THE SOCIAL THROUGHOUT: A MULTISITED ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF
SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART AT THE GALLERY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Social practice is an approach to art-making predicated on participant involvement in the creation of an artwork. It is often made and disseminated in public spaces like parks, community centers, or schools and by artists who want to work with a variety of people. The presence of social practice within a gallery is, therefore, indicative of an artist’s willingness to have their work enfolded into discourse with institutional systems, resources, histories, audiences, and politics. Though art institutions are increasingly hosting and facilitating socially engaged art projects, little scholarship that addresses how this form of art shapes and is shaped by the gallery. Furthermore, institutions, artists, and the academics who analyze social practice tend to tell stories about this form of art that focus on final culminating events and neglect the all-important relational exchanges that transpire throughout a work. This represents a major loss of knowledge about socially engaged art because, as Helguera (2011) has argued, social practice is primarily a dematerialized form of art that lives on through the stories (images, texts, etc.) that are shared about the work. This dissertation addresses this gap with a multi-sited ethnographic case study of two social practice artworks created at two public galleries, one in Canada and one in the United States. This methodological approach leveraged participant observations and interviews to get insight into the lifecycle of each project, as well as how artists’ and gallery workers’ perspectives, objectives, and priorities shifted over the course of the work.

This study found that, in these two cases, understanding the relational experiences that transpired before, during, and after culminating social practice events—what I call the social throughout—required a shift away from the notion of a final artwork. Working from deSouza’s
(2018) articulation of art as “process” (p. 29) and Jackson’s (2011) argument that social practice should be examined based on how it responds to its “supporting apparatuses” (p. 33), this research shows how the durational examination of this form of art can illuminate the often surprising, banal, and fraught interdependencies of a work. At one site, I used this analytic lens to identify how the support apparatus of settler colonialism contributed to a local phenomenon of participation fatigue: exhaustion brought on by frequent and repeating requests from outsiders to participate in story collection artworks and research projects. At my second site, I distinguished how documentation images of socially engaged art represented and created new social aspects of a work. I further assert the value of expanded forms of documentation that incorporate the social throughout into a project’s storytelling. This dissertation contributes to the field of socially engaged art and the overlapping practice-focused fields of gallery education, curation, and public programming by developing new knowledge about the under-attended topic of institutionally supported social practice. By expanding the analytic focus of socially engaged art to include the social throughout, this research provides insights that artists, gallery workers, and participants can leverage in their collaborations.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the forthcoming pages you will read of my agreement with Shannon Jackson’s (2011) argument that socially engaged art should be examined based on how it responds to its “support apparatuses” (p. 33). I believe the same structural analysis can (and should) be applied to other creative output, including this dissertation. Though it may take many years for me to untangle all the notions and systems that are interwoven into this work, I am deeply aware of the massive group of people whose time, care, and expertise enabled every word in this document.

I want to first acknowledge the organizations and people who participated in this research. You let me into the “back room” of your collaborations, shared your ideas, words, energy, and resources with me. You placed trust in me and let me be a part of your communities. Most recently, you gave me even more of your time by reading my writing, offering your thoughts on it, and pushing me to see my work in new ways. I continue to be humbled by your generosity and all that I learned from you. You have changed the way I understand and think about art, research, and myself, and I find my words woefully lacking to express my gratitude for everything you have made possible. Without you, this dissertation would not exist. Thank you.

Next, I want to recognize the incredible labor, good humor, friendship, and patience of my advisor Dr. Tyler Denmead. We have spent countless hours together on this project and if others knew just how often I insisted on doing things the hard way when you offered me much more direct paths forward, they might hold it against me. You, however, never did. Instead, you showed up to every document and meeting with an incredible willingness to let me follow my hunches and helped me figure out how to translate my art moves into academic arguments. You taught me how to write, how to research, and how to laugh when things felt impossible. You
were simultaneously rigorous and empathetic—a skillset which is urgently needed in academia and which I aspire to achieve in my own teaching. You also never blinked an eye when I took time off to have a baby and helped me ease my way back into this work when I was ready. For a long time, I did not think I was going to be able to finish this project but your deadlines and continual expressions of confidence in my abilities motivated me to keep writing. I am so lucky to have worked with you and look forward to spending the rest of my life weaving the things you have shown me into everything I do.

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While at UIUC, I met some of the most brilliant, artistic, and kind colleagues I could have asked for and their time and friendship have been the foundation of this dissertation. Mollie Fox’s creativity, compassion, writing, and humour have held me up in the hardest of moments. Your laughter, commiseration, and willingness to read everything I write have been more important than I can say and I’m so glad we found each other. Joe Carpenter’s vibrant energy, art and thoughtfulness have been unmatched. Your willingness to try anything, your radical honesty and self-interrogation inspire and guide me. My colleagues, Alyssa Bralower and Dulcee Boehm, both of whom I had the joy of undertaking projects with, have made me a better scholar and artist. You are both so talented and hardworking, I learned so much from our collaborations and can’t wait to do more with you in the future. My UIUC School of Art & Design colleagues from across the years and our recent, informal, interdepartmental Whatsapp/video chat writing group spurred me to keep going and be accountable when I needed it most. Thank you so much to you all for your motivational messages, memes, artwork, empathy, ideas, patience, and persistence. Learning from you has been a gift and I can’t wait for all the expansive, fantastic things you do
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Just as Jackson’s framework makes clear, it is not only people but also resources that make projects possible. I was able to do this research because I received financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Kate Neal Kinley Memorial Fellowship, the Graduate College, the School of Art & Design, and the Art Education Program. My ability to acquire these funds was enabled by Dr. Jane Burns, Dr. Tara McDonald, and Dr. Ken Vickery, all of whom helped me refine my funding applications so that they were competitive.

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For my teachers and friends Ted and Neville.

And for Dan, whose artistic generosity was unmatched.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

From 2011 to 2018, I exhibited *The Tar Sands Exploration Station (TSES)* [Fig 1], a mobile museum about oil sand housed in my 1982 Dodge camper van. The *TSES* leveraged the nostalgic interior of the van as a venue for installations, artworks, and museum interactives about the hotly debated Canadian petroleum product oil sand. Inside the vehicle, environmental samples of raw, unprocessed bitumen and oil sand sat in mason jars alongside cookies, ketchup chips, and beverages offered to visitors. A do-it-yourself (DIY) oil extraction machine made from a kettle, taped straws, and used takeout containers filled with tar sand sat atop the counter beside paper towels and other domestic necessities. The van’s lower, faux-wood cabinets contained true and false “lift the flap” questions, maps, and other child-friendly displays, like a model where children could dig for fake oil sand, represented by glitter. The *TSES* was manned by a ‘docent’ who welcomed people to the work, invited them to explore the space, and help themselves to a snack from the fridge. Despite my skeptical feelings about tar sand extraction, the project assumed a politically neutral voice and invited all visitors’ perspectives and contributions on the topic. In many ways, the *TSES* was an elaborate stage for the conversations that took place inside the van, aiming to make space for discussion and collaborative pedagogy about a divisive topic.
The previous paragraph is an accurate summation of the TSES and repeats many of the same talking points that I often use to tell the story of this work. However, the description I provided is, in many ways, incomplete because it does not include a detailed picture or analysis of many of the social aspects of the project. I rarely talk about how I collected the chunks of sulfur displayed in the TSES during a 2010 Tar Sands Healing Walk in Fort McMurray, Alberta, led by citizens of the downstream Indigenous community of Fort McKay First Nation. Our group was not granted permission to block the highway so whenever a truck roared towards us, we shuffled onto the gravel shoulder. It was there that I came across the egg-stinking, pale yellow chunks of sulfur that were a waste product of oil sand processing and which had bounced out of massive pipes being transported for cleaning. Similarly, neither the organizing committee of the
three-day art event that hosted the TSES in front of Toronto’s City Hall nor I have ever shared publicly how the transient people and chess players who normally hung out where the van was parked stopped by to enjoy chips and subsequently had long discussions about their family members who worked in Canada’s oil patch.

As this dissertation will show, socially engaged artists (like me) and the institutions that host them have a propensity for telling stories about their work that prioritize final events rather than make the complex durational, interactions that constitute the social experience of an artwork visible. I argue that the relational experiences that transpire during the creation of a social practice project—what I call the social throughout—are as significant as culminating public events. When the social throughout is brushed aside and not publicly addressed, the understanding that others have of a project are, at best, incomplete and, at worst, inaccurate. This represents a huge, selective loss of knowledge about a work and the ways that others might be able to build upon and learn from it. As Håkanson (2007) explains, when knowledge is not articulated, the continuum of the social processes of knowledge are disrupted. Consequently, if not shared, the knowledge that my and other socially engaged artists’ work generates cannot be built upon or leveraged by other artists, organizers, or gallery workers.

This study seeks to address this scholastic gap through a multi-sited ethnographic case study of the social throughout two socially engaged artworks: a story collection project executed at the Northern Institute of Art and Culture (NIAC) during the 2010s and a 2018 participatory social media and movement work that took place at the Seattle Museum of Art (SAM).

The particular focus of this dissertation is on gallery-supported socially engaged art projects, which,

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1 The identification of each of the institutions included in this dissertation has been determined in consultation with the artists whose projects I studied and their partner organizations. While the SAM and the participating artists at that site have elected to be identified, the artists and gallery I refer to as NIAC have chosen to be anonymized.
like social practice itself, have increased in popularity over the past thirty years. Despite their prevalence, there is little literature about how social practice projects shape and are shaped by the institutions that commission them. As a socially engaged artist whose work often takes up site as a subject, I am fascinated by what the popularization of social practice within sanctioned art spaces means for this form of art, for institutions, and for the people who make, support, and participate in this field.

Unlike object-based practices, social practice is often created (and thereby disseminated) in public spaces like parks, community centres, and schools. Many socially engaged artists seek to connect with audiences who may not traditionally visit an art gallery and eschew institutions because they do not want their work to be in dialog with the structures and politics of formal art exhibiting spaces. The presence of social practice within a gallery is, therefore, indicative of an artist’s willingness to have their work enfolded into discourse with a particular network of ideas, systems, resources, and people. There are a variety of reasons that a socially engaged artist may choose to work with a gallery such as, financial need, a desire to connect with larger audiences, or the aspiration of reconfiguring a historically exclusionary space more accessible for a marginalized community. Regardless of why an artist chooses to collaborate with a gallery, the fact remains that when they do, they (and their work) become imbricated within the particularities of that institution.

However, artists’ comfort with, and knowledge of, the institutions they are collaborating with is frequently tenuous, temporary, and partial. Galleries make deliberate choices to promote aspects of their institutions while rendering thornier issues, relations, or limitations invisible, such as difficulty connecting to specific audiences or the unstable financial status of the gallery. When combined with the absence of academic literature on institutional social practice, these
types of underlying issues make it challenging for artists to anticipate how the site of the gallery may impact their work, as well as what systems, values, or people they may need to reckon with through their project. Per Stake’s (1978) concept of “naturalistic generalization” (p. 85), this text provides detailed thick descriptions of two, gallery-based social practice projects executed at two different institutions so that readers can make connections to their own socially engaged art endeavors and identify how similar issues, values, or histories may be at play in their own gallery-based social practice projects.

While this research may have resonance with scholars and makers from a range of fields, throughout this dissertation I have prioritized the development of lines of inquiry that might be useful to people undertaking social practice art. Though gallery workers have institutional supports and frameworks (however limited, precarious, and flawed they might be) for discussing and reflecting upon their work, these systems are often difficult for artists to access and interpret. Correspondingly, this research aims to render the social throughout of institutional social practice more legible to artists so that they can enter their collaborations with additional knowledge to navigate systems, push back against concerns, and better collude with their institutional partners to foster social engagement and change. Furthermore, the social throughout invites artists and institutions to prioritize the processes by which they produce work so that they can better align their social practice projects with their political intentions.

**Theoretical Orientation and the Social Throughout**

Socially engaged art (which is also known as social practice, participatory art, and by a host of other names) is a form of art that involves the participation of others in its production. This field of practice came into prominence in the late 1990s and early 2000s, though many of
the strategies and approaches most associate with socially engaged art are shared with earlier conceptual and performance artworks. As such, many who work within participatory art choose to forgo the aforementioned terminology. Despite this divisiveness, I maintain it is analytically essential to examine and compare how the socially contingent works that make up this field are manifested, and what impacts they are having on their immediate participants, contemporary art, and the world at large.

Scholastic inattention to the processual nature of socially engaged art has been asserted by art historians and art critics Claire Bishop (2012) and Grant Kester (2018) who have both argued that social practice artists, the institutions who support them, and the academics who write about this work, tend to share and analyze concluding project events. Yet, as artist Pablo Helguera (2011) and museum workers Sarah Schultz and Sarah Peters (2012) have raised, like other forms of dematerialized art, social practice primarily lives on through the stories (images, texts, etc.) that are shared about the work. Bishop (2012) describes the two lives of social practice as a “dual horizon” (p. 174) wherein projects operate as one form of art during their initial, participatory execution, and in different forms in their consequent addresses to secondary audiences. Though Bishop does not take issue with this fissure, I contend that it is a major concern that renders the social experiences that constitute the central, relational aims of social practice invisible to non-participants, as well as any participant who did not partake in the entirety of a project. Though some practitioners may be comfortable with their socially engaged artworks being understood solely by primary participants, many artists who take up the terminology and framework of socially engaged art do so because they want to be involved in wider discourses about social practice as a form of art and field. Participation in these discourses
is especially salient to socially engaged artists who choose to work with galleries, despite the fact that social practice can, and often does, exist outside of art exhibiting contexts.

In service of unpacking how the site of the gallery might be contouring social practice, this study extends performance scholar Shannon Jackson’s (2011) theoretical argument that socially engaged art is best understood based on how it responds to (rather than transcending) its “supporting apparatuses” (p. 33)—the interconnected epistemologies, resources, places, people, and politics which make a work possible. For example, as a fossil-fueled art project, the TSES can be analyzed through the support apparatuses of the Canadian petroeconomy. Its exhibition in a space that displaced under-housed people can be further examined by thinking about how that same petroeconomy impacts the bloated Canadian housing market and affordable housing in Toronto.

As Black Lives Matter (BLM) and countless years of anti-racist activism have brought to the fore despite the pervasive resistance of white supremacy, the structures and systems that make up our world are not benign, they are inflected with history, power, and discrimination (Black Lives Matter, 2021). Just as this is true of policing, governments, and education, it is also true of art and art galleries. In recent years, artist-activist groups such as Decolonize this Place have been working to make the ties between art museums and their financial support apparatuses more visible. For example, as I write this Decolonize this Place are in the midst of a ten-week action Strike MoMA (Strike MoMA, 2021; Bishara, 2021). Throughout this time, they have organized a series of protests and teach-ins to draw attention to how several of New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) board members and benefactors profit from the ongoing conflict in Palestine and the current political unrest in Columbia, as well as a network of other the museum’s entanglements (Decolonize this Place, 2021). As these actions and the research
they are based upon make clear, it is urgent that anyone making, supporting, or writing about art ask difficult questions about what beliefs and systems of power are interwoven into a work by virtue of its location and its associated politics. The necessity of pursuing similar lines of inquiry is acute in social practice, a form of art which, to borrow Helguera’s (2011) framing, seeks to move beyond symbolic representations and facilitate social, experiential change (if only for a moment). As such, the support apparatuses that are knotted within a project are significant because they reflect if and how a work is able to facilitate the relational changes it seeks to foster.

Whereas Jackson (2011) largely relies on analysis of culminating events and first-hand accounts of works provided by artists and their institutional collaborators, my research asserts that the durational examination of the social throughout a piece can better illuminate how the support apparatus of the art gallery shapes the social practice art it hosts. In this study, I deploy Jackson’s concept of support apparatuses as an analytic framework for examining the gallery itself to understand how the systems, logics, and histories of art institutions are interwoven into the relational exchanges and outcomes of gallery-based socially engaged art.

This research also takes up artist, educator, and scholar Allan deSouza’s (2018) framing of art as a process rather than a product. deSouza explains that when defining art, most rely upon the modernist, aesthetic autonomy grounded notion that art is anything an artist claims is art, provided that the corresponding social response (be it from friends, gallerists, other artists, etc.) confirms this claim. deSouza (2018) goes on to show how “a priori experience and information” (p. 28) serve as the essential precursors to both the development and consequent interpretation of art. Working from this temporal theorization, deSouza asserts that art is process because every
work is in a constant state of becoming. This conceptualization of art as process is instrumental to my study because, as deSouza (2018) writes,

The shift from what artworks are to what artworks do, and how they come into being (doing), have major repercussions on how contemporary art viewers—or rather interactors or even enactors—engage with, assess, and continue to think and act upon these works. Where and how we encounter artworks are crucial to how they are activated. (p. 29)

deSouza highlights how, when we think of art as process, the audience’s experience of a piece is not a mere consequence of an artwork’s existence: it is a foundational element that makes up the core of a work which is always in the active motion of becoming. Therefore, the site of the work (e.g., a gallery, a public park, or a studio) is inseparable from how any artwork is encountered, understood, and brought into being.

I take up this theoretical argumentation methodologically by utilizing ethnographic case study which allowed me to see how two social practice artworks came into being, before, during, and after their creation. Focusing on two non-commercial art galleries allowed me to zoom in more particularly on how public art institutions themselves become mediating components of a project. This research models how attending to the social throughout highlights the multitude of ways that the support apparatus of the gallery is entangled within the social of institutional social practice. By disseminating knowledge about the processes by which two gallery-based works came into being, I hope to empower artists to identify and grapple with the support apparatuses enmeshed within their institutional collaborations.

It is critical to note that while I assert that there needs to be celebration and disclosure about the social throughout social practice, I do not underestimate the cascading implications that this shift in focus may have for artists or institutions. I know from my own work that I do not disclose these important aspects of a project for a number of reasons:
a) my ethical desire to protect the privacy and intimacy of the experiences people have with the project;

b) my aesthetic preference for dynamic, compelling, visual storytelling that draws viewers in using the conventions of composition and the vocabulary of contemporary art;

c) my habituation to emulating the “ideal documentation image” of a racially diverse group of people participating in a project, so often used in socially engaged art to minimize the pervasive whiteness found in many of the art spaces where my projects are staged; and,

d) the challenge of mirroring the emancipatory, social change sought out in the work through a form that somehow enacts those same political aspirations.

As these concerns show, there is a continuing tension between my uptake of the aesthetic conventions of art and the multiple support apparatuses (be they the expectations of the art world or the aspirations of white activism) that are at the core of social practice. As a form of art defined by its social interdependence, responsiveness to these contradictory conditions and their political implications, are the central stakes of social practice.

In a recent publication, political economy and art scholar Max Haiven (2018) points to the challenge of drawing boundaries around artistic practice when contemporary art’s permissive nature embraces any gesture or object as visual art. Haiven asks, “…by what mechanisms, under what paradigms, within which circuits, and with what implications are some acts rendered ‘art’ while so many others, worthy as they may be, are denied this valorization?” (p. 22). When Haiven’s question is reframed through the vocabulary of Jackson’s (2011) support apparatuses and deSouza’s (2018) articulation of art as process, it might ask: If the mechanisms, paradigms,
and circulation networks (support apparatuses) that enable the creation of socially engaged art are a part of the artwork (art as process), then what does it mean if they are not articulated? As this question highlights, the ethical, aesthetic, institutional, and political reasons that I cited for not disclosing more of the social processes of my own socially engaged artworks beget further interrogation. My choices about what to include and exclude in my works are reflective of how power is leveraged, circulated, entangled, created, and resisted through the relational experiences that transpire throughout a project and in its dissemination.

The push-and-pull between the aesthetic and relational aspects of socially engaged art is encapsulated in my ongoing difficulties to represent the TSES. Even when I want to share more of the social interactions that make up a work, I often do not make time to create detailed, accurate recordings that would lend themselves to the robust storytelling that participants’ perspectives and experiences warrant. These types of documentation challenges are faced by many socially engaged artists who, due to their decision to work on non-commercial projects, cannot afford the time required to document their work more extensively. Furthermore, my persistent lack of time is reflective of the ways that the social, political, and cultural are articulated within my work and harken to a number of the core issues within the field of social practice, such as: the ethical conundrum of how to secure continual and evolving “consent” for representational forms that social practice curator Deborah Fisher (2016, p. 440) raises and the precarity of the labor involved in creating the work addressed by scholar Claire Leigh La Berge.

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2 Though there is little data about the financial wellbeing of socially engaged artists in North America I offer the following: during my two-year MFA in Social Practice at California College of the Arts we had a minimum of four socially engaged artists or collaborative groups visit our program each year, most of them well established. I asked the majority of these artists how they funded their projects. While the Scandinavian, Australian, and some of the Canadian social practitioners talked about grants they had secured, almost all the American artists spoke about self-financing their work. This included several large, gallery-supported projects whose budgets did not align with the true costs of an artist’s project, or whose payment structures required artists to initially finance material and/or compensation and later be renumerated by institutions, sometimes months later.
(2019). As a consequence of these, and other issues, the stories I typically tell others about the TSES, and the similar stories others tell about their projects, do not necessarily represent the social throughout, nor do they include what may be the most meaningful social aspects of these projects for participants.

It is precisely because of my intimate knowledge of the tendency to neither exhaustively record nor share these durational aspects of social practice that I decided to conduct research that attends to the lifecycle of gallery-supported socially engaged art. I sought to better understand how the social is manifested throughout others’ projects, what aspects of the social are made visible and why, and what can be learned from attending to the social in greater detail through Jackson and deSouza’s frameworks. Furthermore, my interest in learning more about the social, durational aspects of socially engaged art is mirrored by fellow practitioners, researchers, and gallery workers who are similarly invested in expanding the ways their work is analyzed, as well as the development of new academic literature on social practice art. By sharing the social throughout of two gallery-based social practice projects, this dissertation offers artists and institutions information to better plan for their future collaborations and work against any support apparatuses that may undermine the aims of their socially engaged projects.

**Research Approach and Research Questions**

Accounting for the relational experiences before, during, and after culminating social practice events—the social throughout—requires a methodological shift away from the notion of a final artwork and, per deSouza (2018), refocuses on examining a work as it is becoming. In her analysis of the methods used to study social practice Bishop (2012) argues that critics and academics are often not able to be present for the lifecycle of the socially engaged works they
study and are thus unable to represent the full breadth of the projects they are analyzing. She writes that social practice is, "an art dependent on first-hand experience, preferably over a long duration (days, months, or even years). Few observers are in a position to take such an overview of long-term participatory projects" (Bishop, 2012, p. 6). In this dissertation, I set out to address this methodological shortcoming by utilizing an ethnographic case study research design, a methodology that is ideally suited to examining the lifecycle of social practice artworks from inception to post-project debriefing (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2017; O’Rian, 2009).

As an artist, I was interested in the ways that ethnographic methods echo methods used by social practitioners. For example, both ethnographers and socially engaged artists get involved in the daily lives of a community (participant observation) and often seek out contributions of stories, or the words of others to generate their works (interviews). In this sense, though this dissertation is not a social practice artwork, it is underwritten by an art move to deploy the shared forms of ethnography and socially engaged art as a mechanism to examine my field of practice in a novel, responsive way. Furthermore, just as socially engaged art blurs the definitions of what constitutes an artwork, this research uses ethnographic case study to trouble the disciplinary boundaries of art and social science.

In this research, I primarily used the ethnographic method of participant observation which involved "hanging out" in galleries before, during, and after the social practice artworks included in this study were presented to the public (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). As a participant-observer, I was both outside and imbricated within the projects executed at each of my case study sites. This vantage point gave me a long-term view of the social aspects of the artwork, distinct from what the public, gallery, or even other project participants might see.
I complimented my participant observation with interviews, visual analysis, and document analysis to research socially engaged art projects staged at NIAC, a small art center located in the Canadian sub-Arctic, and SAM, a survey museum in a large Pacific-Northwest city. At NIAC (my lead case site), I studied the execution of a story collection project that was co-created by two Canadian visual artists. At SAM (my secondary site), I followed a collaborative team led by socially engaged artists Tia Kramer and Eric John Olson, as they created a hybrid online and movement-centered participatory work that used embodied prompts, such as “Step outside. Notice the direction of the wind” to get people across a range of locations involved in a temporary community and which was then documented and shared online.

In participating and observing in the lifecycle of these artworks, I asked the following research questions:

1. What constitutes the social throughout the lifecycle of institutionally supported socially engaged art?
   a. How does the support apparatus of the gallery shape social practice art at the Northern Institute of Art and Culture and the Seattle Art Museum?
   b. How are the systems and ideologies of different art galleries entangled in institutionally supported socially engaged art?
   c. How do artists, participants, and galleries tell the story of their works throughout and after a project?

By answering these questions based on ethnographic fieldwork, I provide artists and galleries with much-needed insight into the ways that the support apparatus of the gallery is intertwined with the social practice projects they host.
My selection of these two art institutions as research sites was driven by an initial curiosity in their similarities and differences. Though both NIAC and SAM are non-profit art galleries, the former is a small gallery with no permanent collection or curator, while the latter is a major collecting museum with a robust staff of curators, educators, and public programmers. I theorized that studying the execution of socially engaged art at two differently structured and resourced galleries, would allow me to extrapolate what, if any, shared practices, concerns, and strengths, might be at play across a myriad of art exhibiting spaces in Canada and the United States.

Like institutional critique artists Andrea Fraser and Liberate Tate, whose works make political aspects of museological culture visible, I use Jackson’s (2011) concept of supporting apparatuses to see the ways the systems, ideologies, histories, and cultures of each institution fed into the social experiences of the artworks. For example, at NIAC, I traced how a local slowness to get involved in the artist’s story collection project was reflective of a regional phenomenon of participation fatigue brought on by over 150-years-worth of extraction by outsiders going to the North with acquisitional aims. While the phenomenon began with a thirst for resources, Indigenous lands, and knowledge, over time, these outsiders became tourists in search of aesthetic colonial cosplay experiences. Most recently, these outsiders included a deluge of artists who, supported by the local gallery, elected to undertake community-engaged art. In my analysis, I examine how settler colonialism informed this activity, how locals (particularly from the Indigenous nation) resisted their fatigue, and how the artists and the gallery, both bodies invested in Indigenous sovereignty and decolonization, negotiated their sometimes conflicted political and artistic aims.
In my second case study at SAM, I use image analysis to consider the different ways that artists and the museum leveraged documentation to tell the story of their multifaceted collaboration on embodiment and technology. Drawing upon the literature on socially engaged art and deSouza’s (2018) work on art as process, I consider how the images the artists and the gallery produced through their socially engaged art project told the story of the artwork. I use ethnographic data to tease out how documentation created a new social within socially engaged art and the surprising ways it might be leveraged to tell the stories of the social throughout a project.

Working across these two sites was instrumental to my research design because, while it allowed me to dig into the support apparatuses of each case, it also allowed me to step back and ask broader questions about what (if any) commonalities were interlocked into socially engaged artworks executed in such distinct contexts. I used my ethnographic data to identify how the support apparatus of settler-colonialism was at play at my first site NIAC before I took a similar bounded approach to SAM. This analytic strategy allowed me to use the detailed ethnographic data and analysis of each site to further identify how the social throughout was manifested in both of these gallery-supported socially engaged artworks.

However, this methodology and my findings are not without limitations. By working across two sites, I constrained my ability to expand and write about the full breadth of art and literature that informed my analysis of each case. Similarly, my ethic of care has further shaped the ideas and data I engage with in this dissertation. Just as I propose that socially engaged artists must consider the social throughout their projects, so too do I assert that researchers who work with participants have a shared ethical obligation to examine how their scholarship might impact the people it discusses. My ability to execute this research was predicated on a trust between the
participants and me, as well as our shared understandings of socially engaged art and the work of art galleries. There would be little merit to my recommendation that artists should engage in transparent and open communication with their project communities if I did not take up the same charge in this study. As such, not only have I offered anonymity to all involved in this research, I have also shared this document back with those participants before depositing this dissertation so that I might reflect upon and invite their perspectives on this text. What is more, as a socially engaged artist, I am invested in addressing systemic and field-wide concerns of social practice and considering how and why they manifested in these cases so that other socially engaged artists can learn from these galleries and enter their future projects with new, applicable knowledge that can inform their work.

**Significance**

This dissertation contributes to the field of socially engaged art and the overlapping practice-focused fields of gallery education, curation, and public programming by developing new knowledge about the under-attended topic of institutionally supported social practice. Since the early 2000s, socially engaged art has grown from a small subfield of contemporary art to a wide-ranging field that is codified through practice, the establishment of a dedicated Journal, graduate programs, targeted funding opportunities like the A Blade of Grass Fellowship, and conferences like Open Engagement and the Creative Time Summit (Creative Time, 2014; FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism, 2016; Portland State University, 2021; A Blade of Grass, 2018; “Open Engagement Pittsburgh,” 2015). Similarly, there has been a notable swell of exhibitions and writing on participatory and community-centered gallery practices, variously initiated as curatorial endeavors, education department offerings, or the growing, cross-disciplinary outputs of public programming teams such as the Guggenheim Social Practice
Initiative and the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts Socially Engaged Artist Residency
(Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum 2016; Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, 2016). Despite the prevalence of socially engaged art and participatory gallery practices, few researchers have attended to the relationship between social practice and art institutions as I do in my research. Furthermore, this dissertation builds off Jackson’s (2011) call to examine socially engaged art based on its responsiveness to its “support apparatuses” through dedicated investigation into how the support apparatus of the institution was shaping socially engaged art at these two sites. I extend Jackson’s argument to generate data about the surprising ways that settler-colonialism and documentation are interwoven into gallery-supported social practice, as well as how the examination of the social throughout might open up new avenues for examining this form of art and field of practice.

This project further contributes to existing knowledge about institutional social practice art through the methodological innovation of using ethnographic case study to research the social throughout two gallery-based social practice projects. As Bishop (2012) and Fisher (Davis et al., 2016) have identified, traditional art historical and art critical methods of analyzing art do not attend to the durational nature of social practice. My detailed accounting of the benefits and pitfalls of using ethnography to study socially engaged art provides artists, scholars, and gallery workers with much-needed insight into some of the ways institutions and artists might improve their collaborations such as; the prioritization of transparency in artist-institutional communications, the centering of reciprocity in all social practice projects, and the uptake of expanded forms of creative documentation that showcase the social throughout. My combined use of ethnographic methods (Fusch et al., 2017; O’Rian, 2009) and Jackson’s (2011) analytic emphasis on support apparatuses, yielded discoveries about the ways that attending to the social
throughout—which prioritizes the inclusion of process in the dissemination of social practices—can uniquely respond to the complexities of the gallery and its politics.

My dual identity as an artist and art educator has given me an appreciation for how art functions as a form of pedagogy from which others learn about art, the world, and themselves. When art takes up the social as both material and form (as it does in social practice), it is crucial to understand what is transpiring throughout the lifecycle of a project in order to be able to analyze what messages, ideas, lessons, histories, and concepts it is transmitting. By expanding the analytic focus of social practice to include the social throughout, this dissertation provides pedagogical insights that others can leverage in their practices.

The need for dedicated scholarship about gallery-supported social practice grows ever more urgent as art institutions embrace this field with increasing enthusiasm. At the core of all socially engaged art is some form of participation or interaction, which can range from a call to contribute a story, to collaboratively, co-authored projects that upend social conventions through radical art offerings. Even in its most convivial forms, socially engaged art presents numerous risks and rewards to the people who partake in it. The potential consequences of these shared projects are exacerbated by the politics and expectations of art exhibiting institutions. By centering the social as it is manifested throughout two gallery-supported social practice art projects, this research fosters the continued expansion of this field with findings that illuminate some of the ways that artists and institutions can cultivate reflexive projects, that are responsive to the sometimes contradictory and often contingent needs of their participants. The social throughout offers artists and gallery workers a framework to generate the knowledge they need to resist and rebuild their institutions in ways that better represent their interests, values, and politics.
Outline

This dissertation is divided into seven sections. This chapter provided a summary of my dissertation project, research purpose, and questions, my personal orientation to the topic, and my research approach. Chapter two is an overview of scholarship on the social in art, galleries, and social practice with an emphasis on how Jackson’s (2011) analytic focus on support apparatuses opens up new ways of understanding institutional socially engaged art. This chapter centers around many of the texts which constitute the central scholastic discourse of socially engaged art (e.g.; Bishop 2011; Kester, 2013; Helguera, 2011; Jackson, 2011; Finkelpearl, 2013) and which my work on institutional social practice is in dialogue with. Chapter three outlines how and why I used ethnographic case study to research socially engaged art by drawing upon these fields’ shared values and methods. More specifically, I detail how the methodological similarities between social practice and ethnography illuminated the benefits, challenges, and ethical issues within gallery-supported social practice.

This dissertation includes three analytic chapters, two that focus on NIAC and one on SAM. These chapters reflect the wide variety of support apparatuses that are entangled within institutional social practice, from a massive organizing construct like settler colonialism, to a dissemination tool like documentation. As such, the amount of time devoted to each case varies in accordance with the scale of the topic it attends to. Chapters four and five use the analytic framework of support apparatuses to identify and unpack factors that influenced the socially engaged artworks created at my primary research site NIAC, where I observed a phenomenon of settler-colonial inflected participation fatigue. Chapter six uses image analysis to examine three photographs created and shared during my study of a social practice project executed at SAM and considers how documentation operates as a support apparatus of gallery-based socially
engaged art. This dissertation concludes with an overview of the issues raised throughout the rest of this text to argue for more scholarship on the social throughout institutional social practice.
CHAPTER 2
THEORIZING THE SUPPORT APPARATUSES OF SOCIAL PRACTICE ART AND
THE GALLERY

It is problematic to write about gallery-based socially engaged art without in-depth consideration of the support apparatuses that are interwoven into a project because of the vital role that they play in the social aspects of a work. The technologies a gallery uses to disseminate social engagement, the knowledges that artists rely on to structure participation, and the values of the local communities that get involved in a work are all examples of support apparatuses. In this chapter, I show how it is advantageous to think through the various facets of the nexus between social practice art and its supporting apparatuses in order to better comprehend institutionally supported social practice.

In order to interpret what constitutes the “social” of social practice art, it is important to first review how the social has been understood in art and galleries, both historically and in the present. From prehistoric cave paintings of France to the illuminated stories of Persia depicted in the Shahnama, to the decorative bronzes of the Benin Kingdom, until the mid-1700s, the primary function of much historic art was to communicate ideas, be it practical information, religious mythology, or political posturing (Hauser, 1999). This “functional” art reigned dominant in Anglo-American artistic output until the late 1700s, when modernist interpretations of the aesthetic (understood more broadly as the arts) began to take hold in intellectual spheres, first across Germany and then throughout Europe.

As interdisciplinary scholars Born et al. (2017) argue, modernist aesthetic theory pushed aside questions of the social in favor of celebrating non-contextualized, individual yet universal
experiences with works of art. Kester (2011) details how the development of this universalized spectator emerged as a rejection of age-old expectations that art transmits social or political messages and as a way to devalue the popular literature of the era, which many academics saw as intellectually inferior and unworthy. Kester (2011) goes on to describe how, in order to disrupt these two manifestations of arts' function, Schiller, Kant, and their contemporaries developed “an aesthetic discourse based on notions of purity and contamination in which it is necessary to maintain a rigid segregation between corrupt and authentic practices” (p. 35). In this framework, the autonomy of an artwork, both from the social context(s) of its production and its reception, became paramount.

There were an array of other interpretations of aesthetics and art that emerged over the course of the next two centuries (e.g., Dewey’s socially situated pragmatist aesthetics which has had important impacts on the field of education and art, and Marxian analytic frameworks that examines the role of capital in the aesthetic sphere.) However, the modernist notion of the spectator as having transcendent, universal experiences with artworks, regardless of their social context or societal implications, played a dominant role in philosophical discussions of art well into the 20th century. During the 1970s, a swell of scholars including Lyotard, Derrida, and Rorty began to individually and collectively undermine the tenets of modernism through the development of postmodernism, a broad philosophical turn that, amongst other things, rejected the notion that reality is universal and argued instead that reality is contingent and socially constructed by individuals based on their distinct experiences.³ Postmodernism, and, as Kester

³ As deSouza (2018) points out, though the origins of postmodernism are often attributed to 1968 cultural shifts in Paris, a less Eurocentric perspective of history draws attention to the intertwinment of postmodernity and postcolonialism and cite earlier events, such as the 1955 Bandung Conference, as the origins of this shift in thinking (p. 202). Regardless of the start date, it was not until the early 1970s that a surge of postmodernist thinking became a dominant discourse. The entanglement of colonialism and modernity is something I return to throughout this study.
(2013) argues, the corresponding theoretical apparatus of post-structuralism (which stipulates art should be read, analyzed, and interpreted) continue to be the most dominant philosophical framings used in artistic spheres to understand cultural production in Anglo-European contexts to this day.

However, the rise of postmodernism did not silence debates about the autonomy of art—and thus the role of the social in art—both of which remain active. As deSouza (2018) asserts,

The “post” of postmodernism is misleading. We live in colonialism’s aftermath, as we do modernism’s aftermath, but we are also living in their widespread continuation… I consider them [modernism and postmodernism] as coexisting sets of practices, and as highly adaptive, complex systems of ideas and their implementations. [emphasis added] (p. 205)

As deSouza argues, despite the linguistic implication in the term “postmodernism”, modernism never ended and remains an operational logic of the present. Furthermore, he points to how modernism and postmodernism presently coexist as conceptual and practical frameworks that shape how artists, curators, and public audiences understand and make meaning from art.

While there are scholars and practitioners (and of course scholar-practitioners) who overtly espouse one of these ideologies over the other and thus believe that art is either transcendent or sprung from the social, I suspect there are many more thinkers who, consciously or not, hold these values in tandem. It would not be uncommon, for example, to describe a social practice artwork based on how it attended to a local, political issue (postmodern) while also neglecting to include the name of project participants who co-created a work in summations of the project (modern). This simultaneity of the present, wherein both modernist and postmodernist

4 deSouza’s (2018) work on the simultaneity of modernism and postmodernism, as well as the connectivity of modernism and colonialism is as an enactment of articulation theory which asserts the interconnectivity of relations of power as a structuring logic of any field. Per the aforementioned examples, the simultaneity of modernism, postmodernism, colonialism, and post-colonialism are all integral, though conflicting, aspects of contemporary power structures of art and global artistic discourse.
methods of making, displaying, and interpreting artwork are held in tension, has many exciting and charged manifestations and outcomes. In the context of my research, the overlapping of the modern and the postmodern is pertinent as it shapes understandings of the social life of art, and in particular, of gallery-supported social practice. In the remainder of this section, I consider first how the social is constructed in the literature on socially engaged art, then on how the social is constructed within the literature on art institutions, and thirdly, how literature has framed the social in gallery-supported social practice art.

The Social in Socially Engaged Art Literature

Over the course of the past three decades, socially engaged art—a form of visual art that is centered around the involvement of participants in the creation of a work—has risen in popularity. Today, this form of art also is referred to as social practice, participatory art, live art, and using other descriptors that differ based on artist/curator/academic preferences and the context(s) in which they work. Many creators and scholars eschew the terminology altogether, preferring to frame their participatory works using the language of conceptual art, community arts, performance, activism, research, or using a host of other descriptors.

The linguistic diversity of this terminology is reflective of a variety of factors, such as the different approaches used in the work, the aims of its originators, the histories and politics the maker(s) want to be in conversation with, and the funding sources which made a project possible. In this dissertation, I use the terms socially engaged art, participatory art, social practice art, and social practice interchangeably because they best reflect my prioritization of thinking through this form of art as artistic, socially situated output. That said, I appreciate that

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5 For example, in my own artistic practice, I have deployed all of the other aforementioned terms, switching things up depending on my audience and which vocabulary I think will be most productive and relevant in a given context.
“social practice art” can imply a false division between the many “socially engaged” art projects (like Joseph’s Beuys social sculpture and Adrian Piper’s public performances) that proceeded the uptake of this label in the 2000s and the work taking place today. For the purpose of this dissertation, I use the terminology of socially engaged practice because it is analytically productive to group a set of like contemporaneous practices together in order to examine these works and the ideas behind them in conversation with one another.

I agree with deSouza (2018) around a second major issue with the terminology of social practice, specifically the “exclusive” claim to sociality in art that the name “socially engaged art” seems to infer. This claim is erroneous because all art is social. As deSouza (2018) raises at various points in his philosophical lexicon of art terms, art is always coming “into being,” and the viewer is an essential component of this process. He states,

…all artworks require viewers to bring them into meaning and into discourse, even if it is only as advertisers. Audience, then, can be thought of less as passive recipients of artworks and more as active coenactors, brought “into being” in overlapping ways as artworks are, through pre-existing discourses of art history, popular culture, and advertising. (deSouza, 2018, p 108)

This understanding of the audience as coenactors speaks to the essential social nature of all art, be it “socially engaged” or not. Yet, regardless of the sociality of art, there remains a very particular set of concerns that, in its efforts to reconstitute and create social experiences, are heightened in social practice and therefore warrant standalone consideration.

The fraught discourse on the social nature of art is exemplified by the early 2000s debates about what constituted “successful” social practice art. The origins of this debate are typically traced to curator Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), in which the author describes the emancipatory potential of a then emergent (and rather narrow) vein of work in which artists used gallery spaces to foster participatory experiences. In response to this text, art critic and
author Claire Bishop (2004, 2005) drew upon notions of aesthetic autonomy and the philosophy of Chantel Mouffe to argue in favor of confrontational or “antagonistic” socially engaged art. This position was countered first by artist Liam Gillick (2006) and later by art historian Grant Kester (2006), who asserted social practice was at its best when it generated social and political change, a framing which is often referred to by others as “ethical” (Wong, 2012, para. 7). Bishop (2012) and Kester (2011, 2013) have both since put considerable effort into clarifying that socially engaged art does not need to be either antagonistic nor ethical since it can simultaneously be both or neither.

Nonetheless, what these scholars do disagree about is the social role of art. While Bishop (2012) draws on the history of the avant-garde to argue the value of participatory artwork pushing conventions and creating new social and artistic norms, Kester (2011, 2013) believes the avant-garde is an outmoded, modernist ideal that is predicated upon the notion of the artist as a genius. Kester takes issue with this inference because of the vital role of participation and co-authorship in social practice, an approach to making that disrupts modernist claims to the single genius author of an artwork. At the core of this debate between Bishop and Kester is a tension between the perceived autonomy of a work and its social relationships—a discourse that remains a central issue for many socially engaged artists and organizers to this day.6

Over the course of the past decade of my own involvement in social practice spheres, I have been surprised and sometimes exasperated by how often this “antagonism versus effects”

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6 In addition to Bishop and Kester, there are a number of important publications on socially engaged art that have informed my research. These texts offer different thematic investigations into topics such as; cooperation (Finkelpearl, 2013), generosity (Purves & Selzer, 2005/2014), education (Helguera, 2011) and economics (La Berge, 2019). While fundamental in establishing the field of socially engaged art scholarship, what interests me most about these texts is they ways they illuminate different facets of the way that socially engaged art transpires at the gallery, and to which I return later in this chapter. Furthermore, I draw upon these texts analytically within my case studies to help illustrate the types of “social” that socially engaged art most often shares, which it excludes, and how the visibility of these elements helps us understand social practice at the gallery.
or, as it is sometimes framed, “aesthetics versus ethics” debate gets raised at conferences, in papers, and in artist talks. Yet as this research project has helped me see, this debate is omnipresent because, per deSouza (2018), the act of claiming and authoring anything as art always germinates from a position of artistic autonomy. This artistic autonomy enabled naming and claiming of art is particularly acute in the case of social practice, which, in its performative, processual, and socially generated forms, could easily be interpreted as a variety of things that are not art such as schools, meals, protests, social services, and journalism, etcetera. As such, socially engaged art’s autonomy grounded identification as art is always in tension with the multiple social desires and needs of the social worlds and people that are an essential component of creating a work.

While the textual back-and-forth about how to interpret socially engaged art has slowed since the early 2000s, the issues it punctuates—such as who benefits from a work and how a work operates within the context of artistic discourse—are inseparable from this form of art. And, as my fieldwork revealed, this friction surrounding the interpretation of social practice is further amplified by the supporting apparatus of the gallery—a site where questions of artistic autonomy and audience engagement are continuously enacted through the sharing and public reception of works.

**Support Apparatus as Theoretical Orientation**

Jackson's (2011) text on socially engaged art leverages the lens of performance studies to cut through the often-circular discourse on aesthetics and ethics in social practice. Jackson shows how both antagonistic and effect-centered works benefit from analysis that assesses how the aesthetic and the social are simultaneously probed and embodied within a piece. She states,
By emphasizing—rather than being embarrassed by—the infrastructural operations of performance, we might find different ways to join aesthetic engagement to the social sphere, mapping a shared interest in the confounding of the insides and outsides, selves and structures. (Jackson, 2011, p. 29)

These infrastructural vocabularies of performance open up the ways we might understand the aesthetic and the social in socially engaged art because they blur the boundaries between artworks and process and between participants and observers.

For Jackson (2011), social practice is best examined by studying how responsive a work is to the “support apparatuses” (p. 33) that are entangled within the project. Jackson’s use of this term is not always consistent; her language shifts throughout the text, using phraseology such as “props” (p. 80) and “infrastructures” (p. 39) at various times. Nonetheless, her principal argument remains the same: the conditions, people, systems, and beliefs that enable social practice are a necessary component of its production. Just as most analyses of a painting would include consideration of the paint, so too must the supporting apparatuses of social practice be analyzed because, as a form of art enmeshed in social life, the support apparatuses of a project are a core facet of the work.

In Jackson’s (2011) framework, the interconnectedness of socially engaged art to the world is, in itself, an artistic gesture. She writes:

Rather, the de-autotomizing of the artistic event is itself an artful gesture, more and less self-consciously creating an intermedial form that subtly challenges the lines that would demarcate where an art object ends and where the world begins. It is to make art from, not despite, contingency. (Jackson, 2011, p. 28)

This “artfulness,” or the “de-autotomizing” nature of socially engaged art, undercuts modernist ideals that position aesthetics as detached from the world around them. The socialities of a work, are therefore, a central component of its aesthetic or artistic output. Through "intermediality," Jackson (2011) points to the way social practice mixes and entangles different media to develop
new artistic forms that push the boundaries that modernist aesthetics would claim exist between an art object and its context. In this understanding, the social becomes an artistic material that takes up multiple forms.

With the concept of supporting apparatuses, Jackson (2011) points us towards the importance of the contextual specificity of socially engaged art. In this framework, the social contexts and systems that appear to underwrite an artwork (such as the social mores of the site where the work takes place and the economic system of capitalism) are intertwined within the work. Jackson’s use of the term *contingency* is particularly productive to think through because it speaks to the ways that social practice is not determined by outside factors but rather is interlocked within those conditions.

The concept of supporting apparatuses has implications for how social practice art might be judged as art and has influenced my development of the *social throughout* as a framework for examining social practice. Jackson (2011) contends that socially engaged art is successful when, “it provokes an awareness of our *enmeshment* in systems of support, be they systems of labor, immigration, urban planning or environmental degradation” (p. 45) Terminologically, though *enmeshment* is often thought to refer to the negative entanglement of various elements, Jackson’s use of the term here is intended to play off of and disempower ontological claims of the separation between art and life, or that support apparatuses determine social practice. Instead, Jackson’s onto-epistemic assertion—that social practice art should be examined based on how it responds to its conditions because this kind of art move provokes viewers’ awareness of those conditions—highlights the social knowledge needed to both produce and assess this form of art.

Jackson’s (2011) examination of a series of works indicates that support apparatuses come in many forms such as:
• the ideologies that support the social conditions in which a work is produced;
• the labor that enables a project;
• the systems (e.g., telephone networks, food distribution, and globalization) that are ingrained in a work;
• and, the medium specific histories that a project draws upon, just to name a few.

At the heart of Jackson’s idea of “support apparatuses” is an analytic approach that encourages a back-and-forth examination of social practices that uses the aesthetic components of a work to turn towards the social conditions of the project, which spurs new ways of seeing and understanding the aesthetic. In short, a focus on support apparatuses leverages the inherent social interdependence of socially engaged art to see both the work and the world in new ways.

Jackson’s (2011) concept of support apparatuses draws upon a lineage post-Marxist, post-Foucauldian, and post-Brechtian thinking to tease out the complex and entangled relationships between socially engaged art, money, class, power, performance, and histories. Drawing upon the work of philosophers and political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Jackson takes an anti-reductionist and anti-essentialist position in her conceptualization support apparatuses which, despite the linguistic inference of inferiority made by the term support, are intertwined with, and not external to, socially engaged art. For Jackson, social practice art is not determined by the social apparatuses in which it is enmeshed. At the same time, social practice art is not operating outside of those apparatuses either. In this sense, social practice art is not merely situated within a particular social context, but rather, it brings a contingent social context into temporary being.

Though Jackson (2011) does not formally introduce Laclau’s work on articulation, her hybrid methodological and theoretical approach resonates with this position. Jackson’s emphasis
on contingency, intermediality, and enmeshment all point to her position that art is not merely situated within social forces; it also manifests them, at least temporarily. I take up this line of thinking in this dissertation through cultural theorist Stuart Hall and his contemporaries’ more practice-focused and less discourse-centered formation of articulation. Articulation theory’s conceptualization of context is apposite to Jackson’s conception of supporting apparatuses. From this standpoint, cultural theorist Jennifer Daryl Slack (2006) writes that:

…the context is not something out there within which practices occur or which influence the development of practices. Rather identities, practices, and effects generally, constitute the very context within which they are practices, identities, or effects. (p. 126)

In short, the gallery is not external to the socially engaged art projects it supports because the gallery itself is constituted by the people, practices, and effects of all activity (including social practice) that transpire within and in relation to it. Relatedly, as Jackson (2011) lays out, social practice is also not external to the people, practices, or effects involved in a project because they are integral, defining components of the work.

Approaching support apparatuses in a way that is informed by articulation theory has helped me resist reductionist tendencies which might ascribe supporting apparatuses with a limited, influencing role on a work, rather than examining how support apparatuses are knit into the art projects included in my study and vice-versa. For example, at the Northern Institute of Art & Culture (NIAC) both the gallery and the socially engaged artists who undertook the project included in this study were fighting against the totalizing physical, cultural, social, and epistemic violence of settler colonialism while also enacting settler-colonial approaches to time and knowledge—structures that, by virtue of the financial constraints of the institution’s funding, were inescapable. At the same time, the artists’ resistance of settler-colonialism was further influenced by the gallery, which provided a platform for narrative and story-based knowledges.
The tension within this work between the resistance and enactment of settler colonialism is, therefore, an articulation of the ways that the myriad of support apparatuses of the work and the gallery come into being in relation to one another.

To summarize, Jackson’s (2011) analytic concept of support apparatuses is the primary approach used in my examination of gallery-based socially engaged art. This study builds off of Jackson’s corresponding theorizations of intermediality, contingency, and enmeshment—concepts that helped me see how the pluralistic art histories, context-specificity, and heteronomous nature of social practice art impacted the case studies included in this dissertation. When I applied Jackson’s framework through an ethnographic methodology, it allowed me to get a durational understanding of the social throughout the socially engaged projects I examined and helped me see how the interrelationships between the various supporting apparatuses of each gallery were entangled in the projects at hand. Prioritizing support apparatuses in this research underscored the urgent need for a more durational approach to the social throughout social practice art because it drew my attention to how many of the support apparatuses of a work only became apparent when I took a long form view of the processes of a projects production.

Building on Jackson’s intervention into how social practice is assessed, I further argue that an understanding of the social throughout a work is a necessary precursor to judgment or evaluation. Perhaps most importantly, this theoretical approach has opened up new ways of understanding the “social” of institutionally supported social practice art.

In this dissertation, I take up Jackson’s (2011) analytic framework of support apparatuses in order to consider more closely how the gallery is an integral, defining component of social practice art. Examining the two case studies included in this research through the lens of the support apparatus of the gallery has helped me see some unexpected interdependencies of the
projects I researched, the institutions that facilitated them, and the broader field of art making in North America. For example, at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM), I came to see how the gallery deployed images as a way to represent their relationship to their audiences through the work of artists (the effects of the work), how the artists used documentation as a participatory artistic medium (the aesthetic), and how both the artists and institutions’ use of photographic documentation reflected the increasingly professionalized field of social practice.

**The Social of the Art Gallery**

Unpacking social practice art becomes increasingly complicated when it is executed with the support of the gallery—a cultural, institutional form with its own deep and frequently unarticulated support apparatuses. As the artistic movement of institutional critique perhaps best renders, the art gallery is not a neutral white cube and is better understood as a highly politicized space that is enabled through a network of ideologies and numerous systems of capital (cultural, social, and economic) (Bourdieu, 1993). Art institutions spring from a plurality of socially constructed beliefs and in service to their various socially constructed aims, be they curatorial (sharing art with a public), conservational (keeping art safe for a public), educational (facilitating public learning through or about art) and/or a combination of these and other aspirations. To examine the history of art exhibiting institutions is, therefore, to examine how the socially constructed ideals of art, education, and “the public” have changed and shifted over time.

Drawing upon literature from museum studies, curatorial studies, and institutional critique, in this section, I trace some of the ways that art exhibiting spaces have been reconceptualized over the course of the past fifty years. Though I intermix texts on museums and art galleries, I recognize that the particular characteristics, missions, resources, and politics of the
wide range of art exhibiting spaces have wildly different social obligations and interests. How these distinct identities shape the support apparatuses of a given institution is, in fact, at the core of this research project. I have chosen to combine the literature from these varied fields because the precedents set by museums continue to inform all art exhibiting spaces, just as curatorial literature written about small galleries gets taken up by larger institutions. Furthermore, artistic and academic disciplinary boundaries have blurred over the past thirty years, as have the distinctions between education, museum practice, curation, performance, and even activism. As such, the literature required to think through the “social” of art galleries is necessarily cross-disciplinary.

According to the Louvre Museum (2016), their revolution-induced 1793 turn from private royal collection to public art-viewing space was the inception of the first public art museum.7 During the museum’s early years, the main aim of the Louvre was to develop a taxonomy of art and spread the gospel of the enlightenment, which it did through the display of largely European artworks and looted artifacts from colonial exploits (McLellan, 1994). The Louvre’s model of using art to tell a Eurocentric, progressive, linear narrative of art and the world has been massively successful, as evidenced by the vast number of institutions that sprung up to replicate this structure through their own objects from the 1800s to the present day (Duncan & Wallach, 2012).

The aims of the first museums were, therefore, thoroughly modernist. However, as curator and writer Alhena Katsof (2017) argues, though there has been an incorrect tendency to...

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7 The Louvre’s claim to being the first art museum has been scholastically challenged by scholars such as McLellan (1994) and Paul (2012) who propose other public, European art institutions were in fact established earlier. I speculate that numerous other non-European nations had art museums that predate the Louvre but which my own knowledge of is limited by the bombastic din of this popular etymology of museums as well as the linguistic limits of my own, English-focused research.
attribute the modernist display conventions of well-lit, white-walled, and spaced-out artworks to
the Louvre, these installation preferences actually came about more slowly over a number of
years. Katsof (2017) cites this shift to the busyness of European cities and, correspondingly,
galleries during the mid-19th century onwards, which forced institutions to rethink how they
showcased art in a densely populated context (p. 223). In this sense, both the narrative of art
history instigated by the Louvre and the later established modernist characteristics of display
have always been socially, as well as aesthetically informed.

As museum scholar Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (2000) has traced, regardless of the socially
germinating dimensions of their choices, early museums were, nonetheless, established based on
Cartesian and Kantian ideas of knowledge that privileged reason and rationality. Hooper-
Greenhill (2000, 2007) notes how, as a consequence of these modernist aims, historical Anglo-
American art curation relied on behaviorist theories of education, which positioned viewers as
passive recipients of information. In this context, the pedagogical role of the gallery was to
present art to the public through a “objective” voice that gave material form to a linear,
Eurocentric art history in service of public edification.

Since the late 20th century, these modernist conceptions of knowledge and learning have
come under attack, refuting both the authority of the museum and the meta-narrative of art
history on which it has relied. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) identifies two dominant ways art
museums have been challenged:

    The first concerns what is said and who says it, issues of narrative and voice. The second
relates to who is listening, and is an issue of interpretation, understanding and the
construction of meaning. (p. 18)

These two areas of concern—voice and the construction of meaning—are in opposition to the
asocial propositions of modernity.

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Though the above Hooper-Greenhill (2000) quote is over twenty years old, art institutions are still grappling with these issues today. For example, the tagline of the 2017 created (and continuing) online activist campaign and fund redistribution project *Museums are not Neutral*, has two stated priorities, “Expose the myth of museum neutrality and demand equity-based transformation across institutions” (Murawski, 2020, para. 3). This rallying cry to dispel the long repeated modernist narrative of museological neutrality and restructure institutions around equity encapsulates the ongoing failure by many museums to meet the social expectations and needs (political, representational, etc.) of their communities.

Since the 1970s, a number of museum scholars and practitioners have developed different terminologies to articulate a postmodern turn in museology, which, like *Museums are Not Neutral*, aim to reconfigure and challenge the modernist tenants of museology. Grewcock (2014) summarizes how this literature repositioned 21st-century museums as, “connected, plural, distributed, multi-vocal, affective, material, embodied, experiential, political, performative and participatory…” (p. 5). This socially enmeshed recapitulation of art exhibiting institutions and their core missions are perhaps best captured by post-critical museology, a practice-based concept developed by Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh (2013), and which builds upon critical museological theory’s postulation that museums needed to become more inclusive, accessible, and responsive. Post-critical museology further argues museums need to rethink how they enfold academic research and their audiences into their equity-centered activities (Acuff & Kletchka, 2020). As Acuff and Kletchka (2020) highlight, critical race theory, decoloniality, and Black Feminist Thought are braided into the contemporary framing of museums. These research efforts have

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8 Various terms have been used to describe this shift in museology toward inclusive and participatory practices including; Critical Museum Theory (Marstine, 2006), New Museology (Vergo, 1989), the Post-Museum (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000) and the Participatory Museum (Simon, 2010).
reconfigured the social role of the museum, how museums have undermined the modernist claim of neutrality, and exhibitionary practices within museums. Paramount among these concerns is the role of the museum in undoing the damage of colonialism.

Drawing Mignolo’s (2003) work on decoloniality, deSouza (2018) and Esche (2017) emphasize how, due to the intertwine of colonialism and modernism, art museums are not mere soapboxes for these constructs, rather they are *foundational* to the project of colonialism. The social role of art exhibiting spaces in Canada, the United States, and Western Europe have, therefore long been a visual vehicle through which white, Anglo-American audiences absorb colonialist ideals. As a facet of the critical and post-critical museological turn, some art institutions have been pushing back against their colonial origins. The work of decolonizing museums and galleries is an ongoing process that has included numerous scholastic efforts to rethink and critique the ways collections have been framed (Bonilla, 2017), theorized (Soares & Leshchenko, 2018), and documented (Turner, 2020) as well as other undertakings. Correspondingly, there has been an important emergence of focused decolonial activity, including the return of stolen objects and artworks from museums to their rightful homes and the development of decolonial curatorial exhibitions that push against art world expectations of representation, politics, and legibility (e.g., Collison, K’awaas, Bell, & Neel, 2019; Curtis, 2006). However, as Tuck and Yang (2012) explain, decolonization is not metaphorical, it is a literal call to return Indigenous land and recognize the sovereignty of Indigenous nations. Though this framework points to the problematic ways institutions often use decoloniality to signal their political virtue rather than engage in actual decolonization, the “decolonial” movement within art institutions is still salient to my research because it represents a shift in the social role and expectations being placed on art galleries.
The 10th Berlin Biennale *We Don’t Need Another Hero* encapsulates how decolonial curatorial models can use art to create new kinds of sociality within the gallery (Ngcobo, Masilela, Mutumba, Moses, & de Paula Souza, 2018). The Biennale, which was curated by Gabi Ngcobo with Nomaduma Rosa Masilela, Yvette Mutumba, Serubiri Moses, and Thiago de Paula Souza, “explored the political potential of the act of self-preservation, refusing to be seduced by unyielding knowledge systems and historical narratives that contribute to the creation of toxic subjectivities” (“X Berlin Biennale,” 2018, para. 1). One of the largest works in the show was a reconfiguration of South African artist Dineo Seshee Bopape’s stirring 2016 installation, *Untitled (Of Occult Instability) [Feelings]*. Displayed in Figure 2, in this piece by Bopape, a large, piecemeal cardboard wrecking ball hung inertly from the ceiling of a red-orange room that was filled with piles of grey brick rubble and dust that viscerally disrupted modernist expectations of pristine art viewing spaces. The objects in the room were punctuated by a video monitor playing a 1976 recording of Nina Simone singing “Feelings”. The sound of Simone’s voice filled the gallery, leaving the viewer uncertain of what had been destroyed, what that destruction meant, and how to feel about it.⁹ This is but one of the many innovative works included in the Biennale.

In lieu of transpiring in a single city, the 10th Berlin Biennale began with a 2017 program series spread across Berlin, Johannesburg, and Nairobi and used artistic and participatory methods to facilitate learning, unpacking, and “…interaction between participants, works of art, the curatorial team, and exhibiting artists as well as the neighborhoods surrounding the venues” (“Mediation,” 2017). This is but one example of the ways decolonial ideas are being explored in art museums and galleries today. Vitally, these efforts are informed by a larger swell of

⁹ While I did not see the installation of Dineo Seshee Bopape’s *Untitled (Of Occult Instability)* at the 10th Berlin Biennale, I did visit it in its original configuration at Palais Tokyo where it was first commissioned in 2016. It is one of the most powerful, memorable, and ambiguous art installations I have ever had the pleasure of seeing.
decolonial activism (much of which transpires as art). In the context of this dissertation, the discourse around decolonizing art institutions is important because it unravels the modernist expectations of display and narrative by foregrounding the non-neutrality of art and art exhibiting spaces.

Figure 2. Untitled (Of Occult Instability) [Feelings] [Installation by Dineo Seshee Bopape on view at Palais Tokyo.] (Source: Unpublished personal photograph of the author, 2016)

The move away from passive, behaviorist notions of education and colonialist exhibitionary models are but two of the important re-directed foci art exhibiting institutions are
taking up in their efforts to rethink their social obligations to and relationships with their public(s). Yet, as Hooper-Greenhill (2000) asserts, on the whole, art galleries have been slower and less adept than other types of institutions at handling these and other paradigmatic shifts in museology (e.g., accessibility and transparency). She charges that this slowness stems from the disconnect between art museums’ continued adherence to modernist practices of display and institutional aims of audience engagement. Charles Esche, Director of the Van the Abbemuseum goes even further when addressing art galleries continued re-enactment of modernist ideals,

The art world within which I exist is dependent upon modernity for its legitimacy. The endless rehashing and repetitions of the forms of modernism in the current successful art market prove my point. Although all original modern, social or political context is removed, these artworks still exist as parasites on modernity's emancipatory capacity for the West, its communist horizon, and its avant-garde transgressions. (Esche, 2017, p. 216)

While I do not agree with Esche’s implied dismissal of the political potential of the avant-garde, I do support his overall assertion. The art world, and thus art exhibiting institutions, rely upon modernity for their legitimacy and, as such, continue to emulate modernism’s efforts to divorce art from its social context in service of a larger narrative of European intellectual (as well as material) domination. In this sense, through their feigned asociality, many art museums have lauded the sociality of white, male, European culture. On this topic of museological neutrality, former Queens Museum President and Executive Director Laura Raicovich10 said in a textual questionnaire about the future of museums compiled by Paper Monument,

Neutrality actually reflects the needs, desires, and values of the dominant culture. We can talk about diversity all we want but until we dismantle this fictional neutrality, change will only be made on the surface. (Raicovich, 2018, p. 79)

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Raicovich was famously forced to resign from her role at the Queens Museum by the Museum’s Board after she attempted to cancel an Israeli organization’s event booked to use the museum and which had former Vice-President Mike Pence amongst its listed speakers. The board was further irritated when Raicovich participated in a publication in which other authors expressed support for boycotts as a political and artistic gesture, including against Israeli (“Why Did Radical Director Laura Raicovich Resign from New York’s Queens Museum?,” 2018).
As Raicovich makes clear, art institutions reflect dominant and biased culture and, as such, will not change significantly until they contend more robustly with this reality.

To return to deSouza (2018), we can see how the simultaneity of the present whereby cultural institutions hold both modern and postmodern values creates a tension in art exhibiting spaces which are at once invested in the social values and reception of their work while also enacting modernist ideals. In other words, art institutions are attempting to reflect the social, political, and cultural values of their communities (such as decolonization) while also holding onto the modernist display conventions and the trappings of neutrality that they have been beholden to for so long. This strain is most obvious when it is embodied and rehashed in the gallery through artworks that, per Jackson’s (2011) supporting apparatuses, respond to the gallery itself.

Considering the relationship between art and its institutional supports is, however, not new. The term “institutional critique” was first coined to describe late 1960s and early 1970s artistic practices that responded to the placement of art within museums and galleries through forms that critiqued the sites in which these artworks were situated (Alberro & Stimson, 2011, p. 5). Though this phraseology (much like the term social practice) is not universally espoused by all who work in this vein, there is little question about the pivotal role that this approach to artmaking has had in expanding the variety of materials and methods practiced by contemporary artists, and in the ways many curators, museums, and artists understand institutions and their roles within them. Accountings of the history of institutional critique often begin with the work of 1960s and 1970s artists such as Michael Asher, Hans Haccke, and Marcel Broodthaers (Alberro & Stimson, 2011; Ciric & Cai, 2016; Fraser, 2005a; Welchman, 2006). This notably white, male, and Euro-American narrative has been bolstered by recent research that examines
how institutional critique developed simultaneously in other regions such as Serbia (Cric, 2016) and Latin America (Alberro, 2011). Shared across this spectrum of practices are artworks that respond to the conditions of art and the gallery. For example Hans Haacke’s infamous 1970 *MoMA Poll*, a work through which the artist invited the public to respond to the political entanglements of the museum via the query, “Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina Policy be a reason for your not voting for him in November?” (Brackman, 2019). These early institutional critique projects were instrumental in eroding the mythological neutrality of the museum posited by modernity and proposed imaginative alternatives to this practice by forcing the supporting apparatuses of art and art institutions into the foreground.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new group of institutional critique artists emerged to respond to the politics of museums and art galleries (Alberro & Stimson, 2011; Welchman, 2006). As a prominent member of this movement, artist and scholar Andrea Fraser (2005a) ascribes her approach to institutional critique to three historical antecedents:

- the activist work of groups like Art Workers Collective 1975-2000 who pushed against traditional, commercial methods of art circulation;
- conceptual art’s dematerialization of the art object; and,
- the post-studio movement’s temporalization of art that took up space and time as areas of address (2005a, p. 56).\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) Fraser’s omission of the important role that feminist art had on institutional critique in the 1980s is notable. As Maura Reilley (2018) details, a major component of the institutional critique artwork and activist curatorial practices of the 1980s and 1990s germinated from the feminist examination of art institutions.
While their predecessors often crafted material objects, per Fraser’s historical influences, many of this next generation took up the museum itself as their material through hybrid installation/curatorial interventions and performance.

For example, sculpture and installation artist Fred Wilson’s 1992 *Mining the Museum* exhibition, which reinstalled artifacts from Maryland Historical Society in order to emphasize the racist and colonial histories of Maryland, continues to have a biting relevance today (Corrin, 2012). Similarly, James Luna’s 1987 *Artefact Piece* executed at the San Diego Museum of Man was a performance installation in which the artist used the conventions of the institution—in this case the tradition of displaying Indigenous peoples bodies and material culture—as means to poetically eviscerate the discriminatory and problematic nature of these museological practices (González, 2008). Stepping back from materiality even further, Fraser’s infamous performance tours in which she initially took the role of a docent, and then later shifted to performing her works through her own role as an artist, took up the forms and conventions of the museum tour as a means to negotiate issues within art institutions (Fraser, 2005a). For example, Fraser’s 1991 *Welcome to the Wadsworth*, was infused with quotes and contradictory perspectives on the decorative arts, tourism, and racist beliefs around social problems in Hartford (Fraser, 2005b). What this era of institutional critique artists have in common is their deft, political, and aesthetically centered confrontations of the dominant support apparatuses of art galleries and the art world, while also enacting and modeling ways those and other support apparatuses might be taken up and attended to within the museum. This artwork is foundational to my study because it has helped me see and analyze the art gallery and its support apparatuses in new ways.
Today, institutional critique takes a number of forms both within and outside the gallery, from artwork to political activism and political activism as art. I am particularly interested in this latter category, through which activist artists seek to facilitate tangible changes within the institutions they address. A recent example of this form of work is Liberate Tate’s 2012 The Gift, in which this purpose developed collaborative group delivered a wind turbine to the Tate Modern in order to critique the institution’s ongoing financial relationship with British Petroleum (Liberate Tate, 2016). This artistic gesture is but one of the many projects initiated by the group and that have shed light on the problematic funding sources of the museum to such a degree that the Tate Modern instigated policy change (Nuendorf, 2017). Similarly, Gulf Labor Artist Coalition (a component of the Gulf Labor Campaign (GLC)) has created a number of interventions that use art forms to critique the museum’s labour practices. For example, their projections cast onto the exterior of the Guggenheim Museum in New York or their cinematic dropping of “thousands of On Kawara-influenced flyers marking May Day 2015,” (Gulf Labor Artist Coalition, 2015, para. 1) from the well-known circular, sunlit atrium of the Guggenheim, draw attention to the institution’s use of abhorrent labor practices at their franchise location, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (Bishara, 2019a). What is particularly salient about these works to my research is how they underline the increasing energy and attention that artists, cultural workers, and gallery audiences are paying to the support apparatuses of galleries and, even more excitingly, how these artworks are severing modernism’s long exhausted claim of the asociality of the museum.

12 Though I have not gone into detail about the important institutional critique work which transpired outside of gallery contexts from the 1960s through to the present, I agree with Alberro’s (2011) assessment that these types of extra-institutional practices have always taken place and have, in turn, always influenced the work that transpired within galleries.
Socially Engaged Art at the Gallery

The definitional blurriness of socially engaged art can make it difficult to say which texts first took up the relationship between social art and the gallery. For instance, though it does not use the vocabulary of social practice, the 1997 publication *Joseph Beuys: Honey Is Flowing in All Directions* discusses Beuys’ gallery-based social sculpture projects in detail. However, in the context of this dissertation, I have focused on recent publications on social practice and the gallery because, as a form of art that responds to the social world, art trends, and institutional politics, socially engaged art is mediated by the time in which it is produced. The increased number of galleries taking up social and participatory work over the last twenty years further necessitates a closer focus because as this field grows, so too do the ways that people understand and frame it.

Bourriaud’s (2002) Relational Aesthetics and Bishop’s (2004, 2005) responses to this publication are foundational to my work because as early texts on this field, the authors have influenced how many artists and cultural workers conceptualize and make social practice art. Bourriaud’s book, first published in French in 1998, is typically cited as the first major publication to take up then-recent trends in participatory, gallery-based art. In it, Bourriaud (2002) coins the term “relational aesthetics” to describe,

> A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space. (p. 112)

He observed a growing number of gallery-based artists creating participatory (and often convivial) artworks within gallery settings and ascribed them with political agency.

While Bourriaud’s (2002) theories were well received by many who agreed with his reframing of gallery-based participatory works as emancipatory, this publication was also met
with significant criticism. Most prominently, Bishop’s (2004) essay *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* which ignited the aforementioned “antagonism versus ethics” debate. An aspect of this debate that is often omitted from consequent retellings, is the important role that site of the gallery played in this initial conversation.

While Bourriaud (2002) asserted that the gallery became a more democratizing space when it supported participatory practice, Bishop (2004) argued that Bourriaud valued work based on the *mere existence* of participation facilitated between the audience and the work, rather than the quality of the audience relation produced. Bishop went on to assert more particularly that the works Bourriaud was focused on, did not espouse the democratic values he lauded because they failed to consider the politics of the gallery/museum system within which they were displayed. Bishop further argued that sometimes social practice art was embraced by cultural institutions only because it was marketable and entertaining. This early critical reading of relational aesthetics foregrounds many of the questions which still transpire about institutional social practice today: who it is for, what engagement does it facilitate, how does it fit into a larger context of the history of art, and what is art expected to do or be for society.

Bourriaud’s (2002) relational aesthetics and Bishop’s (2004, 2005) responses inform my work because as foundational texts in the discourse of social practice, both authors have shaped how many artists and gallery workers understand and approach this form of art. Some scholars and artists still hold onto the vocabulary of relational aesthetics to discuss participatory, gallery-based art (e.g., Kundu & Kalin, 2015). I see this terminology as temporally and formally fixed to a particular set of late 1990s to early 2000s practices. What is most of interest to me in these early dialogues are the ways that the fracture between Bishop and Bourriaud’s opinions speak to the differing political agendas that people bring to artist and institutional collaborations. My own
focus on the gallery as a supporting apparatus mirrors Bishop’s call for works to incorporate or consider the politics of the site.

In her later focused publication on socially engaged art, Artificial Hells, Bishop (2012) tracks some of the germinating art historical origins of this field, explores social theory as a lens through which to understand participatory art, and reiterates her belief that it is necessary to critically examine social practice as art, regardless if it repairs broken social bonds. Though the gallery itself is not a particular focus of this scholarship, Bishop does include some worthwhile consideration of art institutions’ role in popularizing socially engaged art. She postulates that due to the gallery’s history as a site of high culture for the ruling classes that a corresponding prejudiced view of “the people” has created a false sense that regular (i.e., poor) people need to be actively engaged in order to enjoy or be emancipated by art.

Bishop (2012) also returns to the question of instrumentalization throughout her book, linking it to 1990s and 2000s European (particularly British) cultural policy, which collapsed art and creative labor into a single category and through which government agencies developed funded opportunities for practitioners to clean up messes left by a lack of social infrastructures. Though I would concede that yes, a part of the reason social practice art is so popular is because of the ways some artists use it to attend to social needs, I counter Bishop’s framing of instrumentalization, which neglects the agency that artists have in taking up, negotiating, and working with institutional needs provocatively. However, Bishop’s focus on the structures and systems that inform social practice, as well as her particular analytic focus on artists whose works attends to these supporting apparatuses has been vital in attuning me to some of the ways the site of the gallery may be impacting social practice.
While Bishop (2012) and fellow social practice scholar Grant Kester’s thoughts on social practice are often framed as oppositional, they share some of the same concerns about how this work transpires at the gallery—namely how that site can impact the autonomy of the artist. Similar to Bishop (2012), Kester (2011, 2013) does not dedicate a significant amount of time in either of his major works on social practice to gallery-based works. As one of the most prominent thinkers in this field, Kester’s few remarks on this subject are worthy of consideration due to both the widespread uptake of his scholarship and continued leadership role in social practice manifested through his labor as founder and editor of the sole dedicated social practice journal, FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism.

Kester (2011) offered some brief musings on how invitations extended to artists by international institutions to create works with communities that they are not a part of can be problematic. He argued,

Artists’ capacity to grasp the nuances of a given social, cultural, and political system and, more important to understand how to work effectively within this system while preserving their critical autonomy, is seriously eroded when they are simply dropped into a new country with bureaucratic systems, local political dynamics, histories, and cultures of which they are relatively ignorant. (Kester, 2011, p. 172)

Kester draws our attention to the fact that when an artist is invited into an institution in a place they are not from, they often do not know what supporting apparatuses are interlocked within that space. Consequently, Kester, like Bishop (2012), worries that, in this situation, artists will not be able to preserve their autonomy as artists because they will not be able to extricate themselves from or comprehend the complex realities of the gallery and the local community.

While I do not believe that art or artists have ever been autonomous, I do agree with Kester’s (2011) argument that it is problematic when artists are ignorant of the systems and culture they are working within. In my research, I extend this claim to assert that all social
practice artists working with galleries, even those from within the community, benefit from being knowledgeable about and attending to the supporting apparatuses of a site, as well as how these support apparatuses comingle with the artists own support apparatuses (such as the art histories and knowledges they draw upon.) This site knowledge is best traced through attentiveness to the social throughout.

Kester (2016) has also presented the potential for socially engaged art to be misaligned with the museum through a brisk critique of the 2014-2018 Guggenheim’s Social Practice Initiative. Like the collaborative artist group Gulf Labor Artist Coalition, Kester argues that the political and critical nature of socially engaged art is at odds with the Guggenheim’s exploitative labor policies and the values of their corporate funders. In short, he asserts that the economic supporting apparatuses of the museum undermine the art. Kester’s skepticism about the Guggenheim’s financial and political affiliations and his aforementioned trepidation about gallery-based social practice underlines why studies such as mine which examine how artists respond to the supporting apparatus of the gallery and, in turn, how their work is further impacted by the gallery’s own multiple and complex supporting apparatuses, is long overdue.

There is a rather notable absence of investigations into the gallery’s role in social practice in much of the other most celebrated scholarship on this approach to artmaking. For example, Tom Finkelpearl (2013), former Executive Director of the Queens Museum, included surprisingly little about the role of the gallery in socially engaged art in his edited volume on social practice. This omission seems curious given how much the Queens Museum prioritized work in this vein throughout his tenure at the institution. Though a number of the case studies and interviews Finkelpearl (2013) included in his book contend specifically with museum-based projects, none investigate the politics of the gallery or its impact on the art.
During a 2016 conversation with Shannon Jackson, Finkelpearl offered considerably more insight into his position on the museum’s role, and particularly on how internal political structures of museums inflect social practice works (Jackson & Finkelpearl, 2016). He posits that while curatorial roles are focused on artistic excellence, public engagement activity often originates from education departments whose priorities are pedagogical. As such, he proposes that while curators are accountable to art, education departments are accountable to their publics, and this accountability is often assessed through metrics like attendance statistics (Jackson & Finkelpearl, 2016). Though Finkelpearl does not elaborate on the role of the originating department of socially engaged art projects, the inference of his brief comments is significant. What Finkelpearl is driving at (and which has been of considerable interest to me from the outset of this research) is how the role of artistic judgment and educational evaluation shape gallery-supported socially engaged art. Finkelpearl highlights why broader considerations of departmentally specific assessment models being used by galleries must be considered when discussing gallery-supported social practice. This is a line of inquiry which I take up in my case studies.

While the literature on socially engaged art began with a discourse about gallery-based practice, this analytic lens has since declined in popularity. Though Bourriaud (2002), Bishop (2004, 2005, 2012), Kester (2011, 2013, 2016), and Finkelpearl’s (2016) comments on this area of study highlight important aspects of institutionally supported social practice, there is no doubt that there is considerable room for more scholarship in this area, which I attend to through my research. However, there is a small but significant body of work on institutional social practice, which takes the form of museum/gallery publications that self-author the stories of their
collaborations, as well as a single but important museum studies publication on museological social practice and to which I will turn next.

**Museum and Museum Studies Texts on Gallery-Supported Socially Engaged Art**

Museum and gallery-produced catalogues about social practice art provide an interesting lens through which to filter Finkelpearl’s (2016) assertion about the ways evaluation and accountability inflect institutional socially engaged art. These texts also offer a space to consider how the gallery functions as a supporting apparatus of social practice. Unfortunately, there are few institutions that have taken up these topics in their storytelling of their projects. For example, artist and museum authored publications like *Engagement Party: Social Practice at MOCA 2008–2012* focuses only on project content and gives little attention to how the site of museums shaped a work, how the artists’ work comingled with the museum, nor how the institution evaluated their projects (Hamilton, 2013). Similarly, Mark Dion’s *The Marvelous Museum* created in conjunction with the Oakland Museum, beautifully draws together documentation of Dion’s installations crafted from the museum collection but spends little time unpacking the artist’s relational experiences working with museum archivists, curators, and other staff (Dion, 2010). In a sense, while Dion’s work itself responds to the support apparatuses of the museum (ex/ historical and contemporary natural history collections practices) the retelling of the project omits other supporting apparatuses—like the role of institutional labor and funding—from the narrative of the project. Dion’s catalogue is an artful book that uses art to think through some of the systems of museology, and yet, there is still much left unsaid about the social aspects of the works’ production. This is in line with the general trend to tell celebratory rather than critical stories in gallery-created socially engaged art catalogues.
Similarly, self-authored artist publications that document institutionally affiliated projects often take up the publication itself as a form of art and consequently tend not to focus on the role of the gallery in their work. For example, Mark Menjivar’s (2020) exquisite *Migration Stories* book series shares immigration stories that were collected at galleries and education institutions across the United States by volunteer students and artists (including me.) These books offer an affective and personalized lens to think through questions of migration, family, history, and belonging. Due to its narrative prioritizations, the book series does not focus on unpacking the role of the support apparatus of the institution in the work. To be clear, I am not arguing that Menjivar (or any other artist) should necessarily privilege the supporting apparatuses of the institution in their artistic outputs. Rather, I want to highlight how much knowledge that accumulates via the social throughout a project is often absent from artistic recordings of many socially engaged works. I know this to be true in the case of Menjivar’s project because, as a participant of the work, I got to experience the thoughtful, deliberate, and nuanced ways he worked with people and the museum throughout his project. It is for this reason that academic research projects such as this dissertation which open up new avenues for artists, curators, and scholars to gain insight into ways that the gallery informs social practice, are so important.

There are three notable texts which, like my research project, critically examine gallery-supported social practice art:

- *Open Field: Conversations about the Commons*, a post-project text edited by former Walker Art Center staff members Sarah Schultz and Sarah Peters about their 2010-2012 institutionally directed socially engaged project;
• the Hammer Museum’s 2011 *Public Engagement Artist in Residence* report, which analyzes and describes how Machine Project (led by Mark Allen) executed a series of socially engaged artworks at the institution in 2010-2011; and,

• *Critical Practice: Artists, Museums, Ethics*, a 2017 book on socially engaged art created in the vein of institutional critique and which is written by leading museum studies scholar Janet Marstine.

Though varied in their approaches, each of these documents has been foundational in helping me think through the ways that the support apparatus of the gallery can shape social practice.

Marstine’s (2017) examination of gallery-supported social practice is a text that has had a major impact on my research, both in its framing of the role of ethics within institutional social practice and by attuning me to the ways that my own disciplinary background and experiences as an artist have inflected my research design. While Marstine’s vantage point of museum studies is advantageous for seeing some of the support apparatuses interwoven into social practice, it neglects others, particularly those which germinate from within the art itself. Furthermore, Marstine’s reliance on post-project interviews of completed works punctuated my belief in the importance of durational scholarship on socially engaged art that attends to the role of the social throughout.

Marstine’s (2017) text is concentrated on institutional critique projects which she, (borrowing from artist Neil Cummings) refers to as “critical practice”. More specifically, Marstine is interested in how some works created in this vein have responded to ethical issues in their gallery-supported work as means to move towards reconciliation. Her aim is to think through how artist’s practices can ignite institutional change. As she explains,
I explore how critical practice is such an effort towards reconciliation and generates the potential to reinvent museum space in which similarities and differences are articulated and felt, towards constructing new shared imaginaries. (Marstine, 2017, p. 27)

At the core of this argument is a belief that artists who create critical practice projects often do so because they want to change the institutions they are collaborating with. For example, Marstine describes how artists have attended to some of the political, and social, museological issues that I outlined earlier in this chapter, such as colonialism, accessibility, Western and/or Anglo-American cultural fetishization, and behaviorist educational models.

Marstine (2017) also engages with the concept of reconciliation broadly, pulling on recent national Truth and Reconciliation programs used to heal from trauma, as an informing model that shows how institutional socially engaged art might address ethical rifts between museums and their public(s). Furthermore, Marstine’s work interweaves literature on feminist care ethics, collection management, and the liberatory potential of artistic hybridity into case studies on gallery-based social practice in order to illustrate how questions of ethics can be played out through gallery-based social practice. Though she does not use the vocabulary of supporting apparatuses, Marstine’s emphasis on the ways artists wrestle with museum ethics issues is similar in its prioritization of institutional systems and power, as well as her uptake of the model of articulation theory which prioritizes the interconnectivity of different and sometimes contradictory aspects of culture.

While Marstine’s (2017) argumentation has been influential in my own thinking about the potential ways socially engaged art can respond to the supporting apparatus of the gallery, there a number of key differences in our research approaches. First, unlike Marstine, my research is not concentrated on institutional critique but rather takes a broader examination of how any gallery-supported social practice work is knotted within the supporting apparatus of the
institution, regardless of if the work outwardly confronts those conditions or not. Secondly, while Marstine’s research is based on extensive post-project interviews with artists and museum staff about their collaborations, my dissertation uses durational, ethnographic case study, which affords me a long-range view of how a project is understood by a variety of involved parties before, during, and after a work. Thirdly, unlike Marstine I am not certain that socially engaged art (or even the narrow vein of critical practice she is focused on) always aspires to change institutions, as she contends, nor do I believe that it is the job of artists to point out to museums how they might be more ethical. While Marstine caveats the reconciliatory claims of her work to concede that yes, artists projects do not always inspire institutional change, she does still offer that in cases where there is widespread support for a particular artist work or when an institution is in a moment of upheaval, social practice can ignite a shift within a museum.

I cannot help but wonder if, in these cases, artists are not just performing a kind of confirmation bias through their performance of the institution’s pre-existing aspirational politics. I suspect that Marstine (2017) and my divergent views of artistic agency and the obligations of artists to museums originate from our differing disciplinary backgrounds. Whereas she is thinking through a career of museum work and scholarship and is most invested in how institutions are impacted by artists’ work, as a socially engaged artist, I am more invested in how institutions impact socially engaged art. To return to Finkelpearl’s (2016) comment about the importance of the originating department in social practice, the originating perspective of all those who write and think about social practice is also important to consider due to the way it impacts their framing and priorities within the field.

Another important text on gallery-based social practice *Open Field: Conversations on the Commons* describes, analyzes, and contextualizes a three-year social practice project at the
Walker Art Center (more commonly known as “the Walker”) through the lens of the education department staff who initiated the project (Schultz & Peters, 2012). This publication is distinctive in its modeling of radical transparency about social practice, demonstrating how more reflective and vulnerable texts on gallery-based social practice might play a pedagogic role for other practitioners in this field. Furthermore, this text has modeled how attending to a limited number of support apparatuses of a project—rather than the interlocked way a plurality of support apparatuses work with and against one another—can omit important considerations from an investigation into gallery-supported social practice.

As the name Open Field suggests, this project sprung about in response to a large grassy-plane outside the Walker whose eventual purpose-built function as a sculpture park was not to come to fruition for a number of years (Schultz & Peters, 2012). Sarah Schultz, the former Director of Education and Curator of Public Practice, and Sarah Peters, former Associate Director of Public and Interpretative Programs, worked in conjunction with their colleagues across their institution to initiate an “experiment in participation and public space” during which “the project invited artists and visitors to imagine and inhabit the museum’s campus as a cultural commons—a shared space for idea exchange, creative gathering, and unexpected interaction” (Schultz & Peters, 2012, back cover). The project offered the public a small set of tools (such as tables and outdoor leisure equipment), a set of guiding principles around the spirit and safety of the space, and a series of socially engaged artists-in-residence projects that activated the space and modeled different interpretation of notions of the commons (Shultz & Peters, 2012). For

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13 The Walker’s sculpture park was reopened in 2017 and came into public prominence when the institution unveiled Scaffold, a permanent sculpture by Sam Durant, which, despite a lack of public consultation with Indigenous peoples, depicted, amongst other gallows, the platform used to execute 38 Dakota men in 1862 (Eldred, 2017). This sculpture has since been removed and Durant transferred the copyright of the piece to the Dakota Oyate who have plans to bury the work at an undisclosed location (Durant, 2020).
example, Future Farmers (Amy Francesini and Michael Swaine) led *A People Without a Voice Cannot be Heard*, a multiformal, pedagogical project, and Marc Bamuthi Joseph organized a series of performances and projects, most of which transpired offsite within Minneapolis communities (Schultz & Peters, 2012). Alongside these legible “art” projects was a range of community activity including yoga classes, yarn bombing, performances, and, infamously, a bullwhipping instructional session for children (Schultz & Peters, 2012).

Again, what is of most interest to me is not the particular projects that transpired during *Open Field* but rather the transparency of storytelling taken up in this publication, many sections of which were printed on the museum’s website for easy public access. Unlike many museological accounts of their community engaged work, *Open Field* grapples with its own shortcomings (e.g., the absence of many public participant voices in the publications accounting for the project), tensions embedded in the project (e.g., the relationship between works situated within the museum and those that took place on the lawn) and museological concerns about the work (e.g., safety). Perhaps most importantly, the final chapter of the publication draws upon interviews conducted with a range of Walker staff, from curators to educators, and security guards, to incorporate their thoughts on the project into the narrative of the work (Matteson & Kloecker, 2012). While I think the text would have benefitted from including more and longer quotes from these interviews, the ideas that do emerge from various museum staff members create a complex picture of the *Open Field* project and raise a number of foundational questions about the social role of the art museums, as both a public institution and as an arbiter of art. For instance, as one unidentified Walker staff member questions,

But I worry that people won’t understand the difference between the inside and the outside…I wonder if people will come here to do something just to say they’ve exhibited at the Walker. (Matteson & Kloecker, 2012, p. 237)
By leaving questions like this unresolved, *Open Field* creates space for others to step into a critical discourse of the project.

And yet, despite all its transparency, *Open Field* does not account for many of the supporting apparatuses interwoven into the overall project. The pervasive whiteness of the invited artists (most of whom seem to have been California-based at the time of their residencies) is not addressed. Nor is the fact that the majority of the people included in the documentation are white-presenting, with the notable exception being the participants of the works led by the sole African American artist-in-residence, Marc Bamuthi Joseph. This blind spot around race emulates larger issues of racism and exclusion in art and art institutions, as well as the city of Minneapolis, where the achievement gap between white and Black children is the largest in the United States and where, in 2020, anti-Black racism cost George Floyd his life (Shockman, 2019; Nebehay, 2021). It is also interesting to note that after Schultz left the Walker in 2014, her replacement Nisa Mackie, took an entirely different approach to community responsiveness by focusing her work inward at the museum through the termination of the volunteer-docent program and its reconstitution as paid positions that actively recruited and hired Black, Brown, and Latin(x) people with the goal of mirroring the demographics of the city in the museum. In short, while *Open Field* is an exemplary publication about socially engaged art, it too has omissions.

Like *Open Field*, the final web-published report that concluded Machine Project’s public engagement residency at the Hammer Museum documents and analyses a multi-year collaborative socially engaged project (Agsten & Allen, 2010).\(^\text{14}\) Though *Open Field* and

\(^{14}\) It is worthwhile to note that Machine Project, under the leadership of Mark Allen, was also one of the artists-in-residence of the Walker’s *Open Field* project. The extent to which Allen’s experiences at each institution may have informed these projects or the decision by both institutions to produce self-critical summations is not known by the author.
Machine Project’s residency are similar in that both created structures through which other artists could enact socially engaged art within a gallery-supported context, there are a number of distinguishing factors in the origins of these works, most notably in the supporting apparatuses of the projects in question. By comparing the two texts and their attendance to support apparatuses we can begin to see just how powerful an articulated, analytic approach to the ways that support apparatuses and social practice are interwoven into one another through a variety of factors, from departmental politics to the aims of the work.

First, while *Open Field* was initiated by the Walker’s Education Department, Machine Project (a fluid, collaborative group led by artist Mark Allen) was an outside entity invited into the Hammer Museum to spearhead a series of projects (Agsten & Allen, 2010; Schultz & Peters, 2012). This divergence in project leadership has a multitude of implications, from the agency of each project lead to initiate endeavors, to the ways that their interior/exterior perspective shapes each lead’s understanding of their institution, and (to return again to Finkelpearl’s (2016) aforementioned comment about initiating department) to the ways that the positionality of the project lead as either an educator (Schultz) or artist (Allen) shaped what they did and why. In short, the originating body that initiated these projects brought with them a corresponding and distinct set of support apparatuses that were consequently entangled within the works.

Secondly, while *Open Field’s* main aim was the facilitation of a commons, Machine Project’s residency germinated from the Hammer’s decision (sparked by the advice of their artist advisory board) to ask an artist to help solve a number of the museum’s public engagement problems, from the institution’s lack of a visitor services department to providing wayfinding tools (Agsten & Allen, 2010; Schultz & Peters, 2012). The incidental nature of *Open Field’s* decision to activate and make use of a temporarily available green space is quite distinct from the
instrumental nature of Machine Project’s residency. The implications of these differing motivators and their corresponding support apparatuses cannot be overstated. Though both projects were experiments, one was exploratory while the other was grounded in tangible unmet needs. These disparate goals combined with the interior/exterior positions of the project leaders, led to the production of highly varied artworks at each site and, as these culminating texts reveal, different experiences for all participants. Per articulation theory, we can see how the interlocked nature of the support apparatuses of each work rippled throughout these projects. This is especially acute in Machine Project’s work which models how, despite the dangers of instrumentalization theorized by so many socially engaged artists and critics, used the heteronomous nature of their project as the germinating point for work that attended to the many support apparatuses and socialities of the museum.

Machine Project’s Mark Allen articulates the tension between the institutions’ desire for concrete solutions to museological problems and he and his collaborators’ artistic interest in using those problems as artistic starting points. For example, when Agsten proposed that artists might not be the best resource to turn to for solving institutional problems Allen countered,

Or you could say artists are solution makers to the really eccentric problems they’re interested in and they find the whole world to be that problem. (Agsten & Allen, 2010, p. 40)

Allen’s alternate reading of artists as problem solvers offers a great example of how, despite the fears of Bishop (2004) and many others have expressed about the possible instrumentalizing effects of the gallery, artists can, through their artistic autonomy, generate entirely unexpected, invigorated, and even non-responses to institutional attempts to shape their work.

For example, the Hammer Museum asked Allen to think about wayfinding because, prior to Machine Project’s residency, there was none in the gallery. This entirely de-autonomized
request became a productive ground from which a socially responsive project emerged and encapsulates how gallery-based social practice can simultaneously articulate contradictory support apparatuses. Allen collaborated with exhibition designer and consultant Maria Mortati on the Giant Hand. As indicated in Figure 3, the Giant Hand was a large sculpture that featured a pointing finger atop a model of the museum and which visitors to the museum could press buttons on to get vague visual directions to the sections of the gallery they sought to get to. As Mortati explains,

We started with something very mundane and took it to the most playful conclusion—which became this Giant Hand on top of the building. For the Museum it was politically tougher because it was their problem and they were probably a little embarrassed about it and just wanted it solved. For us, it was a question of whether we were going to be like the hands of the Museum [laughs], just fixing their problems, or whether we were going to do something more interesting that we wanted to do. (Agsten & Allen, 2011, p. 58)

Figure 3. Giant Hand. [Installation view of Machine Project’s wayfinding sculpture at the Hammer Museum] (Source: Machine Project, 2012)
Mortati’s summation of the way she and Allen took the institution’s wayfinding problem and played with it gives a sense of the ways that the artists were able to leverage their artistic autonomy in order to generate a participatory piece that brought levity and wit to an important institutional issue.

Though the Giant Hand was one of the most difficult projects to get the museum’s approval of, it was well enjoyed by visitors and, despite internal fear, did not lead to any confusion or disorientation in the museum, nor did it hinder visitor’s ability to get where they were going, which polled respondents indicated they were able to do (Agsten & Allen, 2010). In this way, Allen and Mortati’s (2010) work solved the problem presented to them in an entirely unexpected manner, by showing the museum that they had been making assumptions about visitors’ experiences and needs that were not accurate. This example illustrates how the simultaneous adherence to modernist and postmodernist ideas about art and institutions can create spaces for mutual learning, artistic excellence, and community participation. In my own study, I have held onto this thread, looking for the ways that the artists and institutions I worked with leveraged and pushed their own boundaries and the social possibilities of the museum. One of the ways that the Hammer and Machine Project text best modelled how a variety of people negotiated these conditions is in their decision to include a multiplicity of voices in their reporting back on their collaboration.

The 2011 Public Engagement Artist-in-Residence Report, which was produced by the Hammer, incorporates a wide range of participant voices and perspectives through interviews as well as essays. As such, this text is the ideal content from which to tease out some of the support apparatuses of institutional social practice because it brings the voices of project participants to the foreground of the storytelling about the work (Agsten & Allen, 2010). The majority of the
interviews conducted with participating artists were led by Allen and, like the text on the Giant Hand, serve as a reflective project documentation that combined retelling of works with discussion of the experience of creating them. Internal institutional interviews were conducted by Agsten and included various staff such as the museum’s Head of Public Relations, the Director of Administration, the Associate Director of Legal Affairs, and the Director of Operations, all of whom offer valuable, position-focused perspectives into what kinds of labor Machine Project’s residency necessitated for them and their departments. These interviews are unquestionably the most transparent communication I have encountered in any institutional accounting of a social practice project and provide incredible insight into how the supporting apparatus of the gallery can facilitate this kind of art, as well as how, when, and why the support apparatus of the institution can be challenged by and even unable to accommodate social practice.

One small example of the ways that the support apparatuses of the gallery seem to be irreconcilable with the artists’ proposed project is revealed in an interview with Portland McCormick, the Hammer Museum’s Director of Registration and Collection Management. According to McCormick, staff at the Hammer Museum worried about the pieces House Plant Vacation, which invited the public to bring their plants to the museum for a short visit, and Fungifest, a multipronged mycological focused project about mushrooms which included films and performance created by Machine Project and filmmaker David Fenster in 2010 (Agsten & Allen, 2010). As McCormick elucidates, from a collection perspective, in their original inceptions, these works were risky because of the potential insect and mold material they introduced to the museological environment. As such, these projects were situated in spaces that were non-collection adjacent and not traditionally used to display art. In effect, the institution’s prioritization and obligations to conservation (supporting apparatuses) played a major role in
shaping how Machine Project’s socially engaged artworks were enacted. This is but one example of the numerous gems of insight and considerations that this report offers artists and institution’s thinking about taking up social practice.

By far the most interesting interview in Agsten & Allen (2010) is the back-and-forth dialogue between Mark Allen and Elizabeth Cline, who, at the time, was a Curatorial Associate charged with a lot of the labor of executing Machine Project’s collaborating partners works. This conversation exemplifies the ways that divergent understandings of the support apparatuses of a work ricochet throughout a project. Though Cline and Allen’s rapport and familiarity are apparent, their discussion includes a number of exchanges where it is clear that they have different perceptions of art, the projects undertaken through the residency, and of the obligations that the artists and the museum have to one another. In one uncomfortable moment Cline reveals that while she loved a ping pong table that Machine Project placed in an underutilized transition space as a way to activate the environment, she did not perceive it as art. When Allen pushes back against her assertion that the museum should have inherited the ping pong table (instead of acquiring it as an artwork which is what eventually happened), Cline offers valuable insight into exactly how her interpretation of the support apparatuses of the gallery bump into and inform her work,

It’s different because there were expectations for what your Residency was going to do or be because it was set forth in the grant. In other institutional residency programs, certainly in the Hammer’s existing Artist in Residence program, there is no expectation for work to be generated because the residencies are specifically oriented toward research and development. [emphasis added] (Agsten & Allen, 2010, p. 52)

As Cline explains, her perception about what and was not art was determined, in part, by the guidelines of the grant that made Machine Project’s residency possible. This exchange illuminates just how much the institutional support apparatus of funding is interwoven into how
museum workers understand and thus support and interact with gallery-based social practice. Or, to return to Jackson (2011), we can see how the support apparatuses of the gallery influence the ways that gallery staff enable and facilitate social practice—and thus becomes entangled in how this form of art takes shape and what participation it courts.

The support apparatus of the Irvine Foundation grant, which enabled Machine Project’s residency, played one final and important role in this project: the existence of this robust report which is geared towards providing information to artists and museums who might want to take up similar social practice endeavors, appears to have been, at least in part, required as one of the grants outcomes. In addition to the aforementioned interviews, Agsten and Allen’s (2010) report includes detailed timelines, budget overviews, and explanations on project creation and approval processes, all with an apparent focus on sharing information that others might use in their own undertakings. The degree to which the Irvine Foundation expected or appreciated the radical level of transparency that the Hammer and Machine Project brought to this document is unknown. What is undeniable, is that this report is a remarkable tool for thinking through and untangling how the support apparatuses of the gallery shapes the social practice art it hosts.

This dissertation research seeks to further foster the groundwork laid in Machine Project’s Report (2010) and extend it methodologically and scholastically through durational, ethnographic case study of gallery-based social engagement. I do this through examination of the support apparatuses—the conceptual, ideological, material, cultural, and social conditions—that are entangled in gallery-based social practice.
Conclusion

Using Jackson’s (2011) analytic structure, I have unpacked how socially engaged art and scholarship have pushed against the autonomizing claims of modernist and enlightenment aesthetic theory to assert the intermedial, contingent, and socially enmeshed nature of this approach to art. I then examined the shifting support apparatuses of the gallery, from modernist methods of display to colonial and decolonial politics and shifting attitudes towards the pedagogical and social function of art galleries with a particular emphasis on how institutional critique artworks have influenced and attended to the support apparatuses of the gallery.

I used Jackson’s (2011) concept of support apparatuses to analyze Bourriaud (2002), Bishop (2004, 2005, 2012), Kester (2011, 2013), and Finkelpearl’s (2013) work on gallery-based socially engaged art and how they each negotiate questions of artistic autonomy through specific and pluralistic art histories and institutional expectations. Finally, I concluded with an examination of the support apparatuses of institutional socially engaged art brought to the surface by museum studies examinations of this topic. These examinations recounted their past collaborations and modeled transparency to reveal some ways that the support apparatuses of museums and artists are comingling in their work.

Through this theoretical and literature review, I have highlighted the durational and methodological limitations of the post-project analytic approach commonly used to discuss social and gallery practices. In order to better understand the social throughout social practice art, support apparatuses as a theoretical framework allows us to study the interrelationships between various, and often surprising factors, that are knotted into socially engaged art collaborations. Next, I turn to how I methodologically studied the social throughout in two socially engaged art projects undertaken at NIAC and SAM in 2017 and 2018.
CHAPTER 3
ART MOVES: ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY AND THE SOCIAL THROUGHOUT

In the previous chapter, I illustrated the need for research on how the site of the gallery mediates socially engaged art and proposed Jackson’s (2011) “supporting apparatuses” (p. 33) as a useful theoretical lens for doing so. I have further shown the methodological limitations in the image and event-centric analytic approaches typically used to study social practice; these approaches under attend to the important role of the social throughout or the lifecycle arc of gallery-based social practice. As Bishop (2012), Kester (2018), and Siegenthaler (2013) have argued, as an approach to artmaking which is centered around relational exchanges, social practice warrants process-centered and durational studies that capture how projects come into being. When insufficient attention is given to how the particular, localized conditions and processes of a gallery are interwoven into a work, it truncates how much artists and institutions are able to learn from and build upon one another’s projects and limits the expanded, relational possibilities of the gallery to attend to the interests of their of publics. Through my methodological approach, I set out to address these pedagogic and relational possibilities through my research on socially engaged art.

This dissertation intervenes into the art historical, and art critical approaches used to examine socially engaged art through ethnographic case study, a methodology ideally suited to the durational study of socially situated phenomena. As scholars in the field of art anthropology have argued, ethnography and socially engaged art are alike in their prioritization of participation and site-specificity (Coombs, 2010; Sansi, 2015). Ethnographic case study is suited to the examination of socially engaged art because the shared values and timelines of these fields
provide a generative lens to examine the *social throughout* gallery-supported social practice. The shared methods and forms of ethnographers and social practitioners make this methodology suited to untangling the interlocked supporting apparatuses of institutional social practice.

In the mid 2010s, I undertook ethnographic case study research at the Northern Institute of Art and Culture (NIAC) and the Seattle Art Museum (SAM), researching the execution of a socially engaged art project at each location. At each site, I took on the role of a participant-observer, supporting the social practice artworks I studied as a part of my data collection methodology. My on-site research used a flexible and emergent design that allowed me to shift and focus my research based on my interests, participants' interests, and events as they unfolded. I conducted interviews, analyzed documents and imagery, and created photographic documentation. All of these methods were instrumental in generating insights into the social processes of institutional social practice and how the various support apparatuses of a work were interlocked into its production and reception.

My first research site, NIAC, is a small arts center located in an idyllic, sub-Arctic, tourist town in Canada. The institution hosts visiting artist residencies that invite international and Canadian artists for one to three months, during which time they produce new work. As my preliminary research highlighted, many of the visual artists who participated in their residency program created collaborative works with and about the community where the gallery is situated. However, my research also revealed there was a growing social phenomenon of participation fatigue—exhaustion brought on by an overabundance of requests from visiting artists,

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15 Both of the art galleries and participants included in this research were given the opportunity decide if they wanted to be identified or anonymized in my dissertation. While SAM and the artists from this site elected to be named, the institution I am refer to as NIAC, as well as the names of the artists who created the socially engaged art project I studied, are pseudonyms. In order to further protect their anonymity, the specific timing when I conducted fieldwork at this site has been withheld from this text.
journalists, and researchers asking locals to participate in their work. As my analysis shows, this participation fatigue was the result of many complex factors, from the ways that the settler-colonial governance of Canada operates as a support apparatus of socially engaged art to the localized social norms of generosity and volunteering that influenced how people spent their time. Participation fatigue is but one example of a phenomenon that was not made visible in the culminating events or documentation of this project, yet it was, as I will show, an important aspect of the social dynamic of the artwork itself. Attending to the social throughout brought this phenomenon into focus and demonstrates the relational and pedagogical possibilities that can be offered by research such as mine, which take a durational and socially grounded approach to studying this form of art.

My preliminary analysis of NIAC informed both my selection of and approach to SAM, my secondary research site. SAM is a large art museum located in Seattle on the Pacific Northwest coast of the United States. I first became interested in SAM shortly after I completed my study at NIAC. After an introduction from a mutual colleague, I spoke with Philip Nasady, a leader in their Education and Public Programs Department who explained the gallery was diversifying their program offerings to include, amongst many things, more community engagement. One component of this push was an annual targeted residency program of participatory projects. These projects became the focus of my study. During my fieldwork at SAM, my interviews and participant observations led me to realize the overlapping ways that documentation, specifically photographic images, served as an aesthetic form, a promotional tool, and relational platform through which the work came into being. Throughout this case study, I unpack how documentation is a support apparatus of socially engaged art.
As my ethnographic case study research of NIAC and SAM’s socially engaged artworks shows, the task of creating and disseminating social practice with the support of a gallery involves a wide variety of knotted socialities, from the arts communities in which the works took place, to the relationships between the collaborators and participants that brought each project into being. By examining two distinct projects at institutions with different mandates, audiences, structures, and priorities, my research has revealed some of the ways that these support apparatuses are entangled in a socially engaged artwork, as well as if, and how, these systems of support are shared with participants and secondary audiences.

Ethnographic case study has also helped me see how examining the social throughout a project can yield information that might better support artists and galleries in executing socially engaged art projects that capture the perspectives and experiences of the participants who are so vital to bringing this form of work into being.

Art Moves to Research Questions

The origins of my ethnographic approach to the study of socially engaged art germinated from my desire to take up Jackson’s (2011) concept of support apparatuses methodologically. As an artist, I espouse this ideal by making works that mirror or reflect the systems that enable my projects. For example, my socially engaged art project the *Tar Sands Exploration Station* was a mobile museum about oil sand housed in a fossil-fuel-dependent camper van (Rowe, 2017). This project attended to its support apparatuses both through material forms (a gasoline powered van) and social forms (by showcasing my own complicity within the petro-economy.) I applied a similar artistic logic to my dissertation research design by asking myself: *what are the forms of socially engaged art and how can my research mirror them?*
It was through this methodological art move that I came to see how ethnography and social practice held many of the same relational and site-specific priorities. They both deploy similar methods to get involved in social life and collect multiple participant perspectives. Drawing upon the ways that artists like James Luna and Andrea Fraser have turned to the conventions of the museum to examine the museum, my research uses the ethnographic forms of social practice to examine social practice.

To my delight and (initial) dismay, this methodological art move yielded not only a rich body of new findings about socially engaged art, it also transported the fraught social issues of institutionally supported social practices to the forefront of my research. As I wrestled with questions of reciprocity, responsibility, and intentionality, I realized that socially engaged art and ethnography have much in common. For example, both are entangled with many of the same support apparatuses including, modernist, enlightenment ideals of knowledge, the financial systems that enable academia and the art world, and the fraught legacies of colonialism. It was this realization that caused me to revisit and revise my research questions to better understand how the social is constructed, leveraged, and grappled with in institutionally supported socially engaged art. More specifically, this research project asks,

1. What constitutes the social throughout the lifecycle of institutionally supported socially engaged art?
   a. How does the support apparatus of the gallery shape social practice art at the Seattle Art Museum and the Northern Institute of Art and Culture?
   b. How are the systems and ideologies of different art galleries entangled in institutionally supported socially engaged art?
c. How do artists, participants, and galleries tell the story of their works throughout and after a project?

By answering these questions through process-focused and participant-centered data collected throughout two socially engaged art projects, I have identified previously underattended phenomena impacting institutional social practice, such as the role of settler colonialism in this form of art. What is more, through this methodology, I have been able to shift the focus of my work away from the frameworks of aesthetic judgment and museological evaluation typically used to assess institutional social practice. Instead, I have oriented myself towards the relationships between the processes of a work’s production and the wider world. In this way, my research models a potential approach to the study of institutional social practices that practitioners, gallery workers, and scholars can use to analyze this growing and important field of art and scholarship.

While some might worry that my ethnographic examination of socially engaged art prioritizes ethics over form, ethnography is a tool suited to illuminating both the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of this field of practice. As Marcus and Myers (1995) explain, unlike most artistic discourse, anthropology is not concerned with defining or critiquing what art is because it is focused on “understanding how these practices are put to work in producing culture” (p. 10). As my research demonstrates, using ethnography to study the processes by which social practice art projects are executed at galleries opens up the aesthetics of the social for consideration. Furthermore, by echoing the methodological forms of socially engaged art within my study, this project demonstrates how arts-based and anthropological methods can be combined to attend to the social throughout.

The first portion of this chapter provides an overview of my research methodology and its
The second section details the shared interests of socially engaged artists and ethnographers, particularly their focus on site-specificity and the privileging of participants and time. The next two sections of the chapter deploy narrative, analytic descriptions of my own research process to show the benefits and challenges of using participant observation and interviews to study institutional social practice. This chapter concludes with a review of the similarities, benefits, and issues of using ethnographic case study to research socially engaged art.

The Shared Values of Socially Engaged Art and Ethnography

Over the course of the past twenty-five years, there has been a growing body of scholarship that asserts the philosophical and methodological overlaps between late 20th and early 21st-century contemporary art practices and ethnography (e.g., Canclini, 2014; Coombs, 2010; Downey, 2009; Foster, 1996; Hjorth & Sharp, 2014). In recent years, as interest in the interrelationship between art and ethnography has expanded, so too has the anthropological uptake of artistic visual methods, as well as the artistic embracement of ethnographic forms (Cantarella, Hegel, & Marcus, 2015; Fillitz, 2018). Sansi (2015) and Coombs’ (2010) detailed accounts of the overlaps between ethnography and art illustrate the historical, theoretical, and methodological similarities of these two fields. Working from these texts, as well as the broader body of literature on art and ethnography, I identified responsiveness to site and the privileging of participation as interconnected aspects of ethnographic and artistic practices. Additionally, though it is not a major feature of the literature on socially engaged art and ethnography, the shared focus that both fields place on time is another major area of overlap. After sketching out

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16 The Fall 2018 issue of *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism* was dedicated to the discussion of how ethnographers can learn from and work with social practice. It is but one example of the ethnographic turn towards art.
these three commonalities, this section concludes with a consideration of the seeming reticence amongst social practice artists to claim their kinship to ethnography.

**Site Specificity**

It is important to revisit how literature about contemporary art conceptualizes place in order to understand how it contributes to the discourse on anthropology and art. Site specificity is most notably outlined in art historian Miwon Kwon’s (2002) foundational study of public art, which illustrates the ways that art is beholden to respond to the context within which it is situated. Similarly, Vaden and Hannula (2003) propose that contemporary art should answer to the specific and often contradictory conditions of its production using the vocabulary of the local,

> We propose the idea of staying here, focusing on the many competing and conflicting versions of the local, facing its demands, and taking the opportunities it offers. Staying put, but not standing still. We forget the universal and the general in favor of the local and the particular. (p. 10)

Though these texts are grounded in different art historical and ethical frameworks, both espouse that art ought to be examined based on its responsiveness to, or the relationships between, the work being produced, and the space where it takes place—a line of thinking which Jackson (2011) builds upon in her development of supporting apparatuses.

This artistic prioritization of site is a familiar echo of the anthropological focus on studying the interconnected facets of localized culture through long form investigations of bounded communities. Working from anthropological lenses, Sansi (2015) and Siegenthaler (2013) both note the shared esteem that ethnographers and socially engaged artists have for site specificity. Similarly, though it is effusive in articulating a concrete idea of site-specificity, Coles’ (2000) edited volume coalesces case studies by a number of key thinkers in art and
anthropology to demonstrate the shared emphasis on site in both fields. Furthermore, as Coombs (2010) and Schneider (2006) model in their respective research projects on art communities in San Francisco and Argentina, site-centered ethnographic studies of art are particularly productive because they mirror the artists’ own investments in the localized conditions in which they work.

However, it is also important to note that while ethnographic notions of site were historically fixed on a single location, these conceptions have been in flux since the 1990s (Marcus, 1995). The rise of globalism brought about a corresponding emphasis on multi-sited ethnographic studies that considered the non-bounded nature of much contemporary cultural practice. Multi-sited ethnography has grown considerably over the past thirty years to further include expanded conceptions of site through digital ethnographic studies that investigate online culture, communities, and connectivity. As Hjorth and Sharp (2014) detail in their accounting of the entanglement of socially engaged art and digital ethnography, the conception of a distributed site is particularly relevant to both fields, which increasingly respond to global issues (such as migration) and which are made up of mobile people.

The shared valuing of site in ethnography and art, as well as expanded understandings of distributed culture, have been instrumental in the development of the research design used in this dissertation. As Coombs’s (2010) ethnographic study of the 2000s social practice art community in the San Francisco Bay Area showed, these fields shared valorization of site-specificity and responsiveness make this an optimal methodological pairing for in-depth, localized investigations into how socially engaged art is intertwined with the politics, systems, and people of its locale. Furthermore, per Hjorth and Sharp (2014), I followed social practice to two different North American art galleries so that I might better see what, if any, phenomena might be common across, or divergent between, the way this work is manifested in different spaces that
both inhabit the shared world of contemporary art. I treated each of my sites as a bounded study, examining the social throughout each project separately so that I might better comprehend what support apparatuses were woven into each work and gallery. However, I was only able to isolate the importance of the social throughout because I examined multiple sites and was thus able to identify shared, and I theorize, broader factors impacting gallery-based social practice in Canada and the United States.

**Participation**

Participation is the second key commonality identified in the literature on socially engaged artistic practice and ethnography. Though Foster’s (1995) formative work on the artistic use of ethnographic methods foreshadowed the ways that social practitioners would take up anthropological forms, his post-colonial centered narrativization of ethnography curtails his arguments from being more widely applicable to a range of relational art practices. However, as Downey (2009) later distinguished, the social practice artist does not function as an ethnographer but rather relies upon participatory methods that are akin to ethnography, “…participative art practices often involve a close, if not intimate, degree of familiarity and involvement with given social groups over extended periods of time…” (p. 594). As Downey has identified, socially engaged art often relies on the durational establishment of social knowledge via participation within social groups to generate artwork. Despite the fact that artists and ethnographers structure participation differently, this shared investment in participation as a means for knowledge/artistic output is significant.

From a methodological perspective, ethnography and social practice are reliant on the involvement of others to produce work. Yet, as Sansi (2018) points out, it is a mistake to think
that socially engaged artists are experts in participation because so many practitioners are reliant upon chance. A chance meeting, a chance passerby, a chance conversation. This is a shared feature of ethnography which is similarly invested in happenstance occurrences in service of meaning-making (e.g., Fine & Deegan, 1996; Fujii, 2015). This embracement of chance is reflective of social practitioners and anthropologists’ valuing of novel and unconsidered avenues of work and thinking that can be introduced by participants. As such, the chance courted through participation is a vehicle for innovation in both fields.

The ethnographic and social practice prioritization of participation is broadened by their shared interest in dissolving the barriers between their fields and the everyday. Sansi (2018) works from Kester (2018) to assert that social practice is predicated upon a disavowal of the separation between art and life. Likewise, ethnography is a methodology whose central thesis is that everyday life should be studied via participation (Brown & Dreby, 2013; Dupret, 2012; Ochs, 2011; Ybema, 2009). What is ironic about both fields’ attraction to learning about the everyday through their participation within it, is that social practice and ethnography are also reliant on their separation from the everyday to assert their value as art and knowledge. Nonetheless, their shared interest in the everyday as accessed through participation is an important feature of both fields. Furthermore, as I expand upon in my discussion of participant observation, there are a variety of approaches and forms that artists and ethnographers use to connect to communities.

**Time**

Though references to the overlapping durational nature of socially engaged art and ethnography are peppered within most texts on this topic, there is not considerable elaboration on the implications of their shared temporality. Early in this dissertation project, I began to use the
term “lifecycle” to encapsulate the temporal arc of socially engaged art. More recently, this term has been unpacked by Jahoda and Woolard (2019) in their pedagogical guide to executing contemporary art, wherein they describe the build-up, execution, and then exit strategies needed to create social practice art. While my research modeled a similar approach to the study of socially engaged art, it is important to note that neither I, nor any other researcher could attend to all facets and activity that transpire during a gallery-based social practice project. In this sense, the term lifecycle, though reflective of the durational nature of social practice, may imply omniscience that is simply not possible. Regardless, a methodological approach to social practice which attempts to reflect the lifecycle of this form of art is better suited to studying the social throughout a work.

One area where ethnography and socially engaged art tend to diverge is their timelines. While traditional ethnographic research might take place over a year or several years, much social practice operates on shorter timeframes. This is particularly true in cultural institutions like galleries, where project timelines are often determined by exhibition run times, grant funding, or fixed, short-term partnerships. It is precisely for this reason that my research uses ethnographic case study in lieu of traditional ethnography. Unlike ethnography, ethnographic case study examines situated social phenomena with more strictly defined limits, determined by the conditions of the site, and is ideally suited to studying the variable durations of socially engaged artworks (Jung, 2014).

**Disciplinary Defensiveness and the Connections between Socially Engaged Art and Ethnography**

The mutual valuing of site, participation, and time in ethnography and social practice art are significant because they signal the shared underlying interest both fields have in the social as
a material. While Fillitz (2018) theorized both fields have shared disciplinarity, Hjorth & Sharp (2014) argued that social practice and ethnography share attributes because artists borrow from ethnography. I believe many artists would balk at this suggestion and suspect this rejection might originate from a discomfort with the history of anthropology as a colonial and ethically problematic approach to working with people.

However, given art and anthropology’s joint roles in the project of modernism, it is inevitable that these histories still inflect work done within these fields. The reality is, despite the fact that anthropology has spent the last thirty years trying to unwind itself from its unethical origins, there is a broad recognition that there is still much room for further developments and new insights on anthropological ethics. When socially engaged artists fail to acknowledge the shared support apparatuses of these fields, they run the risk of mimicking the impositional tendencies of early (and some contemporary) ethnographies by subsuming localized cultures into externalized frameworks. Furthermore, artists and galleries risk developing extractive relationships with their publics that take up local knowledge for artistic or cultural prestige without giving back to their communities.

There are two other significant reasons why socially engaged artists might not claim the connection between their work and ethnographic methods. The first is due to a lack of training in ethnography. Few socially engaged artists have undertaken the study of ethnography, and as a result, many are often under-informed about this discipline, particularly to the processes of participant observation. This lack of training is evidenced by art school curriculums which, even when they do address the production of participatory or community-based art, generally do not
contain targeted ethnographic course offerings. Secondly, most scholastic works on social practice do not use ethnographic methods or analysis (e.g., Bishop, 2012; Kester, 2013; Finkelpearl, 2011; Jackson, 2011). This makes it difficult for other scholars to imagine how they might construct an ethnographic study or how such an approach may differ from the predominant modes of discourse practiced in this field. This is an issue that I first encountered when trying to conceptualize my own research. When combined, the lack of ethnographic training and lack of ethnographic research on social practice has resulted in socially engaged art scholarship that tells the stories of this field through visual/discourse analysis and neglects the all-important social at the center of socially engaged art.

It is crucial to note that disciplinary defensiveness continues to play a role in discussions of art and ethnography. As anthropology, art history, and art education have become ever more responsive to the ethical and political contexts and consequences of their work, these fields have become necessarily more interdisciplinary. This interdisciplinarity has been a crucial tool that many scholars have used to divest their fields from colonialism, exclusivity, and cultural relativism—values inherent to enlightenment era, modernist thinking. Yet, the financial precarity of many higher educational institutions further forces those working within these areas to be able to assert the particular value and distinctness of their scholastic contributions lest they and their departments find themselves on the institutional chopping block. Indeed, the broader context of an increasing and overarching pressure being placed upon the humanities and the arts to prove their disciplinary value in an era of accountability cannot be overstated.

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17 Graduate programs in socially engaged art such as Portland State University and Otis College of Art and Design do not currently offer courses in ethnography (Portland State University, 2021; Otis College of Art and Design, 2021)
18 Recent examples of the precarity of higher education, and particularly the Humanities can be seen in the shuttering of the Art History Department at John Carroll University and the pre and post-pandemic budget cuts to programs across the United States (College Art Association, 2018; Maltese & Scully, 2020; Wintle, 2013).
However, as the pioneering work of scholars like historian Saidiya Hartman (1997, 2019) have shown, pushing the boundaries of disciplinary methodology fosters the innovative scholarship demanded by the academy while also amplifying and making space for historically marginalized perspectives, knowledges, and people. Just as Jackson’s (2011) framework of supporting apparatuses offers art a lens through which to examine arts entanglement in the world, so too does methodological experimentation provide anthropology, art history, and art education, with new ways of probing and fighting against their shared problematic origins. As I model in this research, an interdisciplinary approach to the study of gallery-based social practice opens up new ways of understanding the role of the social throughout this form of art.

The benefits and challenges of using ethnographic methods to research socially engaged art

There are benefits and challenges to using ethnographic methods to research socially engaged art. Ethnography and socially engaged artists both employ the method of participant observation. Like ethnographers, social practitioners engage in participant observation by conducting “fieldwork” through which they connect with communities by participating in and observing local activities from which they ascertain knowledge. There are countless examples of socially engaged artworks that deploy methods analogous to participant observation from Renzo Martens’ (2009) divisive film work Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty to Hari Rajaledchumy’s (2012) Making Kolams in London, a participatory food project developed for the Tamil community (Laine, 2015). Though these two works take different approaches, both use participant observation findings to determine the forms their projects take. Similarly, when working on Sapukay—Cry for Help, Rigo 23 (2008) traveled to southeastern Brazil where he visited, learned about, and worked with,
Like an ethnographer, Rigo 23 conducted multiple site visits, listened to local histories, shared meals, and spent time “…witnessing demonstrations of craft and traditional procedures crucial to their economic autonomy…” (Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego & University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2008, p 44). Building upon earlier trips, Rigo 23 developed a proposal to collaborate with these communities to produce a new artwork using traditional craft techniques that he learned about through his participant-observation activities. As Rigo 23’s work exemplifies, the similarities of ethnographic participant observation and the processes of socially engaged art reflect the shared participant and site-centered values of both fields.

Similarly, dialogical socially engaged art relies on the ethnographic staples of oral history and interviewing as methods for gathering participants’ statements about the subject of the art project. These words are amassed and deployed to create a final product through which others can access participant perspectives. For example, Mark Menjivar’s (2016) multi-year Migration Stories is a socially engaged artwork in which the artist collects and shares oral histories about migration. In her work 2016 work Percent for Green, Alicia Grullón used public workshops held across New York City to gather participants’ thoughts on environmental health concerns (Bury, 2016). Just like an ethnographer would analyze a group of interviews and draw conclusions from them as a body of knowledge, Grullón’s participant response “…provided the basis for a proposed piece of eponymous environmental legislation” (Bury, 2016, para 4). Like ethnographers, every social practice artist who uses interview and oral history methods does
so distinctly using different mechanisms and generating varied outputs that showcase or rely upon participants’ words.

As I have sketched, the ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews share many of the same forms as socially engaged art. However, as I have also identified, artists are not being trained in ethnography, nor is current scholarship on this field attending to the durational nature of this work. As an art educator, I am interested in these seemingly contradictory similarities and slippages, and the pedagogical loss represented by the lack of attention to the shared forms and values of social practice art and ethnography. By using ethnography to study socially engaged art, this research project aims to extend the methodological approaches used to research social practice so that others might be able to find intersections between these two fields in their own work.

In the next section, I describe what I learned from using these methods to research the creation of two social practice art projects at art galleries in North America.

**Benefits of Participant Observation: Durational Learning and Relationship Building**

Participant observation seeks to gather new information about a people, culture, or community through the simultaneous observation of and active involvement within that social group (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). During this study, I discovered there were many benefits to using participant observation to research socially engaged art. Most notably, it allowed me to collect and record large amounts of detailed observations about each site. It also provided me with a durational perspective and fostered positive relationships between my research participants me.
At each of my sites, I took on the role of an unpaid researching intern, working five to twenty hours a week undertaking tasks that supported the projects or institutions I was studying. I did so with all participants’ full knowledge that I was conducting research and taking notes on our interactions. At each site, I completed traditional intern tasks such as: attending meetings, moving furniture, painting walls, checking coats, and gallery sitting. At both sites, I spent most of my time providing direct support to the artists as they executed their projects through a large range of activities like photo editing and project playtesting. Both my traditional and socially engaged art-specific intern work was foundational to my research as these activities generated a large body of data and assisted me in building relationships with my research participants.

Acting as an apprentice within one’s research community is a favored method for organizational ethnographies because it offers a unique access mechanism to gather information about how people interact within a professional environment (Livine-Tararndach et al., 2016; Wadel, 2015). Taking on the role of an intern allowed me to immerse myself in the culture, language, values, and behavioral expectations of each gallery through the lens of a junior staff member whose job was to support others while also learning. In this sense, acting as an intern helped me preserve a dual insider-outsider status by reinforcing my role as both a gallery staff member and a student. Furthermore, working as an intern provided me a formal role through which I could develop relationships with people within the institutions I was studying. This positionality was particularly useful when I wanted to connect to gallery staff who were less directly involved in the artists’ projects, such as a security guard, the gallery’s social media coordinator, or an administrative assistant.

As an inexperienced ethnographer, I knew that I needed to be mindful to take extensive notes about what I observed and experienced during my participant observation activity (DeWalt
& DeWalt, 2011). I transcribed notes on what gallery staff and artists said when planning social practice art projects, how they said it, and things they seemed to leave out. Per Delamont (2008), I gathered information about the physical spaces where meetings took place and the resources and tools used in these spaces. I attended to the mundane aspects of social practice art that accumulated over the course of each project, from popular meeting locations to the types of snacks provided and the number of times a phone call needed to be placed before it was answered. I recorded this information in sufficient detail to later write “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 310) of my research sites so that other social practice artists might be able to draw from my work to inform their own approach to their related but unique sites. These descriptive notes were valuable in jogging my memory during post fieldwork analysis and assisted me in triangulating data. My descriptive fieldnotes also became central to my write-ups about each of my cases as they provided the specificity needed to create vivid linguistic descriptions of my sites and activity.

A considerable portion of my fieldnotes were dedicated to preliminary analysis and reflections. Early in my research, these notes often concentrated on my own discomfort or celebrated confirmations of successful guesswork (e.g., “I knew Tracey must be from Ontario!). As my research progressed, these notes became more analytic and often related back to earlier observations and analyses, making connections to things that had previously been said or done. For example, at my second site, I had extensive conversations with one of the artists about the field of socially engaged art. When he later made decisions that related to his previous statements, I would jot down how he was putting his beliefs about art into practice (e.g., finding new pathways to support the co-authorship of a work.) These reflective fieldnotes were crucial when I later began analyzing my data, as they often sparked my identification of themes and
helped me pinpoint preliminary codes. My more emotive fieldnotes also supported my identification of moments of tension and discomfort within my sites, as well as facilitating self-reflection on my own actions and responses to my research.

The success of all my participant observation activities hinged upon my ability to document and record data. I inscribed most of my field notes into a notebook. These observations varied from quickly jotted notes to more formal texts, dependent upon the situation as well as the time and interest I had in a particular subject. At times I found that it was socially awkward to write down notes (such as during a heated discussion) and would instead type things into my phone, snap pictures, or go to the bathroom to record a voice memo. When I was unable to record notes during an exchange, I would do so as soon as possible after I left the site. This adherence to a strict recording protocol has allowed me to preserve detailed memories of these projects, without which I would not be able to complete this research. As a socially engaged artist, this extensive recording practice has made me question how I document my own creative works because it has attuned me to the large amount of detail I typically mitigate from my documentation of my own projects.

One of the main benefits of my participant observation research was the way it supported my understanding of the social throughout gallery-supported socially engaged art. Since I was able to study the lifecycle of the works being created at each of my sites, I got to experience and collect information on the phases of a projects’ execution, from project selection through to large public events. This access allowed me to learn about the processes by which each institution and artist collaborated and also helped me gain critical insight into how and why projects ended up in their final forms. For instance, at my first site, I was able to see how the artists shifted the focus and forms of their social engagement based on changes that had taken place within the
community. I learned about these changes not only from observing the artists as they worked through their projects but also through overhearing and participating in conversations with the gallery staff about the local community. Like the artists, my understanding of the context they were working in shifted over time, thereby giving me a unique grasp of what it meant to the artists and their work to respond to local interests. Had I not used participant observation as a research method, I doubt I would have appreciated how much the artists changed their project from their initial plans, how the gallery worked with them to facilitate changes to their project, nor what it meant for both parties to be negotiating these changes throughout the course of their collaboration.

A second major benefit of participant observation was the way it facilitated my relationships with my research participants. As aforementioned, acting as an intern provided me a formal role through which I could engage with others. This role gave me and my work credibility and scaffolded my access within the gallery. Perhaps even more usefully, acting as an intern gave me a purpose and softened the discomfort that can be associated with having a researcher in one’s midst. By completing tasks, particularly undesirable or menial ones, I was able to support the gallery and the projects I was studying while simultaneously developing bonds with research participants.

Over the course of each study, my participants and I got closer and were able to speak more candidly about gallery-supported socially engaged art, their projects, and the processes of collaboration between the institution and the artists. These conversations—which extended into my interviews—became some of the most striking data I collected in the course of this research project. Like socially engaged art, the relationships I formed through my participant observation were vital to the success of this study. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) propose, I embraced the
complexity of this dual role through reflexive self-analysis of the ways my relationships impacted my research.

**Challenges of Participant Observation: Time, Blurry Ethical Boundaries, and Consent**

Despite the many benefits of using participant observation to study socially engaged art, several issues arose from my application of this method. I faced issues with the time commitment required, the blurry ethical boundaries it created within my research, and the subsequent consent questions it evoked. These challenges underline weaknesses in both ethnography as a tool for studying socially engaged art and in the forms of participant observation used by social practice artists executing their projects.

The first challenge I encountered within my participant observation activity was the volume of time it took to conduct and analyze data using this research method. As aforementioned, during my fieldwork I typically carried out eight to twenty hours per week of participant observation activity. I determined these hours with my research participants based on their socially engaged art projects and needs. During the preparation and execution of large events, I often took on additional participant observation hours in order to fulfill my commitments as an intern and help see the projects I was assisting come to fruition. It was important that my research include these critical final hours when many pivotal decisions and interactions took place since it is a common practice to increase work hours before and during large participatory art events. As a result, there were several weeks at each site where I spent over thirty hours conducting participant observation activity, a volume of time which presented massive analytic and transcription challenges.
Each day, I endeavored to type up comprehensive notes about my participant observation experiences. However, I chronically underestimated how long it would take me to digitize my notes. This became problematic during periods when I increased my participant observation activity as I did not have enough time to type up the thorough notes that the data I collected warranted. Some of my observations from these periods of research were typed days later and lacked the detail of notes I was able to write up at times when I spent fewer hours in the field. Consequently, my field notes from these important final events may have inadvertently omitted useful information that could have benefited my research.

Similarly, socially engaged artists, like ethnographers, often do not have time to record and analyze their projects in the immediate hours after events. In my own artistic practice, I have often found that culminating events are so busy that it can be challenging to even finish a work, let alone pause and produce detailed reflection about what transpired. As a result, many of my insights about a project get lost in my overall impression of the experience and are typically subsumed into overgeneralizations about the “success” of a piece. After an event, gallery staff (understandably) need to attend to the obligations they often had to neglect in the lead up to the big project, which means it is very common that gallery workers are unable to reflect with artists on their collaboration while the work is still fresh. My fieldnotes indicate that even a 48-hour gap between a large event and subsequent analysis resulted in a loss of detail—information that may have helped me and my participants improve future collaborations. This disappearance of data may be typical in socially engaged art and represents a huge deficit of knowledge that could benefit this field.19

19 Conversely, this time crunch offers a potential benefit to researchers and artists who, like me, want to accomplish the impossible task of documenting “everything”. As I experienced at both my sites, the limited time available to me at the end of projects forced me to develop a progressive and selective focus on the most pertinent aspects of each
A second challenge that arose in my participant observation activity concerned defining the limits of what constituted research activity and what did not. At each site, I developed strong bonds with my research participants. The friendlier my relationships grew, the more challenging I found it to classify what was research and what was socializing. For instance, when I had dinner with the project artists at a restaurant, I questioned if that dinner should be included in my research. We discussed socially engaged art, as well as their project, but also talked about our families, grocery stores, and the weather. Similar events, like attending a non-gallery-related art opening, or going on a walk, also blurred the boundaries of my research activity. This was particularly notable at my first site where the small size of the community made me question if perhaps all my interactions might be considered field work.

The question of defining when something was research and when it was not was further complicated when people were consuming alcohol—an activity that was particularly prevalent at one of my sites. An important aspect of my, and most, participant observation research was securing written consent from all my participants that they agreed to partake in my study. This differs from the more common socially engaged art approach of negotiating consent to participate informally through the building of social relationships over time. My consent form for this research did not include any specific alcohol policy, and as such, I felt it was unethical to record things people said when they were not sober. This created an interesting gap in my research as it meant I needed to exclude a large volume of social and project-related activity

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work. While not exhaustive, the resulting information I gathered was targeted and reflective of my specific, bounded interests.

20 There are, however, and increasing number of socially engaged artists making use of consent forms. For example, Mark Menjivar’s (2016) *Migration Stories* begins with a beautiful and poetic consent form that outlines the purpose of the project and how all oral history data will be used.
from my notes. This information may have been useful in helping me better understand how the
gallery and the artists were collaborating.

This data gap is significant because it highlights a weakness of using ethnographic case
study to research socially engaged art. Alcohol is a common social lubricant and is included as a
component of many socially engaged art projects. Furthermore, the shared consumption of food
and drink is a commonplace activity used by social practice artists during the collaboration phase
of their work as a mechanism for facilitating relationship development. I myself have used
alcohol as a tool to build connections within a community where I was completing a project.

Formalized ethnographic case study, which relies upon clearly defined, and continually
reaffirmed consent, is therefore somewhat ill-suited to study socially engaged art that includes
alcohol and/or drug consumption.

The fracture between the formalized negotiation of consent in ethnographic case study
and the informal negotiation of consent common in social practice art highlights one reason that
the latter can become so ethically fraught. While formalized ethnographic consent creates clear
boundaries for the researcher and the participants—boundaries which may, as I experienced,
limit what can be included in a project—the more informal forms of consent typically deployed
in socially engaged art present numerous risks to participants and artists. These risks include;
potential reputational harm to any party; misrepresentation of a person, community, or beliefs;
and even coercive participation brought on through power imbalance, intimidation, or fear of
reprisal.

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21 Examples of social practice projects involving alcohol include: Tom Marioni’s ongoing iterative project *FREE BEER (The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art)* (1970 – present) (Marioni, 1970, 2021), J. Morgan Puett’s food and drink based works held at her domestic residency and event space Mildred’s Lane (Murphy, 2016), and Justin Langlois’s beer based work *Conflict Studies* in which the artist collaborated on a beer specifically designed to facilitate challenging conversations (Langlois, 2020).
Though it is not present in all socially engaged art, there is still a notable presence of an attitude that social acceptance within a community secures implied consent that the participants of a work agree to allow socially engaged artists to represent participation—and thus participants—however they choose. While many social practitioners might resist this assertion, in my experience, very few artists have ever asked me if or how my words or image can be used to tell the story of a project. As a socially engaged artist myself, I am not troubled by what a social practice artist will “do” with my participation because I am confident that I can assess a work while it is in progress and mitigate my own discomfort or misrepresentation. However, my familiarity with socially engaged art is the exception, not the norm. As such, I question if social practitioners who do not formally negotiate consent are adequately accounting for the power differentials, lived experiences of racism, gender discrimination, homophobia, classism, and the varied educations and art knowledge(s) present within the communities they are working with. In short, when social practice artists do not establish clear and continual processes for reaffirming their participants’ consent to be included in a work, the artists run the risk of misrepresenting and thus potentially harming their participants.

The Benefits of Interviews: Privileging the Social Throughout and Multiple Participant Perspectives

Interviews are an ideal research form through which to learn about people or community through their own voices. Collecting stories, conducting interviews, and soliciting participant commentary on a thematic topic, are common practices within both socially engaged art and ethnography. Like participant observation, interviews provide an abundant data pool that can help artists, ethnographers, and audiences learn about and analyze a community, topic, or phenomenon. The potentiality of this method as a tool for thinking through and analyzing
gallery-based socially engaged art has been previously modeled by Agsten & Allen (2010) and Schultz & Peter (2012). Each of these texts presents a variety of participant perspectives on gallery-supported socially engaged art projects, teasing out the complex and sometimes convoluted stories of a work through individual experiences. My research extended this approach to interviewing and supported the collection of data about the social throughout these socially engaged art projects as they came into being.

For this research project, I conducted between two to eight interviews per week at each of the two research sites (NIAC and SAM). These interviews varied in length from ten to forty-five minutes, depending on the participant’s availability and the complexity of the issues discussed. I interviewed primary participants (i.e., gallery curators, educators, and artists) three times and secondary participants (i.e., security guards, project visitors) only once. By spreading out my interviews over the course of my research, I was able to learn how participant perceptions changed over time. Getting this long form view was particularly useful at both of my sites because the artists’ work shifted forms throughout the course of their project.

At each gallery, I took my time building relationships with interview participants and ramping up the complexity of our conversations in accordance with how well I knew a person and the site. As Murchison (2010), Campbell & Lassiter (2014), and Spradley (1979) recommend, I did not begin interviews immediately upon my arrival. Instead, I completed one to two weeks of participant observation before I began these conversations so that I could gain familiarity with the participants. My first interviews were largely narrative and descriptive and facilitated the establishment of trust between me and project participants, as well as supporting my general understanding of the backgrounds of the site and the interviewees. These conversations helped me expand my understanding of my sites to include factors important to my
research participants, such as the role of a volunteer group or the regulations around interacting with installed museum artwork.

Several weeks later, I conducted follow-up interviews with primary participants and completed initial interviews with secondary participants. This second round of interviews built upon the first, often revisiting topics to get clarity on something I did not grasp or addressing topics that past interviewees raised. For example, a SAM staff member and I discussed his expectations of the artist’s project at our second interview, and I learned how they had changed over the course of the project. I held my third and final interviews in the last weeks of my research after the execution of public-facing participatory events. These interviews were informed by my preliminary analysis of interviews, fieldnotes, memos, and documents. These conversations built upon the longitudinal data I had collected, revisiting participants’ initial plans and considering those in conjunction with what transpired during the project. Post-project interviews were conducted on an as-needed basis, depending on my findings and emergent themes.

Talking and listening to participants provided me with direct insight into their thoughts and feelings about the way that the socially engaged art projects they were a part of as they were taking shape. For instance, my interviews at NIAC revealed the high value that many within the community placed on volunteerism and the consequent role it played in the successful execution of socially engaged art. I heard many people downplay their own as “helping out.” The more I learned from people about volunteerism, the more I was able to make connections between it, a localized understanding of reciprocity, and the various ways people engaged with visiting artists’ participatory projects. Just like socially engaged artists who use interviews or story collection in
their work, I amassed a dataset that encompassed a variety of voices on the topic I was investigating.

Participants’ interpretation of terms were a key component of my interviews. I asked people how they and their institutions employed words such as community, engagement, public, participation, evaluation, reciprocity, and audience. These terms are common but, as my research confirmed, were interpreted in divergent ways. Getting clarification on terminology provided me a more nuanced grasp of the meaning of participants’ words and gave me much insight into the various histories participants were drawing upon in developing their understanding of institutional socially engaged art.

Interviews were also critical in helping me reassess events or conversations that occurred during my participant observation. As Murchison (2010) argues, “Through conversation and interviews, you can obtain detailed explanations and rationales as well as background information that help you make sense out of other pieces of information that may lack context” (pp. 43–44). Moreover, by crafting interview questions based on my participant observation activity, I was able to generate a more nuanced picture of the ways that the process of creating a work was shaping its final form.

I asked different participants to describe the same events, such as a meeting about tech setup or a visit to a community partner. I did so with the belief that “each account is likely to include details not present in the other, to order action in slightly different ways, and to offer different interpretations of cause and responsibility” (Emerson et al., 2011, pp. 140–141). The detailed and sometimes enigmatic ways that participants described their collaborations was some of the most generative data I collected because it often included considerations that I was not aware of like, a safety policy. For example, at SAM I first observed the artists testing forms for
public sculptures and was then able to ask follow-up questions about these sculptures and their testing with both the artists and museum staff. These follow-up conversations enriched my understanding of the events I was observing and helped me see situations in new ways, often through the lens of specific roles. Speaking with one of the artists revealed the ways he understood the project outcomes expected by the museum differed from the actual expectations that museum staff had of the same sculptural tests and their outcomes. This is just one of the many ways that interviews offered me a window into participant’s perspectives of their socially engaged art collaborations.

The Challenges of Interviews: Power, Knowledge, and Misunderstanding

Though interviews offered me the ability to track the perspectives of the multiple participants involved in the gallery-supported socially engaged art I studied, this research method also had notable ethical, analytical, and epistemological limitations. Owing in large part to their shared supporting apparatuses of enlightenment-descendant ideas of knowledge and institutional power structures, my interviews were inflected with my own presumption that I was entitled to ask people to share their words with me, and that having received their words, that I had the knowledge necessary to understand their meaning. While these shortcomings can be mitigated with intentional behavior and researcher transparency, both socially engaged artists and ethnographers alike have much to consider when using interviews (or other related forms of information gathering like oral history recordings and story collection).

From the moment that an interview request is uttered, there are complex power dynamics at play. Embedded within that initial ask is a presumption on the part of the interviewer that they are entitled to make a request to someone else to share their knowledge or perspective. Such a
request, even when it is crafted with respect and openness, is nonetheless always a relational moment wherein the power of each party, their education, their financial status, and their role within, or relationship to, an institution is being evoked and expressed. Over the course of my research, I came to realize just how singularly these relational dynamics played out in different scenarios, particularly when I invited people with unstable, temporary, or tentative relationships to the gallery to participate in an interview. Project artists and upper-level gallery workers like curators, managers, and directors generally had the power and knowledge to refuse or participate in an interview. However, contract staff, vendors, and project participants did not have the same degree of institutional autonomy and, as such, may have unduly felt that they needed to comply with my request for an interview in order to maintain a positive relationship to the gallery.

For example, a large component of the project I studied at SAM was two public-facing events that were supported by provisional and contracted gallery employees like technology staff, bartenders, and security guards. These workers were crucial to the events, and I wanted to interview them as a reflection of the value of their contributions. I theorized that their perspectives on the project and its unfolding would be distinct and provide an outlook on socially engaged art that is not often solicited. However, due to the one-off nature of these large, public, socially engaged events, I often had to jump into interview requests the first time I met someone. This quick turn-around time did not give these participants much opportunity to think through my ask, nor did it give them time to research me online in order to learn more about who I was before agreeing to chat with me.

One of the groups that I was most interested in interviewing were the security guards who, as Agsten & Allen (2010) and Schultz & Peter (2012) modeled, have distinct insights into the safety and structure of institutional social practice projects. I attempted to be straightforward
in my interview requests with all security guards. I approached them before an event began when it was not busy to let them know who I was and what I was doing before asking to interview them later. While most of them declined my request, one young guard said he would be interested in chatting with me. An hour or so later, during the busiest portion of a participatory performance, we ended up in a similar area of the gallery and he made a few critical jokes about the way the public was moving in the space and how he felt about that movement. Then, at the end of the night, during our interview, the guard shared an entirely different and more enthusiastic perspective of the work that contradicted his earlier comments.

While it is possible that the guard simultaneously held positive and skeptical views about the project and simply expressed them at different times, his tone, body language, and word choices made me think otherwise. I knew that he was, at minimum, uncomfortable with being interviewed. At worst, he was concerned about how his words might get back to his employers. I tried to reassure him that our conversation was anonymous. I then prompted him with an open-ended inquiry about his experiences during the performance and he responded by reiterating overwhelming support of the artwork. I could sense the guard did not feel good about our conversation and did not want to extend his discomfort, so I wrapped up the interview and thanked him for his time.

As this story shows, when someone is invited to participate in an interview—be it for an ethnography of gallery-supported social practice or a socially engaged art project itself—there is a multilayered tapestry of individualized support apparatuses woven into that request. This tapestry might include the interviewer’s beliefs about knowledge, the interviewee’s relationship with the institution, and the perceived and actual power of both parties. Though it is possible for researchers and artists alike to disentangle and identify these support apparatuses so that they
might mitigate their potentially problematic consequences, the fact remains that there is a power inherent to the act of asking someone for their words so that they might be incorporated into something being guided or authored by someone else.

I encountered a second and corresponding challenge of using ethnography to study socially engaged art during data analysis. Though there is a plenitude of wonderful texts to guide ethnographers through approaches to coding and analyzing data, there is little consensus about interviewers misunderstanding the meaning of a speakers’ words. In cases like my project where the researcher or artist is working within a field within which they are a member, there is, on the surface, less of a risk of misunderstanding than in instances when outsiders are analyzing the words of others. However, as I demonstrate in chapter five, it is erroneous to presume that artists, institutions, and publics have shared understandings of art just because they are in the same space. Therefore, while interviews do make room for the sharing of multiple voices in both ethnography and social practice, there are also ethical concerns with both the solicitation of interviews and the consequent analysis or use of participants’ words.

**Analysis, Support Apparatuses, and the Social Throughout**

Analysis was an ongoing component of my data collection process and which I built upon through ensuing analysis at the end of each fieldwork period. After I completed my fieldwork at NIAC in the late 2010s, I spent several months using the methodology outlined by Emerson and colleagues (2011) to analyze my data. I built inductively from reading to open coding, writing code memos, selecting themes, focused coding, and finally to drafting integrative memos (Emerson et al., 2011, pp. 171–197). Because prominent themes, such as participation fatigue and the role of settler colonialism in gallery-supported socially engaged art, emerged early in my
fieldwork at NIAC, much of my analysis focused on triangulating this data across my interviews, participant observation notes, and memos to track how these themes were manifested in different ways throughout my study.

Concurrent with this analytic activity, I was in negotiation with SAM to conduct research at the gallery in 2018. My research at NIAC informed my selection of SAM as a research site. I was interested in seeing if, and how, similar concerns and themes might emerge across galleries with differing audiences, mandates, and sizes. Furthermore, I was curious about how the distinct local and national contexts of each gallery might impact the socially engaged artwork produced at each institution. Like my research at NIAC, I conducted preliminary analysis while completing my fieldwork at SAM. My experiences at NIAC allowed me to identify themes more quickly at SAM, as well as the similarities and differences between both sites. My post-fieldwork analysis of SAM was, therefore, more focused as I had already identified (though not yet named) the important role of the social throughout as a major concern of my research. My focus on the role of images at SAM was informed both by the site itself and through comparison between my research sites.

After I had completed my fieldwork and preliminary analysis of both cases, I tested out numerous different theoretical orientations to discern which provided the best framework for understanding my data. Though both pragmatism and Bourdieusian theory provided some interesting insights into gallery-based social practice, I found that Jackson’s (2011) concept of supporting apparatuses was the most productive lens for examining the interconnected and often clashing factors, interwoven into the projects executed at each site. Furthermore, Jackson allowed me to see how both large organizing constructs like settler colonialism, and aesthetic
output tools like documentation, functioned as support apparatuses of the socially engaged artwork included in this research.

Following the divergent and distinct support apparatuses of each site helped me determine what types of analysis and write-up each case warranted. The role of settler-colonialism at NIAC required an in-depth historical examination of the site, as well as additional study of the phenomenon of participation fatigue. The central role of documentation at SAM called for a more focused visual analysis of the images used by the artists and the gallery to disseminate their works. As such this dissertation project models how attending to the social throughout gallery-supported social practice yields distinct findings based on the forms of the work and the context of the site.

Conclusion: Ethnography as a Tool for Studying Socially Engaged Art

As I have outlined in this chapter, there are numerous overlaps between socially engaged art and ethnography. Both value site-specificity, participation, and devoting time to building one’s work. I expounded upon how the similarities between these fields may not be embraced due to disciplinary defensiveness spurned on by a lack of information about ethnographic methods in artist training, an absence of ethnographic studies of social practice, and the scarcity of resources in academia.

Significantly, this chapter outlines the benefits and challenges of using the ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews to study social practice. Due to the similarities between these methods and forms used by social practitioners, this methodological art move revealed much about the shared support apparatuses of these fields. I described how participant observation lent itself to relationship building and to its suitedness for studying the social
throughout. However, I also considered how the time investment, blurry ethical boundaries, and negotiation of consent are all ongoing issues within social practice and ethnography. I chronicled how interviews can be used by both fields to capture durational participant perspectives of a work, despite the thorny power issues and potential for misunderstanding raised by this method. Finally, I discussed how I analyzed my data with a particular focus on how I came to recognize the important role of the social throughout social practice. The intent of this chapter is to make plain the considerable potential that ethnography presents to social practice as both a tool for scholastic study and as a methodological tool kit that can be taken up by socially engaged artists and their institutional collaborators. Next, I deploy ethnographic case study data collected during a 2017 socially engaged artwork in Dawson to understand how the contradictory conditions of the community served as the support apparatuses of the artists’ project.
CHAPTER 4
SETTLER COLONIALISM AS A SUPPORT APPARATUS OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN THE SUB-ARCTIC

I headed down to the public fire pit around nine o’clock, noting that the summer sun was still bright in the sky—a pleasant surprise after an evening of rain threatened to cancel the event. A number of people milled around the fire talking and laughing while visiting artists, Julia and Cara, their curatorial collaborator, Sabrina, a couple of locals, and NIAC employee, Dan, poured hot chocolate into small cups. Children took the cups, sticks, and marshmallows from the artists without pause, jamming their treats into the fire and then into their mouths as quickly as possible.

After ten or so minutes when a sizable group had collected, Sabrina gave a loud whistle and a warm shout of welcome. She introduced Julia and Cara and explained that they had been in town for six weeks collecting animal stories. Julia took over and thanked Dan for bringing the firewood, to which he jokingly replied that the artists could come by his place later and chop more. The crowd laughed, all in on the joke about the endless supply of wood needed during the nine-month winter. Julia jumped in to inform the crowd that she, Cara, and Sabrina made a book of animal encounter stories that they had collected from people in town, and which was available for free at the gallery. She cleared her throat and then read the first piece from the publication.

While not obvious to those attending the gathering, the welcoming and pleasurable evening they experienced was not the original work that the visiting artists had planned to culminate their socially engaged art project with, nor was the process of getting to that moment free from strife. Julia and Cara were the latest of the over 200 artists that had made the journey to the small Canadian town of Dawson since 2000 to participate in an artist-in-residence program at
the Northern Institute of Art and Culture (NIAC), an arts center that continues to run an incredible range of creative, community-centered programming, from musical showcases to arts events, and, most pertinently to this study, an art gallery. As the collaborative group awarded NIAC’s annual six-week thematic residency and exhibition, the artists were charged with creating a work that was both of and for the community—a considerable task in such a short timeframe. This aim was made even more challenging by the complex social landscape that they entered into, wherein the interwoven histories of settler colonialism, tourism, reconciliation, and art all played a palatable role in the everyday. This chapter, which takes the form of an extended, analytic site description, chronicles these various factors and their consequent role in this socially engaged art project.

In order to understand the social landscape of the region, it is essential to grasp the initial colonial violence of settlers arriving on and appropriating Indigenous lands in search of gold and the callousness they enacted towards Indigenous culture, beliefs, and ways of living. The rapid colonial settlement of the lands of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation during the 1896-1900 gold rush reconfigured the region to support white/European extraction (Green, 2018). Then, beginning in the 1960s, Dawson deliberately honed community-wide gold rush aesthetics to establish a tourist industry that leveraged settler-colonial fantasies of the North to draw in visitors and prop up the local economy (Doiron, 2001; English, 1997). Simultaneous with the growth of this tourist industry (which still thrives today), a dense and active local art community took shape. The social landscape shifted again in 1998 following over twenty years of legal negotiation, which resulted in the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation winning back their right to self-govern their lands.

22 The Northern Institute of Art & Culture (NIAC), the names of the participating artists at this research site, and a number of the other research participants included in this and chapter five of this dissertation are pseudonyms that have been given based on the anonymity preferences of the participants and the gallery.
Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in’s decision to co-govern the territory with settler governments has infused the region, and particularly the arts community, with an appreciation of the foundational roles that reconciliation and reciprocity can play in art, and in wider spheres of social life (The Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Final Agreement, 1998). Today gold rush tourism, reconciliation, and art are all important—though often incongruous—vectors in the region.

Despite the prominence of decoloniality in Dawson, during my research, I realized that the contradictory messages of the social landscape were taken up by visiting artists and researchers in their work in surprising ways. The lauding of colonial extraction in Dawson, combined with a reciprocity-centered community environment, created the paradoxical conditions in which Julia and Cara’s socially engaged art project took place.24

Julia and Cara were not alone in their turn to storytelling as an approach to engaging with the local community. Indeed, the volume of story collection25 transpiring in Dawson was so pronounced before the artists arrived in town that it had created a phenomenon that I am calling participation fatigue—exhaustion brought on by excessive requests for stories and local knowledge. In order to comprehend participation fatigue, which I discuss in the next chapter, we

23 Despite frequent affirmations of a belief in Indigenous rights, the current (and recent past) federal governments of Canada have made little to no effort to speed up land claims processes (Trudeau, 2020b). Moreover, the federal government’s continual erosion of existing Indigenous rights to consultation about land use (e.g., the ongoing conflicts about the Costal GasLink pipeline on Wet’suwet’en territory) as well as the erosion of land-based rights (e.g., Mi’kmaw Fishing rights) makes it clear that the Canadian government’s investment in maintaining physical and legal authority over Indigenous land is ever present (“Mi’kmaw Fishing Rights Archives,” 2021; Trumpener, 2021).

24 As I outlined in detail in Chapter 2, my use of the term “support apparatuses” is derived from performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson’s argument that as a heteronomous form of art, social practice is best understood based on how it responds to the structures, ideologies, regulations and resources—the support apparatuses—that are intertwined within the work.

25 Story collection refers to the gathering of participant narratives, histories or perspectives to generate new creative output that coalesces multiple narratives into a single form, like an artwork or a research paper. Story collection is often used by social practitioners to create their projects. This approach to making is addressed in more detail in Chapter 5.
must first examine this contradictory social landscape of Dawson. This contextual analysis allows us to understand the multilayered ways that settler colonialism was enacted and fought against through art and life in the community.

In this chapter, I trace the distinct histories of Dawson City from its Indigenous origins, through the gold rush and the consequent development of a tourist industry into the present moment wherein contemporary Indigenous and settler co-governance informs one of the most invigorated arts communities in Canada.\(^{26}\) I combine history, theory, and ethnographic data to tease out some of the main ideologies, visual languages, and beliefs that are interlocked into life in this region. Through this contextual analysis, I illustrate how the unique conditions of Dawson City helped me see the ways that settler colonialism functioned as a support apparatus of the gallery-based, socially engaged art executed in the community, as well as my own dissertation research. Furthermore, I theorize that while this community’s particular histories make the relationships between colonialism and art tangible, these same settler colonial epistemologies and practices are shaping institutional social practice throughout Turtle Island.

**From Indigenous Fishing Community to Boom Town: How the Gold Rush Shaped Dawson**

As archeological records show, Indigenous people have used the lands at the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike rivers as fishing camps for over 1400 years (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, 2020f).\(^{27}\) For hundreds of years, the Han peoples who have lived in and protected this region

\(^{26}\) My thinking and understanding of the different eras of Dawson’s history has been informed by socially engaged artist Zach Gough’s *Art Boom*, a performative lecture Gough delivered at NIAC as a culminating artist-in-residence project (Gough, 2014). The talk used the concept of economic booms to describe various periods of Dawson’s development. While the focus of this chapter is less centered on economics, Gough’s work has been foundational to my thinking.

\(^{27}\) Deciding where to begin a historic accounting of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in lands is a complex task despite the plenitude of resources, both academic and popular, written and recorded about this region of the world. As a researcher invested in scholastic transparency and Indigenous sovereignty, I have elected to prioritize Indigenous voices, documents, and the historical accounts of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in over publications drafted by non-Indigenous scholars,
have been the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, whose name is derived from their relationship to these particular lands.

Tr’o refers to a special rock—hammer rock—used to drive salmon-weir stakes into the riverbed. Ndëk is a waterway or river. Hwëch’in means people or dwellers. Literally translated it means people who live at the mouth of the Klondike River. (Dānojà Zho Cultural Centre, 2020, para. 2)

The once salmon-rich waters of the Yukon River made Tro’chëk the ideal site for Spring and Summer fishing camps (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020e). At this time, Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens spent months preparing their camps for long days of fishing and preserving salmon, their primary food source and a resource they shared and traded with other Indigenous nations (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020e). At this time, the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in people also hunted, gathered food, and practiced subsistence farming throughout their territory (Green, 2018; Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020e).

Beginning in the 1840s, Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens began participating in the fur trade with white settlers who started traveling to their lands, as well as the territories of other nearby Indigenous communities (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020f). This arrangement continued for fifty years, during which time Anglican missionaries and small early mining operations began to arrive in the North (Green, 2018; Mishler & Simeone, 2004; Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020f). This period of transition was challenging for the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation, who, though always welcoming of newcomers, were obliged to interface with new languages and different conceptions of land ownership and management to maintain their necessary trade partnerships despite the repute and prestige of many of these texts. This decision reflects my belief even the most conscientious non-Indigenous academics inhabit colonial epistemologies, research practices, and beliefs which make it difficult to rely upon their words to represent Indigenous histories. In instances when no Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizen or government authored document was available, this section draws first upon texts that were co-created by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people over multi-year collaborations, secondly by non-Indigenous authored texts that make direct statements in support of Indigenous sovereignty and/or which directly question or confront colonialism and thirdly from resources whose language, framing or verbiage indicates a non-reflexive colonial gaze.
During this era, Chief Isaac (one of the most important chiefs in Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in history) was chosen to lead his people, and his firm grasp of English played a large role in this community decision (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020d).

However, as the story goes, everything changed on August 16, 1896, as George Carmack, Dawson Charlie, and Skookum Jim staked discovery claims on Rabbit Creek (subsequently renamed Bonanza Creek by settlers). These miners kicked off a migratory boom of outsiders who descended upon the land in search of the shiny yellow rocks that the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in’ had long known of and which these transplants saw as their quick ticket to wealth (Green, 2018). Though it lasted less than five years, from 1896 to 1900, the gold rush permanently reconfigured life for the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in’, their territory, and the future of their community. The changes began almost instantaneously with the “discovery” of gold. On September 1, 1896, Joseph Ladue staked the lands for a town at the mouth of the Klondike River, after which he built a sawmill and a cabin and re-named the place Dawson City (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, 2020f). Within one month of the gold discovery on Rabbit Creek, the Hän people who had called the territory their home since time immemorial were forced from Tr’ochëk by the extensive influx of outsiders who descended upon the region in search of wealth (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, 2020f). As Green (2018) details in her in-depth examination of the long-term environmental and cultural impacts of the gold rush and colonialism on Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens, these arrivals were not just miners but also entrepreneurs, police, clergymen, and other opportunists’ eager to benefit from the expanding town.

Dawson City, known as Klondike City to many new arrivals and Tro’chëk to the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in community, was an explosion of activity during the gold rush. This short era
of fast cash was so prolific that it continues to hold a place of intrigue and veneration today, as is reflected in the dozens of popular books and films immortalizing this period (e.g., Arrowsmith, 2005; Berton, 2011; Mann, 1954). The drama of the gold rush is undeniable. In just five years, thousands of largely European-descended people were captured by the notion of pulling gold from the earth; they made a perilous journey North from around the continent, across mountains and through snow, just for the chance to make a fortune (Doiron, 2001). Those who did make it to Dawson (many who tried did not even get there) largely found it hard to cash in on the mythology of the gold rush and ended up working in the various establishments that had opened in town, from bars to brothels and gambling dens. These establishments were said to be favorites of the celebratory newly wealthy and the not so wealthy, in search of carnal comforts to soothe their bruised egos and pocketbooks (Gough, 2014).

The onslaught of gold rush arrivals destroyed all of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in’s fishing traps and buried the entire ancient fishing camp by 1897 (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, 2020b). Later that same year, Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens relocated downriver several miles to a new permanent community entitled Moosehide (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, 2020c). Some settler-scholars assert that this relocation was spearheaded by the Anglican Church who feared that Indigenous people would get caught up in the ‘immorality’ of the gold rush (Mishler & Simeone, 2004). However, oral histories and interviews with Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens indicate it was their leader Chief Isaac’s decision to collaborate with the Church and local colonial officials in an effort to get his people far enough from Dawson so that they could fish and hunt (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020d). Nonetheless, the volume of Euro-descended arrivals was so high, and their approach to hunting so wasteful, that the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens were soon contending with
shortages of all their food sources, including moose, fish, and other game (Green, 2018; Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020f).

Despite the way the newcomers reshaped the land and lives of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation, Chief Isaac, a skilled leader, never failed to welcome others to their territory (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020d). He worked within the Anglican Church (of which he was a prominent member) to secure buildings in Moosehide and studied settler business practices, even making a famous trip to Seattle, Washington, and San Francisco, California, in 1902 with the financial support of major shipping companies (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020d). However, Chief Isaac always followed his welcome messages with a caveat; he asserted that since Indigenous people did not participate in settler activities like mining, settlers should not be permitted to partake in Indigenous activity like hunting and fishing (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020d).

Settlers did not heed these requests and disregarded Indigenous land practices. As Chief Isaac explained to the Tro’chëk local newspaper in 1911, the long-term impacts of the gold rush and the arrival of white settlers were catastrophic,

White man come and take all my gold. Take millions, take more hundreds fifty millions, and blow ‘em in Seattle…Game is gone. White man kills all moose and caribou near Dawson, which is owned by Moosehide. Injun everywhere have own hunting grounds. Moosehides hunt up Klondike, up Sixtymile, up Twentymile, but game is all gone. White man kill all.
Chief Issac quoted in Dawson Daily News, 15 Dec. 1911 (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, 2020d, p. 4)

As this quote from Chief Isaac attests, gold rush era settlers amassed much wealth from their exploits in Dawson but demonstrated no respect for the lands or hunting grounds of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in. As a result of this callous disregard for land, Indigenous law, and Indigenous life, hunters depleted what had once been the abundant local game that had been used for sustenance.
In Dawson, the history of the gold rush beget a long-term extractive approach to the region, creating a social landscape wherein residents were used to outsiders (particularly those from settlers-states) coming to their lands for the purpose of acquisition. This history laid the groundwork for how locals experienced Julia, Cara, and Sabrina’s socially engaged project, brought to the region by a predominantly settler-led gallery in the 2010s and through which these visiting artists sought to collect stories. Furthermore, the legacy of the gold rush and its corresponding colonial value system was further complicated by the extensive tourism industry Dawson established in the 1960s to capitalize on the intrigue of this problematic time period.

Tourism and Colonial Cosplay

After the boom of the gold rush, Dawson saw a period of relative quiet up to the 1960s (Stuart, 1990). The population of the region stayed low, with Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens living downstream from Dawson in Moosehide while the gold mining industry continued to support a small settler population (English, 1997). It was not until the 1960s that Dawson began to reconfigure the economic engine of the region using vestiges of the town’s infamous past through tourism (Burns, 1999; Doiron, 2001; Jarvenpa, 1994).

The tourism industry was stewarded by numerous Indigenous, local, territorial, and federal government initiatives between the mid-1960s and the late 1990s (Doiron, 2001; English, 1997; Stuart, 1990). These initiatives included the establishment of a National Park and heritage areas and the development of arts and cultural tourist activities which have played an instrumental role in drawing visitors to the region (Doiron, 2001; English, 1997; Stuart, 1990).

28 My own ethnographic research process was an academic varietal of story collection and, as such, replicated many of the same issues and drew upon some of the same problematic histories, expectations, and projections discussed within this chapter. These ethical and methodological issues are addressed in more detail in chapters three and five of this dissertation.
Since its inception, the tourist industry in Dawson has centered around visitors’ desires to inhabit colonial mythologies of settlement. This chapter draws upon Furniss’ (1999) “frontier myth” (p. 53), an organizing construct that shows how the settler-colonial veneration of both the initial settlement of Canada and corresponding Indigenous resistance continues to impact how Indigenous people are treated in Canada today.

Despite the range of approaches to cultural tourism development in Dawson, one predominant theme is the main undercurrent of most initiatives—the gold rush. As one of my interview participants reported, as early as the 1960s, Dawson began to refurbish some of the old, gold rush era structures in town, returning them to the Edwardian aesthetics of the bygone era. Other gold rush buildings were left to sink into the permafrost, creating visually intriguing reminders of a departed time through their collapsing, dilapidated forms (Burns, 1999). Visitor interest in these structures and the narratives of the gold rush spurred tourism. In the 1980s, Dawson implemented aggressive guidelines that obligated strict adherence to the aesthetics of antiquated building practices (such as the exclusive use of paned glass or glass that appears to be paned) to ensure that the tourist industry could continue to expand and thrive (Parks Canada, 1989). The practice of managing the town’s Edwardian aesthetics continues today (Commonwealth Historic Resource Management Limited, 2008).

Since the 1980s, the landscape of central Dawson has, to outsider eyes, thus resembled a historic pioneer village. All of the roads in town are unpaved and kick up so much light brown dust that everyone is constantly sweeping out their homes. The streets are moated by wooden slated sidewalks that look like untreated docks made up of raw wood. Behind these sidewalks lay

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29 Though there are numerous Indigenous cultural tourism opportunities in Dawson, including a fabulous museum, and walking tours, these activities appeared to be significantly less popular than gold rush centered programming during my time in the region.
brightly colored structures that display a heightened fondness for vibrant colors like red, sky blue, and mint green. Many buildings are complemented by hand-painted, old-timey, serif-font signs that make it challenging to distinguish between long-defunct businesses and current endeavors (e.g., ‘We buy nuggets!’ ‘Tour the icefields!’). The biggest buildings in town—the art school, library, and churches—are pristine wooden structures with painted trim and expansive porches.

Curiously, alongside these exquisite buildings are empty, run-down structures that appear to have been abandoned since the 1900s. In fact, these are Parks Canada-owned buildings that are a prominent feature on the innumerable walking tours that inch through town six times a day in the summer. Some of these empty structures include window displays that illustrate the gold rush era use of the space; one is a mortuary with gruesome-looking tools, another is a clothing shop with the popular dress of the time laid out in a display that resembles a store. Many more have just been left to collapse slowly into the ground and emanate the sweet smell of rot.

When one looks closer, through an empty lot or down an alley, it becomes clear that many buildings are in fact only wood-fronted, their backs and roofs constructed from a dull, corrugated grey-silver metal, hung in distinct sheets. Others even have back walls constructed of the fake brick laminate that was popular in Canada in the 1980s. These are kept hidden by numerous empty lots filled with weeds, foxtail grass, and bright yellow wildflowers. The further from the main street you travel, the more the contents of the lots switch to the storage of metal sheeting, plastic children’s toys, and abundant gardens.

Despite these visual interruptions that betray Dawson’s life as a thriving contemporary community, the immersive quality of the outdated aesthetics of the town can be consuming. It is easy for most visitors to lose themselves to the dominant narrative of the gold rush as a time of
debauchery, settler-colonial triumph over the land, and extensive capital accumulation. Whereas their predecessors came in search of gold, many of these modern-day visitors are in Dawson to extract and inhabit colonial mythologies.

For example, one day when I was gallery sitting at NIAC, an older woman came in and asked what the current exhibition was about. I explained it was a solo show by a contemporary Canadian artist exploring shamanism. She interjected, not once but twice, to inquire if the work was about the gold rush. When I confirmed it was not, she moved quickly towards the door without even glancing at the art, reporting that, “Well, I’m not here for very long, and there is a lot to see…” before quickly exiting the building. During the hours I spent gallery sitting I encountered many other tourists who shared a similar impatience for anything that interrupted their quixotic explorations of the gold rush.

This vision of Dawson aligns with a phenomenon that Canadian anthropologist Elizabeth Furniss (1999) has described as “the frontier myth” (p. 53). According to Furniss, this myth is “…a highly flexible set of metaphors, images, symbols, and narratives through which a variety of historical perspectives and experiences can be voiced” (p. 55). Furniss explains that the frontier myth is a variable, celebratory conceptualization of colonialism, some forms of which revere settler “discovery” narratives of North America (as is the predominant case in Dawson) and other forms which esteem Indigenous resistance to colonial expansion. Furniss describes how both narratives rely upon individualist tales of the “self-made man,” a common trope of settler narratives (pp 83-84).³⁰

³⁰ The self-made man trope at the center of the frontier myth has much overlap with the self-aggrandizing that occurs when artists “reinvigorate” existing spaces and neighborhoods, casting themselves as “frontiersmen” in the process (Deutsche & Ryan, 1984; Modrak, 2015). Though not the focus of this dissertation, discussions of gentrification and the arts, particularly Dennead’s (2019) study of youth arts programming as a gentrifying force in Rhode Island, have been foundational to my thinking in this research. Additional study on the role of the arts and gentrification in Dawson is warranted.
The frontier myth is not a mere philosophical mediation but rather an active organizing construct that plays a significant role in shaping how dominant settler cultures and peoples articulate history, treat Indigenous populations, and deliver education. Though Dawson’s school curriculums and none of the community members I met enacted a belief in this ideology, the town’s physical embodiment of the frontier myth through the veneration of gold rush aesthetics makes it almost impossible for any short-term visitor to the community to extrapolate a nuanced perspective of colonialism or local Indigenous histories.

The Imaginary North

In Dawson, the visual tyranny of the gold rush is propped up by another of Canada’s most pervasive myths—the fetishization of the North and the national adoption of the North as a foundational component of Canadian identity. Canada’s only NBA team, The Toronto Raptors, use the moniker “We the North” despite being many hours away from any lands even approaching the Arctic (Dunne, 2019). Inuksuit, an Inuit wayfinding rock formation, is frequently deployed to symbolize Canada in international contexts, like the 2010 Vancouver Olympics (CBC News, 2005). Even the Canadian National Anthem attests to a Northern identity with the lyrics, “With glowing hearts we see thee rise/ The True North strong and free!” (“Anthems of Canada”, 2020). Although Canada is an Arctic nation, two-thirds of the population live in the southernmost 100 kilometers of the country, further south than the entire United Kingdom (Statistics Canada, 2017).

However, Canada has a long history of using imagery of wild landscapes—particularly representations of the Arctic—to construct a sense of Canadian identity amongst a nation of people who are racially and culturally diverse and who do not live in close proximity to one
another (Stacey, 2017). Fiction about the North, much of which is written by white, male southerners like Farley Mowat and Robert Service, has long been exalted by the Canadian literary canon (Grace, 2002). Narratives and imagery that reference the conquest of Euro-descended people over the “North” serve as a colonial shorthand to harken to the strength and determination that many settlers feel that early colonizers demonstrated in their taming of the lands—and the peoples—of North America. Luxuriating in a Canadian landscape painting, or an extended passage of text about snow can function as a kind of aesthetic time travel through which the white reader gets to immerse themselves in a moment when life in Canada was (in their assessment) simpler (whiter), or more interesting. As a result of the pervasive cultural output that fetishizes the North, many southern Canadian residents, me included, long to visit the Northern parts of the country. We want to see for ourselves how remarkable and challenging the land is. Coming to Dawson and reveling in the narrative of the gold rush is, therefore, a doubly extractive act—one that feeds visitors yearning for colonial triumphs and national identity.31

This preoccupation with the North has been a major theme in the work of visiting artists who have come to NIAC, many of whom want to solicit local perspectives on the North to incorporate into their artwork, much to the concern of the organization’s staff. For example, Tracey, NIAC’s Gallery Director, shared that, “We worry a little bit about people always

31 The mythologies of the continued wildness of Northern living are in fact so widespread that a multimodal industry of television, literature, and even community engaged art, has emerged to tell the tales of this region. While during the gold rush an onslaught of white male authors gained international fame by relaying narratives and poetic retellings of life in Dawson, today numerous others have tread in their wake to author books about the gold rush. Most recently, more than five reality television series, all of which were conceived by people from outside the area, have been filmed or set in the region. The multitude of outsider musician, journalists, and artists, who visit Dawson are often searching for their own taste of Northern inspiration. This PhD research project germinated with my own fascination with the North and a desire to be in and learn more about this seemingly liminal space within which I imagined life to be both utopic and hard. The continued fascination by myself and others with Canadian mythologies of the North makes clear that settler-colonialism and the frontier myth remain powerful organizing principles in Canada today.
wanting to hear stories of living in the North. It just gets a little repetitive for the community.” In addition to acknowledging the repetitive nature of outsider requests for knowledge about the North, Marguerite, who also worked with NIAC, confessed they often did not partake in story collection projects primarily because they did not think their “version of the North” was what outsiders were interested in. Later in an interview they elaborated that, “…it seems like a lot of artists from down south see the North as being full of wisdom and stories.” As a result of the narrowness of the idealized Northern lens they saw outsiders using, Marguerite extrapolated that, paradoxically, the people who were sharing the types of stories that outsiders most enjoyed appeared to be recent transplants, not long-term residents;

Generally, people that talk about Dawson in a way that is accessible to artists are often the people that have just moved here and are really romantic about it and could wax on forever... The rest of the people might give you a couple of good nuggets of wisdom but there's not very many people who are ready and have the time to go on these long romantic stories with metaphors and great images. People are definitely full of those, sure. But it's not as easily accessible as a lot of people think it will be. And then when it is, maybe it’s just the same people telling the same stories over and over again.

As Marguerite’s in-depth analysis illuminates, the fresh interpretations of recent transplants to the region are more likely to align with the vocabularies and mythological perceptions of the North held by outsiders. This suggests the accuracy of stories being shared about Dawson, outside of Dawson, may be dubious since there is a likelihood that these narratives are a further reflection of a pre-existing idealized version of the North. Moreover, the second group Marguerite identified, story-repeaters, are people who tell the same story to different visitors, presumably because these stories are well received. This suggestion also raises alarms about the “authenticity” of stories that are repeated to numerous outsiders because it infers that the desires or interests of story collectors—such as their utopic visions of the North—may be skewing what types of stories are communicated.
Marguerite’s suspicions about the ways that outsider projections of the North are manifested in descriptions of Dawson by non-Northerners is perhaps best encapsulated in Clark’s (2017), a Gentlemen’s Quarterly (GQ) article on the region. As a piece written close to when I conducted my research, I was taken aback to see Clark assert that, like the infamous art enclave of Marfa, Texas, Dawson is a place where one can experience a strange city and where visitors, like the early gold rush arrivals, can drink excessively and objectify women. The article reads,

Maybe you went to Marfa once, and while sipping a Mexican beer in front of an airstream trailer, you looked out over the desert landscape and thought, this is almost it, but not quite. Just... not quite. Maybe you really need to get the hell away, and you don’t want any sort of packaged, highly Instagrammable vacation to help you do it. If so, consider the derelict beauty of Dawson City. It’s strange, the summers bring endless daylight, and there are women who can-can. Taverns that never close. Taverns that never open. (Clark, 2017)

This quote relies upon passive acceptance of an equivocation between whiteness, heteromasculinity, a settler possessive over the land, and “coolness” to further mythologize Dawson through discursive violence. The irony of the assertion that the heavily regulated and constructed aesthetic of Dawson is “authentic” is almost comedic. This quote betrays the wild success of Dawson’s tourist industry in maintaining a colonial, mythological version of the North for outsider’s consumption and which veils what life is actually life for present-day residents in this region. What is perhaps most unnerving about the heterosexist portrayal of the North in this GQ text is the way that articles like this can serve as a foreground from which outsiders enter into the community. While Clark (2017) makes no mention of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation, their absence within this retelling of Dawson is emblematic of settler-colonial efforts to erase Indigenous people both from the land and from the present.

During the course of my research, I spent a considerable amount of time examining gallery ephemera, such as exhibition materials, talk posters, artist-in-residence projects, and workshop
descriptions. I noted that while early 2010s gallery exhibitions by visiting artists addressed a range of subjects, past artists-in-residence showed a proclivity for generating projects that either directly or indirectly responded to themes of the gold rush and the North.

Curiously, many of these past artists had not articulated an intention to make work about Dawson or the North in advance of arriving in town. This suggested to me that the things these visiting artists saw, experienced, and partook in Dawson had a significant impact on their artistic output. To return to Jackson’s (2011) concept of supporting apparatuses, the mythologies of the gold rush and settlement became, by virtue of the artist-in-residence’s immersion in a soup of colonial celebration, support apparatuses to these artist-in-residence artworks. I further argue that their approaches were influenced by the significant impact that decolonization had in the region following the 1998 legal victory of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in to self-govern their lands.

**Contemporary Conditions: Co-governance, Reciprocity, and Art**

Unlike the tourist industry, much of the arts exchange that happens in Dawson is grounded in the decolonial politics of reconciliation and reciprocity. These politics have been influenced by Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in’s 1997 hard-fought legal recognition as a self-governing nation, one of only a handful of Indigenous nations in Canada to have won back their autonomy over their lands through protracted settler court processes (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2020). Ironically, it is the lived uptake of decolonial methodologies and values that are being worked through at NIAC and in Dawson that revealed how settler colonialism still functions as a support apparatus to socially engaged art projects, even when it is actively worked against.

The fraught social landscape of Dawson creates a context wherein visiting artists
experience the community as both amenable to extraction and invested in mutuality. In the face of these contradictory values, many artists-in-residence attempt to get involved in the generous and tight-knit town via socially engaged art story collection projects. In most cases, artists (and other outsiders like me) who are collecting stories do so because they want to celebrate local knowledge and the reciprocity modeled in the community. This slippage between outsiders’ intentions and the communities’ experiences of their work is a further manifestation of settler colonial politics, wherein settlers misconstrue what Indigenous people need or want.

As numerous interview participants shared, Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in’s approach to self-governance is distinguished by the nation’s decision to partner with existing settler-colonial governments to provide many governmental services like education, road maintenance, and water management. This integrationist co-governance has forced settler governments and settlers within Dawson to learn about Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in’s knowledge systems, beliefs, and values and face the long-term impacts that colonization has had on the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in population. As Lee, a Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizen and a regional community leader explained, local approaches to land development had shifted over the course of the past 20 years. They elaborated that the co-governance structure of the region had obligated settler industries and governments to listen to and collaborate with Indigenous people. On this topic, Lee declared,

We want to ensure that the integrity and sustainability of Dawson remains and that's always been our voice at the table. How do we do that together? We're not against improvement or development but we want to ensure that it is done in the right way. I think there is a lot of respect that way. And hearing our voice has opened up the way that people [settlers] work with us because they know what to expect now. They know what's required of them at the table. These things are kind of entrenched now. So, you have a real collaborative approach to managing, working through, and developing things.

Lee’s explanation provides great insight into how Indigenous-settler co-governance works on the ground. First, Lee highlights two key values that the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation prioritizes in
their work: integrity and sustainability. These terms stress the emphasis that the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation places on the ethical and moral dimensions of governance. Secondly, Lee details the foundational role of mutual respect and listening. Their use of the term “voice” described the distinct perspectives that Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in and settler governments each contribute to any discussion. Voice also speaks to the dialogical and attentive qualities of these exchanges, both of which harken to the important role of the oral in Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in culture. Co-governance is therefore not a negotiation, it is an exchange which results in a shared decision or process. The vocabulary of “the table” further evokes the temporal and relational aspects of co-governance by grounding it in place and time. Thirdly, Lee describes the importance of the longevity in co-governance because it has supported settlers in developing an understanding of their Indigenous partners expectations of them, and because it concretizes the collaboration between the two bodies. Lastly, Lee underlines how co-governance can lead to collaborative decision-making processes wherein Indigenous and settler populations work through things together. This process is highly uncommon in Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. Despite recent and persistent efforts of Canadian government officials to claim a belief in Indigenous sovereignty, they rarely follow through on this rhetoric.

While co-governance in Dawson is still a work-in-progress, during my interactions with settlers from around the community and within numerous organizations, I witnessed a level of respect towards and willingness to collaborate with Indigenous citizens and government that I

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32 The distinction between Indigenous and settler concepts of time is something to which I will return in the next chapter.
33 Under the leadership of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the Canadian federal government has asserted a belief in Indigenous rights and reconciliation numerous times (e.g., Trudeau, 2020b, 2020a). However, the government’s failure to implement the majority of recommendations put forward in the Truth and Reconciliation Final Report and their purchase of an oil pipeline that Indigenous nations are battling due to its infringement on their territorial rights, are perhaps a better reflection of how the current administration feels about Indigenous sovereignty (Jewell & Mosby, 2020; Pashagumskum, 2020; Assembly of First Nation's, 2020; Canada Energy Regulator, 2020).
have never encountered in another Canadian context. The level of investment in decolonization that was manifested in the actions of settlers in Dawson (as well as the organizations they ran) was noteworthy. As NIAC board President and shop teacher Peter Menzies explained, the level of cooperation and mutual respect I was observing had taken twenty years of hard work. He went on to talk about the important role that time, and patience played in settler and Indigenous collaboration, particularly within projects undertaken at NIAC,

You've got to be in for the long haul... You just have to be patient. When you work with a school you can sort of say ‘OK we need X’ and you can really be headstrong. But with the First Nation it's all about collaboration and at whatever pace it takes.

As Peter outlined, settler organizations and settlers working with Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in organizations or community members have success when they enter into their work as collaborators, demonstrate long-term commitment, and are willing to work through things slowly. His use of the term “patience” is reflective of the rupture between settler and Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in approaches to governance and time. Patience is needed in these processes because there is a significant amount of translation and negotiation that needs to take place. While Peter does not mention trauma, I theorize that part of the reason why such collaborations require patience is because working with settlers may oblige Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens to process and contend with past violent settler behavior and its consequences. Furthermore, Peter’s use of the phrase “whatever it takes” reflects the depth of the commitment that Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in and settler partners need to have to one another in order to make their collaborations work.

As a direct result of twenty years of settler-Indigenous partnerships, settlers and settler organizations in Dawson had developed more nuanced understandings of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in and Indigenous knowledge, including the important role of reciprocity as a guiding principle for living and being in the world. David Curtis, a NIAC board member and long-time settler-
resident, attributed his understandings of reciprocity to his experiences working and living within the territory of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation. As a result of this learning, he altered his documentary filmmaking practice to incorporate reciprocity with his film’s participants into the structure of his work. Many others, like David, modeled this reciprocity in the ways they made and shared their music, writing, and art. Consequently, as a community-run organization, NIAC took up the call to reciprocity in a number of ways, including through its artist-in-residence program.

**NIAC and the Reciprocal Benefits of the Artist-in-Residence Program**

In the over twenty interviews I conducted while in Dawson, I spent a considerable amount of time asking people about how such a small community was able to foster such an extensive local arts culture. Though, like much Canadian arts production, the incredible repute of Dawson’s arts community may not extend outside the nation, it is widely extolled across Canadian music, literary, visual, and performing arts communities. NIAC is a central hub from which much of this creative production is made possible. Since 2000, NIAC has hosted a range of arts classes for people of all ages, offered studio spaces, screened films, run workshops, hosted local, national, and international art exhibitions, and has developed and continued to run four annual largescale multi-day arts events.

As an artist who had long been mesmerized from afar by NIAC’s programming, I was most impressed with how the organization maintained both a national-level of arts programming and a community-centered-ethos. Unlike other Canadian arts spaces which tend to feel like quiet mausoleums and where interactivity is relegated to educational departments, NIAC was as much a community center as it was an arts space. Little shoes littered the main entryway during
children’s dance programming, and community members used the organizations’ bathroom when they were out about town. About half of the visitors to NIAC came into the space through the backdoor that entered directly into staff offices—a physical choice that spoke to the intimate relationship between NIAC and their community. It is arguable that the porosity and welcome fostered at NIAC is one of the reasons so many artists relocate to Dawson, thereby extending the growth and continuation of this small, prolific arts community.

One of the most distinguishing facets of NIAC’s culture was the ways the organization took-up reciprocity. Facets of a reciprocity-centered model of living that were most prominent at NIAC included volunteerism, hospitality, and generosity. This reciprocity was modeled by the many volunteers contributing to the organization while also benefitting from it. For example, Adrian, a volunteer member of NIAC’s Gallery Committee, told me that “They [NIAC] definitely do much more for me than I do for them!” I found Adrian’s observation surprising given the high number of hours they put into the gallery each week. Adrian described NIAC’s role within Dawson as a space that brought people together, shared knowledge, and supported the interests of the community. Adrian’s commentary illustrates how NIAC is both an organization grounded in and made possible by its uptake of reciprocity. There is mutuality, or give and take, between the organization and their publics, which, as I heard from countless staff, was a critical component of much of their programming, including their artist residency.

Since it was launched in 2000, NIAC’s artist residency has accepted hundreds of creative practitioners from around Canada and the world. These practitioners apply to come to Dawson

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34 Volunteerism in Dawson is one of the main analytic categories I identified in my ethnographic data on this site, and which I hope to unpack through a future, co-written publication. Furthermore, while discussions about free labour in settler organizations—as well as its prominent use in socially engaged art—warrants further consideration, especially as it relates to artist-run-center culture in Canada. In the context of this dissertation I am most interested in centering Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in reciprocal systems of exchange.
for between two and twelve weeks, per the needs of their proposed work.\textsuperscript{35} The artist-in-residence program serves multiple purposes, from providing undergraduates at the local art school with a chance to work with internationally renowned artists like Rebecca Belmore and Terrence Houle, to hosting filmmakers and musicians participating in Dawson’s annual film and music festivals. One of the most notable characteristics of the residency is the way that it fosters connections between the vibrant but physically isolated local arts community and international creative practitioners. Nolan, a local artist who had been involved in NIAC in several ways, noted that the residency program ensures that emergent art, which might not otherwise reach the small population of Dawson, circulated within the community. Nolan commented,

\begin{quote}
...being in a small town it can feel very isolated and so in that sense it [the residency] really brings in contemporary art from Canada and some other places to us, which is huge. That, combined with all the musicians who come up and the writer’s residents and all the talks that happen and the programming that comes out of it, really keeps that conversation going. You do lose touch in Dawson because it is so far you don't make it out as much as many other places to see as much stuff in person. But it [the residency] does keep you connected and keep conversations going.
\end{quote}

This continuation of contemporary art discourses in Canada was mentioned as a key feature of the artist-in-residence program by a number of my interview participants.\textsuperscript{36} While some argued the artists-in-residence introduced new ideas to the community, others felt the artists-in-residence helped the community avoid stasis by inserting energy into the mélange of conversations and projects already underway. Or, as Gary, a prominent member of the local art scene and NIAC Gallery Committee member articulated, visiting artists often lead workshops that offer tangible new skills to the arts community. He explained,

I think workshops are the biggest deal because we have a community in Dawson which is

\textsuperscript{35} Artists-in-residence and all gallery exhibitions are selected by a Gallery Committee made up of local community members.

\textsuperscript{36} It is notable that the majority of my interview participants have a pre-existing relationship to NIAC so this particular interpretation of the residency may be specific to NIAC’s participants and not the broader community.
very artistic, yet we have very few resources. We have people up here that are dedicating their lives to creative endeavors but in terms of resources and having outside influence for those resources, it is pretty limited. So, when we have people [visiting artists] up here that have a skill they can share with other people, then it's great. When they actually have a venue to teach the people in town whatever their skills are. Because it rubs off. You see one person coming up and doing a workshop about printmaking and then the following weekend the printmaking studio is doing something radically different.

Gary’s identification of the ways that visiting artist-led workshops could facilitate creative growth in the artistically rich but resource-limited community helped me see just how impactful artists-in-residence could be. Regardless of whether they brought in new ideas or new skills, visiting artists functioned like tributaries feeding into a river, helping to ensure the circulation of ideas. In this way, artists-in-residence came into Dawson’s art community on the wings of a local belief in reciprocity that assumed that the outsiders could offer support the continued growth of arts in the region.

However, just as the community ethos of reciprocity implies, artists-in-residence benefitted from their participation in the program. I received firsthand experience of these benefits during my time in Dawson when I was offered the same types of support typically extended to visiting artists. I received invitations to social events, opportunities to speak about and share my work, introductions to people who might be interested in my research, and countless other small gestures of kindness, from the sharing of garden produce to book loans.

Dan, the residency coordinator, and his partner exemplified this openness on the nearly monthly five-hour round-trip drive they took to bring resident artists to visit the nearest national park. Other locals described their own social invitations to residents emerging from a desire to make people feel welcome and to ensure they had a good time in Dawson.

It is also important to note that despite the reciprocal relationships that I heard about from many past artists-in-residence at NIAC, this experience was not ubiquitous. One former
participant of the program also shared that as a non-white artist in a predominantly white community, they had encounters both within and outside NIAC that were unwelcoming and racially charged. This speaks to ongoing issues of racism within Dawson, as well as the pervasiveness of racism in Canada, and the Canadian arts community more broadly.

As a white, cis-gendered woman I was offered extensive hospitality that played a crucial role in my ability to execute this research project and inspired me to undertake creative works that I would not have otherwise pursued. A number of past residents I spoke with echoed my experiences in their retelling of their residencies. Like me, many of these artists-in-residence were motivated by the kindness extended to them and endeavored to find more ways to participate in the community, thus fostering a network of reciprocal acts of generosity and support from the community towards visiting artists and vice-versa.

During my research study in Dawson, reciprocity became one of the main organizing principles that structured my time. While initially, I began giving back to the community by volunteering at the gallery, I then began taking on volunteer jobs and tasks across town. I walked dogs for the Humane Society, helped put away chairs at the Farmer’s Market, and worked at the admission booth at the music festival. The more involved I got in life in Dawson, the more organically my volunteerism expanded. I established a “never say no” policy when asked to contribute to the community and ended up doing everything from giving a talk as a part of a performative lecture series to barbequing for a fundraiser (an act so out of sync with my wimpy vegetarian sensibilities that I later barely believed that I had done it). Engaging in the community in these ways gave me a sense of how rewarding a reciprocity-centered life could be. Moreover, engaging in this reciprocal culture gave me an appreciation of how exhausting life in Dawson was without the added fatigue brought on by outsiders asking for my knowledge.
Conclusion

The distinct nature of the reciprocal relationships NIAC’s residency fostered between visitors, and the local population led to the artist residency becoming a program through which artists experimented and took risks that they might not consider in other less supportive contexts. As a result, a number of visual artists who were not socially engaged artists undertook community-based works in Dawson. However, this move towards participatory models of art did not (as Jackson’s (2011) supporting apparatuses remind us) transpire outside of other interwoven conditions and factors. As such, the reciprocity-centered politics of the community intermixed with the thunderous din of the colonial narrative of the gold rush to foster a simultaneous and contradictory culture of extraction and reciprocity. In their efforts to reconcile these divergent modes of being, many artists-in-residence turned to stories, a material that could both be collected and shared. It is within this context that I identified the phenomenon of participation fatigue.

As one of only twenty-five Indigenous nations in Canada to have won back their legal right to self-governance Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in’s collaborations with settlers and settler organizations like NIAC are forging new approaches to decolonization. As such, the NIAC supported socially engaged art project I studied offers an extraordinary window into how the often-touted Canadian politics of reconciliation are navigated in a community-engaged art context. Furthermore, this research provides artists and institutions who are interested in decolonization with insights that will signal to the challenges and benefits of this important onto-epistemic shift in gallery practices.
CHAPTER 5

“TURN ON THE TAP, I NEED TO FILL MY CREATIVE BUCKET”: STORY COLLECTION, SOCIAL PRACTICE ART, AND THE EMERGENT PHENOMENON OF PARTICIPATION FATIGUE

Story collection is the gathering of participant narratives, typically amassed in an audio and/or text form and then collated into a larger body of work and presented as a social practice art piece.37 It is a popular method used by socially engaged artists, but it is also an approach to artmaking that presents numerous challenges. During one late 2010s summer under the exquisite light of the midnight sun, Northern Institute of Art & Culture (NIAC) artists-in-residence Julia and Cara encountered a phenomenon that threatened to derail their story collection socially engaged art project. I am calling this phenomenon participation fatigue, a form of exhaustion brought on by frequent requests from outsiders to contribute time, energy, and/or knowledge to a project or artwork.

This fatigue was the result of many factors, including an extractivist approach taken by previous visitors towards the community. Or as local artist Nolan aptly described, outsiders working in Dawson as showing up and saying, “Hey, turn on the tap, I need you to fill my creative bucket…” As this quote illustrates, past visitors often behaved as though residents’ stories and local knowledge were an endless resource that could be accessed on-demand. The

37 Recent examples of story collection artworks include; Suzanne Lacy and Corey Madden’s 2012 Storying Rape in which the artists invited nine community leaders to discuss rape and rape narratives at Los Angeles City Hall while a small audience and fifteen social media journalists who were charged with recommunicating the discussion to others watched (Lacy & Madden, 2012); Camille Turner and Alana Bartol’s 2013 The Landscape of Forgetting, in which the artists collected stories about local experiences of slavery from historians, genealogists, and community members in Windsor, Ontario and then reconstituted these narratives into a public walking tour (Turner & Bartol, 2013); and, Mammalian Diving Reflex’s iterative project All the Sex I’ve Ever Had (2010-present) a socially engaged art theatre project in which older adults (typically 70+) discuss their sex lives in front of public audiences (Mammalian Diving Reflex, 2019).
“creative bucket” Nolan described speaks to the ways collected stories were accumulated and then used as material by outsider creative practitioners. Moreover, “creative bucket” refers to the non-discriminating, acquisitional logic that pervaded many of these requests, wherein visitors saw Northern knowledge and stories as potential fodder for their creative pursuits. By focusing on participation fatigue, I seek to show how settler colonial approaches to stories and knowledge play a role in gallery-supported socially engaged art and in my own research processes which led to the development of this writing.

I arrived in Dawson with my own acquisitional objectives: to learn more about how and why the local gallery, NIAC, supported so much socially engaged art. In lieu of a “creative bucket,” I brought a research bucket which I filled with observations, document analysis, and interviews, including one which sourced the above quote from Nolan. As I outlined in chapter 3, I attempted to offer reciprocal benefit to the Dawson community, NIAC, and the artists whose work is at the center of this study by doing labor like providing gallery sitting, car rides, and photographic documentation. Nonetheless, part of the reason I was able to identify participation fatigue within the community was because I too, was asking residents to share their knowledge with me and saw the ways my requests tread upon their time. Furthermore, as I address in this chapter, my own implication within participation fatigue has raised many questions for me about how I approach the knowledge of others in my research and artworks, how I enter into communities, and how I inform or consult my project participants about the outputs of a work. It also made me reflect upon how galleries can support socially engaged art and if (and how) outsiders can make work or conduct research in communities which they are not a part of.

While I self-initiated my research project, artists Julia and Cara and their curatorial collaborator Sabrina arrived in Dawson by way of NIAC’s annual thematic residency program,
which invited outside artists and curators to spend six weeks in the community to create new projects. This thematic residency was a competitive program and was a leading residency opportunity in Canada at the time. Unlike the majority of other NIAC residencies (and most artist-residency programs in the country), this program concluded with a gallery exhibition and a public space installation opportunity. NIAC’s Gallery Committee (which was made up of local community members) chose all artists’-in-residence and gallery exhibitions through a thoughtful, consensus-decision making process during which they evaluated numerous applications, though the total volume of these applications varied year-to-year. In this sense, the Gallery Committee was charged with representing and selecting projects for their community, and, as I learned during my interviews, each member of the Gallery Committee was interested in Julia and Cara’s proposed work for different reasons, such as its investment in land-based knowledge, and the quality of the artists’ past work.

Julia, Cara, and Sabrina applied and were accepted to the residency with a project proposal, which outlined their plans to collect local residents’ stories about animal encounters. As I trace in this chapter, soon after their arrival, the artists noticed there was a reticence to share stories within the community and responded accordingly, shifting their approach to story collection and the final socially engaged art project they developed. What neither Julia, Cara, Sabrina, or I knew before our arrivals in Dawson is that we were entering a community that had been beleaguered by outsiders who proceeded us, landing in town with “creative buckets” that

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38 The residency was discontinued in 2019, and it is currently unclear if it will be relaunched.
39 It is important to note, this chapter does not provide an overview or analysis of the artwork and exhibition that Julia, Cara, and Sabrina generated. This is not a reflection of the value I place on their creative projects, but rather is indicative of my interest in focusing on questions of process and the intertwinement of the support apparatus of the gallery in the construction of the socially engaged elements of their work. As I outlined in chapter 2, and to which I return in chapter 7, there is a history of analyzing social practice based on its final outcomes thereby neglecting the important role of the social throughout socially engaged art. My analytic decision to forgo a focus on the artist work reflects my belief that cross-project scholarship which attends to duration and process in social practice is urgently needed.
David Curtis, one of my interview participants, a NIAC board member, documentary filmmaker and long-time settler resident of Dawson, outlined how the community experienced visitors’ sudden arrivals and consequent story requests. On one of my last days in Dawson (after the artists’ had left town), I came to an agreement with David to meet for an interview. He and I had connected early in my research at a party where we chatted about his reciprocity-centered approach to filmmaking. We met a number of times throughout my research at NIAC, at the music festival ticket booth where I was a volunteer, during a board meeting, and at a large public event where I was working the barbeque for a Humane Society fundraiser. I was excited to speak to David, as he had been involved in NIAC almost since its inception. His thoughtful comments about reciprocity and art suggested to me that he might have a lot to say about social practice at the gallery. Moreover, I had decided to limit my interviews with Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens to people who had a direct role in the gallery. Consequently, I was particularly interested to speak with NIAC involved settlers like David who expressed an investment in Indigenous sovereignty.40

As I learned during our discussion, David agreed to an interview because he had seen me volunteering around town and appreciated that I was trying to contribute to the community. As a result of this shared ground, my interview with David began by thinking through what reciprocity meant or could look like in a co-governed Indigenous-settler town in the sub-Arctic. While with other participants in my research, I waited for several interviews before broaching

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40 During this research I contacted several people who elected not to participate in my study, all of whom had demonstrated a deep dedication to partnering with the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation. While none disclosed their reasons for not partaking in my research, I suspect that their refusal was informed by the extractive aims of my work. The absence of these voices speaks to potential multitude of approaches to reciprocity and decoloniality practiced by settlers in the region which this text does not capture.
the possibility of a local exhaustion with outsiders’ requests for stories, David and I organically turned to this phenomenon in the first few minutes of our meeting. Though he had not participated in Julia and Cara’s project (and which, as I detail later did not align with the approach outlined below) David did have experience with past story collection works, about which he offered that,

Over the years, it's been more and more of this. People with community-based practices that come into the community, parachute in, collect stories, and make artworks about it. And then you either never hear about it again, or, you don't know how that's going to be used presently or in the future. And they're not necessarily always clear themselves about how they want to use it. And so, people here are becoming a lot more astute to that because it really is a colonial thing, in and unto itself.

David’s thoughtful interpretation of story collection, the perils it presented to locals, and the colonial logic which underlined this artistic activity helped me solidify my understanding of what participation fatigue was and why it was so prevalent in Dawson. First, his reference to the fact that there had been an increase, over years, of people coming to request stories illustrates the longevity and accelerating nature of this practice. David’s choice of the term “parachute in” creates an evocative and tangible sense of how community members experienced short-term visitor’s projects as abrupt and unmoored activity, disassociated from life in the community. David’s description of the uncertainty about how stories were going to be used sets up the riskiness of the act of sharing one’s knowledge with a visitor when it may become a component of something participants never even get to see. Moreover, his point about artists not knowing where and how stories would be used speaks to the entitlement artists felt they had to the knowledge of this community. Furthermore, artists’ uncertainty about their plans for stories reflects the ways these visitors were relying upon modernist ideals of the artist as genius to support their requests. David’s concluding remarks about local resident’s “astuteness” spoke to a growing sense of caution emerging within the community around visiting artists’ inquiries.
Finally, his direct linking of story collection and colonialism drives home how this approach to artmaking was informed by the contextual history of the region and Canada.

While he did not provide a direct definition of participation fatigue, this quote from David identifies why people were so wary about sharing stories in Dawson. First, these requests were excessive and increasing, which speaks to the temporal arc of participation fatigue. Second, there was little information about how stories would be used. And third, these requests germinated from a colonial, extractivist approach to the people and lands of the North, which was extended by the presumption of artists. Though I do not believe David was referencing my research or Julia and Cara’s work, these threads, as well as the role of “parachuting in” and “creative bucket” are concepts to which I return throughout this chapter as I consider my own ethnographic case-study and Julia and Cara’s gallery-supported project. I lay out how, despite our aims to resist settler colonialism, we were also imbricated within it. I use interview data to show how refusal was being used by Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens and other Indigenous people to push back against story requests. This chapter concludes with a consideration of the implications of participation fatigue for gallery-supported socially engaged art.

“There Has Been a lot of Projects About Collecting Stories…”

The phenomenon of participation fatigue was so acute that Julia and Cara observed tension around the story collection process in our first interview, conducted only seven days after their arrival in town. During that discussion Julia explained that, from the outset, people expressed a level of caution that made her reflect upon what else had gone on in the community, I’m sort of curious if there are experiences in the town’s memory of working with artists that have created a little bit of caution. Especially because Tracey said there has been a lot of projects about collecting stories… But I’m just wondering if there has been, maybe not negative experiences but it’s not uncommon for stuff to
be taken from people as materials by an artist without the respect or authorship or credit that it should have had.

As this quote illuminates, as an experienced socially engaged artist, Julia knew that the way that some people were responding to her and Cara’s project suggested that there were local issues with story collection. Her use of the term “memory” and reference to Tracey’s (a gallery employee) disclosure that there had “been a lot” of story collection projects, makes clear that Julia understood that she and Cara had entered into a particular local history. Furthermore, her use of the term “caution” and theorization that the attribution of stories might have been one possible issue speaks to her nuanced sense of why a small community might become hesitant towards story collection art projects—because their knowledge had been taken before. Though Julia’s language of “a little bit” and “maybe not negative” softened the deep ethical questions she raised, Julia’s social practice experience gave her great insight into the problematics of past artists’ projects. Moreover, the fact that Julia was able to discern this level of detail from a week’s worth of casual interactions around her project speaks to both her expertise and the widespread nature of participation fatigue within the community.

While only one person I interviewed elaborated on a past problematic story collection artwork, I heard allusions to issues like the non-attribution of stories that Julia raised in numerous casual conversations. Locals made inferences to me about a past community-engaged project exerting a rather aggressive community outreach approach and which then manifested those stories into an underwhelming artwork—a sure-fire recipe for further aggravating local fatigue with story collection.

Though my entry to Dawson only predated Julia and Cara by a week, the distinction of my role as a researcher placed me in a different relationship with NIAC. For example, I participated in a two-hour staff meeting just days after my arrival in town. It was the first time I
was interacting with most NIAC staff in a significant way, so I was nervous. I decided I had not
built enough trust with the group to take notes, so I ran home after the meeting and poured
everything I could recall into my first field note. My summary included this snippet about the
brief dialogue that ensued about Julia and Cara’s project after Tracey explained the premise
behind the work,

What was maybe most interesting about this portion of the conversation is that the group
then started discussing how a lot of residents come to collect stories. The people who
were here last summer, someone who was here in the winter and many others have done
so. The group wondered if there might be a kind of storytelling fatigue in the community
and Marguerite suggested that the artists shouldn’t put out a call and that instead they
should just go out and start talking to people. I wonder if they are correct in thinking
there will be story fatigue.
(Field note, July 6)

When I entered the data analysis phase of this research project, I was shocked to see that
storytelling fatigue was such a pertinent issue that it came up at the very first meeting I attended.

However, the artists did not experience this same level of disclosure about participation
fatigue, and, as such, it was something that they learned about over the course of their project.

When I analyzed the notes, interviews, and observations I gathered throughout my research, I
realized that when NIAC’s Gallery Director Tracey mentioned there had been a lot of past story
collection projects, it was her understated way of telling the artists about participation fatigue
without making them feel like they could not undertake the work they had come to town to
create. During their conversations, Tracey was also trying to safeguard the community by
suggesting ways for the artists’ to create their work that would not exacerbate local exhaustion.

Over the course of my time interviewing and working with Tracey, I came to understand that due
to a year-long leave, she had not been at the meetings where Julia and Cara’s project was
selected by the Gallery Committee. As such, her insider knowledge about story collection and
participation fatigue may not have been discussed when the committee selected the artists’ work,
and consequently was something she had to communicate to Cara and Julia after their arrival in town.

Moreover, as I learned during the final consultations I conducted with the artists and the gallery about this chapter, each had different recollections of what was said about the artists’ use of a story collection approach to creating their work. The artists remembered being discouraged from changing their project’s focus and form because doing so might take their work in a direction that the community-led Gallery Committee (and by logical extension the community) was not interested in. Tracey did not share this recollection but did remember trying to be thoughtful in her discussions with the artists about how their project might be received and executed given local conditions. The discrepancies in their memories of these early discussions about this work are emblematic of the divergent ways that the artists and gallery staff understood their conversations and their meaning. I theorize that these types of miscommunication are common in gallery-supported socially engaged artworks, particularly when the parties involved in project are new to working together.

Furthermore, part of what guided the way Tracey spoke to the artists was her trust in them. She knew from their past projects that they had the ability to work with community and trusted that, combined with the information she had shared, they would be able to create their project. As per her belief, the artists used the information she shared with them to examine their experiences and, accordingly, adjusted their work plan to seek out stories using methods that were responsive to the community’s story fatigue.

As a community outsider whose own collecting of data mirrored Julia and Cara’s processes, I too only came to realize the severity of participation fatigue over the course of my research. The artists and I talked about the frequency of past story collection projects and the
local reception of our works regularly as we all tried to sort out the best and most community-attuned ways to approach people with our artistic and scholastic endeavors. As visitors who “parachuted” into the community with limited prior knowledge, Julia, Cara, and I all spent a portion of our projects walking, unknowingly, along the well-worn trail of story collection induced participation fatigue.

**Settler Time and Participation Fatigue**

Time, timelines, and timing all played roles in exacerbating the impacts of participation fatigue on Julia and Cara’s project. Spinning off of literary scholar Mark Rifkin’s (2017) concept of “settler time” (p. 1), which argues linear time is a Western construct that falsely casts Indigenous people in a spectral past, I assert that the timing and timelines NIAC established for the artists’ project germinated from settler-time imposed administrative systems. These administrative iterations of settler-time manifested in how long the artists had to create their work, the project application to execution timeline, the timing of the residency, as well as larger issues with the tourist positioning of Dawson as being frozen in time.

Julia and Cara had just six weeks to create and install an exhibition of their work. Their curatorial collaborator Sabrina was only onsite for the last two weeks of their residency to design the show and write an accompanying essay. Due to the density of their schedule, the group left town within forty-eight hours of their final public program which restricted their ability to debrief with the community about their project. I arrived in Dawson a week and a half before the artists and stayed nine days after they left. These short execution timelines limited the depth of relationships and community understandings that the artists and I could establish because of the speed with which we needed to resolve our projects. Just as David’s commentary on artists
“parachuting in” articulates, there was a suddenness and urgency in our actions as we endeavored to accomplish our respective artistic and research work.

Due to my decision to limit my interviews with Indigenous residents of Dawson to people with direct roles in the gallery, much of my theorization about Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in time (and some other aspects of participation fatigue) are speculative and draw primarily upon my participant observation notes and interviews conducted with settler allies. However, based on my limited exposure to Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in knowledge and processes, I believe that the condensed timelines the visiting artists and I had to complete work in the community were out of step with Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in concepts of time, which appeared to use slower, more deliberate and involved paths towards understanding and art.

Throughout my research, I heard a number of people who were involved in but not from Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, make mention of only having been in Dawson for a short time. For example, an Indigenous ethnobotanist from a different First Nation who was working with Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Elders and knowledge keepers said she had not been in the region long though she moved to the territory with her family a year earlier. This sentiment was echoed by a settler Traditional Knowledge Specialist about her twenty years in the region, which she proposed was still not long. These comments gave me the sense that Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in time did not necessitate the same urgency as settler time which asserts a “now or never” and accelerationist logic.

Additionally, though there is little written literature on Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in understandings of time, a 2014 report on Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in pedagogy includes a narrative about the importance of patience in First Nations education. As an interviewee of that project shared, patience was vital to education because it modeled, “Giving them [students] time to learn and
have success” (Lewthwaite & McMillan, 2014, p. 17). This notion of patience and “giving time” as precursors to success suggests that, unlike the settler-timelines of the artists’ project and my research work, a Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in timeline would have been more flexible in order to accommodate the processes of learning required to achieve success.

Timelines played a further role in the artist’s work. As Julia described, “The time is also a little bit weird because we applied for this almost two years ago… It is a pretty big stretch of time between proposing and doing the project.” This observation makes it clear that for the artists, the gap between the development and execution of their project was awkward. During that interval, numerous changes transpired in the larger world and within the artists’ practices. Significantly, there was a deluge of story collection projects in Dawson created between their proposal development and arrival in town, a consequence of which was the hastening of participation fatigue.

As a component of this case study, I examined documentation of projects executed by past artists-in-residence. Through this research, I was able to trace a flood of other artists who had parachuted into Dawson and worked with the community, often collecting knowledge from residents. Many of these artists did not propose to execute such work before their arrival but a number of their undertakings during their residencies involved story collection. When one considers that Dawson had an off-season population of around 1,200 residents and that not all residents were interested or engaged with the arts, it is easy to imagine why people would be growing wary of participating in any more story soliciting works.

Through my interviews with NIAC staff, I learned that the long application to execution timeline was dictated by the grant cycles that the gallery relied upon to fund the targeted thematic residency and exhibition program through which Julia and Cara were undertaking their
work. Like many Canadian artist-run-centres and not-for-profit galleries, NIAC relied upon a network of funds from the territorial and federal governments, as well as regional and federal arts granting organizations (such as the Canada Council for the Arts) for almost all of their operational funds. Throughout my interviews with staff, nearly every person I spoke to referenced the major role that the precarity of funding played in their programming, as well the many hours staff dedicated to applying to various grants, most of which had the specific goal of offering direct financial support to artists. As a supporting apparatus that enables NIAC’s work, grants and their corresponding timelines played a huge role in the terms and schedules that dictate when visiting artists were able to create projects. As a consequence of the long application to project timeline, the artists encountered some reticence when they began their story collection work. By that point, the community was experiencing participation fatigue from too many artists “parachuting in” and asking for their “creative buckets” to be filled.

Local caution towards Julia and Cara’s project was furthered exacerbated by another timing issue, the scheduling of the project during the busiest portion of the year. As a tourist town, Dawson had a small window during the summer when many residents made a significant portion of their annual income. For example, a junior staff member explained that she had not participated in the artist’s work because it was the summer, and she, like everyone else, was just too busy. In the summer, she said, “Everybody gets like three jobs. Some people only work seasonally too.” For NIAC gallery employees who are parents, the summer was a particularly difficult time to undertake a labor-intensive project like facilitating a community-engaged artwork because they had the added obligation of contending with childcare complications and gaps brought on by summer school closures.41

41 Like many artist-run-centers and non-commercial galleries, NIAC employees were dealing with discrepancies between the volume of work their positions required and the number of hours they were compensated for. This is a
Moreover, locals’ unavailability in the summer was exacerbated by everyone’s desire to make the most of the short season when it was gorgeous outside—the weather was warm, the sun blazed, if not all night, for many hours. As residents explained, while the community experienced a time for reflection, gathering, and long conversations during the nine months of winter, summers were a time for hard work punctuated by exuberance and excess. In short, the summer was a terrible season for anyone to undertake a participatory artwork.

Why then, was this residency scheduled in the summer? As aforementioned, the program had been running for a number of years with the support of various government bodies and art council grants. Historical research of NIAC’s archive suggested the original intent of the summer scheduling had been to ensure maximum ameliorative weather for visiting artists’ to create outdoor installations. However, in consequent years as the thematic residency drifted towards participatory projects, the timing was not updated because the gallery wanted to remain consistent in their funding requests so as to better ensure a likelihood of getting access to fiscal resources. More importantly, the residency project had also become a prominent feature of Discovery Days, the annual Yukon celebration of the ‘discovery’ of gold by settlers in the late 1800s. The inclusion of the artists’ final residency projects in an event structured around the veneration of settler-colonial mythology quite literally entangled and drew their work into conversation with the construct of settler time.

The folding of Julia and Cara’s project into Discovery Days punctuates the repetitive nature of time in Dawson. As I considered in chapter 4, the gold rush established an extractivist field-wide, feminist issue with Canadian artist-run-center culture wherein small numbers of staff are often charged with executing large volumes of programming. Further research on this topic is needed. My analysis of past projects suggests that over the course of the thirteen years of this thematic residency, artist’s projects seemed to echo a wider contemporary art shift from the popular site-specific art installations of the early 2000s towards more participant involved socially engaged artwork in the 2010s.
approach to the region by settlers who first came in search of gold. Today, this extraction is manifested with tourists coming to town to consume the mythology of that era, and more recently with artists “parachuting” to town to fill their “creative buckets.” Participation fatigue has, therefore, not emerged solely because of story collection artworks. Participation fatigue is a consequence of years of repeated extractions. What is more, as David’s comments included at the beginning of this chapter suggested, requests for stories were even increasing. Though both the visiting artists and I were ensnared within these temporal conditions (and arguably intensifying them) they were also too big for us—or the gallery—to contend with. In summation, settler time was one of the ways that the support apparatus of settler colonialism manifested in both the artists’ work and in my own research. This settler time was further complicated through the community’s prioritization of artistic autonomy, which shaped how outsiders were supported in executing their work.

**Participation Fatigue and Artistic Autonomy**

Through my interviews, I spoke with a number of NIAC staff and volunteers about the community’s experiences with participatory art. During an interview with long-term, settler resident and one of the founding members of NIAC, John, he described Dawson in a way that helped me see how artistic autonomy had played a large and positive role within the town. John expounded that Dawson was a weird place where “There is an ongoing sense of unfulfilled potential...” He cited a number of creative past events and projects that illustrated the ways people in Dawson made amazing, seemingly impossible, creative things happen. These projects ranged from the multi-year Dawson City League of Lady Wrestlers, first initiated by Aubyn O’Grady when she was an 18-year-old art school student to the very existence of NIAC, the
world-renowned Dawson City Music Festival, and countless other local arts festivals (Garrison, 2017; Dawson City Music Festival, 2021).

John’s assessment of the incredible, action-oriented production of the Dawson arts community is not an exaggeration. Throughout my research, I was blown away by the multitude of innovative arts programs and projects people got off the ground. This local experience of people being able to make the seemingly impossible happen had led to a general sense that people should be given creative license to carry out their visions because historically, that permission to explore and author new endeavors often yielded incredible results. As John put it, Dawson is “the kind of place where you can say you’re going to do X, and then you just do.” The “you” to which John referred is, of course, not universal as different people hold and activate different forms of power. For instance, one past Latinx resident shared with me that they experienced hostility within the community and NIAC which suggests that race played a role in determining who was granted permissive artistic agency and who was not. While I was not able to ascertain the limits of the agency bestowed to people in Dawson during my research, I did observe a high level of value placed in the autonomy of artists to imagine and execute their ideas. As a consequence of this belief, NIAC staff and institutional policies were (like a good majority of the artists and institutions in Canada and the United States) designed to cater to artists creating and expressing their distinct visions through works of visual art.

Yet, as Jackson’s (2011) anti-modernist argument reminds us, artwork is always beholden and in relation to its supporting apparatuses. As such, notions of aesthetic or artist autonomy are based on a false delineation between what artists make and the contexts that surround them. Socially engaged art projects that do not grapple with their support apparatuses—in this case, settler colonialism and the corresponding phenomenon of participation fatigue—are
bound to run into tensions or issues. And, as I return to later in this chapter and in the conclusion of this dissertation, cultural institutions that invite artists to work with their communities need to develop open and ongoing communication strategies to attend to local contexts, like participation fatigue. Transparent communication both safeguards publics and ensures that artists can execute works that attend to the social conditions that are an inherent component of this form of art.

**Resisting and Enacting Settler Colonialism through Story Collection**

Despite the prevalence of participation fatigue, Julia and Cara worked carefully to develop bonds and solicit stories from approximately ten local residents during the course of their project. Unlike some of their story collector predecessors, the artists were clear about how stories would be used and shared this information with their participants. They offered all story contributors the choice to be anonymized or identified and ran multiple public events with the aim of facilitating continued dialogue about their work. As a result of this approach, Julia, Cara, and Sabrina developed strong bonds with their participants, most of whom contributed multiple narratives to their project. As Cara explained to me during our last interview, though they did not engage with a large local community, they had meaningful, in-depth exchanges with a small number of people. Julia, Cara, and Sabrina labored to create open-ended opportunities for participation and listened to the ideas of their collaborators in ways that resisted the impositions placed on their project by the support apparatus of settler colonialism. Although there was settler-colonial-induced participation fatigue within the community, with patience and responsiveness to their surroundings, Julia and Cara adapted their socially engaged story collection project to these conditions.
However, that is not to say that the artwork was able to extricate itself from all the pervasive effects of the support apparatuses of settler colonialism, even in instances when the artists were trying to fight against it. This is best captured by the artists’ collection and use of stories from noted storyteller and Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Elder, Percy Henry. As the below summarization of a spontaneous conversation I had with a local resident captures, there were established roles and expectations around Percy’s storytelling within the community:

Although I was in a rush, I stopped to wave hello to the man sitting on the porch across from the residency house. I did not know him, but I had picked up on the local custom of saying hello to everyone I passed in the residential part of town.

The neighbor returned my greeting and stood up to speak to me. He was drinking a beer, barbequing, and wearing shorts which surprised me because I found it cold enough for a couple of layers of clothing. The neighbor asked if I was the artist-in-residence.

I explained that though I was not, I was helping them out with their project which involved collecting animal encounter stories.

He asked if they had spoken to Percy.

I told him that I did not know Percy.

He seemed surprised before clarifying, “Percy the Elder?”

I shook my head no.

“Well, they should talk to Percy; he’s got the best stories.”

(In-progress research memo, August 6)

As I would later learn, Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Elder Percy Henry did contribute a number of rich animal encounter stories to Julia and Cara’s project. He was one of ten local residents who participated in the story collection portion of their work and was the only self-identified Indigenous participant.
Percy is a widely regarded community leader, language teacher, and storyteller, both within his own nation and across the Yukon. As one of the few living fluent Hän speakers, Percy has dedicated a significant portion of his life to helping others learn the language, through digital tools and language guides, collaborations with the Yukon Native Language Centre and the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in government, and, most recently, through the translation of a children’s book about grandfathers which he inspired (“Hän-language childrens’ book pays tribute to beloved Yukon elder ,” 2021; Henry, 2005b, 2005a; MacLeod, 2020). Percy was the Chief of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in nation from 1968 to 1974 during which time he travelled to Ottawa with other Yukon First Nations’ Chiefs to present Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow, the report that paved the way for Indigenous nations to negotiate their self-government agreements with the Canadian federal government (“Percy Henry to receive Honorary Diploma from Yukon College,” 2013; “Together Today For Our Children Tomorrow,” 2019). Percy has been recognized for his important work within his nation in numerous ways, as well as by settler organizations including Yukon University which awarded him an honorary diploma in Northern Studies in 2013, and by the Yukon territorial government which selected him as one of the inaugural recipients of the Order of Yukon in 2019 (“Commissioner names first recipients of the Order of Yukon,” 2019; “Percy Henry to receive Honorary Diploma from Yukon College,” 2013). Percy’s repute as a storyteller within Dawson was unmatched, as was his generosity in giving his time and energy to others for their endeavors, be they research or art.

Given his prominence, the happenstance nature by which I, and subsequently the artists, heard about Percy’s reputation as a valued local storyteller begets more complex relational questions about how the gallery was facilitating the production of Cara and Julia’s work. As I later gathered, gallery staff were aware of Percy’s expertise in storytelling but also cautious of
visiting artists making knowledge requests of him, or any other Elder. NIAC had (and maintains) an organization wide commitment to ensuring that the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation and its citizens lead if/how they partnered with NIAC visiting artists. Though this decolonial process prioritized Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in’s national autonomy, not communicating this procedure to the artists truncated Julia, Cara, Sabrina’s ability to learn from NIAC’s considerable experiences collaborating with the nation and its citizens.

While I cannot say for certain why the neighbor offered up the recommendation to speak to Percy, his comment that “Percy has the best stories” suggests some of the different roles that storytelling and story collection had within the region. First, Percy’s reputation as a storyteller reflected his position as an Elder within the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation. I am uncertain if the neighbor was a Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizen, but if he were, his mention of Percy might have been prompted by the importance of Percy and his knowledge within his nation. To share Percy’s name could be a sign of respect and may have germinated from the neighbor’s experiences of hearing and placing value in Percy’s stories. Alternately (and perhaps simultaneously), the neighbor may have suggested the artists reach out to Percy because there had been so many story collection projects in Dawson that Percy’s role as the person who was willing to tell stories to outsiders had become instantiated within the community. Through this lens, Percy’s role as storyteller may have been extended by participation fatigue. It is also possible that the neighbor made his suggestion because, as a consequence of participation fatigue, Percy had developed an approach to storytelling that safeguarded the community, and/or he was practiced in offering up the kinds of stories that outsiders liked to use to fill their “creative buckets.” In this framework, Percy’s stories may have been a form of resistance or performance.
After my chance meeting with Cara and Julia’s neighbor, I relayed the story to the artists, who later visited the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in government office to inquire about the correct protocol for speaking with an Elder. Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Traditional Knowledge Specialist Jody Beaumont then contacted Percy about the project. He decided to participate in the work which he told the artists’ he had already heard about and had a pre-existing interest in. The Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in office worked with everyone to find an agreeable time for the conversation to take place. As Sabrina explained, she and the artists then signed consent forms and reviewed terms about where and how Percy’s stories would be used,

We had consent forms and we were accompanied by another person. There was a lot of safety around that [interview], necessarily so. [We were] asking for permission, being granted permission, and then re-asking for permission based on different applications of the story. We really had to clarify. They gave us a sound file which is an incredible and a deep responsibility.

As Sabrina detailed, she, Julia, and Cara needed not only to complete consent forms but also had to discuss and agree upon the terms for all of their intended potential uses of the story. Sabrina, Julia, and Cara all signed the consent forms with an appreciation that they were the opening step of a relational exchange and not an absolution of their responsibility to Percy and his knowledge. Sabrina’s quote illustrates her awareness that holding a recording of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in stories was a privilege and represented an ongoing, relational commitment. As the other signatory on these forms, Percy entered into the story collection process with full knowledge of how the artists intended to use his words and with agency around what he disclosed to them and why. The artists’ recounted to me that Percy had also expressed enthusiasm about sharing stories with them, and a desire to have his contributions to their project heard by others. All parties involved in the recording of these stories were aware that, at any point, consent to use the stories could be withdrawn. Notably, this approach to predetermining the outputs that would be generated by
collected stories diverges from David’s earlier mention that many past artists did not know how they would use collected stories and is indicative of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation’s familiarity with story misuse and knowledge theft.

Shortly after the artists’ and Sabrina left town, I decided to pop by the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in office and see if anyone might speak to me about what I then thought were great protocols for ensuring ethical engagement between settlers like myself and the First Nation’s community. When I arrived in the office, I met Jody, the settler Traditional Knowledge Specialist who had helped Julia, Sabrina, and Cara, coordinate their meeting with Percy. In our consequent conversation I was surprised to learn that despite the promise of ethical interaction suggested by the use of consent forms, Jody, who had crafted and deployed this mechanism for developing agreements between outsiders and the Indigenous residents, felt that these forms (and the broader network of ethics protocols she and her colleagues established for Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in) were grounded in problematic colonial ideals of knowledge that privileged the written word over Indigenous oral communication. This presence of settler colonial ideas of knowledge within a self-governed Indigenous community speaks to the intractable and continuing entanglement of settler colonialism within contemporary life in North America.

The act and process of signing the consent forms gave me the sense that the inclusion of Percy’s stories within this artwork was fighting against settler colonial ideas of knowledge through its ethical celebration and dissemination of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in narratives. In fact, it was also enacting them by subsuming stories which, per Jody’s theorization, they did not have the ability to fully understand, into their socially engaged art project. As Jody explained to me during our interview (and which was not disclosed to the artists during their project) the short amount of time during which visitors (like the artists and I) executed story collection works
inadvertently devalued the knowledge that was being shared because we lacked the contextual, cultural understanding to interpret the information that had been divulged to us. This misunderstanding of shared stories was something Jody expressed a significant amount of concern about and which she was wrestling with through her position. She explained,

...people come in and they'll do those tight little timelines, and it gives no respect for the nature of knowledge, how people share it and what it even means. And so, they end up engaging with some community members and walking away with what they think are these answers, but they have zero cultural context whatsoever. What they're interpreting out of what that person told them—because they don't know that person at all—it is not that it's wrong, necessarily, although it certainly can be, but... they've just missed it entirely. I've known these people [Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Elders] for a very long time. Well, actually, not that long, only twenty years, but long enough to know a bit. And you just can't [do that]. It's all the spacing between the words. They don't know what those things mean.

Though Jody was speaking broadly about how researchers, journalists, authors, and creative practitioners approached Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in knowledge, there a number of ways and reasons that all outsiders (including Julia, Cara, and Sabrina) may not comprehend the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in stories they collect. First, Jody mentions the role of timelines. As I previously described, timelines are based on settler-time. Jody expounded on the concept of timelines by detailing that they are in contradiction with Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in knowledge, why it is shared, and what it means when it is disclosed. This relates to David’s earlier point that artists are “parachuting in,” arriving and departing suddenly.

Secondly, Jody clarified that outsiders have neither the cultural nor personal contextual understanding needed to interpret what a Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizen has said to them. Again, this speaks to David’s comments about artists “parachuting in” and suggests part of what David was referencing was the lack of contextual understanding held by visitors to the community. Jody’s description of the importance of the spacing between words gives a sense as to the level of relationship and time investment that is needed within an Indigenous community, and
particularly the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation, to comprehend what a story means. Furthermore, when Jody describes herself as knowing only “a bit” about interpreting Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in stories, despite the fact that she is a Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Traditional Knowledge Specialist and twenty-year settler resident of the area, she underlines exactly how contingent, community bound, and relational Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in story comprehension needs to be. Like my earlier consideration of the role of settler time in the artists’ project, Jody’s comments reaffirm the disjuncture between the artists’ project timelines laid out by the gallery and Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in knowledge. What Jody outlined is an unintended disrespect for Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in knowledge that is enacted through the short amount of time people spend in the community and through the consequent misinterpretations of the stories. However, it should be pointed out that, based on her past experience, Jody is presuming that visitors who receive Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in stories believe that they have comprehended them. As I heard from the artists when we discussed my research findings, none of them felt that they had the ability to understand Percy’s stories. Rather they understood that they had requested and been granted the ability to share them. Nonetheless, Jody’s comments call into question the appropriateness of story collection as a method for social practice artists or researchers to engage with the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation.

Jody further expanded on the communal nature of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in knowledge as one of the reasons outsiders may not be able to comprehend the meaning of a story. She theorized,

There's this fear because you have a community that is very much communal. It is a shared ownership of knowledge, history, story, and all of those things. But you have, in cases, someone [a story collector] coming in and talking to an individual.

As Jody explained, there was a local fear about story collection because Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in knowledge is communal. As such, taking the words of a single speaker or a single story as a depiction of the community or its knowledge can result in a distortion of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in
peoples and culture. The misinterpretation of Indigenous knowledge by settlers or outsiders can be seen as one of the ways that the “white possessive” (p. xi) that Indigenous studies scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) outlines. Moreton-Robinson argues that settler sovereignty is linked and legitimized by race and details how the possessive project of whiteness dispossess Indigenous subjects. In a contemporary Canadian context, this settler possessive is executed, as Indigenous Studies scholar Glen Sean Coulthard (2014) points to, through reconciliation, a process that subsumes and erases Indigenous people, territory, and knowledge. One way this possession is materialized is through the misinterpretation of Indigenous communal knowledge through a settler epistemological framework.

In summation, in our interview Jody outlined how, despite story collectors’ aims to revere Indigenous knowledge, story collectors of all forms (from socially engaged artists to researchers like me) were actually enacting a settler-colonial paradigm based on notions of artistic autonomy and settler temporality. Being in the community for short periods of time meant that outsiders’ ability to understand the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation was limited. Visitors’ frequent use of single stories as representations of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in knowledge or beliefs contravened the communal nature of this knowledge. Despite the illusion of an ethical exchange presented by the use of consent forms, the collection of stories from Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens was ultimately a fraught act.

When taken into consideration with the broader history of story collection within the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in territory, it is easy to see why this nation and its citizens were experiencing participation fatigue. As Lee, a Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizen who was involved in NIAC in various ways explained, their grandparents’ experience of having settlers come to their farm in order to
learn about Indigenous practices and collect stories was part of what contributed to a community-wide exhaustion with this practice. They recollected,

I look back, and I'm jealous that somebody else had all this valuable time with my grandparents, and they [the settlers] learned all these valuable things, but where are they? Have they come back? Have they tried to share it back into the community or tried to find family to share it back with? No. It's always take, take, take.

Lee summarized how their family’s past experiences of sharing their valuable knowledge and stories with outsiders yielded no benefits to their nation because those knowledges never came back to the community they rightfully belonged to. Given Lee’s age, it is possible that their grandparents’ teachings were not transmitted to their parents, who may have been forced to attend residential schools: Canadian government educational institutions whose explicit aim was to eradicate Indigenous knowledge and life through the forced assimilation of Indigenous children (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The loss of knowledge Lee was referencing when stories were taken from their grandparents is, therefore, both profound and traumatic. In this framework, story collection and a consequent fatigue with story requests is not a benign exhaustion but rather, it is representative of multigenerational experiences of an epistemic colonial violence. As Veracini (2015) argues, settler colonialism is like a bacteria that infects, replicates, consumes, and even kills. This analogy gives a sense of both the repeating and pervasive nature of settler colonial violence.

Furthermore, as Jody explained, contemporary requests for Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in stories often mirrored this colonial violence through their replication of the same questions that previous visitors had asked. (This was especially true of outsiders interested in a legal battle about protecting a local watershed.) As the person who sat in on interviews and meetings with Elders, Jody saw how Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens who participated in story collection projects were asked “the same question over and over and over again.” Her repetition of the word “over”
indicates the extensive sameness of lines of inquiry directed towards this community. Jody went on to further ground these questions not just in the present moment but in the longer trajectory of colonial behavior towards Indigenous knowledge by pointing out, “…it's 150 years’ worth of the same questions over and over and over. It's exhausting.”

As Jody’s quote illuminates, outsiders’ attempts to respect and privilege Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in knowledge via story collection was a new form of the extractive approach that settlers have taken towards Indigenous people on Turtle Island since their arrival. As a consequence of this entanglement of story collection within the history of colonization and settler colonialism, Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens are exhausted—not just with the repetitious requests, but also with what these requests represent. Though Julia, Cara, and Sabrina’s project, and my own research engaged with Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens in ways that the people and systems we were interacting with seemed to suggest were ethical, these broader histories and violences were still at play within our work, despite out investment in Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty. Next, I consider how Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens and Indigenous people across Canada have responded to story collection and participation fatigue through refusal.

**Indigenous Refusal and the Rejection of Settler Colonial Extraction**

Thus far in this chapter, I have discussed Julia and Cara’s collaborative social practice story collection project and my own research processes to show how outsiders simultaneously resist and enact settler colonialism in their gallery-supported endeavors. This duality derives from both the settler colonial structures of the gallery and the artists’ and my inescapable epistemological immersion in enlightenment era ideas of knowledge and art. What this account has thus far neglected has been the notable and fundamental role of Indigenous refusal in this and
all story collection projects executed in Dawson. Working from Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson’s (2014) theorization and modeling of Indigenous refusal as a response to settler colonialism, this section shows how the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in community pushed back against story and knowledge extraction through strategies like selective story sharing and story request rejections.

There is a significant and growing body of literature about the potentiality of Indigenous refusal as a means of combatting settler colonial state frameworks of reconciliation. Exemplary works in this field include Coulthard’s (2014) interweaving of Marx and Fanon to illustrate the importance of Indigenous refusal, and poet, author, and scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt’s (2020) genre-defying memoir, which weaves extensive theoretical references into a personal narrative that simultaneously invites the reader in while also holding them at a distance.

Most relevant for this research Simpson’s (2014) ethnographic research into her own nation details how refusal is essential to Kahnawà:ke survival because the settler states of Canada and the US erroneously “recognizes” them as a culture, not as a sovereign nation. She contends that the settler state’s legitimacy must therefore be challenged and subverted through refusal (p. 11). Simpson’s ethnography achieves the seemingly impossible task of representing and rejecting the politics of recognition by modeling Indigenous refusal through her writing. She develops “ethnographic refusal” a methodological move that counters anthropological conventions of rendering Indigenous cultures visible to outsider audiences. Instead, throughout her book, Simpson shows the Kahnawà:ke’s historic and continuing refusal to be defined by the terms of the settler state. Though the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation, unlike the Mohawk of Kahnawà:ke, espouses a cooperative, co-governance approach to working with settler
government, Simpson’s ethnographic refusal was something I considered throughout the latter half of this research project as I tried to determine who to interview.

I did, however, still conduct three interviews with Indigenous Dawson residents who had direct roles with NIAC. One interviewee was a Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizen and junior staff member, another was an Indigenous board member who is a citizen of another First Nation, and the third was Lee, who, as aforementioned, is a Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizen, artist, and community leader. Following the lead of my first two interviewees took in our conversations, we did not engage in dialog about the role of Indigenous culture or sovereignty in NIAC or in the art community. However, Lee and I discussed these topics at length, and it was through these discussions that they shared with me one of the ways they enacted refusal towards story collection requests was through selective storytelling. Lee stated,

> Sometimes, [we say] 'Yeah, no problem, I'll tell you a story or two.' But it's a select story. You're not getting into the real meat of what you can actually hear. So, it's all surface stuff that we already know and are entrenched with so it's okay to tell it.

As this quote explains, Lee and other members of the Indigenous community would participate in story collection projects but then only share “surface” level stories that were engrained within the community. Through this strategy, important, sacred, and in-process Indigenous knowledge was protected by using less vulnerable stories as a shield. Lee signals how this strategy of concealment has been refined over the course of the past 150-years, during which Indigenous

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43 An arts-based example of shield’s being used as a mechanism to fight back against settler colonialism can be seen in Cannupa Hanska Luger’s 2016 Mirror Shield Project (Hanska Lunger, 2020). In this work the artist created and shared plans that Water Protectors could use to fabricate mirrored shields to hold up to police on the Dakota Access Pipeline’s proposed route through the Standing Rock Reservation. These multipurpose shields concealed the holders identity, offered some protection against assault, and reflected the military’s image as well as the surrounding natural landscape, which was being protected, back onto them.
people have been forced to brace themselves against continual efforts to erase and absorb their nations by settlers who parachuted into the region, for gold and for artistic fodder.

Another strategy of Indigenous refusal was executed through direct disavowals to settler requests for knowledge. Local filmmaker and settler David shared a story about how he had seen this model play out when the former director of a nearby cultural center brought two international visitors on a tour of the territory and stopped in for a visit to a First Nations community. David described how one of the visitors asked about the name of a Lake, to which the Indigenous residents of the community replied that the lake did not have a name. When the visitor scoffed in anger about the lake’s lack of a title, David interjected,

I said to him, 'Did you ever think that maybe they didn't want to tell you the name of the Lake? ...That your intentions maybe weren't all that clear?' He replied, 'Why would anybody do that? I'm interested in these things because I would like to write about them.' David’s efforts to help the visitor see why an Indigenous community might want to protect information about a lake from an outsider who had not made clear why he was requesting that knowledge in the first place, could not penetrate this person’s belief that they were entitled to this information. This outsider believed their artistic autonomy gave them the right to fill up their “creative bucket” with whatever knowledge they encountered. This is a belief aided and abetted by modernist notions of the arts as the autonomous products of geniuses. This blatant example of an effort by an outsider to appropriate Indigenous knowledge and the consequent refusal of this request exemplifies how Indigenous communities reject the settler politics of recognition, reconciliation, and absorption.

During our conversation, David went on to more broadly describe how this exchange with the outsider caused him to reflect on both the lack of benefits that story sharing had for
Indigenous participants and of the implications of the growing prevalence of outsiders asking for settler stories in Dawson. He said,

The writer left, and it made me think: do we need to share these things with everybody that comes asking? And I think no. Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in is very much aware that their stories have been stolen for years by anthropologists, with 'good intentions', but they see no benefit from it whatsoever. The stories were taken and used for academic papers and research which promoted the individual's career, CV, publishing record and all that kind of thing. And the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in didn't benefit from it whatsoever. It's very interesting that it, [artistic story collection] is now happening to the non-Indigenous as well. So, it's kind of like payback. Some part of me thinks OK, we deserve this.

David’s summarization of the ways that Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in stories were stolen by anthropologists who used Indigenous narratives to bolster their careers without receiving any discernable benefits drives home why participation fatigue is felt so acutely by members of this nation. Furthermore, though there are similarities in Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in and non-Indigenous Dawson residents’ experiences of story collection, they are also quite distinct because the latter group was not encountering the same type of epistemological possession or violence. David’s self-reflexivity about what it means that settlers were also getting over tapped for their stories through non-reciprocal artist projects speaks to the complexity that Indigenous sovereignty invested settlers like David, are confronted with when forced to encounter the pervasiveness and costs of the support apparatus of settler colonialism in story collection socially engaged art.

In conclusion, the enormous challenge of making art or conducting research within any community in which one is not a member is most visible in rare spaces like Dawson, where Indigenous co-governance has given rise to broader understandings of Indigenous epistemologies and reciprocity. This respect towards Indigenous knowledge and experience was negotiated in different ways within Dawson, within the gallery, and by Julia, Cara, Sabrina, and me. The artists expertise in social engagement gave them a sense that there had been harm done in Dawson through story collection, and they thus shifted their work to a minimal, invitational
model of soliciting stories and worked with a small number of local residents. Furthermore, as Julia shared with me after reading this chapter, in many ways this approach to their project was its own form of refusal—in this case to their understanding that the gallery wanted them to execute their original proposal. Julia’s suggestion raises the potentiality of refusal as a strategy that artists, organizers, and galleries can use in their socially engaged art projects when a work is unfolding in a way that is out-of-step with the needs of any of a project’s participants.

I attempted my own, limited, form of refusal by restricting my story collection to people directly involved in NIAC. However, my success on this front is debatable. While I may not have emulated the most fraught approaches to Indigenous knowledge, this entire dissertation is grounded in my own gathering of the words and experiences of others. I “parachuted in” and used a research bucket to collect the ideas contained within this chapter. There can be little doubt that my requests to engage local residents in conversations about social practice, Dawson, the North, the gallery, story collection, and even participation fatigue, further exhausted some of my interview participants. This fatigue was furthered when I shared this writing back with the community, and asked for peoples’ time, input, and energy again, despite being able to offer little in return for their labor.

My own exacerbation of the phenomenon of participation fatigue speaks to the inescapable nature of the organizing logic of settler colonialism as the basis for life in Canada and the United States. Furthermore, my research shows how settler colonialism is manifested as a supporting apparatus of gallery-based socially engaged art and is, therefore, always a part of work created in this context. For this reason, it behooves artists and institutions to communicate transparently with one another about the circumstances that they are working in, the limits of what each party feels can be achieved, past issues that have arisen in either the artist or gallery’s
experiences, and any concerns that could impact the project. Such an approach would ensure that support apparatuses like settler colonialism and local phenomenon such as participation fatigue, can be considered from the outset of a work. As a durational study on the social throughout, this project has allowed me to acknowledge, there is a considerable benefit for artists when institutions are forthcoming and direct about the conditions within which a work is being created.

The implications of participation fatigue are significant. While the unique conditions of Dawson allowed me to see how settler colonialism was entangled within the institutionally supported socially engaged artwork I studied, the problematic politics of extraction and possession that were magnified at this site are also at play in galleries across Canada and the United States. Whereas Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in’s hard-fought right to self-determination shone a light on the entanglement of settler colonialism within gallery-supported social practice, most galleries are likely not attuned to seeing the ways that they and the projects they support may rely upon colonial ideas of knowledge, time, and autonomy. This case study contributes new knowledge about the potential costs to participants involved in story collection socially engaged artworks and highlights how Indigenous refusal might be taken up by social practice artists and scholars through their own rejection of colonial behavior towards the stories of others.
CHAPTER 6

“ALL YOU NEED IS THREE GOOD IMAGES”:
DOCUMENTATION AS SUPPORT APPARATUS OF GALLERY-SUPPORTED
SOCIAL PRACTICE

It had been a couple of days since the first of the two largescale participatory public performances that the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) supported socially engaged artists Eric John Olson and Tia Kramer had initiated. We were sitting at a table in the indoor pavilion of SAM’s Olympic Sculpture Park, debriefing about the event. The artwork had been a month in the making and used short text message instructions to guide a group of people in a collaborative movement experience inside the same space where we sat drinking coffee. This participatory movement piece coincided with the launch of a new element of the artists’ overarching Orbiting Together project—daily somatic text messages triggered by the overhead passage of satellites across Olympic Sculpture Park and which were sent out for the duration of the second month of the two-month artists’ residency (Kramer, Olson, & Totzke 2018). Both the first event’s score and the subsequent somatic texts sought to create a moment of pause for participants to connect with others, their bodies, and their environments in new ways.

The day of the first big participatory performance was filled with technicalities, including the exact wording of the score, signage placement, projections, and lighting. Over the three weeks I had been studying Eric, Tia, and their movement collaborator Tamin Totzke’s work to create a socially engaged art event for the sculpture park, they generally came to fast and easy agreements with each other about their project. However, they all had different perspectives on the lighting of the event. As I came to realize, their positions on the amount of light needed for
the work germinated from their varied perspectives on the role of documentation in the project. Tamin appeared to want the event well-lit for ease of video recording and movement. Eric seemed to prefer a darker, more aesthetically dramatic lighting schema, while Tia saw merit in both perspectives. After a request from the videographer for more light, the artists tested out some different settings and came to an agreement on a bright but still distinctive lighting design with the museum’s audio-visual wizard, Ava.

Two days later, we chatted about how the lighting impacted the event and recalled Eric’s frustration with the videographer’s appeal. During this conversation, I joked, “You only really need one good photograph to tell the story of a socially engaged art project anyways.” Eric countered that five was a better number. Tia offered that maybe three was ideal. We laughed and agreed that perhaps three images were all that was needed to document a social practice event. We were all in on the joke about the ubiquity of photographs standing in as representations of this form of art.44

Although our remarks about the role of photography in social practice were in jest, our conversation signals to the role of documentation in socially engaged art, a massive yet under-attended, topic in this field. As our discussion reflects, there is a tendency to use images as a surrogate for social practice projects. Documenting ephemeral and durational art through imagery is a well-established convention first instantiated by live and performance art and which continues to this day (Helguera, 2011).45 In this framework, the image is often seen as a trace of

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44 Like much ethnographic research, this dissertation captures particular points in time and, as such, is not representative of the ways that the participants and the museum have shifted a changed over the course of the past three years. For example, both Tia and Eric’s thoughts on documentation and how they use it in their practices have changed since this conversation, as evidenced by the fact that each has undertaken social practice artworks that have not been documented for public audiences.

45 The role of the photographs as a proxy for live art is exemplified by the ways that important artworks become understood through their documentation more and more over time. For instance, if I asked you to imagine Carolee Schneemann’s 1975 Interior Scroll, Adrian Piper’s 1975 The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women, or even Merle
the work, rather than as a work unto itself, though this position is debated. Or, as Bishop (2012) articulates, social practice projects are obliged to have a “dual horizon” wherein each project must be “…addressing both its immediate and subsequent audiences” (p. 274).

Social practice art depends on documentation, particularly the image, to hold the space of the work. Images are needed so that artists can share their projects with others on their websites and various social media platforms. Images also assert the authorial role of the artist as the creator of activity that might not otherwise be recognized as art. Galleries need images to document the works they have supported, what publics they served, and how people got involved in the activity of the institution. Images of social practice are circulated in exhibitions, books, conferences, and, vitally, in grant and project applications. Social practice images are a form of cultural currency through which artists and institutions tell stories in order to enable them to make more work in the future.

“Three good images” is a joke because it suggests that the entirety of a two-month-long residency, or even a four-hour participatory event, might be encapsulated in just three frames. And yet—one photograph that sets the scene and provides a sense of the context, one photograph of people interacting in a way that appears novel or unusual, and one additional image of a moment or exchange that looks meaningful—is often the way that I, and many others within this field, narrate our projects. Three good images is just enough images to hint at the temporal arc of a project and how people or the social were changed (if only momentarily) by partaking in socially engaged art.

Laderman Ukeles decades long exploration of Maintenance Art, I suspect the images that those familiar with these works would call to mind would be the same black and white photographs that have become their material referent (Piper 1975; Schneeman, 1975; Queens Museum, 2016). The fact that the image one might conjure of Maintenance Art is from a specific 1973 performance Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside speaks to the significant role of documentary images in encapsulating performative and temporal works (Laderman Ukeles, 1973).
Just as performance art has contended with, photographic documentation of the live, durational, site-specific, and relational facets of socially engaged art offers a limited story of the social throughout a piece. Per performance scholar Shannon Jackson’s (2011) theorization, social practice is a form of art that gains its meaning by responding to the “support apparatuses” (p. 33) or the infrastructures and conditions entangled within a work. The support apparatuses of socially engaged art vary from gallery to gallery, artist to artist, project to project, and even day-to-day, as the conditions, people, and places involved in a work change. Documentation can render these support apparatuses visible or invisible, bringing elements of a work, like the whiteness of art museums, the landscape of a sculpture park, or the relationality of a technological tool, to the fore or background of a project. In this way, documentation, and particularly image-based documentation, gives secondary audiences of social practice framing devices for understanding the social of social practice in new ways. Yet, the task of rendering the support apparatuses of a project through imagery, let alone a mere three photographs, is a challenge that few artists or institutions can reconcile. There is, therefore, always a tension embedded within photographs of social practice, between the live ephemeral experience and the captured moments used to represent it.

The role of documentary images of socially engaged art becomes further complexified when we consider artist and scholar Allan deSouza’s (2018) framing of art as process. Similar to Bishop’s (2012) articulation of the “dual horizon” (p. 274) constituted by the immediate and secondary audiences of social practice, in deSouza’s framework, documentation and its interpretation by secondary audiences become a part of the artwork. Documentation of socially engaged art is, therefore, always creating new social aspects of a project, as it is encountered in different contexts (i.e., galleries, websites, social media platforms) by different people, who
derive different contextual meanings from it. Even though (or perhaps because) the image becomes a part of a work by perpetuating and extending the social of social practice, photographs can never provide holistic representation of any given project, which is always in the process of becoming. As I trace in this chapter by combining ethnographic data and image analysis, since documentation of social practice lives in the world, these consequent audience experiences become part of the social throughout the project.

As an artist, I’ve elected to use the proposition that “You only need three good images” as an analytic form to guide the structure of this chapter. This art move inspired me to examine three images of Tia and Eric’s two month long socially engaged artwork undertaken at SAM’s Olympic Sculpture Park: one image of a large, participatory public event captured and used promotionally by the museum’s Communications Department, one photograph taken by a photographer hired by Tia and Eric to document a small public program, and one image made by me as a part of the social media component of the artists’ work. While the first two are the first photographs that the gallery and Tia respectively used to tell the story of this project, the third holds the space of my own experiences as a participant in this collaborative undertaking. My selection of these particular images was driven by how they function as documentary and disseminatory tools from which to consider the social throughout of this project—both as it unfolded over the duration of my ethnographic study and in its continuation through the circulation of these images. Furthermore, I use these three photographs to address broader questions about the roles that photography and documentation play in institutional social practice.

As I show in this chapter, images are used, like Figure 4, by gallery’s to promote the artists whom they are working with, to court potential new audiences, and to represent the ways
that institutions interface with their publics through art. In the second section of the chapter, I
discuss Figure 5 to show how documentation is used by artists to record their projects, invite
secondary audiences into their work, and to accrue evidentiary cultural capital that can be
leveraged to access new opportunities. Finally, I conclude with Figure 6, and discuss how
documentation can be a relational form through which participants become co-authors of a work,
thereby determining the content of a relational exchange. Through this analysis, my aim is to
show how the social throughout that was manifested in Tia and Eric’s project in many different
ways: from working with gallery staff to tell the story of their work to using social media as a
tool for co-authorship, and through creation of a walking tour that sought to make the support
apparatuses of the institution and their work visible.46

Although this chapter draws upon art history and theories of representation in service of
analyzing images, the focus of this text is on teasing these ideas out using ethnographic data I
collected during my research in order to illuminate how process is/is not account for in social
practice documentation. As such, this chapter does not provide a comprehensive accounting of
the varied ways photography, performance, and conceptual art have informed socially engaged
art, though these are areas of scholarship that warrant significant investigation and which I hope
to attend to in the future. Instead, this chapter seeks to use three images of one particular
institutional social practice artwork as the starting strands of a braid about documentation in
social practice, within which I interlace interview quotes, field notes, and personal experiences.
In doing so, I aim to open up, rather than foreclose, discussions of the role of images in social

46 As was the case in Chapter 5, the focus of this chapter is not a detailed accounting of the many facets of Tia and
Eric’s socially engaged art project at SAM. Instead, this chapter offers an analysis of the prominent role that images
played in this institutional supported social practice project. This focus is reflective of my own interest in learning
about documentation as a support apparatus of socially engaged art. I may return to the data collected at SAM in the
future and consider somatic social practice art or sculpture parks as a platform for socially engaged art.
practice and instigate further discourse about the ways that the social throughout socially engaged art might be represented by artists and their institutional collaborators.

**Image as Promotion**

![Image of people standing in a circle with hands in the air]

*Figure 4. Documentation image of Tia Kramer, Eric John Olson and Tamin Totzke’s ‘Orbiting Together’ staged at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) Olympic Sculpture Park, January 26, 2018. [Image taken by museum commissioned photographer Sara and disseminated on the SAM Blog.] (Source: Kramer, Olson, & Totzke, 2018)*

This is an image [Fig 4] in which a group of people stand close together with their hands in the air. They are standing in a circle drawn on a concrete floor, though one person’s red-shoed right foot sneaks outside the white line of the form. The circle is intersected by what appears to be another, bigger, white circle, but the crop of the image makes it hard to tell. The line of the form enters the image in the bottom right corner and then arcs across the floor, extending out of the left-hand frame in the bottom third of the picture plane. The sheen of the grey concrete and the white circular forms give the sense that this is perhaps a gym. However, this athletics
inference is counteracted by the long, blue-tinged windows which stretch the length of the back wall, giving off a decidedly posher vibe. There are cars passing by the windows and the lights of a building in the not-so-distant distance.

The figures in the center of the image are almost all wearing pants, most of them blue and black. The majority of the people in the grouping face away from the camera, though a couple of white-presenting faces are visible amongst the raised arms. One smiles. Another person in glasses seems to have their eyes closed, though it is unclear if they are blinking or holding still in some kind of pause. A different tall person’s face is visible in profile, though their expression is inscrutable. They have a piece of paper in their back pocket.

There is a single Black-presenting person visible amongst the group. They are on the edge of the crowd on the right-hand side of the image. While the other’s arms are raised upwards, the lone Black-presenting person arcs their body, like a reflection of the line on the floor. Their arms stretch to the right side of the image on the left side of their body. They have raised their heel so only the ball of their left foot remains on the ground. They face the camera and wear a badge on a lanyard. It looks like this person is dancing. It looks like the other people are reaching. This person’s movement makes this image more dynamic. Their presence makes the image less white. Or perhaps it is the opposite? Perhaps the singular presence of a Black-presenting person makes the apparent whiteness of the rest of the group more visible.

Above the crowd in the top third of the image are blue, pink, orange, and yellow squares, rectangles, and parallelograms. Were it not for the shadows they cast upon the white wall behind them, one could be forgiven for thinking they were applied atop the photograph, like a contemporary Braque collage.
This image [Fig 4] is the first of four photographs featured in a SAM museum blog post about Tia and Eric’s residency and participatory artworks. During their two months at the museum, the artists ran numerous, overlapping projects about satellites, technology, connectivity, and somatics, including:

- a series of temporary, interactive sculptures placed around the sculpture park;
- a social media artwork that used text messages to solicit image and video contributions based on somatic prompts;
- a permanent sculptural bean-bag chair intervention;
- a walking tour;
- and two large public art events that used text messages and video projection to guide participants through movement scores, the first of which is captured in this photograph.

Tia and Eric were selected from a large pool of applications by a jury of SAM staff and community members based on an annual call for a two-month artist residency at the museum’s sculpture park. The running of two free participatory public events labeled *Art Encounters* at the end of each month of the residency were a predetermined expectation established by the museum’s Public Programs division (based in the Education Department), the hosting entity for the work. The artist’s proposed structure for the *Art Encounters* was a major consideration.

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47 The residency selection process used by SAM involved an initial application submission by interested artists, from which pool two staff members in the Public Programming Department created a shortlist. This shortlist of candidates was then invited to the Sculpture Park where they presented their proposals to a jury that included; a museum curator, an artist and member of a local waterfront organization near the park, and a community member. The jury engaged in conversation with each artist/team, and then filled out a ranking sheet about each proposal. The jury selected the final artists through a verbal consensus decision making process. Overall, this selection process took one day, not including the time that the Public Programs team spent reading initial proposals. The selection process took into consideration issues such as; feasibility, equity, and audience. Though the focus of this chapter has limited my discussion of this application process, this is a topic to which I will return for future publications as SAM modelled practices that I believe other institutions might benefit from learning more about.
during the jury’s selection process. The form of Tia and Eric’s movement and technology-centered pieces was determined by the artists in conjunction with their collaborator Tamin Totzke, a movement artist, choreographer, and somatic therapist. For the artists, the aim of these events was to create a social, somatic experience for the public that responded to the site of the sculpture park and SAM.

The Institution’s Voice and the Artists’ Vision

The museum’s Social Media and Content Strategist, Chelsea Werner-Jatzke (2018), wrote the SAM blog post that included Figure 4. She generated the blog’s text from an interview she conducted with the artists, her participation in the social media portion of their project, and her experiences at the participatory Art Encounter held at the end of the first month of the artists’ residency. The post was released on the museum’s website two days before the second and final Art Encounter as a way to promote the event, primarily to museum members, who, as Chelsea shared, tended to be the main readers of the museum’s blog. For this reason, when Chelsea crafted the blog post, she was trying to present a perspective on the artists’ work that would be accessible to a range of people who had already demonstrated an investment in art and in the museum.

SAM is a survey art museum with a collection of approximately 25,000 objects created between antiquity and the present (Seattle Art Museum, 2020). The museum is in Seattle: a beautiful and expensive Pacific coast city where technology companies reign as the largest local employers. The museum’s Olympic Sculpture Park where the residency was staged is located just off the coast in a pricey neighborhood with a high number of condos and many nearby tourist offerings, like the Space Needle and the Aquarium. Museum membership comes in a wide
range of tiered options, from discounted memberships that cost $50 per year to a $10,000 minimum annual fee to join the Benefactor Circle (Seattle Art Museum, 2021). This expanse of membership fees mirrors the significant wealth disparity and racial wealth divide of the region (Prosperity Now, 2021). In recent years, the wealth gap has been accelerated by the increasing presence of new technology industry workers whose continuous arrivals drive up rent, making it even harder for lower-wage earners to get by (Nickelsburg, 2017).\textsuperscript{48} It was no accident that the blog post highlighted that there was no admission fee to the sculpture park, as well as all programming associated with Eric and Tia’s projects, all of which were open to the public.

As linguistic and cultural studies researcher Cecilia Lazzeretti (2016) asserts, museum blogs are distinct from other forms of museum communication. Unlike press releases and social media, blogs combine imagery and content to provide more multivocal, often informal, and “insider” perspectives on the museum. For Lazzeretti, the purpose of a blog is to invite the wider publics of the institution into the museum’s internal community of artists, curators, and educators. Similarly, Simon (2010) asserts that the multivocal potential of blogs and social media are these platform’s strengths because they enable museums to develop rich content that makes room for different types of interpretation or perspectives on museological programming, practices, and collections.

Chelsea’s post about Tia and Eric’s work reflects Lazzeretti (2016), and Simon’s (2010) stated best practices in museological blogging. The written content of the post focuses on sharing an insider perspective on the artists’ projects, showcasing the artists’ voices, and helping to make

\textsuperscript{48} Though not stated in any of the museum’s materials, nor in any of my interviews, I suspect that a part of what led to such a wide range of membership fee options was the significant work being done by the institution’s sizable equity team. While diversity, equity, and inclusion endeavors have become trendier in the past five years, SAM’s labor on this front was long established and seemed to have made a number of significant strides in shifting the museum’s policies and practices; from the artists exhibited, to staffing, and accessibility.
their multi-layered works accessible to audiences who may be more familiar with traditional, non-participatory, forms of art (Werner-Jatzke, 2018). In service of this aim, Figure 4 pulls audiences into the project by giving them a sense of what social practice is and how they might engage with it if they joined the next *Art Encounter*.

Let us return to the image. The people in the photo stand together in a group. Like a flock of swallows, the individual bodies of the participants become one body, engaged in one motion, reaching upwards. There is collectivity and togetherness in this act. However, each person also chooses how much to give in to the gesture, how much tension to hold in their body, and how much to commit (though these choices may be limited and are socially mediated.) A tall person in a maroon shirt who stands with their back to the camera has their legs held in a relaxed position with their arms raised, though not fully extended, above their head. Perhaps this person joined in the activity because someone brought them to the performance, and the hesitancy in their movement is representative of the fact that they only enacted the gesture because they felt obliged to. Further to the right in the image a white-presenting person with paper in their back pocket stretches upward, their seeming enthusiasm evident from their pose. Beside them is the aforementioned lone Black-presenting person in the photo whose more energetic interpretation of the prompt gives a sense of motion to the group. They appear to be excited to engage with the score. Despite these divergent interpretations of the gesture, each person remains a part of the group, a participant in the artwork.

As the text that supports this image, the blog post describes the intention of the work, relying heavily on the artists’ words and descriptions to tell the story of the project (Werner-Jatzke, 2018). Early in the post is a second image, a screen capture of one of the daily somatic text message prompts that any reader could opt-in to receive during the second month of the
artists’ residency. The image of the text message puts the reader in the position to further imagine themselves within the project, as well as how they might respond to the suggestion included in the image “Did you know that your heart physically changes shape with each inhalation and exhalation? After breathing, observe your heart.” The post digs into what Chelsea indicated to me was the central element of the project that she wanted to make sure readers understood—the simultaneity and duality of Tia and Eric’s work which leveraged the often-disembodying technological device of the phone in service of getting people to reflect upon and connect with their body and surroundings.

I was surprised when Chelsea expressed that the duality of the work was the idea, she most wanted to communicate with her blog post. Going into this research, I imagined that the social media arm of SAM (as well as other galleries) would be focused on metrics like increasing attendance at the Art Encounters and getting lots of eyes on their digital content. Though Chelsea did make mention of analytics in passing, what she and her co-worker Simone (SAM’s Social Media and Communications Coordinator) both emphasized to me in their interviews was an art-centered approach to the museum’s online representation of Tia and Eric’s work. Chelsea and Simone saw their blog and social media posts as vehicles to extend the voices and vision of the artists. The image selected to headline this blog entry reflects this aim in that it mirrors the artist’s own prioritization of using technology to activate peoples’ bodies and foster connectivity. By using a photograph made in a moment after a group of people read and then activated one of the artists’ prompts, SAM was extending the artists’ vision, voice, and project aims by creating an opportunity for the public to imagine themselves in the work.

49 A promising area of future research not addressed in this chapter is the role of platform capitalism in socially engaged art, particularly in gallery-supported projects. While this theme was not present in any of my discussions with museum staff or artists, it is undeniable that as users of social media networking sites, all parties, and artworks, were entangled within the complicated algorithmic political and financial structures inherent to social media today.
Chelsea and Simone’s focus on artists’ voices is not a ubiquitous priority found across all art galleries. This valuing of artist’s voices is a reflection of many of the interlocked support apparatuses that enabled this project, including, the tone and values of the local arts community, the leadership within SAM’s Communications Department, as well as the important work of the museum’s Equity division whose labor had brought questions of representation and accessibility to the foreground of the institution. Moreover, this centering of artists was enabled and extended by the comfortable financial status of SAM. Whereas smaller and less-resourced institutions might need their social media to court new visitors, members, and donors, SAM had the luxury of establishing other priorities for their social media, such as the promotion of artists’ voices.

SAM’s blog and social media content also showcased the voice of the institution. In our interviews, Chelsea and Simone both expressed the primacy of showcasing the work of the artists. The importance of using “the institution’s voice” was the point that they each came back to the most throughout our conversations.

This dual assumption of the voice of the institution and artist-centering aspirations of the social media team are captured in Figure 4. As I know from making hundreds of my own photographs during the two *Art Encounters* as a part of my research collection methodology, the

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50 SAM’s leadership in diversity and inclusion is reflected in numerous ways, including the institution’s running of a day long diversity, equity, inclusion pre-conference workshop for the 2018 National Arts Education Association Museum Division and the hiring of a Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, a position that is not commonly held at such high leadership levels within major survey museums in the United States (National Art Education Association, 2018; “Seattle Art Museum Names Priya Frank Director Of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion,” 2020). Over the past five years the museum had staged a number of solo and group shows of work by Black and Native American artists such as: Jeffery Gibson, Latoya Ruby Fraizer, Jacob Lawrence, Kehinde Wiley, Natalie Ball, Mickalene Thomas, Robert Colescott, and Kerry James Marshall (“Figuring History,” 2018; “Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series,” 2017; “Jeffrey Gibson: Like a Hammer,” 2020; “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic,” 2016; “LaToya Ruby Frazier: Born by a River,” 2015; “Natalie Ball: Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Snake,” 2019). I note these practices not because SAM has fully realized their aims of being a more equitable institution, but rather because these actions and exhibitions are representative of their continued, community-informed work on this front.
exposure of this image took some time to negotiate, both during its creation and post-production processing. The different light levels and temperatures of the scene, as well as the quick movement of the participants, created a rather challenging photographic landscape that required additional time and editing. The choice to include such a wide-angled context shot makes clear the museum’s prioritization of depicting the interior of the sculpture park pavilion and the other artwork installed within that space (the aerial colored-glass *The Western Mystery* by Spencer Finch.) This image asserts the institution’s role as an integral element of the artists’ project by showing how important the site and space were in crafting the work. In this sense, the blog uses the voice of the institution to assert that the vision of the artists was enabled by the museum. By doing so, SAM punctuated both the museum’s investment in community-engaged art and its continued role as an authority and supporter of creative practice.

**The Social Throughout Institutional Social Practice Imagery**

Figure 4 was taken by local photographer Sara who was hired to document the *Art Encounter*. She and I met in a fancy modernist coffee shop for an interview shortly after she took the above image. I suspected Sara felt obliged to say yes to my request to chat because she worked for SAM on case-by-case contracts. As a researcher ordained with authority through a formalized role within the museum, my invitation to chat may have felt like a request from her employer.51 Throughout our discussion, Sara often reaffirmed how much she enjoyed photographing for SAM as she articulated their working relationship in detail. Sara described the amount of creative license SAM gave her to interpret the documentation of this event as being enjoyable. She detailed how this freedom was photographically practical and allowed her to

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51 Further consideration of the ways contingent gallery workers experienced my interview requests can be found in Chapter 3.
respond to the conditions she saw in real-time. Sara further explained, “They like what I do, they are very trusting, and I also really like working with them.” The specificity of Sara’s comment about the gallery trusting her and the amount of photographic freedom they gave her, offers a great glimpse into what the museum prioritizes, as well as the quality of Sara’s work. In this way, even though it was the commissioning body of the images, the gallery gave Sara authorship over the photographs she made.

desouza’s (2018) framing of art as process provides an interesting analytic lens through which to interpret Sara’s role in the production of Figure 4 as well as how others (the participants, the artists, the museum, secondary audiences, etc.) contributed to the work. For desouza, an artwork is never finished because it is always being redefined by different contexts and people throughout its creation and consequent interpretation. By positioning art as a continuous temporal arc, desouza invites us to consider the layers of additive meaning and experience that comingled to produce Figure 4. Drawing on this thinking, we might begin by asking: Who made this image? Who is in this image? And, How do these parties play a role in shaping the meanings of this photograph? For example:

1. Figure 4 was made by SAM commissioned photographer Sara.
2. The image depicts participants of Tia, Eric, and Tamin’s social practice artwork of collective movement.
3. The audience of this photograph is people reading the SAM blog.

This reading (which also borrows from photography scholar Ariella Aisha Azoulay’s (2012) triatic theorization of the photographer, the subject, and the audience as the shared agents of photographs) begins to tease out the active roles of all of the parties involved in the photograph, from the photographer to the participants, and the secondary audiences viewing the image. While
it might be tempting to discredit the co-creative role of the participants in the image, their action is equitably as important to the work as the photographer Sara’s capturing of this moment. However, regardless of the co-creative role of the participants, images of social practice are also always interwoven with the politics of the gallery and the support apparatuses therein. These support apparatuses can cut against, or be in contradiction with, what the participants of a project may wish to communicate.

Take, for instance, the lone Black-presenting person who is in Figure 4. As I have observed many times, within museological community programming and social practice, there is a proclivity of organizations and artists to document Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) when they partake in work in these fields. Often, these images of BIPOC project participants feel out of step with the racial politics of an institution and how it supports or welcomes BIPOC community members and artists.

For example, former Queens Museum Director and socially engaged art scholar Tom Finkelpearl noted the ways that museum education departments (often the commissioning bodies of socially engaged art projects) used images of BIPOC children to represent their programs, “In their brochures, the pictures are almost obsessively filled with kids of color.” (Jackson & Finkelpar, 2016, p. 410) With the word “obsessively,” Finkelpar teases at the underlying racist implications of the ways that images of BIPOC children have been used to make claims about museum programming. Non-white children are intended to signal that an institution and/or artist are not racist and that the museum is serving their “community” (which, depending on the context, may be code for “underserved” community) (Krahe & Acuff, 2013). And, on the other hand, images of all white children are problematic in a whole other way.
This reading of museum education departments’ reliance on images of BIPOC children germinates from the long intertwinement of art galleries and colonialism, as well as the history and continued prevalence of racial discrimination within the art world and galleries (Acuff & Kletchka, 2020; Dewhurst & Hendrick, 2018; Mignolo, 2003; Travis, 2019). As I discussed in chapter two, enlightenment descended notions of art position the arts “as white property” (Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, & Carpenter II, 2018, p. 1). Whiteness, and its co-conspirator racism, have long been support apparatuses of museums (Acuff & Kletchka, 2020; Dewhurst & Hendrick, 2018).

Racism’s continued role in art galleries can be traced across many institutions in Canada and the United States by looking at who works for the museum, what is contained within the museum’s collection, and how that collection is shared with the public (e.g., Bishara, 2019b; Domínguez, Weffer, & Embrick, 2020; O’Neill, 2020). And while many institutions and individuals are working in numerous capacities to try to disentangle racism from galleries (as is the case at SAM), the legacy of these institutions as racist is so acute that any photograph a museum produces of BIPOC community members is justifiably worthy of scrutiny. Because, as Sara Ahmed (2007) points out, documents (including photographs) can be used to “…create fantasy images of the organizations that they apparently describe. The document says, ‘we are diverse’ as if saying it makes it so” (p. 606). What Ahmed helps us see is the symbolic ways anti-racist statements, or in this case imagery, can be used aspirationally to communicate an anti-racist message which may not actually be taken up within the institution itself.

If we look at the photograph [Figure 4] again, we might notice that the Black-presenting person who appears at the edge of the crowd wears a badge indicating that they are an employee of the museum. Though it is not contained within the photo, I know from my work with the
gallery that that person is a dancer who had been building their career within SAM for several years, notably by leading tours where they used movement to respond to artworks instead of relying on oral language. That person has appeared in many SAM social media posts, often playing to the camera, striking poses, doing their job, doing other stuff at the museum, and being a general museological superstar employee. Was the sole Black-presenting person in the image conscious that their participation in the event would be documented? Yes. Did they come to the event on their own, unpaid time, because they were interested in the project? Yes.

While not all people (for example, the children so often included in museum education department images) have the ability to refuse a request to be photographed and collected into a museum’s narrative of itself, many others do. This lens underlines that what is being promoted, and by whom, in social practice documentation is, therefore, always situational, contingent, and temporal.

If we return to deSouza’s (2018) understanding of art as process, a new set of equally relevant questions emerge about the other voices interlocked in Figure 4; that of the museum and the artists who initiated the project. I argue that when it comes to socially engaged artworks, these two additional meaning makers join the photographer, the subject, and the viewer in a pentatonic co-construction of meaning.

The institution’s role in the image is twofold. As the commissioning body of the documentation of this participatory project, the gallery established conventions and expectations for the photographer Sara about how she depicted this event. As my interview traced, Sara had worked for the museum and had a trusting relationship with them—she knew what they wanted and was able to deliver it. The procedure of soliciting imagery of social engagement is not a co-occurrence of the work; it is a part of the work. Furthermore, SAM’s later deployment of the
image on their blog extends the role of the museum as a vector in the meaning-making of this participatory performance. By featuring Figure 4 at the top of an article in which Tia and Eric’s ideas and processes are explained, SAM determined how secondary audiences saw and understood this socially engaged art project. Per deSouza’s assertion that art is always becoming, in this case, what the art became was mediated by the blog and the museum, whose co-creative role within this image and its use is undeniable.

As the artists who built the parameters of the socially engaged art experience depicted in Figure 4, Tia, Eric, and Tamin are also important agents within the image. As I unpack in the next section, these social practice artists had a strong sense of what documentation meant to their work and accordingly planned their project, mindful of what images might be made of it and what messages those images would be asked to communicate.
Figure 5. Documentation image of the final somatic walking tour, ‘Temporary Sculptures for a Sculpture Park’ organized by Tia Kramer and Eric John Olson to culminate their Olympic Sculpture Park residency. [Image taken by Jonathan Vanderweit, a local photographer who was hired by Tia and Eric.] (Source: Kramer & Olson, 2018b)

This is an image. In it, a group of people stand together. They are surrounded by a large black form that looks like a massive, extruded triangle that came out of the Play-Doh Fun Factory. Unlike Play-Doh, this form appears hard and inflexible. The form is enclosing the group who appear to stand at its center, in the middle of the image. The black pops nicely against the warm cedarwood chips that cover the ground.

Like the black tube, the people in the image appear to create an open form. Everyone’s back is turned to the camera, and everyone’s head rests on the shoulder or side of the person next
to them. (Except, of course, the young child in a red coat who is nestled in between the hips of two adults.) The act looks intimate and close. I am in the image. I can see a tiny bit of my bright pink hat peeking up over the shoulder of my neighbor. I remember we were all quiet for a moment, standing there together, leaning on one another. After we leaned in this direction, we leaned in the other, to balance our bodies out.

It was a bright but chilly day, as evidenced by my hat. As I learned over the course of the two months I had been in the Pacific Northwest, a rainless day in February is something to be celebrated, even if your breath sometimes caught in your throat and created a tiny puff of steam when you exhaled deeply.

This image is one of a series of twenty-three photographs that Tia used to tell the story of a walking tour that culminated her residency with Eric (Kramer & Olson, 2018b). It is not an image of the big final participatory movement work that she, Eric, and Tamin scored and facilitated. This photograph captures a smaller, more intimate project, executed on a sunny Sunday. Unlike the cinematic stagecraft of the Art Encounters, the aesthetics of the walking tour were more every day. Tia and Eric did not wear costumes or performance clothes and were instead in their regular winter coats. While the somatic landscape of the indoor performance was instigated through text messages and technology, all directions on the walking tour were spoken, by Tia and Eric. Whereas the text directions of the Art Encounters felt like instructions, these prompts felt like invitations. The walking tour was aesthetically and relationally distinct from the other aspects of the artists’ overall socially engaged art project at SAM.52

Walking tours are a popular form of social practice wherein artists guide an audience through a space. Examples include; Ayodamola Tanimowo Okunseinde’s The Rift: An Afronaut’s Journey (2015 – present) an Afrofuturist work where the artist takes on the role of a time traveller who engages in casual conversations with passersby as he walks around in a DIY space suit made of a white jumpsuit with African fabric flourishes and working programmed breathing components (Okunseinde, 2015); The Temporary Travel Office’s Tours (2004-) which leverage research to guide people on analytic, embodied explorations of space (Temporary Travel Office, 2004); and, the Walking the Edge a 2020 digital walking tour project organized at a part of the 2020/2021 Works on Water Triennial that invited

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Tia’s showcasing of this smaller walking tour work alongside the large participatory performances and the online social media components of her and Eric’s collaboration begets the questions: What is the purpose of this documentary image? Why is this the first image? What does this image represent? What is inside the frame, and what is outside of it?

Former Walker Art Center employees Sara Schultz and Sara Peters’ (2012) text on a socially engaged art project staged at the museum where they worked offers a helpful perspective for understanding the potential functions of Tia’s image. They write,

One of the challenges of this process [storytelling about socially engaged art] is documentation. As most artists are well aware, capturing images of ephemeral work is as important as creating it in the first place—so as the twenty-first century saying goes, “if there isn’t a picture it didn’t happen.” [emphasis added] (Schultz & Peters, 2012, p. 23)

As Schultz and Peters’ identified, one of the main difficulties of social practice art is, in fact, documentation. The act of creating a visual surrogate for social engagement is, in Shultz and Peters’ assessment, as important as the engagement itself because it authenticates the existence of the project. What interests me most about this quote is what it reveals about the increasing professionalized expectations of social practice art. As I expound upon in this section using ethnographic data, socially engaged artists are negotiating the professional expectations of their field by making and circulating particular kinds of representations of their work.

Despite its prevalence, there is surprisingly little written about the role of documentation in socially engaged art. It is important to consider what has been written on this front because it raises salient points about the purposes and problems of documentation, particularly in regard to ethics. However, within these texts there is insufficient consideration of the new social aspects of

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a series of artists to created guiding tours of New York’s waterfronts and which others participated in remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Works on Water Triennial 20/21, 2020)
social practice that are created when secondary audiences view photographs of work, nor have many addressed how the professionalization of socially engaged art feeds into its documentation.

Socially engaged and photography artist Corrie Peters (2015) proposes that social practice documentation takes three forms: the contribution (the creation of records about social practice made by project participants), the collection (referring to the images made by artists, cultural institutions, and others interested in the perpetuity of the project) and the afterlife (where collected documentation goes to live such as an artists or gallery’s website). She further argues images are often misused, misrepresentative, and co-opted, inferring that the professional circulation of photographs of social practice can be a corruption of the “authentic” experience of the work. Peter’s position simplifies the complex relationalities at play within socially engaged art and devalues the potential creative, political, and provocative ways that artists and participants may understand and use documentation. Peters also neglects the role of the subjects in social practice images and disregards the new social experiences that documentation can create for secondary audiences.

In a related vein, there is a growing emergence of literature about photography as social practice. This subgenre of social engagement, which photographers Turnbull (2015) and her collaborators Gregory & Strandquist (2020) have written on, combines some of the most pressing questions being dealt with in documentary studies and social practice art to consider the collaborative processes by which some artists engage in the co-production of photographs with a community. Azoulay (2016) explores the topic of collaborative photographic practices and the politics of co-authorship in her own work, as well as that of Wendy Ewald and Susan Miesalas. Relatedly, Hook et al.’s (2015) action research project on the use of digital technology to support participant-created documentation of social art is also concentrated on the co-production of
images. While an important area of study that opens up many useful questions about how co-created images can represent people and relationships, the differing roles of images as art (as is the case in these photographic works), and images as documentation (a more common feature of social engagement) is notable. For the former, the audience’s experience of the image is a priority throughout the creation of the work. In the latter, documentary photos are positioned as a trace of a work and not the work itself. However, this framing neglects that secondary audience’s experiences with documentation create a new distinct element of a project that is quite divergent from the original intended social practice exchange.

Helguera’s (2011) concise publication on socially engaged art offers a historicization of how the documentation practices of performance art inform contemporary approaches to the recording of socially engaged art. In a dedicated (though short) chapter on documentation in social practice Helguera asserts, “Authorship hinges on the existence of a recognizable product” (p. 73). He further clarifies that, for social practice, “Documentation, often taking the place of an end product, helps reinforce the presence of an authorial hand.” (Helguera, 2011, p. 73) Helguera draws the reader’s attention to the relationship between the precarity of social practice’s claim as art and the role that images play in verifying that claim. As aforementioned, deSouza (2018) helps us see how art relies upon the myth of the artist as a genius to authenticate conceptual projects as art via the agency of the artist. This is especially true of social practice, which often has little semblance to traditional, visually oriented artistic projects. In a similar line of thinking, Helguera (2011) emphasizes that documentation is important to that claim-staking of art because it demonstrates that the professional artist performed their expected function as an author.

Helguera (2011) proposes that due to the ways that images have historically been used to record live art, there is an illusion that documentation provides a “true” picture of a project.
Moreover, he explains that “…artists commonly blur the line between what actually happened and what he or she wished had happened…” (p. 74). In this framework, this lapse between the experience of a social practice project and the project’s documentation is a misrepresentation. Helguera is perturbed with artists using imagery to tell tall tales about their work because it shifts a project from being a social work to a “symbolic piece” (p. 74). As someone who does not believe that heavily authored images negate the sociality of an artwork, I am much more interested in the knowledge that is lost, what is represented, and what is rendered invisible when artist’s documentation frames their projects in ways that diverge from the lived experience of that work. In short, what new social is being created by a skewed retelling, and why? The answer to this question lies within the new social relations created when social practice documentation enters the increasingly professional spheres of socially engaged art.

The Professionalization of Social Practice

Figure 5 is a pleasing image. It is well composed and creates a sense of intrigue. The moment it captures is distinctive and a bit unusual, so it gives the viewer pause. The ambiguity of the actions of the people in the center of the frame invites the audience to scan around the outer edges of the image in search of additional clues about what is going on. The background trees and the cityscape combine to tell us this is a photograph of an urban park. The large black form tells us this is a park for art, or at least a park where there is art.

Unlike the *Art Encounters*, which were captured by SAM commissioned photographers, Tia and Eric hired their friend Jonathan Vanderweit who often documented local art happenings to record this final event. The hiring of a professional photographer to document this piece is one of the ways that the increasingly professionalized standards of socially engaged art were
manifested in Tia and Eric’s project. As I elaborate on in this section, the professionalization of participatory art is a driving factor into what images the artist sought out, how they used these images, and where they imagined these photographs might live. As Tia and Eric explained, they asked Jonathan to take these images because they liked that he balanced his documentation of socially engaged art between contextual imagery (such as this) and photographs that placed the viewer in the position of a participant. Tia said that one of the most challenging aspects of social practice documentation was giving subsequent audiences of a work a sense of what it was like to be a part of the live experience. She detailed,

It's less about the image from the outside—the photographer's image—and more about the image from the inside.

The notion of images created from within the work is powerful and references the primacy of the experience for Tia in her socially engaged art undertakings. Other images the photographer made on the walking tour do function in this way: Varied shots of people in motion acting out prompts, people moving, and detailed shots that use a shallow depth-of-field to capture the proximity between the photographer and the other participants, thus placing the viewer within the scene.

I have elected to discuss Figure 5, the first photo Tia shared on her website, to tell the story of this project for two reasons. First, because, like the museum’s decision to use Figure 4 to open their blog post, Tia’s choice to invite people into her and Eric’s participatory performance work with Figure 5 is significant. Even though Tia values photographs that place viewers in the position of the participants, she felt it was valuable to introduce the walking tour with this image [Figure 5], a wider, contextualizing photograph that placed the walking tour in relation to the park and city that surrounded it. In this way, Tia used this image to assert the professional context of the project.
Secondly, I chose to address this image because I like that the participants are all anonymized with their backs to the camera. I have grown increasingly wary of documenting participation in my own socially engaged art practice and have begun to develop a proclivity towards photos (such as Figure 5) that provide the people captured within them with some protection. The cloak of privacy offered to participants when their faces are excluded from documentation suggests that, though the artists want to share the story of their project with the viewer, they also recognize that they may not be able to represent participants experiences of the work and therefore do not try to.\textsuperscript{53} The anonymization of participants speaks to the undeniable fact that images of socially engaged art are made to circulate, to have new lives beyond the initial social interactions of the work.

The field of social practice and the expectations of artists within it was something Tia, Eric, and I talked about often, particularly in relation to the photographs they and others made of their work. Over the course of their project, the three of us spent a lot of time hanging out in the Olympic Sculpture Park pavilion (and on Google Hangouts) engaged in casual conversation while we worked on tasks like image editing and score testing. Throughout these chats, both artists often raised points about the role of imagery and storytelling in socially engaged art. One day, while chatting with Eric about the importance of documentation, he said,

What story does an image tell a secondary audience? If you can’t show what you’ve done, then you can’t tell the story more.

\textsuperscript{53} My own interest in anonymity in socially engaged art documentation is informed by social practice artist Alex Wang’s 2010-2011 projects. In a series of works, Wang used his bedroom window which faced a rapidly gentrifying street in the Bay area as a stage from which he installed multiple socially engaged artworks and experiences. In lieu of documenting these pieces, Wang relied upon tourists snaps to tell the stories of the projects. I cannot cite these images, or even these works because there is no searchable trace of them online. However, I continue to be inspired by their invisibility.
This quote provides a sense of the multilayered ways Eric was thinking about documentation at this time. First, he asserts that photographs of social practice have a function which is to tell the “story” of a work to a secondary audience. His use of the term “story” is meaningful because it speaks to the temporal and relational aspects of a work. Eric was alluding to how static images of social engagement need to do complicated work, in that they are asked to represent more than the moment they depict. Eric’s deployment of the term “secondary audience” is a phrase that has been used by performance artists and historians for many years to describe the ways that live artworks are experienced by people not involved in a project through imagery encountered at a later date. This term speaks to the ways that professional standards, convention, theory, and art history inform social practice today. Eric’s final point, that if social practice artists cannot share what they have done, then they cannot continue their work through sharing it, is an interesting one. While many social practitioners (me included) may fall into the trap of thinking of documentation as “proof” of what has happened during a work, Eric is making a different claim about the way social engagement can continue through the consequent dissemination of a project. In this way, Eric, like deSouza (2018), is pointing out how the secondary audiences of a work become a part of social practice art in their experiences and interpretations of it.

One of the most prominent professional platforms where social practice documentation lives on is its display in museums, galleries, and exhibitions (Helguera, 2011). A prime example of the exhibiting of documentation is the 2011 show Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991 to 2011, the largest single display of socially engaged art staged in Canada or the United States (Creative Time, 2011a). Whereas a catalogue might typically culminate after an exhibition, in the case of Living as Form, the show felt like a compliment to the publication, as well as that year’s Creative Time Summit (an annual social practice art and activism conference).
(Creative Time, 2011b). The Living as Form publication was edited by former Creative Time Chief Curator Nato Thompson and sought to provide a historical overview of some of the most well-known social practice projects that transpired over the twenty-year period when “socially engaged art” was becoming established as a new capitulation of participant involved art (Thompson, 2012). While this text has much art historical merit, the exhibition that went along with it was primarily made up of the same documentary images that were included in the book. As a show, it felt neither alive nor formally interesting.

The dominant use of documentation in Living as Form speaks to the omnipresence of documentary images of social practice within the field, as well as the ways these images get taken up by institutions. Furthermore, this exhibition opportunity exemplifies why socially engaged artists want to make images that meet the professional expectations of their field—because these photographs then get to be a part of exhibitions and books, thereby bestowing more cultural significance onto the artwork and the artist.

Living as Form is but one of many shows that features documentation of social practice. Other examples of documentary heavy social practice exhibits include the 2018 show Talking to Action: Art Pedagogy and Activism in the Americas (first exhibited at the Ben Maltz Gallery at the Otis College of Art and Design) and Social in Practice: The Art of Collaboration curated by Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas (2014) at the Nathan Cummings Foundation (Willis & Willis, 2014; Talking to Action, 2017). If we return to Eric’s earlier point about images allowing the story of a socially engaged art project to continue, we can see how these exhibitions offer a chance for the ideas contained within the documentation to grow and be taken up in new ways, by new audiences. Exhibition opportunities like the aforementioned shows are part of the reason Eric was so mindful about how to document he and Tia’s work; so, it had continued
relevance, was seen by more people, and continued to accrue cultural capital that they could leverage into new opportunities.

A major factor in the increasingly professionalized sphere of social practice is the instantiation of practice norms and expectations through graduate programs concentrated on social engagement in art. At the time of their residency at SAM, Tia and Eric were both enrolled in one such social practice graduate degree: the Master of Fine Art (MFA) in Social Practice at Portland State University directed by leading socially engaged artist Harrell Fletcher. I completed an MFA in Social Practice at the California College of the Arts in 2011. During my studies, there were only three dedicated socially engaged art degrees in Canada and the United States. Today new programs at Moore College, and the University of Indianapolis, as well as more established offerings through Portland State University, Otis College of Art & Design and the tri-institutional Social Practice Queens’ Program offer similar types of degrees (Portland State University, 2021; Otis College of Art and Design, 2021; University of Indianapolis, 2021; Social Practice Queens, 2021; Moore College, 2021). The proliferation of these programs speaks to a growing interest in social practice and institutional desires to monetize and support this interest. Furthermore, these graduate degrees reflect growing expectations around the professional standards placed on artists, particularly socially engaged artists. As the boom of MFA degrees in the United States over the past 50 years suggests, graduate training is increasingly becoming an expected qualification for professional artists (Lam, 2014).

Tia and Eric had substantial socially engaged art practices before they began their graduate studies. Both exhibited often and had previously run a socially engaged art space together. Both became interested in their program separately because they wanted to engage in more rigorous dialogue about their work, connect to others in the field, and think through issues within social
practice, like documentation. Their interests in their graduate program were based in both artistic growth and in developing tools for better navigating the industry they were working in.

Professional practices were an important fixture in their graduate coursework. For instance, Tia, Eric, and their classmates were tasked with sharing their websites and providing one another critique like feedback. Eric discussed how he should represent his and Tia’s work at SAM on social media in his advisory meetings. When I was in school in 2011, nobody seemed to think it was an issue that I did not have an Instagram account. In 2018, Tia, Eric, and their colleagues conversed about ways to use this social media platform as a part of their classes. These discussions reflect the growing professional standards of social practice and expectations of artists to become their own biggest champions and promoters. As the material trace of social engagement, documentation and its circulation in these professionalized contexts is massively significant because it is the means through which artists accrue the cultural capital needed to be a part of the professional sphere of the art world. Tia and Eric were being instructed on how to construct websites, leverage social media, and document their work because, just as Eric explained, the secondary audiences who encountered representations of their work played an important role in the continued social life of the project.
This is a photograph [Fig 6] of a bright blue sticky note affixed to a window, the presence of which is made noticeable by the slight reflection visible in the left-hand side of the image and
through a small glassy flare in the top right corner. The sticky note is sort of in the center of the frame but just a little bit high and a little bit to the right of the true middle. The note has the word CONSTRUCTION written on it in black pen. The letters appear to have been written hastily. Though the first portion of the text is clean and precise, the penmanship gets messier after the R. The bottom of the C is quite light, the starting point of the O doesn’t connect with its tail, and the N is made up of partially disconnected lines, the final stroke of which juts out to the right, like the writer ran out of time.

The bottom edge of the sticky note hovers above a ledge or retaining wall, visible in the landscape behind the image. The wall is a dull grey, as is the interlocked patio stone that buttresses it. The stones form an apparent path that is interrupted by a small tree and three green bushes that reside in a spot where a patio stone would fit. The top of the tree draws your eye up the image to the note. Behind the tiny blue square of paper is an outdoor space that appears to be a park filled with old-growth trees and shrubbery. There is a white vehicle visible in the top right background, a road, and another apparent path that passes diagonally through an expanse of grass.

This is an image that I made as a participant in the social media portion of Tia and Eric’s Orbiting Together. During the second month of their residency, the artists ran an interactive text message piece through which over 500 people received daily texts at seemingly random times triggered by satellites passing over the Olympic Sculpture Park. These texts contained embodied, somatic prompts that receivers were invited to enact, such as;

*Fill the negative space around you with your voice. Feel the resonance in your body.*

*Move backwards. Trust that you know when to stop. Repeat.*

And, the prompt that inspired Figure 6,
Listen for something other than language. Label what you hear.

As a major component of Tia and Eric’s residency undertakings, these text messages served as an invitation to public audiences to become co-authors of the project through the creation of photographs based on the aforementioned prompts. In this way, social media became a relational tool that was used to solicit and represent social engagement. Participants were invited to share documentation of their experiences fulfilling the artist-provided prompts on Instagram through which they could tag the artists’ purpose-built project account. Photographic and video prompt responses could also be sent back to the originating text phone number for users who preferred to be anonymized. Tia and Eric re-posted the content that was forwarded to them, sequencing the images and videos in such a way that they created interesting stories for their followers. For example, Figure 6, which I created, was one of the 15 photographs, videos, and GIFs based on the prompt Listen for something other than language. Label what you hear (Kramer & Olson, 2018a). It was placed third in a sequence of images, after a video of a person handwriting a list of things they heard around them and a photograph of a screened window—content reminiscent of my own poorly written sticky note on a window. I have elected to speak about this image (and not any of the others I made over the course of this work) because, as an artist, I like that this photograph takes up the topic of photography. The text in this image underscores the constructed nature of images and reiterates the tension between the social throughout an artwork and its dissemination.

Tia and Eric’s social media work created a participatory, social practice art interface that allowed people from across the world to get involved in what was largely a site-specific project that germinated from their invitation to be in residence at the SAM sculpture park. This digital approach to socially engaged art was not a format either artist had used previously but one that
they arrived at by thinking about how they might extend the reach of their work to their own broader communities. As Tia explained in an interview,

This is a participatory project, creating a GPS network out of human beings and people who are doing these things together. And the only way to show that everyone is doing it together—so that that collectivity is present throughout the arc of the work—was to incorporate social media as a means of people seeing each other.

The concept behind this participatory project was to connect people in a network of activity. In this way, the piece aimed to foster a shared, embodied socially engaged art experience despite the physical distance between participants. Tia’s choice of the words “collectivity” and “together” speaks to the intended interconnectedness of receiving and participating in the text prompts.

As Tia went on to detail, Instagram was deployed as a means to make the collectivity of this social practice project visible to participants, rather than for the social media platform’s aesthetic or visual interface. Instagram was a tool that sought to make the disparate but shared experiences of enacting the gestures visible. For example, the similarities between my image and the content that proceeded it expresses the parallels between myself and those two other people, one of whom shared my literal interpretation of the prompts call to “label” and the other who turned to an open window to consider their soundscape. Tia’s use of the phrase ‘throughout the arc of the work’ speaks to her own valuing of the social throughout the project, a social which she wanted participants to be able to access. As a mechanism for facilitating a co-authored photographic artwork, Tia and Eric’s text message project leveraged digital tools to disseminate their simple prompts, which served as the scaffold for the rest of the work.
The Art of the Prompt

There is a long history of prompt and score art that gets activated by participants who follow instructions in order to bring a work into being, e.g., Autumn Knight’s 2017 performance Here + Now staged at the Krannert Art Museum with psychotherapist Kelly Hershman, Yoko Ono’s 1964 Cut Piece, Compound Yellow’s 2020 book of pedagogical prompts, Pope L’s ongoing community created archive and installation work The Black Factory, and Sol LeWitt’s 1975 Wall Drawing 273 which I once tried (and failed) to follow the instructions for with a group of high school students (Knight & Hershman, 2017; Pope L, 2004.; Lucero & Shaeffer, 2020; LeWitt, 1975). Drawing upon Dadaism and the experimental music of John Cage, prompt-based art arguably came into prominence through the 1960s-1970s Fluxus art movement. Fluxus enfolded interdisciplinary thought and activity in music, poetry, performance, and visual art to develop a number of new ways of thinking about and generating work in these fields (Alberro & Stimson, 2011; Dezeuze, 2002). Poet, musician, and visual artist Yoko Ono, who has explored the potentiality of instruction in art since the 1960s, began her work in this vein, like her contemporary Brecht, by asking visitors to gallery spaces to interact with objects, such as canvas on the floor or paintings on the wall (Dezeuze, 2002). However, she soon moved into making works whose sole manifestation was as the form of a text-based instruction, the interpretation of which was up to the reader.

Discussion about the documentation of participants’ enactment of prompt-based projects have been transpiring since the inception of instructional art and continue to inform socially engaged artists’ approaches to documentation today. As visual artist and curator Athena Tacha Spear described in the catalog to her 1970 Oberlin college exhibition Art in the Mind,

Most often the piece is constituted by a set of directions to be performed by any individual; the artistic experience may necessitate execution of the given directions, but
in some instances the work can be perceived by simply imagining the results. The performed activity or part of it can be documented by photographs and other means, which are a by-product and, again, the only remainder of the real existence of the work. (1970/1999 p. 210)

Spear’s summary of the way “idea art” functioned provides a sense of the breadth of work being created in this vein at that time, as well as the ways documentation served as a “by-product” or “remainder” of this early conceptual work. Later in her essay Spear contended that exhibitions of documentation were problematic, emphasizing the curatorial challenges presented by this approach to art. For Spear, as a form of art that was invested in subverting form, the recasting of “idea art” as documents or objects was out of step with the original intention of these pieces.

Following the work of famed art dealer Seth Siegelaub, Spear argued that a catalog is the best place for such conceptually driven practices to be experienced because they provide more space and pause for readers to interact with the ideas of a piece, rather than a material representation of it.

Social media’s role as a disseminator of socially engaged art is akin to the Spear’s (1970/1999) articulated vision of the catalog. By using text messages and social media as platforms to publish and present ideas, Tia and Eric created a relational space where participants got to envision and craft the artwork based on their own interpretation of it. Image 6 and the other photographs I made when following the prompts allowed me to become a coauthor of the work, thereby co-determining the aesthetic and social outcomes of the piece.

Tia and Eric’s work was also informed by more contemporary instructional projects like their professor Harrell Fletcher’s collaboration with Miranda July Learning to Love You More (2007a). Unlike Fletcher and July’s (2007b) framing of their prompts as “assignments” (p. 1) harkening to a language of pedagogy, Tia and Eric’s preferred term for describing their work was “scores,” a referent to their project’s use of movement and conceptual grounding in somatic
gestures, as well as its historical precedents in the Fluxus art movement. Moreover, Tia and Eric’s decision to use social media reflected the digital landscape of 2018, as well as the technology-centered culture of the city where SAM and its sculpture park are located. In this way, their project built upon a trajectory of participatory art, but also the specific support apparatuses of the context they were working in, as well as instantiating the professional expectations that socially engaged artists use social media to share their work.

Figure 6, and the photographs, videos, and GIFs created by other participants of Tia and Eric’s text and social media project, are documentation of a socially engaged artwork. They are also their own relational forms, through which each creator sought to transmit their own ideas. In the case of the image Figure 6, I was making a joke about the nature of photographs and the nature of art. The label CONSTRUCTION referenced the noisy white truck completing roadwork in the upper left of the photograph. The label CONSTRUCTION was also a reference to the constructed nature of the image. As a joke, it is not very funny, which is perhaps why it was the third image featured in the Instagram slide deck. However, the one-liner was less for the public audience of the work and more for Tia and Eric, with whom I had so many conversations about the role of documentation in socially engaged art and its constructed nature. Figure 6, like so many of the photographs I created during this project, is a picture of participatory relational experience.

**Conclusion: The Support Apparatus of Documentation in Gallery-Based Socially Engaged Art and the Representation of the Social Throughout**

As the field of socially engaged art grows more professionalized, the expectations placed on artists to perform and record particular kinds of relations and particular kinds of images
increases. Social practice is no longer new, and, as such, it now comes with conventions—including documentation standards to capture the durational and relational aspects of a work.

Despite the potential temporal promise of three images, the fact remains that photographs alone cannot document the social throughout socially engaged art experiences. As a form of art constituted by the relational exchanges that take place over the course of a project, it is simply not possible to render all these moments, or their import, through imagery. Furthermore, documentation opens up new social experiences for subsequent audiences, extending the social throughout social practice to an even longer temporal arc with potentially infinite and unknowable configurations.

In the process of creating a series of socially engaged artworks as a part of their two-month residency at SAM, Tia and Eric considered the social throughout in many ways. Their use of social media as a tool to co-author a work is one such example of a way that social practice artists and institutions might share the social throughout by infusing it into their project design. However, the artists modeled another approach to documenting the social throughout which also acknowledged the support apparatuses of their work—the walking tour featured in Figure 5.

On this guided somatic tour of the Olympic Sculpture Park, Tia and Eric shared snippets of conversations and information disclosed to them by SAM’s facility workers and gardeners. They led the group past their temporary sculptures, giving people a chance to experience the ideas behind them. They used all they had learned over the course of their text message work and the two Art Encounters to share a couple of somatic prompts that invited others into the embodied aspects of their project. As an ever-present vector, helping out and jotting down notes during their residency, my participation was represented with a score I composed for the many
dogs who went for their daily walks in the park. At the end of the walking tour we returned to the sculpture park pavilion and, Oscar Fernández, one of the co-owners of La Pandería, a small coffee shop that was located in the building and who had fueled Tia and Eric’s bodies as they created this work, was waiting with a beautiful tray of cupcakes. While we tucked in to eat them, Oscar told us about how he became a self-taught baker and his journey to running the café. Ending their work by showcasing the vital labor of the person who nourished them felt like a fitting somatic experience to cap off Tia and Eric’s project.

The walking tour in Figure 5 captures the possibility ingrained within the seeming limits of socially engaged art documentation. It used a well-established convention of social practice (the walking tour) as a means to share the support apparatuses and the social throughout their project. As a form of documentation, the walking tour made some of the relationships and people that enabled Tia and Eric’s project possible (Oscar, me, the gardeners), spaces (the sculpture park), and their social forms (temporary sculptures, scores) visible. Like Figures 4, 5, and 6, the walking tour recounted different moments from the course of the work. The audiences’ encounter with this tour, like an image on a blog, a website, or social media, created new social experiences, a new social throughout the project. While the walking tour offered is but one example of the creative side-step that social practice artists and institutions might consider taking away from three images and into more expansive, flexible avenues of documentation. The possibility therein lies in the fact that just as Tia and Eric exemplified in Figure 5, these new forms can still be recorded as images that get to live in the world in new ways, thereby continuing to expand the social possibilities of socially engaged art.

54 My preoccupation with the dogs of the SAM sculpture park is traced in my 2019 article Ethnography, socially engaged art, and a preponderance of dogs: A researcher’s attempt to get a new perspective (Rowe, 2019).
CHAPTER 7
THE SOCIAL THROUGHOUT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR GALLERY-SUPPORTED SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

I have been a socially engaged artist for fifteen years. Over the course of this time, I have become interested in the stories that other artists, institutions, and I share about our social practice artworks. These stories often focus on final culminating events and neglect the complex, relational experiences that occurred throughout the lifecycle of a project. This tendency is replicated in the scholastic study of social practice, which, as Bishop (2012) and Kester (2018) have both discussed, does not typically include analysis of a projects’ production. As a result of these omissions, there is a considerable loss of knowledge about socially engaged art. Since all artworks are a form of pedagogy, the epistemological implications of this loss are significant because partial stories curtail artists’ and institutions’ ability to learn from and build upon one another’s work. This is especially true of socially engaged art that takes place within art galleries, institutions with unequivocal pedagogical mandates.

Accounting for the relational experiences before, during, and after culminating social practice events—what I call the social throughout—requires a methodological shift away from the notion of a final artwork. Working from deSouza’s (2018) assertion that all art is “process” (p. 29), I propose that the small social experiences that occur throughout a work’s production are the social of social practice. This social throughout further draws from Jackson’s (2011) argument that socially engaged art needs to be examined based on how it responds to its “support apparatuses” (p. 33). I propose that as a form of art that is socially interdependent, it is analytically valuable to follow a work throughout its lifecycle in order to tease out what
conditions, systems, people, and structures enabled the creation of the project. Prioritizing the *social throughout* is, therefore, an onto-epistemic shift in how one might approach the nature and knowledges of institutional social practice.

Through this dissertation, I sought to get a long form view of two gallery-based social practice artworks, so I might better understand each project throughout its execution. In service of this goal, I used a multi-sited ethnographic case study research design to follow the lifecycle of two socially engaged art projects, a story collection work created at the Northern Institute of Art & Culture (NIAC) and a somatic, participatory movement project produced at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM). It was my aim to both examine the considerable intrigues of each site and also step back and see what was happening across these two institutional projects so that I might apprehend what, if any, broader issues seemed to be impacting gallery-based socially engaged art. I used participant observation, interviews, and document analysis to study the execution of a social practice project at each gallery, from pre-project selection to post-project debriefing. I analyzed my collected data iteratively using Jackson’s (2011) “support apparatuses” (p. 33) and deSouza’s (2018) framing of art as “process” (p. 29), which helped me expand my own, sometimes limited, ideas about where a work of institutional socially engaged art began and ended. While it was not possible to attend to every interaction that transpired during each project, studying the lifecycle arc of these works through this vantage point allowed me to identify the important role of the *social throughout* social practice, and, in turn, some of the supporting apparatuses that were woven into the projects at each site.

While my articulation and analysis of the importance of the *social throughout* social practice art is the main knowledge contribution of this dissertation, it is also important to note that this argument is not entirely new. Artists, curators, programmers, project participants, and
many others have long known and appreciated that the social throughout social practice art is a part of the artwork (Bishop, 2012; Davis et al., 2016; Kester, 2018). What this study contributes is a scholastic amplification, coalescing, and verification of the experiential knowledge that practitioners have been grappling with and negotiating for many years. Furthermore, my particular focus on the site of the gallery as a mediating factor in socially engaged art offers much-needed thinking on an area of practice that has been underattended to scholastically. Given the growing prevalence of gallery-based social practice and the inherent pedagogical and public roles of galleries, how social practice is executed at institutions with their communities warrants considerably more investigation.

This research has three main findings that stem from my study of the social throughout. First, ethnographic case study is a useful but imperfect, tool for studying gallery-based socially engaged art. This finding has significance for future scholastic research, as well as potential applications for artists and institutions in the ways they approach their recording and analysis of their shared works. My second primary finding is the identification of the phenomenon of participation fatigue, exhaustion brought on by frequent requests from artists or researchers for people to contribute to their projects. This finding has implications for how institutions and artists conceptualize their relationships to their publics and the ways they undertake community-involved art. Lastly, this dissertation shows that though documentation images are an important vector of the social relations of social practice, they also have limitations. As such, it is worthwhile to consider other forms of documentation that showcase the social throughout a work in the dissemination of projects to secondary audiences.

In this chapter, I summarize each of these findings in further detail before outlining recommendations that artists, institutions, and researchers can use to help facilitate and/or study
socially engaged art projects. I propose that artists and galleries who undertake social practice art prioritize a) transparency and open communication, b) reciprocity-centered approaches to social engagement, and c) the use of expanded creative forms of documentation. I additionally identify two areas of recommended further research; settler colonialism and socially engaged art, and Indigenous approaches to socially engaged art, particularly works created in collaboration with galleries. This chapter concludes with a personal reflection on this research project and how this dissertation has informed the ways I approach my own socially engaged art practice.

**Ethnographic Case Study: A Useful but Imperfect Methodology for Studying Socially Engaged Art**

My ethnographic case study research design was instrumental in helping me identify the significance of the *social throughout* gallery-supported socially engaged art. Though scholars have pointed out the importance of duration in social practice (e.g., Bishop, 2012, Kester, 2018), institutions have used aspects of this methodology in their assessments of their work (e.g., Fisher, 2016; Munley, 2018; Ocello, 2018) and other researchers such as Coombs (2010) and Hjorth & Sharp (2014), have deployed ethnographic methods to study social engagement, none have used ethnographic case study to examine the execution of socially engaged art projects throughout the lifecycle of the execution of a work. Furthermore, my particular application of this methodology to research gallery-supported social practice is unique in its examination of how the site of the institution shapes and is shaped by this form of art.

By following two socially engaged artworks at two different sites over the course of their lifecycle, I was able to experience and collect information on the multiple phases of a project. This access allowed me to learn about the processes by which each gallery and artist collaborated and also helped me gain critical insight into how and why projects ended up in their final forms.
Like the artists whose works I studied, my understanding of their projects, and the context shifted over time, giving me distinctive insight into how each work took up and responded to its local conditions. This dissertation models how attending to the social throughout gallery-supported social practice yields findings based on the forms of the work and the support apparatuses of the institution. I speculate that these findings are distinct from what an art critical or art historical approach to this research would have uncovered.

From a methodological perspective, my research has developed new knowledge about the use of ethnographic methods as a tool for studying socially engaged art and gallery-based practices. I identified how ethnography and social practice’s shared emphasis on site-specificity and participation illuminated unexpected, contextual, and relational facets of socially engaged art. I also showed how the shared timelines of ethnography and social practice make this methodology well-matched to the lifecycle study of gallery-based projects in this field. My research further showed how the methods of participant observation and interviews were ideally suited to getting involved in the daily life of a project and privileging multiple participant voices and perspectives of a work, as well as how they change over the course of a project. For these reasons, I assert that ethnographic case study has significant merit as a tool for researching socially engaged art, especially institutionally situated works.

There are, however, drawbacks to this methodology, which I have also expounded upon. Due to the shared colonial, enlightenment era thinking embedded in both art and ethnography, this methodological approach brought many of the ethical issues of social practice to the foreground, including when and how consent is negotiated, the blurry boundaries between research and non-research activity, and the power differentials involved in requests for people to share knowledge. While in many ways it behooves researchers and artists to cope with these
thorny issues through their work, it is important to acknowledge that these limitations may, depending on the context, make the ethnographic study of social practice ill-advised, such as within a community that is grappling with harm done by art or art institutions.

From a practical perspective, ethnography is time-consuming and costly. As such, this is a methodology that may not be appropriate for all artists or institutions because of the significant number of hours that need to be dedicated to this practice. Nonetheless, there is substantial merit to galleries and artists deploying ethnographic methods as a recording tool during their collaborations, so that they might collect and later make use of more durational, multivocal, and site-specific retellings of their projects. Perhaps most importantly, ethnographic case study is the ideal methodological approach to learn about the social throughout gallery-supported social practice.

**Settler Colonialism and Participation Fatigue in Socially Engaged Art**

In chapters four and five of this dissertation, I outlined the paradoxical nature of Dawson’s reliance and embracement of a colonial, gold rush era tourist narrative. I then unpacked how this narrative clashed with the simultaneous decolonial work being spearheaded by the self-governed Tr’ondëk Hwëch’ìn nation. Owing to the influence of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’ìn’s knowledges and epistemologies, NIAC staff, board members, and policies were deeply engaged with conversations around reciprocity and Indigeneity. Despite these politics, it remained challenging for short-term visiting artists and researchers (like me) to untangle these decolonial ideals and the corresponding ways one might espouse or take up a call for reciprocity in the context of the dominant aesthetic narrative of a town steeped in colonial veneration. This led to a high volume of non-social practice artists taking up participatory forms, particularly story collection.
However, the prevalence of story collection aggravated a pre-existing, regional, beleaguerment with extraction to produce a phenomenon of participation fatigue—exhaustion brought on by excessive requests directed at local residents to share their stories and knowledge with outsiders. I detailed how this fatigue, abetted by “settler time,” (Rifkin, 2017, p. 1) laid out timelines and timing limitations that negatively affected how the artists whose work I studied were able to negotiate the politics, needs, and limitations of the community. I further considered how notions of artistic autonomy had been instrumental in instigating participation fatigue because these modernist ideals facilitated the expansive and robust local art scene, thus laying the groundwork for visiting artists to want to come to participate in the gallery’s residency program. Furthermore, positive local experiences with past artist-led projects established the gallery’s trust in artists’ ability to execute their works, a belief which did not mesh with the growing issues of participation fatigue. Furthermore, as I traced through ethnographic data, participation fatigue was so pronounced because previous visiting artists (as well as journalists, television producers, and researchers) misconstrue their artistic autonomy as a license to ask for and use knowledge(s) they did not have the ability to understand, which they did not clarify how they were using, and the results of which they did not share back with the community. As a result, local residents were justifiably exhausted by outsiders, including researchers like me, coming to their town in search of knowledge, even if the authority of a local cultural institution said that we could.

Vitally, though the participation fatigue I observed in Dawson was new to the settler population, it was, unfortunately, a well-understood experience for citizens of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation whose land, knowledge, and stories, had been extracted since first contact with colonizers. Since I did not want to further exhaust Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens, I did not make
finding out about their exhaustion through their words a central feature of this research, though I did speak with two Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens with roles at NIAC and allies (such as long-term settler resident and a Traditional Knowledge Specialist employed by the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in government) to better understand what participation fatigue might mean to the citizens of this nation. These interviews, combined with my participant observations, gave me a sense of the ways that contemporary story collection and requests for Indigenous knowledge were interwoven with over 150-years of epistemic, colonial violence, wherein First Nations knowledge, communities, and livelihoods were fetishized, attacked, and stolen. The call for reconciliation—the most recent turn in settler-Indigenous relations in Canada—was just a recapitulation of the same efforts to erase Indigenous peoples through absorption. While outsider artists, journalists, and researchers sought to revere Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in knowledge by including it in their story collection projects, such gestures were enactments of settler-colonial, extractive approaches to Indigenous peoples. I countered these ongoing issues by considering the ways that Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in citizens pushed back against story collection through refusal.

NIAC and the story collection socially engaged artwork at the center of this first site were the ideal case study for examining the role of settler colonialism in gallery-supported social practice. Whereas in most settler galleries, the politics and problems of settler colonialism can be hard to parse out, in Dawson these politics are actively discussed and lived. Due to its distinct imbrication within these issues, NIAC and this story collection project made apparent the ways socially engaged art relies upon settler colonial constructions of time and leverages modernist notions of artistic autonomy to assert the “rights” of the artist to ask other people for their participation and knowledge.
My ability to see the phenomenon of participation fatigue was facilitated by my methodological approach, which prioritized the durational and processual nature of socially engaged art. It was also abetted by the similarities in my research design and participation fatigue inducing projects executed by other short-term visitors who went to Dawson with acquisitional aims. By studying the social throughout this socially engaged art project, I was able to piece together an understanding of how the gallery, the artists, and the public collaborated on this work. These findings would not have been possible had I not been present and involved in this gallery-based socially engaged artwork throughout the social life of the project.

**Images are a Part of the Social Throughout Social Practice but Cannot Tell the Whole Story of a Work**

In chapter six, I utilized image analysis of three photographs created of a social practice art project executed at SAM to discuss the role of documentation in socially engaged art. Working from deSouza’s (2018) definition of art as process, as well as Bishop’s (2012) comments on the “dual horizon” (p. 274) of social practice, I reframed these images as both representations of social practice, and as a facet of a work that gets experienced and taken up by secondary audiences, thereby generating new social aspects of a project. I further argued that in institutional social practice art, galleries, and socially engaged artists become additional co-creators of the work.

I described and analyzed documentation of a participatory performance event created by socially engaged artists Tia, Eric and their collaborator Tamin [Fig 4] and which was included on SAM’s blog. I considered how, to my surprise, SAM was most interested in presenting the voice of the artists and their ideas about their project and not just in tracking viewing metrics as I suspected they would be. I theorized that this priority reflected the comfortable financial
conditions of the museum, as well as their institutional culture and the more particular values of the Communications Department. I described details in the image to illustrate how the institution also leveraged the photo to make the role of the museum in the work obvious. I considered how the inclusion of a single Black-presenting person amongst what appears to be a majority white crowd of participants harkens to ongoing questions about race, inclusion, and representation are being handled by galleries in Canada and the United States.

The second image I studied [Fig 5] was a photograph that project artist Tia used to represent a walking tour that she and Eric led as a culminating event of their two-month-long, multipronged social practice project. I used interview quotes from Tia and Eric to tease out how the increasingly professional expectations of the social practice field played a role in the way they documented and shared their project. I detailed how, like deSouza (2018), Eric saw documentation images of social practice as an opportunity for a socially engaged artwork to continue on. I also described how he and Tia discussed the importance of having good photographs to tell the stories of their work so they might utilise them to be able to continue getting new opportunities and making more art.

The third photograph [Fig 6] I unpacked was one that I made as a component of the artist’s text message and social media project, which invited the public to enact and document somatic gestures. I contextualized this work within the longer arc of prompt-based, conceptual art to show how images and documentation can become a relational form, particularly when used in conjunction with social media.

I concluded this chapter by returning to the image of Tia and Eric’s walking tour [Fig 5] and reflecting upon how the tour could be seen as a form of documentation that made the support apparatuses of their project (such as museum staff, participants, and the site) into the overall
structure of their social practice work. In this way, the image of the walking tour was both a photographic trace of a creative, social form of documentation and an invitation for secondary audiences to continue the *social throughout* this socially engaged art project by viewing it.

**Recommendations**

**Transparency and Communication: Essential Practices for Gallery-Supported Socially Engaged Art**

Across both research sites, I identified miscommunication between gallery staff and the artists to be one of the biggest risks to both the overall projects and to the gallery’s publics. NIAC’s embracement of artistic autonomy led to the institution trusting artists to negotiate the production of their socially engaged artworks with limited knowledge about the extensive issue of participation fatigue within the community. Had this issue been more plainly articulated to the artists Cara and Julia whose work I studied, I have no doubt that they would have reconsidered the way they approached story collection or perhaps the entire premise of their work. Though the artists were able to lean on their expertise in social engagement to navigate the complex conditions of the site and participation fatigue, I think the gallery, the artists, and the community would have been better served by having frank and transparent discussions about these issues so that they did not need to be discovered real-time.

Similarly, at SAM, all parties involved in the collaboration could have benefitted from more conversations wherein they discussed the expectations they both had for the outcomes of the project. As I discovered through my interviews, the artists felt the institution had more expansive expectations of their work than the gallery actually held. As a result, the artist pushed themselves to make a myriad of works, a volume of production which would not have been
possible had one of the artists not been able to take time off work, and which may also not have been achievable had I not been available to provide additional labor in the form of image collection and editing.

These are, but two small instances that speak to the potential costs of non-transparent communication in gallery-supported socially engaged art. My research also suggests that there are considerable benefits to more disclosure and uncomfortable discussions between social practice artists and the institutions that support them. Per Jackson’s (2011) framework of supporting apparatuses, the particular conditions, people, resources, systems, and ideologies that enable a work are always interlocked within a project, whether they are acknowledged or not. By having open conversations about these factors, artists and institutions open up their collaborations to better respond to their conditions and consider how they might be taken up within a work. Contrary to fears that such an approach would only yield institutional critique (which it sometimes might), we might also turn to examples of other works, such as Autumn Knight’s 2017 performances organized by Curator Amy Powell through the Krannert Art Museum, to see how such explorations can also open innovative avenues of thinking (Knight et al., 2018). In her work, Knight leveraged the site of the institution to both critique and perform diversity work, thereby creating space to analyze and envision the future of the institution anew (Doyle, 2018).

**Reciprocity Centered Approaches to Social Engagement**

As a form of artmaking predicated on the contributions of participants to create an artwork, social practice needs to move past its historic reliance on the notion that getting involved in a project is a gift to participants. Socially engaged art is an established subgenre of contemporary art reflected by its institutional uptake. As such, it is time for social practitioners
and institutions to demand more of themselves when they conceptualize their relationship and commitments to their publics. As work that is constituted by relational experiences, social practice is defined by the types of relationships it brokers and how it responds to the needs of participants.

Drawing upon the reciprocal practices of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in nation and which were taken up by settler artists within Dawson, I offer that reciprocity is an important framework for artists and institutions to consider in their collaborations with community. Reciprocity places emphasis on mutual gain by all parties involved in creating an artwork. Reciprocity demands that artists and the galleries who support them ask the people involved in their work what they need and what they want, both from the artists and the institution. Such a centering of reciprocity would better ensure that artists undertaking this form of art are, per my previous recommendation, engaging in the same type of transparent communication that they desire from their institutional collaborators. From an artistic perspective, reciprocity may lead to new, perhaps unexplored forms and avenues for creative output. It may, in some cases, foreclose projects that were out of step with participants’ expectations or needs, thereby giving artists the opportunity to reconstitute their work in new social forms that better align with the relational context they are working in, or through more symbolic non-socially engaged output.

As museum worker and activist Nina Simon (2015) outlines, reciprocity needs to be a central tenant of contemporary museology. Dismantling the colonialism, racism, exclusion, and accessibility issues of art history and gallery practices is an endlessly complex task. Centering reciprocity with communities and publics who get involved in institutional social practice art projects is one small but critical way that institutions can begin to contend with ongoing issues of access and inclusion and become more porous to the needs and interests of their audiences.
Expanded Forms of Documentation

While images hold the potential to share and create new stories and social experiences within socially engaged art, they are a limited form that often does not showcase the relational, processual, multivocal, or temporal aspects of social practice. As Tia and Eric’s walking tour modeled, there is exciting artistic and aesthetic potential embedded in the rethinking of social practice documentation. This expanded conceptualization of documentation should be taken up by both artists and institutions whose shared obligations to disseminate their work warrant consideration.

Ethnographic methods offer one avenue for potential documentary forms. As institutions and artists have previously modeled (e.g., Agsten & Allen, 2010; Fisher, 2016), participant observation and interviews are useful tools for describing socially situated activity. I argue that all parties involved in institutional social practice would benefit from incorporating such documentation methods into the conceptualization of their works. These outputs can later be leveraged as both aesthetic forms and as possible reporting mechanisms. Furthermore, just as naming socially engaged art creates an opportunity to reflect upon a rather broad set of artistic practices, so too can the naming of non-photographic documentation as documentation create the potential for socially engaged artists and their gallery collaborators to foster more nuanced discourse about this subject.

Further Research

Over the course of writing up this study, I encountered many moments when I identified another chapter or paper embedded within the data I was considering. These include the role of
form in institutional social practice, and sculpture parks as a site for socially engaged art, to name just two. These are both topics I plan to address in future publications.

Through the course of my research, I also pinpointed the relationship between settler colonialism and socially engaged art (which I considered in chapter five) as an area of research that warrants considerably more investigation. Relatedly, during this dissertation I had the opportunity to participate in discussions with artists and gallery workers about Indigenous socially engaged art, as well as Indigenous artist’s institutional collaborations and argue this topic needs further scholastic attention.55 I am not convinced that as a white-settler scholar that my voice is needed on these topics, though it does indicate that I, and many others, have more work to do in addressing whiteness and social practice. Furthermore, I am exploring the possibility of cowriting on these topics and/or finding other ways to support Indigenous scholars working in this area.

Researcher Reflections

Over the course of this study, I have found myself mulling over my own artistic practice often. Though I have undertaken some small creative projects during the course of this research, my primary focus for the last five years has been this dissertation. As a result, I have not had many opportunities to test my newfound knowledge about social practice “in the field.” However, I already know that this research has permanently altered the way I think about collaboration, ethics, documentation, art history, and art galleries.

55 Of particular importance to my thinking about Indigenous artist’s socially engaged art practices was my participation in the 2018 Open Engagement Panel Strengthening Communities: Native American Artists, Social Engagement, and Museums which I was invited to participate in by Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (MoCNA) Membership and Program Manager Andrea Hanley and which also included artist Jacob Menders (Hanley, Menders & Rowe, 2018). My thoughts germinating from this meeting were further extended by two informal interviews I conducted with Indigenous socially engaged artists.
In addition to the aforementioned areas of future scholastic research that I plan to explore, this study has also led me to develop new questions and lines of inquiry for my artistic practice. I am excited to see what happens when I make reciprocity the hinge pin of my environmental socially engaged artworks and what it might mean for the ways I interact with the land. I am curious about the possibility of using interviews as the sole trace of a socially engaged art project and eager to return to past works and ask myself how I am telling those stories and how might I frame them anew. I have an idea about research ethics forms as an “art form” and I am looking forward to seeing how far into non-formness they can go while also being institutionally acceptable agreements. I am also interested in thinking about turning to the creation of a gallery as a socially engaged art project. Above all else, the social throughout has offered me a new way of conceptualizing and understanding my artistic practice.

The social throughout is an ontological proposition that asserts, per Jackson (2011), that socially engaged art gains its value from its intertwinement with the world, as it is manifested over the entire lifecycle of a project, from the initial proposal, through execution, final events, and even in the experiences of secondary audiences. The social throughout has epistemological implications because this way of describing social practice brings the processual knowledges of this work to the fore, thereby creating opportunities for socially engaged artists and institutions to learn from and build upon one another’s work. In a like vein, it is my hope that this dissertation research can be taken up by others, so that the field of social practice can continue to grow and create new social experiences that take the form of art.
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