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**P A R T  
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Documents of Contemporary Art

The point of departure for the selection of texts in this reader is the *social* dimension of participation – rather than activation of the individual viewer in so-called 'interactive' art and installation. The latter trajectory has been well rehearsed elsewhere: the explosion of new technologies and the breakdown of medium-specific art in the 1960s provided myriad opportunities for physically engaging the viewer in a work of art.<sup>1</sup> Less familiar is the history of those artistic practices since the 1960s that appropriate *social* forms as a way to bring art closer to everyday life: intangible experiences such as dancing samba (Hélio Oiticica) or funk (Adrian Piper); drinking beer (Tom Marioni); discussing philosophy (Ian Wilson) or politics (Joseph Beuys); organizing a garage sale (Martha Rosler); running a café (Allen Ruppertsberg; Daniel Spoerri; Gordon Matta-Clark), a hotel (Alighiero Boetti; Ruppertsberg) or a travel agency (Christo and Jeanne-Claude). Although the photographic documentation of these projects implies a relationship to performance art, they differ in striving to collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception. Their emphasis is on collaboration, and the collective dimension of social experience.

These socially-oriented projects anticipate many artistic developments that proliferated since the 1990s, but they also form part of a longer historical trajectory. The most important precursors for participatory art took place around 1920. The Paris 'Dada-Season' of April 1921 was a series of manifestations that sought to involve the city's public, the most salient being an excursion to the church of Saint Julien le Pauvre which drew more than one hundred people despite the pouring rain. A month later, Dada artists and writers held a mock trial of the anarchist author turned nationalist Maurice Barrès, in which members of the public were invited to sit on the jury. André Breton coined the phrase 'Artificial Hells' to describe this new conception of Dada events that moved out of the cabaret halls and took to the streets.<sup>2</sup> At the other extreme from these collaborative (yet highly authored) experiences were the Soviet mass spectacles that sublated individualism into propagandistic displays of collectivity. The Storming of the Winter Palace (1920), for example, was held on the third anniversary of the October Revolution and involved over 8,000 performers in restaging the momentous events that had led to the Bolshevik victory.<sup>3</sup> The collective fervour of these theatrical spectacles was paralleled by new proletarian music such as the Hooter Symphonies: celebrations of machinic

noise (factory sirens, motors, turbines, hooters, etc.) performed by hundreds of participants, directed by conductors signalling from the rooftops.<sup>4</sup> These two approaches continue to be seen throughout the multiple instances of participatory art that develop in their wake: an authored tradition that seeks to provoke participants, and a de-authored lineage that aims to embrace collective creativity; one is disruptive and interventionist, the other constructive and ameliorative. In both instances, the issue of participation becomes increasingly inextricable from the question of political commitment.

One of the first texts to elaborate theoretically the political status of participation dates from 1934, by the left-wing German theorist Walter Benjamin. He argued that when judging a work's politics, we should not look at the artist's declared sympathies, but at the position that the work occupies in the production relations of its time. Referring directly to the example of Soviet Russia, Benjamin maintained that the work of art should actively intervene in and provide a model for allowing viewers to be involved in the processes of production: 'this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, the more readers or spectators into collaborators'.<sup>5</sup> By way of example he cites the letters page of a newspaper, but his ideal lies in the plays of his contemporary, the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht. As Benjamin explains, Brechtian theatre abandons long complex plots in favour of 'situations' that interrupt the narrative through a disruptive element, such as song. Through this technique of montage and juxtaposition, audiences were led to break their identification with the protagonists on stage and be incited to critical distance. Rather than presenting the illusion of action on stage and filling the audiences with sentiment, Brechtian theatre compels the spectator to take up a position towards this action.

By today's standards, many would argue that the Brechtian model offers a relatively passive mode of spectatorship, since it relies on raising consciousness through the distance of critical *thinking*. By contrast, a paradigm of *physical* involvement – taking its lead from Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty among others – sought to reduce the distance between actors and spectators.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on proximity was crucial to myriad developments in avant-garde theatre of the 1960s, and was paralleled by upheavals in visual art and pedagogy. In this framework, physical involvement is considered an essential precursor to social change. Today this equation is no less persistent, but its terms are perhaps less convincing. The idea of collective presence has (for better or worse) been scrutinized and dissected by numerous philosophers; on a technical level, most contemporary art is collectively produced (even if authorship often remains resolutely individual); participation is used by business as a tool for improving efficiency and workforce morale, as well as being all-pervasive in the mass-

# ART NO

LONGER WANTS TO RESPOND TO THE  
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# BUT

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culture by those subjugated to its language. Guattari's *Chaosmosis* (1992) and Rancière's *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (2004) both offer a tripartite history of art's development, and both argue for a culminating phase in which art has an integral relation to other spheres: for Guattari the ethical, for Rancière the political.

Section two comprises artist's writings, the selection of which has been partially determined by the desire to present informative texts relating to substantial works of art. Another desire was to show a range of different approaches to the documentation and analysis of these often elusive and ephemeral projects. The chosen texts represent a variety of proposals for recording process-based participation on the page: the manifesto format (Debord, Kaprow, Beuys), the project description (Carnevale, Höller, Hirschhorn), the detailed log of events (Schwarze on Beuys), reflections after the event (Piper, Cufer, Deller), dialogues in the form of correspondence (Oiticica and Clark), and a retrospective survey in the form of a third-person narrative (Tiravanija). Limitations of space have prevented a fuller presentation of the Collective Actions group, whose methodical approach to documentation erased the boundary between collaboration, event and reflection: the participants in each work were invited to document their response to it. *Ten Appearances*, for example, is accompanied by long, detailed texts by the artist Ilya Kabakov and the poet Vsevolod Nekrasov.

The final section presents a selection of recent curatorial and critical positions. It begins with excerpts from Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, part of which formed the catalogue essay for his group exhibition *Traffic* (1995). Lars Bang Larsen's 'Social Aesthetics' (1999) is an attempt to present connections between today's participatory practice and historical precursors of the 1960s, here with a focus on Scandinavia. One of the most memorable curatorial gestures of the present decade was *Utopia Station* (Venice Biennale, 2003), a collaborative exhibition whose project description draws a connection between activated spectatorship and activism. The final essay in the book, by Hal Foster, is more cautious, and reflects on the limitations of the participatory impulse. The scope of this reader therefore ranges from the 1950s to the present day; although there are important examples of social participation in the historic avant-garde, it is not until the eve of the sixties that a coherent and well-theorized body of work emerges: Situationism in France, Happenings in the United States, and Neo-Concretism in Brazil.

Many writings outside the discipline of art history could have been added to this anthology, particularly texts that draw attention to the history of participation in theatre, architecture and pedagogy.<sup>11</sup> Important work remains to be done in connecting these histories to participation in visual art. Rancière's

media in the form of reality television.<sup>7</sup> As an artistic medium, then, participation is arguably no more intrinsically political or oppositional than any other.

Despite this changing context, we can nevertheless draw attention to continuities between the participatory impulse of the 1960s and today. Recurrently, calls for an art of participation tend to be allied to one or all of the following agendas. The first concerns the desire to create an active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation. The hope is that the newly-emancipated subjects of participation will find themselves able to determine their own social and political reality. An aesthetic of participation therefore derives legitimacy from a (desired) causal relationship between the experience of a work of art and individual/collective agency. The second argument concerns authorship. The gesture of ceding some or all authorial control is conventionally regarded as more egalitarian and democratic than the creation of a work by a single artist, while shared production is also seen to entail the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and unpredictability. Collaborative creativity is therefore understood both to emerge from, and to produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social model. The third issue involves a perceived crisis in community and collective responsibility. This concern has become more acute since the fall of Communism, although it takes its lead from a tradition of Marxist thought that indicts the alienating and isolating effects of capitalism. One of the main impetuses behind participatory art has therefore been a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning.

These three concerns – activation; authorship; community – are the most frequently cited motivations for almost all artistic attempts to encourage participation in art since the 1960s. It is significant that all three appear in the writing of Guy Debord, co-founder of the Situationist International, since it is invariably against the backdrop of his critique of capitalist 'spectacle' that debates on participation come to be staged. The spectacle – as a social relationship between people mediated by images – is pacifying and divisive, uniting us only through our separation from one another:

The specialization of the mass spectacle constitutes [...] the epicentre of separation and noncommunication.<sup>8</sup>

The spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. [...] It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity.<sup>9</sup>

If spectacle denotes a mode of passivity and subjugation that arrests thought

and prevents determination of one's reality, then it is precisely as an injunction to activity that Debord advocated the construction of 'situations'. These, he argued, were a logical development of Brechtian theatre, but with one important difference: they would involve the audience function disappearing altogether in the new category of *viveur* (one who lives). Rather than simply awakening critical consciousness, as in the Brechtian model, 'constructed situations' aimed to produce new social relationships and thus new social realities.

The idea of constructed situations remains an important point of reference for contemporary artists working with live events and people as privileged materials. It is, for example, frequently cited by Nicolas Bourriaud in his *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), a collection of theoretical essays that has catalyzed much debate around the status of contemporary participation. In parallel with this debate, and perhaps addressing the sense of unrealized political potential in the work that Bourriaud describes, a subsequent generation of artists have begun to engage more directly with specific social constituencies, and to intervene critically in participatory forms of mass media entertainment.<sup>10</sup> The texts in this reader have been selected with the development of this work in mind. The aim has been to provide a historical and theoretical lineage for recent socially-collaborative art, presenting a variety of positions that will allow students and researchers to think more widely about the claims and implications of the artistic injunction to participate.

The book is divided into three sections. The first offers a selection of theoretical frameworks through which to consider participation. It begins with key structuralist texts by Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes, which concern the new role of the viewer in relation to modern art, music and literature. It is followed by Peter Bürger's classic Marxist critique of bourgeois art as a failure to fuse art and social praxis. Jean-Luc Nancy, addressing the impasse of Marxist theory in the 1980s, attempts to rethink political subjectivity outside the conventional framework of activation. He posits a community that is 'inoperative' or 'unworked' (*désœuvrée*), founded not on the absolute immanence of man to man (for example, the 'being-in-common' of nations, communities or lovers), but on the presence of that which impedes such immanence, that is, our consciousness of death. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have provided the foundation for several contemporary theories of political action, most notably Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's influential *Empire* (2000), one of the key texts of the anti-globalization movement. (*Empire* is available online, and therefore has not been included in this reader; the most relevant passage is section 4.3 on the multitude.) Ten years prior to *Empire*, Édouard Glissant used Deleuze and Guattari as the theoretical basis of his 'poetics of relation', an argument for the creative subversion of colonialist

unpublished essay 'The Emancipated Spectator' (2004) has begun to do precisely this task, drawing links between the history of theatre and education, and questioning theories that equate spectacle with passivity.<sup>12</sup> He argues that the opposition of 'active' and 'passive' is riddled with presuppositions about looking and knowing, watching and acting, appearance and reality. This is because the binary of active/passive always ends up dividing a population into those with capacity on one side, and those with incapacity on the other.<sup>13</sup> As such, it is an allegory of inequality. Drawing analogies with the history of education, Rancière argues that emancipation should rather be the presupposition of *equality*: the assumption that everyone has the same capacity for intelligent response to a book, a play or a work of art. Rather than suppressing this mediating object in favour of communitarian immediacy, Rancière argues that it should be a crucial third term which both parts refer to and interpret. The distance that this imposes, he writes, is not an evil that should be abolished, since it is the precondition of any communication:

Spectatorship is not the passivity that has to be turned into activity. It is our normal situation. We learn and teach, we act and know as spectators who link what they see with what they have seen and told, done and dreamt. There is no privileged medium as there is no privileged starting point.

In calling for spectators who are active *as interpreters*, Rancière implies that the politics of participation might best lie, not in anti-spectacular stagings of community or in the claim that mere physical activity would correspond to emancipation, but in putting to work the idea that we are all equally capable of inventing our own translations.<sup>14</sup> Unattached to a privileged artistic medium, this principle would not divide audiences into active and passive, capable and incapable, but instead would invite us all to appropriate works for ourselves and make use of these in ways that their authors might never have dreamed possible.

- 1 See for example Germano Celant, *Ambiente/Arte: dal Futurismo alla Body Art* (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1977. Based on *Ambiente/Arte* exhibition, 1976 Venice Biennale); Nicholas de Oliveira, et al., *Installation Art in the New Millennium* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003); Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005).
- 2 See André Breton, 'Artificial Hells, Inauguration of the "1921 Dada Season"' (1921), trans. Matthew S. Witkovsky in *October*, 105, Summer 2003, 139: 'Dada events certainly involve a desire other than to scandalize. Scandal, for all its force (one may easily trace it from Baudelaire to the present), would be insufficient to elicit the delight that one might expect from an artificial hell. One should also keep in mind the odd pleasure obtained in "taking to the street" or "keeping one's footing", so to speak [...] By conjoining thought with gesture, Dada has left the realm of shadows to venture

onto solid ground.'

- 3 For a detailed critical commentary see Frantisek Deak, 'Russian Mass Spectacles', *Drama Review*, vol. 19, no. 2, June 1975, 7-22.
- 4 For a first-hand account of these events see René Fülöp-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism* (London and New York: Putnam's Sons Ltd, 1929) 184.
- 5 Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, 1931-34 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003) 777.
- 6 The French playwright and director Antonin Artaud developed the term 'Theatre of Cruelty' in the late 1930s. He used it to denote a type of ritualistic drama that aimed, through technical methods (sound, lighting, gesture), to express stark emotions and thereby desensitize the audience, allowing them to confront themselves. See Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970).
- 7 On a political level, participation is increasingly considered a privileged medium for British and EU government cultural funding policies seeking to create the impression of social inclusion. See François Matarasso, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (London: Comedia, 1997). In Britain, Matarasso's report has been key to the formulation of New Labour's funding for the arts; for a cogent critique of its claims, see Paola Merli, 'Evaluating the Social Impact of Participation in Arts Activities: A Critical Review of François Matarasso's *Use or Ornament?*', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2002, 107-18.
- 8 Guy Debord, cited in Tom McDonough, ed., *Guy Debord and the Situationist International* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002) 143.
- 9 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) (New York: Zone Books, 1997) 17.
- 10 See for example Matthieu Laurette's *The Great Exchange* (2000), a television programme in which the public exchange goods of progressively less value week by week, and Phil Collins, *The Return of the Real* (2005), which involved a press conference for former stars of Turkish reality television.
- 11 See for example Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1970); Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979); Oskar Hansen, *Towards Open Form* (Warsaw: Foksal Gallery Foundation/Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts Museum, 2005).
- 12 Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', unpublished conference paper, Frankfurt, August 2004, <http://theater.kein.org/>
- 13 Be this 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. See Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator'.
- 14 A similar argument for consumption as creative is put forward by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980). Literary variants of this idea can be found in Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author' (1968) and 'From Work to Text' (1971), and in Jacques Derrida's idea of the 'Countersignature', *Paragraph*, vol. 27, no. 2, July 2004, 7-42.