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## COLLABORATIVE ART PRACTICES AND THEIR DYNAMICS. INTRODUCTION

**ABSTRACT**

*In this introduction, the author presents the diverse theoretical, methodological and conceptual contributions (articles, reports, photo-essays and videos) contained in the volume. The contributions treat key topics in the debates on collaborative art practices and their dynamics, presenting significant collective activities and case studies in the art world, ranging from public and socially engaged art to the movements of artists choosing to deepen their relationships to the communities they effect.*

**KEYWORDS**

Art, Politics, Participation, Place-specificity

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## INTRODUCTION

Giving a form to interpersonal relations is a recurring concern in 20th century art. It is actually a generalized, albeit diversified tendency, which originates from a unique view of contemporary thought towards participation and exchange. According to context and historical period, the interactive practices of art have responded to different needs and ends, redefining the roles of artist and the public, feeding the debate on themes of common interest, reconsidering and giving added value to significant or negligible places, invoking the re-elaboration of important historical events and commemorating special anniversaries.

This publication is intended as a meeting place for scholars, artists, curators, culture professionals, and institutional representatives, and deals with the theme of the relationship between art and participation in the European context. Contributions include interpretative models, critical reflections, and real experiments in which art is presented as a tool of alternative production of contents relative to the public sphere.

The text is deliberately fragmented, with perspectives on the aesthetic, political, social, and ethnographic aspects that expand upon, nevertheless, a question coherently based on transversal notions such as cohabitation, sharing, accessibility, representation, pluralism, identity. The works presented were created in surroundings rather distant from each other – from France to Croatia, from Spain to Poland, from Finland to Italy – and are greatly varied in their planning, languages and methods. Nevertheless, they have the perspective of social implications in common, proposing first hand to involve the spectators and acting in proximity with the space and time experienced, to give shape to real functions of intervention.

A concept of artistry put into effect through action and mobilization comes to light in all of the contributions. As Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster emphasize, they come about through the development of transversal abilities which are not only imaginative and creative, but methodological, organizational, and communicative, as well, and are aimed at changing an interest or an emotional state into a recognizable and recognized perspective. This process outlines a theoretic model – which the authors call ‘civic chain’ – for the analysis of the strategies of politicization and rationalization of cultural organizations that are oriented towards social relations and politically conscious community events and programs. From the moment in which working with people entails an experi-

ence to be shared, the legitimacy and effectiveness of the participating artistic practices can be measured in relation to the quality of the sensations involved, which determines their value and persuasive potential. From this perspective, relationality is, above all, a political act of mobilization, in addition to – as the French critic Nicolas Bourriaud pointed out – an implicit nature of performance in the context of reception and a ‘form’ of artistic event (Bourriaud 1998).

The contribution of Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster is related to that of Roger Sansi, who takes up a subject developed by Néstor García Canclini (2014) regarding the so-called ‘post-autonomy’ of art, in order to reflect on the ethnographic field work among the political activists of certain artistic cooperatives in Barcelona. ‘Post-autonomous’ art, according to Garcia Canclini, abandoned an autarkic, differentiated stance in order to establish itself in everyday contexts, taking shape as a subject of dissolution of disciplinary and epistemological boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Adopting a critical perspective founded on participation, art experiments and contends with the spheres of communication, politics, and anthropology, engaging in subjects that interest and involve the political audience and leads the meaning of the relation from the aesthetic domain to that of direct commitment to the pursuit of shared objectives. Proceeding from these considerations, Sansi provides proof of his research, wondering if one cannot imagine, outside the academic circle, a ‘post-autonomous anthropology’ capable of actively responding to the ‘imperative to participate’ and of adopting a position of a political implication in public contexts.

If inclusive methodologies often have the ambition to transform art into an instrument of responsible governance and workshop of social innovation, one still must know how to distinguish between projects on the basis of methodology, the ‘necessity’ of the intervention regarding the people involved, the distinction of the relationships formed, the definition of the symbolic resources and the capability of restitution to those who took part in the process.<sup>2</sup> An interesting example is the one described by Emanuele Meschini, who retraces the fundamental events in the history of the Nuovo Corviale in Rome, an enormous housing project inhabited by thousands of people. He describes the work carried out by two cultural associations that from 2015 have occupied a part of the complex, organizing art workshops and employment training courses, with the objective of finding a sensible correspondence between community and

<sup>1</sup> The same theme was dealt with, among others, by Schneider & Wright 2006, Groys 2010, Schneider & Wright 2010, Detheridge 2012 and Schneider & Wright 2013.

<sup>2</sup> In regards to such key issues, see the studies by Crehan 2011, Kester 2011, Scardi 2011, Thompson 2012 and Bishop 2012.

settlement. Questioning the forms of legitimacy of the socially engaged art, Meschini distinguishes between associative and participatory practices, demonstrating that in the context of the Nuovo Corviale random participation has materialized through the years into projects and significant moments of definition in the sense of belonging, through activation of an informal economical micro-system and the recovery of downgraded communal areas which have been transformed into places which serve as a reference point and allow explicit connections between people.

Artists who are interested in endowing their research with the theme of social responsibility develop different strategies of inter-subjectivity, subordinating the value of their works to empathy and encounter. Presenting some of his most recent works, closely connected with the landscape and history of the sparsely populated regions of the far north of Europe, the Finnish scholar, curator, and artist Timo Jokela discusses the theoretical and methodological suppositions of *place*-specificity, a collaborative paradigm that redesigns site-specificity as discursive artistic mediation between an environmental context and a social and political one, basing itself on the shared characteristics of the experiential mapping of places.<sup>3</sup> In the case of the communities involved in Jokela's work, the relative isolation of the inhabitants, the vast areas of woodland, the almost constant presence of snow and ice take on stable identifying significance, to which the residents attribute different sensory traits and values of familiarity, from aesthetic to memorial, from economic to ecological. The existential and stratified data concerned are based on the people's knowledge, storytelling, memories and nostalgia, which Jokela collects and translates in collaborative artistic actions in which the participants take on a fundamental and not simply decorative role.

Weronika Plińska's contribution concentrates on two projects carried out by the artist and activist Daniel Rycharski in his home town, Kurówko, situated in a rural area of central Poland. The first project consists of a series of murals depicting outlines of imaginative animals which the artist painted, with the help of the residents, on the walls of houses, outhouses, barns, public buildings and abandoned edifices, in order to transmit the rich heritage of tales about monstrous creatures handed down, mostly by word of mouth. The second project, carried out in 2015, is the *Monument to a Peasant*, an installation which reflects upon the conditions and identity of agricultural workers in the Polish countryside.

<sup>3</sup> Much has been written about the 'sense of places'. I particularly refer to Feld & Basso 1996, Ashworth & Graham 2005 and Convery et alii 2014, who discuss this theme from an artistic, anthropological, historical, and landscape point of view.

Adopting the interpretative perspective put forth by Alfred Gell (1998), Plińska discusses the question of agency in Daniel Rycharski's works, which seem to intervene effectively on reality, generating a community recognizable in images and narrations which are negotiated with the artist intended as primary agent that, in this specific case, gives up occupying an exclusive space.

An important issue regards the role taken on by the 'social' artist, who sometimes speaks in name of the community in order to consolidate his own role or to initiate undertakings permeated with paternalistic or superficial reformism. In addition, there is the problem of what we mean by 'community', a term recurring in the conceptualization of artistic and cultural programs oriented towards participation. As Miwon Kwon notes, in the passage from site-specificity to *community*-specificity, the concept of 'community' preserves a problematic ambiguity in public art today since it is often an unstable and mythic unit, sometimes temporary and always invented, which is used as an effective argumentative device and ideal scenario in which to lead a basically political struggle (Kwon 2002: 6-7). Recognizing these aspects is fundamental in correctly interpreting the social repercussion that is caused in the relationship between artists, the public, and the community: even commitment may become a convention and there is always a risk of exploitation (Scardi 2011: 24 sgg.).

Public commission is mentioned, in particular, in the text by Daria Carmi, who reports some encounters experienced with the intention of renewing the sense of everyday places, in which the curator's role was fundamental in guaranteeing participation. In one of the projects carried out by the author, entitled *Par coii bsogna semnà. Chi semina raccoglie*, some young Italian artists were asked to portray the area and inhabitants of Frassineto Po, a village in the province of Alessandria, by coming up with ideas to expand the awareness of its historical, geographical, and social environment. The prolonged residence in the village of many of them allowed them to execute projects which involved the inhabitants in the reinterpretation of the places and elements of local tradition. Another project was carried out in Casale Monferrato, also in the province of Alessandria, with the aim to artistically recreate the history of the city, tied to the Eternit factory complex and the campaign against asbestos. The work led to the formation of the *Vivaio Eternot*, a monument-garden which is currently entrusted to the care of students and city associations.

In such situations, obviously not only the artist's role but also that of his mutated work abandon their own 'centripetal' nature to endeavor in different contexts and complement each other through the intervention of those willing to interact with such art (Subrizi 2012: 235). This aspect particularly regards the work of Leone Contini, artist and anthropologist, who presented *The Bank of the migrating germplasm* at the Cittadellarte Fondazione Pistoletto of Biella in 2016 in an exhibition curated by Cecilia Guida and Juan Sandoval. The bank consists of an 'archive in progress' of seeds circulating in Italy and originating from various far-away places, which has been created through the years through the study and cooperation among specific local communities who cultivate these seeds, usually importing them informally. The seeds are planted and the produce is used in the preparation of traditional dishes. In Pettinengo in Piedmont, in occasion of the exhibition, Contini worked with asylum seekers in a shelter, creating a vegetable garden in which seeds brought by the refugees themselves could be planted. In this way, the artist negotiates his own engagement as witness <sup>4</sup> with the objective of reflecting and making others think about the culturally decisive production processes belonging to a place in a certain context – such as that regarding international migration – where food plays a strong identity and relational role, made up of procedures and recipes which reproduce themselves in different but compatible contexts, resulting in interesting syncretic phenomena.

Once again on the theme of food and a perspective of meeting between ethnographic research and participatory art, Matteo Guidi presents his photo-essay *Cooking in Maximum Security*, a project created in the context of two penitentiaries, one Italian and the other Spanish. Guidi chooses to turn a non-stereotypical eye on these environments, pausing on a fundamental aspect of everyday life, that of meal preparation, to communicate the orderly intimacy of the cells, spaces of survival and contexts of impermanence – and, at the same time, long-term – with camping stoves, a few dented pans, plastic cutlery, jars and packaged foods. Its residents are strong presences, capable of getting organized, agents of a guise of normality created like an intensely creative patchwork in which objects and staples take on elastic edges, favoring forms of adaptation which give life to tools, recipes and innovative methods. In this way, a piece of sanded wood is transformed into a knife to slice and chop, a simple seat or container for clothing is turned into a space brought to the right temperature in order to bake bread or a cake,

<sup>4</sup> On the concept of artist as 'facilitator' I refer to Pozzi 2014, who presents a series of relational artistic acts, interpreting them with the perspective of giving as a philosophical and anthropological category. See Sansi 2015 on the same subject.

a coffee pot is used as a pestle for preparing pesto, fermented apple juice becomes a slightly alcoholic drink. By documenting these aspects, Guidi's photographs show how, in giving new meanings to things and in the personalization of detention spaces as places – though precarious – of autonomy, inmates can regulate their own existential and relational environment with resistance 'strategies' (de Certeau 2001) that guarantee the psychological containment of distress and the endurance of relationships with oneself and the world.

Nico Angiuli's photographic narrative lingers on some phases of the making of the film which he directed, based on the conditions of farm hands working in the tomato fields in Tre Titoli, a district of Cerignola, in the province of Foggia. The film, carried out through workshops which included the participation of volunteers, professionals, and local associations, involved several young foreign workers and the sons of the farmers who fought for their rights at the beginning of the 20th century along with the trade unionist Giuseppe Di Vittorio. Establishing a conceptual connection between these two historical and cultural worlds, the film brings to light the similarities in the conditions and aspirations of farm laborers of today and yesterday, acting out historic events through the narration of amateur actors, carriers of their own significant biography, who discuss their own role with the director. In this way, the scenic context attempts to produce a balance between contemporaneity and memory, giving back, in a theatrical form, a shared reflection on the systematic and persistent violation of human rights which supports the economic apparatus of exploitation of the low-cost work force.

Finally, Giulio Squillacciotti reports his experience of an extensive period of research on Roman musical subcultures, introducing us to the density of an interstitial and conflicting experience which between the 80's and 90's led to the founding of a movement tied to American Hardcore and Punk aesthetics and style. The study, which led to the filming of the documentary *RMHC 1989-1999 Hardcore a Roma* (2014), was based upon testimonials, audio and visual supporting material, and photographs. The collections in the photo-essay presented in this edition are part of the private archives belonging to those who, having personally lived these experiences, actively contributed to the production of the documentary by donating their own history and recollections.

As evident, in the various contemporary reconfigurations of site-specificity and community conceptualiza-



tions, art becomes, like culture for Stuart Hall (2006), mainly political and politicized, a discursive instrument through which strategic and sometimes ideologically divergent positions are expressed to reset relationships to the advantage of individuals and collectivities.

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