

essay

# The Minute Hand of Social Engagement

By Caroline Woolard

Imagine a clock for social change. What pace does the big hand move at? What pace does the small hand move at? Who winds the clock? In this essay I will outline the central contradictions at work in socially engaged art today, and then I will make a proposal for a basic process that traditional art institutions could follow to support artists and communities involved in social change.



But first, the contradictions. When I think about socially engaged art, I think about multiple contradictions. Here are a few:

Most people would agree that, if a practice is socialized, its originator is less important than the socialization of the practice itself. Antonio Gramsci reminds us that, “creating a new culture does not only mean one’s own individual ‘original’ discoveries. It also, and most particularly, means the diffusion in a critical form of truths already discovered, their “socialization” as it were, and even making them the basis of vital action.” Yet institutions continue to focus on discrete projects with individual authors rather than the socialization of practices like listening, facilitation, and collaboration through training and education. This is why I convene artists to share methods of collaboration at <http://studycollaboration.com>.

The funding for socially engaged art often comes from philanthropists and institutions with investments in private prison companies, payday lenders, and speculative real estate holdings but few philanthropists and institutions will consider divestment measures as a means to achieve their missions of social change. This is why I am part of <http://nycreic.com> and why I respect the Columbia University divestment win so much: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmknKhXN3d0>.

The universities that hire faculty and train students through minors and majors in socially engaged art must be critical of the ways in which student debt is generating funds for the university to expand and displace the very neighbors with whom the students and faculty are in dialog. Unlike other approaches to art-making, which have not been named as genres and have not taken root in colleges and universities, socially engaged art has proliferated within degree-granting programs. Do these potentially studio-less programs appeal to university finance committees because they can bring in a lot of money without taking up a lot of space, all while doing unpaid PR work for the university as it expands into communities it will displace? What does it mean that a socially engaged artist feels that they must take on six-figures of student debt in order to identify with this approach to art-making? This is why I am part of <http://bfamfaphd.com>

What would happen if every young person saw socially engaged artists in their home communities working for social change? What would happen if the interest in social change from art students, art faculty, art schools, and philanthropists in the United States turned toward place-based organizing by supporting long-term initiatives like community land trusts? This is why I am so excited by the Dudley Street Community Land Trust in Boston, which received a Department of Education grant in 2010 for precisely this sort of local arts education.

Caroline Woolard, Eye Amulet, Detail. Courtesy of the artist.

**What can philanthropists and schools do to navigate the contradictions that surround socially engaged art?** It is possible to change the minute hand of social engagement by placing community-led groups first. When I imagine a clock for social change, I see time in years and decades, not in hours and minutes; I see huge groups of people winding a clock with their labors, desires, and imaginations. Because social change happens over time, and requires many people, socially engaged artists need to be supported for years in order to “improve conditions in a particular community or in the world at large,” as the Helicon / Rauschenberg Report describes.

Who sets the pace of the clock for social change? It cannot be a single artist, or a single institution. Don Rhine from the collective UltraRed wrote on the listserv *empyre* in 2016 that, “once we understand ‘social practices’ within a framework of

political struggle, it becomes immediately clear that one's participation is not based on authorship of a social practice. Rather, a practice, if it is 'social,' has no individual author." To honor the slow and heterogeneous work that is necessary for any transformation, monetary support systems for socially engaged art must be community-led.

I propose the following **six steps** as a working model for community-led funding for socially engaged art where art institutions become match-makers for community-groups and artists. This proposal is based upon the match-making that The Center for Urban Pedagogy has refined over years, and reveals current assumptions in the socially engaged art about authorship. This proposal should be adapted in dialog with community-based groups who make art projects.

**To honor the many people involved in any social transformation, art institutions will: form a study group, solicit proposals from community-led groups, and then ask artists to make proposals in relationship to the desires of those groups.**

Here's how I imagine it would work:

**FORM A STUDY GROUP.** Before an art institution (an art foundation, residency, presenting organization, art school) begins to support a socially engaged project, the staff and members of that institution will go through a process of learning from one another and exploring their conceptions of "community" and "artist" in terms of race and class. For example, is "community" a code word for a low-income neighborhood that has been historically marginalized by red-lining? Do you understand "artists" as outsiders to "community" or not, and why? Will your organization support projects made by and for a "community" of professional artists or not, and why? Is an "artist" someone who has been to an accredited art school, or will you make every effort to create a process that speaks to artists who are self-taught? To facilitate these conversations, the group might hire The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, Generative Somatics, or any number of facilitators that the Laundromat Project brings in for a year of cultural organizing workshops in their Fellowship program. Once the staff of the institution feels that they have listened deeply to one another, and are able to embrace hard conversations about "community" and "artists" that will continue to come up, the process of supporting a new project can begin.

**SOLICIT PROPOSALS FROM COMMUNITY-BASED GROUPS.\*** The art institution will create a request for proposals from community-led groups who want to work with artists. The application will be very short (100-300 words) and ask the group to describe the work they do and also the kinds of projects they would like to create with artists (who are inside or outside of their group). The request for proposals will be up for at least six months, and will be placed in print publications in local community centers and public libraries in multiple languages. The request for proposals will be sent to specific worker cooperatives, community centers, neighborhood coalitions, nonprofits, and social centers in the area who might want to work with artists on a project that they define. In-person question and answer days and office hours will be provided so that the groups can learn more about the application process in person, and talk through what kinds of projects artists might make with them, according to their interests.

**SELECT COMMUNITY-BASED GROUPS.** The foundation, residency, presenting organization, or art school will work with a panel of non-artists in groups that have already worked with artists on socially engaged projects, as well as artists from groups who have worked on socially engaged projects. The panel will select the number of community-based groups that they are able to work with, based upon the available funds and capacity to support the process. If time and funding allows, the art institution will ask a selection of the top groups to go through a second round of proposals, where the groups answer more questions in depth, and the art institution will pay them for their time (as is common in the field of architecture).

**SOLICIT PROPOSALS FROM ARTISTS.** Once the groups have been selected, the art institution will put out a call for artists who wish to work with those community-based groups. If the artists are already working with the community-based group, they can apply at this time. The same process occurs from step (2) above: the application will be very short (100-300 words) and will ask the artist why they want to work with the selected groups, and what their skills are in relationship to a particular group's desires. The request for proposals will be up for six months, and will be placed in print publications in local community centers and public libraries in multiple languages. The request for proposals will specifically ask for proposals from artists who have not been trained in accredited art schools. In person question and answer days and office hours will be provided so that the artists can learn more about the application process in person.

**SELECT ARTISTS.** The art institution will repeat step (3) but for artists, working with the community-led groups as well as a panel of artists and non-artists from groups who have worked on socially engaged projects. The panel will select the number of artists that they are able to work with, based upon the available funds and capacity to support the process. The artists could be required to provide references from community-based organizations and participants involved in their past projects, rather than references from people from the arts who might have encountered the artists' past work but have not been involved in the process of co-creation over years. If time and funding allows, the art institution will ask a selection of the top artists to go through a second round, where the artists will answer more questions in depth, and the art institution will pay them for their time (as is common in the field of architecture).

**CONTINUE ONGOING EDUCATION.** Once the artists and community-based group are selected to work together, the community-led group and the artist can request additional funds for education around listening, facilitation, collaboration, and notions of “community” in terms of race and class. To anticipate what issues will come up, the art institution will work with the Center for Urban Pedagogy, the Center for Family Life, and Groundswell to think through the ways in which community organizing and art education can be central to the process of creating any new project over years.

\*If the institution thinks that community-based groups need guidance to understand the wide range of projects that artists might be able to create, the institution should create an online directory of socially engaged projects made by artists who wish to work in communities that they are not already involved with. The online directory will serve as the digital “flat files” or central hub for community-based groups to determine which socially engaged artists they want to work with. The directory could be curated by artists, art institutions, and community-based groups.

#### About the Author

Caroline Woolard is an artist who co-creates discrete artworks that circulate within living systems for the solidarity economy. She is the co-founder of barter networks OurGoods.org and TradeSchool.coop and cultural equity platforms BFAMFAPhD.com and StudyCollaboration.com. Woolard is an Assistant Professor of Sculpture at the University of Hartford and her projects are the subject of three documentaries by Art21. You can follow her work on Twitter and Instagram [@carolinewoolard](#) or at [carolinewoolard.com](#).

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To contact the project, please email:

[info@artmakingchange.org](mailto:info@artmakingchange.org)