Three stages in the art of public participation

The relational, social and durational

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"Participation is not only a form of co-production but also an end product in itself". Curator, artist and theorist Paul O'Neill traces a development from the site-specific artwork to long-term participatory urban art projects.

Participation is currently an all-inclusive term for art’s ability to engage with its publics as collaborators, co-producers or other active agents. Regardless of its ubiquity, the term remains contested territory in recent writing on art. This essay charts one possible reading of participation – as a flexible term for variant modes of engagement with art, through its relational, social and durational aspects. In the process, participation is considered not only as a form of co-production but also as an end product in itself, which provides art with its durational and public dimension.

The relational motivation behind exhibition-making

The transformative potential considered inherent to art – as audiences moved from passive subjects to active citizens – was a key motivation for the early avant-garde in relinquishing a measure of authorial control. In early modernist installations, the work of art was considered to be completed by bringing the viewer into play. In two recent essays on the art of participation, Claire Bishop and Rudolf Frieling trace the modernist reconciliation of art and social life to event-based installations and laboratory-style exhibition-making from the 1920s onwards. [1] Some of the first examples of interactive art include Frederick Kiesler’s exhibition design for Exhibition of New Theatre Technique (at Konzerthaus, Vienna in 1924), El Lissitzky’s Abstract Cabinet (constructed between 1927 and 1928 for the Landesmuseum, Hannover), Marcel Duchamp’s Mile of String [2] (included as part of First Papers of Surrealism at Whitelaw Reid Mansion, New York in 1942). All were intent on subverting the overall exhibition design and layout, and provide an early critique of the passive experience of art and its exhibition space. Central to these activations was the corporeal involvement of individual viewers as part of a general shift towards relational forms of participation that gathered momentum throughout the latter part of the twentieth century.
By the 1960s and 70s, artists and curators had begun to question “the artistic freedom and aesthetic autonomy accorded them by society - an autonomy that reached a certain culmination in high modernist aestheticism.” [3] What Peter Bürger called the “abolition of autonomous art” and its integration into the “praxis of life” precipitated a general move towards more social and situational forms of artistic practice. [4]

Artists invited public participation as a component in the production of open artworks, with key examples being Allan Kaprow’s happenings and Lygia Clark’s relational objects, which embraced serendipity, performativity and indeterminacy.

In the 1990s, one of the legacies of this evolution was a relational art intent on transcending the autonomous symbolic space for art. [5] Underlying Nicolas Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics was his portrayal of a generalised shift towards relational group work, polyphonic exchanges and inter-subjective practices. Anglo-American critiques of his analysis tend to overlook the stated tendency for art to be construed primarily through participation (rather than authorial production), to pit the approaches of individual relational artists against each other, focusing on the aesthetic or ethical dimension of their practices with the aim of establishing subjective criteria with which to differentiate between different forms of socially relational practices, thus curtailing the discussion. This is visible in Claire Bishop’s neo-modernist game, Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics, which sets Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija against Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn, and the various responses to it which, in their own ways, attempt to police the aesthetic boundaries of judgement on legitimate artistic practice. Consequently, the social rationale behind subject-to-situation encounters within works of art is never fully explored. [6] As Gillick states, “My work is like the light in the fridge, it only works when there are people to open the fridge door. Without people, it’s not art.” [7]

But, by basing the primary experience of relational art on sociality, engagement and presence, inter-subjectivity becomes a primary medium of artistic investigation. [8] As Jacques Ranciere writes, ”Relational art [...] intends to create not only objects but situations and encounters. But this too simple opposition between objects and situations operates a short-circuit.” [9] This limits any critique of its efficacy to the merits of types of immediate immersive-ness, restricted as it is either to one-off aesthetic experiences or their possible ethical effects. The viewer becomes a constricted component within the framing of constructed situations in which extant social relations are either subverted or reproduced. [10] And, while relational art of the 1990s intended a more socialised and collective form of immersive experience, the taking part in art’s social space is largely regarded as merely contributing to a metaphorical form of art’s co-production, its meanings and its values. What is required, then, is an interrogation of the procedures, forms and consequences of co-production, of what constitutes the authorial space of the object of art and its reception and of how art produces or reproduces the frameworks for different modes of participation with time.

Also in the 1990s, articulation of a need for people (as public) to engage with art was also representative of a generation of artists partaking in large-scale group exhibitions, which added a new element of nomadic sociality to the experience of art. According to Elena Filipovic, the proliferation of new biennials during this time was often seen as a paradigmatic alternative to the museum and gallery when, in fact, they mimicked them,
rendering them equally privileged sites for cultural tourism and introducing a new
category of art of “bombastic proportions and hollow premises” that earned itself the
name “biennial art”. [11] At the same time, Filipovic argues, there was a privileging of
the group exhibition as the predominant form of relationality, where a particular physical
space with its own parameters was established, “through which relations between
viewers and objects, between one object and others, and between objects, viewers, and
their specific exhibition context are staged.” [12] Relational art may thus be regarded as
a response to the changing conditions for the production, display and reception of art and
the ubiquity of the large-scale group exhibition form. A key illustration of this is found in
the logical bookend of a decade of relational exhibition practices – “Utopia Station”, [13]
co-curated by Molly Nesbitt, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija in 2003 – which
attended to the issues of socialised relations between things by focusing on a
Collaborative exhibition framework rather than selected artists or works. It was described
in the press release as: “Nothing more or nothing less than a way station, a place to stop,
to look, to talk and refresh the route [...] as a whole [it] should be understood to be the
composite of its many layers, each unfolding at different speeds in different times and
places: seminars, meetings, stations, posters, performances and books are coming en
route.” [14]

Utopia Station emphasised durational process over product; temporality was intended to
be as dominant as the encounter with works of art, as much as it was a request for
participation. By employing the exhibition as a site for programmed meetings,
discussions, events and performances, each requiring the participation of an audience,
a relational proposition was created, even if the audience was mainly invited by
name. The exhibition space symbolised a collective dimension for art as a socialised and
open work, with participation conceived of as taking part in a process of evaluation
rather than activation. Participants were implicated in what Pierre Bourdieu calls the
cultural “production of the value of the artist and of art,” [16] with the exhibition
mirroring the art world. That is, the art world as a social subsystem produced by multiple
agencies – from the artist to the audience as co-producer of the value of the work, to
those responsible for the framing of art’s context or situation and its social and spatial
reception. Exhibition-making was thus put forth as a metaphorical relational process,
proposed as a beneficial collective experience, with the most positive outcome being the
possibility, rather than any actualisation, for viewers to act as producers of the work. [17]

The social turn beyond the exhibition space

Parallel to the rise of context-driven biennials and large-scale exhibitions in the 1990s
was the emergence of what Miwon Kwon called the itinerant artist, whose presence was
brought about by “shifts in the structural organisation of cultural production” and caused
values like “originality, authenticity, and singularity” to be “evacuated from the artwork
and attributed to the site”. [18]

The result of artists being brought into a given city, to make work that responds to it,
tends to be displaced, either from the place in which the artist mainly works or, in the
case of nomadic art (made elsewhere and brought to the site of display), from the original
site of production. In its new context, the work becomes identified through its cohesive
relationship with other works in the contextual exhibition and/or its place amongst other
works selected from the international art world and the attendant global art market.
So, what happens to art when its primary objective is to engage with people and places under such mobile conditions, but over a longer period than the exhibition-event? And what about when its material result is also in a more dispersed form of mediation, when its material outcome, its authorial space and its exhibition site is not so easy to locate – when it does not result in a single autonomous work to be viewed as a one-off experience? Does its objecthood disappear completely into processes of operation, interventional procedures and participatory moments? What happens when participation is a negotiated space of co-production within networked flows of social encounters? Collaboration, in the form of socially networked projects, is associated with contextual and dialogical procedures rather than material outcomes. Terms such as conversational art (Homi Bhaba), dialogue-based public art (Tom Finkelpearl), dialogical art (Grant Kester), new genre public art (Suzanne Lacy), new situationism (Claire Doherty), and connective aesthetics (Suzi Gablik) have all attempted to encapsulate the discursive qualities inherent in more immaterial forms of collective artistic co-production predominantly experienced beyond the art institutional setting or the gallery frame.

The social turn in art in recent years has also prompted what Claire Bishop refers to as an ethical turn in art criticism, with heightened attention being paid to how good collaborations are executed and judged rather than how aesthetic objects are experienced. [19] Emphasis on temporal processes of engagement with people takes precedence over art as product. Multiple participants are involved as co-creators, with a view to shaping counter-public spaces – as seen in some of the people-based projects of Temporary Services, Oda Projesi, Skart, Park Fiction, Lucy Orta, or Jeanne van Heeswijk. [20] In these cases, the function of the artwork is to create situations of potential agency for the co-productive processes initiated by the artist as post-autonomous producer. An understanding of the identity of the artwork is put forward as the accumulation of interactions, with the work of art configured as a cluster of participant-driven social- and community-responsive interventions gathered together over time and resulting in its eventual public manifestation. What is experienced and written about as the art in such cases is its outcome, as the end of a process, rather than the durational and participatory process through which this outcome is achieved.

In the work of an artist such as Jeanne van Heeswijk, for example, a public space of contact is created through interactions with others, who take part in the processes of production and who contribute to the dispersed form of the resultant work through its different modes of engagement. [21] Frames of social interaction are put in place for the discursive and material production of art that is metaphorically imagined and actively encouraged. Participants are seen as actors with their actions being part of a cumulative process of engagement with both imaginative and tangible potential. The artist’s longer-term public projects, such as De Strip (Vlaardingen, 2002-04), have engaged participants in the adaptation and production of their public environment as part of a durational process, while Valley Vibes (with Amy Plant, East London, 1998-03) enabled a multitude of narratives to be gathered by, and about, a constituency through their use of a Vibe Detector (a machine filled with sound equipment that could be used by inhabitants for everything from music events and conferences, to radio broadcasts).

As the artist has stated, “My entire artistic practice departs from the belief that art has the capacity to contribute to life.” [22] As has been observed, it is within her “motivation to turn the public into participants” that a clear “transformation from a static spectator to
an active participant is at stake.” (Ibid.) This transformation is akin to what Deleuze calls the subjectivation processes, during which users, participants or subjects are activated with some form of agency in order to engender, transform and constitute themselves as active-reactive subjects. Through communicative processes of subjectivation, individuals might begin to have a greater understanding of how they can shape their environment, by assimilating new forms of knowledge that could not have been foreseen from the outset. [23] Similarly, sociologist Scott Lash maintains that “by actively creating meaning through dialogue and inter-subjective communication, we may be able to find a way out of the productivist system which makes us passive receivers rather than active producers of meaning.” (Lash 1996, pp. 112-129) By focusing on non-representative forms of communication, where no singular subject is represented through the mediation process, Lash proposes that the economies of experience can begin to be activated and understood as indirect, changing and pluralist rather than singular and immediate.

Communicative action occurs at the level of the other rather than the “I”, with communication functioning within a socially networked organisation via relational processes rather than representational procedures. (Rossiter 2006, p. 13)

One of Van Heewijk’s most ambitious projects to date, The Blue House, illustrates how non-representational processes of communication and exchange can form the content and structure of the work of art. Situated in a newly-built suburb of Amsterdam called IJburg, which is set for completion in 2012, this durational project began in 2005 when the artist arranged for a large villa in a housing block to be taken off the private market and designated as a space for community research, artistic production and cultural activities. Over a four-year period, artists, architects, thinkers, writers and scholars of various nationalities are being invited to live and work in the Blue House for periods of up to six months. Invitees conduct research, produce works of art, films and publications, and are involved in discussions and other activities. This has resulted in numerous research-led interventions being made by practitioners in and around the Blue House, which respond to the specifics of a place undergoing construction as part of an extensive urban renewal plan. The Blue House is representative of Van Heeswijk’s interest in producing models of social relationality rather than producing artwork with its own intrinsic aesthetic values. This project offers itself as a model for fostering dialogue within an organisational structure where the collective work of art is an accumulation of actors and actions, uniting diverse modes of participation, just as it is formed and informed by many individuals, members, residents and agencies. The Blue House as a whole can be dispersed without adhering to a single representation as the work of individual artistic agency. [24] The result is the culmination of a body of research that reflects upon the transformation of IJburg, its communities and the organised network of willing participants who collectively contribute to a re-attribution of the durational in public time.

Participation as durational experience of public time

Large-scale public art projects – such as Skulptur Projekte Münster (since 1977), Sonsbeek (since 1971), inSITE (since 1992) or Mary Jane Jacob’s projects “Places with a Past: New Site-specific Art in Charleston” (1992) and “Culture in Action: New Public Art for Chicago” (1993) – have all contributed to a shifting field of public sculpture and exposed ways in which the fabric of time has come to be regarded as an essential
component of art that engages with the socio-historical dimension of places. The 1990s witnessed a growing perception that a coherent relationship between one single place and identity was possible, with art contributing to the “valorisation of places as the locus of authentic experience”. [25] Subsequent theories have shown place to be a temporary, evasive and open construct. Any place is a constellation of co-habited spaces: full of contestation, negotiation and instability. Never fixed, it is always hybrid, differential and mobile, where its multiple dimensions are brought to bear on the social, as much as it is formed out of extant social processes and external forces. [26]

In order to move beyond the ontological notion of a reflexive subject – where moving from passive to active participant in art is equally difficult to quantify – a further contemplation is needed on the issue of time, specifically how public time is framed so that a space of co-production can emerge. This is what Bruno Latour refers to as the need for more “cohabitational time, the great Complicator,” with democratic space being understood as the time spent together publicly in contradiction to one another. If we are to think of participation as more than a closed, one-off relational or social interaction with art, it must take account of duration as a temporal process of cohabitation, where time can contribute to something that is immeasurable, unquantifiable, and unknowable from the outset. Therefore, participation can only be experienced durationally, as a lived difference.

For Henri Bergson, duration is not only a psychological experience – a transitory state of becoming – it is also the concrete evolution of creativity, as a state of being within time that succeeds itself in a manner which makes duration the very material of individual creative action. For Bergson, duration is always evolving by our actions in time, allowing for the unknown to be brought to the fore in a manner that does not foresee its own formation during or within the course of action. For Bergson, duration is something that endures, because change is the substance of duration, materialised through a transitional process that is taking place in time through a capacity to move from one state to another. To understand duration as an attribute of participation, something must shift through time for the participant. Like waiting for something to dissolve in liquid, it is always moving forward through a process of a succession that is always different, both materially and as an experience of that material transformation that unfolds. Nothing that takes place in time will occur again in the same way. There is always an emergence of something different that gives duration its own extrinsic values such as temporality, mobility, agency, change or affect. [27]

Aside from the aforementioned The Blue House, examples of more durational approaches to art and participation contributing to the production of a place – perhaps as a curative to the nomadic method of engaging with place and people – include Park Fiction, Hamburg (since 1995), Rirkrit Tiravanija’s The Land in Chiang Mai (since 1998) and Trekrøner Art Plan (since 2002). Park Fiction halted plans for construction on the last remaining open space in St. Pauli and initiated a collectively designed park through the organisation of a local network that sustained a parallel planning process, creating platforms for exchange among people from many different cultural fields while The Land is a community where artists conduct projects among the rice paddies, vegetable fields and water buffalo, the value of which is counted primarily in terms of utility and sustainability. As part of Trekrøner Art Plan, artist Kerstin Bergendal wrote a 12-year plan for a new suburb in the municipality of Roskilde, where commissioned artists and
local residents were intended to play an active role in the long-term planning of their environment, through their participation in workshops, discussions and planning procedures facilitated by Bergendal.

Public art commissioning projects have also begun to take a longer-term approach. Some have come to an abrupt end such as kunstprojekte_riem (2000-03), led by curator Claudia Büttner, which was undertaken by the City of Munich with a view to making art for Messestadt Riem, a new suburb containing the city’s trade fair centre and intended to accommodate 3000 new residents over four years. [28] Over four years, a range of art forms from objects, to installations, actions, public discussion forums and participation projects focused on how art could shape the future of a residential space through “art in the public interest”. [29] Four different thematics provided a focal point for artists, beginning with city markers in 2000 which dealt with the topography of the site. Subsequently, residential worlds engaged art directly with new citizens moving into the area, then social spaces focused on art intervening in public spaces as they were built, and periphery and centre explored how connections could be drawn between Messestadt Riem and the city centre of Munich in 2004. Each emphasized the necessity for on-site research and illustrated how an arts project could adapt to the changing situation of an area under construction while regarding new residents as the main client. (Ibid.)

Whereas others have sustained their activities: such as Nouveaux Commanditaires en Bourgogne, Dijon (since 1997), an innovative programme for the production of utilitarian public art realised through a collaborative process, and commissioned by the citizens or associations who are directly involved in the conception, production and ownership of the artwork; Breaking Ground (since 2002) as a programme of art commissions in line with a Dublin suburb undergoing regeneration as part of a partnership with the developers, Ballymun Regeneration Committee; Beyond, Leidsche Rijn (2001-09), as a six stranded project [30] has consistently promoted social and spatial practice via temporary art interventions, events and social sculptures, commissioned with the intention of enabling civic interactions, social gatherings and discussions. Mobile architecture and temporary built environments have been central to these experiences, and the overall programme has been orchestrated for a diverse public and permeated with a kind of festival spirit. As such, it may be considered as a series of short-term interactions within a longer term project, with the overall timeframe being long enough to allow real experimentation to take place and an engaged practice to emerge within Leidsche Rijn – a new extension of Utrecht at a time when its first inhabitants are arriving, while Grizedale Arts (since 1999-) is an ongoing curatorial programme of events, projects and residencies responding to the immediate social, cultural and economic environment of the primarily rural English Lake District. Each of these projects has shown recognition of durational process, engaging audiences and encouraging research-based outcomes that are responsive to their specific context, audience and location. These different durational models have begun to embrace more social forms of artistic co-production for a specific place, situation or environment, allowing them to unfold over time through variant modes of local participation.

While diverse in their outputs and objectives, all of these durational projects have presented a longer-term view of how commissioners can respond to a specific situation by considering how art can be a co-operative process of production that is neither autonomous nor over-regulated. They also acknowledge that multiple agents are at work
within the commissioning process – from curators to artists to audience, to planners, city administrators, developers and all those responsible for the framing of art’s context or situation and its social and spatial reception. In their survey of more sustainable recent approaches to art and renewal, Clare Cumberlidge and Lucy Musgrave have discerned that a new form of creative urban practice has emerged in the past few years, which aims to establish a new way of affecting and forming a more co-productively built environment through partnerships. In such projects, they argue, “there is a new openness to the value of partnership and collaboration within and between practitioners, community groups, agencies, and public and private sector organisations.” [31]

They have also opened up a space for rethinking what we might mean by participatory art. As we have seen, the most recent thinking on participation in art and its public contexts has been configured through the experience of art’s reception, its objecthood and its active potential to engage with others – the space of art rather than the duration of art. Instead, we could consider duration-specific as a term for artistic interventions, in which artists, curators and commissioners contribute to sustaining a practice-in-place for a period of static, immobile time, with a view to leaving something behind that could not have been anticipated. If duration involves being together for a period of time with some common objectives, then durational praxis is the specific quality of a new mode of relational and participatory practice. The temporal process is one way of considering an engaged form of co-production for all those who take part. By taking account of participation with art, and in art, as an unfolding and longer-term accumulation of multiple positions, engagements and moments registered in what we account for as the artwork, then we may be able to move beyond the individual participatory encounter of an eventful exhibition moment. For participation to be understood from the perspective of the producer, as a participant through artistic processes, rather than that of the receiver, as participant in art, we may begin to distinguish between different forms of participation and to move beyond the relational as just another social encounter with art, its exhibition, or its objecthood. We might also understand participation not as a relation or social encounter with artistic production, but as a socialised process necessary for art’s co-production, where negotiations with people and places are durationally specific, yet without any prescribed outcomes. Such a shift in the perception of participation must initially consider the different duration-specific qualities of art as something driven by ideas of public time, rather than space, so that we can begin to understand the complexities of artistic co-production in the logic of succession, continuity and sustainability rather than discontinuity in a unitary time and place.

Footnotes


2. For a detailed account of Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí and André Breton’s involvement with the Surrealist exhibitions of the 1930-40s, see Lewis Kachur, Displaying the Marvellous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí and Surrealist Exhibition Installations, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2001.


7. Liam Gillick, quoted in Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", in October 110 (Fall, 2004), 61.


12. Ibid. 79.


17. For a consideration of one notion of an historical emergence of "viewers as producers" see Claire Bishop, Participation op. cit. 10-17.


20. Ibid.


22. Ibid. 175.


25. Kwon op. cit, 52.


27. For an introductory analysis on Bergonisms see Suzanne Guerlac, Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson New York: Cornell University 2006.


30. The six categories of the Beyond programme are: 1. "Looping" -- the public relations department of Beyond aims to involve and to communicate with Leidsche Rijn residents about activities and to stimulate a debate on its art programmes through their website, news and publications. 2. "Parasites" -- a collective term for light, mobile and experimental forms of architecture. During the urban development of Leidsche Rijn, these are commissioned or sited as flexible buildings with a social or participatory function. 3. "Artists' Houses" -- artists are invited to respond to the urbanization process, with a view to thinking about living in Leidsche Rijn, which has sometimes resulted in built houses being incorporated into the existing plans. 4. "White Spots" -- sites/spaces have been bought and given to artists, with "Beyond" acting as land and property developers. These spaces are taken out of the master plan during the construction period and used for parallel and future temporary art projects. 5. "Action Research" -- a programme made up of temporary projects and artistic interventions created by artists during the development with a view to undertaking research-based interaction inducing participation, reflexive practice and observational responses to the evolution of Leidsche Rijn as an inhabited place. 6. "Directing Artists" -- artists actively contribute their ideas in
relation to the infrastructural design of Leidsche Rijn, as part of the design team for the extension, and contribute to a number of large-scale infrastructural projects.