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Graciela Carnevale, *Entrapment and Escape* 2008
Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Carlos Militello

INTELLIGENT DISCOMFORT

by Claire Bishop and Julia Bryan-Wilson

For the last decade, art historian and critic Claire Bishop has been unafraid to court controversy—her smart, sharply written opinions about everything from installation to collaboration are widely taught, cited, and debated. Her new book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso 2012), a sweeping reassessment of participation as an ideologically diverse crux of 20th century art, is sure to generate further discussion. For this interview, I asked Claire to have a conversation with me in real-time via live chat, rather than conducting it as a series of stiff, but more controllable, email volleys. She gamely agreed, so in July 2012 we sat down at our computers (she was in Paris, I was in Oakland). What follows is a lightly edited transcript of our dialogue.

Julia Bryan-Wilson: I want to start by asking you about your writing process. How did you move from shorter, more polemical, critical pieces (like your well-known October article “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”) to this longer, more art historical book?

Claire Bishop: The “Antagonism” essay was turned around very quickly after the end of my PhD thesis; it was always intended as a free-standing polemic, which I incorporated into the installation art book. This book has its core in the “Social Turn” essay/polemic in *Artforum* in 2006, and I knew I had to do something longer as I got so much flak for it. I felt there was a longer, non-canonical history to write around these issues, but I didn’t know at the start that it was going to turn into a cross-20th century epic.

jbw: You draw, for me very interestingly, on theatre and performance to rewrite that history.



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cb: I had often talked with friends about what it would mean to teach 20th century art through the lens of theatre, with Brecht in the place of Greenberg. It became my modest alternative to thinking 20th century art through theatre/performance, rather than through painting (the usual way it's taught) or the ready-made.

jbw: You start with Futurism, which as you note is also where classical "performance art" texts often begin; this is meant to re-orient the history of avant-garde art by making those actions central rather than a side note.

cb: Yes, Futurism is the starting point. This is my overlap with RoseLee Goldberg, but what's important about that first chapter on the historic avant-garde is that it shows how three totally different political positions can underpin participatory art—thereby disrupting the conventional assumption that participation is always leftist.

jbw: Those ideological differences are crucial, as you look at proto-fascist participation, communist participation, anarchist participation, etc. You also discuss Augusto Boal and other major touchstones for performance studies who are not as influential within art history as, say Brecht. For you, is there still a disciplinary divide between performance scholars trained in theatre history, and art historians working on performance art?

cb: This is the first question that Carrie Lambert-Beatty asked me at my book launch in New York!

jbw: I swear we did not plan that!

cb: Let me see if I can answer it better this time round. For me there is a lot of overlap in terms of method, but at the end of the day, the works that I privilege are by people who identify themselves firstly as visual artists; I could have included many more individuals or companies who deal with participation today, like Rimini Protokoll, but they don't raise the same issues as those working in a visual art context.

jbw: Well, the lines between performance and visual art are becoming, institutionally, very blurry; i.e. the emphasis on performance in this year's Whitney Biennial, and more recently its integration at the Tate Modern.

cb: I agree the lines are getting blurred. So the question for me is: why is this happening? On the one hand, I think there's a dissatisfaction with object-based art (and this has been true across the 20th century, we're just having another moment). On the other hand, museums have entered event culture, where performance has cachet and excitement.

jbw: It is also a way for museums to cross-promote with industries like fashion or cinema, potentially.

cb: In some institutions, definitely.

jbw: You mention the Marina Abramovic /Los Angeles MOCA stir-up from fall 2011—an expensive museum gala that featured the heads of silent performers as "centrepieces." That was an event that crystallized, for some people, a distasteful merging of spectacle, art, and publicity on the backs of underpaid volunteers.

cb: It was clearly a dreadfully ill-conceived event, but I disagree with Yvonne Rainer's criticism of the work. For Rainer, it was a question of payment: these performers were getting only \$150 for their participation. Yet focusing on this removes attention from the fact that it's actually just a weak work. Moreover, in the context of the art/performance world, \$150 is actually not bad pay at all. The art world in general relies on unpaid interns—at any one moment, the Guggenheim New York has over 150 unpaid interns. If we want to talk finance, this is more shocking to me than Abramovic 's performers getting paid \$150. The work would be no better if the artist was paying them \$500—it would still be a bad idea, a self-exploitation of her reputation for the service of LA MOCA celebrity fund-raising.

jbw: I was drawn to your brief descriptions of participants who enjoy being on display, despite (or because of) being "used." Can you say more about the "fetishized disavowal" (as you put it) of self-exploitation? It's important to recognize, too, that many people who participate in what you call "delegated performance" get something out of their participation, something that is not necessarily financial or exceeds the dollar amounts that are transacted.

RIDDLE OF THE BURIAL GROUNDS



Susan Hobbs

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cb: Yes, on the whole I would say that people enjoy their own self-exploitation in a work of art, and this is totally overlooked in discussions of this type of performance. It's something I only worked out by interviewing participants and organizing these projects myself. I would be constantly checking with performers to make sure they were ok, comfortable, not too bored, etc. But people love being in a work of art, especially in a gallery. It fuels a certain narcissistic recognition.

jbw: Twice you mention BDSM as an alternative paradigm for thinking through this issue. Can you say more about how you see BDSM as a framework for differently processing both pain and pleasure, and how that might extend to participatory art?

cb: Ha! Well spotted. For me, BDSM and comedy provide two other frameworks for thinking about what bodies can say/do in space. There is a lot of moralistic discussion around contemporary art, but comedy also manages to say, very sharp, poignant, transgressive, politically acute things in a way that is highly pleasurable. And in a different way, the 'scenes' that people get into in BDSM are also (for them) highly pleasurable, even though they have no relationship to their actual desire to be dominated (for example) in daily life. Both are areas of experience that suspend the everyday, but also participate in it—they have the double ontology that I see as crucial to participatory art.

jbw: Sure, it is about power, and a play with power inequality—this fuels both the danger and the delight.

cb: Would you agree? This is something I'm just starting to think about, which is why they are just tentative asides in the book.

jbw: It was a tantalizing suggestion, but too brief. Sometimes when academics talk about BDSM, it becomes an overly romanticized site of resistance. BDSM culture has the potential to be normative, or stultifying, but you're talking about acknowledging the complexities of power dynamics. And to clarify, when you mean comedy, do you mean stand-up?

cb: Yes. Performa did a whole series of stand up comedy nights last year. Not totally successful, but it got me thinking.

jbw: Do you have favorites in the realm of stand-up? Lenny Bruce? Aziz Ansari?

cb: I'm not really very knowledgeable about comedy, but debates in the UK about, for example, Ricky Gervais making pedophilia jokes, have always interested me and suggested some kind of analogy with art as a legitimate space for transgression. What do you make of all these discussions around 'useful art'? I'm thinking of Tania Bruguera, or the last Berlin Biennial by Artur Z.mijewski.

jbw: The Berlin Biennial is very easy to criticize, and so everyone is criticizing it. My main feeling was that it was, beyond all the other problems, just uninteresting to look at. Purely at the level of what there was to see, it was extremely banal.

cb: This is what happens when a desire for utility overtakes a reflection on representation. Z.mijewski's work in the early 2000s was very successful at balancing these—so it was disappointing to see him become so evangelical about instrumentalisation and outcomes. However, I had a wonderful day there, and had perhaps a very atypical experience: I went around the Kunstwerke, then met Joanna Warsza the co-curator, who talked me through the more oblique pieces, plus all the theatre events I hadn't seen. Then I went to the other venues and my day culminated in the Elizabeth-Kirche painting on the wall alongside Pawel Althamer as the sun set. It was perfect. It made me realise that they should have abandoned the exhibition form altogether and just stuck to the events, which (although I didn't see any) seemed the strongest part of the program.

jbw: Your day sound lovely, which was not at all how it was for me. I went on a soggy, grey morning, and the only thing happening in the Occupy space was that a guy was taking a nap on the ground. This discrepancy between our experiences brings up a serious issue. In your book, you narrate a personal encounter with a Hirschhorn piece, with all its unruliness and rambunctious, uncontained energies. You are quite self-conscious that your writing about that work was dependent upon being there, to see how loose and challenging the events were. In hindsight, things tend to get cleaned up. I wonder if some of the participatory events you are less sympathetic to, ones that occurred in the past, were just as rangy and full of failures. In other words, all we have for some of those historical events are sanitized accounts. Some level of messiness is intrinsic to this art, and that is not always acknowledged in your book. Does that make sense?



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cb: Absolutely. This is true, but I do think that the best works give a hint of that mess, or indicate something surplus to the artists' own account. Even the fact that no one was moved to write something interesting about the work might tell us something (i.e. confirm) our suspicion that it wasn't perhaps that interesting. For me two things come out of this: one is about historical research into the past—if no archive/response exists, can we make the audience an archive? The other is about writing in the present, as a critic—can we find other voices by which to document these works so that they don't have to rely on yet more bad digital photographs, which fail to capture the complexity of a durational experience? This type of project-based work challenges our method as art historians and critics.

jbw: How important was it to you that this was a book about history, about digging into those archives? What do you think about the argument that there is a major divide between art historical and art critical writing?

cb: I go back and forward on this one. Most of the time I think that all good historical writing has a critical agenda, and all good critical writing has a historical agenda. Then there are flashpoints when I realise they don't overlap so well. After the relational aesthetics article I realised that I had acted too much as a critic, and shot myself in the foot as an art historian: none of that generation of artists would talk to me for five years. Which is not great if you're researching contemporary art.

jbw: Really? Five years?

cb: More or less. It was as if the boys ganged up on me, and I had to develop different strategies.

jbw: That brings up, tangentially, another question. Claire, are you a feminist? Or, to ask a different way, are feminist theory and feminist politics important to you? There is so little on gender in this book.

cb: I would say of course I am a feminist, and clearly one who builds on the achievements of previous generations of feminists. But I don't think it's that useful or interesting to make identity issues a feature of a book about participatory art in 2012. I am more interested in class, not least because this is a primary preoccupation of participatory art since its inception. I don't want to add in female artists for the sake of it; on the other hand, I am also keen to promote those who don't have the visibility and success of their male peers, which is why there is always a female artist on the covers of my books.

jbw: That makes sense, but it is also the case that so much participation art was pioneered via the feminist art movement.

cb: In the US; not so much in Europe, I feel.

jbw: I do recognize your strategic decision to not engage with North America. But Mary Kelly was doing projects with women workers in the UK in the 1970s, and someone like Argentine Graciela Carnevale was dealing with feminist concerns.

cb: Tell me how you see Carnevale's work as feminist?

jbw: Issues of confinement, especially in a room situation (as in her *Entrapment and Escape* from 1968), for me are linked to questions of the domestic just as much as to institutional critique.

cb: In general, I confess I feel exhausted by identity politics in US academia—endless PhDs that produce an unimpeachable feminist or post-colonial reading... These were essential moments that had to take place—politically, intellectually and theoretically—but I have no desire to repeat them in my own work. I want to operate more covertly, but I'm aware that this risks not being seen at all.

jbw: But feminism is bigger than "US identity politics."

cb: Please continue!

jbw: Feminism contains all sorts of theoretical, philosophical, and political possibilities, including a critique of how class and gender are co-articulated, and so is not limited to demanding to see more women artists in exhibitions. It's about labor, and reproduction, and the public/private divide, and political economy...

cb: But these are not exclusively feminist issues... and I would say I am interested in all of these, just not through a feminist lens.

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jbw: Fair enough. Let's talk about something else, which is that I tracked the approving adjectives you use in *Artificial Hells*.

cb: Don't tell me—compelling, troubling...

jbw: Yes. Others that come up are "difficult" and "poignant," both of which are resonant terms, but challenging to pin down.

cb: One of the reasons why the book is called *Artificial Hells* is that I wanted to hold onto the value of a type of art (discussed by Breton) that is not afraid to be experimental and contradictory and which may not be recognised as important in its own time (like the Paris Dada season in spring 1921). This work might set something in motion that would be later recognised and picked up by subsequent generations... Breton refers to these experiments, if I remember rightly, as 'delicious' in their hellishness. Another idea I wanted to pick up on is the production of affect. Poignancy is about being touched—an affect that goes beyond commonsensical approval or disapproval (the ethical regime I am always criticising). In short, it's an appeal for socially engaged art to be affective, and not just effective.

jbw: Failure is also a big theme in the book. How would you define failure?

cb: With this kind of work that deals with the social realm, there are clearly two types of failure: failure as a social project (failure to change a situation), and failure as a work of art.

jbw: I am curious what it means to you for a work of art to fail.

cb: At heart I'm an old-fashioned romantic, like most avant-gardists, for whom the worst thing is to be bored. Just spare me banality. For me, failure is banality, because we are surrounded by banality.

jbw: In part I agree with you, but we are also too surrounded by the "extreme." Some pause in that frenzy can be welcome. However, I guess I would term it modesty, not banality.

cb: Of course I love works of art that do boredom in fascinating new ways, like *On Kawara* or Bruce Nauman. I love economy in a work of art—concision is fantastic.

jbw: I have a funny anecdote for you. I taught your article "The Social Turn" in a class at UC Irvine, and a student asked, "So, does Claire Bishop just think good art is people getting shot?" Because he understood it to mean that you wanted Major Discomfort. And then one week later I ran into you at the Venice Biennale, and I asked you what your favorite piece so far was in the show, and you mentioned...

cb: Tania Bruguera!

jbw: Yes, and she had just played Russian roulette—perfectly confirming what my student thought.

cb: That was a terrible experience... I couldn't talk to her for months afterwards, Tania gave a lecture on what it means to be a political artist, and at the end of every page (there were about five in total) she picked up a gun, held it to her head, and fired. Each time it was a blank, but on the last one she pointed it to the ceiling and fired, and it was a real bullet. The room was completely hysterical: I remember Rainer Ganahl and Alfredo Jaar begging the curator to make her stop. I was incapacitated with horror.

But this was not in my view a good work of art. It was too sensationalist and moreover idiotically dangerous; it was entirely about the bullets and not the content of the lecture. What good is a dead political artist? So tell your student that it has to be intelligent discomfort. It has to stimulate ideas, thoughts, feelings... not just sensationalist panic.

jbw: One final question—given the trajectory outlined in your book, what did you make of the way that *DOCUMENTA* (13) featured participatory pieces and performance alongside object-based works? Does this *Documenta* seem like a culmination of some of the trends you consider, such as outsourcing and re-skilling?

cb: This was definitely a *Documenta* that reflected a wide range of current trends in contemporary art: the archival impulse (old-fashioned vitrines galore), the rehabilitation of marginal modernists, high-budget video, performance, social practice, research-based art, and of course participatory art. It's characteristic that most of the participatory work was either therapeutic in orientation (Pedro Reyes's *Sanatorium*, Raimundas Malašauskas's pavilion where I got hypnotized, the *And And And*

workshop with clay and poetry that I stumbled into at the back of the Bahnhof, even Jérôme Bel's Disabled Theatre or escapist entertainment (from the utopianism of Gareth Moore's totalitarian hippie enclave to Michael Portnoy's crazy futuristic game show, or the community assembling in Theaster Gates house, or even Tino Sehgal's song and dance routines in the dark). So according to this Documenta, participation today is either therapeutic, or escapist entertainment—and fully integrated into an exhibition structure, for better or worse.

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Tania Bruguera, *Self- sabotage (Autosabotaje)* 2009
Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Cesar Delgado Wixen

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