

# Book Review

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## *Interactive contemporary art. Participation in practice*

K Brown (ed.), 2014

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This book, edited by British art historian Kathryn Brown and published by Tauris, is a collection of essays discussing the very topical concept of participation in contemporary art. With the theories of Nicholas Bourriaud (2002) becoming relevant and indeed prevalent in the late 1990s and subsequently in current art making practices, it is a fitting time for a book such as this to review and problematise different aspects of the concept and its various embodiments in art during the last two decades. The contributors to this volume include theorists, artists and curators, and the book presents their differing interpretations of participation as a strategy employed in and in response to contemporary art and its institutional forms. The notion of which artworks could be understood as participatory or interactive also varies from discussion of artworks that are completely reliant on audience participation, to those that only represent an artistic process put on display.

An important aspect of value of this book lies in the fact that it encapsulates much of the critique of Bourriaud's ideas, rather than merely expounding on their appearance in art. Many authors in the book refer to important critical texts by Claire Bishop (2005, 2006), Grant Kester (2004), and Jacques Rancière (2004, 2009, 2010). During the past few years it has become almost a trend for artists to dabble in work that can be described as participatory, with a social application or emphasis, rather than an aesthetic one. This may emerge as work that invites spectators to participate in the making of the work. Spectators are referred to as participants, and often take on so-called authorial roles, while the artist becomes a facilitator rather than an author (Bourriaud 2002:30-32). Furthermore, what becomes more important than the hallowed art object of modern art, is the process, the social interaction and the experience of making artworks. Such work is also

often thought to emphasise interaction rather than contemplation on the part of the spectator (Steyn 2014:223). The notion of disinterested contemplation is based on Kantian aesthetics and the so-called Cartesian subject position, which has been critiqued as passive, excluding spectators who are not complicit in the masculine 'gaze' associated with the position, and in general an outdated Modernist position from which to view artworks (Lacan 1978; Mulvey 2004). Relational aesthetics seems to offer an answer or antidote to the problems associated with modern art and the Cartesian subject position, in that the authorial autonomy of the artist and the artwork as object of contemplation are both undermined, allowing the spectator to experience agency and involvement in the process of making meaning.

Brown (pp 37-56) explores how relational artworks could function in her discussion of the work of Rafaelo Lozano-Hemmers in the chapter entitled 'Computer art and the cosmopolitan imagination'. In a digital and performance artwork entitled *Body movies* (2001), the artist invited passers-by to become part of the artwork, by filming and displaying their silhouettes on billboards or walls which acted as screens. This public artwork required the spectators to interact with it in order to become an artwork at all, and thus made them part of the work. Brown also discusses another artwork by the same artist, entitled *Two origins* (2002), which used the bodies of spectators to reveal hidden texts. This was projected onto an architectural site, and as such created an interaction between the spectators, the site, and hidden information about the site. Without going into too much detail one may be able to see how "relational" art such as this requires audience participation to come into being. The art object is transient, and the artist cannot author the artwork alone.

In the volume there are many more examples of how artworks could be interactive or participatory. Artists Grobler (2014:57-76) and Ginsberg (2014:97-134) both write about their own creative processes and the participation their work required from spectators, who were at times not necessarily expecting to interact with artworks in settings outside of galleries. Ginsberg's work seems only interactive in that it involved complex interaction between him and a digital interface to an archive of 'art materials' he had constructed. The work, entitled *Walkabout*, highlights the difficulty of the artistic process that aims to involve spectators or audience members. As soon as the artist begins to manipulate the circumstances of their involvement in the work to achieve the desired result, the work may revert into the supposed antithesis of participation, collapsing into the Modernist model of the artist as author rather than facilitator.

Critiques of the notion of relational art, or participation in art, or in fact the loosely defined notion of interactive art, involve precisely this. Bishop (2005:128-131) has argued extensively that relational art requires a spectator versed in artistic practice. As soon as that is not the case, the spectator or participant may become mired in confusion. The spectator needs the artist to facilitate the experience, which in some sense undermines the supposed liberation of the spectator from the limitations of modern art spectatorship. Juliet Steyn (2014:221-222) summarises this very succinctly in saying that experience is preferred over the contemplation of art objects in participatory art. In an essay entitled 'The art of experience in a service economy', she points out one of the biggest concerns with this approach to art making. As soon as experience (or participation) is art in itself, then art begins to dissolve into the everyday. This is comparable to Bishop's point, in that everyday experience is not art, and spectators or participants might find this confusing and paradoxically more alienating than art which appears different from everyday life as an aesthetic counterpoint.

Steyn (2014:230-231) goes on to argue that aesthetic distance itself has been vilified and dismissed in much of supposed participatory art, in favour of a valorisation of participation for its own sake. She says that experience has come to be seen as the embodiment of democracy, authenticity, truth, egalitarianism and so forth, but that experience cannot produce these things by mere virtue of its presence in an artwork. For her aesthetic contemplation should be reframed as something engaged and empowering to the spectator. Rancière argues for such a rethinking of the aesthetic position of the (Cartesian) subject in his book *The emancipated spectator* (2009), which is referred to by many of the authors in this collection. The last chapter of *Interactive contemporary art* fittingly encapsulates the critiques of participation in discussing the social turn in art, and the valorisation of participation as a form of legitimising currency in artistic practice (Free Art Collective 2014:256-257). This discussion by the Free Art Collective aims to reconsider the merit of participation in the light of critiques of it, and debunks some of the myths which have come to be associated with it, such as that art necessarily has a social application, or that has a "moral" purpose.

This book is notable for several reasons beyond the distinguished work of some of the contributors and the editor in this field. Firstly, it is a representative rendition of the different interpretations of interactivity or participation as it has manifested in contemporary artistic practices. It is important to note that Bourriaud's are not geographically determined, although this could be problematised for specific socio-cultural contexts. As such the second reason why this book is notable also comes to the fore; it is unusual in that it spans diverse cultural interpretations of interactive

art. Two South African authors may be of particular interest to readers of *Image & Text*, namely Nicola Grobler and Josh Ginsburg. The third aspect of this book that is useful for readers is that it represents both writing about interactive or participatory art, and reflective writing on artists' own practice, written by the artists, such as the chapters written by Mieke Bal, Grobler and Ginsberg, among others.

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