



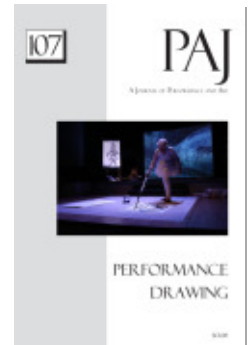
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Participation and its Discontents

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ART & PERFORMANCE NOTES



Musée de la danse. Flip Book. Choreographed by Boris Charmatz. Part of Musée de la danse: Three Collective Gestures, Museum of Modern Art, October 2013. Photo: Julieta Cervantes. Courtesy the Museum of Modern Art © 2013.

PARTICIPATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Bertie Ferdman

A (micro) history of world economics, danced by Pascal Rambert, presented as part of *Crossing the Line*, in collaboration with La MaMa and Performance Space 122; *Spokaoko* by Annie Dorsen, presented as part of *Crossing the Line*, in collaboration with Karaoke Cave; *Bivouac*, by Philippe Quesne, presented as part of *Performa 13*, in collaboration with Pioneer Works. All three works presented in Fall 2013.

Participation is in vogue nowadays. It is everywhere, spanning right and left, from conservative to progressive agendas: social networking, open-source software, business ventures, marketing, advertisement, user-friendly products, interactive learning, experiential learning, experience economies, participatory democracy, community engagement. Over the past few years a wave of “participatory events” has hit the New York art/theatre scene. From Ann Hamilton’s *The event of a thread* at the Park Avenue Armory, which had everyone on swings; to Carsten Höller’s *Experience* at the New Museum, which had everyone going down a slide and riding a carousel; to Ryan McNamara’s recent *MEJM: A Story Ballet about the Internet*, which had dancers grabbing audiences with their chairs and wheeling them off; to Aaron Landsman’s *City Council Meeting*, which had us choosing our roles as Participants, Respondents, or Bystanders, performing in real time

the recreation of a local political meeting. Even Broadway is profiting from the trend, bringing a revival of *Tony and Tina’s Wedding*, where the audience plays the friends and family of the bride and groom as guests in the make-believe marriage. Talk of engaging audiences and different forms of spectatorship is now common in museums, galleries, biennials, art festivals, as well as in performance venues. It seems as though theatricality is no longer infiltrating art (as Michael Fried so adamantly warned) but art has gradually *become* theatre. Participation seems to be the new “it,” particularly as visual art practices continue to engage with creating social environments and putting people in relation to one another.

But given that theatre’s basic premise *is* relational, participatory practices in theatre have historically been concerned with reviving and experimenting with the actor/spectator dynamic. Artaud and

Grotowski wanted to immerse audiences into the drama; Brecht wanted to break the fourth wall; Boal broke the fourth wall altogether. Landmark productions from the sixties like The Living Theatre's *Paradise Now* and The Performance Group's *Dionysus in '69* epitomized the use of audience engagement in theatre practices, where participation was meant to incite spectators to political action, inviting audiences to join the performers out of the theatre and into the streets. Richard Schechner's writings on environmental theatre sought precisely to change the theatregoing experience so that the actor's playing space was not necessarily separate from the spectator's viewing space. Essentially, environmental theatre was a theatre that drew from the aesthetics of earlier avant-garde practitioners as well as on more popular festive traditions where the boundaries between actor and spectator and between art and life were tested.

In all of these cases, audience participation was inherently tied to theatre's role as an agent of change. Spectating had to be active, and therefore, participatory—whether immersed in the drama, distanced from it, or simply, in it. A false dichotomy has infiltrated much aesthetic discourse now whereby spectating is equated with passivity and participation with activity. The philosopher Jacques Rancière in particular has written a lot about this largely in his *Emancipated Spectator*, where he powerfully argues against such binaries (“Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting”) and draws heavily on pedagogy and the teacher/student metaphor to do so (“The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar They are both distant spectators and active interpreters of the

spectacle offered to them”).¹ Curiously however, many so-called immersive theatrical practices often substitute voyeurism for participation, which is exactly the opposite form of critical engagement Brecht had in mind.

Recent discourse in visual art practice has centered on what Claire Bishop has termed “the social turn,” where artists are increasingly using social situations to produce politically motivated projects. Concerned about social justice and rampant class inequality, artists rightfully want their art to make a difference in the real world. In her most recent book *Artificial Hells*, Bishop takes on the task both to historicize the use of the social in art contexts and also to stress new ways of critiquing this type of participatory art in ways that respond not just to its process, but also to its product. Bishop is among an array of art historians, curators, and critics—notably Grant Kester—who are responding to a changing art world where participation has become central to making art (and social change) *happen*. Whereas for Kester the ultimate goal of participatory art is the promotion of equality and social collaboration per se—its social and/or political efficacy—Bishop finds this problematic, stressing the fact that a rewarding participatory experience alone cannot account for its aesthetic value, as the destabilization and questioning of social norms are also essential. Whatever their disagreement over its value *as art*, what is noteworthy is that, ultimately, both Bishop and Kester are concerned with a participation whose intent is overtly social and political.

Since theatre is by its very nature participatory, it is already a social art form. Three distinct pieces I saw this fall:



Left: Philippe Quesne, *Bivouac*,
Performa 13. Photo: Paula Court.
Courtesy Performa. Below:
Spokaoke by Annie Dorsen,
Crossing the Line, Karaoke Cave.
Photo: Brittany Buongiorno.



Pascal Rambert's *A (micro) history of world economics, danced*, Annie Dorsen's *Spokaoke*, and Philippe Quesne's *Bivouac* have had me thinking quite a lot about the nature, and sometimes exploitation, of *participation* in contemporary live art practice today. Sometimes, as these three performances manifest, participation might yield discomfort, tension, and even anger, which may or may not have been the artist's original intention. The outcome may even be unforeseen, and often surprisingly refreshing, particularly when not premeditated.

Inspired by a cover of *Le Monde* in 2008—a picture of an African-American family in Detroit who had been evicted from their house—Pascal Rambert's *A (micro) history of world economics, danced* looked at the effects of the global economic crash on a cast of fifty local participant-performers. The cast also included philosophy professor Eric Méchoulan, who opened by emphasizing that he was *not* an actor, and French actresses Clémentine Baert, Cécile Musitelli, and Virginie Vaillant. Using minimal staging and décor, a white floor, fluorescent lighting, brief caricature scenes depicting Blaise Pascal and Adam Smith, fake moustaches, and interludes with academic lectures on economic philosophy and political theory, the piece's main attraction was clearly the fifty singular bodies of these "participants" onstage, who were recruited locally in every city the piece has toured (it premiered in 2010 at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers where Rambert is artistic director). Whereas the version I saw in New York City seemed to have many trained performers, in Tokyo, for example, it had "many ladies over 90." According to Rambert, the participation of these non-professionals live on stage was essential:

It's very important to me that the artists with whom I work or amateurs or participants really create the piece in real time in front of the eyes of the audience. In *(micro) history*, we do a writing session in real time during the show, so while the philosopher is talking to the audience and the performers are doing something else, [the volunteers] sit on the floor and write, and when it's their turn, they come to a mike facing the audience and read what they just wrote. There has been a lot of *(micro) history* happening in the world, so maybe now 500 people have been participating.²

The onstage use of non-performers, what Berlin-based collective Rimini Protokoll call "real experts," is becoming more and more commonplace in contemporary theatre, with Rimini's own performances (in particular the *100%* series) a clear example of this trend. While I was drawn to the sheer number of bodies on stage in *(micro) history*, and while I understood the element of "live participation" happening in front of me, the production seemed stifled by its own premise. For a piece that aimed to provide a critique of consumer culture and economic inequalities, precisely by using "real people" who, like us, participate in this economy, it fell short of exposing, or at the very least of acknowledging, its *own* participation in the very economy it wanted to critique. Maeve Little, one of the participants in the New York production I saw, wrote an eloquent piece exposing precisely the contradictions inherent in what she considered its "covert economic hierarchy," where some volunteer participants were paid and others weren't.³

While her participation clearly yielded discontent, what seems relevant is that participating per se was not necessarily what she found problematic, since it did provoke valuable exchanges. It was the *context* of the participation, the lack of an open discourse about the production's own economies among cast members, that promoted a double standard. She had perhaps participated in the performance, but what was frustrating was not having participated in discussions that involved economic decisions related to its production. Méchoulán's generalized explanations did little to help us connect to the representational micro-histories present onstage. In this case, it seemed that "participation" did little to engage with the work's content and appeared more as a tool that allowed us, the audience, to witness the *spectacle* of participation.

Another piece I saw, or I should say *experienced*, was Annie Dorsen's *Spokaoke*, a "participatory event" that functioned exactly like regular karaoke, except instead of singing the lyrics to famous pop songs, we were speaking the words to famous speeches, carefully selected by Dorsen. Set in the Karaoke Cave, "the premiere, go-to karaoke bar in NY," *Spokaoke* provided a catalogue with about one hundred speeches we could choose from, ranging from iconic (Ronald Reagan's "Tear down this wall" speech, Bush's Iraq speech) to the politically prescient (Salvador Allende's 1972 speech at the UN, Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman," Charlie Chaplin's Great Dictator), to other eras (Socrates' trial speech), to cult status (Miss Teen South Carolina 2007's beauty pageant answer). I attended the opening night party, which meant there was quite the merry and inebriated crowd not just delivering the

speeches but listening to them, cheering on, booing in some cases, laughing, and just overall having a good time.

After a few drinks I chose Patrice Lumumba's 1960 Congolese independence speech, which had had a significant impact upon me the first time I saw Raoul Peck's documentary *La mort du prophète* over ten years ago. I knew I wanted to "spokaoke" to something I cared deeply about. Oddly enough, as I performed it, I was more concerned with being heard (the mike was new to me) and understood (the words on the screen came much faster than I expected) than with the actual meaning of the words I was reciting. Whereas Lumumba's speech had weighed heavily on Africa's future and had been an unprecedented daring against the horrible King Leopold II, here I was screaming these words out of the top of my lungs at a bar. Taken out of their socio-political and historical contexts, and heard one after the other, the speeches definitely felt different. Their original impact was gone, however undeniably they were *present*, for better or worse, as part of a collective discourse where one has a Lumumba alongside the dumb, the bad, and the ugly: a Sarah Palin, a George Bush, a Margaret Thatcher.

Speaking of evil, some people rose to the challenge. Someone I know chose to deliver Joseph Goebbels's Sportpalast speech, often referred to as the Total War speech, and for *days* afterward he felt horrible. He wanted to see what it was like to utter those words, I remember him telling me when I asked why he had chosen that particular text. I ran into him a week later and he still felt terrible. Enunciating Goebbels's words in public had provoked deep discom-



A (micro) history of world economics, danced by Pascal Rambert, *Crossing the Line*, La MaMa and Performance Space 122. Photo: Ilan Bachrach.

fort, to the point of physical disgust. Saying something had *done* something, operating much like one of J. L. Austin's performatives, where to say something had actually accomplished something (exactly the scary part in Goebbels's words). The fact that the horror of uttering of Goebbels's speech (more than the speech itself) stayed with him for a number of days was for me a sign of the work's power. In *Spokaoke*, participation was not necessarily meant to empower the speaker or embrace their words. It was rather a means to an end, where the end was really uncharted territory. Its effectiveness was unrelated to how pleasant the experience was, which makes this form of participation, and its afterlives, more nuanced. We can choose to participate, but we don't know where that will take us, how long the ride will be, or whether we'll even get there.

Whatever the outcome is, however, we own it. It's ultimately much more exciting.

In early November I attended *Bivouac*, an installation-event created by French artist Philippe Quesne, recently named artistic director of the acclaimed Centre National Dramatique at Nanterre-Amandiers. Originally trained in the visual arts and as a scenographer, Quesne established the Vivarium Studio in 2003 in Paris to produce performances that defy convention, mixing theatre, dance, and live sculpture. I had no idea what to expect from *Bivouac*, which was simply billed as a "site-specific project" where we would embark on a bus tour around Red Hook with Quesne as our tour guide. When I got to the meeting point—a café at the corner of Smith Street in Carroll Gardens—I was greeted

by Performa interns, with instructions (wait here for the bus) and papers to sign (film release agreement). No one knew exactly what we were about to see or where we were going, which built our anticipation and was, I would later find out, apparently part of the work: elevating the audience's expectations. Inside the bus we were treated to a video with a human-sized mole and a worker sawing a hole through a wall.

It was exciting to be taken at night for a ride, both literally and figuratively, and I thought about how submissive performance structures really are. Despite all the hype about creating agency via participatory practices, audiences relentlessly follow rules, to the point where any psychopath need only conceptualize an event, and he will undoubtedly lead a handful of willing participants somewhere they'd rather not go. As the bus turned past a large empty lot next to the IKEA parking lot, I thought about the gruesome Moscow theatre hostage crisis in 2002, where over one hundred people had been killed after Chechen rebels took over a sold-out performance of *Nord-Ost*, a Russian musical theatre production. But Quesne's voice took over through the microphone, a very deliberate soothing voice that seemed to want to comfort its audience into compliance. On the screens, the human-sized mole finished the hole on the wall, and after a view of the Manhattan skyline and a glimpse of the mole walking live on the street, we arrived at our destination (Pioneer Works—a huge arts center/gallery space), where, Quesne gently told us, his video crew would ask us to exit slowly one by one so they could film us. The bus entered the space via the hole in the wall.

Visually, the evening was stunning and conjured the eerie landscape of a David Lynch movie: we were walking amid lots of smoke effects (fake of course, as Quesne explained), a pile of wood, a pickup truck with its headlights on, an elegant and virtuosic theremin performer, and the tour bus itself complete with bus driver inside. Conceptually, however, it felt like we were unpaid extras giving our time and energy for a future Quesne film. As the project description read, *tableaux vivants* are “staged as both adventures and as opportunities for Quesne to document images of curious audiences looking for meaning.” Indeed, Quesne deliberately raised our expectations by setting up a situation that stirred our curiosity, and then coerced our participation by pretending this would make something happen. Except nothing ever did, and this was supposed to be the point. We walked back and forth in the smoke, got filmed, and had some really good whiskey. The event's spectacle-ness, and our participation in it, was meant to carry the full weight of the evening. The quality of any form of exchange, of an embodied encounter, of the reason we were even there in the first place, was not examined or called into question. The possibility of participation seemed wasted, almost dehumanized.

As more artists continue to use differing degrees and approaches to participation, it strikes me that asking people to participate in issues that matter—participate in thinking about indifference, injustice, inequality, humanity—is participating, whether or not we are walking around, sitting still, or even sleeping (*Dream of the Red Chamber*, a performance for a sleeping audience, is Jim Findlay's new

piece). The basis of participation, and I speak from my experience as a teacher and my commitment to pedagogy, is that to produce action one must inspire critical thinking. This is by no means a passive thing. To raise questions. To promote thought. To break out of convention. To question and rethink modes of thought. Participation, as we saw with Dorsen's *Spokaoke*, does not have to be pleasurable for it to be effective. Neither does its use necessarily imply engagement—political or intellectual, or for that matter emotional. Allowing room for discomfort within participation means disavowal is part of the picture. It seems crucial to question our own complicity in what we accept as a given, and the theatre should not be an exception. If participation is supposed to empower

us—the spectators, society somehow—then the current state of affairs tells me any form of participation that does not also *question* that participation seems fishy.

NOTES

1. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Gregory Elliott, trans. (London and New York: Verso, 2009).

2. Interview with Gia Kourias, "Pascal Rambert Talks About His (micro) history of the world, danced." *TimeOut New York*, 26 September 2013.

3. Maeve Little, "Dancing a (micro)economy." *Culturebot Blog*. Accessed December 2013. <http://www.culturebot.org/2013/10/19771/dancing-a-microeconomy/>.

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