After the Turn: New Directions in Socially Engaged Art Research

Deadline: Sep 30, 2021

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We are currently inviting abstracts for a special issue proposal to Third Text journal, edited by Danielle Child (Manchester School of Art) and Mor Cohen (Manchester School of Art)

It has been almost a decade since the publication of Claire Bishop's book, Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship (2012). Artificial Hells is one of the most cited works in the study of socially engaged art and its arrival in 2012 marked the end of a decade of publications that had collectively recognised a 'social turn' in art. Not only did Bishop identify a major shift in the contemporary art system, i.e. a social (re)turn to collective forms of artistic production that are interlinked with "moments of political upheaval and social change" (Bishop 2012: 3), but in Artificial Hells, she further conceptualised and historicised this shift. The book further offered a critical engagement with other curatorial and theoretical work produced during the early 2000s, including Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics (2002), Grant Kester's Conversation Pieces (2004), and Maria Lind et al., Taking the Matter into Common Hands (2005). Each of these contributions sought to evaluate the artistic values of the social turn and to situate it within a broader socio-political context that is characterised by the neoliberalisation of the global economy, the dismantling of the welfare state and the marketisation of the art world. The debates around the social turn were framed within the tension between aesthetics and ethics, equality and quality, consensus and dissensus, and individuality and collectivity.
The decade following the publication of Artificial Hells is characterised by the rapid institutionalisation and canonisation of the 'social turn'. What might have been described as an overlooked phenomenon in the late 1990s and early 2000s, is now a common mode of practice for many art practitioners and institutions operating both in the established and more marginalised and alternative sites of the contemporary art system. It is safe to say that the 'social turn' is no longer a trend but rather a complex discourse encompassing a broad and often contradictory range of theories, agendas, relations and forms that often exceeds the inner artistic platforms. There have been numerous responses to the seminal publications on social practice that aim to compare, contrast and reconcile the different approaches to the social turn with the intention of building a more comprehensive and inclusive analytical framework for socially engaged art (see for example Bell 2017; Miller 2016; Tunali 2017). However, the overwhelming reliance on selected canonical texts on the social turn exposes the gap between the proliferation of socially engaged art projects, initiatives and discussions and the limited theoretical toolbox used to evaluate such proliferation. This gap is especially visible when seeking to identify and conceptualise manifestations of the 'social turn' that have emerged under different geopolitical and cultural circumstances other than the Western case studies that informed the aforementioned examination of the 'social turn'. Recent publica-

tions on social and activist art forms have pointed to the fact that, leaving terminological differences and aesthetic judgments aside, the existing literature on the social turn is largely anchored within Western modernist traditions. This anchoring lies in the historiography, philosophy and political thought that support our understanding on the shared trajectories between artistic practices and social change. Such acknowledgment has prompted more nuanced and comparative studies aiming to expand, enrich and complicate the concepts, frameworks and assumptions employed to examine social transformation and engagement through art (see for example Abdullah 2018; Ali 2020; Castellano 2020; Kedar 2021; Makhubu and Castellano 2021). Nonetheless, the call for decentralised genealogies of socially engaged art practices remains open especially during times of multiple and intersecting crises.

This special issue seeks to examine the evolution of the social turn in contemporary art in light of other emerging and urgent contexts, such as the decolonisation of art history, the climate crisis and the global pandemic. It aims to bring together new ways of thinking, conceptualising and evaluating modes of social engagement and artistic organisation that question, expand and add new meanings to the vocabulary and methods affiliated with the social turn discourse. The contributions can include articles and interviews that respond to one or more of the special issue strands:
1. Non-Western evaluations and genealogies of the social turn;
2. Long term artistic models and infrastructures for social change;
3. Critical investigations of dominant socially engaged art theories and concepts, such as affect, authorship, autonomy, community and complicity;
4. Social class, inequality, marginalised communities and social practice;
5. Alternative ‘social turns’ (geographical, historical or otherwise).

Submission:
- Please email abstracts, keywords and bio to: Dani Child d.child@mmu.ac.uk and Mor Cohen mor0ante0@gmail.com no later than 30th September 2021. We aim to reply to contributors with the outcome of their proposed abstract within 4 weeks.
- Abstracts should be no longer than 150 words.
- Author bio should be 50-70 words.
- Please include 10 accompanying keywords (for internet searches) with your submission.

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Reference:
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