

Art, Activism and Social Change

- Questioning the role of the artist began with Postmodern ideas.
- The Civil Rights Movement and Women's Movements made everyone rethink human rights.
- The environmental movement brought attention to damage humans are doing to the planet.
- The recognition that Capitalism may be causing rampant consumerism began earlier but by the 1990s we realize that we all have too much 'stuff.' And that means too much garbage.

--The AIDS crisis and public art made artists rethink what art should be for.

--Globalization brings attention to artists working outside the U.S. and other Western countries allowing for even more diversity in art and idea.

--All this and more sets the stage for the final explorations of our class.

In the next two weeks we explore artists who are expanding ideas we've already looked at but in ways that more actively engage social and political issues while working at different levels of viewer participation.

We have already looked at how contemporary Art Practices address different social & political issues in various ways.

Think of:

Shirin Neshat

William Kentridge

Rirkrit Tiraviniya

Kim Sooja

David Hammons

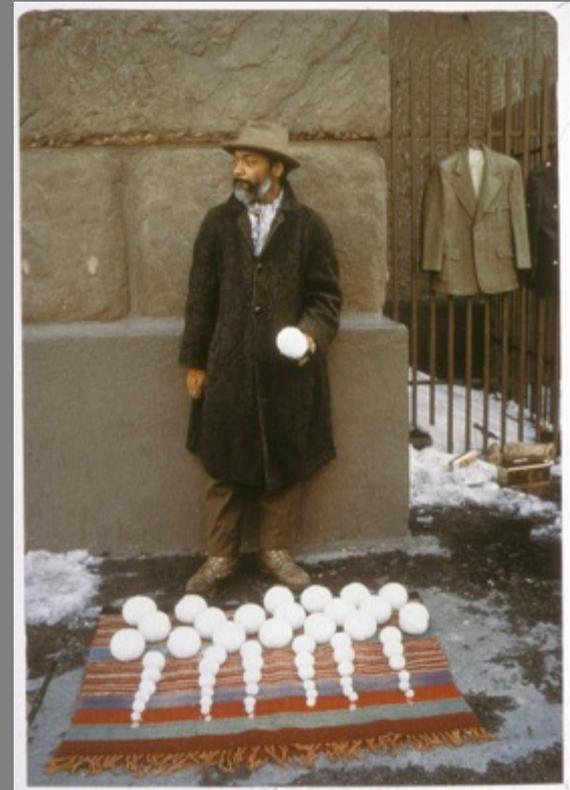
Carrie Mae Weems

Krzysztof Wodiczko

Tim Rollins and K.O.S.

and more.

You may think of some others.



David Hammons, selling snowballs on the street.



Relational Aesthetics,
by **Nicholas
Bourriaud**

Nicholas Bourriaud is a writer and critic who noticed artists doing work that encouraged viewer participation in some way. He named it– “Relational Aesthetics” and wrote a book.

His ideas regarding *Relational Aesthetics* are expanding the way artists imagine their practice.

This week I’m presenting some ways to frame Social Practice Art. Several artists on your final Analysis Paper are included in this lecture. But you should find precedents in earlier works and movements.

In particular, Minimalism & Conceptual Art provide foundations for these ideas.

Pablo Helguera



Education for Socially Engaged Art

A Materials and Techniques Handbook

Another important artist and writer is Pablo Helguera. He wrote a little book called, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*.

In this book he identifies various types of participatory structures within Socially Engaged Art.

Because there are so many different ways artists are working with communities and engaging audiences, he provides ways we might think about what it means for an artist to collaborate or participate with an audience.

You may be reminded we have discussed many different artists who have been concerned with this already.

We could argue that all art has a social component in that it presupposes a viewer, but Helguera has created a helpful way of thinking about the levels of viewer participation—just how and how much does the viewer participate. These are his levels.

1. **Nominal Participation**— *a viewer contemplates the artwork in a passive manner.*
2. **Directed Participation**— *a visitor completes a simple task to contribute to the creation of the work.*
3. **Creative Participation**—*the visitor provides content for part of a work that has been created by an artist.*
4. **Collaborative Participation**— *the visitor shares responsibility for developing the structure and content of the work in collaboration with the artist.*

You should be able to think of different artists we've discussed already who fit into these different areas.

Nominal Participation— Many artists make artworks that fall into this category.

Addressing issues of race, cultural and religious differences the works are seen in traditional art galleries and museums.

These are artworks in which the artist's work is addressing important social issues but the viewer is mostly passive in that they just look at the work.



**Christian Boltanski—
The viewer looks at the work.**

A few are highlighted here...but you must surely think of others.

Kerry James Marshall

Is an African American artist whose paintings, installations, and public projects is often drawn from African-American popular culture.

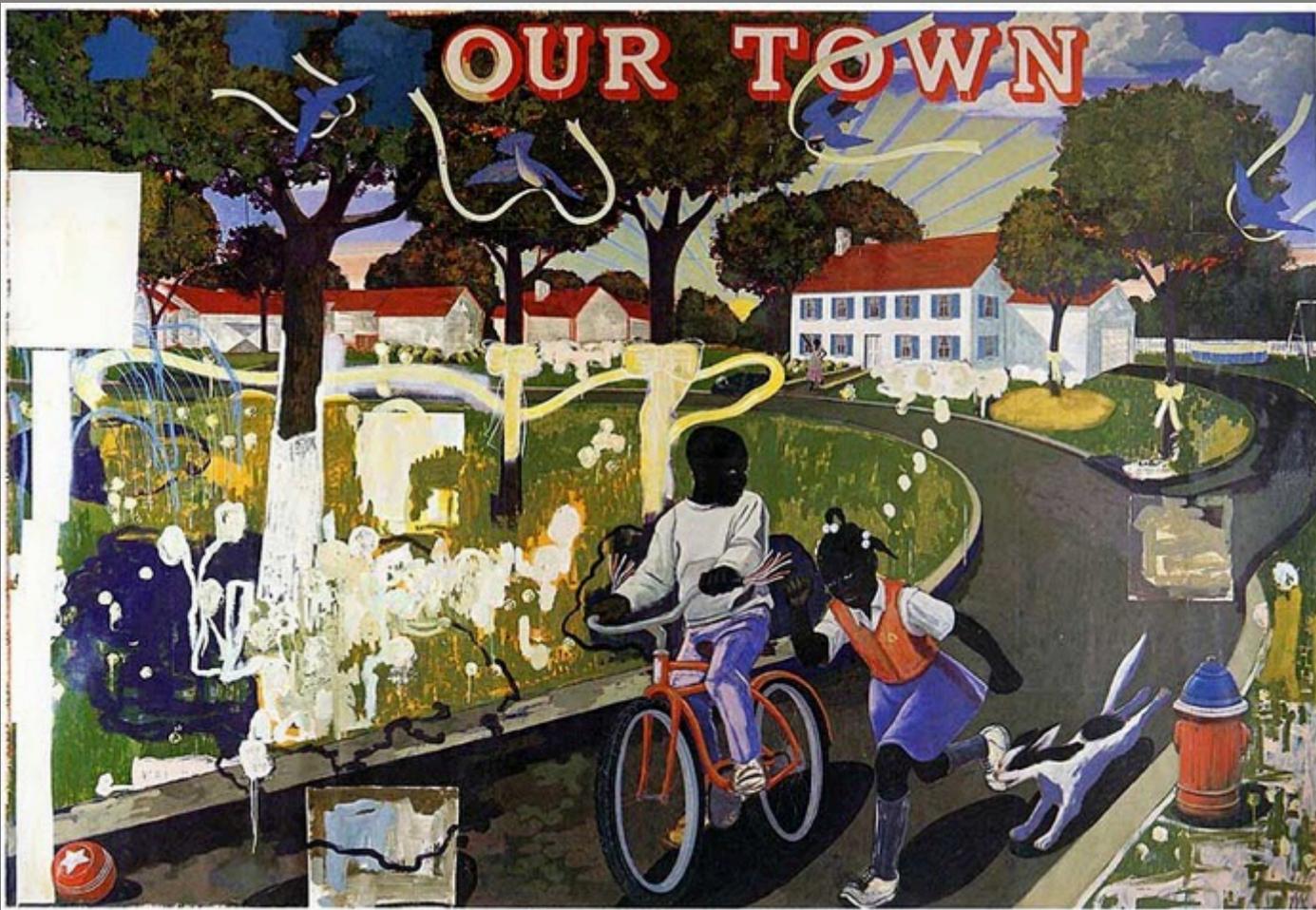
They are also rooted in the geography of his upbringing: *“You can’t be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central [Los Angeles] near the Black Panthers headquarters, and not feel like you’ve got some kind of social responsibility.”*

Cut and paste this if necessary for more on Marshall.

<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/kerry-james-marshall>



Many Mansions, 1994



His works address issues of race, juxtaposing images from the history of Blacks and Whites in America.

In this painting, images of black children playing in an upper class neighborhood, with houses that resemble plantation style are juxtaposed with cotton fields.

Wangechi Mutu

Born in Nairobi, Kenya, Mutu scrutinizes globalization (especially colonialism) by combining found materials, magazine cutouts, sculpture, and painted imagery to comment on how people of Africa, especially women, are imagined in the West.

Sampling such diverse sources as African traditions, international politics, the fashion industry, pornography, and science fiction, her work explores gender, race, war, colonialism, global consumption, and the exoticization of the black female body.

Learn more about her at this link below:

https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/wangechi_mutu/



Wangechi Mutu

Race, cultural and gender stereotypes are addressed.

In particular Mutu exploits Western views of African women as animal (closer to nature but also less than human) and overly sexualized.

Personal Note: Wangechi Mutu was a guest artist when I was in Graduate School. She is very quiet and strong.

Wangechi Mutu *Misguided Little Unforgivable Hierarchies*, 2005.. Ink, acrylic, collage, contact paper on Mylar, 81 x 52 inches



Kara Walker

Walker is best known for exploring the raw intersection of race, gender, and sexuality through her iconic, silhouetted figures.

She uses the traditionally proper Victorian medium of the silhouette, applying them directly onto the walls of the gallery, creating a theatrical space in which her unruly cut-paper characters fornicate and inflict violence on one another.

These are individual images but the pieces contain an entire scene.

Learn more about her at this link:

<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/kara-walker>





Large scale works are designed as a kind of diorama mean viewers walk around the space in a more active way of viewing. But they still view, rather than interact.



Takashi Murakami—

From his studio in Long Island, Murakami, a Japanese artist living in New York, creates large scale paintings and sculptures in the style of popular Japanese Manga-style characters.



Takashi Murakami–

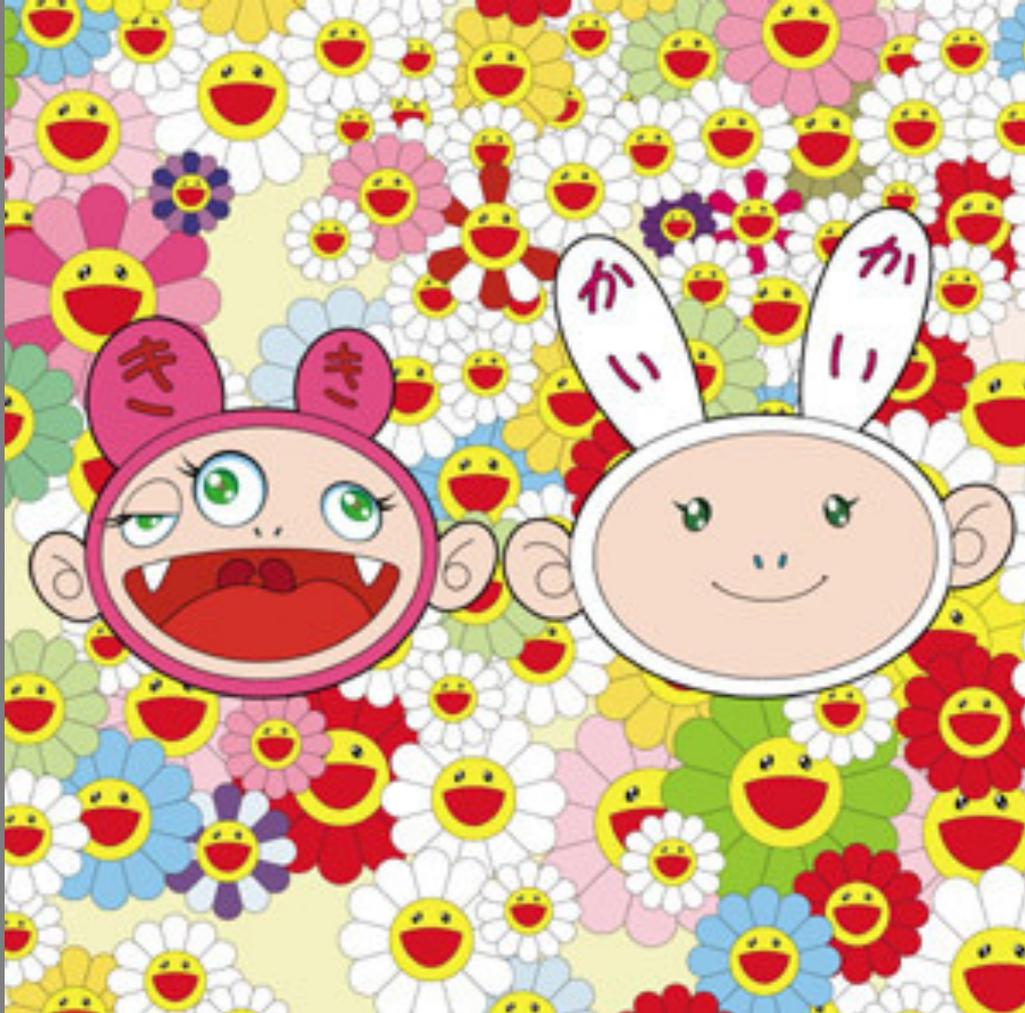
In this large-scale painting we see a Mickey Mouse type character emerging from a landscape with black sharp teeth. Drawing references from Japanese pop culture, Buddhism and Japanese history (including Hiroshima & Nagasaki), Murakami exploits the cartoon aesthetic of Manga while creating a monolithic being suggesting cosmic dissolution.

"Tan Tan Bo Puking - a.k.a. Gero Tan," 2002, acrylic on canvas mounted on board. 141-3/4 x 283-7/16 x 2-5/8"



Takashi Murakami—

Often contrasted to Andy Warhol, who brought elements of common culture into the status of art but kept his work completely in the realm of high art, Murakami crosses all lines by using images and themes from common culture, brings them into high art but then sends it back. Producing everything from high art to T-shirts, key chains, plush toys and cell phone carriers, Murakami makes the high— low.



With his distinctive "Superflat" style, which employs highly refined classical Japanese painting techniques to depict a super-charged mix of Pop, anime and otaku content within a flattened representational picture-plane, Murakami makes use of themes and images as far flung as religion and popular culture.



Murakami's work celebrates commerce, and commerce returns the favor: His Vuitton handbags have become one of the French fashion house's best-selling lines. Murakami explains that his art process is "more about creating goods and selling them than about exhibitions."

From Wired Magazine, article by Jeff Howe.
<http://www.wired.com/2003/11/artist/>

Directed Participation— the artist directs the viewer (or participants) to do something. They have the option to do it or not.

Chinese Artist, **ZHANG HUAN** wanted to bring attention to this group of Chinese Workers, recently laid off when a government factory was closed.

In a group performance "called 'To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond', he asked 40 migrant laborers to stand in a pond, their physical presence altering its volume.

Huan uses his own body, and that of others, to bring attention to social and political issues. In this piece the workers walked into the lake. Huan is the person with the child on his shoulders.



For another titled *'To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain,'* he and nine other artists climbed a mountain near Beijing, stripped and lay down on top of one another to create a second, mini-peak.

Both of these artworks bring attention to how one body matters. In China, where there are so many people, little attention is given to the importance of the individual.



Zhang Huan - "To add 1 meter to an unknown mountain", 1995
C-print surface archival - grand 101.6 x 152.4 cm / Edition 6

Hopefully, you can see the historic precedents for this work:

Postmodern ideas

Identity

Performance

Globalism

Appropriation

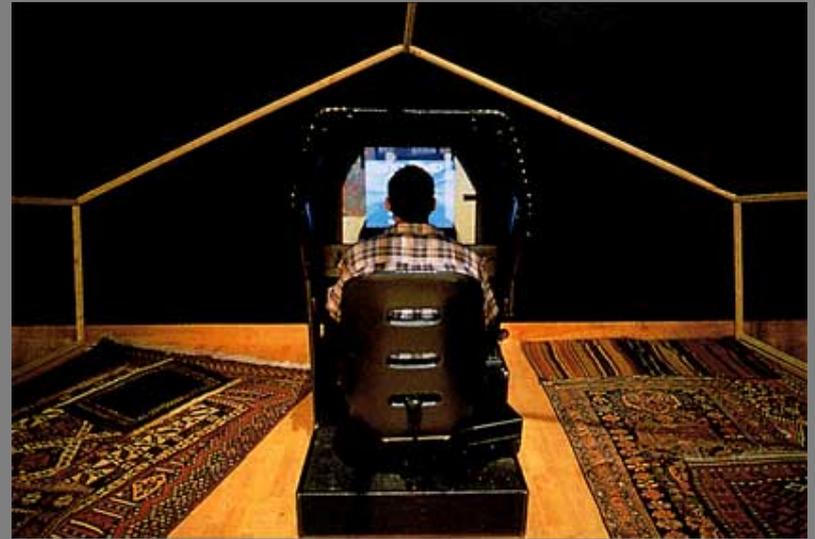
Think of how each of these functions for the different artists.



Mel Chin

believes art can provoke greater social awareness and responsibility so he finds ways to integrate art into people's lives.

His work, *Knowmad*, was designed as a video game based on the carpets of disappearing tribal cultures. His hope was that something fun could also teach people about the beautiful artworks created by these cultures that most Americans were unaware of.



Creative Participation—the visitor provides content for part of a work that has been created by an artist.

While some of Mel Chin's work fits into the directed participatory category, *Project Pay Dirt* fits into the Creative one. When asked by the city of New Orleans to see what creative solutions to problems created after Hurricane Katrina, Chin, Overwhelmed, started with analyzing the soil.

Personal note: I worked with Mel Chin for 6 months during my graduate program. He has a lot of energy.





A soil sample from a property in New Orleans' 8th Ward collected as part of a citywide analysis underway by *OPERATION PAYDIRT*, a massive art/science project to take on lead pollution in the city where soil lead levels are as much as five times the level considered hazardous by the EPA.

Photograph by Amanda Wiles



Based on the recommendations of the team and his own creative direction, he developed the project, *‘operation paydirt’* that would involve people in the community and across the country. These photos are of a community barbecue and dance party to roll out the project.

Recognizing it was going to take money (estimated cost is \$300,000,000), Chin created the “**Fundred Dollar Bill Project**” to raise awareness and encourage Congress to provide necessary funding for the clean up of the lead contamination.

<http://melchin.org/oeuvre/operation-paydirtfundred-dollar-bill-project>





The Fundred Dollar Bill Project is designed to involve 3 million school children and teachers from across the country that creates art for change. Participating children draw or color on specially designed \$100 bill worksheets to create their own Fundred Dollar Bills.



According to Chin, by allowing students to enact the creation of **Fundred Dollar Bills**, children, who are most susceptible to the environmental hazards of lead, are given a voice.

Through their engagement with art, they are exposed to environmental responsibility, social responsibility and as activists, they exercise and consider the power of their collective voice.

Just recently the Fundred Dollar Bills were delivered via armored car to congress.



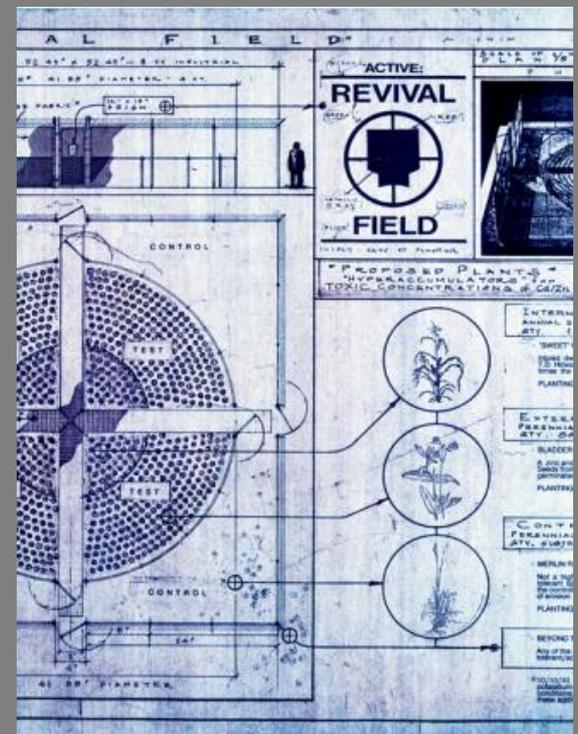
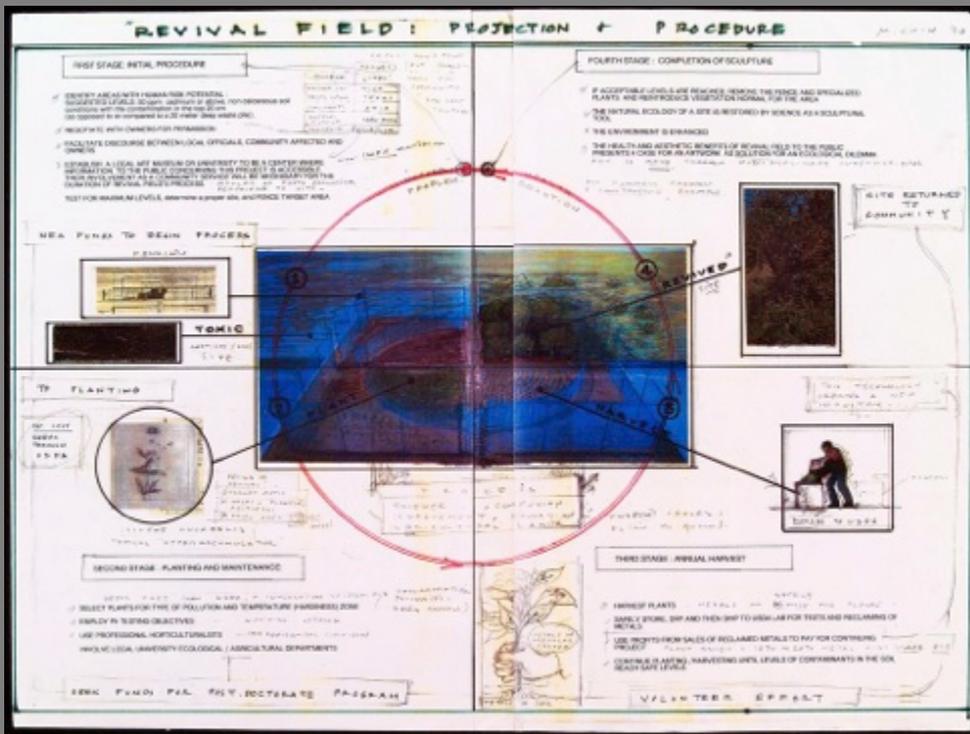
An earlier piece, *Revival Field*, originally begun in 1991 but continuing until now, may have influenced Chin's decision to test the soil in the 9th Ward.

In this piece Chin collaborated with scientist, and government agencies to develop gardens of hyperaccumulators, plants that can draw the heavy metals from contaminated soil.

Watch: <https://vimeo.com/43795366>



According to Chin's website, "*Revival Field* began as a conceptual artwork with the intent to sculpt a site's ecology. The initial experiment, located at Pig's Eye Landfill, a State Superfund site in St. Paul, Minnesota, was a replicated field test using special hyperaccumulator plants to extract heavy metals from contaminated soil. Scientific analysis of biomass samples from this field confirmed the potential of "Green Remediation" as an on-site, low-tech alternative to current costly and unsatisfactory remediation methods. Despite soil conditions adverse to metal uptake, a variety of *Thlaspi*, the test plant with the highest capacity for hyperaccumulation, was found to have significant concentration of cadmium in its leaves and stems."



Chin began his art career making art objects that were poetic and political. At a high point of his success, he abandoned making objects and began his work as an activist-artist.

Revival Field is one of many subsequent works that lie at an intersection between art and social and/or political issues. In this case, the environment.

Chin once stated: “Making objects and marks is also about making possibilities, making choices—and that is one of the last freedoms we have. To provide that is one of the functions of art.” [1]

Collaborative Participation— the visitor shares responsibility for developing the structure and content of the work in collaboration with the artist.

Artists like:

Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival

Thomas Hirschhorn

Rick Lowe

Thomas Hirschhorn--In the 1980s, Hirschhorn worked in Paris as a graphic artist. He was part of the group of Communist graphic designers called Grapus. These artists were concerned with politics and culture, displaying impromptu creations and posters on the street mostly using the language of advertisement. He left Grapus to create the hypersaturated installations he is known for today, using common materials such as cardboard, foil, duct tape, and plastic wrap.



Thomas Hirschhorn—

He has described his choice to use everyday materials in his work as "political" and that he only uses materials that are "universal, economic, inclusive, and don't bear any plus-value"

These everyday materials are nonetheless symbolically charged. References to fashion, art, politics and philosophy intermingle paradoxically in his work





A piece by Thomas Hirschhorn that moves into the collaborative participation level is the Gramsci Monument.

--Commissioned by Dia Art Foundation, *Gramsci Monument* was a new artwork by Thomas Hirschhorn, taking place on the grounds of Forest Houses, a New York City Housing Authority development in the Morrisania neighborhood of the Bronx, New York. It functioned as a temporary community center.

<http://www.diaart.org/gramsci-monument/index.php>



The Gramsci Monument opened on July 1 and ran through September 15, 2013. It was open seven days a week, from 10 am to 7 pm. People in the housing project and community were welcome to participate.

<http://www.diaart.org/gramsci-monument/index.php>



Created with cheap materials, press board, duct tape, found furniture, etc. the monument functioned as a community center constructed directly in the common area of the housing project.

The forth in a series of projects dedicated to famous thinkers, this monument pays tribute to the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), famous for his volume of *Prison Notebooks* (1926–1937). *Gramsci Monument* is based on Hirschhorn's will “to establish a definition of monument, to provoke encounters, to create an event, and to think Gramsci today.”

Lectures
Radio station
Computer rooms
Art & craft rooms
Library



Project Row Houses: Third Ward Houston, Tx



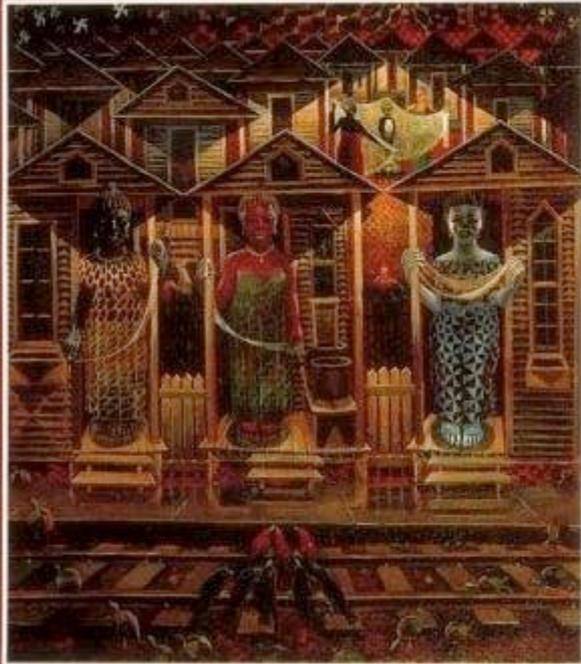
Rick Lowe— artist, architect, urban designer, businessman, activist



Beginning as neighborhood clean up, the artist volunteers began to create things on the windows and construct installations in abandoned houses in a low-income area of Houston. Lowe soon saw these two blocks of condemned row houses as part of a community that spoke to the African American experience.

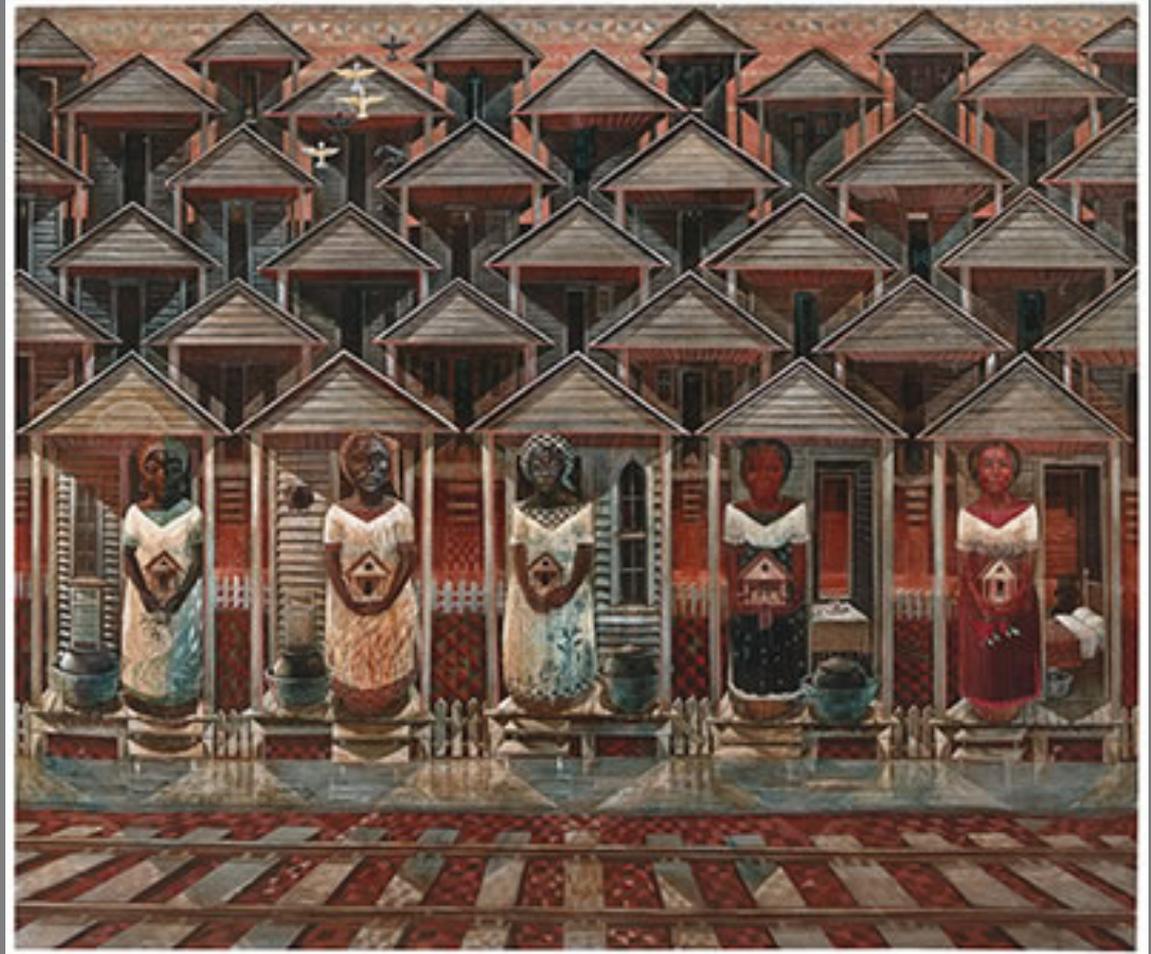


He wanted to reclaim the houses in a way that would recall the paintings of John Biggers— a Houston painter who painted these neighborhoods.



John Biggers, Shotguns

Biggers's paintings reflect a neighborhood of vibrant creativity, intergenerational exchange... a social safety net.



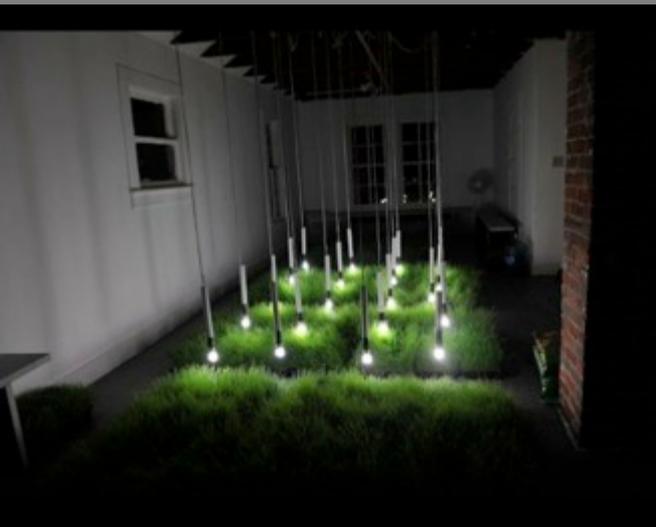


Lowe's problem was how do you create that in a place that is regarded by society as having no value.

Realizing he needed social services, educators, architects and lots of volunteers, a network was established.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHkdQaWt7H8>





Art Exhibition Spaces



Several dozen renovated homes, new homes, a library, multimedia center, childcare, workshops, small businesses, affordable housing were all part of the project.

The economic structures within the community began to shift as there was money to be made building houses, developing laundry services and even a BBQ catering business.





Notice that Images from Project Row Houses are heading our website. Watch these videos.

Personal Note: Rick Lowe spoke at my graduate school, discussing his process and outcomes of Project Row Houses.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/02/rick-lowe-project-row-houses_n_5920778.html

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sqzZChYrkM>



Project Row Houses: affecting how the neighborhood grows. Results are respect, dignity, strong families, education, true community and pride.

What were some of the historic precedents for this work:

Minimalism

Environmental or Land Art

Public Art

Pop

Ever since the beginning of the semester we've been looking at artists pushing the limits of what constitutes art.

There are themes:

- The integration of art and life
- Rejection of art as commodity
- Art outside the gallery and museum situation
- Art that addresses current social and political issues

All the artists we looked at this week continue this trajectory. Then, this week we've taken the viewer into consideration by looking at Helgera's levels of participation--- how are the artists engaging the viewer.

Of course, at the same time, artists have been working in more traditional ways.

We will look at some of those next week.