

Variations on a Theme:
Consensus and Dissensus
in Contemporary Participatory Art
Grant H. Kester

There is no surer way of evading the world than
art, and no surer way of attaching oneself to it.

Goethe, *Elective Affinities* (1809)

The concept of “participation” has emerged as a key theme in contemporary art over the past twenty-five years. This concept is deeply rooted in certain core ideological tensions associated with the history of modernist art, which remain largely unexamined in much of the writing associated with participatory art. In this essay I will explore these tensions and challenge the existing critical framing of participation, which is characterized by which two equally reductive variations. On the one hand participation is presented as the expression of a more egalitarian form of aesthetic experience, made possible through the liberatory erosion of the conventional hierarchies of the institutional artworld. And on the other hand, we encounter an equally reductive dismissal of participatory art for sacrificing art’s unique critical power by embracing an ontologically suspect notion of “consensus”. Instead, artists must dedicate themselves to a program of therapeutic “dissensus,” which offers the only hope for preserving art’s fragile emancipatory potential. As I’ll argue here, each of these paradigms is defined by a tactical elision of the specific mediating effects of the institutional artworld in determining the actual political significance of art practices produced under their auspices.

The concept of a participatory art is most notably linked with the writing of French curator Nicholas Bourriaud, whose book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) played a central role in its art historical validation during the 1990s. Prototypical examples include Félix González-Torres’s *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA)* (1991), in which the artist piled 175 pounds of wrapped candy in the corner of a gallery space.

As individual visitors took a piece of candy the size of the pile gradually diminished. Other examples include a series of meals prepared and served in galleries by artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, Carsten Höller's *Test Site* (2006) in which he installed a giant slide inside the Tate Modern, and Ben Kinmont's *Waffles for an Opening* (1990), in which he invited people to his home for a waffle breakfast. Here we find a group of primarily European and American artists who developed various participatory actions in conjunction with mainstream art institutions (galleries, art fairs, biennials, ICAs, museums), albeit, sometimes located in spaces adjacent to these institutions. There was, I believe, a genuine desire at the time to break down some of the reified conventions of gallery- and museum-based practices which had, by the 1990s, become largely formulaic and disconnected from the experiential reality of actual viewers or art audiences. There were countless reiterations of institutional critique at the time that did nothing but strengthen the institutions in which they were staged, ritualistic efforts to shock or disrupt viewers which were received in an entirely affirmative manner, and, hovering over it all, the omnipresent influence of the contemporary art market, which effortlessly turned even the most transgressive symbolic gesture into an opportunity for conspicuous consumption. This is, of course, a perennial dynamic in the history of modernism. Over a century ago German critic Lu Märten, writing for the *Die Rote Fahne*, identified a form of capitalism «that is still willing to see and pay for its own crimes in a mirror and panopticon under the etiquette of art»¹.

The works championed by figures such as Bourriaud marked an effort to establish forms of meaningful reciprocal interaction with concrete viewers, in a manner that levelled to some degree the hierarchies of the conventional avant-garde (which perceives the viewer as a cognitively deficient individual in need to awakening or enlightenment by the artist). As Bourriaud notes, these relational practices rejected «the elitist attitudes of certain actors in the art world, which reveals their holy terror of public spaces and collective aesthetic experimentation, and their love of boudoirs that are reserved for specialists»². Artistic production located in the «social infra-thin» of

¹ B. McCloskey, *George Grosz and the Communist Party: Art and Radicalism in Crisis 1918-1936*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1997, p. 83.

² N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by S. Pleasance and F. Woods, Les Presses du Réel, Paris 1998, p. 58.

«everyday gestures» evoked by Bourriaud held out the promise of a form of intersubjective exchange in which the artist could transcend the stultifying consensus of the gallery and museum space³. It marked as well the opening out of a participatory armature allowing at least some nominal physical interaction between the viewer and the artwork, in contrast to the conventional spatial hygiene of the museum, in which “do not touch” is the prime directive. In fact, in a society in which human relationality itself is increasingly instrumentalized and «the social bond has turned into a standardized artifact,» according to Bourriaud, this body of work was «really performing a political project when it attempts to move into the relational sphere by problematizing it»⁴.

These practices were, at the same time, subject to their own constraints, which critics were not reluctant to point out⁵. One doesn't elude the ideological snares of the institutional artworld simply by handing out candy or abjuring the production of artisanal objects. Moreover, notwithstanding Bourriaud's improbable claim that this work emerged *sui generis*, with no reference to previous forms of artistic practice, it is clear that these artists were often replicating certain modes of collective and ameliorative action that were already well-established in feminist art practice two decades before, but which only gained significant artworld validation when they were deployed by a cadre of primarily male artists⁶. For critics like Hal Foster and Claire Bishop, who remain committed to a conventional, neo-avant-garde aesthetic paradigm, these works, with their naïve embrace of convivial forms of social interaction, heedlessly sacrificed art's unique capacity for symbolic dissensus. In this view, art's role is to inculcate a cathartic antagonism, epitomized by the installations of Santiago Sierra, which impose forms of physical coercion on the bodies of migrants and workers in order to shock artworld viewers into an awareness of their own class privilege⁷. For myself the most problematic aspect of

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Ivi, pp. 9, 162.

⁵ See, for example, H. Foster, *Arty Party*, in «London Review of Books», vol. 25, no. 3, December 4, 2003. Accessed July 15, 2022. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v25/n23/hal-foster/arty-party>. Also see C. Bishop, *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*, in «Artforum», (February) 2006, pp. 178-183.

⁶ With the work of «relational artists» Bourriaud writes, «we find ourselves in the presence of a group of artists who, for the first time since the emergence of conceptual art in the mid-1960s, simply do not take as their starting point some aesthetic movement from the past»; N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* cit., p. 44.

relational art discourse stemmed from its underlying political resignation, which was evident in Bourriaud's contention that, «Any stance that is directly critical of society is futile. . .»⁸. On the one hand Bourriaud's work offers a salutary acknowledgement that future political change must grow out of the experiential reality of human interaction in the present moment, rather than reproducing the failed utopias of the past («It is clear that the age of the New Man, future-oriented manifestos . . . is well and truly over»), but at the same time the result is a disabling quietism that decisively severs this generative prefigurative knowledge from any connection to praxis here and now⁹.

For Bourriaud, then, “criticality” is directly linked to a conventional notion of vanguard politics, which has been left in the dustbin of history. In the absence of any meaningful critical challenge to the systematic forces of capitalist domination all this left to us are a handful of playful, artistic «micro-utopias» which might anticipate a more harmonious future society, but which must remain entirely disengaged from the practical forms of political change necessary to bring it about¹⁰. Moreover, the «everyday environments» that Bourriaud evoked were tightly circumscribed by the class privilege of the artworld and artworld audiences (even, if not especially, in those cases in which a given project was located outside a conventional museum or gallery space)¹¹. This is exemplified by Rasheed Araeen's project for documenta 14 in 2017 (*Shamiyaana—Food for Thought: Thought for Change*), in which a “public” café providing free daily meals in Athens' Kotzia Square was carefully policed by the documenta staff to exclude homeless people¹². The alternative offered by the proponents of neo-avant-garde antagonism is a body of work that is equally marooned in the institutional artworld, and cut off from any dialogical relationship to praxis, but which seek to

⁷ On Sierra see G. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Duke University Press, Durham 2011, pp. 155-171.

⁸ N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* cit., p. 31.

⁹ As Bourriaud writes, «the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist»; *ivi*, p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 30.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 84.

¹² See G. Gkoukousis, *On the Politics of Visibility, Documentation, and the Claim of Commoning the Artwork: Critical Notes on Shamiyaana-Food for Thought: Food for Change*, in «FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism», Issue 18-19, (Spring-Fall) 2021. Accessed July 15, 2022. <http://field-journal.com/cartographies/on-politics-of-visibility-documentation-and-the-claim-of-commoning-the-artwork-critical-notes-on-shamiyaana-food-for-thought-thought-for-change>.

compensate for this isolation by enacting a provocative cognitive attack on the viewer (understood as a symbolic representative of bourgeois privilege) that is almost entirely performative in nature.

It is important to understand more fully what is actually entailed by the act of participation, as Bourriaud understands it. Of course, we participate all the time, if we take the root of the word as “to partake” or share. What differentiates participation in contemporary art is the implicit claim that the audience is somehow being empowered by the act of participation itself. They are empowered because this gesture, ostensibly at least, unsettles the conventional hierarchy of artmaking in which the artist alone produces meaning or value, to be implanted in the artwork and subsequently consumed by the audience (the “elitist attitude of the artworld,” as Bourriaud describes it). Here the artist is an active agent while the viewer is a passive receptacle. In participatory practices the viewer will be empowered to be “like” an artist (autonomous, creative, self-actualizing) through an inversion in the conventions of authorship, effecting a kind of aesthetic noblesse oblige in which the artist graciously surrenders to the viewer some nominal form of agency, allowing them to act on the world, rather than being acted on by the artwork. The result, in Bourriaud’s view, are forms of artistic production «that do not give the producer any a priori superiority (let’s call it divine-right authority) over the viewer, but which negotiate open relations that are not preestablished»¹³. But, as the examples I’ve given suggest, this emancipatory inversion is almost always constrained by the ideological and economic structures of the institutional artworld and, in particular, the explicit forms of class and racial privilege that it normalizes. Moreover, in most of the examples Bourriaud cites the viewer’s actual participatory agency is reduced to a set of simple physical or bodily gestures (eating food, pick up candy, playing on a slide, etc.). At the same time, while the projects endorsed by critics like Foster or Bishop claim to preserve an endangered form of critical negation they still depend on a mode of reception in which viewers are interpellated as emotionally reactive bodies in need of shock or “provocation” (quasi-physical forms of affect to be administered through the behavioral apparatus set in place by artist), but who are never capable of their own autonomous critical insight without the artist’s benign oversight.

¹³ N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* cit., p.58.

As this outline suggests there were just as many relational or participatory projects that evoked a naïve dissensus (Santiago Sierra, Vanessa Beecroft, Jeremy Deller) as there were projects predicated on a naïve conviviality (Tiravanija's cookouts, Ben Kinmont's free waffles). In neither case was the viewer qua participant engaged as a fully constituted self (beyond their bodily actions). Their ideas, their values, their own autonomous intelligence, could never play a formative role in the actual structure of the work, over which the artist retains absolute mastery. Thomas Hirschhorn captures this dynamic in his concept of the artist's supreme "form giving" authority, predicated on a principle of "unshared authorship" which is evident in his various participatory "Monument" projects. Form is "essential to art," as he writes:

Form is the most important thing. By 'Form' I mean something coming from myself, from my own, something that I am the only one to see and perceive as logic, something that only I can work out and can give¹⁴.

In the case of *Gramsci Monument* (2013), which was created at a public housing development in South Bronx, the residents, according to Hirschhorn, could «participate» by «having fun,» «hanging out,» «feeling implicated,» «making encounters,» «enjoying the artwork,» and perhaps even «thinking of Gramsci's contribution to the thinking of today»¹⁵. These are all potentially valuable experiences, but they are clearly of a different order than the form-giving power of the artist, who creates the behavioral apparatus in which all of these (quasi-utopian) experiential modes might be played out¹⁶. This, the "formal structure" of *Gramsci Monument*, its duration, the physical and discursive organization of the project as a whole, belonged exclusively to Hirschhorn. While this may not constitute a mode of divine right, it hardly marks the radical overturning of the conventions of authorial sovereignty that Bourriaud evokes in his writing.

Notwithstanding these limitations, there is clearly more at stake for Bourriaud in the "political project" of participatory art than a simple gesture of convivial social interaction. Rather, these projects are

¹⁴ T. Hirschhorn, "Tribute to Form" (2012), *Gramsci Monument*, Dia Art Foundation, New York 2013, p. 52. <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/tribute-to-form/>.

¹⁵ These quotes are from an interview with Thomas Hirschhorn in *Dis Magazine* ("Thomas Hirschhorn's Project in the Projects") in 2013. <http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned/47438/thomas-hirschhorn-on-his-project-in-the-projects/>.

¹⁶ T. Hirschhorn, "Tribute to Form," cit., p. 52.

understood to exist in a heightened symbolic relationship to broader processes of social transformation (both past and present). The implicit ground for that transformation is provided by the history of communist revolution over the past century, and the complex entanglement of vanguard political action and avant-garde art. It is, in fact, precisely the symbiotic relationship between these two discursive systems that underwrites the neo-avant-garde tendency to define artistic reception as a form of violent perceptual assault. Here the artwork's relationship to the (implicitly bourgeois) audience represents a perceptual surrogate for the overt political violence of a communist revolution which can't yet come to pass. This symbolic "antagonism" is generated as the artist transgresses specific compositional or institutional norms associated with modern art, thereby forcing viewers to acknowledge their dependence on instrumentalizing forms of class privilege. As a result, for Adorno, «the unresolved antagonisms of reality return in works of art as immanent formal problems. . .»¹⁷.

For figures like Adorno this displacement was necessary precisely because actual revolution was impossible in the current historical moment (an era of "total administration"). Instead, art's role was to lay the groundwork for some future revolution through the incremental transformation of individual viewers' consciousness, and simply by embodying a principle of radical negation that was available nowhere else in the surrounding culture. Avant-garde art would become a kind of placeholder in which the insurrectional energies of revolution could be safely preserved, free from the forms of cooption that would inevitably occur if artists tried to link their practice to actual forms of political resistance. At the same time, the artist would serve as a «deputy,» in Adorno's words, whose own exemplary critical awareness preserved and carried forward a form of revolutionary consciousness that the proletariat had yet to exhibit¹⁸. Here we can identify the symptomatic linkage between Marxist theory, which imagines the vanguard intellectual as a vessel for the «imputed consciousness» of the

¹⁷ J. Frow, *Mediation and Metaphor: Adorno and the Sociology of Art*, in «Clio», vol. 12, no. 1, (Fall) 1982, pp. 60-61.

¹⁸ As Adorno writes, the artist is «not simply the individual who produces [the work of art], but rather through his work, through passive activity, he becomes the representation of the subject of society as a whole, that of the entire, undivided humanity, to which Valéry's idea of the beautiful appeals. . . in which the whole subject is finally realized»; T. Adorno, «The Artist as Deputy,» *Notes to Literature*, volume one, translated by S. Weber Nicholson, Columbia University Press, New York 1991, pp. 98-108.

proletariat, and the avant-garde artist¹⁹. In each case, a form of autonomous subjectivity, rooted in a paradigm of bourgeois possessive individualism, is endowed with a revolutionary imprimatur due to its capacity to sustain an otherwise endangered form of proletarian class consciousness. In this manner, the avant-garde artwork, segregated in the museum and circulating within the rarefied precincts of the international art market, can nonetheless claim to represent a more acute and meaningful form of political engagement than projects developed by artists working in direct conjunction with existing social movements here and now.

The participatory “turn” in contemporary art marks a significant shift in the logic of the avant-garde as I’ve outlined it above. Rather than imposing on the viewer a form of unilateral perceptual violence that is synecdochically linked with currently moribund forms of revolutionary violence, participatory practices can be seen as expressing an implicit critique of the actual form taken by past revolutionary struggles themselves. In particular, they can be seen as preserving a recognition that the failure of previous revolutionary movements stemmed, in part, from their tendency to think of revolution itself as an entirely mercenary and instrumental affair (the violent seizure of power by a vanguard party), in which all forms of prefigurative affect (sympathy, compassion, friendship, love) were forbidden as vestiges of bourgeois sentimentalism. These are precisely the forms of ostensibly naïve affect that are disparaged in participatory art by the advocates of a conventional (neo) avant-garde paradigm. These are also, in Trotsky’s memorable words, the «emotions which we revolutionists. . . feel apprehensive of naming,» which can only be allowed to flourish after the “social hatred” necessary to fuel the violence of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat has burned off²⁰. There was, in this paradigm, no way in which the social forms necessary to function in a post-revolutionary world could ever be refined or experimented with before the revolution was complete. It was assumed, instead, that human consciousness would be so irrevocably altered by the act of revolution itself that these new forms of social being would simply and sponta-

¹⁹ As Lukács writes, «the Party is assigned the sublime role of *bearer of the class consciousness of the proletariat and the conscience of its historical vocation*». G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, translated by Rodney Livingstone, MIT Press, Cambridge 1983, p. 41.

²⁰ Leon Trotsky, “Communist Policy Toward Art” (1923), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23.htm> Leon Trotsky, “Communist Policy Toward Art” (1923). Accessed July 15, 2022. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23.htm>.

neously emerge in the wake of a violent civil war. In practice, of course, the pedagogical effect of “revolutionary terror” and the unyielding, monological authority of the revolutionary party, was precisely to model a form of society predicated on the state’s absolute control over daily life, on behalf of a utopian future which never arrived. For this reason, the forms of conviviality that are mobilized in participatory art practice, as trivial as they may appear, can be seen as carrying a subterranean political significance.

Notwithstanding the differences between the two modalities outlined above at the level of reception (perceptual assault vs. participatory play), they share a common foundation in the broader social architecture of the avant-garde, which is in turn rooted in the deeper historical traditions of modernism. By social architecture I refer to the ways in which modernist art has been constituted historically around a set of a priori subject positions (of artist and viewer, movement and public), defined by specific forms of cognitive agency and interpretive competence, as well as specific paradigms of political transformation. This linkage has been a central concern in my own recent research²¹. While the limitations of space preclude a more extensive analysis, here I would like to sketch out a set of key points that can help us grasp the underling political implications of the participatory turn. As I’ve suggested above, modes of reception in contemporary art are indexed to an implicit temporal schema associated with the potential for revolutionary political transformation in the current moment. Both the antagonistic and consensual modalities are predicated on the assumed impossibility of substantive political change due to the overwhelming appropriative powers of hegemonic capitalism. In both cases artistic practice must be segregated from political action because any possible political transformation is fated to remain entirely reformist in nature, and dependent on proscribed forms of collective identity which necessarily efface the unique subjectivities of their constituent members. Moreover, even successful forms of localized social or political change will simply be used in an exculpatory manner, to further legitimate and normalize the capitalist system itself²². The corollary assumption

²¹ See G. Kester, *The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde*, Duke University Press, Durham 2023.

²² I refer to this as the “exculpatory critique”. See *The Limits of the Exculpatory Critique: A Response to Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen*, in «FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism», no. 6, (Winter) 2017. Accessed July 15, 2022. <http://field-journal.com/issue-6/a-note-on-socially-engaged-art-criticism>.

here, of course, is that praxis itself can never be generative or creative, but only instrumentalizing and pragmatic. This accounts for the unique anticipatory or mnemonic power attributed to artistic production in this schema.

We encounter an incipient expression of this set of beliefs in the aesthetic philosophy of figures such as Friedrich Schiller during the late eighteenth century. In this respect, it's important to recall how thoroughly imbricated the aesthetic and the political are in Enlightenment thought, a relationship that is explicit in the central role played by the concept of the «aesthetic state» as the model for an ideal future society in the writing of Schiller and Hegel²³. In fact, Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, a bellwether document in this tradition, was written in the shadow of the French Revolution. In Schiller's view the failure of 1789, evident in the chaotic violence of the Terror, was proof that humanity was not yet prepared for the political freedom made available in an era of growing desacralization. Instead, as Schiller argues, «we must continue to regard every attempt at political reform as untimely so long as the split within man is not healed, and his nature restored to wholeness . . .»²⁴. The “split” that Schiller evokes refers to the dehumanizing fragmentation of the self brought about by the experience of modernization. The vehicle for this restorative process will be an “aesthetic modulation of the psyche” overseen by the artist, playwright or poet, who is understood to possess a singular ability to precipitate this correction based on their implicit mastery of the cognitive insights inculcated by their own work²⁵. The period of desacralization promised the end of a system of European governance structured around the unquestioned authority of a coercive external force (the ethos of absolutism). The political locus of this transformation centered on the moment of consensual will formation in which individual political subjects would convene together to determine for the first time their own values and norms (autonomy as self-legislation) through the creative negotiation of difference. It is precisely this moment of collaborative, intersubjective exchange that is proscribed by Schiller (the mechanisms of a “political reform” that

²³ See, for example, J. Chytry, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1989.

²⁴ F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, translated and edited by E. M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Oxford University Press/The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987, p. 45.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 163.

would allow the people to collectively devise a more just and emancipatory system of governance). Any real political transformation will remain premature until the incremental transformation of individual viewers, through an ongoing process of “aesthetic education,” gradually produces a critical mass of newly enlightened citizens. And it is in «the realm of semblance alone,» as Schiller writes, on the pages of a poem or the theatrical stage within the institutional sphere of the bourgeois artworld, that this education must unfold, rather than realm of actual praxis²⁶.

In the avant-garde tradition this set of beliefs is both modified and carried forward, as the telos of political transformation shifts from an aesthetic state inspired by Hellenic Greece to the mythos of “full communism,” and the modernist fragmentation of the self described by Schiller takes shape in the world historical division between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. We can observe the same skepticism regarding the potential for emancipation in Adorno’s profound pessimism regarding social movements during the 1960s which sought to develop new modes of sociality and political transformation. These practices, predicated on the «noisy optimism of immediate action» as Adorno writes, ignored the overdetermined nature of capitalist hegemony²⁷. The masses are simply too febrile, too mired in bodily experience, too anchored in their physical particularity, and too weak and impressionable, to sublimate their desire for utopia to the disciplined sacrifice, analytic detachment and coldblooded violence necessary for “objective” revolution to occur. Instead, they entertain themselves with spurious displays of pseudo-resistance and are easily lured into the «instantaneous, immediate gratification» provided by de-sublimated action²⁸. In the same manner, activist artists who would «do away with art by decree,» as a relic of bourgeois ideology, are merely «deluding themselves about the fact that decisive change is foreclosed»²⁹.

²⁶ «It is in the world of semblance alone,» as Schiller writes, that the artist possesses a «sovereign right . . . and he possess it there only as long as he scrupulously refrains from predicating the real existence of it in theory, and as long he renounces all idea of imparting real existence through it in practice»; *ivi*, p. 197.

²⁷ «Those who compulsively shout down their objective despair with the noisy optimism of immediate action in order to lighten their psychological burden are much more deluded»; “Who’s Afraid of the Ivory Tower? A Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno,” *Monatshefte*, vol. 94, no. 1, (Spring) 2002, p. 17.

²⁸ T. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, edited by G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann, translated by C. Lenhardt, Routledge, London 1984, p. 441.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 356.

Rather than aligning itself with these misguided efforts, art's role is to constitute a radical symbolic negation that is produced entirely within the immanent semantic and technical protocols of specific artworks and genres, situated in galleries and museums, concert halls and theaters. This accounts for Adorno's famous contention: «It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads»³⁰. In this manner aesthetic autonomy reemerges and claims a second life, as the necessary bulwark that protects authentic revolutionary consciousness from co-optation by the engines of capitalist appropriation.

The artistic personality (and, in particular, the artist as an autonomous and self-actualizing agent) serves as both exemplar and prefiguration, having already passed through the phases of self-reflexive insight and self-mastery that the audience has yet to achieve. In this sense the artistic personality serves as the template for a whole series of ontological enclosures (the institutional artworld, the artwork, and aesthetic experience itself) that are understood as necessary to preserve art's unique emancipatory power. This accounts for the persistence, across both the antagonistic and the consensual modes of participatory practice, of a symptomatic valorization of conventional authorial sovereignty ("participation" as the sharing out of authorial autonomy, rather than participation which seeks to challenge the underlying structure of the autonomous self). This is also what differentiates the discourse of "participatory" art from parallel strands of "collective" or "collaborative" engaged art practice that emerged during the same period³¹. In fact, the effect of participatory art discourse in an artworld context has often been to de-politicize issues of artistic subjectivity as an ontological form that exists in a complex relationship to modes of class and racial privilege. In particular, it provides a way for contemporary artists to remain relevant during a period in which experimental forms of collective social and political action are increasingly widespread in the broader culture, while at the same time ensuring that these gestures do nothing to disturb the underlying economic sy-

³⁰ T. Adorno, «Commitment,» *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates Between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*, translated and edited by R. Taylor, Verso, London 1977, p. 180.

³¹ See *Collective Situations: Readings in Contemporary Latin American Art 1995-2010*, edited by B. Kelley Jr. and G. Kester, Duke University Press, Durham 2017.

 Grant H. Kester, Variations on a Theme

stem on which contemporary avant-garde artistic production is based. This is necessary because of the essential linkage that exists between conventional notions of artistic genius and the ideological demands of the global art market, which depends precisely on concepts of authorial sovereignty to justify the heightened economic value assigned to works of art that can be indexically linked to the signature personality of a specific artist. The essential ideological operation here is to uncouple the institutional artworld, as the site of a protected form of free critical inquiry, from the overdetermined effects of the art market that subtend it. Thus, the market must simultaneously be recognized (as part of the resistant institutional materiality against which avant-garde art stages its symbolic resistance) and disavowed (in assuming that, despite this fact, the artworld as such is the only site at which meaningful criticality can be produced). In this manner, the notion of participation in contemporary art carries forward the unacknowledged ideological tensions of modernist art more generally, in its ambivalent relationship to the processes of political transformation that it seeks to metonymically preserve.

Abstract

Il saggio prende in esame le implicazioni estetiche e politiche della “svolta partecipativa” nell’arte contemporanea, analizzando la comparsa di due modalità di partecipazione all’interno del mondo istituzionale dell’arte nel corso degli anni Novanta. La prima variante, associata a Nicolas Bourriaud, si impegna nella creazione di interazioni conviviali e non gerarchiche all’interno degli spazi del mondo dell’arte. Il secondo paradigma, sostenuto da Claire Bishop, è legato a pratiche che evocano un “dissenso” terapeutico negli spettatori attraverso varie forme di provocazione. In entrambi i casi, questi progetti implicano una relazione temporale sfalsata rispetto alla trasformazione politica, prefigurativa nel primo caso, simile a una sineddoche nel secondo (l’assalto cognitivo nei confronti dello spettatore imiterebbe la violenza fisica della rivoluzione). Entrambi gli approcci sono radicati in una serie di ipotesi formulate a priori all’interno della cornice dell’avanguardia modernista, secondo la quale il cambiamento politico effettivo sarebbe impossibile a causa del controllo egemonico esercitato dal sistema capitalistico. Di conseguenza, il mondo dell’arte offri-

rebbe l'unico spazio all'interno del quale può essere preservata una forma significativa di criticità politica.

This essay examines the aesthetic and political implications of the “participatory turn” in contemporary art, analyzing the emergence of two modes of “participation” within the institutional art world during the ‘90s. The first variant, associated with Nicholas Bourriaud, is concerned with the creation of forms of convivial, non-hierarchical interaction in artworld spaces. The second paradigm, championed by critic Claire Bishop, is associated with practices which evoke a therapeutic “dissensus” in artworld viewers through various forms of provocation. In each case these projects bear a temporally displaced relationship to political transformation, either prefigurative in the first case or synecdochal in the second case (the cognitive assault on the viewer mimicking the physical violence of revolution). Both approaches are rooted in a set of a priori assumptions within the modernist avant-garde, in which substantive political change is impossible due to the hegemonic control exercised by the capitalist system. As a result, the institutional artworld offers the only space in which a meaningful form of political criticality can be preserved.

Parole chiave: arte partecipativa, estetica, politica, Bourriaud, avanguardia.

Keywords: Participatory Art, Aesthetics, Politics, Bourriaud, Avant-garde.