

ON DEMAND

Alexander Nagel on *Reclaiming Art/Reshaping Democracy*

Reclaiming Art/Reshaping Democracy: The New Patrons & Participatory Art, edited by Estelle Zhong Mengual and Xavier Douroux. Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2017. 432 pages.

UPON ITS PUBLICATION in 2012, Nato Thompson's exhibition catalogue *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011* was duly recognized as a landmark roundup of the participatory, dialogic, and relational experiments of the preceding twenty years. *Reclaiming Art/Reshaping Democracy: The New Patrons & Participatory Art*—a productively expanded English edition of an anthology that appeared in French in 2013—stands as both a follow-up and a response to *Living as Form*, elucidating a model of socially engaged practice that remains underknown among anglophone audiences. The phrase “new patrons” is a less-than-perfect translation of “Nouveaux Commanditaires,” a program of community-driven artistic production funded by the Fondation de France, which sounds like a government body but is in fact a private foundation. Since its creation almost three decades ago by the artist François Hers, the program has grown impressively, producing hundreds of artworks in Europe and beyond. Each commission puts into effect a protocol devised by Hers, so that, in a sense, the entire program can be thought of as a single, ever-expanding artwork.

As Hers explains in *Reclaiming Art*, each work created under the aegis of the Nouveaux Commanditaires begins not with an artist's proposal, nor with a commission from a museum or other institution interested in bringing art into spaces beyond the white cube. Instead, the NC protocol begins with a demand for an artistic intervention on the part of a specific community. This is the crucial step, the realization that what is needed is art, whatever that might be, even if it may appear that a fabricator, an interior designer, or an architect could fulfill the practical requirements of the job. The NC receives the open-ended demand and, using its wide network, matches the requesting community with a “mediator,” who plays a role close to that of curator. The mediator is responsible for finding an artist well suited to the incipient commission, and then for introducing the artist to the community—offering not a specific proposal but a sense of what the artist has done and cares about. If the mediator's selection is approved, a process of dialogue, proposals, revisions, and (often enough) disputes begins. The community is thereby introduced to the logic and modalities of a world of artmaking that it has typically never encountered before. Conversely, the artists are displaced from the

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View of Rémy Zaugg's *Le lavoir de Blessey*, 1997–2007, Blessey, France.

context of art institutions and forced to adapt, sometimes quite radically, their criteria of what an artwork is. As the jacket copy succinctly puts it, “Being a patron acquires a new significance: it is not about financing the making of a work of art, but about stating its *raison d'être*.”

Several essays in this volume point out that the crucial difference here from so many other socially engaged artistic experiments undertaken in the past few decades is the origin of the work in a request coming from outside the art world. No matter how public and dialogue-driven the projects reviewed in *Living as Form* are, for example, almost all were initiated by artists and art institutions. The main goal for Hers, from the beginning, was to move beyond the vestigial notion that the artist is the one solely responsible for conceiving works of art (even if enabled by the institutions that have arisen around the post-Romantic conception of the artist). The demand for art exists in communities, he affirms, but remains mostly unheard because of the historic dislocation of the art world from society as a whole. Hers sees little difference between a piece of public art randomly dropped into an urban context and even such an engaged and functional initiative as the Immigrant Movement International project, conceived by Tania Bruguera and produced in partnership with the Queens Museum and Creative Time. For him, all interventions imposed by the art

world remain limited by existing conditions, either because they become indistinguishable from non-artistic social practice and so leave the category of art intact, or because they simply insert art here or there, leaving the structures of society intact—all the while reassuring art-world insiders that a bridge has been built between art and society, changing both for the good. As Hers wrote in the 2013 book *Art Without Capitalism* (also published by Les Presses du Réel), “Advocating or settling for participation simply maintains, through naiveness or self-interest, an illusion of commitment.”

In light of the fact that so little NC work is explicitly political, such polemical claims are certainly audacious. No doubt champions of socially engaged art as it is conventionally construed would argue that if Bruguera is laboring under a delusion of commitment, while the NC protocol is fighting the good fight by refashioning the washhouses of French villages (take, for example, John Armleder's bejeweled “grotto,” one of a curiously high number of reconceived *lavoirs* realized by the NC), or by commissioning Angela Bulloch's square color-field light boxes reflected in the river of the small town of Laignes, then maybe imposed do-gooding with incidentally beneficent effects is preferable to the real thing. Hers would probably respond that the political efficacy of NC work rests entirely on the rigor and coherence of the protocol. Rather than beginning with the idea of what might be beneficial to society and then trying to introduce that idea into the world, the social and political operativity of the NC inheres in the structure



Left: View of Xavier Veilhan's *Le monstre* (The Monster), 2004, Tours, France. Photo: Tomoyoshi Noguchi/Flickr. Below: View of John Armleder's *La grotte magique* (The Magic Grotto), 2001, Salives, France.



of the protocol itself, which makes it necessary for all parties to operate outside their normal zones of practice, and as a result opens up a new space of dialogue between art and the wider world. At least, that is the idea; videos available on the NC website document the nature and extent of the conversations that inform the works of art and in fact constitute them as works.

Inspired by the video chronicling a project undertaken by the NC for the village of Blessey (a work by the Swiss artist Rémy Zaugg), the philosopher Isabelle Stengers suggests in *Reclaiming Art* that such projects mobilize what Félix Guattari called “existential catalysis,” a capacity for conceptual and aesthetic propagation that proceeds via a kind of conditional logic: “if that is possible, then . . .” One effect of such a process, noted in several of the essays here, is that it extends the temporality of reception retroactively, folding viewer “response” right into the production of the work. The works produced by the NC have already been judged and in part formed by their primary constituencies, the people who called them into being. Even an NC project like Xavier Veilhan's *Le monstre* (The Monster), 2004, in the center of Tours, which looks like a piece of pop art, emerged out of dialogue and debate and went through a process of civic assimilation and activation. Horrifying to many when it first appeared, it has become with time a beloved and defended city monument; it isn't a sculpture but a node of civic discussion that it both generates and inhabits.

Given the historical schema underlying a program that calls itself “New” Patrons, it is appropriate that

this volume includes a number of essays that survey the history of art's role in society, although one wishes the contributors had drawn more explicit connections between their respective areas of focus and the current situation. A conversation between Bruno Latour and Joseph Leo Koerner reviews the development of artistic patronage in the Renaissance and in Romanticism, though the pair do not address what is new and not new in NC. Other contributions focus on the postwar period: Julia Robinson reviews the artistic experiences of Fluxus-affiliated artists, while Patricia Falguières offers a lengthy tour through the history of Conceptual art. Both of these essays are informative and reliable but, again, seem insufficiently related to questions raised by the NC program. The same is true of Helmut Draxler's recapitulation of his theory of mediation, which is in no way adapted to address the issues at stake in this volume. Mary Jane Jacob's exposition of John Dewey's conception of art as experience and as vector of democratic life, lucid as it is, also leaves us to our own devices in applying these ideas to the debate over socially engaged art. In her only reference to the contemporary situation, Jacob rightly stresses that our infatuation over the past two decades with overtly engaged participatory art and relational practices has led to a too-easy dismissal of the real efficacy that artworks qua art can have. An overemphasis on making political headlines with art, she points out, often leads to practices that dispense with art altogether. Other essays in the volume dwell on the problems raised by Jacob, using various theoretical models to do so: Dorian

Astor takes a Nietzschean-Deleuzian approach; Malcolm Miles offers a Sloterdijk-inspired argument; Frédéric Lordon's analysis is informed by Spinoza.

In the excellent final essay, Baptiste Morizot and Zhong Mengual build on Gilbert Simondon's thought, constructing a theory of the individuating encounter to address various forms of participatory art, discussing works by Thomas Hirschhorn, Michael Rakowitz, and Javier Téllez, among others, as well as the projects of the NC. “The problem with contemporary art,” the authors write, “is not that it offers works that are too avant-garde to be understood or appreciated by the public. The real problem with contemporary art is that it tends to not inscribe itself in a search for an individuating encounter with the viewer, it tends to not think about its forms as potential conditions for an encounter.” One may ask, in response: Does a work of art need to be participatory in order to engage an individuating encounter? Indeed, participatory art seems (paradoxically, given its often anti-aesthetic stance) far too preoccupied with formal conditions; the work is designed to produce certain social effects. By contrast, the projects of the NC, since they are not motivated by the requirement for social engagement, are not determined by a search for adequately engaged, social-effect-producing forms. Rather, the works precipitate out of the protocol and take on as many forms as there are encounters between communities and artmakers. □

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