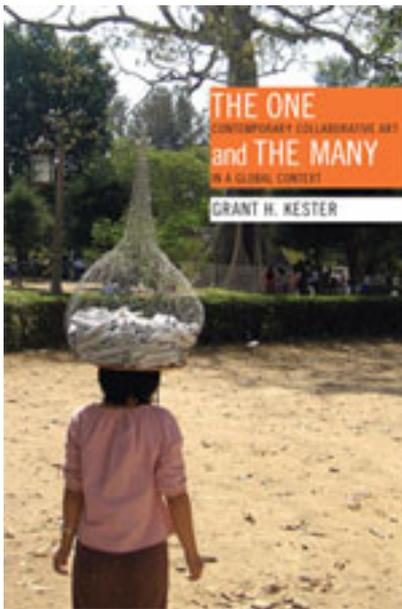


***The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* by Grant H. Kester**

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Kester, Grant H. *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. 309 pages; \$24.95 paper.



As artists increasingly produce work on international sites in conjunction with local populations, art historians seek to model these new practices and assess their conceptual and political implications. In his previous book, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Grant Kester historicized the shift away from art as object-making to art as an open-ended form of exchange, which he characterized as “dialogical practice,” wherein art “unfolds through a process of performative interaction.” In his most recent book, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Kester expands upon his definition of “dialogical practice” to advocate for collaborative, politically-engaged artwork that blurs the line between community activism and artistic production.

Kester begins *The One and the Many* with a question: why have so many artists in the last decade opted to make art collaboratively? Kester defines collaborative work as that which problematizes the authorial status of the artist, challenges the idea of aesthetic autonomy, and insists on durational interaction between site and audience (65). He emphatically contests the ever-popular model of relational aesthetics as pioneered by Nicholas Bourriaud in his eponymous book (1998). Relational aesthetics celebrates art as experience, defining art as a set of participatory encounters rather than as museum-ready objects, as exemplified by the work of

Thomas Hirschhorn, Pierre Huyghe, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Kester argues that such practices do not aim to form relationships with the sites they inhabit or to remodel collective exchange, but rather they maintain a distance from the political and reinscribe the “shock” pioneered by the historical avant-garde. The popularity of relational aesthetics, Kester suggests, stems from the hegemonic influence of critical theory that emerged in response to the events of May ‘68, which privileges the spontaneous event over engagement with the systems of global capital, even if to enact change. By refusing to engage in what is perceived as a corrupt system, Kester argues, these artists have, “foreclosed the possibility that social interaction or political engagement *itself* might transform subjectivity or produce its own forms of insight” (59). While Kester’s position is convincing, his efforts to track the absorption of continental philosophy into art criticism requires a recapitulation of those theories; as a result, he cedes a great deal of space to the very discourse he refutes.

The One and the Many is most compelling when Kester critically assesses the work of popular artists like Santiago Sierra and Francis Alÿs, who have been hailed as models of relational aesthetics. For *When Faith Moves Mountains (Cuando la fe mueve montañas)* (2002), Alÿs gathered five hundred volunteers outside Lima to move a 1,600-foot sand dune four inches using shovels, an event subsequently presented as a video installation. Sierra’s work also exposes the politics of labor, as in *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes (Trabajadores que no pueden ser pagados remunerados para permanecer en el interior de cajas cartón)* (2000). For this piece, six Chechen refugees sat four hours a day for six weeks underneath cardboard boxes in a gallery in Berlin. Although Alÿs and Sierra claim to unmask institutional and economic forces driving art, they often reinforce them. Both artists accrue real and cultural capital through the use of locals who are deliberately not paid or underpaid, and retain singular artistic authority over choreographing the artistic event and its display. In contrast, Kester champions artists who work closely with communities, although they often find themselves entrenched in years of bureaucratic struggles to realize modest dreams.

For instance, Kester lauds the independent art center Dialogue in Kopaweda, India for designing spaces that serve the practical needs of an Adivasi tribal population. Another group Kester spotlights is Park Fiction, a team of Hamburg-based artists and activists founded by Christoph Schäfer and Cathy Skene, who succeeded in gathering the support of local residents, designing a public park, and navigating the bureaucracy needed to claim space for the park along an increasingly gentrified waterfront. Interested in artists working within the system to institute change, Kester cites many other examples of this type of artistic practice, including: Ala Plástica in Argentina, whose *AA Project (Proyecto AA)* (2000) mapped and developed infrastructure for the Rio de la Plata basin; the work of Jay Koh and Chu Yuan, who established the art center NICA (Networking and Initiatives in Culture and the Arts) in Myanmar in 2003 to produce collaborative performances; and Project Row Houses in Houston (PRH), founded in 1993, which offers artist residencies and runs community outreach programs

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to preserve and enrich the neighborhood's racial and cultural history.

Ultimately, *The One and the Many* is concerned with works that are not strictly political or artistic, but rather function within the constraints of a given site to effect social change through creative collaboration. For Kester, these projects resist neo-liberal capitalism and promote the ethical and creative values of the left, despite their pragmatism. As he asks toward the end of his book: "Who can claim space in the city? Who is the audience for actions designed to demand social justice? How is resistance produced through a given site or practice? And what forms of creative agency can be mobilized in this process?" (199). In posing these questions, *The One and the Many* raises the stakes of the debate over both the theoretical and practical implications of activist public art.

Lori Cole received her PhD in Comparative Literature from New York University and will be the Charlotte Zysman Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities and a Lecturer in the Fine Arts at Brandeis University from 2012-2014. Her research focuses on the construction of transatlantic avant-garde communities in print. She was a 2002-3 Helena Rubinstein Fellow in Critical Studies at the Whitney Independent Study Program and a Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art from 2010-2012. Her art criticism, translations, and scholarly writing have appeared or are forthcoming in *Artforum*, *PMLA*, and *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*.