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Impossible Participation

The Free Art Collective

The Free Art Collective was formed in 2004 and is comprised of three artists based in the United Kingdom: Dave Beech, Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan. This chapter sets out Freee's proposal for 'impossible participation' in art and outlines Freee's critique of the rise of audience participation in art since the 1990s.

Contemporary Art's 'Athletics' of Participation

'Participation' first became a buzzword in Britain as part of the New Left's critique of democracy in the 1950s and 1960s and was extended by C.B. Macpherson in his theory of participatory democracy in the 1970s.¹ In these discussions, 'participation' is interpreted as a precondition for democratic society. 'Non-participatory democracy', therefore, is either an oxymoron or singles out a form of political organization that is not democratic in the fullest sense. Liberal democracy, with its elected political representatives, is understood to be more participatory than an unelected dictatorship, but has been viewed by some as less participatory than the form of socialism that the New Left had in mind. For the New Left, therefore, we could say that 'participation' has not only been used as a concept to transform the political arena, but is itself a political and politicizing concept.

¹ C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

During the 1980s, when anonymous market mechanisms dominated political as well as economic thought, the concept of participation fell into neglect in political discourse only to return in the 1990s as a conspicuous political and aesthetic feature of relational art. What emerged was not merely a new type of art or a new toolbox for art, but a new criterion for judging *all* art. Just as the advent of abstract art made it possible – or inevitable – that all prior art would be judged in terms of its abstract qualities, the recent ‘social turn’ in art has raised participation into an obligation. Participation has become a marker in the judgment of artworks, artists, curators, and museums. It is one of the key measures in deciding questions of quality in contemporary art and it is also a criterion by which art is rewarded financially and institutionally. It has not always been the case that commentators on art have agreed with bureaucrats and paymasters on matters of principle in this way, but the concept of participation appears to unite managers, practitioners and audiences alike.

In our view, participation is an illusory ‘solution’ to social or political problems as it occurs only within art’s institutions. It is an invitation to audiences to take part in the relationships supported by the institution. In so far as the discourse of participation in art claims that the relationship between artist and participant is progressively reformed through pragmatic techniques of genuine inclusion in production and decision-making, it is not clear how such strategies diverge from familiar processes of incorporation, recuperation, and complicity. Advocates of participation claim that it replaces the old contract within art (dominated by the artist-viewer relation). Our contention is, by contrast, that it preserves established forms of production and consumption on the condition that some of the roles and responsibilities previously monopolized by the artist are outsourced to the viewer-turned-participant.

Emphasis on an ethics of participation has led to a kind of athletic display in which contemporary artists and curators compete with each other to stretch their participatory techniques further, faster, deeper, longer, wider, and stronger. The interrogation of art after the ‘social turn’ is riddled with questions such as: ‘how early were the participants involved in the project?’; ‘how much time did the artist spend with the participants?’; ‘how many participants were there?’; ‘how much say did the participants have in the shaping of the project or its final outcome?’²

Another way of thinking about this ‘athleticism’ is to see it as a way of contributing to a competitive economy. Participation has been turned into a form of currency. We don’t mean by this something along the lines of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘cultural capital’, which in our view has set back thinking about the relationship between art and capital by several decades.³ What we mean is that participation has become an expression of value and therefore features in competitive economic transactions within the contemporary artworld. Critics, for instance, may praise one artist over another because of his or her use of participation, or commissions may be more forthcoming because projects include participatory elements. Furthermore, as with other forms of currency, it seems obvious that more participation is preferable to less. ‘Viewers’, ‘spectators’, and ‘the public’ appear to

² Freee art collective’s experience of this phenomenon comes from our work with state funded art institutions in the United Kingdom. These institutions have been driven for the past fifteen years by the instrumental objectives of ‘Third Way’ cultural policymakers, namely, social inclusion, regeneration and education. Hence the economic imperative for art institutions, and those working in them, hinges on finding innovative strategies by which to increase audiences or to find new ones. The artist is expected to share in this aim.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1984)

be less fully engaged with artworks than ‘participants’. We can speak, therefore, of individuals who are participation-poor and participation-rich. Alternatively, we can distinguish between full-participants, partial-participants, itinerant-participants, and non-participants. We might even say that we have a radicalized version of the concept of the ‘death of the author’ today: one that displaces authorial power by emphasizing participation, social relations and status at the expense of interpretation and the production of meaning.⁴ The problem with this development is that it merely replaces one individual for another – author for reader – thereby limiting the potential for shared viewing and collectivity.

In our view, emphasis on this kind of participation has its costs. In an important sense, the contemporary artworld seems to have forgotten how to make a place for guests. The insistence that participants are accorded a significant role within a project is the equivalent of turning down an invitation to a friend’s wedding because you feel that there shouldn’t be a distinction between those who are getting married and those who are witnessing it. ‘I’ll only come if I get married too’, the ethical participant seems to say. In our view, by contrast, inequality in such circumstances is not damning; it is built into the relations of care. Let’s call it asymmetry. There is an asymmetrical relationship between host and guest, and different pleasures and responsibilities attach to being the host and being the guest. Participatory equality cannot be forced onto these intersubjective relations without destroying the structures, pleasures and obligations of caring and being cared for. We, therefore, call for a re-organization of the grammar of art’s social relations – an affirmative call to redistribute the *places* that we have come to occupy.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (Hill and Wang: New York, 1977),

While the merits of participation have become increasingly unchallengeable in critical discourses about art production over the past two decades, the alleged value of participatory practices has not been restricted to the field of art. It has entered the fields of business, commerce, education and government policy. Everything from the schoolroom to the internet and from sport to the elimination of world poverty has, in the last twenty years, been reconfigured at various levels of intensity by the imperative to encourage participation. Yet participation doubles not only as an ethic, but also as a technique of capture. It homogenizes the spectrum of social encounters by arranging them hierarchically from zero to full and equal participation. It implies that the only questions to be asked of intersubjective experience are narrow political questions about who is in charge and how the people responsible have managed the process. It goes without saying that being invited to participate in a shocking event is a shocking invitation. The horror of genocide or exploitation is not dampened, but amplified by an increase in participation. If, therefore, we understand that participation is not a value in itself, but something that depends on the value and content of the project in which the participation takes place, then art's athletics of participation is nothing but a novel twist on the old assumption that art is good for you.

Beyond the Divide

Despite the increasing obligation of the artworld to turn the viewer into a participant, there does not seem to be a spate of protests coming from viewers who are denied a forum for interactivity. Few people walk out of a video installation complaining that they have not been invited to make the film. We haven't yet seen hundreds of visitors leaving galleries because they were not allowed to co-produce the paintings on show. Even gallery goers

who witness a participatory artwork in which they are not personally involved do not appear to be kicking up a fuss. And rightly so. The viewer who rejects participation as a precondition for engaging with art should not be seen as a person who suffers socially, ethically or aesthetically as a result.

In order to achieve greater flexibility in the way in which participatory practices can be conceptualized, we suggest that the concept of the ‘actant’ can be helpful. We will argue that the field of actants in an artwork should not be reduced to a binary of any sort (artist/viewer, engaged spectator/passive spectator) and that the concept of the actant can help to move beyond the opposition between exclusion and participation.

Following Jean-Jacques Lecercle, who argues that ‘the author is only an actant, the concrete speaker being interpellated in that place by the structure’ of the work, we think of artistic creation as the labour of constructing *places* for individuals (and groups) to occupy.⁵ Lecercle also shows how the participant can be understood as an *actant*. He ties the reader (or in our case, the spectator) to the author and to interpretation itself by understanding the transmission and transformation of meaning as taking place within circuits, mechanisms, relations, and institutions of meaning production. The author, reader and work are bound together as elements of a single whole. Rather than thinking of the author and reader as actual subjects or as fictions, Lecercle traces a circuit of relations in which the ‘reader’ and ‘author’ are *places* that can be occupied temporarily by various real individuals. In addition, the structural place of the reader or spectator has various modalities: reading, for example, is not one homogeneous kind of activity, but includes a field of possibilities. The place of the reader is always the place of a specific act of reading. And the place of the

⁵ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), 53.

reader is determined by the pragmatic conditions that happen to link reader, author, and work at a particular time.

Lecerle's concept of the *actant* is extrapolated from A.J. Greimas's semantic theory of narrative in which characters and events are understood as conforming to a grammar.⁶ Within the grammar of narrative, characters are redescribed by Greimas in terms of the actants that they embody. As Terence Hawkes puts it: 'the deep structure of the narrative generates and defines its actants at a level beyond that of the story's surface content'.⁷ Lecerle transposes the grammar of narrative to the social relations of reading and writing, of author and reader, in which 'the real "subjects" of the process are not the individual agents, the real and concrete men and women engaged in it, but the relations of production that define and distribute the places'.⁸ The place of the reader is, therefore, an effect of the machinery of textual exchange; the reader is produced by this transaction and simultaneously captured by it. Texts can be seen as traps for literary prey, but can also function as the provisional homes that certain readers inhabit.

But this does not mean the work has the whip hand. As Lecerle has argued, the 'interpellated reader, although subjected as much as subjectified, is not powerless. She sends back the force of interpellation'.⁹ The place of the author can also be understood as a trap set by the reader, just as the notion of a pre-existing reader can be a trap set by the

⁶ Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie. (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1966 [1983])

⁷ Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley: University California Press, 1977), 89.

⁸ Lecerle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*

author. But this does not mean that we simply have a cornucopia of authors and readers waiting to encounter one another in a semiotic free for all. Author and reader are paired actants, so that each (type of) author has its own (type of) reader, and each (type of) reader has its own (type of) author. Furthermore, new readers or spectators bring new demands to old works. The task of the artgoer, therefore, is not simply to conform to the role assigned to him or her. What ties readers/spectators to authors/artists is the work and the circuits through which it flows. This is why the transformation of the reader or spectator must occur within the work and its circuits of production.

The *actants* of art and literature are not fixed but continually renegotiated. And the relations between them change too. Lecercle argues that we have a ‘pantomime of actants’ in which each fantasizes about the others and about themselves.¹⁰ The author cannot write without a fantasy of a reader or of his or her own role. Similarly, reading involves constructing a fantasy of the writer and of the reader. All of art’s actants, including the participant, exist within institutions, economies, circuits, and structures. To speak of artists, authors, viewers, spectators and participants without referring to these material conditions of actantial relations is to cut oneself off from the grammar of art’s social relations. More importantly, if the preconditions of art’s actants are not addressed and transformed, then we are condemned to occupy the *places* that we inherit rather than to inaugurate new *places* to occupy. In order to theorize the actants of art adequately, we suggest that it is necessary to go beyond institutional theory and critique and to think about art’s apparatus.¹¹ We suggest

¹⁰ Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, 54

¹¹ We take this idea from Walter Benjamin, who in his essay ‘The Author as Producer’ from 1924, extended the argument of Sergei Tretyakov that ‘specialists’ after the revolution need to perform a critical appraisal of

that the concept of ‘apparatus’ be understood as referring to the totality of social, material, economic, discursive and institutional determinants of a practice. The emergence of a new participatory practice in art requires the transformation of this apparatus.

Changing the apparatus rather than merely supplying it does not mean taking your eye off art in order to focus attention on its institutions, economies, and structures. Artists making political statements about sponsorship, for example, do not bring about the transformation of the apparatus if they proceed within conventional art genres. So long as the protest artist remains an author in the conventional sense (with a viewer or reader that interprets the work conventionally), no modification of the apparatus takes place, regardless of how much the political content of works by that artist cries out for change. Jean-Luc Godard was closer to what we have in mind when he said ‘the problem is not to make political films, but to make films politically’, a statement that rightly censures political art or protest art that fails to transform the apparatus of its own production.¹²

Godard’s formulation, however, has the disadvantage of appearing to suggest that political content is marginal or irrelevant to a politicized practice. We would modify his idea, therefore, by identifying the problem as being *how* to make *political* art politically. For us this means not only thematizing politics, but also addressing the political and economic conditions of artistic production and consumption (which we can think of as merely the combination of two conspicuous types of political art practice today). At the same time, however, it is necessary to establish new *places* for the engagement with

their field rather than use it as a platform from which to issue universal truths. Walter Benjamin, *The Artist as Producer*, in ‘Collected Writings’, Vol. 2. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press [1934]1999)

¹² Quoted in Colin McCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 19.

artworks in terms of both their production and consumption. Our point is that we need to build into the grammar of art's social relations those *places* that do not yet exist. Only then can engagement with art be construed as an emancipatory experience.

Impossible Participants

Freee has tackled the problem of participation by creating a role for new participatory *actants* that is, in a very specific sense, impossible. We only want the 'impossible participant' – that is to say, the participant who is only possible within an apparatus that does not yet exist. We take the view that the critical and political emphasis that has been placed on participation in recent years merely serves to reinforce familiar roles within art's existing apparatus. This means that participation simply deepens and strengthens art's apparatus by drawing the public into its familiar modes of production. By contrast, our conception of the 'impossible participant' requires a search for new places for the participant to occupy within a framework of relations that remains unrealized. Although less participatory in the conventional sense, our impossible participants are, in another sense, much more vital. We can explain this more clearly with an example.

Revolution Road: Rename the Streets! was a Freee project commissioned by Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, UK in 2009 as part of the exhibition 'Generosity is the New Political' (6th September – 1st November 2009). One of the key elements in the work was the precise configuration of its social relations. First, the invitation we made was not open; Freee invited a small group of Wysing staff, artists and trustees to participate in the event. This meant that the participants were known to one another and knew more about the institution (perhaps antagonistically) and the locale where the performance took place than

the artists. This was not an attempt to make a ‘community-specific’ artwork, which, as Miwon Kwon has discussed, typically aims ‘to foster social assimilation’.¹³ The group of volunteers was accustomed to hosting others. Like many other arts institutions, it regularly aimed at audience development by encouraging the participation of visitors in art projects. These are usually targeted at specific groups i.e. old, young, the ‘economically marginalized’. In contrast to this, our aim was to establish a relationship that stood outside the conventional grammar of art participation. The initial dynamic of the social experience of the artwork was structurally delineated. The artists did not hold the monopoly on expertise in the work and they were not the most at ease in the encounter. The social configuration of the invitation began, from the start, to subvert the conventional settlement of the ‘pantomime of actants’ in ways that were at once structurally clear and yet imperceptible.

The work consisted of a walking tour to rename the streets of Cambridge. The participants wore bright costumes (including ‘Liberty bonnets’ as worn by Jacobins), carried percussive instruments and whistles and read scripted ceremonies. The script and the new names for the streets drew on the book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, by E.P. Thompson, a work that outlines the key figures, events and institutions within English Jacobinism immediately after the French Revolution.¹⁴ This included the work of radical thinkers, pamphleteers, publishers, mutineers, trade unionists and Republicans, many of whose writings had been censored or suppressed during the eighteenth century.

¹³ Kwon quotes Hafthor Yngvason’s use of this phrase. See Kwon, *One Place After Another* (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2004), 115.

¹⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class London* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963)

From the local court building to King's Passage, through residential, educational, retail and civic areas, every street, lane, road and square that the participants passed was renamed after these lesser known citizens in a ceremonial ritual performed by the participants.

[Insert figure X.1 here: landscape

[Fig. X.1. Free Art Collective, *Revolution Road: Rename the Streets!* (Emmanuel Street renamed as Colonel Despard Walk), (2009) performance still. Photograph courtesy of the artists.]

The ceremonies included detailed expositions of the historical significance of the new name for the street, followed by an exchange in which the new street name was proposed and confirmed in an act of acknowledgement during which the new name was written in chalk on a blackboard. Although this dialogue was scripted by the artists and took place as a call-and-response dialogue between the artists and the participants, the script which renamed the streets also renamed the individuals in the ceremony: the artists were referred to throughout the script as 'the chalk-holders', and the participants were referred to throughout as the 'witnesses'. An extract from the script follows:

Emmanuel Street renamed as Colonel Despard Walk

The chalk-board is placed in position. The Chalk-holders stand facing the Witnesses.

Chalk is used to write a new name on the chalk-board.

THE CHALKHOLDERS: We rename Emmanuel Street, **Colonel Despard Walk.**

Colonel Despard was a member of the London Corresponding Society who was the

last person to be sentenced to being hanged, drawn and quartered, in 1803, commuted at the last minute to avoid sparking public riots. He had been found guilty of high Treason with evidence that he was leading a plot to seize the Tower of London and Bank of England and assassinate George III. He was arrested in November 1802 in *The Oakley Arms*, Lambeth, in the company of forty workers and soldiers, and he had been at similar gatherings over the previous months in *The Flying Horse*, Newington, *The Two Bells* and *The Coach and Horses*, Whitechapel, *The Ham and Windmill*, Haymarket, *The Brown Bear* and *The Black Horse* in St Giles, and *The Bleeding Heart* in Hatton Gardens.

THE WITNESSES: *Make encouraging and celebratory music/noise.*

CHALKHOLDERS: We have written the name

WITNESSES: We witnessed you write the name

CHALKHOLDERS: The name was Emmanuel Street

WITNESSES: We disavow the name Emmanuel Street

CHALKHOLDERS: The name **Colonel Despard Walk** has been written

WITNESSES: We avow the name **Colonel Despard Walk**

CHALKHOLDERS: Do you believe the name of this place is **Colonel Despard Walk**?

WITNESSES: Yes, I do believe the name of this place is **Colonel Despard Walk**

CHALKHOLDERS: The name of this place is **Colonel Despard Walk**. Make your noise in the name of this place.

WITNESSES: *Make encouraging and celebratory music/noise.*

Chalk-holder # 3 washes the chalk from the chalk-board The Chalk-holders turn their backs on the Witnesses and walk to Grand Arcade accompanied by the music/ noise of the witnesses.

Renaming the streets could be seen as an alibi for renaming the actants of art. But this second act of renaming and reconfiguration took place within a process of transforming the world itself. We might also say, therefore, that the renaming of art's actants was figured within a performative scenario in which the world was rendered malleable, a social precondition for the transformation of art's apparatus.

The fact that the participants were already a group meant that their experience of each other was not primarily as viewers or participants in an artwork, but as colleagues, neighbours, friends. The actants that the work designated had to compete with the identities and relations of real individuals. But the *actants* that the work orchestrated were not that of 'artists' and 'participants'. The new 'places' that the work called for were much stranger than that. The act of renaming the streets functioned as a disruption of certain conventions that structure the familiar world. Freee brought a new set of meanings and associations to the street names in Cambridge in order to contest existing ones and the histories they represent. The meanings are only shared by those who 'action' the work in the performance or who later read or even follow the walk at a later date. Documentation of the artwork was shown as part of the exhibition, 'Generosity is the New Political', in the gallery space at Wysing Arts Centre. And it was partly through this strangeness that the real individuals were converted into actants.

To the passerby, this strange group they see in the public realm appear as a collective. In this case the passerby was not party to the ritual and was not given information about the process. So what may look like a public performance is in fact a private event. This is counter to most other participatory projects that would seek to include the passer-by for the purpose of generating an audience, the conventional form of public relations and spectacle produced by the publicly funded art institution. *Revolution Road: Rename the Streets!* is a refusal of such public relations.

For us, publics are not consumers, fans, viewers, customers, taxpayers, citizens, identities, communities, clients, markets, voters, readers, victims. We prefer witnesses, signatories, advocates, spokespersons, publishers, badge-wearers, distributors, marchers, recruits, promise-makers, co-conspirators, accomplices. The latter are not necessarily more active, productive or democratic than the publics envisioned by art galleries and policymakers. Instead, they are performatively inscribed into processes of ‘publishing’ the artwork. The ‘witnesses’ of the work are not its audience or its participants in the usual sense; they are more like witnesses at a court hearing or godparents at a christening – persons who hold a semi-legal status and without whom the performance is a mere rehearsal or a sham. In *Revolution Road: Rename the Streets!*, the witnesses played a vital role within the performative act of renaming the streets of Cambridge. They had a script that placed them as communal agents in the renaming ceremony.

But they continue to have another vital role as the memory of the work. Since there was no permanent physical alteration to the streets – no monument, no vandalism, no replacement of existing signs – the act must be remembered, documented, vouched for, and authorized. The event was documented by photographers in both still and video format.

Instead of thinking that the photographer makes the role of the witnesses redundant, however, this project casts the photographers as technologically enhanced witnesses. Rather than treating the documentation of the work as external to it, the photographs and video can be seen as issuing from one of the places set out by the internal relationship between actants within the work.

Another tactic Freee uses to form new actants within a changing apparatus for art is to work with manifestos and manifesto readings. This sets out places for participants to occupy that are dependent upon what those participants bring to the work both personally and imaginatively. The manifesto readings such as those for International Project Space (2007) and Eastside Projects (2011) are examples of Freee's use of manifestos to generate agreement or disagreement on specific issues relating to, amongst other themes, the role of art in the contemporary public sphere, the impact of globalization on society, and the effects of market forces on art production. The content of the manifesto is an explicit call for the transformation of art and society, and Freee readily adapts existing historical manifestos, speeches and revolutionary documents, such as *The Manifesto for a New Public*, based on Vladimir Tatlin's *The Initiative Individual in the Creativity of the Collective* (1919) and the *UNOVIS, Program for the Academy at Vitebsk* (1920), and the *Freee Art Collective Manifesto for a Counter-Hegemonic Art* based on the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848).

The format of the reading includes contributions by individuals who are usually invited through our network of friends and interested associates; they are requested to read the given text and make their own minds up about which statements they subscribe to and which they reject. When at the group reading, the participants only read out those words of

the manifesto with which they agree. The reading then becomes a collective, and potentially antagonistic, process in which individuals publicly declare their commitment to, or rejection of, Free's manifesto. Each event sees the formation of a unique 'spoken choir' in which individuals listen to each other rather than perform for the benefit of an audience.

[Insert fig. X.2 here: landscape]

[Fig. X.2 Free Art Collective, Manifesto reading of the *Free Art Collective Manifesto for a Counter-Hegemonic Art* at the Exhibition by Free entitled, 'How to Make a Difference', International Project Space, Birmingham, (2007). Photograph courtesy of the artists.]

While the use of a specific text by Free is a given, the text itself can be used and reworked by those who read it to formulate their own opinions just in the same way that Free reworked it from the original. Free acknowledges that ideas are developed collectively through the exchange of opinion. In this way Free offers a text that it has produced, but makes it the basis for the action of critical thinking. The text of the manifesto and the group reading needs individuals who bring to it their own opinions. It is a mistake to consider the readings as performances. This is precisely the type of theatrical spectacle or performer–audience relationship that Free attempts to overcome by asking all those who attend to contribute as readers, speakers, and debaters. The readings usually take place in an enclosed space, and all those who come along are the readers. If the reading takes place in

the public realm (for example at the Band Stand on Clapham Common, London, (2012)), members of the group read to each other in a circle and not to bystanders or passersby.

[Insert Fig. X.3 here – landscape]

[Fig. X.3: Free Art Collective, Manifesto reading of the *The Manifesto for a New Public* at the bandstand, Clapham Common, London, (2012). Photograph courtesy of the artists]

Participation in art might best be understood as an ethical ‘solution’ to art’s crisis of legitimation. In Freee’s view, the problem calls for a political solution in which the apparatus of art is transformed, establishing social relations for art that anticipate a world beyond bureaucratic control and market forces. In so far as prominent forms of participation in recent practice have sought to hand over various capacities and privileges of the artist to the participant, the apparatus of art has simply resulted in a new division of labour and responsibility. By contrast, our call for the transformation of art’s apparatus demands new places, new actants, new roles, and new tasks for art that are unthinkable within the current configuration of art’s apparatus. This is why the only participant worth thinking about is an impossible participant.