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Relational aesthetics and the chances of democratising culture

Estetyka relacyjna i szanse demokratyzacji kultury

The article makes an attempt to analyse cultural field and chances of its democratisation. Article refers to the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion described by Manuel Castells and the idea of symbolic dominance analysed by Pierre Bourdieu. In conclusion, article suggests that relational aesthetic did not confront the problem of exclusion from the field of cultural production in satisfying way.

Key words: field of cultural production, democratisation, exclusion, relational aesthetics

Celem artykułu jest analiza pola produkcji kulturowej pod kątem szans na jego demokratyzację. Artykuł odwołuje się do mechanizmów włączania i wykluczania opisanych przez Manuela Castellsa i koncepcji władzy symbolicznej analizowanej przez Pierre'a Bourdieu. W konkluzji artykuł stwierdza, że projekt estetyki relacyjnej nie rozwiązał problemu wykluczenia z pola produkcji kulturowej w sposób satysfakcjonujący.

Słowa kluczowe: pole produkcji kulturowej, demokratyzacja, wykluczenie, estetyka relacyjna

Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse cultural field and the chances of its democratisation. It is well known that the political project of democracy failed by creating a system of social inequality and unlimited growth of authority. That authority became decentralised and ceased to take responsibility for its decisions. As society underwent stratification, it transformed into a collective of individuals subject to financial and societal

hierarchies. This situation may be seen as exposing a fundamental flaw of democracy. Although proclaiming social equality, it ceased to be the political system which maintained it. The idea of a society based on knowledge and information became an optimistic vision for the contemporary world. The critical analysis of Manuel Castells and his theory describing the rise of the network society revealed new forms of social exclusion and hierarchies. According to Castells, the network society replicated previous social hierarchies by referring to the global economy as the leading force shaping contemporary politics.[1] The ongoing segmentation of countries, regions and cities was a result of the functioning of networks, based on acts of inclusion or exclusion. Those lands and populations appropriating more wealth were incorporated into global money-making networks. Those considered to have rather low economic potential were excluded and discarded. The analysis conducted by Castells concentrated on the socio-economic factors responsible for shaping the inner structure of contemporary global societies. However, it is possible to apply his thesis about the mechanism of social inclusion or exclusion to different spheres, as it describes the mechanisms of maintaining dominance in general. Similar processes of stratification can be noted in cultural field. However, inclusion or exclusion from cultural life, and particularly from the world of art, results not only from economic factors acting on a global scale.

The dominance of elites and their role in maintaining high standards of cultural production, which led to symbolic violence, were key factors distinguished by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. As he wrote, economic capital was not the only condition for acceptance into the dominant group, but there is no doubt that it could be supportive.[2] Bourdieu distinguished various types of capital: economic (money and property), cultural (cultural goods and educational qualifications), symbolic (the power of legitimisation) and social (acquaintance and networks). According to his analysis, symbolic systems were structuring the social world by referring to three aspects: cognition, communication and social differentiation. As they served as means for integrating and maintaining the status quo of dominant groups, their role was perceived as political. They were based largely on the logic of inclusion and exclusion, and they provided stable order by operating with dichotomies such as low and high culture, where the latter equated to European art practices and undisputable canonical cultural heritage. This binary code of cultural practices was then

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[1] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2010), pp. 134–35.
[2] David Schwarz, *Culture and Power* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 74, 82–84.

used to enhance the power relation in modern societies. Bourdieu concluded that so-called "high culture" might be perceived as one of the instruments legitimising the power of the elitist part of societies. Those unable to participate in high culture, usually because of financial reasons or educational deficiency, were excluded from cultural life and had to find their comfort in low (unsophisticated) cultural practices. The symbolic dominance of the elite, its interest in preserving "high culture" and its extended cultural capital combined well with the idea of the autonomy and exclusiveness of art. What is more, the accumulation of cultural capital may be perceived as a powerful tool for preserving social hierarchies, as it basically reflects material and economic discrepancies. As Julian Stallabras wrote, it is no accident that the world's major financial centres are also the principal centres for the sale of art.[3]

The reasons for cultural inclusion and exclusion

The social hierarchies and structures identified by the analyses of Castells and Bourdieu would appear to diminish the prospects of democratising culture. As the idea of democracy and civic society is difficult to accomplish in the contemporary socio-economic situation, it is even more unattainable in the cultural field, accompanied by various practices, including art practices as well. To be more precise, inequality and mechanisms of exclusion in culture are due mostly to two aspects. First, the space of culture and art multiplies social inequalities because it offers limited access, regulated by prosperity. In order to attend internationally recognisable art events and to become part of a global society interested in contemporary culture, a substantial sum of money is required, although obviously not as much as attendance of those elite artistic-social events at which decisions on art investments are made.[4] However, the experiences gained by Sarah Thornton through her sociological observation of such events, later described in *Seven Days in the Art World*, may be considered as exposing representations of contemporary elitism. Most art festivals and biennials charging for admission offer discounts and special free days. That does not alter the fact that exhibitions created for the editions Venice Biennial are not accessible to everyone, even if the entrance fee is waived, and they will not be presented elsewhere. Obviously, such a globally recognisable art festival with a long tradition and history as the Venice Biennial is

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[3] Julian Stallabras, *Art Incorporated* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 5.
[4] *Sarah Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, *2008).*

addressed to a particular public and does not even intend to shed its inequality. However, this problem may be perceived as rather insignificant. Most European cities have their own public cultural institutions and try to address their offer to the local audience without the necessity to travel or even to pay for entrance. Still, these are not the most popular places to visit,[5] and addressing that issue will reveal the other aspect leading towards cultural exclusion. Access to high culture is conditioned by one's education and acquired cultural capital. According to Pierre Bourdieu, inequality is assumed at birth.[6] One's cultural capital is built by one's parents, co-creating their own cultural capital through their involvement in culture and their collection of cultural goods. A child inherits cultural dispositions and cultural possessions and develops them further at each level of education. Equal educational opportunities could effectively eliminate some deficiencies and contribute to an individual's cultural capital. However, as the education process takes place at various institutions, with different resources, it is rather difficult for everyone to participate in the art world on equal terms. What is more, the education system supports processes of social stratification from the beginning of compulsory schooling. Those who receive more cultural capital from their parents will be always rewarded. They are also likely to attend prestigious universities and become involved in the arts and cultural life, whereas those lacking cultural capital will see their social status become even more unprivileged. On the top of that, there is a demand for art autonomy, popularised by many art philosophers, such as members of the Frankfurt School, which empowers the elitist status of art practice as non-political and sophisticated intellectual activity. Obviously, it should be emphasised that Bourdieu's analyses were conducted some time ago and referred essentially to French society. However, their conclusions are on quite a general level, and some of them remain current.

Participation as the solution?

As mentioned above, financial prosperity and cultural capital, supported by the education system, were cited by Bourdieu as being responsible for social inequality in the cultural field. Deficiency in those areas would be highly likely to result in exclusion from

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[5] For example, only twenty-one per cent of people in Poland declared that they had visited an art gallery at least once in 2013. This information is based on a report on the cultural practices of people in Poland, available only in Polish. Rafał Drozdowski et al., *Praktyki kulturowe Polaków: raport* [The cultural practices of Poles: a report] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika) p. 297.

[6] Schwarz, *Culture and Power*, p. 76.

"high culture" and a lower position in the social hierarchy. The strong belief that the idea of participation would change the current impasse informed the project of relational aesthetics and the promotion of community arts. Becoming active creative subjects was supposedly the future of all excluded communities, which would be able to join the world of erstwhile "high culture" and leave the idea of art autonomy behind. Following the publication of Jacques Rancière's famous *The Politics of Aesthetics*, that idea spread across the art world in a wave of hope. According to Rancière, the main aim of art practices defined as relational was not to create a better world by construing a unique form of art but to create a situation which would influence the individual perception of social context.[7] In other words, he considered art to be a necessary tool helping to establish a situation that would improve human relations. The idea was developed by Nicolas Bourriaud, in *Relational Aesthetics*, in which he recognised involvement, interaction, uniqueness and unrepeatability as the foundations of relational art.[8] According to Bourriaud, relational art spread through a multitude of forms, opposed to the well-known practice of passive viewing, such as meetings, games, festivals and interventions in public space. All those activities were supported by the same social substance which animates social interaction. The final result of each creative process was a combination of socio-cultural qualities derived from the interactivity of aesthetic experiences, different forms of communication and social interchange.

Subsequently, the whole concept of relational art was deeply criticised as supporting social hierarchies of a new kind in the name of solidarity. One of the fiercest opponents in the public discussions of artists' pursuit of socially engaged projects was Claire Bishop. As an art historian, she accused the increasingly popular community arts and socially engaged projects of straining ethical values. This severe critique was formulated in a short article, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents" (2005), in which Bishop analysed the danger of collaborative practices, which tended to be more interested in rewards than in creating relational aesthetics.[9] According to her observations, many artists who turned to socially engaged art had been part of the art establishment. However, their non-commercial projects, which blurred the boundaries between art and life, were to become political statements. The problem with such involvement came as those art practices allowed aesthetics to be merged

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[7] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 10–15.
[8] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002) pp. 25, 29, 41, 43.
[9] Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents", *Artforum* 44 (2006), pp. 179–180.

with ethical values. Modernist purposelessness and art autonomy were replaced with social involvement, and the final result was as if self-created. Every art project was considered as a process of obtaining and enriching a particular social capital. This basically meant that artists were evaluated according to whether they supported good or bad models of collaboration. If the outcome was unsuccessful, they were accused of having bad intentions, creating new forms of social exploitation or incomplete representations of community. Consequently, they were also excluded from art criticism, which always considered aesthetic reflection as its basic reference point, as the art practices they offered were likely to be evaluated on the basis of the moral precepts they represented. What is more, Bishop took issue with the status of such practices that were conventionally regarded as art. In other words, she was opposed to the idea that the author's intention should become the main theme of discussion that moved away from aesthetic reflection on the form and meaning of artistic gesture. In her opinion, the self-sacrifice of an artist renouncing his or her presence in favour of the creativity of community members could not become the most important part of art practice. In her recently published work, this critical voice seemed to sound even more intensely. Bishop pointed out that as collaborative practices aimed to create symbolic dematerialised capital, by referring to social structure, projects of socially engaged art could not be officially considered[10] as unsuccessful or boring.[11] She also analysed the credibility of the major argument for supporting community arts as representing practices that engaged with "real people". In fact, this art was produced for, and consumed by, a middle-class gallery audience and wealthy collectors.

The authoritative position of an artist was given separate critical analysis as generating a great deal of social uncertainty. The cause of this scepticism lay in the institutionally legitimated artist obtaining permission to involve a local community in the process of creating its self-representation.[12] However, playing the role of an amateur anthropologist or ethnographer entailed many negative consequences. This particular danger

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[11] Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), pp. 13, 37–38.
[11] Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), pp. 13, 37–38.
[12] Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2002), pp. 138–140.

was widely analysed by Hal Foster in the article "The Artist as Ethnographer".[13] According to Foster, this model of collaboration might result in an artist strengthening his authority, relinquishing the possibility of engaging in dialogue and escaping institutional criticism; an artist placed in the position of a social activist is empowered and may perform "ideological patronage" during the ongoing process of social identification. The willingness to work with authentic people at authentic local sites might, however, result in a new version of urban primitivism, an unwelcomed tendency which has already been widely discussed through postcolonial criticism. In other words, Foster basically pointed out the danger of creating another form of colonial exploitation.

The practices enabling artists to place themselves in the position of community representatives were subjected to critical analysis by Grant Kester, for whom the act of speaking on behalf of a community might be considered as an act of appropriation, since the symbolic and political representations of community were dependent on the artist.[14] What is more, by working with "real people", the artist may strengthen his/her ideological view on the community, which would be noticeable through developed representation. Finally, by receiving permission to speak on behalf of a particular social group, an artist maintains his/her moral, professional and political position, which is always connected with asserting authority. Nevertheless, as Kester claimed, the rhetorical background which accompanies community arts conceals any connections between participation and authority. By calling them a form of aesthetic evangelism, he emphasised the general willingness of collaborative arts for their work to be perceived as being of a missionary character. Expressing fervent hope, community arts served as a particular kind of salutary social practice that should result in the inner transformation of each individual community member, and therefore help to reduce crime, improve living standards and develop social awareness. However, as the end justifies the means, artists played the role of social messiah, having the authority to speak on behalf of a community for the common good. Finally, if the end products of community arts were not important, then why were they globally present at art biennials and in other exhibition spaces?

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[13] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1996), pp. 172, 173.
[14] Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2004), pp. 135, 146–150.

In addition to all the critical voices heard above, one more will be considered in particular. Although the analyses conducted by Markus Miessen originate from a different academic background, namely architecture, his findings concerning social practices informed by the idea of participation were conclusive also for the field of cultural and artistic production. Miessen questioned the idea of participation as the key element leading towards democracy. According to him, in order to put the idea of democracy into practice, there must exist a relationality of power, which basically leads towards social conflict but not in terms of physical violence.[15] Without conflict, the system reproduces a sense of agreement without the possibility of creating new knowledge. This kind of post-consensus participation, which is also visible thought relational art, replicates a single pattern and consequently reintroduces mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Invoking Chantal Mouffe's notion of conflictual participation, Miessen emphasises that only an unexpected emergence from deep disagreement may create new forms of knowledge and implement the project of democracy. This controversial thesis, which triggered a great deal of discussion worldwide, highlights one particular unsolvable problem connected with community arts: how can there be any social change leading toward democracy in a situation characterised by strong leadership, agreement and limited ways of participating?

The democratic field of cultural production

As already stated, the binary opposition between low and high culture was used as an instrument enabling elites to dominate. Inclusion or exclusion from high culture was dependent on accumulated economic and cultural capital. The demand for the autonomy of art disabled its political involvement and societal impact. Participation and the idea of community arts were supposed to create a solution to the inaccessibility of high culture and its highly exclusive character. However, not only did collaborative practices fail to eliminate the differences between low and high culture, but they also helped empower the existing hierarchies by referring to the artist as an authoritarian and missionary voice speaking on behalf of an excluded community. It turned out that participation was not a reliable guarantee of removing the limitations of high culture, especially considering that its documentation was presented for a middle-class gallery audience. Consequently, the idea of democratisation was

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[15] Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), pp. 94, 96.

not fulfilled, as the state of equality which would oppose the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion was not attainable. So what direction would lead to cultural democracy?

First of all, there is still a great urge to speak of culture as of binary code transmission, which emphasizes the importance of its high profile. However, it should be stated that the cultural field consists of a wide spectrum of practices and artefacts that are liable to change over time. Therefore, it would be rather difficult to speak of cultural institutions that present art and worldwide heritage as being the only social actors contributing to the accumulation of desired cultural and symbolic capital. As Henry Jenkins wrote, there is a great necessity to acknowledge the fact that culture is not "made" only by institutionalised powers. In his interpretation of the notion of participatory culture, he points out the shift from individual expression to community involvement caused by dynamic technological development.[16] Cultural participation appears on many different levels and is performed also beyond the institutional space. As Markus Miessen pointed out, the relationality of powers is a necessary condition for democratic order to be achieved. Therefore, it is advisable to stop defining culture in the context of its elitist, highly institutionalised and professionalised profile. This broad definition of culture would emphasise that culture is a way of organising life, supported by various cultural practices with their own meanings and symbolic power, reflecting individual value systems. Only some of those practices constitute the art world.

It would be a great mistake to consider the project of cultural democratisation as representing a process of mass education that would enable everyone to appreciate the splendour of high culture, its achievements and the methods of its interpretation. The effectiveness of that mass education would be verified by mechanisms checking the level of understanding, akin to school tests in reading comprehension. That would simply sanction the dominant role of the elites, imposing their own practices, crucial to themselves, on others. Ultimately, that is unlikely to bring positive results. Democratisation would also not mean returning to the idea of community arts defined in a different way. This model of collaboration serves only the realisation of temporary goals and does not build genuine social relations. That is because all community art projects are time-limited and rather incapable of repeating performed actions. Furthermore, it may be difficult to estimate the influence of those projects on their participants in terms of expanding social, cultural or artistic

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[16] Henry Jenkin et al., *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2009), pp. 5–8.

competences. We basically want to believe that people excluded from the art world somehow change after being given a voice, transforming themselves into social actors. On the other hand, they might also become the first victims of community arts projects, led by artists without the obligatory competences of ethnographer, anthropologist, social worker or social activist. This initiative should bring about increased cooperation between such professionals and artists before the realisation of any cultural project.

The democratisation of culture would support the process of unlocking creative and social potential and help to establish long-term social relations, which are the foundations of civil society. Therefore, it could be initiated not only by individuals, non-profit organisations and community centres, but also by other cultural institutions willing to overcome elitism in order to establish meaningful collaboration with citizens. It is important, however, that this strategy be built by state institutions, which are less susceptible to a neo-liberal market-oriented way of thinking, with its concern for financial profitability and effectiveness. Action must be preceded by research diagnosing the social needs of future recipients. It should also not overwhelm the beneficiaries by specifying how every act of cultural engagement should be performed. In addition, it would be advisable to support non-institutional or grassroots initiatives, as they originate from a desirable specificity of local context. The will to sustain social involvement should become a key aspect for establishing a long-term educational, artistic and individual development strategy. The relationality of powers should engender new ways of negotiating between different symbolic capital, needs and interests, as well as the different educational experiences of the recipients. What is more, this strategy should avoid discrediting everything that has been called popular or non-institutionalised as not interesting enough to be further developed. Finally, I would tend to agree with Claire Bishop's doubt about referring to such practices as art. It would be beneficial to all the people involved to call them educational or societal, as then there is no obligation to present their effects in an exhibition.

It should be stated that there will never be a society that is unconditionally enraptured with the music of Schoenberg, unquestioningly admiring of conceptual artists and engrossed in the novels of literary Nobel Prize winners all at once. Even if those exemplary "parameters" of artistic taste were limited to recipients of so-called high culture, it would not come as a surprise that some of them may discredit Schoenberg's music, considering it an artistic mistake, think of conceptual artists as non-professionals or perceive contemporary novels as

incomprehensible, preferring the timeless artworks of Mozart, Michelangelo or Shakespeare. It would be pointless, then, to discuss the superiority of Mozart over Schoenberg (or vice versa), as the final argument would point out that artistic taste cannot be evaluated or that the practice of culture and art evolves in formal terms, examines its own limits and creates new practices. If there is such a diversity of cultural and artistic practices, why does it refer basically to institutionalised practices of legitimated "high culture"? This diversity is also manifested through various types of cultural practices which are a vital part of contemporary life as experienced by many but which, lacking museums or other institutionalised forms of popularisation, remain somehow discredited.