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Sustainability Made Possible by Documentation:
Exploring Assemble's Granby Four Streets (2013)

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Abstract

Since the late 20th century, various projects in the public domain where local communities and art organizations collaborate have been attempted in miscellaneous ways. In terms of anticipating an active attitude of the community, socially engaged project focuses on proactively changing everyday life and environment of people. An art collective, Assemble who won the Turner Prize in 2015 for one of their projects named Granby Four Streets (2013) has been admitted as an exemplary of this phenomenon, and it appears frequently in discussions about community-led projects. We investigate Granby Four Streets, as well as the documentation formed by the perspective of third parties based on the surveillance and criticism aspects. It asserts that the limitation of socially engaged projects that are kept ephemerally and easily forgotten could be overcome with the concept of documentation and its practice.

Keywords: Socially Engaged Practice, Community-Led Project, Assemble, Documentation, Sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

The series of these concepts of art dealing with the human life, its surrounding environment, and the social experiences can be converged on the term *socially engaged practice*. It describes art that is collaborative, often participatory and involves people as the medium or material of the work [1]. The main feature of the artwork in public realm which are collaborated with local community and art collective is that it is usually done by not just artists themselves but also by various participants who are the key players of the project. Due to the feature, this is frequently called a 'community-led project' in that it expects the active and initiative attitude of the community rather than their passive participation.

While various forms of community-based projects have been tried since the 2000s, there is an art collective and its works that are often referred as an exemplary of socially engaged practice: *Granby Four Streets* (2013) by Assemble who won the Turner prize in 2015. Assemble is a collective made up of people from artists, architects, to students who do not major in art, with a wide range of professions. They introduce themselves as a multi-disciplinary collective working across architecture, design and art.

However, when Assemble won the prize for *Granby Four Streets*, the art world came to the pinnacle of discussion on what can be defined as art. The number of critics, artists, and others who watched their win had

a fierce argument especially about whether their project could be considered art. The response of the media surrounding their awards varied from news in the form of reports that objectively convey only facts, to various forms of writing praising or criticizing their project.

What is worth noting here is, apart from the way how Assemble, and the members of community, which are each agent of this project, perceive it, *Granby Four Streets* has been framed by the perspectives of others from media, journal, social network services. Their ways of framing this socially engaged project and the whole process of discussion surrounding it certainly became a holistic *documentation*. The term of documentation here will share the similar context with the concept of *art documentation* from Boris Groys'(1947~) book named *Art Power* (2008). This paper will analyze the corresponding documentation dealing with *Granby Four Street*s and navigate discourses that could be explored within it. This analysis will serve to support the argument that community participatory projects can achieve sustainability through the documentation.

2. WORK OF ART AS SOCIALLY ENGAGED PROJECT

John Dewey(1859 - 1952) once mentioned "production of creative process through interaction with one's environment" and "combination of art and daily life" significantly to explain the concept of *art as an experience* [2]. His idea influenced Allan Kaprow(1927 - 2006), who is one of frontiers in establishing the concepts of performance art regarding to Environment and Happening, to develop the concept of *participatory art* [3]. The participatory art takes on philosophy's early role as critique of life and it forces to reveal people's experiences to solve an ambiguity between art and life [4]. It also served as the basis for the popularization of a new genre of art called *public art* worldwide. This new genre public art, coined by Suzanne Lacy(1945~) who is renowned as a pioneer in socially engaged and public performance art, is a form of *socially engaged practice*.

As the term of socially engaged practice integrates cooperative activities going beyond boundaries between artist and community, The works or projects with certain characteristic is significant in that they are primarily intended to help solve the social problems that the residents are experiencing. Social engaged art can include any form of art that involves people and communities in discussion, collaboration, or social interaction. Along with the often-created artworks being equal to or less important to the collaborative acts of creating them, the element of socially participatory practice is key.

In this regard, Tom Finkelpearl(1956~) said that the social practice here is art that's socially engaged, where the social interaction is at some level the art, in his book *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (2003). He preferred the term *social cooperation* than *social collaboration* since the latter is simply too far-reaching a claim to make; not all the participants are equally artists of projects, especially in the initiation and conceptualization. On the other hand, he claimed that *cooperation* simply implies that people have worked together on a project [5]. This writing consents with his explanation itself, but in fact, the use of these two terms can be applied flexibly depending on the inclination of each socially engaged projects.

In this theoretical background, the interdisciplinary collective, Assemble's project emerged as exemplary performance that corresponds to the conditions and nature of socially engaged practice. This group is founded in 2010, London to undertake a self-built project and aims to retain a democratic and co-operative working methodology that enables built, social, and research-based work at a variety of scales, both creating things and making things happen [6]. They proactively use socially engaged practice with the idea at their base which is about how collaborating with residents to improve their local area could make a shift in their lives and experiences.

For instance, *Granby Four Streets* (2013), they worked together to revitalize the area at request of the community in Granby, Liverpool, which had occupied a large part of the British trading port. As industries

related to international exchange of goods gradually declined, the local community suffered from mass unemployment. As shown in Figure 1, then the vibrant city of Granby disappeared. Residents who lived each day struggling with poverty eventually rioted in 1982. Accordingly, the British government announced the launch of a redevelopment project in the region as a kind of counterattack to the demonstrations of residents. In a stormy situation, residents fought to protect Granby's four main streets from the redevelopment policy. Also, resident planned their own regeneration campaign to further revive the collapsed city. Feeling the need for a more systematic organization, in 1993, they established the Granby Residents Association (GRA) in order to halt the demolition of houses in the remaining streets, as well as creating a community forum to protect its residents. Despite additional housing losses leading to empty patches, the GRA lobbied Congress throughout the 1990s to save the neighbours from the demolition [7]. This movement led to more focused campaigning to save the Four Streets in following years. To complement the initial organization and to be more enterprising, the residents formally constituted themselves as the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust (CLT) at the end of 2011. Later, the CLT invited Assemble to design renovation of the homes and to work closely with the organisation for developing derelict properties of the region.

Figure 1. Outworn houses of Granby

Assemble was largely executed in two main things first. To begin with, they worked with residents to repair old and vacant houses, eliminating old roofs and windows, so that the plants inside the house and the outside landscape were in harmony. The big frame of *Granby Four Streets* started with the idea in detail suggested by Assemble, but it was the inhabitants of Granby streets who should be the starring characters in it. The members of Assemble were faithful to the role of supporting and assisting residents to participate in this project on their own. Specifically, only local residents were hired for the project and Assemble attempted to revitalize the area based on regional spirituality toward the community. This is because they believed that the identity of the residents, who have accumulated daily lives and memories in the region, could be restored by breathing into the Granby themselves. In this way, this invited collective achieved the result of a successful community regeneration by considering not only the outcome of *Granby Four Streets* but also the process of it.

In 2015, Assemble won the Turner prize for their work *Granby Four Streets* as being credited with working with residents in Liverpool to regenerate the area. Judges praised the "a ground-up approach to regeneration, urban planning and development in development in opposition corporate gentrification". The point which can never be overlooked is that their winning is, above all, not their own achievement. The project they

collaborated/cooperated with the residents perfectly fit the practical nature of *public art* that Assemble originally pursued. They helped the inhabitants contemplate the ideal look of their home. In the process, the members tried to actively reflect the intentions and thoughts of the residents. *Granby Four Streets* demonstrated the core agenda of the public art practice that local people contribute to saving their residence on their own. Thus, Assemble's win the Turner prize was a joint victory of experimental collective and the residents.

Figure 2. Granby Four Streets houses after the renewal

3. SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY BY DOCUMENTATION

However, when Assemble won the prize for *Granby Four Streets*, the art world came to the pinnacle of discussion on what can be defined as art. The number of critics, artists, and others who watched their win had a fierce argument especially about whether their project could be considered art. The response of the media surrounding their awards varied from news in the form of reports that objectively convey only facts, to various forms of writing praising or criticising Assemble's project. Doubts about whether their work can be called art and the expectation that this could also become a new form of art were in tight conflict with each other. Also, after the winner was announced, people's reactions were posted on social network services in real time. There were articles which were written by art experts with various perspectives and positions about *Granby Four Streets*.

Apart from the way how Assemble, the CLT, and the residents, which are each agent of this project, perceive it, *Granby Four Streets* has been framed by the perspectives of others from media, journal, social network services. Their ways of framing this socially engaged project and the whole process of discussion surrounding it certainly became a holistic *documentation*. The term of *documentation* here shares the similar context with the concept of *art documentation* from Boris Groys' book named *Art Power* (2008). The *art documentation* he refers to can direct performances, temporary installations, or happenings, and so on. In such cases, one might say that these are art events that were present and visible at a particular time, and that the documentation that is exhibited later is intended merely as a way of recollecting them [8]. He claims that multi-dimensional art documentation is being produced and exhibited than in the past.

According to his idea, examples including complex and varied artistic interventions in daily life, lengthy and complicated processes of discussion and analysis, the creation of unusual living circumstances, artistic

exploration into the reception of art in various cultures and milieus, and politically motivated artistic actions can be the subject of art documentation. As multi-tissued project which based on the socially engaged practice, *Granby Four Streets* seems enough to be the subject of documentation. Tracing the documentation produced by media, critics, artists, participants, spectators and so on will help find out how the community-led project framed as 'work of art.'

What is worth noting here is, the documentation can take responsibility for the socially engaged project after it is first completed and revealed to the world. In case of community-led project, it can have a temporary limitation related to sustainability. Due to its characteristic, the process which consists of collaboration and making a scheme by participants receives a lot of attention, rather than a story after that. However, how to accountable after the project confronts criticism that leads directly to the issue of sustainability. This writing attempts to assert that a practice of documentation can support the sustainability. Revising the documentation constructed with criticism from the various perspective of third parties who are not directly involved in the project can go beyond what only the participants of the project can do on their own. To be more specific, the documentation, by enabling continuous attention and surveillance, it will make it possible to maintain the newly reborn living ground completed by Assemble and the residents of Granby for a long time.

4. EXAMINATION OF THE DOCUMENTATION

It is important to examine how the media, critics, journals, and social media have looked at *Granby Four Streets* from a certain point of view after Assemble won the Turner prize for this community-led project. There are some press reviews which being more active involvement in the controversy surrounding Assemble. Each critical evaluation consists of critical approach and perspective in the argument about whether *Granby Four Streets* can be called art.

The article named "Turner Prize 2015: London architecture collective Assemble nominated … but is it art?" which was posted on *Evening Standard*, as we can find in its title, defines Assemble as an architecture collective, and asks if their work could fall into the category of art. It explains that they have eschewed top-down "regeneration" in favour of supporting a community-led programme to restore derelict two-up, two-down terraces to create new homes, a glass-roofed winter garden out of other house ruins [9]. It also focuses on its participatory feature by introducing the Granby Workshop, where locals are being trained to make crafts for sale. It argues that there is no reason not to include architecture as the material of art is expanding like the universe such as film, performance, archives, and found objects. This article notes that Assemble's work has a practical function unlike other nominated works. But function alone cannot be the line between architecture and art. However, *Granby Four Streets* employs aesthetic decisions about composition, light, form, materials which means its abstract ideas realised in space. Thus, it might be possible to say the project shares both art and architecture realm.

In order to bring Assemble's work closer to the classification as a work of art, the concept of *useful art* is suggested on the writing. According to the paper, Turner prize judge Alistair Hudson from the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art has an interest in the notion of the *Arte Útil* which means *useful art*. Lewis Jones and Fran Edgerly, who are leading members of the Granby project, confessed that *useful art* is a new concept to them, but it relates well to the Assemble ethos of self-help, hands-on projects with a social commitment – although Edgerly said that she prefers the translation 'art as a tool.' When asked how they would like their work to be classified, the two said: "We don't say 'this is an arts project and that's a building'. They are messy, blurry things." Likewise, asked if the products of the Granby Workshop are art, craft or design, Edgerly maintains that they are all these things. As a result, these voices on the dispute over Assemble highlight that it simply avoids the extreme classification of architect or work of art, but rather breaks down the boundaries and

approaches a new form of art, especially practical to its role as a tool.

However, the point of view that regarding Assemble's work as art is not shared by everyone. The article named "Assemble help Turner Prize rediscover the art of controversy" from the *BBC News*, organized the different opinions about the Granby project and Assemble's Turner prize win [10]. Interestingly, a new comment from one critic was introduced on the article which opposed to comments suggesting their project could be a work of art. *The Daily Telegraph*'s art critic Mark Hudson told *BBC Newsnight* that he did not see Assemble's work as art. He said, "It works very well as architecture. [...] Why bring it in as art? If you are just looking for stuff that is not pretentious and is useful, why don't you nominate B&Q or Oxfam? [...] It is great if art can be useful. But just because it is useful does not make it art [11]." He also pointed out that there was not much actual art on the Turner prize shortlist in that year and perhaps it is an indictment of the state of British art. His opinion implicates that still it is valid to make a distinction of the category of art with conventional classification method.

So far, the documentation investigated previously has focused on the discussion on the project could be accepted as art. However, from a critical point of view, there is an opinion which said that Assemble winning the Turner prize was an embarrassing thing to happen to art in the United Kingdom since they are in collaboration with the state and private gentrification programs, appropriate the free labor of entire communities and also are not in fact artists. Moreover, there is a claim that Assemble is one of the biggest purveyors of *art washing* in connection with *Granby Four Streets*. In relation to this opinion, it introduces an interview about the role of artists in gentrification, the involvement of the British art scene and the government and the trickiness of challenging *art washing*.

The interview consists of a conversation with Stephen Pritchard who is an academic, a community artist, an activist, and a writer. It gives a critical perspective on Assemble's *Granby Four Streets*. The conversation starts from the role of artists in the gentrification. He said it has been for a very long time that artists are involved in gentrification. They would meanwhile inhabit temporary spaces and improve them, bringing with them coolness. Then this would lead to others following, and the area become seen as trendy, house prices rise and eventually often the artist themselves moved on [12]. He also pointed out that increasingly artist have been commissioned by developers, by their local authorities and by their governments as a front end, as a knowing means to begin a process, which would be seen as planned gentrification. This a sort of mechanism that how artist involved to the gentrification which is an intervention in the region environment and further affects the property market [13].

Regarding to the term of *art washing*, Stephen gives an account of it. It is the use of art as a mask. Looking at how it works, the most cynical way of all *art washing* is, when art went socially engaged in a community, harvest their histories and perspectives in what seems to be a good-natured way: finding out, trying to record social lives, but it has been used. By taking their social capital and turn it into financial capital, which is then been used to sell. He argues that the Assemble's project is a classic example for *art washing*. Assemble was commissioned to do the project by a private investor, who invested half a million pounds in the project and who owned buildings in the streets next door, which were bought for one pound. He reveals the fact that the ten houses in the street that Assemble worked on have some sort of anti-gentrification clauses on them, but all the streets around the area have not. As critics are concerned, people all over the world are coming to see the Granby streets due to the Turner prize winning. In his perspective, winning the prize was a massive "For Sale" sign for the region, and then it proves that the half a million pounds have been a worthwhile investment.

Furthermore, Stephen Pritchard wrote a research paper dealing with critical investment of Granby Four Streets in regard of what is behind it regarding to the private investor. He argues that the media and art world picture of Assemble is overly simplistic and masks a far more complex and uncertain set of events that,

ultimately, relied on 'mystery' private social investors to force local government to act in support of the project and to lever money from national grant funders [14].

He found out that the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust received £500,000 from a "mystery millionaire" via a private social investment company which later changed its name to Steinbeck Studio [15]. This private limited company was established to apply for the land to the City Council and invest in the CLT. It would seem clear that major financial backer of Granby Four Streets wishes the expand upon the success of the studio's 'by the people for the people' approach which led to Assemble's Turner prize winning. Xanthe Hamilton, the founder of Steinbeck Studio as well as a board member of the CLT, said that this project might have faltered without the studio's loan, an assemblage of grants and Assemble's vision. It means that without these interventions, *Granby Four Streets* would not have been constituted. Since Steinbeck Studio's team is well connected with the board of the CLT, it is the result of entangled interests of investors, Assemble, and the residents. The intricate fulfillment of the Granby Four Streets and Steinbeck Studio makes it rather difficult to accept claims that the project was done under community-led practice.

This critical writing considers that *Granby Four Streets* is not transparent enough because the role of Steinbeck Studio as its key financial sponsor who had played main character during lengthy negotiations with the city council was largely ignored by the media. Perhaps this indicates that they wanted to remain mysterious and anonymous to attract attention to the CLT and Assemble deliberately. Stephen wanted to expose that the partnership of Granby Four Streets, Steinbeck Studio and Assemble reveals a complex, multi-faceted approach to urban regeneration which adopted a community-led façade that acted to veil instrumentalized, culture-led approaches.

5. CONCLUSION

Having navigated through the documentation generated with diverse perspectives surrounding Assemble and *Granby Four Streets*, the essay finally faces one question: Whether this can still be left as a model for socially engaged project, or whether it should be re-evaluated by a multidimensional critique. What is certain is that excessive idolization of the project as exemplar of community led regeneration that utilized *useful art* or *socially engaged art* to empower local people to achieve great things should be kept in check. It is the net function of documentation that enables the retrospective of the project and the reflection itself. Press and media coverage, criticism, and surveillance would play a role in further development of it.

Assemble participated in the 2016 Cultural Convergence Forum in National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), South Korea. Louis Schulz, a member of Assemble said, "Sustainability is an issue that we are concerned about. However, we do not work with long-term plans. Each year, we discuss what to improve though an annual conference. That is how we naturally move forward to the next project." Obviously, their own reflection activities mean their willingness to develop their works sustainably. However, sustainability will become more readily possible from an understanding of the documentation made up of others' reviews and thoughts about them.

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