

Can the Contemporary Art World and its Institutions "House the Social?" A Personal Account

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Who are the "outcasts?"

In the morning, we rushed to MoMA to visit Diego Rivera, Cindy Sherman, and Sanja Iveković, as well as the print exhibitions. Having spent a couple of hours reviewing the works, talking about the Occupy Museums' protest while looking at Diego Rivera's murals, and noticing the similarities between some visitors and the characters of Cindy Sherman that portray elderly well-off art loving Americans, we left the museum with relief and satisfaction that we had covered the major program, and continued with other meetings and visits.

The next day, in one of our meetings, while discussing the role of foreclosure in the current financial crisis and the function of urban regeneration in processes of capital reinvestment, our host asked if we had seen the exhibition "Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream" at MoMA, which is the outcome of a series of public workshops on the potential solutions for housing in the aftermath of the recent foreclosure crisis, held by five interdisciplinary architectural teams (WORK.ac, MOS Architects, Visible Weather, Zago Architecture, and Studio Gang Architects) at MoMA/PS1 in the Summer of 2011. Responding to "The Buell Hypothesis," a research report prepared by The Temple Hoyne Buell Center at Columbia University, the open studios worked on five selected "mega-regions" to envision further possibilities in housing, spatial organization, and infrastructures that could catalyze urban transformation, particularly in the American suburbs.

It was more than surprising to find out that we not only missed the exhibition, but, didn't even notice its existence while spending almost the whole morning at MoMA. We decided to use the last hours of our time in New York for this research exhibition and

went to visit it even more enthusiastically. As it was a Saturday, the museum was packed with visitors and the staff was very busy and occupied. Perhaps because of guilt, triggered by having missed an exhibition that was supposed to be in front of our eyes, we urged ourselves to find the location of the exhibition and began to look for the signs, announcements, or publicity material – starting from the entrance, even including the street where various exhibition banners were hanging. Unexpectedly, there was no visible trace of this exhibition, as if it belonged to an "underground" program of the museum, only accessible to a "secret society" or its "outcast" members and audiences. When finally visiting it, we understood that the "outcasts" were the graduate students and New York intelligentsia.

It was obvious that this exhibition was not a marketing device for the museum, or very interesting or entertaining for its major audience. However, the extent to which it was *not* publicized, even at a much scaled down proportion, implies that it is not good for the image of the museum; that it may cause a decrease in the number of visitors – for whom it may be too serious and demanding; that it asks for active reading and understanding; or that it may bore some of the funders and could have a negative influence on fund raising. Seeing the attempt to reduce the visibility of such an exhibition where knowledge production and artistic production can work together for the audience to produce meaning for their lives in a wider social context, one wonders what the criteria for the prioritization of the programing and publicity are. Evidently, the facts and figures, marketing aims and strategies, and funding possibilities are the determinant factors of the criteria rather than aiming to create a public forum for debate of the urgent issues, such as the ones put forward by “Foreclosed,” that have a vast impact on the daily lives of each of us – the audience.

What is marginalized, and almost eliminated, in the museum is the possibility of producing a public sphere that can lead to an alternative sociality. Rather than entertaining the crowds, such exhibitions propose to shift the experience of the audiences

from passive reception to active learning and reacting. If blockbuster museums such as MoMA cannot afford this, can these institutions be seen as relevant places to "house the social?"

Housing the geopolitical diversity and cultural multiplicity?

The same question of institutional patronage can be seen in major museums' acquisition policies. Here, a museum's marketing ethos can be seen as a superficial endorsement of cultural difference and multiplicity discourse. Coming from Istanbul ("ex-periphery"), each time I hear that an artist's work from Turkey is acquired for the collection of an important international museum like Tate Modern or MoMA, I feel appreciative, though sometimes a little confused with the criteria and method.

Recently, geopolitical diversity and cultural multiplicity has become an important policy issue for even the blockbuster museums. One can assume that post-colonial critique had an impact on the policies of such institutions, to the degree that they began to articulate cultural difference and to collect from previously unfavorable geopolitical regions (ex-communist countries, ex-colonies or the Middle East, etc.), and from artists with diverse backgrounds. Often the works acquired for the collections are directly related to the specific context of the respective countries: socio-economic and political conditions, histories – specifically art histories – and market parameters. Certainly, these acquisitions have a deeper impact on the art histories and market parameters of the respective countries than the institutions that include such works in their collections as they rarely exhibit those works, almost never in their permanent collections and usually only in the context of regional "profiling": "Eastern Europe," "Middle East," "Arab World," and so on. This impact is effected in the sense that income from sales, and the prestige that the sales bring, has a direct economic effect both nationally and internationally on the artists, gallerists, and internal art market from the "periphery,"

whereas inclusion in an exhibition about the "Arab World" is of little importance for the artists coming from these regions (and, on the contrary, may even produce a negative critical effect). The frequency of exposure of such works in the collections is also related to the ratio of immigrants from those countries living in the cities where these museums are located. Frequently, commercial galleries are happy to give financial and organizational support to the museums when their artist's work is included in the exhibitions of those museums. And usually collectors, instead of specialized curators and academics from these geopolitical regions, are invited to take part in the decision-making processes and sit on the boards of these museums. Furthermore, it is not unusual anymore to hear that the trustees and board members are affiliated with art's commercial world, i.e. MoMA and Sotheby's (which was indirectly protested by the Occupy Museums when they were demanding the end of the lockout of the workers by Sotheby's).

Maybe ten years ago, such affiliations with the commercial world were considered a "conflict of interest," but today we know that the contemporary art world is happy to subscribe to neo-liberal agendas and life styles, and thus can function harmoniously within the market structure and its parameters. Hence, it is not surprising to see in the top art institutions that differences and multiplicities are exoticized and commodified rather than articulated. It is not difficult to make an analogy between the top fashion designer brands – which seek to expand their consumer profile through the invention of lower-end diffusion brands for mass merchandising – with the new "exotic" collection lines of such top museums, that in the same way expand their audience (and crucially their diversity) profile.

"Spectacular" art versus socially engaged art

The same contradiction between social engagement and marketization is noticeable in public art commissioning, even though it is often set up as an alternative to

"spectacular" museum production. There is a widespread assumption in the field of public art/art-in-public domain¹ that such art reaches "larger publics" beyond the white cube. Generally speaking, it does bring a democratic facet to the distribution and availability of art for the multitudes and has the potential to generate a public sphere, in the sense of a public forum. This can be a departure point, but not a means nor an end in itself, especially in this day and age of the unbalanced over-production of public art projects.

Though the social welfare state – that was the foundation of the production of "public art" – has been eroded, its "consensual" model is still serving to produce art projects in the public domain in order to embellish and raise the standards of public spaces, while also functioning, at times, as a cover-up for architectural, urban, and social "accidents." As every consensus involves compromise and negotiation (as well as repression of the weakest voices), broadly speaking, public art projects, in the best possible scenario, aspire to an average of aesthetic understanding by the stakeholders (facilitators, commissioners, governmental bodies, artists, and the public) in their aim of being legible for "everyone." There is much debate related to art projects in the public domain on the issues of inclusion versus exclusion, consensus versus conflict, permanence versus temporality, facilitation versus curation and "spectacular" versus "socially engaged" art. But none of it questions the basic premise of consensualization, which is at the heart of its social and political assumptions. Could it be said that such public art treats its audience in the same way that major museums treat material from the "periphery?"

In these precarious transitional times, the role of the curator as a critical agent (as opposed to a facilitator) becomes more urgent. The curator's role today is more than a matter of creating a consensual platform around a commission in the public domain. It is often a matter of social and political – as well as aesthetic – negotiation and decision-making, as the public domain is not a neutral space, but the "battlefield of hegemonic

dominant forces.”² Since art projects are employed as tools for the branding of the public domain and the instrumentalization of publics by politicians and governments (alongside public and private funders and sponsors), a curator's role must be to act against this. Thus, we can claim that today the *raison d'être* of any art project in the public domain is to create a contrast, even to add more conflict to the specific context and to make this "battle" and the conflict visible, and thus debatable. Ultimately, this leads us to issues concerning spectacle and participation, which in turn, directs us to the question of "spectacular" art versus socially engaged practices.

As a reaction to the indulgent style of market-driven top art institutions that promote "spectacular" – and sleek – art, one can easily associate oneself with socially engaged art practices as an antidote and a remedy. As socially engaged practices aim at the distribution of art specifically to the lowest strata of society – as opposed to the audience profile of the top institutions that favor the middle and upper middle classes – they can be taken as an antidote to the distribution tendencies of such institutions. Furthermore, as socially engaged art aims at social change, it is also considered as an antidote to spectacle, which is assumed to create passive audiences that conform to the existing status quo, and as a remedy for participatory practices, which are supposed to create an active engagement and agency in/of audiences/publics, and, thus, to empower them.

Today we all know that art and the social are related. We do not take an artwork as an autonomous world in-itself, but in relation to its social context. Furthermore, although we acknowledge its social function and position in the capitalist system, this doesn't mean that we can treat art and the social in the same way. Without doubt, the relation between social and artistic critique is a dialectic one, and these differences should not be homogenized or collapsed into each other. The discussion around the spectacle – and spectacular art – indicates such a collision. But when we look closer, there is a difference between the use of spectacle by the ideological system of capital (for instance,

in the museum) and its function in aesthetic experience. Rancière called “spectacle” a “third thing,” a “mediating” object in between the artist’s intention and the spectator: “This spectacle is a third thing, to which both parts can refer but which prevents any kind of ‘equal’ or ‘undistorted’ transmission. It is a mediation between them. ... The same thing which links them must separate them.”³ Therefore, when we use spectacle in terms of aesthetic critique, it is the “object” of inter-subjective experience that mediates between two – or more – individuals, and it is different than the use of spectacle as a critique of consumerist culture, which refers to an ideological apparatus that pacifies people. Hence, the spectacular form, size, and scale of a project do not necessarily function as a pacifier. Many good projects that have strong formal properties – and also critical strands – have been unappreciated, or the spectacular size and scale of a project in the public domain became a matter for their discrediting. That which Claire Bishop criticizes as a “voluntary subordination to the artists’ will, and... the commodification of human bodies in a service economy (since voluntary participation is also unpaid labor)” in participatory art, can be contrasted with spectacular art, which in fact may be a more interesting method of engaging people in discussions about the political and socio-economic conditions in which they are living.⁴

Another aspect of the discussion on socially engaged art and spectacular art is the issue of instrumentalization. The “anti-form” tendency of socially engaged art is usually taken as a counter-force to the instrumentalization that spectacular art is assumed to have by the institutions that commission or buy it (often in order to raise audience numbers and attract further funders and sponsors). In fact, just as spectacular art is instrumentalized by blockbuster institutions, socially engaged art is instrumentalized by neo-liberal governments to sooth the tension and resolve the conflicts related to immigrant communities, problematic neighborhoods, and tension zones. Accordingly, it is not a satisfactory position to select one over the other. Rather than subscribe to one form of art – which is too easy a formula – we need to evaluate each situation and the *raison d’etre* of the art project in that specific context without making totalizing claims and generalizations on the form and content, or the size and scale, of the work.

Three Examples

Without abolishing the "mediating object" of spectacle or commodifying the participants, how can artists produce socially engaged projects to "house the social" and attract similar attention to spectacular art? Thomas Hirschhorn's projects *Bataille Monument* (2002) and *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* (2009) can be taken as examples. Both projects are collaborations with immigrant communities, the first one, with the Turkish immigrants in Kassel, and the second, with the Surinamese and Indonesian community in the Bijlmer neighborhood in Amsterdam. Formally speaking, with their physically evident energy, urgency, and tension reflecting the action of wrapping large amounts of cardboard and unprocessed wood with duct tape, these projects are visually spectacular, however, they reverse the usual visual language of the "spectacular" – not sleek nor complete, revealing the untidiness of the ongoing process. Although the projects are not spectacular in the usual sense and do not have the necessary properties to attract the attention of the media and society proper, Hirschhorn is able to raise attention and put the specific issues of these immigrant communities into the heart of the societies, through locating them within larger spectacular contexts like the Documenta 11 (2002) or the *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*. With these projects, the artist not only challenges the conventional definitions of socially engaged practice or the issues related to spectacle, but also makes the repressed and ignored visible.

Maidor Lopez, on the other hand, takes the most outwardly trivial issues, like a traffic jam, staging it in the mountains, where it is an unlikely, almost impossible scenario, to bring together people from diverse layers of the society – from different communities, groups, networks, classes, ages and genders, etc. In her project *Ataskoa* (2005), the artist invited people to create a traffic jam at a certain date and time in the Aralar mountains of the Basque country. She was able to assemble a large group of participants from contrasting networks (i.e. environmentalists protesting against pollution alongside car collectors, for whom this project offered a pretext to take their antique cars from their garages and show them off). Undoubtedly, this project could not have been realized without the full participation of the people living in the area. Through the project, they came together, conversed, discussed, ate, and spent the day together. This intense participation became the spectacle, through the documentation taken from an aerial perspective, which reveals both its remarkable scale and

its absurdity. The photographs were published in the local newspapers. Articulating the human relations vis-à-vis their social contexts, this project, from a general perspective, can be considered an example of that which Nicolas Bourriaud calls "relational."⁵ However, embodying the project with a spectacular visuality, the artist embeds the "relational aesthetics" with form. The photographs – which by themselves are very impressive – served as the "mediating object" between the artist, the participants, and society at large.

Ayşe Erkmen's produced but un-exhibited project, *Santana* (2002) for the "Metropolitan Iconographies: Cities" exhibition of the twenty-fifth São Paulo Biennial, was an attempt to bring participation and spectacle together, while keeping the tension between art and the social. She asked the inhabitants of the favela in the Santana region of São Paulo to participate in her work by sending messages that they wanted to share (with almost one million people who were visiting the Biennial) to the banner shop in the neighborhood, where the messages were hand-written on banners by the shop owner – in this case, a woman. The cost of the banners was covered by the Biennial so that the participants didn't need to worry about the financial side. The banner size was given in line with the size of the railings in the building, as Erkmen planned to hang the banners next to each other on the railings of the ramp way and vault area of the biennial venue, in order to convert the neutral exhibition space into a square, a stadium, or a gathering place, where people usually congregate to demand or protest and hang or hold their banners. Relating the exhibition space directly to the Santana favela, and voicing the demands, desires, reactions, complaints, advertisements, or whatever the favela residents wanted to express (hundreds of banners of messages were sent to be exhibited at the biennial), the artist opened a space for them. Using the existing plasticity and sculptural quality of the building – designed by Oscar Niemeyer – she created a "spectacular" installation in the vault area, aiming to elevate the expressive power – manifested through the messages and their visuality – of the Santana favela people, who occupy the lowest of strata of society, to the place of the highest. The participants, their friends, and relatives were excited to see the work – their banners – and the exhibition.

However, although the project and its placement were agreed (a photograph showing the installation at a much smaller scale was published in the catalogue), even highly praised by the chief curator of the exhibition, just before the opening, the banners were taken away by the Biennial and we were informed that it was visually disturbing Vanessa Beecroft's opening performance – an entirely different type of spectacle realized with beautiful naked models. Another place was found in the café area – not as central as the previous one but also a circulation area which conformed to the requirements of the work in terms of size. The chief curator happily accepted this proposal. However, later on, it is understood that the president of the Biennial foundation reacted against having the favela banners inside the exhibition hall. Once again, the artist was asked to change the location and install the banners outdoors. She rejected the offer – analogous to throwing the favela back out of the territory it had been invited to occupy – and withdrew her work.

Unquestionably, this case of exclusion and censorship was taken to the international media. In the midst of feverish opening events, only one of them was interested in the story; Austrian television and the local newspaper, *Folha de S. Paulo*.⁶ At least the exclusion and censorship exercised by the Biennial against the residents of Santana favela and the artist, Ayşe Erkmen, became public. The event unexpectedly disclosed the fact that even the, so-called, most experimental and politically tolerant institutions of the art world, the biennials, in this case, the São Paulo Biennial, can play the role of censor in the name of big patrons to keep the repressed in their own place.

Epilogue

What happens in MoMA or the São Paulo Biennial is symptomatic all around the world, integral to the fluxes of privatizations in every field including art, from its production to its display strategies and marketing. Alongside the replacement of social governments with liberal ones, we are witnessing the withdrawal of public resources, which leads to an increase in art institutions' increased dependence on private sources (which will

eventually happen also in the Northern European countries, the Netherlands is one, together with the withdrawal of the social welfare states). What the institutions of the art world are paying in return is more serious than the exposure possibilities of the credit and acknowledgement panels and pages. They open themselves up to a market-driven ethos, which is not only a question of posing for the market, but means infusion to the most minute detail in the decision-making mechanisms and processes of the market. This is true for many centers such as New York and ex-periferies such as Istanbul. Although the MoMA and São Paulo Biennial cases that I describe do not share any common point, both illustrate a corporatization of decision-making processes that, in turn, has an impact on the criteria, not only for marketing issues, but also artistic and social ones. And, as exemplified with these cases, it may, eventually, lead to marginalization, exclusion and even censorship artistically and socially.

In this way, the institutions of the art world function as the freelancers of the market and the neo-liberal state, a classification and stratification machine, described by Loic Wacquant – in reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the bureaucratic field; “neoliberalism entails a rightward tilting of the space of Bureaucratic agencies that define and distribute public goods and spawns a Centaur-state that practices liberalism at the top of the class structure and punitive paternalism at the bottom.”⁷ Rethinking the issues related to the “publicness” of such mega institutions and different impacts of the privatization on them and ultimately on the art world, we can ask if there is any place for the social anymore in the current form of these institutions. Should we start instituting new forms?

¹ After 1989, in the last couple of decades, together with the mega global changes and transformations in governance and ideology the concept of “public,” thus, the role of art and cultural institutions has been shifted. Furthermore, the understanding, *raison d’être* and aim of “public art” has been changed, signified in neologisms like “art in public domain,” “art in civic space” or “art as public space,” etc. While “public art” is a legacy of the welfare state with the conviction that art can be used as a tool for the wellbeing of its citizens, “art in public domain” is an emancipated autonomous form of contemporary art originated in the late 50s as a part of the institutional critique when artists left the museums and galleries to go out to the streets to situate art in the hearth of life. While public art is subsidized by governments and involved in commissioning, art-in-public domain may or may not be involved in commissioning, instead, may be an artist initiation, and can be supported by public and/or private sources. Unlike “public art,” which conforms with the existing status quo and governmental ideologies and programs, “art in public domain” situates itself critically in the public domain, challenging the status quo, specifically unfolding the socio-political and ideological structures that we all are living in.

² Chantal Mouffe, “Art and Democracy: Art as an Agnostic Intervention in Public Space”, *OPEN* 14 (Amsterdam: SKOR/NAi, 2008): 6-15.

³ Jacques Rancière quoted in Claire Bishop, “Participation And Spectacle: Where Are We Now?” in Nato Thompson, ed. *Living As Form, Socially Engaged Art From 1991 – 2011* (New York/Cambridge: Creative Time Books/MIT, 2012), 40.

⁴ Claire Bishop, *ibid.*, 39.

⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud defines the art of the 1990s as “relational art,” which he delineates as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 109. Formally, this shift points to temporary spatial site and event-specific organizations and interventions, collaborative, interactive, and socially engaged processes and projects, political activism, and performances, Internet, and media-bound practices, and the like.

⁶ <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/ilustrada/ult90u22333.shtml>

⁷ Loic Wacquant, “Three steps to a historical anthropology of actual existing neoliberalism,” *Social Anthropology*, volume 20, no. 1 (New Jersey: Wiley, 2012): 66.