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The Road to Artificial Hells: Revisiting the Theory of Socially Engaged Art

Much theoretical discourse drafted in the wake of the so-called artistic «social turn» or «*re*turn» of the 1990s and 2000s converges on the production of a series of candidate terms that each jostle for the title of most explanatory viable and historically insightful.[1] Whether indexed as ‹contextual art› or ‹behavioral art›, ‹relational aesthetics› or ‹littoral art›, socially engaged artistic practice is variously held to present one of the greatest recent challenges to received concepts of art because its novelty pushes at the limits of what is conceivable, drawing into the fold activity that would otherwise be extraneous and demonstrating the redundancy of certain theoretical categories, particularly those associated with the history of high modernism, for description, comprehension, and assessment.[2] Thus, with an edge of skepticism Marina Vishmidt notes that theories of autonomy have «been long since discredited as a critical framework for art»; in its place, the stress on social and economic «dependency, in all its fluid and contextual forms, comes to constitute a current orthodoxy».[3] To meet the challenge, the discourse often suggests, art theory and history are now to borrow from other disciplines in order to expand their conceptual repertoire, in order, that is, to account for the presupposition that contemporary art is definitively reliant on, a product of, functional among, and harbors within it social relations. Unsurprisingly, the most privileged of these disciplines is sociology, precisely insofar as it is the site that proclaims to reflect on the logic of society and the social and should thereby allow us to rethink, revise, or abandon those obstinate and redundant philosophical, theoretical, and critical categories that cannot acclimatize to new artistic and institutional practices.[4]

In the following intervention, I propose to take parts of this «orthodoxy» as an object of metacritical analysis, reflecting on ill-considered problems I believe to be fundamental to attempts to think the ‹social› in art.[5] I will consider two competing terms and their accompanying theoretical architecture not in order to arbitrate among them, but to demonstrate their participation in a shared tendency. Here, I am less interested in whether they each are adequate to their respective objects, but propose to enter into and reflect on the disputes over the social in contemporary art, on their enduring good intentions and the paths they have led us down, to suggest that they presuppose a politically and philosophically dubious concept of the social. To make this claim, the two art historical and theoretical approaches under consideration are read through the problem of what Theodor W. Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* terms «aesthetic positivism», a particular correlate of sociological positivism that threatens to obscure the real relations that condition art and to neutralize what may be genuinely socially oppositional about it.[6]

The Bishop–Kester Debate

Perhaps the most significant, public, and adversarial in the aforementioned disputation over terms was the disagreement that emerged between Claire Bishop and Grant Kester in a series of articles and books, foremost among which are Kester's *Conversation Pieces* (2004), Bishop's *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* (2004), their dialogue across the pages of *Artforum* in 2006, Kester's *The One and the Many* (2011), and Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012). Informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of language and Jürgen Habermas' theory of modern social rationality, for Kester, recent developments in artistic practice, developments that are best captured and assessed under the heading ‹dialogic art›, undermine our «conventional» notion of art «in which the artist deposits an expressive content into a physical object, to be withdrawn later by the viewer».[7] Thus, in art history and theory the model of meaning constitution that is centered on a static artistic object is challenged by one that foregrounds «a process of dialogue and collaboration».[8] This shift registers a deeper ontological questioning of art, drawing the viewer, who need not be a critic, into its production and circulation. Where convention holds that the «object-based artwork (with some exceptions) is produced entirely by the artist and only subsequently offered to the viewer», Kester suggests, «[d]ialogic projects, in contrast, unfold through a process of performative interaction».[9] The consequences of changes in artistic practice for our theoretical categories are significant, requiring us «to reevaluate some of the normative assumptions of art criticism and art theory. Aspects of these projects simply cannot be grasped as relevant by conventional art critical methodologies.»[10] Such artistic practices lean on a gradual, intersubjective, and dispersed model of social change, one that older art theoretical categories cannot properly account for. Thus, as he puts it during one of his several etiolated dismissals of Adorno, the problem of continuing to theorize with our extant concepts of art emerges as

> «a kind of category error, in which the norms associated with gallery or biennial-based art are simply imposed on socially engaged practices in which modes of dissent and conflict function in an entirely different manner. The result is a form of critical analysis that relies on a synchronic model of aesthetic meaning to account for processes and practices that are self-evidently diachronic in nature».[11]

On the other side, drawing on Jacques Rancière's philosophical aesthetics and political theory as well as Jacques Lacan's reflections on the ethical, Bishop argues that comparable tendencies in artistic practice are best thought of under the heading ‹participatory art›, insofar as this framing «connotes the involvement of many people (as opposed to the one-to-one relationship of ‹interactivity›) and avoids the ambiguities of ‹social engagement›».[12] For Bishop, the advantage of the adjective ‹participatory› is that it signals that «people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance», it ties contemporary artistic developments to an extended tradition of rethinking the relation of art, audience, and spectacle that began with the historic avant-garde, and it provides the proper framework for thinking ‹the politics of spectatorship›.[13] Like Kester, Bishop further suggests that, when seen from «a disciplinary perspective, any art engaging with society and the people in it demands a methodological reading that is, at least in part, sociological».[14] Art theory and history must, according to this logic, borrow from the social sciences in order to comprehend its object, though importantly, for Bishop, this means that the artistic object *resembles* the sociological object rather

than merely converging with it. Or, with a little less caution: «it is impossible adequately to address a socially oriented art *without* turning to these disciplines, and that this interdisciplinarity parallels (and stems from) the ambitions and content of the art itself».[15]

So far in this sketch, so amicable. The flashpoint in their encounter occurred once Bishop tried to uncover and criticize the latent (liberal humanist) ethical and moral assumptions at play in Kester's work. Thus, Bishop charged Kester's theoretical framing as treating «communication as an aesthetic form», judging the success of a work at «the level of social intervention», privileging «intentionality […] over the work's artistic identity», and averting away from «dealing with the *forms* […] and the *affective* responses» of artworks.[16] And in response, Kester claimed that Bishop was «determined to enforce a fixed and rigid boundary between ‹aesthetic› projects […] and activist works», sought out «an art practice that will continually reaffirm and flatter her self-perception as an acute critic», left uninterrogated a «broader set of assumptions *about* the viewer» and her agency, and failed to heed the significance of the disruption to «conventional aesthetic autonomy of both the artist and art practice».[17]

Over and above ego, at stake in this dispute are those axiological questions that look to establish the legitimate criteria for assessing artworks that include social relations as a *self-conceived* element of their structure. Seen from the side of Bishop, Kester cannot adequately comprehend participatory art, as she repeatedly italicizes, «*as art*».[18] Seen from the side of Kester, Bishop cannot adequately comprehend dialogic art as a challenge to art. It is my contention that we can better comprehend the underlying antinomy of this dispute, and with it, some basic assumptions of much contemporary art history and theory that tries to account for contemporary art's social character, by turning to an instance in which the conjuncture of art, sociological categories, society, and politics has already been thought: Adorno's criticisms of aesthetic positivism.

The Problem of Aesthetic Positivism

The postwar return and reestablishment of the Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt am Main brought with it the attempt by its members, individually and as a collective body, to challenge tendencies that were commonly understood to be emerging in German sociology: its anti-theoretical retreat from philosophy, its reductive commitment to empirical social research, and its regressive function as a tool of public policy.[19] For the purposes of my exposition, I want to draw on and heavily abridge just two of Adorno's interventions in this context. The first is located in his attempt to undermine the positivist valorization of the ‹facts› and its attendant withdrawal from theoretical reflection. Rather than taking facts to be a faithful and true index of what is, they designate, he argues, only a limited and partial perspective of social reality. This positivist misdirection toward the ‹facts›, a politically quietist recasting of the given as true, reveals more about what the hypostatizing tendencies of capitalism condition as social relations, than the essence of social relations themselves. Accordingly, he claims: «The reified nature of the method, its inherent tendency to nail down the facts of the case, is transferred to its objects, that, to the subjective facts which have been ascertained, as if they were things in themselves and not hypostatized entities. The method is likely to both fetishize its object and, in turn, to degenerate into a fetish.»[20]

The second is his challenge to the self-image of sociology's «immediate practical utilizability», its claim to be able to identify and present solutions to definite social problems.[21] Taking a long-view of the development of the *practice* of empirical research and methodologies, particularly the surveys conducted by nineteenth-century European states into their working-class populations, and the account of sociology as an *Ordnungswissenschaft,* it would be hard to make the case that this is exclusively a postwar problem.[22] Adorno is not, however, insensitive to this history, but aims to diagnose these developments insofar as they primarily signal how deeply and stringently sociology's affinity is to the advancing administrative social logic of ‹late› or ‹high› capitalism, how seemingly neutral claims for scientific accuracy, neutrality, or objectivity are themselves socially conditioned, and how empirical sociology's claim to practical applicability repeats the functionalism of society itself. He writes:

> «A social science which is both atomistic, and ascends through classification from the atoms to generalities, is the Medusan mirror to a society which is both atomized and organized according to abstract classificatory concepts, namely those of administration. But in order to become true, this *adaequatio rei atque cognitionis* requires self-reflection. Its legitimation is solely critical. In that moment in which one hypostatizes that state which research methods both grasp and express as the immanent reason of science, instead of making it the object of one's thought, one contributes intentionally or otherwise to its perpetuation. Then, empirical social research wrongly takes the epiphenomenon – what the world has made of us – for the object itself. In its application, there exists a presupposition which should not be deduced from the demands of the method but rather the state of society, that is, historically.»[23]

As with the broader thrust of Adorno's essays, lectures, and seminars, neither of these two interventions intends to persuade academic sociology to renege on its commitment to the importance of the empirical or the concrete – such a position would be entirely inconsistent with his own, sometimes reluctant, involvement in social and psychological studies as either researcher or director of the Institut. Instead, they aim at interrogating how such sociological methods and methodological standpoints reinforce a state of affairs rather than critically dissolve it.

While I outline the implications of this more fully elsewhere, here I want to focus on the ways these problematics manifest in the history, theory, and criticism of art, in the methodological repetition of elements of positivist sociology. For Adorno, the question of aesthetic positivism enters into the frame following the recasting of art as an exclusively sociological object: «Once art has been recognized as a social fact, the sociological definition of its context considers itself superior to it and disposes over it. Often the assumption is that the objectivity of value-free positivistic knowledge is superior to supposedly subjective aesthetic standpoints.»[24] For readers of *Aesthetic Theory,* this might be a somewhat perplexing statement, particularly in view of his description of one half of art's double character as *fait social,* but the core concern here is the manner in which sociological reasoning potentially domesticates or neutralizes art's critically oppositional claim, in which a sociological account claims to sufficiently and objectively comprehend art as it does any other compartmentalized aspect of social life. «Such endeavors», he continues, «themselves call for social criticism. They tacitly seek the primacy of administration, of the administered world even over what refuses to be grasped by total socialization or at any rate struggles against it.»[25] Where sociological positivism seeks to meth-

odologically narrow, while ontologically elevating, its object of study to given empirical ‹factual› material, its art historical and theoretical cognate moves away from the claim of the independent objectivity of art *qua* art towards assessing its effects on a definite subject or set of subjects. Its basic proposition is rather simple and, on the surface, not so controversial, it is the claim that we can best interpret, know, and judge art and its social character through the various subjective and intersubjective traces a work leaves behind, through the various responses that an artwork stimulates or engenders. Replacing «the theoretical decipherment of artworks by taking inventories of their effects», aesthetic positivism thus bases its criteria for the comprehension of a work, whether historic or contemporary, on how it has been received by a definite public, what kinds of institutional or individual engagement it prompts, how certain socio-economic groups respond to it, what kinds of intersubjective exchanges or dialogues result, and so on and so forth.[26] In sum, they ask after the effect and function of art within a web of social relations. But under these auspices, Adorno argues, art «would be an empirical entity, nothing more than – in American argot – a *battery of tests,* and the adequate means for giving an account of art would be program analysis or surveys of average group reactions to artworks or genres».[27] As a consequence, aesthetic positivism misapprehends its object through a double impoverishment. First, it relinquishes a conceptual or theoretical notion of art, recasting it as a merely empirical entity and thus forgoing the need for and capacity of distinguishing it from other empirical objects or parts of social activity. Second, it degrades artistic or aesthetic experience to that of the mere stimulus, the mere prompt or occasion for the winning of a particular feeling – hence the conceptual absurdity at the heart of the very term ‹aesthetic positivism›. And combined, it mistakenly maintains that the study of art as empirical material leads to a sufficient or desirable, however inexhaustive, analysis of it.

Although this characterization reads as something of a straw man for, even as Adorno admits, aesthetic positivism is seldom embraced outside a narrow subset of sociology and cultural studies, I would argue that we can more commonly find its base methodological impetus in widely accepted contemporary attempts to forego problems of the quality of a work, its critical propositions, and its claim to truth content in favor of judging or interpreting art according to what we might broadly call its ‹impact›. That is to say, just as in the 1950s and 60s debates in German sociology, aesthetic positivism is perhaps best understood not as a self-identified epistemological standpoint or proposition but as a tacit, even unacknowledged, methodological or theoretical presupposition.

Our two warring parties, Bishop and Kester, should be somewhat alert and resilient to this tendency and, indeed, hostility a hostility to it does occasionally emerge in their respective writings, the clearest example of which is Bishop's emphasis on the «inadequacy of a positivist sociological approach to participatory art (as proposed, for example, by cultural policy think-tank studies that focus on demonstrable outcomes)».[28] While such statements correctly eschew the transposition of a positivist sociological approach into the discipline of art history or the field of art theory, its diagnosis misapprehends exactly where and how this approach manifests. The problem is not simply that positivist sociological criteria (here, «demonstrable outcomes») are unsuitable to art – to say nothing about their inadequacy to the social itself – but that positivism's faults and contradictions are rehearsed in the crude importation of certain skewed sociological categories, methodological

priorities, and interpretative techniques, in blindly assuming the applicability of a contestable model sociology to art. As I tried to summarize above, one of the organizing principles of the discussion between Bishop and Kester was the focus on the attempt to comprehend the significance and meaning of a work according to what it provokes. In this, one of the disputants, Kester, turns towards criteria of intersubjective dialogue, making as his model for the intelligibility of art a concept of social rationality; whereas the other, Bishop, turns towards criteria of antagonism and disruption, predicated on a model of politics that prioritizes dissensus and its cognate in spectatorship and the «affective».[29] In both instances, however, they hold up the viewers' responses as a significant property of the artwork itself and, in doing so, draw in a series of associated, subterranean presuppositions and problems that Adorno, some forty years earlier, began to articulate.

If this almost-recent discourse on socially engaged art now appears as somewhat passé, this is, I would argue, mostly attributable to the successful institutional and public policy adoption of its premises, rather than to its ultimate ‹failure›. In today's ‹post-social› moment, where engagement, dialogue, and participation determine institutional self-understanding, where dependency is an orthodoxy made morally comfortable, the view that art is thoroughly and unquestionably social, and that this is empirically demonstrable, is unavoidable. And indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a better or more articulate, if politically milquetoast, defender of this condition than Kester, though he would no doubt protest at some length.[30] The desideratum to think this is the desideratum to think positivism's inverted and distorted truth as, in Adorno's words, «the bad consciousness of art».[31] At its most charitable extreme, it reminds art that its claim to and critique of autonomy is always partial and provisional, that a work itself «is not unmediatedly true».[32] But the naïveté with which aesthetic positivism offers and upholds its categories, with which it flouts its theoretical presuppositions, demonstrates an adherence to a stunted sociology. In effect, it wrongly takes the epiphenomenon – what the world has made of art, to paraphrase Adorno paraphrasing Karl Kraus – for the object itself.[33] It falsely conceives what may be genuinely socially oppositional about art as what presents itself as immediately socially oppositional.

Notes

1 On the ‹social turn› or the ‹*re*turn›, see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship,* London/New York 2012, p. 3.

2 In addition to those just listed, a partial catalogue of all such terms would have to include: arte útil (Tania Bruguera), community-based art (Miwon Kwon), connective aesthetics (Suzi Gablik), dialogic art (Grant Kester), dialogue-based public art (Tom Finkelpearl), new genre public art (Suzanne Lacy), participatory art (Claire Bishop), social aesthetics (Lars Bang Larsen), social justice art, social practice, and socially committed art – to say nothing of sometimes proximate, sometimes distant neighboring categories such as activist art (Gregory Sholette), strike art (Yates McKee), and tactical media. If I opt for ‹socially engaged art› in what follows, this is only done so under the assumption that it seems to have emerged as the term broadly favored or most frequently used in art-theoretical discourse.

3 Marina Vishmidt, The Value of Autonomy – A Conversation Between Marina Vishmidt and Kerstin Stakemeier About the Reproduction of Art, in: *Texte zur Kunst,* 2012, No. 88, p. 102–117, here p. 102. Cf. Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt, *Reproducing Autonomy. Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art* (second, revised edition), London 2016, especially p. 75–79.

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5 Vishmidt 2012 (as Note 3), p. 102.

6 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* London 1997, p. 267.

7 Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces. Community and Communication in Modern Art,* Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2004, p. 10.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Grant H. Kester, Action and the Critique of Action in Theodor W. Adorno and Joseph Beuys, in: *The Art of Direct Action. Social Sculpture and Beyond,* ed. by Karen van den Berg, Cara M. Jordan a. Philipp Kleinmichel, Berlin 2019, p. 65–98, here p. 94–95.

12 Bishop 2012 (as Note 1), p. 1.

13 Ibid., p. 2.

14 Ibid., p. 7.

15 Ibid.

16 Claire Bishop, The Social Turn. Collaboration and Its Discontents, in: *Artforum,* 2006, Vol. 44, No. 6, p. 178–183, here p. 181 and Bishop 2012 (as Note 1), p. 23 and 25, respectively.

17 Grant H. Kester, Another Turn, in: *Artforum,* 2006, Vol. 44, No. 9, p. 22. Cf. Claire Bishop, Claire Bishop Responds, in: *Artforum,* 2006, Vol. 44, No. 9, p. 23; Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many. Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context,* Durham, NC/London 2011, p. 63 and 65, respectively.

18 Bishop 2012 (as Note 1), p. 17 and 22.

19 See Theodor W. Adorno, Contemporary German Sociology, in: *Transactions of the Fourth World Congress of Sociology. Volume I: Sociology in Its Social Context,* 1 Vol., London 1959, p. 33–56.

20 Theodor W. Adorno, Sociology and Empirical Social Research, in: *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology,* London 1976, p. 68–86, here p. 72.

21 Ibid., p. 74.

22 See Wolfgang Bonss, Critical Theory and Empirical Social Research: Some Observations, in: Erich Fromm, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany. A Psychological and Sociological Study,* ed. by Wolfgang Bonss, Warwickshire 1980, p. 1–38, here p. 9–14; and Oskar Negt, Konstituierung der Soziologie zur Ordnungswissenschaft: Strukturbeziehungen zwischen den Gesellschaftslehren Comtes und Hegels, in: Oskar Negt, *Werkausgabe,* 20 Vols., Göttingen 2016, Vol. 1: *Konstituierung der Soziologie zur Ordnungswissenschaft,* p. 17–137.

23 Adorno 1976 (as Note 20), p. 74.

24 Adorno 1997 (as Note 6), p. 250.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., p. 267. Here we could consider extending these criticisms to include certain claims in the art-historical methodology and the historiography of art, especially those that seek to recount, analyze, and comprehend a work's reception. In this regard, Adorno repeats that reception theory often confuses the «study of social effect» with «what is social in art». Arguing further that frequently «reception wears away what constitutes the work's determinate negation of society». Both, ibid. p. 228. In order to test whether this actually holds for modern attempts, however, more work would have to be undertaken.

27 Ibid., p. 264. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, Opinion Research and Publicness, in: *Group Experiment and Other Writings. The Frankfurt School on Public Opinion in Postwar Germany,* ed. by Andrew J. Perrin a. Jeffrey K. Olick, Cambridge, MA/London 2011, p. 179–183.

28 Bishop 2012 (as Note 1), p. 7. Also: «And so we slide into a sociological discourse – what happened to aesthetics?» Ibid., p. 17.

29 See, for instance, ibid., p. 5–8 and 22. Though I leave it here undeveloped, I would

suggest that Bishop passively relies on a politically and theoretically regressive tendency within the sociology of conflict that seeks to replace notions of class contradiction with that of social antagonism. See Theodor W. Adorno a. Ursula Jaerisch, Anmerkungen zum sozialen Konflikt heute, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften,* 20 Vols., Frankfurt am Main 1972, Vol. 8: *Soziologische Schriften I,* p. 177–195.

30 See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, A Note on Socially Engaged Art Criticism, and Grant H. Kester, The Limits of the Exculpatory Critique. A Response to Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, in: *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics,* 2017, Vol. 25, No. 53, p. 60–72 and 73–98, respectively. In some senses, recent debates on art's social character recode the opposition of the modernism of autonomy versus the politics of the avant-garde, as theorized by Peter Bürger, as an opposition of the modernism of autonomy versus the moralism of contemporary ‹post-social› artistic and institutional practices. In this context, the dispute between modernism and the avant-garde as the dispute between the aesthetically conservative and the politically radical returns as a dispute between the conservative and the ethical. Bishop, I think, recognizes something of this: «What serious criticism has arisen in relation to socially collaborative art has been framed in a particular way: The social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism.» Bishop 2006 (as Note 16), p. 180. For a development of this line, see Claire Bishop, Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?, in: *Living as Form. Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011,* ed. by Nato Thompson, New York 2012, p. 34–45; and, drawing on Peter Dews and Jacques Lacan, Bishop 2012 (as Note 1), p. 22–26.

31 Adorno 1997 (as Note 6), p. 268.

32 Ibid. Cf. John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde,* London 2015.

33 «Wie fand ich das Geheimnis wieder? | Man hatte mich darum gebracht. | Was hat die Welt aus uns gemacht! | Ich dreh' mich um, da blüht der Flieder.» Karl Kraus, Flieder, in: Ibid., *Werke,* 14 Vols., München 1959, Vol. 7, p. 235–236, here p. 235.