

CuMMA PAPERS #1

CuMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

NORA STERNFELD PLAYING BY THE RULES OF THE GAME PARTICIPATION IN THE POST- REPRESENTATIVE MUSEUM¹

Taking up the idea of participation seems to be a trend in current institutional discourse and museum practice, which increasingly set out to achieve “social inclusion.” But who is to be included, and in what way? Which identitary ascriptions are part of the game? And why should anyone be interested in taking part in a game invented entirely by others? This text focuses on spaces of agency within the museum that seek to reject, transgress or even also to redefine the significances ascribed to the concept of participation.

This will be done in three parts: The first focuses on the problem of the “participatory imperative”²—by using an historical example from Germany, on the one hand, and by taking a look at Antonio Gramsci’s concept of transformism, on the other. In the second part (with the help of Carmen Mörsch and Jacques Rancière), I want to bring the rules of the game themselves into the game. The third part (drawing on Irit Rogoff) is concerned with the question of spaces of possibility. After all, perhaps something unexpected can happen within the post-representative museum...

THE PARTICIPATORY IMPERATIVE

Art for all! This is not so much a political demand, as almost more of a threat in the history of the culture police. At the same time as art was gaining autonomy, along with the possibility of adopting political positions, it also acquired an educational, state-representative function. At the close of the 18th century, Schiller attributed to art the potential to affect the development of morals. Thus, over the years, while intending to disseminate culture—by opening museums and through compulsory education—participatory approaches to viewing art increasingly become technologies of dominance. *Die Kunst für Alle!* (Art for All!) In the early 20th century, this was the programmatic title of a readily accessible outlet for reactionary, racist and anti-Semitic currents. In 1885, the first issue of an art magazine bearing that same name was published in Germany, taking as its task the education of the masses (*volks-erzieherisch*).³ By 1910, it was one of the most widely circulated art magazines in Germany. Its first publisher and editor-in-chief was Friedrich Pecht, who understood “Art for All” as being synonymous with art that was both popular and national in character. The magazine’s aim of educating the masses largely involved forging links between representational painting, the people of the nation (Volk), health and race. The magazine remained in print until 1944. Thus, in the history of art reception in Germany, anti-elitist rhetoric emphatically went hand in hand with anti-modernist and anti-intellectual positions.

Today, art and culture are no longer supposed to merely be there “for all,” rather, under the banner of “participation”, art is now supposed to be done “with everyone.” What is more, under the banner of “creating visibility”, the emphasis is frequently on expanding the field of representation so as to include marginalized groups within society. From the perspective of this “all” (meaning marginalized positions that until now have not been won over as part of the “all”—or, more succinctly, as target groups) at which the new institutional discourses are directed, this means, on the one hand, that they are invited to participate and, on the other hand, that they are expected to be available as objects of representation. Within this context, art and cultural education are ascribed the role of a bridge between these target groups and the elitist themes of the institutions. They are expected to close the gaps in the (educational) responsibilities that the institutions have failed to fulfil—and to ensure that the institution remains as fully intact as possible. Within this context, participation usually means interaction.⁴ Everyone should have the impression that they are participating, yet without their participation having any influence whatsoever.

How are we to understand this participation, which aims to include as many people as possible, but without giving them any possibility of having

¹ This article has been translated by Erika Doucette and Sam Osborn. The German version appeared in: Susanne Gesser, Angela Jannelli, Sibylle Lichtensteiger (Eds.) *Das partizipative Museum. Zwischen Teilhabe und User Generated Content. Neue Anforderungen an kulturhistorische Ausstellungen.* (Bielefeld, February 2012)

² Cf. the conference entitled “The Participatory Imperative. Art Mediation, The Art of Mediation.” Museum for Contemporary Art Zagreb, 13-15 May 2010, http://www.imperativsudjelovanja.net/index_njem.html, accessed on 30 August 2011, and the publication containing contributions from the conference: Jedermann, Katharina/Leko, Kristina (2011): “The Participatory Imperative. Art Mediation, The Art of Mediation,” in: *Zivot Umjetnosti* Nr. 88/2011, pp. 6-19.

³ Cf. Meister, Jochen, Brantl, Sabine (2006): *Ein Blick für das Volk. Die Kunst für alle*, München. Published on the occasion of the exhibition “Ein Blick für das Volk. Die Kunst für Alle” at Haus der Kunst, Munich, 14 June - 3 September 2006, online: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/frontdoor.php?source_opus=102

⁴ Cf. Kravagna, Christian: *Arbeit an der Gemeinschaft*, republicart web journal, 1/1998, http://www.republicart.net/disc/aap/kravagna01_en.htm, accessed 30 August 2011: “Interactivity goes beyond a mere perceptual offer to the extent that it allows for one or more reactions, which influence the work—usually in a momentary, reversible and repeatable manner—in the way it is manifested, but without fundamentally changing or co-determining its structure.”

an impact on the decisions made? It is obvious that the strategy at work here is, for the most part, not emancipatory but more the institutional-hegemonic one that Antonio Gramsci termed “transformism.”⁵ According to Gramsci, this is based on the idea that hegemony is never created merely through coercion, but that educational processes are also always a part of attaining and maintaining hegemony. “Every relationship of ‘hegemony,’” he writes, “is necessarily an educational relationship.”⁶ And because he takes an insight from reform pedagogy seriously, namely, that learning is not a one-way street leading from those teaching to those learning, but a relationship full of mutual learning effects, he makes it clear that hegemony also entails learning from the peripheries. This, however, is not done with the goal of altering, but of maintaining existing power relations. “Those who want to keep what’s good have to change some things” (*Wer gutes bewahren will, muss manches verändern*) was a slogan of the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) in the 1990s: a transformist perspective on what it means to uphold the existing power relations. Transformism aims to integrate critique without necessarily bringing the relations - and structures of power and exclusion themselves into play.⁷

THE RULES OF THE GAME AS SUCH

In addition to this hegemonic understanding of “participation,” I would also like to present and expand on another notion of participation. I propose that participation be understood not only as “joining in” something, but also as a way of taking part and of having a part, and thus making the conditions of participation part of the game.

Carmen Mörsch distinguishes between four different types of education and speaks of affirmative, reproductive, deconstructive and transformative approaches to education:⁸ According to Mörsch, affirmative approaches are frontal forms of passing on the knowledge and values of institutions, while reproductive approaches tend to work with dialogue-based and interactive methods for acquiring institutional knowledge and values. In both cases, however, the institutional canon remains unquestioned. This questioning takes place in the third category, by employing deconstructive approaches. While these three types reflect on the logics of institutions and the institutions themselves, only transformative strategies go a step further: they aim not only to analyse, but also to transform the institutions. Here, I would propose that only transformative strategies be regarded as participation in the proper sense of the word. After all, a democratic understanding of participation entails being able to participate in the decision-making process that determines the conditions of participation, decision-making and represen-

⁵ Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (editors and translators). 1999 [1971]: *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. London, p. 214f

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 666.

⁷ Cf. Marchart, Oliver (2008): *Hegemonie im Kunstfeld, Die documenta Ausstellungen dX, D11, d12 und die Politik der Biennalisierung*, Cologne, p. 25. Oliver Marchart takes the notion of transformism from political theory and applies it to exhibitions, thus enabling a differentiated analysis of the current tendencies and strategies within the exhibition context that goes beyond lamenting over cooptation.

⁸ Cf. Mörsch, Carmen: *At a Crossroads of Four Discourses: documenta 12 Gallery Education in between Affirmation, Reproduction, Deconstruction, and Transformation*. In: Mörsch, Carmen et al. (Eds.): *documenta 12 education II. Between Critical Practice and Visitor Services Results of a Research Project*, Berlin 2009, pp. 9-33.

tation. Participation is not simply about joining in the game, it is also about having the possibility to question the rules of the game: the conditions under which education, the public realm and representation within institutions happen. And, when understood in this way, participation can indeed make a difference.

Participation thus has to do with the possibility of transformation. However, whether this opening up puts us in a situation in which change is possible in a transformatory sense (in terms of a technique of domination as Gramsci describes it), or in a transformative sense (understood in emancipatory terms, as in Mörsch), depends on the particular situation.

Perhaps Jacques Rancière's distinction between politics and police could be of help in making this decision. In Rancière's political theory, politics take place in the moment when "the part that has no part" demands a part, in the name of equality—thereby disrupting the police logic of administration and organized inequality.⁹ Drawing on this notion, it seems that, in most cases, participation entails an element of police logic: voluntary participation as a form of voluntary self-regulation.

Accordingly, there is no reason to demand art—as a technique of domination—for all just so that the part of society that has been refused the power of definition can better study and learn to accept its lack of access, and better internalize the existing relations governing the power of definition. It also seems just as unnecessary to advocate "art with all," which political programs and art education concepts have tended to include in their demands since the 1990s. Who would want to participate anyway? It cannot possibly be enough to merely take part: creating visibility—being visible or being allowed to say something—cannot possibly suffice. It is more a matter of engaging in a discussion of the conditions governing the power of definition. A change in perspective that does make a difference is one that focuses on all the rules of the game and not simply on the possibility of joining in the game: it focuses on the power to define what is visible. It is about entering into the contentious territory of what can be seen or said. It is thus a struggle for hegemony, for power, for distribution, and also for expropriating the existing power relations within the field of visibility. What is at stake then are the rules of the game themselves. From Rancière's perspective, demanding to have a part is also a question of politics. Extending an invitation does not result in participation: this is achieved through struggles that transgress and reshape the hitherto existing social logics.

⁹ Cf. Rancière, Jacques (1999). *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose, Minnesota (La Méseintente. Politique et philosophie, 1995).

SPACES OF POSSIBILITY IN THE POST-REPRESENTATIVE MUSEUM

In recent years, theorist and art historian Irit Rogoff has been working on reformulating the concept of participation. Her essay “Looking Away. Participations in Visual Culture”¹⁰ begins with the question: “What comes after the critical analysis of culture?” She consequently asks what else can be done within institutions besides institutional critique? Rogoff proposes shifting the view in a way that transgresses the binary of actors and spectators: “a shift of the traditional relations between all that goes into making and all that goes into viewing, the objects of visual cultural attention.” While traditional art history and the tried and true praxis of mediation have always assumed that the aim was to examine the works better, together, and in more detail, Rogoff proposes “looking away” as a strategy of participation. She shifts attention toward what could happen

- if the intentions (of artists and curators) no longer dominated all conversations and forms of actions within exhibitions.
- if unexpected and unusual encounters were to take place.
- if performative acts were to generate new forms of engagement with institutions and exhibitions.

Rogoff’s understanding of participation thus begins when we cease imagining exhibitions as spaces of representation, and a space of possibility emerges. So, what comes after critique? In other words, how can the critique of the museum have an impact on the museum that is neither predefined nor known in advance? And how can this impact go beyond sheer representation and preordained identity ascriptions?

Rogoff raises a crucial aspect of the discussions on “identity” that have taken place over the past twenty years. These are indeed closely linked to the debate on “participation,” often going hand in hand with the function of museums and institutions as sites of “social inclusion.” Rogoff points out that the representation of marginalized groups is not an achievement in and of itself. Upon closer examination it is obvious—and here, I would like to go beyond the context that Rogoff discusses—that concepts of mediation that target marginalized groups or aim at social inclusion are more strongly oriented toward fixing identity ascriptions than toward self-definition. In most cases, defining new target groups and presenting various aspects of an agenda so as to include a designated and specified social group brings about even greater exclusion (of those outside the scope of the target group). Participatory projects proudly see themselves as giving a voice, for instance, to “former drug users”—an attribute that transports the participants’ past into the present in an exhibition. What is the point? When dealing with issues of participation, integration and inclusion, it is also important to consider the ques-

¹⁰ Rogoff, Irit: Looking Away. Participations in Visual Culture, <http://umintermediai501.blogspot.com/2009/12/irit-rogoff-looking-away-participations.html>, accessed 30 August 2011.

tion of who is able to include whom, and what gives them the right to think they can make that decision. In order to avoid this question and, at the same time, to render it productive in order to create a possibility for agency, Rogoff proposes rethinking the concept of “we” in a new, post-identitarian manner. As such, she understands participation as a collective praxis of speaking and acting publicly that resists identitary ascriptions.

In conclusion, I would now like to add to this post-identitary “we” the idea of post-identitary solidarity. In order for this to happen, the question must be raised as to how acts of solidarity can take place within institutions—if they are to learn from marginalized positions (as in Gramsci’s notion of transformism)—thus, not in terms of maintaining the status quo, but in terms of bringing about change. What does this mean? An institutional act of solidarity would be to act in solidarity with the disturbance that takes place when what Rancière calls “the part that has no part” disrupts the police logic. An institution would act in solidarity if it were to make an effort to oppose the constant dismissal of such a disturbance through transformism. Since the effects of transformism can be felt through small acts and within large structures, this post-identitary solidarity could be imagined both within the small everyday lives of institutions and within social structures and exclusions.

In this sense, conceiving of art education as a space of possibility means departing from the exhibition space as a space of representation and conceiving of it as a post-representative public space:

First of all, as a space where something can happen—something that has not been predefined, neither with regard to what it will be nor to who the actors will be.

Secondly, this goes beyond the idea that something unexpected will happen; instead, it is about the fact that what is happening has the potential to bring about change and, thirdly, that all of this—even if it leaves the logic of ascriptions behind—takes place within relations of power.¹¹ A democratic notion of participation such as this one takes a stance and, at the same time, leaves open any idea of where it is going. It is both critique and affirmation (in terms of agency).

Although this sounds good, but in reality, it is still tied to a number of questions—which are not to be omitted at the end of this article. After all, understanding art and education as a space of possibility also means dealing with all the problems entailed in open processes: What happens if nothing unexpected happens? What happens if nobody wants to take any action? What happens if we do not agree with the objections made by those who are marginalized? What happens if nobody has any objections? Our work within the context of *trafo.K*¹²—an agency within which my colleagues Elke Smodics-Kuscher, Renate Höllwart and I have spent twelve years conducting edu-

¹¹ James Clifford refers to museums as contact zones. In doing so, he places the emphasis on the fact that the aim of polydimensional discussions that also have multiple perspectives within museums cannot be pursued on the same level if the social power relations are not also incorporated and taken into consideration (with a view to transforming them). Clifford, James (1997) *Routes, Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, pp. 189-219.

¹² <http://www.trafo-k.at/> accessed 30 August 2011.

educational projects at the interface of education and knowledge production—has shown how contradictory it is to act within spaces of possibility. Because, after all, when participation is at stake, and it is impossible to clearly determine the focus in advance, then we have no answers, we run into problems and setbacks, difficulties, confrontations, questions... However, it is precisely within these challenges that the power of participation lies, the power of participation that this text has sought to advocate.

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