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ON ENGAGEMENT

What do we mean when we say engagement? What does being engaged look like?

We use these terms often in the GFRY Studio and at SAIC, and their ubiquity in these contexts is emblematic of their contemporary popularity at large. Institutions such as cities and universities speak of building civic engagement or public engagement. Museums grapple with visitor engagement as a measurement of their success. Non-profit organizations identify their missions by their commitment to community engagement. And many artists are producing socially-engaged art.

It's not entirely clear to me how and why engagement is being used in these myriad phrases. Perhaps they loosely suggest a connection, an interaction between groups or individuals. In these connections, there is an implicit assumption that engagement is what one party cultivates to gain the participation of another. Perhaps more cynically, engagement has become hackneyed, taking on the hollow mystique of other once-potent terms like diversity. Much like diversity, too, engagement has through overuse and institutionalization become a box to check to prove that one has thought of others.

If we are in fact thinking of others, then we need to think more critically about what it means to *engage*. I fear that the fashion of the phrase has emptied it of some of its meaning, allowing us to talk about engagement too broadly and abstractly. How can we begin again to use it with force and intention?

A look at the historical meanings of engagement suggests a range of nuances that we might usefully recover.

To engage most commonly denoted a commitment or a pledge. We see this used in financial records and legal contracts—an agreement between a lender and borrower, for instance—but the term was used to describe any kind of serious vow or promise. Some engagements had a time span—like in the case of the debt—but others were ongoing and open-ended.

With the exception of the kind that precedes a marriage, engagement in its modern usage does not imply the same kind of serious commitment. We might say that someone has a prior engagement, but this only means they have an appointment to attend. Or, we might say that an artist who hosts a dinner party is practicing social engagement, but such an engagement only spans the length of the evening. Granted, engagements in historical contexts could also be time-bound. But there has been a marked shift in the formality and intention of its usage. Just consider the silliness of saying that you are unavailable because of a prior *vow*. In short, engagement is no longer synonymous with a vow or pledge, but rather with a single event or interaction.

Moreover, the oft-temporal nature of engagement today masks the bonds that the term once required. Historically, behind an engagement was a relationship, and a mutual sense of trust and responsibility. Importantly, this meant that there was also risk. The Oxford English Dictionary gives one definition of engage as to "expose to risk," namely, to expose *oneself* to risk by entering into a commitment. In fact, the word engage derives from an earlier phrase, "in gage," as in, "she left her wallet in gage." A gage was a valuable possession that one left in the keeping of another as a sign of good faith. Though this word of French origin may be unfamiliar to us now, a variation of it is still used in English today: wage.

What we define as engagement today does not presume these kinds of interpersonal and interdependent relationships. An engagement is when a person interacts with a touchscreen at a museum. It is when an artist leaves a letter on a fence for a stranger. It is when we fill out a survey. Such engagements do not require—they may even depend on not having—a prior relationship. I am not suggesting that these are not valuable modes of communication and interaction. I am saying, however, that these diminish the intimate interpersonal aspect of engagement. Lost, it seems to me, is the leaving of a gage, of deciding to commit to something *together* in good faith.

Finally, an unspoken aspect of the term engagement historically is that it was used for exchanges between individuals or small parties. Even if what was offered or received was more abstract—pledging one's honor—the vow was made on an intimate scale, with all the idiosyncrasies and messiness those relationships entail. In a less common usage, to engage was another way of saying, "to get entangled." It meant getting involved, mixed up in.

If we took seriously the older sense of the word, each and every engagement would possess all of the idiosyncrasies of its participants. It would reflect their needs, their desires, their "entangled" histories together. As we move away from our understanding of engagement as something that happens on an intimate scale, however, the players involved in the exchange are more and more abstracted: an institutional policy, a quantified measurement of success, a drop-in community project, a portable model with interchangeable parts.

Engagement is not a word that will be exiting our conversations anytime soon, nor do I want it to. I do want, however, for us to use and reflect on engagement more intentionally and critically. When we talk about our practice, our projects, our communities, what do we mean by engagement? How do we do engagement? I hope that as we continue in our work—as artists, educators, activists—we do it in the spirit of the original meaning of engagement: with commitment, risk, and entanglement, and in interpersonal relationships that are built together in mutual respect.