

The Multiple Paradoxes of Participatory Art: Power, Emotion, and Autonomy

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Abstract: This study examines the core tensions within participatory art, analyzing how its foundational mechanisms, audience participation, emotional interaction, and market integration, simultaneously generate constructive possibilities and inherent contradictions. The article first analyzes how shifting power structures reconfigure artistic creation, noting the evolution of the artist's role from organizing social collaboration to guiding individual inner experiences. It then explores the dual nature of emotional healing, proposing that immersive environments designed to provide emotional release may also subtly guide and influence participants' affective responses. Finally, it considers how market forces absorb participatory art practices, often transforming critical engagement into consumable cultural products. By tracing these ongoing negotiations, the study investigates how participatory art navigates the balance between its social aspirations, psychological dimensions, and the conditions of contemporary cultural production.

Keywords: Participatory Art; Power; Emotion; Autonomy

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1. Introduction

The changing times have consistently driven the evolution of art, as evidenced by the shifts in practice from modernism to contemporary art. The advent of economic globalization has resulted in the dissolution of ideological and cultural barriers between countries, effectively eliminating ethnic and geographical boundaries. Consequently, freedom and equality have emerged as universal values embraced by all humanity. In this pluralistic environment, art is no longer merely a vehicle for the artist's expression; it has gradually evolved into a platform for dialogue and reflection, with broader social and cultural functions. This shift is particularly noticeable in participatory art, where audience participation gradually becomes an important part of the meaning and impact of the work. Artists are not only exploring ways of self-expression but also researching how to promote social interaction and cultural exchange through art.

As British artist Peter Dunn points out in Variant, artists have become 'context providers' rather than 'content providers' [1]. This notion resonates with me, especially in today's culture of instant gratification and ubiquitous connectivity, where we are always 'online,' documenting our lives through feedback and commentary. This environment prompts artists to re-examine the relationship between their work and the viewer and to explore how interaction can

deepen empathy. In conjunction with Nicholas Beriord's concept of 'silent' communication in Relational Aesthetics (1998)^[2], which emphasizes the interaction between the work and the viewer rather than an isolated presence, I have also tried to incorporate the idea of 'silent' communication in my work. Additionally, my artistic endeavors seek to transform the conventional boundaries of art into a conduit for discourse and introspection. This is achieved by investigating the capacity of art to facilitate emotional expression and healing. In my participatory art project 'Echoe' (2024), I use Arduino technology to capture the heart rate of the participants as they recall their memories and translate these emotional changes into visual effects in real-time. This real-time data translation not only enables the audience to visualize their emotional changes but also externalizes their subjective experience into a shared visual representation. This shift in the relationship between artist and audience from a traditional one-way expression to two-way interaction raises several questions: is the role and power of the artist redefined in participatory art? Can this mode of art bring about psychological healing? As art has moved from individual creation to wider social practice, the emotional manipulation of participatory art has also become intricately linked to the market and institutional interests, opening up a critical discussion of the function of art in social participation and economic structures. The following chapters will undertake a detailed examination of the theoretical and practical implications of this transformation, investigating how the role and function of art and the artist in contemporary society can be redefined, as well as the potential applications of this artistic practice in emotional healing. Furthermore, it will demonstrate how participatory art is pioneering new avenues of interaction and counterbalancing with traditional market forces, thereby offering novel perspectives on the distinctive role of art in social engagement and the economy.

2. Shifting power structures for artists

Art in itself is both an expression and a manifestation of power. In traditional art forms, the artist is seen as having the highest creative authority, while the audience is a passive recipient. In contrast, the power structure is reversed in participatory art. The audience is thus endowed with the capacity to create. The emergence of participatory art was influenced by the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century, which placed emphasis on the role of art in society and politics. The avant-garde artists, including the Dadaists and Surrealists, sought to challenge and change the existing social order through art, a concept that has influenced contemporary participatory art. This leads us to consider the related question of socially engaged art, which, although differing in definition and purpose, shares significant overlaps and extensions. To what extent does the identity of the artist become 'blurred' in this form of art?



Figure 1. Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacoby, and Chris Johnson, *The Roof Is on Fire*, 1993–94. Performance, 4 June 1994, City Center West Garage, Oakland, California. (Photograph by Nathan Bennett). (Source: Frieze, 2020; © Suzanne Lacy)^[3].

Socially engaged art is defined by its reliance on the participation of others, in addition to the artwork's originator. As Pablo Helguera notes in *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, the term "social practice" obscures the discipline from which socially engaged art has emerged, namely, art. In this way, it denotes a critical detachment from other forms of art-making,

which are primarily centered and built on the personality of the artist^[4]. As an illustration, Suzanne Lacey's 'The Roof is on Fire'^[5] fostered community dialogue and social change by inviting teenagers to discuss racial and social issues on a public rooftop. In this work, Suzanne Lacy and community members were part of a collaborative effort that did not explore social and political issues through traditional art forms (e.g., painting, sculpture, etc.). In contrast to the exploration of social and political issues through traditional art forms (e.g., painting, sculpture, etc.), the artist emerges in a new capacity as a social participant and facilitator. This project illuminates the artist's transition from the role of independent author to that of facilitator. As a facilitator, the artist empowers participants to engage in the co-creation of meaning through collective engagement with the work. This participatory structure has the effect of disrupting existing power dynamics, thereby creating an environment in which art becomes a platform for dialogue and collective reflection.

Compared to Socially Engaged Art, Participatory Art, although it also does not necessarily deal with social or political issues, and both emphasize the social and participatory nature of art. Socially Engaged Art focuses more on social issues and community involvement, while Participatory Art focuses more on audience participation and interaction. This model blurs the boundaries between art-making and social action, prompting reflection on whether this practice should be considered part of traditional art or extend into the realm of sociological or political activism. This ambiguity is not merely theoretical; it challenges social norms and the ways in which individuals interact with cultural and political discourses. The redistribution of creative power through the breakdown of the hierarchical structure of traditional art challenges established ways of thinking and encourages participants to view the world and their roles within it in a new light.

This raises the question of whether this art form can be considered to belong in the realm of art. Many art students attracted to the form often question whether they should turn to community organizations, activists, politicians, or sociologists.

The transformation of the artistic career of artist Lygia Clark, best known for her painting and installation work, provides a concrete example of this phenomenon. This led to a shift in her approach to participatory art, in which she broke away from the mechanical nature of art and incorporated more emotion into her work. This shift placed more emphasis on the "participant," and the emotions of the participants are also incorporated into the work.



Figure 2. Lygia Clark, *Máscaras Sensoriais* [Sensory Masks], 1967. Sensory objects (fabrics, plastic, foam, etc.). (Source: Projeto Lygia Clark; © Projeto Lygia Clark)^[6].

Her work on 'Sensorial Masks' (1967–1968)^[6] provides an exemplar of this approach. In 'Sensorial Masks' (1967–1968), the participant's head is wrapped in a hood containing a variety of textured and scented balms, which stimulate the participant to disengage from their visual environment and rediscover the physical experience and immersive inner world. This breaks the traditional paradigm of the passive viewer of art. Through these works, Clark redefines the relationship between art and the viewer, demonstrating the boundaries and potential of socially engaged art in the art market and in the social sphere. During the 1970s, Lygia Clark's work gradually transcended the boundaries of traditional art, evolving from a psychoanalytic approach to a psychotherapeutic one. The shift was not abrupt, but rather a gradual transition from art that incorporated psychoanalysis to a psychotherapeutic approach based on sensory experience. Clark combined her

earlier aesthetic experiments to develop what art historian Yve-Alain Bois has termed ‘psychotherapeutic experiments’^[7]. In her 1974 work “Relaxação”^[8], for example, Clark collaborated with students from the Sorbonne to have flowers placed on people who were blindfolded and lying on the ground. Over the course of the 1970s, Clark gradually transformed this collective, playful practice into a one-on-one therapeutic approach.



Figure 3. Lygia Clark, Relaxação [Relaxation], 1974. Participatory/relational event with participants and organic elements. (Source: Lygia Clark; © Projeto Lygia Clark)^[8].

In examining Clark’s work, it is evident that participatory artists temporarily bring themes and issues from other disciplines into the ambiguous space of art by introducing them. Whilst this boundary is blurred, it is this uncertainty and interdisciplinary interaction that make socially engaged art a particularly powerful tool for challenging the art market and driving social change. By accepting and affirming their identity as artists, socially engaged artists are able to exert influence within and beyond the art field, redefining the boundaries and functions of art. Returning to the question raised at the beginning, “Does participatory art form belong to the art field?”, I think I have got the answer. Perhaps it is not necessary to dwell on its specific demarcation line. Participatory art is not simply an extension of art but a radical redefinition of the creative process itself. “Participation” as a technique or tool is closely linked to capitalist cultural production and cultural politics. As participatory art has developed, the diversity of its subjects has expanded to include women, marginalized groups and ethnic minorities. These groups have been included in the structures for transforming society and participation in order to achieve dialogue or maintain confrontation. This not only promotes social change and extends the scope of discussion to a wider social level, but it also provides us with new perspectives and frameworks for understanding the identity and responsibilities of the modern artist.

3. The double-edged sword of emotional healing and potential manipulation

In participatory art, the viewer is transformed from a passive observer to an active experiencer, motivated to act and participate, which means that they enter into a situation carefully designed by the artist. Debord (1958)^[9] proposed the concept of *dérive* in Situationist International, which is a kind of behavior that breaks the regular, unconscious patterns of everyday life by rapidly changing the environment. Behavior by means of rapid changes in the environment. He sees it as part of a psychogeographical study that explores how the urban environment affects emotions and behavior through participants wandering aimlessly through the city. Through this experience, participants are able to feel more directly the potential impact of the environment on human behavior, resulting in a renewed understanding and perception of the environment. This idea is visualized in participatory art, which Guy Debord describes as ‘constructed situations’^[10], where the viewer becomes a co-creator of the experience and the situation through artificially designed activities and behaviors, thus triggering real, interactive, and emotional participation in the behavior and space. And emotional engagement

in behaviors and spaces. However, participatory art is not only about creating interactive experiences but also about influencing and directing emotions on a deeper level. This type of art allows viewers to explore their own emotional and psychological responses by transforming them from spectators to participants in designed situations. Unlike traditional psychotherapy, which relies on verbal expression, participatory art provides an alternative way of expressing and releasing emotions that are difficult to express verbally. Participants express complex emotions through non-verbal means (e.g. movement, visual creation), which not only releases internal stress but also helps participants to better understand and integrate their emotional experiences.

A good example of the role of participatory art in emotional healing is Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (2010)^[11]. She facilitates the emotional healing of the participants through a simple yet powerful 'constructed situation' that provides a space for empathy and reflection, allowing the participants to confront their own hearts and emotions. The audience cried, smiled, and felt remorse. Many of the audience members felt a strong emotional release and healing in making eye contact with Abramovic. This suggests that participatory art is not only a tool for emotional expression but also an effective method for social group psychotherapy. But whether participatory art can effectively help groups with similar emotional distress to form a new social interaction and support network, as well as truly play a role in psychological healing, is still a question that deserves further research.

Since artists can guide and shape participants' emotions and behaviors to a certain extent when designing participatory artworks, it is possible that viewers may be unconsciously guided by the behaviors and reactions of others. According to Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious^[12], emotions and experiences can be shared within a social group, thereby influencing group dynamics. This is because individuals tend to be less self-conscious in a group setting and are more easily guided by group emotions and behaviors. An example of this is Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003)^[13]: an installation consisting of a giant artificial sun and fog in which the audience is encouraged to gather and relax in the exhibition space. The lighting, temperature, and visual effects throughout the installation create a stunningly immersive experience that, while healing, also means that the artist is inadvertently manipulating the viewer's emotional experience.

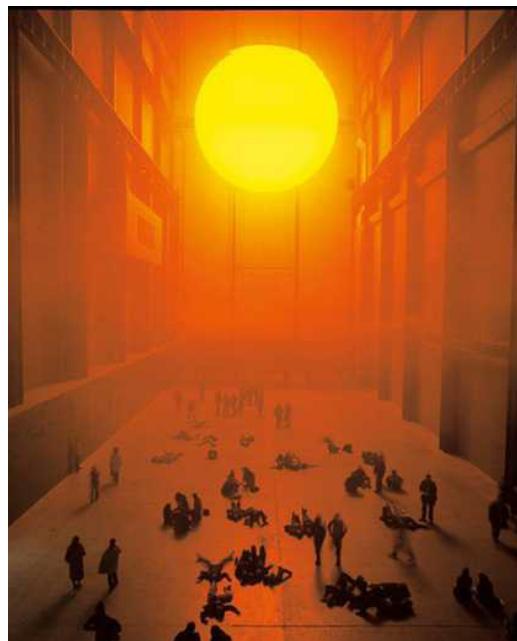


Figure 4. Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003. Installation view, Tate Modern, London. (Source: Tate, 2003)^[14].

Participants in the work often appear to be observing and mimicking the behavior of others, such as lying down or sitting and staring at the 'sun.' Through immersive visual and psychological cues, the artist's design manipulates the audience's spatial perception and emotional state to a certain extent, increasing their concentration and commitment to

the work and making them more susceptible to emotional guidance. This guidance, while mostly positive and healing, simultaneously reveals the double-edged nature of participatory art. In this case, the use of herd mentality also comes with the potential risk of emotional manipulation. Artists who use psychological guidance to de-emotionalize and act when designing participatory art may inadvertently amplify the emotional responses of the participants, and may even be used as a tool to reinforce a certain ideology or to guide public behavior, especially if the artist advances a particular political agenda or expresses prejudice through these means. Thus, participatory art is not only a tool for exploring emotional expression and achieving healing, it also demonstrates the duality of emotional manipulation.

The challenge for artists in this process is to create empathy while avoiding the negative consequences of emotional manipulation. Participatory art can be an effective platform for promoting emotional healing and social connection, but its ethical and psychological boundaries must be fully valued and respected. Artists and audiences need to be jointly aware of this dual nature to ensure that the art experience is both inspiring and ethically prudent.

3. The contradiction between market absorption and artistic autonomy

The rise of participatory art in the global art market and museums is also related to a shift in the consumption habits and needs of the audience, which can be seen as a reflection of the ‘experience economy’ in the field of art. According to Pine and Gilmore in *The Experience Economy* (2011)^[15], modern consumers are no longer satisfied with simple goods or services, but have shifted their attention to the process of consumption, and participatory art is a form of art that conforms to this trend. This form of art makes the original uniqueness and distance between the artwork and the audience gradually disappear, and art is no longer presented in a ‘superior’ posture but becomes an experience that can be interacted with and participated in. Especially in the age of social media, viewers tend to share their experiences of artworks on social platforms, which brings free marketing opportunities for both art creators and exhibition organizations. For example, Yayoi Kusama’s ‘Infinity Mirror Rooms’ (1965/2013)^[16] creates an illusory space of infinite extension through endless reflections and light and shadow effects, allowing the viewer to feel the loneliness and insignificance of an individual in a vast universe. However, with its global popularity and commercial success, the work was quickly absorbed by the mainstream art market and institutions, and *Infinite House of Mirrors* (1965/2013) gradually became an iconic exhibition that attracted audiences and raised the profile of museums. The rapid expansion of its commercialization made it a cultural phenomenon. However, when the work was transformed into a mainstream entertainment experience, especially in the social media era, when it was heavily ‘clocked’ and shared, the level of philosophical thinking and self-reflection was often overshadowed by the visual spectacle on the surface. Viewers are more concerned with the aesthetics of the photographs and the experience of taking them, rather than the exploration of human loneliness, infinity, and self-awareness that the works imply.

In a capitalist environment, art organizations play the role of promoting artistic innovation, as well as needing to consider economic efficiency. Initially, participatory art often appeared as anti-capitalist and anti-mainstream art structures, attempting to challenge the consumerization of art by rejecting its commodification. However, its success in the marketplace has often led to its rapid uptake and commercialization, which inevitably undermines its initial critical stance. For art organizations, the interactivity and social media communication power of participatory art make it an ideal medium for engaging audiences, selecting or including the work of established artists as a gimmick, or even using it as a strategy in terms of increasing financial returns. For example, Tate Modern launched a unique ‘after-art dinner’ during the exhibition of Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Mirror Rooms*^[17], selling tickets to the exhibition in combination with a seasonal menu. In this model, the original intent of the artwork may be diluted by commercialization, as the organization focuses more on making the artwork an all-encompassing entertainment experience that satisfies the audience’s sensory needs and desire for social sharing.

In the modern art market, artists face an ambivalence between maintaining creative autonomy and participating in the capital market. Participatory art requires institutional and market forces for its social impact and dissemination, and its

creative process often relies on financial, venue, and technical support, which are usually provided by art organizations, private sponsors, or commercial partners. This dependence inevitably triggers a complex power dynamic between creative freedom and institutional control. The capitalist structure itself has an inherent tendency to absorb and repackage rebellious, critical, or experimental creations into consumable cultural products, a process of commercialization that not only diminishes the original critical nature of art but also challenges the autonomous intentions of the artist. As works of art are gradually transformed into commodities that conform to popular aesthetics and commercial interests, the artist's original expressive intent and social critical function are also weakened.

In a capitalist environment, participatory art has transformed from a marginalized art form to a highly commercialized cultural phenomenon. Its success relies heavily on meeting audience demands for experiential and social engagement while revealing the complex interactions between art and commerce, culture and economy. While this environment provides more opportunities for artists and cultural institutions, maintaining artistic independence and criticality in the midst of ever-expanding market demands remains an ongoing challenge for artists. Achieving this balance requires artists to have a clear understanding of their own artistic positioning and to ensure that collaborations are premised on maintaining creative autonomy rather than succumbing to commercial interests. It also reminds artists to be vigilant in their choice of partners and sponsorships, ensuring that collaborations support their creative intentions rather than forcing them to cater to market demands. By incorporating unpredictability and experimentation into their work, for example, artists can resist commercialized interference in the content of their creations. The evolution of participatory art in capitalist culture suggests that artists must find a delicate balance between meeting market demands and maintaining creative autonomy when creating interactions and experiences. How artists respond to this challenge will determine whether participatory art can continue to serve as a tool for reflection and critique, rather than merely an extension of consumer culture.

4. Conclusion

In the context of contemporary art, participatory art redefines the relationship between artist and audience while challenging the traditional boundaries and functions of art. An in-depth exploration of the artist's power structure, emotional role, and marketability has led me to a growing awareness of the complexity of participatory art and its potential in modern society. In the process, I observed and reflected on the practices of other artists involved in similar projects, whose work demonstrates how art can be a catalyst for social dialogue and collective healing. The role of the artist is no longer limited to that of a creator of work but evolves into that of a guide and partner. The power in art creation is gradually devolved from the artist to each participant, giving them the power to co-create in the creative process. This redistribution of power promotes art to show richer social functions in practice and also makes art more inclusive and interactive. These reflections have not only helped me refine my own creative approach, but also given me a deeper understanding of the transformative potential of participatory art. In the application of emotional healing, participatory art provides a unique platform to help participants release their emotions and reach inner reconciliation. By actively engaging in creation and expression, participants are able to confront and process complex emotions. Art in this process is not only a medium for expression and self-exploration, but also a supportive environment that empowers individuals with a sense of belonging and an experience of being understood. This role of art prompts participants to feel emotional connection and empathy, contributing to emotional exchange and healing between individuals and groups. Participatory art also faces challenges in interacting with and counteracting market forces. As this art form is gradually absorbed and commercialized by the market, artists need to find a delicate balance between maintaining creative autonomy and meeting market demands. Finding a creative path between economic interests and artistic independence has become an unavoidable issue for contemporary artists. How to maintain creative autonomy without losing the essence of art is a challenge that artists must face in today's environment.

While participatory art cannot be expected to resolve all emotional traumas or social problems, it does possess the potential to alter the discourse system and exert an influence on social dynamics. It provides new insights into the

distinctive role of art in social engagement and the economy, and encourages artists to extend their role and function in contemporary society. This format enables artists to fulfill the social function of art while maintaining their artistic independence and creative spirit, thereby promoting wider collective understanding and emotional healing.

Disclosure statement

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