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Bodies and Subjects



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Bodies and Subjects

Participation and the Differential Field of Art's Encounters

Today one of the key debates within art concerns the bundle of questions related to how it is encountered. At the same time, there has been a marked ethical turn in contemporary art. Putting these two developments together, we can say, since art's social turn it is not the formal properties of art objects that count but the ethical character of its social relations. Ethics has become one of the key economies through which contemporary art is judged. Art after aesthetics has become ethical.

Alongside the ethics of ecological responsibility, the ethics of representation, the ethics of participation and the ethics of institutional care, art and its institutions are now subject to the ethics of 'artwashing' and the ethics of internships as well as the ethics of pedagogy and the ethics of the art boycott. It is noticeable that the ethical tendency in art has built itself up around those intersections of the artist, the public and art's institutions that have been highlighted by the social turn.

Participation is presented as a form of cultural engagement that flattens cultural hierarchies and has been characterised in opposition to the elitism of the aesthete, the passivity of the spectator, the compliance of the observer, and the distance of the onlooker. Reconfiguring the encounter with art as an ethically loaded and social mode of address, ranging from pleasant social gatherings to the recruitment of activists in staged protests against Big Oil's sponsorship of the art museum, to tense and even chilling reflections on identity and society, participation in art might best be understood as an ethically loaded response to art's crisis of legitimation.

Participation could never deliver what it promised. In both art and politics, participation is an image of a much longed for social reconciliation but it is not a mechanism for bringing about the required transformation. In politics, participation vainly hopes to provide the ends of revolution without the revolution itself. And in art, participation seems to heal the rift between art and social life without confrontations between cultural rivals.

Front Cover:

Protest is Beautiful (Tottenham), Free Art Collective
(Dave Beech, Andy Hewitt, Mel Jordan), silk flowers, 2013

Even if we view participation in its rosiest light, Jacques Ranciere argues it sets up a new economy which separates society into participants and non-participants, or those who are participation-rich and those who are participation-poor. Judith Butler counters the naive advocacy of inclusion in which the problem is how to include more people, not to question whether being included within the dominant framework blocks off vital forms of subversion, difference and the rejection of normalcy.

The participant in art's social turn is not typically cast as an agent of critique or subversion within the artwork but rather as one who is invited to accept its parameters. Participants are complicit. Participation always involves a specific invitation and a specific formation of the participant's subjectivity, even when the artist asks them simply to be themselves. Claire Bishop, whose writings on participation put a strong emphasis on antagonism and dissensus, nevertheless neglects the complicity of the participant in a theory of the antagonistic agency of the artist or the antagonistic qualities of the artwork.

Participation in art often neutralises opposition by presenting itself as a viable alternative to the historical and social privilege of art as a cultural formation. As such, we shouldn't assume that inclusion is always preferable to exclusion. Given a disturbing or horrific activity, say, the gradient of virtue from spectator to participant is inverted, with the dishonour being shouldered more by participants than spectators. It is only by assuming that art is good that we can go on thinking that participation in it is something that ought to be encouraged and extended.

Bishop defines participation by contrasting it with interactivity understood as incorporating the viewer 'physically' (pressing buttons, jumping on sensitive pads and so on). Participation differs from interactivity insofar as it draws on decisions, values and choices. The viewer or spectator, which has been theorised as a 'disembodied

eye', was in some quarters regarded as superseded by the interactive body, but this embodied encounter with art now appears mechanical in comparison with the participant. In this respect, we might say that the participant returns us somewhat to the condition of the viewer, which interactivity neglected.

Despite this, contemporary proponents of participation have come to regard the viewer or spectator with suspicion, seeing the visual onlooker of art as a constrained relationship which denies full access to the work no longer conceived in terms of objects. The ethics of participation today confronts the hegemony of the spectator and its processes of interpretation. The critique of the spectator implies a set of questions about cultural and social transformation. It has always been impossible to produce new works and new configurations of art without at the same time questioning the existing spectator, whether this means substituting the narrative hunting spectator for the formalist spectator or replacing the formalist spectator for the dialectical spectator of montage, or whatever. The rejection of the spectator in favour of the participant, therefore, is the latest in a long line of disruptions of established modes of attending to art in order to make way for new ways of attending to art and therefore new forms of art. As such, the critique [of] the spectator implicit in the ethics of participation is a utopian call for new publics, new experiences, new kinds of art, new institutions, new social forms, new ideologies and a new world.

Participatory practices are assumed to shun the spectator as part of their ethical commitments, but most splinter art's encounter between participants in events and viewers of documents of those events. The theoretical emphasis on participation has been pursued in relation to works in which techniques of participation are combined with techniques of spectatorship as the work is transposed from the site of its production to the site of its display, albeit in some cases in the same place. A generation or two of artists, critics, curators and

others have been pressing the case for various forms of participation, interaction, community-specificity, co-authorship, collaboration and counterpublics in art but their practices have frequently addressed themselves to multiple forms of engagement, encounter and reception. []

The social and cultural distinctions of art's social relations that prompt the ethics of participation in the first place are reproduced within participatory techniques themselves, not least through an economy of the participants' relative proximity to the invitation. This is why, taken on its own terms, the palpable shortfall between participation and collaboration leads to difficult questions about the degree of choice, control and agency of the participant compared with collaborators. Unlike participants, collaborators share authorial rights over the artwork, make fundamental decisions about the key structural features of the work and do not hold a status that is secondary to art's producers. Clearly, collaborators have rights that are withheld from participants. If the ascent from interactivity to participation is to be accepted, then collaboration is to participation what participation is to interactivity.

The alleged ascent of the art subject from the spectator to the interactive body to the participant conceals a complex set of questions. We need to approach this series of bodies and subjects critically and with a certain scepticism towards the ideological arguments for which they are currently being deployed. The simple binary logic which opposes participation to exclusion and passivity is a romantic fantasy that can be replaced with a constellation of overlapping economies of agency, control, self-determination and power. Within such a constellation participants take their place alongside a series of bodies and subjects constructed by art. As a particular genre of cultural engagement with its own constraints, problems and subjectivities, techniques of participation can be located within, rather than beyond, the differential field of culture's social relations.

The distinction between participation and collaboration already

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noted not only highlights the limits of participation, nor should it be taken to signify the virtues of collaboration. Collaboration is only superior to participation in regard to something valuable whereas it is inferior to participation in regard to something objectionable. That is to say, participation and collaboration sound promising only until you imagine unpromising circumstances in which you might be asked to participate or collaborate. Being invited to participate or collaborate in unsavoury or atrocious or vile activities does not quite match the ethical promise of participation. There is potential horror within the threat of participating in or collaborating in something awful. Since the promise of participation and collaboration depends entirely on the ethical value of the situation to which the participant or collaborator is invited, the ethics of participation must presuppose that art is a promising activity.

Within the social turn and its ethical twist there are artists who not only organise their works according to the ethical principles of tolerance, kindness and conviviality but who instead prod and pinch social fissures, who irritate the tender relics of world historical trauma and politically obscene encounters, as the very basis of the relationship between the artist and his 'public'. This is a harsh testing ground for art's encounter, to be sure, but milder inquiries lower the stakes.

I raise the issue of the dilemma of participating in something objectionable not in order to take sides within the rather limp

dispute between conviviality and antagonism in art's social turn. Claire Bishop values the antagonism integral to those works that incorporate participants in questionable ways. She believes that this sort of antagonism resonates with Chantal Mouffe's political concept of agonism and the necessity of dissensus rather than consensus in political exchanges. However, the opposition between conviviality and antagonism nestles too narrowly within the artwork, like a latter-day formalism. This opposition is trivial since it addresses itself to styles of participation rather than to the politics of participation in general.

We Can think beyond the purely ethical critique of the cruel treatment of participants and spectators in some contemporary art. So, rather than endorsing Santiago Sierra's reputedly antagonistic practices, it is more productive to analyse the combination of bodies and subjects in his work. Sierra cuts through the public by presenting one part of society to another part of society.... Watching the works can be harrowing and uncomfortable but the viewer looks on from a safe distance and is not the object of scrutiny. The spectator does not view other spectators, but participants. Sometimes this might be felt as a loss since participation is closer to the action, but sometimes it is a relief since the participants get most of the flak. [...]

In the work of the Freee art collective, the athletics of participation and collaboration, in which more is better than less, longer is better than shorter, is subject to radical critique. Taking our cue from political activism, which doesn't have an audience, since marchers and protestors 'go public' but do not address 'the public' as a separate social entity, Freee works address art's publics as capable of action, of joining in and opting out. Just as political activism divides the social body, addressing itself to comrades and enemies, allies and rivals, Freee projects aim to divide the social body, confronting participants and non-participants through techniques

and processes that are fuelled by agreement and disagreement.

Our spoken choirs, for instance, in which a group of people read out a Freee manifesto, is prepared for by readers underlining only those phrases or sentences in the manifesto that they agree with. When we come together to perform the reading, participants are asked to go quiet when we are reading out those sections that they did not underline. For other works we have asked people to act as co-signatories or carriers for the work. Sometimes personhood counts, sometimes bodily effort counts. In a piece we made for Peckham Platform we asked local shopkeepers to sign a giant pledge for a photoshoot in which they committed themselves to hand over their shop to the people in the event of a socialist revolution.

Although within the current ethical consensus our techniques of participation can be seen as not participatory enough, participants are, in another sense, much more vital. Like the godparent at a Christening or a witness at a wedding or a co-signatory of a legal document, the place of our participants is structurally integral to the event even if her activity, authorship and input is minimal.

Revolution Road: Rename the Streets! was a Freee project commissioned by Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, UK in 2009. One of the key elements in the work was the precise configuration of its social relations. First, the invitation we made was not open. Freee invited a small group of Wysing staff, artists and trustees to participate in an event. This meant the participants were known to one another, shared (perhaps antagonistically) a familiarity with the place, and knew more than the artists about the institution and the locale where the performance was set.

This was not an attempt to conform to Miwon Kwon's category of "community-specific" art, which typically aims 'to foster social assimilation.' Our aim was insert a fissure at the heart of the social relations of the artwork in which the artists did not hold the

monopoly on expertise in the work and they were not the most at ease in the encounter.

The actants which the work orchestrated were not that of 'artists' and 'participants'. The places that the work called for were much stranger than that. The work consisted of a walking tour of Cambridge town, wearing bright costumes that distinguish them from passersby (members of the general public) and performing scripted ceremonies. From the local Court building to King's Passage, through residential, education, retail and civic areas, every street, lane, road and square that the participants passed was renamed in a scripted ritual. All the streets were renamed after key figures, events and institutions within English Jacobinism immediately after the French Revolution. The ceremonies included detailed expositions of the historical significance of the new name for the street, followed by an exchange in which a new name for the street was proposed and confirmed in a performative speech act of acknowledgement that a new name had been written in chalk on a blackboard.

Although this dialogue was scripted by the artists and took place as a call-and-response dialogue between the artists and the participants, the script which renamed the streets also renamed the individuals in the ceremony: the artists were referred to throughout the script as 'the chalk-holders' and the participants were referred to throughout as the 'witnesses'. The witnesses played a vital role within the performative act of renaming the streets of Cambridge. The witnesses had a script that placed them as the communal agent of the renaming ceremony. But they have another vital role, as the memory of the work. Since there is no permanent physical alteration to the streets the act must be remembered, documented, vouched for, and authorized. The witnesses in this sense embody and represent within the work the role of the photographer or archivist.

Rather than thinking that the photographer makes the role of the 'witnesses' redundant, this project casts the photographers as technologically enhanced witnesses. Rather than treating the documentation of the work as external to it, therefore, the photographs and video can be seen as issuing from one of the places set out by the internal pairing of actants within the work.

Renaming the streets could therefore be seen as an alibi for renaming the actants of art. So, we might also say, the renaming of the actants of art is figured within a performative scenario in which the world appears malleable.

For us publics are not consumers, fans, viewers, customers, taxpayers, citizens, identities, communities, clients, markets, voters, readers, victims. We prefer Witnesses, Signatories, Advocates, Spokespersons, Co-publishers, Badge-wearers, Distributors, Marchers, Recruits, Promise-makers, Co-conspirators, Accomplices. These actants are not just necessary to the work's execution or deployed for the work's social justification, nor are they necessarily more active, productive or democratic than the participants of art's social turn. What is more important to us is that they are invited to occupy very specific roles that are integral to the structure of the work. Participation, both in its convivial and antagonistic forms, is too general, too abstract, too neutralising, and too presumptuous about the value of art; the social turn needs to take much more care about the nature of its invitations, and this requires a more precise concept, or series of concepts, for mapping and navigating the possible modes of encounter with and within art.

*A longer version of this paper was presented
By Dave Beech at the Create Networking Day,
IMMA November 2015*

EXTENDING ARCHITECTURE

an Arts Council initiative
managed by Create



Cinema Usura TXP
(Image: Todo Por La Praxis)



Kate Goodwin, Trainer, Galway
(Image: Inside Heatherwick Studio)



Teddy Cruz, Fonna Forman and Blaithe Quinn,
Workshop 30 April, National Sculpture
Factory Cork (Ailbhe Murphy)

WELCOME TO CREATE NEWS

This is the twentieth edition of Create News and includes a longer essay. Create News is published twice yearly in May and October. It is sent free of charge, features a guest writer and offers the latest information on Create events and services. If you do not wish to receive further editions, please write or email us at info@create-ireland.ie. You will automatically receive copies unless you ask us to remove your details from the list. If you would like to receive a personal copy of Create News please email info@create-ireland.ie and include details of name, address and postcode.

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DIS-RUPTIVE MOVEMENTS

(Create / DDF)

Date: 26 May // Time: 2—4pm // Venue: Fringe LAB Dublin

It's time to think about those who are absent. It's time to discuss how art and artists can reach across political, cultural, geographic and socio-economic divides and approach the urgent matters of today: migration, identity, mobility, territory – absence and silence. The time is now!

Create, the national development agency for collaborative arts, and Dublin Dance Festival invite an international panel of arts practitioners to discuss some of the issues which find expression in the 2016 Festival programme - through interdisciplinary collaborations and cross fertilisations of form, idea and inspiration.

Panel includes: Eckhard Thiemann, an independent international curator, producer and arts manager and Artistic Director of Shubbak, the London-wide festival of contemporary Arab culture; Karthika Nair, an award-winning French-Indian poet and dance producer, and

principal scriptwriter of Akram Khan's Chotto Desh; and festival artist Euripides Laskaridis, a Greek stage director, short-filmmaker and performer (Relic). Additional panelists will be announced. Check back for updates.

Booking via Dublin Dance Festival website
www.dublindancefestival.ie

ARTS COUNCIL ARTIST IN THE COMMUNITY SCHEME FIRST ROUND 2016

Create manages the Artist in the Community Scheme on behalf of the Arts Council

Research and Development Award

Artist; Community / Context; Artform; Location

Veronica Dyas; Community of interest; Saol Project; Theatre; Dublin

Michael Holly; Clonakilty Friends of the Asylum Seekers; Cultural Diversity; Visual Arts; County Cork

Research and Development Award with Mentoring

Artist; Community / Context; Artform; Location (Mentor)

Declan Mallon; arts and health; Theatre/Performance; Louth (Louise Lowe)

Project Realisation Award

Community; Artist; Project title; Context; Artform; Location

Short Term

Ability West; **Louise Manifold**; Songs from a disorderly world of things; Arts and Disability; Visual Arts; Galway

Long term

Skibbereen Community and Family Resource Centre; **Sheelagh Broderick**; Urban Explorer; Community of place; Visual Arts; County Cork

Camden Fort Meagher; **Marie Brett & John McHarg**; Torpedo; Community of interest; Visual Arts; County Cork

AkidWa (Young Migrant Women's Group); **Kathryn Maguire**; 'We Claim'; Cultural Diversity; Visual Arts; Dublin

Panel: Linda Shevlin, visual artist and curator; Gavin Kostick, theatremaker and dramaturge, Fishamble; Orla Moloney, Droichead Arts Centre. Observer: Ann O'Connor, Arts Participation Adviser, Arts Council;