My experience curating Memphis Social has placed me unequivocally on the ground, tasked with negotiating both public and private concerns in presenting a show that mixes discrete works of art and social performance with community organizations in both institutional and non-institutional settings. This alternative model for an exhibition creates its own, often unpredictable, dynamic and I have needed to be ready with a contingency plan at every turn of events, often navigating the boundaries between the public and private. Maintaining this permeable grey area between private and public might be seen ineffec- tive when attempting to initiate social movements or galvanize political change, but I have found it to be quite practical and humane in its open-ended and non-ideologically driven way of being. The risk of losing one’s private aesthetic stake is taken on the chance that its public enactment is integrally connected to its share, not in historical time, but in ethical contingency. The actual social can therefore be seen as differentiated and cohesive, not necessarily toward a historically determinist nor- malization, but toward an awareness of an organic continuum of both liminal and embodied agency.

While the balance between public and private has been important to my personal experience curating the show, it has also been a critical part of how the exhibition has come together in relation to its physical presentation. One of my goals in organizing Memphis Social has been to present a wide array of artists as a group ensemble in gallery spaces at the Memphis College of Art, and also individually in alternative locations and public spaces throughout the city. As curator I have worked to problematize “the partition of the sensible” head on by literally displacing many of the artists and their works to locations less ideologically determined than the typical institutional venues.
These diverse locales include Marshall Arts, Caritas Village Community Center, and Crosstown Arts—an art center housed in an old Sears warehouse—and many of these locations feature new, site-specific work. Each of these organizations seek to focus social activity and serve communities in need of cohesive civic centers. The curatorial intention behind presenting art, dance, and musical performance at these locations has been to augment what already takes place there and to offer an objective acknowledgement of their significance to the Memphis community that they serve. In addition to these alternative spaces, the exhibition is also sited in specialized institutions such as The Cotton Museum, which was the location of the commodities exchange for the crop that defines the South in its agrarian economy and also links it, inescapably, to the history of slavery. The screening here of Kara Walker’s 2005 video<br>Five Possible Beginnings, along with a collection intervention by the young Memphis artist Lester Mennweher, brings to the fore this institutional partitioning of the explicit and implicit national assumptions of economics, labor, and race.

Other participants in Memphis Social such as Tim Rollins and Doug Ashford, represent artists responsible for setting the standard of socially inclusive presentations of aesthetics and ethics in their work as respective members of Group Material (1979-1996). An older generation of artists in the exhibition—Leon Golub and Nancy Spero—exploited idiosyncratic imagery from their social experiences in addressing the Vietnam War, agrarian economics, labor, and race.

While rooted in Memphis, the exhibition brings together artists from such diverse backgrounds and experiences as Tracey Moffatt from Australia and Alexandra Kostrubula from Sweden, and presents the work of artist collectives such as Bullet Space from Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The nomadic nature of contemporary art is underscored by the inclusion of artists such as Virginia Overton, originally from Tennessee but currently situated in New York City, and William Pope L., born in New Jersey but now living and working in Chicago. For Memphis Social Overton is contributing a large site-specific work, which will be presented on a pair of outdoor billboards located across from Marshall Arts; a selection of Pope L.’s Failure drawings will be presented at the Hyde Gallery at the Memphis College of Art. Aija Rihmanns has charged her art with an environmental awareness in restoring wetlands habitats near her home in Maine. She brings this practice to bear in her participation in Memphis Social with a work that represents the degradation of the Mississippi watershed. Myatt is known for his art at the Hyde Gallery, examine the social dynamic of body image in contemporary culture. These artists’ work speaks to the broad aim of the exhibition because of their ability to draw from localized experience without being limited to it. This “de-territorialization” of a sense of place in individual and collective experience is also an important subtext of Memphis Social.

Memphis is a place, which, like many others, becomes universal in its specifics. The city is a locale, vicariously known and practically experienced. It is important to the world at large that Memphis is a birthplace of the Blues, yet more locally, the blues still lives there. Its being the location of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination is significant to the wider public, but in a local context, the struggle for racial and class equality continues. Memphis Social is not ostensibly about Memphis, but the city as a specific environment has proved fertile ground to explore socially engaged artwork. The site of “the social” is a moving target that can pop up in the most unpredictable places. Organizing Memphis Social has taught me to re-orient my own position in ways I couldn’t have rightly mapped. The artists and cultural practitioners I have chosen as my guides to wend my curatorial way through Memphis Social play with sometimes blustary but often subtle relations of the aesthetic and ethical. The meaning of the exhibition is contained in their diverse experiences of these relations.

Tom McGlynn (Beautiful Fields Collective) © 2013 2012-2013 Franchise Program Winner

Memphis Social participating artists:


Participating venues:


Many thanks to:


Participating venues:


Many thanks to: