



2 Risks and opportunities of active spectatorship from a management perspective

Giuliana Ciancio

Ricardo Álvarez

Giuliana CIANCIO



Image by Fred Guerdin

Active spectatorship, changes and novelties in the performing arts sector

Giuliana Ciancio

At first sight...

This paper aims to look at some of the events that are contributing to the development of the notion of “participation” and “active spectatorship” in the performing arts sector. First, a brief observation of the current state of the art of the sector is provided, followed by references to specific projects that highlight how the new participatory approach is impacting the life of cultural organisations and the policy perspective. The analysis is inspired by different cases: from the Be SpectACTive! European project, to other EU projects and networks that are experimenting with different forms of creation and management, and specific experiences in the performing arts sector.

The cultural sector is currently facing a series of important challenges from the point of view of aesthetics, management and economy. Since 2008, the world’s post-industrialised countries have witnessed a global increase in political instability, inequalities and unemployment. This process has generated protests all over the world. At the same time, it gave birth to unexpected models of cultural and artistic experimentation. The new practices that have emerged during this period highlight the importance of participation not only in the artistic sector, but also in the political sphere. These have influenced, and are progressively being embraced by, policymakers and public institutions, therefore becoming potential tools for global development.

The idea of participation in the cultural sector dates back to the 1960s. At that time, interesting examples could be found in the context of community art, where local communities are involved as a part of the artistic process, expressing themselves and connecting with others through experiences of free art making. The “site-specific approach” in the performing arts sector is another example of collaboration between artists and communities, where the former nourish their creations with contributions from the local people and their stories. This approach sees the artist carrying out surveys at a local level, exploring narratives, spaces, contexts and characters to create new projects in specific new venues. These practices had an impact on the sector in the 70s and the 80s, transforming the relationship between the art and the audience, the aesthetic results and the managerial models, as well as the stage and

the spectator. Over the last 20 years, these practices and methodologies have been applied in different contexts and embraced as strategies to promote social cohesion, local development and urban renewal. In these cases, the community is involved in processes of regeneration or, sometimes, of internationalisation. Of course, not all the experiences can be considered best practices, but these can be observed as expressions of a need that comes both from the top-down policymaking and the bottom-up art creation.

Starting from 2008, a more complex idea of participation has been developed in both the political and cultural spheres. Audience development, co-creation and participatory practices have a significant role in the identity-building process of cultural organisations or institutions and represent a form of legitimacy to re-take a role in a cultural and political context (Walmsley, 2013). The participatory practices are introducing a new perspective. The active involvement of the audience, in some specific projects, refers to the idea of sharing “responsibility” in the decision-making process. This introduces a sense of belonging in the arts, a form of free exchange of creative energy. The process of participatory decision-making is one of democratic engagement (Negri & Hardt, 2009) that is transforming the notion of cultural consumption (Lash & Lurry, 2007) and cultural policy.

As Bishop (2012) argues, nowadays the artist is conceived as a collaborator and producer of situations, rather than an individual producer of discrete objects: “the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an on-going or long-term project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a “viewer” or “beholder”, is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant” (p. 2).

The figure of the “prosumer”, following Bishop’s suggestion, comes to mind. The emergence of this new role comes from the experience of digital cultures, where the explosion of smartphones and the consolidation of the Web 2.0 open up to new possibilities for creating a participatory society. Popular books such as *We think* (Leadbeater, 2009a) and *Here Comes everybody* (Shirky, 2008) popularised the idea of a society moving towards a greater, bottom-up democracy, made possible by digital media.

Engagement and the policy level

The European Union’s Creative Europe programme has translated part of the novelties that were emerging from the cultural sector into a policy perspective, pushing cultural organisations to find their position within this new cultural and

economic order. Audience development is one of the main priorities that artists, theatres, cultural institutions and art companies had to deal with over the last few years.

On the one hand, the EU programme highlights a qualitative relationship between cultural venues and spectators, fostering processes of co-creation and practices addressing a variety of audiences who represent a new society. As mentioned in the 2016 Creative Europe call, “audience development is about doing something together with audiences, rather than doing something for them” (European Commission, 2015, p. 4). On the other hand, the EU programme should also take into consideration that this process needs time, expertise and a long-term perspective. Thus, the final outcome should not be creating “art products”, but leaving a legacy in the communities involved. In the near future, this aspect needs to be monitored and debated both at the institutional and organizational level. The evaluation of the Creative Europe programme after the first five years of activity will represent an occasion for examining the novelties introduced at the local and European level and assessing their sustainability in the long-term.

Besides EU policy priorities, it is interesting to observe how the topic of audience or citizen engagement has somehow become one of the institutional priorities and, as mentioned above, it is also a process of legitimisation for cultural institutions. Interesting examples are seen at the city level. To mention but one, in Naples the Mayor and cultural activists intend to re-design the use of private spaces as an arena for “civic use” in the light of the Commons. Thanks to an official act made by the Mayor’s office in 2015, local government and activists are designing new ways to collaborate in order to produce immaterial values. This exchange is evidently transforming the relationship between these two agents and the economic relationship between artists and institutions, while it also introduces possible practices for the management of Common Goods at the city level. Certainly, the process is still too recent for being easily evaluated at this stage, but it is presenting an alternative way to approach the topic.

The participatory aspect is also at the centre of Matera’s bid for the European Capital of Culture 2019. Citizens were involved in the creation of proposals throughout the whole bidding process, demonstrating that cities can create civic engagement around the core ideas behind the EU Capitals of Culture project. Similar experiences are presently taking place all over Europe. The cases of Naples, Matera and other Capitals of Culture show that the notion of participation plays a strategic role and creates a breeding ground where perspectives of policy-makers and citizens sometimes can

meet (of course, with different results in terms of recognition and legacy). Indeed, in the case of Naples, this common ground is designed thanks to a participatory use of laws, where institutions and citizens are working together for redefining their roles.

All these practices activated both at the EU and local level are introducing new policy ideas, based on sharing responsibilities between policymakers and citizens, and supporting new ways of designing cultural programmes. What is happening at this level deserves to be observed and monitored, since it has an impact on cultural organisations' practices. One critical question that comes to mind is the following: are these practices a way to build real democratic engagement or, in the long run, can these represent new opportunities for creating political consensus?

Of course, there are no certain answers. However, it is interesting to observe that participatory experiences in the cultural sector are leading new processes of creation, art programming and policy. As Gielen (2009) suggests, the cultural sector - here he is explicitly referring to the art world more than the performing arts - is a strategic site where conducting analysis on social and political transformations, because "the logic of the art world no longer belongs on the margins but has established itself at the heart of a significant part of our society" (p. 14).

The organisational perspective

Cultural institutions and organisations across Europe have enacted many forms of engagement, from co-creation processes (such as community art, immersive theatre, site-specific approaches) to actual forms of co-programming. In this scenario, the notion of active spectatorship introduces a new perspective. Audiences, who are made of citizens, are not only involved in the artistic process, but act also as decision-makers who express their ideas and needs and can represent new social groups and values. Their decisions can influence and impact the general architecture of institutions and organisations.

Spectators can either be part of the artistic direction or have an impact on artistic decisions or have a dedicated programme (e.g. the Italian Kilowatt Festival with its *Visionari*, the UK Contact Theatre, the EU project Pivot Dance, etc.), where they can manage entire aspects of a season or a festival (as in the case of the Take Over Festival supported by the York Theatre Royal, UK) and can actively take part in the planning of promotions and the dissemination of strategies (as in the case of *La Briqueterie*, France).

In this scenario, Be SpectACTive! provides an interesting case study, due to the variety of organisations that constitute the network and their unique geographical perspective that they bring in their cultural practice. Be SpectACTive! is a large-scale European project, supported by the Creative Europe programme, which focuses on the active engagement of spectators. The spectators play the role of decision-makers in a process of co-programming (of the theatre seasons or festival programmes) in the various venues of the network organisations, as well as the role of “influencers” in the production of theatre performances held among the project partners, across various countries.

The production of new performances in Be SpectACTive! counts with the collaboration of local communities, associations, schools or intellectuals, with the aim to nourish the process of creation starting from the main topic of the art project. This is made possible by a residencies programme in which all the interlocutors are involved: cultural organisations, local communities, active spectators and artists. The creation process creates links and bonds with the communities; whereas the artists and the organisations are the medium that brings about contents and information. Each venue of the Be SpectACTive! network is involved in this process and offers its own network facilities to the artists. However, what are the implications for the single organisations?

In this process, each production is a new adventure for the organisations, with unique contents and practices that need to be explored. For each residency, the theatre employees have to conduct a research, open contacts with other organisations at the local level and explore the contents the artists will work on. This process of residency is an important opportunity to discover new audiences and to create new connections at the local and European level. At the same time, the organisations need to deal with the overlap of the European (or international) aims of the project and their own local needs. They have to uptake a long-term vision, which involves new practices and connections. Sometimes, they need to rethink their way of programming, according to the new audiences reached or potential changes derived from the co-programming process.

Alessandro Bollo, responsible of the Research area of Fondazione Fitzcarraldo in Italy, in a speech presenting the *Study on audience development – How to place audiences at the centre of cultural organisations* commissioned by the European Commission (Bollo et al., 2017), mentioned that younger organisations born during the crisis are “genetically modified”, since they do not easily have access to public funds and show a genuine need to engage the audience for their general strategies. Older organisations find more difficult to open the doors of their institutions to the audience at the governance and management levels.

There is a new challenge for cultural organisations, which requires transparency in the management of their activities and in their aims and strategies. The process of sharing responsibility is an opportunity to inform the audience about the complexity that lies behind cultural production. It is a way to increase a sense of awareness in both the audience and the professionals, at the same time requires attention, time, competencies and long-term strategic vision.

New approaches to continue the debate ...

On an artistic and organisational level, the impact of engagement practices is visible, for instance, in the emerging of new roles and professional figures. For example, the “community manager” represents an interesting shift in the life of the organisations. This professional figure can be part of large enterprises, taking care of the social media communications, but is also a new profile increasingly required in the social and cultural contexts. Community managers have a strategic role and should be able to have an open dialogue with a variety of actors and, at the same time, having organisation and coordination skills. They are a sort of “creative producers” who should be sensitive to the artists’ language, capable of connecting people and, therefore, creating community. This position involves different tasks: the community manager follows the process of urban renewal, manages the bottom-up process for the definition of activities and the mission in a new place/space and is constantly in contact with a wide range of stakeholders, institutions and local actors, creating a proper community of interests and actions.

In this process of engagement, the spectator (as mentioned above) becomes a *prosumer*. The term is used when the consumer and the producer are the same person: for instance, Facebook or other social media are based on user-generated contents. Prosumers are taking a key role also in the performing arts sector. One example of this trend is provided by the German-based company Rimini Protokoll and their *Home Visit Europe*. In this performance, they “contrast this abstract idea of Europe with the individuality of a private apartment” (Home Visit Europe, n.d.), where the spectators are the performers, bringing their own experiences, visions and interests. There are no actors on stage, the contents are created through the interactions among the spectators, in a dramaturgy that allows them to be authentic and to share their own values, stories and perspectives.

Theatres and cultural organisations, in light of the variety of audience engagement processes, are becoming places where new ideas, citizens and networks can meet, coexist and express their values. With the same logic, artistic programming is symbolically the space in which cultural and social complexities can find their expression.

This is the arena of artistic research, where new strategies and policy experiments can be developed through a dialogue between different interlocutors and localities across Europe and across the globe. It will be important to observe where this process will lead the arts and the policy sector.

As Dragan Klaic (2012) said regarding the creation of a European dimension, the attention should be put on a “regional anchoring”, and perhaps it can be added that, after recent events such as refugee emergencies and new forms of nationalism, we need to foster the relationship between these localities through culture and art practices, to avoid the creation of new localism and barriers.