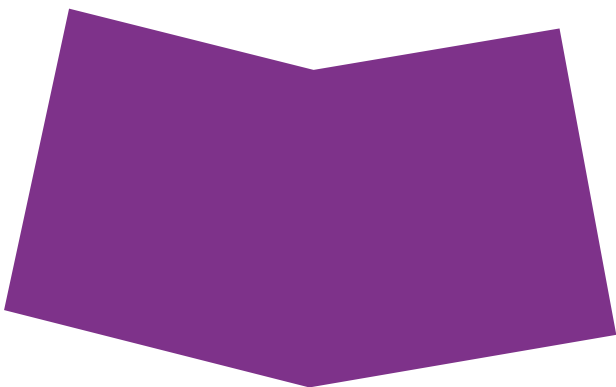
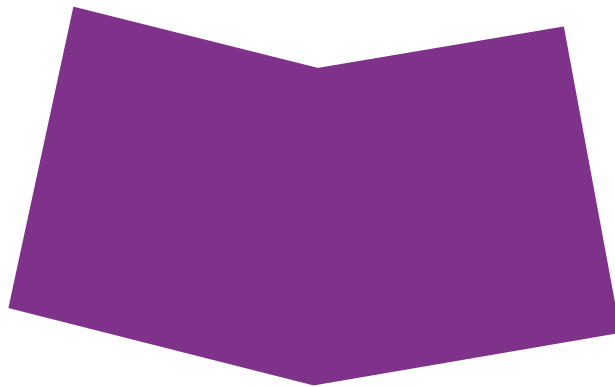
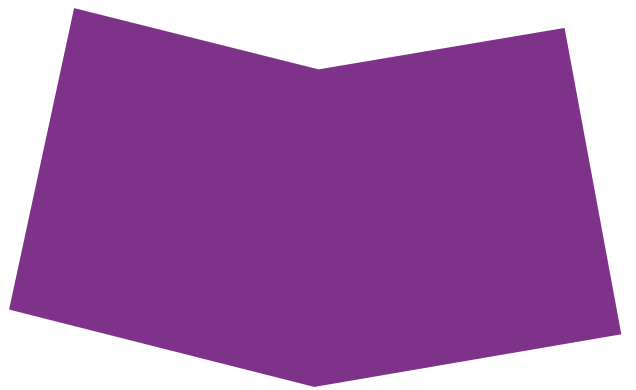


# Essential reads:

## The politics and possibilities of artists working with communities

by Dr Anthony Schrag



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# Background

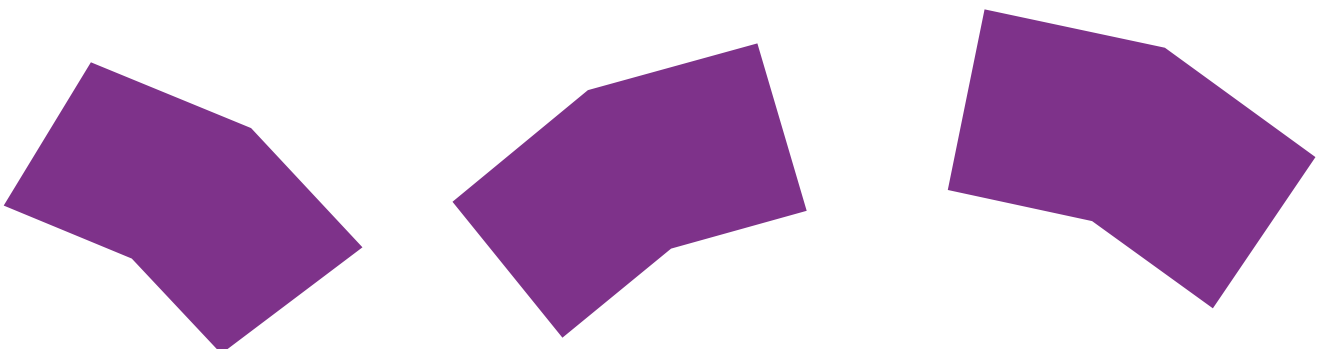
Socially engaged art practices are those where a professional artist develops creative interventions in public rather than within a gallery, theatre or traditional cultural venue. Such activities might automatically assume ‘public good’ as they imply a sense of community engagement. Problematically, however, the intention and outcome of such creative practices can vary drastically, and as practitioners, we often make assumptions about the purpose, function and value of such work.

Consider, for example, the difference between David Harding’s *Town Artist* (1968-1978) as a city-council-employed artist in Scotland making sculptural and civic interventions and Suzanne Lacy’s *Sounds of Water; Sounds of Hope* (2016) exploring socioeconomic deprivation in the English Midlands via performance and film. Or think about the contrast between Lottie Child’s *Street Training* (2019), which looked at the political interventions young people could develop using play as a methodology, and Adam Douglass’ *Vätaulua* (2015), a painting collaboration with a community of patients within a psychiatric ward.

How can all these projects be considered part of the same “practice”? Even within these four examples, there are vast differences in the techniques, intentions, politics and processes. Their only common ground seems to be the notion of “working with people”.

In my own practice as an [artist](#) and [researcher](#), I am particularly interested in notions of “dissensus” (as opposed to “consensus”) and how artistic practices can accurately reflect the democratic social domain. I emphasise a process of “[pro-social conflict](#)” and my socially engaged artwork always features a focus on the complex interactions between things like ethics, power, social systems, economics and health. My approach, therefore, might be very different from someone interested in “social inclusion” through arts and education or using this practice for community wellbeing.

Socially engaged art practices cannot, therefore, be thought of as homogenous, nor do all have the same “value”. Instead, as practitioners, we need to recognise the diversity of politics, processes and possibilities. To this end, I have suggested some essential texts that discuss the diversity of this practice. I include a journal and a website within these essential reads to reference this practice’s plural, discursive nature.



## 1. A Restless Art: How participation won, and why it matters

François Matarasso (2019)

Squarely situating his view of social practice via the legacy of Community Arts activities of the 1960s and 1970s, François Matarasso has consistently explored the “productive” nature of participation and the positive impacts such work can have on people’s lives. This text provides a clear, helpful and accessible way to become familiar with iterations of socially engaged art practice that ally themselves with community development.

The text is over 200 pages and looks at the history, definitions and intentions of this work by linking it to political and sociological theories and processes. You don’t have to read the whole thing, though – the text is broken down into accessible chapters.

This text is a useful reflection for practitioners of socially engaged art who would prefer to orient their work towards ideas such as community building or social cohesion.

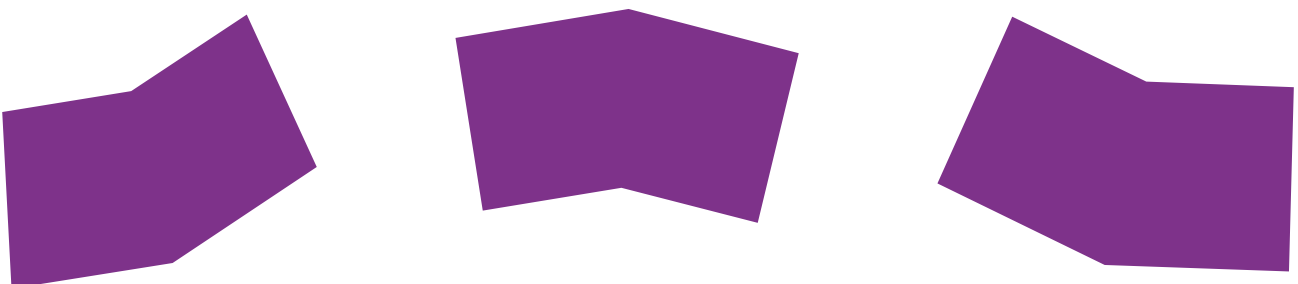
## 2. Meanwhile In An Abandoned Warehouse

Various (Ongoing)

Featuring many of the “big names” of socially engaged art practices – such as Matarasso, Arlene Goldbard, Clive Owen and Sophie Hope – this programme of podcasts includes interviews, book reviews, personal reflections on old writings, case studies and panel discussions. All explore another nuanced and distinct type of socially engaged art practice: one that is more political in nature.

The website suggests that, since 2018, Meanwhile In An Abandoned Warehouse (MIAAW) has “been publishing podcasts about cultural democracy and community art – sharing experiences, ideas and possibilities, to inspire like-minded people.” This “like-minded people” frame is important because the short, weekly conversations mostly align this work to leftist political or activist causes.

This podcast series offers a wide range of voices of those who would situate socially engaged art practices in a more politically minded vein. The nature of the podcast makes this resource very easy to access and is a great way to reflect on the form and function that such work might have in a political context.



### 3. Field Journal

Grant Kester (editor)

Another resource that isn't a single monolithic voice, but rather a collection of texts is the journal *Field*. This is published by the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts and is edited by another giant in the sector, [Grant Kester](#).

The journal can boast of being one of the few peer-reviewed journals about socially engaged art practices, meaning that it presents both research but also critical analysis and case studies. Such things are useful for practitioners because it can feed and inspire reflection about our own creative work.

While there are many different case studies, interviews or theoretical discussions, it's important to note that they are almost always framed through the prism of Kester's theory of "dialogic aesthetics" that he developed in his book [Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art](#) (2010). In his view of the practice, art made with people should not only be in service to political or activist change, nor purely to community development, but rather is a creative practice, fundamentally about ethical relationships.

The journal gives a different insight for practitioners into the formulation of socially engaged art practices that aim to open up dialogue and conversation rather than set out with specific outcomes.

### 4. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship

Claire Bishop (2012) *While not open access, this book is widely available, and it would be worth checking with your local library if they hold a copy.*

In every field, there will be a clash of key figures: social engaged art practices is no different. In 2006, in the pages of *Art Forum* and other sector publications, Claire Bishop and Grant Kester very publicly engaged in an all-out-war of words and theories over the purpose, function, format and focus on socially engaged art practices.

This book is Bishop's "mic drop" to that debate and features both an extensive history, but also significant theory, case studies and examples. Following through from the early 1900s, Bishop traces the lineage and legacy of this work and unpicks the knotty tangles of its relationship to ethics, politics, community, education, engagement and power. Her position can be – very broadly – summed up as: "The best contributions that artists can make to society is art." In other words, artists are not trained to be social workers or community workers: artists' expertise is in making art.

This critical view of socially engaged art practices is often difficult to stomach, as it might conflict with the more ameliorative, helpful view of the practice as seen above. That said, it certainly provides an alternative view of what this practice should be or should do. In that regard, every practitioner should read this text to question their own assumptions.

## **5. Who cares? At what price? The hidden costs of socially engaged arts labour and the moral failure of cultural policy**

Eleonora Belfiore (2012)

The infrastructures that support this sort of work are often overlooked and Belfiore's work provides a topical insight into the complexities of what it means to do this work with communities.

In brief, the text focuses on the emotional labour required of artists who choose to work with people. As such, it reminds us that no matter the function of this work – political, community or artistic – the artist making such work is operating in a very different way than the artist working in a studio, with inert materials. It is vital for anyone interested in socially engaged art practices to think of the emotional complexities that go along with such making, not just its outcomes and outputs.

## **Summary**

While many other texts explore this subject, Belfiore's text is a good one to end on as it reminds practitioners that these things called "socially engaged art practices" are an interconnected, complex field, requiring policymakers, funders, community members, artists, third sector organisations and commissioners to work together. This requires negotiation and collaboration with not just the communities with whom we might work, but with the infrastructures that support this work.

Within this negotiation, I believe there is a recognition that we might not all want the same things: but that's not necessarily a bad thing. After all, difference and diversity are what make this work so interesting and important.

## About the author



Dr Anthony Schrag is a practising [artist](#) and [researcher](#), and Senior Lecturer at Queen Margaret's University (Edinburgh). The central focus of his work examines the role of art in participatory and public contexts, with a specific focus on social conflict, agonism and ethics. His PhD and current research examines the notion of '[Pro-Social Conflict](#)' within participatory and social-practice projects.

His most recent publication [The Failures of Public Art and Participation](#) (co-edited with Cameron Cartiere) was released in Sept, 2022 and recently completed a residency with the Perth Museum and Art Gallery that tried [to persuade the museum to destroy a single item from their collection, as chosen by the public](#). This project failed.

He leads on both the MA [Applied Arts and Social Practice](#) and MA [Arts, Festivals and Cultural Management](#) at Queen Margaret University and is a member of the [Centre for Communication, Cultural and Media Studies](#) Research Centre, leading the Practice Research Cluster: Finding and Using Creative Knowledge.



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