

# No Faith in Form

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Claire Bishop. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso, 2012. 388 pp.

...a *form*: no matter what the philosophical postulates called upon to justify it, as practice and as a conceptual operation it always involves the jumping of a spark between two poles, the coming in to contact of two unequal terms, of two apparently unrelated modes of being. Thus in the realm of literary criticism the sociological approach necessary juxtaposes the individual work of art with some vaster form of social reality which is seen in one way or another as its source or ontological ground, its Gestalt field, and of which the work itself comes to be thought of as a *reflection* or *symptom*, a characteristic *manifestation* or simple *by-product*, a *coming to consciousness* or an imaginary or symbolic *resolution*, to mention only a few of the ways in which this problematic central relationship has been conceived (Jameson 4-5).

Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* is an exhortation in the guise of a history lesson. The book's pre-condition is a welter of generic terms: "new genre public art," "dialogic art," "community art," "relational aesthetics," "social practice." Each attempts to describe a related but non-identical assortment of contemporary artworks. In the face of the confusion that results, Bishop offers a competing collective noun, and more importantly to her, a set of standards by which such works can be sorted and assessed. Specifically, Bishop offers a critical genealogy for what she calls "participatory art." The term is meant to encompass, while more thoroughly historicizing, the names in the above list (the list itself is now a commonplace—it's as though the proper form of the name for this set of works, its true collectivizing concept, is an ellipsis). The genealogical impulse in Bishop's book hints at her primary response to the confusion: she believes the category of participatory art, defined, historicized and properly judged, has earned a name and a name's accompanying generic shape. This book, as much as any other work to date, means to perform that nominalization.

Bishop attributes the impasse in the discussion of participatory art to several factors, each of which she sets out to address: a lack of critical nuance around binaries like active/passive, singular/collective, participation/spectatorship; a preference, in both the art and the critical literature that remediates it, for what Bishop calls the ethical over the aesthetic (or as she elsewhere draws the distinction, for social reform over

aesthetic judgment); and, in a more periodizing frame, the onset of a neoliberal milieu in which the very notion of participation has been compromised by its new value in a networked commodity market. By drawing a distinction between the ethical and the aesthetic—Bishop’s primary instrument of categorization and assessment—Bishop means that participatory art seems to care more about producing an ethical relation with a set of participants than it has cared to foster the exercise of critical judgment.<sup>1</sup> In other words, works of participatory art, Bishop fears, might all be equal, their differences not subject to judgment so much as to infinite modulation. Against this specter, Bishop wants to create the grounds on which critical distinctions can be made.

In its desire to foster judgment about certain contemporary art practices that she feels have been indifferent to that enterprise, *Artificial Hells* continues the work of Bishop’s influential essay from 2004, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.” But unlike the earlier essay, the page-by-page tonality of the book is distanced, enumerative, exploratory. While the original essay included a detailed discussion of Laclau and Mouffe’s work on radical democracy, to whom Bishop’s concept of antagonism is indebted, here the discussion of political theory is muted in favor of the proliferation of artistic examples. These examples of participatory art are chosen from wider spans of time and geography than the earlier essay, and include works that are variously (to use Bishop’s own oppositions) antagonistic and accommodationist, artistic and social, aesthetic and ethical. In other words, the book includes more than just the works that Bishop favors (the former term in each of these pairings).

Three dates and their familiar referents anchor the book’s historical sweep: 1917 (“artistic production was brought into line with Bolshevik collectivism,”), 1968 (“artistic production lent its weight to a critique of authority”), and 1989 (“the fall of really existing socialism”)( 193). This chronological structure allows Bishop to build to an argument about the “ambivalence” of participatory art in our current socio-economic period, where certain forms of participation have been commodified (think: Face-

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<sup>1</sup> In the conclusion, Bishop attempts to transcend the impasse between the ethical and the aesthetic. The argument sketched there is that participatory art tends to appear at moments of political transition—1917, 1968, 1989—and its appearance at those times is symptomatic of a concomitant clash between the ethical and the aesthetic, the first risking reformism in order to enact “actual change,” the second risking social irrelevance in order to antagonize norms of doing and knowing. The terms Bishop uses at this point in the book are “social critique” and “artistic critique.” She borrows these terms from Boltanski and Chiapello’s book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* and immediately aligns them with her own oppositional pairing of the ethical and the aesthetic, so that by the end of the book we haven’t traveled very far from where we started.

book). “Ambivalence” is Bishop’s word, and Bishop’s feeling (although one might also feel, given the dangers of economic proximity that Bishop herself dramatizes, that participatory art is a risky form as much as it is an ambivalent one). But against critics who have seemed to want to dismiss the entire endeavor of participatory art because it can be so easily analogized to a feature of contemporary commodity culture,<sup>2</sup> Bishop wants to rescue certain strains through the exercise of judgment, the generation of standards by which artworks put forward for inclusion in the category can be deemed unequal—some praised for the right reasons, others dismissed or criticized, also for the right reasons. Specifically, Bishop wants to clarify a distinction between work that capitulates to its own instrumentalisation and work that is able to reflect critically on the inevitability of its own historical situation. In other words, she wants participatory art to be treated as a medium. This would mirror Rosalind Krauss’ understanding of a medium, spelled out most recently and most starkly in her latest book, *Under Blue Cup*. Krauss is never cited in this regard, but Bishop’s belief in the efficacy of critical judgment, in the making of distinctions, clearly follows Krauss’s, as well as that of the many Modernist critics and art historians who agree with Krauss. But the concept of a medium, so strongly suggested, is nowhere discussed in depth. Its definition and implications for this context are not spelled out so much as entailed by Bishop’s desire to promote standards of judgment, and her attempts to produce a genealogy, a tradition for participatory art.

The book’s silence on this point marks a broader tension between Bishop’s goal and her means for arriving at that goal. From page to page, example to example, *Artificial Hells* unfolds according to the conventional logic of a survey text—a genre of survey text in which a previously heterogeneous set of cases is assembled to produce critical acumen around certain motifs: singular/collective, active/passive, participant/spectator, social/aesthetic. Bishop proliferates cases, the amassing of which does the work of historical argumentation by producing a genealogy for some contemporary problem or impasse.<sup>3</sup> Each chapter, excluding only the introduction and the conclusion, sets out a historical period and a geographic location, then identifies artworks from that time and place that can speak to the themes the book pursues. By the end, Bishop has assembled a generous array of cases, including some unfamiliar works from familiar movements and some works from contexts that are unfamiliar within the predominantly American and Western European milieu out of which Bishop writes (an especially striking example is Ján Budaj, the Czechoslovakian coal heating engineer, and his 1978 piece *The Lunch* [152]).

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hal Foster’s “Arty Party.”

<sup>3</sup> The archetype of this genre is *Art Since 1900*—of course, there is no comparison of scale here, only of genre.

By speaking of the survey text as a genre, I mean to draw the specific conventions of its generic form into relation with the kinds of disciplinary problems Bishop sets out to resolve. One of the values of a survey text is a kind of generosity in which the amassing of cases enables the future re-assembly and re-use of those cases. Choice in this context, the author's pre-sorting of cases into worthy and unworthy, is subjugated to a more ecumenical procedure, the survey of a field where inclusion is determined not by a polemic but by a desire to mobilize the reader's attention. The debate sparked by Bishop's own "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" foundered on a question of choice, with the difference between the main participants—Nicolas Bourriaud, Grant Kester, Liam Gillick and Bishop—too often seeming to turn on their allegiance to certain artists and the modes of art production they are each made to represent (Bourriaud sides with Rirkrit Tiravanija, while Bishop sides with Santiago Sierra). Bishop addresses this problem by assembling a heterogeneous array of cases that might all be considered part of the expanded medium of participatory art, even while she never hides her belief that some are more "successful" (a common word in Bishop's writing) in their contexts than others, or her desire for her readers to be able to make such distinctions in their own work.

The survey text, in other words, puts its faith in the example, while not always theorizing what counts as an example or exemplification in the context under consideration. It follows that Bishop does not consider the claims that any other medium might make to a form of participatory engagement with spectators, although this is a common complaint about participatory art—e.g., hasn't painting always engaged viewers in a kind of participation? What forms of participation are permitted by the optical? Are there times when opticality is powerful, multivalent, even multi-sensory? Bishop anticipates this complaint by defining participation as a situation "in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance" (2). By that definition, Bishop feels that painting, sculpture, installation art, land art, etc. should be excluded. But to agree on that definition, we have to set aside some important questions, questions that are not only in the vicinity of, but central to Bishop's own concerns about the relationship between participation and spectatorship: questions, for example, about what exactly it means to consider a person a medium; about what constitutes a coherent, stable form of personhood in any given historical moment; about historical changes to subjectivity and thereby to the mediation of subjectivity. Can a person be a medium in the same way that painting is a medium? Did classical modernism exclude people from being mediums? Didn't modernism have a theory of participation, and through it, a theory of subjectivity—that is, a theory of persons as participants in a mediated scene?

It is here that the choice of the survey format precludes certain forms of analysis, or—to bend the discussion toward the concerns signaled in my epigraph—precludes

an analysis of form that might begin to address such questions within the bounds of Bishop's primary interests. Bishop's priority is to amass examples, running each through the same set of questions, making diverse geographic contexts and diverse political environments answer to her interests in semiotics, duration, documentation, phenomenology, liberal subjectivity and mass collectivity. One consequence of this choice is that her time for the work of explicating each individual artwork is necessarily limited. A few paragraphs of explication is the most any work gets. Analysis therefore arrives epiphenomenally, as an accretion, something that can be given in conclusion at the end of the chapter or the end of the book, after a number of cases have been considered on the run. It rarely emerges from within a sustained analysis of form in any single instance.

But it is difficult to see how the confusions surrounding participation and contemporary art can be addressed without considering, in patient detail, the specific forms of participation that appear in participatory art, in other artistic mediums, and, crucially, in the commodity cultures whose own aesthetics of participation make the whole project of participatory art such an anxious one. This would require that particular examples be treated as singular rather than as generalizable data points—that they be treated, in other words, as form. Participation—the galvanizing force of Bishop's ambition to make a medium out of the diverse array of works she assembles—has been an intractable analytical object because it confusingly names both a potential, an open field where anything might happen, and a pre-coded possibility, a form of sociality that arrives in the aesthetic scene already tainted by its circulation in a new commodity scene. It is, on the one hand, an encounter whose formal qualities always need further specification while, at the same time, it is an iconic feature of what Bishop characterizes as a neoliberal landscape. That guilty association makes the term's invocation almost automatically into a value judgment, a taking of sides against participation understood as such. This negative valence, which is predicated on the simplistic analogy between the always-unspecified participatory nature of commodities and the usually-under-specified participatory ethos of some art, normally precludes the description and analysis of form because the pre-coding seems to make that analysis irrelevant. But in the absence of careful formal description, "participation" is a nearly meaningless (or impossibly meaningful) term.

Without what Jameson calls an "unrelated" "sociological" pole, which in *Artificial Hells* is always the enemy lurking just off stage, the analysis of form cannot spark. The problem here is viciously circular—and, more than it is about any particular art movement, it is a problem of how the writing of history relates to living in the present tense. Bishop's method, to amass cases and mobilize attention across those cases, precludes the kind of careful description that would historicize participation rather than just analogize it to a particular commodity form. Bishop's ultimate desire to in-

duce judgment, to produce an inequality of cases among those she surveys, disregards most of the historical action, debased though it may be, in the forms of participation available to the majority of people. It neglects the ordinary in favor of an avant-garde desire for rupture, negation—idealized events of frame-breaking. Considered as a shifter between the aesthetic and the ordinary, participation would be less an artistic medium than an optic for viewing any moment of aesthetic or mediated encounter.

This re-framing raises a number of questions that have always lingered on the sidelines of the debate over participatory art, and that remain sidelined in Bishop's work: what is the difference between the structure of a participatory occasion and the affective experience of that event? Does an antagonistic work always feel aggressive or oppositional? Likewise, does a convivial work always induce convivial feelings—is it always only comforting? When structure and affect are misaligned, what combination of historical, social, or aesthetic factors has caused the divergence? How, in any given instance of proffered participation, do people move between habits, expectations, and an unavoidably improvisatory encounter with the event—between comfort and risk, self-consolidation and self-dissolution? What resources do people draw on to accept or refuse a participatory ethos? I would call these all questions of form in Jameson's sense—questions, in other words, about how the historical forces that shape people's capacity to show up for a participatory event come into contact, frictionally, with the event as it is structured aesthetically (be it a painting or a meal, a political protest or the reenactment of one). Such questions are only answerable where each case is considered on its own terms, for the difficulties that it presents, for its proximity to as well as its distance from the compromised ordinary zones of contemporary life. Considered as such, the aesthetic case can do more than reorganize the art world around another collective noun. It can do analytical work in and on the present tense. Such attention to form would seek not only to use disciplinary standards to reassure ourselves of art's critical distance—to notice when, from that distance, it attacks other people's comforts—but would demand that historians of the aesthetic event re-invent the genres of our own participation.

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