

How To Be Good?

By Lise Haller Baggesen

Art as a social Force 12/09/11

Classmates, Comrades, Fellow Collaborators,

In the spirit of letter writing, which has been the common denominator of our work with Tamms Year 10, I am writing this letter to you, in reaction to some of the topics that have come up during this course, both in class conversations and in our community site field -work.

I want to examine some of the questions that can arise in the intersection of art and activism, a field that is often referred to as 'relational aesthetics'.

I will use the reading *'The Social Turn: Collaboration and it's Discontents'* by Claire Bishop, and the book *'Good Intentions. Judging the art of Encounter'* by the Dutch art critic Erik Haagoort as well as Willem Flusser's essay *'War and the State of Things'* from his bundle *'The Shape of Things, a Philosophy of Design'*, in which he philosophizes about the inbuilt incongruity between the two different meanings of the word 'good' (the 'moral' good and the 'functional' good), which I believe is at the heart of the matter.

I will briefly introduce some prison related art projects, we encountered through our collaboration with the TY10 campaign, but I will start in NYC in September 2011.

According to its press release *'Living as Form is an unprecedented, international project exploring over twenty years of cultural works that blur the forms of art and everyday life, emphasizing participation, dialogue, and community engagement.'*¹

According to chief curator and producer Nato Thompson *'socially engaged art is on the rise, shaking up foundations of the art world, and sharing techniques and intentions far beyond the arts. But unlike its avant-garde predecessors such as Constructivism, Futurism or Dadaism, socially engaged art is not an art movement. Instead, these cultural practices indicate new ways of life that emphasize participation, challenge power, and span disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theater and the visual arts.'*

Apart from an exhibition, which took place in the Essex Street Market over the course of three weeks, and presented over 100 artists' projects as well as a program of walks, talks and commissioned neighborhood projects, the summit included a publication² as well as a *'dynamic online archive of over 350 socially engaged projects.'*

The lineup reads as a who's-who of the biennale-surfers and the international gallery circuit of the last two decades: Thomas Hirschhorn, Jeremy Deller, and Superflex among others, as well as a cohort of the lesser gods of the art world. But also a broad range of social activists and community based projects, with as trump the wiki-leaks rock-star Julian Assange.

¹ <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/livingasform/about.htm>

² To be released in 2012

Nato Thompson concludes his curatorial statement by saying: *we hope that by exacerbating the tensions that exist among the myriad of forms, this archive will inspire further inquiry, and ultimately, new approaches to social practice. To that end, we have commissioned several living projects in order to encourage participation, and to provide a glimpse of the energy that surrounds this work. For the artists, activists, and engaged citizens in Living as Form, it is that energy, not the notion of art, which propels them toward the elusive goal of social justice.*³

I can all too easily imagine Julian Assange not giving a fart about art, but I wonder if, say, Thomas Hirschhorn fits into this generalization?

What I've seen of his work tells me not.⁴

His complex installations, looking like hoarder's dens or the nests of oversized magpies, are layered and mysterious, almost hermetic. There are references to social history, for sure, as well as hints to the history of philosophy –most notably Spinoza- but his monumental structures do not read as manifests -they don't tell me what to think. In fact, I still don't know what to think of them, some 10 years later.

That is not to say I didn't 'get' them... but I digress!

³ <http://roarmag.org/2011/09/living-as-form-socially-engaged-art-for-a-world-in-crisis/>

⁴ According to Thomas Hirschhorn *'To make art politically means to choose materials that do not intimidate, a format that doesn't dominate, a device that does not seduce. To make art politically is not to submit to an ideology or to denounce the system, in opposition to so-called "political art." It is to work with the fullest energy against the principle of "quality."*

First time I heard of 'Living as Form' was also the first time I met Laurie Jo Reynolds; artist, activist and founder of Tamms Year 10, -our community field site. She had just returned from New York, where the Tamms Year 10 campaign had been presented as part of 'Living as Form'.

She was not impressed. She told us how she had to rehang her booth last minute, because 'the curators' had left out what she considered the crucial part of her campaign; her correspondence with the prisoners at Tamms Supermax Prison. Instead they had made an aesthetically pleasing display of some of the banners and graphics she had provided –they had, in her words, regarded it as 'just art'.

While I feel her frustration –she is not the first or the last person I know to have felt misunderstood and misrepresented by the art world- I do not share her disdain for 'Art for Art's Sake'. Although I often heard it repeated by many of the people I met with over the course of this collaboration, the statement 'I don't believe in art for art's sake' sounds as weird and hollow in my ears as, say, 'I don't believe in freedom for freedom's sake'.

The conquest for art and beauty is as innately human as the conquest for freedom –it is also as elusive. And in fact they are often contradictory.

In his essay *'War and the State of Things'*, Willem Flusser sets himself the ambitious goal of redefining the word *good* for the end of the millennium. He draws the following conclusion: *'Between pure good ('moral' good), which is good for nothing, and applied good ('functional' good), there can be absolutely no compromise, because in the end everything which is good*

*in the case of applied good is bad in the case of moral good. Whoever decides to become a designer has decided against pure good.*⁵

Flusser uses the example of a cruise missile to illustrate his point about how the two notions of *good* are at odds with each other i.e. the 'better' the missile becomes in terms of functionality, the 'badder' it becomes in moral terms.

I have not had much firsthand experience with cruise missiles (thank goodness!), but I will take a minute to ponder on an example closer to home: the noble iPhone.

When I call the iPhone 'noble' it is because it fits perfectly into all the criteria Flusser sets out in the beginning of his essay, where he paraphrases Goethe's recommendations for man to be 'noble, generous and good' by replacing 'noble' by 'elegant' and 'generous' by 'user-friendly'.

Now, there is no point in arguing that the iPhone is not user friendly and elegant. In terms of commodity fetishism it is unsurpassed, and will probably only be dethroned by its successor, the iPhone-n. So, in terms of functionalism, of course the iPhone is 'good'. When we look at the iPhone in terms of 'moral' good, things get a bit murky. As we know, Apple has risen in the ranks of the industry, from being the nerdy, intellectual left wing underdog to being the schoolyard bully. Its user-interface which is the picture of applied democracy on the surface (my daughter has known how to navigate their devices, ever since she discovered that she had opposable thumbs) allowed Apple to navigate into a position, where the company is controlling a substantial part of the inter-net media content, making their

⁵ *The Shape of Things. A philosophy of Design* by Willem Flusser, Reaktion Books LTD, London, UK, 1999 pg. 33

distribution policies akin to censorship. And that is not to mention the works circumstances in the factories where these gadgets are being produced to meet the ultimate in consumer 'goodness' –the good price.

I have a fair idea, what Flusser would have to say about the iPhone, had he been alive today, but I wonder what he would think about relational aesthetics?

The following quote might give us a clue: *'there are, however, people who are against war. They are not willing to be killed by rockets (although, when asked, they cannot say what kind of death they would prefer). Such people are prepared, in the interest of peace, to accept bad design. They are downright pleased if rockets, paper knives and arrowheads get worse and worse and thus become less and less elegant, less and less convenient. They are good people in a totally different sense of 'goodness' from the one intended. These good people are good for nothing but for simply existing. They are anti-designers.*

Admittedly, when you see them completely at home using the pavement designed in spite of them, one gets the impression that they nevertheless do design things: jewelry for instance. But they cannot keep this up for very long because one cannot 'make love' forever (which the jewelry is intended for) without lapsing into 'making war'. One cannot at the same time be 'good in oneself' and 'good for something'; one has to make a choice to be either a saint or a designer.'

In the case of art, this discrepancy between being 'good in oneself' and being 'good for something' has been expressed in the dichotomy of 'form' and 'content'. But when we look at relational aesthetics, like the old modernist slogan, form follows function.

And as with modernism, within this dogma, form and function are subject to fashion.

If the winners of the Chicago based art grant, the Propeller Fund Award, are anything to go by, it would seem that following the current trends in socially engaged art prison is the new soup kitchen. Out of the 30 recipients of the award so far, 3 of them are related to prison projects. The 2011 winners included The Chicago Torture Justice Memorials Project and the theatre production *a Day at Stateville*, and in 2010 the project Sex Offender Next Door was given a the award.

Of the three, *The Chicago Justice Memorials Project*, is probably closest to most people's notion of 'art'. According to their website '*The Chicago Justice Memorials Project invites artists and justice seekers to submit proposals for a speculative monument to memorialize the Chicago police torture cases. Our goal is to honor the survivors of torture, their family members and the African American communities affected by the torture.*'⁶ Although proposals of 'radical imagination' and proposals in all media are encouraged, the very idea of a *monument* embraces the idea of resurrection through inclusion in the canon of art history.

'*A Day at Stateville*' is a stage performance that highlights the typical day-in-the-life of convicted felons. Performed by ex-offenders, the play describes various aspects of crime, punishment, and criminal justice policy. It has been touring a number of universities, civil rights- and youth organizations throughout Illinois, but more important than the play itself is the dialogue it spurs between the players and their audience, and the debate that the audience engages in with their community as a result of the play.

Chicago Torture Justice Memorial: <http://chicagotorture.org/>

And then there is Laurie Jo Reynolds' 'Sex Offender Next Door'.

As mentioned earlier Laurie Jo Reynolds is not a big fan of 'art for arts sake' and the main purpose of this campaign, as with Tamms Year 10, is to reach beyond the art world to bring about criminal justice reform. Our involvement in the campaign came about when Laurie Jo was invited to present it as part of the Propeller Fund presentation of the 2010 winners at the MDW art fair.

As you can all imagine, the presentation of this highly charged subject, the Sex Offender Registry, was surrounded with a fair deal of nervousness on both sides; that of the organizers of the art fair, as well as that of Laurie Jo. From both sides the nervousness evolved around the idea of *exposure*; Lauren Basing, who was in charge of the Propeller presentation, was uneasy about her public being exposed to 'live sex offenders', whereas Laurie Jo was worried about the reception 'her people' would get when exposed to a wider (art) public.

During the cause of the preparation for the fair, our presentation changed name from *Sex Offender Next Door*, to the less offensive *Ex Offenders Next Door*, to accommodate for the sensitivity of both parties. In order to mediate between the two and to create a space where they could 'mingle', we decided to set up our booth as a traditional art-fair reception, complete with bar tables and -chairs, and with a 'salon style' hanging of testimonies and information from and about the ex-offenders. Calling cards and fortune cookies functioned as graphic interfaces and 'icebreakers' to accommodate the communication between the two parties, -who mingled and communicated beyond expectation!

But how do we judge these projects? Are they any 'good'? Does their 'moral goodness' stand in the way of their 'being good for something', or is it even more complicated – if we are willing to accept these projects as being both 'moral good' and 'good for something' does that somehow affect our ability (or indeed our willingness) to judge them in terms of 'good or bad art'? Are they accomplished as form just by the grace of them fulfilling their function (in this case drawing attention to the broken state of the criminal justice system in the state of Illinois)?

In her essay '*The Social Turn: Collaboration and its discontents*' Claire Bishop notes that '*for [...] supporters of socially engaged art, the creative energy of participatory practices re-humanizes – or at least de-alienates—a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism. But the urgency of this political task has led to a situation in which such collaborative practices are automatically perceived to be equally important artistic gestures of resistance: There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond. While I am broadly sympathetic to that ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyze, and compare such works as art. [...]*'⁷

⁷ She continues: *The emergence of criteria by which to judge social practices is not assisted by the present-day standoff between the nonbelievers (aesthetes who reject this work as marginal, misguided, and lacking artistic interest of any kind) and the believers (activists who reject aesthetic questions as synonymous with cultural hierarchy and the market). The former, at their most extreme, would condemn us to a world of irrelevant painting and sculpture, while the latter have a tendency to self-marginalize to the point of inadvertently reinforcing art's autonomy, thereby preventing any productive rapprochement between art and life. Is there ground on which the two sides can meet?*

As she points out '*the discursive criteria of socially engaged art are, at present, drawn from a tacit analogy between anti-capitalism and the Christian "good soul". In this schema, self-sacrifice is triumphant: The artist should renounce authorial presence in favor of allowing participants to speak through him or her. This self sacrifice is accompanied by the idea that art should extract itself from the "useless" domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis.*'⁸

So, in other words, we are back at Flusser's standoff between the saints and the designers.

In his book '*Good Intentions. Judging the Art of Encounter*' Erik Haagort suggests that this is not really the artist's problem, but instead, the art critics' because '*the work [is] so embedded in the social structures, that to render an aesthetic judgment seem[s] preposterous.*'

He argues that there '*are artists for whom it is not about crossing the imaginary boundary between the moral and artistic domain. For them, the boundary does not even exist. [...] For these artists, art does not exist in a realm beyond morality. It is these artists, albeit few in number, who apply themselves to the art of the encounter.*'

⁸ '*The social Turn, Collaboration and its Discontents*' by Claire Bishop Artforum, February 2006, pp179-185

In his words: *‘the concept of morality has several shades of meaning. It refers to a peremptory system of rules regarding good and evil, which are implicitly or explicitly bestowed or imposed upon people. It also refers to man’s behavior with regards to these rules. [...]’*⁹ *It is a personal disposition in which the focus is on the ethical quality of our daily lives. Subsequently, the way in which you do something, is just as important as what you do. [...] These philosophical views are instrumental to the discourse of the art of encounter since they draw in the quality of the presentation. The manner in which someone presents himself, has a quality of its own.*

He concludes that: *‘this opens up new perspectives. No longer do we have to fixate –to no avail– on an imaginary dividing line between art and morality. And the question whether moral dispositions can be art, is immaterial. It all revolves around what is presented in the art of encounter, and how to judge the presentation. Not that the art of encounter is an illusion of philosophical ethics and vice versa. Nor have philosophers presented us with the touchstone by which we can judge this art form, let alone a list of criteria that art critics can apply directly. Philosophers and artists generally live in a world unto themselves. Nevertheless, a number of views within philosophical ethics can be instrumental to developing an alternative view of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ on the art of the encounter.’*¹⁰

⁹ *In addition, as Michel Foucault demonstrated*, morality points to the manner in which we pay heed to the quality of our moral behavior in everyday life. Other philosophers besides Foucault, including Ilse Bulhof, Michel de Certeau, Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum, have also contemplated this aspect of morality. They share a fascination for man’s predilection to strive for the best, and on a daily basis, not just when a tricky problem or delicate situation arises.*

¹⁰ *‘Good Intentions. Judging the Art of Encounter’* by Erik Haagoort, Fonds BKVB (Foundation for visual Arts, Design and Architecture,

In other words, Erik Haagoort is urging us to look at it *philosophically*. And so, I have come full circle, from design philosophy to ethics philosophy, and it is perhaps in the overlap of these two spheres that the fields of relational aesthetics expands.

Speaking for myself, our collaboration with TY10 has at times forced me to be quite philosophical about the question: *‘But is it art?’* but on another level it has also forced me to encounter my own ideas about what art is and what it is ‘good’ for.

Flying back from Art Basel Miami Beach, it’s hard to deny the hypocrisy of politically charged works in these surroundings. The art world as seen through the prism of the international art fair is a weird and vulgar place – but it’s got oomph, you know!

Still, the awareness of art as a creative force that moves not only through the market driven forces that dictate the commercial art scene, but permeates all layers of society to a level where people –still- believe that it can change their world makes me hopeful, both for the art world, and for the world at large.

It’s good to be good, but you have to know how!

Peace,

Lise

Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2005