THE SOCIAL TURN: COLLABORATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

by
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Discusses: Heavy metal, New Labour, aesthetic regime, Ode Projesi, ethical turn, The folk archive, social inclusion, collectivity, hidden assumption, Christian ideals, critical pedagogy.

"All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art."—Dan Graham

1. The Social Turn

The recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration, and direct engagement with 'real' people (i.e., those who are not the artist's friends or other artists) from Superflex's internet TV station for elderly residents of a Liverpool housing project (Tenantspin, 1999) to Jeanne van Heeswijk's project to turn a condemned shopping mall into a cultural center for the residents of Vlaardingen, Rotterdam (De Strip, 2001–2004). Although these practices have had a relatively weak profile in the commercial art world—collective projects are more difficult to market than works by individual artists, and less likely to be a 'work' than a social event, publication, workshop, or performance—they nevertheless are increasingly visible.

New institutional frameworks have contributed. One is the unprecedented expansion of the biennial—thirty-three have been established in the last ten years, many in locations until recently considered peripheral. Another is the rise of 'new institutionalism' and the auteur-curator with an interest in performative (or self-reflexive) exhibition-making: collaborating with artists to broaden the institution's remit from a space of exhibition to a production centre and hub for discussion. The art fair (such as Frieze, London) is another new forum for performative social gestures engaging with 'real' people. A fourth is the commissioning agency dedicated to the production of temporary projects in the public realm (such as Artangel in London). In her landmark study of site-specificity in North America, Miwon Kwon argued that socially-collaborative art takes critiques of 'heavy

metal' public sculpture as its point of departure to address the site as a social rather than formal or phenomenological framework. For Kwon, the removal of Richard Serra's Tilted Arc (1981-7) from Federal Plaza, New York, marked a transition to more discursive models of site-specificity, exemplified in the United States by New Genre Public Art: temporary projects that directly engage an audience—particularly groups considered marginalised—as active participants in the production of a process-oriented, politically conscious community event or programme. In these projects, intersubjective exchange becomes the focus—and medium—of artistic investigation.

This expanded field of engaged practices has various names: socially-engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based, or collaborative art. In this respect, the work differs significantly from the type of work discussed by Nicolas Bourriaud in Relational Aesthetics (1998), although these projects appear to have much in common. Bourriaud describes as 'relational' work that takes as its theoretical horizon 'the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space'. But despite Bourriaud's emphasis on human relations and their social context, the artists he supports independently of his arguments are less interested in human relations than in the 'relational' understood as the relations between space, temporality, fiction and design. As such, Bourriaud is frequently critcised for 'aestheticising relations'. In contrast, the projects that form the focus here are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity.

Such contemporary work forms a marked shift away from 'relational' art of the 1990s, and is part of a historical trajectory of socially-oriented practice—from Dada excursions to Situationist dérives, collaboratively-produced Happenings and Actions, and a host of appropriated pseudo-institutions such as offices, restaurants, hotels, tours and discussions. These practices have received relatively little art historical attention, but the conspicuous revival of such strategies in the present decade has prompted a burgeoning historical revisionism. Guy Debord is frequently cited for his theorisation of collectively-produced 'situations' and his indictment of the alienating effects of capitalism in The Society of the Spectacle (1967). For the supporters of socially engaged art, the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanize—or at least de-alienate—a society rendered

numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production. They also share Debord's suspicion of the visual: 'One reason why artists are no longer interested in a passive process of presenter-spectator', writes the Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk, is 'the fact that such communication has been entirely appropriated by the commercial world [...] Afterall, nowadays one could receive an aesthetic experience on every corner'. Now the emphasis is on restoring the social bond, providing a space for creativity and communication otherwise lacking in contemporary society.

Such projects therefore seem to operate with a twofold gesture of opposition and amelioration. Firstly, they work against dominant market imperatives by diffusing single authorship into collaborative activities that transcend 'the snares of negation and self-interest'. Secondly, they reject object-based art as elitist and consumerist; art should channel its symbolic capital towards constructive social change. Given these commitments, it is tempting to argue that socially collaborative art forms the contemporary avant-garde: artists use social situations to produce dematerialized, anti-market, politically engaged projects carrying on the historic avant-garde blur art and life. But the urgency of this social task has led to a situation in which socially collaborative practices are all perceived to be equally important artistic gestures of resistance: there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art, because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond. While broadly sympathetic to this latter ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyze, and compare this work critically as art.

This task is particularly pressing in Europe. In the UK, for example, New Labour deploys a rhetoric almost identical to the practitioners of socially engaged art in order to justify public spending on the arts. The government asks what can the arts do for society? They answer: increasing employability, minimising crime, fostering aspiration—anything but the production of culture for its own sake. The production and reception of the arts has thus been reshaped within a political logic, where audience figures, marketing and statistics are essential to securing public funding. The government's key term here is 'social inclusion': the arts compensate for social exclusion through socially inclusive strategies. (Meanwhile, the structural inequalities of society remain uninterrogated.)

This elision of neoliberal and radical leftist positions appears in the writing of numerous artists and curators on socially-collaborative art. For example take curator Charles Esche's writing on the Tenantspin project by the Danish collective Superflex: an internet-based TV station for the residents of a run-down tower block in Liverpool. His central judgment about this project concerns its effectivity as a 'tool' that can 'change the image of both the tower block itself and the residents' and forge a 'stronger sense of community in the building'. Esche is an innovative and politically-engaged curator, but his reluctance—or inability—to discuss the artistic value of Superflex's project ultimately renders his value judgments indistinguishable from New Labour arts policy founded on a report by François Matarasso proving the positive impact of social participation upon communities. It identifies fifty benefits of social participation: among them, increasing people's sense of self worth, giving people influence over how they are seen by others, reducing isolation by cultivating friendships, developing community networks and sociability, contributing to people's employability, encouraging people to accept risk positively, and helping to transform the image of public bodies. The latter are the most insidious: social participation is viewed positively by the government because it creates submissive citizens who respect authority and accept the 'risk' and responsibility of diminished public services. As Paola Merli points out in her critique of this report, none of these outcomes will change the structural conditions of people's daily existence, it will only 'help' people to accept them.

Here I have entered a sociological discourse. Where's the art? The development of a new terminology by which to discuss and analyse socially engaged practices is now an urgent task— one not assisted by the current opposition between non-believers (aesthetes who reject this work as marginal and misguided) and believers (broadly, activists who reject all aesthetic questions as synonymous with the market and cultural hierarchy). If the former risk condemning us to a world of market-driven painting and sculpture, the latter self-marginalise to the point of artistic and political disempowerment. A productive rapprochement must take place if we are to create compelling alternatives both to market-driven work and the state instrumentalisation of art.

2. The Ethical Turn

It seems that socially-engaged practices are difficult to discuss within the conventional frameworks of art criticism. The critic Reinaldo Laddaga, for example, has commented in relation to "What's the Time in Vyborg?", a four-year project by Liisa Roberts undertaken with the assistance of six teenage girls in the city of Vyborg on the Russian-Finnish border, 'What's the Time in Vyborg' is difficult—perhaps even impossible—to assess as an "art" project in as much as the criteria of its success for those involved could not be described as artistic. The objective … wasn't simply to offer an aesthetic or intellectual experience to an outside public but to facilitate the creation of a temporary community engaged in the process of solving a series of practical problems. The project aspired to have a real efficacy in the site in which it came to happen. Accordingly, any valuation of it should be at the same time artistic and ethical, practical and political.

I broadly agree with Laddaga's assertion that such projects require a more integrated mode of artistic judgment. However, instead of such integrated analyses, we find a recurrent focus on concrete achievements and the fulfillment of social goals. In turn, these are elided into a hazy territory of assumptions not so much 'practical and political' as entirely ethical. This is manifest in a heightened attentiveness to how a given collaboration is undertaken, rather than to the meaning of this collaboration and its production in toto. Artists are judged by their working process—the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration—and criticized for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to 'fully' represent their subjects, as if such a thing were possible.

The Turkish artists' collective Oda Projesi demonstrate how ethical criteria can replace aesthetic ones. Oda Projesi is a group of three artists who, since 1997, have based their activities around a three-room apartment in the Galata district of Istanbul (oda projesi is Turkish for 'room project'). The apartment provides a platform for projects generated by the group in cooperation with their neighbours, such as a children's workshop with the Turkish painter Komet, a community picnic with the sculptor Erik Göngrich, and a parade for children organized by the Tem Yapin theater group. Oda Projesi wish to open up a context for the possibility of exchange and dialogue, motivated by a desire to integrate with their surroundings. They do not set out to improve or heal a situation—one of their slogans is 'exchange not change'—though they see their work as gently oppositional. By organizing workshops and events with their neighbours, they want to produce a more creative and

participatory social fabric by being 'mediators' between groups of people who normally don't interact.

Because much of Oda Projesi's work exists on the level of art education and neighbourhood events, we can see them as dynamic members of the community bringing art to a wider audience. It is important that they open up space for non-object-based practice in Turkey, a country whose art academies and art market are still largely oriented toward painting and sculpture. And one may also be pleased that three women have undertaken this task. But their conceptual gesture of reducing authorship to the role of facilitation ultimately leaves little to distinguish their projects from a slew of community-based practices that revolve around a predictable formula: workshops, discussions, meals, film screenings, and walks. Perhaps this is because the question of the aesthetic is not valid for Oda Projesi, which I asked them in person. They replied that dynamic and sustained relationships provide their markers of success, rather than aesthetic considerations. Indeed, because their practice is collaborative, Oda Projesi consider the aesthetic to be 'a dangerous word' that should not be brought into discussion. This seemed to me to be a curious response: if the aesthetic is dangerous, shouldn't that be all the more reason to interrogate it?

Oda Projesi's approach is adopted by the Swedish curator Maria Lind in a recent essay on their work. Lind, one of the most articulate supporters of political and relational practices, undertakes curatorial work with a trenchant commitment to the social. She notes that the group is not interested in showing or exhibiting art but in 'using art as a means for creating and recreating new relations between people'.   Lind compares their work to Thomas Hirschhorn's Bataille Monument (2002), his well-known collaboration with a mainly Turkish community in Kassel for Documenta 11. (This elaborate project included a TV studio, an installation about Bataille, and a library themed around the interests of the eponymous dissident Surrealist.) However, Lind also observes that Oda Projesi, contrary to Thomas Hirschhorn, are the better artists because of the equal status they give to their collaborators:

[Hirschhorn's] aim is to create art. For the Bataille Monument he had already prepared, and in part also executed, a plan on which he needed help to implement. His participants were paid for their work and their role was that of the "executor" and not "co-creator".

Lind argues that because Hirschhorn's work uses participants to criticize the art genre of the monument, it was rightly criticized for '"exhibiting" and making exotic marginalized groups and thereby contributing to a form of a social pornography'. By contrast, she writes, Oda Projesi 'work with groups of people in their immediate environments and allow them to wield great influence on the project'.

Lind's judgment is based on an ethics of authorial renunciation: the better work exemplifies a superior model of collaborative practice, where authorship is suppressed in favour of facilitating others' creativity. The conceptual density and artistic significance of the respective projects are sidelined in favor of a judgment on the artists' relationship with their collaborators. In other words, Lind downplays what might be interesting in Oda Projesi's work as art—the possible achievement of making dialogue a medium, or the significance of dematerializing a work of art into social process. Instead her criticism is dominated by ethical judgments on working procedure and intentionality. Art and the aesthetic are denigrated as merely visual, superfluous, academic—less important than concrete outcomes, or the proposition of a 'model' or prototype.

This value system is marked in both curatorial and theoretical writing. For example, curator and critic Lucy Lippard concludes The Lure of the Local (1997), a discussion of site-specific art from an ecological and postcolonial perspective, with an eight-point 'ethic of place' for artists who work with communities. Grant Kester's key text on collaborative art, Conversation Pieces (2004) also advocates an art of concrete interventions in which the artist does not occupy a position of pedagogical or creative mastery (p. 151). The Dutch critic Erik Hagoort, in Good Intentions: Judging the Art of Encounter (2005), argues that moral judgments must be made; viewers should assess the presentation and representation of each artist's good intentions. This may explain why socially engaged art has become largely exempt from art criticism: emphasis is continually diverted from the disruptive specificity of a given practice to a generalized set of ethical precepts.

But if ethical criteria have become the norm for judging art what ethics are being advocated? In Conversation Pieces, Grant Kester argues that consultative and 'dialogic' art necessitates a shift in our understanding of what art is—away from the visual and sensory

(which are individual experiences) and toward 'discursive exchange and negotiation' (p. 12). He compares two projects undertaken in East London in the early 1990s: Rachel Whiteread's cast concrete sculpture House (1993) and Lorraine Leeson's billboard project West Meets East (1992, a collaboration with local Bengali schoolgirls). He argues that neither is the better work of art; his tone, however, is clearly judgmental. House has emerged from a studio practice that has little to do with the specific conditions of Bow, while Leeson and her partner Peter Dunn (working under the name The Art of Change) attempt to learn as much as possible about the cultural and political histories of the people with whom they work, as well as their particular needs and skills. Their artistic identity is based in part upon their capacity to listen, openly and actively, and to organise scenarios that maximise the collective creative potential of a given constituency or site. (p. 24)

In this type of work, empathetic identification is necessary, since only this can facilitate 'a reciprocal exchange that allows us to think outside our own lived experience and establish a more compassionate relationship with others' (p. 150). Hence Kester's ideal form of collaboration: conversation, in which all participants are open to a temporary confusion of boundaries between self and other, a blurring achieved through the act of dialogue itself.

   Kester's emphasis on compassionate identification with the other is typical of the discourse around social participation. It represents a familiar summary of the intellectual trends inaugurated by identity politics, and elaborated in 1990s theory: respect for the other, recognition of difference, protection of fundamental liberties, and a concern for human rights. The philosopher Peter Dews has recently described this as an 'ethical turn' to questions of conscience and obligation.   In the discourse around socially-engaged art, we find a similar insistence upon consensual dialogue and sensitivity to difference. Artistic strategies of disruption, intervention or overidentification are denigrated as 'unethical'. As a result, simplistic oppositions become ossified: active versus passive viewer, egotistical versus collaborative artist, cold autonomy versus convivial community.

A resistance to rupturing these categories pervades the literature on social collaboration. For example, Kester's rejects art that might offend or trouble its audience—most notably the historical avant-garde, within whose lineage he nevertheless wishes to situate social participation as a radical practice. Kester criticizes Dada and Surrealism for seeking to

'shock' viewers into being more sensitive and receptive to the world—because for him, this position turns the artist into a privileged bearer of insights, patronizingly informing audiences as to 'how things really are'. This aversion to symbolic disruption potentially signals the end of all new and courageous thinking, and self-censors on the basis of second-guessing how others will think and respond. By contrast, I argue that shock, discomfort, or frustration—along with absurdity, eccentricity, doubt or sheer pleasure—are crucial to a work's aesthetic and political impact.

3. The Aesthetic Regime

A major problem in the discussion around socially-engaged art is its paradoxical relationship to the aesthetic. This does not mean that the work does not fit established notions of the attractive or the beautiful, although this is often the case. More significant is the tendency to view the aesthetic as (at best) merely visual and (at worst) an elitist realm of unbridled seduction entirely complicit with spectacle. Simultaneously, it is also argued that art is an independent zone, free from the pressures of accountability, institutional bureaucracy, and the rigours of specialisation. The upshot is that art is perceived as too removed from the real world while, paradoxically, art must remain autonomous in order to initiate or achieve a model for social change.

Jacques Rancière has articulated this antinomy clearly. He argues that the system of art as we understand it since the Enlightenment—'the aesthetic regime of art'—is predicated on a tension and confusion between autonomy (the desire for art to be at one remove from means-ends relationships) and heteronomy (the blurring of art and life). For Rancière, the primal scene of this new regime is the moment when, in Schiller's fifteenth letter On the Aesthetic Education of Man (1794), he describes a Greek statue known as the Juno Ludovisi as a specimen of 'free appearance'. Following Kant, Schiller does not judge the work as an accurate depiction of the goddess, nor as an idol to be worshipped, but as self-contained, dwelling in itself without purpose or volition, and potentially available to all. As such, the sculpture stands as an example of—and promises—a new community, that suspends reason and power in a state of equality. The aesthetic regime of art is therefore premised on the paradox that 'art is art to the extent that it is something else than art': a sphere at one remove from politics, yet always already political because it contains the

promise of a better world.

What is significant in Rancière's reworking of the term 'aesthetic' is that it concerns aisthesis, a mode of sensible perception proper to artistic products. Rather than considering the work of art to be autonomous, it concerns our autonomy of experience of art. As pursued by Schiller—and Rancière—this freedom or suspension of aesthetic judgment from domination by the faculties suggests the possibility of politics, because the undecidability of aesthetic experience brings a questioning of how things are, and therefore the possibility of change. Aesthetics and politics overlap in their concern for the distribution and sharing of the sensible world—what Rancière calls le partage du sensible. In this framework, it is not possible to conceive of an aesthetic judgment that is not also at the same time a political judgment—a comment on the 'distribution of the places and of the capacities or incapacities attached to those places'.

One of Rancière thus reinvents the term 'aesthetic' so that it denotes the very linguistic and theoretical domain in which thought about art takes place. In this logic, all claims to be 'anti-aesthetic' or reject art still function within the aesthetic regime of art, which thus signals an ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change. Another way to understand this is that art has a 'metapolitics' (its distribution of what is visible, sayable and thinkable)—just as politics is inherently aesthetic (we are political creatures because we can be persuaded by language and images). In this way, Walter Benjamin's famous distinction between the 'aestheticisation of politics' and the 'politicisation of aesthetics' collapses as meaningless: There has never been any "aestheticisation" of politics in the modern age because politics is aesthetic in principle. Politics and aesthetics therefore overlap in their concern for equality, their ways of intervening in how ideas are made and distributed, and the forms of their visibility. In short: the aesthetic need not be sacrificed at the altar of social change, because it already contains this ameliorative promise.

4. Directed Reality

Rancière's point is not that all art is automatically political, but that good art is necessarily political in its redistribution of sensible forms that have a dissensual relationship to the

autonomous world of art and the everyday world we inhabit. The translation of this into art criticism is difficult, despite the fact that Rancière, unusually among philosophers, pays attention to contemporary art. Yet undeniably his judgment falters when faced with the material and conceptual specificity of particular artists' practices. He dismisses, for example, in Malaise dans l'Esthetique (2004) the 'inventory' tendency featured in Voilà, and cannot differentiate the mournful sublimity of Christian Boltanski's Les Abonnés du téléphone (an installation of international telephone directories) from the rectitude of On Kawara's sound installation One Million Years—Past, One Million Years—Future (1999) from the delightfully banal excess of Fischli and Weiss's archive of 3,000 photographs, Visible World (1986-2001). Although he argues against 'critical art' that intends to raise our consciousness by inviting us to 'see the signs of Capital behind everyday objects'; Rancière's preferences incline towards those that offer a clear message related to a political topic—such as Martha Rosler's anti-Vietnam collages Bringing the War Home (1967-72), or Chris Burden's The Other Vietnam Memorial (1991).

   Rancière's arguments are most persuasive when he describes art that avoids the pitfalls of a didactic critical position in favour of rupture and ambiguity:
Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.

Good art, implies Rancière, must negotiate the tension that pushes art towards 'life' and separates aesthetic sensoriality from other forms of sensible experience. This friction ideally produces the formation of elements 'capable of speaking twice: from their readability and from their unreadability'. This shuttling between meanings is possible because artistic forms are undecidable and have no fixed political affiliation. Audience participation techniques pioneered in the 1960s by companies like The Living Theatre and Théâtre du Soleil have become commonplace conventions in the theatrical mainstream. One only has to think of the diverse uses made today of social participation to understand its instability. Techniques once pioneered by critical pedagogy to revolutionary

empowerment (such as Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich) are today used by business as tools for improving workforce morale and company loyalty.   And the most pervasive new trend in the mass-media is reality television, where 'everyday' people participate in the mechanisms of celebrity. By rejecting artistic questions as synonymous with the market and cultural hierarchy; and by focusing attention onto the exemplary ethical gesture, socially-collaborative art ensures its aesthetic and political impotence.

   The exceptions to this trend do not sacrifice authorship for the recovery of a fantasmatic social bond. Instead, they play autonomy against heteronomy, sense against non-sense, interested more in provocation than in the compensatory gesture. Some of these works are well known, such as Thomas Hirschhorn's Bataille Monument (2002) and Musée Précaire Albinet (2004): controversial sculptural projects undertaken in collaboration with mainly working-class immigrant neighbourhoods. Likewise, there are numerous projects by Polish artist Pawel Althamer, where he constitutes a situation enacted by selected participants and unfolding unpredictably in real time. Althamer uses the term 'directed reality' to describe this way of working, with its connotations of unpredictable control: 'you discover very quickly that although you design the fairy tale, you are also designed by it.' Rather than positioning themselves within an activist lineage, where art is marshalled directly to social change, these artists have a closer relationship to avant-garde theatre, performance, or experimental architecture. The success of their works is not dependent upon authorial suppression, but upon the careful deployment of collaboration to produce a poetic and multi-layered event that resonates across many registers. As such, they think the aesthetic and the political together, rather than subsuming both within the exemplary ethical gesture.

For example Jeremy Deller's work forges unexpected encounters between diverse constituencies, and often displays a strong interest in class, subculture, and self-organisation. The Battle of Orgreave (2002) is a re-enactment of a violent clash between miners and policeman in the Yorkshire village of Orgreave in 1984, performed by former miners and policemen, together with historical re-enactment societies. Although the work seemed to contain a twisted therapeutic element (miners and police involved in the original struggle were involved, some of them swapping roles), The Battle of Orgreave didn't seem to heal a wound so much as reopen it.

Deller's event summoned the experiential potency of political demonstrations but only to expose a wrong seventeen years too late. The involvement of historical re-enactment societies was integral to this shift from a journalistic register: their participation symbolically elevated the relatively recent events at Orgreave to the status of English history—while also drawing attention to this eccentric leisure activity where bloody battles are enthusiastically replicated as group entertainment. As the photographs testify, The Battle of Orgreave is and isn't a violent revolt. Constantly on the brink of chaos, it harnesses the experiential potency of collective action towards dark and unsettling ends.

This capacity for affective response to The Battle of Orgreave indicates a movement away from a sociological discourse where methodology, process and outcome are the primary considerations. Although Deller's event serves to re-present recent history as a counter to its original misrepresentation in the media, while also restaging one of the last working-class industrial disputes, this is achieved through a selection of participants that dismantles any impression of sentimental class unity: not just former miners, but the (mainly) middle-class battle re-enactors, whose presence elevates the incidents at Orgreave to the status of English history. The whole event could be understood as contemporary history painting, one in which representation is collapsed with real-time re-enactment. This status of re-enactment also problematises influential definitions of performance art as founded on the unrepeatable gesture and undermined by documentation.   This shuttling between genres and between political narrative and weekend leisure pursuit, allows the work to give visibility to dissent, while also testifying to the aesthetic potency of collective presence.

   Since 1999, Deller has collaborated with artist Alan Kane on the Folk Archive, a collection of material celebrating amateur creative activity in the UK. The archive redefines 'folk' as a class of contemporary visual culture, rather than the rural traditions conventionally evoked by this term, although some of the latter does feature: scarecrows, photographs of prize-winning cakes, outfits made for local festivals. Around a third of the archive is distinctively urban, including tropical nail designs, graffiti, and fake parking tickets. These are collected alongside novel floral tributes (including one shaped like a cigarette), political banners, elaborately customised cars, and paintings made by prisoners.

Although the overall selection varies wildly and is admittedly incoherent, Kane and Deller's eccentric attempt to reimagine the category of folk across a broad axis of creativity cuts across the conventional horizons of cultural attention. Gregory Sholette has described such unofficial creative culture as 'dark matter', but his main points of reference are activist and tactical media collectives; in contrast to these overtly political groups, the work gathered in the Folk Archive present a more subtle opposition to capitalism. They are examples of unalienated creativity in extravagant, lewd or comic forms.

Pleasure, and occasional revulsion, is essential to our experience of the Folk Archive and its distance from didactic critique. The artists compare folk art to contemporary art, arguing that both have been responsive to 'recent social, technological and cultural changes' and have turned to 'performance and action, video and installation'.   This comparison has the intriguing effect of inviting us to read high culture and everyday activity as parallel aesthetic forms—nail designs as body art, sound systems as found sculpture, etc. Hierarchies are distorted through the assembly of a peculiar assortment of material, displayed as a functional archive, with the artists as curators. Significantly, the artists claim no authorial equality with their collaborators: what matters is not their surrender of authorship, but the opposite—their eye for, and appreciation of, quirky strokes of individualism and self-organised collective activity. Displaying the archive as an exhibition also reinforces the artists' attempt to renegotiate which objects merit cultural attention and why, but this is not undertaken as a reprise of postmodern eclecticism and the collapse of high/low art; as Deller says, the Folk Archive's relationship to the contemporary art world can be read both as a bridge and as a declaration of war.   Deller and Kane's collection resonates in gestural opposition to corporate homogeneity (the archive was begun in 1999, responding to discussions about the Millenium Dome and its representation of British life), as an intervention in cultural visibility and taxonomy, as a selection of pleasingly maverick objects, and as a corroboration of their assertion that the most potent forms of self-organisation are 'those that are really self-organised, rather than mobilised by an artist'.

5. Emancipated Spectators?

A possible objection arises: Deller produces objects for consumption within a gallery. His

work invites both a passive mode of reception (compared to the active production of 'real' collaborative art), and reinforces the hierarchies of élite culture; despite its engagement with 'real people', their art is ultimately produced for, and consumed by, a middle-class gallery audience and collectors. Both of these arguments can be refuted. Firstly, the idea that performance documentation is a betrayal of the authentic, unmediated event is a legacy of Debord's terms in The Society of the Spectacle (1967), where active engagement is opposed to passive consumption. This binary is a vicious circle that hovers over any discussion of participation—in art, architecture or theatre—to the point where it becomes an end in itself: 'Even when the dramaturge or the performer does not know what he wants the spectator to do, he knows at least that he has to do something: switching from passivity to activity.' This injunction to activate is pitched as a counter to false consciousness and as a realisation of the essence of art (or theatre) as real life. But the binary of active/passive always ends up in deadlock: either a disparagement of the spectator who does nothing, while the performers on stage do something—or the converse claim that those who act are inferior to those who look, contemplate ideas, and have critical distance on the world. As Rancière observes, the two positions can be switched but the structure remains the same. Both divide a population into those with capacity and those with incapacity. As such, the binary of active/passive forms an allegory of inequality.

This insight can be related to the argument that high culture, as found in art galleries, tends to be produced for and on behalf of the ruling classes; by contrast, 'the people' (particularly the marginalised and excluded) can only be emancipated by direct inclusion in the production of a work. This argument underpins arts funding agendas influenced by policies of social inclusion. Its hidden assumption is that the middle classes have leisure to think, while the marginalised can only engage physically; this argument reinstates the class prejudice where working class activity is restricted to manual labour. It is comparable to sociological critiques of art, where the aesthetic is found to be the preserve of the élite, while the 'real people' prefer the popular, the realist, the hands-on. As Rancière argues, in a scathing response to Pierre Bourdieu's Distinction (1979), the sociologist-interviewer announces the results in advance, and finds out what his questions already presuppose: that things are in their place.   So to argue, in the manner of New Labour and the advocates of collaborative art alike, that social participation is particularly suited to the task of social inclusion not only assumes that participants are already in a

position of impotence, it reinforces this arrangement. Crucially for our argument, Rancière's argument is that the status quo is preserved by never confronting 'the aesthetic thing' directly. In Bourdieu, the grey area of aisthesis is excluded:

Questions about music without music, fictitious questions of aesthetics about photographs when they are not perceived as aesthetic, all these produce inevitably what is required by the sociologist: the suppression of intermediaries, of points of meeting and exchange between the people of reproduction and the elite of distinction.

The discussion around participatory art and its documentation proceeds with similar exclusions. Without engaging with the 'aesthetic thing', the grey areas of slippery meaning are cleaned, contained and kept in place—subordinated to the statistical affirmation of use-values and direct effects. Without the possibility of blurring and rupture, there is merely a Platonic assignment of bodies to their good 'communal' place—an ethical regime of images, rather than an aesthetic regime of art.

   The most compelling artists working in this realm today do not make the 'correct' ethical choice: they do not embrace this Christian ideal of self-sacrifice, but act upon their desire without the incapacitating restrictions of guilt. This fidelity to their (conscious or unconscious) desire—rather than to the judgmental eyes of the big Other—enables their work to join a tradition of highly authored situations that fuse social reality with carefully calculated artifice, such as the Dada-Season of 1921, a series of manifestations that sought to involve the Parisian public. In the Dada-Season, as in more recent examples of 'directed reality', intersubjective relations are not an end in themselves, but serve to unfold a more complex knot of concerns about representation, visibility, pleasure, engagement, and the conventions of social interaction. Instead of extracting art from the 'useless' domain of the aesthetic and fusing it with social praxis, the most interesting art today exists between two vanishing points: 'art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art'.   Pushed to an extreme, each of these scenarios entails its own entropy, its own end of art.

At present, the discursive criteria of participatory, collaborative and socially-engaged art is drawn from a tacit analogy between anti-capitalism and the Christian 'good soul'. In this schema, self-sacrifice is triumphant: the artist should renounce authorial presence in favor of allowing participants to speak through him or her. Some people will consider this a

harsh way to express reservations about some of today's most politically-ambitious practices, but good intentions should not render this art immune to critical analysis. The most compelling contemporary art does not surrender itself to exemplary gestures, but uses participation to articulate a contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention; moreover, it reflects on this antinomy both in the structure of the work and in the conditions of its reception. It is to this art—however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing it may first appear—that we must turn for an alternative to the well-intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on social collaboration. These homilies unwittingly push us back towards a platonic regime where art is valued for its truthfulness and educational efficacy—not for inviting us to confront the more complicated considerations of our predicament.

NOTES

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