



UNIVERSIDADE  
CATÓLICA  
PORTUGUESA

TOWARDS AN AGONISTIC ETHICS IN CONTEMPORARY  
ART

Dissertation submitted to Universidade Católica  
Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Culture  
Studies – Management of the Arts and Culture

By

Orsola Vannocci

The Lisbon Consortium  
FCH – Faculdade de Ciências Humanas  
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Under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Luísa Santos  
and Prof. Dr. Ana Cristina Cachola

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## **Abstract**

Today we are witnessing the emergence of antagonism, a dimension intrinsically bound to the human beings, which results from the expression of specific power relations composing social hegemonies, that inevitably want to prevail over each other. Furthermore, the system of symbols produced by the dominant hegemony to maintain the control, has pervaded all sides of the human sphere, creating its own aesthetic.

According to Chantal Mouffe (2013), the antagonist dimension could be solved, or better yet sublimated, through its conversion to agonism, which is realized through discussion and confrontation among peers. In this context, the aim of this dissertation is to analyse how contemporary art practices might operate as effective counter-hegemonic processes, taking into account the particularity inherent in ethics (Badiou, 2001) and the political dimension to which art is intrinsically bound (Rancière, 2004).

After a first theoretical backbone, which presents an analysis of participatory art and deepens the concept of agonistic approach, I consider the practice of three artists, Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), Paweł Althamer (1967) and Tania Bruguera (1968), whose works are challenging the viewer in a counter-hegemonic manner, to answer the main question of this dissertation: how should the artists engage the viewer through their artistic practices and actions? It will be seen that the work of these artists seems to tell that the artistic practice should not be superior to the spectator, neither an explicit complaint. It should question the system, being a subtle trigger for the beholder, inducing a reaction, a dialogue, an autonomous reflection.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

Starting from the assumption of the political<sup>1</sup> power of Art and its dimension both sensible to the individual and the collective, I wish to understand what is the position – at social, cultural, and political levels - of contemporary art today. More precisely, I aim to question what is the role of culture, and in particular of contemporary art, with regard to power relationships? Should contemporary artists challenge and engage the viewer through their artistic practices and actions? And how, through which approach? After a first theoretical backbone, I will analyse three artists that seem to engage the audience as viewer/participant, through similar approaches as they attempt to turn the spectator into a participant who is politically aware of her/his contemporary position within the global world, questioning the dominant hegemony where she/he is currently living.

The role of culture and the intellectuals in the implementation process of a dominant hegemony is a topic that has been already addressed in a thorough manner by several authors such as Antonio Gramsci in his *Quaderni del Carcere* (1929-1935), written while he was under arrest during the Fascist regime. Gramsci evidences the fundamental involvement of culture as a tool to maintain the consensus towards the dominant hegemony, which objective is the formation of a collective will and the establishment of a new worldview. Gramsci claims that consensus is created in a cultural manner, that is, through cultural organizations and tools, as schools and churches, but also books. Thus, the dominant hegemony enforces its way of thinking, controlling the subordinate groups, through the intellectuals. In fact, Gramsci identifies a ‘modern’ type of intellectuals, named the organic intellectuals. According to the politician the organic intellectuals are somehow ‘tools’ of the dominant hegemony, used to give a certain congruity and consciousness of its political, social and economic role. Furthermore, Gramsci suggests a new duty to the contemporary intellectuals: they should be organizers and creators, merging their practice with a dimension more real and political.

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<sup>1</sup> Here, for political, I intend the very meaning of “politics” as from the greek *politiké* - which is “the art which belongs to the *polis*, meant as collectivity.

Also in the contemporary age, several researchers are interested in effects more tangible and practical for the human beings as “social animals”<sup>2</sup>. As Delia Vekony reports in an essay published in *Seismopolite*, “What good are the arts?” (2015), the neuroscientist Tamás Freud discovered that the artistic and creative experience, stimulating our perceptive complexity, allows humans’ capacity to take complex decisions in other contexts of our life. Also François Matarasso in *Use or Ornament?* (1997) analysed the social impact that art practices could have in our life, through case studies and questionnaires of people involved in artistic projects, concluding that art is able to socially empower human beings.

This brief premise is to highlight the fact that culture, but specifically art, is something that goes further than the sensitive perception. Thus, my research is related more to a dimension, which comprehends politics, the domain of the social and ethics. Particularly, my main interest is to show how artists, with their work, allow the realization of counter-hegemonic practices, challenging the normal order of things and how their artistic practices enable the beholder to perceive her/his weight in the contemporary society in a manner which is effective and not elitist. My research supports the idea that an effective model is the one developed in an agonistic context, a concept postulated by Chantal Mouffe, who in *Agonistics: thinking the world politically* (2013), identifies the agonistic approach as an efficient counter-hegemonic practice, which acts also through the artistic domain.

This research is included in the frame of Culture Studies not only due to the theory in which it is based but also because art, in this case contemporary art, is part of our different cultural practices, coming from our background, our countries, our political, social and folkloristic experiences that are inhabiting the world we live in, representing its bigger energy. Art, as a media to express feelings, thoughts and experiences, is capable to show what is happening around our familiar territory bringing our thoughts outside the box, and it could hypothesize, due to its creative aspect, a series of possible solutions and alternatives of the social systems already discovered. Furthermore, it is not possible to disembodiment the bond between the artist (and his/her production), from her/his cultural, social and political background, which will always be somehow present in his work, hence

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle defined the human being as a social animal in his work *Politics* (V B.C.). With this definition, the philosopher meant that humans tend naturally to unite with each other and, consequently, to create a society.

revealed to the beholder. Briefly, art is not just an expression of culture or a part of it. Recalling Herbert Read and his book *The Meaning of Art* (1931), art is a language which is universal, because it communicates straight to our senses and, quoting Andrei Tarkovsky: “Art is a meta-language, with the help of which people try to communicate with one another; to impart information about themselves and assimilate the experience of others” (Tarkovsky: 1986, 40). Art is a language to share ideas, anxieties, emotions, feelings, hence, to solve problems. As we observed before through Gramsci, culture, thus art, became a tool, implementing the dominant hegemony, helped by the intellectuals, the artists. But at the same time, culture and its agents – in the case of this dissertation, art and the artists – can also challenge and question the dominant system, stimulating us to think about different possibilities. Moreover, as it will be further analysed through the dissertation, today we are living within a system impregnated with the bio-power, which is highly implemented through a system of symbols which are acting on our identitarian culture and that are aimed at maintaining the hegemony of a certain ruling class and its market logic. Finally, we will see that art, as culture, is able to act as a sort of identity creator, helping to establish a precise idea of a certain social group.

In order to broach the subject, I decided to divide the dissertation in two parts. The first, is theoretical and the second, is a critical analysis of three artistic practices which can be read as agonistic and counter-hegemonic practices. This choice is due to the fact that Mouffe’s agonistic approach is the result of the studies around ethics, politics, sociology and art, in addition to the observation of the society of our times. Thus, I felt the need to start my reflection from far, to increasingly get close to the main concept. In fact, the first chapter illustrates in what aspects art could improve social empowerment. The second chapter considers recent models of participatory art and the new artistic tendencies, questioning their ethical and aesthetical relevance. Finally, the third chapter is entirely dedicated to the Agonistic Approach and its analysis. Chapters four, five and six, composing the second part, are focused on three artists who developed, through their artistic career, forms of counter-hegemonic practices: Joseph Beuys, Paweł Althamer and Tania Bruguera.

The first chapter considers the concept of ethics of the particular, as it was ideated by the philosopher Alain Badiou in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001), that is

the concept about the impossibility of a universal ethics, because it has to be based upon the contingencies related to a certain situation, which always differs from the others because of the subjects implied. It will then be analysed why a work of art or an artistic project should consider the ethics of the particular, to conclude that art involves what is happening in a specific moment, in a specific contingency, hence it cannot cleave from politics. Therefore, it is consequently mentioned the theory of the philosopher Jacques Rancière, who claims that art and politics are both acting within the System of the Sensible, as forms of dissensus, deducing that art and politics are both playing a fundamental role: make visible the invisible. It is important, at this point, to highlight the connection between civil action and artistic civil action, which are both based on the concept of civil chain, developed by Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster in the essay *The Civil Potency of a Singular Experience* (2017), considering also the idea of artistic citizenship, postulated by David J. Elliott, Marissa Silverman and Wayne D. Bowman, intended as the commitment, of the artists, to engage in practices which are supporting a certain well being shared by a community.

So how art behaved in the last 15 years? And how was – from an ethical point of view – valued? What it has created? The second chapter tries to answer to these questions, analysing the concept of Relational Aesthetics by Nicholas Bourriaud, and continues through Claire Bishop's critique and the elaboration of the concept of participatory artistic practices and the ethics related to it, developed by her. Bourriaud evidences the recent tendencies in contemporary art, defining it as a "state of encounter", while according to Bishop, the artistic practices mentioned by the curator are limited to reflect the current economic model, based on the experience market. In the second chapter it is approached the concept of today's "ethical turn", thanks to which participatory art practices are somehow forced to be socially successful, thus appreciated exclusively according to their social effectiveness, regardless the ethics of the particular and provoking its entrance into the capitalistic logic. Contemporary art practices should trigger the spectator, scandalize, agitate, and do not be a tool in the hands of the dominant hegemony to maintain its control, as it is analysed through the examples of Santiago Sierra and Jeremy Deller.

In the third chapter, it is perceived that the theories mentioned in the first two chapters flow into Mouffe's thought. In fact, it seems that the professor and researcher considers all these concepts – metaphorically and not, because some of them were developed after she published *Agonistics*, in 2013<sup>3</sup> – to postulate the agonistic approach regarding today's counter-hegemonic practices. Mouffe describes how every society results from the expression of specific power relations that are intrinsically bound to an antagonistic context, which denies the opportunity of a perfectly reconciled and harmonious coexistence. She proposes to succumb to the antagonism turning it into agonism, which is a chase between adversaries among whom there is a sort of consensus. This type of confrontation is able to stimulate discussion and possible alternatives, which according to Mouffe, is the very condition of a “vibrant democracy”, where the hegemonies are not, and not trying to be, superior to each other. Other concepts will be analysed in this chapter, such as the biopower<sup>4</sup>, which should be challenged acting towards a withdrawal from institutions (as suggested by Hardt and Negri, 2000) and then provide a process of re-articulation (as proposed by Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006), aiming briefly to re-articulate a given situation in a new configuration. Concluding that the concept of agonism suggests that the only way to fight the system is through the system itself, challenging it and remodelling it, and this is the terrain where art could intervene. Even if today it has been incorporated by the aesthetic of biopolitical capitalism, which is nourished, and nourishing, by a system of symbols, which are helping the enforcement the dominant hegemony, art could also have the possibility to weaken this imaginary used by capitalism to reproduce itself. Art is capable to make us acknowledge new possibilities and to subvert the existing configuration of power providing a re-articulation, as it will be observed through the examples of Alfredo Jaar's *Skoghall Konsthall* (2000) and Palle Nielsen's *Model* (1968).

Finally, as already mentioned, the second part is composed by the analysis of three artists which developed their artistic practice in an agonistic perspective, focusing on one work for each one of them. It was crucial to mention Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986) not only because he was a pioneer in terms of linking art and society focusing on mankind and

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<sup>3</sup> As for example, the concept of artistic citizenship was ideated in 2016, and the book *The Art of Civil Action* was published in 2017.

<sup>4</sup> In biopower “mechanism of command became immanent within the social field. The modes of social integration and exclusion are increasingly interiorized through mechanism that directly organize the brains and bodies of the citizens” (Mouffe, 2013: 67).

developing a discourse, which reached the domain of politics and ecology. The artist is analysed starting from the beginning of his career, and approaching his ideas about conceiving art as a stimulus, which initiate a heat movement, meant as the energy intrinsic of the human being. Instead of imposing his own vision, Beuys tried to open space for dialogue, through direct participation, as it is contemplated with *7000 Eichen – Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung*, the work analysed in this chapter. In 1982, on the occasion of the eighth edition of documenta, the artist proposed to plant 7000 oak trees, coupled with a basalt stele, with the participation of the citizens of Kassel. With this project, Beuys wanted to give to the citizens the chance to act, to take responsibility through experience, and he wanted the trees to become an inspirational image for the future generations, symbolizing the power of creativity in transforming the world we are living in.

The reflection about the second artist, Paweł Althamer (1967), starts with an observation about Poland's transition from a communist country to a liberal one, event that deeply influenced his practice. In fact Althamer, whose practice tries to trigger the beholder differently than Beuys: evidences the invisibles, such as the people at the margins of the society, through the analysis of the reality. Thus his practice has a double function: those 'witnessing' this analysis of the reality, as the spectators of a museum, are faced with what is usually removed from our sight. On the other hand, for the outcasts, the main characters of Althamer's projects, the fact of being included represent the possibility of being visible, firstly to themselves. For this reason Althamer's work analysed in this chapter is *Bródno 2000 (2000)*: a spectacular action, happened in Bródno, where the inhabitants of a block of flats, coordinated by the artist, turned on (or off) the lights in order to form the number 2000 on the façade. Thence, the artist enlightened for one night, literally but mostly metaphorically, one of Warsaw's most disgraceful neighbourhood.

The third artist, Tania Bruguera (1968), creates an aesthetic based on utility. Since her work is profoundly related, or better, impregnated with the history of her country, Cuba, the chapter begins with a brief historical background of Castro's regime. The discourse around Bruguera's practice, which reflects around issues of power and control, through the devices normally implied by the biopower, concludes with the concept of *Arte de*

*Conducta*, behaviour art, ideated by the artist herself. Finally, Bruguera's work analysed in the third chapter goes beyond the limits of the domain of aesthetics. In fact, *Arte Útil*, which is actually more a concept than a 'real' art-work, means useful art, aims to create beneficial and tangible results and turning the spectators into citizens. Thus, it is considered how Bruguera invented a new aesthetic canon which is based on utility.

These three artists were chosen as case studies because they embody the accomplishment of agonistic counter-hegemonic practices, and they relate to the concepts presented in the theoretical backbone of the dissertation. Beuys's practice is based on the idea of stimulus and process, implemented through participation, both considered as tools to create a dialogue, a confrontation, which is defined by Chantal Mouffe, as one of the fundamental requirement to realize a "vibrant democracy". Althamer's work, in showing the simple reality, which is usually obscured in what Rancière defines as the System of the Sensible, shocks the spectator. Most importantly, Althamer's practice shows the reality as it is, in an agonistic manner, that is avoiding to be superior to the beholder. Tania Bruguera, in acting against, but through, the biopower, is perhaps one of the most representative artists of the agonistic practices, since she acts, with her works, in contrast to the dominant system but, simultaneously, through it. With the project of *Arte Útil*, Bruguera aims to establish a new typology of aesthetics, resulting in, on one hand, an erasure of the hierarchy artist-audience, and on the other hand she tears art from the logic of today's market, which is based on mere experience.

This dissertation focuses on artists and typologies of artistic process, which are more participative, both as a result and as a practice *per se*. This is the consequence of my personal interest, but also because I thought it was necessary to somehow circumscribe the space of my research, since a Master dissertation does not leave enough space to deepen the subject in a more complex way. Furthermore, the majority of the theoretical material included in the development of the first part of this dissertation, was postulated in a western context, which might be seen as fragility in this work. This choice is because this is the geographical area where my studies and my life experience is located, but it is required to evidence that the theories deepened in the theoretical backbone would be different if we were to analyse practices in different cultural and geographical contexts. It

is important to acknowledge that this subject of research – art and politics - is not exclusive of the Western context and there seems to exist a tremendous amount of research to be done in acknowledging this but also in enlightening and in giving voice to those practices and theories. This came to my attention along the research path and even though I still think it's relevant and necessary to speak from and about the West, it is also urgent to speak of / about and within other realities, and contexts. This will probably form the next step of my career as a researcher and as a practitioner. I believe that such a conclusion is the main achievement of this dissertation since it sets a path for future research.

# 1. Ethics, Politics and Contemporary Art

## 1.1 Ethics of the Particular

There are several reasons that made the word *ethics* crucial to the reflection developed in this dissertation. It could have been considered also the word *moral*, which in contemporary times seems to be much more commonly used. But even if today these two words have become synonyms, the difference between them is fundamental to start the discourse which will then be evolved throughout the chapters<sup>5</sup>.

Firstly, it is important to mention the influence in this dissertation of the book, edited by Walead Beshty, titled *Ethics* (2015) and, in particular, its introduction written by the same artist and writer. According to Beshty, the concept of morals and the one of ethics are representing two antipodes, since they seem to be completely opposite: “while moral criteria are always external to the circumstances to which they are applied, the ethical is immanent to the site of its deployment” (Beshty, 2015: 19). Therefore ethics, in referring to the particular, is also more focused on the individual. Beshty’s distinction between ethics and morals is based on Alain Badiou’s reflexions formulated in his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001). The thoughts of the French philosopher are related to the concept of agonism associated to the arts developed in the third chapter of this dissertation<sup>6</sup>. In the cited essay, as Peter Hallward points out in the introduction, the aim of Badiou’s reflections is to provide evidence for the innovative aspects present in every situation (cf. Hallward in Badiou, 2001).

In order to reach the concept of ethics, the French philosopher analyses the one of truth. Alain Badiou claims that human actions could be identified in two types: the ones related to consolidate identities and those, extraordinarily, innovative. The second ones belong to

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<sup>5</sup>“Generally, the terms ethics and morality are used interchangeably, although a few different communities (academic, legal, or religious, for example) will occasionally make a distinction (...) Ethicists today, however, use the terms interchangeably. If they do want to differentiate morality from ethics, the onus is on the ethicist to state the definitions of both terms. Ultimately, the distinction between the two is as substantial as a line drawn in the sand” (Grannan, Cydney, “What’s the Difference Between Morality and Ethics?”, *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/story/whats-the-difference-between-morality-and-ethics>, accessed 3 January 2019)

<sup>6</sup>The concept of agonism related to the arts above mentioned, is developed by Chantal Mouffe in her book *Agonistics* (2013).

the sphere of truth, which can be reached with a double-sided process consisting in “fixing the domination of the state over the situation and in evading this domination” (Badiou, 2001: ix).

“A truth is innovation *en acte*, singular in its location and occasion, but universal in its 'address' and import. Inaccessible to the classifications of the state, the truth comes to pass as a universal-singular, particular to but unlimited by the contents of the situation in which it comes to exist” (Badiou, 2001: ix).

Consequently, truth is not just something related to the situation, but it is also a dimension, which combines the individual with the collective. Its achieving process starts with a rupture in a situation, defined by the French philosopher as an event, towards which the subject maintains his/her fidelity. In this equation, ethics is the oil, which keeps the engine, which is the fidelity, active against the corruption of the evil. However, for the reflection of this dissertation it is particularly important to consider Badiou’s concept of ethics, focused on the situation, as he states:

“The concept of situation is especially important, since I maintain that there can be no ethics in general, but only an ethic of singular truths, and thus an ethic relative to a particular situation” (Badiou, 2001: ivi)

This idea of ethics is a result of the observations, as evidenced in the introduction of Ethics, about the evolution of the term ethics itself, from its Greek origin to the third millennium. Originally conceived as the pursuit of the good, in particular the good human behaviour, ethics evolved as the set of rules judging the practice of a collective/individual subject. Then Hegel, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, anticipating and consequently inspiring Badiou, made a distinction between ethics and morals. According to the German philosopher, ethics in fact concerns the domain of the immediate, contrary to a reflexive action, linked with morality. The term continued its evolution, referring to a sort of series of universal laws and ways of behaving that every human being should follow, without considering the singularity of the subject.

Badiou evidences the number of pretentious situations where the word ethics is adopted, which meaning now defines a principle that

“governs how we relate to 'what is going on', a vague way of regulating our

commentary on historical situations (the ethics of human rights), technico-scientific situations (medical ethics, bio-ethics), 'social' situations (the ethics of being-together), media situations (the ethics of communication), and so on.” (Badiou, 2001: 3).

Ethics today is still used in a universal manner, but as Badiou continuously points out through his book, a universal subject does not exist. In keeping with the philosopher, even the consideration of ethics as a good way of being against evil is erroneous, since the latter could not be considered as a universal concept: regarding evil as something negative *a priori* means denying another time the singularity of the situations. Hence again, he rejects the previous concepts of ethics and expresses how particular situations and singular processes should be at the core of the concept, evidencing the impossibility of a generalization of the term because of the very nature of man which is linked to the possibilities of the single situation.

Alain Badiou refuses today's denotation of the concept of ethics focused on the Other, since for him this is a reflection of a sort of do-goodism which is an end to itself. The Other nowadays, as stated by the French philosopher, is recognized and approved just if its differences are seen as acceptable, as a sort of new good form of colonialism<sup>7</sup>. The acceptance of the Other, seen as the coexistence of different truths, takes place only if the diversities are not considered under the same ethics.

Alain Badiou illustrates how a universal ethics does not exist, but several ethics do, as much as there is not a universal subject but as many subjects as truths. It is the process of truth which influences the diverse subjects and they all coexist, but they do not constitute an *unicum*.

“The very idea of a consensual 'ethics', stemming from the general feeling provoked by the sight of atrocities, which replaces the 'old ideological divisions', is a powerful contributor to subjective resignation and acceptance of the status quo (...) a truth, in its invention, is the only thing that is far so it can actually be achieved only against dominant opinions, since these always work for the benefit of some rather than all” (Badiou, 2001: 32)

This small paragraph explains the choice of the term ethics, based on Beshty and Badiou's considerations, in particular for the importance that both of the theorists give to the dimension of the contingency:

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<sup>7</sup> For further study on this issue: “The Location of Culture” (1994) by Homi K. Bhabha (Routledge Classics).

“A turn to ethics is a turn to the affirmative question of art, not art as a negation, allegory or critique, but the description of an art that operates directly upon the world is situated in.” (Beshty, 2015: 19)

Contemporary art should be based on the Ethics of the particular, which is, meant and analysed critically through the context that contemporary art (objects and projects) are positioned in. When judging, creating, or collaborating in an artistic practice or project, it is crucially important to consider what surrounds it, the particularity within which it is located. As Walter Benjamin, quoted by Beshty in *Ethics* (2015) states: “...the rigid isolated object (work, novel, book) is of no use whatsoever. It must be inserted into the context of living social relations...” (Benjamin in Beshty, 2015: 18). Art is inevitably a reflection resulting from the situation in which the artist is situated and the stimulus surrounding him/her. Furthermore, Claire Bishop whose ideas will be examined in the next chapter, claims the importance of the context, hence the particular situation, in judging an artwork<sup>8</sup>. The practice of the artists studied in the second part of this dissertation, and their artistic projects, are all grounded in a certain ethics of the particular, the *milieu*, modelled for a social group: as Joseph Beuys and his *7000 Eichen* (1982 – 1987) for the city of Kassel, which has been completely destroyed in the World War II, thence rebuilt; *Brodno 2000* (2000) by Pawel Althamer, made possible through the cooperation of the inhabitants of the Polish neighbourhood; and Tania Bruguera, who, in creating *Arte Útil* (2013 – ongoing), established a platform for new forms and uses of art improving existing communities, and even creating new ones.

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<sup>8</sup> In *Artificial Hells* (2012), Claire Bishop evidences that today art and especially art critique, moved towards a “social-turn”, that is shortly, art which is valued because of their non-artistic features and their ethical attitude based on a westernized and Christianised idea of ethics, hence not considering the particular situation.

## 1.2 Art and Politics: distributing the sensible

“Without political engagement, art ceases to be contemporary because being contemporary means being involved in the politics of one’s own time.” (Groys, 2017)

Art and Politics: these two words (and worlds) have been, especially in recent years, constantly and intensively echoed close to each other and with several meanings, from the political power of the arts and art used for political purposes, to artistic activism and artivism, or simply to show how politics influence the world within which we are living. One need only think about the latest editions of documenta, one of the most important exhibitions of contemporary art worldwide which began in 1995 and happens every five years in Kassel, Germany. *Collapse and Recovery*, the title of the thirteen edition of documenta, under the artistic direction of Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, wanted to suggest a ‘recovery’ from a panorama of destruction and war, with the help of the Art and it included a parallel exhibition in Kabul, Afghanistan. Documenta14 was directed by Adam Szymczyk and for the first time took place in two locations: Kassel, from the 10<sup>th</sup> of June till the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 2017, and Athens, from the 8<sup>th</sup> of April till the 16<sup>th</sup> of July 2017. *Learning from Athens* – its title - was focused on the present political unstable situation, emphasising the tension between the Northern and the Southern parts of the world, and how this might be reflected in the contemporary artistic production. Further examples include the newest Turner Prize<sup>9</sup> nominees: Forensic Architecture, Naeem Mohaiemen, Charlotte Prodger and Luke Willis Thompson. The London-based research agency Forensic Architecture (founded in 2010) is composed by an interdisciplinary team of researchers, artists, scholars and scientists, whose production goes from publications to exhibitions. It presents analysis and researches mainly about human rights violations and questions issues of power in the contemporary art society, providing the public with a critical reflection of our society. Naeem Mohaiem (1969) is a Bangladeshi-English artist who in his production (mainly composed by videos and installations) analyses the consequences of the processes of decolonization, questioning collective memory and the idea of nationality and contemporary culture. The third nominee for the Turner Prize is the English artist Charlotte Prodger (1974), whose recent practice is focused on moving images. Her work, often consisting of personal archival material, examine queerness,

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<sup>9</sup> The Turner Prize is a prize awarded to a contemporary British or Britain-based artist every year by the TATE institution.

identity, the body and the tensions between those elements. Finally, Luke Willis Thompson (1988) is a New Zealander artist who uses different media and forms and whose research goes deeply into matters of violence, in particular the one perpetrated by the police and the sources of institutional power, inequalities and migration. As we can deduce, these artists are raising issues of power, domain, post colonialism and gender expressing, through their artistic practice, the human struggles in the post-capitalist era and revealing the flaws in this system.

In *Burden of proof: contemporary art and responsibility*, an article published in *Artforum*, Tom Holert reflects about art and information systems which have always been linked with political power<sup>10</sup>. In a time where inaccurate political information is spreading, and fake news<sup>11</sup> is growing, according to the author, while the public journalist (and media in general) continues to decline, a new opportunity has emerged for artists to inhabit the position of provider of information and truth (cf. Holert, 2013). The same idea is shared by the film-director Joshua Oppenheimer, as he stated in a talk with Olafur Eliasson, at Heartland Festival in 2017: “(artists should) expose that which people are too afraid to talk about but no (...) we can no longer remain silent”<sup>12</sup>. The importance of the political role of the arts is also expressed by Pascal Gielen and Philipp Dietachmair, who in the introduction to *The Art of Civil Action* points out that cultural artistic institutions (including galleries, museums, non-profit organizations, artist run based spaces and biennials) have become the only places of authentic political discussion and the artists have become its real promoters (cf. Gielen and Dietachmair, 2017). In *Aesthetics and the Political Turn in Art*, Czekaj claims that political art, even if today seems to be prevalent, was not invented in recent times, but “it has always been there – but one might mind the fact that today it manifests its politicalness using devices that are sometimes difficult to recognize as

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<sup>10</sup>One needs only to think about the censorship of information, such as the one implemented by the two opposite blocs during the Cold War; the manipulation of information by the Salazarist regime; or Silvio Berlusconi, whose media empire has been a springboard for his political career (Curran, James, *Media and Democracy*, 2011).

<sup>11</sup>Fake news are false reports spread in order to reinforce political opinion and generate consensus (Casati, Davide and Pennisi, Martina (2017, December 1) “Cosa sono le fake news e perché ne parlano tutti: una guida essenziale”, *Corriere della Sera*. Retrieved from: [https://www.corriere.it/tecnologia/17\\_novembre\\_27/cosa-sono-fake-news-perche-ne-parlano-tutti-guida-essenziale-definitiva-326c94f4-d37a-11e7-8de2-d9fed093f9f2.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/tecnologia/17_novembre_27/cosa-sono-fake-news-perche-ne-parlano-tutti-guida-essenziale-definitiva-326c94f4-d37a-11e7-8de2-d9fed093f9f2.shtml), (accessed January 1, 2019)

<sup>12</sup>Heartland Festival (2017, June 20) *Olafur Eliasson & Joshua Oppenheimer talks On Art and Responsibility at Heartland Festival 2017*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OZcTuywxNE&t=152s> (accessed January 2, 2019)

artistic” (Czekaj, 2015: 83). Recalling also the quoted lines by Boris Groys at the beginning of this subchapter, art is by nature political, because it inevitably reflects the conditions surrounding the artist and the politics of his time, but today the aesthetic canons have changed (or rather, are modelled on the contemporary times) as well as the political aesthetical representation (cf. Groys, 2017). Therefore, one can conclude that there is an inner bond between art and politics.

Furthermore, in *The Distribution of the sensible*, Jacques Rancière evidences how art and politics are distributing what humans perceive with their senses. In this regard, they are operating in the system of the Distribution of the Sensible, which Rancière describes as,

“The system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have part in this distribution” (2004: 12)

The Distribution of the Sensible is then the system which divides human perception, and art and politics are both acting within it, as forms of dissensus, a concept that will be briefly analysed afterwards. In *Social Systems* (1984), Niklas Luhmann states that art is a specific form of communication which, instead of a language, uses perceptions to communicate. Rancière’s concepts might give further light into this idea in relation to art as he expands the domain of perceptions to politics. The French author claims that both the specificity of arts and politics resides in ‘their contingent suspension of the rules governing normal experience’ (Corcoran in Rancière, 2010: 1), they operate in changing the principles through which human actions are routinely regulated and then acting a *re*-distribution of the sensible. The system of the distribution of the sensible is based on the location of the idea of the proper (which constitutes what the French philosopher defines as consensus) and the one of the improper (the dissensus). Consensus is then defining hierarchically the distribution of the ones within the system according to his/her proper place and function, whilst dissensus questions the dictatorship of the proper, showing its impropriety and discomposing its identity.

What Rancière does in *Ten Theses on Politics*, the first chapter of his book *Dissensus*

(2010), is to overturn the meaning of politics:

“Politics is not the exercise of power. Politics ought to be defined in its own terms as a specific mode of action that is enacted by a specific subject and that has its own proper rationality” (Rancière, 2010: 27)

The French philosopher continues emphasizing that Aristotle in *Politics* (IV B.C.), when defining a citizen as the subject of politics, describes him/her as the partaker in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled, evidencing the very specificity of politics: to take part in the possibilities and contingencies of the Distribution of the Sensible. He elaborates further with a third thesis:

“Politics is a specific break with the logic of the *arkhê*. It does not simply presuppose a break with the ‘normal’ distribution of positions that defines who exercises power and who is subject to it. It also requires a break with the idea that there exist dispositions ‘specific’ to these positions.” (Rancière, 2010: 30)

Rancière opposes the meanings of politics and police, being the latter also a division of the sensible, but it acts not through repression or control, but maintaining the consensus, the proper. The police does so because it is a symbolic constitution of the social, its principle being “the absence of void and supplement” (Rancière, 2010: 36), that is giving a role and function to every part of the system of the Distribution of the Sensible, without leaving any gap. This gap is fundamental to define politics which, according to the philosopher, has the objective of showing and making visible the dissensus, consisting in “not a confrontation between interests or opinions” but “the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself” (Rancière, 2010: 38).

And what has art to do with all of this? What does art have in common with politics, what do they share? Rancière’s thought is extremely innovative in this regard. The effectiveness of art is not in the counter model, counter device it proposes, or its potential hidden message. Art is effective because it divides the space, the time and the location of the subject. In short:

“It creates new modes of individuality and new connections between those modes, new forms of perception of the given and new plots of temporality. Similar to political action, it effectuates a change in the distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2010: 141).

Rancière talks about a commingling between art and politics, which results in an “aesthetics of politics”, defined as:

“the framing of a *we*, a subject, a collective demonstration whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts, an element that I call the part of those who have no part (...). In this way, it aids to help create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed.” (Rancière, 2010: 142)

Therefore, the change in the system of the “Distribution of the Sensible” that arts and politics are able to trigger does not consist in an interchange of the power relations among groups already existing in the system, but introduces new modes, new relations of power, challenging radically the normal social distribution. What Rancière seems to convey is that both art and politics have the ability to dismantle the dominating forms of power.

An example of how art could introduce new modes and challenges to the normal social distribution is the project *Across The Border* (2010 – ongoing) by the Italian artist Filippo Minelli (1983), recently exhibited in Palazzo Ajutamicristo (Palermo) for *manifesta12*<sup>13</sup>.



Fig. 1 Filippo Minelli (1983, Brescia, Italy), *The Border* (2010 – ongoing), Mixed media, variable dimensions, photograph by the author.

<sup>13</sup> *manifesta* is a well-known biennial of contemporary art in Europe. Founded in 1996, it is characterized by its nomadism – it changes location every two years – hence by its “desire to explore the psychological and geographical territory of Europe, referring both to border-lines and concepts” (“*manifesta12*”, *manifesta* Retrieved from <https://manifesta.org/biennials/about-the-biennials/> (accessed January 5, 2019).

(Fig. 1) Filippo Minelli (1983, Brescia, Italy), *The Border* (2010 – ongoing), Mixed media, variable dimensions, photograph by the author.

The aim of the project is to question the flag as an object, the identity symbol *par excellence*, on one hand evidencing its representative limits and on the other hand showing that it could also become an object, which has the power to connect, but also divide people from different communities. The artist commissioned 30 flags to the same amount of people, performers and others, who are living in different countries (Mongolia, Bosnia, Turkey, among others). They are connected because all countries are witnessing phenomena of migrations and all were met by the artist during his travels. The content of the flags is both personal and related to another place in the world which, according to its maker, shares a sort of similitude with his own country. With this project, Filippo Minelli dismantles the very inner symbolic function of the flag which instead of defining a single nation and its population, isolates it from the others, possibly using them as a tool, connecting different peoples who are apparently incompatible.

### 1.3 Civil Artistic Actions and Citizenship

Art and politics seem to be bounded at their core, in dividing the sensible space, and in being both forms of what Rancière defines as dissensus. It could be said that civil actions and civil artistic actions operate similarly and have a similar degree of effectiveness. The compendium *The Art of Civil Action* (2017), by Pascal Gielen and Philipp Dietachmair, present an additional layer to the discussion, as it highlights important notions comparatively between civil artistic actions and non-artistic ones.

The introduction to the compendium claims that culture is nothing but a signification process, which determines what surrounds the human beings, allied to what Jacques Rancière identifies as the artistic expression as a medium for this meaning-process. Following up on this idea, culture can be said to be a process acting in the distribution of the sensible, and the civil action starts from assigning (or attempting to assign) new codes so it is as well a process of signification. Consequently, since they both realize a re-signification, “artistic expressions (...) are effective tools for developing an emotional and deeper understanding of civil concerns” (Dietachmair, Gielen; 2017: 13).

The authors identify a common feature in the artistic action and the civil one that is their inner creativity. In the second paragraph of the introduction they evidence the fact that the civil space lies between creativity and criminality:

“In the grey area between what is allowed and not, or not yet allowed, civilians initiate that which a government or state has not yet thought of and for which there are no interested markets (...). Civil actions simply concern non-regulated domains, areas not covered by law (...) is then up to public opinion to judge the claim or action on its legal, but also its moral and ethical merits” (Dietachmair, Gielen; 2017: 14).

In order to understand this statement, it is important to clarify the distinction between the terms civic and civil made by the authors. Gielen and Dietachmair determine civic as the exercises organized and established by the state or a governmental entity. As such, the civic is already determined, meaningful, while the civil has still no rules, it is an open space, dynamic, “where positions still have to be taken up or created” (Dietachmair, Gielen; 2017: 15). The authors propose a further division between civil space and public space, which could actually be considered more as consequentiality since they are inextricably bound together. The public space is a free space, where there is an exchange

both of people and of thoughts and ideas, which in order to be effective they need to be organized and structured: at this point comes into play the civil space.

“Public space provides, as it were, both new ideas and new people (new citizens) but they can only claim and obtain their place in society through self-organization in the civil domain (...). The interaction between both constitutes the famous *praxis*, where the action is suited to the word but also where actions can and may be put into words.” (Dietachmair, Gielen; 2017: 17-18).

It is in this moment of intersection, particularly between word and action that art intervenes. The process, *praxis*, is further analysed in the first chapter of the compendium, in particular regarding cultural organizations. These could, however, be generally applied to artistic activities. In *The Civil Potency of a Singular Experience*, Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster locate a process at the base of the civil action, named civil chain. The fuse that triggers the civil chain is an emotion, usually a negative one, which is provoked by the contingencies surrounding the individual/s. The initial emotion, in order to enter the civil sphere, has to be organized, as previously mentioned, but also, it has to be de-privatized (cf. Gielen and Lijster in Dietachmair, Gielen, 2017), it has to move from a private dimension to a shared one: from the individual to the collectivity.

“this succession of processes – which we call the civil chain – looks like this: (1) emotion – (2) (self-) rationalization – (3) communication – (4) de-privatization (or going public) and, finally, (5) self-organization.” (Gielen and Lijster in Dietachmair, Gielen, 2017: 42)

According to the authors, a cultural organization is located at the end of this chain<sup>14</sup>, but this could be extended to any artistic process. An activity which involves art is indeed an attempt to organize an emotion and transpose it in a public, visible dimension.

Bearing in mind Rancière’s thought, art, as the political acts in the system of the division of the sensible and, in shaping it art makes the matters visible. Furthermore, as stated also in the second paragraph of the chapter, art, through its inner capacity of re-signification, is able to transform a negative emotion into a positive one and has the potential to create and raise new organizational and communicative configurations, challenging the existing ones:

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<sup>14</sup>In this regard, it is important to mention, as a possible further study, the New Institutionalism (1990 – 2010 circa), which defines a current of museum administrative processes (hence comprising also curatorship and education) aimed to rethink and redesign the role of the contemporary art institutions and of its activity, conceiving them as a social project. Further reading: Ekeberg, Jonas (ed.) (2003), *Verksted #1 : New Institutionalism*, Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art Norway.

“culture and cultural organizations also provide the signs and the imagination to think of and shape a transnational civil space” (Gielen and Lijster in Dietachmair, Gielen, 2017: 46).

Summing up, artistic civil actions are even more powerful than other type of civil actions. As it has been already pointed out, artistic actions are able to convert a negative emotion into a positive one and they could provide new configurations, or, recalling Rancière, new ways of distributing the sensible. In the subchapter “The Art of Mirroring”, Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster also point out the mimetic capacity of artistic actions in public spaces and the fact that being involved in or participating in an artistic action means also to have a certain experience, which is something that has an extremely strong power:

“Experience is not just a kind of entertainment in a non-casual way. Experience is about responsibility. Having an experience is taking part in the world. Taking part in the world is really about sharing responsibility. So art, in that sense, I think holds an incredible relevance in the world in which we're moving into, particularly right now” (Eliasson, TED2009)<sup>15</sup>

As pointed out by Olafur Eliasson, artistic (civil) actions contain an incredible strength, which is indeed based on experience. In his talk, Eliasson continues evidencing that “art and culture (...) have proven that one can create a kind of a space which is both sensitive to individuality and to collectivity.” (Eliasson, TED2009). In fact, it has been mentioned above that in order to be effective, an artistic (civil) action has to move from a preliminary private dimension to one shared by the collectivity, by the citizens belonging to a certain community, country or reality. This argument brings us to the concept of artistic citizenship, developed by David J. Elliott, Marissa Silverman and Wayne D. Bowman in the homonymous book, from 2016, intended as the commitment to engage in artistic practices, which are supporting a certain well-being shared by a community.

In order to explain this concept, the editors evidence the emergence of artistic practices much before the appearance of the so-called artworks as objects. Taking as example the art forms of music and dance, which promoted group cohesion and behaviour as a survival necessity because “humans need to live in groups where individuality and competition are

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<sup>15</sup>TED, “Olafur Eliasson: Playing with space and light” (2009, February). Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/olafur\\_eliasson\\_playing\\_with\\_space\\_and\\_light](https://www.ted.com/talks/olafur_eliasson_playing_with_space_and_light) (accessed January 1, 2019).

balanced with cooperation” (Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 4), the three authors point out three fundamental assumptions from which they start the discussion about artistic citizenship. Firstly, they indicate that “arts are made by and for people” since artistic practices consist of interpersonal engagements between human beings and that “artistic actions and interactions are fundamental to the creation of our individual and collective human identities” (Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 5). Hence, since artists are human beings, living in a world filled with contingencies, the arts resulting from them will inevitably concretize those contingencies surrounding them. So

“Artistic endeavours involve a special kind of citizenship – civic responsibility to conceive of and engage in them with a view to the particular social “goods” they embody or nurture. The arts are rich human actions replete with human significance and, by extension, ethical responsibilities” (Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 5).<sup>16</sup>

Bowman, Elliott and Silverman refer to John Dewey, who in *Art as Experience* stated the unreasonableness of separating art from the everyday life. Briefly, the pedagogue claimed that the arts should be for the common people, instead of standing on a pedestal and being addressed limitedly to those belonging to, and working with, the art system. Because of their capacity of making somehow a sort of social difference, they should not be separated from the quotidian because in this case they will be nullified (cf. Dewey, 1934).

Finally, their third assumption is linked to ethics, but unlike Badiou<sup>17</sup> who, as indicated in the first subchapter, focuses more on its dimension of the particular, the three editors channel the concept with the one of praxis. Praxis is a term already mentioned in the subchapter about the differences between civil actions and artistic civil actions. Similar to Philipp Dietachmair and Pascal Gielen, who meant praxis as the interaction between public and civil space “where the action is suited to the word but also where actions can and may be put into words” (Dietachmair, Gielen, 2017: 18), the three authors identify praxis as an action dedicated to “personal and collective flourishing” considering the circumstances surrounding it. Hence, recalling the previous assumptions, that evidenced how arts are

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<sup>16</sup>I would use the word civic responsibility, recalling its definition by Pascal Gielen and Philipp Dietachmair in *The Art of Civil Action* (2017) mentioned before.

<sup>17</sup>In *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001), Alain Badiou claims that contingency and the particularity of the situation should be at the basis of the concept of ethics. According to him, universal ethics does not exist, but several ethics since there is not a universal subject but as many subjects as truths.

intrinsically social practices, they should “be viewed, studied, and practiced as forms of ethically guided citizenship” (Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 5).

With the term citizenship, Bowman, Elliott and Silverman identify the concept of artistic citizenship as their belief

“that artistry involves civic-social-humanistic-emancipatory responsibilities, obligations to engage in art making that advances social “goods” (...) artistic citizens are committed to engaging in artistic actions in ways that can bring people together, enhance communal well-being, and contribute substantially to human thriving. (Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 7)

The idea of the communal well-being, may clash with the ethics of the particularity claimed by Alain Badiou<sup>18</sup>, but it is not the aim of this research to focus on this aspect, but on the participative and relational characteristics of the concept of the Artistic Citizenship, as “artistic actions in ways that can bring people together” (Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 7).

In the essay *Art and Citizenship*, included in *Artistic Citizenship*, David Wiles stresses on the convivial/interconnected dimension of arts and democracy in Plato’s republic:

“Democracy meant far more than voting together; it also meant fighting together and dancing together, two closely linked activities that involved surrendering one’s individual body to a common rhythm.” (Wiles in Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 24)

Broadly speaking, it could be said that Plato suggests that a society is harmonious and balanced if embracing a certain rhythm, or rather, is extremely bonded to a certain rhythmical harmony. In this case, as Wiles points out, a good political man is nothing more than a good choreographer, recalling Rancière’s system of distributing the sensible<sup>19</sup>.

In his essay, Wiles continues, drawing on the history of art, broadly culture, and social policies. He reports the words of Polybios<sup>20</sup> who in his *Histories* (II B.C.) wrote about his

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<sup>18</sup>Please, see the first subchapter for Alain Badiou’s thoughts analysis.

<sup>19</sup>Please, see the second subchapter for Rancière’s thought analysis.

<sup>20</sup>Polybios was a greek historian, who was probably born in 210 B.C., in Megalopolis. In his work *The Histories* he covers more than 50 years, in which he narrates how the Romans subjected the world known to their dominance.

hometown, Megalopolis, and the importance of dancing for its inhabitants, the Arcadians. In Megalopolis there was a culture of participation and the arts were used as a form of social cohesion (cf. Wiles in Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016). Hence, Wiles illustrates the fact that, according to the Arcadians, and to Polybius, culture is a humanizing force, theory which will also inspire Voltaire during the Age of Enlightenment. While in Megalopolis there was a culture of participation, in Athens, in the Attica Region, due to the staging of the tragedies, it was emerging a culture of spectatorship. As a matter of fact, because of the amount of population living in the region, a much bigger number than the Arcadians from Megalopolis, not all the inhabitants could join the chorus. On the other hand, a considerable audience could have attended each performance. Furthermore, to a tragedy the citizens could take part both as spectators and as actors, since the piece could be replicated once someone would buy the script.

Even if Plato suggested that a society is harmonious and balanced when embracing a certain rhythm, his view about the actors extremely differs. According to him, and then to the Romans, the actors were unable to be good citizens. In Rome and in all of the Empire, citizenship was linked more with the idea of property than with the one of democracy. The arts were considered mere leisure (mostly to keep the citizens quiet) and the actors were seen as nothing more than impersonations of vices, sins and bad habits. Wiles evidences that we need to wait until Diderot, one of the most important exponents of the Enlightenment, who finally re-establishes some ethics/citizenship, claiming that actors have actually the opportunity to inspire a better world. More than one hundred years later, Brecht would make use of Diderot's words: in the time of the raising of Fascism and Nazism, he writes a piece in dialogue with the participants and "engages them not just as recipients of the work of art, and of the playwright's message, but as fellow makers of the script, fully engaged in the problem that the play confronts" (Wiles in Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 33).

For Brecht, performance is not mere contemplation, and it has no ideal of beauty, but of usefulness. His words could reflect the attitude towards the rise of the authoritarian movements, or rather the unresponsiveness, without mentioning the Nazi position on

culture, seen as mere propaganda, and the *Bücherverbrennungen*<sup>21</sup>. In front of the rise of the authoritarian regimes that were deadly injuring the liberties of the human beings and the processes of civilization, annihilating populations, the exiled playwright sees in culture a last chance, a hopeful light.

In summary, in Ancient Greece, a democratic regime, art was practiced, hence conceived, as communitarian and participative, and as a tool producing human cohesion, while in Rome, where the concept of citizenship was bound with the one of propriety, art was considered a mere leisure. Then, during the Age of Enlightenment, art has been re-evaluated as an inspiration, because of the trust in humans' capacities and in the technological development. Finally, recalling Brecht, during the rise of the authoritarian regimes, which produced a sort of annihilation of the European population because of the brutal lack of human rights, art was seen as a chance, as something useful and a way to progress towards a democratic turn. Hence Wiles concludes that the concept of art is determined and shaped by the idea of citizenship that each human being has.

Wayne D. Bowman, in his essay in the same book, *Artistry, Ethics and Citizenship*, briefly tries to illustrate the concept of citizenship. What is commonly defined as a citizen usually is a member of a political community, who because of it, enjoys certain rights and is expected to perform certain duties. Citizenship “seeks to strike a balance between individual freedom and the presumed needs of the social collective” (Bowman in Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 61). It is the meeting point between the individual and the collective. According to Bowman, the concept of citizenship comprehends three dimensions; the legal one, which concerns rights (individual) and duties (collective), a political one, involving citizens' personal engagement in the society. And a third dimension, related to the capacity that the idea of citizenship has in being somehow an ‘Identity Creator’, in producing and/or defining an identity by demarcation, developing a shared sense of belonging between the members of a certain community (the citizens). Hence,

“citizenship helps in the process of social integration, and designating the right and freedom of a certain community (...) it designates something shared by all who are

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<sup>21</sup>Series of fires lighted on by the Nazis in 1933, in order to burn the books “not suitable” for the regime.

legitimately considered members of a collectivity, a common identity where difference might otherwise prevail” (Bowman in Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 63).

Starting with the romans, mentioned a few lines before, citizenship had to do with the concept of nationality for an extremely long period of time. Nowadays, with the advent of globalization and the tapering of the cultural borders, citizenship is highly bound with what Bowman defines as “the right of difference”. Because of the range of the “us” that got extended, we can speak of several citizenships coexisting together<sup>22</sup>. This very last thought is the pivotal point in Chantal Mouffe’s reflection in *Agonistic* (2013), who claims that in the contemporary world, there are several hegemonies living together, which could coexist not in harmony, but in an agonistic form<sup>23</sup>.

As already discussed through this chapter, in a social collectivist it is fundamental, for its survival, that its parts think collectively, caring about the community instead of caring just about one’s personal interest. Then one might ask where to locate artistic citizenship? A question that might be answered as follows:

“The full and free development of one’s human potential requires the fulfilment of important obligations to one’s community, culture, or society. One’s basic human rights can be exercised only in a community that acknowledges and is committed to honouring and sustaining them (...). We might well argue, then, that defending and protecting others’ rights and freedoms are crucial responsibilities for artistic citizens: that artistic citizenship necessarily entails a relation of stewardship toward the social values and practices that make artistry possible” (Bowman in Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 65)

The authors emphasize the necessity of perceiving art as a tool to design liberties but also in affecting the developing process of the “habits, values, knowledge and skills relevant to people’s membership in communities” (Bowman in Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 66). In other words, art could be a device to create and promote a shared identity culture,

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<sup>22</sup> In this regard, an interesting theory is Gayatri Spivak’s idea of Planetarity as a substitution to the one of globalisation. In *Death of a Discipline* (2003) she proposes “the planet to overwrite the globe” (Spivak, 2003: 72), since according to her, the latter is something virtual and abstract, “an imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere” (Spivak, 2003: 72). On the contrary, for the Indian scholar the planet is something concrete and tangible and “if we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than normal agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us (...) we must persistently educate ourselves into this peculiar mindset” (Spivak, 2003: 73).

<sup>23</sup> Mouffe’s agonistic approach will be further analysed in the third chapter of the first part of the dissertation.

which makes a citizen a member of a certain community but also the right to difference mentioned before.

It could be then said that art has a great power both to affect social good and to subvert it, hence artistic citizenship involves “both remarkable privilege and tremendous responsibility (...) artistic citizens are stewards of individual rights and freedom on one hand, and agents of civic education on the other” (Bowman in Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 66).

## 2. Relational Aesthetics and Participation

### 2.1 Relational Aesthetics

In the previous chapter, it has been analysed, particularly through the study of the 2017's essay *Art and Citizenship* by David Wiles, that the concept of art can be determined by the one of citizenship, which is a meeting point between individuality and collectivity<sup>24</sup>. This concept is claimed also by Olafur Eliasson, who, as quoted before<sup>25</sup>, describes artistic practices as something sensible both to individuality and to collectivity<sup>26</sup>, hence permeated by a fundamental relational dimension.

In 1998, in his *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicholas Bourriaud, analysing the artistic production of the 1990s, evidences how the artistic dimension is a “state of encounter”, highlighting the relational aspect of the artistic practices of that decade. Bourriaud claims how, since then, many artists' practices consist of producing experiences, or better, relations rather than aesthetically pleasing objects / artworks as we know them. He quotes several names from the international artistic panorama, such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Maurizio Cattelan and Rirkrit Tiravanija, evidencing how today (meaning then, in the late 1990s), “the liveliest factor that is played out on the chessboard of art has to do with interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts” (Bourriaud, 2002: 2). He notices that the human relations today are drowned and reified, symbolized by goods and logos and the “social bond has turned into a standardised artefact” (Bourriaud, 2002: 2). This is fundamental for those who govern the diverse societies because in this way human relations are carried out through repeatable and controllable formulas. However, to this monitored and standardized system, the artistic practices seem to socially experiment new dimensions.

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<sup>24</sup> Please see paragraph 1.3 of this dissertation.

<sup>25</sup> Please see paragraph 1.3 of this dissertation.

<sup>26</sup> TED, “Olafur Eliasson: Playing with space and light” (2009, February). Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/olafur\\_eliasson\\_playing\\_with\\_space\\_and\\_light](https://www.ted.com/talks/olafur_eliasson_playing_with_space_and_light) (accessed January 1, 2019).



Fig. 2 Rirkrit Tiravanija (1961, Buenos Aires), *Untitled (Tomorrow is Another Day)* (1997), Installation view at Kölnischer Kunstverein, Courtesy of neugerriemschneider, Berlin.

For instance, in 1997, Rirkrit Tiravanija (1961), Thai Argentinian-born artist, created a plywood copy of his New York Apartment for the exhibition at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne, titled *Untitled (Tomorrow is Another Day)*. The visitors could enter the artwork, a house, which was accessible 24/7, and use the bathroom, the kitchen or simply walk around as if it was an ordinary flat, open to everybody. Initially, the public was extremely embarrassed when entering this new, discomfiting, dimension where art and daily life were combined together, but they would eventually unwind and enjoy the fundamental convivial aspect of the artwork (cf. Bois, Buchloh, Foster, Joselit and Krauss 2016). A further example is *Untitled (Public Opinion)* (1991), one of the famous candy-pieces by the Cuban artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957 – 1996). The artwork, consisting in a large number of bullet-shaped liquorice candies, displayed as a carpet disposed on a corner, reflects the conservative political climate of those years (Gulf War, AIDS crisis, censorship) in the United States. The bullet-shaped, silvery black, candies form a black mass “which takes on a funeral quality and even brings to mind an oil spill.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Gonzalez-Torres defined an ideal weight for this artwork: 700lb, a number which reminds to the weight of a small group of people “perhaps the foundation for a family, a platoon, a mob, or an electorate (...) with the work’s subtitle, this brings to mind fundamental tensions between free expression and nationalism”. But the most characteristic peculiarity

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<sup>27</sup>Trotman, Nat, (2017, August 10), “How a Sculpture by Felix Gonzalez-Torres Traveled around New York”, *Guggenheim*. Retrieved from <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/how-a-sculpture-by-felix-gonzalez-torres-traveled-around-new-york> (accessed January 2, 2019)

of *Untitled (Public Opinion)* is the fact that, as in all the candy-pieces by Gonzalez-Torres, the visitors are allowed to take one or more candies with them, so again, as in Tiravanija's work, the key and the strength of the artwork is its relational aspect, the action it asks from the audience. Both artists move the point of balance of their artworks from a unilateral connection work-spectator, to a multilateral connection among all the visitors/viewers. As pointed out in *Arte dal 1900* (2016), many so-called relational artists, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, developed such connective structures through acts of hospitality, in which an artist predisposes situations without trying to occupy the scene with his own person or with objects that he produces (Bois, Buchloh, Foster, Joselit, Krauss, 2016: 806). The objective of these artists is the one of "creating open scenarios" where the others could enter, hence provoking social acts that are also aesthetical (Bois, Buchloh, Foster, Joselit, Krauss, 2016: 860). In this way the artists try to enter into the human existence, engaging in a direct relationship and making it part of the artwork itself.



Fig. 3 Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957, Guáimaro), *Untitled (Public Opinion)* (1991), installation (Black rod liquorice candies individually wrapped in cellophane, endless supply, ideal weight: 700 lbs), variable dimension, courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

According to Bourriaud, artistic practices are not immutable since they evolve according to the social contexts surrounding them. Hence, he claims that this relational turn is relevant today and a result of the time we are living since the last decade. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Berlin wall, the world witnessed an intensification of the trades between countries, business relations, hence an increasing free movement of people and goods. Moreover, the creation of new technologies, both in communication and in transportation, thinned the distances between nations and cultures (cf. Bourriaud, 2002 and Bois, Buchloh, Foster, Joselit, Krauss, 2016). Briefly, the future and the possibility of future elaborated by the artistic avant-gardes of the first half of the 20th century is still happening today. Bourriaud states that while before art had the “announcing function of the upcoming World”, today it has the role of elaborating new models of possible universes (Bourriaud, 2002: 4). He insists that art tries to inhabit the World in a better way, without creating imaginary utopias, “but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real” instead (Bourriaud, 2002: 5). Furthermore, he defines this new possibility of artistic practices as ‘relational’, which instead of defining an autonomous and private space, has the perspective of penetrating the sphere of human relation within their social context. Art is therefore a tool, which opens towards unlimited discussion.

Actually, the relational has always been an intrinsic feature of art, meaning that it was always a factor of social participation and triggering possible dialogues and exchanges, concurring then with Bowman, Elliott and Silverman who, in *Artistic Citizenship*, claimed that art is made by people and for people, because artistic practices consist of interpersonal engagements between human beings<sup>28</sup>.

“(Art) tightens the space of relations, unlike TV and literature which refer each individual person to his or her space of private consumption, and also unlike theatre and cinema which bring small groups together before specific, unmistakable images (...) At an exhibition, on the other hand, even when inert forms are involved, there is the possibility of an immediate discussion, in both senses of the term. I see and perceive. I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time” (Bourriaud, 2002: 15-16).

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<sup>28</sup> In this regard, it will be outlined and analysed in the second part of the dissertation, the concept of “Social Sculpture” postulated by the artist Joseph Beuys in the 70’s. According to Beuys, creativity is an inner, anthropological, substance of the human being (cf. De Domizio Durini, Lucrezia, *Joseph Beuys, L’immagine dell’Umanità*, 2001), hence everyone could potentially be an artist as well as every feature existing in life could be undertaken in a creative manner. Thence according to the artist, life is a social sculpture, because every person has the possibility to model and shape it.

For a better comprehension and credibility, Bourriaud re-evaluates the artwork within the economical dimension, to conclude defining the artistic product as a “social interstice” (Bourriaud, 2002: 6). The curator borrows the term “interstice” from Marx, who identifies with this term the trading communities that are avoiding the capitalistic terrain by being erased from the profit law. This space on one hand is part of the global system, while on the other hand it proposes new trading opportunities than those already existing within the system itself<sup>29</sup>. Contemporary relational art works in the same way, creating structures which differ from the ones belonging to the everyday life and stimulating an “inter-human commerce that differs from the communication zones that are imposed upon us” (Bourriaud, 2002: 4).

Furthermore, in focusing on the ‘relational part’ of the artistic practices, Bourriaud evidences how art could be a tool, aiding to succumb to the reduction of the interpersonal relationship which is typical of our historical moment, marked on one hand by the thinning of the distances between different countries and cultures, and on the other hand a strong individualism and nationalism. It is important to remember that, according to Bourriaud, the definition of art as ‘state of encounter’ should not be limitedly understood as creator of a place of discussion. It is not about two human beings meeting in an art gallery and debating about a painting. He claims that the ‘forms’ are created through the congregation of two elements that were previously separated, which, through their meeting in an (art)work, are creating new “possibilities of life” (Bourriaud, 2002: 8). Hence art is able to “keep together moments of subjectivity associated with singular experiences” (Bourriaud, 1998: 8), and in doing so it creates new models of vital worlds.

Art can then be seen as essentially a state of encounter between several layers: artist – artist, spectator – spectator and artist – spectator, and of course, everything surrounded by the context where the performance/artwork/project is located and of which it is inevitably impregnated. The artists, and case studies, approached in the second part, are all creating a

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<sup>29</sup>“This interstice term was used by Karl Marx to describe trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit: barter, merchandising autarkic types of production, etc. The interstice is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities that those in effect within this system” (Bourriaud, 2002: 4).

space of encounter through their practice, creating aesthetic relations within different social communities.

## 2. 2 Relational Antagonism

In the fall of 2004, for October, an academic journal published by the MIT press, Claire Bishop, art historian and professor at The City University of New York, published an essay titled *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, in which she criticizes Bourriaud's theory as well as the concept around the inception and mission of Palais de Tokyo, founded by the curator in Paris.

She firstly points out that institutions as the aforementioned Palais de Tokyo in Paris, or the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, are defining themselves as

““laboratories”, “construction site”, and “art factory” to differentiate themselves from bureaucracy-encumbered collection-based museums; their dedicated project spaces create a buzz of creativity and the aura of being at the vanguard of contemporary production” (Bishop, 2004: 52)

In using these (to her) pretentious names, these institutions seem to be apparently free from the mere commercialization, and according to Bishop, are actually entering the world of the spectacle, of the experience economy. Hence, the institution makes the artworks a show, which tarnishes the artist while celebrates and glorifies the curator with an unclear benefit towards the spectator: “what the viewer is supposed to garner from such an ‘experience’ of creativity, which is essentially institutionalized studio activity, is often unclear” (Bishop, 2004: 52). She evidences that Nicholas Bourriaud and other curators adopted this curatorial methodology as a reverberation from the artistic practices produced in the 1990s, which are constantly changing: “rather than the interpretations of a work of art being open to continual reassessment, the work of art itself is argued to be in perpetual flux” (Bishop, 2004: 52). Claire Bishop claims that this idea is problematic because it damages the identity of the artwork itself.

Bishop is critical towards some of the practices by the artists mentioned by Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* such as Rirkrit Tiravanija. Claire Bishop recognizes the artist's critical approach in order to erode the distinction between the institutional space and the social one, as well as the relationship between the artist and the audience. Even though Bishop is aware that his practice is a reaction and a criticism towards the economic model

of globalization, to her, Tiravanija's work is limited to reproduce this system, without deeply questioning it. Furthermore, Bishop points out that the artist is one of "the most established, influential, and omnipresent figures on the international art circuit" (Bishop, 2004: 58), a circuit which is accessible to a limited number of people, an intellectual elite, implying that Tiravanija is actually part of a system that he wants to somehow criticize.

Claire Bishop acknowledges that Bourriaud observed and reported a leading artistic tendency in the (then) recent years, but the concept of the artwork viewed as an activator of participation is something already seen in the past, such as in the Happenings in the '60s<sup>30</sup> and in Joseph Beuys practices<sup>31</sup>, among others. She recalls Umberto Eco, who in *Opera Aperta* stated that every artwork is open because it produces unlimited possible readings (cf. Eco, 1962). Bourriaud employs this concept into a specific dimension of artistic practices, the relational ones, those requiring a factual interaction, hence focusing the attention on the activity of the artist instead of what is perceived by the viewer/participant. Furthermore, Eco claims that art reflects the fragmented conditions of the modern culture, while Bourriaud writes that the artists have the ability to produce conditions and solutions "to inhabit the world better" (Bourriaud, 2002: 5). Hence, according to the curator, relational artworks should not be evaluated just aesthetically, but also in a political and ethical manner, according to the relations that they are able to produce. On this very subject Bishop is particularly sceptical, asking herself how is it be possible to judge the quality of the interpersonal relations produced.

What is extremely pertinent to the aims of this dissertation is the reflection that Bishop does in criticizing Bourriaud's approach using Laclau and Mouffe's concept of antagonism, which is the forerunner concept proceeding the agonistic approach elaborated by Chantal Mouffe and deeply analysed in the following chapter. Bishop's reflection could also be considered a premise for her further research that will result in the essay *The Social Turn* (2006) and in the book *Artificial Hells* (2012). In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau claim that a democratic society, in

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<sup>30</sup> The happenings were mentioned for the first time by Allan Kaprow in his work/performance *18 happenings in 6 parts* (1959), and are one of the first examples of participatory art. They consist in an artistic practice, which mix several techniques, and involve improvisation and the participation of the public. In the happenings the focus is not on the created artwork, but in the creative process.

<sup>31</sup> Recalling Beuys' most famous statement: "Jeder Mensch ein Künstler" (Every man is an artist), through which the artist intends art as a fundamental feature of human beings, to socially and politically develop.

order to be considered as such, should be continuously stimulated with debates, discussions and conflicts,

“one in which new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate (...) without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order—a total suppression of debate and discussion, which is inimical to democracy” (Bishop, 2004: 66).

This approach is Laclau, Mouffe and Bishop’s analysis on the concept of democracy, an attempt at answering to what it really is and interpreting it as a system continuously stimulated to diversities. Hence, Bishop states that the relations created through the works defined by Bourriaud as – to her - relational aesthetics are not democratic, since they are not able to provoke a discussion, a debate, or better they do not do it in an antagonistic manner:

“There is debate and dialogue in a Tiravanija cooking piece, to be sure, but there is no inherent friction since the situation is what Bourriaud calls “microtopian”: it produces a community whose members identify with each other, because they have something in common” (Bishop, 2004: 67).

Bishop continues her argument displaying the practice and the works by the controversial Spanish artist Santiago Sierra (1966). The artist analyses the power structures in our social system, challenging the limits of its mechanism, often showing how much they influence people to push beyond their limits. As for example, in order to realize the performance *250 cm Line Tattooed on Paid People* (1999), Sierra recruited six unemployed Cuban men for 30\$, in exchange for being tattooed on their back, in Espacio Aglutinador in Havana. What the artist is doing in this case is on the one hand to expose what a human being could do, especially those particularly disadvantaged, for money. On the other hand, Santiago Sierra, by symbolically tattooing those young men, is turning them to social guerrilleros against the capitalistic system.



Fig. 4 Santiago Sierra (1966, Madrid), 250 cm Line Tattooed on Paid People (1999), performance in Espacio Aglutinador, Habana, Cuba, courtesy of the artist.

In Sierra's works - as in other artists taken into account by Bishop, the relations produced are characterized by anxiety and discomfort. His practice declares the impossibility of a utopia, denouncing our social system, creating a certain tension among the performers, the beholders and also the context within the performance is located (cf. Bishop, 2004). In this case, unlike with the work of Tiravanija, the sense of discomfort is not provoked by the subversion of the role artist-spectator or by the blurred borders of the art institution. Uneasiness is given because the audience is asked to confront with controversial issues, to engage in a discussion, to think: "the viewer is no longer required to participate literally, but is asked only to be a thoughtful and reflective visitor" (Bishop, 2004: 70).

This approach, relational antagonism, represents Rancière's concept of dissensus analysed in the first chapter, since, unlike relational aesthetics (which in Rancière's dimension could be interpreted as the police), it does not maintain the proper, but it confronts with the gaps in the system of the sensible. Rancière evidences that police is a division of the sensible which acts maintaining the Consensus, based on filling all the gaps in the system of the sensible, giving a role to every part composing it. Art, as politics, are both forms of dissensus, which take action in demonstrating the gap of the sensible itself (cf. Rancière, 2010).

“This relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony. It would thereby provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other”. (Bishop, 2004: 79)

As mentioned before, in this critical essay by Claire Bishop there are premises for her next essay - *The Social Turn* (2006) – in which she will evolve her reflections on artistic practices in a more ethical point of view, recalling Badiou’s ethics of the particular. The concept of Antagonism introduced in this chapter will be deeply analysed as the agonistic approach is a key point of the reflection of this dissertation<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> As theorized by Chantal Mouffe in *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically* (2013).

### 2.3 Ethics of Participation

Claire Bishop's critique of Nicholas Bourriaud's idea of relational aesthetics, highlights that this concept evidenced the artists' growing interest towards projects engaging social groups and states that art nowadays is having what she has coined as a 'social turn':

“These practices are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity – whether in the form of working with pre-existing communities or establishing one's own interdisciplinary network (...). Although the objectives and output of these various artists and groups vary enormously, all are linked by a belief in the empowering creativity of collective action and shared ideas” (Bishop, 2006: 179)

These words are written by Claire Bishop in *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*, an article published in *Artforum*, in February 2006, which she subsequently develops, converging in 2012, in the book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* as the first chapter.

According to Bishop these artistic practices, which she will eventually name as participatory practices are constituting the today avant-garde, “artists using social situations to produce dematerialized, anti-market, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life” (Bishop, 2006b: 179). However, most importantly she points out the general perception of this participatory movement by several art critics and theoreticians such as Grant H. Kester<sup>33</sup>, who focus more on an ethical judgement, stating that these particular practices are able to reactivate the apathetic capitalist society in which we currently reside. Even though Claire Bishop agrees with Kester's opinion, she specifies that the ethical judgment made the participatory artistic projects as something forced to succeed in any social achievement, thus appreciated limitedly according to their social effectiveness. Bishop is particularly critical about the fact that, when evaluating participatory practices, the social results/consequences are more acknowledged, compared to the artistic quality. The art historian claims that due to this social turn in contemporary art, art criticism also experienced an ethical turn. This means that the focus of attention of the critics has shifted to the way a certain collaboration, or artistic practice, is ethically

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<sup>33</sup>Professor and researcher of the University of California in San Diego, author of *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), where he analysed community and socially engaged art.

implemented. These artistic practices would be considered worthy just if the collaboration would be a good model and criticized if they would not be able to represent perfectly the subjects involved (cf. Bishop, 2006b).

According to Bishop, this ethical turn in art criticism is wrong because it is fully based on a Christian, Westernized concept of the ethical, which consists of banal clichés and where the artist has to abdicate his authority on the artwork, so to give the audience/participants the chance to be the artwork itself, the tool for the social change.

“The best art manages to (...) not surrender itself to exemplary (but relatively ineffectual) gestures. The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address this contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work and in the conditions of its reception. It is to this art—however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing it may first appear—that we must turn for an alternative to the well-intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on social collaboration. These homilies unwittingly push us toward a Platonic regime in which art is valued for its truthfulness and educational efficacy rather than for inviting us (...) to confront darker, more painfully complicated considerations of our predicament.” (Bishop, 2006b: 183)

As aforementioned, in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), Bishop develops the discourse she had started in *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents* (2006), defining the participative projects as participatory art, “since this connotes the involvement of many people (as opposed to the one-to-one relationship of ‘interactivity’) and avoids the ambiguities of ‘social engagement’, which might refer to a wide range of work, from engagé painting to interventionist actions in mass media” (Bishop, 2012: 1). While in the 2006 article, Bishop was writing about a social turn, in *Artificial Hells* she prefers to refer to this tendency as a return of the social. In fact, Bishop locates recurring participatory practices, developing an historical reflection around three poles, 1917 – 1968 – 1989, corresponding to three moments where art has been redesigned, reconsidered and rethought with regards to its connection with the political and the social sphere.

The return of the social in the contemporary era aroused from the need to counter-act the

incorporation of the former artistic language into the *Société du Spectacle*<sup>34</sup>. The past conception, and communication, of an artwork – that is the creation of a certain (art)work consumed passively by a spectator, has been completely absorbed by the market system, hence, in the most recent artistic practices, this led to a counterbalance consisting of persistent references to communities and collectives. Bishop evidences that in some cases the ‘return to the social’ broke the artistic boundaries, entering the political sphere, as the New Labour<sup>35</sup> in England.

Briefly, the New Labour policy favoured art and creativity, elaborating an approach encouraging investments in art and emphasizing its benefit for the society as something socially inclusive which would also contribute to the growth of the employment and the reduction of the criminality. Essentially the New Labour remodelled the arts and their production according to a political logic. Nevertheless, Bishop points out that actually the New Labour definition/interpretation of the word participation was referring to a certain conformation of the society as to erase the disturbing elements within the society itself. The art historian states that social participation was perceived, hence implemented, by the New Labour policy as beneficial because it would help the citizens in accepting the responsibility of taking care of themselves, without the aid of the state whose public services were lacking in functionality. Social participation generates citizens that are passive and accommodating, unaware of their conditions and accepting of them. Therefore, the New Labourist program of social inclusion was nothing but a political tool so that the civilians would manage themselves autonomously, “fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatised world” (Bishop, 2012: 14). Social participation was an attempt to make citizens take charge of themselves and assume responsibility of what was previously responsibility of the state.

More European countries, where creativity seems to have become the main ingredient of a successful economic recipe, share the New Labour attitude. Such as the example of the city of Lisbon, where new creative hubs and co-working spaces spring up every day, next to

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<sup>34</sup> This term is used in the homonymous essay by Guy Debord (1967) in order to define the contemporary society, which is based on mystifying and deceitful images fostering the capitalist system.

<sup>35</sup> The New Labour (1994 – 2007, with Tony Blair and then until 2010 with Gordon Brown) refers to a period of transformation of the English Labour Party, historically leftist, towards a sort of centrism.

contemporary art galleries and design shops<sup>36</sup>. However, the subtle and confused border between creative and cultural industry, art and entertainment drives everything to a financial issue. As Bishop highlights, artists' lives have become a useful model for freelancers and those with precarious jobs based on the flexibility of the worker, hence this confusion causes inevitably an instrumentalisation of the art. She claims that through the discourse of creativity, art, which before was perceived as something elitist, has been democratized. This artistic democratization brought the creative realm to fully enter in the capitalist market logic, even if artistic practices have the chance, as we mentioned in the previous paragraphs, to face and negate society, antagonistically and the discourse of creativity nullifies this power, reducing art to a “unified context and instrumentalises for more efficacious profiteering” (Bishop, 2012: 16).

Nowadays, several artists and curators in evaluating an artwork use as criteria demonstrable results and with verifiable social impacts, exactly as the New Labour policies. According to Bishop this has its origins in the evolution of the term and the conception of aesthetic, particularly in the academic world, which draws “attention to the way in which the aesthetic masks inequalities, oppressions and exclusions (of race, gender, class, and so on) (...). The result is that aesthetics became synonymous with the market and conservative cultural hierarchy” (Bishop, 2012: 17-18). The orientation towards the social element in the artistic projects, disadvantaging the aesthetic one, leads to a critical understanding of contemporary art as something which must have aims that should be tangible, since these are even more important than the artistic experiences themselves. Fundamentally, these projects are considered valuable, because of their non-artistic features and their ethical attitude, as nowadays “art enters a realm of useful, ameliorative and ultimately modest gestures, rather than the creation of singular acts that leave behind them a troubling wake” (Bishop 2012: 23).

As already observed in the first chapter and recalling Alain Badiou's denial of the existence of a universal ethics, the dilemma lies in the choice of which ethics is appropriate

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<sup>36</sup> One need only think of some recent enthusiastic article titles: “Lisbon's thriving creative economy” by Palet, Laura (2014), in OZY, retrieved from <https://www.ozy.com/fast-forward/lisbons-thriving-creative-economy/3340> and “The new Berlin? How austerity helped Lisbon's creatives to succeed” by Mackay, Mairi (2017), in CNN Style, retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/lisbon-cultural-scene/index.html> (both accessed January 4, 2019)

considering a work of art. Claire Bishop illustrates this issue in the last chapter of her *Artificial Hells*, where she highlights that usually the norms used to evaluate an artistic project, in particular a participatory one, are based on a western and humanist ethical narrative. Moreover, these principles, influenced by the Christian moral beliefs, are not taking into account the particularity of the ethics itself, as analysed by Badiou<sup>37</sup>. Recalling Jacques Rancière, as well already mentioned in the first chapter, Claire Bishop evidences that this compliance to an ethical judgment (which is de facto based on a western perspective) is bringing artistic, as well as political, dissensus to collapse, transforming it into new forms of consensual order. According to Rancière, art (as politics) is acting within the Distribution of the Sensible, which is the system regulating the human perception, as a form of dissensus. That is, art questions the idea of the proper, changing the principles through which human actions are routinely regulated. Hence, if using western ethical criteria, which became part of the marketing system itself, in the evaluation process of an artwork, the dissentive force is nullified.

“because the undecidability of aesthetic experience implies a questioning of how the world is organised, and therefore the possibility of changing or redistributing that same world (...) For Rancière, the ethical turn does not, strictly speaking, denote the submission of art and politics to moral judgements, but rather the collapse of artistic and political dissensus in new forms of consensual order.” (Bishop 2012: 28)

Bishop reports an emblematic artistic project as an example of how the participatory artistic practices could be ‘effective’ both in an ethical perspective and in an aesthetical one. In 1984, in the town of Orgreave, England, occurred a clash between the police and the striking miners. It was one of the worst events during Thatcher’s government, which led to the arrest of 95 miners and it was disastrous for the areas where the work in the mines was the only source of income. However, what is even worse is that the media, hence the public opinion, were supporting Thatcher’s policy, so the miners had been portrayed as entirely responsible for the clashes. The 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2001, the artist Jeremy Deller<sup>38</sup>, brought together in the Southern Yorkshire town, former miners, local residents and few historical re-enactment companies in order to perform again the events of 1984,

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<sup>37</sup>Alain Badiou illustrates how a universal ethics does not exist, but several ethics do, as much as there is not a universal subject but as many subjects as truths. It is the process of truth which influence the diverse subjects and they all coexist, but they do not constitute an *unicum* (Paragraph 1.1).

<sup>38</sup>Jeremy Deller (London, 1969) is an artist who works with several media (such as video and installation). His works, often questioning the cultural identity of his home country, have a powerful political perspective.

*The Battle of Orgreave*. Deller's project included the performance itself, a film which is documenting it by Mike Figgis<sup>39</sup>, a publication<sup>40</sup> and an archive<sup>41</sup>. As Bishop reports, several critics evidenced how Deller's project was evocating a bitter event, but the circumstances of the re-enactment was a reminder of a village party, "between menacing violence and family entertainment" (Bishop, 2012: 32), so it is extremely hard to bring Deller's work to a single message and/or to a single 'concrete result'.

We could reassume by illustrating the several layers embraced by the British artist. The encounter between the middle class (the actors) and the working class (the miners) constitutes one of the layers, which lead to another one, is the achievement of a sort of political awareness by the actors. Then, the artists created somehow a simultaneous dialogue between social and art history, which in this case is coordinated by mainstream media (as Figgis' shooting, but also the art magazines that would eventually write about Deller's work). Furthermore, Deller designed a certain counter-narrative to the dominant one, which comes from the "history from below" and through the act of naming it as a "Battle", instead of one of the several clashes between the miners and the police, gives the past deadly event a sort of legitimacy. Finally, with *The Battle of Orgreave*, Deller aims to be part of the "writing" of a universal history of the oppression, in a completely different way than the "usual leftist narrative", in placing side by side workers, miners and the middle class.

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<sup>39</sup> *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001.

<sup>40</sup> *The English Civil War Part II: Personal Accounts of the 1984-85 Miner's Strike*, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> *The Battle of Orgreave Archive (An Injury to One is an Injury to All)*, 2004.



Fig. 5 Jeremy Deller (London, 1969), *Battle of Orgreave* (2001), performance, photographed by Martin Jenkinson.

As pointed out by Bishop, there exists multiple opinions about Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* and on the role of the artist in this project as well as its ethical/unethical results. According to the author of *Artificial Hells* this evidences the completeness of the work itself. She claims that, opposing the trend of socially engaged artistic projects, Deller instigates, acting as an orchestra director, without suppressing himself or his authorship, "his authorial role is a trigger for (rather than the final word on) an event that would otherwise have no existence" (Bishop, 2012: 36).

The artist – as – a – trigger mentioned in the lines above will be a key concept to analyse the three case studies in the second part of the dissertation, in which the artists, or better, his/her practice, has the triggering function to stimulate the bystander/participant/spectator, through a social practice which is also an aesthetic practice bound to the ethics of the particular.

## **2.4 A brief reflection on the spectator: from passive viewer to emancipated participant**

In this subchapter, I wish to briefly reflect on the figure of the spectator, particularly in a context of a dominant hegemony, who could be defined as a constantly evolving character over the last century, from being a passive subject to even becoming an agent of the work of art itself.

In 1967, Guy Debord, in his celebrated book *La Société du Spectacle* (The Society of the Spectacle), claims that the contemporary society is a set of spectacles, thus what before used to be lived, has become a mere representation. Debord's spectacle acts similarly to the Rancierian police mentioned in the first chapter. According to Debord, the vision of the world has been objectified: "Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society's unreality" (Debord, 1992: 8). The spectacle is in such a state because the society is now a society made out of information, propaganda and consumerism and it is controlled by the categories of vision. In this context, according to Debord, everyone is a spectator, since the spectacle is widespread, and all the spectators are alienated, due to the fact that they are living in a mere contemplation of the object, the society. They willingly accept to recognize themselves with the dominant images, erasing their real and true desires. Briefly, under this viewpoint the spectator is passive, even if he/she believes to be active, and somehow he/she is, but in the spectacular regime. For example: the worker, during his free-time is supposed to accomplish his own existence, his own desires. But actually, what the worker has in this time is not a 'liberty', or rather, it is a some form of freedom inscribed in the society of the spectacle; Debord states that in the contemporary society people became passive spectators of flowing images, designed and chosen by the power hegemony and that are replacing the dimension of the real. The society of the spectacle produces alienation, where, spectators/, and our desires, are guided and organized by the consumerist society. This radical act is capable of estranging us from the judgment and understanding of our true needs, similar to the Rancierian police, which hides the truth in the "System of the Sensible". Also Maria Lind in the essay *Why Mediate Art?* (2013) evidences, analysing MOMA's policy of cultural mediation in the 1930s, that the art system entered in the consumerist one, and the spectator is identified as an

“educated consumer”, visitors were considered “tastemakers who were expected to become responsible members of the emerging society of consumption” (Lind in Hoffmann, 2013: 110-11).

Yet Rancière does find flaws in that ideology as he disagrees and critiques Debord’s idea of a society composed by passive and powerless spectators. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1987), he denies the didactic classical conviction of the undeniable existence of a relation teacher-student as the-one-who-knows vs the-one-who-does-not-know. While with *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), he goes further in his theory, applying the previous concept to spectatorship, in this case in a sense which is more related to the arts. Rancière’s approach, claims that the concept of passive spectator is similar to the one of the ignorant student presented in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. In fact, according to Rancière, Debord is just implementing the discourse about the opposite dichotomy ignorant public vs intelligent cultural elite. Rancière explains that the concept of emancipation allows to overcome the dichotomy previously mentioned, modifying the hierarchies and acknowledging the possible power of the spectator:

“Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting (...) it begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets (...). They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered them” (Rancière in Rancière, 2009: 13)

In João Pedro Cachopo’s *How does the spectator act. Benjamin and Rancière on the task of the spectator-translator* (2013), the spectator translates the spectacle in the language of his everyday life, because according to Rancière, “an emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators” (Rancière, 2009: 22). Thus, the spectator observes and appropriates, applying what he/she sees in her/his everyday life. Therefore, the activity of the artist is extremely important, since it could influence and stimulate the beholder.

In the previous subchapters it has been observed that today we are witnessing a sort of tendency or a movement of artists who are trying to engage actively the spectator, in a work of art. The active participation of the spectator - who in this case ceases to be a mere

state of observer and goes further to becoming an actor – is considered as something ethically correct, inducing a beneficial social change. Bishop points out that this shift implies a certain hope to create an active subject who, through participation, has the chance to get emancipated and to define his political and social will (cf. Bishop, 2006a). Bishop continues and evidences that this participatory turn is the result of post-communism policies and the alienation produced by the capitalistic consumer society, that provoked a crisis in the social system: “One of the main impetuses behind participatory art has therefore been a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning” (Bishop, 2006a: 12). In participatory art, the (Rancieran) emancipated spectator goes a step further to becoming the medium (as matter and as tool) of the work of art. In communicating both to the artist and the spectator, participatory art is able to render the experience of “paradoxes that are addressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing, and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relation anew” (cf. Bishop, 2011), through an artistic practice/work/project which allows it. Participatory art is something precarious that cannot be expected, since there is always the variable-spectator and it depends upon the context: “(participatory art) is precarious as democracy itself” (cf. Bishop, 2011).

We have seen that an important role of participatory art today is to not fall into the trap of the ethical turn, entering on one hand the capitalistic market logic of the experience, and on the other the political sphere, as Bishop evidences through the example of the New Labour policy in England, discussed in sub-chapter 2.3., participatory art should try not to transform the spectator in what Maria Lind defines “entertained consumer”, which according to the curator, is a new typology of spectatorship which seems to be about to born, in which art “does not typically challenge the status quo; it is about enjoyment and judging”. (Lind in Hoffmann, 2013: 102).

To conclude this reflection, the contemporary spectator can be regarded both as a participant actor, with reference to Bishop, and emancipated, as claimed by Rancière. He/she should overcome the (Debordian) idea of passivity, ignorance and powerlessness, with the aid of the artist. Indeed, the artist could intervene, modifying the spectatorial action, in being a trigger, rendering visible the paradox of the real, being careful to not

enter the capitalistic logic of the experience market. The next chapter will take the topic even further as I address the notion of the agonistic approach, where the spectator, through the artist, is enabled to play an important part in artistic counter-hegemonic practices. Subsequently, it will follow the practice analysis of three artists, whose work aim to boycott the traditional role of the spectator, trying to make her/him responsible and able to take a stand, individually.

### 3. The Agonistic Approach

#### 3.1 From Antagonism to Agonism

The artist-as-a-trigger is a concept considered also by Chantal Mouffe, Professor of Political Theory at the University of Westminster, who developed an enlightening theory regarding today's counter-hegemonic practices. Claire Bishop acknowledged Mouffe in her article *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, in 2004, illustrating her and Laclau's analysis of the concept of democracy as a system continuously stimulated to diversities and debates<sup>42</sup>. Since then, Mouffe has refined and developed her ideas, merging them in the book *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (2013), which, one could argue, pushes further the discussion on artistic practices and ethics due to the fact that nowadays theoretical postulation arises from a socio-political reflection and analysis of society. Mouffe's discourse is fundamental for this dissertation, since it explains how art could reflect and implement radical politics, and in which ways artistic practices could act as subversive tools against a certain hegemony, taking into account an ethical dimension and without trying to be somehow superior. The three artists analysed in the second part of this dissertation, are acting, or trying to, within an agonistic dimension.

Chantal Mouffe's states that every society is the expression of specific power relations and for this reason we should forget every possibility of a perfectly reconciled and harmonious society. In expanding her argument, she makes a distinction between what she defines as 'political', namely the dimension of antagonism intrinsically bound to the human being, and 'politics', which she identifies as the system aiming to organize the human co-existence (Mouffe, 2013: XII), always operating and shaped by the political, hence creating conditions which are always potentially conflicting. In differentiating politics from the political, Mouffe is claiming that societies are not just intrinsically linked with the antagonistic dimension, but are also founded upon. Mouffe's attempt to solve the intrinsic and unsolvable inner antagonistic dimension is to propose to shape it, in order to convert it in what she defines as agonism. The theoretician claims that

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<sup>42</sup>Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal (1985), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

“a central task of democratic politics is to provide the institutions which will permit conflict to take an ‘agonistic form’, where the opponents are not enemies, but adversaries, among whom exists a conflict consensus” (Mouffe, 2013: XII).

From this perspective, this is the only chance to conceive a democratic order, even though it starts with a deep antagonist dimension.

In order to understand what she identifies as the political, Mouffe provides two important keywords: antagonism, which, as already mentioned, is highly negative since it prevents the society from becoming fully realized, dividing it and creating relations of power within it and hegemony. The latter is, as the first, an intrinsic feature of a social order since it creates a system of practices which establish the order itself and fixes the meaning of social institutions. Hence, according to Mouffe, every society is hegemonic and is then “susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices” (Mouffe, 2013: 3) which, in turn, will install a new hegemony. In asserting all this, Mouffe is extremely critical about today’s mainstream liberalism theory. In their understanding of pluralism, she states, the liberalistic theoreticians are claiming that since the world abounds of diverse perspectives and values that cannot be all entirely adopted by every society, it is possible to assemble them in a harmoniously and peaceful way. But this would mean to annihilate the antagonistic dimension of the political and the liberalistic approach would then lead to impotence when confronted with the unavoidable emergence of antagonism (Mouffe, 2013). Moreover, the intrinsic individualistic dimension of liberalism is totally unable to interpret the formation of the collective identities. This point of view is particularly significant for the historical moment in which this dissertation , and the reflection within it, are written. Nowadays the proof of the above mentioned unavoidable emergence of antagonism, and the incapacity of the liberalistic approach could be seen in the current situation in the Middle East, in the rise of terroristic movements as well as the (re)birth of fascist and nationalist parties in the European Countries.

Notably, interesting and appropriate is the concept of ‘constitutive outside’ originally proposed by Henry Staten and borrowed by Chantal Mouffe in order to better understand the inner antagonistic dimension of the political (Mouffe, 2013). In his book *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (1984), Staten draws attention to the process of formation of an identity, which for him always implies the creation of a difference. In short words, Staten is

claiming that to create an ‘us’ it is compulsory to locate a ‘you’, or better, a ‘they’. The demarcation of the ‘they’ and the acquiescence of a difference with the ‘us’ is then a fundamental requirement to make an identity exist. The process of demarcation as a creator of a certain identity is also fundamental in the formation of the idea of citizenship, as Wayne D. Bowman points out, in developing a shared sense of belonging between the members of a certain community (the citizens)<sup>43</sup>. Furthermore, the fact that politics is dealing with collective identities and due to the reason that the line between the demarcation us/them and friend/enemy is extremely subtle, it is impossible to split the antagonistic dimension from it. Borrowing Staten’s concept, Mouffe affirms the importance of acknowledging that “the very condition of possibility of the formation of political identities is at the same time the condition of impossibility of a society from which antagonism can be eliminated” (Mouffe, 2013: 5). Mouffe is then suggesting that the us/them condition within the process of identity creation is a vicious circle.

As a consequence, Mouffe’s main controversial concern is to outline the structure of the us/them distinction in order to be suitable with the World’s inner pluralism. For Mouffe, this issue should be addressed through the agonistic approach mentioned before, a struggle between adversaries, conversely to the clash among enemies, representative of the antagonism (cf. Mouffe, 2013). The very core of this concept is the perception of the Other, which can be seen either as an enemy or as an adversary: the first is someone who is antagonist, hostile, whilst the adversary is a contestant, someone who resists. So, adversaries are actually fighting against each other “because they want their interpretation of the principles to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent’s right to fight for the victory of their position” (Mouffe, 2013: 7), the opponents adhere to the same democratic ideals of ‘liberty and equality for all’, while disagreeing about their interpretation.

Mouffe emphasizes that the confrontation between adversaries is the very condition of a “vibrant democracy” (Mouffe, 2013: 7), which should stimulate a discussion about different democratic political positions and possible alternatives. If this is not happening there will always be the menace of the establishment of forms of identification which are

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<sup>43</sup>Wayne D. Bowman writes about this concept in the essay *Artistry, Ethics and Citizenship* (2016), analysed in the second chapter of this dissertation.

composed by non-negotiable moral values or too essentialist, or new hegemonies *de facto*. The provocative and stimulating feature present in the Agonistic approach is that “antagonism” is not erased. This is actually impossible since, as mentioned before, the antagonistic element is intrinsic to the political dimension of the societies. What the theorist proposes is its sublimation “by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives” (Mouffe, 2013: 9). So, the confrontation is still happening but is performed through procedures equally accepted by the opposed parts.

Particularly crucial for the reflection around which this dissertation is constructed, is Mouffe’s reference to the concept of “Hostipitality”, coined and developed by Jacques Derrida in *Acts of Religion* (2002). According to the French philosopher, “Hostipitality” defines an encounter where there is no annihilation or assimilation of the other because these are replaced with tensions enhancing the pluralism of a multipolar world (Mouffe, 2013: 41). Briefly, the “Hostipitality” dimension is a space where an agonistic encounter takes place and where the two adversaries are not pretending to be superior against each other. This concept is slightly different from the acts of hospitality performed by the relational artists, in particular Rirkrit Tiravanija, as mentioned in the second chapter. In this case each opponent is not behaving superiorly towards the other, whilst the relational artists ‘hosts’ the bystander, making him the protagonist. Derrida’s concept of the political force of art is particularly crucial because it will be further analysed considering its feature of not prevailing over the audience, the spectator, but on the contrary, arousing, challenging and dialoguing. A theory that also comes to mind, regarding pretentious superiority (especially from the intellectual point of view) is the “banking concept” postulated by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (1968). He applies this concept to education, claiming that it should not be an act of depositing, where the teacher (or the one-who-knows) is in a privileged position, delivering his knowledge to the one-who-does-not know (the student) in a unidirectional level, or rather, without a true involvement of the latter, because this would make education “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire, 2000: 72). There would be no thinking and no reflection, just a deposition of knowledge. Freire’s concept could be applied for cultural institutions, as Johanna Graham suggests in her talk *Target practice vs*

*Para – sites* (2012)<sup>44</sup>, but also regarding the artistic practice. I believe that artists should not teach nor deposit experience in the beholder, but they should expose reality in a way that induces reflection, erasing the hierarchy teacher-student (in this case, artist-viewer), and insinuating questions such as why? How?

Mouffe claims that every society is a hegemony, founded upon the antagonistic dimension, and this could be solved converting it in a confrontation between adversaries, which is the basis of the Agonistic approach. But, as she insists, if the adversaries should not pretend to be superior against each other, how should counter-hegemonic practices act? Mouffe examines two different strategies of radical politics proposing an alternative to the neo-liberal globalization: critique as withdrawal from institutions and as engagement with institutions. The withdrawal from institutions strategy is supported by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their books *Empire* (2000), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009) and developed differently but reaching the same conclusion, by Paolo Virno in *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004). Extremely pertinent to this dissertation is Hardt's and Negri's new paradigm of power, identified by them as biopolitical. The two philosophers express that there has been a transition from a disciplinary society (regulated through disciplinary institutions) to a society of control (impregnated with the biopower previously mentioned). In the latter, "mechanism of command become immanent within the social field. The modes of social integration and exclusion are increasingly interiorized through mechanism that directly organize the brains and bodies of the citizens" (Mouffe, 2013: 67). Furthermore, what will be discussed is how art should act within the biopolitical paradigm itself, in order to challenge the spectator in a way which differs the New Labour policy evidenced by Bishop in the previous chapter. Hardt and Negri claim that, due to the shift of the society previously mentioned (disciplinary → society of control), the labour power has become collective and social, and this new collective worker, named Multitude, now lives under a new global form of sovereignty: empire, characterized by the inexistence of a territorial centre of power or fixed boundaries and by a decentred and deterritorialized apparatus of rule. The two philosophers believe in the critical role of the multitude, which, according to them, will be

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<sup>44</sup>Talk held at the symposium "Médiation! Plus que de simples recettes.", organized by Pro Helvetia and Pour-cent culturel Migros at Gare du Nord (November 11, 2012).

able to construct a counter-empire, but which recalling Mouffe's thought, will just be a hegemonic counter-hegemony.

For this reason, Chantal Mouffe calls into play Paolo Virno, who goes further identifying two key terms drawing the Multitude's political action: exodus - "mass defection from the state aiming at developing the 'publicness of Intellect' outside of work and in opposition to it" (Mouffe, 2013: 69) - and civil disobedience, consisting in questioning the State's very faculty of command. For him, the only possible civil action to win the Empire is what he identifies as desertion, an evacuation of the places of power, a withdrawal from the existing institutions so as to foster the self-organization of the Multitude (cf. Mouffe, 2013). However, even Virno's approach is not enough.

Mouffe, enlightened by the artistic critique approach developed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2006) evidences how "a crucial aspect of the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism consisted in a process of discursive re-articulation of existing discourses and practices" (Mouffe, 2013: 73). For Mouffe, re-articulation is crucial, and the withdrawal from institutions approach supported by Hardt and Negri fails since it does not provide a process of re-articulation. She affirms that the objective of a counter-hegemonic intervention should not be to unveil the true reality or the real interest, because it does not exist since it cannot be universally shared. Its aim should be to re-articulate a given situation in a new configuration. Briefly, radical politics can be regarded as agonistic practices. I see this concept of agonism as a suggestion that the only way to fight the system is through the system itself, challenging it, disembowelling it and finally remodelling it, and this is exactly the terrain where art could intervene.

An agonistic counter-hegemonic example is what happened in Chile in 1988, where Pinochet's regime was not overturned by guns and violence, but through joy and peace. In fact, in 1988, it was announced a referendum to reconfirm Augusto Pinochet, who was dictatorially ruling the country since 1973, and who during his military regime violently suppressed his political opponents, making the life of the Chilean harsh and dreadful. In order to re-confirm Pinochet, the voters had to choose YES, while to end the dictatorship it was NO.

The only propaganda allowed for the NO, consisted in 15 minutes of television commercial per day, where the publicists hired by the opposition managed to realize a brilliant advertising campaign. Instead of focusing the campaign on the atrocities committed by Pinochet, or Chile's dark past, they decided to bring the attention to the joyful future that the NO could take. Hence they came up with a logo and a motto, *NO – Chile la alegría ya viene*, represented with a rainbow, an element which rises after the rain, when the sun shines, which symbolically was announcing the imminent positivity and optimism of the future, and which includes all the social groups, represented by the colours.

“The notion of “alegría” was a broad term, one that could be interpreted differently by each person according to his or her situation: it could mean a job for the unemployed, a home for the homeless, a reconciliation to someone who had experienced a fallout with his brother for political reasons. It all fit under the umbrella of “alegría” and it was cut above the darkness and violence represented in Pinochet’s campaign.” (Cronovich, 2013:6)

At the end of the campaign the NO won, and Pinochet’s dictatorship came to an end.



Fig. 6 The NO Logo and its slogan: Chile, la alegría ya viene, retrieved from <http://www.antennedipace.org/nuovo/aree-di-intervento/americhe/cile/item/895-5-ottobre-1988-quando-la-nonviolenza-vinse-la-dittatura-in-cile> (accessed January 3, 2019)

I reported this example because it shows how a revolution was not implemented with violence, the same weapon used by the dictatorship, or exposing, unveiling the dreadful truth. What the NO campaign did was a battle inside the political system itself and the

advertising one, using the tools provided by those against whom they were actually fighting. They were able to reveal a promise, a future, a re-articulation, which could have been shared by everyone (the characters in the television advertisement were representing every Chilean social class).

### 3.2 Agonistic Artistic Practices

It is particularly interesting how Mouffe locates artistic practices in a context of agonistic politics. She indicates that many theorists today express their doubts about art autonomy as a resistance space<sup>45</sup>, because it has been incorporated by the aesthetic of biopolitical capitalism, which is constantly fed by (and feeding the society with) a system of symbols. The cultural industry has been subdued by the capitalistic hegemony and is now dominated by the media and the entertainment corporations. Advertisement and the system of symbols mentioned above, are continuously stimulating desire and creating new identities, compliant to the hegemonic dominant structure. Recalling Adorno<sup>46</sup>, Mouffe writes that by now the capitalistic system absorbed not just the consumers of cultural products, but also those who produce them. Nevertheless, some intellectuals identify in new forms of artistic production a certain ability both to influence new modes of resistance and to revitalize the emancipatory project, in which the artistic practices can have a main role (Mouffe, 2013: 86). Mouffe refers to Paolo Virno<sup>47</sup>, who pointed out that nowadays there is a hybridization between different domains: the one of labour, the political action and the intellectual thinking. Through this combination they are created, or rather, it is created the possibility to generate new modes of social relations which art should support and stimulate. According to Virno, artistic practices ought to produce new subjectivities and enhance new worlds (Mouffe, 2013: 87), but, since the capitalistic market logic has embodied those aspects, the area of the artistic intervention should be extended to fields and social spaces which are non-traditional and uncharted.

Mouffe agrees with Brian Holmes, who in the essay *Artistic Autonomy* affirms that art offers to the society an opportunity to reflect collectively on imaginary figures, evidencing that art could create a space of resistance, which weakens the imaginary used by capitalism to reproduce itself. However, for her it is crucial that artistic practices should be perceived and processed in an agonistic way. As mentioned before, she bears in mind the artistic critique by Boltanski and Chiapello. The two theoreticians point out, as Claire Bishop did when analysing the cultural policy of the New Labour, that the “aesthetic strategies of the

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<sup>45</sup>Such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) before and Hardt and Negri today, as mentioned in the previous paragraph.

<sup>46</sup>In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written with Max Horkheimer in 1944.

<sup>47</sup>In *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Semiotext(E) (2004).

counter-culture (...) have been harnessed in the development of the post-fordist networked economy to promote the conditions required by the current mode of capitalist regulation” (Mouffe, 2013: 88). To Mouffe this is an evidence of the important role played by the artistic and cultural practices in the counter-hegemonic struggle.

Influenced by Antonio Gramsci, who in his *Quaderni del carcere* (1929-1932) evidenced the importance of artistic practices in the reproduction or disarticulation of a dominant hegemony, Mouffe points out that a counter-hegemonic artistic practice should engage with the existing terrain of symbols and advertisements in order to encourage new forms of identification. The conflict between hegemonies does not only take place in conventional institutions and political locations, but also in those sites where a certain hegemony is created and perpetrated. Gramsci affirms that it is in those sites that is created what he defines as common sense, that is a constructed and defined understanding of the reality which consequently conduces to the creation of certain form of subjectivity. As Hardt and Negri pointed out (and as mentioned in the previous subchapter), the society nowadays is impregnated with the biopower and the capitalist system needs to build the people’s identity, or rather, the buyer’s identity. Hence, the artistic and cultural practices are fundamental on one hand to create and to reproduce a certain hegemony/identity, but on the other hand they have also the chance to dismember it. Recalling Rancière, art (similar to politics) is a form of dissensus, having the chance to make visible what has been obscured by the society/hegemony.

Chantal Mouffe identifies art activism<sup>48</sup> as an ineffective practice, or rather, as not effective enough: “It is an illusion to believe that artistic activism could, on its own, bring about the end of neo-liberal hegemony” (Mouffe, 2013: 99) and she also disagrees with the opinion that artistic activism is the only chance that critical art has to exist. According to the Belgian sociologist, in art activism there is the lack of the fundamental process of ‘re-articulation’ as evidenced by Boltanski and Chiapello. This also recalls Gayatri Spivak’s affirmative sabotage, postulated in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), an idea which she actually applies to the imperialist discourse but that, as she said

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<sup>48</sup>Art activism is when art is used as a tool for activism, “that is grounded in the act of ‘doing’ and addresses political or social issues” (“Activist art”, *TATE*. Retrieved from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/activist-art>, (accessed January 14, 2019))

in an interview with Nazish Brohi<sup>49</sup>, it could also be applied to any hegemonic discourse. For Spivak, “affirmative sabotage” means to not destroy, not break, the dominant discourse, but to engage and work within it to challenge and finally subvert it. As she claims in a video for the Harvard University Press: “if you sabotage an instrument, you can’t use it anymore. My sense is that you should actually turn it around, so that you can use it for something else”<sup>50</sup>.

An effective artistic project (hence counter-hegemonic intervention) reported in *Agonism*, is Alfredo Jaar’s ideation and building of the first *Skoghall Konsthall*. Alfredo Jaar (Santiago de Chile, 1956) is an artist known for his commitment both ethical and civil, through his works that reveal inequalities and other critical issues so as to translate them positively. In 2000 he was invited by the town hall of Skoghall, in Sweden, to create a new work. When Jaar noticed the absence of cultural spaces in the city, he decided to design and build a *kunsthalle*<sup>51</sup>, which the day after the opening, was burnt down by the artist himself. The reason of this quite controversial act was that Alfredo Jaar did not want to impose something on the citizens they did not fight for. But the force of the Chilean artist’s project lies in what happened after some time: through Jaar’s project, the citizens realized that the city of Skoghall really urged a cultural space, thus they mobilized themselves in order to materialize it. Seven years later, Alfredo Jaar was invited again by the city of Skoghall, but this time in order to build a real *kunsthalle*.

“Besides testifying to Jaar’s pedagogical strategy of never imposing his own vision but instead bringing people to articulate their own needs, this work is also an illustration of his ability to engage with institutions in a critical way (...) his profound grasp of the role that affect plays in the process of identification and of the role of passionate attachments in the constitution of political identities”. (Mouffe, 2013: 96)

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<sup>49</sup>Brohi, Nazish (2014, December 23), “Herald exclusive: In conversation with Gayatri Spivak”, *Dawn*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1152482>, (accessed January 11, 2019).

<sup>50</sup>Press, Harvard University (2012, January 20), *Gayatri Spivak on An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Retrieved from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBzCwzvudv0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBzCwzvudv0) (accessed January 11, 2019).

<sup>51</sup>*Kunsthalle* is a German term to define a space which stages art exhibitions. It is often operated by a non-profit art association (*Kunstverein*) and it differs from a Museum because of its dimension (usually a *kunsthalle* is smaller) and because generally it does not own a permanent collection.



Fig. 7 Jaar's Skoghall Konsthall on fire; Alfredo Jaar (1956, Santiago, Chile), Skoghall Konsthall (2000), retrieved from <https://theartstack.com/artist/alfredo-jaar/skoghall-konsthall>, accessed January 13, 2019

In conclusion, Mouffe evidences art's capacity to "make us perceive new possibilities" (Mouffe, 2013: 105). According to her, art, in a sense by creating new practices and new subjectivities, can help to subvert the existing configuration of power, instead of revealing 'true' realities, but to be effective, they should provide a re-articulation.

Another example I would like to report here, as a project providing a sort of re-articulation, is Palle Nielsen's *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* (1968). In 1968, for three weeks, the artist and a group of activists who collaborated with him, transformed the Moderna Museet exhibition space into a children's playground, which consisted of jungle gyms and foam carpets. At the children's disposal, there were also painting materials, music instruments, fabrics as well as a set of historical costumes from the Royal Theatre of Stockholm and rock music was played all day long, in order to stimulate the children. Basically, it was not just a mere playground, but it was a platform giving the children every possible sensory and creative experience possible at the time. The adults who would join the experience could play or help in accordance with Nielsen's guidelines: "If conflicts arose, for example, they were to hug the children or jump into the foam rubber with them, instead of trying to resolve the situation verbally, educationally or intellectually." (Juul Ruggard, 2015: 15).



Fig. 8 Nielsen, Palle (1920 – 2000, Copenhagen), *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* (1968), photograph by Palle Nielsen, from the catalogue MACBA, Palle Nielsen. *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* (2010), Edited by Lars Bang Larsen, Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. ©Palle Nielsen.

The concept and the aim behind the creation of this space, was to create a situation where kids were able (and allowed) to do whatever they wanted to, freeing all their energy and creativity.

“The Model was concerned with the meaning of the social and subjective change that the playing child generates within the machinery of society. As such the event was nothing short of a mass utopia of art activism, aimed at applying an anti-elitist concept of art for the creation of a collectivist human being.” (Juul Rugaard, 2015: 15)

The artist wanted to see, to show, to demonstrate, and to record (several cameras were installed in order to observe and register the children's actions, and a group of

psychologists was studying the event, and this led to several critiques<sup>52</sup>) a society inhabited already and governed by the future generation, with the mere innocence and irrationality of a kid<sup>53</sup>. In fact, the choice of the title is ambiguous, how could this social irrationality lead to a model? How, from a non-authoritarian system, can a prototype of qualitative society be created? Of course, this brings us to a discussion about the difference between quality and quantity, hence qualitative vs quantitative<sup>54</sup>. To dwell on the difference between the two has no particular relevance in the frame of this dissertation, but what is particularly important is to highlight that with his *Model*, Nielsen is actually getting this thought through our heads, making us question and meditate.

“Perhaps it will be the model for the society children want.

Perhaps children can tell us so much about their own world that this can also be a model for us.

We hope so.

Therefore, we are letting the children present their model to those who are working with or are responsible for the environment provided for children outside – in the adult world.

We believe children are capable of articulating their own needs.

And that they want something different from what awaits them.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>“Around the space, television cameras record every movement, and here and there microphones are hidden, recording every noise. All around, psychologists and educationalists are taking notes. It all looks like a clinical experiment with guinea pigs.” (Nilsson, Macke in Nielsen and Bang Larsen, 2010: 64).

<sup>53</sup>“But even if it was a playground, *The Model* was paradoxically *not* a toy or a game, nor was it in this sense a model. *The Model* was a miniature that dismembered the past (‘adult society’), but it didn’t miniaturise anything that already existed. Instead it miniaturised the future by aiming to accelerate time towards the moment of its own application and enlargement”. (Larsen, in Nielsen and Bang Larsen, 2010: 90)

<sup>54</sup>“And in a developed society needs are not only quantitative (the need for goods for consumption) but also qualitative: the need for a faceted and free development of human beings’ skills, the need for information, communication and a human community, the need for emancipation not only from exploitation but also from coercion and isolation at work and during leisure time.” (Nielsen in Nielsen and Bang Larsen, 2010: 64).

<sup>55</sup>Palle Nielsen, *En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle* (1968) opening statement of the exhibition catalogue in (Nielsen in Nielsen and Bang Larsen, 2010: 70).



Fig. 9 Nielsen, Palle (1920 – 2000, Copenhagen), *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* (1968), photograph by Palle Nielsen, from the catalogue MACBA, Palle Nielsen. *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* (2010), Edited by Bang Larsen, Lars, Barce Edited by Bang Larsen, Lars, Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. ©Palle Nielsen.

In the playground, the objects located in the space did not have a pre-established function, it was their use by the children which was defining a role for them, on the spot, hence creating, or rather, inventing and imagining new uses of these objects, and new patterns. Therefore, the figure of the child is empowered and their actions are legitimated: the dimension of the play, the child activity *par excellence* is seen as something which is beneficial and constructive. Nielsen created an overturn, where the role of the naïve child

replaces the one of the adult who-knows, it “reversed the art exhibition’s hierarchies of visual and behavioural control and dissolved aesthetic form into play”. (Bang Larsen in Nielsen and Bang Larsen, 2010: 64).

Nielsen’s *Model* is located in the frame of the agonistic approach because, together with the de-articulation (represented by the non-authoritarian dimension of the play), it provides a re-articulation (the play itself, or better: the new frameworks created by the kids, the new functions established to the objects...). Moreover, the model happened in an institution, which is one of the places where hegemony is created. As written and explained before<sup>56</sup>, artistic and cultural practices, hence institutions, are fundamental both to create and reproduce a certain hegemony/identity but also to dismember it, therefore counter-hegemonic artistic practices should challenge the hegemony through the institutions of the hegemony itself, exactly as the model did. Finally, the model represents a form of ranciorean dissensus, enlightening and making possible, a form of society which has been obscured by the system, or better, by the social structure which inevitably influences the development of a human being. What I am trying to say is that this project made the adults perceive a different way of acting within the world, or rather, a way of acting within the world that has been forgotten and that is still not influenced by the social structure, opinions, habits, that are shaped in the process of growing up. Basically, the way of acting showed in *Model* is pure, unfiltered, hence true.

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<sup>56</sup>In this regard, please see the paragraph of this dissertation: 1.2 Art and politics: distributing the sensible.

## 4. Joseph Beuys and his 7000 oaks in Kassel

### 4.1. Life and artistic practice

“(According to Beuys) the provocation should not produce an inconvenient moment of shock, but it should be an energy push to widen the worn path of a consciousness which is too unilateral, so that the unconscious could appear as experience and the indifference could be transformed into interest” (De Domizio Durini, 2001: 243; my translation).

Joseph Beuys could not go unmentioned in this dissertation. Mankind was the main focus of his artistic research, and for this reason, the German artist during his life dealt with several dimensions of human existence such as art, politics and ecology. While looking at Beuys’ biography, one can see an interesting combination of exhibitions and performances, alternated by political actions, sit-ins and lawsuits. As will be further developed, his artistic production is therefore inseparable from his persona and from his life itself.

Joseph Beuys was born in Krefeld, in Germany, in 1921. As a young man, he was interested in science, and for this reason he subsequently began his studies in medicine, but also in art (particularly sculpture and philosophy). He was forced to enrol in the Nazi army in 1940, where he was trained as part of the *Luftwaffe*. According to what became accepted as truth<sup>57</sup>, in 1943, while he was flying over Crimea, Beuys’ aircraft was shot down and he was rescued by a Tatar tribe which treated the artist covering him with fat and felt in order to keep him warm. These two elements, the fat and the felt, were later crucial in the Beuysian artistic production. He was wounded other times before the end of the Second World War and this traumatic experience changed him. He began to be tormented by nightmares and guilt as well as a distressing worry for the fate of the mankind (cf. Davvetas in De Domizio Durini, 2001).

When the war ended, he decided to quit his medical studies and he enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts of Dusseldorf, in 1947. During his artistic studies (which ended in

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<sup>57</sup> A discovered letter from 1944 tells that a Tatar tribe did not save Beuys, but that Russian workers and Beuys himself refashioned the story of his rescue several times. In this regard please read Knöfel, Ulrike (2013, July 12) “New Letter Debunks More Wartime Myths”, *Spiegel Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/new-letter-debunks-myths-about-german-artist-joseph-beuys-a-910642.html> (accessed January 17, 2019)

1954) he became interested in the Anthroposophical theories of Rudolf Steiner<sup>58</sup>. In 1961 he was appointed Professor of Sculpture, in the Academy of Fine Arts of Dusseldorf, and at the same time, with his practice, he began to be interested in the Fluxus<sup>59</sup> movement, hence his participation in many of their events. Beuys developed diverse actions, performances, such as *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* (*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965)<sup>60</sup>, at the Galerie Schmela in Dusseldorf. He also started to develop his reflection around the elements that ‘saved him’ during the Second World War, the fat and the felt, which then condensed into works such as *Fettstuhl* (*Fat Chair*, 1964) and *Fettecke* (*Prozess*) (*Fat Corner (Process)*, 1968)<sup>61</sup>.

In 1964, he was invited to participate in documenta 3, where he, or better his practice, interfaced for the first time with a large audience. After this event, Beuys started to think about choosing to move to “a position less vulnerable towards the beholder” (Davvetas in De Domizio Durini, 2001: 187; my translation), and his work, or rather, his life, started to have a more political turn. In fact, in 1967 he founded the *Deutsche Studentenpartei* (German Student Party), and then in 1974, the FIU, the Free International University<sup>62</sup>. In

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<sup>58</sup>Antroposophy is a theosophical doctrine, formulated by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). It conceives the universal reality as a divine manifestation which is constantly evolving. According to this theory, even the human beings are continuously evolving, in reincarnating countless times, constantly trying to raise their spirits and depleting their fate which they created through their previous actions. (“Antroposofia”, *Treccani*. Retrieved from <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antroposofia/> (accessed January 13, 2019).

<sup>59</sup>Avant-garde movement initiated by George Maciunas (1931-78) at the beginning of the 60s. Fluxus denied any kind of distinction between art and life, claiming that the actions belonging to the everyday life should be considered as artistic events. They also believed that everything was art and that anybody could do it (cf. Bois, Yve-Alain, Buchloh, Benjamin H. D., Foster, Hal, Joselit, David and Krauss, Rosalind, 2016).

<sup>60</sup>*Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* (*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965), Beuys’s first exhibition in a commercial gallery where the artist put himself into the exhibition space, doing a performance, which was visible only through the window. Beuys’ face was covered with honey and gold foil and he was trying to describe to a dead hare, which he held in his arms, the paintings hanging in the gallery. In one of the boots he was wearing, Beuys had hidden a microphone, so that everyone could hear his voice. There are several symbolic layers in this performance, such as the element of the honey, which reminds to the bees, emblem of a society based on collaboration and equality, and the hare which is dead, but “provided with more intuitive skills than the men, trapped in their cold rationality” (Beuys in Spinelli). Through this performance, Beuys wanted to awake the intellect, “the hare is a symbol of regeneration and reincarnation; it becomes the power whose purpose is to awake the *ratio*” (Davvetas in De Domizio Durini, 2001: 191; my translation).

<sup>61</sup>*Fettstuhl* (*Fat Chair*, 1964), consists in a chair, with fat placed on top. This artwork is a metaphor of the human body and of its continuous interior movements. This work is actually a process: in fact the fat evaporated completely in 1985. *Fettecke* (*Prozess*) (*Fat Corner (Process)* 1968) moves around the same concept. It consists in two boxes in a vitrine, each one containing a piece of fat.

<sup>62</sup>Based on a manifesto written by Joseph Beuys and Heinrich Böll, is a free school, which aims to diffuse creativity: “The school is based on the principle of interaction, whereby no institutional distinction is drawn between the teachers and the taught. The school’s activity will be accessible to the public, and it will conduct its work in the public eye (...) it is not in the aim of the school to develop political and cultural directions

the meantime, he got fired from the Fine Arts Academy in Dusseldorf due to the fact that he wanted to accept students who had been rejected through entrance exams into his classes. Therefore after a demonstration he occupied the school. His political actions were not reflected just in his artistic practice but also in his daily life. In fact, Joseph Beuys was also one of the founding members of the Green Movement<sup>63</sup> in Germany and he ran, (unsuccessfully) for the European Parliament in 1979.

He believed in direct democracy in which people should vote through referendum, without having parties and parliament interfering with their choices. Beuys' practice, from the Seventies, evolved in this sense, as for example with the installation of the *Organisation für direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung* (Organisation for Direct Democracy by Referendum) in 1972, at documenta 5. The project evolved in his program for documenta 6 (1977), where during the whole duration of the event (100 days), he designed a conference which included discussions and workshops all reflecting around political and social issues. At the same time, in the centre of Friedericianum, documenta's main venue, he installed *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* (Honeypump in the Workplace, 1977), a mechanism which was pumping honey, symbolically recalling the transpiration of a human body.

It is particularly interesting that Beuys connects the role of the artist/performer to the one of pedagogue/educator<sup>64</sup>, presenting educational lectures as performances, even using blackboards, as in the example of *Four Blackboards* (1983). As part of the event "Seven Exhibitions"<sup>65</sup>, held at the Tate Britain, in London (1972), Beuys participated with a performance: *Informative Action*. For the first two weeks of the exhibition, documentaries and videos of his past performances were shown and on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February the artist appeared suddenly, performing a lecture/discussion with the visitors and chalking his theories on four blackboards which then became an artwork. The interesting part of the pedagogue version of Beuys is that the artist does not limit

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(...) its chief goal is the encouragement, discovery and furtherance of democratic potential, and the expression of this." (FIU Manifesto, 1973).

<sup>63</sup> The Green Movement (*Die Grünen*) was a political movement, which then evolved into a Party, fighting for ecology and the defence of the environment.

<sup>64</sup> In this regard, particularly interesting is the chapter "Pedagogic Projects: 'How do you bring a classroom to life as if it were a work of art?'" in Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012).

<sup>65</sup> *Seven Exhibitions* was an event staged between the 24<sup>th</sup> of February and the 23<sup>th</sup> of March in London, at the Tate Gallery, in which seven artists were invited to participate with a work, and presenting it for four weeks (Lange in Mesch and Michely, 2007).

the expression of his political beliefs through his artworks, actions or performances, but also through the act of teaching, by turning it into a work of art.

Through his innovative and peculiar practice, we could say that today the persona of Joseph Beuys became even more well known than his artworks. This is also linked with the image of Beuys himself, his way of dressing, as Lucrezia De Domizio Durini points out:

“The hat, a sign of wisdom and initiation, the jacket, reminding a ‘fisherman of souls’, which refers to the figure of a shaman and Christ, the hare fragment on the chest, a simile indicating the principle of movement and metempsychosis, the jeans, as symbol of the revolution of manners and finally the boots, symptom of dynamism and of the wayfarer.” (De Domizio Durini, 2001: 236; my translation).

Joseph Beuys died in 1986, without seeing *7000 Eichen – Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung* (7000 Oaks – City Forestation Instead of City Administration, 1982-1987) (the project to which the next paragraph is dedicated) completed. The last oak was planted by his son in 1987.

What is the conception of art according to Joseph Beuys? He actually answers this question in a book, or rather, in a conversation with the pastor Volker Harlan in 1979, which was then documented and later became a book. Firstly, it has to be said that Beuys was working with an expanded definition of material, which include speech and thought, hence his concept of art was also expanded.

“My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture, or art in general. They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone:

Thinking forms – how we mould our thoughts or

Spoken forms – how we shape our thought into words or

SOCIAL SCULPTURE how we mould and shape the world in which we live:

Sculpture as an evolutionary process; everyone an artist.” (Beuys, 2004: 9)

As already mentioned, Beuys was influenced by the Fluxus movement and the anthroposophical doctrine, in particular by the idea which is shared by both theories of the existence as a continuous state of flux and evolving movement. Hence, his non-

performative works are focused on chemical reactions, movement of substances, and passages from one physico-chemical state to another one, as is the case with the fat pieces previously mentioned before.

According to Beuys, art is something indispensable for mankind, which is able to free it, but at the same time it is something intrinsic, enclosed in the human being itself. The artist draws parallels with John Dewey, mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation, who in 1934 in *Art as Experience* stated that art cannot be separated from the everyday life because in this case it will be nullified<sup>66</sup>. According to him, art is able to create a sort of social difference. Beuys believed in the same ideas and his conception of art is extremely anthropological in the sense that according to him, every man is an artist whose essence is composed by creativity, seen as an expression of liberty, and which is “embodying, carrying forward and further evolving the world’s evolutionary impulse.” (Beuys, 2004: 10). Therefore it can be assumed that the man/artist embodies the projection of the future.

These materials which are triggering a movement, a process, are also leading to a discussion and to an experience. As observed in the first chapter, Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster (2017) argue that being involved in or participating in an artistic action means also to have a certain experience, which is something that has an extremely strong power. Furthermore, Olafur Eliasson points out that artistic experience is related with responsibility<sup>67</sup>. According to Beuys, it is something fundamental because it signifies to give a meaning to the human life and for him it is possible to fulfil an experience just with a simple walk, if one is conscious of his act. For the artist, experience is such if it creates something new, not just for experiencer but for all the human beings. All these concepts are related to the one of warmth because Beuys sees dialogue, discussion and experience as the transmission of the warmth, meaning the intrinsic human energy. From this comes the decision of the artist to use the material of fat which represents the warmth. In plants fat results from the thermal process of organic growth and it is a substance which is susceptible to changes in shape when it is induced only by heat.

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<sup>66</sup> In this regard, please see the paragraph 1.3 Civil Actions vs Civil Artistic Actions.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem.

Joseph Beuys believed that art is not leading just to a new culture, but it could also evolve in the future, creating something completely new and developing possibilities. Through art he searched for an access to the truth which “he did not to find in the arbitrary invention of the system in which we live, but it (the truth) is already existing in the world; the human being should just re-discover it, through himself and the nature.” (De Domizio Durini, 2001: 235; my translation). Beuys somehow tried to embody what Jacques Rancière would then define dissensus<sup>68</sup>, meaning that his action is not aimed to create something new, but to reformulate what already exists, acting a re-distribution of the sensible.

Beuys claims that true art is not the one which imposes itself, because a characteristic of great art is “that just doesn’t force itself on you at all, but rather completely merges with its context” (Beuys, 2004: 37). We could say that Beuys adopts a sort of agonistic approach in order to challenge hegemony: he installs a dialogue, to softly trigger the perception, hence the sensation of the viewer, making him/her reflect and create his/her own thought<sup>69</sup>.

Therefore, to recapitulate Beuys’ thoughts, the man being endowed with creativity (which is his anthropological substance) is an artist, in particular a sculptor since he is able to mould the social through single words (with dialogues, debates) that, according to Beuys, are the ideal sculpture material: “creativity is not limited to people practicing one of the traditional forms of art, and even in the case of artists creativity is not confined to the exercise of their art” (Beuys, Böll, *F.I.U. Manifesto*, 1973). Therefore, these humans/artists form the collective paradigm named Social Sculpture which should act in a collaborative manner and consider the diversity of the peculiarities within itself. “Creation—whether it be a painting, sculpture, symphony or novel, involves not merely talent, intuition, powers of imagination and application, but also the ability to shape material that could be expanded to other socially relevant spheres” (Beuys, Böll, *F.I.U. Manifesto*, 1973). Consequently, art is the *materia prima*, the constituent and the capital of this collective paradigm/society, hence Joseph Beuys created the renowned motto *KUNST = KAPITAL* (ART = CAPITAL).

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<sup>68</sup> In this regard, please see the paragraph 1.2 Art and Politics: distributing the sensible

<sup>69</sup> In this regard, please see the paragraph 3.2 Agonistic Artistic Practices

Joseph Beuys, through the use of materials which are visible (the case of fat and copper among others, elements reminding a process), and invisible, or rather, not tactilely tangible, (the words in the paradigm of the Social Sculpture, the F.I.U.), attempted to awaken human beings from the slumber caused by the modern society and he tried to do it through the stimulus, the process and the dialogue, instead of imposing its own vision.

#### **4.2. 7000 Eichen – Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung (7000 Oaks – City Forestation Instead of City Administration, 1982 - 1987)**

*7000 Eichen* was the project proposed by Beuys for the seventh edition of documenta, which lasted from the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1982, to the 28<sup>th</sup> of September of the same year. In 1981 when he was invited to participate to the event, the artist proposed to plant 7000 oak trees, each one of them coupled with a basalt stele of 1.20 m high. The project had to be completed (and that is exactly what happened) in 1987, on the occasion of documenta 8. The 7000 basalt steles were piled in Kassel's Friederichsplatz, in front of Museum Friederichanum, documenta's main venue and they were decreasing every time a tree was planted so that everyone could see the progress of the project. Beuys planted himself the first oak just before the opening of the exhibition next to the pile of basalt stones.

In order to help the execution of the project, it was established a *Koordinationsbüro*, a special Coordination Office part of the Free International University, in which the participants were engineers, planters and landscape planners. They were official experts which on this occasion were named by Beuys as "artists". In order to proceed successfully the project needed the participation of the citizens. The planting, which was free of charge for Kassel's inhabitants, was implemented through submissions by the residents, the schools or any entity located in the German town. Because of the 'costless' aspect of the project, Beuys persistently acted in order to fund it by creating and selling editions, asking for donations and even participating to a Japanese whisky commercial as each oak and stone had a cost of circa 500 DM.



Fig. 10 Joseph Beuys planting the first oak, photograph by Dieter Scwerdtle in Scholtz, 1986.

“I think the tree is an element of regeneration which in itself is a concept of time. The oak is especially so because it is a slowly growing tree with a kind of really solid heartwood” (Beuys in Levi Strauss, 2006: 101).

There is a symbolic meaning behind the choice of using the oak, rather than any other tree: it could be said that the oak is Germany’s national tree because of its deep historical meanings with the German culture (cf. Goto Collins, 2012). The oak was worshipped, hence protected, by the Druids<sup>70</sup>, Celtic priests, whose cult was intrinsically bound with nature. Furthermore the element of the forest has always been related to the imaginary of Germany. This acquires even more significance if one thinks about the fact that this project was intended for Kassel, a city which was 95% destroyed during bombings in the Second World War. documenta is an event which had an important role in the restoration of culture after the Nazi defeat<sup>71</sup> and the projects use of trees is the symbol of life par excellence.

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<sup>70</sup> Actually, etymologically the word Druid comes from the old Celtic root –deru, which means tree, specifically oak tree (“Druid” in Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/druid> Accessed October 2018)

<sup>71</sup>Quoting Andrea Gyrody: “Artist and professor Arnold Bode launched documenta in 1955, choosing Kassel as his venue because the town’s landscape and its Enlightenment-era museum, the Fridericianum, still bore

As it can be understood by Beuys' words quoted before, the oak was chosen also because of its extremely slow growth, and its coupled stele, located next to it, will show the passage of time, considering that they will never have the same height (if not for a very short time). Moreover, the process of the tree growth, recalls the concept of warmth, heat expansion and the element of the fat typical of Beuys' body of work. In fact, as mentioned in the previous subchapter, fat results from the thermal process of organic growth. Hence the artist, with this initiative reminds us of the principle of energy. This further brings attention to the inner human act of thinking and the ability of doing this. It is contrasted with the basalt stone which represents materialist culture and which lies cold and still.

“My point with these seven thousand trees was that each would be a monument, consisting of a living part, the live tree, changing all the time, and a crystalline mass, maintaining its shape, size and weight (...) By placing these two objects side by side, the proportionality of the monument's two parts will never be the same” (Beuys in Cooke, 1994).

As highlighted by Bellin-Harner & Körner, *7000 Eichen*, is an intervention which, unlike the performance at the Tate Britain, *Informative Action* (1972), or the *Organisation für direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung* for documenta 6, is not only temporary, but enters the everyday life of Kassel's inhabitants: “7000 Oaks is a sculpture referring to people's life, to their everyday work. That is my concept of art which I call the extended concept or art of the social sculpture” (Beuys in Scholtz, 1986). In planting the oaks, Beuys wished to amplify, or better, to metaphorically plant, his concept of Social Sculpture, expanding it worldwide. He used Kassel as a starting point for an afforestation plan of the world: to plant an oak, or any other tree, paired with a basalt stele, or a generic stone, is something easy to replicate<sup>72</sup>.

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the visible scars of WWII aerial bomb raids. That made Kassel, in Bode's view, a poignant and appropriate backdrop for his showcase of what remained of so-called “degenerate art” – works of the major pre-war movements, from Fauvism to Cubism and Expressionism – which had been condemned, looted, maimed, destroyed, or sold during the reign of the Third Reich” (Gyrody, 2014: 117).

<sup>72</sup>As a matter of fact, this project expanded, and reached New York (some trees were planted in 1994 by the DIA Foundation in Chelsea), Bolognano (in Italy) and Ireland (from 2000, 7000 oaks were planted on the Hill of Uisneac) among other countries.

An interesting prospective is the one of Andrew Bruce who, in his paper *From the Earth to Heaven: 7000 Oaks and the Legacy of Trees as Media* (2017) claims that with this action, Beuys aimed to metaphorically destroy the state, or rather, what represented the state, as the asphalt of the street, the sidewalks and other ‘traces of civilizations’ in the German city: “the trees were planted where they were most urgently needed, in the paved-over heart of town. The infrastructure of the statue was torn asunder; concrete and asphalt were destroyed to make way for trees” (cf. Bruce, 2017).

Beuys certainly wanted to give citizens the chance to act by presenting the possibility to take a step through the experience of an artistic project. The art was taken out from an elitist circle and put in front of every Kassel’s inhabitant or Documenta’s visitor as the basalt stones piled in Friederichsplatz. The trees that were gradually planted would, in addition to improving the quality of life in the city, become an inspirational image for the future generations as a symbol of the power of creativity in transforming the planet. But in order to do this and to start this path a human being, an entity, an organization, should firstly consider their own possibility hence responsibility to actually act in shaping the future. This could happen with the participation to Beuys’ project through the simple act of planting a tree. To take responsibility through experience.

“It’s such a simple act, planting a tree. But it gives one immediate purchase on the human condition: powerful agency, limited longevity. If all goes well, these 7000 trees will survive the generations of their human agents. But for that to happen, someone will have to care for them a little. If there is to be future, these are its acts” (David Levi Strauss, 2006: 104).

But what happened, how did people actually perceive and understand the planting of the 7000 oaks? And furthermore, what is the situation of the trees today, years after the seventh edition of documenta? Is Beuys’ legacy still effective? It is important, once again, to remember the importance of the role of the citizens in Beuys’s project, in which their participation was fundamental: every planted tree in the city would be different, depending on how the citizens living nearby took care of that plant, hence, if the Kassel inhabitants would not participate in the project, the oaks were destined to die and the project to fail<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup>Actually the *Koordinationsbüro* had also been created to compensate, hence to intervene, if public attention would start to lack.

Therefore, the importance of this project is linked to the importance regarding a possible research or study about citizens behaviour on ecological and environment issues.

Despite the premises and the positive ideals and the optimistic receptions of many art critics and theorists<sup>74</sup>, at first the Kassel city council was not favourable to the Beuys's proposal. According to the plantation plan, the trees would be distributed homogeneously, partly in the city centre, partly in the residential area and partly in the new suburban neighbourhoods. The city board was worried about how the oaks would affect the expansion of the city of Kassel and wanted to plant them in the outskirts. For this reason, the administration rejected more of the 70% of the planting requests due to logistic issues.

Not only this, the citizen's initial reaction to the proposal was quite different from the one expected by Beuys. Most of them refused the trees and didn't support the project. They were extremely sceptical (cf. Bellin-Harner & Körner, 2009 and Bruce, 2017). In *DOCUMENTA: LAND+ART?* (2008) Lee Cabangbang claims that the perception of Beuys' project changed as soon as the stones were place in Friederichsplatz. In fact, the artist's decision to pile the basalt steles in front of the Museum Friederichanum was not just for a symbolic reason, but also in order to press both the city administration and the citizens to somehow react to his initiative and it was successful, as for example, just after placing the steles, someone sprayed them pink<sup>75</sup>. According to Norbert Scholtz it was one of the members of the *Koordinationsbüro*, "individuals raised in disadvantaged conditions might be sceptical of change imposed from outside" (Bellin-Harner & Körner, 2009: 8), hence the Coordination Office acted in order to change the idea surrounding the plantation of the oaks, trying to educate the citizens to the project instead of imposing it. They therefore started to carry out a social-kind of work, including the diverse communities of the German city and sometimes the "planting event", the act of planting an oak had an extreme celebrative aspect which allowed it to become a sort of a party.

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<sup>74</sup>As we can read in *Joseph Beuys, L'immagine dell'Umanità* by Lucrezia De Domizio Durini (2001) and in *Beuys: 7000 oaks in Kassel* by Norbert Scholtz (1986).

<sup>75</sup>Furthermore, each stele had to be taken from the center of the pile. In this way, the reduction of the size of the pile was very hard to perceive.

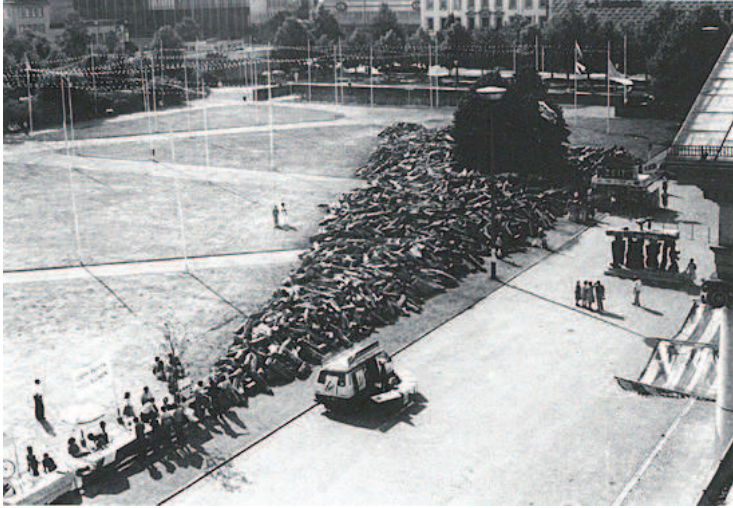


Fig. 11 Installation view of the 7,000 basalt stones in Friedrichsplatz, Kassel, 1982, photograph by Dieter Schwerdtle © documenta Archiv

Unfortunately, as proved by the study undertaken by Bellin-Harner and Körner in 2007, which then resulted in the paper *The 7000 Eichen of Joseph Beuys – experiences after twenty-five years*, 50% of the trees were not maintained after being planted and less than half of the oaks appeared in good condition. Moreover, some trees in the process of growing had started to create some problems and will continue to create them because of their roots and branches that are ruining the asphalt of the streets. However, in Bellin-Harner and Körner' research it is also reported that a linden tree<sup>76</sup>, planted in a square close the *Kunstakademie* of Kassel, has become a meeting point for the citizens living in the neighbourhood and after the construction of a pergola next to it, mothers started to organize the birthday party of their children there. This tree is actually really hard to recognize as a Beuys' tree, since its stele has been covered by a fence built around its trunk.

Bearing in mind the Rancierean concept<sup>77</sup>, Joseph Beuys, with *7000 Eichen*, tried to redistribute the sensible by enlightening the mind of Kassel's citizens with his trees and referring to Bruce's theory<sup>78</sup>, he attempted to decompose the proper that is the statehood and its representation through the invention of an urbanistic revolution. However his effort

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<sup>76</sup>Of the *7000 Eichen*, around the 90% of them were actually oaks, whilst the others were other type of trees.

<sup>77</sup> The concept of the Distribution of the Sensible. In this regard, please see the paragraph 1.2 Art and Politics: distributing the sensible.

<sup>78</sup>According to which through *7000 Eichen*, Beuys aimed to metaphorically destroy the state.

to reform the mentality of the city administration, hence the one of the citizens, did not have the desired outcome because as pointed out by Bellin-Harder and Körner, Beuys' initiative does not differentiate "from the work of an urban planner who has to do with politicians" (Bellin-Harder and Körner, 2009: 17). It seems that the aesthetic element of the artwork, or rather, the fact that first of all *7000 Eichen* is an ARTwork, had been forgotten – also by Beuys himself - as suggested by the linden tree mentioned previously, which nobody knows is a Beuys' tree since its stele is almost invisible.

Beuys did not question the role of the city administration: it is as if he effectively entered inside it. *7000 Eichen* was meant to be a civil artistic action, but the artist missed one of the main elements to make it happen. In fact, if one considers the concept of civil chain<sup>79</sup> (which lies behind any civil artistic action), as expressed by Gielen and Lijster in *The Civil Potency of a Singular Experience* (2017), the artist's initiative lacks the first step. The sequence of the project involves an emotion, which has to be shared (step 1), which is then followed by "(self-) rationalization – (3) communication – (4) de-privatization (or going public) and finally, (5) self-organization." (Gielen and Lijster in Dietachmair, Gielen, 2017: 42). Surely there was a certain emotion, or rather, a willing to raise public awareness about environmental issues, but Beuys failed in its aesthetical representation and in the process of involvement of the common citizens of Kassel. Beuys created and stimulated a "state of encounter<sup>80</sup>", a dialogue with the inhabitants of the German city, but it resulted in an interchange between a certain elitist group of thinkers, intellectuals, Beuys's students and environmental activists who implemented the planting process but did not fully succeed in involving the locals. Again, it resulted in a mere act of urban planning, losing completely its aesthetical aspect.

But on the other hand, *7000 Eichen* had also some positive consequences. The planting and the consequent maintaining of the trees triggered (as has been observed above), several thoughts and problems about both the perception of trees in a city environment, in its

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<sup>79</sup>Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster locate a process at the base of the civil action, named 'civil chain': "this succession of processes – which we call the civil chain – looks like this: (1) emotion – (2) (self-) rationalization – (3) communication – (4) de-privatization (or going public) and, finally, (5) self-organization." (Gielen and Lijster in Dietachmair, Gielen, 2017: 42)

<sup>80</sup>Bourriaud evidences that art is a state of encounter, highlighting how many artists' practices consist of producing 'experiences', or better, 'relations'. In this regard please see the paragraph 2.1 Relational Aesthetics.

planning and in the improvement of the quality of life. As Bellin-Harder and Körner noted, not only did the initial debate about the tree locations and their future care influenced Kassel and its administration, but also the city itself which became a case study for urban planners and landscape architects. It could be said that Kassel with its 7000 trees became somehow an urbanistic model for other cities and created a network of other projects inspired by *7000 Eichen*.

What I have tried to put into words through this chapter is that the premises to this project and its aims were extremely interesting, powerful, and innovative. Beuys perfectly embodied the concept of Artistic Citizenship, elaborated by by David J. Elliott, Marissa Silverman and Wayne D. Bowman (2016)<sup>81</sup> intended as the commitment to engage in artistic practices which are supporting a certain well-being shared by a community. According to the editors of *Artistic Citizenship* (2016), “artistry involves civic-social-humanistic-emancipatory responsibilities, obligations to engage in art making that advances social goods” (Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 7). Thence, artistic citizens engage in artistic actions in order to connect people and to improve their social development. Focusing on the process of experience - the act of planting – the artist wanted to instill and to sow his broad concept of Social Sculpture, of creativity as an inner human engine for changing and improving the world we inhabit and taking responsibility of our actions. With the public and free initiative of *7000 Eichen*, Beuys also questioned the artsy system represented by the art galleries and other cultural locations by creating something which could not be bought, sold or exhibited in a museum. But maybe the citizens of Kassel were not ready or perhaps the unready ones were Beuys and the members of the *Koordinationsbüro*. Perhaps the process and its aesthetic statement was not defined enough or even contemplated. But still, the controversiality and the legacy of this project and actually of Beuys himself (realized in 1982 before Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics and Bishop’s ethical turn<sup>82</sup>), makes an interesting starting point for a perspective under an agonistic viewpoint. In fact, the “man with the hat<sup>83</sup>” through *7000 Eichen* and actually with his artistic/political practice from the 70s on, stimulated a discussion and a dialogue between diverse subjects who presented different interpretations

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<sup>81</sup>In this regard, please see the subchapter 1.3 Civil Actions vs Civil Artistic Actions.

<sup>82</sup>In this regard, please see the chapter 2. Relational Aesthetics and Participation.

<sup>83</sup>One of the names given to Joseph Beuys by the critics as he was always wearing a hat.

on the same topic. Beuys wanted and fought in his own way for dynamic and vital democracy and indeed, as stressed by Mouffe (2013), the very condition of a vibrant democracy is the confrontation between adversaries – in this case between individuals with divergent views – stimulating then a discussion about different democratic political positions and possible alternatives. In fact, Mouffe claims that every society is a hegemony founded upon the antagonistic dimension and to solve this, it is necessary to convert it into a confrontation between adversaries without pretending to be superior against each other. Hence, an agonistic counter-hegemonic practice should act through creating a dialogue and providing a trigger for reflection exactly as Beuys tried to do. Furthermore, as stressed at the end of the chapter about the Agonistic approach, in the third chapter of this dissertation, Mouffe's concept of Agonism suggests that the only way to fight against the system is through the system itself, challenging it and re-articulating it. Beuys indeed acted through the system of culture in the locations where culture is created and perpetrated such as as schools, universities, and in this case documenta. It could be said also that Beuys enters the structure of biopolitical capitalism as it is defined by Hardt and Negri (2000), which provides and it is sustained through a system of symbols by using a symbol: the oak, or more generally, the tree. He employed a mystic symbol, an image of life in the area of Kassel and more broadly the Hesse region of Germany, which had witnessed so much destruction and death. The symbol is reproducible in a way which does not enter the capitalistic logic and has been replicated, or better, planted in other locations, hence the spread of its meaning and value, enhancing somehow a new world.

## 5. Paweł Althamer and the invisibles

### 5.1 Life and artistic practice

In order to approach Paweł Althamer (1967, Warsaw) it is fundamental to mention the context, or rather within which peculiarly renewing and interesting historical and social perspective his practice developed. In fact, when Althamer was a young boy, in the beginning of the 80s, his hometown Warsaw - Poland was a satellite of the Soviet Union. *Solidarność* (Solidarity) founded by Lech Wałęsa was the first trade union which wasn't controlled by a communist party in the Soviet area of influence<sup>84</sup>. *Solidarność* eventually brought the collapse of the communist regime in the country, helped by the Vatican Church, both spiritually and economically<sup>85</sup>. Therefore during those years Poland had a radical change, not just politically but also inevitably economically and socially. In short, Poland switched from communism and its market logic to a democracy based on Catholic principles, capitalism and free market. Therefore, the 90s, the years when Paweł Althamer was completing his formation at the Academy of Fine Arts<sup>86</sup>, were a time when the Polish social system was redefining itself and this of course was also translated into contemporary artistic production: "The non-time of the nineties could be (...) described as a natural state or a kind of resetting. All these concepts designate basically one thing: a state of void which has to be filled with great narrations of the transformation period" (Banasiak in Pstuzek, 2018: 84).

In this somehow changing, hence experimental context, permeated by a sense of anxiety for the orthodox Catholic ideologies that were taking ground, emerged the Polish movement of *critical art*. The artistic movement which included artists such as Althamer's professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw Grzegorz Kowalski and Althamer himself, was somehow researching and reflecting on this political and social change, trying

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<sup>84</sup>*Solidarność* was founded in 1980 by Lech Wałęsa, who would eventually become President of the republic of Poland in 1990-95.

<sup>85</sup>Pope Giovanni Paolo II, previously Karol Józef Wojtyła, pope from 1978 to 2005, because of his Polish origins was publicly spiritually supporting the *Solidarność* movement, and Wałęsa himself declared that the support was also economical (Viviano, Francesco (2009, March 14), "Dal Vaticano a Calvi ecco chi aiutò Solidarnosc", *La Repubblica*. Retrieved from <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2009/03/14/dal-vaticano-calvi-ecco-chi-aiuto-solidarnosc.html> (accessed 15 January, 2019).

<sup>86</sup>Paweł Althamer attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw from 1988 to 1993.

in a way to find a new order inspired by the European wave of counterculture such as “subversion and recontextualisation, body art or even abject art” (Pstuzek, 2018: 84). *Critical art* aimed to be controversial, questioning the founding rules of the former order and the ones of the order which was about to be designed and established in order to stimulate both critical thinking and reflection on the current social situation as well as a sense of indignation towards the system itself.

As Pstuzek points out in his essay *The Social Potential of the Polish Art in the Transformation Period* (2018), the Polish beholders were often not ready to this shock of indignation due to a lack of an adequate basic education (leading to sad but hilarious accidents<sup>87</sup>) and also because of the scarce, almost inexistent support from the public institutions. Nevertheless, the *critical art* movement broke new grounds in Polish art, and Paweł Althamer is one of the artists who established its legacy. The Polish artist, as we will see through the chapter, challenges both the post - communist legacy and the catholic interpretation of the world. He searches for the tools of communication with the environment, a sort of new reality, one which is pure but it does not necessary has to be shared by a collective, within himself and others.

Paweł Althamer attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, as mentioned before, from the 1988 until the 1993, in a moment when Poland was drastically changing, with Grzegorz Kowalski (1942) as a professor. Kowalski’s sculpture studio has been an important training and formation ground for many famous Polish artists belonging to the same generation of Paweł Althamer<sup>88</sup>. He defended and taught that art never acts or aims for itself, but it is always a mean, a tool, to communicate something, even unintentionally or unconsciously<sup>89</sup>. The concept of art as a communication and connection tool would

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<sup>87</sup>“Another spectacular example of a conflict which escalated around a work of art was the behaviour of a Polish MP Witold Tomczak. On 21 December 2000, the politician visited Zachęta Gallery together with his colleague from the same political club, Halina Nowina-Konopczyna. Driven by patriotic and religious motives, he felt the need to “correct” Maurizio Cattelan’s sculpture *La Nona Ora*, which presented Pope John Paul II squashed by a meteorite, by relieving the Head of the Church of his burden. Despite security’s intervention, the MP succeeded in removing the heavy object from the Pope’s body — sadly, together with one of the Holy Father’s lower limbs” (Pstuzek, 2018: 86).

<sup>88</sup>Artists such as Katarzyna Kozyra (1963), Jacek Markiewicz (1964) and Artur Żmijewski (1966).

<sup>89</sup>“His flagship assignment, ‘Common Space-Personal Space’, addresses the process of non-verbal communication. The students, the professor and the assistants meet in the space of the studio and try to communicate by using body language, a language of gestures and visual forms. The project thus becomes a micro-model of society, but also provides for isolating one’s own private space, a space inaccessible to

influence Althamer's practice, becoming fundamental and then developed throughout his life.

Since his first works it was clear that Althamer's practice would develop around two main fronts: the exploration and the analysis of the, almost sacral, reality, both within and outside himself and a unique way to attempt the overturning of the current social order, exploring new and unexpected others. As for example, in 1991, for a university exam where the students were asked to depict the figure of a cardinal, he realized the video *Cardinal* where the artist, naked, plunges into a metal tub filled with water and papier-mâché. As soon as he was inside it he started smoking joints and blathering to himself, while religious songs belonging to different cultures were played as background music. As Massimiliano Gioni claims in his essay *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2008), his aim was to claim back the inner rituality of any religious ceremony and to challenge the hierarchy present in the theological order. He elaborated this in *Paweł Althamer* (1993), a 1:1 scale hyper realistic sculpture of himself naked, made of grass, hemp fibre, animal intestine, wax and his hair, created for the final exam at the Academy<sup>90</sup>. The choice to employ these organic materials reflects Althamer's attempt to find a true reality and to recover the primordial close relationship with nature as well as the basic instincts of human species. This aim is also explicit in *Cardinal*, erasing all the social superstructures and exploring the inner human nature. His work is "an overdose of reality, an excess of life that gives access to a higher form of consciousness – a natural high likely to completely change the way we look at normality" (Gioni, 2008: 91).

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others, teaching that art never operates in a vacuum, that it is a communications tool, though often an imprecise and intuitive one" (Sienkiewicz in Goetz, Michelberger, Schumacher, 2012: 32).

<sup>90</sup>Along with the sculpture Althamer projected a video, *Forest* (1993), documenting the artist leaving the Academy and traveling (by bus) to the woods at the end of the town. He would eventually take off his clothes, disappearing into the nature. During the day, he was supposed to present the project, Althamer did not show up, but he was replaced by his then-wife Monika who read some words explaining the artist's absence, and played the video.



Fig. 12 Paweł Althamer (1967, Warsaw), *Cardinal* (1991), Single channel video projection (colour, sound), Courtesy Sammlung Goetz, Medienkunst, München

Althamer's research translates into diverse ways and media, as sculpture, installation, painting but also performance and actions. For one of his first solo exhibitions, in 1992, the artist re-transformed the Polish gallery a.r.t. in Plock from its previous appearance, a simple flat. The artist restored a domestic ambient in the now-white cube gallery, which was formerly an apartment belonging to a Jewish family, scraping its white paint and bringing furniture inside the gallery/house. He basically brought back the true reality, the former one, erasing the artificial and sterile white cube of the art gallery.

According to Paweł Althamer, art is able to explore reality not only within the artistic locations, but also and foremost in spaces differing from the ones intuitively artistic. Althamer invites the beholder to go out, to explore the world with him, through his works that are recalling our basic instincts, but also in a more physical manner as is the case with his exhibition at the Wiener Secession in 2001. The intervention, named provocatively *Paweł Althamer and others*, consisted in creating an exit from the gallery through a corridor leading the visitor to the garden beyond the institution, as he himself did in the

video *Forest* (1993) presented for his final exam at the Fine Arts Academy<sup>91</sup>. Through these vanishing points, Althamer suggests that “we should not content ourselves with viewing, but should actually leave the exhibition room and go out into the world” (Szablowski, in Goetz, Michelberger, Schumacher, 2012: 108).

Althamer’s experimentation towards the dimension of reality and unity with a mystic primordial universe brought him to work with pre-existent groups and communities. In particular, what interested the artist was to approach marginalized communities or people with a role somehow already defined by the society. As for example, his collaboration for many years with the Nowolipie Group in Warsaw which is a group of people suffering from Multiple Sclerosis to whom Althamer teaches ceramics once a week. Their creations had been often exhibited with Althamer’s works<sup>92</sup> and they participated frequently to his artistic actions, as in the video *Winged* (2008) in which the artist takes the Nowolipie Group on a biplane, flying over Warsaw, all filmed by Artur Żmijewski<sup>93</sup>. *Winged* is an extremely symbolic act since half of the members of the Nowolipie Group are in a wheelchair. Althamer, through developing a work, hence a relation with them, attempts to change their social role. He does not want them to be just a group of ill people, he aims to push them to be something else, to expect something else from life and not just the path designed for them firstly by the disease and then by the society. He does not want that the members of the Nowolipie group think of themselves as human beings that do not have a role in society anymore.

Another marginal group which extremely interested Althamer is the one composed by the homeless, the alcoholics and the outcasts living on the streets of industrialised metropolis of the new millennium such as the ones who participated in the project *Obserwator*

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<sup>91</sup>Please see the previous note (90).

<sup>92</sup>As the exhibition *Double Agent* (2008), curated by Claire Bishop, where he presented his works along with the ones created by the patients under the name of “Nowolipie Group & Paweł Althamer”, or the fountain, a sculpture, *Sylwia* (2010), located in Warsaw’s Bródno Sculpture Park (designed by Althamer himself).

<sup>93</sup>Artur Żmijewski (1966), is one of the most important Polish visual artists. He works mainly, but not limited to, video and photography. Him and Althamer studied together at the Academy of Fine Arts, hence they are not just colleagues, but also friends and they often collaborate together as for *Winged* (2008), the exhibition they curated in *Choices.pl* (2005) in Warsaw (with also the participation of the Nowolipie group) and the journey, which then became a video, to Israel *Pilgrimage* (2003).

(Observer, 1992)<sup>94</sup>, or the one he invited to be the protagonist of his project *Astronaut 2* (1997)<sup>95</sup> for the tenth edition of documenta: “offering them another chance to join the game on different rules can’t hurt anyone – them or the system” (Althamer in Cotter, Kurzmeyer, Szymczyk, 2001: 30). Althamer got these excluded and outcast groups involved in a sort of, as defined by Stach Szablowski, role – play carnival (Szablowski in Goetz, Michelberger, Schumacher, 2012: 109) where the ones at the margins enter into the artistic realm, claiming their space within it.

“The cause that Althamer seems to pursue is a mission to rediscover reality, to redefine it and to recognize one’s own place in it. To re-establish themselves in the world and recognize their own identity is one of the great challenges faced by the Polish people and other Eastern European society after the fall of communism” (Szablowski in Goetz, Michelberger, Schumacher, 2012: 109).

A slightly different example of his work with the homeless, in the sense that it lacks their participative part, is *Guma* (2009), built with a group of underprivileged kids from Warsaw’s suburbs, who have learning disabilities<sup>96</sup>. The artwork is a sculpture of one of the most popular tramps, named Guma, from the poor district of Praga, in Warsaw and created after his death. As is *Paweł Althamer* (1993), *Guma* is a 1:1 scale sculpture made of polyurethane foam and placed on a special structure so that it lightly sways if someone touches it similar to the way human *Guma* did when he was alive. In this case, Paweł Althamer re-establishes what we perceive and what we intend as memorial, redefining what should be remembered and questioning the concept of the monument itself. A memorial should make us reflect on what happened before us, on what but especially who, has been written about in the pages of History, and through the creation of *Guma* Althamer he asked the beholder the following questions: what has to be remembered, or rather, what is important to remember? Which part of the human history should we make visible through the construction of a memorial?

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<sup>94</sup>In 1992, Althamer was invited by the Polish newspaper *Obserwator* (Observer) to create its advertising campaign. He then asked to some homeless people, those who somehow ‘observe’ the life on the city from a privileged point of view, the street, to sit, or better, to continue their normal daily routine, wearing a badge where it was written “Obserwator”.

<sup>95</sup>For documenta 10, Althamer turning a former military truck into a small house, inhabited by a Polish homeless. The visitors could enter the vehicle, which had installed inside a monitor, where it was displayed a video of the homeless dressed in a spacesuit, walking around the city of Kassel.

<sup>96</sup>These kids were part of a previous project by Paweł Althamer, *Einstein Class* (2005).

Instead of deciding to build a statue of an unfamiliar and distant historical celebrity or scientist Althamer and the kids erected a sculpture which could make them remember of a figure from their daily life, who, before his death, was someone tangible and an integral part of the everyday in the Praga district. With *Guma* Althamer, once again, he made visible the invisible, in this case the ones living in the margins of the society and who do not have any more role within it. Talking in a Rancieran way, Althamer in this case, redistributed the sensible, moving the focus to what that, due to the system, is hidden and removed from the view, rendering it not just evident and palpable but also somehow relevant and important<sup>97</sup>. The artist enlightened questions which are not just real but that also have to do with a certain historical responsibility: what will be remembered from the contemporary era? What roles did the people at the margins of our societies have and will have?

“Why dedicate a monument to Copernicus or the Pope, if you can instead raise one to your local hero – Mr. Rubber. Moreover, it is possible give it a lighter, more accessible form. You can wobble him, write on him, stand by him. Monuments are important – as things that act as reminders. The question is – what do they remind us of?” (Mytkowska in Sural, 2015).

If Bourriaud, in his *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) claims that art has the role of elaborating new models of possible universes<sup>98</sup> and that artists nowadays through their practice try to inhabit the world in a better way, Althamer and his artistic methodology seems to want to study it deeply, not to improve the way to inhabit it, but rather to declare and expose the real and to somehow discover the truth and make it visible. Althamer’s attempts to sabotage the society and its order, even showing ‘sick’ realities hidden by the society itself, are ways to face the viewers, public opinion and society with questions by simply putting them in front of the truth: “He produces circumstances that subvert the display mechanism and the work is what it is, nothing more, nothing less”. (cf. Ünsal, 2012).

Another example of an action which is almost a subtle denunciation of the capitalist system itself and which recalls Santiago Sierra’s practice<sup>99</sup>, mentioned in the second

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<sup>97</sup>After the realization of the statue, Althamer donated it to the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, and it was exhibited in many locations such as the Sammlung Goetz (Munich, 2012), and even the presidential palace in Warsaw. When *Guma* is traveling, a replica of the sculpture is installed at its place.

<sup>98</sup>In this regard, please see subchapter 2.1 Relational Aesthetics and Participation.

<sup>99</sup>In this regard, please see subchapter 2.2 Relational Antagonism.

chapter, is the exhibition which Paweł Althamer realized in 2001, at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago. The artist invited his high school friend, Piotr Anczarski, who was living in Chicago for many years and who, despite his Fine Arts studies, was working as a house-painter, to collaborate with him for the show. Basically, what Althamer asked his friend to do was to continue doing his ordinary job but inside the Museum, that is painting the walls of the institution every day in a different colour. In a country, the United States of America, where immigration is a real yet burning and ticklish issue, the visitors were paying to observe nothing more than the reality: a polish immigrant painting the walls however in this case the act became an ARTwork, or rather, the truth became an artwork, hence the visitors were somehow obliged to look and think about it. Because Althamer's real concern is "to subvert our usual view of the existing power structures. You cannot ignore the fact that the artwork looks back at you even if you don't want to see it. What's more, it continues to look back even when you are not in the museum anymore." (Kurzmeier in Cotter, Kurzmeier, Szymczyk, 2001: 57).

## 5.2 Bródno, from the outskirts to the art scene

During the Second World War the city of Warsaw had been completely destroyed. After the end of the war, in 1945, as were many cities under the soviet influence, the Polish capital was completely redesigned and dozens of high-rise buildings with several flats within them with very low ceilings and few, small, windows, were constructed in the outskirts of the cities. These areas of blocks were planned to contain a huge amount of families, many of them coming from the countryside to work in the industries in the city. One of these neighbourhood is Bródno which, particularly after the restoration of democracy in 1989, became one of the sad symbols of the former socialist regime, classified as an extremely dangerous district and, as pointed out by Szablowski in his essay *The Shaman in the Space Suit of his own body* (2012), was considered by the Warsawian as a slum to segregate the most disadvantaged and poorest part of the population. This is the neighbourhood where Paweł Althamer lived with his family until few years ago who despite his fame and popularity which allowed him to move somewhere else, decided to stay there.

I have already mentioned that Paweł Althamer often develops his practice with marginalized communities, the ‘invisibles’, hence the inhabitants and the neighbourhood of Bródno itself are a perfect subject became the perfect subject for Althamer’s work. As for example, the action *Common Task* (2009-ongoing), conducted with his neighbours and his relatives where the artist, once again, expands the *milieu* of the exhibition outside the art institution. In fact, the participants, wearing a golden suit, which mirrors the one of an astronaut, started a journey, firstly inside Bródno itself, which lead them to Bruxelles, the capital of the European Union, and to other countries such as Brazil where they visited Brasilia. They even participated in some workshops with the local community in Mali and in Italy<sup>100</sup>. Moreover, Althamer often invites the participants of *Common Task* to take part in activities dedicated to children living in the neighbourhood. The artist conceived and then developed this action in order to surprise and impress people, to see their reactions facing a different, almost alien and collective self and to see also how the *Common Task* participants would react, especially in places which are close to them such as Bródno.

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<sup>100</sup>In 2012, the *Common Task* group visited the Museion in Bolzano, on the occasion of Althamer’s exhibition *Polyethylene*.

“When we visit these different places, wearing those golden suits, we are testing how much the society and the group which hosted us are open and interest to get to know who we are. The variables are different according to each location, but it is always fascinating to discover how people react to our “intervention” which – often – for us simply means to be in this particular place.” (Althamer in Conta, 2012)



Fig. 13 Paweł Althamer (1967, Warsaw), *Common Task*, (Warsaw, 2009), courtesy of neugerriemschneider and Foksal Gallery Foundation, ©Paweł Althamer.

On the one hand, Paweł Althamer, as Rainald Schumacher claims in his essay *Return to Paradise? Take action against impotence!* (2012), acts as if he would be a sort of Robin Hood, because he somehow gives, or rather, acts to and with the marginalized with what the elite is willing to pay. In the sense that the artist uses his fame to realize projects that otherwise would have never been realized as is the case with *Einstein Class*. In 2005, Althamer was invited to realize an artwork in Berlin, on the occasion of the Einstein Year. The artist ‘recruited’ a group of boys, all inhabitants of Bródno, with learning disabilities, and he created some workshops for them. Those boys are the ones who would eventually aid Althamer to create the sculpture *Guma*, four years after this experience (2009).

On the other hand, Paweł Althamer aims to unveil the invisible, that is the people living in the margins who are thinking that they do not have a weight on the society anymore or neither count for anything. The artist wants to show also this reality of the world by

exposing it and making sure that its inhabitants feel important. In 1993, just after graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts, Althamer realized an action which consisted in a walk with a group of German collectors, around Bródno. The title of the work was simple, as the reality of the act itself: *Walk with a German collectors*.



Fig. 14 Paweł Althamer (1967, Warsaw), *Bródno 2000* (2000), courtesy of Foksal Gallery

The 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2000, Althamer orchestrated a spectacular action: *Bródno 2000*, which consisted in creating the number 2000 with the lights of the flats within it, on the façade of one of the many blocks in the neighbourhood (the one where his previous apartment was located). Basically, at a certain time of the day the block inhabitants would have to switch on or off the lights of their own home so that the number would appear and the action would happen successfully. As it can be seen in the video published by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw<sup>101</sup>, in order to realize this, Althamer was helped by a group of volunteers and scouts who in the days preceding the action were visited every apartment in the block, illustrated the project and distributed information leaflets in order to explain to the inhabitants which lights had to be turned on or off. Around 200 families were involved in the happening, all coordinated with walkie-talkies by Althamer and the volunteers and the number was visible for more than 20 minutes. After the event which

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<sup>101</sup>Althamer, Paweł, *Bródno 2000*, retrieved from <https://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/althamer-pawel-brodno-2000> (accessed January 15, 2019).

was attended by almost 3000 people there was a party with bands playing music, fireworks and political speeches. The audience was composed of inhabitants of Bródno and also by art critics, curators, gallerists, collectors and many more joined together as a big unique group in Bródno. The project had a strong media coverage, hence many people knew about it.



Fig. 15 Bródno 2000's instructional leaflet (2000), courtesy of the artist and Foksal Gallery Foundation.

*Bródno 2000* is an example of what Althamer himself defines ‘directed reality’, in other words the staging of an action, directed and orchestrated by the artist but that actually relies just upon the participants and their behaviour, thence truly represents reality. *Bródno 2000* happened, but the performance could have been done differently, some of the inhabitants could have decided to not turn on/off the lights – and actually someone did not participate, and some black dots in the number 2000 were clearly seen. In this sense, it is as if the authorship of the happening would change, as if Paweł Althamer in his actions leaves the space to his participants, the people from Bródno. In Althamer’s practice though, the authorship is not erased but distorted in order to change the order of things:

“Distorted. Yes, I wanted to distort it. To show that being jolted from the habits of perception, deprived of certain expectations, is something I can relate to personally – it stimulates my ceaseless curiosity. When I go to a sculpture exhibition and see there are no sculptures, I find that very interesting. If I were to go to a Paweł Althamer exhibition – I’m projecting here – and find no Paweł Althamer, it would set the right process in motion.” (Althamer in Cotter, Kurzmeyer, Szymczyk, 2001: 30)

Althamer, with these words in an interview with Adam Szymczyk, is trying to explain that he does not want to erase the fact of being the author of his actions, but to distort the concept of authorship in order to transform it into a trigger for something, or rather, for literally everything, every message. This can be noticed clearly in *Bródno 2000*, as reported by Roman Kurzmeyer in the essay *To an Invisible Sculpture* (2011). In fact, many organizations tried somehow to appropriate the concept of the action: political parties gave speeches in front of the block, local activists organized a gathering and organized themselves in order to provide a free meal to all the attendants and even the priest of the local church, during the homily, insisted on the importance of the light in the Christian faith. And this is exactly the most interesting and powerful aspect of the action and it reflects Badiou's concept of the ethics of the particular<sup>102</sup>: in *Bródno 2000*, everyone could find the starting point they wanted. It was the trigger for the message and aims they wanted to spread and the sole static element was Bródno's neighbourhood and its residents. What the artist created is indeed a lever, a stimulus, a force, but in a joyful and amusing context.

In fact, another fundamental layer of this work, and of Althamer's practice in general, is precisely this dimension of joy and community. Contrarily to Santiago Sierra, mentioned above and in the second chapter of this dissertation, who has a dimension of somehow exploitation of those who participate in his performances<sup>103</sup>, in Althamer's case, even if it could be said that the artist uses Bródno's inhabitants for his artistic purposes, there is no distress or anguish. The beholder is not disturbed by the way in which the artist tries to subvert the existing power structures or expose the flaw in our social system or simply the reality itself. The spectator and the participants are experience a dimension of joy and community, which, in the case of *Bródno 2000*, overturns the idea of a neighbourhood considered ill-famed, dangerous and irrecoverable, and it reverses the concept of the 'block', the high-rise socialist buildings, as something sad, grey and impersonal.

“The artist has created a real difference: redirecting art's resources, energy and prestige to Bródno changed the neighbourhood's image; a housing project that was expected to degenerate into a slum (...), but also convinced the local authorities that

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<sup>102</sup>“I maintain that there can be no ethics in general, but only an ethic of singular truths, and thus an ethic relative to a particular situation” (Badiou, 2001: ivi). In this regard, please see subchapter 1.1 Ethics of the Particular.

<sup>103</sup>In this regard, please see subchapter 2.2 Relational Antagonism.

the place's fate was not sealed at all and that art could be an instrument of genuine social change.” (Szablowski in Goetz, Michelberger, Schumacher, 2012: 110)

In the first chapter, in particular in the third subchapter, it was illustrated how art affects the process of creating a shared identity, thus how the artistic practices could influence the creation of identity both of an individual person and of a community<sup>104</sup>. In this case, Althamer seems to re-create the identity of a forgotten place and its marginalized inhabitants. The symbolic number 2000, which not only represents the new millennium but also, in a broader sense, the future, seems to announce prophetically that in the following years the outcasts, those who always had been ignored by the society and who even excluded themselves, will finally be visible. Althamer in a way tries to show the marginalized communities to the world but, at the same time, he aims to engage them, as if he wants to present their importance to the world while making them feel important for themselves in a powerful double-action. Similar to Jeremy Deller<sup>105</sup> previously mentioned with his work *Battle of Orgreave* (2001), Althamer tries to re-write history, or better, to write the future in a prospective of a ‘history from below’, as he did with the concept of memorial in *Guma* (2009). Quoting the artist: “I had an impression year 2000 to be the time, when many people expect miracles” (Paweł Althamer in the video *Bródno 2000*).

Recalling Rancière, Paweł Althamer acts directly against what he defines as police. According to the philosopher, the police is an organ of the consensus which serves to maintain the proper, assigning a function to everything that acts through the system of the Distribution of the Sensible<sup>106</sup>. Althamer with his practice operates in two ways: on one hand he attempts to change, or rather to mix and confuse the assignment of the social roles *per se*. On the other hand, he illuminates the dark gaps, the invisible, the dissensus, which in this action is represented by Bródno and its residents.

David Wiles (*Art and Citizenship*, 2017) and Olafur Eliasson (in the video *Playing with*

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<sup>104</sup>In this regard please see the subchapter 1.3 Civil Artistic Actions and Citizenship.

<sup>105</sup>In this regard please see the subchapter 2.3 Ethics of Participation.

<sup>106</sup>“The system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distributions of spaces, times and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have part in this distribution” (Rancière, 2004: 12). In this regard, please see the subchapter 1.2 Art and Politics: distributing the sensible.

*space and light*, 2009), as mentioned in the first chapter, claimed that artistic practices are, as the concept of citizenship, both sensible to the individuality and the collectivity, hence they are acting as a sort of meeting point between the two<sup>107</sup>. In the same subchapter it was reported that Philipp Dietachmair and Pascal Gielen, in *The Art of Civil Action* (2017), evidenced that the arts are effective tools in order to understand deeply and emotionally civil concerns. Althamer, with the residents of Bródno, but also in general, with those who participated in his actions went further, merging the collective and the individual. In fact, his performative works have a double approach: one which proves to those involved actively in the action the civil importance of themselves and the other which highlights this importance to the beholder.

Furthermore, through his practice the artist makes possible the encounter between communities and social groups that have nothing in common. What is a collector doing in such a neighbourhood<sup>108</sup>? Why is there a housepainter in a museum<sup>109</sup>? These are the questions that Althamer suggests to the audience, questions that inevitably lead to further discussion and debate. When Claire Bishop, in *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* (2004), criticizes Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), she points out that the examples carried out by the French curator, in particular the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija<sup>110</sup>, do not produce any form of antagonistic discussion, on the contrary they assemble a community where its members already had many features in common before their encounter in the context of the artwork. Althamer dissimilarly faces realities and truths which completely differ from each other, showing, recalling Rancière, the gaps present in the system. And what is fundamental in the artist's work is that he is not imposing his view, there is not any act of superiority in his practice. Of course, there is an inner critique in locating his practice in a declassed neighbourhood but it is not its most important aspect. Althamer provides evidence for the truth, making visible the invisibles, challenging the order of the society but leaving the choice to the beholder.

In the Polish situation, which is where most of Althamer's actions are located and which

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<sup>107</sup>Please see subchapter 1.3 Civil Artistic Actions and Citizenship.

<sup>108</sup>*Walk with German collectors* (1993)

<sup>109</sup>Exhibition realized in 2001, at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago, where he invited his high-school friend, Piotr Anczarski, a housepainter, to paint the walls of the museum, every day in a different color.

<sup>110</sup>In this regard, please see chapter 2 Relational Aesthetics and Participation.

was subjected to a radical change after 1989, the artist fills the gap created by the shift between two orders with questions so that they could stimulate a discussion about the future. His questions are based on pure reality, highlighting its darkened spots. Hence, instead of imposing his own view, his own ethics, everyone could find their own truth and especially for the people at the margins of the society, everyone could recognize their own place in this reality.

## 6. Tania Bruguera and the utility of art

### 6. 1 Life and artistic practice

In 1959, Fidel Castro and the *Ejercito Rebelde*<sup>111</sup>, entered La Havana, Cuba's capital, taking control over the government and establishing a direct socialist democracy, replacing the US-puppet Fulgencio Batista, who ruled the country since 1952. Cuba, which until that moment was *de facto* an American protectorate, witnessed in 1960, as the first act of the newly installed socialist government, an agrarian reform which nationalized all the plantations and removed the American industries. This act generated an economic stagnation, solved through the help of the USSR, which help became even more crucial (and became also the only contact with the outside world) after the Bay of Pigs Invasion<sup>112</sup> in 1961, and the American embargo in 1962. After the revolution Cuba witnessed censorship, political persecution of the ones who did not believe in the socialist principles and a strong closure towards the outside, except during the *perestroika*<sup>113</sup>, in the 1980s. In these years in fact, a new generation of Cuban artists emerged, *la generación de los ochenta*, which brought a sort of cultural ferment and a proliferation of happenings<sup>114</sup>.

In 1989, after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, which meant for Cuba the loss of its sole commercial partner and the intensification of the American embargo, the country went to a dreadful crisis. This crisis led Cuba to the *Período especial en tiempos de paz* (special period in time of peace), in 1991, years marked by immense poverty, rationed food and commodities, but also by a small opening towards the outside world which consisted in decriminalizing the dollar and implementing tourism<sup>115</sup>.

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<sup>111</sup>Cuban paramilitary organization, part of the revolutionary movement, which overthrew Batista's regime.

<sup>112</sup>In April 1961, a group of Cuban exiles, trained and helped by the CIA, tried unsuccessfully to overthrow Castro. After this dreadful episode, Cuba became closer with the USSR.

<sup>113</sup>Term used to indicate the political and economic reforms implemented by the USSR, including a moderate liberalism in the market system of the Union and the recognition of an internal opposition (1985-1991).

<sup>114</sup>"In the Cuban context, the concept of *perestroika* was interpreted as the Campaign to Rectify Errors and Correct Negative Tendencies, aiming to cut through bureaucratic corruption and reinvigorate the spirit of the Revolution. Artists were encouraged to participate in the rectification process. And in turn, they took seriously the Revolutionary call for 'critical participation', advancing a model of art that could play a role shaping the State and its institutions. This gave way to the rise of a distinct generation of artists, known as *los '80s*. They believed that their art was both a catalyst for freedom of expression and the development of an independent nation in the name of the Revolution." (Tello, 2016: 43)

<sup>115</sup>Bruguera identified this period as "posguerra": "a rapid decline in living standards, including shortages of food and power, characterized Cuban society following 1989 alongside a rise in siege mentality and relentless if not paranoid calls to come together and support the nation" (Tello, 2016: 38).

It is extremely important to mention that Cuba had three considerable migratory waves: the first one in 1960, as soon as Castro took power, composed of Cubans who were against the revolution, but also by the ones who, despite having supported Fidel Castro, did not want Cuba to turn into a socialist regime. A second wave in the 1980s and a third, substantial, one, during the *Período especial*. Of those ‘exiles’, defined as such because they were unable to return to their country, there is no information in Cuba. In their motherland nobody knows anything about them and it is as if they had been erased from Cuba’s official history, as if they had never existed.

This brief historical prologue on the Cuban historical situation is necessary in order to approach the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera since her country is the starting point of her artistic research which, as it will be developed through the chapter, has diversified over the years, but starts from the Caribbean island and in particular from the exiles.

Tania Bruguera was born in 1968, in Havana. Tania, daughter of a Cuban diplomat, faithful to the revolution lived in many countries during her childhood such as France, Lebanon and Panama. She came back to Cuba with her mother in 1979 after her parents’ divorce because of political incomprehension<sup>116</sup>. From 1987 to 1992 she studied at the *Instituto Superior de Arte* in Havana where she was influenced by the *generación de los ochenta*. After her graduation, she became assistant professor in the same institute and she also started teaching at the *Escuela de Conducta “Eduardo Marante”*, a school for troubled boys and young criminals where art was used as a rehabilitation therapy. This experience was crucial to Bruguera, in particular it helped the artist to postulate the concept of *Arte de Conducta*, which was then converged into the creation of the *Catedra Arte de Conducta*, as it will be discussed through the chapter.

Bruguera’s first work is part of a series of tributes to another artist, Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), but actually, broadly, to all the Cuban exiles. In fact, in 1961 when she was 13 years old Mendieta and her sister were given up for adoption in the United States as part of joint

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<sup>116</sup>Bruguera eventually changed her surname, which originally was ‘Brugueras’ (Alvarez, Carlos Manuel (2016, November 26), “Tania Bruguera: Cuban artist fights for free expression”, *Aljazeera*. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/10/tania-bruguera-cuban-artist-fights-free-expression-160930124023219.html> (accessed January 16, 2019).

initiative of the American government and the Catholic Church because their parents were against the revolution. Mendieta visited her motherland only three times in the 1980s before dying in 1985. Furthermore, her work had never been shown in Cuba: it was obscured and hidden by the censorship as was all of the work by exiled intellectuals, “the worms against the revolution” (Tello, 2016: 39).

Tania Bruguera made the Cuban artist ‘re-live’, as if she would be re-inserted in the history of the country, through her series of *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta* (1985-1996), where basically Bruguera re-enacted various Mendieta’s performances. Mendieta’s practice is marked by a sense of seeking out her motherland as she continuously questioned her belonging. An example is through the sculpting of the figure of her body in the landscape as an attempt to leave a trace of herself (series *Silueta*, 1973 – 1980), embodying the “perpetual dialectic of exile and desired repatriation” (Tello, 2016: 47). Through these re-enactments, Bruguera aimed to awaken the minds numbed by censorship. She tried to act on Cubans’ collective memory, rewriting it, therefore attempting to rewrite the past. By becoming more aware of the past she attempts to re-design the future and create a new form of imagining a world, one which the Cubans could not access.

Bruguera continued her artistic research around the concept of memory and the techniques of rewriting history implemented by the Cuban government. She essentially reflected about the ways through which the socialist regime became a sort of biopower<sup>117</sup>, acting through the collective memory of a country and its citizens, using the medias and other means which are acting on subjectivity. “The immersive affect of the Cuban media is catalysed through the State’s policing of information, which in effect shapes historical consciousness and concepts of the present and future, augmenting or diminishing agency” (Tello, 2016: 54).

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<sup>117</sup>Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their books *Empire* (2000), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009) developed a new paradigm of power, identified by them as biopolitical. The two philosophers express that there has been a transition from a disciplinary society (regulated through disciplinary institutions) to a society of control (impregnated with the biopower previously mentioned). In the latter, “mechanism of command become immanent within the social field. The modes of social integration and exclusion are increasingly interiorized through mechanism that directly organize the brains and bodies of the citizens” (Mouffe, 2013: 67). In this regard please see subchapter 3.1 From Antagonism to Agonism.

In 1993, Bruguera created *Memoria de la Postguerra*, a subversive newspaper which reported news and articles written mostly by exiles. *Memoria* was the first newspaper in the country to publish something written by the exiled Cubans, hence somehow proving their existence because, as Bruguera said “when you leave, it’s as if you are being erased from culture” (Bruguera in Schwartz, 2012: 221). Bruguera’s newspaper represented the only alternative to the official press and it was actually almost imitating it and making fun of it but in a very serious way. In fact, *Memoria* was made in the image and likeness of *Granma*, the official newspaper of the Cuban revolution, the only one circulating in the country: “*Memoria* directly confronted the means by which the Cuban Government secured its lock on writing – and re-writing – Cuba’s history” (cf. Schwartz, 221). As pointed out by Andrés David Montenegro Rosero in *Politics and Aesthetics of “The ‘Uncanny’”*, *Memoria* stole and incorporated the power strategies of the regime and managed to subtly infiltrate the centre of Cuban public life (Rosero, 2014: 190).

It is interesting how Bruguera plays with the devices used to create the identity of a country, the media, in order to subvert this identity and create a new one, a new reality or rather a true one which was censored before. It has often been mentioned through this dissertation that art and culture could act as identity creators, and it is possible to see this concept also in Castro’s regime. As for example, the establishment of the Propaganda Laws in 1961 or the expulsion of the intellectuals against socialism, and the implementation of those in favour of it. Bruguera seizes the aesthetic of the revolution, acting agonistically through the system in order to re-design not only the history and the truth but also, as inevitable consequence, the social reactions of the Cubans. She puts her fellow countrymen in front of the unknown and untold, facing then a possibility of reaction and offering them a space to think and write the history of their country. “Appearing at a moment characterised by a sense of a “cultural vacuum,” the project was the only platform for the discussion of important, usually state censored, topics such as human rights abuses, the implications of the Cuban revolution and other controversial issues” (Rosero, 2014: 188). For these potentialities, *Memoria de la Postguerra* was firstly censored and then, in 1994, after the second edition it was confiscated and destroyed.

*El peso de la culpa* (1977), is another performance which plays with Cuban identity and its memory. In fact, it consists in a re-enactment of a Cuban legend about the indigenous populations inhabiting the island before the Spanish conquest. According to the legend, the indigenous people were unable to win against the *conquistadores* and committed mass suicide by eating soil until they died. This event even entered in the Cuban jargon, *comer tierra* (eating soil) is a way of indicating a moment when someone has to hold on to get out of it, a moment similar to the *Periodo Especial*, when *El peso de la culpa* was conceived. In the performance, Bruguera was kneeling naked with a lamb, symbol of innocence and purity, on her shoulders while eating pieces of soil as the indigenous people did. *El peso de la culpa* was performed in Havana, hence “the artist’s body was her own subjective body, but it was simultaneously ritualized into a social body” (Savin, 2017: 92).

During the development of her practice, Bruguera eventually abandoned this typology of performance, that were focused on her body in order to turn her research towards more participative and collective work. According to the artist, her previous pieces were an experience exclusively figurative and visual for the beholder and therefore something happening outside the audience. For this reason, she decided to develop a new practice through which the spectators could have a first-hand experience in order to live and experience the artwork so that it would stay impressed in the story of their life. Something experienced and not just evocative. Furthermore, following her Masters in Performance Art at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1999-2001), she extended his artistic investigation about the subversion of power in a broader sense, expanding it from the Cuban situation to the one of the world.

An example of this is the series of performances titled *Tatlin’s Whisper* (2006-ongoing), named as such to recall the Russian architect Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) who had designed the *Tatlin Tower* in 1919 to be the symbol of the 3rd Communist International but which was never realized. The title of the series then alludes to the utopian project of the tower which was supposed to unite architecture with avant-garde art but which like the one of the socialist revolution was reduced to a mere whisper.

In the series of performances which vaguely recalls the concept of directed reality by Pawel Althamer<sup>118</sup>, Bruguera questions the images implemented by the power hegemonies, or its display of force through their decontextualization. In fact, these images are torn from the media that have spread them and from other means of biopower dissemination and brought into the art world, rendering them more realistically possible.

“This series intends to activate images, well known because of having been repeatedly seen in the press, but are here decontextualized from the original event that gave way to the news and staged as realistically as possible in an art institution. The most important element in this series is the participation of spectators who may determine the course the piece will take” (Bruguera in Rosero 2014: 227)

Each performance, or better, each event of the series, was conceived and modelled around an image which, as evidenced by Stephanie Schwartz in *Tania Bruguera: Between Histories* (2012), is politically time-specific. This is similar in *Tatlin’s Whisper #3* which happened in 2006 at the art gallery Helga de Alvear in Madrid where Bruguera hired an engineer to teach the audience how to create a Molotov cocktail in the wake of the many ETA attacks<sup>119</sup>. The artist has politically empowered the beholder, giving him/her the ‘know-how’ and the ability to create an incendiary and subversive object. “She actually made them potentially dangerous” (Beatty in Rosero, 2014: 231).

*Tatlin’s Whisper #5* (2008), realized in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London, consisted in two mounted police officers who, in the space of the institution, were giving orders to the visitors and performing mass control techniques. The image of the mounted policeman is extremely common in English media as they are employed to control and repress manifestations and public events. Therefore, Bruguera not only made this image closer to the viewers both physically and emotionally but also made sure that they were subjected to the authority, an authority for its own sake and for the sake of power.

The most recent event to date of the series was in Cuba in 2009. With *Tatlin’s Whisper #6*, Bruguera created something that under Castro’s regime had never happened, a stage where

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<sup>118</sup>In this regard, please see chapter 5. Pawel Althamer.

<sup>119</sup>Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (“Basque Homeland and Liberty”) was a separatist political movement from the Basque Country, born in 1959 and disbanded in 2018. ETA was militating, even using terrorism, for the independence of the region from Spain.

the Cubans had the freedom to express themselves for one minute without any censorship or repression (at least, not immediately<sup>120</sup>) from the authorities. On the stage, built at the Centro Cultural Wilfredo Lam during the tenth edition of the Havana Biennial, there was a microphone and two actors dressed in military clothes. The actors had to place a white dove on the shoulder of the person who was talking and then remove it once the time had expired. The choice to use a white dove is of course, not accidental. In fact, after he entered Havana on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 1959, Castro addressed the crowd and during his speech a white dove perched on his shoulder. This symbolic image had been continuously echoed in the media of the Revolution and is now part of the Cuban historical-collective imaginary.

Once again, Bruguera plays with the means of communication of the power apparatus and inspects how they are able to infiltrate in people's lives. However, she goes further similar to Pawel Althamer<sup>121</sup>, Bruguera instrumentalized her position as an artist (a privileged position) thanks to the international notoriety that she gained during her career, "where instead of the artist being the only one who could have access to certain spaces, this responsibility was delegated and disseminated amongst the audience" (Rosero, 2014: 236). Through *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, 39 Cubans had the chance to express themselves. Someone started crying, screaming, someone spoke against the regime and someone in favour, but at least, as indicated by Andrés David Montenegro Rosero, Bruguera made it possible to conduct a participatory and for the first time, democratic dialogue through which past history could be re-evaluated.

Tania Bruguera argues that her art is *Arte de Conducta* which could roughly be translated into Behaviour Art. She refuses to identify her practice as performance because the word 'performance' is firstly, an English word and as such is related with a Western cultural tradition and differs completely to the one of the Cuban artist. Furthermore, as she claims in an Interview with Francesca di Nardo for *Janus*, "many things have made me feel

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<sup>120</sup>Few days after *Tatlin's Whisper #6* was staged, the Havana Biennial organizers divulged a press release denouncing the event: "Last Sunday March 29th 2009, in the Wilfredo Lam Contemporary Art Centre, various people unrelated to the culture, headed by a professional 'dissident' created by the powerful media group PRISA made use of a performance by Tania Bruguera to strike a blow at the Cuban Revolution. It was a case where individuals, in the service of the anti-Cuban propaganda machine, repeated worn-out claims of "freedom" and "democracy" demanded by their sponsors. They spoke – or rather acted – for the cameras and now several media outlets in Florida are turning it into big news" (Schwartz, 2012: 231).

<sup>121</sup>In this regard please see chapter 5. Pawel Althamer.

uncomfortable over the time with performance art: the expectations people have with it, its transformation into visual iconography and its apparent fatalism to become entertainment” (Bruguera in Di Nardo, 2007).

According to Bruguera, *conducta* behaviour is intended as the language of society, a concept influenced by Michel Foucault who in his essay *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (1977), claims that the behaviour in the context of a society, has an extremely important role concerning the interaction between individuals. Furthermore, Bruguera states that the behaviour, the act and the gesture, is an exceptionally powerful ideas transmitter, much stronger than the mere body with which the artist realizes a performance. Hence, through *conducta* and the behaviour, Bruguera is able to reach a much larger public compared to the one used to the contemporary art scene and its language (cf. Cippitelli, 2006).

For the artist, performance has to do with an act which somehow creates a separation between the artist and the beholder and which then results in mere contemplation. With *Arte de Conducta*, Bruguera emphasizes the replacement of performance art which now is part of the spectacle, with something which is deeply connected with society, hegemony and with its mechanisms of control and influence on people’s lives.

Moreover, as Andrés David Montenegro Rosero points out, in Spanish the word *conducta* is employed to indicate the capacity of conduct. It could also be associated with the notion of passage, transition, or being a transit point to reach something. Hence,

“the multiplicity of meanings associated with the word *conducta*, therefore, clearly exceed a narrow definition of behaviour understood as the ‘manner of bearing oneself’ or in close relation to the word good – as in good manners – , a marker of value judgments and measurement against an established rule or ideal” (Rosero, 2014: 184).

With *Arte de Conducta*, Bruguera wants to find new ways of being together, engaging with what the empowered hegemony employs in order to shape the subjectivity of the people, and in particular, she attempts to involve her practice with the collective strategies used by the ruling system to perpetrate its power (cf. Tello, 2016). Bruguera attempts to shape the reactions and the behaviour of the beholder. Instead of passively observing what is going on, she wants to enable him to react and get involved.

As mentioned before, following her graduation from the *Instituto Superior de Arte*, Bruguera started teaching at the *Escuela de Conducta “Eduardo Marante”*, a school for troubled boys and young criminals where art was used as a rehabilitation therapy, in particular as a tool to improve the capacity of conviviality and sociability between those who were in the institute so to facilitate their reintegration into society. Briefly, art was employed to re-educate those boys who ‘behaved badly’.

Inspired by this experience, Bruguera created the course *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* (2002-2009), managed by her and two collaborators, with foreign artists, curators and art professionals, participating as lecturers. The School/Course, belonged to the *Instituto Superior de Arte* in Havana but the teaching was outside the school, in the studios of the artists, in art institutions or in other official/unofficial cultural locations. The aim of this project was, as in *Tatlin Whisper #6*, to create a space where the students could freely discuss the censorship of the Cuban regime and “to train students not just to make art, but to experience and formulate civil society” (Bishop, 2012: 247).

Tania Bruguera places the spectator in a condition where he/she has to live the event and, furthermore, react and get involved instead of watching passively. She changes their established position as viewers and encourages them to become agents: “I am interested in having spectators stop ‘acting as an audience’” (Bruguera in Curia, 2009). She explores the diverse possibilities through which the beholder could be “politically activated” (Rosero, 2014: 232) with Art. In particular, she deepens her reflection around the symbols, media and tools employed by the biopolitical power hegemony to implement their control over people. As she said in the interview with Dolores Curia:

“I believe that the way to work is using facts and not symbols. We live in an information society and this is what we must work with, not with interpretations. We must have confidence in the spectators and let them an active part of presentations. They must feel they are a part of a community of thought and see possibilities for action that they might have considered impossible before” (Bruguera in Curia, 2009).

In evolving this research, Bruguera developed the concept of art as something that is on the one hand, aesthetic and symbolic, and on the other hand she refused the belief that art

cannot have a tangible function in society (cf. Bishop, 2012), which will further be evolved in *Arte Útil*.

## 6.2 *Arte Útil*: aesthetics of usefulness

For Tania Bruguera, *Arte Útil* is a concept, a way of doing and creating art, or rather, a way of producing useful art. In fact, the word “useful” is one of the attempts to translate the Spanish *útil* into the English language, even if it doesn’t perfectly render the correct definition. The Spanish version of the word emphasizes the dimension of *útil* as a tool and an instrument. In 2012, Bruguera reflects on the concept of *Arte Útil* (“Reflexiones sobre el Arte Útil” in *ARTE ACTUAL: Lecturas para un espectador inquieto*, 2012), trying to find a sort of definition and seeking an elucidation of its core concepts. According to Bruguera, what drives every artist in his/her practice is the willingness to understand what exists and happens in the world surrounding them and sharing these encounters and explorations with other human beings. Hence, the artist claims that art and the process of artistic creation are the development of something that still does not exist in the present reality. Thus, it could be said (as Bourriaud was highlighting in *Relational Aesthetics*<sup>122</sup> (1998), that art is a chance to create the future, “Art is hiring the future in the present (...) art is to start practicing the future” (Bruguera in Aznar, Martinez, 2012).

What Bruguera defines as *Arte Útil* lies in the space between the possibility, the willingness, the proposal and its application in real life, creating a form of art which gives people a beneficial, or better, a useful result. Essentially, art projects should stop from being merely utopias and they should be applied in reality in a tangible manner. Moreover, in keeping with Bruguera, the act of implementing an artistic practice within the context of *Arte Útil* is also a way to somehow democratize art and to make it accessible to every social class, ethnic groups and more:

“With excessive frequency we hear about the barrier existing between the work of art and the non-informed audience for which access to the work is impossible. The usefulness of the work for the audience is (...) the key to solve this barrier of communication and interest by the non-informed/non-initiated audience in contemporary art” (Bruguera in Aznar, Martinez, 2012).

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<sup>122</sup>In his book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), Nicholas Bourriaud claimed that while before art had the “announcing function of the upcoming World”, nowadays it has the role of elaborating new models of possible universes (Bourriaud, 2002: 4). Furthermore, he insists that art tries to inhabit the World in a better way, without creating imaginary utopias, “but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real” instead (Bourriaud, 2002: 5).

As she implied in many interviews, the concept itself of *Arte Útil* was not invented by Tania Bruguera. It is something shared by many artists, “it’s open source” (Bruguera in O’Neill, 2014). In fact, she resumed this concept from the *Manifiesto de Arte Útil*, written in 1969 by the Argentinian artist Eduardo Costa (1940), when he presented his *Useful Art Works* as part of the event *Street Works* which organized by a group of artists and poets in New York<sup>123</sup>. Not only this, the Italian artist Pino Poggi (1939), starting from 1965, redacted several manifestos about the possibility of creating an *Arte Utile*<sup>124</sup>, ideas that he would eventually share with Bruguera.

*Art Útil* became somehow tangible through Bruguera’s project *Immigrant Movement International* (2010-2015), where she implemented the ideas of usefulness and art combined together. The project was sponsored by Creative Time<sup>125</sup> and the Queens Museum in New York. During the first year of the project, Bruguera was living in an apartment with another ten people in Corona, an ethnic neighbourhood in New York, inhabited by many immigrants, thus experiencing the migrants daily life. She was also working in a center created by the Immigrant Movement International in the same district which combined an artistic atelier with a reception centre for migrants. This center had two functions: on one hand it served to welcome and to help immigrants who just arrived in the city, on the other hand it was an attempt to sensitize the citizens to issues related to immigration through participative performances and workshops, or better, through *Art Útil*. The Immigrant Movement International is basically a socio-political movement, composed by a community of people who are questioning the meaning of being an immigrant in the time we are living now by exploring “who is defined as an immigrant and

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<sup>123</sup>“The first of these works consisted of buying at his own expense and placing in the right place the missing metal street signs at the North East corners of 42<sup>nd</sup> St. and Madison Ave., 51<sup>st</sup> St. and Fifth Ave., 49<sup>th</sup> St. and Fifth Ave. (...). These new ones replaced only some of the street signs missing in the area of midtown New York designated for the performance of *Street Works* (...). The second *Useful Art Work* consisted of painting the subway station at 42<sup>nd</sup> St. and Fifth Ave. on the Flushing line. These art works were intended to attack the myth of the lack of utility of the arts, while being in themselves a modest contribution to the improvement of city living conditions” (Eduardo Costa’s *Manifiesto on Useful Art*, 1969).

<sup>124</sup>“In the past, art had a goal - to invoke certain feelings in the viewer.

In the past, art had a purpose - to express something to the public, that is, to reach the individual.

Art in the past was an art of individuals for individuals.

AVANTGARDE UTILE (AU), on the contrary, is intended to help give the average man a clear grasp of his real problems in life” (Pino Poggi’s *Manifiesto Arte Utile I*, 1965). In this regard, please see *Arte Utile* website: <http://www.arte-utile.net/PinoPoggi/web-content/navigation/f-au.html>.

<sup>125</sup>Creative Time is a non-profit organization, based in New York. It works with artists who are developing a socially engaged practice. In this regard please see Creative Time website: <http://creativetime.org/>.

the values they share, focusing on the larger question of what it means to be a citizen of the world” (*Immigrant Movement International* statement, 2010). Furthermore, parallel to her activity in New York, she carried out an intense information and awareness-raising campaign, engaging in symposiums, workshops, exhibitions and educational programs in other countries. As evidenced by Alex Kershaw in the interview with Bruguera (*Immigrant Movement International: Five Years and Counting*, 2015), the extremely interesting aspect about the *Immigrant Movement International* is that it managed to combine diverse areas of contact, all belonging to the sphere of the real such as art, politics and governments, legal entities, social service organizations and the media.

After this first step implementing the concept of *Arte Útil*, Bruguera ideated and then realized, the *Arte Útil Lab*, presented at the Queens Museum of Art from the 17<sup>th</sup> of February through the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, 2013. As the title suggests, *Arte Útil Lab* was not an exhibition but rather a laboratory and as written in the press release: “an investigative space that will evolve throughout its run as projects explore this concept by creating artistic tools for transformation, tools for social interaction, tools to address current real-world issues, and tools that challenge the role of art as separated from use”.

The exhibition was divided in two different areas. One was a sort of archive, named *The Library*, which included several documentations of projects that according to Bruguera, belonged to the concept of *Arte Útil*. A second area, *The Lab*, presented tools and objects which would eventually turn into *Arte Útil* during the four months of the exhibition. *Arte Útil Lab* also included conferences, symposiums, workshops and a programme of development of individual projects in which working groups composed by artists and whoever was interested would work on different issues.

During the occasion of *Arte Útil Lab*, for the first time, Bruguera defined the criteria through which an artwork, a project, a performance could be qualified as *Arte Útil*:

“Arte Útil should:

- 1- Propose new uses for art within society
- 2- Challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc)
- 3- Be ‘timing specific’, responding to current urgencies

- 4- Be implemented and function in real situations
- 5- Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users
- 6- Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users
- 7- Pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions
- 8- Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation (*Arte Útil Lab* press release).

As John Byrne highlights in his article *Social Autonomy and the Use Value of art* (2016), the implementation of *Arte Útil* by Bruguera acts as a reorganization not only of the connection that we human beings and citizens have with art itself, but also with the places where culture is located such as museums and galleries and with their agents – the artists. Moreover, as already mentioned, it has to do also with the subversion of the idea that art and culture should be separated from daily life and that somehow they should not be tangible, or better, useful.

An emblematic attempt to subvert the classic idea of the museum was the transformation of the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven) into the *Museum of Arte Útil*, from the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2013 until the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2014. The *Museum of Arte Útil* was an attempt to, on one hand, study art's social function and on the other to question the idea of museum itself and the possibility that, instead of being a place of 'representation', it could become also a place of production. In fact, through the creation of the *Museum of Arte Útil*, Bruguera wanted to transform the Van Abbemuseum into a *Social Power Plant* "where spectators become users and collective, transformative energy can be generated for use in the world outside" (*Museum of Arte Útil* website).



Fig. 16 Museum of Arte Útil Poster, courtesy Museum of Arte Útil and Van Abbemuseum

On this occasion, an archive was created, including the current projects that met *Arte Útil* criteria and a lexicon/dictionary which was produced by the theorist Stephen Wright and which includes terms that should be “retired” alongside “emergent concepts”. Several case studies were presented in the Museum and were displayed in ten rooms<sup>126</sup>, divided on the basis of the strategies that they were implementing. The audience, or better, according the *Arte Útil Lexicon*, the users, were invited to observe the case studies and to participate in some of them (as written in the website: “Users must be prepared to commit both time and energy”), guided by the artists, named initiators.



Fig. 17 Arte Útil display structure, courtesy Museum of Arte Útil and Van Abbemuseum

After the exhibition *Museum of Arte Útil* ended, the project merged into the *Asociación de Arte Útil*, co-directed by Bruguera and Alistair Hudson<sup>127</sup> which supports and implements ‘useful’ art projects. The *Asociación* also updates the members<sup>128</sup>, whose number is increasing annually, with news about the association and the *Arte Útil* projects. It invites them to contribute to its development both in practice and in theory<sup>129</sup>. Furthermore, the archive created during the exhibition at Van Abbemuseum in 2015 evolved into an online

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<sup>126</sup>The name of the rooms were: Use it Yourself; Institutional Repurpose; The Room of Propaganda, Legitimation and Belief; A-Legal; Room of Controversies; Archive Room; Space Hijack; Open Access; Legislative Change; Reforming Capital.

<sup>127</sup>Alistair Hudson is the Director of the Whitworth and Manchester Art Galleries. He is the former Director of Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (mima), where he applied the concept of Useful Museum in managing the institution.

<sup>128</sup>It is extremely easy to be part of the *Asociación* since there are no particular criteria to be part of it, except for the willing to participate to implement the idea of Arte Útil: <http://www.art-util.org/join-the-association/>.

<sup>129</sup>In this regard, please see <http://www.art-util.org/about/activities/>.

platform (<http://www.arte-util.org>) which includes all the projects which can be downloaded. The projects meeting the *Arte Útil* criteria are divided into seven categories: Urban development, Scientific, Pedagogical, Economy, Environment and Social. The website is intended as an open source, hence the audience, or better, the users of the platform are welcomed to submit new projects and therefore to change their status from users to initiators. The ‘Tools’ section of [arte-util.org](http://www.arte-util.org), includes also the *Lexicon of Usership* ideated by Stephen Wright which can be downloaded for free as well as the manual to build the *Arte Útil* structure: a modular wooden display system which can be mounted everywhere and adapted to every location. It is a device to illustrate the *Arte Útil* projects so that whoever and wherever a sort of homemade *Museum of Arte Útil* can be created.



Fig. 18 Arte Útil archive, courtesy Asociación Arte Útil

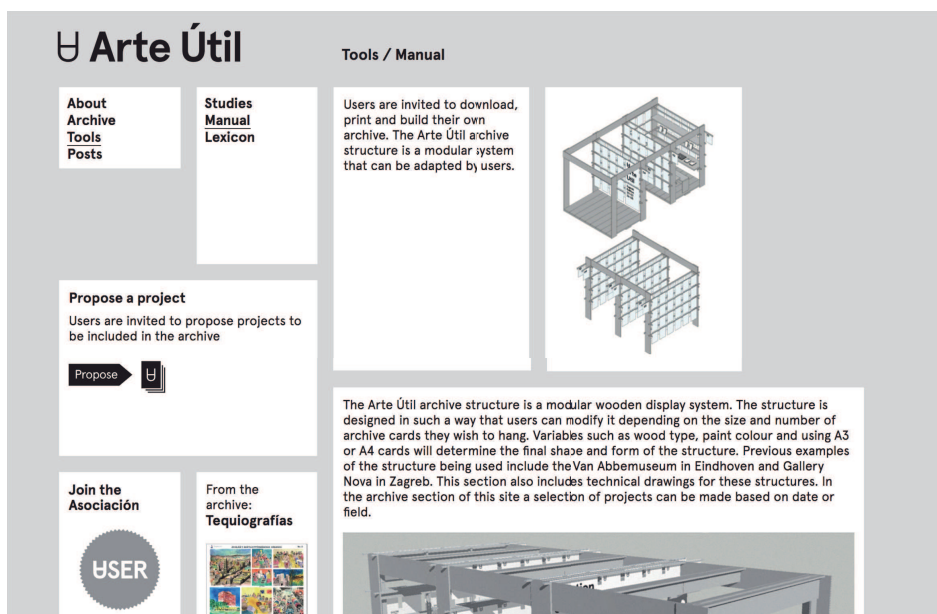


Fig. 19 Arte Útil structure manual, courtesy Asociación Arte Útil

Among the projects in the *Arte Útil* website there is *Aerocene*<sup>130</sup>, initiated by the artist and architect Tomás Saraceno (1973), which consists in the production of air-filled sculptures that are able to fly thanks to the heat of the Sun and the infrared radiations from the Earth. *Aerocene*, which is an open project, thus inviting everyone to participate and contribute to it, is proposing the “most sustainable and energy efficient vehicle humans have ever created” (*Aerocene* description in arte-util.org). Another project in the archive is *The Silent University*<sup>131</sup>, a knowledge exchange platform by immigrants, initiated by the artist Ahmet Ögüt. *The Silent University* is operated by professors and lecturers who are immigrants and who provide both specific classes and invite the users to reflect on what it means to be a refugee or an asylum seeker. The project involves in particular those who had an academic background in their home countries but that now cannot use their knowledge because of their immigrant status.

According to Badiou, as mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation, “there can be no ethics in general, but only an ethic of singular truths and thus, an ethic relative to a particular situation” (Badiou, 2000: ivi). Therefore, keeping with the philosopher, a

<sup>130</sup> In this regard, please see *Aerocene* page on *Arte Útil* website: <http://www.arte-util.org/projects/aerocene/>.

<sup>131</sup> In this regard, please see *The Silent University* page on *Arte Útil* website: <http://www.arte-util.org/projects/the-silent-university/>.

universal ethics does not exist but several ethics do, according to each situation<sup>132</sup>. Ethics is located within a certain particularity. In an interview by Paul O’Neill for BOMB magazine (2014), Bruguera claimed that art and ethics cannot be separated in *Arte Útil* practice: “they are interdependent, they define each other” (Bruguera in O’Neill, 2014). Thus, it could be said that, through the implementation of the *Arte Útil* projects, Bruguera created a sort of tangible application of Badiou’s concept of ethics of the particular. In fact, each project is modelled and applied on a specific community, context and issue.

In *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), Rancière states that art and politics operate in changing the principles through which human actions are routinely regulated and then acting a re-distribution of the sensible<sup>133</sup>. Therefore, if Bruguera with her previous works tried to question the dictatorship of the proper, evidencing the improper, the gap in the system of Distribution of the Sensible that the power hegemonies are hiding, and introducing new modes, new relations of power, challenging the normal social distribution; with *Arte Útil* she goes further. Bruguera renders tangible these new modes, acting through a re-articulation of the aesthetics and introducing a new aesthetical canon: the one of the usefulness.

Furthermore, *Arte Útil* merges the concepts of artistic action and civil action, as evidenced by Dietachmair and Gielen in *The Art of Civil Action* (2017)<sup>134</sup>. In fact, according to the two editors, civil action begins as something which the government or the state never thought about. In the same way, the *Arte Útil* projects are created in order to answer to an actual and still unsolved need to which nobody ever addressed and they evolve as a civil action through the civil chain<sup>135</sup>. Indeed, they begin with an initial emotion, the one of the

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<sup>132</sup>In this regard, please see subchapter 1.1 Ethics of the Particular.

<sup>133</sup>According to Rancière, the system of the Distribution of the Sensible is “The system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have part in this distribution” (2004: 12).

<sup>134</sup>In this regard, please see chapter 1.3 Civil Artistic Actions and Citizenship.

<sup>135</sup>In *The Civil Potency of a Singular Experience* (2017), Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster locate a process at the base of the civil action, named ‘civil chain’: “this succession of processes – which we call the civil chain – looks like this: (1) emotion – (2) (self-) rationalization – (3) communication – (4) de-privatization (or going public) and, finally, (5) self-organization.” (Gielen and Lijster in Dietachmair, Gielen, 2017: 42).

initiator of the project which finally moves from a private dimension to a shared and participative one in order to be self-organized.

Through her practice, and in particular through *Arte Útil*, Bruguera aims to turn the spectators into citizens: “I am interested in having spectators stop “acting” as an audience, as onlookers, and to start to act like citizens, like civilians in a reality suggested through art” (Bruguera in Curia, 2009). Thus, it can be claimed that Tania Bruguera does not only realize tangibly the concept of artistic citizenship ideated by David J. Elliott, Marissa Silverman and Wayne D. Bowman (2016)<sup>136</sup>, (intended as the commitment to engage in artistic practices, which are supporting a certain well-being shared by a community) but she goes further, almost developing a new sort of citizenship which could be defined as a “spectatorship citizenship”, where individuality and collectivity come together, activating and triggering each other.

After having analysed, in the second chapter of this dissertation, the viewpoint of Claire Bishop, Tania Bruguera’s *Arte Útil* might seem fallacious and somehow contemporary. In fact, the professor and curator, in *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its discontents* (2006) and in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), claims that recently contemporary art experienced an ethical turn and the focus of attention of the critics has shifted to the way an artistic practice is ethically implemented. Bishop continues by claiming that this ethical turn is wrong because based on a Westernized concept of the ethical<sup>137</sup>. But the case of *Arte Útil* is different because each project is modelled, shaped, designed, for a specific community and issue. They are ethical for a determinate location/situation, thus considering an ethics of the particular. It is true that *Arte Útil* is based on verifiable social impacts but this is not the point. The key is that Bruguera aspires to create a new kind of aesthetics, a new canon, situated within the dimension of usefulness. Furthermore, she wants to create a dialogue and a discussion,

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<sup>136</sup>“Artistic endeavours involve a special kind of citizenship – civic responsibility to conceive of and engage in them with a view to the particular social “goods” they embody or nurture. The arts are rich human actions replete with human significance and, by extension, ethical responsibilities” (Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016: 5).

<sup>137</sup>In this regard, please see chapter 2. Relational Aesthetics and Participation.

trying to get out from the capitalist market logic of the mere experience<sup>138</sup>, but mostly her practice and in particular *Arte Útil*, has the objective to be a trigger for reflection. As Paweł Althamer, mentioned in the previous chapter, Bruguera's authorship in *Arte Útil* is blurred and confused because her concept could be appropriated by anyone to be a stimulus for the beholder, or better, the user.

It has been already pointed out that Bruguera, through her practice is highlighting the gap within the sensible and within the power hegemony. Firstly in Cuba and then she expanded her practice in a general matter. However, what I want to highlight is that she acts within an agonistic context and through an agonistic practice. What Bruguera does is that she exposes reality in a way that induces reflection and involves directly, actively and participatively the spectator, erasing the hierarchy artist-beholder. In fact, the initiator/s of any *Arte Útil* project is not, as in the banking concept postulated by Paulo Freire<sup>139</sup>, depositing, delivering, his knowledge to the one-who-does-not-know. The implementation of an *Arte Útil* project is a process involving both parts, the initiator and the user, fundamental to each other and to its successful finalization.

Furthermore, the *Arte Útil* concept provides something which according Chantal Mouffe, who postulated the Agonistic Approach, is essential to contribute to the counter-hegemonic struggle: a re-articulation<sup>140</sup>. Bruguera defines herself as an activist, or better, an "artist"<sup>141</sup> but actually her practice goes further. According to Mouffe, art activism is not effective enough as a counter-hegemonic practice because it lacks of the process of re-articulation. It is not what Spivak in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012) identifies as affirmative sabotage<sup>142</sup>. On the contrary, *Arte Útil* acts within the

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<sup>138</sup>According to Bishop, the market today is based on an 'experience economy', and creativity seems to have become the main ingredient of a successful economic recipe. In this regard, please see subchapter 2.3 Ethics of Participation.

<sup>139</sup>Concept ideated in *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (1968). In this regard please see subchapter 3.1 From Antagonism to Agonism.

<sup>140</sup>In this regard, please see chapter 3. The Agonistic Approach.

<sup>141</sup>I decided to not focus about Bruguera's activist actions, because they would not be relevant for my reflections. In this regard, please see Bruguera's talk at TEDGlobal 2013, "Art + activism = activism" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C38sPtBj4uo>), and the website of the Institute for Artivism that she created in Cuba in 2016 (<https://artivismo.org/>).

<sup>142</sup>For Spivak, "affirmative sabotage" means to not destroy the dominant discourse, but to engage and work within it in order to change and finally subvert it. In this regard please see subchapter 3.2 Agonistic Artistic Practices.

system –in the sense that it involves museums, institutions and also it is spread mostly online - rearticulating and providing tangible solutions with tangible benefits and all related to the particularity of the situation.

As already claimed, the innovative aspect Bruguera’s practice is the attempt to create a new aesthetic canon and the usefulness thus, providing social benefits through art without leaving the aesthetics but on the contrary, re-establishing “aesthetics as a system of transformation<sup>143</sup>”. Bruguera, starting from the Cuban dimension and reflecting on the dimension of the biopower and its mechanism of perpetuation, aims to turn spectators into active users and responsible citizens, bearing in mind the transformative power of art and rendering it tangible within the aesthetic dimension.

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<sup>143</sup> 8th criterion of *Arte Útil*, as mentioned in the *Arte Útil Lab* press release.

## Conclusions

The approach that I presented, postulated by Chantal Mouffe (2013) is a key concept to my research questions regarding the role of culture, and in particular of contemporary art, with regard to power relationships and how contemporary artists challenge and engage the viewer through their artistic practices and actions. The agonistic approach not only results from a careful analysis of the nowadays society, but it seems to me that it includes also the concept of the ethics of the particular (cf. Badiou, 2001), of art as a form of dissensus (cf. Rancière, 2004, 2010) and other theories presented along the lines of the first two chapters of the dissertation, including the notion of artistic citizenship (cf. Bowman, Elliott, Silverman, 2016) and the potency of the artistic civil action (cf. Dietachmair, Gielen, 2017). Indeed, the strictly agonistic dimension of any society is so because every society is the expression of specific power relations. Furthermore Mouffe, as Bowman, believes that the various political identities are formed through the development of a shared sense of belonging, helped by the cultural apparatus. The problematic antagonistic dimension, which is inherent in the world's inner pluralism, should be solved through the agonistic approach, consisting in a constructive confrontation between adversaries, which stimulates a dialogue, a discussion, about possible alternatives. Indeed, the dialogue is the fundamental condition of a dynamic and vital democracy, but the two parts should avoid acting superiorly against each other. The antagonistic dimension is then sublimated because the encounter of different forms of identification is performed through a series of processes, which is accepted equally by the opposed parts.

Counter-hegemonic practices should challenge the biopower<sup>144</sup>, which now impregnates our society, acting toward a withdrawal from institutions and then providing a re-articulation, which is the terrain where art could intervene. In fact, as I analysed through the ideas of Rancière (2010) art is able to act as a form of dissensus, showing us what is obscured by the dominant hegemony, and as suggested also by Bourriaud (1998) enabling us to explore new possibilities, new worlds. Furthermore, since today art has been

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<sup>144</sup>New paradigm of power developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their books *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004). In biopower “mechanism of command became immanent within the social field. The modes of social integration and exclusion are increasingly interiorized through mechanism that directly organize the brains and bodies of the citizens” (Mouffe, 2013: 67).

incorporated by the aesthetics of the dominant hegemony and its system of symbols, it can also subvert and undermine it. To conclude, her approach is a valid method to confirm that art is an effective counter-hegemonic medium because it could intervene as a tool to trigger the beholder, to induce to reflection, to a dialogue, acting through the system which serves to implement the power of the dominant hegemony, as the practice developed by the artists considered in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

It could be said that Joseph Beuys was one of the pioneers of the agonistic approach, preceding it (and perhaps influencing it). In fact the artist, both symbolically - as with *Fettstuhl* (1964) and *Honigpumpe an Arbeitsplatz* (1977) – and in practice – as with the *Organisation für direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung* (1972), wanted to create triggers, to stimulate a dialogue, attempting to not impose his own ideas. As Bishop would suggest, his artistic actions are effective because, through a stimulation, they turn the beholder a participant, and they also surprise her/him, as it happened in Beuys' exhibition at TATE Modern in 1972, where he suddenly started a debate with the visitors. Through the postulation of his concept of Social Sculpture, Beuys claimed that every human being has innate creativity to be an artist, asserting that each one of us could modify and shape the world we live in. In other words, as artists change a given matter (such as wood, paint, among many others), society is matter that can be changed through everyone's creative potential. Beuys embodies then the ideas claimed by Rancière, Bourriaud and Mouffe: the human, being naturally a creative being, incorporates the projection of the future and he/she can create new possible worlds, through stimuli and dialogues, but mostly, through experience. In fact, according to Beuys - and also as Gielen and Lijster (2017)<sup>145</sup> and Eliasson<sup>146</sup> - experience is bound to the meaning of life itself, and help us to realize the importance, thus the responsibility, that we as human beings have within the world we live in. In the last part of his life, Beuys' actions became more participative and related to the experience of the beholder. As in *7000 Eichen – Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung* (1982 – 1987), he tried to realize what Gielen and Lijster (2017) identified later as “Civil

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<sup>145</sup>In the essay “The Civil Potency of a Singular Experience” in the compendium *The Art of Civil Action* (2017). In this regard please see subchapter 1.3 Civil Artistic Actions and Citizenship.

<sup>146</sup>In the TED talk *Playing with space and light* (2009). In this regard please see subchapter 1.3 Civil Artistic Actions and Citizenship.

Artistic Action”<sup>147</sup>, but lacking, in my opinion, of the shared emotion, which holds the base of the civil chain. But at the same time, in *7000 Eichen*, Beuys considered what Badiou defines as “Ethics of the Particular” (Badiou, 2001): he realized this project in Kassel, a city completely devastated during the Second World War, and during a specific artistic moment, the seventh edition of documenta, when the spotlight was on the city and in his work, hence the environmental cause would have the potential for a big echo. To answer the research question - regarding which approach contemporary artists should use to challenge and engage the viewer through their artistic practices and actions - it was necessary to report Beuys’ practice, since as mentioned before, he was a pioneer of the agonistic approach that would be, decades later, developed by Chantal Mouffe. Indeed, his work brings together the Rancieran concept of art as a form of dissensus and as a tool to create new worlds and, recalling Bishop and Bourriaud, as a trigger and a state of encounter. Beuys aimed to stimulate a discussion, exploring new possibilities in a system which already existed: the nature of the human being. Beuys tries to improve society with his questions and attempting to realize tangible impacts on the everyday life, as with the oaks planted in Kassel, which indeed became an urbanistic model for other cities and it created a network of projects influenced by the one realized by Beuys.

Pawel Althamer, having developed his practice in a post-communism country, in the context of a re-narration from the new catholic influenced policy, analyses what for him is the unique truth: (what he understands as) the reality. He does so in order to discover new and unexpected social orders, inviting us to explore the world surrounding us in its totality. The artist, through his work with the marginalized, is able to embody the Rancieran dissensus<sup>148</sup>, rendering visible the ones made invisible by the consensus. In fact, Althamer mixes and confuses the social roles assigned by the dominant hegemony, enlightening the dark gaps in the system of the sensible. Moreover, Althamer acts agonistically, developing a new social order which consists in elevating the outcasts, but using a social group which already exists, in a seemingly simple act of reversing it. The artist, in facing the beholder

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<sup>147</sup>In the essay “The Civil Potency of a Singular Experience” in the compendium *The Art of Civil Action* (2017), Gielen and Lijster identifies as artistic civil actions those civil actions that involve art. In order to happen, they should follow a process, defined “civil chain” which consists in several passages: “(1) emotion – (2) (self-) rationalization – (3) communication – (4) de-privatization (or going public) and, finally, (5) self-organization”. (Gielen and Lijster in Dietachmair, Gielen, 2017: 42). In this regard please see subchapter 1.3 Civil Artistic Actions and Citizenship.

<sup>148</sup>In this regard, please see subchapter 1.2 Art and Politics: distributing the sensible.

with what is generally and widely accepted as truth, is stimulating her/him to the dialogue, to take a stand, without imposing his own vision, but the one of what might be closer to realities, in the sense of lived experiences. In this sense, Althamer uses an agonistic approach, that is not enforced upon, but triggering the existing system and the biopower, as in *Guma* (2009) where he overturns the historical meaning of the memorial. The one of Althamer is a subtle complaint, almost implicit, of the power relations in our society. As Mouffe claims, quoting Virno, art creates new modes of social relations and the area of the artistic intervention should be extended to non-traditional spaces, as Althamer's practice in Bródno and with social groups that usually are excluded from the artistic contexts. In fact, with *Bródno 2000* (2000), Althamer explores the boundaries of the artistic action, bringing it outside the classical and institutional borders. Bródno, considered by the Warsawian as a sort of hopeless ghetto, becomes a fertile *milieu*, where to cultivate new art forms, creating a joyful stimulus in the beholder and the participant. Althamer's work creates a space of encounter between different social groups that have nothing in common and that will probably never meet. Thus, Althamer, in attempting to show life as it is, challenges the order of the society and makes visible those who, since they are at the margins, are invisible. But he does not impose his own thoughts: he suggests but leaves the choice to the viewer/participant. Althamer, through his practice, is able to create a double impact; indeed his actions on the one hand evidence, to those involved actively, the civil importance of themselves, on the other hand this importance is revealed to the beholder.

Tania Bruguera might be one of the artists who embodies the most the concept of agonistic approach. Indeed her practice, which started by analysing the historical narrative of her motherland, Cuba, and the techniques operated by the regime to maintain consensus, uses the power devices which implements the narrative provided by the dominant hegemony to create a true reality, which was obscured before. During her artistic career, Bruguera developed her work, moving to a more participative practice, based on the experience of the beholder, extending her research from the Cuban context to a global one. The artist stimulates the spectator to have a reaction, using the means of communication of the dominant hegemony, analysing how they powerfully enters people's lives and, as Althamer, she uses her position as an artist to make actions happen, as in *Tatlin's Whisper #3* (2009). She wants to deeply analyse the society, the beholders and in particular how

they behave. For this reason, Bruguera defines her form of art *Arte de Conducta*, ‘behaviour art’. With the postulation of the concept of *Arte Útil*, useful art, and subsequently the implementation of its project, Bruguera fulfils the thoughts and the idea mentioned in the first part of the dissertation. In fact, an artistic initiative, to be qualified as *Arte Útil*, should agonistically suggest new uses of art within the society, “challenging the field within operates”, but also it should answer to current urgencies, thus consider the ethics of the particular, as ideated by Alain Badiou. Through *Arte Útil*, Bruguera provides a re-articulation which, according to Mouffe, is the crucial element that makes effective a counter-hegemonic practice. Furthermore, what Bruguera does is to assign new roles both to the artist, who becomes an initiator, and to the beholder, who becomes a user. But Bruguera goes even further, giving also to the aesthetic itself a new role, which is based on a new canon: the one of the usefulness. As in Althamer, also in Bruguera’s work the authorship is somehow distorted, in this way everyone could appropriate the concept of *Arte Útil* and realize a project which stimulates the user.

The three artists composing the second part of the dissertation are developing differently their artistic path: if Beuys and Althamer are both acting as soft triggers towards the beholder, Bruguera is more explicit, but she is similar to the German artist regarding the presence of the political element, which in their work is quite obvious, while in Althamer is ambiguous, but rather neutral. Joseph Beuys, Pawel Althamer and Tania Bruguera have something in common which makes their work an effective counter-hegemonic practice. The three of them do not enforce the beholder to take a step, a position, neither they impose their own vision. They prompt her/him towards an enlightened path, providing what Mouffe defines a re-articulation, that is a new possibility among those already existent. But the new re-articulated possibility is not created by the artist: it is realized and ideated by the beholder her/himself. Beuys, Althamer and Bruguera’s practices are effective because they play on the experience of the participant, the spectator, but each one of them does it in a different manner, respecting the ethics of the particular. Each one of them acts as a tutor, or rather, as Bruguera would claim, as an initiator, without being what Freire defines as a “depositor” of knowledge or truth. They insinuate questions, erasing the hierarchy artist-spectator, and triggering, inducing a reflection.

Thinking again about Gramsci's thoughts in *Quaderni del Carcere* (1929-1935), mentioned in the introduction, which influenced also Chantal Mouffe, culture, but in this case art, helps to maintain consensus towards the dominant hegemony, but at the same time it is able to subvert it. Likewise, the intellectuals, in this case the artists, are tools that support the implementation of the consensus, but for Gramsci they could – and should – use their practice to organize and create an alternative. Today's society, compared to the one where Gramsci lived and wrote his theories, is even sicker: as highlighted by Hardt and Negri (2000), is impregnated with the biopower and is feeded by a system of symbols, based on a subtle and consumerist aesthetic. To answer the research questions regarding the role of culture, and in particular of contemporary art, with regard to power relationships, the artist today seems to have significant responsibilities, because enabled to act through the system of the sensible permeated with the biopower. Metaphorically, the artist can play with the same weapons of the dominant hegemony, to disturb this deep consensual numbness where human beings are immersed. But the artist, and her/his practice, in order to make us act upon and within society, to be effective as a counter-hegemonic agent, must commit her/himself to act within an agonistic context, bearing in mind the particularity of individual situations, but mostly she/he should not stumble into the ethical turn or in the Westernized goodism, which is not based on reality, but on a purely Christian ethic.

What the work of these artists seem to tell is that the artistic practice should not be superior to the spectator, neither an explicit complaint. It should question the system, being a subtle trigger for the spectator, inducing a reaction, a dialogue an autonomous reflection.

Recently, as a curator, I had the chance to work with the Brazilian artist Maura Grimaldi (1988), whose practice is related with the imaginary and a sort of oneiric and illusory dimension, which apparently it does not seem political. The day after the Brazilian elections (28<sup>th</sup> of October, 2018), won by Bolsonaro, representative of the extreme right, Maura said to me: “Revolução é imaginação, alienação (Revolution is imagination, alienation)”. What the theory and the artistic practices analysed in this dissertation have taught me is that counter-hegemonic practices should enable the beholder precisely to

imagine new possibilities, besides the existing ones, and for this reason, art could be an effective tool of intervention.

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