

**Concepts
and Conditions
for Art
as a Social
Action**

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1. Rethinking Art and Society

Capitalism and art: Art has long been bound to the private realm for a long time. Artists are the owners of that territory. Artists, as a creator does, perform the 'creation' of the artworks. Some of them may become a 'masterpiece'. The world, being unable to understand by its providence, casts the appellation of 'the genius' down to the artist. The artist then appears as the most perfect model 'individual' in the age of individualism. Individualism, however, is an ideology and its material foundation, capitalism. An individual is a construct made out of the demand of capitalism. 'Market' needs an individual as a subject and elementary unit of estimating and deciding the supply and the demand. Market loathes community. It is because a community is the root cause of all "collusion" that interferes with the normal operation of the market. Being an individual is possible when the community is completely deconstructed. The collusion of private art and capitalism then comes as a matter of course. An artist who is discord with others is an ideal of an individual of the market, drifting away from the community. Genius commonly symbolizes a legendary entrepreneur. 'Luxury' brands function as a substitute for a masterpiece in the market. However, private art does not stop at being an allegory of capitalism. The market involves in the work of art more directly. Art at once becomes part of the market itself. We trade works of art. Art then exists as means of the pursuit of profits. Artists without selling their artworks cannot even pick up their livelihood. Individual artists admit the market as the condition of their existence.

Even the revolutions could not prevent art from being subsumed under capitalism. Even the most revolutionary artists do not hesitate to sell their artworks at high prices.

Transition, the Entanglement of Art and Society: Art and society intersect. At this crossroad burgeons a tiny change. Artists are moving towards the public realm. Art time and again brings people together in the name of art. Artists stand at the center of the community. Some artists would want to be neighbors, not lone geniuses. They refuse to create fixed and unchanging masterpieces and intervene in the ‘situation’ through artworks. Art appears in ‘streets’ and ‘walls’ and in people’s chatter. It achieves differentiated meanings in different times and spaces. Art is ‘interpreted’ and ‘understood’ in everyday situations by those who are in it. Here, art acquires intersubjectivity and ‘indexicality.’ Public value now becomes one of the important characteristics of contemporary art. Reflecting on the public nature of art further expands the realm of art. Artists intervene in people’s daily life and in public affairs. Gender, race, poverty, ideology, discrimination, generation, region, education, etc. become a new stage for the artist. The social space is the studio, the canvas, and the paint.

2. Locality, a space of assimilation and exclusion

Regions and Communities: The local or region in its denotative sense refers to an area within a certain geographical boundary. In Korean, ‘ji-yeok’ 지역 falls under this meaning. At the same time, the region includes the ‘group of people’ established within the area. The community is suitable for calling such gatherings. The English word ‘community’ comes from the Latin words ‘together’ (‘cum’) and ‘service’ (‘munus’) or ‘give’ (‘munere’). Local is often used interchangeably with ‘local community.’ A community is a group of people who exchange “gifts” with each other while sharing a geographical space.

Community composition and reorganization: Members of the community are not passive subjects. They are active and reflective subjects. They not only react to the world, they change it. A local community is not given from the beginning, but a common creation of its members. This creation is neither fixed nor immutable. The interactions of community members constantly reshape the community. However, the re-organization of communities is not always harmonious. Community is a place of confrontation and conflict. The community is the place of people's struggle. The community is maintained or changed by the struggle of the subjects to preserve or overthrow the current situation. This struggle makes the community a space of discrimination and exclusion.

Cursed Space, the provinces: The struggle, induced from within or outside the community, lowers the region to a 'local' as opposed to a 'center', a 'border' or a 'periphery' as opposed to the 'core'. The central/local polarization made the local into a space of "disappearance".

3. Artists as Social Practitioners

'Place' and 'Relationship' as Space of Aesthetic Practice: A strange situation arises. The local is re-emerging as a stage for aesthetic activity. Critical reflection on 'place' became the basis of this change. Places began as geo-spatial concepts and evolved into relational realms. The place meant the 'interaction' itself between people or the site where such interaction was triggered. The artist is now someone who intervenes in the interactions between people. Nicolas Bourriaud called this aesthetic aspect of interaction 'relational aesthetics.'

Becoming an Anthropology of Art: Hal Foster calls an artist working in the community an 'ethnographer.' Foster reads "signs of an ethnographic shift in contemporary art and

criticism.” The artist modeled as an ethnographer tenaciously probes into the political possibilities of art on the horizon of postmodernism. This political possibility is implemented in the form of ‘identity’ politics. Identity politics takes as a key phrase the issue of how to establish the relationship between the subject and the other. The politics of modernism is implemented in a way that confirms the subject by colonizing the other. Postmodernism rather performs the othering of such a self-subject. Through this reversal strategy, postmodernism rehabilitates others. Ethnography based on participatory observation is inherently other-oriented. According to Foster, “mapping” has become one of the effective ways that art meets anthropological methods and sociological orientations. Artists infiltrated the community. They meet the members of the community, and they themselves become members of the community. Artists learn the language of community members. They ask, talk, record, collect data, and observe what has happened there. Artists plan, propose and carry out common projects within the community.

Democracy as an Artistic Value: The social practice of the artist raises the issue of politics as an artistic value. Art does not exist just for the sake of art. Art has an irreplaceable importance from a social point of view as well. The state and the market have implemented the so-called logic of ‘monopoly’ in their prolonged history. The logic of power and capital inevitably implies monopoly by the strong. In politics and economics, these two monopolies conspire with each other. The political and economic system of the collusion as such is called by the name of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism distorts the relationship between people and spreads various prejudices and opinions (*doxa*) that justify the distortion. The social practices of artists try to coexist with the alienated and forgotten others in the relationship they are trying to restore. Artists try to redistribute the meaning of beings that are appropriated rather than power and

capital themselves. If the sum total of values opposite to the monopoly of power and capital can be collectively referred to as ‘democracy,’ the social practice of today’s artists can be said to be the most powerful means of achieving democracy beyond aesthetics. Rather, at the intersection of aesthetics and relations restored by art, democracy becomes the purpose of both politics and aesthetics. The social practice of the artist is a means of intervening in life through art in a larger context.

Artists as Social Actors: In the social space, artists go beyond simple aesthetic practitioners. He doesn’t have to be a sociologist. However, his work inevitably has social meaning or exerts social influence on the audience. Art is performed where aesthetics and sociology overlap. Such an intersection is getting widened. The social practice of the artist expands the possibilities of art, and somewhere along the path of that extension redefines art in a different way. The expanded art ‘implodes’ the way of existence of the artworks and the qualifications of the artists. Artists have social responsibility. Society is not only a place of love, reciprocity, tolerance, dialogue, and recognition between people, but also a place where confrontation, hatred, exclusion, domination and exploitation, and oppression are implemented. Artists who intervene in society are beginning to believe that they can contribute to a change in those relationships through their participation. They are the ones who give an ‘aesthetic form’ to human experiences and actions among them. They understand and explore the formation, history, and structure of social space. Furthermore, they try to intervene and participate in the place for a certain period of time.

Symbolic Struggle, Being Recognized as Art: Of course, the expansion of these arts is not without obstacles. When moving into the public realm, art faces two challenges. First, it is to be recognized as a legitimate symbol. Sometimes a ‘street’ is not considered a ‘place’ for an artwork to reside.

Roads, walls, signboards, and dialogues are not the complete habitation given to the work. The sharpest criticism comes from inside the field of art. In particular, private art sharply opposes public art. In private art, public art is nothing but ‘garbage’ that has been abandoned and left unattended. For individual artists, art must be produced in an isolated studio and displayed in a white cube. Public art struggles with private art to obtain legitimacy as art even on the road. Second, public art should induce social change. The artist intervenes in social space. Sometimes the artist stands in the middle of social contradictions. Artists expose poverty and discrimination through art and contribute to the democratization of social space. However, these two tasks are interconnected. It is because the social intervention of the artist is based on recognition as a legitimate symbol within art. Art changes society, and the changed society further expands the possibilities of art. For this change and expansion, two conditions must be considered together. The first is the possibility of ‘critiques of community’ and the second is the reflection on the ‘expanding art museum.’

4. Are Critiques of Community Possible?

Critiques of Community: The artist's social practices experiment with the new sense of community that seeps between individuals and between individuals and communities. The aesthetic meaning of this experiment should be properly captured through discourse. Uncollected meaning evaporates in the street. The volatilized experiment did not exist from the beginning. Critiques of community are the discursive work that attempts to fully capture the social practice of the artist. If an artist's practice moves toward a social space, critiques of community would go in the opposite direction. In other words, it ‘aestheticizes’ the social practice of the artist. However, in this case, aestheticization should be done away from describing or explaining the ‘single’

work independently created/made by an ‘individual’ artist from the ‘objective’ position or ‘ex-post’. Such art is nothing more than a ‘monologue’. Such a critique is just another monologue to such a monologue. An artist's intervention in the community is a ‘conversation’ and participation with different participants. Such a dialogue is transformed into an aesthetic meaning at some point due to the artist's intervention. Critiques of community should track and capture the moment when such an interaction constitutes an aesthetic transformation. Critiques of community should also engage in dialogue. The critic should participate in the dialogue as another speaker, and weave the sporadic meanings vomited by the other speakers accumulated in the dialogue into a web.

Critique as dialogue, or aesthetic ethnography: Perhaps an appropriate paradigm for the critique of community is an ‘aesthetic ethnography’. It is a more collective and critical writing that is at the same time closer to the field.

Ethnography is the work of meeting, talking, observing, and recording various participants in the field. As Foster emphasized, if ethnography is a method of artistic practice, it is also a method of the critique. Artists and critics capture the interactions of the sites in which they participate in different ways. Ethnography is therefore not an individual record, but a product of dialogue within/between unfamiliar communities. Community critics must also engage in the interaction of the artist with members of the community and discern the aesthetic boiling points of that interaction.

5. The social ontology of art museums

Expanding the art museum into the field: The social practice of the artist attempts to include a variable community that is created, changed, and destroyed in the realm of artistic practice. These attempts face the following problems. Namely, how would the art museum maintain its institu-

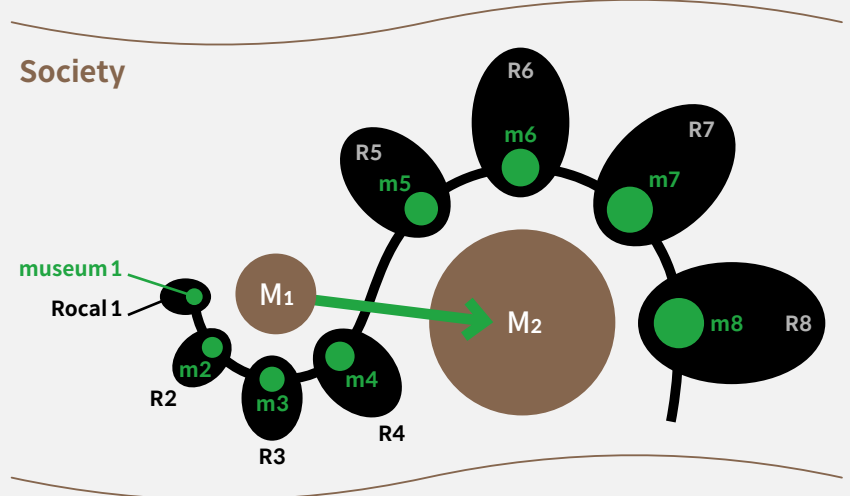
tional identity in the virtuous cycle of public participation of artists and democratization of social space? Art museums should cease to exist as huge monuments in the downtown area. The museum should be expanded into a space of community and life where artists' practice is induced while maintaining the strengths of experience, material resources, and human capabilities that have been accumulated over the years.

'Community Curator': In this case, the community curator system can be a form of art museum suitable for presenting the public participation of artists. A community curator is a form of operation of an art museum that is affiliated with a specific large art museum and provides organic feedback between the art museum and the community. Community curators are dispatched to the field of social space while guaranteeing expertise in the management of art museums to establish a cooperative system between artists and residents. The physical conditions and planning functions of art museums are already being separated in various forms. A community curator is an embodied and 'living' form of an art museum. The activities of community curator turn the site to which he was dispatched into an art museum. They conduct work such as investigation, research, excavation, education, and public relations in a specific place, and return feedback with the museum. On the one hand, community curators effectively organize human and material artistic resources in the area and contribute to the creation and change of new communities. Community curators jointly plan, mediate, and coordinate interactions between artists, residents, and art museums.

'Expanding Art Museum': The social practice of artists requires institutional conditions for an expanding art museum. The museum deals with various local agendas and collaborates with the support of the community. As such, the identity as well as the position of the art museum

that it occupies also changes for dealing with more diverse agendas in many regions. According to the trajectory of the museum's 'positioning', the scope of the museum's effect also expands. The expanding museum functions as a public base for collaboration between artists and the community, and the financial resources required for the operation of the museum depend on public support according to the degree of publicness. As the span of activities of the art museum grows, its status also changes, and at the same time causes a transformation in social space.

Conceptual diagram of an expanding art museum



When society becomes art: The change of contemporary art accommodates the intimacy that can never be appropriated by others. The intimacy is not necessarily limited to the artist alone, but belongs to the various members of the project. The social practice of the artist provides reflection on the relationship between art and society. It ensures the social expansion of artistic logic while satisfying social needs in an aesthetic way. At some point in the interaction between art and society, art becomes society and society

becomes art. The expanded art museum swims in and out of the boundary between art and social space, expanding and permeating each other. The art museum confirms the existence of it and the meaning of its existence in the horizon of art and society. The museum guarantees its existence value in the name of democracy. Art museums can be made a place of common solidarity in the name of culture.

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