

MYRMECOCHORY OCCURS

Exhibiting indifference to the participating subject
in Pierre Huyghe's *Untilled* (2012) at Documenta 13

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Pierre Huyghe's art installation in the composting area of the Karlsau Park at Documenta 13 doesn't care about my experience of it. Events such as pollination and compostation continue to happen whether or not I choose to view or participate in the exhibited work. As such, it raises questions for a regime of contemporary art that focuses on viewer-object relations or on the co-completion of meaning through openness to public participation, as well as for attendant political claims premised upon reconfigurations of the subject of sense experience. This paper proposes that Huyghe's *Untilled* (2012), through complicity with material processes, stages an indifference to participation, and challenges the claims of a participatory regime of art by actively producing a non-subject-dependent reality. It does this through strategies of closure, exposure and, paradoxically, by claiming the importance of exhibition for an artwork that refuses to prioritise a subject of experience. The exhibition, in this context, acts as a registration for material processes, and as a continual ungrounding (or compostation) of anthropocentric experience. This suggests a politics distinct from both relational aesthetics and its antagonistic reworkings, which are premised on openness to and dependence upon a subject.¹

¹Bishop 2004.

1 Compost model

Untilled can be described as a composting machine that uproots histories and responses into a literal and conceptual heap. The work takes place in the composting area at the back of the Karlsau Park exhibition space at Documenta 13. The area looks overgrown and makeshift, with piles of gravel and algae-covered puddles. It consists of various elements: there is, among other things, a wandering skinny white Podenco Ibencico dog with a painted pink leg; a concrete statue of a reclining female nude with its head immersed and covered in a beehive; a dead and uprooted oak, recalling Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks* at Documenta 7 in 1982; a number of peyote and afghan poppies; toxic foxglove and jimson weed; a scrawled diagram and a text by Huyghe in the exhibition catalogue, and a video interview with him on the website. Relations are suggested, through their gathering, between bees and plants, art histories and the earth, interventions and contingent processes.

It is clear, first of all, that composting is taken not just as a figurative but as a literal model for the work. The decomposition and recycling of organic matter, at varying speeds, provides a formal compositional structure for the piece. Experiencing the work, I am implicated in this, minimally, through the rearranging of mud beneath my feet, but am also distanced from it, as I watch processes take place that I have no direct control over, and which have no interest in me as a macro-organism. Composting becomes a model for the destratification of categorising processes and for their replacement with a different kind of organisation—one that draws nourishment from organic matter, indifferent to the histories and significations of its participating objects or the experience of its viewing subjects, and indifferent to their difference. The area, as Huyghe has described it in an interview, is “a place where things are dropped, things which are dead or considered useless. The compost becomes a place where things are left without culture, *where they become indifferent to us*, metabolizing, allowing the emergence of new forms.”² By staging this

²Huyghe, cited in Goodden 2012, my italics.

indifference through its framing as artwork, the compost model is put under the conditions of contemporary art, and shapes my experience, interpretation and affective response, which are then also dropped as useless, as catabolic fodder for mulch.

2 Ecologically extended antagonism

How does the non-participatory character of the work differ from the dominant subject-centred participatory regime of contemporary art? I want to suggest that *Untilled* draws on this regime but extends it through relaying it alongside more ecologically defined human and non-human participations and effects, and want to consider what is at stake here politically.

The participatory regime can be defined according to three theses extracted from the work of Claire Bishop:

[1] the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; [2] the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term project with an unclear beginning and end; [3] while the audience, previously conceived as a ‘viewer’ or ‘beholder’, is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant.³

Untilled correlates with the first two of these claims. Importantly, however, the work does not fulfil the third part of Bishop’s definition. Its audience is not conceived as viewer or beholder, but neither is it repositioned as co-producer or participant. Viewers of the work have been described as “collaborators,”⁴ but actually, fundamentally, and

³Bishop 2012, p. 3, numbers added. Claire Bishop, in her work on installation and participatory art practice, aims to rethink twentieth century art history through the lens of theatre rather than painting or the readymade. She defines the turn to social, relational or participatory practices since the 1990s according to these three central theses.

⁴Druchs 2012.

against the criteria of Bishop's model, they aren't. People are implicated in processes of which they are a part, but they are refused any access of collaboration through the indifference of the work's appeal to them.

While, for Bishop, people come to constitute the central artistic medium and material for participatory practice,⁵ in *Untilled* this priority is rejected both in terms of material constitution and in terms of meaning-making through interpretation or participation. The viewer, however defined, makes no difference.

What is at stake in such a claim becomes clearer when we see how Bishop's argument develops into a political dimension. As the subtitle of her *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012) suggests, Bishop develops a critical reflection on art as the site for a politics of spectatorship. Subjectivity is fundamental to this, and she writes that "it is possible to say that all art presumes a subject—insofar as it is made by a subject (the artist) and is received by a subject (the viewer)."⁶ She is critical of the ways in which this exchange can lead to claims for consensus that mask actual social divisions, a model of subjectivity premised upon "togetherness . . . feel-good positions . . . the fictitious whole subject of harmonious community."⁷ Such consensus is replaced in her thought with the demand for a 'relational antagonism,' premised on "a divided subject of partial identifications open to constant flux."⁸

It is this version of subjectivity that she pursues in her 2005 study of Installation Art, where art plays the role of simultaneously activating and decentering or dispersing subjectivity. The work she valorises here "insists on our presence to subject us to experience of decentering," its very force coming from the way this experience is not only articulated but performed by the work in correlation with a paradoxically activated/decentred participating subject.⁹ This experience is political because, through its negativity and continual unreconciled tension, it

⁵Bishop 2012, p. 2.

⁶Ibid., p. 10.

⁷A model that she reads in Nicolas Bourriaud's definition of relational aesthetics (Bishop 2004, p. 79).

⁸Ibid., p. 79.

⁹Bishop 2005, p. 130.

draws attention to that which otherwise remains occluded by the feeling of harmony in relational aesthetics, and, by extension, to affective underpinnings of liberal democratic communities, and therein is able to support transformation and change.

Bishop's discussion of a politics of aesthetics relies on the work of Jacques Rancière. He maintains that what is proper to politics is "the existence of a subject defined by its participation in contrarities."¹⁰ It is the identified indeterminacy of the 'aesthetic regime,'¹¹ which enables this contrary participation, and can lead to the destabilising operation that produces dissensus about what is able to be said and thought in the world, allowing for redistribution of the sensible.¹²

While antagonism is crucial to such an account, *Untilled* does not reject this. It merely strips away its dependence on a subjective encounter. In effect, *Untilled* demonstrates that "there are antagonisms . . . with no encounters."¹³ While experience is folded into the work as part of its materials, it is not prioritised and the work is not conditioned by it. While one may experience a feeling of decentring, this is not the focus of the work, which continues its complicity with material processes. Whether the participant feels this or not, "the colony pollinates aphrodisiac and psychotropic plants . . . Myrmecochory occurs."¹⁴

'Stuff happens', in other words, in which I am inevitably implicated ecologically, while the work is not reduced to a stage for my experience, activation or tension. The antagonisms disavowed in relational aesthetics and valorised in Bishop's critique re-appear on an extended ecological plane, without, however, addressing a subject to feel, resolve, interpret or be disrupted. This non-encountered

¹⁰Rancière 2001, Thesis 2.

¹¹Rancière 2004, p. 4.

¹²"Politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of the community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals . . . Practices and forms of visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration" (Rancière 2009, p.25).

¹³Huyghe 2012, p. 262.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 262.

non-participation takes place, not through refusal or escape, but simply through an indifference of address, raising the questions of why this needs to be exhibited as art, and to what end?

3 Rejection of the participatory regime

As soon as the limitations of political claims for participatory aesthetics are considered, the argument developed above can be taken a step further. Its inherent claims to address to a free and autonomous subject leave it tied affectively and conceptually to current forms of neoliberal subjectification. *Untilled* points to this through its refusal to address such a subject while also attempting to produce something outside of this interpellation. Firstly, then, it can be argued that through staging indifference to the participating subject, the work questions the political claims of the participatory regime. While pointing to the UK context of New Labour's embrace of social art practice as a form of soft social engineering, Bishop has argued that:

Even though participatory artists invariably stand against neoliberal capitalism, the values they impute to their work are understood formally (in terms of opposing individualism and the commodity object), without recognising that so many other aspects of this art practice dovetail even more perfectly with neoliberalism's recent forms (networks, mobility, project work, affective labour).¹⁵

These 'other aspects' can also be broadened, however, to include the labour, subjectification and conditions of participation itself. As Maurizio Lazzarato has argued of the immaterial labour crucial to neoliberal economies, "the new slogan of Western societies is that we should all 'become subjects'. Participative management is a technology of power, a technology for creating and controlling the subjective processes."¹⁶ It can be argued that offering new participatory choices or

¹⁵Bishop 2012, p. 281.

¹⁶Lazzarato 2006, p. 134.

communities does not unproblematically challenge these technologies of power, because inherent to the very notion of participatory practice is already a valorization and prioritization of a subject entirely concomitant with current neoliberalism. Art under this regime, in other words, addresses an individual subject (or a group of individual subjects) as free autonomous co-producer(s) of the meaning of the work, precisely through participation. Tension, negativity and disruption are framed through the insistent presence of the centrality of subjective experience.

Such experience, it is to be assumed, can cope very well with such disruptions, while, further, the proposed 'flux' or indeterminacy of identification institutes an openness to interpretation that re-affirms the centrality of subjective thought. Bishop's antagonistic participation can be recoded, then, as a kind of economic survivalism or affordance. This can be understood, drawing on Reza Negarestani, as a form of pre-negotiated strategic openness that does not threaten the survival of the subject or its participatory environment. As he writes, "openness is represented as the level of *being open* (to) not *being opened* (the plane of epidemic and contagion: plagues, contaminations, possession, etc.). 'I am open to you.' means, I have the capacity to bear your investment or 'I afford you'".¹⁷ If that is right, work under the participatory regime is open, made affordable, precisely through the indeterminacy of its produced 'situations,' which are fed upon by the oscillating decentred/activated subject in a strengthening of the economic tension they co-produce. This assemblage of affordably tense situations and a subject open to staging its own flux capacity institutes a mutually supportive limit to such work, ensuring that the subject and its contemporary art environment are maintained while offering no incision into the subjective demands of participative capital.

Untilled, on the contrary, is presented as "enclosed" and this enclosure can be understood not only as the demarcation of an exhibiting stage but also a closing off, as refusal and negation of such openness.¹⁸ To avoid affirming the inclusive freedom of interpretive

¹⁷Negarestani 2003, §1.

¹⁸Huyghe 2012, p. 262.

pluralism ultimately implied by the exogenic tension¹⁹ of indeterminacy, the work thinks beyond openness through its spatial and affective enclosure. These points, then, connect and lead directly to a defence against anthropocenic ungrounding.²⁰ While the activation of a decentring of the participatory regime may suggest a critique of the self-enclosed Cartesian subject, it does little to address humanity's place in the world, and remains wedded to correlational dependence on, openness to, and prioritisation of, human experience. Indeed, as Bishop herself makes explicit, “[installation art] constructs a set in which the viewing subject may experience [the fragmentation of dispersed subjectivity]”²¹ For *Untilled*, on the other hand, by instituting indifference as a turn away from the focus on subjective disruption or activation, it allows space for processes that the regime does not account for.

4 Production of a non-subject-dependent reality

It has been argued that one effect of exhibiting *Untilled* is critical: it deprioritises the sensible as the primary category of engagement without this deprioritisation itself being recuperated as a central focal point. More positively, the work also tests what happens when relations of participation are extended into a non-human realm. In other words, the materiality of the work refuses to map onto the limits of human knowledge or experience, but instead proposes its own positive ontology not correlated to the human. Huyghe describes *Untilled* in terms of a series of operations:

I'm interested in the vitality of the image, in the way an idea, an artifact, leaks into a biological or mineral real-

¹⁹An “exogenic tension . . . whereby the system, instead of staving off or dismissing exteriority, economically binds it within the affordable duplicity of capacity and exorbitant external world” (Negarestani 2011, p. 28)

²⁰The Anthropocene is the geological age that marks the evidence and extent of human activities on their environment, flattening out the priority of the human as one object among others.

²¹Bishop 2005, p. 131.

ity. It is a set of topological operations. It is not displayed for a public, but for a raw witness exposed to these operations.²²

One way to think of this formulation of the image and the raw witness is through a deconstruction of the Duchampian co-efficient between the art-object “in its raw state” and the viewer-subject who completes the work by giving it meaning.²³ Here it is the subject that is made raw, stripped of any qualities or powers of interpretive immunisation against the humiliating decentring of ecological thought, while it is the art-object (defined here through its radiating force as ‘image’) that is invested with ‘vitality’ to overflow its subjective containment and impinge upon the real. These poles (vital image/raw witness) are neither inverted nor connected through dependence and hierarchy but imaged horizontally through leakage and exposure, respecting no separation between them.

Exposure suggests not only *being open to* (the economic openness of the participatory regime), but also being opened by doses of immersion in contagious materials, where ‘being opened’ has the power to produce an image, through chemical processes, for another material, in an intra-agency of emulsion, reaction and marks. In this sense, it accurately captures my experience of *Untilled*—an experience in which I was exposed to processes, lured to affecting and becoming affected by them, without being addressed by them as a subject, and without their becoming dependent upon me. My reaction is a registration of this exposure, where experience is made raw, both in the sense of minimally processed (untilled) image and in the sense of stripped-down availability to the radical ungrounding impact of the real.

In this way the work, as exhibition, twists the ‘outside’ of experience,²⁴ as inhuman affect, through being attendant to its exposure to perception, manifested as the weird vital thingness of the image.

²²Huyghe, cited in Goodden 2012.

²³See Antlin 2012, p. 136.

²⁴The level of experience described by Mark Hansen (2012) as ‘sensibility’, outside of direct perceptual access. It is modulated in this case not through the compressed temporality of the conscious-bypassing machinic loop, but by the indifferent mode of address and imagistic operations of the ecological display.

Huyghe describes his own role as a witness of accidents, yet this operation of exposure does not need an outside viewing position, but instead stages its ‘witnessing’ as complicity with the contingency of its materials. If the work has any drama, it is one that addresses no audience, as the ungrounding of the priority of the subject is played out through the flattening of experience into this mesh of ecological effects.

5 Catalysing conditions

As a situation where processes continue without any human participation, why does the work need to be exhibited as art at all? The preceding discussion allows an answer to this question.

Untilled draws on a legacy of participatory art in order to question the political claims and philosophical limitation of this regime, deprioritising the sensible as the primary category of engagement without this deprioritisation itself being recuperated as a central focus point. More positively, it suggests the production of a non-subject-dependent reality where, through strategies of closure and material complicity, antagonistic relations are extended to include non-human processes, temporalities and contingencies—the subject-object relation is replaced with an ontology of exposure, populated with vital images and raw-witness objects.

It does this neither through dialectical negation of the human, nor through a sublime allusion to events that will never be perceived, nor through a registration of the opacity of the real.²⁵ A non-subject-dependent reality is suggested through its focus on the incessant and abundant materiality of things indifferent to subjectification. This is not at all an optimistic or joyful abundance, as the uprooted oak and affect of desolation suggest, but one that installs art as a set of conditions for continuous ungrounding or compostation. Art in this sense does not need to re-institute the figure of the artist as catalyser but itself continues to distribute material effects, registered through ex-

²⁵Aesthetic tactics that I am exploring and examining at length in my current PhD research.

hibition as part of this process. In this way, *Untilled* fulfils the Documenta curator Carolyn Christov-Bagarkiev's call for the production of circumstances that are readable by art, allowing an understanding of art as a parasitical set of interpretative conditions.²⁶ By exhibiting the work as staged indifference of address, Huyghe's installation takes the conditions of the participatory regime, and their dependence on a subject-object relation, as part of its contingent materials, and subjects them to an ongoing operation of compostation.

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²⁶Christov-Bagarkiev 2012, p. 31.

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