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Forms of Participation in Art

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Translated by Daniel Hendrickson

The problem of how aesthetic experience relates to the dimension of intersubjectivity is not new. What *is* new is the way this problem is being formulated. In contemporary aesthetic discourse it is not, as in Kant, a matter of some generality that would be implicit to every aesthetic judgment because it is based on a manner of experience that, in its very structure, can principally be assumed for all thinking beings. Nor, however, is it a matter of participating in some truth of universal validity. Like the first Kantian perspective, the second, the perspective of what has been called truth aesthetics, also abandons all concrete subjectivity. So, for Adorno, the ideal artist is one who emphasizes a moment in the work that allows it to step outside of its connection to the individuality of the artist (its expression). By committing to the project of relieving art's autonomy from its relation to all concrete subjectivity, and thus also including his or her own, the "artist" is meant to become "the deputy of the total subject."¹ Out of art, writes Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*, "it is a We that speaks and not an I—indeed all the more so the less the artwork adapts externally to a We and its idiom."² From this perspective, participating in art means that the viewer, listener, spectator, or reader is meant to overcome his or her empirical situatedness in relation to the work and to participate in something universal.³ And

as far as this participation is understood as participating in a “pure We,” the relation to the work gains a utopian dimension as well. To have an aesthetic experience, for Adorno, means participating in the “adumbration of reconciliation.”⁴

Contemporary art, on the other hand—indeed, increasingly since the 1960s—explicitly turns against the overburdening of art with the project of anticipating a pure subject for a utopian “total society.”⁵ Rather, to many artists today, this project appears just as corrupted as the hopes that were placed in the presumably universal language of abstraction. No matter what the bone of contention, whether it be the marginalization of women in the art of high modernism, the aloofness of this art in relation to proletarian culture and subcultures, or the largely white and Western character of the art world that it belongs to (which certainly is manifest in exotic references to its others)—in too many respects such universalism has turned out to be particularism. It is this insight that must be taken into account in reformulating the question of the relationship between aesthetic experience and the dimension of intersubjectivity. For this dimension can no longer be imagined as pure or abstract. Rather, it has to be referred back to concrete culturally and socially marked subjectivities.

A variety of theoretical responses have been formulated to the question of how aesthetic experience can be reimagined within the dimension of intersubjectivity with particular focus on the relation between modes of participation in (open) work and modes of participation in social and political life. Many contributions to the discussion grouped under the title “participatory art” are even found in open argument with one another—chiefly falling into two camps. One side, mainly associated since the late 1990s with the French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud, maintains that art should create concrete communities, thus generating immediate political achievements. Both in writing and in shows—especially at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris which Bourriaud co-directed from 1999 to 2006—Bourriaud has developed an art-political program he calls “relational aesthetics.” However, this program has been debated a lot since its programmatic formulation in 1998, both in terms of its political implications and the role it attributes to

art. In the first part of this essay I will reconstruct the respective objections in order to lead over to a totally different understanding of participating in art, which I will discuss in more detail in the second part. For the other side of the art-theoretical discourse on participation sees the ethical-political potential of art not so much in the formation of concrete communities but, to the contrary, in its potential to call such communities into question. While Bourriaud seeks to suspend the problem of aesthetic judgment in favor of an immediate communal experience, the problem poses itself anew against the backdrop of an aesthetic questioning of the communal.

Social Integration through Art, or Bourriaud and His Critics

Bourriaud's relational aesthetics is expressly directed not only against the definition of art as the deputy of utopia taken from truth aesthetics,⁶ but also against the idea of the autonomy of art as such. Instead of isolating art from life and utopia from politics, as is the case with the truth aesthetics of modernism, the idea is to bring both of these things into the space of what's possible here and now, namely, into a communicative practice that is opposed, in that it is directly intersubjective, to the standardization and commodification of social relationships (*RA*, 9). Instead of impeding the direct experience of social ties by replacing it with representations of the social, the art world itself is meant to provide a space for "social experiments" that explode the "uniformity" of common "behavioural patterns" (*RA*, 9). In regard to the artwork, or better yet, in the situation created by it, an interpersonal exchange should take place that is distinct from the reified social relationships outside the art world. The concrete exhibition situation is thus meant to become a playfully realized utopia. Instead of isolating its viewers from one another by placing them in individual relations to art objects, the viewers should be brought into contact with one another and in this way be transformed into social agents.

Bourriaud's idea of producing social relationships through art differs strikingly from the much larger sociopolitical claims of earlier artistic programs in its self-restriction to an audience that is

always already reachable by artistic practice in the here and now. The community that is targeted here no longer has anything to do with the totality of a political community. Relational aesthetics understands community as being temporarily limited, particular, and concrete and thus of a decidedly post-utopian nature. Art should no longer imagine other worlds, but should contribute practically to “learning to inhabit the world in a better way” (*RA*, 13). “It seems more pressing,” notes Bourriaud, “to invent possible relations to our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows” (*RA*, 45). This is the spirit in which art should operate, by inventing situations and modes for subjects to relate with one another in social settings. What matters here is no longer the relation between the individual and the work, between subject and object, but that between subject and subject (*RA*, 22). The work should withdraw into a role of mediating such intersubjectivity. Correspondingly, what such work is supposed to focus on is no longer the form of an object, but the formation of a situation (*RA*, 21), no longer the space of exhibition, but the time of the social (*RA*, 15), no longer individual reflection and aesthetic judgment, but collective participation and open-ended encounters (*RA*, 22).

Bourriaud’s conception of engaged art has been met with two objections that deserve serious attention. The first objection claims that Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics is shockingly blind to the social dimension of its own institutional premises.⁷ The playful realization of utopias of social integration, as Bourriaud expressly writes (*RA*, 9), are meant to take place in the institutionally protected space of the art world. Since the term “play” here is no longer meant to indicate a logic proper to the aesthetic but is to be understood as a social experiment meant to serve as a model for the rest of society, the accusation that relational aesthetics forgets the institution takes on a particular weight. For here, the old difference between art and life, which relational aesthetics claims to have overcome, sneaks in once again behind the agents’ backs as social difference instead of the distinction between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic. The stress of the social difference lies between the creation of social relations in art institutions—however successful—and the disintegrated social relations that remain outside this space

of privilege. This objection takes on even more gravity when one considers the self-restriction to small, temporarily limited audiences in the light of Bourriaud's aesthetic-theoretical claim that such practices liberate the utopian possibility of art from its false abstraction and exemplarily (RA, 18) transfer it over into concrete practice. Granted, the utopian possibility might indeed be conceived too abstractly in modernist truth aesthetics, too engrossed in the impossible to be able to develop any power to change in reality. But there is also a converse problem in relational aesthetics: its idea of the possible is always already translated into the achievable, and thus, relational aesthetics runs the risk of merely perpetuating reality.⁸ While the new mankind projected by the old utopias was usually too engrossed in the unreal, the concrete viewers and their social potential that relational aesthetics appeals to are always already there—namely, usually as privileged members of the international art world. From this perspective, the model of participation turns out to be a highly problematic “caricature of the democratic demand by the same name.”⁹

The second critique argues that Bourriaud's critical intuition, according to which schematized and commodified forms of interaction, such as are meant to prevail outside the art world, must be burst open by social experiments in the art world, seems peculiarly outdated, especially in the light of one influential strand of contemporary cultural and social critique. For the relevant diagnoses in the present such as those of Deleuze or Boltanski and Chiapello deliver a quite different image than do those of the 1950s and 1960s, of which we should mention the examples of Guy Debord's manifesto against the *Society of the Spectacle*,¹⁰ which Bourriaud explicitly invokes, but also the critique of the culture industry by Horkheimer and Adorno.¹¹ The earlier cultural critique had stressed that the passivation and indoctrination of the cultural consumer and his or her disciplining in the working world should be seen in an internal connection. Only those who allow themselves to be overcome by schematic interpretations of the self and the world in their leisure time, thus also allowing themselves to become socially impoverished, will be able to use their labor appropriately to meet demands. In the areas in Western societies marked today by a tran-

sition from a disciplinary society into a society of control,¹² the decisive demands have instead become originality, creativity, mobility, personal initiative, and connectivity. Under these circumstances, the individual can only participate in social reproduction if his or her activity is permanently networked, active, and autonomous. In the context of such a social formation, however, activation, participation, experiment, and rule breaking should obviously not be identified too quickly as modes of resistance. On the contrary, the suspicion arises that there is a fundamentally new constellation of culture and work at play, in the light of which the imperative to participate in art, much like the volatility and indeterminacy of the idea of the social produced by it, simultaneously appears as an effect and a model of those new profile requirements.¹³ The complaint about the schematized, passivized, and isolated effects of the society of the spectacle at any rate tends to come down to nothing in view of this situation. To quote Diedrich Diederichsen in this vein: “In view of today’s active consumers, the forced networkers, who are constantly and actively present, who judge, assess, and respond; who are required to be networking soft-skills virtuosos in today’s world of leisure, service, and cultural work and are thus exposed to a terror of surrogate-democratic participation, a new term is long overdue: participation is the new spectacle” (*E*, 279).¹⁴

Now, we might grant Bourriaud that his relational aesthetics is aimed at directly experiencing social relations, which are also meant to oppose the commodification of social circumstances under the conditions of the “new spirit of capitalism” just outlined.¹⁵ The “interpersonal exchange” initiated by art should be distinguished from the “zones of communication” imposed on us from outside (*RA*, 16). Here, however, further political problems turn up. Bourriaud not only seems to have such a positive view of the psychological directness of social situations per se that he grants its experience, however fleeting, explosive emancipatory powers, but he also seems to absolutely trust the positive energy of groups and communities—however small they might be. However, and this is the third substantial objection, nothing is more unpolitical than claiming community without inquiring into its specific quality.¹⁶ And even worse: the unpolitically generalized praise of so-

cial connectedness harbors a political problem, especially when one takes into account more recent theories of democracy, which maintain that democratic politics is in part located where it itself is divided—that is, where communities are called into question by their other(s) and compelled to change. In the context of such reflections, then, the point of the turn against great political utopias is understood quite differently than it is in Bourriaud. For from this perspective, a problem can be seen that Bourriaud, in his belief in the positive power of direct and, as he obviously thinks, authentic community, does not see. In this context, it seems much more that Bourriaud—despite his post-utopian gesture—is not critical enough of the old utopias.

For the great political utopias did not by any means fail solely due to being implemented in non-ideal circumstances, that is, in a corrupt reality. Much more, it is the idea of social authenticity at the basis of these utopias itself that is problematic. For it bears latent or manifest traits of authoritarian collectivization, even when it is understood as democratic. Rousseau is perhaps the most pertinent example here. This problem has become expressly recognized in reflecting on the totalitarian experience of the twentieth century and is the focus of more recent theories of democracy. In line with an influential strand of democratic thinking—one might think here of otherwise very diverse authors such as Jacques Derrida, Chantal Mouffe, Claude Lefort, Helmuth Plessner, Jacques Rancière, or Albrecht Wellmer—the problem of democracies is precisely not represented as one of division, caused by representations, of the political community into spectacle and public, as Bourriaud argues in reference to Debord (*RA*, 9). While Bourriaud, following Debord,¹⁷ seemingly untroubled by the political reflection just mentioned, continues dreaming the old dream of social authenticity beyond all mediation,¹⁸ the respective contributions to political theory are precisely about defending mediation, representations, and thus the divisions that go along with them. True democracy, according to Rancière, for example,¹⁹ only begins with the end of the more or less latently totalitarian idea of an authentic identity of the *demos*, of the people, with itself. For there is never a *demos* outside of its political representations, which give it a concrete shape and a uni-

fied will in the first place. At the same time, however, this means that the people never completely and conclusively coincide with their political representations. Democracy thus begins with the insight that the possibility of calling the political representations of the *demos* and its will into question is not the least of the assets of democracy. In fact, democracy is the only form of governance in which it is allowed to criticize everything publicly, to call everything into question publicly—including the shape of democracy itself. The history of democracy, then, can no longer be told as that of an asymptotic approach to a final utopia of social authenticity, in which the *demos* would ultimately come into agreement with itself in a way that would make all mediation and representation irrelevant. Rather, it has to be understood in the sense of a dynamic in which democracy can only be won anew, time and time again, in and through the struggle over the concrete interpretation of its very concept.²⁰

Bourriaud, according to this strain of critique,²¹ not only misrecognizes the equally necessary and productive role that conflict plays in the life of democracies but is also insufficiently attentive to the problematic legacy that his utopia of social authenticity carries with it. This point is still valid even if one acknowledges that Bourriaud is not speaking of reconciliation but of open-ended dialogue. For the emphasis on the open-ended encounter overlooks exactly the point that must not be overlooked from the perspective of political philosophy, namely, that we must undertake determinations in order to act politically—and indeed to the best of our knowledge and belief *and* in the complete awareness of the fallibility of our always only finite and thus principally contentious determinations.

This perspective suggests an understanding of the politics of art that is quite opposed to that of Bourriaud. Art would then no longer be under the sign of any utopia of social authenticity—however microtopically broken down to the sociotope “art world.” Rather, it would be under the sign of an actual post-utopian concept of democracy, although at the same time not one marked by resignation but committed equally to pragmatism and to openness to the future. From this perspective, art and politics would merely be joined by an affinity in the attitude that corresponds to them in each case

(and in their own way)—an attitude of self-reflexive stepping back and calling-into-question the finite horizons of justification, within which we undertake to determine the good. In this way, then, art works on a perception of the given, which it shares with the emphatically political. Instead of remaining at the level of the seeming evidence of the immediately given, this given itself becomes a problem, a problem of interpretation. The ethical-political function of art would then at least in part consist in the fact that it reminds us that what is, is not everything.

Ironically, some of the positions taken up by Bourriaud for his program of relational aesthetics can be understood in this sense. For, and this is the fourth objection, Bourriaud's program misrecognizes the ethico-political logic of the works that it claims for itself.²² If one takes a closer look at works by Rirkrit Tiravanija or by Felix Gonzales-Torres, and both are paradigmatic artists for relational aesthetics, it quickly becomes clear that they are not at all, or at least not only, about provoking direct participation—neither in the sense of participating in the social nor, however, of participating in the work—but about problematizing or thematizing participation. Whatever one might think of these works and their manageable complexity individually, they don't seem to fit quite right with Bourriaud's program, in which the task of art is meant to be creating social situations that can be experienced directly. This is not even the case in those works that initially fulfill most of the criteria of relational aesthetics. For instance, Rirkrit Tiravanija's works from the early 1990s have the reputation of essentially aiming to bring people together. Instead of exhibiting objects, Tiravanija cooked and served soup to visitors to the exhibition. In no way, however, did these actions amount to nothing more than getting the art world to eat soup together. If that had been the case, the works would in fact be of a practically inconceivable triviality and paltriness—with regard to both politics and aesthetics. But for Tiravanija, it was obviously in part about the social structure of the concretely gathered art world; it potentially became the object itself here (which positions are taken up—concretely in space and in a figurative sense?); and at the same time it was also about making visible the factual particularity of a Western art world that po-

sitions itself as universal by means of what is excluded from it. Pad Thai was served—which, tellingly, was also the title of this series of actions. What are we participating in under these circumstances? And how do we participate?

Felix Gonzales-Torres's works undermine the superficial impulse to take part even more clearly than do Tiravanija's actions. If, for instance, his work "*Untitled*" (*Lover Boys*), which in its first manifestation (1991) consisted of pieces of hard candy piled up on the floor, invites visitors to take one of the candies, this invitation must be seen in the context of the disturbing possibility to associate the weight of the pile of candies (which are continually replenished) to that of the artist and his partner Ross Laycock (see fig. 1).²³ The work was created shortly after Laycock's death as a result of HIV infection. And Gonzales-Torres himself died in 1996, as so many of his friends and acquaintances had before him, from AIDS. Given all of this, whether one takes a candy or not is then secondary to the effect of the work. Rather, the immediately practical meaning of participation here is precisely subverted.²⁴ Instead, the *possibility* of participation itself becomes the material to reflect upon, by which the visitor is enmeshed in a certain sense, and which can touch him or her much more intensely than the reduction of aesthetic experience to practical participation might have it. Even Bourriaud couldn't avoid the abyssal dimensions in the work of Gonzalez-Torres; he in fact has even produced apt descriptions of them (see *RA*, 55). But these stand in a sort of tension to those passages in which he attempts to construe the audience of such a work as a community, however temporary or fragile it may be. Precisely in view of the suggestion to participate in the work, however, everyone is alone with the work.

While Bourriaud reduces the engagement with the artwork to "private consumption" (*RA*, 16) in order to replace it with processes of intersubjective meaning production, such art, in fact, is not about producing intersubjectivity, neither in contents nor in structure, but about reflexively thematizing it. The intersubjectivity that such works address is less the concrete and arbitrary constellation of the audience that finds itself facing the work at a certain moment; what becomes reflexively thematized much more,



Fig. 1. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*” (*Lover Boys*), 1991.
 Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea
 Rosen Gallery, New York.

for each individual alone, is an intersubjectivity that has always already marked our experience: the dynamic horizon of our cultural and social background assumptions. Such a work unfolds ethico-political potential therefore not by forming random communities but by reflexively problematizing those intersubjectively formed convictions that make us—in different ways—into historically and socially situated subjects. Precisely because no temporary social is being produced here, in relation to which the concrete situation of the exhibition would become unimportant, but, to the contrary, because we are provoked by the exhibition to enter into a reflexive distance towards the social, of which we are already a part, such an art maintains connections to possible politicizations of what it means to take part in social practice. Even in the context of the contemporary norm of permanent accessibility in ever new social constellations, experience of such distantiation might unfold more

explosive power than those of (self) activation in the context of further venues of experimental “relationality.” But the experience of such distantiation might also contain more explosive power, I would say, than the mere confrontation of social antagonisms, the drastic production of which is demanded from art in undialectical reaction to the somewhat harmless emphasis on community by certain of Bourriaud’s critics, such as Claire Bishop.²⁵ Not only is the demand for the artistic production of socially antagonistic situations politically as empty as that for social integration; it tends, like these, to reduce the function of art to producing social situations.

While it is certainly valid to speak of explosive power in relation to the experience mentioned here, it is the explosive power of an aesthetic experience—understood in a post-Kantian sense—that can hardly be reduced to private consumption. The cautious talk of ethico-political *potential* in the aesthetic experience is due to the logic proper to the aesthetic, to aesthetic difference. This is the common element of those political positions that see the social less as the goal of aesthetic procedures than as their *object*. In this context, the problem of the relation to the community implicit in all aesthetic judgment is posed anew.

The Dual Character of Participating in Art

The difference between the program of relational aesthetics, according to which art is supposed to have the function of producing social relations, and other approaches, according to which art thematizes the social in a specific way, can certainly best be clarified through performative works in the broadest sense. Such works assume co-presence, the common attendance of all participants at one place at one particular time, and thus include a social moment in their very structure. This is already the case in traditional theatrical performances, but as theater scholars such as Erika Fischer-Lichte²⁶ and Hans-Thies Lehmann²⁷ have demonstrated in various contexts, it has taken on a new quality since the 1960s. Less and less frequently is contemporary theater about showing the audience a closed world (that of drama), and much more about reflecting the “theatre situation” as a “whole made up of evident and hidden communicative

processes" (*PT*, 17) in forms through which the old defining oppositions of fiction and reality, stage and auditorium, are destabilized. In performative situations in which there is as little clear separation between stage and auditorium as there is a clear ontological distinction between a real world and a fictional one, not only is the (always also bodily) presence of the actors intensified, but it will also have an effect on the spectator. For the spectator is then no longer a consumer or voyeur hiding in the darkness, but an attendee—no less bodily—who also assumes influence on the theatrical proceedings, even if this is not on equal par with the performers. This already occurs through his position in the space and in relation to the other attendees or through audible reactions. Every spectator necessarily becomes a co-actor here; "by entering the theatrical space," writes Lehmann, "he cannot help but become a 'participant' for the other visitors" (*PT*, 123). The spectator's movements and position in relation to others become relevant for the situation and for the events themselves, at the same time he is cast back on himself. Every individual, then, as Lehmann continues, becomes the "*only spectator* for whom the performers and the rest of the audience produce 'his' or 'her' theatre" (*PT*, 123). An essentially individual "reflection on forms of behaviour and interpersonal communication" (*PT*, 124) is produced here by the fact that the boundaries of the aesthetic object—in this case the performance—are kept unclear, which gives rise to a zone of indeterminacy, expanding to the situation in which the event takes place.

As long as the old separation between stage and auditorium went hand in hand with the distinction between the fictional events onstage and the real auditorium, the uncertainty of this separation also implies the destabilization of this distinction. Everything that happens here also happens really and not merely fictionally—nonetheless, it remains within a representational context. This as well was already the case for traditional theatrical performances. An actor who falls onstage does not act as if he had fallen; he really lets himself fall (*AP*, 297). But in the context of dramatic theater, such a case can likewise mean something else: the suicide attempt by Gloucester in *King Lear*, for example. Without an element of the real, nothing can be staged (*PT*, 175). As an effect, the

real can take the focus of attention at any time, even in traditional theater—for instance, when the actor’s performance or her charisma become more important than her role. Yet, although the “level of the real” as “a ‘co-player’” (AP, 111) is a constitutive given for all theater, it is nonetheless usually played down in traditional dramatic theater and held latent. In postdramatic theater, by contrast, where no closed dramatic world is represented, it is expressly accentuated. However, as the real cannot be subtracted from the staged in traditional theater, staging cannot entirely be removed from postdramatic theater and performance practices. It is not a matter here of overcoming the space of staging in favor of a real situation, but of allowing for the real, which was always already part of the staging, expressly to appear in the staging in a way that the tense relationship between the real and staging—already latently present in traditional dramatic theater—is emphasized. This happens particularly when the boundaries between the staged and the real themselves are kept blurred. Such boundary crossings in theater allow real and staged moments perpetually to turn over into one another without ever resolving the tension between the two in favor of one side or the other.

Since staging in postdramatic theater and in contemporary performance practice always indicates its own material reality, in turn creating a certain indistinguishability between the staged and the real, the possibility now arises for the spectator to intervene directly in what happens. Stopping what is happening altogether is the outer horizon of responsibility that is now expected of the spectator for the theatrical situation. This is particularly dramatized by performances that leave it up to the spectators to decide when the situation is “no longer a play” and must be stopped.

In 2000, for instance, the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra exhibited persons who were, or so it seemed, illegally in Germany in cardboard boxes in Berlin’s Kunstwerke; at other actions, members of the precariat were paid to allow a line to be tattooed on their backs or their hair to be dyed (see fig. 2).²⁸ The possibility of not viewing the works primarily in moral or political terms and in relation to the living conditions of the extras who were appearing in them, but as merely staged—and as fictional in the broad-



Fig. 2. Santiago Sierra, *Six people who are not allowed to be paid for sitting in cardboard boxes*. Kunst-Werke, Berlin, 2000. Copyright VEGAP Spain. Courtesy estudio Santiago Sierra.

est sense—cannot be separated from the work any more than can the connection to the bodily and social reality of its performers. This circumstance triggered moral discomfort among Sierra's audience. He was accused of exploiting the performers for a media spectacle. His critics felt that the presumably enlightening aspect of his work should be de facto placed at the level of the pornography of *Schadenfreude* that is mass produced today for commercial television, in which the *reality* and *liveness* of the miserable is little more than fetishized for its sensational appeal.²⁹ Now of course one could ask whether an art that so obviously expresses the stamp of cynicism is also in fact cynical. This is how the defense of Sierra goes: the artist is merely holding up a mirror to the cynicism in society—and therefore is not himself cynical. This alone, however, does not free Sierra's art from the accusation that it happens in a way that is more part of the problem of exploitation than part of its solution. But this accusation overlooks a decisive factor, namely, that by blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, art and

non-art, his works—unlike reality television shows—trouble and make problematic the position of the spectator or viewer himself. The viewer or spectator with Sierra is part of what's happening, and this gives him a certain share in the responsibility for the situation. At the same time, however, the moral action of freeing the undocumented immigrants from their undignified position under the cardboard boxes runs the risk of committing the same categorical mistake that Stanley Cavell describes in the case of the southern yokel at the theater who storms the stage to free Desdemona from the black man.³⁰ But pointing out that this is “only” art is obviously not much more instructive. Rather, the point of the work comes precisely from the discomfort generated by a situation that calls into question the security of the spectator's position by turning the boundaries between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, art and non-art, fiction and reality, into the object of a doubtlessly serious aesthetic play. There are numerous other examples of this: one might think of Yoko Ono's famous *Cut Piece* (which she first performed in 1964), in which the audience is asked to cut the clothes from her body—leaving it open to them to decide how far to take this task. Another example in this respect, cited especially frequently in theater studies, is Marina Abramović's performance *Lips of Thomas* (which she first performed in 1975), at which Abramović broke a glass in her hand, used a razor blade to score a five-pointed star in her belly, and lay on a cross of ice blocks until the audience intervened.³¹ The boundary crossing between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic, fiction and reality, was no less drastic in Christoph Schlingensief's *Bitte liebt Österreich!* (2000), when he set up a container village in the first district in Vienna during the Viennese Festwochen to house twelve asylum seekers. Following the model of the reality TV format *Big Brother*, not only could the participating public observe the lives of the twelve people by means of six cameras, but this same public could presumably also decide their fates—also based on the model of *Big Brother*. Two candidates from the container were chosen each day for deportation. (This part, for all the actual audience participation, was admittedly staged, although this was only acknowledged afterward.)

What all these conceptually very different works—the spectrum

ranges from the spectacularly political (Schlingensiefel) to the ritually esoteric (Abramović)—have in common structurally is that they plunge those confronted by them into a crisis. For the various artistic strategies cause us to question whether this (still) has something to do with a staging that can be observed by the spectator, or (already) reality, in which one might and perhaps should intervene—and both resolutions appear to be equally problematic. The interruption of events, however moral its motivation may be, negates the artistic production; formalist pleasure in them negates the reality at play here. Such productions are obviously precisely about creating a tension between these two attitudes—the practical and the formalist—that lands the spectator, as Fischer-Lichte formulates, “between the prescribed rules, norms, and orders” (AP, 177). Aesthetic experience, says Fischer-Lichte, thus becomes a “liminal experience” (AP, 174). The effect of the aesthetic play with the boundaries, meanwhile, is not, as the ritual-oriented term *liminal experience* might suggest, a transformation of the spectator in the sense that he overcomes his position as spectator in favor of another—practical—stance, even if some performances, such as Abramović’s *Lips of Thomas* (Fischer-Lichte’s favorite example) count on this moment as their end point. These works draw their aesthetic-political-ethical potential not from any practical resolution but from the suspense that precedes such a resolution. Unlike in ritual, the liminal experience here is no mere transitional moment in the service of a process that would end in a (new) social identity; rather, it is about aesthetically isolating the uncertainty of the liminal experience itself and liberating its reflexive potential. For this experience causes the position of spectating, as well as the moral problem of voyeurism that can be linked to it in extra-aesthetic contexts, to become thematized, if not problematized. Such works are not political in any direct sense of the term, but rather indirectly or potentially—indeed due to the reflexive realization of conventionalized stances and attitudes from ordinary life that they make possible. But whether such reflections in fact lead to any change in consciousness that in turn leads to practical action is a question that cannot be decided by art itself.

Just as contemporary practices of theater and performance the-

matically work on a tension—between staging and “co-playing” reality—that was already in effect, if only latently, in traditional dramatic theater, they also only underscore in an especially drastic way a paradox that runs through all art related to the world, sometimes more and sometimes less expressly. In his book on participation in art, Alexander García Düttmann drew attention to the fact that such art demands a moment of immediate belief in the world opened up by it as much as it demands an attentiveness to the mediated quality of art that breaks down this belief.³² Art happens, then, so long as the paradoxical unity of these two sides is acknowledged, so long as its tense relationship is carried out. From this perspective, as García Düttmann says, participation in art has a “dual character,” according to which neither of its poles, neither that of the side of content nor that of the side of form, can be resolved without at the same time ending the aesthetic experience through this resolution.³³

This also means that, when looking at the art of the present, the aesthetic cannot simply be reduced to formalism—and this is something we should identify as progress in our understanding of the aesthetic. The artistic practices of the present do not suspend the aesthetic in favor of a real space of political or moral action; much more, they insist on an anti-formalist understanding of aesthetics. Having an aesthetic experience means experiencing experience, that is, encountering the world of experience familiar from the real world anew in the mode of reflexive distance.³⁴ This effect comes in because even the most reality-saturated art does not simply merge into life, as if art merely repeated life—except without the demand to be directly real itself. Rather, the autonomous life of art consists in a dynamic that negates the unilateralness of formalist approaches or those exclusively oriented to content, a dynamic from which the viewer or spectator cannot be exempt. The artwork is created and maintained solely through a *constant exchange* between form and content. This can be emphatically seen in those works that intensify their relation of tension to such a degree that both sides, as well as the corresponding approaches, conflict with one another to an intolerable point, but without ever completely liberating themselves from the other side. Precisely be-

cause even those works that emphasize a real always at the same time harbor a moment of semblance, those who participate in them are rebuffed back to themselves, to their behavior, their perception, as well as the social schemes of interpretation at their base. Our participation is reflected in art as a question.

This logic takes hold also and precisely when the aesthetic experience involves strong sensations and feelings. There are doubtlessly a group of artistic works, and not only in the areas of theater and performance, that are intended precisely to evoke in the viewer such emotional effects as shame, disgust, dread, pity, and the like. Because, however, as García Düttmann insists, the uncontested reality of these feelings breaks down at the same time with the consciousness of semblance, because the attention to the mediated quality of art demanded by art conflicts with the immediacy of the emotional reaction that it nonetheless provokes (*T*, 98–111), the *mediated* quality of the emotions also always comes forth in the experience of such works. One can think of the example of so-called abject art here, an art that works with or evokes materials that are considered contaminative (such as feces, urine, blood, vomit). Correspondingly, this art has often induced reactions of disgust in its viewers, indeed, by the same stroke has triggered discussions in social and cultural studies about the social constructedness of disgust or of the discarded (the abject). Something similar can certainly be said in view of the artistic engagement with the feeling of shame, which plays a role, for instance, in Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*. As can be gleaned in Christiane Voss's philosophical work, emotions, unlike instincts and reflexes, do not belong to a stratum that would lie beneath or before the level of meaning.³⁵ Rather, emotions themselves are meaningful; they are multiply interwoven with our assumptions about the world. Thus, this means that emotions are marked by a normative social practice in a manner that is always conveyed through language. We have learned to feel shame or disgust. And we have learned this in reference to specific situations or objects. Emotions are not independent of the situations or objects that trigger them—nor of our assumptions about them. Interpreting situations and objects is generally what outlines the sense of emotions in the first place. If one didn't know

what it was about, or respectively how to interpret what it was about, one would hardly be able to decide what emotional condition one was in. Emotions thus can be traced back to particular evaluations of situations or objects; but the reverse is equally conceivable, that bodily perceptions associated with emotions have an effect on how we assess situations and objects. Only because I turn red do I perceive the situation as shameful; only because my heart pounds do I notice that my relation to X is not as neutral as I had thought. The objects of our emotions are therefore equally the triggers as well as the products of emotions. In each case, however, the dynamic connection between emotions and an evaluative dimension of perceiving objects and situations cannot be denied.

The connection between emotions and the normative orientations that mark our perception, deep into the affective dimension, is realized in the aesthetic experience with a certain necessity. Due to the dual character of participating in art, the “suspense-packed simultaneity of a doubled demeanor” toward it (*T*, 100), our immediate reactions to what is represented remain subject to an opposing attentiveness to the representation that also reflexively distances its effects on us. This does not reduce these effects themselves to semblance, but rather puts them in a perspective that can become thematized in connection to cultural and social patterns of interpretation.³⁶ This is exactly why cases in which we experience art to a certain degree on our own bodies (and we become sluggish, turn red, or the like) might even particularly lead to something like an awareness about the socially mediated quality of the seemingly immediate.

By targeting such experiences, the art of the present turns irrefutably and explicitly against the idea of a neutrality of the spectator tied to the objectivity of the matter, as had been central to the conception of aesthetic experience in truth aesthetics. While from the perspective of truth aesthetics, participating in art means that the recipient overcomes his empirical subjectivity through absorption in art, he is referred time and again to his empirical situatedness in his experience of significant strains of contemporary art. In the relevant experience, it is less transcended than reflected.

This also has consequences for the practice of judgment. The

necessary shift we need to think now can be explained quite well through the figure of the professional judge, the critic. Traditionally, the critic was imagined as someone who establishes his authority through distance from the object, and this distance was meant to guarantee his neutrality—as if the boundaries of the self and the object were stable. Understood in this way, the ideal critic is not only objective but also as free as possible from prejudices; he also shows as few affective reactions as possible, above all no strong reactions like shame, excitement, fear, or disgust. In this conception, neutrality is a requirement for the practice of critical judgment.³⁷ In the last few decades this model of criticism, as we have seen, has come under enormous pressure from art—whether through polarizing contents which point to the heterogeneity of the art public, that is, to the fact that the experiences made here and the judgments passed here are always already influenced by various social backgrounds, or through the fact that artistic productions have been targeting an affective loss of distance in the spectator. Both strategies compel us to become aware of the implication of our embodied, empirical subjectivity in the objects of our judgment.

This happens, however, exactly to the degree that a defining judgment is suspended (for instance, because in the examples cited, the status of the situation was already left unclear). The aesthetic judgment refers to an experience in which the categories or our evaluative relation to the world become problematic. If there is an implicit relation to community in the aesthetic judgment because it expects “the concurrence of others,”³⁸ it would be the community of those who have become suspicious of the self-assurance of their own practice of judgment; it would be a community that is precisely not beholden to any unity, but one that exceeds itself through the possibility of challenging itself.

Acknowledgments

This text is the translation of excerpts from a chapter in Juliane Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst: Zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2013), 58–91.

Notes

1. See Theodor W. Adorno, "The Artist as Deputy," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 98–110.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 228. Hereafter cited as *AT*.
3. A similar position is represented today by Alain Badiou, who has updated central motifs of modernist truth aesthetics. It is thus no coincidence that Badiou is also highly skeptical of the field of contemporary art and calls for an aesthetic return to the early twentieth century. See Alain Badiou, "Third Sketch of a Manifesto of Affirmationist Art," in *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 133–48. For a critique of Badiou on this point, see Juliane Rebentisch, "7 Negations: Against Aesthetic Affirmationism," in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, ed. Armen Avanesian and Luke Skrebowski (Berlin: Sternberg, 2011), 51–63.
4. Adorno does emphasize that the aesthetic experience of such a collectivity always remains in the mode of semblance, which is why art, if it does not wish to compensate ideologically for bad—unreconciled—conditions, must at the same time remain adamant in relation to this: "Paradoxically, art must testify to the unreconciled and at the same time envision its reconciliation" (*AT*, 229).
5. I have noted the critical relation that contemporary art takes on to Adorno's universalism in Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012), 267–70.
6. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Paris: Presses du réel, 1998). The page numbers given here are based on the English translation, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Presses du réel, 2002). Hereafter cited as *RA*. Initial notes on some of the arguments elaborated in this and the next paragraph can be found in Juliane Rebentisch, "Participation in Art: 10 Theses," in *Contemporary Art: Themes and Histories, 1989 to the Present*, ed. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 267–75.
7. See especially Walead Beshty, "Neo-Avantgarde und Serviceindustrie: Die Schöne Neue Welt der relationalen Ästhetik," *Texte zur Kunst* 59 (2005): 150–57, here 151.
8. There are thus *two* ways in which, as Adorno formulates, "Utopia is blocked off by possibility." Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 57. See Alexander García Düt-

- tmann, "Dieser verrückte Visconti oder Einsichten in Fleisch und Blut," in *Zwischen Ding und Zeichen: Zur ästhetischen Erfahrung in der Kunst*, ed. Gertrud Koch and Christiane Voss (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005), 38–49, here esp. 46.
9. Diedrich Diederichsen, *Eigenblutdoping: Selbstverwertung, Künstlerromantik, Partizipation* (Cologne: KiWi, 2008), 275. Hereafter cited as *E*.
 10. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983).
 11. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94–136.
 12. See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 177–82.
 13. On the connections between participation (in art) and work, see also Bojana Kunst, "Precarious Audience: On the Tension between Effort and Idleness of Judgment in Contemporary Performance," in *Juzgar el arte contemporáneo/Judging Contemporary Art*, ed. Cátedra Jorge Oteiza and Juliane Rebentisch (Pamplona: Universidad Pública de Navarra, 2012), 243–64, esp. 257.
 14. For a similar diagnosis see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 277.
 15. See Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).
 16. Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004): 51–79, esp. 65. Hereafter cited as "ARA."
 17. While Debord himself, for all his critique of separation, could make great use of the anonymity of the big city (for example, the end of *The Coming Insurrection*), a more recent manifesto that makes a radical critique of representation in line with Debord (also stylistically) contains a vision of small authentic communities or respectively communes. Here, presumably, representation is no longer needed for collective action—since the asymmetries between representer and represented would also be abolished, all relations of power and domination would disappear. The idea, however, that no one would predetermine the direction of anyone else (representing them and deciding for them) assumes that everyone shares not only the same geographical standpoint but also the same knowledge and political standpoint. But it has never been possible to resolve the problem of

- difference by keeping political communities small. Such social cozi-ness can be suffocating. See The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2009), 100.
18. For a critique from a democracy-theory perspective of the one-sided dream (nightmare?) of participation, one that excludes conflict and difference, see also Markus Miessen, *Albtraum Partizipation* (Berlin: Merve, 2012), esp. 10.
 19. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), 53.
 20. For a more thorough discussion of this, see Juliane Rebentisch, *Die Kunst der Freiheit: Zur Dialektik demokratischer Existenz* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012).
 21. This happens frequently, for instance, in Claire Bishop or Markus Miessen, with respect to the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in particular to their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001).
 22. See Sandra Umathum, *Kunst als Aufführungserfahrung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), 159–74. According to Umathum, however, the same objection must also be applied to those critics of relational aesthetics, most prominently perhaps Claire Bishop, who conflate relational aesthetics with the art subsumed by it.
 23. “Untitled” (*Lover Boys*) (1991) is a discrete artwork that has been exhibited many times, most recently in 2012. Each installation is called a manifestation and referred to as “the work”; the parameters of the work allow for change to exist from manifestation to manifestation. While the materials used to manifest the artwork have often been hard candies, there have also been instances where nougats and taffies have been used. What has been maintained in all of the manifestations to date is the blue-and-white swirl that was part of the original candy used. While some of these artworks have parenthetical titles that can be understood to reference Ross Laycock—for example “Untitled” (Ross), “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*)—the ideal weight does not, of course, necessarily relate to the body weight of any particular individual.
 24. On the supposed unambiguity of the participation directions in Gonzales-Torres, see also Lars Blunck, “Luft anhalten und an Spinoza denken: Zu Fragen der Publikumsbeteiligung in der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” in *Werke im Wandel? Zeitgenössische Kunst zwischen Werk und Wirkung*, ed. Lars Blunck (Munich: Schreiber, 2005), 87–105, esp. 90–92. For a similar point with regard to works by another artist

who has also been hastily associated with Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, namely, Angela Bulloch, see Juliane Rebentisch, "Partizipation und Reflexion—Angela Bullochs *The Disenchanted Forest x 1001*," in *Angela Bulloch: Prime Numbers*, ed. Gregory Burke, Hendrik Driessen, Matthias Herrmann, and Andrew Nairne (Cologne: Walter König, 2006), 88–108. Naturally, this text also includes initial formulations of the objections to Bourriaud elaborated here.

25. See "ARA." For a critique of Bishop on this point, see Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 55.
26. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp), 2004. Hereafter cited as *AP*.
27. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006). Hereafter cited as *PT*.
28. The works are also simply called *Laborers who cannot be payed, remunerated to remain in the interior of carton boxes* (Kunst-Werke, Berlin, 2000), *250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People* (Espacio Aglutinador, Havana, 1999), and *133 persons paid to have their hair dyed blonde* (Arsenale, Venice, 2001). The following argument on Sierra is based on Juliane Rebentisch, "Realismus heute: Kunst, Politik und die Kritik der Repräsentation," *WestEnd: Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 2 (2010): 15–29, here 20.
29. On the affinity that a "sensational new realism in the visual arts" at first glance maintains to "new formats in mass media," see also Diedrich Diederichsen, "Realitätsbezüge in der Bildenden Kunst: Subjektkritik, Repräsentationskritik und Statistenkunst," in *Realismus in den Künsten der Gegenwart*, ed. Dirck Linck, Michael Lüthy, Brigitte Obermayr, and Martin Vöhler (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2010), 13–28, here 14.
30. Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 267–353, here 329.
31. The performance script for *Lips of Thomas* reads as follows:
 - I slowly eat 1 kilo of honey with a silver spoon.
 - I slowly drink 1 liter of red wine out of a crystal glass.
 - I break the glass with my right hand.
 - I cut a five pointed star on my stomach with a razor blade.
 - I violently whip myself until I no longer feel any pain.
 - I lay down on a cross made of ice blocks.

The heat of a suspended space heater pointed at my stomach
causes the cut star to bleed.

The rest of my body begins to freeze.

I remain on the ice cross for 30 minutes until the audience inter-
rupts the piece by removing the ice blocks from underneath.

32. Alexander García Düttmann, *Teilnahme: Bewusstsein des Scheins* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2011). Hereafter cited as *T*.
33. For this formulation, which is the source for the title of this section, see Alexander García Düttmann, "QUASI: Antonioni und die Teilhabe an der Kunst," *Neue Rundschau* 4 (2009): 151–65, here 163.
34. See Martin Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung: Zum Begriff ästhetischer Rationalität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 319.
35. See Christiane Voss, *Narrative Emotionen: Eine Untersuchung über Möglichkeiten und Grenzen philosophischer Emotionstheorien* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004).
36. For more on this, see also Christiane Voss, "On the Affective Transformation of Aesthetic Judgment," in *Juzgar el arte contemporáneo/ Judging Contemporary Art*, ed. Cátedra Jorge Oteiza and Juliane Rebentisch (Pamplona: Universidad Pública de Navarra, 2012), 187–215.
37. For a feminist critique of this model of (art) criticism, see also Amelia Jones, "Art History/Art Criticism: Performing Meaning," in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (New York: Routledge, 1999), 39–55, as well as—in reference to Jones—Jennifer Doyle, "The Effect of Intimacy: Tracey Emin's Bad Sex Aesthetics," in *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 97–120, here esp. 115.
38. See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 56.