

PHOTO-BASED SOCIAL PRACTICE

A DISCUSSION OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED, TRANSDISCIPLINARY, AND EXPANDED PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY.



ABOVE: Members of Free Minds DC read poetry and talk about their experiences of being incarcerated. This event was one of several workshops, film screenings, and community discussions that took place during the 'Windows From Prison' exhibition at George Mason University in April, 2014. Photograph Mark Strandquist.

LOCATING THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED PHOTOGRAPHY

by ELIZA GREGORY

MANY OF THE MOST COMPLEX

and exciting elements of contemporary photographic practices are invisible to audiences. They consist of relationships, compassion, patience, and listening. They consist of really challenging oneself, as the artist, to give up conventions within the art-making process that subtly reinforce oppressive social dynamics.

We have an opportunity to talk about an expanded practice in photography that focuses on the process. What are the structures and methods that allow a contemporary ethos of self-awareness and human connection to blend with traditional photographic approaches? When does photography become a socially engaged act? When does photography create real social change? Implicit in these conversations are challenges to artists to make invisible project structures, relationships, and decisions available to a larger audience. At the same time, audiences are chal-

lenged to evaluate, appreciate and criticize these elements as part of the work itself, not as auxiliary to the work.

We organized this panel and this paper because it feels urgent that we as a photographic community develop language and intellectual conventions around these ideas. We need common understanding. And so we'd like to say welcome—thank you for your time and your curiosity, thank you for your experience and expertise.

Here are a few ideas to push off from.

The Invisible

As practitioners of this kind of work, we are interested in the elements of an expanded photographic process that are invisible, and difficult to communicate or explain to a broad audience.

There are many intangible elements (e.g. brainstorming, moments of mutual discovery, design by consensus, and relationships) that often feel the most important, and the most vibrant, but they are also the least accessible to anyone beyond the artist. Speaking to the artists represented here, and others in the field, it seems like they are also the moments in which people feel they are having the most impact.

There is a gap between the experience of making this work and the audience's understanding of the process. We need to communicate what's going on in these projects so that the people who

support this kind of work—through funding it and through absorbing it or looking at it or experiencing it—can invest in the lengthy research and development process of a project and the non-visible components of it.

How do you articulate your expanded photographic process? How do you describe your collaborations? And what, for you, is the part of your work and your process that feels the most vital, the most exciting, the most important?

Can we create a lexicon to describe an expanded photographic process?

Evaluation:

When a photographic project contains non-tangible components, what criteria can we use to evaluate those components? Could we use:

- an aesthetic that describes ethical integrity
- an aesthetic that describes structural beauty and complexity of the project
- quality of relationships
- quality of every component in a project, and how all those pieces fit together—i.e. from every email sent, to every tweet, to every image, to every piece of documentation, to whatever is the main event of the project: are all those pieces equally good and are they cohesive? Do they all serve the same goals?
- political impact
- personal impact, breadth of people impacted

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SOME THOUGHTS

from
the panel on socially engaged
photographic practices.

Pete Brook: We don't have to be making photographs to be making a difference. In fact, of the many photo-centric acts that increase engagement with—and understanding between—fellow humans, image-making is only one. Researching, collating, preserving, reframing, holding and talking about images form the context for photography in our world. Making an image is only the opening gambit; when an image-maker freezes a moment or place in time within a photo, he or she merely guarantees a long thaw of meanings and associations running from it. How we discuss, use and consume photography shapes the thaw. Andrea Stultiens' 'History In Progress Uganda'; Susan Meiselas' 'Kurdistan'; and Alyse Emdur's 'Prison Landscapes' (see far right) are just a few of the many photo-based projects with methodologies from which we can learn.

Wendy Ewald: When I first started making photographs, I was fascinated by documentary efforts to catalogue social and economic problems of the 1930s and the occasional successes of social reforms. With time I learned to back off from the world and let it reveal itself to me, and as I did, each project became a distinct challenge to see beneath surface relationships. As the work progressed and I became more conscious of my method, I was able to experiment with ways of sharing control over the image-making. The active dialogue between the photographer and the subject (and inevitably the viewer) became for me the essential point of a photograph. Beyond esthetic choices, I came to see photography as a language to which everyone has access.

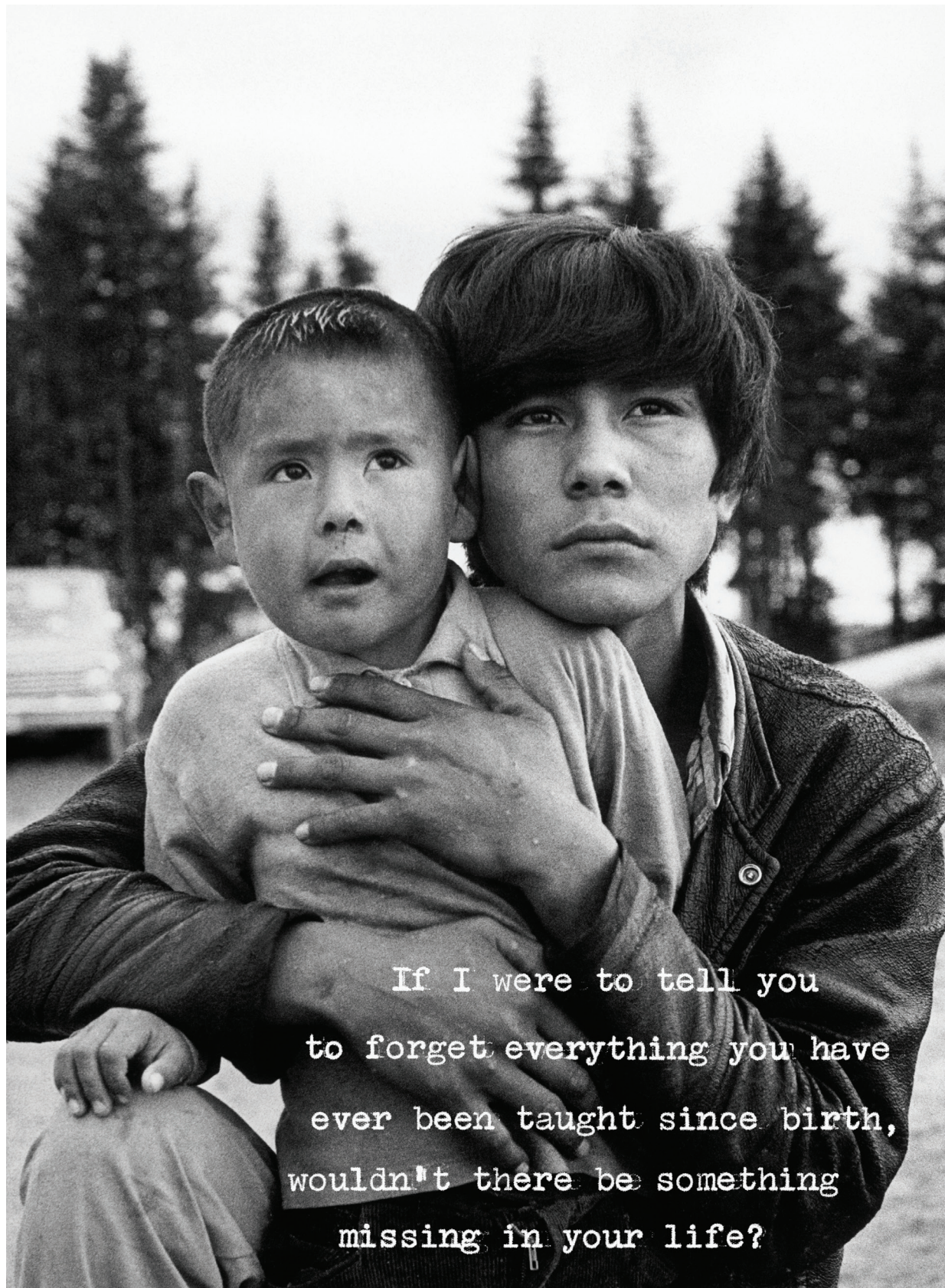
Eliza Gregory: My personal life can be intertwined with my work in a positive way; relationships can provide the foundation of an image and a project, as well as a life. As I've grown into this understanding of myself and my work, I've moved from being focused on an image to being focused on a neighborhood. I've become a wife and a mother. I've seen how photography can create social change, and it isn't through the pictures, it's through the process of making art.

Mark Strandquist: In his book, *Bending the Frame*, Fred Ritchin called for photographers to produce "visual reference points," for ways forward not simply an index of past struggles. If we focus on the process, and bring to the forefront the social interactions that went into the photograph, as well as those that its exhibition inspires, we can begin to see how those reference points could be created.

By championing and further investigating the social aesthetics of photography; by viewing the production of the image as a staging ground for interaction, and its exhibition as an equally exciting realm for dialogue, exchange, and community action; by seeing the socio-political potential behind every creative choice; then our images can begin to create those reference points, and can propose and realize new ways of seeing, understanding, and being within the world.

Gemma-Rose Turnbull: As documentary photographers integrate participatory and collaborative practices into their projects—inviting people who were previously 'subjects' to become co-creators—there is an increased tension between the process and the photographic product. When we move towards making work that is co-authored, how do we meet the needs of our collaborators (as the primary audience of the work), and communicate the primary experience to the secondary audience (anyone secondary to the people making the work)?

Basically, how can we continue to utilize the visceral, affective visual language of documentary photography to activate for social change, while democratising the process of creating those images *with* people, instead of *of* people?

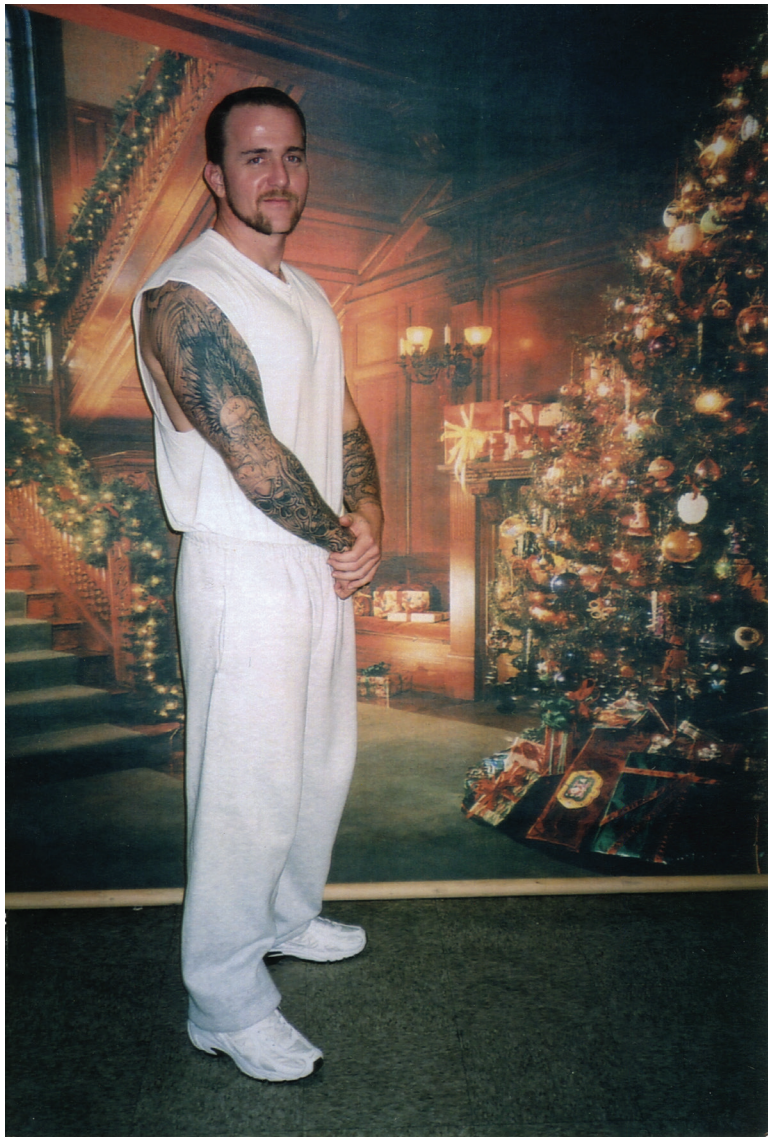


If I were to tell you
to forget everything you have
ever been taught since birth,
wouldn't there be something
missing in your life?

ABOVE: Photograph by Wendy Ewald, text by Benedict Michel. 'Benedict Michel 1969/2007.' From 'Pekupatikut Innuat Akunikana/Pictures Woke the People Up: An Innu Project With Wendy Ewald and Eric Gottesman'.

BELOW: Bek 'Self portrait where I look like a painting.' From 'Red Light Dark Room; Sex, lives and stereotypes' a project by Gemma-Rose Turnbull in collaboration with street-based sex workers in St Kilda, Australia.





ABOVE: Eliza Gregory, 'Granny and Grace, Fourth of July, California, 2008.' From ongoing work in collaboration with extended family focused on cultural identity and relationship to place.

LEFT: Photographer unknown. 'Brandon Jones, United States Penitentiary, Marion Illinois.' Courtesy: Alyse Emdur. From Emdur's project 'Prison Landscapes'. Image selected by Pete Brook.

LOCATING THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED PHOTOGRAPHY cont...

Points of exchange:

One way to map a project's structure is to identify the points of exchange in the work. This implicitly asks, What are the incentives for each participant to do any and all actions that advance the work? What are people getting out of this? And what are people putting into it? What is this work really made of? What makes it happen?

For example, you might have only one exchange in a project—someone poses for a picture, and the artist gives the person a copy of that picture in exchange for their time and compliance. Or, that might get slightly more complicated—someone poses for a picture, signs a release form giving the artist the ability to use it in any context, gets a picture in return, and also gets a relationship with an artist and the ability to see their image in a new and interesting context. It could also be an unequal exchange—the process of analyzing the exchange might reveal that the artist gains much more than the participant, and the assumptions that the artist makes about what the participant gains are inaccurate.

The exchange could also get *much more complicated*. Teaching could be involved—an exchange of skills and knowledge. Money could be paid, or in kind donations made. Books could be distributed, or exhibitions could be initiated that benefit

multiple people in multiple ways. Many small exchanges of food, time, hospitality, social capital, cultural capital, financial capital and other goods, services and knowledge might take place over years or decades.

So how do we acknowledge these points of exchange in projects? What can we learn from understanding them in different artists' work?

A spectrum of collaboration:

We have identified a few spectra of collaboration going on in photo-based social practice work.

- Simplicity of collaboration vs. Complexity of collaboration
- Short duration vs. Long duration
- Few collaborators vs. Many collaborators
- Few points of exchange vs. Many points of exchange

Could these spectra be helpful in discussing and understanding different structures and processes manifested in this kind of work? What other spectra can we create that would be more helpful?

When does a project really challenge social norms?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, when and how do image-based projects truly create social change? Photography comes from, and occurs within, a set of social systems. Just as the photographer cannot be truly objective or outside of the situation he or she depicts in a given image, the photograph itself is not objective. Photographic creation and distribution implicitly reflect society

at large.

So if we as photographic artists are trying to use images to challenge the status quo, the social impact and social critique we create gets much bolder when it takes place in all aspects of the project, far beyond what is "pictured."

To propose a significant shift toward more socially-engaged practices in photography and art is to propose significant shift in our culture as a whole. There's a wonderful paragraph about this idea in *A User's Guide to the Impossible* (Minor Compositions, New York, 2010, p. 12).

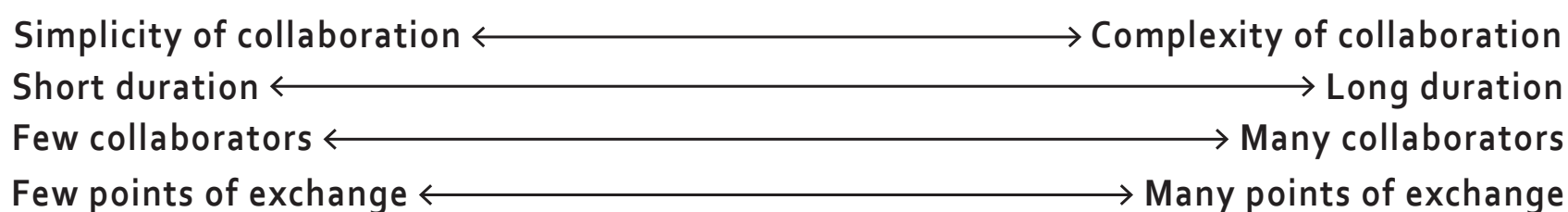
To dismantle and reinvent institutions or systems we have to start at the roots, with the culture that supports them. Culture is the material substratum of politics, the muddy foundations upon which it is built, but these foundations can't be changed in the same way that you can undo a law - they are transformed by infiltrating them at the molecular level, through the fault lines, pores and gaps, burrowing away like an old mole opening up millions of potential north-west passages. Luckily for you, that's where you are already.

To put it another way, many photo-based social practice projects challenge the status quo within their structures. The very bones of the project imagine new social forms, new power dynamics, new social relationships on individual and institutional levels.

We are interested in a photography that emerges from the fault lines.

-EG

Spectra of Collaboration



SOCIALLY ENGAGED PHOTOGRAPHY

DRIVING QUESTIONS

In 2013, prior to the event *More Than a Witness* held at the Bridge Progressive Arts Initiative, Mark Strandquist solicited questions about photo-based social practice from a variety of people working in the field. The questions were originally posed to start a conversation between panelists David Levi Strauss, Yukiko Yamagata, Edgar Endress, Matthew Slatts, and the audience of the event.

We have edited and added to that list, and present it here, to contribute to this ongoing conversation.

THE VOCABULARY OF EVALUATION

- If the 'social aesthetic' of an image (the social interactions that led to its production, exhibition, distribution) is forefronted, how do we critique it? What process of valuation can be used to address these intangible aspects of contemporary image-making? Are these emerging practices funded? What difficulties arise in discerning the 'success' of these projects?

- For artists who champion the 'social aesthetics' of contemporary images, the interactions that lead to the production and distribution of the photograph, and those that the corresponding exhibitions produce and inspire, become integral components to their projects. Within this framework, how is the form and function of photography being re-imagined by artists and institutions? How has this evolution been interpreted through critical, institutional, and ethical lenses?

AUDIENCE

- At what point does the audience enter our artistic process?
- How can we expand our art practices to include non-art audiences? Is transdisciplinary collaboration our main tool?
- What happens when an audience views a photograph that was originally intended for another community?
- When does asking permission negate the value of what you're photographing? Is it ever okay NOT to ask permission?
- Is it important for artists to come up with alternative means for exhibiting and distributing their images? If so, when have you seen artists and institutions push this further in interesting and powerful ways?

ETHICS

- In looking at other professions (e.g. medicine), ethical codes mandate actions that limit impact and focus on positive outcomes. Should there be an ethical code for artists and/or photographers? Should they be beholden to a contract/value system of doing no harm?

- What are the ethics of process, and what issues arise from that?

- So often one hears, "I began taking photographs as a way to meet people and be in situations that I would never have access to without a camera." Is all photography involving a human subject socially engaged?

- If you're using photography to connect with people, how far are you willing to go to connect with them?

OBJECT/NON-OBJECT, OBJECTIFICATION, REPRESENTATION

- Photography is a tool of instant-objectification. But objectification is not always automatically negative. When can objectification be useful or positive?

- When are the parts of photography besides the object (the image) the most valuable part of the medium?

- How might the role of the artist in society change when the art object (the photograph) is no longer a commodifiable product?

- Is it important for artists to mitigate issues of representation and authorship for photography to be an effective tool for socially engaged art?

- In an increasingly media-saturated world, are images losing their ability to generate emotional reactions? What does it take for an image to stick out, have an impact and move communities to action?

- How has an image-saturated media affected image-making? Curating? Criticism?

- By focusing on the social aesthetic of image-making (the interactions that lead to the production and distribution of the photograph) does photography lose its power of replication?

DOCUMENTATION OF SOCIAL PRACTICE

- What is the role of the photograph as documentation in social practice?

- Ideally, documentation reaches secondary and tertiary audiences. How do social practice artists consider the ethics of representation when reaching those audiences?

- Is it possible to make documentation that is as effective/provocative as the original work?

PANEL:

May 16th

10AM-12PM

Photo-based Social Practice:
A discussion of socially engaged, transdisciplinary, and expanded practices in contemporary photography.

Panelists: Pete Brook, Wendy Ewald, Mark Strandquist, and Gemma-Rose Turnbull. Moderated by Eliza Gregory.

APERTURE FOUNDATION
547 WEST 27TH STREET, 4TH FLOOR,
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10001

It is increasingly evident that expanded, participatory, and socially engaged photo-based projects are of public interest and in need of heightened discussion and analysis. Often, the very bones of these projects restructure the power dynamics inherent within representation, challenging the patterns through which we engage with media, distribution systems, technology, journalism and images themselves. This panel will ask a group of critics, curators, and practitioners of photo-based social practice to engage the urgent questions artists are tackling in this field.

This panel is offered in conjunction with the Spring 2014 issue of Aperture magazine, produced in collaboration with guest editor Susan Meiselas and the Magnum Foundation, which explores how the ground for socially engaged documentary storytelling has radically shifted over the last decade and how photographers might adapt.

The panel is co-presented by Aperture Magazine Presents and the Photography, Expanded Initiative of the Magnum Foundation, and supported by Portland State University and The University of Queensland, Australia.

Open Engagement is an international conference that sets out to explore various perspectives on art and social practice, and expand the dialogue around socially engaged art making. It takes place May 16-18th, 2014. Register for free at: www.openengagement.info.

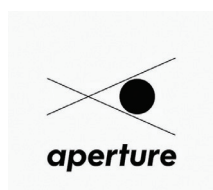
PHOTOGRAPHY

AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

THE CONVERSATION ABOUT PHOTO-BASED SOCIAL PRACTICE IS CONTINUING. YOU CAN GET INVOLVED AT: WWW.ASOCIALPRACTICE.COM

THANKS TO OUR CO-PRESENTERS

Designed by Gemma-Rose Turnbull, with support from The Ian Potter Cultural Trust



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