



ESSAY

# Who is it for? Art and social practice in a time of slow burn crisis [version 1; peer review: 2 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

Raphael Vella , Margerita Pulè 

Department of Arts, Open Communities, and Adult Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida, Malta

**V1** First published: 10 Nov 2022, 1:23  
<https://doi.org/10.12688/routledgeopenres.17577.1>  
 Latest published: 10 Nov 2022, 1:23  
<https://doi.org/10.12688/routledgeopenres.17577.1>

## Abstract

The open principles of socially-engaged arts practice frequently come into conflict with ethical considerations despite positive intentions on the part of the artist or commissioning body. When confronted by crises in society, particularly challenges and forms of discrimination that tend to slip under the radar, artists and other stakeholders in the arts and education often engage with dilemmas related to power imbalances, responsibility, political agendas and artistic quality. These dilemmas are discussed through a handful of projects created in Malta as part of the artistic research project 'Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture' (AMASS), and other arts-based community- and artist-led projects. The article discusses possible methodologies towards fully democratic, horizontal, and sustainable processes, and opens questions around agency and intent in participatory art practice.

## Keywords


socially-engaged art practice, participatory arts, community, artist-led, participatory art practice






This article is included in the [Art and Crisis](#) collection.

## Open Peer Review

Approval Status   

	1	2	3
<b>version 1</b> 10 Nov 2022	 <a href="#">view</a>	 <a href="#">view</a>	 <a href="#">view</a>

1. **Steve C. Willis** , Missouri State University, Springfield, USA
2. **Anniina Suominen** , Aalto University, Espoo, Finland
3. **Rolf Laven** , University College of Teacher Education, Vienna, Austria

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

**Corresponding author:** Raphael Vella ([raphael.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:raphael.vella@um.edu.mt))

**Author roles:** **Vella R:** Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; **Pulè M:** Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation

**Competing interests:** Prof Raphael Vella led the AMASS project in Malta through the Malta partner in the University of Malta. Margerita Pulè was Research Support Officer for the same project.

**Grant information:** This work received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870621.

*The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.*

**Copyright:** © 2022 Vella R and Pulè M. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

**How to cite this article:** Vella R and Pulè M. **Who is it for? Art and social practice in a time of slow burn crisis [version 1; peer review: 2 approved, 1 approved with reservations]** Routledge Open Research 2022, 1:23 <https://doi.org/10.12688/routledgeopenres.17577.1>

**First published:** 10 Nov 2022, 1:23 <https://doi.org/10.12688/routledgeopenres.17577.1>

## Introduction

This essay speaks about marginalised voices; how they can be given an equal platform in society, and who (if anyone) has the right to grant that platform. Thus, it is perhaps fitting that the essay was conceived as a conversation which allows for a series of questions and challenges, leading to an open and genuine dialogue drawn from the authors' quite different experiences of socially engaged art practice. This dialogical approach allows for a discussion ranging from ethical considerations, methodological approaches and a debate on the issue of engagement and agency in artistic practice. As a reflection on the relationship between art and various political crises, the essay maintains a critical stance, putting forward thoughts, questions and sometimes doubts, rather than certainties and conclusions. This too perhaps is in line with its subject-matter and the open-ended methodology which socially-engaged arts practice often uses.

Raphael Vella (RV): The collective act of gathering people together is simultaneously an encounter with whatever separates us from others. The artistic research project '[Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture](#)' (AMASS) forges social and creative relationships out of encounters between artists, performers, social scientists, educators, groups and individuals based in a variety of urban and rural environments<sup>1</sup>. The project's acronym refers to the importance of numbers in collective projects: to 'amass' implies that the connection of different things, skills, knowledge, people and so on gives us a sense of security and simultaneously enriches people's lives. We usually speak of amassing wealth, assets and so on. AMASS assembles or accumulates resources collectively rather than individually, focusing on encounters rather than personal symbolic spaces. Yet, those amongst us who question every step of their creative or pedagogical practice cannot avoid reflecting about the state of encounter itself: its imbalances of power, varying starting points of individuals and groups involved in the artistic process, and the possible misrepresentation or misuse of others' ideas, resources, cultures. If encountering others through an 'amassing' of resources serves to bring us closer to each other, it can also highlight distinctions and privilege. In our desire to amass choirs of different voices, it's not too difficult to forget that not all voices are equally powerful. If a group of people is experiencing a particular predicament or injustice, who is or should be

responsible for taking action? The notion of 'social sculpture' developed by Joseph Beuys ultimately meant that we are all responsible for making the changes that are necessary to sculpt a utopian society on the basis of our creative work (Harlan, 2004).

Margerita Pulè (MP): I agree that there is an inherent tension between the desire to work with communities using an open and welcoming approach, and the realities of privilege, art practice training and social distinctions (Jackson, 2011). Local and global challenges faced in recent years have arguably seen societal inequalities and prejudices slide towards crises. The small cohort of artists in Malta who work mainly with a socially-engaged practice, must constantly negotiate short-term funding, shifting policy priorities and a general public that is not familiar with visual art disciplines that diverge from traditional manifestations. Looking at the AMASS activities in Malta, perhaps it would be useful to analyse the different methodologies used by the five projects, examining where these tensions become apparent despite the best efforts of the artists, and of the AMASS project itself in the role of commissioning body.

Firstly, and necessarily, a structure, scope and broad outcome was defined for all five of our projects *before* the project began. Due to the nature of the overall project structure and timeframes, and while stakeholders were consulted early on during each project's development, it was not possible to design or plan projects directly with participants or communities. This meant that for practical reasons, many elements, such as the artistic discipline to be used, the number of participants, and the commissioned artist, as well as the projects' timeframes and locations, were already decided. This does not mean that the artists and project managers were not sensitive to the needs of the participants; 'Suitable Citizens'<sup>2</sup> planned for childcare and transport, 'Is-Sigra tat-Tin'<sup>3</sup> rehearsals worked around the availability of the participants, while 'Batman Gżirjan'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Suitable Citizens - a collaboration with the local branch of the Jesuit Refugee Service - brought together a group of participants from different African countries and local artists and educators to produce various artefacts: photographs, screen printed tote bags, scarves, face masks and a large textile artwork combining stencilling with collage, sewing and painting. The project engaged with the challenges of integration and inclusion of third country nationals in arts events and projects, and aimed to bring artists and non-professionals together to work in a non-hierarchical process of co-creation

<sup>3</sup>Is-Sigra tat-Tin (The Fig Tree) - a collaboration with Opening Doors Association - provided a creative space for participants to explore themes and subjects which mattered to them and which they wanted to share with audiences, through the creation and performance of a devised, integrated theatre production.

<sup>4</sup>Batman Gżirjan (Batman from Gzira) was a socially-engaged art-research project - in collaboration with Flimkien għal Ambjent Ahjar - which examined how local inhabitants in a busy and changing town are affected by over-construction, private development, and encroachment of land, and how local people can react at development which is not in their best interests. The project attempted to encourage participants to articulate their feelings about their neighbourhood, and to empower them to express themselves publicly against the exploitation of their town for commercial interests.

<sup>1</sup>The AMASS projects mentioned here refer to projects created as part of 'Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture' (AMASS), a Horizon 2020 project researching the role of the arts in mitigating social challenges, and assessing the societal impact of the arts through a wide range of disciplines, contexts, and participatory approaches. The projects conducted in Malta by the University of Malta (five out of a total of 35 conducted across Europe) addressed challenges faced by marginalised communities, including the elderly, migrant communities, those living with HIV, people with learning difficulties, and those living alongside overdevelopment and construction. Disciplines included theatre, dance, photography, screen-printing, sewing, and performance art. All research and data-collection was approved by the University of Malta's Research Ethics Committee. The project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870621. <https://amassproject.weebly.com/>

artist, Kristina Borg went to great lengths to communicate with a broad range of participants with varying needs, posting letters, visiting at different times, and spending time on the phone with those who were not familiar with newer technologies. However, it does mean that from the inception of each project, it was the participants that fitted into and around the project, rather than the other way around. This unintentional top-down approach can imply a hierarchy, no matter how sensitive, experienced and humble the artist is.

A methodology used by the three theatre-based projects saw a conventional devised theatre approach come into play, with theatre practitioners ‘harvesting’ participants’ stories and experiences during a series of workshops or interviews and weaving these into a performance (See Figure 2). While the projects remained faithful to the participants’ voice in the final performance (I attended both workshops and performances and saw that many of the participants’ words and thoughts were reflected accurately in the final production of ‘Is-Sigra tat-Tin’ for example), this methodology meant that for a certain period, the creative aspect of the project was exclusively in the hands of the artists, and not the participants. Changes and additions to the work were encouraged, and the original stories were offered by the participants, but nevertheless, the material was produced by the artists, and not the participants. This approach exposes a hierarchical tension between artist and participant in terms of creativity and artistic validity; whose voice and whose creative vision will ultimately be shown to an audience?

‘Batman Gzirjan’ took a more forensic approach to this ‘harvesting’ phase, with the artist spending long amounts of

time with participants, requesting written and photographic input from them, and transcribing hours of interviews and workshops for research purposes (see Figure 3). This more intensive way of working allowed for a deeper knowledge of the concerns and complex social dynamics within which the project was working, and yet, broadly speaking, the project followed the same model as the theatre-based projects mentioned above, with the participants’ input filling a framework and dramaturgy created by the artist.

A different methodology was used by the ‘Suitable Citizens’ project, which took a pedagogical approach, aiming to teach various (photography, screen-printing, textile) skills to participants, and to create hand-crafted items with these newly acquired skills (see Figure 1). No matter how welcoming and sensitive an atmosphere the project sought to create, a pedagogical approach implicitly implies a teacher-student relationship, where the artist-teacher is imparting knowledge to the student-participants. It should be said that what was interesting in this case, was that some of the participants were already highly skilled in tailoring and sewing, and so, were able to guide and contribute to parts of the project.

Thus, what these projects had in common (as with many artist-led socially engaged projects), is their acting as a mouthpiece for participants; providing a vehicle through which marginalised communities could voice their opinions, concerns and aspirations. However, what they also shared, was that none of them (for various reasons) managed to grant more than a limited amount of creative autonomy to their participants. Perhaps this second point was not essential to the



**Figure 1. The participants of Suitable Citizens work on a co-created textile artwork.** In this image (left to right) Daniel Jude Okoeguale, Raphael Vella, Tesfay Simon, Habtom Tsigehans, Edith Flore, Precious Orogun, Helen Adhanom. Photo Elisa von Brockdorff. This figure has been published with permission from the individuals involved and shown.



**Figure 2. Is-Siġra tat-Tin treated participants as professional theatre-makers in the creation and performance of a devised theatre production.** In this image (front to back) Jacob Piccinino, Benjamin Grech, Sharon Bezzina. Photo Elisa von Brockdorff. This figure has been published with permission from the individuals involved and shown.



**Figure 3. Audience members watch a group of synchronised swimmers in the busy sea that forms part of Gżira, in Batman Gżirjan (2021).** Photo Elisa von Brockdorff. This figure has been published with permission from the individuals involved and shown.

projects' success; and perhaps the former achievement—granting a voice to marginalised communities—was enough.

RV: I have shared many of your concerns throughout the duration of these projects, and I think it is essential to question every decision we take during an artistic process, even if this means that we find that our work could have been more effective, democratic, creative, or whatever. I think that the kinds of projects you seem to have in mind—fully

autonomous, self-directed, and so on—are projects that emerge out of long-term collective platforms that grow within very specific communities, generally in geographically and politically distinct locations. However, it is very likely that even these kinds of platforms begin with one person or a small group of persons coming together to create the foundations of a vision for change. Democracy and horizontal actions are processes that need time to become sustainable enough to acquire the sort of community-driven stability

you are talking about. So, while I agree that individual projects may appear relatively tame, they become stronger once they stop thinking of themselves as a workshop that is leading towards a definite end-result, like a play or an exhibition. Project Row Houses took off with only seven artists based in Houston and the inspiration of a German artist—Beuys—who believed that shamanism—of all things!—could help to transform society.

Documenta 15 was replete with collaborative and even pedagogical initiatives. Educational or knowledge-sharing platforms have become quite common in contemporary art. I am thinking of Gudskul in Jakarta, for example, where students, young artists and others can collaborate on projects while making use of very open-ended methodologies. Pedagogy is not necessarily a top-down relationship; actually, it becomes a repressive pedagogy when one person dictates things from a position of power. It can be more radical, taking into account a variety of theories, ranging from border pedagogy (Giroux, 1991) to critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005), or sociological theories relating to indigenous knowledge and cognitive justice (Santos, 2014). We can deepen our research approaches by exploring methodologies such as arts-based action research (Jokela, 2019).

Besides, artists working in projects like these cannot assume that participants merely join projects to play around and take artistic ‘risks’. In other words, artists need to avoid thinking, subconsciously, of participants as mirror-images of themselves. They should not assume that everyone who participates in an artistic project ought to aspire towards the (Western) model of the artist as creative individual/genius. In ‘Suitable Citizens’, not everyone shared my initial desire for work that expressed political goals, though some warmed up to the idea after a while (as I said, change takes time). I realised that some had joined the project because they wanted to learn new skills that could help them progress in their careers. Tania Bruguera’s Immigrant Movement International in Corona, Queens, for example, supported local immigrants with English classes and legal advice. We cannot underestimate the political impact of ‘learning’, which can also be a form of ‘unlearning’.

The main challenge, I guess, is to try to make change happen in the context of an economic model that is still firmly rooted in established funding schemes or institutional setups that tend to limit what can be done in specific situations. Alternatively, we need to think of new economic models for working together in the arts. AMASS received EU funding and would probably never have materialised without that funding. Yet, we know that some of the projects we started have already led to new projects and programmes that lie outside the remit of those EU funds. And this is essential if we really want to believe that art has a place in the political reimagining of this world. For me, a question we cannot stop asking ourselves is this: how can art engage in a conversation, or even a struggle, with the violence of xenophobia, or prejudice towards persons whose gender identity

is different from that of the ‘majority’, or indifference towards persons whose intellectual abilities are judged to be inferior to the norm? And I think that your last point about ‘granting a voice’ is very important, even though we shouldn’t really ‘grant’ persons ‘permission’ to speak but simply provide platforms where their voices are heard or can reach further. But we need to be modest enough to accept that these platforms might not look as sensational as what large-scale artistic events have taught us to expect. Maybe the art world needs to begin looking at sewing classes as radical forms of political learning and change!

MP: Well possibly what we can do is question more deeply what we define as an art project, and how important this definition actually is. Assemble’s project *Granby Four Streets* (2013) engaged with residents of a Liverpool area through design and many other activities, outside of those traditionally defined as ‘art’. Joshua Decter (2014) gives the right of definition to the artist; a social event or workshop can be defined as an art project when the artist ‘endows the social event with an art condition’. This change in thinking, and in broadening the parameters of how artists can work, how they can self-identify as artists—for practical and personal reasons—could allow for more meaningful collaborations, and projects that are closer to the quietly radical forms of practice—like sewing classes—you mention. To take the argument a step further, however, we could then ask how important actually is the inclusion of art or creativity in socially-engaged projects? Could the same results be achieved through sport, through lessons in public speaking, or through a philosophy course instead?

I see the xenophobia and prejudice you mention above as a sort of slow-burn crisis in our society. Though we are not living in immediate danger day to day, economic policies, technology and world events have made our societies more polarised, leading to an ever-greater acceptance of prejudice against what we feel to be the ‘other’ (Delia, 2022), and facilitating the separation of communities into self-styled cultural silos. We do not (yet) exist in a state of universal crisis, but have come to a point where stress and anger play relatively large roles in our lives (Farrugia, 2022), and it may be that a shift in how socially-engaged practice works or is perceived, could provide marginalised groups with greater autonomy. Projects like the Malta Migrant Befriending Programme, run by the Hal Far Open centre here in Malta, for example, brings people from different backgrounds together, for support, social events and community activities. Another initiative, The Honey Island Rollers (an independently-run roller derby club for women, also in Malta) fosters a sense of community among its members, lending them a feeling of strength and confidence through a very physical and quite particular sport.

This brings us back to the question of who socially-engaged projects are really *for*; who is expected to engage, and through what discipline. The artist Alexandra Olympia Peristeraki, who works mainly with text, dismantled hardware and

video, is creating a community of those who want to code using HTML, in order to democratise and demystify coding. The activity is open to everyone, and is not intended to be exclusively artistic or creative; yet Peristeraki is working as an artist, and views the activity as part of her artistic practice. Perhaps this is the equivalent of the sewing class that you mentioned; a radical act through a modest activity, and in this case, with an added gender shift. The crisis she is addressing through her work is also one of representation, and links to the ‘granting of a voice’ which you questioned earlier; her work gives people the tools with which to create an online presence and voice for themselves, without relying on big tech firms to build, format and host them.

RV: You have highlighted several important issues. First of all, there is the broad issue of what you call a slow-burn crisis. If the impact of a crisis is so slow that it becomes almost invisible, is it really a crisis? Once we ask ourselves this question, we are already on a path that leads to forgetfulness. However, if we agree that artists and others working in the field of art cannot simply ignore even the slowest of slow-burning crises, we find ourselves in the midst of other questions you formulated: Who do such artworks represent? Who are they for? And what makes *artistic* actions different from other kinds of engagement, like social work?

Artists who choose to turn their gaze away from problems that affect others living in faraway places might do so because they are afraid of misrepresenting a political and social context they can never really fathom. Yet, we should not forget that the media also regularly ignores tragedies taking place in non-Western, ‘peripheral’ zones. When I initiated the ‘Suitable Citizens’ project, I asked myself this question: Who gives you the right to engage with a problem you have never experienced? I have never been forced to escape my country or a war on a dinghy along with scores of other migrants. That thought almost convinced me to withdraw from the project before I had even started it. I decided to go ahead with the project for two reasons. First of all, negative reactions to migration from sub-Saharan Africa do not only impact migrants’ lives. They form an integral part of *my* reality too. They contribute to the moulding of the realities that children experience at school, that friends and others I have never met experience in the streets, on public transport, and so on. Secondly, I dove into the process without a clear end-product in mind. It was an *emergent*, pedagogical process, evolving on the basis of whatever images and ideas others brought to the table. I did not begin the project with a clear idea of what makes someone a ‘suitable citizen’; rather, I felt that the democratic process of negotiating and translating creative ideas in a group would help us all to understand what it might mean.

This does not mean that the end-product is completely irrelevant. Sometimes, it takes a tragedy encapsulated in a single image to make the world recognise a crisis for what it is. The photo of the lifeless body of three-year-old

Aylan Kurdi that appeared in 2015 made the world realise that there was a humanitarian crisis in Syria. The image was very in-your-face and brings to mind Susan Sontag’s account of dead bodies in photographs (Sontag, 2003): she wrote that images of war and death that represent ‘foreign’ bodies are often frank, but photographs of bodies belonging to people we know or who are close to home are expected to be discreet.

We also know that artists whose work revolves around others’ tragic circumstances risk being accused of appropriation or exploitation. Ai Weiwei’s infamous re-enactment of Aylan Kurdi’s dead body on a pebble beach in Lesbos is a case in point. Clearly, artists who engage with the catastrophic experiences of others in their work hover over a very delicate ethical threshold. For Alfredo Jaar, artists can only achieve empathy when they understand that extreme violence like genocide does not require direct representations of violence. Yet, as Jaar stated in his conversation with philosopher Simon Critchley (Morris, 2011), there exists no clear rule for artists as they seek new ways of representing a crisis, for who knows what constitutes the most truthful representation of a catastrophe like the Rwandan genocide?

Jaar’s ‘silent’ approach to violence in his art brings me to another issue you brought up: Why should we use art, and more specifically, socially engaged art, to deal with societal challenges? What distinguishes artistic engagements from other services like social work or journalism? I quite like Luis Camnitzer’s approach to this question. Camnitzer is wary of socially engaged artistic work that ‘leaves out’ the artistic component from the process. For him, art—like education—generates new knowledge in a process that is conceptually complex because it does not only echo existing problems but engages with the unknown (Camnitzer *et al.*, 2014). For me, experimental work that links communities with emerging artists, like that produced by the Bangladesh-based artists’ network Britto Arts Trust, is important because it employs collaborative and processual methodologies to reconceptualise the world, not simply describe it. Art is an encounter with the unpredictable.

MP: An encounter with the unpredictable is a beautiful description. It could be the strangeness of seeing a group of synchronised swimmers performing in a busy, not-quite-pristine harbour area (as in ‘Batman Gżirjan’), or the juxtaposition of imagery and text on the large, colourful textile piece made by a group of recent migrants to Malta (as in ‘Suitable Citizens’).

But perhaps the beauty is in the collaborative process itself; the group of residents-as-artists planning and preparing for a guided tour around their congested, overbuilt town, or the migrants to Malta collaborating to create a single textile piece. This reframing again approaches Joshua Decker’s question of when a social event can be seen as corresponding to an art activity. His answer, in short, is ‘when

the artist says so', or when the artist and the context 'endow the social event with an art condition' (2014, p191), although he goes on to qualify this endowment as a conscious signifier in itself, and warns against expectation that using art to penetrate ever-deeper into reality will guarantee an 'enhanced authenticity' (2014, p192).

This brings us back to your point about being reluctant to encroach on the troubles of other social groups. You make a good point about prejudice against migrants being part of your reality and not only theirs. It challenges a siloing of experience and cultures, where eyes are averted and responsibility relinquished. The crisis in these situations is the siloing of lives; you could possibly argue that the challenge is not to have people participate, but to have people participate *together*. Would it be realistic to aim for a project where migrants and self-identifying racists participate in a project together? Or to have construction moguls participate in a creative project with beleaguered residents? The image is a comical one, but it might be an experiment worth trying.

I feel I have to stop here, however, and mention the elephant(s) in the room. Pakistan is currently enduring an unprecedented climate catastrophe created by human-made changes to global weather systems. At the same time, the world is watching Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in fear of a nuclear catastrophe in the Russian-occupied area. What can art do in the face of crises of such inconceivable proportions?

RV: I am not keen about categorical distinctions between 'passive' and 'active' encounters with art or between political and aesthetic dimensions of art. I believe that even an intimate encounter with a painting or a piece of music can be uplifting and life-changing in various ways. And our interest in the political dimension of art and artistic collaborations should not lead us to conclude too hastily that art's aesthetic dimension is powerless in the face of crises, such as these you mention.

I also think that there should always be room for dialogue, though we need to be wary of transforming participatory practices into accommodating practices. Placing construction moguls in situations which can make them appear falsely democratic and happy to negotiate conditions and plans with grassroots organisations and individuals can be counter-productive. We see this happen all the time. Contractors prepare plans with their architects to construct twenty floors of concrete, so they apply for a permit to build twenty-five floors. Then, they respond 'positively' to public objections by bringing the height down to twenty floors, and they get their permit.

As I said, dialogue is always welcome, but I also believe that artists need to avoid becoming complicit with power and market values, and I think this might be happening too often. Rather than ask ourselves whether art can do anything about the war in Ukraine, we could ask: can art afford to remain silent? Can we afford to accommodate or even support repressive conditions by adapting to a system that values competitiveness and back-stabbing in the cultural, educational and various other fields? If we are able to realise that art can, under certain conditions, actually become too comfy with conservative or repressive agendas, we should also be able to understand that we need to make choices and take clear positions. This is not about a degradation of more aesthetic spheres in cultural production. It's not about beauty versus politics, because beauty can become a political force too. It is about taking a stand with whatever means we have at hand or can envision, even if that stand appears minuscule in the face of such adversity. In its infinite possibilities, art can discover ways of surviving, in constructive rather than destructive ways.

---

## Data availability

No data are associated with this article.

## References

- Camnitzer L, Helguera P, Marín B: **Art and Education**. Publication Studio, 2014. [Reference Source](#)
- Decter J: **Art is a Problem**. Jrp Ringier, 2014. [Reference Source](#)
- Delia J: **Human rights lawyers flag bipartisan statements on deportations as attempts to 'gain populist approval'**. The Shift, August 25, 2022. [Reference Source](#)
- de Sousa Santos B: **Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide**. Routledge, 2014. [Reference Source](#)
- Farrugia C: **Maltese are the angriest and most worried people in EU**. Times of Malta, August 10, 2022. [Reference Source](#)
- Freire P: **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**. Continuum, 2005. [Reference Source](#)
- Giroux HA: **Border Pedagogy and the Politics of Postmodernism**. *Social Text*. 1991; **28**: 51–67. [Publisher Full Text](#)
- Harlan V: **What is Art? Conversation with Joseph Beuys**. Clairview, 2004.
- Jackson S: **Social Works: performing art, support publics**. Routledge, 2011. [Reference Source](#)
- Jokela T: **Art-based action research for art education in the North**. *The International Journal of Art & Design Education*. 2019; **38**(3): 599–609. [Publisher Full Text](#)
- Morris D: **Humiliation and Hope: Alfredo Jaar and Simon Critchley in Conversation**. 2011. [Reference Source](#)
- Sontag S: **Regarding the Pain of Others**. Picador: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. [Reference Source](#)



# Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status:   

---

## Version 1

Reviewer Report 12 January 2023

<https://doi.org/10.21956/routledgeopenres.18853.r26914>

© 2023 Laven R. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



**Rolf Laven** 

University College of Teacher Education, Vienna, Austria

### Intro

This review approaches the complex subject matter of the AMASS research alliance "Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture" (Pulè & Vella) from a bird's-eye perspective and aims to briefly outline the text format, its contents and perspectives, and furthermore the reviewer's own perspectives. The open-discursive format of the essay by Margerita Pulè and Raphael Vella explored here appears to be an interesting, inviting and yet challenging concept that aims to create transparency and overview and to promote dialogue. The exposition of publication and peer review processes opens up multiperspectivity and meta-levels for interested readers.

### Values, Aims, Content

The Horizon 2020 project discussed in the contribution by Margerita Pulè and Raphael Vella addresses the challenges of integration and inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable groups through workshops and art projects in the period from 2020 to 2023. This arts-based action research alliance aims to provide concrete opportunities for the socially excluded in an arts learning environment. It aims to bring together creators and lay people a low-entry level, to create a non-hierarchical process of co-creation and to explore the effects of participatory art on social challenges and personal community belonging. A total of thirty-five projects will be implemented in six European countries. In Malta, five artist-initiated and led community participatory arts-based activities are being implemented as part of the AMASS project. The shaping of group dynamics and social actions remains in the foreground, not the design of an object: process orientation comes before product orientation. The reviewer finds the multitude of methods, strategies, techniques and the abundance of theoretical background knowledge remarkable, which made the respective situations manageable. The most diverse requirements, disciplines, possibilities and aspects seem to be compatible within arcs of tension.

### The (Self-)Questioning of the AMASS project

Margerita Pulè and Raphael Vella, as members of the Maltese partner, question the AMASS project from a self-reflecting, distance-accepting perspective. At the end of the project, they make their joint reflection transparent. With their value-reflective contribution, which functions as a meta-level, they diversify the otherwise scientific writing in the publication. Pulè and Vella make it clear that they are aware of the challenges associated with autonomy and agency. Legitimate questions raised include: Who chooses, who creates and grants this podium, who is empowered to have this exchange? Who makes the decisions in socially engaged art projects?

For further stimulation, the essay reviewed here is conceived as a dialogue.

The authors maintain a questioning attitude, introduce thoughts and sometimes doubts, name certainties and conclusions only cautiously. It becomes clear that some questions will remain open, as they cannot be evaluated with certainty. Thus, artists and scientists are not to be understood as those who provide correct answers; rather, they pose the questions: How can collaborative art workshops engage people from different social backgrounds in community-building processes that advocates for social justice, empowerment and civic engagement? How can this artistic engagement be promoted beyond the framework of the art events and result in sustainable developments? To what extent can these possibilities be used by participants as a mouthpiece? What creative means are there to make opinions, concerns and hopes visible?

### **The 'Social Sculpture' as topos and reference in AMASS - Backgrounds and Perspectives**

Using the text by Pulè and Vella, we follow the German artist Joseph Beuys. He calls for the creativity and active participation of all people, with the aim of changing and improving the social community. Beuys is considered the most influential artist of the post-war period, a visionary who used art to shape 'direct democracy'. With his demands, the artist Beuys had a decisive influence on pedagogy: as a pioneer of artistic intervention in the service of personal and political self-determination and education, he was convinced of the reformatory potential of art. Social work should be understood as an artistic act; every human being has creative abilities. Pulè and Vella underline this call by Beuys to overcome patronising conditions in social practice by means of art/creativity. Similar to Beuys' call, the projects they present aim at active participation and constructive development of self-dynamics. Once again, it becomes clear that ethical and moral principles are paramount in the context of socially engaged art. The AMASS projects also visualise the changing concept of art. Besides symbolic practices, activist ones are also made possible.

### **Empowerment through Working Practices with an Emancipating Character**

The empowerment aspect can thus be understood against passivity and in favour of an actual participation of the group or individuals. As role models with experience and knowledge, art practitioners support participants to take an active part. Vella notes that every decision made during an artistic process should be questioned, even if it leads to the conclusion that the work could have been more effective, more democratic, more creative, more participatory. These concerns could not be fundamentally addressed during the project activities - a limited degree of creative autonomy had been granted to the participants. Vella describes the process of open space development. In it, time was also often cited as a limiting factor. Only in later phases were participants given active roles in co-creating and developing creative solutions. Being able to develop and expect these moments is rewarded. However, the signals of self-empowerment are always rather tentative at the beginning. We may interpret that the cautious activity and free

space development of the participants could correspond to their life circumstances and certainly underlines the need for such activities.

The potential of the time spent together is considered: Well-sufficient periods of time become comprehensible as a development factor for participatory-emancipatory visualisation and deepening. Only through them does the depth of understanding and empathy develop. It becomes clear that it cannot be a question of whether it is art that is created here. The real achievement, the significant thing for society, is to give voice (in the form of creative capacity and action) back to marginalised communities, to individuals.

### **Prospects and Outlook**

Through the contribution of Margerita Pulè and Raphael Vella, readers are given the opportunity to look behind the scenes and take different perspectives. It opens up the continuous work on values. The exchange of questions and references, as a self-reflection, may open up the readers for their own activities. Commonalities of projects taking place all over the world may be examined, but also that each target group needs its specific-experimental explorations, knowledge and solutions and how it partly works these out itself. It is suggested to us that for these requirements, the time frame offered has a special role to play.

The ways in which new things can be created become comprehensible. The bridging across disciplines as a synthesis of specialised knowledge and experimental action, seems particularly exciting and profitable to the reviewer.

Certainly, the projects created for participation should always be put on the test bench, but it is precisely they that make otherwise little visible people and their needs - and thus social difficulties - apparent for the first time. Giving marginalised communities a voice, an expression, is a high and difficult goal to achieve. Although such collaborations are sometimes problematised, the question of viable alternatives arises. However, the participation of these individuals and groups must not be blocked by a lack of alternatives or because of an excessive focus on risks or criticisms. The fact that it takes developmental periods, phases and empowerment, as well as continuity and openness of action close to the arts, until the participants have actually observed the active roles in the environment and try them out in the form of creative co-creation and expression, is to be celebrated as a challenge, an achievement and a milestone.

The courage to experiment, to do what has not yet been proven, is to be emphasised. When these inherent risks are mastered, the empowerment experience is particularly evident. Every engagement of social-personal participation is to be welcomed - with as much art, personal responsibility and autonomy as possible.

### **Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?**

Yes

### **Is the work clearly and cogently presented?**

Yes

### **Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?**

Yes

**Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?**

Yes

**Competing Interests:** As we are both active members of the supranational professional association 'InSEA International Society Education in the Arts', there have been chance meetings at conferences between Raphael Vella and myself, and we are in collegial contact. He has organised the 2019 InSEA conference 'Art Education: Conflicts and Connections' in Malta, where I was involved as a conference presenter with paper, lecture and publication. However, no joint projects have emerged between us, although we work in similar fields and have comparable approaches to our work.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Art & Design Education. Art Didactics, Visual Art, Service-Learning, Reform Pedagogic

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.**

Reviewer Report 15 December 2022

<https://doi.org/10.21956/routledgeopenres.18853.r26913>

© 2022 Suominen A. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



**Anniina Suominen** 

Aalto University, Espoo, Finland

The topic if the essay is fascinating and very timely. This is an important topic. Myreview focuses mainly on how to strengthen the structure and argumentation to ensure clarity and increase reader enthusiasm for the really great project these authors are doing.

I am not sure the title tells me much. I would omit the question from the title. I would also consider using art as social practice or link this to the title to the AMASS core ideas.

I appreciate the dialogical style of writing but I would like the key terms to be defined or contextualised in the beginning, and summarised in the end. Basically sharing where the conversations started in terms of concepts, notions, guiding key ideas -and then return to those in the end.

I would caution the authors about the inclusion of several projects that are mentioned in passing and not fully explored. In reading this text, I was starting to loose track of the topic (thematic base) as I felt I should start googling these other projects. This could also be resolved by giving more emphasis in exploring the 3 projects that seem to be part of the authors project.

Finally, I would recommend including more recent arts pedagogical citations to support arguments.

With some more work, this text is definitely one that I will use in my classes.

**Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?**

Partly

**Is the work clearly and cogently presented?**

Partly

**Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?**

Partly

**Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?**

Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Arts education, arts advocacy, diversity education, arts pedagogy

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.**

Reviewer Report 01 December 2022

<https://doi.org/10.21956/routledgeopenres.18853.r26916>

© 2022 Willis S. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



**Steve C. Willis** 

Missouri State University, Springfield, MO, USA

The narrative that the authors present engages with dilemmas related to power imbalances, responsibility, political agendas, and artistic quality. Their comments open the doors for a series of questions and challenges, leading to an open and genuine dialogue drawn from the authors' quite different experiences of socially engaged art practice, which are well founded in the evolving posture of grounded theory.

Most refreshing are the agreements and disagreements between the two narratives that present the voices and visions seen through sociocultural lenses that reflect quite differing personal and professional experiences. Each author presents interesting comments referring to the artists'

interactions to support the sustenance of the comparative discussions of the slow burn crisis in society.

Many references to artists provide a refreshing depth of perception. This narrative adequately refers to contemporary scholarly and artistic information relevant to the narrative and the artistic research project 'Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture' AMASS Project.'

**Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?**

Yes

**Is the work clearly and cogently presented?**

Yes

**Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?**

Yes

**Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?**

Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** My research interests are in indigenous knowledge, issues of equity, Native American practices, tribal cultural construction, issues of arts assessment, service learning, community engagement, and spirituality in art.

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.**

---