

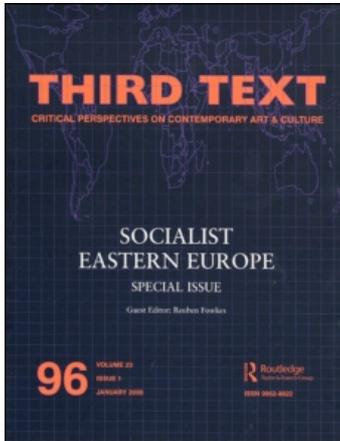
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An Ethics of Engagement

Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer

Anthony Downey

The conditions under which contemporary art is produced, disseminated, displayed and exchanged have undergone significant changes, if not radical transformations, in the last three decades. In a broad sense, this period has been concomitant with a series of incremental shifts from object-based to context-based practices to, more recently, artworks that primarily utilise forms of collaboration and participation – or so-called socially engaged artworks. I am, of course, abbreviating a highly complex system here and it would not be very difficult to find a number of conceptual holes in such a schema. I should also note that I am not promoting a teleological reading to such developments. Participation and collaboration, for example, could be dated from the period covering Dada onwards, in particular the spectacle of audiences participating, willingly or not, in the Dada Season in Paris in April 1921. To this we could add the collaborative gambits of Situationism in the mid- to late 1950s and the participatory improvisations employed by Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clarke throughout the 1960s. Moreover, if we were to broaden the scope of contemporary art to include theatre we could also cite Bertolt Brecht's ambition to 're-function' it to a new and more collaborative form of social participation and political engagement.¹ Nevertheless, and putting to one side my own truncated account of the possible pitfalls inherent in my opening statement, the fact of collaborative and participative-based practices in contemporary art has certainly become more notable of late, and with this other more immediate concerns have emerged too, not least the sense that contemporary critical discourses are struggling to both criticise and, indeed, support such practices.

That art criticism, in response to these developments, has reacted with a bout of analytical hand-wringing and theoretical throat-clearing is all the less surprising when we consider the inherent incitement to collective forms of social, communitarian and political agency that underwrites collaborative art practices. To complicate matters further, some of these practices are attended (albeit to different degrees) by forms

1. Fredric Jameson has observed that apart from the manifold collaborations with other writers and musicians, Brecht's theatre disavowed the notion of a passive viewing experience. In this sense, he produced 'theatre as collective experiment', a formal device that effectively encouraged viewer participation with the overall aim of social and political change. See Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, Verso, London, 1998, pp 10–11.

2. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988. Clifford notes on page 9 that: 'ultimately my topic [ethnography] is a pervasive condition of off-centeredness in a world of distinct meaning systems, a state of being in culture while looking at culture, a form of personal and collective self-fashioning. This predicament – not limited to scholars, writers, artists, or intellectuals – responds to the twentieth century's unprecedented overlay of traditions.'
3. The notion of the artist as ethnographer is nothing new. Artists such as Lothar Baumgarten, Renée Green, Nikki S Lee, Jimmie Durham and Allan Sekula have all engaged in practices that could be read as ethnographically inclined. Published in 1996, Hal Foster's 'The Artist as Ethnographer' posited the artist as a self-reflexive ethnographer who explored not so much sameness, difference and alterity but the very problems involved in exploring such issues. See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant Garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996, pp 171–204, passim.
4. An argument for the latter has been put forward by Carlos Basualdo and Reinaldo Laddaga in 'Rules of Engagement: Art and Experimental Communities', *Artforum*, XLIII:7, March 2004, pp 166–9. Writing of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* (2002), in which the artist co-opted a local community of mostly Turkish immigrants in Kassel to construct a number of edifices and thereafter maintain them, Basualdo and Laddaga suggest on page 167 that: 'even the process of constructing the piece itself

of ethnographic and research-based activities that recall, to quote James Clifford's definition of ethnography, 'ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation'.² This is not so much to posit the collaborative artist as an ethnographer per se, or 'outside observer', as it is to note the extent to which participative art practices often involve a close, if not intimate, degree of familiarity and involvement with given social groups over extended periods of time.³ Such developments, needless to say, have further problematised critical reaction to collaborative practices, involving as they do a series of ethical quandaries when it comes to considering how communities are co-opted, represented and in some instances exploited in the name of making art. In what follows, I will outline the critical debates in relation to collaborative art practices and thereafter observe the emergence of quasi- and pseudo-ethnographic rhetoric in these practices. In a broader sense, I want to rethink the potential to be had in developing an ethics of engagement that would ameliorate some of the divisions in critical reactions to collaborative art practices thus far and, thereafter, further contextualise the aesthetics of their ethnographic impulses.

COLLABORATION AND PARTICIPATION: AESTHETICS OR ETHICS?

When terms such as socially engaged artworks and collaboration are used in debates, we must ask: What exactly is meant by the social or public sphere in collaborative artworks? This brings us to a further, perhaps more incisive, question: Are artists reflecting upon and co-opting already formed communities – regular visitors to galleries, for example – or are they producing provisional communities that come together in experimental formations for the duration of a project?⁴ It is likewise critical to note that there are degrees of collaboration. Are participants being asked to partake in a social event, such as eating a bowl of soup in a gallery (as when Rirkrit Tiravanija encouraged gallery-goers to eat bowls of pad thai at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York in 1990), or have their backs tattooed for the price of a fix of heroin, as four Spanish prostitutes were in 2000 in Santiago Sierra's *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People*?⁵ Putting to one side, for now at least, the ethical and political ramifications of tattooing individuals for the price of a heroin fix, it is worth observing that forms of collaboration and participation can consist of attending an opening; ticking a box or pushing a button to express a preference; sharing a meal; engaging in dialogue; being paid to hold up a beam against a wall in a gallery or live in a box for a period of time (both part of Santiago Sierra's oeuvre to date); volunteering to move a mountainous sand dune a few inches (as in Francis Alys *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002); attending a workshop for former drug addicts that specialises in recycling materials (as in WochenKlausur's collaboration with the Anton Proksch Institute in 2003 in Vienna);⁶ being paid to have your hair bleached or live in the hold of a ship for an extended period of time (Sierra again); helping to build and maintain a community centre of sorts in a neighbourhood of Kassel, Germany (as in Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument*, 2002); being uprooted from China to live with a German family in

constituted the invention of a possible community – a community that, while composed from certain preexisting elements, ended up incorporating people, places, and ideas that were initially foreign to it’.

5. In the artist’s text accompanying the video, he explains that: ‘four prostitutes addicted to heroin were hired for the price of a shot of heroin to give their consent to be tattooed. Normally they charge 2,000 or 3,000 pesetas, between 15 and 17 dollars, for fellatio, while the price of a shot of heroin is around 12,000 pesetas, about 67 dollars.’ Sanitago Sierra, *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo. Salamanca, Spain. December 2000* (2000)
6. WochenKlausur’s interventions are socially orientated and to date have included such diverse projects as creating platforms for public debate (in Nuremberg in 2000) and setting up language schools in Macedonia for Kosovo-Albanian refugees of the Balkan War. Their website reads: ‘Since 1993 and on invitation from different art institutions, the artist group WochenKlausur develops concrete proposals aimed at small, but nevertheless effective improvements to socio-political deficiencies. Proceeding even further and invariably translating these proposals into action, artistic creativity is no longer seen as a formal act but as an intervention into society.’ Available at http://www.wochenklausur.at/projekte/menu_en.htm.
7. In 2005, under the direction of Artur Żmijewski, a ‘prison’ was constructed in Warsaw’s historical district of Praga. For a planned period of two weeks, and following on from a screening process, seventeen unemployed Polish men were paid forty dollars a

Kassel (in effect, Ai Weiwei’s contribution to Documenta 12 in 2007); having the number that was ascribed and tattooed on your arm in a concentration camp re-tattooed so that it becomes more legible (as in Artur Żmijewski’s *80064*, 2004); or, indeed, subjecting yourself to a makeshift ‘prison’ in the role of either a guard or a prisoner and thereafter being subjected to twenty-four-hour surveillance for forty dollars a day (as in Artur Żmijewski’s *Repetition*, 2005).⁷ And to the extent that there are degrees of collaboration, there are of course degrees of agency involved here too. To this end, we might enquire into the power relations involved in collaborative art practices and the extent to which participants are frequently cajoled (or, indeed, goaded) into collaborating in projects that often have modalities of conflict at their heart. Of course, in extreme instances, such as Żmijewski re-tattooing a holocaust survivor’s tattoo or Sierra paying Iraqi workers in London to be sprayed with polyurethane, there is the argument that such acts expose precisely the relations of power to be had in modern society, not to mention the frangibility of social bonds and the fragility of the subject’s rights in a neoliberal social consensus.⁸ Sierra sees his work in terms of an ethico-political critique of social conditions: it is not the tattoo that is of interest here, to paraphrase the artist, but the very fact that the social, economic and political conditions exist whereby such events can take place. There is an obvious degree of disingenuousness to Sierra’s comments which have both a political limit point and an ethical threshold to traverse before such comments can be taken at face value – a point to which I will shortly return.⁹

Despite the ethics involved in co-opting individuals into an artwork, we arrive here at an interpretive conundrum that would appear to divide discussions of contemporary collaborative practices: the emergence of collaborative and participative artworks that co-opt communities, persons and the social sphere – the so-called expanded field of contemporary art practices – has brought about a significant development in criticism that looks towards the ethics of such encounters, in the first instance, and their status as art (aesthetics) in the second. Collaborative art practices, in short, appear to be judged on the basis of the ethical efficacy underwriting the artist’s relationship to his or her collaborators rather than what makes these works interesting as art.¹⁰ In this rubric, works such as Żmijewski’s *Repetition*, where his volunteers – after much artist-produced provocation – called a halt to the re-staging of an experiment due to the stresses and trauma involved, would be judged by the quality and ethics of the collaborative practices that they set in motion rather than the way in which they reconfigure the relationship of aesthetics to social praxis – or, more precisely, the manner in which they elide simplistic distinctions between art and life. This is, broadly speaking, the gist of the argument Claire Bishop has carried forward when, writing of collaborative artworks, she suggests that:

... what serious criticism has arisen in relation to socially collaborative practices has been framed in a particular way: the social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism ... accusations of mastery and egocentrism are leveled at artists who work with participants to realise a project instead of allowing it to emerge through consensual collaboration.¹¹

day and allocated the role of either guard or prisoner before being consigned to the prison. This event was effectively a re-staging of an earlier experiment, the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment carried out by Philip Zimbardo in the basement of Stanford's Psychology Department building in 1971. After six days, and having arbitrarily allocated to his volunteers the role of either 'guard' or 'prisoner', Zimbardo brought a halt to the experiment on ethical grounds. From day one, Zimbardo noted that his volunteers had internalised their roles so completely that his 'prisoners' had become traumatised and his 'guards' increasingly sadistic, so much so that some were becoming visibly disturbed by the events and abuse that was unfolding before them. Zmijewski's re-enactment, almost thirty-five years later, followed a similar pattern and concluded with an equally abrupt ending that was orchestrated by the participants in this instance. I have written elsewhere on the ethics of using surveillance in this work. See Anthony Downey, 'The Lives of Others: Artur Zmijewski's "Repetition" and the Aesthetics of Surveillance', in *Conspiracy Dwellings: Surveillance in Contemporary Art*, eds Outi Remes and Pam Skelton, Cambridge Scholars Press, Cambridge, forthcoming 2010.

8. This latter work had the self-explanatory title *Polyurethane Sprayed on the Backs of Ten Workers* and was produced at Lisson Gallery in July 2004. The text accompanying the work read: 'Ten Iraqi immigrant workers were hired for this action. They were provided with protective chemical clothing and with thick industrial plastic sheeting. Afterwards they were placed in order in different

We turn here to more familiar critical terrain when it is suggested that the discursive criteria used currently to address socially engaged art are 'accompanied by the idea that art should extract itself from the useless domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis'.¹² Art, in this schema, should be both socially and politically committed and utilise the aesthetic as a symbolic bearer of sorts for such commitment. The pitfalls of such an approach for the aesthetic – its a priori subjugation to both social and political considerations – are obvious and do not necessarily need to be rehearsed here. However, and having noted as much, there is still work to be done on the relationship of ethics, in the form of engagement, to the aesthetics of collaborative art practices, nowhere more so than when they deploy the methodological rhetoric associated with ethnographic discourse.

PARTICIPATIVE OBSERVATION IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES

As a practice ethnography has rarely reached consensus on the issue of methodology and the ethical ramifications of encountering and representing (by whatever means) our so-called others through forms of participative observation and interpretation. It is all the more instructive to evaluate, in light of such comments, the problems that underwrite the co-optation (if not discursive production) of communities and thereafter enquire into the distinction between experience and interpretation in ethnographically inclined collaborative artworks. In more specific terms, and in relation to Miwon Kwon's discussion of the distinctions to be had between 'ethnographic authority and artistic authorship', this lack of consensus comes down to the relationship, if not antagonism, between forms of experience and interpretation.¹³ Kwon writes:

To clarify, the concept of participant observation encompasses a relay between empathetic engagement with a particular situation and/or event (experience) and the assessment of its meaning and significance within a broader context (interpretation). The history of ethnography and the methodological debates within the discipline could be understood in large measure as the shifting of emphasis from the former to the latter as the primary site of ethnographic interest.¹⁴

Rather than just applying art historical or critical paradigms to artworks that employ ethnographic rhetoric, it is perhaps more germane to note that ethnographic methodology and practice have been judged, not unlike collaborative art practices, on issues such as contribution to our understanding of social life (substantiative contribution); whether they work aesthetically (aesthetic merit); authorial self-awareness and self-reflexiveness in terms of approach, observations and findings (reflexivity); the effect of the work on the viewer/reader (impact); and the credibility of its account of the so-called 'real' (expression of a reality).¹⁵ It would seem, in this rubric, that ethnography does indeed have much in common with contemporary collaborative practices and art in general: they both reify a reality that has an impact upon the viewer/reader (however unquantifiable); they involve experience and its interpretation

positions and sprayed on their backs with polyurethane until the material accumulated into large free-standing forms. All the elements used in this action have been left abandoned in the space.'

9. Both Sierra and Źmijewski, who are regularly written about in conjunction with one another, often pay their subjects and produce situations where conflict is inevitable. Despite his obvious role in generating conflictual circumstances, Źmijewski has nonetheless often been seen as an observer in his works with some critics choosing to see him as above the fray: 'In many instances,' D C Murray writes, 'Źmijewski purposefully inhabits the role of a disengaged observer, allowing events to unfold without intervention.' This is patently untrue: if anything Źmijewski is the agent provocateur and very quickly allows his influence to be felt upon the protagonists in works such as *Repetition* (2005) and *80064* (2004). See D C Murray, 'Carceral Subjects: the Play of Power in Artur Źmijewski's[AQ1], *Parachute*, no 124, 2006, pp 78–91. Despite these and other instances in which Źmijewski plays an obvious if not decisive role in his films, he still has a name for being objective, a bystander in what is unfolding around him as opposed to a protagonist in events. In a relatively lengthy exploration of Źmijewski's work that continues this line of thought, Norman L Kleebblatt recently argued that the artist 'offers nothing but dispassionate observation'. See Norman L Kleebblatt, 'Moral Hazard', *Artforum*, April 2009, pp 155–61, p 159.
10. There is a significant ethical inclination in Nina Montmann's critique of Źmijewski's oeuvre, nowhere more than in her argument: '[in] genuine participatory art, as

(which, in turn, implicates the conditions of reception); and they are both apparently concerned with self-reflexive practices and aesthetic merit.¹⁶ In sum, both have an abiding interest in reproducing and representing experience, not to mention the distinctions (or relationship) to be had between 'ethnographic authority' – figured here in terms of ethico-political praxis – and 'artistic authorship' or aesthetics. It would seem that recent collaborative practices that employ pseudo-ethnographic rhetoric are exploring this relationship between authority and authorship, albeit in terms that tend to parody or knowingly discard 'ethnographic authority' in the name of 'artistic authorship'.

In the context of participative observation as a form of collaboration, Swiss-born Olaf Breuning would appear keen to exploit the differences between ethnographic authority and artistic authorship whilst simultaneously blurring the lines between humour and forms of exploitation. In *Home* (2007) he engaged the actor Brian Kerstetter to traverse the world in a manic reiteration of all that is wrong with global tourism and its 'discovery' of so-called natives and 'authentic' native customs. At the outset of the film, Kerstetter coyly speaks to camera and notes that men and women look the same in Papua New Guinea, an in-joke with the cameraman that he tirelessly reprises throughout the film. In Ghana, he encounters young children playing and foraging on a smouldering rubbish heap and proceeds to hand out money to them before finally throwing it all up in the air and provoking an unseemly free-for-all. This frankly crass act was to later become a photograph, *20 Dollars* (2007), in which the grateful recipients of Kerstetter's (and, by extension, the artist's) largesse grin broadly for the camera. In bringing together the collaborative aspect of this piece – a group of children are remunerated to participate in a film and thereafter become the subjects of a limited edition photograph – I am observing the similarities with aspects of Sierra's work and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Źmijewski.¹⁷ All three artists, in short, have paid individuals money to debase themselves in the name of artistic production.

Breuning could, if he was so inclined, nevertheless argue (pace Sierra) that such a work, far from being exploitative, represents and draws attention to the systems within which individuals are exploited. This is certainly how it has been read recently by one commentator who sees in the photograph a 'political charge' and a form of ethico-political commentary.¹⁸ However, the issue that interests me here concerns the critical tools available to us when it comes to reading a collaborative, pseudo-ethnographic practice in terms of both 'ethnographic authority' (the ethics of knowledge production and the politics of social praxis) and 'artistic authorship' (the aesthetics of mock-documentary). *Home* is, needless to say, not without aesthetic merit in so far as Breuning deploys a number of ethnographic and filmic tropes including the illusion of flickering film-stock or grain on the film (complete with the occasional overlaid noise of a spool whirring), the cross-continent jump-shot, the rambling to-camera monologues of Kerstetter, the occasional attempt at an interview, and the jumpiness associated with a hand-held camera. All appear to imitate, or parody, the ethnographic impulse in documentary film and to that end draw attention to its rhetorical formalisation of touristic and, by extension, our experience. Ethnographic authority, and



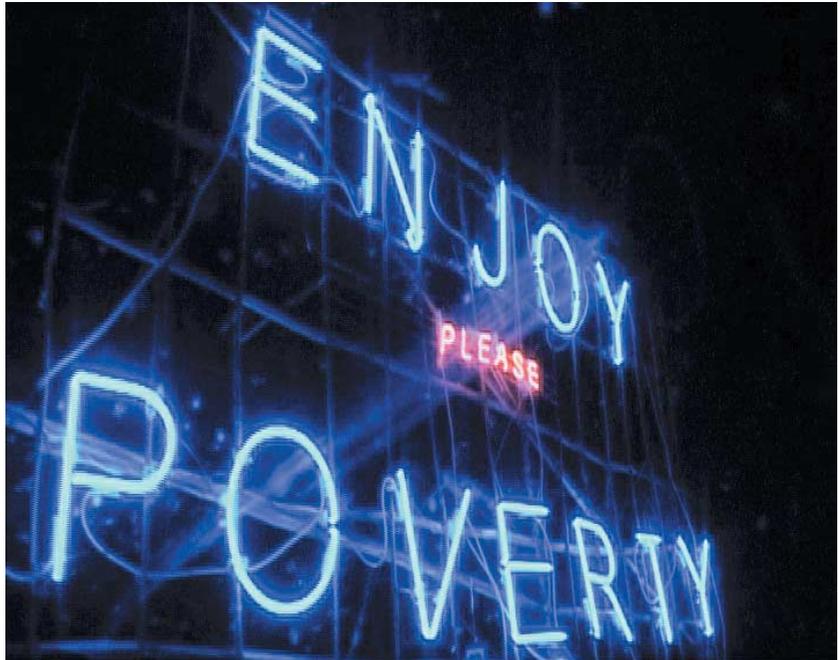
Olaf Breuning, *20 Dollar Bill*, 2007, mounted c-print on 6mm sintra, framed, 48 × 60 inches, 121.9 × 152.4 cm, courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

distinct from art that deals with objects, it is the participants themselves who constitute the basic constant factor. Despite the differences in the treatment of those involved, the vaguely defined community in the projects of ... Zmijewski [are] ultimately united by the defencelessness of the human individual at the mercy of a power structure set up to control, discipline, or destroy them.' See Nina Montmann, 'Community Service', *Frieze*, 102, October 2006, pp 37–40.

11. See Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', in *Right About Now: Art and Theory Since the 1990s*,

with its forms of answerability, would appear to be usurped here in the name of artistic authorship in a schema that sees aesthetics prevail over ethical considerations.

It would be all too easy to discount Breuning's and Kerstetter's antics in the spirit that they would appear to be intended: a slacker, mock-stupid aesthetic that thrives on nonsense and schoolboy innuendo in an attempt to draw attention to the neo-colonial figure of the disingenuous tourist-cum-quasi-ethnographer. However, the collaborative aspect of *Home*, the manner in which it co-opts communities such as the children who trawl a dump in some unnamed city in Ghana, then (literally) throws money at them, and then has them pose for a photograph (which can in turn be purchased through Metro Pictures in New York), calls for an ethics of engagement that would see a form of ethico-political praxis emerging in this work rather than a restatement of the obvious. To be patronised once by a disingenuous colonialist does not make it any less patronising second time round by an all-too-knowing artist in the name of film-making. The point being made here is that the aesthetics involved in the so-called expanded field of pseudo-ethnographic collaborative art cannot be divorced from ethics, nor can



Renzo Martens, *Episode III*, 2008, colour video, sound, duration 88 minutes. English subtitles, courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery London



Renzo Martens, *Episode III*, 2008, colour video, sound, duration 88 minutes. English subtitles, courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery London

differently, the artwork participates in the sensorium of autonomy inasmuch as it is not a work of art.' See Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy', *New Left*

and the West. On the collaborative aspect of Martens's ethnographic overview of the current state of the Congo, and putting to one side his work with the photographers he meets, the most visible form of community participation is witnessed when he pitches up with a group of locals bearing boxes and embarks upon assembling a neon sign that reads 'Enjoy Poverty'. Marten's interlocutors, whom he refers to as a 'community-based group meeting', consists of a village of impoverished Congolese who are largely delighted by this surreal sign in their midst and use it



Renzo Martens, *Episode III*, 2008, colour video, sound, duration 88 minutes. English subtitles, courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery London

Review, 14, March–April 2002, pp 133–51, p 136.

13. Miwon Kwon, 'Experience vs Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S Lee', in *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed Alex Coles, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2000, pp 74–91
14. *Ibid*, p 75
15. These are, broadly speaking the five guidelines for ethnographic study put forward by Laurel Richardson in 2000. See Laurel Richardson, 'Evaluating Ethnography', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6:2, 2000, pp 253–5.
16. For a broader discussion of the connections to be had between anthropology and art history, see Matthew Rampley, 'Anthropology at the Origins of Art History', in *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, op cit, pp 138–63.
17. For Nina Montmann it is *inter alia* the fact of remuneration that compromises Żmijewski's

as the occasion for a party. The event subsequently managed to garner the all-important attention of journalists covering the region who refer (so it seems in the film) to it online as an 'action art project' before noting that it was an 'ill-placed project' that caused considerable offence and should result in the remission of Marten's UN-accredited journalist's pass.

Although not as facile as Breuning's protagonist, there is a similar degree of disingenuity to Martens's endeavour. It is also, make no mistake, an egocentric (as noted by the artist) venture that is often confused in terms of its overall goals. However, as a comment on the apparent altruism behind the West's aid to the Congo, it is a damning indictment of neo-colonial involvement and support for an interne-cine war that has seen millions die over the control of the very resources from which the Congolese themselves do not benefit; that is, gold, oil and coltan.²⁰ Martens's ethnographically inclined film, with its walking tracking shots, monologue-to-camera and hand-held shakiness, sets out to make a point, and does so with a relative economy of means. It would be worth enquiring whether or not it showed significant respect, in the form of consent, for the persons involved and whether or not he respected the decisions of the subjects being filmed. We may also ask who actually benefits from Martens's film, a question that raises precisely the meta-critical issues that the film is attempting to explore if not exploit. Martens parades misery – severely malnourished children, for example, and harrowing footage of a recently deceased child surrounded by keening relatives – before the camera to observe how misery is daily paraded before the world's cameras and to what ends. All of which returns us to our primary question: how do we formulate an ethics of engagement in relation to

work. She argues that 'the questionability of works in which social evils are not discussed but demonstrated, using living subjects treated as objects, is further heightened when most of the participants take part only because of their own deprivation, solely for the (small) fee being offered. Their own motivations and experiences play no role whatsoever; the participants merely perform, either actively or passively, in order to give an art audience the crassest possible sense of its own moral dilemmas by means of a form of shock treatment and the breaking of taboos'. See Montmann, *op cit*, p 40.

18. David Ebony writes that 'the image recalls a casual travel snapshot of kids relishing a tourist's largesse, but on another level it refers to the paltry economic aid developed countries have offered poverty-stricken areas of Africa'. See David Ebony, 'Olaf Breuning: Metro Pictures', *Art in America*, March 2009, p 136.
19. Writing of the so-called 'expanded field of art practices', Simon Sheikh notes that the introduction of the term 'public' into this field entails 'different notions of communicative possibilities and methods for the artwork, where neither its form, context, nor spectator is fixed or stable'. For Sheikh, 'this shows how notions of audience, the dialogical, modes of address, and conception(s) of the public sphere(s) have become the important points in our orientation, and what this entails in the form of ethics and politics'. See Simon Sheikh, 'Talk Value: Cultural Industry and the Knowledge Economy', in *On Knowledge Production: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, eds Maria Hlavajora, Jill Winder and Binna Choi, BAK, Utrecht, 2008, pp 182–97, p 185.

collaborative, quasi-ethnographic artworks that tend to flout – for a variety of reasons – the very notion of ethical compliance? How do we articulate an interpretation of events from an individual's studiously portrayed and ultimately singular experience? We could equally ask whether the artist is intentionally alienating his viewer so as to make us enquire into what our relationship is to the images we see and how we tend to look at them. Provocation here begets a form of viewer antagonism that is nonetheless a form of engagement, but is that an ethics of engagement or just provocation?

PARTICIPATIVE THINKING: TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF ENGAGEMENT

In the moment of co-opting the public sphere and the subjects who inhabit it, not to mention the quasi-ethnographic co-optation of subjects worldwide, we find the imbrication of the ethical and the political within discussions of the aesthetic. This encounter between artist and co-opted public(s) can often create sites of confrontation and exploitation. It is difficult to see an eighty-two-year-old Holocaust survivor being cajoled into having his concentration number re-tattooed; or to watch children scrambling for dollars in some unnamed part of Ghana; or a group of impoverished villagers celebrating in the glow of a neon sign that inveigles them to 'enjoy poverty'. If the point is to shock the viewer out of complacency, do we merely arrive at the re-inscription of disgust and disdain associated with the original power structures that enabled these practices both to exist and to determine relations to power in the first place – and if so, what do such reactions encourage by way of a commitment to change, if that is indeed the goal of socially and politically engaged artworks? These points return us to the earlier discussion of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) and how it produced a form of defamiliarisation (*Ostranenie*) in observers that encouraged active as opposed to passive participation in spectacles. Such an idea provides a forerunner of sorts to the problematics encountered in present-day collaborative practices: do such practices result in engagement – or, to use a far from ambiguous phrase, commitment – on behalf of the viewer or further forms of dissociation and transference of responsibility? Can art, moreover, live up to such responsibilities in the first place?

Brecht's articulation of the social and political dimension to aesthetic practices has counterpoints in Walter Benjamin's writings and (perhaps less notably) the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. In both we find a concern with the social, ethical and political dimension of the aesthetic. In Bakhtin, who with few exceptions has been left surprisingly unacknowledged in contemporary theories of collaborative and participative art practices, we find a blueprint of sorts for contemporary art works that co-opt communities.²¹ In his take on the carnivalesque as an integrated form of action that usurps hierarchies, taken in conjunction with his reading of the dialogic as a series of agonistic as opposed to dialectic events, we find the pluralistic underpinnings of collaborative art practices. Moreover, in less transparent phrases such as *postupaiushchee myshlenie* ('action-performing thinking') we find the basis

20. A fuller discussion of this is needed and, for reasons of space, that will have to wait for another time; however, it is worth enquiring into the relationship between the UN peace forces, their protection of gold mines owned by AngloGold Ashanti Gold and human rights abuses; the percentage of monies donated in poverty relief aid to the Congo that ends up flowing back to the country that gave the aid in the form of 'technical assistance'; and the frankly inequitable access to means of production and dissemination available to Congolese vis-à-vis foreign vested interests in the country's natural resources. For a sobering report on that subject, I would direct readers to a Human Rights Watch report on how gold mining in the north-eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo has fuelled massive human rights atrocities. See <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2005/06/01/dr-congo-gold-fuels-massive-human-rights-atrocities> (accessed 30 April 2009).
21. This is not universally the case, however, and for a relatively extended discussion of Bakhtin in the context of the dialogic and community-based art, see Grant H Kester's *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, California University Press, California, 2004, passim.
22. Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p 61

of 'participative thinking' and the promotion of a subject who 'thinks participatively' in respect of both the ethics of artistic production (experience) and the conditions of its reception (interpretation). The significant philosophical underpinning to his philological and linguistic works – which were largely concerned with the ongoing and reciprocal contestations between speech acts – has been to develop an ethics of the act itself, our responsibility for that act, and the sense of answerability on my behalf for all acts undertaken; an ethics, in sum, of performative and collaborative practices.

To be clear: to prescribe the aesthetic to a series of ethical and political considerations is to engage it in either a form of agitprop and propaganda or forms of instrumentalist rationalism. Likewise, to prioritise the autonomy of the aesthetic is to reduce it to formal considerations and disavow its heteronomous engagement with the social. That was precisely the state of affairs that Bakhtin, at significant personal cost to himself and his career, refused to support. Rather, aesthetics, for Bakhtin, is yet another form of ethics, a point observed by Ken Hirschkop in his discussion of the author in relation to democracy:

... because aesthetics is defined as one kind of ethics [in Bakhtin's thesis] it is bound to the sphere of social relationships (and so also to 'life' in the broadest sense), but its meaning and value depend upon its difference from relationships governed by moral-practical or cognitive values.²²

There is, finally, a broader argument here in relation to an ethics of engagement, forms of artistic autonomy, social intervention, and the heteronomy involved in social praxis. And the stakes, I would argue, could not be higher. In a milieu where the political arena seems increasingly compromised, it would appear that aesthetics (specifically the inter-disciplinary aspect of contemporary art practices) is being ever more called upon to provide insight into both politics and ethics but without becoming reducible to such terms. It is with these points in mind that we need a more sophisticated theory for addressing precisely the relationship between the aesthetics and the ethico-political dimension of works that appear increasingly to rely upon a more-often-than-not vaguely defined field of social engagement that is in turn underwritten by a series of performative spectacles and pseudo-ethnographic encounters. We need, in sum, a theory of collaboration and participation that employs an ethics of engagement, not as an afterthought or means by which to deconstruct such practices, but as a way of re-inscribing the aesthetic as a form of sociopolitical praxis.