

What Cannot Be Seen: Thoughts and Notes on Social Practice and Social Sensibility

By Alessandro Rolandi

In 2009, I organized an intervention at the Beijing CIGE art fair, in which I led 22 people with different skills and backgrounds through the corridors of the art fair until each of them dropped out of the line and started a performance or an action whose content, length and characteristics were unknown to myself and to the others. The event had been given an unofficial authorization from the curator of the experimental section of the art fair and generally fit under the definition of “performance”. During the event, which lasted almost two hours, no one apart from the individual artists, directed or controlled the sequence of the events. It was not stopped by the authorities, who only approached us afterwards to kindly tell us that this should not happen again.

The performances had been designed and organized over the course of two months of theatrical training and shared moments, during which members of the crew met, discussed and practiced methods and exercises that were not related to the final event.

The event was called “The Blind Leading the Blind”; this was my first professional experience in which elements from Situationalism, Happening, Guerrilla Intervention, social practice and social intervention merged together in an unplanned way; at the time, being only partially aware of these references, I had worked following intuitively few simple principles:

-) Changing the reality and the function of a physical space for a short time using a human presence and human action as a sort of poetic suspension for the set of rules and habits of the chosen space.
-) Having the project accepted without being fully explained (step by step in details) in order to create a spontaneous situation in which neither the artists, nor the organization could be “in control” or “directing” what would happen according to a script or a plan.
-) Thinking through this open situation in a way that would give the public the opportunity to “use” it on multiple levels: surprise, participation, refusal, engagement and criticism.

Since that event I have been engaging in actions and performances in public spaces, sometimes using humor and provocation (for example, in an open call to all foreign artists to sweep Beijing’s *Gulou* Square on May 1, 2013, re-enacting in a ironic way Joseph Beuys’ action in China without any public meeting of workers or students taking place at all¹, sometimes creating poetic suspension (such as in my collaborative works with Megumi Shimizu: the slow walking in the *hutongs* – named “Something on the Way”² – or playing Russian roulette by walking randomly under a tall building while bricks were blindly thrown from the top, named *Where/Nali?*³).

In some works I have used guerrilla tactics and secrecy, (as in the fruitful and extended collaboration with *Forget Art*⁴), while in others I have taken the more didactic approach of creative movement workshops or group readings and group performances (as in “Words” at *Homeshop*⁵). These interventions always included collaborations with other artists and sought after a loss-of-authorship within the process.

¹ <http://aestheticsofprotest.org/tag/alessandro-rolandi>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zspXAx8RRbM>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0f5z69dAqec>

⁴ <http://www.forgetart.org/>

⁵ <https://vimeo.com/45763756>

Although I still consider all these forms of intervention as legitimate and valuable, at one point I felt the need to go further and it seemed there would be only two ways to do it: either pushing the poetic suspension to the edge of direct confrontation (remaining in a dualistic logic of opposition), or trying to invent a new space inside the system with a different set of rules of engagement.

In 2010, I started my Social Sensibility Research and Development⁶ program at Bernard Controls Asia in Beijing; in 2011 an internal department was created and the legitimacy of an artistic presence in the company became real. Since then various artists have been invited to contribute to the research and develop their own. In 2014, the project was extended to the Bernard Controls plant in Paris-Gonesse, and in 2016 the first artist was invited to develop a four-month-long project in the French plant.

The artists' interventions never followed a rigid path and the practice of the department has been constantly adjusting in order to respond to the necessity of maintaining a level of spontaneity and disturbance inside a flexible structure of legitimacy and organized timeline embedded in the company's day-to-day activity.

One intervention by Chinese artist and curator, Ma Yongfeng, a graffiti tag in which the former motto of the company, "Invest in Confidence" is twisted into "Invest in Contradiction," synthesizes what I now consider to be one of the core values of my practice; a strategy according to which, in my experience and understanding, the idea of social practice can be developed.

I should make clear here that I think social practice can and should be carried on in various ways; more or less confrontational, more or less organized, more or less spontaneous, or more or less structured. Nevertheless, in terms of my own approach, "invest in contradiction" represents the conceptual mode I see that remains open, unpredictable and, as of yet, not restricted or confined to the dualistic dynamic of resistance or collusion in which art has been cornered by the modes of production and existence of late semi-capitalism.⁷

"Invest" is nowadays commonly understood as a purely capitalist word, perhaps the key word that suggests economy, innovation, speed and the modern notion of progress as a linear drive through space and time. "Contradiction" is a word that occupies the realm of dialectic, art, creativity, spontaneity, emancipation and imagination; it exists and it is easily associated with the idea of resistance, suspension, impasse, entropy, blockage; a zone where progression is not necessarily linear and often not seen as necessary in itself. Contradiction is a word feared by investors.

It is where the notion of progress and the linear interpretation of the capitalist system experience friction, where they are questioned and their own logic is challenged. Contradiction as an impasse that needs to be "solved" then, (generally in the western interpretation), can ultimately lead either to violent revolt, or to slow apathetic stagnation, reiterating a dualistic logic.

In China, contradiction is understood not only as an impasse, but also a dynamic tension and moreover, an interesting condition in itself that sometimes does not need to be "solved" but can exist the way it is, because of its potentiality.

⁶ <http://www.socialsensitivity.org/>

⁷ <http://theamericanreader.com/on-theory-and-finance-review-of-berardis-the-uprising>

When we say, “invest in contradiction” we are not “translating” each of the words into a specific and specialized jargon more suitable for art or more suitable for business; we are simply juxtaposing them, suggesting that one could support the other, and that in doing so, it would be supporting an apparently opposite force.

The obvious question is which logic, for example a Kamikaze logic, could support such an argument. What I wish to suggest here is that we should shift our understanding of contradiction from that of a “frozen” situation to that of the initial stage of a process of individuation, a process that never determines a definitive state, but only a temporary coexistence of dynamic instabilities.

By “investing” in this kind of process we can create a new situation for art, culture and economy to explore and interact in a different way, from which a different balance can emerge.

This requires openness, courage and risk, because our departure is not simply from the standard logic of investment, but it goes much further, into the territory of an unknown risk dealing with the very notion of order and disorder. This kind of philosophy does not work piece after piece, analyzing concept-by-concept, or testing thesis after thesis; it rather works holistically and pragmatically. It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things that we did when we spoke in the old way. It suggests instead, that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else, but not suggest this on the basis of antecedent criteria.

It rather re-describes lots of things in different ways, until they will have created a pattern, a linguistic vocabulary and a direct experience one, which will be possible to adopt and which will push the rising generation to look for different appropriate forms of non linguistic behavior.

The Social Sensibility Research and Development department at Bernard Controls has been functioning according to this logic and in this is its value as a social and artistic experiment. The long-term, integration of art and artists in a company as a tool to stimulate sensibility has already created important shifts:

- 1) The material of art becomes relationship;
- 2) Art is not the “purpose” but a tool that triggers collateral effects;
- 3) Art is integrated into reality, not in the form of object-oriented production, but in that of research and experimental practice;
- 4) People are no longer just viewers but they become “users” of art; they become artists and creative dynamics;
- 5) The mental and physical space where the encounter between artists and workers/employees/managers happens is not defined, not compulsory and not necessary and needs to be negotiated every time;
- 6) Conceptually and practically, instead of simply bringing “art” into the company life, we are bringing “the artist” to share and deal with it.

Therefore, this encounter exists in a zone where the normal conditions for art and work do not apply and it exists only if the two parties accept to maintain and explore this uneasy and unfamiliar territory that does not belong to either of them and in which, as a consequence, they are both more fragile, more exposed and less in control.

The logic of this new territory is different from that of the art world and from that of the corporate world.

In this new context, art takes risks by functioning in a complex relational situation where its absolute independence is challenged by its interaction with a living, optimized and regulated

environment; the company takes a real risk of productive interference and potential disruption by opening constantly its doors to creative forces.

Because of this situation, in which both the art world and the corporate world are meant to commit to such a dose of risk in a new unknown “space”, it is shortsighted to think of the idea of social sensibility only as a form of social practice within the realm of art.

I’d like to think this “social sensibility” (that is able to create, preserve and explore this kind of space), as a hybrid form emerging from this new, different and complex dialogue started by two fields apparently in open contradiction on multiple levels.

And if this space can exist, as we proved with the SSR&D department at Bernard Controls, and if it can be expanded to other companies, then social sensibility could be a tool to promote a shift from a quantity-oriented perception of the relationship between work and life to a quality-oriented one, through a “radical” stimulation of social imagination.

What we mean by “radical” here also needs a reconsideration of the current perception of this word – that of a violent external outburst to force change– to its original meaning: “root.” In this sense, a radical action individuates the hidden core of a system and carries out a specific and sophisticated action at this deep critical point to influence the whole external output.

In our understanding, this root can be identified with the “social bond”, which we consider as the most precious and crucial element; the one on which it is still possible to imagine and build the fabric of a present and a future society, and that, unfortunately, is undergoing a quick process of disruption.

It is possible to revitalize the social bond through the exposure of working environments (those where most people spend most of their time) to a different logic, such as that of art.

In the case in which the public becomes one of art users instead of one of art viewers, or even one of art makers (as in specific projects within the Social Sensibility, such as the “work/live”⁸, a new logic appears that can be used without necessarily being adopted, and become, at the same time, an empowering practical tool and, on the level of experience, a source of increased human dignity.

In order to establish a connection with a lineage of studies and practices in the West, the research on Social Sensibility finds its inspiration in the historicist and pragmatist philosophy, that since a while ago, has tried to go behind the theological and metaphysical attempt to fuse the public and the private (heritage of Plato, Kant and Hegel), and with Dewey, Rawls, Rorty, Habermas on one side (that of the desire for a more just and free human community) and Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault on the other (that of the desire for self-creation for private autonomy)has denied that there is such a thing as “human nature” or the “deepest level of the self” and insisted that socialization and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down—that there is nothing beneath socialization and prior to history which is defines the human.

In Social Sensibility the assumption to consider “art as experience” recuperates elements from the tradition of Dewey, Steiner, Beuys, Fluxus, Situationism and other practices from the 60ies and 70ies in which the process-oriented understanding of art practice is considered more relevant (in its didactic level, in its spontaneous one, in its participatory and in its socio-political ones) that the object-production-oriented one.

⁸ <http://www.socialsensibility.org/project-36-Tianji-Zhao-A-Rolandi-Work-Live>

Yet, if compared to these practices, it differs in the sense that it tries to de-legitimate established references without replacing them, and, it operates to maintain its nature organically unstable enough to foster a process of redefinition of each sphere (that of art and that of corporate work and daily reality at large).

In terms of specific references to hybrid practices between art and industry, the experience of the Artist Placement Group in England in the 1970s and that of “Experiments in Art and Technology” of Bell Laboratories, constitute a logic link, but in both the “organic” aspect was not a priority.

Yet if I have to mention a more meaningful and inspiring experiment to refer to, I’d definitely suggest Jacotot’s anti-stultification practice as described in Jacques Ranciere’s “The Ignorant Schoolmaster”, without forgetting the French philosopher’s further historical inquiries on spontaneous and self-taught emancipatory and creative behaviors in his ‘Proletarian Nights’ and his specific analysis of relationships between aesthetics and politics in “The distribution of the sensible.”

Finally, considering the difficult topic of ethics and economics in Human Development, the research in Social Sensibility can be also looked at as a tool to pursue some of the conditions described in Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s Capability Theory as “fundamental” to grant the notion of individual human dignity, such as those regarding the possibility to engage in various social interaction, to articulate and cultivate emotions, senses, imagination, thought and play.

Sen’s notion of *agency*, intended as the often contradictory nature between people’s values and their personal well-being, (which translates *Liberum Arbitrium*) also echoes meaningfully Social Sensibility’s drive to ultimately explore the difficult and contradictory topic of freedom of choice.

If we are looking at references in Eastern philosophy, we can navigate through the tradition of Taoism to transpose its inner conceptual value of ‘negativity’ and non-action into a possible idea of the artist “by subtraction” to reach out to the already mentioned definition of “contradiction” and its development along the centuries in both the philosophical and the political fields.

Particularly in dealing with Chinese language and narrative it is not difficult to find pragmatic examples of logic shifts that can help communicating the importance of this key moment. For example in a passage of Shen Fu’s classic “Six Records of a Floating Life”, addressing the units of measure of space and length, respectively *li* (里) and *mu* (亩), we learn that “The length of the *li* (里), or Chinese mile, has varied greatly with time, place and circumstances. It is customarily taken to be about one third of an English mile. Frequently however, the *li* (里) was less a measure of distance than it was a measure of effort required to cover a given distance. An uphill road would measure more *li* (里) on the ascent than it would on the descent.”

In the same way: “The Chinese acre, the *mu* (亩), is usually converted at the rate set by nineteenth-century treaty in Shanghai as being equal to 1/6 of an English acre, by local practice, however, it could vary anywhere from 1/15 to 1/3 of an English acre. There are some indications that this variation may be accounted for by varying productivity of the land at the time the local standard was set. The real definition of a *mu* (亩) would thus be the amount of land required to produce a given yield, and a MU of high quality land would be smaller than a *mu* (亩) of low quality land.” The ancient logic of the *mu* (亩) and the LI challenges the mere logic of a “standard unit of measure”, introducing a “flexible unit of measure” and yet its “other logic” is impeccable and more sophisticated because of its complexity and sensibility.

Now this digression through theory is not simply an attempt to justify or to legitimize our research.

The debate about a different logic is carried on through a Wittgensteinian analogy between vocabularies and tools in a way according to which these references inspires us, suggests us tactics and methods and help us to try and figure out where we are and what we are doing at every different phase of this organic development.

Yet, as our attitude is closer to that of the poet, in the wider sense of one who tries and make things new, we are typically unable to make clear exactly “what is that we want to do” before we developing the language in which we are doing it.

The new vocabulary we want to create (and the related logic shift) would make it possible, for the first time, a formulation of our own purpose. It will be a tool for doing something which could not have been envisaged prior the development of a set of descriptions which it itself provides.

And this new vocabulary can not be a discovery about how old vocabularies fit together, a result of successfully fitting together pieces of a puzzle: it should be more like discarding two or more vocabularies whose mutual interference has created an impasse and proceed to invent another one to replace them.

This is more about imagination then about discovery.

Despite an endless search for rational and simplified models to address everything, human life, in all its aspects, remains a very complex and articulated process and every individual is generally capable of functioning in the organic complexity of reality.

This also makes sense when thinking the nature of the social bond, which cannot really be designed, taught or forced, but needs instead to be “imagined” and lived through its tensions and contradictions if we wish for a diverse and more egalitarian social dynamic to appear.

Under this premises, the emergence of an organic social landscape built around sensibility, through an expanded notion of art practice, can give birth to a new critical sense which will bypass the necessary but ultimately passive-aggressive stage of indignation (which, as we are witnessing, has become the only way to resist and oppose the dystopian drive of the status quo, via political and social actions in the public, in the social media and in the cultural sphere) and move towards a different path of social imagination.

To be able to build this path around “relationship” as a key word and as a key material, we ought to leave behind the sterile dichotomy between a “persistent object” from a phenomenological point of view or its “vaporization” from an ontological point of view and to promote an understanding of the intertwined nature of subject and object in all the different aspects of life, work and society.

But how could this kind of openly acknowledged balance of instabilities and negative approaches constitute a “constructive” path?

Again a shift is necessary concerning the notion of “constructive”: after 6 years of experience I have witnessed that a social sensibility can exist, but what constitutes its foundations is not just the outcome of the artistic projects that are recorded and put forward to embody the practice, but the whole other invisible part constituted by the slow, resilient process of listening and blending with both the people and the environment.

One of my mentors once told me “Whenever you are in a place that you do not know, first ask yourself this simple fundamental question “Where am I?” “How is the space around me?” “Why it is like that?” and “Which are its manifest and its hidden rules?”

Within the Social Sensibility approach, the quality of the exchange is based upon the quality of the participants' capacity of listening to one another and emerges as much from the failed attempts to build a dialogue or to carry on a project, as from the successful ones.

It emerges from the time that seems wasted because nothing visible happens, but it is instead a time of mutual study and of mutual listening; a time for testing and thinking, for comparing and for searching for the right words to start a conversation, or to make a joke or to formulate a concept in an accessible way.

It emerges from the impasses, from the misinterpretations, from the doubts and the hesitations. It emerges from the moments of boredom and from the sense of uselessness and from the moments in which the effort to make something sincere and spontaneous seems impossible or meaningless because of the overly challenging context and pressure.

It emerges when, after having hurt somebody's feelings or questioned his/her values, or missed the point or having raised suspicion, or having broken the rules or having neglected procedures and hierarchies, we nevertheless still remain and try to engage.

It emerges when, after having been dismissed or treated with arrogance and superficiality, we still come back in order to keep the communication-line open.

Finally, it emerges when, despite the fact that surprise and curiosity never last long and inertia ultimately takes over, we are still there, waiting for the right opportunity, for the *kairos*, the right moment for something to happen.

If this sense of belonging to an environment becomes real, even the constant presentation (without imposing it) of something odd or unnecessary as “art” to people, at some point, will be perceived and understood as a form of sharing between equals on equal terms.

Authentic participation cannot be engineered; it can be facilitated by preparing the conditions for it to grow, and still, this is not a guarantee; it demands an accurate and selfless listening and the capacity to drop previously conceived paths whenever a new and more interesting one appears.

Participation cannot be conceived only in the visible, action-oriented, tangible result-driven dynamics; in its invisible, intangible and inactive form of silent observation, mutual studying and testing, hesitation, doubt and dismissal, participation is equally present and valuable if not even more important.

The visible form is only possible if the invisible part has happened before. This balance between action and non-action generates the sense of possibility that inhabits the space created by Social Sensibility and it represents the core of its vision.

It is embodied in the concept-action-mode of “listening.”

Moreover, due to the endless constraints, intermissions and difficulties that this new territory presents to both art and working life, a playful and precious condition of “amateurism” re-appears, as both these mental and physical spaces are constantly negotiated during a process that, having no previous references, can only happen in a situation of common willingness to participate, as well as mutual creative and ethical tension.

The failure to try and engage in such a difficult (and perhaps impossible) task will, in my opinion, generate an even deeper cleavage between an anti-human, technocratic, extreme system of capitalist extraction of value and a frozen, derivative and powerless form of culture only capable of the endless reproduction and celebration of the hyper-realistic delusional aesthetic landscape of the consumerist sphinx.

It is our responsibility, as artists and thinkers, and it is the responsibility of corporate leaders and policymakers, to, at least, try to commit to new forms of dialogue and interaction if we wish for some kind of future to be possible.

As I write this, I am aware that I am addressing far bigger issues than just meaningful and mindful action, but I still feel that this proposal is not just an idealistic dream or an empty exercise of intellectual creative challenge.

This is because here there is no pretension to “change” culture or art or society with some “next thing,” but rather the suggestion to change the modes and the conditions in which art, culture and corporate industrial world happen, interact and function.

If this can be tested, we might then witness the appearance of a different kind of relationship to ourselves and to the other resulting into the possibility to bring about “balance” to our society.

My question is why shouldn't the “poetic” and the “sensible” be fundamental parts and principles in the process to define an Economic model?

Since Freud we have come to terms with the fact that if a creative unconscious exists in everyone, the idea of genius needs to be democratize.

Psychoanalysis showed us that poetry is indigenous to the very constitution of the mind, or, better said, that the mind is to a great extent, a poetry-making faculty.

In the words of Leo Bersani this goes even further, when he gets to say: “Psychoanalytic theory has made the notion of fantasy so richly problematic that we should no longer be able to take for granted the distinction between art and life”

Then why do we continue to consider this possibility as an exception to the norm, which we look at, most of the time, with an unresolved mixture of suspicious and desire?

Why we do exclude this level from our daily life, according to our supposedly sophisticated logic of rationality and work, only to pursue it over and over in the split, delusional, dimension that we call free time as a “cure” or a “medicine”?

Why can't we not integrate it within that same pragmatic, scientific and economical logic which has become so dry that, not only, it is un-capable to respond to today society's deep crisis, but it has started, since a while, to turn against it and threaten its own existence?

This quest, despite the huge attitude-shift it demands, still appears to me as belonging to the domain of what is possible – growing a new intelligible, living landscape is utopia in act everyday instead of of wished-for utopia.

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