PARTICIPATORY ART: A PARADIGM SHIFT FROM OBJECTS TO SUBJECTS

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The shift that has been recognised recently in the field of art from establishing relations between objects towards establishing relations between subjects is not the result of an overnight turn, as it may seem at first sight. It has been greatly influenced by philosophical or sociological theories and today is mainly appropriated by post-conceptual, socially and politically engaged art, or by art activism, although some similar art discourses and practices existed before, anticipating contemporary theory and practice. This text is envisaged as a kind of assessment in which I want to focus on the way some theoretical discourses have shaped this recent «participatory shift» in the arts.

My main aims are to follow the trajectory along which the established theoretical concepts turn into art projects and to locate the gaps between the promise of participation in theory and its shortcomings in concrete art projects in different contexts.

In such a limited space, I cannot undertake an in-depth analysis of the prehistory of the participatory turn. It is clear that, besides the theoretical background of this cultural shift, there have been some other overlooked participatory art phenomena, media and artists that long precede those starting in the early 90s, the period to be examined in this text. Let me mention only a few examples: the video art practice of the independent and guerrilla TV stations (e.g. Top Value TV), participatory theatres such as The Living Theatre, or the early happenings by Alan Kaprow and Mike Kelly from the 60s, as well as the «new genre public art» coined by Suzanne Lacy.

Besides avoiding any in-depth analysis of previous participatory art practices, I will also have to circumvent any analysis of the political circumstances during the late sixties and early seventies. However, it has to be stressed that they somehow invite a comparison with today’s political context, e.g. the great number of armed conflicts in the world involving the USA or the international threat of anarchy and terrorism that incited the newly awakened social and political conservatism.

At this stage, I also find it important to differentiate between participatory art practices and the much broader term «interaction», wherein the relations established between the members of the audience or between them and the art objects are much more passive and formal (usually directed by certain formal instructions, given by the artists, that are to be followed during the exhibitions).

I have to make all these distinctions to narrow the framework of this text because I want to reflect particularly on the most recent shift of the artists’ focus: from dealing with objects and installations towards dealing with subjects and enabling their participation in art activities. I am interested in the processes of establishing certain unique relations with these subjects that are initiated by the artists and in examining the effect of these projects as reflected in the real life of the participants (not only within the «laboratory conditions» of art galleries). Participation is the activation of certain relations that is initiated and directed by the artists and often encouraged by art institutions, and that
sometimes becomes the sole goal of certain art projects.

While inviting the audience to actively participate, the artists of the participatory projects create certain interfaces that are well prepared in advance and highly contextualised in a certain social, cultural and political environment. This shift, I will argue, happens both as an inevitable response by the art practice to the philosophical texts dealing with the re-definition of the concept of community and communitarian, and as a kind of reaction to the societal demand to include and make visible the marginalised groups of citizens who have been excluded from the social environment or from participation in public cultural life. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious that art stemming from theoretical and societal participatory discourse invites severe criticism and this text will therefore look at the sources of this criticism as well.

Aporias of »we«
Among the many different categorisations of various participatory art practices I present the one suggested by the art market researcher Alan Brown:

- Inventive Arts Participation - engages the audience in an act of artistic creation that is unique and idiosyncratic.
- Interpretive Arts Participation - a creative act of self-expression that brings alive and adds value to pre-existing works of art.
- Curatorial Arts Participation - a creative act of selecting, organising and collecting art according to one’s own artistic sensibility.
- Observational Arts Participation - encompasses arts experiences motivated by some expectation of value.
- Ambient Arts Participation - experiencing art, consciously or unconsciously, that is not consciously select.[1]

In order to be able to locate the reasons for the vehement criticism directed at participatory projects, let me go back to certain theoretical concepts that I find relevant to such projects. Several references can be used as starting points when discussing participatory art. They are interconnected and interwoven, since all of them concentrate on intersubjectivity, communitarianism or Hardt/Negri’s »multitude«.

I will start my account with a discussion of the philosophical concept of »being singular plural« as it is formulated by Jean-Luc Nancy, or the »coming community« by Giorgio Agamben.2 I will then move towards the sociological concepts that emphasise participation as a crucial societal tendency, vitally necessary today to control the all-embracing neoliberalism driven by the »consumerisation« of human relations. At the end, I will focus on the discourses that are very closely related to art theory and art practices, such as the concept of »relational aesthetics« coined by Nicolas Bourriaud.

Nancy’s concept of »being« is always already »being with«. According to him, »being« always entails »with« as an inevitable conjunction that links different singularities.3 Nancy is a philosopher of the »coessentiality of being-with« because he does not believe in any philosophical solipsism or any »philosophy of the subject in the sense of the final [infinite] closure in itself of a for-itself«.4 He goes as far as saying that »there is no »self« except by virtue of a »with«, which, in fact, structures it.«5 He finds Heidegger’s existential analytics incomplete because, according to him, even though »Mitsein« is coessential with »Dasein«, it still has a subordinate position.6

When Nancy claims that the sharing of the world is a co-implication of existence he refers to the problem that at this moment we cannot truly say »we«: that we have forgotten the importance of »being-together«, »being-in-common« and »belonging«, and that we live »without relations«. In order to attain this knowledge and the praxis of »we«, according to Nancy, it is important to understand that »we« is not a subject in terms of self-identification, nor is that »we« composed of subjects.7 Here Nancy reminds us that the aporia of the »we« is actually the main aporia of intersubjectivity and he points out the impossibility of pinning down a universal »we« that consists of always the same

components.8

Whatever participation is to be discussed in the context of art, it always necessarily refers to a certain »we«, to a certain identification with a particular community in which different members of selected communities (members of the audience, professional groups, homeless people, or children) are to become co-existing parts of a certain »we«.

Even when the conditions of participation of the audience or a selected group or community of people are clearly marked, it is always the »we« that needs to be created in order for a project to start functioning as a participatory one.

The other part of this »we« is the artist, the curator, the art institution, or even the state (in some public art projects) that supposedly cares for the invisible, marginalised or neglected »other« as the counter-part of the very same »we«. The usual problem with this imaginary »we« is that it mostly exists only for the duration of a particular art event, except for rare examples where the artists create self-sustainable projects that continue even when they leave with the circus.9 Interestingly enough, the always newly created »we« contains different parts and counter-parts each time when necessary, but it is never stated what happened to the previous parts/participants.

Often the lack of a feeling of belonging to a common group, the lack of having a common identity with the artist-initiator prevents a thorough participatory effect. However, a real participatory effect in fact happens exactly when the conditions of participation are not based on strict commonality and predictable decisions for participation, or on a clear identification with the artist or the concept in terms of social, cultural or political commonalities. In addition, the clearly distinct »inoperative communities« that refuse to be state »accomplices« can always be more easily seduced by art methods and practices, as they are less involved in official political structures.10 For Nancy, the fear of communitarian work is related to the fear of totalitarianism that has existed ever since Stalin was associated with communist ideas; he therefore suggests that we should re-think the question of community.11

Fragmented community

In this context it is important to look at Nancy’s remark that community cannot arise from the domain of work.12 He states that community takes place through the withdrawal from work or »unworking« (»déseoeuvrement«), to use Blanchot’s term. Interruption, fragmentation, suspension: that is where community happens for Nancy. »Community is made of interruption of singularities...community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works...«13

This interpretation of community as being intrinsically inoperative and fragmentary helps in understanding the way in which participatory art projects function or fail to function in practice, especially when they are to be controlled by institutions.

This is linked to Agamben’s warning about the fact that »what the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging (even in the form of a simple presupposition.«14 Similarly to Nancy, Agamben sees »being-in-common« as distinct from community. In fact, the most frightening community for the State, according to him, is the one that rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, that is based on singularity and that wants, not to belong, but itself to appropriate belonging.15 Participatory art projects are distinct from the sociologically highly valued communitarian projects and they differ exactly in the possibility they offer for circumventing the conditions of belonging to a certain pre-existing and socially defined community.

The main question for Nicolas Bourriaud in his »Relational Aesthetics« stems from Guy Debord’s »Society of Spectacle«, and is related to Debord’s claim that our society is »a society where human relations are no longer »directly experienced.«16 In line with Debord’s critique of representation and its mediation of the world, Bourriaud asks: »Is it still possible to generate relationships with the world, in a practical field of art-history traditionally earmarked for their »representation«?17 For him, the answer to this question lies precisely
in the direct relations that artists can establish through their art activities as »social interstices«, which, according to him, is an effect of urbanisation. Bourriaud contrasts Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s »natural state«, which was dense and »trouble-free«, with the city as a »tangible symbol and historical setting of the state of society«. 18 By referring to Althusser’s notion of a »state of encounter imposed on people«, Bourriaud interprets this system of intensive encounters as a direct source of linked artistic practices, as »an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes ›being-together‹ as a central theme«. 19 Perhaps Bourriaud’s interpretation of works of art in Marxist terms as social interstices, using the term »interstices« as a space in human relations that suggests alternative »trading possibilities than those in effect within this system«, best explains the basis for his »relational aesthetics«, but it does not explain very well the participation of these relational projects within the overall societal functions. 20

In one of her texts, Marie Gee cites Arza Churchman’s discussion of various kinds of participation. According to Gee, Churchman defines participation as »decision-making by unelected, non-appointed citizens, or the incorporation of community members in planning and design. Without that decision-making element in participation, or if decisions are made by elected or appointed representatives, she will not even call it ›participation‹ but rather ›involvement‹«. 21 Two additional contradictions are at work in participatory art practices: 
- the limits of participatory and relational theories of art in the light of a postcolonial critique of art and cultural institutions
- the inclusion/exclusion binary and the tension between its social and political definitions in different contexts (e.g. liberal democracy and transitional societies)

One of the main criticisms of the impact of relational theory and the extent to which it is applicable to artists influenced by postcolonial critique is that the participatory art projects can easily be captured in the vicious circle of criticism without taking into account positive perspectives and any proposition for »real« participation. These kinds of projects can be more easily accepted by the society as a welcome, mild social critique instead of a more direct political critique.

There is another problem with participatory art in activist circles, when art is understood as a call for revolution and its success or failure is measured according to its revolutionary prerogatives. The interpretation of art as an agency that should circumvent the main societal and ideological obstacles that artists face outside of European democracy is prescriptive and expects too big an impact from art activism projects.

Finally, I would argue that art has yet to find a position that would reconcile the contradictions between these two radical ends: between »critique for critique’s sake« and art that can be turned into a revolutionary instrument.

1 »The Five Modes of Arts Participation«, January 31, 2006
4 Nancy, Being Singular Plural, p.29.
5 Nancy, Being Singular Plural, p.94.
6 Nancy, Being Singular Plural, p.93.
7 Nancy, Being Singular Plural, p.75.
8 Nancy, Being Singular Plural, p.75.
9 Thomas Hirschhorn’s project »Bataille’s Monument« during Documenta 11 is a typical example of a participatory project that provokes many hopes among the targeted local community that later cannot be fulfilled (a criticism addressed at Hirschhorn during the public debate after his lecture held in the Victoria Miro Gallery in London, organised by Goldsmiths College’s Visual Culture Department as a part of the conference »Field Work: Reports from the Fields of Visual Culture«, 2003).
11 Nancy, The Inoperative Community, p.2.
12 Nancy, The Inoperative Community, p.31.
13 Nancy, The Inoperative Community, p.31.
14 Agamben, The Coming Community, p.86.
15 Agamben, The Coming Community, p.87.
17 Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, p.9.
18 Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, p.15.
19 Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, p.15.
20 Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, p.16.