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Activism and Participation in Twentieth Century Art

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"Down with art that aspires to be nothing more than a spot of beauty on the ugly lives of the rich. Down with art that tries to be a glittering stone in the merciless and dirty lives of the poor. Down with art whose sole purpose is to escape a life not worth living. Work for life and not for palaces, cathedrals, cemeteries and museums. Work in the midst of all and with everyone."
Alexander Rodtschenko, Slogans, 1920/21

If one is involved with art history, then the dominant theme of the nineties – the saga of radical change along with paradigm change – seems to be less radical New Art and more about refocusing on the determination of that which counts as contemporary and relevant. In fact, what is happening is an updating of the discourses and practices with which artists were involved during the entire twentieth century.

At the beginning stands the project of modernism: committed to the spirit of the enlightenment, progress-oriented, optimistic and justice-conscious. A pre-view was already staged in one of the century's first theatre plays, Chekhov's "Three Sisters," written in 1900 and premiered in spring of 1901. Even these unhappy figures, who with their rudimentary education are cut off from all intellectual discourse in their empty provincial Russian nest, still feel the utopia of the turn of the century. In the future, happy people will exist who will no longer be able to imagine how miserably those - from today's perspective pre-modern - people, lived.

When the Revolution transformed Czarist Russia into the Soviet Republic in 1917, artists were heavily involved in designing the new society. Lenin himself repeatedly referred to the significance of their role.
In their central demands, the constructivists followed the same objectives as the entire European avant-garde after World War I: to unite art and life and to break from the indifferent autonomy of the nineteenth century's bourgeois salon art.

However, different countries and movements have attached different significance to the impulses for this break and have connected it to diverse political, social, institutional-critical or individualist demands.
To clarify: Even the Italian futurist's project was a political one, although it was tied to a deep-seated elitism, nationalism and fascism. Even the futurists were calling art back into life. In the Futurist Manifesto of 1909 there is a statement similar to Rodtschenko's: "We want to destroy the museums." Yet Marinetti also goes on to state: "We want to praise militarism, patriotism and war, the only hygiene of the world." The individual exists here

merely as the man at the steering wheel; the masses are cast as extras in the stage light of glorious industrialization.
The futurists are often put forward as counter examples when art as social intervention is defined as primarily a project of the left. The futurists, however, were not concerned with actual human standards of living. Umberto Boccioni wrote in 1910, in a manifesto that follows along with Marinetti: "Human suffering interests us to the same degree as the suffering of an electric light bulb, whose trembling ends with a heart-thumping screech of color."

The critical, emancipative and enlightening claim that we identify with art as social intervention leads to its assessment as a leftist project. But what is leftist? The Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio published an essay in 1994 with the subtitle "right and left." In it, he describes the twin concepts as necessities ever after the end of state communism in Europe, at a time of economic interests' unchallenged priority over political course setting. Bobbio comes to the conclusion that it is in no way obsolete to associate the left with freedom, equality and fraternity.
Of course, also in leftist theory, the claim to social shaping through art is controversial. In the philosophy of the Frankfurter Schule there are clearly divergent views. On one hand it is obvious that there is no pure consciousness and no consciousness outside of economically determined power structures. It is still, however, remarkable that in the context of the authority-critical and trial-like art of the nineties, also projects, actions, texts and other non-object forms have long serviced their own markets. Similarly, often our own ideological character is the blind spot overlooked in the process of ideological critique.

Theodor W. Adorno assumed that art in the age of the mass media

and culture industry would dissolve into a popular culture that is understandable and accessible to the masses and into a thin, mysterious and retreating avant-garde, whose hermeneutics and elitism it would defend as a reservoir of resistance. In this, he denies the possibility of an emancipative-participatory practice of art which transverses art.
Herbert Marcuse, on the other hand, sees particularly in this marginality and peripheral position of art its affirmative character - as a demarcated zone in which societal problems and neuroses can be acted out without consequences. - Once again, nothing effectuating social change. Jürgen Habermas speaks of a "false revocation of the separation of art and life," in which he meets Marcuse's "repressive de-sublimation," which means the loosening of social coercion for the purpose of better economic and institutional control.

That many of the Frankfurter Schule's ideas no longer apply in the current context has to do with the changes of the media, power structures, the creation of more and more partial audiences and forms of information and communication. The kind of problem that artists of the left must confront, for example, is culturalization - the transposing of virulent conflicts into art events. What do events such as "Film Day Against Racism" or "Anti-Xenophobia Clubbing" mean?

For Norberto Bobbio, the concept of equality is central to a contemporary leftist worldview. Art's connection to leftist guiding principles can take place on various levels. For one, in the message formulated by a work: famous historical examples are George Grosz' brutal portraits of capitalists or the worker-frescos of Diego Rivera. However, the effort to make the art business less elitist is also leftist, as was attempted for example by the "Art Workers

Coalition" in New York after 1969, when it took up opposition to the white-herrscher attitude of the Museum of Modern Art. Or collaboration between artists and non-artists.
In the countless manifestos of the Russian constructivists, equality is formulated as solidarity among artists, architects and writers together with workers and farmers. The professed commonality however, besides being a very generously described aim of communist society, remains unclear.

In 1920, Tatlin announced the program of the "Productivists' Group," in which he turns against the increasing individualism of the constructivists. And in 1923, the Magazine LEF (Left Art Front), founded by Wladimir Majakowski warned:
"Constructivists! Beware of degenerating into a school of aesthetics.... Production artists! Beware of becoming artisans for the applied arts. Learn from the workers while you are teaching them. Your school is the factory."
Popular art history reduced Russian constructivism to Malewitsch's "Black Square," perhaps also including Tatlin's "Tower"-design. Rodtschenko is marketed today as a photographer and Warwara Stepanowa's worker's clothing is shown at art and fashion shows next to Elsa Schiaparelli. And the term "Production Art" is rarely ever used today in the sense of an interaction between artists and industrial workers on equal levels.

The problem that resurfaced toward the end of the nineties was also not solvable at the beginning of left art: equality among artists and non-artists in projects conceived of and carried out by artists remains a fiction. Alexander Rodtschenko and Warwara Stepanowa, unlike other constructivists, consciously give up painting; yet even these production artists finally see themselves as teachers and graphic designers who work for and not with the

population. Their pedagogic idealism is to be seen in the image-language which they and others, among them Majakowski, developed for the illiterate and which is used as political propaganda as well as for advertising.
In the equal positioning of the fine and the applied arts, the Russian revolutionary artists are related to art producers of the nineties. With one difference: If an artist, for example a woman artist, creates graphic art today, then that is most probably for a catalogue, flyer, brochure or other means of communication within the art industry. The kind of worker's association that Rodtschenko developed in 1925, the Club for Cultural Workers, corresponds today to the "Depot - Art and Discussion" in Vienna which was set up in 1994 by the artist Josef Dabernig.

In the European/US-American writing of art history, constructivism is seen as a formal-ism among other -isms. However, in the space of time from the turn of the century until Soviet isolation under Stalin (Lenin died in 1924) there had been a flourishing exchange of political ideas between Russian and German artists. The manifesto, for example, of the German "November-Gruppe," founded after the failed revolution in November 1918, was influenced by the Russians. Their guidelines, published in 1919, could have been taken from the New York "Art Workers Coalition's" 1969 manifesto and are also consistent with current demands:

"We want a voice and an active roll in:
All architectural projects as a matter of general interest: in city planning, in new developments, in public administration buildings, industry, social constructions, in private building projects...
The reorganization of art academies and their curricula, ...the selection of teachers by artists' associations together with the

students...
The transformation of museums: eliminating prejudice from collection policies, putting a stop to the purchasing of objects which are only valuable to scholars... the transformation of museums into art centers for the general public...
Accessibility of art halls: eliminating privileges and halting the influence of privilege and capitalism...
Legislation in artists' affairs: rights for artists as inventors of ideas, protection of artists' ownership, doing away with all taxes on art works."

Not long thereafter, the "November-Gruppe" was attacked by "Opponents of the November-Gruppe" for being false revolutionaries. Today, their challengers are more prominent: Otto Dix, George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch. And with this it was possible to move on to dada: to the dada movement which of course can only be understood with a much more anarchist political concept than constructivism, which dada associated mainly with the rejection of the bourgeoisie.

The ideology of constructivism had already begun to fade in the inter-war period. As of the late twenties, three concepts became the three main coordinates of art: abstraction, realism and surrealism.

Popular art historical works are picture books. Since art, through to the present, has for the most part produced images and objects, its content continues to be falsified through the convention of illustration. Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes and Roy Lichtenstein's paintings of typeset copies are reproduced in art books' chapter on the sixties. What is not shown? For example the neighborhood projects that Stephen Willats has carried out since the mid-sixties

with tenants of English housing developments in which he examines, together with them, their living conditions.

The picture book as form of mediation is the side effect of an art system whose core functions through tradable goods. All major institutions within this system need an art that is transmittable through individual objects: the museums, art halls, auction houses, galleries, the accompanying magazine, etc. As soon as artists produce something other than transportable and representable objects or installations, they fall out of art historic mediation and canonization. Their visibility and with it the extent of their effectiveness is limited.

Only recently has the historical phase of concept art been dealt with by museums - the exhibition "Reconsidering the Object of Art" on the period 1965 - 1975 took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1996. In 1997 Catherine David designed a documenta with a conceptual-political focus. Yet the transmission of the history of ideas is always insufficient. Why is Jeff Koons known but not Dan Graham; why is Anselm Kiefer a star while no one has ever heard of Robert Smithson?

A history of activism and participation in twentieth century art: an 'other' art history with a focus on participatory interventions with critical-emancipative intention. It is clear that the constructivists and productivists can only be credited as pre-participatory art, after which they must form the base for such a story.

Why is it at all necessary to rewrite art history? Must the established canon be changed?

Shedding a new light on the historical bases and writing critical

artistic practices into art history: only on this basis can art history carry weight and find a new, sustainable definition. Without this historical consciousness, it remains possible to attack socially and politically motivated art, by which authority is legitimated by turning back to an aesthetically oriented art history. In autumn of 1998 in Austria, one such attack was made by the former dean of the Hochschule für Angewandte Kunst. Art's capabilities consist, Rudolf Burger wrote, "only of sensually sympathizing with individual problem moments, of symbolic or allegorical illustration, and this only in retrospect." Everything else is deemed nonsense. Or non-art.

Between agitation and animation. Activism and participation in twentieth century art:
The Duden dictionary for German foreign words and phrases explains agitation as a compelling advertisement for certain political views, animation as invigoration and excitement, activism as the emphasis of purposeful behavior and participation as (temporary) involvement.
Like agitation, activism is usually based on some pre-formulated, mostly politically defined goal, while participation claims to be nothing more than someone playing a role in some process, some event, some business that could also be at a profit or loss in an economic sense. Participatory practices in art are developed fundamentally as a result of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Whatever artists are dissatisfied with is followed by a characteristic offering of participation and enabling the participants a degree of self-determination. Participation can be based on the equality of rights and competencies and can be distributed in the sense of the allocation of social capital (knowledge, skills) to real or presumed underprivileged groups. Or animation: whereas animation - in an entertainment-oriented Club Med style, in which artists guide

free-time activities - is a somewhat crude description for art projects. Art's recent 'festivalization' has offered us a number of such spectacles.

After World War II, a participatory concept of art found further development, above all in interdisciplinary collaborations.
At Black Mountain College in North Carolina, USA, the painter Robert Rauschenberg, the musician John Cage and the choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham, among others, met each other. They developed - partly together and partly individually - works with participatory approaches. In 1952 Cage composed "4' 33"", a piece which consisted only of sounds from the concert hall. The same year, Rauschenberg painted his "White Paintings," whose integral component is the shadow of the observer. In both works, the audience was quasi instrumentalized and not individually active. That may appear insufficient by today's standards, yet historically it was a preliminary step. These examples are also interesting for a more precise definition. Without an audience, neither "4' 33"" nor "White Paintings" can exist at all, exist completely or make any sense. The extent of audience participation in projects is a question that has been very current in Austria since the early nineties. When does an artwork become an artwork? Was it when the artist Christine Hill opened her second-hand boutique - as she did in Berlin and then at the documenta X - or was it when someone first bought an article of clothing there? In any case, Hill does not define her "Volksboutique" as an installation but as a realm for social communication.

Even fluxus events and happenings were oriented on participation, yet the amount of audience participation followed lines that had been predetermined by the artist. As a result, participation sometimes meant touching the art objects and rearranging them.

The German Franz Erhard Walther displays objects, often textiles with choreographic instructions - which is related to Franz West's concept of sculpture in which significance is first given by handling the objects.

This concept of participation does not of course necessarily open up a social realm.
In the sixties, the emancipation movement made an immediate dynamic impact on art. In North America, above all in the USA, the civil rights movement influenced the art scene decisively: the women's movement, the protests against the war on Vietnam, the struggle for the rights of ethnic minorities, black power. Grassroots organizations were formed, citizens organized. In 1969 artists founded the "Art Workers Coalition" after a conflict with the Museum of Modern Art. Soon the coalition organized protests and events on museum policies, the representation of women and persons of color in the art world, the neglect of the socially disadvantaged in terms of cultural offerings and last but not least, also against the Vietnam war. These actions were however not declared to be art works. The members - among them Nancy Spero and Leon Golub, Carl Andre, Robert Morris and Lucy Lippard - also carried out their work individually. At the same time, Vito Acconci was staging participatory actions with underlying political content. He spent every night for four weeks in spring 1971 on a lonely pier on the Hudson and invited the public to visit him between one and two in the morning when he would then tell them a secret. The visitor became an ally, at the mercy of the artist.

One consequence of the emancipation movement was in the cultural field of integration with less privileged groups. They were encouraged to formulate their own ideas and to find their own cultural expression. "Giving a voice" is the corresponding parole. In

1978 in a slum in South Bronx, the artist Stefan Eins founded his art studio "Fashion Moda," which became a cultural pressure cooker in which graffiti, rap, popular culture and high art were all steamed together.

Numerous related projects and initiatives can be cited: in the beginning of the eighties, the "Group Material" from the store gallery on the Lower Eastside or Tim Rollins and his collaboration with the black ghetto youths under the label "K.O.S." (Kids of Survival). In the mid-eighties, the social pressure under conservative Reagonomics and the tragedy of the Aids epidemic politically remobilized the US art scene. With "ACT UP," the "Aids Coalition to Unleash Power," artists, cultural workers and other activists worked together on strategies against the repression of the Aids crisis by the government and the increasing hysterical homophobia and art-xenophobia among politicians. "Art is not enough," proclaimed the artist-activist collective "Gran Fury."

Art or not art - in the urgency of activism, these questions were the last to be asked and would first resurface when Aids activists' propaganda posters turned up in museums.

The dominant figure of the art-politics-participation debate in Germany never doubted the status of art. With Joseph Beuys, everything was art: from his enigmatic objects to his candidacy for the Green party, from his autistic-seeming performances to the founding of the "Freien Internationalen Hochschule für Kreativität und interdisziplinäre Forschung" ("Free International School for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research") in 1974.

Art - art concepts - political practice: When is something considered art? When is it accepted and by whom? In the New

Genre Public Art, or art in the public interest, as it has been practiced in collaboration with representatives of special audiences and interest groups since the eighties in the USA, the insistence on the status of art is tied to the claim of a struggle. This is also true of the seemingly endless applications of art practices in the nineties in Europe, where everything, from a charitable measure to a party, from a lecture to an interview, can be defined as art.

Since February 2000, or since the right wing, national-populist government took office in Austria, artists have played a significant role in the resistance. Interestingly, the status of art in these projects and initiatives is not even an issue.
Is it necessary to draw the conclusion that political practice by artists is only considered art when it's about nothing serious? Even within a progressive scene, the absence of a sense of history has its drawbacks. What was initially called the re-politicization of art in the nineties was rejected by various sources as a fading trend at the end of the decade - not only for conspicuously conservative reasons. The demand for an 'other' art history is also directed against this.

Further literature in:
Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.): "Art in Theory. An Anthology of Changing Ideas" (Oxford/UK, Cambridge/USA 1992, 1993)
Norberto Bobbio: "Rechts und Links. Gründe und Bedeutungen einer politischen Unterscheidung" (Berlin, 1994)