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Problematising the problem of participation in art and politics

Introduction

After the collapse of the totalitarian regimes, participation into public matters has been an objective of democratic theory. Judging by a variety of instances from the sixties to today, it can be said that finding new means for encouraging audiences to participate in their works has become the major concern for contemporary art as well. Therefore, we can say that the problem of participation is the focal point of art and politics.

As Benjamin (1968/2007) states, the age of mechanical production compelled the artists to find new ways of expressing the political, and render artistic forms resistant to reification. For this reason, a participatory turn can be regarded as a silent consensus among political artists.

Nevertheless, the way art reflects the social problems differs from that of political theory. Art is a mode of understanding for the already existing human situation waiting to be translated into a sensible language, and the current situation is a case of disconnectedness: The disconnectedness between the idea of participation and forms of representation.

Due to the structural inability of the idea of participation in resolving existing structures of polarisation, as Tormey (2005) remarks, fewer people are getting involved in processes such as voting and joining political parties in recent years. This is not surprising since "political theories have nothing to say" against those who reject to be a part of "representative structures" or those "who attempt to elaborate structures, institutions and processes that go beyond representation" (p. 139).

Regarded merely as a reform, i.e. a way to get involved in formal democracy, participation simply empowers the alienation of the people to the political arena. Similarly, in art, the position of a spectator regarded as a passive eye in the dark and that of the player as an active subject is fixed and re-produced through problematic participatory initiatives.

In this context, our inquiry will start with a brief introduction of the philosophical roots of the problem of representation, the crisis of which resulted in the search for new models of political expression. Since this quest was immediately transferred to historical endeavours in art, we will continue with Brechtian Theatre

which asserted one of the most controversial topics to the theory of art: namely, how to overcome the distinction between the player and the spectator. Meanwhile, Ranciére's and Adorno's critics of Brecht will be clarified as they are his major opponents. Afterwards, some striking examples from a direct understanding of participation will be referred under the notion of art as an affective experience. We will also examine confrontational theatre as a radical attempt to stir the audience. Finally, the provocative definition of "the spectator as a voyeur" will be considered, and this will carry the discussion to the notion of innocence in a society of opinions.

All these steps will lead us to the conclusion that contemporary art and politics indicate the need to renew our conceptions about taking part in the system of representation which is in a crisis, and consider radical ways of becoming and subsisting in our *singularities*. Art and politics unite in this depiction because they are nothing but two different modes for understanding the political.

A critique of representation

According to Tormey (2005), the critique of representational politics was initially announced in the fields of "philosophy, ethics and literature" and spread to "black studies, feminism, queer and lesbian studies," and finally to areas of "postcolonial research" (p. 138). Specifically speaking, post-representational politics found itself in Deleuze and Guattari's works in the seventies and eighties, namely in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *Difference and Repetition* (1968) (pp. 139–40).

Deleuze grounds the philosophical problem on his interpretation of Hume's empiricism as well as on Spinoza's ontology. He states that objects are ontologically prior to systems of classification which we use to order the world.

Whereas the Platonic paradigm of truth is based on the self-sameness of the ideas, Deleuze (1968/2001) offers to put "difference" ontologically prior to identity (pp. 39–41). In other words, we need to seek for an understanding of the things through their state of differentiation and mutual-relations instead of their assumed identity. Once we manage to dismiss our habit of assuming identities, we can see singularities in becoming (Tormey, 2005, p. 141). It should be noted that by "becoming" Deleuze does not refer to an underlying claim to an end. On the contrary, becoming is "the continual production (or 'return') of difference immanent within the constitution of events" (Stagoll, 2005, p. 21). Therefore, difference, which has no essence or fixed nature, is what returns with becoming.

Singularities are qualitative differences within an evolving whole. Our faculty of understanding conceives them distinctly by means of abstraction, but the fact that I can think about something as a distinct identical being does not prove that it is a metaphysically distinct entity: "the real distinction between attributes is a

formal, not numerical distinction (Deleuze, 2001, p. 303). In this context, Spinozistic ontology is important for its break with Cartesian dualism, according to which mind and body are distinct substances and the *thinking substance* (cogito) is, at the same time, an 'I.'

One of the problems with understanding singularities as subjects is the underlying requirement of transcendence. Both Hume and Kant noticed the assumption of transcendence in Descartes's cogito. In order to equate "thinking" with a self-identical subject, one needs to assume the existence of a transcendent category of self-sameness (Deleuze, 2001, pp. 265–66). Transcendence is the basis of the idea of representation, because everything is judged with respect to their relations of similarity *to* or difference *from* those identical beings.

As Kant underlined in his critiques, in order to talk about that which is beneath phenomena, we need to make metaphysical judgments of knowledge—indeed we cannot talk about what is essentially unknowable and ineffable. Right before Kant, Hume stated that our talk of subjects does not necessitate that there really are transcendent subjects, but we psychologically need to posit the notion of identity in the beginning of our construction of the whole world (Deleuze, 2001, p. 263). On the other hand, two centuries later, Deleuze argued that claims to transcendence and identity must be totally rejected.

If human beings can no more be conceived of static subjects, and, instead, be understood as processes that never are but are always becoming, "difference" replaces the notion of "self." "To restore difference in thought is to untie this first knot which consists of representing difference through the identity of the concept and the thinking subject" (Deleuze, 2001, p. 266). Explained reversely, difference cannot be captured as a static whole and thus cannot be represented conceptually. Nevertheless, the system of representation is based on the habitual assumption of identities, classes, groups, and other categories of sameness.

The ideological outcome of a society structured around the idea of representation is the threat against the plurality of human beings. According to Arendt (1958/1998), plurality is the condition of political action. What makes humans political beings is their actions, and what depoliticises and renders them "uniform" is the loss of their "words and thus [their] speech" (Akkın, 2011, p. 51).

In formal democracies professionals, leaders, and representatives speak on behalf of people. They are represented as subjects and understood in political categories such as Muslims, Germans, people of colour, LQBTQI, etc. A post-representational politics, then, begins with a rejection of those categories of reduction (Tormey, 2005, p. 142). This is at the same time the difference between politics of identity and minoritarian (non-representational) politics.

Setting a face against representation, categorization, pigeonholing is a denial or negation of the logic of representation; but this is a denial that is itself active and thus constitutive of difference itself … To assert that 'I am not like that' is a negation; but it is also a form of affirmation … It is a disavowal of the possibility of being contained by the representative claim, whilst at the same time an affirmation of singularity … It is the process of becoming that affirms difference. Difference cannot in this sense be mute or silent; but must 'speak' for itself (p. 143).

This was the point of departure for the contemporary artist as well. She wanted to instantiate the "irreproducibility" and unrepresentability of an aesthetic experience in the form of an "event," and to discover a more democratic means of participation (Demaria, 2004, p. 295). However, before considering such performances, let us talk about Brecht as a revolutionary, but simultaneously transitory, figure in the history of theatre and political art.

Artists rolls up their sleeves to change the world

Just like the influential German Romantic Schiller who ascribed the role of human emancipation mainly to fine arts, playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht believed in the social task of political art: the task of encouraging people to question the facts about class conflicts by mediation of epic-dialectic theatre which is an artistic reflection of the relevant historical context.

Deeply influenced by the social outcomes of Hitler's fascist regime in Germany and the apparent inequalities as part of the economical results of the Great Depression in America during the 1930s, Brecht wrote and directed plays like *The Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and *St John of the Stockyards*. The main themes of his texts were the abuse of religion, the rise of fascism, and market economy and its crisis, as well as the fatalities of capitalist production methods, class struggles, exploited workers, resistance, and revolution.

Although there is a general message, i.e. "the world can be changed," in his dramas, Brecht did not aspire to teach a complete doctrine through direct messages. On the contrary, he used a special method, *Verfremdungseffekt* (distancing effect), in order to activate the viewers so that they would intellectually grasp their own inferences from the play by the use of their own rational powers. Hence the element of didacticism in Brecht's theatre consists of "usefulness," which means "practice" (Jameson, 1998, pp. 3–8): just like science is entertaining when it is based on learning through practice, theatre can be entertaining so long as it is participatory.

The distancing effect consists of certain elements such as highlights, projections, outer voices, décor, and—most importantly—acting techniques. Brecht's aim was putting the audience in a state of constant wakefulness by reminding

her what she is watching is not something real with which she can emotionally sympathise, but it is an illusion. Therefore, in order to arouse curiosity and attention, the stage must be cleansed from all the illusory and magical elements and turned into a social lab (Wright, 1998, p. 44). On the contrary, in classical (imitative) theatre the audience is passivised by a process of hypnotisation through emotional attachment.

However, the key element of Brechtian acting is *Gestus*. It is an exaggerated ideological attitude which makes it visible to the audience that social relations are not natural but determined by relations of production (Wright, 1998, p. 39). For instance, the antagonistic attitude between a worker and his employer is expressed by a *Gestus*. The aim of *Gestus* and the distancing effect is to establish an empathy between the social position of the characters and that of the viewers—but not a sympathetic identification with the players due to their emotional states.

Nevertheless, critiques of Brecht's epic-dialectic theatre, e.g. Adorno, argue that Brecht's texts contradict his goals and present a "dissymmetry," as they are highly sophisticated and beyond the level of an ordinary audience (as cited in Daddario, 2011, p. 129). Furthermore, intellectual activism does not necessarily lead to *praxis* in the political arena, and the so-called active/passive dichotomy cannot be surpassed by reducing participation to intellectual activity alone (pp. 126–29).

The element of reductionism in Brecht's theatre is a crucial point of disagreement between him and some other playwrights too, e.g. Antonin Artaud and Augusto Boal. For instance, in his well-known manifesto for the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud (1958) explicitly states that he desires to "abolish" the safe distance of the spectator completely by placing them in the middle of the events, a position where they cannot help but be "physically affected" by the play "all around them" (p. 96).

Artaud's theatre is based on the idea of raising the sensitivity of the audience by stimulating their emotions through various elements. Therefore, creepy scenes, weird voices, screams, blood, irrational powers and symbols of dreams are elements of the Theatre of Cruelty. He is inspired by rituals of ancient tribes, magic and other metaphysical applications, but more importantly Artaud is critical about the importance attached to human rationality. Hence, theatre of cruelty is close to the Aristotelian notion of *katharsis*; i.e. purging the soul by the revelation of repressed emotions. In brief, whereas Brecht wants the audience to remain at a "distance" and intellectually process the play, Artaud expects a "vital participation" from them (Ranciére, 2009, pp. 4–5).

The idea of audience participation was problematised by stronger critiques too. In his article "The Emancipated Spectator," Ranciére (2008/2009) establishes an analogy between the artist who wants to activate the viewer by changing her role

and an ignorant schoolmaster who wants to save her pupils from their ignorance by educating them. In order "to replace ignorance by knowledge, [the schoolmaster] must always be one step ahead, install a new form of ignorance between the pupil and himself" (Ranciére, 2009, p. 8). Just as the hierarchy between the two positions—that of a teacher and a student—is fixed in an attempt to teach the unknowledgeable, so too is that of the spectator and the artist; the artist wants to activate the viewers being unaware of the fact that external intervention but only strengthens the hierarchy between the oppositions of activity/passivity and viewing/knowing (Ranciére, 2009, pp. 8–9).

Nevertheless, not all the artists who are concerned with those oppositions act with the ignorance and hubris of the schoolmaster. There are several examples in contemporary political art which are immune to Ranciére's critique.

Art as affective experience

In the eighties, continental philosophy became a theoretical source of inspiration for politically inclusive art collectives which deviated from earlier versions of participatory art and were more likely to be defined as fields of affective experience.

Whereas philosophy thinks through concepts, art thinks through percepts and affects. In the Deleuzian philosophy, "affects are becomings" and hence non-representational modes of thought, i.e. they cannot be exhausted in the language and thus by the intellect (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, p. 256).

To talk about art in terms of affect, we can refer to Brian Massumi (2003), who follows the way Spinoza understands affect, i.e. in terms of bodily affection. The body has a "capacity for *affecting* or being *affected*," and when I affect something, I also open myself "up to being affected in turn," which means that affect is what enables the mutual change in our virtual capacities (p. 212). In this respect, Spinoza conceives of affect as a transition—a passing from a capacity to another—but he also defines a body as "what it can *do* as it *goes* along," i.e. as a moving capacity (Massumi, 2003, p. 213). Therefore, art can be seen as a way of thinking through movements of bodies as both affects and bodies which are constantly changing.

In every affection, something is accumulated "in memory, in habit, in reflex, in desire, [and] in *tendency*" (p. 215). This is why art, as affective experience, is capable of deepening our affective potential. The artist enlarges our capacity by adding something new to the world (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 175).

When humans are understood as difference, i.e. as affective bodies who can be encountered only at their presence with one another, co-existence becomes the condition of human affairs. The rejection of self-identicalness stresses the priority of action and presence-in-the-now over an atemporal identity and stability.

In this context, the performances or installations which are based on a "co-existence criterion" aim at questioning whether the work of art at stake permits the people to "enter into dialogue" and create a space to co-exist in (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 109). The artists thought that artwork should not be a commodity but "an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects" (p. 107).

The following cases can be regarded as good instances of minoritarian, non-representative, affective exchanges in art:

(1) In 1988, "access to political power was obstructed […], participation in politics had degenerated into passive and symbolic involvement" (Group Material, 2006, p. 135). Therefore, the U.S. collective Group Material organised a conference and installation project in New York:

> We identified four significant areas of the crisis in democracy: education, electoral politics, cultural participation and AIDS. For each topic, we collaboratively organized a round table discussion, an exhibition and a town meeting. For each round table we invited individual speakers from diverse professions and perspectives to participate in an informal conversation. These discussions helped us to prepare the installations and provided important information for planning the agendas for the town meetings. Each of the four exhibitions that we installed at 77 Wooster Street reiterated the interrelatedness of our subjects and the necessity of our collaborative process (Group Material, 2006, p. 136).

Due to the elimination of the "demarcation between experts and the public," *Democracy* had a collaborative and inclusive form, and for the same reason, it is a perfect example of art as an affective experience (Group Material, 2006, p. 136).

(2) In a similar fashion, in the year 2000, a group of artists called the *Colectivo Sociedad Civil* started a series of activities—*Lava la bandera*—in Lima, which quickly spread throughout Peru. They organised a "symbolic act of washing the Peruvian flag in the main square of Lima" (Fisher, 2011, p. 17). Gustavo Buntinx (one of the activists) later described this piece of "artivism" as a "participatory ritual of national cleansing directed against the corrupt and increasingly despotic regime of Fujimori-Montesinos" (as cited in Fisher, 2011, p. 17).

Deleuze and Guattari (1991/1994) underline that an artwork has a being of its own, i.e., once created, it no longer depends on the creator; and furthermore, those who get involved in it enter a process of becoming with it.

Regarding the cases of *Democracy* and *Lava la bandera*, my opinion is that the point when the artist does not know the outcome of the performance, i.e. it is up to the collective desire of the *co-producers*, Ranciére's critique of the ignorant schoolmaster becomes inapplicable since those performances do not repeat the criticised dichotomies.

Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 164).

In-yer-face theatre

In the nineties, a form of critical theatre emerged through the pages of British drama. It is known as "in-yer-face," or confrontational theatre.

Naturalism is the central tenet of these experimental works, and it is to be understood as the desire to touch life as such and unveil the truth about social facts, such as violence, crime and the problematic distinction between private and public spheres. What seems brutal, awkward, or outrageous on stage is indeed a real part of life out there.

In his text *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, Sierz (2000) reports a scene from a performance at the Bird's Nest pub theatre in Deptford in February 1996 which might give a general idea of the types of scenes one is confronted with in experimental (in-yer-face) theatre:

> Anna Reading's *Falling* had an excruciating incident in which Ket, a fifteen-year-old, had to remove a tampon after having been raped. As she struggles to do it, she imagines dying, 'and then they'll cut me open and find maggots and stinking dead flesh' (p. 233).

After the show, Sierz asks the director of the play why she had written about such horrors and she replies "because life is like that" (as cited in Sierz, 2000, p. 233). This was a phrase Sierz had heard several times when he asked young writers.

Accordingly, the idea behind confrontational theatre is that violence, rape, and ruthlessness do not come from outer planets, but rather the sterilising effort of cultural and legal censorships hide the wild side of human relations. Thus, in-yer-face performers started a fight against the hypocritical conservativism of society, and provocation became their ultimate tool. As in his famous manifesto of provocative theatre, Peter Brook states:

> the intention was to crack the spectator on the jaw, then douse him with ice-cold water, then force him to assess intelligibly what has happened to him, then give him a kick in the balls, then bring him back to his senses again (as cited in Sierz, 2000, p. 18).

By pushing them in the middle of intense emotions and very vital scenes of pain and pleasure, artists of this école coerced the viewer to have a reaction. The spectator

felt ashamed, embarrassed, blushed, and shocked. Petrified by the effect of shocking scenes, eventually the viewer's position was sometimes reduced to that of a voyeur.

In Webster's dictionary, "shame" is defined as "a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety in one's own behaviour or position, or in the behaviour or position of a closely associated person or group" (as cited in Feinberg, 1985, p. 18). In the case of a viewer who is confronted with an in-yer-face drama, it is not so easy to understand the kernel of the feeling of shame because the performers are total strangers. Why, then, would a viewer feel ashamed for someone else's behaviours?

Think about a couple who have sex on the stage. Indeed, the things they do to derive sexual pleasure would be rather "ordinary and acceptable" if they did it in "private" (Feinberg, 1985, p. 16). The same is true for a naked player since no one is offended by people's nudity in their privacy. This time, the question is why "perfectly acceptable [actions] become 'indecent' when performed in public?" (p. 17).

According to Feinberg (1985), there is an "unresolved conflict between instinctual desires and cultural taboos," and "nude bodies and copulating couples [etc.] have the power of preempting the attention and absorbing the reluctant viewer" (p. 17). Therefore, such behaviours "create a kind of inner agitation" (p. 18) or "that experience of exposure to oneself of one's 'peculiarly sensitive, intimate, vulnerable aspects'" (Lynd as cited in Feinberg, 1985, p. 18).

I agree that this inner feeling can be named shame, but from an experimental point of view, these are also situations in which one can confront one's own undiscovered fears, delusions, taboos, desires, mistaken thoughts, and even hopes. Furthermore, one can even encounter the hypocrisy of the society about the matters which are culturally regarded obscene:

> There is a temptation to see and savour all, and to permit oneself to become sexually stimulated, as by a pornographic film, but instantly the temptations of *voyeurism* trigger the familiar mechanism of inhibition and punishment in the form of feelings of shame (Feinberg, 1985, p. 17).

This mechanism is what causes one's unease in the case of encountering someone else's privacy: "His own presence is a jarring foreign element in their privacy" (p. 19). In the extremely provoking cases one might even feel "that he is threatened by what is happening, that either the unrestraint public performers or his own stirred up feelings may surge out of control" (p. 19). In some cases, the observer sympathetically identifies herself "with the other party" and hence "feels ashamed or embarrassed *for* the other party" (p. 19).

Although in-yer-face theatre was the trend setter of the nineties, their shocking effect was over by the year 2000, since the viewers of megacities like London got

used to staged nudity and violence. Nevertheless, many of the dramas written by British authors are translated into other languages, adapted and played around the world, which proves that experimental performances remain sensational for the spectators in different countries.

Discussion

Representative politics results in the formation of a "society of opinions" (Baker, 2005, p. 13). Similar to Debord's "Society of the Spectacle" (1977/2006), the people in the society of opinions are passivised and controlled by the opinions of professionals in the screen. The state's claim to legitimacy is based on an assumption of the "innocence" of people—the viewers—in the society of opinions (Baker, 2005, p. 22; p. 78). The most valuable and sacred property of innocent people is their bare life, and the state guarantees the continuity and protection of bare-biological life, i.e. lives of innocent people (Agamben, 1998). Therefore, the state is always righteous in its actions. But protection requires discipline, control and even punishment of those who are guilty.

Imagine that a country wages an unjust war against another country. It is not the case that all people have to join the army, but the state's policy forbids anti-war protests too.

A group of people in that country directly support the army by producing weapons, armours etc., while others indirectly support it by supplying food and dresses to the soldiers. Still another group takes such a position that they neither directly nor indirectly support the war, but they do not object it either. Note that all those people are conscious of the possible results of their attitudes. In this situation, can we simply name the people in the third group, who remain apathetic to the unjust war, "innocent" (Wasserstrom, 1969, p. 1651)?

Before giving a shortcut yes/no answer to the question, we must add a fourth group to our hypothetical case. The people in the fourth group break the state's banning of anti-war protests by risking their own lives, and they organise campaigns to create an awareness on the unjustness of the war. Now, is it still so easy to claim that those who neither directly nor indirectly support war, but at the same time, silently accompany official-violence (in the sense of not objecting to it) either, are innocent (Baker, 2005, p. 78)?

At least we can argue that there are different levels of innocence. It might be the case that the people in the third group are afraid of being punished, and thus they comply with the state's prohibition which leads them to behave immorally or, at least, selfishly (Wasserstrom, 1969, p. 1651). In contrast to the moral behaviour

of those who risk their own lives to tell the truth about war, the silent group's fear can be regarded as an instance of cowardice.

There are many philosophers who would define cowardice as a vice and, in contrast, courage as a virtue, e.g. Aristotle (1998). In this context, even if we are not sure whether a person is innocent or not, in choosing a specific type of behaviour, we can still say, for sure, that a vicious behaviour is guilty!

In this context, the provocative analogy between the viewer as a voyeur and the passivity of allegedly innocent people in modern society is still an important topic of discussion for both the theory of art and politics.

Conclusion

To summarise, our investigation departed from the mutual relationship between art and politics. It has been stated that art reflects the political in its own ways. Therefore, it was important to see how the problem of political participation was approached by different practices within the field of political theatre and the art collectives who adapted a direct idea of participation.

The examples within the perspective of co-existence or art as affective experience indeed blurred the distinction between art and activism, but consequentially came up with a merged form of the two, namely artivism. As the number of examples that could be provided in a short article is limited, we only mentioned the initiatives of *Colectivo Sociedad Civil* and *Group Material*. Nevertheless, the origin of such art collectives goes back to the Avant-Garde tactics and especially the Situationist International (1957–1972) which was an influential group in the outbreak of May 68 uprisings (Knabb, 2011). The Umsonst Campaigns along with other occupy movements around the world can be interpreted as belonging to the category of affective artivism as well (Kanngieser, 2011). In my opinion, all these movements are up-to-date versions of the Situationists.

Finally, we have shown that confrontational theatre is important due to its provocative challenge to voyeurism which can be read as a reflection of the guilty position of the people faced with official-violence and cultural hypocrisy. Our discussion on the vague character of innocence (assigned to apathetic people in the face of political matters) came to be the junction point between art and politics.

Depending on this intellectual journey, our initial remark can be restated as follows: The rising call for participation and action has repercussion in art and post-representational political theory, and it is simultaneously expressed in the street.

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