



Photo: Rachel Daniell

## Engaging Archival Power: Creative Time's "Social Practices Archive" and the Living as Form Project

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*Social Practices Archive—Living as Form*. Exhibition and online archival database curated by Creative Time. Essex Street Market, various venues in Lower Manhattan, and online. New York, NY, USA. September 24–October 16, 2011.

"If politics have become performative, so, too, has knowledge—in other words, you have to share what you know." *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011*

In September 2011, the public arts organization Creative Time launched an ambitious curatorial project called *Living as Form*. Walking in through the slender entryway of a repurposed market building on the Lower East Side, visitors to the exhibition encountered a 15,000 sq. ft. cavernous structure filled with photographs, fliers, videos, books, devices, banners, and digital media—a collection of the objects and documents produced through what the curators called "socially engaged practices" during the 1991–2011 period. From the metal plaques of REPOhistory's Lower Manhattan Sign Project to consoles for accessing the free online resources of Pirate Bay to copies of the Yes Men's 2008 mock

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*New York Times* with its "Iraq War Ends" headline, the exhibit attempted to bring together representative documentation of what socially engaged practices do and make. The project's goal was not only to exhibit this documentation, but also to generate new participatory activity, bridging artists and audiences, creators and community, social commentary and social action. Makeshift benches clustered throughout the space invited visitors to linger and participate in group discussions, and a series of small booths housed meeting places for neighborhood walking tours, information on local community organizations, and an exchange board for bartering labor. Though the curators have declined to "[resolve] the issue of how to define this work" in their exhibition description, they use the terms "social practices," "socially engaged practices," and "socially engaged art" to gather together "new ways of life that emphasize participation, challenge power, and span disciplines, "through the deployment of cultural programs."<sup>1</sup>

Images from the *Living as Form* exhibit and screenshots of the Social Practices Archive. All photos by Rachel Daniell.

Of all the project's components, the one that raises the most provocative questions is the [Social Practices Archive](#), a comprehensive online database archiving over 360 of these socially engaged practices from 1991–2011. Because the focus of *Living as Form* is on dynamic social processes, interesting tensions are generated by this attempt to create digital records that would house and preserve these forms in a long-term, historical repository. In the project's brochure, the curators explicitly define their endeavor as an archive of projects that "resist display in an archive such as this one." A closer examination of the archival work involved, however, can shed light on the kinds of understandings that the *Living as Form* project is generating, as well as reveal the ways in which the very creation of this online archive is, itself, a socially engaged practice.

In November 2011 I interviewed Leah Abir, former Associate Curator and Director of Programming for Museums of Bat Yam in Israel and lead researcher for *Living as Form* under the Artis Curatorial Fellowship. I asked Abir how Creative Time conceptualized the term "social practice," the particular connections they make between art and activism, and the reasons behind their choice to create an archive of this work focusing on the 1991–2011 period:

That's exactly what the title of the exhibition is referring to: that encounter between [art and activism] and the way that they work together. I don't think we were trying to define the difference; we were trying to see how, when these things work together—even if it's not real collaboration but the mutual adoption of forms and methods—this intersection becomes something that acts in a very influential way and a powerful way.

I think that [defining the scope as the past twenty years] was one of the most important decisions that shaped the project. It certainly shaped the curatorial statement, saying that [socially engaged art] is now back or that it has developed into a new form that we now need to

pay attention to. It is happening all over the world and it is a phenomenon we really need to explore. And it is not explored in traditional museums or academic spaces, which are having a hard time containing these things.

We could have started with the '60s, returned to the Surrealists, the Dadaists, or have gone back centuries. But this wasn't the decision taken. And I think that says something about the curators insisting that there was something new, something different about the way this phenomenon is now being handled or being pursued that requires special attention. And also, emphasizing that it is vast enough and is important enough to really research and try to archive—to map, I would say, even more than archive.

Yet, despite her direct reference to the potential of archives and mapping to serve as interventions, Abir had a more reserved view of the project's online Social Practices Archive, separating it from the other aspects of *Living as Form*. I originally requested the interview with Abir because of my interest in the tensions involved in the documentation of the dynamic and transformative processes of social practice in a system designed for long-term research and historical knowledge. When I asked Abir whether she considered the online database to be in the same category as the projects it attempts to archive with regards to social engagement, she voiced hesitation:

Do I think about the web database as a social [practice]...? I don't think so. I think in the future it can develop into that. But in the state it is in right now, it is really just a very basic tool for anyone who wants to know more about the subject. And from now on, activating it is a whole different issue.

Nato Thompson, chief curator of *Living as Form*, also expressed doubt that the online Social Practices Archive lived up to the vision of interactivity upheld by many of the project's other areas. At the book release party for the project's exhibition catalog, I asked Thompson his views on *Living as Form* as a socially engaged practice. Though he agreed with the basic contention that the overall project fit this description, he was less enthusiastic about the archive database, indicating that Creative Time hopes to modify it in the future so as to make it a more interactive system where people can upload new work and have it operate similarly to a Wiki, a web-based informational platform that allows users to add, modify, or delete content.<sup>3</sup>

A more interactive database would certainly open up exciting possibilities, however, the curators too quickly dismiss the work the archive does in its current iteration. If the current archive is not living up to the *Living as Form* vision of socially engaged practice, then what kind of a practice is it and what does it "do"? Following the lines of analysis opened up by Michel Foucault, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Ann Stoler, and Diana Taylor, we can move from a conception of "archive-as-source" to one of "archive-as-subject" in order to examine the form and the formation of this archive and better understand the work it is doing in the world (Stoler 2002,

93).

As both Thompson and Abir pointed out, the current Social Practices Archive does not generate a participatory, interactive engagement with the public in terms of the creation or editing of records. It is, in fact, a startlingly rigid database. A visitor to the online archive finds a flat array of records arranged as a grid of images over 13 scrollable subpages. All of the 366 projects it documents have been forced into the same compact template record style: zero to four images, short descriptive text written by Creative Time curators, and a small set of standardized categories with no options for entries of non-standard keyword tags or the inclusion of videos or hyperlinks for projects that generate such output. In addition, the archive is not searchable via any free-entry mechanism, it is not sortable, and can only be separated into subsets of records by utilizing the five pre-set category filters and their associated subfilters.

Despite this rigidity, however, the Social Practices Archive does function as the extension of the arguments of *Living as Form* in other ways. To examine this further, we might analyze the archive using the same two categories through which the overall project is organized: first, by its "form," or the ways in which it collects, organizes, and makes its data visible; second, by its "living," or, the ways in which it participates in the social world. To borrow from Trouillot, we must ask how the Creative Time curators have, "prepare[d] facts for historical intelligibility" and "select[ed] the stories that matter" (Trouillot 1995, 52).

To analyze the Social Practices Archive on the basis of the curators' notion of form, we might consider how such an archive functions as a map: tracing specific features of a broader landscape of phenomena and putting them in relation to each other. "Research and its presentation" is one curatorial category of the "forms" of social practice the curators have included in the *Living as Form* project and the Social Practices Archive itself clearly falls into this genre, offering a "map" of socially engaged practices through their representation in the archive. But what are the processes through which the archive is mapping these phenomena? And what particular maps of social practice is it generating?

The first element shaping the contours of the map is the selection process itself, the collating of projects at the intersection of art and activism described above. Then there is the mapping work done through the representation of the projects in the database record—the short descriptive text, the scant image(s), and the metadata tags that label the practice according to just five principles: "Methods," "Topics," "Setting," "Duration," and the project's "Initiator/Producer." Interestingly, it is the Social Practices Archive's rigid record structure and extremely limited number of category and subcategory tags that brings the conceptual connections between the different projects so vividly into view. Because a nonprofit-led environmentalist project like El Puente's "Green Light District" is grouped in the same category with a public theater project such as Paul Chan's performances of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in post-Katrina New Orleans as well as with large-scale social movements like Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST), the ties

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between these projects—concerns with space, environment, physical well-being, and the state's role in shaping our lives—become visible, despite their very different contexts. Had the form of the archive been more open, offering an unlimited number of metadata tags, these connections would likely be less visible. The minimal content of the database records serves to draw disparate practices (as different as video production, participatory performance art, public sculpture, and health care services) together by making them appear more the same. In our interview, Abir described how the database categorization process led curators to rework the standard museum label and generated new ways of seeing relationships between different works:

We knew that the traditional categories of archiving or cataloging art do not apply anymore to these kinds of works. So, for example, if you think about the museum label, you think about "artist's name" and then the "title," and "material," and then "year," right? And the "medium." All of these things, each and every one of them, was irrelevant for different reasons. For example, "artist's name" sometimes didn't make sense because it was a public work done by a group of people, not necessarily defining themselves as artists, and not single authors. And then "title," sometimes, when you're dealing with NGOs, that's not, you know [applicable]. And then "medium," that's not really relevant because this work is so direct, it's so alive, and it's much more conceptual in the sense that it can use anything, it can use murals and videowork and... the medium could be anything. Then "year," also, there were projects that started in such-and-such year but, then, it was more important to define it as a "long-term project," a "one-time occurrence," or a "recurring project."

So what we came up with is basically a system of topics or issues and then methods [...] What the merging [into a limited number of subcategories] did was [that] it forced me to find an accurate definition that could include more but still be accurate, still be relevant... For example, to discover that "reuse" could mean both the reuse of materials and also a method of reenactment—finding that as a method, discovering that this could actually apply to several kinds of work, that was really interesting.

Thus, the archival representation of a project's relationship to time (typically "year") had to be completely reconceptualized to make sense in an archive of social practices (into "duration" and "recurrence"). A descriptive subcategory like "reuse" led to connecting social practices that might, on other levels, appear to be quite different from each other (for example, projects utilizing recycled physical objects and those reenacting historical events). Through the online database categorization, the "Public" becomes a possible "Initiator/Producer" for these works and "Methods" such as the creation of "Alternative Economies and Markets" and "Campaigns, Protests and Advocacy" are recognized at the art-activism nexus. In this way, the practice of archive creation itself generates new theoretical understandings.

In order to analyze the Social Practices Archive on the basis of the *Living as Form* project's concept of "living," we need to examine its social engagement.

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"Living," as defined by Thompson in the exhibition catalog, can be understood as the way a project is situated in relation to what he calls "the 'real' world" and to the spheres in which a project operates, particularly the political sphere (21-22). The Social Practices Archive, too, has its situatedness and its spheres of operation. It may not be socially engaged with a broad public through interactive technology, as are some of the projects highlighted in the archive (such as the user-generated multimedia content of the prison reform advocacy website [ThousandKites.org](http://ThousandKites.org) or the [Public Access Digital Media Archive/Pad.ma](http://PublicAccessDigitalMediaArchive/Pad.ma)'s open-access video material and online annotation platform), but it is nonetheless socially engaged through its creation of a new source of historical knowledge that might change the conditions of possibility for future historiography and debate.

For projects in the archive whose original forms did not accrue online or otherwise broadly accessible documentation—for example, a community workshop or a performance in a town square—the archive database record becomes a way of acknowledging the project's existence regardless of geographic distance or the passing of time. As Abir recalled from her curatorial experience:

When you're dealing with a project by an artist in Tehran done ten years ago, it's really hard to find materials on it, any information online.... That was part of the point—for us to create a space where these projects can actually be accessible and be part of that history and be part of any research that is dealing with socially engaged work.

This rendering accessible the sometimes-ephemeral work of socially engaged practice is a form of socio-political engagement through archival practice. Abir noted that even the online archive's metadata categories themselves can provide a fulcrum around which to generate dialog:

The way we categorized things [in the online archive] was just a suggestion and it had a lot of holes. It leaves a lot of room for people to come in and say, well, this is not right, or this is right, or, well, what about this? So, just to create a basis for thought and for research on this that doesn't [yet] exist. That's the purpose. I think Creative Time sees it as a database that can be used by universities, artists, students, or anyone who has an interest in this field. And anyone who is interested in healthcare can just go in and see the projects that were done in this framework regarding health care. It doesn't have to be people from the art scene or activists or anything like that. It can really be just anyone who is interested in that field. This can be a starting point.

Thus, through the socially engaged practice of generating a new source of historical knowledge that maps these phenomena in particular ways and provides an axis for understanding and debate, this new online Social Practices Archive participates in "redesigning the forms that constitute [our] lives."<sup>3</sup>

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The invited editors of this issue of *e-misférica*, "On the Subject of Archives," organized the theme around a provocative set of questions. Two in particular seized my imagination and inspired me to examine *Living as Form's* Social Practices Archive through the tensions these questions illuminate: Do 'live' acts, such as performances, resist the archive? Or does the archive produce its own special kind of performances? These live actions of social practice, so rooted in philosophies of engagement and exchange, seemed to offer a particular kind of challenge for the questions posed by the editors. Ultimately, the answer to both questions is "yes." Yes, these acts do resist the archive, which results in the reshaping of both the live actions (through particular forms of their representation) and the reshaping of the archival form (its categories and, potentially, its structures). Yet this struggle between the lived practice and the archival form itself results in a new engaged social practice—the archive's "map" and the archive's potential effects on debates over what constitutes art and how social transformation might be achieved.

The Social Practices Archive's process of selecting, assembling, ordering, and making visible particular practices and forms of work—predicated on a conception of the intersection of art and activism—has created a new source from which histories can be told. The archive does this work by connecting disparate kinds of social practice and making it possible to trace different histories. Abir commented on this:

If you ask me, and I hope that Nato agrees, this whole show is about the political. It is taking a certain position toward the question: "what is the political?" and it is answering it through the works. This is the political: the way that people come together to use space and to act in it in different ways. This is one of the answers to "what is the political?" offered by the exhibit. So it's not about politics. It's about the political and how it is formed. If you think about it this way, it's only natural that Tahir Square can be shown alongside Jeremy Deller in the same show. Or Wikipedia and Phil Collins. These can be in the same space and make sense.

In the *Living as Form* book, Thompson demurs: "we merely present the temperature in the water in order to raise compelling questions" (21). But Creative Time has carefully chosen where to dip their thermometer; and, by virtue of making this project, of seizing this "archival power," they have made a significant contribution to the visibility of these kinds of practices in the art world, in the sphere of activism, and beyond. If archival power constitutes the authority to generate understandings by bringing together elements, categorizing them, and organizing them in ways that put forth a specific vision of the world, it is this power that the curators of the exhibition and online database have wielded. Exercising this power in order to make socially engaged practices more visible also makes it possible for individual practices to more easily resonate with each other. Describing how *Living as Form* coincided with Occupy Wall Street (OWS), with the exhibit opening just one week after OWS first claimed space in Zuccotti Park, Abir commented:

One of the talks turned into a walk to Occupy Wall Street, and then a group was formed there,

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and then later we screened what was going on in the square at the exhibition. And we had this wall of prepared signs, you could just go into the exhibition and grab a sign and go to Occupy Wall Street. So we maintained a connection. And Creative Time was very fast to announce itself as an official part of Occupy Wall Street[...]. It was nice that people who came into the exhibition not knowing anything were kind of "oh, is it intentional that this is happening exactly when...." Just the spirit of the show and the way it was built got people to think about the connection.

You have that zeitgeist thing, you have that spirit of the time, and they both came out of the same spirit.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Exhibition signage, brochure, and website:

[http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/livingasform/curator\\_statement.htm](http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/livingasform/curator_statement.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication at book launch event for *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*.

<sup>3</sup> Exhibition signage

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