GRETCHEN COOMBS

Activism, art and social practice: a case study using Jacques Ranciere's framework for analysis

Abstract

The question can no longer just be whether 'art and social practice' or creative forms of activism are part of larger neo liberal agenda nor if they are potentially radical in their conception, delivery or consumption. The question also becomes: what are the effects of social practice art and design for the artists, institutions, and the publics they elicit in public and private spaces; that is, how can we consider such artworks differently? I argue the dilution of social practices' potentially radical interventions into cultural processes and their absorption into larger neo liberal agendas limits how, as Jacques Rancière might argue, they can intervene in the 'distribution of the sensible.' I will use a case study example from The Center for Tactical Magic, an artist group from the San Francisco Bay Area.

Introduction

The question posed for this panel suggests that much socially engaged art, social practice, or more broadly, participatory and relational art, have fallen prey to some neoliberal trappings that potentially limit their radical conception, delivery or consumption. It is the aim of this paper to outline how the work of French philosopher Jacques Rancière might provide a productive reordering of how we engage in this discourse through the work of San Francisco Bay Area art collective, The Center for Tactical Magic.

The descriptive terms of post relational aesthetics (dialogic art, littoral art, social aesthetics, public practices) could form another paper, so for purposes of simplicity, I will use 'social practices' or 'socially engaged art' to refer to the case study I discuss. For Shannon Jackson, social practice is 'an interdiscipline that integrates experimental aesthetic movements with the traditions of social science and social theory,'[1] and for Pablo Helguera, 'socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this

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[1] Jackson, 2008, 136

temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines.'[2] These art practices, therefore, are relational acts that involve interactions between artists and audiences; interventionist acts that are activist in nature and occur in public spaces; offer transgressive economies and forms of exchange; performances; installations; and events that speak to social and political concerns. It is art that is engaged in the broader social world, work that is conversational, interactive, temporal, and performative.

A process of exchange, rather than a reflection precipitated by an object, facilitates small ruptures and interventions in social structures which oppose prevailing stereotypes and fixed identities in public art practice and community- based art, thus serving to articulate other ways of being in and imaging the world for artists, activists, and their audience/ participants/ communities. These practices can elicit new thoughts and action in an activist discourse that moves away from direct political action (strikes, protests, etc.) by way of artists' practices and audience engagement, and as I will demonstrate, 'creative activist practice... should be judged on how well it opens up a space, is read, and understood within this area.'[3] Yet, I also acknowledge that many projects of this nature are also subject to the limitations of being institutionalized and operating through and because of neoliberalism (in terms of artists' labor and art's instrumentalization).

The differences in practices are nuanced, and they can be interpreted and claimed by a range of disciplines and take inspiration from a variety of sources, their definition is often contextual. Some resonate with performance art or conceptual art practices; others expand our understanding of community arts and civic participation. Some draw inspiration from, or are complemented by, artistic groups like the Dadaists and Situationist International or social movements such as the Beats and the Black Panthers, and more recently, activist movements like Occupy Wall Street. Outlining historical trajectories and describing tendencies in these artworks, or as Brian Holmes describes, 'eventworks,'[4] reinforces the notion that defining terms can flatten a discourse, create affinities where they may not belong or possibly ignore casual relationships, and at the same time, this type of visibility, ubiquity and codification may ultimately dilute of social practices' potentially radical interventions into cultural processes because of their absorption into the larger neoliberal agendas that hover above knowledge production in higher education, grant funding agencies, and art institutions.

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[2] Helguera, 2011
[3] Duncombe and Lambert, 2013
[4] Holmes, 2011

Much of the skepticism surrounding art and social practice may also be due to their increased institutionalization through MFA degree programs, 'textbooks' such as *Artificial Hells* (Claire Bishop), *Living as Form* (Nato Thompson), *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Material and Techniques Handbook* (Pablo Helguera), which cover the history, practice, pedagogy, and affinities with other, more activist forms of cultural production; and there are conferences such as Creative Time Summit and Open Engagement, all of which have produced an exciting discourse, reflecting on myriad projects, all of which have expanded upon and challenged Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*. These institutional frameworks have, to a certain extent, codified this discourse. The debates surrounding socially engaged artwork and its reception have raised questions concerning how to assess the efficacy of such practices that claim to be politically and socially relevant, yet at the same time challenge, subvert, and reproduce these same frameworks within context of contemporary art. There are critical questions for art that has political and social leanings: do they mirror the social relations already present, or do they act out a 'better' form of social relations, offer sustained political alternatives? Downey believes, 'in a milieu where the political arena seems increasingly compromised, it would appear that aesthetics (specifically the interdisciplinarity of contemporary art practices) is being ever more called upon to provide both insight into politics itself and the stimuli for social change.'[5]

Bishop outlines the two fold manner in which social practices mirrors neoliberal tendencies: the demands now placed on artists' work: networked, project based, collaboratively; and importantly, and two, where artists now step in to mop up the mess that neo liberalism has caused in a strained social services sector.[6][7] She has also taken issue with the preponderance of ethical considerations over aesthetic criteria when discussing art and social practices, in particular collaborative artwork that occurs in the public sphere.[8] The artist's or collaborative's intentions are foregrounded while the conceptual sophistication is backgrounded. Bishop believes many of the more community-based and political projects are strained by their description as art, and should be evaluated more on their conceptual depth than on the ethical imperative assigned to each action of the collaborative and the efficacy of their work in the community. Bishop sees these practices within the

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[5] Downey, 2007, 275

[6] Bishop (2011b)

[7] Brian Holmes, 2003, identifies this tendency for artists work within the pressures of a post Fordist economy as a 'flexible personality.'

[8] Bishop, 2006b

artworld and therefore argues they should be evaluated by more traditional aesthetic criteria. She has a point when it comes to assessing the efficacy of practices that make political claims and the perceived societal deterioration that many of these projects address. She questions the democratic inclusion and participation that these practices engender, and sees the potential of socially engaged work to overburden its form, which creates a demand for efficacy within its functionality and ultimately 'neutralized art's capacity to remain outside the instrumentalist prescriptions of the social.'[9] Bishop highlights the inclination for social practices to be characterized and subsequently presented as a part of an artist's, curator's or institutional agenda that is 'doing right in the world'; 'do gooders doing good,' which can been seen in contrast to the market driven forces of the art world, but no less problematic in terms of couching these as political. Further, if we are to assume that many social practice artworks aim, for example, to remedy social relations that have disintegrated due to technology and the alienating effects of a neo-liberal world order, then we have to ask to what degree these practices are already circumscribed within this order.

In contrast to Bishop, Nato Thompson's *Living as Form* gives an alternative perspective on socially engaged work. With provocative essays from Brian Holmes and Teddy Cruz, and also one from Bishop, the book serves as survey of cultural production that sees itself breaking free of disciplinary constraints such as art in favor of new language and meanings. Thompson states, 'If this work is not art, then what are the methods we can use to understand its effects, affects, and impact?' He quotes and unlikely source, Donald Rumsfeld who once declared: 'If you have a problem, make it bigger.'[10] For Thompson, this means exaggerating those activist elements of an artwork so that they become filed under the rubric of cultural production. The book is celebratory, understandable after so much doubt surrounding the definitions and efficacy of the practices. It raises important questions, the survey of work is expansive, but it resists providing resolute or prescriptive answers while acknowledging the delicate balance of remaining radical in an easily co-opted art world. Helguera's book provides practical advice, yet remains true to the complex relationship that socially engaged art has to art history and activist movements. It avoids being prescriptive but does allow for following coordinates on a road map to practice.

Therefore, I ask broadly in this context: can these art practices shape public discourse, advocate for policy change, and protest dominant cultural forces? Do they engender agency amongst the public and/or audiences, the

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[9] Jackson, 2008, 138
[10] Thompson, 2011

communities in which they work? Are different subjectivities produced that reorient relationships amongst participants, with each other, and in response to social and political concerns?

For some provisional answers, we can look to Rancière's work on a reconfigured relationship between art and politics and how, he might argue, social practices can intervene in the 'distribution of the sensible.' [11] Further, it is Rancière who pries open a space between these polarities mentioned above and looks to more productive ways of viewing these types of art practices as potentially political and emancipatory. I will use a case study example from The Center for Tactical Magic, whose work I believe can play critical political role in disrupting our sense of the contemporary world, our understanding of what can happen in public space, who can be highlighted in that space, and what can be said in that space.

The Aesthetic Regime: possibilities for art, politics, and activism

Many scholars, artists, and activists have contributed to a productive debate about the history and current relationship of art and politics, and what this creates at the level of reception, Politics as it is generally understood is often circumscribed by the activities of institutions, governments etc., within already established arenas of contestation and debate (the distribution of material wealth, resource sharing/management, electoral politics and so on), narrowing the political field to a small sphere of activity, which then effectively polices the boundaries of legitimate political practice. Instead, Rancière's has different definitions of politics; the normal, everyday structures that are 'policed' by institutions, and he calls the 'police'; and, real politics which he sees as disrupting the distribution of the sensible - which he calls dissensus. Rancière's aesthetic regime expands the political field and reshapes our ideas of who can participate in politics, and what activity is even thinkable as political.

In a contemporary art context, Rancière uses the 'aesthetic regime' and 'distribution of the sensible' to speak to the relationship between art and politics in terms of relations between visible/invisible, participant/observer, and consensus/ dissensus. Rancière's work on aesthetics opposes historical categories of art history: Modernism, postmodernism, and the autonomy of the avant-garde.[12] His 'aesthetic regime' suggests that in a given social and

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[11] Ranciere, 2006
[12] Ranciere, 2004, 2006, 2007a, 2007b

historical context, art is identified as art, which subsequently rejects Modernist categories.[13] He uses aesthetics to show how some of the oppositions within Modernism were already there at the beginning. Instead, art is always subject to different forms of what he terms the 'distribution of the sensible'—which is how we perceive and that which regulates that perception of our social roles and the subsequent affective response. Art is caught in a persistent tension between being 'art' or mixing with other activities or other ways of being. Rancière suggests, The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously established the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life used to shape itself.

Instead, Rancière's 'politics of aesthetics,' the dichotomy of 'becoming art or life,' and the 'resistant form' (of art) always exist together. He also sees much of relational aesthetics as an extension of modernist art practices that sought to become life and thereby provide a new form or model of life.[14] Rancière would prefer that art offer possibilities for life, not a model for life. The 'politics of becoming life or art' then sees aesthetic experiences that resemble other forms of experience, and therefore can dissolve into other forms of life. In a contemporary context where there is often a shrinking space of public discourse or 'visible' political action, such art practices become reflect the political inherent in the aesthetic regime. The aesthetic regime sees art and politics to be rebuilt at the intersection between a work of art and its interpretation, and it is this reordering of the senses (or sensory experience) that for Rancière can engender social change, or be marked as 'political.'

In 'The Emancipated Spectator' in the context of Brecht, Artaud, and Boal's theater, Rancière describes how, in his view, the spectator is never passive. He argues that the acknowledgement and subsequent value placed on contemplation erase the division between the active and passive—strategies of art's autonomy and its social use—viewer, which becomes part of his 'distribution of the sensible.'[15] With this perspective, participation can be privileged or passive viewing, and can just as quickly be the opposite.

For Rancière, the idea of emancipation 'implies that there are always several spaces in a space, several ways of occupying it, and each time there trick is knowing what sort of capacities one is setting in motion, what sort of world one is constructing.'[16] This perspective questions the common belief that there are some who have the 'ability' to understand and some who do not.

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[13] Ranciere, 2006, 23
[14] Ranciere, 2004, 53; 2008
[15] Ranciere, 2007b
[16] Ranciere, 2007a, 262

For spectators, audiences, and the public, this allows a gaze or an encounter other than what is programmed or expected. He relates this emancipation with dissensus, which in the context of art, means to constantly reexamine 'the boundaries between what is supposed to be normal and what is supposed to be subversive, between what is supposed to be active, and therefore political, and what is supposed to be passive or distant, and therefore apolitical.'[17] Tanke expands: 'aesthetic dissensus means that works of art fashion and sustain new subjects; they create new objects and new forms of perception; and, finally, they offer experiences fundamentally dissimilar from the everyday order of sense.'[18] As I discuss below, the Center for Tactical Magic makes inroads into dissensus through their use of 'tactical magic.'

In 'The Art of the Possible', Rancière (in conversation with Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey) outlines more clearly how he reimagines the relationship between art and politics. He does this by formulating an approach that reestablishes 'an element of indeterminacy in the relationship between artistic production and political subjectivication.'[19] This shift in the formulation between art and politics, for Rancière, opens the space for art to intervene and thereby be political, if it modifies what is visible and how this can be expressed and perceived, as well as its subsequent experience as tolerable or intolerable. These ideas build on his idea that 'Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.'[20] In the context of the Center for Tactical Magic, this belief suggests that the practices' revolutionary potential comes from their ability to present what is possible, what capacities are set in motion, not what is actual. A complete reordering not only of categories but also of the senses—arts autonomy does not dissolve, but remains in tension with its desire to become life. This is its political—and perhaps magical—role.

The Center for Tactical Magic: two projects

The Tactical Ice Cream Unit

The Tactical Ice Cream Unit—a large white van reminiscent of a communist era spy vehicle—drives into a public gathering. Out of the van emerges a

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[17] Ranciere, 2007a, 267
[18] Tanke, 2011, 103
[19] Ranciere, 2007a, 256
[20] Ranciere, 2006, 63

small man with a handlebar moustache and mirrored sunglasses. There are two menus on the van: an ice cream menu and a propaganda menu. The ice cream flavors have vaguely political names, but they are on separate menus. Then the magic comes in, in what magician's call a 'force.' Rather than asking if someone wants info with their ice cream, he asks: 'What flavor of propaganda would like with your ice cream?' The public is given a choice of flavors, but not a choice of whether or not to make choice – it's assumed they want both. The public leaves with a 'treat for the streets' and 'food for thought.' The truck then disappears. (Fig. 1 & 2)

Figure 1: The Center for Tactical Magic, *The Tactical Ice Cream Unit* (copyright Aaron Gach)

Figure 2: The Center for Tactical Magic, *The Tactical Ice Cream Unit Logo* (copyright Aaron Gach)

The ice cream truck disguises Center for Tactical Magic's (CTM) dual purpose; the truck is equipped to support protest, and has within in it the tools and capacity to support the activists present with a legion of surveillance cameras that can monitor police activity. Whether at a protest or an opening, Gach states, 'in each case we are providing a set of services that can be measured concretely; yet, we are also presenting familiar cultural forms combined in an unfamiliar way.' By combining elements of popular culture that are then recombined with satire, the result is what Gach hopes is disarming, while 'the operational potential as an activist command center forces a social re-imagination of the terms of engagement in a theater of operations that includes both the visible landscape and the invisible realms of affect and empowerment.'[21] This project subverts common understandings of two things, and because of this, resonates as political from Ranciere's perspective. Tanke outlines how this works in this context: aesthetics is political because it introduces dissensus into the world of shared appearances and meanings.'[22]

CTM uses the magician's craft to engage audiences in new and different ways. This San Francisco-based art collaborative has been performing interventions in public places since 2000, and with projects like the *Tactical Ice Cream Unit*, they provide the public with alternative sources of information about current events. Tanke describes this type of 'shock' to what a daily activity can entail and subsequent result in terms of empowerment, as reminiscent of the Situationist International's (a heavy influence on CTM)

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[21] Gach and Lab Mimesis, 2007, para.21
[22] Tanke, 2011, 84

detournement.[23] Inside the private space of a museum or gallery, their magic renews perceptions with 'magic' installations. A large body of CTM's work is informed by the processes in which magicians perform and incorporate elements of magic. Gach describes their magic as a tactic to engage audiences and reveals what he mimics and what he critiques in some of his work—it is the creative and conceptual impetus for evoking magic in his work. Gach sees 'occult practice on a broader, historic level, with a sweeping gaze, you will see that a lot of occult practice has been invested in a broader goal of social liberation. '[24] Using disguise, humor, surprise, and tactical magic. CTM takes activism to a new level and make an incisive commentary on popular media forms.

Gach is interested in how people perceive the world around them, and how signs and language are manipulated and then used to control thoughts and desire. By creating alternative experiences, whether through 'magical' means or more directly political means, he hopes to challenge the mechanisms of capitalism that tend to co-opt even the most mundane activities in daily life. He states:

> depending on the participants, our efforts will be interpreted through different lenses, and will see different ideas reflected in our work...in the best cases, we are fully engaged with multiple audiences while simultaneously offering critical creativity in a range of   discourses. In the worst cases, we risk being dismissed by magicians as charlatans, by witches as tricksters, by activists as not serious enough, or by curators as too political.[25]

This remainder of this article examines two of CTM's projects that attempt to intervene in the 'distribution of the sensible.' works that challenge what is possible to know and experience (within the context of art and activism). From this survey of the group's work, I will argue that such tactics for intervention operate more effectively than traditional forms of activism and overtly political art forms. CTM's work allows the public to engage work they may not deem art, yet the conceptual approach CTM uses couches their work within the artworld and launches a direct attack on the artworld's desire to figure out what an artwork is about by providing a context to ask, 'what

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[23] Tanke, 2011, 90
[24] Levy n.d., para. 8
[25] Modigliani, 2010, 7

can art do?' Further, it is with this question that we can look deeper into their potential impact: what can art do that other forms of activism can't?

CTM hopes to be a source of inspiration for others to act, by helping people come up with the tool, providing tactics that can be replicated by others, and 'examining manifold expressions of cultural activity, not just market driven aesthetics.'[26] This comment underscores one of the latest, perhaps more 'shamanistic' than activist projects, *Witches' Cradle* (2009–2010).

Witches' Cradle

This interactive installation reimagines a time when witches were hunted, captured, placed in sacks, and then swung from tree limbs; CTM appropriates this technique to induce alternative states of consciousness for participants. In this project Gach 'established conditions for immersive investigations of collective subjectivities such as altered states of consciousness, extra sensory perception, and other cognitive phenomena.'[27] With Transporter, a part of the *Witches' Cradle* project, CTM utilized a 1969 Volkswagen suspended on a crane. Each 'run' of the cradle could carry up to 13 travelers who sit inside the 'cradle' with all the windows blacked out. They are then pushed and spun; the 'cradle' swings while slightly suspended off the ground. Being deprived of light and moving freely creates a sense of confusion for the participants. According to Gach, this project used equal parts technology, urban amusement ride, and a subversion of use-value. The Transporter is a sort of bizarre reckoning of a late 60s radicality with the current political environment of torture and contemporary witch hunts. The two vehicles— hippie bus and construction crane–serve as ideological opposites connected by a single strand. The utilitarian, powerful, and imposing crane is used to construct an ordered world that constantly rebuilds itself in an effort to maintain hegemony. At the other end, the idealized 'magic bus' of '69 represents a free-wheeling, sub-cultural drive towards a more autonomous, optimistic and empowered society.[28] The buses are representative of movement across the borders of nation-states, and CTM wants the current passengers of Transporter to 'continue the journey and deliver its passengers

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26 Modigliani, 2010, 6
27 Modigliani, 2010, 7
28 Modigliani, 2010, 9

to magical destinations within the current socio-political landscape.'[29] The project taps into the nostalgia of a time period (activism, hippies, and the 1960s in general) that has been sold back to us, devoid of context, politics, and passion (Figs 2 and 3).

The logic of this work as aesthetic and disruptive defies bodily comfort and disorients participants' popular understanding of history (1960s and Witch Hunts). Ranciere looks to art in relation to politics because he recognizes that politics is ultimately a platform for determining social realities, and this is essentially manifested as and by aesthetic practices. That notion of reality shaping is also integral in the CTM, but it is frequently examined through the precursor of magic, which attempts to tap into that desire to produce a dominant reality but in a non-hierarchical, egalitarian manner. Projects such as the *Witches' Cradles* are directly informed by this question: is it possible to facilitate visionary experiences for participants in a manner which challenges dominant reality forms? This challenges comes from this discomfort, and for artist and critic Lars Bang Larsen, 'when artists promote radical alterity, the potential of the unknown is acknowledged as productive force.'[30] Tanke describes this aesthetic as something that 'cancels the logic binding bodies to specific places and times, and it is through these operations that new capacities can be discovered and invented.'[31] In *Witches' Cradle* this process works physically and figuratively.

Conclusion

It may be difficult to measure the 'success' of Gach's projects, or the social or political outcomes, if any, that they offer—it may be better to think in terms of the questions they raise regarding the ability to challenge the 'distribution of the sensible', which includes predetermined artworld objectives and the efficacy of certain forms of activism. Duncombe and Lambert underscore this sentiment: 'Much harder, much more ambitious, and therefor much more difficult to evaluate, is art that intends to change the very way we see, act and make sense of our world – including what we understand to be politics itself. It is hard to measure the long term total victory of a shift in the culture.'[32]

He believes 'we have no real way of measuring if this happens [new mental categories to account for what people have seen], or if so, the when the cognitive process results in some sort of social action.'[33] CTM attempts to promote this radical alterity; that is, to create experiences for

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[29] personal communication with the author, 2008
[30] Larsen, 2007, para.10
[31] Tanke, 2011, 84
[32] Duncombe and Lambert, 2012
[33] Modigliani, 2010, 8

audiences/public/participants that are drastically different from something familiar to them, inspiring a sense of awkwardness, unfamiliarity, or discomfort. Part of the notion of the 'distribution of the sensible' articulates the fundamental idea that any aesthetic regime renders some topics visible while occluding others, and the group's secular magic (illusions and tricks) and spiritual magick (ritual and so on) is very much set on shining the light into the dark places and seeing what lurks in the shadows. At the same time, it is a shadow show itself that is trying to shed some light on our socio-political realities. CTM's 'oppositional device'[34] then opposes reason, an embodied state of the 'unknown' that speaks to other ways of knowing and experiencing the world, which reflects Ranciere's proposal of an aesthetic experience, and a challenge to the 'distribution of the sensible.'

CTM's work presents an interesting dilemma: How do artists engender change, promote social action, and themselves survive in a market-driven economy, notwithstanding the artworld's collusion with the latter? In his own words, 'nothing short of the complete and irrevocable unleashing of the creative and prophetic potential of the multitude.'[35] CTM creates insertions in public life in a manner that doesn't rely on an audience's knowledge of art, or activism for that matter. Gach's intention is for the illusion to be crafted and create a magical sense of potential where other possibilities might emerge. Evoking the 'multitude' may require a different type of action, or even a stronger magic—an impulse to radically rethink and change of the visible and invisible in our political landscape, and thus pushing towards one of Ranciere's goals: equality. CTM and Rancière intersect at the positional aspects of any aesthetic effort: an active position in relation to determining a political outcome. Further, projects such as CTMs contribute to the rich discourse circulating around socially engaged art or creative forms of activism, and instead of situating this work within a polarity of analysis, it might prove more productive to use Ranciere's framework of art and politics.

Biographical Note

Gretchen Coombs lives and works in Brisbane. Her interests include art and design criticism/activism, specifically recent practices that challenge social structures within urban contexts. Her doctoral research involved artists, design collectives, critics and scholars who are immersed in new ways of practicing art that intervenes in social and ecological processes and which find creative solutions to complex urban challenges. Gretchen's ethnographic research provided deep insights into understanding the socially engaged art - or 'social practices' - in San Francisco, practices that draw on the Bay Area's

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[34] Holmes, 2007b

[35] Gach, 2007, para. 25

legacy of progressive politics and vanguard art practices. She continues to publish articles and give lectures on socially engaged art and teaches design and cultural theory in the School of Design, Creative Industries Faculty, at Queensland University of Technology.

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