

What Do We Have in Common? A Venture into the Taxonomy of Participatory Art Practices in the Post-digital Era

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The Participatory Culture Burnout

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented emphasis on participation across diverse sectors, including politics, arts, journalism, media, education, and entertainment. This focus on engagement is driven by the rise of networked culture, particularly with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies. These technologies inherently possess an «architecture of participation» (O'Reilly, 2005), making involvement in various processes almost inevitable. In our postdigital age, where the virtual is the norm and the boundaries between the analog and digital worlds have blurred (Fernández Castrillo, 2023, p. 366), the co-production and sharing of knowledge, both online and offline, have evolved from a voluntary strategy used by artists to engage audiences into a fundamental principle of societal functionality. Convergence culture, defined by its constant flow of content across multiple platforms, cooperation between media and technologies, and the «migratory behavior of media audiences» (Jenkins, 2006, p. 11) has fostered a participatory turn. In such an environment, everyone is encouraged to actively engage in creating and circulating new content. However, the call for participation varies widely: in some instances, it is merely rhetorical, offering limited engagement, while in others, it facilitates significant shifts, providing individuals with greater voice and influence in decisions affecting their lives. Consequently, it has become increasingly urgent to develop a more refined vocabulary to distinguish between different models of participation and to evaluate the shifting dynamics of power.

The critical discourse on participatory art sometimes overlooks artists who employ technological devices to initiate open production, presentation, or distribution processes. Interactivity is often viewed merely as a

property of technology, defined by its capacity to provoke reactions without allowing for co-determination of its structure; in contrast, participation is seen as belonging to the cultural and social sphere of human relationships (Jenkins, 2009, p. 8). However, after nearly a quarter-century immersed in a networked culture often characterized by imposed participation, it is evident that the digital has had a decisive influence on collaborative practices. The ubiquitous and overwhelming connectedness has amplified both the potential and contradictions within participatory practices, making these dynamics more visible. Participation fundamentally differentiates producers and recipients, focusing on involving the latter in the creative process. This engagement can occur either at the conceptual stage or throughout the progression of the work, entrusting significant portions of the creative process to the public (Kravagna, 1998, p.1).

Over decades, participation has been considered an expression of social collective efforts, often gaining a romantic aura due to the uncritical assumption that participation equals democratization (Aldouby, 2020, p. 11). Starting with avant-garde movements at the beginning of the 20th century, such as Bauhaus, Constructivism, and especially Soviet Productivism, the participation of the "masses" in art production was seen as breaking down the boundaries between art and life, aiming to develop new social forms as models for imitation and development (Chubarov, 2014, pp. 427-52). Artists worked on models for the radically new organization of life, taking charge of educating the public. The expansion of the boundaries of art into political and social realms continued throughout the 20th century. By its second half, the emphasis on participation became more pronounced, particularly through the works of artists associated with happenings, the Fluxus movement, Institutional Critique, and later New Genre Public Art projects. The modernist figure of the «sole heroic artistic genius» lost its absolute centrality (Jacob, 1995, p. 55). Artists' engagement in various social movements – such as civil rights, anti-Vietnam war, women's rights, and LGBT rights – blurred the lines between the individual and the collective. The involvement of the audience as an integral part of the artwork became a widespread practice.

The late 20th century saw the emergence of Relational Aesthetics, a term coined by curator Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) to describe art that focuses on human interactions and social contexts. In the wake of postmodernist irony, skepticism towards ideology and political engagement, and the discourse on the "end of history" – Fukuyama's (1992) notion of liberal

democracy as the endpoint of ideological evolution – Relational Aesthetics aligned itself with these sentiments. It proposed learning «to inhabit the world in a better way» and considered the production of «positive human relationships» a sufficient outcome of artistic practices (Bishop, 2004, pp. 13, 62). According to Bourriaud (2002, p. 46), «art [...] is no longer seeking to represent utopias; rather, it is attempting to construct concrete spaces». At the turn of the 21st century, some researchers warned against the diluted rhetoric that vaguely advocates «dialogue over monologue» (Bishop, 2004, p. 68) and promotes generic values of emancipation, while obscuring the underlying mystifications within the shared process. Claire Bishop (2004, pp. 64-9) criticized the Relational Aesthetics approach for its formalist and unpolitical attitude towards participation, seen as «immanent togetherness», which, however, produced closed private groups for gallery-goers and was based on exclusion. Similarly examining another form of participation, Christian Kravagna (1998, p. 4) challenged New Genre Public Art projects for veiling «the process of "othering", the construction of an "other" as a condition for further projections» and consequently fostering a «traditionalist, essentialist, moralizing and mystifying» relationship towards communities considered in need of being "healed" through art.

A decade later, Ekaterina Degot (2015) scrutinized "assemblism"¹, a practical study of the potential of meetings. The degradation of representative democracy, the frustration and internal transformation of the anti-globalization movement after September 11, and the advent of conservative forces gave birth to a new collaborative phenomenon – an assembly. According to the philosopher Judith Butler (2015, p. 58), assembly implies multiple forms of performative political action suggesting alliances with other groups of bodies, even if disparate in terms of identity, on the condition that they share a state of "precarity". Individual artists and collectives united in new models of public assembly that emerged within worldwide social movements, shaping hybrid temporary and long-term constellations. Artists and art institutions began to imitate the

¹ "Assemblism" is a term coined by Dutch artist Jonas Staal (2017) to describe a practice that links art, theater, performance, activism, and politics in the creation of new social forms through public assembly. Drawing on Judith Butler's (2015) theory of performative assembly, Staal argues that assemblism creates morphologies of collective power that challenge existing political structures. It involves not just representing politics through art but using artistic practices to prefigure and enact alternative forms of democratic life within social movements.

methodologies of antagonistic groups and involve activists to enhance decentralized structures and networked cooperation². According to Degot (2015, p. 21), in today's climate of «cynical corporate capitalism», artists striving to create «indisputably good» and «righteous» art while fighting structural inequalities powered by institutions and curators, sought democracy in unlikely places – namely, in art itself. This tendency produced a paradox: artists made themselves «responsible for what they are, in reality, victims of» (p. 21). However, Degot argues, art cannot and should not compensate for the deficiencies of governmental institutions or the shortcomings of welfare politics.

Today, we are witnessing a phenomenon of "participation burnout". As engagement becomes ubiquitous across all sectors, its strategies, goals, and methods are becoming increasingly obscured. Participation has become a marketing buzzword, used to signal inclusivity and partaking but often failing to provide meaningful involvement (Naveau, 2020, p. 168). This trend is evident in various urban requalification programs and artistic grants, which frequently mandate community engagement and co-design processes. However, these initiatives repeatedly fall short of their emancipatory promises, assigning the public a marginal role of a user. Boris Groys highlights a related concern, observing a growing «domination of consumption over production» (Pombo Nabais, 2019, p. 225). He states that the capitalist framework often reduces participants to mere consumers rather than co-producers. Groys advocates for a return to the autonomy of art, drawing inspiration from radical avant-garde movements like Bauhaus. He suggests that genuine participation should occur within the artistic milieu itself through collective production by «people who want to create some kind of different and communal lifestyle» (p. 225).

The progressive disenchantment with participatory practices can be attributed to several factors. One significant issue is the difficulty in identifying the intrinsic qualities of cooperative art and in evaluating its consistency. The exclusive relationship of participatory art to socio-political processes has led to an ambiguous situation where artistic processes are judged by the success or failure of implementing declared political programs or addressing specific social problems, rather than assessing their aesthetic qualities. According to Degot (2015, pp. 22-24), «the particular

² The examples of this new direction in contemporary art are numerous: the *Bergen Assembly* (s. 2009), the *Autonomy Project* (s. 2010), the *Arctic Art Forum* (s. 2016), the *Assemblism* (s. 2017), *The Art of Assembly* (s. 2020) and others.

confusion between the regime of representation and critique understood as "art" and the activist regime of "real life"» has resulted in art initiatives being evaluated in fundamentally reductive terms, considering whether they do any good – in a moral, not aesthetic, sense – for society. Another reason for the participation culture fatigue we observe today is the appropriation of radical artistic tendencies by established contemporary art institutions. Institutions often co-opt participatory practices, stripping them of their conflict-driven essence in favor of abstract interconnectedness and uncritical inclusivity. A notable case occurred in 2012 when curator Artur Żmijewski attempted to present a radical political alternative within the conventional framework of the Berlin Biennial. The curators aimed to use the exhibition as a quasi-public space where activists could gather, discuss plans, and exchange experiences. However, the attempt to demonstrate the principles of activist horizontal organization within the official art structures, like the Biennial, encountered serious issues. These ranged from the established hierarchical and functional divisions of roles to activists accusing the curators of staging a «performative, political circus» (Kopenkina, 2013).

A similar example is the Venice Biennial, which focused its latest editions on themes such as posthumanism, feminism, collective production, and activism. Despite the topics, the event itself retains a rigid, hierarchical, and opaque structure, with artists, curators, administrators, and the local context of the city appearing completely isolated from each other (Baravalle, 2022). To address the Venetian art milieu, the independent cultural network Institute of Radical Imagination, the association for cultural workers' rights Mi Riconosci?, and grassroots trade unions developed the Metropolitan Charter of Cultural Work within their year-long participatory project *Biennalocene* (Ciccarelli, 2023). The ongoing project aims to highlight the «precarious and exploitative conditions that characterize the arts sector» and to encourage cultural institutions to adopt the Charter, «taking a decisive step forward on the terrain of labor rights» (IRI, 2023). This situation reveals a paradox: both inside and outside the Biennial, participatory and political projects are visible and often explore similar issues. However, within the institutional framework, the exhibited works are "closed" and predetermined, balancing political statements with their status as artistic commodities. In contrast, external participatory projects maintain an element of unpredictability and openness.

Another pertinent case is the 2022 Documenta edition, where despite the rhetoric on participation and decolonization, the curatorial collective ruangrupa faced severe criticism for the event's management (ruangrupa, 2022). Rather than merely representing alternative politics, the collective explored the potential of a collaborative art system by concretely practicing radical inclusivity, which can be described using Jacques Rancière's words as «a moment of equality of everyone to everyone» (2001, p. 36). Starting from the unconditional recognition of each individual's right to exist, ruangrupa's curatorial strategy aimed at models «based on democratic principles of assembly, agreement, commons, right to stage collective protest, and right to abolish absolute power» (Darmawan, n.d.), effectively seeking what Rancière (2000, pp. 51-56) terms the «redistribution of the sensible» – a reconfiguration of who can participate in common space and how. However, the existing art world system and its underlying power dynamics seem unable to implement the necessary changes to overcome economic, gender, and racial inequalities. Participatory and socially engaged practices, while intending to reform and democratize the art world, often conclude without tangible change due to institutional resistance and market pressures, or in the worst case, are reduced to mere rhetoric or intentional illusions by the very institutions that claim to support them. To preserve the integrity and transformative potential of participatory art, it is essential to establish a refined understanding of what constitutes effective and transparent collaborative practices.

Attempt at Methodology of Unpredictability

The aim of this research is not to indiscriminately criticize artistic operations for becoming institutionalized, categorized, or absorbed within an art domain that they seemingly challenge, nor to minimize the significance of politically oriented projects and creative endeavors driven by social agendas. Rather, it is beneficial to distinguish between the two dimensions – descriptive and aspirational – that participatory culture as a concept encompasses. According to the authors of *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* the descriptive dimension refers to how participatory practices and forms of cultural production are carried out, while the aspirational dimension is highly normative, focusing on how such practices can inspire agency and empowerment among different groups (Jenkins, Ito and boyd, 2016, pp. 182-83). My goal here is to go beyond the aspira-

tional and investigate the structural and functional features of participatory practice with a twofold objective. Firstly, I aim to demystify the mechanisms of appropriation, deception, instrumentalization that may hide behind seemingly open and shared processes. Secondly, I hope to delineate characteristics that clarify both the necessary conditions for effective participatory art models and advance the development of research methodology in this field.

In addition to the theoretical framework concerning "traditional" participatory art, I will incorporate the critical analysis developed within digital culture understood as «networks of interconnected nodes». According to Manuel Castells (1996, pp. 470-71), network is the main organizational form of our world and has played a fundamental role in the restructuring processes of society. The significance of each node is determined by its participation in the entire network and its ability to gain trust through resource sharing. The evolving relationships between power, economy, and social life in a world transformed by globalization and large-scale informatization have fostered new forms of intersubjectivity and intercreativity. The current labor and social paradigm places the "dialogic" methodology, with its emphasis on collaboration, at the core of the entire system. This approach, as defined by Grant Kester (2004) in his seminal work *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, highlights the centrality of dialogue and cooperation in contemporary society. On one hand, online participatory and socially engaged practices provide a space for egalitarian critical thinking, meaning-making, and aesthetic understanding (Fernández-Castrillo and Mantoan, 2024). On the other hand, the contradictions inherent in participatory logic within an increasingly privatized network milieu come to the forefront, prompting a thorough and skeptical examination of the underlying systems of power.

In artistic contexts, participation typically begins with an invitation from the artist, which can manifest in several distinct ways. Therefore, I propose to shift the critical reflection from the question of why one participates to a more nuanced inquiry into how artists incite public involvement, insert this involvement in the artistic frame, and to what objective. Reflecting on the logic of participation in network culture, Manuela Naveau (2020) developed a taxonomy based on four models of invitation and response that can lead to conscious, voluntary, unwitting, and involuntary engagement. These categories are fluid, with forms of interaction potentially evolving throughout a project. The first of Naveau's models

describes what she terms "traditional"³ participation, involving clear and open invitations that encourage deliberate and voluntary collaboration (Naveau, 2020, p. 169). This model is characterized by mutual understanding between artist and participants, who willingly engage in the creative process. For example, Jonas Staal's (n.d.) works implement "parliaments" and "summits" that include representatives of stateless states, autonomist groups, and blacklisted political organizations to reflect on the performative nature of political processes and envision an alternative. Similarly, his project *The Ideological Guide to the Venice Biennial* (Staal, 2013) is a mobile application that relies on conscious and voluntary contributions from artists, theoreticians, and anonymous participants, providing insights into the underlying geographical politics of pavilions.

In contrast, the second model – "appropriation" – involves incorporating contributions from individuals without their explicit consent, thereby turning them into involuntary participants (Naveau, 2020, p. 169). Such an approach raises ethical questions about consent and the use of personal contributions in artistic works. Paolo Cirio (2020) took this model to the extreme with his project *Capture*, where he created an online platform containing a database of 4,000 photos of police officers taken during protests in France, aiming to crowdsource their identification by name. On one hand, *Capture* appropriates the identities of the officers without consent; on the other, it engages a wider audience in a voluntary collective gesture of information gathering and indictment. The project comments on the potential uses and misuse of facial recognition and artificial intelligence. To question the asymmetry of power at play, Cirio appropriates the data and enacts the asymmetry of participation, granting agency to the public while removing it from the police.

"Deception" is another method where participants, although voluntary, are misled about the true nature or purpose of their involvement (Naveau, 2020, p. 169). In such scenarios, the offer to participate presents one intention while concealing the actual objectives of the operation, thereby manipulating participants' engagement. In 2000 Christoph Schlingensiefel developed an unsettling participatory project in the form of a television show, imitating *Big Brother*. His work *Bitte liebt Österreich! – Erste Österreichische Koalitionswoche*⁴ targeted right-wing electoral success in Austria (Tautz, 2019). Schlingensiefel's "houseguests" – immigrants

³ Here and throughout I employ Naveau's terminology; however, further reflection on the accuracy of the terms could be beneficial.

⁴ *Please Love Austria: The First Austrian Coalition Week* (my translation from German)

who had actually applied for asylum in Austria – spent a week in containers while their activities were streamed live 24/7. Online, the audience could vote for their "favorite refugee", thus determining who could stay in the country. The project's effects were far-reaching, as Birgit Tautz (2019, p. 50) argues, the «public, press, and other media organizations, as well as artists and accused politicians, became co-producers of factual declarations, name-shaming, and misreadings». Styled as an entertainment show, *Bitte liebt Österreich!* used the deception pattern to critique both mediatic manipulation and latent xenophobia.

"Instrumentalization" model, particularly prevalent on social media platforms, involves participants knowingly contributing their data or efforts that are subsequently repurposed for secondary objectives beyond their initial understanding or consent (Naveau, 2020, p. 170). For instance, users of Facebook and similar social networks are aware that their participation feeds into larger data-driven marketing strategies, even if they do not fully endorse this exploitation. Aaron Koblin's (n.d.) project *The Sheep Market* intentionally reproduces and exposes such mechanisms of commercial instrumentalization in an artistic context. In 2006, using Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing platform, Koblin commissioned 10,000 workers to draw sheep facing left. The participants were paid a small amount for their contributions, unaware that their collective efforts would be used to create an art project critiquing the nature of digital labor and crowdsourcing. The data generated from these drawings was "instrumentalized" to highlight issues of labor value and the commodification of creativity.

Manuela Naveau's taxonomy provides a valuable framework for classifying a wide range of participatory practices. It enables us to characterize collaborative efforts based on the structure of their relationships and to differentiate between those where participation is merely a decorative accessory, those who demystify exploitative mechanisms by subverting them and those that involve others in generating new collective knowledge. According to Naveau (2020, p. 163), visibility of the knowledge generation process is a key measure of efficiency for a collaborative art project. Additionally, the open-endedness of the result and the potential for «coincidence», understood here as disruption in the process, are crucial qualities (Naveau, 2020, p. 172).

From a different theoretical standpoint, Pietro Montani (2014, pp. 77-80) similarly recognizes coincidence, or unpredictability, and generation of new knowledge as the key elements that distinguish political collabora-

tive artworks from self-referential closed systems. Montani (2014, p. 54) interprets true interactivity as an autonomous artistic procedure, which he, quoting Noam Chomsky, refers to as «rule-making creativity». This term is used to describe the interactivity of techno-aesthetic environments that should include unpredictability. In this context, the aesthetic world is seen as being constantly under construction, capable of disassembly and reassembly, and able to connect originality or "auto-nomy" – where the art project literally creates its own new rules – with exemplarity – where a community involved in the art process adopts the new rules as an opportunity to reorganize their parameters of judgment. The synergy between originality and exemplarity is the primary requirement of political and autonomous artwork and the model for rule-making creativity (Montani, 2017, pp. 129-30). The open-endedness of artistic processes is a central concept in Montani's analysis (2014, pp. 76-78; 2017, pp. 111-117), which he exemplifies through a critical examination of the series *Musei narrativi* and particularly the multimedia installation *Museo Laboratorio della mente* by the collective Studio Azzurro (2008). The installation unfolds as an interactive journey, immersing the viewer in the atmosphere of a psychiatric hospital. The visitor engages with digital characters because «the entire sensitive environment in which he finds himself is asking him to do so because that environment is asking him to become part of it» (Montani, 2017, p. 116)⁵. However, as Montani (2014, p. 77) states, the installation lacks unpredictability since it does not allow for its own interruption and radical transformation by the public, thus failing to achieve the interplay between originality and exemplarity necessary for true interactivity.

Likewise, Emanuele Rinaldo Meschini (2023), analyzing collaborative endeavors within urban regeneration processes – particularly calls for proposals and public grants that encourage participation – identifies unpredictability as the cornerstone upon which participation and co-design are based. This insight helps explain the contradictions inherent in many socially engaged projects when they encounter institutional frameworks. As Meschini explains, administrative logic often constrains social processes into regulated and stereotyped practices. However, the fieldwork itself introduces a range of unpredictable subjectivities that are integral to community composition. The involvement of people as co-producers inevitably disrupts initial grant requirements, moving the shared situa-

⁵ My translation from Italian.

tion beyond institutional conformity toward the potential for self-regulation. In a similar vein, Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2016, p. 184) argue that participation is only «defined in opposition to the dominant structures of institutionalized power», and «is not an absolute» in itself. Building on all the theoretical reflections presented thus far, my examination of concrete participatory practices – those in which «people constitute the central artistic medium and material» (Bishop, 2012, p. 2) – encompasses the analysis of the invitation-reception relationship and explores art projects' rule-making capacity and their ability to accommodate unpredictability.

The Game and A Social Gym: Analysis of Two Case Studies

To illustrate the theoretical framework developed above, this section examines two recent participatory art projects through their structural and functional mechanisms. Rather than focusing on political messages or social impacts, this analysis explores how these works organize participation and negotiate the power dynamics between artists and audiences. *The Game* by Trickster-p and *A Social Gym* by Didymos employ analogous rhetoric to incite participation and arrange apparently similar conditions for implementing their shared processes, making their comparison particularly effective. Both works build on constructed ritualities where behavior patterns and rules are proposed for public engagement. These game-like structures are well-known techniques for involving audiences, offering an inherent collective nature and clear objectives that guide participation. In his influential study of rituality in a vast context ranging from anthropology to theater and from everyday life to the arts, Victor Turner (1982, pp. 102-122) posits that play and performance are activities that significantly contribute to social and psychological constitution of individuals and communities. By engaging in play, Turner suggests, people can explore different identities, challenge norms, and envision new social possibilities.

Combining performance, installation, and game design, the Swiss duo Trickster-p (n.d.) – Cristina Galbiati and Ilija Luginbühl – immerses the audience in imaginary scenarios that investigate the mechanisms of communal living. Over the past twenty years, the artists have progressively moved away from strictly theatrical practices, experimenting with diverse aesthetic languages that place the spectator's experience at the center (Trickster-p, 2023). In this artistic evolution, the duo began explor-

ing the board game arrangement as a possible framework for social critique. Trickster-p's latest project, *The Game*, aims to «play out the complex economic dynamics and organizational structures of contemporary society» (2024). The Swiss duo operates within the institutional context of experimental theater, organizing a series of one-hour and half sessions in which a limited number of participants, having purchased an entrance ticket, can take part⁶. I joined the session of *The Game* held in April 2024 at Milan's Casa degli Artisti. The audience, divided into groups, was asked to compete in a milk-farm management setting. Participants needed to raise animals, earn a living while facing natural and social challenges, and strive to achieve the highest profit to be declared the winner. At the beginning of the experience, only basic rules for moving around the board were shared. As the game progressed, the game masters – the artists – introduced new scenarios and rules, disorienting the audience and prompting them to rethink their strategies and behavior. At the end of the event, Trickster-p facilitated a short discussion, informing the public that their gaming behavior mirrored the contemporary competitive economy and demonstrated that participants were focused primarily on personal profit rather than on team solidarity. Additionally, participants were invited to express their judgments on the behavior of their adversaries and to choose the team that exhibited what they considered the most ethical approach to gameplay.

The engagement in *The Game* began with a clear and open invitation from the artists and voluntary collaboration from spectators, adhering to the "traditional" principle of participation. However, as new rules were introduced and unexpected circumstances emerged without explanation, the relationship between the participants and the artists became progressively "instrumentalized". In their interviews, Trickster-p members acknowledge the power dynamics behind creator-public relationships and claim they strive to avoid manipulation (Franzoso, 2023, p. 84-5). Yet they simultaneously admit that the progress of the event, including the introduction of new rules, is defined by a strict dramaturgical line conceptualized beforehand (Franzoso, 2023, p. 86, p. 92). Such an attitude reveals that they have effectively renounced placing themselves in a position of open dialogue among equals with the public. Consequently, conscious participation turned into unwitting involvement, sliding into a

⁶ The project was co-realized with the support of Theater Chur, Theater Casino Zug, Theater Stadelhofen Zürich, ROXY Birsfelden, TAK Theater Liechtenstein, Triennale Milano Teatro.

"deceptive" framework. Despite the artists' statement that *The Game* «is a participatory project that does not merely support existing social and cultural positions but opens up a space of possibilities to disrupt and alter them» (Trickster-p, 2024), the reality appears to be quite the opposite. The audience was deprived of the agency to act and to consciously reflect on the proposed situation. The brief debates at the end of the event only reinforced the hierarchically privileged position of the artists, who retained the authority to judge the behavior of their "collaborators", without any possibility of reciprocity.

From the perspective of originality and autonomy, *The Game* formally established its own rules that governed the entire action, but these principles engaged neither the symbolic nor the structural level of expression. They were merely designed to maintain the spectacle within the predetermined temporal frame and narrative set by the artists. Digital animations displayed on the LED screens, the accompanying sound, and the artistic devices – the playing surface and game pieces – served as immersive scenery. However, they did not allow for any interaction beyond moving one's pieces according to the instructions. The audience was unable to internalize the event's framework as an exemplary «opportunity to comprehensively organize the parameters of the faculty of judgment» (Montani, 2017, p. 130). The protocols of the spectacle were kept opaque, and the project did not anticipate any mutual influence between the artists and participants, because the latter were not treated as autonomous and equal agents. *The Game* lacks unpredictability and the potential for coincidence or disruption, and it covertly transforms the invitation-reception relationship into an exploitative modality⁷.

The second case study involves the Italian artistic duo Didymos and their project *A Social Gym*, in which I participated in 2022 at the TIST artist-run

⁷ Contemporary art often utilizes unsettling content or structures to expose exploitation, violence, or deception through the strategy of subversive affirmation. These are «forms of critique that through techniques of affirmation, involvement and identification put the viewer/listener precisely in such a state or situation which she or he would or will criticise later» (Arns and Sasse, 2006, p. 445). This approach deliberately exaggerates ethically or politically incorrect situations, however, exposing simultaneously a distance or a revelation, «a surplus which destabilizes affirmation», as art historians Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse (2006, p. 445) claim. Notable artists who have effectively employed this strategy include *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, The Yes Men, Andrea Fraser, and Christoph Schlingensiefel, among others. However, there is no evidence that Trickster-p's work employs the method of subversive affirmation, as neither the artists' statements include such a "revelation", nor does the artwork possess the necessary distancing "surplus".

space in Bologna. This project shares a similar framework and descriptive lexicon with *The Game*. Formed in 2007 by performers Alessia Certo and Giulia Vannucci, Didymos (n.d.) brings a rich background in visual arts, theater, and philosophy to their work. The duo employs a diverse array of aesthetic tools in their creative process, including painting, video, choreography, and sound, and consistently engages a group of participants whom the artists refer to as "doers"⁸. The collective's recent performative practice, *A Social Gym*, is structured as a training course open to all (Didymos, 2022). The course features "coaches" – the artists themselves, "equipment" – artworks and everyday items, and "exercises" with written instructions designed for group activity and at-home repetition. The tasks involve routine human activities such as seeing, listening, writing, movement coordination, and breathing linked to aesthetic faculties like perception, cognition, imagination, and political intention, which are the ultimate goals of the entire training.

The trainers, Didymos, lead the exercises, expecting participants to invest trust and commitment in the practice. Each "workout" session is meticulously planned with a specific location, designated time, and carefully sequenced activities, collectively shaping the session's individual and political impact on doers. The public engaged in *A Social Gym* is not informed in advance about the training they undertake or the significance of the artistic operations. The structure is distinctly rigid, with a strict division of roles. The sequence of elementary yet unusual operations evokes feelings of unease and embarrassment among the participants. The tasks include enigmatic actions such as – just to name a few – washing one's eyes followed by washing the floor in an inverted "V" position; tracing the line of a fellow participant's gaze and moving toward each other; manipulating a real rose along with its painted and digital versions; collaboratively embroidering a flag with a logical statement. Only at the end of daily sessions are the activities collectively discussed. The artists explain the origins behind the bizarre practices, many of which are based on theatrical preparatory techniques or philosophical exercises.

According to Didymos (2023), the element of unpreparedness is crucial, as it exposes doers to extraordinary actions that challenge their habitual

⁸ The participants are referred to as "doers" after Jerzy Grotowski's neologism, which the renowned theater director adopted to rid himself of the links that subjugated the words "actor" and "comedian" to the theater of the European tradition, twisted in his eyes in antiquated ways (Pradier, 2013; Shevtsova, 2014).

patterns. Furthermore, artists shift the focus from individual psychological impact to a collectively shared experience. The intentional introduction of uncertainty, or "doubt" in Didymos's terms (2023), aims to dissolve traditional hierarchies – between the artists and the public, among the participants themselves, and within broader social structures – thus fostering a general re-evaluation of how reality is constructed and understood, as well as how roles and functions are distributed. A lengthy collective discussion serves as the cornerstone of the entire session of performative actions. Participants are invited not only to express their feelings and thoughts but also to critically assess the exercises and their functionality. Everyone is encouraged to propose their own activities, which may be incorporated into future sessions, thus allowing the audience to shape the unfolding occasions. The participants are acknowledged as authors on Didymos's website and in the communication.

Despite the apparent similarity in structure, *A Social Gym* is the antithesis of *The Game*. Collaborators are engaged voluntarily by Didymos, but their participation is initially unwitting: they do not know what to expect; even if the rules are made clear from the start, the audience remains unaware of the overall scope. However, what may initially seem like a case of instrumentalization, aimed at confusing contributors about the purposes of their participation, ultimately transforms into a political act of radical equality – drawing on Rancière's concept (1995, pp. 51-52) – through the collective processing of "doubt". Equality arises from the joint experience of sensible disorientation and uncertainty, common to both artists and participants, and through its elaboration into shared rituals that foster "trust". Following Rancière (1995, pp. 51-52), politics itself – as opposed to «police» – is feasible only by «starting from the point of view of equality». *A Social Gym* practice is not an assurance of a single truth, spoken by the artists, but an invitation to «attempt at doubt» (Didymos, 2023), to enact a "dissensus" among equals, and, hence, to engage in a political artistic process⁹. In this way, the artwork names its own new rules, involving each subjectivity in co-creation and thus connects originality with exemplarity, grounding its procedures in open-endedness.

This conceptualization of radical equality clarifies why, despite similar participatory rhetoric, *The Game* and *A Social Gym* differ fundamentally in

⁹ I have conducted an in-depth examination of the relationship between Didymos's aesthetic category of "doubt" and Jacques Rancière's concept of "dissensus" understood as disruption of established ways of relating to reality. Both categories act as mechanisms for dissolving the boundaries between aesthetics and politics (Tikhomirova, 2024).

their approaches and outcomes. *The Game* implements a top-down structure and ultimately manipulates participants, depriving them of agency and reducing their role to mere pawns to fit within a predetermined dramaturgy. In contrast, *A Social Gym* fosters a bottom-up approach and engages participants as co-creators, allowing for genuine interaction that encompasses disruption and coincidence, and transparently generating new, shared knowledge.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the exploration of participatory art practices in the postdigital era reveals a complex landscape where the promise of engagement often clashes with the realities of implementation. The comparison between Trickster-p's *The Game* and Didymos's *A Social Gym* illustrates this dichotomy vividly. The integration of traditional and postdigital theoretical apparatus is necessary precisely because the ubiquity of networked culture and its mandatory involvement expose manipulative mechanisms behind participatory discourse that were previously obscured. Consequently, I propose shifting methodological analysis from aspirational dynamics to structural and functional features of art practices. This encompasses understanding how partaking is invited and received, and distinguishing between involvement grounded in equality and the merely decorative or exploitative schemes. Collaborative practices need to be transparent, with clear intentions and open processes, as the visibility of knowledge generation is a key measure of efficiency. Such jointly created new knowledge is actually what we have in common – to answer the question posed in the title of this paper – the shared meaning-making capable of dismantling both habitual patterns and the hierarchies that hold them. Artistic endeavors should connect originality with exemplarity, creating new rules and inviting communities to reorganize their parameters of judgment, while dismantling traditional power dynamics and fostering collective agency. By incorporating these principles, the proposed methodology aims to demystify mechanisms of appropriation and deception, foster participatory art beyond mere emancipatory rhetoric, and embed disruption within the process itself by embracing radical equality and unpredictability.

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