

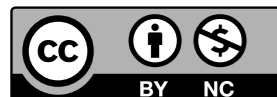
Participatory art is not a privileged political medium  
nor a ready made solution to a society of spectacle  
but it is as precarious as democracy itself.  
Claire Bishop

# REDISTRIBUTING POWER?: A POETICS OF PARTICIPATION IN CONTEMPORARY ARTS

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# REDISTRIBUTING POWER?: A POETICS OF PARTICIPATION IN CONTEMPORARY ARTS

Anne Douglas



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## CONNECTED COMMUNITIES Foundation Series

Today we are increasingly seeing calls for universities to collaborate with communities in designing and conducting research. While such calls are to be welcomed they tend to suffer from a historical blind-spot that ignores the fact that research collaboration – partnerships, participation (call it what you will) – is a deep and powerful research tradition that dates back beyond the recent emergence of calls for ‘co-produced’ knowledge.

This series of reviews developed as part of the AHRC’s Connected Communities Programme, sets out to make visible some of these traditions of collaborative research. In doing so, the series aims to:

- help those who are new to the field to understand the huge wealth of history and resources that they might draw upon when beginning their own research collaborations;
- help those who seek to fund and promote collaborative research to understand the philosophical and political underpinnings of different traditions; and
- support those working in these traditions to identify points of commonality and difference in their methods and philosophies as a basis for strengthening the practice of collaborative research as a whole.

▼  
*Research collaboration is a deep and powerful research tradition that dates back beyond the recent emergence of calls for ‘co-produced’ knowledge.*  
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The eight reviews in the series were developed to provide eight very different ‘takes’ on the histories of collaborative research practices in the arts, humanities and social sciences. They do not pretend to be exhaustive, but to provide a personal perspective from the authors on the traditions that they are working within. As we worked together as a group to develop these, however, a number of commonalities emerged:

1. A critique of the mission-creep of scientific knowledge practices into the social sciences and humanities, and of the claims to produce universally valid forms of knowledge from specific limited institutional, cultural and social positions.
2. A commitment to creating research practices that enable diverse experiences of life and diverse knowledge traditions to be voiced and heard.
3. A resistance to seeing research methods as simply a technocratic matter; recognising instead that choices about how, where and with whom knowledge is created presuppose particular theories of reality, of power and of knowledge.
4. A commitment to grapple with questions of power, expertise and quality and to resist the idea that ‘anything goes’ in collaborative research and practice. There are better and worse ways of developing participation in research practice, there are conditions and constraints that make collaboration at times unethical.

At the same time, a set of names and events recur throughout the reviews: John Dewey, Paolo Freire, Raymond Williams, Donna Haraway appear as theorists and practitioners who provide powerful philosophical resources for thinking with. Critical incidents and moments reappear across the reviews: the rise of anti-colonial movements in the 1950s and 1960s, of second wave feminism and critical race theory in the 1960s and 1970s; of disability rights movements in the 1970s and 1980s; of post-human and ecological analyses in the 1990s and 2000s. Read as a whole, these reviews demonstrate the intellectual coherence and vibrancy of these many-threaded and interwoven histories of engaged scholarship and scholarly social action.

The first of the reviews, by **Kevin Myers** and **Ian Grosvenor**, discusses the long tradition of ‘history from below’ as a collaborative enterprise between researchers, archivists, curators, teachers, enthusiasts, local historians, archaeologists and researchers. They discuss the emergence of the ‘professional historian’ alongside the rise of the nation state, and the way in which this idea was challenged and deepened by the emergence of activist histories in the mid-20th century. They investigate the precedents set by the rise of groups such as the History Workshop movement and trace their legacies through a set of case studies that explore feminist histories of Birmingham, disabled people’s histories of the First World War and the critique of white histories of conflict emerging from the work of black historians and communities.

Two of the reviews explore currents within participatory and critical research traditions. Niamh Moore explores these traditions through the lens of feminist philosophies and methodologies, while Tom Wakeford and Javier Sanchez Rodriguez explore the history of participatory action research (PAR) and its ties to social movements outside the academy.

**Niamh Moore's** review highlights the strategic contributions made to participatory research through the traditions of feminist and indigenous methodologies. Drawing on Donna Haraway's metaphor of the cat's cradle, Moore explores the way that these different traditions have learned from each other, fed into each other and been in (productive) tensions over the years. Importantly, she makes visible the common threads of these traditions, including a concern with questions of power, matters of voice, agency and empowerment and reflexivity. She identifies examples that include: popular epidemiology and women's health; the controversies and emerging insights arising from the publication of the book 'I Rigoberta Menchú' (a collaboration between Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan activist and Peace Prize winner and anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray); and the online Mukurtu platform for sharing and curating community stories.

**Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez's** review is written from the position of individuals who situate themselves as both activists and academics. From a perspective both inside and outside the academy, they make visible the traditions of participatory action research that have evolved in social movements and their interaction with academic knowledge. They explain how PAR emerged as a practice that seeks to intervene and act on the world through disrupting assumptions about who has knowledge, and by building intercultural dialogue between those whose interests have historically been marginalised and those experts and institutions in dominant positions. They discuss the contributions of Paolo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, as well as the emergence within universities of centres for Action Research and indigenist approaches to research before exploring recent examples of PAR from the Highlander Folk School in the US, to the Cumbrian Hill Farmers post Chernobyl, to questions of Food Sovereignty in India (amongst others).

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build collaborative research practices  
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methodologies as a means of engaging  
with different forms of knowledge.*

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Central to many attempts to build collaborative research practices is a turn towards the arts and arts methodologies as a means of engaging with different forms of knowledge. Such a turn, however, can often overlook the distinctive and sustained tradition within contemporary arts of reflecting upon the question of how publics can come to participate in arts practices. Our series therefore includes two reflections on this question from different perspectives:

First, **Anne Douglas'** review offers a 'poetics of participation in contemporary arts', locating the turn to participation in contemporary arts within a wider history of 20th and 21st century arts and politics. She highlights the huge range of work by artists and arts co-operatives who are seeking to make work through participatory forms, and the deep scholarly tensions and debates that surround these practices. She explores through this rich history the debates over whether participation has become instrumentalised; whether the art/life divide should be preserved or eroded; the links between participatory aesthetics and cybernetic ethics; and the capacity for participation to challenge alienation and neoliberalism. Recognising arts practice as itself a form of research and inquiry into the world, she concludes with a set of powerful reflections on the role of the freedom to improvise and the importance of participation as a moment of care for and empathy with the other.

Second, **Steve Pool**, community artist and academic, reflects on the related but different traditions of community arts as they might relate to social science research. He considers what researchers in the social sciences might need to know and understand about artistic traditions if they desire to mobilise arts practice within the social sciences. He discusses the increasing democratisation of tools for making, the potential for them to open up artistic practice to publics as well as the importance of recognising that such practices are part of wider traditions and philosophies about the value and purpose of art. In particular, he discusses the tension between the idea of artistic autonomy – art for art's sake – and artistic democracy – the democratic creativity of all individuals. He foregrounds the way in which the community arts movement was also allied to a wider politics that moved towards cultural democracy and explores the contemporary practice of artists working in and with social science through examples such as Nicola Atkinson's 'Odd Numbers' and the Community Arts Zone's 'Being Cindy Sherman'.

More recent traditions of collaborative research characterise our final three reviews which take on, respectively, the way that design theory and practice are playing an important role in reshaping society, products and services; the emergence of new technologies to facilitate new forms of collaboration; and the increasingly urgent injunction to develop research approaches that enable collaboration with the 'more-than-human' others with whom we share the planet.

**Theodore Zamenopoulos** and **Katerina Alexiou** discuss the field of co-design and its underpinning theories and methods. They argue that Design as a process is always concerned with addressing a challenge or opportunity to create a better future reality, and explore how co-design has evolved as a process of ensuring that those with the life experiences, expertise and knowledge are actively involved in these making new tools, products and services. They observe how the participatory turn in this field has been concerned with both changing the objects of design – whether this is services or objects – *and* with the changing processes of designing itself. They highlight four major traditions and their distinctive approaches, before exploring the politics and practices of co-design through case studies of work.

**Chiara Bonacchi** explores how the internet is enabling new forms of collaborative knowledge production at a massive scale. She locates this discussion in the traditions of citizen science and public humanities, and examines how these have been reshaped through the development of hacker communities, open innovation and crowd-sourcing. In this process, she discusses the new exclusions and opportunities that are emerging through the development of projects that mobilise mass contribution. She examines the cases of MicroPasts and TrowelBlazers that demonstrate how these methods are being used in the humanities. In particular, she explores the ethical questions that emerge in these online collaborative spaces and the need for a values-based approach to their design.

**Tehseen Noorani** and **Julian Brigstocke** conclude the series with an exploration of the practice and philosophy of ‘more-than-human research’ which seeks to build collaborative research with non-human/more-than-human others. They discuss its philosophical foundations in pragmatism, ecofeminism and indigenous knowledge traditions and identify some of the theoretical and practical challenges that are raised when researchers from humanist traditions begin to explore how to ‘give voice’ to non-human others. In the review, they consider how researchers might expand their ‘repertoires of listening’ and address the ethical challenges of such research. To ground their analysis, they discuss the work of the Listening to Voices Project as well as accounts of researcher-animal partnerships and projects that draw on Mayan cosmology as a means of working with sustainable forestry in Guatemala.

This collection of reviews is far from exhaustive. There are other histories of collaborative research that are under-written here – there is much more to be said (as we discuss elsewhere) on the relationship between race and the academic production of knowledge. Each of these accounts is also personal, navigating a distinctive voiced route through the particular history they are narrating.

Despite this, at a time when politics is polarising into a binary choice between ‘expert knowledge’ and ‘populism’, these reviews show, collectively, that another way is possible. They demonstrate that sustained collaborative research partnerships between publics, community researchers, civil society, universities and artists are not only possible, but that they can and do produce knowledge, experiences and insights that are both intellectually robust and socially powerful.

**Professor Keri Facer**  
**Dr Katherine Dunleavy**

Joint Editors: Connected Communities Foundation Series

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### Anne Douglas

Anne Douglas is an artist researcher exploring the changing nature of art in public life through a programme of work, *On the Edge* research ([www.ontheedgeresearch.org](http://www.ontheedgeresearch.org)), that has evolved over two decades. This research has developed in collaboration between artists, academics and organisations through two interrelated strands of work. The first focuses on experimental approaches to practice-led research through the arts at doctoral and postdoctoral levels, predominantly supported through research council and related funding, including a number of Connected Communities awards. The second involves arts projects and interventions in public life framed by research questions. Douglas is a research associate with *Knowing from Inside*, a European Research Council Advanced Grant held by Professor Tim Ingold, University of Aberdeen (2013–18). She was a research associate at the Orpheus Institute of Research into Music (2008–12). Douglas publishes increasingly in the field of art and ecology and is currently also exploring the relevance of drawing as a contemporary art practice.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine a man standing in a covered market place. Other stallholders around him sell fruit and vegetables, clothes and household goods. However, he is undertaking an altogether different kind of exchange. He offers to insure the shoppers and other stallholders in the market place against the loss of mystery in contemporary life. He invites members of the public to contribute their personal examples of mystery in exchange for an insurance certificate and a jar of two pence coins. He receives a rich and unexpected range of experiences from lost keys to a possessed mobile phone.

*The Insurance Stall*, 21–23 November 2006 is the first part of a four-part project, *The Preston Market Mystery Project* (2006–8) by the artist John Newling (Figure 1). Three full days of running the *Insurance Stall* from dawn to dusk in Preston Market in November 2006 resulted in the collection of 280 mysteries:

Mystery, as a kind of truth that is incomprehensible to reason, is familiar to us. Many of us have been in, or observed, situations when something inexplicable has occurred. An object goes missing, never to be found or the cause of odd sounds in the house is never discovered. There are hundreds of small events that seem to be beyond our understanding. Other incidents of mystery are miraculous in their form. The recovery, against reason, from a terrible illness; the happenstance of circumstances that prevent an awful incident; an extraordinary event in nature, the like of which has never been experienced before, all are witness to mystery in the world.<sup>1</sup>

In the second part of the project, *Voicing Mysteries* March 2007 (Figure 2), Newling read out the mysteries one by one from a spot-lit golden lectern in the same market place assembled at the key five entrances into the market. The readings took place after market hours beginning at twilight and demarcating a threshold 'where our dreams and thoughts coalesce'.<sup>2</sup> It continued deep into the night. In this way, the private thoughts and experiences of individuals willing to take part in this work in its preliminary stages were gifted back, ceremoniously, within a public space in the form of a public proclamation.

In part three the following June, *The Knowledge Meal* (Figure 3), individuals whose contributions stood out were invited to a formal, beautifully produced meal. Again, this was held in the market place and after hours. The exchange had been prepared carefully through correspondence beforehand between the 40 individuals about the peculiarities of their mysteries. The public was encouraged to view the whole ritual.

<sup>1</sup> Newling 2008: 15.

<sup>2</sup> Newling 2008: 25.



**Figure 1**  
John Newling.  
*The Preston Market Mystery project:*  
*The Insurance Stall,*  
November 2006.

Courtesy of the artist © Kristy Noble





Courtesy of the artist © Elaine Spreight

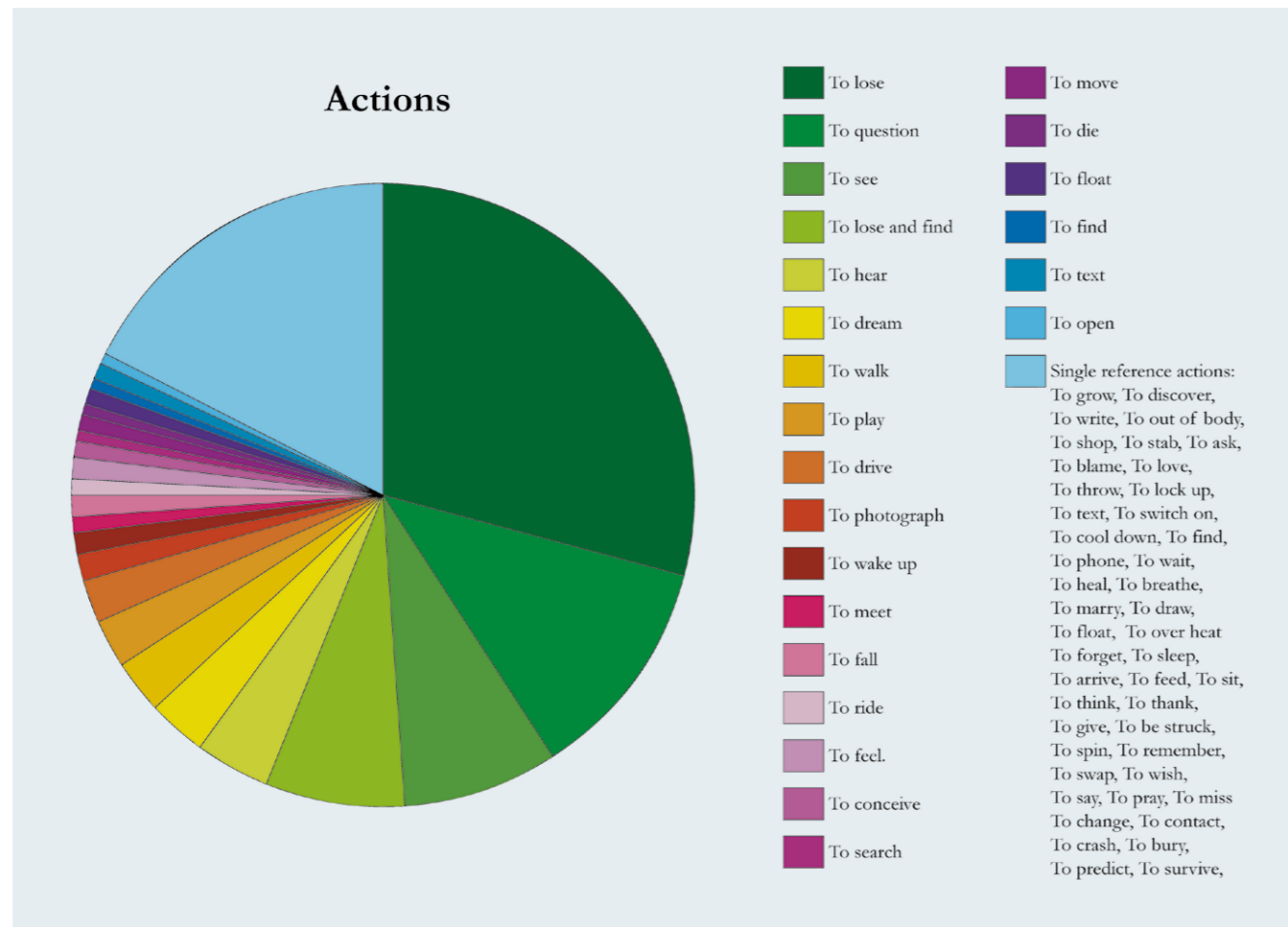
**Figure 2**  
John Newling.  
The Preston Market Mystery project:  
Voicing Mysteries,  
March 2007.



Courtesy of the artist © Elaine Spreight

**Figure 3**  
John Newling.  
The Preston Market Mystery project:  
The Knowledge Meal,  
June 2007.





Courtesy of the artist © Paula Love

**Figure 4**  
John Newling.  
The Preston Mystery Market project:  
The Propositional Stalls,  
(analysis of mysteries).

The fourth aspect of the work, *The Constructed Mystery* (November 2006–June 2007) (Figure 4), involved a careful analysis of the mysteries of the earlier work, presented back to the public in ways that re-opened each mystery to new interpretations and meanings.

The whole work contributed to a temporary public art programme managed and curated under the title *In Certain Places* by Charles Quick and Elaine Speight. Core to Newling’s interest in becoming involved in the programme was the widening of possibility in *contemporary art* to connect with issues, places and the public. The *Preston Market Mystery Project* undoubtedly offered an opportunity to explore quite fundamental questions of uncertainty and individuality, of chance and superstition, of spirituality in everyday experience. In addition, and as Speight comments in her introduction, the work produced a public – that of the stall holders and shoppers of the market itself.<sup>3</sup> It also revealed, as Newling notes, how markets are places of transaction, like shopping malls, that hold a visceral sense of *community* that is both fluid and transitory.<sup>4</sup>

Is this a work of *participatory art*? If so, what characterises it as such?

<sup>3</sup> Newling 2008: 7–8.

<sup>4</sup> Newling 2008: 15.

## 2. ALIENATION AND MODERNITY

There is a marked trajectory of development in the literature from the early 20th century to the present that positions *participation* as a counterpoint to the alienating effects of *capitalism* and *industrialisation* within *modernity*. Herbert Read and John Dewey as philosophers through to Claire Bishop, Shannon Jackson and Grant Kester as contemporary art critics and historians, among others, all cite *alienation* as a condition of separation from a sense of self, from physical and, increasingly, social and emotional wellbeing.

This sense of alienation is manifest not least in the perception that contemporary art stands at a distance from its audiences. The *avant-garde* of the 20th and 21st centuries addresses this issue in a somewhat paradoxical way. Dada in 1920s, the Situationists International (Debord) in the late 1960s and current developments in social forms of art – dancing the samba (Oiticica) or running a travel agency (Christo and Jeanne-Claude) – are all attempts to counter the widening gap between artwork and audience.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically the more these attempts break with an expected tradition or canon of art, the stranger, more alien and, importantly, more critical they are perceived to be.

The relationship of art to society has not always been this way. Herbert Read, an art historian and theorist in the first half of the 20th century, points to pre-modern art forms from the Paleolithic until the onset of industrialisation that are integral to the societies that produced them. He views alienation as a very recent occurrence in the history of art that brings with it a complex, asynchronous dynamic between artist, artwork and viewer:

The possibility of alienation exists whenever social and political developments create feelings of anxiety and despair, of rootlessness and insecurity, of isolation and apathy... In the past it was still possible for the alienated artist to address his fellow men in a traditional language of symbolic forms, but to have lost the advantage is the peculiar fate of the modern artist: a *lingua franca* of visual symbols no longer exists.<sup>6</sup>

For Read, alienation begins as separation from nature that permeates individual and social relationships. While it might be tempting, following Marx, to see the root cause in capitalism and to seek change in economic systems alone, this, he argues, is insufficient. The whole character and scope of an industrialised civilization is involved in creating fragmentation and it is man’s fragmented psyche that needs to be reconstructed. Art offers that possibility:

The relationship between art and society is dependent upon two separate but interacting psychic entities: on the one hand the subjective ego of the artist, seeking to adjust itself to the external world of nature and society; on the other hand, society itself as an organism with its own laws of internal and external adjustment.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bishop 2006: 10.

<sup>6</sup> Read 1967: 13–14.

<sup>7</sup> Read 1967: 18.

## 2.1 Debunking the myth of progress

Felix Guattari, a *postmodern* critical theorist and philosopher, positions the artist unequivocally at the centre of public life, proposing that it is no longer credible in a postmodern, post industrial world for artists to withdraw from the civic, the mass mediated world into the private realm of the individual. Artists need to be visible in public life, actively and persuasively negotiating a different kind of subjectivity:

...the immense crisis sweeping the planet – chronic unemployment, ecological devastation, deregulation of modes of valorization, uniquely based on profit or State assistance – open the field up to a different deployment of aesthetic components. It does not simply involve occupying the free time of the unemployed and marginalized in community centres!<sup>8</sup>

This positioning, Guattari argues, involves a fragile, potentially disruptive process that drives to the core of disciplinary knowledge, in particular the myths of science and progress that underpin *modernism*. We live in a society in which mass media has become infantilised and trivialised. We need new forms of art to move beyond entertainment or aesthetic isolationism, developing and re-energizing life through subjectivity:

Perhaps artists today constitute the final lives along which primordial, existential questions are folded... How are sounds and forms going to be arranged so that the subjectivity adjacent to them remains in movement, and really alive?<sup>9</sup>

Guattari echoes Read's observation that it is the whole character and scope of an industrialised civilization that is responsible for fragmentation. He adds a sense of urgency in environmental devastation. The arts have the potential to readdress the damaging effects of alienation but this involves rethinking the place and practice of the arts in society.

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<sup>8</sup> Guattari 1992: 79–82.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

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*The arts have the potential to readdress the damaging effects of alienation but this involves rethinking the place and practice of the arts in society.*

▲

## 2.2 Community: countering neoliberalism

Read poignantly remarked in the mid-20th century on the absolute and necessary connection between the artist and a community who could make sense of the work. In his introduction to the published version of a lecture presented in Jena in 1924 *On Modern Art* by the artist Paul Klee, Read points out:

Klee, with the clarity and humility not characteristic of many of his contemporaries, realised that individual effort is not sufficient. The final source of power in the artist is given by society, and that is precisely what is lacking in the modern artist – 'Uns trägt kein Volk'. We have no sense of community, of a people for whom and with whom we work. That is the tragedy of the modern artist, and only those who are blind to their own social disunity and spiritual separateness blame the modern artist for his obscurity.<sup>10</sup>

Read was a self-confessed anarchist and a champion of modern artists in Britain after World War One. This observation occurs at a high point in the cult of *individualism* in modernist art. It points to a trauma that is not confined to the arts but extends into society as a whole. This trauma has deepened in the transition from liberal to a neoliberal society and the current interest in participation may be read in part as an attempt to address its negative effects.

However, it is a crucial and open question as to whether the effects of participation in contemporary art and research are simply ameliorative or begin to address the root cause of this trauma.<sup>11</sup>

Henry Giroux, a US based cultural theorist writing in the context of the politics of education, defines *neoliberalism* as an extreme form of capitalism, simultaneously an ideology, an economic theory and a form of cultural politics. Taking free market rationality to its limits, neoliberalism erases social democratic ideals (notions of public interest, the welfare state, family and community) by positioning the market as the organising principle of all political, social and economic decisions. Such unmediated forms of profiteering take the form of self-confirming cycles with disastrous consequences, socially and ecologically.<sup>12</sup>

Under neoliberalism everything is either for sale or is plundered for profit: public lands are looted by logging companies and corporate ranchers; politicians willingly hand the public's airwaves over to powerful broadcasters and corporate interests without a dime going into public trust; the environment is polluted in the name of profit-making just as government passes legislation to make it easier for corporations to do so.<sup>13</sup>

Activist forms of art in the avant-garde attempt to bring social values and democracy into the foreground, based in criticism, rebellion and resistance. They are critical of the way that modernism rationalises cultures that have evolved through the specificity of place and tradition, in the name of progress and economic growth.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Read 1948/1989: 5–6.

<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Dr Tehseen Noorani, lecturer in clinical and community psychology, University of East London for raising this difference as it locates very precisely the distinction between forms of art making that radically rethink systems of value (Newling, Lacy, Ukeles, Haacke for example) and others in which art is used instrumentally to effect community participation. Both have value and are distinctively different forms of practice.

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<sup>12</sup> Giroux 1992/2005: 5–6.

<sup>13</sup> Giroux 1992/2005: 212.

<sup>14</sup> Giroux 1992/2005: 36.

### 3. PARTICIPATION: REDISTRIBUTING POWER FROM THE MAKER TO AUDIENCE, FROM COMPOSER TO THE PERFORMER

Allan Kaprow, as an avant-garde artist and art historian, defined participation as a transfer of power/authority from the maker that interrupted the unidirectional 'flow in one direction from the artist through a medium towards an audience'.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the experience of a participatory artwork should be reciprocal, a process in which the artist may frame an activity that is followed through with different contributors. It has the quality of an encounter in which outcomes are uncertain and beyond the artist's control, opening up to the contingencies of everyday life.

Kaprow drew on the work of John Cage, one of the most radical artists working in the transition between modernism and postmodernism as a composer and, later, visual artist. Cage's life work might be read as a 50 year process of inquiry and experimentation to figure out how creativity, normally the domain of the composer, could be shared with the performer in the context of performance, a significant gesture towards opening up creative agency. Cage developed this question with other contemporaries – Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman, and, indirectly, Kaprow himself. While each artist evolved their own singular style in response to the challenge, they shared the question of where creativity begins and ends – with the composer, with the performer and/or with the audience?

This shift in the power of creative agency is poignantly evidenced at this early stage in Cage's *4'33"* (1952). The performer sits at the grand piano but does not play it. Instead the ritual of a classical performance frames ambient sound creating an environment that is sensory and, importantly, draws the audience, performer and composition together in a shared space connected through listening. The conventional hierarchy in which the (active) composer generates material that the performer (as mediator) realises to a (passive) audience gives way to new configuration. The listener, who could be composer or performer or a member of the audience, becomes the creator of his/her own singular experience of sound.<sup>16</sup>

Cage acknowledged the influence of Zen Buddhism as a practice and way of knowing in his work. However, he radicalised a conventional Zen approach to art making by developing tactics, such as that demonstrated in *4'33"* that sought to remove himself as the originator or creator. He focused instead on framing moments through which it might become possible for anyone participating to experience life as profoundly interrelated.<sup>17</sup> Such tactics and their focus on perception are more easily recognised within practices of meditation than in the conventions of artistic production. In art, traditionally, the artist creates a way to imagine the world 'as if'. Meditation seeks the world 'as is' at a deep level of experience.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly 2003: xvii.

<sup>16</sup> Cage 1952: *4'33"* (online)

<sup>17</sup> Martin 2017.

*4'33"* is one of a number of radical experiments in the arts that contest the conventions of artistic production and reception in 20th and 21st centuries. These question who creates the work: the artist or the audience, or both working together? Kaprow, closely following Cage, introduced performance into the visual domain. One of the important qualities of their experimental work as a possible way to think about participation is the critical distance that it opens up between art and everyday life. In this interval, the conventions of artist, artwork and audience in its institutionalised, familiar forms are suspended temporarily, offering an opportunity to develop new forms of perception and collectivity. The right to challenge what already exists in culture and society is a fundamental tenet of modernism that is upheld in postmodernism. In other words, what at first appears to be a negative consequence of alienation is turned into a positive opportunity to do things differently, breaking convention.

Such experimentation can be aligned with the emergence of ethnomethodology in the social sciences including the breaching techniques developed in the late sixties of Harold Garfinkel.<sup>18</sup> They resonate to a degree, particularly in relation to the aim in ethnomethodology to value knowledge produced by participants through their own sense making practices. Garfinkel's breaching techniques are a form of psycho-social experimentation that is based in violating expectation. They involve rupturing everyday experience by creating disorder as a means to see commonly accepted norms. For example, he instructed students to return to their own parental homes 'as if' they were strangers, profoundly disturbing normal relations.<sup>19</sup> These techniques look like some areas of performance art, such as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* 1964 in which she invites members of the public to take it in turns to cut and keep a piece of her clothing, or the one year performance work of Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh, *Rope Piece* (1983–4), in which they were tied together by an eight foot rope for a year and not allowed to touch each other.<sup>20</sup>

However, the point of experimentation in each field is distinctive. The arts tend to focus more on the individual and their quality of experience through heightened forms of perception, even in shared experiences. Experience in this sense has value in itself rather than serving a further purpose as data. Experimentation in the arts involved Cage, Kaprow and others who pioneered such approaches, in creating methods that would enable participants to tune into everyday life by, as Cage put it, 'sobering and quietening the mind' as individuals and opening up the senses.<sup>21</sup> It is based in an assumption that sensory overload in everyday life takes the individual away from deeper forms of knowledge and understanding. In contrast, Garfinkel's breaching techniques focus on the social rather than the individual, on behavior rather than quality of experience. Experiences that such experimentation produces serve a purpose to contribute useful knowledge within a discipline rather than create the conditions for a singular experience. The experimental techniques of Newling's *Preston Market Mystery* project look 'useful', mimicking social science techniques of framing questions, conducting interviews, issuing questionnaires and constructing pie charts, but these address the absurd, attempting to find meaning but uncovering contradiction in the form of mysteries that cannot be explained. The resulting 'data' is bizarre and of no use value. It becomes material to draw out an image the interpretation of which remains a singular experience.

<sup>18</sup> Garfinkel 1967/1991.

<sup>19</sup> Garfinkel 1967/1991: 45.

<sup>20</sup> Yoko Ono 1964: *Cut Piece*; Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh 1983–4: *Rope Piece*.

<sup>21</sup> Brown 2001.



### 3.1 'Coercive consensus' or 'narcissistic projection'?<sup>22</sup>

A paradox underlies our desire for more democratic forms of art. On the one hand, excessive individualism and radical forms of experimentation can isolate the artist and artwork in elitism. On the other, efforts to build collectivity may come at the cost of the *autonomy* of the individual and a loss of the capacity to imagine a different world. Grant Kester, as a key theorist of collaborative, participatory art, frames this tension provocatively. On the one hand, we fear the kind of conformity that collective social formations may impose on individuals ('coercive consensus') and, on the other, we fear the power of the one over the many where an individual may treat the world as a resource to be played with ('narcissistic projection'). At what point, Kester asks, do these transform into positive qualities of radical plurality that are open to alterity and tolerance of difference?<sup>23</sup> Kester offers a precise definition of collaborative, participatory art as a form of practice based in collective modes of production. In so doing, he does not seek to undermine the specific skills and attributes that an artist brings to a context of work but notices a shift in terms of what we might expect from the arts. Collective modes of production are more concerned with art as a process, unfolding in and generated through a dynamic interplay between a particular site or context, the artist and other collaborators on the ground. He juxtaposes this with 'textual' production in which an artist completes a work that is then presented to a viewer.<sup>24</sup>

**The work of each of the (artist) groups I've discussed is characterised by a particular order of attention to the nuances of space and visuality, of integration and isolation, which structure a given site. In each case it involves a kind of noticing, distinct from normal perception, which emerges in the act of opening oneself to a specific context or situation.**<sup>25</sup>

This difference forms a framework through which he analyses the work of a number of artists who claim participation as a quality of the work.

### 3.2 'Relinquishing the 'singular, auratic' artist'<sup>26</sup>

In the second of his major texts on participation, Kester juxtaposes two arts practices both of which claim to be participatory. One is positioned in the context of the art institution of mainstream, gallery or museum-based practices – Francis Alÿs' *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002). The other is a community-based arts project, *Nalpar* led by the arts organisation *Dialogue* in Kondagaon, Bastar, India (2001–4) (artists Navjot Altof, Rajkumar, Shantiba, Gesuram and the Kondagaon community). Alÿs' *When Faith Moves Mountains* (Figure 5) engaged a group of volunteers, mainly students from a local university, in shifting a sand dune outside Lima, Peru by a few centimetres. As a development of earlier works, this artist's intention was to harness the potential of collaborative action to create a change of consciousness among participants, presumably a hyper awareness of exploitative forms of labour that might provoke the 'the illusion that things could possibly change'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kester 2011: 2.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>24</sup> Kester 2011: 8.

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<sup>25</sup> Kester 2011: 152.

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<sup>26</sup> Kester 2011: 3.

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<sup>27</sup> Kester 2011: 68.



**Figure 5**  
Francis Alÿs.  
*When Faith Moves Mountains* 2002,  
Peru.

Kester reappraises how the art world literature discusses this work and its claims of creating a convivial community through the sharing of effort. He asks what kind of knowledge is produced in the experience of the participants engaged in shoveling the sand and in the viewers in the gallery who experience the work through screenings of the film. He characterises this kind of documentation as 'textual', i.e. the meaning and experience of the work is carried by its material outcomes in the form of the video and photographs. These exhibit-able materials are attributed unequivocally to the authorship of the artist. Participants (the students who collaborated in the production of the artwork) were, Kester argues, reduced to a homogenous mass wearing matching t-shirts emblazoned with the project logo. Despite the artist's intention to develop a different kind of awareness through collaboration, Alÿs' aesthetic decisions frame the work as a spectacle. The focus is not on the quality of relationship between participants, who effectively function as paid workers in the manufacture of the piece, but on its textual afterlife. The video, photographs and narrative clearly position the artist within a system of value i.e. an international gallery network that is hierarchical, with the artist positioned somewhere near the top.



In contrast, *Dialogue* is a collective working with the Adivasi tribal and peasant communities in Central India where access to water and land is at the sharp point of competing interests due the forces of modernisation. Over a number of projects between 2001 and 2004, *Nalpar* focused on the cultural traditions of water collection, mainly undertaken by young women and girls. Through a process of workshops they drew together different groups within the Adivasi community. The artists and their host communities arrived at a series of constructions that improved the water pumps and also generated cultural screens that demarcated a social space of water collection, supporting its social practices. The screens themselves were sculptured forms that were meaningful to the community so that the constructions as physical interventions were simultaneously practical and symbolic (Figure 6).

The work of a co-operative such as *Dialogue* focuses on building a relationship with a community within a particular set of social, environmental and cultural circumstances. It is by working collaboratively that the participants identified and imaginatively addressed pressing issues of everyday life, through long-term investment in dialogue and exchange. Kester identifies in this (and a number of related examples) the importance of collective action, civic engagement and co-creation as defining qualities of collaborative, participatory art. Contemporary art of this kind upholds the modernist traditions of critique, opening up the possibility that life can be different, while transcending modernism's overwhelming concern with form and style:

(Projects) replace the conventional 'banking' style of art (to borrow a phrase from the educational theorist Paulo Freire) in which the artist deposits an expressive content into a physical object to be withdrawn later by the viewer. Within a process of dialogue and collaboration, the emphasis is on the character of interaction, not the physical or formal integrity of a given artifact or the artist's experience of producing it.<sup>28</sup>

Alÿs' work of 2002, Kester argues, fits the conventions of a 'banking' style artwork, functioning effectively as a set of objects in which the viewer has no immediate input into the forming of the work. In his view, this kind of work is essentially static, upholding conventions while claiming to break from them. In contrast, *Dialogue's* projects among the Adivasi unfold through a process of co-production in which individual participants need to confront their differences, not least of social status, in realising practical outcomes and through these develop quality of life. The resulting work of art is not an artefact but a process or project that enables the creativity of multiple contributors in relation to specific contexts. In sharing responsibility as an experience of community, this approach arguably offers a deeper, quieter, more ethical form of radicalism than practices founded in spectacle. (By implication, projects such as that of Alÿs engage spectacle in this negative sense).

In his conceptualisation of participation, Kester creates an important shift in our theoretical understanding of the arts in postmodern society. This takes to heart the pervasiveness of a market economy, not least that of the art world itself, and foregrounds an equal and opposite force – that of the co-creation of knowledge and experience that has the potential to offer a different set of social practices. In this construction, 'a viewer, participant or collaborator as a creative agent ...can answer back and those answers constitute a decisive contribution to the formation of a work'.<sup>29</sup>

Contemporary art of this kind upholds the modernist traditions of critique, opening up the possibility that life can be different, while transcending modernism's overwhelming concern with form and style.

<sup>28</sup>  
Kester 2004: 10.

<sup>29</sup>  
Kester 2016: 2.



**Figure 6**  
Navjot Altaf, Rajkumar, Shantibai and Gessuran.  
*Nalpar* (Water pump site exterior and interior),  
Kopaweda, Bastar District, Chhattisgarh, India.

Courtesy of Grant Kester and Navjot Altaf © Grant Kester.





Courtesy of the artists © Chu Chu Yuan

**Figure 7**  
 Chu Chu Yuan.  
*Imagining Possibilities,*  
 Open Academy Ulaanbaatar,  
 curated by Chu Chu Yuan and Jay Koh,  
 Mongolia 2009.

<sup>30</sup>  
 Read 1967: 7.

<sup>31</sup>  
 Kester 2015.

<sup>32</sup>  
 Kester 2011; Kester 2004.

<sup>33</sup>  
 Koh 2016: vii.

Kester's overarching aim is to write artistic practices that engage participation as a core value into art history. Herbert Read, writing in the late 1960s, had pointed to the absence in European art history of any attempt to deal with art as a social phenomenon.<sup>30</sup> Kester addresses this gap in the 21st century by tracing collaborative, participatory art as a continuation of a Western avant-garde tradition. Such practices are proliferating, he argues, but are not well understood or sufficiently grounded in a history of ideas. In his editorial of a new journal, *Field*, he observes:

**While otherwise quite diverse, this field is driven by a common desire to establish new relationships between artistic practice and other fields of knowledge production... We are sorely lacking in any useful intermediary theories that retain a sufficient engagement with the materiality of practice to open up its complex interrelationship to larger political and economic structures.**<sup>31</sup>

In the process, Kester has questioned prevailing theories and practices of the avant-garde, principally the dependence on shock or disruption as a model of reception. Collaborative, participatory arts create forms of collectivity as a durational process, he argues. The artists that are interesting in this respect do not make the assumption of a public in need of a sudden break or rupture to be woken out of a passive state.

As a possible formulation of participatory art, co-creation is a seismic shift in the way we have understood the function of the arts in society creating the conditions for a collaborator to speak back. It raises questions such as: Who generates knowledge and experience? Who is included in/excluded from knowing and experiencing? Participation as co-creation constitutes a paradigm shift, not just in art, but also more widely in culture and society in the relationship of knowledge to power. In this shift, the absence of an identifiable 'art object', on the one hand, and, on the other, a conflation with methods and approaches shared with non-art fields, including the work of civil society organisations and anthropologists among others, has raised the question – so why is it art?

Kester explores this question with the work of the artist partnership of Jay Koh and Chu Chu Yuan. Operating as Networking & Initiatives for Culture & the Arts (NICA), Koh and Chu have worked in challenging socio-political contexts of Myanmar and Mongolia, contexts in which there are varying degrees of restricted personal freedom. They had already developed this work some time before Kester's theorization and he draws upon it as important case examples in both of his key texts (*Figure 7*).<sup>32</sup> Where the West cites alienation as the catalyst to participation, Koh cites entrenched subjectivities in which so-called 'Asian values' of harmony, humility and modesty mask injustice, inequality and cronyism.<sup>33</sup> As artists, they are interested in developing an approach that motivates audiences and fellow artists to work together to develop constructive relationships before moving onto stages of self-reflection and critical thinking towards social change. The work engages with significant levels of anxieties, dissensus and conflict. It is, therefore, very important to this context that value runs in both directions, artist to participant and vice versa. Koh and Chu develop face-to-face exchanges, conversations and social spaces with specific groups of people to build mutual knowledge and understanding as well as trust.

In this way of working, there is no place for a single artefact that carries the meaning of a work as art nor is there a place for a signature artist. Instead, the work of art emerges through specific and intentional relationships that are carefully and organically developed to open up spaces that might not otherwise occur within the social and political life of their hosts. Koh and Chu manifest the quality of attention and openness to context that Kester cites as skills that are integral to this form of artistic practice. He juxtaposes these with the work of some non-governmental organisations and aid agencies that are at risk of overwhelming vulnerable cultures by imposing their values, cultures and preformed solutions in a frequently misguided effort to create improvements.<sup>34</sup>

Does this juxtaposition sufficiently clarify the artist's role as in some sense particular?

To answer this, one might draw on the work of the Artist Placement Group (APG) (1966–79, founders John Latham and Barbara Steveni) who reinvented the role of the artist in relation to public institutions and industry. They identified particular skills: being able to think in the long-term and thinking imaginatively, and being interested in tracing the implications of social and political decisions on quality of life. They set these in contrast to the short-term, expedient goals of organisations set on making profit within a monetary economy. They imagined the artist as 'an incidental person', who could move freely across the social hierarchies of major organisations and across boundaries of knowledge. The open-endedness of an APG artist was conceptualised in terms of an 'Open Brief', a contractual agreement that secured three months of freedom before agreeing objectives between the host and individual artist. APG artists could produce works in the form of art objects, or not. What was important was to bring a perspective to their host that challenged what was taken for granted and that opened up new, unimagined possibilities. As such, the artist would become a producer of experiences that had the promise of creating transformations of consciousness.<sup>35</sup> APG had some success in placing artists in this way in British Steel, the National Coal Board, the London Health Department, the Department of the Environment in Birmingham and the Scottish Office in Edinburgh.

Applied to the work of NICA, both artists, Chu and Koh, carefully negotiate, as strangers in this sense of 'an incidental person', the possibility of new social and political realities. Their priority is to uncover issues by listening, attentive to the patterns and social protocols of a particular culture, a process of suspending belief as to what should be done, negotiating at every stage the freedom not to predetermine by managing expectations around a different set of goals.<sup>36</sup> NICA reveals the degree to which context is formative and integral to the way collaborative, participatory art develops aesthetically. It also reveals that the production of new subjectivities is far from a consensual process. Their practice requires reciprocity. The site itself becomes generative of new learning and they, as artists, are part of the learning. It is also research-led in the sense of constantly undergoing critical evaluation and seeking to contribute at a meta-level to a field of practice that is rife with complexity and contradiction.

Despite the theoretical underpinning by individuals such as Latham and Steveni, Chu and Koh, and Kester for a different way of imagining art in public life, the question of art's place, particularly in relation to current social claims, remains open to scrutiny. This is core to the writings of Claire Bishop.

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<sup>34</sup> Kester 2011: 78.

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<sup>35</sup> Kester 2004: 62.

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<sup>36</sup> Chu 2013.

### 3.3 Rich potential or a divided discourse?

Bishop, a UK based curator and art theorist, is skeptical of channeling the arts and their symbolic capital as constructive of social change. She has engaged in something of an agonistic battle with Kester over what participation means in contemporary art.<sup>37</sup> Her perspective has developed predominantly through her work as a UK based curator and critical writer in contrast to Kester's context in the history of art in the US. One major difference lies in the availability of public funding for the arts in the UK and not in the US.

Bishop argues that by framing the function of the arts in purely social terms (dematerialised, anti-market, politically engaged and by implication towards positive forms of sociality), it becomes difficult to evaluate the work critically as art because all projects are then equally directed towards repairing the social bond.<sup>38</sup> Participation is no more intrinsically political or oppositional as an artistic medium than any other form of activity, she argues. In fact, qualities that are celebrated for their participatory potential, far from countering the attributes of neoliberal economies, mimic these attributes – the growing importance of networks, mobility, individual agency, the prevalence of projects over infrastructure, the emergence of the artist as entrepreneur. In business, for example, participation is a tool for improving efficiency and work-force morale. It is also all-pervasive in mass media (reality TV) and in politics.<sup>39</sup>

If participation is engaged uncritically, the arts become vulnerable to instrumentalism. Bishop's motivation for writing *Artificial Hells* in 2012, the second of her two key texts on participation, was a concern with the way participatory arts had in fact become instrumentalised in European cultural policy in tandem with the dismantling of the welfare state. New Labour (1997–2010), for example, deployed the rhetoric of participation to justify public spending on the arts on the basis that the arts can increase employability, minimise crime and foster aspiration.<sup>40</sup>

Bishop draws somewhat differently on the history of the avant-garde from Kester, while sharing his conviction that participatory arts should be viewed as the continuation of, rather than a break with, an avant-garde tradition, in particular its challenging of conventional values and assumptions. At each moment of the historic avant-garde, she suggests, we have experienced the collapse of a collectivist vision of society. Dada emerged in 1917 in the wake of the devastation of World War One. The Situationists International 1968 positioned itself against the rise of consumer capitalism in the wake of World War Two. Oscar Masotta's *Circolo de Arte Experimental* 1989 in Rosario, Argentina emerged after a series of brutal dictatorships. The Artists Placement Group (APG) in the UK brought into the foreground a crisis in the early 1970s in which the State was called upon to take action in support of the once successful industries that were experiencing severe competition from newer, more viable initiatives in other parts of the world. These movements all address the gaps left empty by power. The avant-garde in Eastern Europe has evolved through the same principle but out of a different set of assumptions. The Collective Actions Group in Moscow 1976 – onwards and participatory happenings in Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s and 1970s challenge the tendency to view participation as liberatory, as in these Eastern European cultures participation is synonymous with forms of *collectivism* imposed by the State.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bishop 2006.

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<sup>38</sup> Bishop 2012: 13.

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<sup>39</sup> Bishop 2006: 11–12.

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<sup>40</sup> Bishop 2012: 13.

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<sup>41</sup> Bishop 2012: 4.



Participation, in Bishop's reading, is unpredictable, temporary and transient. It does not unfold as a coherent new aesthetic paradigm nor as an identifiable form of practice that can be placed in history, in the way that Kester perhaps asserts:

**Participatory art is not a privileged political medium nor a ready made solution to a society of the spectacle but it is as precarious as democracy itself. Neither are legitimated in advance but continually need to be performed and tested in every specific context.**<sup>42</sup>

Bishop is critical of Kester's insistence on consensual dialogue as an attribute of participatory arts. In taking this position, Bishop conjures up (and is critical of) the commonly held image of participatory projects as harmonious. In fact, the work of good participatory work most often takes the form of an encounter with difference – class, race, gender, capacity and character – that necessitates negotiation to reach common ground and in which difference is upheld rather than rationalised. In Bishop's argument, sensitivity to difference risks becoming a repressive norm in which difficult questions and controversial ideas are ruled out through oversimplified oppositions: passive versus active viewer, signature versus collaborative artist. This simplification overexposes interpersonal interactions at the cost of grasping the politics of social justice. She advocates sustaining a continual tension between art and the social, between the autonomy of the artist and the *heteronomy* of public responses. In addition, the work of art as an identifiable entity is crucial, she believes, to mediating the ideas and intentions of the artist and the interpretation of the spectator. It is important therefore to respect, rather than collapse, both positions – author and spectator – as a means of confronting the inconsistencies at work in social engagement.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>  
Bishop 2012: 284.

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<sup>43</sup>  
Bishop 2012: 23 – 30.

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**Sensitivity to difference risks becoming a repressive norm in which difficult questions and controversial ideas are ruled out through oversimplified oppositions: passive versus active viewer, signature versus collaborative artist.**

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### 3.4 Art/life or art/support?

Shannon Jackson picks up on the author/spectator debate, adding an important and distinctive perspective from her expertise in the field of performance studies. Visual artists have moved into performance through an increased interest in sociality as we have already seen with Kaprow and Cage. In invading the space of performance, they have disrupted the conventions in both domains in the relationship of artist, artwork and viewer. The arts communities in both territories (visual and performance arts) have become involved in de-familiarising critical assumptions that linger in either domain.

Jackson identifies a number of problems that arise with the commitment to social engagement and participatory modes of working. First, socially engaged art challenges the very borders of what is considered within and what lies outside of the aesthetic sphere. Jackson shares Bishop's concern that the arts may become beholden to 'external rules' of the social and, therefore, incapable of extracting themselves from social claims long enough to be able to be critical.<sup>44</sup> Secondly, Jackson is wary of forms of criticism that routinely disrupt without taking into account the systems that support the way life is managed and sustained. The coupling of art and life might more usefully be articulated as a deeper coupling of art and its support. In this way, the material, organisational and institutional infrastructures that underpin an apparently dematerialised or immaterial form of practice, move from the background into the foreground becoming clear in the way they influence the work.<sup>45</sup>

A key case study in Jackson's analysis is the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Ukeles is interested in the high maintenance involved in sustaining the institutions of museum and gallery and society more generally. In her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* 1969 (Figure 8) she flipped conventional systems of value, juxtaposing two basic systems – development and maintenance. She linked these with two psychotic drives – the Death Instinct and the Life Instinct (theorized in psychoanalysis by Lacan, Freud and Winnicott). Ukeles aligned the art world values of progress, individuality and the avant-garde concern for rupture, with the Death Instinct. She aligned maintenance with the Life Instinct. Maintenance from a domestic level of care to a civic level of waste management was normally a zone that involved sustaining the creativity of others. It was repetitive, uncreative and underrated. In Ukeles' construction it becomes valued as the way in which life itself is sustained.<sup>46</sup>

Over 40 years, Ukeles has worked with the New York sanitation department and its labour force, making visible the invisible activities that are necessary to processing the waste of the city. She utilises the manifesto form to establish participation as a principle (Figures 9).<sup>47</sup>

In exploring Ukeles' work, Jackson, as a critical theorist of performance, shares the view (with Kester and Bishop) that conventional oppositions of autonomy/heteronomy are inadequate for understanding new forms of participatory art, in particular, those practices that undertake a critique of social institutions. At the same time, she advocates steering a course by acknowledging that boundaries exist but are constantly changing.<sup>48</sup> Jackson's way of imaging the arts as deeply implicated in all aspects of institutional life appears to draw on aspects of *systems thinking* developed by Jack Burnham, critic and art historian.

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<sup>44</sup>  
Jackson 2011: 28 – 29.

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<sup>45</sup>  
Ibid.

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<sup>46</sup>  
Jackson 2011: 85 – 86.

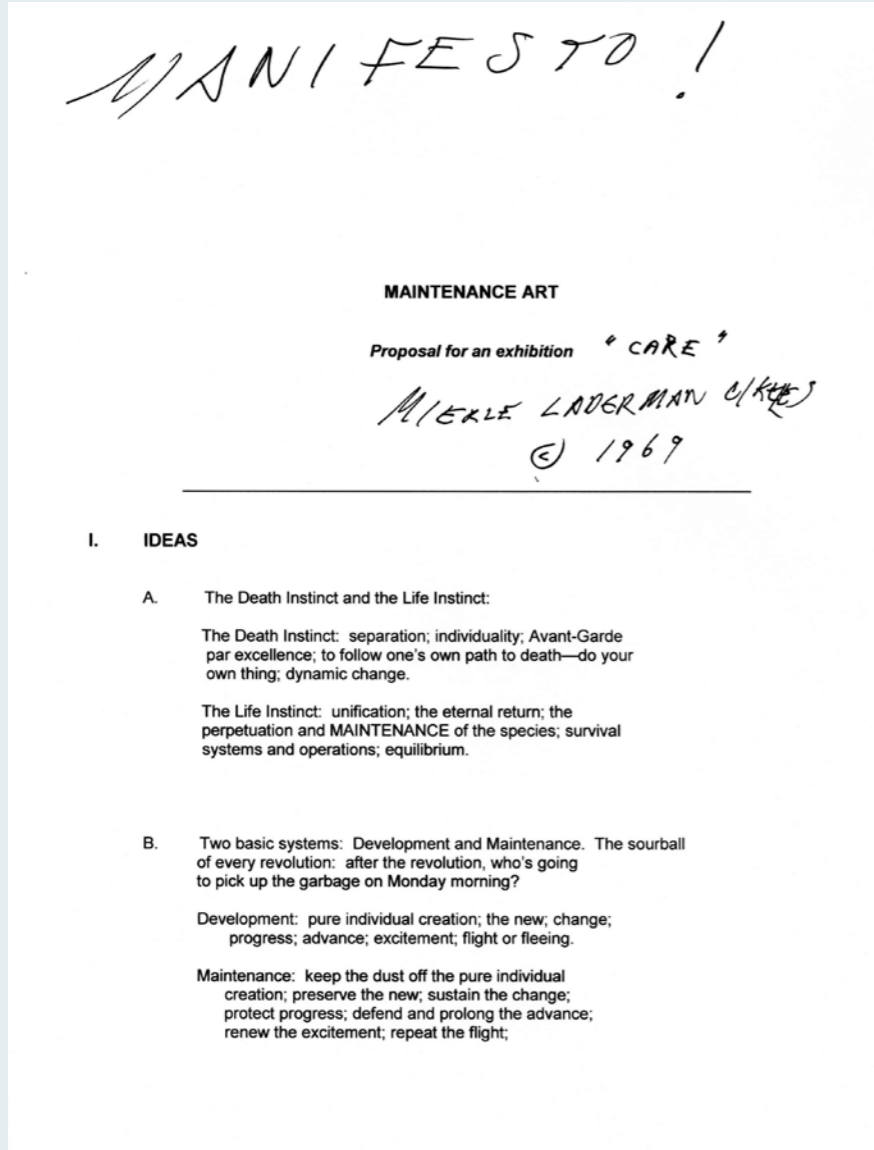
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<sup>47</sup>  
Jackson 2011; Ukeles 1969: 622 – 624.

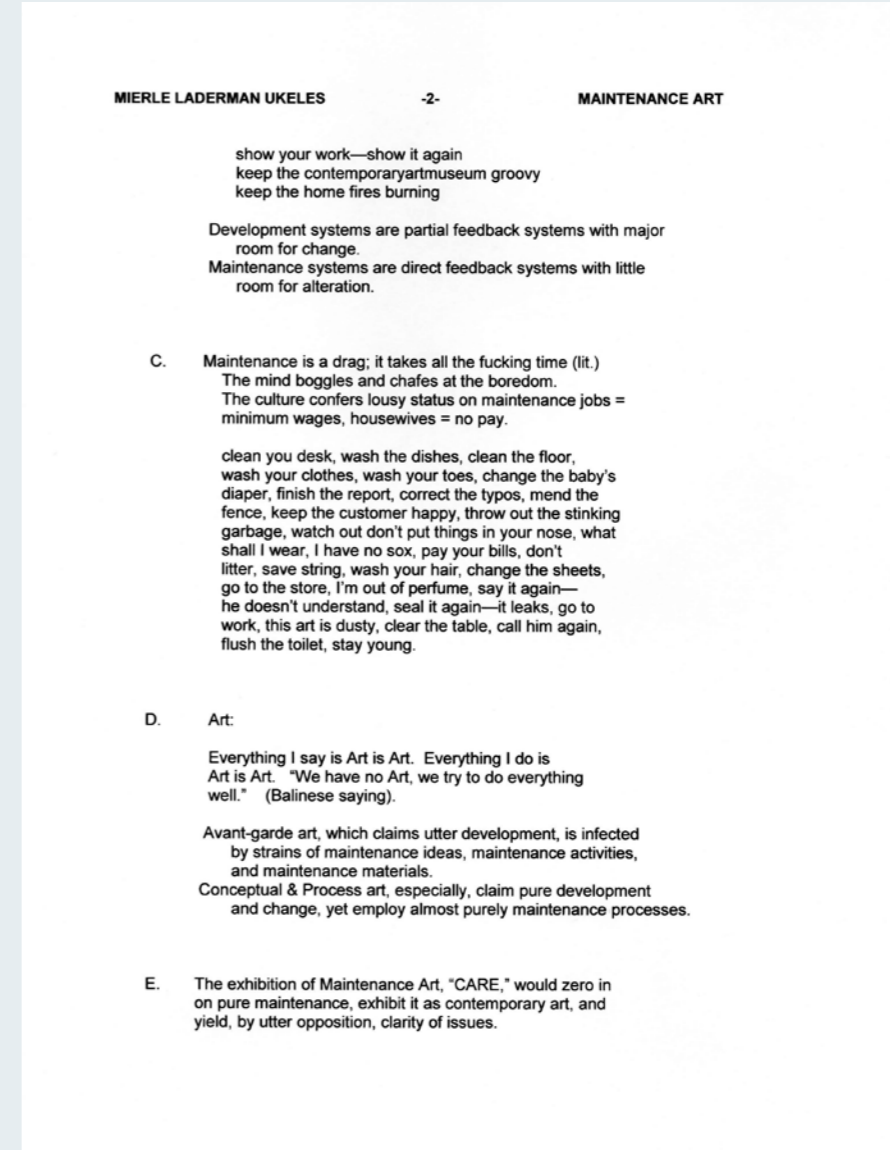
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<sup>48</sup>  
Jackson 2011: 236.





**Figure 8**  
 Mierle Laderman Ukeles.  
 Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!  
 Proposal for an Exhibition "CARE", 1969,  
 Four typewritten pages, each 8 1/2 x 11 in.



Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York



Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York © Marcia Bricker

**Figure 9**  
 Mierle Laderman Ukeles.  
*Touch Sanitation Performance, 1979–80,*  
 July 24, 1979–June 26, 1980,  
 Citywide performance with 8,500  
 Sanitation workers across all fifty-nine  
 New York City Sanitation districts.



Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York © Vincent Russo

## 4. IMAGING PARTICIPATION THROUGH SYSTEMS AESTHETICS

Writing in 1968, Burnham introduced the notion of systems aesthetics to explore how some of the artists he was interested in (Duchamp, Smithson and Haacke, among others) related to current research in cybernetics as well as ecology. He noted a marked shift in capitalism brought about through information technologies. These anticipated a shift in power from objects as the traditional symbols of wealth to information:

In the automated state power resides less in the control of the traditional symbols of wealth than in information.<sup>49</sup>

Where earlier forms of industrialisation addressed human needs in a piecemeal capacity, this new technological capability constituted a paradigm shift from an object oriented to a systems oriented culture, not least in an attempt to redress the negative effects of overconsumption. Survival on the planet would require more effective models of social interaction based in co-dependency and competition between human beings, technologies and natural resources. Systems aesthetics was radical, going to the roots of social institutions, charging them with developing new forms of productivity. It influenced how art would be made. Its implications also extended beyond art into new forms of research and education. This ecological perspective helped to make the shift in research from human self-interest to acknowledging humans as profoundly interrelated to all living things. This has been developed recently in highly experimental work characterised as more-than-human research, explored in Noorani and Brigstocke's review as part of this Foundation Series.<sup>50</sup>

Burnham speaks positively of a participatory aesthetic that draws on ecology and cybernetics as foundational concepts. Ecology is a field interlinking systems of biodiversity and technology, social practices and political structures. It is a strong concept from which to view participation because it positions human beings as part of a system to which we are bound. We do not have the possibility to opt out. More importantly it challenges conventions in scientific research that have tended to view humans and animals as passive objects in a form of research inquiry that is based in extractive rather than interactive techniques. In contrast, an ecological perspective views nature and the non-human as having a constitutive role in social life, including research.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Burnham 1968.

<sup>50</sup> Noorani and Brigstocke 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Systems aesthetics responded to a different set of needs from a culture that revolved around art as product, Burnham argued. Where an earlier aesthetic paradigm could embody an aesthetic impulse in objects or things in which boundaries are materially fixed, the demands of an aesthetic based in systems is to focus on the way things are done:

The specific function of modern didactic art has been to show that art does not reside in material entities, but in relations between people and between people and the components of their environment.<sup>52</sup>

In this way, Burnham opens up a way forward in response to Guattari's appeal to the arts to enliven a world that is severely challenged by environmental crises and that is stretched to the limits of current knowledge and understanding. In raising questions, the arts could work within much wider frames of reference of social, cultural and environmental change. Burnham proposed that the plasticity of artistic creativity could become part of the flows of energy, material and information that make up contemporary life, rethinking boundary conditions that change over time and in relation to external mechanisms of control. Ukeles' approach can be read through systems aesthetics. She enters into the social and cultural processes of high maintenance, domestic and civic. She reshapes the values underpinning those systems through concepts that generate a fundamentally different starting point – maintenance as a force of life versus individual self-interest as a force of death. She follows the practices of maintenance workers, the flows of energy created by their day to day routines, making visible through art what otherwise would be invisible and unchallenged as systems, both sanitation and art world, in urgent need of renovation.

### 4.1 Searching for the 'right' kind of participation

In the light of Burnham's thinking, the kinds of boundaries that have accreted around the discourse of participation in the arts appear to have become unnecessarily territorial and binary. While it is crucial to exercise caution in the way we construct participation and not to assume, for example, that it is automatically liberatory, the polarised nature of the recent discourse has tended to split the community of practicing artists and theorists into followers of one position or the other. This, in fact, militates against Kester's aim to seek alterity and tolerance of difference.<sup>53</sup> Participation in the arts should work towards understanding the microcosmic ways in which we become complicit, or not, in centres and peripheries of power.

Where Burnham proposes a transition from object to process he is not intent upon forcing a single totalising narrative of participatory arts as one form of practice over another. Through ecology and cybernetics as constructs, he opens up the arts to multiple possible situations. Any situation, either in or outside the context of art, may be designed and judged as a system.

The implications of Jackson's interest in the function of art as institutional critique and Ukeles' work as critique of museum practices and civic processes, make it possible to imagine art institutions as part of the mix, as an integral part of the wider social fabric and as one of many contexts that are formative of participation as a discourse.

<sup>52</sup> Burnham 1968.

<sup>53</sup> Bowman 2016: 6; Bishop 2012: 25; Price 2015: 31; Kester 2011.



A key example of this kind of institutional critique is Suzanne Lacy's large-scale performance work *Silver Action* in Tate Modern, London, 2013. Lacy is a socially engaged feminist artist and activist, student and life long friend of Allan Kaprow. Her work has focused on **public pedagogy**. Public pedagogy is a complex research field operating across a number of primary sites that include citizenship within and beyond schools, popular culture and everyday life, informal institutions and public spaces, dominant cultural discourses, and public intellectualism and social activism.<sup>54</sup> Lacy creates interventions as moments of (anti-) public pedagogy through which the marginalised and vulnerable in society (including women and young black people) are given the opportunity to produce knowledge that counters more dominant voices such as that of the media. She focuses attention on the power of the media to create representations, attitudes and behavior in day to day social interaction and seeks to flip the hierarchy through media education.<sup>55</sup>

Increasingly, Lacy has been invited into major museums and galleries across the globe to open up a different quality of relationship between artist, artwork and viewer that is simultaneously performative and dialogic. *Silver Action* problematises participation in relation to the art institution in the form of staged conversations in public addressing real experiences of ageing among 400 women volunteers. The unscripted conversations explored personal political commitment between the women with reference to activist movements from 1960 – 1985 (Figure 10).

At the core of *Silver Action* are a number of potential ethical and aesthetic collisions. Firstly, the hosting of socially engaged, performance work sits uncomfortably in an institution that is accustomed to handling art in the form of object or installation. Lacy's name was of more interest and value to the institution's function of collecting art than the volunteers. In contrast, Lacy consistently refers to participants by name and as an active agent in creating the work. Secondly, the involvement of volunteers as content producers in Lacy's work normally takes the form of two to three years workshop activity as part of a durational commitment to the issues, as happened, for example, in the Oakland projects 1991 – 2001, whereas *Silver Action* began and ended with the Tate programme. Thirdly, encouraging older women as volunteers to explore their personal real life experiences of ageing and framing these as a spectacle is at risk of developing an affirmative space of shared social engagement potentially undermining the function of the arts to expose and hold in tension contradictory values.<sup>56</sup> However, Lacy throughout her career as a performance artist, invites criticism simultaneously of the work as art and as social engagement. In doing so, she is responsive to Jackson's observation that breaking the traditions of one medium (or in this case one aspect of life) means engaging with the mores and practices of another.

Arguably, it may be precisely the risks and their bearing on participation that is important to *Silver Action* as an avant-garde work:

**To participate in something is to cross the psychological boundaries between self and other and to feel the defining social tensions of those boundaries.**<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Sandlin, O'Malley and Burdick 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Lacy 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Bishop 2012: 29.

<sup>57</sup> Kelly 1993/2003: xxiii.



Courtesy of the artist



**Figure 10**  
Suzanne Lacy. *Silver Action*,  
Tate Modern, 2013.



*Silver Action* upsets the established order of things. It frames several important questions and issues. What kinds of learning and adjustment does the institution need to undergo to support the legacy of socially engaged artwork and the real life of the practice? Correspondingly what kind of trade-off does the artist need to make to secure legacy? How deeply does the work enter into the public imagination, affecting attitudes as well as the governance in this case of ageing in the long-term?

The conventional role of the institution lies in creating legacy and an appreciation of the canon. A newer possible role prompted by Lacy's approach, lies in creating an active civic space in the museum or gallery for the exploration of issues such as power and representation. The point that the work makes is that we are bound together in a shared world of social interactions and values. In being encouraged through the artwork to cross boundaries, living the tensions of those boundaries, we may become open to suspending disbelief, examining expectations and attitudes.

## 4.2 Participation, art and power

Etymologically, participation carries a range of meanings – to 'participate' may mean 'to take part in' or 'share with others' or 'to impart', or 'make known'. The adjective 'participatory' carries a more defined practice of 'involving members of the community in decisions' or 'allowing members of the public to take part'.<sup>58</sup> Mapped onto arts practice, this range of meaning should allow for an equally rich range of approaches and corresponding theoretical frameworks. Making known or imparting could be an act of authorship. It could mean sharing an existing work and it could also mean creating a new experience by involving others in decisions. Each interpretation of participation engages social and political questions such as: Who has the power or knowledge to impart or make something known to others? How do acts of sharing come about? Who is included/excluded from becoming involved? Such plurality is also likely to engage contradictory positions.

In this light, it is interesting to return to John Newling's *Voicing Mysteries*, which opened this review. His work, taken as a whole, confounds both Kester's and Bishop's definitions of participation in a number of respects while also upholding a number of qualities that they cite as important. Newling makes artefacts albeit in unlikely forms such as soil balls, hydroponic tents, cabbage walking sticks, as well as newspapers. He works both in the isolation of the studio as well as public spaces. He exhibits in galleries and museums as well as holding events in shopping malls and civic squares. *The Preston Market Mystery Project* in all of its four parts forms unlikely social, cultural experiences. The golden lectern present in *Voicing Mysteries* (part 2) in the market stall is at odds with its surroundings. The artwork evokes a space dedicated to reflection and quiet, unnerving the normal function of a market place as business. As 'viewers' we are drawn into the work in a number of compelling ways. We participate literally by offering our experiences of mysteries, shaping the content of the work as it unfolds. We also participate by listening and opening up to whatever meaning emerges. In sharing the same time, space and content, we take part in community. Each part of the work offers a different form for the sharing of experience.

●  
*The conventional role of the institution lies in creating legacy and an appreciation of the canon. A newer role lies in creating space for the exploration of issues such as power and representation.*  
●

<sup>58</sup>  
Oxford English Dictionary 2nd edition.

From the perspective of co-creation, Newling's work could be dismissed as not participatory because his authorship is deemed to overwhelm, rendering the audience and viewer the object of a creative ego. From the perspective of social critique, his work could also be dismissed as insufficiently radical in addressing social justice/injustice. Newling's method is a little like Lacy's but *The Preston Market Mystery Project* might seem inconsequential compared to her works addressing rape or police brutality. Instead, the work encourages us to suspend disbelief and share the artist's deep fascination with an unfathomable world. It would be easy to miss this nuance if we were to impose onto his artwork a predetermined notion of participation. In Newling's work participation is something that happens to us as a quality of experience, rather than something the artist sets out to construct as a form of practice.

### Pausing a moment...

The direction of argument so far has been to position participation as a potential counterpoint to alienation. Alienation is defined as a sense of separation that an individual experiences as a consequence of industrialisation, capitalism and, increasingly, neoliberalism. In opening up to issues of public life through experimental participatory forms, the arts have attempted to enter more centrally into public life.

Artists and theorists alike have targeted the relationship between autonomy and heteronomy as a site through which to address alienation, seeking new forms of relationship between artist, artwork and audience that are democratic. These new forms challenge the conventional hierarchy that privileges the artist as active agent in relation to supposed passive forms of reception.

Nonetheless, participation in relation to the arts is complex. Definitions tend to polarise the discourse and become exclusive, e.g. participation defined as co-creation displaces the notion of authorial control. In addition, participation cannot be assumed to be always positive or liberatory. Participation has been used politically as a means to coerce publics into conforming to totalitarianism. Issues of power are always present and need to be negotiated, not least in the arts. This has increasingly involved artists in entering critically into the systems and forms of governance through which everyday life is sustained.

The etymology of participation offers a rich, contradictory set of possibilities to artists. This presents the meta level of discourse on participation a different kind of opportunity, sustaining the tension between defining participatory arts as a form of practice that can be clearly differentiated from other forms and viewing participation as a state of being in social, political life that can be imposed instrumentally or encountered experientially, depending on the context and circumstances of a work.



© Hans Haacke/VG Bild-Kunst

**Figure 11**  
Hans Haacke.  
*Rhinewater Purification Plant*, 1972,  
Museum Haus Lange,  
Krefeld.

### 4.3 Participation: the new normal?

In his catalogue introduction to *Radical Nature – Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009*, T. J. Demos makes reference to two ecology art projects by the artist Hans Haacke, both in the same 1972 exhibition at the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, West Germany.<sup>59</sup> One models an ecological system designed as a practical solution to water pollution and the other models a social system revealing how environmental degradation occurs in relation to self-interest.

*Rhinewater Purification Plant*, 1972, was a two month project for the museum. The artist set up a system to purify Rhine water polluted through untreated sewage from the city of Krefeld by means of a filtration process that drew grey water from the Rhine through sand, charcoal and chemical filtration. Haacke demonstrated the success of the purification process by including an acrylic basin containing gold fish as part of the exhibition. He completed the cycle by using the surplus water to water the museum's garden thereby developing a system that could be used in any public building (Figure 11).

A second related project shown at the same exhibition, *Krefeld Sewage Triptych*, 1972, recorded the level of untreated sewage from the city of Krefeld that entered into the Rhine annually (42 million cubic metres). It also included the volume and types of industrial waste and household sewage, and provided the names of major industrial contributors.

The remit of the whole exhibition *Radical Nature* was, Demos suggests, 'intent on *participating in* the ethico-political reinvention of life in the face of climate change' (author's own emphasis).<sup>60</sup> Participation here implies that the arts become part of a process of shared inquiry with other domains, moving into a set of issues normally seen outside of art, not just at the level of content but in the way the work of art is set up in relation to a viewing public. As an approach, it mirrors the values and methods of more-than-human research in which researchers, human and non-human inhabitants, and nature itself become contributors to the development of new knowledge and ways of knowing.<sup>61</sup>

Demos is critical of Haacke's work as failing in terms of participation; '...it relegated viewers as mere observers of a system that excluded their immediate active participation' undertaking a more pedagogical role and authority in relation to the public. Demos' criticism of Haacke's works is resonant with that of Kester and Koh but, arguably, its insistence on co-production in an overt and literal form is limiting and only acknowledges one of a number of possible forms that participation might take. In other words, where a viewer's response has no reciprocal effect on the making of the work, that work, Demos argues, fails in terms of participation. In taking this hard-line position, Demos falls into the trap of over-layering onto a work an intention that the artist himself did not entertain. This risks an unnecessary and reductive reading of what otherwise could be appraised as a highly significant contribution to public understanding of ecology through art. It also risks reducing participation to a single meaning and set of protocols that can be replicated, and indeed commodified.

<sup>59</sup>  
Demos 2009.

<sup>60</sup>  
Demos 2009: 17.

<sup>61</sup>  
Noorani and Brigstocke 2018.



An alternative reading might acknowledge that Haacke's work operates at the meeting point between the institution of art, activism and local governance; the museum director was a civil servant and the museum itself a public institution in Krefeld. This, it can be argued, is already a participatory structure and significant step in the direction of modeling how civic participation in ecology through art might work. Haacke's artworks are critical of existing conventions in environmental practices and offer alternative, well-conceived ecological systems. They attracted considerable public attention, effectively drawing the media into the issues of environmental degradation while extending out into the world beyond art. In addition, each work models a system, the first practical and the second social, with significant transferable potential in the development of new modes of being in a *postindustrial*, low carbon economy.

Since this 2009 exhibition at the Barbican, overt participatory forms of artistic production have proliferated in the UK under the pressure of cultural change and available funding (for example, Connected Communities Artist Legacies project and charities such as Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Artworks/Paul Hamlyn). Not all of this work has succeeded in involving different publics and communities in an identifiably participatory way, as sharing or creating the circumstances for meaning. The critical frameworks and historical underpinning for such activity are also not clear, in particular the degree to which activities serve or distance themselves from neoliberalism. In addition, the pressure to measure participation in terms of co-creation has possibly overshadowed the more subtle possibilities that might constitute a deeper, equally fulfilling experience of art. Haacke's work, as one example among many, invites us to observe intently, to grasp and retrace in our experience his articulation of particular social and ecological systems. To a careful viewer, this may become a point of entry into a wider discourse on ecology that with time will develop beyond an experience that is confined in the gallery.

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***Since 2009, overt participatory forms of artistic production have proliferated in the UK under the pressure of cultural change and available funding. The critical frameworks and historical underpinning for such activity are not clear, in particular the degree to which activities serve or distance themselves from neoliberalism.***

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## 5. WHAT DOES ART BRING TO PARTICIPATION SPECIFICALLY?

### 5.1 Re-imagining governance and power

Price addresses participation in the arts from the wider perspective of cultural leadership and the way that it influences and shapes the circumstances of cultural production.<sup>62</sup> He traces a connection between these circumstances and conditions for more (or less) democratic forms of governance. He draws on Arendt's theory of 'action' as an unending web of relations into which we are pitched 'unmasked' through the circumstances of birth and through which we have the opportunity to respond pro-actively.

Price references Hope's provocation – *Participating in the Wrong Way?*<sup>63</sup> There is a subtle distinction, Hope argues, between the democratisation of culture and cultural democracy. The former involves a top down process of educating the public into cultural forms that intend to create celebratory, unifying experiences of culture. These are increasingly considered politically to be the 'right' form of participation in the arts. In contrast, the 'wrong' form of participation involves individuals in the possibility of exceeding or challenging what is given by generating their own culture.

Price as a cultural theorist and Hope as an artist, both echo Bishop in pointing out how power is always present in all forms of civic participation, including in the arts. They offer a different perspective on the constraints of participatory approaches to art from that of Bishop. She (Bishop) points out that social concerns, which are in themselves worthwhile and important, can overwhelm art's capacity to hold critical distance. Price and Hope are more interested in the impact of public funding. Power may be masked when participation forces a sense of collectivism while serving the interests of funders. In addition, there is the danger that artists simply deliver what is expected to avoid biting the hand that feeds them. It becomes difficult to critique the conventions of participation within a sector for which participatory work has become key to promoting the benefits of that sector. In life, Price argues, these 'right' or 'wrong' forms of participation act as a provocation and do not operate as clear-cut binaries. Instead, exchanges between artists and local government officers in the light of available funding and opportunity give rise to a host of unpredictable approaches. Participation has increasingly become part of the rhetoric, an expectation rather than radical activity. The hazard of gaining respectability carries a number of risks, not least that the arts become instrumentalised in the process.

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<sup>62</sup>  
Price 2015.

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<sup>63</sup>  
Hope 2011.



## 5.2 Sidestepping convention

Artists and theorists have sought to confound such a tendency. To return again to *The Preston Market Mystery Project* (2006–7), Newling skillfully and quietly plays between situating the participant as (passive) accessory and (active) co-creator of the work, holding in tension two apparently contradictory positions.

Jackson, as critical theorist, defines ‘action’ in terms of oscillation between passive and active forms of political engagement to demonstrate what happens when one medium of art invades the territory of another:

**Consider the inhabitants of the gallery who measured politically engaged art’s distance from the static art object; from such a position “action” signified a turn to the political. Then consider a theatre maker such as Berthold Brecht, someone for whom dramatic action was already conventional; for him, then political engagement occurred in the theatre only when the action stopped.**<sup>64</sup>

Jackson is inviting us to notice how the arts open up human perception in highly skilled ways, unfixing what to expect as we move from one medium to another.

Buchloch, an art historian of 20th–21st century art, is also wary of the tendency to uncritically embrace ‘action’ as a means of apparently replacing passive contemplative modes of aesthetic experience. In analysing the work of Andy Warhol (*Dance Diagrams* and *Do it Yourself paintings*), he recalls how Warhol attempted to inscribe the viewer almost literally into the plane of the paintings by exhibiting these on the floor, as opposed to on the wall. Warhol’s intention was to invite the possibility of interacting with the diagrams of dance steps apparently drawing on an avant-garde tradition of physically engaging the audience in the work. Buchloch comments that despite these intentions (or perhaps Warhol was aware of this), advertising design at the time was adopting the same strategy soliciting a viewer’s active participation as consumption.<sup>65</sup>

## 5.3 Opening up different forms of sensory perception: the freedom to improvise

These critical positions caution against literal, overly deterministic approaches to participation. The discourse has relied heavily on speech and conversation as the means of opening the arts up to social experience and political issues. However, there are many registers of communication, sensory and poetic ways of generating experience, particularly in the arts. These are rarely drawn into analyses of participatory artworks and yet are fundamental to the question of what the arts have to offer participation specifically.

It is interesting, in this light, to return to Cage’s *4’33* as an early experiment of a participatory artwork and to note its framing of sound as a sensory experience. The listener is central to an experience of sound and sound is more than speech but nonetheless inclusive of speech.

In developing a philosophy of sound art, the theorist Salomé Voegelin frequently juxtaposes the visual and sound as quite distinctive domains:

**Vision captures, orders and disciplines space but does not see the simultaneity of its time... Sound on the other hand is its immediate sensibility: unordered, purposeless, always now.**<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Jackson 2011: 4.

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<sup>65</sup> Buchloch 2000/2.

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<sup>66</sup> Voegelin 2010: 169.

Sound is neither linear nor intentional. It permeates experience. Through sound, living organisms build relations inter-subjectively with other beings or entities.

Such improvised, indeterminate forms of encounter contrast dramatically with the way that Bogost, academic and game designer, for example, characterises new media and its way of consuming time and experience through highly organised forms of text and image. The result is an avalanche of email, Instagram and YouTube that spills over into everyday life. These have the effect of creating obligation to the point of exhaustion, generating forms of hyper-employment that displace other possibilities for experience for its own sake, the quality of experience we seek in leisure for example.<sup>67</sup>

While we share culture as human beings, our own experiences are fundamentally our own, generated through our bodies and generative of what we might become through the process:

**...it is the action of sound on the listening body, which triggers this body into the action of perception that produces the work and the body itself.**<sup>68</sup>

The listening body will inevitably meet other listening bodies and ‘they produce community, not a republic, but as a formless, transient meeting of listeners whose bodies momentarily coincide’.<sup>69</sup> When strangers meet they produce fragile and tendential connections that emerge out of their own effort rather than out of a social contract such as a lexicon of pre-digested symbols.

Voegelin’s world experienced through sound and encounter is close to Ash Amin’s sense of contemporary urban public space. Amin is a cultural geographer and writer on urban and regional development and cultural change. Where in the past, Amin argues, we might have sought a clear role in urban public space for instilling knowledge and civic value, the contemporary city, with the privatisation of its public spaces and the diversity in the way we now communicate, challenges this traditional function. Despite the pervasiveness of the city (as it has emerged) as a place of frenzied consumption, current research reveals that this has not entirely displaced our sense of curiosity, the enchantment we find in cities and the regard we might hold for others. The contemporary city continues to support building awareness of the commons.

In this respect, Amin’s perspective as an urban geographer unexpectedly aligns with John Newling’s revelations as an artist working within the market place in Preston, exploring mystery. Like Newling, Amin attributes the richness of contemporary urbanism to complex forms of entanglement that go beyond purely social interaction. We become involved in the material and sensory qualities of our surroundings, crossing human and non-human boundaries. This dynamic is dependent upon excess, a surplus of energy and materiality in which we might experience a diverse and crowded place that is always incomplete and open to improvisation.<sup>70</sup>

It is interesting to note that Noorani and Brigstocke identify “attunement” within more-than-human research approaches, appealing to our sense of hearing and rhythm as a way into grasping the “otherness” of the non-human world, avoiding assimilation.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Bogost 2013.

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<sup>68</sup> Voegelin 2010: 177.

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<sup>69</sup> Voegelin 2010: 179.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>71</sup> Noorani and Brigstocke 2018.

In this notion of participation, the individual as listener and as improviser generates experience through his/her own acts of perception, a 'maker of culture rather than (as) witness to its monumentality'.<sup>72</sup> Participation is a way of being in the world that is sensate and affective. As listener, I bring my own past to this experience, not as a collective memory but as something unique to me. This is not an ideal community produced from our ability to reason, but the coming together of different subjectivities. Speech is simply one way of attempting to meet a neighboring body. As sound it is contemporaneous, transient and transitional.

Voegelin's listening, Amin's improvising bodies and Noorani and Brigstocke's attuned body are resonant of earlier formulations of participation in John Dewey and Herbert Read as the starting point for social and political life:

**The senses are the organs through which the live creature participates directly in the on-goings of the world around him. In this participation the varied wonder and splendor of this world are made actual for him in the qualities he experiences...**<sup>73</sup>

Action is the means by which participation is undergone, carried through and directed, and the mind is part of any action as the means by which participation becomes fruitful in the creation of meaning and a sense of value.

Participation through art, Dewey argues, is as integral to life as mountain peaks are to the landscape; they do not float unsupported. Nor do they just rest on the earth but are the earth manifest in one of its operations. Our sense of inner harmony as individuals is dependent upon making terms with this vital force. In life we work with the environment and exist through interaction with it, with materials, rhythms, stoppages and release.<sup>74</sup>

Artefacts such as buildings, paintings or books do not exist apart from human experience. Nonetheless, the products of art become reified, isolated through a certain kind of status and isolated from the circumstances that brought these into being. In remitting art to a separate realm it has lost connection with human effort and experience, creating a sense of a living postponed rather than life lived:<sup>75</sup>

**We see without feeling; we hear but only in a second hand report, second hand because it is not reinforced by vision.**<sup>76</sup>

Following a parallel line of thinking, Read suggests that society and the arts are inseparable:

**Society as a viable organic entity is somehow dependent on art as a binding, fusing and energizing force.**<sup>77</sup>

It is the deep connection between the body and sensory experience in the development of knowledge and understanding that both Dewey and Read seek to re-establish as the basis of civic life and community – in education, medicine, economics, as well as politics. Art is a means of restoring a conscious and deeply felt set of connections between a singular being and a shared world.

<sup>72</sup>  
Voegelin 2010: 179.

<sup>73</sup>  
Dewey 1934/2005: 22.

<sup>74</sup>  
Dewey 1934/2005: 2.

<sup>75</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>  
Dewey 1934/2005: 12.

<sup>77</sup>  
Read 1967: 16.



**Figure 12**  
Allan Kaprow. *Fluids*, 1967,  
*A Happening presented for "Allan Kaprow",*  
*Various locations in Pasadena*  
*and Los Angeles.*

<sup>78</sup>  
Dewey 1934/2005: 45.

<sup>79</sup>  
Antin 2004: xv.

## 5.4 Creating the 'unartist' in art and life

Dewey was a significant influence on Kaprow and his early experiments, following Cage, on formulating participatory modalities in contemporary art. In the foreword to Jeff Kelley's account of Kaprow's work, David Antin, a fellow artist, poet and literary critic, draws attention to Dewey's description of a simple act of a man lifting a stone. By experiencing the stone's weight, strain and texture, the man is able to judge a stone's suitability for an intended purpose because of the way the stone resists what he desires. This interaction continues as a process of mutual adaptation, eventually reaching closure:<sup>78</sup>

**For Dewey, all experiences have a common form, a narrative form, because as he sees it, an experience is not continuous or instantaneous, but an articulated whole with a beginning and an end that enclose a sequence of engagements between a desiring object and a resisting object that comes to some kind of resolution. It is this common form of what Dewey calls all true experiences that lets him argue that all experiences have an aesthetic component.**<sup>79</sup>

Each new experience is generative of another, not imposing on the world what is already known but discovering it through interaction.

Antin gives a vivid, poetic insight into how Kaprow's 1967 project *Fluids* follows the narrative structure of the man lifting a stone, and goes further, offering a space to reflect on social experience by mimicking social practices, albeit in a heightened manner (*Figure 12*):



Building the seven-hundred-square-foot, seven-foot-high enclosure out of blocks of ice was a difficult job for the dozen or so art student workers that had been enlisted for each site. The ice blocks were heavy and cumbersome and cold. They had to be carefully fitted into place to make the building truly rectangular on a ground that had not been carefully levelled beforehand. Each worker had to adapt his or her work pace to other members of the team. And everyone working on the piece had to deal with all the particular difficulties and contingencies that any serious construction job would entail without being able to rely on the established tools and techniques of the building trade because they were using an unfamiliar material. Yet all this effort was expended for its own sake and voluntarily by each worker, each of whom had to have some strong feeling of accomplishment on completion of the work that they all knew had no purpose than to be built and then melt away.<sup>80</sup>

Fluids followed a simple score (Figure 13):

Fluids 1967. During three days, about twenty rectangular enclosures of ice blocks measuring about 10 feet long, 10 feet wide and 8 feet high are built throughout the City. Their walls are unbroken. They are left to melt.

15 structures were built and sited across Pasadena and Los Angeles in the form of multiple simultaneous events. Pasadena Art Gallery acted as commissioning agent and the ice was supplied by The Union Ice Company (405,000 pounds), paid for by an anonymous donor.

The physical, sensory labouring in difficult conditions is resonant of Alÿs' project of moving a sand dune. Like Alÿs, the work explored the political implications of the very strategy that sustained high productivity, in this case of capitalist America, i.e. planned obsolescence, allowing anyone in the presence of the work (as maker or witness) to reflect on their own part in these wider social processes. Antin points out that *Fluids* was open to anyone who wished to be involved. It offered a potential participant a choice of some kind, whether or not to take part. The volunteers needed to deal with the contingencies of major construction projects without the knowledge and experience of construction workers, and in relation to their own place of dwelling.

In Alÿs' work the labouring of participants creates a new story that is retold in the context of the museum or gallery by means of a video work. The form and place of the work as art is unambiguous. In contrast, Kaprow's *Fluids* functioned more like an elaborate ploy to gather interest. It was absurd. Blocks of ice as building material in the heat of California were never destined to form a discrete work of art. The focus instead was on the experience of coming together over an apparently simple instruction, to follow and improvise upon Kaprow's plan as a collaborative effort.

80

Antin 2004: xiv.

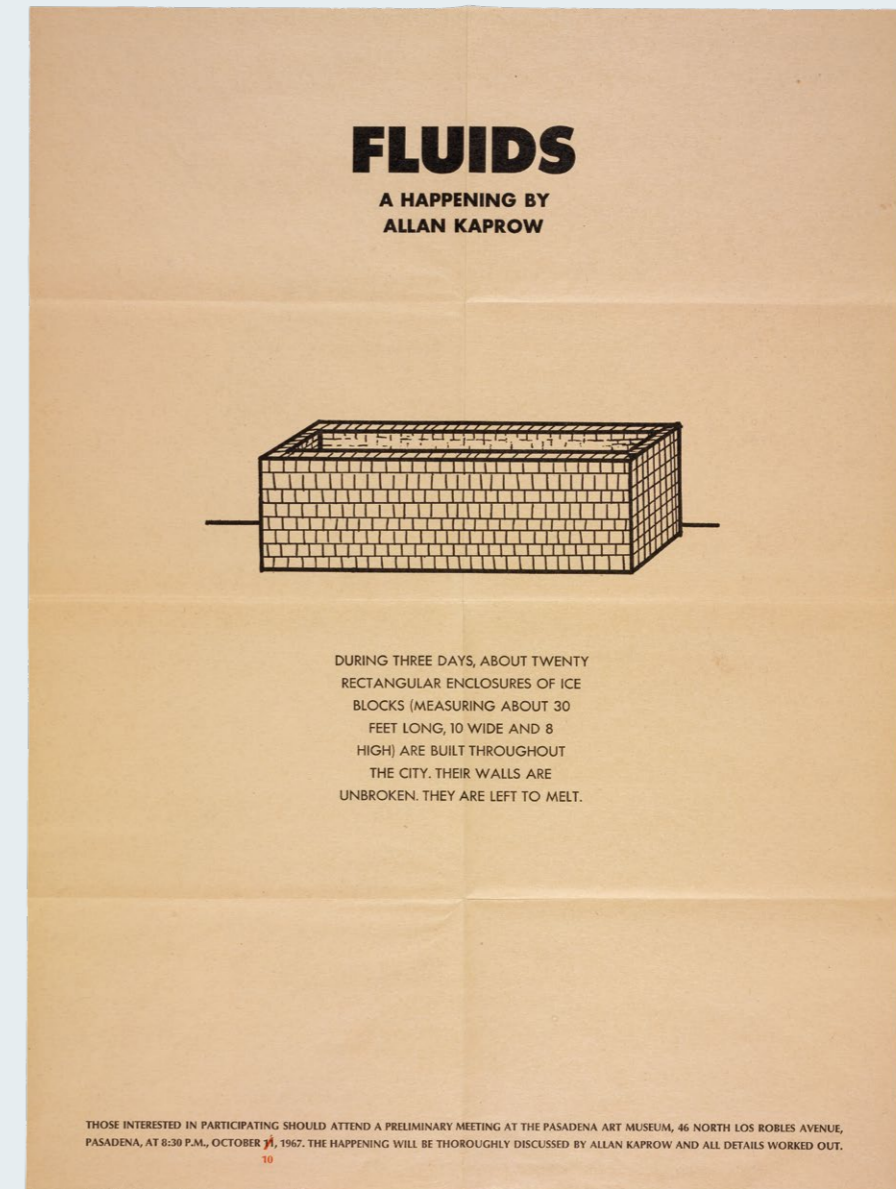


Figure 13

Allan Kaprow.

Poster for *Fluids* (with score), 1967.



Where is the work of art in this instance – in the instructions or documentation, in the experience of being present or of taking part as a ‘builder’ making the constructions, or as city dwellers who witnessed the process? Who then is the artist and where is the artwork?

Kaprow had studied Dewey carefully in the development of his own thinking. He evolved, in response to Dewey, the concept of the ‘unartist’ who positioned him/herself in a place of uncertainty, suspending disbelief about what the artist could be, by merging into life. Looking at life and then art, the ‘unartist’ would realise that creativity in life was far more interesting than what was going on in conventional forms of painting and sculpture. Kaprow chose to explore these thoughts increasingly focusing on everyday activities as art:

**Unless the identity (and thus the meaning) of what the artist does oscillates between ordinary, recognizable activity and the “resonance” of that activity in the larger human context, the activity itself reduces to conventional behavior. Or if it is framed as art by a gallery, it reduces to conventional art. Thus toothbrushing, as we normally do it, offers no roads back to the real world either. But ordinary life performed as art/not art can charge the everyday with metaphoric power.<sup>81</sup>**

Important to *Fluids*, and the earlier example of Cage’s *4’33*, is the quality of becoming immersed somatically in an environment that shapes and is shaped by interaction and uncertainty. We hear the sounds we make in relation to sounds made by others in *4’33* or deal with the weight and slippage of a block of ice in a state of transformation from solid into liquid. Our experience of these works goes beyond speech and beyond concept. Each project is carefully framed to direct attention within a considered set of constraints that open experience up to what otherwise would go unnoticed.

Participation at a deep level, therefore, is more than working with critical, issued-based content. It is more than deploying innovative modes of engaging a public, physically or mentally/imaginatively in an experience. It is a particular kind of freedom that allows us to explore, to question, to think for oneself and to learn. Our experience as sentient beings develops and is expanded by encountering other perspectives and things in the world. In this way, learning intensifies, particularly perhaps when perspectives conflict or where what we encounter is unfamiliar. Freedom in this sense is interpersonal and interactive, generative rather than anarchic – a freedom that is mindful of others rather than the freedom to do what one wants.

<sup>81</sup>  
Kaprow 1993/2003: 222.

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***Our experience as sentient beings develops and is expanded by encountering other perspectives and things in the world. In this way learning intensifies, particularly perhaps when perspectives conflict or where what we encounter is unfamiliar.***

▲

## 6. CONCLUSION: EXPERIENCE DEEPLY FELT

### **What can participation mean in contemporary art practice?**

This review has traced the discourse of participation as a fine art strategy across UK and US perspectives and beyond. This discourse begins through writers such as Herbert Read in the UK and John Dewey in the US, both of whom position participation as a felt response to alienation brought about through industrialisation and totalitarianism. To address the effects of alienation in modernity, the arts have drawn on participatory modes of working to reconfigure the relationship of artist, artwork and audience enabling creativity to be shared more democratically. The implications of this are developed by art theorists and historians such as Grant Kester, Claire Bishop, Shannon Jackson and Jack Burnham. They place participatory arts as a continuation of an avant-garde tradition and the seeking of alternative ways of imagining society and power in a world that is challenged by the success of its cultural/economic systems.

Alongside these theoretical perspectives, it has also been important to analyse the work of exemplary artists. John Newling, Allan Kaprow, John Cage, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Suzanne Lacy, among others, frequently confound the different theories, offering rich, contradictory ways of imagining what art might bring to participation and participation to art, in a changing world.

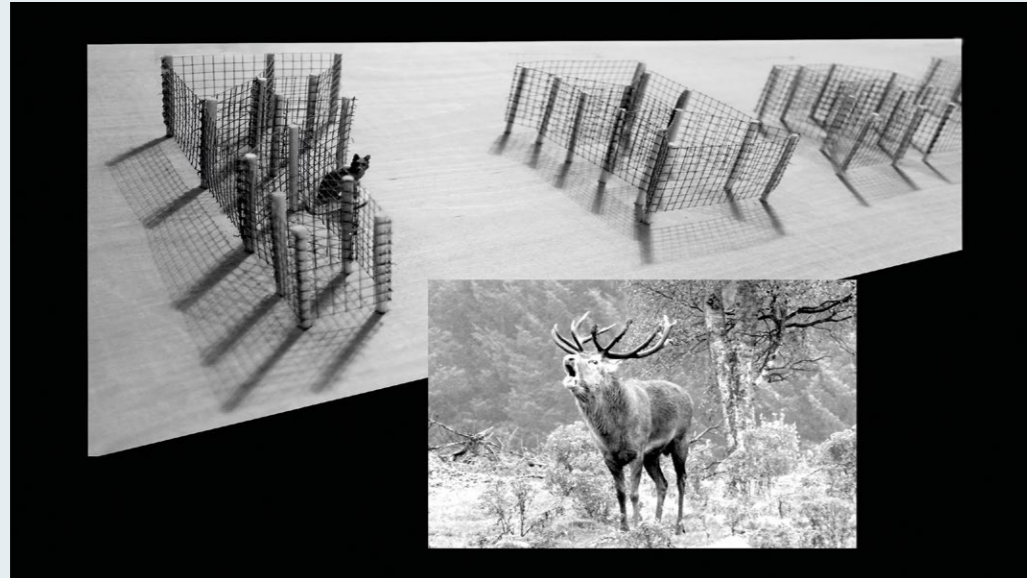
### **Why and how is participation important in relation to the arts?**

Implied in the notion of alienation in modernity is the sense of loss of community. However, community, according to Jean Luc Nancy, is a condition of being, of human existence. We are born and die in community. We have no choice in the matter.<sup>82</sup> It is, therefore, absurd to imagine community as something that we can construct, or indeed lose and re-find. Community imagined as noun leads us into difficulties because one social group identifies itself in juxtaposition and, therefore, at the exclusion of another. Community imagined as an existential condition, as verb, is an ongoing unfolding of experience and entanglement with other beings and processes that form organic life.

Nancy’s differentiation between understanding community as noun and community as verb is useful to participation and the place of contemporary art in public lives. Imagined as noun, participation becomes a special category of artistic practice that distinguishes itself from other categories or forms of practice. Perhaps the dangers of instrumentalism follow from imagining participatory art as a distinctive genre of practice vis a vis others. From this perspective, we begin to create characteristics that distinguish one from the other that also allow us to eliminate one or other when those characteristics are not present. Artists themselves reveal a different, altogether more subtle, complex and contradictory dynamic.

<sup>82</sup>  
Nancy 1958/6/1991.

**Figure 14**  
Reiko Goto-Collins and Tim Collins.  
*Decoy* 2017.



Courtesy of the artists



**Figure 15**  
Reiko Goto-Collins and Tim Collins.  
*Plein Air Team* 2007–present.

In his story of the Little Prince, Saint-Exupéry opens a discussion between the little prince and a fox on the meaning of 'to tame':<sup>83</sup>

To me you are nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am a fox, nothing more than a fox, like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world.<sup>84</sup>

Taming, in the fox's interpretation, means to create a relationship of care, an invisible link between one thing in the world and another that sustains and nurtures, creating the life of both things. Care is a feeling and a form of practice that cannot be visualised, but felt and experienced. The fox's parting gift to the little prince is a secret:

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.<sup>85</sup>

Reiko Goto Collins, ecology artist working in partnership with Tim Collins (*Figures 14 and 15*), has explored this principle through her work on empathy as a metaphor through which to develop a relationship between human beings and the environment.<sup>86</sup> Drawing on the philosophy of Edith Stein, phenomenologist and pupil of Husserl, Goto defines empathy as an act of perception. Empathy is different from sympathy, which may be a self-interested overlaying of one's own feelings onto an experience, a way of relieving one's own mental pain in the light of the experience of another. Empathy is a reaching out to something that is outside of ourselves, to what is essentially foreign and unfamiliar, through a careful noticing of small actions. Care embeds experiences in ways that change our understanding at a deep level. Goto-Collins explores empathy through her 'taming' of a group of Icelandic horses in North East Scotland as a relationship of care in ways that inform her understanding and practice of ecology or in their close observation over time of the breathing patterns of trees in photosynthesis or regenerative potential of forests in the Scottish Highlands.<sup>87</sup>

There is a thread that runs through this work and the practices of John Cage, John Newling, Suzanne Lacy, Hans Haacke, Goto and Collins, and Chu and Koh, among others. This thread helps us to imagine what participation might mean to a work of art seen through the wisdom and character of the fox. If participation is in some sense a quality of relationship with the world that is invisible to the eye, then it is only in the heart working with the mind that we can judge this. Fox is also a trickster figure in mythology. Like Rabbit and Spider (and Artist), Fox is cunning, avoiding the traps set by other living creatures through his intellect and wits.<sup>88</sup> Like Fox, contemporary artists working with participation question the tendency to normalise the forms that social and cultural life take. They cross boundaries and question conventions including the rhetoric of participation. It is in this cunning that participation can act as a catalyst to new unimagined and unanticipated horizons.

<sup>83</sup> I would like to acknowledge John and Ann Newling for re-introducing me to the writing of Saint-Exupéry in the context of this work on participation.

<sup>84</sup> Saint-Exupéry 1945/2009: 64.

<sup>85</sup> Saint-Exupéry 1945/2009: 68.

<sup>86</sup> For an overview of this important work see [www.collinsandgoto.com](http://www.collinsandgoto.com)

<sup>87</sup> Goto Collins 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Hyde 1998.



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# GLOSSARY

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## **Alienation**

A social, cultural and psychological condition based in a feeling of separation from a sense of self, from physical and increasingly social and emotional wellbeing, a form of powerlessness. Marx argued that alienation in society had become exacerbated through capitalism in which the labour of one social group of workers could be expropriated by a ruling wealthy class as a commodity with little sense of fulfillment on behalf of the worker. Durkheim and Tönnies, sociologists, associate alienation with a loss of traditional societies leading to fewer personal relationships and an increase of impersonal bureaucracies.

## **Autonomy**

The right to self-governance as a group and to self-determination as an individual. It is freedom from external control. It carries a moral and political sense of having the capacity to make informed, un-coerced decisions. For Kant autonomy (in the sense of the right to make one's own decisions, to exercise independent critical powers and to live as an individual in society), was a condition for morality itself.

## **Heteronomy**

(Opposite of autonomy) refers to action that is influenced by a force outside of the individual; the condition of being ruled or governed or in a more extreme form, being under the sway of a military dictator.

## **Avant-garde**

Forms of art-making that are both provocative and also open to interpretation and critical engagement. It draws on a military metaphor; the advance guard was a small platoon of soldiers that went ahead of an army to scout the conditions of a forthcoming battle. This future orientation is upheld in forms of avant-garde art to indicate an opening up of new, radical visions of society.

## **Capitalism**

An economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry (including property and business) are controlled by private owners for profit rather than by the state. The goal of an economic system of private ownership is to make the greatest possible profit for the owners. The industrial revolution saw the start of money-based social relations establishing a class of workers for wages and a capitalist class who owned the means of production. Supporters of capitalism argue that it is an effective way of achieving economic growth and increased standard of living. Critics of capitalism point to its negative effects: the exploitation of a majority working class and the privileging of profit over social good alongside damage to the environment by over exploiting natural resources.

## **Neoliberalism**

An extreme form of capitalism that positions the market and monetarism as the organising principle of all political, social and economic decisions excluding notions of public interest, the welfare state, family and community. David Harvey, economic theorist, argues that under capitalism there was an effort to overcome the psychological effects of alienation through humanist education. This is eroded in neoliberalism in which governments increasingly engage in practices of dispossession in the form of reduced publicly funded education, health service and pension rights under the guise of austerity measures. These effectively pass public expenditure or wealth of a nation onto corporate heads.

## **Contemporary art**

Quite simply, art that is made at the time of speaking or writing. It has come to mean in the present the opening up of the arts to social, cultural and political issues (such as the environment, gender, identity), issues that shape new forms of artistic practices and their relationships with diverse publics. In such practices, the issues underpinning the work do not only form subject matter. They frame the conditions in which a work is realised in relation to communities of interest and may consciously form publics that become capable of taking action. Subsets of contemporary art include socially engaged art that focuses on socio/political issues and relationships, ecological art that focuses on the environment and community art that focuses on community engagement. There is however considerable overlap between the terms and they can be interchangeable, differently inflected particularly between UK, US and European contexts.

### **Collectivism**

A way of conceiving human society that privileges the group over the individual. Human beings are by nature distinct separate beings with their own bodies and faculties necessary to existence. A collectivist perspective positions the individual's life as part of a group or society to which he/she belongs. A more polarised perspective defines collectivism in juxtaposition to individualism. It suggests that thought and action are only possible through social interaction and dialogue within a community.

### **Individualism**

As a counterpoint to collectivism, is a way of imagining society through the individual and in relation to other competing individuals in a state of competitive self-interest and inherent conflict. Philosophers such as John Dewey are critical of individualism in the context of classical liberalism, arguing that individuality can only be sustained when social life is tied to the well-being of the whole.

### **Community**

May refer to a group of people that share a way of life or set of interests. It may also mean a way of being, more verb than noun. Community imagined as noun leads us into difficulties because one social group identifies itself in juxtaposition and therefore, at the exclusion of, another, as Jean-Luc Nancy argues. Community imagined as an existential condition, as verb, is an ongoing unfolding of experience and entanglement with other beings and processes that form organic life. In contemporary arts practice the term 'community' has tended to displace 'audience' within more self-conscious forms of participation in an attempt to open the arts up to more democratic forms of engagement.

### **Industrialisation**

A period of social and economic change in the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society that brought about an extensive reorganisation of an economy for the purposes of manufacture. Changes in the economy also involved changes in the fabric of social life: the extended family became a nuclear family that was more mobile, physically and socially; craftsmanship and manual labour in general was replaced by the assembly line and mechanisation. Industrialisation is associated with the Industrial Revolution in Europe of the 18th and 19th centuries and escalated in the two World Wars in the first half of the 20th century. It is aligned with the growth of capitalism.

### **Postindustrialisation**

A period of change in which an economy shifts from a predominantly manufacturing base to one of services and information. David Harvey suggests that as industry moved to other parts of the globe, including India and China among other nations in the early 1970s, industrialisation, so long deemed a sure path to prosperity, was increasingly associated with the perpetuation of poverty.

### **Modernism**

Specifically, refers to movements in the arts that undertake a self-conscious break with the past and in theology in accommodating traditional religious beliefs into contemporary thought.

### **Postmodernism**

A 20th century movement characterised by scepticism in particular in relation to ideology that asserts and maintains political and economic power. It reverses many of the assumptions underpinning 18th century Enlightenment such as the objective nature of reality, challenging the underpinnings of scientific practice and language. It questions the idea of human progress as an ideal and its associated faith in science and technology.

### **Modernity**

An historical period (the modern era) and its ensemble of particular social-cultural norms following the Renaissance in the so called 'Age of Reason' of the 17th century and 'Age of Enlightenment' of the 18th century. It is associated with the emergence of individual subjectivity, scientific explanation and rationalisation alongside rapid urbanisation and nation states.

### **Participation**

The act of taking part in something or of making something known. It also carries a more specialised, politicised sense of involving members of the public or community in making decisions or, conversely, of coercing the public into conforming to forms of totalitarianism. Some thinkers such as John Dewey and Allan Kaprow argue that participation is a foundational aspect of all experience (see collectivism). It is a way of imagining a living organism as it develops in response to its environment, adapting to conditions of life as found. By extension participation can be a way of imagining the relationship of a viewer or audience to a work of art through, listening, seeing, interpreting and finding meaning through one's imagination.

### **Participatory art**

A form of artistic practice that focuses specifically on involving the public in creating 'the work'. It targets the question of who has the power to speak or create. The artist's role in this approach frequently becomes that of an enabler of the conditions of creativity displacing for some the role of a sole author.

### **Public pedagogy**

A research field and set of practices operating across a number of primary sites that include citizenship within and beyond schools, popular culture and everyday life. Learning takes place more often in informal institutions and public spaces, addressing dominant cultural discourses and aligned to forms of social activism.

### **Systems thinking**

A field that has emerged since the late 1960s with the development of cybernetics and the importance of information over objects as a symbol of wealth. In ecology it is a conceptual framework that integrates life's biological, cognitive and social dimensions imaging all living things including human beings as interrelated and co-dependent.

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