

University of Pécs Faculty of Music and Visual Arts Doctorate School

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PARTICIPATIVE ART STRATEGIES

**THE ROLE OF THE ACTIVATED SPECTATOR IN PERSONAL CREATIVE WORK AND FROM THE
ASPECT OF EXTENDED SCULPTURE**

DLA thesis

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Choice of topic and research intentions

Participative viewpoint as an approach is a growing tendency in contemporary art and a phenomenon in other disciplines, such as education, urbanism, architecture, sociology, anthropology. This process is happening now, constantly and continuously changing, expanding.

My choice of topic for this doctoral thesis is justified with conceptual questions, and their theoretical background, arising from my personal work experience. One of the most important „intellectual need” with my work is attention (and focus on) to the audience. Involving, activating them has become a conscious, key aspect of my work. My aim here is to examine the ideas, art theory concepts I have encountered. My viewpoint is to be understood from an extended notion of sculpture.

Therefore, my research is practical: it is primarily to analyse the theoretical background of my artistic work, to examine the actual objects and questions that arose, complemented by my learnings and art show experiences, reflecting on the work of Hungarian and international artists who share my interests and orientation.

Thesis layout

My thesis consists of seven chapters: 1 Introduction, 2 Personal history, 3 Geneology of participative practices, 4 Definition of participative artistic strategies and related case studies (examples), 5 History of participative tendencies in Hungary, 6 Aesthetic or ethic-based critical approaches – questions of surrendering authority, and finally, 7 Conclusion.

In Personal history, under section *Basic Notions* one must examine *Rosalind E. Krauss: Sculpture in the expanded field* to discuss the radically changing expansive character of sculpture’s language and sculpture notions from the 1960. Following modernism, this work is the base to understand and interpret contemporary artistic endeavours.

In the above mentioned chapter I present my artistic approach, followed by the section *My art work – adjoining theoris* where I discuss some of my most prominent works: either because they introduced key questions from the creational viewpoint, or they set ground for other works and theoretical questions, problems, perceived at the birth of new works. Having introduced these works, I shall discuss their theoretical background or support them with associative, case study-like examples.

The third chapter deals with the genealogy of participative practices. The spread of collaborative, participative tendencies is undoubtedly one of the main features of contemporary art. Numerous art groups around the world take position with collectivity, sometimes unanimously, without the authority of their artistic work. The aim of these collaborations is to motivate the audience in participation, to activate the social environment where they may flourish. Such endeavours are not new, their history is long and extensive. The genealogy of participatory art is introduced by Richard Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk* theory, followed by early 20th century radical avantgard movements, like the Italian Futurists, the Zürich Dada, Duchamp and the Surrealists, or Bakhtin's carnival theory. I then commence to discuss John Cage's followers, Fluxus and its practices, Allan Kaprow's happenings, the new media and Internet, Marshall McLuhan's media theory, Peter Weibel, closing with recent participative artistic practices.

In chapter four, while defining those artistic practices that build on spectator participation, I shall deal with related definitions of common terminology but different meaning that are often used interchangeably without defining exactly their meaning or the important questions of „who takes part“ and „who is included“ in participation systems. Indeed, we shall see that „participative art strategies“ is an umbrella term that includes all related tendencies (such as new genre public art, relational aesthetics, littoral art, etc.) It is to avoid misunderstanding that the definition and exemplification through case studies of such notions is necessary. Numerous expressions are used in connection to public practices – sometimes almost indistinguishable, or their differences are hinted depending on their perceivable characteristics – different theorists position these differently. Kester in his *dialogical art* talks about the conversation-like character of the work, while Bourriaud emphasizes the interhuman relationships in *relational art*. Since different tendencies are often similarly defined, or describe an almost identical phenomenon, the case studies presented as examples may turn up several times simultaneously due to the attributes of the definitions. Therefore, analyses and case studies of artists or art projects are to be presented after the conceptual tendencies.

I have divided the case studies into three groups:

1 Artists and artistic endeavours undertaking such behaviour which turn to social interaction only as an extension of their conceptual and sculptural practices. Instead of positioning themselves as activists, seeing art as a means of social change, rather they are closer to avantgarde theatre, performance or architectural theory. (For example: Carsten Höller, or the more performative Francis Alÿs works.)

2 Those who focus on tackling real social problems, representing socially, politically engaged art. (For example: WochenKlausur, the Oda Projesi group's projects.)

3 Artistic behaviour featuring both of the above ideals, such as Ai Weiwei's works. He pays attention to and delivers an opinion on social and political events, but his installations, sculptures also meet

aesthetic needs. Watching social and political phenomena closely, his finish and use of material reveal an applied strong sculptural approach appearance, and also displaying performative aspects as well.

In chapter five I shall discuss a few Hungarian institutional projects, participative endeavours in public space and socially engaged, or communal projects from Pécs. I wish to introduce Ilona Németh's and Antal Lakner's work as case studies – I have chosen them because of personal preferences. Their activities demonstrate the approach which turn to participative strategies as the extension of conceptual and sculptural aims. These kind of neo-conceptual artists involve – as the work's actual element – the audience through the extension of their sculptural practice?.

In the final chapter before the conclusion I would like to discuss the surrendering of artistic authority and the critical approach to participative art.

Almost anything may be considered art since Duchamp rid everyday objects of their context and inserted them into the context of art, as a kind of axiom. What follows logically from this is that all activity building on social, political collaboration – regardless of its quality – is to be considered art when taken into the context of art and thereby shows in artistic discourse. How much a work is seen as social activity may influence its reception. If it is defined in the context of art world, it is easily definable; if somewhere else, the project is more of a social work. Hidden in real life, it is invisible for the art world.

Socially engaged art is usually not judged by aesthetic quality, it is strictly valued from ethic criteria. It is not the product, but the process of activity, which is to be seen as art. This is why Claire Bishop suggests setting up a new complex aesthetic system instead of the primarily ethics-based critical approaches, which, she claims, have almost exclusively served as means to analyse this type of art until now. Bishop contends such, primarily ethics-based approaches. She claims that such artistic strategies surrender aesthetic aspects to ethic ones and throw away the former, along with artistic authority. Bishop's views are certainly valid for most politically or socially engaged art works, where neither visual quality, nor aesthetic criteria are important. As an artist, my personal preference is considering aesthetic aspects and this subjective approach is supported by the case studies presented. However, if one is to think by another set of criteria – often needed by works of the new approach – this extended field does incorporate the interpretation of those social and other endeavours as art which is not inclined to comply with aesthetic standards. Thinking in this extended field – similar to Duchamp's argument above – is to be considered as an axiom.

One important aspect of participational, collaborative works is the set of aesthetic and ethic criteria, the other is the paradox of surrendering authority. The question is whether the artist must create authority

as a prerequisite even if their professional activity is based on collaborative, or participatory effects? Andy Warhol, creator of the first DIY art is considered the author of his works precisely because his *workshop* idea and Factory rules are irreconcilable with the notion of authorship. Warhol built his career on this paradox.

Despite the *death of the author* declared by Roland Barthes, we are seemingly unable to get rid of the author: the harder we try, the stronger their myth returns. It seems like if artists wish to function in the world of art, they are inevitably perceived as responsible for their work, regardless of involving participants. The surrendering of authority, of the self, the melting of the ego into the crowd, according to Boris Groys, is not only to be interpreted as a generous deed. Hereby, the audience loses its safe, outside position and aesthetic distance from the work and becomes the actual part of it. Therefore, participative works are not only to be interpreted reductively, but also as the extension of authority.

Conclusion

Several ideas from previous decades reflect on social changes brought about globalization, the alienation of interpersonal relationships and seeks to find some answers with the means of art. Alienation is recognisable not only in interhuman relationships, but between art and audience as well. Art, detached from society, institutional and marketable, is probably more excluded from everyday life than ever before, its audience being but a handful of experts. The trends of the 60s have already tried to dissolve this isolation.

Art, which is a special form of communication itself – always a community creating, forming, keeping and representing act – is now in many cases surrounded by unacceptability and confusion, only to be understood by those „insiders,” the trade itself. To understand contemporary art, one must possess background information – this may be true more than ever before. Works today can not be defined without information and knowledge, thus are unenjoyable for a wider audience. Artistic tendencies which struggle against alienation seek to re-establish a circle of *connoisseurs*. Regardless of the historical era, art has never existed in itself, it is inconceivable without the presence of audience, since the very act of creation assumes the act of incorporation later. Institutional initiatives, like school trips to museums or miscellaneous art show events, help promote and explain contemporary art to a wider audience.

Revising my career, one can realise a growing emphasis on approximation with the audience. As an artist I began to look for communicational possibilities by nature, because I found a need for direct

feedback and establishing a conversation. This inner drive led me to the subject of my thesis, to historically and phenomenologically overview participative endeavours. While searching for answers through my artistic career, I have tried to research the theoretical background of this matter thoroughly and provide a fine, but definitely subjective summary. The information I have gathered during research is parallel to the learning process, which, following the intake of knowledge needs forgetting them: by turning into a skill, it facilitates free utterance without barriers.

Participation has been a growing tendency during the previous decades, but – along with other key attributes – only a kind of characteristic part of contemporary art. Within extensive participative endeavours, my personal preference from my artistic behaviour is rather sculptural and material, to emphasize visually powerful works – but it has been necessary to investigate other tendencies building on audience involvement in order to realise and manifest this.