

## *Art, Participation and Politics*

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Translator: Phoebe Clarke

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# Art, Participation and Politics

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## REFERENCES

Markus Miessen, *Crossbenching: Toward Participation as Critical Spatial Practice*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016

Alexander Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin American Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017

Guy Cools, *Imaginative Bodies: Dialogues in Performance Practices*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2016, (Antennae)

*Practicable: from Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016. Sous la dir. de Samuel Bianchini, Erik Verhagen

- 1 The possible equation between participatory art and emancipatory politics truly emerged in the second half of the 20th century. Several recent publications on the historical roots of participatory art formulate this issue in one way or another. By putting art history into contextual perspective, as well as through essays and interviews, they demonstrate the possible connections between art and participation and what this implies, beyond the spaces of visual culture.
- 2 **The Role of Latin America**
- 3 In *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth Century Latin American Art*, the art historian Alexander Alberro offers an “analytical narrative”<sup>1</sup> of the evolution of Latin-American Concrete art towards Neo-Concrete forms and reconfigures the role of the viewer. The book covers a wide geographical and historical range, from Europe to Latin America, from 1944 to 1968, and is enlivened by beautiful colour illustrations. Alberro examines artists and groups that are less well-known in Europe along with the main figures. Over the course of his survey, Alberro explores case studies such as the Concrete art of Rio de la Plata, Jesús Soto’s career, Julio Le Parc and the Groupe de

Recherche en Art Visuel's (GRAV) work just before 1968, the radicalisation of participation in the works of Brazilian artists Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clark. The importance of Neo-concrete art is based on its relationship with the viewer, who becomes more and more involved over time, and whose intervention takes on a critical importance as the work is completed. Throughout these different approaches, the work of art is understood as inseparable from its context. It necessarily requires the participation of viewers in order to be valid.

- 4 Like a tenuous “red thread”<sup>2</sup>, the question of ideology interlaces the whole process. For artists, the integration of the viewer has to do with a militant posture, or even with the quest for effective social change. Altered perceptions, along with the active participation to the piece, awaken the viewers to a new self-awareness, by directing them towards a freed society.
- 5 One thing is for sure, the degree of abstraction described in this book is very different from the literality that predominates in a great part of what is now considered “political art”. What’s more, questions of interactivity and participation are addressed differently nowadays, since these kinds of practices have been completely absorbed by the economy of experience. At the end of his book, Alberro stresses the importance of a legacy that has laid the foundations for more political approaches (Jacoby or Cildo Meireles), that consider the viewer as potential doers – “participation” is intrinsically connected to the possibility of alteration.
- 6 At the basis of this development is an understanding of artworks in which “the meaning does not reside in the intent of the artist, nor in the essence of the art object, nor in its site of display, nor even in the consciousness of the spectator engaging with the work. Meaning is constructed in the aesthetic field, a space that includes all of these elements as well as writings and statements by the artists and others about the work.”<sup>3</sup>
- 7 **From Participation to Interaction**
- 8 By introducing the idea of “device” to describe the new kinds of relationships with the spectator, Alberro is in accordance with the authors of *Practicable: From Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*. Edited by artist and theoretician Samuel Bianchini, and critic and art historian Erik Verhagen, this outstanding book develops the same approach of historical contextualisation, by following a pattern that naturally associates chronological order and thematic organisation. The meticulous selection of texts outlines a global vision of the subject apprehended from different points of view.
- 9 From an aesthetic perspective, Bianchini and Verhagen wonder: “what happens to the aesthetic experience when it becomes practical as well?”<sup>4</sup> The book highlights the correlation between the introduction of participative strategies and the development of a vision of the artist that is radically opposed to univocal visions of an artwork’s authorship. This point of view also differs from the classical modernist theory expounded by Clement Greenberg and continued by Michael Fried, according to which the artwork is considered as an autonomous entity, detached from the world.
- 10 The book’s subtitle refers to the evolution of the forms of participative art from the end of the 1950s to the normalisation of the ideas connected to interactive art in the 1990s. By meticulously leading up to the present day, *Practicable* retraces a specific history that should be understood in the light of the participation of a third party in art. This approach, like Alexander Alberro’s, is understood through the prism of long duration. As a result, participation appears simultaneously in fields as diverse as “new social

movements”, cybernetics and digital art. The first part of the book examines the premises of the relationship between art and technology, particularly the considerable impact of cybernetics in the merging process. The authors then analyse in greater depth the numerous participative strategies used in digital art (Part 2), delving into the specific points of view of anthropology, sociology, law (Part 3) and performance art (Part 4), as well as into the exhibition of participative pieces (Part 5). This analytical approach is concluded by Part 6, devoted to relevant case studies, and a final section that gathers interviews with significant persons, such as artists Thomas Hirschhorn and Rirkrit Tiravanija or the theoreticians Peter Weibel and Nicolas Bourriaud.

11 The sweeping chronological approach allows for unexpected contextualisations and connections, such as the link Luke Skrebowski establishes between the “aesthetic system” framed by Jack Burnham at the end of the 1960s and the “relational aesthetics” that Nicolas Bourriaud theorised in 1996. Significantly titled “The Myth of the Active Subject”, the interview with art historian Claire Bishop ends the book on a critical note, while opening the analysis in many directions.

## 12 **The Dangers of Participation**

13 Along with Claire Bishop,<sup>5</sup> Markus Miessen is one of the best known figures to have developed a body of critical texts on the political aspect of participation. In a way, his last book can be seen as an answer to some essays in *Practicable*, who consider participation as something intrinsically positive. In *Crossbenching: Toward Participation as Critical Spatial Practice*, the author and prolific architect continues, in the same vein, the research he has been conducting for almost ten years. *Crossbenching* is closely related to Miessen’s trilogy on participation, which he began in 2006 with *Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice* (with Shannon Basar), *The Violence of Participation* (2007) and *The Nightmare of Participation (Crossbench Practice as a Mode of Criticality)* (2010). In this series of books and in the events that accompanied it, the architect strongly criticised the politically correct rhetoric of participation, particularly by highlighting the way in which it has been used in order to produce fake consensus.

14 According to Miessen, “participation has become the contemporary ritual of instant relief [...], a problem-solving ideology that has deeply infiltrated the political and cultural sphere.”<sup>6</sup>

15 What’s more, he notes that participation can be used in order to escape responsibilities, alluding to public consultations by politicians and the dissolution of the architect’s process of conceptualisation, which can be used as ways to legitimisation while relieving one from upstream decision-making.

16 Markus Miessen suggests several ways in which to avoid these traps. One of these directly concerns the *crossbench-practitioner*. Although he does not explicitly clarify this in his text, the term refers to *crossbench-politicians* at the House of the Lords in London: these independent persons, seated on perpendicular benches in the centre of the room, make decisions although they are not connected to any party. Miessen himself incorporates similar figures into his study, particularly what he calls *uninterested outsiders* and *uncalled participators*. By trying to distance himself from romantic concepts of participation, he recommends creating frames for dissent, understood in a productive sense. Rather than *participation*, Miessen prefers the term *critical spatial practice*. He calls for a post-disciplinarian approach that apprehends space in a political way, while also adapting to every situation, by valuing process over results. According to him, this practice does not

necessarily have an incidence on physical space. It develops in forms as diverse as the characteristics of different contexts are. By devoting a subsection to the production of publications, he stresses the importance of the textual field as speculative space. Miessen defends the research process as practice devoted to the production of questions and new spaces for thought and action. Though the slim volume leaves the reader wishing for concrete examples, additional information is to be found in the previous publications of Markus Miessen. Despite its elegant design, the book lacks illustrations. As a consequence, the text appears incomplete if the reader does not know the previous works of the author.

17 **The Body As Starting Point**

18 *Imaginative Bodies: Dialogues in Performance Practices* deals with entirely different issues. Edited by choreographer, critic and dance producer Guy Cools, this book is a collection of interviews on the theme of the body. It compiles the talks given during the conference cycle *Body: Language Talks* that took place at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London between 2008 and 2013. According to Guy Cools, the dialogue form gives discourse a very concrete signification, especially when it concerns the search for attentiveness and the "corporalisation" of ideas. He connects his own interest for an "ethical turn" in the arts – which he had already theorised with Pascal Gielen<sup>7</sup> – with a renewed concern for dialogue, which James P. Zappen dates back to Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>8</sup> By quoting philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara, sociologist Richard Sennet, scientist David Bohn and art historian Grant H. Kester, Guy Cools stresses the importance of attentiveness in dialogue, and makes the former a guiding principle of the book. For his discussions, Guy Cools chose to concentrate on exchanges with people he already knew or with whom he had already worked. These choices doubtlessly explain the book's orientation towards performing arts, and particularly dance. However, there are a few exceptions, including the last guest, Antony Gormley, one of the only visual artists to exchange with Cools and to question the role of the body in his practice.

19 The theme of attentiveness as justification for a collection of interviews may seem like a mere pretext. However, the dialogic approach places Guy Cools within the research connected to direct exchange inside a cultural environment that Alexander Alberro, Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagen have already historically situated. The fact is that this interest for participation coincides with the growth of transnational capitalism, Therefore Hal Foster's analysis could help understand this process: "perhaps discursivity and sociability are in the foreground of art today because they are scarce elsewhere."<sup>9</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Alberro, Alexander. *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth Century Latin American Art*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017, p. 10

2. Louis Althusser refers to the "hilo rojo de la modernidad" [red thread of modernity] (Althusser, Louis. *La Soledad de Maquiavelo*. Marx, Maquiavelo, Spinoza, Lenin, Madrid: Akal, 2008).

3. Alberro, Alexander. *Abstraction in Reverse*, Op. cit., p. 3
4. Bianchini, Samuel. Verhagen, Erik. « Introduction », in *Practicable: from Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016, p. 1
5. See : Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, New York, London: Verso, 2012
6. Miessen, Markus. *Crossbenching: Toward Participation as Critical Spatial Practice*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016, p. 78
7. Cools, Guy. Gielen, Pascal. *The Ethics of Art: Ecological Turns in the Performing Arts*, Amsterdam: Valiz, Colophon, 2014
8. Guy Cools quoting James P. Zappen, *The Rebirth of Dialogue: Bakhtin, Socrates, and the Rhetorical Tradition*, New York: New York Press, 2004.
9. Foster, Hal. "Chat Rooms", *London Review of Books*, 4 December 2004, reproduced in : *Participation*, Londres: Whitechapel ; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, p. 194 (Ed. by Claire Bishop)