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Reason, Matthew ORCID:

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Participations on Participation: Researching the ‘active’ theatre audience

Matthew Reason,
York St. John University, UK

The audiences whose experiences are described and analysed by the articles in this section are all, in one form another, ‘active’.

That is they are all audiences engaged in some kind of participatory relationship with theatre performance. Whether that is walking through a museum as the performance unfolds around them (Gröschel); physically navigating non-linear immersive worlds (Biggin; Wozniak); being rudely provoked (Wilson) or playfully encouraged (Breel) to interact with the performers; or taking part in private one-to-one exchanges with the artist (Gomme). Across each of these examples – and again it is worth stressing that there is no one singular form of audience participation here – there is what Gareth White describes as an ‘*invitation to participate*’ (2013: 9). In other words, audience participation is an integral aesthetic and structural feature of the performances, often motivated by the artists’ and companies’ desire to reformulate the performer-spectator relationship and to invite a different, explicitly more *active*, kind of audience engagement.

So, for example, in his paper Wozniak describes how Punchdrunk promote their work as ‘a game changing form of immersive theatre’ and one that ‘rejects the passive obedience usually expected of audiences’ (302); while Biggin discusses how the company’s marketing rhetoric often emphasises themes of ‘individuality, excitement and exploration’ (284) within the immersive environment. Meanwhile Wilson discusses how Belgium-based theatre company Ontroerend Goed very deliberately set out to explore and subvert the audience-performer contract, often through direct provocation. Or, in her paper, Breel defines participatory performances as offering audiences a ‘level of agency’ in creatively contributing to and even co-creating the work.

In part the objective of the papers in this section is to test out, to measure and evaluate, to nuance and refine, the ways in which audiences respond to these performances. In doing so the papers highlight the diverse manner in which spectators accept, decline, subvert and interpret the invitation to participate. They also engage with

audiences' affective, interpretative and evaluative responses, and in doing so reveal how these responses often challenge an easy understanding of the very concept of participation.

This should perhaps be no surprise, as almost all the words at play in this debate – participation, immersive, active, passive – have extremely tricky conceptual grounding. As a starting point, the idea of an 'active audience' is extremely problematic, mired in the legacy of an overly comfortable binary between active and passive spectatorship. One prominent context in which this debate has played out is within film and media audience research. Here the description of active and passive audiences has the particular connotation of spectators being either subservient to the inbuilt codes and effects of the media or transformatively active in their own re-interpretations and reconfigurations. Martin Barker discusses, and critiques, this binary when he observes that 'the rhetorical figure of the "active" audience' was a device to capture the multiple and complicated processes by which audiences engage with media, but at the same time masked 'a great deal that is definitely *not* active in literal senses' (2006: 2). In this context, the phrase 'active audience' was deployed as a way of capturing the complex processes of interpretation and meaning making that spectators might potentially be undertaking even while being physically passive and immobile in their seats.

Behind this debate is a barely concealed judgement that an active audience is good, a passive audience bad. Indeed, in her discussion of theatre audiences, Helen Freshwater suggests that 'the belief in a connection between audience participation and political empowerment' is one of the most 'cherished orthodoxies in theatre studies' (2009: 3). Under this perspective, performances that engage audiences actively through participation also emancipate and empower and are consequently radically liberating. The 'goodness' of the participatory audience in this context can mean variously politically good (empowered), ethically good (empathetic), creatively good (not reactionary), perhaps even good in terms of wellbeing (physically active).

In his book *The Emancipated Spectator* Jacques Rancière describes how the negative perception of the passive spectator ('being a spectator is a bad thing' – 2011: 2) results from two factors. Firstly, that viewing is the opposite of knowing, which is located in doing; secondly, that viewing is the opposite of acting – 'the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act' (2011: 2). Of course one of the objectives of Rancière's book, as I will discuss in a moment, is to explicitly critique this perception, but first it is worth remembering that it is one that has stuck fast and resonates widely. Even to the extent that in Boal's formulation to be a spectator is to be 'less than a man, less than fully human' (cited in White 2013: 20).

I don't want to use a 'therefore' here, or a 'consequently', as to do so would suggest an overly linear or overly causal relationship in the development of participatory arts practices. Indeed, it is worth acknowledging other parallel contextual and conceptual explanations. Firstly, participatory practices sit within the much wider development of what Pine and Gilmore call the 'experience economy' and a shift from purchasing goods, to purchasing services, to purchasing experiences (1999). Illustrative of this is the marketing

language of immersive theatre companies, which plays heavily on the promise of an experience. Secondly, participation enables theatre to (re)assert its essential liveness, in opposition to mediatisation, with interactivity and immersion very much dependent on spatial and temporal co-presence. Both of these are significant factors in the growth of participatory theatre practices. Braided through these impulses, however, one of the trajectories of twentieth and twenty-first century art more widely has been to explore the role of the spectator and mark a shift in various ways from 'passive observer' to active producer (see for example Bishop 2006). Emerging as a result of a whole range of different contexts and traditions, the rise of participatory, immersive, one-to-one, interactive and other similar forms of performance practice can be seen as part of this trajectory in which the performer-audience relationship has become increasingly central.

One of the foremost conceptual articulations of this shift has been from Nicolas Bourriaud, whose framing of 'relational aesthetics' has had influence far beyond its original context in contemporary fine art. It is present as a key theoretical framework, for example, in White's book *Audience Participation in Theatre* (2013) and in Josephine Machon's *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (2013). Central to Bourriaud's argument is the proposal that encounters (between spectators and the artist; between spectators and each other; between spectators and objects) should become the 'quintessence of artistic practice' (2002: 22). The purpose of the art work becomes 'to invent possible encounters', which only reach their real manifestation when activated by human interaction. Equally the purpose of the spectator is to receive or engage with the art work and thereby 'create the conditions for an exchange, the way you return a service in a game of tennis' (22-23). In Claire Bishop's summation of relational art, it 'privileges intersubjective relations over detached opticality' (2004: 61).

The full extent of Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics is beyond the scope of this discussion, but two important elaborations are worth noting. Firstly, that the intersubjective encounters prompted by relational art are shared and public; secondly that they produce potentially politically radical spaces of exchange, but that these are provisional and temporary 'micro-topias'.

The connections between relational aesthetics and the participatory theatre practices that are the subject of the papers in this collection are numerous. They typically entail the construction of provisional, transient spaces into which participants immerse themselves, stepping out of or beyond conventional rules of behaviour. They often explicitly invite forms of interaction, intimacy, social exchange in which the notion of an 'encounter' is central. They at least promise to position participants as co-creators of the experience (or in Bourriaud's terms, 'the beholder is joint creator of the work' – 2002: 99). Finally, like relational art, participatory practices privilege interaction, doing, engagement, over the 'detached opticality' that has become synonymous with traditional audience/spectator relationships.

There is in Bourriaud's proposition an almost romantic exposition of the democratic and emancipatory potential of relational art practices. Inevitably this opens itself up for

radical critique, not least that there must necessarily be various degrees of intersubjective participation not all of which are equally emancipatory. Before addressing this, however, an important questioning of Bourriaud's ideas comes from Claire Bishop in a paper titled 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' (2004). For my purposes the most important element of Bishop's argument is her suggestion that Bourriaud fundamentally misinterprets a central aspect of the emancipation of the reader that was proposed in the poststructuralist writings of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and others. Here Bishop writes:

It is Eco's contention that *every* work of art is potentially 'open', since it may produce an unlimited range of possible readings; it is simply the achievement of contemporary art, music, and literature to have foregrounded this fact. Bourriaud misinterprets these arguments by applying them to a specific type of work (those that require literal interaction) and thereby redirects the argument back to artistic intentionality rather than issues of reception (2004: 62).

In this context there are two vital points in this analysis.

Firstly, the presumption that 'detached opticality' automatically produces passive and disengaged spectators, while works that require 'literal interaction' engage audiences in active participation, is fundamentally problematic. Here it is worth returning to Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*, which offers a fundamental rebuttal of both the association of seeing with passivity and of participation with emancipation.

In response to the moral repudiation of passive spectatorship, Rancière identifies two alternative conclusions. First, that theatre is necessarily bad and should be abolished; second, that there is a need for a different theatre, where passive optical spectatorship is replaced by new relationships in which spectators become 'active participants' (2011: 2-4). Although he never uses the term, preferring the more negatively loaded phrase 'hyper-theatre', Rancière's description of spectators as active participants matches that of the participatory/immersive/interactive theatre paradigm. For Rancière, however, the audience as active participant is forever in danger of becoming lost in a form of 'consumerist hyper-activism'. Engulfed within the work the audience is no longer able to see the work, no longer able to question its principles (21). Rancière's description of hyper-theatre here perhaps has echoes of the concept of 'false consciousness', in which the consumer is manipulated into imagining they have choice and power while in fact and [at](#) the same time voluntarily surrendering their freedoms. In contrast, for Rancière, 'being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity' (17) but is in and of itself an emancipated position from which the audience is empowered to produce their own interpretations, to 'compose her own poem with the elements of the poem before her' (13).

From its entirely different philosophical perspective, Rancière's articulation of spectators as an emancipated 'community of narrators and translators' is a powerful echo of the description of audiences as active interpreters that emerged with media audience

research. If the dictum of the active audience privileges readings that stand away from the text because 'distanced readings are seen as more active' (Barker 2006: 11), so does Rancière reinvigorate seeing as an active role. The ways in which all theatre audiences are actively engaged in processes of interpretation and meaning making has also become the focus of much empirical theatre research, including the papers in this special section of *Participations* that explore how audiences to both explicitly 'participatory' and more 'traditional', passive, optically detached theatre performances are potentially 'active' in all sorts of ways.

However, if there is a romanticism to Bourriaud's celebration of the potential of relational arts, then equally there is something too easily idealistic in Rancière's concept of the emancipated spectator. *And* there is something too simplistic about the statement that *all* audiences are *always* active, are always participating. This leads me onto Bishop's second criticism of Bourriaud's formulation of relational aesthetics, which is that he directs his argument 'to artistic intentionality rather than issues of reception' (2004: 62). Indeed, despite the development of reader or spectator focused discourses, there remains a tendency to value intention over reception in a manner that results in an erasure of actual spectators. In Bourriaud's formulation, participation is in the offer or gift of the artist, with a lack of attention paid to the manner in which this offer is received, accepted, modified or enacted. As Bishop points out, the radical proposal of Eco's 'open work' was that it related to potentially *every* work of art, rather than only specific types of work positioned as such by the artist. The difference is a relocation of agency – and therefore empowerment – from the artist to the spectator. The value of this collection of papers, therefore, is precisely this very explicit and very deliberate emphasis on processes of reception.

What is needed are not competing over-statements of idealised or imagined possibilities, which too easily become straw figures for alternative artistic preferences to support or repudiate. A criticism with relevance to Rancière's writing, which is not only largely divorced from actual theatre practice (a point made by both Freshwater 2009: 17 and White 2013: 22) but also entirely from actual audiences. Instead what is required is a serious focus on reception processes, and an analysis of the manners in which actual audiences engage with different kinds of audience-performer relationships to produce different kinds of experiences.

It is this that the six articles in this section provide, both in terms of the insights that the individual authors bring to the topic, but also as a collection as a whole. In each instance the author explores the particular *quality* of the audience-performer relationship that is produced by the circumstances they are investigating. What is interesting is that in addressing the challenge of researching audiences to explicitly participatory performances, the authors often adopt or develop methodological approaches that enable them to consider the question in a particular manner. So for instance, in engaging with the intimate, individualised encounters promoted by one-to-one performance, Gomme argues for the value of the deeply reflexive analysis of her own individual experiences as a form of audience study of one. As Heddon et al observe, one-to-one performances offer an

interesting paradox in which a survey of one person could arguably cover 100% of the audience and yet remain 'always partial and subjective and significantly incomplete' (2012). Or Gröschel, who adopts 'walking fieldwork' as a specifically appropriate method of investigating a promenade performance; or Breel, who in part uses mobile phones and digital methods to echo the work her audiences experienced; or Biggin, whose use of fan mail sent to Punchdrunk enables her to investigate highly-invested audience members who explicitly 'get' what is expected of them.

Within each article the authors are upfront about the scope or limitations of their particular investigations, whether in terms of the narrowness of their sample, the partial nature of the respondents (in some instances they are, in one form or another, 'expert' or 'invested' audiences), or simply the very specificity of the performance under investigation. None of which is to criticise the individual articles; such is simply the nature of empirical research. However, it does mean that as well as the individual strengths of the articles there is a particular pleasure and reward that comes from reading across the contributions, for by doing so it is possible to build up a strong meta-understanding of how audiences engage with the different invitations to participate offered by contemporary theatre and performance.

This invitation to read across papers is unavoidable with those of Rose Biggin and Jan Wozniak, as both examine the work of Punchdrunk. Here Biggin's analysis of the engagement of invested fans contrasts with Wozniak's respondents, who are mostly experiencing Punchdrunk's work for the first time. Biggin describes how invested fans explicitly know the rules of spectatorship within the participative theatre worlds created for them. At the same time, Biggin suggests that one of the strong draws of immersive theatre is its sense of difference and newness, and wonders if something intrinsic to the experience is lost 'when an audience becomes increasingly aware of the rules of engagement' (285). What is lost, in part, is the sense of bafflement, confusion and even danger that comes through strongly in Wozniak's paper. Perhaps also lost is a sense of authenticity, as the event becomes increasingly more explicitly known as a theatrical form.

As a counterpoint to this, in his paper on audiences to a promenade performance at the Manchester Museum, Uwe Gröschel describes the discomfort and anxiety felt by some participants at not fully understanding what was expected of them as spectators and how the performance upset some basic expectations, such as there being enough space for everybody to see comfortably.

Through this disruption of established and stable conventions of audience engagement at even the most basic physical and practical level, such productions require audience members to develop what White describes as 'tactics and strategies' through which to experience the performance. The idealised claim made for such encounters is that they are democratising, with Wozniak citing Felix Barrett's (artistic director of Punchdrunk) celebration of how each individual constructs their own experience: 'like directing your own film [...] they are in charge' (305). In fact Biggin describes the existence of a fluid interrelationship between an individual and social experience, with audience members

attending the performance as a group, consciously splitting up during the performance, and then actively rejoining afterwards to share and contrast each other's experiences. Biggin notes how even though immersive theatre often emphasises the individualised experience there remains a strong social element to participatory performances, manifested in a desire to talk afterwards. Meanwhile Wozniak more radically challenges the idealistic nature of this invitation and provides a striking image of how in the pursuit of an individualised experience audience members find themselves competing with each other, 'pushing and shoving to attain prime position' (311). For Wozniak this unintentionally replicates the competition, commercial struggle and consequent anxiety of contemporary society, and there is a parallel here with Rancière's envisioning of hyper-theatre as a culture of consumption rather than contemplation.

Running through all of these discussions, indeed perhaps implicit within the very framework of participatory performance practices, is the question of agency. Many of the papers in this section revolve around and return to the question of what level of agency is present in the invitation to participate? In relation to Punchdrunk, Wozniak records one audience member observing wryly 'how willingly [many audience members] subject themselves to the demand of the show', while another comments:

Even though it is participatory theatre, ultimately the actors rule the show and as a spectator you play along and do as you're told. If you don't follow the rule then issues begin to occur and you will ruin the show for everyone else. If you really wish to play a role then play the role you are given; the role of spectator. (309)

This ultimately is Rancière's criticism of 'hyper-theatre': that the audience as participant becomes lost within the work and as a consequence is no longer empowered to see the work. Rather than an empowered position of active agency, this is a disempowered position of the functionary – or in a powerful image in Wozniak's paper, a 'blank scrabble tile' which 'can make no meaning and have no value of their own' (312).

The analysis of agency is very much at the centre of Breel's paper, 'Audience agency in participatory performance', in which she clearly identifies that the significance of agency rests not with the offer (or invitation) but with the audiences' understanding of and response to this offer. 'Agency is concerned with intention and choice,' writes Breel, 'so it is commonly assumed that for a participant to have agency they should intentionally perform an action (however small) that causes something to happen or change within the performance as a result' (357). Her research maps degrees of agency from reactive (answering a question), to interactive (completing a task), to proactive (self-initiated). Unsurprisingly there is an increasing rareness the further along this scale you travel. Breel's participants report enjoyment and engagement with the agency offered to them by the performance, while at the same time articulating scepticism about the true extent to which their actions influenced the performance.

In particular Breel identifies no occurrences of proactive agency in her case study and it is interesting to consider what, in participatory performance, might genuinely count as proactive, self-initiated agency. This is also an issue for Wilson, in her fascinating discussion of how spectators respond to a moment of performer-audience bullying in Ontroerend Goed's *Audience*. In this moment the audience are implicitly offered a 'choice': collaborate with the bullying and thereby bring it to a quicker end; confront the performer directly; remain silent; walk out of the theatre. In her discussion Wilson explores how while remaining silent might initially feel like a form of complicity, for many audience members the apparently more active option of confronting the performer would be to play the game of the performers. There is a fascinating parallel here with the forms of passive resistance (such as falling asleep) that Dominique Pasquier describes occurring amongst audiences to more traditional forms of performance. There remains of course an uneasiness to the suggestion that silence is the only form of resistance possible, with perhaps one conclusion being that Ontroerend Goed have successfully manoeuvred their audience into a position where no act – perhaps not even walking out – is truly possessive of proactive agency.

For Wilson and her respondents the situation is further complicated by differing perceptions of the authenticity of the moment – is the female audience member in fact a plant? Is the experience of bullying 'real'? The latter is a question which might be considered in terms of its affective feeling (it *felt* real to some spectators) or its theatrical context (in which the frame of theatre renders everything within it unreal).

In her reflexive discussion of her own engagement, Wilson notes that 'my own overall reticence to actively participate was driven by a resistance to the idea of being manipulated'. This word is perhaps the loaded reverse of the promise of participatory performance. Who would want to attend manipulatory performance? When Breel phrases a question to her respondents asking if at any point they felt manipulated she received the answer: 'manipulated is too strong a word; I felt encouraged, nudged, I was sort of, you know, instructed, umm, cajoled, maybe, but that's too strong. Not manipulated' (361).

Finally, in the paper opening this section Rachel Gomme presents a close reflexive analysis of her own experience of a number of one-to-one performances. Titled 'Not-so-close encounters: Searching for intimacy in one-to-one performance', Gomme's paper describes how one-to-one performances promise an authentically intimate encounter (in one promotional tag: 'individual performances, tailor-made especially for you'). In her experiences, however, rather than intimacy she often finds herself more consciously aware of the boundaries between the individual and the other. Moreover, awareness that the promise of intimacy is always managed within an experience economy implies a reproducibility that belies uniqueness. Here again we may read across the papers, noting Wozniak's description of how one-to-one encounters within Punchdrunk's much larger immersive productions often appear to have 'highest value' to audience members. This is a result of their perceived authenticity and restricted availability.

Gomme describes how she increasingly became aware of how her encounters with one-to-one performances 'ultimately contributed to a degree of alienation at odds with the

vulnerability and mutual exposure suggested by the promise of intimacy' (277). However, in her final example she almost seems to surprise herself through a one-to-one encounter in which she participates in a moment of sharing with a full sense of agency. It is in this particular example that there is perhaps the full realisation of Bourriaud's notion of micro-topias: a temporal, fleeting zone of communication constructed in the encounter between spectator and artist. For Gomme the question is how can a work be open enough and the performer vulnerable enough to allow for such moments to occur?

The return to agency here is apposite, as this seems the central question to address in our understanding of audiences to participatory performance. If, following Bishop's critique of Bourriaud, we shift our focus from intention to reception, then agency also marks a shift from a focus upon the invitation to participate to the perception of, and response to, that invitation. As I noted earlier the shift from intention to reception marks a relocation of agency – from the artist to the spectator – and in doing so entails a more radical emancipation of the spectator.

Reading across the papers in this collection also brings to mind that temptation, in discussions of participatory practices, to propose some kind of spectrum of participation. Or, alternatively, to borrow a pre-existing one from elsewhere, with the most commonly appropriated schema Sherry Arnstein's 'Ladder of Participation', first published in 1969. Updated many times within the fields of citizen science and participatory public inquiry, Arnstein's ladder is presented, and quickly rejected, by Bishop in her book *Artificial Hells* (2012). More recently Ben Fletcher-Watson has adapted Arnstein's ladder as a model for participation in theatre for early years (2015). In this ladder Arnstein maps out eight rungs, ranging from 'manipulation' (where the illusion of participation is cover for a mere rubberstamping of pre-determined decisions) through to full 'citizen control' (1969). Relating this to participatory theatre we might be tempted to follow a similar spectrum, from empty participation (which is eulogised in marketing slogans but a mask for manipulative relationships), weak or tokenistic participation (which might include many interactive and immersive practices but are artist led and allow only restricted agency) and finally full participation (implying a full sense of proactive agency and co-creation in process as well as performance). In any artist led process it is likely that full participation would be a rare beast indeed, except possibly in the form of collaborative community-orientated practices.

There is a clear evaluative hierarchy in Arnstein's ladder and Bishop's specific criticism is that the 'progressively more virtuous' levels of participation cannot account for the complex and sometimes paradoxical interrelationships that exist between artist-participant (2012: 279). Indeed, in art there is no linear progression of virtue and evaluation: we should not – at least supposedly – evaluate performances as good or not-so-good according to their position on a ladder of participation, but because of their aesthetic and experiential qualities. In practice, however, this is exactly what is implied by discourses that valorise active spectatorship for its own sake over optical passivity.

Both the difficulty and the desirability of a typology of audience participation would be that it would fix what are inherently fluid relationships, which is a final reminder of why empirical audience research has such value. For it both reminds us and requires us to avoid overly generalizable statements and to recognise the fundamental diversity of audience responses. This is what all the articles in this section do excellently, ensuring that rather than looking always for overarching structures or grand narratives we look first at the particular qualities of the encounters and how these are received, remembered and valued.

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