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The kiosks of the Free art collective: Understanding social art practice and opinion formation for new models of collaboration.

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Introduction

My name is Mel Jordan I am an artist in the Free art collective (with Dave Beech and Andy Hewitt) and Head of Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art, in London. I am also a founding editor of Art & the Public Sphere Journal.

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Paper Context

Existing qualitative studies into the value of 'participation in the arts' tend to be from a traditional empirical-sociological perspective and do not take into account the value of these projects as part of art historical concerns and the contexts of art practice.

Some studies are located from within an art history discipline where scholarship is focused on participatory art practices (an it's art historical categorization) that accomplish a significant work of art, discounting the social relations attained during the project and resorting to a traditional art historical analysis of discrete objects.

We believe that these approaches fail to capture the complexity, significance and value of social art practices. We believe that is crucial to understand artworks as having various forms of value depending on their context and function.

So we are going to have a go at unpicking some of this through our ideas and practice.

To do this, the paper is divided into 3 sections

1. Introduce our conception of participation in art which is centred upon a public sphereian approach to participation
2. Explore current art historical thinking in participation
3. Argue for a public spherian attitude to the evaluation and accounts of participatory art projects through our own art practice

Free's work has proposed the application of public sphere theory to the practice of participatory arts in order to investigate the relationship between art and politics. We have been developing, further possibilities for participation including dissensual methods and techniques. It is our intention to initiate projects that produce a form of social encounter but although we operate collectively and socially we don't want our work to be regulated - thus we reject the idea of our projects as instruments to carry out the remit of funders or philanthropic commissioners. This is why we conceive of our participants as counter-publics. We aim to bring art's "outside" into art's "inside." In order to achieve this, participation needs to be turned inside out, consequently this means probing the methods of evaluation and 'accounts' of participatory practices.

The Bourgeois Public Sphere

The theory of the bourgeois public sphere - a term commonly confused or used in place of the terms public space or the public realm¹ - means in-between private and public. The historical bourgeois public sphere is generally thought of as civil society - the totality of voluntary, civic and social organizations and institutions. According to Habermas' theory the bourgeois public sphere is where collective opinion formation takes place, which can challenge oppressive state bureaucracy as well as capital (Habermas, [1962], 1989).

So the history of the public sphere is really the history of Western liberal democracy and European politics –but the processes of the public sphere can be used as a way to unpick political systems, through the interrogation of what it means to be 'public'.

Freee enquire into the history of art and politics and how artists and thinkers have considered culture's role in the reforming of society. We are essentially intrigued, on behalf of politics, by how values and opinions are formed by society and then become integrated in our behaviours as if they were 'natural'. We are interested in addressing how we can live together now and we want to engage with what it means to be Public.

Participation / Art and the social turn

The rise of participation in art since the 1990s –sees artists and curators searching continually for new and increased levels of audience inclusion. The increase of participatory art practices is due to two main causes;

1. an ethical concern by artists over the prevailing idea from Modernism that the production of meaning is located with the artist rather than transmitted through the artwork and produced in the space between artwork and spectator – the general principle being that by sharing the generation of ideas the artist will renounce the problem of dominant instruction
2. added to this is the alignment of economic functions of art through the rhetoric of creative industries via cultural policy in which art is required to be put to work and moreover demonstrate a type of civilizing social function.

“PARTICIPATION” first became a buzzword as part of the New Left's critique of existing democracies in the 1950s and 1960s. It was then taken up by C.B. MacPherson in his theory of participatory democracy in the 1970s, but went missing during the monetarist 1980s only to return in the 1990s as a conspicuous feature of relational art.

Participation in contemporary art resonates with political promise. However, when one considers that participation in the new art includes having dinner, drinking beer, designing a new candy bar and running a travel agency, there seems to be justification in talking about a declining ambition for the politics of participation.

Within the discourse on socially engaged art or “art's social turn,” conceptions of art and participation have been provided by theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, in his concept of Relational Aesthetics, and more lately in exchanges between Grant Kester and Claire Bishop that interrogate recent trends in didactic and participatory art.¹ This demonstrates divergent ideas of art and social relations between those that are convivial, ethical, or agonistic. In the UK these affirmative ways of engaging with the social have been exploited by Third Way cultural policy whereby artists have been employed to promote an ethics of participation in order to construct and manage publics and audiences.

Can participation in art be anything other than a pale imitation of its original political

promise?

It seems that there has been slippage in the definition and articulation of participation; it is the ethics of co-production that is really what is being played out here. Through this preoccupation with co-production there is an assumption that the big problem for Modernism was sole authorship and that we can somehow overturn the social relations that created that (class, race, gender) by producing everything **together**. The ethics of co-production is what has replaced the politics of participation. Artists have been ethically obsessed with their role in the production of an artwork and the construction of meaning and content being shared with others.

For Claire Bishop and Grant Kester, the current ethic of participation homogenizes the spectrum of social encounters by arranging them hierarchically under full and equal participation, as if the only questions to be asked of intersubjective experience are the ethical questions about who is in charge and how the people responsible have managed the process. In art this leads to a kind of athletics of participation in which artists and curators compete with each other to stretch their participatory process further, faster, deeper, longer, wider and stronger. If, however, we understand that participation is not a value in itself but depends entirely on the value of the project in which the participation takes place, then this muscular participation is, at best, ambivalent.

If we are proposing an antagonistic response to participation, which is not simply to call for a rejection of it but to call forth a different sort of participant; one that cannot be managed or cajoled into consensus and one that in fact proves impossible. It is only through the 'impossible participant' that we can begin to change arts social relations. This is in line with the way the early 20th century avant-garde viewed arts social potential and counters the way in which recent cultural policy has demanded a social function for art. If we are proposing a public spherian version of participation in art then it is inevitable that we need a public spherian evaluation – how do we evaluate the experience of the impossible participant?

The Kiosks of the Free art collective
SLIDE (KIOSKS)

Why are we interested in Kiosks? Kiosks are more public, more intimate and more approachable than shops. They have a sociality that shops lack. By taking away the commercial profit-making utility of the kiosk we can capture its social dimension. The kiosk shows how socialism exists inside capitalism, trapped in financial exchanges we can see glimpses of a world of public exchanges. By taking away all retail aspects of the kiosk and replacing its branding and advertising with opinions and beliefs we can draw out its full social potential.

SLIDE (FREEE KIOSKS)

Freee's recent works have been systems, constructions and kiosks that facilitate conversations and enable the exchange of individual views. We are preoccupied with the idea of 'the collective' and ways and methods in which we can all act more collectively within the public domain.

We are interested in consensus and dissensus, so the participatory methods we employ are directed at political exchange and opinion formation; we are engaged with how collectively we decide what we believe, considering different cultures and the social political moment we find ourselves in. We work with others to write slogans, usually borrowing from a history of protest and debate. i.e Protest is Beautiful derives from

Black is beautiful. Slogans only work if they are collectively adopted, we encourage others to choose badges and wear them on their bodies publishing what they believe in. We also write manifesto's based on existing texts that we have adjusted from the original - we ask others to underline what parts of the text they believe in and then we read these out together, it becomes clear by the volume of the choir who believes in what.

Other artists Kiosks

Artists have made Kiosks that appropriate the spatial conditions of the kiosk i.e that they operate in the public realm as a means to employ various interactive or relational methods have been used by artists. In subsequent research we would like to consider in what ways they use a public spherian logic to activate their kiosks.

As part of the Free Carracci Institute at NN Contemporary in Northampton we made Social Kiosk II. This kiosk structure was the prop that initiated a collaborative project with the Forum for Democratic Practices (a research group at the University of Northampton, academics from Business & Law, Psychology, Cultural Studies and International business students). Social Kiosk II +WHY? MAP is a project about the way in which the public of Northampton had reached the decision in the recent referendum to leave the EU. The data gathering, the first stage of the project, collected the public's reasoning about their arguments. The emphasis here is on the opinion formation process, rather than making a value judgment about the decisions people had made. This collaboration was not an employment of an artist as a tool for visual ethnography but a partnership based on agreed objectives between us and the other researchers – the key thing we have in common is our interest in opinion formation. An art historian spent the day with the kiosk and project and created a series of field notes.

Along with graphic designer Alex Taylor we designed and published the WHY? MAP. The Map is reflexive and is added to by others whenever it is published. The project has become collective through agreeing on shared beliefs.

Finally, as part of the Milton Keynes City Club initiative Free art collective and architect Sean Griffiths have produced a new mobile artwork called Citizen Ship. This is a portable pavilion with a resemblance to Milton Keynes bus shelters and is part laboratory, part kiosk and part meeting place. Citizen Ship extends the concept of participation in art by engaging new groups in the production of collective artworks that will be displayed in and on the structure. Free will work with passers-by and invited groups at five locations in Milton Keynes to make badges, develop slogans and have conversations in which they share stories and histories.

We are carrying out two short studies of the work in Milton Keynes one by an art historian and one by a social scientist. And we will compare outcomes.

In conclusion we call for

1. an acknowledgement of various approaches by artists working with methods of participation, i.e. the core principles within the artist's work are considered in relation to its assessment and function and a recognition that artists are key agents in the projects that they design and perform. For Free in particular this means a question around how do you evaluate and understand the impossible participant?

2. The use of collective working as opposed to collaboration; that shared values of disciplines, organisations / art institutions etc are established so that the artworks are not employed as a means of visual ethnography but operate towards a number of political and ideological values and functions that are shared.
3. That we strive for a combination of evaluation processes in order to establish these works within a legacy of art history - questions of archive, documentation and its retrieval are a crucial part of a series of ongoing questions for contemporary artists that work with methods, processes, temporality and publics. It is this entanglement of conditions and reflexive responses that we are keen to have acknowledged and discussed through reflective means such as ethnography.

ⁱ For example Naomi Klein in her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* 2007 continually misuses the term public sphere, when she means 'state regulated' or even 'public sector' (Klein, N, 2007).