

DOING PUBLIC HUMANITIES

Edited by Susan Smulyan

First published 2021
by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smulyan, Susan, editor.

Title: Doing public humanities / edited by Susan Smulyan.

Description: New York, NY : Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2021. |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2020011482 (print) | LCCN 2020011483 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780367500177 (pbk) | ISBN 9780367524517 (hbk) |

ISBN 9781003058038 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Humanities--Study and teaching--United States. |

Humanities--Methodology. | Humanities--Social aspects--United States. |

Digital humanities. | Public history--Study and teaching--United States. |

Public art--Study and teaching--United States. |

Libraries and community--United States. | Museums and community--United

States. | Group identity. | Collective memory.

Classification: LCC AZ183.U5 D65 2020 (print) |

LCC AZ183.U5 (ebook) | DDC 001.3071--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020011482>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020011483>

ISBN: 978-0-367-52451-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-50017-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-05803-8 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Taylor & Francis Books

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WHAT CAN PUBLIC ART TEACH
PUBLIC HUMANITIES?*Susan Smulyan*

Introduction

What can Brown University, an elite, Ivy League school, and the scholars who work there, learn from a small, scrappy, non-profit after-school art program, located about a mile away from campus on Westminister Street, called New Urban Arts? In the past, we believed that the University taught the local community. Professors knew about literature, history, and art and should go off campus and help ordinary people (who are not as smart as we are) to better appreciate the world and the humanities that describe it. I want to ask the question the other way—what can the community teach the university? While the organization focuses on youth and the creative visual arts, everyone at New Urban Arts in Providence, Rhode Island, writes a lot. The reams of writing coming out of New Urban Arts remind me that the humanities exist to explain the arts. I contend that, in addition to its art practice, the community at New Urban Arts engages in a New Urban humanities, a form of radical humanities, that serves as an example for how the humanities could flourish in the twenty-first century.

Maybe the question of what can New Urban Arts teach Brown's Center for Public Humanities should be thought of as something bigger. What can public art, and the contemporary artists rethinking what it means to work in public, teach humanities scholars? Answering this question opens a new approach to the so-called "crisis in the humanities." The humanities face fewer students, less funding, and many jokes about our irrelevance. We are seen and see ourselves as not very helpful to people in the "real" world.¹ The lessons of the arts could help the humanities in their quest to become more "public" and to think about the consequences and possibilities of that move. In particular, this essay examines social practice art and what its precepts can teach those of us who practice "public humanities."

Social practice art operates in four methodological and ideological vectors. The art begins and remains public and community based; process is as important as product; and all the art is collaborative. In addition, its approach is rooted in social justice activism and it takes up issues of racial and gender inequality as well as the sources and amelioration of poverty. Even if the "crisis" sometimes seems overblown, the humanities should make a difference in our society, should contribute to social justice, just as the arts do. How can we reconceive the humanities by considering how they might be practiced in public?

It was probably never possible for faculty and students to study and learn separated from the world. Students and faculty have always engaged in politics. But we tend to think about student political actions, as crucial as they have been to our thinking and our lives, as something extra to the university, not its central mission. Scientists cure diseases and fix or prevent environmental disasters, while those who study policy describe how to better run whole cities or countries. Large parts of the university matter because they provide answers to questions that society needs answered. And I would say that humanities students have always contributed social and cultural insights through their political activities, but such activities have been thought of as disruptions, more than contributions.

Most people understand history, to use one example, as a way of staving off doom—as in the quotation: "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it." Most people understand the work of historians in this way. Every country wants to learn from its successes and most recently, those of us in the United States have been thinking about our failures, principally, slavery and the Civil War. How can we learn from those events and institutions and what lessons are the right ones to learn? I'm proud of a range of historians who have spoken and written about memorials to the Confederate slave-owners that still exist in American cities and what should happen to them.²

There have always been history museums, historic houses, and cultural heritage sites. These exist around the world—sometimes to teach the lessons of history, sometimes just to preserve history in case it suddenly becomes an event or a place we can learn from. Audiences who visit these sites have been mostly passive—receiving the wisdom/knowledge/scholarship of historians and anthropologists through wall labels or tour guides.

Scholars in literature and the arts have taken part in public discourse by explaining how people should appreciate poetry, plays, novels, music, or paintings. There are some exceptions, particularly with anthropologists or ethnomusicologists who participate in art making as part of their studies. And, of course, there have been artists on university faculties who have made art, instead of writing about pieces of art and literature that already exist. Those who create art have also had a mixed relationship with their audiences. Sometimes artists live like geniuses, alone in an attic, composing or painting and then presenting their work for others to admire. But artists have also sometimes worked in

public ways by sculpting statues in town squares (like the Confederate monuments getting so much attention in the United States) or painting murals on public buildings.

We have usually thought of public art as belonging, as sited, in the town square, or the shopping mall, or in front of a big skyscraper. That kind of public art is on one end of scale—it appears in public and visitors look at it. But I'm more interested in public art at the other end of the scale, beginning with a memorial designed for a passive audience but which changed how we think of public art.

Maya Lin, a young Chinese American student, was chosen to design and install a memorial to Vietnam War veterans in Washington, DC, in 1983. There are many things to say about this beautiful memorial consisting of two pieces of black marble in a V shape, built into the landscape, and engraved with the names of American soldiers who died in the war. We can talk about the controversy surrounding its designer and its design; we can talk about the memorial and its commission as substitute or maybe a palimpsest, for the public struggle over the Vietnam War. But as a piece of public art, the Vietnam Memorial became an early, and partial, example of the way in which new forms of art became participatory.

Lin thought hard about what memorials meant to individuals and to society and searched history for models. She wanted visitors to be able to see their reflections in the highly polished marble that also listed the names of the war dead.³ But visitors went far beyond that—first to make rubbings of particular names and then by leaving things meaningful to them. The phenomenon was so widespread, and so important, that the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History built an exhibit of the objects left by visitors to the Vietnam Memorial.⁴ Visitors also used the wall as a place to meet and talk to people they knew and people they didn't know. Public participation changed the sculptural memorial in ways that neither those who commissioned it, nor Lin, had considered.

The next wave of public artists thought more directly about such interactivity, about what the visitors wanted, how to engage them in making the art, and about social change. Artists worked in a range of new ways that combined art and activism, art and community engagement, art and collaboration. Ideas about public art began to change and artists looked to older schools of art, and individual artists and activists, for inspiration. Tom Finkelpearl, formerly Director of the Queen's Museum and then the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs pointed to Guy Debord, Joseph Beuys, and Paolo Freire, writing that: "they promoted ideas that would influence American artists' emergent practice of socially cooperative art. Among others, these writers helped plant the seed of the activated audience that was translated by some artists into active experiments in group creativity."⁵

Another source of inspiration was the art made as part of political movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement, the WTO protests, and the Umbrella

Movement in Hong Kong.⁶ One important group, Creative Time, has become a gathering place for the artists and their community collaborators and have sponsored thoughtful models of this work in addition to a yearly conference.⁷ Creative Times' Curator, Nato Thompson, has become one of the philosophers of the movement, publishing several books exploring its methods and approach. Thompson has his own explanation of the roots of the artistic movement, writing: "The call for art into life at this particular moment in history implies both an urgency to matter as well as a privileging of the lived experience. These are two different things, but within much of this work, they are blended together."⁸ Nato Thompson and Creative Time have used the name, "social practice art" for the range of activities they explore, but others have called it socially engaged art or community art.

Social practice art exists in a range of formats and places, but it always focuses on engagement, process, collaboration, and social justice. To make this definition more concrete, let me briefly mention two projects, one that looks more like art, and one that doesn't look anything like art, to give an idea of the reach and variety of this kind of work.

Wendy Ewald, a conceptual photographer, collaborated with four different groups of children as she investigated "the ability of language to create barriers or alliances between groups according to gender, age, and race." With the children she created four alphabets: a Spanish alphabet with English-as-a-Second-Language students in North Carolina; an African-American alphabet with students at an elementary school in Cleveland; a White-Girls alphabet at a boarding school in Massachusetts; and an Arabic alphabet with students at a middle school in Queens, New York. Ewald published the result of the project, her photographs of the students and their alphabets, as a book, *Wendy Ewald: American Alphabets*.⁹

The art comes out of the collaboration between the artist and the children as they thought through issues of identity, culture, and language. This project shows the usefulness of the visual in thinking about social justice, a way of seeing that artists can contribute to activism. In this project, who makes the art changes—the art is the collaboration between a conventional artist and children—but in some ways the exhibiting of the art doesn't change—there is a book called *American Alphabets*. Ewald would say that the art is not only the photographs and situations that she and the children created and which are documented in the book, but also their process, even though the process is harder to see.

A wide-ranging endeavor in Houston, Texas, called Project Row Houses, shows how much social practice art can encompass. Rick Lowe, the artist who started Project Row Houses, believes that the art has happened since he and some artist friends from Houston's Third Ward took over a group of falling down houses. Inviting others to live in the houses, the artists, working with the surrounding community, transformed the spaces. The houses include art exhibits, but also living spaces for single mothers and their children. Project Row Houses

lists five sets of programs on their website: Public Art, Education, Social Safety Nets, Sustainability, and Architecture. They write: "The mission of Project Row Houses is to be the catalyst for transforming community through the celebration of art and African-American history and culture" and continue "PRH is a unique experiment in activating the intersections between art, historic preservation, affordable and innovative housing, community relations and development, neighborhood revitalization, and human empowerment."¹⁰ Project Row Houses declares their interest in historic preservation just as, in Chapter 4 of this book, Marisa Brown outlines how artists contribute to a new critical heritage study and practice.

During a 2013 Creative Time summit conversation with Nato Thompson, Rick Lowe said that artists should get up every day and ask "what is my race question" noting that the art world is very divided with "not a lot of people of color at the level where the real conversations are coming." Lowe described his work as existing between community art and social practice art, and explained that "When I started, I don't care if its art, forget the aesthetics, it's about the impact." He also explored the strong pull for artists, in a capitalist culture, to do profitable projects and connected that to his own work. Critics want Project Row Houses to "scale"; to solve Houston's housing problems. But, says Lowe, "an art project doesn't have to solve all the problems, just point at them."¹¹ In thinking about new projects, Lowe combines his interests in race, social justice, and art by focusing on how to empower people in the communities in which he works, including finding ways to bring jobs to impoverished communities when members say that is their first priority.¹²

I first learned about social practice art in a storefront on Westminster Street in Providence, Rhode Island. New Urban Arts seemed the opposite of Providence's Ivy League university "on the hill" across town where I worked. But the lessons I learned there have helped me understand the ways in which universities, their researchers, their students, should approach their public work, should practice the humanities in the twenty-first century.

In 1997, two students from Brown University and two students from the Rhode Island School of Design began meeting with ten high school students in a church basement to make art. The next year, one of the Brown students, Tyler Denmead, received a prestigious Echoing Green fellowship to extend the activities to more students. He rented a storefront across the street from several high schools and gathered a group of artists who wanted to "mentor" students after school.

As Tyler tells the story, he based the model on his work one summer in France where he apprenticed in a restaurant. Every day, the chef said: "make me lunch" and Tyler cooked while the chef made suggestions. This model has evolved some over the twenty years but much has remained the same—the artists who serve as volunteer mentors see themselves less as teachers and more as guides; the students choose the mentors and have enormous power within

the organization and over their own art making. In 2016–2017, New Urban Arts served over 500 students (about half came more than once a week); 25 emerging artists who volunteered as mentors; and 3,000 people who came to their events. Only 12% of the students identified as white and 82% qualified for free or reduced price lunch according to income guidelines. The organization had eight staff members and a budget of about \$500,000. The organization has received many awards, most memorably, in 2009, when First Lady Michelle Obama presented New Urban Arts with a Coming Up Taller Award (now called the National Arts & Humanities Youth Program Awards). The award goes to out-of-school arts and humanities programs, particularly those that reach underserved children and youth. The day that one of their colleagues went to the White House, the New Urban Arts community felt newly connected to their country.

Creativity and mentoring remain part of everything that happens at New Urban Arts. The mission statement reads: "Our mission is to build a vital community that empowers young people as artists and leaders to develop a creative practice they can sustain throughout their lives." Never satisfied with one paragraph, the website also explains: "Our free, year-round out-of-school programs promote sustained mentoring relationships between urban high school students and trained artist mentors—who, together, engage in youth leadership, risk taking, collaboration, and self-directed learning." The programs are needed because: "In Providence, like in many other cities in our country, young people—particularly low-income youth and those in communities of color—are systematically denied access to high-quality, creative learning opportunities." New Urban Arts now owns their own studio space, just down the street from where they started, two floors with a print shop, dark room, music studio, sewing studio, and lots and lots of art supplies.

I've been working with New Urban Arts for more than ten years, at first more as a community member than as a faculty member. I do all the things that a volunteer can do to help a non-profit. I was first a member of the Board of Directors; I chaired the fund raising effort to buy and partially renovate the new studio space; and I was chair of the board. Why do I do this? In part because it's important work and the students, artists, and staff change lives. And I discovered that the skills I had honed in my academic career helped this non-profit. I knew about adolescent development; how to run a meeting; the ways in which a non-profit needs to stay true to its mission; about dealing with conflicting stake holders (we call it "herding cats" at the University); and empowering young people. I chose New Urban Arts because they question how the American state, non-profit, and educational organizations usually work, albeit from only slightly outside the capitalist power structure. Their contradictory and always contested subject position helped me understand my own as a faculty member in an elite university.

Along the way, I learned a lot about the radical potential of public humanities. I learned how a student-centered pedagogy might work. The joy of students who direct their own learning changed my own teaching outside of the arts. More directly, I came to understand that the lessons of the arts could help the humanities in their quest to become more “public” and to think about the consequences and possibilities of that move.

Brown prides itself on its “New Curriculum” now older than the students who study it, and students boast about the lack of requirements. But walking into the studio at New Urban Arts shows how student-centered learning is quite different than even the somewhat loose curriculum at Brown. New Urban Arts students insist that what happens there is the opposite of “school.” Students decide what they want to learn and make that happen. Expertise is prized wherever it is found, with mentors often having skills that students seek either individually or through the student-led process that chooses mentors at the beginning of the year, but students have specific skills to teach as well. I found the individual pedagogical approach very different than what I experienced in the University, but doubted that Brown could change enough to benefit from these other pedagogical approaches. After several years, I decided that one thing I had learned, and could actually take back to the University, was a different idea about the purpose of education. New Urban Arts doesn’t see itself as a substitute for what should be happening in the schools, or even as a supplement. The artists there explore creativity and develop, they will always tell you, a life-long creative practice. A rethinking of the reason for an education changed how I thought about my University teaching.

In the end, the form of art practiced at this storefront provided the most important lessons for the University and for the humanities. Newcomers to New Urban Arts repeatedly ask “what is the art” in the organization’s name? Is the art the work that the students produce? Or are they apprentices and their mentors produce the art with student help? Or does the studio offer classes in methods (“How To Make Art”) and the art is produced somewhere else, maybe after the students and the mentors leave, education in hand? New Urban Arts knows what it collectively thinks about these questions. They write on their website that they foster a “creative practice.”

What if creativity were a social enterprise rather than an individual one? What if our creativity was measured not by a finished artwork—the innate talent it may suggest or the prescribed expectations it may meet—but by the extent to which that work was fueled by our own process, our own questions, and by our relationships with one another? With this definition, New Urban Arts places itself directly in the field of Social Practice Art.

New Urban Arts is public, working not just with an amorphous community but with a specific community known and formed by its emerging artists. They regard everyone who comes through the doors as creative. The art is a process,

not the product, of creative work. The art is what happens in that storefront in Providence, the interactions among the artists. The individual pieces of work—the music, the posters, the paintings, the clothes, the photographs—those are art too but not the most important contribution by themselves. The “art” is everything that happens at New Urban Arts. So, like all social practice art, what happens at NUA is participatory, engaged with, and answerable to a community. From its beginnings, New Urban Arts rooted itself in social justice activism addressing issues of racial inequality in its programming and service, and seeing its work as a chance to create with students enrolled in the schools hit hardest by poverty in Providence.

Public art takes on a new meaning when looking at New Urban Arts. Maya Lin’s memorial suggested this new approach and it was practiced by Wendy Ewald and her young collaborators as well as by the artists and their community at Project Row Houses. A social practice artist might not build a memorial but could simply call the interactions around the idea of remembering the Vietnam War the art. Artists looked at, and learned how people used their public artworks, and went on to make new art in collaboration with their audiences.

I looked at New Urban Arts and asked: If we can recognize social practice art, why aren’t there socially engaged humanities? Why don’t we do history and sociology and literature in storefronts or row houses? Why isn’t there a New Urban Histories or a New Urban Humanities for young people? Public art was, for a long time, a statue in the public square, but now artists have moved into neighborhoods, taken over houses or commercial spaces, and are doing a different kind of engaged art. But even public historians still practice history in a museum or a historic house. The public comes to learn or look, but not to participate. The humanities scholar doesn’t learn from them, they learn from us.

As social practice art was developing and as New Urban Arts was being founded, some universities in the United States began to rethink humanities’ definitions and pedagogy as Robyn Schroeder describes in Chapter 1. Of course, there are examples of publically engaged scholarship all around us. The public history movement trains students to work in museums and historic houses and thinks about exhibits as a form of scholarship. Oral history takes community knowledge as something that should be preserved. Oral historians work with community members as collaborators and often present parts of their research to the community before it goes to the archive. Public anthropology includes both anthropology museums and community ethnographies and has thought carefully about its relationship with the public who constitute both its research subjects and its audience simultaneously. More recently, explorations in the digital humanities sometimes presented publically engaged projects with online crowd-sourced history. Digital Public Humanities projects teach us that it’s worth thinking about how social networking and crowd sourcing can provide audience, research materials, and collaborators for scholars all at the same time, as Jim McGrath’s essay in the next chapter details.¹³

The Brown University American Studies department had a Museum Studies M.A. program which wasn't satisfying either intellectually or pedagogically. We thought museums were changing and that community arts programs, digital humanities, literature, should all be part of an interdisciplinary program that thought about how to integrate the humanities with the community. We looked to the primary national government organization that funded the humanities—the National Endowment for the Humanities—and named our new program Public Humanities. If we weren't the first to have such a program—we were among the first. Now, there are programs around the country and several national and regional organizations to the serve them.¹⁴

At Brown, our new program in Public Humanities got lucky. The University was trying to figure out what to do with a beautiful, eighteenth century historic house that had been donated. AMST offered to fill it with students studying Public Humanities. In return, we got stewardship of the house as well as a small endowment to take care of it and we were off! In 2017, we celebrated our 10th anniversary of admitting M.A. students into a two-year program in Public Humanities by holding an alumni weekend. It was a raucous, argumentative, and lively group, debating, as our student, alumni, and faculty always do: "what is Public Humanities?" As the second Director of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, I've been working out the answer for myself and was struck by the differences between Brown, and our Public Humanities program, and New Urban Arts.

Physically, the two spaces starkly, almost comically, represent the differences between how wealth is apportioned in the United States with New Urban Arts in a storefront and the Center for Public Humanities in an opulent historic house. The Center's House has demonstrated, for over one hundred years, continuing through its time as a University facility, the owners' wealth and status. Within the University, I explain that Public Humanities doesn't have enough money to move forward with exciting programs or enough funds to support our students, but it's hard to make a case for our poverty when you look at either of these places. Most of us would think that the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University, housed at the historic Nightingale-Brown House, seemingly has all the cultural capital, and thus the answers to important questions, but I want to say that it is New Urban Arts who understands how to make the arts and humanities important in people's lives. The University needs to learn from public art projects like New Urban Arts.

It isn't enough for the University to serve our students even when we send students out in the world to do important work. How will they learn how to do that work, how will they know how to make the humanities matter, if faculty don't have an understanding of what to teach them? Or, to think in New Urban Arts terms: how will the students and their mentors together discover how to make the humanities matter if we don't face that question? In facing the question, we have to think about what has made New Urban Arts, and social practice art,

successful. Social practice artists learn from the community; they focus on process; they collaborate; they put social justice at the center of their work; and they intentionally think about inequality, race, gender, and wealth. It's difficult to think of many University projects—research or student—that do all these things.

I am not calling for student or faculty engagement where the University is at the center of the work and sends, formerly disengaged but suddenly engaged, scholars out to help the community. Public Humanities work needs to be collaborative, process driven, and politically based. Research and learning must grow from projects developed off campus, as well as on. Neither do I think this is the only form of scholarship or teaching that should happen at the University. But a public humanities, built on the lessons learned from social practice art, could reinvigorate humanities work.

Public Humanities done in this way, is far rarer than it should be. I worry that one reason is because humanities scholars are afraid of the political power of an engaged history or an applied sociology or even don't understand that they have something to offer in collaboration with communities. Much of social practice art is very critical of the current political climate and a critical approach has always been the point of university scholarship. I think a more engaged humanities, a more critical humanities, a social practice humanities—would be very important to changing how the humanities is viewed and maybe to changing the world. So, the question "Why do the humanities matter?" is not one that scholars should answer. This is where public humanities begins, in a conversation, a set of questions that we need to ask the people outside the university so we can move forward together.

By now, you know that I think part of the answer can be found in a storefront, on Westminster Street, in Providence, RI.

Notes

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- 4 "'Personal Legacy: The Healing of A Nation' Exhibit, NMAH," Smithsonian Learning Lab, accessed 29 December 2017, <https://learninglab.si.edu/resources/view/186865>.
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- 8 Nato Thompson, ed., *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art From 1991–2011* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 21; see also Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2014); Nato Thompson, *Culture as Weapon: The Art of Influence in Everyday Life* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2017).
- 9 Wendy Ewald, *Wendy Ewald: American Alphabets* (Zurich: Scalo Verlag Ac, 2005); see also Wendy Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969–1999* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000).
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- 13 For examples, see Jim McGrath et al., “OUR MARATHON, The Boston Bombing Digital Archive, 2013–2015,” accessed 9 January 2018, www.northeastern.edu/marathon; Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media and American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning, “September 11 Digital Archive,” accessed 9 January 2018, <http://911digitalarchive.org/>.
- 14 “Imagining America,” accessed 9 January 2018, <http://imaginingamerica.org/>; “Welcome North Eastern Public Humanities Consortium,” accessed 9 January 2018, <http://neph.org/>; “ACLS American Council of Learned Societies: Public Fellows Program,” accessed 9 January 2018, <http://www.acls.org/programs/publicfellowscomp/>.