

ROSAS

A text by Stefan Heidenreich
on the work of
Marinella Senatore

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*Dedicated to
Rosa Mangullo*

The artist wants to thank the Peres Projects staff, the 20.000 participants of *ROSAS*, Laura Senatore, Stefania Palumbo, Alfredo Cramerotti, Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin, Matadero Madrid and Quad Derby

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A different type of Gesamtkunstwerk

When the opera composer Wagner employed the concept of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, he wanted to overcome the division of labor by including all of the artists in one overarching musical, theatrical, painterly, and sculptural form. What he did not touch was the position of the viewer. Ever since the first half of the 19th century, when the light was turned off in the spectators' section of the theater, the viewer was rendered a passive being, stuck in a chair and deprived of movement and conversation. The total passivity that we take for granted when seeing a theatre piece or an opera was indeed a revolution. Cinema took over this perceptual setting, the dark hall and the lit stage, and transformed it into a sensory laboratory. Seen from that background, it is quite telling that Marinella Senatore's collective chose the form of an opera. The participants engaged in a format that is like no other, where the division of labor and the reintegration of all different professions became one all-encompassing work. In the making of this opera, the division of cultural labor is overcome in a different way. In this new sense, the opera as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* creates a new unifying sphere of production and reception. It includes all of us because all of us could have participated. It does not really matter whether we are just watching the opera, or whether we participate in another way. We are put into a different place. We escape the duty of judgment that Kant tried to impose on the emancipated spectator. It also undermines the superficial passive involvement of relational aesthetics. Instead, watching the opera itself becomes part of its making.

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Participation

Participation is not a term that has grown from within the art system. Thus it cannot be rooted to its institutional settings, but more so to a technical change concerning entire human interaction and communication. One has to keep in mind that this term is not new. Fantasies of true common participation have occurred with almost any new medium, from the telephone, to the radio, to the television. The recent appearance of participation may be traced back to a comparatively simple technical achievement. Ever since media left the paradigm of unidirectional communication, as existed in broadcasting, and opened to bidirectional communication, the place of the public changed. Since it is as easy to send as it is to receive, and not only on a one to one scale, the technical basis for a different communication environment was established. Things turned out to be a bit more complex; as we find wisdom in the crowd, we also encounter its stupidity. As much as participation is welcomed, it can also turn into a nightmare. The attitude towards culture has also been affected. More and more it feels bewildering to accept the canonized culture, the authority of the art historian or the critic or to accept the division of labor and the alienation which comes along with it. Instead, culture is seen as something in which the spectator does not only have stake, but where the division between spectator and artist will be abolished altogether. One cannot stress enough this difference to the other forms of involvement.

Relational

Active public involvement was not a concern when large cultural institutions were founded, it was actually quite the opposite. Modernism found its strongest legitimization in the continuous revolt against old-fashioned bourgeois taste. The idea of continuous progress powered by the institutions of high culture took art far away from the core of our society to an elitist avant-garde. The power game will only shift when the state itself, as the main power behind cultural institutions, shows signs of crisis. As pressure has been placed on the institutions of museums to engage with a broader public, the least inventive approach has often been utilized: populist blockbuster exhibitions. But the message did not escape the rest of the art world. This is where relational art (as in relational aesthetics) comes in. Bourriaud's idea to transform museums into a social space only tries to regain a legitimization that was ignored during the course of modernism. The orientation towards the public had to be rebuilt, but the way relational art tries to narrow the distance to the public leaves both sides unchanged. Artists are asked to somehow involve the public, and in a way the spectators may even become part of the work, but neither position is questioned. We still have the artist on one side, and the spectator on the other. In this sense, relational art might be called a "fake" involvement. Artists produce work pretending they would serve or include the public. The claim made by the artist is sufficient, and whether the work actually fulfills their stated intention does not really matter. This is what has stirred the most vivid criticism, namely that relation was nothing but a superficial claim abusing fictitious public involvement for purposes of self legitimization.

The Making Of

Some remarks on art and the division of labor

Inclusion

The question of overcoming the separation between artists and viewers has lately been discussed under a variety in terms: as emancipation (Rancière), relation (Bourriaud), or participation (Bishop). Why has this divide become such an urgent topic, and how do the different terms refer to it? One may take the recent work of Marinella Senatore as an example from where these questions can be addressed.

To even call Senatore's work her own sounds slightly out of place. The artist arranged for an artwork to be made, more precisely, for an opera to be produced at three different locations. She did not do it herself: she neither composed it, nor directed it in the traditional sense, nor performed in it. More accurately, one might say that Senatore facilitated it and let it happen. In conventional terms, the work would have to be credited to many others. In fact, by the end of production, there were over 20,000 contracts to be signed by the contributors. Operating as a facilitator, formerly known as artist, Senatore intervened only when asked to step in and when her contribution seemed necessary to solve a problem. Her main activity consisted of knitting the social fabric needed to let the work happen. "That's what I know how to do. That's what I am talented in", she says. In 2010 Senatore did a collective piece with retired workers from an abandoned sulfur mine in Sicily. To this day, the workers call her every Friday just to talk, long after the art work has been completed. The social fabric remains, as does a documentation of a performance, but with the slight difference that her involvement is required.

Division of Labor

Certainly, Senatore is not the first to work with nonprofessional actors, but maybe the issue of professionalism is not really what is at stake in this case. Professionalism as a category applies to a field that is altogether marked by the division of labor and an associated monetary exchange. As such, what does professionalism mean? A certain range of skills? A symptom of commercialization? An effect of the division of labor?

A scene I witnessed in the tribal areas of Southern Ethiopia comes to mind. People from this area could not believe that people from most of the economically developed world would not know how to produce the items that they use daily, for example, the mobile phone. The tribal people would take this for granted and assume that every person who uses a mobile phone knows how to carve one out of a shiny piece of metal, as much as they know how to transform a pumpkin into a bowl.

Emancipation

For Kant, enlightenment calls for “Ausgang aus der selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit” or “emergence from one’s self-imposed nonage”. For its time, this idea shook up many things. The *Unmündigkeit* was for the most part not self induced, but the result of an absolutist regime trying to keep people in this very state of nonage. What is to be blamed on an obsolete form of government, Kant depicts as a responsibility of the citizens. In calling for this type of emancipation, Kant himself fulfills the command of a Prussian minister who wanted to educate citizens to not only follow commands, but to engage. This idea has to be seen in the light of ongoing reforms of the army and the administration. In calling for emancipation, Kant obeyed a command and therefore emancipation is always linked to a situation of authority to be overcome, but not necessarily to be abolished. It remains a personal achievement and mostly leaves the social order untouched. Personal freedom may be achieved, but authority remains.

Reappropriating

When the practice of feudal representative culture was taken over by the institutions of the new nation states, cultural production had to serve different goals. Under feudal conditions, the artist operated as servant and creator in one. The term *artist* itself came about when painters, architects and sculptors, caught in a medial scheme of guilds, adapted to the working conditions of the feudal system. Artists were employed by the nation state for the purpose of helping to imagine its own history as a national, cultural heritage. For that matter, art history served the transition from the feudal to the nation state and artworks turned into objects of education. The act of alienation stayed the same as art remained in the sphere of institutionalized professionalism. The commercialization of the cultural industries did little to change these matters, as it broadened the deep rift between production and consumption, profiting from the division of labor.

Things are slowly changing and another attitude towards culture has shown its face. One example would be of the fresco depicting Jesus Christ that was painted over by an 84-year old woman in the Spanish town of Borja. When the woman turned the original work, painted in an old school, academic style of the 19th century, into a naive blend of cat and bear faces, she reappropriated an alienated piece of cultural heritage. The attention this story gained worldwide brought about some important questions. Why aren't we allowed to decorate our churches as we want? Why do state authorities rush in, in order to restore the old artwork? In which name do the art historians speak if they mourn a loss? Why are we not allowed to touch or change the cultural artifacts that surround us? Who declared this divide and whose power does it serve to keep it up? In light of these questions, one might return to the three terms of involvement: emancipation, relation, and participation.

Working is networking

Our contemporary world is full of the products of divided labor. The more we become distanced from material production, which is increasingly outsourced to cheaper labor markets, the more we seem to increasingly only require one skill: networking. What was formerly known as a craft, appears today as something trivial to be self-taught over YouTube and applied at a convenient point within a network. Even if one concedes that not everyone knows how to do everything, it becomes more important to find the place where to apply the skill, than to actually have it.

Of course, this also applies to the cultural field, where the division of labor seems to look back on a much longer tradition. Musicians, actors, and writers have existed ever since there was recorded culture. Conversely, ever since divided labor took over the cultural field, culture has been recorded. This very recording in turn shapes the division of labor; someone writes a piece of theater or music, and someone else performs it. This fact leads us to a surprising conclusion. Looking back through the history of culture, we necessarily look back to what was recorded and stored. If a recording was only required under the condition of divided labor, our cultural history is biased towards the divided production mode. It shows us only one part, and maybe even a very small part of overall cultural activities.

There has always been another mode of cultural production which avoids divided labor: when a member of a community sings a song, or recites a poem, or narrates a story, either alone or with the help of others. Think of all the musical forms involving a solo singer and a choir, or of a prayer when a group echoes a priest. It is no surprise that these old fashioned non-divided cultural forms survived within ancient institutions like the church. We also find traces of them in cults, festivities, and processions of contemporary collective events, but they are usually regarded as a minor, less

important form of culture. For example, few art historians actually know that one of the main preoccupations of the Renaissance artists was to conceive and decorate huge processions. The mainstream of our culture is fixated on stored, durable items. Everything else is dismissed, even against the history of art.

Aesthetics

In the division of cultural labor, the term aesthetics marks a turning point. In writing his book *Aesthetica* in Latin, the German philosopher Baumgarten coined the term, but his text did not address what we would call aesthetics today. The term became popular when the philosopher Kant adopted it in the title of one of his books, *Kritik der ästhetischen Urteilskraft*, and in doing so, changed its meaning significantly. In regard to Baumgarten, he turned one crucial thing upside down. He talked about the aesthetic qualities of an artwork and its perception. Although, Baumgarten was mainly concerned with the production of a work of art, following a trend of his time that universities should teach their students practice and knowledge. Ultimately, Kant theory won out, and the term *aesthetics* played a crucial role in that victory. It was the anchor around which the swing for activation to passivity occurs, because *aesthetics* could refer to both the ability to make and the ability to judge. The swing did not only occur between Kant and Baumgarten, but affected all university disciplines. In a way, it was responsible for the fact that we learn either to make art at the academy or to look at it in art history at the university. What was formerly unified, became separated by two disciplines and two institutions. Here we also find the limitations of the project of enlightenment: it argues for emancipation, but only on the basis of a division.