Interactive Contemporary Art Participation in Practice edited by Kathryn Brown

Interactive Contemporary Art Participation in Practice is a thought-provoking book that enriches the critical discourse about contemporary art practices which incorporate interactivity or audience participation. Kathryn Brown has gathered together twelve illustrated essays by a mix of authors that includes three artists, eight academics and one museum professional. The essays are grouped thematically into four sections exploring in turn; social, imaginative, performative and institutional aspects of these kinds of practices (2014: 7). Ten of the essays critically evaluate specific works and practices. Two pose more general critiques of institutional perspectives on interactive art.

In her excellent introduction, Brown bases her definition of 'interactivity' in contemporary art on Dominic McIver Lopes' notion of interactivity within computer art. In this view, interactivity draws attention 'not just to a process of exchange between artist, artwork, and audience, but also to the impact of that exchange on the look or display of the work' (2014: 4). Brown introduces Berys Gaut's argument that 'in interactive artworks, members of the audience assume a 'performance' role in relation to the content of the work.' By undertaking 'performance', the audience member not only contributes to the work's instantiation, 'but is also an integral component of […its] aesthetic effect' and their own appreciation of that effect. (2014: 4-5). Although others have defined 'interactivity' as a relationship of one-to-one, Brown points out that different kinds of interactive encounters 'between individuals and objects and/or artist can lay the foundation for collective art experiences' (2014: 5) and gives credible examples of this. Brown sketches a definition of interactivity in art, therefore, as a method that involves some kind of exchange wherein audience members take on performance roles that are incorporated into the work, contribute to its aesthetic effect and change its display.

Brown sets out a number of characteristics of the artworks featured in the volume; and in doing so, illustrates her view of what makes good interactive art. One fundamental attribute is that insofar as they bring people 'directly into their processes and outcomes'; participatory artworks have an unavoidable ethical dimension and are subject to socio-political interpretation (2014: 3).

A second characteristic concerns *specificity*. Brown references critiques of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* proffered by Claire Bishop and Grant Kester. In Bishop's view, Bourriaud's celebration of practices that produce social relationships fails to pay sufficient attention to the *quality* of the relations produced which 'remains unquestioned by those who make, experience, and judge them' (2014: 2). Kester worries when participatory practices are assumed to have 'universal appeal' (2014: 2). He emphasises that careful attention to the specific site must be given 'in the creation and execution of artworks that involve dialogue with, and exchange between, members of a community' (2014: 2). In response to both of these critiques, Brown has selected essays about practices that pay close attention to the specific contexts in which specific kinds of dialogue have been fostered (2014: 3).

This emphasis on specificity extends to the works' audiences as well. Drawing on T. J. Clark, Brown writes that the art audience is 'a fantasy' – an idea – that is generated in the artwork

and in the process of its creation. Thus, a third characteristic is that the audience and the work are considered together. In other words, an idea of the audience must inform the structure and execution of an artwork that invites participation (2014: 3-4).

Throughout the opening discussion, Brown refers to 'participatory' practices. One reason she choses to privilege the term 'interactive' in the title, however, is that the word 'interactivity' allows for a distinction to be made between participatory artworks and those that are produced 'collaboratively' (2014: 4). The presence of an 'underlying idea, script, or form […that is clearly] the product of the artist's own creativity' is another characteristic of the artwork featured in the volume. The essays place importance on identifying this even though, in all cases, the audience's performance is integral to the works' aesthetic effects (2014: 5).

Another characteristic relates to the focus of attention of the interactive artwork away from object and spectator and toward what Gustaf Almenberg has called the 'act of creating'. It can be argued that a viewer participates in the creation of any artwork and in this regard Brown draws on Kendall Walton's idea that representational artworks operate as props for a kind of imaginative game-playing through which the artwork comes alive within the viewer. Participatory artworks, Brown writes, have the potential to extend this by 'serving as props [… for] more elaborate games with multiple participants'. Through their physical and psychological engagement with an artwork, and because they may also learn the consequences of their individual and/or collective actions within the artist's 'script', participants might, Brown argues, discover critical self-awareness and self-knowledge (2014: 6).

This is a bold claim that is not proved by the case studies presented in the book. Nor can a publication of this kind be expected to do so. The collection teases out issues, exposes theoretical possibilities and poses pertinent questions. A reader can draw connections between the essays to find shared concepts or trends of beliefs, but no empirical evidence of any particular artwork's ability to engender self-awareness or self-knowledge in participants is presented. The broad claim remains a theoretical assertion. The essays do, however, offer valuable insights into how a number of artists think about and use interactivity, as well as the ways in which they hope their audiences might become more self-aware and knowledgeable through interaction with their work.

The essays in the first section look at artwork that is both social and spatial within three settings: the gallery; the public spectacle and the everyday urban environment. Mieke Bal theoretically contextualises her spatially complex exhibition, *Landscapes of Madness* (2011). Bal understands the 'aesthetic' as 'a sensorial engagement in public space', and as such, intrinsically political (2014: 24). Using footage from a feature film she made with Michelle Williams Gamaker about madness and its cultural history, Bal worked against film's inherent resistance to interaction by arranging sixteen video installations within a large space. Allowed to move freely through the installations, each viewer encountered a different series of juxtapositions or montages – threading together a unique narrative (2014: 18). *Landscapes of Madness* positioned the audience into the action of the footage, and thereby, Bal suggests, encouraged each viewer to consider her socio-political position relative to how madness is understood and perhaps experienced.

In the second essay, Kathryn Brown looks primarily at the 'relational architecture' work of Rafael Lazano-Hemmer and links it to 'concepts of individual agency within a broader public sphere of debate' (2014: 43). This technically stunning, computer generated work uses the actions and reactions of people in a public space to transform the experience of those places. Using light and projection, Lazano-Hemmer's work becomes visible only when viewers physically interact with the space. This, Brown suggests, creates 'an image of shared physicality [which] becomes a metaphor for awareness of a common humanity' (2014: 46).

Nicola Grobler reflects on her own urban performative work, *Small Victories* (2009), and fellow Capetonian Lerato Bereng's curatorial project *Thank You Driver* (2009). In contrast to Lazano-Hemmer's spectacular work, these projects operate in the modest space of the everyday. They offer individuals a space for expression and endow 'single encounters with a significance beyond the local and personal' (2014: 72). Inspired by the theoretical work of Ben Highmore, Jacques Ranciere and Michel De Certeau, Grobler's text celebrates the transformative potential of small acts, the political possibilities of incremental change and the 'opportunities for grace' that can be found in 'tactics' employed in everyday Capetown (2014: 72).

The essays in the second section explore 'imaginary geographies' in three settings: the real world; the mind and the interface between the world and the mind. Joel Robinson meditates on relationships between contemporary art and landscape or place through works by Andrew Kötting, (*Gallivant*, 1996) and Alex Hartley (*Nowhereisland*, 2004). Robinson builds an argument for understanding landscape, and even 'land' itself, as structured by the social. This structuring may happen organically over time, as revealed by *Gallivant*, or through a radical technical process like that employed in the creation and maintenance of *Nowhereisland*.

Josh Ginsburg explores an internal landscape in his project *Walkabout*. Ginsburg sees participation as 'a strategy for rendering private thought processes public'. (2014: 98). He uses a disorderly digital archive of 'fragments' in rule-based interactive experiments. Responding to conversations initiated by participants, he accesses the archive and triggers 'thought events' (2014: 100). Functioning as an external extension of his brain, the archive allows Ginsburg and possibly his audience, to observe the way that a brain might make connections between ideas. He sees the archive, as a spatial realm into and around which he can wander.

Claudia Slanar interviews the artist Warren Neidich, whose overtly political project operates in the interface of the exterior environment and the inner workings of the brain. Like all animals, Neidich explains, humans are especially attuned to the things around us that support (or appear to support) our needs. The distribution of prevalent phenomena, or 'constancies', in our environment shapes our attention and, in turn, shapes our brains. Neidich uses the term 'cognitive capitalism' for the 'distribution of [networks of] constancies [...in] the aesthetic or political sphere' (Neidich in Slanar, 2014: 146) through which background power structures operate to shape our minds and 'seek to create consensus among individuals' (2014: 135). Today, he writes, many of the constancies we pay attention to and which therefore 'sculpt our neuroarchitecture', are 'manifested by large corporations on a global scale' (Neidich in Slanar, 2014: 147).

By making work that might change the cultural landscape, alter customary patterns and associations and/or foster 'dissonance', artists, Neidich argues, can change how these constancies 'live' in the space around us (2014: 147). In his own research and artwork, Neidich deploys neural plasticity and learning to build new neuroarchitectures that he hopes will free minds from 'coercive' structures (2014: 136).

The three essays in the third section introduce ethical dimensions of performance and agency. They consider the implications of the different situations into which participants have been placed by the artwork discussed. These 'participants' range from the knowing and prepared in a gallery setting, to the unknowing and unprepared passer-by in the public realm and finally to the gallery audience who have deliberately not been told how they will be expected to participate.

Susan Jarosi studied photographs taken of participants in Maria Abramović's 2010 work, *The Artist is Present,* to reflect on their visible emotional responses to their experience. Unusually in performance art documentation, the performer *and the audience* were filmed and photographed. This suggests that an empirical study of participant responses might be possible. But, as Jarosi finds, the documentation is rendered subjective by the conditions of its production, one being, of course, the effect of Abramović's reputation and 'celebrity' on participants as they queued for their turn, long before they found themselves in the artist's presence.

Jarosi suggests that the images may offer evidence that the relationship between Abramović and her participants reflects Jacques Ranciere's ideas about performance. Rejecting the notion that performance plays out a hierarchical relationship between artist and viewer, Ranciere's writes that it creates a separate third thing - a '"form of consciousness, an intensity of feeling, an energy for action" that is the spectator's prerogative to deploy' (2014: 170).

Harry Weeks has contributed an especially thought provoking exploration of ethical issues around antagonistic performance in public space, looking at work by Artur Zmijewski, Renzo Martens, Kristina Norman, Shlomi Yaffe and the Yes Men. These artists use performance transgressively: involving unknowing participants; inadvertently misleading audiences and/or deliberately implicating them. Performance is often tricky - it can dupe audiences and, as a result, carry artists into unexpectedly difficult ethical terrain. Drawing on Richard Schechner, Chantal Mouffe and Claire Bishop, Weeks writes of two antagonisms inherent in performance. The first is between the performer and the performed role, that is, within the artist/performer herself (2014: 183). The second antagonism relates specifically to performance in public. The 'ambiguity generated by the confusion of the performer's two identities' puts onlookers into uncomfortable positions. Even in the situation where they don't know that they are part of a performance or are uninformed about the nature of the performance, bystander/participants are nevertheless implicated (2014: 186). Although Weeks understands role-playing as fundamental to the artistic process (2014: 188), he also sees how when played out in the public realm, that process can generate complex ethical issues with lasting implications for artist and participant.

Jennifer Kalionis' essay on Martin Parr's radical and ethically questionable methods of structuring audience participation takes some of the problems raised by Weeks further.

Although he meticulously plans his performances, Parr does not usually prepare his audiences for what they will see or be asked to do. He sometimes subjects them to very unpleasant and or frightening experiences. Parr's work, Kalionis writes, seeks to 'awaken political action […] through the re-enactment of trauma'. He considers his spectators to be 'accomplices' and attempts to convince them to change their habits of behaviour by engendering self-loathing. Kalionis' believes that Parr's performances affect the audience through 'cruelty aimed at eliciting impulses of culpability and empathy, and because they generate a sense of self-loathing'. But as they happen within art institutions, these performances also, she writes, erode the basic relationship of trust between artist and audience which is the foundation of all our encounters with art (2014: 212).

The final section looks at institutional frameworks. The essays by the critic Juliet Steyn and Margriet Schavemaker of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, offer critiques of how interactive art is presented and/or used within and by institutions. Their texts offer useful ammunition for thinking critically about popular interactive exhibitions like Carsten Höller's *Decision*, showing at the Hayward Gallery in London at the time of this writing. Although it may be true, as Steyn writes, that 'experience has […] become associated with authenticity, truth, egalitarianism, democracy, feeling, subjectivity, and sensibility'; it has been fully commodified within art institutions. Steyn rightly points out that this commodification of experience obscures the fine, yet crucial, distinction between 'perception as an active engagement' and perception 'as a mere conduit for stimuli' (2014: 230-1).

The collection ends with Freee Art Collective's polemic 'Impossible Participation'. The essay begins with a useful survey of the history of 'participation' in Britain from the 50s onward. By the 1990s, Freee writes, the concept of participation emerged as 'an obligation […-] a marker in the judgment of artworks, artists, curators, and museums' (2014: 256). In this situation, Freee asks, where participation has become a 'form of currency' within the cultural production apparatus, what can interactive art actually achieve (2014: 256)? Is it not just 'an illusory 'solution' to social or political problems' that relies uncritically on the Enlightenment era assumption that art is good for people (2014: 258)?

The essay generously guides the reader through Freee's rigorous and engaging 'thinking-through' of how to 'make *political* art politically' (2014: 261). It concludes with a discussion of their project *Revolution Road: Rename the Streets!*, performed in Cambridge in 2009, and their tactic of 'manifesto reading' which they have employed in other projects at various locations.

Instead of asking participants to interact, Freee, following Jean-Jacques Lecercle, construct 'places' they can occupied. Author - reader, artist - participant, performer - audience, are all '*places* that can be occupied temporarily by various real individuals' (2014: 259). Calling for the 'transformation of art's apparatus demands new places, new actants, new roles, and new tasks for art that are unthinkable within […its] current configuration'. As such, Freee contend, 'the only participant worth thinking about is an impossible' one (2014: 268).

The collection ends with this provocative statement - one that points to a flaw in the theoretical underpinning of the book. Freee write lucidly about how 'participation' as a concept has come to be used and abused by art institutions and propose an alternative way of structuring and understanding audience agency. But they assume that we know what a

'participant' is. Do we? Despite Brown's explanation of interactivity in her introduction, the tendency to use 'participation' and 'interactivity' interchangeably throughout the book leaves these terms and their relationship to each other (and to other important terms like 'audience') unquestioned. Although room for improvement in a text's definition of key terms, could be a fatal flaw, this is not the case here. The artworks presented are thoughtful and thought provoking. The essays generously offer insights into the artists' thinking. Crucial questions about participation and interactivity in practice are posed and the collection as a whole sheds light on and critiques the way that the idea of participation pervades institutions resulting in a tendency to privilege 'experience as stimuli' over other possibly more meaningful forms of 'active engagement'. There is much to be learned by reading this important book.

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