Based on the project Art Gym at Tate Liverpool in 2016 the article outlines how the art museum as an institution has become a site for production and ‘participatory models’. Doing so it exposes the artistic and political background for socially engaged art and ‘the educational turn’, and the ways in which these practices manifest themselves within and beyond the museum.

As artists have moved towards models of post-studio practice, in which the art object is no longer privileged above other forms, the gallery itself becomes a site for production, interaction and debate. This turn, of sorts has seen the museum and the curators who programme exhibitions turn their attention to ”user experience”. As such, the contemporary museum is quickly moving into a site of production and gravitating towards participatory models. The conventional exhibition – the survey exhibition, or solo presentation – may still be favoured by museums, however it is being challenged by participatory, project-led activities that not only challenge viewers’ expectations but also the museum as a site of learning and co-production. The demands of the viewer in these spaces constitutes a new level of engagement for museums, as, often the emphasis is placed on process rather
than outcomes, the viewer may become an active collaborator, spectator or enactor; as the limits for practices such as that of Tino Seghal, Francis Alÿs and Santiago Sierra, may traverse the boundaries of the participant led process, their engagement is still dependent on the museum as the site of execution. Therefore, how might socially engaged, durational and situated practices manifest in and outside the museum, and what are the legacies associated with this? This essay will consider the contemporary museum as a site of active collaboration, as the project-based model has overtaken forms of artistic practice with an emphasis on knowledge production. At this precise moment the contemporary art world is undergoing significant shifts to widen participation in the gallery, and extend the commissioning process to include participatory projects. Thus, the position of the museum has shifted the emphasis towards project-based work. The standard exhibition format, in which a range of works are selected based on their thematic, scholarly, or aesthetic reasons, has been dropped by many contemporary art institutions in favour of the project – which allows for a variety of activities under one umbrella, such as symposia, talks, screenings, and artworks. It provides the curator, and the institution with an open format, which can easily be adapted. In the context of Art Gym, a participatory project led by Assemble with Tate Collective in 2016 at Tate Liverpool, this model will be discussed along with relevant examples that are illustrative of this transformative practice.

**Art Gym**

Tate Liverpool has actively been generating new projects with community groups and collectives, through the community, family and young person’s collectives. In 2016, Tate Collective together with Assemble formed an alliance in a project that ‘held the gallery hostage’ and produced a series of participatory projects. Tate Collective is a collective comprised of 16-25 year olds based at Tate Liverpool since the 1990s. Work with young people was pioneered here and later exported to other Tate sites, namely Tate Modern and Tate Britain. The group has previously programmed special events at Tate Liverpool, including activities during the school holidays. Assemble used their expertise as community organisers to negotiate a set of terms with directors at Tate Liverpool. These
“ransom notes” formed the basis of the project and led to the execution of a series of projects held at Tate Liverpool from 7 March – 31 March 2016. The gallery was transformed into a series of stations resembling a fitness studio, and as such the project was aptly named *Art Gym*. Visitors to the gallery could therefore enroll on a series of courses and activities centered on art making, with titles such as: ‘Build a Pinhole Camera’, ‘Small Cinema for Young Children’, ‘The Wellmaking Clinic’ and ‘Let’s Make a Zine for Art Gym: Editorial Workshop’. In addition, a comprehensive range of guest-led events, lectures, talks and workshops took place throughout the duration of the exhibition; offering the chance to artists to present their work and practices. The gym format allowed for a range of activities to take place at Tate Liverpool, as it used a familiar format of a gymnasium, where physical activity takes place. One could say this project followed a conventional model of participant...
led activity in the gallery that has a history in art education, whereby activities are created in response to visitor interaction.  For example, activities centered around stations that take place in museums, such as building a puzzle from a series of paintings, or completing a sculpture challenge. However, in this context, the collaboration between Assemble and Tate Collective created a new set of conditions, and enabled Tate Collective to enter into a curatorial process – planning, executing, delivering and developing the concept – which transfers the conventional power structure of the institution; whereby the programme is usually devised by curators and the vision of the artistic director. Through Art Gym, the museum became a site of co-production, learning and participation in which an emphasis was placed on process rather than actual outcomes, in the form of formalised complete artworks. Visitors to the gallery engaged in a series of activities, such as badge making or shooting films, in order to become part of the exhibition. The space created by Tate Collective allowed for this experience to manifest. It is worth noting the exhibition attracted a range of audiences from all age groups during the period it was open.

It is important to note that the global political economy of the art world is driven by the post-studio, ‘responsive’ artist, and the roving global curator. Both areas of practice are based on the project-model, shaped in turn by the successful connections. Although the project may be an all-encompassing model, used to link together a range of practices, it becomes applicable to curatorial labour, and a strategy for creative individuals under the uncertain conditions of neoliberalism. Thus, further participants can be included in the ‘project’, working across multiple sites and locations and delivering a variety of projects that may suit multiple audiences and groups.

Therefore, the boundaries associated with exhibitions and public programmes become increasingly blurred, as museums move more into a project-based model of programming. Both artists and curators favour the project model as it provides a context from which they are able to situate their practices, irrespective of spectatorship or participation; both of these distinct models no longer matter in the project model. In Art Gym Tate Collective members became the enactors and the programmers.
of the project. Consequently, it becomes evident that as museums move towards participatory models to engage with new audiences, at the same time they enter a new relationship with their audiences as co-producers of the projects they are willing to present. In Art Gym, the expertise of the learning and exhibition curators was used to facilitate the project, yet the programming of activities remained in the domain of the collective. In effect, this was a transfer of skills and empowerment on behalf of the institution; providing an opportunity for collective members to learn about curatorial processes. The collectives’ involvement with the project allowed for a range of practices to be included in Art Gym that perhaps would not have otherwise been shown. As the collective has links with other young peoples groups, this also provided an opportunity to offer shared sessions with other partners in the UK.

Socially Engaged Art in Context
In order to consider the rise of socially engaged and participatory art in the last twenty years, it becomes apparent to look at the history of community art. The role of community arts in the UK and North America have allowed artists to engage with a variety of community groups with the support from institutions. The arguments outlined in this essay are positioned in this context, and build upon a connection from a range of institutional contexts. A range of community arts projects took place from the 1980s onwards with the support of local and national government initiatives and, in the 1990s, as a means of creating social harmony in problematic areas. The history of community arts is crucial to understanding the development of socially engaged art today. However, it is often excluded from a socially engaged art trajectory, as it appears to be unfashionable and disconnected from the art world’s hype. Community arts projects in the UK and North America allowed a group of artists to work directly with people and later incorporate this into a language with which the art world is familiar. Suzanne Lacy coined the term New Genre Public Art in 1995. This term relates to the public art projects in which Lacy was involved. This allowed her, and others, to discuss the role of public art in the United States, which until then had largely been about public sculpture.
Crucially, notions of direct democracy through art, the initiatives of new genre public art, and outreach projects of the early 1990s were all important resources in the development of contemporary socially engaged art. These practices acted as a precursor to the interventionist claims of socially engaged art, and provided artists and curators with new strategies for engagement. Indeed, Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* is also indebted to this legacy. But, of particular importance from this period, however, is how community arts, activism, and public art undergo a fundamental re-orientation that is mostly lost or rejected in relational aesthetics with its gallery-based ethos. Bourriaud’s curatorial theory relates to activity happening inside the white cube, as in the work of Rirkrit Tirvanija. There remains no discussion in his writing about projects occurring outside of this context, that may enact a relational work.

Rather, what emerged in the 1990s under the ‘New Genre Public Art’ and the new community practices is part of a new language of social engagement. During this period (1990-2000) a number of projects emerged that focus on sustainable community art projects, operating over an extended period of time. The exhibitions *Culture in Action* in Chicago, and *Sonsbeek 93* in the Netherlands, are exemplary of this shift (as is Suzanne Lacy’s project *Full Circle* from 1993 with its hundred commemorative boulders). *Culture in Action* and *Sonsbeek 93* were two of the first major exhibitions to a focus on community art and the social as an ambitious and experimental space of activity. They placed an emphasis on place and locale; resulting in a range of projects, that addressed social and political concerns at the time. Most of the works in these exhibitions were produced by artists in collaboration with local groups, and in close communication with curators, opening up artists, curators, and collaborators to the demands of project-based work.

For example, Mark Dion created an intervention in Bronbeek, a museum attached to the Royal home for retired veterans, whose collection comprised objects (such as taxidermy) that Dutch soldiers and sailors had brought from overseas’ missions. Dion worked with the retired veterans. Miwon Kwon has argued how the primary target of this community-specific work during this period is the assumption that public art is the presentation or display of objects in public spaces (‘heavy metal’ public art). Indeed,
the issue of the public in this work links site-specificity and art to the production of ‘social’ rather than the production and consumption of objects within a formal or phenomenological framework. Projects are produced that focus on the process and engagement with an audience in favour of actual objects. In these projects the presentation of art in a given space of itself is overtaken by an emphasis on the project as a medium of artistic investigation. The material of the artist is the process (as it intersects with the social relations of collaboration). Thus, the artist becomes the intellectual and empowered subject who is able to enter into dialogue or exchange with a specific community, either via their own initiative or through an institutional affiliation. In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of artists and art collectives developed approaches to community-based work along these lines: Mark Dion, Gran Fury, Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio, Group Material, Ha ha, Jenny Holzer, Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, Daniel Martinez, Amalia Mesa-Bains, REPO-history, Tim Rollins and Krzysztof Wodiczko. This work shares the same cultural and intellectual framework of collaboration as Culture in Action and Sonsbeek 93. But by the beginning of the 2000s the specific social demands of collaboration in Culture in Action and Sonsbeek 93 become more explicitly about artists’ engagement in specific contexts and how they might share their skills with a community in order to transform a particular state of affairs or context. Consequently new community art thinking has had a transformative impact on both what remains of community art and how socially engaged art is produced within communities. The distinction between community art and socially engaged art, therefore, may institutionally still exist (community art exists outside museums, in community centres, schools and social centres; socially engaged art may take place in the same locations, but it is often verified by an art institution such as a museum or gallery, who has directly commissioned the work), but, intellectually and culturally, community art and socially engaged practice are mutually defining. However, there are models that traverse these boundaries, in that they may have an institutional valorisation or a commissioning role, and still remain an autonomous project, this is exemplified in Jeanne van Heeswijk’s 2Up-2Down/Homebaked (2012-) project in Liverpool, commissioned by the
Liverpool Biennial. This project features many of the characteristics of Grant Kester’s ‘dialogical aesthetics’, in so far as the artist was invited by the biennial to create the project in a rundown area of the city, away from the regenerated centre. The major premise of Grant Kester’s ‘dialogical aesthetics’ is that twentieth century avant-garde practices are mistrustful of the communicational model of dialogue and therefore resort to various anti-discursive means to radicalise art production, notably shock and abstraction. As Marc James Léger notes, Kester’s model tacitly assumes that modern aesthetics can do more to contribute to progressive social change if class struggle (and a politics of negation) is replaced with social interaction. Kester’s dialogical aesthetics offers, then, a counter argument to Relational Aesthetics, on precise social democratic terms, bringing an American pragmatism to a new community art ethos. Dialogical artists are interested, first and foremost, in what a given community, in a given locale, might share and exchange. They favour these engagements over gallery-led activity, and expand the notion of what an engagement might be.

In Liverpool, this regeneration project is able to fulfil a purpose by strengthening a community’s sense of itself by promoting ‘feel-good’ social values. Initiatives such as this are often aimed at marginalised groups in poor areas and aim to empower the community overall, or at least ameliorate some of its difficulties. Suzanne Lacy defines “interactive, community based projects” of this kind as particular kinds of transformative-centred social practice. Her use of the term ‘New Genre Public Art’ reveals an interest in artworks that have a practical value and that make an immediate political impact. The art’s response to local contexts is focused on the creation of a collaborative process that develops the consciousness of the artist and co-participants.

**The legacy of Community Art**

It is important to note that in the 1980s, however, community arts became the victim of government-led funding which resulted in projects being led by funding as opposed to being artistically led, through the notion of ‘welfare arts’. In the UK, art institutions such as the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, the Arnolfini in Bristol, the Serpentine Gallery, and...
Tate Liverpool became Arts Council, “centres of excellence.” These galleries, contributed to by publically funded organizations, focused on developing a modern and contemporary programme of art. Gallery education became linked to individual artists’ positions. Some public galleries at the time, however, retained their link with the community art legacy. The Whitechapel Art Gallery in London’s East End became a centre for community education opportunities as well as placements for artists. These placement projects were linked to a remaining legacy of community arts in the borough of Tower Hamlets, including ‘THAP’, ‘The Art of Change (Formerly the London Docklands Poster Collective)’ and ‘Cameraworx’. This kind of approach ends, however, under New Labour, where ‘gallery education’ and ‘outreach’ take over from community art projects. However, many practices have been adopted, and owe a great deal to the community art movement. The Showroom Gallery in London has been running a long-term programme (2015-2017) looking at communal knowledge. The visual artist, Ed Webb-Ingall has been leading community groups in workshops to create community videos, as part of the series, ‘People Make Videos: UK Community Video from the 1970s to now’; this project appropriates community video techniques from the 1970s.

This change is evident in museums outside of London, such as Walsall Museum and Art Gallery, and the Middlesbrough Institute for Modern Art (MIMA), where audience interests are integrated into the programme rather than seeking audience involvement beyond the gallery. The role of the participant-observer emerges as galleries seek to widen their participation in the gallery itself. Public art commissions, solo exhibitions, and new models for collaboration see curators and educators emerge as the new producers of gallery ‘outreach’. A new paradigm of curating has thus brought about a range of engagement in art. As the socially engaged curator has emerged in this field, his or her investment in art as a socially transformative tool has become omnipresent. At the same time, these practices place an emphasis on the welfare state and social democracy as it once was, and as such become active decision makers in the future of projects that engage in social discourses across community rebuilding, activist networks, and regeneration.
In parallel with this shift, the participatory values of ‘New Genre Public Art’ began to find a place within this new gallery-centred community remit in the UK, Europe and North America. Curators and institutional directors sought to engage art in ‘real’ non-art places, and facilitate the participation of artists and curators in ‘unique’ or ‘authentic’ locales, thus increasing the chance for real community engagement. The people involved in this process can, according to Miwon Kwon, “install new forms of urban primitivism over socially neglected minority groups.” In these terms, the question of community (its involvement, transformation) becomes crucial to art’s move from art context to non-art context. The Serpentine Gallery’s Edgeware Road Project (2005-2010) remains a key example of this shift. The project manifested as a range of projects on the Edgeware Road in London, working directly with community schools and community groups, the work involved the majority of the members of this community: a busy, multi-ethnic London Street. By taking place in a circumscribed geographical context, the artists were able to intervene directly within the fabric of the community, and as a consequence its community problems and alienation.

The Edgware Road Project, 2012. Photo: Peter Erni
The *Edgeware Road Project* emerged out of a desire from the public programmes curator, Sally Tallant, to create a long-term project that extended over a period of five years. With the support of a team of curators and artists who had the expertise and desire to work with community schools and community groups, the work involved the majority of the members of this community: a busy, multi-ethnic London Street. By taking place in a circumscribed geographical context, the artists were able to intervene directly within the fabric of the community. This complex interaction, therefore, avoided some of the concerns of older community practice and ‘New Genre Public Art’ idea of representing/working with ‘neglected’ or ‘minority’ communities. The community, in its totality, was constructed as a heterogeneous unity, in which all who engaged in the project, contributed. Similarly, Superflex’s *Tennantspin*, commissioned by FACT in Liverpool, allowed local residents living in a high-rise development to film, program, and edit their own local TV show, without recourse to ‘well meaning’ guidance. Superflex provided the groups with the resources to engage with TV, and used the institutional affiliation – FACT, one of the UK’s largest media arts centres – to facilitate this process.

Facilitating community involvement, in these terms, is of course no given thing. It is dependent on the willingness of the participants and their desire to learn and acquire new skills. The role of the curator, then, in this ‘new community’ socially engaged art, is about first and foremost constructing and enabling a free space of engagement for participants. That is, in mediating between the artist and the community group, the curator seeks to secure the condition for participant autonomy. Kwon puts forth the view that in many social engaged practices the opposite applies: participation is predicated on the assumption that communities are coherent and unified. The problem is not that artists and curators construct an ideal image of the community, but that a socially engaged project often carries with it an inflated social imperative that is promoted by funding bodies, curators, and city administrators. Both *Tennantspin* and *The Edgeware Road* Project took place outside the walls of the museum, although some of the activity may have taken place inside the gallery, the process and collaboration existed within the community groups. In opposition to this model of engagement in the community is the concept of co-producing projects with communities, whether this is at the museum or in a specific locale. Museums such as Tate Liverpool may seek to expand the idea of learning in the museum by “learning through audiences” and as such this presents a range of new challenges. As the educational turn in curating has been debated in the ways in which the curator appropriates educational models in his or her practice, the new model of co-productions present a wider set of challenges and debates. Rather, the institution itself needs to undergo changes to facilitate these projects, hierarchies and boundaries have to be corroded and essentially more of us (curators) have to take bigger risks.

**Producing Knowledge**

Curators have responded to the challenges associated with art making by producing projects that rely on educational models, and ultimately they seek to educate audiences. These would include: alternative art schools, reading groups, lecture series, and mobile teach-ins. As Kristina Lee Podesva notes, “Educational formats, methods, programs, models, terms, processes and procedures have become pervasive in the praxes
of both curating and the production of art and in their attendant critical frameworks.”

Within the art world, the knowledge producers – mostly curators and artists – are able to engage in projects that encompass educational methods, or even through the most simple of means, such as an artist’s talk. As John Roberts has observed, this pattern is highly prevalent in the biennial structure: The world of the biennale – and its links to various public galleries around the globe that see themselves as commissioning ‘research centres’, rather than simply exhibition spaces – has become one of the few large public arenas still able to function as a space of open dialogue, in which artists and intellectuals and the public can participate. The rise of the philosopher-speaker and political activist at such events since the 1990s is a case in point.

Roberts views this as one of the few places where dialogue can take place, and indeed he is right. The demand for discussion-based events in the contemporary art world is indeed very high. Curators and artists alike are able to engage in the system of knowledge production whether or not it is dependent on a specific exhibition. Increasingly there is a demand for discussion-based events; audiences are increasingly willing to take part in events that provide a framework around a set of ideas or a topic. Attending a talk at a museum or gallery does not require as much commitment as enrolling in an accredited course does, yet it can provide as much stimulation for the attendee.

Increasingly within the education sector, museums are offering education programmes on a short and long-term basis. The museum itself has become a centre for education, and while the shift in emphasis has seen an increase in those who take up places in more educational environments, the demand for education in art institutions has coincided with this. The educational turn has emerged at the same moment in the political economy, where the demand for ‘creativity’ seeks an outlet in further education, and this is not only limited to artists themselves.

In addition, the educational turn has provided curators and educators with the opportunity to present a set of ideas under a general theme and predicate other practices and research topics into these constellations. The transfer of art teaching to museums and art centres allows for a
greater shift. Every institution that has an educational department has put resources in place to further support this, using a hybrid format of lectures and seminars as presentations. The presence of the curator has allowed the educational turn to be used for productive ends. Nevertheless there remains a clear distinction between the educational turn in the institutional context, in relation to pre-existing learning roles, where projects have been established, and in artistic praxis, where artists use pedagogical mechanisms with an open workshop format. Curators produce educational programmes in collaboration with artists, and are able to seize on a variety of networks and expertise to conduct these initiatives. The mechanism of the art-knowledge-programme alters art’s relationship to production, in that artists and curators who are involved in the delivery of art activities do this in the form of knowledge and pedagogical programmes, which may not produce art objects. In this re-functioned role, the artist becomes a researcher, involved in both participatory strategies and knowledge production. Their practice is not dedicated to the studio – as an object-making mission – but rather to the form of a planning role, as is usually associated with that of the educator. In this model, artistic practice and curatorial practice interact with the pedagogical and become practices delinked from their institutional associations. The pedagogical function offers an alternative methodological possibility where people can learn about a specific topic. However, this also develops into a “sociospatial, participatory activity”, in that it is removed from additional market objects of education – schools, universities and colleges – in these spaces learning is seen to be “instrumentalised and disciplined.”

Projects, which take on pedagogical elements, such as talks, screenings, and lectures, are able to operate in a flexible way, and thus attract different audiences at each iteration. Although the overall project may be connected under one theme, the audience may elect to only attend one part of it, which is appealing to them. The diversity of the audience may also reflect the different needs of the project, which require experts who are present in the audience to contribute to and change the dialogue that is going on. What remains at stake in this new regime of knowledge and production is far beyond what is known as “the social turn” in art.
Participatory practices engage audiences beyond the short-term aims of the projects outlined earlier in this debate, and instead allow for co-productions and the sharing of knowledge with audiences. Socially engaged art has moved into other areas in society, operating outside of art institutions and indeed the art world. It moves beyond the norms of artistic production and into service providing, social commentary, activism, community organisations, urban design, and ecology. Twenty-five years after Suzanne Lacy coined the term ‘New Genre Public Art’, the art practices that constituted these practices are no longer “new” and instead they function in a system of convergence between society and art.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, artists and curators have responded to the challenges associated with art making by producing projects that rely on educational models, and ultimately they seek to educate audiences. Pedagogical projects offer a break from conventional art school learning as well as providing organizing structure for artists and curators. Part of the legacy established by community art projects in the 1960s and early 1970s was the collective learning-through process. In many ways projects such as *Art Gym* are indebted to this legacy, they build upon the processes identified during the period, and co-exist under the new regime in the museum. Throughout the last decade these projects have taken on a public and civil-society role, given the cuts in education (particularly adult education) and cuts generally to state provision for the arts (and to outreach). Thus the growth of self-organized structures outside of mainstream institutions have convened themselves as sites of *alternate* learning, inadvertently collapsing the divisions between formal sites of education and non-formal sites, such as creative practice, performance, and activism. When knowledge production becomes the focus of activities in the art world, it becomes a field of critical potentiality, and a potential place for free exchange.
Michael Birchall

MA and PhD is curator of public practice at Tate Liverpool and senior lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University in Exhibition Studies. His interests include: socially engaged art, participatory practices, queer history, community art, exhibition histories from the 1960s onwards, and new forms of creative labour in the arts. Previously he has held curatorial appointments at The Western Front (Vancouver, Canada), The Walter Phillips Gallery at The Banff Centre (Canada) and Künstlerhaus Stuttgart (Germany). Forthcoming curatorial projects include a socially engaged commission at Tate Liverpool to take place in Spring 2017; a series of projects at Tate Exchange around Queer genealogy, access and mediation; and a series on the crisis of overproduction in the arts. He has co-edited the journal After the Turn: Art Education Beyond the Museum (On Curating), and his writing has appeared in Art & the Public Sphere, Frieze, Modern Painters, On Curating, C-Magazine, and various catalogues.

NOTES

1 Assemble are a collective who work across the fields of art, architecture and design, to facilitate the production of projects with communities. In 2015 they won the Turner Prize for their project in the Gramby Four Streets, Liverpool. This project included a major refurbishment of derelict housing and the creation of community led activities.

2 http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/display/art-gym (last accessed 05.05.16)


4 In museums in Europe, other models of co-production are emerging including Tensta Kunsthall’s ‘Tensta Museum’, and the Queens Museum’s ‘Immigrant Movement International’. These projects, commissioned by institutions, usually focus on a specific locale and engage in that context for a set period. The artists become part of an unfolding research process in the embedded community, with the curators working as temporary liaisons between institutions, artists, local councils, and national governments.


14 Moody.


16 Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*.


18 Léger.

19 Helguera.

20 Lacy.

21 Kester.

23 Tate Liverpool distinguished itself in the 1990s as space for contemporary art, which placed an emphasis on community engagement at its core.

24 http://www.theshowroom.org/exhibitions/communal-knowledge-at-work (last accessed 05.05.16)


26 Moody.


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