



Suzana Milevska

Participatory art

A paradigm shift from objects to subjects

The new tendency towards art that invites the participation of the viewer is both a response to philosophical texts re-defining of the concept of community and the communitarian, and a follow-up to the demand to make visible marginalized groups that have been excluded from public cultural life, argues Suzana Milevska.

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

My main aims are to follow the trajectory through 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 the concrete art projects in different contexts.

In such a limited space, I cannot go into 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 precede and go much earlier in history of art than those starting with the early 1990s, 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 (eg Top Value TV), the participatory theatres such as *The Living Theatre*, or the early happenings of Alan Kaprow and Mike Kelly from the 1960s, as well the "new genre public art" coined by Susanne Lacy.

Besides avoiding any in-depth analysis of the previous participatory art practices, I will also have to go on circumventing the analysis of the political circumstances during the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, it has to be stressed that they somehow invite the comparison with today's political context, for example the great number of military conflicts in the world involving the US or the international threat of anarchy and terrorism that has 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 art

objects are much more passive and formal (usually directed by certain formal instructions set up by the artists to be followed during the exhibitions).

I have to make all those distinctions that are to narrow the framework of this text because I want to reflect particularly on the most recent shift of artists' focus from objects and installations towards subjects and enabling their participation in art activities. I am actually interested in the processes of establishing certain unique relations with these subjects that are initiated by the artists and in taking into account the reflection of these projects onto the real life of the participants (not only within the "laboratory conditions" of art galleries). Participation is a demanding activation of certain relations and initiated and directed by the artists and often incited by art institutions, sometimes becoming the only 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 contextualized in a certain social, cultural, and political environment. This shift, I will argue, happens both as a kind of inevitable response of the art practice to the philosophical texts dealing with the redefining of the concept of community and the communitarian, and as a kind of a follow-up to the societal demand for inclusion and for making visible the marginalized groups of citizens who have been excluded from their own 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; this text will also look at the reasons for this criticism.

Among many different categorizations 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, organizing, 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 selected.¹

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

I will begin 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 emphasize participation as one of the crucial societal tendencies today that is mostly needed in order to control the all-embracing neo-liberalism driven by the consumerization 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 "coessentiality of being-with", because he does not believe in any philosophical solipsism and in 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 forgot the importance of "being-together", "being-in-common", and "belonging"; 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, neither 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 to pin down some 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 wherein 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, marginalized, 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 during the period of a particular art event, with 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 ever 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 easier seduced through art methods and practices, since they are

less caught up in high-level politics.¹⁰ The fear of communitarian work for Nancy is related to the fear of totalitarianism that has emerged ever since Stalin became attached to communist ideas; it is for this reason that Nancy suggests that we should re-think the question of community.¹¹

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 withdrawing from work or "unworking", using 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

The interpretation of community as being intrinsically inoperative and fragmentary helps understand 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 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 Like 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 that wants not to belong but to appropriate belonging itself.¹⁵

Participatory art projects are distinct from the sociologically highly evaluated communitarian projects and they differ exactly in the possibility of 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 out of 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 rests exactly in the direct relations that artists can establish through their art activities as "social interstices"; this, according to him, comes as a kind of effect of urbanization.

Bourriaud contrasts Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "natural state" that was dense and "trouble-free" to the city as a "tangible symbol and historical setting of the state of society".¹⁸ By referring to Althusser's notion of "state of encounter imposed on people", Bourriaud interprets this system of intensive encounters as a direct source for 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 "interstice" as a space in human relations that suggests alternative "trading possibilities than those in effect within this system", explains best 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

Discussing Arza Churchman's analysis of various kinds of participation, Marie Gee argues that 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; and, the inclusion/exclusion binary and the tension between its social and political definitions in different contexts (eg liberal democracy and transitional societies).

One of the main critiques of the impact of relational theory, to which extent 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 easier accepted by the society as a welcomed 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 prescripts and expects all too big an impact of art activism projects.

Ultimately, I want to 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 turned into revolutionary means.

¹ "The Five Modes of Arts Participation", January 31, 2006, www.artsjournal.com/artfulmanager/main/005967.php.

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne O'Byrne. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000. Giorgio Agamben. *The Coming Community*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1993.

³ Nancy, *ibid.* 13.

⁴ Nancy, *ibid.* 29.

⁵ Nancy, *ibid.* 94.

⁶ Nancy, *ibid.* 93.

⁷ Nancy, *ibid.* 75.

⁸ Nancy, *ibid.* 75.

⁹ Thomas Hirschorn's project "Bataille's Monument" during Documenta 11 is a typical example of a participatory project that provokes great hopes among the targeted local community that later cannot be fulfilled (a criticism addressed to Hirschorn during the public debate after his lecture held in Victoria Miro Gallery in London, organized by Goldsmiths College's Visual Culture Department, as a part of the conference Field Work: Reports from the Fields of Visual Culture, 2003).

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, (ed.) Peter Connor, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991, 80–81. Nancy writes about the inscription of infinite resistance.

¹¹ Nancy, *ibid.* 2.

¹² Nancy, *ibid.* 31.

¹³ Nancy, *ibid.* 31.

¹⁴ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 86.

¹⁵ Agamben, *ibid.* 87.

- 16 Nicolas Bourriaud. *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Les presses du reel, 2002, 9.
17 Bourriaud, *ibid.* 9.
18 Bourriaud, *ibid.* 15.
19 Bourriaud, *ibid.* 15.
20 Bourriaud, *ibid.* 16.
21 www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/1999/12/yes_in_my_front.php

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