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DOES THE ARTIST NEED TO BE PRESENT?
THE "PARADIGM OF VISIBILITY" AND ART PRACTICES IN PUBLIC SPACE

Abstract
The thesis of my paper is that art participatory practices in public space have a paradoxical potential to avoid a paradigm of visibility. What I call the paradigm of visibility is a formula of social presence of art which is based on a necessity of occupying a certain physical or symbolical space and an effort to sustain it. This kind of public presence of art is traditionally considered to be a guarantee of its value in terms of both artistic and social legitimisation. A question arises if this formula has an alternative. It seems that participatory art practices in public space – focused on production of objects and searching for social impact and social efficacy – can formulate a different model of presence of art (of its production and distribution) than object-based art.

Keywords:
Marina Abramović, visibility, public space, artworld

THE RULES OF ART

On March 14, 2010, the Museum of Modern Art in New York launched what proved to be one of Marina Abramović's longest and best-known performances. For six weeks, during the museum's opening hours, the Croatian artist sat by the table, waiting for the company of the audience. Viewers formed long queues, seeking their chance to sit with the artist in silence for several minutes. The performance piece was organised on the occasion of MoMA's retrospective show of Abramović's work. The scale of the event was quite impressive – when the artist was involved in her performance (which lasted the total of 760 hours

and 30 minutes[1]), every day, more than fifty young volunteers re-enacted her pieces performed several decades earlier. The press celebrated Abramović as a pop culture star, the exhibition was promoted in accordance with the best marketing models, while the whole event was summarised by Matthew Akers' documentary film issued for international cinema distribution in 2012. The exhibition and the performance had a joint title that resembled an advertising slogan: "The Artist Is Present," while the film had a similar title – "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present."

I am referring to this event because due to its meaningful title and due to the presence of Abramović at the MoMA, it has become a perfect metaphor for contemporary art practice as such, as well as for the mechanisms behind it. The title of the museum's event – reminiscent of a smart publicity catchphrase – aptly summarises the condition of both contemporary art as well as that of the entire field of cultural production by putting forward its two intrinsic elements: the figure of the artist and the necessity of his or her visibility in public space. Certainly, this observation sounds unseemly trivial. Why would we find it surprising that some individuals take up artistic activity and present its outcomes to the public? What kind of revelation can we find in the slogan that marketed the MoMA events?

Surely, we shall learn nothing new from this situation if we assume that the rules at work within the field of art are natural, as it were, while the order they generate is the only acceptable order. According to those rules, any form of creative practice is naturally defined by its author (even if the author is anonymous, he or she is still present as an imagined figure), who produces objects, actions, and initiatives seeking the widest possible audience and making efforts to move from a private or semi-private sphere towards the agora of exhibiting institutions, galleries, or the mass media. Therefore, it is a model of the field of art that involves a gradual shift from the private into the public space. The wider its scope, the higher status and acknowledgement enjoyed by the artist. However, this apparently natural figure does not constitute art's universal functional mode. It evolves, emerges, and disappears depending on the cultural and historical context. Suffice to note that the formula of presenting art to the public within the museum or gallery frameworks has been established as late as the Early Modern period, while its present form emerged in modernity. In the Middle Ages, on the other hand, the guild system, the anonymity of artists, as well as their shared status with craftsmen, together with art production based on private patronage, formed a significantly different kind of artistic field and artwork distribution system from the present one.

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[1] Rosie Gray, "Pippin Barr, Man Behind the Marina Abramović Video Game, Weighs In On His Creation," *The Village Voice* 16 September (2011), http://www.villagevoice.com/news/pippin-barr-man-behind-the-marina-abramovic-video-game-weighs-in-on-his-creation-6711775, accessed: 11 November 2016.

Undoubtedly, historical transformations could easily be dismissed as merely one of many spheres undergoing continuous change. However, the figure I am discussing here is not ethically neutral and – which is most relevant to our context – it makes a tangible impact on the public space. I suggest that this figure, which I shall define here as the paradigm of visibility, deeply informs the public space where particular subjects are forced to dispose of asymmetrical potential of making themselves present, as well as of unequal possibilities of expression. Perhaps the most prominent theoretical effort to describe this order from the standpoint that I have chosen is Pierre Bourdieu's The Rules of Art.[2] According to his notion, the field of art is, generally speaking, driven by the rule of accumulation of symbolic capital, which is then translated into economic capital. In order to amass both types of capital, any individual working within the field of art needs to compete against others and achieve higher position within the hierarchy established by the field. In this system, the artist, as the owner of certain symbolic capital, seeks to continuously increase its resources by moving – to use the language of the theory of information – through gates or filters that he or she encounters when moving through the field of art. The higher the status within the hierarchy of the field, the more restricted the access through the gates. Apart from the recognition on the part of the academy or fellow artists, filters of this kind include also art institutions, professional magazines and the widely understood media, as well as private and public art collections. If the latter are considered elements of broadly understood public space, then the perspective proposed by Bourdieu understands access to this space as guaranteed by a sufficiently high position within the hierarchy of the field of art. And vice versa.

In this sense, the title of Marina Abramović's exhibition expresses a well--founded rule: the artist is present, since she must make herself present to legitimise her value through her presence in public space. The artist who is present is an established artist. At least in the sense that her absence from public space (gallery, institution, public collection, etc.) results in the lack of legitimacy of her work, which in an extreme case means also the impossibility of being constituted as an artist at all. Bourdieu's model envisions art as embedded within a model whose major determinant is visibility. I would like to define this necessity – become visible or die – as "the paradigm of visibility." Below, I will start with the assumption that my definition of the paradigm is a viable conclusion that can be drawn from Bourdieu's theory, and I will further investigate whether its logic is inevitable, as well as how certain art practices operate in order to escape it.

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[2] Pierre Bourdieu, The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1996).

HOW TO SQUANDER SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

Within the field I have described, what is at stake for any art practice is to construct such structure of the field of art where the mechanics defined by Bourdieu is no longer at work. This way, the form of the field is transformed: it still contains the figure of the artist, yet his or her role is shared with the audience, while the presence within the public space is no longer treated as legitimising the claims to status and recognition. In this model, the artist works within the public space not so much to confirm his or her value by being present, but to treat this space as the subject matter of the practice. It seems that the two key categories that allow us to describe this model are: the white cube and allocution seen as an information traffic pattern.[3]

The boldest treatment of these two categories – at least in terms of declarations – comes from artists working in the field of socially engaged practices. In its broadest sense – as proposed by Paul Ardenne[4] – socially engaged art takes many forms: from gallery painting that takes stance on a socio-political issue, through memorials, graffiti works, murals, site-specific installations in urban space, or art animation practices, to semi-cabaret performances by the Dadaists or, at present, by Pussy Riot. In this text, I am interested in such examples of socially engaged practice that, first, are not aimed at producing objects whose aesthetic value makes them the object of visual appreciation, second, show a community-engaging potential, and, third, seek political or social agency construed as a direct impact on social life and ability to bring change thereof.

Certainly, this kind of attitude – the search for a contact with the audience unmediated by an object of art – may stem from a variety of motivations, yet one of its permanent aspects is the dismissal of the traditional formula of taking a stance in a public debate by presenting an object in an art institution. The nature of this dismissal is not so much emotional, but rather comes from a sceptical assessment of the political potential of the traditionally established formula. Negation of the artwork as an object displayed in a gallery space has a long history – from Theodor Adorno's Aesthetic Theory to Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics – which is too complex to discuss here at length. For the sake of brevity, I will merely provide a rough generalisation and suggest that critiques of this type stemmed from the belief in the high potential of commodification and thus of inscribing art into the logic of capitalist exchange. This logic shows a tendency to petrify the system of social inequality and – through a kind of backlash – turns the artwork into a tool of social exclusion. The latter is played out both on economic (being inaccessible to some), as well as

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[3] Jan van Dijk, *The Network Society. Social Aspects of New Media* (London: Sage 2006), 10.
[4] Paul Ardenne, *Un art contextual* (Paris: Flammarion 2002).

symbolic level (to refer to the category of aesthetic experience: it evokes ine-quality related to education, knowledge, access to leisure, etc.). In the context of my observations, what is significant is that by withdrawing from making objects as autonomous products, socially engaged practice makes a leap out of the paradigm of visibility. In other words, strategies of this kind seek to develop a model of the field of art that opposes both the sociological fatalism envisioned by Pierre Bourdieu, as well as the optimistic utopia conceived by Nicolas Bourriaud.

If we assume that the demand for visibility imposes the obligation to compete for the access to public space, then an art institution – as a place that regulates both the access as well as the physically and temporally limited possibility of representing particular individuals functioning within the field of art – has to be seen as playing the role of the key filter. The act of bypassing this filter by failing to put the object on display and moving outside the exhibition space gains a particular resonance. The access to an art institution seen as a frag-ment of public space is no longer at stake in thus undertaken artistic practice, since the step straight into the public space hinders the accumulation of sym-bolic capital that comes when the artist exhibits in a prestigious institution or functions within the media space. Consequently, this strategy entails absence within the institutionalised art circuits, yet facilitates realisation of political and social goals.

The strategy of moving outside the gallery can be seen as subversive, at least in the sense that artists who decide to take this step engage in a dubious game of positioning themselves beyond the rules of the field of art in order to keep investigating its ability to absorb. Working in this vein, artists of this type, although they usually come from the artworld, reject the consecrated (and conse-crating) exhibition space to often find themselves back within its confines. Working in accord with the saying that "no one is a prophet in their own land," socially engaged practices often make a triumphant entrance into the gallery space in the form of photographs, films, notes, sketches, press materials, or exchange of correspondence, exhibited as already established art productions, though not so much for their position within the hierarchy autonomously introduced by the field of art, but due to the publicity enjoyed beyond the field's boundaries. It needs to be noted, however, that although artists of this type are not prophets in their own country, they are hardly anonymous before they become prophets beyond it. It is difficult to distinguish any strict structural pattern, yet it is clear that most artists of this type have some connections with the artworld through social relations or professional education before they work outside the gallery. Their move outside the gallery, even though it means negating the rules that determine who becomes consecrated by the field, does not necessarily entail – this is the problematic part – that they are reluctant to join in the feast of sharing the profits of symbolic capital.

The difference between the strategies of working from within and without the exhibition space is further intensified by the nature of information traffic pattern within the gallery space – to employ here the terminology of media studies. In contrast to urban space and cyberspace in particular, the space of the white cube is defined by its physically determined limitations and its "bandwidth." Moreover, the pattern of information traffic that dominates in this space is, more often than not, a pattern of allocution. An art institution works like a centre that distributes information, resembling analogue radio and television broadcasters that decide about the time, place, and channel of transmission. What is more, because it works according to the pattern of allocution, the white cube pays little attention to feedback, as long as it has no immediate impact on the condition of institution or gallery (e.g. on sales or funding). The specificity of an art institution as a centre that transmits unreciprocated information is not related to its being dominated by media such as painting, sculpture or even video and installation, which, in contrast to interactive media, are hardly focused on the viewer's immediate response. Instead, it finds its roots in numerous non-art-related aspects, such as the hierarchic model of exercising power, value of presented objects, or a quasi-religious aura that surrounds the artworks and shows a propensity to sacralise the author through the power of inertia. The more so that the direct contact with the author is usually impossible, while his or her relation with the viewer, mediated through the object, renders the artist as the figure both anonymous as well as mysterious and inaccessible. The artist, then, functions in the role identical – with all proportions in place – to that of the celebrity, whose figure becomes present within the space of imagination while the person remains physically inaccessible.

Attempts to disrupt the mechanics of the paradigm of visibility emerging in this reality seek to transform the allocution pattern of information traffic into the pattern of conversation. They substitute the strategy of "distribution of information" with a diametrically different practice, that is, with a practice of negotiation of content. By focusing their communication – to use the media theory terminology once again – on the time, place, and channel of information traffic, artists seek – at least theoretically – to create symmetrical relations between them and the viewer. Above all, those relations become direct relations, therefore the figure of the artist known only from his or her name, a faceless though significant figure, becomes transformed into a relationship governed by the rules of spontaneous interpersonal communication. Undoubtedly, there is also an element of visibility, yet due to the fact that both sides become visible to each other, visibility achieves a different level. Visibility that is mutual and therefore symmetrically guaranteed is much less (or even not at all) susceptible to the emergence of mechanism of competition for the access to public space. From the status of a trophy, as it is conceived by Bourdieu, and therefore

something to be fought for, it turns into something shared, at least in the sense that mutual visibility becomes the prerequisite for action. Thus understood visibility manifests, then, the potential for eliminating the spectacle that characterises the presence of the artist in the traditional field of art, because it loses its function of generating spectacle as a mode of symbolic domination.

The direct presence of the artist translates also into the definition and meaning of the work of art as an object situated between the artist and the viewer. The work of art ceases to be one-sided communication and becomes merely an element of infrastructure that is supposed to develop a particular social situation. This, of course, does not mean that the object of art disappears, but merely that it no longer plays the role that it used to play within the closed space of the gallery. It starts functioning on the level where it is no longer a candidate for appreciation, and becomes a tool for achieving a political, social or other goal. Its assessment is pointless not only from a sociological perspective, according to which its recognition by the artworld ensures the consecration and legitimacy of the artist's value, but also from an aesthetic standpoint. As Claire Bishop suggested, such object is no longer subject to "value judgement."[5] The latter aspect is especially important in the light of what is at stake when a socially engaged activity is being undertaken. If public space is to become a democratic space, that is, if its frameworks define the relations between individual subjects as symmetrical, then the aesthetic aspect becomes unwanted due to its involvement with the category of taste and its potential for exclusion. As Bishop suggests, "In the field of participatory art, quality is often a contested word: rejected by many politicised artists and curators as serving the interests of the market and powerful elites, 'quality' has been further marred by its association with connoisseurial art history."[6] Therefore, this kind of attitude to quality means that the object of art is seen as existing beyond the field of aesthetic order, indeed, as a part of socio-political reality, which brings forth the postulate to shift the focus away from "value" judgement towards the assessment in terms of the object's "practical" and "moral" aspects. This brings art back exactly to the place from which the Kantian aesthetics wished to expel it. Consequently, it is no longer the pure object whose form is being evaluated, but the outcomes that it produces. Ultimately, there emerges yet another escape route that allows art to avoid the fatalism of valuation in aesthetic categories and in reference to the hierarchies that they entail.

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[5] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 19–23.
[6] Ibidem, 7.

MERELY A "CANDIDATE FOR APPRECIATION?"

Art practices that I have described above – works that seek to reformulate the role of the artist in public space – belong to the group of practices that have already been thoroughly analysed, if not entirely "exhausted" as topics for critical investigation. Yet, it seems that up to now, there have been made few attempt to conceptualise them as a set of practices that aim to escape the paradigm of visibility, that is, as strategies of withdrawing from the exhibition space, seen as a part of the public space that consecrates the artist and generates hierarchies within the field of art, in order to enter the agora that spreads beyond this field. This space "beyond" is also a space of hierarchy, yet art practices that develop within this field do not need to engage in making their way up the professional ladder, indeed, usually a reverse situation takes place – it is the hierarchies that become the subject of critique, of polemic, and therefore the very matter of action. Therefore, in this field, the criterion for assessment of art practices is not so much visibility, but political and social agency. Clearly, although many express their wish for autonomy, the art world is not a separate entity locked safely in an ivory tower to contemplate the world around us. Art is a part of the cultural, social, and economic system of interconnected elements, so that the works realised by artists as social or participatory works resonate in their homeland as well. Very often – as I have already noted – socially engaged practices happen to provide artists with a high position within the field of art, which, in return, ensures their "visibility" within the artworld. Their resignation from functioning within the mode of commercial art production bounds artists of this type to struggle to procure public funding, find sponsors, collaborate with institutions, and the higher the artist's recognisability the bigger their chance to successfully achieve these goals. The more often artists manage to acquire this kind of support, the more integrated they become with the mechanics of the paradigm of visibility.

   Strategies of participatory art perceived in the context of categories such as the white cube and the allocution pattern of information traffic constitute a theoretical model. Certainly, it would be possible to distinguish therein numerous "intermediate stages" and departures from norm (at least in reference to the artist's intentions or the discrepancy between the declarations and actual outcome of given project). However, the construction of such a model has also the goal of formulating a theoretical reflection, which I shall discuss only briefly. In short, it seeks to pose a question on the conditions required for art to function beyond the space governed by the rule of visibility and production of symbolic capital. Is participatory practice by necessity – dictated by "the rules of art" – bound to the space where visibility equals appreciation, or can it retain its private character? I do not mean privacy understood as intimacy and protection from the gaze of others, but the possibility to develop cultural

techniques that recognise the cultural potential of an art practice despite the fact that it refuses to seek the status of a social "candidate for appreciation" – as expressed by George Dickie in his famous institutional definition of art[7] – that is, if it wishes to position itself beyond the system of hierarchy and distinction. If we assume that the processes of accumulation of symbolic capital at work within the traditional field of art find their reflection in other areas of culture, my observations are to provide an introduction permitting us to pose the question about the significance of an individual voice in public space and the possibility of developing cultural practices that allow for constructing public space as a space of participation rather than of the "personality cult" of the winner in the game for the supreme form of visibility.

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[7] George Dickie, *Aesthetics. An Introduction* (Winnipeg: Pegasus Publications, 1971), 101.