In 2006 Grant Kester spoke of a paradigm shift in art practice which involved both a shift towards collaborative or collective approaches in contemporary art, and a shift towards participatory, process-based experience.[1] Claire Bishop called this 'the social turn' which involves a movement away from a textual mode of production that creates an object or an event which is subsequently presented to the viewer.[2]After the social turn the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; the work of art as a finite commodifiable product is reconceived as a project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a viewer is now re-positioned as a co-producer or participant.[3] This has been a distinctive trend going under a multiple of names including socially engaged, relational, participatory, dialogical and interventionist art. Using the words of Peter Dunn, Kester holds that artists such as these who have defined their practice around the facilitation of dialogue among diverse communities are "context providers" rather than "content providers."[4]This essay will examine what is at stake for Kester in this claim, using recent projects by Seamus Nolan and Jeanne Van Heeswijk as examples. Kester is not without his critics, the most well-known of whom Claire Bishop famously argued many collaborative projects lack political bite and that the social turn in art has led to an ethical turn in art criticism.[5] The projects of Van Heeswijk and Nolan will also be examined in the context of this criticism.

The art practices that Kester discusses in both *Conversation Pieces* and *The One and The Many*, feature a collaborative core,[6] are open-ended and many of them take place over

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[1] Tim Stott "Interview with Grant Kester", in *Circa 117*, Autumn 2007

[2] Claire Bishop *ARTIFICIAL HELLS Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship,* (London, Verso: 2012),2

[3] Ibid

[4] Grant H. Kester, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art In A global Context*,(Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 11

[5]Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents", in *Artforum*, February 2006

[6] It is useful at this stage to note the difference between participation and collaboration. Participatory practice is interested in its recipients, wishing to turn over a significant portion of the work to them in either its conception or in its realisation.(Christian Kravanga, *Working on Community, Models of Participatory Art*, accessed online at http://eipcp.net/transversal/1204/kravagna/en accessed on 8/2/2013)

Participation has an authorial limit, it is an invitation to participate in an artist's project in order to realise an already well defined idea and bring it to completion. Collaborative engagement on the other hand creates the conditions for further shared conceptualisation of an idea and its subsequent development into a project. Thus collaboration is in a way a move towards co-authorship which can result in unpredictability and holds many dangers of the possibilities or impossibilities of realising a practice with others.(Ailbhe Murphy, "Artistic Formation for Collaborative Art Practise", in *Art Education and*

an extended duration. A key argument of Kester's is that the language of traditional art-historical critique is deficient when it comes to understanding and judging the aesthetic experience of contemporary collaborative art practices.[7]This language relies on an avant-garde tradition which includes a particular model of reception based on shock or rupture, a priori assumption of the viewer's perceptual or cognitive naiveté, and a belief in the intrinsically transgressive or liberatory power of an encounter with a work of art.[8] It is the task of the artist or intellectual to supervise this process through the production of texts that seek to destabilise the viewer or reader through an essentially individual interpretation.[9] Collaborative practice on the other hand is involved with the generation of insight through durational interaction rather than rupture; they seek to openly problematize the authorial status of the artist and often rely on more conciliatory strategies and relationships (both with their participants and affiliated movements, disciplines etc.). They challenge the aesthetic autonomy of both the artist and art practice, relative to a given site, context or constituency.[10] These practices require a new analytic approach.

Rather than transmitting a pre-existing content, expression in this type of art takes place through an unfolding, extemporaneous process among an ensemble of collaborative agents.[11] The artist provides the context for this collaboration to take place. There are a number of criteria under which this context could be evaluated.

- The duration and the degree of open-endedness of the project. These projects require a paradigm shift in our understanding of the work of art; a definition of aesthetic experience that is durational rather than immediate. This is the notion of practice as a sequential unfolding, extended through the cumulative experience of discrete moments of interaction, negotiation, conflict and reconciliation.[12] Kester advocates viewing the labour that is involved in many of these projects as an aesthetic process. He argues this co-labouring of sorts occurs has the capacity to transform the consciousness of its participants and to

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Contemporary Culture: Irish Experiences, International Perspectives, ed Gary Granville(Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 156)

[7] Kester, *The One and The Many*, 11

[8] Kester, *The One and the Many*

[9] Ibid 54

[10] Ibid, 65

[11] Ibid 114

[12] Ibid 104

disclose new models for being-together. It occurs through the haptic and discursive exchanges that unfold in these projects, often over a period of months and even years.[13]

- The degree of surrender of control of the artist. Kester speaks of a meaningful loss of intentionality in dialogical practice as the artist opens out to the effects of site, context and the collaborative. This process is active, generative and creative.[14]Their goal is not the violent extraction of value or the suppression of difference but the co-production of identity at the interstices of existing cultural traditions, political forces, and individual subjectivities.[15]
- The nature of the discourse. The interactions that are central to these projects all require some provisional discursive framework through which the various participants can exchange insights and observations. It may be spoken or written, or it may involve some form of physical or conceptual collaboration.[16]The collaborators or participants in these projects come not as delegates and representatives charged with defending a priori "positions" but as individuals sharing an extensive collective knowledge of the subject at hand. It is based on the generation of a local consensual knowledge that is only provisionally binding and that is grounded precisely at the level of collective interaction. Subjectivity is formed through discourse and inter-subjective exchange itself. Discourse is not simply a tool to be used to communicate a priori "content" with other already formed subjects, but is itself intended to model subjectivity.[17] The role of the artist is to guide the discourse without directing it. A dialogical aesthetic suggests a very different image of the artist; one defined in terms of openness, of listening and a willingness to accept dependence and inter-subjective vulnerability.[18]
- The relationships between the artist and collaborators can be difficult to negotiate equitably, as the artist often operates as an outsider, occupying a position of perceived cultural authority. [19] This is where the skill of the artist is

[13] Tim Stott, "Interview with Grant Kester"
[14] Grant H. Kester, *The One and The Many* 115
[15] Kester, *The One and the Many*,112
[16] Ibid 115
[17] Kester, *Conversation Pieces*,, 122
[18] Kester, *The One and The Many*, 139
[19] Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 115

important in understanding these pitfalls. The privileged expertise and positions of those who are involved with the work must be valued as much as the privileged status of the artist.

The Blue House is an example of a project which provides the context for collaboration to take place. This was a durational project initiated in The Netherlands in 2005 by Van Heeswijk which lasted from May 2005-December 2009. During the course of the project there were 46,000 visitors and participants and over 900 events. The artist arranged to have a house taken off the market which she then persuaded someone to buy, and agreed to pay off the interest on the mortgage for the four year duration that the project would run.[20] Over a four-year period, artists, architects, thinkers, activists, writers and scholars of various nationalities were invited to live and work in *The Blue House* Housing Association of the Mind for periods of up to six months (Fig. 1). Engagement with the project was unconditional but participants had to be willing to surrender to the concept of community as an evolving entity and to find their place within its changing organisational structure. *The Blue House* provided a space for discussion, research and intervention in the public domain. [21] It was the members of *The Blue House* who decided how, when and to what extent they wished to engage with the project. The only prerequisite was that they shared their thinking and what they produced with the other members of the house. Decision making within the group was not hierarchal but was undertaken democratically by its members through discussion, conflict and disagreement.[22]*The Blue House* is representative of Van Heeswijk's interest in producing models of social rationality rather than producing artwork with its own intrinsic value.

[20] During the planning and pre-development of the new island town of IJburg (set to contain 18,000 homes for 45,000 residents), Van Heeswijk was approached by an architect working for the municipality to consider making an entrance to block thirty-five of a new housing estate in IJburg more visible. Van Heeswijk rejected the invitation because of its limitations, but began to look at projected plans for IJburg. Having being asked by a public art advisor to make a proposal outlining the future role of art in the newly created environment Van Heeswijk noted that little room had been left for the uncontrolled, the unexpected and the unplanned. She persuaded that a large villa in the central courtyard of block thirty five which would face privately owned dwellings on one side and social housing on the other side be taken off the market. She spent the next eighteen months looking for a buyer until eventually in 2004 she persuaded someone to buy the house with the artist paying the interest on the mortgage from funds raised for the following four years, in exchange for use of the house as the core site within a durational project.(Paul O Neill, "The Blue House(Het Blauwe Huis) IJburg Amsterdam, the Netherlands" in *Locating the Producers: Durational Approaches to Public Art*, Claire Doherty and Paul O Neill(eds)(Amsterdam: Valiz 2011),22)

[21] Ibid, 31-33

[22] Ibid 36

The time spent by the members of *The Blue House* is productive because of its durational and discursive attributes where many ideas and people interact with one and other.[23]Invitees conducted research, produced works of art, films and publications and were involved in discussions and related activities. This resulted in numerous research led interventions being made by practitioners in and around *The Blue House* and IJburg, which responded to the specifics of a place undergoing construction as part of an extensive urban renewal plan.[24]

Central to any consideration of the *Blue House* are the ways in which urban issues can be dealt with while retaining artistic freedom under often restrictive conditions, and ways in which both ethics and aesthetics can prevail without value being limited to considerations of either social effectiveness or artistic merit.[25] It provided a framework that united multiple modes of participation and its value as an artwork lay in its capacity to be experienced by participants as part of a collaborative process in which their multitude of experiences were also the end point of the process. Rather than being experienced as an aesthetic object, *The Blue House* functioned as a discursive tool, gathering its form and content in the process of its production with conversation being an integral part of the object itself.[26]This corresponds to Kester's notion of dialogical art which has as its core value the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange, with this dialogue envisaged as an artistic medium. Van Heeswijk has said "my activities are primarily focused on constructing frameworks, then I guide the processes happening inside the frame, although I don't enforce anything. At most I create conditions where moments could emerge which intervene with perception, so that new images of frameworks might come into being."[27]

The Sligo United Trades Club Revival was a project by Seamus Nolan, commissioned by The Model with funding from Create. It took place between 2009 and 2010. The project involved the refurbishment and utilisation of the space and ethos of the defunct social club[28] by a group of local voluntary participants and social activists, in the process of

[23] Ibid, 34
[24] Ibid, 35
[25] O Neill, "Locating the producers", 40
[26] O' Neill, "Locating the Producers", 41
[27] O' Neill, "Locating the Producers", 56
[28] The Sligo Trades Club was founded in 1893 and for more than 100 years the Trades Club has been the home of a vibrant working man's club, a voluntary members club where those who use the space were directly involved in its running. The club moved to a permanent location in 2 Castle Street Sligo in 1906.

which a small board of directors emerged to formalise the club and maintain its operation for the following twelve months. The motivation for the artwork was the activity of interrogating public space and its production, and of accessing the commonalities of community formation and replication.[29] The role of the artist involved playing different roles until each role until each role was filled by someone who wanted to take it on. Over the course of the year the monthly committee meetings attracted the support of committed individuals, a growing number of public and private events and organisers wishing to use the space, resulting in its frequent use and a growing competence in managing its operation. The role of the artist was to guide the discourse, provide interruptions when it stalled, and to act as a catalyst to direct it away from localised identity politics. His role as an outsider enabled a venting and an objective opening up of dialogue around the space and its history, a public forum, a civic space of shared responsibility and historical lineage. The artist relinquished his autonomy becoming just another committee member, according to Nolan "although initiating and driving the project, the artist's role was no different than that of the many previous revivalists who took on the club and facilitated its operation, negotiating common concerns and reaching collective forms of agreement."[30] The Trade's Club is a place where different senses of self can be understood and formed.

Claire Bishop argues that the social turn in contemporary art has led to an ethical turn in art criticism and that if looked at from an avant-garde perspective many of these practices lack political bite, and are judged by how ethically good they are rather than being judged aesthetically as art. Bishop writing from an avant-garde perspective judges good participatory art to be one that rubs the viewer or participant against the grain, the aesthetic experience of which is discomfort and rupture.[31].It is not possible to apply these criteria to either the Trades Club Revival or The Blue House as both of these projects occur over an extended duration, and their aesthetic experience is not based on an individual exhibition encounter.

The collective BAVO are highly critical of the art of Van Heeswijk calling it NGO art in which art is redefined in terms of creative consultancy which is the act of consultancy

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By 2007 due to various reasons the club was in a bad state of repair and closed.(Seamus Nolan, "The Trades Club Revival," in *The Trades Club Revival*, ed. Seamus Nolan (Sligo: The Model,2012), 39)

[29] Nolan, "The Trades Club Revival", 39

[30] Nolan, "The Trades Club Revival", 45

[31] Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents", in *Artforum*, February 2006

constructed as an artwork. To BAVO this constitutes a fundamental move away from any deep criticism, from a practice that throws fundamental questions at the ruling order and confronts it with its inconvenient truths towards an arts practice devoted to providing answers, solutions, and toolkits for the problems at hand often in close cooperation with market players or public institutions.[32] The criticism seems unjustified in terms of *The Blue House*. By self-commissioning she has side-stepped the issue of cooperation with the market players and has given a good deal of autonomy to the project. Although the project operated from within the community, while retaining enough distance for things to happen, it was not there to serve the community or do-good for the community.[33] As the project was not funded by city planners, public art agencies or developers responsible for IJburg, it did not have to fulfil obligations for public outcomes, deadlines for exhibitions or a proposed program of activities that met funder's objectives.

The Trade's Club Revival is not an ethical project, the trades club is not a place of self-improvement or utopian endeavour instead it is an oasis that offers pleasures such as pool, alcohol and wild music (Fig. 2). Nolan did not set out to engage with any particular community, he artist initiated the project with a call out for a public meeting to consider the idea of reviving the historical social centre. Nolan provided the context and used his skills to guide the discourse and help the project to develop momentum. The community built around the process of reviving the club. In an article commissioned for the piece Frances McKee describes the *Trades Club Revival* as an artwork that activates a social interstice, or a micro-revolution, a small tactical gesture of resistance that evades "the nets of power thrown across social activity by the forces of capital." [34]

Collaborative practices such as these offer a different articulation of a capacity that Kester considers central to the constitution of modern art: that is the ability of aesthetic experience to transform perceptions of difference and to open space for forms of

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[32] BAVO, *Always Choose the Worst Option-Artistic Resistance and the strategy of Over-Identification*, 30/10/2007 accessed online at http://www.bavo.biz/texts/view/45, accessed on 8/3/2013

[33] Addressing the criticism of being a social worker Van Heeswijk has said "such comments don't just display an arrogant attitude towards other professions but also contempt for an artist's strategy […] incidentally I don', I specifically don't see it as the artist's duty to relieve social distress. I strive to generate positive energy which is within my means."(Miriam Weston " The Artist as Versatile Infiltrator of Public Space", in *n.paradoxa international feminist art journal volume* 12)

[34] Frances McKee, "Common Ground" in *The Trades Club Revival*, ed. Seamus Nolan(Sligo" The Model, 2012), 12

knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, or political conventions.[35] Open-ended collaborative practices do not sit easily with traditional art-historical critical methods which have an understanding of the transformative power of the aesthetic experience of art to be based on shock and rupture. The context provided by the artists in works such as these allow for collaboration between many different agents, the aesthetic experience of which in many ways lies in the process of this collaboration. The context or art work needs to be evaluated according to this experience.

Figure 1. The Blue House. Accessed online at http://www.artandeducation.net/client/the_blue_house/ accessed on 21/4/2014

[35] Grant H. Kester, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art In A global Context*,(Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 11

Figure 2. The Sligo Trades Club, September 2010. Accessed online at http://themodel.ie/weblog/the-trades-club-revival project accessed on 21/4/2013

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