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## **AESTHETIC PARTICIPATION AS A REALIZATION OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL POIESIS**

**Abstract:** In this essay, I will attempt to present a model of aesthetics based on a distinctive way of understanding artistic participation, relying on examples from the conceptions of Michel Maffesoli and Nicolas Bourriaud. My characterization does not claim to provide a complete description of the phenomenon in art and in contemporary theoretical approaches. Instead, I will attempt to show that the model, despite its narrow formula, provides a good opportunity to showcase certain shifts that have occurred in contemporary aesthetics due to late modern (especially characteristic of the post-industrial age) processes of de-autonomization. These shifts can be traced in the space of tension between two categories: distance and engagement. I will also show that the shifts open a new way of defining the subject of artistic creation. The subject no longer has an individual or intentional nature, nor yields to a substantialising characterization. The creative force is the self-articulating social life converged in human practices (and, among others - in artistic practices). In a way, Bourriaud and Maffesoli reuse a well-known philosophical template: one in which the poietic power of creation is alternately bestowed upon Nietzsche's life, Heidegger's or late Merleau-Ponty's Being, Dufrenne's self-creating Nature etc. Bourriaud and Maffesoli, in their conceptions of artistic and aesthetic participation, fall within - and this is my overall conclusion which serves as the guideline for the present analysis - in such a generally understood poietic model.

**Keywords:** artistic participation, participatory aesthetics, relational aesthetics, aesthetic autonomy, proxemic relationships, late modern culture

### **1. Emancipation of participatory aesthetics from the imperative of aesthetic autonomy and aesthetic distance**

The aesthetic is being increasingly recognised as an important aspect of contemporary cultural reality. It is not only the key to its examination, an inherent component of philosophical, sociological and psychological or anthropological

and cultural paradigms and models that assist us in our attempts to understand the surrounding world and the place we hold in it but also a particular mode of participation in reality and its creation. Disinterested distance that characterised aesthetic experience in the post-Kantian aesthetics is increasingly replaced with an attitude of engagement and participation. They characterise not only artistic practices which, starting from the avant-garde, broke down the barriers between life and art or recipients who have assumed the role of co-authors of art in creating new forms of life but also – theoreticians. Participatory and engaged character of new art theories, which include the conceptions discussed in the present essay, consists in the incorporation of aesthetic reflection in the process of self-creation—by introducing an element of self-reflection into artistic practices, it contributes to the emergence of new, alternative forms of life.

In this essay, I will attempt to present a model of aesthetics based on a distinctive way of understanding artistic participation, relying on examples from the conceptions of Michel Maffesoli and Nicolas Bourriaud. My characterization does not claim to provide a complete description of the phenomenon in art and in contemporary theoretical approaches. Instead, I will attempt to show that the model, despite its narrow formula, provides a good opportunity to showcase certain shifts that have occurred in contemporary aesthetics due to late modern (especially characteristic of the post-industrial age) processes of de-autonomization. These shifts can be traced in the space of tension between two categories: distance and engagement. I will also show that the shifts open a new way of defining the subject of artistic creation. The subject no longer has an individual or intentional nature, nor yields to a substantialising characterization. The creative force is the self-articulating social life converged in human practices (and, among others – in artistic practices). In a way, Bourriaud and Maffesoli reuse a well-known philosophical template: one in which the poietic power of creation is alternately bestowed upon Nietzsche's life, Heidegger's or late Merleau-Ponty's Being, Dufrenne's self-creating Nature etc. Bourriaud and Maffesoli, in their conceptions of artistic and aesthetic participation, fall within – and this is my overall conclusion, which serves as the guideline for the present analysis – in such a generally understood poietic model.

I believe that the project of participatory aesthetics outlined by Bourriaud demonstrates two tendencies: it no longer wishes to be an aesthetics of distance, a theory of autonomous experience that adopts the marks of autonomy with respect to other experiences, blurring the divisions and distinctions between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic. On the other hand, however, as a project of aesthetic de-alienation that advocates a formula of aesthetic participation in the creation of a better, social world, it is indebted – via neo-Marxism – to the idea of emancipatory mission of the art, ushered in by the German, classical philosophical thought. Together, the tendencies comprise a poietic model of

its aesthetics that remains close to a particular type of artistic practice – one immersed in social life that realises social dynamism and the productivity of its forms.

This paradoxical (or dialectical) relationship between the two above mentioned tendencies was excellently captured in the aesthetics of Lukács or Theodor Adorno. Bourriaud, however, wants to be much more radical in transcending aesthetic autonomism – having gone through the experience of neo-capitalism and being aware of the end of the individualist and liberal model, i.e. the space where the paradigm of autonomous aesthetics operated and was legitimised. In this respect, his insights complement the diagnoses of such researchers as Scott Lash, Frederic Jameson or Martin Jay – authors who are aware that aesthetic autonomism has exhausted its power together with the end of validity of metaphysical interpretations of the world and utopias of its unification or salvation through descent into its aesthetic sources. Let us add one further remark: by becoming an important ally in the late modern battle against on metaphysics, aesthetic autonomism became the vehicle of its own destruction. Consequently, in contemporary art practices and many contemporary theories, the aesthetic plays a double role – an autonomous sphere that breaks away from the existing forms of organization of the world and a sphere that penetrates the experience of late modern reality, existing only as inextricably bound with the ways it manifests itself and resisting being bound by a formula of an order independent of the experience.

The new perspective on experience in contemporary philosophy as well as the functioning of the idea in various discourses, aesthetic discourse being one of them, has been elaborated by Martin Jay in *Songs of Experience*, where he reconstructs the understanding of aesthetic experience from Kant to Dewey as a history of struggle with aesthetic autonomism.

Frederic Jameson – who similarly to Nicolas Bourriaud draws on Marxist and neo-Marxist recognition of the ambivalence inherent in the fundamental evolutionary mechanism of capitalism – uses art (especially postmodern art) as a way to gain insight into social and cultural consequences of the development of late capitalism. In the book *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he shows that one of the effects of corporate capitalism is the disappearance of the individual, “bourgeois” subject. In light of Jameson’s observations, all models of aesthetic experience built within the field of aesthetic autonomism, presupposing individual character of artistic creativity and subject-creative character of the aesthetic receptive experience lose their basis. Postmodern response of late modern culture to the exhaustion of the formula of an individual subject is pastiche and schizophrenia (cultural splintering of the temporal and narrative continuity, loss of ability to maintain a relationship with the historical). And yet, ironic distance and a state of disorientation as

a reaction to the breaking of spatio-temporal forms in which the modern subject used to be rooted do not pave way to new forms of aesthetic engagement.

One of the authors who call for engaged aesthetics, with a focus on the question of participatory aesthetics, is Berleant. In *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, he notes that the Kantian formula of disinterestedness does not yield good results in the assessment of traditional and contemporary art. In its place, we need an aesthetics of engagement and integration of experience in the field of perception. He outlines a vision of aesthetic engagement in different areas: theory, everyday practice, broadly understood creativity, art; he suggests different ways of transcending traditional aesthetics; places special emphasis on incorporating the questions of the body and sensuality in aesthetic research; broadens aesthetics with the overlooked areas of activity and practices.

Moving in the direction indicated by Berleant, we should emphasise the importance of those aesthetics that explore the conditions for and the character of the new way of functioning of art in the dynamically changing social and cultural reality. After all, due to the processes of de-autonomization – the blurring of lines between art and non-art – contemporary art practices are becoming particularly sensitive to the “logic” of these changes<sup>1</sup>, and the artists no longer lock themselves in ivory towers or deplore the fact that they are being abolished and absorbed by the mechanism of the market and social regulation. To the contrary: they apply strategies that take advantage of this phenomenon to increase the critical potential of their own message (these strategies were described by such authors as Hal Foster, Scot Lash or Frederic Jameson) as well as to bring art and social life even closer – as in the case of participatory art which believes in its own causative powers – in the creation of its desired forms. The development of the new forms of social life, the phenomena of modernization (Scott Lash uses the term “reflexive modernization”) characteristic of post-industrial society’s consumerism in combination with the processes of mediatization and dominance of images in the cultural communication, the phenomenon of multi-national capitalism that blurs traditional identity affiliations are among factors that influence the new shape of late modern experience. They provide grounds for aesthetics of participation.

Generally speaking, aesthetics of participation springs from the economic, social and cultural transformations that characterise late capitalism and set up contemporary aesthetic practices as well as their theories against new challenges. It is an expression of a broader phenomenon of evolution of contemporary aesthetics in the direction of transcending the limits of aesthetic autonomism, which requires substituting the metaphysical set of questions and categories

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the works on the topic concerning the logic of the avant-garde and the neo avant-garde by Frederic Jameson, Caroline Levine, Marc Jimenez, Rainer Rochlitz.

with a different philosophical outlook. After Nietzsche and Heidegger, but also Dewey and Shusterman, contemporary varieties of phenomenology (especially phenomenology of embodiment) or hermeneutics, aesthetic experience also means an experience of a well-lived life, which cannot be considered in opposition to action, practice or engagement. Nietzschean and Heideggerian, but also e.g. Frankfurtian revolt against techno-scientist formula of thinking, which, in turn, provides for the possibility of separating the category of thinking from the category of cognition, allows for blurring and overcoming divisions, competencies and discipline methods as well as their subjects that were perpetuated by traditional Western metaphysics, for tearing down the traditional division into aesthetics and other fields of philosophy. This need is even more evident given that aesthetics is being increasingly treated as an important phenomenon of contemporary aesthetics; it infrequently serves as the key to its examination, being an inherent component of philosophical, sociological and psychological or anthropological and cultural paradigms and models that assist us in our attempts to understand the surrounding world and the place we hold in it but also a particular mode of participation in reality and its creation.

Resistance against the effects of aesthetic autonomism requires rebuilding the traditional research field of aesthetics and expanding it with other aesthetic areas of experience as well as expanding the way we understand aesthetic experience itself. In sum (and this is a fairly common belief), following the emergence of new challenges of reality, we can no longer practice aesthetics in the Kantian manner – i.e. divorced from cognitive or ethical concerns, separated with a caesura of disinterestedness from entanglement in various, not only aesthetic, experiences of a contemporary man.

Above all, the new participatory model of aesthetics is looking for ways to deal with the opposition of two attitudes of the subject of aesthetic experience that was inherited after Kant's aesthetics and further enhanced by numerous Romantic and Modernist artistic practices – namely, the opposition between disinterested distance and engagement. This opposition was legitimised, as we know, on one hand, in philosophical and aesthetic attempts at saving the subject's autonomy from the destructive implication in the matters of the world; on the other hand, it was codified in cultural and social practices that separated the aesthetic sphere from practical life. Even, if aesthetics, in its new, re-sacralized function, was entrusted with the mission of saving the endangered values in the face of pauperising consequences of the processes of industrialization.

## 2. Proxemic relationship as a prerequisite for the model of participatory aesthetics (Maffesoli)

Given the above, does it mean that the category of distance is being “thrown out with the bathwater” of de-autonomizing processes characteristic of contemporary aesthetics? Does it lose its heuristic utility in the aesthetics of participatory engagement?

To answer the above question we would need to understand this category more broadly than in Kant's subjectivist aesthetics or post-Kantian aesthetics, which locate it within the field of aesthetic consciousness. We would need to show that it is inextricably linked with the category of engagement, examine various levels on which the relation between distance and engagement finds expression in different life practices of contemporary people. Most importantly, however, we would need to place this relation in the context of current social relations and cultural forms of these relations. The aesthetic – following the observations on late modern aesthetization processes and in the face of blurring of the lines between art and life which characterises it – becomes an inextricable aspect of contemporary social and cultural practices. The aesthetic nexus of distance and engagement both provides excellent insight into the socio-cultural and a means of its shaping.

Such observations at the level of elementary forms of aesthetization of social and cultural life are made, for example, by Michel Maffesoli, whose insights are pertinent to this essay because they establishes an interesting, complementary context for Bourriaud's aesthetics of participation and engagement. It is pertinent despite the differences between the two optics and despite the fact that Maffesoli speaks of an inseparability of distance and engagement in cultural and social forms of a new, post-industrial “enchantment of the world”, while Bourriaud discusses the dialectical relationship between the two categories with respect to artistic projects that fulfill the functions of social creations in the conditions of a post-industrial society.

In *The Time of the Tribes*, Maffesoli refers to Edgar Morin's category of aesthetic participation which signifies a co-existence of attitude of participation and distance. “But by pretending, – writes Maffesoli – we are participating magically in a collective game which reminds us that something like the ‘community’ has existed, does exist or will exist. It is a question of aestheticism, derision, participation and reticence all at once”<sup>2</sup>. This combination of participation (expressed in emotional engagement) and distance that charac-

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<sup>2</sup> M. Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, transl. Dom Smith, Sage Publications, London 1996, p. 49.

terizes contemporary neo-tribalism endows it with the features of an aesthetic phenomenon. Both Maffesoli and Bourriaud write about the mechanism in terms of a game that characterizes collective behaviors. It is worth noting that, on one hand, the category of game allows to do away with questions implicated in metaphysics of the subject and substantial identity and to replace them with questions about relations; on the other hand, however, it allows to uphold the connection with the tradition of aesthetic eschatology that readily uses the category of aesthetic game (Kant, Schiller, Marcuse, Adorno, and even – in an unburdened version – Lyotard, Rorty).

In Maffesoli's case, the aesthetic has the features of *sensus communis* – meaning common feeling, common emotivity which is, at the same time, an emotivity that “tastes”, assesses (and in this sense entails distance). Maffesoli refers in his interpretation of the aesthetic to Adorno and Max Scheler. The former, he claims, shows that thus understood aesthetic is a vehicle of non-identity, a way to emancipate from the reality that is subjugated to “identity compulsion”<sup>3</sup>. The latter highlights the importance of the emotive function in the creation and functioning of the phenomena of social life. New tribal communities (internet communities, subcultures, colleague groups at work or school, etc. created on the basis of shared interests) are aestheticized in the sense that their constitutive power consists in an emotional bond of belonging, and, at the same time, in the sense that the very of participation is recognized and assessed aesthetically. It is this combination of identification and distance (a sense of “domesticity” and alienation) that allows for fluid participation in new tribal communities, and engenders their relative impermanence.

Maffesoli writes about the fluidity of neo-tribalism, its temporariness, emotivity and also transcending the principle of individuation by strong emotional identification with the group on the examples of Californian counter-culture and European student communes from the 1970s, where moving from one group to another was a common practice. The aesthetics of these groups, he writes, is “a way of feeling in common. It is also a means of recognizing ourselves”<sup>4</sup>.

The French researcher characterizes this “being together without purpose” of the new tribalism in terms of “pure form”, referencing Simmel's concept of form, and in analogy to artistic form: “Thus, just as the artistic form is created from the variety of real or fantastic phenomena, the societal form could also be a specific creation based on the minuscule facts that make up everyday life. This process thus treats the common life as a pure form of value in and of itself,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76-77.

(...) In this perspective, life can be seen as a collective work of art. Whether it's a work of bad taste, kitsch or folklore, or even one of the various manifestations of contemporary mass entertainment"<sup>5</sup>.

Contemporary forms of social life are subject to processes of aesthetization and theatricalization. Today's culture is a "a machine for the making of Gods" – as he calls it after Bergson in *Le reenchantment du monde* – a machine whose substance is made up of collective myths and archetypes, collective expressions of feelings: from urban forms of theatricalization of life up to the Internet, it enacts the extra-personal, the collective. Contemporary music, theatre, sport, tourism are forms of manifestation of powers hidden from the individual consciousness of the subject, that escape the formula of subject's individual creativity. Nowadays, Maffesoli contends – and thereby joins the lively discussion on the postmodern subject, in which he would be situated, as I believe, in close proximity to Wolfgang Iser's concept of transversal subject – we are witnessing the transformation of the traditional formula of individual subject into a "persona" comprised of a multitude of social roles, "masks" and ways of visualizing what is hidden from individual consciousness, and what is a peculiar vehicle of collective contents.

In general, he highlights, the phenomena whose constitutive strength consists in experiences that transcend the limits of individual consciousness, ones that provide a kind of emotional communication do not require referring to substantially understood subjects (a substantial "I" and substantial "other"). A peculiar alchemy of understanding which characterises it is an expression of a hidden vital social force or an "organic order" inherent in the "life-world". Maffesoli, who oftentimes refers to the Dionisian rhetoric in his analyses, does not conceal his Nietzschean inspirations in diagnosing the forms of re-enchantment of the world as a way to restore the lost vitality to culture. In this respect, his diagnosis of social and cultural manifestations of the aesthetic is similar to the contemporary versions of pragmatic aesthetics. It is no coincidence that Maffesoli and Shusterman diagnose similar aesthetic phenomena (jazz, hard rock, rap etc.).

In general, he notes, we are witnessing a moving away from individualism and rationalism to sensualism: from the thinking "I" to the perceiving "I". This is followed by a departure from the ideal of universalizing, timeless and spaceless forms of communication to temporally and spatially "localized" proxemic relations. Maffesoli uses the concept of proxemics, understood as what is close and in relation to the surroundings, in a general sense. The term combines the phenomenon of uprootedness in abstract belonging with concreteness and ne-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

arness of relation. It focuses on lived space and time. An experienced concrete that the researcher focuses on "expands the world together with its surroundings"<sup>6</sup>: "The common participation, this *Lebenswelt*, life-world is rooted in proxemic values that favor the intensity of relationships"<sup>7</sup>. A bond established through the Internet or a mobile phone, notes the French researcher, is a concrete and abstract relations at the same time, surrounded by an "aura" of understanding ("an aura of a true spiritual communion").

The renascent homo aestheticus, which Maffesoli writes about when analyzing this type of bond, escapes modern anthropocentrism and its theoretical tools: substantialism, subjectivism, category of self-consciousness. Above all, it escapes the "logic of identity". As we will see in the next paragraph of this essay, one other thing that escapes the logic of identity is a specific version of philosophical relationism (as a view that replaces the substantially understood identity with the category of relation), which underlies, in my view, Bourriaud's relational aesthetics.

Let us go back, however, to Michel Maffesoli: in his view the above mentioned forms of enchantment of the world do not yield to traditional philosophical classification – they are a mixture of a reanimated primal vitalism and technological and cultural sophistication, Dionisian losing oneself in experience and aesthetic distance. "Our own *Philosophenweg* – declares the author of *The Time of Tribes* – passes over beaches crammed with holiday-makers, department stores thronged with howling consumers, riotous sporting events and the anodyne crowds milling about with no apparent purpose. In many respects, it would seem that Dionysus has overwhelmed them all. The tribe he inspires demonstrate a troublesome ambiguity: although not disdaining the most sophisticated technology, they remain nonetheless somewhat barbaric"<sup>8</sup>.

Late modern mediatized culture allows for new forms of universalization of collective life, enforces a new formula of the subject, blurs the lines established by modern individualism. At the same time, it develops an attitude of readiness to adopt various versions of lived worlds, not allowing to permanently or even for a longer time to form an attachment to any of them; it continues to get rid illusions and expectations with respect to stability of any of these versions.

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<sup>6</sup> M. Maffesoli, *Le rééchantement du monde. Une éthique pour notre temps*, Édition de La table Ronde, Paris 2007, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes*, op. cit., p. 28.

### 3. Art as participatory means of shaping social relations (Bourriaud's relational aesthetics<sup>9</sup>)

Postmodern "sting" triggered a certain defensive reaction: aestheticians became inclined to construct conceptions that provide an alternative to postmodern ideas, and, at the same time – taking into account their critical results – look for tools adequate to analyze the phenomena of recent art outside the field of deconstructed metaphysics. This would include ideas that combine this analysis with the task of diagnosing the contemporary times. Nicolas Bourriaud's proposition can be, on one hand, deemed an expression of the postmodern breakthrough; on the other hand, however, it resurrects certain old traditions: it was borne out of the spirit of a return to the communal ideal that works against the individualism that reigned in postmodernism. The return is a response to the needs of our times, in which – along with the crisis of economic and cultural liberalism, the trust in philosophical and theoretical resources is in decline; it demands to interpret anew, more diligently – apparently outdated – left-wing attempts at reactivating the idea of communal experience, social solidarity or social dialogue. In other words, philosophical and theoretical basis for Bourriaud's concept is – on one hand, a "re-worked" postmodern thought (selectively treated Lyotard or Deleuze) as well as, and perhaps more importantly: Hegel, Marks, Althusser, Benjamin, Bourdieu, Debord, Guattari.

It is also worth to note one other coincidence that the author himself does not articulate: the return to the reality that he declares, to analyzing aesthetic experiences which are constructed on the basis of actual interpersonal relations and have a shaping impact on them brings relational aesthetics close to aesthetics that focuses on the category of experience, to wit, pragmatic aesthetics. This also allows to place his conception in a certain – cautiously constructed – proximity to the perspective of contemporary forms of community in which the aesthetic, according to Maffesoli, and thus can serve as a justification for situating this essay next to the essay on the author of *The Times of the Tribes*.

The theoretical discourse of aesthetics should, according to Bourriaud, answer the fundamental question of the nature of actual relations between art and society, history, culture. At the same time, it should have at its disposal tools that are able to capture the specificity of the latest artistic – processual and behavioral – achievements, which cannot be analyzed with the conceptual tools formerly developed by aesthetics, philosophy or history of art.

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<sup>9</sup> N. Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, Le presses du réel, Dijon 1998. Contrary to the proposition of the Polish translator of this book, I prefer the term "estetyka relacyjna" to "estetyka relacyjna". I justify my decision later in this essay.

Among the contemporary forms of artistic activity, the author brings forward phenomena that most closely fit with the assumptions of his own method: activities of artists such as Rivkit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, Maurizio Cattelan, Vanessa Beecroft, Christine Hill, Noritoshi Hirakawa and others are, in his view, excellent illustrations of the shifts that took place with respect to the subject and forms of artistic creation.

These artists create an interactive space of social relations. In their case, artistic practice is a space of artistic experiment, of constructing “worlds”. In the above sense, such art harkens back to the avant-garde spirit of social critique and experimentation, which only seemingly may be deemed a continuation of Enlightenment-revolutionary emancipatory ideas. Only seemingly because the author stipulates that this emancipatory dimension of contemporary artistic experiments does no longer bears the idealistic and teleological mark. It is not modernity – he notes – that we need to reject but its idealist and teleological version. The “works” he analyses do not serve an imaginary or utopian function, instead they are characterized as models of reality that function within the actual world. Social relation produced by the artist becomes “a crevice in the social system” that allows to think, imagine and enact its different variants. In 1994, one of the artists mentioned by Bourriaud – Jens Haaning used a megaphone to tell jokes in Turkish on a square in Kopenhagen. This drew a group of immigrant and by creating this proxemic relation (distance afforded by laughter but at the same time a sense of belonging to a group) effected a redefinition of their situation.

Art whose substance is relations requires a change of the theoretical horizon: it cannot be analyzed in terms of an autonomic symbolic field but only with tools that can capture the mutual social relations that constitute it and are constituted by it, as well as their broad contexts. A contemporary work of art, he notes, is not a space that you can traverse in the act of reception but a process that is experienced and that begins a never ending dialogue. It is an intersubjective experience and encounter whose sense is worked out collectively. It is also a place of creation of specific forms of co-habitation, specific communities which are part of the global system of interpersonal relations but at the same time offer “other possibilities of exchange”, other spheres of mutual communication than the forms we deal with in everyday practice of our life.

However, this conception is not about ideas of transcending art through life or through art. The practice of interpersonal relations that Bourriaud writes about has a contingent nature, devoid of a pre-existing sense or final aim. It is a practice understood in the spirit of Althusserian aleatoric materialism. Therefore, it is more apt – as the author notes in reference to Althusser and Debord – to use the category of form in place of the category of art, which – to his mind – is overly burdened with eschatological and teleological rhetoric.

Art is one of the forms of thus understood world, and not its only form; it is one of many structures (units) that present the world's nature. It is a way to capture its elements that allows for a "continuity of encounter". The form is in fact a relation and what produces relations, it is potentially socially productive and in this sense – relational. As in Gombrowicz, to whom Bourriaud refers at this point – it is an agent that establishes relations with the Other, and by this virtue – shapes the space of intersubjectivity that stands in the center of artistic practice. Moreover, it represents desire (enables its transitivity), and hence, its dynamizing power; it refers to and dynamizes relations of exchange, calls for dialogue, enables an encounter between different planes of reality.

What is art bestowed with this productivity, what is its scope and manner of being? Bourriaud's characterization of activities of selected artists from the 1990s – somewhat presumptuously – claims the right to being representative of the leading tendencies in contemporary art. I set aside however – as an issue that is of secondary importance to the aims of this essay – the question of usurping representativeness, which may have its methodological foundations in the error of sociological reductionism. The more so where Bourriaud assigns to the chosen artists the function of seismographers of a new philosophical and aesthetic sensibility which is expressed in directing their actions towards relations, and not producing objects of certain aesthetic qualities.

Regardless of the above objections, the analyses are still heuristically useful as the practices cited by Bourriaud are characteristic of a world after the fall of metaphysics and its strong categories: substance, the related identity of the subject and ontological identity of the object. It is an art of shaping, conferring forms on social relations that emerge from an uncodified, unbound by the rules of productivity of economic and social life. This shaping is aleatoric, event-like, it does not have a prescribed "grammar" of creation and it does not create permanent records of any of its forms.

The important question here is not the applicability of Bourriaud's model of aesthetic to the whole of contemporary art but the relevance of his characterization with respect to one of the important areas of contemporary artistic practice: bringing out the participatory aspect of the works of artists cited in *Relational Aesthetics*. If the artists do create social relations, it is only by participating in them, as if, "from the inside". The artist cannot obtain a full distance vis-à-vis the relations he creates because in the conditions of post-capitalism he is not a creative subject in the sense still maintained in modern art. There is no human individual subject with a substantial core of identity; what is human, the subject – and what Bourriaud will call, after Marks from *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, the "interpersonal" or the network of social relations – is only a fiction that we still collectively produce. This type of artistic practice does away with the distance between art and social life.

At the same time, however – similarly to the phenomenon of proxemics described by Maffesoli – art maintains certain aesthetic distance towards life, “it maintains autonomy vis a vis the socius that wants to absorb and trivialise it”<sup>10</sup>. If the works of Gonzales-Torres or Angela Buloch bring to life new possibilities of shaping interpersonal relations (possible worlds) then, it is because they the possibility preserve – inherited after the model of autonomic art – of breaking away from the existing forms, an element of distance and criticism. This art is not about translating the existing relations into artistic forms but about creating new, alternative forms of relations, about bringing to life the potential possibilities of these forms that are hidden in social life, and set in motion only by the artist. Therefore, it is not about “relacyjność”, as suggested in the Polish translation of the term, but “relacjonalność” – a potential productivity of relational space, it is about realizing this potentiality by participating in the ambivalent experience of distance and engagement.

This type of practice entails a specific type of artistic and aesthetic criticism. It is not an aesthetics that stops at the level of description of existing relations but is focused on the potential of their ceaseless, alternative production at the heart of the social. Thus, it is not “relacyjny” but “relacjonalny”. The latter term seems to better express the potentiality inherent in the French term *relationelle*. The proposed translation of the French term (contrary to the translation proposed by the translator of the Polish version of the book) has the advantage that it takes Bourriaud’s conception to a level of meta-theoretical reflection on the status of the production of social form. Relational aesthetic is a specific application of philosophical relationalism described in this essay.

It is difficult to inscribe it in any of the existing categories of cultural phenomena. In its case, the divisions between sculpture, painting, “technical reproduction”, installation, performance or social action become blurred. Its characteristic interactivity and transitiveness dynamize “the work” and as a result the relational object becomes a “place of negotiation between an endless number of senders and recipients”. Relational art, creating references to its “externality” and acting as a stream of relations, does not yield to the tools of post-Kantian subjectivist aesthetics; it is not a creation of an individual artist: the art creates art, not the artist, the author highlights after Pierre Bourdieu.

There is one question that Bourriaud answers in a rather unsatisfactory way, namely the question of the scope of relational art. He uses this category with respect to the art of the last decades, mainly from the 1990s. On the other hand, he also writes that we can speak of the relational character of art with reference to Renaissance works; from the moment when interpersonal relation

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<sup>10</sup> N. Bourriaud, *Estetyka relacyjna*, transl. L. Białkowski, Kraków 2012, p. 19.

becomes the focus of artistic practice, we can, to his mind, start writing the history of art anew – as relational art. The author will not develop or justify this view further, although, it is undoubtedly interesting and worth examination.

The theoretical layer of Bourriaud's insights is only a skeleton of an attempt to understand the art of the last decades. It is more convincing when the author sets them in interpretative and analytical motion, when analyzing specific artworks. The most important include the analyses of works by Gonzales-Torres and artists from his circle. These analyses are the real source of power that is able to legitimize the claims of relational aesthetics: the art testifies – as Bourriaud's analyses suggest – to important metamorphoses at the heart of contemporary culture, to the departure from the idea of emancipation of an individual in favor of the idea of interpersonal communication and relational dimension of contemporary human existence.

The author, being aware of the transformations taking place in recent art, and taking them as legitimization and a gauge of the version of aesthetic he proposes, believes that a return to its classical version, along with the central concept of a closed totality of the work, is no longer possible. Contemporary art, as an open continuum, inscribes itself, in his view, in the broad social context of existence, blurs its own limits, showing a tendency, described by Marks with respect to broadly understood social processes, namely – mutual interweaving of the spheres of praxis and poiesis.

One advantage of this approach is its openness to challenges of most recent art and generally – our times, the current character of its analyses. It is also worth noting the originality of the proposal; although, it brings forward from under a layer of dust and updates seemingly outdated theories, it does inscribe itself in the line of thinking of the most recent and popular attempts at their revival.

One drawback of the project is its vague character. It is merely an outline of an interpretative idea. It is undoubtedly interesting and stimulating but, at the same time, understated in its use of a disquietingly simplifying discourse. It is a shame that it is one of the few attempts at philosophical and cultural interpretation of the status and condition of “high” art, if we can use the traditional that allows us to separate the set of examples discussed by Bourriaud from mass culture which, as we have seen, is the centre focus in the case of Maffesoli. Both theoreticians discussed in this essay attempt to examine social and artistic phenomena of contemporary culture in the situation of a loss of foundations, treating the phenomena as a specific, poietic response to the loss.

#### 4. Conclusion

As many of our contemporaries have noted, after Simmel and Benjamin and up to Welsch, Jameson, and Featherstone, the aesthetic is increasingly becoming the signum of late modern transformations. What underlies the creation of a new type of aesthetic sensibility and the new way of practicing art and its functioning are the violent and radical changes in the economic and social sphere along with new communication and information technologies. These changes, to an extent, go against the belief in a stable, timeless status of the work of art and the view that the acts of artistic creation and reception are rooted in a sphere of authenticity or the originary that transcends the everyday; as a result, they disrupt the traditional aesthetic ideal of art that enacts metaphysically grounded values. It forces us to transcend barriers between the aesthetic and the disciplines that examine the complex processes of transformations that occur in the late modern experience of the world.

They lead to a necessary, although methodologically problematic, destruction of traditional divisions into aesthetic and other “areas of philosophy” -- nowadays, it is difficult to be an aesthetician in the old, post-Kantian style. The previously established foundations (also in the sense of institutional belonging) of being an aesthetician are constantly disrupted, who is today at risk of being accused stepping into someone else’s competencies, at the same time, oftentimes being “helped out” by ethicists, psychoanalysts, philosophers and theoreticians of culture, sociologists, anthropologists, etc. who take up questions that are usually considered aesthetic. It is telling that some researchers that deal with problems commonly considered aesthetic does not consider themselves philosophers, and the other way round: some philosophers who take up these problems do not consider themselves aestheticians, if they examine them on the general level (e.g. in the contexts of new social relations and new rules of social communication, mechanism of human perception, way of understanding, phenomenon, corporality, “other”, difference, eventualization, temporality, narration, etc.). The fact that the above issues were not usually a part of the canonical scope of “classical aesthetics” is not a fundamental obstacle to upholding the validity of its important questions and placing them in the current contexts or even posing new questions due to the emergence of new contexts.

As Michel Maffesoli rightly shows, the new, cultural and social “enchantment of the world” which involves in fact its continuous disenchanting (which involves mutual establishing as well as mutual abolishing of the attitudes of engagement and distance) is not outside, as in the case of the old vision of the enchanted world, outside the demystifying philosophical consciousness as the only place of insight into the truth. As Michel Bourriaud shows, in turn, the

philosopher whose tasks transition seamlessly into the tasks of a cultural sociologist or aesthete, registering the previously mentioned phenomena and subjecting them to interpretation is aware that his own thinking is part of these processes as well as their symptom. He is not a spiritual leader or a prophet aristocratically separated from the lost masses. In this sense, the new model of practicing philosophy or aesthetics involves an acceptance of participation in life and getting past what – alongside the loss of foundations – is actually happening: a dethronement of philosopher and aesthete from their former functions.

Transl. by Karolina Bosak

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## **ESTETYCZNA PARTYCYPACJA JAKO URZECZYWIŚNIENIE SPOŁECZNO-KULTUROWEJ POIESIS (streszczenie)**

W niniejszym eseju ukazuję model estetyki oparty na swoistym sposobie rozumienia partycypacji artystycznej opierając się na przykładach dwóch koncepcji: Michela Maffesolego i Nicolasa Bourriauda. Moja charakterystyka nie rości sobie prawa do wyczerpania opisu zjawiska, jakim jest powodzenie kategorii partycypacji w sztuce i we współczesnych ujęciach teoretycznych. Postaram się pokazać, iż opisywany model jest mimo swojej dość wąskiej formuły, dobrą okazją do pokazania pewnych przesunięć, jakie dokonywane są w estetyce współczesnej wskutek późnonowoczesnych (zwłaszcza charakterystycznych dla doby postindustrialnej) procesów jej dez-

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autonomizacji. Przesunięcia te rysują się w polu napięć między dwiema kategoriami: dystansu i zaangażowania. Pokażę również, że przesunięcia te prowadzą do nowego sposobu definiowania podmiotu artystycznej kreacji. Nie ma on charakteru jednostkowego, intencjonalnego, ani tym bardziej nie podlega charakterystyce substancjalizującej. Siłą tworzącą jest samoartykułujące się życie społeczne, ogniskowane w ludzkich praktykach (m.in. w praktyce artystycznej). Bourriaud i Maffesoli powielają w pewien sposób matrycę dobrze znaną filozofii: poietyczną siłą kreacji obdarzane w niej bywa samo życie (Nietzsche), Bycie (Heidegger), Byt (późny Merleau-Ponty), samostwarzająca się Natura (Dufrenne) itp. Bourriaud i Maffesoli w swojej koncepcji artystycznej i estetycznej partycypacji mieszczą się – to jest najogólniejsza teza, która ukierunkowuje moje analizy – w tak ogólnie rozumianym modelu pojetycznym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** estetyczny dystans, estetyczne zaangażowanie, relacje proksemiczne, estetyka późnej nowoczesności, estetyka partycypacyjna