

ARTIFICIAL HELLS

Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship

CLAIRE BISHOP



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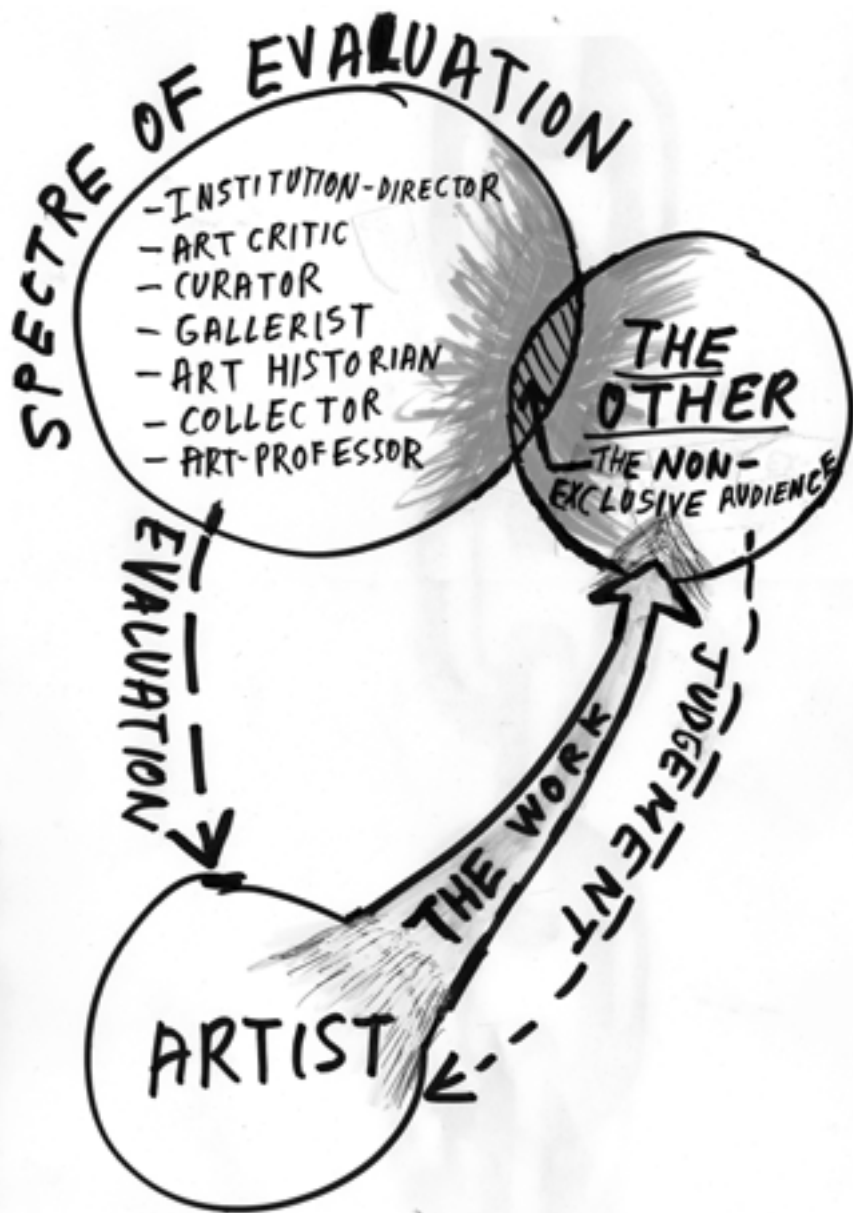
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Thomas Hirschhorn, *Spectre of Evaluation*, 2010, ink on paper

Introduction

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

Dan Graham

Alfredo Jaar hands out disposable cameras to the residents of Catia, Caracas, whose images are shown as the first exhibition in a local museum (*Camera Lucida*, 1996); Lucy Orta leads workshops in Johannesburg to teach unemployed people new fashion skills and discuss collective solidarity (*Nexus Architecture*, 1997–); Superflex start an internet TV station for elderly residents of a Liverpool housing project (*Tenantspin*, 1999); Jeanne van Heeswijk turns a condemned shopping mall into a cultural centre for the residents of Vlaardingen, Rotterdam (*De Strip*, 2001–4); the Long March Foundation produces a census of popular papercutting in remote Chinese provinces (*Papercutting Project*, 2002–); Annika Eriksson invites groups and individuals to communicate their ideas and skills at the Frieze Art Fair (*Do you want an audience?*, 2004); Temporary Services creates an improvised sculpture environment and neighbourhood community in an empty lot in Echo Park, Los Angeles (*Construction Site*, 2005); Vik Muniz sets up an art school for children from the Rio favelas (*Centro Espacial Vik Muniz*, Rio de Janeiro, 2006–).

These projects are just a sample of the surge of artistic interest in participation and collaboration that has taken place since the early 1990s, and in a multitude of global locations. This expanded field of post-studio practices currently goes under a variety of names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art and (most recently) social practice. I will be referring to this tendency as ‘participatory art’, since this connotes the involvement of many people (as opposed to the one-to-one relationship of ‘interactivity’) and avoids the ambiguities of ‘social engagement’, which might refer to a wide range of work, from *engagé* painting to interventionist actions in mass media; indeed, to the extent that art always responds to its environment (even

via negativa), what artist *isn't* socially engaged?¹ This book is therefore organised around a definition of participation in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance.

It should be stressed from the outset that the projects discussed in this book have little to do with Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998/2002), even though the rhetoric around this work appears, on a theoretical level at least, to be somewhat similar.² In truth, however, many of the projects that formed the impetus for this book have emerged in the wake of *Relational Aesthetics* and the debates that it occasioned; the artists I discuss below are less interested in a relational *aesthetic* than in the creative rewards of participation as a politicised working process. One of the achievements of Bourriaud's book was to render discursive and dialogic projects more amenable to museums and galleries; the critical reaction to his theory, however, catalysed a more critically informed discussion around participatory art. Up until the early 1990s, community-based art was confined to the periphery of the art world; today it has become a genre in its own right, with MFA courses on social practice and two dedicated prizes.³

This orientation towards social context has since grown exponentially, and, as my first paragraph indicates, is now a near global phenomenon – reaching across the Americas to South East Asia and Russia, but flourishing most intensively in European countries with a strong tradition of public funding for the arts. Although these practices have had, for the most part, 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 'works' than a fragmented array of social events, publications, workshops or performances – they nevertheless occupy a prominent place in the public sector: in public commissions, biennials and politically themed exhibitions. Although I will occasionally refer to contemporary examples from non-Western contexts, the core of this study is the rise of this practice in Europe, and its connection to the changing political imaginary of that region (for reasons that I will explain below). But regardless of geographical location, the hallmark of an artistic orientation towards the social in the 1990s has been a shared set of desires to overturn the traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience. To put it simply: the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder', is now repositioned as a co-producer or *participant*. As the chapters that follow will make clear, these shifts are often more powerful as ideals than as actualised realities, but they all aim to place pressure on conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under capitalism. As such, this discussion is

framed within a tradition of Marxist and post-Marxist writing on art as a de-alienating endeavour that should not be subject to the division of labour and professional specialisation.

In an article from 2006 I referred to this art as manifesting a ‘social turn’, but one of the central arguments of this book is that this development should be positioned more accurately as a *return* to the social, part of an ongoing history of attempts to rethink art collectively.⁴ Although art of the 1990s and 2000s forms the primary motivation for this research, artists’ preoccupation with participation and collaboration is not unprecedented. From a Western European perspective, the social turn in contemporary art can be contextualised by two previous historical moments, both synonymous with political upheaval and movements for social change: the historic avant-garde in Europe circa 1917, and the so-called ‘neo’ avant-garde leading to 1968. The conspicuous resurgence of participatory art in the 1990s leads me to posit the fall of communism in 1989 as a third point of transformation. Triangulated, these three dates form a narrative of the triumph, heroic last stand and collapse of a collectivist vision of society.⁵ Each phase has been accompanied by a utopian rethinking of art’s relationship to the social and of its political potential – manifested in a reconsideration of the ways in which art is produced, consumed and debated.

The structure of the book is loosely divided into three parts. The first forms a theoretical introduction laying out the key terms around which participatory art revolves and the motivations for the present publication in a European context. The second section comprises historical case studies: flashpoints in which issues pertinent to contemporary debates around social engagement in art have been particularly precise in their appearance and focus. The third and final section attempts to historicise the post-1989 period and focuses on two contemporary tendencies in participatory art.

Some of the key themes to emerge throughout these chapters are the tensions between quality and equality, singular and collective authorship, and the ongoing struggle to find artistic equivalents for political positions. Theatre and performance are crucial to many of these case studies, since participatory engagement tends to be expressed most forcefully in the live encounter between embodied actors in particular contexts. It is hoped that these chapters might give momentum to rethinking the history of twentieth-century art through the lens of theatre rather than painting (as in the Greenbergian narrative) or the ready-made (as in Krauss, Bois, Buchloh and Foster’s *Art Since 1900*, 2005). Further sub-themes include education and therapy: both are process-based experiences that rely on intersubjective exchange, and indeed they converge with theatre and performance at several moments in the chapters that follow.

The first of the historical chapters begins with the invention of a popular mass audience in Italian Futurist *serate* (1910 onwards) and the theatrical innovations that took place in the years following the Bolshevik

Revolution, focusing on the gaps between theory, practice, cultural policy and audience reception. These contested events are contrasted with the Dada Season of 1921, when André Breton and his colleagues ‘took to the street’ in order to shift the tenor of Dada performance away from one of scandal.⁶ The following four chapters examine post-war forms of social participation under four disparate ideological contexts, with a view to showing the divergent political investments that can accompany ostensibly similar artistic expressions. The first of these (Chapter 3) focuses on Paris in the 1960s: it examines the alternatives to visual art devised by the Situationist International, and contrasts their ‘constructed situations’ to the participatory actions devised by the Groupe Recherche d’Art Visuel (GRAV) on the one hand, and Jean-Jacques Lebel’s anarchic and eroticised Happenings on the other. Although the literature on the Situationist International is extensive, it also tends to be partial; my aim has been to provide a critical reading of the group’s contribution to art, even though this cuts against its avowed intentions and those of its supporters. If the French scene offers a liberatory repertoire of responses to consumer capitalism in Europe, then participatory actions in South America were formulated in relation to a series of brutal military dictatorships beginning in the mid 1960s; the aggressive and fragmented artistic and theatrical propositions that this gave rise to in Argentina are the subject of Chapter 4. The following chapter turns to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, specifically to the proliferation of participatory happenings in former Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and to the work of the Collective Actions Group in Moscow from 1976 onwards. These examples from socialist contexts aim to problematise contemporary claims that participation is synonymous with collectivism, and thus inherently opposed to capitalism; rather than reinforcing the collectivist dogma of dominant ideology, these case studies indicate that participatory art under state socialism was often deployed as a means to create a privatised sphere of individual expression. The last of these four ‘ideological’ chapters focuses on participation in a welfare state social democracy, turning to two artistic innovations that flourished in the UK in the 1970s: the Community Arts Movement and the Artist Placement Group. Little art historical work has been undertaken on either of these phenomena, and it is hoped that this provocative conjunction will trigger further debate.

The third section of the book begins by providing a narrative of the rise of social engagement in contemporary art in Europe after the fall of communism, focusing on the ‘project’ as a privileged vehicle of utopian experimentation at a time when a leftist project seemed to have vanished from the political imaginary. Chapters 8 and 9 focus on two prevalent modes of participation in contemporary art: ‘delegated’ performance (in which everyday people are hired to perform on behalf of the artist) and pedagogic projects (in which art converges with the activities and goals of

education). Both of these chapters aim to take on board the methodological implications of process-based participatory art, and to propose alternative criteria for considering this work. The book ends with a consideration of the changing identity of the audience across the twentieth century, and suggests that artistic models of democracy have only a tenuous relationship to actual forms of democracy.

The scope of this book is of course far from comprehensive. Many important projects and recent tendencies have been left out. I have not, for example, dealt with transdisciplinary, research-based, activist or interventionist art, in part because these projects do not primarily involve people as the medium or material of the work, and in part because they have their own set of discursive problems that I would like to address as a separate issue in the future. I have been similarly strict about the geographical scope of this book, which is organised around the legacy of the historic avant-garde – hence the decision to include Eastern Europe and South America, but not Asia.⁷ Readers may also wonder about the paucity of case studies from North America. When I began this research, I was initially interested in producing a counter-history, since the discussion around social engagement has for too long been dominated by North American critics writing on North American art – based on issues of new genre public art, site specificity, and dialogic practices. My desire to put these debates aside was not intended to undermine their importance; on the contrary, the work of these critic-historians has been central to the emergence of this field and the terms that we have available for its analysis.⁸ As the research developed, however, more focused political concerns replaced my naively anti-hegemonic desire to avoid a re-rehearsal of North American art history, despite my eventual inclusion of a few key US examples. One of the motivations behind this book stems from a profound ambivalence about the instrumentalisation of participatory art as it has developed in European cultural policy in tandem with the dismantling of the welfare state. The UK context under New Labour (1997–2010) in particular embraced this type of art as a form of soft social engineering. The US context, with its near total absence of public funding, has a fundamentally different relationship to the question of art's instrumentalisation.

I will conclude this introduction with some methodological points about researching art that engages with people and social processes. One thing is clear: visual analyses fall short when confronted with the documentary material through which we are given to understand many of these practices. To grasp participatory art from images alone is almost impossible: casual photographs of people talking, eating, attending a workshop or screening or seminar tell us very little, almost nothing, about the concept and context of a given project. They rarely provide more than fragmentary evidence, and convey nothing of the affective dynamic that propels artists to make these projects and people to participate in them. To

what extent is this a new problem? Some of the best conceptual and performance art in the 1960s and '70s similarly sought to refute the commodity-object in favour of an elusive experience. Yet visibility always remained important to this task: however 'deskilled' or desubjectivised, conceptual and performance art nevertheless manage to prompt a wide range of affective responses, and their photo-documentation is capable of provoking deadpan amusement, wry embarrassment, iconic reverence or appalled disgust. By contrast, today's participatory art is often at pains to emphasise process over a definitive image, concept or object. It tends to value what is invisible: a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy, a raised consciousness. As a result, it is an art dependent on first-hand experience, and preferably over a long duration (days, months or even years). Very few observers are in a position to take such an overview of long-term participatory projects: students and researchers are usually reliant on accounts provided by the artist, the curator, a handful of assistants, and if they are lucky, maybe some of the participants. Many of the contemporary case studies in this book were gleaned through hit-and-miss field trips, which led me to understand that all of this work demands more on-site time commitment than I was habitually used to as a critic of installation art, performance and exhibitions. Ideally several site visits were necessary, preferably spread out over time – a luxury not always available to the underpaid critic and tightly scheduled academic. The complexity of each context and the characters involved is one reason why the dominant narratives around participatory art have frequently come to lie in the hands of those curators responsible for each project and who are often the only ones to witness its full unfolding – at times present even more so than the artist.⁹ An important motivation for this study was my frustration at the foreclosure of critical distance in these curatorial narratives, although I have come to realise that in staging multiple visits to a given project, this fate increasingly also befalls the critic. The more one becomes involved, the harder it is to be objective – especially when a central component of a project concerns the formation of personal relationships, which inevitably proceed to impact on one's research. The hidden narrative of this book is therefore a journey from sceptical distance to imbrication: as relationships with producers were consolidated, my comfortable outsider status (important but secure in my critical superiority) had to be recalibrated along more constructive lines.

This trajectory is reflected in this book: readers may note the shift between the polemic in Chapter 1 – first published (in shorter form) in 2006 – and the conclusion from 2011. The book's title, *Artificial Hells*, is intended to serve both as a positive and negative descriptor of participatory art. Taken from André Breton's eponymous post-mortem of the *Grande Saison Dada* in Spring 1921, in which he argues for the exquisite potential of social disruption in the public sphere, the title appeals for more bold, affective

and troubling forms of participatory art and criticism. Breton's analysis also suggests that work perceived by its makers to be an experimental failure in its own time (like the Dada Season of 1921) may nevertheless have resonance in the future, under new conditions. This model of delayed reaction has been foundational to my selection of examples, whose inclusion is based on their relevance to the present day, rather than for their significance at the time of their making.

From a disciplinary perspective, any art engaging with society and the people in it demands a methodological reading that is, at least in part, sociological. By this I mean that an analysis of this art must necessarily engage with concepts that have traditionally had more currency within the social sciences than in the humanities: community, society, empowerment, agency. As a result of artists' expanding curiosity in participation, specific vocabularies of social organisation and models of democracy have come to assume a new relevance for the analysis of contemporary art. But since participatory art is not only a social activity but also a symbolic one, both embedded in the world *and* at one remove from it, the positivist social sciences are ultimately less useful in this regard than the abstract reflections of political philosophy. This methodological aspect of the 'social turn' is one of the challenges faced by art historians and critics when dealing with contemporary art's expanded field. Participatory art demands that we find new ways of analysing art that are no longer linked solely to visuality, even though *form* remains a crucial vessel for communicating meaning. In order to analyse the works discussed in this book, theories and terms have been imported from political philosophy, but also from theatre history and performance studies, cultural policy and architecture.¹⁰ This combination differs from other interdisciplinary moments in art history (such as the use of Marxism, psychoanalysis and linguistics in the 1970s). Today, it is no longer a question of employing these methods to rewrite art history from an invested political position – although this certainly plays a role – so much as the acknowledgment that it is impossible adequately to address a socially oriented art *without* turning to these disciplines, and that this interdisciplinarity parallels (and stems from) the ambitions and content of the art itself.¹¹

At the same time, it must be emphasised that one of the goals of this book is to show the inadequacy of a positivist sociological approach to participatory art (as proposed, for example, by cultural policy think-tank studies that focus on demonstrable outcomes) and to reinforce the need to keep alive the constitutively undefinitive reflections on quality that characterise the humanities. In the field of participatory art, quality is often a contested word: rejected by many politicised artists and curators as serving the interests of the market and powerful elites, 'quality' has been further marred by its association with connoisseurial art history. More radical options have tended to advocate a confusion of high/low boundaries or to

prioritise other terms (in the words of Thomas Hirschhorn, ‘Energy yes, quality no!’). This book is predicated on the assumption that value judgements are necessary, not as a means to reinforce elite culture and police the boundaries of art and non-art, but as a way to understand and clarify our shared values at a given historical moment. Some projects are indisputably more rich, dense and inexhaustible than others, due to the artist’s talent for conceiving a complex work and its location within a specific time, place and situation. There is an urgent need to restore attention to the modes of conceptual and affective complexity generated by socially oriented art projects, particularly to those that claim to reject aesthetic quality, in order to render them more powerful and grant them a place in history. After all, aesthetic refusals have happened many times before. Just as we have come to recognise Dada cabaret, Situationist *détournement*, or dematerialised conceptual and performance art as having their own aesthetics of production and circulation, so too do the often formless-looking photo-documents of participatory projects have their own experiential regime. The point is not to regard these anti-aesthetic visual phenomena (reading areas, self-published newspapers, parades, demonstrations, ubiquitous plywood platforms, endless photographs of people) as objects of a new formalism, but to analyse how these contribute to and reinforce the social and artistic experience being generated.

A secondary methodological point relates to the pragmatics of my research. I have already mentioned the geographic purview of this book: it is international but does not attempt to be global. To stay local is to risk provincialism; to go global risks dilution. Language has been an ongoing problem: in conducting my case studies, I was confronted with the unavoidable reality that I do not have the language requirements to do original archival work in so many different contexts. For better or worse, English is the lingua franca of the art world, and is the language in which I have undertaken the bulk of this research. And due to the experience-based character of participatory art and its tangential relationship to the canon, the bulk of this research has been discursive: seven years of conversations, interviews and arguments with artists and curators, not to mention the audiences to whom I have lectured, colleagues who were patient interlocutors, and students at numerous institutions.

One of this book’s objectives is to generate a more nuanced (and honest) critical vocabulary with which to address the vicissitudes of collaborative authorship and spectatorship. At present, this discourse revolves far too often around the unhelpful binary of ‘active’ and ‘passive’ spectatorship, and – more recently – the false polarity of ‘bad’ singular authorship and ‘good’ collective authorship. These binaries need to be taken to task, and with them the facile argument – heard at every public debate about this art I have ever attended – that singular authorship serves primarily to glorify the artist’s career and fame. This criticism is continually levelled at

participatory art despite the fact that since the late 1960s, artists across all media continually engage in dialogue and creative negotiation with other people: technicians, fabricators, curators, public bodies, other artists, intellectuals, participants, and so on. The worlds of music, film, literature, fashion and theatre have a rich vocabulary to describe co-existing authorial positions (director, author, performer, editor, producer, casting agent, sound engineer, stylist, photographer), all of which are regarded as essential to the creative realisation of a given project. The lack of an equivalent terminology in contemporary visual art has led to a reductive critical framework, underpinned by moral indignation.

Academic research is no less subject to these valorising paradoxes of single and collective authorship: single-authored monographic books have more status than edited volumes, while the most reputable scholarship is subjected to the collective monitoring called 'peer review'. I am acutely aware that the form of this research is conventional, resulting in a monographic study – rather than exhibition, DVD, website, archive or more collaborative form of output.¹² On the other hand, while a number of edited anthologies and exhibition catalogues around this subject already exist, few of them make a sustained argument.¹³ We should bear in mind that there is no fixed recipe for good art or authorship. As Roland Barthes reminded us in 1968, authorships (of all kinds) are multiple and continually indebted to others. What matters are the ideas, experiences and possibilities that result from these interactions. The central project of this book is to find ways of accounting for participatory art that focus on the meaning of what it produces, rather than attending solely to process. This result – the mediating object, concept, image or story – is the necessary link between the artist and a secondary audience (you and I, and everyone else who didn't participate); the historical fact of our ineradicable presence requires an analysis of the politics of spectatorship, even – and especially – when participatory art wishes to disavow this.

1

The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents

A recurrent set of theoretical reference points governs the current literature on participatory and collaborative art: Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, the Situationist International, Paulo Freire, Deleuze and Guattari, and Hakim Bey, to name just a few.¹ Among these, the most frequently cited is the French film-maker and writer Guy Debord, for his indictment of the alienating and divisive effects of capitalism in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), and for his theorisation of collectively produced ‘situations’. For many artists and curators on the left, Debord’s critique strikes to the heart of why participation is important as a project: it rehumanises a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production. 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. The art historian Grant Kester, for example, observes that art is uniquely placed to counter a world in which ‘we are reduced to an atomised pseudocommunity of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition’.² ‘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 . . . After all, nowadays one could receive an aesthetic experience on every corner.’³ More recently, the artist/activist Gregory Sholette and art historian Blake Stimson have argued that ‘in a world all but totally subjugated by the commodity form and the spectacle it generates, the only remaining theatre of action is direct engagement with the forces of production’.⁴ Even the curator Nicolas Bourriaud, describing relational art of the 1990s, turns to spectacle as his central point of reference: ‘Today, we are in the further stage of spectacular development: the individual has shifted from a passive and purely repetitive status to the minimum activity dictated to him by market forces . . . Here we are summoned to turn into

extras of the spectacle.⁵ As the philosopher Jacques Rancière points out, ‘the “critique of the spectacle” often remains the alpha and the omega of the “politics of art”’.⁶

Alongside a discourse of spectacle, advanced art of the last decade has seen a renewed affirmation of collectivity and a denigration of the individual, who becomes synonymous with the values of Cold War liberalism and its transformation into neoliberalism, that is, the economic practice of private property rights, free markets and free trade.⁷ Much of this discussion has been given impetus by Italian workerist theories of contemporary labour. In this framework, the virtuosic contemporary artist has become the role model for the flexible, mobile, non-specialised labourer who can creatively adapt to multiple situations, and become his/her own brand. What stands against this model is the collective: collaborative practice is perceived to offer an automatic counter-model of social unity, regardless of its actual politics. As Paolo Virno has noted, if the historic avant-garde were inspired by, and connected to, centralised political parties, then ‘today’s collective practices are connected to the decentred and heterogeneous net that composes post-Fordist social co-operation’.⁸ This social network of an incipient ‘multitude’ has been valorised in exhibitions and events like ‘Collective Creativity’ (WHW, 2005), ‘Taking the Matter into Common Hands’ (Maria Lind et al., 2005), and ‘Democracy in America’ (Nato Thompson, 2008). Along with ‘utopia’ and ‘revolution’, collectivity and collaboration have been some of the most persistent themes of advanced art and exhibition-making of the last decade. Countless works have addressed collective desires across numerous lines of identification – from Johanna Billing’s plaintive videos in which young people are brought together, often through music (*Project for a Revolution*, 2000; *Magical World*, 2005) to Kateřina Šedá inviting everyone in a small Czech village to follow her mandatory programme of activities for one day (*There’s Nothing There*, 2003), from Sharon Hayes’ participatory events for LGBT communities (*Revolutionary Love*, 2008) to Tania Bruguera’s performance in which blind people dressed in military garb stand on the streets soliciting sex (*Consummated Revolution*, 2008). Even if a work of art is not directly participatory, references to community, collectivity (be this lost or actualised) and revolution are sufficient to indicate a critical distance towards the neoliberal new world order. Individualism, by contrast, is viewed with suspicion, not least because the commercial art system and museum programming continue to revolve around lucrative single figures.

Participatory projects in the social field therefore seem to operate with a twofold gesture of opposition and amelioration. They work against dominant market imperatives by diffusing single authorship into collaborative activities that, in the words of Kester, transcend ‘the snares of negation and self-interest’.⁹ Instead of supplying the market with commodities,

participatory art is perceived to channel art's symbolic capital towards constructive social change. Given these avowed politics, and the commitment that mobilises this work, it is tempting to suggest that this art arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists devising social situations as a dematerialised, anti-market, politically engaged project to carry on the avant-garde call to make art a more vital part of 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 repairing the social bond. While sympathetic to the latter ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyse and compare this work critically *as art*, since this is the institutional field in which it is endorsed and disseminated, even while the category of art remains a persistent exclusion in debates about such projects.

I. Creativity and Cultural Policy

This task is particularly pressing in Europe. In the UK, New Labour (1997–2010) deployed a rhetoric almost identical to that of the practitioners of socially engaged art in order to justify public spending on the arts. Anxious for accountability, the question it asked on entering office in 1997 was: what can the arts do for society? The answers included increasing employability, minimising crime, fostering aspiration – anything but artistic experimentation and research as values in and of themselves. The production and reception of the arts was therefore reshaped within a political logic in which audience figures and marketing statistics became essential to securing public funding.¹⁰ The key phrase deployed by New Labour was ‘social exclusion’: if people become disconnected from schooling and education, and subsequently the labour market, they are more likely to pose problems for welfare systems and society as a whole. New Labour therefore encouraged the arts to be socially *inclusive*. Despite the benign ring to this agenda, it has been subject to critiques from the left, primarily because it seeks to conceal social inequality, rendering it cosmetic rather than structural.¹¹ It represents the primary division in society as one between an *included majority* and an *excluded minority* (formerly known as the ‘working class’). The solution implied by the discourse of social exclusion is simply the goal of transition across the boundary from excluded to included, to allow people to access the holy grail of self-sufficient consumerism and be independent of any need for welfare. Furthermore, social exclusion is rarely perceived to be a corollary of neoliberal policies, but of any number of peripheral (and individual) developments, such as drug-taking, crime, family breakdown and teenage pregnancy.¹² Participation became an important buzzword in the social inclusion discourse, but unlike its function in contemporary art (where it

denotes self-realisation and collective action), for New Labour it effectively referred to the elimination of disruptive individuals. To be included and participate in society means to conform to full employment, have a disposable income, and be self-sufficient.

Incorporated into New Labour's cultural policy, the social inclusion discourse leaned heavily upon a report by François Matarasso proving the positive impact of social participation in the arts.¹³ Matarasso lays out fifty benefits of socially engaged practice, offering 'proof' that it reduces isolation by helping people to make friends, develops community networks and sociability, helps offenders and victims address issues of crime, contributes to people's employability, encourages people to accept risk positively, and helps transform the image of public bodies. The last of these, perhaps, is the most insidious: social participation is viewed positively because it creates submissive citizens who respect authority and accept the 'risk' and responsibility of looking after themselves in the face of diminished public services. As the cultural theorist Paola Merli has pointed out, none of these outcomes will change or even raise consciousness of the structural conditions of people's daily existence, it will only help people to accept them.¹⁴

The social inclusion agenda is therefore less about repairing the social bond than a mission to enable all members of society to be self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatised world. As such, the neoliberal idea of community doesn't seek to build social relations, but rather to erode them; as the sociologist Ulrich Beck has noted, social problems are experienced as individual rather than collective, and we feel compelled to seek 'biographic solutions to systemic contradictions'.¹⁵ In this logic, participation in society is merely participation in the task of being individually responsible for what, in the past, was the collective concern of the state. Since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came to power in May 2010 this devolution of responsibility has accelerated: David Cameron's 'Big Society', ostensibly a form of people power in which the public can challenge how services such as libraries, schools, police and transport are being run, in fact denotes a laissez-faire model of government dressed up as an appeal to foster 'a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, social action'.¹⁶ It's a thinly opportunist mask: asking wageless volunteers to pick up where the government cuts back, all the while privatising those services that ensure equality of access to education, welfare and culture.

The UK is not alone in this tendency. Northern Europe has experienced a transformation of the 1960s discourse of participation, creativity and community; these terms no longer occupy a subversive, anti-authoritarian force, but have become a cornerstone of post-industrial economic policy. From the 1990s to the crash in 2008, 'creativity' was one of the major buzz words in the 'new economy' that came to replace heavy industry and commodity production. In 2005, a policy document *Our Creative Capacity*

(Ons Creatieve Vermogen) was presented to the Dutch right-wing coalition government by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Ministry of Economic Affairs. The paper's aim was to 'intensify the economic potential of culture and creativity by boosting the creative powers of Dutch trade and industry' by operating on two fronts: firstly, to give the business community more insight into the possibilities offered by the creative sector, 'generating a wealth of ideas for the development and utilisation of new technologies and products', and secondly, to encourage the cultural sector to have a greater awareness of its market potential.¹⁷ In the same document, we find that the authors of this paper acknowledge no difference between 'creative industry', the 'culture industry', 'art' and 'entertainment'. What results from this elision is not a productive blurring and complication of both terms (as we might find in certain cross-disciplinary artistic practices) but rather the reduction of everything to a matter of finance: 'the fact that some people attribute greater artistic merit to certain sectors is completely irrelevant when looked at from a perspective of economic utilisation'.¹⁸ One year later, in 2006, the Dutch government inaugurated a €15 million 'Culture and Economy' programme, capitalising upon creativity as a specifically Dutch export, as if taking the logic of *De Stijl* to its unwitting expansion as an entrepreneurial opportunity. At the same time, Amsterdam City Council began an aggressive rebranding of the Dutch capital as a 'Creative City': 'Creativity will be the central focus point', it claimed, since 'creativity is the motor that gives the city its magnetism and dynamism'.¹⁹

One of the models for the Dutch initiative was New Labour, who placed an emphasis on the role of creativity and culture in commerce and the growth of the 'knowledge economy'.²⁰ This included museums as a source of regeneration, but also investment in the 'creative industries' as alternatives to traditional manufacturing.²¹ New Labour built upon the Conservative government's openly instrumental approach to cultural policy: a 2001 Green Paper opens with the words 'Everyone is creative', presenting the government's mission as one that aims to 'free the creative potential of individuals'.²² This aim of unleashing creativity, however, was not designed to foster greater social happiness, the realisation of authentic human potential, or the imagination of utopian alternatives, but to produce, in the words of sociologist Angela McRobbie, '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'.²³

In short, the emergence of a creative and mobile sector serves two purposes: it minimises reliance on the welfare state while also relieving corporations of the burden of responsibilities for a permanent workforce. As such, New Labour considered it important to develop creativity in schools – not because everyone must be an artist (as Joseph Beuys declared),

but because the population is increasingly required to assume the individualisation associated with creativity: to be entrepreneurial, embrace risk, look after their own self-interest, perform their own brands, and be willing to self-exploit. To cite McRobbie once more: ‘the answer to so many problems across a wide spectrum of the population – e.g. mothers at home and not quite ready to go back to work full time – on the part of New Labour is “self employment”, set up your own business, be free to do your own thing. Live and work like an artist’.²⁴ Sociologist Andrew Ross makes a similar point when he argues that the artist has become the role model for what he calls the ‘No Collar’ workforce: artists provide a useful model for precarious labour since they have a work mentality based on flexibility (working project by project, rather than nine to five) and honed by the idea of sacrificial labour (i.e. being predisposed to accept less money in return for relative freedom).²⁵

What emerges here is a problematic blurring of art and creativity: two overlapping terms that not only have different demographic connotations but also distinct discourses concerning their complexity, instrumentalisation and accessibility.²⁶ Through the discourse of creativity, the elitist activity of art is democratised, although today this leads to business rather than to Beuys. The dehierarchising rhetoric of artists whose projects seek to facilitate creativity ends up sounding identical to government cultural policy geared towards the twin mantras of social inclusion and creative cities. Yet artistic practice has an element of critical negation and an ability to sustain contradiction that cannot be reconciled with the quantifiable imperatives of positivist economics. Artists and works of art can operate in a space of antagonism or negation vis-à-vis society, a tension that the ideological discourse of creativity reduces to a unified context and instrumentalises for more efficacious profiteering.

The conflation between the discourses of art and creativity can be seen in the writing of numerous artists and curators on participatory art, where the criteria for the work’s assessment in both cases is essentially sociological and driven by demonstrable outcomes. Take for example the curator Charles Esche, writing on the project *Tenantspin*, an internet-based TV station for the elderly residents of a run-down tower block in Liverpool (2000–), by the Danish collective Superflex. Esche intersperses his article with long quotes from governmental reports about the state of British council housing, indicating the primacy of a sociological context for understanding the artists’ project. But his central judgement about *Tenantspin* concerns its effectiveness as a ‘tool’ that can ‘change the image of both the tower block itself and the residents’; in his view, the major achievement of this project is that it has forged a ‘stronger sense of community in the building’.²⁷ Esche is one of Europe’s most articulate defenders of politicised artistic practice, and one of its most radical museum directors, but his essay is symptomatic of the critical tendency I am drawing attention to. His

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Superflex, *Tenantspin* (2000) view of Coronation Court, Liverpool

decision not to address what it means for Superflex to be doing this project *as art* ultimately renders these value judgements indistinguishable from government arts policy with its emphasis on verifiable outcomes.

And so we slide into a sociological discourse – what happened to aesthetics? This word has been highly contentious for several decades now, since its status – at least in the Anglophone world – has been rendered untouchable through the academy’s embrace of social history and identity politics, which have repeatedly drawn attention to the way in which the aesthetic masks inequalities, oppressions and exclusions (of race, gender, class, and so on). This has tended to promote an equation between aesthetics and the



Superflex, *Tenantspin* (2000), Kath operating film equipment

triple enemy of formalism, decontextualisation and depoliticisation; the result is that aesthetics became synonymous with the market and conservative cultural hierarchy. While these arguments were necessary to dismantle the deeply entrenched authority of the white male elites in the 1970s, today they have hardened into critical orthodoxy.

It was not until the new millennium that this paradigm was put under pressure, largely through the writing of Jacques Rancière, who has rehabilitated the idea of aesthetics and connected it to politics as an integrally related domain. Before the popularisation of his writings, few artists seeking to engage with socio-political issues in their work would have willingly framed their practice as 'aesthetic'. Although Rancière's arguments are philosophical rather than art critical, he has undertaken important work in debunking some of the binaries upon which the discourse of politicised art has relied: individual/collective, author/spectator, active/passive, real life/art. In so doing, he has opened the way towards the development of a new artistic terminology by which to discuss and analyse spectatorship, until that point somewhat schizophrenically governed by the critical untouchability of Walter Benjamin ('The Work of Art . . .' and 'The Author as Producer') and a hostility to consumer spectacle (as theorised by Debord).²⁸ When I began researching this project, there seemed to be a huge gulf between market-driven painting and sculpture on the one hand, and long-term socially engaged projects on the other. At the conclusion of this research, participatory work has a significant presence within art schools, museums and commercial galleries, even if this accommodation is accompanied by a degree of mainstream confusion as to how it should be read *as art*. Without finding a more nuanced language to address the artistic status of this work, we risk discussing these practices solely in positivist terms, that is, by focusing on demonstrable impact. One of the aims of this book, then, is to emphasise the aesthetic in the sense of *aisthesis*: an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality. To begin this task, we first need to examine the criteria by which socially engaged projects are currently articulated.

II. The Ethical Turn

It is often remarked that socially engaged practices are extremely difficult to discuss within the conventional frameworks of art criticism. Take, for example, Liisa Roberts' *What's the Time in Vyborg?* (2000–), a long-term project in the city of Vyborg on the Russian-Finnish border, undertaken with the assistance of six teenage girls, and comprising a series of workshops, exhibitions, performances, films and events carried out around the still-ongoing restoration of the city library that Alvar Aalto designed and built in 1935. The critic Reinaldo Laddaga has commented in relation to this project that

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 of Roberts and the core group of *What's the Time in Vyborg?* 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.²⁹

This brief quotation throws up a number of important tropes: the division between first-hand participants and secondary audience (‘temporary community’ versus ‘outside public’), and the division between artistic goals and problem solving/concrete outcomes. Inasmuch as Laddaga calls for a more integrated mode of addressing such work (‘artistic and ethical, practical and political’), his writing also points to a tacit hierarchy between these terms: aesthetic experience is ‘simply’ offered, compared to the implicitly more worthwhile task of ‘real efficacy’. This uneven inclination towards the social component of this project suggests that contemporary art’s ‘social turn’ not only designates an orientation towards concrete goals in art, but also the critical perception that these are more substantial, ‘real’ and important than artistic experiences. At the same time, these perceived social achievements are never compared with actual (and innovative) social projects taking place *outside* the realm of art; they remain on the level of an emblematic ideal, and derive their critical value in opposition to more traditional, expressive and object-based modes of artistic practice. In short, the point of comparison and reference for participatory projects always returns to contemporary art, despite the fact that they are perceived to be worthwhile precisely because they are non-artistic. The aspiration is always to move beyond art, but never to the point of comparison with comparable projects in the social domain.³⁰

All of this is not to denigrate participatory art and its supporters, but to draw attention to a series of critical operations in which the difficulty of describing the artistic value of participatory projects is resolved by resorting to ethical criteria. In other words, instead of turning to appropriately social practices as points of comparison, the tendency is always to compare artists’ projects with other artists on the basis of ethical one-upmanship – the degree to which artists supply a good or bad model of collaboration – and to criticise them for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to ‘fully’ represent their subjects (as if such a thing were possible). This emphasis on process over product – or, perhaps more accurately, on process *as* product – is justified on the straightforward basis of inverting capitalism’s predilection for the contrary. Consensual collaboration is



Oda Projesi, *FAIL# BETTER* project by Lina Faller, Thomas Stussi, Marcel Mieth and Marian Burchardt, 2004. Two-week workshop about building structures in the city, in the Oda Projesi courtyard.

valued over artistic mastery and individualism, regardless of what the project sets out to do or actually achieves.

The writing around the Turkish artists' collective Oda Projesi provides a clear example of this tendency. Oda Projesi is a group of three artists who, between 1997 and 2005, based their activities around a three-room apartment in the Galata district of Istanbul (*oda projesi* is Turkish for 'room project'). The apartment provided a platform for projects generated by the group in co-operation 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 organised by the Tem Yapin theatre group. Oda Projesi argue that they wish to open up a context for the possibility of exchange and dialogue, motivated by a desire to integrate with their surroundings. They insist that they are not setting out to improve or heal a situation – one of their project leaflets contains the slogan 'exchange not change' – though they evidently see their work as oppositional. By working directly with their neighbours to organise workshops and events, they evidently wished to produce a more creative and participatory social fabric. The group talks of creating 'blank spaces' and 'holes' in the face of an over-organised and bureaucratic society, and of being 'mediators' between groups of people who normally don't have contact with each other.³¹

Because much of Oda Projesi's work exists on the level of art education and neighbourhood events, immediate reaction to it tends to include praise for their being dynamic members of the community bringing art to a wider audience. It is important that they are opening up the space for non-object-based practice in Turkey, a country whose art academies and art market are still largely oriented towards painting and sculpture. The fact that it is three women who have undertaken this task in a still largely patriarchal culture is not insignificant. But their conceptual gesture of reducing authorship to the role of facilitation ultimately leaves little to separate their work from arts and museum educators worldwide, or indeed the community arts tradition (discussed in Chapter 6). Even when transposed to Sweden, Germany, South Korea and the other countries where Oda Projesi have exhibited, it is difficult to distinguish their approach from a slew of community-based practices that revolve around the predictable formula of children's workshops, discussions, meals, film screenings and walks. When I interviewed the group and asked by what criteria they judge their own work, they replied that dynamic and sustained relationships provide their markers of success, rather than aesthetic considerations. Indeed, because their practice is based on collaboration, Oda Projesi consider the aesthetic to be 'a dangerous word' that should not be brought into the discussion.³²

Where artists lead, curators follow. Oda Projesi's approach is reiterated by the Swedish curator Maria Lind in an essay on their work. Lind is an ardent supporter of political and relational practices, and she undertakes her curatorial work with a trenchant commitment to criticality. In her essay on Oda Projesi, 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'.³³ She goes on to discuss a project she produced with Oda Projesi in Riem, near Munich, in which the group collaborated with a local Turkish community to organise a tea party, hairdressing and Tupperware parties, guided tours led by the residents, and the installation of a long roll of paper that people wrote and drew on to stimulate conversations. Lind compares this endeavour to Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* (2002), his well-known collaboration with a mainly Turkish community in Kassel for Documenta 11. In this work, as in many of his social projects, Hirschhorn pays people to work with him on realising an elaborate installation dedicated to a philosopher, which often includes an exhibition display area, a library and a bar.³⁴ In making this comparison, Lind implies 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".'³⁵ Lind goes on to argue that Hirschhorn's work was rightly criticised for "exhibiting" and making



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Bataille Monument*, 2002. Installation view showing library.

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'.

It's worth looking closely at Lind's criteria here. Her comparison is based on an ethics of authorial renunciation: the work of Oda Projesi is better than that of Thomas Hirschhorn because it exemplifies a superior model of collaborative practice, one in which individual authorship is suppressed in favour of facilitating the creativity of others. The visual, conceptual and experiential accomplishments of the respective projects are sidelined in favour of a judgement on the artists' relationship with their collaborators. Hirschhorn's (purportedly) exploitative relationship is compared negatively to Oda Projesi's inclusive generosity. In other words, Lind downplays what might be interesting in Oda Projesi's work *as art* – the achievement of making social dialogue a medium, the significance of dematerialising a work of art into social process, or the specific affective intensity of social exchange triggered by these neighbourhood experiences. Instead her criticism is dominated by *ethical* judgements on working procedures 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 for social relations. At the same

time, Oda Projesi are constantly compared to other artists, rather than to similar (but non-art) projects in the social sphere.

This value system is particularly marked in curatorial writing, but theorists have also reinforced the disposition towards the ethical. The front cover of Suzanne Lacy's *Mapping the Terrain* (1995) reads: 'To search for the good and make it matter', while the essays inside support a redefinition of art 'not primarily as a product but as a process of value-finding, a set of philosophies, an ethical action'.³⁶ The curator and critic Lucy Lippard concludes her book *The Lure of the Local* (1997) – a discussion of site-specific art from an ecological and post-colonial perspective – with an eight-point 'ethic of place' for artists who work with communities.³⁷ Grant Kester's key text on collaborative art, *Conversation Pieces* (2004), while lucidly articulating many of the problems associated with socially engaged practices, nevertheless advocates an art of concrete interventions in which the artist does not occupy 'a position of pedagogical or creative mastery'.³⁸ The Dutch critic Erik Hagoort, in his book *Good Intentions: Judging the Art of Encounter* (2005), argues that we must not shy away from making moral judgements on this art: viewers should weigh up the benefits of each artist's aims and objectives.³⁹ In each of these examples, the status of the artist's intentionality (e.g. their humble lack of authorship) is privileged over a discussion of the work's artistic identity. Ironically, this leads to a situation in which not only collectives but individual artists are praised for their conscious authorial renunciation.⁴⁰ This line of thinking has led to an ethically charged climate in which participatory and socially engaged art has become largely exempt from art criticism: emphasis is continually shifted away from the disruptive *specificity* of a given practice and onto a *generalised* set of ethical precepts. Accordingly, a common trope in this discourse is to evaluate each project as a 'model', echoing Benjamin's claim in 'The Author as Producer' that a work of art is better the more participants it brings into contact with the processes of production.⁴¹ Through this language of the ideal system, the model apparatus and the 'tool' (to use Superflex's terminology), art enters a realm of useful, ameliorative and ultimately modest gestures, rather than the creation of singular acts that leave behind them a troubling wake.

If ethical criteria have become the norm for judging this art, then we also need to question 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 towards 'discursive exchange and negotiation'.⁴² He compares two projects undertaken in East London in the early 1990s: Rachel Whiteread's concrete sculpture *House* (1993), cast from the inside of a demolished terrace, and Loraine Leeson's billboard project *West Meets East* (1992), a collaboration with local Bengali schoolgirls. He argues that neither is the better work of art; they simply make different



Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993



Lorraine Leeson, *West Meets East*, 1992

demands upon the viewer. However, his tone clearly contains a judgement: *House* 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.’⁴³ In this type of project, empathetic identification is highly valued, 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’.⁴⁴ Here I should be clear: my aim is not to denigrate Leeson’s work, but to point out Kester’s aversion to dealing with the *forms* of both works and the *affective* responses they elicit as equally crucial to the work’s meaning – be this the jarring conjunction of traditional decorative patterns and garish colour photography in the montage aesthetic of *West Meets East*, or the bleak, haunted, cancerous white husk of *Whiteread’s House*.

Kester’s emphasis on compassionate identification with the other is typical of the discourse around participatory art, in which an ethics of interpersonal interaction comes to prevail over a politics of social justice. It represents a familiar summary of the intellectual trends inaugurated by identity politics and consolidated 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 described this development as an ‘ethical turn’, in which ‘Questions of conscience and obligation, of recognition and respect, of justice and law, which not so long ago would have been dismissed as the residue of an outdated humanism, have returned to occupy, if not centre stage, then something pretty close to it.’⁴⁵ At the centre of opposition to this trend have been the philosophers Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek who, in different ways, remain sceptical of the jargon of human rights and identitarian politics.⁴⁶ It might seem extreme to bring these philosophical indictments of the ethical turn to bear upon the well-meaning advocates of socially collaborative art, but these thinkers provide a poignant lens through which to view the humanism that pervades this art critical discourse. In insisting upon consensual dialogue, sensitivity to difference risks becoming a new kind of repressive norm – one in which artistic strategies of disruption, intervention or over-identification are immediately ruled out as ‘unethical’ because all forms of authorship are equated with authority and indicted as totalising. Such a denigration of authorship allows simplistic oppositions to remain in place: active versus passive viewer, egotistical versus collaborative artist, privileged versus needy community, aesthetic complexity versus simple expression, cold autonomy versus convivial community.⁴⁷

A resistance to rupturing these categories is found in Kester’s rejection of any 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 criticises 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, patronisingly informing audiences as to ‘how things really are’. He also attacks post-structuralism for promulgating the idea that it is sufficient for art to *reveal* social conditions, rather than to change them; Kester argues that this actually reinforces a class division whereby the educated elite speak down to the less privileged. (It is striking that this argument seems to present the participants of collaborative art as dumb and fragile creatures, constantly at risk of being misunderstood or exploited.) My concern here is less the morality of who speaks to whom and how, but Kester’s aversion to disruption, since it self-censors on the basis of second-guessing how others will think and respond. The upshot is that idiosyncratic or controversial ideas are subdued and normalised in favour of a consensual behaviour upon whose irreproachable sensitivity we can all rationally agree. By contrast, I would argue that unease, discomfort or frustration – along with fear, contradiction, exhilaration and absurdity – can be crucial to any work’s artistic impact. This is not to say that ethics are unimportant in a work of art, nor irrelevant to politics, only that they do not always have to be announced and performed in such a direct and saintly fashion (I will return to this idea below). An over-solicitousness that judges in advance what people are capable of coping with can be just as insidious as intending to offend them. As my case studies in the chapters that follow bear out, participants are more than capable of dealing with artists who reject Aristotelian moderation in favour of providing a more complicated access to social truth, however eccentric, extreme or irrational this might be. If there is an ethical framework underpinning this book, then, it concerns a Lacanian fidelity to the singularity of each project, paying attention to its symbolic ruptures, and the ideas and affects it generates for the participants and viewers, rather than deferring to the social pressure of a pre-agreed tribunal in which a cautious, self-censoring pragmatism will always hold sway.

III. The Aesthetic Regime

As I have already indicated, one of the biggest problems in the discussion around socially engaged art is its disavowed relationship to the aesthetic. By this I do not mean that the work does not fit established notions of the attractive or the beautiful, even though this is often the case; many social projects photograph very badly, and these images convey very little of the contextual information so crucial to understanding the work. More significant is the tendency for advocates of socially collaborative art to view the aesthetic as (at best) merely visual and (at worst) an elitist realm

of unbridled seduction complicit with spectacle. At the same time, these advocates also argue that art is an independent zone, free from the pressures of accountability, institutional bureaucracy and the rigours of specialisation.⁴⁸ The upshot is that art is perceived both as *too removed* from the real world *and yet* as the only space from which it is possible to experiment: art must paradoxically remain autonomous *in order to* initiate or achieve a model for social change.

This antinomy has been clearly articulated by Jacques Rancière, whose work since the late 1990s has developed a highly influential account of the relation between aesthetics and politics. Rancière argues that the system of art as we have understood it since the Enlightenment – a system he calls ‘the aesthetic regime of art’ – is predicated precisely on a tension and confusion between *autonomy* (the desire for art to be at one remove from means–ends relationships) and heteronomy (that is, 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. Rather, he views it 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, one that suspends reason and power in a state of equality. The aesthetic regime of art, as inaugurated by Schiller and the Romantics, is therefore premised on the paradox that ‘art is art to the extent that it is something else than art’: that it is a sphere *both* at one remove from politics *and yet* always already political because it contains the promise of a better world.⁴⁹

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, he draws attention to the autonomy of our *experience* in relation to art. In this, Rancière reprises Kant’s argument that an aesthetic judgement suspends the domination of the faculties by reason (in morality) and understanding (in knowledge). As taken up by Schiller – and Rancière – this freedom suggests the possibility of politics (understood here as dissensus), because the undecidability of aesthetic experience implies a questioning of how the world is organised, and therefore the possibility of changing or redistributing that same world.⁵⁰ Aesthetics and politics therefore overlap in their concern for the distribution and sharing out of ideas, abilities and experiences to certain subjects – what Rancière calls *le partage du sensible*. In this framework, it is not possible to conceive of an aesthetic judgement that is not at the same time a political judgement – a comment on the ‘distribution of the places and of the capacities or incapacities attached to those places’.⁵¹ While brilliantly theorising the relationship of aesthetics to politics, one of

the drawbacks of this theory is that it opens the door for all art to be political, since the *sensible* can be *partagé* both in progressive and reactionary ways; the door is wide open for both.

In *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, Rancière is nevertheless outspokenly critical, attacking what he calls the 'ethical turn' in contemporary thought, whereby 'politics and art today are increasingly submitted to moral judgement bearing on the validity of their principles and the consequences of their practices'.⁵² It is important to note that his targets are not the kind of art that forms the subject of this book, but Jean-François Lyotard's arguments concerning the unrepresentability of the sublime (*vis-à-vis* representations of the Holocaust in art and film), together with relational art as theorised by Nicolas Bourriaud. For Rancière, the ethical turn does not, strictly speaking, denote the submission of art and politics to moral judgements, but rather the collapse of artistic and political dissensus in new forms of consensual order. His political target is even more important to bear in mind: the Bush administration's 'war on terror', in which 'infinite evil' was subjected to an 'infinite justice' undertaken in the name of human rights. As in politics, Rancière argues, so too in art: 'Just as politics effaces itself in the coupling of consensus and infinite justice, these tend to be redistributed between a vision of art dedicated to the service of the social bond and another dedicated to the interminable witnessing of the catastrophe.'⁵³ Moreover, these two developments are linked: an art of proximity (restoring the social bond) is simultaneously an art seeking to witness what is structurally excluded from society. The exemplary ethical gesture in art is therefore a strategic obfuscation of the political and the aesthetic:

by replacing matters of class conflict by matters of inclusion and exclusion, [contemporary art] puts worries about the 'loss of the social bond', concerns with 'bare humanity' or tasks of empowering threatened identities in the place of political concerns. Art is summoned thus to put its political potentials at work in reframing a sense of community, mending the social bond, etc. Once more, politics and aesthetics vanish together in Ethics.⁵⁴

Although we should be sceptical of Rancière's reading of relational art (which derives from Bourriaud's text rather than artists' works), his arguments are worth rehearsing here in order to make the point that, in his critique of the ethical turn, he is not opposed to ethics, only to its instrumentalisation as a strategic zone in which political and aesthetic dissensus collapses. That said, ethics stands as a territory that (for Rancière) has little to do with aesthetics proper, since it belongs to a previous model of understanding art. In his system, the aesthetic regime of art is preceded by two other regimes, the first of which is an 'ethical regime of images' governed by the twofold question of the truth-content of images and the uses to

which they are put – in other words, their effects and ends. Central to this regime is Plato’s denigration of mimesis. The second is the ‘representative regime of the arts’, a regime of visibility by which the fine arts are classified according to a logic of what can be done and made in each art, a logic that corresponds to the overall hierarchy of social and political occupations. This regime is essentially Aristotelian, but stretches to the academy system of the fine arts and its hierarchy of the genres. The aesthetic regime of art, ushered in with the Enlightenment, continues today. It permits everything to be a potential subject or material for art, everyone to be a potential viewer of this art, and denotes the aesthetic as an autonomous form of life.

One of Rancière’s key contributions to contemporary debates around art and politics is therefore to reinvent the term ‘aesthetic’ so that it denotes a specific mode of experience, including 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*. The aesthetic for Rancière therefore signals an ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art’s relationship to social change, which is characterised by the paradox of belief in art’s autonomy *and* in it being inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come. While this antinomy is apparent in many avant-garde practices of the last century, it seems particularly pertinent to analysing participatory art and the legitimating narratives it has attracted. In short, the aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, because it always already contains this ameliorative promise.

Because of this structural openness, Rancière’s theory of the politics of aesthetics has been co-opted for the defence of wildly differing artistic practices (including a conservative return to beauty), even though his ideas do not easily translate into critical judgements. He argues, for example, against ‘critical art’ that intends to raise our consciousness by inviting us to ‘see the signs of Capital behind everyday objects’, since such didacticism effectively removes the perverse strangeness that bears testimony to the rationalised world and its oppressive intolerability.⁵⁵ Yet his preferences incline towards works that nevertheless offer a clear (one might say didactic) resistance to a topical issue – such as Martha Rosler’s anti-Vietnam collages *Bringing the War Home* (1967–72), or Chris Burden’s *The Other Vietnam Memorial* (1991). Despite Rancière’s claim that topical or political content is not essential to political art, it is telling that the ‘distribution of the sensible’ is never demonstrated through abstract forms unrelated to a political theme. In the chapters that follow, Rancière has therefore informed my thinking in two ways: firstly, in his attention to the affective capabilities of art that avoids the pitfalls of a didactic critical position in favour of rupture and ambiguity.⁵⁶ Good art, implies Rancière, must negotiate the tension that (on the one hand) pushes art towards ‘life’ and that (on the other) 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’.⁵⁷ Secondly, I have adopted Rancière’s idea of art as an autonomous realm of experience in which there is no privileged medium. The meaning of artistic forms shifts in relation to the uses also made of these forms by society at large, and as such they have no intrinsic or fixed political affiliation. The history traced in this book aims to reinforce this point by situating participation as a constantly moving target. Audience participation techniques pioneered in the 1960s by the Happenings, and by companies like The Living Theatre and Théâtre du Soleil, have become commonplace conventions in the theatrical mainstream.⁵⁸ Today we see a further devaluation of participation in the form of reality television, where ordinary people can participate both as would-be celebrities and as the voters who decide their fate. Today, participation also includes social networking sites and any number of communication technologies relying on user-generated content. Any discussion of participation in contemporary art needs to take on board these broader cultural connotations, and their implementation by cultural policy, in order to ascertain its meaning.

IV. Directed Reality: The Battle of Orgreave

Despite Rancière’s argument that the politics of aesthetics is a *metapolitics* (rather than a party politics), his theory tends to sidestep the question of how we might more specifically address the ideological affiliations of any given work. This problem comes to the fore when we look at a work that has arguably become the epitome of participatory art: *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) by the British artist Jeremy Deller. Since the mid 1990s, Deller’s work has frequently forged unexpected encounters between diverse constituencies, and displays a strong interest in class, subculture and self-organisation – interests that have taken the form both of performances (*Acid Brass*, 1996) and temporary exhibitions (*Unconvention*, 1999; *Folk Archive*, 2000–; *From One Revolution to Another*, 2008). *The Battle of Orgreave* is perhaps his best-known work, a performance re-enacting a violent clash between miners and mounted policeman in 1984. Nearly 8,000 riot police clashed with around 5,000 striking miners in the Yorkshire village of Orgreave; this was one of several violent confrontations prompted by Margaret Thatcher’s assault on the mining industry and signalled a turning point in UK industrial relations, weakening the trade union movement and enabling the Conservative government to consolidate a programme of free trade. Deller’s reconstruction of this event brought former miners and local residents together with a number of historical re-enactment societies who rehearsed and then restaged the conflict for the public, on the site of the original hostilities in Orgreave. At



Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001

the same time, Deller's work has a multiple ontology: not just the live re-enactment on 17 June 2001, but also a feature-length film by Mike Figgis, who explicitly uses the event as a vehicle for his indictment of the Thatcher government (*The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001), a publication of oral history (*The English Civil War Part II: Personal Accounts of the 1984–85 Miners' Strike*, 2002), and an archive (*The Battle of Orgreave Archive [An Injury to One is an Injury to All]*, 2004).⁵⁹

At first glance *The Battle of Orgreave* appears to be therapeutic: letting former miners re-live the traumatic events of the 1980s, and inviting some of them to switch roles and play policemen. But the work didn't seem to heal a wound so much as reopen it, as evidenced in the video documentation and publication, which includes a CD of recorded testimonies by the protagonists.⁶⁰ Figgis's film shows emotional interviews with former miners, a clear testimony to ongoing class antagonism, belying Thatcher's claim that 'there is no such thing as society'.⁶¹ The ex-miners' anger at their treatment by the Conservative government is still raw, and emerges in casual footage of rehearsals the day before, where several participants are choked with bitterness. Importantly, however, while the book and film are partisan in their approach to the miners' strike, the performance itself is more ambiguous. Figgis's video footage of the latter takes the form of short sequences inserted between his interviews with former miners, and the clash of tone is disconcerting. Although Deller's event gathered people together to remember and replay a charged and disastrous event, it took place in circumstances more akin to a village fête, with a brass band, children running around, and local stalls selling plants and pies; there was even an interval between the two 'acts' when mid-1980s chart hits were played (as one critic noted, in this context "Two Tribes" and "I Want to Break Free" acquired an unexpected political urgency).⁶² As the film footage testifies, *The Battle of Orgreave* hovers uneasily between menacing violence and family entertainment. In other words, it is hard to reduce *The Battle of Orgreave* to a simple message or social function (be this therapy or counter-propaganda), because the visual and dramatic character of the event was constitutively contradictory. For David Gilbert, Figgis's film is most successful when it captures this convergence of emotions, showing 'how the re-enactment provoked memories of pain, camaraderie, defeat and indeed the excitement of conflict'.⁶³

In his introduction to the publication *The English Civil War Part II*, Deller observes that 'As an artist, I was interested in how far an idea could be taken, especially one that is on the face of it a contradiction in terms, "a recreation of something that was essentially chaos."' ⁶⁴ This problem of attempting to perform chaos carried a double risk: either deadening a re-staged riot into over-organised choreography, or conversely, losing order so entirely that the event becomes illegible turmoil. These poles were managed through the imposition of a structure that had a tight conceptual

kernel – a re-enactment of the strike by former miners and battle re-enactment societies – but allowed for formal laxity and improvisation, even while the ‘conditions of participation’ issued to the performers were fairly strict.⁶⁵ It is precisely here that one sees the grey *artistic* work of participatory art – deciding how much or how little scripting to enforce – rather than in the *ethical* black-and-white of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ collaboration. The artist Paweł Althamer has referred to this strategy as ‘directed reality’, and this evocative phrase is a useful way to describe the combination of clear conceptual premise and partially unpredictable realisation that characterises some of the best examples of contemporary participation (including Althamer’s own).⁶⁶ At one point in Figgis’s film, Deller is interviewed crossing the field where the action is about to happen, noting with trepidation that the project has developed a life of its own. When asked by the interviewer ‘How’s it going?’, he replies uneasily: ‘It’s going interesting . . . This is the first time we’ve actually got these two groups together, and it’s difficult to say what’s going to happen. Look at it . . . I’m not in charge any more, really. As you would be in a real situation like this, you’d be a bit excited and a bit worried as well.’

The point I am making is that this anxious thrill is inseparable from the work’s overall meaning, since every one of Deller’s choices had both a social and artistic resonance. The decision to restage one of the last major working-class industrial disputes in the UK by involving over twenty battle re-enactment societies (including the Sealed Knot, the Wars of the Roses Federation and the Southern Skirmish Association) impacted on both the process and outcome of the project, as well as its broader cultural resonance. In terms of process, it brought the middle-class battle re-enactors into direct contact with working-class miners. Deller noted that ‘A lot of the members of historical re-enactment societies were terrified of the miners. During the 80s they had obviously believed what they had read in the press and had the idea that the men that they would be working with on the re-enactment were going to be outright hooligans or revolutionaries.’⁶⁷ This had the effect of dismantling (and indeed seemed to critique) any nostalgia for sentimental class unity. On the level of production, meanwhile, the battle re-enactment societies were essential to accomplishing the dramatic and technical success of the re-performance, but also to shifting *The Battle of Orgreave* away from a journalistic register. Since battle re-enactors usually perform scenes from English history at a sufficiently safe remove from contemporary politics, such as Roman invasions or the Civil War, the inclusion of these societies symbolically elevated the relatively recent events at Orgreave to the status of English history (as Deller makes explicit in the title of his publication, *The English Civil War Part II*). But this also forced an uneasy convergence between those for whom the repetition of events was traumatic, and those for whom it was a stylised and sentimental invocation. Re-educating the battle re-enactors to be more

politically self-conscious about their activities emerged as an important subtheme of the event.

The Battle of Orgreave therefore manages to dialogue simultaneously with social history and art history, a point reinforced by the work's reception in the mainstream media, journals of oral history and art magazines. In 1984, the press presented the riot as having been started by unruly miners, rather than by the decision to send mounted cavalry into the frontline of strikers – an impression achieved by reverse editing the sequence of events on the television news. Deller has described his counter-narrative as 'history painting from below', evoking a genre of historical writing referred to as 'people's history' or 'history from below'.⁶⁸ The work also invites us to make a comparison between two tendencies conventionally considered to be at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum: the eccentric leisure activity of re-enactment (in which bloody battles are enthusiastically replicated as group entertainment) and performance art (then at the outset of a trend for re-enactment). However, Deller's work forms part of a longer history of popular theatre comprising gestures of political re-enactment, including the Paterson Strike Pageant of 1913 and the Storming of the Winter Palace in 1920 (discussed in Chapter 2). Deller does not shy away from these connections, and has referred to *The Battle of Orgreave* both as a contemporary history painting through the medium of performance and as a work of 'community theatre'.⁶⁹ In 2004 *The Battle of Orgreave* was given a further



Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave Archive (An Injury to One Is an Injury to All)*, 2004

mode of dissemination in the form of the installation *The Battle of Orgreave Archive* (*An Injury to One Is an Injury to All*), which comprises a timeline of events leading up to and after the riot at Orgreave, displayed on the gallery walls alongside objects (badges, posters, a jacket, a riot shield, and a painting entitled *I am a Miner's Son* made in a Young Offenders Institution in 2004); a number of vitrines presenting archival information about the National Union of Mineworkers and copies of letters sent to Deller's participants; a small collection of books on the strike available for viewing; a collection of accounts of the strike on CD (with headphones); and two videos on monitors (one of police riot training and one of a re-enactment society 'Festival of History'). *The Battle of Orgreave Archive* is therefore a double archive: a record of the riot in 1984 and the strike leading up to it, but also of the artist's reinterpretation of these events in a performance seventeen years later.

The reason why Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* has become such a *locus classicus* of recent participatory art therefore seems to be because it is ethically commendable (the artist worked closely in collaboration with former miners) as well as irrefutably political: using a participatory performance and mass media to bring back into popular consciousness 'an unfinished messy history' of the state crushing the working class and turning it against itself.⁷⁰ And yet I would like to suggest that *The Battle of Orgreave* also problematises what we mean today when we refer to a work of art as 'political'. It is noticeable that a number of reviewers perceived the event to be politically *non-committal*, particularly when compared to the overt partiality of Figgis's documentary and Deller's collection of oral histories, which privilege the picket position.⁷¹ Others, such as Alice Correia, maintain that the event was biased: 'the casting of the striking miners as "right" and the anti-strike policemen as "wrong" in *Orgreave* avoids some of the complexity of how to position non-striking miners'.⁷² The Marxist critic Dave Beech argues that although Deller's aims were 'political' (to rewrite history from below), the involvement of re-enactment societies compromised this intention: *The Battle of Orgreave* became a 'picturing' of politics, rather than political art, and despite Deller's good intentions, the use of battle re-enactment societies meant that the work ultimately took sides 'with the police, the state and Thatcher's government'.⁷³ For other critics, it was the very performativity of *Orgreave* that allowed it to be more than just a work 'about' the miners' strike, since performance was a way to sustain awareness of history by re-living it as experience.⁷⁴ For the artists Cummings and Lewandowska, it was 'a rich, profound, and provocative contemporary art work that uses the legacy of a Marxist cultural critique to bring one strand of this ideological text explosively into the present'.⁷⁵ For the artist, *Orgreave* 'is a political work without a doubt', even though it had to be pitched in a neutral way to secure the collaboration of the battle re-enactment

societies.⁷⁶ Because *Orgreave* commemorates one of the last gasps of class struggle in the UK, we could also add that the re-enactment reflects upon the changed aesthetic lexicon of social protest movements between the 1980s and today, when organised class resistance has morphed into a more sprawling, acephalous anti-globalisation struggle, with its ‘multi-tude’ of alignments and positions, no longer aligned around class.⁷⁷

In this brief survey of responses to *The Battle of Orgreave*, the ‘political’ has myriad connotations: it denotes the theme of a strike, a conflict between the people and the government, the adoption of a working-class perspective, the artist’s failure to withstand state co-option, his updating of key Marxist tenets, performance as a critical mode of historical representation, and the nostalgic use of the insignia of working-class demonstrations. The only way to account for the ‘political’ here is through Rancière’s concept of *metapolitics*, the destabilising action that produces dissensus about what is sayable and thinkable in the world. At the same time, this conclusion seems inadequate for describing the specific party political interests at play in *The Battle of Orgreave* (in this case, the history of a working-class strike and its suppression by a right-wing government). To argue that *Orgreave* is meta-political does little to help us articulate the evident – but far from univocal – ideological position of Deller’s work: it is neither a straightforward re-enactment of the type produced by the Sealed Knot, nor an agit-prop, activist theatre promoting a political cause.⁷⁸ It is tempting to suggest, then, that *Orgreave* has become such a celebrated instance of participatory art not just because it was one of the earliest and highest profile examples of the 2000s, but because Deller’s aesthetic decisions also reorganised the traditional expression of leftist politics in art. Rather than celebrating the workers as an unproblematically heroic entity, Deller juxtaposed them with the middle class in order to write a *universal* history of oppression, therefore disrupting not only the traditional tropes of leftist figuration but also the identificatory patterns and tonal character by which these are habitually represented.

The fact that so many views can be thrust at *The Battle of Orgreave*, and that it still emerges intact, is evidence of the work’s artistic plenitude: it can accommodate multiple critical judgements, even contradictory ones. *Orgreave* also shows the paucity of the tendency to assess social art projects in terms of good or bad models of collaboration. Rather than being undertaken as a corrective to social fragmentation (‘repairing the social bond’), *Orgreave* engages a more complex layering of social and art history. It summons the experiential potency of collective presence and political demonstrations to correct a historical memory, but (as the title of the *Orgreave* archive indicates) it also aspires to extend beyond the miners’ strike in 1984–85 and stand symbolically for all breaches of justice and acts of police oppression. In contrast to the dominant discourse of socially engaged art, Deller does not adopt the role of self-suppressing

artist-facilitator, and has had to counter criticisms that he exploits his various collaborators.⁷⁹ Instead he is a directorial instigator, working in collaboration with a production agency (Artangel), a film director (Figgis), a battle re-enactment specialist (Howard Giles), and hundreds of participants. His authorial role is a trigger for (rather than the final word on) an event that would otherwise have no existence, since its conceptualisation is too idiosyncratic and controversial ever to be initiated by socially responsible institutions. In short, *The Battle of Orgreave*'s potency derives from its singularity, rather than from its exemplarity as a replicable model.

V. *Emancipated Spectators*

It should be stressed that such an extended discussion of *Orgreave* is only possible because the work takes into account the apparatus of mediation in relation to a live performance. *The Battle of Orgreave*'s multiple identity allows it to reach different circuits of audience: first-hand participants of the event in 2001, and those watching them from the field (primarily Yorkshire locals); those who saw the television broadcast of Figgis's film of this work (Channel 4, 20 October 2002) or who bought the DVD; those who read the book and listen to the CD of interviews; and those who view the archive/installation in the Tate's collection. In these diverse forms, *The Battle of Orgreave* multiplies and redistributes the art historical categories of history painting, performance, documentary and archive, putting them into dialogue with community theatre and historical re-enactment.⁸⁰

Of course, at this point there is usually the objection that artists who end up exhibiting their work in galleries and museums compromise their projects' social and political aspirations; the purer position is not to engage in the commercial field at all, even if this means losing audiences.⁸¹ Not only is the gallery thought to invite a passive mode of reception (compared to the active co-production of collaborative art), but it also reinforces the hierarchies of elite culture. Even if art engages with 'real people', this art is ultimately produced for, and consumed by, a middle-class gallery audience and wealthy collectors. This argument can be challenged in several ways. Firstly, the idea that performance documentation (video, archive, photography) is a betrayal of the authentic, unmediated event has been questioned by numerous theorists in the wake of Peggy Phelan's polemic *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993).⁸² Secondly, the binary of active versus passive hovers over any discussion of participatory art and theatre, to the point where participation becomes an end in itself: as Ranci re so pithily observes, 'Even when the dramaturge or the performer does not know what he wants the spectator to do, he knows at least that the spectator has to do something: switch from passivity to activity.'⁸³ This injunction to activate is pitched both as a counter to false consciousness and as a realisation of the essence of art and theatre as real life. But the binary of active/

passive always ends up in deadlock: either a disparagement of the spectator because he does nothing, while the performers on stage do something – or the converse claim that those who act are inferior to those who are able to look, contemplate ideas, and have critical distance on the world. The two positions can be switched but the structure remains the same. As Rancière argues, both divide a population into those with capacity on one side, and those with incapacity on the other. The binary of active/passive is reductive and unproductive, because it serves only as an allegory of inequality.

This insight can be extended to the argument that high culture, as found in art galleries, is produced for and on behalf of the ruling classes; by contrast, ‘the people’ (the marginalised, the excluded) can only be emancipated by direct inclusion in the production of a work. This argument – which also underlies arts funding agendas influenced by policies of social inclusion – assumes that the poor can only engage physically, while the middle classes have the leisure to think and critically reflect. The effect of this argument is to reinstate the prejudice by which working-class activity is restricted to manual labour.⁸⁴ It is comparable to sociological critiques of art, in which the aesthetic is found to be the preserve of the elite, while the ‘real people’ are found to 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.⁸⁵ To argue, in the manner of funding bodies and the advocates of collaborative art alike, that social participation is particularly suited to the task of social inclusion risks not only assuming that participants are already in a position of impotence, it even reinforces this arrangement. Crucially for our argument, Rancière points out that Bourdieu preserves the status quo by never confronting ‘the aesthetic thing’ directly. 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.⁸⁶

Rancière’s point is important for drawing attention to the work of art as an intermediary object, a ‘third term’ to which both the artist and viewer can relate. Discussions of participatory art and its documentation tend to proceed with similar exclusions: without engaging with the ‘aesthetic thing’, the work of art in all its singularity, everything remains contained and in its place – subordinated to a stark statistical affirmation of use-values, direct effects and a preoccupation with moral exemplarity. Without the possibility of rupturing these categories, 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.

Yet in any art that uses people as a medium, ethics will never retreat entirely. The task is to relate this concern more closely to *aesthesis*. Some key terms that emerge here are *enjoyment* and *disruption*, and the way these converge in psychoanalytic accounts of making and viewing art. It has become unfashionable to import psychoanalysis into readings of art and artists, but the discipline provides a useful vocabulary for diagnosing the heightened ethical scrutiny that so much participatory art engenders. In his seventh Seminar, on the ethics of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan connects the latter to aesthetics via a discussion of sublimation, proposing an ethics founded on a Sadeian reading of Kant.⁸⁷ Setting individual *jouissance* against the application of a universal maxim, Lacan argues that it is more ethical for the subject to act in accordance with his or her (unconscious) desire than to modify his or her behaviour for the eyes of the Big Other (society, family, law, expected norms). Such a focus on individual needs does not denote a foreclosure of the social; on the contrary, individual analysis always takes place against the backdrop of society’s norms and pressures. Lacan links this ethical position to the ‘beautiful’ in his discussion of Antigone who, when her brother dies, breaks the law to sit with his body outside the city walls. Antigone is an instance of a subject who does not relinquish her desire: she persists in what she has to do, however uncomfortable or difficult this task may be (the key phrase here is from Beckett’s *The Unnameable*: ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’). Lacan connects this ethical position to an art that causes disruption by suspending and disarming desire (as opposed to extinguishing and tempering it). In his schema, art that gives full rein to desire provides access to subjective ‘good’.

One could extend Lacan’s argument to suggest that the most urgent forms of artistic practice today stem from a necessity to rethink the connections between the individual and collective along these lines of painful pleasure – rather than conforming to a self-suppressing sense of social obligation. Instead of obeying a super-egoic injunction to make ameliorative art, the most striking, moving and memorable forms of participation are produced when artists act upon a gnawing social curiosity without the incapacitating restrictions of guilt. This fidelity to singularised desire – rather than to social consensus – enables this work to join a tradition of highly authored situations that fuse reality with carefully calculated artifice (some of which will be discussed in the chapters that follow). In these projects, intersubjective relations are not an end in themselves, but serve to explore and disentangle a more complex knot of social concerns about political engagement, affect, inequality, narcissism, class, and behavioural protocols.

At present, the discursive criteria of participatory and socially engaged art is drawn from a tacit analogy between anti-capitalism and the Christian

‘good soul’; it is an ethical reasoning that fails to accommodate the aesthetic or to understand it as an autonomous realm of experience. In this perspective, there is no space for perversity, paradox and negation, operations as crucial to *aesthesis* as dissensus is to the political. Reframing the ethical imperatives of participatory art through a Lacanian lens might allow us to expand our repertoire of ways to attend to participatory art and its negotiation of the social. Instead of extracting art from the ‘useless’ domain of the aesthetic to relocate it in praxis, the better examples of participatory art occupy an ambiguous territory between ‘art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art’.⁸⁸ This has implications for the politics of spectatorship: that Rancière’s ‘metapolitics’ of art is not a party politics is both a gift and a limitation, leaving us with the urgency of examining each artistic practice within its own singular historical context and the political valencies of its era. The next chapter, which traces the origins of participatory art back to the historic avant-garde, offers precisely this challenge to contemporary equations between participation and democracy, since it begins with Italian Fascism.