

It's Not That There is Too Little, It's That There Is Too Much:
Musings on the Literature and Lineage of Social Practice

By:

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I'm overwhelmed. Research tells us that when we are overwhelmed, we shut down. We can't process information or stimuli correctly because our bodies go into fight of flight mode. Overwhelm is digested internally like a trauma response. My MCP friend and colleague Amanda Peña – who is also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker – does an excellent job explaining how our brains and bodies respond to trauma. Not being Amanda, I do not do her excellent job here, but will share that her description starts with a fist – the fist is the brain and the different fingers and parts of the fist represent the different parts of the brain and our synapses firing and what parts take over during a trauma response. In the explanation, we all raise our fists in the air. I raise my fist. My brain is on fire. I am overwhelmed by the literature.

It's not that there is too little, it's that there is too much. The literature and scholarship on social practice is vast and deep. It comes from all different directions. While it has absolutely nothing to do with this paper, the title of our most recent reading has stuck in my overwhelmed, over-firing brain, and inspires this reflection essay. *Why am I always being researched?* Why am *I* always being researched? I am the literature. I am what I have read. I am social and spatial and a subject. I am practice. *Why am I always being researched?*

In order to do research, the researcher must place themselves in the context of the scholarly discourse. They must not only place themselves and their work, but they must also *contribute* to the discourse. It is no longer enough to learn or to be on a journey of discovery, one must identify gaps and fill them. Move the needle, my friends! Be *original*. Do not plagiarize, even though if you believe painting is dead, everything has been done and said before somehow, by somebody who is probably way smarter than you.

I'm a conceptual artist. I make a joke often that “someone had the great idea I just had in 1964.” If I'm going to place my work in a scholarly lineage, it starts with conceptual art and Lucy Lippard – my all-time greatest heroine. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* is the most important written work of humankind.¹ But Lippard didn't stop there. *Undermining* is her follow up and mea culpa to the world she and other conceptual art dematerialists blew up in the 1960's. And yes, in *Undermining*, Lippard talks a lot about bombs. The bombs of conceptualism, of the ego and power of the artist, of moving the earth, and of atomic

¹ I will actually fight myself on this, because I also think there are three other equally if not more important works that every single human should read, and those are *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *The Little Prince*, and *The Phantom Tollbooth*. If you only read those three books in your entire life, you'll probably turn out okay.

power and total annihilation by warfare – or worse, the slow destruction of humankind by nuclear waste storage. We wouldn't have social practice or planning without Lucy Lippard. Or so I thought.

In 2020, during the early days of the pandemic, I had gone back to graduate school part time. I was sitting on a stool in front of my computer in my Planning History and Theory class at the University of Maryland taught by Dr. Brittney Drakeford. On this particular day, Dr. Brittney Drakeford gave a lecture about the Black Panthers and Mutual Aid Societies. And my mind and world exploded. Dr. Brittney Drakeford did not know that planning history and theory had just exploded everything I knew about the literature and scholarly discourse because during the pandemic, we had no shared experience.

In that very moment, dematerialization and social practice *did not start* with Lucy Lippard and conceptual art. According to planning history as conveyed by Dr. Brittney Drakeford, at the very same time in the history of the world the Lucy Lippard brought us *The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, Black activists were shaping conceptual underpinnings of practice and understanding and they were doing it in the real world with real impacts, not in galleries and museums. The scholarly understanding of planning literature doesn't even consider the Black Panthers and Mutual Aid Societies the literature because they're practitioners and history, not theory. It's what scholars have written about them that is the literature.

I don't know what to do with this exclusion from the canon. I'm overwhelmed. My brain is still firing with a trauma response. I've been trying to process Lucy Lippard and the Black Panthers and Mutual Aid Societies for *over two years*, and I need help. Here's where the story goes even crazier.

In 1967, Jacques Derrida wrote *Of Grammatology*, which introduced the main ideas of deconstruction. (I would like to see an Amanda Peña explanation of deconstruction that features a fist.) Deconstruction pushes back on the Platonic ideals of set definitions of meaning; deconstruction is tensions between meanings and language, it's both the things that something used to mean and something new *at the same time*. Derrida is writing about the dematerialization of meaning while Lippard is writing about the dematerialization of the art object and the fragmentation of object and being as a means to use anti-form as a political statement. At the same time, the Black Panthers are using their bodies and formations and radical acts of care to undermine the traditional forms of hierarchical social practice, giving us mutual aid societies which are inherently anti-form and Derrida refers to all of these things as “undecidables” – things that are resisted and organized – “unities of

simulacrum—"false" verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition."

Out of this emerges social practice. Planners didn't read Lippard or Derrida, but they thought the work of the Black Panthers and Mutual Aid Societies was cool, so they started doing more of that social stuff and called it social practice. Artists looked at Lippard and the radical 1960's counterculture that was now getting big museum shows and thought that was cool, so they started doing more social stuff and called it social practice. This leads us to Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) in which he defined the term as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space." Claire Bishop hated Bourriaud's relational aesthetics and Nato Thompson's social practice so much, she wrote an awesome, scathing, bomb-dropper in *Artforum* in 2006 and published *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* a few years later. As someone who was and is obsessed with relational aesthetics, social practice, and the dematerialization of the art object, Bishop's scathing critiques are like if a planner criticized art makers. It's awesome. It calls all social practice work unethical and exploitative. It's like if *Why Am I Always Being Researched?* was published in *Artforum* instead of as a report for a bunch of community and economic development planners because you know those transportation guys aren't gonna read it. *Artificial Hells* really is a masterpiece, and I don't know why it's not on our reading list.

This is where I transition into the conclusion of the paper, say something brilliant and punchy in summary, restate my argument, and posit further research. In summary, I'm overwhelmed. I have a fist in the air that represents both overfiring synapses and protest. I need help understanding and crafting a literature review. Maybe you, dear reader, need clarification. To clarify, I really am asking for help crafting a literature review. Further research is needed to process and understand the literature. Social Impact and Practice just dropped *Insurgent Public Space* a couple of weeks ago and my mind is so blown I bought the book. I need to process that. Can we please not transition class to a new thing yet? There is still more work to do to understand *Why Am I Always Being Researched*. We are not done yet. In conclusion, I give a call to action: further research is needed.