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Image Character in Installation Art Practices

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ABSTRACT. In this article, I explore some remarkable 'participative' features of installation art and transmedia artworks to highlight if and how they can raise what we could call the 'image character' of installation itself. I contend that what is mainly at stake in contemporary so-called 'participatory art' is neither a transmedial way to augment a single narrative through social awareness, nor a collaboration between artists and audience (as it was in experimental theatre and happenings in the 1960s and 1970s), but an "affiliation" with the work of art based first of all (following Adorno) on the 'mimetical' share of its image-making.

Through integration of multiple media forms installation art has been regarded, at least for the last three decades, as being able to generate new ways for the audience to understand and experience art. Its widespread 'participative' motive moreover – a highly ambiguous motive – asks not to simply consider transmedial shaped technology as a new medium to express artistic concepts, but to assess how it gives way to intersecting aesthetic and social exchange.

A few years ago, Claire Bishop spoke of installations as 'participatory art', referring to them as a way of "reconfiguring everyday actions as performance" (Bishop 2012: 238). She conceived *Artificial Hells* as a form of rethinking of the relationship of art with the social and its political potential. The book, in fact, puts itself "in the wake of [Nicolas Bourriaud's] *Relational Aesthetics* and the debates that it occasioned", though the announced intention to stress more the cases of artists interested "in the creative rewards of participation as a politicised working process" than "in a relational *aesthetic*" (Bishop 2012: 2-3). A choice which sounds, skimming through the book and its primary reconstructive motivation, like a *petitio principii*, if compared to Bourriaud's strategic attempt to grasp in

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1990s artistic records of human relations the political hosted *in* the formal-aesthetic feature of ‘relational art’. Bourriaud had described a group of artists in the 1990s inventing alternative informational networks of global capitalism (Bourriaud 2002: 28, 31). According to Nicolas Bourriaud the social is “the material” of an artwork, while the production involved in contemporary social engaged art practice is equivalent to an aestheticisation of the social.¹ In Bourriaud’s view, relational art seems to be the art which promotes a social experiment in artistic experimentation and which tends towards “collective production”.²

Since her 2006 essay on ‘social turn’ in contemporary art, Bishop admits that participation is an uncertain and ambiguous issue. In her reconstruction of the claims of the so-called ‘relational art’ in its community/collective aspirations, however, Bishop indulges in her indebtedness to theatrical models to excess, renovating ambiguity about the possibility that her participation in artistic and installation projects since the 1990s could be regarded *as* a political form³.

Bishop’s main thesis is that the aesthetic and political ambitions of ‘participatory’ art come down to a ‘politics of spectatorship’, which becomes a true behavioural indicator based on a “prescriptive approach to art” (and politics).⁴ Ethics substitutes politics, and the social-spectatorship value substitutes artistic value. In Bishop’s view, the key word is ‘prescription’: the ethical dimension has prevailed over any other alternative value in these artistic productions. Bishop, however, believes that an ongoing search for such values is still essential (to get out of Hell).

What actually usually happens is that in so-called ‘participatory art’ both aspects – the political and the aesthetic that relational art creates – seem to disappear to the benefit of an obscure ‘socialization’. Here the ‘social’ establishes itself as the only binding assumption capable of determining, simultaneously, the aesthetic and political nature of relational works as well as their point of contact, that is the (socialising) political nature of the aesthetic and the (socializing) aesthetic nature of the political, as Bour-

¹ Bourriaud 2002: 57.

² Bourriaud 2002: 15.

³ “Participatory art (...) uncertain and precarious as democracy itself”, Bishop 2012: 284.

⁴ Bishop (2012). Cfr. also Bishop (2004), pp. 51-79.

riaud's theses clearly show.

The social / artistic overlap leads us straight to a second problem or risk entailed in this type of artistic production, which mirrors the difficulty involved with the circular definition of 'relational art'. It is the situation whereby the spectators, not unlike the 'form' they interact with, are born already relational, domesticated, the prototype of a *fictional* socialisation, midway between a tribal (or lobby-like) gathering and entertainment. Because of this, there is a major difficulty in recognising any political value to the "temporary communities" that are invited to come together and interact with the installation, which would, however, originally be consensus-based communities, missing – as Jacques Rancière has pointed out – the element of dissensus and discussion that should inform the political.⁵

The problem thus becomes to establish whether there really are all the ingredients needed to produce an "ethical-political system", that is if the stake can be, for relational art, "to reconstruct a lost political arena".⁶

It is also true that the spectators are subject to the same short circuit and simplification as the coincidence that forcedly equals the means with the ends, and makes the definition of relational art circular: called to be a protagonist and co-author of the artwork, the spectator's margin for action does not go beyond the instrumental freedom envisaged by the device. The preventive 'domestication' of the spectatorship downgrades the 'relation' which relational art enhances experimentally. This seemingly prevents it from becoming, against what Bourriaud contends, something that replaces or compensates for insubstantial or evasive political relations.

However, by stressing the fact that relational forms are nothing but "deviations" from pre-existing images and forms able to give rise to "random experimental encounters", Bourriaud trustfully embraces the situationist heritage, trying to fill the idea of relational aesthetics with the forms of life introduced and theorized by International Situationist movement: *détournement*, *dérive*, construction of *situations*. Yet, Bourriaud avoids ending up in the "overcoming" of art which the Situationists predicted in the name of a more genuine, non-spectacular institution of places and communities.⁷

⁵ On this topic, see Rancière 2004 : 160-161; Tavani 2014: 81-103.

⁶ See Tavani 2014: 95.

⁷ See Debord 1967, §§ 191, 192. The International Situationist set up in 1957 near

In *Artificial Hells*, Bishop chooses community-based art from historic avant-garde in Europe during the first decades of 20th Century to ‘neo’ avant-garde of 1950s and 1960s, to find as a landing-place the “resurgence” of participatory art in the 1990s focusing mainly on “delegated performance” and “pedagogic projects” as the “two prevalent modes of participation in contemporary art” (Bishop 2012: 3-4).

Despite Rancière’s argument – recalled by Bishop – sustaining that the politics of aesthetics is a *metapolitics* (which has little to do with a different, not party-based politics, but rather involves an *indirect* way to be politically productive), in Bishop’s view collective authorship, artistic and theatrical orientation “towards the social”, and process-based “participatory actions” are *ipso facto* considered as a means to generate “artistic models of democracy” (Bishop 2012, 30, 38, 4-5). Bourriaud’s claim that relational aesthetics fosters democratic relations was, instead, more prudentially addressed not properly or exclusively to interact between people, but also between ‘levels of reality’ normally ‘kept apart from one another’ (Bourriaud 2002: 8). For this reason, according to Bourriaud, the relational cannot be overestimated to the detriment of the formal-aesthetic. The form of a relational installation cannot be reduced to the things the artist produce but is “the principle acting as a trajectory evolving through signs, objects, forms, gestures” (Bourriaud 2002: 20-21). Only on this basis “a work may operate like a relational device containing a certain degree of randomness, of a machine provoking and managing individual and groups encounters” (Bourriaud 2002: 30). In the catalogue *Contemporary Art: from Studio to Situation*, Bourriaud declares that “democracy is a montage of forms” (Bourriaud 2004: 48), revealing a closer attention to Theodor Adorno’s idea of the aesthetic as the paradoxical unification of disparate factors and materials: aesthetic form being a structure where disparate elements are stitched together to form a whole consisting in the “tensions” between the elements.

Theodor Adorno saw the aesthetic not only as an antidote to the modern regime of instrumental reason and rational calculation, but also as offering instances of otherness through a non-predetermined relation between different and even discordant elements (Adorno 1997). As such, the

Imperia (Italy) and dissolved in 1972.

aesthetic stages unpredictable paths to a form of non-dominating knowledge and relationships – in particular in a work of art. Jacques Rancière seems to be not so far from Adorno’s seminal idea of an equal, non hierarchical, “paratactic” relationship between the various elements converging in a critical or aesthetic ‘construction’;⁸ equality as a presupposition can only operate when it is put into action: “equality only generates politics when it is implemented in the specific form of particular cases of dissensus” (Rancière 2004: 52).

Unfortunately the key point of the debate is often bound exclusively to ‘artworld gaming’ or to the possibility of art to rework the social,⁹ thanks to the nature of installations as technological arrangements producing huge amounts of information and images to deal with in a quasi-automatic way.

I would like to focus now directly on the question of the *image-character* of multimedia and relational installations. I contend that it could be useful to search for the *character of image* of installations considering it as distinct from the concrete images – technical, as well as social and relational – that they produce in the first place. This choice may be partly supported by what Adorno called “experience of images”, partly by Gottfried Böhm’s later suggestion not to consider images as ‘bodies’ alone, but also as “actions and forces” that they generate and that can claim their own value.¹⁰ In this ‘transcending’ value, imagination has not directly got a cognitive and epistemic role while reading the work of art; it rather enables the viewers to improve their *mimetic* need to get in touch with material, somatic, emotional, technical features of the installation, including its bio-social and bio-technical effects.

Considering the image in this ‘transcending’ sense with respect to the concrete images produced by an artwork may help us get out of the stand-still which Rancière described with reference to the literal or non-literal value of the issues generated and exhibited by ‘participatory’ art. In other words, what is at stake is trying and verifying whether and how the ‘experience economy’ promoted by contemporary art installations and perform-

⁸ I maintained the issue of a convergence of *aesthetic* and *critical* in Adorno in Tavani 2012:13-32.

⁹ See in particular the theorists of a “social turn” in aesthetics, like Bishop (2006) and Kester-Strayer (2005).

¹⁰ See Böhm 2006.

ances is not only obsessed with the target of an *institutive* managerial approach to the creativity exhibited in installations, but brings about an “experience of images” as an aesthetic experience in terms of *technical and evaluative comprehension* of the energetic outcome of installations as techno-artistic productions.¹¹

In Walter Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* the image is announced by an alteration of perception, by a shock: inside the *passage* things, as historical objects, lose their neutrality and go as far as touching us.¹² Furthermore, Benjamin had reserved the term ‘tactical’ to express the relationship we have with an architectural space, in which reception occurs “in distraction”, given that the environment is perceived through use, which makes it look very much like film viewing in a cinema, with most of the attention based on “occasional looks” rather than extended contemplation.¹³ It seems to me that both suggestions, the image as a historical sign and the link of spatial-environmental experience to a ‘tactical’ or use-focused experience are fundamental statements to answer the questions raised above. In this kind of experience, habit allows us to manage with a distraction which does not mean inattention, but is rather *functional* to specific environmental occurrences like those generated by multimedia installations.

In the case of multimedia installations, however, a “perception in distraction” would not only be describing a certain way of perceiving in the presence of multiple perceptive stimuli, coming up one immediately after the other or simultaneously, but it would also be naming the type of somatic, aesthetic *and* cognitive experience in which the artifice draws its vital character directly from the practical attitude which prepares us for the *use* above all, for practice rather than for a mere vision or synesthetic perception of the installation and with the image-making of installation as a ‘transmedial’ technical object itself.

This idea of exchange and openness characterizes contemporary installation art especially when it foregrounds a paradigmatic shift from questions of artwork as an object or of ‘artworld’ to the notion of “field,” taken

¹¹ Here I am using and developing categories of Theodor W. Adorno’s aesthetic theory, whose possible persisting topicality of the category of “autonomy” of the artwork I have discussed elsewhere; see Tavani 2012.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Benjamin 1992, § 15.

from Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, the “field” implies a dynamic space where antagonistic forces are deployed, a field of possibilities, of operation or challenging experience (1992, 72).

In the installation, the *power of exhibition* typical of the museum – a power to arrange, to place, to exhibit, whose overwhelming power was first investigated and handled as an instrument by Marcel Duchamp – is, in fact, combined with an architectural bio-power which supplies, through light devices, pathways, arrangement of spaces, a specific perceptive-emotive-cognitive experience, environmentally dedicated to contemplation and/or interaction.

‘Environment’ therefore shall be no longer viewed in a mainly architectural sense, given that the ‘environmentalisation’ of space seems to be rather due to both a widespread “context awareness” and to the physical presence of several viewers at the same time; i.e., to the resonance their movement rises through the frequent integrations of the dynamics of their bodies (visual, acoustic, thermal elements, etc.) within spaces of virtual action. Many installation artworks reveal to be constituted out of the paradoxes and discontinuities of a “mixed heterogeneous zone”.¹⁴ What is truly new, in other words, is the turning of the installation into the extensive physical terrain of deeds and contents coming from the virtual environment of electronic worlds – of actions and relations based on the collective and connective logic of the digital.

So the environment produced by multimedia installations concerns the generation of a *gaming* space in which “the multisensory mechanism of the body is supported, and interactive media are extending man’s space for play and action”.¹⁵

Importantly the structure of the installation makes the limit, threshold or border and passage explicit in a spatial and temporal sense. This means not only that the work of art presents itself “as a relationship” – acknowledged as communal and shared and not exclusive and circumscribed to installations – but that invites each viewer to experience a kind of aston-

¹⁴ On this topic see Crary (2003) and Petersen (2010).

¹⁵ From Monika Fleischmann and Wolfgang Strauss’s comments on their installation *The Home of the Brain* (1992), quoted in Grau 2003: 219: “Many visitors said that they experienced the decoding of the image program and the possibility of discovering connection as a game”.

ishment, a meditational detachment as well as a sympathetic identification with the *living* environment.

In installations such as *Meccatuna* (2003) or *Tijuanatanjierchandelier* (2006) by Jason Rhoades, something peculiar happens: a sort of ordinary (though orderly) chaos reigns over the interlacement of multi-coloured ropes, neon signs, sculpture-chandeliers, cascades of ropes ending in vaporous, quasi-circular nests, the floor covered with striped red carpets like in a Mosque, camel-shoes, lanterns and various objects hanging all around – the installation as a whole creating an image/portrait or an object-like and spaced-like reformulation, with evident playful features, of the (Inter)net's interlaced structure and its self-containment, while showing a number of symbolic layers spread all around the exhibition area.¹⁶ While presenting themselves as *practices* that have taken on the fluid, performative *habitus* of 1950s – 1970s happenings and site-specific events, last-generation multimedia installations outline a new set of values and potentials, with a strong retroaction of the virtual-digital logic, as a collective-connective logic of the installation itself, appearing alongside its persisting process-like rather than 'object-like' character.

The changed *formality* of multimedia installations concerns in particular the appearance of an environment which increasingly turns to *everyday life*,¹⁷ which imposes a focus on everyday practices increasingly tied to the *living artifices* of technological arrangements. Considering their 'transmedial' and not just multimedial nature, a strong 'programmed' device is required also for installations that are more socially targeted to a 'relational' realisation. On the other hand, the situation put forward by an installation is real, and can be experienced personally and shared with others physically. This circumstance does not only make the overall *image* generated by the installation a composite, analogic-synthetic one, but provides all of the digital imaging stored in the programme with an external reference, adds to the computer-generated diffusive effects the opportunity of concretely affecting the here and now, which thus takes on the role of environment.

At this point it seems necessary to ask some questions. With their nat-

¹⁶ See Schaffner (2013).

¹⁷ I think of the exemplary parable of Allan Kaprow, from the *Environments* and the *Performances* in the late 1950s and 1960s to what he called "Activities" (in the 1990s), devoted to the study of normal human activity and perception in a way congruent to ordinary life.

ural drive to become an environmental phenomenon, what do multimedia installations reveal? The full achievement of life ‘mediatisation’? The need for the relational being to be remodelled or amplified? No doubt the resonance of artistic productions in our lives has long led us to focus on the foundations of such production rather than to develop a ‘theory of art’.¹⁸ But if this production takes shape mainly in the *living device* of multimedia installations, what are the foundations we should be talking about?

Going back to Adorno again, the necessary precondition to understand a work of art is being able to understand the work technically, as a construction, to enter the structure of the work so as to ‘perform’ it from the inside. However, a second step is required: the evaluation of the artwork through the intercepting of its “eloquence” or image-character.¹⁹ It is very likely that he wouldn’t have opposed the additional request that visitors would make to museums fifty years later, that is to go so deep into the work-installation as to be completely absorbed by an interactive multimedia environment. He may have objected to the idea whereby this type of participation not simply because apparently too entertaining or playfully organic to ‘culture industry’. Full immersion can’t exhaust a relationship with the artwork, given that in Adorno’s view even techno-artistic innovation must be able to introduce a dissenting note, some sort of diversion (and thus a ‘distraction’ too) from the system and the device, all the more so when these are particularly routine-based and systematic or, better, when the technical medium is taken as fetish.²⁰ Only the emergence of a distinguished artistic outcome generates an *image* as what I would call its *individualised force*.

According to Adorno, we call “expressive” the nature we experience as “image”: it’s not nature *tout court*, it’s not “simple nature”²¹, but it’s not the image of nature, its idea or mythical or ideal figure either. It is, rather, nature “taken as manifestation” (*Erscheinung*) alone, and never as a material to be handled or processed. For these reasons “even the aesthetic ex-

¹⁸ See Henrich 2001.

¹⁹ Adorno 1981: p. 131.

²⁰ Adorno 1979: 86-87.

²¹ An art aiming to defend repressed nature, says Adorno, would in turn become a ‘natural reserve’ of irrationality, what Hegel called “bad indeterminacy”. See Adorno 1981: 408.

perience of nature, like the experience of art, is an *experience of images*".²² The art of installation therefore entails a comprehension in terms of bio-technical revealing. The main instance of this experience, however, remains defined only in negative terms if captured in the quasi-automatic way of 'immersive attentiveness'. Let's go back then to what Theodor Adorno suggests when he describes the encounter with artworks as an "experience of images" able to grasp their meaning-making. The character of image of a work of art has to be understood on the ground of the presence of the two 'moments' of the artwork – appearance and expression – which he considered as antithetical outputs of its "dialectics". And which in multimedia installations clearly cannot be presented in the same terms. However, the idea of an 'experience of images' does not seem to be doomed to collapse together with the 'dialectics' of art. In order to manifest anything, an artwork must create some form; yet for this manifestation to express something, the mimetic attitude of art must not look to forms nor figures (myths) but to the formless, to the non-identical, to unchannelled energy. In the case of installations: technical and social energy.

To enter the gravitational field of the installation's programme it seems to rather be necessary to go beyond any acquisitive behaviour towards the artwork's formal architecture or the sensorial and emotive stimuli it contains. I contend that if we want to try an analysis of installation-art experience not reduced to context-awareness we need to intertwine the aesthetic position of the viewer inside the image produced by the installation with an evaluation and assessment of the image-making of installation; an outcome becoming available only avoiding a mere subsumption of the work of art to existing canons or standards (Adorno 1967).

The assessment therefore must concern first of all a recognition – that is to say, the installation ability to *individuate* itself, in line with what Adorno stated about the technological artwork's faculty to rise as a distinct entity with *its own* formation path,²³ which Bernard Stiegler has described more recently as occurring through "technologies of trans-individuation".²⁴

Thinking about the classical concept of aesthetic autonomy, Jacques Rancière rightly reminds us the necessity to fight against this 'own', the

²² See Adorno 1981:103, 427; translated from German.

²³ Adorno 1981: 94-96.

²⁴ Stiegler 2015: 159-166.

autos of art's autonomy, which sees the closure or the self-reflexivity of the work of art as a rule.²⁵ We should however maintain, under certain conditions, the possibility to recover a specific meaning of 'autonomy' we could also apply to techno-artistic production and installation art. This would be the claim: each and every entity, being loaded with features or properties, is originally related to its own individuation (including the technological one) as a *particular* path or output, whatever intertwined and multifocal it could be. If we refer it to individuation, 'autonomy' would not express an isolation or a self-centred reflection by the artwork,²⁶ but rather the concrete possibility to mark a diversion with respect to the general technical or technological medium. In this sense, individuation (being the outcome, not the starting point) cannot but concern the operational relation within the new technologies, and therefore also the work of an artist or a collective to the extent to which it is able to re-new or re-activate technology from the inside.²⁷

Considered in its image-character, a value or a meaning of installation art should consist in a "release of forces" through a *hint beyond the medium* with respect to the specific structure and logic of the artwork itself. If images – as Gottfried Böhm remarks – are not only bodies, but also the "actions and forces" they put forward they "may claim a value" – for Adorno being an 'eloquence' as the genuine outcome of an image-experience.²⁸

In conclusion, I would like to mention the case study of Do-Ho Suh's work (*The Contemporary Austin*, Jones Center, Austin 2014-2015). Drawing attention to the ways the viewer can inhabit a public space, the Korean sculptor and installation artist conceives the sculptural or architectonic presence of furniture or 'houses' as transparent structures made of monochrome polyester, at once luminous and ephemeral, inviting viewers to wander through their interior passageways. Installations become 'fields' where energy however proves to be not necessarily ephemeral, and rather generated by the intransitive communication of their image-making in the

²⁵ Rancière 2002: 134-137.

²⁶ On Adorno's insightful analysis of historical changes in the concept of 'autonomy' of art see Adorno 1981: 10, 86, 158, 96.

²⁷ Stiegler 2015: 162.

²⁸ "Art mobilises technique" says Adorno; as mobilisation, artwork is *Frage-Gestalt*. I have explored these topics in Tavani 2012: 157-174.

environment made up by the installation ‘inhabited’ by the viewers. What does ‘social practice’ mean related to this kind of site-specific installation? In my view, it is mainly a living-form practice, technically processed so to say by the installation, where crucial is the act of passing through spatial thresholds stimulating body and mind with diverging sensation – without any priority of ‘social’ sensations.

In Do-Ho Suh’s hanging or standing transparent architectures the density and intensity of the *interrogation* about living in and inhabiting an environment suspends itself forming, apparently, the very image-character of the installation.

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