Is it possible to make Ethical Dialogical Art?

The ethical implications of applying Intersectional Feminist methods to work with Dialogue-based Community Art.

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Positioning/background

I am a white, non-binary, crip[1], and queer person with mixed european minority heritage, raised as part of the rural Swedish working class. My understanding of the world is defined by this background as well as by my time as a gender scholar and in art school. To state this is to position myself to the knowledge I am hereby trying to produce: as a person from the margins this is also where I continue to position myself and my art, in connection to the American professor, social activist, and author bell hooks' notion of the margin as a place for radical openness.[2] In this text I present my current ideas on how applying Intersectional Feminist methods to work in Socially Engaged Art is a radical opening towards new, cooperative[3] knowledge, and especially when working with dialogue-based art. In conjunction with these ideas, this essay questions what the ethical implications of engaging with such work might be.

Intersectional Feminism

The theory of intersectionality was developed by American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991[4] as a legal tool to identify and ultimately subvert the particular oppression Black womxn[5] face in a heteropatriarchal white-centered society. Intersectional Feminism looks at how different forms of social marginalisation intersect to create individual positions of oppression. In this essay I use my own extension of Intersectional Feminism, which includes feminist texts predating Crenshaw's theory, as well as succeeding it. These are not necessarily positioned as Intersectional Feminism but nevertheless touch upon how different positions in the web of social power relations create different privileges and disadvantages for navigating our shared society and

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[1] Crip is a reclaimed term used as self-identification by disabled people.
[2] bell hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', in The Applied Theatre Reader, ed. by Tim Prentki and Nicola Abraham, 2nd edn (Second edition. | Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2020.: Routledge, 2020), pp. 80–85
[3] Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Duke University Press, 2013). Finkelpearl uses cooperation instead of collaboration since he finds it better encompasses the diverse interactions taking place in the field of Socially Engaged Art.
[4] Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991).
[5] Womxn is an alternative spelling used by feminists to include and bring forth nonbinary and transgender people.

culture. My own feminism is deeply rooted in the realisation that White Feminism[6], (or feminisms acting from a Eurocentric perspective in Europe) more often than not continue to uphold the narrative of a singular (White Christian Cishet) Woman, and thus continue to disregard and exclude the experiences of the Other[7] also within feminist contexts. The silencing of multiple narratives effectively upholds the power of the norm, be it in society in general or in feminist work. These realities make an Intersectional Feminism necessary if the aim is to work towards any radical political change towards a better world, whether or not this aim and the work towards it is done as activism, theorisation, or art.

What is knowledge?

During the Enlightenment French philosopher Descartés' ideas[8] were picked up to become a defining theory of the mind, and thus of our thinking. *Cartesian Subjectivity* was Descartés' idea of the free mind, disconnected from the body and the nature around it, while simultaneously able to contemplate and place judgment upon its surroundings. *The Cartesian Subject* is 'objective', placing judgment from its own moral and aesthetic position, completely disconnected from social structures and broader context. The Cartesian Subject is not tied down by social structures because he is the norm, and the norm doesn't either *see itself* nor *need* any [9]contextualisation, he simply *is* and *does*. This mindset also formed the base for the colonial mind; which is still ever present and currently exists in one of its dominant manifestations as xenophobic late capitalism. So one could argue that Cartesian Subjectivity, also known as Cartesian Dualism, is still the prevalent system of thought through which we understand the world, and thus base our knowledge production on.

The feminist theorisation of knowledge production joined the playground in the late 1900's. As part of this, and of the field of Feminist Critique of Science, feminist scholar E. K. Minnich presented the analytic tool of the *Root Problems* (1984)[10] in an attempt to unveil the faulty structure of how knowledge is produced. The root problems are:

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[6] White Feminism is the name of feminisms which centers white womxn without taking other identities and lived experiences into consideration.

[7] Othering is the process in which an us/them thinking is established, based on prejudices and xenophobia.
 'The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging', *Othering and Belonging*, 2017

[8] Particularly those presented in Descartés *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

[9] In norm criticism the norm is 'invisible' until someone breaks it - And then becomes visible through the social punishment addressed at the normbreaker.

[10] Elizabeth Minnich, *Transforming Knowledge 2nd Edition* (Temple University Press, 2005).

1. *Faulty generalization*: the idea that everyone is the same and can be judged under the same values; i.e. those of the white male christianity, the defining centre.
2. *Circular reasoning*: the faulty cultural narratives discriminating against certain groups and expressions that can later be used as 'proof' that the subject of critique is indeed 'just like that', even though these narratives were faulty to begin with.
3. *Mystified concepts*: the discourse around concepts through which they are deemed the same for everyone and objectively true, when in reality they are subjective and differ from individual to individual. This abstraction derives from the latter problems.
4. *Partial knowledge*: this is what we are left with when the previous three root problems have taken their toll, a partial knowledge about a subject that presents itself as all-encompassing but in reality is but a limited fragment of any full understanding.

The people in power of these processes, i.e. the hegemonic positions that Minnich refers to as *The Defining Centre,* are the ones privileged enough to think that the knowledge produced under their judgement is truly objective. Because we are living in a Eurocentric paradigm, ruled by and privileging the experiences of white cishet Christian men, the aggressive masculinity and the faulty generalisations it promotes is reproduced in *all* knowledge produced under this paradigm, and in all actions taken within it, as long as the engagement is based on critical perspectives, in both theory and action.

Feminist scholar Donna Haraway introduced embodied subjectivity in 1988[11] as a necessary antidote to the Cartesian Dualism. Just like Minnich, Haraway talks about the need for self-reflexivity to uphold the necessary distance to one's own, generally heavily biased, thinking. Haraway further articulates how subjectivity is always *Partial, Embodied,* and *Situated.* This means that the knowledge of an individual is always limited to a certain partial understanding of the world, which in turn is tied to the body carrying this knowledge, and the past experiences that this body is holding. The subjective understanding is also always situated, positioned, and in context.[12] Haraway's ideas sit as part of the field of Feminist Standpoint Theory, which argues that the subjective experiences of both researcher and researched should form the base of all knowledge production.

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[11] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988), 575–99.

[12] This builds on the notion of Embodied Knowing which was developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Milton, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 1982).

Since the presentation of the theories mentioned here, there has been a shift in feminism; both academic and activist, where White Feminism and Eurocentric feminism and its practitioners first came under scrutiny through Black Feminism and Postcolonial Feminism, and later had to stand back for theories encompassing and contextualising the different oppressions of individual positions in the power structures of society, which is how Crenshaw's intersectional theory was picked up to become Intersectional Feminism. I myself have been working with art from a feminist position for the entirety of my practice and education, and have long been investagiting how art can act as a tool of knowledge production not limited to the current paradigm. However it was only during my Master's studies that I fully started to comprehend how the form of art in itself is the key part of the work, if the aim is to engage with an alternative production of knowledge This was a critical point, when my focus finally turned outward, towards connection, cooperation, and community.

What is art?

The Western concept of art, or rather of aesthetics and aesthetic judgement, was laid out by Kant in *1790.*[13] The position of 'objective' aesthetic judgment Kant introduced became the base of art as we have known it since; focusing on the individual genius of the artist as well as on the concept of taste (i.e. objective aesthetic judgement). Kant's theories laid the base of a system of meaning under which art operates, and for how it is producing a certain kind of knowledge for a certain audience. The problem with the concept of art is that it is working under a flag of objectivity, when in reality the concept of art was created by a white Christian man,[14] to be activated by and for other white Christian men. So art as we know it has an intimate tie to social power, and to the *Defining centre,*[15] *the norm of* society. Art as a concept is as much about the creation and contextualisation of art as it is about the separation between the elite (the norm) and the masses (the norm breakers), in part through the gatekeeping of the knowledge of the 'right' aesthetic judgment (i.e. taste).

The Western concept of art is of course really one of many narratives. It is however so that within this framework all other traditions and cultures of art are deemed norm breaking; The Other, and is either appropriated, stolen, disregarded, or misrepresented within the singular narrative of the norm; in this case the The Western Art World. The

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[13] Immanuel Kant, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000).
[14] Kant's ideas of aesthetic judgment were positioned within his broader ideas of the interconnectedness of science, morality, and religion.
[15] Elizabeth Minnich, Transforming Knowledge 2nd Edition (Temple University Press, 2010).

colonising countries of the West have countless stolen national treasures from the colonised countries on display in their museums, and in recent years the voices calling for repatriation are starting to get impossible to ignore. In Sweden the Sámi people have been fighting for repatriation of both arts and crafts objects, artifacts, and physical remains of their ancestors, which have been held at Swedish cultural- and/or medical institutions.

Socially Engaged Art

Socially Engaged Art is a field of art with its focus on participatory, cooperative and social activities that has developed since the 1990's. The term I am using is one of several that tries to encompass the multiplicity of practices of this field, and I will be using this particular term since I find that the core of these practices lies in the social *engagement* needed to produce projects in this particular field. Socially Engaged Art[16] is building on art movements of the 1900's such as Fluxus, the Situationist International and Performance Art.[17] Artists in the field often use dialogue to some extent as means for and parts of their projects. Dialogue-based art is art where the dialogue makes up the base of the project or the project itself.

A prominent practitioner of Socially Engaged Art is Suzanne Lacy,[18] who through her practice was also taking part in the first development of the field itself. Lacy's projects generally center a community, letting them articulate their issues with, and longings for change to, their environment and lived experiences. Lacy then presents the findings to relevant authorities through aiding discussions between the people affected by a certain issue and the people who hold the power to change the situation. In *Anyang Women's Agenda*[19] (2010) Suzanne Lacy (with Raul Vega) worked in Korea together with local activists and womxn politicians to collect womxn's experiences of the extremely gendered public space they inhabit, with the aim to make a base for new local policies improving their situation.

An example from the next generation of Socially Engaged Artists is Christine Wong Yap, a project-based artist from San Francisco. She too engages with dialogue-based art, but is focusing on subtler experiences than Lacy, with one of her recent projects centering and collecting stories of belonging from residents in the San Francisco Bay Area.[20] Her following project consisted of collecting 20 stories from her own

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[16] The social turn has been contextualised and critiqued by art historian Claire Bishop in, amongst other texts: Claire Bishop, 'THE SOCIAL TURN: COLLABORATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS', 17.

[17] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso Books, 2012).

[18] Even as Lacy's own term for the field is *New Genre Public Art.*

[19] 'Performance/Installation', *SUZANNE LACY* <https://www.suzannelacy.com/performance-installation> [accessed 23 October 2020].

[20] The project titled Belonging (2018-2019).

neighborhood, and then hand-drawing these in the participants own words to become the comic-book *Alive and Present - Cultural Belonging in the S.F. Chinatown and Manilatown.*[21] The project was supported by the Chinese Culture Centre of San Francisco and Chinatown Arts & Culture Coalition, and the 56-page book is available at an affordable price, making it accessible for the participants and their community. As artists it is our responsibility to act more ethical than the society we are raised in, and accessibility is a key part in this process. An outsider's (here participant's) access to the art institutions and the knowledge produced therein is generally limited, both spatially and theoretically, and it falls on the artist to facilitate situations which are accessible to the participants on the participants own terms and not on the terms of the art world.

Both of the above mentioned artists have been important to my own practice and my artistic approach. Lacy and Wong Yap both work with dialogue at the core of their projects, and have thus acted as references for the development of my own practice, but over different time periods. I was introduced to Lacy and her work during my Master's programme, and then discovered Wong Yap and her work as part of my research into artists whose practices entail a more ethical interaction with participants.

Dialogical Art

Dialogical Art, or dialogue-based art, where the 'meaning' of an artwork is not set or inherent in a static object but instead lets the participants take part in producing the meaning through communication, has the possibility to function in a radical way where the polyvocal perspectives of the participants are not only being consulted, but make up the base of the entire project and the knowledge it produces.

In *Conversation Pieces* (2004), Professor of Art History Grant H. Kester presented his theory of a *dialogical aesthetics*, which highlights the act of communication as an inherently aesthetic experience. Kester exemplifies artists who work with dialogue and communication as a core part of their projects, rather than as something which will later lead up, or involve, the production of an artwork in the physical sense. Kester argues that the experience of an object artwork is always a communicative act, but in object-based art the meaning of the artwork is already set, transmitting a message that is communicated to and then engaged with by the audience in a passive way. In dialogue-based projects, on the other hand, Kester finds that the communication is not coming only from one of the parts but instead is developed through dialogue and discussion between the artists and the participants. Kester sees the artists he is

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[21] 'Belonging' <https://christinewongyap.com/work/2020/belonging-chinatown/index.html> [accessed 11 November 2020].

exemplifying as content providers rather than content producers, and also talks about the context in which dialogue takes places rather than dialogue as a means of itself. [22]

 Interviewed by art writer Tom Finkelpearl as part of *What We Made* (2013)[23] Kester articulates his standpoint in opposition to a cynicism towards artistic works, practices, and processes that he is identifying as a common position within the contemporary art world. Kester's position can be summarised by how he in his work is interrogating ways in which communication can succeed instead of keeping focus on how it can fail.

I too find that dialogue is a method of possibilities, both for a more ethical engagement (as the moral values of the group can be negotiated in real-time), and in terms of the immediate production and transfer of knowledge that any conversation is. However the situations I facilitate work on more subtle levels than that of facilitating policy-making meetings.[24]

I identify with, and position my practice as, intersectional feminist dialogue-based art, both with a clear community focus and with an emphasis on a cooperative production of knowledge. I use the idea of a dialogical aesthetics as applicable to my practice on a theoretical level. However, the most important aspect is my political connection to Intersectional Feminism, to decolonial practices, and to tactics for subverting enforced social power structures.

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[22] Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2004).
[23] Finkelpearl (2013).
[24] Such as in works by Suzanne Lacy.

Image courtesy of Christine Wong Yap (2020).[25]

Ethics and Socially Engaged Art

I find the project I mentioned by Lacy to be a good example of what Socially Engaged Art, or Dialogue-based Art should aim to be in terms of working for and in favour of the participants, but I also see the story Lacy is repeating, that of the white artist traveling to underprivileged POC to change their lives, for being what it is: a modern enactment of a colonial structure. As prominent postcolonial and transnational feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty states[26], the artist in this process (or in her example White Feminist Scholars) becomes a colonial tourist or explorer, who both seem to lack understanding of their own position in the power structures that their modus operandi is activating, and

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[25] The image is a screenshot from Wong Yap's Instagram account, @christinewongyap, posted on 20th of October 2020 and accessed 11th November 2020, with permission from the artist.

[26] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review*, 30, 1988, 61 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395054>.(pp.23)

of how they are themselves taking part in consolidating these power structures through their engagement with their repetition in action.

Art can be magickal[27] and heal communities, but as an artist, it might be best to focus on your own communities. If the artist comes from a privileged background it is crucial to critically and self-reflexively examine why there is a longing to move out of one's own community to do work, and to investigate what social power structures the artist might enforce in doing so. At least an artist must always critically examine their own position in relation to the participants, and remove themselves when the power relations seem too unbalanced. It is worth noting that travelling to other communities effectively leaves your own community behind, as well as positions it and its inhabitants as 'fixed' or already enlightened, as opposed to the Other community, which then needs to be saved. It might also be inherently easier to establish a radical connectivity when working locally, such as Wong Yap does in most of her projects and the one mentioned above. I find that an outsider's intervention can never fully live up the radical possibilities of an authentic connection established through shared experiences. The fact that most artists and researchers are completely disconnected from any community they read as in need of assistance should probably act as a wake up call for said artists and researchers as to how their own privilege is what needs to be the first point of investigation.

The above mentioned structure is only one of many ethical problems concerning both the practices in and the contextualisation of Socially Engaged Art in general and Dialogue-based art in particular. Another is how a trap of thought seems to exist in the art scene, wherein participation is seen as ethical in and of itself. This is perhaps due to an inherent problem in our understanding of what an ethical interaction even is. When we relate back to the Root Problems, it becomes clear how also ethics at its core has an inherent connection to the defining centre, to the White Christian male's aggressive colonial and capitalist perspective on the world. So what could a speculative ethics look like?[28]

We need to look critically at why ethics exist, who's ethical understanding they reproduce and whose moral values they uphold, to arrive at where we need to be to start investigating what ethics can become if we change their parameters entirely. Mariia Puig de la Bellacasa writes about how new speculative ethics must center *care*. Bellacasa identifies that care is many things, ranging from the social web that ties us together, to a key theme in feminist ethics, and also at the core of politics. She writes that *"...a politics of care engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective,*

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[27] Magick is a term used to separate magickal practices from stage magic.
[28] Another notion famously critiqued by art historian Claire Bishop, who does however fall short at presenting alternatives for a more ethical interaction in the field.

ethical, and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence."[29] Artists have a role in the process of developing such care-centered ethics if they wish to facilitate change and subvert social power. The problem is that when this is done within the existing frameworks of art, research, and ethics, we will more often than not end up reproducing the current social power structures, while at the same time thinking we are doing good.

Utilising HUD[30] associate Sherry Arnstein's *Ladder of Citizen Participation* (1969)[31], it becomes apparent that many of the projects that are labeled as collaborative are really working with participants based on structures of tokenism or non-participation.[32] When an artist is creating a project based solely on the ideas of the artist, and working towards a goal that will benefit the artist and not the participants, the project is using the participants as tokens. An example is visual artist Felize Hapetzeder's arranging of a self-portrait sculpture workshop with children from the small town of Bromölla, Sweden. Selected childrens sculptures were then used by the artist in his solo exhibition, without any further contextualisation of the children's experiences or intervention by the participants.

According to Arnstein's ladder participation can be acted out on a scale, in which real citizen power is only achieved at the top. Citizen control, Delegated Power, and Partnership are degrees of citizen power, sitting above the three degrees of tokenism and the two modes of Nonparticipation. I find that Arnstein's ladder can act as a moral compass in which any involvement with participants, cooperators, or collaborators should strive to manifest through and as citizen power. The ladder is also an important tool for self-reflexive interrogation of the level of control an author, initiator, or facilitator keeps in participatory situations.
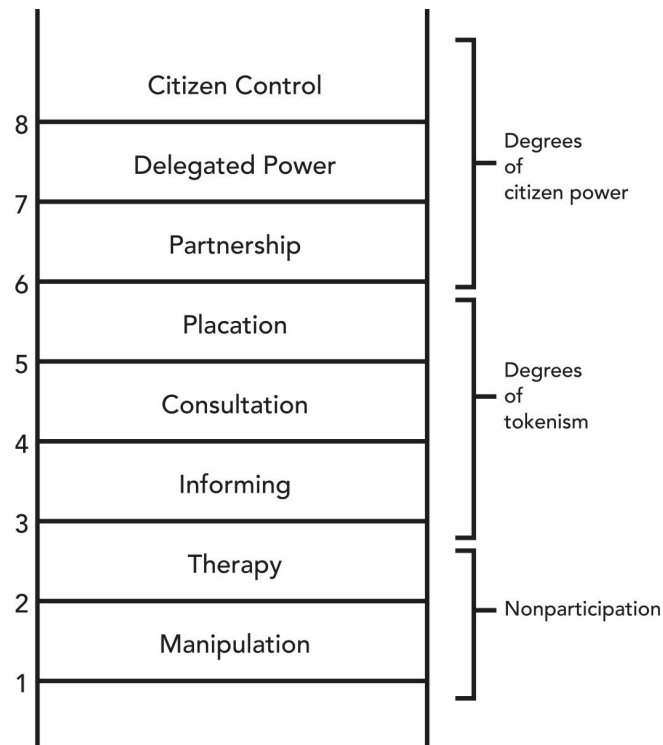
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[29] María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, Posthumanities, 41 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
[30] U.S. Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare.
[31] Sherry R. Arnstein, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 85.1 (2019), 24–34 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2018.1559388>.
[32] The workshop was arranged in Ifö Center Konsthall, Bromölla, in October 2019.

Citizen Control		
8		
Delegated Power		Degrees of citizen power
7		
Partnership		
6		
Placation		
5		Degrees of tokenism
Consultation		
4		
Informing		
3		
Therapy		
2		Nonparticipation
Manipulation		
1		

In conjunction with Arnstein's ideas of participation as always existing on a scale, Social Cooperation is a term used by art writer Tom Finkelpearl[33] in response to the more common use of Social Collaboration, because the practices he is trying to encompass range anywhere from completely artist-authored or pre-scripted projects, to totally open-ended projects created and controlled by the participants.

Unfortunately more often than not an exploitative form of 'inclusion' or 'collaboration' is taking place in which the participants are acting as informants or research subjects who are discarded after the participatory part of the project is finished. This generally seems to be the case when white middle-class cishet artists from privileged backgrounds (the norm) work with participants from outside of the art world (the norm breakers): Because of the repetition of the anthropological journey to the suburbs and then the extraction and exploitation of the resources (the participants); the participants effectively become puppets in an artist's or art institution's project. The 'findings' of the research, in this case art, are then presented to the homogenous audience that inhabit the art world without any consideration of how the projects affected the participants or how its findings could have benefitted or exalted the community being 'researched'.[34] This model of practice is built on colonial structures and continues to uphold them, but now

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[33] Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Duke University Press, 2013).
[34] This is not a process only existing within the art world, but in all research in the humanities.

under the guise of inclusion into ethical art: A sort of White Saviorism[35] mission which uses subordinated groups as tokens for its own agenda.

This process is humorously pinpointed and sharply critiqued in a short scene in artist Kasra Alikhani's graduate film *Ni måste namaste* (2020)[36], in which Alikhani and another person are playing the characters of two friends living in a social housing block, who are visited by an artist conducting workshops to "restore dignity and hope for the future" to the participants. Alikhani and his friend are speaking Persian to each other whilst sorting beads as instructed by the artist, who stands next to them unaware of the fact that they're talking about him. The friend is complaining about the artist's stay, to which Alikhani replies "Look, this guy is an artist! Have some pity. Let's just help him out a little, it will make him happy". The friend replies back "But I've got a life, I've got work to tend to. What am I, a child?" The fictional artist then breaks into the conversation saying "That just sounds lovely. What is it, Arabic? [..] I just love foreign languages."
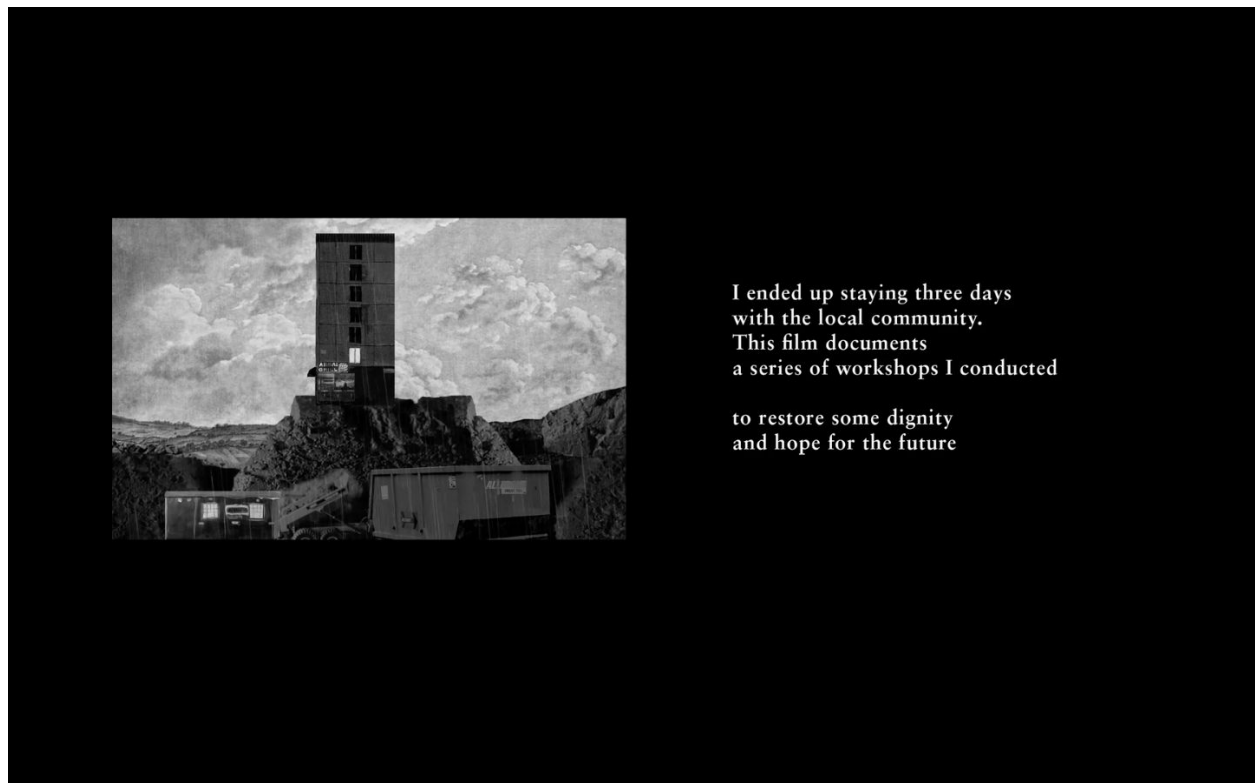
Screenshot from the opening of the above mentioned scene, as told from the fictional artist's perspective, Alikhani (2020)[37]

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[35] White Saviorism is the process in which a white person 'helps' non-whites in a way that is self-serving, instead of truly helpful for the targeted community.
[36] 'Ni Måste Namaste', *Vimeo* <https://vimeo.com/426071714> [accessed 26 October 2020]. 05:02-06:20.
[37] 'Ni Måste Namaste'. Alikhani, Kasra (2020)

This short scene illustrates the dichotomies between centre/margin,[38] white/POC, and artist/participants as they are by default reproduced in a society built by and for the norm. Being a self-reflexive critical practitioner of community-based or participatory art must include conscious and continuous action taking towards subverting colonial and heteropatriarchal modes of interaction. Paired with an interconnected sense of care, such practices can both act as biopolitical suggestions and as arenas for the creation of radical political alternatives to the norm.

Littoral Art

Littoral Art is a term coined by artist Bruce Barber in 1998[39], and theorised by art historian Grant H. Kester in 1999.[40] It refers to artistic practices that take place outside of the traditional art institutions, and its name refers directly to the location on the margins.[41] The political positioning of certain practitioners within Socially Engaged Art and/or Littoral Art also often seem aimed at facilitating tools for self-sufficiency of the participants; be it social, political or cultural. Thus littoral practices have the possibility to act as radical political suggestions, not limited to current norms of the art world in particular and of culture in general. A local project example is *Ortens Konstfestival*[42] (The Suburb's Art Festival) in Gothenburg, arranged from 2013 to 2017 by *Pantrarna*[43] (The Panthers), a political group whose modus operandi often intersected with Lacy's in their work towards dialogue between the local community and institutions of power (Gothenburg City), but who had a more radical approach to working towards political change.[44]

By positioning oneself and one's projects at the margins, and by accepting the root problems as an analytic tool in opposition to Cartesianism, and the theories of Intersectional Feminism and subjective positioning as methods to be utilised, we can begin to develop ways in which to produce knowledge that is not limited to the traditional paradigm, and that can encompass the experiences of more people; a process that can become a radical political suggestion. A crucial part of this work is to

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[38] bell hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', in *The Applied Theatre Reader*, ed. by Tim Prentki and Nicola Abraham, 2nd edn (Second edition. | Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2020.: Routledge, 2020), pp. 80–85 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429355363-17>.
[39] 'Sentences' <http://www.brucebarber.ca/index.php/sentences> [accessed 11 November 2020].
[40] 'Variant | Issue 9 | Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art, Grant Kester' <https://www.variant.org.uk/9texts/KesterSupplement.html> [accessed 17 September 2020].
[41] hooks.
[42] 'Ortens konstfestival', *Konstfrämjandet*, 2016 <http://konstframjandet.se/aktuellt/ortens-konstfestival/> [accessed 23 October 2020].
[43] 'OM PANTRARNA', 2011 <https://pantrarna.wordpress.com/om-pantrarna/> [accessed 26 October 2020].
[44] Pantrarna was a radical political group working for positive change to and emancipation of the suburbs of Gothenburg and its (young) inhabitants.

develop methods of more ethical interactions with participants. Another is about how to present the knowledge produced in these settings in an ethical way that works in favour of the participants and the findings. Just as Crenshaw intended with her original theory, Intersectional Feminism is not to be used as a thought experiment but in action, effectively subverting the power structures it is critiquing through producing alternative modes of acting within the system. That is what needs to be done If we want to facilitate situations within Socially Engaged Art and elsewhere which are actually working for the Other, and is not just an exercise in cultural tokenism to deal with the guilty conscience of the norm. And, as social activist poet and self-described 'black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,' Audrey Lorde famously stated in the title of her 1984 essay: The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.[45] For me it is not within the galleries and museums that change within the art world will take place, as I find that revisionism is no longer enough. However I do realise the need for other people, from other positions, to work in galleries and art institutions. As curator and arts writer Maura Reilly stated in *Curatorial Activism*[46](2018) there is an urgent need for better representation within the art institutions, both in terms of gender, racial and ethnic background, and LGBTQIA+ identities. Artists whose practices are situated in or in close proximity to these institutions might find that the representation and diverse visibility within these scenes are what is most important, and the artists' own identities often either enforce or diverge from this need.

Conversations About The Future

In early 2019 I was looking for a venue in which I could center a dialogue-based graduation project about the future. I would not recommend for anyone else to engage with such a project just for the sake of doing it, and I don't deem it ethical to do so, but as art education goes I had to present a project according to our deadlines. The future was a theme I thought could encompass a variety of political realities and longings, and also one I myself was already working with on many levels. In January I was introduced to the project manager of Fixoteket Bergsjön. Fixoteket[47] is a project by Göteborgs Stad, realised as four recycling- and meeting places located in different neighbourhoods of Gothenburg. Fixoteket Bergsjön was not running as smoothly as the other three, both because of the particular social composition[48] of Bergsjön and of the immediate area where Fixoteket was located (Siriusgatan). I was invited to host events there, as it could help them with visitation numbers, which in turn could help Fixoteket Bergsjön to get

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[45] Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Penguin UK, 2018).
[46] Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Thames & Hudson, 2018).
[47] 'Fixoteket' <https://goteborg.se/wps/portal?uri=gbglnk%3a201819141030378> [accessed 11 November 2020].
[48] Bergsjön is a segregated satellite-suburb of Gothenburg with a majority of its inhabitants both having non-european heritage and living with lack of economic funds.

continued funding from the city. There was a clear need for adjusting the modus operandi to better suit the local community and its needs, but this was something the City of Gothenburg seemed uninterested in. Instead, in the end Fixoteket Bergsjön was deemed a failure, and did not receive further funding. However, this was not yet settled when I started working there.

Fixoteket Bergsjön, January 2019.

I hosted three focused conversation events, and volunteered at Fixoteket so that they could extend their general open hours. Since at the time I was developing the ideas put forward in this essay I was interested in investigating how to produce cooperative knowledge, and also in how the local community viewed the themes of social justice and knowledge production, and their effect on their lives. I wanted to know if it was possible to, through lots of care and consideration, meet a stranger and have a deep conversation which could lead to new radical political realisations. Doing so I was considering three parts of my project:

- The ethical interactions with participants

- The knowledge the project might be able to produce
- The representation (as art) of the results of such processes

At this time in the project the main focus lay in the process of facilitating situations where people would both show up and then want to talk. I was nervous that this would not be the case. Although when I first started talking to people in the neighborhood and discovered I was welcomed and listened to, I relaxed and was able to shift my focus towards navigating the ethical and political implications of my project. I think that my sincere joy in meeting people and listening to others' stories shines through; since I was never met with suspicion or resistance when I started engaging more with this community.

I was recommended to read up onIsraeli Social Workers Michal Krumer-Nevo and Mirit Sidi's *Writing Against Othering* (2012)[49] and learned how the three-step method is applicable both to the situations and the conversations I engaged with. They present the importance of resisting Othering in academic writing through the three modes of:

1. Narrative, which lets participants take power over their own subjectivity;
2. Dialogue, which lets the participant present and represent their experiences as well as their analysis of them; and
3. Reflexivity, which highlights the artist's position and through transparency and responsibility over the power of authorship makes themselves an example through which the audience can access the subjective positions of participants.[50]

For me these translated into multiple parts of the project. It was already stated on the flyers that the conversations would be about the future, and that the participants would decide what to talk about specifically. I tried to be transparent with all levels of the project. In the dialogues I was cautious not to talk too much or steer the conversations, but to instead make more room for the participants' stories. I was also cautious not to make the events 'too much of a safe space', one in which consensus is upheld based on the exclusion of some stories, but instead to make room for disagreement and challenging ideas to coexist within the conversations.[51] In a Swedish context consensus is upheld as an ultimate goal, and safe spaces are generally limited to a consensus-based safety. Thus antagonistic and agonistic[52] spaces are norm breaking and can act as necessary antidotes to the status quo. In my practice I am navigating the

[49] Michal Krumer-Nevo and Mirit Sidi, 'Writing Against Othering', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18.4 (2012), 299–309 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411433546>.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Chantal Mouffe writes in 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces' about how antagonism is political, and how an agonistic space is needed for radical political work.
[52] 'Art & Research : Chantal Mouffe' <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html> [accessed 17 September 2020].

limitations of conflict both before a conversation and together with the participants, to facilitate conversations in which everyone's stories are taken into consideration, as long as they are not oppressing others.[53]

Navigating conflict versus consensus also meant that I needed to apply an Intersectional Feminist perspective to my actions; through for example focusing more on the stories of those who generally don't get to share theirs and being acutely aware of my own privilege in relation to some of the participants. I chose to focus on the creation of radical political common ground with the participants.[54] Instead of engaging with damage-centered research[55] I was interested in developing shared understandings of existing at the margins, and political suggestions based on these.[56]

As always when working on a project I also journalled extensively about my experiences, actions, ideas, and their ethical and aesthetic implications. Writing about the work and my partaking in the process is a way for me to create the necessary distance to be able to judge myself and my actions. Through the process of this project I realised that the writing-about is at the base of my self-reflexivity and the upholding of a healthy level of such. As artist Suzy Gablik wrote in 1992, it is also so that the self-reflexivity of a connective post-Cartesian era must include other values for and forms of interacting and connecting: *"Such relationships require a consciousness that is different from the structural isolation and self-referentiality of individualism."* [57] Which means that both my interactions and reflections must change accordingly.

I was advertising the events through posting flyers in the area and handing them out to people on the street. I also invited people from the city to take part in the conversations through a digital event, just as I later invited the local community to take part in the final conversation, hosted at Göteborgs Konsthall.[58] This was also a way to make the conversations into a meeting place for people who generally have no contact with each other to meet and talk (as the segregation between different bodies and knowledge is a problem in itself, and Gothenburg is one of Europe's most ethnically segregated cities).

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[53] The limitations of this essay don't allow for this to be fully unpacked, but the notion of the safe space, especially in a Swedish context, is a key part of my practice which is constantly in development.
[54] As hooks says: "Speaking from margins. Speaking in resistance". (pp. 22)
bell hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', in The Applied Theatre Reader, ed. by Tim Prentki and Nicola Abraham, 2nd edn (Second edition. | Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2020.
[55] Eve Tuck, 'Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities', *Harvard Educational Review*, 79.3 (2009), 409–28 <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>.
[56] Tuck defines Damage Centered Research as all research into communities and individuals which focuses on their damage and hurt, and thus continues to uphold the idea that certain communities need to be fixed, rendering its inhabitants into victims at the mercy of a (White) Saviour.
[57] Suzi Gablik, 'Connective Aesthetics', *American Art*, 6.2 (1992), 2–7 <https://doi.org/10.1086/424147>. (pp.4)
[58] I would not have hosted a conversation there if I wasn't a requirement of the course.

In my aim of constructing accessibility for the participants both the location of Fixoteket in the immediate neighbourhood, and the notion of ownership of this place that the participants seemed to share, turned out to be important. It was also acting as legitimising for my project that I was working in collaboration with Fixoteket, which was an established context in this suburban area.

I facilitated three events, each with conversations going on for two hours. Fika was served and the participants could come and go as they wished. Between five and ten people were present each time. People of all ages and many different backgrounds took part in the conversations. In this process I learned that the main part of my role as a guiding participant is to listen. Gemma Corradi Fiumara wrote in 1995[59] about how contemporary culture and language is centered around proclaiming and making statements instead of listening or asking questions. The act of listening is something I will continue to develop as a method of resistance in my art practice.

After the three conversations in Bergsjön I hosted one in Göteborgs Konsthall, which only art people, i.e. connected to the local art scene and/or practicing artists, attended.[60] I also led a workshop for a group of teenagers on norm criticism, comics, and the future, in collaboration with GKH as part of their pedagogic programme.[61] I would deem all the conversations and the workshops successful, both because they opened for new political understandings of being connected by our location at the margins, and for how warm, open, and present these meetings turned out to be.

My time for self-criticism comes when thinking of how I later represented one of the conversations (the only one where the participants were OK with being recorded) through extracting quotes from the conversation and making them into posters. Even as the participants were fine with this, and their anonymity was decided by them, I feel that I disrespected the participants through presenting the posters in GKH. At the time I was encouraged by teachers to present something 'more than' a conversation in our graduate exhibition, and I landed in the posters because they could act as a re-representation of our conversation to a second audience which they then could take home, and hopefully talk about. The full conversation was available via a QR-code in

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[59] Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995).
[60] The project does gain legitimacy from its connection to an art institution, which might create a certain level of trust in the participants towards the project and my intentions - but this is the same with other established meeting places such as Fixoteket. In the end the scariness of the institutions seems to have overtaken the positive notions - at least in this situation when the previous participants came from outside of the art scene and then did not wish to partake in an event within GKH.
[61] There is a difference between doing a collaboration with GKH versus only focusing my project in such a context. The aim for my pedagogic collaboration with GKH was another than that of the project itself - and instead acted as an extension of the project. The participants were also all hijabis from the suburb and not from the general art population of Gothenburg.

the corner of the poster to read for those who wanted to read it. This re-representation made the authentic connections with participants into relations of tokenism, based on the using of participants as informants for my posters, authored by me. I will never again present findings from a cooperative setting under single authorship, nor will I myself decide what such a presentation would look like; but instead let the participants do so.

I choose to work in the margins, with Littoral and Dialogic Art, since this is both where my allegiance lies and where I find the necessary openness to create the possibility of a project's radical political qualities to flourish. In these times it is no longer enough for artists to critique, we must also actively engage in building alternatives. My interest, and my contribution, comes in the facilitating of situations in which, with care and curiosity, it becomes possible to meet a complete stranger, share a deep connection, and create something together. It is the act of the meeting, connecting, and creating that I find most interesting, more than any wishes I have for knowledge to be created.

When people are present to represent themselves we create the possibility of acting out a new ethics of interacting, making research, or connecting. To make space for a variety of voices from a variety of backgrounds and positions is the very base of any useful conversation, if we are working to test out methods in opposition to the Cartesian rule. The very act of coming together with an interest in talking,in meeting and in openness, is what I am most driven by. In our aggressive and hostile authoritative culture, with segregation between groups being a key feature of the system's success.

Conclusion

In this text I have laid out how it is a complex task to try and navigate the ethical and political realities of facilitating situations based on meeting, talking, and cooperating in the name of art. I have argued for how knowledge production in general and within Socially Engaged Art in particular is restrained by Cartesian Subjectivity and its ties to the concept of art. I have introduced Intersectional Feminist theories (in my own extension of the term) which critique and present alternatives to the faulty objective that is centered in these systems. I have described how one can go about applying these theories in practice within the field of Socially Engaged Art in general and dialogue-based art in particular. I have also discussed what the ethical implications of doing so might be. My conclusion is that it is possible to make ethical Socially Engaged Art, but it must be done from a critical standpoint in which the shortcomings of the paradigm we live under can be challenged, and alternatives to it can be developed.

My suggestion and summary is that to make Ethical Feminist dialogue-based Community Art it is advised to:

- Work from decolonial and Intersectional Feminist understandings.
- Use methods and modes of working which reflect and activate these understandings.
- Engage with and embrace both the facilitation of and the representation of polyvocality and multiple narratives.
- Engage with others with care and empathy.
- Make ethics a practice, together.
- Be self-reflexive!

As I continue my research I hope to delve deeper into:

- Feminist ethics in theory and action.
- Decolonial aesthetics and knowledge production in opposition to the capitalist commodification of knowledge exchange and -production in the name of art.
- How to, if at all, extract and present the 'findings', 'results' or new knowledge 'produced' in dialogue-based community settings.
- The act of vulnerability as a fundamental and radical resistance. How vulnerability translates into applied feminist ethics as well as dialogue-based community art.
- Listening as an Intersectional Feminist practice of resistance.

To really be interested in broadening your horizons beyond the stories of your own ego is to actively engage in meeting other people with openness and respect. And to listen to them.

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