

Power and the Margins: Social Critique and Artistic Intervention in the Works of Santiago Sierra

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of accelerating globalization and neoliberalism, contemporary artists have become increasingly attentive to the contradictory relationship between power structures and marginalized social groups. This article focuses on the socially interventionist works of the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, examining how he reveals the exploitative mechanisms of contemporary capitalism through labor exchange, institutional exposure, and body politics. The study aims to analyze the artistic logic of 'labor–power–body' embedded in Sierra's works and to discuss the ethical controversies and social reflections they provoke. The methodology primarily includes literature review and case analysis, systemically sorting through the structures, contexts, and audience experiences of Sierra's representative works in order to understand the social logic underlying his artistic strategies. The study finds that Sierra's works present the operations of social power in a stark and direct manner, rendering suppressed labor relations visible while prompting viewers to recognize their own complicity within power systems. This article argues that Sierra's practice not only exposes inequalities within social structures but also unveils the power mechanisms operating inside the art institution itself, offering an important perspective for understanding the social-critical function of contemporary art.

Keywords: Contemporary Art, Power Structure, Social Intervention, Labor Politics

1. Introduction

In the development of contemporary art, artists have increasingly addressed social realities, particularly the relationship between power structures and marginalized groups. Spanish contemporary artist Santiago Sierra (1966–) is known for his sharp, provocative, and controversial socially interventionist works. By 'hiring' vulnerable groups to perform repetitive, meaningless, or discomforting tasks, he presents the hidden mechanisms of capitalist exploitation in a direct and unsentimental way.

This article aims to explore the social critique and artistic intervention in Sierra's works, analyzing how he exposes structural inequality through forms of 'work' and 'compensation,' while examining the ethical debates and social significance triggered by his projects. Through close readings of representative works, this study demonstrates how Sierra visualizes and critiques power relations through artistic intervention.

2. Contemporary art's engagement with marginalized social groups

2.1. Overview of the relationship between contemporary art and marginalized groups

Since the 1960s, contemporary art has gradually shifted from formal inquiry toward social intervention. Nicolas Bourriaud, in *Relational Aesthetics*, argues that art constitutes a 'state of encounter,' emphasizing its significance as social practice [1]. This theory provides a legitimate foundation for artists addressing marginalized groups. Meanwhile, Hal Foster argues in *The Return of the Real* that postmodern artists return to social trauma and marginalized individuals, seeking to bridge the gap between reality and representation through artistic practice—an inclination he associates with a return to the body, society, and trauma [2].

Within this context, contemporary art is no longer confined to 'aesthetic' concerns but becomes a site for experimenting with social structures and ethical issues. Through participatory, performative, and installation-based strategies, artists intervene in social issues—from refugees and gender to race and labor rights—extending Joseph Beuys's concept of 'social sculpture' [3]. This socially engaged art not only redefines the function of art but also expands the viewer's social awareness.

2.2. Attempts by contemporary artists to address marginalized groups

Many contemporary artists highlight marginality and unequal power relations through diverse methods. For example, Hans Haacke reveals the hidden ties between art and capital (e.g., *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings*, 1971), while Tania Bruguera promotes civic action through the notion that 'performance art is political action' (e.g., *Rhinewater Purification Plant*, 1972).

What these artists share is the use of art as a medium to make invisible individuals 'visible' again. Grant Kester argues in *Conversation Pieces* that such practices reconfigure power relations in public space through dialogue and collaboration [4].

However, unlike these more 'collaborative' forms of socially engaged art, Santiago Sierra's artistic interventions are characterized by austerity, exploitation, and unease: he does not aim to 'save' the weak but to expose the brutality of systems by reenacting exploitation itself.

2.3. The creative logic and background of Santiago Sierra

Sierra's creative practice is deeply influenced by the globalization wave and neoliberal economic structures of the 1990s. His years in Mexico exposed him to the vast divides between labor and capital, directly shaping his thematic focus on 'labor–power.' As art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina notes, 'Sierra's art is not a plea for compassion, but a revelation of the logic of power' [5].

Sierra's works often take the form of concrete 'labor contracts,' wherein he pays participants to perform tasks, thereby exposing the asymmetrical relations among body, labor, and money in capitalism. Examples include: *The Spanish Pavilion of the Venice Biennale* (2003), where only holders of Spanish passports were allowed entry, reenacting exclusionary institutional mechanisms; *7 Forms Measuring 600 × 60 × 60 cm Constructed to Be Held Horizontal to a Wall* (2001), in which workers use their bodies to support heavy forms, symbolizing oppressed labor structures; *War Veterans Facing the Corner* (2010), forcing veterans to stand facing the wall, representing forgotten individuals within the machinery of war; *133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blonde* (2001), exposing racialized aesthetics and cultural hegemony under globalization.

3. Social inquiry and impact in Santiago Sierra's works

Sierra's artistic practice constitutes more than a surface-level exposure of social injustice; it is a systematic mechanism of social critique. He treats art as an experimental social apparatus, constructing a visual language of 'power–labor–body' through hired labor, bodily intervention, and institutional exposure. This language rejects traditional aesthetic mediation and forces the audience to confront social reality in a direct—even brutal—manner. As Boris Groys argues in *Art Power*, the politicality of contemporary art lies not in what it says but in how it reveals mechanisms of power [6]. Sierra achieves this critical force through his strategy of 'formal exposure.'

3.1. Societal discussion: revealing structures of power and exploitation

3.1.1. Visualizing labor and power

One of Sierra's core strategies is re-presenting 'invisible labor' to the public. By paying minimal wages to temporary workers, the homeless, or migrants, he exposes the alienation of labor value in capitalist society. In *6 Paid People to Stand Back to Back Against a Wall* (2000), the hired participants remain silent and invisible—their bodies symbolizing economic exploitation. The viewer's act of looking reproduces and becomes complicit in the structure of exploitation.

This 'visualization' is both revelation and trap: Sierra positions viewers within ethical tension, oscillating between sympathy and complicity. Through the staging of 'labor,' he materializes power structures within art spaces, destabilizing the boundary between art and reality.

3.1.2. The body as social metaphor

In Sierra's works, the body is not merely a vessel for action but a metaphor for social power structures. In *Paid to Have Four Prostitutes Tattooed* (2000), the female body becomes the literal site of monetary exchange, exposing the intersection of gender and economic oppression. Sierra does not 'exploit' these bodies but compels viewers to confront the exploitative systems they already participate in.

As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, the meaning of the body is continually produced through power relations [7]. Sierra translates this theory into visible experience: the marked body becomes a tangible sign of social control.

This bodily politics also resonates with Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary power over the body in *Discipline and Punish* [8]. By making the body an object of endurance and resistance, Sierra's work becomes a rebellion against disciplinary systems—an artistic strategy of 'revealing structural violence through bodily pain.'

3.1.3. Institutional critique: the mirror of the art system

Sierra's critique extends beyond social structures to the institution of art itself. The Spanish Pavilion of the Venice Biennale (2003) is a quintessential example, turning national identity's exclusionary mechanism into an exhibition rule. Being denied entry forces the viewer to experience institutional violence firsthand.

Rather than creating new objects, Sierra incorporates the institution itself as a ready-made, echoing Duchamp but with a sharper political edge. Groys argues that Sierra transforms art space into a microcosm of political power rather than its representation [6]. By using institutions as a medium, he exposes the structural exclusions embedded within artistic systems.

3.2. Social impact: ethical controversy and awareness

3.2.1. Provoking ethical debate in art

Sierra's works consistently occupy the center of ethical controversy. Critics argue that he re-exploits the weak under the guise of art, yet this accusation reveals the ethical complexity of his practice. Carol Becker suggests in *The Subversive Imagination* that the moral power of art lies not in avoiding harm but in exposing how society produces harm [9].

For Sierra, 'harm' is not incidental but reflects structural reality. By reenacting exploitation, he induces a sense of internal complicity in viewers, refusing to replace structural critique with sentimental comfort.

3.2.2. Inspiring reflection on social structures

Sierra not only exposes social contradictions but also prompts viewers to reconsider their own positions within social systems. Jacques Rancière argues in *The Politics of Aesthetics* that politics fundamentally concerns the reconfiguration of what is visible and sayable [10]. Sierra redistributes this regime of visibility, marking marginalized subjects within symbolic order.

This is not merely a 'politics of viewing' but a 'reconfiguration of consciousness.'

He does not offer answers about whether art can change society; instead, he presents problems, inviting autonomous reflection.

3.2.3. Art institution's self-revelation

Sierra treats artistic institutions as extensions of capitalist power structures—museums, biennials, and galleries all reproduce inequality. In contexts such as the Venice Biennale or Berlin galleries, his works reveal both social exclusion and the art world's moral hypocrisy: the art system consumes social suffering while packaging itself as 'critical.'

This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field as a site of power struggle [11]. By incorporating institutions into his works, Sierra completes a reflexive critique of art itself.

4. Conclusion

Santiago Sierra's works expose contemporary power structures and marginal mechanisms in a brutal and direct manner. Rather than depicting the weak with sentimentality, he forces viewers to confront exploitative logic. His practice generates ethical discomfort while fostering social awareness.

At its core, Sierra's art constitutes a social experiment: by rendering the relationship among 'art–labor–capital' visible, art becomes a site for reflecting on power structures. Through extreme strategies, his works compel a reconsideration of the boundaries among art, ethics, and society.

This study still has some limitations: a. Methodological limitations: This article relies mainly on literature analysis and case studies without interviews, fieldwork, or quantitative methods from art sociology; thus, subjective experiences of marginalized participants remain insufficiently explored; b. Lack of systematic audience studies: While Sierra's works provoke ethical debate, this study has not examined how different audiences interpret his works; c. Need for broader theoretical frameworks: The article primarily employs critical theory and institutional critique without incorporating affective politics, actor-network theory (ANT), etc.; d. Insufficient comparative context: The article focuses on Sierra without systematically comparing artists in other regions (Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia) working in similarly socially engaged art. Future research

may focus on conducting qualitative interviews to analyze subjective experiences of those hired in Sierra's works and examining how ethical reactions differ across countries and cultures.

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