

# Social Aesthetics – What is it?

Palle Nielsen, 2001, in close dialogue with Lars Bang Larsen

Social aesthetics is a way of producing, interpreting or presenting art so connections arise between aesthetic knowledge and the surrounding society. Ordinary, cultural activity – the ways people do, think and consume things in their everyday lives – are emphasised in an exchange with art. The aesthetic become a process that involves life and people here and now, rather than the stagnant forms referred to when talking about ‘great artists’ and ‘masterpieces’. Art is to be used communally, among people, not just something to be looked at in a museum on a Sunday.

Social aesthetics’ concept of reality is based on dialogue, and its goal is to confirm and consolidate identity in a broad cultural perspective. That is to say, to work with art on the basis of focusing on what the work of art is and does in the concrete situation, as well as in a communicative perspective. The way the work of art is communicated is part of its value. This consciousness of artistic work has qualitative and quantitative goals for what and to whom art communicates, and thereby attempts to push the boundaries of communication. Both the work of art and its communication are thus located on an axis between the aesthetic, the cultural and the political.

At the same time, social aesthetics is based on the consciousness that art has traditionally been used in a specific way, i.e. as the guarantor of the values of the elite. In opposition to this, it is necessary to try to broaden the dissemination of art so it can contribute

to the establishment of values that concern and reach more people. Art has become populist – in the finest sense of the word. Social aesthetics has a dialogical relationship to cultural institutions, and reflects the desire to establish collaborations with institutions that permit the development of shifts towards constructive forms of critique and socially relevant artistic practices.

In this way, art can become a qualitative accumulation of forms of knowledge that are not necessarily in the interests of the increasing commercialisation of our surroundings. As an art practice, social aesthetics works with models that point towards change, and with artworks that have concrete functions in the social and physical contexts surrounding us. It is knowledge that is used locally in collaboration with people, and that emphasises the fact that with the development of a globalised world where decisions are made centrally and beyond our reach, people's need for democratic participation in their immediate realities increases.

Social aesthetics is therefore a way to open a discussion of aesthetics and ethics. This applies to both principled, democratic discussions and current cultural debates. There are social processes that are under pressure out there in society, and social aesthetics re-evaluates art on the basis of its motivation to make a difference. Basically, social aesthetics aims to investigate the meaning of aesthetics in relationship to the desire to expand the forms of democratic action in the society surrounding us. The socially aesthetic is a resource that can communicate and consolidate values across cultural, social and ethnic boundaries,

*The term social aesthetics was first used in 1982 by the American Bill Olander. As an art form, it has existed in Denmark – in more or less defined forms – since at least the late 1960s. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, social aesthetics was primarily seen in different forms of activism, feminism and institutional critique. During the 1980s many artists and art groups worked with social aesthetics, including Group Material, Political Art Documentation and Distribution, Alan Sekula, Repo History, Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper and ACT UP. American AIDS activism was a powerful cause during the 1980s. In the 1990s a mainstream awareness of social*

*aesthetics emerged in the form of concepts and art practices like context art, ephemeral art and relational aesthetics. ▲*

