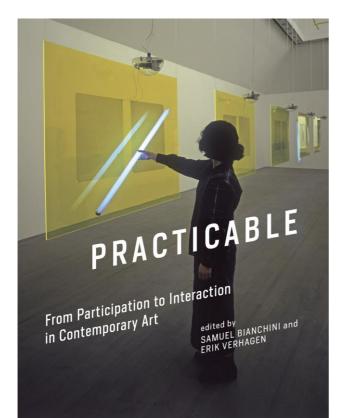# Practicable. From Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art

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BOOK REVIEW

Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagen (Eds) (2016) Practicable. From Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 930 pages.

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With contributions dating back to 2011, this publication is characterized by the balance between theoretical orientation, historical framing and critical analysis of artistic manifestations ranging from the late 50s to the present day. The book approaches all the pieces that constitute the artistic system, namely: works and projects, exhibitions, festivals, meetings, artists, audiences, critics, curators, academics and production, mediation and reception processes. And it does so by means of a thorough and extensive exam where critical awareness and theoretic orientation lead to new concepts and a new

understanding of artistic works, interventions and creations under the concept of "practicable". In the words of the book's organizers, the "distinguished features" of these art works consist in "their capacity to accommodate the concrete involvement of their viewers and to generate an activity that can transform the works themselves as well as their audience" (p. 1).

If, above, we used the traditional artistic terminology, what is at debate in this book shows us that the broadening and transformation of this nomenclature are in process of being studied. In fact, the use of traditional terminology is not adequate as regards the experiences inherent to an artistic universe which calls both the aesthetic and the utilitarian (operational and practical) dimensions and sets new players and roles, just as it is inadequate to make a simplistic contrast out of the two dimensions. Therefore, in various contexts, there is the idea that the comprehension of these phenomena should not be based on an antagonism between contemplation and action. As Bruno Latour refers, for example: "I do not think we can make much progress if we try to draw a line between those works in which the audience participates and those in which it doesn't" or "I can't think of any more incredibly lively activity than to sit in front of a painting and contemplate it." (pp. 775-776).

Throughout the book, there is a continuous urge to generate a vocabulary capable of rigorously expressing the change of ongoing categories and the alternate roles between who creates and who makes use of, who produces and who consumes, and who configures an experience and who reconfigures it. Right in the *Introduction*, several possibilities for terminological replacement are referred: "Effects. Events. Openings. Participation. Relationships" (p. 7) and, throughout the book, various alternative terms can be found regarding the different agents involved in the ongoing artistic processes.

The field at issue is extremely broad, since art transcended the frontiers of a supposed sphere of its own long ago, taking on the lands of the improper and letting itself be invaded by operations and procedures from the fields of communication, entertainment and cultural industries. Actions, happenings, performances and installations ranging from the participative model that ruled the

experimental atmosphere of the late 50s, 60s and 70 to the interactive model that characterized the laboratorial environment of computer technology of the late 90s and, particularly, of the early 21st century onwards, are, therefore, covered.

In its chronological and conceptual delimitation, the book has the huge advantage of not denying the historical density of the problems approached, positioning the artistic manifestations which frequently maintain a dialogue with practices of the past in the continuity of the time stream. From here results the positioning of this work, which does not set the discussion away from the artistic horizon, hereby correcting the strictly technological point of view present in a wide range of bibliography on the period and the practices at issue. In fact, it is neither the technological matrix that stands out, even though its presence is inevitable in several contributions, nor the resources, technological processes and concrete programming and digital production steps which constitute this book. The focus goes to the reflection upon the "dispositifs", technological or not, which altered art and society – and still do nowadays –, and to the phenomena characterized above: in the words of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, dematerialization, deterritorialization and detemporalization (p. 693).

This positioning involves epistemological values worth mentioning: the artistic practices of participation and interaction are understood as constituents of the broad contemporary art problematics framework. Since the so-called "new media" have already been assimilated by contemporary art, the category becomes meaningless and the volume's editors not only reject the term, but also avoid structuring a classification of artistic creations based on the "medium".

Containing 57 texts divided into 7 parts (I-VII), the book offers an extraordinary view of the contemporary artistic field, with contributions ranging from a historical approach (part I), to movements, trends and artistic practices (parts II, III e IV), exhibition specificities (part VI), case studies (part VI) and, lastly, texts, interviews and testimonials of artists and academics (part VII). An extensive bibliography concludes the book.

Risking some exaggeration, we can attest the presence in the book of all issues raised by

technology-based art and the new media: perception, aesthetic experience, user experience, audiences and audience tests, new behaviours, legal frames, political, social and gender implications, and environmental criticism. The information and discussion of projects, artists, groups and attitudes include, among others: *Internationale Situacionniste*, *Social Sculpture* of Beuys, *Arte Programmata*, the *Penetrables* of Oiticica, the French collective *GRAV*, *Fluxus*, *arte cinética*, *op art*, *net art*, the successive *Demos* of the techno-aesthetic era, the *Very Nervous System* of David Rokeby, the *Homeless* vehicle of Wodiczko, the proposals of *Workspace Unlimited*, and the installations of Masaki Fujihata and Seiko Mikami.

In spite of occupying a less extensive section of the book, the reflections upon curatorship and ways of exhibiting digital, interactive and "practicable" art are worth mentioning. Jean-Louis Boissier's proposition on the "dramaturgy of interactivity" stands out by means of the analogy with the practicable, an instrument from the universe of theatre available for the movement of actors, as does the text by Sarah Cook on the challenges and the responsibility of the curator as a facilitator of audiences' access to and participation in complex and demanding exhibitive discourses.

Also worthy of note are the interviews published, given the relevance of the questions raised first-hand by emblematic figures of the artistic circuit and certain affirmations that are just as surprising as they are challenging, as this one by Bourriaud: "I've become increasingly sceptical about the critique of the artwork's autonomy. […] I believe we need to reconsider that autonomy […] I think a work that truly has a social impact has to make a formal impact first" (pp. 782-783).

By covering five decades of contemporary artistic production, the result is a cartography of the most relevant institutions and exhibitions of the technological era and culture, and the building of an artistic landscape displayed within museums' conventional settings, public spaces and communication channels and networks.

The framing of these problems within the regimes of history, culture and art constitutes the great virtue of this book, which makes it a reference for all interested in the most recent developments in contemporary art.

The book has the coordination of Samuel Bianchini – artist and researcher, associate professor at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (EnsAD) – Paris Science et Lettres – Research University Paris, head of the Reflective Interaction research group – and Erik Verhagen – curator and art critic, associate professor of Contemporary Art History at Université de Valenciennes.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Laura Castro is a researcher at the Research Center in Science and Technology of the Arts – Universidade Católica Portuguesa.

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