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CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: SYMBOLIC AND SOCIAL PRACTICE OF MICHAEL  
KURZWELLY'S ŚLUBFURT AND NOWA AMERIKA

Olga Kostyrko

99 Pages

My thesis is concerned with the analysis of two long-term community-based socially engaged art projects of German artist Michal Kurzwelly: “Ślubfurt” (1999-2018) and “Nowa Amerika” (2010-2018). The research methodology for the analysis is drawn from the fields of art theory and criticism, and sociology. More specifically, in order to evaluate the social impact of long-term social art practices on the local community I borrow the criteria from the sociological discourse of bottom-up community development, while simultaneously, combining it with the insights from art criticism to discuss aesthetic dimensions of the work. I am arguing that Michael Kurzwelly’s projects are good examples of a successful long-term socially engaged project as they reconciles the antagonism between ethics and aesthetics, keeping both artistic and social critic in tension. I contend that the powerful imaginative component in combination with dedicated community work has led to the tangible social transformation of the local community, enabling its sustainable development through infrastructures of grassroots civil society and engagement in critical self-reflective dialogue. These social changes became possible due to the emancipatory potential of the mediated collective aesthetic experience that enabled the release of social imagination: the capacity to imagine better worlds, manifested in real action.

KEYWORDS: social practice; participation; civil society; community development

CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: SYMBOLIC AND SOCIAL PRACTICE OF MICHAEL  
KURZWELLY'S SŁUBFURT AND NOWA AMERIKA

OLGA KOSTYRKO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

School of Art

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2018

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CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: SYMBOLIC AND SOCIAL PRACTICE OF MICHAEL  
KURZWELLY'S SŁUBFURT AND NOWA AMERIKA

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O.K.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*“Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deadline: to dismantle in order to build a social organism as a work of art.” Joseph Beuys (Beuys 1974, 48)*

The focus of this study is the analysis of two ongoing long-term socially engaged art projects of German artist Michal Kurzwey: “Słubfurt” (1999-2018) and “Nowa Amerika” (2010-2018). Kurzwey’s projects are site-specific, located on the German-Polish border in between the German town of Frankfurt (Oder) and the Polish town of Słubice. His projects fall into the category of participatory community-based strategic social practices that require long-term investment into the community. The artist has been living and working within the community for nineteen years, blurring the boundaries between life and art practice. In 1999, Kurzwey founded the first German-Polish city on the river Oder, which consists of two the districts: “Słub” on the Polish side and “Furt” on the German side. Słubfurt is an on-going participatory urban project in the form of an imaginary city that was designed to create a sense of belonging, consolidating the tension between the Polish and German sister border towns.

The project addresses various conceptual layers such as the issues of the identity crisis on the German-Polish border, as well as the construction of nation-states, borders, history, and collective memory. Over the course of time, the project has expanded its geographical and conceptual boundaries. Kurzwey's work functions on two levels: the local level of the imaginary capital-city of Słubfurt, and the level of the region - the country of immigrants, Nowa Amerika. The latter was created with an ambitious attempt to foster a grassroots civil society-network across the German-Polish border, engaging the region into the broader self-critical

dialogue. As the two worlds of "Słubfurt" and "Nowa Amerika" are tightly merged with each other, I will further discuss both projects and their components simultaneously. I consider Kurzwelly's practice an intriguing example for analyzing it through the convergence of art critical and sociological discourses as it can be simultaneously considered bottom-up community development, as well as relevant contemporary art practice, taking into consideration the symbolic, imaginative, and pedagogical dimensions of the project. Therefore, the central lines of inquiry of this research are to define the criteria for the analysis of socially engaged projects, and Kurzwelly's works specifically, comparing the approaches to long-term social practices from the perspectives of both socially engaged art criticism and sociology, looking for commonalities, as well as for the contradictions between the two. Namely, I am interested in defining where is the fine line between what can be considered contemporary social practice art and community work. In addition, I want to assert that bringing the theories from the field of bottom-up community development can be a useful framework for the assessment of long-term socially engaged art practices. Especially the tangible social impact that they produce on the well-being of local communities; their potency for social and political transformations.

In Chapter Two *Social Practice and Community Development*, I discuss the shift towards participatory socially engaged practices that occurred in the 1990s in the contemporary art that occurred simultaneously with the growth of bottom-up participatory community development strategies in sociology as a response to neoliberal globalization and its negative effects on social infrastructures. In particular, I focus on the "strategic turn" in socially engaged art and the absence of the common critical framework for the assessment of long-term participatory projects. To clarify, the "strategic turn" is the shift towards long-term practices that are inspired by activism and community development, emphasizing ideas of empowerment, criticality, and

sustainability of communities. Such long-term socially engaged art projects are deeply rooted in community relations and are motivated by a commitment to the idea over time in order to effect political or social change in an instrumental way. However, the instrumentalization of artistic practices and their similarity to community work has launched heated debates about the dynamic between aesthetics and ethics in the emerging field of socially engaged art criticism. In fact, we can observe two tendencies in contemporary criticism of socially engaged art as artistic and social discourses. For the first set of critics, curators, and artists a good project appeases the desire to ameliorate society, favoring humanist ethics and disregarding more conventional art historical aesthetic criteria (Bishop 2006; Bishop 2012). For the latter schema, art's purpose is understood in terms of throwing established systems of value into question, including morality; thus, devising new languages with which to represent and question social contradiction.

Therefore, roughly speaking, one group of scholars (Grant Kester, Maria Lind, Lucy R. Lippard, Erik Hagoort) emphasizes the ethical criteria, focusing on discussing the modes of collaboration and participation between the artist and the audience. While, the other side of the art critical discourse (Claire Bishop, Gregory Shollete) advocates for examining the symbolic and aesthetic value of artistic gestures, criticizing the instrumentalization of art practice. In this chapter I will address more thoroughly the debates between art critics Claire Bishop and Grant Kester, which are illustrative of the two tendencies in the criticism of socially engaged art. Bishop contends that attention to ethical consensual dialogue and authorial renunciation became a new repressive form in art criticism – the one that dismisses supposedly “unethical” artistic strategies of disruption, intervention, and over-identification. Therefore, these practices are perceived as “unethical” and authorship is equated with authority and perceived as totalizing (Bishop 2012, 25). In Bishop's opinion, the problem lies in privileging authorial intentionality (or lack of) over a discussion of

the work's conceptual significance as a social and aesthetic form. Grant Kester, in his turn, responds to Bishop's critique, pointing out the limitations of current art critical discourse with its dominant post-structuralist tradition that promotes simplistic opposition between a naive and utopian social art practice and a theoretically rigorous, politically sophisticated avant-garde artistic practice (Kester 2011). Alternatively, Kester advocates for works that challenge a post-structuralist discursive system by problematizing the authorial status of the artist and favoring durational interaction over rupture. He criticizes the distanced artist's position as subversive intellectual provided by critical theory for being patronizing. In my viewpoint, both sides of critical discourse provide valid arguments that can help to analyze contemporary socially engaged art projects. I agree with Claire Bishop that not all collaborative projects are equally important radical gestures, as some projects can be ineffective in comparison to community development or activism, as well as irrelevant and banal from an art critical point of view. What can be perceived as radical in the institutional world of contemporary art can be commonplace and ineffective in terms of activism and grassroots community development. I also concur with Bishop when she writes that the focus of critical analysis should not be shifted exclusively towards the ethics of artist's intentionality and politics of collaboration, but should consider the figure of the artist. Simultaneously, I agree with Kester that Bishop's opposition between naive activist inspired community work and conceptual complexity is too rigid and simplistic. It seems to me that a more productive way to approach participatory socially engaged art is to acknowledge the significance of the certain degree of artistic autonomy that allowed establishing conceptual frames and boundaries of the project, while simultaneously paying attention to the collective aesthetic experience. Therefore, I will try to reconcile the tensions between the two sides of art criticism, drawing upon Pablo Helguera's difference between symbolic and social

action (Helguera 2011; Kester 2013). In his book *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A materials and techniques handbook*, Helguera argues that symbolic practice acts through the representation of ideas and issues and, thus, addresses social or political issues on an allegorical, metaphorical, or symbolical level (Helguera 2011). By contrast, social action aims to control a situation in an instrumental and strategic way in order to achieve a specific goal. For Helguera, it is important to stress that the relationship between symbolic and social practices are not hierarchical, nor are they mutually exclusive. More so, I agree with his claim that the most intriguing and successful socially engaged projects, in fact, are a combination of social practice and symbolic practice simultaneously, and keep the ambiguity of artistic and social critique in tension. Such socially engaged art projects consist of relevant, symbolic artistic gesture that can be clearly articulated in art critical discourse, as well as of meaningful social action with the potency of producing a tangible social impact. Hence, instead of only focusing on the ethics of collaboration, I will pay attention to the conceptual significance, artistic mastery, and aesthetic dimension of Kurzweil's by rearticulating his role as artist through the concepts of "mediation" and "facilitation of ritual interactions" (Harris 2011; Lowe 2001, 457-471). Nicolas Papastergiadis proposes to reconceptualize collaborative practices through the idea of "mediation" of collective experience (Harris 2011). In his view, the function of the artist-as-mediator is to create a process in which both outsider and insider develop mutual understanding and participate in collaborative knowledge making as "epistemic partners" (Harris 2011). Similarly, Seana Lowe helps to frame the role of the artist as a facilitator of ritual interaction: "upon examining the nature of community art, it appears that the artist assumes a role comparable to that of a ritual elder facilitating the ritual interaction" (Lowe 2001, 457-471, 468). Therefore, artists should not be neutral entities or invisible catalysts of experiences, but provide a

certain level of expertise and knowledge, authorizing participants to envision, dream, and explore their creative potential and imagination. This can be achieved through what Jacques Ranciere calls the “mediating third term”: an object, image, story, or film through which the artist can mediate collective experience, production of new social knowledge, and have a “purchase on the public imaginary” (Thompson 2012, 102). In the case of Kurzweily, it is an imaginary town Slubfurt and a country Nowa Amerika that exists only because people believe in it.

The work of contemporary artists today is very similar to the work of professional community developers and activists. Therefore, in order to locate the tangible social impact of the Kurzweily’s practice, I will borrow the criteria from the community development theories, such as community action, community empowerment, and sustainability (Isidiho and Sabran 2016, 266). In this regard, two interesting questions to ask are: where is the border between what is considered to be art or community development? How do we distinguish between the two? On this matter, Pablo Helguera suggests that social work and social practice operate in the same realms, but widely differ in their goals (Helguera 2011). He defines social work as a value-based profession based on a tradition of beliefs and systems that aims for a better humanity and social justice. Whereas, socially engaged art has a “double function that social work lacks” (Helguera 2011). According to Helguera, this double function (apart from the struggle for social justice) is an ability of socially engaged art to co-exist in several discourses simultaneously. This means that when artists make socially engaged art, they not just simply offering a service to a community, but also proposing action as a symbolic statement in the context of cultural history, thus entering into a larger debate (Helguera 2011). It is exactly for the lack of these qualities, Claire Bishop criticizes community arts. In her opinion, artistic experimentation and research are

values of art in themselves, as well as an element of critical negation and ability to sustain a contradiction that cannot be reconciled (Bishop 2012a). In this regard, Helguera argues that this argument against equating socially engaged art with social work is weak because it precludes the possibility that art can be deliberately instrumental (Helguera 2011). In fact, today many artists and art collectives use a broad range of bureaucratic and administrative skills that are typically accessible to the domain of larger institutions, such as marketing, fundraising, grant writing, city planning and educational programming. This “deliberate instrumentalization” gives them more freedom and resources for implementing ideas. In the case of Michael Kurzwelly, this plurality of self, a flexibility to perform different roles depending on the situation, is one of the reasons why Michael Kurzwelly’s project has managed to develop successfully over the last nineteen years. Kurzwelly, who identified himself as an artist, performed the role of community developer alongside the duties of project manager, presenting his projects as political education, German-Polish border cooperation, social work, cultural initiative, and socially engaged art. Which identity he emphasizes depends on the resource of potential funding. Thus, artists have the privilege to slip between various worlds, while problematizing, enhancing tension and provoking reflections and broader interdisciplinary discussions. For Helguera, it is exactly this space of ambiguity in between art and real life that is the most important feature of socially engaged art, as it allows reaching broader audiences and bringing new insights to particular social problems (Helguera 2011). Therefore, the figure of the artist, regardless of his or her attempts to eliminate the importance of authorship in art discourse, is what distinguishes social work or community development from social practice.

In Chapter Three *Construction of Reality: Shubfurt and Nowa Amerika* I will in detail describe the history of German-Polish border region and Kurzwelly's artistic practice. Michael

Kurzweily refers to his practice as process-based open-ended laboratory emphasizing the importance of experimentation that gives the freedom to test different modes of participation and collaboration. Kurzweily describes his artistic strategy of reinterpretation and redefining spaces using reality constructions. For this kind of artistic intervention, he uses the term "applied art", which he defines as art applied in a public context and space. He creates tools to intervene, interact, and transcend into another construction of reality in people's minds, by appropriating governmental techniques and mechanisms of history, identity and memory manipulations. Kurzweily undertook the attempt to construct a new Polish-German identity, reimagining historical boundaries, and prejudices beyond national borders. The worlds of Słubfurt and Nowa Amerika are meticulously elaborated; the city has its own mythology, visual identity, government, legislative system, cultural policies, and even its own language (a unique mix of Polish and German specific to this region). On the other hand, Kurzweily's practice has a multilayered structure of participation, as the artist, throughout almost two decades, implemented various micro-projects and initiatives experimenting with modes and strategies of community engagement inside an imaginative conceptual framework. Słubfurt offers extensive cultural and educational programs and is constantly providing the community with events, initiatives, festivals, and workshops that take place in multifunctional public spaces. Among these activities are included community newspaper "Profil" and community Radio Słubfurt", speaking club "Café Blala", community garden, and community choir for refugees, and solidarity economies, such as Time Bank with its own currency and Repair Shop. In particular, I am interested in Nowa Amerika University, an educational institution aimed to develop communication between inhabitants of the Nowa Amerika region by means of transpedagogy; a term coined by Pablo Helguera to describe a new experimental pedagogical methodology that combines education and



art making (Helguera 2011). The Nowa Amerika University is a research-based discursive art practice that aims at developing intersubjective communication and new forms of emancipatory narratives aimed at awakening curiosity, creativity, and reflection on the self and the surrounding world. The main strategic goals of the University as an educational institution are to develop Nowa Amerika by improving communication in the common German-Polish region, strengthening the common identity of the inhabitants, awakening creativity, deteriorating mutual stereotypes and prejudices, working out consolidating the new perception of a common history, and developing new forms of education, horizontal structures of civil society and common perspectives for the future. Using the example of the project "Land of Immigrants" I examine the emancipatory potential of the blend of community development approaches, critical pedagogy, and art making.

Finally, in Chapter Four *Social and Symbolic Practice of Michael Kurzwelly*, I am applying the criteria described before, arguing that Michael Kurzwelly's projects are a good example of a successful long-term community-based social practice project, they reconcile the antagonism between ethics and aesthetics in socially engaged art criticism, operating simultaneously both in symbolic and social realms. I will differ two layers: the symbolic framework that the artist has created and that should be analyzed through the lenses of the artist's autonomy and aesthetic dimension of the work, and multiplicity of experiences provided to the community through the "mediated third term". While discussing the aesthetic dimension of Kurzwelly's work, I will use Deleuze's understanding of aesthetics as "rupturing quality of art: its power to break our habitual ways of being and acting in the world; and on the other, for a concomitant second moment: the production of something new" (O'Sullivan 2010, 196). Thus, I will argue for an understanding of the aesthetics in terms of a process of imagining new worlds;

creating a new meaning that “break habitual ways of being” (O’Sullivan 2010, 196). O’Sullivan defines two approaches to the aesthetics in contemporary art: one of dissent (a turn from, or refusal from the typical), and the second one of the affirmation (O’Sullivan 2010, 189-207). Affirmative attitudes towards contemporary art are understood as the production of new combinations in and of the world, which suggest new ways and times of being and acting in the world (O’Sullivan 2010, 189-207). Practices of dissent, on the other hand, are the one of deconstruction, mobilizing pre-existing reading strategies and interpretive paradigms, capturing art within our already set up temporal frames and systems of reference (O’Sullivan 2010, 189-207). Therefore, an affirmative approach not only disrupts and deconstructs in a postmodern sense, but also proposes the solutions, and imagines alternative realities. In this respect, Kurzweily’s artistic strategy is one of affirmation, as he constructed a new fictional non-referential reality. Kurzweily’ himself describes this through Foucault’s concept of “heterotopias” (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 22-27), visions of better or of a different world, the starting point for the development of new realities against existing structures (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 22-27). Therefore, the artist asserts the existence of this new reality by visualizing it in the form of the experimental laboratory of role-playing in which he invites people to participate. In my opinion, his projects are unique, given the scale and multi-layering of the imaginary world of Słubfurt and Nowa Amerika. It meticulously elaborated, intertwined with fictional mythology and visual identity. Kurzweily constructed reality by appropriating governmental attributes (flag, map, borders, coat of arms, anthem, constitution, ID cards), institutions (University, Parliament, Congress), and techniques of the power manifestation through visual identity, social rituals, language, memory, and history. Therefore, the acceptance of the existence of Słubfurt and Nowa Amerika launches the process of counter-

mythologization, unplugging constructed and top-down notions of reality through everyday practices. According to O’Sullivan, this “fabulation” produces a gap between fixed habits and rituals of a society (O’Sullivan 2010, 189-207). Consequently, this gap can be filled with what Deleuze calls “creative emotion”, the release of inner creativity and imagination (O’Sullivan 2010, 189-207).

On the other hand, Michael Kurzwelly’s project is an example of a successful strategic long-term social practice that affects the community in a deep and meaningful way through actual (not symbolic or hypothetical) social action that reorients artist-audience dynamics towards collaborative participation. Kurzwelly’s project is an example of a successful bottom-up community development, as the artist has managed to transform the community into a sustainable grassroots civil society, producing the tangible social impacts on the wellbeing of the community such as reduced crime rates comparing to other border towns, social advocacy and community support to refugees, public space defended by joint forces of local citizens.

## CHAPTER II: SOCIAL PRACTICE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

### **Historical Overview and Methodologies of Socially Engaged Art**

Since the early 1990s the field of art has expanded to include activist-inspired methods and practices based on participation and collaboration as a response to the globalized commodification of artistic production, fall of social infrastructures and the aggressive neoliberal economic reality that affects the lives of contemporary people on every level. The shift towards participation and interaction with an audience is usually referred to as the “social turn” (Bishop 2012) or the “collaborative turn” (Maria and Kuan 2011, 15-31). Participatory artistic practices and curatorial strategies aimed at merging life and art are rooted in avant-garde movements of the twentieth century and further spread across the world at the beginning of the twenty-first. Nevertheless, in order to put socially engaged art practices in context, it will be useful to provide an overview of the contemporary political, economic and social realities in which they emerged. The tendency towards social issues in contemporary art overlapped with the beginning of the era of neoliberalism and the culmination of the process of decolonization. The geopolitical cataclysms of 1989, such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall, student protests in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, and the wave of democratic revolutions that swept across Eastern Europe from Czechoslovakia to Poland and Hungary to Romania were responses to the tearing down of the Iron Curtain that stretched across the Soviet-aligned nations of Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War. Thus, after the collapse of the last economies of the Eastern Communist bloc, the world was no longer divided into capitalist and communist zones; instead it entered the era of globalization. The term “globalization” usually used to refer to the neoliberal globalized economy. Neoliberalism, in turn, is a complex of economic and political beliefs and objectives

predicated on the faith that the free-market is the only means of distributing resources, illustrating Milton Friedman's notorious idea that freedom of choice equates with the freedom to consume (Friedman 2009). In fact, the logic behind neoliberalism is to expand free market ideology by economic colonization of the world's market. As a result, neoliberal globalization has led to state withdrawal from social responsibility, weakening of the power of the public sector and institutes of democracy, the world's resources coming under control of large multinational corporations, fracturing local communities by producing economic inequalities, increasing the gap between rich and poor, spreading individualistic values and turning people into passive consumers by means of commodification and homogenizing the culture. According to postcolonial theorist Sankaran Krishna, globalization is a negative process that, in its neoliberal form, is a "triumph of the economy over politics, with the latter invariably seen as something that interferes with or corrupts the functioning of the "natural" and rational logic of the economy" (Krishna 2009, 3).

Similarly, many scholars in postcolonial studies define the contemporary state of the world in terms of neo-colonialism, which can be defined as the practice of neoliberal globalization and cultural imperialism to influence developing countries in lieu of direct military control or indirect political control. At the same time, in the discourse of political philosophy, globalization is theorized as an era of post-ideology or post-politics by scholars such as Alain Badiou, Jacques Ranciere, Slavoj Žižek and cultural and economic hegemony (Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Antonio Hardt, and Michael Negri fits here) (Hardt and Negri 2001; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Badiou 2005; Zizek 1997, 28).

With regard to changes in the art world, neoliberal globalization has led to ubiquitous commodification of artistic production focused around a western oriented art market and an

international contemporary art community. As Boris Groys puts it, the “aura returns to contemporary art through the installation of objects, freezing in time and space that which is ordinarily in commercial circulation”(Smith, Enwezor, and Condee 2008, 76)In his book *Postcolonial Constellation*, Okwui Enwezor argues that contemporary art today is refracted, not just from the specific site of culture and history, but in a more critical sense, from the standpoint of a complex geopolitical configuration that defines all systems of production and relations of exchange as a consequence of globalization after imperialism (Enwezor 2003, 57-82). According to Susan Buck-Morss, today’s consumers of art are engaged in the formation of a global elite art community produced by international art institutions and biennales; a privileged group of art critics, dealers, and famous artists who have insider knowledge and are involved in the exclusive circle of art market, art production and institutions. However, Buck-Morss, the price of this privilege is the policing of imagination and self-expression: “Together artists and their public are unwitting collaborators in shutting down responsibilities for escape from neoliberalism’s self-proclaimed freedom, which is in fact is highly regulated” (Elkins, Valiavicharska, and Kim 2010, 95). Buck-Morss contends that today contemporary artists are more like businesspeople with managers and agents, than cultural resisters. In this respect, Tania Bruguera’s call “to put Duchamp’s urinal back in the restroom” does a great job of illustrating the desire of socially engaged artists to escape the white cube gallery space and focus their energy on local grassroots, bottom-up struggles to provide voice to the powerless, and to free art and culture from commodification and political impotence (Thompson 2012, 106). To quote the artist France Morin, concerning her long-term project “The Quiet in the Land”: “contemporary artists have the potential to stand alongside scientists, economists, and representatives of other disciplines to meaningfully examine critical discourses, ranging from globalization to biotechnology, that

affect the daily lives of individuals and communities”.<sup>1</sup> Terry Smith’s influential article “Currents of World making in Contemporary art” also helps to map this shift from the global to the local in contemporary art. He discusses the tendency towards new local practices apart from “three currents” in the very end of the article. Smith contends that artists have started to respond to the complexities of globalization in modest, collaborative ways in order to reshape the human capacity to make worlds on small, local scales. In his opinion, these efforts might allow one, for the first time in history, to experience “truly an art of the world from the world”(Smith 2009, 116). Nikos Papastergiadis called socially engaged art practices “the first truly global movement in art” that develops across the borders and parallel to the conventional institutionalized art world (Harris 2011, 285). However, the prominent socially engaged art theorist Nato Thompson argues that from a conceptual standpoint these practices can be approached not as an art movement, but rather as a complex of cultural practices that indicate a new social order based in “ways of living” that emphasize participation, activate communities, challenge power and advance public awareness of social issues (Thompson 2012). For Thompson this distinction is important considering the crisis of production of meaning under neoliberalism. He writes: “Without understanding that the manipulation of symbols has become a method of production for the dominant powers in the contemporary society, we cannot appreciate the forms of resistance to that power that come from numerous artists, activists, and engaged citizens” (Thompson 2012b, 30). Taking into consideration the experimental nature and high interdisciplinarity of approaches, Thompson proposes to shift the conversation away from art’s typical lens of analysis and aesthetics, and, instead, focus on methodologies. The disciplines of socially engaged art projects can range from urban planning and community work to theater and online-banking; the political

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.thequietintheland.org/laos/the\\_story.html](http://www.thequietintheland.org/laos/the_story.html)

and social issues the artists address can also vary significantly: sustainability, the environment, education, housing, labor, gender, race, colonialism, gentrification, immigration, incarceration, war, homelessness, gun warfare, and borders, to name few. However, Thompson also points out that it does not mean that the visual or symbolic aspect has no value in these works, but instead this new approach emphasizes the designated forms' produced impact. To put it differently, instead of analyzing visual aspects of representation, Thompson suggests focusing on how the work uses various forms to approach the social issues it addresses. This antagonism between aesthetics and politics challenges conventional criteria of assessment of artworks and has launched heated debates within the field, which I will address later in this chapter.

Therefore, due to its high ubiquity, interdisciplinary nature, lack of shared critical theoretical language, and comprehensive historical documentation, socially engaged art is still considered to be a work-in-progress concept within the contemporary art field. The lack of common critical language and criteria for analysis becomes obvious when researching the scholarly literature on socially engaged art. Over the last two decades various scholars from all over the world have started to focus their studies on this new emerging field of art (Claire Bishop, Tom Finkelpearl, Grant Kester, Miwon Kwon, Shannon Jackson, Maria Lind, Carol Becker, Brian Holmes, Pablo Helguera, and Gregory Shollete are among them). The authors use a variety of interdisciplinary critical frameworks to map affinities, provide reflection and interpretation, as well as to examine the historical backgrounds, the methodologies, the ways of engaging and participation, the issues addressed, the dynamics between political and esthetical dimensions, the level of political critical potency or social impact. Nevertheless, they all agree that socially engaged art operates according to the principles of public engagement, participation, collaboration, dialogue, collective action and collective authorship. Throughout the publications



by these authors we encounter a wide range of terms: “community art, “collaborative art”, “participatory art”, “dialogic art”, “new genre public art”, “tactical media”, “interventionist art”, “contextual art”, “social practice”.

Many scholars track the genealogy of contemporary social practice to the historical avant-garde, the practices of the Situationists, Dada, Futurists, Russian Constructivists, Fluxus, Tropicalia, and Happenings. Marc James Leger, for instance, drawing upon Peter Bürger’s classification of twentieth century avant-garde movements (Bürger 1984), argues that while the practices of the “historical” avant-garde intervened with the needs of political movements of their time, contemporary practices that Leger defined as “post-neo-avant-garde” have developed in the absence of mass organized social movements, moving away from the postmodernists concerns of representation, focusing instead on class politics and more radical practice (Léger 2013, 35).<sup>2</sup> Claire Bishop also points out that political commitment and the dematerialized, anti-market nature of these works make them arguably what we can call avant-garde today (Bishop 2012).

French art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term “relational aesthetics” in 1996 to identify a new set of practices from the exhibition “Traffic”. According to Bourriaud, this new relational art (exemplified by the work Pierre Huyghe, Maurizio Cattelan, Gabriel Orozco, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Vanessa Beecroft, and Liam Gillik), is characterized by the fact that it takes “as its starting point human relations and their social context, as opposed to autonomous and exclusive art” (Bourriaud and others 2002). Relational

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<sup>2</sup> According to Bürger, the “neo-avant-garde”, the art practices that emerged after the Second World War (Fluxus, Minimalism, Conceptualism, Performance, Institutional Critique), shifted the focus from class politics to the exploration of extra-disciplinary forms of knowledge: systems theory, sociology, structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, race theory etc.

aesthetics is seen as an aesthetic theory that judges artworks in terms of the inter-human relations that they show, produce, or give rise to. According to Bourriaud, relational art should not be considered in terms of spaces to be walked through, but instead, in terms of the duration of an experience. The performative aspect of the work (in the form of events, meetings, encounters, performances, and behaviors) and collaboration between people are claimed as alternative modes of exchange over unusable, commodified objects in a gallery space. However, many scholars have criticized “relational aesthetics” for its political limitations. Over time, many in the activist art milieu viewed this kind of performativity in the gallery space as politically toothless and simply digested by the globalized circuit of art system. Grant Kester argues that, even though, on a theoretical level the rhetoric of Bourriaud’s “Relational Aesthetics” is similar to contemporary participatory practices, the works of artists associated with relational aesthetics has failed to challenge the traditional institutional format (Kester 2004).

Nevertheless, the critical reaction to this work has launched further important discussion around participatory art. “New genre public art” is a term coined by American artist Suzanne Lacy in her book *Mapping the Terrain* (1994). Lacy contends that “new genre public art” (or just “new genre art”) is based on relations between people, and on social creativity, rather than on self-expression (Suzanne 1995, 76). This form of art praises collective production as opposed to individual expression and is socially engaged, interactive, participatory, community-based, and aimed at more inclusive public art institutions. According to Lacy, what exists in the space between the words “public” and “art” is the relationship between artist and the audience, a relationship between that may itself become the artwork. “New genre public” art came out almost at the same time as the idea of “connective aesthetics”, a term proposed by artist and art critic Suzy Gablik. According to Gablik, connective aesthetics locates creativity in a dialogical

structure, which is the result of collaboration between a number of individuals rather than an autonomous author (Gablik 1992, 2-7). These ideas echo Grant Kester's concept of "dialogical art", which are artistic experiments with empathic modes of communication (Kester 2004). In *Conversation Pieces* Kester argues that "dialogical art" shifted an understanding of art away from the visual and sensory (which are individual experiences) and towards "discursive exchange and negotiations" (Kester 2004). The art works Kester analyses use conversation as a medium, and exist outside of any international network of institutions, curators and collectors. "Dialogical art" intersects with cultural activism, based on collaboration with audiences and communities. He proposes to understand "dialogical art" as an "open space" within contemporary culture, where questions should be asked and the critical analysis articulated (Kester 2004). Art critic Claire Bishop, in her turn, refers to this tendency in contemporary art as "participatory art" because it connotes the involvement of other people and avoids the ambiguities of "social engagement" (Bishop 2012). In her opinion, the term "socially engaged art" evokes confusion as the word "engage" can refer to almost any activity from painting to interventionist actions in mass media. She focuses on the dimension of "participation" and its recent forms, in which people are the medium of an artist's work. Bishop argues that the call for an art of participation tends to be allied to one of the three following agendas. The first concerns the desire to create an active subject, empowered by the experience of physical and symbolic participation.<sup>3</sup> The newly emancipated subject of participation then will be able to determine its own social and political reality. The second argument concerns the issue of authorship, where the collaborative creativity is understood as a more egalitarian and non-hierarchical social model,

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<sup>3</sup> These arguments imply the dichotomy active/passive spectatorship inspired by Guy Debord's *Society of Spectacle*.

which however is seen to entail the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and unpredictability (Bishop 2006). The third agenda is related to the crisis in community and collective responsibility. A concern to restore the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning is one of the main impetuses behind participatory art and is rooted into the tradition of Marxist critical thought that indicates the alienating and isolating effects of capitalism (Bishop 2006). Comparatively, Swedish art critic and curator Maria Lind, in her studies, explores the dimension of collaboration. In 2007, she first marked the tendency towards an interdisciplinary approach in art practice as the “collaborative turn” (Billing, Lind, and Nilsson 2007). Lind argues that more recent modes of collaboration exist within the same tradition as the collaborative experiments from the historic avant-garde, but in more developed and revised versions, questioning the notion of “collectivity” and “authorship”. She also contends that, even though it is hard to categorize the variety of forms of collaboration and motivations behind them, the common denominator of these practices is their emphasis on the practice of generosity and sharing, as an alternative to contemporary individualistic capitalist culture and the traditional role of the author. However, Lind encompasses the concept of collaboration from economic, political, and cultural perspectives, warning that it does not mean that any form of collaboration is a “good” method, as it can be paradoxically coopted by neoliberal self-management ideology and, as a result, loses its critical potency. In particular, many scholars have voiced considerable unease over the similarities of some collaborative methodologies in art and the neoliberal corporative ideology and culture of exploitation of creative labor in light of post-Fordist precarious working conditions with its emphasis on communication, collaboration, networking, and outsourcing.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Post-Fordism is the idea that contemporary post-industrial production has moved away from mass production in huge factories, as pioneered by Henry Ford, towards specialized markets based on small flexible manufacturing units.

For instance, Claire Bishop harshly criticizes the report of Francois Matarasso for the British New Labour cultural survey that was aimed to answer the question: What can the arts do for society? In his quantitative study, Matarasso came up with fifty benefits of the positive impact of community art programs on the society. The benefits included reducing isolation between people, minimizing crime, developing community networks and sociability, helping offenders and victims address issues of crime, fostering aspiration, and contributing to people's employability (Matarasso 1997). Bishop criticized the report for its "ameliorative" function and serving the top-down neoliberal rhetoric of "social inclusion." "Participation," she writes, "became an important buzzword in the social inclusion discourse, but unlike its function in contemporary art (where it denotes self-realization and collective action), for New Labour it effectively referred to the elimination of disruptive individuals. To be included and participate in society means to conform to full employment, have a disposable income, and be self-sufficient" (Bishop 2012a, 13). She claims that used in this way 'art', 'culture,' and 'creativity' became blurred synonyms easily co-opted by the neoliberal economy. Therefore, Bishop's anxiety here is that contemporary socially engaged art practices in the neoliberal era can be easily instrumentalized by power structures. Similarly, Bishop contends that even though some participatory artists can stand against neoliberal capitalism, the value they input to their work is understood formally, without recognizing that so many other aspects of this art dovetail perfectly with neoliberalism's recent forms that praise networking, mobility, and freelance (Bishop 2006).

"Social practice" is the umbrella term that is used in the most recent discourse upon which the majority of scholars agree. Artist, educator and art critic Pablo Helguera argues that this new term, for the first time, excludes the direct reference to art making and both the modern

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role of the artist (as genius or visionary) and the postmodern vision of the artist (as a self-conscious intellectual critical-being) (Helguera 2011). Instead, the term ‘social practice’ democratizes the role of the artist into an individual, who works with society as a medium of its professional needs. He offers a definition of socially engaged practice as “social interaction that proclaims itself as art” (Helguera 2011). Art critic Shannon Jackson also advocates for the term “social practice,” arguing that it works for celebrating a degree of cross-disciplinarity in art-making, paralleling the kind of cross-media collaboration across image, sound, movement, space, and text that we find in performance, and also gestures toward the realm of the socio-political, recalling the activist and durational community-building ethic of socially engaged performance research (Jackson 2011, 14):

”Whereas for many the word “social” signifies an interest in explicit forms of political change, for other contemporary artists it refers more autonomously to the aesthetic exploration of time, collectivity, and embodiment as medium and material. Even when social practices address political issues, their stance and their forms differ explicitly in their themes and implicitly in their assumptions about the role of aesthetics in social inquiry. While some social art practices seek to innovate around the concept of collaboration, others seek to ironize it. While some social art practice seeks to forge social bonds, many others define their artistic radicality by the degree to which they disrupt the social.”

However, the removal of the word “art” and “aesthetics” from the most recent definition of “social practice” is symptomatic of the tendencies in the criticism of socially engaged art. As was briefly mentioned before, the status of aesthetic value and the social effects of socially engaged art still are very much in dispute. The social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism. I turn to that now.

## The Dynamics Between Ethics and Aesthetics

Claire Bishop was among the critics who launched the discussion about the dynamics between aesthetics and ethics in the emerging field of socially engaged art practices. In 2006, she first criticized the “ethical turn” in her famous *Artforum* article “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents” which was expanded into a chapter in her book *Artificial Hells* (Bishop 2012). Basically, Bishop indicates that when discussing participatory art, social and artistic judgments are not easily merged because they have different criteria. She defines these two tendencies in contemporary criticism of socially engaged art as artistic and social discourses. For the first set of critics, curators, and artists a good project appeases the desire to ameliorate society, favoring humanist ethics and compassionate identification with others. For the latter schema, art’s purpose is understood in terms of throwing established systems of value into question, including morality, thus, devising new languages with which to represent and question social contradictions. In other words, the social discourse accuses artists of amorality and inefficacy, arguing that it is not enough merely to reveal, reduplicate, or reflect upon the world but what matters is social change; whereas, the artistic discourse accuses the social for attaching itself to existing ethical categories, while disregarding artistic strategies that trouble or challenge the audience, as a way to convey certain social, political messages (such as radical examples of social practices from the historical avant-garde). Bishop’s concern here is that insisting upon ethical consensual dialogue and authorial renunciation became a new repressive form in art criticism – one in which artistic strategies of disruption, intervention, and over-identification are dismissed as “unethical”; and authorship is equated with authority and perceived as totalizing (Bishop 2012, 25). Therefore, in her opinion, authorial intentionality (or lack of) is privileged over a discussion of the work’s conceptual significance as a social and aesthetic form (Thompson

2012, 126). She argues that it has led to the situation in which all participatory projects are perceived to be of equal importance regardless of their actual symbolic and aesthetic value

(Bishop 2005, 178):

“ I would argue that such discomfort and frustration – along with absurdity, eccentricity, doubt, or sheer pleasure – can, on the contrary, be crucial elements of a work’s aesthetic impact and are essential to gaining new perspectives on our condition. The best examples of socially collaborative art give rise to these – and many other – effects, which must be read alongside more legible intentions, such as the recovery of a phantasmic social bond or the sacrifice of authorship in the name of a “true” and respectful collaboration”.

In order to illustrate an activist-oriented “ethical” tendency in socially engaged art criticism Bishop brings up Maria Lind’s analysis of the practice of the Turkish artists collective Oda Projeci, a group of three artists who, between 1995 and 2005, based their community activities around a three-room apartment in the Galata district in Istanbul. The apartment provided a creative lab for neighbors’ cooperation and idea sharing. In Lind’s article, the work of the collective was contrasted with Thomas Hirschhorn’s “Bataille Monument” (2002), the collaboration he did with the Turkish community in Kassel for Documenta 11. In this work, Hirschhorn pays people to work with him to realize an elaborate installation dedicated to a philosopher Georges Bataille, which includes an exhibition area, a library, and a bar. Lind considers Oda Projeci to be a better model of collaborative practice because it suppresses individual authorship and gives equal status to all collaborators. In contrast, she argues that Thomas Hirschhorn simply exploits communities for his “art”, as he already prepared the plan in which community members were “executors” but not “co-creators”. According to Lind, this has led to exoticizing the marginalized groups and contributing to “social pornography” (Bishop 2012a, 22). However, for Bishop, Lind’s criticism is blindly dominated by ethical judgments, dismissing aesthetics dimension of Hirschhorn’s work, his visual, conceptual and experimental



accomplishments. In addition to Hirschhorn's series of monuments to philosophers (*Spinoza Monument* (1992), *Deleuze Monument* (2000), *Bataille Monument* (2002), *Gramsci Monument* (2013). Bishop cites the following as good examples of participatory projects: Bill Collins project *shoot horses* (2004), Francis Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002), Santiago Serra's *450 Paid People* (1999). These works, in Bishop's opinion, embrace aesthetics and the social/political together, rather than shift the focus exclusively on the ethics of collaboration. As illustration, for Collins' project *they shoot horses*<sup>5</sup>, the artist recruited teenagers in Ramallah to dance nonstop all day to pop music against a pink backdrop, while he filmed them in a single take. The resulting seven-hour video captures the marathon performance that Collins displayed in two channels on opposing walls of museum and galleries. For Bishop, the sound track's banal lyrics acquired connotations in light of the kids' double endurance of the marathon and of the endless political crisis between Israel and Palestine (Bishop 2006). In her view, the work is a powerful metaphorical gesture that, by avoiding direct political narrative, demonstrates how "this space is filled by fantasies generated by the media's selective production and dissemination of images from middle East" (Bishop 2005, 178). Bishop argues that, by using pop music that is familiar to Palestinian as well as Western teens, Collins provides a poignant social commentary on globalization that is more nuanced than most activist-oriented political art (Bishop 2005, 178).

Grant Kester, in turn, responds to Bishop's critique in his book *One and the Many*, pointing out the limitations of current art critical discourse with its near canonical post-structuralist tradition that promotes simplistic opposition between a naive and utopian social art

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Collins's work inspired by Horace McCoy's novel *They Shoot Horses, Don't They* about dance marathons that emerged during the Great Depression

practice, associated with the evils of humanism or pastoral sentimentality, and a theoretically rigorous, politically sophisticated avant-garde artistic practice (Kester 2011). Kester accuses Bishop of being biased toward activist art by imposing rigid boundaries between the “aesthetic” project (which should be “provocative”, “uncomfortable”, and “multilayered”) and activist work (which is “predictable”, “benevolent”, and “ineffectual”) (Kester 2011, 31). He contends that, for Bishop, art can become legitimately political only indirectly, by exposing the limits of a contradiction of political discourse from the quasi-detached perspective of the artist (Kester 2011, 33):

“In addition, to naturalizing deconstructive interpretation as the only appropriate metric for aesthetic experience, this approach places the artist in a position of adjudicatory oversight, unveiling or revealing the contingency of systems of meaning that the viewer would otherwise submit to without thinking. Hence, the deep suspicion which both Bourriaud and Bishop hold for art practices which surrender some autonomy to collaborators and which involve the artist directly (implicitly compromised) in the machinations of political resistance.”

Alternatively, Kester advocates for works that challenge a post-structuralist discursive system by problematizing the authorial status of the artist and favoring durational interaction over rupture. He criticizes the distanced artist’s position as subversive intellectual provided by critical theory for being patronizing. Kester, similarly to Lind, is concerned with the ethics of representation, arguing that works by Santiago Sierra, Thomas Hirschhorn or Francis Alÿs, first of all, are targeted to affect the art world and the participants of biennales rather than effect any lasting meaningful “ontic dislocation” (Kester 2011, 63). As an illustration of his point we can recall the performance work of Francis Alÿs *When faith moves mountains* (2002) that took place in Peru. The artist provided shovels to 500 volunteers standing at the base of 1600-foot sand dune located near an impoverished town outside Lima. For the next several hours, the volunteers, all dressed in white, climbed the mound in a single, horizontal line, digging in unison until they reach the

other side, and had displaced the sand by nearly four inches. By the conclusion of the project, participants had succeeded in displacing the dune by a few centimeters from its original location. The majority of critics who analyzed the work focused on hermeneutic issues around the project's transmission in the art world, or on the symbolism of the performance as a *beau geste*, "mythic" image, and "powerful allegory, a metaphor for human will" (Kester 2011, 65). For Kester, however, the critical reaction to Alÿs project avoids any extended discussion of the actual mechanics of the collaborative interaction and negotiation necessary to bring the work into existence. Likewise, Kester argues that mainstream critics praise Santiago Sierra's works for "exposing" the operations of power, but avoiding any discussion of the more complex experiences and responses that his works might catalyze among actual performers and audience members.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Sierra has been heavily criticized for reproducing the logic of globalization and capitalism, in which rich countries "outsource" or "offshore" labor to low-paid workers in developing countries (Bishop 2012, 233). Bishop, however, perceives this work as an example of a symbolic artistic gesture that aims to provoke critical reaction and unease in society. She contends that Sierra's deliberately distant position from the performer, in fact, is an artistic strategy, as is his decision to outsource the production of the performance via recruitment agencies. He made details of the payment part of the work's description, turning the economic context into one of his primary materials (Bishop 2012a, 233).

In order to better frame this discussion, it is helpful to turn to Pablo Helguera's insight on the difference between social and symbolic action. Drawing the distinction from Jurgen Habermas's work, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Helguera argues that symbolic

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<sup>6</sup> For his delegated performances (*450 Paid People*, *250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People*) Santiago Sierra involves low-wage workers who were willing to undertake banal or humiliating tasks for the minimum wage.

practice acts through the representation of ideas and issues and, thus, addresses social or political issues on an allegorical, metaphorical, or symbolical level (Helguera 2011). In this respect, Helguera claims that in terms of the symbolic experience it offers to its participants, a painting on a political issue is not very different from performances of Sierra or Alÿs mentioned above. By contrast, social action aims to control a situation in an instrumental and strategic way in order to achieve a specific goal. Referring to Habermas, Helguera writes that communicative action is a “type of social action geared to communication and understanding between individuals that can have lasting effect on the spheres of politics and culture as a true emancipatory force” (Helguera 2011, 7). In other words, Bishop emphasizes participatory projects as symbolic practices, whereas Kester and Lind advocate for the socially engaged projects as social actions based on the real meaningful dialogue with the audiences that they try to engage. Further, Helguera’s ideas will be extremely helpful when defining criteria for the critical assessment of socially engaged art practices.

To my mind, both sides of critical discourse provide valid arguments that can help to analyze contemporary socially engaged art projects. First of all, I agree with Claire Bishop that it is dangerous to equate all collaborative projects as equally important radical gestures as some projects can be ineffective in comparison to community development or activism, as well as irrelevant and banal from the broader art historical perspective. I would also agree with Bishop that the focus of critical analysis should not be shifted exclusively towards the ethics of an artist’s intentionality and politics of collaboration. In my opinion, a more productive way to approach participatory socially engaged art is to acknowledge the significance of the certain degree of artistic autonomy that allowed establishing conceptual parameters and boundaries, while simultaneously discussing the heteronomy of the produced experience. Here I agree with

Grant Kester that Bishop's opposition between naive activist inspired community work and aesthetic and conceptual complexity is too rigid and simplistic. Therefore, I advocate for a balance between the "totalizing figure of the author" and collaboration for "its own sake". With this in mind, interesting socially engaged art project should consist of relevant, symbolic artistic gestures that can be clearly articulated in art critical discourse, as well as of meaningful communicative action with the potency of producing tangible social impact. Considering all the strong points and flaws of both sides of the criticism, new criteria for analysis should be developed.

### **Strategic Turn and Community Development**

The two tendencies in socially engaged art criticism illustrate the difference between short-term tactical and long-term strategic approaches. When socially engaged art practices entered mainstream contemporary art discourse, discussions began to unfold about the motivations of the artists embarking upon participatory projects. The question asked was whether artists were genuinely producing a socially engaged artwork to actually help people or using it as a career-climbing maneuver? Nato Thompson argues that the anxieties over the genuine intentions of the artists involved in social practice work came from the criticism of the global biennale circuit, where artists seemed to travel the world trading in the symbolic culture of activism (Thompson 2012, 102). His concern is that in the contemporary era of a neoliberal economy when a corporate business manipulates cultural symbols and using community building and activism rhetoric for its own advertisement, artists can be also accused of using the

fashionable tendency of social practice to simply advertise themselves.<sup>7</sup> As artist, anarchist, and activist Josh MacPhee pointed out: "I am tired of artists fetishizing activist culture and showing it to the world as though it were their invention" (Thompson 2012, 102) . At the same time, it became noticeable that more and more artists were shifting their practices from the short-term into long-term site-specific community projects. French theorist Michael de Certeau describes the production of aesthetics through concepts of "tactics" and "strategy" (De Certeau and Mayol 1998). In this sense, the tactical works are short-term acts of public sensationalism, cultural sabotage, and short-term interventions. Whereas strategic turn is the long-term investment of the creative energy into the slow transformation; the latter projects are explicitly local, durational, and community-based. If tactical media marked socially engaged art of 90s, the new millennium has revealed a form of, what Maria Lind called "strategic separatism".<sup>8</sup> Lind refers to the most intriguing experimental art projects that exist in a self-organized, site-specific parallel reality to the commercial world of art markets and mainstream public institutions (Maria and Kuan 2011, 15-31). In her opinion, the urge to create space for maneuvering or "collective autonomy" is both a sign of freedom and protest to the globalized art world, as these artists are working locally within communities and building bottom-up networks. These artistic practices, as well as curatorial strategies aim at examining and reflecting on local problems, and socio-political conditions are relevant alongside cross-cultural, regional, and global conceptions of human rights. Similarly, Pablo Helguera claims that the most ambitious projects directly engage with the

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, we can recall recent scandalous Pepsi advertisement, which appropriated the aesthetics of the civil protest.

<sup>8</sup> Tactical media is a term coined in 1996 to denote a form of media art activism that privileges temporary, hit-and-run interventions in the media sphere that engage and critique the dominant political and economic order. The term is associated with artists' collectives such as Critical Art Ensemble, Yes Man, Electronic Disturbance Theater, etc.

public realm – on the street and/or in open social spaces, and non-art communities (Helguera 2011). Such projects are deeply rooted in community relations and are motivated by a commitment to the idea over time in order to produce socio-political change. Characterized by site-specificity, these process-based, open-ended artistic activities emerged in the absence of a social project and collective political horizon. The examples of such long-term projects are: Jeanne van Heeswijk “Blue House” (2005-2008); Tania Bruguera “Immigrant Movement International” (2011-2018); and Rick Lowe’s *Project Row Houses* (1993-2018) and *Park Fiction* (1994-2005). *Project Row Houses* is one of the emblematic long-term, community-engaged projects initiated in 1993 by artist Rick Lowe. He purchased a row, abandoned houses in a low-income, predominantly African-American neighborhood in Houston, Texas, that was slotted for demolition. With the help of hundreds of volunteers, the artist preserved the buildings, rebuilt facades, and renovated the old housing’s interiors. Then, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and private foundations, the growing group of activists transformed the neighborhood into a vibrant campus that hosts visiting artists, galleries, a park, commercial spaces, gardens, and as well as subsidized housing for young mothers, an exhibition spaces, a literary center, a multimedia performance art space, offices, low-income houses, and other amenities. Now functioning as a non-profit organization, *Project Row Houses*, has grown from 22-houses to 40, and provides essential social services to residents. *Project Row Houses* has built trust and strong relationships with the surrounding neighborhood, offering a sustainable growth. Tania Bruguera’s *Immigrant Movement International* is another example of committed community work. Since April 2001, the Cuban artist has been operating a flexible community space, housed in Corona, Queens, which serves as headquarters for the project. *Immigrants Movement International* is an organization that has been examining growing concerns about the

political representation and conditions facing immigrants. Engaging both local and international communities, as well as social service organizations and elected officials, the project aims to embrace common identity and shared human experience to create new ways for immigrants to achieve social recognition. Michael Kurzwelly's project "Shubfurt" (1999-2018) and his most recent "Nowa Amerika" (2010-2018), which I will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter Three and Four, falls into the category of strategic community-based socially engaged art practices that require the artist's long-term commitment to the community. Kurzwelly's projects are site-specific, located in a community center initiated by the artist. For nineteen years he has lived and worked within the community, blurring the boundaries between his art practice and day-to-day activist work.

It is hard not to notice that the "strategic" work of contemporary artists today is very similar to the work of professional community developers and activists. In fact, many art historians agree that contemporary long-term socially engaged art practices are the continuation of community art practices that developed in 1980s and 90s. Gregory Sholette, for instance, argues that, even though it is hard to distinguish what makes current forms of social practice art distinct from these previous examples of community art, one of the differences is that contemporary art practices, instead of producing a tangible outcome or an object (such as a mural, exhibition, book, video, etc.), focuses on choreographing the social experience itself as a form of socially engaged art practice (Sholette 2015, 104). Therefore, social practice art treats work with the community itself as a medium and the material of expression, and so embraces more ephemeral activities such as collaborative programming, performance, documentation, protest, publishing, mutual learning, discussion, or research. However, some findings from the literature on community development complicate Sholette's observation. In this respect, it is



useful to draw parallels between long-term socially engaged practices and community art as a tool in bottom-up community development in order to locate the tensions, differences, and similarities between the two.

As it did in the arts, the shifts in community development of the 1980s and 90s moved toward a bottom-up approach, and were a response to globalization and neoliberal policies that led to the fracturing of local communities (Kay 2000, 414-424). Bottom-up community development corresponds to the local attempts and collective action by community members to provide voice to the powerless and participate in activities focused on improving their present wellbeing in order to achieve change in policy and practice (Kay 2000, 414-424). Such collective grassroots community action consists of small-scale local attempts to negotiate with power holders and initiate independent projects and programs. Participation here is the crucial aspect that distinguishes the bottom-up approach from a top-down approach. One of the strategies implemented by bottom-up development programs for cultural, political, and economic transformation of communities is the use of community art programs as a tool for change. The majority of scholars in the literature on community development view art from a sociological perspective, as a collective action, a collaboration between agents (Becker 1982; Guetzkow 2002; Matarasso 1997; Lowe 2001, 457-471; Greene 1995). Similarly to contemporary social practice, the process of creating of art is perceived as an activity of symbolic expression of a culture that is connected to a larger community and reflects its values rather than just individual act of artistic expression. The main object of community art is not the art product itself, but the process of community building. However, the word “art” in community development discourse is often blurred with other notions, such as “creativity” and “culture”. For instance, Su Braden and Marjorie Mayo in their article, “Culture, community development and representation,” refer

to the broader term “culture” instead of “art”, describing how “culture as a design for living has been central for community development” (Braden and Mayo 1999, 191-204 ,198). The authors define culture as a creative expression within society and focus on different approaches to the role of culture in community development, including various “community media” (that can take the form of visual arts, music, drama, dance etc.). This tendency toward the conflation between the discourse of art and creativity can also be seen in the works of many artists and curators of participatory art, where the criteria of assessment is essentially sociological and driven by demonstrable outcomes. Even though sociological research on community art is relatively new (since 1990s) the comprehensive analysis of the transformative nature of art demonstrates various positive impacts on the local community, such as the ability to enforce changes in individual identity, to develop and express collective identity (sense of community), and to build common ties of solidarity (“social cohesion”) (Lowe 2001, 457-471; Matarasso 1997). The main features of community art are the collective experience and collaborative nature between an artist and members of a community, providing them a way to express themselves and address their shared problems, values, and concerns (Guetzkow 2002). Seana Lowe in her study, “The Art of Community Transformation,” focuses on the ritualistic nature of community art experience, arguing that community art provides a ritual framework for social interaction and can affect personal and social transformation by bringing individuals together, embracing a shared goals, and setting a common mood by, for example, designing a community symbol (Lowe 2001, 457-471). Lowe argues that ritual is a unique type of social interaction that serves as a context for possible change and release of imagination. Lowe is referring to Erich Fromm’s ideas of a sane society and the theory that collective art is capable of transforming a community from “atomistic to communitarian” (Fromm 2012, 461). According to Fromm: “collective art is an integral part

of life and it corresponds to basic human need and without it the picture of the world is unrealized giving the man anxiety and insecurity“ (Fromm 2012, 301). Similarly, Maxine Greene points out that this collective experience has an impact on developing creativity and imagination on the collective level as well the individual level, and is a helpful tool in imagining new perspectives to identify alternatives (Greene 1995).

So, what happens when the focus is shifted from aesthetics to a sociological discourse in assessing projects of socially engaged art? Where is the borderline between what is considered to be art or community development? How do we distinguish between the two? Why, for instance, is it that the New York-based community organization “All Starts Project, Inc.” – an organization that uses performance as an approach for the empowerment of youth of color and community building – is considered community development but not an art practice? (Their project “Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids” is an innovative community relations model program in collaboration with New York City Police Department that uses performance and improvisation to engage black teenagers and police officers in a dialogue). Or what makes the projects such *Project Row Houses* or *Guarana Power*, or *Supergas* (both projects of the Danish art collective Superflex), examples of contemporary social practice, but not community development? As was discussed before, critics and theorists of contemporary social practice mainly argue around aesthetic and social heterogeneity, trying to define the matter of efficacy, and the dynamics between the symbolic, the mediated, and the practical. In this respect, Pablo Helguera argues that social work and social practice operate in the same realms but widely differ in their goals (Helguera 2011). Helguera defines social work as a value-based profession based on a tradition of beliefs and systems that aims for a better humanity and social justice. Whereas, an artist, while subscribing to the same values, makes work that problematizes, ironizes, or even

enhances tensions around those subjects, in order to provoke reflection (Helguera 2011). Exactly for the lack of these qualities, Claire Bishop criticizes community arts. In her opinion, artistic experimentation and research are values of art in themselves, as well as an element of critical negation and ability to sustain a contradiction that cannot be reconciled (Bishop 2012a). She also points out that community art lacks a secondary audience i.e. critical public discourse. In this respect, Helguera argues that traditional argument against equating socially engaged art with social work is weak because it precludes the possibility that art can be deliberately instrumental; this argument relinquishes a crucial aspect of art making that demands self-reflexivity and criticality (Helguera 2011). What is the most paradoxical is that while ignoring that instrumentalization of art can be a deliberate artistic conceptual move (such as Superflex's "tools"<sup>9</sup>, or Tania Bruguera with "arte util"), Bishop acknowledges that Santiago Sierra deliberately chose distant position of exploitation of live bodies in his performance as artistic strategy. Today many artists and art collectives use a broad range of bureaucratic and administrative skills that are typically accessible to the domain of larger institutions, such as marketing, fundraising, grant writing, city planning and educational programming. This "deliberate instrumentalization" gives them more freedom and resources for implementing ideas: "Many artists and art collectives use a broad range of bureaucratic and administrative skills that typically lie in the domain of larger institutions, such as marketing, fundraising, grant writing, real estate development, investing in start-ups, city planning, and educational programming" (Thompson 2012, 102). Going back to Helguera's point, the stronger argument is that socially engaged art has a double function that social work lacks, which means that when artists make socially engaged art, they are not just simply offering a service to a community, but are also

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proposing action as a symbolic statement in the context of cultural history, and so are entering into a larger debate (Helguera 2011). This leads to the next question: is the typical community art project more powerful than, for instance, a conceptual gesture by Santiago Sierra? For Pablo Helguera neither community “mural project” nor Santiago Sierra’s gestures fail to critically engage community in self-reflective dialogue (Helguera 2011, 11). In his opinion, a good project is a combination of social and symbolic action. Helguera advocates holding artistic and social critique in tension, embracing both symbolic and political dimensions of the project.

#### New criteria

So what makes a socially engaged project successful? What are the criteria of a successful project? What are the frameworks to understand its dynamics and effects? As Claire Bishop pointed out, one of the main problems in the art criticism of socially engaged art is that the main aspiration is always to move beyond art, but never to the point of comparison with projects in the social domain (Bishop 2012). She contends that instead of turning to comparison with social work, the tendency is always to compare artists’ projects with other artists on the basis of ethical “one-upmanship” degree to which artists supply a good or bad model of collaboration. As a result, consensual collaboration is valued over artistic mastery and individualism, regardless of what the project sets out to do or actually achieves. Therefore, in order to evaluate effectiveness and social impact of long-term social art practices on local communities, I will look for criteria of successful community development project in the sociological discourse of community development, while simultaneously, combining it with the insights from art critical discourse. In other words, instead of the focus on the ethics of collaboration, I will analyze Kurzwelly’s project through the lens of the produced impacts, at the

same time keeping in mind the relevance, conceptual density, and artistic significance of the author's practice.

In this respect, Grant Kester's new field-based approach in critical assessment of the long-term socially engaged projects will be a useful framework. In his opinion, the strategic turn required a new understanding of duration in aesthetic experience (Kester 2013). According to Kester, dialogical practices, unlike textual and object-based models that are finite and exist during the time of exhibition or the commission, are durational and can unfold over weeks, months, and even years. And if the boundaries of the first are often predetermined by the particular limitations of a given exhibition space, the spatial contours or boundaries of the latter typically expand and contract over time (Kester 2013). Thus, we need to examine how these spatial and durational boundaries have been produced, modified, and challenged. Kester argues that it is necessary to develop a system of diachronic analysis that can encompass the project as a whole "in its movement through moments of conflict and resolution, focusing on the productive tension between closure and disclosure, resistance and accommodation" (Kester 2013). Kester also notes that social practices require a very different understanding of the relationship between consciousness and action within the aesthetic. He suggests understanding the aesthetic as a form of knowledge that can be communicable between a larger collective rather than a single, sovereign consciousness. Even though, classical critical theory can provide profound insights into the operations of language, consciousness, and art itself, Kester advocates for more reflective and reciprocal understanding of the relationship between theory and practice in art criticism: "In this scenario theory can bring insight, but it can also be challenged in turn, perhaps by the very experience of practice itself" (Kester 2013). He advocates for new research methodologies, what he calls a field-based approach, in which the critic inhabits the site of

practice for an extended period of time, paying special attention to the discursive, sensuous and social conditions of space, as well as to the sustainability of the transformed consciousness. According to Kester, this would include an analysis of the artist's or art collective's entry and departure from the field itself, as well as the decisions that led them to define a given social context as a field of practice in the first place. Two questions he suggests asking are: How the project evolved over time? How the perceptions of the various participants were altered over the time?

Another important parameter for analysis to look at is the process of collaborative artistic production and the role of the artist. Nicolas Papastergiadis proposes to reconceptualize collaborative practices through the idea of "mediation" (Harris 2011). In his view, artistic practices are one of the means by which artists participate in the mediation of new social meaning. The function of the mediation is not to catalogue existing facts, or extract meaning that is suppressed, giving aesthetic or intellectual saliency to ideas that are suppressed and hidden, but instead to develop new strategies for coexistence that are based on mutual understanding: "Relocate the idealized position of the artist at the forefront of the engine of social change, and move it inside the processes of social production so that artists see themselves as mediators in the global and local networks of communication" (Harris 2011, 281). Papastergiadis argues that the new goal for the artist as mediator is to create a process in which both outsider and insider participate in collaborative knowledge making as "epistemic partners".<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Pablo Helguera argues that the most crucial goal for the majority of the successful work within the field of social practice is to critically engage community in self-reflective dialogue. Referring to

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<sup>10</sup> Drawing on Jacques Ranciere's concept of the "equality of intelligences", anthropologist George E. Marcus's developed idea about seeing anthropologist and native as "epistemic partners".

Jacques Ranciere's influential work, *Emancipated Spectator*, he argues that the purpose of a successful socially engaged community project is to create an "emancipated community of narrators and translators" (Helguera 2011, 13). Here emancipation of the spectator means dismantling the binary of active/passive spectator, which implies epistemic inequality and paternalism between the active artists and the "passive spectator". Helguera argues that the dynamics between emancipated participants corresponds to the dynamics between the teacher and the student that learning from each other and engaging in the dialogue "from which they extract enough critical and experiential wealth to walk away enriched, perhaps even claiming some ownership of the experience or ability to reproduce it with others" (Helguera 2011, 13). However, he claims that only few artists undertake this task successfully. A majority of socially engaged art projects fail because of the break in communication; the artists may have not been attentive to the interests of the community, and, thus, unable to see the ways in which members can contribute to an exchange. Similarly, Francois Matarasso, while examining the social impact of art as a tool in community development, contends that not all participatory community art projects are successful (Matarasso 1997). One of the reasons is the vague purpose and objectives of the projects. When nonprofessional agents with limited understanding of the outcomes of cultural action are engaged in the process this can be a problem for the community. Matarasso argues that participatory art projects that promote personal and social benefits can have complex and unpredictable results in the short-term perspective. Therefore, successful projects that lead to the real tangible changes require long-term strategic planning. According to Matarasso, the key of the successful project lies in building the environment based on seven core principles: clear objectives, equitable partnership, good planning, shared ethical principles, excellence,



proportional expectations, and joint evaluation. He emphasizes that, if built on these principles, projects can produce positive social outcomes.

Consequently, artists can learn from social workers and community developers how to inform themselves about the social environment, record local problems, hopes, and beliefs of the community, as well as how to find the right balance between openness and mutual interest through direct communication. In other words, for the project to be effective and to result in any level of social change the artist or the community developer must approach the projects meaningfully by exploring the historical, geographical, psychological, sociological backgrounds and asking the questions: What are the social issues of this community? What are their political issues? What are their struggles? Similarly to community organizers, artists need to earn the trust and mutual respect of a community. Pablo Helguera advocates for the importance of accountability and expertise while working with the community (Helguera 2011). He claims that for a collaboration to be successful, the distribution of accountability between the artist and his or her collaborators must be articulated. Therefore, an artist should not be neutral entity, or an invisible catalyst of experiences, but provide a certain level of expertise and knowledge. Seana Lowe also helps to frame the role of the artist, providing interesting insight on the essential role of the artist to facilitate the ritual interaction: "upon examining the nature of community art, it appears that the artist assumes a role comparable to that of a ritual elder facilitating the ritual interaction" (Lowe 2001, 457-471, 468). Therefore, the artist should be a facilitator or mediator, authorizing participants to envision, dream, and explore their creativity.

Additionally, Helguera argues that in every socially engaged art project the level of input expected from the community should be proportionate to the community's investment in the project and the responsibility it is assigned in it (Helguera 2011). He explains that first what

should be recognized is the value that individuals bring to the collaboration; each individual has their own expertise or interest that they can put into collaboration. A second important rule is to create a collaborative environment and framework that is not completely predetermined in theme or structure. Because otherwise a community can feel that they can't put their own expertise and interests to use. Pablo Helguera proposes the collective brainstorming method of Open Space Technology (OST) that can provide a beneficial outcome for understanding needs and interests of the group. OST is designed to address a real and tangible problem with a group. Francois Matarasso also points out that for the artistic process to be effective there must be a visioning component which involves the brainstorming sessions and exposing group members to different ideas and images to expand their concepts of what is possible thematically and aesthetically (Matarasso 1997). These sessions can often involve research in groups during which the participants discover common ideas and visions, and work to find technical, esthetical and logistical ways to represent it. The sense of community, in its turn, emerges when members of the community work together to solve specific problems or deal with specific issues that embody community values. Similarly, Lowe argues that for effective facilitation of an art project the framework is crucial (Lowe 2001, 457-471). The framework is an organization of the project, the parameter of the art project and its "community media" (Braden and Mayo 1999, 191-204). The framework should be based on the artist's area of expertise, the recourses available for the project, and other relevant environmental, political or social variable. Here we can recall Jacque Ranciere's idea of a "mediating third term": an object, image, story, or film through which the artist can mediate collective experience, production of new social knowledge and to have a purchase on the public imaginary (Thompson 2012, 102).

Last but not least, the question of sustainability is also important in a discussion of the social impact of the art. Through the lens of community development, the successful project leads to a self-sustaining, self-determining, collectively run grassroots organization in the future (Isidiho and Sabran 2016, 266). In other words, if, and after its initiation, with external help, the project continues and its goals are adopted and self-managed by the members of the community, the project can be considered a success. Consequently, applying these criteria to long-term socially engaged art projects, we can argue that if an artist's imagination and critical thinking inspired and empowered people from the community to self-organize and develop autonomous practices, we can talk about the tangible social and political potency of art. In the following chapters I will test these ideas on the example of Michael Kurzwelly's projects "Slubfurt" and "Nowa Amerika".

## CHAPTER III: CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: ŚLUBFURT AND NOWA

### AMERIKA

Michael Kurzwelly's projects "Ślubfurt" (1999-2018) and his most recent "Nowa Amerika" (2010-2018) fall into the category of participatory community-based strategic social practices that require an artist's long-term investment into the community. His projects are explicitly local, deeply rooted in community relations, and motivated by a commitment to the idea over time in order to effect political or social change. Kurzwelly's projects are site-specific, located in a community center initiated by the artist. Simultaneously, they are on-going participatory urban projects in the form of an imaginary city and country with various conceptual layers, addressing topics of identity crisis, the construction of both history and collective memory, and a need for a civil society and public space. For 19 years Kurzwelly has lived within the community of people from sister towns Ślubice, Poland and Frankfurt (Oder), Germany, blurring the boundaries between his life and art practice. While Michael Kurzwelly's work can be considered as a category community art or community development, the symbolic, imaginative and educational dimensions of his artistic practice provide an intriguing example for analysis through the convergence of art critical and sociological discourses. Michael Kurzwelly was born in Darmstadt, Germany in 1963 and grew up in Bonn. The question of identity was always important for the artist as since childhood he experienced the discomfort of being German, being embarrassed to have a family connection to Nazi Germany. Kurzwelly recalls when he was 16 years old a school history teacher gave children homework task to ask their grandparents what they were doing during the Nazi regime and the Second World War. Kurzwelly's grandparents were outraged by the teacher, refused to participate, and wanted to make a complaint to the

school; their reaction made him suspicious. Later he found out that his grandfather, who was a lawyer, was part of a Nazi party where he had enforced some social laws. After school, Kurzwelly refused military service and went to France with the international peace service program, Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, to work on a small farm in Normandy. He spent three years there, learning the language, culture, and the lifestyle of the French people. After the service, the artist came back to Germany to study painting at the Alanus University of Arts and Social Science in Alfter. In 1990, married and moved to Poznań (Poland). Two years later, in 1992, Kurzwelly founded the International Art Center (Międzynarodowe Centrum Sztuki). In 1998 he moved to Frankfurt (Oder) where he presently lives and works.

The German city of Frankfurt (Oder) and the Polish border twin city of Słubice are connected by a 0.6-mile bridge across the River Oder. Historically, the two cities used to be the one city of Frankfurt that was founded as a Polish settlement in the 13th century. Since its founding, Frankfurt (Oder) has been a part of Poland, Brandenburg, The Bohemian Crown, Prussia, the German Democratic Republic, and now, contemporary Germany. Słubice was a Silesian suburb of Frankfurt called Dammvorstadt until 1945. However, after the Second World War, when the borders were redrawn westward of the Polish borders as a part of the Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences, Poland ended up with the part of the city east of the river. This city was renamed Słubice, a restored version of Zliwicz, a West Slavic settlement. The city of Frankfurt (Oder) was divided by the newly defined border between Germany and Poland, the Polish part was from then on Słubice. As a result, the former German region was Polonised, while Polish regions in the east became Ukrainian and Belarusian. East Poles had to leave their homes and were mostly located in the areas that belonged to Germany. When Hitler escaped from the Soviet army in 1945, he declared Frankfurt as a fortification. The civil society was

evacuated and there were only four hundred civilians left (about 600 people remained by April 1945). Most of the residents never came back and the city became a refugee camp for Germans coming from the east from former German territory. Meanwhile, Słubice's German residents were forcibly expelled and replaced primarily by resettled Poles, many of who had themselves been compelled to leave Polish territories annexed by the Soviet Union in what is today Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania. After separation in 1945, the cities had little contact because of strict border controls. After the collapse of communism and German unification in 1991, the cities saw some more contact, but the tension between residents was very high. The climate got worse with the rise of neo-Nazi activity, mainly in the form of robberies and minor assaults, in Frankfurt that was directed mainly at Poles. For instance, when in 1991, visa requirements were lifted between the two countries for one day, a group of about 200 neo-Nazi protesters gathered near the border crossing in Frankfurt to throw rocks at Polish cars (Asher 2012, 497-520). Another example of anti-Polish violence was a firebomb attack of the dormitory of the Frankfurt's European University of Viadrina, an institution with the stated goal of enhancing Polish-German relations by linking the two countries' academic communities. The attack was apparently motivated by the high enrollment of Polish students into the University (Asher 2012, 497-520). The border control remained strict until Poland joined the European Union in 2004 and, eventually, the border- and passport-free Schengen Zone in 2007. Today, both cities continue to share a marginal socio-economic condition characterized by a chronically dwindling population and high rates of crime, unemployment levels, and industrial stagnation. In addition, Frankfurt experiences the rise of the nationalist political party "Alternative for Germany" (right-wing political party) simultaneously with a demographic crisis fueled by an over 25% decline in population since 1989 (Asher 2012, 497-520). Its younger residents left for more promising parts of Germany, specifically nearby

Berlin. This complicated history has produced deep prejudices and hostility between two towns. Many Frankfurters today are ignorant about the history of the towns and continue to perceive Poland only as a place where one can buy cheap cigarettes.

### **Slubfurt and Nowa Amerika – Reunification of History**

While living in Poland for eight years, Kurzwelly always perceived himself as othered, not fully belonging to either Polish culture or to his German identity. When he moved to Frankfurt (Oder) he felt a natural response to create a "space in-between" aimed to address the tension and launch a dialogue between Germans and Poles. Kurzwelly's first Polish-German participatory project, "Kommunikationsraum Frankfurt-Słubice" or "Communication room Frankfurt'- Słubice" (1999) co-curated with Thomas Kumlehn, was a reflection on the division he experienced living in between the cities. The idea of the project was to find families in Frankfurt and Słubice who were ready to host 16 German and Polish artists in their homes to live and work together for three weeks. Polish families' hosted German artists and vice versa. The invited artists used this time to get to know families and to develop the concept of artworks they could do inside the homes. During the weekends, the living rooms of these families became public spaces for discussions and reflections. People from Frankfurt and Słubice could walk through both towns from one apartment to another where they would meet the family, the artist, and see or experience the artwork.

In 1999, Kurzwelly founded the first German-Polish city on the river Oder, which consists of the two districts: "Słub" on the Polish side and "Furt" on the German side. The hypothetical city center of is located in the overlapping space on a map between two congruent circles around the centers of Słubice and Frankfurt (Fig.1).



Fig. 1. The map of Słubfurt. (Image courtesy of Michael Kurzwelley.)

The next year, together with friends from both cities, Kurzwelley created a community organization called "The Citizens' Association of Słubfurt". It was registered as a cross-border cultural non-profit organization with the aim of promoting the transnational character of Słubice-Frankfurt's urban space. In the same year, 2000, Słubfurt was registered in the Register of European City Names. Kurzwelley describes his artistic strategy of reinterpretation and redefining spaces using reality constructions. He creates imaginative subversive tools to intervene, interact, and transcend into another construction of reality in people's minds, by imitating basic techniques that governments use to construct history, memory, and identity. According to the artist's statement from his website: "To reorder space one needs to redefine space. For this kind of artistic intervention I use the term "applied art", which means art applied in public context and space. This is to describe an artistic strategy focusing problems in society to then intervene,



interact and transcend into another construction of reality. I create tools to create this new reality in other people's minds".<sup>11</sup> Thus, by renaming towns and streets, he claims the space. Kurzweily undertook the attempt to construct a new Polish-German identity, reimagining historical boundaries, and prejudices beyond national borders. Therefore, initially, Słubfurt was designed to heal the alienation that characterized the relationship between the two cities. Kurzweily emphasizes that he did not want to refer to the history directly, knowing that the Polish people could perceive the idea of merging two cities as chauvinism from the German artist. On the contrary, he wanted to refer to a common future, the creation of new "common we". However, the German-Polish hostility was noticeable even in the way people from both sides of the border reacted to the name of the project. According to Kurzweily, many Poles initially thought Słubfurt was advocating a return to Germany, while many Germans thought it was destroying "their" city's name. The artist claims that the identity crisis between Frankfurt and Słubice destabilizes a sense of "Heimat", which translates literally from German into English as "homeland". However, the term "Heimat" also refers to the general idea of belonging and the emotions that go along with this, not to any physical space. It has no adequate translation to English, or to Polish, for that matter (Applegate 1990). According to Applegate: "Heimat has never been a word about real social forces or real political situations. Instead, it has been a myth about the possibility of a community in the face of fragmentation and alienation" (Applegate 1990, 19). In this respect, Kurzweily, by using imagination as a transformative force, created a conceptual framework within which he could implement various participatory projects aimed at developing a sense of community ("Heimat") and fostering civil society. Equally important for the Kurzweily has been

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<sup>11</sup> <http://arttrans.de/>

the use of humor and playfulness as subversive artistic tools. According to Kurzwelly, the ability to laugh at oneself offers an individual the chance to de-ideologize and revitalize the mind. This playfulness and flexibility of identity are noticeable in the way the artist presents himself and his work to the public. Depending on the context, he describes his work as, on the one hand, an example of community and social work, and on the other hand, as political education or Polish-German cooperation, and even as a conceptual art practice. In fact, he often calls his projects "laboratories", emphasizing the importance of experimentation that gives the freedom to test different modes of participation and collaboration. At the same time, Kurzwelly's projects are meticulously elaborated. He subverts existing "reality" by appropriating governmental techniques and mechanisms of history, identity, and memory constructions. Słubfurt's "parallel reality" has its own mythology, visual identity, government, legislative system, cultural policies, and even its own language ("Słubfurtish", or "nowoamerikan", a unique mix of Polish and German specific to this region). Since 1999, this fictional world has developed significantly. In 2010, Kurzwelly went further and extended his reality construction strategy to the creation of the new country on the German-Polish border, "Nowa Amerika", a land of immigrants. Similarly, as with Słubice and Frankfurt after the Second World War, the borders were shifted from East to West across the whole German-Polish region. According to Kurzwelly, due to the constant historical-political border shifts and human migrations (around 2-3 million), almost nobody comes originally from this territory. For instance, Lviv (contemporary Ukraine) was a Polish city, but after the Second World War it became part of the Soviet Union, and the whole Polish community was relocated from Lviv to Wrocław. Meanwhile, the Germans who were living in Wrocław had to leave their homes and moved westwards. Another example is the population of Lemkos, a city in the Western Ukrainian Carpathian Mountains region; its inhabitants were

moved to Poland, where they were oppressed and forbidden to speak Ukrainian. Today they are mostly assimilated, but one still can find some communities that preserve the unique culture and language of Lemkos. In GDR times (1949-1990), many Vietnamese from Communist North Vietnam got working contracts and stayed in Germany, while Poland experienced an immigration of around 5,000 Greek political refugees during the Greek Civil War. Today there is a vibrant Greek-Polish community in Zgorzelec. Since 2014, with the beginning of the European migrant crisis, Kurzwelley's "Nowa Amerika" project has gained one more significant social and conceptual layer: a massive flow of refugees from the Middle East and Africa to Germany. Namely, about 1,150 refugees have been housed in and around Frankfurt (Oder). Responding to these changes, Kurzwelley came up with the idea of "Asylum in Słubfurt", a project designed to help integrate refugees into the Słubfurt community, providing them safe public space and psychological support.

Today, Kurzwelley's work functions on two levels: local and regional. The capital city, "Słubfurt" addresses local issues, while "Nowa Amerika" functions at the regional level and is an ambitious attempt to foster a grassroots civil society-network across the German-Polish border, engaging the region into the broader dialogue. As two worlds of "Słubfurt" and "Nowa Amerika" are tightly merged into each other, I will further discuss both projects and their components simultaneously.

### Nowa Amerika Mythology

The country Nowa Amerika was founded on March 20, 2010.<sup>12</sup> The federation consists of the four states: Szczettinstan, Terra Incognita, Lubusz Ziemia and Schlonsk. The borders of

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/informacjon/en/nowa-amerika/>

Nowa Amerika are fluid; sometimes the country expands to Poznań and Berlin, sometimes it shrinks. However, Nowa Amerika has a backbone that is formed by the former German-Polish border, the two rivers Oder and Neisse. Its graphics representation can be found in the official flag of "Nowa Amerika" that was designed in the colors of Germany and Poland, with a blue wavy line that stands for the spine, river Oder, and four stars for the four states (Fig.2). Słubfurt is the capital of Nowa Amerika. Apart from German and Polish, Słubfurtisch (or nowo amerikan) language is the official language. The size of Nowa Amerika depends on the number of people that believe that Nowa Amerika exists. Today, according to Kurzweily, around 300 people consider themselves to be Nowa Amerikans.



Fig. 2. The map and the flag of Nowa Amerika. (Image courtesy of Michael Kurzweily.)

The term "Nowa Amerika" actually refers to a construct of reality first introduced by King Friedrich the Great in the 18th century.<sup>13</sup> At that time, due to the general crisis, there was a big wave of farmers immigrating to the newly formed United States. King Friedrich decided to attract farmers to stay by draining the marshland areas on both sides of Oder and Neisse and giving them houses and land to farm. For several generations, the farmers were exempt from taxes, so they felt themselves pioneers on a new land. King Friedrich the Great did a trick by naming the area "New America" (Nowa Amerika). He created new villages with deliberately American names, such as Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, New Yorck, Florida, and Maryland,

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/informacjonem/nowa-amerika/>

but also, made random naming decisions such as Jamaica, Malta or Sumatra. However, after the Second World War, these towns and villages were given Polish names. Thus, Jamaica, became the Polish village, Jamno. Only the village of Malta has remained unchanged. Kurzwelly was inspired by this historical absurdity and decided to recreate Nowa Amerika, giving it a new connotation. According to the artist, "Nowa Amerika" is also a land of pioneers; active citizens who want to reshape society from the bottom-up together.

### **Legislature and Government**

Słubfurt and Nowa Amerika have their own government body: The Parliament of Słubfurt and the Nowa Amerikan Congress. Słubfurt Parliament is a result of a delegated performance initiated by Michael Kurzwelly during the annual holiday of Polish-German friendship in 2009.<sup>14</sup> Kurzwelly, together with the actress Lucyna Winkel, made the first elections of Słubfurt Parliament under the bridge that connects Słubice and Frankfurt, inviting local residents to participate and create their own parties. Together they created the election rules, according to which the party should consist of at least one person from Słub, and one from Furt. During the first performance, they created seven self-organized parties. Members of these parties spoke from the stage to people on the street, agitating them to vote for their programs and discussing important local issues they wanted to address. Then, local residents who had Słubfurt ID cards participated in elections. Those who didn't have the identity cards could quickly get one in the nearby ID card office. Eventually, around 300 local residents from both sides of the Oder participated in the elections. The festival ended, but the practice of coming together under the bridge has continued. Since then, the Parliament meets when there are important topics to

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.slubfurt.net/politika/parlament/sitzungsindex/>

discuss, such as the development of the common German-Polish urban space of Słubfurt. In one of those meetings, the basic Law of Słubfurt was elaborated. The basic Law of Słubfurt consists of eighty-four articles in total, including chapters responsible for fundamental rights, political, economic, social and cultural freedoms and rights, protection of freedom and rights, duties, right to vote, local self-government, courts and tribunals, city and the citizens and city order.

According to the Article 29: “Art and culture are city goals. The freedom of art is inviolable. The city of Słubfurt is based on the principle of an artist society, which must be protected.”<sup>15</sup> The model of the parties later changed into the civil society platform with the mechanism of direct democracy. Whoever comes to the meeting is considered to be a parliamentarian and has a right to vote. Initiated as an artistic and political experiment, today the Parliament of Słubfurt functions as a citizens' grassroots network addressing local issues essential to both towns through collective decision-making. As an illustration, the members of the Parliament of Słubfurt have discussed issues such as the need to organize anti-demonstrations against neo-Nazi deployment in Frankfurt, the plan to build a German-Polish cycling track that will traverse the Oder, and the need to publish a tourist guide for the town. As Słubfurt also functions as an NGO; the Parliament collectively discusses the opportunities for project funding. Over the last 19 years, the Parliament of Słubfurt has implemented various initiatives and projects proposed by residents. For instance, in 2013 during one of the Parliament meetings, it was decided to develop the project "Brückenplatz - Plac Mostowy" (Bridge Square). This is a public space for various Słubfurt events and activities, and is comprised of a public garden, volleyball court, bike pump, track, and speaker's corner. In addition, with the beginning of the intense flow of refugees to the Frankfurt (Oder), the Parliament started to work on integrating asylum seekers into the Słubfurt

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.slubfurt.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/slubfurtergrundgesetz.pdf>

community. Together they discussed the issue of providing legal support for asylum seekers and the opportunity of collaborating with local legal counsel to increase refugees' chances in the court. Today, many refugees feel themselves Słubfurters and participate in Parliament meetings, articulating their needs and proposing new ideas.



Fig. 3. The meeting of Nowa Amerika Congress. (Image courtesy of Michael Kurzwelley.)

The Nowa Amerika Congress is based on the idea of Słubfurt Parliament and is the highest body of Nowa Amerika (Fig.3). However, in contrast to Słubfurt Parliament, the Congress only meets annually at a conference. The Nowa Amerika Congress makes decisions concerning the legal form, organizational structure, and management of the network. It is a platform for the exchange of information and ideas of the civil network that includes around 600 activists from the German-Polish region. The committees elected at the Nowa Amerika Congress

serve the development and coordination of the network, as well as manage projects in groups, discussing programs and the funding. For instance, in order to facilitate citizens' identification with Nowa Amerika, the Congress has established a "Name Change Commission in the Nowa Amerika" that is working on new names for places, towns, and streets in the Nowa Amerika region. Considering historical, political, and geographical complexity of the region, the Commission is an important component of the country's cultural policy; a strategic force in subverting historical constructs and claiming and reimagining new transnational spaces. After all, anyone can become a Nowa-American. No matter where one comes from, it is enough to follow the Basic Law and Constitution of Nowa Amerika. The application for an ID is enough to be accepted. Therefore, anybody can apply for Nowa Amerikan ID card online by filling out the digital form and inserting a photo (Fig. 4). Then one needs to send the completed form to one of the Nowa Amerikan state printing houses and pick up the ID card of 2 € (8 zł). After signing, the ID card becomes valid and one can proudly be the citizen of Nowa America. Here is the extract from Constitution of Nowa Amerika:<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/politika/konstytucja-verfassung/>





Fig. 4. Nowa Amerikan ID cards. (Image courtesy of Michael Kurzweily.)

"§1

1.1. Nowa Amerika is a European region that includes the former German-Polish border region.

1.2. Nowa Amerika is also an open network of individuals, institutions, groups and non-governmental organizations working for the common good in the region.

1.3. Nowa Amerika serves a free exchange of ideas and experiences, as well as unlimited activities, which serves the possibility of a free construction of reality.

1.4. Nowa Amerika is made up of four states: Szczettinstan, Terra Incognita, Lubuskie Ziemia and Schlonsk. These four regions can be divided into smaller, easier-to-manage sub-regions.

1.5. Nowa Amerika is a region without borders and nationalities. Nowo-Amerikans is anyone who feels like a Nowa-Amerikan, regardless of their origin, place of residence or age.

1.6. The basic principles of Nowa Amerika, such as freedom, openness, and respect for others, are based on the Charter of Human Rights.

- 1.7. The official languages in Nowa Amerika are Nowoamerikan, Polish, and German.
- 1.8. Nowa Amerika has freedom of belief.
- 1.9. Nowa Amerika maintains friendly relations with all regions, regardless of their geography.
- 1.10. One goal of Nowa Amerika is to create a common civil society in the German-Polish border region.

## § 2

Symbols of Nowa Amerika are the flag and the figure of Sedina.<sup>17</sup>

- 2.2. The Flag of Nowa Amerika is legally protected.

## § 3 The highest body of Nowa Amerika is the Nowa Amerika Congress.

- 3.2. Anyone who feels Novo Amerikan can attend the Nowa Amerika Congress.
- 3.3. Every Novo-Amerikan participating in the Nowa Amerika Congress has one vote in the polls.
- 3.4. Nowa Amerika is a democratically governed European region.
- 3.5. The Nowa Amerika Congress makes decisions concerning the legal form, organizational structure, and management of the network.
- 3.6. The committees elected at the Nowa Amerika Congress serve the development of Nowa Amerika and the coordination of the network.
- 3.7. The Nowa Amerika University and other facilities launched by the Nowa Amerika Congress, or projects realized by Nowo Americans, serve to realize the objectives of Nowa Amerika."

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<sup>17</sup> Sedina is a mythological patroness of Nowa Amerika originated inspired by ancient Christian iconography <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/informacjon/en/sedina/>

## Culture, community media and solidarity economies

Słubfurt offers extensive cultural programs and is constantly providing the community with events, initiatives, festivals, and workshops. Słubfurt offers "Café Słubfurt"; a non-commercial community place used for meetings and cultural events, community newspaper, community radio (internet radio shaped by the citizens themselves), speaking club, community garden, and community choir, solidarity economies (Repair Café, Time Bank). All the programs take place in the community space "Café Słubfurt" or at the public space Bridge square (Brukenplatz). The main goals of Słubfurt's cultural program are community building. However, there is an educational aspect in the form of "Nowa Amerika University", a research-based institution with its own library and contemporary art collection. It encourages residents of the two cities to develop a critical perspective that questions the nature of identity and belonging.

A lot of cultural community events of Słubfurt are designed to integrate refugees into the community, providing them not only a safe environment and psychological support but also outreach and legal consultations. For instance, the conversation club "Café Blala" is a speaking club where people can talk in different languages, learning from each other. The initiative invites local German and Polish residents to learn from refugees and vice versa. As is written on the slogan: "Whether you are from Syria, Cameroon, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Iran, Somalia, Eritrea, Pakistan. Come!". There is also a community choir and community garden. The choir gathers every Tuesday, during which local residents and refugees have fun singing together. An annual festival offers a program with various dance groups and musical contributions from the local artists and refugees. There you can hear rap, traditional Syrian music, an Afghanistan rock band, or Ethiopian jazz.



Fig. 5. Community members during the workshop at Brukenplatz. (Image courtesy of Michael Kurzwelly.)

"Café Słubfurt" is a multifunctional public space located in the community center in district Furt that belongs to all Słubfurters and can be used for events, meetings, discussions, lectures, and lessons.<sup>18</sup> Those community members who want to participate in events hold keys for space. As Kurzwelly explains: "The small group that is owning keys is one of the most democratic parts and the strongest platform because everyone who has this key is feeling responsible for space and feels like they have got something to say. They want to make some proposals because they have a group of people that they are working with."<sup>19</sup> Two examples include, some musicians from Afghanistan who proposed to organize a concert for the community, and the Muslim community who uses the space for praying and celebrating Ramadan.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.slubfurt.net/service/cafe-slubfurt/>

<sup>19</sup> Kurzwelly, Michael. Interview with Olga Kostyrko. March/19/2018/

The capital radio station of Nowa America is "Radio Słubfurt", a non-commercial, Internet radio designed by citizens of Słubfurt to be broadcast from all Nowa Amerika regions about local issues.<sup>20</sup> Słubfurt also has its own daily municipal newspaper, "*Profil*".<sup>21</sup> It has been in publication since 2004. The newspaper is published in Słubfurtish and discusses important issues of the community (for instance, updated reports about work on Brukenplatz, interviews with local Słubfurters under the title "Portrait of Słubfurter", documentation of the projects of Nowa Amerika university, and articles discussing sustainable gardening or the political crisis in Cameroon). This project is especially significant giving the fact that in Słubice and Frankfurt, there is no multi-lingual newspaper that exists to serve both sides of the border region, and it is extremely difficult to find any Polish newspaper in Frankfurt or any German paper in Słubice.

Słubfurt also experiments with alternatives modes of exchange, so-called solidarity economies. They have their own Time-Bank, called ZeitBank Czasu, with its own currency of energy exchange, coins called the Studzina and Minutyn.<sup>22</sup> For 15 minutes volunteered, one will receive a "15 Minutyn"; for 1 hour volunteered, one will receive a "1 Studzina" coin (Fig.6). The idea of the Bank is to imagine creating a community where individual abilities can be traded based on time units.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.slubfurt.net/mediaen/radio/>

<sup>21</sup> The archive of newspaper "Profil" <http://www.slubfurt.net/mediaen/gazetazeitung/>



Fig. 6. 1 Studzina and 15 Minutyn. (Image courtesy of Michael Kurzweily.)

Anyone can offer services that match his or her abilities and interests while receiving the same compensation as anyone else. The time-money thus acquired can be exchanged for offers published on the website [zeitbankczasu.slubfurt.net](http://zeitbankczasu.slubfurt.net).<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, this money can be exchanged for another person's time and energy. You can buy homemade products from the ZBC shop or you can pay for other services. For instance, the Time Bank offers support for refugees in the form of translating, interpreting, administrative procedures, preparation for the hearing, administration, and preparation for an interview, transportation, and language lessons. Repair Café, a space that offers tools and repairs, is a part of ZeitBankCzasu. People can find there help in repairing their bicycle, defective electronics, worn clothing, or, even, assistance with problems with the authorities.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <http://zeitbankczasu.slubfurt.net/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.slubfurt.net/projekte/brueckenplatz-plac-mostowy/kultur-laboratorium-kultury-2017/repaircafe/>

## **Transpedagogy and Nowa Amerika University**

In 2006, artist and educator Pablo Helguera coined the term "transpedagogy" to refer to the proliferation of socially engaged art projects by artists and collectives that blend educational processes and art-making. Transpedagogy offers an experience different from conventional art academies or formal education (Helguera 2011, 77). Describing the wide range of socially art practices that use pedagogy as a tool, Helguera paraphrased Rosalind Krauss's famous description of postmodern sculpture, naming these practices "pedagogy in the expanded field" (Helguera 2011, 80). "Transpedagogy" focuses on the pedagogical process itself, on the use of discursive, pedagogical methods and situations, creating their own autonomous environment outside of the official academic or institutional frameworks. Such alternative education-as-art practices not only embrace different modes of educational forms and dematerialized mediums (such as lectures, symposia, discussions, talks, workshops, etc.), but also offer alternative methodologies, such as collaborative dialogues, participatory action research, inquiry-based methods, and experiential learning. Since the second half of the 1990s and the beginning of 2000s, the tendency towards educational artistic and curatorial practices emerged in the form of various artist-run schools and institutional programs. However, the prerequisites of this educational turn can be traced to the experimental teaching methods of 1960s and 1970s; the action teaching of Bazooka Brock or the performative lectures and experimental pedagogy of the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research of late Joseph Beuys (1977), are two historical examples. One contemporary example of transpedagogy is Tania Bruguera's "Catedra Arte de Conducta" (2002-2006), a Havana-based experimental art school project of behavioral art. Another is "The Center for Urban Pedagogy" (1997-2018) founded by artist and architect Damon Rich that combines art practice, design education, and research to

increase meaningful civic engagement. These new experimental pedagogical methodologies were mainly inspired by the ideas of critical pedagogy proposed by Brazilian pedagogue and education theorist Paulo Freire. In his influential book *The Pedagogy of The Oppressed* (1968), Freire proposed revolutionary anti-hegemonic teaching methods and roles, advocating for democratic conditions of education (Freire 2018). Freire focuses on dialogical reflection and action as a means to overcome relations of domination and subordination between oppressors and the oppressed, colonizers and the colonized. Therefore, according to Freire, the goal of critical pedagogy is to develop a critical consciousness that focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, allowing for the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions. Freire defines critical consciousness as the ability to "intervene in reality in order to change it" (Freire 2018, 35). Consequently, critical consciousness proceeds through the identification of "generative themes", which Freire identifies as means for thematic investigations (Freire 2018, 83). It seeks to understand the world by trying to reflect upon it collaboratively. Paulo Freire proposes to think critical pedagogy through the concept of praxis – the process by which a theory, lesson or skill is enacted, embodied, or realized. It can be understood as a "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed"; through praxis, oppressed people can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition. In addition, Peter McLaren points out that critical pedagogy seeks to understand how structures of power shape experiences of everyday lives, as well as to analyze the possibilities for the resistance and transformation of social fabrics, both on individual and collective, personal and macropolitical levels (McLaren 2015). This means constantly reflecting on the cultural construction of the identities of teachers, students, and researchers while connecting such critical reflections to a wider terrain of political action and class struggle. Therefore, to sum up, we can argue that artists



and curators engaged in the field of transpedagogy are motivated by producing more flexible and democratic ways of sharing knowledge, instead of spreading constructed knowledge from top-down hegemonic value systems.

The Nowa Amerika University ("Nowa Amerika Uniwersytät" in the Slubfurtish language) is an example of transpedagogy that combines educational and artistic approaches. As a research-based discursive art practice, the University aims at developing intersubjective communication and new forms of emancipatory narratives aimed at awakening curiosity, creativity, and reflection on the self and the surrounding world. The main strategic goals of the University as an educational institution are to develop Nowa Amerika by improving communication in the common German-Polish region, strengthening the common identity of the inhabitants, awakening creativity, deteriorating mutual stereotypes and prejudices, working out consolidating the new perception of a common history, and developing new forms of education, horizontal structures of civil society, and common perspectives for the future.



Fig. 7. Logo of the Nowa Amerika University. (Image courtesy of Michael Kurzwelly.)

The headquarters of Nowa Amerika University is located in the Polish district Słub in the Collegium Polonicum. The Nowa Amerika University is migratory in nature, and its program is carried out in various places in Nowa Amerika. The University focuses on engaging residents of the Nowa Amerika region regardless of age, nationality, and education. Preferred target groups include mixed Polish-German groups whose participants will learn from each other. The educational program includes a series of workshops, festivals, and lectures, as well as large independent projects, all of which address issues of the construction of borders, identity, nationalism, migration, the refugee crisis, land, and landscape. Nowa Amerika University collaborates on programs and workshops with students and professors from the European University Viadrina.

Mediateka of Nowa Amerika University is a community library and is a part of the Nowa Amerika University. It serves as a visual community archive that helps to consolidate the new perception of a common history, memory, and identity of the region. It is located in the library of the Collegium Polonicum and is open to the public. The media library was established to serve as a cultural exchange for the region, where the citizens can share their life stories relating to essential themes of identity, to which the Słubfurt city is bound. The library collects thoughts, media, objects, and personal memories on the topics of "borderline" and "identity". The library has an archive of the documentation of projects, in which all existing media are registered and provided with short descriptions. Mediateka collaborates with schools and other educational institutions in the format of lectures, discussions, and workshops. For instance, as part of a cultural studies seminar at the European University Viadrina, students developed projects on the issues of border and identity, the results of which are also partly reflected in the media library.<sup>25</sup> Examples in the archive of the Mediateka include: "Limit Research" and "Club". Both are films created by Michael Kurzwelly and Konrad Smolenski in collaboration with young people from Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice.<sup>26</sup> In 2014, Collegium Polonicum in Słubice also opened a collection of contemporary art dedicated to the themes of border and identity. The collection consists exclusively of works donated by artists. The initiator of the collection is the Berlin artist Roland Schefferski, who, together with the artists Lars Borges (Berlin), Łukasz Prus-Niewiadomski (Warsaw), Sławomir Sobczak (Poznań) and Erika Stürmer-Alex (Lietzen), opened the collection. According to the website, the opening of the collection was accompanied by a cultural policy conference entitled "art saves the world".<sup>27</sup> The speakers

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<sup>25</sup> [http://www.mediateka.slubfurt.net/mediateka/pl/d\\_index.htm](http://www.mediateka.slubfurt.net/mediateka/pl/d_index.htm)

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.slubfurt.net/kultura/socjokultura/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/uniwersytaet/kolekcja-sztuki-kunstsammlung/>

and participants of the conference considered the contemporary role of art in society and how it can be improved.

The project "Nowa Amerika - Land of Immigrants" (2015-2016) is a research-based participatory project commissioned by Nowa Amerika University in collaboration with local schools, organizations, initiatives, community centers, and youth clubs from the German-Polish border region (Police, Szczecin, Mescherin, Chojna, Frankfurt (Oder), Ośno Lubuskie, Rzepin, Müllrose, Słubice, Zielona Góra, Eisenhüttenstadt, Bautzen and Zgorzelec).<sup>28</sup> The project invited young people (aged 9-25 years) to participate in eighteen research-based workshops exploring the roots of the Nowa-American region, addressing the Polish-German border identity crisis, the complicated history of regional migrations, as well as the more recent European refugee crisis.<sup>29</sup> The project was aimed to facilitate critical consciousness through collective inquiry and horizontal collaboration. It was both educational and artistic: participants were asked to explore topics in the collective research under the guidance of knowledgeable experts who mediated workshops. During the workshops, participants collaborated as co-researchers in different groups and were provided with various visual research methods to create narratives that captured their findings and reflections. The workshops were not limited to specific medium (photo and video documentary, theater performances, animated cartoons, collages based on photo archives) and were mostly designed on the methodology of participatory action research commonly used in community development and education. This approach, inspired by Freire's critical pedagogy, embraced a pluralistic orientation to knowledge making and social change. It emphasized collective inquiry, self-investigation, and experimentation grounded on three principles: participation (life in society and democracy), action (engagement with experience and

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/projekte/migranten-migranci/>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/projekte/migranten-migranci/worksztaty/>

history), and research (production of knowledge) (Reason and Bradbury 2001). In the first year (2015) ten workshops took place (five Polish and five German educational institutions), and in the second year (2016) eight, four from Polish and four from the German side, respectively. Following the research part, the groups presented their findings in the hometown of the partners' educational institutions and later were asked to participate in a group installation.

Even though the majority of the transpedagogy practices claim to be process-oriented, Kurzwelly emphasized that both the process of research and the representation in the form of the final exhibition are equally important. He explains: "The idea was to encourage kids to start making their own exhibition, which means that they also have to think in what form to present others the findings of their research. They were free to make films, they could make drawings, write a story, they could make interviews with audio files and so on".<sup>30</sup> The bilingual multimedia exhibition traveled through the region (at Collegium Polonicum in Słubice, in the Marienkirche in Frankfurt (Oder), in the Voivodship Library in Szczecin, in the University Library in Potsdam, in the Voivodship Library in Zielona Góra, in the Tabakspeicher Vierraden in Schwedt and shown in the Bautzen State Academic Academy), taking part in various public events.<sup>31</sup> The results of the research projects were presented during the two Nowa Amerika conferences "Nowa Amerika – In the Country the migrants" (2015-2016).<sup>32</sup> Many topics discussed during the conference arose from the questions that the young people developed during the workshops. To clarify, the Nowa Amerika conference is an annual cultural event of Nowa Amerika network that includes a panel discussion, political debates with invited experts on various issues such as integration and cultural diversity, migration, and German-Polish cooperation.

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<sup>30</sup> Kurzwelly, Michael. Interview with Olga Kostyrko. March/19/2018/

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/projekte/migranten-migranci/ausstellungen/>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/projekte/migranten-migranci/konferenzja/>

As an illustration, the workshop "Identity of Opole Silesia" invited second-year school pupils of the rural village Polish village Chrzastowice to explore their mixed Silesian-Polish identity and historical reality of the region through the creation of animated cartoons.<sup>33</sup> The experts helped the participants construct visual narratives based on interviews and personal observations. Another workshop, called "Homeless," was designed in collaboration with pupils of the Performing Arts class of the Albert Schweitzer Gymnasium in the German town Eisenhüttenstadt.<sup>34</sup> Considering the complicated history of the German-Polish border shift after World War II, pupils explored the issues of home, displacement, and homelessness. By means of theater and performance research methods, they wrote and performed scenes based on interviews conducted with their family members. A significant part of the workshops was dedicated to the refugee crisis. One of the workshops, "Refugees today", for instance, invited members of the Frankfurt (Oder)-based Mikado Youth Club (kids 6-10 years old) to conduct a series of interviews with refugees, visiting their homes and workplaces, and used photography and video to document their life and conversations (Fig.8-9). In the interviews the kids conducted with refugees, they explored their personal stories and experiences of everyday life in Frankfurt (Oder). According to project's website, the children's perception of the refugees changed noticeably in the course of the project; initial mistrust and anxiety disappeared, as they were transformed by joint action and experience.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/projekte/migranten-migranci/worksztaty/tozsamosc-slaska-opolskiego-identitaet-des-oppelner-schlesiens/>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/projekte/migranten-migranci/worksztaty/heimat-los-bez-ojczyzny/>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.nowa-amerika.eu/projekte/migranten-migranci/worksztaty/was-sind-denn-das-fuer-welche-co-to-za-jedni/>



Fig. 8. Children interviewing refugees from Frankfurt (Oder) during the workshop "Refugees today" (2015). (Print Screenshot made from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uw7imijCJWE> minute 03:06. Video courtesy of Michael Kurzwelly.)



Fig. 9. Children interviewing refugees from Frankfurt (Oder) during the workshop "Refugees today" (2015). (Print Screenshot made from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uw7imijCJWE> minute 06:40. Video courtesy of Michael Kurzwelly.)

A majority of the workshops were based on photo-voice and documentary research methods. Introduced by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris in 1992, photo-voice method is

one of the methods of participatory action research used for community-based participatory research to document and reflect community reality and perspectives. It is based on a combination of Paulo Freire's notion of "critical consciousness" (a deep understanding of the way the world works and how society, politics, and power relationships affect one's own situation); feminist theory, which emphasizes the importance of voice; and documentary photography, which is often used to help bring about social change (Wang and Burris 1994, 171-186). Photo-voice has since become an empowering methodology that allows individuals to reflect upon the strengths and concerns of their community. It is a flexible process that combines photography with grassroots social action. Participants are asked to express their points of view or represent their communities by photographing scenes that highlight research themes. It is a tool to engage youth and children, giving them the voice and the opportunity to communicate their concerns. Photo-voice typically has been used in conjunction with collaging, drawing, and mapping. For instance, through documentary film and photo, teenagers from the German city of Bautzen engaged with local residents, displaced persons and refugees, to explore the city's history and current situation. Another group from the Polish city Szczecin participated in the urban workshop "Flavors from Szczecin" and used the photo-voice method to explore the identity of the city and its inhabitants. The students used photography to document and explore the food culture of local immigrants while interviewing owners, chefs and managers of restaurants on the matter of their tastes, culture, and cuisine. Alongside with interview and documentary photo-voice methods, participants experimented with archival research in local municipal archives, as well as also with personal archives of the people they interviewed (collecting photographs, letters, etc.). Archival research served as a good tool for some workshops that embraced the method of what Paulo Freire called "investigations of generative



themes" (Freire 2018, 77). A good example is a workshop called "Jews in Pomerania". In this workshop a group from Polish Szczecin explored the history of German-Jewish disappearance in Pomerania. By examining the collected photos, ID documents, and fingerprints in the State Archives of Szczecin, they attempted to track what happened to these individuals (Fig.10-11).



Fig. 10. Documents from State Archives of Szczecin. (Print Screenshot made from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYt0U9Y8ino> minute 06:48. Video courtesy of Michael Kurzwelly.)



Fig. 11. Documents from State Archives of Szczecin. (Print Screenshot made from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYt0U9Y8ino> minute 1:45. Video courtesy of Michael Kurzwelly.)

Comparatively, archival research methods were also implemented during the workshop "Siberian incarcerated" in Rzepin. This workshop dealt with the fates of Polish people who went to back to the German-Polish region from Siberia's Gulag prison camps. As the borders shifted from East to West after World War II, many Polish territories became part of USSR. Therefore, Polish people who were sent to Vorkuta and to other Gulag concentration camps, when coming back from incarceration in Siberia often could not find their homes because their homes were in the area that was no longer Polish. So they were settled in the Poland-German border region in the western Polish territories where they still live today. That is why once a year Poles of the region commemorate the victims of the repressions. The fates of many Poles who were incarcerated in Siberia during USSR were not documented. Students researched archives of the Institute of National Memory in Szczecin, conducted interviews with the ancestors of the people who experienced the trauma of that time, photographed memorabilia, and collected photographs and letters. The collected material, along with the interviews and discussions, served as a basis for the development of the exhibition. Other workshops explored issues of migration in more metaphorical ways. Namely "Flowering arrivals" and "Migration of birds". While the first was aimed at tracking the origin of exotic trees, shrubs, and flowers that inhabit gardens of the urban landscapes, the latter was reflecting on the natural phenomenon of seasonal bird migration, linking it to the trajectory of refugees from the southern hemisphere to the north.

To summarize, the project "Land of Immigrants" of Nowa Amerika University is an example of transpedagogy that blends community development, critical pedagogy, and art practices. The proposed generative themes and methods of the participatory action research were designed to awaken the critical consciousness of young participants from both sides of the German-Polish border, turning them into the "emancipated community of narrators and

translators ", who are able to self-reflect and relate to the communities in which they live  
(Rancière 2009, 22).

## CHAPTER IV: SOCIAL AND SYMBOLIC PRACTICE OF MICHAEL KURZWELLY

In the 1996, the Danish art collective Superflex collaborated with European and African engineers to develop and construct compost system for processing organic waste to create sufficient biogas for the cooking and lightening needs of families living in rural areas of Tanzania.<sup>36</sup> “Supergas” was proposed as an ecologically sustainable solution to present problems in energy supply. Several years later, in 2003, with Brazilian local farmers, Superflex developed and produced the brand of the soft drink from Guarana beans called “Guarana Power”.<sup>37</sup> The project was a response to a disastrous economic stagnation of the local agriculture of Brazil affected by globalization; the biggest multinational corporations held a monopoly on the purchase of the raw material of the berry, which forced the price of guarana down eighty percent, undermined the sustainability of local communities, and produced unemployment. The project consisted of a series of workshops in which new industrial and economic approaches to the situation were discussed in order to help produce a competitive local product. As a result, farmers and artists developed the soft drink “Guarana Power”, determined ways to affordably produce it, created the visual identity of the brand and marketing campaigns in the form of commercials featuring the farmers’ own narratives about the project. Both the research and the production of the soda were funded by the art organization Nordic Institute of Contemporary Art. The project was shown in the form of photography and video documentation at San Paolo’s 2006 Biennale. In comparison, in 1991 the grassroots community activist and artist Paul Glover founded the time bank *Ithaca HOURS* in Ithaca, New York, in order to strengthen the local

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.superflex.net/tools/supergas/>

<sup>37</sup> [https://www.superflex.net/tools/guarana\\_power/image](https://www.superflex.net/tools/guarana_power/image)

economy.<sup>38</sup> The currency of *Ithaca HOURS* are bills produced in the denomination of 2, 1, 1/2, 1/4, 1/8, and 1/10 hours. It is one of the largest, and oldest, alternative currencies in the United States. The currency is valid only within a 20-mile radius from Ithaca, NY, and trade is limited to residents and businesses within the region. The currency promotes local shopping and reduces dependence on transport fuels. A value of seven million dollars of HOURS have been traded since 1991; nearly 500 businesses, including banks, contractors, restaurants, hospitals, landlords, farmer's markets, and local Chamber of Commerce have accepted *Ithaca HOURS*. The project was selected, alongside Guarana Power and other socially engaged art projects, into the exhibition and anthology *Living as a form: Socially Engaged Art 1991-2011* produced by Creative Time. One might ask: Why was "Guarana Power" supported by contemporary art institution and presented at the international contemporary art exhibition if the project more closely resembles one of economic community development? Why was the community development project *Ithaca HOURS* included in a contemporary art exhibition? What is artistic about these projects?

While one group of critics perceive "Guarana Power" as a radical social practice directed in an instrumental way to affect the economic situation, others see it as a quasi-activist community project that, by claiming its radical anti-aesthetics position, has nothing to offer to art discourse rather than ethical collaboration. Similarly, from the point of view of community development, Superflex's projects raise a lot of questions: What is the tangible economic impact on the well-being of local Brazilian farmers the work has produced? What happened with the community when the art collective left? Did the community eventually manage to sustain itself? As Claire Bishop pointed out, art critics rarely ask these questions in the context of long-term

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.ithacahours.com/>

socially engaged works, but instead, focus on analyzing the modes of collaboration between artist and participants. Therefore, what can be perceived as radical in the institutional world of contemporary art can be commonplace and ineffective in terms of activism and grassroots community development. Even though, as we can notice, the boundaries between social work and contemporary social practices are sometimes extremely blurred, we can try to bring some clarity. Going back to the discussion in Chapter Two, *Social Practice and Community Development*, about the criteria of critical assessment of socially engaged practices, I want to examine more thoroughly the “double function of socially engaged art that social work lacks” (Helguera 2011, 36).

According to Helguera, this double function (apart from the struggle for social justice) is an ability of socially engaged art to co-exist in several discourses simultaneously. This means that when artists make socially engaged art, they not just simply offering a service to a community, but also proposing action as a symbolic statement in the context of cultural history, entering into the larger debate (Helguera 2011). Thus, artists have the privilege to slip between the worlds, while problematizing, enhancing tension, and provoking reflection. For Helguera, it is exactly this space of ambiguity between art and real life that is the most important feature of socially engaged art, as it allows an artist to reach broader audiences and bring new insights to particular social problems. Therefore, the figure of the artist, regardless of his or her attempts to eliminate the importance of authorship in art discourse, is what distinguishes social work or community development from social practice. In this respect, both projects, “Guarana Power” and “Ithaca HOURS,” are similar in that Superflex and Paul Glover deliberately instrumentalized their practice, playing the role of the “secret agent in the real world with an artistic agenda” (Helguera 2011). The difference here is that the Superflex art collective used the “tools” for

short-term community projects, whereas Paul Glover dedicated his creative energy to community work for a long period of time. *Ithaca HOURS* is a more successful example of community development, whereas Superflex projects are always mentioned exclusively in an art-related context. Moreover, the effectiveness and sustainability of Superflex's work with local communities in Brazil and Tanzania needs to be examined more thoroughly. Unlike Superflex, Paul Glover operates simultaneously within social and artistic discourses. In his essay "Anti-Money Monopoly" (2011) published in *e-flux journal* Glover writes:

"But artists are cultural leaders, and for this reason they can become financial leaders, because money is primarily a cultural product. Just as artists are essential to the movement of armies, which gather around music, uniforms, flags, so does the artist have a pivotal role in determining the future of money, and the future of the economy. So why shouldn't artists create their own money? It will not be Monopoly money, but anti-monopoly money. It will be real money to the extent that people trade with it."<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, similarly to Paul Glover, Michael Kurzwelley slides between the worlds, enhancing tension and provoking further broader interdisciplinary discussion around his practice. This plurality of self, namely the flexibility to perform different roles depending on the situation, is one of the reasons why Michael Kurzwelley's project has managed to develop successfully over the last nineteen years. The artist, who identified himself as such, performed the role of community developer alongside the duties of project manager, presenting his projects as political education, German-Polish border cooperation, social work, cultural initiative, and socially engaged art, depending on the resource of potential funding.

Needless to say, not all social practices are interesting or radical symbolic statements, even if they claim to be. In this regard, I agree with Claire Bishop that the typical community art project promoting community bonds and a positive mood by means of collective art-making

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/27/68004/anti-monopoly-money/>

cannot be considered relevant contemporary social practice as it lacks symbolic, metaphorical, and conceptual depth. On the other side of the spectrum, the symbolic practice that addresses social or political issues only through metaphorical representations, giving the audience the role of nominal or directed participants, loses its social function (Helguera 2011). Nominal participation here corresponds to the viewer's contemplation of the artwork, while directed participation, in its turn, invites the public to execute an idea that is already pre-directed by the artist. For instance, we can think of Fluxus scores and instructions, or interactive installations by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Another example of directed participation is the participatory performance, "City Council Meeting" (2013), by Aaron Landsman, which invites local community members to participate in a re-enactment of a local city council meeting, addressing issues of empathy, democracy and power.<sup>40</sup> The participatory theater, which artist calls "performed participatory democracy", addresses social issues in a symbolic way, depriving participants from any non-scripted activity. In comparison, Pedro Reyes's project "People United Nation" (2013), is also a participatory project that aimed to address issues through the imaginative play in which members of the community perform as diplomats and members of UN depending on countries of their origin.<sup>41</sup> "People United Nation" is an experimental participatory conference during which delegates creatively imagine conflict resolutions to current geopolitical conflicts. From the first sight, we can find here some similarities with Kurzweily's practice. However, Reyes's project was performed in a museum setting and addressed issues symbolically, as well as Aaron Landsman's participatory theater. Whereas, Kurzweily went further and turned "performed participatory democracy" into the lived every-day experience, the participatory democracy in action with real tangible consequences.

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.citycouncilmeeting.org/>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.pedroreyes.net/pun.php?sLang=en&Area=work>



Even though the tendency towards deliberate instrumentalization of art practices troubles the ontological status of art and the very existence of art criticism as a discipline, it is important to stress that the relationship between the symbolic and social practices is not hierarchical, nor mutually exclusive. Furthermore, the most intriguing and successful socially engaged projects, in fact, are comprised of a combination of social practice and symbolic practice simultaneously, and keep the ambiguity of artistic and social critique in tension. This tension can be achieved through Ranciere's "mediated third term"—an object, image, story, film, or spectacle that permits this experience to have a "purchase on the public imaginary" (Thompson 2012, 102). As an illustration, Paul Chan's project *Waiting for Godot* (2010) addressed the New Orleans post-Katrina trauma through four site-specific outdoor performances based on Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot". Chan organized scenery of Samuel Beckett's stage play, finding "a terrible symmetry between the reality of New Orleans post-Katrina and the essence of this play, which expresses in stark eloquence the cruel and funny things people do while they wait for help, for food, for tomorrow" (Thompson 2012, 102). Chan began to collect feedback from the residents of New Orleans on the idea of staging a free, outdoor production of the play. The artist spent nine months leading up to the production engaging New Orleans activists, artists, and organizers to help to shape and broaden the social scope of the project. The production was comprised of four outdoor performances in two New Orleans neighborhoods — one in the middle of an intersection in the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood and the other in front of an abandoned house in Gentilly. However, keeping the sustainability and accountability in mind, the project evolved into a larger series of events, including art seminars, educational programs, theater workshops, and conversations with the community. The project acted as a metaphor for the desperate situation of the citizens of New Orleans caught in between hope and waiting for help.

Furthermore, the project has evolved into a larger social production involving free art seminars, educational programs, theater workshops, and conversations with the community.

Thus, we can argue that one of the keys of a successful socially engaged art project is to engage the community in a dialogue of critical self-reflection by means of a symbolic mediated object, such as the scenery of the play, or time-based local currency, or, in case of Słubfurt, creation of the imaginary city. In this regard, Michael Kurzwelley's project is a good example of a successful long-term community-based social practice project. The artist has managed to transform the community into an active self-reflective civil society, producing tangible social impact on the wellbeing of the community. At the same time, the project reconciles the antagonism between aesthetics and politics, operating simultaneously both in symbolic and social realms. The invention of the imaginary universe of Słubfurt and Nowa Amerika, in this case, is the symbolic mediating object through which the artist communicates social issues of the marginalized border towns of Słubice and Frankfurt (Oder), inviting local community members from both sides of the river into dialogue and collaboration through the aesthetics of play. Before I analyze the symbolic dimension and social impact of Kurzwelley's work, I want to emphasize that one of the crucial aspects and reasons why we can consider this case study successful is its continuous development and the artist's commitment to the idea over the time. For nineteen years the spatial and durational boundaries of Kurzwelley's project have been developed, modified, and challenged. The project expanded its geographical and conceptual borders from the imaginary town, Słubfurt, to the country of immigrants, Nowa Amerika, engaging the whole Polish-German border region into a bottom-up grassroots civil society network. Therefore, in order to better understand the duration of aesthetics experience, we need to apply Grant Kester's method of durational diachronic analysis, mapping a number of things: how the project and the

perception of its various participants and community members have changed over time; how the civil society has evolved; and how artistic strategies and tactics have adjusted in response to social and political alterations. Therefore, firstly, I will focus on conceptual significance, artistic mastery and aesthetic dimension of Kurzwelly's project from an art critical point of view. Secondly, with the help of a sociological framework, I will examine the success of the project as community development, while trying to locate the tangible social impact of the practice on the local community.

### **Symbolic Practice**

When discussing Kurzwelly's work, we need to separate two layers: first, is the symbolic framework that the artist has created and that should be analyzed through the lenses of the artist's autonomy and aesthetic dimension of the work; second, is the various participatory projects implemented inside the conceptual frame; the multiplicity of experiences provided to the community through the "mediated third term." Here, by "experience of art" I mean the participation of local residents in the elaborate fictional reality of Slubfurt and Nowa Amerika; how residents co-exist and participate in its framework on a daily basis. However, prior to discussing the aesthetic dimension of Kurzwelly's work, it is helpful to map the definition of the "aesthetic" in the context of socially engaged art. Simon O'Sullivan, drawing on Deleuze's views on aesthetics, argues: "Aesthetics might, in fact, be a name for the rupturing quality of art: its power to break our habitual ways of being and acting in the world; and on the other, for a concomitant second moment: the production of something new" (O'Sullivan 2010, 196). Thus, in this context, we can understand aesthetics in terms of a process of imagining new worlds; creating new meanings that "break habitual ways of being" (O'Sullivan 2010, 196). O'Sullivan

defines two approaches to aesthetics in contemporary art: one of dissent (a turn from, or refusal from the typical), and a second approach of affirmation (O’Sullivan 2010, 197). Affirmative attitudes towards contemporary art are understood as the production of new combinations in and of the world, which suggest new ways and times of being and acting in the world. According to O’Sullivan these practices work through the “ruins of representations” and are involved in the production of worlds rather than in critiques and deconstructions (O’Sullivan 2010, 197).

Practices of dissent, on the other hand, are practices/gestures of deconstruction, mobilizing pre-existing reading strategies and interpretive paradigms, capturing art within our already-set-up temporal frames and systems of reference (O’Sullivan 2010, 189-207). In brief, the distinction lies between the logic of deconstruction, negation and critique, and affirmation, invention, and creativity. Therefore, an affirmative approach not only disrupts and deconstructs in a postmodern sense, but also proposes solutions and imagines alternative realities. The classic examples of negation methods from the historical avant-garde are the series of disturbing public performances of Zurich Dada’s Cabaret Voltaire (1915-17) full of provocation, absurdity, and nonsense poetry. In contrast, examples of affirmative approach are the practices of the constructed situations of the Situationist International (SI), which they defined as: “moments of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by collective organization of a unitary ambiance and game of events” (Bishop 2012, 85). In this respect, Kurzweily’s artistic strategy is one of affirmation, as he constructed a new fictional non-referential reality. He describes this through Foucault’s concept of “heterotopias” (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 22-27). For Kurzweily “heterotopias” are not utopias in the classical sense, because utopias are rather unattainable and idealized dreams. However, “heterotopias” are visions of better or of a different world, the starting point for the development of new realities set against existing structures. In the draft version of “QR code

book” sent by email to the author on July 17, 2018, Michael Kurzweily stated: “To be more precise, building upon Joseph Beuys’ concept of “social sculpture”, I should speak of the “plasticity of reality” - in contrast to a sculpture or a construct, plasticity is an unfinished process of an ongoing potential.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, Kurzweily asserts the existence of this new reality by visualizing it in the form of open-ended experimental laboratory of role-play in which he invites people to participate.

In my opinion, given the scale and multi-layering of the imaginary world of Słubfurt and Nowa Amerika, his projects are unique. They are meticulously elaborated and intertwined with fictional mythology and visual identity. While researching this project, it was challenging to distinguish between the “real” and the imaginary realms in Kurzweily’s work. It is hard to understand, for instance, whether the myth of the creation of the country Nowa Amerika is based on actual historical fact or on Kurzweily’s fantasy. Most importantly, it does not matter because once you believe in the existence of this country, you allow yourself to participate in the imaginative mind game, questioning the boundaries between what is real and what is already pre-constructed, and, most importantly, by whom. It seems to me that exactly this poetic aspect and playfulness of the project has encouraged the engagement of many local residents and people from the border region. Kurzweily invited the community to be part of the imaginary town and country through affirmative play. For instance, the project’s website, while mostly written in a serious conventional narrative manner, is sometimes randomly interrupted by elements of humor and absurdity. For instance, the description of the community newspaper “Profil” on the website says that the daily newspaper is especially notable for not appearing every day; or you can read that Nowa Amerika was founded at a conspiratorial meeting and the borders of Nowa Amerika

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<sup>42</sup> The draft of “QR code book” sent by email to the author on July 17, 2018.

are fluid: they shrink and expand depending on the origin of its actors. In contrast with “real” nation-states, the structure of Nowa Amerika has no strict rules, citizenship is easy to get (based on the fact that you believe that the country exist), the voices of the residents are acknowledged (everyone can propose his or her ideas and vote during the Parliament meetings), and the borders are open for everyone. Kurzwelly constructed reality by appropriating governmental attributes (flag, map, borders, coat of arms, anthem, constitution, and ID cards), institutions (University, Parliament, and Congress), and techniques of power manifestation through visual identity, social rituals, language, memory, and history. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau, while examining the everyday practices of people, distinguishes between “strategies” and “tactics.” For de Certeau, “strategies” are the execution of power isolated from environments; the generation of relations from outside the stronghold of its own “proper” place or institution (De Certeau and Mayol 1998, 152). Thus, political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model. On the other hand, through the daily “ways of operating”, “ways of being”, and what he calls ”multitude of tactics”, people from the position of the insider can potentially produce acts of resistance in everyday life. For instance, these include practices of reading, practices of speaking, practices related to urban spaces, and utilization of everyday rituals (De Certeau and Mayol 1998). For de Certeau, these practices of everyday life have political potency if they are used consciously. The strategy can be perceived as a discourse, tactics as a decision, act, and/or the manner in which the opportunity can be “seized” (De Certeau and Mayol 1998). Therefore, inside his strategic symbolic frame, Michael Kurzwelly uses a “multitude of tactics”: opportunities to subvert the commonplace, the silent hegemonic consent. Kurzwelly’s project has a powerful visual-linguistic dimension, as the city and the country have its visual identity (coat of arms, flag, cartography) and language. Slubfurt

and Nowa Amerika claim the legitimacy of the “Ślubfurtish” (“nowaamerikan”) language, a unique mix of German and Polish from the border region. The language is manifested through Ślubfurt and Nowa Amerikan socio-political institutes. For instance, through its national anthem or “Name Change Commission”, which is responsible for the naming of cities, regions, streets, the federation of Nowa Amerika consists of four fictional regions: Szczettinstan, Terra Incognita, Lubusz Ziemia and Schlonsk. The name of the country “Nowa Amerika” is a mix of Polish word for “new” - “nowa”, and German word for “America” - “Amerika”. Similarly, the original name of Nowa Amerika University – “Nowa Amerika Uniwersytät” is a mix of Polish “Uniwersytet” and German “Universität”. According to Pierre Bourdieu, in *Language and Symbolic Power*, linguistic exchanges are also relationships of symbolic power in which power relations between speakers or their groups are actualized. Bourdieu writes that language is a primary instrument of action and power; it represents authority, as well as manifests and symbolizes it (Thompson and Wolf 1997, 101-102). In this sense “Ślubfurtish” language subverts the dominant narratives, questioning the history of artificial separation of the people in the German-Polish border region. Moreover, it functions as a “minor-literature”: “A minor-literature stutters and stammers the major; it breaks with the operation of “order-words”, or simply stops making sense. Minor literature is always a collective enunciation; it works to pave the way for a community – sometimes a nation – yet to come” (O’Sullivan 2010, 200). As mentioned before, Ślubfurt and Nowa Amerika also manifest themselves through narratives and myths. Here we can recall the Deleuzian concept of “mythopoesis” (O’Sullivan 2010, 203):

“Mythopoesis – names the imaginative transformation of the word through fiction. This is the production of new and different myths for those who do not recognize themselves in the narratives and image clichés that surround them. It involves both signifying and asignifying components. In-fact so-called ‘reality’ is always already the result of myth-construction in the above sense. Events are made sense of through causal logic and other framing devices that dictate meaning and, indeed, the condition of what is considered meaningful”.

Therefore, the acceptance of the existence of Słubfurt and Nowa Amerika launches the process of counter-mythologization, unplugging constructed and top-down notions of reality through everyday practices. According to O'Sullivan, this "fabulation" produces a gap between fixed habits and rituals of a society (O'Sullivan 2010, 203). Consequently, this gap can be filled with what Deleuze calls "creative emotion", the release of inner creativity and imagination (O'Sullivan 2010, 203). With this being said, "mythopoesis" contributes to the construction of collective identity, memory, and history; to the sense of belonging.

### Social Practice

At the same time, in addition to conceptual and aesthetic merits, Michael Kurzwelley's project is an example of a successful strategic long-term social practice that affects the community in a deep and meaningful way through actual (not symbolic or hypothetical) social action that reorients artist-audience dynamics towards collaborative participation. More so, his practice resembles bottom-up community development as the artist invested his time and energy into designing the environment for the community empowerment. Kurzwelley defines his practice as a process-based open-ended laboratory, stressing the importance of the experimentation that gave him the freedom to test different formats and ideas. Kurzwelley's practice has a multilayered structure of participation, as the artist, throughout almost two decades, implemented various micro-projects and initiatives experimenting with modes and strategies of community engagement inside the imaginative conceptual framework.

Throughout the nineteen years the artist provided the community from both sides of the river Oder with various collective aesthetic experiences. Aesthetics, here, should be understood



in the sense of a knowledge that is communicated between a larger collective rather than a single consciousness (Kester 2013). Accordingly, another lens for the analysis of Kurzwelly's work is the multiplicity of the experiences that the artist designed for the local residents. In contrast to textual, object-based practices and short-term interventions that exist during the exhibitions or the limited time of commissions, long-term social practices are site-specific and durational. For this reason, they require a different approach to the lasting aesthetic experience produced on its participants; attention to the discursive, sensuous and social condition of space, as well as to the sustainability of the transformed consciousness (Kester 2013). Hence, the starting point of the analysis is to encompass the project diachronically as a whole, paying attention to the moments of its development through instants of conflicts and resolutions (Kester 2013). While discussing such projects, we need to ask the following questions: How has the perception of community members altered over the time? How did the spatial and durational boundaries of the project evolve? At the same time, shifting into a sociological discourse, allows us to set up additional frames for analysis of the lasting effects of the social practice on the community. The insights from the field of bottom-up community development are helpful in evaluating the effectiveness of social practices through parameters such as community empowerment and sustainability. In this respect, the role of the artist corresponds to the role of community organizer. The questions that we need to ask include: How has the project affected the well being of the community? What tangible social impact has been produced? Did the community eventually manage to sustain itself?

While examining Kurzwelly's projects diachronically, we can follow their transformation from the local community initiative to the well-established regional civil-society network. This transformation was possible due to the nineteen years of continuous committed work through

various participatory projects and community building events that addressed multiple social issues as the project evolved. When Kurzwelly started with Słubfurt in 1999 his primary goal was to reconcile the tension between Poles and German by building a sense of community in between two sister-towns of Slubice and Frankfurt (Oder). In 2000, he registered a non-profit community organization “The Citizen Association of Słubfurt” aimed at promoting the transnational character of Slubice-Frankfurt urban space. This administrative body helped the artist to apply for funding to support Słubfurt’s cultural initiatives and community building events. Kurzwelly has managed to build a strong self-sustainable community by establishing a ritual framework for social interactions (Lowe 2001, 457-471). In this sense, a ritual is a unique type of political interaction that serves as a context for possible change and releases imagination (Lowe 2001, 457-471). According to Lowe, this ritual framework includes bringing individuals together, embracing shared goals and setting a common mood. Kurzwelly has provided the community with the safe space for social interactions, such as the community “Café Słubfurt” where various community-building events took place (community art programs, workshops, music festivals, speaking clubs, community garden, community choir, and more). Kurzwelly also was able to build common ties of solidarity through the functioning of solidarity economies, such as “Time Bank” and Repair Café practicing ideas of generosity and free exchange. He managed to develop the sense of belonging (or Heimat) and common collective identity through designing a community symbol (Lowe 2001, 457-471). In this sense, it is the “mediating third term”, the visual identity and mythology of Słubfurt town through which the artist mediated collective experience, activating imagination of the community (Thompson 2012, 102). Later with the beginning of Nowa Amerika project, the Nowa Amerika University was designed to explore and strengthen collective identity through transpedagogical practices of that combine art making,

research and education in order to engage people in a cross-border dialogue about the issues of borders, land, identity, history and memory contractions. Mediatheka of Nowa Amerika University, for instance, is a community library and public visual archive designed to collect artifacts, thus consolidating common identity. The educational programs of Nowa Amerika University are inspired by community development methods, such as participatory-action research and photo-voice methods.

In order to illustrate how established ritualistic social framework transforms communities we should recall the grassroots institute of a direct democracy Słubfurt Parliament that emerged from the ritual of coming together under the bridge. In 2009, Kurzwelley created a framework in the form of a delegated performance during the annual holiday of Frankfurt-Slubice friendship, which further transformed into the regular practice of coming together under the bridge to discuss important for the community issues. Therefore, the model of creative participation (the one in which participants provide content for a component of the work within an already established structure) evolved into collaborative participation (in which participants share responsibility for developing the structure and content of the work in collaboration and direct dialogue with the artist) (Helguera 2011). Today citizens of Słubfurt meet regularly at the sessions of Słubfurt Parliament where they address shared community problems and concerns through collective-decision-making and brainstorming methods. Moreover, one of the reasons why Kurzwelley's practice can be considered successful is the healthy communication that artist has established with the community; the right balance between expertise and distribution of accountability between the artist/community organizer and collaborators (Helguera 2011). As Lowe argues, the role of the artist here is similar to that of the "ritual elder" who facilitates ritual social interactions (Lowe 2001, 457-471). In other words, the artist orchestrates a collective

experience, developing new strategies for coexistence. In addition, a successful project requires a collaborative environment and flexible framework that is not completely rigid and determined (Helguera 2011). Kurzwelly created a condition for the community members to put in use their expertise and interests. Commenting on the collaboration and authorship of his project, Kurzwelly points out that Słubfurt is not his individual creation, but rather is a collective creation: “I could not create Słubfurt by myself – it would’ve been a stillbirth. Słubfurt only functions when there is a group of people who bring their ideas and implement them within the frame that I have established. This means that the creative energy put into practice comes from the many people who get involved.”<sup>43</sup> Empowered by collective decision-making, the members of the community have built the self-organizational skills they have implemented in their independent projects: Time Bank “ZeitBankCzasu”, Słubfurt Radio, Repair café, and the community newspaper “Profil,” are among these. Today a variety of grassroots “Słubfurt” initiatives independently function without any external help of the artist. Together they discuss funding, facilitate cultural programming and strategic development of a common area. One of the most significant tangible results of Słubfurt Parliament community in action is the public space that citizens of Słubfurt have defended by joint forces. For many years, a vacant open public space near the city bridge of Słubfurt (district Furt) remained undeveloped, after the demolition of all buildings in 2004 in the hope of investors. During one of the Słubfurt Parliament sessions, active citizens came up with the idea for "Brückenplatz – Plac Mostowy" or "Bridge Square".<sup>44</sup> The project was implemented in the period of 2013-2015 by the hands of many civil society actors and partners in the Frankfurt (Oder) city administration. Eventually,

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<sup>43</sup> Hannes Langer, “Autopoetry: Słubfurt as a Self-Relating Social Sculpture”, catalogue “Azylum in Słubfurt”, 2016

<sup>44</sup> [http://www.parlament.slubfurt.net/parlament/de/slubfurter\\_platz.htm](http://www.parlament.slubfurt.net/parlament/de/slubfurter_platz.htm)

they claimed the public space, cleaned and built the square, and planted a public garden. The association of Slubfurt has managed to get funding from European cultural programs for development cultural program in the Bridge Square. In 2015, as part of the project “Activator”, there were 9 workshops and 15 concerts.<sup>45</sup> Today this public space provides the community with all kinds of recreational and cultural activities suitable for social interactions. Moreover, in 2013, Slubfurt community won the award "Aktivplätze - fertig, los!" of the state of Brandenburg for grassroots participation and urban design.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, I argue that Kurzwelly’s practice has led to community empowerment. According to Baum: “Community empowerment is more than the involvement, participation or engagement of communities. It implies community ownership and action that explicitly aims at social and political change. Community empowerment is a process of re-negotiating power in order to gain more control” (Baum 2008, 88-89). Above all, it is a bottom-up civic engagement, the ability to negotiate with power holders through small-scale local attempts and initiate independent projects through collective grassroots community action (Isidiho and Sabran 2016a).

Furthermore, in 2010, the regional Nowa Amerika civil-society network emerged as a result of the strength and self-sustainability of the local community of Slubfurt. Nowa Amerika was established to foster a grassroots civil-network across the German-Polish border, engaging the region into a broader dialogue to analyze the political dimension of grassroots societies. Today around 600 people hold Nowa Amerika ID cards. Nowa Amerika Congress functions on the regional level and meets once a year to discuss strategic plans and future projects, such as “Nowa Amerika Land of Immigrants” or “Nomadic Garden”. The dialogical project “Nomadic

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<sup>45</sup> <http://www.slubfurt.net/projekte/brueckenplatz-plac-mostowy/aktiwator-2015/>

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.slubfurt.net/projekte/brueckenplatz-plac-mostowy/aktiwator-2015/ideea/>

garden” explores the cultural needs and wishes of the inhabitants of “Nowa America” and promotes civil society through conversations with community members in small towns across Polish-German border.

One more example of the tangible social impact of created frameworks or ritual interactions is the successful integration of refugees into the local community. With the beginning of the European refugee crisis, Kurzwelly, together with his friend conductor, Thomas Spicker, initiated a choir “Singing cultures” for asylum seekers to invite them to participate in the life of the community in a non-conventional way. The project started from the ritual of coming together to sing and further was transformed into the program “Asylum in Słubfurt” (since 2014) that helps to reduce social isolation and provide asylum seekers with a real alternative and transnational safe space where everybody is welcome and feels at “home”.<sup>47</sup> Kurzwelly points out that the goal was to create a new kind of refugee inclusive institution that, in contrast to other official refugee centers in the world, will develop a totally different kind of input. Today twenty-one refugees share a physical key to the common public space. According to Kurzwelly, this is the most democratic element of his work and his biggest achievement. He calls this process “inter-culture” instead of “integration”, pointing out that Słubfurters and refugees need to share, exchange, and learn from each other.<sup>48</sup> For instance, the conversation club, "Café Blala," is a speaking club that invites local residents and refugees to exchange different languages, learning from each other. Słubfurt Parliament plays a key role in developing the infrastructure of solidarity; together they designed cultural community events in order to provide psychological support to asylum seekers, as well as looked for opportunities for social advocacy to increase refugees' chances in the court. Every Tuesday and Friday from 5 to 6:30 at

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.slubfurt.net/politika/azylum-in-slubfurt/>

<sup>48</sup> Kurzwelly, Michael. Interview with Olga Kostyrko. March/19/2018/

Brukenplatz refugees have an opportunity to meet local lawyer, Dieter Bollmann, from Frankfurt (Oder), who provides legal consultations, assists with the documents, and defends them in court. According to Kurzwelly, the lawyer is currently defending over 200 refugees.

When Kurzwelly started this project, he experienced many obstacles with local authorities. The project faced a lot of hostility in both towns because of the emancipatory and anarchic nature that challenged the normative logic of governmental structures. However, after years of committed work, the impact of his practice became so obvious that even the mayor of Frankfurt (Oder) acknowledged him in one of his public speeches. He emphasized that one of the reasons why the city sees reduced crime rates is the positive impact of Kurzwelly's projects on the community.<sup>49</sup> In fact, Frankfurt (Oder) became a safer town, compared to all other towns along the Polish-German border region that still experience problems with crime and violence. Namely, with the rise of nationalist ideologies and the flow of refugees, there is a lot of violence unfolded between local Germans and immigrants.

Given these points, Kurzwelly's practice is an example of successful bottom-up community development as it resulted in a self-sustaining civil-society of empowered citizens. The powerful imaginative component in combination with dedicated community work over the course of nineteen years has led to tangible social transformations, enabling the sustainable development of Slubfurt and Nowa Amerika through infrastructures of solidarity, grassroots civil society and engagement in critical self-reflective dialogue. By and large, these social changes are the products of the emancipatory potential of the collective aesthetic experience that enabled the release of social imagination: the capacity to imagine a better world, manifested in real action.

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<sup>49</sup> Kurzwelly, Michael. Interview with Olga Kostyrko. March/19/2018/

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