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# MIND THE GAP

*audience, governance and policies*

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# Mind the gap: audience, governance and policies

The session gathered professionals with diverse experiences in the performing arts to discuss crucial topics related to audience/ citizens' participation in art practices. The four panelists presented various aspects of participation through examples of their work and then formed three working groups to discuss the topic in detail. Why should we do participatory work? Is it possible for cultural institutions to manage cultural democracy? What are the power structures underlying participatory practices? To what extent is participatory agenda aligned with the neoliberal agenda? How can we rethink participatory theatre? These questions were at the heart of the discussion.



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## *A critical approach to participatory practices*

Goran Tomka, a researcher from Serbia interested in audience exploration, urged for rethinking of the 'hegemony of participation', as he called it. Isn't it yet another expression of the neoliberal doctrine of praising productivity, activity, innovation, and entrepreneurship? Is it really that bad to contemplate a piece of art without obviously 'participating' in it?

Starting from the 16th century audiences at the Elizabethan theatre, Goran drew a brief historical outline to demonstrate that audiences were not always as silent, well-behaved and rule-obeying as we are accustomed to think of them. In fact, rules for audiences were established in the late 18-19th century, with introducing seats, taking the lights off, demanding silence, raising the prices for tickets and so on.

### Moderators:

Marijana Rimanic, Head of communications and marketing at POGON – Zagreb, Croatia

Matt Fenton, Artistic director at Contact Theatre, UK

Keisha Thompson, Young people's producer at Contact Theatre, UK

Goran Tomka, lecturer / researcher, Serbia

What is more, Goran believed, audience behaviour at the theatre could be, to a great extent, explained by external social and political factors.

The 19th century was marked by mass revolts of working classes against the capitalism, if we use Marxist terminology, and the treatment to that turmoil was calming down the audiences, instilling

bon ton for well-behaved audiences in theatres and in museums, concert halls and so on. The 1960s were again times of disturbance: Paris student riots, the Prague Spring, and many more. There was also a riot against the bourgeois civility in the theatre. Antonin Artaud, along with other theatre makers, urged for activating and emancipating the audiences.

Nowadays, Goran assumed, our societies have shifted towards depression. In fact, depression has become one of the most significant public health problems facing the world in the 21st century. People are getting increasingly depressed, they are unwilling to go to work, to produce. So the treatment would be to activate them. How? Through cultural participation.

The general consensus implies that participation should involve transition from passive into active audience. That particular preference of active audiences to the passive ones, that overvaluing of production and activeness is what Goran puts into question. *Why do we think that audiences that are not 'participating' are not active? By regarding non-active, i.e. not participating, spectators as some residue of participatory arts, aren't we casting away idleness, dreaming, just wandering about the world as well? Isn't that kind of participation in the arts formulated to suit the goals of a neo-liberal agenda?* - "In a way, may it be not on purpose, we are training to be the perfect employee even while enjoying arts", presumed Goran.

The critical approach group, which Goran moderated, discussed whether the participatory agenda is aligned with the creation of the neoliberal self and how we can rethink participatory theatre to make sure it serves no other purposes than its own artistic and ethical ones.

It became apparent that audience participation is far from being a uniform practice. Rather, we can speak about a spectrum of participation: from attending a performance, volunteering, performing, co-creating, and taking part in decision-making. So, for artistic organisations, it is not about making a choice between participating and spectating audiences, but making a decision on what would be the suitable approach for a particular artistic project. Of course, artists have the freedom not to apply any participatory practices if that is the ethos of their work.

This artistic freedom to choose what kind of participation, if any, art professionals may want to apply in their project should be properly integrated in the funding programmes that have recently grown fond of promoting 'participation in the arts'. As

it was noted in other discussion groups as well, telling the story about the change that participation caused in a particular community, organisation and to particular individuals is even more convincing than providing large numbers of "participants". Simplifying "good participation" to "loads of children jumping around, otherwise it is boring" should be refuted.

Asking for participant's consent to be involved and specifying its terms and conditions were identified as the foundation of any ethical participatory art practice. Participants should be informed about the goals and the activities they will engage with. They should have the right to disagree with the rules, to influence the decision-making and to withdraw their consent at any time they decide.

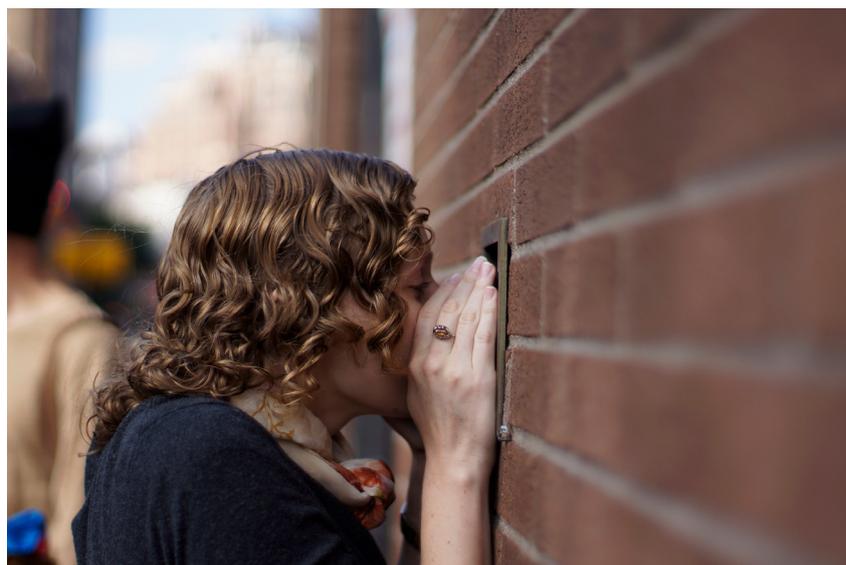
### *Affecting organisations and communities through participation*

Inevitably, doing work not for but with the audiences, asking for their freely given and reversible consent, poses many changes to the way art is being created, and to the role of the artist in the production process. As it has been acknowledged in all the discussion groups, participatory work calls for different production techniques than the work with professional artists.

In participatory projects, artists act more as moderators than as creators. Usually, it is about assisting and co-creating with the participants on the topics which are important and interesting for them. Participants should be co-creators, and they should have a say in the decision-making process - that is how genuine participation is fostered.

A successful example in that direction was provided by Matt Fenton, Artistic director & CEO, and Keisha Thompson, Young people's producer at [Contact Theatre](#) (UK).

Contact Theatre is a Manchester based company which for the last twenty years has been making performances "with young people and of young people". There are numerous culture centres designed to address certain society groups that end up just making art for the regular art goers, without reaching the target groups they intended to. Contact Theatre managed this issue not by exploring and developing their audience profile or by programming "suitable" performances but by making some simple yet radical decisions about its governance. At Contact, young people aged 13-30 lead the organisation, working alongside the staff on deciding the artistic programme, making staff appointments and acting as full Board members. Matt Fenton is the third director who aims to keep the principles of this cultural democracy and participatory guidance active in the governance of the theatre.



Dertop (Gleaner): Subjective Contours Istanbul Week 2013 / © Columbia GSAPP

Those principles, as Matt presented them, are simple and straightforward: young people in the board of trustees of the theatre; young people's panel (15-25 years old) recruiting all the staff members; and young people working on the programming of the theatre, collectively with the theatre professionals. "You would be surprised by the new perspective to your work that comes with having young people in the managing board. For instance, I was interviewed by them when recruited for my current position, and none of them asked where I have studied or what my previous job position was. Instead, they asked me what was the most interesting experience in my life", Matt recalled.

Making the programme a co-decision process in which four young people work together with four professionals from the theatre resulted in having performances that are of explicit interest to the young audiences. As a result, 70 percent of Contact's visitors are under 35 years, with a significant representation of ethnic minorities who would not otherwise attend a theatre.

Keisha Thompson, Young people's producer at the theatre, told her story with Contact: from a 15-year old participant / performer to her current position in her mid-twenties. She confirmed that the artistic programme is informed by young people's topics of interest, so that it features plays about young Muslim female boxers, a play on teenage pregnancy abortion, a play about young people with cancer, among others.

Contact Theatre is currently going through a major building restoration and is expected to reopen its premises in 2019. A survey has been conducted among the young people - audiences, staff, and performers - on what they would like the new venue to offer. The respondents made many suggestions about spaces for social entrepreneurship or for civic journalism. So, obviously, Contact Theatre will diversify their activities if they want to stay in contact with young people.

In this connection, but also, speaking broadly for the cultural sector as a whole, Keisha and Matt wished to debate with their discussion group the following questions: *Why should we engage in participatory*



As a result of actively involving young people in the day-to-day management of the organisation, 70 percent of Contact Theatre's visitors are under 35 years old / © Gary Moyes

*co-decision making? Is it possible for cultural institutions to manage cultural democracy? Which non-art organisations could we learn from and could we collaborate with?*

It was a shared opinion in the discussion group that participatory practices are beneficial for both artistic organisations and participating communities.

Sharing knowledge, sharing the process with participants, as well as the artistic outcomes, gives professionals the chance to be more effective in their interaction with audiences. Reaching out to disadvantaged communities is never an easy task for artists and art organisations. Simply saying that you are making art for such groups would hardly bring any audience. What proved to be working and was shared through several examples from different countries was engaging community members as participants: in decision making, in creation, in performing. Inviting them, asking them to have a say in the artistic project resulted in a much more meaningful audience relationship and at the end, in better art. "We always look up to authorities of all sorts for approval of our work. What if we look down - to communities for judgement what good art is" - someone in the discussion suggested.

Participatory art practices, especially in disadvantaged communities, help overcome privilege and invite more people to experience art. Art gives opportunity to change, Keisha noted. That is why it is so important for the disadvantaged groups to be involved. She knows that having access to art changed her world and she wants more people to have this access. This is not a fast process. Participation takes time to grow, so fostering engagement needs to be an ongoing activity of the organisation. In participatory work, it is the artists' responsibility to leave a legacy in the community that was engaged with their art project.

Participatory art projects are often situated at the border with social work, inclusion, empowerment, activism. In this connection, it seems likely for artists to collaborate with non-art organisations to secure outreach, social intervention or sustainability of the project. Yet it was difficult for the participants in the discussion to define who those partners should be. Most possibly, charity organisations, youth organisations, civil rights NGOs, healthcare institutions, educational institutions, architects, teachers, medical workers, scientists would be natural partners in participatory projects.

“We need to interrogate our role in the social sector and then see ourselves as contributors, not as someone being able to address every issue in society”, was the conclusion, reached by the participants in that discussion group.

## How to constitute a horizontal democratic decision making process

Contact Theatre has implemented the principles of cultural democracy and participatory governance by engaging young people at all levels of its organisational structure. Pogon centre for independent culture and youth, based in Zagreb, Croatia, also promotes horizontal co-decision making by democratising its governance structure. Marijana Rimanic, head of communications and marketing at Pogon, shared the challenges their organisation has to deal with and how they manage the centre.

Pogon was established in 2008, after a long run of advocacy efforts to secure infrastructural support – funding and spaces – from the city government for the independent art scene in Zagreb. The advocacy campaign started in 2005 with developing strategic documents for the future centre, holding public discussions, initiating media activities, and organising a festival with 26 independent organisations holding more than 70 events in various places in the city, which were attended by 15 thousand visitors. Thanks to that visibility campaign, the needs of the scene were recognised and supported by the citizens, by experts, by the media. In 2006, some guerrilla actions followed, and in 2007, one of the buildings designated as suitable for an independent art centre, was squatted. Finally, the city of Zagreb acknowledged the need of a platform for the independent arts scene and in 2009 agreed to establish the centre.

Pogon was founded as a hybrid cultural institution based on a new model of public-civil partnership between the Alliance Operation City (an alliance of thirty NGOs in the field of arts and culture) and the City of Zagreb. It provides an open platform for

programmes of culture organisations and youth. The programme is not curated but it is composed through an ongoing open call.

Securing such an open and transparent selection procedure demanded for equally open and democratic institutional design which participatory decision-making could provide. So, Pogon adheres to the following principles:

- participation in decision-making, ensuring that the independent art scene, represented by the Alliance has an equal role in managing Pogon as the City of Zagreb. Furthermore, Pogon regularly organises consultations with stakeholders and public discussions to let the wider community have a say;
- equality in access for all the users and their programmes;
- transparency, simplicity, and flexibility in programming – secured by making all programming rules and procedures accessible online;
- partnership and collaboration – through the founding civil-public partnership, in the cooperation between different groups and organisations, and in the interaction between two complementary civil society sub-sectors – culture and youth.

Even though the guiding principles and the governing procedures that resulted from them have been established and tested in practice, Pogon, as well as any other organisation trying to apply participation in decision-making, still has a lot of questions to address: *What are the goals of applying participation practices - what do we want to accomplish with it? To what do we wish to contribute? What are the power relations that are at stake? How to set an environment of equality and is this possible with various stakeholders?*

In the following discussion, several examples of arts organisations applying participation in decision-making were shared, which may drive to the conclusion that horizontal governing and co-decision-making have become a trend, especially in managing smaller scale independent art organisations and associations. That does not automatically resolve power tensions,

as it became apparent. These tensions could occur within the organisation, especially if it is a collective of independent NGOs. It can be posed from outside, from funding bodies who could insist on having someone specific in charge to sign the contracts with.

Indeed, it might need more time and efforts to manage processes in a non-hierarchic manner but it's worth it if equal access and participation are at stake. Establishing a system of common values is key to secure integrity in horizontally structured organisations. Such a practical element as consistent documentation of discussions and decision-making proved to secure democratic and participatory governance of the organisations. Rotation of staff has been pointed as a useful way to keep all the people in the organisation involved in decision-making and, in wider networks or associations, to counter members drifting off.

So, participants agreed that this type of organisation management takes time and investment of financial resources but also, of shared values and trust. But stakes are high. “Alone, we are small and insignificant. When we unite that makes us powerful. That's why we put so much effort in collaboration”, Marijana concluded.

The discussion group also voiced out some important considerations to have in mind when applying participatory practices towards audiences and communities. The initiative should better come from the community. The artist's role should be more in supporting and accommodating creation to happen: “we should switch our perspective, keep the doors open and foster participation, but not impose it to our audiences”, someone explained. Such an approach would bring out the themes that are important for the participants and the participation would be consensual and engaged.

There are no strict rules and no recipes for participatory projects, the group concluded. And although it is a collaborative process, at the end of the day, it is the artist who takes the responsibility and determines if what was done through participation was ethical and good.