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# Stretching New Boundaries: *Participation* in Visual Arts

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The symposium *Stretching New Boundaries: Participation in Visual Arts* was organized by artists Strange Cargo, managed by ArtReach, and was part of the itinerary of the Folkestone Triennial 2011. The symposium was a day-long event and comprised an examination of current participatory art practices internationally and in the UK. It aimed to reach a practical understanding of the 'participatory' approach to art in the context of current developments in UK arts policy, planning and strategy – in what will surely be an age of austerity and radically reconfigured priorities. This is a summary report and evaluation of the symposium. I will (i) introduce the subject; (ii) outline the proceedings of the day, and how each contributor articulated a model of practice; (iii) register the main points of debate; (iv) outline the value of the symposium, and (v) offer some theoretical reflections. The day was introduced by Rosa D'Alessandro (Strange Cargo Board member), and the contributors were Brigitte Orasinski (Artistic Director, Strange Cargo), Jochen Gerz, Andrea Schlieker, Assocation, Frenchmottershead, boredomresearch, Mirjam Struppek and Tom Andrews of People United.



### **(i) Introduction: participatory art**

Over the last ten years the term 'participation' has become central to contemporary art. Sometimes referred to as participative art, collaborative art, socially-engaged art, relational aesthetics, or creative process art, it is not to be confused with the more traditional empirical-sociology documentation of social 'participation in the arts'.<sup>1</sup>

However, it is not easy avoiding confusion, since participatory art can be found using a vast diversity of art media across multiple social contexts. It is often sponsored by public agencies, for it promises the opportunity for extending 'participation in the arts' in the form of new audiences and increased media awareness, in turn providing immediate cultural impact, evident value, public interest and so justifying public expenditure on culture.<sup>2</sup>

For the artistic community, policy makers and arts managers alike, the nature of the 'engagement' of participatory art generates complex questions about the possible meanings and social purposes of art (particularly art sustained by public funding), the ethical and political dynamics of the artist-viewer relationship, or the 'politics' of the social context in which this is located. Participation in art is therefore under scrutiny by cultural policy research, contemporary art curating, public art commissioning, community art and social work, and not least historical art research and art theory.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of 'participation' is of course internal to historical theories of art and aesthetics (the viewer has always 'participated' in some way with the work of art, even though traditional naturalistic forms of representation cultivated a 'passive' or purely optical form of viewing). But, with pressing questions emerging from policy-spheres and public bodies – questions about public value, social involvement, citizenship and cultural literacy – artists and the variety of art agencies are both experienced in, and strategically situated for, playing a role in this public debate. With radically changing economic priorities, demographic and cultural shifts in society, and new policy challenges, participatory art is positioned to become an effective vehicle for interrogating the very conditions of social community – access, engagement, identity and recognition, rights and social capital.

In the context of this symposium, a distinction needs to be made between participatory art *projects*, and *participatory art per se*. This distinction is often made in discussions of participatory art – it separates participatory practices in contemporary art (largely revolving around gallery commissions, biennales or contemporary art-based events) with social-engagement based projects in socio-urban, public or community contexts (often sponsored by local government or art agencies). Participatory art, it can be assumed, involves a significant 'work of art' able to withstand the critical evaluation of 'art world' critics. The participatory art *project*, however, may not involve a conspicuous artwork, or even if it does, the value is lodged in the interaction between participants (and whatever products or benefits that brings). This is the standard distinction, which, it must be said, can be reinforced by art world prejudices against what is commonly understood as 'social therapy' against what must be preserved, 'authentic art'.

In this symposium, all the contributing artists were involved in constructing what we might refer to as the discrete 'work of art'. However, the distinction articulated above is dissolving – as in each case, the work of art in question was not only site-specific, but created out of dialogue with the occupants of a given 'site'. In the symposium, participatory art was both a form of contemporary art – *an event of participation*. This 'event' means that the work of art is no longer hermetic, but a component in a process or project. Each project may often create works of art that could withstand rigorous critical evaluation *as art* – but, it was evident that the primary value of the artists' activity was in *the dynamic between* the work and its particular, social community or constituency. This is not 'social therapy', as the value is not invested in the perceived benefits, effects or contribution to the social good as normally conceived. The value is in the dynamic, art interaction – *the participation in art, the specificity as an art project*. We find this in the work of Strange Cargo, Jochen Gerz, Assocation, Frenchmottershead, and boredomresearch.<sup>4</sup>

In the social expanse of everyday life, the possibilities for participatory art are endless.

In our five 'case' examples, we find a diversity of approaches – where the 'event' of participation may take place in one coincidence of time and space, or be dispersed out to a series of related spaces, or even 'virtual' and online. The event may revolve around the creation of a physical artwork, or an unfolding dialogue on the meaning of the artwork in public space. The participatory artwork may be 'used' as media for research, or as a mechanism to cultivate badly needed social communication with hostile others. It may be to activate processes of disorientation, chance encounter, and the reconfiguration of expectations that is needed for deeper reflection; it may mean provocation and a demand for a revised concept of social relations, or the nature of our ethical obligation to others, known and unknown, newcomers and indigenous. Participatory art may just be discovering history, uncovering suppressed or embedded memory, making claim to a place and space, or learning how active citizenry can shape the urban environment. Participatory art may be gallery-sited, outdoor situated, engaging a targeted constituency, an invited or a random public.

It is in the realm of public art commissions that arguably the great advances in participatory practice has been witnessed, and to a large extent this was the focus of this symposium. Where even the established realm of 'public art' was avoided or even derided by mainstream contemporary artists, public realm commissions are now attracting the most high profile international 'gallery' artists. This symposium was both an extended discussion, but also a showcase of some of the most compelling participatory practices today, all of which are artists who maintain a credible art world profile, despite in reality being once-removed from the celebrity-driven art world art markets.

## **(ii) The Proceedings**

The symposium revolved around five case studies – the artists giving a presentation of their work – with an extended discussion on the various concepts of participation, along with the breadth of strategic approaches used by artists, curators and commissioners, and the practical implications for using participatory art in particular socio-urban or community contexts. The case studies demonstrated a range of approaches, from the international peripatetic work of Jochen Gerz, to *Strange Cargo*, with their long-range embedded social engagement in the English coastal town of Folkestone. As this symposium was a critical moment in the calendar of the Folkestone Triennial, the perspectives of *Strange Cargo's* Artistic Director Brigitte Orasinski and Triennial curator Dr. Andrea Schlieker, provided a fulcrum around which the complexity of participation unfolded. Is participatory art about certain types of 'art objects'? Or is it about the aesthetics of social communication? And is this generated by social interactions that revolve *around* art objects sited in particular spaces? Is participation effectively empowered by revolving around a recognized form of 'public' art? How is public art developed in relation to particular communities of interest, facilitated particularly by an artist-curator dialogue? Andrea Schlieker's case study offered an insight into the artistic rationales and creative aspirations of Folkestone Triennial, now the largest single event for the commissioning of new public artworks in the UK. She demonstrated how participation did not negate the traditional core competencies of art curating, but that an attentiveness to the art object, and its engagement with the spaces of its viewing, was central to the value of contemporary participatory practice.

The day began with a substantial keynote address from Angus Farquar, onetime professional pop musician, now artist and Director of NVA, one of the UK's most outstanding public arts organizations. NVA are at the forefront of using new technology in public art, and also developing public art out of historical models of commissioning. They work with artists to develop site-specific installation, new ways of activating place and spaces, cultural events and urban festivals, and art-architecture interaction.

Significantly, NVA exemplify a new genre of arts organisation, their professional practice cutting across the usually segregate areas of creative production, management and cultural entrepreneurship, commissioning and curating, design and public communications.

NVA state that their purpose is to develop 'non-gallery based democratisation of presentation. Generative models of exchange are created to stimulate people to use ideas and methodologies to support their own development and means of expression'. Angus Farquar's opening address thus explained NVAs strategic framework with reference to some recent projects, such as the forthcoming *Speed of Light* at Arthur's seat in Edinburgh. The work operated on many levels, involved a heritage location, diverse social communities, new technology, a website, and a celebratory interconnection with Olympic and Paralympic Games in London. The participatory content of the public art for NVA is strategically managed to engage with many dimensions of other concurrent cultural activity in Scotland and elsewhere. At the core of this particular work, athletic runners will activate bespoke energy harvesting light suites, animating the landscape as they run, trailing patterns of light, with spectators becoming part of the work as they all ascend to the summit. The visual aesthetic of the event is the significant fulcrum of the participatory project.

NVA is an established arts organisation, with permanent staff, medium term strategic planning, and the facility to engage with local and regional funders, as they develop a national profile and track record of delivery – for 'high end' adventurous, powerfully symbolic, public art. The art in question operates on the level of 'spectacle' (which is to say, it has a power of visual engagement that can compete for the attention of a non-art audience), Yet it is not reduced to public entertainment insofar as it is driven by a strong strategic intent to use the visual aesthetic in engaging with specific social or urban situations.

Two members of the Austrian collective Assocreation were visibly present at the symposium, in matching bright white and pink screen-printed suits. The artists explained how, through a sequence of random events on a street in Vienna in 1997, began to re-think Josef Beuys' notion of 'social sculpture'. Social sculpture was to be completely re-configured for a new multi-media social environment, beginning with their first major work *Bump*: 'Bump: a tactile interface versus the immateriality of the virtual world. Pressure creates counter-pressure, but the counter-pressure manifests itself on the other side'. It became an interactive, telematic installation, blended into public places, with the use of moving floorboards, sensors, pneumatic pistons and internet connection between its location in two cities (Linz and Budapest, for former for the Ars Electronica Festival in 1999). The work was later 'invited' to Istanbul's Europe 2010 Capital of Culture. Their other works all thematise the 'ground' or street space upon which all activity takes place, where 'rules', written and unwritten, are activated and broken (and Assocreation are acutely aware of the 'rules' imposed by art, when art hits the street).

The work of Assocreation revolves around such transnational experiments with boundaries and borderlines of both social behaviour and communicative interaction. In a sense they are involved with the 'sculpting' of social experience in time, and through virtual interconnections made by new media technology this then becomes a concrete intervention in a specific urban space.

Jochen Gerz followed Assocreation by offering a conceptually articulate overview of many of his works of the past forty years, including his *Monument Against Fascism* (Hamburg-Harburg, 1986) and *Future Monument* (Coventry, 2004). Each of Gerz's projects revolve around a concept, idea or statement. From that single effective point, a public communication strategy is developed – which becomes a way of both

communicating the idea, but also gathering a 'public'. Gerz work is significant, as by using radical avant-garde artistic techniques it has pioneered effective forms of public dialogue. It reveals that a 'public' is never simply given, even if presumed by a democratic political system. The public, in order to be addressed, needs to be *convened*, and given recognition in particular social ways. Gerz often uses teams of researchers, volunteers and signatories to his many events and projects in social spaces. The artistic concepts that are at the core of Gerz's work are simple yet intriguing – a 'future monument', for example. They de-institutionalise contemporary art (removing it from designated cultural spaces) and break the cultural dichotomy between art-as-visual image and art-as-literature (or text or script). The artist is a facilitator of acts of public 'authorship' – and this involves a conferring of an identity on participants, who become the authors of their own participation. It is through conceptualizing the creative process in terms of authorship that a free dialogue emerges between artist and participants.

Of all the artists in the symposium, only Jochen Gerz worked as a 'lone artist' (albeit with a project manager and often a volunteer research team). His medium was his own highly distinctive means of multi-media conceptual art, whose creative application was always subject to the forms of 'dialogue' constructed in specific public spaces. This dialogue always began by addressing a specific historical condition – for example, the legacy of the Second World War, or the fate of post-War urban welfare and the poor patterns of urban habitation that have emerged.

To move on -- Artists Frenchmottershead (Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead) make 'live work', developed in a dynamic way (in interaction with their contexts of work – invariably everyday life and social situations). They have generated a framework they call 'microperformance', where they use a variety of media and props to involve ordinary people in their creative activities. 'Microperformance' can be rolled out as a workshop, lecture or one-to-one training in the analysis of social sites for art, research of 'microgeographies', exploring social ritual, behaviour and associations, identity, public gatherings and collaborative communication.

Frenchmottershead's most well-publicised work is perhaps *The Shops Project*, where through many different countries (Brazil, Turkey, China) they investigated the everyday rituals of social life through the multimodal prism of the small shop.<sup>5</sup> Their symposium presentation, however, concentrated on other works – including the recent 'residency' in London's Soho. This particular piece, entitled *Over the Threshold*, resulted in eleven narrative photographic works, constructed from their close contact with local residents in their home environments.

Through a 'collaborative and performative' relation with their subject, Frenchmottershead reconstruct the physical, social and cultural environment of domestic life never seen – the 'world' of residents, with an almost historically obsolete social intimacy generated by the limited space. The resulting photographs are not simply ethnographic record. They are artifacts of contemporary art photography, constructed through narrative dialogue and with a particular set of compositional reference points. Their subject is the nature of identity, social ritual and the symbolic content of everyday life – explored as living realities in the daily lives of city inhabitants.

Throughout the symposium an art installation was situated in an adjacent room – a laptop and projector uploaded with bespoke software, created for the occasion and called *Aspiration Storm*. The artists Vicky Isley and Paul Smith – known as boredomresearch – use computational technology to explore the diversity and behaviours of nature, both material and human nature and the interaction between them. The installation was intended to create 'an oasis of self motivation in the deserts of distraction, that bury our desires under mountains of requests for our diminishing grains of time'. Through a bespoke website – [www.aspirationstorm.net](http://www.aspirationstorm.net) (which has

remained live after the symposium) – the delegates articulated their future aspirations for their lives, free of the usual conditions and limitations or career considerations. Each aspiration was open for others to view, and to ‘join’ if this future plan involved interested others. The site is not a place of wishful thinking – boredomresearch were drawing on scientific research into motivation demonstrating that the articulation of aspiration is the central factor in an individual’s capacity for life-change. The installation space was a space for projection but also thinking and conversation, and making a social event of something that is usually private – articulating personal motivations, direction and objectives.

The work of boredomresearch generally explores the tense distance and interconnections between the abstract world of virtual communications (and its visual languages) and the concrete social world of ‘individuation’ (individual people constructing a sense of self, and a personal trajectory through the world). The participants in their projects explore the contradiction of the abstract languages of social life and the intense but isolated experience of emotion.

Tom Andrews, Director of People United, along with international urbanist, researcher and curator Mirjam Struppek, were members of the panel discussion, which followed the five case studies. It also involved a protracted contribution from the delegates. The discussion began with comments on the ‘idealism’ and inherent frustration with participatory approaches to art – for as this symposium exemplified, the necessity of generic ‘formats’, project ‘structure’, production ‘system’, or any other strategic management or administrative coordination, will inevitably suppress the participatory dimension of art.

Participatory art will therefore reveal the points of tension between artist and participant, the contradiction between the ideals of free association, interaction and the demands of art dialogue. As Assocreation had pointed out, art re-constitutes social behavioural ‘regulation’ and structuring devices as much as it attempts to dissolve or supplant them. Art therefore is never socially neutral or simply a liberation from social norms. The panel offered various responses indicating that participation must therefore involve *reflexivity* (a developing awareness of the symbiotic relation between the regulatory frameworks of the art location and the regulatory frameworks of art), and work within the tensions of the actual, imagined and the possible.

Andrews and Struppek both exemplify the way participatory art demands *research*. Not all contemporary art demands research, of course. Yet with participatory art, there is an inherent need for knowledge-creation as well as art creation: the artist needs to understand the conditions of participation in the form of the social norms and regulations of the site, as well as the behaviour regimes and horizon of expectations of the subjects to participate.

Tom Andrews defines People United as a ‘creative laboratory’. Its organizational aims are disarmingly – ‘to make the world a better place’ and to ‘spread kindness’. And yet, Andrews conveyed the extent to which this project involves scientific research and collaboration with the social psychology department at the University of Kent. For Andrews, ‘data’ and data-driven measurement, evaluation and the monitoring (that every recipient of public funds usually dreads), are frameworks of thought – groping their way to the construction of ‘value’. Value in public policy does not logically tend to ‘make the world a better place’. Yet for People United, art has the facility to interact with data-driven frameworks, creating temporary forms of engagement and community that can test the terms of those frameworks, and however temporary, can expand their interpretation to generate a sense of the broader scope of mutual understanding and social experience. This is carried out invariably through celebratory event-based engagements (such as music concerts, performance and theatre, storytelling, digital

media screenings). And the locations are similarly the most 'everyday' -- bingo halls, shopping centres, parks, hospitals and the beach. Each event is in turn documented and placed against scientific evidence and current theories on what motivates altruism and positive social behaviour.

Mirjam Struppek's concerns were less existing forms of community life and more the potential of new media to construct new community formations -- locations for new community in the urban public sphere. She conveyed how the public sphere is both expanding and contracting, and there is a vital need for us to find ways of remaining active in the spaces so colonized by non- or anti-public forces. As pioneer of the European 'urban screens' phenomena, she is finding the means to create digital infrastructures for new public interactions and communication. The technology and converging platforms that make for new digital dialogue and a renewal of urban culture is now widely available and affordable by local authorities or agencies, and yet the colonization of communications technology by the entertainment or media industries have reduced our understanding of its social function. Struppek stated how urban screen media can dissolve many of the restrictive and divisive social barriers that are embedded in actual physical locations -- forming a 'social communication-driven', not civic-custom driven, urban space.

### **(iii) Points of debate**

Throughout the symposium, questions, responses, general statements on participatory art emerged through the day in various forms. As topics for further research (particularly for academics and policy-makers) they are worth listing in point form.

1: *Art and the State: state art?* Participatory art often revolves around a series of radical oppositions -- between individual and community, public needs and private interests, the temporary and permanent siting of art, the property of the artist and property of the public, State demands and civil society freedoms, creative expression and the limits of social engagement, the demands of practice and the demands of policy, and so on. While some participatory practices take these oppositions as their 'subject' (Assocation shape the oppositions of social experience -- localism and globalism, geo-physical and technological, regulative boundaries and communication systems), many contemporary artists today steer clear of the public realm for what they regard as contradictions that can only generate artistic compromise. Tom Andrews of People United, particularly, conveyed the way in which policy contexts (which many artists understand in terms of hostile demands from an unresponsive State system), were in fact frameworks within which dialogue with authorities could be *demanded*. In other words, while the chronic oppositions between the State policy mechanisms and everyday social life express serious contradictions at the heart of the public sphere, they can also present opportunities for artists to develop a discursive space.

2: *Creative Evaluation*: The symposium delegates at successive times noted the way that central terms like 'public', 'social', 'citizen', all have varied and different meanings, depending on the policy context. The term 'public' is particularly problematic, particularly in places where the 'audience' is disempowered or has no voice or social status; or, as with major cultural events, 'biennale-culture', or destination-management culture, the public is divested of their active agency. Jochen Gerz's work strongly suggested that a strong (or stronger) concept of 'public' is therefore needed in participatory art practices, following from which 'participatory' models of public evaluation could emerge. Participatory art, suggested one delegate, is creative in approaching social community but not creative in producing mechanisms of their own evaluation -- demonstrating how and why they are in 'the public interest'.



3: *The Re-spatialisation of the Public?* New and digital media is rapidly opening up new public spaces and potential for creating new modes of social interaction and dialogue. Before the internet becomes wholly colonized by corporate interests and state censorship, participatory art has and can develop spaces for deliberation and extended social interaction, particularly as means of artist-audience 'co-creation'. And – as boredom research and Mirjam Struppek both emphasized – by adapting or even innovating interactive digital software, new models of cultural interaction can be generated that promote a new horizon of expectations for art audiences, and importantly, non-art audiences. It can also extend the sphere of 'user-experience' from the realm of mere consumption – exploiting the 'skills' of consumption, already embedded in the social sphere, for purposes of socially-directed cultural production.

4: *Participatory organisation:* Participatory practice in new complex urban-social spaces offer the opportunity for artists to innovate organizational formations – beyond the older art 'commissioning agency' structures. NVA demonstrates an ability to maintain a creative-critical dynamic at the core of operations, from initial ideas, project design, commissions and project management. Older arts management models of cultural production will need to evolve to be responsible to a public realm that is diverse and has a range of complex social requirements. Policy-making at both local and national levels (in both NDPBs, local authorities, and other arts funders) should reconstruct their role in art production through a sustained attention to the form and structure of new participatory practices.

5: *The Third Space of Participatory art:* Participatory art is not a genre of art severed from the mainstream development of contemporary art, but maintains a productive dialogue with it, and opens new forms of dialogue between curators and artists (not just artists and commissioners, as with the older 'public art' model). Andrea Schlieker's curatorial practice exemplified ways of working in socio-urban space and event-driven commissions that also connected with the discourse of international contemporary art – a constituency that has in the past largely avoided public art, social, community or event-based art practices. Participatory art is not a 'recontextualisation' of contemporary art (from the art gallery out onto the street – though of course some high profile artists are often paid to do this). It is a new form of art practice for which the recent history of contemporary art and curatorial practice is a significant resource and a necessary 'resounding wall' of dialogue. Public art and Community art traditions are also significant reference points.

6: *The Identity of the Artist:* Throughout the symposium, and particularly with Brigitte Orasinski's representation of the work of Strange Cargo, it became clear that participatory art can radically change the professional identity of the artist. The role of the artist in society is subject to extraordinary social stereotypes, many restricting the understanding of policy makers on what contemporary art is capable of doing. In participatory art, artists have been enacting a performative critique of dominant stereotypes (and the way artists, and art schools, have themselves perpetuated a cycle of individualist anti-social, self-absorbed, self-interest). The dominant model of the professional artist over the last 150 years is not a 'creative one', but an economic one – a free trader and maker of pure commodities for a market of niche luxury products, of which he/she is the only beneficiary.

Participatory art (and public art before it) has developed a range of socio-political skills in negotiation, public dialogue and policy-making. Their expanding skills-set includes project management, finance, PR, education and social work of various kinds. The stereotypes are unlikely to go away, as they are instrumental in both the national media representation of British contemporary culture and of course the art market's

representation of the value of its own commodities. However, the very ambiguities of the role of the artist can be used tactically, gaining access to regions of social or civic life inaccessible to others. Public officials sometimes ridicule artists (as naifs or eccentrics), but at the same time they often allow them an unusual degree of latitude in social projects.

There were more points raised in the symposium than could be addressed: these included the uses of 'empathy' in participatory art, and the socially-therapeutic dimension to participation – stimulating people to 'care' about their urban environment, their social empowerment, their public participation, and so on. The problem of *advocacy* and representation was also raised -- how artists are often placed in a position (by a commission, by arts strategy, by an event) of 'representing' a community to the wider world, or 'representing' art to a suspicious community: how can that representation fully become a part of the creative process?

8: *Social Impact*: Participatory art has a way of touching lives and intervening into the social dimension of urban experience. FrenchMottershead demonstrated the range of social communication and physical contact possible (for example, forgotten elderly people) and how the participatory artist needs to maintain social commitments beyond the usual concerns with making a work of art. FrenchMottershead have also found ways of subverting the 'local-global' opposition by focusing and intervening in various 'local' situations across the world – from Turkey to China – breaking the new global order's stratification of value. In a policy context now interested in the generation of 'social capital' (Bourdieu) beyond mere economic capital, there is a lack of understanding on the nature of social capital for the reason that policy research is largely incapable of 'entering' the world of everyday social experience and forming useful knowledge. FrenchMottershead demonstrate, among other things, a social methodology for social knowledge-formation ('microperformance').

There were many other topics of discussion that could not be pursued: the question of 'social experience' is a particularly pertinent one. How can the artist negotiate a social field whose demographics are shifting so fast – whose occupants are so diverse in both sensibility and use of language cannot coalesce around one unified 'art work'. Participatory projects need to operate on many different registers at once. Or, as Strange Cargo exemplified, perhaps participatory art could only be *socially* effective if it itself remains embedded in the fast developing social environment of one place – so the processes of art production emerge from the rhythms, interruptions and tensions of this developing social environment. The artists become mediators of policy ideas, given how increasingly difficult policy-makers are finding it to keep in touch with the changing populace.

#### **(iv) The symposium and the 'value' question**

Symposia are not 'talking shops' but play an important role in validating professional practice, clarifying methods and approaches, disseminating information on sector developments, and offer practitioners a 'digest' of current projects and commissions. This symposium attracted at least six categories of people: artists, curators and other practitioners; policy makers, cultural managers and other public workers; consultants and art agents; students and teachers; academics/lecturers and researchers, and social/community workers. While the symposium was tightly scheduled and formatted around five case study presentations, the delegates were able to voice a response to the symposium format and by the middle of the afternoon the tight schedule was loosened to facilitate a protracted period of delegate-artist dialogue. Some delegates were irritated at the structure not being 'participatory enough', although the alternatives aired specified an event with quite different objectives. Within the short time allotted,

the symposium had to effectively race through a major talk and five cases, and then open for discussion. The post-presentation events of the guided tour of the Folkestone Triennial by curator Dr Andrea Schlieker, and the drinks reception at Georges House Gallery in the Creative Quarter (Strange Cargo's HQ), offered time for both further questions/answers and networking. The value of the symposium could be defined in terms of the following.

1: *Ideas, techniques, new forms of strategic thinking*: the symposia brought together a unique breadth of creative practice, feeding into the problem-solving initiatives of delegates own work challenges. This cross-fertilisation of ideas on professional practice is rarely possible at 'academic' conferences or arts policy conferences.

2: *Cultural production*: the symposium promoted an understanding of the origin, frameworks, professional problems and networks of people and organizations required for participatory projects. Given that artists worth their salt tend to avoid established 'models' of practice (desiring to respond to the specificity of their location, as well as create something new), commissioners and managers need to understand the processes (both the artists strategy, behaviour and research and cognitive processes) through which art is made.

3: *Dialogue*: discussion on current ideas, ideals, policy pressures and theoretical terms internal to the production and management of participatory projects (as noted in the section above).

4: *Reassessment of strategic options in the light of recent and immanent cuts in public funding and a contracting cultural sector*: the symposium generated ideas and practices that could address the decline of large capital funding as a context. New methods and strategic approaches need to be formulated and deployed in the shifting conditions of the near future.

The question of 'models' of practice is an interesting one – there is often a clash of priorities between the artist and their repudiation of pre-packaged or typical 'models', and the policy-maker's demand for 'best practice'. Funding bodies need to anticipate in advance what a participatory project will involve, and yet the participatory dynamic needs to maintain a high degree of spontaneity and interactive involvement from participants, from which something unplanned can emerge.

The very term 'model' can relate to different categories or registers of activity, and artists either intentionally or by default do use standard models of practice in areas like project management or planning. Working with other agencies (not just art agencies but political representatives, community workers, architects and urban designers), models of practice become the contractual basis of a working relationship (almost always politically inflected). Artists can position themselves within these working relationships as they emerge within a particular project (and every project can be different in this regard). Among our symposium participants, we could identify many levels that could articulate a 'model of practice' – from the organizational structure of the artist-as-company (as with NVA, or People United), the strategic project management of the art creation (Jochen Gerz acts as an orchestrator and leader throughout the duration of his projects, which can last up to seven years), to the communication strategy or communication tactics used to engage with a constituency (boredomresearch's 'products' are constructed around basic patterns of interaction between users and technology), to the structure of the art project itself (Strange Cargo's work is place-project-driven).

However, all these examples refer more to the activity of the artist than the spatial function of the object of the artwork. As a curator, Schlieker's interest is in the aesthetic structure of the artwork (in this context, the art object-viewer dynamic in open urban

space). Yet the object-viewer relation can be configured as different models of practice – depending on the ‘social relations’ it sets up. It might be oriented as an intervention into physical-urban space (as with Urban Screens) or as a communicative mechanism of engagement with urban life on the street (as with Assocreation). So despite the confusing array of possible applications, the term ‘models of practice’ continues to emerge in discussions with artists, policy makers and managing agencies, and did so in the symposium.

Bourriaud, in his now famous *Relation Aesthetics* (1998), noted three historical models for participation in art -- *connections and meetings, conviviality and encounters, collaborations and contracts*.<sup>6</sup> These each denote forms of social exchange. As a curator-critic, Bourriaud’s concept of social exchange is heavily institutionalised within art world discourse, which is to say the intellectual trajectory of mainstream contemporary ‘gallery’ artists (who, it must be said, are not often concerned with the actual problems of social experience, the public good and the politics of public-political deliberations). For Bourriaud, the dominant models of participatory art are derived from a perceived structure of aesthetic relations that have been configured around basic models of social intercourse (i.e. not around models of artistic composition).

Our symposium artists demonstrated the viability of non-cultural (non-prestige) locations as sites for significant contemporary art. They also demonstrated the way contemporary art can move outside the institutional orbit of historical art discourse, and remain ‘credible’ contemporary art. They were not using models of social exchange as the vehicle of an art agenda – they were working within the tensions of already existing social life in order to generate a reflexive order of what we may call ‘aesthetic knowledge-production’ (and it was through this exploration that significant art could be created). The ‘aesthetic knowledge’ in question revolves of course around ‘visual experience’, but unlike mainstream contemporary art, this visual experience opens out onto a field of social interaction. It may, on the face of it, take the form of cultural ethnography (Frenchmottershead), the critique of historic civic identity (Jochen Gerz), investigation of sociability and altruism (People United), or of cultural capital (Strange Cargo).

To view art as a ‘knowledge’ production and not simply a ‘visual experience’ that is abstracted from social life, shifts the axis of value from the confines of art historical discourse to the realms of public culture and its politics. And ‘public culture’, defined as a ‘discourse’, is something I would say is not fully formed. It is imperiled by the discourses of mainstream contemporary art (and all the other cultural ‘specialisms’ that generate elite interest groups, hermetic terminology, professional networks and associations, and closed markets). The discourse of public culture is also stunted by hostile political conditions and the media domination of the public sphere.

#### **(v) Theoretical reflections on the symposium**

Outside of policy-driven arts strategy in the social arena, participatory art can be found in a diverse range of contemporary art from the last three decades: from Rirkrit Tiravanija, Freee, Sophie Calle, Thomas Hirschorn, WochenKlausur, Santiago Sierra, On Kawara, Liam Gillick, Littoral, and Braco Dimitrijevic. As popularised by Thames and Hudson’s 2008 publication, *The Art of Participation: 1950 until now*, (by Rudolf Frieling and Boris Groys, with a subsequent major exhibition at the SFMOMA), the recent history of contemporary art is being re-assessed in this new framework.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever the potential functions of participatory art in policy or arts management context, ‘participatory art’ in the UK is a serious artistic genre. ‘Participatory art’ in itself is not the instrumentalisation of art for social/public policy objectives. This symposium demonstrated that artists working in the broader fields of everyday life can use

participation to interrogate and explore issues internal to contemporary art's own spectrum of interests. Participatory art also generates synergies and collaboration between diverse regions of art practice from performance, to sculpture, to film and media, to installation art, generating an expanded field of artistic activity outside the gallery-walls. It has enabled professional prejudices and institutional boundaries between contemporary art, community art, public art, art therapy, outsider art, and the many genres of art practice in social space, to be broken down and realigned.

As a new and growing interdisciplinary field of art research, in the last few years participation has featured in significant debates from high profile thinkers like French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, philosopher Jacques Rancière, (as well as Jochen Gerz, himself a writer as well as artist). It has been the subject of art historical inquiry, by the likes of Rosalind Deutsche, Miwon Kwon, Claire Bishop, and particularly Grant Kester. Central theoretical topics have run from experimental-format exhibitions; space, agency and structure in art; aesthetics and the phenomenology of subject-object interactivity; artist-viewer dialogue; and new strategies of artistic interpretation using alternative concepts of community, social experience or the public sphere.

To conclude this report I will outline five theoretical issues that emerged from this symposium.

*On Method:* the questions being asked by delegates amounted to several means by which a research method could be constructed, for analysis, critique or evaluation of participatory art. These could be listed as topics and questions.

1. *Representation and identity:* how is the artist represented in a given social space (how, and by whom)? How is 'art' or the participatory project represented, and how in turn does the project represent its participants and their participatory role (their interests or issues pertinent to the spaces they inhabit).
2. *Moral economy:* What relations to self and other does the project set up – and what moral assumptions are embedded in the project as a process and enterprise of production? What ethical dynamics does it create, or efface or revise? What processes of decision-making is embedded in the project, and how is power acknowledged and (re)distributed?
3. *Framing and context:* how does the project respond to and negotiate its ideological contexts and the boundaries between social and cultural space?
4. *Collectivity:* how are collective, cooperative and collaborative relations constructed, and with recourse to what lexicon, discourse or political reference points? How does the project manage the participants' expectations and the ideologies of historical creativity?
5. *Mobility:* how does the project position or situate itself (or is situated) within the discourse of participation or social engaged practice, or of fine art or art world genres of practice, or of the demands of audience, exhibition and commissioning agencies?

*On Theory:* It became clear throughout the symposium that artists as well as arts workers of all kinds felt disenfranchised, not only from policy-making but from the strategic frameworks used to commission and evaluate public arts. The very language or terminology that is central to policy-making is not inflected by actual social experience. Terms like 'value', 'social impact', 'evidence', and 'measurement' were more often than not simply transposed from economic policy to cultural policy, where no process of translation could make the evaluation process register the social experience in question.

Some delegates in the symposium had not come to participatory arts from a mainstream 'public art' background, and were therefore unaware of the policy-based research in the last few years by independent agencies like IXIA Public Art Think Tank (<http://ixia-info.com>), or the Open Space research centre (<http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/>).

However, the spectrum of participatory arts, particularly as it proceeds from mainstream contemporary art and not public art, has its own distinctive concerns – and is less property-based and more ‘people-centric’ than public art. Perhaps one way of addressing this is to address the distinct lack of collaboration in the UK between artists, arts workers and theorists. Theoretical work needs to be undertaken, so as to reconstruct the relation between method, language and knowledge in participatory arts policy formation, devising new strategic approaches to commissioning and public management, all capable of challenging national frameworks that attempt to turn art into a sub-branch of economics.

*Cultural Capital:* one symposium participant pointed out the tension between ‘the temporary and the permanent’, particularly in relation to the intellectual property of the artist. Participatory art, as we noted in the introduction, is an ‘event’ (whatever art object or production process is used). Its identity and value is invested in the temporality of subject interaction – the value (and often documented remainder) of the work of art is often entirely relative to that moment of interaction. However, the work of artists (as Bourdieu pointed out – author of the concept of ‘cultural capital’) is governed to a great extent by a ‘trajectory’ or co-extensive line of development, where ideas, creative inspiration, strategic communication, evolves in succession throughout an artistic career. This ‘successive’ nature to the creative process requires its own conditions of production. Yet participatory art is often project-based and thus a series of singular ‘events’. Participatory events – conceived as singular, finite, decisive, and requiring a finality than can be measured and documented – can convert artists into ‘cultural service providers’, radically reducing their own professional capital. Cultural capital as a concept needs to be re-thought, understanding the way artist’s vocations (not ‘careers’) proceed on a different level of temporality, requiring different conditions of social support and social resources.

*Cultural Conflict:* In the last twenty years, the liberal democracies of Europe have become more sensitive to the potential for conflict among its inhabitants. In keeping with the ideal of consensus at the heart of liberal democracy, they have attempted to minimize conflict (sometimes at the expense of rights of expression or speech). And yet conflict is at the heart of all democracy, particularly ‘adversarial democracy’ like the UK. The role of conflict in culture is confusing and unclear. There is a certain double-mindedness at the heart of participatory art commissioning: oppositional and adversarial art is celebrated if sealed in the museum gallery (the centrality of the avant-garde and anti-art to the history of modern art), but it is precluded in principle from public or social space. The participatory artist all too often works under an enforced ethic of consensus, where the participatory art must be ‘positive’, inclusive, accessible and ‘for everyone’ to the point where the real dynamics of social experience are avoided. Most social experience revolves around conflict, injustice, contradictions between individual and social system, politics and faith, for example, which remain unaddressed by an art that is conceived as an ‘addition’ to an already pre-formed social community. We need to re-assess conflict: in the symposium many artists referred to the way conflict emerges, but never understood or able to become part of the artistic project.

*Cultural Memory:* The work of Strange Cargo was central to this symposium – in the sense that the symposium was generated by their exploration of the current meaning and purpose of participatory art practice. By virtue of their long-term residency in the town of Folkestone, they have been able to develop access to realms of social life inaccessible to other types of art organization. The significance of their approach is in the way urban geo-politics is a part of social life. The relation between people and their urban infrastructure (and thus cultural facilities, education and training, social

institutions, and so on) is rarely understood by ordinary citizen's themselves, least of all immigrant newcomers. To be able to mediate knowledge on the evolution and current constitution of the social community, is a way of then opening that community to the conditions of their social existence and the potential for change without the direct sponsorship of the State.

If participatory art is to stand for anything, it must surely be the empowerment of people in developing an identity and role as a citizen (where the very category is changing as the spectrum of socio-political power is changing). It is to equip people as citizens, linguistically and intellectually, to play a formative role in shaping the environments in which they live their lives.



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7: Frieling, R. and Groys, B., (2008) *The Art of Participation: 1950 until now*, London: Thames and Hudson. [SFMOMA exhibition: last accessed 10/11/11: at [http://www.sfmoma.org/exhib\\_events/exhibitions/306](http://www.sfmoma.org/exhib_events/exhibitions/306)]. See also Grant Kester, ed. (1998) *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, Duke University Press; Claire Bishop (2004) 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110, Fall, pp. 51-79; Grant Kester (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press; Claire Bishop, ed. (2006) *Participation*, London: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press; Grant Kester (2011) *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Duke University Press.

*Contributing artists websites:*

**Strange Cargo:** <http://www.strangecargo.org.uk/>

**NVA organisation:** <http://www.nva.org.uk/about/>

**Assocreation:** <http://www.assocreation.com/>

**Jochen Gerz:** <http://www.gerz.fr/>

**Frenchmottershead:** <http://www.frenchmottershead.com/>

**Boredomresearch:** <http://www.boredomresearch.net/>

**People United:** <http://www.peopleunited.org.uk/>

**Urban Screens:** <http://www.urbanscreens.org>