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CLAIRE BISHOP THE SOCIAL TURN COLLABORATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

"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 inviting groups and individuals to communicate their ideas and skills at the Frieze Art Fair (*Do You Want an Audience?*, 2004); Jeremy Deller's *Social Parade* for over twenty social organizations in San Sebastian (2004); 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*, 1997-present); Temporary Services' improvised neighborhood environment in an empty lot in Echo Park, Los Angeles (*Construction Site*, 2005); Pawel Althamer 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).

The above-mentioned projects are just a sample of the recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration, and direct engagement with specific social constituencies. Although for the most part these practices have had a relatively weak profile in the commercial art world - collective projects are more difficult to market than works by individual artists and they are 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 toward this shift, as is the new model of commissioning agencies dedicated to the production of experimental engaged art in the public realm.¹ In *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.

This expanded field of relational practices currently goes under 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 pre-existing communities or establishing one's own interdisciplinary network. 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, anti-market, politically engaged projects that carry on the Modernist call to blur art and life. For Nicolas Bourriaud in his book *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 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 pseudo-community of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition." For these and other supporters of socially engaged art, the creative energy of participatory practices re-humanize – or at least de-alienate – a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism. But the urgency of this *political* task

1. Artangel in London, SKOR in the Netherlands and Nouveau Commanditaires in France are just a few that come to mind.

2. This critical task is particularly pressing in Britain, where New Labour use 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 audience and "performance indicators," the government prioritizes social effect over considerations of artistic quality.

3. See: www.odaprojesi.com.

has led to a situation in which socially collaborative practices are all perceived to be equally important *artistic* gestures of resistance: there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved or boring works of socially collaborative art, because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond. While broadly sympathetic to the latter ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyze and compare this work critically *as art*.²

The emergence of criteria by which to judge social practices is not assisted by the present-day stand-off between the non-believers (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 the market and cultural hierarchy). The former condemn us to a world of irrelevant painting and sculpture, while the latter 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 attentiveness as 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 (that is to say: 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.

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").³ The apartment provides a platform for projects generated by the group in cooperation with their 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 exchange 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. The group talks of creating “blank spaces” and “holes” in the face of an over-organized and bureaucratic society, and of being “mediators” between groups of people who normally do not have contact with each other.

Because much of Oda Projesi's work exists on the level of art education and community events, we can see the three artists 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 has exhibited, there is little to distinguish their projects from other socially engaged practices that revolve around the predictable formulae 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 group and asked what criteria they based 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.⁴ Indeed, because their practice is based on collaboration, Oda Projesi consider “the aesthetic” to be “a dangerous word” that should not be brought into discussion. To me this seemed to be a curious response: if the aesthetic is dangerous, is that not all the more reason it should be interrogated?

Oda Projesi's ethical approach was adopted by the Swedish curator Maria Lind in a recent essay on its 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

4. Claire Bishop, “What We Made Together,” interview with Oda Projesi, *Untitled*, Spring 2005.

5. Maria Lind in: Claire Doherty (ed.), *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004).

6. For example, Lucy Lippard, concluding her book *The Lure of the Local* (1997), presents an eight-point “ethic of place” for artists who work with communities. Grant Kester's *Conversation Pieces* (2004), 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* (Amsterdam: Fonds BKVB, 2005), the Dutch critic Erik Hagoort argues that we must not shy from making moral judgments on this art: “we must weigh up the presentation and representation of an artist's good intentions.”

the social. In her essay on Oda Projesi, 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.”⁵ She discusses the collective's project in Riem, near Munich, in which the group 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 Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument*, his well-known collaboration with a mainly Turkish community in Kassel for *Documenta 11* (2002). Lind observes that Oda Projesi, contrary to Thomas 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 a 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 is worth looking closely at Lind's criteria here. Her judgment is based on an ethics of authorial renunciation: the work of Oda Projesi is better than that of Thomas 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 a judgment on 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.

Similar examples can be found in the writing on Superflex, Orta, Eriksson and many other artists working in a socially ameliorative tradition. It finds support in most of the theoretical writing on art that collaborates with “real” people (that is to say, those who are not the artist's friends or other artists).⁶ In these examples, autho-

rial 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 his book *Conversation Pieces* (2004), Grant Kester argues that consultative and "dialogic art" 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 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, because they assume that the artist is 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 fantasmatic social bond or the sacrifice of authorship in the name of a "true" and respectful collaboration. Some of these projects are well known: Thomas Hirschhorn's *Musée Précaire* (2004) and *24h Foucault* (2004), Aleksandra Mir's *Cinema for the Unemployed* (1998), Francis Alÿs' *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2003). Rather than positioning themselves within an activist lineage in which art is marshaled to social change, these artists have a closer relationship to avant-garde theater, performance or even 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 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 *They Shoot Horses* (2004). Collins paid nine teenagers to dance continually for eight hours, on two consecutive days, in front of a garish pink wall to an unrelentingly cheesy compilation of pop hits. The teenagers are mesmerizing and irresistible as they move from exuberant partying to exhaustion. The sound track's banal pop lyrics of ecstatic love and rejection acquire poignant connotations in the 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' decision to present the participants as generic globalized teenagers becomes clear when we consider the puzzled questions regularly overheard when watching the video in public: How come Palestinians know Beyoncé? How come they are 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. 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 this with the visual and conceptual conventions of reality TV. The presentation of the work as a two-screen installation lasting a full eight-hour working day subverts both genres in its emphatic use of seduction on the one hand and grueling duration on the other. The work of Polish artist Artur Zmijewski, like that of Collins, often revolves around the devising and recording of difficult, and sometimes even excruciating, situations. In Zmijewski's video *The Singing Lesson I* (2001), a group of deaf students are filmed singing 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 their 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 a church where Bach once served as cantor. 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 stylized editing, compounded by my inability to understand sign language, seem 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 multi-layered 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 re-enactment 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 re-enactment of this clash, performed by former miners and policemen together with a number of historical re-enactment societies. Although the work seemed to contain a twisted therapeutic element (in that both miners and police involved in the struggle were involved, some of them swapping roles), *The Battle of Orgreave* did not seem to heal a wound so much as to reopen it. Deller's event was both politically legible and utterly pointless: it summoned the experiential potency of a political demonstration, 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 a feature-length 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 of tone is disconcerting. The involvement of historical re-enactment 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.

Deller, Collins and Zmijewski 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 still 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" to the church of Saint Julien le Pauvre, which 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, inter-subjective relations were not 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.

The discursive criteria of socially engaged art are, at present, drawn from a tacit analogy between anti-capitalism 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 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).⁷ 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 does not need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise. The best art manages to fulfill the promise of the antinomy which 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 last 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.

7. Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes," in: *New Left Review*, No. 14, March/April 2002, pp. 133–151.