

“All Art is Dedicated to Joy”

By Angelle Siyang Le



Faile and Bast, *Live, Nasty, 1-ON-1*, 2010

At the end of 2011, the image of Carsten Höller's Giant Psycho Tank (1999) was all over the news, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and a number of other social networks, due to the artist's recent exhibition, *Experience*, at the New Museum in New York. The work was an image of a man floating on the surface of a constructed pool inside the gallery space. The Huffington Post described the Giant Psycho Tank as 'a sensory deprivation pool of heavily salinated, skin temperature water', in which a psychological sensation, a so-called 'out-of-body experience', was given to those who had floated weightlessly in this massive tank. This image was certainly a recall of Höller's *Mirrored Carousel* – the carousel-like swinging machine; as well as *Untitled (Slide)* – a two-storey high slide, most famously installed in the Turbine Hall of London's Tate Modern.

The collective comment of such works is – interactive and fun. The collaborating artists, Faile and Bast, re-



Faile and Bast, *Waiting for You*, 2010

programmed retro arcade machines into installation art by modifying games into interactive vignettes. The audience is given a hands-on, tactile opportunity with the graphical games of the different machines, while simultaneously obtaining a visual experience. The audience's comprehension of this contemporary work could be enhanced through such participation and the experience therefore deepened the understanding of this particular form of contemporary art – what is being called an interactive installation.

What is contemporary art? This question has been asked over and over again, yet the answer is really not as complicated as 'what is love?' However, there is no fixed definition. In the early 19th century, when Vincent van Gogh decided to paint a pair of peasant shoes, he had elevated art from a traditional level to an era of modern art through personalization. Meanwhile, those pioneers brought art from the bourgeois to the



Vincent van Gogh, *A Pair of Shoes*, 1885

working class. After a number of influential movements and revolutions, those who were fairly active during the period of modern art once again challenged the definition of art. Marcel Duchamp shifted away from his cubist paintings and created one of the very first ready-made artworks – *Fountain* (1917), a repurposed male urinal. These objects, which were once upon a time considered ‘junk’ became the works of art inside gallery exhibitions. The boundary was broken through; contemporary art was then truly coined when the classification of art was broadened from art for art’s sake to anything and everything.

An art professional would sound rather unprofessional if he or she asked a question as general as ‘what is art’, simply because the determinations of art depend on various matters – eras, movements and all the ‘-isms’. Therefore, in this article I will be investigating the current status and evolution of contemporary art from

institutional exhibitions and interventions to artistic demonstrations in public spaces. At the same time, the usage of interactive art and the importance of public participation will be examined in terms of how they contribute to the further understanding of contemporary art by the general public. The focus will be to explore how today’s art intends to bring contemporary practices towards a wider scope, in order to comment on why the larger sector of society, the general public, is the most crucial audience when it comes to the communication of contemporary art.

Contemporary art today can no longer be classified by its mediums, due to the rapid transformations in societies, the developments in technologies, and even the rising number of global protests and riots, all of which feed into what contemporary art is and what contemporary art will gradually evolve into. One thing we will all need to bear in mind when simply looking



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917)

at, if not appreciating, contemporary art is to approach the subject with an open mind – the mind to adapt and accept the fact that ‘we’ are the driving force behind such forms and mediums.

Firstly, ‘we’ are the subjects of contemporary art. Secondly, the ‘happenings’ are the source of contemporary art. Finally, the approach to a subject or subjects sourcing from various inspirations comprises the outcome which, at times, we call the artwork.

Art must be understood through a contemporary context. The evolution of contemporary art has slowly developed beyond the institutional knowledge of a two or three-dimensional outcome. Art in today’s society is not only a reflection of the reality, but it has become an instigate part of our reality. Art is therefore to be understood by a wider scope – the public. Though the public is already participating in various concepts of art through different forms, consciously or unconsciously it leads the mediums of art. The interaction between art and its audience is no more restricted to the confines of an exhibition space. Instead, it is expanding towards a more experiential and performative manner.

In other words, the interaction of art and public participation has become the priority when it comes to the communication between art and its surroundings. The social function of art nowadays is rapidly shifting from the luxury property of the 1% to the societal uprising of the 99%. It has become a different tool in comparison to its previous institutional usages. It is now an ‘actable’ operational model of a communication interface. It is no coincidence that many practitioners of postdramatic theatre started out in the visual arts.

The operational model carries its information, whether as a commodity or a social function, depending on the interactive network which has created it (Fig.1). The model can be operated through the basic relationship, where information is transported only from the transmitter (artwork) to the receiver (audience). Alternatively, another more interactive relationship can occur both ways – between the transmitter (interactive artwork) and the receiver (audience). Such an interactive network meanwhile acts as an instigator of social change within a wider ‘social environment,’ instead of the ‘art environment’. A structural model of Art’s Social Environment would not be dissimilar from that of other Social Environments. The differences between the Art Environment and other Social Environments could be said to be in the operational models and objectives that the artist adopts, rather than in a variation in social parameters’. As communication becomes the key to today’s art, the target audience of a contemporary artist should be the 100%! The 1% consists of the wealthiest sector of the society that monitors the major percentage of a state’s wealth. The 99% signifies the rest of the population. The actual term ‘99%’ has appeared frequently since the early 2000s. Professor Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University in the United States claimed that such a ‘1%’ of American citizens obtained too much spending power, which increased the rapid growth of inequality, both nationally and globally. In Stiglitz’s article *Of the 1%, by the 1%*, for the 1%, he criticised the ‘marginal-productivity theory’ seeing it as a false strategy by the government that led to today’s economical vicious circle. During the vast development of recent decades, technology and globalism, as well as multiple social changes, the economies remain unbalanced and produce insufficient

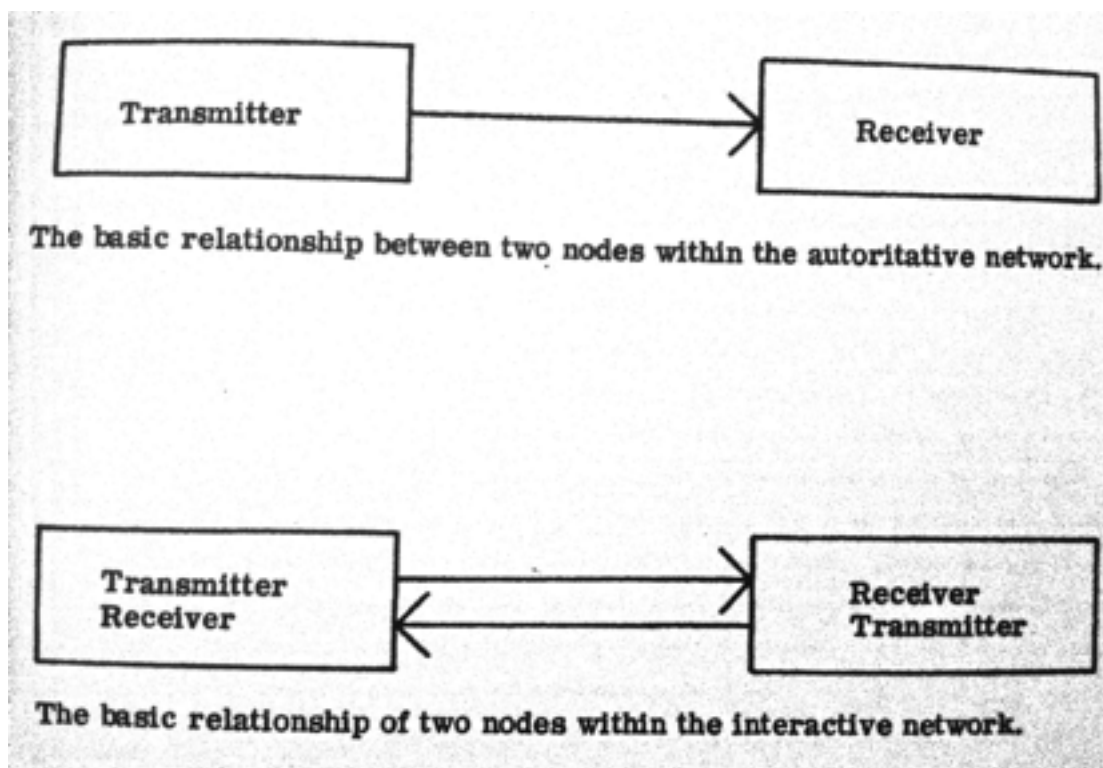
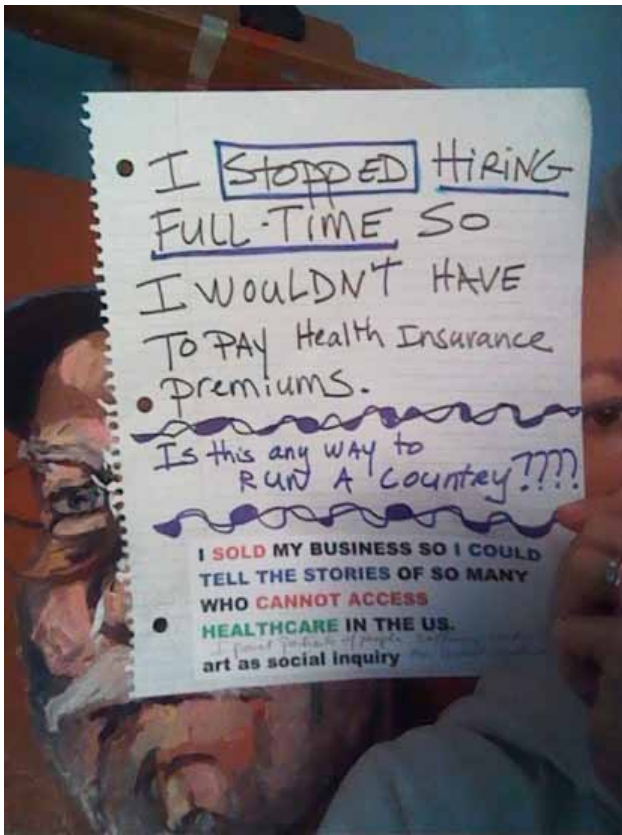


Diagram of 'The Operation of a Socially-Oriented Stance by the Artist'

common goods. The rich have become richer and the poor have become poorer, which has triggered conflicts between the 1% and the 99%. 'We are the 99%' first appeared on the social network Tumblr, and shows numerous photographs of an image of a person holding a piece of paper that explains the story of being the 99% and ends with the phrase 'We are the 99%,' which soon became a political slogan. The purpose of such virtual and non-violent insurrection was to raise attention internationally in order to prevent the world from worsening its political, social and economic cycles. As today's art environment is integrated into the social environment, artists are no longer the initial instigators of social behaviour. However, such social artifacts, created by non-art professionals, motivated and united artists to encourage instigation in social and behavioural change. As beautiful as classical art could be, contemporary practices are far beyond its visual definition. If traditional art equates to 'passions', modern art equates to 'revolutions'; thus contemporary art should be known as 'actions'.

Museums, galleries and art institutions have been trying to educate the general public for decades in terms of the understanding of contemporary art. The attempt to promote contemporary artworks to those who do not necessarily recognise such a sense of ideology has always been difficult. The barriers between the public and the works have built up due to the power of traditional and institutional knowledge, despite revolutionists sacrificing their lives to break through the class-boundary of art. Has art truly reached the general public from such 'well-curated' exhibitions? Has the message and influence of art really spread out in its widest scope through this approach?

Contemporary art can be anything and everything. It can be fun and it should be more steered towards the general public – the majority of society, rather than aiming at commercial galleries and auction houses. The 99%'s attention is essential to art; we do not wish the current vicious circle of the economy to appear in art, as the acknowledgement of the art market only occupies about 1% of the total contemporary art sphere.



Tumblr image, 'We are the 99%'

Fortunately, before we even realised it, contemporary art was already working in parallel with the public. Rami Farook and James Clar, a curator and an artist, have collectively created a series of one-night-only events, The Satellite Broadcast Series, which features a site-specific installation or a performance in each episode. This totally non-profit event takes place in their studio 'Satellite' located in the Al Serkal gallery district in Dubai. The audience's participation is the objective of the event. They are required to overcome the institutional knowledge of art by witnessing a variety of ambiguous forms of art and through various interactions. Previously, the audience has been invited to play chess on a scaled model reproduction of the Tahrir Square chessboard executed by the artist UBIK in the first episode, in which both the government and the uprising public were represented by each side of the chessboard. This was followed by the artist Akshay's mechanical ridden camel of Cameltopia in the second

episode, which provided the experience of art making through Middle Eastern influences. There was also, the American artist, James Clar's Turbulence of a flying light bulb, which represented the chaotic condition of one's psychological mind and a state's developing socio-political situation. The curation of the events aims to encourage the public adoption of the developing art scene. Simultaneously, the creators challenge the local art community to break through institutional boundaries. The 'new' forms of art can still take place within an institutional space. However, the significance requires continuous progresses.

Support by the public is paramount to the success of such projects, but guidance by the art professionals must be clear. The artist initiates the operational model and the curator contributes to creating the network by combining all selective operational models. Eventually, the objective is to successfully create effective communication within such a network.

'In operating with an audience that is external to the Art Environment, the artist is going to be competing for attention with well-established drives that are central to the audience's day-to-day survival and to its longer-term drives such as attaining social stability, etc'.

The public can either lack the understanding of contemporary art, or unwittingly appear bias. Therefore, effective communication is required to firstly evoke attention and attraction through channels of 'joy' and curiosity, which are essential for interaction and to encourage participation.

kaBOOM! was an exhibition at the Detroit Museum of New Art in March 2002, in which audiences were invited not only to visit the artworks but also to destroy them. 'The museum is a place where art takes shape, gains meaning and where, at last, it comes to its end. kaBOOM!' . Despite the meaning, an 'ever-present moment' was being embraced and enlarged; a manifesto was raised through this 'breaking' action. The public involvement in this institutional space created social awareness due to the 'abnormal' educational approach. In addition, the relationship between life and art was merged into reality in that everything will one day meet its end. This particular style of presentation is known as 'art intervention,' meaning that an interaction is involved with a previously existing artwork, audience or venue/



Satellite Broadcast Series: Akshay

space . It can also be considered as a form of conceptual art, as well as performance art. Art intervention specifically challenges the traditional understanding of art, which shows an attempt to revolutionise the existing institutional statement. kaBOOM! is an artistic example of public engagement in contemporary art. However, it occurred under a certain authorisation in order to distinguish it from vandalism.

Art interventions began in the early twentieth-century. Recent interventions include the exhibition *Flip*, curated by Andrew Lamprecht, as well as Eleonora Aguiar's duck-taped statue of Lord Napier of Magdala. Illicitly, Yuan Chai and Jian Junxi jumped on Tracy Emin's *My Bed* (1998) during London Tate Britain's Turner Prize in 1999, while carrying out an anti-performance art.

In the recent global uproar, contemporary art has also been used as a tool to directly encourage the general public. Utilising forms such as public announcements, artists have promoted non-violent social and political instigations through the communication of interactive

art. The 99% needs motivation and direction while participating in social activities.

The artist Zefrey Throwell's *Ocularpation: Wall Street* has taken interactive art to a wider public level – a performance interacting with daily life on New York's Wall Street. Throwell gathered artists to perform daily activities, while being naked, on Wall Street. The group of artists, led by Throwell, executed what they called the 'Freudian nightmare' in order to raise the attention of the government. The 1%, and the rest of the public that changes, are required to alter the government's immoral policies. The term *ocularpation*, contracted from 'ocular', visually resonates the word 'occupation', reminding us of another socio-political protest, *Occupying Wall Street* . This interactive performance shows that contemporary art and current world events can take place in parallel to each other. Contemporary art and contemporary life reflect each other. At the same time, artists are part of the public and hence the understanding between artist and public becomes more significant. Such performative



Satellite Broadcast Series: James Clar

and interactive structures in social art appear more and more often in today's contemporary practices because of the effective voice that it evokes and the simplicity of its connection with the audience. Experimental approaches may receive a greater educational response than many institutions have been, and are still, aiming for. This approach popularised the conceptual and abstract representations that the 'static' works of art achieve. Understanding can therefore be exchanged both ways, between the 'work' and the 'audience.' Thus the audience is no longer only a 'viewer,' but also a 'participant'. 'Experimental art performances use visual, embodied, collective, durational, and spatial systems, but the critical sense of their innovation will differ depending on what medium they understand themselves to be disrupting', says Shannon Jackson, the director of the Arts Research Centre at the University of California in the United States. The aesthetics of contemporary art therefore include what Jackson called

'a degree of cross-disciplinarity' that combines multiple media and multiple spaces. At the same time, if art practice functions as social practice, it will serve more closely not only the 1%, but also the 99%. Through such a condition, various communities could then appreciate the sense of aesthetics due to such social engagements. Public Movement is a performative research body providing aesthetic performances in public spaces across the world, according to specific social and political issues. Through the different forms of performative action – manifestations of presence, fictional acts of hatred, new folk dances, synchronized procedures of movement, and more – its voice can reach as many individuals and communities as possible, which also includes the state. Omer Krieger and Dana Yahalomi founded Public Movement in late 2006 and it is currently run by Yahalomi. By combining political investigations and aesthetics choreographies, the group of performers interacts with public spaces



Public Movement, 'Wiosna W Warszawie' (Spring in Warsaw)

in order to raise social awareness. In April 2009, for example, the group of artists organised a public march called 'Wiosna W Warszawie' (Spring in Warsaw) in Tel Aviv, which encouraged the public to walk with them along the memorial path while small ceremonies and artistic actions created by the artists were also taking place during the walk. The march was not to criticise the past, but to motivate 'love and high hopes', create social harmonies and peace, in order to commemorate those in the past who fought for human dignity and survival. 'Performing Politics for Germany' was also one of the practices by Public Movement. The artists believe 'the purest arena of politics is the street' and hence the majority of demonstrations/performances interact with the public on the streets. Public Movement constructs non-violent protests by introducing the ideology of contemporary aestheticism. The nature of such performative movements is to encourage social interactions and public participations through different

aesthetic forms and a variety of contemporary practices. This is under the umbrella of contemporary art and the umbrella is immense.

Contemporary art evolved from modern art, the era of art that transitioned through the boundary of bourgeois. Yet, contemporary art is way beyond the ideologies of all previous eras. It is now breaking through the institutional boundaries. Thus, the art of today is even freer from restrictions – it is to be participated in and to be shared shamelessly by everyone and with everyone, for good or for bad reasons, by phone-recorder documentations, YouTube video sharing and the 'Big-Brother' effect.

In a contemporary context, the 'art-world' should not be a 'sub-world' of the 'real-world'. Art is not only the religious sculptures and royal paintings; it is not only a format of either landscape or portrait. Contemporary art is reality that serves as a communication tool, which connects everyone's life to a metaphor and in which

we finds resonance and can seek a collective response. Scholars ask whether sociality is the 'new substrate' of contemporary art. I cannot define such an academic study in one article; however, it is a straightforward fact that contemporary art commonly sources from social needs. Social participation increases the level of 'fun' and 'joy' for the public; additionally it functions to reach out to those who are less likely to read the 'static' meaning of art. As Clement Greenberg, one of the most well-known Modernism critics once said, it is a shift away from the 'ineluctable flatness of the support that remained most fundamental in the process by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism'. The beauty of 'static' works is for the last era; today it is the theatricality of staged interactive art that encourages the aesthetic social exchanges in this mass-consuming world.

Beyond its architectural determinations, the scenic space of art soon absorbed a wide set of economic and political implications that artists set about deploying in a veritable dramaturgy of unveiling. Institutional critique or "contextual" art derived from this virtually unlimited expansion. But for many years, some Puritan superego forbade us from recognizing its original theatricality.

Interactive art may not be the only form of art that enhances social participation. However, its manner is certainly a pioneering example. By constructing a 'situation' that dramatizes the actual circumstance, the work can become profound and illicit human emotion and reaction. Many artists and critics see interactive and performative practice as the most effective 'post-studio' and 'post-optical' art making. Such forms of art conduct vibrant communication between the work of art itself and the participator. Shannon Jackson believes that this 'situationism' characterises the 'performative turn', which is fundamental for attracting interest in the nature of sociality.

It is my hope that contemporary art can be served as a more innovative form of public announcement, which will outdo aesthetic social work. Contemporary art itself is a critic of today's mass media, societal politics and aims to put pressure on governments. Its power is unlimited, however it requires positive direction. Additionally, it needs to be carefully harnessed. In spite of the complexity of contemporary aestheticism it opens the

door to everything and anything. Critical organisations can always serve as the driving force. Though, if standard becomes too easy to start an art project, this ambiguous system will lose its charm. Artists and curators should not be able to 'entitle' for themselves. Public acceptance is the foundation of such a movement even if it is not professionally approved. Art starts from the existence of human passion, it functions in many forms of expression, and the understanding process of its visual and experimental dignity can be both engaging and fun to learn about. The ever-lasting excitement of art is to create alongside our changing lives. Therefore, this 'contextual' art is now convincing us of a new era of contemporary art, which explains the apropos context according to the 'happenings' of our generation. As an individual amongst the general public, I will be more likely to appreciate work which serves the community with an aesthetic point of view. As someone who works with art, I would like the community to appreciate the aesthetic creations that contemporary art professionals present. What connects the two worlds, however, is the key. As the philosopher Friedrich Schiller once said, 'all art is dedicated to joy'. Certainly, as I see it, fun is a vital need.

Bibliography

- i. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/barbara-becker/carsten-holler-new-museum_b_1099588.html
- ii. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 247.
- iii. Stephen Willats, *The Artist As An Instigator Of Changes In Social Cognition And Behaviour*, Occasional Papers.
- iv. The theory that was introduced since the mid-19th century in order to tackle inequalities, which support the higher incomers with higher productivity and hence greater contribution to the rest of the society.
- v. Wikipedia, 'We are the 99%'. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_are_the_99%25.
- vi. '2011.09.19 Broadcast 001 by UBIK – Tahrir Square': is an interactive installation comprised of a grid of chess boards that spans nearly half the area of Satellite. The installation aims to act as a scale model reproduction of the Tahrir Square. One side of the installation is comprised of the Officials [King, Queen, Rook, Bishop, Knight] representing the Mubarak posse. The other side of the installation represents the uprising [pawns]. The installation is played out during Satellite Broadcast. One person controls the moves of the 'Officials' and Ten people control the moves of the 'Rioters'.
- vii. '2011.10.24 Broadcast 002 by Akshay – For Broadcast 002': he creates a fully immersive experience that features an interactive, robotic camel, camel treats, and all things camel within Satellite. A wry commentary on the region's relationship with the camel.
- viii. 2011.11.13 Broadcast 003: James – A minimal installation using a single lightbulb that that's pushed, pulled, and swings in a chaotic, random pattern': The lightbulb moves around the warehouse space, making areas light while making others dark, building up momentum, flaring up, settling down, and building up again; a meditation on life in constant transition and a world at flux.
- ix. Stephen Willats, *The Artist As An Instigator Of Changes In Social Cognition And Behaviour*, Occasional Papers.
- x. Detroit Museum of New Art, 'KaBoom', http://www.detroitmona.com/Jef_Bourgeau/kaboom.htm.
- xi. Wikipedia, 'Art Intervention', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_intervention.
- xii. The Occupy movement is an international protest movement which is primarily directed against economic and social inequality. The first Occupy protest to receive wide coverage was Occupy Wall Street in New York City, which began on September 17, 2011. Wikipedia, 'Occupy Movement', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_movement
- xii. Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: performing art, supporting publics* (Routledge: USA & Canada)