

Mojca Puncer

Faculty of Education, University of Maribor, Slovenia

Interspaces of Art – Challenges For Contemporary Aesthetics

Abstract: The paper deals with the consequences of an exceptional rise of hybrid forms of in-between spaces in contemporariness, which are populated with objects and phenomena from a wide and very heterogeneous field of (visual) arts. Theoretical reflection on this field requires cross-disciplinary networking and transdisciplinary treatment, intersectional co-operation of disciplines, and the deployment of new methodological approaches that often result from the recombination of already existing methods and procedures. We are dealing with the consequences of the productive fading of the boundaries of different areas (especially aesthetics, political philosophy, new urban studies and contemporary art history), i.e. by introducing new hybrid research subjects, which expound the potentials of ever new, yet unexplored areas, which can also be marked on the level of terminology.

The discussion aims to contribute to the analysis of participatory art from the perspective of intermediate spaces between art and everyday social reality. The focus is on the critical reflection of such art with examples from Slovenia in the light of the need to find new ways of analyzing art, which would no longer be related only to visuality. The author comes from the view that participatory art due to its hybrid and transdisciplinary nature cannot be adequately evaluated within the traditional framework of art criticisms, and thus strives for more general concepts in the field of philosophy and political theory. Deployment of contemporary approaches, which contribute significantly to the reflection on such art (besides Rancière's politics of aesthetics, the affirmation of aesthetics based on critical discourses of post-Marxist, post-socialist and post-transitional perspectives), is particularly helpful for the author.

Keywords: art in social space; politics of aesthetics; post-transition; hybridity; transdisciplinarity; participation; interspaces of art; visual arts.

What is crucial for the processes of the (neo-)avant-garde, postmodernism and especially contemporary artistic practices is precisely their crossing artistic boundaries into areas of exploring the ideal and broader social phenomena. Claire Bishop, an art historian and critic, points out, in particular, the “social turn” of art in the 1990s,

with which artists changed from the creators of objects into the producers of situations co-created together with the other participants in the project.¹

Faced with contemporary artistic practice, art history found itself in a crisis. Since the 1960s, it did draw on the findings and methods of linguistics, psychology, psychoanalysis, semantics, various branches of structuralism, semiotics, Marxism, etc., available in the international environment, which also had a significant effect on the happenings in Slovenia, but this did not bring about a greater increase in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary expansions of the field of art history. In this contribution, we also endeavor to strengthen the significance of various theoretical approaches in shaping the interpretative tools in order to deal with contemporary (participatory) art in a more effective way. The social turn of art (Bishop) takes us through the insufficient sociological discourse on art to a renewed and strengthened philosophical and aesthetic reflection on contemporary participatory art, the kind stimulated by Jacques Rancière's aesthetic oeuvre.

Methodological remarks on participatory art: towards the politics of aesthetics

The analysis of Claire Bishop's case studies in her *Artificial Hells* (2012) effectively shows the challenge posed by the methodological implications of participatory process art, which demand that we seek alternative criteria for the study and evaluation of such art.² When research is faced with an artistic practice that has to do with people and social processes, visual analyses prove to be insufficient as they miss the affective dynamics between the participants of the event itself. It was already conceptualism and the performative practices of the 1960s and 1970s that tried to shake the commodity-object in favor of an elusive experience, but visibility remained their important part. In contemporary participatory art, performativity (in addition to teaching as an artistic medium) is crucial since the live contact between the participants enables a more effective participatory engagement. The emphasis, therefore, lies in direct experiences based on the process of intersubjective exchange (group dynamic, raised consciousness, etc.). Bishop devotes special attention not only to the processual nature of participatory art but also to its product or result, which she attempts to evaluate in relation to the formation of an "analysis of the politics of spectatorship"³.

¹ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).

² The work of North American critics was crucial for the establishment of the field of participatory art in Europe, the creation of the terminology used in its analysis and thereby also for the formation of Claire Bishop herself. In Europe, the main stimulation for the development of the field is Nicholas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, from which Claire Bishop decisively distances herself.

³ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 9.

As Bishop's case studies of participatory art illustrate,⁴ we face the insufficiency of the positivistic sociological approach to participatory art (evidence, measurability of results), on the one hand, and the need to preserve the fundamentally undefined reflections on a quality characteristic of the humanities, on the other hand. We also have to mention the pragmatic aspect of the method of researching such arts, which due to their experiential nature demand a specific discursivity: concretely, the case study presented below took several years of continued research of the local art scene, ranging from the study of archive material and a series of conversations, interviews and discussions with the artists, curators and individual participants in the projects to the communication with the audience to which the research findings were presented in the form of texts, lectures, exhibitions and public debates.⁵

In the methodological sense, dealing with people and social processes, however, at least partially requires a sociological reading since the analysis necessarily has to include concepts such as 'community', 'society', 'agency', etc., which traditionally had a greater significance within the social sciences than the humanities.⁶ But because, in addition to being a social activity, participatory art is also a symbolic activity, which enables it not only to be embedded in the world, but also to be separated from it and have a certain aesthetic distance to it, the positivist social sciences are, in this regard, less useful than the more general, more abstract concepts from the field of philosophy (especially aesthetics and political philosophy).

For the needs of discussing participatory art practices, we use the theories and concepts from aesthetics or the philosophy of art and political philosophy (Rancière, Mouffe), aesthetics under post-socialist and post-transitional conditions (Erjavec, Kreft, Šuvaković), contemporary art history and criticism (Bishop) and also architecture and urbanism (Jurman and Šušteršič, Krasny).⁷ This specific interdisciplinarity and trans- or post-disciplinarity differ from the interdisciplinary approaches of art history from the 1970s since the need for theoretical inter- or transdisciplinarity originates in the participatory art practices themselves.

Contrary to the sociologically and ethically colored approach to evaluation is the decision to deal with participatory projects "*as art*."⁸ In view of the described cir-

⁴ Ibid., 16–17.

⁵ In this process, however, a transition from a theoretical critical treatment of the practices of Celje artists took place (researches about the so-called Celje alternative of the seventies, Admission Free festival from the late nineties, etc.) to active participation in several projects of artists from the Association of Fine Artists of Celje. Recently the author of this paper has assumed the role of curator in several exhibition projects: e.g. *The Architecture of Interpersonal Relationships*: open studio, Celje, August 31 – September 11, 2015; *WE MET AT SIX: Proposals for Communal Practices and Green Areas in Celje*: an exhibition on view at the Celje Gallery of Contemporary Art (co-curator Irena Čerčnik), Celje, September 11 – October 18, 2015.

⁶ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 7.

⁷ On participatory urbanism see Urška Jurman and Apolonija Šušteršič, ed., *AB. Arhitektov Bilten [Architect's Bulletin International Magazine for Theory of Architecture]* 41, 188–189 (2011). See also Elke Krasny, ed., *Hands-On Urbanism 1850–2012: The Right to Green* (Hong Kong and Vienna: MCCM Creations, Architekturzentrum Wien, 2012); Marjetica Potrč, "Self-Organization Where the State Has Withdrawn," (2015), <https://design-fortheivingworld.com/self-organization-in-communities-where-the-state-has-withdrawn/>, acc. July 20, 2019.

⁸ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 17.

cumstances, we need to reconsider the role of aesthetics, which some time ago (in the context of historical avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes) became discredited for allegedly concealing the inequalities and exclusions in society, which is why it was equated with formalism, decontextualisation and depoliticisation; furthermore, aesthetics became synonymous with the market and social hierarchy. A certain re-evaluation of aesthetics only came about in the new millennium with the important contribution of Rancière's aesthetic thought. In addition to overcoming traditional art classifications and hierarchies, Rancière insists on preserving the tension or paradox between the autonomy and the heteronomy of art: "in this regime, art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or something other than art."⁹

Participatory art practices under post-socialism and post-transition: a few examples from Slovenia

The demise of socialism coincided with the emergence of Western postmodernism, which supports Erjavec's thesis about the emergence of a specific form of postmodernism within the transition period of the so-called "postsocialism" of former Eastern Europe, which saw the rise of interest by the Western art system only in the 1990s.¹⁰ After the fall of communism, former Eastern Europe, that is, former socialist countries also witnessed a rise in socially engaged and participatory art. When Slovenia became independent in 1991, it went through a period of transition to neo-liberal capitalism, which was crucial for the formation of new production conditions for making art. This led to a change in the way artists worked and established a relation with the audience, but also to changes in the reception and the evaluation of art, which moved more and more to the margins of social happening. While the critical performative, research and participatory practices moved from the traditional institutional venues of fine and visual arts through alternative places and locations into the broader social space, they remained quite neglected in the eyes of criticism and critical theoretic reflection. We can assume that what caused a certain unease among the critics was especially their participatory procedures, which demanded a fundamental rethinking of value criteria.

In continuing this paper we shall focus particularly on those contemporary artistic articulations by Slovenian artists that are actualized in different hybrid forms of experimental spatial, aesthetic and habitation practices playing a connective role in a community. Central to those projects concerned with the production of spaces is the question of the role of the public in their involvement in decision-making processes

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2009), 36.

¹⁰ Cf. Aleš Erjavec, ed., *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism* (Berkeley, University of California Press, Berkeley 2003); Aleš Erjavec, *Postmodernism, Postsocialism and Beyond* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008). Miško Šuvakovič, *Postmoderna (73 pojma)* (Beograd: Nova knjiga, Alfa1995).

regarding spatial practices, since these projects are connected to the local community's ways of habitation. The common attributes of discussed projects are a certain affinity towards conceptual art, expansion from 'just art' to social space, urban contexts, forms to which we can attribute a relational form, participation and striving towards community despite the heterogeneity of their formal approaches and content accents.¹¹

The first wave of art in the public, urban, social space that appeared in Slovenia in the mid-1990s was followed by the second wave at the beginning of the new millennium (the majority of these artists have been from the narrower sphere of fine arts and architecture). Among the more prominent socially engaged artists of the first wave is Marjetica Potrč; from the second wave are especially engaged members of KUD Obrat (Polonca Lovšin and others) and also of the Association of Fine Artists of Celje (DLUC); the work of the latter has not been appropriately evaluated or entered in national art surveys, which is why I devote special attention to this below.

The internationally-renowned architect, sculptress and urban anthropologist Marjetica Potrč artistically explores often overlooked and conflictual aspects of contemporary cities, possibilities of self-supply and habitation alternatives. Her typical artwork is based on a structure or situation that she finds in a remote location where she tries to contribute to its revitalization. Artistic actualizations of the ideas about self-sufficiency, self-organization, participation and alternative sources of energy in Potrč's art are based on high social and environmental awareness and are very engaged since they originate in the habitation needs of individuals, disadvantaged groups and local communities.¹²

The next example is Ljubljana-based Obrat association. Obrat members strive for an interdisciplinary integration of art, architecture and urban planning in the so-called "critical spatial practices".¹³ In their project *Beyond the Construction Site* (August 2010–ongoing), which is situated in the long-closed building site on Resljeva Street in Ljubljana, they explore the potentials of degraded municipal areas and their reevaluation with temporary community interventions: "[T]he site is being transformed into a hybrid community space, dedicated to urban gardens, socializing, ecology, culture, play and education."¹⁴ (Figure 1)

One of the members of Obrat, an artist and architect, Polona Lovšin, focuses on self-organized initiatives and alternative forms of action within architecture and urban planning. In her public art projects, she explores spatial participation practices where the local community's collaboration plays a crucial part. The project *Movement for Public Speaking* is an interactive and temporary public sculpture¹⁵ that offers an

¹¹ Mojca Puncer, "Art in the Social Space: Parallel Strategies, Participatory Practices, Aiming towards Community," in *Hibridni prostori umetnosti [Hybrid Spaces of Art]*, ed. Barbara Orel, Maja Šorli and Gašper Troha (Ljubljana: Maska, 2012), 235.

¹² See for e.g. Potrč, "Self-Organization Where the State Has Withdrawn."

¹³ Jurman and Šušteršič, "Introduction," 10.

¹⁴ Obrat, "Onkraj gradbišča / Beyond the Construction Site," *AB. Arhitektov Bilten [Architect's Bulletin International Magazine for Theory of Architecture]* 41, 188–189 (2011): 105.

¹⁵ Polonca Lovšin, project *Movement for Public Speaking* (Trg svobode, Maribor, Slovenia, UGM / Maribor Art Gallery, 2015), <http://www.ugm.si/en/exhibitions/movement-for-public-speaking-1349/>, acc. July 20, 2019.

opportunity to connect individuals and groups with the aim of public speaking. The sculpture is comprised of a podium and a platform for generating electricity, both interconnected and interdependent. Namely, the speech can only be heard if a group of people generates energy for the sound system by moving on the platform (Figures 2, 2a). The practices of individual artists from the DLUC circle are also marked by social engagement and participatory tendencies – most prominently those of Andreja Džakušič, Simon Macuh, Estela Žutić and Gilles Duvivier.¹⁶ Art enters the public space, where it addresses the residents of the city of Celje. In this, the Celje art scene has important references in the so-called “Celje Alternative” of the 1970s, which brought conceptualization and performativity to the local art practice that extended beyond the gallery walls.¹⁷ At the end of the 1990s, artists took art onto the streets of Celje (the Admission Free festival has been run under the auspices of DLUC since 1999),¹⁸ sparking off a renewed interest in social issues and art activism. In Celje, a complex network of local artists has been forged in collaboration with the art institution, whose aspiration always strove towards change in the local environment. In the new social conditions, individual DLUC members practice community art as a part of informal urbanism, actively involving themselves in initiatives for the revitalization of the city center. In pursuing real, sustainable impact within the local community, these artists are acting following the principles of urban regeneration, social integration and participatory urbanism. In doing so, they stem from the belief that urban areas tied to the community can significantly improve the prospects for sustainable development. The artists appear in the role of co-initiators in establishing community-based urban gardening as well as in the conservation and expansion of green areas as an opportunity for sustainable development for the city. They are approaching the debate by means of artistic research covering experimental and educational workshops and actions for all ages, by which they are encouraging the exchange of experience and knowledge of all participants. In such a way Andreja Džakušič deals with plans for community-based gardens: together with workshop participants and experts, she questions the pressing environmental concerns and the possibility of hanging gardens as a form of sustainable, environmentally friendly urban gardening (Figures 3, 3a).¹⁹ An echo of Situationist urbanism²⁰ can also be recognized here, which likewise reso-

¹⁶ Cf. Mojca Puncer, “Community Based (Artistic) Practices as a New Spatial Ecology in Celje,” in *WE MET AT SIX: Proposals for Communal Practices and Green Areas in Celje*, ed. Irena Čerčnik (Celje and Ljubljana: Center sodobnih umetnosti Celje and KUD Mreža, Galerija Alkatraz, 2015), 4–10.

¹⁷ On Celje alternative see Mojca Puncer, “Conceptual Art in Slovenia: An Example of the Celje Alternative in the Seventies,” *Maska* 24, 123–124 (2009): 104–123.

¹⁸ Cf. Mojca Puncer, “Festival Vstop prost – petnajst let” [“The Admission Free Festival – Fifteen Years”], *Likovne besede* 99 (2014): 62–67.

¹⁹ Already as part of the *Hanging Gardens* project by artist Andreja Džakušič, which she prepared on the occasion of her retrospective exhibition *Encounters* (Celje Gallery of Contemporary Art, December 20, 2012 – February 21, 2013), a series of accompanying events took place. This included workshops on composting and recycling as related to creating a garden plot in an urban environment suffering from pollution.

²⁰ The avant-garde movement of the Situationist International (SI, 1957–1972) is characterized by doubt in art, so its vision of the aesthetic revolution favors direct collective action in an everyday urban environment

nates in the proposals for contemporary informal participatory urbanism. The latter emphasizes user-friendly and adapted spatial planning.

These artists are interested not merely in the overlooked aspects of the local urban space in their research, but also in the relationships with the local residents of the space of exploration itself, as well as in the aesthetic and conceptual relationships with the gallery audience and the general public. The participatory process at a specific location itself does not actually have a secondary audience, which makes the public critical discourse in the form of an exhibition all the more important. The exhibition discloses the results of the preceding artistic research related, for example, to specific city locations that stand out by their topical nature since they are subject to broader civil initiatives (Figure 4). The artists communicate the messages from the separate initiatives through heterogeneous and multi-dimensional works, which are aesthetic and at the same time expand into the social space (the set of works can include live events, installations, documentary material, drafts, sketches, drawings, photographs, video, as well as materials, relocated from the urban environment into the gallery space) (Figure 5). Creating works/projects following the principles of participation is necessarily integrated into a network of connections with specific historical and socio-political contexts as well as everyday life situations. The artistic means of urban life research are always contextually specific, and thus bound to the singularities of determining the meaning.²¹

Towards an elaboration of the politics of a critical view in contemporary aesthetics

Rancière's conception of aesthetics in its close relation to politics can importantly contribute to us understanding the effects of contemporary art dealing with the social field. With the help of Rancière's aesthetic regime and the politics of aesthetics, we can also see contemporary participatory art in Slovenia as a certain continuation of the participatory impulses of international neo-avant-garde movements and their heteronomous nature.

Questioning the emphasis on affective responses, compassionate identification and consensual dialogue brings to light a typical discourse around participatory art, in which "an ethics of interpersonal interaction comes to prevail over a politics of social justice."²² This is a frequent objection to participatory, community art. Opposed to this trend, which can be denoted as an "ethical turn", is Jacques Rancière's politics of aesthetics. In his influential critique of the recent ethical turn, Rancière points out

(implementation of so-called "unitary urbanism") prior to the production of works of art for the art world. Cf. Raymond Spiteri, "From Unitary Urbanism to the Society of the Spectacle," in *Aesthetic Revolutions and the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, ed. Aleš Erjavec (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 178–214.

²¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 23; Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 335.

²² Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 25.

the weakening or even the elimination of political dissensus and social antagonisms.²³ But it is not necessary that every such project ends in a consensus, exclusion and the concealment of otherness rather than in an aesthetic break with the habits of perception, a break that, by way of a dissensus, irony or critique, arouses a unique negative pleasure, embarrassment, unease, ambivalence, etc., in relation to the questions about the 'excluded' as a condition of the existence of every community (for example, about foreign migrant workers). For art is also characterized by elements of critically opposing society and operating in the field of antagonism or *agonism* (Mouffe),²⁴ where it can realize the power of maintaining a contradictory position in relation to the economic-political imperatives. The participatory process is not immune to the characteristic traps of the contemporary capitalist modes of production when it comes, for example, to unpaid collaborators that co-create the work of art, etc. This is why it is not unusual that, with its distancing from the conventional forms of art production under capitalism, participatory art prompts discussions within the tradition of Marxist and post-Marxist writing about art (Mouffe, Rancière, Bishop, etc.). In Slovenia, Lev Kreft has called for a reconsideration of the relevance of Marxist aesthetics in relation to the critique of political economy in the context of both art and aesthetics, referring to Marx's research into "*esthesis* of the capital" and his "critical analysis of fetishism of commodities and universal mystification", which Marx does not discuss "as ideological illusions, but as objective conditions of sensuality and perception."²⁵ In contemporary times, after art and aesthetics turned to everyday life and all areas of life were taken over by the capitalist machine, the need for such a critique has become evident in view of the increasing objectification of interpersonal relations in line with the criterion of usefulness "because the commodity form translates relations between people into relations between objects."²⁶ As a subversive social power against capitalism, art must reach towards the social (a sensual experience of community), but at the same time remain in the domain of art and be successful in both fields, which means that – in line with Rancière's aesthetic regime – it persists in a constant tension, even a paradox. Artistic re-presentation has the power of intervening in public discourse, which appears as a contextually specific artistic or aesthetic strategy (of division, intervention, over-identification, etc.), repeatedly put to the test in every new project (Rancière, Bishop). This realization has important consequences for the reflection on contemporary participatory art, which, with the democratization of the aesthetic means of expression, endeavors to transform the material conditions of its own practice and establishes new, different relations with the audience and the reality outside art. This is also in concurrence with Rancière's finding on the radical contingency of the work of an "emancipated spectator", who is in principle active and equal with

²³ Cf. Rancière *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 109–132.

²⁴ Cf. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso, 2000).

²⁵ Lev Kreft, *Estetikov atelje: od modernizma k sodobni umetnosti* [*Aesthetician's studio: from modernism to contemporary art*] (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani, 2015), 282.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 268.

everybody.²⁷ Furthermore, such a politics of spectatorship essentially concerns and determines the formation of the critical view and the elaboration of its politics also in the field of aesthetics dealing with interspaces of art and social life in a contemporary global society.



Figure 1: Obrat association, *Beyond a Construction Site* (2010–), a community-based garden intervention in a degraded urban space in Ljubljana, February 2011. Photo: Suzana Kajba. Courtesy of Obrat association.



Figure 2: Polonca Lovšin, *Movement for Public Speaking: Everybody's Land*, a community-based garden *Beyond a Construction Site*, Ljubljana, Slovenia, June 1, 2019. Photo: Toni Poljanec. Courtesy of the artist.

²⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 17.



Figure 2a: Polonca Lovšin, *Movement for Public Speaking: Everybody's Land*, a community-based garden *Beyond a Construction Site*, Ljubljana, Slovenia, June 1, 2019. Photo: Toni Poljanec. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3: Andreja Džakušič, *Hanging Gardens*, making a raised bed adapted to contaminated soil; In collaboration with: mag. Jure Radišek / ProTellus (solutions for our soil and environment) and Bogdan Rahten, a permaculture farmer, Kare 9, Celje, September 7, 2015. Photo: Valentin Steblovnik. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3a: Andreja Džakušič, *Hanging Gardens*, making a raised bed adapted to contaminated soil; In collaboration with: mag. Jure Radišek / ProTellus (solutions for our soil and environment) and Bogdan Rahten, a permaculture farmer, Kare 9, Celje, September 7, 2015. Photo: Valentin Steblovnik. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4: Andreja Džakušič, *Hanging Gardens*, installation at the Gallery of Contemporary Art Celje, 2015. Photo Tomaž Černej. Courtesy of Zavod Celeia Celje, Center for Contemporary Arts.



Figure 5: Andreja Džakušič, *Save the Future* (2013), installation at the Gallery of Contemporary Art Celje, 2015. Photo: Tomaž Černež. Courtesy of Zavod Celeia Celje, Center for Contemporary Arts.

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