshank (2019) emphasise how emotionally charged content, rewarded by digital platforms, fuels reactionary discourse, replacing critical analysis with mob mentalities. Morgan (2021) underscores the emotional toll on individuals targeted by cancel culture, a phenomenon with documented psychological consequences including depression, diminished self-esteem, and increased anxiety (Masten et al., 2013; Arseneault et al., 2010). These effects can be particularly alarming in artistic disciplines, where confidence and openness are foundational to growth.

The events described in the Nordic case studies manifest the interplay of cultural values and cancel culture. Cultural contexts shape how creativity is expressed and evaluated (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, 1999; Shao et al., 2019). For instance, collectivist cultures, which emphasise group harmony, may see heightened pressures for conformity, further stifling individual expression. Conversely, in individualistic cultures, cancel culture challenges autonomy and personal artistic freedom, directly inhibiting exploratory thinking (Sawyer, 2012). These cultural dynamics may complicate how students and educators navigate the fear of being “cancelled” while balancing the imperatives of social responsibility and artistic freedom.

The tensions extend beyond individual creativity to institutional missions. Historically, higher arts education has served as a hub for intellectual and creative exchange, challenging students’ beliefs and fostering critical engagement with diverse perspectives. Yet, the trend of shielding students from provocative ideas risks undermining this mission. As York (2021) and Heinze (2021) argue, such protective measures can erode intellectual rigour and limit students’ capacity for critical inquiry, essential for artistic and professional development.

Addressing this requires a nuanced approach. Activism, when guided by ethical leadership, can enrich discourse without stifling dissent. Higher arts education institutions can benefit from cultivating environments that encourage diverse perspectives while resisting reactionary tendencies. Topics like critical race theory, decolonial theories, and intersectional feminism, alongside indigenous knowledge systems, environmental justice, ecofeminism, and theories of post-humanism, as well as the ethics of representation, can deepen the understanding of local and global challenges. However, such exploration must occur within a framework that values open dialogue over indoctrination, ensuring students can critically assess and integrate multiple viewpoints. Moreover, these theories need to be approached rigorously, considering their discursive underpinnings and pitfalls, as well as possible misunderstandings and misuses of these perspectives. Without meticulous engagement, there is a risk of oversimplification, tokenisation, or the instrumentalisation of these theories in ways that distort their original intent and undermine their transformative potential.

Ultimately, higher arts education can benefit from navigating the intersection of activism, cultural pressures, and academic freedom by fostering environments where creativity, inclusivity, and intellectual growth coexist. Recognising that cancel culture can disrupt these dynamics, institutions need to balance the imperative to address exclusion and discrimination with efforts to preserve spaces for creative risk-taking and robust debate. By embracing leadership that prioritises dialogical engagement and ethical governance, these institutions can uphold their role as vibrant centres of artistic imagination and critical inquiry, ensuring they remain socially relevant and responsive to contemporary challenges.

Chapter reflections

In this chapter, I have delved into the nuanced dynamics of activism within higher arts education, particularly as it intersects with identity politics, institutional frameworks, and artistic practices. My analysis highlights how activism, when integrated thoughtfully, serves as a powerful pedagogical framework, fostering critical dialogue, civic engagement, and collaborative learning.

However, my analysis also underscores the challenges posed by polarisation and the rise of cancel culture, which can suppress dissent, stifle creativity, and hinder intellectual freedom. The tension between fostering inclusive, transformative activism and navigating the rigidity of identity politics or cancel culture reflects broader societal debates. These dynamics complicate efforts to balance the imperatives of social accountability with the preservation of open dialogue and creative exploration. Indeed, case studies scrutinised in this chapter demonstrate the need for institutional leadership that prioritises transparency, inclusivity, and ethical decision-making.

For higher arts education institutions, these insights have profound relevance. Socially engaged art, as a subject of study, can benefit these institutions not only by meeting the needs of expanding professionalism in the arts but also by playing a part in their Third Mission of contributing meaningfully to society. By integrating activism into curricula and fostering reciprocal engagement with communities, institutions can amplify the transformative potential of art to address societal challenges. At the same time, they need to sustain environments that encourage diverse perspectives and critical inquiry, ensuring students develop the skills and resilience needed to navigate complex social issues while preserving the openness essential for artistic and intellectual growth.

Considering the complexities discussed, the interplay between activist efforts and reactive opposition can contribute to culture wars and fuel cancel culture within higher arts education contexts. Ultimately, this chapter proposes nuanced approaches to activism that balance the pursuit of social justice with the core mission of higher arts education: to cultivate spaces for dialogue, critical creativity, and transformative learning, while leveraging the power of socially engaged art to inspire societal progress.

Hence, in the next chapter, I will explore the challenges and opportunities of creating inclusive environments. I will examine how “safe/r spaces,” which are increasingly proposed in educational and artistic contexts, can be designed to foster trust, open dialogue, and critical reflection, particularly within the constraints highlighted by the case examples above. This focus will contribute to reimagining higher arts education as a platform that not only nurtures artistic skills but also as a space where socially engaged art can amplify diverse voices in addressing pressing societal challenges through inclusive dialogue.

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10 From safe spaces to polyphonic spaces

Fostering inclusive dialogue and intellectual growth in higher arts education

The societal dynamics shaping socially engaged arts practices—and the arts more broadly—demand sensibilities capable of navigating evolving complexities in ways that foster transformation rather than obstruct it. As explored in the previous chapter, phenomena such as culture wars and cancel culture often impede this transformative potential.

In higher arts education, fostering openness to polyphony is crucial because knowledge is socially constructed from diverse standpoints. Feminist epistemologies, such as Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledges and Sandra Harding's (1992) framework of strong objectivity, stress that marginalised perspectives offer critical insights that challenge dominant narratives and reveal biases in traditional ways of knowing. By integrating the subjects and objects of knowledge and employing reflexivity as a resource, standpoint theory enables a more comprehensive understanding of the world.

In the arts, artists often draw on their unique standpoints, making observations about phenomena they find compelling to explore in their artistic practice. In contrast, socially engaged art projects typically do not prioritise the artist's standpoint. Instead, they focus on the participants—often individuals from the margins of society—allowing the participants' perspectives to emerge through a shared process. By highlighting experiences from the margins, these projects contribute to a richer and more nuanced social and cultural understanding.

Yet, all standpoints are inherently partial, and no single perspective can capture the full complexity of human and non-human life. Therefore, it benefits higher arts education to cultivate a polyphonic approach that values the interplay of diverse standpoints. Critical reflection in this context helps students empower themselves to scrutinise their own assumptions, engage empathetically with other worldviews, and transcend the constraints of rigid convictions and dogmatic beliefs. By embracing the plurality of voices and fostering co-creative dialogue, higher arts institutions can support the development of

critical, reflexive practitioners equipped to navigate the complexities of a pluralistic world.

In this chapter, I explore the challenges and opportunities of creating inclusive and polyphonic environments in higher arts education. I examine how safer spaces can be leveraged to foster open dialogue and critical reflection, particularly within the constraints highlighted by the case examples above. The evolving landscape of activism compels us to reconsider the role of higher arts education institutions—not just as sites for creative exploration, but as spaces where socially engaged art can amplify diverse voices and contribute to meaningful, inclusive discourse.

Safe spaces

The concept of safe space was briefly mentioned in Chapter 3 where participation in socially engaged arts was discussed. Safe spaces, originally associated with LGBTIQ+ communities, are environments where students can engage with others who share similar ideologies, racial backgrounds, sexual orientations, or other defining characteristics (Ben-Porath, 2017). These spaces offer a unique opportunity for students to “explore ideas and express themselves in a context with well-understood ground rules for conversation” (Palfrey, 2017, p. 20), providing a “materially different” (p. 29) sense of safety compared to conventional settings. Designed to be free from bias, conflict, and harmful actions, they are often facilitated by trained adults or peers and create opportunities for marginalised student groups to participate in open discussions without fear or perceived risk.

As conceptualised by The Roestone Collective (2014), safe spaces are dynamic and relational environments shaped by the social and material conditions that give rise to them. Far from being static or universal, they require reflexivity and periodic re-evaluation to ensure inclusivity and address evolving social differences. These spaces are inherently imperfect, functioning as sites for both separation and integration, where oppressive structures can be challenged. By embracing uncertainty and fluidity, safe spaces foster an intersectional approach to nurturing equity. In this sense, safe spaces are not merely protective bubbles but proactive environments that reflect the complexities of navigating identity, power, and solidarity in educational settings. They highlight the necessity of balancing the comfort provided by shared experiences with the transformative potential of encountering and addressing differences. Thus, safe spaces serve as critical platforms for fostering critical dialogue, creativity, and inclusive practices within educational institutions.

Safer spaces

Building on the concept of safe spaces, the notion of *safer spaces* introduces a nuanced approach to fostering inclusivity and support for marginalised groups. As defined by Ruth Deller (2019), safer spaces are environments intentionally designed to prioritise safety and inclusivity by establishing principles and

practices that address systemic inequalities and interpersonal harm. Unlike the idealised premise of a completely harm-free environment, safer spaces acknowledge the impossibility of eliminating all risks. Instead, they aim to equip at-risk individuals with the resources and support necessary to navigate challenges while fostering care, resistance, and mobilisation to transform social realities.

By focusing on both systemic and interpersonal dimensions of harm, safer spaces shift the emphasis from merely providing comfort to actively confronting inequities. These environments seek to balance the need for safety with the transformative potential of engaging with difference, emphasising a proactive approach to cultivating equity and resilience. In educational contexts, the framework of safer spaces complements and extends the goals of safe spaces by creating conditions for critical dialogue and collective action that not only protect but empower individuals to challenge oppressive structures and reimagine inclusive futures.

Balancing safety, inclusion, and freedom in higher arts education

Bouchrika (2024) notes how the safe space movement in American colleges is expanding, with more students seeking protection from ideas or speech they find offensive or uncomfortable. Consequently, many educational institutions have introduced safe spaces within their activities to provide protection for students who feel emotionally distressed or personally targeted. Emotional reasoning, where personal feelings shape interpretations of events or ideas, is shaping campus policies and events, leading to the cancellation of activities seen as offensive. Disinvitations of speakers with controversial views are also on the rise, limiting the diversity of thought on campuses. Trigger warnings are becoming more common, with students requesting warnings for potentially distressing content, influencing how professors approach sensitive topics. Concerns over microaggressions—subtle, often unintended discriminatory remarks—are increasing, heightening student sensitivity, Bouchrika (2024) reports.

These trends shaping campus policies in the US are not confined to American colleges. As the US-centred discourse on cancel culture and political correctness—with intellectual underpinnings that are far from neutral or unproblematic—spreads, it intersects with academic traditions and cultural norms in various regions, including Europe (Hollis, 2020). This process involves not mere replication but complex adaptation shaped by local cultural and political climates. While foundational issues of academic and political discord have long existed globally, recent US activist frameworks have significantly influenced how these tensions manifest in academic environments worldwide (Giddens, 2022). In this chapter, I strive to articulate how such evolving dynamics are impacting higher arts education, exploring both the challenges and opportunities of navigating these intersecting global and local forces.

While these concerns have drawn critique, similar movements towards fostering safety and inclusion are emerging in Europe, often with a more balanced approach. At Uniarts Helsinki—where I work—the guidelines for safer spaces draw on recommendations from organisations like The Feminist Culture House, The Museum of Impossible Forms, and the UN Association of Finland, as well as student-led initiatives at the Academy of Fine Arts. These guidelines aim to create an inclusive academic environment by emphasising mindful communication, respectful dialogue, and recognising the diverse needs of individuals (University of the Arts Helsinki, 2022). Unlike the US model, which sometimes limits engagement with contentious topics, the Finnish approach focuses on fostering mutual respect while preserving the free exchange of ideas. This balance is crucial in fostering a space where complex and potentially uncomfortable ideas can be discussed openly.

The Finnish guidelines also emphasise accountability, urging both students and faculty to reflect on their roles in creating safer spaces. Structural changes, such as gender-neutral facilities and inclusive curricula, address systemic inequalities proactively rather than simply shielding individuals from discomfort. By advocating for shared responsibility, these measures avoid the rigidity of overprotective policies (Kipnis, 2017) and encourage engagement with complex and potentially uncomfortable ideas.

Ultimately, while safer spaces are vital for supporting marginalised voices, higher arts education must navigate tensions between activism and institutional governance. How can we balance the drive for inclusivity, safety, and activist ambitions with the need to uphold freedom of expression, academic inquiry, and the polyphony essential for creative and intellectual growth, art-making, and knowledge production in higher arts education?

Navigating activism, inclusivity, and dialogue

The exploration of socially engaged arts practices in higher education reveals both opportunities and challenges in navigating a landscape shaped by cancel culture and the quest for safer spaces. The case studies discussed in the previous chapter illustrate the tension between activism and institutional governance, highlighting the delicate balance required to foster a productive academic environment. Artistic activism has the power to challenge prevailing narratives and spark meaningful discourse, yet it also carries the risk of escalating into actions that undermine its own objectives if not carefully managed. The example of Langkilde's resignation underscores the need for a thoughtful approach to activism that acknowledges institutional stability while striving to address social injustices.

However, socially engaged approaches can provide a way to transcend the limitations imposed by cancel culture and restrictive frameworks.

ArtsEqual: A case study

The ArtsEqual project (2015–2021), a multidisciplinary research consortium led by Uniarts Helsinki and funded by the Strategic Research Council of Finland, aimed to transform Finland's arts and arts education systems to promote equality and accessibility. Grounded in the principle that the arts should be a basic public service available to all, not a privilege for a few, this socially engaged research project in the arts sought to address structural inequalities, social exclusion, and cultural well-being. As the project's vice director, I was responsible for stakeholder relations and societal interaction activities, ensuring that its initiatives effectively engaged diverse communities, fostered meaningful dialogue across societal sectors, and contributed towards research-informed policy work at a national level.¹

ArtsEqual brought together researchers, artists, educators, and diverse community groups to confront systemic barriers such as elitism, ableism, and socioeconomic disparities that limit access to the arts. The initiative fostered interdisciplinary collaboration to study the arts in varied contexts, including dance ambassadors in elderly care (Lehikoinen, 2019), supported teaching for people with immigrant backgrounds (see Figure 10.1), hospital musicians working in neonatal intensive care units, elderly care hospitals, and hospices (Koivisto, 2022), inclusion in music education for older adults and people



Figure 10.1 Dance ambassador Satu Hakamäki from the Regional Dance Centre of Western Finland facilitating a session for students in a supported teaching programme to build trust and foster language learning. Photograph by the author.

with disabilities (Laes, 2017), musical thirdspaces for reciprocal integration (Thomson, 2021), the embodiment of hope in dance for displaced children (Anttila, 2018), and disability as a transformative force in arts education (Jaakonaho & Junttila, 2019). In addition, the project yielded a devising theatre performance *Päivästä voisi tulla rikas* [A Day Could Become Rich] with people in prison (Koskinen, 2021), and a documentary theatre performance *Toinen koti* [Other Home] with individuals from refugee backgrounds (Lehtonen & Pöyhönen, 2018). By examining the mechanisms that constitute and perpetuate these inequalities and exploring how they shape participation, ArtsEqual generated actionable, research-based solutions to promote inclusivity.

One of ArtsEqual's key contributions was its focus on policy reform, advocating for changes that prioritise accessibility and inclusivity (Westerlund, et al., 2021; Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021). ArtsEqual also emphasised community engagement and co-creation, amplifying under-represented voices, and ensuring that cultural offerings reflect societal diversity. This dual focus on grassroots action and institutional change created a model for linking higher arts education to broader societal transformation.

By providing insights and recommendations for institutions and policymakers, ArtsEqual highlighted the potential of the arts to foster equity, cultural well-being, and social cohesion. The work done in the project demonstrates how socially engaged research in and through the arts can dismantle restrictive frameworks and drive meaningful change, all while maintaining open dialogue with diverse stakeholders—a challenging yet essential endeavour. As an example of the Third Mission of higher arts education—contributing to society—ArtsEqual showcases how academic institutions can embrace activism to create more equitable and inclusive cultural and educational systems. Ultimately, ArtsEqual stands as a testament to the transformative role of researchers in higher arts education institutions, particularly through interdisciplinary and transprofessional collaboration, in addressing societal challenges.

Reconciling activism, safetyism, and polyphonic dialogue in higher arts education

As we reflect on the intricate dynamics of activism, safetyism, and open dialogue in higher arts education, it becomes evident that balancing these elements is not just ideal but essential for fostering creativity and critical thought. The 2021 Holberg Debate's exploration of identity politics underscores the polarisation that can arise when activism eclipses open dialogue.² Similarly, controversies at institutions like the Royal Danish Academy, as discussed in the previous chapter, highlight the need for thoughtful navigation of tensions between social justice and free inquiry, ensuring that neither compromises the other.

Although the Holberg Debate did not specifically address higher arts education, its examination of identity politics offers valuable insights into contemporary institutional challenges. The debate questioned whether identity politics serves as a path to social justice or fosters cultural antagonism, political polarisation, and injustice (Holberg Prize, 2021). These themes resonate deeply within arts education, where activism often shapes discussions of diversity and inclusion. By reflecting on these broader insights, institutions of higher arts education can better understand the dual potential for positive change and factionalism.

The Royal Danish Academy controversy exemplifies how activism can ignite essential social conversations but also risks fostering exclusion and polarisation. As John Stuart Mill (1859) emphasises, free inquiry and open debate are crucial for intellectual progress. However, the Academy's 2020–2021 protests exposed how activism can devolve into dogmatism, ostracising dissenting viewpoints and threatening the openness essential for academic and artistic growth.

Judith Butler's focus on thoughtful, extended discourse during the Holberg Debate is particularly relevant to higher education, where reactionary responses often undermine intellectual depth. Cornel West's emphasis on compassion and solidarity further highlights the importance of framing identity politics within collective social justice efforts rather than individual struggles (Holberg Prize, 2021). These perspectives reinforce the need for arts institutions to pursue systemic change through inclusive, courageous dialogue while avoiding the factionalism Hannah Arendt (1958) warns against. Arendt cautions that suppressing dissent and excluding opposing viewpoints can lead to ideological conformity, undermining creativity and the purpose of education: to challenge, question, and expand understanding.

Similarly, Bouchrika (2024) observes that while safetyism seeks to protect students, it may inadvertently weaken resilience and tolerance for opposing viewpoints, thereby obstructing meaningful dialogue, academic freedom, and artistic expression. Higher arts education institutions, like universities more broadly, serve as unique spaces for exploring, developing, and sharing knowledge and practices. As Ben-Porath (2017) argues, scholars and students must have the freedom to question, challenge, and engage with both established ideas and emerging—not yet fully developed—perspectives without fear of censorship or reprisal. This freedom is integral to artmaking, research, teaching, and learning. Safeguarding free speech ensures that these institutions fulfil their societal role by fostering the artistic and academic contributions that challenge assumptions, “expand ... intellectual horizons, and prepare ... for civic roles” (Ben-Porath, 2017, p. 36).

Greenwald's reflections on the contextual nature of identity politics during the Holberg Debate caution against rigid interpretations of activism in educational settings (Holberg Prize, 2021). This perspective aligns with Jürgen Habermas's (1984) theory of discourse ethics, which advocates for rational, coercion-free dialogue as a pathway to moral progress and conflict resolution.

Habermas underscores the value of participatory ethics, where mutual understanding and consensus are prioritised. By fostering environments of open inquiry rather than ideological conformity, higher arts institutions can balance activism with the principles of free expression, equipping students to navigate the complexities of a pluralistic world.

Fostering polyphonic spaces

In socially engaged art, critical imagination and creativity are pivotal in addressing social, political, and environmental issues. This art form, driven by an activist mindset, employs strategies such as direct action, participatory projects, and subversive techniques to challenge the status quo and provoke thought. Through approaches like radical juxtaposition, satire, and symbolic art, socially engaged art pushes boundaries and offers new perspectives that traditional rational discourse may overlook. These strategies are crucial for highlighting injustices and inspiring change in ways that resonate emotionally and intellectually with diverse audiences.

The interplay between socially engaged art and Habermas's (1984) vision of rational dialogue can be complex. While the activist orientation of socially engaged art aims to disrupt and challenge prevailing narratives, Habermas's framework emphasises a dialogical process free from coercion, aimed at reaching mutual understanding. On one hand, the provocative and imaginative nature of socially engaged art can stimulate dialogue and encourage critical reflection, aligning with ideals of open inquiry and democratic engagement. On the other hand, its confrontational and subversive tactics may clash with Habermas's emphasis on a rational, consensus-driven approach.

Fostering a culture where socially engaged art and rational dialogue coexist requires the creation of polyphonic spaces, where diverse voices and perspectives are not only expressed but actively engaged with. This can be achieved through carefully designed participatory processes that prioritise dialogue, co-creative imagination, and critical reflection, allowing for inclusive discussions without the expectation of consensus. Drawing on Palfrey's (2017) concept of "brave spaces," these polyphonic environments also encourage serious, respectful discourse, where students and participants are challenged to engage with uncomfortable or unfamiliar ideas. Brave spaces, characterised by less restrictive norms, allow for a broader range of expression, enabling the free exchange of ideas even when they challenge deeply held beliefs. In this context, polyphonic spaces can cultivate resilience, fostering both intellectual and emotional growth as individuals confront difficult conversations and develop new perspectives.

By integrating these elements into artistic initiatives, higher arts education institutions can create environments that value both artistic freedom and rational discourse. In doing so, they ensure that activism within the arts contributes meaningfully to societal change while upholding the principles of reasoned and inclusive dialogue. Engaging with a pluralistic world requires

appreciating a wide range of voices, worldviews, and ideologies, demanding both resilience and empathy towards the Other. It involves cultivating emotional resilience to engage with differences, even when they are not yet fully understood, and fostering empathetic listening over preconceived judgements. Moreover, rather than shielding participants from discomfort or mistrust, polyphonic spaces should promote in-depth discussions about the divisions that separate us, facilitating opportunities for finding common ground and addressing the complex challenges facing humanity, non-human species, and the planet.

Furthermore, Frankie Morgan's (2021) perspective on the necessity of compassion and understanding in conflict resolution reinforces the polyphonic framework, as both adaptable communication skills and compassionate dialogue are essential for advancing higher arts education and broader societal interactions.

The case studies in the previous chapter demonstrate how activism, when it becomes overly dogmatic, can lead to exclusionary practises and suppress creative freedom. When higher arts education succumbs to political polarisation or exclusionary practices, it compromises its role as a space for intellectual and artistic diversity. As it continues to engage with pressing local and global issues, it is essential that institutions maintain a commitment to intellectual rigour and artistic diversity in upholding the fundamental purpose of higher education: to engage with, challenge, and broaden diverse perspectives. Only by maintaining a commitment to both social justice and open dialogue can higher arts education continue to help students and faculty empower themselves to contribute meaningfully to broader societal conversations about equity, creative freedom, sustainability, and the shared challenges shaping our planet's future.

The intersection of activism and higher arts education presents both opportunities and challenges. Socially engaged art has the potential to drive significant social change, empowering students and faculty to contribute to movements addressing racial inequality, climate change, and historical injustices. However, when activism becomes overly rigid or polarised, it risks undermining the very freedoms that higher education is meant to protect. The cases discussed illustrate the delicate balance that must be maintained between activism and open dialogue, ensuring that higher arts education remains a space for both critical engagement and creative freedom.

Chapter reflections

To recap, socially engaged arts provide powerful avenues to address inequities and other societal challenges in higher arts education, while identity politics and activism are necessary for confronting persistent injustices. However, higher arts education must also remain a place where ideas can be freely explored and debated. The lessons from the Holberg Debate remind us of the importance of thoughtful, compassionate discourse in overcoming the risks of

polarisation and ensuring that institutions remain inclusive, dynamic spaces for both intellectual and artistic growth. Polyphonic spaces, where diverse voices can coexist and engage in meaningful dialogue, remain essential in navigating the complex interplay of activism, academic freedom, and creative expression.

As Habermas reminds us, rational, coercion-free dialogue is key to resolving conflicts and promoting equity. Similarly, Arendt's caution against ideological conformity underscores the importance of maintaining openness to dissenting viewpoints, ensuring that the pursuit of social justice does not stifle individual freedom or artistic exploration. While the rise of safetyism reflects a genuine desire to protect students, it should not come at the cost of intellectual rigour or artistic diversity. It can benefit higher arts education to navigate this tension by fostering environments that are both supportive and intellectually challenging, preparing students to engage with complex issues and constructively cope with dissonance.

By fostering a balanced approach to activism—one that embraces both social justice and open dialogue—higher arts education can continue to be a catalyst for meaningful change without sacrificing its commitment to creative and academic freedom. Moving forward, these institutions must continue to adapt, finding meaningful ways to reconcile activism with open dialogue and artistic freedom. Only by doing so can they equip future generations with the critical tools needed to address the pressing social, environmental, and political challenges of our time.

Notes

- 1 For more information, see Ilmola-Sheppard et al. (2021) or visit the ArtsEqual project website at www.artsequal.fi.
- 2 In 2021, three prominent American figures—philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler, philosopher, political activist, and actor Cornel West, and investigative journalist and author Glenn Greenwald—were invited to Bergen, Norway, to participate in the Holberg Debate. This debate, inspired by Ludvig Holberg's Enlightenment ideas, aims to explore major challenges of our time. Organised by the Holberg Prize, an international award presented annually by the Norwegian government to scholars for outstanding contributions in the arts, humanities, social sciences, law, and theology, the debate addressed a critical question: "Does identity politics, as it is currently manifesting, offer a suitable path to social justice, or has it become a recipe for cultural antagonism, political polarization, and new forms of injustice?" (Holberg Prize, 2021, para. 3).

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11 Socially engaged art and the futures of higher arts education

In an era marked by profound global challenges—from the climate crisis and inequality to the preservation of cultural diversity—higher arts education institutions are increasingly called upon to redefine their societal roles. Traditionally centred on teaching and research, these institutions now have an opportunity to broaden their contributions by embracing a “Third Mission” that entails active engagement with society and diverse stakeholders. This shift is key to ensuring their future relevance and vitality in a rapidly evolving world.

As the global community recognises the importance of interdisciplinary and trans-professional collaboration, overcoming the siloed thinking of modernity has become essential. The need for higher arts education institutions to engage more deeply with society is particularly urgent in the 21st century.

A consensus on the importance of sustainable development goals (SDGs) has been established through the United Nations, with UNESCO’s Education 2030 Agenda underscoring education’s critical role in furthering these goals. The agenda calls for educational institutions to act as catalysts for rapid, equitable, and sustainable change, particularly in the areas of poverty eradication, equitable quality education, and transformative learning (UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda, 2022). Though the arts’ full potential remains underexplored in global education systems, higher arts education institutions are well-positioned to contribute to the SDGs through socially engaged arts practices that address pressing societal issues. By adopting these practices, which integrate diverse voices and perspectives into creative problem-solving, higher arts education institutions can play a vital role in advancing social inclusion, fostering critical thinking, and building resilient communities.

As outlined in earlier chapters, socially engaged art, which involves communities directly and addresses social issues through co-creative practices, offers valuable insights for higher arts education. These practices demonstrate the transformative power of the arts to foster critical thinking, community building, and social change—qualities that are increasingly essential as institutions worldwide grapple with the demands of the SDGs.

Across regions, there are growing opportunities for socially engaged art to act as a catalyst for addressing pressing social needs. In Africa, incorporating

the sustainable development goals (SDGs) into higher education is essential for nurturing cultural expression and addressing local challenges (UNESCO, 2022). In South Asia, a 2023 World Bank's report emphasises regional educational cooperation to tackle the climate crisis and enhance social cohesion (World Bank, 2023). Post-pandemic, countries like Australia face challenges such as funding cuts and the deprioritisation of arts education, compounded by a global youth mental health crisis (Ezarik, 2022; Smith, 2020). Advocacy efforts underline arts education's role in cultivating engaged citizens, balancing educational policies that increasingly favour science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) integration (Kerby et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2021). Finally, a UNESCO report highlights the role of arts education in peacebuilding and cultural preservation in South America, especially in regions impacted by inequality and conflict. Here, arts education empowers communities, promotes intercultural dialogue, and supports cultural preservation—foundations for peace and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2022).

In this chapter, I adopt a future-oriented perspective, imagining how socially engaged art can fulfil the “Third Mission” of higher arts education institutions across four large-scale scenarios developed in the FAST45 project. By examining the potential contributions of these institutions within these scenarios, I strive to envision pathways for addressing the complex challenges outlined in UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda.

Possible futures

The future is inherently uncertain. Futurists like Roy Amara (1981) argue that, because the future has yet to take shape, its exact trajectory cannot be precisely predicted. Rather than a single, fixed outcome, numerous potential paths are possible for the arts, higher education, and the broader world. Despite this unpredictability, it is reasonable to assume that higher arts education institutions will remain integral to creative ecosystems and society, with engagement in the arts, research, and teaching continuing to play a vital role within them (D'Hespeel, et al., 2023).

Futures thinking does not predict what lies ahead for higher arts education, specific arts universities, or society in general. Unlike analytical thinking, which relies on convergent methods to find definitive answers and minimise uncertainty, futures thinking promotes creative and exploratory approaches that embrace divergent thinking. This process encourages the exploration of multiple possible outcomes, recognising the inherent uncertainty in imagining alternative futures, assessing their likelihood, and considering their preferability (Bell, 2017).

Four scenarios for higher arts education

The EU-funded FAST45 project used a futures studies approach to envision and shape a higher arts education landscape where the arts play a vital and integrated role in both the sector and society. The project gathered knowledge,

developed new methodologies, and applied them through Art School Futures Labs—an arts-based workshop approach designed for higher arts education institutions (Lehikoinen & Tuittila, 2023). These labs engaged students, faculty, and stakeholders in imagining future possibilities for the arts and higher arts education. The resulting images and reflections were analysed and transformed into four large-scale scenarios and policy recommendations to help institutions actively shape, rather than merely anticipate, their future directions within these scenarios (D’Hespeel, et al., 2023).

Open Spaces—Fostering creativity and innovation in society

In the Open Spaces scenario, higher arts education institutions emerge as hubs for societal innovation, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration to address social, environmental, cultural, and technological challenges. These institutions prioritise open, flexible learning and research environments where students, educators, researchers, and partners collaborate as equal contributors, with a strong emphasis on individualised learning and equality (D’Hespeel et al., 2023). Key drivers of change, such as demographic shifts, globalisation, cultural diversity, and the shift towards project-based and interdisciplinary work, shape this scenario. Institutions respond by creating adaptable workspaces that support work-life balance, remote work, automation, and lifelong learning through diverse, personalised learning paths that focus on individual growth. In this scenario, institutions are deeply networked locally and globally, forming active partnerships and fostering dialogues that address complex issues. Moving beyond traditional arts training, these institutions prioritise societal impact, using art and creativity to tackle pressing social, cultural, and technological problems.

In this scenario, socially engaged art holds immense potential to strengthen the Third Mission of higher arts education institutions—fostering social responsibility and contributing to innovation through research and development (R&D). By engaging with communities and addressing real-world social challenges, socially engaged art aligns with the broader goals of interdisciplinary collaboration, societal impact, and public engagement. Its integration into the Third Mission not only enriches institutional roles as centres of cultural innovation but also reinforces its capacity for transformative R&D collaboration.

Socially engaged art can elevate the role of higher arts education institutions as socially responsive entities by embedding community concerns into their core practices. Through participatory projects that reflect societal needs, institutions can move beyond traditional educational frameworks to become active agents of social transformation. By fostering meaningful collaborations with local stakeholders—such as public organisations, NGOs, and community groups—institutions can strengthen public trust, deepen mutual investment, and demonstrate the arts’ relevance in addressing societal challenges.

Incorporating socially engaged art into institutional research fosters interdisciplinary R&D collaboration by addressing real-world social issues through creative, community-oriented approaches. It provides a platform for partnerships between the arts, sciences, and other fields, enabling critically creative responses to complex challenges such as climate crisis, social inequality, and urban regeneration. Socially engaged art projects can act as experimental test-beds, advancing both artistic practice and applied research while deepening the institution's engagement with societal needs.

Socially engaged art can translate complex research outcomes into accessible and relatable forms, fostering greater public understanding and involvement. By engaging communities in the creative process, these projects serve as a bridge between academic inquiry and societal concerns. This participatory approach aligns with the Third Mission's emphasis on public engagement, making the institution's research more transparent, inclusive, and impactful. Additionally, socially engaged art often generates qualitative insights and lived experiences that can complement traditional R&D methodologies, enriching the research process itself.

Through its interdisciplinary and project-based nature, socially engaged art has the potential to equip students and researchers with the skills needed for meaningful collaboration across sectors. Institutions leveraging these projects as part of their Third Mission cultivate a workforce adept at integrating diverse perspectives and navigating complex social dynamics. This capability is particularly valuable in R&D contexts, where partnerships with external organisations often require adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and critically creative approaches to problem-solving.

In the Open Spaces scenario, the Third Mission calls on higher arts education institutions to contribute to sustainable and inclusive development and innovation at both local and global scales. Socially engaged art, with its focus on community-driven processes and real-world issues, inherently supports these goals. By aligning projects with the United Nations' SDGs or other global frameworks, institutions can demonstrate their relevance in addressing pressing challenges such as climate crisis, poverty, education, and health equity. Moreover, these projects highlight the role of art as a catalyst for long-term social change, underscoring its value in R&D initiatives focused on systemic transformation.

Socially engaged art can encourage collaborative forms of artistic research that emphasise co-creation, reflexivity, and societal relevance. These approaches expand the scope of traditional research to include collaborative, community-based exploration that is needs-informed. Institutions embracing socially engaged art as part of their Third Mission not only advance knowledge production but also create research outputs that are directly applicable to real-world contexts. Such work enhances the institution's reputation as a hub for socially impactful innovation and positions it as a spearhead in emerging fields such as social design or cultural sustainability.

Ultimately, in this scenario, integrating socially engaged art into their Third Mission enables higher arts education institutions to redefine their societal

role, amplifying their impact through meaningful R&D collaborations and community-centred approaches. This alignment not only enriches the institution's research agenda but also reinforces its commitment to social responsibility and public engagement. As centres of creativity and new ideas, arts institutions that embrace socially engaged art contribute meaningfully to the cultural, social, and economic well-being of society, ensuring their relevance and adaptability in a rapidly evolving world.

Slow Eco-Life—Embracing sustainability and mindful creativity

The Slow Eco-Life scenario envisions a transformative future where higher arts education institutions respond to escalating ecological crises—climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution—by embedding sustainability, ecological consciousness, and social equity at the core of their mission. This shift is driven by the urgent need to address environmental degradation and societal challenges, prompting institutions to prioritise resilience, community engagement, and intentional creativity (D'Hespeel et al., 2023).

In this scenario, institutions adopt practices aligned with regenerative sustainability and circular economies, ensuring their operations and curricula emphasise responsible consumption and waste reduction. Strict environmental regulations shape institutional policies, while sustainability becomes a fundamental value permeating all aspects of education, from material selection to artistic practices. These changes foster a new mindset, where arts education not only reflects but actively contributes to ecological and social well-being. Art thrives as a powerful means of activism, addressing themes such as climate justice, ecological restoration, and interspecies rights. Students emerge as advocates and changemakers, weaving these concerns into their creative processes. The use of renewable materials, Indigenous knowledge, and interspecies collaboration defines artistic innovation, promoting a form of artistry that is both reflective and responsive to ecological realities (D'Hespeel et al., 2023).

Institutions also reimagine their spatial and social roles, relocating to smaller cities and rural areas to foster local self-sufficiency and stronger community ties. This decentralised model supports immersive learning experiences, enhancing social cohesion through collaborative projects with local communities. Alongside this, curricula evolve to incorporate cross-disciplinary and intersectional approaches, equipping students with the skills to navigate ethical complexities and contribute to sustainable futures.

A hallmark of the Slow Eco-Life scenario is its commitment to inclusive governance, where hierarchies are flattened, and students are actively involved in decision-making processes (D'Hespeel et al., 2023). This participatory ethos fosters collaborative environments where responsibility and innovation are shared, aligning with the broader values of “slowness”—encouraging deeper reflection, resilience, and thoughtful creativity in response to the challenges of degrowth and ecological transition. In this context, socially engaged art

emerges as an affirmative practice for advancing the Third Mission of higher arts education institutions: contributing to societal transformation through public engagement, sustainability, and transformative action. Rooted in collaboration and community involvement, socially engaged art fosters active dialogue between institutions and local communities, positioning art as both a practice and a philosophy for driving meaningful change in ecological and social contexts.

The ecological crises central to this scenario demand an approach to education and research that transcends disciplinary boundaries and traditional academic frameworks. Socially engaged art exemplifies this approach by prioritising community co-creation, enabling institutions to serve as focal points for regenerative and inclusive practices. These projects often involve partnerships with local communities, environmental organisations, and policymakers, allowing institutions to address pressing issues such as habitat restoration, sustainable urban planning, or climate adaptation through creative, participatory methodologies.

One of the key strengths of socially engaged art is its ability to integrate diverse forms of knowledge, particularly Indigenous and local ecological wisdom, into institutional research and practice. This integration is made possible through ethical practices of participation, inclusion, and multivoicedness, where art serves as a platform for dialogue and collective knowledge-building. By prioritising collaborative processes, socially engaged art invites marginalised voices and local communities to actively shape the research agenda, ensuring that diverse cultural, ecological, and experiential insights inform both creative and academic practices. This approach fosters a more holistic understanding of sustainability, rooted in the lived experiences and traditions of those who are often excluded from mainstream discourse.

Socially engaged art also enhances the educational mission of higher arts education institutions by equipping students with the skills needed for interdisciplinary collaboration, critical thinking, and social responsibility. Through participation in community-centred projects, students learn to navigate complex ethical and ecological challenges, applying their creativity in ways that address real-world issues. This experiential learning model aligns with the scenario's emphasis on slow, reflective processes, allowing students to develop resilience and adaptability as they engage with the social and environmental dimensions of their art. Moreover, socially engaged art amplifies the public engagement aspect of the Third Mission by making institutional research accessible and meaningful beyond academic contexts. By creating works and initiatives that resonate with local communities, socially engaged art transforms abstract concepts of sustainability into tangible, relatable experiences. This not only increases public awareness of ecological challenges but also fosters collective action, empowering communities to take part in solutions.

In the Slow Eco-Life scenario, where decentralisation and community self-sufficiency play a significant role, socially engaged art can reinforce the institution's presence as an active participant in local ecosystems—both social and

natural. By working directly with rural or smaller urban communities, institutions can address localised ecological and social issues, fostering resilience and equity in ways that scale responsibly to broader contexts. In addition, socially engaged art can encourage higher arts education institutions to adopt a more fluid and dynamic role in society. Rather than functioning solely as centres of learning and research, these institutions evolve into catalysts for sustainable development and cultural transformation. Through partnerships and community collaborations, socially engaged art transforms institutions into laboratories of social change, advancing the ecological consciousness and social equity that define the Slow Eco-Life scenario.

Thus, in the Slow Eco-Life scenario, socially engaged art not only supports the Third Mission of higher arts education institutions but also redefines it to align with the values and priorities of the scenario. By fostering sustainability, public engagement, and interdisciplinary innovation, it enables institutions to address ecological crises while empowering students and communities to contribute to a more equitable and resilient future. This integration of art, ecology, and social responsibility through socially engaged art positions higher arts education as a powerful driver of transformation in eco-politics, particularly in times of uncertainty caused by the systemic challenges of the eco-crisis.

Phyigital frontiers: Seamless fusion of physical and digital realms

In the Phyigital Frontiers scenario, higher arts education institutions integrate physical and digital realms through technologies like AI, quantum computing, and neurotechnology, creating a “phyigital” environment that reshapes artistic creation, learning, and governance. This transformation is driven by the ecological crisis, technological advancements, and cyborgification, challenging social norms, ethical standards, and governance structures. Socially engaged art thrives in this context by using immersive technologies to foster inclusivity, collaboration, and societal impact. It allows artists to create interactive works that evolve with audience participation, making art more accessible and inclusive, particularly for marginalised communities. Additionally, the integration of body-enhancing technologies invites exploration of identity, power, and human agency, encouraging public discussions on bioethics, AI, and personal autonomy. This environment also promotes new, decentralised governance models within institutions, empowering marginalised groups to co-create policies and practices (D’Hespeel et al., 2023).

In this scenario, socially engaged art holds significant potential to advance the Third Mission of higher arts education institutions, particularly in the areas of public engagement, societal transformation, and the ethical integration of technology into creative practices. This scenario, characterised by the blending of physical and digital realities, provides a unique environment where art becomes a catalyst for addressing complex social issues while challenging traditional notions of artistic production and institutional governance.

As higher arts education institutions increasingly incorporate technologies such as AI, neurotechnology, and immersive digital environments, socially engaged art can serve as a bridge between the technological and social dimensions of contemporary life. These technologies enable artists to create interactive, dynamic works that evolve based on audience participation, enhancing engagement, and ensuring that art reflects the ever-changing nature of society. Through these interactive and participatory practices, socially engaged art can expand its reach beyond the physical realm, allowing communities, particularly marginalised ones, to engage in global artistic dialogues. This shift eliminates geographical barriers, democratising access to art and fostering inclusivity by enabling diverse voices to be heard and respected.

Furthermore, the integration of body-enhancing technologies presents new opportunities for socially engaged art to explore themes of identity, autonomy, and human agency. In a world increasingly shaped by bioethics and AI, artists can create works that invite reflection on the implications of these advancements for individual and collective identity. For example, public interventions that explore the ethical concerns surrounding AI's role in personal decision-making or neurotechnology's impact on consciousness could serve as forums for broader societal debates. These artistic practices will offer new perspectives on what it means to be human in an era of rapid technological change, potentially contributing to the development of future ethical frameworks.

In terms of governance, the Phygital Frontiers scenario also sees a reimagining of institutional decision-making processes. The role of AI-led systems in guiding institutional governance opens new possibilities for decentralised, collaborative models. Socially engaged art can support these innovations by promoting participatory governance structures within institutions, where students, faculty, and community members co-create policies and practices. Through the lens of socially engaged art, institutions can shift away from hierarchical decision-making towards more inclusive and responsive frameworks, ensuring that all voices are heard and actively contribute to shaping the institution's direction. This aligns with the broader societal transformation at the heart of the Third Mission of higher arts education, positioning institutions as leaders in fostering social change through collaborative, technology-mediated practices.

Ultimately, in the Phygital Frontiers scenario, socially engaged art has the potential to redefine the role of higher arts education institutions in society. By harnessing cutting-edge technologies and fostering inclusive, collaborative practices, socially engaged art can address the complex ethical, social, and ecological challenges of our time. It can help institutions shift their focus from traditional disciplinary boundaries to a more fluid, interconnected approach that integrates the physical, digital, and societal realms, positioning institutions and arts professionals as change agents who drive social transformation. In doing so, socially engaged art advances the Third Mission of higher arts education: contributing to the creation of a more just, equitable, and resilient future.

Overall, socially engaged art is a transformative force in the Phygital Frontiers scenario, pushing the boundaries of collaborative creativity and

social change while empowering institutions and artists as change agents who shape a positive societal impact in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Profitable endeavours: Adaptation in a neoliberal and right-leaning political climate

In the Profitable Endeavours scenario, higher arts education institutions must adapt to a neoliberal environment marked by economic pressures, political ideologies, and austerity measures. The mid-2020s economic downturn, exacerbated by geopolitical events such as the escalating risks of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, leads to severe cuts in public funding for the arts and higher arts education. To survive, institutions increasingly rely on industry partnerships and commercialised educational offerings, shifting focus from artistic development to market-driven outcomes. Educational programmes in higher arts education are often tailored to meet industry demands, prioritising practical skills over critical inquiry and, at times, artistic freedom. As a result, the gap widens between affluent students who can afford rising tuition fees and those excluded due to economic constraints, often relegated to shorter, workforce-oriented micro-credentials (D'Hespeel et al., 2023).

This market-driven model also shifts the priorities of arts institutions. Creative expression, intellectual development, and critical engagement are sidelined in favour of economically viable programmes. As industries increasingly influence curricula, the focus on profitable art forms reduces space for experimental or socially engaged practices. In this context, intellectual property and licencing agreements play a key role in securing funding but also lead to legal complexities surrounding the ownership of creativity. Despite these pressures, a grassroots movement of independent art collectives challenges the commodification of art, emphasising openness, community-driven teaching, and self-directed research. These independent initiatives offer a space for creative exploration free from market constraints, providing a counterpoint to institutionalised, commercialised art works (D'Hespeel et al., 2023).

In this context, socially engaged art holds the potential to resist the market-driven agenda and address the societal challenges amplified by neoliberal policies. By centring collaboration, activism, and social transformation, socially engaged art remains a vital counterforce in the face of economic constraints. Artists use their work to advocate for marginalised communities, critique market forces, and foster inclusive, community-centred artistic practices that operate outside the profit-driven motives of mainstream institutions. This form of art offers an alternative educational model that resists commercialisation by prioritising collective knowledge-building, creative exploration, and non-hierarchical teaching.

Moreover, socially engaged art can help raise awareness of pressing social issues, such as economic inequality, political instability, and systemic injustice. Through participatory projects and public interventions, artists mobilise communities and advocate for societal change. Additionally, socially engaged

artists challenge the growing commercialisation of intellectual property by promoting open access and collaborative practices, ensuring that creative work remains accessible and not confined to profit-driven frameworks.

Ultimately, socially engaged art offers a means for artists to navigate the challenges posed by the neoliberal art world, transforming institutional and societal practices from within. By blending creativity with activism, it fosters an environment where artistic practice is a tool for social change, empowering communities and challenging the political and economic systems that shape both art and society.

The relevance of socially engaged art for higher arts education in four scenarios

The four scenarios from the FAST45 project provide a framework for envisioning the transformative potential of socially engaged art and its critical relevance for higher arts education institutions. Whether fostering creativity and innovation in the Open Spaces scenario, promoting sustainability and mindful creativity in the Slow Eco-Life scenario, embracing technological fusion in the Phygital Frontiers scenario, or resisting neoliberal pressures in the Profitable Endeavours scenario, socially engaged art holds immense potential across all four scenarios. It aligns with the evolving missions of higher arts education institutions, enhancing their capacity to respond to societal changes.

By emphasising collaboration, community involvement, and interdisciplinary approaches, socially engaged art can significantly strengthen the Third Mission of higher arts education: helping to build a future that is more inclusive, sustainable, and forward-thinking. As institutions increasingly embrace these practices, they can position themselves as dynamic agents of positive change, addressing pressing global challenges while ensuring that art remains a powerful means for social, cultural, and ecological progress. In doing so, higher arts education institutions can continue to justify their societal relevance and demonstrate the public value of the arts, ensuring sustained public funding and support. Ultimately, these scenarios highlight the immense potential for higher arts education institutions to evolve into transformative hubs that not only adapt to future challenges but actively shape a better world through socially engaged art.

Chapter reflections

As we look towards the future, the role of socially engaged art in higher arts education institutions becomes even more crucial in addressing the complex challenges of our time. The four scenarios developed through the FAST45 project—Open Spaces, Slow Eco-Life, Phygital Frontiers, and Profitable Endeavours—offer distinct but interconnected visions of what the future may hold. While these scenarios represent possible trajectories, it is important to recognise that elements of these futures are already unfolding in various ways in different regional contexts around the world. Some institutions are already

embracing aspects of these scenarios, adapting their curricula, governance, and artistic practices in response to changing social, environmental, and technological dynamics.

How these scenarios will fully evolve, both locally and globally, remains uncertain. The interaction of political, economic, and technological forces will shape their development—often in unpredictable ways. Local contexts, cultural values, and regional priorities will also influence the integration of socially engaged art into higher education, with unique opportunities and challenges arising in different parts of the world. Importantly, these scenarios have also yielded policy recommendations for higher arts education institutions and policymakers, offering concrete pathways to guide decision-making in diverse contexts (see D’Hespeel, et al., 2023). What is clear, however, is that the future will likely draw on elements from all these scenarios, along with unforeseen developments.

Considering this uncertainty, the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) offer a weighty and enduring framework to guide progress towards a socially and ecologically responsible future. While the future may be shaped by a range of complex, intersecting forces, the SDGs provide a clear direction for integrating social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and responsible governance into the work of professionals in the arts and higher arts education.

Socially engaged art is uniquely positioned to contribute to these goals, particularly in the context of higher arts education. In each of the four scenarios, socially engaged art can meaningfully foster collaboration, promote sustainability, and challenge the status quo. Whether addressing environmental stewardship in the Slow Eco-Life scenario, navigating digital transformation in Phygital Frontiers, or resisting the marketisation of education in Profitable Endeavours, socially engaged art practices demonstrate their ability to engage communities, adapt, and catalyse change. These practices enable institutions to create collaborative, arts-based environments where democratic values, critical thinking, and creative imagination can thrive.

However, for socially engaged art to fully realise its potential in these diverse contexts, it must first and foremost be considered a subject of study in its own right. Only through dedicated research and scholarship can we better understand its complexity and future potential in different contexts. This deeper understanding will help higher arts education institutions, arts organisations, and professionals in the arts harness the full breadth of socially engaged art’s transformative power and ensure that it can adapt to and shape the challenges of an ever-evolving world.

In this way, socially engaged art remains a dynamic and invaluable resource, not only for higher education institutions committed to contributing meaningfully to the SDGs but also for arts professionals across sectors. By understanding and harnessing the diverse potential of socially engaged art, these institutions and professionals can position themselves as key agents of change, playing a central role in shaping socially and ecologically responsible futures.

The integration of socially engaged art into higher arts education enriches the educational experience and empowers both students and arts professionals to actively participate in the transformation of society.

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12 Coda

Reimagining the role of socially engaged arts in higher arts education

In this book, *Creativity, Society, and the Role of Socially Engaged Art in Higher Arts Education*, I have explored the multifaceted role of socially engaged arts in academia, justifying its position as an autonomous subject of study and highlighting its transformative potential in fulfilling institutions' Third Mission—contributing meaningfully to society. As both a dynamic set of practices and a rich field of study, socially engaged arts engage with the complexities of human experience, foster authentic connections with diverse communities, and promote interdisciplinary, trans-professional dialogue. They celebrate differences, advocate for social transformation, and envision futures centred on human development and planetary well-being. In this concluding chapter, I summarise key insights and propose strategic action points for higher arts education institutions to consider.

Unpacking the passion and complexity of socially engaged arts

The case studies in this book demonstrate that socially engaged arts are as intricate and varied as the communities and contexts they engage. Understanding their full potential requires a deep, sustained commitment to exploring their nuances. This requires a passion not only for understanding the field's breadth but also for embracing its complexity. Such passion to inquire needs to balance critical reflection with creative exploration, fostering a holistic understanding of how socially engaged arts in varied contexts intersect with broader societal and educational landscapes.

At their core, socially engaged arts thrive on connection and interaction, encouraging practitioners, researchers, and students to collaborate across diverse groups and communities. These connections are not peripheral but central to their ethos, requiring empathy, mutual respect, and co-creative agency. By engaging with such practices, artists and participants collectively cultivate dialogues that transcend disciplinary, professional, cultural, and geographic boundaries—nurturing social imagination by fostering environments where transformative ideas can flourish.

The power of interdisciplinarity and visionary collaboration

Socially engaged arts flourish in many types of communities and in spaces where disciplines and professions intersect. Tackling complex societal challenges demands imaginative approaches born from dialogue and collaboration across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries. Socially engaged arts encourage such exchanges, enabling visionary co-creation and fostering interdisciplinary insights in tackling pressing issues—local and global.

Reflection is central to these efforts. By embedding critical thought into co-creative practice, socially engaged arts offer means for navigating and addressing the social, ethical, cultural, and ecological challenges of our time. This synthesis of reflection and action empowers the field to serve as a catalyst for meaningful change.

Fostering human development and celebrating differences

Socially engaged arts celebrate diversity as a source of strength and inspiration. They view cultural, social, and individual differences not as barriers but as opportunities for dialogue and understanding. By embracing these differences, the field fosters inclusive practices that contribute to social cohesion and human development, while also addressing the broader ecosystems that underpin planetary well-being.

In this context, socially engaged arts align with foundational principles from critical theories, such as Marxist thought, Freirean pedagogy, and feminist insights, which advocate for art's transformative power in challenging systems of oppression and fostering empowerment. Socially engaged arts also go beyond merely aesthetic expressions, becoming a means of liberation and a way for reclaiming identity, promoting critical consciousness, and resisting systemic injustices. As seen in many of the case examples in this book, arts can actively challenge dominant narratives, mobilise collective action, and nurture critical awareness among communities.

The ethical foundation of socially engaged arts reinforces its commitment to equity, reciprocity, and mutual learning. This foundation challenges higher arts education institutions to take active roles in promoting diversity, inclusion, and sustainability, fostering resilience, and driving social transformation.

The role of higher arts education institutions

Socially engaged arts equip higher arts education to address urgent local and global challenges, including social exclusion, poverty, climate crises, biodiversity loss, political polarisation, and humanitarian disasters. These issues demand responses that are as ethically grounded as they are creative. They benefit higher arts education institutions to prioritise genuine, non-hierarchical engagement with communities, ensuring that their interactions are guided by respect, reciprocity, and co-creation.

Higher arts education institutions play a pivotal role in nurturing socially engaged arts. Through dedicated collaborative arts-based research initiatives, the attentive integration of socially engaged arts into curricula, and active involvement in community partnerships, they can foster critical, arts-informed reflection and transformative practices. These efforts not only benefit the communities they engage but also enhance the relevance and resilience of the institutions themselves.

In the face of neoliberal pressures that prioritise metrics and competition over meaning and collaboration, socially engaged arts can provide an all-important counter-narrative for higher arts education institutions. They champion co-creation, intentional processes, and collective impact. By embracing socially engaged arts practices, institutions can resist the dehumanising effects of neoliberalism and reaffirm their commitment to societal and educational transformation that holds genuine relevance for all people, non-human life, and the planet.

Navigating polarisation and preserving freedom of expression

This book has also examined the emotional intensity often associated with activism within higher arts education. While such intensity can drive action, it can also lead to polarisation, oversimplified conclusions, self-censorship, and retroactive censorship—practices that risk distorting art history and stifling artistic critical dialogue.

To counter these tendencies, it is essential to foster environments that embrace discomfort as a catalyst for growth. Biesta's concept of democratic education provides a valuable framework, advocating for "spaces of plurality and difference" (Biesta, 2006, p. 149) where diverse perspectives coexist and challenge one another constructively. Socially engaged arts, with their focus on dialogue, diversity, and ethical engagement, align closely with this vision, offering a pathway to deeper understanding and critically creative problem-solving.

A vision for the futures

Looking ahead, the passion that drives socially engaged arts should also guide their future exploration. Higher arts education institutions have an opportunity—and a responsibility—to integrate socially engaged arts into their core missions, positioning themselves as centres of ethical inquiry, creative collaboration, and societal change. This integration demands continued study, deep understanding, and an unwavering commitment to critical reflection, interdisciplinary dialogue, and visionary co-creation.

As socially engaged arts evolve, they offer a hopeful and transformative path for higher arts education institutions. By nurturing students and practitioners who are not only skilled artists but also active agents of social change, socially engaged arts redefine the role of higher arts education in a rapidly evolving world. Their passion for engagement, diversity, and planetary well-being

illuminates the potential of higher arts education to inspire, envision, and transform—serving as a dynamic force for inclusive, sustainable, and resilient communities.

The preferred futures of socially engaged arts hinge on deliberate action and visionary collaboration. There is value in higher arts education institutions embracing their responsibility to integrate these practices into their missions, fostering ethical inquiry, critically creative imagination, and meaningful social engagement. To realise this vision, several strategies are critical:

1. *Embedding competences in curricula*: Ensure that the defined competences are taught in a clear, balanced, and pedagogically sound manner across programmes.
2. *Introducing career pathways*: Integrate socially engaged arts as a potential career path in all BA programmes in the arts, ensuring that students gain an informed understanding of the field so they are prepared to pursue further study in socially engaged arts at the MA level if they choose to do so.
3. *Prioritising research and reflection*: Invest in long-term strategies, research programmes and networks to systematically accumulate and assess knowledge in socially engaged arts, supported by dedicated research infrastructures, professors, post-doctoral researchers, and doctoral candidates in the field.
4. *Fostering access and inclusivity*: Expand opportunities through scholarships, modular curricula, and online learning.
5. *Encouraging collaboration across sectors*: Build partnerships that bridge academic disciplines, professional sectors, and global communities.
6. *Advocating for sustainability*: Embed environmental and social sustainability into all aspects of the field.

By pursuing these strategies, socially engaged arts can nurture polyphonic dialogue, foster inclusivity, and drive meaningful social transformation, both within and outside higher arts education institutions.

Chapter reflections

As socially engaged arts practices evolve, they challenge us all—practitioners, educators, researchers, students, and institutions—to reimagine the role of art in shaping inclusive, equitable, and sustainable futures. They invite us to confront discomfort, embrace complexity, and engage deeply with the pressing challenges of our time.

The potential of socially engaged arts is immense, but realising this potential requires commitment, collaboration, and a shared vision. The time to act is now. By nurturing this field, higher arts education can illuminate pathways to a more equitable, sustainable, and creative world—serving as a beacon of hope and transformation in an ever-changing global landscape.

In line with these insights, socially engaged arts' transformative power is not only evident in their artistic outputs but also in their capacity to challenge and reshape societal structures. Their ability to foster collective action and critical consciousness, as seen in real-world examples, is what truly underscores their relevance and necessity in both academic and broader societal contexts.

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