

**PARTICIPATION IN MUSIC AS SOMETHING SEPARATE FROM PARTICIPATORY ART**

by

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## I. History of Participation

The impact of participation in the art of the 20th century is undeniable. It is not necessarily that there is now a broader range of possibilities under the guise of artistic creation, but rather that participation has questioned the fundamental condition upon which art is created; particularly, the radical separation between the artist and their audience that emerges with secular art. Clare Bishop, in their book *Artificial Hells*, categorizes three different reasons artists create works that include participation: activation, authorship, and community.

Activation can be described as the desire to create an active body who, through participation, is empowered to determine their own social and political reality. The questioning of authorship most often has political implications and is often debated vehemently by critics. The idea of collective agency is centered around the notion that a work could be more egalitarian and democratic than the work could have otherwise been with a sole author. The third concept of community comes from a tradition of Marxism and involves the attempt to heal or create community and support collective responsibility. As Claire Bishop asserts, one of the main impetus behind participatory art has been a restoration of social bonds through collective collaboration. It is worth mentioning, at the outset, that I do not see the concepts of activation and community as being entirely separate, but rather the two influencing each other through slightly different motivations.

One of my primary aims in composing music is creating an experience. And

experience for myself, performers, and the audience. Music is one of the most compelling ways of creating an experience. I believe that sound is dissimilar to most of the other senses; sound has the ability to “hijack” one’s feelings, moods, and physical sensations. I believe that music can be used as a powerful tool in creating experience.

In order to craft an experience, the theoretical focus of my works highlight activation and authorship, and thus I will focus on these topics in the discussion that follows. Despite the clear connections between activation and community, I focus on activation of the individual. This individual activation could be seen as creating community as a byproduct, but my works focus on the individual, and thus I will leave out the already large discussion on “relational aesthetics” as largely debated by Nicholas Bourriaud and Clare Bishop.

## **Activation**

I see two distinct conceptual motivations relating to participatory art as a means of activating audiences. The first is a symbolic self-sacrifice that can be attributed to a long lineage of philosophical thought, which becomes notable in both the work of Karl Marx and Frederick Nietzsche, though, these works arrive at similar conclusions through very different means. The second is the aim of pedagogy. That is, artists who utilize participation in the creation or demonstration of a work as a means of teaching audience members how to evaluate their artistic contribution to society. This society is an ideal and generally an effort to reconstitute the idea of commerce on something other than money.

On the surface, the philosophy of Marx and Nietzsche seem to be in opposition, however, both these philosophers’ writings have steeped the western epoch and come together in the life of

participatory art of the 20th and 21st centuries. Many of these artistic movements seek out this self sacrifice for the greater good of humankind (origins in Marx's writings), but it seems to be motivated by a desire to shake audiences out of passivity and seek self actualization through pedagogy (origins in Nietzsche's writings).

## **Self Sacrifice**

In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels completed the Communist Manifesto. And while the influence of this work in the Revolutions of 1848 were relegated to those uprisings in Germany, they had an influence on Richard Wagner, and thus were a part of Wagner's influence on the rest of the art world. Additionally, as time progressed, the Communist Manifesto became ever prevalent in world political ideology. One can see that there is a clear correlation between the geographic distribution of the manifesto and occurrences of the avant-garde.

In 1849-50, Richard Wagner wrote an essay titled "The Artwork of the Future". In this essay, Wagner discusses the need to free ourselves of the ego and pass over into communism. This was, in essence, an attempt to reassert the aims of the revolutions that took place just one year prior, through artistic means. Wagner calls this dissolution of the ego the "self sacrifice of the artist" and is done for the greater good of the people. In the early 1900s Marinetti wrote their fascist critique of the Communist Manifesto and created one that, while maintaining its function as political ideology, had artistic aims as its primary purpose: and thus the era of manifestos began. These art movements were intricately linked to political movements of their time and influences between the two were common.

Italian and Russian futurists wrote political manifestos. Some of them even ran for

political office. Dadaism sought to continue the political aims of Vladimir Lenin in the city of Zurich and others in Berlin. Guy Debord, founder of the Situationist International, sought to revolt against “the spectacle” that had become of the film and viewer relationship.

In the early 19-tens, the Dada art movement sought to instigate individual activation through participation in Zurich. In addition to being anti-war, Dada was also anti-bourgeois and had political affinities with the radical left. Dada sought to turn the contemporary art world on its head by creating art that questioned art itself. Karl Marx wrote extensively on the idea that art, religion, culture and other human institutions are superstructures based around economy. Dada’s tendencies to disrupt the superstructures of art and culture, as described by Marx, by creating disruptive art, or anti-art, could be seen as a grassroots effort at re-organizing these superstructures from within.

The Dada art movement, guided in part by philosophical and political thought, brought about art that disrupted the relationship between artist and audience as a way of elevating the role of audience members to that of active participants. They did this by questioning the fundamental elements of Western art. Their response to these questions has had a lasting influence on the entirety of the art world, and can be seen in subsequent art movements such as Fluxus and the participatory works we see from the 1990s and on; including Superflex, Anton Vidokle’s work etc.

In all of these movements, participation is used as a tool to instigate questioning and evaluation. The goal was to create an active body who, through participation, is empowered to determine their own social and political reality. But what then should these active bodies do? In some regards, the artwork is used to teach audiences how to critique the social and political

structures that they exist within. Therein lies the role of pedagogy in participatory works.

## Pedagogy

Italian futurists, Zurich Dadaists, artist collectives such as Fluxus, Guy Debord's Situationist International, and Andy Warhol's Factory. All of these artistic movements and collectives utilize collaboration and the synthesis of materials to shift artistic focus from product to process, from performance to performativity, from artistic intent to indeterminacy. These shifts all blur the boundaries between performer and audience, professional and amateur, and production and reception.

This blurred boundary impacts the way by which we look at the art world and political and cultural systems we are a part of, challenging the authority of the institutions we are a part of. If Dada artists create anti-art that is in direct conflict with what institutions teach and consider to be art, and a Fluxus event affords amateurs with the opportunity to participate in the creation of such a work, what validity does an academy have in saying that they are the authority on the definition, evaluation, and instruction of art?

Joseph Beuys, a Fluxus artist, was one notable figure who embraced pedagogy as a means of activating audiences. Beuys' work rejected the specialism adopted by cultural and academic institutions. Beuys believed that no one needed to be accepted into one of these institutions in order to learn how to create art. Beuys also did not believe that there were any prerequisites to becoming an artist. Beuys described their own work as "social sculpture", wherein it becomes the molding of a society based on the total energy output of the individuals' creativity. Here we see how Beuys exemplifies the synthesis of Marx's equality and Nietzsche's

free individual.

In Beuys social sculpture they sought to pronounce all individuals as artists and went on to say that “art is capital”; or one could likewise infer that “creativity is capital”. The belief was that, through a total devaluation of art by the leveling of the playing field of artists, a destabilization of artistic institutions would ensue. What would then follow is a system in which the creativity of the people would become a currency of sorts.

I believe that Beuys’ effort was a pedagogical pursuit: a demonstration to audiences on how one could reconstruct an entire cultural superstructure by revaluation. An effort to activate audiences so that they pursue similar reconstructions in the systems that they are a part of.

## **Authorship**

The concern with authorship typically takes one of two forms: an attempt by the artist to bridge the gap between themselves and the passive role of the audience or the relinquishing of autonomous control with the aim of mirroring a utopian ideal. Regardless of the motivation, a claim can be made that, by relinquishing some control as the sole author of a work, a broader range of control is acquired through the assimilation of the artist into the audience. In the case of artists seeking to bridge the radical separation between the artist and their audience by creating collaborative and anti-commercial art, the goal is to entice viewers out of a passive role and onto a common ground with the artist. The uninvolved viewer is seen as occupying a safe distance from the work, and subsequently evaluating it based on aesthetic preference alone. Conversely, when the engaged viewer is involved in the work from the outset, every criticism expressed is directed, at least in part, at themselves, thus encouraging the evaluation of cultural

superstructures.

Relinquishing the position as sole author would at first seem to be sacrificial with the aim of empowering the audience. Critics of the process, however, are quick to point out that it also frees the artist from critique in the traditional aesthetic sense. In that regard, it could be seen as a potential means of dodging the unfavorable judgment that can result in a work that is not well received on aesthetic grounds. In any case, the practice of participation challenges the traditional artist and audience roles by reevaluating conventional ideas on authorship.

In my efforts to construct experience, the issue of authorship comes up immediately. For, how can one be the author of another's experience, let alone own it? My work can be the object of another's experience, but nothing more. The audience is the author of their own experience, whether they recognize this or not.

In the late 1960's, in the midst of the already established Fluxus collective, literary theorist Roland Barthes explored a poststructuralist conception of shared authorship. Barthes wrote an essay titled "The Death of the Author", in which they asserted that the moment one's work becomes text, its meaning is not dependent on the author's intent, but rather the point of active reception of the reader. Barthes conceives of an author's work as finite, but text as a "methodological field" that readers can interact with via layered possibilities and associations. That is, the moment an author's ideas become a symbol, words on a page, and only exist as a means of conveying words, a disconnection occurs between the author's intent, and the words take on new meaning as they interface with the reader. Barthes states that, at this point, the author enters into their own death.

What is important here is that the words the author used carried intent as they were

written, but as someone other than the author reads them, those very same words carry meaning and associations specific to the reader, not the author. Text is comprised of multiple writings, meaning is drawn from different cultures, and enters into a complex relationship between dialog, parody, and narrative. There is only one place where all that multiplicity is focused, and that is in the reader themselves. The author is unable to convey all of those influences, as the author understands them, using only symbols (text), and thus written words only have life in the reader themselves, not on the printed page.

Barthes' focus was on written word, but the analog in other artistic practices can easily be seen. In fact, the heightened abstraction of those mediums serves to intensify the subjectivity of the symbol and thus the death of its author. In music, this is especially true, as is illustrated by John Cage's 4'33". As Seth Kim Cohen, in their book *In the Blink of an Ear*, illustrates, the ear does not have an eyelid to cease the flow of sensory input. Rather, the brain acts as a filter and feeds into our consciousness what it deems most prevalent. Listening is, therefore, a highly individualistic experience. Just as Cage makes this self-sacrifice of the artist and individual experience the aesthetic of a work, a work of art can turn authorship into an aesthetic itself, thus questioning the notion of owning a work of art.

In 2007 Jonathan Lethem wrote "The Ecstasy of Influence" for Harper's magazine. In this piece, Lethem declares that influence should not be eschewed, but rather embraced as an inevitability of human and artistic development. Whether influences are conscious or unconscious, we have our experience, which is built on the experience of others, which is built on the experience of others, and so on till the beginning of humankind. At the end of this thought provoking work, the reader finds a key in which Lethem discloses that almost every line of the

text from their article comes from quotes of other's works, reordered and modified for consistency of narrative. This work not only comments on the notion that our understanding of these symbols (words) is based on the entity body of their cultural and individual usage, but it celebrates it.

The parallel between Lethem's "Ecstasy of Influence" and musical practice is easily drawn. Even beyond borrowing in musical compositions and common musical idioms, systematic practices such as tonal harmony and serialism lend themselves to the idea that we, as audiences, take our understanding of all that we have heard into our next musical experience. It is not that we understand a piece of music based on the techniques used by the composer to create it, but rather we understand the new work in relation to all of the works we have heard prior to that point.

From this, and also from the discussion on activation and authorship, emerges the notion of active listening. While, as we have seen in the artistic movements discussed, an activated audience is important to all works of art, it is especially important in music. If we stare at a painting, for example, and close our eyes, we can be sure that it will still be there, complete, as it was before we closed our eyes. Our perspective might have changed by whatever happened internally while our eyes were closed, but the photons entering into our eyes will be the same, or very similar, when we open them. With music, conversely, if one stops listening to the music and lets their mind wander during a section of music, they will not have another opportunity to hear that segment of music again. Music is temporal, and thus the need for active listening is often of utmost importance. This is not the case with ambient music, sound installations, or the like, but for most other forms of music it is. This is one of the main differences between participation in

music and other art forms. Music, by its very nature, requires a certain level of participation, or engagement.

## **II. Participation in Music**

Even in non-participatory art, the efforts of many in creating a public exhibition is a given. Curators and gallery staff often have an invisible hand, but their work frames the event. Their influence on the occasion is unquestionable, though the extent to which they influence the audience's experience is. In music making, however, the process of writing and presenting a work is inherently collaborative. Nearly all works of music are written by a composer and then realized by musicians.

The complexity and temporal aspects of the medium are such that numerous individuals are needed in order to realize a single work of art. The score is interpreted, often by a director and performers, and then highly trained musicians realize the work for an audience. Should the work be available on a recorded medium, there is then the inclusion of a recording engineer who is knowledgeable and trained in the use of specialized recording equipment, companies to distribute the recording, and so forth. In a professional orchestra, hundreds of people could have some part to play in a single night's performance.

The performers, conductors, artistic directors, composers, art administrators, etc. are all highly trained and their expertise dramatically affects the experience of the work. Furthermore, the dynamics of the parties involved are unique. For example, no one orchestra is the same: the

artistic director chooses to program specific types of works, the conductor injects their personality and energy into the performances, and the instrumentalists are able to respond to that with their instruments. Each individual involved shapes the dynamics of the ensemble, which has a direct influence on the music they create. None of this is considered to be “participation” in the music world, and is a distinctly different dynamic than the one we see in non-participatory gallery arts: music is inherently collaborative.

In addition to all those involved in the creation and performance of a work, the audience inherently has an active role. In fact, listening to a musical work, can, at times, be more involved than the creation of the work itself. In considering the differences between participation in music and other art forms, I believe that it is important to consider the skill needed in order to perform music and also the dynamics of contemporary performance practice.

### Consideration of Skill

An important influence on participation in music is that of skill. The skill necessary in order to complete a task within the overall creation of a work of art will invariably limit the tasks that a participant is able to complete. This limitation has two net effects worth mentioning here: the quality of the work and skill as a factor in differentiating between participation and collaboration. I use the term quality not to describe condition, but rather the constitution of a work; that is, the influence of skill on the attributes and characteristics of the work itself. If the end goal of an artwork requires specialty skills, then specialists are needed and thus participation is not open to everyone. This necessity creates limitations in two respects: that of the participant and that of the artwork. If a work requires specialty skills, then this will limit

participation to those who possess the skills required. Conversely, if participation is to be truly open to all, the tasks involved must be limited to those that do not demand specific skills. Of course, the tasks involved with the creation of any work will always be varied and thus the degree to which skill influences the quality of a work will vary depending on the work itself. In music, the sonic outcome of a particular work and the skills of those involved will heavily influence each other; perhaps to a greater degree than some forms of visual arts or artistic happenings that focus on relational aesthetics.

In music, There exists a blurry line between participation and collaboration. In a traditional performance practice, performers are thought of as being participants. In contemporary performance practice that involves a large degree of improvisation, that same performer could be thought of as a collaborator. There is no set amount of co-creation required in order to be considered collaboration. Generally speaking, however, collaboration implies a more significant amount of artistic control and influence than participation does.

## **Considerations of WEB 2.0 and Remote Performances**

Despite the historical, political, and ideological differences between artists mentioned in the historical context at the beginning of this paper, similar aims can be found. Be it a Wagnerian opera or a Fluxus happening, the unification of artist and audience relies on both parties' presence in physical space. How is one to then make sense of art that takes place in virtual "spaces" through virtual "interactions" that ever increasingly occur on the internet?

In Lev Manovich's essay "Art After Web 2.0", two principle tendencies of Web 2.0 are discussed. First, there has been a gradual shift from a majority of internet users accessing content

produced by a much smaller number of professional producers, to a growing number of users accessing content produced by other non professionals. Second, if web in the 1990s is primarily a publishing medium, in the 2000s it has increasingly become a communication medium.

General communication between users and communication regarding user generated content can take the form of email, posts, comments, review, ratings, gestures, tokens, votes, badges, and so forth.

To Preserve This, it Must Change, a current project of mine, exists as a sort of abstract communication through musical preference. Though, it goes beyond this and addresses the issue of authorship of that communication and questions the notion of “original content”. This is accomplished by allowing artists to download all of the material I used to create an original musical work. They are then able to rework or create anything that they like, as long as it uses my piece as its starting point. Once their new work is complete, they are then able to upload their work, which overwrites mine and becomes the new object that others can manipulate. In addition to projects such as this, the nature of authorship and original content comes into question with sites that allow users to post their own content.

While sites like YouTube and Facebook allow for mass distribution of original user generated content with ease, reports indicate that most traffic to these sites is that of consumers rather than creators. A recent report indicates that less than 1.5 percent of users contribute content. Remix and meme culture have created an influx of artists who now have access to a plethora of material and huge audiences though these sites. And while that still indicates a significant increase in the number of people generating content in contrast to mass media in the century prior, one can ask: given that a significant portion of user generated content follows

templates and professional entertainment conventions or even directly reuses professionally produced content, does this mean that people's identities and creative output are now even more firmly inhabited by commercial media than they were before?

To put this another way, is the shift from mass consumption of commercial culture generated by mass media to that of mass consumption of user generated cultural objects fueled by consumer electronics and social media ventures merely a logical next step in more of what has already been; mass media? Or does this represent a recent upheaval of the existing media superstructures and should be considered a new form of participatory art. While I do not seek to answer that question here, I will say that it does represent a new form of active audiences. Whether or not their participation is reinforcing or antagonizing the status quo of existing superstructures is another question entirely.

## Conclusion

Whether art utilizes participation with the goal of activating audiences, re-imagining authorship, or reinforcing community, it is art that seeks change; be that artistic change or political change. Participatory art in the early 20th century imparted a significant impact on contemporary politics and artistic institutions. With the revitalization of participatory art beginning in the 1990's and continuing through today, one must ask whether the principles acted upon in the last century and a half are appropriate to the contemporary political and artistic climates we find ourselves in, or whether they must be adapted to suit our current needs. Technological advances have significantly impacted the world of participatory art, largely by making it readily available through electronic interaction and distribution. Though, I would argue

that this does not constitute a compelling enough reason to utilize participation. Participatory art has always been, and I believe continues to be, a synthesis of art and politics. One simply cannot break from the established norm without it having political ramifications. Where, then, does participatory art belong in a contemporary art practice?