WHAT STRIKES ME IS THE FACT THAT IN OUR SOCIETY, ART HAS BECOME SOMETHING WHICH IS RELATED ONLY TO OBJECTS AND NOT TO INDIVIDUALS, OR TO LIFE. THAT ART IS SOMETHING WHICH IS SPECIALIZED OR WHICH IS DONE BY EXPERTS WHO ARE ARTISTS. BUT COULDN’T EVERYONE’S LIFE BECOME A WORK OF ART? WHY SHOULD THE LAMP OR HOUSE BE AN OBJECT, BUT NOT OUR LIFE?

— Michel Foucault

I WENT FROM BEING AN ARTIST WHO MAKES THINGS, TO BEING AN ARTIST WHO MAKES THINGS HAPPEN.

— Jeremy Deller
PART I: LIVING AS FORM

Women on Waves is an activist/art organization founded in 2001 by physician Rebecca Gomperts. The small nonprofit group would sail from the coasts of countries where abortion is illegal in a boat designed by Atelier Van Leishout that housed a functioning abortion clinic. Gomperts and her crew would then anchor in international waters—since the boat was registered in The Netherlands, they operated under Dutch law—to provide abortion services to women, legally and safely. The following quote is from a documentary film about the history of Women on Waves. While reading, bear in mind the almost Homeric qualities this seafaring narrative conjures. It is a drama, and this is no accident.

"As the ship sails into the Valencia harbor, conservatives dispatch ships bearing banners reading “no” and drumming thunders from the anti-choice protesters leaning on the gates to the port. The dock is mobbed with supporters and aggressive press. As the ship attempts to tie up, a dissenting harbor patrol ship lodges itself between the Women on Waves ship and the dock, securing their lines to the ship and attempting to drag the ship back to sea, while the activists frantically try to untie the line. The authorities seem to be winning the tug of war, when Rebecca, clearly enjoying the moment, emerges from the hole wielding a large knife. The crowd onshore thunderously stomps and cheers as she slices the patrol’s rope in half, freeing her ship, bows to the crowd, and tosses the Women on Waves lines to the eager supporters. As the harbor patrol’s motorboat circles, baffled and impotent, hundreds of hands pull the ship into dock."

Seven years later, for his project Palas Por Pistolas, the artist Pedro Reyes collected 1,527 weapons from residents of Culiacán, a Western Mexican city known for drug trafficking and a high rate of fatal gunfire. Working with local television stations, he invited citizens to donate their firearms in exchange for vouchers that could be redeemed for electronics and appliances from domestic shops. The 1,527 weapons—more than forty percent of which were issued by the military—were publicly steamrolled into a mass of flattened metal, melted down in a local foundry, and recast into 1,527 shovels. Reyes distributed the shovels to local charities and school groups, which used them to plant 1,527 trees in public spaces throughout the city. The spades have been widely exhibited, with labels attached explaining their origins; each time they are shown, they are used to plant more trees.

Here we have before us two socially engaged art projects—both poetic, yet functional and political as well. They engage people and confront a specific issue. While these participatory projects are far removed from what one might call the traditional studio arts—such as sculpture, film, painting, and video—what field they do belong to is hard to articulate.

Though defined by an active engagement with groups of people in the world, their intentions and disciplines remain elusive. Are these projects geared for the media? Each project flourished among news outlets as these artists created new spin around old stories: a woman’s right to choose and the drug wars of Northern Mexico. Women on Waves has performed relatively few abortions over the course of seven years. In fact, the boat has mainly been deployed as a media device intended to bring awareness to the issue. Similarly, Pedro Reyes did remove 1,527 guns from the streets of Culiacán. But, given the actual extent of gun violence there, his gesture seems far more symbolic than practical.

And yet, symbolic gestures can be powerful and effective methods for change. Planting trees does improve quality of life, and using recycled guns to do so speaks directly to those most affected by the violence. Likewise, Women on Waves provided essential services to women in anti-choice countries, regardless of how many were actually able to take advantage of them. While we may not know how to cat-
egonize these projects, they verify a growing array of complex cultural production that confirms, to the art world's content, the term "socially engaged art." We can also look to the art world for inspiration in the case of the West Coast term "social practice." The term "social practice" is used to describe a range of projects, often collaborative in nature, that involve the community and address social issues. These projects have been classified as social practice because they involve the participation of the community and address social issues. Examples of social practice include community gardens, public art projects, and other initiatives that seek to address social issues.

The socially engaged art movement has been in existence for several years, and it continues to grow and evolve. The movement has been characterized by a focus on social justice and community engagement, and it has been embraced by a wide range of artists, activists, and community organizations. The movement has been driven by a desire to create art that is relevant to the lives of ordinary people, and it has been characterized by a focus on collaboration and community involvement.

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How do we write such an interdisciplinary, case-specific narrative without producing misleading causal relationships? The desire to merge art and life resonates throughout the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, and then multiplies across the globe at the beginning of the twenty-first. Artists have borrowed from a plethora of histories—from Russian Constructivists, Fluxus, Gutai, Tropicalia, and Happenings to Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty, Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe. However, it would be a mistake not to place within that history the seminal pedagogic social movements of the last one hundred years: this includes AIDS activism, the women’s movement, the anti-Apartheid movement, Perestroika, the civil rights movement, Paris ‘68, the Algerian wars, as well as the many leaders and visionaries within those movements who discussed the importance of sociality, methods of resistance and confronting power, and strategies for using media. History itself is a problem when it leads to a false sense of causality. If we follow the trail of this work strictly through the lens of art (which is what most disciplinespecific histories do), we could easily imagine a very Western trajectory moving from Dada to Rirkrit Tiravanija in 1991 making Pad Thai—a version of a history in quick strokes. But of course, this kind of highly problematic narrative lacks a true appreciation of the vast complexity of global and local influences, an all-too-common signpost for the contemporary period. Art is no longer the primary influence for culture and because of this, tracing its roots is all the more complex.

Living as Form searches the post-Cold War era, and the dawn of neoliberalism, for cultural works which serve as points of departure for specific regional and historic concerns. However, this book does not offer a singular critical language for evaluating socially engaged art, nor provide a list of best practices, nor offer a linear historic interpretation of a field of practice. Instead, we merely present the temperature in the water in order to raise compelling questions.

WHAT IS MEANT BY LIVING?

Artists have long desired that art enter life. But what do I mean by “life”? In the context of Living as Form, the word conjures certain qualities that I wish to explore, an aggregate of related but different manifestations of the term.

Anti-representational

When artist Tania Bruguera states, “I don’t want an art that points at a thing, I want an art that is the thing,” she emphasizes forms of art that involve being in the world. Yet, she has also said, “It is time to put Duchamp’s urinal back in the bedroom.” Duchamp’s “Readymades” are a great place to initiate the conversation about art and life. For some artists, the desire to make art that is living stems from the desire for something breathing, performative, and action-based. Participation, sociality, and the organization of bodies in space play a key feature in much of this work. Perhaps in reaction to the steady state of mediated twodimensional cultural production, or a reaction to the alienating effects of spectacle, artists, activists, citizens, and advertisers alike are rushing headlong into methods of working that allow genuine interpersonal human relationships to develop. The call for art into life at this particular moment in history implies both an urgency to matter as well as a privileging of the lived experience. These are two different things, but within much of this work, they are blended together.

Participation

In recent years, we have seen increased growth in “participatory art”: art that requires some action on behalf of the viewer in order to complete the work. Consider Tiza (2002) by artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla. This public space intervention consisted of twelve enormous pieces of chalk set out in public squares. People used discarded remnants or broke off a chunk to write messages on the ground. Since Allora and Calzadilla generally choose urban environments with politically confrontational histories, the writing tends to reflect political resentment and frustrations.
This is just one example of numerous works that enter life by facilitating participation.

**Situated in the “real” world**

Clearly, an urge to enter the “real” world inherently implies that there is an “un-real” world where actions do not have impact or resonance. Nonetheless, we find in numerous socially engaged artworks that the desire for art to enter life comprises a spatial component as well. Getting out of the museum or gallery and into the public can often come from an artist’s belief or concern that the designated space for representation takes the teeth out of a work. For example, Amal Kenawy’s *Silence of the Lambs* (2010) focused on a performance in Cairo wherein members of the public were asked to crawl across a congested intersection on their hands and knees; the work critiqued the submissiveness of the general public to the autocratic rule of then-president Hosni Mubarak, and was an ironic precursor to the Arab Spring. Kenawy’s performance entered into life by taking place in the public realm. While this is quite literal, it is important to bear in mind the basic semantic difference as well as the potential risk and cost.

**Operating in the political sphere**

As much as art entering life can have a spatial connotation, it can also possess a judicial and governmental one as well. For many socially engaged artists, there is a continued interest in impact, and often the realm of the political symbolizes these ambitions. Artist Laurie Jo Reynolds’s long-term project aims to challenge and overturn harsh practices in southern Illinois’s Tamms Supermax Prison. Focusing on the basic political injustice (as she sees it) that this prison uses solitary confinement as a condition of incarceration, and that Tamms meets and exceeds the international definition of torture, Reynolds organized *Tamms Year Ten*, an all-volunteer coalition of prisoners, ex-prisoners, prisoners’ families, and concerned citizens. Reynolds has labeled her efforts “legislative art” which reflects the term coined by Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal’s “legislative theater.” Borrowing from the work of education theorist Paolo Freire, Augusto Boal produced a new form of living theater in the 1960s whose entire mission was to assist in the politicization and agency of Brazil’s most oppressed. In addition to inventing different modes of theatricality that entered into daily life, such as newspaper theater and invisible theater, he developed a form of participatory politics called “legislative theater” when he was a city council member in Rio de Janeiro.

In a world of vast cultural production, the arts have become an instructive space to gain valuable skill sets in the techniques of performativity, representation, aesthetics, and the creation of affect. These skill sets are not secondary to the landscape of political production but, in fact, necessary for its manifestation. If the world is a stage (as both Shakespeare and Guy Debord foretold), then every person on the planet must learn the skill sets of theater. The realm of the political may perhaps be the most appropriate place for the arts, after all.

**WHAT IS MEANT BY FORM?**

"THE PUBLIC HAS A FORM AND ANY FORM CAN BE ART."

— Paul Ramírez Jonas

Just as video, painting, and clay are types of forms, people coming together possess forms as well. And while it is difficult to categorize socially engaged art by discipline, we can map various affinities based on methodologies. This includes the political issues they address, such as sustainability, the environment, education, housing, labor, gender, race, colonialism, gentrification, immigration, incarceration, war, borders, and on and on.

Focusing on methodologies is also an attempt to shift the conversation away from the arts’ typical lens of analysis: aesthetics. This is not to say that the visual holds no place in this work, but instead this approach emphasi-
es the designated forms produced for impact. By focusing on how a work approaches the social, as opposed to simply what it looks like, we can better calibrate a language to unpack its numerous engagements.

**Types of gatherings**
Consider *Please Love Austria: First Austrian Coalition* by the late artist Christoph Schlingensief. For this work, he invited refugees seeking political asylum to compete for either a cash prize or a residency visa, granted through marriage. He locked twelve participants in a shipping container, equipped with a closed-circuit television, for one week. Every day, viewers would vote on their least favorite refugee; two were banished from the container and deported back to their native countries. The container, placed outside the Vienna State Opera House, sported blue flags representing Austria’s right-wing party, bearing a sign that read, “Foreigners Out.” It was clearly controversial because the project used the technique of over-determination to promote and magnify the nascent xenophobia and racism already existing in Austria. The project took place in a public square, and provided both a physical space for people to come together as well as a mediated space for discussion. This gathering of people wasn’t what one would call a space of consensus but one of deep discord and frustration.

**Types of media manipulation**
I have previously discussed the manner in which Women on Waves and Pedro Reyes used the media as a critical element in their work. One can add to this list most of the socially engaged art in this book, including Bijari, Rwanda Healing Project, the Yes Men, and Mel Chin. As the realm of the political and the realm of media become deeply intertwined, media stunts become an increasingly important part of the realm of politics. This is true for those resisting power and those enforcing it. And it reflects a contemporary condition wherein relationships with mediation are the basic components by which political—and thus social—decisions are made.

**Research and its presentation**
If politics have become performative, so too, has knowledge—in other words, you have to share what you know. Researchers and scientists who feel a sense of political urgency to disseminate their findings might use the skill sets of symbolic manipulation and performativity in order to get their message out. Similarly, we find numerous artists and collectives who deploy aesthetic strategies to spread their message. For example, Ala Plástica’s research-based environmental activism focuses on the damage caused when a Shell Oil tank collided with another cargo ship in the Rio de la Plata. Over 5,300 tons of oil spilled into this major Argentine river. Using photographs and drawings, and working with local residents to conduct surveys, the collaborative deploys techniques of socially engaged art in order to bring this issue to light. One should also mention the work of Decolonizing Architecture Architecture Residency based in Beit Sahour, Palestine, a group that aims to visualize the future re-use of architecture in occupied territories. In places where war, migration, and mass atrocities have become commonplace—such as Rwanda, Beirut, and Palestine—it is not surprising that many artists focus on archives as a way to document histories now lost.

**Structural alternatives**
The “Do It Yourself” ethic, as it was termed in the early 1990s, has gained cultural traction, and has spread into the basic composition of urban living. Experiments in alternatives—whether the focus is food production, housing, education, bicycling, or fashion—have become a broad form of self-determined sociality. Once just the modus operandi of anarchists at the fringes of culture, the practice has now entered the mainstream. The food movement, perhaps inspired by increasing fear over genetically modified organisms in food by large-scale corporate agriculture and horror of cruel animal slaughtering practices, has become an integral element of many urban metropolises. Community-Sourced Agriculture (CSAs), guerrilla community gardens, and the Slow Food movement, are all forms of new lived civic life that...
Also too, we have to measure how science is emerging to be something that is not the skill of the scientist but transformation of the society. Similarly, sociologists and their colleagues have been searching for the link between the Don de la Mano and the transformations into this new society of research and planning. The relevent is that the Don de la Mano displays a new way of working in order to create a new society that is not the same as the one that was there. This is a re-use of the Don de la Mano in places that are not really original places, such as in the cities of the world. In this way, the Don de la Mano becomes a powerful tool for the transformation of society. Once we overcome these obstacles, we can move forward and perhaps bring something that is a metaphor for the city. We can use the Don de la Mano to create a new city that is not based on the old animal dogma and the old animal individualism. We can create an integral city that is not only based on the individual but also on the collective. We can use guerrilla tactics and new forms of movement to create a new life that is not based on the old animal dogma.
takes the work, literally, into one’s own hands. We also find pervasive growth in alternative social programs occurring in response to the evisceration of state-funded social programs by various austerity measures. We find numerous alternative economies and schools at work as well. Fran Illich’s *Spacebank* (2005) is just one example of an alternative economy aesthetic/form of living. Launched with just 50 Mexican pesos, *Spacebank* is both an actual and conceptual online bank that offers real investing opportunities, and loans to activists and grassroots organizations. Similarly, Los Angeles-based architect Fritz Haeg offered free classes and workshops in his *Sundown Salons*, which he held in his residence, a geodesic dome. I say “similarly” in so much as these are two art world examples of tendencies reflecting the urge toward a DIY aesthetic that has prevailed for nearly twenty years.

**Types of communicating**

As group participation increases, the basic skills sets which accompany group process become more useful. Isolated artists must focus on speaking, while groups of people coming together must focus on listening—the art of not speaking but hearing. The Los Angeles-based collective Ultra-red writes, “In asserting the priority of organizing herein, Ultra-red, as so often over the years, evokes the procedure so thematic to investigation developed by [Brazilian radical pedagogue] Paulo Freire.” Grant Kester has come up with the term “dialogic art” to discuss such methods of art production that emphasize conversation, and certainly many artists privilege conversation as a mode of action. In evoking Freire, Ultra-red also points towards a form of education that must address conditions of power as much as it does culture and politics. The personal is not only political but the interpersonal contains the seeds of political conflict inherently. In reflecting on his work with the sixteen-year-old experimental community housing project/art residency/socially engaged Project Row Houses, Rick Lowe stated in an interview with the *New York Times*, “I was doing big, billboard-size paintings and cutout sculptures dealing with social issues, and one of the students told me that, sure, the work reflected what was going on in his community, but it wasn’t what the community needed. If I was an artist, he said, why didn’t I come up with some kind of creative solution to those issues instead of just telling people like him what they already knew. That was the defining moment that pushed me out of the studio.”

**FORMS OF LIFE**

Tania Bruguera’s call to return Duchamp’s urinal to the restroom is a poignant, provocative notion. For once it has been returned, what do we call it? Art or life? Once art begins to look like life, how are we to distinguish between the two? When faced with such complex riddles, often the best route is to rephrase the question. Whether this work can be considered art is a dated debate in the visual arts. I suggest a more interesting question: If this work is not art, then what are the methods we can use to understand its effects, affects, and impact? In raising these questions, I would like to quote the former U.S. Defense Secretary responsible for leading the United States into the Iraq War, Donald Rumsfeld: “If you have a problem, make it bigger.” Rumsfeld’s adage has been taken to heart as we begin to, hopefully, solve the conundrum of art and life by aggregating projects from numerous disciplines whose manifestations in the world reflect a social ecosystem of affinities. By introducing such a broad array of approaches, the tensions nascent in contemporary art exacerbate to the point of rupture. The point is not to destroy the category of art, but—straining against edges where art blurs into the everyday—to take a snapshot of cultural production at the beginning of the 21st century.

An important project that defies easy categorization is Lowe’s Project Row Houses. Situated in a low-income, predominately African-American neighborhood in Houston’s Northern Third Ward, Project Row Houses was spurred by the artist’s interest in the art of John Biggers, who painted scenes of African-American life in row house neighborhoods, as well as his desire to make a profound, long-term commit-
that, given in the community, why creative people was not of an unicoative.

We are the WE ARE PEOPLE

Stuart Mose Family

Above: Artist Sam Durant contributed We Are the People to Project Row Houses in 2001 (Courtesy Project Row Houses).

to a specific neighborhood. As the community was on the verge of being demolished by the City of Houston, the project began with the purchase of several row houses, which have been transformed into sites of local cultural participation as well as artist residencies. Over the years, many artists have come and gone, more homes have been purchased, and the row houses have undergone rehabilitation. The project initiated a program for the neighborhood’s single mothers, providing childcare and housing so that the mothers could attend school. Project Row Houses has built trust and strong relationships with the surrounding neighborhood, offering a sustainable growth model that is perfect for the neighborhood, one created from the ground up.

Project Row Houses is a nonprofit organization initiated by an artist. If it can be included as a socially engaged artwork, why not include more nonprofit organizations as artworks as well? Many artists and art collectives use a broad range of bureaucratic and administrative skills that typically lie in the domain of larger institutions, such as marketing, fundraising, grant writing, real estate development, investing in start-ups, city planning, and educational programming. As opposed to assuming there is an inherent difference between artist-initiated projects and non-artist-initiated projects, I have opted to simply include them all. Let us call this the “cattle call” method. While it might feel strange to include nonprofit art organizations such as Cemeti Art House and Foundation in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, which has been involved in post-earthquake cultural programming, or the work of the United Indian Health Services located in Northern California, which combines traditional cultural programming with access to health care, consider what they do, not who they say they are. Certainly these projects are not specifically artworks, but their...
collaborative and participatory spirit, community activism, and deployment of cultural programming as part of their operations makes their work appear close to some projects that arise from an arts background. In fact, there are thousands of other nonprofits whose work could be considered and highlighted as well.

In an even greater stretch of the framework of socially engaged art, some works have been included in *Living as Form* that possess no singular author or organization. For example, the celebrations in Harlem on the night of Barack Obama’s election were spontaneous eruptions of joy and street parading in a community that had long thought the election of a black president to be an impossibility. And, in a similar vein, the protests that have erupted across the Middle East—particularly those in Tunisia and Egypt—have become models of spontaneous popular action facilitated across dynamic social networks with the collective desire to contest power. Does this constitute art? Does this constitute a civic action? Certainly some questions are easier to answer than others.

This book’s title borrows from Harald Szeemann’s landmark 1969 exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern, *When Attitudes Become Form: Live in Your Head*, which featured artists including Joseph Beuys, Barry Flanagan, Eva Hesse, Jannis Kounellis, Walter de Maria, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, and Lawrence Weiner, introducing an array of artists whose conceptual works challenged the formal arrangements of what constituted art at the time. The show highlighted a diverse range of tendencies that would later materialize as movements from conceptual art, land art, Minimalism, and Arte Povera. Writing on the exhibition, from Szeemann’s catalog, Hans-Joachim Müller stated, “For the first time, the importance of form seemed to be questioned altogether by the conceptualization of form: whatever has a cer-
tain form can be measured, described, understood, misunderstood. Forms can be criticized, disintegrated, assembled.” Such a break is in the air again, but now accompanied by a keen awareness that living itself exists in forms that must be questioned, rearranged, mobilized, and undone. For the first time, the importance of forms of living seems to be questioned altogether by the conceptualization of living as form. Whatever has a certain form can be measured, described, understood, misunderstood. Forms of living can be criticized, disintegrated, assembled.

PART II: NEOLIBERALISM AND THE RISE OF SPECTACULAR LIVING

Why does this book focus on the last twenty years? Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a new neoliberal order has emerged. Loosely defined, neoliberalism as a political order privileges free trade and open markets, resulting in maximizing the role of the private sector in determining priorities and deemphasizing the role of the public and the state’s function in protecting and supporting them. This pro-capitalist governmentalism has radically shaped the current geopolitical and social map. From the global boosterism of the 1990s to the subsequent hangover and contestation in the 2000s, this vast history includes the growth of capitalism and free-market influence on international governance; formation of the European Union; genocide in Rwanda; the events of September 11, 2001, and ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the bellicose efforts of the Bush administration; and flexible labor in the Western world where decentralized businesses hired and fired quickly, and temporary work became a more familiar way of life. As these policies became commonplace, we found a widespread exacerbation of nascent race and class divisions. The prison industry in the United States now booms, and the gap between rich and poor increases. Widespread protests in Europe and Latin America yielded the term “precarity,” which gained traction as a description of social life always in jeopardy. Austerity measures forced governments such as Argentina, Spain, Greece, and Ireland to eliminate their social welfare programs and ignited protest movements. In Latin America, new left governments emerged that redefined the region’s relationship to culture, capitalism, and power.

The last twenty years were also accompanied by a global growth of advertising in a more media-rich world—from film to cable television to the explosion of video games to the rapid formation of the Internet and social media. Using the same symbolic manipulation and design methods that have long been the bread and butter of artists, the growth of “creative industries” were undeniably part of the cultural landscape. While in the 1940s, the Frankfurt School philosophers Adorno and Horkheimer warned of an impending wave of capitalist-produced culture that would sweep across the world, the last twenty years has seen that wave become a reality. Guy Debord and the Situationists of Paris 1968 coined the term “spectacle” to refer to the process by which culture, expressions of a society’s self-understanding, is produced within the capitalist machine. Typified by the image of an audience at a cinema passively watching television and film, the spectacle can be seen as shorthand for a world condition wherein images are made for the purpose of sales. Certainly when considered from the standpoint of scale, the sheer amount of culture we as a global community consume, as well as produce, indicates a radical break with our relationship to cultures of past eras. Over the last twenty years we find people forced to produce new forms of action in order to account for this radically altered playing field. We find a form of activism and political action that is increasingly media savvy. As opposed to thinking of a war fought with only guns, tanks, and bodies, wars were fought using cameras, the Internet, and staged media stunts.

In 1994, on the same day that NAFTA was signed into office, the Zapatista EZLN Movement emerged in the southern jungles of the Mexican province Chiapas. An indigenous movement demanding autonomy and broadcasting its message via a ski mask-wearing,
pipe-smoking Subcommandante Marcos, the Zapatistas were savvy in their early use of cultural symbols and the Internet to rally the international sympathies of the left to their cause. There is no way to conceive of the protest in Seattle in 1999 as anything but inspired by the Zapatistas’ use of the carnivalesque, poetics, the Internet, and social networking culture. This is to say that over the last twenty years, we have seen the integration of cultural manipulation into its most poignant social movements and accompanying forms of activism. Certainly the antics of the Yes Men—who poke fun at corporate power through their numerous appearances on television and in print media, posing as executives—is another example of resistance manifesting itself in the media-sphere via the manipulation of cultural symbols.

With that in mind, it should be said that this present spectacular reality is simply the chess board we, as people on the planet, must strategically move across. However, the way in which we choose to produce politics and meaning on it yields different ethical and political ramifications. The September 11th attack and destruction of the World Trade Center Towers by two hijacked planes, and the subsequent media hysteria, were clearly considered by their creators in terms of spectacle, not just casualties. In reflecting on this spectacular political terrain, the theoretical collective Retort wrote, “One of the formative moments in the education of Mohammad Atta, we are told, was when he came to realize the conservation of Islamic Cairo, in which he hoped to participate as a newly trained town planner, was to obey the logic of Disney World.”

When considered within the framework of socially engaged art, such events help make sense of the media antics and performativity of hallmark projects such as Women on Waves and Pátalas Por Pistolas. They, too, are meaning-makers in an era of vast spectacle. The same can be said of the aesthetic participation to research, its presentation, and engaging the political terrain. Who needs to worry about art, when all the world is literally a stage? So rather than thinking of the last twenty years as the “post-Cold War” era, we might think of it as the moment in which the spectacle became the increasing reality for not only culture-makers, but all people. Reflecting on the fall of the Berlin Wall, Guy Debord wrote, “This driving of the spectacle toward modernization and unification, together with all of the other tendencies toward the simplification of society, what in 1989 led the Russian bureaucracy suddenly, and as one man, to convert to the current ideology of democracy—in other words, to the dictatorial freedom of the market, as tempered by the recognition of the rights of homo spectateur.”

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the crumbling of the Soviet Union can also be seen as a rise of the spectacle behind the veil of democracy. And because the spectacle enjoys its veils and illusions (as a creature of symbolic production), perhaps it can be symbolized by the mass-media phenomenon that we have lived with for the last twenty years: reality television. The format started in 1992 with the launch of MTV’s The Real World, a supposedly real-life drama about multicultural young people living together, on camera, 24 hours a day. The idea was greeted with paranoid Orwellian concerns of Big Brother (enjoyably enough, the name of the inspiration for The Real World launched in Britain), but over the course of time, what was to stand out about the show was that it not only predicted the largest growth market in television programming, but also foretold the Internet’s now-commonplace role in documenting everyday life. Since 1991, contemporary life has become a kind of schizophrenic existence, where we are both on television as well as in the world. We are both being mediated by things as well as experiencing them.

Why mention this in a discussion of socially engaged art? Without understanding that the manipulation of symbols has become a method of production for the dominant powers in contemporary society, we cannot appreciate the forms of resistance to that power that come from numerous artists, activists, and engaged citizens. We find it in the rhetoric of urban cultural economy guru Richard Florida whose
quick formulas on the creative class have been accepted and built on by major cities in the United States. A pro-arts, pro-real estate development advocate, Florida's quick fix to economic woes explicitly draws a connection between the arts and the global urban concern of gentrification. While It is not the purview of this book, one could easily write a different one based on the practices of the powerful as well. Take, for example, fast-food chain McDonald's Ronald McDonald House. Here we have a global corporation who offers, "essential medical, dental, and educational services to more than 150,000 children annually." We can also see social programs initiated by most major corporations of the United States as well as the manipulation of cultural symbols in media by right-wing political organizations such as The Tea Party. Socially engaged artworks, perversely enough, are not just the purview of artists, but, in fact, can additionally be deployed by capitalists for the production of their own version of meaning and advertising.

It is upon this stage of vast spectacle that we must attempt to create meaningful relationships and actions. And this is not easy. For as the world of The Real World moves from a fiction to a reality, we find ourselves confused by whether things are advertisements or what they say they are. The artist Shepard Fairey's guerrilla wheatpaste poster campaigns across the world have garnered not only great press but also much cynicism as many in the street art community accuse the work of being a corporate-sponsored commercial enterprise. And in an era in which the production of culture is often used as an advertisement, artists too can be guilty of projects wherein the production of art is simply advertising for the ultimate product: themselves. Thus, similar laments might be thrown at some of the work in Living as Form. Is an artist genuinely producing a socially engaged artwork to help people, or is it yet another career-climbing maneuver? Does public art in a city serve its current residents, or does it operate as an advertisement for future gentrification?

This paranoia of what cultural producers actually want is an integral part of a global culture caught in decades of spectacular production. It has radically altered not just the arts, but politics in general. Paranoia is the binding global ethos. With that freakish personality trait in mind, many artists have had to reconfigure their methods to account for this lack of transparency. I would like to call this the strategic turn, borrowing from French theorist Michel de Certeau's terms the "tactical" and the "strategic"—notions that explore how aesthetics are produced in space. If the tactical is a temporary, interventionist form of trespass, the strategic is the long-term investment in space.

Throughout the 1990s, the relational aesthetics of contemporary art began to reveal certain political limitations. By being discreet and short-lived, the works often reflected a convenient tendency for quick consumption and exclusivity that garnered favor among museums and galleries. When the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija cooked Pad Thai in a Soho gallery, the work was praised as a radical redefinition of what constituted art. This simple maneuver was heralded by Nicholas Bourriaud as a seminal project in the production of the genre "relational aesthetics." Over time, many in the activist art milieu viewed this kind of discreet performativity as simply digested by the conditions of power. For some, there were too many similarities between a VIP cocktail party and the intimate personal experiences advocated by much of the work gathered under the heading of relational aesthetics. Similarly, suspicions of the global biennial circuit arose; artists who espoused supposed political ambition and content seemed to simply travel the world trading in the symbolic culture of activism. To quote the artist, anarchist, and activist Josh MacPhee, "I am tired of artists fetishizing activist culture and showing it to the world as though it were their invention."

Thus, the strategic turn where we find works that are explicitly local, long-term, and community-based. Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses is certainly an example, as is Laurie Jo Reynolds's Tamms Year Ten campaign. The organization Park Fiction combined the efforts of numerous parties, including artists, musicians, filmmakers, and community
activists in order to produce a public park in Hamburg by rallying the support and input of numerous community members. What started as a civic campaign in 1994 was finally realized in 2005 after hundreds of meetings, arguments, events, and exhibitions. These are projects that are deeply rooted in community relations and motivated by a commitment to political change. They also gain community traction by committing to an idea over time. As publics become increasingly aware of the hit-and-run style of not only artists, but other industries of spectacle—such as advertising, film, and television—they develop a suspicion of those “helping them.” As with many long-term efforts, the longer the project, the more the artist or artists must behave like organizational structures in order to operate efficiently, and combat fatigue and overextension.

At the time of this writing, the protests and occupations of what are being called the Arab Spring, the European Summer, and the American Autumn are moving apace, catching many governments and societies by surprise. In consideration of the strategic turn by artists and activists, we find a similar reflection in the new social movements of the current period. Whereas the protests of the anti-globalization movement possessed a hit-and-run style focusing on various gatherings by large governmental and corporate bodies, including the WTO (World Trade Organization), the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), the G8 (Group of 8), the IMF (International Monetary Fund), et al, the current occupation strategies stay in one place over a longer period of time.

GLITCHES IN THE FORMS

While the language for defining this work is evolving, some criticisms and considerations find their way into most discussions. A constant battle (which is difficult to resolve) is the matter of efficacy and pedagogy between the symbolic, the mediated, and the practical. When is a project working? What are its intentions? Who is the intended audience? When is an artist simply using the idea of social work in order to progress her career? Are these socially engaged works perhaps a little too sympathetic with the prevailing values of our time and, thus, make themselves vulnerable to state instrumentalization? Again, socially engaged art can easily be used as advertising for vast structures of power, from governments to corporations. Determining which forms of social engagement truly lead towards social justice is a constant source of debate. Knowing this, in itself, is useful.

As art enters life, one must consider the powerful role that affect plays in the production of meaning. The concept of affect derives from the understanding that how things make one feel is substantively different than how things make one think. As cultural production is often geared towards emotive impact, understanding how cultural projects function politically and socially would benefit from an understanding of this poorly analyzed concept. In addition, how these projects function and are understood is as varied as the audiences they impact. Unmooring this work from the strict analysis of aesthetics should not only assist in truly appreciating its complexities, but also liberate the dialogue of aesthetics to include knowledge sets of the global public. Moving across racial, cultural, disciplinary, and geographic boundaries provides a complex public to consider. Obviously a person with a contemporary art background appreciates a socially engaged artwork differently than someone who does not. But more important than disciplinary-specific knowledge are the vast differences in approach developed out of geographic, racial, class, gender, and sexuality differences. A form of analysis that can account for this broad spectrum of difference (while obviously difficult) will at least provide a framework for interpreting social phenomena from an honest position based in reality.

Socially engaged art may, in fact, be a misnomer. Defying discursive boundaries, its very flexible nature reflects an interest in producing effects and affects in the world rather than focusing on the form itself. In doing so, this work has produced new forms of living that force a reconsideration and perhaps new language altogether. As navigating cultural sym-
bols becomes a necessary skill set in basic communication and pedagogy, let alone community organizing, the lessons of theater, art, architecture, and design have been incorporated in a complex array of social organizing methodologies. Deep research, media campaigns, dinners, conversations, performances, and online networking are just a few of the numerous techniques deployed in this strategic and tactical playing field.

As Duchamp placed the urinal in the museum at the beginning of the twentieth century, perhaps it should be no surprise to find artists returning it to the real at the dawn of the twenty-first. This maneuver could easily be interpreted as yet another art historical reference. However, I suspect the more important interpretation is that this maneuver reflects a necessary recalibration of the cultural environment surrounding the world today. For, as art enters life, the question that will motivate people far more than What is art? is the much more metaphysically relevant and pressing What is life?