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Participatory Art.

In recent decades, contemporary visual and performance art created through a participatory process has drawn increasing attention. Its value is the subject of considerable debate, including a lively conversation around the ethics and aesthetics of the practice as well as the vocabulary best suited to describe and critique it. Participatory art exists under a variety of overlapping headings, including interactive, relational, cooperative, activist, dialogical, and community-based art. In some cases, participation by a range of people creates an artwork, in others the participatory action is itself described as the art. So the conceptual photographer Wendy Ewald gave cameras and photography training to a group of children in a village in India, who, in turn, depicted their community, and the resulting photography show was considered participatory art. On the other hand, the multimedia visual artist Pedro Lasch collaborated with a group of “Sonidero” DJ’s on a party at an art center in Mexico City, and he called the social interactions leading to, and including, the public event an artwork co-authored by a range of participants—including the people who simply showed up for the event.



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Tatlin's Whisper #5, 2008 (mounted police, crowd control techniques, audience), Tania Bruguera. Photo by Sheila Burnett.

courtesy of tate modern

Of course participation in the collective creation of art is not new. Across the globe, throughout recorded history people have participated in the creation of art—from traditional music and dance to community festivals to mural arts. And the emergence of participatory art as a distinctive field has antecedents at least through the modernist period, as many scholars have argued. For example, recent books on the topic have traced these origins through the European and Latin American avant-gardes (Bishop, 2012), in the context of the participatory politics of feminism and the civil rights movement since the 1960s (Finkelppearl, 2013), in a global context (Kester, 2011) and in relation to twentieth-century performance and theater innovations (Jackson, 2011). This entry takes as its subject not the history of participation in art but the recently designated genre of participatory art in the last three decades.

Before proceeding to a brief outline of recent participatory art, it is worth considering some categories that have emerged within a field that encompasses such diverse practices as a meal served in a gallery in New York; activities in a cluster of buildings in Houston, Texas; and mounted policemen herding unsuspecting visitors around the gigantic atrium of a museum in London. Clearly, these projects are not unified by medium. Rather, they share only one characteristic: They were created through the participation of people in addition to the artist or art collective. In participatory art people referred to as citizens, regular folks, community members, or non-artists interact with professional artists to create the works. Each of these three projects is emblematic of a very different approach to participatory art.

Three Modes of Participation.

Starting in the early 1990s the Argentine-Thai-American artist Rirkrit Tiravanija initiated a series of exhibitions that consisted of cooking pad thai (a Southeast Asian stir-fried noodle dish) for gallery visitors. This performance, called *Untitled (Free)* was often enacted within a gallery whose environment had been altered by the artist, but the gesture was radical in its simplicity: a shared meal. The artwork was defined as the social situation, the relations of the visitors within the environment set in motion by the meal. The visitor, who ate, conversed, shared, and generally interacted was not a spectator but an active participant in the creation of the social art. The participants tended to be art world insiders, members of

the audience for avant-garde contemporary art. In this performance installation, participation is voluntary. Here, social art is a social event. *Untitled (Free)* became Tiravanija's signature piece, appearing in shows in the United States, Europe, and Asia, and, in 1996, it was included in the exhibition "Traffic," the seminal show organized by the French critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud. In the show's catalogue, Bourriaud coined the term "Relational Aesthetics" to refer to the sort of work that creates temporary and small-scale convivial moments and experiments in interpersonal relations that he hails as models for positive social interaction.

Also in the early 1990s, a group of African American artists in Houston, Texas, began to meet to discuss how to make a difference in their community. After several years of planning, they opened Project Row Houses in 1994 within a set of eight renovated shotgun houses dedicated to artists' projects. Over the years, they added major new initiatives, including a residency/education program for single mothers, in-depth education programs for local kids, a nonprofit community development arm that has built low- and middle-income housing, a laundromat, a ballroom for public events, and experimental architecture projects in collaboration with Rice University's architecture program. While it resembles an activist community art center, Project Row Houses is often defined as a work of art, as a neighborhood-wide, interactive, participatory public sculpture. If there is an author of this large-scale project it is the founder, Rick Lowe, who often invokes Joseph Beuys's notion of social sculpture and his idea that every person is an artist. Participants in Project Row Houses range from the staff to the resident mothers to architecture students and planners to the visitors who daily engage the social setting to the exhibiting artists who create works within the overall artwork. These participants come from a variety of social and economic sectors and from across the region and around the United States. Rhetoric around the project is unapologetically idealistic, instrumental, and activist—the project is meant to make a positive difference in people's lives. This sort of project is referred to as socially engaged, interventionist, or activist participatory art.

When "Tatlin's Whisper #5" (2008) by the Cuban-born artist Tania Bruguera is on view, visitors arrive at the Great Hall of the Tate Modern in London only to encounter two mounted policemen directing the audience around the space. Using the skills they acquired as mounted officers, they move the crowd from one side to another, clearing certain areas or pathways although with no specific crowd control goals to be accomplished. While visitors at the Tate have certainly entered the space anticipating an art experience, "Tatlin's Whisper" is not clearly announced as a performance nor, once the audience is under the policemen's

authority, can participation be said to be voluntary. One simply finds oneself being told where to go by an authority figure—a police officer on a powerful animal not usually encountered at a museum. This sort of project—experimenting with power relations, working with participants who have not necessarily agreed to the terms of engagement, seeking no apparent social good—could be characterized as an example of destabilizing, contradictory, and/or antagonistic participatory art. Claire Bishop is the most vocal advocate of this tougher, more confrontational version of participatory art. Indeed, an image of “Tatlin’s Whisper” graces the cover of Bishop’s 2012 book on participatory art, *Artificial Hells*.

So, in broad strokes, participatory art can be considered to fall into three categories: relational, activist, and antagonistic. But while the motivations in the three cases are quite different as are the means, all depend on participation. A painting alone in a gallery would still be a work of art. If Tiravanija prepared pad thai and no participants arrived at the gallery, however, there would be no artwork, and just so for Project Row Houses and “Tatlin’s Whisper.” In these projects, it is the social space, the interactive moment, that is the subject of aesthetic consideration, not the food, architecture, or equine choreography.

Participatory Art in the Mainstream.

In the United States and Europe, critical discussion of a range of art practices that are interactive and include non-artists in the creation of work, as exemplified by the three cases above, has been ongoing most especially since the late 1990s. While numerous important examples of participatory art took place in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, a major milestone in terms of public perception was a pair of projects in the early 1990s orchestrated by Mary Jane Jacob—first, “Places with a Past” in 1991 in Charleston, South Carolina, and then “Culture in Action” in 1992–1993 in Chicago, which truly brought participatory art into the mainstream. “Culture in Action” had a well-known museum curator (Jacob), a sizable budget, and was accompanied by a substantial publication. In the context of the project, Marc Dion collaborated with a group of teenagers on an urban ecology collective, Daniel Joseph Martinez orchestrated a multisite parade through communities in Chicago, and Suzanne Lacy worked with a coalition to recover and reinscribe the memory of notable Chicago women in the urban setting. The projects were interactive and there was a clear social agenda—including the direct participation of marginalized communities. There was an imperative to create art *with* (not about or for) people not included in traditional museum audiences. The idea was to build social bridges through art that embraced aesthetic interaction. One of the prominent critics of “Places with a Past” and “Culture in Action” was Miwon Kwon. Her complaint,

first expressed in *October* magazine in 1997 and eventually published in her book on site-specific art in 2002, was multifaceted: that the cultural action undertaken in Jacobs's projects could be used for urban boosterism, that the voice of the community could be appropriated by itinerant artists in the name of inclusive participation, and that the curator had overdetermined the sort of social partnerships that were appropriate (Kwon, 2002). This argument between those committed to direct social action, on the one hand, and critics suspicious of the social efficacy and aesthetic complexity of participatory art, on the other, has continued to play out since that time.

Around the same time in Europe, participatory practices were also bubbling to the surface. Most famously in France, in 1996, the curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud mounted "Traffic" at the contemporary art museum in Bordeaux. His formulation, that there could be an aesthetics of human interaction, rippled through the European art world and made landfall in the United States upon its translation in 2002. In the 1990s and 2000s important examples of participatory art were beginning to gain recognition and funding across the globe, including Ik-Joong Kang's collaborations with children in South Korea, Najot Altaf's water projects in India, Pawel Althamer's cooperative projects in his housing estate in Poland, and Tania Bruguera's experimental school in Cuba.

This is not to say that an international embrace of participatory art ensued. In the late 1990s the mainstream press was cautious to even consider the process of participation as art. In 1997 the *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith reviewed "Uncommon Sense," a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (which this author co-curated with Julie Lazar) that included projects by participatory art veterans, including Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Mel Chin, and Rick Lowe, and participatory theater/performance artists such as Cornerstone Theater and Ann Carleson. To Smith, much of what she saw was not art. She wrote of the show that there was "nary an artwork in sight," and that "nothing changes a museum more quickly than removing art from it" (*New York Times*, 11 May 1997). She was particularly dismayed by the amateur creation of participants in the projects, such as the fire fighters who had worked on Mierle Laderman Ukeles's installation. In many of these projects, Smith correctly noted, the participatory moment had taken place prior to the exhibition's opening, so the museum audience was excluded from the most interesting and engaging element of the works. So from the beginning of the surge in interest in participatory art, skeptics of the social value of the practice, as well as critics who doubted its status as art, could be found.

But perhaps the clearest debate regarding participatory art has played out

between the art historians Claire Bishop and Grant Kester. Since a well-read exchange on the topic in 2006, Kester and Bishop have come to embody two sides of the debate—Bishop calling for a critical, problematizing art of negation and Kester looking for affirmative models of communication in dialogic art. This debate coincided with a burst of mainstream attention. “Social Practice” programs, often teaching the intricacies of participatory art, sprung up in graduate Master of Fine Arts programs. In 2008 the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art mounted “The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now.” In 2009 New York’s Guggenheim Museum presented “theanyspacewhatever,” which reunited the artists from Bourriaud’s “Traffic.” Though these shows did not garner positive press across the board, few questioned the aesthetic status of the works in them. Over the last decade, it has become commonplace to understand participatory moments as art. Art can now be a meal, a free school, an immigrant services community center, a dance party, or a collectively designed park.

Agreeing on the possibilities of participation as art is one thing. Agreeing on aesthetic criteria, however, remains particularly difficult in the light of the diversity of practices and the fact that the aesthetic, ethical, and social values can be diametrically opposed. While one artist or critic might seek healing through participation, another might valorize rupture. Some see political potential in artistic social action; others see the likelihood of the cooptation of artists and communities. But perhaps the most fundamental questions arising from participatory art revolve around authorship and use.

In the visual arts, authorship has important implications, perhaps most obviously in the economic sphere. A painting has only a fraction of the value it would otherwise possess if it fails to be authenticated as a Cézanne or a Rembrandt. There are art historical implications as well. Critics are used to writing about a body of work by an artist. Audiences are interested in who a work is “by.” So, making art through participation and ascribing authorship to a group—especially a group of nonprofessional artists—has created difficult issues of authorship and interpretation. Artists and critics invested in this art form often contend that a social and aesthetic value exists in creating a participatory process that moves away from the individualistic model to a more socially horizontal structure. They sometimes argue as well that non-artists have perceptions, local knowledge, professional expertise, or visual ideas that are unique and unattainable without their participation. Furthermore, participation does not necessarily erase authorship. While public participation is required to activate “Tatlin’s Whisper #5,” the author remains Tania Bruguera, and, in fact, the Tate Modern has acquired the piece for their collection in the form of a set of instructions of the interactive experience. Project Row Houses,

on the other hand, is not available for sale. Its bureaucratic structure is that of a tax-exempt nonprofit. There is an acknowledged author, Rick Lowe, but there is a bit more distance between Lowe and individual authorship. The project's website and printed literature do not refer to Project Row Houses as being "by" Lowe as much as critics may do so. Still, across the field of participatory art, most well-known projects are identified with an artist who has orchestrated the interaction and initiated the participation. So the claims of horizontal structure and participatory decision making are often made in a zone of contention.

Perhaps more contentious than the arguments around authorship are those about the use of participatory art projects, particularly the relational and activist projects that are often accompanied by declarations of social gain. Authors such as Hal Foster have questioned the social claims of relational aesthetics while the aforementioned Miwon Kwon and Claire Bishop have interrogated the politics of participation. Some artists, such as like Thomas Hirschorn from Switzerland, are careful not to make any social claims for their art, though participants in his work often make the case for the positive value in their community. But many others, from Rick Lowe to Tania Bruguera, look unapologetically to the notion of social usefulness. The debate around use often manifests itself in two questions: If a project takes the form of a useful social service such as a center for immigrant rights or a safe haven for sex workers, what is the value of calling it art? And, if the aspiration of a participatory art project is social good, should it be judged on the basis of instrumental results without reference to what is traditionally considered aesthetic value? A variety of answers to the first question ranging from the bureaucratic to the psychological can be given. Simply put, it can be useful for an artist to call a project art in order to gather resources. Project Row Houses received its first funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, an agency that recognized the potential value of the arts intervening in a distressed neighborhood. It was only later that the project was able to garner urban development funding, having built a foundation through the arts. Second, if Project Row Houses had been framed as a social services initiative, it would have joined a number of other similar organizations and agencies in the third ward of Houston. There is a very different psychological frame if a community member says, "I am participating in an experimental art project" than if that member were to say, "I am receiving social services," even if the activity (housing, education, gardening) seems exactly the same. The goals of social participation and community creativity can be reached more efficiently by calling certain projects art and, instead of passive recipients of service, working with a group of active participants. And finally, the question of evaluation hovers over the field of participatory art with no clear set of criteria in place. Many artists resist the simple math of calculating the social utility of social art. Even proponents of activist, socially motivated

participatory art, such as Grant Kester, point more to the quality of the interaction and dialogue than to simple social usefulness.

Discussion of participatory art seems to be in its infancy. A new crop of books, shows, funding opportunities, and debates has appeared since 2000. But a field that includes both a neighborhood in Houston and a meal in a gallery in New York seems ripe for further classification.

[See also [Beuys, Joseph](#); [Collectivism](#); [Dialogical Art](#); [Politics](#); [Public Art](#); and [Relational Aesthetics](#).]

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