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The Politics of Aesthetics of Contemporary Art in Slovenia and its Avant-Garde Sources

1. The Theoretical and Contextual Frame

1.1 An Introduction to the Politics of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art
Our study of the meaning of the connections between avant-garde art and politics for contemporary artistic practices presumes the synthesis of theoretical discoveries regarding the avant-garde deconstruction of the modernist work of art and the institution of art (Peter Bürger's theory of the avant-garde[1]) with contemporary findings in studies of the avant-garde.[2] These discoveries are then linked to the key international avant-garde movements of the 20th century, including Slovenian art, and to the further reconciliation of art and the social sphere in contemporary participatory practices.

We shed additional light on the avant-garde impulses for the reciprocal articulation of aesthetics and politics by linking them with the Jacques Rancière philosophy when we delve into the key undertaking of contemporary aesthetics, which is for us to theoretically explain contemporary sentience. Above all, we are interested in the social destiny of the sensuous as shown in the contemporary critical and socially engaged art context, which can be perceived as a specific politics of aesthetics. According to Rancière, aesthetics is linked to a special mode of experience of or thinking about art that he calls an aesthetic regime. The aesthetic regime is characterized by an internal relation between aesthetics and politics that unveils to us—as does politics—"what is common to

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[1]   *Cf.* Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[2]   In this context, we are interested in those new approaches that are at the same time in dialogue with the philosophy of Jacques Rancière. *Cf.* Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Aesthetic Revolutions and the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

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the community" within the (given/new) "distribution of the sensible".[3] Such a (re)distribution is possible only by an inherent and direct connection between aesthetics and politics, and it "extends aesthetics beyond the strict realm of art" into social or political domains.[4] Rancière thus connects the theories of politics and aesthetics respectively in the "redistribution of the sensible", which enables for us "a consideration of the aesthetic in politics, as well as of the political in aesthetics".[5] Typical traits of the aesthetic regime are permanent rivalry between art and non-art, interventions in the established distribution of the sensible, the equality of represented subjects and styles, and "the absolute singularity" of defining a meaning.[6] The aesthetic regime of art appeared together with "aesthetic revolution"[7] at the end of the 18th century and was also the main characteristic of the historical avant-gardes. The idea of aesthetical revolution is one of those concepts which seems to be especially appropriate for exploring avant-gardes, as it discusses the effect of aesthetic avant-garde movements that differ from merely artistic avant-gardes of the first three decades of the 20th century, in that that they link their art projects to the political avant-garde. Their intent is not only an introduction of new styles or techniques (artistic avant-garde, the autonomy of art), but also a transformation of life and the world (aesthetic avant-garde, heteronomy of the world of art and non-artistic spheres).[8] In order to achieve this, an aesthetic revolution is needed as an event, which according to Rancière brings a watershed "redistribution of the sensible" and the start of the "aesthetic regime of art" that remains with us down to this day.[9] Besides transcending artistic classifications and hierarchies, Rancière insists

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[3] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 12–13.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 82.

[5] Léa Gauthier and Jean-Marc Adolphe, "Democracy as a Scandal Bound to Happen", *Maska* 19, 86–87 (2004), p. 50.

[6] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 23.

[7] *Ibid*., p. 27. Rancière actualizes the idea of aesthetic revolution that comes from German Romanticism: the avant-garde efforts to transform life itself and the world echo Schiller's utopian idea of the aesthetic state as the joining of the artistic and political.

[8] This is also a central thesis pursued by Aleš Erjavec with the coauthors in *Aesthetic Revolutions and the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements* (*cf. op. cit*.).

[9] Aesthetic revolution can be understood according to Erjavec as a series of events caused by the aesthetic avant-garde movements of the 20th century—also outside Europe and the United States (Mexico, Nicaragua, Brazil, etc.). *Cf*. Erjavec, "Introduction", in *op. cit*., p. 5.

on the preservation of tensions or on a basic paradox[10] between the autonomy and heteronomy of art, and he tries to include the artistic, social and political dimensions of both avant-garde and contemporary (participatory) artistic practices, which all belong to the same aesthetic regime in his thought.

The actualization of art as a politicized aesthetic practice today concerns its connection with a community and democratic emancipatory politics that allows a *dissensus*[11] in the name of equality. Rancière understands avant-garde art as a driving force behind political subjectivization or as an aesthetic anticipation of a future community.[12] He explains aesthetic practice by means of forms of visibility shown through art on the basis of a primary aesthetics that defines the space of an individual community. The key element here is emancipation stemming from the principle of the equality of intelligence and starting with an understanding that the distribution of the visible is a part of the configuration of dominance and submission. Emancipation begins "when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions".[13] The key supposition here is that of an (in)equality or contact between two modes of the distribution of the sensible (police and politics). This is a regime which defines who is (in)visible in the public space of a community. On this premise, Rancière forms a view of the equality of intelligence as an emancipatory politics and fundamental principle of aesthetics—also in the context of art:

> This shared power of the equality of intelligence links individuals, makes them exchange their intellectual adventures, in so far as it keeps them separate from one another, equally capable of using the power everyone has to plot her own path. [...]. It is in this power of associating and dissociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists—that is to say, the emancipation of each of us as spec-

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[10] Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 36: "The politics of art in the aesthetic regime of art, or rather its metapolitics, is determined by this founding paradox: in this regime, art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art."

[11] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 148: "Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible."

[12] *Cf*. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, pp. 29–30.

[13] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 13.

tator. Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation.[14]

The idea of the emancipated and active spectator thus derives from the idea of intellectual emancipation,[15] and in the context of aesthetic regime it regards art as a form of emancipation.

Rancière's actualization of the relations between artistic and political avant-gardes and their placement within the aesthetic regime of art prompts us to question ourselves about the avant-garde legacy, its influence on the contemporary art of participation and modes of subjectivization in the light of its integration within a collective or community. Alongside utopia and revolution, participation is the main idea of progressive art that strives for positive social change. Regarding the expansion of participatory principle, Rancière establishes how contemporary politics and art experienced the so-called "ethical turn"[16], which along with the efforts to re-establish social bonds contributes to the creation of an image of an imaginary, non-problematic, unified and conflict-free community. The effectiveness of politics as conflict recognized in avant-garde art disappears in the neutral and consensual form of relation in contemporary art. Rancière therefore advocates art and politics that are aware of the necessity of acknowledging a dissensus in a community.

The politics of aesthetics is always a meta-politics denoted by the fundamental paradox of art that is simultaneously non-art; the suppression of art as a separate reality and the concealment of its autonomy give birth to a promise of emancipation by transforming art into a form of life. Here we are trying to think such a politics of aesthetics while discussing the examples of participatory practices in Slovenia in the light of the avant-garde artistic tradition.

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[14]   *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[15]   Intellectual emancipation is a result of Rancière's study of archival sources on workers' emancipation, which through the example of the French professor Joseph Jacotot from the 19th century is recorded in the book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987). This work was the basis for the subsequent redefinition of politics in the context of a so-called (re-)distribution of the sensible. *Cf.* Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 35: "Social emancipation was simultaneously an aesthetic emancipation, a break with the ways of feeling, seeing and saying that characterized working-class identity in the old hierarchical order."

[16]   Rancière mainly detects the ethical turn in two forms: "sublime art" and "relational art". *Cf.* Rancière *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, pp. 109–132.

1.2 Participatory Artistic Practice and Its Avant-Garde Sources

We will start by presenting key theoretical concepts and contexts that serve as a basis for current aesthetic thought in order to reflect on the relation between avant-garde artistic tradition and politics. This relation originally presented itself as a symptom of the institutional crisis in art and as a sign of transitions and splits between the modern autonomy of the institution of art and the aspirations of the avant-garde to transcend art and move towards life (aesthetic heteronomy). As a rule, attempts at avant-garde theorization must first confront Peter Bürger's influential *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1974).[17] Bürger understands the paradoxical situation of the division of art between autonomy and pragmatic aims through the inability of the avant-garde to abolish art in or through new life practices, and he defines its aspiration as historical. As a consequence, the neo-avant-garde of the 1960 could not re-establish the sociopolitical protest of the historical avant-garde but could only institutionalize it, as its art pieces entered modern art museums instead of life. According to Bürger, art can only enter into the so-called "post avant-gardiste phase", that is into a period of the "post-modern avant-garde" or "post-avant-garde".[18] What is very interesting for us here are the events in Slovenia that led from the historical avant-garde via the neo-avant-garde to the retro-avant-garde movement of Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) and thus contributed to the third-generation avant-gardes or a specific postsocialist avant-garde, which can be understood as a product of Eastern or postsocialist postmodernism in the territories of former (and in some cases current) socialist countries (Cuba, China).[19] Bürger concludes that the avant-garde self-critique of the system of art, which in its most radical form

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[17] Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-garde* developed the so-called critical institutional theory of art from a Hegelian perspective and with the conceptual apparatus of the critical theory of society as its background. When the avant-garde rejects bourgeois aestheticism for isolating art (and thereby the institution of art) from life, it simultaneously advocates the (total, modernist, utopian) project of transforming the practice of living itself. However, a precondition for the emergence of avant-garde art as a self-criticism of the institution of art is precisely its autonomy.

[18] *Cf.* Charles Jencks, "The Post-Avant-Garde", in *Art and Design* 3, 7–8 (1987), p. 20. Such a classification of historical avant-garde movements into three periods in the area of the former Yugoslavia, in which such movements are in many ways parallel to those of Central Europe, can be found in the anthology by Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (eds.), *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes and Post-Avant-Aardes in Yugoslavia 1918–1991*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

[19] In his classification of avant-garde instead of post-avant-garde, Aleš Erjavec introduces the concept of postsocialist avant-garde. *Cf.* Erjavec, *op. cit*, pp. 7–9.

means destroying the institution of art itself, enables a fundamental theoretical insight into the socio-historical determinism and partiality of art in general.

A large part of both the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde refuted the principle of the work of art—an object, a product—as did not pass unnoticed among theorists of the avant-garde. Hence we can follow the flow of the transformation of an art piece as an artefact into a post-aesthetical work of art (i.e. art that is not substantiated by the category of beauty, etc.), a work of art as a fragment and avant-garde tendencies for artistic events and situations outside artistic environments. In stressing the outside nature of the avant-garde with respect to art, we have in mind its main intention of transcending the boundaries (norms, standards, canons, institutions, forms, techniques, etc.) of art itself. One of the consequences of this is the closeness of the artistic avant-garde with often controversial and paradoxical processes variously termed as the politicization, educationalization, ecologization, technification and scientification of art. Especially important but controversial is the process of art's politicization, which has already received numerous critiques (Benjamin) and approvals (Rancière) in turn. This historical avant-garde line announces "a social turn"[20] of art and the simultaneous occurrence of participatory art, which is on the rise since the 1990s.[21] While the participation of historical avant-garde generally dealt with the revolutionary mobilization of masses for total and utopian political goals (the dissolution of art in life in close correlation with party politics), it transforms into a more reformative participation of people (democratization of art in connection with anarchistic activism and emancipatory movements) with the neo-avant-garde, and it leads to a less political and more playful or didactic participation in the sense of changing consciousness and perception.[22] Now the centres of participatory practices are those communities which are not

[20] *Cf*. Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents", in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 11–40.

[21] We are dealing here with so-called post-studio practices, in which the key media are people and for which the key concepts in use since 1990s are "socially engaged art", "community art", "relational art", "participatory art", "collaborative art", "dialogic art", "new public art", and "social practice".

[22] For a historical perspective of "participation as a programme" in avant-garde art (revolutionary/reformative or more playful and/or didactic), *cf*. Christian Kravagna, "Working on the Community: Models of Participatory Practice", in Anna Dezeuze (ed.), *The "Do-it-Yourself" Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 241–243.

connected to any concrete political project, but only with a loose and principled rebellion against the global logic of neoliberal capitalism.

Theoretic confrontations with socially engaged and community-oriented or participatory art are strewn with numerous traps. Contributing to this are the procedures and approaches that turn out to be of great importance in contemporary art, i.e. the critical dimension, documentary or reality references, processuality, exploration, transdisciplinarity, performativity, participation and artistic aspirations towards community. Beside contemporary art's temporariness and transience, skepticism is evoked particularly by the political claims that were supposed to be inherent to those principles and by their exclusion from economic and political instrumentalization. Scruples about politics often being a "blind spot" of contemporary art are quite common and often not unfounded, since contemporary art tends to sidetrack a precise analysis and critique of its own production conditions together with the actual possibilities to resist the existing situation in the art sphere itself and in a broader context.[23] Nevertheless, this does not mean that all contemporary art is only fashionably fitted out with the attributes of "the political" without any subversive potential or that it is completely trapped in the machinery of hyper-production and -consumption. One of the promising starting points of Rancière's discussion of "the paradoxes of political art" is our understanding the possibility of political art to establish (aesthetical) distance towards social events.[24] Discussion about this distance is crucial for the reflection on contemporary art practices and the politics of representation. Contemporary art is often tightly woven into the social fabric and is thus always in a specific paradoxical intertwining of distance and closeness to differing ideologies and public politics. In this respect we can agree with Rancière that there is no prior criterion for establishing a relation between aesthetics and politics or between politics and art, and that progressive art always includes egalitarian political ideals.

Within the context of key international waves of the historical avant-gardes, neo-avant-gardes and specific postsocialist retro-avant-gardes, the impulse

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[23] Hito Steyerl, "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy", in Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (eds.), *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), p. 35.

[24] *Cf.* Jacques Rancière, "The Paradoxes of Political Art", in *Dissensus*, pp. 142–159; "Politics of Aesthetics", *Maska* 19, 88–89 (2004), p. 10.

of reconciling art and politics has played an important role in contemporary Slovenian art as well. The emergence of contemporary art in Slovenia is in general linked to this avant-garde tradition,[25] albeit it shows its key attributes through differentiation between the contexts of modernism and contemporary social reality. By using the idea of Rancière's aesthetical regime, we can see that contemporary art in Slovenia has a certain continuity with the participatory impulses of international avant-garde movements and their heteronomous nature, but nevertheless certain deviations and differentiations exist as well. Later, we are going to focus mainly on the effects of contemporary art dealings with the social sphere, where interventions into public and social space on the principle of participation are of key importance.

1.3 The Case of Slovenia

The historical avant-garde movement in Slovenia had its more prominent expression only in the form of Constructivism, which broke with the official art and national Slovenian culture within the former Yugoslavia.[26] In doing this, it put itself on the map of the international European avant-garde, with ideas crucially linked to the great utopian ideologies from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Constructivism later established a certain continuity with the post-war avant-garde emerging in Socialist Yugoslavia, with the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s (represented in Slovenia especially by neo-Constructivist experiments in sculpting, by the OHO group Conceptualism and by the so-called "Celje Alternative of the 1970s").

The question of economic and socio-political determination and the subsequent institutional (non)consideration of conceptual art in the context of socialism could be linked to the discussion about the political aspect of conceptual art in the territory of Eastern Europe: it can also be regarded as a form of institutional critique directed against the deficiency of art institutions.[27] The oppositional at-

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[25]   *Cf.* Zdenka Badovinac, "Introduction", in Igor Španjol (ed.), *OHO: A Retrospective* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija; Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007), p. 7.

[26]   After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy within the state named the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, there followed in 1929 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; the country was renamed the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in 1946 and then again in 1963, when it was named the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

[27]   *Cf.* Nataša Petrešin, "Self-historicisation and Self-institutionalisation as Strategies of the Institutional Critique in Eastern Europe", in Marina Gržinić and Alenka Domjan (eds.),

titude of Eastern European conceptualism towards state institutions is a consequence of a much greater social control over the field of art there as compared to the West. The main difference between the two art systems therefore concerns the different function of conceptual art in the developed Western art system, where conceptual artists strived in particular to do away with the commodity status of art objects (a consequence of this is a tendency towards dematerialisation).[28] There conceptual art was thus seen as an alternative to the rules of institutional and market law. The process of institutionalization of conceptual art in Slovenia differs from that of the West and cannot be separated from the then-common Yugoslav space. However, Eastern European art, which at first acted as a critique of institutions, was, in the end, at least partly integrated into them.

The postmodern retro-avant-garde movement NSK (formed in 1984) fits the era of "postmodern avant-garde" or "post-avant-garde" in Slovenia (back then within the SFR Yugoslavia). The development of postmodernism in the first half of the 1980s was focused on the past and actualized the questions of the classic avant-garde, which encouraged appropriate theoretical research, documentation and evaluation according to their place within the European and broader cultural history of the 20th century. The demise of socialism coincided with the emergence of Western postmodernism, which supports Erjavec's thesis about the emergence of a specific form of postmodernism within the transition period of the so-called "postsocialism" of former Eastern Europe, which saw the rise of interest by the Western art system only in the 1990s.[29]

With independence in 1991, Slovenia entered the transition period that led to neoliberal capitalism, crucial for forming new production conditions in art. As a consequence, this changed artists' modes of work, their relations to audiences and an experience of art that has found itself being pushed more and more to the fringe of social events. This is one of the reasons for critical performative,

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Conceptual Artists and the Power of Their Art Works for the Present (Celje: Zavod Celeia, 2007), pp. 23–28.

[28] *Cf.* Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art" (1968), in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 46–50.

[29] *Cf.* Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Aleš Erjavec, *Postmodernism, Postsocialism and Beyond* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

participatory and research practices traversing traditional institutional venues, alternative places and broader social spaces.

The influence of the avant-garde legacy of reconciling art and politics through international impulses is reflected in neo-avant-garde phenomena in Slovenia as well. It is worth mentioning that neo-avant-garde developments in Slovenia were parallel to the reconstruction of the historical avant-garde, hence members of the neo-avant-garde could not find many inspirations in the historical avant-garde. Due to the looser ideological state control, there was greater permeability of Western cultural influences, including pragmatic realizations of "concrete utopias" or "micro-utopias", efforts for the revolutionization of daily routines (in the spirit of Situationism, for example), individual rebellion by young people (hippyism, anti-war movement, rock culture), and actionism by German artist Joseph Beuys. The origin of participatory art practices was introduced to Slovenia by the neo-avant-garde group OHO in particular. The neo-avant-garde legacy still resonates in the contemporary participatory art and its articulations of public and social space. From the 1990s onward, the focus of interest by individual artists and art collectives is often directed towards the community. Among those who actively direct their artistic creation to this field in Slovenia and abroad are Marjetica Potrč, Apolonija Šušteršič, Obrat association and the Association of Fine Artists of Celje (Društvo likovnih umetnikov Celje– DLUC). The legacy of the political implications of the historical avant-gardes (Suprematism, Constructivism, etc.) has had an important influence on the internationally most recognized third generation of the avant-garde in Slovenia, the postsocialist avant-garde or the so-called retro-avant-garde, understood as a politicized artistic practice after the fall of socialism (NSK) that has led to contemporary projects interlacing art and science, and to redefining relations with politics under new conditions of global neoliberal capitalism. Due to the scope and specifics of its conceptual problems, the transdisciplinary practice of post-gravity art—which is based on media archeological and technoscientific research and which itself explicitly refers to Suprematism and Constructivism (Dragan Živadinov and his collaborators) but is not participatory in its essence— is only mentioned in passing in this paper and is the object of an independent discussion elsewhere.

2. Re-Education of Perception: Art in Social Space

Neo-avant-garde artistic manifestations play an important role in creating a new social sensibility through the individual's sensory apparatus, critical view on political norms, eco-awareness, etc. One very telling example is Beuys' work on so-called "social sculpture", which does not have only artistic but also distinctly non-artistic functions, namely scientific, educational and above all political.[30] Beuys' goal was the transformation of social life, the integration of new art forms with forms of a non-exploited nature, the creation of alternative life-forms as social sculptures, of society as a work of art. The neo-avant-garde of the 1960s (USA, Europe) in general contributes a unique aesthetic revolution with their conceptual turnaround and with the inclusion of daily routines and coincidences in art. This aesthetic revolution can be discussed together with the occurrence of the so-called "cultural revolution of the 1960s" and a new sensibility or a new distribution of the sensible as a way of fighting against indi-vidualistic capitalism.[31] Avant-garde efforts to transform life and world through art resound with Schiller idea on aesthetical education,[32] which sees the aes-thetic as a union of the artistic and political in a future community.[33] Opposite to this universal utopian tendency of the majority of other avant-gardes is the OHO[34] group avant-garde impulse that was expressed in aesthetic and social provocation, and achieved special meaning in the so-called "reistic phase"[35]

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[30] *Cf*. Claire Bishop, "Social Sculpture", in *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), pp. 102–106.

[31] *Cf*. Tyrus Miller, "All along the Watchtower: Aesthetic Revolution in the United States du-ring the 1960s", in Erjavec (ed.), *Aesthetic Revolutions*, pp. 145–177.

[32] *Cf*. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publi-cations, 2004).

[33] *Cf*. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 27.

[34] The OHO group is one of the most significant representatives of neo-avant-garde in the 1960s and 1970s in Slovenia, which played a pioneering role in the historical context of the neo-avant-gardes in the broader Yugoslav space; OHO entered the history of the neo-avant-garde movements also at an international scale. *Cf*. Tomaž Brejc, *OHO 1966–1971* (Ljubljana: ŠKUC, 1978); Španjol (ed.), *op. cit*.; Laura J. Hoptman and Tomaš Pospiszyl (eds.), *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), pp. 92–95.

[35] The concept of *Reism* indicates an attempt to reach a non-anthropocentric world of "things" (lat. *res*: thing). In the first *reistic* period (1966–68), OHO functioned as a multi- and inter-media movement with a broad range of members and collaborators. In the sec-ond period (1969–70), OHO was organized as an art group of four members whose activi-

when the members of the group strove not to change the world but only "to change consciousness and transform it into the permanently open and attentive reistic vision"[36]:

> Reism sought to establish an identity between art and life, but not through the realization of an utopian project represented by art. Rather, we could say they understood the field of art as an area where particular attention and a reflective attitude were still possible and sought to extend this attitude beyond the isolated field of art to life as a whole.[37]

The members of the group nevertheless tried to eliminate art as a special social sphere. The founding member of the OHO group, Marko Pogačnik, and his friends thus established a commune (the Šempas Family, 1971–78) where they tried to actualize an alternative form of life that, besides artistic endeavours, included eco-farming and coexistence with nature (in which we can recognize the

Fig. 1: The Šempas Family, *Nature—Art*, 1978. Courtesy of Moderna galerija/Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

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ties included process-oriented avant-garde art. In its third and final period (1970–71), OHO was transformed into a community and ended up with "transcendental conceptualism" (*cf.* Brejc, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–33) as a radicalisation of the dematerialisation of the art object or the upgrading of the rational concept with a spiritual, mystical dimension. In 1971 OHO decided to abandon art as a separate field and tried to find a synthesis of art and life by founding a commune in the village of Šempas.

[36]   Igor Zabel, "A Short History of OHO", in Španjol (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 109.

[37]   *Ibid.*

continuity between the Šempas Family practices and OHO's land art projects). (Fig.1) With this gesture, they significantly contributed to the development of contemporary and community-oriented artistic practice in Slovenia, which has been emergent particularly from the 1990s onward.

The OHO group introduced forms of conceptual art, land art, body art, *arte povera* and process art in Slovenia – all of which have radically intervened into the traditional perception of a work of art. In a formal sense, this means a de-construction of an autonomous and completed art object and its expansion into a process, action, situation, event, a site-specific work, art installation outside traditional exhibition spaces, an intervention into social space. This tendency was, after OHO's programming conceptual projects from the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, continued by the alternative scene of the 1980s. In the 1990s, the visual art in Slovenia started to problematize conventional art norms in a multidimensional manner, including in relation to social spaces and their mechanisms: new strategies of entering into urban public and social spaces appeared.

"Art in social space"[38], with its processual, research, relational and participatory artistic procedures, is thus linked in an artistic and historical sense partly to the specific tradition of the historical avant-garde, but mainly to the neo-avant-garde movements. The wave of community-based public art projects, which in the international context expanded under the label *new genre public art* (the term was introduced by Suzanne Lacy),[39] had bypassed Slovenia in its rise. With some delay, the tendencies for art in public urban space in Slovenia were encouraged from abroad (through the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art, SCCA–Ljubljana)[40] and represented the first wave of this form of art in Slovenia, while the second wave has been presented by engaged artists who have created their

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[38] For the influential thinker of space Henri Lefebvre, "social space" is a place of social practice under the certain influence of capital and capitalism (*cf*. H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, Oxford 1997, pp. 9, 26). Furthermore, according to the cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, "social space" includes various types of capital: economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital; embedment in the social space also affects our movement and relationship to other social positions, etc. (*cf*. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge, London, 1984, pp. 114, 291).

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

[40] *Cf*. Lilijana Stepančič (ed.), *Urbanaria* (Ljubljana: Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, 1994–1997).

art since the start of the new millennium (the majority of these artists have been from the narrower sphere of fine arts and architecture). Among the examples which importantly contribute to questioning production and other interpersonal relations both in the spheres of art and culture respectively, as well as in broader social reality, is the establishment of someone's own (fictitious or phantom) institutions, research platforms, etc. The common attributes of such projects are a certain affinity towards conceptual art, expansion from "just art" to social space, urban contexts, forms to which we can attribute a relational form, participation and striving towards community despite the heterogeneity of their formal approaches and content accents.[41]

3. Urban Anthropology, Participation, Striving towards Community

In continuing this paper we shall focus particularly on those contemporary artistic articulations by Slovenian artists that are actualized in different hybrid forms of experimental spatial, aesthetic and habitation practices playing a connective role in a community. Central to those projects concerned with the production of spaces is the question of the role of the public in their involvement in decision-making processes regarding spatial practices, since these projects are connected to the local community's ways of habitation. One of the vital characteristics of community-oriented artistic practices is that they stem directly from a social space, transcend the borders between art and everyday life, and strive to activate and transform a community in the sense of *public* and *common*/*community* spaces. In the course of this process a classical viewer is transformed into an active co-designer of an artistic act, which is at the same time an intervention into a social space. The key element for the articulation of a collective or community is the idea of actualising participation as the process which treats the participants as the "material" or "medium" of the project, where the "residue" of the process is inseparable from the "performer". The artists devise their own actions through research (with a series of workshops, participatory artistic actions, informal meetings with the local community, etc.) that assumes their own involvement in the everyday life of the urban centre, whereby the community is firstly understood in terms of everyday coexistence and cooperation. The

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[41] Mojca Puncer, "Art in the Social Space: Parallel Strategies, Participatory Practices, Aiming towards Community", in Barbara Orel, Maja Šorli and Gašper Troha (eds.), *Hibridni prostori umetnosti* (*Hybrid Spaces of Art*), (Ljubljana: Maska, 2012), p. 235.

Fig. 2: Marjetica Potrč, *Next Stop, Kiosk*, 2003, mixed media: a house-jack, a group of urban kiosks (the System K-67 kiosks were originally designed by the Ljubljana-based architect Saša J. Mächtig in the late 1960s; they could serve as a basis for a mobile dwelling unit), with reference to a South American *palafita*—a house on stilts—and the illegal rooftop houses of Belgrade; installation view at the Moderna galerija, Ljubljana. Photo: Dejan Habicht, Matija Pavlovec. Courtesy of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana.

main difference lies in the fact that their post-minimalist predecessors can be addressed in a broader sculptural context,[42] whereas contemporary artists work in "an expanded, cross-disciplinary field", which can also include research, similar to the work of a geographer, social worker, anthropologist, activist or experimental architect, etc.[43]

Among those contemporary Slovenian artists tackling concrete social issues, it is worth to focus on the internationally renowned architect, sculptress and urban anthropologist Marjetica Potrč, who artistically explores often overlooked and conflictual aspects of contemporary cities, possibilities of self-supply and habitation alternatives. (Fig. 2) In her art, Potrč actualizes the idea that art can change the world or encourages deliberation. Her typical artwork is based on a structure or situation that she finds in a remote location—in Venezuela, for example—where she tries to contribute to its revitalization. Among other things,

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[42]   *Cf.* Brian Wallis, "Survey", in Jeffrey Kastner (ed.), *Land and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 37.

[43]   Claire Bishop in Jeffrey Kastner (eds.), *Nature* (London: Whitechapel; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), p. 107 (Tim Griffin (chair), *et. al.*, extracts from "Remote Possibilities: A Roundtable Discussion on Land Art's Changing Terrain", 2005).

Potrč collaborated in designing dry bathroom facilities for a favela in Caracas (*Dry Toilet,* 2003), a system for rainwater collection and other sustainably oriented practical and artistic solutions. When asked about socio-critical dimensions of her art, Potrč replies, "My work is not about social criticism or institutional critique; rather I'm trying to show what I see today in cities—for instance, low and high cultures having similar goals."[44] Artistic actualizations of the ideas about self-sufficiency, self-organization and alternative sources of energy in Potrč's art are based on high social and environmental awareness and are very engaged since they originate in the habitation needs of individuals, disadvantaged groups and local communities. Potrč belongs to the increasingly larger group of artists who reject the creation of stable and self-sufficient structures or events strictly defined in time and space, but instead suggest open and ongoing projects where more or less temporary "experimental communities"—embracing artists, non-artists, social relations and exchanges between them, and focusing on the search for inventive solutions for specific issues—are formed.[45]

In her public art projects, Apolonija Šušteršič explores spatial participation practices where the local community's collaboration plays a crucial part. Together with Meike Schalk, Šušteršič created *Garden Service* (2007), a temporary garden in a public yard for the Edinburgh International Festival. (Fig. 3) The phenomena she is particularly interested in are "participation, agonistic plurality, the appropriation of space, and performance and performativity".[46] Šušteršič is also a member of the Ljubljana-based Obrat association. Obrat members strive for an interdisciplinary integration of art, architecture and urban planning in the so-called "critical spatial practices".[47] In their project *Beyond the Construction Site* (August 2010–ongoing), which is situated in the long-closed building site on Resljeva Street in Ljubljana, they explore the potentials of degraded municipal areas and their revaluation with temporary community interventions:

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[44] Hans Ulrich Obrist, "A Conversation with Marjetica Potrč", in Lívia Páldi (ed.), *Marjetica Potrč: Next Stop, Kiosk* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija; Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2003), p. 42.

[45] *Cf.* Carlos Basualdo and Reinaldo Laddaga, "Experimental Communities", in Beth Hinderliter, *et al.* (eds.), *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 197–214.

[46] Meike Schalk and Apolonija Šušteršič, "Taking Care of the Public Space", *AB—Architect's Bulletin* (*Participation*) 41, 188–189 (2011), p. 43.

[47] Urška Jurman and Apolonija Šušteršič, "Introduction", *AB*, 188–189, p. 10.

Fig. 3: Apolonija Šušteršič and Meike Shalk, *Garden Service*, 2007, participatory public art project, meeting place in the temporary garden, Chessels Court, Edinburgh. Photo: Kees van Zelst, Daniel Killian. Courtesy of the artists.

Fig. 4: Obrat, *Beyond the Construction Site*, March 2011, community-based project of urban gardening, view on the gardens from the Resljeva Street 32, Ljubljana. Photo: Suzana Kajba. Courtesy of Obrat association.

"[T]he site is being transformed into a hybrid community space, dedicated to urban gardens, socializing, ecology, culture, play and education".[48] (Fig. 4)

The practices of individual artists from the Association of Fine Artists of Celje (DLUC) are also distinguished by their social engagement and environmental awareness.[49] Art enters the public space, where it addresses the residents of the

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[48]   Obrat, *AB*, 188–189, p. 105.

[49]   These are especially the works of artists Andreja Džakušič, Simon Macuh and the tandem Estela Žutić and Gilles Duvivier. *Cf.* Mojca Puncer, "Community Based (Artistic) Practices as a New Spatial Ecology in Celje", in Irena Čerčnik (ed.), *WE MET AT SIX: Proposals for*

city of Celje. In this, the Celje art scene has important references in the so-called Celje alternative of the 1970s, which brought conceptualization and performativity to the local art practice that extended beyond the gallery walls.[50] At the end of the 1990s, artists took art onto the streets of Celje (the Admission Free festival has been run under the auspices of DLUC since 1999), sparking off a renewed interest in social issues and art activism. In Celje, a complex network of local artists has been forged in collaboration with the art institution, whose aspiration always strove towards change in the local environment. In the new social conditions, individual DLUC members practice community art as a part of an informal urbanism, actively involving themselves in initiatives for the revitalization of the city centre. In pursuing real, sustainable impact within the local community, these artists are acting following the principles of urban regeneration, social integration and participatory urbanism.

Such socially aware and at the same time poetic works also have a pedagogical function since they propose practical solutions (e.g. regarding the self-supply of food) while contributing to the development and dissemination of ecological discourse. Otherwise, it is not only speech that can be recognized today as an artistic medium, but also teaching, which artists usually link with experimentation and play.[51] The latter can be recognized as an important activity that is not alienating (as opposed to the functionalism and rationalism of urbanism) and is accessible to all, which is why it is imperative to find spaces for play in urban areas. An echo of Situationist urbanism[52] can also be recognized here, which likewise resonates in the proposals for contemporary informal participatory urbanism. The latter emphasizes user-friendly and adapted spatial planning.[53]

Communal Practices and Green Areas in Celje (Celje: Zavod Celeia; Ljubljana: KUD Mreža/ Galerija Alkatraz, 2015), pp. 4–10.

[50] On Celje alternative see Mojca Puncer, "Conceptual Art in Slovenia: An Example of the Celje Alternative in the Seventies", *Maska* 24, 123–124 (2009), pp. 104–123.

[51] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 245.

[52] The avant-garde movement of the Situationist International (SI) (1957–1972) is characterized by doubt in art, so its vision of the aesthetic revolution favours direct collective action in an everyday urban environment (implementation of so-called "unitary urbanism") prior to the production of works of art for the art world. *Cf.* Raymond Spiteri, "From Unitary Urbanism to the Society of the Spectacle", in Erjavec (ed.), *Aesthetic Revolutions*, pp. 178–214.

[53] For example, this trend is today reflected in the form of the global campaign of urban walks known as Jane's Walk (so called after the American-Canadian urban planner and activist, Jane Jacobs) as a catalyst for people's needs and desires.

Fig. 5: Andreja Džakušič, *Hanging Gardens*, 2015, installation view at the Gallery of Contemporary Art Celje (as part of the exhibition *We Meet at Six: Proposals for Communal Practices and Green Areas in Celje*). Photo: Tomaž Černej. Courtesy of the Center for Contemporary Arts, Celje.

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. (Fig. 5) 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.

4. Paradoxes of the Politics of Aesthetics: Community-Oriented Art Practices

The current global state of crisis has its causes in radical changes from the last two centuries—from industrial modernity to the post-industrial and information society—and expresses itself through the consequences of war cataclysm, genocides, natural disasters, mass migrations, etc. Many contemporary art expressions do not agree with visions of destruction and are not driven by any utopian

vision of the future. Instead, when inevitably confronted with the instrumental-ization of their aesthetical dimension, they are driven by the awareness of their own limited power.

Community-oriented art takes over the concern for the common good while looking for new productive and ethical principles of working together in the community and encouraging efforts for lasting and sustainable changes. In a so-ciety where alternatives are lacking at the systemic level, a certain alternative is offered by art. Rancière recognizes in this the danger of the instrumentalization of art and politics in the name of an ethical neutralization of disagreements and achievement of consensus in society. Through its close relation to politics, Ran-icière's ideas of aesthetics can significantly improve our understanding of the effects of contemporary art's involvement with the social sphere and communi-ty-oriented art. Rancière rehabilitates the aesthetic in the sense of *aesthesis* as "an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality".[54] It is a form of the sensual perception of art, which moves aesthetics closer to politics through the potentiality of the new "distribution of the sen-sible" (distribution and exchange of experiences, skills, ideas and knowledge among subjects). What is significant here is that, due to the artistic attempts to strengthen social bonds and a sense of community, politics and aesthetics, according to Rancière, disappear in ethics or the instrumentalization of ethics in the name of reaching a consensus and denying antagonisms in a community:

> For instance, by replacing matters of class conflict with matters of inclusion and exclusion, it [contemporary art] puts worries about the "loss of the social bond", concerns with "bare humanity", or tasks of empowering threatened identities in the place of political concerns. Art is summoned thus to put its political potential to work in reframing a sense of community, mending the social bond, etc. Once more politics and aesthetics vanish together into ethics.[55]

Rancière in his critique of recent ethical turnarounds does not oppose ethics, only its instrumentalization. Rancière recognises one of the key paradoxes of the politics of aesthetics in this weakening or even depleting of political disa-greement and social antagonisms on account of artistic dealings with "social

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54   Bishop, *Artifical Hells*, p. 18.
55   Rancière, "Politics of Aesthetics", p. 16.

bond loss" and their agreeing to new forms of consensus. The politics of aesthetics is supposed to reflect on the contradiction between the autonomy and heteronomy of art.

The articulation of community with the intervention of art in post-utopian times concerns society as a whole and regards the very survival of human beings. In order to analyse artistic ambitions in a community, it is sensible to consider discoveries within the Italian *post-operaist* theory of contemporary work or labour[56], which together with the activation of flexibility and similar concepts (viability, precarity, etc.) in the world of art significantly contribute to the understanding of contemporary production of flexible subjectivities. The concept of resilience as an upgrade of global orientation towards the sustainable development of developed Western society (or globally the North exploiting the poor South) is also closely connected with the aspirations of contemporary (participatory) art.[57] The concept of a flexible creative subject, which effectively intertwines with the neo-liberal production scheme, is in harmony with these aspirations. A transition to post-Fordist capitalism is enabled by the occurrence of an "immaterial labour" as a new production paradigm, where the key tools of the production process are communication, affectivity, and the making of inter-subjective relations.[58] The neo-liberal concept of community has a destructive effect on social ties, as it exploits them for its own driving force, while it abolishes public welfare and social security with its implementation of new economic models. Community-oriented art takes on the role of a caretaker for the common good through new forms of cooperation. In a society lacking alternatives on a systemic, national level, a certain alternative comprised of non-conformity, informality, performativity, friendship, empathy and sensibility is offered by art to fellow people, a living environment and nature. With such approaches, artists

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[56] *Cf*. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[57] *Cf*. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez (ed.), *Resilience / The 7th Triennial of Contemporary Art in Slovenia* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2013), p. 5.

[58] *Cf*. Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor", in Virno and Hardt (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy*, pp. 133–147. According to Lazzarato "immaterial labour" produces mostly "social relations", and only if it is successful in this production is it of economic value. In this regard, so-called "affective labour", which, due to its vague nature, is very difficult to measure, is of key importance.

want to activate a *provolutive*[59], self-organising process in the fabric of social relations, which are crisis situations of neoliberalism, capitalistic hyper-production and -consumption often rendered stunted or non-operable. Art theorists thus rightly warn about the danger of the instrumentalization of participatory art in its aspiration to restore and strengthen social ties in Europe during crisis.[60]

The production of subjectivity in capitalism and the creation of community ties through art intervention can nevertheless be seen in a more optimistic light. What we need to redefine are the processes of subjectivity production in the light of their integration into a community. We can use the reflections by Félix Guattari, who places the production of a fluid, flexible subjectivity and its placement within the framework of the general economy of exchange at the centre of his thought.[61] He emphasises our ability to create new modes of thinking and operating that represent numerous similarities with artistic activities. Guattari discovers a privileged territory of subjectivization in art, which then offers a possibility of new living forms and possible models for human existence in general. Subjectivity exists only through the modes of connections with other people, social groups or information machines. A similar view on subjectivity can be found by Rancière in his otherwise vague conceptualization of some kind of fluid, "unpredictable", "fleeting" subject, which can also be seen as rebellious, dissident, etc.[62] In the name of resistance to the uniformity of thinking and operating, modes of social production need to go through the screen of "mental ecosophy". Individual subjectivity is thus the result of *dissensus* and at the same time inseparable from the entirety of social relations.[63] Guattari in his defence of the "three ecologies" (environmental, social and mental) pays particular attention to aesthetics as a basis that allows flexible modes of operation on various levels, and by this articulation of "ecosophy" he offers an alternative model of subjectivity production. Art has a function of reconstructing subjectivity, which

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[59] Provolutive strategy as a work method means, above all, constructing and connecting (as opposed to revolution strategy, where demolishing old structures precedes the building of new). *Cf.* Marjan Krošl, "A Theory of Provolution in Contemporary Art", in Alenka Domjan (ed.), *Concept Phoenix* (Celje: Zavod Celeia, 2009), pp. 4–28.

[60] *Cf.* Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 5.

[61] *Cf.* Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 1–32. Guattari's work is an important reference for Nicholas Bourriaud's idea of relational aesthetics.

[62] Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 61.

[63] Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 33.

then brings it closer to a psychoanalytical (therapeutic) perspective. But above all, art helps "to ward off the ordeals of barbarism, the mental implosion and chaosmic spasm looming on the horizon, and transform them into riches and unforeseen pleasures".[64]

5. Conclusion

This paper on contemporary art in Slovenia is based on art practices that transcend the dichotomy between art and social context as two completely separate spheres. The boundaries between art forms themselves, between the sphere of art and other disciplines, as well as between art, everyday life and broader social reality are clearly shifted or permeable. The start of all these processes is in the 1960s in the conceptual turning point, with individual impulses in historical avant-garde. The reflection of participatory artistic procedures reveals how contemporary art practices have moved away from historical avant-garde explorations in the connections between art, aesthetic and politics. On the one hand, we have been witness to different relations between aesthetical and political that call for ethical questioning anew, while on the other, we have seen a further loosening of the autonomy of the art sphere with the aim to constantly search for new artistic strategies of integration in a complex economic logic of globalization.

The practices discussed here are permeated with life-forms of a specific cultural environment, and these are the hubs where we need to look for new strategies of phenomena like participatory, community-oriented art—not in the sense of searching for an ideal model, but rather in the sense of experimenting with open concepts that question anew dominant relations and ideologies, and open horizons for new intellectual articulations and incentives to act. Contemporary participatory art in Slovenia wishes to imprint itself into a broader cultural perception as a call for intensifying the contribution of art to the reorganization of globalized social reality, and these efforts can be linked to avant-garde calls for positive social changes. One of the interpretative keys is the consideration of aesthetical and sociopolitical aspects in art theory and philosophy of art. With the analysis of the community-oriented art, this discussion has aspired to open aesthetical and political perspectives that are inspired by Rancière's aesthetics, which among other things reminds us of the so-called "ethical turn" of con-

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[64]   Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 135.

temporary art in its attempts to patch up social connections. Guattari offers a promising concept of "an ethico-aesthetic paradigm" that not only provides the ability to open up social interspaces in the Situationist sense, but also serves as a basis for the transversality of art as a global and subversive social power against capitalism, which with its demand for a complete social revolution continues the line of avant-garde artistic utopias. Numerous phenomena in contemporary participatory art, including projects based on research and exploration of phenomena in urban space, are influenced by the ideas of the Situationist avant-garde movement. The Situationist International can be placed in the broader trajectory of emancipatory fights and protests firmly rooted in the 20th century, but in this time of crisis and recent anti-globalist and anti-austerity protests their ideas are nevertheless still topical, as they are an expression of not agreeing with the political *status quo,* and are part of the same desire to search for new meanings and to envisage a different world. Artists are often among the first to grab for this latent potential.

According to Guattari, art has to—as in Rancière's aesthetical regime—reach for the social (sensorial community experience), but at the same time it must stay in the domain of art and be successful in both fields, which means that it perseveres in a constant tension, even as paradox. Such tension gives birth to a transformative aesthetical experience and emancipatory political potential, which exist at the integration points of resistance and dematerialized artistic strategies freed of utilitarianism, brought on by contemporary social movements directed against consensus and exclusion while producing and distributing a common sensory experience, cognizance and knowledge.