# Negotiation

❖

by Diego Mantoan

University of Palermo

## Abstract

The term *negotiation* is investigated in its shift towards positive connotations for Public Art, while much art theory in the second half of the twentieth century was focused on defining the solipsist existence of contemporary art. The long queue of Modernism pressed artists to impose their persona on the artworks, though with Public Art practitioners projecting their work decidedly beyond the art field and *negotiation* became the essence of strategies engaging with the audience and their context. The term poses a methodological challenge, implying a paradigm shift from Pierre Bourdieu's idea of a "closed art field" to Howard Becker's open concept of "cooperating art worlds", thus addressing the passage from an art history focused on adamantine interpretations to one open to participatory dynamics engaging with environmental and societal issues. The ecologist projects by Gayle Chong Kwan and Sasha Vinci are presented as recent examples.

## The Shift from Closed-Circuit to Open Engagement

Some time ago, while quarrelling with the director of an artist estate of a late European abstract expressionist, it became clear to me how the shift in meaning making — from the artist to the wider audience — truly constitutes the backbone of postmodern developments in contemporary art. My counterpart argued that it was ridiculous how artists like Joseph Beuys, John Latham, Barbara Steveni or the wider Fluxus collective pretended that everybody could be an artist. In his view, the privilege of artistic creation and sense building rested with the artist alone, taken as a heroic being with thaumaturgical abilities. I was hardly in the mood to engage in a verbal fight over the contribution to Postmodernism that arose from George Maciunas' concept of anti-art, which pushed towards a complete entanglement of creator and spectator, of art and life.[1] Participation was then a matter of art's democratisation, with some artists pushing participants to become necessary co-creators.[2] Today, Public Art engages the audience in the artwork's process and outcome, often moving beyond the art field to address wider

---

1   George Maciunas, "Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art (1962)." In *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Realisme: Eine Dokumentation*, edited by Jürgen Becker and Wolf Vostell (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1965), 192–195.

2   Georg Jappe, "Not just a few are called, but everyone: Interview with Joseph Beuys." In *Studio International* 184, n. 950 (1972), 228–229.

societal issues.[3] This does not mean artists are renouncing their creative freedom; rather, they involve the public in the artistic process to *negotiate* its outcome. In the social arena, meaning must adapt to the balance emerging between the artist's intentions and the audience's expectations. For many public artists, the principle of *negotiation* steers their effort towards earnest community engagement, fostering a process of reflection, exploration and reckoning with societal, political, environmental or economic malfunctioning, far beyond the isolated art world.[4]

   Although participatory practices expanded the concept of art, much art history and theory in the second half of the twentieth century remained focused on — perhaps even obsessed with — the need to define the conditions of existence of contemporary art. Such was the ontological attempt by George Dickie to theorise the institutional dynamics of art legitimation, referred to as a normative act by a higher authority.[5] On the sociological side, Pierre Bourdieu singled out the art field from ordinary life; a specialised domain which strives autonomously and finds its meaning inside a closed circuit.[6] It appears the long queue of the Modernist view still pressed theoreticians to identify artists as subjects who impose their will or persona on the products of creativity, thus prefiguring the existence of a definitive meaning for every artwork strictly laying within the artwork itself. From this perspective, the term *negotiation* can only take the negative trait of the artist renouncing his or her own character and freedom, as if going back to the Pre-Modern Era when painters and sculptors were subject to the demands of patrons

3   Chris Crickmay, "'Art and Social Context', its Background, Inception and Development." In *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 2, n. 3 (2003), 119−133.

4   Ruth Wallen, "Walking with Trees." In *Dark Matter: Women Witnessing*, Issue 9: "Extinction Illness: Grave Affliction and Possibility" (2019). Available online: https://darkmatterwomenwitnessing.com/issues/Oct2019/articles/Ruth-Wallen_Walking-with-Trees.html. accessed on 26 June 2021.

5   George Dickie, "Institutional Theory of Art." In *Theories of Art Today*, edited by Nöel C. Carroll (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 107.

6   Pierre Bourdieu, "The Intellectual Field: A World Apart (1990)." In *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 15.

and clients.[7] However, as practised in Public Art, *negotiation* takes on the opposite meaning, that of a proper engagement with the spectators or participants. The term poses a methodological challenge for art historians and theoreticians since it implies a paradigm shift from Bourdieu's idea of a "closed art field" to the concept of "cooperating art worlds" as postulated by Howard Becker. In the writings of Bourdieu, an idea of an autonomous art system emerges, defined as a space of positions where cultural meaning and artistic predominance are at stake, though strictly within the field itself.[8] To the contrary, on Becker's view the art world is an open set of interrelated people *negotiating* their reciprocal roles, activities and meanings, thus presenting art as the result of a convention, a bottom-up process of collective engagement.[9] *Negotiation* addresses the passage from a kind of art history focused on adamantine interpretations to one open to participatory dynamics reaching out into the wider world. As seen through the lens of *negotiation*, an artwork acquires meaning not for what it represents, but for what it stands for.

## Blurring the Distinction between the Artist and the Public

At some point in the waning twentieth century, the term *negotiation* shifted towards positive connotations as a form of deeper engagement with the public. In the first instance, it was site-specificity, inside the museum or gallery space, that helped the artwork exit its solipsistic existence in order to respond to the elements of a given place.[10] Land Art, in particular, disrupted Modernist paradigms by harmonically integrating with a site or drastically reacting to its spatiotemporal dimension.[11] The terms "site" or "place" opposed the Modernist idea of the artwork as an ontologically independent object existing outside of any possible

7   Peter Burke, "L'artista: momenti e aspetti." In *Storia dell'arte italiana* 2, edited by Giulio Bollati, Paolo Fossati, and Giovanni Previtali (Torino: Einaudi, 1979), 101.

8   Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 12−36.

9   Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 39.

10  Elizabeth C. Baker, "Artworks on the Land." In *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*, edited by Alan Sonfist (New York: Dutton, 1983), 75.

11  Rosalyn Deutsche, "Tilted Arc and the Uses of Public Spaces." In *Design Book Review* 23 (Winter, 1992), 22−27.

relationship.[12] Suddenly, the "disembodied eye" was questioned and substituted with an embodied encounter, that of the spectator engaging in an aesthetic experience with the artwork or the artist.[13] Referring to Public Art, Latham once maintained that context was half the work; it constitutes the nurturing ground for the public to build relationships and meaning.[14] However, the artist and the public remained distant until public artists concretely involved their community in the artistic process.[15] Not all art-making underwent this transformation, of course, just artists who deemed public involvement an essential element of the aesthetic experience, especially those who felt art had the moral imperative to engage with societal issues.[16] The principle of *negotiation* then made its entrance into art education, prompted by reformed study courses across the Western world that entailed student placement in the wider social context. In the United Kingdom alone, such experimental training started in the late 1970s at Darlington College of Art, Glasgow School of Art, East London Polytechnic, Bradford College, Central Saint Martins and Newcastle Polytechnic, where students undertook a residency in a setting where art was not normally practised; the terms of their intervention had to be *negotiated*.[17]

Today, only an earnest *negotiation* of means and meanings with a self-aware public can deliver an artwork that makes sense in a particular situation.[18] As *negotiation* occurs between two willing parties, the artist has to abandon a patronising attitude and confront an audience made of emancipated spectators,

---

12  Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 17.

13  Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity (1997)." In *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 34−35.

14  Diego Mantoan, *The Road to Parnassus: Artist Strategies in Contemporary Art* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2015), 88−91.

15  Su Braden, *Artists and People* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 1−15.

16  Moira Roth, Suzanne Lacy, Julio Morales, and Unique Holland, "'Making & Performing Code 33': A Public Art Project with Suzanne Lacy, Julio Morales, and Unique Holland." In *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 23, n. 3 (2001), 61.

17  Mantoan, *The Road to Parnassus*, 91−93.

18  David Harding, "Another History: Memories and Vagaries: The Development of Social Art Practices in Scotland from the 60s to the 90s." In *Art with People*, edited by Malcolm Dickson (Sunderland: Artist Information, 1995), 26−30.

that is, people participating with their own beliefs, intentions and expectations.[19] Socially-engaged practices, in particular, promote a "dialogic" understanding of the artwork, setting the artist and the public at an egalitarian level, engaging in an act of sharing contents and *negotiating* meaning.[20] Abandoning the pretension of universal truths, this discursive character implies the accomplishment of a provisional consent — which is the outcome of a negotiation — that more or less allows the coexistence of different perspectives, be they the artist's or those of the public.[21] As if at a bargaining table, the "dialogic" principle in art produces relationships based on empathy, interconnections, expectations as well as forms of "connected knowing" [22]. The true sense of *negotiation* becomes clear when artists do not take the audience for granted, but instead envision the public as a self-aware actor that engages in a relationship among equals.

Thoroughly trained in public strategies, young artists in the 1990s embraced open-endedness to produce works that incorporated engagement as a natural component of artmaking. Such was an installation like Liam Gillick's *Big Conference Platform Platform* (1998), a mere canopy suspended in the gallery space, which intended to foster autonomous conversations among the audience. Even more engaging were Gillian Wearing's *Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say* (1992/93), where she gave casual people met in the district of Peckham absolute freedom to draft their own message. A similar attitude informed Christine Borland's collection of *Small Objects that Save Lives* (1992), when she asked friends to provide her with

19   Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), 10−15.

20   Grant Kester, "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art (1999)." In *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 155−157.

21   Jürgen Habermas, "Justice and Solidarity: On the Discussion Concerning 'Stage 6.'" In *Philosophical Forum* 21, n.1−2 (1989), 47.

22   Patrocinio Schweickart, "Speech is Silver, Silence is Gold: The Asymmetrical Inersubjectivity of Communicative Action." In *Knowledge, Difference and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing*, edited by Nancy Rule Goldberger, Jill Mattuck Tarule, Blythe Mcvicker Clinchy, and Mary Field Belenky (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 317.

lifesaving or life-changing items from their personal experience. Open-endedness and public engagement were epitomised in such artworks, though to critic Claire Bishop they were by no means enough to democratise the art world or address societal issues.[23] In a written response to Bishop, however, Gillick opposed the claim that art becomes interesting when it does not try to patronise the audience, but rather when it addresses the *negotiating* processes that shape the contemporary environment.[24]

## Two Modes of Engagement as Participation as Negotiation

Engaging the spectators is hardly worthwhile *per se* for artists who embrace public strategies because the *negotiating* attitude bears profound consequences for the methodology and practice of Public Art, especially in connection to Eco-Activism, community art and gender debates. Public artists work at the fringe of the art world, carving their own niche that responds to broader society, sometimes even disregarding established art institutions.[25] *Negotiating* the terms of intervention, encountering prospective audiences and designing participatory practices all constitute means of engagement that bring the artistic action into the midst of society, far beyond the artistic field. Cast away from the limelight of the art world, many of today's public artists engage with the audience and their context to produce works meant as the start of a public discussion, not as the solipsistic crystallisation of the artist's persona. In this regard, the participatory projects of London-based Gayle Chong Kwan and the environmentalist interventions of the Sicilian artist Sasha Vinci emerge as two possible manners of engaging with the public through the principle of *negotiation*. Over the last two decades, both have

---

23   Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." In *October* 110 (2004), 59−61.

24   Liam Gillick, "Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.'" In *October* 115 (2006), 100.

25   George Baker, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, James Meyer, Robert Storr, Hal Foster, John Miller, and Helen Molesworth, "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism." In *October* 100 (Spring, 2002), 202−203.

concentrated on creating works that combine a genuine ethnographic attitude in the sense of Hal Foster with a pronounced passion for public engagement centred on activating communal experiences and shaping collective meaning, particularly with regard to ecological issues.[26]

An eclectic artist with a broad cultural background, Gayle Chong Kwan's projects question the consequences of deeply rooted production and consumption paradigms of the post-industrial era. She frequently resorts to participatory activities inside a specific community that lead the public from the everyday to fantasy, such as confronting them with the practical consequences of its history, habits and beliefs. Starting from common objects or discarded items, she imagines the afterlife of these materials through a process of formal transformation and physical preservation, often resorting to techniques of the Victorian age originally used for collection, study and display. In doing so, she retrieves the artifices of the *Wunderkammer* to create marvellous reflections of the familiar by physical miniature, artificial illumination, optical enlargement and aesthetic resemblance.[27] In public installations for subways and underpasses, such as *Wastescape* (2012), Chong Kwan draws the passer-by into unfamiliar surroundings produced from the remains of collective consumption, like a cave of stalagmites and stalactites made of empty milk cans.[28] The audience is invited to put its own beliefs and recollections into play, especially through acts of collective food consumption and narrative entanglement that allow participants to connect to their surroundings and behaviour. Her mobile *Memory Tasting Unit* (2004) or her microclimate sensory banquet *At the Crossroads* (2018) are two such examples. Discarded food becomes the privileged material of her communal actions, inviting the public to collect the remains of edible items on the streets and come to terms with their consumption habits. In *Paris Remains* (2008), discarded food is turned into urban reconstructions and gothic landscapes, while, in *Waste Matters* (2021), participants

26    Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 1–71.

27    Adalgisa Lugli, *Museologia* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1992).

28    Amanda Boetzkes, "Plastic, Oil Culture, and the Ethics of Waste." In *RCC Perspectives* 1 (2016), 51–52.

walk through Venice collecting food waste, which is then photographed and transformed into fashionable hats taken again through the streets of the city.

Another perishable natural element is the core material of Sasha Vinci's art activism, as he uses flowers as an empathetic metaphor of beauty and transience in his collective processions. In most human cultures, blooms embody nature's energy and frailty while simultaneously constituting a powerful symbol of environmental and societal rebirth. Drawn from the Sicilian tradition of decking horses in flower garments for the patron saint festivities at the beginning of spring, the artist first adopts this deep-rooted technique to cover objects of individual or collective memory and then leads participatory parades that stir environmental and socio-political consciousness in local communities. For the project *Mutabis* (2016) in his hometown Scicli, he wore a mantelpiece of flowers and wandered like a shaman along natural landscapes and historical buildings soon to be doomed by human greed, either to be turned into landfills or exploited for commercial purpose.[29] The visual and symbolic power of this action spilled over to other endangered territories, such as with collective processions that drew attention to the illegal landfills of Caserta in *La terra dei Fiori* (2017) or the overwhelming impact of tourism on Venice in *La Repubblica delle Meraviglie* (2018). Participants joined in an open lab for the collective *re-negotiation* of the social, political, economic and environmental foundations of a truly sustainable future.[30] The true moment of sharing and community building is neither the parade nor the workshops, but the so-called "infiorata" (decorated with flowers or flower carpet), when the public comes together to cover signs, carpets and garments with

---

29  Paola Tognon, "Trilogia del possibile." In *La Repubblica delle Meraviglie*, edited by Maria Grazia Galesi, Diego Mantoan, Paolo Tognon, and Sasha Vinci (Venice/Caserta: Ca' Foscari Sostenibile and aA29 Project Room, 2018), 15−17.

30  Lara Gaeta and Diego Mantoan, "Sustainable Art for Sustainable Cities: A Performance and a Screening Afternoon at EDRA50 Brooklyn." In *Proceedings of the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA) 50th Conference, Brooklyn*, edited by Amy Beth, Richard Wener, Betsy Yoon, Ruth A. Rae, Jessica Morris (New York: Environmental Design Research Association, 2019). Available online: https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/read/sustainable-art-for-sustainable-cities/section/97029364-bf7b-4715-96fb-60c02dd8388a. accessed on 11 July 2021.

flowers for an improvised demonstration for nature by means of natural elements. The signature example of "infiorata" was *A Human Flower Wall* (2019) in New York, where thousands of coloured gerberas applied on the rally instruments were brandished in the streets for societal transformation. Such art activism sparks the communal *negotiation* of new values that challenge consumerist culture and make the Earth bloom, again in harmony with humankind.

As exemplified by the public projects of Gayle Chong Kwan and Sasha Vinci, recycling waste, restoring communities and reclaiming nature are not just artistic gestures; they become means for citizens to *negotiate* a new relationship within society and towards the environment. Their works speak of liberation from economic exploitation and cultural imperialism via the reversal of a Western view or even an anthropocentric perspective, thus contributing to a shift in paradigms within the community of participant public. Engagement is thus sought through the participation in an open *negotiation* of artistic means and cultural meanings, as well as of our relationship with the environment.

## ⚜ Bibliography

Baker, Elizabeth C. "Artworks on the Land." In *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*, edited by Alan Sonfist, 75. New York: Dutton, 1983.

Baker, George, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, James Meyer, Robert Storr, Hal Foster, John Miller, and Helen Molesworth. "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism." *October* 100 (Spring, 2002): 200–228.

Becker, Howard. *Art Worlds.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Boetzkes, Amanda. "Plastic, Oil Culture, and the Ethics of Waste." *RCC Perspectives* 1 (2016): 51–58.

Bishop, Claire. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* 110 (2004): 59–79.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Intellectual Field: A World Apart (1990)." In *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, 13–20. Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.

Braden, Su. *Artists and People*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.

Burke, Peter. "L' artista: momenti e aspetti." In *Storia dell'arte italiana* 2, edited by Giulio Bollati, Paolo Fossati, and Giovanni Previtali, 85–115. Torino: Einaudi, 1979.

Crickmay, Chris. "'Art and Social Context', its Background, Inception and Development." *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 2, n. 3 (2003), 119–133.

Crimp, Douglas. *On the Museum's Ruins*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993.

Deutsche, Rosalyn. "Tilted Arc and the Uses of Public Spaces." *Design Book Review* 23 (Winter, 1992), 22–27.

Dickie, George. "The institutional theory of art." In *Theories of Art Today*, edited by Nöel C. Carroll, 93–108. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000.

Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.

Gaeta, Lara and Diego Mantoan. "Sustainable Art for Sustainable Cities: A Performance and a Screening Afternoon at EDRA50 Brooklyn." In *Proceedings of the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA) 50th Conference, Brooklyn*, edited by Amy Beth, Richard Wener, Betsy Yoon, Ruth A. Rae, Jessica Morris. New York: Environmental Design Research Association, 2019. https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/read/sustainable-art-for-sustainable-cities/section/97029364-bf7b-4715-96fb-60c02dd8388a. accessed on 11 July 2021.

Gillick, Liam. "Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.'" *October* 115 (2006): 95–106.

Habemas, Jürgen. "Justice and Solidarity: On the Discussion Concerning 'Stage 6.'" *Philosophical Forum* 21, n. 1–2 (1989): 32–52.

Harding, David. "Another History: Memories and Vagaries: The Development of Social Art Practices in Scotland from the 60s to the 90s." In *Art with People*, edited by Malcolm Dickson, 26–30. Sunderland: Artist Information, 1995.

Jappe, Georg. "Not just a few are called, but everyone: Interview with Joseph Beuys." *Studio International* 184, n. 950 (1972): 226–229.

Kester, Grant. "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art (1999)." In *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, 153–165. Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

Kwon, Miwon. "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity (1997)." In *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, 34–55. Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

Maciunas, George. "Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art (1962)." In *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Realisme: Eine Dokumentation*, edited by Jürgen Becker and Wolf Vostell, 192–195. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1965.

Mantoan, Diego. *The Road to Parnassus: Artist Strategies in Contemporary Art*. Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2015.

Roth, Moira, Suzanne Lacy, Julio Morales, and Unique Holland. "'Making & Performing Code 33': A Public Art Project with Suzanne Lacy, Julio Morales, and Unique Holland." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 23, n. 3 (2001): 47–62.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2009.

Schweickart, Patrocinio. "Speech is Silver, Silence is Gold: The Asymmetrical Inersubjectivity of Communicative Action." In *Knowledge, Difference and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing*, edited by Nancy Rule Goldberger, Jill Mattuck Tarule, Blythe Mcvicker Clinchy, and Mary Field Belenky, 305–331. New York: Basic Books, 1996.

Lugli, Adalgisa. *Museologia*. Milan: Jaca Book, 1992.

Tognon, Paola. "Trilogia del possibile." In *La Repubblica delle Meraviglie*, edited by Maria Grazia Galesi, Diego Mantoan, Paolo Tognon, and Sasha Vinci, 15–17. Venice/Caserta: Ca' Foscari Sostenibile and aA29 Project Room, 2018.

Wallen, Ruth. "Walking with Trees." *Dark Matter: Women Witnessing*, Issue 9: "Extinction Illness: Grave Affliction and Possibility" (2019). https://darkmatterwomenwitnessing.com/issues/Oct2019/articles/Ruth-Wallen_Walking-with-Trees.html. accessed on 26 June 2021.