**Anatomy of an Affect**
**Chronology Reflections and Theoretical Framework of 15 Years of Research into Social Sensibility**

In this article, I will refrain from engaging in a theoretical analysis or citing various references that have been integral to the development of Social Sensibility research. Instead, my primary aim is to document and explain the department's evolution over the course of 14 years, focusing on how this long-term, socially engaged art project, structurally embedded within an industrial company, has impacted the "affect" in the various locations where its activities take place. Bernard Controls, a small to medium-sized, family-owned international industrial company, operates in the business-to-business (B2B) sector. The company has managed to survive and adapt to the significant transformations and disruptions of the modern and post-modern eras. Alongside its evident profit-driven motives and pursuit of technical excellence, Bernard Controls has maintained its original commitment to fostering a respectful, inclusive, sustainable, and safe working environment. This mission emphasizes cultural diversity and community engagement. When I first visited Bernard Controls in Beijing in 2010, I was struck by the specific form of "relational affect" that the company embodied. Its relatively human-scale operation, combined with its history, seemed to evoke a unique atmosphere. To conceptualize a work environment—or any environment—as an "affect" offers a valuable shift in perspective, one that frames the research on relational practice as a means of testing the value and transformative potential of art and artists within a highly complex, non-artistic setting, such as an industrial assembly line. The Social Sensibility research was born out of a desire to interact with the "affect" of factory life, to observe the degree and quality by which a long-term, socially engaged art project could question, enrich, and ultimately transform this environment, while simultaneously testing art's potential in real-world contexts.

## The Beginning in China: Some Context

The inaugural Social Sensibility R&D Department was established in 2011 when I, after nine months of field research in their Beijing factory and three months of planning with Guillaume Bernard, signed the first contract with Bernard Control Industries. The genesis of this original project stemmed from a serendipitous encounter between an artist and the future CEO, devoid of premeditation or calculation. Having immersed myself in Beijing's independent socially engaged art scene since 2003, my perception of what was considered a meaningful socially engaged art practice in China had been shaped by diverse experiences and a nuanced understanding of the context. Collaborating with a network focused on specific topics and praxis provided insights into ongoing efforts and directions. Mr. Bernard's genuine curiosity about experimental art's societal impact presented an opportunity for experimentation.
My reflection stemmed from the limitations of socially engaged art practices—typically independent, short-term endeavors reliant on tactical improvisation. I pondered whether these ephemeral moments, characterized by vitality and subversive challenge, could be sustained within a structured context. The paradox intrigued me: embedding decentralized practices within a structure could limit their freedom yet measure their influence internally. Nine months of research in the Chinese factory actualized this paradox. I obtained permission to spend voluntary

time with workers, disrupting routine for open-ended conversations—an unprecedented breakthrough. By bending implicit rules, we created a conceptual artwork in allowing time for artistic engagement during work hours.

**Continued Growth and Engagement**

As confidence grew, workers and employees embraced the opportunity for artistic engagement, demonstrating spontaneity and enthusiasm. What began as extra breaks evolved into meaningful activities, such as repurposing tools and spaces for creative expression. Workers like Mrs. Li Zhan sought solace in the warm Beijing sun, relocating their workstations outdoors. Inside, others transformed machinery into art installations with remarkable instinct and skill.
Simultaneously, informal interactions provided insights into workers' lives, fostering a new set of spontaneously born, genuine horizontal relationships. Our time together, though unconventional in an industrial setting, held a profound quality—difficult to define yet legitimate. This experimental phase sparked questions about sustainability and scalability. Could such encounters be reproduced? The challenge lay in preserving spontaneity within formal structures while nurturing long-term impact.
Presenting my findings to Mr. Bernard and the company board after nine months of informal research led to a ground-breaking proposition: the establishment of a formal collaboration with a long term sustainable economic backing. Artist Ma Yongfeng’s graffiti "invest in contradiction" encapsulated our ethos. Over the next two months, we outlined the department's formal integration, aiming to legitimize experimental art practices within the company's framework.

**Formalizing the Vision**

To realize our vision, we delineated rules and definitions ensuring the department's integration while safeguarding its autonomy. We aimed to create a space where art intersected with daily work life, fostering sensibility and influencing relationships. Key considerations included economic sustainability, spatial requirements within the factory, internal and external communication protocols, and short- to long-term strategies. Striking a balance between structure and flexibility, we sought to enable organic interactions without imposing constraints.
By formalizing these guidelines, we aimed to facilitate genuine, unpredictable encounters, allowing art to transcend its traditional boundaries. Our goal was to create a space where experimentation flourished, contributing to individual growth and collective sensibility.

**Legal and organizational structure**

-) Establishment of the Social Sensibility R&D Department within the company's organizational structure, mirroring the technical R&D unit.

-) Creation of a social sensibility manager position with a part-time contract, ensuring economic support and legitimacy for the artist running the department.

-) The manager's salary set at the minimum wage according to local regulations.

-) Weekly visits by the artist-manager to the factory, with flexibility based on project needs.

-) Workers empowered to allocate their working time for engaging with the department's activities.

-) Encounters between artists and workers held in comfortable locations chosen by the workers.

-) Provision of office space for the artist-manager, although encounters need not be confined there.

-) Initial hiring of one artist-manager and budget allocation for inviting external artists for short-term residencies.

-) Planned expansion to include a second local artist after 3-5 years, enhancing connections with staff and refining strategies.

-) Departmental replication in other company branches, fostering international collaboration.

-) Budgetary sustainability achieved through careful planning, requiring less expenditure than corporate communication efforts.

-) Aim to provide regular access to art for employees and stable income for artists, fostering meaningful research.

-) Defined methodologies: WORK/LIVE for internal creative development and external artist residencies for collaborative projects.

-) Budgets tailored to local needs with flexibility over time.

-) Salary parity between artist-managers and other employees.

-) Variable salaries for visiting artists, aligning with local norms.

-) Emphasis on project discovery on-site by visiting artists, with renumeration for dialogue and collaboration rather than final output.

-) Final artworks credited to participants, not the company, allowing flexibility for exhibition or removal.

-) Artworks remain at the company's discretion unless otherwise decided by the creators.

-) Activities focused on research rather than profit, with possible sales outside the project determined by the authors.

-) External exhibitions require proper attribution to individual and group authors and acknowledgment of the department's role.

-) Establishment of rules to foster natural interactions, protecting spontaneity and horizontal relationships.

-) Mutual acknowledgment of vulnerability fosters respect and curiosity, allowing for boundary exploration.

-) Micro-decisions empower individuals, contributing to enhanced self-confidence and emancipation.

-) Engagement levels vary, allowing individuals to shape their interaction with the department.

-) Ongoing monitoring and feedback from external and internal participant ensure project relevance and integrity.

**THE EVOLUTION**

After establishing the legal and formal aspects of the department, a routine of activities commenced. Regular discussions with intrigued workers, dissemination of art information to interested employees, and acceptance of criticism formed the core activities. The project's visibility attracted numerous artists, academics, and cultural figures to the factory. Over time, it became a notable destination, with returning artists and engaged workers refining their projects. External feedback and internal balance between curiosity, support and skepticism prompted critical reflection on the project's legitimacy and value.
The project in the Chinese factory developed organically over the years, navigating crises and highlights. Its unorthodox nature gradually became accepted as part of the weekly routine, reaching a level of respect and legitimacy. External visibility through exhibitions and events enhanced its potential beyond the factory walls, providing workers with access to Beijing's cultural scene. Workers presenting their creations in cultural institutions bolstered the project's credibility and differentiated it from conventional corporate initiatives. Despite China's surveillance and censorship complexities, the project continued to engage with critical issues, navigating historical, cultural, and diplomatic contexts.
In 2014, following a three-month residency, artist and researcher Tianji Zhao, who had been informally contributing to the project since its inception, was invited to officially join the department. She became the second artist to receive a monthly stipend in exchange for a weekly commitment to organize activities and contribute to the project’s strategic development. One of my primary goals, as a foreign artist in China leading a unique, complex, and sensitive socially engaged project within a foreign company, has always been to involve the local community in the development and to find a local artist/ researcher to manage the activities. When Mrs. Zhao joined the team in 2014, we worked collaboratively to foster the department's growth. At this time, I also began traveling periodically to other Bernard Controls factories in Paris/Gonesse and their office/workshop in Milan/Rho to introduce the department’s activities with the aim of establishing a twin structure at these European locations. In 2016, after implementing a series of activities in Paris/Gonesse that mirrored the methodology developed in China, I invited artist and researcher Blandine de La Taille for a two-month residency at the French factory.

Upon the conclusion of her residency, I formally asked Mrs. de La Taille if she would be interested in joining the department and becoming the French representative for its development in the Paris/Gonesse factory. By 2017, the French unit was officially established and is now in its seventh operational year. Meanwhile, in 2019, I initiated activities at the company's office and technical test-lab in Milan/Rho. Today, the Social Sensibility R&D Department operates across three different sites in three countries and two continents. In each location, the operations are led by a local artist, which facilitates a deeper cultural connection with the employees. As the founder and director of the department, I coordinate activities through regular online meetings and periodic visits to the three locations. It is important to emphasize that, from the project's inception, my intention was to involve the local artistic community and to find local artists to become permanent team members. This approach ensures the maintenance of critically valuable quality in both the project's development and its ethical standards in social relationships—essential components given the project's complexity and sensitivity and the necessity to avoid the risk of co-optative and extractive dynamics. Along the years, the project has been trying to implement and adapt an experimental specific methodology across multicultural and transnational contexts, navigating the significant differences between the three locations: Beijing/Daxing, Paris/Gonesse and Milan/Rho. In order to analyze its uneven trajectory in the 3 locations we need to conduct an intersectional analysis of the parallel sociological aspects and an accurate critical reading of the different, economic, political and cultural frameworks within the specific temporal arch during which the project was conceived, developed and distributed.

**China**

The tradition of factory life, charged with symbolic significance and rooted in the working-class struggle, along with the cultural aura surrounding the *Working Units* (*danwei*), is crucial to understanding why the concept of the Social Sensibility R&D Department did not appear entirely foreign. These units often featured music bands, theater groups, and literary collectives, whose artistic practices served socialist propaganda. This historical context fosters a comprehension of how the Social Sensibility R&D Department might be perceived as a contemporary reimagining of socialist collectivist ideas, where art is created for and by the people. Older generations of workers and managers had either experienced this firsthand or heard about it from their parents. While this potent historical and ideological reference undoubtedly facilitated the establishment of the department, its relatively smooth reception cannot be solely attributed to this factor. By 2010, it had become evident that in China, the celebration of working-class culture and its associated sense of political and sociological empowerment had significantly diminished. Young workers, particularly migrants, often perceived themselves as occupying the lowest rungs of society, with little leverage and no sense of pride in any even nostalgic revolutionary mission. Moreover, these workers were acutely aware that China, now regarded as the "world's factory," had ironically subjected them to exploitation by both local and Western corporations and governments. These laborers had come to embody the surplus value that drove China's unique economic miracle and sustained the core phase of globalization. The acceptance of the department and its activities by a significant portion of the employees facilitated the development of a new and complex interaction routine between workers, artists, and managers. While production needs and organizational hierarchy regularly generated friction and

tension, these were then negotiated by the creation of this unique imaginative relational “grey zone” maintained through different elements: the official existence and incorporation of the department in the company’s structure, a mutual sense of care, respect, and curiosity shared among the colleagues for their new “artists colleagues”, for the “visiting artists” and for those among the employees who started to practice art and conceive individual and group projects. The ever-existing skepticism and criticism expressed formally and informally by a number of people who never really liked the project has also been a very important factor to legitimate the department through its problematization. From an external point of view, local artists and artistic institutions, particularly the younger generation of curators interested in socially engaged art, also played a crucial role. Their support, along with access to museums and alternative art spaces, created a favorable ecosystem that allowed the project to gain attention and visibility beyond the factory walls. This resonance extended to the artistic and academic communities, as well as to the broader public attending events in Beijing and other Chinese cities. Recognition by international entities, festivals, and institutional events over the years further legitimized the project and helped sustain its long-term viability and significance. Despite the significant socio-political and economic changes in China, the Social Sensibility R&D Department remains fully operational within the organizational framework of the Bernard Controls factory in Beijing. It has demonstrated an inspiring, albeit modest, transformative function. In using the term “affect” throughout this survey, I am confident in asserting that the department in Beijing has successfully altered the company’s affect. It has also had an external impact, sparking curiosity and attracting students of art and the humanities from China and beyond. These students have written articles, conducted comparative research, and completed master’s and doctoral theses on the project’s legacy. The long-term, direct and indirect support and commitment of both local and international cultural operators and researchers have also been instrumental. This support has enabled the department to grow and adapt over the years, fostering its specific approach to “art usership” that remains consistently attuned to the interests and needs of workers, while embodying various performative and communication roles within and beyond company life. Chinese society's collective cultural, philosophical, and ideological traditions, along with the multi-layered significance of informal relationships and networks in both daily and working life, have been crucial in generating the potential and actualization of a research project like the one embodied by the Social Sensibility R&D Department. This intricate interplay, characterized by the permeability between private and public spheres, has been a key factor in fostering the conditions necessary for such an endeavor. The period between 2002 and 2013 represented an unprecedented moment in Chinese history, marked by radical economic and social changes that unfolded at a breathtaking pace. These transformations deeply impacted people's lives, simultaneously presenting incredible opportunities and a heightened sense of precarity and uncertainty. The powerful energy generated by these contradictions may have contributed significantly to the emergence of experimental art practices like the Social Sensibility R&D Department. During this time, China itself functioned as a vast experimental laboratory across various fields—a situation not unfamiliar in its historical trajectory. The direct and radical perception of change, speed, and impermanence was palpable, affecting nearly every aspect of daily life in immediate and profound ways. This context likely created fertile ground for the department’s

initiatives, embedding art and research into the very fabric of a society undergoing rapid transformation.

## FRANCE

In 2014, I began periodic trips to France, visiting the company's factory in Paris/Gonesse and organizing informal presentations of the department's activities in Beijing for local workers, managers, and employees. It became immediately apparent that the work organization, social and cultural environment, management history, and physical and spatial dimensions—in one word: the affect—were, in certain aspects, consistently different, while retaining the basic structural elements guaranteed by the company's identity and standard production procedures. Compared to China's relative homogeneity in terms of age, education, and qualifications within departments, the Paris/Gonesse staff includes individuals from over 15 different nationalities and/or origins, distributed across at least three generations of local and migrant workers and managers. These employees represent a variety of ethnic, religious, and social groups. The plant and offices in Paris/Gonesse function as a multicultural hub where diverse micro-ethnic, religious, cultural, educational, and social environments coexist. France's specific socio-political and traditional class tensions further characterize, define, and enrich this environment, making it highly sensitive. Unlike China's complex and often opaque relational dynamics, where traditional social hierarchy and the authoritarian nature of the state are constantly renegotiated and adjusted informally, the French context operates within a framework of open dialectic and negotiation. This negotiation involves management, employees, workers, human resources, and unions, each expressing their specific needs, roles, and political and economic interests more transparently. The French context raises profound questions about the role, place, and significance of socially engaged art in Europe and in open societies at large. While China's fragmented social context often reacts with unique curiosity and generates organic mobilization—from workers, artists, and local institutions—toward participating in long-term socially engaged art projects within highly symbolic venues like factories, the French context presents distinct challenges. In France, and in open societies more broadly, socially engaged art struggles to gain legitimacy and understanding among various agents and participants. Broadly speaking, socially engaged art and the experimental relational dynamics it fosters seem to resonate more readily in contexts marked by pronounced socio-political tensions. These are often settings where authoritarian or hyper-capitalist, neo-liberal systems push people and societies to confront sharp contrasts and crises, fostering the creation of decentralized, informal spaces of emancipation and solidarity. In contrast, in a European democratic country like France, with its long-standing welfare systems, the social sphere has long been occupied by a complex network of specialists and experts—social workers, cultural mediators, therapists, and unionists—whose competencies have been honed through years of professional training and experience. These existing entities, alongside avenues for direct political action, activism, and participation in political organizations, present a significant challenge to socially engaged art. The latter, with its grassroots and experimental nature, struggles to establish legitimacy and a meaningful role in such a well-established landscape. From the outset of the Paris/Gonesse project, it was clear that the 'affect'—a term capturing the social sensibility and dynamics of the environment—differed significantly from the Chinese context. This necessitated careful observation,

learning, and adaptation to determine the most meaningful ways for the department to operate. The choice of intervening and resident artists also became crucial in exploring the potential for social practice to gain legitimacy in such settings. Following the inclusion of artist/researcher Blandine de La Taille, and drawing parallels to the earlier collaboration with Tianji Zhao in China, the team focused on gathering extensive data and feedback to maintain the department's flexibility, spontaneity, and experimental nature. This ensured its continued voluntary engagement and relevance for employees. Blandine De La Taille's first successful three-month residency followed two years of periodic visits to the Gonesse plant, during which I introduced workers and managers to the department's activities in China and invited interested individuals to engage in creative activities. Leveraging the experience and enthusiasm from the Chinese initiative, and playing on first-time curiosity, these activities gained natural traction with the support of both workers and managers. Once Blandine De La Taille assumed a steady role in the Social Sensibility Research Department, we began articulating a development plan that mirrored the Beijing model while respecting the specific social codes, unwritten rules, and established procedures of Gonesse. Between 2015 and 2018, the French department developed the Work/Live methodology and hosted several local artists for short residencies. A significant milestone came in 2018, when the department received an official invitation to Manifesta. This provided an opportunity to bring together workers from Beijing and Gonesse who had regularly participated in departmental activities. This week-long encounter itself became an extension of the Work/Live process, emphasizing that any external engagement by the department should replicate the experimental and collaborative exchanges that underpin its foundation. Until the pandemic, activities in both locations continued, highlighting the departments' resilience. Even during COVID-19, the teams collaborated remotely on a publication collecting creative activities that workers and employees spontaneously initiated as coping strategies during the crisis. Post-pandemic, as society reopened, both locations recognized the need to understand what people had endured and explore how the departments' activities could evolve to maintain their appeal and relevance. The collective unconscious, still recovering from the trauma of the pandemic, has since faced new pressures, including the Russia-Ukraine war and escalating tensions in the Middle East. Throughout this period, Bernard Controls, as a company, navigated significant challenges to remain competitive while transitioning from a family business to a multinational entity. Despite this transformation, the company strives to retain the ethical premises, decisional independence, and flexibility characteristic of a family-run organization. The management style has gradually shifted from traditional hierarchical structures to more collaborative approaches, involving the departure of long-standing personnel and the arrival of younger managers and engineers with different educational backgrounds, work ethics, and methodologies. While luck and determination have played roles in ensuring the continuation of the Social Sensibility R&D Departments in Beijing and Paris/Gonesse, a foundational premise of their creation was to guarantee their sustainability, even during periodic crises. Recent analysis of the French context, coupled with reflections on data and feedback from Gonesse and Beijing, has identified several shared and context-specific elements worth considering. First, the pandemic and current geopolitical tensions have profoundly altered the 'affect' globally, transcending regional differences. Second, the pressure on small and medium companies to remain competitive while maintaining ethical and worker-friendly practices has intensified. For Bernard Controls, this means balancing

performance enhancement with a commitment to workers' dignity, conditions, and economic well-being—a task increasingly complicated by the transformations within the global hyper-capitalist system. Despite its modest scale, the Social Sensibility R&D Department addresses critical contemporary questions about the meaning of work and life, the artificial optimization of productive processes, and the extraction of value from individuals. From its inception, the department has functioned as a laboratory to explore the future of art practice and its integration into society beyond traditional economic and institutional frameworks. At a time when socially engaged art is simultaneously praised and marginalized—often viewed as a fleeting phenomenon—the department's symbiotic approach continues to propose a hybrid model of critical interdependency. This model bridges a corporate entity, embodying the potential excesses of capitalism, and an experimental, socially engaged art practice that typically represents resistance. By bypassing a binary conflict model and embracing the inherent contradictions of coexistence, the company and the department take on the risk of being questioned and delegitimized by their respective domains. The complex and continually renegotiated terms of this coexistence exemplify a pioneering spirit that seeks to reimagine human and post-human relationships in terms of dignity, equality, and ethics. Rather than simplifying and optimizing relationships—a path that often leads to undemocratic and oppressive systems—this collaboration embraces complexity. While it may seem overly ambitious to hope that an experimental art project within a small-to-medium industrial company could ignite significant change, it remains possible that a spark can eventually kindle a fire.

After inviting several artists in residence in Gonesse and observing the commonalities of their general approach, it has been possible, through the accurate feedback of Blandine de La Taille re-elaborated in weekly online meetings, to spot and isolate several typical dynamics that constitute the core of the difficulties the French Department has to face and resolve.

1. Due to a persistent cultural antagonism between private industry—identified mostly as the mere embodiment of the greedy capitalist ethic whose investments are interpretated only as serving the company's gain, profit, and face-washing—opposite to the public cultural sphere, (universities and public funding), which are seen as representing 'good money' spent on resistance and ethical stances, the concept of a critical field research department embedded in a company's organigram is easily perceived as biased from the start.
2. The polarization of this binary juxtaposition often leads artists to regard a residency in a company either as a traditional commission for producing a well-remunerated artwork—fully aligning with neoliberal logic and leveraging it as an opportunity to foster their careers in the art world—or as a territory to uncover pre-existing stereotypes of class and exploitation in a demagogic way. This approach frequently results in projects, artworks, and academic texts that systematically reinforce a conflictual narrative, perpetuating the necessity of identifying with a confrontational dualism. While demystification and deconstruction remain essential to any practice that claims a critical stance, they should not justify an over-indulgent, passive-aggressive attitude that risks cultivating an overly detached perspective. Such an approach could exacerbate the already existing divide between artists, institutions, cultural

> operators, and the broader society with which they profess to engage. Social Practice, as conceptualized in our department, is expected to navigate the micro-politics of negotiation with various entities whose goals and values may not align with its core objectives. This negotiation process is crucial for bridging the gap between communities and artistic practices, enabling the field to operate within its inherent contradictions and create previously unforeseen interstitial spaces for critical dialogue and exchange. Such outcomes are unlikely to materialize, however, in environments characterized by rigid ideological entrenchment, which perpetuates binary confrontations and obstructs the potential for more nuanced, transformative interactions.

While this positioning remains relevant from a traditional academic and critical standpoint of direct intellectual opposition, it falls short when engaging directly with workers, managers, and employees. These individuals, who find it difficult to articulate their experiences purely in intellectual abstract terms, struggle to connect with these efforts. Consequently, this approach fails to define new modalities for interaction, exchange, listening, learning, and engagement across diverse educational, professional, and social backgrounds. Instead, it perpetuates predetermined roles and intellectual/ideological stances that limit the options of any encounter to conflict or mutual exploitation. Over the years, in both Beijing and Paris/Gonesse, the Departments have often operated as informal, transversal entities. Without explicitly claiming this as a purpose, they have naturally functioned as "Ghost HR" or "Ghost Unions" providing a safe space to share internal problems, issues, and wrongdoings. These concerns, communicated anonymously, have traversed departments and hierarchical levels, fostering a unique internal dialogue. To address the complex ideological and sociological challenges inherent in the French context, a differentiated and multi-layered trategy was developed during regular exchanges and reflections with Blandine de La Taille. It drew inspiration from one of her preferred lines of field research: rediscovering France’s rich tradition of experiments in popular and informal education. These experiments, which date back to the 19th century, played a significant role in shaping class consciousness and remain relevant today. They offer a means of bringing together workers, artists, and cultural operators to recognize shared territories by redefining spaces for critical thinking and lively engagement in the micro-politics of work and life. Such spaces, disrupted and atomized by hyper-capitalism acceleration and the growing divide between culture and daily life, are crucial for fostering connection and social imagination, in a fragmented society. Another parallel direction involves inviting resident artists based in France who possess a mixed cultural identity, potentially rooted in multicultural backgrounds and educational experiences from the Global South, Eastern Europe, or other non-Western contexts. Such individuals are likely to establish a more authentic and empathetic connection with the diverse worker communities in Gonesse, as they may inherently understand the nuanced behavioral and psychological underpinnings, as well as the unspoken mechanisms and automatisms, shaping these environments. To this end, the Paris Department, much like its Beijing counterpart, and the newly born research site in Milan (which, so far, has been showing a promising interest and acceptance of the Department’s activities even if the engagement time at the moment has been too short to provide relevant data to discuss) focuses on building connections and networks with artists, entities, and organizations that align with this experimental approach to socially engaged art and field research. In Europe, while such initiatives remain limited in scale and

resources, they are active in peripheral and self-organized contexts. Additionally, collaborations are underway in both Beijing and Paris with visiting Master degree students from institutions such as Paris VIII and NYU Shanghai. These collaborations aim to introduce the Department's experience, methodology, and approach to the next generation of artists, researchers, and cultural practitioners. Despite its limited resources and the inherent fragility of such experiments, the research in Social Sensibility continues its mission to envision an inclusive, sustainable, and critical artistic practice embedded in daily and working life. This practice does not pose itself as an indulgent service or a therapeutic intervention but, instead, aims to define unusual fertile micro-territories for socio-political inquiries in possible future scenarios and aspires to navigate the overwhelming tensions, conflicts, and contradictions of contemporary processes while maintaining and fostering the potential for collective engagement. Overall, after having witnessed and recorded the potentiality for a practice like this to transform, at a micro-level, the 'affect' of a complex environment such as the one of an industrial company in different locations, we would really appreciate if whenever we present our history and/or different people, entities and institutions discover our activities, the reaction would not be of admiration towards a unique experiment as an exception, but instead, if the path we point at could be perceived as a concrete possibility.

Alessandro Rolandi, Bern 2025

References:

www.socialsensibility.org

@socialsensibility (Instagram)

社会敏感性研发部 (RedNote)

**Theoretical Frameworks and Key Concepts that contextualize the Social Sensibility R&D Department**

**0. Affect Theory**

- **Lauren Berlant:**

In her book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant explores how individuals become attached to structures of hope that may ultimately perpetuate discomfort or exploitation. This concept is particularly relevant in understanding the affective conditions of factory environments, where workers might remain loyal to systems that fail to serve their well-being.

**Reference:** Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism* . Durham: Duke University Press.

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- **Brian Massumi:**

In *The Politics of Affect* (2015), Brian Massumi examines how affects operate preconsciously, shaping behaviors and relationships before they reach conscious awareness. His work highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing these

subtle emotional forces in collective settings, such as factory environments, where stress, fatigue, or alienation can permeate the atmosphere.
**Reference:** Massumi, B. (2015). *The Politics of Affect* . Cambridge: Polity Press.

**1. Participatory Art**

- **Claire Bishop** :

In her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), Claire Bishop critiques and analyzes various forms of participatory art practices. She discusses how these practices aim to democratize art by involving spectators in the creation process.
**Reference**: Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* . London: Verso.

- **Grant Kester** :

Kester's work in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004) emphasizes the importance of dialogue and communication in socially engaged art. He argues that such art creates spaces for meaningful interaction and exchange.
**Reference** : Kester, G. H. (2004). *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* . Berkeley: University of California Press.

**2. Relational Aesthetics**

- **Nicolas Bourriaud** :
- Bourriaud's seminal work *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) introduces the concept of relational aesthetics, which focuses on art that is based on human relations and their social context. According to Bourriaud, art becomes a space for interpersonal encounters and social interactions.
- **Reference** : Bourriaud, N. (1998). *Relational Aesthetics* . Dijon: Les presses du réel.
- **Jacques Rancière** :
- Rancière's notion of "the distribution of the sensible" in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) explores how art and politics are intertwined through the sensory experiences they create. His ideas resonate with SSR&D project, as it redistributes the roles of artists and participants within industrial settings.
- **Reference** : Rancière, J. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics* . London: Continuum.

**3. Social Practice Art**

- **Nato Thompson** :
- In *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Age of Cultural Production* (2012), Nato Thompson explores the intersection of art and activism, emphasizing the role of artists as agents of social change. He highlights how social practice art addresses political and social issues through collective action and community involvement.
- **Reference** : Thompson, N. (2012). *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Age of Cultural Production* . Brooklyn: Melville House.
- **Paulo Freire** :
- Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*(1970) advocates for education as a means of liberation and empowerment. His emphasis on critical pedagogy aligns with SSR&D's approach, where employees are not passive recipients but active participants in creating knowledge and transforming their environment.

• **Reference** : Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* . New York: Continuum.

**4. Community-Based Art**

• **Suzanne Lacy** :

• Suzanne Lacy's extensive work in community-based art emphasizes the importance of long-term engagement and collaboration with local communities. Her projects often involve extensive research and dialogue to address specific social issues.

• **Reference** : Lacy, S. (Ed.). (1995). *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* . Seattle: Bay Press.

• **John Dewey** :

• Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) argues that art should be an integral part of everyday life, fostering democratic participation and communal growth. This perspective complements SSR&D's efforts to integrate art into industrial environments, promoting creativity and social cohesion.

• **Reference** : Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as Experience* . New York: Perigee Books.

**5. Political and Ethical Dimensions**

• **Wang Hui** :

• Wang Hui's writings on contemporary Chinese society and its transformations provide valuable insights into the socio-political context within which SSR&D operates. His analysis of the interplay between modernization and tradition helps contextualize the project's impact on Chinese industrial workers.

• **Reference** : Hui, W. (2003). *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

• **Amartya Sen** :

• Sen's capability approach, outlined in *Development as Freedom* (1999), emphasizes the importance of expanding people's freedoms and capabilities to lead fulfilling lives. This framework resonates with SSR&D, as it aims to empower industrial workers by enhancing their creative capacities and fostering social connections.

• **Reference** : Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**6. Ethical Philosophy and the Politics of Attention**

• **Simone Weil** :

• Simone Weil's concept of "attention" from *Gravity and Grace* (1947) underscores the ethical imperative of empathetic engagement, resonating with the R&D Department's mission to prioritize relational care and marginalized voices. For Weil, attentiveness is a radical act of justice that dismantles hierarchies and fosters solidarity.

• **Reference** : Weil, S. (2002). *Gravity and Grace* (E. Crawford & M. von der Ruhr, Trans.). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1947)

**Decentralizing Art, Centralizing Society: The Social Sensibility Research & Development (SSR&D) as Transnational Critical Praxis (a schematic essay)**

## Introduction: Art as a Living Dialogue

In an era of algorithmic alienation and authoritarian silences, SSR&D reimagines art as a living dialogue—a process where aesthetics, pedagogy, and dissent converge. Rooted in A.Rolandi's interdisciplinary training (chemistry, theater, Media Art and environmental humanities) and informed by a constellation of global theorists, SSR&D dissolves binaries between artist/spectator, analog/digital, and East/West. This essay traces how SSR&D's history, methodologies, and theoretical entanglements forge a radical synthesis of critical thought, positioning art as a catalyst for collective agency.

## Historical Trajectory: From Beijing's Margins to Global Networks

Foundations (2002–2010): Interdisciplinary Experimentation

Rolandi's relocation to Beijing in 2002 catalyzed SSR&D's emergence. His scientific background (chemistry) informed systematic inquiry into social dynamics, while training under experimental theater pioneers (former students of Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Actor's Studio) shaped SSR&D's performative ethos. Early projects, like "Suibian" (2011), engaged migrant communities through participatory activities, echoing Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" and Li Zhi's subversive use of codified space in "A Book to Burn" (1590). These interventions also resonate with Wang Hui's critique of China's neoliberal modernization, particularly his argument in "The End of the Revolution" (2009) that the marginalization of rural and migrant labor undercuts the socialist ideals of equality and collective welfare. SSR&D's focus on migrant experiences thus becomes a counterpoint to the erasure of these voices in China's rapid urbanization.

In 2011, SSR&D institutionalized its critique of labor hierarchies through the Social Sensibility R&D Department at Bernard Controls (Beijing/Paris), a Michel Foucault-inspired heterotopia that destabilized corporate-artistic boundaries. This move aligns with Amartya Sen's capability approach, which emphasizes the importance of creating spaces where individuals can exercise agency and develop their potential beyond economic metrics. By embedding art within corporate structures, SSR&D challenges the reduction of labor to mere productivity, advocating instead for a holistic view of human flourishing.

## International Recognition (2011–2020): Ethical Turns

SSR&D's inclusion in Manifesta12 (2018 Palermo) marked its ascent as a transnational platform. Creations issued from the Work/Live methodology leveraged discomfort and emancipatory imagination to investigate factory labor, resonating with Claire Bishop's critique of participatory art's consensual limits ("Artificial Hells", 2012). The 2016 Beijing Media Art Biennale fused migrant testimonies with New Media and AI ethics, embodying Joan Tronto's ethics of care and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory.

Here, Wang Hui's analysis of China's "depoliticized politics" ("The Politics of Imagining Asia", 2011) provides a critical lens for understanding SSR&D's interventions. By foregrounding the voices of migrant workers and questioning the ethical implications of AI, SSR&D resists the depoliticization of labor and technology, reasserting the political dimensions of these issues. Similarly, Amartya Sen's emphasis on justice as a process of public reasoning ("The Idea of Justice", 2009) underscores the importance of creating platforms where marginalized voices can participate in shaping the discourse around their own conditions.

**Digital Pivot (2021–Present): Hybrid Futures**
Relocating to Bern (2020) and enrolling in an MA in Global Media and Digital Culture (SOAS), Rolandi expanded SSR&D's digital praxis blending the analog practice, constantly supervised by Tianji Zhao in Beijing and Blandine de La Taille in Paris, with online archives, chat-groups, social media and interactive channels, critiquing Wendy Chun's "homogeneous empty time" in digital networks. Extended partnerships with online platforms, independent actors such as f.eks in Alborg and institutions such as the Goethe Institute Beijing amplify the coordination of creative dissent across Arjun Appadurai's ethnoscapes-technoscapes, while presentations in Zurich and Bern (Gepard14, 2022 and Sinokultur, 2024) reflect Néstor García Canclini's "glocal" hybridity.

In this context, Wang Hui's critique of global capitalism's homogenizing effects (China's New Order, 2003) offers a framework for understanding SSR&D's resistance to digital erasure. By creating decentralized, hybrid archives, SSR&D challenges the monopolization of cultural memory by corporate and state actors. Meanwhile, Amartya Sen's concept of "development as freedom" ("Development as Freedom", 1999) aligns with SSR&D's commitment to using digital tools to expand access and agency, rather than reinforcing existing inequalities.

**Materiality and Virtuality: The Social Sensibility Project as an Affective Archive**
Bridging analog experience and digital expression, the *Social Sensibility* project interrogates the affective dimensions of social life through the lenses of Lauren Berlant and Brian Massumi. Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) frames the project's analog interventions—tactile installations, community workshops, and printed zines—as spaces where participants confront the materiality of collective emotions. As Berlant writes, "Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (*Cruel Optimism*), a dynamic the project materializes through hands-on engagements with societal ideals and their emotional toll. Conversely, the project's digital dimension, anchored by its online archive (www.socialsensibility.org), echoes Brian Massumi's assertion in *Parables for the Virtual* (2002) that affect resides in "the realm of potential, the not-yet felt" (p. 35). The website's interactive maps, video diaries, and crowdsourced narratives embody this virtuality, capturing affective intensities that evade fixed representation. Together, these analog and digital layers form a living archive, where Berlant's "attachments" and Massumi's "intensities" coalesce, inviting users to navigate the porous boundaries between embodied emotion and digital mediation in shaping social change.

**Methodologies: Participation, Pedagogy, and Dissent**
1. Emancipated Spectatorship and Radical Pedagogy
SSR&D operationalizes Jacques Rancière's emancipated spectator, dissolving artist-audience hierarchies. The Work/Live projects transform work spaces into sites of co-creation, where participants become Augusto Boal's spect-actors. This aligns with Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1968), where education is a dialogical process—evident also in exporting SSR&D's methodology to conceive workshops at Roxbourg Humanitarian MBA (2021–2023), which trains leaders to navigate crises through collective inquiry.
Amartya Sen's emphasis on participatory democracy and public deliberation ("The Idea of Justice") complements SSR&D's pedagogical approach. By fostering spaces

where participants can engage in critical dialogue and collective problem-solving, SSR&D enacts Sen's vision of justice as a collaborative, ongoing process.

2. Analog-Digital Hybridity and Archival Resistance
SSR&D's multimedia archive embodies Hito Steyerl's "poor image" theory, using low-resolution media to democratize cultural memory. The archive/website www.socialsensibility.org, the Instagram page @socialsensibility and the homonymous Red Note account digitize ephemeral performances and merge images, videos and oral histories with open-source platforms—a nod to Rancière's belief that "every spectator is already an actor." This hybridity infiltrates analog and digital capitalism's homogenizing forces, echoing Late Ming Dynasty scholar Li Zhi's tactic of masking dissent within ambiguity.

Wang Hui's analysis of China's cultural and intellectual history ("The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought", 2004) provides a historical context for SSR&D's use of ambiguity as a form of resistance. By drawing on Li Zhi's and the long legacy of intellectual dissent in China, SSR&D situates itself within a longer tradition of Chinese thought that challenges authoritarianism through subtle, subversive means.

3. Ethics of Care and Posthuman Solidarity
SSR&D reframes care as political praxis. The 2016 Beijing Media Art Biennale juxtaposed migrant labor with AI ethics, mirroring Tronto's call to integrate care into systemic structures. Workers-run workshops at Ming Museum Shanghai elevated non-artist labor, reflecting Gregory Sholette's dark matter theory. Meanwhile, collaborations with Roxbourg Humanitarian MBA embodied Donna Haraway's "staying with the trouble" and Latour's posthuman networks.
Amartya Sen's capability approach reinforces SSR&D's focus on care as a foundation for justice. By prioritizing the well-being and agency of marginalized communities, SSR&D aligns with Sen's argument that justice must address the material and social conditions that enable individuals to flourish.

**Theoretical Frameworks: Bridging East-West Critical Thought**

1. Deweyan Aesthetic Democracy and Li Zhi's Tactical Dissent

John Dewey's "Art as Experience" (1934) underpins SSR&D's belief that art must dissolve boundaries between life and creativity. SSR&D's workshops exemplify Dewey's "learning by doing," fostering democratic dialogue. Simultaneously, Li Zhi's Ming Dynasty dissent ("A Book to Burn") informs SSR&D's tactical ambiguity, as seen in multiple projects realized by artists in residence in collaboration with factory workers and employees, where subtle interventions critiqued state-corporate hierarchy and power without confrontation.
Wang Hui's work on the intellectual history of dissent in China ("The End of the Revolution") provides a deeper understanding of Li Zhi's legacy and its relevance to contemporary struggles. SSR&D's use of ambiguity and subtlety can be seen as part of a broader tradition of Chinese intellectual resistance to authoritarianism.

2. Institutional Critique and Radical Pedagogy

Andrea Fraser's institutional critique frames SSR&D's infiltration of corporate R&D (Bernard Controls), while Freire and Boal's pedagogies shape its workshops. Various projects empowered participants to interrogate urban displacement and alienation through performative cartography and psycho-geography.

Amartya Sen's emphasis on education as a means of expanding capabilities ("Development as Freedom") aligns with SSR&D's commitment to empowering participants through dialogical and participatory methods.

3. Digital Justice and Glocal Dialectics

Wendy Chun's critique of algorithmic erasure informs SSR&D's focus on amplifying marginalized voices through online channels, while Appadurai's "scapes" model explains its digital-analog hybridity. García Canclini's hybrid cultures theory contextualizes SSR&D's navigation of China's "socialist market economy" and European institutional collaborations.

Wang Hui's critique of global capitalism's impact on local cultures ("China's New Order") provides a critical lens for understanding SSR&D's glocal approach. By bridging local and global contexts, SSR&D resists the homogenizing forces of neoliberalism while fostering cross-cultural dialogue.

4. Agonistic Pluralism and Posthuman Ethics

Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism—embracing conflict as democratic—frames SSR&D's engagement with friction in participatory processes. Haraway's cyborg feminism and Latour's actor-network theory underpin its activism for a social ecology, where human and non-human (machines and AI) actors collaborate to address the risks of societal collapse.

Amartya Sen's emphasis on pluralism and public reasoning ("The Idea of Justice") complements SSR&D's commitment to agonistic democracy. By creating spaces where conflicting perspectives can coexist and interact, SSR&D enacts Sen's vision of justice as an inclusive, participatory process.

5. Ethical Philosophy and the Politics of Attention

The *Social Sensibility R&D Department* resonates profoundly with Simone Weil's philosophical inquiry into ethical responsibility and collective care, particularly her concept of "attention" as a radical act of empathy. In *Gravity and Grace* (1947), Weil posits that true attention—a selfless, patient focus on the needs of others—is the foundation of justice and solidarity. This ethos aligns with the department's mission to decentralize artistic practice and foster relational dynamics that prioritize marginalized voices. Weil's critique of systemic dehumanization and her call for "rootedness" in community mirror Rolandi's emphasis on analog interventions, such as workshops and site-specific performances, which seek to rebuild social fabric through sustained, localized engagement. By weaving Weil's ethical framework into the methodology, the department underscores art's capacity to enact what Weil termed "the supernatural virtue of justice"—a practice of care that transcends transactional logic and reimagines human connectivity.

**Critical Impact: Redefining Art's Sociopolitical Role**

SSR&D's legacy lies in its refusal to compartmentalize art's role:

- Labor Visibility: SSR&D's Work/Live methodology centers factory workers, challenging creative economy inequities through Freirean conscientization.
- Glocal Dialectics: SSR&D bridges Beijing's and European institutions embodying Canclini's hybridity.
- Digital Justice: Rolandi's recent SOAS studies explore future potential for decentralized archiving, resisting Chun's "homogeneous empty time."

Wang Hui's critique of China's neoliberal modernization and Amartya Sen's emphasis on justice and development provide critical frameworks for understanding SSR&D's impact. By centering marginalized voices and challenging systemic inequities, SSR&D enacts a vision of art as a tool for social transformation and collective agency.

**Conclusion: Sensibility as Radical Synthesis**

SSR&D transcends art's traditional confines, becoming a sensibility that thrives in the interplay of visibility and concealment, conflict and care. By synthesizing Dewey's democratic faith, Li Zhi's tactical dissent, Rancière's emancipated spectator, Freire and Boal's liberatory pedagogies, and Haraway's posthuman ethics, SSR&D's work proves that art's radical potential lies not in resolution but in the tension between theory and praxis. As SSR&D evolves, it carries forward the understanding that the gallery, the street, and the classroom are not separate—they are stages for the same struggle.


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