

AP University College Antwerp/Royal Conservatoire

OF PARTICIPATORY ART

**The relationship between
the artist and the viewer
from the perspective**

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The relationship between the artist
and the viewer
from the perspective of
participatory art

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1. Introduction

In most dance performances today, it is common to see the audience sitting in the audience seat and watching what is performed on the stage by professionally trained dancers. How does this traditional relationship between artist and viewer holds up to the famous quote by Marcel Duchamp?

Duchamp, a pioneering artist and leading figure in the Dada movement, says, "both the artist and the viewer are necessary for the completion of a work of art."¹. I grasp his meaning as follows.

If the artist and the viewer both are needed to complete the work of art, then there has to be some cooperation between the two. How does this cooperation affect the traditional relationship between artist and viewer? Maybe the traditional role of the artist as artist and of the viewer as viewer becomes unnecessary. I think that the experiences from the viewer and from the artist within a work of art can be connected or even shared. I think this connection can be more intense when the boundaries between the artist and the viewer evaporate. Everyone in that moment can be in that same moment.

I think participatory art is one of the art forms that question these boundaries between artist and viewer. In addition, participatory art does not require a difference in class: also people that are not

¹ See Marcel Duchamp,

https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/media-and-performance-art/participation-and-audience-involvement/(accessed on March 24 2019.)

artistically trained can join or participate in the art work and thus a borderless relationship between artist and viewer is established. I believe that participatory art can even eliminate the border between everyday life and art.

I would like to examine the characteristics of participatory art works in the field of performing arts, compare them with my own works, and reflect on the relationships created by participatory art.

2. Relationship between the artist and the viewer

2-1 Historical Change

First, I will trace the history of the relationship between the artist and the viewer in the world of art. First of all, since the Renaissance there is an era in which art was mainly created to support Christian religious norms. However, the only beneficiaries of the art culture of this era are the privileged parties such as the royal aristocrat or the church who is the client of the work (demander / audience), and the artist (supplier) who produced the work that in request of the client. We see a one-way relationship: the artist produces his work at the request of the higher class audience.

In France in the late 19th century, the bourgeoisie emerged in place of the royal aristocrat and the church as the main client, and the style of the artist's output also changed with the establishment of the modern civil society. It became essential for an artist to produce his own work in order to get selected to the salon, where his work could be exhibited in order to get new clients.² Although now a relationship in two directions is established, it is still one-sided in the sense that the only viewer is the purchaser of the art work.

In that time, art was considered to create an extraordinary, dreamy world. Especially in dance, in classical ballet and modern dance, the audience intended to forget the reality by looking at it. In

² Yukie Ohya,

https://repository.musashi.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/11149/2011/1/soc_2018no20_001_030_ohya.pdf (accessed on March 18 2019.)

other words, the artist's or performer's role was to create a different reality, and the audience's role was distinguished by watching this reality. There is the real area of the viewer's real body and space in which he lives. On the other hand, there is a virtual area in which the body and space are represented. It created a boundary between everyday life and art.

In his art movement "Happening" since the 1950s, Alan Kaprow began to put more emphasis on the relationship between the audience and the artist, and between everyday life and art. It obscures the boundaries that were created up to that point. After this movement participatory art and interactive art was born. It can be argued that the artist has started to delegate some of the process of art making to the audience and others such as collaborators and assistants whilst still retaining authorial authority through ideas and concepts.³

2-2 The conventional way

If the artist creates a work in the conventional way of making works, and presents this work to an audience, some impact is created. However, the work will have more impact to those members of the audience who will find some connection to what is being presented to them. Other members may not understand or feel the work and thus be less impacted. In other words, in this conventional way the relationship relies on what the artist *gives* to the audience. The

³Samuel Ross (2016: 4).

audience *receives* what is being given to them.

However, in today's democratic society, this relationship can be questioned. I think more dimensions can be added in a way that the viewer not only receives, but truly is invited to think, feel and experience. It is a shift from being on the sideline to really experiencing the work. I believe that in modern society, the more aware you are of what surrounds you in daily life, the more those 'normal' things can trigger you to discover things you don't immediately see. And I truly believe that art can help us to become more aware of what surrounds us. But in order to do this, I believe the one-sided relationship between the artist and the viewer as we've seen before, should be changed.

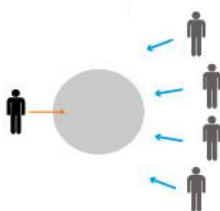
3. Participatory art

3-1 Three forms of participatory art

The TATE Museum website describes participatory art as follows: "Participatory art is a term that describes a form of art that directly engages the audience in the creative process so that they become "participants in the event"".⁴ Kenjiro Hosaka, curator of the National Museum of Modern Art Japan, advocates three types of participatory art⁵.

A. Co-production type

The co-production type is a type in which ordinary people are involved in the production process of a work. The work is completed by the joint production of the artist and the general public. For example, Maria Abramovic's Rhythm 0 belongs to this type. In her work Rhythm 0, the audience is free to use multiple materials on the desk placed in front of her. Among them are rose flowers, pens, scissors, razors and bullets.



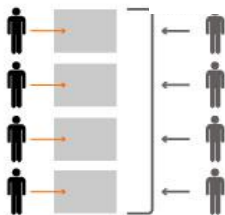
⁴ See N.N <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/participatory-art> (accessed on March 20 2019).

⁵ Kenjiro Hosaka., <http://10plus1.jp/monthly/2014/11/issue-01-2.php> (accessed on April 10 2019).

The audience can freely use these materials on another material (the artist's body). This performance lasted six hours. In other words, the artist and the audience worked on the six-hour process and made one work. If there is no spectator there, it is a work that cannot be made. The audience was initially hesitant to do something to her. But gradually they began to touch her. At a certain point one spectator put a loaded gun to her head. The experience of the audience (co-producers) at that time is only there and could not be gained without their own participation in the work. People that weren't there can only imagine this work by reading about it but will never experience the emotions they felt, the things they received, nor the things they gave. It is a work created by the people who were there and it can never be duplicated.

B. Participatory type

This is a type in which ordinary people participate in creating



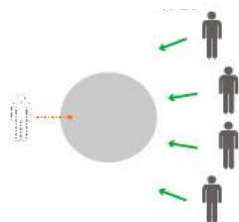
mechanisms and environments for artists to produce works. In other words, the work made by the artist is a work that needs the environment created by the audience. For example, *Plastic* by Maria Hassabi may be mentioned as a

representative example of this type. The performer is moving slowly on the floor of the museum space. The viewer stops and watches the performer. The performer passes by and talks to the viewers. However, the performer considers the audience as part of the work.

When viewed from a third party, some of the spectators have turned into parts of the work without their knowledge. The gestures, words, and states that they use naturally are all part of the work. In other words, the audience, without thinking, creates the work's environment. If this environment changes, the work also changes. You cannot repeat the same work exactly. However, in this type of participation, participation is created separately from the audience's intention. The audience is unconscious and does initially not know that they are participating in the work. Eventually, some viewers may notice the space created by the performer and the other spectators and realize they are also performers.

C. Experience type

The co-production type and the participatory type are types related to the work production process. The experience type consists of general participation after the work is completed. The work itself is



finished, and the essence of the work is realized only when the audience experiences it. In other words, the work's frame is already there, but the work will only exist when it is experienced by an audience. An example here is Charlotte Spencer's

Walking Stories. In this work, the audience is supplied with an mp3 player and headphones. The artist herself is not present there, the score is built into the mp3 player. The audience acts in accordance to the score flowing from the headphones. In this work, the audience is

a participant / performer, not a viewer. The work is created by the audience experiencing it.

Such experience-types of participatory art, can also break down the barrier between art and more conventional types of entertainment (cinema, amusement parks, etc.) As a result from the activities of the early 20th century Futurists and Dadaists, and the happenings and performances of the 50s and 60s, a new definition to art is given, in which the audience is also part of the work.

3-2 Relationship between the audience and the artist created by participatory art

In participatory art, the relationship between the artist and the viewer can be described as 'give and take'; information is exchanged between the artist and the audience, and proposals are mutually made in order to create the art work. In conventional works of art there is no system of give and take, the relationship is one-sided: the artist has an idea, creates a work and presents this work to the audience.

Yoko Ono criticizes this one-sided relation in an interview about her piece 'Cut Piece':

"A form of giving, giving and taking. It was a kind of criticism against artists, who are always giving what they want to give. I wanted people to take whatever they wanted to, so it was very

important to say you can cut wherever you want to”⁶

In this piece Ono sits on stage wearing clothes, telling her audience they can cut her clothes freely. She creates a situation and presents her body on the stage (GIVE), on the other hand, the audience can cut it freely (TAKE).

By making works through participating with the artist, the impression or impact an audience can experience can be much stronger than that in more conventional works. Because the audience itself is part of the work. However, this also means that each participatory art work is exclusive: the same work can never be repeated. They are unique moments in space and time. Those who are not present can never experience that same work again. Nevertheless, the experience gained through participatory art can be very powerful. Because there is a certain "presence" created that can only be felt by who is there in that moment.

⁶ Yoko Ono <http://imaginepeace.com/archives/2680> (accessed April 18 2019.)

4. A common language

In order to create this presence in which the artist and the audience can share the same experience, I think we need a common language. The art work should be based on commonly shared elements from everyday life, instead of relying on techniques only professionally trained performers have. Speaking, walking, thinking, eating, etc., actions taken by people on a daily basis can be considered as a common language that connects a performer with the audience. By using this common language, the relationship between the audience and the performer transforms into a relationship between oneself and the other.

From the late 1950s to the 1960s, Allan Kaprow advocated a happening that focused on the relationship between the artist and the viewer, the person and the other, by focusing on real life. The purpose of this happening was to abolish the borderline between everyday life and the art work, by creating a consciousness of "here and now".

"Anything I say do, notice, or think is art whether or not I intend it because everyone else aware of what is occurring today will probably say, do, notice and think of it as art at some time or another. This makes identifying oneself as an artist ironic, an attestation not to talent for a specialized skill. But to a philosophical stance before elusive alternatives of not- quite- art and not-quite-life. Artist refers to a person willfully enmeshed in the dilemma of categories who per

forms as if none of them existed.⁷

As Kaprow states, we live in a world where all elements of daily life can be called art. Everybody can be an artist. Kaprow made a distinction between “art like art” and “life like art.” “Art like art” holds that art is separate from life and serves only art while “life like art” is art in the service of life. “The purpose of life like art was therapeutic: to reintegrate the piecemeal reality we take for granted. Not just intellectually, but directly, as experience—in this moment, in this house, at this sink”.⁸

⁷ Allan Kaprow, (2003: 81)

⁸ Allan Kaprow, (1983: 37-44. 39)

5. A reflection on own works

I will reflect on my own work and compare it to the three participatory and everyday concepts of art as mentioned above. This year I made a solo piece and a group piece. Both works are less than 10 minutes in duration, and both works are performed in the theatre of the Royal Conservatory Antwerp. In the group piece I worked as a choreographer with performers from the first and second grade. In my solo piece I collaborate with a musician and together we perform on stage.

5-1 Group piece Nonai

First of all, what I value most in this work is the diminishing line between the audience and the performer, and the creation of "here and now." The subject is 'mindfulness': to one by one let go of the layers we all possess in order to see the core of one another eventually.

The piece is performed by three men and three women.

At the beginning of the piece, the audience can choose their own spot on the theater stage, they can sit or remain standing. A woman from the theater walks on to the stage and puts on headphones. All the other performers put on their headphones at the same time following her movement. Then, with her counting of "3, 2, 1", each performer starts to operate the MP3 player or i-Phone. Each performer stands up and walks in various directions on the stage. Sometimes they speak words. The performers need to answer the various questions heard in their headphones honestly. The questions

heard from the headphones are different for each of the six performers and consist of random questions. Also the rhythm is different. During the answering of the questions, some performer starts to interact with the audience. The audience reacts or answers to the dialogue that is created. In the middle of the piece, actions such as running, flying, laughing, screaming and singing take place, creating a chaotic atmosphere. At one point each performer returns to the simple movement of walking, like in the beginning of the piece. Then, one of the performers invites the audience to close their eyes. Five questions to reflect on themselves are thrown from the performer towards everyone. Finally, with the question "Which question do you have right now? When you find it, open your eyes," everyone in the room opens their eyes and the work is over.

In this work, the questions coming from the headphones are the



score for the performer. Performers who listen to the score respond frankly to the contingencies that occur there. Performers use different question audio tracks every time from rehearsal to the day of performance. They cannot predict in advance.

Also, the combination of questions and the musical composition is different every time. By doing so, I create two conditions in order to find 'presentness': answering questions in an honest manner and

responding to the questions and situations". By using headphones the performers can focus on themselves and answer honestly. By suddenly asking questions to the audience, I want to create a natural reaction. In that same moment, the audience reaffirms the performers' existence, which they had forgotten for a while after the piece started. At the end of the performance I created a time where all the people, performer and audience, becomes aware of their own presence. By doing this, I wanted to reaffirm the existence of myself, to experience a moment where everyone is "here and now", and to see emotions and conditions that could only be felt in that specific moment in time. In the beginning the audience were just bystanders, now they are participants in the work. In a certain way the audience becomes a performer and by watching what is happening around them, the performer becomes the audience.

I think that this work can be classified as the Experience type from the three types of participatory art described before. Although the work includes elements from the Co-production type as the work is made with their cooperation, the proportion of the Experience type is higher. This work relies upon the participation from the audience, and it is made by the people that are present in that moment in time. The exact same work cannot be reproduced again. That is the reality of this work, it is 'here and now'.

In addition, actions such as running, flying, laughing and shouting in the middle stage are actions coming from daily life. By using these actions, I create a common language through which the performers and the audience can communicate with each other. You

don't have to be a professionally trained dancer to use this language. In that way there should be no difference between the physicality of the performer and that of the audience.

However, I wonder if their physicalities are really equal. After all, the spatial consciousness of the performer is considered to be refined. The performers are used to grasp the sense of space on the stage, they can rely on already gained experiences of moving with and touching other people's bodies. In other words, even if spectators and performers perform the same task in the performance, their experience will be different.

5-2 Solo piece 1 / f on an interval bounded away from both zero and infinity

In this work I also emphasize on the reality of 'here and now'. In addition, I focus on the physical sensations that people have on a daily basis.

The subject is 'uncomfortable and comfortable'. What makes people feel comfortable? Why do we fall asleep more easily when we hear the sound of raindrops on the roof? Why do we like watching a breezy wind blowing through a tree? Why do we like the vibrations of a rotating laundry machine? Or the crackling sound of a fireplace?

Scientists say it's all because of pink noise or $1/f$ noise. Unlike white noise, which is a static sound (think of the drone of a ceiling fan), pink noise commonly comes from nature. Everything in this world is a wave and it's dynamics are rhythmically fluctuating. These

fluctuations are part of the universe and are found in diverse number of physical and biological systems.⁹

Hacho is a Japanese term which means wavelength. In a more spiritual way I believe that when someone's wavelength matches that of another person, communication between these two people happens more naturally. Those two people will feel comfortable being with each other.

The space that surrounds us in everyday life is full of fluctuations. I want to examine how each fluctuation intersects with another, what creates a new fluctuation? In this piece I want to explore fluctuations



Photo by Boris Bruegel

that can be found in everyday human movements. How can we manipulate the frequencies by which humans communicate with each other? So again I wanted to use a common language in order to communicate with the audience.

I and Anton (electronic musician and composer) have done research to how we can present this invisible world of fluctuations visually, aurally, and sensibly.

⁹See N.N.,

<https://health.clevelandclinic.org/why-pink-noise-might-just-help-you-get-a-better-nights-sleep/> (accessed on October 24 2018.)

At the beginning of the piece I invite the audience "to close their eyes and to open them when they feel something.". The audience is sitting in a circle on the stage. A faint noise is heard from the speakers. It is a sound like the waves on a beach. After listening for a while, the vibrations spread to my ear with a deep bass. Other sounds appear. Light is emitted from the center. Light passes by the audience, illuminating them. When the audience opens their eyes, they see the white light being emitted from the center. Other audience suddenly appear while following the light. In the first half, the music is symmetrical with the mechanical movement. And when the relationship between music and the movement of light begins to break down, the movement becomes an organic movement. An unpleasant sound of treble hits the head in this organic movement. Meanwhile, the color of the light turns red and the light starts to draw a circle again. And you can hear the breathing sound from the center along with the rhythm of the music base. When the breathing sound, the circle of light and the bass sound reach the top, momentary darkness and silence appear. When the audience begin to feel the calmness, white light appears again and passes near me. You can also sense the smell of lemon when it passes by. With the sound of being in the water, white light draws waves back and forth towards the audience. And it naturally begins to draw a circle in space. While following the light, the audience sees other members of the audience that appear suddenly. The music calms down and the light goes out.

The position of the audience in this work is that they are part of the work while not being fully aware of this role. But by looking at others, they can acknowledge themselves.

After the performance, somebody from the audience told me that the comfort created by the movement and the music put her in a state of trance. This is exactly what I as the performer felt. So actually, both performer and audience shared the same state of mind. I would say that there is no boundary between the performer and the audience. When light is reflected on me as a performer, my body becomes an object, in the same way as when light is reflected on a member from the audience.

I consider this work to be a mixture of the different types of participatory art. The audience sometimes becomes the object of the work even though this is not their intention, but in the work they can feel different senses coming from various effects, and they can feel discomfort and pleasure, just like the performer does.

6. Conclusion

Through researching for this paper and the creation of my own works, I found that it is possible for the viewer and the artist to share the same experience in an art work. Following the historical background in Chapter 2, we've seen that the relationship between the viewer and the artist changes, just like society changes. There are various ways to share experiences, and the three participatory types described in Chapter 3 are more effective in creating this shared experience. Of course, these three types of participatory art do not completely eliminate the boundary between the viewer and the performer, but this boundary can be manipulated freely by the artist and by the audience. As I wrote in Chapter 4, I think that through creating a common language by including elements from everyday life, a work of art can give the audience a greater awareness that art can be found everywhere around us. The creativity of a person can be an art work, depending on that person's awareness.

It is now that you, who are reading this dissertation, can be a performer in this work. I think that the act of reading can become a performance: it is a matter of your awareness of the environment that is created by me, the author.

The work I mention here is this dissertation, and it does not only exist in the space of the author. It also exists in your space now, the space of the reader. Somehow we can always break down the barrier between the audience and the artist. Maybe these boundaries are not sharp lines anyway, but more like waves of the sea.

By reading this paper, you traveled through the same experience as me, the author. However, the impressions and feelings you have after reading this paper will differ depending on the reader. It is because you are reading this work and confront it with the knowledge you already possess. In other words, we can travel the same road through art and life, but our journey will always be different.

Now close your eyes for 10 seconds and then turn the page.

Write down one thought that you are thinking of this moment.

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