

## [Authorship, Criticism and Participation Between Contemporary Art and Sociological Theory]

*Abstract:* The paper presents some recent transformations of contemporary art by showing the implications for sociological theory. In particular, relations between the ethnographic turn in contemporary art and the transition from the concept of society as totality to the idea of society as a process of which the work of art itself is part, are discussed. The consequences of this transition emerge in three directions: in the interest of the artists-ethnographers for the use of the methods of social research in their creative work; in the changed conditions of artistic social criticism, and finally in the development of participatory art according to Post-Fordist conceptions of participation. The aim of this essay is to show how these conceptions of social criticism and participation, recently established in contemporary art, show some similarity with categories and methods of contemporary sociological theory.

*Keywords:* Sociological Theory, Contemporary Art, Social Change.

### Foreword

What do the transformations in contemporary art tell a sociologist? Sociological analysis is fuelled and carried on through tools that could, by right, appear totally alien to those of the artist. Fundamentally, social differentiation processes have outlined different fields in which art can only be of sociological interest in the form of a social object, in the same way as other spheres with different functions, such as the economy, politics and science.

The reasons behind this essay are different. The initial idea is that, in contemporary art, transformations have taken place in the last thirty years that form fresh proximity between artistic work, its forms of justification, the logics activating various types of public, and categories of sociological theory, which appears to provide fertile ground for future developments. It is not yet a matter of an actual sociology of art, namely of studying the social conditions in the production, legitimation and circulation of art. What I would like to propose is a reflection on the forms of sociological interest that have characterized the work of numerous contemporary artists and some currents of contemporary art in the last quarter of a century. By so doing, it is possible to outline a parallel course between sociological theory and artistic change that could unearth very fertile cues for sociological reflection on social change.

Three dimensions seem interesting in this light. The first is the conceptualization of society in artistic products, in particular the transition from the idea of society as a totality or historical background to a work of art, to the idea of society as a set of processes of which the artistic work itself is a part. It is a transition that has notable consequences, both owing to the changed conditions of social criticism and to the interest paid by artists to social research methods for their creative work. Second, the changes in the relationship between author and audience are worthy of attention. Following on from the processual idea of society, the creative process is also rethought as a social process, a significant expression of which are tendencies towards distributed authorship rather than authorship focused on an individual artist. What conditions are at work so that this can happen? I will try to show that these are not always accessible, even when the artist is working *in* and *for* a community. But what happens when public/citizen participation in the creative process is real? The topic of participatory art, the third dimension, is connected to the social conditions presiding over transformations in social and political participation. However, at the same time, artistic work can make sociologically significant aspects of participation emerge that often escape a sociologist's studies. Art, in particular public art, is interlinked with forms of urban planning and social participation policies, giving rise to phenomena of change of great sociological interest.

The reflection in this paper is not systematic, but instead tries to rebuild, in a thematic and in part chronological order, some transformations in the field of contemporary art - which, despite being attested to in the literature, of course, do not cover all that is produced in the much vaster artistic world today - for each showing the aspects that converge with, stimulate or pose problems for sociological theory.

*Mapping the context: the ethnographic turn in contemporary art<sup>1</sup>*

The essay *The Artist as Ethnographer* by Hal Foster (1996) has had a remarkable impact on theoretical reflection on the transformations of contemporary art. In it Foster discusses the recent transformations of the relationship between artistic output and social criticism, and its implications in the increasingly widespread production of art in contexts of everyday life. This change is detected both in practices of audience activation and participation in the artwork, and in the artist's immersion in the life of the community for whom the artistic project is created.

While speaking of an «ethnographic turn in art and criticism» (1996: 202), in his essay Foster proposes a genuine interpretive paradigm, framing the work of contemporary artists in the context of an ethnographical epistemology. In other words, his proposal cannot be summed up as a simple reference to the importance of cultural otherness, already a key theme in early twentieth-century art.

The ethnographic turn shows some transformations in the relationship between art and criticism enabled by ethnography and cultural anthropology. First of all, cultural anthropology is taken to be the lingua franca of both artistic practice and criticism, because it provides know-how through which to process otherness in culturally non self-referential forms and places social practices at the centre of culture. In other words, an anthropological gaze and techniques give several possibilities of *removing* the artist from his or her *pivotal position* in determining the contents of the work of art. However, at the same time, through them attention is maintained on the question of the 'right distance' in the relationship with otherness, thereby avoiding the aesthetically inclined appropriation, not without ethnocentric veins, typical of the exoticism of early twentieth-century avant-garde movements. Another significant aspect is that ethnography offers tools for art work that prefers artistic agency directly connected to the everyday life practices of the individuals or communities subject to the work over artistic action conducted by the artist individually in his studio. Lastly, the ethnographic perspective offers an interdisciplinary key to reading the communities' everyday life, that is, the possibility of thematizing dimensions of social and individual and collective experiences that may have very different contents; at the same time the reflexivity and self-criticism developed in anthropological studies in the past twenty years do not lessen the artist-ethnographer's position in the work of interpretation. Owing to the complexity of the anthropological paradigm, the artist can find effective interpretive categories to move in what may be very different directions, in a continuum that goes from the notion of the social sphere as a symbolic order - drawn up as of the linguistic turn in cultural anthropology in the 1960s - which means that objects and social processes can be thematized in art in terms of systems of symbolic exchange, to the more recent thematization of the social sphere in terms of material practices and, more in general, of material culture. By drawing from this range of interpretive paradigms, the artist-ethnographer can move between different models of art work. At once he or she can assume the role of the critic denouncing the oppressive logics of social processes; or deconstruct the circularity of symbolic-social exchanges and show its groundlessness; or put him/herself in the embedded perspective of the marginal subject-community and pay testimony to it by once again placing subjectivity at the centre of the work; or relativize subjectivities and return them to the flows of social, media and cultural industry communication; or, lastly, carry on the critical theory of the social sphere, but also condemn it and show its intrinsic shortcomings<sup>2</sup>.

The diffusion of these paradigms in art work is parallel to artists' growing attention to everyday life and the social processes that mould and transform it. A particularly significant aspect of this interest is the emergence of the *context* as an object of contemporary art. Between the 1960s and 1970s, a wide range of movements and

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1 Owing to space restrictions, it was preferred to place use hyperlinks in the titles or words identifying the works in order to view images or videos of them. It is highly recommended to visualize the references, also to further clarify the reasoning set out in the text.

2 For a brief summary of works on the ethnographic turn in art see Bargna (2009, 19-23) and Cattani (2006).

currents put great pressure on the significance of space in artistic work. From the minimalist art of the early 1960s, to conceptual art, to performances, body art and site-specific art, it is clear to see a first breakdown of the *context* as a topic in the development of new meanings of spatiality in/of the work of art. The institutional and institutionalizing spaces of artistic work - the studio, museum, gallery - lose the central place they had had during what were nonetheless radical transformations of modern art. The artist's work found different conditions for its realization and legitimation, generated by social changes - for example, civil rights movements, feminism, multiculturalism - in concomitance with expanding theoretical and cultural debates - inspired over the years by representation theories and psychoanalysis, by the works of Foucault, Lacan and Althusser, by renewed interest in Gramsci, up to the most recent developments in the postcolonial debate. All of these broke the restrictive definitions of art and artist, setting out new conditions for the legitimation of practices and references to new forms of subjectivity and community.

In parallel, the product of artistic agency also changed, to increasingly look, but in very varying ways, towards the social sphere and its dynamics: it is along these lines that the context shapes up as a place for artistic thematization. Individual and collective social living conditions, such as illness, and material needs, such as homelessness, became objects of artistic work by *first of all* reconsidering everyday life as a field of artistic interest. Art thus came to link up with the field of practices and, in the cases of most sociological interest, assumed social processes as a source and object of artistic agency. In these cases, the artist wove his or her own modes of comprehension and representation in different epistemic fields, gathering documentary forms - photos, sound recordings, videos, archives, objects - and associating them with narrative forms that structure the documented experiences according to spatial, textual or media logics, putting them together to form an object that can be experienced by its users. The socio-logical trait of the art user's experience is typically marked by a mix of knowledge and emotion: gaining knowledge *about* the social processes, social groups and categories, and communities subject to the work; empathy towards the *people* and their experiences represented and narrated by the work. The *social* context therefore takes on an artistic significance that is progressively being seen in the development of new creative techniques, of which the mapping technique is particularly interesting. In this concentration on the context, the dimension of space prevails over time. And this is taking shape as the great narratives providing an interpretation and perspective for local events disappear. While framing events within social history took precedence for a large part of the twentieth century, recent globalization processes show the primacy of geopolitical interpretation over long-term explanations. In this logic, space is no longer the local and contingent point of specification for general socio-historic processes, but instead it *glocally* combines and juxtaposes different elements.

The aesthetic implications of this change are great: the work of art thought and realized in the logic of the ethnographic turn finds itself face to face with the variety of contingent phenomena and the issue of finding a shape that is no longer just a problem of aesthetics and/or artistic technique, but acquires the significance of making a brand new interpretation of the social sphere. Like a city's inhabitants who - having lost their mental map of their habitual haunts - cannot give a meaning to the place where they are, nor locate it in the geography of the urban space, so the social experience of globalized local space takes on the traits of the multitude of different elements that populate the contexts and gropes its way forward, while formulating consciously partial and temporary interpretations. In this way, mapping and building 'cognitive maps' becomes an operation through which the artist formulates hypothetical interpretations of the social experience which are circulated by viewing the work.

The category of *cognitive mapping*, formulated by Fredric Jameson (1989), indicated this route for contemporary artistic production. The artist's work thus comes to form that which Jameson (1992) called a *geopolitical aesthetic*,

which seeks to account for the underlying relationships between the different areas and cultures of the globe and can cast light on that real world which we do not know and is hidden by the media bombardment we are constantly subjected to (Pedullà 2003 xxxiii-xxxiv, own translation).

To think the work of art as a map is to work to build an interpretation, which, in making its description, orders elements of reality through abstract concepts and symbolic representations; it is a work of inclusion and exclusion that gives the author a decisive role in shaping what is nevertheless represented as reality. Tellingly, this aesthetic

category has come to be an important point of reference in the artist-ethnographer's work in the last thirty years<sup>3</sup>. Many works have been made in line with these criteria, even though the use of mappings can have very different ends in artistic projects.

It is works of social criticism that particularly highlight the overlap between the artist's work and the field of sociological research. Foster speaks explicitly of sociological mapping as a technique of artistic work, specifying that

Sociological mapping is more explicit in much institutional critique, especially in the work of Hans Haacke, from the polls and profiles of gallery and museumgoers and the exposés of real-estate moguls in New York [...] to the investigations of arrangements among museums, corporations, and governments [...] Martha Rosler belies the apparent objectivity of medical statistics regarding the female body and of sociological descriptions concerning the destitute alcoholic. Recently she has also pushed this critical use of documentary modes toward the geopolitical concerns that have long driven the work of Allan Sekula [...] [who, by building] «imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world», [...] sketches a «cognitive map» of our global order (Foster 1996: 185, 191).

Among the great many socio-artistic works by Sekula, who was very active until his death in 2013, *Fish Story* puts together many of the dimensions at play in the aesthetic and social configuration of the seas and their relationship with globalization processes. It is a very complex work<sup>4</sup> which maps very different areas through photographs, literary texts and sociological analyses: from industrial ports to spaces inside big cargo and passenger ships, from the ocean surface to its depths, showing the transformations in their social meanings through processes of rationalizing modernity. To sum up very briefly, the transformation of the spatial meanings is grasped on at least three levels: the transition from the premodern gaze cast over the whole sea surface as a space where traces and presences could be found for navigation, security and control, to the modern gaze mediated by machines and technological reconstruction, where it is no longer the whole scene but the details that become significant, the material as well as the abstract details, produced by the work of calculating and control tools.<sup>5</sup> Another level is that of the undersea depths. By making reference to literary sources and essays, Sekula reconstructs how submarine warfare, which appeared in the First World War, can rationalize the meanings of the undersea spaces, where, through a genuine process of disenchantment, a variety of details progressively substitute the panoramic vision of a single reality.

3 Foster wrote that, «mapping in recent art has tended toward the sociological and the anthropological, to the point where an ethnographic mapping of an institution or a community is a primary form of site-specific art today» (1996 185).

4 «*Fish Story* is the third in a cycle of works on the imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world (...) Sites were chosen for reasons that were whimsical as well thematic. In general the choices were predicated on a search for past and present centers of maritime power, as well as more peripheral zones, often those that have been subjugated to a single power, as has been the case with Mexico, or those that have endured a history of being caught between greater powers, as is the case with Korea and Poland. (...) From the beginning, the project was conceived as becoming both an exhibition and a book, with "chapters" being presented as they evolved» (Sekula 2002 202). The work was carried on between 1995 and 2002, with seven exhibitions and two editions of the book.

5 «The recording of the sea by modernity begins with the rupture between the age of sail and that of steam. As so many other fronts, it is the modernity of the military that provokes broader cultural change. The passage of the prestige of the panorama to that of the detail is perhaps most strongly manifested in the intertwined discourses of naval strategy and naval intelligence (...) Coal-fired boilers, torpedoes and long-range naval guns introduced a new abstractness to the maritime space of combat. Abstract measured distance - from coaling stations, from one gun to another - came to matter more than the immediate and local vagaries of the wind. The wind gave precedence to time: under sail, the crucial question was how long favorable or unfavorable conditions would hold. Steam gave precedence to space: the key question, the question of the gunner and the chief engineer, was "How far?" (...) steam-powered ships, while free to travel thousands of miles in any direction without regard for the wind, were restricted by the capacity of their coal bunkers. Thus establishment and control of coaling stations became a factor of utmost strategic importance. Steam tethered ships more firmly to the land, by a line that stretched back to the bowels of the earth. The ultimate and likewise contradictory result of the "distancing" of determining factors was that the detail, rather than the panorama, became crucial. At the level of naval "intelligence" details became the analytic fragments that had to be entered into a vast statistico-taxonomic grid, a grid that compared and weighed the fleets of the world» (Sekula 2002 107).

*Conclusion of search of the disabled and drifting sailboat. Happy ending - Allan Sekula, Fish Story, 2002*



The third type of marine space is ships, whose spaces are territories regulated by logics of authority that can be very different in modern times from the forms of power on land.

The ship is one of the last unequivocal bastions of absolutism regardless of the political system behind the flag that flies from the stern. This makes ships all the more curious and anachronistic in an age proclaimed to be one of worldwide democratization. Ships function both as prisons and engines of flight and escape (Sekula 2002 183).

Sekula's work combines different frames, which are also produced by alternating photos and texts, as is characteristic in his exhibitions, using different narrative, sociological, documentary and iconic registers. Therefore, how the work is experienced is powerfully guided by the artist, who keeps his pivotal position as author. In this, Foster observes, he 'is as reflexive as any new anthropologist about the hubris of this ethnographic project' (1996 190).

*Fish-market, South Korea - Allan Sekula, Fish Story, 2002*



The question of the artist's authorship and its implications with relation to the context of his or her work becomes more important in site-specific work, where the relationship between the artist and local community (the inhabitants of the neighbourhood) is essential in generating the work of art. In these projects the preparatory work draws widely from the ethnographic techniques of participant observation, focus groups and at times also unstructured interviews. The logic of approach and distancing belonging to these types of techniques is also a key point in the artist's work. From the aesthetic point of view, with respect to the ethnographer and the sociologist, the artist is definitely freer to cross the line separating identification with the community and remaining legitimately in the field of his or her own (artistic) production. However, it needs to be considered that the different way of appearing to the community involved in the project will have a strong influence on the formal structure that the work will take. Assuming a descriptive gaze of the community will direct the research towards more emotionally neutral channels of expression than a more identificatory gaze. These different possibilities of expression highlight how the topic of defining the 'right distance' from which to consider the subject of the work<sup>6</sup> is intrinsically connected to that of the artist's authorship, that is, the role the artist reserves for him or herself in the work and in orienting how it is used by the community itself and the public. In the case of authorship too, the possibilities can be set out at intermediate points between two ends of a continuum: authorship centred on the author on one hand, and distributed authorship acted out by the users or the communities (in site-specific works) on the other hand.

In context-oriented art, the relationship between defining authorship and determining the 'right distance' is highly important. However, unlike what happens for the social sciences - whose products, albeit conscious of the limits of 'scientific objectivity', nevertheless have to deal with the obligation to intersubjective validity and a more restricted authorship - in the case of contemporary art the critical-aesthetic topic of dissolving the author's role and distributing the artistic action to the users plays an important part. Installations, performances and art projects can in many ways be thought and realized as 'open works', in which the user's action goes to make up the work itself. In itself, this does not mean that the author disappears, but numerous routes appear along which the author can distribute the artistic agency.

A further level of involvement, as we will see later, is achieved in those public art projects promoted in urban contexts *through* joint citizen-artist participation in the work right from the planning stages.

*From the social as a system to the social as a process: participatory art and post-Fordist logics*

In the 1990s the consolidation could be seen of a transition that marked a new conceptualization of the context in site-specific art. International contemporary art exhibitions increasingly thematize the site as a web of social processes, rather than the socio-historical background for works conceived in formal terms (Bishop 2012 195). It is a very relevant shift, because it attests to a change in the conceptualization of the context as 'social', no longer in the sense of an adjective, but as a noun. In the first meaning of 'site', the artist takes the context to be a consistent and autonomous reality, characterized by its integration of different structural elements (economy, politics, culture, etc.) and by actors whose social agency is influenced by their collocation in the structure and history of that society. From this point of view, the artist's work tends to be oriented towards criticism, to revealing, and to drawing up new perspectives through which to stimulate the actors' reflexivity towards the cultural, structural and socio-historical influences that condition them in their social agency. In this sense, while it problematizes the relationship *between* social actors and social context, the site-specific work - more or less consciously - takes the

<sup>6</sup>The question of the 'right distance' is important in determining the values mobilized by a critical outlook towards the social sphere, but, in turn, the operation of distancing depends on the social positions *from which* the artist moves his gaze. «In the *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) Nietzsche intimates that two contrary impulses are at work in all critical judgment: a "noble" will to distinction and a "base" reflex of resentment. [...] the difference between noble and base (in ethical-political terms) depends on the distance between the high and the low (in social-spatial terms) [...] Nietzsche poses the question of whether criticism can ever be free of distinctions on the noble side and resentments on the base side. Etymologically, to criticize is to judge or decide, and I doubt if any artist, critic, theorist, or historian can ever escape value judgments. We can, however, make value judgments that, in Nietzschean terms, are not only reactive but active, and, in non-Nietzschean terms, not only distinctive but useful. Otherwise critical theory may come to deserve the bad name with which it is often branded today» (Foster 2006 225-6).

social to be a *thing*, in its Durkheimian interpretation.

In the meaning of site that emerged subsequently, the shift is significant: the passage from the context as the structure *to deal with* artistically, to the idea of social processes *in which* the artistic action *is inserted*, involves redefining the work of art and the artist's relationship with the community. This enhanced closeness is not achieved by empathetically blending together, but through work that involves the artist *within* the social processes, at times at a greater distance - also owing to the use of sociological research tools - and at times more embedded in them, thereby creating the conditions to develop social interactions between the members of the community itself.

An interesting example of these different routes is given by *Project Unité*, an exhibition put on in 1993 in Firminy, a small town in the Loire valley where Le Corbusier built the last of his large *unités d'habitations*, a colossal [16-floor council building](#), hosting 414 council flats, a post office and a nursery school, which were later closed, a theatre and, outside, a play area (made entirely of concrete), while a shopping centre and a church were designed but never built. Inaugurated in 1967, during the 1970s some of the inhabitants progressively moved out of their flats and as of 1982 those who lived in the northern wing of the building were moved to the south wing. Then in 1985 the north wing was closed and access blocked by Plexiglas panels through which, in the following years, it was possible to follow the progressive decay of the materials. In 1993 the building, now a national monument, became an oxymoronic emblem of the utopian-dystopian vision of state-funded modernist architecture. On one hand, the rational desire was for it to be oriented towards the inhabitants' needs and to promote community relations, but, on the other hand, the decay of the materials and the areas bore witness to promises of modernity - community relations and intentions to (re)build collective identity - that had not been maintained. The exhibition was organized on the seventh floor of the north wing, where the curator, Yves Aupetitallot, invited forty European and US artists and architects to live and work for the period of realization of their artistic projects in twenty-nine apartments which - as material proof of this oxymoronic condition - had only partially been restored from the decay. The realized works pay good testimony to the transition underway in the way of relating to a specific site. Most of the artists followed the mainstream criteria of site-specific artistic work and used the apartments themselves as the source and also the object of their work, by dialoguing with the building's architecture and the aspirations - concerning culture, politics and identity - of a now early-modern idea. For example, with [Individual Comfort](#), Christian Philip Müller would work on the bad soundproofing of the rooms and the connection between this and neighbours, on aspirations for isolation and bourgeois living conditions. He had a specialized company make a survey in order to insulate the flat, he insulated it with special curtains, one by one framed the pages of the report produced by the specialized firm in gold frames, and hung them on a wall. The overall effect was a transformation of the apartment into a protected and 'warm' space, very much separate from the surroundings, and with an unexpectedly middle-class atmosphere. Hence, by keeping the attention fixed exclusively on soundproofing the place - a specific physical-natural aspect - the artist was able to cast light on the socio-structural implications of social inequality in passing from a proletarian connotation to a middle-class social climate, clashing immensely with the physical-spatial context.

With *Apartment Inhabited by the Artist Prior to the Opening*, Renée Green displayed the same rooms where she had lived and notes on the project and landscape drawings made in the flat.

R. Green, *Apartment Inhabited by the Artist Prior to the Opening*, 1993 (Armaly 2014 88-89)



Another group of artists instead followed a different artistic logic and tried to form relations with the inhabitants of the building and make the work of art the result of common engagement. Among them, the pair of artists Clegg & Guttman built an *open work*, in the form of a [Firminy Open Music Library](#), which reproduced the shape of the building to scale. They then asked the residents to make compilations of their music collections and place the compilation on the shelf corresponding to the position of the flat they lived in. Martha Rosler, with *How Do We Know What Home Looks Like?*, made video interviews of the residents and produced analyses of the inhabitants' characteristics. The Milanese team Premiata Ditta built relational maps on which they represented data taken from questionnaires given out to the building's residents. Heimo Zobernig transformed one of the flats into a bar, which became the most popular installation in the exhibition.

In this second group of works, the artists' outlooks concentrated on the interactive processes that were prompted by their work or that they tried to enter for the purpose of analysis. While on one hand the generation of the work of art involved a participatory logic, which was certainly important but at the time had already been authoritatively thematized, on the other the second group's work reconceptualized the context as social processes. Hence an innovative convergence was seen between artistic agency and sociological theory. In other words, in these works, more consciously than in the past, the artistic agency grasped and dealt with the connections between the micro and macro levels of social processes, instead of objectivizing the social as a totality or system and thematizing the action as a contingency influenced/conditioned by the forces of the social system. The microsocial level of the interactions was shaped by the artist's construction of frames (library, video interviews, questionnaires, bar) which - in their epistemological difference - enabled a reading of the micro level as processuality *through which* the social construction of the macro level is produced. It is an important shift, as to which Claire Bishop correctly observed that in the *Project Unité* exhibition

the use of the word 'project' rather than 'exhibition' in the title seems to imply that the totality of the situation (building, residents, artist residencies, installations) was more important than a final exhibition of 'works'. It carries connotations (which would accelerate in the 1990s) of art overlapping and engaging with the social sphere, rather than being at one remove from it - more akin to an architectural project, a particularly apt point of reference for Firminy (Bishop 2012: 198).

This transition from a contextual to a processual paradigm of the site overlaps with a second recent transition, this time relating to the social conditions of the legitimation of contemporary art. Over the span of the twentieth century, the legitimation of art was developed through at least two different logics: on one hand the work of artists, curators and critics was pointed in an emancipatory direction, to improve society, through the production of works of denunciation and revelation, works to stimulate mobilization, and works of criticism as social engagement oriented ethically towards the affirmation of justice values; on the other hand, artists, curators and critics supported a different social role for art, in first place specialized and characterized by the ability to call all values into question. As a result, they strove to deconstruct the existent and represent the contradictions present in collective life more as communicative paradoxes than as dialectic-emancipatory tensions. In this conception of art, the attention is directed first and foremost towards the artist's work, whose main value is to offer new languages as codes to deconstruct the existent. While the first accuse the second of relativism and of a lack of efficacy, the second would reprimand the first for accepting categories of thought without calling them into question and therefore for remaining imprisoned by images of the world that they in turn had received. Bishop (2012 276-277) elegantly observes that this distinction closely resembles the distinction between social criticism and artistic criticism formulated by Boltanski and Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2014).

The two French sociologists underline that artistic criticism

foregrounds the loss of meaning and, in particular, the loss of the sense of what is beautiful and valuable, which derives from standardization and generalized commodification, affecting not only everyday objects but also artworks (the cultural mercantilism of the bourgeoisie) and human beings. It stresses the objective impulse of capitalism and bourgeois society to regiment and dominate human beings, and subject them to work that it prescribes for the purpose of profit, while hypocritically invoking morality. To this it counterposes the freedom of artists, their rejection of any contamination of aesthetics by ethics, their refusal of any form of subjection in time and space and, in its extreme forms, of any kind of work.



Instead, social criticism takes aim at

the egoism of private interests in bourgeois society and the growing poverty of the popular classes in a society of unprecedented wealth - a mystery that will find its explanation in theories of exploitation. Basing itself on morality and, often, on themes inspired by Christianity, the social critique rejects - sometimes violently - the immorality or moral neutrality, the individualism, and even the egoism or egotism of artists (Boltanski, Chiapello 2007: 38).

Now, if it is true that capitalism does not change with regard to the principle of accumulation, it does however change in its organization of production and in the logics of justification. It is the transformations in these latter two dimensions that surround the profile of the new spirit of capitalism. Within these dimensions the conditions to produce creativity also change.

The expression *project work* linguistically attests to the intrinsic combination of organizational and justificatory elements contained in this mutation. The *project* proves to be a powerful organizational and justificatory criterion because it is located at the crossroads between two fundamental aspects of contemporary capitalism: the reticular mutation of relations among individuals as well as enterprises and the approach to a much more than organizational change, in spite of what it may seem. The network becomes

a sort of common basis shared by all, strong and weak, capitalists, managers and workers, *fans of capitalism and its detractors* (...) The network is a polysemic concept which allows us to approach and together indicate a disparate series of phenomena and processes: the possibilities offered by the new information technology, the explosion of big business into a myriad of organizations linked together by partnerships that go beyond the classic market relationship, globalized finance, the organization of work using a considerable quantity of temporary workers, and so on (Vitale 2007: 223 own italics and translation).

The project consists precisely of the capacity to select and form knots and connections in the network, which can be linked in accordance with specific and temporary goals. This reticular mutation leads to a logic of the temporary and mouldable project, dimensions which affect both the organization of work and the conditions for its justification, such as requesting creative workers for *intellectual flexibility*. In this picture, it becomes crucial for the worker to be *employable*, that is to know how to adapt to changing conditions, to use new tools requested by new project conditions, to be reticular him or herself, that is, to know how to build up relations and contacts that can be prepared for the following (or additional contemporary) work project. Ultimately, creative workers are assessed on their capacity to go from one job to another. In short, in the new conditions justifying and organizing capitalism, there is a whole new convergence between businessman and artist:

Is not the neo-manager, like the artist, a creative figure, a person of intuition, invention, contacts, chance encounters, someone who is always on the move, passing from one project to the next, one world to another? Like the artist, is he not freed of the burdens of possession and the constraints of hierarchical attachments, of the signs of power - office or tie - and also, consequently, of the hypocrisies of bourgeois morality? Conversely, however, is not today's artist, even today's intellectual or researcher, likewise a network creature in search of producers, the realization of whose projects demands costly, heterogeneous and complex arrangements, an ability to arrive at an understanding with distant, multiple actors who hold very different positions - from the local elected official, to the head of a firm, via an attaché from the ministry - and whom he must interest, persuade, win over? (Boltanski, Chiapello 2007: 312).<sup>7</sup>

From my point of view, what is worth pointing out is that it is precisely *from* the project logic that participation finds a new justification. In art as in politics, participation can no longer only express an invitation to a community form of social relations, to practices evoked and promoted as a criticism of individualism and the depersonalization of capitalist relations. Now participation is becoming a way of making social relations, as well as these creative projects, perform. Participation becomes a condition for developing the individual's performances. This 'doubling'

<sup>7</sup> In some interesting research on the professionalism of the creators of public art performed by Mazzucotelli Salice, this is what a US artist who was interviewed had to say about his work: 'It's a full-time job because you're like all the small businesses that have a lot of things on the go at the same time. I've probably got five or six jobs at the moment and all of them are in different phases of development. And then there's the marketing, the bureaucratic part [...] of everything, of all these projects' (Mazzucotelli Salice 2014: 103, own translation).

of the semantics of participation and its assumption into logics of reproducing capital can easily be observed in politics too, where the meanings of participation are often not emancipatory, but today are appropriated by the West's populist neoliberal parties and governments. In the same way, in the field of art, the desire for public participation - in television and radio programmes, in artistic performances<sup>8</sup>, in shows - is not prompted by emancipatory ideals or neo-communitarian aspirations, but by an ambivalent need for distinction and belonging.

### *Participation after participation*

In the paradigm of emancipation as the flywheel of social improvement the participatory logic is thought following an incremental dynamic: participation should go from less to more, gradually overcoming different thresholds of citizen involvement and increasing their participatory motivation/awareness. Halts and about-turns and the commitment to overcome them are part of the semantic field of this conception of participation, but the assumption that participation prompted by an artist can produce effects in the socio-political field depends on being able to convert the effects of the former into the latter, which these days does not seem very plausible. In other words, participatory art cannot be an exercise of democratic control. As hinted earlier, activation of the audience does not necessarily involve distribution of the work's authorship, but it can also foster and reinforce the artist's position of authorship. In this case, the audience entrusts itself to the artist, waiting for his or her gesture of initiation and following his or her guidance. In the end, the work is really the fruit of common work, but the leadership is focused on the author, who uses the participants' creative and relational potential to contribute to the artistic product. It can be understood that there is a much more varied frame of possibilities than the alternative of participating/not participating. However, this does not mean that even paradoxical forms of participation cannot also generate situations with a wealth of political meanings which the artist does not create but makes appear through the paradoxes, making connections and elements assumed to be implicit in everyday life visible and public. As Bishop observed, «the relationship between artist/participant is a continual play of mutual tension, recognition and dependency (...) rather than a ladder of progressively more virtuous political forms» (Bishop 2012: 279).

An interesting example of this overlapping is *Please Love Austria* (2000), a performance by the German artist Christoph Schlingensiefel that he installed for a week in the square in front of the Vienna State Opera in the form of a container with a large poster saying «Foreigners out!». Twelve asylum seekers from a detention centre outside the city entered the container. In the style of the *Big Brother* television game, the container's inhabitants were recorded 24 hours a day by web TV cameras. Every day the audience could vote on the Internet to expel the least liked participant from the trailer and the morning after the two with most votes left the container to be taken back to the detention centre. The winner, on the other hand, would get a cash prize and the possibility - depending on the willingness of female volunteers - to acquire citizenship by marrying an Austrian. The performance was documented by the director Paul Poet in the film *Ausländer raus! Schlingensiefel's Container* (2002). The year before, in 1999, the FPÖ, the extreme right-wing, racist, nationalist party led by Jörg Haider, had gained 27% of the votes in the political elections and entered the Austrian government at the beginning of 2000.

What happened in those six days was incredible. The artist spent a lot of the time in the square getting people's attention with both right- and left-wing slogans. Hundreds of people progressively flocked to the square, talking to the artist and amongst themselves about the meaning of the initiative, and those who wished could go to look at the foreigners inside the container through some cracks in a wooden wall installed on purpose in front of one of the container windows, like a pornographic peep show. The Viennese newspapers gave a lot of coverage to the event and the debates it sparked, television channels organized debates that they invited Schlingensiefel and exponents of the political parties to, a vast number of people phoned in for the televote, the container was attacked on various occasions with fire and acid bombs and assaulted by an extreme left-wing group that wanted to free the foreigners and destroyed the 'Foreigners out' billboard, an MP from the social-democratic party visited

<sup>8</sup> For example, for *One and Other* (2009), performance by the British sculptor Antony Gormley - giving anyone who so asked the possibility to occupy the Fourth Plinth of Trafalgar Square in London for an hour, twenty-four hours a day for 100 days - he received 34,520 requests, 14 times more than the 2,400 people needed.

the foreigners showing his favour for the initiative, the asylum seekers in the container wrote a puppet play in which they collected sentences that had been said against them and put it on show for the public on the trailer roof, and they followed German lessons and did exercise every day.

The work, famous in the world of contemporary art - but also, in my opinion, of great sociological interest - included a wide range of forms of participation: political, media, artistic and civic, which, in the different situations, generated many different types of public. This mix of different dimensions was generated by the artist's ability to provide a frame of the event which stood apart from those evoked and promoted by the different types of participants. The viewpoint was non-political - with neither a right- nor a left-wing slant - but at the same time critical, and above all proposed to arouse participation in the debates. It is difficult to say if anyone changed their opinions thanks to this performance, but Schlingensief's goal - which was clearly against racist views - was not to oppose them, but, thanks to people's spontaneous participation, to make political, media and artistic dynamics overlap. Hence, he returned an image overturned in the prism of the performance of democratic participation, which he did by bringing the prepolitical structure - of prejudices, fears, resentment, emotions - common to the different political, media and intellectual positions to the surface. By framing the topic of migrants as a politico-communicative resource that could be developed and exploited in different ways, the artist focused on a decisive transformation in the public sphere of our society: the shift of participation into communication and the participants into *enterprising publics*<sup>9</sup>. Lastly, Poet's film introduces additional publics, located at different times to the performance, and a frame that enables a different point of view from all those at play in the performance.

A different direction from that of Schlingensief in overcoming the dyadic artist/public model can be seen in the works of *New Genre Public Art*. In general, the label of 'public art' identifies a vast field of interventions, sculptures, installations, performances, etc. which have the characteristic of being located or done outside museums, in public spaces, with the precise aim of making the relationship between artist and public open to the meanings and uses made each time by the people going through these spaces. The participatory element is certainly superior to museum art, but the authorship dimension remains highly focused on the artist, reproducing - albeit in different conditions - the segmentation between the artist and the public<sup>10</sup>. *New Genre Public Art* distances itself from this set-up to work on distributing authorship when producing a public work of art:

Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art - visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives - is based on engagement [...] a history of new genre public art is not built on a typology of material, spaces, or artistic media, but rather on concepts of audience, relationship, communication, and political intention (Lacy 1995: 19, 28).

In these cases, not only are the users involved, but the patrons are too: from local public institutions to government agencies, environmentalist organizations, trade and/or professional associations, stakeholders, neighbourhood groups, down to single citizens. The artist's intervention is part of actions to develop or regenerate the urban sphere which - especially in some US cities - do not require the art to fit into the finished work for merely decorative purposes (as often still happens in Italy). Instead, the artist is involved right from the planning stage, the art is incorporated into the urban governance policies, and the public artist's relational sensitivity is used in projects to regenerate degraded areas or revitalize outlying districts. This is the case of Seattle, which in the mid-1970s was one of the first US cities to implement policies to promote public art, today counting over 400 permanent art interventions incorporated into buildings and public works - parks, libraries, civic centres, etc. -

<sup>9</sup> In my opinion, it would not be correct to label *Please Love Austria* as an example of the social's configuration as a spectacle in Debord's meaning of the term. While there is no doubt that from many points of view the analysis formulated by Debord is effective and stimulating, its critical limit is given by the assumption that the social can be observed as a totality. This leads Debord to effectively show, as has since been historically proven, the limits of the emancipatory model of criticism. Nevertheless, he remains within that same model, as other types of criticism would not be possible if it were broken off. It is a complex issue that I have tried to discuss systematically elsewhere (Bontempi 2005).

<sup>10</sup> See for example [Cloud Gate Sculpture](#), made in 2006 by Anis Kapoor in the Millennium Park in Chicago, which offers visitors a highly suggestive and changing experience. Yet it is still firmly rooted to the traditional artist/public distinction all the same.

and 3,000 removable works, in addition to numerous temporary initiatives. Among these is the *Metro Downtown Seattle Transit Project*,<sup>11</sup> the mixed public bus/train subway to cross the city in short timespans, featuring the joint work of artists, architects, engineers and administrators. In this and similar projects the problems of participatory art find different thematizations from the ones we have seen. Different professions take part, with the task of agreeing on realizations of public interest. In an interview for some research by Mazzucotelli Salice, an artist who worked on this project states:

After working three years on the Seattle Downtown Bus Tunnel project, where by contract I had to work side by side with an architect, I came out a different professional figure. I learnt to work with contracts, to speak to engineers, I learnt techniques for attracting wide public involvement. I learnt loads of different skills and that's just what I was looking to do (2014: 101, own translation).

An architect who was part of the team working on a station in the same project said:

We were enthusiastic about this tunnel idea. It was the first time that Seattle would have had any kind of underground transport system. So it took a lot of effort to think how people would use it. We asked how we could use both art and architecture to make them feel at ease, so that they would go on the subway [...] We could have just done something cool, but we also wanted the people to feel at ease underground. Before they did anything, the artists had to understand what an underground tunnel was and how it worked. [...] The result is a project built on teamwork, a station where *you literally can't say who did what because we did it all together*. So we all had offices near the tunnel. We had a whole floor in a large building downtown. The administration, us architects and the engineers were all there. The artists had to come to our offices and find a place for themselves in the architects' work areas [...] this way not only were the meetings regular, but we could share drawings, projects, talk and discuss things. It really was a true example of joint planning' (2014: 105 own italics, own translation).

Numerous projects have followed this trajectory to promote forms of participatory art in which the artistic agency is distributed among different actors. An interesting example is the *Nouveaux Commanditaires* (New Patrons) programme. Created in France at the start of the 1990s by the artist François Hers and immediately sponsored by the Fondation de France, it is an organizational protocol whose main goal is to produce works of public art patronized by citizens to promote social integration and the regeneration of urban areas. The protocol is activated every time it is possible to build collaboration between three actors: citizens in the role of patrons, associations and foundations in the role of intermediaries, and artists. The intermediaries help the citizens to structure their request in the form of an artistic commission, and together they lay down a protocol of intents to define the type of work and identify an artist to commission the work from. This group is also involved in identifying possible public, private or collective (crowd) funders and lastly, through the intermediaries, the artist comes into contact with the patrons. Since coming to Italy at the end of the 1990s as *Nuovi Committenti* thanks to the Turinese organization 'a.titolo', it has produced numerous initiatives in particular since the year 2000. In 2001 it was included in the *Urban 2* programme to regenerate public spaces, with four projects promoted by citizens in the Mirafiori district, right up to the realization in 2013 of a youth centre, urban furniture and a play area in the Barca neighbourhood.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the large number of works and high-quality results, what interests me here is to underline the participatory logic in promoting contemporary art. On one hand, it is included in the protocol as know-how that can listen to and absorb different stimuli, and on the other hand it is accessible know-how if citizens decide to collectively structure the meanings and needs prior to formulating the request for art. As such, the *Nuovi Committenti* protocol is an authentic participatory policy tool, in which citizen participation on topics of common interest and artistic action weld together, giving shape to interventions whose final output clearly shows this mix of meanings and practices.

11 There are numerous artistic interventions, of different kinds. For a description of the works see <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19900912&slug=1092772>.

12 For an overview of the works please see <http://www.atitolo.it/>

*Conclusions?*

There is no doubt that contemporary art is an open field in which it is quite unlikely to draw conclusions. What I have tried to do in this reflection is first of all show how the transformations of some segments of the vast world of contemporary art can be, perhaps for the first time, of remarkable interest for sociology theorists. It is not a matter of mixing up levels of social analysis, instead what has and still is opening up in the recent transformations in contemporary art is an interest not only in social dynamics, but also in social reflection on social dynamics.

For example, interaction sociology offers effective conceptual elements for theoretical reflection on the critical capacity of some works and artistic currents. This happens because it is only in recent times that interaction has become an object of reflection for artists. Not that the reflection is necessarily openly expressed, but it is nevertheless made in the work, as is normal in producing art, but this does not make it any less rich in elements to stimulate the sociologist.

A second aspect concerns the relationship between criticism and authorship. In these short notes I have tried to show that the conceptualization of the social and the artist's role with relation to society and the public are closely connected. On these topics, the social criticism of art has undergone transformations that are not distant from those of sociological critical theory. The convergence between the theses of Boltanski and Chiapello and the post-Fordist transformations of artists' work is significant, not just with regard to the organizational aspects of artistic work, but also its justification, which, from the artist's point of view, means activation of the audience in participatory art.

The third and last aspect that is worth considering is the transformation of the practices of artistic participation after the end of conventional political participation. In the sphere of public art in the last twenty years, there has been a great deal of pithy research on non-conventional forms of participation: the goal of the examples shown here is just to indicate some directions. They are ways of looking at participation that both touch on the theoretical discussion in sociology about the reconceptualization of participation and mould participatory practices that - although no less important than socio-political participation, classic object of study for political sociology - are given much less scholarly attention.

In short, the changes in sociological theory on one hand and in contemporary art on the other, show possible overlaps that are not limited to the, albeit important, scientific practices of classic sociology of art, but offer interesting new ideas for the development of theories of social change.

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