A Long Walk to the Land of the People: Contemporary Art in the Specter of Spectatorship

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> Who is this Spectator, also called the Viewer, sometimes called the Observer, occasionally the Perceiver? It has no face, is mostly a back. It stoops and peers, is slightly clumsy. Its attitude is enquiring, its puzzlement discreet. He – I'm sure it is more male than female – arrived with modernism, with the disappearance of perspective. He seems born out of the picture and, like some perpetual Adam, is drawn back repeatedly to contemplate it. The Spectator seems a little dumb; he is not you or me. Always on call, he staggers into place before every new work that requires his presence. This obliging stand-in is ready to enact our fanciest speculations.
> –Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 1976.[1]

> A kind of chicken-and-egg circularity confronts us in the idea of a public. Could anyone speak publicly without addressing a public? But how can this public exist before being addressed? What would a public be if no one were addressing it? Can a public really exist apart from the rhetoric through which it is imagined? If you were to put down this essay and turn on the television, would my public be different? How can the existence of a public depend, from one point of view, on the rhetorical address, and from another point of view, on the real context of reception?
> –Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 2002.[2]

Writing 25 years apart, but on either side of what can be termed contemporary art, art critic Brian O'Doherty and social theorist Michael Warner write from not only two different positions, but posit two different sets of questions that are nonetheless related. In O'Doherty's famous musings on the establishment of the white cube as the primary exhibition model, it is a question of identity and ideality, of trying to understand how the abstract figure of the spectator can be made more concrete both in terms of art theory and artistic practice during a specific period of breakthrough and rupture. In Warner's account of the production of a public as both abstract and concrete, the question becomes one of identification: how is the viewer or public identified through theory and actual modes of public address, and in turn, identifies herself with this public, a community or citizenry? Both of these queries around identity and identification are useful in reflecting on the figure of the spectator or addressee in contemporary art and politics, as is, crucially, the relation and movement between them. They are not simply points in a double bind, but also forms of a particular connection that defines them and their relation in what can be called a modern fable, or history, of the spectator and

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[1] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986), p. 39.
[2] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 67.

spectatorship in art. As such, these two terms are bound up with moments and elements outside of themselves, namely, the circumscriptions of spectatorship within culture in general, including mass media and mass-movements (of identification).

In what follows, I shall attempt to untangle some of these relations through a dual focus on both critical theory and artistic practice, since this is an oscillation that I find to be particular to the period discussed—the postmodern—where theory and practice often address the same problematic, informing as much as illustrating each other. This was a moment when theory in modern art took on the productive form of the manifesto, projecting into an immediate future, and where ideas were literally to become manifest through aesthetic productions following the plans laid out by the project, such as in the case of the Surrealist and Futurist manifestos, both of which were written, crucially, *before* there was any practice of that name. Thinking and doing in postmodern art were often simultaneously in dialogue and in conflict, and this is no more evident than in the writings of O'Doherty, who in the 1960s held the curious double position of both an artist involved in post-minimal sculpture and conceptual art as well a critic and chronicler of the scene. While they qualify as art criticism, his essays on the white cube also very clearly spring from practice itself, and thus deal practically with the problems of the white cube and its circumscription of subjects and objects.

The Hovering Eye

In his analysis of the advent and eventual hegemony of the white cube as exhibitionary model, O'Doherty also describes the appearance of a specific figure: the *Spectator* (or *Viewer*), who experiences art in all its forms, and is constantly contested and challenged—even humiliated—by the works themselves. But the Spectator is also a wholly fictitious entity—somehow present, if not always welcome—in the perfect hanging or installation of the work in the pristine white cube. As a result, the Spectator must be detached from his body, and thus from his history and sociality, becoming merely an abstract, hovering act of looking—what O'Doherty calls simply "the Eye"— which becomes a stand-in for the troublesome body. In this way, the spectator is comprised of "two opposite forces: the fragmentation of the self and the illusion of holding it together."[3] This non-corporeal Eye is the ideal perceiver and receiver of art, rather than the physical Spectator, who not only experiences the work, but also stands in front of it, preventing optimal visibility. As O'Doherty wryly comments, it is only the

[3] O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, p. 61.

Eye—never the Spectator—who inhabits what he calls "the sanitized installation shot."[4]

However, it was exactly this high modernist notion of spectatorship that artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s tried to dismantle with their focus on the bodily presence and experience of the viewer, an artistic critique that O'Doherty in turn based his critique upon. Although the art of this period can be said to be concerned with the art object and its dematerialization, to paraphrase art critic Lucy Lippard, it could just as well be discussed in terms of its placement of the spectator at the center of the work. This observation finds its most visible contours in the shift from minimalist sculpture to installation, with the proliferation of didactic and programmatic installations such as Bruce Nauman's *Corridor Installation* (1970), Robert Morris's *Untitled (Labyrinth)* (1974), and Dan Graham's *Time Delay Room* (1974). In all of these works and others like them, there is no seeing without movement, no experiencing the work without a physical interaction in the form of walking through it. The experience here becomes one of participation and presence, which were precisely the issues at the heart of art historian Michael Fried's (in)famous critique of minimalist sculpture, dismissed by Fried as "theatrical."[5] For Fried, the problem with this otherwise fairly formal work was its foregrounding of the body, or, if you will, the spectator. In opposition to all of this unwanted bodily presence, Fried suggested the mysterious term "presentness," which corresponds very closely indeed to O'Doherty's Eye. The reason, interestingly enough, was one of ethics, if not politics: Fried was objecting art's participation in the "corrupted or perverted" sensibility of theater that had become all pervasive—a "virtual universality."[6]

It suffices to say that Fried lost the historical argument in favor of presentness, the Eye, to the camp of presence and physicality—or *sociality*—of the spectator, as demonstrated by minimalists and post-minimalists, and to which the subsequent art-historical consecration of figures like Graham, Nauman, and Morris further attests. O'Doherty, however, focuses on two particular developments after minimalism that amounted to a literal and radical transformation of the position and production of the Spectator: Conceptualism and Body Art, both of which he calls "extreme cases."[7] Conceptual art, according to O'Doherty, eliminates the Eye by forcing the audience to *read* rather than to

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[4] Ibid., p. 42.
[5] See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" [1967], in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).
[6] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," p. 147.
[7] O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, p. 64.

see, while Body Art—or performance—is about the punishment or destruction of the Spectator by conflating the body of the viewer with that of the artist, and both of them with art itself. In both of these efforts, there is a transformation of the role of the viewer at play, one that removes emphasis from pictorial perception towards bodily experience. Through this shift from the centrality of the artist and the object to the experience of the viewer, the viewer comes, however slowly, into focus and begins to be identified. This is not necessarily a new theme for (modern) art, but certainly a new mode of address in the form of exhibition-making, with a gradual movement from the enclosed space of painting into the expanded field of installation. Moreover, with the arrival of the installation, the exhibition itself became a primary medium before and above the single art object, and the emergence of the hitherto invisible spectator signaled the advent of the curatorial.

The Death of the Author and the Birth of the Viewer

This new attitude towards viewership can perhaps better be understood in the terms of literary theorist and critic Roland Barthes's essay, "The Death of the Author," first published in 1967 in an edited volume of the journal *Aspen* and edited by none other than Brian O'Doherty, who placed the text alongside contributions by artists such as Graham, Mel Bochner, John Cage, and Sol Lewitt, among others.[8] Although Barthes was concerned with literature and the act of reading specifically, the essay was deeply influential for visual artists, especially those from the post-minimalist environment. What struck a chord with them was surely Barthes's programmatic shift from the act of writing to the act of reading in the construction of meaning and flow and fixing of signs, ending with the immortal lines: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."[9] Indeed, the art historian Craig Owens would later summarize the art of the period under this theme, constructing syllabi under the neatly paraphrased heading "The Death of the Author / The Birth of the Viewer."[10] It is interesting to revisit Owens' lists, most of which were made in the mid-1980s, at approximately the same temporal remove from its topic as we are now from Owens' writings. His courses were taught in various formats, sometimes as one topic and other times as two, parceling out, as it were, death and birth. The "death list," here, is expanded beyond Barthes and minimalism to include appropriation art: it includes German Capitalist Realist artists,

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[9] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148.
[10] See Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 330–342.

Sherrie Levine, as well as a crucial injection of the feminist critique of the author function—the artist as male genius—stemming from art historian Griselda Pollock's contributions to the field. All of this, Owens simply, but crucially, defines as *postmodern art*.

The artists whose names appear in Owens's list are also accompanied by more media-orientated artists like Jack Goldstein and Richard Prince, and this expansion of the problematic can further be gauged from the extensive bibliography that not only relates to minimal art, but also to critical theory and film theory by the likes of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Raymond Bellour, Christian Metz, and Laura Mulvey. From all of this, we can see the emergence of not just a theme or genre, but a whole field of investigation that pertains to the position of the viewer—not only in aesthetic debates, but also in sociological and semiotic terms. In other words, spectatorship and the production of subjectivity unfolds through both art and theory, as well as is placed within a larger societal frame beyond the isolation of the white cube. Naturally, this context can be given a name, but before doing so, a few more aspects regarding the positioning and production of the spectator must be elaborated upon.

Now, as both O'Doherty and Owens have pointed out, the activation of the spectator and thus of viewing took on several artistic forms: the spectator as a reader in conceptualism, and the spectator as a body in performance art. Although O'Doherty saw these forms as radically different, they share several features, most notably in their mutual demand on the active participation of the viewer, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. But by introducing and privileging actual text, as in certain conceptual strategies, there are two potential breaks with the timeless contemplation of the white cube. On the one hand, time can be measured in terms of *reading time*, accompanied by the risk of the spectator consciously giving up experiencing the fullness of the work if she were to stop reading. On the other hand, visual pleasure or displeasure is decentered by the replacement of the act of viewing with reading, and presumably, of feeling with thinking. And furthermore, since a text-based work is always a statement in linguistic form, it is therefore closer to the notion of a debate, of agreeing or disagreeing with the statement, rather than the mere pleasure of the text, of language.

In performance art, such as that of Chris Burden, we are also dealing with a similar shift towards a culture of debate. By nature, such performances can be highly intrusive, almost violent, creating in effect aggressive and negative responses, and by extension,

an argument in that confrontational sense of the word. In both cases, contemplation is rejected in favor of debate, in favor of demanding a response, that the visitor to the gallery forms an opinion and takes a side. The exhibition space is also central for communication, even if—or perhaps precisely because—it employs forms of communication easily found elsewhere in society and culture. It is the gallery that guarantees works their status, but more importantly, it is the gallery that provides and *specifies* an audience, weaving them into a particular discourse. Where the work employs a specific mode of address, it is the gallery that is the "scene of address," to invoke theorist Judith Butler's recent term.[11] For Butler, the scene of address is both a moment and a place: the moment when speech is uttered, statements are made, and thus reflexivity is made possible, as well as the actual place or institutional form where this reflexivity can happen. As such, it is never neutral or innocent. On the contrary, the scene of address is the site where speech is not only presented, but also *demanded*, or violently extracted, as in philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogy, where self-reflection was also suffused with guilt, with interpellation from external authority and use of power. Although the modernist art object may have been undone, the quintessential modernist object that was the gallery space remained intact, and perhaps even more so.

Gendered Spaces and Spectators

By the early 1970s, such formal exercises as the corridors, labyrinths, and reading rooms were already seen as retrospective rather than forward-looking, with other ways of identifying and producing social forms outside of the white cube and the gallery system already in full-swing through the counter-culture and its dropping out of straight society, new feminist collective forms, and performative and participatory practices. If we stay within the United States context of post-minimalism, we find that the establishment of a feminist art class in California by Judy Chicago in 1970, as artist Faith Wilding notes, "contested the canons of modernism and Greenbergian formalism" and introduced "a rupture of the Euro-American male litany of artistic criteria, aesthetic value, and art-historical practices."[12] One of the outcomes of this class was the now-legendary 1972 exhibition *Womanhouse*, which took place in a domestic setting—an abandoned house in Los Angeles—rather than a gallery, so as to reflect female lived

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[11] See Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
[12] Faith Wilding, "The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970–1975," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Abrams, 1994), p. 32.

experience and history. *Womanhouse* departed from experiences and concerns that lay outside of the field of art, and in even further contrast to the contemporaneous male-led experiments inside of the white cube, the project was a collective rather than individual undertaking. We know from Owens's bibliography that feminism also played a significant role in the death of the author / viewer through its undoing of the genius of the male artist and, with it, the undoing of a certain way of looking. This is precisely what was at stake in *Womanhouse*: spectatorship became wholly dependent on a life-world previously excluded by the art sphere. The project revealed what the center that was the gallery space simply could not hold: the body that was concealed by the Eye was a gendered body, and its very concealment was ideological rather than practical in establishing a particular male gaze as the universal mode of looking at art. This seemingly simple identification of the spectator in gendered terms undermined the concept of a universal and unified viewer or spectator.

A projects such as *Womanhouse* can be seen as a forerunner to two subsequent models of exhibition-making as producing publics or spectatorship. As a collective undertaking that explored the position of women in the male-dominated art world and its spaces of viewing (i.e., the gallery), the space of the exhibition was transformed into a space of social and aesthetic investigation that reached far beyond the bodily presence of the viewer, functioning as a form of solidary, consciousness-raising community-building. *Womanhouse* also marked the beginning of what would later become known as the politically motivated "project exhibition" format of the 1990s, distinct from the thematic exhibition. As formulated by artist and writer Marion von Osten, the project exhibition is characterized by its collective and political production process, which entails addressing a problem and arriving at a critique of current situations. Furthermore, the project exhibition operates from a different understanding of the spectator: while it continues to follow the conceptualist strand of engaging the audience in debate, it simultaneously breaks with its sender-receiver model by building a constituency—a *group within the project itself*. This unarguably political grouping can thus continue to function in various configurations even after the event of the exhibition, extending its reach beyond the physical and discursive boundaries of the art institution. Within such groupings, the viewer is neither recipient nor reader, but (co-)producer, and thus active in terms of political agency as well as cultural production.

The collective production of art, debate, and agency in *Womanhouse* can also be viewed in terms of another form of world-making and subject production that would

subsequently play an enormous role on the US West Coast and become imported to other (primarily European) regions. I am mainly referring here to the notion of community art, historically trading under the slightly unwieldy moniker of "new genre public art" coined by the artist Suzanne Lacy, who herself emerged through the Southern California feminist art circles.[13] Although the themes explored by *Womanhouse* are universally applicable, the project nonetheless points to specific female experiences, and thus addresses or produces a particular community with shared political and aesthetical goals. While this community may not be politically coherent and differences and conflicts in terms of culture, class, and ethnicity will admittedly still remain, they can nonetheless be negotiated and placed in a dialogue or comparison through the shared identity or multiplicity of women's history, femininity, and feminism. As a community, participants at once transgress and upset these borders and delimitations, producing instead a commonality through gender and identity. In many ways, this double movement of identity and identification is the central contradiction and dynamic driving force of all community art, which always oscillates between addressing a (perceived) pre-existing communal entity and producing a community, whether consciously or unconsciously, known or unknown, and (potentially) new. And it is around this double of existant and emerging, and thus around the ideas of producing a community—whether aesthetically, or politically, or both—that the central debates on community art revolve.

Participatory Aesthetics

If a community can be identified, it can also be addressed; as purely special, as typical, or as having universal(izing) qualities. An artist or cultural institution can then focus on this specific community by representing, provoking, or accommodating it. The shift from the ideology of the white cube and its hidden universality towards identifiable communities outside of the traditional space of art owes in part to an acknowledgement of a particular social and aesthetic lack. Where the work had before been conditioned on a specific site or space, it now became directed towards a certain group or constituency. The neutrality of the gallery space was viewed as false and as socially tilted towards a certain group—the upper classes—and their cultural rule and political hegemony, with other social groups regarded as un- or underrepresented, and therefore powerless. Working with and in the community was thus seen as a path toward empowerment, of allowing for cultural recognition and subsequent political access and power. However,

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[13] See Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

this movement assumed that the excluded communities already existed, and furthermore, that they could be identified and thereby represented. This idea has since been heavily criticized (if not wholly discredited) on two major points that both have to do, in my mind, with the mode of address employed by the particular community project, and how it can be said to not represent and visualize the community, but rather *produces* the community as a particular identity.

The construction of the identity of a community through identification is at the crux of art historian and curator Miwon Kwon's critique of community-based art, in which she calls out its "*idealized specter* of community."[14] This fixing of identity partly overshadows any inherent conflicts and differences within the community, by claiming innate unity or universality and, moreover, tends towards an essentializing and typecasting of the community, if not downright victimization and stigmatization of the particular group. As Kwon writes, "[i]t has become commonplace in public art to cast the community as the victimized yet resilient other that continuously tests the stability of prevailing sociopolitical and economic conditions."[15] In lieu of this production of the community, however participatory and self-representing, Kwon suggests "unsiting" the very idea of a coherent (political) community through a process of reflection in regards to the governmentality implied in the endeavor of community art. Interestingly, this governmentality is located not in the artistic process for Kwon, but primarily in the commissioning and funding bodies; that is, in an institutional intervention, requiring thus an artistic and political response in the form of institutional critique.

An opposite view is held by art historian Grant Kester, who was initially a critic of community art but later became its champion. In his linkage of community with *communicability*, Kester understood that communication needs not only a sender and a receiver, but that this relation must be inscribed in a social bond of recognition (in contrast to Kwon's focus on misrecognition). For Kester, the main critical difference does not reside between community art and reflexive art practices such as institutional critique, but rather, between different forms of community and the ways in which art engages them. Community art might indeed be misrepresentative as Kwon fundamentally sees it as, but it can also be truly dialogical—it cannot only detract from, but also add to the identity of the community—translating thus quite literally into

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[14] Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2004), p. 149.
[15] Ibid., p. 147.

community-building. The distinction is one between politically coherent and incoherent communities, with the former understood as one that is self-instituted and therefore politically engaged around certain social issues and questions of identity, and the latter established and designated through outside artistic intervention and/or institutional inscription. Whereas the first approach makes political representation through artistic modes of participation possible and valuable, in the second category artistic representations of politically incoherent communities are always forms of ethical and epistemological violation, forms of misrecognition. This is, in Kester's words, about the "difference between *naming* and being *named*, and the profoundly different forms of political agency that each of these actions represents."[16] Regardless of whether one agrees with Kester's separation between coherent and incoherent communities (and the pragmatist politics it implies), the question in relation to artistic production as a mode of address remains whether any similar distinction can be made between naming and being named. What is representation, after all, if not the double bind between naming and being named, a constant oscillation between activation and pacification?

In community art, there is rarely an object or image or exhibition, but rather: 1) an event or 2) a spatial formation, such as platforms, playgrounds, teahouses, bookshops, and so forth. If the project does center around an object (e.g., a table), the object merely functions as an instrument to instigate conversation, as Kester notes, or to facilitate a situation of an exchange, following Ted Purves's observations that draw upon theories of the gift economy.[17] The critical measure of community projects has often thus been one of temporality rather than visuality, with the time spent on the project and in the community as indicator of its seriousness, effectiveness, and indeed, quality. This is a far cry from the high modernist criteria of "timelessness" as a measure of quality, as purported by the work's "transcendence" of time, as well as in the sense that no one was able to say exactly how long one should look at an abstract painting, since such a measuring would be a vulgar denigration of its very mode of address and ontological being. Conversely, the "good" community artist will assure you that they have actually spent a considerable amount of time on the project, perhaps even years, But the irony is that this marker of time is no less measurable or provable than modernist timelessness; in either case, you will simply have to take the artist's word for it, which by definition

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[16] Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 162 (italics mine).
[17] See Ted Purves, *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

places the viewer into a relation of blind faith or pure belief in artistic intentionality and authenticity. More often in community practices, however, contemplation and viewing are replaced with another form of reception: talking, dialogue, and participation—all requiring an active uptake of the proposition through discussion, as in the democratic tradition of town hall meetings and community organizing. Such works are always therefore localized and must be read in terms of their localizations, regardless of how universal their conceptions and claims for community and commonality may be.

Community Art and Social Outreach

The issue of localization has crucial bearings on the exportation of historical community art projects into the outreach programs of contemporary institutions in other parts of the world. Seen in this light, community art appears to be not so much in contrast to institutional critique as it seems parallel to it. Both were skeptical of the museum's production of a bourgeois subject of reason through abstraction, and instead inserted the social—either in the form of actual people or institutional policies and economics—and both were imported in subsequent decades, mainly to Europe. But in the case of community art, this transposition too often occurs without the specific localization that addresses the particular public and political formation of its new site, with its own modes of producing publics and political subjects. Indeed, the function—and undoubtedly, the very definition—of community is different for each society as well as even within the same group. For example, in a nation like the US, where there is no state to support you socially or financially, the notion of community attains particular urgency and meaning and becomes crucial for survival. The situation has principally been quite different, however, in Europe—both in the former East *and* West—where community-building was not so much an alternative to the state or its lack, but rather a force that was mobilized in opposition to the state. In the West, community-building usually took on more conservative forms, as in religious communities and the conservation of traditional values and family structures that resisted modernity and the egalitarian claims of social democracy. In the East, communities were produced outside of the Communist state in the form of dissident milieus (it should be noted here that the anti-Communist, neo-religious invocation of community only gained momentum after the fall of Communism). These models of community art-outreach were thus radically different from what is now trading under that name, and we need not even refer to the obvious but severed historical connection to Russian constructivism, and can instead

turn to two examples that were contemporaneous with the US West Coast model of the 1970s.

These models of bringing art directly to the people always operated in intimate spaces of experience—namely, the spaces of everyday life and work—as these were regarded as spaces decisively operating outside of the art institution. Such efforts took on many forms in various European contexts, and while they cannot all be mentioned or mapped out here, they can be synthesized into two major ideas: 1) that of literally bringing art to where the people can be found, and 2) that of empowering the people as innate creators, even artists. A prime example of the first tendency can be found in the Artist Placement Group (APG) in the United Kingdom, established in 1966, which tried to bring artworks into the workplaces of common men and women. In the second movement, we might locate the efforts of the widespread, state-funded amateur film movement in Poland during the 1950s-1970s, recently excavated by the artists Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska. Whereas the latter effort can be seen as a fulfillment of a certain Communist ideal of equality, and thus something quite different from artist Joseph Beuys's famous polemical claim of everybody being an artist, it is equally striking how APG is part and parcel of a now also defunct political ideal—that of social democracy. Surely, the willingness of both state and various companies and factories to house the experiments of APG could only have taken place at a time when businesses were not only held accountable for profit maximizations, but also for their working conditions and care for employees, thanks to the formation of strong labor unions in a state that still believed, however vaguely, in some sort of economic redistribution and social justice.

This allows us to see the import in the last few decades of US West Coast-style community art into Europe in a new light. We might see it as a sort of anomaly, since community art produces and facilitates communities where it should really not be necessary to do so, having taken on the role of public policy that should instead be the responsibility of the state. It is a situation in which artists take on the duties of the state, and as such, community art becomes perhaps even more of a "state art" than Social Realism or abstract public sculpture ever were. In taking on the role of the state, such projects risk devolving into a highly authoritative tone, despite their intended openness and democratizing mission. It is therefore no surprise that community art has been so successful and institutionalized—especially in the UK, precisely at the time of the waning of the social welfare state, following Margaret Thatcher's government and New Labour—in contexts where culture suddenly has to perform the work that social

services should impart. Community art (specifically the US model) can now be mobilized by a state in order to do what the state no longer wishes to provide—i.e., skills of empowerment, welfare, and even cultural education.

Communities as Commodities

This appeal to community in art has striking parallels in how larger art institutions today cater to their audiences: through social mapping, and thus social fixing, as in educational departments and so-called outreach programs. How, then, have state institutions—and here I am thinking specifically of art museums—responded to institutional critique, the call for communities outside of bourgeois spaces of edification, and the structural transformations of the welfare-state itself? Moreover, how has this affected institutional modes of address, with the traditional production of a subject of reason and a national citizen having come under critique, deconstructed and threatened by both the left and right? Partly they have done so through outreach, obviously, but also through a different understanding of how the public is situated—and, more crucially, *activated*—in the museum. In a manner similar to the tendency towards participation in community art practices, museums are no longer happy with passive modes of viewing, and try instead to engage visitors, even if along drastically different lines. The mode of address here is one of *inter*-action, of literally allowing the visitor to interact with art through various technological gadgets—from audio tours, touch screens, to cell phone codes, and so on—but also more structurally in terms of the museum as entertainment complex, where gift shops, cafes, and restaurants are equally central to the overall experience economy of contemporary institutions as places of consumption. Art and its viewing is something to be consumed, and social engagement takes place not through any gift economy, but through the commodification of culture, whether in the form of the exhibition as a pallatable good or through the actual purchase of goods. What the models of entertainment and consumption share with the models of engagement and participation is the underlying assumption that viewing in itself is passive, and therefore neither desirable nor sufficient socially, economically, and politically.

It should come as no surprise, then, that this commercial mode has—in tandem with community-directed outreach—become the dominant model of audience interaction within the current neoliberal hegemony, wherein audience is understood primarily in terms of numbers. As an ideology of financialization, neoliberalism sees audiences not in

terms of a public, or even a community for that matter, but solely in terms of counting and accounting. Indeed, the main demand placed on art institutions today is that they not only sustain audience numbers, but constantly strive to increase them. The art institution is thus understood as merely one among many sites of leisure and infotainment (as much as enlightenment), and must try to increase its audience count through blockbuster exhibitions, further transforming the traditional bourgeois public sphere of the museum into an entertainment complex. Implied in this transformation is the assumption that the spectator is fully immersed in capital, not unlike Guy Debord's speculations on the form of capital becoming an image in *The Society of the Spectacle*. It is interesting to note that Debord's treatise on the spectacle—perhaps the most radical critique of spectatorship ever written—was published at the beginning of the period we now call "contemporary art," and his observations still cast a specter over artistic production today, whether in the way we look at image culture, or in the subsequent demand for inclusive participation and advent of relational aesthetics. For Debord, there was only one possible political response, a total *withdrawal* from art, both on part of the producer and receiver: "Only the real negation of culture can inherit culture's meaning. Such negation can no longer remain *cultural*."[18] Several decades later, we can still hear echoes of Debord's diagnosis, but we also recognize its romanticism, as exhibited by his proposal of the possibility of a total negation and exit from the subjectivization of capital. This romanticization nonetheless stands in stark contrast to the romanticism of participation and outreach and its utopia of an all-inclusive, free-for-all, total democracy of culture.

Can art be made unspectacular and still remain cultural? That is, can it avoid the spectacle, perhaps even the staging of an audience, and still create a relation that is aesthetic in nature? This was precisely the claim made by the art and theory of relational aesthetics in the 1990s, which operated in marked contrast to the divergent yet politicized aesthetics of the project exhibition and community art. Relational aesthetics concerned itself not with representation (of a problematic or a social group), but rather with what its main theorist Nicolas Bourriaud called "social interstice" and "relational form." Indeed, Bourriaud saw the art of the 1990s as a distinctively art-historical and generational project that responded to Debord's accusations against art. Bourriaud's argument was twofold: although he agreed with Debord's critique of the spectacle, he disagreed with his idea of culture being part of the spectacle. According to

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[18] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 146.

Bourriaud, Debord's analysis was limited to capitalist forms of exchange under the regime of representation, whereas the relational art of 1990s offered "a rich loam for social experiments" and "a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavorial systems."[19] This move from the *representational* to the *relational* made it possible for Bourriaud to once again privilege the space of art as a space for a particular encounter— the social relation—but in a manner different than the project exhibition or community work, with which it shared certain formal (but not ideological) resemblances. Contrary to what Debord believed, Bourriaud saw this encounter not as a space of contestation and struggle, but as a space of social exchange exempt from commodification: "The work that forms a 'relational work', and a social interstice, updates Situationism and reconciles it, as far as it is possible, with the art world."[20]

Whether one can still accept Bourriaud's provocative claims hinges on whether the art world and its institutions can provide a space exempt from the commodity exchange— something that was surely doubtful in the late 1990s and is certainly impossible to claim now, following half a century of neoliberal reform and its concomitant deconstruction of any social bond. If relational artistic and curatorial practices did indeed reject the idealism of either complete negation or full participation, presenting in their place a third way of producing audiences, it suffices to note its simultaneity with the political movement that called itself the 'Third Way' at that time, which proposed a marriage between social democracy and neoliberalism. Relational aesthetics was likewise neither left nor right, but simply *relational*. In this sense, it seemed to draw more inspiration from the work of sociologist Michel Maffesoli than it did from Situationism and Debord. Particularly influential was Maffesoli's notion of being-together, which he saw as a key concept in the contemporary, and which stood *in opposition to the political*.[21] It is precisely on this point that the problems of relational aesthetics—and indeed, a large part of contemporary art's problems with its audiences—lie: namely, that being-together is not only *not* politics, but rather its *other*, and that, moreover, the forms of art and the formats of the exhibition rarely bring people together in celebration, but more often in isolation and contemplation. Unlike theater or cinema, art audiences come to exhibitions at different times and in groups of different sizes; never in any phenomenological sense do they congregate or cohere as a collective beyond— perhaps—the spectacle of the opening. Contemporary art is not a spectator sport.

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[19] Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002), p. 9.
[20] Ibid., p. 85.
[21] See Michel Maffesoli, *The Contemplation of the World: Figures of Community Style*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

Another Relationality

Another curator invested in relational aesthetics, Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen has written convincingly about the possibility of an art without audience—not in the sense of negation, but in reference to the work of artist Phillipe Parreno, for whom the audience functions as co-creator of the work and its meaning.[22] Schmidt-Wulffen understands receivers as producers and, without abandoning artistic authorship (as with the death of the audience and the birth of the viewer), believes it possible to create social situations and relationality that "levels the hierarchy" between the author and the receiver.[23] In other words, the audience is a part of the work and not its spectators. Again, the parallels with communicative capitalism and its social networks of accumulation and exploitation are obvious. Ironically, though, this co-creation was never particularly popular with museum-goers, leading to a crisis of actual audience numbers while the stock of the artists in the art market and curators in the job market rose significantly. If the populist museum and the blockbuster exhibition are expressions of financialization, then might we today see relational aesthetics as the cultural form of the since abandoned Third Way of centrist politics?

And what exactly is a blockbuster exhibition? Taking its cue from Hollywood, it would seem to indicate a format that works on a large scale with a large institutional apparatus, followed by a sizable audience. If this is indeed the case, then like many blockbuster films that turn out to be huge flops at the box office, the blockbuster exhibition cannot be assured success. Moreover, that something has a blockbuster format or intention surely does not tell us everything we need to know about what is shown in it, and how it is shown, or what method of mediation is employed in its display. Do audiences act the same in every mega-exhibition? And is it the same audience that is being addressed by every mega-exhibition? Are mega-exhibitions always entertaining or even superficial—that is, is entertainment truly the antithesis of knowledge and critique? Do blockbuster exhibitions by definition produce spectators rather than citizens, and is this even a proper distinction? Unquestionably, mega-exhibition have a bad reputation in contemporary art theory, probably owing in large part to the legacy of Debord's critique of the spectacle. This is no doubt further

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[22] Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, "Kunst ohne Publikum" [Art Without Audience], in *Zeitgenössische Kunst und ihre Betrachter* [Contemporary Art and Its Spectators], ed. Wolfgang Kemp (Cologne: Oktagon, 1996), p. 185.
[23] Ibid., p. 187.

compounded by the corporate style of presentation in larger institutions (with their public relations materials, first received by art critics) and the architecture of major museums that tend to make them almost indistinguishable from airports or shopping malls, as in the non-place, super-modernist architecture described by anthropologist Marc Augé—a style quite different than the hallowed halls of the white cube as historicized by O'Doherty.[24] Indeed, blockbuster exhibitions are now something curators almost feel the need to apologize for, as if they were a necessary evil in the quest for audiences and the appeasal of funders and backers of institutions (governments and foundations alike). Blockbusters are powerful, but they are not empowering; rather, they are a required response to the dispatches from above, what Kwon called the intervention of outside power.

If curators and institutions have become, under neoliberalism, slaves of the audience or audience numbers, the audience itself has presumably been emancipated, to use philosopher Jacques Rancière's famous phrase. Emancipation, here, can be understood in a number of possibly connected but nonetheless contradictory ways. If the audience has indeed been emancipated, from what exactly has it been emancipated, and how? Are spectators emancipated by art or from art, and is art itself, however we choose to define it, something that has been or must be emancipated? Emancipation seems to only hold positive properties within certain political discourses, especially those aligned with notions of progress rather than conservation. But the notion of emancipation has been completely reinscribed and redefined under the neoliberal regime. For neoconservatives, for example, emancipation is associated with the dreaded permissiveness of the 1960s, having clearly gone too far in letting other identities out of the closet, as it were. This backlash also affects contemporary art, from US Senator Jesse Helms's attacks on the works of Robert Mapplethorpe and the subsequent dismantling of the National Endowment for the Arts through the writings of figures like critic Hilton Kramer. We have also seen this more recently and contradictorily in the denigration of any other form of contemporary art besides painting by one of the key figures in the commercial and public success of contemporary art, gallerist Charles Saatchi,[25] as well

[24] See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).
[25] Charles Saatchi, "The Hideousness of the Art World," *The Guardian*, 2 December 2011, online at: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/02/saatchi-hideousness-art-world.

as in the designation of contemporary art as a "leftist hobby" by right-wing political parties in the formerly proud and self-righteously liberal Netherlands.[26]

Emancipation is not just a problem or annoyance for admittedly conservatives circles (from where it, after all, should be expected); it also poses challenges within the curatorial profession itself—that is, for the very figures who stand in between artists, viewers, and institutions. Spectators might be emancipated, and thus free to think and act, or, more economically, free to choose with which exhibitions and cultural institutions to spend their valuable leisure time. At the same time, however, viewers have also attained a sovereign power. Outstripping both artists and curators, they have become *dictators*. The subtitle, "The Dictatorship of the Viewer," was used without irony in the 50th Venice Biennale, curated by Francesco Bonami, which nonetheless didn't address the issue of spectatorship, citizenry, or for that matter, democracy versus dictatorship. Instead, the Biennale concentrated on art-historical and stylistic questions in its main exhibition, *Delays and Revolutions*, where artistic developments—while they may have been construed as non-linear—were presented as free from viewer expectations and interaction, as well from outside power. The artworks in the exhibition always responded to other artworks, with art begetting art, and thus were isolated from social and political questions, making it impossible to not think that it was actually the curatorial dictate that was authorial and authoritarian, not spectatorship. And this curatorial disdain for the audience was, this time with sublime irony, also at play in the panel dedicated to the notion of audiences and public perception, titled "Dismeasurement and Public Responsibility," during the *Institutional Attitudes* conference in Brussels in 2010. At the event, some of the art world's top curators freely admitted to preferring their museums full of art—but not visitors—and to feeling no responsibility to the audience, only to history. Obviously, such sentiments cannot really be uttered in public or, in front of an audience, as the ensuing, slightly unruly public discussion attested to. Is the curatorial response, then, to the dictatorship of viewer—whether seen as the demand for ever-higher visitor numbers across the arts sector, the freedom to choose what to see in the competition for entertainment, or the freedom to think what you want about art—to instead claim an emancipated curator, free from audience numbers and expectations?

Spectators: Emancipated from Power?

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[26] Geert Wilders quoted in Sven Lütticken, "A Heteronomous Hobby: Report from the Netherlands," *e-flux journal*, vol. 1, no. 22 (2011), online at: http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-heteronomous-hobby-report-from-the-netherlands/.

For Rancière, the emancipation of the spectator did indeed mean equality, that there should be no hierarchical relationship between the performer and the spectator by means of active participation, negation, or mediation. "That is what the word 'anticipation' means," he writes, "the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body."[27] Besides wrestling the powers of authorship from the artist or curator, something the example of *Institutional Attitudes* illustrates they are highly reluctant to relinquish, and bestowing upon the artwork the status of what he calls "the third thing" (owned by neither artist or curator), Rancière's main purpose is to undo the distinction between active performers and passive viewers, literally freeing spectatorship from its long historical association with passivity and submission. In this dispensation, we are all simultaneously actors and spectators in our stories and creative interpretations of other stories and actors in the shape of cultural idioms, suggesting some sort of cultural actor-network theory. An emancipated community for Rancière is thus "a community of *narrators* and *translators*"[28]—terms slightly different than "producers" and "consumers." In a sense, Rancière's assertion is in line with the modernist artistic credo of "what you see is what you see" and theories of reading as in writer Umberto Eco's notion of the "open work." While Eco writes about theater, with its own specific notion of audiences or spectators as bodies in a room, possibly separated from the performers and the text by the stage itself, the forms and spaces of the theater, here, becomes a metaphor for the crystallization of the people.

It must be noted that Rancière's text is not an essay primarily concerned with artistic and curatorial methods and practices of constructing audiences as people, be they active or passive. (Perhaps intentionally, Rancière does not consider theatrical forms such as street theater in his analysis). His move is mainly conceptual and rhetorical in its rethinking of the spectator and cultural production along the lines of his earlier work on pedagogy and equal intelligence. If Rancière's favored pedagogical method of ignorance can be translated into emancipating the spectator in the theatre by not assuming their identity and position, how could this relate to the gallery space and contemporary art, which do not place their audiences with the same sense of punctuality, spatiality, and embodied collectivity? In the history of the museum, mediation has always been key to the framing and presentation of art works and ideas, and within the exhibitionary

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[27] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009), p. 19.

[28] Ibid., p. 22 (italics mine).

complex, education is sutured with entertainment. As we have already noted, exhibitions do not produce their audience as a people in terms of bodies together in a room, sharing an experience, but rather they do so through a more abstract construction of national citizenry: the artifacts or artworks on display form a historical narrative that viewers in turn recognize themselves in and reflect back onto the world. There is no set viewing time for an exhibition, and even time-based media tend to be looped, following the modernist ideal of individualized viewing time and commitment. In a sense, if curating is seen through a Rancièrian prism, it is more a matter of stultification than actual emancipation.

If curating is indeed about the power of display, does the emancipation of all its various actors—artists, curators, audiences alike, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees—mean the freeing of subjects from the control and gaze of power? Does it imply a resistance to power, and moreover, a form of powerlessness or empowering of subjects? Here, it may be instructive to revisit art historian Norman Bryson's sign theory of the image and looking. In his critique of what he called "perceptualism," Bryson remarked how power does not merely reside outside of the image, that is, in institutions and social circumstances, as is so often claimed by most variants of art history. Instead of understanding power as an institutional imposition or outside intervention in the artwork, Bryson argues that:

> The social formation isn't, then, something which supervenes or appropriates or utilizes the image so to speak after it has been made: rather painting, as an activity of the sign, unfolds within the social formation from the beginning. And from the inside—the social formation is inherently and immanently present in the image and not a fate or an external which clamps down on an image that might prefer to be left alone.[29]

An Audience with the Sovereign

This would have to do with the very location of power in relation to the act of viewing, and not simply the dichotomy of sender and recipient, producer and consumer, passive and active, and so on. Rather, structures and lines of power lie not only in the creative act, authorship, nor in reading alone, but within the shaky triangle of author, viewer, and context (physically, historically, and politically). This has become increasingly prevalent,

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[29] Norman Bryson, "Semiology and Visual Representation," in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, eds. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 66.

of course, with the shifts in the scene of address from the physical place and presence of the artwork (and its institutional setting) to the virtual interaction of online viewing and participation. In the post-Internet constellation, which is often discussed, somewhat misleadingly, in terms of the status of the art object within contemporary art theory, the division between viewing and doing, or between active and passive spectatorship, are not only blurred, but decisively intermixed and connected. Indeed, whether one sees new modes of capital extortion or new avenues of democratization, the road to achieve this is precisely in the merger of production and consumption, but in a different way than in community art, blockbuster exhibitions, and social outreach. In online life, the public and counter-public, grass roots politics, and corporate capitalism are now fellow travelers, linked through the global digital network of communication and surveillance, and any problematization of this interconnectedness would have to proceed precisely through these contradictory entanglements. Since online presence is never a matter of merely looking, but of always being active, this does not mean that this activation cannot be politically pacifying, as Debord would surely have argued, but nor does it mean that new, virtual communities cannot be produced and politicized.

In contemporary art as it has been periodized in this essay, audiences are almost exclusively listed as the primary reason for the politics of artistic production and cultural institutions. While simultaneously viewed as troublesome and unappreciative, the audience is an entity to both call into being and to question, and as such, is always as much of an imagined ideal as it is a social reality. Art's institutions are never more or less than its audiences, although this in no way indicates a smooth relationship; rather, the relationship is one of asymmetry, desire, projection, and conflict. Furthermore, this codependent, but far from seamless, relationship is also one that has to be established in both a temporal and spatial sense, that is, as the formation of a public. There needs to be a location, a place in which the audience can become a public in the form of a collective body rather than a number of individuals, and it is a particular place or occasion that produces this public. As Warner has observed, "[a] kind of chicken-and-egg circularity confronts us in the idea a public."[30] On the one hand, a public only exists by virtue of its being addressed, while on the other hand, only public speaking, and indeed public services, exist for this public. In other words, an art institution cannot exist without a public to address, but at the same time, it produces this public through its very mode of address.

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[30] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 67.

Audiences should not be understood solely as those who attend exhibitions and public programming; they also exist as an imagined body that might at any moment be activated. For years now, we have seen an increase in virtual audiences who read publications, websites, blogs, *e-flux* announcements, and watch material streamed online. The audience thus always casts its shadow, its mirage. But the very word "audience" also has its semantic double: audience not as spectators or listeners, but audience as something granted by power, as in the sense of "an audience with the pope." And this audience can be thought of not only in terms of institutions gaining feedback and promoting participation rather than passive viewing, but also in terms of how institutions place themselves in relation to power and use their public role to gain an audience with those in power, so that they may, in turn, address them. The notion of audience invoked here is thus not that of the art audience, whether as viewer or citizen or both, but of *art institutions seeing their public role as one not only subjected to power in the form of new public management, but more crucially, as one capable of bringing the powers that be to listen.* This is, perhaps, their privilege, but surely also their obligation?