

“Secrets are Lies” and “All That Happens Will be Known” are slogans in Dave Eggers’ *The Circle*, a Google meets Facebook novel that deals with the manufacturing of ‘social needs’. To me the saga reads like a cheap update of Orwell’s 1984. It’s a one-dimensional artefact that nonetheless manages to spark controversies, for instance in Germany, where the citizenry easily gets carried away by such a dark vision of the happy yet tamed people, steered by large corporations that claim not to do evil. Much like in the film *Minority Report*, the world is centred around event prevention and self improvement.

In a technological society like ours art that questions and disrupts is no longer welcome. Radical art with consequences is being aborted and is no longer given the possibility to manifest itself. What remains is entertainment, a spectacle that can be consumed and appreciated. Punk can be as pedagogical as New Age, as long as it is confined within the boundaries of the industrial entertainment complex.

Such questions are important issues in a field like ‘public art’. What is critical work that does not merely improve already destroyed public environments? What has happened to the field of public art after new media? What happens to a field like this in times of austerity when, for instance in the Netherlands, an established institution like SKOR gets closed over night? Over the past few years I have been discussing these issues with Cecilia Guida who came to work at our Institute of Network Cultures in 2010 as part of her PhD research. In the meanwhile she finished her PhD in Milan, started teaching in L’Aquila and Florence and got a job as director of the education office and curator of the programme of [UNIDEE - University of Ideas](#) at the Michelangelo Pistoletto Foundation, also called [Cittadellarte](#) in Biella (80km north-west of Milan). Recently Cecilia Guida finished the Italian translation of Claire Bishop’s magnum opus on participatory art, *Artificial Hells* (Verso Books, 2012), a hell of a job, now out as [Inferni artificiali](#). After having discussed all these matters, we decided to have an email exchange in which Cecilia Guida talks about her work and explains her role inside the Pistoletto Foundation.

Geert Lovink: How do you look at art projects in the public space? From what I understand of your position there is some sort of “third space” for the true contemporary artwork, in between the obscurity of the private and the obscenity of the (mediated) public space. There is a truth to art in the public space, a subversive core, that is either there, or not there, one that cannot possibly be captured by the current social media tools such as smart phones,

a non-residual autonomous energy that cannot possibly be captured – but is still out there. We recognize it in particular works that, regardless of their obscurity, fit so easily into art history. Can you help us to distinguish between pseudo-events and the real artworks in public space?

Cecilia Guida: In “Brazil”, the famous 1985 film by Terry Gilliam, the organization and total control over individuals confuses instead of clarifies. In the array of situations everything becomes unreachable, despite the fact that the desire to understand is growing. Logics clashes with the illogical and the inexplicable is experienced through the perception of the body in transformation. Well known is the ulcer of one of the two presidents, an ulcer that gets cured by removing the callous and necrotic tissue and disinfecting it. We can see this as a symbol of the relationship between art and life. I don’t think that in our technological society critical and avant-garde art is considered and supported less than in the past, as I don’t believe that art heals society. I would rather see art as a virus. Similar to viruses, art can penetrate into the cells and replicate itself, transcribing its genes into the language of the host cell. Art carries out an analysis (to gain a better awareness), subverting the status quo within the stereotypes of language, codes and habits of a community. If an artist experiments in the public space – as indeed in private or institutional spaces – with a creative use of technological devices, meanings and cultural objects available to society, in order to open an alternative and innovative perspective on reality, this could be enough for his research to be recognized as being of artistic value and not as a spectacular event...

In my book *Spatial Practices, Public and Political Function of Art in the Network Society* (available only in Italian) from 2012, I discuss the claim of a different way of living in space according to an on or off line mode – which I prefer, even if I very much like your dichotomy, in regards to the relationship between the obscurity of the private space and the obscenity of a mediated public one. Moving beyond the rhetoric of the contact (physical vs. virtual), new technologies have “spatialized” human presence in a world in which it occupies and owns every habitative system: one’s presence is what matters, it is indifferent where, what differs is how. Having been a pioneer in the ’90s, you well know that the new media have contributed to the formation of collaborative networks producing micro-narrations, which juxtapose themselves and give life to more and more complex plots. The narrativity of the images corresponds with a deployment of the tangles of stories that coincide with individual subjects, who are in turn the activators

of stories that develop into the “expanded” time and reproduce themselves in situated relationship, which in turn produce other situations in the “expanded” space. Being-in-connection is therefore a performative status with real effects, ranging from the sharing of knowledge to the fulfilling of wishes and needs of a community. According to this perspective, authorial poetics becomes secondary (“What does it matter who speaks?” Foucault said in 1969) to the augmented abilities of such new subjectivities and to the narrations allowed by a connected and habitable space.

GL: In *Spatial Practices* you’ve contrasted urban space with the Net. When we started the Digital City project in Amsterdam in 1994, the city and the electronic networks were not a contradiction. As an assemblage of the technical and the social, the mediated public place stood in a rich and long tradition in which we operated, from subversive book printing till the publicly-owned cable television channels (which would soon after be privatized). These days such an explicit relationship seems to be pushed into the background. Today’s “smart city” is not a public infrastructure but a “partnership” driven by large companies, aimed at monetizing citizen data. For them the city is rather a sphere inhabited by autonomous agents who seem unaware of the invisible technologies that surround them. How can art intervene in such a situation?

CG: The contrast between the physical space and the Net is determined by reasons of a practical (the book form sets limits) and didactic (the division in chapters works better with students, the book’s main audience) rather than conceptual order. What I tried to do is uncover a network of historical and theoretical connections between the two. The best formalization for my research would probably have been a big map... With respect to the meaning of “smart city” today, the role of the artists working in public space is to (re)direct the attention towards the ongoing transformations in contemporary cities – more and more technological and planetary on one side, powerful financial hubs on the other – in specific areas, at a local level, involving the reference community directly, and facing the impact such top-down decisional processes have on its daily life. In these cases the artists enter into a dialogue with the people and start long-term projects with them, which create new network-like forms of social organization, of shared urban politics and of sustainable economical systems, with the intent of opposing the institutional political authorities animated by economical logic.

Look at “Row Houses” by Rick Lowe where a team of residents of the

neighbourhood of Third Ward, Houston, Texas, try to fight commercial development in order to save houses to convert into cultural civic structures. Milan's "Isola Art Center", led by the artist Bert Theis, for the past ten years has been persistently opposing the gentrification (in view of the 2015 Expo) of the historical neighbourhood inhabited by Isola's artisans, through the occupation of disused spaces, debates with politicians, public actions, exhibitions and conventions in order to put pressure on the decision makers and to request the involvement of the citizens (and of their daily needs and wishes) in the re-planning of the city.

GL: Let's talk about Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells*. In the summer of 2014 you finished the Italian translation (lucassossella editore, 2014). A hell of a job. This monumental study can be read as a history of participatory art, even though the writer doesn't want to make such a claim, which is understandable because of its sheer size. Nonetheless, the choices of countries, artists and decades, is an interesting one, from the Soviet-Union and France in the 1920s up to the UK in the 60s, happenings in Czechoslovakia and the networked "Former West" event in recent years.

CG: Bishop presents a long counter-history of participatory art - which (unexpectedly) had its origins in the theatre and performance (and not in the painting and ready-made, as in the "official history" narrated in *Art from 1900* by Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh and Yves-Alain Bois, 2004) and doesn't come only from a European matrix -, where the relationship between art and socio-political events are linked to three precise key moments (1917, May '68 and 1989). The author, refusing the common generalizations on the theme, wants both to satisfy the need - expressed in the book almost like an urgency - to analyse the participation and the spectatorship in their complexity, and to assume the ethical commitment to examine the artistic projects in relation to the different contexts in which they are realized. As a consequence, the choice to dedicate chapters to Argentina, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and former Russia aims at showing the different (sometimes contradictory) meanings and uses of the concept of participation, besides filling some important historical gaps.

GL: You say counter-history... Can you explain to us the official history then? Isn't that precisely the confusing part of the story? Was Christoph Schlingensiefel an underground artist? He may have been controversial.. but marginal? Hardly. The same can be said of Jonas Staal and Jeanne van Heeswijk, here in the Netherlands. They are political and outspoken, yes.

But hardly subcultural. Not to mention Joep van Lieshout. They all operate according to the books, well within the boundaries of the existing art institutions. This could be said of most of Bishop's artists.

CG: I agree with you up to a point. It is true that the artists you mention are known for their projects with communities, some of them have received important recognitions with exhibitions in influential museums and biennales around the world, but before Bishop's extensive and in-depth research there was no historical, critical and theoretical overview of participatory art, characterised by the involvement of ordinary people as medium and artistic material of the work. It is, as such, a counter-history... Bishop tells an innovative history of art spanning from the first decade of the last century to today, in which participatory art is not a mere trend but the pivotal element. I partially agree with you (I also expected to find less known or equally important names, e.g. Michelangelo Pistoletto) that Bishop indeed resorts to the "usual" well know examples (Jeremy Deller, Tania Bruguera, Dora Garcia, Thomas Hirschhorn etc, besides the one you mention), but she does that - as she claims - firstly because she knows their projects, having been herself involved in them, and then - and it is the stronger motivation - because she presents them from a different point of view (sometimes "subordinate" to their research as a whole) finally integrating them within the official History.

GL: It's such a boring topic, and I almost do not dare to raise it, but of course internet and new media are completely absent in *Artificial Hells*. This is not because Claire Bishop is too old for computers. It is taboo in the visual arts world to cross the line, and Bishop is keenly aware of the sanctions if you do so. Isn't it weird so see how such conventional boundaries are maintained? Would it endanger her career and social standing? We all understand that "new media art" is dead by now. That's not the issue. On our side we're the first to admit this and we don't need to discuss it again. But doesn't that come with an obligation towards the Bishops of this world to finally wake up?

CG: In this book the transformations of art and the concept of participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century caused by the Net are indeed missing. Bishop places the media space of the digital languages in an "elsewhere" (and it is therefore a topic she is not interested in) and sees the medium as mere technique and not a technology. In the McLuhanist sense (*Understanding Media*, 1964) I was referring above to an inhabitable space and a communicative

environment. I think that in this case the point is irrespective of the death of new media art, and it stands for the “difficulty” in understanding and interpreting the role of the artist as an activator of forms of aesthetic participation and communicative processes in the Net, because the latter, taking to the extreme the category of the artist and of work of art (with dematerialized and universally accessible interventions), really determines a “deviation” (according to the most traditional and critical interpretations that’s what they are in the true sense of the word...) in respect to the model, and they are lacking immediate classifications.

GL: Bishop doesn’t have to start from scratch. In my view it is intellectual laziness, driven by institutional fear to be left out. There is a rich collection of critique of Henry Jenkins’ notion of “participatory culture” which this American new media academic defines as “fandom”. The notion that our smart phones are participatory in nature (if we remain silent and only click) is to be lost on Bishop. The art world has yet to study bots and algorithmic culture. Participation in today’s digital network culture is the default. It is not a voluntary act but a built-in feature in which the willing online subject smoothly interacts with the software. How do you see participation these days? Is there a genuine form that we should thrive for? Is it still a value that you are fighting for?

CG: Today the term participation is widely used, or rather abused, I’d say. Everything is, requires, implies participation... so much so that we talk about a so called “rhetoric of participation”. I think we need to consider the meaning, the existence and the opportunity of participation each time, in relation to the subjects involved (artist, curator, public), to the context of reference and to the medium used, because there are different types and levels of participation: e.g. from taking part in something or taking something from it to expressing an opinion, to carrying out an action, to performing a public function. There’s no such thing as implicitly good participatory work (in that case it would be – or respond to – a format), but rather the choice to activate a participatory project (on the part of the artist), to participate (on the part of the audience) and of how to do it imply an “awareness” of one’s condition as a singularity, an active subject, a citizen, and a reflection on the sense and the objectives of the process you want to start. I also believe that participation must be more precisely intended as an act of individual “responsibility” towards the specific community it is expressed in, in particular today, when politics and public institutions are going through a deep economical and identity crisis, which



causes them to resort more and more often to participatory strategies (of inclusion and social involvement) also according to a Net model. That's why I prefer to use the word responsibility - in the sense of "ability to respond" to something - instead of participation.

GL: Please take us on a tour through the Cittadellarte-Pistoletto Foundation in North Italy where you work. What are you doing there? Do you see this place as a laboratory for public art?

CG: Cittadellarte was founded in Biella (West of Milano) in 1998 in a former wool mill as "the city for art", i.e. the concrete realization of the "Manifesto Progetto Arte" from 1994, in which Michelangelo Pistoletto spoke of art as of an "instrument of social utility" and proposed a new role for the artist: to put art in relationship with all sectors of society, from education to politics to economy to spirituality to fashion to nourishment. It is a big laboratory which carries out field research, starts projects in collaboration with specific communities and develops processes of urban transformation at a local level (in Piedmont and in Italy) and at an international level (from Columbia to Japan). Cittadellarte is both a "living" work of public art in itself and a place where to learn Pistoletto's poetic and artistic ethos, in order to subsequently experiment with it in one's own frame of reference.

My long-standing collaboration with Cittadellarte started in 2009 on the occasion of my UNIDEE residency, during this period I started a collaborative project on memory, the relationship and the gift, which I closed last year with the publication of the book "Archive of Forgotten Ideas". Two years ago Paolo Naldini and Juan Sandoval, Cittadellarte's managing director and head of the Art Office respectively, asked me to curate the exhibition-research ARTInRETI, a mapping of Piedmontese organizations operating in the social sphere with similar artistic methodologies and with the emancipation of the citizens as their objective. This initiative has been very successful, turning from an exhibition project into a real network active on the territory with self-educational meetings, public debates and "political" projects; at the moment we are for example working with a jurist at the reform of the 2% law, an outdated law (from the Fascist period, from 1939 to be precise...) that keeps regulating the nature and the form of public art funding in Italy.

For the past six months I have been directing and curating the new programme of the Education Office, which we are transforming from a programme of artists' residencies into an educational programme of week

long seminars open to students, artists, curators, art practitioners (and in general to anyone interested in Cittadellarte's topics and projects) in collaboration with European and international Universities and Fine Arts Academies (like the University of Turin, la Escuela de Bellas Artes of Medellin, the Sorbonne University of Paris, the Polytechnic of Milan).

GL: Can you introduce us to some of the strategic debates inside Cittadellarte? What's at stake?

CG: Cittadellarte is at the moment reflecting on educational pedagogies and methodologies. The objective is to start an innovative educational programme extending from nursery to university, accompanying the individual from the first steps of learning to academic development. We are discussing together with Cittadellarte's representatives the start of an interdisciplinary project able to combine theoretical and projectual research placing art (as language, experimentation, vision, practice, methodology) at the centre. It is an ambitious initiative Cittadellarte has decided to work on in the next years, investing its energies, projects and overall resources in it. This is a decision taken against the growing crisis of the public educational system (where fewer spaces and resources are destined to an artistic education) and its transformation into a commercial enterprise looking for profits and strong results. Aware of the fundamental role of education in the growth and affirmation process of the responsible individual both in the present and future society, Cittadellarte has decided to take care of it using the languages, the instruments and the opportunities offered by art. For the time being we are working at a triennial programme which will include courses, seminars, laboratories, residences, events and a final publication presenting the work carried out over the three years with an analysis of concepts, practices and theories on the topics of art and education. The project is met with a lot of enthusiasm, but there is still a lot of work to do...

GL: Can you give us some examples? Does education mean finding out more about art history, or rather contemporary issues? I can see that there are more and more gaps being created in what we could call the 'general art education' which includes historical avant-gardes, conceptual art and everything that came after that. Is your work mainly policy-focussed or rather hands-on for ordinary citizens and young people?

CG: I mean education not so much in regards to the contents - certainly linked to the themes of contemporaneity and dealt with from a genealogical perspective - but rather to the present debate on a renewal of the



educational system (Noam Chomsky, Rosi Braidotti, Yves Michaud, Bruno Latour and Alberto Abruzzese, to mention a few, have recently written about the shortcomings of today's universities, reflecting on new ways to access knowledge). To clarify: literally speaking, "education" means "make come out" (*ex-ducere*) – although the meaning of "lead" (*ducere*) commonly prevails –, inherent in the root of the concept is therefore the prominence of the process through which someone is encouraged to free himself of mental models and established habits, and to express himself autonomously, rather than forming or forging him. This is what interests me of education. Freedom is also the fundamental condition of art: what the artist does is he frees human action from the idea that it can be aimed at a predetermined objective (presenting it as an example of success or of failure). In this sense, the liberation of the behaviour from pre-established schemes and aims makes art a precious educational device, an instrument of experimentation and of opening to possibilities.

Since the very beginning, Cittadellarte has been meant as an "interdisciplinary educational laboratory" (Andy Warhol's Factory and Rauschenberg's studio in Front Street in New York meant to create intellectually lively "environments" too, just to mention contemporary examples, without forgetting the historical ones like Raphael's *The School of Athens* and Courbet's studio) on the themes of art in relation to social responsibility, to urban transformation, to democracy etc, where artists meet other artists and specialists in different disciplines (from architects to philosophers to economists to fashion designers to ecologists to educators) in order to work in their sphere but also *at its margins* or *outside* it creating projects, hybrid and new forms and genres of knowledge. As an institution born from art and not for art, the educational objective Cittadellarte means to pursue is the education not only of new artists – a task which could also remain a prerogative of Academies and Universities, with which Cittadellarte is starting different forms of collaboration –, but mainly of individual and subjects as participants (and not spectators), able to respond to the wider range of needs of a changing world, addressing young and ordinary people.

*Biella-Amsterdam, October 2014-February 2015*