

# On participatory art

## Interview with Claire Bishop

Dušan Barok

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Interview was made after workshop *Monument to Transformation*<sup>1</sup> organised by Tranzit initiative in Prague in July 2009.<sup>2</sup>

**Dušan Barok:** In recent years, many artists have been to a lesser or greater extent appropriating the roles of social workers, urban planners, or ombudsmen in order to question and critique the dominant culture by channeling voices and activities of the ones who are underrepresented, repressed or left out from political process. In your essay ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents’ whose updated version was also published in Czech you very interestedly state that socially engaged art can easily fall in trap of overestimating ethical judgement over the aesthetical. Aesthetics is a rather complex matter. To put it roughly, what exactly is wrong with using the art system for ‘social sake’?

**Claire Bishop:** Good question. Instrumentalisation isn’t in itself wrong; many good artists successfully instrumentalise their role for progressive social ends. The problem is that neoliberal governments also instrumentalise art for social ends, privileging participatory art as a way to provide homeopathic solutions to problems that are systemic. Socially participatory art often serves to fulfil these government agendas for ‘social inclusion’ (ie compulsory participation in a consumer society), even though its rhetoric is ostensibly oppositional. Both camps spurn a framework for accounting for these gestures as art: the artists because they tend to view artistic questions as elitist and synonymous with privilege; governments (ie cultural policy makers) because it is easier to deal with art quantitatively (ie as a matter of statistics - who participates, how many etc) than qualitatively.

When confronted by socially-engaged art projects of the type you describe above - projects that aim to release the ‘creativity’ of (often disenfranchised) communities through photography, painting, theatre, cooking, or other workshops - it is often hard to respond to these events with anything other than moral approval. The same can be said for art projects

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<sup>1</sup>[http://cz.tranzit.org/en/lecture\\_discussion/0/2009-07-10/workshop-monument-to-transformation-copy](http://cz.tranzit.org/en/lecture_discussion/0/2009-07-10/workshop-monument-to-transformation-copy)

<sup>2</sup>Originally published on *Multiplace theory* mailing list at <http://multiplace.org/pipermail/mtp-teoria/2009-July/000165.html>.

that directly research and/or criticise social policy, gentrification, globalisation, etc. These projects are often praised for providing a ‘good model’, but on an aesthetic level they blindly repeat tired formulae, while the results of research-as-art are invariably less useful than a book or report on the subject. In short, such projects tend to be worthy, but dull. I am more interested in socially-engaged art activities that are perverse, indirect, or antagonistic - too singular, raw or idiosyncratic to be held up and instantiated as a ‘model’.

For me, the theoretical consequences of this are that we need to consider socially-engaged projects as political and artistic operations, not simply as ethical gestures. Some of the most powerful artistic projects of recent years have not taken a directly ameliorative approach to social participation. They produce situations of conflict and unease, since the artist does not pretend to be a facilitator of others, but is explicitly self-reflexive about his/her role as motivator and manipulator. These works don’t just concern themselves with process but also with the (conceptual) product of these gestures, with their meaning beyond the satisfaction of their immediate participants. They marshal aesthesis to produce a strong symbolic meaning, rather than short-term topicality. Importantly, this does not mean that such works are unethical or pessimistic. They are just more indirect, using formats that require more imagination and generosity from the viewer than a kneejerk reaction of moral outrage at the careerist individualism of the artist.

**DB:** Interesting. There are many things to react on, let us focus on the aesthetical (and political) implications of admitted manipulation. In engaging others in a creative process, artists put themselves in situation when it is hard to communicate intentions to participants. Social-sculpture artists often end up hiring people as uncredited cast to work in the alienated and exploitative conditions for the sake of a good art project. Artists and theorists in argument against these kind of projects say that in a choice of building the intentions bottom-up with participants one can also read the political account, which in turn is forming the ground for reexamination of what we consider the aesthetic, how do we approach the idea of audience and how do we evaluate art. Do you think the conceptual product of a socially engaged art project is compromised without admitting (or affirming) the gap, or distance, between artist and participants? What is the nature of this distance?

**CB:** I’m not sure I fully understand this question, but I’ll try and respond to the main point, which I understand to concern the gap between artists and participants. In the research I have done, I would say that this gap is largely a fantasy projection on the part of the viewer who is uncomfortable with being confronted by people of another class or race. The reality is that no socially-engaged project would even happen without clear and exhaustive communication between the artist and participants. Artists (both the strong ones and the lesser ones) are, in my experience, incredibly engaged in the process of interviewing, explaining and contextualising the project to the people they work with. Where exceptions occur - and the performers are really ‘outsourced’ by a casting agent or the gallery (for example in the work of Beecroft or Sierra) - then that distance is not without a point and aesthetic effect. Even so, I have interviewed people who have performed in such works and the last thing they feel is exploited; more usually they feel thrilled to be centre of attention. Simplistic critical

accusations exploitation don't take into account the complex psychological motivations of both artist and performer.

I really think that accusations of exploitation from over-solicitous viewers are completely misguided - but as Zygmunt Bauman points out, it is always easier to focus on micro-ethics rather than confront the macro-ethics of the society in which we're implicated.

**DB:** How do you understand the concepts of participation and collaboration in how do they differ and what do they have in common? And if that's not too broad question, how do these change the idea of authorship?

**CB:** The British critic Dave Beech has argued for a distinction between participation and collaboration: 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<sup>3</sup>. This seems to me an accurate distinction. The problem is that it doesn't readily translate into art critical judgment. Good collaboration doesn't necessarily mean good art (and here I disagree with many people). In my view, manipulation and coercion do not invalidate a work of art if it exists in critical dialogue with a larger social and political context, as can be seen, for example, in the work of Artur Zmijewski or Christoph Schlingensiefel (both of whom were included in an exhibition I co-curated last year at the ICA London which dealt with some of these issues).

Do these strategies challenge the idea of authorship? Only slightly. The critically-correct position today is to dismiss a singular model of authorship, which is understood to be complicit with privatised individualism and necessary for establishing market value. This is the story of a romantic conception of the singular artist as outsider, whose singularity gradually became determinate for establishing an object's worth. But this association between single authorship and capitalism is misleading, and can be challenged on a number of fronts.

For a start, we could observe that even the most collaborative types of contemporary art still circulate as authored products (albeit ones with less market success than individual efforts). This is not a moralistic point about who earns money and how, but a theoretical issue: each work of art or project is a sovereign domain established by the artist. Even the most open-ended projects are still circumscribed by an artistic identity, and inscribed within a chain of previous or similar co-authored projects. Even when artists make a point of including participants names as co-authors, it is still the singular artist as motivator and facilitator that provides the work's identity. This is what differentiates collaborative projects in the sphere of contemporary art from the more anonymous tradition of community arts.

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<sup>3</sup>Dave Beech, "Include Me Out", *Art Monthly*, April 2008, pp.1-4: "the participant typically is not cast as an agent of critique or subversion but rather as one who is invited to accept the parameters of the art project [...] participation always involves a specific invitation and a specific formation of the participant's subjectivity, even when the artist ask them simply to be themselves. [...] Collaborators, however, are distinct from participants insofar as they share authorial rights over the artwork that permit them, among other things, to make fundamental decisions about the key structural features of the work. That is, collaborators have rights that are withheld from participants." (p.3)

We could also note that collaboration and participation are not new phenomena, but have been essential to art throughout its history, be this on the level of technical assistance or installation, and not always as secondary to artistic genius. During the Renaissance, for example, bronzes were signed by the person who cast the object at the foundry, rather than by the artist. We could also see votive objects in the middle ages - such as books, shrines and relics - as participatory. We therefore need a more complex history of authorship than the most recent one to which contemporary artists are responding; ideally I would like to see authorship discussed in many shades of grey, rather than as a black/white opposition between single and multiple authorship.

The challenge, as I see it, is to rethink individual authorship so that it is no longer synonymous with capitalism but rather with what Guattari calls 'resingularisation', an individual or collective struggle against the banalisation and homogenisation of institutional domains.

**DB:** You have been researching the participatory actions in Czechoslovakia from 1960s and 1970s. Is there anything which particularly interested you?

**CB:** I am currently writing a history and theory of the kind of art we have been discussing. The aim is to show that the meaning of socially-engaged participatory art changes under different ideological contexts, in order to complicate the frequently heard assumption that participatory art is politically progressive and emancipatory in effect. I therefore have a series of case studies looking at the artistic desire to work participatively with other people in the 1960s, under military dictatorship, state socialism, and welfare state social democracy. Many of these works look identical (black and white photos of people doing things in streets) but their meanings and motivations are very different.

The artists I have been focusing on here are Milan Knížák and Alex Mlynářčík, but I have also enjoyed learning about other figures (such as Vladimír Boudník and Ján Budaj) that I did not know before coming to Prague. In contrast to all the other examples in my book, participatory art produced under socialism does not engage with an idea of public space or 'marginal' communities; instead, actions are undertaken with a close and trusted group of friends, for obvious reasons. A second difference is that these projects are not articulated as political (even though we wish to read them as such in retrospect), since the 'political' was at that time perceived as synonymous with state interests, too omnipresent and overdetermined. What was at stake for artists was existential rather than political, the desire to live a more vivid, individual life. Today, the reverse seems to be the case. We live in 'post-political' times and so artists compete to be as political as possible. Individual existentialism is seen as a private indulgence.

**DB:** Contemporary Czech artist Kateřina Šedá has done several acclaimed projects in which she works with her family members or neighbours, in the village on the outskirts of Brno. She tends to refuse taking part in projects that require short intervention in an environment that is unfamiliar to her. What do you think of her work in the context of socially-engaged art?

**CB:** I have only a limited knowledge of Šedá's work; I like some of the videos made with her family. One of the pieces you are referring to, called 'There is Nothing There' (2003), involved getting everyone in the same village to follow a certain pattern of activities for a number of days (shopping, eating, etc). It seems to me an update of the idea of social sculpture, and reminds me of Kaprow's later projects from the 1970s, in which everyday actions are scripted. But I am struggling to find the kernel of its meaning. Everyone in the village agrees to do what the artist says, in what effectively becomes a form of benign aesthetic totalitarianism. (I am reminded of a more brutal version of Šedá's idea: an unrealised project by Elmgreen and Dragset for a Norwegian village, in which they wanted everyone to acquire the same species of dog.)

Šedá's work is distinctive within the Czech art scene, and certainly one of the most interesting practices here, but from an outside perspective, it also seems a bit too gentle and eager to please - at pains not to provoke anyone into doing anything too challenging. As an observer, I would say that the strength of 'There is Nothing There' lies in the experience produced for the participants rather than for its subsequent viewers. I prefer the type of invisible sculpture made by Paweł Althamer, such as 'Movie' (2000), which operate for the viewer as well as the participant. In this work, he positioned a number of actors around the main square in Ljubljana, and for a certain period of time each day they performed the same actions as if on a video loop. Viewers were thus completely uncertain whether or not they were seeing art or just everyday life on the square. For me this is a very powerful piece even through hearsay.

**DB:** Let's look at the online video ecosystem, which is emblematic for the recent boom of creativity. Web services like Blip.tv or Nico Nico Douga (highly popular Japanese portal for animated videos made collaboratively by large groups of users) present the works that are accessible for immediate feedback and debate on a wide scale and attract massive attention. Their authors rarely claim them being the works of art or seek a legitimacy from the art world, even they often act anonymously.

Despite that, these works are accompanied by the rich aesthetic experience and expand it dramatically. To illustrate, French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (after Simondon) talks about the process of collective individuation (or transindividuation), when by sharing and experiencing the (online) cultural content, interhuman relation is created, not by means of what is identical in every human subject, but by means of the charge of preindividual nature that is conserved with the individual being and that contains potentials and virtuality. What is your take on the impact of networked technologies (eg. internet) on aesthetics of collaborative practices?

**CB:** I have to confess that regarding new media I am a dinosaur. I much prefer the problems of live presence in a theatre/performance art/gallery tradition, and their relationship to questions of mediation. Despite this, I'll try and answer your question.

Of course, the emancipatory potential of the web has often been discussed as a tool for networking (eg anti-globalisation protests) and a source of amateur journalism (eg recent events in Iran). But it is also the biggest imaginable repository of banality and aesthetic

homogeneity (as the photography site Flickr all too readily demonstrates). It exacerbates a culture of self-focused consumption - providing endless sublimation via music videos, downloads, and online shopping - but also of self-centred exhibitionism (in social networking sites and blogging). This problem brings us back to my previous answer. Participation is a term that has been thoroughly co-opted by commerce, and no longer carries the automatically radical connotations of '68. An Atelier Populaire poster from Paris that year read "Je participe/tu participes/nous participons...ils profitent". This could not be a truer statement of the present day playground of online participation and reality television. These 'democratic' expressions of participation are completely standardised and privatised, with immediate aesthetic consequences. This is why I remain attached to art as a site for visual thinking, since its boundaries are not delimited in advance, and because it demands a relationship to physical presence rather than the merely virtual.

**DB:** In the talk at the workshop (devoted to transformation processes in the societies with experience of repressive regime) just held at Prague's Tranzitdisplay you were questioning the notion of 'everybody is an artist' and Marx and Engels' scenario of the art seen as the basic creativity everyone has access to if freed from exploitation. You linked this stance, which has been taken up by many artists critiquing the neoliberalism, with the recently formulated policies of creative industries, that call for the unleashing of the creativity, promising to produce the future generations of the creative workers. Can you elaborate on this? What is at stake here?

**CB:** As you say, the workshop was dedicated to a comparative study of experiences of social transformation in countries that have undergone revolution or ideological upheaval. Coming from the UK and living in the US, my contribution to the workshop was necessarily oblique. I spoke about a subtle form of transformation that has taken place in western culture since the 1960s. Namely, the idea that key terms that were the hallmarks of artistic and intellectual critique circa 1968 (the demand for more authenticity, creativity, participation in society, fulfillment at work etc) have today been realised in post-industrial societies, but in ways that facilitate - rather than oppose - the march of global capital.

On the one hand, this can be seen in the rise of the 'creative industries' (fashion, music, media, etc) as the replacement for traditional industry. Richard Florida has referred to the workers in this sector as 'the creative class': people who engage in complex problem solving that involves independent judgment, creativity and high levels of education or human capital (his examples include artists, musicians, engineers and computer scientists). On the other hand, it can be seen in employers taking positive steps to counter alienation by making the workplace 'creative', socially fulfilling, and so on.

Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello have referred to this contemporary assimilation of creativity as 'the new spirit of capitalism'. The values of what they call the 'artistic critique' of 1968 have now been normalised (eg profit motive alone is not enough for successful business; employees want to feel creatively fulfilled by, and identify with, the company they work for). In the UK, this has extended to government intervention in the National Curriculum to

facilitate the development of creativity within schools as an equal to literacy and numeracy.

This aim of unleashing creativity, however, is not directed towards greater social happiness, the realisation of authentic human potential, or the imagination of utopian alternatives - as we might find in the project for 'New Babylon' by the utopian architect Constant in the late 1950s. Rather, it is designed to accelerate the processes of neoliberalisation: in the words of Angela McRobbie, it is aimed at producing "a future generation of socially diverse creative workers who are brimming with ideas and whose skills need not only be channelled into the fields of art and culture but will also be good for business. Most importantly these will be self standing or self sufficient individuals whose efforts will not be hindered by the administrations of the state."

So what is at stake here is that the romantic connotations of the artist as a unique, creative individual with a privileged place within society has been co-opted by the state (particularly in the UK and Netherlands) as an economic tool. In many cases, its glamorous associations are a cover for the increased precariousness of 'creative' (ie freelance) labour. The rhetoric of 'everyone is creative' is a euphemism for introducing yet more independence from the welfare state. All this is important for contemporary art, because it means that certain terms that it holds dear now need to be urgently recontextualised: creativity, but also community and participation.