

# Critical Reflections on Participatory Art. *The Counterfeit Crochet Project* by Stephanie Syjuco

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## Resum

A través de l'anàlisi d'una obra participativa de l'artista estatunidenca Stephanie Syjuco, aquest assaig mostra com l'art contemporani pot reflexionar críticament sobre la seva problemàtica proximitat als valors del treball postfordista i l'economia global. Al mateix temps, es destaca el potencial activista d'aquest treball respecte a objectius feministes. Finalment, es mostra com l'obra de Stephanie Syjuco pot entendre's com una contribució crítica a una certa canonització de l'art relacional.

**Paraules clau:** Stephanie Syjuco, art participatiu, postfordisme, craftivism.

## **Abstract**

Through the in-depth analysis of a complex participatory work by US artist Stephanie Syjuco, this essay shows how contemporary art can critically reflect on its own problematic proximity to the values of post-Fordist work and the global economy. At the same time, the activist potential of this work is highlighted in regard to feminist goals. Finally, it is argued that Stephanie Syjuco's work can be understood as a critical contribution to a certain canonization of relational art.

**Key words:** Stephanie Syjuco, Participatory Art, Post-Fordism, Craftivism

## Introduction

Since the 1990s, participatory art has increasingly developed into a specific area of contemporary art. With the major survey exhibition in 2008 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York entitled *theyanspacewhatever* (Spector, 2008), a certain canon of mostly male artists was finally established, which the French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud had previously made known under the label *art relationnel* (Bourriaud, 2009 [1998]).<sup>1</sup> Given this context, the participatory spatial installation by US artist Stephanie Syjuco (\*1974) entitled *The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)* is particularly interesting. On the one hand, it has a decidedly feminist thrust. On the other, it critically reflects on the socio-economic framework conditions of participatory art. The author thus places at the center of her artistic work two aspects that were not addressed with such clarity by the artists in the exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. Stephanie Syjuco first showed this work in San Francisco in 2008. In Germany, the art project was exhibited in 2011 in the group exhibition *The Global Contemporary, Art Worlds after 1989* at the ZKM in Karlsruhe (Belting et al., 2013).<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, the work consists of a booth, which is formed by three simple partition walls. It separates the installation from the rest of the exhibition and looks like the exhibition stand of an art gallery (Fig. 1). Photographs and various objects are displayed on the walls. There is furniture that could be used by gallery owners for potential customer meetings, and a sign with lettering and a logo on the side facing the visitor path, drawing attention to the stand. At first sight, one might think of the pop-up store of a fashion boutique. After all, the objects on display are handbags in the style of well-known fashion labels, and in many of

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<sup>1</sup> Among the ten artists exhibited were two women, Angela Bullock and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. The male artists were Maurizio Cattelan, Liam Gillick, Douglas Gordon, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Jorge Pardo, Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

<sup>2</sup> See also the information on the artist's homepage:

[www.stephaniesyjuco.com/projects/the-counterfeit-crochet-project-critique-of-a-political-economy](http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/projects/the-counterfeit-crochet-project-critique-of-a-political-economy).

the pictures that hang on the walls, the bags are presented as accessories in the style of fashion photography of young women, as if on an advertising poster. In this context, the logo on the sign of the supposed store is recognizable as the well-known trademark of the Chanel company.



**[Fig. 1].** Stephanie Syjuco (2008). *The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)*. Installation. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. © Stephanie Syjuco, courtesy of the artist.

While there might be a lot to say about the somewhat provisionally furnished store of a fashion boutique or the exhibition stand of an art gallery, the simple tables, benches and stools made of cheap pine wood do not really fit in with the ambience that one would expect for high-quality and high-priced products - whether artwork or luxury brand. The furniture is more reminiscent of a workshop where several people can work together. The materials and tools provided on the tables reveal the kind of handicraft that is being done here: crocheting. The instructions

can be found in the manuals on display. Here, crochet patterns are compiled for brand handbags from Chanel, Gucci, Fendi, Prada and other luxury labels, and examples are on display on the long wall of the room installation and in the photographs on the side walls. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that all the handbags shown here are crocheted and made of yarn (Fig. 2). The room installation is thus an invitation to do it yourself (DIY). The choice of handicraft technique, which traditionally has female connotations, and the specification of the product, which is also aimed at a female clientele, mean that the artistic project is primarily intended to appeal to women.



**[Fig. 2].** Stephanie Syjuco (2008). *The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)*. Installation detail. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. © Stephanie Syjuco, courtesy of the artist.

This means that visitors to the exhibition can become part of the installation by sitting down to crochet handbags on site, spending time and perhaps getting into conversation with other craftswomen,

exchanging ideas about their work and helping each other, thus creating a temporary community (Fig. 3). This participatory aspect is the actual core of the artistic work, which is thus to be understood as a processual open art project, whereby the object-like artwork of the room installation only represents the stage or the setting. The artist supports the participatory orientation of the art project by offering additional workshops during the exhibition in which she introduces the work of crocheting handbags and other fashion accessories. Some of the results of her workshops will also be presented on the walls of the installation.

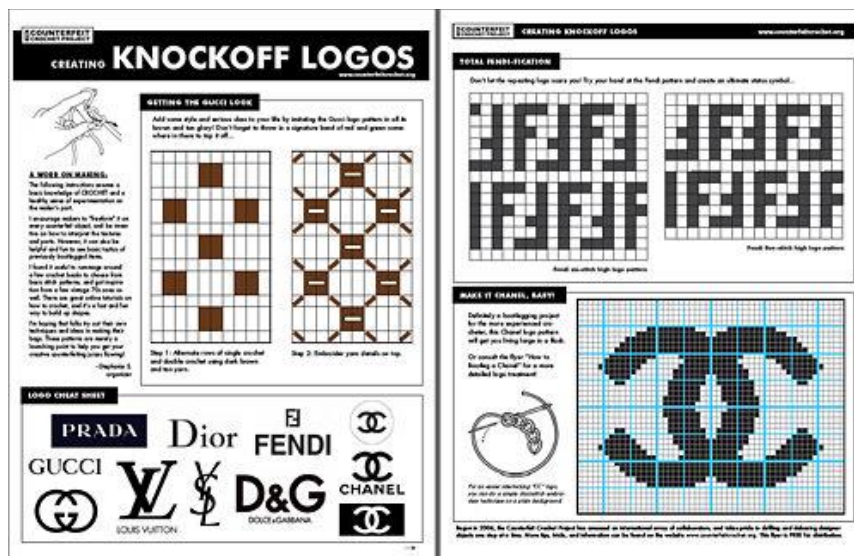


**[Fig. 3].** Stephanie Syjuco (2008). *The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)*. Installation, and participatory activity. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. © Stephanie Syjuco, courtesy of the artist.

This quasi-analog setting, which exists for the duration of the exhibition, is complemented by a digital online setting. A website designed by the artist has existed since 2006. It introduces the *Counterfeit Crochet Project*, promotes participation, and provides the necessary crochet instructions digitally (Fig. 4). The spatial installation, which has been set



up in the museum context of the art exhibition since 2008 (as in Karlsruhe), is largely based on the digital aspect of the work. This is because the bags presented there were all produced by participants involved in the Internet project, are still in their possession, and are only made available to the artist on loan for the duration of the respective exhibition (Belting et al., 2013). The same applies to the fashion style photographs mentioned above. They were also taken by participants in the Internet project. The black eye bars inserted by the artist are intended to protect the participants from possible criminal prosecution by the fashion houses<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 5). After all, the imitation of branded handbags is a form of product piracy. This context is also alluded to in some of the photographs on the walls of the installation alongside the fashion shots, which document the confiscation and destruction of counterfeit branded goods in Southeast Asia. So-called designer bags are among the most popular objects of product piracy because the profit margin for counterfeiters is particularly high (Thomas, 2009).



[Fig.4]. Stephanie Syjuco (2008). *The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)*. Website. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. © Stephanie Syjuco, courtesy of the artist.

<sup>3</sup> In a public lecture, Stephanie Syjuco (2010) reports that the fashion house Louis Vuitton threatened her with legal action, but ultimately failed to carry it out.



**[Fig. 4].** Stephanie Syjuco (2008). *The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)*. Website, detail (Diana's Dior). Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. © Stephanie Syjuco, courtesy of the artist.

While the product piracy of branded bags normally aims to come very close to its role models so that the cheap copy looks as deceptively similar as possible to the expensive original, Stephanie Syjuco sets limits to the degree of imitation from the outset. Simply translating the handbags into a different material and processing it using a technique that is foreign to the original product results in a completely different appearance. Additionally, there is the somewhat amateur crochet technique, which results in further deviations from the original. However, it is precisely the creative transformation of the original along with the original solutions of amateur craftspeople that particularly interest Syjuco, as she herself writes: "The resulting 'translations' are both homages and lumpy mutations. Crochet is considered a lowly medium, and the limitations imposed by trying to create detail with yarn



takes advantage of the individual maker's ingenuity and problem-solving skills" (Syjuco, n.d.).

The associative spatial interweaving of art gallery, fashion boutique and workshop, which is extended globally in the digital space, raises the question of the extent to which the activities taking place in this hybrid location also make a complex sensually tangible interweaving of art, commerce and work and at the same time critically reflect on them. As the subtitle of this art project clarifies, Stephanie Syjuco sees her product piracy crochet project as a critique of the political economy. In doing so, she explicitly refers to Karl Marx, who also gave his main work, *Das Kapital*, the first volume published in 1867 this subtitle, in order to draw attention to the thrust of his analysis of the capitalist economic system (Marx, 1962 [1867]). His critique was aimed, on the one hand, at the preceding traditional theories of economics, and on the other, directly at the social conditions associated with capitalism at the time and their concealment by bourgeois ideology. To what extent is the piracy crochet project to be understood as a critique of political economy? In answering this question, I will pursue the thesis that Stephanie Syjuco deals with the current manifestation of capitalism in the late 20th and early 21st century, which is referred to as post-Fordism.

### Reflections on post-Fordism

To a certain extent, the artist uses the specific means of contemporary art - such as installation and participatory art - to imitate not only a counterfeiting workshop for designer bags, but also a post-Fordist company.<sup>4</sup> This is characterized by the fact that the artist appears here in the figure of a manager, so to speak, who takes care of the development of the brand, but no longer produces it herself, instead delegating production to others - similar to the outsourcing of large companies. Just as the imitation of designer bags using yarn and crochet creates a distance to a real counterfeiting workshop, the artistic imitation of a

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<sup>4</sup> On the general connection between participatory art and post-Fordist neoliberalism see Bishop (2012).

post-Fordist company also stands at a distance to a real company. This is evident in the fact that Syjuco does not make any financial profit from the production of the handbags. As already mentioned, they remain the property of the participants and are only lent to the artist for the duration of the exhibition. As an entrepreneurial artist, she nevertheless benefitted from the collaboration of the participants, because, through her artistic project, she was able to use the handbags made available to her and make use of their symbolic capital. In short, this project enabled Stephanie Syjuco to become well-known in the art world, opening doors for her in other art institutions.

But how does the artist reflect on post-Fordist conditions in contemporary capitalism in the Marxian tradition of a critique of political economy? Firstly, it is noticeable that by choosing designer bags, she has selected a product that is almost emblematic of the concept of the commodity and consumption in post-Fordism. Handbags from renowned fashion brands such as Chanel, Gucci, or Prada are precisely not products of Fordist mass production and mass consumption. Instead, they are quite the opposite: often only produced in small quantities. They are very high-quality goods that cannot be produced by machine, as a great deal of manual work must be invested. This makes them high-priced luxury goods that only a few can afford. This is why this fashion accessory is particularly suitable as a social status symbol that is worn in public.

Luxury consumption, which serves as a means of social distinction, is not a new phenomenon, but it is already part of the essence of Fordism. Precisely because access to consumption is open to many people in Fordism, the "subtle differences" in consumer behavior play an increasingly important role (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]). The American sociologist Thorstein Veblen already observed this around 1900 and described it as *conspicuous consumption* (Veblen, 2009 [1899]). In this context, fashion accessories, and in particular high-quality handbags, already played a central role in the fashion world of the 20th century. A prominent example is the Kelly Bag by Hermès, which has been produced since 1935 and was made famous by the actress Grace Kelly (Wilcox, 1997, p. 96f.).<sup>5</sup> However, it was not until the early 21st century that there

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<sup>5</sup> For the history of the handbag in general, see van Eijk (2004).

was a real hype around designer bags, which were launched by fashion houses as so-called "*it bags*" for each new fashion season. In contrast to fashion accessories in the first decades of the 20th century, since the 1980s, brand logos have no longer merely appeared on the sewn-in labels, but rather appear ostentatiously as an ornament in the outer appearance of the bags, which can even be dominated by this design element (Klein, 2000). This also applies to the crocheted handbags created under the direction of Stephanie Syjuco. Here, too, the logo of the respective fashion brand stands out.

When Stephanie Syjuco placed designer bags at the center of her artistic project in 2006, she was also implicitly reacting to the strategy of the fashion house Louis Vuitton, which has been commissioning renowned artists, such as Stephen Sprouse, Yayoi Kusama, and Jeff Koons, to create designs for its bags since 2001. The proximity to art is intended to further enhance the auratic charge of the brand.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of the 21st century, designer bags fetched horrendous prices that could no longer be justified by the high production costs. Similar to the deliberately limited and often even numbered editions of handbags, the high prices were intended to increase the exclusivity of the goods. What is consumed is primarily the image of the brand, which is typical of the post-Fordist form of consumption. However, criticism of this phenomenon became increasingly loud around 2006. Alluding to the real estate bubble at the time, there was talk of a "handbag bubble". As Eric Wilson commented in *The New York Times*: "Status handbags, you see, are a lot like housing. After the rise of the \$1,000 purse, fashion's equivalent of the \$1 million studio, there inevitably comes talk of a backlash. Are we now living in a handbag bubble?" (Wilson, 2007, p. G10).

Stephanie Syjuco's artistic project also criticizes this phenomenon of consumption, which is typical of contemporary capitalism. However, her attitude is ambivalent. On the one hand, it enables a cheap copy of luxury goods that everyone can afford, but on the other hand, it serves the fascination that can emanate from the luxury brand. In the do-it-yourself process, access to luxury products is potentially available to everyone,

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<sup>6</sup> On Louis Vuitton's collaboration with contemporary artists, see Modigliani (2007).

which can be understood as a critique of financial and social inequality in a post-Fordist society. Accordingly, she invites the participants in her art project to choose handbags as models that they would like to own but cannot afford financially (Syjuco, 2010). However, the homage to the luxury brand, which can be felt in her artistic project, also affirms aestheticization as a positive effect of post-Fordist production and consumption. In this regard, Gernot Böhme speaks decidedly of an *aesthetic capitalism* that has increasingly dominated Western societies since the late 1960s (Böhme, 2017). His assessment is also double-edged. In addition to the manipulative aspects, he emphasizes the pleasurable, life-enhancing dimension provided by the *scenic value* or *staging value* of the goods. He affirms that:

Only in such a situation, which has also been described as a society of affluence, did it become clear that luxury and extravagance are by no means merely a means of distinction and the realization of social status, but are something universally human and therefore also relate to a universally human basic need. It is not an elementary need, not one that serves to maintain life, but rather the desire to increase life. [...] This is the phase in which a large part of social production becomes aesthetic production, i.e. no longer serves utility values, but rather staging values (Böhme, 2017, p. 39).

The photographs of the participants Syjuco shown both on the Internet and in the exhibition display reflect this joy in the staging value of the goods. There is certainly a dose of wit and humor involved when the young women imitate the poses of models from fashion magazines. But it is also clear that wearing the self-made branded goods is fun and conveys a good sense of self-esteem. This may be enhanced by the fact that the exclusivity sought by luxury brands has been taken to extremes here - albeit in an ironic way.

The artist not only analyzes and criticizes typical post-Fordist forms of consumption, but also specific forms of production in contemporary capitalism. As already mentioned, she imitates a post-Fordist company to a certain extent, with the strict separation between management and brand development on one side, and material labor and the production of goods on the other, the latter being outsourced to other locations. In this context, it is not insignificant that branded handbags are

*counterfeited* in this fake company. The counterfeits produced on a large scale are manufactured in factories, usually under poor working conditions in *sweatshops* in the low-wage countries of the global South. Alongside many other authors, Naomi Klein drew attention to the newly created precarious working conditions with her widely received book *No Logo - The Struggle of Global Players for Market Power*, thus giving the anti-sweatshop movement a boost (Klein, 2000). However, this was not about the luxury brands addressed by Stephanie Syjuco, but about fashion brands from the middle segment with large market shares such as Nike or Tommy Hilfiger.

If the factory work in today's *sweatshops* resembles pre-Fordist working conditions to a certain extent, as they were found in Western countries in the 19th century, the manual work that Syjuco delegates to the participants in her art project also resembles pre-Fordist working conditions, namely homework. Before the invention of the assembly line, it was common for women, for example seamstresses, to carry out certain tasks at home, especially in the textile sector (Thomas, 2009). The organization of manual work in the artist's project also resembles the post-Fordist corporate culture in European and North American countries. In contrast to the work in the *sweatshop*, the work in Stephanie Syjuco's workshop is voluntary and self-determined. It is not alienated and instrumental work but, on the contrary, an activity that is enjoyable and is carried out with pleasure. Work and leisure are no longer strictly separated, but flow into one another. The artist does not act as an authoritarian manager but strives for flat hierarchies and gives the participants a feeling of emotional closeness. This emotional reward serves as compensation for unpaid labor. The skills that are particularly desirable in the working world of post-Fordism are especially encouraged here. These include creativity, which can and should flow into the work despite the templates (Reckwitz, 2017 [1995]). In addition, the participatory offer promotes teamwork and networking.<sup>7</sup> Networking takes place worldwide online, while face-to-face communication can take place in the exhibition installation. The chosen

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<sup>7</sup> On the significance of networks in the context of the *project-based polis*, see Boltanski & Chiapello (2005 [1999], p. 188-204).

activity - tying the threads - seems to symbolize the desired social networking. By titling her artistic work as a *project*, Stephanie Syjuco implicitly alludes to the change in professional careers in post-Fordism. As Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2005) explain, the new spirit of capitalism does not envisage continuous careers, but only successive, more or less heterogeneous projects.

### Reflections on craftivism

With her choice of technology, which traditionally has female connotations, Stephanie Syjuco implicitly refers to the movement known as craftivism, which has gained widespread popularity in the USA, since the start of the new millennium, and must be seen in the wider context of the maker movement and the DIY movement. The term *craftivism* was coined in 2003 by the US writer Betsy Greer, who wanted to express a connection between *craft* and *activism* (political activism) from a feminist perspective.<sup>8</sup> The recourse to textile handicraft techniques was understood as a recuperation or reappropriation of traditionally female activities and skills, which were now taken from the private into the public sphere and thus upgraded to an instrument of resistance and political empowerment. Betsy Greer formulates this program in the introduction to her anthology *Craftivism - The Art of Craft and Activism* (2014) with the following words: "The creation of things by hand leads to a better understanding of democracy, because it reminds us that we have power" (Greer, 2014, p. 8).

Textile handicrafts were traditionally carried out by women of different social classes and the knowledge of these techniques was passed down from generation to generation.<sup>9</sup> Whether in aristocratic, bourgeois, or working-class culture, textile handicrafts were usually confined to the domestic sphere of work and therefore ranked very low on the patriarchally calibrated scale of values of productive work. The only difference probably lay in the function that textile handicrafts were supposed to fulfill in the context of domestic work. In aristocratic culture,

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<sup>8</sup> See Greer (2014); see also Eismann & Zobl (2011, p. 188-197).

<sup>9</sup> On the historical perspective of textile handicrafts, see critical crafting circle (2011, p. 12-57).



textile handicraft was a way of idle pastime whereas for the bourgeois class it was ascribed of a moral function. However, in working-class culture, it was more of a necessary life-sustaining practice. The fact that textile handicraft is one of the traditional cultural techniques performed by women from different social classes and strata as well as different ethnicities and cultures makes it particularly interesting for activists in contemporary feminism. The gender debate has become more complex in current so-called third-wave feminism, because it focuses on the intersectionality of discrimination, i.e. it examines the interplay of categories of difference such as gender, class and race.<sup>10</sup>

With her *Counterfeit Crochet Project*, Stephanie Syjuco also offers textile handicrafts, and crochet in particular, a public stage. However, unlike many other craftivism projects, this does not mean the urban space, but rather the museum space of the art exhibition, although some of the exhibited photographs indicate that the handbags crocheted by the artists themselves are worn in the city and thus subversively smuggled into the urban space as textile symbols. The community aspect, which plays an important role in many craftivism projects, is also central to Stephanie Syjuco's work. The workshop and supervised workshops she provides are intended to promote collaborative work and the associated communicative and social exchange. The very tangible knotting of threads enables networking on a social level, which gains a worldwide radius through the Internet. In line with the feminist thrust of craftivism, the artist's project is a critique of patriarchal social conditions, with a particular focus on capitalism, in which women's work is traditionally devalued and therefore less well paid.<sup>11</sup> In a way, Stephanie Syjuco reflects this problematic situation by not paying the participants in her project any wages at all.

With her artistic project, Stephanie Syjuco not only encourages reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of contemporary capitalism with

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<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Lutz (2001).

<sup>11</sup> In this context, see also the works critical of capitalism by Cat Mazza, whose participatory textile works also criticize the globally outsourced *sweatshops*. Sabrina Gschwandter, Françoise Dupré and Shane Waltener also pursue participatory projects. See McFadden (2008, p. 9-19).

its specific forms of production and consumption, but also examines the role of art and artists in this economic and socio-political system. It becomes clear that many works of art - especially in their traditional object character - resemble high-priced luxury goods that only a few can afford financially. Like certain fashion accessories, works of art are particularly suitable as status symbols because they are intended to enable the privilege of high financial power with the intellectual aura of good taste (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]). To a certain extent, the expensive brand-name handbags that the artist uses here as a central example from the capitalist world of commodities can also be understood as a metaphor for the work of art. By playfully slipping into the role of a manager who is concerned with the brand development of her post-Fordist company, Stephanie Syjuco implicitly refers to the general significance of marketing for artists in today's art world. Of course, even in earlier centuries, most artists were already trying to attract the attention of their audience and were in competition with their professional colleagues. With the increasing globalization of the art world and the art market, however, attention has become an extremely scarce resource that is hotly contested (Franck, 1998). By referring to the luxury brands of certain fashion companies, Stephanie Syjuco makes it subliminally clear how important the image of an artist is for today's capitalist art system. A personal public appearance plays just as important a role as the visibility of the work in the public media, the consistent profiling and recognizability of the artistic work, the representation by financially strong and renowned galleries, the interest of potent private collectors and the prices achieved on the art market. To be successful on the art market, most contemporary artists must establish themselves as a brand (Reckwitz, 2017).

### **Reflections on Relational Art**

As already indicated at the beginning, Stephanie Syjuco's *Counterfeit Crochet Project* ties in with the tradition of participatory art, as it has developed and established itself significantly since the 1990s, while at the same time critically distancing itself from it. Interestingly, she presented her art project to the public for the first time in 2008 as a spatial installation in the context of an art exhibition, the same year that

the major survey exhibition on the protagonists of so-called relational art entitled *theanyspacewhatever* opened at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (Spector, 2008). Participatory art -as practiced by Syjuco in her project- is a specification of relational art that deals with interpersonal relationships and forms of coexistence in general and aims to activate the viewer to a greater extent. With the selection of artists, the New York exhibition confirms the canon that the French art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud (2009 [1998]; 1996) defined in the mid-1990s with his writings and exhibitions. In contrast to the canonized representatives of Relational Art, it is striking that Stephanie Syjuco strongly emphasizes the participatory aspect in her *Counterfeit Crochet Project*. The participants in her project are addressed and activated on different levels by involving them mentally, physically and emotionally in the production process of the artistic work. As we have seen, the artist specifically promotes communicative exchange and social networking, which can lead to new forms of community (Möntmann, 2011). She thus fulfills the theoretically formulated requirements of relational art better than many of the artists represented in the New York exhibition.

Another difference is that in Syjuco's *Counterfeit Crochet Project* the critical examination of aspects of contemporary capitalism takes place in a very direct way, whereas in the works of the artists represented in the New York exhibition this is only the case - if at all - in a more concealed manner. For example, in the work *Z Point* (2001/2004) Angela Bulloch alludes to the final sequence of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 film *Zabriski Point*, in which the female protagonist observes or imagines the explosion of a modernist luxury villa (Mühling, 2008). All kinds of consumer goods fly through the air in slow motion. However, these images of a critique of consumption in the spirit of the 1968 movement are not shown directly to the viewers of Angela Bulloch's work but appear stretched out in time and extremely pixelated on her screen, which is made up of large, illuminated cubes, so that they can at best only be perceived imaginatively. Questions as to whether the capitalism-critical and utopian potential of the 1960s and 1970s has evaporated or can be reactivated in the digital age of an increasingly post-Fordist society also concern Liam Gillick, who is also one of the most important representatives of relational art. Even the title of his *Discussion Platforms*

from the 1990s alludes to the think tanks of the new corporate culture. And in works such as *Construcción de Uno* (2006) and *Mirrored Image: Volvo Bar* (2008), the artist alludes to the social experiment of short-term worker participation in Scandinavian automobile companies of the 1970s (Roberts, 2013).

However, art critics have scrutinized many of the artists grouped under the label of Relational Art for not explicitly reflecting on their relationship to contemporary capitalism. In a 2010 article in the renowned art magazine *Artforum*, Joe Scanlan accused the then long-deceased artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres of indirectly promoting the skills desired by the post-Fordist establishment with his works, which were designed for participation and flexibility:

If the formal properties of 1960s Minimalism (hardness, geometry, impenetrability, silence) were aligned with those of the military-industrial complex, then more than forty years later Gonzalez-Torre's work exhibits precisely the inverse properties (flexibility, organicism, accessibility, eloquence) and yet is aligned with the same thing: the dominant social order. Gonzalez-Torre's signal accomplishment was his realization that the most expensive, pervasive way to amass power is to not seem powerful at all. (Scanlan, 2010, p. 165).

According to the author, the artist thus confirms -albeit perhaps unintentionally- the "dominant social order" of the so-called Internet economy (Scanlan, 2010, p. 165).<sup>12</sup> In the same year, Liam Gillick formulated a kind of defense in the *e-flux journal*, in which he rightly pointed out that contemporary artists often work very close and parallel to the structures they criticize. That is why it is precisely these subtle differences in which the critical potential of artistic work is expressed (Gillick, 2010). These differences must also be closely observed and worked out by the critic:

The reason it is hard to determine observable differences between the daily routines and operations of a new knowledge-worker and those of an artist is precisely because art functions in close parallel to the structures that it critiques. [...] The notion that artists are a perfect analogue to the flexible entrepreneurial class is a

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. also the critique by Tom Holert (2010, p. 143-144).

generational concept that merely masks a lack of differentiation in observation of practice [...] (Gillick, 2010, p. 3-8).

This observation by Liam Gillick ultimately also applies to the work of Stephanie Syjuco, who, with her *Counterfeit Crochet Project*, comes very close to a post-Fordist company, but at the same time enables shifts and transformations in relation to socio-political reality through her artistic distance. It is precisely in this way that this reality can be reflected upon in a differentiated and critical manner by both the participants in the project and the visitors to the exhibition.

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