

# People as More Than a Subject

"Socially Engaged Puerto Rican Artist, Chemi Rosado-Seijo,  
Uses Community Collaboration As His Medium"

by Juliana Biondo



Photo by Al Miner

This isn't the classic white cube gallery exhibition. For starters, the objects do not maintain an air of

aloofness, visitors can get close. There is even noise in the space, a lot of it. The pings of chatter and hums of not-so-far-off cars coming from the gallery's speakers create an ambiance akin to a public playground. Right away the mood is set: the art in this gallery is connected to a public, we are looking at art that belongs to a community.

Chemi Rosado-Seijo's *Communities in Motion/Comunidades en Movimiento* - now on view until April 8th at the Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Art Gallery and the Lucille M. & Richard F. X. Spagnuolo Art Gallery of Georgetown University - is an exhibition of socially engaged art, also known more simply as "social practice."

Socially engaged art is a notably broad characterization. And, more importantly, it is a field of artistic practice that is rapidly updating its own parameters. Generally speaking though, socially engaged art is a practice wherein the artist is equally - if not more - concerned with the process of creating the work of art as he or she is with the final object.

While in more traditional forms of art the artist may push paint around with a brush, or mold clay with his or her hands, in socially engaged art the artist instead becomes a kind of maestro, a facilitator. The artist orchestrates symphonies of individuals, bringing them together over a period of time to engage in some expressive activity. The socially-engaged artist's medium is people.

There are two notable thought leaders who began to

carve out this field in the late 1990s. Crafting the foundational terms, the first was British anthropologist Alfred Gell and the second was French curator Nicolas Bourriaud. As showcased in his 1998 text *Art and Agency*, Gell focused on exploring the ways in which art could make tangible and measurable changes. Changes that one could point to and say 'art did that.' Bourriaud, in his text *Relational Aesthetics* also from 1998, posited that the job of an artist was to mirror the human experience as it was an experience constantly shaped by social contexts and relationships, not independent private spaces or thoughts.

With this in mind, we return to Rosado-Seijo's exhibition. *Communities in Motion* showcases a collection of his community-based artworks as captured through videos, photographs and sculptures. Notable for the fact that this is his first show in the mainland (Rosado-Seijo is Puerto Rican), the exhibition includes his largest project to date, *El Cerro*, as well as *La Perla Bowl*, and his more recent work with DC's skateboard communities, to name a few.





The works on view read mostly as documents (and many have in their very title “documentation of”). In the gallery showcasing *El Cerro* - a project centered around engaging local residents in the painting of their homes to build social cohesion and communal pride - we are presented with digital photographs. Some showcase the beautifully painted houses, images taken with a slight bird’s eye perspective to see the hillside of facades. Others capture details from within the streets and highlight the community members involved. It is a sweet moment to see the smiles of those impacted. Though, the sweetness lacked some depth. I wanted to better understand the texture of the process behind *El Cerro*. In the introductory text we learned that the project had challenging moments, triumphant successes, and pivotal occurrences of realization and newfound community buy-in. What did those exact moments look like? Feel like? We know that *El Cerro* took root, but how? I wished for something to break the surface documentation of the project and provide a window into the world that would give me a hint at the answer to these questions.





El Cerro (detail shot) 2003

Chemi Rosado-Seijo,

mounted chromogenic prints

18.27" x 13.87"

Walking across the room, there was a set of photographs where this surface began to crack. In an otherwise sea of archival materials, certain photographs managed to go beyond their historian responsibilities and transcended into art objects with their own agency. Though indicated as a document, *Documentation of El Trampolín* is fantastically artistic - it simultaneously presents as surreal and realistic. The photograph is taken from below automatically placing us as the viewer into a position in which everything feels magnified. We see this young boy frozen mid-tumble after he launches himself into what we can only assume (and hope) is water. He is coming off a diving board, but the diving board is attached to a stone ledge. This is an unlikely combination. Our eyes slowly but surely catch the only moment in the photograph that is not an earth gray, brown, blue or green color - a yellow mechanical brace. We learn that this board was in fact manually installed onto a stone bridge to provide a more adept launching point for the residents who would often dive from the bridge into the water for fun anyways. The image documents something as real as possible - a summer recreational

activity that gained traction organically among its residents in a search for joy, and relief from the heat. Yet, the image doesn't allow all the pieces of the puzzle - a diving board, no visible water, a plastic brace, a singular figure - to stack up logically. It's individually real components render it holistically surreal. This is the crack. This is perhaps that window I was craving. In this image I can feel the sentiment of spontaneity and tailor-made solutions. I can feel the freedom that comes with knowing locality. I can feel why this intervention was so successful.



Documentation of El Trampolín, 2000

Dos Hermanos Bridge, San Juan, PR

Chemi Rosado-Seijo

Chemi's work expertly reveals the interpersonal means by which art functions, how his work relies on the involvement of others. Of his practice, Chemi states, "*Often my artworks, projects or interventions are set*

*and/or developed in the communities that have inspired said works, projects or interventions...This 'interweaving' of the communities that have inspired my work intends to pay homage to the people and the site where they have formed their communities."*

The relational aspect of his work places him at the very center of socially engaged art. His practice is a beautiful one with recognizable ripple effects. Perhaps this is the real magic of social practice, it endows art with actions that no one can ever predict, but instead can only appreciate as they unfold. And it is this ripple effect that stands as the new art, the new "object" to showcase in the gallery space. The challenge is now how to crystalize the process- one that by its very nature is always changing - to best showcase it as a real learning opportunity for not only those who experience it, but also for those who can only see it through its documents. Or maybe this kind of art cannot exist in the realm of spectators, it can only truly exist among its actors, those living its intervention first-hand.

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*Chemi Rosado-Seijo: Communities in Motion/Comunidades en Movimiento* is now on view at the Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Art Gallery and the Lucille M. & Richard F. X. Spagnuolo Art Gallery of Georgetown University until April 8, 2020.

For more information and visiting hours:



Juliana Biondo is an internationally-oriented arts practitioner based in Washington DC as the assistant curator at the World Bank's Art Program. Prior to her current role, Juliana worked in Rome as a curatorial researcher and educational programs manager for the Vatican Museums, and New York as an account executive at SUTTON, orchestrating domestic and international media strategies for gallery and museum clients. She holds a BA in the History of Art from Yale University, and an MA in 20th Century Art from the Courtauld Institute in London.

<https://julianajbiondo.com/>





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