The Myth of Participatory Art:
An Analysis of the Contradictions Present in Marina Abramović’s The Artist is Present and Hélio Oiticica’s Parangolés

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Abstract

Participatory artworks, despite the efforts of artists and theorists alike, remain commodifiable, highly profitable, and ultimately support the conception of the artist as a singular genius. These works must negotiate the paradoxes and contradictions that are inherent to their production, exhibition and dissemination. I believe that artists, participants, critics, curators and historians will be in a better position to negotiate the contradiction of participatory art once a critical intervention in the discourse has occurred—an intervention that would illuminate the fact of paradoxes, analyze the content of these paradoxes, and recognize the conditions from which such paradoxes necessarily emerge.

The aim of this thesis is to provide evidence of specific paradoxes that exist within the conception, display, marketing, and dissemination of participatory art with the hope of shedding light on the ways that participatory art is mythologized and typically represented within a narrow set of art historical paradigms. Ultimately this thesis suggests tactics for the presentation and discussion of participatory art that will acknowledge these paradoxes and provide an accurate presentation of participatory art’s processes.

My analysis rests on two case studies: Marina Abramović’s *The Artist is Present*, 2010, and Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolés*, 1965. Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* consisted of Abramović sitting at a table for 8 hours a day at the New York Museum of Modern Art, from March 14 until May 31, 2010. Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolés*, is a series of colourful capes and costumes that were inspired and worn
by the samba dancers of the Rio de Janeiro shantytown of Mangueira, as a means of freeing colour from the plane of the canvas.

This thesis articulates the ways in which art historians and theorists construct Abramović’s biography to support the notion of a singular artistic genius, while maintaining Abramović’s connection to collaborative art practices. It addresses the meaning of objects that are the byproduct of participatory works; the profitability of participatory art; the ways in which participatory art is historicized and subsumed by art institutions; and the apparent incongruity of Parangolés being attributed to a single author, despite the many types of labour required in its creation.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Participatory art, despite the efforts of artists and theorists alike, remains commodifiable, highly profitable, and ultimately supports the conception of the artist as a singular genius. Participatory artworks are thus the product of a series of functioning paradoxes. These works must negotiate the paradoxes and contradictions that are inherent to their production, exhibition and dissemination. At the core, participatory art must contradict itself to exist in a capitalist, commercially driven art world. Participatory art has become an operative myth, abandoning its philosophical purpose in order to survive in the market. I believe that participatory works can negotiate their contradictions if alterations are made to the discourse surrounding these works.

The aim of this thesis is to provide evidence of the great many paradoxes that exist within the conception, display, marketing, and dissemination of participatory art with the hope of shedding light on the ways that participatory art is mythologized and misrepresented. Ultimately the goal of this thesis is to suggest tactics for the presentation and discussion of participatory art that will acknowledge these paradoxes and provide an accurate presentation of participatory art’s processes. My analysis rests on two case studies: Marina Abramović’s The Artist is Present, 2010, and Hélio Oiticica’s Parangolés, 1965.

The paradoxes of participatory art need to be articulated and mitigated. In order to accurately analyze these works, to accurately assess what they accomplish, we must first understand the factual evidence of their execution. The paradoxes that are inherent in the creation, dissemination, and commercial success of participatory
works, are part of this body of evidence. If a participatory artwork’s goal is to create social interactions or a connection, as in the case of Marina Abramović’s *The Artist is Present*, and a byproduct of that creation is a series of profitable objects, the creation and existence of these objects should be considered in analyses of the work’s success. It is not enough to re-iterate the ideals and goals of a participatory work, without considering the reality of that work from the point of view of participants, and without considering the effect that the art world, its institutions, and their commercial agendas may have had on the work.

Each case study of this thesis highlights the paradoxes and the unique philosophical and theoretical difficulties created by participatory art’s necessary participation in the commercial art world. The first case study will discuss Marina Abramović’s *The Artist is Present*, part of the artist’s solo retrospective exhibition at the New York MoMA in 2010. The work consisted of Abramović sitting at a table for 8 hours a day, from March 14 until May 31, 2010. During this time, anyone could sit across from Abramović. The only parameters were that they not speak, or use it as a platform for their own agenda. The second case study is Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolés*, a series of works conceived by the artist while spending time at the Mangueira Samba School in the Rio de Janeiro shantytown of Mangueira in 1965. The artist designed colourful capes and costumes that were donned by the participants—originally the Mangueira samba dancers—as a means of freeing color from the artist’s canvas. The work has been performed on numerous occasions, in different countries, by different demographics of the public.
Several motivations and concerns have influenced participatory art practices since the 1960’s, and continue to inform interpretations of participatory artworks today. In the introduction to her text *Participation*, Claire Bishop states that works such as Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolés*, 1965, and Adrian Piper’s *Funk Lessons*, 1983, are “striving to collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception. Their emphasis is on collaboration, and the collective dimension of social experience.”¹ Nicholas Bourriaud defines relational art, a body of participatory artworks completed in the 1990’s and early 2000’s, as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”² Following her participatory work, *Caminhando [Walking]*, revolutionary Brazilian participatory artist Lygia Clarke wrote to fellow artist Hélio Oiticica, “the object for me has lost its significance, and if I still use it, it is so that it becomes a mediator for participation.”³

Bishop’s *Participation* contributes a list of the three concerns that “are the most frequently cited motivations for almost all artistic attempts to encourage participation in art since the 1960s.”⁴ The first motivation is “the desire to create an

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active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation.” The second motivation is a desire to shift authorial control from a singular artistic producer towards shared production that is “seen to entail the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and unpredictability. Collaborative creativity is therefore understood both to emerge from, and to produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social model.” The third motivation is the longing to create works that will contribute to “a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning,” in response to “a perceived crisis in community and collective responsibility.” Bishop states in a separate text, Artificial Hells, “these shifts are often more powerful as ideals than as actualized realities, but they all aim to place pressure on conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under capitalism.” The agenda and motivations of participatory art, as it is outlined by these artists and theorists, stands in contrast to the ways in which artists, theorists, curators, and the media execute, present, disseminate, and market participatory art.

In this thesis I argue that paradox is a necessary condition of participatory art, a condition often occluded by the art market and its requisite forms of commodification. I present this argument over four chapters: an Introduction, [5 Ibid.  
6 Ibid.  
7 Ibid.  
8 Ibid.  
wherein I outline the projects under analysis, define my terms, and provide a literature review; Chapters 2 and 3 offer case studies of artists whose practices offer different perspectives on the paradoxes facing participatory art; and the Conclusion advances some ways to think about the future research potential that the paradoxes of participatory art offer. This Introduction begins with some overviews of the definitions of participatory art and then proceeds to introduce the artists on whom the case studies rest. The final section of the Introduction is a Literature Review.

Definitions

There are many definitions of participatory art, and participatory artworks exist within other genres of art. Claire Bishop lists several of them in Artificial Hells: “Socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art.”10 She also lists “collaborative art, contextual art, and (most recently) social practice.”11 Carlos Basualdo states that participatory art “is not art that calls for a specific kind of activity from a particular subject or group of subjects.”12 He suggests that participatory art should not be evaluated according to whether a particular participant completes a particular action mandated in the artist’s statement, or whether the work is completed in the way that the artist

10 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 2.

11 Ibid.

envisioned. Basualdo goes on to state that participatory art is “art that is capable of imagining through its very materiality, a potential community through which the work may be made complete.” The inference that participatory art is open to the interpretation of the participants, reminds us that once an artwork is in the world, what the world does with that work is not up to the artist; particularly in the case of participatory art. In “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” Claire Bishop highlights Umberto Eco’s point that “‘every work of art is potentially ‘open.’” It may be useful to think of all art as being on a continuum of openness with participatory art being at one end of the spectrum, with performance art in the middle, sculpture further along, and paintings and drawings further along still. Similarly, it may be helpful to think of a continuum of viewership and participation.

For the purposes of this discussion, participatory art will be defined as work that requires audience participation in order to be successful, in order for it to exist in the form intended by the artist. It is not a unified artistic movement but rather a series of works that share characteristics. As such, it does not have a shared set of ideals or unified approach to artistic practice; however, participatory art shares some characteristics with performance art, body art, and installation art. It also shares some ideals: a resistance to commodification, a desire to engage the audience physically, and the production of work that resists conventional methods of display within galleries and museums. Participatory pieces can take place in galleries and

13 Ibid.

museums, in public settings, or be designed for the benefit of a specific community, with the aim of creating a positive difference in that community. Participatory artworks aimed at social outreach are becoming increasingly common.

A second definition that is helpful in discussions of participatory art is that of the word presence. Participatory works insist upon being engaged with by viewer/participants in the present, in the here and now. The Mirriam-Webster dictionary defines present as “not past or future: existing or happening now,” and “now existing or in progress.” Amelia Jones provides a definition of “present,” as it pertains to the direct experience of participatory, or performance art. It is “commonly understood as a state that entails unmediated co-extensivity in time and place of what I perceive and myself; it promises a transparency to an observer of what ‘is’ at the very moment at which it takes place.” This definition is helpful to keep in mind given that a goal of many participatory artists’ is to have their work experienced in the presence. Furthermore, it is helpful in articulating whether participatory artists achieve this goal.


16 Ibid.

17 Amelia Jones, “‘The Artist is Present’: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” The Drama Review (Spring 2011), Volume 55, Number 1, 17.
**Case Studies**

In the second chapter I discuss the ways in which Marina Abramović is represented by art critics, art historical texts, exhibition catalogues, and the media as a singular genius engaging in collective art. George Yudice criticizes the participatory art discourse for attributing works of participatory art to two authors alone: the artist and the participant. I apply and expand upon this criticism in relation to *The Artist is Present*. I discuss the exhibition of *The Artist is Present* and its profitability for the artist, her representation, and for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The way in which this exhibition was executed and marketed contradicts the notions that participatory artworks are resistant in some way to commodification or sale; that they put “pressure on conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under capitalism.”

Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* was widely disseminated by photographs and film footage, creating a series of objects which can be bought, sold, and coveted, and used to further the agendas of the artist, the MoMA, and Abramović’s representation. I illuminate the paradoxes created by photographing, filming, and recording participatory works, if they are, as the discourse suggests, comprised of human social interaction; if “people constitute the central artistic medium and material.” Viewing photographs, and film footage of participatory works does not create human connections; they are merely visual representations of human

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18 Ibid.


connection. It is particularly paradoxical if the artist has defined the work as an experience in which the participant’s presence is inherently essential. Mary Richards describes Abramović’s conception of her works as having the purpose of “creating an energy dialogue between performer and spectator.”\textsuperscript{21} She also cites Abramović’s idea that “as an artist her [Abramović’s] ‘one idea’ is the human body.”\textsuperscript{22} Mary Richards adds in response, “this would be meaningless as a concept without the additional premise of using the body in ways that precipitate or catalyse an exchange of energies.”\textsuperscript{23} Viewing participatory works, such as \textit{The Artist is Present} through photographs and film footage is not the same as experiencing the work as a participant, yet artists allow and arrange for their works to be reproduced and memorialized.

The concept of the simulacrum can shed light on the meanings attributable to the plethora of images and objects produced by \textit{The Artist is Present}. If the substance of a participatory artwork is the community it creates, and the possibility for human relations that it creates, it is paradoxical for a participatory work ultimately to become a series of objects. Marina Abramović’s \textit{The Artist is Present} allows for an analysis of the way in which the gallery itself facilitated contradictions within Abramović’s work. I engage Amelia Jones’ analysis of the contradictions present during \textit{The Artist is Present} as a key reference point. The particular conditions of \textit{The Artist is Present} exhibition, and of Abramović’s performance of the same name,

\textsuperscript{21} Mary Richards, \textit{Marina Abramovic} (New York: Routledge, 2010), 43.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
forced her work to become part of a Debordian media spectacle. I address how the spectacle functions through an analysis of the gallery as a place of observation and spectacle, and consider the effect that this had on Abramović’s performance.

In the third chapter, I explore the *Parangolés* performances as an example of how a participatory artwork can take advantage of socioeconomic disparity between the artist and their participants, and can advance the career of the artist without having to acknowledge, credit, or compensate the work of participants. *Parangolés* highlights the complexity of assigning appropriate authorship to works of art that involve participants throughout various stages of the work, from inception to reception; in these cases, authorship no longer belongs to the singular artist. This chapter addresses issues of authorship separate from those highlighted in relation to *The Artist is Present*, and also draws attention to the lack of analysis in art historical sources that discuss Oiticica’s relationship to Mangueira. The omission of participant’s voices throughout discussions of participatory art is discussed briefly as well.

Analyzing a selection of the different manifestations of Oiticica's *Parangolés* provides the opportunity to assess how a participatory artwork changes when it is completed in different contexts; each context creates different contradictions. *Parangolés* was performed both inside and outside of the gallery space, as well as in very different political, socioeconomic, and geographic contexts. I will compare three different contexts in which the *Parangolés* series were performed: in the streets of Mangueira, outside of the 1965 *Opinião 65* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (MAM RJ); and in the *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour*
This exhibition was developed by the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, and later visited the Tate Modern in London. Both locations of The Body of Colour exhibition featured re-performances of Parangolés, and the purpose and value of these re-performances will be analyzed.

As with Marina Abramović's The Artist is Present, The Body of Colour exhibition is comprised of a series of objects and historical visual displays relating to the original production of Parangolés. This same paradox of displaying ephemeral artwork as a series of permanent objects thus occurs in The Body of Colour exhibition as well. The exhibition uses these displays in order to historicize artwork originally created in order to resist consumption by art institutions. These unavoidable contradictions created in the process of historicizing and memorializing a participatory artwork will be addressed. Both the chapter addressing Parangolés, and the chapter addressing The Artist is Present discusses a generalized tendency to ignore the experience of the participant within the analyses and criticism addressing participatory art. Both chapters address the tension between participatory art's profitability for artist, gallery, and theorist, and the idealized notions that it is a communal art form, resistant to commodification and sale. They challenge notions relating to the value of artistic work, collective authorship, and the value of participation.

Both of the artists I have chosen are leaders of their respective avant-garde movements: Oiticica was a leader of the Brazilian Neoconcrete movement of the 1960's, and Abramović of Performance art from the second half of the twentieth century to today. Both artists have received wide recognition for their artistic
pursuits. Neither of them is primarily defined as a participatory artist, however, both *Parangolés* and *The Artist is Present* are participatory and are dependent on viewer/participants. Oiticica’s *Parangolés* is considered a watershed work in the history of collective art practices, and Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* is one of the most economically lucrative participatory artworks in history. These two works engage different conceptions of viewership, participation, and engage the public in very different ways. In Claire Bishop’s introduction to *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, she calls for new forms of evaluation of participatory works in light of their sociological nature—this is one response to that call.
Literature Review

Addressing the paradox of participatory art requires an approach that is as much based in art theory and philosophy as it is in art history. The methods of investigation employed in the research of this thesis reflect a multidisciplinary approach, best organized thematically. This literature review will be divided into the following four themes: “The Business of Art Institutions and Their Interdependence”; “The Development of the Participatory Art Discourse”; “Art Historical Analysis of Performance Art and the Work of Marina Abramović”; and “Mid-century Brazil, Neoconcretism, and Hélio Oiticica.” There are countless sources that address these subjects, some of which are referenced in the main body of this thesis or the bibliography, and others which could not be consulted in the interests of maintaining a manageable scope regarding the size of this research project.

Certain texts were used as general references, and were of great value in that capacity. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism; Vol. 1: 1900-1944* was useful as a reference for the history of avant-garde movements, and as a source of information concerning many of the artists and concepts which influenced both Marina Abramović and Hélio Oiticica. *Themes in Contemporary Art*, edited by Gill Perry and Paul Wood, served a similar function.

The Business of Art Institutions and Their Interdependence

This discussion builds on the work of Sarah Thornton, Charles Harrison, and Elizabeth Mansfield. Each of these authors has worked in their own sphere of expertise to illuminate the ways in which art institutions influence one another
financially, politically, and socially; even if galleries, auction houses, and art museums may work to maintain the illusion of independence. Of particular value is the essay collection, *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, edited by Elizabeth Mansfield. The essays in this volume collectively formed a critical lens through which the organizing principles and motivating factors of art institutions are more visible. This thesis attempts to analyze the effects of these organizing principles and motivating factors on the participatory works *The Artist is Present* and *Parangolés*.

Sarah Thornton’s *Seven Days in the Art World* illustrates how art institutions such as the auction, the art fair, and the biennial work collectively to determine the value of works of art, and the taste of buyers, gallerists, and dealers. A chief interest of this thesis is to establish how an ephemeral work of art, designed to resist commodification and sale—such as a participatory work—can be absorbed by art institutions, becoming commodified and profitable. Thornton’s work, Howard S. Becker’s *Art Worlds* and Lee Caplin’s *The Business of Art*, provided the background knowledge of the art market in order to complete this line of inquiry.

The philosophies of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeimer, as well as George Yudice have been foundational in forming an understanding of the culture industry; in particular, the way in which art institutions control patrons and the objects in their care. Adorno and Horkeimer’s essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, addresses the effect of monopoly capitalism and the ubiquity of the presence of the media on art production and art’s potential. Adorno and Horkheimer discuss the creation of
cultural tastes and their corresponding values in the age of “the culture industry.”

George Yudice’s text *The Expediency of Culture* provides “an understanding, and a series of illustrations, of how culture as an expedient gained legitimacy and displaced or absorbed other understandings of culture.”

Yudice’s chapter, “Producing Cultural Economy: The Collaborative Art of inSite,” is a critique and analysis of the exhibition *inSITE*, comprised of a number of collaborative works taking place at a series of assembly sites. Although the chapter is a criticism of the *inSITE* exhibitions, many of Yudice’s points regarding the participatory and community-based aspects of that exhibition, can be applied broadly to participatory art as a whole. Several of his criticisms of *inSITE* will be applied to *The Artist is Present* and *Parangolés*. He addresses the lack of credit given to the many individuals whose labour is required to produce a large-scale exhibition of participatory works, and the mislabeling of collaborative works as having singular or dual authorship. Finally his notion of the obsolescence of notions of the avant-garde is applied in the conclusion of this thesis.

**The Development of the Participatory Art Discourse**

A debt is owed to the research of Nicholas Bourriaud and Claire Bishop for the extensive work they have done in publicizing and analyzing participatory art, collaborative art, and relational aesthetics. Nicholas Bourriaud championed and publicized the participatory works of the 1990’s known as relational works. This grouping is comprised of a specific list of artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Robert

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Barry, and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. A shared feature of these artists is their treatment of the art gallery as a laboratory: “their theoretical and practical point of departure [is] the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”

He penned the foundational text, *Relational Aesthetics*, contextualizing the importance of these works within twentieth century art practices. This discussion does not address the works discussed by Bourriaud, but some of the concepts and definitions he developed in service of relational art are applicable to participatory and collaborative works in general. For example, he applies the definition of the Marxist term *interstice* to the art market, describing it as “a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within the system.”

The term *interstice* may be helpful in the task of defining what participatory artists ultimately achieve. Over time the discourse and art institutions mold participatory works so that they fit into the art market. Participatory works suggest the possibility, however, of functioning outside of this economic system, and in their earliest forms such as the first renditions of *Parangolés*, may succeed in this task. *Relational Aesthetics* is one of the key texts in the art historical discourse of participatory art.

Claire Bishop criticized *Relational Aesthetics* heavily in the journal article “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.” She takes particular issue with Bourriaud’s

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26 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 16.
tendencies to support works that serve to glorify the institution and the curator over the artist; that allow the “laboratory” to become “marketable as a space of leisure and entertainment;”\textsuperscript{27} and which function in gallery spaces that do not require them to defend themselves, allowing them to “collapse into compensatory (and self-congratulatory) entertainment.”\textsuperscript{28} This thesis advances Bishop’s criticism by censuring works of participatory art that serve to glorify the artist over their participants, and the collective labour and effort required to produce participatory works. She is also the author of the most comprehensive discussion of issues within participatory art forms to date, \textit{Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship}. Previous to this she edited a collection of primary source text excerpts related to the history of participatory art entitled, \textit{Participation}. Collectively, Bishop’s texts have contributed significantly to the ways in which participatory art is conceived and criticized.

Other important texts are the exhibition catalogue, \textit{The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now}, the exhibition catalogue for the San Francisco MoMA show of the same name that took place from November 08, 2008 - February 08, 2009. This show remains the most comprehensive survey of participatory art exhibited collectively to date. The theoretical underpinnings of participatory art, though not cited in this thesis, are omnipresent in the ideology of participatory art. Claire Bishop cites some of these theories including “Walter Benjamin’s ‘Author as Producer,’” (1934), Roland

\textsuperscript{27} Bishop, “Antagonism,” 52.

\textsuperscript{28} Bishop, “Antagonism,” 79.
Barthes’ ‘Death of the Author,’ and ‘birth of the reader’ and Umberto Eco’s “The Open Work,” 1962. I would add to this list philosophical works that inform conceptions of how artistic value is ascribed such as Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” (1935), and works which plot the history and notions of the avant-garde such as Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde (1974). Other philosophical texts that are key to developing the arguments of this thesis are Gilles Deleuze’s The Logic of Sense, and its interpretation of the simulacrum as a positive entity. Nicholas Bourriaud cites Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle in the final chapter of Relational Aesthetics, in support of the activities of relational artists, claiming that relational works can work against the spectacular world of the screen and images by creating human connections. In this thesis, participatory works are analyzed in light of this same theory in order to demonstrate how easily their potential to resist the spectacle is nullified.

Art Historical Analyses of Performance Art and the Work of Marina Abramović

Vital resources on the history of performance art include the survey texts The Artist’s Body by Amelia Jones, and Live: Art and Performance, a collection of essays edited by Adrian Heathfield. These two sources contextualize Marina Abramović’s work within the genre of performance art, while also positing Abramović’s status as a singular, artistic genius, the Grandmother of performance art. The following discussion will analyze this assertion. There is a wide selection of sources addressing Abramović that allow for a complex understanding of Abramović’s work.

29 Bishop, “Antagonism,” 62.
in relation to performance art, and in relation to her biography. Sources of biographical information on Abramović abound. Abramović’s former assistant and a great admirer of her work, James Westcott, is the author of the latest, most comprehensive text addressing Abramović’s life. Throughout Westcott’s writing process, Abramović shared intimate details of her early family life, her romantic and sexual life, the rifts within her family, and her struggle to be taken seriously as an artist. This text is an invaluable source regarding the way that Abramović discusses and markets her own life story.

In addition to the Westcott text, Abramović has given countless interviews, providing insight into how she presents her artistic ideology and biography. A great deal of interview footage can be accessed by watching, amongst others: the Akers documentary, Abramović’s segment on the PBS show Art21, her interview for the 92Y organization, and her interviews with the New York Times, and Jian Giomeshi for Studio Q. Furthermore, Abramović: Conversation Series 23 is a book comprised entirely of conversations between Hans Ulrich Obrist and Abramović. The question of how much control Abramović exercises over sources of information on her biography and work is omnipresent. Amelia Jones points out the amount of control Abramović seems to have had over the documentation of her series of re-performances, Seven Easy Pieces. Arguably she has had comparable control over the dissemination of the rest of her work for the past decade, particularly as regards

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When using any interview as a source, one must be aware of the agenda of the interviewer themselves, and the financial or political pressures which may colour the questions being asked, the way in which Abramović responds to them, and the way the interview is edited.
marketing strategies, documentation, and the exhibition catalogue of The Artist is Present.

Amelia Jones’ article “The Artist is Present: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” shares some of the arguments built in this thesis related to Marina Abramović’s tactics in sensationalizing, marketing, and historicizing her own work. The aim of Jones’ discussion, however, is to disprove the substance of re-enactments of performance art works, partially by means of identifying paradoxes within the marketing and display tactics of these re-enactments. Her work ultimately serves as an exposé of Abramović’s art practices throughout the past decade, and ultimately an analysis of the way performance art as a whole is historicized, documented, and discussed. Having participated in The Artist is Present while it was at MoMA, she characterizes the work as a spectacle, describing the experience of being exposed to multiple gazes, and the flashing lights of cameras while sitting with Abramović. Her description is of great value to this research, as it offers a critical approach to reflecting on the experience of The Artist is Present.

Jones also points out the paradoxical nature of preserving ephemeral works by exhibiting large collections of objects, the way in which Abramović’s work is contextualized in contradictory frameworks (the art historical gallery as well as the ephemeral avant-garde), and provides discussions of the effect of the art market and commercialization on ephemeral, performance works in gallery spaces. Jones posits that the context of The Artist is Present prevents either the patron or the artist from being present. She posits that there is no “authentic,” “live” moment at all. I disagree with this theory, and posit instead that participatory works can negotiate their
contradictions if alterations are made to the discourse surrounding these works. Some of the research and argument-building tactics engaged by Jones are also engaged here; the analysis of Abramović is a further shared characteristic of the discussion.

**Mid-century Brazil, Neoconcretism, and Hélio Oiticica**

The final assembly of sources that will be considered in this literature review are those which address the art of Hélio Oiticica and his historical, art historical and sociopolitical context. The research for this discussion on Hélio Oiticica’s life and work, particularly *Parangolés*, was limited to English language sources. It was not feasible to consider the content of these sources as well as the many articles and books addressing Oiticica in Portuguese. This decision was in the interests of defining a manageable scope for this project, as well as in crafting a Western art historical perspective regarding Oiticica’s work in order to form a criticism of it. For any researcher interested in Oiticica’s work and that of the Brazilian neoconcretists, a great debt is owed to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and its work in collaboration with the Projeto Hélio Oiticica (Hélio Oiticica Project). Their combined efforts produced the *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour* exhibition. This exhibition is used by this discussion as a critical source for developing criticisms of re-performances of *Parangolés*. They are also in the process of completing a seven-volume catalogue raisonné of Oiticica’s work in English and Portuguese. This will include translations of the thousands of pages of Oiticica’s journals, as well as published writings by Oiticica, and writings published addressing Oiticica
throughout his lifetime. Research on Oiticica’s life and work will be greatly aided following the publication of these volumes.

The most significant sources consulted regarding the chronology of Hélio Oiticica’s life are the timelines provided by the Hélio Oiticica Project both online, and in the exhibition catalogue, *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour*. Significantly these timelines provide some of the details of Brazil’s history and politics required to contextualize Oiticica’s work appropriately. Most of the English language art historical essays discussing Oiticica’s works are uncritical of his relationship to the Mangueira community and of the way this relationship is depicted. Michael Asbury departs from this trend and provides an informed analysis of the scholarship addressing Oiticica in his article, "O Hélio não tinha Ginga (Hélio couldn’t dance).” He posits that from the photographic evidence, it is likely that Oiticica could not samba as well as sources suggest, calling into question the way in which his relationship to samba and the Mangueira is depicted. He provides key examples of tension in Oiticica’s relationship to the Mangueira community, and calls for improvements in the art historical accuracy of descriptions of Oiticica’s work. This thesis posits the need for art historical accuracy in the service of defeating the process of myth-making that occurs regarding Oiticica’s art, and participatory art in general. Sources addressing neoconcretism and Brazilian art history have been found in exhibition catalogues addressing the work of Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, and Oiticica, such as *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom* edited by Rina Carvajal, and the recently released *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art*. A valuable source of
information on Brazilian art is *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles*.

With the definition of participatory art provided in the introduction in mind, some final methodological points must be addressed regarding the research of works that require participation. The following discussion will rely heavily on excerpts from interviews with artists, artist statements, and artists’ writings about their own work. Artists’ websites have become a vital resource, containing information absent from exhibition catalogues and critical reviews. In most cases, little evidence is offered regarding how participants experienced an artwork, or how communities responded to works developed specifically with them in mind. The lack of representation of these voices in texts addressing participatory art is striking, and a particular challenge to this research. In order to gain an understanding of how a work functions in a gallery space and how it affected those who took part in it, one must rely on accounts of art critics and secondary sources. Unless one has been present during a participatory piece, nuances of the work will be lost, making one reliant on primary and secondary source accounts of the work. This is a limitation of many discussions of participatory art, including this one. New meanings and readings are made possible, however, by reading primary source accounts of these works and their analyses, through viewing photographs of these works, and the collections of objects that they generate. While analyzing the paradoxical nature of these photographs and objects, I have greatly benefited from their existence.
Chapter 2
Contradictions in Marina Abramović’s The Artist is Present

Marina Abramović is known in the art world as the Grandmother of Performance Art: its most daring pioneer and most dedicated practitioner. Abramović has achieved an exceptional level of acclaim, becoming a pop-cultural phenomenon in the wake of her blockbuster MoMA exhibition Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present, and in part through her collaborations with actors and musical artists such as Tilda Swinton, James Franco, Lady Gaga, and Jay-Z. Her placement in this present discussion is due to the nature of the work, The Artist is Present (fig. 1), the only original piece included in her 2010 retrospective exhibition at the MoMA. The rest of the exhibition was comprised of film footage, photographs, and objects that related to Abramović’s career. A series of actors and artists were hired to re-perform many of Abramović’s works as well.

Figure 1: Marina Abramović, The Artist is Present. Exhibition view, Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present, 2010, MoMA, New York.
The Artist is Present is a participatory work containing performative elements; the structure of the piece activates the audience, requiring someone to be sitting with Abramović at all times, while those present in the gallery become viewers of the work. It fulfills the definition outlined in the introduction of this document; most significantly, the work would not function without the participants. The Artist is Present was translated to audiences in several formats: as a participatory work in the gallery space, as a documentary, as a series of photographs, and as a media sensation. Each of these manifestations presents a unique philosophical challenge to conceptions of participatory art.

It is important at the outset of this discussion to recognize that the Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present exhibition is intrinsically paradoxical in that Abramović conceived of it as a means to prove that performance art - in spite of its inherently ephemeral nature - can be preserved in the same way as art objects. This chapter addresses further self-contradictions created within the production, display and dissemination of The Artist is Present. For instance, Abramović’s public image—particularly in relation to The Artist is Present exhibition—has been crafted to uphold the idea of the artist as a singular genius, all the while emphasizing her connection to collaborative art practices and the avant-garde. Further, this chapter will address the apparent incongruity of the many types of labour required in the creation of a work that, nonetheless, is presented as having a singular author. Additionally there is the dilemma of enormous monetary gain on the part of the artist, her representation, the MoMA, and the makers of the associated documentary film juxtaposed with the idealized notion that participatory art can in some way
evade the profit-seeking agendas of art institutions, that it places “pressure on conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under capitalism.”

Another area of apparent inconsonance is found in the ways in which the work The Artist is Present has become a series of visual representations and profitable objects; consideration will be given to the effect of those representations on the original work. Finally consideration will be given to Guy Debord’s concept of the spectacle. The potential of participatory art in relation to the spectacle will be considered, alongside the ways that The Artist is Present was absorbed by the spectacle.

Collectively, these issues of apparent incongruity call into question the substance of The Artist is Present. The work itself is defined as Abramović sitting at a table for three months, while spectators take turns sitting across from her. This context creates a social experience in real space and time. These moments are not erased through the process of objectifying, marketing, and making a spectacle of the work, but their value is made more complex. The images and objects created as byproducts of The Artist is Present arguably require new systems of evaluation altogether.

It is a contradiction in terms to champion an artist for her collaborative and participatory art, in order to define that artist as a singular genius. This first argument is not about the contradictions of a singular participatory artwork, but it is an example of how the public image of an artist and the representation of their work can be shaped to influence the reading of that work. Evidence will be presented citing how Abramović is represented as being connected to collective art

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31 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 2.
practices and the avant-garde, while simultaneously being defined as a singular artistic genius. Marina Abramović’s biography is referenced in almost all discussions of her work, and has been a chief tool in crafting an image of Abramović as a singular artistic genius. Throughout Abramović’s career, specific details of her biography are reiterated in each review, analysis, and write up. In each case Abramović is shown to be connected to, and a participant in, the avant-garde from the outset of her career. Consistently cited is Abramović’s early interest in collective and communal art practices, and her rejection of the way art objects have been commodified historically.\(^{32}\) Abramović shapes the narration of her own biography, through the anecdotes she chooses to share, and the details of her life that she reiterates frequently.

Descriptions of Abramović’s biography begin with the story of her militant upbringing in communist Yugoslavia where she lived until her late twenties. She was the daughter of two National heroes. Her Father Vojo was a member of communist leader Tito’s elite guard, a high-ranking military officer, and prominent Communist party member. Her Mother Danica Abramović was a Major in the Yugoslavian military, and later became Director of the Museum of the Revolution and Art in Belgrade. Marina was raised by her religious grandmother, and claims to have been largely neglected by her partisan parents;\(^ {33}\) she credits each of these

\(^{32}\) References to Abramović’s dedication to collective art practices can be found in Hans Ulrich Obrist. *Marina Abramović: The Conversation Series*, James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, and Mary Richards, *Marina Abramović* amongst others.

influences for different aspects of her artistic output, and her work itself is often analyzed through the lens of her biography. In the documentary *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, Abramović states,

You’re looking at the Marina who is product of two partisan parents, two national heroes, no limits, will power, any aim she put in front of her [she will accomplish]. Right next to this one you have the other one whose like the little girl whose mother never gave her enough love, very vulnerable, unbelievably disappointed and sad. And then there’s another one who has this kind of spiritual wisdom, who can go above all that. And this is actually my favourite one.34

Abramović’s description of her own identity emphasizes the influence of her communist upbringing, the pain of her mother’s perceived rejection, and her own inner strength that allows her to overcome it all. She creates a sound-bite crystalizing her persona as a tortured artist who can overcome great diversity by the power of her singular, personal strength.

Simultaneously, Abramović’s relationship to the avant-garde and collective art practices is reiterated whenever possible. It was formed at the outset of her career with her participation in the Student Cultural Centre (SKC) artists’ collective in Belgrade following the 1969 student revolution. This grouping was chiefly interested in the avant-garde artists of the 1960’s and 1970’s, and in artistic practices that departed from figurative representation. Their influences included the Arte Povera of Jannis Kounnellis, Marcel Duchamp, Kazimir Malevich, conceptual

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34 Marina Abramović interviewed in *The Artist Is Present*, directed by Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre, 2010 (New York, NY and Los Angeles, CA: HBO Documentary Films, 2012), DVD. Quotes taken directly from Abramović are transcribed literally, and reflect Abramović’s accented English.
art in the United States, and “the social-mystical nexus of Joseph Beuys.” Each of these influences rejected the traditional relationship between the art institution and the objects it contained. Westcott cites Yugoslavian artistic collective OHO as an influence over Abramović’s early work. OHO were the first to practice performance art in Yugoslavia, and they developed a new mode of relations to physical objects and strived for a collapsing of art into life, which James Westcott states, “opened new psychological territory for Marina.” Eventually OHO lived collectively on a farm, and devoted their daily activities to artistic experiments and tasks of endurance. There are clear similarities between the OHO farm, the environment Abramović tried to create for the artists who re-performed her work during the MoMA exhibition, and the descriptions of the Marina Abramović Institute, which is still being constructed. A member of OHO, Jerko Ješa Denegri, remembers Abramović speaking in defense of the group and their radical activities at the fourth Yugoslav Triennial of Contemporary Art in Belgrade in 1970. “He was impressed that she was standing so firmly with the avant-garde rather than the establishment

35 Westcott, When Marina Abramović Dies, 41.

36 Westcott, When Marina Abramović Dies, 42.

37 In preparation for the MoMA Exhibition, Abramović took the artists and actors who would be re-performing her works to an isolated farm in upstate New York where they fasted for several days, had no contact with the outside world, and completed a series of training exercises. This was intended to prepare them for performing Abramović’s physically and psychologically arduous performance works.

art world that Danica [her Mother] represented.” This anecdote is offered as a direct expression of Abramović’s early admiration, and vocal support for the avant-garde and performance art.

Specific anecdotes are used when describing Abramović’s biography that function to “legitimize” Abramović’s history as a struggling avant-garde artist. For example, Abramović and her artistic and romantic partner Ulay, lived in a Citroen van for five years from 1976-1981 (fig. 2); according to Abramović, this allowed them to live off very little and to commit fully to the craft of performance art. Ulay states in the documentary, "Being a performance artist from the 70’s to the 80’s: it was poverty. Full stop.” During a series of interviews with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Abramović stated, “In my time in the 70’s, a plumber was paid better than an artist. That wasn’t fair. Our work is to elevate the human spirit. In the 70’s it was shameful for an artist to even ask for money.” In the same interview, Abramović shares an anecdote about Ulay appearing naked in a Museum Director’s office before a performance of Imponderabilia, in order to intimidate the Director into paying them the agreed sum for their work. This anecdote is used as proof of the lengths one

39 Jerko Ješa Denegri, quoted in Westcott, When Marina Abramović Dies, 41.

40 I am not suggesting that Abramović did not struggle, or that she did not experience economic hardship, this is a comment on the way in which this anecdote functions within the discourse surrounding Abramović and her relationship to the avant-garde.

41 The van itself was on display during The Artist is Present exhibition.

42 Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen), interviewed in Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present, DVD.

43 Marina Abramović interviewed by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Abramović: Conversation Series 23 (Cologne, Germany: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 2010), 16.

44 Abramović, Abramović: Conversation Series 23, 18.
had to go to be in order to be reimbursed for certain types of artistic work during the 1970’s. Abramović seems to use it as a measure of how much the art world has changed regarding the recognition of performance art.

Figure 2: Citroën van lived in by Abramović and her partner Ulay from 1976-1981. Exhibition view, Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present, 2010, MoMA, New York.

James Westcott posits that the ideals of communism that Abramović admired most were its ability to inspire the individual to accomplish great feats, and the willpower it lent the people to carry on in tragic and difficult circumstances. “Marina was more interested in the ‘walk-through-walls’ determination of communism than in its ideological intricacies.”45 For example, “She cut out stories from the newspaper that she found funny but still inspiring in their blind

45 Westcott, When Marina Abramović Dies, 35.
earnestness." Westcott gives the example: "250 workers died in an explosion in a mine, but production goes on." Echoed in this anecdote of determined miners, is the great personal strength Abramović cites as her favourite personal attribute. The Artist Is Present reflects this ideal; most of Abramović’s works require intense mental and physical endurance in the service of an artistic vision. When described by critics and theorists, Abramović’s work becomes about the triumph of the individual, the greatness of Abramović’s will and determination, and her willingness to suffer in pursuit of her art. The Artist is Present is presented in the documentary and by Westcott, as the ultimate triumph of the human will over the body.

Regarding her earlier works such as the Rhythm Series, Abramović states, “The energy of the public helped me to go through this. At the same time, I become a mirror for the public: If I can do this, then maybe they can deal with the pain in their own life. Once you understand you can control the pain, then you stop having fear of pain.” Although, The Artist is Present is dependent on the public choosing to sit across from Abramović, the documentary emphasizes the struggle

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 The Rhythm series consisted of four performances: “Rhythm 10,” “Rhythm 5,” “Rhythm 2” and “Rhythm 0.” In each performance Abramović put her body at risk by her own hand, or by the hands of the audience. For example, in Rhythm 0, in the Galleria Studio Mora in Naples, “For six hours, Abramović simply stood still and allowed herself to be manipulated by the public in any way that they chose, using any of the seventy-two items laid out on a table.” Some of these items were a fork, a bottle of perfume, sugar, an axe, a bell, a feather, chains, needles, scissors, a pen, lipstick, a gun and a bullet. The performance lasted a full, planned six hours.

and triumph of the artist. It contains footage of those close to Abramović analyzing how difficult it will be to sit still for three months. They worry aloud about the artist’s health, and whether or not she can survive completing the work. The work is presented as a dangerous feat, a foe to be overcome, complete with a training montage of Abramović working with personal trainers, physical therapists and massage therapists in order to continue (fig. 3). The final moments of The Artist is Present are the last scenes of the documentary, creating a fairytale ending for the audience: proof that the impossible is possible, that pain can be overcome.

Abramović’s performance of The Artist is Present, when presented in this light, becomes about an individual who is serving the collective through their personal strength. The work is conceptualized and theorized as being participatory, as being dependent on those who sit across from Abramović, but it is re-conceived in the documentary as being about a singular, personal triumph. It is about serving a community through the completion of one’s own vision, as opposed to creating something with a community in service of that community. This interpretation re-categorizes Abramović’s The Artist is Present, distancing the work from notions of participation or collectivity, making the work about the triumph of the individual.

This evidence highlights some of the ways in which Abramović is defined as a singular artistic genius. The participatory nature of The Artist is Present, its dependency on the viewer-turned-participant, becomes a novel detail in service of Abramović’s epic biography. The truth of the artwork becomes subject to the story of the artist. In the interviews, literature, and art criticism Abramović has become a heroic protagonist, contradicting the very nature of collective and participatory art
practices. Not only is the participation of the audience devalued by such a representation of Abramović’s work, a further contradiction is exacerbated: Abramović is by no means singular in her artistic output if one considers the sheer amount of time and effort that is required of others in order to create a participatory work on the scale of *The Artist is Present*.

Figure 3: Marina Abramović in Training. Screenshot from *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, directed by Matthew Akers, DVD, 2010.

The Akers documentary provides evidence of the “many actors, many intermediaries who collaborate in the authorship of these works.” George Yudice describes the tireless process of producing a collaborative art exhibition on a large scale: “For a year or more, artists work with curators, directors, the directors’ staff, and corporate, public, and community representatives (contact with whom is almost

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always facilitated by directors and staff)." The documentary contains footage of negotiations between Abramović and her staff, of her staff negotiating with the museum staff, and of the security guards as they attempt to control the flooding masses of the public. A particularly compelling scene shows negotiations between the museum guards and Abramović. During the final weeks of *The Artist is Present* Abramović decided that the custom-built table separating her from the participants was no longer necessary. She wanted to sit directly across from members of the public, with nothing between them but energy. In the documentary scene, she tries to convince the security guards to remove the table, while the guards inform Abramović of the safety concerns and increased risk related to the request. In the end, the table is removed (fig. 4), but if Abramović’s safety had been compromised as a result of this decision, the security guard would have been held accountable. This not only highlights the complexity of security responsibilities when facilitating collaborative works, but the power dynamic that exists between artist and museum employee.

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51 Ibid.

52 Artists such as Fred Wilson have called attention to the circumstances of security guards in America’s art museums and galleries.
George Yudice criticizes the way in which participatory works are defined as an interaction between an artist or artwork and the viewer/participants. “In the reviews and critical pieces, collaboration and interaction seem to mean the encounter of or working together of two sets of actors,” as if “‘engagement’ were important only in the coming together of these two groups.” It narrows the reading of works, and doesn’t take into consideration the infrastructure and staff required to execute large-scale collaborative art exhibitions. One of Claire Bishop’s chief criticisms of Relational Aesthetics is Nicholas Bourriaud’s choice to favour works which ignore actual societal context and which aim to create social encounters within the very narrow context of the gallery space. Bishop is calling for an acknowledgement of the societal utopianism present in the discourse of

53 Yudice, The Expediency of Culture, 324.
54 Ibid.
Relational Aesthetics, and an acknowledgement of the limitations and controls of the gallery space on the social interactions facilitated by participatory artworks.\textsuperscript{55} George Yudice presents the idea that works within the gallery space are not in fact outside of society, but that the discourse surrounding collaborative art is very limited in its acknowledgement of the reality of collaborative works. Yudice calls for an acknowledgement of the public labor required by collaborative works. Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* is clear evidence that a participatory work as simple as two people sitting at a table requires an immense amount of labour that goes “largely unrecognized.”

Yudice’s completion of his argument is particularly germane to discussions of *The Artist is Present* as well as *Parangolés*. He describes the trend in literature addressing collaborative art exhibitions, wherein writers harken back “to the avant-gardist notion of bringing art and life together, yet do not appreciate that life (including the everyday arrangements for the projects...) flows through a capillary profusion of macro- and micro-institutions and networks of individuals.”\textsuperscript{56} He calls for an understanding of collaboration that “takes into account all aspects of the development of projects,”\textsuperscript{57} suggesting it is possible for artists to admit that their work is “coauthored in this complex process,”\textsuperscript{58} without detracting from the credibility of their work. What is called for is transparency regarding the reality of

\textsuperscript{55} Bishop, “Antagonism,” 67.  
\textsuperscript{56} Yudice, *The Expediency of Culture*, 326.  
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
participatory works. They are not made less valuable when their makers admit to their complexity. A renegotiation of whose labour, and whose interactions are acknowledged in the historicizing and criticism of participatory art would allow for the full complexity of these works to be explored.

Marina Abramović’s MoMA Exhibition, and its many forms of publicity, were highly successful both economically and symbolically. In the Akers documentary, Abramović makes many statements articulating her joy at having finally “made it” in the art world. She is thrilled by the art world’s recognition of performance art. Abramović states, “After forty years of people thinking you’re insane and you should be put in mental hospital you finally actually get all these acknowledgements. It takes such a long time to take you seriously.” The Akers documentary emphasizes how far Abramović and performance art have come. The early years of many avant-garde artistic practices were economically insolvent for their practitioners; this is largely because it is in the nature of many avant-garde art practices to resist institutionalization and commodification. This tendency has been romanticized, as well as exaggerated.

Claire Bishop discusses how participatory artworks are more challenging to market than art objects, and are more likely to be “a fragmented array of social events, publications, workshops or performances.” The idea is embedded in the

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59 Abramović also discusses the benefits and costs of economic success throughout her discussions with Hans Ulrich Obrist, transcribed in *Abramovic: Conversation Series 23*.

60 Marina Abramović interviewed in *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present*, DVD.

discourse of participatory art that these works are resistant to commodification or sale. Some of their artistic value may be entrenched in their ability to resist absorption by the art market and art institutions. Bishop admits that participatory works “nevertheless occupy a prominent place in the public sector: in public commissions, biennials and politically themed exhibitions.” The profitability of Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* would contend that if packaged and marketed carefully, participatory works have the potential to become increasingly profitable for the artist and various art institutions. Each of the parties involved in *The Artist is Present* exhibition profited immensely. These include: Abramović herself; her representation; the Sean Kelly Gallery; the MoMA; and the documentary filmmakers and producers.

Abramović’s MoMA exhibition, *The Artist is Present*, drew 750,000 people to the MoMA, as well as immeasurable notoriety, and a significant amount of free press coverage. The price of admission to the MoMA in 2010 was $20.00 for an adult, $16.00 for a senior, and $12.00 for a student. When asked via e-mail, if they could divulge how much the Abramović exhibition grossed, or how much the other performers in the exhibition were paid for their time, a representative of the MoMA stated, ”I regret that indeed, this info is not available to the public.” Regardless of the exact sum, the MoMA made millions from Abramović’s exhibition, portions of

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62 Ibid.


64 Statement was written in an e-mail received by the author on May 27, 2014, from Jenny Tobias, Librarian at MoMA.
which would have gone to the artist, her staff, and her representation. The documentary film, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, had grossed $86,211.00 as of October 2012, a sum that has undoubtedly increased since then. It was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance International Film Festival in 2012, won six other film festival awards, and was nominated for three others. It was not a blockbuster hit, but it was a great success for a documentary, as well as highly profitable for the reputations of the film directors and producers.

The Akers documentary contains film footage of Abramović and gallerist Sean Kelly discussing how they made performance art profitable in the 1970’s. They explain how each of Abramović’s performances was photographed; those photographs were made into editions, originally selling for $2,000.00 to $5,000.00 each. Sean Kelly states, “If you can find them [today] they would be between $25,000 and $50,000 each. The model that we created for Marina and the way that we created the market for her has become something of a standard that other people have looked at.” Abramović’s work continues to be purchasable in this format, although the Sean Kelly gallery does not publicize the current prices of its Abramović prints (fig. 5).

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67 Sean Kelly interviewed in *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, DVD.
The retrospective portion of the MoMA exhibition was composed largely of objects, an aspect of the exhibition described by Amelia Jones (fig. 6). The galleries were filled with "spotlighted vitrines containing objects presumably deployed in the original performances." She goes on to describe how “one entire large gallery was replete with photographs of Abramović from her birth onward and ephemera relating to her life.” Other profitable objects created by *The Artist is Present* include exhibition catalogues, the *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* documentary, exhibition posters, and souvenirs created for sale at the exhibition. Images of *The Artist is Present* were available in magazines reviewing the story in print and online, and through social media once visitors to *The Artist is Present* began to publish photos taken on their camera phones. MoMA itself created an account on the photograph-sharing website Flickr; each day a portrait style photograph was posted of each person who sat across from Abramović, taken by Marco Anelli (fig. 7); captions state how long they sat with her. This included celebrities such as James Franco, Sharon Stone, Alan Rickman (fig. 8), Rufus Wainwright and Lou Reed, garnering further media attention and coverage. News agencies covered the exhibition, and it was reviewed in a wide assortment of magazines and online publications, as well as academic journals.

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69 Ibid.

Figure 5: Marina Abramović, *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, 1975-2010. 20 framed gelatin silver prints.


It is this paradoxical process of creating commodifiable objects and countless images out of ephemeral works that requires unpacking. The rejection of the conventional art market and its commodification of art objects are in the theoretical and philosophical origins of participatory art; they are cited as being in the origins of Abramović’s art practice as well. Westcott states that a significant part of the appeal of performance art for Abramović was that it was a way of “working without a traditional, easily commodified art object.” 71 The substance of participatory works, of The Artist is Present, is human connection, a social interaction. The moments of human connection that comprised The Artist is Present were filmed and photographed, made into prints for sale, placed in exhibition catalogues, and uploaded to the Internet. They were reproduced on iPhone and iPad screens, and used as profile pictures on Facebook. These images and objects articulate the appearance of a moment of human connection that is deemed to be of value, but they do not contain human connection itself. Are these images simulacra—devoid of value—because they do not contain the essence of the original?

A definition of the simulacrum as it pertains to Poststructuralism in art is provided by Benjamin Buchloch in Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism. This definition presents the negative denotation of the term as it is used in many philosophical schools of thought. Simulacra are copies of copies. An “imitation that folds over what is already double or ambiguous does not, then, enter the realm of truth. It is a copy without a model and its condition is marked by the

71 Westcott, When Marina Abramović Dies, 73.
term simulacrum: a copy without an original—‘a false appearance of the present.’”

One evaluation of the philosophical value of images of *The Artist is Present* would be to define them as poor imitations. This would refuse them meaningful value beyond their ability to publicize the original moments of *The Artist is Present*.

Gilles Deleuze provides an alternative definition of the simulacrum. “The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbors a positive power which denies the *original and the copy, the model, and the reproduction*.” He goes on to say, “There is no longer any privileged point of view except that of the object common to all points of view. There is no possible hierarchy, no second, no third.” This definition of the simulacrum provides a different scheme for the evaluation of images of *The Artist is Present*. Those images that are readily available to the public can be interpreted as negating the hierarchies implicit in art viewership. The artwork becomes available to the masses at the click of a button. The economic profitability of *The Artist is Present* was made possible largely at the expense of visitors to the MoMA. Admission to the MoMA is prohibitively expensive for many; it is also located in one the most expensive cities on earth. The dissemination of images of participatory art could be conceptualized as a step towards remedying issues of access to art institutions, and the “authentic,” “live” art experiences it can offer.

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73 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 262.

74 Ibid.
There is an existing hierarchy of images of *The Artist is Present*; there are the high quality photographs sold as prints, creating profit for the artist and their representation, and there are the myriad of other images of the work available on the internet and in print sources. The photographs sold by the Sean Kelly Gallery have been defined as having a certain a value. They are ascribed certain qualities such as “rarity, authenticity, originality, and uniqueness—[that] are part of the value of the work implicitly asserted by the space of the gallery.” 75 These values have had a price attached to them by the gallery, “in an act that erases any fundamental difference between what it has to sell and the merchandise of any other commercial space.” 76 Fine art prints of participatory works such as *The Artist is Present*, allow the work to be absorbed by the art market and its systems of evaluation and judgment. Deleuze’s interpretation of the simulacrum is a way of negating that ascribed value; all copies become of equal value to the original image. During the exhibition it was possible to look at the Flickr account periodically and track who had sat with the artist. Although none of these photographs contain the substance of the participatory work itself, the sharing of these images through online communities creates the potential for unforeseen human connections.

Amelia Jones visited *The Artist is Present* and sat with the artist. She describes her experience disparagingly:

I primarily felt myself the object of myriad individual and photographic gazes (including hers [Abramović’s]), and the experience overall was very strongly one of participating in a spectacle—not an emotionally or energetically

75 Buchloch, “Postructuralism,” 42.

76 Buchloch, “Postructuralism,” 43.
charged interpersonal relation, but a simulation of relational exchange with others (not just the artist, but the other spectators, guards, the ‘managers’ of the event).\textsuperscript{77}

Jones’ experience reflects the experience of being part of a spectacle. She goes on to analyze her experience, and the work in its totality as a result. The introduction to this thesis cites the definition of “presence” provided by Jones.\textsuperscript{78} According to her definition of presence, Jones states, “the event, the performance, by combining materiality and durationality (its enacting of the body as always already escaping into the past) points to the fact that there is no ‘presence’ as such.”\textsuperscript{79} Jones posits that there cannot be a “definitively ‘truthful’ or ‘authentic’ form of the live event even at the moment of its enactment.”\textsuperscript{80} She uses this as the basis for her critique of re-enactments of performance art, citing that it is futile to try to re-enact an “authentic,” “live,” event that was never authentic or live to begin with. Deleuze’s theory of the simulacrum was written in reference to images that are copies. It may, however, be helpful to apply that same theory to live art events. If, as Jones posits, there is no authentic, original event, then the re-enactments of that event become of equal value to the original. In this case, it is the insistence upon a works authenticity that robs that work of its potential. If \textit{The Artist is Present} were to be appraised with criteria other than “authenticity,” it would allow for the work to be valued for what it is, rather than what it is not, or what it is trying to be.

\textsuperscript{77} Jones, “Artistic Re-enactments,” 18.

\textsuperscript{78} Cited p. 11 of this document.

\textsuperscript{79} Jones, “Artistic Re-enactments,” 18.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
A final philosophical framework that is helpful in ascribing significance to the paradoxes of participatory art is that of the Guy Debord’s spectacle; a description of society as a whole under late capitalism. He states, “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”\(^81\) The production of art today inevitably occurs within the spectacle as a condition of post-modernity. As a response to his own development of a theory of the spectacle, Debord wrote in detail about the agenda of the Situationist International, an avant-garde movement spanning from the late 1950’s until the 1970’s, of which Debord was a co-founder. Claire Bishop includes his text, “Towards a Situationist International” in Participation because “it is invariably against the backdrop of his critique of capitalist ‘spectacle’ that debates on participation come to be staged. The spectacle – as a social relationship between people mediated by images – is pacifying and divisive, uniting us only through our separation from one another.”\(^82\) The passivity and stagnancy of human consciousness as it exists within the late capitalist spectacle led Debord to call for “an injunction to activity”\(^83\) advocating the construction of “situations.” Debord defines “situations” as


experimental and “temporary settings of life and their transformation into a higher, passionate nature.”

In “Towards a Situationist International,” Debord states, “We must advance the keywords of unitary urbanism, of experimental behaviour, of hyperpolitical propaganda, and of the construction of environments.” He calls revolutionaries to “concretely contrast, at every opportunity, other desirable ways of life with the reflections of the capitalist way of life; to destroy, by all hyperpolitical means, the bourgeois idea of happiness.” These descriptions of the Situationist International agenda certainly suggest that art projects could function as “situations,” through the “construction of environments,” and the facilitation of “experimental behavior.” There is a chance that they could break through the spectacle. Abramović’s choices regarding the execution of The Artist is Present, however, prevent such a rupture. Making the decision to complete The Artist is Present in a high profile, large-scale retrospective exhibition ensured it would be subsumed by the spectacle. There was a viewing gallery above the atrium where Marina and her participants sat, allowing the work to become as much about viewership as it was about participation. As has already been discussed, far more people viewed The Artist is Present through photographs, film footage, or the Akers documentary, than were able to participate in the work itself. The Artist is Present, designed to facilitate human connection, was

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86 Ibid.
quickly translated into a body of images and representations. In his discussion of the spectacle, Debord states, “The spectacle is not a collection of images: rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” Those that sat across from Marina may view their portrait on the Flickr account and gaze at the image of their lived experience, their memory and associations of the lived moment becoming mediated by its visual representation. One result of this is that the life of the work is prolonged.

The visual accessibility of The Artist is Present for spectators, photographs, and film crews was part of Abramović’s design. The Artist is Present could have been formatted very differently within the MoMA exhibition, to create a private space for Abramović and her participant. Yayoi Kusama’s Gleaming Light of the Souls (2008), (fig. 9) is an example of how this could have been accomplished. The work creates a closed environment for the viewer, devoid of the gaze of others. It is an intimate, fully immersive environment. I had the opportunity to experience the work in 2010 at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art outside of Copenhagen, Denmark. The work requires you to stand in a line regulated by security guards until you are let into a room, two people at a time. The walls of the room are mirrors, and the ceiling contains a blanket of lights on a black background. The lights change colour frequently, and the floor is comprised of a mirrored catwalk, lined by pools of water on either side. The effect is that the viewer is surrounded entirely by an environment of coloured light, darkness, and projections of their own reflection in the mirror. This experience is quite opposite to the experience of The Artist is

87 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 12.
Present that Amelia Jones describes. Kusama’s work is provided here as evidence that a different set of curatorial choices could have been made regarding the location and visibility of The Artist is Present.

Abramović could have set up The Artist is Present in a closed room, with a security guard letting participants in one at a time. Abramović’s choice to install the work in an atrium, allowing it to be gazed upon, recorded, and photographed from every angle guaranteed its absorption by the spectacle. A further contradiction of the work is thus revealed: if Abramović desired for the work to consist of two individuals facing each other uninterrupted, experiencing each other’s energy, The Artist is Present could have been placed in a closed environment. This may not have created a work resistant to the conditions of the spectacle, but it would have given the work a greater chance at accomplishing its goal of human connection.

Figure 9: Yayoi Kusama, Gleaming Light of Souls, 2008. Mirrors, coloured lights, water. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark, Copenhagen.
The MoMA Exhibition is over, and the possibility of participating in the work is lost. It is still possible, however, to experience the work visually, to have an experience of the work through images mediated by Matthew Akers through the documentary, by Abramović through her website, and by the MoMA through their website. Robert Atkins states, “As artists became more adept at exploiting media coverage of their work, they also began to produce art that was designed to gain its full meaning from the press’s response to it.” Abramović’s work has certainly gained complexity through its visual representation and dissemination by media coverage and the Akers documentary. The original concept of the work, an artist gazing at a member of the public and sharing energy with them, prevailed only in mythical form. This original concept is restated as the meaning and purpose of the work, even though the condition no longer exists.

There is, then, ample evidence of the intrinsically paradoxical nature of the work of art, The Artist is Present. Self-contradiction has been shown to be inherent to several fundamental aspects of the conception, production, display and dissemination of the exhibit: the artist’s conceptual intent to preserve an inherently ephemeral art form; the careful crafting of the artist’s public image such that she was seen as a singular artistic genius, yet never lost the patina of connection to collaborative art practices and the avant-garde; the attribution of singular authorship to a work that required the labour of many; the highly profitable outcomes of an art form still somehow seen as evading the profit-seeking agendas

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of art institutions; and the metamorphosis of the ephemeral original into a series of visual representations and profitable objects.

The inconsonance that is so evident in all these aspects should not, however, be deemed inherently negative in the context of the substantive exhibit. Rather, it is this tendency of misrepresentation that is problematic and which creates the need for new, more transparent lenses for viewing and valuing these works in all of their incarnations.
Chapter 3
Contradictions in Hélio Oiticica’s Parangolés

Parangolés was a revolutionary series of performances that was devised as an answer to Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica's primary quest of the early 1960’s: the dematerialization of colour, and the “blazing [of] a trail for a painting of pure color, space, time, and structure.”

Oiticica’s Parangolés (fig. 10) was conceived as a means to release colour from the plane of the canvas, and from the surfaces of art objects, allowing it to be inhabitable by participants. He created a series of “capes, flags, banners, and tents made from layers of painted fabric, plastics, mats, screens, ropes and other materials.”

Jordan Crandall states in regards to the Parangolés, “The artwork, no longer something in relation to which one stands, became something in which one is immersed: a ‘cycle of participation’ in which viewer and viewed, ‘watcher’ and ‘wearer,’ are enmeshed in circulatory, changing patterns.”

As was stated in the introduction, Oiticica was not chiefly a collaborative or participatory artist. The participatory aspect of Parangolés is a by-product of its purpose: to overcome “the physical limits of painting so as to allow the concrete,

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material essence of color to speak on its own terms.” These inhabitable paintings were the result of a confluence of many years of writing and artistic practice, the particular socioeconomic and political context of Brazil in the mid 1960’s, and the inspirational influence of the Mangueira samba school dancers, or passistas.

Figure 10: Hélio Oiticica, Parangolés, 1965. Textiles, wood, and paint. Various dimensions. Photograph of the artist with his work courtesy of Desdemone Bardin.

Many of the same paradoxes are evident in the dissemination and display of Parangolés that were addressed in Chapter Two. I mention arguments developed in relation to The Artist is Present if they are relevant to this analysis of Parangolés, but I will not re-state them. The following reveals a number of contradictions present in the inception, creation, performance, and dissemination of Oiticica’s Parangolés. In

the theoretical and art historical literature, Parangolés is credited to Hélio Oiticica. These works are defined by the discourse as participatory, completed in collaboration with others, but it will be argued that they were co-authored by the dancers of the Mangueira samba school. The Parangolés were developed in order to fulfill Oiticica’s artistic agenda; the passistas, however, brought the work to life (fig. 11).

Performances with Parangolés took place numerous times over the course of Oiticica’s career, as well as in re-performances in exhibitions following the artist’s death. The ability of these objects to facilitate experience, to trigger states of invention in the viewer/participants so that they might embody a new state within the costume, is easily compromised. The first public performance of Parangolés
took place at the opening of the MAM-RJ *Opinião 65* Exhibition. Finally, the paradox of exhibiting *Parangolés* in exhibitions such as *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour*, will be explored thoroughly. The re-performances of *Parangolés* at *The Body of Colour* became more about commemoration or recollection, and invoke a different historical, cultural, and sociopolitical context, rather than heightening one's experience of their current one. An analysis of *The Body of Colour* exhibition is helpful in articulating how the *Parangolés* have become objectified and profitable. The exhibition displays a wide selection of objects and visual images related to the *Parangolés* including the historical capes and tents used by the Mangueira *passistas*, reproductions of those objects for use by visitors to the exhibition, photographs of the *Parangolés* and Oiticica, and historical film footage of the original incarnations of *Parangolés*.

This discussion is not meant to discredit Oiticica's authorship of *Parangolés*. Many of the contradictions that will be addressed in this discussion are a product of decisions made after Oiticica's death in 1980; decisions made by those exhibiting Oiticica's work, and those who have written and analyzed his work. Michael Asbury is one of the few who takes into account the limitations in much of the scholarship addressing Oiticica today. He acknowledges that a process of mythologizing Oiticica and his work has occurred within the discourse, with many accounts “re-articulat[ing] contemporaneous narratives rather than examin[ing] the work and documentation afresh.”93 He states that a chief task of those art historians, theorists,

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curators and critics dealing with the work of Oiticica is to follow lines of enquiry “that focus on revising the often-simplistic way in which such historical connections have been constructed.” For example, the names of the Mangueira samba dancers are left out of most discussions. One of the goals of articulating the paradoxes of Oiticica’s Parangolés is to plot the way in which historical participatory works’ are altered in the process of historicization, preservation, and exhibition. The simplification and mythologizing of Parangolés in the discourse minimizes its complexity, and shuts down the possibilities of further inquiry into those complexities. This analysis aims to remove the veneer of myth in order to reveal the intricacies of Oiticica’s artistic process, his relationship with the Mangueira community, and the process of the works’ historicization.

A brief biography of Oiticica’s life up until the creation of the Parangolés provides insight into his artistic influences and his socioeconomic status. These details contextualize the arguments presented in this chapter. Oiticica himself was not from the Mangueira shantytown. Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1937, Hélio enjoyed a relatively privileged upbringing, as the first of three children born to a father who was an “engineer, mathematics teacher, entomologist, and one of the first experimental photographers in Brazil.” He was homeschooled until age 10 when his father received a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, allowing him to work at

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94 Ibid.

the Smithsonian Institution. The Oiticica children attended Public School while living in Washington, D.C. As a family, the Oiticica’s traveled to the many art exhibitions and Biennials emerging in Brazil. Oiticica studied with Ivan Serpa at the MAM RJ, and worked as a translator as a young adult allowing him to focus on his artistic pursuits. He became involved with the Grupo Frente a group of avant-garde artists founded by Serpa. Oiticica participated in their second show in 1955, before leaving the group to join Grupo neoconcreto, or the Neoconcrete Group of Rio de Janeiro, alongside artists such as Lygia Clark and Ferreira Gullar. Oiticica’s greatest influences were Paul Klee, Kazemir Malevich, and most importantly Piet Mondrian and Neo-plasticism (fig. 12).

Oiticica began recording his thoughts and artistic ideas in journals in 1959—an activity maintained throughout his life—and rapidly began working through complex theoretical questions regarding the possibilities of colour. Asbury makes the point that Oiticica’s Bolides (fig. 13) and Parangolés are not in fact neoconcrete works. “The artist’s work during the brief period when the neoconcrete group (1959-1961) was active is indeed very distinct from his subsequent production.”

During this time frame, Brazil’s political situation was greatly altered. In 1964, President João Goulart was deposed in a military coup d’état, beginning a decades long military dictatorship. In 1965, when the Parangolés were first unleashed on the streets of Mangueira, several “Atos Instituconais (Institutional Acts denying all Constitutional privileges granted by law) [were] introduced and enforced by Brazil’s


military dictatorship.” The Parangolés were thus conceived in the socio-political context of a burgeoning military dictatorship in coexistence with the “persistent colonial trappings that appear to be endemic conditions in Brazil.” The Brazil of the mid 1960’s was a socially and economically stratified society where the largest demographic in the country were those stricken with poverty and social immobility.

Figure 12: Piet Mondrian, Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow, 1940. Oil on canvas, 46 x 46 cm.


Figure 13: Hélio Oiticica, *Bólide vidro 5 homenagen a Mondrian*, Glass, textile, water, pigment and cork. 300 x 475 x 600 mm. Tate Modern, London, UK.

The early *Parangolés* performances are paradoxical because the residents of Mangueira are conceived of as “participants,” while an accurate representation of this relationship would acknowledge that the samba dancers provided Oiticica with the inspiration and raw material that he required to progress in his artistic ideology, and to realize his vision. In other words, Oiticica is dependent on the dancers. The work is described as being revolutionary because of its collaborative nature, but it is still only attributed to a single artist. The process of Oiticica discovering the shantytown and befriending its inhabitants has been romanticized and mythologized unduly, and has not been subjected to appropriate criticism.
Mari Carmen Ramirez provides one account of Oiticica’s relationship with the Mangueira favela. Apparently, in 1963 Oiticica’s friend, “the sculptor Jackson Ribeiro, introduced him to what was one of the city’s most special communities and one of the keepers of traditional Brazilian samba.”\(^{100}\) Ramirez cites Mario Pedrosa’s interpretation of this step in Oiticica’s artistic trajectory. His “descent from ‘his ivory tower, his studio’ in the skirts of Jardim Botanico was a necessary step. That is, if the ‘aristocratic’ southern Rio artist was ever to shed completely his Concrete art baggage, he would have to enter the impoverished Mangueira Hill—\textit{the reality of the matter} in the north sector of the city.”\(^{101}\) The tone of this narration of events is sarcastic, but it provides insight regarding the perception of the class disparity between Oiticica and the inhabitants of the shantytown was perceived by Oiticica’s contemporaries. Asbury posits that, “The very fact that the \textit{favela} is a \textit{barra pesada} (dangerous) place was one of the reasons Hélio was attracted to it.”\(^{102}\) He goes on to share an anecdote disclosed to him by the late poet Waly Salomão: there were apparently “a number of incidents that occurred during some of Hélio’s visits to Mangueira. Although Salomão did not clarify the motives—whether they were


\(^{102}\) Asbury, “Hélio couldn’t dance,” \url{www.forumpermanente.org}. 
robberies, drug or sex related - these incidences involved inhabitants of the 
favela being violent towards the artist.”

Oiticica’s status as an outsider in the favela is confirmed by Asbury’s final
description of Hélio’s relationship to Mangueira: “he did not belong to the favela. His
involvement within that community operated through his friendship with particular
individuals. This does not mean that he had been accepted by the community as a
whole.” The opinions of the residents of Mangueira are lost in the re-telling of
Oiticica’s relationship to the community. Regardless of how the majority of the
community may have felt about Oiticica’s presence, his acceptance by a few
individuals is re-defined as acceptance by the community as a whole. George Yudice
criticizes participatory works with goals of social outreach by admitting that the
artists often “parachute” into communities, thereby failing to translate cultural
differences. Though the latter may not be true of Oiticica in Mangueira, it may be a
helpful term in conceptualizing Oiticica’s relationship to the community. There is no
mention of Oiticica sharing the profits of the artistic career built largely upon this
work. The term “parachute” also evokes the mobility of the artist in comparison to
the residents of the favela.

The disparity between the quality of life and socioeconomic status of the
artist in comparison to the residents of the favela is made clear by these
descriptions. The artist chose to spend time in Mangueira for the sake of his art. He
put himself at risk physically, but he also had the agency and economic ability to

103 Waly Salomão, interview with Asbury, cited in Asbury, “Hélio couldn’t dance,”
www.forumpermanente.org.

come and go as he pleased. Asbury states, “The artist’s encounter with the favela community and his discovery of Samba and carnival were of course central to the development of his subsequent inventions.” Given the extent to which Oiticica’s relation to Mangueira is reiterated throughout the discourse, it is a grim omission that no one has examined this dynamic more critically. Most pertinent to this discussion is the degree that Mangueira is credited for having inspired and facilitated Oiticica’s work. It is incongruous that credit for the creation of Parangolés is not given to specific individuals, such as Nildo, Mosquito (fig. 14), Miro, Jerônimo, Rose (Rose de Souza Mattos), and Maria Helena, who are named only in texts addressing Oiticica that are historiographical. The multiplicity of the authorship of this work is not reflected in the way that it is accredited; a single artist is receiving credit for the work of the many, despite that work being defined as participatory and collaborative.

The first public presentation of Parangolés took place on August 12, 1965. Oiticica was invited to participate in the MAM-RJ’s Opinião 65 exhibition (fig. 15). He planned to present the capes worn by the passistas of Mangueira in the gallery space, with a carnival parade of the Parangolés to follow. Famously, the gallery forbade Oiticica from showing the Parangolés, and would not allow the dancers in the building. Oiticica’s response was to have the Mangueira dancers perform in front of the Museum, “to the applause of other artists, journalists, critics, and the audience.” The contradictory nature of this event is that the Parangolés, designed


to be vessels of experience, allowing the dancer to inhabit colour, now became props in a performance for an audience. Oiticica addressed the dual presence of viewership and experience in encounters with the Parangolés: the wearers of the capes and banners, those dancing in the Parangolés, allow those viewing the objects to gaze upon their maximum potential. Viewership of the Parangolés is as much a part of their existence as samba; thus, the viewing of Parangolés alone does not warrant criticism.

Figure 14: Hélio Oiticica, Bólide vidro 5 homenagen a Mondrian, and Mosquito of Mangueira dancing with the Parangolé P 10, Cape 06. Photograph by Desdemone Bardin.

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Arguably, however, the context of the performance—staged rebelliously outside MAM-RJ, and for the benefit of Oiticica’s career—changes the relationships among artist, participant, and the Parangolés objects. Oiticica describes the purpose of the viewer interacting with Parangolés as follows: It is not “a proposition for ‘elevating the spectator to the level of creation’ or ‘meta-reality;’ it imposes no ‘ideas’ or ‘aesthetic standards’ that might correspond to such concepts of art onto the artist; rather, they provide him with a simple opportunity for participation so he
'find’ something that he wants to achieve”108 Once the Parangolés became a display of defiance against the institution, the purpose of dancing in the objects no longer becomes about each dancer finding something they want to achieve; it becomes a display that must fulfill the vision of the artist. The direct experience between the wearer of the Parangolés and the Parangolés themselves may be superseded by the need to create a performance of direct experience. In performing the work for the media, the work became absorbed by the spectacle. The relationship between the dancers and the Parangolés was interpreted and transmitted to the public by media outlets and media images. The performance of direct experience became images of the performance of direct experience.

The controversy of the Opinião 65 performance was only made possible by Oiticica’s affiliation with the racialized samba dancers. There would have been no scandal without them, and in all likelihood far less press coverage. Oiticica is, nonetheless credited as being responsible for the work and the scandal.

An extension of this enquiry that requires research beyond the reach of this thesis is an investigation of the fate of the samba dancers of the Mangueira. Less than three months after the Opinião 65 exhibition, the Altos Institucional would strip the nation of its rights, including the ability of judges or the Supreme Court to question military decisions. Oiticica gained international success as an artist, and lived outside of Brazil for the majority of the 1970’s.109 In 1966 he was awarded a

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sizeable cash prize for his participation in the 1e Bienal Nacional de Artes Plásticas da Bahia [First National Visual Arts Bienal of Bahia].\textsuperscript{110} In 1966 Oiticica had his first solo exhibition, in 1968 he was included in multiple shows internationally, and in 1969 the show entitled \textit{Hélio Oiticica} opened at London’s Whitechapel Gallery. Hélio lived in London and New York until 1978. There is no discussion of payment being made to the Mangueira samba school in any of the English texts addressing Oiticica’s work, or in his journal entries that have been consulted for this project.

It is not as simple as saying that he used the dancers of Mangueira or the community itself. It would be a disservice to the community to make assumptions about how the lives of the dancers were affected by their participation in \textit{Parangolés}. Oiticica’s friendships with individuals such as Nildo, Miro, Jerônimo are well documented in photographs,\textsuperscript{111} but it is impossible to know the extent and meaning of those friendships for Oiticica or for the dancers. Luciano Figueiredo, in reference to Oiticica’s \textit{Parangolés}, as well as his body of work known as \textit{Appropriations}, asks Oiticica’s audience to “understand his work just as he carried it out—withn within a system of relationships that continually and reciprocally nourished one another.”\textsuperscript{112} This system of relationships requires further primary source research, in order to assess the extent to which the Mangueira samba dancers were nourished by their association with Oiticica. At the very least, specific individuals

\textsuperscript{110} Figueiredo, Gaztambide, Matera Lins, “Chronology,” 377.

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Hélio Oiticica: the Body of Colour}, 298-315.

\textsuperscript{112} Figueiredo, “The world is the museum,” 106.
from the Mangueira should be credited for their co-authorship of *Parangolés*, and their names should be included in discussions of the work.

The lack of representation of how class and social mobility operated in the creation of the *Parangolés* is evidence of how the work has been mythologized by the discourse, and divorced from its historical reality. The reason why we cannot know how the Mangueira community members and *passistas* felt and thought about Oiticica and his *Parangolés* is due to one of the chief ongoing issues of participatory art: the omission of participants’ voices in discussions and analyses of participatory works. George Yudice provides a thorough critique of community-based collaborative art projects in *The Expediency of Culture*. He critiques contemporary examples of collaborative works, and the circumstances of those works in the conditions of the contemporary art world, but his critiques are nonetheless valid in relation to the discourse of *Parangolés* and other historical collaborative works. Yudice outlines the problematic tendency in the discourse to omit participants’ voices:

I question curators’, artists’, and critics’ assumptions about the art experience. In any other sphere of activity, such claims need to be backed up by some form of verification. How do we know that the ‘participants’ brought in by invitation...necessarily walk away with—and retain as memory—the significance given to the event by the curators, artists, and those who write on their behalf?¹¹³

Oiticica offered the Mangueira *passistas* the chance to partake in an event outside the sphere of their community, but we have no way of knowing what their experience of the event was, or how they remember the event.

¹¹³ Yudice, *The Expediency of Culture*, 305.
Yudice suggests that the voices of participants be taken into consideration throughout the planning and execution of collaborative works, and in discussions of the work following its completion. He specifies that the tendency to publish “one-minute testimonials”\(^{114}\) of participant experience is insufficient. Most importantly he goes on to state, “Only by establishing the participants’ protagonism and even authorship at all of these levels can one begin to understand what it means for a community to benefit from a project in ways that go beyond limited inflections of ‘enrichment’ (i.e. established notions of cultural, economic, and social capital).”\(^{115}\) The establishment of the protagonism and authorship of the Mangueira *passistas* in the development of *Parangolés* could begin with primary research, with the goal of assessing how *Parangolés* affected its original participants. At the very least, the discourse can begin to address the complexities of Oiticica’s relationship to the community, and more accurately represent *Parangolés* as a work in which individuals from Mangueira were not only participants but also co-authors.

The final contradictions that will be addressed in this discussion are those that have been produced by exhibitions of *Parangolés* following Oiticica’s death. With *Parangolés*, Oiticica attempted to create an experience of colour that moved beyond the art object, but when presented on the walls of gallery spaces, the capes and banners become stagnant art objects, symbolic of the experience they facilitated, stripped of their purpose. The habitable paintings have become profitable, objectified, and commoditized through the process of canonizing Oiticica

\(^{114}\) Ibid.

\(^{115}\) Ibid.
and historicizing his work. The methods of display used in the presentation of Parangolés in gallery spaces will be addressed. The effect of photographing participatory art works has already been thoroughly addressed in the discussion of Abramović’s The Artist is Present. Parangolés have undergone a process of dissemination by means of widely available photographs, and high profile art exhibitions. Thus the analysis of the simulacra and the discussion of the potentially resistant participatory art exhibition being absorbed by the spectacle provided in Chapter Two are relevant to Parangolés as well.

According to Mari Carmen Ramirez, Oiticica’s fame has been steadily on the rise for the past fourteen years, following his first major retrospective in 1992, and several monographic exhibitions in Brazil and the United States. “He has attained recognition as one of the most innovative Brazilian creators of the second half of the twentieth century and, consequently, his works are among the most coveted by art institutions and collections worldwide.” She goes on to discuss the irony of this given Oiticica’s distain for the limelight during his lifetime. She states, “Hélio rarely worked with art dealers and seldom sold his work. His radical stance originated in a more encompassing ethical position regarding what he believed the function of art should be in an increasingly reified world.” This interpretation of Hélio’s relationship to the art market minimizes his international artistic success and moderate financial success, and engages in the familiar trope of authenticating an


artist’s work by distancing that artist from the art market. Despite the fact that Parangolés were made “outside of or in overt denial of the institutional parameters of art,”118 “Hélio frequently exhibited them in museums and biennials.”119 He was dependent on the system of art institutions in order to support his craft. The irony of his work being internationally successful and the basis for economic profit is, nevertheless, paradoxical.

A product of his success has been posthumous art exhibitions such as *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour*. The exhibition was developed at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and displayed from December 10, 2006 until April 1, 2007. It then travelled to the Tate Modern, London, where it was open from June 6 until September 23.120 The curators incorporated the Parangolés by hanging the original works on the wall (fig. 16), and providing copies “draped over dress-hangers, ready to be used by the public on an open dance floor that stretches out in front of three large film screens.”121 Those planning the exhibition acknowledge the complexity of displaying the work in *The Body of Colour* catalogue. Efforts were made to avoid a presentation of Parangolés as “empty hanging costumes or museum textile pieces.”122 Nevertheless, the exhibition of Parangolés is a collection of objects. The

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119 Ibid.


room contains screens showing a short film containing footage of Oiticica in Mangueira with the *Parangolés*, of *passistas* dancing in *Parangolés* in the streets (fig. 17), and close-ups of the colourful *Parangolés* fabric folding and turning. This footage was intended to provide a sense of the original use of the *Parangolés*. These films can also be viewed online on the Tate Modern website, extending the reach of the Exhibition.

Figure 16: Hélio Oiticica, *Parangolés*, Exhibition view from *Hélio Oiticica: A Body of Colour*, 2008.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston also employed performances of the
Parangolés, in an attempt “to convey to non-Brazilian audiences the intensely
liberating experience that can result from wearing these embodied color-structures
to the body-shaking rhythm of samba.”\textsuperscript{123} Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour cites the
revolutionary history of the Parangolés with museum labels, photographs and film
footage. It then invites the viewer to partake in Parangolés’ revolutionary potential.
One reviewer’s response to this is that “the magic revolt is of course unrealistic.”\textsuperscript{124}
“The projected archival films underline the impossibility of recreating the intuitive
or direct communal exuberance of dancing samba on the carnival streets or
imagining the collapse of class and race difference.”\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{123} Ramirez, “Hélio’s Double-Edged Challenge,” 22.

\textsuperscript{124} Birringer, “Review,” 44.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
The Tate Modern in London used its Turbine Gallery to host the performances, and incorporated basic samba lessons, allowing visitors to the exhibition to join in the dancing. These participatory performances do not contain comparable cultural relevance when undertaken in the United States or London, England, rather than in Brazil. These re-performances are historiographical and commemorative; an attempt to demonstrate how the Parangolés were used, but giving them a function very different to their original raison d’être. Mari Carmen Ramirez negotiates the irony of the Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour exhibition eloquently: “The presentation of this show within the buffered context of a fine-arts museum would fall right at the center of Hélio’s rebuttal, turning it into an inescapable paradox of curatorial practice today.”

She goes on to ask a question that is highly relevant to this investigation: “Is it really possible to avoid the sterilization of a fertile proposal of revolt or, even worse, the outright aestheticization of an antiart strategy stemming from the body of work?”

Chapter Two of this thesis cites Amelia Jones’ discussion of the impossibility of the authenticity of a moment in relation to Abramović’s The Artist is Present. This was answered with an application of Deleuze’s concept of the simulacrum to events; if this same theory is applied here, then each of these re-performances—at the Opinião 65 exhibition, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and at the Tate Modern—are of equal value, and equally inauthentic. This conception provides an

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127 Ibid.
opportunity to re-define these works value independent of ideas of authenticity or originality.

This chapter has illuminated several contradictions in the invention, enactment, and historicization of the Parangolés. The works are attributed to a single author, despite their collaborative nature, and the likelihood of co-authorship with individuals from the Mangueira favela. They were the result of vigorous artistic inquiry on the part of Oiticica, but were arguably facilitated by his friendship with individuals in the Mangueira community. The inequity between Oiticica and the Mangueira community was articulated, alongside a chronology of Oiticica’s rise to artistic fame. This line of enquiry was engaged in order to flesh out the details of the often romanticized interactions between Oiticica and the favela.

Parangolés, whose substance was intended to be the embodiment of colour, have been re-constituted in posthumous exhibitions of Oiticica’s work as commemorative artifacts divorced from their original cultural context. His goal of releasing colour from the plane of the canvas thus was subsumed. These exhibitions also have created a series of objects, and images of those objects, related to the Parangolés, transforming a series of artworks that are ephemeral into a series of objects that allow that work to conform to the gallery space. These paradoxes articulate the inexactitudes of much Oiticica scholarship, allowing critical junctures in his career—such as his relationship to the Mangueira community—to go without scrutiny. It is a disservice to the depth and complexity of Parangolés and the artistic career of Oiticica, to not strive for an account of Parangolés that articulates its complexity.
It is not possible to avoid the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in the process of disseminating, re-performing, and historicizing works of art that are about the immediacy of experience. It is, however, possible to be transparent about this impossibility. In order to give space in galleries to artists whose work is intended to circumvent the system of art institutions and the art market, in some way, that work must be compromised.
Conclusions

Nicholas Bourriaud states in the Foreward to *Relational Aesthetics*, “The critic’s primary task is to recreate a complex set of problems that arise in a particular period or age, and take a close look at the various answers given.” This discussion has identified what is perhaps most troubling about the discussions surrounding participatory art: its critics and scholars are not engaging in this vital primary task. Complex problems are not being identified in these works, and the gulf between the idealized notions that are the basis of these works, and their reality when they inhabit gallery spaces and encounter the public, is not being addressed. Chapters Two and Three of this discussion have provided ample evidence of the paradoxes and contradictions in the creation, display, and dissemination of two works of participatory art: Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolés* and Abramović’s *The Artist is Present*. These paradoxes have been allowed to flourish in an environment without scholarly scrutiny.

Descriptions of the authorship of both *Parangolés* and *The Artist is Present* are simplified in the discourse. The work of George Yudice was used in this discussion to re-contextualize *The Artist is Present* as one part of a complex system of relations within the gallery space instead of an artistic transaction between two parties; the work was redefined as the product of the labour of many individuals, and not of the artist and her participant alone. The influence of individuals from the Mangueira community and samba school in the development of *Parangolés* was re-affirmed and re-evaluated. Given the development of Oiticica’s artistic ideology as evidenced in

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his journals and recounted in secondary sources, Parangolés was a solution to Oiticica’s greatest artistic query up until that point; it was made possible only by the Mangueira passistas. Abramović and Oiticica were each rewarded as individuals for art that they completed collectively with others.

*Parangolés* and *The Artist is Present* have been placed in contexts that allow them to be objectified, despite the fact that their substance lies in the human interaction and experience that they facilitate. The plethora of objects and images that are the byproducts of *Parangolés* and *The Artist is Present* are devoid of the substance of the participatory works themselves. A photograph does not contain the potential for a lived, intimate moment with another person; nor does a hanging cape, out of reach on a gallery wall, contain the possibility of life-affirming samba.

A consequence and privilege of artistic success is being given space within major galleries, and media attention for one’s work. This discussion has outlined some of the unique consequences for participatory art in this situation. The substance of a participatory work can be lost in the publicity of an exhibition, the images that are produced, and the onslaught of media coverage. These byproducts, however, create the potential for unforeseen connections and interactions. Engaging Deleuze’s interpretation of the simulacrum puts forth the possibility that the universal availability of images of *The Artist is Present*, may negate the value of fine art prints of the work. If none of the images contain the content of the participatory work itself, then they are all of equal value. Amelia Jones calls into question the potential for any live work within a gallery space to produce “real” or “authentic” moments. If Deleuze’s theory of simulacrum were applied to moments and performances as well
as copied images, each performance of a work of art would have equal value; the removal of the possibility of the “authentic” may allow performance and participatory works to be investigated within a framework separate from any discussion of authenticity and “presence.”

The greatest error in the execution and documentation of these works is the constant underrepresentation of the voice of the participant, and the lack of attention paid by the scholarship towards the artists’ conception of the role of their participants. If a work is going to be comprised of participation, the voices of the participants should be as necessary to the discussion of the work as the artist’s voice. There is a void in the discussion regarding the way that participants are treated, presented, compensated, and accounted for within participatory art scholarship, as is demonstrated by these two works. The voices of the Mangueira community members involved with Parangolés are non-existent in the discourse; to find an author that provides individual names such as Nildo, Mosquito, Miro, Jerônimo, Rose (Rose de Souza Mattos), and Maria Helena, is a rarity as well. The images of Abramović’s participants were well documented on MoMA’s Flickr page that contains a portrait of each person who sat with Marina. Their faces are engaged in the process of publicizing and disseminating The Artist is Present yet their voices are omitted. They are presented in “one-minute testimonials,”129 in the Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present documentary, but these provide little scope regarding their choice to participate in the work, and their feelings regarding the experience.

129 Yudice, The Expediency of Culture, 305.
Yudice posits the necessity of meaningful dialogue with participants, and this approach may finally allow the ideals of participatory art to be upheld throughout the execution of participatory artworks. In one of his journals, Hélio Oiticica provided a description of what opening up art to the authorship of the masses could accomplish:

Whatever fixed quality the artist’s work might possess would take on meaning and be completed only in light of each participator’s stance—for it is he who attributes corresponding meanings to such work—something is foreseen by the artist, but attributed meanings are unforeseen possibilities to which the work has given rise; countless possibilities also including nonparticipation.\(^{130}\)

This description echoes Carlos Basualdo’s definition of participatory art cited in the introduction to this thesis. He asserts that participatory works are not defined by requiring a particular action or inaction from the viewer/participant. Participatory work is rather, “art that is capable of imagining through its very materiality, a potential community through which the work may be made complete.”\(^{131}\) One of the keys to solving the contradictory nature of participatory art is to produce work that allows for any response from a participant, including nonparticipation; and to produce a system with the capacity to truthfully document those responses. If a space is provided for the viewer/participants opinions to be recorded, heard, and considered, then unforeseen possibilities of participatory works may have the potential to be revealed and investigated instead of being omitted and forgotten in

\(^{130}\) Oiticica, “Position and Program,” 320.

service of a myth of participation; the "potential communities," of participatory works may be able to become actual communities.

The most glaring paradox outlined in the preceding two chapters is the usage of the myth of the avant-garde as a key trope in the production of the mythology of participatory art. The scholarship cited here provides ample documentation of the relationship between each of these two artists, and the avant-garde; it also articulates their alignment with art production that resists commodification and resists conforming to the parameters permitted by art institutions. Paradoxically, both of these artists achieved a significant level of economic and artistic success by exhibiting in gallery spaces, and in the case of Abramović, by devising ways for ephemeral works to be transformed into commodifiable art objects. Participatory art cannot avoid being commodified, or in the cases of successful participatory works, becoming profitable for artists.

This thesis has offered the following strategies in order to combat the ubiquity of paradox in the creation, dissemination, marketing, and representation of participatory art: artists and art historians alike should take into account and seek out participant's responses to participatory art; the artist and the discourse should begin the process of acknowledging the many individuals whose labour is required to produce a participatory work. This thesis suggests the commendation of the authorship of some or all participants, particularly those involved in the planning of participatory works; transparency regarding the necessity of economic gain for an artist and their representation; and finally, an abandonment of concepts of the authentic or avant-garde as a means of evaluating participatory or performance
works. George Yudice states, “Once we recognize that only interests are at play, then there is no role for the avant-garde, which endeavored to uncover the intoxication of life buried under ideology.”\textsuperscript{132} He goes on to say that, “What we have, quite simply, is the untenability of any ultimate ground of authority and legitimacy.”\textsuperscript{133} This proposition is alienating in relation to an art world where authority and legitimacy have been the standard currency. If the concept of the avant-garde is eliminated as a means of evaluating artwork, and along with it, a system of assigning authority and legitimacy to particular works and not others, new forms of evaluation must be determined. “The role of publics, and more generally, culture (which is the currency now at play in access to such events) can only be made fully evident if the circumstances of organization, including sponsorship and raison d’etre, are part of the encounter.”\textsuperscript{134} If the mythology of participatory works is replaced with factual documentation of the way participatory works function in the world, documentation of the way participatory works function in tandem with their participants, new knowledge, awareness, and creativity become possible.

\textsuperscript{132} Yudice, The Expediency of Culture, 355

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{134} Yudice, The Expediency of Culture, 358.
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