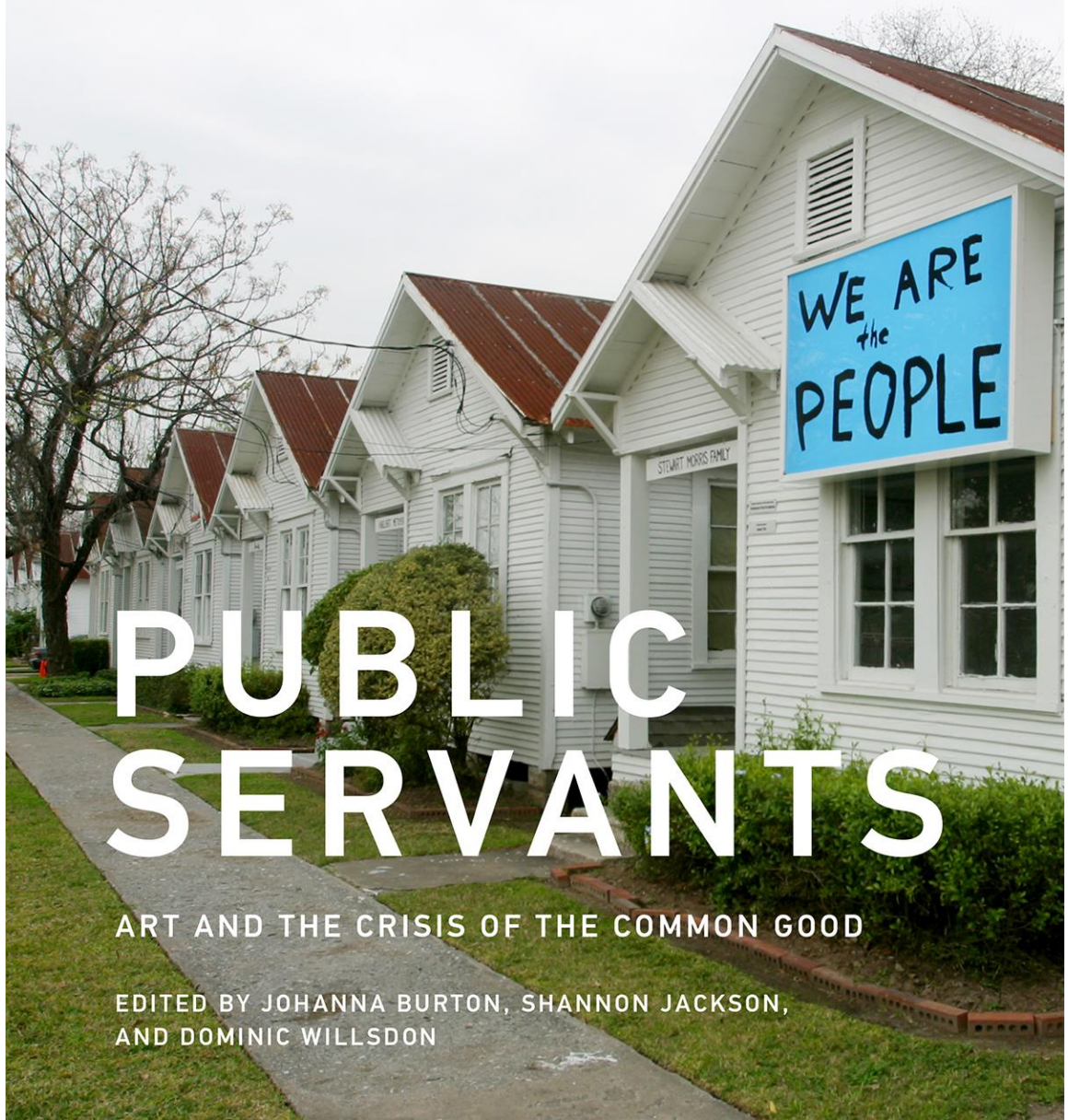




Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture



# PUBLIC SERVANTS

ART AND THE CRISIS OF THE COMMON GOOD

EDITED BY JOHANNA BURTON, SHANNON JACKSON,  
AND DOMINIC WILLSDON

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## A CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL PRACTICE ART: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A POLITICAL ARTIST?

Ben Davis

Located in Houston's predominantly African-American Third Ward, Project Row Houses (PRH) stands today as one of the most-lauded examples of a burgeoning genre of contemporary art: "social practice." In fact, the project's origin story could well serve as a parable about the significance of the entire concept. In the early 1990s, founder Rick Lowe was an artist working in a more traditional genre of engaged art-making, creating works that called attention to various causes. The turning point came for him, however, when a group of students from the Third Ward came to visit his studio:

I was doing big, billboard-size paintings and cutout sculptures dealing with social issues, and one of the students told me that, sure, the work reflected what was going on in his community, but it wasn't what the community needed. If I was an artist, he said, why didn't I come up with some kind of creative solution to issues instead of just telling people like him what they already knew. That was the defining moment that pushed me out of the studio.<sup>1</sup>

And so, Lowe was pushed to reconceive what it meant to be a political artist. Instead of making work *about* community topics, he would have to become involved directly in community organizing. With seed money from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, and help from corporate volunteers and local museum staff, he set out to rehabilitate a series of "shotgun houses" in the Third Ward, to turn them into a community space integrated with artist residencies. The experiment opened in 1994. Today, according to its website, "PRH's campus has grown from the original block and a half to six blocks, and from 22 houses to 40 properties; including twelve artist