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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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Department of Philosophy

University of Fribourg

Avenue de l'Europe 20

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

Internet: <http://www.eurosa.org>

Email: secretary@eurosa.org

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Displaying Participatory Art

Gizela Horváth²³¹

Christian Partium University, Oradea

ABSTRACT. Recently, participatory art has become more and more present on the international scene and also in theoretical debates. This tendency was clearly visible at the Documenta 15, which displayed a lot of participatory art projects. This paper underlines the differences between the modern paradigm of art and the model offered by participatory art, suggesting that the most acute problem raised by this form of art is related to the communication of art: displaying and receiving/consuming participatory art is not resolved in the frames of actual institutional practices. The two major questions are what to exhibit and what is the receiver expected to do. Based on the discussion of these questions, there are two possibilities. A possible solution is to renounce the exhibitions of this form of art. Participatory art should not be exhibited at all, it has an intrinsic value, obvious for the target group, and no meaning for others. Another possible solution is to find a way of presenting participatory art to the public. Here we also have more possibilities: presenting participatory art by non-artistic ways, presenting the outcomes of the participatory process or presenting participatory art as ongoing projects. The challenges of each option will be addressed²³².

1. Introduction: Participatory Art Everywhere²³³

For at least a quarter century, the “social turn of art” (Bishop, 2006) has become increasingly apparent in the practice of artists and artist collectives, in curatorial discourses, in state funding, and – indicating the official inclusion of participatory art in the “community of saints” – in the program of the 15th Kassel Documenta. Despite this, the name and definition

²³¹ E-mail: horvath.gizela@partium.ro

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²³³ As it is stated by a veteran of community art, François Matarasso in his book *A restless art: How participation won, and why it matters*.

of this relatively new artistic form are not uniform.

In a manifesto published in 2010, Gustaf Almenberg claims that “personally I used the term Participatory Art at my first solo exhibition in Stockholm, Sweden in 1982” (Almenberg, 2010, p. 10), and “in the early 1980s, no one had heard of Participatory Art, and it is little known even today.” (Almenberg, 2010, p. 11). By the “Age of Participation”, Almenberg mainly refers to the phenomenon that Alvin Toffler calls the “prosumer” – when the consumer participates in some form in the production process. Almenberg sees this trend reaching its full potential in art as well, stating that “we are now entering the Participation Age – an age of mass creativity” (Almenberg, 2010, p. 13).

Finkelpearl noted in 2014 that “discussion of participatory art seems to be in its infancy” (Finkelpearl, 2014), and numerous terms are competing (activist art, collaborative art (G. H. Kester, 2011), community art (Matarasso, 2019) or community-based art, cooperative art, dialogic art (G. Kester, 1999), experimental communities, interactive art, interventionist art, littoral art (G. Kester 1999), participatory art, relational art (Bourriaud, 2009), research-based art, socially engaged art – to name just a few). Today, the situation has perhaps only changed to the extent that the term “participatory art” appears to have become institutionalized as a generic term.

A few years ago, community artist François Matarasso observed that: “[d]uring the past 20 years, something unexpected happened to participatory art. It became normal.” (Matarasso, 2019 p. 19) and “[i]t is promoted by curators, reviewed by critics and studied by academics.” (Matarasso, 2019, p. 21) The weight of participatory art at the Documenta 15 exhibition proves this normalization.

The phenomenon itself is so diverse that it is difficult to comprehend, and even more challenging to create some kind of conceptual framework for it. Those who engage with participatory art come with some preferences that influence how they think about the entire phenomenon. For instance, Nicolas Bourriaud favors Rirkrit Tiravanija, who creates “micro-utopias” (Bourriaud, 2009). In contrast, Claire Bishop draws attention to the works of Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn and Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, which “are marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging” (Bishop, 2004, p. 70). Grant Kester is open to collectives like Park Fiction in Hamburg, Ala Plastica in Argentina, or Dialog in Central India (G. H. Kester, 2011). Based on his own practice, Almenberg believes that “much of

Participatory Art probably is abstract sculpture” (Almenberg, 2010, p. 19). Matarasso mainly focuses on community programs in England, including many theatrical and musical performances and festivals.

I do not wish to delve deeper into the terminological debate or the definition of the phenomenon – only to the extent that it can be decided whether a terminological clarification solves the specific aspect that is the topic of this paper: the presentation of participatory art (displaying). Thus, I accept François Matarasso’s simple definition, which states that “participatory art is the creation of art by professional artists and non-professional artists”. (Matarasso, 2019, p. 48) This definition differs from Finkelpearl’s in that the term used by the latter – “people referred to as citizens, regular folks, community members, or non-artists” (Finkelpearl, 2014) – is not careful enough, according to Matarasso. Firstly, it perpetuates a hierarchical view that implies a qualitative difference between the artist and other people. Secondly, it does not take into account that someone who makes art, even if it is just a temporary episode in their life, is an artist in that specific situation. Matarasso, who himself has been a community artist his entire life, distinguishes community art as a subcategory of participatory art:

Community art is the creation of art as a human right, by professional and non-professional artists, cooperating as equals, for purposes and to standards they set together, and whose processes, products and outcomes cannot be known in advance. (Matarasso, 2019, p. 51)

Despite the terminological difficulties, it is clear that the participatory art is a radically new phenomenon (even if some aspects can be traced back to Duchamp, Fluxus or other antecedents), which stands out from the modern paradigm of art.

2. Participatory Art Goes out of the Frame of Modern Paradigm of Art

The modern paradigm of art (Horváth, 2016) has three main elements: 1. the author/artist, conceived as outstandingly gifted and compulsorily original, 2. the artwork, which is a remarkably original and valuable artifact, and 3. the museum, conceived as the temple of arts. The modern paradigm of art could be logically deduced from Immanuel Kant’s theory of “beauty without concept”, which offers no choice to the producer of beautiful art (artist) but

to be original, to create without rules. Being original is the new categoric imperative for artists, but it is also a very rare capacity, a gift from the Nature for a select few individuals, who are referred to by Kant as “geniuses”. This geniality reflects also on their work, so the artwork started to be viewed as more than an object, almost a living being, belonging to a sacred territory. The encounter with the work of art could happen on the almost sacred place of the museum, which legitimates the work of art and displays it to the public, to the receivers. The public (receiver/viewer) has to contemplate (in awe) the work of art, with respect/adulation, from a distance, without physical, tactile connection.

Participatory art reverses this model in all respects. In participatory projects, the author is not the genius individual: the artist is often replaced by artistic collectives, and the “work of art” is not produced by the artist, but it implies the participation of non-professional communities. Identifying the natural gift of artists or artistic collectives that cannot be reproduced, conceptualized or executed by ordinary people is a challenging task. The work of art as an object which can be displayed is often missing, being replaced by projects without stable temporal or spatial limits. These projects can hardly be exhibited in museums or galleries, or even in large exhibitions as Documentas or Biennales.

In the following, I will try to abstract from the (valid) questions that arise in connection with participatory art – such as where it is situated between use and ornament (Matarasso, 1997), or between political art and the politics of aesthetics (Bilbao Yarto, 2017), or for example, the highly unsettling question of where the boundaries of participatory art lie, if it is true that “their practice becomes indiscernible from other contemporary socio-political practices, which threatens art’s unique position as a medium for criticism” (Bilbao Yarto, 2017, p. 61). If we consider everything that advocates of participatory art claim as given and accepted, and do not raise questions like the ones mentioned above, there remains an essential question that, in my opinion, requires a solution: the question of presenting/displaying participatory art.

In my opinion, the main rupture produced by participatory art in the way of thinking about art is related to the communication of art, the relation with the receiver/viewer, which was traditionally mediated by museums/galleries/mega-exhibitions.

3. Troubles with Displaying Participatory Art

The modern paradigm of art generally interprets the work of art as an object (which includes not only painting, sculpture, and printmaking, but also installation or video art). According to Claire Bishop, after 1989 the process characteristic of the project – “an open-ended, post-studio, research-based, social process, extending over time and mutable in form” (Bishop, 2012, p. 194) – replaced the object. The term “project” itself is the umbrella term for many types of art: “collective practice, self-organised activist groups, transdisciplinary research, participatory and socially engaged art, and experimental curating” (Bishop, 2012, p. 194).

What is particularly characteristic of participatory art is that the process is at least as important as the resulting object: the aim is not to create works of art that meet classical criteria of beauty or quality, but rather to create an experience or encounter for non-professional participants during the process, and possibly to have an impact on the life circumstances of the participants involved in the project. However, if this is the case, exhibiting the potential products/outcomes actually misses the point. Indeed, how can one exhibit or even present and communicate the experience of the participants? Is it even meaningful to attempt to communicate the participants’ experience to outsiders?

If we focus on community art, then the question becomes even more disturbing. Generally, the target audience of community art is a very specific community that often suffers from some disadvantage: the poor, the elderly, women, ethnic or sexual minorities, immigrants, those struggling with mental health problems, prison inmates, etc. It is not in question that the artistic project brings benefits to the selected community, and its usefulness or value can be judged by the participants themselves. The question is whether such artistic projects are aimed at outsiders as well, or only at those belonging to the community (the curious, the viewers, and the audience – generally those we traditionally refer to as “receivers”)?

The previous discourses primarily focused on the legitimacy, interpretation, and value of participatory art. In 2022, however, at the 15th Kassel Documenta exhibition, we could almost exclusively encounter participatory art, thus the 15th Documenta became a huge laboratory of participatory art exhibition. Unfortunately, an incident that caused ideological conflicts (the accusation of anti-Semitism generated by the large mural of the Taring Padi art collective, entitled *People’s Justice* and the heated debate surrounding it) completely

overshadowed the discourse on Documenta 15, and those interested missed the opportunity to ask substantive questions based on the analysis of specific cases that relate not only to a single work but to the entire phenomenon of participatory art – for example, whether Documenta 15 was able to solve the issue of presentation and exhibition.

In the following, I will outline some possible options for presenting participatory art.

3.1. To display is a must

Let us start with the premise that it is essential for art to reach others – to be exhibited, performed, read, projected, etc. The value of art, in this perspective, lies in the fact that it is important not only for the creator but also for others, the audience. It must be universal or at least have a significance that goes beyond individual value. In order to determine whether it has such value at all, art (the artwork) must be made available to others – ideally everyone and anyone. In other words, the process of reception and perception is just as essential to the nature of art as the process of creation, and it is through exhibition, through presentation, that reception becomes possible.

This expectation is not weaker even in the case of participatory art – in fact, we can consider it even more essential. Participatory art allows non-professional artists to enter the arena because it aims to demonstrate the transformative power of art to society, communities, and other people. Moreover, if we are talking about community art where non-professional artists are not random individuals but a group chosen by the artist(s), and often a deprived group, and if the artistic project is driven by some social ideals (such as equality, democracy, freedom, self-determination, etc.), then it would be even more important for the voice of the non-professional participants to be heard, for the “world” to know their position, to understand their feelings, concerns, and problems, to have a spectator-receiver who can develop empathy, compassion, understanding, and a sense of solidarity through art. According to community artist François Matarasso, the communication of art is always necessary.

Unless it is presented, in performance, exhibition, online or print, art has no life. It becomes an act in the world when it is freed from the artist’s control. After that, its future depends on how people respond to it. (Matarasso, 2019, p. 97)

If we accept this line of reasoning, we must decide what (or how) to exhibit and what we recommend and expect from the viewer.

The first option is to exhibit ARTIFACTS in some form. The difficulty arises from the fact that the aim of participatory art is not to create an artifact, but to initiate or sustain a process, which sometimes spans over a considerable period of time (for example, Tania Bruguera's organizations, the Cátedra Arte de Conducta launched in 2002, and INSTAR – the Hannah Arendt Institute of Artivism launched in 2016 operated for several years, with the latter being an important and permanent participant of Documenta 15). What can be exhibited from all of this, and in what form?

The importance of process brings participatory art close to an artistic form that has been around for about a century if we take into account the first initiatives of Dada: performance art (or happening, or created situation). In the case of performance, the process takes place live, and the most authentic experience is created when we are direct witnesses of the event (possibly participants if it is a happening or a created situation). But of course, many of us were not there in 1977 when Marina Abramović and Ulay stood naked and blocked the gallery entrance, forcing every visitor to squeeze past them to enter the exhibition – yet, many of us have seen pictures, read descriptions, or heard conversations about this performance. The documentation of this performance can be exhibited, and the visitor can gain an important artistic experience. In 2017, the documentation of two performances by Tehching Hsieh was presented at an exhibition in Venice: *One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)* and *One Year Performance 1981-1982 (Outdoor Piece)*. In the first case, the artist punched a time clock every hour for a year and took a photo of himself while doing it – 24 pictures every day, with some gaps. In the other case, for a year, the artist did not sleep under a roof – every day he marked his movements on a printed New York map, wrote down where he slept, ate, and fulfilled his bodily needs. 365 maps. The exhibition was impressive, captivating, unforgettable. Even if we weren't present to witness the performance, viewing the associated documentation can leave a profound and lasting impression. Therefore, over time, it has been demonstrated that performative art, a genre tied to a specific time and place and inherently transient, can be effectively showcased in galleries and museums.

As in the case of performances, we can exhibit records (photos, videos, texts) of the activities. Of course, there is a huge difference between witnessing a performance and

watching a video – but a presentation of a performance can be truly informing. The difference is that the performance in most occasions is performed before an audience, so recording it is not surprising. The recorded and displayed image could be seen as the objective gaze of the witness of the performance. In participatory art, numerous projects have no audience, only participants. A video recording, a photomontage should be perceived as a foreign body in the project. A performance is meant to be presented to others, a participatory project is meant to be realized with others, but without spectators.

If participatory art is exhibited as an ARTIFACT, we see two possibilities.

First: the exhibited artifact documents the project (photo installation, video, film, recorded conversation with the participants, etc.). This is an artwork that is about the process but not a part of the process itself. This product is created by professional artists and can be evaluated using the same criteria as for similar creations – such as photos, installations, videos, etc.

Second: The participatory art project is likely to produce some tangible outcome: drawings, paintings, installations, posters, furniture, etc. (e.g., the El Warcha workshop that we saw at the 15th Documenta). François Matarasso emphasizes that participatory art cannot do without artworks: “participatory art involves the creation of art. Without that, what is happening is not art but a form of art education or social development.” (Matarasso, 2019, p. 48) These works are likely created by non-professional artists. These can also be exhibited. They are part of the project, but they may not necessarily express the essence of the project. In this case, it is very likely that these artifacts will be measured by the same standards as classic works. At Documenta 15, we could see many murals, posters, and puppets of the Indonesian art group Taring Padi. If the visitor knew that these were protest materials, i.e., they were used in various protest actions, then obviously some kind of ethical evaluation could be made. And as the exhibited materials were still murals, paintings, prints, visitors also aesthetically evaluated the exhibited objects – not always in an appreciative way. At Documenta 15, the Project Art Works collective “cast light on the work of people living and working in neurodiverse ways” (Ruangrupa et al., 2022, p. 169). In fact, the art group brought a stockpile of works, placed on shelves, so that the visitor could only see the quantity of these, along with a few highlighted exhibited works (paintings, drawings). As a matter of fact, these paintings, drawings had aesthetic value – they were beautiful, interesting, naively simple, or

obsessively saturated. But does this matter? In terms of evaluating and understanding the several-months or year-long project, does the aesthetic value of the outcome matter?

If an artist or artistic collective works with neurodiverse groups, it may not be essential to focus on the quality of the paintings created, but rather on the personally enriching, life-improving experiences that the non-professional participants can gain. In this case, it is not clear what the role of the viewer is. On the one hand, since the artworks were created in a classical medium, they can be approached in the same way as other paintings, drawings, photographs, objects, etc. In this case, these works fall into the realm of works created by professional artists, and on the one hand, it is likely that few of them will meet the standards set by professional art, and on the other hand, if the visitor focuses only on the aesthetic quality, then they will miss the point. If we choose this exhibition format, it is likely necessary to offer a story alongside the artwork, which makes the work interesting. We cannot necessarily expect the artworks to be interesting in and of themselves, to speak to us on their own – the situation in which they were created is significant in this case. Only with knowledge of the story can the viewer develop solidarity, empathy, and a striving to understand the situation – which can be an essential goal of presenting such projects.

Another possibility for presentation is NON-ARTISTIC DOCUMENTATION, i.e., presenting participatory art by non-artistic ways, e.g., as reports, descriptions, statistics, memories, interviews, documentaries. In this case, instead of “displays” or “exhibitions”, we will have presentations, discussions, lectures – in short, non-artistic communication.

It is obvious that the presentation of participatory art through lectures and discussions is useful and serves to introduce and understand the artistic form, and can even help to cultivate an empathetic relationship with the adopted social group - however, this type of communication loses its artistic nature. It resembles science popularization, where the audience expects information rather than aesthetic or artistic experience. In this form, it is precisely the “art” aspect of participatory art that is left out.

Finally, it is possible to attempt to present the ONGOING PROJECT. This was the concept of the organizers of Documenta 15.

Facing the dilemma of displaying participatory art, the curators of Documenta 15 have chosen to “translate” their local practices to Kassel (Ruangrupa et al., 2022, p. 9). So, instead (or besides) of video- or photo-documentation, one could meet at Kassel a space for education

(Fridskul), a space for kids (rurukids), a fully equipped kitchen (Britto Arts Trust), a garden maintained by Vietnamese immigrants (NHÀ SÀN Collective), two floating gardens maintained by locals (Ilona Németh, invited by OFF BIENNALE), a carpentry workshop (El Warcha), an open-to-all printing press, a skateboarding ramp (Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture), etc. These “translations” of local practices were meant to give viewers the opportunity to shift from contemplation to participation. In the words of the Documenta handbook: “We try to produce a new aesthetics – an ethical paradigm where the viewer is obsolete. They should not be there to observe but to be part of the process” (Ruangrupa et al., 2022, p. 29). Unfortunately, the translations did not solve the problem: in most locations there were no activities for the entire 100 days of Documenta, and the artists were not able to be presents all the time in Kassel in order to interact with visitors. In many cases it was not clear who should participate, and what it means to participate in the first place. The viewer did not have a definite opportunity to participate in the process.

When participatory art is presented as an ongoing project, it has to be very carefully considered what we expect from viewers, in order to ensure the possibility to experience the participation in the project. The purpose of presenting ongoing projects is to enable the exhibition visitor to place themselves in the position of the non-professional artist with whom the artist(s) originally worked/works. If this is not the goal, presenting ongoing projects is a weaker solution than presenting artifacts with explanatory texts. Observing and contemplating ongoing projects does not come with the experience of sensation or immersion. At Documenta, the ongoing projects were often represented only by their props, which visitors could either try out or not (in several places, there were warnings such as “do not touch” or “do not use”), and which had an unpleasant warehouse-like character. Many people praised the Vietnamese garden of NHÀ SÀN Collective in Kassel: the artists built a vegetable garden with Vietnamese plants with the help of Vietnamese immigrants in Germany, with whom they maintained contact, and they also offered the seeds of the garden for taking away. This is indeed an example of a participatory art project that was “translated” to Kassel: the community space built on the banks of the Red River in Vietnam was reconstructed in the city on the banks of the Fulda, in collaboration with the Vietnamese immigrant community. The artists worked with the community and organized conversations, “with celebratory imbibement of rise-based street food and homemade wine” (Ruangrupa et al., 2022, p. 155). A European

visitor, for example, who visited the garden on a rainy Thursday at noon, did not experience much of this. It did not seem that the visitor could participate in any artistic project. In this case, how could the visitor have been “part of the process”? How should participation have been imagined? Would the visitor have participated in the project by starting to weed the garden? Does eating a tomato (although the artists may not have been happy about it), having a glass of beer or wine at the bar count as participation? Does posting a selfie among the tomatoes with lots of heart and hugging emojis count as participation? I find the case of NHÀ SÀN Collective relevant because it produced two works that stood out for me among the projects of Documenta 15. In the Stadtmuseum, they presented their studio (or perhaps rather the symbolic objects and space of the studio) in a beautiful, elegant, airy interior installation, while in the Vietnamese garden, the associated Appendix Group exhibited three unremarkable blue vases and a hand-drawn comic to explain why they were unable to realize their original, very poetic and spectacular project in Kassel. The sight of the artifacts makes it easier for the viewer to connect with the artists’ ideas, while the ongoing projects often reinforced the feeling that the visitor was an outsider.

Documenta 15 was a bold and radically innovative experiment. In my opinion, however, the presentation of ongoing projects did not succeed in conveying the essence of participatory projects to the visitors, and did not succeed in transforming the viewer into a participant. Of course, this does not mean that this option is always necessarily doomed to fail. Rather, I see it as necessary to carefully consider how, if we want to turn the visitor into a participant in the display of participatory art, we can create the conditions for such participation. We need to carefully consider what we expect from the ideal (and not only the ideal) visitor: what they should do, how they should behave in this unfamiliar situation, so that their encounter with the ongoing project is not alienating, but rather enables them to experience a sense of belonging to the project, to a collective.

3.2. No display at all

From the discussion of the previous options, it becomes apparent that introducing participatory art in a way that implies some form of aesthetic or artistic experience on the part of the audience, while still maintaining its participatory nature that distinguishes it from other forms of art, poses significant challenges. Whatever we choose, something will be

compromised. If we exhibit the ARTIFACT, the process and the communal experience are left out. If we display the DOCUMENTATION, the audience misses the aesthetic or artistic experience, and only informative communication takes place. If we present ONGOING projects, it is not easy to ensure that the viewer does not feel foreign or even excluded from the target audience. Considering these aspects, a possible radical option is to renounce the display of this form of art. Participatory art should not be exhibited at all, it has an intrinsic value, obvious for the target group, and no meaning for others. Actually, even the Documenta handbook articulates this viewpoint: “Our work should not be judged by an outsider but in terms of the benefits that it brings to the community which creates it” (Ruangrupa et al., 2022, p. 29). If the viewer is considered obsolete and the judgment of outsiders is undesirable, perhaps it would be better to refrain from the exhibition. In this way, the internal purity of the project would be preserved, there would be no need to make any compromises, and there would be no question of “extractive” politics, institutional pressure, or even the question of misunderstanding. There is no need to prove or defend the value of the project against possible attacks, as its value is evident to those who participate in it. In this case, however, we would have to give up presenting the art to the audience – which is a *sine qua non* in our present paradigm of art. At the same time, refusing to exhibit contradicts one of the aims of participatory art: increasing access to art (Matarasso, 2019, p. 63), thus creating a rift within the coherent structure of participatory art itself.

4. Questions to Be Answered

This article does/cannot not aim to solve the issue of exhibiting participatory art, but rather to outline the possibilities and present some arguments for and against the various options.

The first question to be answered is whether we should even insist on exhibiting participatory art.

If we start from the assumption that this is a project operated for a specific community, whose value is obvious to the participants, it is even possible to imagine giving up entirely on presenting the project (3.2). In this case, however, the impact of the project seems very limited, and this option is difficult to reconcile with the general principle that art exists for the viewer and the artwork ends in reception (Barthes, 1977; Eco, 1989).

In my opinion, for participatory art too, exhibition and communication with others should

remain essential, even if it presents unusually difficult choices for artists and curators.

If participatory art is presented without artistic devices, by non-artistic documentation, its artistic nature may be lost: it will be difficult to distinguish the work of artists from that of social workers, clergy, psychologists, volunteers, etc.

Presenting participatory projects through artifacts created by the involved professional and non-professional artists definitely highlights the artistic nature of the projects. This form of presentation is closest to the functioning of the modern paradigm of art, and therefore, it is the easiest to assimilate. At the same time, this approach runs the risk of overshadowing the very essence of the participatory artistic form, the cooperative process and the experience of sustained collaboration.

Finally, presenting participatory art as an ongoing project seems to be the boldest attempt, as it highlights the collaborative nature and the process of cooperation. However, this can only work if the casual visitor can truly be turned into a participant – presumably through hard efforts, well-thought-out roles, and by planning ongoing activities that anyone, regardless of cultural background, can engage in. If we accept Ruangrupa's vision, in which the viewers are obsolete, and „they should not be there to observe but to be part of the process” (Ruangrupa, et al. 2022, p. 29), then a functional mediator and exhibition framework must be devised and created for this purpose.

Participatory art definitely rewrites the modern paradigm of art. While in the case of traditional art we presume a relation between at least two players (the artist and the viewer/receiver), in the case of participatory art we have to take in consideration at least 3 types of players: 1. the artist(s), 2. the non-professional artists who collaborate in the project, 3. the viewers/receivers/visitors. It is almost a unanimous expectation formulated by these artists that participatory art should be appreciated by the community which is involved in the project. But in this case, the traditional model of contemplation by a third party is rather inaccessible. So, it seems that we have to find a new model of displaying art.

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