

Book Review:

Sommer, Doris. *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014)



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Doris Sommer's Book *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* must be received as vivid recollections of anecdotal and yielding civic interventions. Most of these celebrated creative social interventions relate either to confident "high-ranking" political leaders or weird grassroots artists in some particular socioeconomic contexts already in paralysis. No doubt, such models of civic initiatives cannot be transposed to other communities; therefore, it is easy to reject Sommer's propositions as over-optimistic and operationally inapplicable. It is also acceptable here to restate the reactions of the Duke Press editors who told Doris Sommer right at the onset that this book "is too much theory" and "no one wants to read theory".¹

The most remarkable blame Somers should take is that she overlooks pertinent contributions to the field as she must not introduce herself as a unique contributor to the subject: many other scholars attempted to reconcile humanities with democracy and social action. However, Doris Sommer tries to invite renowned philosophers to endorse her argument in her book *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities*. Schiller and Kant are on top of her inspiring guests.

Sommer's attempts to answer the lately persistent question about the utility of humanities are partially pertinent. For most pragmatist views, humanities have become *useless*, as many column writers and academics argue, but for Sommer, humanities offer a wide range of creative and engaged civic action possibilities. In her book *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities*, Sommer advances a convincingly mature argument favouring the utility of humanities outside museums and art galleries. Most of the chapters in this book are rather appealing than convincing. Sommer acknowledges this is a "*Beta*," or experimental version of the project to generate commentary and criticism (12). She attests that she is only trying to pave the way for a remarriage between humanities and the civic agency grounded in the *millennial* tradition of art and democracy. As she tries to do so, she steps down the ivory tower; Sommer insists on diversifying resources to her theoretical framework by borrowing creative interventions from both extremes of the social continuum, from the elite and the grassroots, to avoid criticism for academic elitism. In subsequent paragraphs, I will see how consistent Sommer was in building her argument across the chapters of her book.

The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public takes inspiration from art projects that required more recognition than they have received. These are creative works on grand and small scales that morph into institutional innovation (14). Sommer opens her book by paying tribute to the creative

¹ MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology. Doris Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities*, March 2, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJANn193KD0&t=3405s>

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projects that received less attention than they deserved. Sommer meticulously recalls several socially engaged projects from various fields and disciplines in the first two chapters. All of these models are appealingly inspiring and enthralling. In effect, this beautiful recollection of such successful models of civic engagement constitutes the cornerstone of Sommer's theoretical '*pragmatic defense*' in favour of the utility of humanities outside academia.

Sommer unceasingly reports the *unconventional cures* that the Anatan Mockus invented in the face of violence and corruption that paralyzed a whole city such as *Bogotá*, Columbia. This notorious nerd utilized 'relational art' (27) to generate dialogue and interaction among citizens aspiring for some social action to reduce traffic deaths and, later on tax evasions. This project received much attention as it cut down traffic casualties and refreshed the city's economy as the inhabitants willingly started to pay a significant percentage of their income to the state. Amongst the other successful projects that Sommer suggests is that of the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, who managed to turn a decaying city into the safe haven of beauty and arts. These two models are branded as '*top-down*' (12) initiatives.

As for the '*bottom-up*' (13) socially engaged initiatives, Sommer devotes the second chapter of her book to projects that some disempowered social groups launched to stir the dynamics of social change. Most of these projects' effects mounted to lobbying for equitable state legislation that recognized the rights of marginalized groups. She stresses that such projects used creative artistic tools to express the needs of the oppressed. However, Sommer fails to deal with a counter-argument presented by a fellow scholar named Michael Warner, who attests in *Publics and Counter publics* (2002) that members of marginalized groups can participate in socially engaged public life projects only if they are given space to articulate their identities and interests openly. That is to say, the freedom to express *oneself* is not generalized to include all members of society, namely subcategories that still struggle for a just *sexual citizenship*. Sommer is invited to reframe her optimism in a more calculated style.

Sommer stresses the civic possibilities of arts to address the central question of her book about the utility of humanities in the wake of the twentieth century. She strives hard to inscribe her contribution to a genealogy of aesthetic philosophy and literature. Therefore, Sommer's book *The Work of Art in the World* gives insights into the operationalization of high-order theory in the down-home routines. Such a stretch in history and literature eclipses the viability of the pedagogical framework she introduces in her book. This book is so deeply grounded in the Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy that it overlooks prominent contributions of recent scholars to the heated academic debate about the utilities and value of the humanities in the twenty-first century, both in the Americas and the world.

In chapter three, Sommer states that arts are socially accountable. She writes in this respect that individuals who engage with arts will be either confused or delighted; therefore, '*develop free thinking*' (87) and '*unbiased judgment*' (88), both necessary for building a democratic society. It is fair to acknowledge the presence of the Schillerian and Kantian traditions in her defence of aesthetic judgment as a model of judgment that communities need to challenge arbitrarily conventional paradigms. In this regard, she calls for training aesthetic judgment as it is free and disinterested. That is to say, it never succumbs to economic or any other interests. She further tries to differentiate disinterest from indifference because disinterest is crucial for engendering universals for agreement, whereas indifference kills every chance for civic agency and collaboration.

In the fourth chapter, Sommer falls back on her background professional experience as a high school teacher. She seems somewhat operational and mainly preoccupied with devising a pedagogical workshop for teaching about the utilities of humanities. She writes that humanistic education will advance literacy, educate taste and encourage civic participation. Sommer brings in an inspiring project called Pre-texts for analysis in this chapter. She describes *pre-texts* as follows: Pre-Texts is an

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intentionally naughty name to signal that even the classics can be material for manipulation. Books are not sacred objects; they are invitations to play (113). The overall intent behind this resonates adequately with the Freirian theory of the education of the underprivileged. Sommer is likely devising some classroom activity for students to acquire higher-order thinking skills they would later need to participate in socially engaged action.

In chapter five, Sommer falls back on a tradition of optimism about the arts' civic possibilities. Friedrich Schiller's book *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* is the cornerstone of her adventure to bridge the historical gap between Baconian reasoning and Kantian morality. Schiller introduces a third faculty called "*the Spieltrieb or play drive*" (136). In general, Play brings balance between the two hemispheres of the mind by inviting reason and sentiment to a rewarding agreement. She writes in this regard that "raising man above his dual and dangerous nature . . . playfulness creates multiple perspectives that bypass the monovision of sensuousness or of reason" (137). Obviously, Sommer seems here paddling centrifugally from her initial promise to advance some *pragmatic defense* in favour of the civic possibilities that humanities offer to delve deep into the deepest oceans of Aesthetics philosophy.

Sommer's book is a work of art: I experienced plenty of delight and confusion while reading this book. She creates a near-perfect *collage* of anecdotal projects of engaged social action to endorse her account of the utility of humanities in a world that needs more civism than ever before. She wins her case for the viability of using artistic ways to solve public issues and encourage democratic participation. She brought models from all walks of life to tell us that creativity is exclusive to none.

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