

Paula Serafini, Jessica Holtaway and Alberto Cossu, *artWORK: Art, Labour, and Activism*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. ISBN: 9781786601889 (cloth); ISBN: 9781786601902 (ebook)

We live in populist, perilous, and authoritarian times; a paradigm when urban processes are stretched instantaneously and endlessly across networks and scale. Theorists are scrambling to catch up to the realities of the era, as the ghost of neoliberalism continues to reshape landscapes and politics. Yet, grassroots movements and insurgent forces are presenting alternative pathways. As always, artists are at the front of the queue both in representing contemporary socio-political life, but also, as instigators, stimulators, and political actors themselves. It is this latter, crucial role of the artist that is less understood, and where *artWORK: Art, Labour, and Activism*, a new volume edited by Paula Serafini, Jessica Holtaway and Alberto Cossu, enters the conversation.

The book and its 11 chapters joins a robust collection of new works on the nexus of art, urban landscapes, and activism in the (post?) neoliberal era (one in which neoliberalism is dead, yet dominant—as Neil Smith mused in 2008). This volume, through the narratives of a mix of academic researchers and practitioners (cultural producers, activists) focuses around the central question of *labour* and the relations between cultural producers/production, the temporality/fixity of institutions, and the new global geography of activist networks (including digital relations). The elevation of labour to focal point of the discussion is a crucial contribution; creative production has long been under-explored and questions of what these production networks look like across various contexts have often gone un-addressed.

Contextually, the volume fits well amidst geography's creative (re)turn (De Leeuw and Hawkins 2017), and also the convergence across several fields where *the political*—and political socio-spatial relations—has once again become central to discussions (as Dikeç and Swyngedouw 2017 argue). Serving as a bridge between the parallel and related—yet often disciplinarily

distinct—literatures on art geographies, politics and political economy, and comparative urbanism, Serafini et al.’s volume represents an important effort to bring these areas together.

While other recent works (e.g. Luger and Ren 2017; Zebracki and Palmer 2017) likewise approach the flows and networks of art’s relationship to the urban landscape (or “artscape”), this collection zeros in on the production, embodiment, and practices of processes that are both the art’s subject and involved in the art’s impact and meaning (p.2). This less conceptual, more descriptive focus on the political production of art, rather than just a focus on the meaning/interpretation of the art itself is welcome. The volume is also pointedly political, which is required in these insurgent (and populist) times.

The book addresses two main questions: [i] “how can the organisational structures required for collective action generate new ways of art-making and resist co-option into capitalist frameworks?” and [ii] “in what ways to practices at the intersection of art and activism reproduce or challenge ideas around the instrumentalisation of art and ‘art for arts’ sake’?” (p.2). By re-engaging with older debates about the nature (and limits) of art this volume seeks to deconstruct and even destroy fixed assumptions about any single map of art’s capabilities or relational texture, suggesting an approach based on Grant Kester’s (2011:226) framing of art as “dialogical”, or, incalculable. This admission comes as a breath of fresh air as art theorists struggle with how, exactly, to define and look for art’s “expanding field” (Hawkins 2013) or an even *further* expanded field (Cartiere 2008).

But by far the volume’s most novel contribution is the way it approaches both the creative labour of the political, and art’s ties to labour struggles themselves. As such, explorations move beyond art for art’s sake and into specific political struggles, suggesting that artists have a role in contemporary activism that goes far beyond aesthetics or symbols, spectacle or synecdoche. Too often artists are portrayed as stirring activism, representing activism, or being used within larger activist struggles. Rarely are they explored as activists themselves, or is

the fruit of their labour, and the forgotten work in the production processes of art, brought front and centre.

This effort by the editors to “shed some light on the multiplicity of linkages between artist and political mobilisation processes” (p.11) is one way the volume links art and politics. The other is by surveying the vast and confusing digital networks that inform current politics and, increasingly, the artscape. This exploration of “the role of art and new media in facilitating the organisation, production, and communication of political action” (p.11) is charged with importance in a global climate where populism and both left- and right-wing politics form instantly in digital interstitial spaces. Art is often central to, and representative of, these movements, which (as we have seen in dramatic political shifts) have clear implications—even dangerous ones—for daily life.

It is fitting, then, that the volume’s structural journey begins in Ulster, Northern Ireland, a site where art and politics make and re-make urban relations in complex ways (Sheelagh Colclough and Sarah Feinstein’s chapter), and art serves as a community controversy and community-builder—themes that carry through several other chapters. Further chapters journey to Milan (Cossu and Maria Francesca Murru) and Argentina (Konstantina Bousmpoura and Julia Martinez Heimann), Egypt (Rounwah Bseiso) and Barcelona (Roger Sansi), though many chapters are UK-centric.

The lack of Sub-Saharan African cases, or East, Southeast or South Asian voices, somewhat contradicts the editors’ claim to decolonise the conversation, and also silences a range of fascinating case studies in less-explored terrains. While the cases are understandably the result of a UK/Europe-based collaboration and funding assemblage, it is nonetheless somewhat of a mis-representation to claim a “wide” conversation amidst subaltern absences. Recent socio-political movements have also represented rich examples of art-politics-society combinations, from Hong Kong’s “Umbrella Revolution” and the work of artists in South Korea to help

mobilize the mass protests leading to the president’s impeachment and resignation, to the role that colour has played as community builder in Kenya and Johannesburg (see Arboleda and Alibhai 2017). Also, notably missing are discussions/cases from that vast and misunderstood “illiberal” part of the world—Russia, for example—where the work of art has never been more important, or more dangerous.

These gaps are ameliorated somewhat, though, by the diversity and range of the authors that span the arts practitioner, activist, policy, and theoretical community(s). Contributions that join theory and practice in this way are not plentiful enough. Also refreshingly diverse are the styles of the chapters themselves and the mix of traditional and less-traditional formats and methodologies, such as those focusing on digital ethnography and media analyses (e.g. Emanuele Braga’s chapter) or the poetic and lyrical construction of Jane Trowell’s playful engagement of art-activists in neoliberal London (in Chapter 9). I argue that another key contribution of this volume is the ability to draw upon the fresh, ongoing, and exciting PhD empirical research that is only possible with a collection including many doctoral students. As such, there is both a feeling of the book being a “work in progress”, but also a richly-informed and exciting collection of fieldnotes from research projects that feel like they are being undertaken as the reader traverses the book.

The editors conclude with a four-pronged taxonomy of the geography of art, labour, and activism, or, “four coordinates for the study of art, activism, and labour” (p.246). These coordinates are the categories “subjects,” “process”, “main arena”, and “artistic artefact/medium”, grouped with different sets/types of practices, performances, institutions, and artworks. While a useful way to conclude, I could not help but thinking that this would have perhaps been better introduced in the volume’s preface or introductory chapter, to help frame the structure and groupings of chapters, cases, authors, and subjects. Also, presenting the taxonomy seemed to differ from the earlier admission that, as Kester (2011) proposed, art is “incalculable”,

and “dialogical”; the taxonomy represents a somewhat *collapsed* field of the artscape rather than a *further expanded* one and leaves the reader with more unanswered questions than answered ones. Still, such a taxonomy in itself is a novel tool and does helpfully serve to epistemologically link together the varied discussions and debates contained in the preceding chapters.

In summary, *artWORK: Art, Labour, and Activism* is an ambitious and successful project and an enriching read for the way it highlights the generative capability of art/artists as cultural producers that are part and parcel with, rather than separate from, broader socio-spatial activist struggles. The enthusiasm and spark of the contributors, many of whom are freshly inspired/informed by empirical research, comes off the pages and imbues the reader with a sense of possibility and optimism in otherwise fairly dark and perilous times. The attack on the arts, the attack on labour rights, and the frightening attacks on human and civil rights occurring in many corners of the world within the new authoritarianism and right-wing populism generates many dire discussions. This volume, however, presents a hopeful diagram of the potentiality of solidarity between cultural workers and wider global justice movements. In a paradigm where the sputtering (yet dominant) specter of neoliberal hegemony has divided groups into an incoherent amalgam of identity politics and discordant voices incapable of making meaningful change, representations and examples of solidarity, and the power of art to transform, point to brighter alternatives.

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March 2018