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Artificial Hells

A Conversation with Claire Bishop

Madeline Eschenburg

Abstract

Claire Bishop answers questions about some of the arguments put forth in her recent book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*.

About the Author

Claire Bishop has been a professor of contemporary art in the History of Art Department at CUNY Graduate Center, New York since 2008. She has previously taught at Warwick University and the Royal College of Art. She is editor of the volumnes Participation *(2006) and* Installation Art: A Critical History *(2005). In 2008 she co-curated the exhibition* Double Agent *with Mark Sladen. Her 2004 essay "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," published in* October *was a pivotal initiation of the critique of relational aesthetics.*

Madeline Eschenburg is a Ph.D. student at the University of Pittsburgh. Her primary research focus is the history of collaborative art in China in the last three decades and its historical precedence. She is a co-editor-in-chief of the journal Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture.

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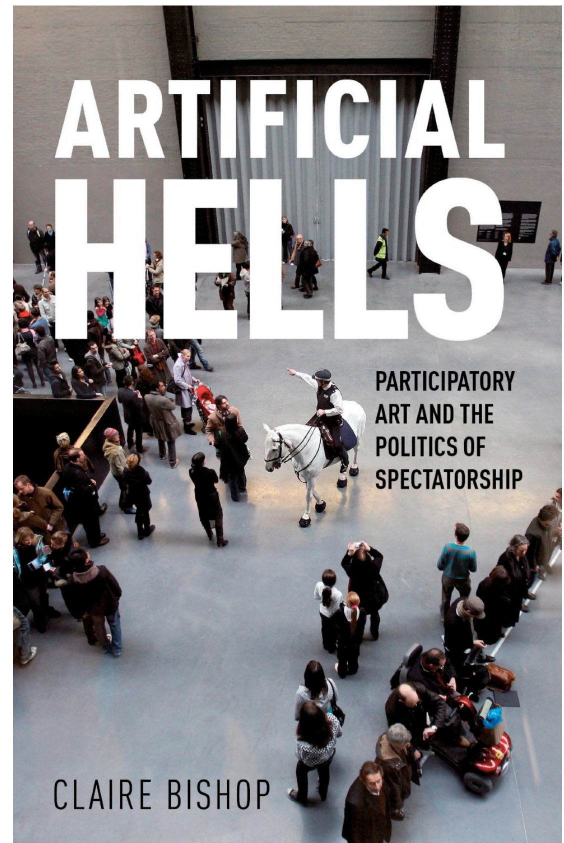

Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship (London: Verso, 2012) by Claire Bishop is an insightful exploration of the history of participatory and socially engaged art and its current manifestations. More than merely descriptive, Bishop takes to task the major theorists of this topic (particularly Grant Kester and Nicolas Bourriaud) for their general failure to critique participatory art along artistic and aesthetic terms, in favor of assessing its ethical efficacy. For Bishop, this lack of criticality is a direct descendent of the silence of art critics in regards to community art, particularly visible in Britain in the 1970s. Due to biases of sponsoring organizations, art that was created in collaboration with and often for the benefit of marginalized groups of non-artists did not receive continued support based on standards of artistic quality. Rather, it was evaluated based on ethical criterion. Drawing from Rancière's notion of aesthesis ("an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality"), Bishop argues that not taking into account the aesthetic elements of these projects is tantamount to maintaining, rather than rupturing the status quo that these projects claim to challenge.[1] The autonomous state of aesthesis allows for freedom of interpretation and response on the part of the viewer, which for Bishop, via Rancière, is always in itself political and open-ended. Earlier this year, Bishop kindly took time to answer a few questions about *Artificial Hells* for *Contemporaneity*. The questions follow the thematic sequence of production, temporality, the Western/non-Western binary, the USA, and her critical engagement with Rancière.

[1] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London, New York: Verso, 2012), 18.

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Madeline Eschenburg: You frame the politics of participatory art largely in terms of spectatorship, as is of course appropriate, but is there a specific politics of production in play in such work? A related question would be: what relationship does the production of artistic participation have to its subsequent reception?

Claire Bishop: Obviously production (and an ethics of production) has been central to the discourse on socially engaged art to date. But this is precisely the framework I've been trying to break with—or at least, to drag back to a consideration of aesthetics and its relationship to politics. To do this I've been asking questions that don't deal solely with process and instead address what the viewer sees, experiences and understands when looking at social practice. If an artists' process (production) isn't visible in the work, or legible to the viewer, then does it matter? Does the recipe affect the meaning of the work? Or are we paying too much attention to process at the expense of considering a project's larger cultural meaning? In my view there is no point celebrating an "ethical" working process as a goal in itself. The overall meaning of the work has to be more complex than a mere celebration of how a work was implemented.

ME: As the focus of our journal is contemporaneity—the complexities of how the multiplicity of ways of being in time find visual form—I wonder if you could speak briefly to the question of temporality? The focus of *Artificial Hells* is clearly on the political, but you allude to questions of temporality on several occasions. I was wondering if you could speak to how you see the relationship between time and the politics of spectatorship, particularly as the temporal nature (either on-going or ephemeral) of these participatory events is frequently cited as a key part of their political charges. Does persistence beyond the initial time of the event guarantee any kind of effectiveness?

CB: I guess the chapter that brings up questions of temporality most obviously is the one dealing with exhibitions in the early nineties, which focuses on the curatorial struggle to reconcile the expanded time-frame of participatory/socially-engaged projects with the conventional temporality of the exhibition, where work is presented in a more or less "final" mode. This struggle leads to a flurry of experimentation with "performative" exhibitions, which attempt to make the time of the exhibition and the catalogue adequate to the expanded temporal production of the art project.

Participatory art in general has always prioritized experiential immediacy, and its more activist variants have rarely considered how and why one might also consider the transmission of these works to a secondary audience; demonstrable impact in the here and now is invariably seen as more important. I think my position has been fairly clear that in the more interesting projects, there is always some kind of "take home" experience for the secondary viewer (i.e. those of us who weren't there, who look at projects after they have ended). This is not a question of making nice "documentation" for the work (there is a common perception that I am someone who always insists upon documentation) but rather, enabling adequate modes of communication—be this video, exhibition, narrative, text anthologies or re-performance—that allow subsequent viewers to experience and engage with the ideas that these projects put forward.

Efficacity is a perennially thorny issue, and one that we have to address carefully. Debates around efficacy tend to refer to demonstrable outcomes, rather than being understood as part of a work's aesthetic conception. But my point of view is that there is no guaranteed recipe for a good work of art, and duration ultimately has very little to do with efficacy. A short sharp intervention can have more aesthetic and political potency than years of collaborative fieldwork.

ME: Your focus in this book is primarily on Western examples of participatory art. In keeping with the theme of our journal, *Contemporaneity*, we must acknowledge that Western participatory art can only be truly explained within or against the other contexts in which participatory art emerges. This is particularly relevant when discussing a cross-cultural phenomenon such as performance art, Fluxus, and certain kinds of conceptualism. How might non-Western participatory art be integrated into your chosen artistic and theoretical purview?

CB: I find it interesting that you read the book as Western-centric; I thought I was making a point of excluding the US and including examples from Eastern Europe, Russia and South America that have been overlooked in Western art histories. That said, I did research some examples from Asia—such as Chiang Mai Social Installation in Thailand, or the Long March Foundation in Beijing—but rapidly concluded that it made no sense to include practices that spring from entirely different artistic traditions. As I state in the introduction, my focus is on the legacy of the historic avant-garde, and its dispersal (via the 1960s neo-avant-garde) into Eastern Europe and South America. From an academic perspective, I already feel I am breaking certain rules by not having the language skills to do original research in Russia, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Argentina, let alone adding Asian countries into the mix! I am also skeptical of "the world is my oyster" approach, in which authors attempt to gain an omniscient overview of practice globally. I prefer to be led by compelling problems in particular contexts, trying to understand them in depth, rather than giving everywhere a dutiful glance. If the results are a little random then so be it. The point is not a global survey but to demonstrate the different uses and political resonances of participatory art in different ideological contexts—with the goal of viewing the practices of our own day in a more critical light.

ME: You advance the idea that participatory art emerges in moments of political upheaval (1917, 1968, etc). You are pointed in not referring to the United States. But it seems that your conclusion could, with some consideration, be applied to the US, not so much directly at the service of the government, but certainly at the service of the broader ideology of neo-liberalism that dominates US political discourse. I wonder if you could speak to the differences in these regards between Europe and the US as you see it?

CB: The instigation for the book was the particular political context of Northern Europe in the 2000s, pre-crash, in which neoliberal cultural funding policies began to use art as a way to reinforce social inclusion agendas that were simultaneously being undermined by the privatization of education and healthcare. Among the privileged genres in this panorama of public funding were participatory art and theatre. Given that the US has barely any public funding to speak of (institutions rely upon private foundations and philanthropy more than they do upon the NEA, especially after the controversies of the late 1980s), participatory art has a different relationship to the political. Here in the US, social practice has evolved as a compensatory sphere for what are perceived to be endemic social injustices; it has a very clear artistic lineage going back to New Genre Public Art, which incidentally emerged around the same time as the NEA controversies. Where federal agencies have no interest in stepping in, artists mobilize their cultural capital and ingenuity to bring about small scale, localized ameliorations. The difference between the US and Europe is that in Europe, governments will support this work if it produces enough media attention (see for example the Cultural Olympiad in the UK, leading up to the 2012 Olympics). That said, with the recent turn to the right in Europe we are facing a situation more comparable to that in the US: conservative governments no longer want to recognize the creative industries as an economic generator, and in an age of austerity, culture is perceived as a luxury for the rich rather than as a basic right. Many European countries don't have tax breaks for culture and lack a tradition of philanthropy, so the situation will probably get worse before it gets better.

ME: You find Rancière's work quite theoretically productive, particularly used in conjunction with Lacan. Could you speak to your particular interpretation of Rancière; what did he provide you that no one else could, and what did you think were the limits of his thinking for your purposes?

CB: Yes Rancière hit me with a force of revelation when I read his essay "The Emancipated Spectator" around 2005. It expressed so much of what I wanted to say, and so clearly. I then devoured pretty much everything he wrote from the 1970s onwards. If I encounter limitations with his work, it lies in the difference in our roles: I am a critic/historian and he is a philosopher. He doesn't need—or have—to give artistic judgments. This means that Rancière is not a great deal of help if one wants to find a formula by which to defend or support a certain aesthetic position. His "politics of aesthetics" leaves one without a critical safety net: each individual instance must be considered in the context of the dominant forms of power in its own time and place. As a result, there can be no privileged medium. So at a certain point, as a critic, one necessarily has to leave Rancière—because he provides you with a map but no direction. However, this does mean that a certain freedom ensues, critically and historically. Some art historians (like Hal Foster) have expressed skepticism towards this approach and consider Rancière's writing to signal the end of criticality, but I disagree. Rancière knows that critical paradigms are context-specific, and thus allow us to decide what does or doesn't constitute a critical practice (if indeed criticality is what is called for) at any given historical moment.

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