

A RESTLESS ART: PARTICIPATORY ART IN A CHANGING WORLD

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1 Introduction

The title of this conference is art and hope. It's a brave flag to stand under today. We are living in difficult, dangerous times – you don't need me to describe the social, economic, political, security and environmental challenges. But a new year is a time of hope, if only because, here in the northern half of the globe, we have just passed the darkest time of year. The nights are getting shorter. So this is a good moment for such a conference.

And a focus on participatory art is appropriate too, because it is true that a great deal of hope is usually invested in it.

- The hope of the artists – to create something satisfying and worthwhile, to move someone, to be understood, to connect and to make a difference
- The hope of the funders – to alleviate some social difficulty or tension, to help people in crisis, to find a new solution for some intractable problem
- The hope of the participants – to get a chance, to do something interesting or positive, to be recognised, to have a good day that can lead to a better tomorrow

All this hope bound up in participatory art may be one reason why, in these difficult times, it has grown so fast. It must now be one of the most extensive kinds of non-commercial arts practice, not only in Europe but throughout the world.

Its rapid growth is something to celebrate, because it has enabled so many people to participate in the artistic life of their society and because it has nurtured new art, fresh ideas, unheard voices and changing situations. At the same time, this very richness has produced a confusing spectrum of names and approaches, theories and practices, which can make it hard to understand even what participatory art is – to say nothing of its purposes and value.

So today I shall try to shed some light on those questions, drawing on my own experience and the research I have been doing with the generous support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation here in Lisbon and through the UK Branch. I'll look at three big questions:

- What is participatory art?
- How has it developed?
- What hope could it offer?

There are many people here who know as much about these things as me from different perspectives and experiences. So I offer my thoughts in a spirit of participation, keen to hear other ideas, to share insights and to create something of value together, for us all.

2 What is participatory art?

Let's start at the beginning: what is participatory art? I would like to propose that this term is most useful when it is understood very broadly, inclusively and simply. So the definition I offer you is this:

- Participatory art is the creation of an artwork by professional artists and non-professional artists.

That's all. Everything that could be added to that definition is part of what creates one or other *sub-category* of participatory art – and there are many of those. The work has been described in different times and places as socially engaged practice, new genre public art, community based arts development, community engagement, relational aesthetics, theatre for social change, community art, education and outreach, applied theatre, community cultural development and more.

Each of these – and others I haven't mentioned – has its practitioners and theorists, its admirers and critics, but they are all structured around the creation of an artwork by professional artists and non-professional artists. It is that *partnership in creation* – however it happens, for whatever reasons and irrespective of what it finally looks like – that defines participatory art.

Because it is the creation of art, participatory art has three other shared characteristics:

- a theoretical and aesthetic framework that guides those who make it happen;
- a duration in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end; and
- a presentation of the work created.

It seems obvious when I say it, but this does get misunderstood. Participatory art, just as much as conventional theatre, visual art or music making, is about creating art. The art work itself may be small or ambitious, innovative or familiar. It may be presented in a cultural institution or a private space. The audience may be vast or intimate, strangers or friends. Finally, of course, the work may or may not be artistically successful. All these things are to do with the work's character and how well it is achieved. But the work is art.

Unless the intention is to create art, then the activity is better understood as education, community development, political activism or social work – all of which may be excellent and important, but they are not participatory art: they are social interventions that make use of art. The critical difference here is *intention* and that affects everything, including the changes that can happen and the ways in which they take place.

The last point I would draw your attention to in my definition is my use of the phrase ‘professional artists and non-professional artists’. I am making a claim here, which is simply that *everyone* involved in a participatory art project is acting as an artist when they take part. Of course the way they act and the resources they use will vary according to the extent of their education and experience, as well as their personality and social situation. All those things influence *how well* they act as an artist, but not the *nature of the act* itself. Someone who runs is a runner, whether they are fast and graceful, or slow and clumsy: it is the act of running that defines them in that moment. When a person takes part in a co-created art project, they are an artist, not a mere participant.

That is important in many ways, but above all because it means that participatory art is not about artists doing things with, for or even – at worst – to so-called ‘ordinary’ people. It is about a group of people creating art together or it is nothing that deserves its own definition.

3 How has it developed?

3.1 ANTECEDENTS OF PARTICIPATORY ART

Participatory art – in all its forms – can seem quite a new idea and certainly in some places, such as North Africa and Eastern Europe, it is a more recent development than it is, for example, in Britain or Australia.

But actually, in different forms and with other names, it has been around for a long time. In the middle of the last century, theatre for development was an important force in post-colonial countries such as the Philippines and while Brazilian innovators like Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal had a profound influence on work in Europe. And we could go further back than that. The idea of giving working people access to art was powerful in the cultural development of 19th century cities – and so was the self-organisation of working people to achieve that for themselves, from Mechanics’ Institutes in Welsh mining communities to the *chitalishta* (community cultural clubs) of pre-independence Bulgaria.

So let’s not imagine that these ideas are new and in need of special justification. And let’s not underestimate their emancipatory power or their influence on social life. Still, it’s true that participatory cultural action gained new energy and took innovative new forms during the cultural and social upheaval of the 1960s. In Europe, that was probably most important in the UK, where a combination of social, demographic and cultural factors led to the emergence of community art.

3.2 THE FIRST GENERATION: COMMUNITY ART

It was driven by young visual artists and theatre makers – other art forms became involved in participatory art somewhat later – many of them from a generation of working class people who got access to art schools and universities for the first time in the 1960s. Their different culture and life experience, combined with the radical politics of the time, led some of them to reject art world values they considered elitist and self-serving. Artists such as Murray Martin, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen and Graham Denman, who left a London Polytechnic for Newcastle in 1968 where they founded Amber Collective, wanted to make working class culture a legitimate part of the art world.

In taking elite artistic ideas and practices to social housing estates those artists had to learn a great deal about community, politics, psychology, education, local government and much more. What was possible in the privileged space of an art school studio or theatre rehearsal room was utterly changed in an unheated community hall with people who had very different life experiences, skills, expectations and reasons for being there.

Those young community artists, naïve and idealistic as they often were, had to learn fast to survive in the new situations they had chosen to create. In that crucible, they developed many core ideas, workshop techniques, organisational methods and artistic forms that are still influential today. The legacy of that first generation of community artists in shaping the language of participatory art is enormous, though it has not always been recognised, even by those artists who have inherited and built on it.

Some, probably a minority, in that generation were also influenced by left wing and radical politics and much of the theatre and visual art work they made was polemical. They became directly involved in anti-racist and feminist campaigns, as well as supporting communities resisting the deindustrialisation of the 1970s and 1980s. But by the time Margaret Thatcher resigned in 1990, community art was in many ways a spent force in Britain. The left – with which many community artists had associated themselves – had lost the struggle that would determine the future direction of the UK. Many community artists left the field: some to pursue community action outside the arts, some for other jobs on which they could better support their young families and some to pursue more personal artistic interests.

3.3 THE SECOND GENERATION: PARTICIPATORY ART

Those who stayed in community arts at the end of the 1980s had to adapt to a new political, social and ideological world. Post-industrial Britain was left with deep scars in communities whose reason for existing – steelworks, coal mines, shipyards and docks – facing a future in which their skills were not wanted. The discourse of community arts shifted from radical politics to social healing and its name changed too. During the 1990s, the term community arts was gradually dropped by most people working in the field and replaced by the more neutral sounding ‘participatory arts’.

This change also reflected an internal struggle between those who prioritised social change and those who prioritised art. This distinction – which I have always believed to be false – was expressed in arguments about quality, and it continues today. A few days ago an artist told me that he disliked the term 'community arts' because for him it 'has a history which often undervalues the quality of artistry and creative rigour involved'. I don't accept that. Much of the work I have seen over the years – and especially in the past 19 months – has been artistically outstanding. And I have experienced a great deal of dull art in theatres, concert halls and galleries at the same time. Quality cannot be merely a matter of form.

Since the emergence of community art, the Arts Council had consistently used the quality argument to avoid giving funds or other support to the work. So, during the 1990s, the re-named participatory arts world turned increasingly to local government and public agencies for funding – especially the urban regeneration companies established to counter the effects of deindustrialisation. They spoke about how participating in the arts could contribute to urban renewal, to health care, to education and even to the reintegration of offenders into society.

In 1997 Britain elected the first Labour government for 18 years and the idea of social inclusion entered political discourse. There was also substantial new funding for the arts from the National Lottery established three years earlier. Research into the social impact of participation in the arts (including my own) was beginning to provide an evidence base for public investment in participatory art as a form of social policy. During the next 20 years, participatory art in Britain grew in that relatively fertile context of economic prosperity and remedial social policy. It began to receive new attention in countries like the Netherlands and Belgium. The art world itself – albeit with very different ideological preoccupations – became more interested in the opportunities it presented, on the one hand for increasing its legitimacy through outreach and education work, and on the other for new relations between artists and their audiences.

And then, in 2008, the neoliberal economic bubble collapsed like a badly-cooked soufflé. The impact of what has been called the Great Recession – signalling its similarity to the Great Depression of the 1930s – has been felt across the world and in few European countries more severely than Portugal. Its consequences are still far from clear, but they certainly include the political events of last year and the uncertainties we face today

3.4 THE THIRD GENERATION: A RESTLESS ART

Direct and indirect effects of the financial crisis are already evident in the small backwater of participatory art where I spend my time. Together, they seem to be shaping the emergence of a third generation of participatory art. The first and most obvious effect has been the slashing of public funding for the arts as part of wider so-called austerity measures, many of which have hit the poorest (who are the people most involved in participatory art)

especially hard. That has been accompanied – in Britain at least – by a sharp decline in government interest in socially-oriented participatory arts programmes. This is not because policy-makers have singled them out or are even much aware of what has never been a large part of public policy. It is simply a side-effect of how the post-war welfare state is being redefined on a narrow model. The rights and wrongs of that are not at issue here but the effects, in terms of lower public funding for participatory art, are clear and likely to become more so in the years to come.

The effects of the Great Recession, and the globalising economic policies that many economists now see as having contributed to it, have also created a breakdown in trust between citizens and political leaders. This has produced large votes for new and sometimes radical political movements, such as Podemos, Syriza and Five Star. This loss of trust also played a role in the Arab Spring, the Euromaidan events in Ukraine and most recently in the Brexit referendum and the American Presidential election. Again, it is not my intention to comment on these historic upheavals, but simply to note that artists are also citizens and they are as likely to be affected by this changing consciousness as their neighbours.

This is most evident among artists working in participatory projects in Southern and Eastern Europe and in other Mediterranean countries. I have spoken to many of them in recent years and I'm struck by how their work is either directly critical of the state and public policy – in ways that echo the first generation of community artists – or, more often, simply ignores the state's interests altogether. The loss or, in some countries, the total absence of public support for participatory arts is redefining the relationship of the work with state institutions and the longer term effects of that are unforeseeable.

In this ferment of change, another factor contributes to the emergence of what I see as the third generation of participatory art. The young artists investing their energies in the field belong to the post-Internet generation. Most of them grew up in a connected, globalising, diverse and unstable world. Their ideas, expectations and ways of working are not those of the previous generations. They do not recognise the art form silos of visual art, theatre and music that proved so limiting to the acceptance, if not the practice, of their predecessors. They are reinventing participatory art as I speak, in Portugal, in Spain, in Greece, in Serbia, in Ukraine, in Turkey, in Egypt, in Tunisia, in Brazil and in many other places.

And if I do not always feel I would do the same things, or even understand why they have made the decisions they have made, I am thrilled by the energy, the commitment, the new ideas and the courage I see. I am convinced that the work they are doing is often having profound effects on everyone involved – as the best community and participatory art always has – empowering people by developing skills, confidence, networks, imagination, creativity and solidarity. Finally, I am delighted by art they are making – by turns unexpected, fascinating, joyful, angry, beautiful and moving.

4 What hope could it offer?

To me, and I expect to all of us gathered for this conference today, this new generation of participatory arts activists is deeply encouraging. It does offer hope at a time when that is so badly needed, above all to those who are involved.

Among the many people I have spoken to in recent months, I remember a young man in prison in Leiria, still buzzing with the rap he had recited thirty minutes earlier for an audience of hundreds during an astonishing performance of *Don Giovanni* by professional and non-professional artists.

I remember a couple of middle-aged women who travelled 100 kilometres to have lunch with me in Sarajevo because they wanted me to know how important was the theatre project they had taken part in with their small, volunteer run mental health centre. For months, they along with other people from Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia had travelled to one another's cities to create and perform theatre about mental illness in a spirit of reconciliation.

I remember the women who have taken to acting since retirement and lay in their night-clothes in bed on a street in Bristol to perform their stories of loneliness and old age for anyone who stopped.

These people – and millions of others who create participatory art work together – find hope in what they do and nurture hope in others. Collectively, they are part of a gradual transformation of our attitudes, our expectations and, yes, our society. If that sounds grandiose or unlikely, remember how previous movements of popular education changed society in the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century. Participatory art – which I think has never been as mature, as extensive or as energised – can be the equivalent in our time.

And let me say, in conclusion, that the hope it offers is not some shallow form of goodwill, some vague and hollow optimism. Twenty years ago, I published research that showed how much these experiences of participating in the arts could transform individual lives, and what I have seen since then has only deepened my confidence in the importance of participatory arts in human and social development. But the reason why I take hope from this work today is not that, or not only that. It is because at a time when Europe's democratic values are being challenged, when the very concept of human rights is undermined, when tolerance of diversity is openly derided, the best participatory art work does more than stand for certain values. It enacts them.

You cannot do good participatory art without recognising others as equal to yourself. You cannot do it without tolerating, respecting and accepting other people's differences – indeed, you cannot do it without being actively interested in others and wanting to hear and learn from them. You cannot do it without knowing that we are better together, when we trust and depend on one another, when we share our strengths and are open about our weaknesses. You cannot do it without accepting the possibility of failure. You cannot do it if you think failure is the end. You cannot do it without care, affection or empathy. You cannot

do it without a vision of a better way of living and ideas of how to get there. You cannot do it with optimism, courage and laughter. You cannot do it without hope.

Participatory art is one of many ways to enact these beliefs and values, of course, and I don't want to place too heavy a burden of expectation on a practice that, in the end, people rightly do for pleasure. But perhaps for that very reason, because it brings pleasure, satisfaction, delight and joy, participatory art has a special and valuable place in our life today and tomorrow. And that's enough hope for me.