EMPATHY, ART AND SOCIAL PRACTICE
EMPATHY, ART AND SOCIAL PRACTICE
FEBRUARY 10–APRIL 26, 2014
CONTENTS

2  RISK Map
4  Introduction
   Mary Jane Jacob
6  The Quandary of Social Practice: Why Risk? Why Empathy?
   Amy M. Mooney and Neysa Page-Lieberman
10 The Art of RISK
27 Acknowledgments
INTRODUCTION

By Mary Jane Jacob, Executive Director of Exhibitions and Exhibition Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Making art—the art that comprises RISK—takes form and garners content through process. This process lives on in the individuals involved or touched by this art. All art does, or can do this, and we can even say this is the operational, Deweyan definition of art: art lives in and through those who experience it.[1] But, in fact, not all art does, not just because it might fall short of a certain level of quality or artistic achievement, but also because something in the environmental interventions, takes us away from being with even great art in the moment so that we never find our centerlessness with the work and the artist’s prompt remains unfilled. But this art, the art of risk, draws from what is around us so that the environment or condition in which we live enriches the work and then allows it to continue to resonate over time. Has the decollation of the art experience over the 20th century into a museum encounter led us to this point where art demands a more overt relation between artists and audience as makers and participants? Did we need to take a deep breath, start again by front-loading exposure, building it into the process, so that the art experience might occur and endure? Art in this exhibition is at once there to see and not, yet to unfold as it is activated by those engaged; it is both the platform upon which this understanding rests. Things tacitly known by a group or collectively tangled with, nonetheless, go forward, because for those living the process the risk of not trying is greater than the failure of the attempt. Happening on the wiggedy or necessity of the process, the work remains with them, long after a show, for some forever. At once it transforms them as they transform the work, integrating the experience of it into their lives. For those seemingly less affected, however, this work keeps doing its job and can come back in time to have an unexpected effect. So to appreciate RISK’s claim that social practice reveals our mutual dependencies, is to understand that mutual does not mean the same experience for everyone. That’s the beauty of experience after all.

But what kind of risk are we talking about? The risk of the relation. Here failure is personalized because process is embodied in persons engaged over some length of time, whether short or long, and who become known to artists as the artists become known by them. It’s an opposite to that of the gallery visitor whose experience, if known at all, is traced in less-than-felt ways. So while the experience is risky, it’s the beauty of having deep, direct experience that makes it worth the risk. Yet, if this show posits, risk emerges from an empathetic pact—the extension of one’s self to another, the idea that we can feel the feelings of others, and that there is value in that bond—then there is a risk that we might not connect.

So study the self to know the self. We know the self to forget the self. We forget the self to know all others.

As the 13th-century Genjoan of Zen Master Dōgen gives,[2] we are not only in an inextricable relationship in sharing the Earth, but also we are bound to each other to realize ourselves. For Dewey, it was only as “social individuals,” as he termed it, that we could realize ourselves. There has been much critical contention (and suspicion) around why members of the public would give themselves over to artists’ social practice projects. Accordingly, a reply has been that they are manipulated or exploited for the artists’ own careerist ends. This is part of a missed thesis that in calling for critical distance in social practice engenders empathy from the argument. Have these critics ever fully, mutely, experienced social practice works, giving themselves to the process?[3] Art, as Dewey saw it, was a means of making meaning, and finding meaning is what we do when we consciously live life. This, as we have seen, necessitates looking both inwardly and outwardly beyond oneself. In the early 1990s a once-powerful and fierce Chicago art collector said in my presence that he was fed-up with hearing about “self-esteem art.” A century before in Chicago Dewey had awoken to the power of art to engender a sense of belonging that confirmed both self-affirmation and self-actualization in society.[3] Turn of the last-century immigrants in this city in Dewey’s time had no exclusive claim to alienation; disconnection takes many forms and springs from various sources over one’s lifetime. To address this Dewey, as we today, drew upon art’s exceptional ability to provide a glimpse of something greater. To put faith in the power of art is to confront the human condition of powerlessness that in the flux of life is always lurking for everyone regardless of station.

When an artist’s project and the exchanges embedded in the process offer the chance to feel a sense of connectedness, there is a sensation of hope. In this, in being open to risk, models the openness to see things differently. Then, we find the potential. And in the end isn’t our sense of agency more rooted in seeing potential than having power?[4] "The function of art," Dewey said, "has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things...not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desires and thought. This process is art,"[4] it is these “common things” that are the materials of social practice and with them artists are breathing life back into the art experience.

Yet common everyday things are not easy—not in life or when they make that transformation, transformative move into art. It is a risky operation, a task that takes care. So this socially engaged art practice has made greater demands on the curator’s role, but in turn helped define it in essential ways by bringing us back to this artworld job’s Latin roots, curare, to care for and heal. In this process-based work, curators care for all the steps that make the work come into being & can live in this socially committed work, they care because they know this work matters. Risk and empathy are the unstable, but ultimately satisfying, foundation on which they work. This is what Amy Mooney and Neysa Paige-Leiberman have undertaken and for which they showed finesse, commitment, and a good deal of courage. Now, with the artists, they take the task on to audiences to live it.


[1] My thanks to Travis M. Boyles and archival sources for their contribution to this essay.


of reciprocity and the constant and careful work that its facilitation requires. The importance of evaluative determinants of “success” and “failure” fall short of explaining the myriad of creative experiences, all working toward establishing relationships and “art,” such as potlucks, story exchanges or dance parties, the artists produce a series of socially engaged projects point to a growing movement toward interdependence. In neighborhoods, community centers, museums and galleries, the efforts of Collaboration and dialogue serve as tools central to the realization of this art form. From Edgewater to Greater Grand Crossing, we invited viewers to map illustrates how artist-generated collaborations form points of order to expand our understanding of ourselves and each other. The Chicago community is significant. Too often, community members are asked to acknowledge. Yet the numerous other voices note that beyond a mutual experience, creating situations that rely on public participation. To varying degrees, the participating artists extend themselves to others, risking their interests into the public realm. For example, Faheem Majeed’s Shacks and Shanties consists of dwelling-like structures with “front porch” stages for invited “hand-wringers” rather than the critical practices of artists. Other voices note that the rise in social practice parallels the loss of government entitlements and the proliferation of austerity measures. By beyond this academic realms, the enactment of social practice is equally charged. In neighborhoods, community centers, museums and galleries, the effects of socially engaged projects point to a growing movement toward interdependence rather than separation. Using formats that challenge our expectations of “art,” such as picnics, story exchanges or dance parties, the artists produce a myriad of creative experiences, all working toward establishing relationships and connecting communities. To do so, the artists and their participators rely upon two linked phenomena: empathy and risk. Drawing from the world of relational aesthetics, artists often employ empathy in their work when amidst social boundaries, seeking cooperation and the formation of new communities. Social practice reveals our mutual dependencies upon one another, yet the generosity, acceptance and reciprocity that such work demands is difficult to establish and even more challenging to sustain. Current evaluative determinants of “success” and “failure” fail short of explaining the experience of projects that are porous, in flux and process-based. The importance of the Chicago’s performing art center—yet it is increasingly difficult to categorize and ever-expanding. Recent publica- tions such as Tom Finkelpearl’s What We Make: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation and Claire Bishop’s Artist’s Hotbed: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship testify to the contemporary relevance of this art form and its continued engagement in the framework of Finkelpearl, discussed the intellectual rigor that marks the negotiations of these ambitious and demanding projects that leave indelible marks on our civic consciousness, later influencing our sense of political engagement. In Chicago, Blais explores and articulates complica- tions between points of reciprocity and altruism, concerned that too many projects border on social work, reflecting the aspirations of “no goodness and hardships” rather than the critical practices of artists. Other voices note that the rise in social practice parallels the loss of government entitlements and the proliferation of austerity measures. Beyond these academic realms, the enactment of social practice is equally charged. In neighborhoods, community centers, museums and galleries, the effects of socially engaged projects point to a growing movement toward interdependence rather than separation. Using formats that challenge our expectations of “art,” such as picnics, story exchanges or dance parties, the artists produce a myriad of creative experiences, all working toward establishing relationships and connecting communities. To do so, the artists and their participators rely upon two linked phenomena: empathy and risk.
Alberto Aguilas dinner parties and Potluck: Chicago’s meal-sharing events are inspired by the desire to form connections and ask participants to take certain risks in doing so. The seating and layout of the space were designed to maximize the chance to connect in meaningful ways. The parties are a way to facilitate the appreciation of aesthetic experiences and place-making plays in our daily lives. Aguilas built this installation first and foremost as a space to engage different aesthetic experiences and simultaneously create a site of resistance to individualization. In close conversation with the political anxieties of contemporary culture. From jars of Iranian medicinal herbs to the cultivation of medicinal herbs, Aguilas considers the intersection between food production and public policy, underscoring the economic and cultural risks that dictate our diet. Toys work addresses autonomous wisdom and the ethics of “together-ness” ecologies. She draws from a belief that folk traditions and community gardening can be sites of resistance to individualization. In close consultation with her mother, family recipes and traditions, Toys work holds a number of community gardening events that focused on the therapeutic properties of gardening for self-care and medicine and simultaneously served as a site for social practice in its own right. RISK contributed to their recipe box that will be shared with audiences across Chicago.

The relevance and categorization of some forms of social practice continues to inspire debate. The cultivation of food also informs the work of Farzaneh Toosi and her manifold RISK projects, which incorporate storytelling, history, agriculture, healing and multisensory experiences. During the exhibition, the artist tended to multiple installations of Anxiety Garden (both on- and off-site) which focused on the therapeutic value of gardening for welfare and medicine. Toosi held the public nature of contemporary culture. From jars of Iranian medicinal herbs to the cultivation of medicinal herbs, Toosi considers the intersection between food production and public policy, underscoring the economic and cultural risks that dictate our diet. Toys work addresses autonomous wisdom and the ethics of “together-ness” ecologies. She draws from a belief that folk traditions and community gardening can be sites of resistance to individualization. In close consultation with her mother, family recipes and traditions, Toys work held a number of community gardening events that focused on the therapeutic properties of gardening for self-care and medicine and simultaneously served as a site for social practice in its own right. RISK contributed to their recipe box that will be shared with audiences across Chicago. The participating artists extend themselves to others, risking the personal and the political.

The relevance and categorization of some forms of social practice continues to inspire debate. As previously noted, the relevance and categorization of some forms of social practice in its own right. RISK contributed to their recipe box that will be shared with audiences across Chicago. The participating artists extend themselves to others, risking the personal and the political.

The relevance and categorization of some forms of social practice continues to inspire debate. As previously noted, the relevance and categorization of some forms of social practice in its own right. RISK contributed to their recipe box that will be shared with audiences across Chicago. The participating artists extend themselves to others, risking the personal and the political.
“For me [social practice] is making work with and around others...it is giving my work into the hands of others to come to new results and outcomes...it is using my interaction with others as raw material for making new works and conducting experiments...it is leaving the isolated space of the studio with the hopes of creating an expansive space and a larger conversation.”

Lunch Room Expansé [installation], 2014; and Lunch Room Expansé [series of events], February 14, 26, March 12, 26, April 11, 25
Building materials, drop leaf table, mirror tile, hat rack, blinds, and latex paint. Six lunches were performed during the exhibition for groups of strangers who answered a call for participants.

Wedding to Unknown, March 21
An unknown couple was presented with an actual wedding and celebratory reception, joined in union before a group of strangers. In collaboration with Jeremy Blake, Collective Cleaners, David Ettinger, Megan Isaacs, Jorge Lucero, Eric May, Potluck: Chicago, Edra Soto, Michael Soto, Strawberry Moon Women Singers, DJ Mr. Wiggles aka John Phillips and Ben Yahola.

For me [social practice] is making work with and around others...it is giving my work into the hands of others to come to new results and outcomes...it is using my interaction with others as raw material for making new works and conducting experiments...it is leaving the isolated space of the studio with the hopes of creating an expansive space and a larger conversation.”
Social Podium for a Public Rehearsal, 2014
Reclaimed lumber from Chicago schools, centers and parks

Private Versus Public Speaking: Notations on a Personal History, 2014
Graphite, cardboard and tape

Social Podium: Lauren Lystrup with Proyecto Algarabía, April 9
An interactive talk at the podium about using the power of art, oral history and popular education to develop tools for survival, resistance and shifting current paradigms.

“Through the Stockyard Institute, an artist project started in 1995, I have explored communities as a form and a force for working out questions and building relationships with local artists, activists, performers, teachers and residents.”
“My project is a collaboration between Bronzeville community organizers and myself. I am asking the community to share their stories about Bronzeville and access to their archives to create an interactive installation for the public. The purpose of this project is to create an artwork with the Bronzeville community about the area, which will allow the public to experience the cultural renaissance in an intimate way. Project participants will be active collaborators in the art making process.”

Samantha Hill
“The greatest risk you can take is to surrender control over the way that you are remembered.”

*After Life (Post Mortem Relational Aesthetics), 2014*
frame, photo-sensitive paper, legally binding codicil, limited-edition seeded informational cards, informational cards. In partnership with Hemlock of Illinois.

“*The greatest risk you can take is to surrender control over the way that you are remembered.*”

*Kirsten Leenaars*

“My projects always start with a set of questions, never with an idea of what a work will look like in the end. Responding specifically to a given community, situation or site, I start to collect personal stories in response to these questions. I see this as a collaborative form of research, a process of shared vulnerability in which I don’t have all the answers and maybe not even all the right questions...In the production phase of my video projects this uncertainty is a very creative space for me, allowing for fluidity, improvisation, and continuation of a responsive process.”

Not In Another Place, But This Place... (Happiness), 2013
Three-channel video installation. Videographers Paul Death and Will Goss, music composer Dan Bitney, audio/sound montage Matthew Inks.
“Although all of the Shacks and Shanties have a similar aesthetic, each structure functions differently solely because of the surrounding residents, community partners and community members. There is no schematic or defined plan for the structures because they are defined by what objects I find, the topography of the location, the people I engage in the construction, the potential use of the space by community members, etc. Part of the risk comes from allowing this organic construction to take place...I would say that as an artist engaged in a social practice, much of what I deliver goes beyond what I create directly and moves into one part curation and one part program management. Bringing so many artists together in an odd or unusual space over a tight period of time is also a risk. Part of my process is building relationships over time and engaging in reciprocal trust because, in many cases, I am basically handing over the keys.”

FAHEEM MAJEED

Shacks and Shanties, 2014
Recycled building materials

Performance I @ Shacks and Shanties, March 13
P Michael Grego and travis of DNO and Khalfani of Impolite Society

Performance II @ Shacks and Shanties, April 2
Jenae’ Taylor and Viktor Le of the Margaret Burroughs Collective

“Although all of the Shacks and Shanties have a similar aesthetic, each structure functions differently solely because of the surrounding residents, community partners and community members. There is no schematic or defined plan for the structures because they are defined by what objects I find, the topography of the location, the people I engage in the construction, the potential use of the space by community members, etc. Part of the risk comes from allowing this organic construction to take place...I would say that as an artist engaged in a social practice, much of what I deliver goes beyond what I create directly and moves into one part curation and one part program management. Bringing so many artists together in an odd or unusual space over a tight period of time is also a risk. Part of my process is building relationships over time and engaging in reciprocal trust because, in many cases, I am basically handing over the keys.”
Nice People Dancing to Good House Music, 2014
Archival pigment prints and video. In collaboration with D Cain, Ian Curry, Stephen Flemister and DJ Sadie Woods.

Collective Ecstasy: Video Dance Party, January 31
House music party where the artist captured individuals dancing for his work in the exhibition.

“My works depend on the public for its very existence! I seek the public, family, friends and friends of friends to participate in my photographs, videos and performances. This initial interaction is usually the first layer, often the photograph, video, etc. will take place in a public manner/space where the public may encounter the interaction. This interaction may also be recorded creating a second layer of complexity in the final work.”
“For this work, I explored the underside of empathy and consider the moments where that ideal can fall apart. I’m interested in the social responsibility of working with relationships as a material. Works may claim to be giving, when they are actually taking advantage of the artist or the viewer. In my own practice, I have composed hundreds of social exchanges in a gallery setting, and the moments when I identified more with a ‘circus freak’ than an artist began to open up a world of questions for me. What were many times real and meaningful exchanges could other times give way to something entirely different. The exchanges that felt from either party to be forced, selfish or unproductive gave me pause. I feel that loss is possible from superficial or forced exchanges, and I bring this to attention with the unrelated, flat figures in the circus-themed peep through board.”

*J. Citizen, 2014*

Digital flatbed print on Sintra panels, pamphlets, capsule vending machines, buttons, business cards, chair. In partnership with The CivicLab.

**J. Citizen Game Design Workshop, February 23**

Makers, civic activists, design thinkers, and more invented a world-based, real-time game that empowers citizens to enact changes in their city and beyond.

**J. Citizen Game Design Alpha Test, March 23**

MCP alpha-tested the *J. Citizen* game with a panel of seasoned Chicago activists.

**J. Citizen Game Beta Test Weekend, April 11 and April 12**

*J. Citizen* was played in its prototype phase.

“By placing itself outside the art world and in the world of Chicago activism, *J. Citizen* engages everyone who is curious about making and playing a game for democratic participation with real-life consequences. The gallery installation is one portal for participants to gain access to a series of public events for making and testing the game, but a second portal exists online, and with our growing community of game MAKERS and PLAYERS, our third portal is our actual participants. At the completion of the exhibition, the game will continue to evolve citywide with their help, a living tool to guide people through the process of enacting meaningful change in the civic realm.”

---

**STEP RIGHT UP! INTERACT WITH AN ARTIST!**

*Acrylic paint on birch veneer plywood, freestanding wood easel. In partnership with Ron Kobold Studio.*

**MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHENOMENON**

(HELEN SLADE, RASHMI RAMASWAMY AND MIKE NEWMAN)
"In order to offer reactions, ideas, or solutions, one needs to step into the situation and consider all the angles. It is in this process that the makers will develop empathy to infiltrate into their designs. There is then the potential that this empathetic consideration embedded in the work will evoke a reaction or thought or awareness in the viewer that can lead to further empathy."

A Silent I, 2014
Nylon and tackle twill banners. In partnership with Sarah E. Goode Stem Academy.


Just Yell: Silence the Silence, February 18
A memorial parade to grieve, acknowledge, and call attention to the many Chicago youth killed by gun violence. In collaboration with Chicago High School for the Arts.

Just Yell: Walk with Me, March 25
Walk with Me paired visitors one on one with a teen to hear a spoken word piece. In collaboration with After School Matters, Air Force Academy High School, and poet Ayinde Cartman.

Just Yell: Bring to Light, April 22
Bring to Light is an evening of performances curated by the MCA Teen Creative Agency showcasing the top Chicago youth living in communities on the south and west side. All Just Yell events held at Museum of Contemporary Art.
“Through the empathic act of bringing a taste of your favorite comfort food from your culture to a table of strangers, the potluck fosters a connection among diverse cultures and generations over the common need for nourishment. These moments of mutual generosity, when the story of one dish is exchanged for another, often reveals additional commonalities and dependencies among a seemingly incompatible group of people.”

Photo by Clare Britt.

Amity Garden: Financial Crisis Mycoremediation, 2014

Heritage Tea Time, March 10
Conversational event including sampling heritage and heirloom foods and healing tea.

Food for Thought: Operation Pickle, March 18
While sampling Iranian foods, a group learned about Persian new year traditions, including the pickling of garlic. In partnership with Asian American Cultural Affairs.

Green Art & Social Practice (GASP) Fair, April 25
Educational micro-presentations about the art of science. In collaboration with Koch Unni.

Amity Garden: Do not open until 2023, 2014
Glass jars, glass weights, garlic, malt vinegar, sea salt, and grape molasses

Amity Garden: Green Art + Social Practice (GASP) Fair and Reference Library, 2014
Lemon balm, chamomile, lavender, skullcap, valerian, seeds, seed-starting soil mix, propagation trays with hooks, water, sunlight, and books

In the Persian language, there is a common expression “ghorbanet beram.” The literal English translation is “I will sacrifice myself for you,” but it simply means “Thank you very much.” The structure of Iranian culture and language emphasize the importance of putting other people before yourself. Sometimes this self-deference is sincere and advantageous, other times it is a facade that can be debilitating. Empathy might be a similar kind of etiquette. It is a habit of mind that is cultivated long before the work is made by an artist. If and when my creative processes approach affective transformation, I hope that it does so in a genuine way, rather than as a token gesture of false virtue.”

Photo by Clare Britt.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As anyone working in socially engaged art can attest, the projects and performances rely on the expertise and energy of many. RISK is no exception and we would like to express our sincere appreciation of the many who contributed to its realization.

The Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS) team provided extraordinary support throughout the installation and logistical oversight of the exhibition with special appreciation to Justin Witte, Exhibition Manager, whose installation design gave structure and clarity to the exhibition’s vision and to the projects that were in flux and process-based; and to Camille Morgan who assumed the role of grant manager and onsite educator. We are grateful to graduate student Marcella Andrade, our curatorial assistant, who provided much needed curatorial and organizational support, plus her management expertise. We are also thankful for the creative vision of Eavan Wallner and Ben Bilow as evident in the show’s distinctive brochure, logo, labels and catalog.

One of the unique parts of the exhibition was its multi-venue platforms for which we must thank our city-wide partners: Allison Peters Quinn at the Hyde Park Art Center, Jeffreen Hayes at the Rebuild Foundation, Tricia Van Eck at 6018North, and Heidi Reitmaier and Michael Green at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Their generous extension of space and resources as well as their support of and belief in these artists made it possible for us to stage the unfurling of the show over several months.

In addition to the artists, we also want to note those who pushed our inquiry into its critical consideration. Mary Jane Jacob, Jim Duignan, Abigail Satinsky, Alberto Aguilar and Bad at Sports were especially generous in extending their networks and resources. Lisa Yan Lee, Stephanie Smith and Tricia Van Eck encouraged our initial forays into empathy and its risks.

The generosity of the artists included in RISK is only surpassed by their partnerships that extend beyond the exhibition including: Dan Bitney, Blanc Gallery, Bronzeville Historical Society, D Cain, Chicago High School for the Arts, Civic Lab, Collective Cleaners, Ian Curry, Paul Deuth, Donmester Projects, En Las Tablas Performing Arts, David Ettinger, Stephen Flamsteed, From the Roots (formerly known as Social Innovation Advocates), Garfield Park Conservatory, GARLIC & GREENS, Willie Gois, Harold’s Chicken, Hemlock of Illinois, Hyde Park Art Center, Meagan Isaacs, Mathew Akins, Khafani of Impossible Society, Lindblom Arts and Science Academy, Jorge Luzuri, Margaret Burnoughs Collective, North Branch Projects, OND, Parkway Ballroom, Ron Kudob 746 Studios, Sacred Keepers Sustainability Youth Garden, Sarah E. Gonde STEM Academy, Edra Soto, Michael Soto, South Shore Chamber of Commerce, Spanish Mexican Kitchen, Territory Urban Design Team, University of Illinois Extension’s Master Gardener Program, Koch Umi, DJ Wiggles aka John Phillips, DJ Sadie Woods and Ben Yahola.

We would also like to acknowledge our partners within Columbia College including: Public Relations Manager, Cara Birch, Asian American Cultural Affairs, Art + Design, Campus Environment, Center for Book + Paper Arts, Creative Services, Interdisciplinary Arts, Institutional Advancement, Multicultural Affairs, Office of the President, Photography, School of Fine and Performing Arts, Science and Mathematics and Student Affairs.

RISK: Empathy, Art and Social Practice would not have been realized without the generous support of the Joyce Foundation. In particular, we would like to express sincere appreciation of the advocacy of Angelique Williams Power, Senior Cultural Program Officer. The Foundation’s support of artists of color and work that improves communities is central to our practice.

Finally, we would like to thank our families for the empathy that they so generously extended to us during this process, supporting our long hours and inquiry into this challenging and dynamic art form.

Amy M. Mosney and Noya Pag Liheiman, Curators