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## Participatory Art, Philosophy and Criticism

Starting from the point of view that participatory art cannot be properly evaluated within the traditional framework of art criticism, which uses purely aesthetic and formal conceptual tools, we are resorting to more general concepts within the field of philosophy. In doing so, Rancière's rehabilitation of aesthetics proves particularly helpful, as it significantly contributes to the reflection upon such art. At this point it is useful to stress the historical failure of aesthetics as the philosophical treatment of art and its consequence for critical discourse on contemporary art (Osborne). Besides acknowledging the discomfort in aesthetics and exposing the relationship between aesthetics and politics, Rancière also provides a critique of the so-called ethical turn, according to which ethical criteria in assessing participatory ("relational") art (good/bad models of participation, etc.) prevail, which means the collapse of artistic and political disagreements in the new forms of reaching a consensus. Claire Bishop calls special attention to the discomfort of participatory art in relation to aesthetics, which is manifested as rejection or evasion of the aesthetic dimension and is also reflected in critical writing. The discursive framework for considering the causes of this discomfort can be found in the productive contradiction of Rancière's aesthetic regime between the autonomy (the autonomy of the aesthetic experience tied to an art form) and the heteronomy of art in its aspiration toward social change (transgressing the boundaries between art and social reality, a fusion of art and life). Given the rise of participatory art in the 1990s and its effort for social change, the ability of art to connect to the community as a politicized aesthetic process, and consequently also of an accompanying discourse to critically reflect this kind of art, should be questioned anew. Besides providing critical theoretical and historical perspectives, an attempt is being made to evaluate the importance of philosophical concepts for the articulation of critical discourse on contemporary (participatory) art. This essay aims to contribute to the analysis of the occurrence of participatory art also by addressing the case of Slovenia.

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## 1. Methodological bases for evaluating contemporary fine/visual arts in Slovenia

Connoisseurs discuss the current crisis of art criticism as a global phenomenon,<sup>1</sup> so we have to consider this issue from a broader and not merely the Slovenian standpoint, while also taking into account certain Slovenian specifics. According to philosopher Peter Osborne, who detected the general absence of a historically grounded criticism of contemporary art, the situation dates back to the failure of the project of a “critical postmodernism” in the face of judgement in the early 1980s.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to writing about contemporary artistic production, post-socialist Slovenia has also witnessed a decrease in qualitative criteria, which is one of the main signs of the mentioned crisis.<sup>3</sup> In the field of contemporary aesthetics/philosophy of art, Aleš Erjavec, for example, also points out this lack of normativity, noting “that the contemporary conditions in art and culture are characterised by normative emptiness.”<sup>4</sup> According to Erjavec, one of the key reasons for this normative emptiness is the extensive establishment of the institutional theory of art (introduced by Arthur Danto and George Dickie), whose purpose is “not, first and foremost, to evaluate or differentiate between good or exceptional art and non-art, but, on the contrary, to enable a definition that will capture all possible forms and examples of art.”<sup>5</sup> Despite the important con-

<sup>1</sup> James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago 2003. We shall also refer here to the *October* roundtable discussion, “The Present Conditions of Art Criticism” (*October*, No. 100, Spring 2002, pp. 220–228), in which the idea of critical judgement was mostly still associated with a late Greenbergian aesthetic formalism and notion of “quality” that led the discussants to reject the problematic of judgement as such in favour of “knowledge” or “theory.”

<sup>2</sup> Peter Osborne, “Art beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Criticism, Art History and Contemporary Art,” *Art History*, Henley-on-Thames, 27 (4/2004), pp. 651–52; cf. also Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York 2013, pp. 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> Tomaž Brejc, “Kaj se je zgodilo likovnemu kritiku: izkušnje množine, dvojine in ednine v slovenskem slikarstvu” [“What Happened to the Art Critic: The Experience of the Plural, the Dual and the Singular in Slovenian Painting”], *Likovne besede*, Ljubljana (73–74/2005), pp. 73–74.

<sup>4</sup> Aleš Erjavec, *Ljubezen na zadnji pogled. Avantgarda, estetika in konec umetnosti* [*Love at Last Sight: Avant-garde, Aesthetics and the End of Art*], Založba ZRC, Ljubljana 2004, p. 128.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

tribution of the most prominent writers (mostly art historians)<sup>6</sup> professionally formed in the 1960s to the reflection on contemporary art, and contrary to the extreme reactions against progressive art at the time, we especially see relativization and passivity in relation to contemporary art. After being on the rise until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the binding and polemically critical discussion has in general gradually dwindled, which testifies to a need for expounding a “platform for a *new critique*.”<sup>7</sup>

As an activity of evaluation, art criticism, which is considered above all the domain of art historians, manifests its expertise by way of an explanatory method with which it not only interprets, but also provides the criteria of evaluation and argues the quality of an artwork.<sup>8</sup> As a science, Slovenian art history formed a normative toolkit for interpretation,<sup>9</sup> which the emergence of 20<sup>th</sup>-century relativism then increasingly more often stripped of its competencies in determining a work’s quality or artistry and meaning.<sup>10</sup> In general, (Western, modernist) art history focuses on artistic objects and differs from the conception of art in the philosophical or aesthetic sense. Philosophical aesthetics (a product of the Eurocentric epistemological context) asks what art is and examines the concepts of the artistic as such. In this regard, it is significant for art history primarily because it reveals the conceptual background, but it is not meant (or, rather, had not been meant until recently) to be employed in the evaluation of individual works and the direct contextual influences on them. A philosophically considered critique strives primarily to express the thought concept (for example, the currents of modernism, such as abstraction; the currents of post-modernism; etc.), which presupposes knowing the context. Its criteria lie outside the work itself, in the idea that the work embodies and according to which art itself becomes a reflection on its own possibilities, for example, in conceptualism. The conceptual turn in the 1960s with its anti-aesthetic and anti-visual interventions into the artworld stresses a fundamental mutation in the ontology

<sup>6</sup> Since the 1960s, the following people were particularly active on the art scene: Braco Rotar, Tomaž Brejc, Jure Mikuž, Andrej Medved and Igor Zabel.

<sup>7</sup> Miško Šuvaković, “Teorija in praksa kritike” [“Theory and Practice of Criticism”], *Likovne besede*, Ljubljana (73–74/2005), pp. 163–164.

<sup>8</sup> Milček Komelj, “Umetnostna zgodovina in kritika” [“Art History and Criticism”], *Mars*, Ljubljana, 1 (1/1989), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> This interpretative toolkit was based on Izidor Cankar’s concept of style.

<sup>10</sup> Komelj, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

of the artwork. The critical legacy of conceptual art acknowledges the conceptual as well as “anti-aesthetic” character of much contemporary art, including participatory art.<sup>11</sup>

However, what is crucial for the processes of the (neo-)avant-garde (conceptualism), “postmodernism” and especially contemporary artistic practices is precisely their crossing artistic boundaries – also in terms of criticism – into the areas of exploring conceptual and broader social phenomena. Contemporary art is ontologically trans- or post-disciplinary in such a way as to cross the multiplicity of disciplinary and institutional discourses necessary for the conceptualization of art.<sup>12</sup> Claire Bishop, an art historian and critic, points out in particular the “social turn” of art in the 1990s, with which artists changed from being the creators of objects into the producers of situations co-created together with other participants in the project.<sup>13</sup>

Faced with contemporary artistic practice, art history found itself in a crisis. Since the 1960s, it had drawn on the findings and methods of linguistics, psychology, psychoanalysis, semantics, various branches of structuralism, semiotics, Marxism, feminism, postcolonial studies, etc. available in the international environment, which also had a significant effect on the happenings in Slovenia, but this did not bring about a greater increase in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary expansions of the field of art history. It was individuals who opened up the traditionally delimited fields of art, including art criticism: Igor Zabel thus explained that, in his critical writing, related especially to his curatorial work at the Slovenian Museum of Modern Art, he endeavoured to be a critic in the Anglo-Saxon sense of someone who writes reviews, which differs from the form of critical writing that originates in the German cultural paradigm, which had been traditionally the most influential in Slovenia. In Zabel’s form of critical writing, one “cannot distinguish between theory, history and evaluation.”<sup>14</sup> In

<sup>11</sup> According to Osborne, contemporary art is historically determined as a postconceptual art. Cf. Peter Osborne, *Postconceptual Condition*, Verso, London & Brooklyn 2018, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London and New York, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Borčič and Vesna Teržan, “Poskušam biti kritik v angloameriškem smislu besede: intervju z Igorjem Zabelom” [“I’m Trying to Be a Critic in the Anglo-American Sense of the Word: An Interview with Igor Zabel”], *Likovne besede*, Ljubljana (17–18/1991), p. 56.

this contribution, we also endeavour to strengthen the significance of various theoretical/philosophical approaches in shaping the interpretative tools of contemporary art history and art theory in order to deal with contemporary (participatory) art in a more effective way.

## 2. Excursus: Philosophy, aesthetics and art criticism

It was already Jan Mukařovský, an aesthetician from the Prague linguistic circle that conceived structural aesthetics as a research and not a normative science, who, in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, argued that the question of aesthetic value in art is closely related to the emergence of art criticism.<sup>15</sup> Here we shall mention the problem of the aesthetic and historical-ontological deficit of semi-otic and linguistic paradigms in art criticism, derived from general formalism as a theory of signification (French structuralism).<sup>16</sup> It is important to distinguish Mukařovský's type of "formalism" of structural aesthetics, which is concerned with the "individualizing function of the aesthetic at the level of feeling and signification."<sup>17</sup> In the perspective of the development of the structural principle in relation to an artwork, a critic, as an artist's collaborator and a mediator between the artist and the audience, assumes the standpoint of the future (as opposed to a historian, who assumes the standpoint of the past). On the other hand, criticism is in a constant intensive relation with the science of art: science too is forced to evaluate, even though it aims to translate evaluation into knowledge to the greatest degree possible. Critics, on the other hand, aim at translating knowledge into evaluation. In this, they come across the question of "aesthetic judgement," which is necessarily related to a certain taste, a normative canon ("aesthetic norm"): "Criticism and the science of art are, as is evident, contradictory even though they are internally mutually connected."<sup>18</sup>

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One of the main things at issue here is the relationship between aesthetics (as a modern philosophical discourse on art) and art criticism – the latter in the sense

<sup>15</sup> Jan Mukařovský, *Estetske razprave [Aesthetic Discussions]*, Slovenska matica, Ljubljana 1978, pp. 48–51.

<sup>16</sup> For the problem of a specific type of formalism raised by the reception of French Theory in Anglophone art criticism (e.g. of Krauss's displacement of formalism from the aesthetic to the theoretical field), cf. Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, pp. 93–107.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> Mukařovský, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

of art judgement, different from Kant's aesthetic (pure reflective) judgement.<sup>19</sup> We can note the revival of interest in philosophical discourses about art (e.g. Danto's acknowledgement of the immanently philosophical character of contemporary art that led to the idea of end of art)<sup>20</sup> as well as the acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the prevailing philosophical discourse on art ("aesthetics") to contemporary art.<sup>21</sup> The turn toward the post-Kantian European philosophical tradition should recognize the historical transformation in the ontology of the artwork as the very sign of its contemporaneity.<sup>22</sup>

According to Šuvaković, criticism is a (meta-)discourse of the second degree (statements about statements) that accompanies, examines and promotes (recognises, describes, explains and interprets) current artistic production.<sup>23</sup> While modernist criticism is either "objective discourse" and a "discourse of art" or a constitutive part of current art movements or even a catalyst and motor of the art production, definition and self-presentation of an artist or an art movement, the period from the end of the 1960s to the 1990s sees the emergence of non-normative or less binding forms of post-avant-garde and post-modernist criticism.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> According to Osborne, the roots of the confusion between aesthetics and art are in the transition between Kant and the Jena Romantic philosophy of art (cf. Osborne, "Art beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Criticism, Art History and Contemporary Art," pp. 656–662). In the light of Osborne's brief reconstruction of the philosophical pre-history of this confusion (Friedrich Schlegel's critique of Kant's use of 'aesthetic'), we can discern the two traditions in the criticism of art: (1) the tradition of 'art as aesthetic' (aesthetic judgement) runs from Kant to Greenberg's late writings (an aesthetic theory of medium and judgements of 'quality'; indifference to the cognitive, relational, historical dimensions of work of art); and (2) tradition of 'art as (historical) ontology' (art-critical judgement) runs from philosophical Romanticism to conceptual art and its consequences in the 'post-medium' (Krauss) or 'transmedia' (Osborne) condition. In this second tradition (the first to think the ontology of the artwork as the condition of its experience), Osborne looks for the conceptual ground for contemporary art criticism.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Columbia University Press, New York 1986, pp. 81–115.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* According to Osborne, one of the reasons is also a diffusion of interest in post-structuralism into Anglo-American art criticism (cf. *ibid.*, p. 7).

<sup>23</sup> Miško Šuvaković, *Postmoderna (73 pojma)*, Nova knjiga/Alfa, Belgrade 1995, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> In several places, Šuvaković provides a similar classification of art criticism, spanning from modernism (for example, criticism as a judgement or a response to a work of art: positivistic, impressionistic, expressionistic, formalistic or existentialist criticism) through the "crisis of criticism" in the 1960s and 1970s ("against interpretation," acritical criticism,

Postmodernist theory and art in general could be said to be a unique critique of the integral humanistic view of the world. Due to the disintegration of the firm categorical constructions of modernism (philosophy, aesthetics, art history and criticism), the conception of the subject also underwent a fundamental turn and came to be considered a product of very heterogeneous languages of culture.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the critical writing about contemporary art and culture was increasingly less transparent and more heterogeneous. We shall demonstrate how a critical discourse of contemporary art should participate in the revival of a philosophical art criticism.

The key task of philosophy/aesthetics in relation to art is supposed to be (or was supposed to be until recently) a persistent search for the definition of art.<sup>26</sup> The task of aesthetics understood as the philosophy of art is to construct and interpret the definitions of art and a work of art or to provide arguments for the claim that something (an object, a situation, an event, a text) is or is not a work of art. Aesthetics is a metalingual philosophic theory that provides a legitimacy, in terms of value, meaning and theory, to something that can become or can be experienced, understood and evaluated as a work of art. Aesthetic definitions are either ontological (when they define a work of art as a morphological phenomenon) or relativistic (when they define a work of art as a conventionally accepted object, situation or event).

The possible new prospects of philosophical-aesthetic reflection in establishing normativity can also be considered in the context of a prior questioning of the generally established institutional theory of art.<sup>27</sup> This has important consequences for the interpretative work of art theory and criticism, which, in contemporary times, find themselves in the context of the demands for a critique of culture and the broader network of the global transnational capitalist society, which, among other things, also calls for a renewed critique of political

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criticism of criticism, structuralistic criticism) to contemporary times (post-criticism, criticism at work, media criticism, criticism of art as criticism of culture). Cf. Šuvaković, *Post-moderna*, pp. 68–69.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>27</sup> Erjavec, *Ljubezan na zadnji pogled*, pp. 101–115.

economy.<sup>28</sup> In line with the institutional theory, they therefore usually begin by problematizing the contextuality of a work of art or an artistic practice, which lies in specific functions of culture and society.<sup>29</sup> It seems that this eliminates the questions about the functional theory of aesthetic experience as the main aesthetic concept and qualifier of value (tradition of modernism). Furthermore, the social turn of art (Bishop) takes us through the insufficient sociological discourse on art to a renewed and strengthened philosophical–aesthetic reflection on contemporary (participatory) art, the kind stimulated by Rancière’s aesthetic oeuvre. Rancière is a thinker who, among other things, “tried to change aesthetics into a tool for the interpretation of contemporary art by declaring modernism – especially the Greenbergian one – to be outdated.”<sup>30</sup> The dominant category of modernist art criticism was, until the 1960s, the category of medium. New philosophical concept of art criticism should explore the consequences for modernist criticism of the deconstruction of the ontological significance of the “medium.”<sup>31</sup> One task of contemporary criticism is, according to Osborne, the renewal of the legacy of Romantic philosophy of art (bequeathed by Benjamin and Adorno) for clarifying the distinction between “art” and “aesthetic” in the context of contemporary art.

### 3. Methodological remarks on participatory art

#### Art-theoretical and critical aspects

The analysis of Claire Bishop’s case studies in *Artificial Hells* (2012) effectively shows the challenge posed by the methodological implications of participatory process art, which demand that we seek alternative criteria for the study and evaluation of such art.<sup>32</sup> When research is faced with an artistic practice that has

<sup>28</sup> Lev Kreft, *Estetikov atelje: od modernizma k sodobni umetnosti [Aesthetician’s Studio: From Modernism to Contemporary Art]*, Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani, Ljubljana 2015, p. 268.

<sup>29</sup> *Context-driven research* is becoming crucial also for contemporary aesthetics. Cf. Ernest Ženko, “Mode-2 Aesthetics”, *Filozofski Vestnik*, Ljubljana, 38 (2/2007), pp. 99–115.

<sup>30</sup> Aleš Erjavec, “Predgovor” [“Foreword”], in Terry Smith, *Sodobna umetnost in sodobnost*, Slovensko društvo likovnih kritikov, Ljubljana 2013, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, p. 3. Osborne demonstrates a transacategorical character of the so-called post-conceptual art (equated with contemporary art) as a consequence of the critical destruction of “medium.”

<sup>32</sup> The work of North American critics was crucial for the establishment of the field of participatory art in Europe, for the creation of the terminology used in its analysis and thereby

to do with people and social processes, visual analyses prove to be insufficient as they miss the affective dynamics between the participants of the event itself. It was already conceptual and performative turns in art of the 1960s and 1970s that tried to shake the commodity-object in favour of an elusive experience, but visuality remained an important part of them. In contemporary participatory art, performativity (in addition to teaching as an artistic medium)<sup>33</sup> is crucial since the live contact between the participants enables a more effective participatory engagement. The emphasis therefore lies on direct experiences based on the process of intersubjective exchange (group dynamic, raised consciousness, etc.). In view of this, Bishop calls attention to the problem of only rare observers having the possibility of obtaining an overall insight into the generally longer participatory projects; often, the curators are the only ones with a comprehensive overview of individual projects, but their narratives lack a critical distance due to their own personal involvement.<sup>34</sup> We can see this as one of the consequences of the curator becoming the central figure of the art world in the 1990s, also tasked with theoretically expounding the support for both their own activity and the creation of art projects. To a certain degree, the figure of the curator thus overshadows the role that the art critic played in modernism.

Bishop's entire project, delineated in her *Artificial Hells*, can be understood as a call for "more bold, affective and troubling forms of participatory art and criticism."<sup>35</sup> The author devotes special attention not only to the processual nature of participatory art, but also to its product or result, which she attempts to evaluate in relation to the formation of an "analysis of the politics of spectatorship."<sup>36</sup> In this text, we also affirmatively consider the mediating object (concept, image or story) as an important link between the artist and a secondary audience, on the one hand, and the related elaboration of the politics of spectatorship and the critical view, on the other. We will return to this in our discussion of local Slovenian artistic practice.

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also for the formation of Claire Bishop herself. In Europe, the main stimulation for the development of the field is Nicholas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, from which Claire Bishop decisively distances herself.

33 According to Bishop, the two predominant forms of participation in contemporary art are delegated performance and pedagogical project.

34 Bishop, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

The key critical topics related to participatory art include the tension between (1) questions of quality (related to the limitation of the traditional modernist value of objectness) and the equality of forms/expressions and (2) between individual (also a modernist value) and group/collective authorship. As Bishop's case studies of participatory art illustrate,<sup>37</sup> we face the insufficiency of the positivistic sociological approach to participatory art (evidence, measurability of results), on the one hand, and the need to preserve the fundamentally undefined reflections on quality characteristic of the humanities, on the other hand. In discussing participatory art, *quality* is often considered a contentious word because it supposedly serves the interests of the market and social elites; furthermore, it is believed to be connected with the connoisseur formalism of art history (and thus also with the figure of the modernist art critic); and, finally, in a more radical perspective, the question of quality is supposedly equated with the dividing line between high and low culture. Bishop builds her analysis on the presupposition that "value judgements are necessary, not as a means to reinforce elite culture and police the boundaries of art and non-art, but as a way to understand and clarify our shared values at a given historical moment."<sup>38</sup>

Special attention should be given to the forms of conceptual and affective complexity of the socially oriented art projects that reject the aesthetic dimension. Like in conceptualism and situationism, the photo-documents of contemporary participatory projects (workshops, public tribunals, protests, etc.), as "anti-aesthetic visual phenomena," do not offer objects of new formalism, but prompt an analysis of their contribution to "the social and artistic experience being generated."<sup>39</sup>

In involving people, participatory art aims above all at "the creative rewards of participation as a politicised working process."<sup>40</sup> In the methodological sense, dealing with people and social processes, however, at least partially requires a sociological reading since the analysis necessarily has to include concepts such as "community," "society," etc., which have traditionally had a greater significance within the social sciences than the humanities.<sup>41</sup> But because, in addi-

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

tion to being a social activity, participatory art is also a symbolic activity, which enables it not only to be embedded in the world, but also to be separated from it and have a certain aesthetic distance to it. Accordingly, the positivist social sciences are, in this regard, less useful than the more general, more abstract concepts from the field of philosophy (especially aesthetics/philosophy of art and political philosophy).

For the needs of discussing participatory art practices, we use theories and concepts from aesthetics or the philosophy of art and political philosophy (Rancière, Mouffe), philosophy of contemporary art (Osborne), contemporary art history and criticism (Bishop) and also architecture and urbanism (Jurman and Šušteršič, Krasny).<sup>42</sup> This specific form of interdisciplinarity and trans- or post-disciplinarity differs from the interdisciplinary approaches of art history from the 1970s since the need for theoretical inter- or transdisciplinarity originates in the participatory art practices themselves.

### **The politics of aesthetics in contemporary (participatory) art**

With the evident need to find new ways of analysing participatory art that would no longer be related merely to visuality, we are, as Bishop has noted, faced with the problem that art and the aesthetic are often characterized as “merely visual, superfluous, academic” and thus less important than the concrete results concerning social relations.<sup>43</sup> Questioning the emphasis on affective responses, compassionate identification and consensual dialogue brings to light a typical discourse around participatory art, in which “an ethics of interpersonal interaction comes to prevail over a politics of social justice.”<sup>44</sup> Opposed to this trend, which can be denoted as an “ethical turn,” is Jacques Rancière’s politics of aesthetics.

As a rule, criticism solves the problems with describing the artistic value of participatory art by resorting to ethical criteria (judging whether an artist provides a good or a bad model of collaboration). An example of this is the ethics of au-

<sup>42</sup> On participatory urbanism, see Urška Jurman and Apolonija Šušteršič, ed., *AB – Architect’s Bulletin (Participation)*, Ljubljana, 41 (188–189/2011). See also Elke Krasny, ed., *Hands-On Urbanism 1850–2012: The Right to Green*, MCCM Creations, Architekturzentrum Wien, Hong Kong and Vienna 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Bishop, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

thorial renunciation as a criterion of judgement and the comparison with other projects: a superior model of collaborative practice is one “in which individual authorship is suppressed in favour of facilitating the creativity of others.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, the visual, conceptual and experiential results of the projects are often subordinate to the judgement on the relationship between the artists and their collaborators; what might be interesting as art (for example, social dialogue becoming an art medium, the significance of dematerializing a work of art and its transformation into a social process or the specific affectiveness of social exchange) is thus subordinate to ethical judgements on working procedures and intentionality.

Contrary to the sociologically and ethically coloured approach to evaluation is the decision to deal with participatory projects “*as art*.”<sup>46</sup> In view of the described circumstances, we need to reconsider the role of aesthetics, which some time ago (in the context of historical avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes) became discredited for allegedly concealing the inequalities and exclusions in society, which is why it was equated with formalism, decontextualization and depoliticization; furthermore, aesthetics became synonymous with the market and social hierarchy. A certain re-evaluation of aesthetics only came about in the new millennium with the important contribution of Rancière’s aesthetic thought. According to Bishop, Rancière rehabilitates *aisthesis* as an “autonomous regime of experience” that cannot be captured with the tools of logic, reason or morality.<sup>47</sup> According to Rancière, aesthetics is not “the name of a discipline,” but the “name of a specific regime for the identification of art”<sup>48</sup>; it refers to a special mode of experience and thought about art, which he names the aesthetic regime. What is essential for him is the distribution of the sensible, which is possible only on the basis of an imminent and direct relation between aesthetics and politics and which extends the realm of the aesthetic beyond the limits of the art world to the domain of the social or political.<sup>49</sup> The aesthetic regime is characterized by interventions into the established distribution of the

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden 2009, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, London and New York 2004, p. 82.

sensible, the equality of represented subjects and styles and the singularity of determining meaning.<sup>50</sup> It emerged with the “aesthetic revolution” at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was the main characteristic of historical avant-gardes and is still relevant today. In addition to overcoming traditional art classifications and hierarchies, Rancière insists on preserving the tension or paradox between the autonomy and the heteronomy of art: “in this regime, art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or something other than art.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, he tries to think together the artistic and the socio-political dimension of both avant-garde and contemporary art practices. With the aesthetic regime, Rancière introduces a political conceptualization of the sensible, which he demonstrates with the interventions of the artists and the audience (emancipated spectators) into the existing distributions of the sensible (the distribution and exchange of ideas, skills, know-how, experience, etc.), which in the modernist paradigm remained unreflected, understood as an aesthetic disturbance and the like.<sup>52</sup>

What is telling here regarding participatory or “relational” art is Rancière’s claim that, in view of the artistic attempts at strengthening social ties and the sense of community, politics and aesthetics disappear in ethics or its instrumentalization in the name of reaching a consensus and denying the antagonisms in a community.<sup>53</sup> In his influential critique of the recent ethical turn, Rancière points out the weakening or even the elimination of political dissensus and social antagonisms.<sup>54</sup>

One of the starting points of Rancière’s discussion on the “paradox of political art” is the understanding of political art in its capacity to establish (aesthetic) distance from social happening.<sup>55</sup> The thematization of this distance as a break or a dissensus is crucial for the consideration of contemporary artistic practices

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p. 36.

<sup>52</sup> The concept of the emancipated spectator is one of the key concepts for understanding the elaboration of the critical view in this discussion. Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Verso, London and New York, 2009.

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Politics of Aesthetics,” *Maska*, Ljubljana, 19 (88–89/2004), p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> Rancière detects the ethical turn primarily in two forms: “sublime art” and “relational art.” Cf. Rancière *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, pp. 109–132.

<sup>55</sup> Rancière, “Politics of Aesthetics,” p. 10.

and the policies of representation.<sup>56</sup> Due to it drawing on the fabric of society, contemporary art is always in a specific paradoxical intertwinement of distance from and proximity to various ideologies and public policies. Based on the above, we can conclude that there is no a priori criterion for the establishment of the relation between aesthetics and politics or politics and art. According to this theory, all art could potentially be political due to the lack of criteria for the distribution of the sensible. But with his critique of the ethical turn, which subjects art to moral judgement, Rancière clearly directs his critical attention at the collapse of artistic and political dissensuses into new forms of consensuses, thereby at least indirectly giving a value judgement on a certain type of art. The discussed examples make it clear that the “new distribution of the sensible” is not shown through abstract works unrelated to political topics or through the didacticism of critical art – contrary to the “good” projects that ensure the aesthetic equality of forms in which the dissensual relation is realized by way of an aesthetic break, persistence in ambiguity and tension between the world of art and everyday reality.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the numerous productive thought impulses, we also need to direct our attention to the lack of normativity in Rancière himself. Tracing Rancière’s thought, Bishop points out especially the ethically oriented value judgements and binaries such as “the false polarity of ‘bad’ singular authorship and ‘good’ collective authorship,” but does not go deeper into problematizing the lack of normative criteria in Rancière, whom she refers to when criticizing the ethical turn, which essentially concerns contemporary participatory art.<sup>58</sup> Bishop believes that Rancière’s arguments are “philosophical rather than art critical,” but what she nevertheless finds important is especially his debunking of the binaries in the discourse of politicized art such as individual/collective, author/spectator, active/passive, etc., because this opened the path toward the development of a new artistic terminology by which to discuss spectatorship.<sup>59</sup> The fact is that

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<sup>56</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Bloomsbury, London and New York 2015, p. 148.

<sup>57</sup> Among the examples that show Rancière’s appreciation of the rebellious forms of critical art that evidently resist current events are Martha Rosler’s anti-war photomontages (*Bringing the War Home, 1967–1972*) and Chris Burden’s *The Other Vietnam Memorial* (1991). Cf. Rancière, “The Politics of Aesthetics,” pp. 14–15.

<sup>58</sup> Bishop, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

the questions of value and judgement do not play any visible role in Rancière's aesthetic works. We therefore agree with Jakub Stejskal's conclusion:

“That the question of value is not addressed by Rancière can perhaps be explained by the generally egalitarian character of his aesthetics, for which any hierarchical distribution is to be dissolved. Introducing artistic excellence and good taste smacks of hierarchies and canons.”<sup>60</sup>

Rancière's resistance to aesthetic evaluation or his positive evaluation of only that art which aims at securing the aesthetic equality of forms – despite his otherwise delving deep into the paradoxical nature of aesthetic experience – seems to be ignorant of another key paradox: “that the egalitarian redistribution taking place in the aesthetic sensorium becomes accessible only through an evaluative experience that elevates certain artefacts above others because of their very possibility to have such an effect on us.”<sup>61</sup> We thus find ourselves, on the one hand, in the sphere of the institutional theory of art, and, on the other hand, within the normativity of western modernism, both in Rancière's aesthetic regime and Bishop's critical discourse. Whereas “aesthetic” or “autonomous” art openly embraces aesthetic judgement and its translation into money value, there is a false openness and distance in heteronomous (participatory) art, which operates within the same boundaries of the institutionally defined artworld. We should acknowledge that with the rise of neoliberalism the idea of judgement was replaced by the idea of the measurement of art in terms of social importance/impact by both a neoliberal state's mechanisms of power and an activism opposed to it. The value of contemporary participatory art is thus not articulated in its own terms, and therefore the artworld urgently needs a discourse of judgement or validation.

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#### **4. Critical and interpretative views of participatory practices from Slovenia**

After the fall of communism, Eastern Europe, that is, former socialist countries, also witnessed a rise in socially engaged and participatory art. When Slovenia

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<sup>60</sup> Jakub Stejskal, “Rancière's Aesthetic Revolution and Its Modernist Residues,” <https://philarchive.org/archive/STERAR-6>, p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

became independent in 1991, it went through a period of transition to neoliberal capitalism, which was crucial for the formation of new production conditions for making art. This led to a change not only in the way that artists worked and related to their audience, but also in the reception and the evaluation of art, which moved more and more to the margins of social happening. While the critical performative, research and participatory practices moved from the traditional institutional venues of fine and visual arts through alternative places and locations into the broader social space, they remained quite neglected in the eyes of criticism and critical theoretic reflection. We can assume that what caused a certain unease among the critics was especially their participatory procedures, which demanded a fundamental rethinking of value criteria. We also have to stress the pragmatic aspect of the method of researching such arts, which due to their experiential nature demand a specific discursivity: concretely, the case study mentioned below took several years of continued research of the local art scene, ranging from the study of archival material and a series of conversations, interviews and discussions with the artists, curators and individual participants in the projects to an engagement with the audience to which the research findings were presented in the form of texts, lectures, exhibitions and public debates.<sup>62</sup>

The first wave of art in the urban public and social space that appeared in Slovenia in the mid-1990s was followed by the second wave at the beginning of the new millennium (the majority of these artists have been from the narrower sphere of fine arts and architecture).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> In this process, however, a transition took place from a theoretical critical treatment of the practices of Celje artists (research about the so-called Celje alternative of the 1970s, Admission Free Festival from the late 1990s, etc.) to active participation in several projects of artists from the Association of Fine Artists of Celje. Recently the author of this essay has assumed the role of curator in several exhibition projects: *Grass, Sparrow and Gasoline*: artistic actions, interventions, performances and installations in public space, ZDSLU Gallery and the public space of the city of Ljubljana (2013); *The Architecture of Interpersonal Relationships*: open studio, Celje (2015); *WE MET AT SIX: Proposals for Communal Practices and Green Areas in Celje*: an exhibition on view at the Celje Gallery of Contemporary Art (2015).

<sup>63</sup> Among the more prominent socially engaged artists of the first wave is Marjetica Potrč; from the second wave are especially engaged members of Ljubljana-based Obrat association (Polonca Lovšin and others) and also of the Association of Fine Artists of Celje (Andreja Džakušič and others).

These artists are interested not merely in the overlooked aspects of the local urban space in their research, but also in the relationships with the local residents of the space of exploration itself, as well as in the aesthetic and conceptual relationships with the gallery audience and the general public. The participatory process at a specific location itself does not actually have a secondary audience, which makes the public critical discourse in the form of an exhibition all the more important. The exhibition discloses the results of the preceding artistic research related, for example, to specific city locations that stand out by their topical nature since they are subject to broader civil initiatives. The artists communicate the messages from the separate initiatives through heterogeneous and multi-dimensional works, which are aesthetic and at the same time expand into the social space (the set of works can include live events, installations, documentary material, drafts, sketches, drawings, photographs, video, as well as natural materials, relocated from the urban environment into the gallery space). Creating works/projects following the principles of participation is necessarily integrated into a network of connections with specific historical and socio-political contexts as well as everyday life situations. The artistic means of the urban life research are always contextually specific and thus bound to the singularities of determining the meaning.<sup>64</sup>

## 5. Toward an elaboration of the politics of a critical view

In conclusion we shall summarize the main challenges for contemporary philosophically informed art criticism: one of the main problems is how to deal with participatory art as a transdisciplinary concept and how philosophically oriented aesthetics (questioning the truth/definitions/social functions of art) can help to construct a transdisciplinary ontology in such a way as to cross the multiplicity of disciplinary and institutional discourses. Rancière's aesthetics can bring some valuable critical insights regarding the ethical turn of aesthetics and politics but cannot contribute to critical judgment about participatory art (in terms of the changed ontology of the artwork). It would be useful for art criticism to reconsider the meaning of the concept of socially determined autonomy (in the Adornian sense, accepting Schiller's argument on the autonomy as appearance in the artwork) for contemporary ("post-autonomous") participatory art and (*politics of*) aesthetics (Rancière). Reevaluation of this concept can also

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<sup>64</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 23; Bishop, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

bring a better understanding of artists' and activists' aims in global social movements for a new democracy. The treatment of participatory art, with its tension between autonomy and heteronomy in the context of the growing hybridization of autonomy and neoliberalization, demands a reevaluation of the critique of political economy in art and aesthetics. This would be helpful for art criticism on how to treat spaces of participatory artistic "*counter arrangements*" (in the Foucauldian sense as well as in the sense of struggle with the commodity form) or specific interspaces of art in a global capitalist society and also on how to deal with participation itself. In horizontally-oriented cultural organizations (e.g. of producing participatory art projects), all models of participation and the activation of the "audience" must be reconsidered, including ambivalent processes in the Post-Fordist participation imperative. This is crucial in searching for alternative social modes of the institutionalization of art and its critical (self-)reflection.

Rancière's conception of aesthetics in its close relation to politics can importantly contribute to our understanding the effects of contemporary art dealing with the social field – and thereby also the unease in the related criticism. With the help of Rancière's aesthetic regime and the politics of aesthetics, we can also see contemporary participatory art in Slovenia as a certain continuation of the participatory impulses of international neo-avant-garde movements and their heteronomous nature.<sup>65</sup>

A frequent objection to participatory, community-oriented art is that the ethics of interpersonal relations prevails over the politics of social justice (Bishop). But it is not necessary that every such project ends in a consensus, exclusion and the concealment of otherness rather than in an aesthetic break with the habits of perception, a break that, by way of a dissensus, irony or critique, arouses a unique negative pleasure, embarrassment, unease, ambivalence, etc. in relation to the questions about the "excluded" as a condition of the existence of every community (for example, about foreign migrant workers). For art is also characterized by elements of critically opposing society and operating in the field of antagonism or *agonism*, where it can realize the power of maintaining a contradictory

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Mojca Puncer, "The Politics of Aesthetics of Contemporary Art in Slovenia and its Avant-Garde Sources", *Filozofski Vestnik*, Ljubljana, 37 (1/2016), pp. 133–156, 226–227.

position in relation to the economico-political imperatives.<sup>66</sup> The participatory process is not immune to the characteristic traps of the contemporary capitalist modes of production when it comes, for example, to unpaid collaborators that co-create the work of art, etc. This is why it is not unusual that, with its distancing from the conventional forms of art production under capitalism, participatory art prompts discussions within the tradition of Marxist and post-Marxist writing about art (Mouffe, Rancière, Bishop, etc.).

In Slovenia, Lev Kreft has called for a reconsideration of the relevance of Marxist aesthetics in relation to the critique of political economy in the context of both art and aesthetics by referring to Marx's research into the "*esthesis* of the capital" and his "critical analysis of fetishism of commodities and universal mystification," which Marx does not discuss "as ideological illusions, but as objective conditions of sensuality and perception."<sup>67</sup> In contemporary times, after art and aesthetics turned to everyday life and all areas of life have been taken over by the globalized capitalist machine, the need for such a critique has become evident in view of the increasing objectification of interpersonal relations in line with the criterion of usefulness "because the commodity form translates relations between people into relations between objects."<sup>68</sup> As a subversive social power against capitalism, art must reach toward the social (a sensual experience of community), but at the same time remain in the domain of art and be successful in both fields, which means that – in line with Rancière's aesthetic regime – it persists in a constant tension, even a paradox. Artistic re-presentation has the power of intervening in public discourse, which appears as a contextually specific artistic and aesthetic strategy (of division, intervention, over-identification, etc.), repeatedly put to the test in every new project (Rancière, Bishop). This realization has important consequences for the reflection on contemporary participatory art, which, with the democratization of the aesthetic means of expression, endeavours to transform the material conditions of its own practice and establish new, different relations with the audience and the reality outside art. This is also in concurrence with Rancière's finding on the radical contingency of the work of an "emancipated spectator," who is in principle active and

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London and New York, 2000.

<sup>67</sup> Kreft, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

equal with everybody.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, such a politics of spectatorship essentially concerns and determines the formation of the critical view and the elaboration of its politics. That is also one of the guiding lines of this discussion, which, by using contemporary philosophical concepts and by interpreting the participatory artistic practice in a conceptually open way, encourages and deepens the critical reflection on contemporary participatory art in Slovenia and the broader international context of the movements of the contemporary transnational globalized artworld.

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<sup>69</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 17.