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THE SOCIAL TURN: COLLABORATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS **CLAIRE BISHOP**

***All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art.* —Dan Graham**

SUPERFLEX'S INTERNET TV STATION for elderly residents of a Liverpool housing project (*Tenantspin*, 1999); Annika Eriksson's inviting groups and individuals to communicate their ideas and skills at the Frieze Art Fair (*Do you want an audience?* 2003); Jeremy Deller's *Social Parade* for more than twenty social organizations in San Sebastián (2004); Lincoln Tobier's training local residents in Aubervilliers, northeast Paris, to produce half-hour radio programs (*Radio Ld'A*, 2002); Atelier Van Lieshout's *A-Portable* floating abortion clinic (2001); Jeanne van Heeswijk's project to turn a condemned shopping mall into a cultural center for the residents of Vlaardingen, Rotterdam (*De Strip*, 2001–2004); Lucy Orta's workshops in Johannesburg (and elsewhere) to teach unemployed people new fashion skills and discuss collective solidarity (*Nexus Architecture*, 1995–); Temporary Services' improvised neighborhood environment in an empty lot in Echo Park, Los Angeles (*Construction Site*, 2005); Pawel Althamer's sending a group of "difficult" teenagers from Warsaw's working-class Bródno district (including his two sons) to hang out at his retrospective in Maastricht (*Bad Kids*, 2004); Jens Haaning's producing a calendar that features black-and-white photographic portraits of refugees in Finland awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications (*The Refugee Calendar*, 2002).

Phil Collins, *they shoot horses*, 2004, stills from a two-channel digital video, 7 hours.

This catalogue of projects is just a sample of the recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration, and direct engagement with specific social constituencies. Although these practices have had, for the most part, a relatively weak profile in the commercial art world—collective projects are more difficult to market than works by individual artists, and they're also less likely to be "works" than social events, publications, workshops, or performances—they nevertheless occupy an

increasingly conspicuous presence in the public sector. The unprecedented expansion of the biennial is one factor that has certainly contributed to this shift (thirty-three new biennials have been established in the past ten years alone, the majority in countries until recently considered peripheral to the international art world), as is the new model of the commissioning agency dedicated to the production of experimental engaged art in the public realm (Artangel in London, SKOR in the Netherlands, Nouveau Commanditaires in France are just a few that come to mind). In her critical history *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2002), Miwon Kwon argues that community-specific work takes critiques of "heavy metal" public art as its point of departure to address the site as a *social* rather than formal or phenomenological framework. The intersubjective space created through these projects becomes the focus—and medium—of artistic investigation.

Oda Projesi, *Picnic*, 2001. Installation event with community participation, organized by Erik Göngrich, Oda Courtyard, Istanbul, June 10, 2001.

This expanded field of relational practices currently goes by a variety of names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based, or collaborative art. These practices are less interested in a relational *aesthetic* than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity—whether in the form of working with preexisting communities or establishing one's own interdisciplinary network. It is tempting to date the rise in visibility of these practices to the early 1990s, when the fall of Communism deprived the Left of the last vestiges of the revolution that had once linked political and aesthetic radicalism. Many artists now make no distinction between their work inside and outside the gallery, and even highly established and commercially successful figures like Francis Alÿs, Pierre Huyghe, Matthew Barney, and Thomas Hirschhorn have all turned to social collaboration as an extension of their conceptual or sculptural practice. Although the objectives and output of these various artists and groups vary enormously, all are linked by a belief in the empowering creativity of collective action and shared ideas.

This mixed panorama of socially collaborative work arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists using social situations to produce dematerialized, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life. For Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998),

the defining text of relational practice, “art is the place that produces a specific sociability,” precisely because “it *tightens the space of relations*, unlike TV.” For Grant H. Kester, in another key text, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), art is uniquely placed to counter a world in which “we are reduced to an atomized pseudocommunity of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition.” For these and other supporters of socially engaged art, the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanizes—or at least de-alienates—a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism. But the urgency of this *political* task has led to a situation in which such collaborative practices are automatically perceived to be equally important *artistic* gestures of resistance: There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond. While I am broadly sympathetic to that ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyze, and compare such work critically *as art*. This critical task is particularly pressing in Britain, where New Labour uses a rhetoric almost identical to that of socially engaged art to steer culture toward policies of social inclusion. Reducing art to statistical information about target audiences and “performance indicators,” the government prioritizes social effect over considerations of artistic quality.

The emergence of criteria by which to judge social practices is not assisted by the present-day standoff between the nonbelievers (aesthetes who reject this work as marginal, misguided, and lacking artistic interest of any kind) and the believers (activists who reject aesthetic questions as synonymous with cultural hierarchy and the market). The former, at their most extreme, would condemn us to a world of irrelevant painting and sculpture, while the latter have a tendency to self-marginalize to the point of inadvertently reinforcing art’s autonomy, thereby preventing any productive rapprochement between art and life. Is there ground on which the two sides can meet?

WHAT SERIOUS CRITICISM has arisen in relation to socially collaborative art has been framed in a particular way: The social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism. This is manifest in a heightened attention to *how* a given collaboration is undertaken. In other words, artists are increasingly judged by their working process—the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration—and criticized for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to “fully” represent their subjects, as if such a thing were possible. This emphasis on process over product (i.e., means over ends) is justified as oppositional to capitalism’s predilection for the contrary. The indignant outrage directed at Santiago Sierra is a prominent example of this tendency, but it has been disheartening to read the criticism of other artists that also arises in the name of this equation: Accusations of mastery and egocentrism are leveled at artists who work with participants to realize a project instead of allowing it to emerge through consensual collaboration.

Jeanne van Heeswijk, *De Strip*, 2001–2004. Performance view, Rotterdam, 2002.

The writing around the Turkish artists' collective Oda Projesi provides a clear example of the way in which aesthetic judgments have been overtaken by ethical criteria. Oda Projesi is a group of three artists who, since 1997, have based their activities around a three-room apartment in the Galata district of Istanbul (*oda projesi* is Turkish for "room project"). The apartment provides a platform for projects generated by the collective in cooperation with its neighbors, such as a children's workshop with the Turkish painter Komet, a community picnic with the sculptor Erik Göngrich, and a parade for children organized by the Tem Yapin theater group. Oda Projesi argue that they wish to open up a context for the possibility of interchange and dialogue, motivated by a desire to integrate with their surroundings. They insist that they are not setting out to improve or heal a situation—one of their project leaflets contains the slogan "exchange not change"—though they clearly see their work as gently oppositional. By working directly with their neighbors to organize workshops and events, they evidently want to produce a more creative and participatory social fabric. They talk of creating "blank spaces" and "holes" in the face of an overorganized and bureaucratic society, and of being "mediators" between groups of people who normally don't have contact with one another.

Because much of Oda Projesi's work exists on the level of art education and community events, we can see them as dynamic members of the community bringing art to a wider audience. It is important that they are opening up the space for non-object-based practice in Turkey, a country whose art academies and art market are still largely oriented toward painting and sculpture. And one may also be pleased, as I am, that it is three women who have undertaken this task. But their conceptual gesture of reducing the authorial status to a minimum ultimately becomes inseparable from the community arts tradition. Even when transposed to Sweden, Germany, and the other countries where Oda Projesi have exhibited, there is little to distinguish their projects from other socially engaged practices that revolve around the predictable formulas of workshops, discussions, meals, film screenings, and walks. Perhaps this is because the question of aesthetic value is not valid for Oda Projesi. When I interviewed the collective for *Untitled* magazine (Spring 2005) and asked what criteria they base their own work on, they replied that they judge it by the decisions they make about where and with whom they collaborate: Dynamic and sustained relationships provide their markers of success, not aesthetic considerations. Indeed, because their practice is based on collaboration, Oda Projesi consider *aesthetic* to be "a dangerous word" that should not be brought into discussion. This seemed to me to

be a curious response: If the aesthetic is dangerous, isn't that all the more reason it should be interrogated?

Oda Projesi's ethical approach is adopted by the Swedish curator Maria Lind in a recent essay on their work. Lind is one of the most articulate supporters of political and relational practices, and she undertakes her curatorial work with a trenchant commitment to the social. In her essay on Oda Projesi, published in Claire Doherty's *From Studio to Situations: Contemporary Art and the Question of Context* (2004), she notes that the group is not interested in showing or exhibiting art but in "using art as a means for creating and recreating new relations between people." She goes on to discuss the collective's project in Riem, near Munich, in which they collaborated with a local Turkish community to organize a tea party, guided tours led by the residents, hairdressing and Tupperware parties, and the installation of a long roll of paper that people wrote and drew on to stimulate conversations. Lind compares this endeavor to Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument*, 2002, his well-known collaboration with a mainly Turkish community in Kassel. (This elaborate project included a TV studio, an installation about Bataille, and a library themed around the interests of the dissident Surrealist.) Lind observes that Oda Projesi, contrary to Hirschhorn, are the better artists because of the equal status they give to their collaborators: "[Hirschhorn's] aim is to create art. For the *Bataille Monument* he had already prepared, and in part also executed, a plan on which he needed help to implement. His participants were paid for their work and their role was that of the 'executor' and not 'co-creator.'" Lind goes on to argue that Hirschhorn's work, by using participants to critique the art genre of the monument, was rightly criticized for "'exhibiting' and making exotic marginalized groups and thereby contributing to a form of social pornography." By contrast, she writes, Oda Projesi "work with groups of people in their immediate environments and allow them to wield great influence on the project."

It's worth looking closely at Lind's criteria here. Her assessment is based on an ethics of authorial renunciation: The work of Oda Projesi is better than that of Hirschhorn because it exemplifies a superior model of collaborative practice. The conceptual density and artistic significance of the respective projects are sidelined in favor of an appraisal of the artists' relationship with their collaborators. Hirschhorn's (purportedly) exploitative relationship is compared negatively to Oda Projesi's inclusive generosity. In other words, Lind downplays what might be interesting in Oda Projesi's work *as art*—the possible achievement of making dialogue a medium or the significance of dematerializing a project into social process. Instead, her criticism is dominated by *ethical* judgments on working procedure and intentionality.

Bataille Monument, 2002. Performance view, Documenta 11, Kassel.

Similar examples can be found in the writing on Superflex, Eriksson, van Heeswijk, Orta, and many other artists working in a socially ameliorative tradition. This ethical imperative finds support in most of the theoretical writing on art that collaborates with "real" people (i.e., those who are not the artist's friends or other artists). The curator and critic Lucy R. Lippard, concluding her book *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (1997), a discussion of site-specific art from an ecological/postcolonial perspective, presents an eight-point "place ethic" for artists who work with communities. Kester's *Conversation Pieces*, while lucidly articulating many of the problems associated with such practices, nevertheless advocates an art of concrete interventions in which the artist does not occupy a position of pedagogical or creative mastery. In *Good Intentions: Judging the Art of Encounter* (2005), the Dutch critic Erik Hagoort argues that we must not shy away from making moral judgments on this art but must weigh the presentation and representation of an artist's good intentions. In each of these examples, authorial intentionality (or a humble lack thereof) is privileged over a discussion of the work's conceptual significance as a social and aesthetic form. Paradoxically, this leads to a situation in which not only collectives but also individual artists are praised for their authorial renunciation. And this may explain, to some degree, why socially engaged art has been largely exempt from art criticism. Emphasis is shifted away from the disruptive *specificity* of a given work and onto a *generalized* set of moral precepts.

IN *CONVERSATION PIECES* Kester argues that consultative and "dialogic" art necessitates a shift in our understanding of what art is—away from the visual and sensory (which are individual experiences) and toward "discursive exchange and negotiation." He challenges us to treat communication as an aesthetic form, but, ultimately, he fails to defend this, and seems perfectly content to allow that a socially collaborative art project could be deemed a success if it works on the level of social intervention even though it founders on the level of art. In the absence of a commitment to the aesthetic, Kester's position adds up to a familiar summary of the intellectual trends inaugurated by identity politics: respect for the other, recognition of difference, protection of fundamental liberties, and an inflexible mode of political correctness. As such, it also constitutes a rejection of any art that might offend or trouble its audience—most notably the historical avant-garde, within whose avant-garde lineage Kester nevertheless wishes to situate social engagement as a radical practice. He criticizes Dada and Surrealism, which sought to "shock" viewers into being more sensitive and receptive to the

world, for presuming the artist to be a privileged bearer of insights. I would argue that such discomfort and frustration—along with absurdity, eccentricity, doubt, or sheer pleasure—can, on the contrary, be crucial elements of a work's aesthetic impact and are essential to gaining new perspectives on our condition. The best examples of socially collaborative art give rise to these—and many other—effects, which must be read alongside more legible intentions, such as the recovery of a phantasmic social bond or the sacrifice of authorship in the name of a "true" and respectful collaboration. Some of these projects are well known: Hirschhorn's *Musée Précaire Albinet* and *24h Foucault* (both 2004); Aleksandra Mir's *Cinema for the Unemployed*, 1998; Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002. Rather than positioning themselves within an activist lineage, in which art is marshaled to effect social change, these artists have a closer relationship to avant-garde theater, performance, or architectural theory. As a consequence, perhaps, they attempt to think the aesthetic and the social/political *together*, rather than subsuming both within the ethical.

THE BRITISH ARTIST Phil Collins, for example, fully integrates these two concerns in his work. Invited to undertake a residency in Jerusalem, he decided to hold a disco-dancing marathon for teenagers in Ramallah, which he recorded to produce the two-channel video installation *they shoot horses*, 2004. Collins paid nine teenagers to dance continuously for eight hours, on two consecutive days, in front of a garish pink wall to an unrelentingly cheesy compilation of pop hits from the past four decades. The teenagers are mesmerizing and irresistible as they move from exuberant partying to boredom and finally exhaustion. The sound track's banal lyrics of ecstatic love and rejection acquire poignant connotations in light of the kids' double endurance of the marathon and of the interminable political crisis in which they are trapped. It goes without saying that *they shoot horses* is a perverse representation of the "site" that the artist was invited to respond to: The occupied territories are never shown explicitly but are ever-present as a frame. This use of the *hors cadre* has a political purpose: Collins's decision to present the participants as generic globalized teenagers becomes clear when we consider the puzzled questions regularly overheard when one watches the video in public: How come Palestinians know Beyoncé? How come they're wearing Nikes? By voiding the work of direct political narrative, Collins demonstrates how swiftly this space is filled by fantasies generated by the media's selective production and dissemination of images from the Middle East (since the typical Western viewer seems condemned to view young Arabs either as victims or as medieval fundamentalists). By using pop music as familiar to Palestinian as to Western teens, Collins also provides a commentary on globalization that is considerably more nuanced than most activist-oriented political art. *They shoot horses* plays off the conventions of benevolent socially collaborative practice (it creates a new narrative for its participants and reinforces a social bond) but combines them with the visual and conceptual conventions of reality TV. The presentation of the work as a two-screen installation lasting a full eight-hour workday subverts both genres in its emphatic use of seduction on the one hand and grueling duration on the other.

Artur Zmijewski, *The Singing Lesson II*, 2003, still from a color video, 16 minutes 30 seconds.

The work of Polish artist Artur Zmijewski, like that of Collins, often revolves around the devising and recording of difficult—sometimes excruciating—situations. In Zmijewski's video *The Singing Lesson I*, 2001, a group of deaf students is filmed singing the Kyrie to Jan Maklakiewicz's 1944 *Polish* Mass in a Warsaw church. The opening shot is staggeringly hard: An image of the church interior, all elegant Neoclassical symmetry, is offset by the cacophonous, distorted voice of a young girl. She is surrounded by fellow students who, unable to hear her efforts, chat with one another in sign language. Zmijewski's editing draws constant attention to the contrast between the choir and its environment, suggesting that religious paradigms of perfection continue to inform our ideas of beauty. A second version of *The Singing Lesson* was filmed in Leipzig in 2002. This time the deaf students, together with a professional chorister, sing a Bach cantata to the accompaniment of a Baroque chamber orchestra in Saint Thomas Church, where Bach once served as cantor and is buried. The German version is edited to reveal a more playful side of the experiment. Some students take the task of performing seriously; others abandon it in laughter. Their gestures of sign language in rehearsal are echoed by those of the conductor: two visual languages that serve to equate the two types of music produced by Zmijewski's experiment—the harmonies of the orchestra and the strained wailing of the choir. The artist's editing, compounded by my inability to understand sign language, seems integral to the film's point: We can only ever have limited access to others' emotional and social experiences, and the opacity of this knowledge obstructs any analysis founded on such assumptions. Instead we are invited to read what is presented to us—a perverse assemblage of conductor, musicians, and deaf choir that produces something more complex, troubling, and multilayered than the release of individual creativity.

It will be protested that both Collins and Zmijewski produce videos for consumption within a gallery, as if the space outside it were automatically more authentic—a logic that has been definitively unraveled by Kwon in *One Place After Another*. Her advocacy of art that "unworks" community might usefully be applied to the practice of British artist Jeremy Deller. In 2001 he organized the reenactment of a key event from the English miners' strike of 1984—a violent clash between miners and the police in the village of Orgreave in Yorkshire. *The Battle of Orgreave* was a one-day restaging of this confrontation, performed by former miners and policemen, together with a number of historical reenactment societies. Although the work seemed to contain a twisted therapeutic element (in that both miners and police involved in the struggle participated, some of them swapping roles), *The Battle of Orgreave*

didn't seem to heal a wound so much as reopen it. Deller's event was both politically legible and utterly pointless: It summoned the experiential potency of political demonstrations but only to expose a wrong seventeen years too late. It gathered the people together to remember and replay a disastrous event, but this remembrance took place in circumstances more akin to a village fair, with a brass band, food stalls, and children running around. This contrast is particularly evident in the only video documentation of *The Battle of Orgreave*, which forms part of an hour-long film by Mike Figgis, a left-wing filmmaker who explicitly uses the work as a vehicle for his indictment of the Thatcher government. Clips of Deller's event are shown between emotional interviews with former miners, and the clash in tone is disconcerting. *The Battle of Orgreave* stages a political grievance, but plays it out in a different key, since Deller's action both is and isn't a violent encounter. The involvement of historical reenactment societies is integral to this ambiguity, since their participation symbolically elevated the relatively recent events at Orgreave to the status of English history while drawing attention to this eccentric leisure activity in which bloody battles are enthusiastically replicated as a social and aesthetic diversion. The whole event could be understood as contemporary history painting that collapses representation and reality.

Operating on a less charged symbolic level, Carsten Höller's project *The Baudouin Experiment: A Deliberate, Non-Fatalistic, Large-Scale Group Experiment in Deviation*, 2001, is strikingly neutral by comparison. The event took as its point of departure an incident in 1991 when the late King Baudouin of Belgium abdicated for a day to allow an abortion law of which he did not approve to be passed. Höller brought together a group of one hundred people to sit in one of the silver balls of the Atomium in Brussels for twenty-four hours and to abandon their usual lives for a day. Basic provisions were supplied (furniture, food, toilets), but otherwise there were no means of contact with the outside world. Though it bore some resemblance to a reality show like *Big Brother*, the social action was not recorded. This refusal to document the project was an extension of Höller's ongoing interest in the category of "doubt," and *The Baudouin Experiment* forms his most condensed consideration of this idea to date. Without documentation of such an anonymous project, would we believe that the piece ever really existed? In retrospect, the elusiveness of Höller's event is akin to the uncertainty we may feel when looking at documentation of socially engaged art that asks us to take its claims of meaningful dialogue and political empowerment on trust. In this context *The Baudouin Experiment* was an event of profound *in*action, or "passive activism"—a refusal of everyday productivity, but also a refusal to instrumentalize art in compensation for some perceived social lack.

Deller, Collins, Zmijewski, and Höller do not make the "correct" ethical choice, they do not embrace the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice; instead, they act on their desire without the incapacitating restrictions of guilt. In so doing, their work joins a tradition of highly authored situations that fuse social reality with carefully calculated artifice. This tradition needs to be written, beginning, perhaps, with the "Dada-Season" in the spring of 1921, a series of manifestations that sought to involve the Parisian public. The most salient of these events was an "excursion" (hosted by André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Louis Aragon, et al.) to the church of Saint Julien le Pauvre that drew more than one hundred people despite the pouring rain. The inclement weather cut the tour short and prevented an "auction of abstractions" from being realized. In this Dada excursion, as in the examples given above, intersubjective relations weren't an end in themselves but rather served to unfold a more complex knot of concerns about pleasure, visibility, engagement, and the conventions of social interaction.

Jeremy Deller, *Social Parade*, 2004. Performance view, Manifesta 5, San Sebastián.

THE DISCURSIVE CRITERIA of socially engaged art are, at present, drawn from a tacit analogy between anticapitalism and the Christian "good soul." In this schema, self-sacrifice is triumphant: The artist should renounce authorial presence in favor of allowing participants to speak through him or her. This self-sacrifice is accompanied by the idea that art should extract itself from the "useless" domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis. As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière has observed, this denigration of the aesthetic ignores the fact that the system of art as we understand it in the West—the "aesthetic regime of art" inaugurated by Friedrich Schiller and the Romantics and still operative to this day—is predicated precisely on a confusion between art's autonomy (its position at one remove from instrumental rationality) and heteronomy (its blurring of art and life). Untangling this knot—or ignoring it by seeking more concrete ends for art—is slightly to miss the point, since the aesthetic is, according to Rancière, the ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change, characterized precisely by that tension between faith in art's autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come. For Rancière the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise.

The self-effacing implications of the artist/activist position bring to mind the character Grace in Lars von Trier's 2003 provocation, *Dogville*: Her desire to serve the local community is inseparable from her guilty position of privilege, and her exemplary gestures perturbingly provoke an evil eradicable only by further evil. Von Trier's film doesn't present a straightforward moral, but articulates—through a reductio ad absurdum—one terrifying implication of the self-sacrificial position. Some people will consider *Dogville* a harsh framework by which to express reservations about activist-oriented practice, but good intentions shouldn't render art immune to critical analysis. The best art manages (as *Dogville* itself does) to fulfill the promise of the antinomy that Schiller saw as the very root of aesthetic experience and not surrender itself to exemplary (but relatively ineffectual) gestures. The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address this contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work *and* in the conditions of its reception. It is to this art—however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing it may first appear—that we must turn for an alternative to the well-intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on social collaboration. These homilies unwittingly push us toward a Platonic regime in which art is valued

for its truthfulness and educational efficacy rather than for inviting us—as *Dogville* did—to confront darker, more painfully complicated considerations of our predicament.

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