(The Walking Neighbourhood, APAM 2014, Created by Lenine Bourke)

**TALKING HEADS PANEL #1**

# Utopia and the Institution: Socially Engaged Art Practices in the 21st Century

**Tuesday 23 February, 2016**
**11:00 – 12:00**
**Ballroom 3, Sofitel Brisbane Central**

The word utopia has been used to describe both intentional attempts to create an ideal society and imagined ideal societies portrayed in fiction. Both versions of a utopia have been created by contemporary socially engaged artists.  In politically, environmentally and socially tumultuous times, artists need to critique and consider the ways in which we are working, with each other, with other people and various institutions.

Using a two-page commissioned provocation by **Alexandra Winters** as a starting point, this panel explores the complexities of creating and producing socially engaged art alone, with other people and various presenting and commissioning partners.

**MODERATOR**
Lenine Bourke (The Walking Neighbourhood, APAM 2016 Artist in Residence, AUSTRALIA)

**CONTRIBUTORS**
Alexandra Winters (Open Engagement, Brisbane Powerhouse, AUSTRALIA)
Darren O'Donnell (Mammalian Diving Reflex , APAM 2016 Artist in Residence,CANADA)
Libby Harward (Creative Inclusive, Gold Coast, AUSTRALIA)
Sally Szwed (Creative Time, New York, USA)

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Utopia and the Institution are not considered binaries in the context of this discussion: although utopia, by its very etymology, means 'without - place', whereas the institution is a physical space or venue - it can be understood that both engage with a set of conditions and ideals established to promote a cause, that affect and support a community. It is interesting to consider these semantics in relation to socially engaged art making, a practice concerned with the significance of a site and its inherent community - a practice which in its simplest and broadest form, is a process of reimagining an existing system or set of conditions for that site, community and audience.

If we map the antecedents that lead us to an understanding of a contemporary socially engaged ecology, we can excavate a long historical tradition of movements that problematise previous approaches and attitudes, in order to evolve the field. This list includes the "Dada Cabaret Voltaire, [Guy Debord and the Situationists of Paris], Joseph Beuys' notion of Social Sculpture, Allen Kaprow's "happenings", Gordon Matta Clarke's interventions, radical community theatre of the 1960s, Lygia Clark's Tropicália movement in Brazil, [Grant Kester's writing towards a dialogical approach to art making], the community-based public art projects of ground-breaking artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Rick Lowe, ['relational aesthetics' coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, and] ...social movements from Civil Rights to Feminism … (Pasternak 2012, 8).

These movements although diverse, have a commonality in their ability to activate dialogue within communities, through amplifying or idealising ways of living, to make important social issues publicly visible. When socially engaged artist Tania Bruguera states, "I don't want an art that points at a thing, I want an art that is the thing" she emphasises forms of art that involve being in the world (Thompson, 2012, 21). Bruguera, identifies a rupture in accepted modes of art making and presentation caused by a flux of artists moving beyond building-based formats, inviting us to redefine our parameters of understanding of what art can effect in the world.

We already understand that when art comes to exist in an autonomous, self-referential environment, it is a problematic scenario, one which has historically seen the arts institution forge a cultural responsibility to support artists in the generation and presentation of new and relevant work. More recently there has been a surge of institutions including socially engaged art practices in their curation and public programming. Institutions are arguably searching for new modes of delivery that are relevant to audiences, and the inclusive nature of S.E.A becomes an attractive programming opportunity. Projects that encourage participation and reach a far wider segment of the market than an institutional structure can access, make programming this kind of arts practice a desirable niche.

It is not uncommon to see socially engaged projects entering the institution by way of public programming or education departments - initiatives developed to bring community into a venue, in an attempt to generate meaningful interactions between artists and non-artists. Other ambitions include removing a work from its original site and inserting it into the institution, re-creating or performing the original interaction within an institutional setting, or presenting the ephemera and residue of the original work as a

process of documenting activism. But for these examples to become the principal modes by which institutions and socially engaged artists work together, would miss the point entirely.

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Institutions are traditionally a spaces that need to be 'filled' continually by work that constitutes an institutional program. However, the current S.E.A landscape sees artists working beyond building-based formats, in community as a form of agency, critique and action. This emergent approach towards generating social outcomes and invested engagement is a recent development in the field. As Doherty (2014, 268) writes, "It is the aesthetic integrity to which new forms of social practice [art] aspire and which can distinguish critically successful projects from other cultural activities which offer immediate gratification, but which do not generate new forms of critical dialogue or transformation." This shift in mindset, articulated by artist Peter Dunn who refers to his approach as 'context provider', not 'content provider' (Kester, 2013, 1) is difficult to marry with the traditional function of the institution as a platform for the presentation of art.

By taking on a collaborative and consultative approach with communities it is important to note that artists have to navigate complex histories and consider the associated risks and ethics that their practice entails (Thompson, 2012, 22). A foundation of ethics includes the acknowledgment and consideration of interactions that may amplify or reinforce demonstrations of power and privilege when artists work with non-artists and beyond that, the institution. Presentation aside, there are systems that are the core business of the institution that are of mutual benefit - this could include partnering for funding opportunities, ongoing support for long-term projects, sharing facilities and resources and access to elevated platforms of visibility, critique and dialogue. Whilst obvious structures for support can be garnered from building relationships between socially engaged practices and the institution, caution must be taken to avoid proliferation of practices that defang the political and dialectic impetus of a work, exploit the community and non-artists involved in the process, and reduce the project to being merely performed as socially engaged art.

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During the 1980s and 1990s socially engaged art practices were discussed in terms of avant-gardism or community art traditions, however, Grant Kester in his book *Conversation Pieces* (2013, XV - XVII) suggests that these approaches convey only partial truths. He argues that the advancement of the practice lies in the interdependence of the aesthetic, political and ethical functions of the work. These emerging characteristics can no longer be reduced to, or understood exclusively in terms of art or activism - yet current critical dialogue has not advanced beyond measuring the field's efficacy as such.

Common critiques surface that socially engaged projects belong to a strand of art that "often looks so much like activism… [that]…seems like a drop in the bucket, a feel-good footnote to the real story" (Davis, 2013). This reductive logic suggests that the work is both practically and theoretically indistinguishable from political or social activism, or goes on to accept its identity as art, but limits critical engagement to a straightforward calculation of political efficacy (Kester, 2013, 11). These reactions don't acknowledge the dialogical and community centred outcomes, or the multiple measurable deliverables for those involved. More commonly, the typical metrics and scale of impact are called into measure.

To begin to understand S.E.A's measurable impact, one must recognise its purpose or aim as a practice that is not 'solving' social problems, but one that creates dialogue and demonstrates an alternative reality

for how groups in society, such as civic bodies, activists, communities, the media and political figures are handling or mishandling 'the problem'.

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Practitioners in the field as well as funders, partners and pedagogues agree that new forms of evaluation are contributing to a growing language and theory with which to discuss the field and its multiple engagements. The integrity and success of projects are measured by assessing a range of accountabilities that do not exclusively belong to traditional art or community-based practices. Reporting is pluralistic and dependent on whom the outcomes are for. If we are looking at the merging of socially engaged practices and institutional programming, beyond documentation and re-presentation of existing socially engaged projects - then the area of reporting success or significance, and understanding the ongoing impact and efficacy of a project has much room to be developed. We need to consider the responsibility of the institution to its audience, culture and its artists, and by extension the artist's role in relation to community, society, history and inciting systemic change.

Long term projects and social organising within a community that see practitioners invest potentially years of work into a project, as opposed to a 'fly-in fly-out' approach, are cases for research into efficacy, significance and legacy. Measuring the legacy of a project, is more closely related to a memory linked to an emotion or discovery, rather than something one learned from an experience and promptly forgot. Attempting to measure the poetic impact of the work – especially when the mindset of funders and organisations are geared towards the *positive* effect of art, is complex. There is value in, and a responsibility from practitioners and enablers to consider the negative impact that both long and short term projects may enact.

The field's defiance of discursive boundaries must also be reflected in its process of evaluation in different spheres of practice, for example the cultural landscape, civic bodies, political groups, activist communities and education institutions. These discussions whilst competing and overlapping, will contribute to the evolution of practice and collaboration between these fields, as well as a matrix of critique and reporting that does not purely rely on aesthetics and metrics, but which involves sociological, economic and cultural measures. Institutions work towards long-term strategic goals and have resources and processes for reporting, as such these are potential areas of support that institutions can extend to socially engaged practices through partnership with such projects and practitioners.

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Socially engaged art exists as a range of nuances including methodologies from community organising, art theory, pedagogy, activism and sociology that uncover the politics of ethics, privilege and power being called into question through art, activism and reimagining civic life. With the field in constant evolution, and one that encourages problematising the status quo, S.E.A escapes capture as a single narrative or framework.

Also escaping capture is utopia. Marcuse (Miles, 2006) refers to its death as an environment where the conditions for change are in existence and the reimagined systems seem capable, but the shift is being road blocked by existing organisations of productive forces. By this token socially engaged artists could be called utopians, as their practice uncovers and trials alternative systems. The current landscape is one on the cusp of what Marcuse aforementioned; as the language of S.E.A evolves to communicate its impact and efficacy to different enablers, and the impetus exists for the institution to evolve their role to support artists in the continuation of new and relevant work..

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