

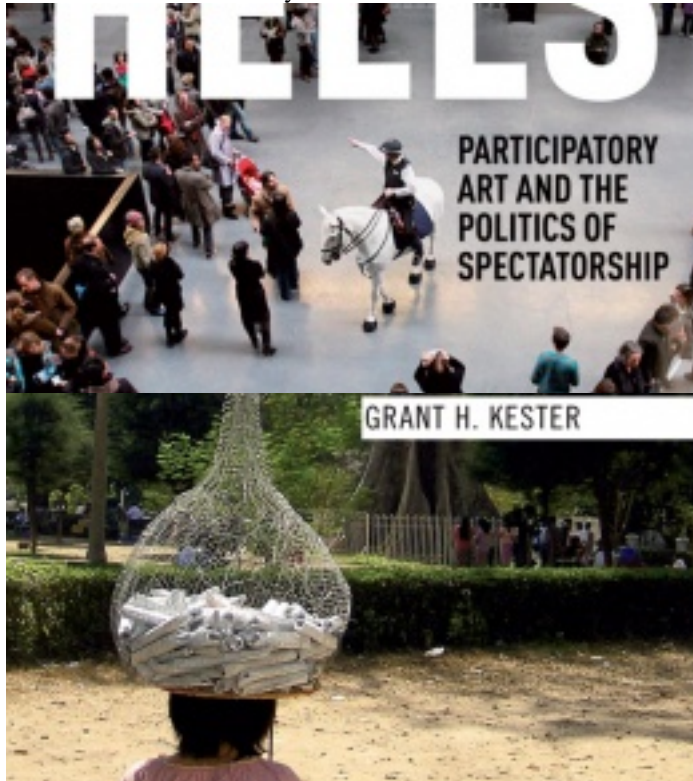
From *Art in America*:

## Can Art Change Lives

By Grant H. Kester, Claire Bishop  
reviewed by Eleanor Heartney

Published: June 2012

Publisher: Duke University Press



[View Slideshow](#) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, by Claire Bishop, New York, Verso, 2012; 368 pages, .95.; *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, by Grant H. Kester, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2011; 320 pages, .95 cloth, .95 paper.;

It's rare these days to find critics squaring off for a no-holds-barred match over matters of principle. So it was exhilarating to see Claire Bishop and Grant Kester butt heads in the spring of 2006 over the issue of participatory art. In a published exchange regarding Bishop's article "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," charges and countercharges flew thick and fast. Kester claimed that Bishop, driven by "paranoid knowing," is obsessed with "unveiling hidden violence" to a supposedly benumbed or disbelieving world. Bishop accused Kester of espousing an ethical imperative that, by emphasizing the shared creation of works, revels in the "Christian ideal of self-sacrifice" and reduces participatory art to mere good intentions.

Now the two have come out with dueling volumes that allow them to make their cases at length and in detail. Kester, who is chair of visual arts at the University of California in San Diego, has titled his book *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*. It offers in-depth discussion of individual artists in relation to his vision of reparative collaboration, and attacks some of the cherished verities of current critical theory. Bishop, a professor of art history at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York, has written *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Here, she takes a

topographical approach, tracing the evolution of participatory art and theater from early 20th-century Italy and Russia to the present day, arguing that its essence lies in a potential for social disruption.

Kester and Bishop actually share a good deal of common ground. Both criticize Nicolas Bourriaud, guru of relational esthetics, for equating mere sociability with true democracy. They, on the contrary, each seek a model for real social change, offering two contrasting but not necessarily conflicting visions of art's transformative role.

At the heart of both visions is a resistance to the apparent triumph of neoliberalism, the gospel of free market economics and privatization that is sweeping the world, from the United States, Europe, Africa and Latin America to ostensibly communist China. For Kester, the battle is best waged through the communitarian approach of what he terms "dialogic art," in homage to the theories of Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Kester valorizes artworks that involve an immersion in local conditions, allowing artists to slowly develop solutions to very particular sociopolitical problems through a sustained dialogue with specific communities. He sharply distinguishes groups like Park Fiction in Hamburg, Germany, Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses participants in Houston, and the Argentine collective Ala Plastica from better-known "neconceptual" artists like Santiago Sierra, Francis Alÿs and Superflex. Remaining mostly beneath the art world's radar, he argues, the former groups effect admittedly small but significant changes in their local milieus. In 2003-04, for instance, four Indian artists worked with residents of a poor rural village to redesign the town's water-pump area into a healthier and more dignified gathering place for the local women—one that provides not only improved drainage but privacy and architectural appeal.

Conversely, Kester dismisses the second type of artists as purveyors of "EU art"—self-indulgent work that, made possible by generous European educational and cultural budgets, has become a staple on the international biennial circuit. He disparages claims by such artists that their projects unsettle a complacent art world. Instead, he charges, their "revelation" of the art-loving bourgeoisie's complicity in Third World poverty and oppression is at best disingenuous and at worst a cynical, conscience-salving aid to the dominant order.

Artists like Sierra, Alÿs and Superflex, along with Thomas Hirschhorn and Liam Gillick, have long been members of Bishop's pantheon. She has repeatedly defended their works as products of the irreconcilable conflicts that underlie con-temporary society.

In her new book, however, these figures play a surprisingly small role. Much space is given over to a discussion of broader historical movements and activities, among them Futurist performance, Situationism, artistic Happenings during the 1960s military dictatorship in Argentina, the Moscow-based Collective Actions Group of the late Soviet era, Czech Fluxus, the British Community Arts Movement of the 1970s and Mary Jane Jacob's 1991-93 Culture in Action project, which embedded artists in local non-art situations. Bishop notes that the participatory impulse surfaces in response to severe social tension and historical change, traits she sees as symptomatic of our own troubled age. Her title comes from a 1921 text by André Breton in which the author, in his Dada phase, advocated an art of provocation and shock.

Like Kester, Bishop seeks a standard for judging participatory works. But while he finds it in the ability of projects to advance the "agency" of their non-artist participants, she insists on maintaining an esthetic criterion. Her definition of the esthetic, however, would be unrecognizable to champions of modernist formalism like Clement Greenberg. Instead, she draws on the writings of French philosopher Jacques Rancière to argue that art must maintain a degree of autonomy and unreadability in order to resist co-option by the political and economic forces intent on imposing a false social consensus. The potential for such a takeover looms on both the right and the left, as evidenced early on by Italian Futurism and the Socialist Realism of post-Revolutionary Russia.

After her historical survey, Bishop examines the present-day trend toward "delegated performance" exemplified by artists like Sierra, Tino Sehgal, Artur Zmijewski and Phil Collins. These artists orchestrate actions performed by others, often in ways that critics deem exploitive. Here Bishop seems to echo some of

Kester's criticisms, noting of this form of participatory art, "It is telling that it takes place primarily in the West, and that art fairs and biennials were among the earliest sites for its popular consumption." At this point her analysis takes an unexpected turn, as she seems to depart from her longtime defense of disruption in order to consider the way such projects generate a peculiar kind of esthetic pleasure—mildly masochistic for the performer, who plays along with rather demeaning instructions, and mildly sadistic for the viewer and artist.

Bishop confesses in the introduction that her initial skepticism toward much of today's participatory art was tempered as she became more deeply involved with current practitioners. And indeed, she closes the book with a discussion of various education-based projects, among them Tania Bruguera's *Arte de Conducta* (Behavior Art Department), 2002-09, a non-accredited, semiofficial training course in contextual art for students in Cuba, and Pawel Althamer's collaboration with Warsaw's Nowolipie Group, which for the last 10 years or so has provided classes and outings for disabled adults. This orientation seems to bring her to the outskirts of Kester's camp.

Despite this, their outlooks remain distinct, notably in their differing takes on participatory art's relationship to neoliberalism. Kester critiques Bishop's favorite artists by charging that their emphasis on artistic autonomy, shock and (ersatz) viewer disturbance merely shore up a capitalist system based on individualism and spectacle. Bishop charges that the communalism of Kester's artists is simply another form of the volunteerism that advocates of privatization often knowingly exploit in their quest to dismantle a once-vibrant public sector.

In the end, however, Bishop and Kester are asking the same questions: What kind of progressive change is possible in the current environment? And what can artists do to facilitate that change? Kester argues against some of the more strident voices on the left today, for whom pure anarchy is the only viable alternative. While acknowledging that many of the projects he praises may simply offer modest adjustments that keep the current system going, Kester also has a compelling riposte: just because you can't change everything doesn't mean you can't change something. Bishop, though less collectivist in her approach, proffers a similar note of hope in suggesting that small gestures have a potentially liberating effect for many individuals.

1 See Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum*, February 2006, pp. 179-185, followed by Grant Kester's letter to the editor and Bishop's reply, May 2006, pp. 22-23.

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