THE INFILTRATORS

**Daniel Landau / Paul Poet /
Ghana ThinkTank / Documentary Embroidery**

Curator **Maayan sheleff**
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The exhibition "The Infiltrators" examines the local and global state of asylum seekers and refugees through works created with the participation of communities of asylum seekers in Israel and elsewhere in the world. The projects by Ghana ThinkTank, Documentary Embroidery, and Daniel Landau were undertaken with the participation of African asylum seekers and Israelis from south Tel Aviv. The first two works were commissioned for the exhibition. The film by Paul Poet documents a project from 2001 by the artist Christoph Schlingensief, who worked with asylum seekers in Vienna.

In Israel, the term "infiltrators" is used to describe the transgression of the country's political borders in order to commit a terrorist act, while the more general meaning of this term describes the hostile crossing of enemy lines or the covert transgression of a given territory's borders for the purpose of espionage, a political coup, or a gradual conquest. At present, this term is commonly used to refer to Africans who have crossed the border from Africa into Israel; alongside additional terms such as "refugees," "asylum seekers," and "immigrant workers," it plays an important role in the discussion of the status and future of these groups. In this context, the term "infiltrators" fixes the status of border crossers as that of liminal subjects, who remain trapped between here and there, citizens of no place.

The exhibition title plays a double role, since it aspires to look at the included art projects as constituting an act of infiltration. The featured artists attempt to undermine existing stereotypes by enacting different forms of participation, thus questioning common perceptions of the complex state of asylum seekers or refugees. These artists infiltrate the communal or public sphere as outlaws or cunning spies, and cross the thin line between reality and fiction in order to examine and destabilize the power relations that control and define this sphere. Like spies, they gather information about a given environment before deciding how to act in it. They search for the fissures within dichotomies, for the liminal spaces between points of contention, and linger within these borderline spheres.

Three of the four works presented in the exhibition are concerned with the local sphere and with the place of asylum seekers within it. At the same time, they echo the existence of a more global reality, much like the work of the Austrian artist Paul Poet echoes contemporary Israeli reality. The relations between the Western world and between refugees and immigrants – the Mexican immigrants entering the United States by crossing its southern border, the African refugees who reach Europe by sea, the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, and many others – are a complex subject that occupies a central place in the global media and in world politics, while serving as the subject of numerous

contemporary artworks. Among these works are long-term art projects that examine this subject by using tools that are neither strictly documentary nor strictly representational: these include Tania Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International* at the Queens Museum of Art; the shared struggle of refugees and artists in Holland, which is addressed by the artist Jonas Staal in his project *New World Academy*; the Silent University created by the Turkish artist Ahmet Ögüt in London, and more. Much like the artists participating in the current exhibition, these artists have created platforms that undermine the hierarchy and boundaries between different genres of art, as well as between art and activism. By putting forth initiatives that combine theater, education, political activism, squatting, hacking, and more, they attempt to examine the artistic sphere's ability to instigate actual change in reality without relinquishing the open-ended, poetic, even ambiguous nature of art, which is capable of impacting our consciousness in non-restrictive ways.

At the same time, it is important to note that this exhibition was born of a sense of urgency, as a reaction to an acute situation in the local sphere. To date, approximately 50,000 asylum seekers from Africa, most of whom fled ethnic or political persecution in Sudan or Eritrea, are living in Israel and are asking for recognition as refugees.

Israel's policy vis-à-vis these asylum seekers is one of non-deportation, based on the alleged recognition that their life would be endangered if they were sent back to their countries of origin. At the same time, until recently Israel did not examine any such

applications for asylum, and applicants had no possibility of receiving refugee status.

According to data provided in 2012 by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 83.6% of the Eritreans and 69.3% of the Sudanese who submit applications for asylum in various countries are recognized as refugees according to the strict standards of the UN's treaty of refugees. By contrast, the percentage of asylum seekers recognized as such in Israel is only 0.2%, and includes only two Eritreans and no applicants from Sudan. The asylum seekers who end up in Israel thus remain in an intermediate state – they are not deported, yet their status is not regulated, and they are not awarded basic rights. In recent months, thousands of asylum seekers were summoned to the "open" detention center in Holot, where they are kept indeterminately in an attempt to encourage them to return to their countries of origin or to a third African country in a process termed "consensual departure."

In the UN treaty of refugees, which was signed in 1951, a refugee is defined as "A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country […]." Israel not only signed this treaty but even participated in drafting it, due to the harsh experiences of Jewish refugees.

In Israeli society, the term "refugee" is especially charged, since it relates both to the Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Europe or who suffered persecution and violence in Arab countries, and to the Palestinian refugees deported from the country in 1948. The consideration of non-Jewish refugees is related, in collective Israeli consciousness, to a change in the country's demographic balance and to a threat to Israel's status as a state offering asylum to the Jewish people. This is perhaps the reason for the institutional rhetoric that refers to asylum seekers as "immigrant workers," or brands them as violent, or as carriers of various diseases. This rhetoric filters down to the street, where it is fused with the real distress of Israeli citizens living in areas characterized by a high concentration of asylum seekers, such as south Tel Aviv.

Thus, in order for such an exhibition to successfully touch upon the metaphorical and symbolic aspects of this subject, it must first delve into the charged sphere of south Tel Aviv. It must bring to the surface repressed issues and expose the lacunas concerning the suffering of both local citizens and refugees through an open discussion with the various participants in the featured projects – asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan, Israeli residents, artists, and community activists. The exhibition will be held in conjunction with a series of discussions, performances, presentations, and guided tours led by some of these participants and representing their own points of view regarding the situation, the process, and the artistic outcome. The gallery, which is located in south Tel Aviv, is at once physically close to these charged areas

and removed from them in terms of its character; the exhibition will thus attempt to allow the public sphere to infiltrate the gallery, just as this sphere enabled art to infiltrate it. The purpose of this strategy, however, is not to fix the problem of refugees as a local "problem" relegated to south Tel Aviv, as is often done by the media or by various officials, but rather to reveal how this problem is relevant to us all. In many ways, this is only the beginning of a process, an immediate reaction to a temporary state before it becomes permanent, before we are able to fully understand it.
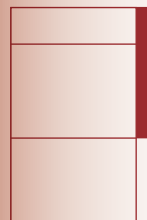
One of the projects created for this exhibition with communities in south Tel Aviv is by **GHANA THINKTANK**, a group of American artists including Christopher Robbins, John Ewing, and Maria del Carmen Montoya. Within the framework of this project, think tanks composed of asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan offered solutions to the problems of Israelis from south Tel Aviv, and vice versa. The Sudanese group met outside the detention center in Holot, since its members were summoned there in the course of the work process. The process evolved over the course of several months, and included conversations with dozens of residents and asylum seekers who raised problems such as neglect, debris, and the absence of green areas, alongside feelings of insecurity and fear on the streets, the changing character of their neighborhoods, misunderstandings, mutual hostility, indifference on the part of Israeli society and the establishment, and more.

The solutions offered by these groups included the mutual study of cultural codes, guided tours and campaigns in south Tel Aviv, a security guard composed of African and Israeli women, urban guerilla gardening, and more.

More than 20,000 asylum seekers from Africa have arrived in south Tel Aviv in recent years, settling in neighborhoods which were already suffering from governmental and municipal neglect, and which were home to crime, drug abuse, and prostitution. South Tel Aviv thus became the focal point of tensions between asylum seekers and Israeli citizens, and demonstrations by both sides, alongside violent actions performed by individuals, have been seized upon by politicians.

In working with residents of south Tel Aviv and asylum seekers, two groups that often suffer from prejudices and discrimination, the project attempts to approach these problems from a perspective that is not often addressed in the media: rather than situating the two groups as enemies, it explores whether they can stand on the same side of the divide, in opposition to their stereotypical perceptions by certain sectors of Israeli society.

The installation at Artport Gallery attempts to follow the processes undertaken by means of documentation, sculptural representations, and a series of workshops that will mobilize people out of the gallery and into the public sphere of south Tel Aviv, and vice versa. A mobile sculpture positioned on a tricycle functions as a point of encounter and a work station that continues to record problems and broadcast solutions in the gallery and throughout the city in the course of the exhibition, and perhaps also after it ends.

Ghana ThinkTank was established in 2006, and has since founded an international network of think tanks in Ghana, Cuba, El Salvador, Serbia, Mexico, Ethiopia, and Gaza, which produce strategies for the solution of local problems in the "developed" world. The initial idea of the founding artists was that think tanks in the so-called "third world" could offer solutions to "first-world" problems. They later discovered that this process could serve to create encounters between groups in conflict and to produce unexpected alliances. Over the past two years, they have been working with groups of Mexican immigrants and American citizens who opposed "illegal" immigration on the Mexico-US border.

Ghana ThinkTank relates to the West's colonialist attitudes toward the "Third World," and its members employ irony and reflexive strategies to examine their own role as Western artists. They attempt to infiltrate sets of existing stereotypes and overturn them by transforming the traditional division between those who offer assistance and those in need of assistance, consultants and those receiving counsel. Their work with different communities strives to serve as a catalyst for real change and empowerment by raising problems and offering solutions, while also consciously exposing conflicts and antagonisms that arise through participatory art practices. They are aware of their own position of power, and use it as a metaphor for other forms of power relations that exist in reality.

The artists behind all of the projects included in the exhibition use reality as the raw material for creating works that vacillate between the documentary and the fictional. They are not afraid of navigating reality, while leaving room for improvisation and unexpected occurrences that arise from the interaction with the participants in their projects. The manner in which they document and mediate the process intentionally undermines traditional relations between the documenter and the documented. In this context, the power to describe reality is no longer in the hands of the documenter; rather, each project makes room for a subjective and multilayered perception of this same reality, which also reflects the complexity of the participatory process.
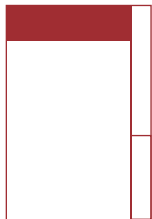
The artistic duo **DOCUMENTARY EMBROIDERY**, whose members are Aviv Kruglanski (Spain/Israel) and Vahida Ramujic (Serbia), employ embroidery as a documentary medium unfolding in real time. They spend long periods in different places, where they speak with inhabitants and passersby. In each case, they create an embroidery work based on people's stories and responses, alongside their own interpretations as artists. At times they ask the participants to draw or write about elements that they would like to add to the gradually embroidered patchwork.

Their project for "The Infiltrators" involved spending a month doing embroidery work in Levinsky Garden – a site that has acquired symbolic value for African asylum seekers: this is in most cases where they first disembark in Israel, after being released from the preliminary absorption and detention facilities; this is where work and community relations are created, as well as the site of social and cultural activities, humanitarian and activist initiatives, demonstrations and protests.

Embroidering in the public sphere as a routine that evolves over time produces a heterotopic sphere where social dynamics may be observed, and where everyday reality is amplified and rendered more extreme through the focus on small details. Just as a photographer impacts the reality he documents, so the intervention of these artists in a given sphere does not constitute a detached anthropological gaze, but rather a presence that calls for participation and interference, and which subtly infiltrates human relations in that sphere. Embroidery as a form of documentation is a medium characterized by duration, and is thus closer to the medium of drawing than to a photographic snapshot, offering a more subjective reflection of a given sphere and of the social relations that shape it.
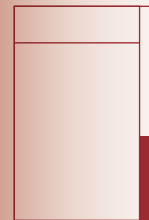
DANIEL LANDAU's project similarly makes use of documentary conventions, while undermining them through its means of display. Landau worked with asylum seekers from Darfur in south Tel Aviv, as part of a long-term project with immigrants and refugees in different places worldwide, and collected their stories

and testimonies. This long-term project, *Resident Alien*, examines the limits and limitations of documentary and performative actions in the context of testimony. The installation featured in the exhibition presents video documentation of the faces of asylum seekers, who tell personal stories about their journey to Israel and their life here. The faces are projected onto a mask positioned above a chair on which the viewer can sit, while the transcript of each story is projected separately, without sound. On another chair, viewers can sit and wear a helmet equipped with loudspeakers, which transmit the story in the narrator's voice. The viewer's face is filmed and projected onto an additional mask, alongside the one featuring the face of the asylum seeker. The connection that is thus forged between the one giving the testimony and the one listening to it challenges conventions of distance between viewer and artwork, and gives rise to a feeling that evolves in the space between estrangement and empathy. The work reflects the experience of geographic and cultural uprooting and its implications for perceptions of language, body, and place.

Like Ghana ThinkTank, Daniel Landau examines participatory art in a reflexive, critical manner by creating different circles of participation – the community that participated in the process, as well as the audience invited to participate in order to experience and understand the work. As is the case in the process undertaken by Documentary Embroidery, here too the one being observed becomes the viewer, while the viewer becomes the one being observed.
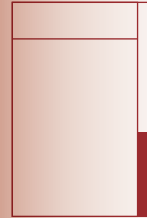
The theme of observation and surveillance, and the relations between different circles of participation, is especially noticeable in the Austrian artist and filmmaker **PAUL POET**'s documentary **AUSLÄNDER RAUS! SCHLINGENSIEF'S CONTAINER** (2002), which follows the project of his collaborator, the late artist and theater director Christoph Schlingensief. For this project, Schlingensief set down a container temporarily inhabited by 12 asylum seekers from different countries in the square outside Vienna's opera house. The container stood there for an entire week, and the audience was asked to vote daily in order to decide which of the asylum seekers would be deported from Austria.

Poet's film presents this project – one of the best-known and most influential works of public art ever to be made – as a fascinating, frightening, and absurd horror ride. The political context for this work, which was created in 2000, was the electoral success of the FPO party led by Jörg Haider, which had just joined the government. This was the first time since the end of the Second World War that an extreme-right party in Austria joined the government. The German Schlingensief, who was known as an avant-garde political theater director, decided to respond to the situation in a manner that would appropriate and externalize the legitimization of hatred towards foreigners. To this end, he placed the container – a sort of improvised, symbolic concentration camp – right in the middle of Vienna's bourgeois, tourist-filled center. The 12 asylum seekers were followed via surveillance

cameras that broadcast live to an Internet site, and could also be observed through peepholes in the container itself – in a satire of sorts on reality TV shows.

The period in which this project was presented was marked by the appearance of the first reality TV shows and by the beginning of online sharing and collaboration, which has since expanded significantly. The manner in which such forms of participation presume to reflect democracy or present an alternative to hegemony, even though they often conceal the agendas and interests of various bodies, underscores the fragile and elusive status of participation, and the ease with which it may be co-opted by various agents.

The work and the film documenting it cynically reflect the image of fascism in the 21st century as interactive, amusing, and sensational – while exposing the dark, terrifying dimension lying beneath its attractive packaging. Thousands of people assembled at the site in the course of the project, and about 800,000 viewers watched and voted online. The project garnered much media attention and gave rise to political discussions on television, to demonstrations staged by people across the political spectrum, and to violent attacks on the container and on the artist himself.

Within the framework of this exhibition, the film is presented as a test case for participatory art in the public sphere, which has appropriated and rendered extreme the very means and characteristics it wishes to protest against. Together with the other featured projects, it reflects a range of participatory strategies that

do not shy away from provoking conflict and walking the thin line between the ethical and the aesthetic. Schlingensief's tactic calls to mind a kind of artistic terrorism (a term used by both Schlingensief and Poet), which infiltrates reality in order to present it with its own reflection.

These themes are addressed in the second text included in the catalogue – **"PARTICIPATION AND SPECTACLE: WHERE ARE WE NOW?"** by the critical thinker **CLAIRE BISHOP**. Bishop surveys the history, theory, characteristics and limitations of participatory art in the neo-liberal age, while providing an in-depth examination of Schlingensief's container project. Among other things, she discusses the writing of the critical thinker Jacques Rancière, who distinguishes between meta-political art and art that reflects a specific party agenda. Whereas the first form of art opens up onto an aesthetic and poetic sphere, the second limits and flattens the message. Bishop's reading of Rancière defines the aesthetic, in the context of social, participatory art, as the ability to think in terms of contradictions – to believe in the autonomy of art as well as in its ability to instigate change. According to Bishop, there is no need to resolve these contradictions by means of a consensual ethical process that relegates the aesthetic and the artistic to the margins, or alternately by means of formalist art that refuses to take a stance. Good participatory art will enable the ethical, the aesthetic, and the political to coexist, and will build on the antagonisms, contrasts, provocations, uncertainty, and ambiguity to which their coexistence gives rise.

By means of these four works, "The Infiltrators" attempts to examine participatory art's forms of representation and display as well as its limitations, while probing the relations between artist, community, and audience. The creation of these works included actions, conversations and feelings that are difficult to represent as artistic objects. In addition, the themes of copyright, authorship, power relations and the ethical status of works undertaken with the participation of a community all surfaced in this process. There is also, of course, the eternal question: how to forge a connection between art and reality and between the public sphere and the sphere of the gallery, and who even cares to come and view it?

At times, indeed, this seems to be the tragedy of participatory art: on the one hand, there is the desire to produce a collective social experience that contains a promise for a better future, and which may lead to a wide-ranging change in collective perceptions; at the same time, there is an insistence on complexity, nuances, and contradictions that demand more active modes of viewing and have difficulty reaching a wide audience. Can such art really give rise to a unique temporary connection between different communities, and change their perceptions? Do asylum seekers, activists, residents of south Tel Aviv, artists and art connoisseurs even want to meet in the artistic sphere, which can never escape its own whiteness, its sterility and privileged status?

How can one transmit to the audience viewing the exhibition the range of sensations that arise in the course of creating a participatory artwork: the sadness and helplessness stemming from identification with distress and an inability to help, the difficulty of managing and staging while also containing and enabling, the desire not to eschew misunderstandings, provocations, and sometimes even manipulations, alongside a sense of responsibility towards the participants and their expectations, and a concern with what will happen when the project ends. Finally, there is the sense of happiness experienced during surprising moments when prejudices are dismantled and zones of comfort are abandoned.

All we can do is linger on the border, and hope that others will linger there as well: on the border between art and activism, between imagination and reality, between one territory and the next, between one person and another; plant the seed of artistic infiltration and hope it will grow in the gray areas of life routines, and create breaches in the borders that surround us.

DANIEL LANDAU
RESIDE 1.4: MOUNT ZION, DARFUR, 2012

Participants > Gumar Baker Tahe Din, Adam Muhamad, Adam Kamis,
Adam Keler, Abdul Hamud Josef

1-4_ Detail and installation views, Daniel Landau, *Reside 1.4: Mount Zion,
Darfur* , 2012 [photographer: Ben Hertzog]

PAUL POET
FOREIGNERS OUT! SCHLINGENSIEF'S CONTAINER, AUSTRIA, 2002, 90 MIN

1-4_ Stills from the documentary film *Ausländer Raus! Schlingensief's
Container* ("Foreigners Out! Schlingensief's Container") directed by
Paul Poet, available through Filmgalerie 451, Berlin
[special thanks to Doc-Aviv Festival]

CLAIRE BISHOP

1. SPECTACLE TODAY

One of the key words used in artists' self-definitions of their socially engaged practice is "spectacle," so often invoked as the entity that participatory art opposes itself to, both artistically and politically. When examining artists' motivations for turning to social participation as a strategy in their work, one repeatedly encounters the same claim: contemporary capitalism produces passive subjects with very little agency or empowerment. For many artists and curators on the left, Guy Debord's indictment of the alienating and divisive effects of capitalism in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) strike to the heart of why participation is important as a project: it re-humanizes a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production. This position, with more or less Marxist overtones, is put forward by most advocates of socially engaged and activist art. Given the market's near total saturation of our image repertoire – so the argument goes – artistic practice can no longer revolve around the construction of objects to be consumed by a passive bystander. Instead, there must be an art of action, interfacing with reality, taking steps – however small – to repair the social bond. As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière points out,

"the 'critique of the spectacle' often remains the alpha and the omega of the 'politics of art.'"[1]

But what do we really mean by spectacle in a visual art context? "Spectacle" has a particular, almost unique status within art history and criticism, because it directly raises the question of visuality, and because it has incomparable political pedigree (thanks to the Situationist International).[2] As frequently used by art historians and critics associated with the journal *October*, it denotes a wide range of attributes: for Rosalind Krauss writing on the late capitalist museum, it means the absence of historical positioning and a capitulation to pure presentness; for James Meyer, arguing against Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* (2003), it denotes an overwhelming scale that dwarfs viewers and eclipses the human body as a point of reference; for Hal Foster writing on the Bilbao Guggenheim, it denotes the triumph of corporate branding; for Benjamin Buchloh denouncing Bill Viola, it refers to an uncritical use of new technology. In short, spectacle today connotes a wide range of ideas – from size, scale, and visual pleasure to corporate investment and populist programming. And yet, for Debord, "spectacle" does not describe the characteristics of a work of art or architecture, but is a definition of social relations under capitalism (but also under totalitarian regimes). Individual subjects experience society as atomized and fragmented because social experience is mediated by images – either the "diffuse" images of consumerism or the "concentrated" images of the

leader. As Debord's film, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1971), makes clear, his arguments stem from an anxiety about a nascent consumer culture in the '60s, with its tidal wave of seductive imagery. But the question as to whether or not we still exist in a society of the spectacle was posed as early as 1981 by Baudrillard, who dispatches not only Debord but also Foucault in his essay "The Precession of Simulacra":

"We are witnessing the end of perspective and panoptic space… and hence the very abolition of the spectacular… We are no longer in the society of the spectacle which the situationists talked about, nor in the specific types of alienation and repression which this implied. The medium itself is no longer identifiable as such, and the merging of the medium and the message (McLuhan) is the first great formula of this new age."[3]

More recently, Boris Groys has suggested that in today's culture of self-exhibitionism (in Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, which he provocatively compares to the text/image compositions of conceptual art) we have a "spectacle without spectators":

"The artist needs a spectator who can overlook the immeasurable quantity of artistic production and formulate an aesthetic judgment that would single out this particular artist from the mass of other artists. Now, it is obvious that such a spectator does not exist – it could be God, but we have already been informed of the fact that God is dead."[4]

In other words, one of the central requirements of art is that it is given to be seen, and reflected upon, by a spectator. Participatory art in the

1   Jacques Rancière, "Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art," *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 2008, 7.

2   The Situationist International was an international group of revolutionary Marxist writers, poets, theorists, painters and film-makers active 1957-72, and who had a key influence on the strikes of May 1968.

3   Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 54.

4   Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," *e-flux journal*, December 11, 2009, available at www.e-flux.com.

strictest sense forecloses the traditional idea of spectatorship and suggests a new understanding of art without audiences, one in which everyone is a producer. At the same time, the existence of an audience is ineliminable, since it is impossible for everyone in the world to participate in every project.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY

Indeed, the dominant narrative of the history of socially engaged, participatory art across the twentieth century is one in which the activation of the audience is positioned against its mythic counterpart, passive spectatorial consumption. Participation thus forms part of a larger narrative that traverses modernity: "Art must be directed against contemplation, against spectatorship, against the passivity of the masses paralyzed by the spectacle of modern life."[5] This desire to activate the audience in participatory art is at the same time a drive to emancipate it from a state of alienation induced by the dominant ideological order – be this consumer capitalism, totalitarian socialism, or military dictatorship. Beginning from this premise, participatory art aims to restore and realize a communal, collective space of shared social engagement. But this is achieved in different ways: either through constructivist gestures of social impact, which refute the injustice of the world by proposing an alternative, or through a nihilist redoubling of alienation, which negates the world's injustice and illogicality on its own terms. In both instances, the work seeks to forge a collective, co-authoring, participatory social body, but one does this affirmatively (through utopian realization), the

other indirectly (through the negation of negation).

For example, Futurism and Constructivism both offered gestures of social impact and the invention of a new public sphere – one geared towards fascism, the other to reinforce a new Bolshevik world order. Shortly after this period, Paris Dada "took to the streets" in order to reach a wider audience, annexing the social forms of the guided tour and the trial in order to experiment with a more nihilistic type of artistic practice in the public sphere. It is telling that in the first phase of this orientation towards the social, participation has no given political alignment: it is a strategy that can be equally associated with Italian Fascism, Bolshevik communism, and an anarchic negation of the political.

In the postwar period, we find a similar range of participatory strategies, now more or less tied to leftist politics, and culminating in the theater of 1968. In Paris, the SI developed alternatives to visual art in the "derive and constructed situation"; while the Groupe Recherche d'Art Visuel devised participatory actions, both in the form of installations and street environments. Both of these are affirmative in tenor, but as a critique of consumer capitalism. Jean-Jacques Lebel's anarchic and eroticized Happenings provide a different model – "the negation of negation" – in which the audience and performers are further alienated from an already alienating world, via disturbing and transgressive activities that aimed to produce a group mind or *egregore*. When these artistic strategies were put into play in different ideological contexts (such as South America and Eastern Europe), the aims and intentions of participation yielded different meanings. In Argentina, where a brutal, U.S.-backed military dictatorship was imposed in 1966, it gave rise to aggressive and fragmented modes of social action, with an emphasis on class antagonism, reification, and alienation. In Czechoslovakia, brought

into line with Soviet "normalization" after 1968, participatory art had a more escapist tone, with avant-garde actions often masquerading under vernacular forms (weddings, parties, and festivals), often in remote locations, in order to avoid detection by the secret police. Art was disguised by life in order to sustain itself as a place of nonalienation. The work of Collective Actions Group (CAG), active in Moscow from 1976 onwards, further problematizes contemporary claims that participation is synonymous with collectivism, and thus inherently opposed to capitalism; rather than reinforcing the collectivist dogma of communism, CAG deployed participation as a means to create a privatized sphere of individual expression.

Further analogies to contemporary social practice can be found in the rise of the community arts movement after 1968, whose history provides a cautionary tale for today's artists averse to theorizing the artistic value of their work. Emphasizing process rather than end result, and basing their judgments on ethical criteria (about how and whom they work with) rather than on the character of their artistic outcomes, the community arts movement found itself subject to manipulation – and eventually instrumentalization – by the state. From an agitational force campaigning for social justice (in the early 1970s), it became a harmless branch of the welfare state (by the 1980s): the kindly folk who can be relied upon to mop up wherever the government wishes to absolve itself of responsibility.

And so we find ourselves faced today with an important sector of artists who renounce the vocabularies of contemporary art, claiming to be engaged in more serious, worldly, and political issues. Such anti-aesthetic refusals are not new: just as we have come to recognize Dada cabaret, situationist *détournement*, or dematerialized conceptual and performance

art as having their own aesthetics of production and circulation, so too do the often formless-looking photo-documents of participatory art have their own experiential regime. The point is not to regard these anti-aesthetic phenomena as objects of a new formalism (reading areas, parades, demonstrations, discussions, ubiquitous plywood platforms, endless photographs of people), but to analyze how these contribute to the social and artistic experience being generated.

3. TWO CRITIQUES

One of the questions that is continually posed to me is the following: Surely it is better for one art project to improve one person's life than for it not to happen at all? The history of participatory art allows us to get critical distance on this question, and to see it as the latest instantiation of concerns that have dogged this work from its inception: the tension between equality and quality, between participation and spectatorship, and between art and real life. These conflicts indicate that social and artistic judgments do not easily merge; indeed, they seem to demand different criteria. This impasse surfaces in every printed debate and panel discussion on participatory and socially engaged art. For one sector of artists, curators, and critics, a good project appeases a superegoic injunction to ameliorate society; if social agencies have failed, then art is obliged to step in. In this schema, judgments are based on a humanist ethics, often inspired by Christianity. What counts is to offer ameliorative solutions, however short-term, rather than to expose contradictory social truths. For another sector of artists, curators, and critics, judgments are based on a sensible response to the artist's work, both in and beyond its original context. In this schema, ethics are nugatory, because art is understood continually to throw established systems of value into

question, including morality; devising new languages with which to represent and question social contradiction is more important. The social discourse accuses the artistic discourse of amorality and inefficacy, because it is insufficient merely to reveal, reduplicate, or reflect upon the world; what matters is social change. The artistic discourse accuses the social discourse of remaining stubbornly attached to existing categories, and focusing on micropolitical gestures at the expense of sensuous immediacy (as a potential locus of disalienation). Either social conscience dominates, or the rights of the individual to question social conscience. Art's relationship to the social is either underpinned by morality or it is underpinned by freedom.[6]

This binary is echoed in Boltanski and Chiapello's perceptive distinction of the difference between artistic and social critiques of capitalism. The artistic critique, rooted in nineteenth-century bohemianism, draws upon two sources of indignation towards capitalism: on the one hand, disenchantment and inauthenticity, and on the other, oppression. The artistic critique, they explain, "foregrounds the loss of meaning and, in particular, the loss of the sense of what is beautiful and valuable, which derives from standardization and generalized commodification, affecting not only everyday objects but also artworks... and human beings." Against this state of affairs, the artistic critique advocates "the freedom of artists, their rejection of any contamination of aesthetics by ethics, their refusal of any form of subjection in time and space and, in its extreme form, any kind of work."[7] The social critique, by contrast, draws on

different sources of indignation towards capitalism: the egoism of private interests, and the growing poverty of the working classes in a society of unprecedented wealth. This social critique necessarily rejects the moral neutrality, individualism, and egotism of artists. The artistic and the social critique are not directly compatible, Boltanski and Chiapello warn us, and exist in continual tension with one another.[8]

The clash between artistic and social critiques recurs most visibly at certain historical moments, and the reappearance of participatory art is symptomatic of this clash. It tends to occur at moments of political transition and upheaval: in the years leading to Italian Fascism, in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution, in the widespread social dissent that led to 1968, and its aftermath in the 1970s. At each historical moment participatory art takes a different form, because it seeks to negate different artistic and sociopolitical objects. In our own times, its resurgence accompanies the consequences of the collapse of really existing communism in 1989, the apparent absence of a viable left alternative, the emergence of contemporary "post-political" consensus, and the near total marketization of art and education.[9] The paradox of this situation is that participation in the West now has more to do with the populist agendas of neoliberal governments. Even though participatory artists stand against neoliberal capitalism, the values they impute to their work

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6   Tony Bennett phrases the same problem differently: art history as a bourgeois, idealist discipline is in permanent conflict with Marxism as an anti-bourgeois, materialist revolution in existing disciplines. There is no possibility of reconciling the two. See Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London: Methuen, 1979), 80–5.

7   Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005), 37–8.
8   The implication of Boltanski and Chiapello's book is that in the third spirit of capitalism, the artistic critique has held sway, resulting in an unsupervised capitalism that lacks the "invisible-hand" of constraint that would guarantee protection, security, and rights for workers.
9   For a clear summary of "post-politics" see Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 13. She presents two positions: "post-politics as an ideal of consensus, inclusion, and administration that must be rejected" (Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière) and "post-politics as a description of the contemporary exclusion or foreclosure of the political" (Slavoj Žižek).

are understood formally (in terms of opposing individualism and the commodity object), without recognizing that so many other aspects of this art practice dovetail even more perfectly with neoliberalism's recent forms (networks, mobility, project work, affective labor).

As this ground has shifted over the course of the twentieth century, so the identity of participants has been reimagined at each historical moment: from a crowd (1910s), to the masses (1920s), to the people (late 1960s/1970s), to the excluded (1980s), to community (1990s), to today's volunteers whose participation is continuous with a culture of reality television and social networking. From the audience's perspective, we can chart this as a shift from an audience that demands a role (expressed as hostility towards avant-garde artists who keep control of the proscenium), to an audience that enjoys its subordination to strange experiences devised for them by an artist, to an audience that is encouraged to be a co-producer of the work (and who, occasionally, can even get paid for this involvement). This could be seen as a heroic narrative of the increased activation and agency of the audience, but we might also see it as a story of their ever-increasing voluntary subordination to the artist's will, and of the commodification of human bodies in a service economy (since voluntary participation is also unpaid labor).

Arguably, this is a story that runs parallel with the rocky fate of democracy itself, a term to which participation has always been wedded: from a demand for acknowledgement, to representation, to the consensual consumption of one's own image – be this in a work of art, YouTube, Flickr, or reality TV. Consider the media profile accorded to Anthony Gormley's *One and Other* (2009), a project to allow members of the public to continuously occupy the empty "fourth plinth" of Trafalgar Square in London, one hour at a time for one hundred days. Gormley

received 34,520 applications for 2,400 places, and the activities of the plinth's occupants were continually streamed online.[10] Although the artist referred to *One and Other* as "an open space of possibility for many to test their sense of self and how they might communicate this to a wider world," the project was described by *The Guardian*, not unfairly, as "Twitter Art."[11] In a world where everyone can air their views to everyone we are faced not with mass empowerment but with an endless stream of banal egos. Far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it.

This new proximity between spectacle and participation underlines, for me, the necessity of sustaining a tension between artistic and social critiques. The most striking projects that constitute the history of participatory art unseat all of the polarities on which this discourse is founded (individual/collective, author/spectator, active/passive, real life/ art) but not with the goal of collapsing them. In so doing, they hold the artistic and social critiques in tension. Felix Guattari's paradigm of transversality offers one such way of thinking through these artistic operations: he leaves art as a category in its place, but insists upon its constant flight into and across other disciplines, putting both art and the social into question, even while simultaneously reaffirming art as a universe of value. Jacques Rancière offers another: the aesthetic regime is constitutively contradictory, shuttling between autonomy and

10   The difference between Gormley's webstreaming and that of Christoph Schlingensief (dis-
     cussed below) is that the latter is a conscious parody of reality TV's banality, while the former
     uncritically replicates it. A press shot of Gormley with the participants in his work evokes the
     image of Simon Cowell with his protegés in *American Idol*.
11   Anthony Gormley, www.oneandother.co.uk (last accessed August 23, 2010). Charlotte
     Higgins, "The Birth of Twitter Art," The Guardian, July 8, 2009, available at www.guardian.
     co.uk (last accessed August 25, 2010).

heteronomy ("the aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and*").[12] He argues that in art and education alike, there needs to be a mediating object – a spectacle that stands between the idea of the artist and the feeling and interpretation of the spectator: "This spectacle is a third thing, to which both parts can refer but which prevents any kind of 'equal' or 'undistorted' transmission. It is a mediation between them. […] The same thing which links them must separate them."[13] In different ways, Rancière and Guattari offer alternative frameworks for thinking the artistic and the social simultaneously; for both, art and the social are not to be reconciled or collapsed, but sustained in continual tension.

4. THE LADDER AND THE CONTAINER

I am interested in these theoretical models of analysis because they do not reduce art to a question of ethically good or bad examples, nor do they forge a straightforward equation between forms of democracy in art and forms of democracy in society. Most of the contemporary discourse on participatory art implies an evaluative schema akin to that laid out in the classic diagram "The Ladder of Participation," published in an architectural journal in 1969 to accompany an article about forms of citizen involvement.[14] The ladder has eight rungs. The bottom two indicate the least participatory forms of citizen engagement: the non-

participation of mere presence in "manipulation" and "therapy." The next three rungs are degrees of tokenism – "informing," "consultation," and "placation" – which gradually increase the attention paid by power to the everyday voice. At the top of the ladder we find "partnership," "delegated power," and the ultimate goal, "citizen control." The diagram provides a useful set of distinctions for thinking about the claims to participation made by those in power, and is frequently cited by architects and planners. It is tempting to make an equation (and many have done so) between the value of a work of art and the degree of participation it involves, turning the Ladder of Participation into a gauge for measuring the efficacy of artistic practice.[15]

But while the Ladder provides us with helpful and nuanced differences between forms of civic participation, it falls short of corresponding to the complexity of artistic gestures. The most challenging works of art do not follow this schema, because models of democracy in art do not have an intrinsic relationship to models of democracy in society. The equation is misleading and does not recognize art's ability to generate other, more paradoxical criteria. The works I have discussed in the preceding chapters do not offer anything like citizen control. The artist relies upon the participants' creative exploitation of the situation that he/she offers, just as participants require the artist's cue and direction. This relationship is a continual play of mutual tension, recognition, and dependency – more

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[12] Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Employments of Autonomy and Heteronomy," *New Left Review*, 14, March–April 2002, 133.
[13] Rancière, "Emancipated Spectator," lecture in Frankfurt.
[14] Sherry Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35:4, July 1969, 216–24. The diagram has recently been the subject of some historical reassessment among architects and planners, reflecting the renewed interest in participation in this sector.

[15] See, for example, Dave Beech's distinction between participation and collaboration. For Beech, participants are subject to the parameters of the artist's project, while collaboration involves co-authorship and decisions over key structural features of the work; "collaborators have rights that are withheld from participants." (Beech, "Include Me Out," *Art Monthly*, April 2008, 3.) Although I would agree with his definitions, I would not translate them into a binding set of value judgements to be applied to works of art.

akin to the collectively negotiated dynamic of stand-up comedy, or to BDSM sex, than to a ladder of progressively more virtuous political forms.

A case study, now 11 years old, illustrates this argument that art is both grounded in and suspends reality, and does this via a mediating object or third term: *Please Love Austria* (2000), devised and largely performed by the German filmmaker and artist **Christoph Schlingensief** (1960–2010). Commissioned to produce a work for the Weiner Festwochen, Schlingensief chose to respond directly to the recent electoral success of the far-right nationalist party led by Jörg Haider (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, or FPÖ). The FPÖ's campaign had included overtly xenophobic slogans and the word *überfremdung* (domination by foreign influences), once employed by the Nazis, to describe a country overrun with foreigners. Schlingensief erected a shipping container outside the Opera House in the center of Vienna, topped with a large banner bearing the phrase *Ausländer Raus* (Foreigners Out). Inside the container, *Big Brother*-style living accommodation was installed for a group of asylum-seekers, relocated from a detention center outside the city. Their activities were broadcast through the Internet television station webfreetv.com, and via this station viewers could vote daily for the ejection of their least favorite refugee. At 8 p.m. each day, for six days, the two most unpopular inhabitants were sent back to the deportation center. The winner was purportedly offered a cash prize and the prospect – depending on the availability of volunteers – of Austrian citizenship through marriage. The event is documented by the Austrian filmmaker **Paul Poet** in an evocative and compelling ninety-minute film, *Ausländer Raus! Schlingensief's Container* (2002).

Please Love Austria is typical Schlingensief in its desire to antagonize the public and stage provocation. His early film work frequently alluded to contemporary taboos: mixing Nazism, obscenities, disabilities, and assorted sexual perversions in films such as *German Chainsaw Massacre* (1990) and *Terror 2000* (1992), once described as "filth for intellectuals."[16] In the late 1990s Schlingensief began making interventions into public space, including the formation of a political party, *Chance 2000* (1998–2000), which targeted the unemployed, disabled, and other recipients of welfare with the slogan "Vote For Yourself." *Chance 2000* did not hesitate to use the image of Schlingensief's long-term collaborators, many of whom have mental and/or physical handicaps. But in *Please Love Austria*, Schlingensief's refugee participants were barely visible, disguised in assorted wigs, hats, and sunglasses.[17] In the square, the public had only a limited view of the immigrants through peepholes; the bulk of the performance was undertaken by Schlingensief himself, installed on the container's roof beneath the "Foreigners Out!" banner. Speaking through a megaphone, he incited the FPÖ to come and remove the banner (which they didn't), encouraged tourists to take photographs, invited the public to air their views, and made contradictory claims ("This is a performance! This is the absolute truth!"), while parroting the most racist opinions

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16 Herbert Achternbusch, cited in Marion Löhndorf, "Christoph Schlingensief," *Kunstforum*, 142, October 1998, 94–101, available at www.schlingensief.com (last accessed December 4, 2008).

17 During their evictions, the asylum-seekers covered their faces with a newspaper, inverting the celebratory, attention-seeking exits of contestants from the *Big Brother* house. Rather than viewing this absence of identity as an assault on their subjectivity, we could see this as an artistic device to allow the asylum-seekers to be catalysts for discussion around immigration in general (rather than individual case studies for emotive journalism).

and insults back to the crowd. As the various participants were evicted, Schlingensief provided a running commentary to the mob below: "It is a black man! Once again Austria has evicted a darkie!"

Although in retrospect – and particularly in Poet's film – it is evident that the work is a critique of xenophobia and its institutions, in Vienna the event (and Schlingensief's charismatic role as circus master) was ambiguous enough to receive approval and condemnation from all sides of the political spectrum. An elderly right-wing gentleman covered in medals gleefully found it to be in sympathy with his own ideas, while others claimed that by staging such a shameful spectacle Schlingensief himself was a dirty foreigner who ought to be deported. Left-wing student activists attempted to sabotage the container and "liberate" the refugees, while assorted left-wing celebrities showed up to support the project, including Daniel Cohn-Bendit (a key figure from May '68), and the Nobel Laureate author Elfriede Jelinek (who wrote and performed a puppet play with the asylum-seekers). In addition, large numbers of the public watched the program on webfreetv.com and voted for the eviction of particular refugees. The container prompted arguments and discussion – in the square surrounding it, in the print media, and on national television. The vehemence of response is palpable throughout the film, no more so than when Poet's camera pans back from a heated argument to reveal the entire square full of agitated people in intense debate. One elderly woman was so infuriated by the project that she could only spit at Schlingensief the insult, "You ... artist!"

A frequently heard criticism of this work is that it did not change anyone's opinion: the right-wing pensioner is still right-wing, the lefty protestors are still lefty, and so on. But this instrumentalized approach to critical judgment misunderstands the artistic force of Schlingensief's

intervention. The point is not about "conversion," for this reduces the work of art to a question of propaganda. Rather, Schlingensief's project draws attention to the contradictions of political discourse in Austria at that moment. The shocking fact is that Schlingensief's container caused more public agitation and distress than the presence of a *real* deportation center a few miles outside Vienna. The disturbing lesson of *Please Love Austria* is that an *artistic* representation of detention has more power to attract dissensus than an *actual* institution of detention.[18] In fact, Schlingensief's model of "undemocratic" behavior corresponds precisely to "democracy" as practiced in reality. This contradiction is the core of Schlingensief's artistic efficacy – and it is the reason why political conversion is not the primary goal of art, why artistic representations continue to have a potency that can be harnessed to disruptive ends, and why *Please Love Austria* is not (and should never be seen as) morally exemplary.

5. THE END OF PARTICIPATION

In his essay "The Uses of Democracy" (1992), Jacques Rancière notes that participation in what we normally refer to as democratic regimes is usually reduced to a question of filling up the spaces left empty by power. Genuine participation, he argues, is something different: the

[18] Silvija Jestrovic has explained this preference for the *performance* of asylum rather than its reality by way of reference to Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, specifically the epigraph by Feuerbach with which it opens: "But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to essence … illusion *only* is sacred, truth *profane*." (Silvija Jestrovic, "Performing Like an Asylum Seeker: Paradoxes of Hyper-Authenticity in Schlingensief's *Please Love Austria*," in Claire Bishop and Silvia Tramontana (eds.), *Double Agent* (London: ICA, 2009), 61.)

invention of an "unpredictable subject" who momentarily occupies the street, the factory, or the museum – rather than a fixed space of allocated participation whose counter-power is dependent on the dominant order.[19] Setting aside the problematic idea of "genuine" participation (which takes us back to modernist oppositions between authentic and false culture), such a statement clearly pertains to *Please Love Austria*, and the better examples of social practice, which have frequently constituted a *critique* of participatory art, rather than upholding an unproblematized equation between artistic and political inclusion.

The fact that the Ladder of Participation culminates in "citizen control" is worth recalling here. At a certain point, art has to hand over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved: it is not enough to keep producing activist *art*. The historic avant-garde was always positioned in relation to an existent party politics (primarily communist) which removed the pressure of art ever being required to effectuate change in and of itself. Later, the postwar avant-gardes claimed open-endedness as a radical refusal of organized politics – be this inter-war totalitarianism or the dogma of a party line. There was the potential to discover the highest artistic intensity in the everyday and the banal, which would serve a larger project of equality and anti-elitism. Since the 1990s, participatory art has often asserted a connection between user-generated content and democracy, but the frequent predictability of its

results seem to be the consequence of lacking *both* a social *and* an artistic target; in other words, participatory art today stands without a relation to an existing political project (only to a loosely defined anti-capitalism) and presents itself as oppositional to visual art by trying to side-step the question of visuality. As a consequence, these artists have internalized a huge amount of pressure to bear the burden of devising new models of social and political organization – a task that they are not always best equipped to undertake.

My point, again, is not to criticize specific artists but to see the whole rise of social practice since 1989 as symptomatic. That the "political" and "critical" have become shibboleths of advanced art signals a lack of faith *both* in the intrinsic value of art as a de-alienating human endeavor (since art today is so intertwined with market systems globally) *and* in democratic political processes (in whose name so many injustices and barbarities are conducted).[20] But rather than addressing this loss of faith by collapsing art and ethics together, the task today is to produce a viable international alignment of leftist political movements and a reassertion of art's inventive forms of negation as valuable in their own right.[21] We need to recognize art as a form of experimental activity overlapping with the world, whose negativity may lend support towards a political project (without bearing the sole responsibility for devising and implementing it),

[19]   Rancière argues that participation in democracy is a "mongrel" idea deriving from the con-flation of two ideas: "the reformist idea of necessary mediations between the centre and the periphery, and the revolutionary idea of the permanent involvement of citizen-subjects in every domain." (Jacques Rancière, "The Uses of Democracy," in Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 60.

[20]   The Slovenian collective IRWIN has recently suggested that "critical" and "political" art are as necessary to neoliberalism as socialist realism was to the Soviet regime.
[21]   A positive example of new developments is the new left organization Krytyka Polityczna in Poland, a publishing house that produces a magazine, organizes events, and maintains a reg-ular, forceful presence in the media (via its charismatic young leader Sławomir Sierakowski). The artists who have affiliated themselves with this project are as varied as Artur Żmijewski and the painter Wilhelm Sasnal.

and – more radically – we need to support the progressive transformation of existing institutions through the transversal encroachment of ideas whose boldness is related to (and at times greater than) that of artistic imagination.[22]

By using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world, and at one remove from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels – to participants and to spectators – the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing, and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew. But to reach the second level requires a mediating third term – an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle – that permits this experience to have a purchase on the public imaginary. Participatory art is not a privileged political medium, nor a ready-made solution to a society of the spectacle, but is as uncertain and precarious as democracy itself; neither are legitimated in advance but need continually to be performed and tested in every specific context.

[22] Latin America has been preeminent in instituting such solutions. See, for example, the initiatives introduced by Antanas Mockus, then-mayor of Bogotá, discussed in María Cristina Caballero, "Academic turns city into a social experiment," *Harvard University Gazette*, March 11, 2004, available at http://www.news.harvard.edu.