Łukasz Białkowski
Uniwersytet Pedagogiczny im. KEN w Krakowie

Flexible, shaky form. "Fatality of the commentary" and socially engaged art

In this text, I would like to investigate several postulates that have for over a dozen years been consistently promoted by the celebrated Anglo-American critic, Claire Bishop. She included them in her famous article from 2004, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* (Bishop, 2004, p. 51–79), where she argued with the most important tenets of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics.* However, they have also been included in her text on *Social Turn* (Bishop, 2006, p. 178–183), as well as in *Artificial Hells* (Bishop, 2012), a book published in 2012, where they become tools employed to analyse the development of socially engaged art. Moreover, Bishop refers to socially engaged art with a number of different terms, and includes in her area of interest phenomena such as community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art, delegated performance, as well as social practice (Bishop, 2012, p. 1). On the Polish ground, most of these terms sound rather artificial and they are rarely used either in Polish literature or in the language of practitioners – both artists and curators. Nevertheless, intentions inherent in all those terms are clear enough. They all refer to the sphere of art making that seeks not so much production of objects, but rather their use for creation of social situations, or even rejecting objects altogether in favour of activity within the area of interpersonal relations (in this text, I shall use interchangeably two terms: socially engaged art and participatory practices). As an art critic, Claire Bishop is not merely interested in describing art works and labelling them – which an art historian would find satisfactory enough – but she also presents several postulates that serve her as criteria for assessment of particular works.

Before I go on to reconstruct and discuss them, I would like to explain that, in my opinion, they constitute an interesting example (interesting because quite typical) of approaches and strategies present in art criticism. A particular attitude towards described art works often stems from particular political choices and worldview (which Bishop declares openly), working, as a result, as an attempt to uncover certain political efficacy of art which makes it possible to realise political goals remaining in concord with the critic's beliefs. Understandably, on the methodological level, the latter translate into searching for tools and sketching notional structures capable of uncovering political potential within investigated practices.

In the light of these methodological investigations and assumptions made as part thereof, artistic practice is understood as a process of making those involved in participatory practices aware of their condition (economic, gender, class, political, social, etc.). In this optic, art becomes a machine whose main goal is to generate knowledge. A question arises here – a question whose formulation together with the premises for this formulation will constitute the main goal of this text – namely: what is the mechanism of knowledge production, what is its status, and what are its chances to translate into political efficacy? In other words, I am convinced that this understanding of art's basic objectives invites posing questions about the way in which Claire Bishop's methodological approach to participatory practices allows us to treat socially engaged art as a source of knowledge, as well as about how this knowledge can be used at the wake of social change.

Dialectical machines

For Claire Bishop, the basic criterion for assessment of an artwork – though she does not suggest this explicitly – is related to the extent it is capable of problematising the phenomena to which it refers. In other words, the main criterion of assessing participatory practices is their critical potential, namely the extent to which they allow participants to address their position within particular art practice or distance themselves from it. Bishop's stance – which follows the line of Adorno's cultural critique where it received its classic articulation – is far from extraordinary and it might be seen as a basic perspective on creative practices, in particular those with powerful social engagement[1]. Nonetheless, the notional structure employed by the Anglo-American critic to participatory practices to examine their level of criticality is an interesting proposition. Particularly for its provenance, which manifests itself as an original mixture of tropes derived from both Jacques Rancière, Bruno Latour, as well as Felix Guattari, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. It is also appealing for its flexibility, that is, the possibility of applying one perspective onto a wide array of diverse artistic practices, from classic theatre, through performance and interventions in public space, to educational workshops. Thirdly, methodological premises posited by Claire Bishop are meant – at least at the level of the author's declaration – to consolidate the aesthetic aspect of the projects she discusses (which she also defines as formal aspect) with the aspect of their social efficacy. The latter means keeping socially engaged practices within the field of art and recognising their autonomy as art works, with simultaneous search for the possibility of their assessment in terms of social impact (Bishop, 2012, p. 11–40).

The attempt to locate participatory practices in both areas – artistic-aesthetic-formal and socio-political – can be seen as Claire Bishop's fundamental objective. Significantly, her endeavours are partly convergent with postulates propounded by Walter Benjamin in *The Author as Producer.* Benjamin sought to reformulate political engagement of art in the face of what he saw as unproductive debates of Marxist aesthetics and art criticism on the possibility of unifying progressive contents of art

---

[1] As well as any other artistic tendencies that manifest a Conceptual or Post-Conceptual nature, where criticality constitutes a model of the work's reference to itself or to its environment.

work with its form, that is, mediating revolutionary content through reactionary artistic formulae inherited (or adopted) from the bourgeoisie. Benjamin's proposition was not to ask about how form reflects the content, but to change the approach to the role of technology in art production, as well as to the relation between the author and his work. On the other hand, Claire Bishop suggests that the issue of how to connect form and content should not be put aside, which in her language means that artistic and political aspects should not be separated, while their mutual contradiction should be treated as a favourable circumstance.

Indeed, in her attempt to have the cake and eat it – to retain art's autonomy from politics and other cultural fields and simultaneously maintain its political impact – Bishop reaches for the notion of form as a key category for her definition of socially engaged practice (Bishop, 2012, p. 7). In fact, in *Artificial Hells*, the notion of form features rarely enough for readers to deduce that Bishop treats it as a starting point. On the one hand, it connotes the Kantian aesthetics based on the notion of the autonomy of aesthetic experience, on the other hand, it is capacious enough to allow references to any aspect of reality that has a developed structure, including, of course, to artistic practices and interpersonal relations. What transpires is that Bishop is in this respect very close to Jacques Rancière. Indeed, Rancière and his reinterpretation as well as rehabilitation of Kant's aesthetics in *The Distribution of the Sensible* constitute a basic orientation point for Bishop's analysis. I shall quote her at this point, to fully account for her position and attitude towards Rancière:

> One of Rancière's key contributions to contemporary debates around art and politics is therefore to reinvent the term 'aesthetic' so that it denotes a specific mode of experience (…). In this logic, all claims to be 'anti-aesthetic' or reject art *still function within the aesthetic regime*. The aesthetic for Rancière therefore signals an ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change, which is characterised by the paradox of belief in art's autonomy and in it being inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come. While this antinomy is apparent in many avant-garde practices of the last century, it seems particularly pertinent to analysing participatory art and the legitimating narratives it has attracted. In short, the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, because it always already contains this ameliorative promise (Bishop, 2012, p. 29, original emphasis).

Bishop treats Rancière and his „pan-aesthetic" identification of art and politics as a means to reconcile artistic autonomy with social engagement. Noteworthy, in the above cited passage Bishop emphasises the possibility of thinking through contradictions that is present in Rancière's philosophy. Therefore, the form that Bishop imposes onto participatory practices, is inherently fractured and it is this fracture that – in her opinion – invests it with its heuristic as well as political potential. Bishop identifies at least two moments when thus understood form allows for taking in parenthesis the apparent contradictions present in socially engaged practices.

As we know, a large part of such practices aim at achieving a particular social goal, for instance, integration of ethnic minorities with a community on the margins of which they live, improvement of the standard of life of a particular group of people, or expression of a political opposition. Material results of such actions: performances, objects, and archived documents are merely means to such end. In this

perspective, a success of such action is assessed by artists, friendly critics and curators, not through the prism of artistic quality of objects made as part of the project, but in terms of their usefulness or efficacy. This kind of attitude perfectly expresses the leading motto of Thomas Hirschhorn's manifesto „Energy = YES. Quality = NO" (Hirchhorn, 2007). On the one hand, assessment of such practices in terms of traditionally understood artistic and aesthetic values makes no sense, on the other hand, rejection of such criteria of assessment by their authors comes from a belief that they are inherited from exclusionary aesthetics, involved in building hierarchies of taste, divisions into elite and mass art, therefore responsible for generating social distinctions. Wishing to invest their works with maximally inclusive and egalitarian element, their authors decidedly refrain from making value judgements through categories developed within „bourgeois" aesthetics. From Bishop's point of view, this contradiction stems from a certain underestimation of the significance of aesthetics, at least when it is seen in Rancière's terms. She argues that:

> value judgements are necessary, not as a means to reinforce elite culture and police the boundaries of art and non-art, but as a way to understand and clarify our shared values at a given historical moment. (…) The point is not to regard these anti-aesthetic visual phenomena (reading areas, selfpublished newspapers, parades, demonstrations, ubiquitous plywood platforms, endless photographs of people) as objects of a new formalism, but to analyse how these contribute to and reinforce the social and artistic experience being generated (Bishop, 2012, p. 8).

Another tension explicitly indicated by Claire Bishop concerns the position of participants of art practices. Numerous art historians and critics identify a tendency to define the situation of the public in terms of dichotomy, on the basis of the binary opposition of passive vs. active. In the moment when the public takes the role of observers, there is recognised the existence of an artificial barrier which prevents the audience from fully participating in what is taking place. Commonly, this claim, not unlike the one concerning the value-based assessment of art practices, is supposed to demonstrate that numerous art practices that reduce the audience to the role of passive observers, or allow them only a semblance of participation, evoke categories that have their roots in aesthetics based on social hierarchies and divisions. On the other hand, when the public actively participate in the project, they risk allegations that they lost their critical distance towards collectively created situation (Bishop, 2012, p. 37). At this point, they are seen as becoming merely a group of figureheads who merely realise plans prepared in advance by organisers. According to Bishop, it is difficult to establish whether any of the two model roles taken by the audience has an objective advantage over the other. Each time, the value of given approach depends on a particular project, circumstances in which it is being realised, as well as on the objectives behind it. In this optic, much more critical potential can be found in the actions by Santiago Sierra, whose programme is to objectify participants or even exploit them, at the same time emphasising circumstances that allow for it (be it economic, institutional, or political), than in educational workshops, for instance, which approach issues of social exclusion on a merely theoretical level.

Bishop discusses in detail two identified tensions in the form of numerous socially engaged practices, yet it seems that a lot more similar structural dichotomies

can be identified. It is the point of view of those who describe them that determines which of the elements of the two binaries will be positively valued. For instance, if we take into consideration a pair of notions such as individualism and collectivism, both the former as well as the latter can be valued both positively and negatively. Reviews of particular socially engaged practices express both affirmation of the fact that the artist plays the role of director who employs amateur actors to realise a social spectacle (e.g. Tino Sehgal's works), as well as reservations about such practices that are then considered guilty of instrumental treatment and dehumanisation of human beings (which is often the case with Santiago Sierra's works). Similarly, both positively and negatively received are works that put focus on collective execution of the project. They are being appreciated, for instance, for the participants' spontaneous complementing of one another's roles and ability of bottom-up cooperation (which often feature in descriptions of Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*). However, the same bottom-up cooperation and spontaneous participation in the project can also be received as unwanted chaos or even practice that seeks opposing the social order (those were accusations against Łukasz Surowiec's *Dziady*). According to this mechanics, a plus or minus sign can be applied to each binary referring to socially engaged art, such as: ethics – aesthetics, director – partner, antagonism – consensus, cooperation – rivalry, engagement – escapism, process-oriented – result-oriented practice, and many others.

On numerous occasions, Bishop emphasises that the changeable contexts wherein socially engaged practices are naturally located always require a diversified approach. For her, this means that there is no objective model formula into which such practices could be incorporated, so that adherence to this formula could be treated as a criterion for its success. This is happening because:

> 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 (Bishop, 2012, p. 284).

In other words, according to Bishop, there is no equivalent of a Sèvres metre measure for socially engaged practice. And if it did exist, its form would be characterised by fracture. This fracture requires that each time we describe or assess a socially engaged practice we make an effort to invent new language, new categories, and criteria for assessment, adequate to the context within which the project is realised.

Culture of the commentary

In the light of this fracture, critics may assess the same aspects of artistic practices either positively or negatively. Let us emphasise again – Claire Bishop reaches for the notion of form, which she refers to Rancière's rendition of Kant's aesthetics, in particular, the autonomy of aesthetic experience. The Anglo-American critic proposes a vision where the notion of form is the one through which those interpretive contradictions present in socially engaged practices can be suspended.

Yet, clearly enough, the form that Bishop imposes on socially engaged practices becomes as heuristically potent, as it is flexible or even shaky. The fact that such practices move between binaries such as active and passive, elitist and popular, as well as ethical and aesthetic, reified and process-based, antagonist and consensual, etc. requires from a critic to each time reconstruct anew the work of modes responsible for the mechanics of artistic production. This way, their form must also be constructed on the level of analysis by critics. If particular practice contains contradictions, that is, if it shows a tendency to realise two contradictory goals at the same time, the role of critic and artist is to affirm one of them or to prove their complementary nature. This kind of artwork proves to be a fluid entity, with blurred structure or, perhaps – and here I shall risk a term that will work as a basic premise to ask the key question in this paper – empty.

This conclusion stems from the terminological language that Bishop inherited together with Rancière's aesthetics. As we know, Kant's insistence on the autonomy of aesthetic judgement from cognition and morality was rooted in the assumption that aesthetic judgement is an experience of subjective purposiveness of nature. In contrast to inter-subjectively communicable notions inherent in cognition and ethics, aesthetic judgement is „without a concept" (Kant, 2008, p. 225). It is based on free imagination and though it allows the subject to perceive sensory data in an intended manner, that is use them to create some pleasant looking constellations, nonetheless the subject is unable to inter-subjectively communicate the contents of such experience. In this sense, for Kant, the notion of beauty is empty, for it is not related to any inter-subjectively communicated content. Moving forward, we need to remember that Kantian aesthetics is not tantamount to a philosophy of art. It centres on sensory experience, yet it does not necessarily concern a work of art. In this system, the latter is not, as an object of aesthetic judgement, privileged in any way; Kant is merely interested in the process of sensory experience within which aesthetic value is produced, but his object is reality at large. This allows Claire Bishop to democratically include in the sphere of her interest objects other than artworks as well. On the other hand, it makes works of art become equal to other objects of sensory perception, and, consequently, lose their original character. And this originality needs to be created. Unsurprisingly then, for Bishop, autonomy is the highest stake for thus construed art. When anything can be an artwork, only the postulated autonomy warrants any kind of substance or – to put it mildly – particularity.

Understandably, the autonomy of the field of art is not its immanent feature that stems from its definition, which finds its confirmation in art history, as well as in the very fluidity of the notion of art. The alleged autonomy of the field of art has emerged over the 19th century together with the institutionalisation of some spheres of life in Western culture. Therefore, it exists merely as a historically, geographically, and culturally relativized effect of some discursive practices that generate cultural images. Understanding of art practices as an activity autonomous from other types of cultural practices requires *a fortiori* a discourse that fully defines them. Here, a question arises about the mechanisms of this discourse that contribute to strengthening this autonomy-generating discourse.

The fractured form that Claire Bishop imposes on an artwork perfectly plays the role of generating various, often contradictory perspectives, commentaries, opinions, interpretations, and assessments. In this context, it is important to ask whether

the methodology proposed by Claire Bishop is merely an attempt to reconcile often contradictory tendencies inherent in participatory practices, or whether, perhaps, it plays a completely different function, namely, of generating the uttermost polysemy of art practices and leaving the widest possible space for what can be referred to as the „culture of commentary". In other words, a work of art, seen in the perspective that Claire Bishop adopts after Rancière, seems to become an empty *significant.* It is a machine for meaning production. While aesthetic experience as defined by Kant is devoid of inter-subjectively communicated content, participatory practices based on contradictory tendencies also allow for investing them with any chosen meaning. Bishop's terminology invites a conclusion that it is the subject experiencing the form who is responsible for investing it with content or even for defining and unifying the form itself, when it is internally torn by contradictory dynamics.

It is for a reason that I refer to the notion of *significant*, explored in depth by the French Structuralism and Post-Structuralism. The problem of the identity of the work of art – in this context, of „text" – and of giving it „form", posed by Bishop in her book, can be seen as an echo of the question about the identity of the text which emerged together with Barthes' concept of the death of the author. This problem was addressed by Michel Foucault, among others. If we accept the concept of the death of the author, as well as the conclusion that the text works in no connection with his intentions, then were do we find the limits of the text, asked Foucault, if, for instance, we would wish to publish Nietzsche's collected works? Certainly, we would publish what Nietzsche published in his lifetime, but the doubt would emerge if we reached for his notebooks, personal notes with deletions, additions, addresses, etc. Which of them should be published and which should not? Methodologies that reject the figure of the author treat literature as a „text" and dismiss the notion of work. In their consideration of the conditions of possibility of a text, they take a risk of assuming the existence of history that made the text possible, and „in transcendental terms, the religious principle of the hidden meaning (which requires interpretation) and the critical principle of implicit significations, silent determinations, and obscured contents (which gives rise to commentary)" (Foucault, 2008, p. 283). According to Foucault, after the figure of the author is rejected, the text is condemned to – as Michał Paweł Markowski described it – „the fatality of the commentary" (Markowski, 1999, p. 335–386). The text becomes prey to interpretations, annotations, footnotes, references, and travesties. Literary criticism argues that texts contain some unformulated rest, some surplus that it tries to capture and which eludes it constantly. Ultimately, the author and his death mean only, as Roland Barthes saw it, the birth of the reader. More than anything, however, it occasions the birth of the critic and the emergence of an infinite chain of interpretations and counter-interpretations or – in other words – „fatal," eternally incomplete attempts at giving the text its final form.

Yet, Claire Bishop's methodology leads us much further: depending on the direction of interpretation it allows the critic to remove either the author or the audience, the process or the result, consensus or antagonism. It forces interpretations of artworks to move between two binaries and freely locate either on one or another side the influence of each on the identity or substantiality of the art work. In one instance, a critic may resign from assessing an artwork in terms of its quality by affirming inclusive tasks, in another, dismiss the active participation of the public by emphasising the role of talent. This softens the substance of the artwork much

more than – in this context – an endearingly conservative and archaic concept of the death of the author. At the same time, it allows for criticism to emerge. In *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop notes that Rancière's theory of the aesthetics of politics „has been co-opted for the defence of wildly differing artistic practices (including a conservative return to beauty), even though his ideas do not easily translate into critical judgements" (Bishop, 2012, p. 29). In the light of the ambivalence of interpretive results achieved with this perspective, yet again we arrive at a suspicion that perhaps interpretation is here a goal in itself. Political efficacy, on the other hand, becomes reduced to textual mediation in the form of reviews, articles, and interviews in professional press. Indeed, it does not escape the fatality of the commentary, on the contrary, it owes it its being and its meticulous construction of the interpretive house of cards.

Bibliography

Bishop C. (2004). Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics. *October*, 110.
Bishop C. (2012). *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.
Bishop C. (2006). Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents. *Artforum*, February.
Foucault M. (2008). What is an Author? J.V. Harari (transl.). In: eds. D. Lodge, N. Wood 3rd (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader*. London–New York: Routledge, pp. 281–293.
Hirschhorn Th. (2007). *Where do I stand? What do I want?* London: ArtReview.
Kant I. (2008). *Critique of Judgement*, J. Creed Meredith (transl.). Oxford: University Press.
Markowski M.P. (1999). Anty-hermes. In: T. Komendant (red.), *Szaleństwo i literatura. Powiedziane, napisane*, Bogdan Banasiak (et al.) (przeł.). Warszawa: Aletheia, pp. 335–386.

Abstrakt

W artykule zostały poddane analizie metodologiczne propozycje dla badania historii sztuki zaangażowanej społecznie, które Claire Bishop wysuwa w swojej książce *Sztuczne piekła.* Według anglo-amerykańskiej krytyczki i historyczki sztuki kluczową rolę w pisaniu historii tego typu działań artystycznych może odgrywać pojęcie formy. Jej zdaniem, pojęcie to pozwala objąć zróżnicowane składowe działań partycypacyjnych oraz często sprzeczne tendencje, które one ujawniają. W niniejszym artykule rozważane są możliwości analizy działań partycypacyjnych przy użyciu pojęcia formy a także zaprezentowane zostają argumenty przemawiające za tym, że wykorzystanie pojęcia formy w takim kontekście może prowadzić do całkowicie odmiennych rezultatów, niż zakłada Claire Bishop: rozmycia się struktury dzieła sztuki oraz przesunięcia akcentu ze skuteczności takich działań na budowanie ich znaczenia i określanie siły ich oddziaływania wyłącznie na poziomie teorii.

Słowa kluczowe: autonomia doświadczenia estetycznego, autonomia dzieła sztuki, praktyki partycypacyjne, forma dzieła sztuki, interpretacja dzieła sztuki, kultura komentarza, społecznie zaangażowane praktyki, zwrot społeczny

Flexible, shaky form. "Fatality of the commentary" and socially engaged art

Abstract

The article has analyzed the methodological proposals for exploring the history of the art of social involvement, which Claire Bishop puts in her book Artificial Hells. According to this Anglo-American critic and art historian, a key role in writing the history of this type of artistic activity can play the notion of form. In its view, this concept allows for differentiated components of participatory actions and often contradictory tendencies which they reveal. This article discusses the possibility of analyzing participative activities using the notion of form, and also argues that using the notion of form in such a context can lead to completely different results than assumed by Claire Bishop: blurring the structure of a work of art and shifting the accent from the effectiveness of such actions to building their meaning and determining the strength of their impact only at the level of theory.

Key words: autonomy of aesthetic experience, autonomy of a work of art, participatory practice, form of a work of art, interpretation of a work of art, commentary culture, socially engaged practice, social turn

Nota o autorze
Łukasz Białkowski (ur. 1981) – adiunkt w Katedrze Teorii Sztuki i Edukacji Artystycznej Wydziału Sztuki UP, krytyk sztuki, tłumacz z języka francuskiego. Publikował w wielu czasopismach, katalogach wystaw i monografiach książkowych. Autor książki *Nieszczere pole. Szkice o sztuce* oraz *Figury na biegunach. Narracje silnego i słabego podmiotu twórczego*. W latach 2010–2011 pracował w Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej w Krakowie jako redaktor naczelny kwartalnika „MOCAK Forum". W latach 2012–2013 był kierownikiem programowym galerii BWA Sokół w Nowym Sączu. Prowadzi dział sztuk wizualnych w kwartalniku „Opcje". Członek AICA. Zajmuje się przekształceniami polskiego pola sztuki po 1989 r. w kontekście przemian ekonomiczno-politycznych oraz rozwoju nowych technologii.

Łukasz Białkowski (born 1981) – Assistant professor at the Chair of Art Theory and Artistic Education of the Art Department of the Pedagogical University, art critic, French language translator. His publications appeared in many magazines, exhibition catalogues, and book monographs. Author of the book Nieszczere pole. Szkice o sztuce oraz Figury na biegunach. Narracje silnego i słabego podmiotu twórczego. In the years 2010-2011 worked in the Contemporary Art Museum in Cracow as a chief editor of the „MOCAK Forum" quarterly. In the years 2012-2013 he was a program director of the BWA Sokół gallery in Nowy Sącz. Chief editor of the visual arts section of the „Opcje" quarterly. Member of AICA. Engaged in reforming the Polish field of art after 1989 in the context of economic-political shifts and the development of new technologies.