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Participation, Art and Digital Culture

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ABSTRACT

Participatory art has become an umbrella term for a broad range of artistic practices that focus on the importance of participation, interaction, social networks and processes as a crucial part of art projects and that move away from an exclusive focus on clearly defined and delineated art products. At the same time, the notion of participation in the arts is inevitably influenced by the increasing ubiquity of digital culture in which “participation” is a central feature. In this special issue of *Critical Arts* we aim to explore art practices that specifically engage with participation, interaction, technology and digital media. We have sourced papers from researchers, theorists and artists to engage critically with how technology, media and networks open up new avenues to develop practices that examine space and locality, community and communication, interaction and intimacy, proximity and distance, creation and co-creation.

Keywords: participation; art; digital culture; co-presence

Introduction

Participatory art has become an umbrella term for a broad range of artistic practices that focus on the importance of participation, interaction, social networks and processes as a crucial part of art projects and that move away from an exclusive focus on clearly defined and delineated art products (Finkelpearl 2014; Hillaert and Trienekens 2015; Jancovic 2017; Siegenthaler 2013). From this perspective, the events, processes and initiatives that engender social interaction, participation and cultural encounters are seen as the actual art practice and from this perspective artists and practitioners recognise that their work is embedded in context-specific and relational networks (Rutten 2016;



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2017; Siegenthaler 2013). In the *Manifesto for Participatory Art Practice*, Hillaert and Trienekens (2015, 5) define participatory art as

[a] form of artistic research, in which artists together with citizens seek the right artistic format that allows alternative voices and interpretations to be heard. The artists understand their artistic work as the driving force behind wider processes, rather than simply as the creation of a preconceived artistic product.

From a related perspective, well-established notions such as “relational” and “dialogic” aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002; Degarrod 2013; Kester 2004) have taken on various forms in which social relations, dialogue and interaction are at the same time the context and content for art production, mediation and consumption (Hjorth and Sharp 2014; Rutten 2017). Within many participatory art practices, the aim is indeed to create intersubjective encounters between artists, publics and local contexts. However, the notion of relational aesthetics as a framework for participatory art has also been criticised because these projects do not always necessarily address the power imbalances that can potentially lead to uneven and unequal forms of participation (e.g. Bishop 2006; Martin 2007; for an extended discussion, see Hjorth and Sharp 2014; see also Rutten 2017). The concept of participation is indeed a very complex and multilayered concept ranging from “passive” to “active” participation with many different forms in between and many different approaches to what participation can and should entail (Almenberg 2010; Finkelpearl 2014; Jancovic 2017).

More recently, the notion of participation in the arts has inevitably also been influenced by the increasing ubiquity of *digital culture* in which *participation* is (arguably) a central feature. Digital technologies have opened up the disciplinary boundaries of art and its focus has increasingly shifted towards process, participation, interaction and dialogue (De Wit, Van Bogaert, and Huybrechts 2011; Gronlund 2016). The emphasis on participation in both contemporary art and (digital) media has led to an increasing convergence between participation, art and digital culture and an exploration of changing notions of interaction, space, place and community within the arts and also within art institutions (Order 2016; Rutten 2017). As already discussed in previous work, several authors have explored the notion of “co-presence” as a concept that offers an alternative perspective that moves away from “co-location” or “collaboration” in site-specific participatory practices (Beaulieu 2010; Horst and Hjorth 2014; Hjorth and Sharp 2014; Rutten 2017; Westenberg and Rutten 2017). Co-presence is utilised to problematise different notions of participation and to redefine the relationship between artist, technology and audience, a relationship that is increasingly being challenged by digital culture. From this perspective, technological mediation becomes a crucial component of social interactions in participatory art projects rather than an obstacle (Beaulieu 2010; Westenberg and Rutten 2017). Because participation, interaction, immersion and collaboration characterise contemporary media culture, participatory art is challenged to move beyond the mere instrumental application of new technologies: “[t]here is a

need to focus on how the use of new technologies within the arts is also changing our experience of place, conceptions of intimacies and interactions, and to generate new understandings of participation and collaboration” (Westenberg and Rutten 2017, 111; see also Horst and Hjorth 2014; Hjorth and Sharp 2014; Rutten 2016; 2017).

In this special issue we therefore explore the intersection between participation, art and art mediation in relation to technology and digital media. Contributions have been collected from researchers, theorists and artists who engage critically with how technology, media and networks open up new avenues to develop practices that examine space and locality, community and communication, interaction and intimacy, proximity and distance, creation and co-creation and new forms of art mediation. The papers focus more broadly on the impact of digital technologies on art today, for example by exploring the creative and participatory practices that are made possible by artists working with technology or by collaborations between artists, scientists and technological experts (Gardiner and Gere 2010; Gronlund 2016). Next to full research papers we also incorporate vignettes—short statements and reflections by artists about their practice.

Contributions

User-Generated Content

In her contribution “YouTube Scenes and the Public Re-Seen: Natalie Bookchin and the Digital Public,” Holy Arden focuses on how from the 1990s onwards there has indeed been an increasing interest in participatory art and collaborative art practice. She specifically discusses the artist Nathalie Bookchin whose works can be situated within this participatory turn. The work of Bookchin engages with the format of the video diary or vlog that is very present in online participatory formats such as YouTube and Vimeo. These formats are useful for creating user-generated content and to “interact” with a largely autonomous public. The author argues that Bookchin’s works use these formats to explore the impact of these technologies on the lived experience of vloggers within the broader digital economy. This article specifically focuses on the notion of “the public” in relation to user-generated media. Arden problematises that the public sphere on the one hand is preferably free from private interests, while the participatory platforms are inevitably co-opted by commerce. However, based on a thorough analysis of recent works, she argues that the practice of Bookchin focuses on the possibilities of the public in user-generated digital and social media.

In the current convergence culture (Jenkins 2006) digital and social media indeed increasingly offer the possibility for media users not only to consume but also to actively generate and create their own content online and as such also to (critically) generate their own representations. In their article, “A Different Point of View: Women’s Self-

Representation in Instagram's Participatory Artistic Movements @girlgazeproject and @arthoecollective," Sofia Caldeira, Sofie Van Bauwel and Sander de Ridder explore the potential of self-representation on social media based on the analysis of participatory artistic movements on Instagram. The authors focus on how representations on Instagram can be understood as a form of "everyday politics" and as such have the potential to perform social change and affect the politics of representation. The authors specifically focus on the examples of @girlgazeproject and @arthoecollective. These are ongoing artistic projects on Instagram that give a platform to artists who are often underrepresented in the mainstream art world. The article specifically explores how through self-representations artists have the opportunity to reclaim their position as active creators. As such, the authors argue, these Instagram accounts, because of their focus on intersectionality and diversity in visual cultural representation, become a form of "everyday activism." Based on a close reading of these Instagram accounts, the authors provide a theoretical reflection on the politics of self-representation through participatory art practice.

This attention to the "politics of (self-)representation" is also explored in "Everyday Media: The Performativity of Whiteness in Australian Digital Storytelling" by Daniella Trimboli. In this paper, the author argues that digital storytelling has become a popular participatory tool in Australian community-based art projects that offer a platform for sharing everyday experiences. Digital storytelling has indeed become increasingly popular, but the author argues that there is a lack of research on the material implication of digital stories in relation to cultural difference. Trimboli compares two digital stories—Big hART's *Junk Theory* (2006) and Sam Haddad's *Loving Lebanon and Australia* (2007)—and argues that such migrant digital stories offer a perspective to explore the crossroads of multiculturalism, affect and performativity. By reconsidering the connection between performativity and affect, Daniella Trimboli argues that besides the potential of an archival and personally transformative artistic medium, these stories also risk to consolidating normative affective responses.

Integrating Technology in Artistic Practice and Research

Next to the exploration of existing (social) media platforms as spaces for artistic reflection, technology is also increasingly used in art projects to stimulate participation and interaction. In her article "Digitalising the Shared Experience: Interconnected Dramaturgy and the Role of Media in the Tri-National Performance *Phone Home*," Sarah Beck discusses the collaborative performance project *Phone Home*, which was a collaboration between three theatre companies, across three countries (Britain, Germany and Greece). These three performances took place at the same time in three cities and the performances were telematically interconnected. The focus of the performance was the ongoing refugee crisis across Europe, and the connection between the performances and the audiences was done through video-conferencing. The aim of the article is

specifically to explore what role technology has played in developing the project as well as to critically assess the role of media in its actual performance. Based on interviews with the collaborators and by examining the use of technology throughout the project, the author argues that it is necessary to critically reflect on how technology and content are being negotiated in a creative and dramaturgical process, specifically when the performance is based on real stories of displacement.

There are also important cognitive and embodied aspects related to the increasing possibilities for interaction in the arts through technology, and specifically how interaction and technology are interrelated in the creative process. In their article “Embodied, Participatory Sense-Making in Digitally-Augmented Music Practices: Theoretical Principles and the Artistic Case ‘SoundBikes,’” Pieter-Jan Maes, Valerio Lorenzoni, Bart Moens, Joren Six, Federica Bressan, Ivan Schepers and Marc Leman argue that digital technologies generate unlimited opportunities for music composition, listening, interaction and participation. They also argue, however, that these technologies challenge the basic principles of engagement and interaction with music. The article has two main purposes. First, to theoretically discuss the principles of sensorimotor and participatory sense-making, and second, to present a participatory music installation that implements these theoretical perspectives. The music installation “SoundBikes” starts from the idea that collective music-making is indeed a form of participatory sense-making that emerges from embodied, dynamic and collaborative interactions between co-performers. From this perspective, the authors discuss how this specific participatory music installation integrates these different features by stimulating social collaboration and competition.

Cultural (Re)Mediation

From the perspective of the arts we also need to focus on how digitisation creates new practices and understandings of cultural literacy and what this implies for traditional cultural genres and institutions such as libraries and museums. Approaches to changes in culture and the arts due to digitisation address questions such as: how does digitisation change cultural production, reception and participation and what does this imply for traditional mediators of culture? (see e.g. Horts and Hjorth 2014; Vlieghe, Muls, and Rutten 2016). Verboord (2014) emphasises that the decline and shift of cultural hierarchies over the past few decades have been extensively explored within cultural sociology and literacy studies. However, he also argues that there is a need for more research on the role of digital technologies as mediators of knowledge about culture and the arts, because of the essential role of “authority” in constructing cultural capital and achieving cultural literacy (on this, see also Vlieghe, Muls, and Rutten 2016). The ubiquity of digital technologies has indeed strongly increased the opportunities for sharing and discussing cultural commodities (Bourgonjon et.al 2016; Tepper and Hargittai 2009; Verboord 2011; 2014; Vlieghe, Muls, and Rutten 2016).

In her paper, “The Logic of Platforms: How ‘On Demand’ Museums Are Adapting in the Digital Era,” Caroline Wilson-Barnao argues that one of the central missions of art institutions is the provision of broad public access to collections. This mission is very much affected by the fact that museum spaces are increasingly becoming “smart spaces.” This is for example reflected in the use of mobile devices that work simultaneously with digital platforms and databases to provide visitors information about cultural artefacts but also to enhance the museum “experience.” This raises important questions about how technology impacts the public access to and engagement with collections. The author conducted interviews with cultural workers to reflect upon the participatory ideology of these art institutions and to consider the tensions associated with the digital transformation of cultural collections.

Increasingly, virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) is also becoming an important tool for mediation in museum contexts. In her article “The Audience and Artist Interactivity in Augmented Reality Art: the Solo Exhibition on the *Flame* Series,” Cecilia Suhr starts by problematising the traditional act of viewing artworks in art exhibitions. She then explores how augmented reality art (AR) potentially affects viewing behaviours and norms in relation to the experience of traditional paintings as well as new media arts. Starting from a discussion of a recent solo exhibition, the goal of the paper is to unpack the conceptual framework of the exhibited *Flame* series, to explore audiences’ viewing behaviours of augmented reality and to problematise how AR affects the tensions between the artist and active/passive audiences.

The changing notion of mediation of culture also has an impact on the field of literature. In her article “Literature and Participatory Culture Online: Literary Crowdsourcing and Its Discontents,” Hana Kuusela discusses literary crowdsourcing and participation from the perspective of critical media studies and aesthetic theories. She first focuses on the social turn in literature and specifically the social values and affordances attached to literary crowdsourcing. She then focuses on the challenges that literary crowdsourcing is confronted with, specifically by focusing on contemporary social, economic and aesthetic discontents. The aim of the article is to offer critical tools for analysing participatory online practices in art in general and literary crowdsourcing in particular by exploring how literary crowdsourcing can live up to its promise of social value in a media context that is characterised by platform capitalism, precarious labour, communicative capitalism and affective economics.

Vignette

This special issue also incorporates one vignette. Vignettes are short statements and reflections by artists about their practice. In “FIG(URATIONS): One Extended Metaphor for the Poetic Method, a Vignette for Convolute H (and an Ode to Walter Benjamin),” Olivia Guntarik presents a vignette that is part of an intellectual exploration of Melbourne and Manhattan. The project draws from a site-specific work, and should

be read as an ode to Walter Benjamin, a poetic description of collecting as method, walking and philosophy.

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