



---

Post-Participatory Participation

Author(s): Ricardo Basbaum

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, Issue 28 (Autumn/Winter 2011), pp. 90-101

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of [Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/662974>

Accessed: 15/11/2012 09:33

---

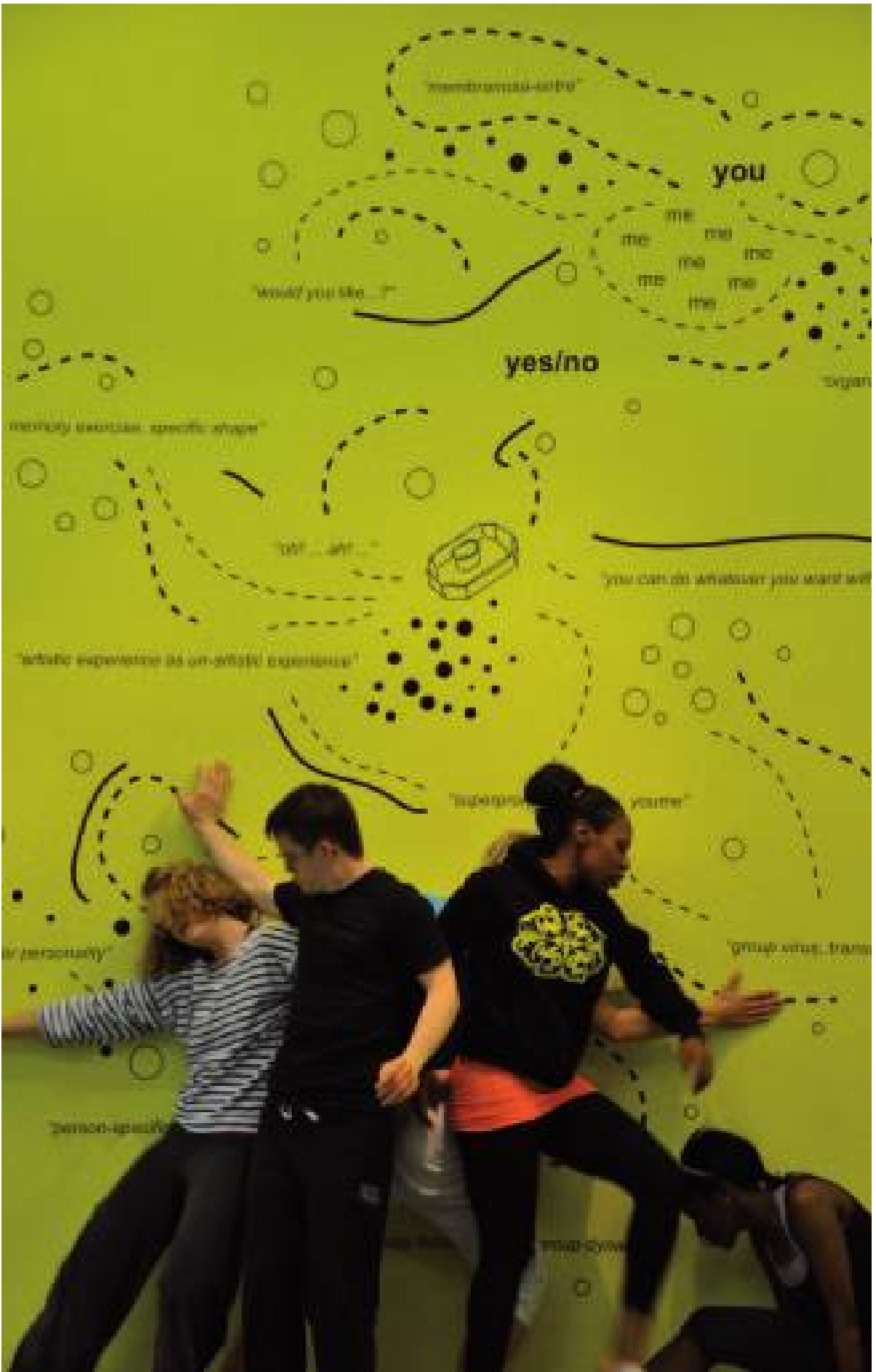
Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



Ricardo Basbaum,  
[small operatic event]  
*Would you like to  
participate in an artistic  
experience?*, 2010,  
with Joyce Gyimah,  
Dance Physics and  
Bruce Nockles,  
press-on vinyl  
diagram, monochrome  
wall-painting,  
painted, metal  
object, dance, sound,  
reading event at  
The Showroom,  
London.  
Photograph:  
Daniela Mattos.  
Courtesy the artist

# Post-Participatory Participation

– Ricardo Basbaum

*‘Who, me?’*

*‘Yes, we were already expecting you.’*

‘When I invite people to take part in some of my propositions, what am I offering them and what is expected from them, from me, for me, for them?’ This should be a basic question addressed to participatory processes, which would help to indicate more precisely how this or that project is building the image of the artist and its other, the so-called ‘participant’. There was a time when artists did not conceive of their practice as a gesture towards someone else: it was enough that the art piece had been completed and had its internal aspects

---

## Ricardo Basbaum reflects on the introduction of the audience and participatory practices into the realm of contemporary art as a form of resistance to neoliberal strategies.

resolved. There wasn’t even space for interpretation: before modernism, the ‘reading’ of the piece pointed to a non-ambiguous narrative. During modernism, however, the structure itself of artistic language guaranteed that the artwork would function correctly by pointing to the future, bringing forward advanced critical topics. But somehow in the mid-1950s a shift occurred — towards a sort of ‘participatory condition’ of contemporary society — that was meant to de-centre the artistic gesture and add a new role into the art system or circuit: that of the active participator, a figure of otherness who would not only become more and more relevant for art processes but would also decisively influence the shift from critical to curatorial practices at the end of the twentieth century.

Yes, Marcel Duchamp considered that the reception of his work would influence its meaning, but he was more concerned about the impact that an anonymous and general mass of people (that is, an ‘audience’) would have on his place in *history*. He did not write specifically on the production or negotiation of the subject; that topic would only surface later in the art debate in general, in conversations in the 1980s around micropolitics and the politics of the subject. So while it is true that his famous *Mariée* portrays in fact a subjectivation process (*she* and the tireless bachelors) — there is a flow of desire that energises *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*Le Grand Verre*) (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915–23) and the pages of *The Green Box* (1934) — our position looking at the glass is like sitting in a classic movie theatre: the plot and the process are happening somewhere else and have no direct relation to us (as voyeurs), unless we (as obsessive thinkers) integrate the glass mechanism into our selves. But that we would only do later, as contemporary participators: one of the main aspects of the participatory protocols, not yet in place then, refers to the re-enactment of the work’s process by the viewer, as a paradoxical internalisation process, where one’s subjectivity is built up by the artwork — which is at the same time activated by him or her. Despite this, yes, ‘Doctor MD’<sup>1</sup> was in fact one step ahead of his colleagues and did open up a small area in his practice where the other became just barely visible, as a pale shade or a spectre that in the future would become a giant impossible to ignore.

The significant shift, which came in the second half of the century, can be traced from at least three different sources, each of which affected the field of the symbolic

---

1 This is how Allan Kaprow refers to Marcel Duchamp in one of his texts. See A. Kaprow, ‘Doctor MD’, in Jeff Kelley (ed.), *Allan Kaprow: Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp.127–29.

and changed the 'pact' that determines the art field and its roles — in the sense that not only the artist and viewer but also the positions of the critic, historian, curator, etc. were affected and had to be reframed. On one side, structuralism and anthropology de-centred the role of the producer and receiver of knowledge, which had been played typically by the white European male, and it became apparent that much of the planet had already reacted against Eurocentrism by developing other modernisms, and thereby in many aspects jumped directly into the discussion of alternative centres. At the same time, the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics in New York (1946–53) established a proto-diagrammatic comprehension of the relational and communicational patterns of human society, instituting a mediation zone where the body, living beings, machines and cultural artefacts would share common layers and lines of contact.<sup>2</sup> According to the topics proposed by this conference, sensorial experience would not return directly to the inner self but would instead surface as external layers and lines that could be prospectively modelled — we can see Lygia Clark's 'organic line', a concept she first articulated in 1954, as related (although indirectly) to this development, as she 'discovered' the border or line of mediation as the result of the contact of two different surfaces: body and object or artwork.<sup>3</sup> Finally, we can refer to Umberto Eco and his text *The Open Work* (1962) and Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser's aesthetics of reception (*Rezeptions-ästhetik*) in literature in the late 1960s, which set out a concrete and definite role for the recipient actor of a text's symbolic production, and argued that the author merely indicates a process to come, as the achievement of a literary experience will

only arrive through a 'creative' gesture from this reader or viewer, who can complete the work and without whom the piece remains just a potential promise.

Of course, we could sum up other aspects that contributed to this turning point, but what these share is an awareness about deconstructing certain dominant and for a long time unchangeable models of subjecthood, and subsequently the bringing of the very mechanics of this process to the art field. And, at the same time, there was also the improvement of the implementation of a communicative model (and the reaction to it) that brought to the map (or diagram) of the art field further positions (or points) that related to the interfaces between art and its context (society, science, the subject, the public, the economy, etc.) — defining the art circuit or system in even more explicit terms. In fact, it has today become commonplace to refer to the art circuit or system as a natural entity, so used (*we*) the art practitioners have become to dealing with layers of mediation: any gesture requires being part of a project; having a budget; calling for advertising, press, license fees; engaging with museology, security, etc. That is, making art entails a permanent state of negotiation with many nodes of the circuit network — so that reaching the actual artwork is only possible after outrunning mediator after mediator, layer after layer; ultimately, what can be considered an artwork is a cluster of multiple explicit interests, including, fortunately, the artists' proposals.

Some clear moments in this mid-century process can be found among the many gestures that characterised the several conceptualisms (including orthodox Conceptual art) then current worldwide: this was a particular and highly influential moment of collective thinking,

2 For N. Katherine Hayles, the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics were 'radically interdisciplinary', putting together 'researchers from a wide variety of fields — neurophysiology, electrical engineering, philosophy, semantics, literature and psychology, among others'. Some of its main topics involved 'how to convince that humans and machines were brothers under the skin' and to act 'as crossroads for the traffic in cybernetic models and artefacts'. Hayles organised the Conferences' arguments along 'three fronts': 'the construction of information as a theoretical entity'; 'the construction of [human] neural structures [...] as flows of information'; and 'the construction of artefacts that translated information flows into observable operations'. See N.K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

3 The organic line is a line that has not been drafted or carved by anyone, but which results from the contact of two different surfaces (planes, things, objects, bodies or even concepts). According to Guy Brett, Lygia Clark liked to exemplify the organic line as the one we can see 'between the window and the window frame or between tiles on the floor'. She stated that it first appeared in 1954, when she was observing the line that formed where a framed collage touched the *passee-partout* paper. She wrote: 'I set aside this research for two years because I did not know how to deal with this space set free.' Quoted in G. Brett, 'Lygia Clark: The Borderline Between Art and Life', in *Third Text*, no.1, Autumn 1987, p.67. See also Ricardo Basbaum, 'Within the Organic Line and After', published in English in Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (ed.), *Art after Conceptual Art*, Vienna and Cambridge, MA and London: Generali Foundation and The MIT Press, 2006, pp.87–99.

---

which relied completely on the already conquered (but still open and full of potential) area of the presence of the participant other — most of the propositions dealt directly with discursive standards (though achieved by defined material elements), which were launched onto the viewer as a task, a work-to-do, a problem to solve — that is, he or she would be invited to engage in complex duties and operations to make the work produce sense. Conceptualism made clear that the viewer produced by the artistic operation is not a simple, ordinary and neutral one: the artists realised that one of their main tasks was to work in the direction of modelling the subject who would receive their production. This *imperative* (i.e. the artwork's demand for its other) was indeed

---

***Different moments of contemporary art can be reviewed in terms of the investment in what we might call an expected spectator production process.***

perceived as too important and decisive to be left in the hands of the market, consumption and other directed social processes. The system of art (and in fact Conceptualism has always been concerned with the drafting of systems, maps and diagrams) has, since then, comprised this *site* of the expected other — which also has several grades of *specificity*. Different moments of contemporary art can be reviewed in terms of the investment in what we might call an *expected spectator production process* — although this is not a field for causal or linear results

(which can be quite naïve in the face of the complexity and importance of the problem).

In the 1950s, the Concrete and Neoconcrete movements in Brazil established their main conceptual lines under the new 'epistemological' condition that considered the presence of the viewer or reader as part of the poetics triggered by the artwork. Not that there was a special perception of the problem among Brazilian artists and intellectuals (indeed, at the same time in France Yves Klein was proposing *Le Vide* (*The Void*, 1958), which contains a similar preoccupation with dissolving everything previous to the reception of the work, forcing the viewer to rebuild him or herself in direct contact with it),<sup>4</sup> but some particular aspects of that moment are important for today's landscape and should be examined in further depth. Both groups, at various points, acknowledged their debt to Oswald de Andrade's 'Manifesto Antropófago' of 1928: there is no doubt that this strong modern statement was a decisive step in reconfiguring the local culture as international, in the sense of recognising difference, feeding from it and producing the new — no longer as a subservient other but as a full voice charged with the potential for invention.<sup>5</sup> It is not incorrect to link this modernist piece of resistance (several other modern Brazilian artists and writers from the same epoch turned to more conservative positions) with a particular sensitiveness to a more close and direct involvement of the viewer and reader in terms of the activation of the artwork: if, on one side, the poet and essayist Haroldo de Campos was recognised by Umberto Eco as having anticipated similar

---

4 However, Klein was more concerned with the 'immaterial' mediation layers than with the direct touch of the artwork on the body. The work's full title is *La Spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée, Le Vide* (*The Specialisation of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilised Pictorial Sensibility, The Void*).

5 Suely Rolnik states this point precisely: 'The notion of "anthropophagy" [...] proposed by the [Brazilian] modernists harks back to a practice of the indigenous Tupinambás [...], a complex ritual, which could go on for months, years even, in which enemies made captive in battles would be killed and devoured; cannibalism is only one of its stages'. Another stage involved the executor changing his name and scarring his body with the name of the enemy: 'The existence of the other [...] was thus inscribed in the memory of the body, producing unpredictable becomings of subjectivity.' Thus, in 'advancing the idea of anthropophagy, the avant-garde of Brazilian modernism extrapolates from the literality of the indigenous ceremony, in order to extract from it the ethical formula of an unavoidable existence of an otherness in oneself that presides over the ritual and to make it migrate into the terrain of culture. With this gesture, the active presence of this formula in a mode of cultural creation practised in Brazil since its foundation is given visibility and affirmed as a value: the critical and irreverent devouring of an otherness always multiple and variable.' Rolnik also proposes an important update: 'We would define the anthropophagic cultural micropolitic as a continuous process of singularisation, resulting from the composition of particles of numberless devoured others and the diagram of their respective marks in the body's memory. A poetic response — with sarcastic humour — to the need to confront the impositive presence of the colonising cultures [...] an answer [...] to [the] need to come to grips with and render positive the process of hybridisation brought by successive waves of immigration, which has always configured the country's lived experience.' See S. Rolnik, 'Politics of the Fluid, Hybrid and Flexible: Avoiding False Problems', *SUM magazine for contemporary art*, Copenhagen: The Royal Academy of Fine Arts, no.2, Summer 2008.





theoretical ideas on the incompleteness of the artwork (which later resulted in his theories about translation), on the other, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica pursued highly inventive and experimental research that meant they entered the 1960s and 70s with an open consideration of the participant as a necessary part of the artistic gesture. But one more point is important to note: both movements still saw themselves as avant-garde actors, organising their actions and statements as manifestos and fighting for the right place in history — that is, defending a final truth within the field of modern art. (The Concrete and Neoconcrete groups were notorious for their battles.) In that sense, it is important to emphasise that so-called participation entered the discussion as an avant-garde topic, and as such was modelled — particularly in Brazil, in this historical moment — under the influence of the ‘pedagogy of the avant-garde’: no concessions at all to the general public, to common sense or to the market. The spectator, here, is meant to be offered an integral engagement within all the radical aspects of the new, and as such is taken as someone who will get access, through contact with the artwork, to a possibility of real emancipation and autonomy.

We have been arguing here for the presence of the ‘participatory’ as a general and epistemological condition for the

last fifty years of contemporary art. This condition has been variously appropriated by different works’ and events’ layers and roles, and by the actors and forces that comprise the art circuit: it is not difficult to see, then, how the corporate art world, for instance, has been profiting from this, publicising big spectacular art events as special participatory moments, or how society has been slowly inserting into all of us the timing of consumption as a gesture of will and desire, as described in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s vehement and acute analysis of the fundamentals of capitalism, *Capitalism et Schizophrénie* (vol.1, 1972; vol.2, 1980). Pointing to the demand for the other as part of an avant-garde platform intends to shed some light on this process as a truly constitutive element of the contemporary artefact — obviously, the term ‘formal’ does not fit here, because it is no longer a matter of plastic composition but rather a problem of concept and sensitisation. How to conceive something (an object, an event, a film, an image, etc.) that can function as an artwork in terms of triggering the production of new sensorial layers? And, moreover, which takes these particular dynamics as a bodily assemblage (artwork + participator) where the subject is rebuilt and the symbolic rewritten, as a simultaneous and bidirectional process? The questions seem awkward;

Ricardo Basbaum,  
*me-you: choreographies, games and exercises*, 2007, performed at Lisson Gallery, London. Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London



Ricardo Basbaum, *me-you: choreographies, games and exercises*, 2008, performed at the 7th Shanghai Biennial. Courtesy the artist and the Shanghai Biennial

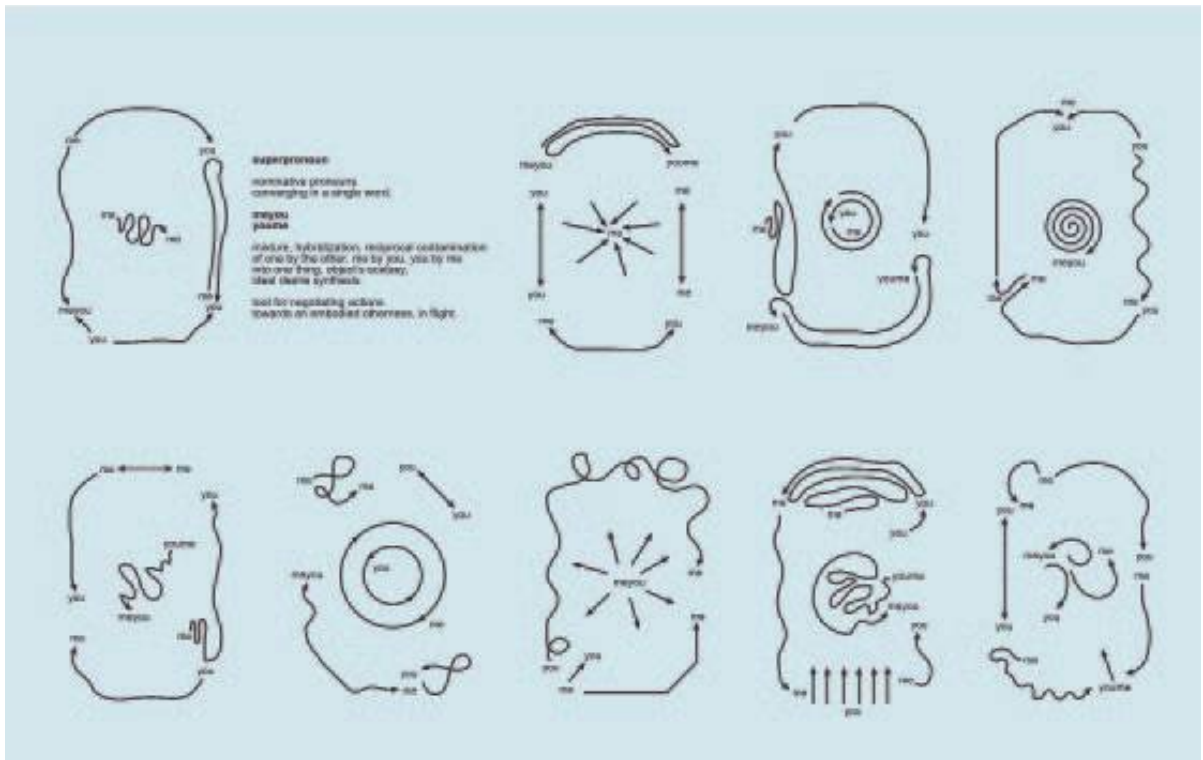
to produce sense, the artwork should (not exclusively, of course, this is just one possible account of the problem) be addressed by the *informe*, by the idea of gaming (not game theory, but an area related to the history of games in culture and politics) and by the political frame of a bio- or micropolitics. Respectively, such a blurring of formal and previously established categories, as well as the maintenance of a space for open conversation and the public problematisation of subjects and bodies, would make the problem of producing art in a participatory mode productive in terms of establishing lines of resistance against instrumentalisation and other forms of manipulative appropriation. Artists like Oiticica and Clark, but also David Medalla, Antônio Dias, Luis Camnitzer and Cildo Meireles, for instance, helped (in different modes and by different strategies) to build the thickness of this contact zone, allocating responsibility to the viewer and establishing the double aggregate 'body subject + work of art' as an unavoidable feature of the contemporary.



Such avant-garde pedagogical capital, in terms of participatory practices,

proved decisive in the context of the 1980s and 90s, when Brazilian society shifted from military dictatorial control to a neoliberal market economy following the spread of integrated world capitalism. I started to work as an artist under these conditions, and developed my practice as a combination of artistic and communication strategies — in the sense of organising visual and conceptual aspects so that they were able to perceptually flow easily through certain networks: signs, logos, diagrams, refrains and other forms of graphic communication that presuppose direct contact with the viewer. There was a moment when a decision had to be made: in 1990, I reduced all my work to a simple drawing, which was conceived of as an easily memorisable particle, and I developed this (in the form of objects, diagrams, installations and drawings) as a vehicle or a sort of virus, for circulating in *your* body (therefore, pointing directly towards the reader or viewer) — the adopted *artistic methodology* suggested the use of contagion theory, together with the repetition of visual refrains.<sup>6</sup> After some initial experiences as an artist in the atmosphere of the so-called re-democratisation period,<sup>7</sup> it was possible — as for several other artists from the period (such

6 See R. Basbaum, 'What Is NBP?', manifesto, 1990, available at <http://www.nbp.pro.br/nbp.php> (last accessed on 12 December 2010).



as Alexandre Dacosta, Alex Hamburger, Márcia X. and Mario Ramiro) — to comprehend that the art circuit and the neoliberal economy were developing new and complex relationship patterns, and were doing so quickly and aggressively: the 1980s artists who emerged globally under the ‘return to painting’ melded perfectly into these new dynamics and were quickly promoted as representatives of the period. Such an overload of strategic and promotional practices encountered resistance among artists with art and science research-based practices (Eduardo Kac, Ramiro) and performative practices (Dacosta, Hamburger, Márcia X.) — as well as within the field of the ‘participatory’. As already indicated, the corporative economy organised its management programmes in order to engage the subject in a productive and creative mode.<sup>8</sup> It is not a coincidence that the work of Oiticica and Clark resurfaced in such a context, after decades

of an almost underground (or ‘subterranean’, as Oiticica preferred) and lateral existence: when the game of art was running the risk of losing itself in a sort of speculative bubble, where the institutional fabric could not clearly assign value to artwork apart from that based in art-market operations, the presence of two artists who deliberately set their work and themselves apart from these dynamics (Clark’s and Oiticica’s practices started in the late 1950s, still under the impact of modernism) somehow restored some concrete value to critical art practice. This (urgent and necessary, of course) emergence — which can be exemplified by the first international Oiticica retrospective, organised at the Witte de With in 1992 by Luciano Figueiredo, Guy Brett, Chris Dercon and Catherine David<sup>9</sup> — figures as a symptom of the heatedness of the dispute between the cooperative and institutional art universes — necessary for adjoining

Ricardo Basbaum,  
*diagrams for choreographies*, 2008,  
digital print  
56 × 86cm.  
Courtesy the artist

7 The first presidential elections after the end of the dictatorship were held in Brazil in 1989.

8 See Brian Holmes, ‘The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique’, available at <http://transform.eicpc.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en>; and S. Rolnik, ‘The Geopolitics of Pimping’, available at <http://transform.eicpc.net/transversal/1106/rolnik/en> (both last accessed on 18 October 2010).

9 The art critic Glória Ferreira organised the first survey of the work of Clark and Oiticica in 1986, at Paço Imperial, Rio de Janeiro. The exhibition ‘Lygia Clark e Hélio Oiticica’ had ‘a very particular field of approach, [...] the “participation of the spectator” [...] as the unfolding of the questions common to them during the Neoconcrete period.’ See G. Ferreira, ‘Terreiro do Paço: cena para Lygia Clark e Hélio Oiticica’, in *Lygia Clark e Hélio Oiticica, Sala Especial do 9º Salão Nacional de Artes Plásticas*, Rio de Janeiro: Funarte/INAP, 1986. Clark was still alive and attended the exhibition several times. The arguments she had with collectors regarding the originals of her *Bichos*, a series of 1960s sculptures included in the exhibition, were remarkable: although she invited the public to use them, the collectors who owned the pieces prevented any manipulation.





Ricardo Basbaum, *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?*, 1994—ongoing, painted steel structure, wire mesh, painted steel object, carpet, mattresses, cushions, 8 monitors, 2 DVD players, 4 computers, 8 closed-circuit TV cameras, 2 closed-circuit systems, wall diagram, wall text installation: 2000 × 960 × 240cm. Installation view, Ave Pavilion, documenta 12, Kassel, 2007. Photograph: Julia Zimmermann. Courtesy the artist

critical and intellectual value with contemporary practice — as well as indicating the strength of the interests and actors (institutions and artists, but also banks and other international finance and communication companies) that continue to align themselves with the topic of ‘participation strategies’. Clearly, it was important to stress that an artistic, critical and intellectual compromise should prove viable and suitable for strategies of resistance (still to be further explored, of course) before the subject would become generally dispersed through the interests of the new cultural economy. The rapidity of the alignment between art and neoliberal practices also indicates how ambiguous the connections have been between both the Concrete and Neoconcrete artists’ heirs<sup>10</sup> and the current art market — because it is in fact almost impossible to make work for both the

market and within the pedagogical field without clearly comprehending the complex implications of both fields (basically, how difficult it is for the market and the pedagogical to get along without strong conflicts). When I initiated the project *NBP (Novas Bases para a Personalidade) (New Basis for Personality, 1990—ongoing)*, it was as a gesture of locating the work in line with transformational strategies,<sup>11</sup> in close contact with the other and acting to involve and model the subject: ‘*NBP* is a programme for sudden changes. What? How? When? Let it be contagious: they will be the fruit of your own desire and effort.’<sup>12</sup> There was a recognition, through this particular project, of the existence of a locus of potentiality proper to the contemporary artwork and, equally, of the need to occupy it conceptually and sensorially<sup>13</sup> — seeking to make

10 It is not a coincidence that the estates of the three main Neoconcrete artists (Clark, Oiticica and Pape) are managed by their families, as private cultural associations. This gesture is justified by the lack of support by Brazilian museums and governmental institutions towards contemporary art in general (with very few exceptions). The private associations have to search for funds on the corporate and art markets, sometimes assuming positions that directly contradict certain gestures that the artists themselves defended in their lifetimes. It is not necessary to say that such conflicts and contradictions speak vehemently about the current economy of culture. See Projeto Hélio Oiticica, founded in 1981 (<http://www.heliooiticica.org.br>); Associação Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark, founded in 2001 (<http://www.lygiaclark.org.br>); and Associação Cultural Projeto Lygia Pape, founded in 2004 (<http://www.lygiapape.org.br>) (all last accessed on 11 July 2011).

11 For ‘transformational strategies’ I refer to the different programmes and projects that aim to actively engage the other (viewer or participant) in an intensive process vis-à-vis the artwork, facing a ‘problematic field’ and triggering a subjectivation process. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (trans. Paul Patton), New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.246.

12 R. Basbaum, ‘What Is NBP?’, *op. cit.*

13 This aspect of contemporary artworks is developed in my text ‘Who Sees Our Work?’, *Roland*, no.1, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, May 2009. Also available at <http://ica.org.uk/download.php?id=696> (last accessed on 12 December 2010).

the artwork productive and to adopt procedures that would foreground the avant-garde's pedagogical capital as a means of resisting the speculative capitalism of the private art market (the only active side of the commercial Brazilian art sphere: there has not yet been a public initiative to support collecting outside of the private sphere).

The sign that I adopted as a starting point and which I repeated in different ways in subsequent years has connections to Daniel Buren's reductionist strategy, in the sense of establishing an iconic structure for continuous play: 'the repetition which interests us is that of a method and not a mannerism (or trick): it is a repetition with differences'.<sup>14</sup> But an important and significant methodological particularity for *NBP* indicates another strategic position: the *NBP* sign does not depart directly from painting (as Buren's does), and instead assumes a viral and communicational profile, which not only makes it function as a vehicle or mediator but also situates it as an emblem that simultaneously points to the visual and to the discursive.<sup>15</sup> This double bind triggers every and each unfolding of the *NBP*, which includes, from 1991 to 2000, a series of sculptural objects that deal with the size of the human body, and, since 2001, a series of architectonic sculptural structures; this development is accompanied by diagrams and texts, and also some closed-circuit live video installations. The project does not, of course, see discourse simply as an explanatory tool or the visual as a purely seductive and hypnotic gadget, but carefully attempts to bring both fields together as mutually implicated layers, in permanent contact with each other. If this condition makes the project's reception flow (the direct contact contagion from mind to mind, body to body) slower than in similar endeavours that organised participatory or relational strategies more

pragmatically and which were more market-oriented — for in *NBP* the viewer/reader has more or less to follow both visual and the verbal fields — it also produces an interesting action field where gestures can replicate themselves sensorially and conceptually; it is possible to 'see' how visual structures attach themselves to concepts in complex ways, to experiment with producing a 'problem space without a solution', where questions are brought forward as devices for opening spaces and making connections. There the subject is confronted with the production of speech as the consequence of intensive and sensorial involvement in visual/conceptual structures.

Projects like *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?* (1994—ongoing) and *me-you: choreographies, games and exercises* (1997—ongoing) are conceived as methods for engaging the other through the artwork, but in such a way that the subject can take part in the proposed situations and produce something in these situations — be it speech, images, written statements, choreographic movements, events, experiences, etc. That is, the subject is given space for organising him- or herself in terms of both visual and verbal involvement. Group dynamics are important to how these situations unfold, particularly, in the 'me-you' actions — an ongoing series of choreographies, games and exercises which I have been performing with different sets of participants, and which are carried out mostly in outdoor public spaces, without any specific audience — where the events succeed when the initial unrelated participants start to behave as one organic and affective entity, a sort of fragile and local swarm, forceful and volatile at the same time.<sup>16</sup> This aspect brings to the work some sort of self-sufficiency that does not require the presence of the art-habitual audience

14 Daniel Buren, 'Beware', in *5 Texts*, London and New York: John Weber Gallery and Jack Wendler Gallery, 1973, p.17.

15 If I refer to a *viral strategy* for the *NBP* project, it has to do with the particular relation it establishes to the issues of *replication, contact and contagion*: the work (relational situations, objects and installations) seeks for a continuous re-staging of the initial specific-shape drawing, always with differences, investing in a sort of tactile/haptic condition in which the body is always physically involved. The proposed effects can be organised around Jacques Derrida's 'virology': the French philosopher 'begins a philosophical enterprise that attempts to *introduce the Other into the I*: a redefinition of the subject. Eventually, this "introduction" becomes "infection", and the Other is radically recast as the virus.' Quoted in Thierry Bardini, 'Hypervirus: A Clinical Report', *CTheory*, vol.29, no.1—2, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=504> (last accessed on 8 April 2011). Emphasis Bardini's.

16 For an account of the 'me-you' actions, see my text 'Differences between us and them', available at <http://rbtxt.files.wordpress.com> (last accessed on 11 July 2011). Originally published in Becky Shaw and Gareth Woollam (ed.), *Us and Them — Static Pamphlet Anthology 2003—04*, Liverpool: Static Gallery, 2005.



Ricardo Basbaum,  
*Would you like to  
participate in an  
artistic experience?*,  
1994—ongoing,  
painted steel object,  
experience,  
125 × 80 × 18cm.  
Participation  
Jorge Menna Barreto  
Porto Alegre, 2002.  
Photograph: Jorge  
Menna Barreto.  
Courtesy the artist





(as do Allan Kaprow's 'activities'<sup>17</sup>); the games develop within the group, and the results are publicly visible only when the video is exhibited. The reader/viewer and the art proposal suffice to trigger a situation and make the poetics of the work function: here, the aggregate 'artwork + (collective) subject' is the basic unity that is submitted to transformational dynamics (we could add 'the artist' to this cluster, as I am also included in the experiences, and, in certain cases, 'the institutional partner'). The participatory condition is not proposed as mere entertainment (although fun, of course, can be part of the process) or empty production in and for itself, but as the moment when the subject and artwork are taken to a liminal state, each one pushed towards the other in the direction of a mixing situation where body and artwork superimpose and create common regions, membranes and folds. Not only is the art piece meant to be actively enacted, but the subject is also meant to be produced in a different way, in close contact with the work, and to reinvent him- or herself there.

Such a condition is not easily achieved under the art system's standard functioning: where in this process can the art institutions, the collectors and the art market access the work and make it available to the so-called general public?

Under the participatory 'wave' that shakes the economy, artists have anticipated — since the 1950s — certain effects and have been addressing the multitude in various ways: sensorial-conceptual developments by artists become useful and strategic now. The condition of this operation can be turned into the pedagogical if the investment involves the production of the subject and the artwork at the same time, as part of the very process of the aesthetic experience (which should itself be inseparable from an awareness of its institutional location). Seen from the perspective of the modification of the economy of culture, in the last decade of the twentieth century, the pedagogical — as proposed by the avant-garde, in terms of the public sharing of the sensorial and conceptual aspects of artistic propositions

Ricardo Basbaum,  
*[small operatic event]*  
*Would you like to*  
*participate in an artistic*  
*experience?*, 2010,  
 with Joyce Gyimah,  
 Dance Physics and  
 Bruce Nockles,  
 press-on vinyl  
 diagram, monochrome  
 wall-painting,  
 painted, metal  
 object, dance, sound,  
 reading event at  
 The Showroom,  
 London.  
 Photograph:  
 Daniela Mattos.  
 Courtesy the artist

17 The development of the work of Allan Kaprow (1927—2006) is usually considered under three sequential and complementary series: 'environments', 'happenings' and 'activities'. The latter series, made after the 1970s, consisted in sets of daily actions and gestures, to be performed by small groups of volunteers under the artist's written instructions or scores. The activities were never documented for public notice as they were actions that should be performed — and later discussed — only within the group of participants. Towards the end of his life, Kaprow encouraged others to create new versions of his works 'under three principles formulated by the artist: site-specificity, impermanence and doubt in art'. See the gallery guide published to accompany 'Allan Kaprow: Art as Life', Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 23 March — 30 June 2008, available at [www.moca.org/kaprow/GalleryGuide\\_Kaprow.pdf](http://www.moca.org/kaprow/GalleryGuide_Kaprow.pdf) (last accessed on 1 August 2011).



---

and the production of a new subject from that confrontation — is recognised as one of the regions that can be occupied by strategies of resistance which value *contact* as a means of bringing forward *difference*, in terms of subjectivation and transformational dynamics (i.e. resistance). Today, this aspect has also been highly disputed by the actors of macroeconomic games — and this is an overly present symptom of how significant it is now: it is important not only to pay attention to the microsensorial<sup>18</sup> (the layers of perception that are activated when in contact with the artistic proposition), but also to occupy such space with double-bound sensorial and discursive strategies. The pedagogy of the avant-garde indicates how to produce membranes that generate contact and potentialise experience: *becoming other with the artwork* points towards a model for action, for modelling the subject and being transformed by

---

***The contemporary art field is daily becoming more integrated into the pragmatics of the regular cultural economy, making the art circuit change some of its practices to find places closer to the culture industry.***

it, outside of formal limits. As an artist, I have focused on this scenario for the transformation of art and its actors — coming up with proposals to contribute to this general shift in terms of the production of the sensorial and the discursive together. New images for artists are being continuously arranged and collectively modified, emphasising more than ever the act of listening, of being attentive to any shake, touch, scratch and sign produced in close or distant contact.

Thus, working as an artist in the years to come (that is, looking ahead from the conditions of today), seems to pose some particular and specific questions: the contemporary art field is daily becoming more integrated into the pragmatics of the regular cultural economy, making the art circuit change some of its practices to find places closer to the culture industry.

If an increase in the number of regular practicing artists can be expected, perhaps also a better and more generous distribution of art's conceptual and pedagogical capital is in process — breaking some still present class, economic and cultural barriers, and also pointing to inevitable changes in its concepts, modes of production and reception. But no one has the right to speculate from within the art field; this is not a place from which to look at the future — the contemporary artist lives and produces problems as part of a radical present that is not easily accessible, and to work for its emergence is one of the main tasks of the contemporary. However, how do you participate in something — an action or process — when your body is already *there*, long before you answer 'yes' or 'no'? The more interesting art practices today may bring us closer to this paradox: to mobilise the other as an extension of yourself and mobilise yourself as an extension of the other — where alterity is mutually reinforced and where *me* and *you* are continuously replaced by a larger and external contact area. What can *we* do but live outside of ourselves?

---

18 See José Gil, *A imagem nua e as pequenas percepções: estética e metafenomenologia*, Lisbon: Relógio D'Água, 1996.