

Introduction

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator. (Gramsci, 1996, p. 10)

The paradox of participation

What does it mean to participate in art beyond the pre-determined roles and options allocated to us? This is the question that the following study grapples with. The issue is at once current and a matter of long-standing debate. Following decades of critical discussion in the field of participatory art, it is not entirely unfair to say that the concept has been found to have reached a point of exhaustion. Yet we are living in times when it is necessary to work towards new concepts, with nothing else to hand but hopelessly inadequate and worn-out ones. Such concepts, seemingly self-evident and clearly defined, strangely become unwieldy when described, confusing when experienced, contradictory when subject to analysis. Their inadequacy may be a consequence of their being co-opted, misused, unmoored or simply unresponsive to the world they are meant to speak to. Yet they cannot be conveniently discarded and replaced with other terms, for the problem is of course neither a matter of terminology alone, nor one of mere inconvenience. There are concepts that insist on being rethought and reconstructed in as much as the discontent with them seems inseparable from the attachment and possibility they offer. Participation is one such concept, at once a source of artistic, social

and political hope and simultaneously the vulgar distortion of this hope into a form of profit-oriented governance and subjugation. The study joins the debate around participation at the stage of asking what next: what happens after or beyond the critique of the managerial absorption of participation, when neither grand theory nor the resort to particularism, neither the celebration of its utopian promises nor the criticism of its neoliberal disembowelment, seem to suffice. For even a critique of participation is predicated upon some form of participation, and even non-participation or any other category posited in its place remain equally fallible to the very same charges of critique.

Core to this investigation is the way in which the political premises underlying the call for participation are reimagined aesthetically. The questions that interest me most can be posed in different interconnected ways: first, how do artists and audiences respond to or take part in participatory art in unexpected, unscripted ways; how do the addressees of art take part in and partake of its making beyond the roles and options allocated to them? Second, in what ways does participatory art participate in civic, public life? These questions are interconnected by the vectors of participation. All attempts to answer one inevitably have to deal with the problems of the other. The question of an artwork's participation in public life is partly an expansion of the question of audience participation in art from the micro to the macro scale, since performance practices might, at one level, be viewed as microcosms of a broader social reality. They are not located outside of social reality, in a safely cordoned area marked as an aesthetic space, wherein they may reflect or represent the world outside, undisturbed or untouched by it; rather, these two dimensions are porous, connected by a vector shuttling back and forth between them, not merely transporting ideas from one dimension to the other, but affecting and transforming each of them in the process.

The present study undertakes an examination of participatory practices in contemporary theatre, performance and the visual arts, setting these against the broader social and political horizons of civic participation. It does not attempt to define the field as apparently given, but rather reconsiders the status of participation. My particular stake is in reflecting on participatory art both beyond a judgement of its social

qualities as well as beyond the confines of format and devising. I am specifically interested in how participatory art might contribute to delicately altering the terms and conditions of participation, as well as those moments in which the withdrawal or refusal of participation might function as a critical form of participation. I am concerned with the ways in which artistic or cultural thought-practices participate in the social bases they emerge from or respond to, in the unorthodox reformulation of participation.

There is growing interest in the field of participatory art, attested by a vast range of experimental practices in cultural, art, educational and developmental contexts, accompanied by a surge of recent publications on the subject, as well as by its expanding place in university curricula and in the agendas of professional organizations. There is an equally vehement rejection of participatory practices, particularly in relation to their disregard for respected conventions and modes of experience in the arts, but more broadly, in terms of their appropriation and dilution into contemporary models of neoliberal, entrepreneurial governance. The real or attempted transformations in the relations and conventions of interaction between artwork and viewer, between spectators and performers, between authorship and reception, are met with responses ranging from enthusiasm to dismissal. Such responses cannot be explained away as differences in taste or aesthetic judgement, or liberally mediated through mid-way positions, as if it were only a matter of the right dosages of participation; they need to be contextualized and examined across diverse domains. I attempt a cross-disciplinary discussion of participation, bringing together examples from the field of applied and community theatre, performance art and participatory visual arts, investigating points of intersection with existing discussions in the social sciences on participation. Being a contextual question, the appraisal of the category of participatory art, in this wide sense, is accompanied by dangers even in modest generalization. Different disciplines have distinct institutional, epistemological and political stakes in their various conceptions of participation. I use the term participatory art as an umbrella term, yet I do so, not in order to insist on the stability of the category as a genre or defined form, but rather in order to problematize it and dwell on its antinomies, contingencies and

contradictory features. I contend with the loaded term ‘art’, although the disciplinary formations and perspectives guiding my own journey are undeniably located in theatre and performance studies. Despite my repeated desire to expand the field, there are many kinds of participatory practices that I do not discuss at all, from participatory rituals in cultural performances to participation in the virtual electronic sphere. It is easy to offer the disclaimer that these are left out for the sake of providing an achievable framework for the study, but more difficult to retain a peripheral awareness of the ways their inclusion might have complicated its findings and constitutive frames.

The theorization of participation in the arts faces the challenge of transposing a concept with roots in the economic-political arena on to imaginative terrains. The Oxford English Dictionary cites the earliest usages of the term ‘participation’ in terms of two closely interlocked regimes: commerce and theology. Participation refers to ‘commercial involvement in a company enterprise’ on the one hand, as well as ‘sharing in, or partnership or communion’ on the other. ‘Taking’, ‘giving’ and ‘having’ seem to be the crucial connecting verbs here. Participation in the commercial sense became common in the late seventeenth century with reference to a financial involvement in a commercial enterprise. The much older Latin-derived theological use of participation dates back to the twelfth century, referring to being a recipient of or partaking in an act of divinity. In English the term flows between the connotations of taking part in or contributing to something, having a part or a share, in the form of ownership or territorial demarcation, or being (given) a part of or in something larger than what is one’s own, staking a claim, pledging alliance. Many languages employ a nominalized form of the verb ‘to take part’ and distinguish between participation in the sense of ‘taking part’, which is usually the mere statement or assertion of participation, and ‘having a part’ or ‘acquiring a part’, suggesting a more active claim.¹ The term can thus be used descriptively as well as in the form of a demand of an entitlement, or indeed as an assertion of belonging to a greater common social entity. Participation could be a means towards a defined end, or an end in itself. It speaks to the forms and modalities of interaction between individuals and social entities, religious institutions or public goods, sometimes acting as

a descriptor of these modalities and at other times placing demands on them.

Translated broadly to the arts, the notion of participation primarily indicates a realignment of the relationship between the makers and the recipients of the arts, whereby the ‘recipients’, however defined, stake a claim to or assume a share in the enterprise of the arts. It is further underwritten by a general assumption that this realignment is beneficial or desirable for the arts and for the wider contexts in which they are located. These points of departure already demonstrate that ideas about participation in the arts remain indebted to its origin in the powerful discourses of shareholding participation in commerce and the provenances of participation in community formation. Just as the idea of shareholder participation marked the transition in ownership from feudalism to a bourgeoisie or a state-led economy, so participatory artistic practices might be regarded as reflecting a transition from the primacy of the artist as creator genius and sole proprietor of an artwork to an economy of redistributing authorship and creative functions in the arts. Just as the idea of participation in a societal sense indicates affiliation to a community or a shared idea, so participation in art might be indicative of a model of shared, dialogical and empathetic artistic practice. Yet the grafting of these discourses on to the artistic terrain is not without its difficulties and contradictions. If participation makes art more democratic, more social, more useful and relational, what remains then of the Kantian ‘purposiveness without a purpose’, so often regarded as the defining characteristic of the aesthetic realm? If participation in art is benign *a priori*, what remains to be interpreted or critically appreciated? If the terms of participation are already set by such authoritative forces, then doesn’t participation in the arts require the greatest vigilance?

Artistic practices seem to have responded to these quandaries with an explosively wide range of different interpretations of participation: devised works involving scripted and stylized audience participation, as in immersive performances² or live art;³ those that manipulate or steer the public or intervene in a situation without the public necessarily realizing that they are participants, as in invisible theatre;⁴ delegated performance,⁵ where members of the public are specially selected or invited to take part in the artwork or performance;

socially engaged community-based artistic practices; and projects that highlight the collaborative process of interaction and dialogue between artists and the public during various stages of the work, not necessarily only at the stage of its final presentation.⁶ They may be short- or long-term, with spectators contributing spontaneously to an ephemeral event, or involve people from neighbourhoods or local communities, as hosts, interview partners, contributors of material, or in playing roles. Live and virtual events involving question-and-answer sessions, direct conversations between artists and audience members, interactive installation-based presentations, performances that involve following instructions on headphones and making dance moves in the street, a museum exhibition inviting visitors to donate items of their own, collective readings, video games that generate scenarios based on images uploaded by players, intermedial storytelling events, do-it-yourself or, for that matter, don't-do-it-yourself artworks, citizen journalism, peoples' juries, crowd-sourced works, community kitchens, flash mobs, audio-tours, bus trips, assemblies, market-places, speed-dates, lottery draws, reality shows, visits to the homes of strangers: the list of means of invoking and inviting participation in and through artworks can hardly be exhaustively categorized, as this risks becoming outdated, with new formats emerging in response to distinct circumstances. The category of participatory art is thus by no means confined to the literal fact of audiences taking part in an artwork. It remains pliable and is, as has often been pointed out, invoked for very different ends and in very contradictory ways (Nicholson, 2013, p. 114). 'Participation' can refer to many types of experiences; it is a historical rather than a static concept, implying that participatory art is not unified by formal characteristics, and can be traced to vastly divergent art-historical traditions (Kraynak, 2007, p. 231). It can be a manner of doing, a manner of perceiving, and a manner of perceiving doing.

I do not attempt a systematic or historical analysis of participatory art as a genre, since I am less invested in outlining the possible terms or criteria of genre formation, and more intrigued by the questions that participatory art, when posed as genre, is seen as being able to ask or address: problems related to its institutional affiliations and entanglements, the question of its societal impact, the hierarchies

of participation, the relationship between embodied and discursive articulations of participation, the relationship between participation and non-participation. By emphasizing the operations that participatory art practices are used to carry out, I follow the insight of the cultural theorist Raymond Williams, who argued that certain concepts are not understood by way of a genre or terminological discussion, i.e. by analysing and comparing different definitions according to the presence or absence of certain formal traits, but that the meanings of a given concept are 'inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss' (1983, p. 15). Williams thus questions the assumption that concepts such as culture are expressions of, or indeed determined by, broader economic, social and political forces; instead he proposes culture as a form of material production. In the following I mobilize Williams's proposition as a way of understanding how the operations and vocabularies of participation in the arts are intermeshed with participation in the social and political sense. To do this, it is necessary to closely examine how artistic practices interpret and give life to the concept of participation in historically and contextually specific ways. These might be at the level of formal experimentation, or in the ways in which the artistic practice interacts with or intervenes in a given social environment, or in the mode of navigating the boundaries between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, the artistic and the quotidian. In this regard, I do not make a distinction between an active, oppositional, antagonistic participation and a passive, receptive, cohesive (non)-participation, nor do I try to monitor what is or is not a properly participatory form of art (Harpin and Nicholson, 2017). Applause, audience laughter, silence, passing interactions between performers and spectators may all be part of any form of audience participation in the broadest sense. I am interested in moments when such phenomena become foundational to a certain artistic practice, when such seemingly ordinary participatory gestures carry an unexpected potential for realigning the terms of participation.

The question of this study arises from a paradox. The demand for participation intensifies when participation is denied to us. Yet we are inclined to refuse participation when it is demanded of us. If we are only able to participate in ways that are already deemed acceptable

or proper, then, sooner or later, our participation becomes an instrument of our own subjugation and pacification rather than a means of freedom. Participation, even in the guise of non-participation, becomes necessary to resist the imperative of participation. The visual cultural philosopher Eyal Weizman elegantly describes the paradox of participation as ‘the problem of equally practicing it and avoiding it’ (2011, p. 10). Participatory art is by no means exempt from this paradox. In some senses one might claim that the field of participatory art emerges historically from artistic relations to the paradox of equally seeking out and disavowing participation.

Divergent legacies of participatory art

The examples analysed in this study are drawn from three main domains of participatory art: applied or community-based performance, immersive performance and contemporary visual art. These domains each evoke distinct genealogies and modes of conceptualizing participation, and they each have their own milestones as reference points. The question of the histories of participatory artistic practices becomes complicated for several reasons: the diversity of practices, different understandings of concepts, their vastly different disciplinary routes, national and regional differences, as well as distinctive processes of institutionalization. To summarily and ahistorically leave aside these differences and gather any and every artistic or cultural practice in which participation plays a role under the rubric of ‘participatory art’ can be misleading, risking that the term disintegrates rather than expands as a result of its diversity and ubiquity. Yet the diversity of genealogies of participatory art itself demonstrates that participation in relation to theatre and performance has meant many different things in different historical moments, and that it is a polyvalent category. Participatory practices may be found in all regions and across all historical periods or artistic domains, but this does not mean that participatory art becomes a universal category. The qualities and characteristics associated with participatory art are nevertheless historically bound. This history might be usefully approached not in terms of points of origin but in terms of how participatory practices have been regarded as offering possibilities for

realigning the relationship of art to society. This too needs qualification, as the very idea of art being separate from the societal has its own history and geography. What are the specific disciplinary concerns around participation in each of the domains of community-based art, immersive performance and contemporary visual arts? What are the recurring questions to which participatory practices have appeared as offering responses?

Reading across these domains, it is remarkable that scholarship on participation in one sub-field does not necessarily take notice of developments in other sub-fields. Participatory forms of educational theatre tend to be assumed to belong to a different discursive universe from one-to-one experiential performance practices or the participation of visitors in a museum installation. Yet in the process of researching this study, I became aware of a significant number of common concerns between these domains. In terms of their histories, what stands out most are the zigzag currents that run between artistic experimentation and processes of social-political transformation, or, as political philosopher Gerald Raunig has argued, of 'practices emerging in neighbouring zones, in which transitions, overlaps and concatenations of art and revolution become possible for a limited time, but without synthesis and identification' (2007, pp. 17–18). The idea that participatory practices emerge from 'neighbouring zones' or from the thresholds between artistic and social-political concerns is fitting. Their objectives may vary, from a more pragmatic search for alternatives to frontal narrative staging devices to an explicitly political search for ways to alter the grammar of people's relations to issues of significance to the broader society (Katsiaficas, 2004). In some cases, the need for participatory work is motivated by a striking self-consciousness and desire to reflect on artists' positionality and privileges, to call attention to the assumptions underlying certain forms of presentation and representation, possibly through an awareness of feminist, postcolonial and anti-racist critiques and demands for a self-conscious avowal of art's interdependence and inseparability from its external conditions (Jackson, 2008, pp. 143–144). In other cases, the choice of participatory forms may be a trendy mirroring of modes of participation in economic life, characterized by a feverish quest for the new, the innovative, the risky (Raunig, Ray and Wuggenig,

2011). The intersections between historical and artistic periods are uneven but not accidental. They make it evident that the meaning of participatory art, or what is defined as participatory, radically changes under different historical circumstances, and that these meanings are usually part of a larger narrative of how art engages with society and politics (Bishop in Barok, 2009).

The grand question of the relationship between art and society and politics can be framed in slightly more modest terms as the relationship between artists or artistic practices and audiences. In the field of applied or community-based theatre and performance, the concern with questions of popular participation and theatrical citizenship in the twentieth century is often traced to Bertolt Brecht. For Brecht, the realignment of the relationship between performers and spectators was simultaneously a reimagining of the relationship of art to society. He envisaged the critical participation of audiences in theatre as a means of transforming the merely entertaining or 'culinary' functions of art. For Brecht, it was less a matter of making audiences get up from their seats and 'do' something and more a question of altering the dramaturgy of theatre in order for audiences to adopt a different attitude (*Haltung*). Similarly, political theatre cultures around the world in the second part of the twentieth century looked for a theatrical language and an aesthetic that could be adequate to the realities of nation formation following the end of colonial rule. Participatory practices often formed the zone of concatenation or overlap between the quest for modernity and the quest to recover lost traditions. The antecedents of participatory performance in the domain of community-based and applied arts can be traced to what Eugene van Erven calls the 'counter-cultural, radical, anti- and post-colonial, educational and liberational theatres of the 1960s and 1970s' (2001, p. 1). This might pertain to both the post-independence political theatres in the Global South as well as to the surge of performance art, happenings and artistic activism in European and North American contexts. They each have their own distinct legacies, but can all be termed participatory in terms of their quest for artistic forms that could accommodate a variety of modes of participation that were not necessarily pre-determined by the makers of the artworks alone.

Similar modes of expanding participation can be found in the transactions between theatre, therapy, education, labour, civil rights or ecological struggles. In the field of educational theatre, for instance, theatrical histories and educational histories converge in specific ways, demonstrating how educational theatre movements in different parts of the world placed audience participation at the centre of theatrical practices, developing 'innovative methodologies that blurred the boundaries between audiences and performers' (Nicholson, 2011, p. 199). In many instances this involved forging long-term alliances with counter-cultural movements, to be able to pursue educational goals even in times of authoritarian rule, travelling and performing widely, conducting workshops, inviting writers in local languages to contribute plays or co-creating works on socially relevant topics (Fernandez, 1996; Roces and Edwards, 2010, p. 45). Participation here is as much about taking theatre to rural or urban-peripheral community life as about inviting young adults to participate in and be exposed to art workshops.

In the terrain of immersive performance, the threshold between artistic and social-political concerns is often to be found in the highlighting of the individual spectator and of the stylized and intimate one-to-one encounter with its visceral, multi-sensorial dimensions (Machon, 2013; White, 2012). In a broader disciplinary genealogy, branching out to cultural anthropology, an immersive experience can be said to refer to a range of cultural practices, involving an intense, engrossed physical and emotional presence of all concerned, often taking place outside of art institutions and spaces (Singer, 1959; Turner, 1975). Each of these understandings of immersive performance points to important distinctions and separate histories. Their contours and their terminology have evolved differently according to region or art-historical tradition. The emphasis on the individual experience of the spectator might, on the one hand, be derived from the post-dramatic and performative turns in the arts, i.e. a shift away from textual, dramatic sources towards embodied performance, to the extent that the turn away from the text is also always a turn towards the audience (Lehmann, 2005, p. 5). In doing away with the authority of the dramatic text and with narrative devices, post-dramatic forms such as immersive performance elicit an alternative dramaturgy of

addressing the audience, often deliberately involving spectators in the action on stage, bringing them into close physical contact with the staged environment, or directly evoking ‘the real’ in the framework of theatrical action. There is no longer any security of the performance being a fictional event in the mode of the ‘as-if’ (Lehmann, 2005, p. 103). This might be accompanied by a disregard for the solemnity of theatrical conventions, with the spectatorial distance being substituted by a staged environment suggesting a party, rehearsal atmosphere, an intimate setting, or a shared or quasi-ritualistic space into which audiences can enter, as if entering a space of leisure and relaxation (Lehmann, 2005, pp. 122–123).

In what has come to be known as performance art since the 1960s, participation assumes the specific sense of a multi-directional, multi-sensorial and visceral communication between performers and spectators in a highly stylized setting that troubles the boundary between the artistic and the quotidian spheres. In the anthropological genealogies of immersive cultural performances, on the other hand, this boundary crossing has been expressed through the concept of the liminal. Victor Turner (1975) used the architectural notion of the limen, the threshold or sill linking one space to another, as a concept for thinking the process and site of creating a sense of ‘communitas’ between people, especially in rituals marking rites of passage such as initiation rites or sacred ceremonies and performances. Such liminal events demand a participatory immersion of all concerned for a specific period of time within a dedicated space, allowing for a transition or transformation from one life stage to another.⁷

The border between the space demarcated as aesthetic space and the world it is surrounded by can move in ways that affect the registers of participation. Modes and conventions of performance can, for instance, be brought to bear upon legal and political settings, as a medium for staging political transformations and events of public participation. Examples of this are the profoundly theatrical frames of historical events such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (Cole, 2009), or the public gatherings and participatory actions in the 1990s of groups such as H.I.J.O.S in Argentina following the years of military dictatorship (Holmes, 2009; Taylor, 2003). Not only is the border between theatrical action and legal-

political action called into question in such phenomena, but also the distinct separation of the spheres of production and reception or of performance and spectatorship are troubled.

The legacy of participation in the visual arts reveals yet another kind of entanglement between artistic and social-political spheres. The demand for a radical break with elitist art institutions at the beginning of the twentieth century brought with it a wide range of experiments and programmatic shifts, often deploying participatory practices and attempting to reach out to people in their everyday lives. Tom Finkelpearl argues that the prominence of participatory forms in what he terms public art emerged from a confluence of local political struggles and international influences (2013, p. 49). In the case of the Futurists and Paris Dada, the invocation of the participatory generated what was then a radical break with traditional formats of spectatorship, through performances on the streets or the adoption of popular entertainment forms (Bishop, 2012, p. 47). In Central and South America in the 1960s and 1970s, participatory artistic practices called for an engagement with marginalized social groups and people without a voice in public life. Similarly, in Asian and African contexts, it implied close ties between artists and civil rights and nation-building movements, as well as with feminist and indigenous movements. In Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, under the conditions of the Cold War, an engagement with participation was a matter of establishing trustworthy publics, who were not allied with the ruling powers (Bishop, 2012, p. 130). In the post-1989 context, under expanding privatization and economic liberalization, the valorization of participatory technologies and formats in the art world can be regarded as complementary to a governmental biopolitics, where participation may not be a staking of a people's claim to ownership or control but a form of government through self-regulation (Lorey, 2012, pp. 52–53). In this context, participation becomes not what people demand from the ruling powers but what is demanded of the people by the ruling powers.

This sketch of the different routes through which the notion of participation is summoned, spanning across the visual arts and theatre and performance, is by no means sufficient to make any comparative historical claims. Yet this much is immediately evident: the

antecedents of participatory art in the twentieth century can be read as accounts of how art positions itself in response to societal questions around participation. Instead of looking for overarching commonalities in form and expression in all these instances, one could turn the tables and ask what participatory art sets itself apart from, or to what questions it proposes itself as having answers. To what can the emergence of a participatory aesthetic be seen as responding? Viewed from this angle, the legacies of participatory art do not reflect or mirror their social environments but rather diffract them, at best attempting to offer a critique, intervene in shifting the underlying tenets of the field, and at worst, making the neoliberal socio-economic underpinnings blatantly apparent (Haraway, 2004, p. 70).

The metaphor of diffraction is applicable to a genealogical appraisal of participatory art in so far as the claim to and justification of a certain conception of participation simultaneously marked a distancing or differentiation from existing conventions or understandings. Brecht's participatory learning plays (*Lehrstücke*) were propounded as a move away from what was perceived as the bourgeois convention of segregating spectators and performers, or directors and actors. Similarly, Augusto Boal's concept of the 'spect-actor' – the spectator who intervenes on stage as an actor – was proposed as a system of dissociation from the Aristotelian conception of the theatre. The performative turn that strongly influenced participatory performance art represented a turn away from the primary emphasis on texts and language in humanities scholarship and a turn towards embodied knowledge and practice, thus a reconception of the boundary between the sphere of artistic production and reception, as well as an expansion of the scope of performance outside of institutionalized artistic realms. The happenings and activist performance art of the 1960s marked a significant departure from conventional assumptions of what constitutes an artwork, foregrounding process and ephemeral experience in place of a finished work. A call for non-hierarchical and collective artistic working processes was often born out of the impulse to critically counter institutional frameworks that positioned the artist as creative genius and unique author. An antagonistic, dissenting form of artistic participation often grew out of a rejection of the cynicism of a top-down promotion of participatory citizenship.

Philosophical or political questions thus become diffracted on to the register of the aesthetic. This partly explains why it is difficult to pinpoint the characteristics of participatory art as a genre or in formal terms, for even when issues such as engagement with audiences or spectatorship might appear as a common feature of all participatory artforms, the form of this engagement with spectatorship can vary from the affirmative to the adversarial, or from an assertion of artistic autonomy to a complete rejection of any autonomy.

The gestures of participation

In the process of working on the concept of participation in, through and away from its exhaustion, other concepts unexpectedly emerge as helpful friends. In this study, the notion of the gesture has proven most valuable in comprehending the paradoxes of participation, whereby the demand for it is almost always accompanied by its refusal. I argue that participatory practices are best appreciated in the register of the gestural. As a unit of theatrical or performative action, the gesture is simultaneously an expression of an inner attitude as well as a social habitude. It extends beyond the stage of theatre or performance into the sphere of civic life. It therefore offers a possibility for critically linking the legacies and aesthetic debates on participatory art to larger issues of citizenship, democratic praxis, collective action and social justice. I also propose that the concept of the gesture not only speaks to the contemporary problems and critiques of participation, but also situates these practices in disciplinary terms at the juncture between the visual and performing arts. I envisage this possibility by a reading of the concept of gesture as situated in between image, speech and action, no longer image but not yet act, not strictly within the coordinates of language but also not wholly external to it. I suggest that the concept of gesture might be a rewarding way of theorizing participatory practices at the crossroads of the visual and performing arts. Such a conceptualization can, I hope, avoid two common pitfalls in scholarship on participatory art, namely the problem of explaining participation through assessing and measuring impact on the one hand, or, conversely, the problem of restricting the discussion to formal, aestheticized, medium-specific lines on the other.

The concept of the gesture has proven productive in engaging with the unsolicited, unruly and counter-intuitive aspects of participation that continually intrigue me in this study. As a unit of theatrical or performative action, usually defined as a stance or movement of the body as a whole or a specific body part, it is simultaneously an expression of an emotional condition or an inner attitude, as well as a social habitude. It thus extends beyond the stage of theatre or performance into the sphere of public, civic life. It is a concept derived from aesthetic theory, referring to a central component of the body, language and cultural communication, and simultaneously a concept with social and political ramifications (Mauss, 1973; Wulf and Fischer-Lichte, 2010). A wide array of philosophical reflections on gesture, both in continental European philosophy as well as in several non-Western traditions, support such a multi-layered understanding of the concept as simultaneously embodied and abstract, physical and social, provisional and indicative in its enactment and embodiment, but never fully determined by it. While it would be impossible to offer anything close to a comprehensive review within the framework of this study, I have drawn inspiration from different sources to suggest how participatory art is characterized by gestural qualities. The Brechtian notion of the *Gestus* is one such source, understood as a physical manner of carrying or bearing the body that is equally a social attitude, theorized and sharpened in Walter Benjamin's indispensable companion essay on Brecht's gestures (Benjamin, 1966; Willett, 1974). My mobilization of the concept of gesture is also close to recent approaches to cultural activism, especially scholarship on civic protest. To give one example: in a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* entitled 'Theatre, Performance and Activism: Gestures towards an Equitable World', a number of contributions employ gesture 'as a pivot for examinations of the body in protest' (Hughes and Parry, 2015, p. 302). The editors categorize these into a range of 'gestural repertoires', namely gestures intersecting the public and the private realms, gestures of labour and care work, gestures of mobility and migration, and collective gestures (2015, p. 309). While I do not directly employ such gestural repertoires, they resonate with my reading of participatory art to the extent that they indicate a constant shuttling between art's aesthetic and

sociopolitical dimensions, and the intersections between individual and collective forms of embodiment.

While the concept of the gesture speaks to the contemporary problems and critiques of participation, it also crucially situates these practices in disciplinary terms at the juncture between the visual and performing arts. Shannon Jackson keenly observes in her study *Social Works* (2011) that the experiments of crossing the deemed limits of the aesthetic and the social have very different expressions across various domains of the arts. Whereas participatory art in the visual art context seeks out tropes, figures and methods from the performing arts, it can be conversely observed that participatory theatre and performance practices, especially in the institutionalized circuits, increasingly look for inspiration in installation, film, architectural and conceptual art. Jackson rhetorically describes this phenomenon as

an experimental chiasmus across the arts: a movement toward painting and sculpture underpins post-dramatic theatre, but a movement toward theatre also underpins post-studio art. In such a chiasmus, breaking the traditions of one medium means welcoming the traditions of another. (2011, p. 6)

The rhetorical figure of the chiasmus (literally, ‘crosswise arrangement’) is characterized by two distinct clauses balanced against each other by a structural reversal. The reference to a chiasmus suggests that the aesthetics of participatory art might be located somewhere at the juncture between the visual arts and the performing arts; or in other words, if one would simplify these domains to their very basic units, at the intersection between the *image* and the *act*. Theatre and performance theory as well as art history have a concept for this intersection: the concept of the gesture. In comparison to the static image or the tableau, the gesture is a dynamic concept: it indicates a transition, often involving a bodily movement, literally a gesticulation, which bears or suggests meaning (from the Latin *gestare*, to carry or bear, German *Gebärde*), and marks a socially recognizable form of conduct (from the Latin *gerere*, to conduct oneself). On the other hand, in comparison to the theatrical unit of the act, gesture can be read as a static concept: it is a condensation or decomposition of an act, close to the term ‘gist’, i.e. essence. It is no longer an image, but not yet quite an act; it is an act that is condensed into a hint, a suggestion.

By framing participatory art as gestural, as more than an image or a representation, yet not quite an act or action – rather as an indicative, decomposed, interrupted move that extends beyond itself – I suggest that the concept of gesture might be a rewarding way of theorizing participation. Perhaps the force of the participatory lies not in a causal relationship between audience participation in the theatre and people’s participation in civic life, but in a relationship of simultaneity, one gesturing (to) the other. The sociologist Marcel Mauss proposed in his 1935 essay entitled ‘The Techniques of the Body’ that the relationship of physical gestures to the social is not successive but simultaneous (1973, pp. 85–86). An individual bodily technique of walking or making a fist is, he argues, a gesture that is simultaneously corporeal and social-cultural. As I move in this study from broader discussions of institution or social impact to observing concrete moments of delicate participation or categorical refusals of participation, I am interested in how representation and movement, a given form and an imagined form, are interconnected through gesture, how the interdependence between formal and informal gestures of participation is performed and made observable.

The word gesture is also etymologically related to the Latin word *jacēre*, ‘to lie’, in the sense of ordering or arranging parts of the body, in support of and giving shape to a thought or attitude. In this sense, gestures often have the role of supporting thoughts through bodily movements rather than representing actions on their own. This is most often claimed in relation to the hand or facial gestures that accompany speech. In Giorgio Agamben’s reading, gesture has no relationship to causality or utility; it is a means without ends and because it is removed from any use or representational function, it can allow us to see what otherwise becomes invisible when attached to referentiality (Agamben, 1993). Gesture thus involves the disruption or interruption of an action, its breaking down into repeatable and quotable units that conceal as much as they reveal (Benjamin, 1966; Weber, 2008, p. 98). They can range from being codified, ritualized and culturally specific to being expressive, free, emotive and non-formalizable. This oscillation between the formal, codified characteristics of the gesture and its informal, interstitial articulations is repeatedly found in artistic practices that pursue participatory meth-

ods or aims. Rather than claiming any absolute subversive potential of participatory practices, I argue for interpreting participation in performance as a provisional and suggestive, but never fully determined element. These gestures of participation in performance, however, indicate possibilities for reconfiguring civic participation in public spaces in unexpected ways, putting less emphasis on direct opposition and instead seeking a variety of modes of resisting co-optation, through unsolicited, vicarious or delicate gestures of participation. Sometimes the performance of a gesture is merely symbolic, at other times gesture may become event (Butler, 2014b).

Outline of this study

How, then, does one study the gestures of participatory art? Where are they to be found and traced? The cases examined in this book are drawn from my own horizon of exposure in the last decade, which can in no way claim to be comprehensive in scope or international outreach, but which nevertheless reflects the privilege of living in and moving between different countries and cultures, from which I have benefited in countless ways. The choice of these cases is most pertinently related to the possibilities available to me, allowing me to become familiar with the projects in some depth, and to gain the trust, support and intellectual camaraderie of those involved, which has proven indispensable to the study.

Chapter 1 begins with the question of institutional critique in relation to participatory art. What is the place of institutional critique in relation to participatory performance? Where might institutional critique be located and how is it practised? I reflect on the challenges and conundrums of institutional critique, exploring the formation of participatory art forms, specifically community-based, applied art, as emergent from the critique of mainstream art institutions. I inquire into modalities of institutional critique which foreground questions of participation or non-participation, and examine their disciplinary configurations within the arts. I compare a number of approaches to institutional critique: the institutional affiliations of a community-based theatre project from Darfur, Sudan, a flash mob performance by an Israeli activist group protesting a Cape Town Opera production

in Tel Aviv Opera House, and a breaching experiment by visual artist Pilvi Takala of trying to enter Disneyland dressed as Snow White, among others. Sometimes institutions can be usefully manoeuvred and hijacked to serve progressive causes. At other times they need to be challenged and boycotted. Sometimes the gesture of critique consists in building counter-institutions, and sometimes in fleeing them. Institutional critique, understood as the explicit use of an artistic practice to interrogate, oppose or break out of art institutional frameworks, has very asymmetrical trajectories and conditions across the world and across domains. I argue that they alert us to the changing institutional conditions that allow or restrict participation, exposing not just the rules or norms of a certain institution, but also, or equally, the rules of its specific traditions of institutional critique.

Chapter 2 addresses the relationship between participatory art and the concept of 'impact'. I investigate the assumptions around impact in relation to participatory art, as well as the critical and methodological challenges of thinking the impact of a work of art. Using the 2012 Spanish-language production *Afuera: lesbianas en escena* (*Outside: Lesbians on Stage*) by the theatre collective Teatro Siluetas from Guatemala and El Salvador as a point of departure, the chapter reflects on a number of debates in theatre and performance scholarship pertaining to assessing and evaluating impact in relation to the question of participation. I critically engage with the field of evidence-led impact studies in the arts, particularly those that seek to prove and rationalize the benefits of the arts and demonstrate them as worthy of receiving structural or financial support. I situate the debate on the usefulness or non-utility of participatory art in relation to social science scholarship relating to the ascendancy of 'participation' in the context of international development. I propose that the internal dynamics and modalities of participation cannot be entirely viewed at a remove from their external modes of circulation. I suggest that it is worthwhile to extend the kinds of activities considered as relevant to a participatory aesthetic, to not only analyse performances as distinct works, but to place them in a longer-term aesthetic continuum with workshops, rehearsals, after-talks, meetings with artists, and other para-theatrical events. The chapter grapples with the question of how to discuss impact in

relation to participatory art without it being mortgaged into a matter of quantifiable impact alone.

In Chapter 3, I closely examine one workshop setting using the methodological framework of the ‘theatre of the oppressed’ in the context of a political party-led initiative to run a women’s empowerment programme in rural south India, launched in 2013. My analysis focuses on identifying instances and moments of unsolicited participation in a theatrical format explicitly defined as participatory. I question the status of participatory art in the developmental context as forging cohesion and understanding among participants, and instead turn to its ambiguities. The analysis of participation thus seeks to link the macro-dimension of participation in social development with the micro-dimension of community theatre practice. Of particular interest is how participation occurs by way of a nuanced range of reactions, with functions ranging from the disruptive to the ameliorative. The case study calls for methodological attention to ancillary activities that take place at the margins of the theatre event. These phenomena indicate that community participation often assumes unsolicited forms, at times defiant, at times cooperative, at times evasive; it is no straightforward task to classify them as either subversive or subsidiary to the established formats of participation. They are neither interested in offering scholars legible evidence in order to be able to produce a neat account of a certain genre, nor in reassuring theatre practitioners of the efficacy of their methods. I plead for attention to those gestures of participation that may not find their way into discursive iteration, because they may arise out of the very impossibility of such an iteration in language or in formal conventions.

Chapter 4 follows two conceptually inspired performance projects by the Amsterdam-based Lebanese artist Lina Issa, *Where We Are Not* (2009) and *If I Could Take Your Place?* (2010 – ongoing). These works explore the question of what it means to take someone else’s place, to participate in someone’s life by doing something on their behalf, in their name and in the mode of ‘as if’. The commonly held rule of participatory art, which involves audience participation in an already devised or open performance setting, is reversed in Issa’s work, either because it is the artist who seeks to participate in a situation that relates to someone else’s daily life, or conversely because others are

invited to take her place, with audiences witnessing and imagining this process and participating by proxy. By analysing how this vicarious participation unfolds, I foreground the spectatorial parameters of participation, which refer not only to the modes of activating participation, but also deem it the task of participation to make a given situation worthy and deserving of spectators. Here again, the critical theorization of participation calls for an interweaving of the aesthetic with the social or political. Issa's playful performances of standing in for others point to larger questions of what it means to participate in collective processes of imagining and transforming selfhood. I suggest that the solidarity in the gesture of vicarious participation lies not so much in recognizing and finding the so-called 'other' or in respecting and celebrating differences, but rather in being prepared and willing to dispossess oneself of the fixity of one's ideas of the self, a potentially transformative gesture.

Chapter 5 dwells on an installation-based project titled *Nomad City Passage* (2005–09) by the German scenographic and visual artists Rebekka Reich and Oliver Gather, in which visitors are invited to spend one night in a tent in one of several unconventional urban sites, such as the top floor of a high-rise building, a public square in a commercial district or inside a shopping mall. My analysis focuses on how common-sense assumptions around audience participation in theatre and performance theory are called into question by the artwork's foregrounding of sleep as a mode of participation. The delicacy of this is evidenced in the ambivalence of sleep in a scenically prepared setting, oscillating between being an intense, active, dynamic experience on the one hand, and a non-performance, an absence of activity on the other. I suggest that audience participation in the artwork and the artwork's participation in urban spaces differ in significant ways from sociological and political concepts of participation. Where social theory conceives of civic participation in terms of being a part of some larger entity or social unit, the aesthetics of *Nomad City Passage* emphasizes participation in a counter-intuitive way: it becomes possible to participate precisely because of its fleeting and ephemeral conditions, because of its *not* being a part of some shared community ideal.

A feminist impulse is important in one way or another to the

selection and analysis of all the artistic practices in this study. Many of the cases discussed prominently involve women, whose choice of participatory methods and approaches to artistic and social engagement is guided by a firm belief in its emancipatory potentials, an emancipation that necessarily and inevitably intersects with questions of gender and gendered power relations. My insistence on the need for the genre of participatory art to remain conceptually open and unfixed is motivated by a feminist critique of genres being not only 'genus' (origin, repository, affiliation), but also 'generative', what Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell describe as 'a sort of participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of' (Derrida and Ronell, 1980, p. 59). Affiliation to a given type of participatory practice is thus never far from exceeding those same terms of affiliation: a fundamentally emancipatory gesture, I hope.

Participatory practices pose a number of challenges to existing modes of inquiry in the arts. How should the relation between researcher and researched be realigned, if the researcher is required to participate in an event, obliged to step outside any assumed possible safe outsider position and relate a performance or a certain practice to her own horizon of experience? How can artistic practices from the past be accessed, where there was no possibility of involvement of the researcher as participant observer? Given that participatory works often recalibrate the relationship between process and outcome, the question arises as to what should be included or regarded as relevant to the practice; what is the status of a workshop in comparison to a performance in front of an audience, or as opposed to an unexpected intervention in the streets; how should attendant issues such as documentation be taken into account? How should the perlocutionary after-effects of participation be traced, not just on individual participants but also in terms of appraising an artistic practice as social or political praxis? In each of the cases I examine, these questions repeatedly arise, in ways that are inseparable from the central concerns of the study. Methodology is thus not a technical, ancillary task to the main problem of rethinking the concept of participation, but profoundly tied to its theoretical assumptions and axiological visions.

I was involved in several, but not all, of the cases discussed in the study as a participant observer in the workshop or rehearsal process,

as a casual passer-by or as a ‘regular’ audience member with a ticket. In other cases I had to reconstruct a performance and interpret its participatory aesthetics on the basis of documentary evidence, conversations and interviews with other participants, and extensive discussions with the artists. The choice of appropriate methods for collecting and evaluating material was often largely influenced and altered by suggestions and feedback from the artists or other participants. Yet despite the fact that the relations between researcher and researched, or between subject and object of study, had to be repeatedly and necessarily questioned, this is not a practice-led study or a model for participatory action research. A critical and heterodox reflection on the concept of participation and its paradoxes in the arts remains the core objective of this investigation. In the spirit of Antonio Gramsci’s quest for intellectual rigour, cited in the epigraph to this introduction, I am in search of ways, however small, to reimagine and reclaim participation at this particular moment of time, not for the sake of eloquence but as a means of collective organizing, constructing, persuading and moving. It is my conviction that participation challenges us to think through this impasse of enabling its potentials beyond the limitations of its administration.

Notes

- 1 This distinction holds, for instance, for the German terms *Teilnahme* (‘taking part in’) and *Teilhabe* (‘having a part/partaking of’). In my mother tongue Tamil, there are further valences emphasizing a willed action such as *panku perukka* (‘to acquire a part’) or *pañkērka* (‘to take on a part’).
- 2 The term is used mostly in northern Europe: examples of recent scholarship using the concept of immersive performance are Josephine Machon’s *Immersive Theatres* (2013), Gareth White’s *Audience Participation in the Theatre* (2013) and Adam Alston’s *Beyond Immersive Theatre* (2016), which deal with performances in the UK; Liesbeth Groot-Nibbelink’s dissertation ‘Nomadic Theatre’ (2015), which deals with experiential and immersive performance, though it is not primarily interested in questions of participation, drawing on examples from the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. In the German-speaking world, no equivalent term exists, with ‘Mitmach-Theater’ having pejorative connotations of the audience being forced to be interactive, and much recent scholarship being influenced by the term ‘everyday experts’ introduced by the collective Rimini Protokoll, whose

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work sometimes involves audience immersion (Dreyse and Malzacher, 2008).

- 3 The term 'Live Art' is used mostly in the Anglo-American context; see the three-volume Live Art Almanac series for a selection of found materials on the topic (Brine, 2008; Keidan, Mitchell and Mitchelson, 2010; Keidan and Wright, 2013).
- 4 The term originates from the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2000).
- 5 This refers to certain tasks being delegated to audience members or other lay persons. It is critically appraised by Bishop (2012) and elaborated in Harvie (2013).
- 6 Collaborative practices inform the discussion of art and its potential for intervention, dialogue or activism in its social contexts in Finkelpearl (2013), Kester (2011) and Thompson (2012).
- 7 Turner made a problematic distinction between *liminal* events in so-called 'primitive' societies and *liminoid* events in 'technologically advanced', i.e. industrialized, societies, counting the arts and entertainment as belonging to the latter, as they are voluntary and involve a cultural conception of leisure (Turner, 1969). As such a distinction has no purchase in a critical decolonial understanding of the arts and cultures, I use the terms synonymously.