

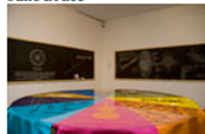
# Smack Mellon Hosts *Condensations of the Social*

## Pedagogy, anyone?

By Martha Schwendener

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Jane Bruce



Didacticism courtesy of Portland State

Jane Bruce



Mary Mattingly's *Flock House*

Jane Bruce



Tim Rollins and K.O.S.'s *The Inferno* (after Dante Alighieri)

Details:  
**'Condensations of the Social'**  
Smack Mellon  
92 Plymouth Street,  
Brooklyn  
718-834-8761  
Through August 1

Exhibitions devoted to social practice—that is, various forms of pedagogy, participation, performance, and activism—are like the organic produce of the art world. Growing out of critical postmodernism and fertilized with a smattering of '60s utopian ideals, they reached critical mass in the last decade, particularly on the biennial circuit, then trickled down to local art supermarkets: museums, galleries, and alternative spaces.

"Condensations of the Social" at Smack Mellon is one such effort, but it's also interesting for what it reveals about both past and present art. Two historical models are among the works on view: Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Touch Sanitation* (1977–1984), in which she went out and personally thanked 8,500 New York sanitation workers, and two paintings by Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (*Kids of Survival*).

Ukeles's presentation is an exemplary post-conceptual enterprise. There are wall texts, documentary photos, and videos showing the artist interacting with "sanmen." Rollins and his crew of Bronx school kids gained fame in the '80s for paintings that were formally unremarkable, but accompanied by a winning, *Boys Town*-style backstory. The works here are firmly hitched to period styles: *The Inferno* (after Dante Alighieri) (1983–1984), a mélange of graffiti and cartoon images in the vein of Kenny Scharf, and *Where Do We Go From Here* (2008), reflecting the recent enthusiasm for geometric abstraction.

New work in the show adopts suitably contemporary platforms. Mary Mattingly and a group of collaborators have created *Flock House*, a scaffolding structure hung with buckets of plants upon which a revolving roster of artists will take up residence. The work builds on Mattingly's well-publicized *The Waterpod* (2009), a sustainable dwelling constructed on a barge.

Pablo Helguera's *The Art World Home Companion*, a hackneyed satire of art-world types, is delivered through headphones nestled amid a folksy stage set. (Better representations of crooked critics can be found in Émile Zola's *L'Oeuvre* and William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*.)

A group of students from Portland State University's MFA concentration in Art and Social Practice, whose most famous faculty member is the artist Harrell Fletcher, have lined the back gallery with blackboards and banners and scheduled classes and workshops with local chefs, gardeners, and artisans.

Beyond the question of how experience, collaboration, and participation are currently packaged, thornier issues quickly arise. In a newspaper accompanying the show, curator Sara Reisman asks the artists, "How do you define social practice?" Ukeles bluntly points out how the shift in artspeak from "public" to "social" appears to represent a "turning inward into my group, your group and to hell with everyone else with whom I am not in an acknowledged relationship." If this is the case, "then it isn't so public after all."

"Condensations," for its part, offers a smorgasbord of slightly weird, entertaining, and educational experiences—but to what end? On opening day, I attended a performance of three young fiddle players and their teacher—for an audience of six, which included the curator and me. It was pleasurable, listening to kids play and sing bluegrass songs. But where did these people come from and why were they put in front of me? Turns out, they were brought in by the Portland State students, who arrived in town a little over a week beforehand, scouted some locals, and recruited them to demonstrate their craft and skills.

The Portland State installation—blackboards and an essay printed on fabric spouting platitudes about identifying "sites and moments of learning"—echoes myriad other projects, including local gallery ones like last year's Bruce High Quality Foundation University and Patterson Beckwith's schoolroom at American Fine Arts in 2004 (not to mention Joseph Beuys's work and a few dozen biennial entries). Half a decade ago, someone I know called Beckwith's project a "parlor game for the privileged." In the "Condensations" newspaper, Ukeles offers a similarly scathing critique of contemporary art's recent pedagogical turn: "Somehow everyone is getting art degrees, even PhDs. So it could be part of not wanting to leave school . . . ever . . ."

Which is not to say that earlier social/public art was uncomplicated. The glam-erotics of *Touch Sanitation* are amplified in photos of Ukeles: With her massive blond hair (and scrubs, Adidas, and Foster Grants), she looks like one of Charlie's Angels tackling trash while communing with the proletariat. Similarly, Rollins has been charged with tipping the balance of power away from pedagogy and collaboration into a self-aggrandizing system of production. (For whatever reason, the paintings here are attributed on the checklist to "Tim Rollins," not "Tim Rollins + K.O.S.")

And yet, in her 1979 project statement, Ukeles promised the sanmen, "you can participate in directing the [video] shooting . . . whatever I shoot, I'll show you a playback immediately, so you'll know what's on the tape." And while Rollins didn't exactly set up a Renaissance apprentice workshop, he provided kids, mostly of color, access to an otherwise virtually impenetrable realm. Several have reportedly gone into teaching and other quasi-art careers.

The point is that, where earlier social practice—or at least the models shown here—often attempted to bridge the gap between disenfranchised communities and the relatively privileged art world, current artists often steer clear of such messy engagements. The critic, in this case, runs the risk of sounding like an ethicist, policing artistic process and practice. And yet, how do you reconcile the seemingly endless art world calls for action, resistance, collective production, self-organization, etc., with the hermetic and sanitized work calling itself social, pedagogical, political, and so on?

If social practice is the organic produce of the art world—something that sounds good, and by all means should be adopted, although we're not exactly sure what it entails—perhaps we need our own salmonella outbreak. Remember those bags of contaminated spinach in 2006? What that calamity revealed was how "local" and organic food was really being distributed through big-agricultural channels—which are dangerously interconnected with other food systems, like bacteria-carrying animals. A fitting analogy, perhaps, for an art world where systems and semantics are often confused.

