

A RESTLESS ART

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The success of participatory art

Participation has become so fashionable today that it is in danger of becoming a cliché, by which I mean that we might take it for granted and stop asking questions about it. That would be a pity, because the questions it raises are important and fascinating – but it would also be dangerous because they involve not just artistic dilemmas but ethical and political ones as well.

Overview

Today I want to explore some of the dilemmas and tensions that make this a restless art

- A working definition of what I mean by 'participatory art'
- A partial history of its development since the 1960s to today
- Then I want to consider the intentions behind the work
- Some questions for reflection

A working definition

'Participatory art is the creation of an artwork by professional artists and non-professional artists working together' A big field needs a simple definition, which aims to be inclusive. But it says nothing about quality

The creation of an artwork

Unless something is created, what is happening is not art but, perhaps, a form of art education. The creation of art requires

- a distinctive framework of ideas and values,
- an attempt at sense or meaning-making,
- a duration in time and
- a public presentation.

Together, these can turn a shared learning activity into something with an autonomous existence: a work of art. The art may be modest, naïve, derivative and short-lived; it may just not be very good. But there is a difference of kind (not degree) between the worst work of art and the best learning experience. The second may be preferred to the first, but that is a choice between different things.

Professional artists and non-professional artists

I speak of 'non-professional artists' rather than 'ordinary people' or 'community' which are more commonly used descriptions. I do so because in participatory art *everyone* is acting as an artist. The professionals bring more training, experience, knowledge and – perhaps – more talent but the process is one of co-creation. The difference between the people involved is of degree, not kind.

A Partial History

This is a partial history because it's far from complete, but also because it's rooted in my own experience, which is itself inseparable from the place and culture in which it occurred. I want to suggest that so far there have been three phases or generations:

- The period of community art
- The period of participatory art
- A period that I have no name for – except perhaps a restless art

Community arts 1960s – 1980s

There are precedents to the emergence of community art, but the key event is the social and cultural upheaval of the 1960s, which brought working class artists in art school for the first time and challenged to choose between two sets of values.

Artists like those who formed Amber, Free Form, Action Space and Greenwich Mural Workshop chose community over career. Not all of them understood why the art world rejected them and their work in consequence. In her study of Free Form, a pioneering community art group formed in London in 1968, the anthropologist Kate Crehan observes:

If an artist wants to be accepted as a bona fide, serious artist, it is dangerous to stray too far from the dominant institutions of the art world.¹

The tension between these sets of values – and who determines what art is good and why – has shaped the development of participatory arts ever since.

In its strengths and weaknesses the mural is emblematic of this period

- Visual, community-based and public
- Clearly outside the art world and its economic and cultural structures
- But limited by its technical demands, time and aesthetics

There was radicalism in the 1970s. Many community artists were involved in local campaigns around bread and butter issues like housing, often working with the community development sector. It's no accident that the community artists spoke of a 'movement'.

A high water mark of this period occurred in the early 1980s in work with communities protesting against deindustrialisation, as Corby Community Arts did in the campaign to save the town's steel works. Elsewhere, many community arts groups worked to support mining communities during the 1984 strike.

But the politics could also be rhetorical or performative – as in Welfare State's Burning of Parliament fire shows and their film 'King Real and the Hoodlum's in the nuclear submarine town of Barrow. Art has always had complex connections with power.

Participatory art, 1990s – 2010s

The first generation of community art practice in Britain – from the mid 1960s to the end of the 1980s – was marked by a struggle to establish the artistic legitimacy of a practice that rejected the art world's systems of legitimacy.

By the early 1990s, in Britain at least, it looked as if this battle had been lost and much of the early radicalism was abandoned by artists who had to find ways of operating in a world of ascendant neoliberalism. Individualism is a cornerstone of this ideology and it is not an accident that community art was then rebranded 'participatory art', which is the most common designation used today: collective action was out.²

The strength of this period is how the practice made connections with the mainstream art world and the fields of community, health and educational policy – though this did not come without some cost to its independence. But if participatory art is taken seriously in regeneration and social policy today, it is largely because of what happened in the 1990s.³

Bealtaine, Ireland's month long arts festival for the older generation, was founded in 1995, and involves people from all over the country in arts workshops, performances and events. It's organised not by artists but by a civil society organisation, Age & Opportunity, with many partners and a huge amount of voluntary commitment. In 2016, its participants numbered 120,000 people or about 20% of all those over 65 years old in Ireland.

A few years earlier, an independent evaluation reported that

There is compelling evidence that participation is empowering and transformative and that self-reported physical and psychological well-being is enhanced at an individual level. Bealtaine has proven itself to be a major positive force for the well-being of older people in Ireland.⁴

The recognition of participatory art's potential to bring positive change at individual and community level has influenced cultural policy and encouraged many social agencies and civil society actors to become involved. Nonetheless, using art to bring about social change brings its own questions and dilemmas.

At the same time contemporary artists began using participatory methods in various ways. Like all art practice, there's good, bad and – mostly – ordinary work here.

Spencer Tunick's work meets my definition of participatory but it is clear that who participates has no substantive effect on the work. On the other hand, people report that participating offers a profound and memorable experience

A restless art, 2010s – ?

Today, we are on the cusp of a third generational change. Participatory art has spread far beyond its origins in working class communities. It is used for a multiplicity purposes by a vast range of people – including contemporary artists.

It was always strong in post-colonial countries because of its emancipatory force but globalisation now means there are stronger connections and parallels between, say, Brazil, Zimbabwe and Britain than ever before. It is flourishing too – and often for the first time – in countries undergoing social, economic and political change, such as Portugal, Spain, Greece, Ukraine, Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia and elsewhere.

This third generation has grown up in a globalising world. The means of cultural production that the early community artists struggled to share are now in everyone's hands. But regressive forces of different kinds seem to be growing in strength and confidence:

- You might be able to share your view but what if nobody who cares
- Having human or cultural rights is meaningless if they're unenforceable where you live

This is a restless art in an unstable world.

Defeat, colonisation or subversion?

This story has elements of defeat, colonisation or subversion

- **Defeat** – the radicalism of the first generation seemed out of place in the booming economic individualism of the late 1980s
- **Colonisation** – yet many ideas and methods developed by community artists were brought into the mainstream art world's practice
- **Subversion** – who knows, but perhaps the values of the art world are themselves changing partly as a result of that contact

Intentions

Participatory art can seem a vast and incoherent field. What do National Theatre Wales, Spencer Tunick and Bealtaine have in common?

It becomes easier if we think not about art form, policy, culture or institution but the intention of the people doing it. All the work can be seen in relation to three broad intentions

- Cultural democratisation
- Social change
- Cultural democracy

Cultural democratisation

The first, which is also the oldest and most widespread, is simply the intention to involve people in the arts. Although the methods of participatory art are often used in this work, its aim is to inspire people to want an existing artistic offer, rooted in elite forms and practices and supported by state cultural agencies.

I do not mean to be glib: a good case can be made for offering people access to what you consider to be the best, especially in the case of children and young people. Much inspiring work is done to open up access to the arts to more people.

But it is rooted in the idea of improvement. It believes that if people are introduced to art, preferably at an early age, they will begin a lifetime of personal growth leading to a fuller appreciation of great art's transcendental value.

One risk is that more attention is given to future engagement than to the intrinsic quality of the participatory arts activities themselves. More profoundly, this approach cannot avoid, however unconsciously, casting those intended to benefit from access initiatives as deficient in relation to those providing them. That is an unsatisfactory basis for working with anyone.

Social change

The second major intention of participatory art is social change. In the later 20th century, participatory art has been an important tool in community development, not only in Europe and other Western Country but in the Global South and in post-colonial situations.

Theatre, music and traditional culture have all proved valuable resources in education, community building and emancipation. This work has often influenced participatory art across the world, for instance through Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Today, organisations such as Radio for Peacebuilding, In Place of War, Afroreggae and thousands more do extraordinary, life-changing work in conditions that are difficult and sometimes dangerous

Circumstances are generally better in Europe but there are also many excellent participatory arts organisations dedicated to social change, including the Bealtaine Festival already mentioned, or Geese Theatre, one of many organisations working with people involved with the criminal justice system and whose purpose is to change lives for the better

Cultural democracy

The third intention is cultural democracy. This was what many of the first community artists wanted to achieve when they set out to find new ways of creating art with people.

Their intention was not to give people access to a fixed cultural offer nor to address social problems directly. Instead they wanted people to have the means of cultural production, as a right, not a favour. They might have agreed with the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, who describes democracy as 'a collective effort with a noble goal: inclusion'.⁵

For them, having access to someone else's art was not enough: people also had the right to create art of their own. What they needed access to were the creative resources, training, knowledge and platforms that more privileged artists took for granted.

If there was a social benefit, it was the benefit of education.

If there was a political intention, it was that of empowerment, rooted in the community development model that had influenced much postcolonial work.

Fields of intention

These add up to three overlapping fields of intention at the heart of which, there is a real possibility of creating empowerment

Where you stand, how you move between one and another of these fields – these are a matter of your own values. One project may sit closer to one intention and the next may be rooted in another. Within a project, different people may take different positions, and those positions might shift even during the project.. What matters is that you know where you stand – and why. That involves asking questions such as these

- Why offer participatory art experiences?
- How does that offer appear to others?
- What assumptions does it imply?
- What responsibilities does it bring?
- What difference does it make?

A Restless Art

For myself, I stand with cultural democracy because it recognises three fundamental ideas.

- First, **all human beings have equal rights**. Those rights may in reality be denied or restricted but, in democratic states governed by the rule of law, the principle of equal citizenship must underpin all state policy, including arts policy.
- Secondly, art and culture have an irreplaceable **value as a means of development, sense-making and expression**, both for individuals and for groups.
- Thirdly, **democracy is not a state but a process**, which is maintained by constant negotiation between all citizens through formal and informal means.

Art and culture are **an essential form of democratic expression** whose freedom and diversity are directly related to the freedom and fairness with which democratic life is conducted.

Why does that matter? The Great Recession of 2007-08 marked an end to many things that had been taken for granted in the prosperous democracies, just as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 threw the communist world into disarray.

2016 has brought historic changes to this country's relations with its neighbours and the prospect of equally big changes in the United States and the whole Western Alliance. No

one knows what is happening now, though we do know the world is more unstable than it has been for decades.

The Cold War's threat of mutually assured destruction was terrible but it was at least understandable. Today only fools and zealots believe they understand the future. We live in dangerous times and one of the dangers is not to see it

And art? What has art to do with that, or that to do with art?

Only this. Art remains one of our best ways of understanding ourselves and our experience, of expressing our feelings, or sharing our hopes, dreams, fears and terrors, of finding common ground and empathy, of imagining other ways of being, of making sense and finding meaning.

We need all those capacities now and, partly thanks to the social and technological changes of the last half century, they are more accessible to more of us than in the past.

Participatory art is one of the doors that open on those resources and if it is contested, if we don't agree what it means or what it is for – it does not matter. In answering those challenges we answer other, bigger ones about the life we want to live. In uncertain times, we need to learn how to live with ambiguity.

In unstable times, we need a restless art.

Participatory art work used to illustrate during the talk

Li Diuen Mar – Teatre Tantarantana (Spain)

- <https://youtu.be/24d9lem-cLM>

In Place of War (UK)

- <https://inplaceofwar.net>

National Theatre Wales

- www.nationaltheatrewales.org

Don Giovanni– Sociedade Artística Muisical de Pousos, Portugal

- <http://www.samp.pt/portal/>

Mass Bolero - Nottingham Playhouse

- <http://www.nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk/news/mass-bolero-now-freely-available-to-watch-on-youtu/>

Amber Collective

- <http://www.amber-online.com>

Floyd Road Mural - Greenwich Mural Workshop

- <http://greenwichmuralworkshop.com>
- <https://londonmuralpreservationsociety.wordpress.com/2013/02/20/mural-of-the-month-floyd-road-mural/>

Welfare State International

- <http://welfare-state.org>

Acoustronic – Inclusive Creativity

- <http://inclusivecreativity.com>

Bealtaine, Ireland

- <http://bealtaine.com>

'Sea Of Hull', Spencer Tunick

- <https://www.hull2017.co.uk/whatson/events/seaofhull/>

Tandem Shaml

- <http://www.tandemforculture.org/programmes/tandem-shaml/>

Lampedusa Mirrors Teatre dell'Argine & Eclasion d'Artistes (Italy/Tunisia)

- <http://teatrodellargine.org/site/lang/en-EN/page/45/project/30/>

Molke Lab, 5e Kwartier (Netherlands)

- <http://www.5ekwartier.nl/lab-molke-2015/>

'Explore' 2008, Ikon Gallery

– <https://ikon-gallery.org>

Démos, Philharmonie de Paris France

– <http://demos.philharmoniedeparis.fr>

Radio for Peacebuilding (UK)

– <http://www.radioforpeacebuilding.co.uk>

Afroreggae (Brazil)

– <http://www.afroreggae.org>

Geese Theatre

– <http://www.geese.co.uk>

X–Church Gainsborough

– <https://www.facebook.com/xchurchgainsborough>

Pele, Portugal

– <http://www.apele.org>

¹ Crehan, K, 2011, *Community Art, An Anthropological Perspective*, London: Berg, p. 30

² See <https://arestlessart.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/2013-all-in-this-together.pdf>

³ See Matarasso, F. 1997, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*, Stroud, <https://arestlessart.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/1997-use-or-ornament.pdf>

⁴ http://www.icsg.ie/sites/www.icsg.ie/files/personfiles/bealtaine_evaluation_full_1_aine.pdf

⁵ <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/how-to-restore-your-faith-in-democracy>