

**PART 3. Debated Territory: The Nineties**



## Introduction

As audiences for arts expanded, public art became an object of civic debate. The classic example was the placement, and subsequent removal through public protest, of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in the Jacob Javitz Plaza in New York City. My writing focus during this period was to align practice with textual argument, for example, to reframe public art, insert community and race activism into feminist art, and test the strategies of the field against theory-based criticism. I convened a national conference, and from this gathering *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* was published, a series of essays by artists and writers to distinguish an activist public practice from then-current definitions of public art.

During this decade I "left" art in a sense, spending more of my time engaged directly with local communities, rather than exhibiting in museums and galleries. I recorded this work via televised newscasts and documentaries and through widely attended performances, lectures, and other presentations. Living in Oakland, an extraordinarily racially diverse city, I worked with youth, artists, and activists on a ten-year series of projects within education, criminal justice, health, and local governance, an endeavor that taught me much about the alignment of political forces around/against race and class.

The more time that artists spend in a community, the more they must respond to demands for authentic engagement. As these performances began to resemble the complex community practices they aligned with and sometimes mirrored, I developed a practice led by critical questions: whether it was possible for artists to exert a substantive impact on communities, in direct partnerships with media producers, politicians, and activists; whether civic institutions could be significantly recruited for social and aesthetic aims; and how to transform hundreds, even thousands of personal attitudes that might, in turn, be measured through policy outcomes. In a barrio of Medellín, in a maximum-security prison in upstate New York, and in Oakland, California, collaborators and participants engaged, not without conflict, in deep and substantive civic discourse through art.