

Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?

1. Spectacle Today

One of the key words used in artists' self-definitions of their socially engaged practice is "spectacle," so often invoked as the entity that participatory art opposes itself to, both artistically and politically. When examining artists' motivations for turning to social participation as a strategy in their work, one repeatedly encounters the same claim: contemporary capitalism produces passive subjects with very little agency or empowerment. For many artists and curators on the left, Guy Debord's indictment of the alienating and divisive effects of capitalism in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) strike to the heart of why participation is important as a project: it re-humanizes a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production. This position, with more or less Marxist overtones, is put forward by most advocates of socially engaged and activist art. Given the market's near total saturation of our image repertoire—so the argument goes—artistic practice can no longer revolve around the construction of objects to be consumed by a passive bystander. Instead, there must be an art of action, interfacing with reality, taking steps—however small—to repair the social bond. As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière points out, "the 'critique of the spectacle' often remains the alpha and the omega of the 'politics of art'"¹.

But what do we really mean by spectacle in a visual art context? "Spectacle" has a particular, almost unique status within art history and criticism, because it directly raises the question of visibility, and because it has incomparable political pedigree (thanks to the Situationist International).² As frequently used by art historians and critics associated with the journal *October*, it denotes a wide range of attributes: for Rosalind Krauss writing on the late capitalist museum, it means the absence of historical positioning and a capitulation to pure presentness; for James Meyer, arguing against Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* (2003), it denotes an overwhelming scale that dwarfs viewers and eclipses the human body as a point of reference; for Hal Foster writing on the Bilbao Guggenheim, it denotes the triumph of corporate branding; for Benjamin Buchloh denouncing Bill Viola, it refers to an uncritical use of new technology. In short, spectacle today connotes a wide range of ideas—from size, scale, and visual pleasure to corporate investment and populist programming. And yet, for Debord, "spectacle" does not describe the characteristics of a work of art or architecture, but is a definition of social relations under capitalism (but also under totalitarian regimes). Individual subjects experience society as atomized and fragmented because social experience is mediated by images—either the "diffuse" images of consumerism or the "concentrated" images of the leader. As Debord's film, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1971), makes clear, his arguments stem from an anxiety about a nascent consumer culture in the '60s, with its tidal wave of seductive imagery. But the question as to whether or not we still exist in a society of the spectacle was posed by Baudrillard as early as 1981, who dispatches not only Debord but also Foucault in his essay "The Precession of Simulacra":

¹ Jacques Rancière, "Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art," *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 2008, 7.

² The Situationist International was an international group of revolutionary Marxist writers, poets, theorists, painters and film-makers active 1957-72, and who had a key influence on the strikes of May 1968.

We are witnessing the end of perspective and panoptic space... and hence the very abolition of the spectacular... We are no longer in the society of the spectacle which the situationists talked about, nor in the specific types of alienation and repression which this implied. The medium itself is no longer identifiable as such, and the merging of the medium and the message (McLuhan) is the first great formula of this new age.³

More recently, Boris Groys has suggested that in today's culture of self-exhibitionism (in Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, which he provocatively compares to the text/image compositions of conceptual art) we have a "spectacle without spectators":

the artist needs a spectator who can overlook the immeasurable quantity of artistic production and formulate an aesthetic judgment that would single out this particular artist from the mass of other artists. Now, it is obvious that such a spectator does not exist—it could be God, but we have already been informed of the fact that God is dead.⁴

In other words, one of the central requirements of art is that it is given to be seen, and reflected upon, by a spectator. Participatory art in the strictest sense forecloses the traditional idea of spectatorship and suggests a new understanding of art without audiences, one in which everyone is a producer. At the same time, the existence of an audience is ineliminable, since it is impossible for everyone in the world to participate in every project.

2. A Brief History

Indeed, the dominant narrative of the history of socially engaged, participatory art across the twentieth century is one in which the activation of the audience is positioned against its mythic counterpart, passive spectatorial consumption. Participation thus forms part of a larger narrative that traverses modernity: "art must be directed against contemplation, against spectatorship, against the passivity of the masses paralyzed by the spectacle of modern life".⁵ This desire to activate the audience in participatory art is at the same time a drive to emancipate it from a state of alienation induced by the dominant ideological order—be this consumer capitalism, totalitarian socialism, or military dictatorship. Beginning from this premise, participatory art aims to restore and realize a communal, collective space of shared social engagement. But this is achieved in different ways: either through constructivist gestures of social impact, which refute the injustice of the world by proposing an alternative, or through a nihilist redoubling of alienation, which negates the world's injustice and illogicality on its own terms. In both instances, the work seeks to forge a collective, co-authoring, participatory social body, but one does this affirmatively (through utopian realization), the other indirectly (through the negation of negation).

For example, Futurism and Constructivism both offered gestures of social impact and the invention of a new public sphere—one geared towards fascism, the other to reinforce a

³ Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 54.

⁴ Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," *e-flux journal*, December 11, 2009, available at www.e-flux.com

⁵ Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," *e-flux journal*, December 11, 2009, available at www.e-flux.com (last accessed September 3, 2010).

new Bolshevik world order. Shortly after this period, Paris Dada “took to the streets” in order to reach a wider audience, annexing the social forms of the guided tour and the trial in order to experiment with a more nihilistic type of artistic practice in the public sphere. It is telling that in the first phase of this orientation towards the social, participation has no given political alignment: it is a strategy that can be equally associated with Italian Fascism, Bolshevik communism, and an anarchic negation of the political.

In the postwar period, we find a similar range of participatory strategies, now more or less tied to leftist politics, and culminating in the theater of 1968. In Paris, the SI developed alternatives to visual art in the “derive and constructed situation”; while the Groupe Recherche d’Art Visuel devised participatory actions, both in the form of installations and street environments. Both of these are affirmative in tenor, but as a critique of consumer capitalism. Jean-Jacques Lebel’s anarchic and eroticized Happenings provide a different model—“the negation of negation”—in which the audience and performers are further alienated from an already alienating world, via disturbing and transgressive activities that aimed to produce a group mind or *egregore*. When these artistic strategies were put into play in different ideological contexts (such as South America and Eastern Europe), the aims and intentions of participation yielded different meanings. In Argentina, where a brutal, U.S.-backed military dictatorship was imposed in 1966, it gave rise to aggressive and fragmented modes of social action, with an emphasis on class antagonism, reification, and alienation. In Czechoslovakia, brought into line with Soviet “normalization” after 1968, participatory art had a more escapist tone, with avant-garde actions often masquerading under vernacular forms (weddings, parties, and festivals), often in remote locations, in order to avoid detection by the secret police. Art was disguised by life in order to sustain itself as a place of nonalienation. The work of Collective Actions Group (CAG), active in Moscow from 1976 onwards, further problematizes contemporary claims that participation is synonymous with collectivism, and thus inherently opposed to capitalism; rather than reinforcing the collectivist dogma of communism, CAG deployed participation as a means to create a privatized sphere of individual expression.

Further analogies to contemporary social practice can be found in the rise of the community arts movement after 1968, whose history provides a cautionary tale for today’s artists averse to theorizing the artistic value of their work. Emphasizing process rather than end result, and basing their judgments on ethical criteria (about how and whom they work with) rather than on the character of their artistic outcomes, the community arts movement found itself subject to manipulation—and eventually instrumentalization—by the state. From an agitational force campaigning for social justice (in the early 1970s), it became a harmless branch of the welfare state (by the 1980s): the kindly folk who can be relied upon to mop up wherever the government wishes to absolve itself of responsibility.

And so we find ourselves faced today with an important sector of artists who renounce the vocabularies of contemporary art, claiming to be engaged in more serious, worldly, and political issues. Such anti-aesthetic refusals are not new: just as we have come to recognize Dada cabaret, situationist *détournement*, or dematerialized conceptual and

performance art as having their own aesthetics of production and circulation, so too do the often formless-looking photo-documents of participatory art have their own experiential regime. The point is not to regard these anti-aesthetic phenomena as objects of a new formalism (reading areas, parades, demonstrations, discussions, ubiquitous plywood platforms, endless photographs of people), but to analyze how these contribute to the social and artistic experience being generated.

3. Two Critiques

One of the questions that is continually posed to me is the following: Surely it is better for one art project to improve one person's life than for it not to happen at all? The history of participatory art allows us to get critical distance on this question, and to see it as the latest instantiation of concerns that have dogged this work from its inception: the tension between equality and quality, between participation and spectatorship, and between art and real life. These conflicts indicate that social and artistic judgments do not easily merge; indeed, they seem to demand different criteria. This impasse surfaces in every printed debate and panel discussion on participatory and socially engaged art. For one sector of artists, curators, and critics, a good project appeases a superegoic injunction to ameliorate society; if social agencies have failed, then art is obliged to step in. In this schema, judgments are based on a humanist ethics, often inspired by Christianity. What counts is to offer ameliorative solutions, however short-term, rather than to expose contradictory social truths. For another sector of artists, curators, and critics, judgments are based on a sensible response to the artist's work, both in and beyond its original context. In this schema, ethics are nugatory, because art is understood continually to throw established systems of value into question, including morality; devising new languages with which to represent and question social contradiction is more important. The social discourse accuses the artistic discourse of amorality and inefficacy, because it is insufficient merely to reveal, reduplicate, or reflect upon the world; what matters is social change. The artistic discourse accuses the social discourse of remaining stubbornly attached to existing categories, and focusing on micropolitical gestures at the expense of sensuous immediacy (as a potential locus of disalienation). Either social conscience dominates, or the rights of the individual to question social conscience. Art's relationship to the social is either underpinned by morality or it is underpinned by freedom.⁶

This binary is echoed in Boltanski and Chiapello's perceptive distinction of the difference between artistic and social critiques of capitalism. The artistic critique, rooted in nineteenth-century bohemianism, draws upon two sources of indignation towards capitalism: on the one hand, disenchantment and inauthenticity, and on the other, oppression. The artistic critique, they explain, "foregrounds the loss of meaning and, in particular, the loss of the sense of what is beautiful and valuable, which derives from standardization and generalized commodification, affecting not only everyday objects but also artworks ... and human beings." Against this state of affairs, the artistic critique advocates "the freedom of artists, their rejection of any contamination of aesthetics by

⁶ Tony Bennett phrases the same problem differently: art history as a bourgeois, idealist discipline is in permanent conflict with Marxism as an anti-bourgeois, materialist revolution in existing disciplines. There is no possibility of reconciling the two. See Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London: Methuen, 1979), 80–5.

ethics, their refusal of any form of subjection in time and space and, in its extreme form, any kind of work”.⁷ The social critique, by contrast, draws on different sources of indignation towards capitalism: the egoism of private interests, and the growing poverty of the working classes in a society of unprecedented wealth. This social critique necessarily rejects the moral neutrality, individualism, and egotism of artists. The artistic and the social critique are not directly compatible, Boltanski and Chiapello warn us, and exist in continual tension with one another.⁸

The clash between artistic and social critiques recurs most visibly at certain historical moments, and the reappearance of participatory art is symptomatic of this clash. It tends to occur at moments of political transition and upheaval: in the years leading to Italian Fascism, in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution, in the widespread social dissent that led to 1968, and its aftermath in the 1970s. At each historical moment participatory art takes a different form, because it seeks to negate different artistic and sociopolitical objects. In our own times, its resurgence accompanies the consequences of the collapse of really existing communism in 1989, the apparent absence of a viable left alternative, the emergence of contemporary “post-political” consensus, and the near total marketization of art and education.⁹ The paradox of this situation is that participation in the West now has more to do with the populist agendas of neoliberal governments. Even though participatory artists stand against neoliberal capitalism, the values they impute to their work are understood formally (in terms of opposing individualism and the commodity object), without recognizing that so many other aspects of this art practice dovetail even more perfectly with neoliberalism’s recent forms (networks, mobility, project work, affective labor).

As this ground has shifted over the course of the twentieth century, so the identity of participants has been reimagined at each historical moment: from a crowd (1910s), to the masses (1920s), to the people (late 1960s/1970s), to the excluded (1980s), to community (1990s), to today’s volunteers whose participation is continuous with a culture of reality television and social networking. From the audience’s perspective, we can chart this as a shift from an audience that demands a role (expressed as hostility towards avant-garde artists who keep control of the proscenium), to an audience that enjoys its subordination to strange experiences devised for them by an artist, to an audience that is encouraged to be a co-producer of the work (and who, occasionally, can even get paid for this involvement). This could be seen as a heroic narrative of the increased activation and agency of the audience, but we might also see it as a story of their ever-increasing voluntary subordination to the artist’s will, and of the commodification of human bodies in a service economy (since voluntary participation is also unpaid labor).

⁷ Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005), 37–8.

⁸ The implication of Boltanski and Chiapello’s book is that in the third spirit of capitalism, the artistic critique has held sway, resulting in an unsupervised capitalism that lacks the “invisible hand” of constraint that would guarantee protection, security, and rights for workers.

⁹ For a clear summary of “post-politics” see Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 13. She presents two positions: “post-politics as an ideal of consensus, inclusion, and administration that must be rejected” (Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière) and “post-politics as a description of the contemporary exclusion or foreclosure of the political” (Slavoj Žižek).

Arguably, this is a story that runs parallel with the rocky fate of democracy itself, a term to which participation has always been wedded: from a demand for acknowledgement, to representation, to the consensual consumption of one's own image—be this in a work of art, YouTube, Flickr, or reality TV. Consider the media profile accorded to Anthony Gormley's *One and Other* (2009), a project to allow members of the public to continuously occupy the empty "fourth plinth" of Trafalgar Square in London, one hour at a time for one hundred days. Gormley received 34,520 applications for 2,400 places, and the activities of the plinth's occupants were continually streamed online.¹⁰ Although the artist referred to *One and Other* as "an open space of possibility for many to test their sense of self and how they might communicate this to a wider world," the project was described by *The Guardian*, not unfairly, as "Twitter Art."¹¹ In a world where everyone can air their views to everyone we are faced not with mass empowerment but with an endless stream of banal egos. Far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it.

This new proximity between spectacle and participation underlines, for me, the necessity of sustaining a tension between artistic and social critiques. The most striking projects that constitute the history of participatory art unseat all of the polarities on which this discourse is founded (individual/collective, author/spectator, active/passive, real life/art) but not with the goal of collapsing them. In so doing, they hold the artistic and social critiques in tension. Felix Guattari's paradigm of transversality offers one such way of thinking through these artistic operations: he leaves art as a category in its place, but insists upon its constant flight into and across other disciplines, putting both art and the social into question, even while simultaneously reaffirming art as a universe of value. Jacques Rancière offers another: the aesthetic regime is constitutively contradictory, shuttling between autonomy and heteronomy ("the aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and*"¹²). He argues that in art and education alike, there needs to be a mediating object—a spectacle that stands between the idea of the artist and the feeling and interpretation of the spectator: "This spectacle is a third thing, to which both parts can refer but which prevents any kind of 'equal' or 'undistorted' transmission. It is a mediation between them. [...] The same thing which links them must separate them."¹³ In different ways, Rancière and Guattari offer alternative frameworks for thinking the artistic and the social simultaneously; for both, art and the social are not to be reconciled or collapsed, but sustained in continual tension.

4. The Ladder and the Container

¹⁰ The difference between Gormley's webstreaming and that of Christoph Schlingensief (discussed below) is that the latter is a conscious parody of reality TV's banality, while the former uncritically replicates it. A press shot of Gormley with the participants in his work evokes the image of Simon Cowell with his protégés in *American Idol*.

¹¹ Anthony Gormley, www.oneandother.co.uk (last accessed August 23, 2010). Charlotte Higgins, "The Birth of Twitter Art," *Guardian*, July 8, 2009, available at www.guardian.co.uk (last accessed August 25, 2010).

¹² Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Employments of Autonomy and Heteronomy," *New Left Review*, 14, March–April 2002, 133.

¹³ Rancière, "Emancipated Spectator," lecture in Frankfurt.

I am interested in these theoretical models of analysis because they do not reduce art to a question of ethically good or bad examples, nor do they forge a straightforward equation between forms of democracy in art and forms of democracy in society. Most of the contemporary discourse on participatory art implies an evaluative schema akin to that laid out in the classic diagram “The Ladder of Participation,” published in an architectural journal in 1969 to accompany an article about forms of citizen involvement.¹⁴ The ladder has eight rungs. The bottom two indicate the least participatory forms of citizen engagement: the non-participation of mere presence in “manipulation” and “therapy.” The next three rungs are degrees of tokenism—“informing,” “consultation,” and “placation”—which gradually increase the attention paid by power to the everyday voice. At the top of the ladder we find “partnership,” “delegated power,” and the ultimate goal, “citizen control.” The diagram provides a useful set of distinctions for thinking about the claims to participation made by those in power, and is frequently cited by architects and planners. It is tempting to make an equation (and many have done so) between the value of a work of art and the degree of participation it involves, turning the Ladder of Participation into a gauge for measuring the efficacy of artistic practice.¹⁵

But while the Ladder provides us with helpful and nuanced differences between forms of civic participation, it falls short of corresponding to the complexity of artistic gestures. The most challenging works of art do not follow this schema, because models of democracy in art do not have an intrinsic relationship to models of democracy in society. The equation is misleading and does not recognize art’s ability to generate other, more paradoxical criteria. The works I have discussed in the preceding chapters do not offer anything like citizen control. The artist relies upon the participants’ creative exploitation of the situation that he/she offers, just as participants require the artist’s cue and direction. This relationship is a continual play of mutual tension, recognition, and dependency – more akin to the collectively negotiated dynamic of stand-up comedy, or to BDSM sex, than to a ladder of progressively more virtuous political forms.

A case study, now 11 years old, illustrates this argument that art is both grounded in and suspends reality, and does this via a mediating object or third term: *Please Love Austria* (2000) devised and largely performed by the German filmmaker and artist Christoph Schlingensiefel (1960–2010). Commissioned to produce a work for the Wiener Festwochen, Schlingensiefel chose to respond directly to the recent electoral success of the far-right nationalist party led by Jörg Haider (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, or FPÖ). The FPÖ’s campaign had included overtly xenophobic slogans and the word *überfremdung* (domination by foreign influences), once employed by the Nazis, to describe a country overrun with foreigners. Schlingensiefel erected a shipping container outside the Opera House in the center of Vienna, topped with a large banner bearing the

¹⁴ Sherry Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35:4, July 1969, 216–24. The diagram has recently been the subject of some historical reassessment among architects and planners, reflecting the renewed interest in participation in this sector.

¹⁵ See, for example, Dave Beech’s distinction between participation and collaboration. For Beech, participants are subject to the parameters of the artist’s project, while collaboration involves co-authorship and decisions over key structural features of the work; “collaborators have rights that are withheld from participants.” (Beech, “Include Me Out,” *Art Monthly*, April 2008, 3.) Although I would agree with his definitions, I would not translate them into a binding set of value judgements to be applied to works of art.

phrase *Ausländer Raus* (Foreigners Out). Inside the container, *Big Brother*-style living accommodation was installed for a group of asylum-seekers, relocated from a detention center outside the city. Their activities were broadcast through the Internet television station webfreetv.com, and via this station viewers could vote daily for the ejection of their least favorite refugee. At 8 p.m. each day, for six days, the two most unpopular inhabitants were sent back to the deportation center. The winner was purportedly offered a cash prize and the prospect—depending on the availability of volunteers—of Austrian citizenship through marriage. The event is documented by the Austrian filmmaker Paul Poet in an evocative and compelling ninety-minute film, *Ausländer Raus! Schlingensief's Container* (2002).

Please Love Austria is typical Schlingensief in its desire to antagonize the public and stage provocation. His early film work frequently alluded to contemporary taboos: mixing Nazism, obscenities, disabilities, and assorted sexual perversions in films such as *German Chainsaw Massacre* (1990) and *Terror 2000* (1992), once described as “filth for intellectuals.”¹⁶ In the late 1990s Schlingensief began making interventions into public space, including the formation of a political party, *Chance 2000* (1998–2000), which targeted the unemployed, disabled, and other recipients of welfare with the slogan “Vote For Yourself.” *Chance 2000* did not hesitate to use the image of Schlingensief’s long-term collaborators, many of whom have mental and/or physical handicaps. But in *Please Love Austria*, Schlingensief’s refugee participants were barely visible, disguised in assorted wigs, hats, and sunglasses.¹⁷ In the square, the public had only a limited view of the immigrants through peepholes; the bulk of the performance was undertaken by Schlingensief himself, installed on the container’s roof beneath the “Foreigners Out!” banner. Speaking through a megaphone, he incited the FPÖ to come and remove the banner (which they didn’t), encouraged tourists to take photographs, invited the public to air their views, and made contradictory claims (“This is a performance! This is the absolute truth!”), while parroting the most racist opinions and insults back to the crowd. As the various participants were evicted, Schlingensief provided a running commentary to the mob below: “It is a black man! Once again Austria has evicted a darkie!”

Although in retrospect—and particularly in Poet’s film—it is evident that the work is a critique of xenophobia and its institutions, in Vienna the event (and Schlingensief’s charismatic role as circus master) was ambiguous enough to receive approval and condemnation from all sides of the political spectrum. An elderly right-wing gentleman covered in medals gleefully found it to be in sympathy with his own ideas, while others claimed that by staging such a shameful spectacle Schlingensief himself was a dirty foreigner who ought to be deported. Left-wing student activists attempted to sabotage the container and “liberate” the refugees, while assorted left-wing celebrities showed up to support the project, including Daniel Cohn-Bendit (a key figure from May ’68), and the

¹⁶ Herbert Achternbusch, cited in Marion Löhdorf, “Christoph Schlingensief,” *Kunstforum*, 142, October 1998, 94–101, available at www.schlingensief.com (last accessed December 4, 2008).

¹⁷ During their evictions, the asylum-seekers covered their faces with a newspaper, inverting the celebratory, attention-seeking exits of contestants from the *Big Brother* house. Rather than viewing this absence of identity as an assault on their subjectivity, we could see this as an artistic device to allow the asylum-seekers to be catalysts for discussion around immigration in general (rather than individual case studies for emotive journalism).

Nobel Laureate author Elfriede Jelinek (who wrote and performed a puppet play with the asylum-seekers). In addition, large numbers of the public watched the program on webfreetv.com and voted for the eviction of particular refugees. The container prompted arguments and discussion—in the square surrounding it, in the print media, and on national television. The vehemence of response is palpable throughout the film, no more so than when Poet’s camera pans back from a heated argument to reveal the entire square full of agitated people in intense debate. One elderly woman was so infuriated by the project that she could only spit at Schlingensiefel the insult, “You ... artist!”

A frequently heard criticism of this work is that it did not change anyone’s opinion: the right-wing pensioner is still right-wing, the lefty protestors are still lefty, and so on. But this instrumentalized approach to critical judgment misunderstands the artistic force of Schlingensiefel’s intervention. The point is not about “conversion,” for this reduces the work of art to a question of propaganda. Rather, Schlingensiefel’s project draws attention to the contradictions of political discourse in Austria at that moment. The shocking fact is that Schlingensiefel’s container caused more public agitation and distress than the presence of a *real* deportation center a few miles outside Vienna. The disturbing lesson of *Please Love Austria* is that an *artistic* representation of detention has more power to attract dissensus than an *actual* institution of detention.¹⁸ In fact, Schlingensiefel’s model of “undemocratic” behavior corresponds precisely to “democracy” as practiced in reality. This contradiction is the core of Schlingensiefel’s artistic efficacy—and it is the reason why political conversion is not the primary goal of art, why artistic representations continue to have a potency that can be harnessed to disruptive ends, and why *Please Love Austria* is not (and should never be seen as) morally exemplary.

5. The End of Participation

In his essay “The Uses of Democracy” (1992), Jacques Rancière notes that participation in what we normally refer to as democratic regimes is usually reduced to a question of filling up the spaces left empty by power. Genuine participation, he argues, is something different: the invention of an “unpredictable subject” who momentarily occupies the street, the factory, or the museum—rather than a fixed space of allocated participation whose counter-power is dependent on the dominant order.¹⁹ Setting aside the problematic idea of “genuine” participation (which takes us back to modernist oppositions between authentic and false culture), such a statement clearly pertains to *Please Love Austria*, and the better examples of social practice, which have frequently

¹⁸ Silvija Jestrović has explained this preference for the *performance* of asylum rather than its reality by way of reference to Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, specifically the epigraph by Feuerbach with which it opens: “But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to essence ... illusion *only* is sacred, truth *profane*.” (Silvija Jestrović, “Performing Like an Asylum Seeker: Paradoxes of Hyper-Authenticity in Schlingensiefel’s *Please Love Austria*,” in Claire Bishop and Silvia Tramontana (eds.), *Double Agent* (London: ICA, 2009), 61.)

¹⁹ Rancière argues that participation in democracy is a “mongrel” idea deriving from the conflation of two ideas: “the reformist idea of necessary mediations between the centre and the periphery, and the revolutionary idea of the permanent involvement of citizen-subjects in every domain.” (Jacques Rancière, “The Uses of Democracy,” in Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 60.)

constituted a *critique* of participatory art, rather than upholding an unproblematized equation between artistic and political inclusion.

The fact that the Ladder of Participation culminates in “citizen control” is worth recalling here. At a certain point, art has to hand over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved: it is not enough to keep producing activist *art*. The historic avant-garde was always positioned in relation to an existent party politics (primarily communist) which removed the pressure of art ever being required to effectuate change in and of itself. Later, the postwar avant-gardes claimed open-endedness as a radical refusal of organized politics—be this inter-war totalitarianism or the dogma of a party line. There was the potential to discover the highest artistic intensity in the everyday and the banal, which would serve a larger project of equality and anti-elitism. Since the 1990s, participatory art has often asserted a connection between user-generated content and democracy, but the frequent predictability of its results seem to be the consequence of lacking *both* a social *and* an artistic target; in other words, participatory art today stands without a relation to an existing political project (only to a loosely defined anti-capitalism) and presents itself as oppositional to visual art by trying to side-step the question of visibility. As a consequence, these artists have internalized a huge amount of pressure to bear the burden of devising new models of social and political organization—a task that they are not always best equipped to undertake.

My point, again, is not to criticize specific artists but to see the whole rise of social practice since 1989 as symptomatic. That the “political” and “critical” have become shibboleths of advanced art signals a lack of faith *both* in the intrinsic value of art as a de-alienating human endeavor (since art today is so intertwined with market systems globally) *and* in democratic political processes (in whose name so many injustices and barbarities are conducted).²⁰ But rather than addressing this loss of faith by collapsing art and ethics together, the task today is to produce a viable international alignment of leftist political movements and a reassertion of art’s inventive forms of negation as valuable in their own right.²¹ We need to recognize art as a form of experimental activity overlapping with the world, whose negativity may lend support towards a political project (without bearing the sole responsibility for devising and implementing it), and—more radically—we need to support the progressive transformation of existing institutions through the transversal encroachment of ideas whose boldness is related to (and at times greater than) that of artistic imagination.²²

²⁰ The Slovenian collective IRWIN has recently suggested that “critical” and “political” art are as necessary to neoliberalism as socialist realism was to the Soviet regime.

²¹ A positive example of new developments is the new left organization Krytyka Polityczna in Poland, a publishing house that produces a magazine, organizes events, and maintains a regular, forceful presence in the media (via its charismatic young leader Sławomir Sierakowski). The artists who have affiliated themselves with this project are as varied as Artur Żmijewski and the painter Wilhelm Sasnal.

²² Latin America has been preeminent in instituting such solutions. See, for example, the initiatives introduced by Antanas Mockus, then-mayor of Bogotá, discussed in María Cristina Caballero, “Academic turns city into a social experiment,” *Harvard University Gazette*, March 11, 2004, available at <http://www.news.harvard.edu>.

By using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world, and at one remove from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels—to participants and to spectators—the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing, and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew. But to reach the second level requires a mediating third term—an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle—that permits this experience to have a purchase on the public imaginary. Participatory art is not a privileged political medium, nor a ready-made solution to a society of the spectacle, but is as uncertain and precarious as democracy itself; neither are legitimated in advance but need continually to be performed and tested in every specific context.

Claire Bishop
Lecture for Creative Time's *Living as Form*
Cooper Union, New York, May 2011