

## Martin Lucas

Martin is an artist and educator, with a BFA from NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Art. His film, *Tighten Your Belts, Bite the Bullet* (NYFF, 1980) detailed the engineered bankruptcy of NYC. *Camino Triste: The Sad Road of the Guatemalan Refugees* (1982) investigated genocide in the Mayan communities of Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos-Montt. (Permanent collection, Museum of the American Indian). As a member of Paper Tiger TV, Martin co-produced *The Gulf Crisis Television Project* (Whitney Biennial, 1993). His essay film, *Hiroshima Bound* (2015), unpacks America's collective memory of the atomic bombings of WW2. Other work includes multi-media installation, performance and video art. A former director of the Integrated Media Arts MFA Program, Hunter College, CUNY, Martin speaks regularly on issues related to visual culture and documentary art. His articles have appeared in journals including *Afterimage*, *Postscript*, and *World Records Journal*.

## SDSS 2023: What Do We Share?

Shared Dialogue, Shared Space (SDSS) is a city-wide project that invites you to participate in the production of a very special New York in very regular spaces. The sites of SDSS are real but modest: a public park, perhaps in Queens, maybe in Upper Manhattan or the South Bronx. A visit will show you here an outdoor photo studio, there a printmaking workshop, or a group sewing textile scraps. A gleeful group of youngsters use long-handled brushes to daub a spread out canvas with bright colors while older visitors sit folding origami and chatting. On the surface this might look something like a summer arts and crafts program. But behind these efforts lies a strong determination to offer participants a new and subtly atypical art experience.

New York is a city that claims status as a global art capital. But New York is a world city in more than one way, and in this city of eight million, most are outside of the circuits of power, glamour, art and fashion that make it a cultural mecca. These other New Yorkers live in a city connected more by its subways and buses than by its airports and interstates. Its residents are the ones who make up much of the functional rhythm of the day-to-day city. Forty percent of the city's population are immigrants, add their children and you get sixty percent. These are people who've come to New York to pursue a better life, yet for many that "better" does not include real access to the cultural spaces of the city. SDSS aims to rectify that situation.

Beginning in Europe in the 1990's, we have seen the emergence of a new type of art that focuses less on making objects such as a painting or sculpture for gallery showing, and more on approaches that bring artists out of their studios to interact in dialogue with communities. While SDSS can be seen as an heir to this "dialogic art," it takes these developments to new places in several significant ways. As organizer and facilitator Heng-Gil Han has suggested, Shared Dialogue, Shared Space, now in its fourth year, can be seen as the outcropping of a new

artistic eco-system, outside of the museum/gallery/auction house “Art World” for which New York is famous. For one, the artists themselves, like the people they are engaging with, are immigrants or the children of immigrants. The locales are typically outer boro parks, where kids play, families picnic, and the elders gather to reminisce.

What is being produced here? The work is not site-specific per se. Rather it seeks to develop dialogue between groups in the outlying neighborhoods of the city that normally have little to do with each other. Immigrant communities, bound internally by shared language and culture, can be seen as engaged in similar enterprises of integration: assimilating, learning English, finding work, educational opportunities. “Immigrant” may be a status, but the actual people who come to New York from different countries aren't a group. Bound together only by similar circumstances, those communities are also separated by the exigencies of daily life (in a way that can breed misunderstanding and conflict, as we've seen in New York, notably since the arrival of COVID.) These circumstances are the target of Heng-Gil's efforts. As Heng-Gil understands it, most immigrant communities have real resources, but they are narrowly focused internally. Korea Art Forum, the umbrella sponsoring SDSS, focused initially on the divide between North and South Koreans. For Heng-Gil, a strong urge to make bridges between peoples, which came from his own experience of growing up in a divided country, was one of the drivers for his efforts to create a cultural initiative that would help bridge gaps between different communities in New York.

But the arts come with their own splits and divides. For Heng-Gil, the focus on fine arts and the production of discrete art objects in an Art World comprised of gallery, museum and auction house is a trap — a set of circulations that means that many New Yorkers do not find themselves in a position to appreciate fine art.

Of course the artist is defined as well by a world where they must pursue careers defined by critics, academic degrees, gallery collectors. With SDSS, on the other hand, there is an appreciative audience whose basis of judgement is built around

a completely different subjectivity. Do you want to be part of this? Why not? Of course, we are reminded by theorists, there is a lot to be given up, notably the artist's vaunted autonomy. But in this street-level practice the public are co-participants, and even more cogently, co-authors. As Minshik Shin, one of the artists of SDSS, notes, he wants everyone who had a hand on his canvas to be listed as maker. As Heng-Gil suggests, “this is a collective freedom, not so much individual.”

The artists themselves have varied reasons for wanting to be part of SDSS. Each of them in their own way is responding to the opportunities offered through SDSS by calibrating their offerings and rethinking their artistic goals. For Minshik the possibility of working in a non-gallery context was key. With some 20 years experience as a studio artist, he simply felt lonely and ready to embrace communities using the tools he had developed in 20 years of studio practice. “Too selfish! Too subjective.” Minshik's response was to offer a space for a kind of action painting a la Jackson Pollock with a canvas laying on the ground, a pile of long handled brushes and paint pots alongside. While some visitors responded with text on his canvas, the main result of his first efforts was a wild abstraction. Here it is important to see his canvases in two ways, on one level, the experience is just fun, bright colors, zany brushes, and real canvas. The cheerful crowd attests to the art experience. On another level, as Minshik notes, he is offering “the elementary conditions of a self-organizing unity.” While Pollock's expressionism was the poster child for a seductive individualism, for Minshik the canvas is a democratic space.

For Stephanie Alvarado, another SDSS artist, there are several layers. While admitting that her own background in community organizing pre-disposes her to see the value in collective action, she notes that the specific efforts to occupy public space with cultural action is empowering. Her own piece “Fotos y Recuerdos” (Photos and Memories) asks community residents to find value in their own histories, and to actually start developing an archival approach to those histories, bridging personal story and shared history. For her the starting

point was the double marginalization of LGBTQ+ elders whose lives and stories are obscured both inside and outside their communities. And while she originally developed this in Spanish and English, she is embracing the opportunities offered by SDSS to create materials in Chinese as well. Stephanie encourages people to take seriously both the histories and the saving of them, offering participants the professional tools of the archivist: protective sleeves, white gloves, and guidance in how to work with family albums. And for children, the ability to create a material object, a polaroid offers an experience unknown in an era when their only experience with images is on a phone or a tablet.

Nancy Paredes, Stephanie's collaborator in SDSS, is an artist whose studio practice brings together photography and printmaking to evoke complex landscapes. On the one hand these abstract images can link back to places such as her family's Honduran homeland, on the other, to the post-industrial waste sites of Queens. The portraiture work Nancy has elected for SDSS offers her a different subjectivity. Here she reveals a genius for a photographic genre that often suffers from formality. In her hands, the camera is a way of "sharing her joy," trying to 'read' the people, young and old, who show up at her impromptu studio. Her process involves producing an instant polaroid print for participants, as well as materials, glue, paper, buttons, and more, that give them a chance to create a collage with the image, making their portraits their own on another level. Her approach, using a classic form from the earliest days of photography, is well understood, but takes on an unusual unofficial flavor in her hands. This dovetails with the intentions of her collaboration with Stephanie Alvarado, as these images can be part of a kind of counter-history or alternative archive, a recorder of a larger community that is a salutary antidote to the isolating life-style of the career artist.

The Square Theater, a collaborative project of Jing Dong and Jiawen Hu, offers a different kind of potential. As an improvisational dramatic project, theirs is one that can help more directly articulate a voice of immigrant concerns. With backgrounds in public theater in China and degrees in performance studies from New York University they skillfully create a shared space where themes defined

by the participants can emerge. Their work combines discussion with a bit of soap box (they literally give participants a megaphone), intriguing signage (quotes from participants in various languages dot the fences around their work area) and a lot of zany movement that helps dramatize the issues they explore. Their process is ongoing and open. Each event leads them to rethink their approach and re-tune it. When they feel that participants are nervous about being part of their project they shift gears to doing their discussions over origami, chatting while folding paper birds as a way of easing concerns about speaking with a pair of strangers.

While art museums have docents, guards, and galleries catalogs, here the framing is supported in a different way. Each event includes translators who help the artists and their audience interact in a low key way. In fact, they are translating culture as well as just words. It is efforts like this that make the 'shared dialogue' not just possible but fun. At these events you'll hear artists calling for help to convey thoughts from a roving team. And as Heng-Gil notes, even before the event, he seeks out community members who can help find ways to help the community understand what art can do and how it can be part of their neighborhood's life in a beneficial way.

Jennifer McGregor in the Bronx is someone who loves her nabe, loves art, and acts as a bridge utilizing her mix of passion and solutions to practical issues. Jennifer brings to the project many years of experience as a curator of site-specific work, notably at Wave Hill in the Bronx. She is also a resident of Upper Manhattan, well equipped to make links between the art world and the neighborhoods of the city. Additionally, the project depends on the group of young interpreters who can jump in and intervene to help participants interact with the artists. These efforts are substantial, and in addition, SDSS makes good on its claim to offer a shared dialog between artists and neighborhood residents by making all materials available in Chinese, Spanish and Korean as well as English.

Given that SDSS offers artists a chance to try their hands at a more participatory public type of art making, it is valuable to see how their practices shift in this

new context. The fact that the artists as well as their audiences have immigrant backgrounds means that artists can invest in an audience that also have experienced the cultural and geographic dislocations they themselves know.

Participating artist Yeon Jin Kim has thought deeply about her own experience in a way that links her artistry and her ancestry intimately to her practice. Drawing on her own Korean heritage, she has developed a project using traditional quilting technique, *jogakbo*. For Yeon Jin, fore-fronting *jogakbo*, a quilting form that incorporates many small multi-colored rectangles in an abstract way, came naturally. Her own aunt was an accomplished practitioner, and Yeon Jin developed her own eye for color, pattern and composition learning from her. Today, her artistic practice incorporates film animation, drawing, and more, but for her, textiles with roots in folk craft, offered a clear route to a public practice. "Many people know how to sew." This work, where fabric scraps become something new and hopefully beautiful, offers a space for creativity, for sharing and for learning that the leftover bits of the environment are the raw material for art.

Moses Ros is an artist with a Dominican heritage who has a long history of work in the public sphere that spans a variety of forms. Moses has developed a unique graphic art technique he calls 'repróllage' that mixes printmaking and collage which seemed a natural for SDSS. He sees participation as building self-awareness and self-confidence as well as an awareness of the produced environment. The use of recycled boxes and other materials offers New Yorkers a way to rethink and re-evaluate the trash that our unique on-street sanitation system makes ever-present. For Moses the participation with half-dozen other artists creates its own synergies, crossovers such as seeing kids proudly bearing their recently made *repróllage* pieces to display for their portraits with Nancy Paredes.

If SDSS opens up a window to a new artistic eco-system, it is a deceptively modest one. SDSS does not aim for disruption, but its goals involve real change in the balance of cultural forces. Valuing the familiar, validating experiences, opening up new spaces for creativity in people and between them in a context where, as

critic Grant Kester suggests, 'compositional and receptive roles' are not fixed, all are part of the framing of SDSS. And if roles of artist and audience are not fixed, neither is the content.

In terms of framing, the project does not offer a specific theme; it is not about economics, or housing, or any other relevant social or political issues. Of course the artists are free to raise specific issues and often do, but if SDSS has a politics, it is cultural. For Heng-Gil and for many of the artists, there is a link between their own experience with the arts and with crafts in a vernacular context and the ability to share in this new space. Looked at another way, SDSS is a validation of an understanding of the value of one's own creativity without worrying about art's hierarchies, and in a highly accessible context.

Immigrant communities are in many ways spaces of diminished civic participation, both in terms of legal residency, citizenship and immigration status, but also in terms of what is possible through language barriers, economic constraints and a lack of obvious routes into the larger society. Perhaps we can understand what is being offered here as a kind of "artistic citizenship" where the art and the artist can be validated not by their distance from the real world and the community, but by their ability to set up new lines of communications and create cross-currents that shed new light and ask new questions about the complexities of identities both collective and individual. While this kind of civic participation is a kind of implicit promise for New Yorkers, Shared Dialogue, Shared Spaces is a step toward making that promise real.