

Participation in Cultural Policies: Ideological Roots and Institutional Use

Partizipation an kulturpolitischen Maßnahmen: Ideologische Wurzeln und institutionelle Nutzung

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Abstract

Participation is a widely discussed subject matter in cultural policy. Over the years, scholars and practitioners have approached it in a variety of ways as policy paradigms have evolved; today these paradigms demonstrate a complex understanding of culture and what participation in art and culture means. Requirements from public administration have sought to promote cultural offers with increasingly higher levels of participation, though with a varied set of interests behind them. By attending to several of these paradigms—excellence, cultural democratisation, cultural democracy, and creative industry—with a perspective that is unique to socially engaged art, this article highlights the tensions that arise in the question of means for cultural production, and further problematises the institutional use of the combined notions of art and participation.

Partizipation ist ein intensiv diskutiertes Thema in der Kulturpolitik, ein Thema, dem sich Wissenschaftler und Praktiker auf unterschiedliche Weise genähert haben. Aktuell zeigt sich ein komplexes Verständnis von Partizipation in Kunst und Kultur. Die Anforderungen der öffentlichen Kulturverwaltung zielen darauf ab, Kulturangebote mit immer höherer Beteiligung zu fördern, wobei unterschiedliche Interessen eine Rolle spielen. Indem dieser Artikel einige der kulturpolitischen Paradigmen – Exzellenz, kulturelle Demokratisierung, kulturelle Demokratie und Kreativwirtschaft – aus einer für sozial engagierte Kunst spezifischen Perspektive betrachtet, werden Spannungen, die bei der Frage nach den Mitteln kultureller Produktion entstehen, deutlich. Problematisiert wird darüber hinaus der institutionelle Gebrauch der Begriffe Kunst und Partizipation.

Keywords

Social Change/sozialer Wandel, Ideology/Ideologie, Cultural Policy/Kulturpolitik, Community Arts/gemeinschaftliche Kunst

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Introduction

Participation has been at the centre of deliberation in academic and administrative circles of European cultural policy since their inception. Although participation is an inherent value in any cultural policy intended to maintain the right to equal cultural expression and individual emancipation, scholars have recently sparked debate on whether the recent proliferation of participatory practices, seen as tools for innovation, constitutes a “Participatory Turn” (NÉGRIER/DUPIN-MEYNARD 2020: 11). In the attempt to find adequate answers, rigorous theoretical investigation and action research have been undertaken. These efforts have yielded important insights into how institutional practices of organisation and strategies of participation align with policy paradigms, each of which demonstrates a different democratic principle (BIANCHINI et al. 2020; CIANCIO 2020; DUPIN-MEYNARD/VILLARROYA 2020; OTTE/GIELEN 2020). The research presented here aims to make a significant contribution to the understanding of the art field’s response to common participation paradigms and objectives in cultural policy. Nevertheless, a critical body of evidence should be explored from the opposite direction: what can cultural policy construe about the role, meaning and use of participation from observing the institutional and artistic practices of individual, socially engaged artists and groups, and internalising their critiques and motivations in the production of art that is participatory and socially minded?

To prepare the ground for an experiment in this direction, this article brings the principles underlying participatory cultural policy paradigms together with artistic critique and socially engaged art (SEA) theory. In doing so, I argue it is vital to connect to the desires, credos and ideologies underlying each discipline; and to engage critically with the theory of cultural policy, alongside the body of knowledge that is being generated and socio-historically contextualised by art institutions and academia, to inform critical curatorial and artistic practices.

By referring to the critique of SEA in relation to policy, I hope to highlight the issues, concerns and tensions that arise from the meeting point between the theories of the two fields. Using participation as the connecting thread, I will focus on the ideational foundations that led to its current heyday as a concept, rather than on how participation is actualised or measured. This paper thus is not an evidence-based report more common in policy sciences. Instead, it is a literary investigation dedicated to (1) the presentation of artistic critique with regards

to participation, and (2) the complementation of more traditional approaches to interrogation of participation in the field.

Background

Participation, or in its collateral use, engagement, has been a cardinal subject matter in Europe-wide cultural policies since the 1960s. Participation is the hinge on which democratic societies turn, therefore a main concern of public policies is how they can bring democratic participation into everyday practice. Even though it is evident that policies of illiberal and totalitarian regimes cherish participation as well (ZAMORANO/BONET 2020), its meaning in European-wide policies, is close to that of freedom. Specifically, participation is the democratic freedom to take part in culture, which has been constituted, firstly, as means to recover from the autocracy and fascism of the Second World War (UNESCO 2022b) and later as a linchpin in the policies of democratic countries.

The use of participation in cultural policies is twofold. First, it is a value and an end pertaining to the belief in democracy's capacity, equally to give voice to and empower different groups in society and to champion individual emancipation. The common assumption is that through the representation and practice of inclusion and diversity, we can reinforce a feeling of belonging, tackle alienation, racism, and exclusion, and strengthen social cohesion. Second, participation is also a means and a tool for creating an active civil society, building on the privilege of art to give affordances for unconstrained deliberation and partaking in the public sphere. An example of this rationale is citizen science, which has been promoted to feed into academic knowledge production and policy-making (MANZONI/VOHLAND/SCHADE 2021). Citizens' methodologies and common knowledge from everyday life are invited to contribute to institutional knowledge generation from a belief in the added value that participation brings to creativity and innovation.

The multiple approaches and practices that can exist under participation have created a mode whereby cultural policies have been promoting participation more as an ethos than as a clear policy objective (BONET et al. 2020). The extended human right to participate in culture (UNESCO 2022a) is phrased with imprecision and openness to interpretation so that it can be freely manifested in various ways. However, not all forms of participation have been treated as equally significant. In both SEA and cultural policy, Arnstein's model (1969) for citizen democratic

participation has been indicative of a tendency that favours practices whereby more power is redistributed to participants, as it suggests that doing so is more democratic and socially empowering. At this point, the distinction between participation in art and participation in culture is important. Associated with the latter is the art institution that—in consequence of the right to participate in culture—is seen as of, and for, society. Therefore, while art can be participatory in form and content, the publicly funded art institution must determine the extent to which it permits a public mandate within, and over the institution as a consideration with an explicit democratic gravity.

Socially Engaged Art (SEA) or Participatory Art do not describe a strictly defined art form but are loose terms for artistic practices whose core interest and production (in terms of generating tangible and intangible social value) are in the social and political spheres. These practices often involve the participation and collaboration of people as the raw material of the work (TATE 2022). The practices thus gain a performative feature that afford to those collaborating the privilege to act directly (MAZACHER 2014) or symbolically to resolve a (chiefly) social cause or an urgent problem. Conscious of the tension between the direct and the symbolic power of art, which is a point of immediate contestation, pertinent to the question of what SEA means, I will highlight how this tension translates into issues around the means of cultural production and underscores the concerns and questions they currently bring about in relation to cultural policy in Europe. I recognise that recounting the long roots of SEA will unavoidably exceed the scope of this paper. Therefore, with an eye for adequacy and objectivity, this overview will be selective of the main ideational developments in SEA against the backdrop of the political and economic events that always, and to a large degree, have shaped the practice.

Participation in policy paradigms and SEA

The first policy paradigm to emerge after the Second World War was that of excellence. Focusing on the quality of cultural offers, the excellence paradigm made a significant impact by placing the decision-making power in the hands of experts. Those experts were more aligned than politicians and civil servants to the realities of safeguarding artistic freedom following the types of political repression experienced, in that period, under totalitarian regimes.

In the period that followed the Second World War, avant-garde art became eligible for support through governmental interventions to promote excellence. Previously, it was excluded from policy for its lack of academic legitimacy (NÉGRIER/DUPIN-MEYNARD 2020). The emphasis on quality and excellence continued into the 1960s, when public funds were provisioned for rendering cultural offers accessible to all. Participation, under efforts to democratise culture by removing a set of barriers (mainly financial), was then seen as an individual's right to take part in quality cultural and artistic events regardless of status, class, or physical condition. To this day, cultural democratisation is considered the main rationale for state-level funding for culture. As a result of advocacy for cultural democratisation, artistic producers and institutions were encouraged to seek out and reach further into various and marginal social groups in society and open their doors to them. However, efforts to democratise an existing artistic canon in the spirit of Enlightenment and modernity have proved rather unsettling in the attempt of institutions to create access for those who would not necessarily engage with, purportedly, high art. What had to be recognised is the unavoidable sociological observation that taste is contingent on class and habitus (BOURDIEU 1984), and it had to be acknowledged more clearly that the distancing of culture from ethnography and the division of high and low culture in the promotion of enlightened, hegemonic, European art is, in fact, an elitist structuring.

Here, sociological thinking must stress the significant changes in social structures in the last fifty years due to the academisation of society and artists. In Germany today, for instance, more than fifty percent of the student-age cohort is studying towards a bachelor's degree (STATISTA 2021a). This implies that cultural capital and skills are more common assets in society, which suggests that the idea of certain types of art as a domain of exclusive elitist expertise and practice has lost its plausibility. However, the parallel professionalisation of artists by the academy has created a new distinction between legitimate and amateur art. Consequentially, a system of expert standardisation has reproduced and maintains the hierarchy that places professional, criteria-led, and accredited art, above other cultural expressions, despite the growing percentage of university-educated individuals in society. In the institutional context, it is important to relate that only twelve percent of the attendees at the blockbuster exhibition, documenta 14 in Germany, did not hold an academic degree (HELLSTERN/OŽGA 2019). Cross-reference this with the finding that only twenty-four percent of the German population,

as a whole, are university graduates (STATISTA 2021b), and it tells of the longstanding reality of the art institution that excels in providing to populations already wealthy in educational, economic, and cultural capital (MUNDER/WUGGENIG 2012: 106). However, even more so, it makes the case for the relevance of the anti-hegemonic struggle in the art world.

By stating that “community and participatory art cannot be understood without reference to the invention of fine art in the late 18th century”, community artist, author, and researcher François Matarasso (2019: 128) insists on the ideological foundation of participatory art; that is, the negation of the self-serving Enlightenment thought that reserved the universal right to culture (and after the French Revolution, a combined civic, human, and cultural right) to the “white, Christian men with property and education” (MATARASSO 2019: 133). Thus, SEA, which is intrinsically related to community art is, by origin, a working-class, anti-hegemonic practice aimed at power-dismantling, as well as an expression of the right to cultural emancipation. Community art movements were the artistic workforce that protected and actualised the freedom for all kinds of cultural expressions to be included under Art and Heritage (UNESCO 2001). Their raging against a bourgeois distinction of what kind of art would be considered a civilised taste was a key influence on shifting the philosophy of European-wide cultural policy in the 1970s towards the paradigm of cultural democracy. Owen Kelly, on behalf of the Community Arts Movement in the UK, made the case for cultural democracy in his response to Roy Shaw’s speech “Art for All” (1985). He proposed to replace Shaw’s championing of the expansion of the concept of art to include more activities for more people, with an opposing contention to grant people the right to access the means of cultural input (KELLY 1985).

The emergence of the cultural democracy paradigm was a pivotal point in the field of cultural policy, not only because it remodelled a principal value in the field—diversity—to fund more grassroots and controversial art forms, but also because, under this paradigm, new challenges, related to the evaluation of quality and merit, were introduced with the new perception of cultural democracy that required change in the structures for the dissemination of funds. It is in the context of cultural democracy, which later provides entry to discussing Commons more widely, that community art and social practices gain traction in terms of their eligibility to receive funding as independent institutions, and their consideration, equally, as art producers.

The golden era of community art during the 1960s was not coincidental with the break of cultural revolutions in the Western societies of Europe and the US. During that time, multiple grassroots art and social movements flourished and built on the achievements of each other in their ideologically aligned practice of art as a part of everyday life in Beuysian terms. This is in strict opposition to a cognitive capitalism-type of invigoration of consumption of (mostly popular) art products. The proposition of the synthesis of art and life is of a practice that breaks the association of art with consumption, as well as the separation between artist and audience, by making cultural production a Commons. This counterproposal was a central motif of the Situationist International, a group of artists, socio-political theorists and intellectuals, who critiqued capitalist society as subject to the pacifying mechanism of capitalism—the spectacle. The group resisted the notion of publics as passive receivers of materialised representations that were prefigured products made subject to someone else's decision-making power (DEBORD 1992). The Situationists' allegorical use of terms from art has a bearing on their operative roots in this field. However, the Situationist's critique certainly aimed at going beyond the artworld and was directed against the wider capitalist society. Their endeavours proved successful; the May 1968 student uprising in France drew on their activity as a source of inspiration (HEMMENS/ZACARIAS 2020), which followed by a wide recognition of the Situationists' vision for a proletarian revolution. However, due to internal conflicts during their fight to be seen not merely as French counterculture protesters, the group dissolved (HEMMENS/ZACARIAS 2020: 100). The Situationists International left behind a nuanced philosophy about how a social revolution should be pursued that still constitutes a cornerstone in wider avant-garde thought.

The conundrum of how cultural rights are being exercised through, or translated into means and modes of production—a central concern in cultural policy—cannot be understood without an account of the avant-garde, which is considered the ideational premise of politically and socially engaged works by highly influential individual artists and groups, such as Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser, the Guerrilla Girls, Superflex, Copenhagen Free University, Tanja Ostojić, and Chto Delat. Avant-garde is a concept with a history that, in its recounting, reveals its complex relationship with the institutionalised art world and more largely with the establishment. The ideas associated with the concept of the avant-garde relate to its temporality—its focus on

the future—and positionality in relation to the art world and wider society. Therefore, the avant-garde is understood as a force of innovation, an explorer of alternatives and possibilities, and an agent of experimentation with the yet-to-become. At the same time, the intrinsic transcendence in its operation with the speculative and counter-hegemonic creates a detachment, or critical distance. On the one hand avant-garde artists and movements have been endowed with a status through which they could express scientific and artistic revolutionary thought in almost full autonomy and in a level of abstraction that was not expected to appeal to the common people. On the other hand, due to financial alliance with the bourgeoisie, the status of the avant-garde has been obfuscating its very basic premise—that the resistance to mass culture is premised upon the resistance to the establishment (specifically, capitalism).

The distinction of avant-garde art from mass culture, which Clement Greenberg called “rear-guard” and “Kitsch” (1961: 9), is an emphasis on the positionality of the avant-garde in opposition to the consumer culture that developed during the industrialisation of Europe. Such a position was possible due to the conditions of modernity, in which industrial society was strictly class-structured and culturally divided by the notion of high and low culture. Within the prevailing status quo, the avant-garde was largely affiliated with bourgeois society and later with bohemia (GREENBERG 1961). Certainly, this is not a clear-cut definition, primarily because of the multiplicity of avant-garde movements and individual artists, but also because their spread in different localities meant that each artist’s own local context determined how their resistance to capitalism was framed. Nevertheless, Greenberg’s observation of the avant-garde’s “emigration from the markets of capitalism” (GREENBERG 1961: 5) to a culturally distinct social class begs the question of what social positionality the avant-garde is working from, with what political intent and what strategies it uses for achieving value in handling the dualities of cultural and financial capital.

In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, originally published in 1974, Peter Bürger kindles a debate precisely about this set of questions. His harsh critique stressed that the historical avant-garde movements were projects devoted only to their aesthetic value and only where production was for the sake of art itself. Bürger (1984) ascribed this to Enlightenment aesthetics, where the autonomy of art was idealised and rendered devoid of any type of social or political value. Problematically assigning to all avant-garde movements the aim to “destroy the false autonomy of bourgeois art” (FOSTER 1996: 8) Bürger stressed that while the historical

movements had failed to destruct the art institution through their strategies of “reintegrat[ing] art with the praxis of life” (BÜRGER 1984: 87), the repetition of the same strategies by postwar neo-avant-garde proved unsuccessful too. This overall failure, as Bürger (1984) explains, was the circumstance to the replacement of aesthetic examination with a functional sociological analysis of art.

Bürger’s work recalls the way Adorno (2002) depicts the power structures at play in the terrain of art, society and patronage. Corresponding with Bürger’s bleak theory, critiques that followed Adorno’s ominous science of the culture industry have suggested that discursive and vanguard art is doomed to either fall prey to aesthetical satisfaction of the market or become an affirmation of the dominant culture (POLLOCK 1988). In fact, Adorno himself expressed his misgivings about discursive art through his assault on Brechtian theatre (ADORNO 2002). But however grim this might appear, Adorno, in opposition to Bürger, left more room for hope by implying the possibility of a critical aesthetics. One that “is concretely attached to that from which it declares its autonomy and, through its declared autonomy, negates that to which it is concretely attached” (POLLOCK 1988: 15). Put more simply, turning to the social construct from which the artwork emerged to emancipate it from any type of instrumentalisation can tap into art’s “regenerative potential” (POLLOCK 1988: 12). Following this thread, Hal Foster (1966) conveys a rather propositional and constructive critique. Like others (BUCHLOH 1984; LEIGHTEN 1988; WEISS 1994), he breaks with Bürger’s uniform explanation and formation of a single theory (and overall failure) for the very complex and diverse avant-garde. But in addition, he dialectically approaches avant-garde practice as “neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation with life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both” (FOSTER 1996: 16). Foster (1996) acknowledges that the domains of activity of the avant-garde—art and life—are diffused and so advances his argument that the postmodern neo-avant-garde is focused on the institutional.

Foster’s observation contributed concrete terms that reshaped avant-garde practices. Increasingly interested in institutional critique, avant-garde artists developed methodologies to deconstruct and theorise a system from which they did not see themselves separated. This means that a more complex account of the proximities and affinities of the elements in the system, including the artist and the artwork, emerged. In more practical terms, the critique considers the power relations between the artist and the art world as an institution when making

decisions. Furthermore, practices of organisation and self-institutionalisation became a significant part of art making (an additional version of the diffusion of art and life) as a critique through action, with the artist and art institution emancipating themselves through the configuration of places of possible agency.

The reflexive question: what is an institution? prompts developments in theoretical and artistic making. An institution correlates with its environment and reflects it by how it differentiates itself. For that reason, changes in the environment shape the institution to the extent of its response to those changes (BARALDI/CORSI/ESPOSITO 2021). Avant-garde art can be looked upon as a regenerative force such that, once it has overcome its moment, itself becomes the establishment. Originally a socialist concept and generally connected with the left, the avant-garde has been discussed intensely under capitalism for what it is and what it negates. A more recent conceptualisation of contemporary avant-garde institutions describes them as “suspensive” (ROBERTS 2010: 723) for how they uphold the revolutionary pathos of historical movements. Located in the art world’s “secondary economy” (ROBERTS 2015: 21), their contribution from the position of a precarious segment of individual and small artist groups is in innovative and radical practices.

Perhaps these traits do not necessarily apply only to the avant-garde but are an outcome of socio-economic conditions that have coloured all SEA practices with similar shades. The following section provides a broad, and somewhat simplified overview in order to emphasise that in light of capitalism—and specifically neoliberal capitalism—SEA, participatory art, community art, social practice and other movements have all worked with one common denominator: to be a counterproposal to capitalist business as usual and address the social inequalities that capitalism and its institutions have rendered abysmal. Yet, the methodologies these movements developed, the social desires they had, and the ways in which they related to space and publics varied.

Neoliberalism and the crisis of participation

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989—when the triumph of Western liberal democracies was hailed as “the final form of human government” (FUKUYAMA 1989: 4) and, as such, legitimated capitalism to become the global norm—is a dramatic datum-point in art theory indicating a new era. Distinctive to this era is fervent art creation that is committed to the struggle

against neoliberal injustices peaking throughout the 2008 financial collapse and recession, the immigration crisis of 2016, and more recently, the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and the climate catastrophe.

Returning momentarily to the 1990s, a tendency of a return to socially engaged practices emerged in the visual arts. This tendency was described by art critic and theorist Claire Bishop as the “Social Turn” (BISHOP 2006). By calling it a turn, Bishop alludes to a wider context that brought about this fashion, and critiques a policy narrative of the 1997 newly elected, New Labour government in the UK that increased state funding for the arts with a new strategy. The strategy was built upon the conclusions of *Use or Ornament?* a report that was published, shortly after the elections, by François Matarasso (1997). Still considered far-reaching and influential, the report focuses on the social benefits associated with participation in art. The stark evidence that was provided prompted policymakers to adopt the rhetoric and practices of participatory art to unlock the policy’s latent social impact.

Already building on “creativity” (LANDRY/BIANCHINI 1995: 12) as a new generator of financial growth, the new strategy was expected to tap into the twofold potential in art—financial and social—and brought with it a more pronounced conception of the use-value of art. Consequentially, a unique understanding of people’s creativity as a vehicle for employment and growth (BRUELL 2013) emerged. In contrast to supporting art and culture’s democratic orientation, where governments preserve the human right of actualisation through culture (GALLOWAY/DUNLOP 2006), the terminology, instead, was of economic investment equating subsidisation of art and culture with national financial gain. This latter position is a utilitarian conceptualisation that disassociates public funding from cultural rights.

The interest to find a new economic motif that would motivate the UK out of the worldwide economic stagnation of the 1980s—combined with evidence of the gained, social benefit from participation in art—created a policy model that would later be framed into the paradigm of the creative industry. This was during the 2000s when fundamental shifts in labour structures, pertaining to a globalised perspective on production and finance, introduced immaterial labour and freelancing as new emancipated forms of employment. Hopes for freedom based on a free-market economy were entangled with neoliberal deprivation in the form of austerity policies that permitted states’ withdrawal from public services. With growing hardship in society, the creative economy narrative continued to gain traction in making crises into potential generators

of creativity and innovation (FLORIDA 2002), and so the paradigm of the creative industry that emerged in British cultural policy had spread rampantly through the rest of Europe.

The creative industry continued the major changes of public policies in the 1990s under New Public Management rationales that pressured the implementation of the “3E’s”, namely economy, efficiency, effectiveness (LEWANDOWSKA 2017: 2). The policy ethos that was intent on measuring impact and value, brought about by creative industry, was part of a larger rationale that all policy objectives can be measured—including cultural and social. This ethos entailed a conflict: on the one hand, evaluation and assessment tools were set up for generating compelling data to bolster justifications for why the arts should be publicly funded. But on the other, it created an unwieldy administrative burden for artists who lacked the skills to accommodate the demand, or who were not interested in doing so (MATARASSO 2019).

Although creative industries, in the last fifteen years, has borne more marked anti-neoliberal criticism regarding its commodification and instrumentalisation of art, as well as its incessant preoccupation with value extraction in art funding (BANKS/O’CONNOR 2009; BELFIORE 2012), cultural production and labour remain an underfunded, crisis-ridden field with high susceptibility to exploitation (ABBING 2014; BAIN/McLEAN 2013; GILL/PRATT 2008; MAHON et al. 2018). By some measures, cultural workers have been operating for long under precarious conditions while enjoying little security. It is well known by now that it should be in the capacity of cultural workers to manage risks independently and deal with uncertainty on their own (MENGER 2017). Nonetheless, even when they unwittingly or naively did so, their creative and innovative ways to navigate distressing situations have been co-opted by naming them entrepreneurs (RAUNIG/RAY/WUGGENIG 2011), a jargon that not only normalises precarity, but insists on equating artistic pursuit with individuality, despite the inherent sociality of art.

It is important to recognise that science around the creative industries is multiple in perspectives, and diverse. As been previously mentioned, this article presents an artistic critique of cultural policy proceeding from how it is expressed in art literature and theory. These propose that, against the backdrop of the overall precariousness of cultural labour, the case of Socially Engaged Art is distinctively striking when confronted with policies of the creative industries.

These policies exacerbated the encroachment of economic reasoning on the means of cultural production and subjugated social contribution

to considerations of value-for-money. This is most evident through the redesignation of social practices into tools for audience development. In the past, community art groups emerged from a particular local community, named themselves for the area they came from and worked from the particularities of the people who lived there. Today, social practices are instruments whereby art institutions and funders attract groups of their target audience based on their common interests or experiences (MATARASSO 2019), for instance, disabilities, immigrants, elders, prisoners, mothers, and more. In short, participatory and social practices were displaced as instruments for measurable social impact and de-contextualised from the ideologies of art movements that, through them, actualised cultural emancipation.

It is quite staggering how saturated public spaces have become with representations of traditionally excluded, weakened, and oppressed groups. Carried across various commodities—as well as artistic commodities—the production of symbols might have brought social inequalities into mainstream consciousness, but certainly with an inextricable link to consumption and value accumulation. Nato Thompson, in his seminal book *Living as Form* (2012), borrows Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the schizophrenic existence to describe the human condition since 1991, and its exacerbation in life through a sea of fragmented representations. The manipulation of symbols, he explains, is a production method that has been adopted by “dominant powers in society” (THOMPSON 2012) that, consequentially, have made it difficult to decipher, from the side of both production and reception, what is intended to serve image-building and corporate responsibility, and what is genuinely dedicated to a social cause. More importantly, it obscures what oppressive powers are at play, and what forms resistance to these powers takes.

The longstanding internal discourse in the art world about the political limitations of relational aesthetics (BOURRIAUD 2000) demonstrates this difficulty. Overlapping with other socially engaged practices in the desire to make art—that is living—the installations that gathered people together, had on the one hand, a political dimension since they were focused on the social. On the other hand, these works were short-lived, temporal and favoured by the gallery and museum space. In time, some suspicion arose concerning what economy they were a part of, and what kind of political rigour they upheld. Scepticism intensifies when considering the current conditions for the production of social practices, by artists who principally invest, over time, in growing deep

roots in their communities, and who are motivated by a commitment to political change.

Situating socially engaged artists along with the oppressed, and the struggle against systemic exploitation explains why it is that the labour and working conditions of socially engaged artists are analysed through an ethics of care (BELFIORE 2022) and discussed in relation to the labour of social workers. In fact, the ethical and ideological intricacy of their labour and economy is similar to those of other NGOs. Their interrelationship with precarity is dense, as they “start in the middle” (ROGOFF 2016: 467); that is, from their recognition of a problem or an urgent issue. This is the reason why—more often than not—they appear in times of crisis, performing their resourcefulness for the sake of people’s resilience. But their capacity to operate in such conditions is not to be mistaken or confused with the assumption that these are favoured by them, nor that it should be taken advantage of, as it has been with neoliberal austerity policies. Operating within a neoliberal social order, socially engaged artists are aware of their *Catch-22* situation: they receive funding because their social practices help to alleviate the adversity of the communities they engage. But in working under the auspices of government or private funds, they feed into a neoliberal system that is designed to neglect their communities from the outset.

It is to this capitalist co-optation and misuse of social practices that scholar Marc James Léger refers in his discussion of Andrea Fraser’s institutional critique, which he considers as confirmation of “the Lacanian truth that art always dies twice—the first time as formalist autonomy and the second as culture industry” (LÉGER 2012: 22). In both cases, the deaths are the radical and political nature of art. While the first death is by post-structuralist science, the second is a result of “biocapitalist administration” (LÉGER 2012: 19), Léger’s term for the systems of power that control the means of cultural production. He argues that policy and funding institutions have remodelled activist art practices to fit into institutional strategies under the guise of promoting democratic inclusivity (LÉGER 2012). In effect, the absorption and normalisation of radical revolutionary aspirations into a capitalist reproduction is the dismantling of counter-hegemonic and egalitarian struggles.

Within the ample writings about art and authority are two exemplary observations by the sociologist Eve Chiapello and art critic Marina Vishmidt that accurately summarise SEA’s paradox in relation to cultural policy. The first is with regards to the loss of SEA’s political power. Following the connotative convergence of creative neo-management tools

with art's "liberated" (CHIAPELLO 2004: 592) form of labour came the conception of art as operating as part of the service economy. "Artist critique" (CHIAPELLO 2004: 585) thus lost its poignancy after it was re-configured with the aim to catering rather than initiating, critiquing, and demanding. The second observation concerns the resistance to conform to the current neoliberal system and social order that, to some degree, cultural policies represent. In the interplay of SEA with the art institution and administration, only the accumulation of value is possible, but never a real disruption (VISHMIDT 2003). This is made clear through the many cultural policies that champion inclusivity and cherish art's capacity to empower one's (as empowerment for the most part refers to an individual) social mobility. The same policies, however, never work to change, structurally, the foundational barriers of social systems.

Concluding remarks

This article has presented the ideological roots of social participation in art, as well as the central debates that are unique to the field of SEA concerning the promotion of social engagement in cultural policy. At the very fundamental level, this conjunction is counterintuitive. SEA resides exactly in the territories of resistance to any sort of oppression, while the state, in setting policies and constituting laws, does precisely this with the aim of establishing order. But from a closer reading of both, it appears that SEA, or more specifically, grassroots engagement of communities with art, contributed significantly to the cultural revolution that made cultural democracy the norm. However, in consideration of how social practices have been harnessed to satisfy the explicit economic objectives of contemporary cultural policies, SEA's core aspiration to dismantle capitalist hegemony appears radically alien to any policy objective.

SEA is situated within a complex set of affinities and infrastructural relations that in theory reads as a deadlock—aspirations for class and economic revolution do not sit well within capitalist mechanisms of control over resources and capital. Therefore, a recurrent debate in SEA circles is related to how the field engages against the oppressions of capitalism and in the light of the crises it induces that always call SEA into action. This debate applies equally to the question of funding, as the relationship of SEA with policy institutions and the institutional art world equates with a similar political dilemma.

Artists have been responding pragmatically to the obstinate status quo of capitalism, with strategies for political action and social change that range from a total withdrawal from the system to producing change from within it (MOUFFE 2014). Cultural policy in some views, can be taken as a system relative to which different economic strategies are formed, to balance the need for means of artistic production with artists' political integrity. How malleable and constitutive is this system? By posing this question I would like to argue that in opposition to the loss of cultural policies to economic interests, a necessity emerges to ask the same question of culture as that being asked for art: how can we repurpose it back to its social cause?

This should not be merely a theoretical undertaking, but a bottom-up investigation through the material and organisational realities of socially engaged artists; in other words, we need to enlarge the scope of our exploration to ask what we can learn from how socially engaged artists participate in the funding system, and in turn, how can it be rendered responsive to facilitate the delivery of a social good.

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