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Community Subjects

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COMMUNITY SUBJECTS

ritical theories of community art provide new ways to consider the question of identity from a non-essentialist perspective that affords us the occasion to conceptualize the relationship between subjective and social formations. In relation to developments in critical cultural theory, the terms "community" and "subject" imply a series of displacements of liberal, nationalist and multicultural conceptions that function as what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, after Deleuze, refer to as "capture devices," systems of incorporation and differentiation that alienate living, productive labour from autonomous self-valorization outside the decision-making power of the State and the coercive forms of capitalist integration.[1] From a Lacanian, psychoanalytic point of view, capture devices like "identity" are not external to biopolitical production, but are the *points de capitonnage* (points of ideological suturing) that are inherent to subjectivity and that operate through processes of (dis)identification. What does global neoliberal capitalism want from community subjects? How does identity relate to the voluntary class of virtuous citizens that are today expected to empower the traditional face-to-face community against the vagaries of the neoliberal capitalization of markets—increasing poverty and economic disparity, crumbling infrastructure, mass displacement of populations through unemployment, war and famine—and how can we reimagine a community that is both subject to criticism and a space of democratic contestation? These are some of the questions that are posed by today's socially engaged community art. In the following, I will consider two competing paradigms of community art and propose a third, alternative framework for critical cultural practice. The first of these is Nicolas Bourriaud's *Esthétique relationnelle*,

first proposed in 1998.[2] Bourriaud describes relational work, for instance, the work of artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick, as unfinished, open-ended works that do not provide collectible objects but that are oriented toward social interaction. The creation of communal spaces like bars, lounges, and libraries allows for connective possibilities, participation and unexpected encounters. The low-fi, in-between aesthetic of relational works is nevertheless related to a somewhat deterministic criterion: the shift to a post-Fordist experience and service economy. Bourriaud's idea of relational aesthetics has received the kind of approval that comes from its association with the work of internationally recognized artists. The criticism it has received, however, is due precisely to its somewhat naive approach to social economy.[3] Despite the idea that the participant viewer is part of the work, the model of service provision willfully ignores the divisions of labour that structure the field of culture. While there is an attempt to shift the question of value away from labour toward various other economies or "powers," the emphasis on "freeness" and "open-endedness" results in a kind of inertia that makes the experience of the work not unlike the experience of the rest of everyday life in a world of exchange. What is significant for our discussion, however, is that relational aesthetics seeks to shift art's focus away from the 1980s preoccupation with economies of identity. Fixed agendas are replaced by an ambient, transcultural mixing and confusion of codes.

One example of relational work is the Danish collective Superflex's *Free Beer* campaign. *Free Beer* is an "open source beer" modeled on file sharing; the recipe is available to anyone through a Creative Commons license that allows Superflex to bypass the conventional copyrighting of intellectual property. *Free Beer*

WockenKlausur, Community development
"From Place to Place", 2001.
Mobile laboratory. Courtesy of WockenKlausur.

WockenKlausur. Civic participation in the design of public space, 2000. Krems, Austria. Courtesy of WockenKlausur.

to social problems affecting the unemployed, the homeless, drug addicts, immigrants and the handicapped. The problems they address are endemic and are not solved by existing divisions of administrative expertise and legal jurisdiction. The artists use their status as autonomous and creative agents to oversee discussions among selected participants and to propose means of improving social coexistence. The criteria for quality and success are not aesthetic but are determined in advance by the deliberate intentions of the intervention. In order to facilitate the public acceptance of the work, the instruments of the bourgeois public sphere, the mass media and the art system, are strategically co-opted and politicized.

There are some problems related to groups like *WochenKlausur's* subordination of aesthetics to an instrumentalized or operative notion of what is "good social activism." In *One Place after Another*, Miwon Kwon raises the problems associated with the assumption that communities are coherent and unified.[5] Kwon suggests instead that communities are unstable and, in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, inoperative.[6] The singularity of a community is similar to Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick's idea of "nonce-taxonomic," both particular and non-repeatable.[7] Kwon also addresses the issue of institutional pressure. As socially engaged community art is increasingly promoted by institutions and granting agencies, curators, critics and administrators take on a greater role in the integration of autonomous practices with the management criteria of the creative industries. For Grant Kester, this results in the ideological subsumption of community art within the "moral economy of capitalism." Artists work with community subjects whose social disadvantages are individualized and whose paths to social improvement are clearly marked out in relation to existing state institutions or to free market, entrepreneurial solutions.

Kester seeks to defend politically motivated activist art against the depoliticizing attitudes of the institutionalized art world. The problem with Kester's disparagement of Avant-garde practice is that it prevents him from considering how it is that the avant-gardes have traditionally associated communication with ideology and not fixity in a general, formal sense. The subject that is represented in Avant-garde art is the subject in ideology. For Kester, as for many critics who have been weaned on postmodern difference politics, all reference to class politics and dialectics (or the kind of dialogics proposed by the Russian formalists) is associated with the fixing of identity and with masculinism. What is at stake in the repeated pronouncements of the death

has been shared on numerous occasions and in particular at the inaugural gathering at the Copenhagen IT University in 2005. Another example is Piotr Uklanski's *Dance Floor* of 1996, which is now part of the collection of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Uklanski has stated that he set out to create a work "that would be all generosity and no ideology." In both cases, we could offer the criticism that while the artists seek to create convivial experiences, they ignore the conditions in which their work is produced and received, not to mention the fact that the freeing up of copyright restrictions is part of the contradictions of the liberalization of markets. How are patronage and the conditions that structure the field of production reflected in the emancipation of spectators?

A second model for engaged community art is Grant Kester's idea of "dialogical aesthetics," developed in his book *Conversational Pieces*.[4] Kester developed his idea as an offshoot of the Littoral art movement that emerged in the 1990s. Littoral artists are concerned with politically efficacious Activist art. The major premise of dialogical aesthetics is that twentieth-century Avant-garde art is largely mistrustful of the communicational model of dialogue and has resorted to various non- or anti-discursive means to radicalize art production: shock, defamiliarisation, abstraction, etc. Translated in simple political terms, Kester seems to be suggesting that modern aesthetics can do more to contribute to progressive social change if class struggle is replaced by social collaboration. Rather than producing transgressive works that merely contribute to art's estrangement from the public and that reify the exclusiveness of the field of cultural production, Dialogical artists make work that is participatory, deliberative, democratic and pedagogical. Dialogical artists are not interested in the celebrity status of the individual artist and signature styles are substituted for whatever means suit the needs of a project.

Perhaps the most notable example of communicative art practice can be found in the work of the Viennese collective *WochenKlausur* [weeks of closure]. In the last fifteen years, *WochenKlausur* has created numerous projects that proposed creative solutions

of the avant-garde and the death of communism is the belief that there are no alternatives to global economic neoliberalism. In "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," Slavoj Žižek analyzes the hidden logic of identity politics.[8] For Žižek, the kinds of identity politics that are based on gender, race and sexual difference typically work to preserve the category of the propertied white male as the unstated superego point of exclusion, thereby failing to properly politicize the field of social reality. The result is post-politics, politics in which the social administration of cultural tensions operates as a support for existing forms of transnational capitalism. By design or by neglect, difference politics has failed to address the ideological processes that suture subjectivity and social reality and willfully undermines any effective politicization that would change the current
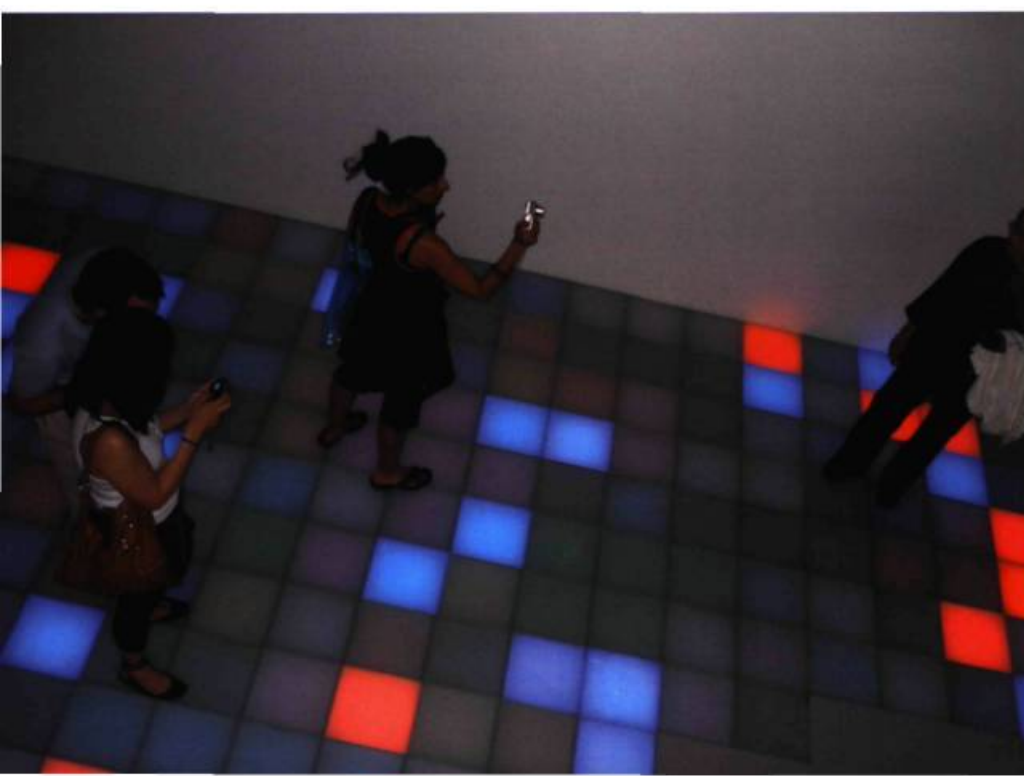
state of things. We could say, following Žižek, that the community artist works to fill the vacuum left open by the declining welfare state and acts as a creative agent of new genre public-private partnerships. Žižek argues that the proper response to the problem of cooptation is not the way of the superego, the impossible embrace or the refusal of all identification with cultural institutions, a catastrophic sacrificing of oneself to the sacred community, but the authentic act which would change the very coordinates of the situation. We could call this, after Lacan, *sinthomeopathic cultural praxis.* The sinthome is the complex that structures the subject's libidinal attachments, a means to consider the division of labour between reality and fantasy and the possibility of repositioning the utopian drive in

relation to social change. In a sinthomeopathic practice, there is no security in the impossible exit from the institutionalized art world. Instead, the proper response is to lend ourselves to institutional arrangements, the symptoms of contemporary cultural production, while still maintaining the fantasy of critical distance. Sinthomeopathic solutions also avoid the fetishism of singularity that theory has recently turned to as a means to avoid class analysis. It does so by simply considering the prohibitions and refusals that structure the reconfiguration of postmodern attitudes toward traditional regimes of art and spectatorship.

What I am proposing relates to a process of subjectivization and not a programme for advanced art production. In contrast to the previous models of community art, I am not proposing a new aesthetic. I would suggest as an example Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* of 2002, constructed for Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany. The work bears many resemblances to other examples of community art. The artist lived "in residence" for several weeks and for the 100-day duration of the exhibition alongside the Turkish immigrant community where the various parts of the monument were installed. The monument was made available seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day and was accessible without charge. A pedagogical component was devised and community workshops were hosted by local philosophers. The fragile, temporary monument, built with the help of members of the community—including children—functioned as a poetic homage to the renegade avant-garde Surrealist, Georges Bataille.

While the liberal multiculturalist attitude towards "the public" would likely dismiss Bataille as a suitable topic for public discussion, Hirschhorn's open pedagogy does not decide in advance what is and what is not suitable for mass consumption. He works with the space of autonomy as part of a deeply subjective investment in the formalization of oppositional energy, thus bringing to light the way that everyday life is organized according to the direction and expansion of opportunities and dialogue. While highly capitalized forms of communication are structured in terms of the commodification of experience, affect and information, Hirschhorn's

"informalization" of relationality and dialogue makes room for the redirection of content in the direction of a universally accessible experience. In contrast to the reciprocity involved in gift-giving, Hirschhorn's approach to over-production signals the excess and the "accursed share" that structures the economy of cultural production.

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NOTES

1 See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
2 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).
3 Most prominent is Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* #110 (2004) 51-79.
4 Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
5 Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).
6 See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 23.
8 Slavoj Žižek, "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," in Žižek's, *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings, Volume Two.* Edited by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006) 151-182.