
SHATTERING THE MYTH OF THE PASSIVE SPECTATOR: ENTREPRENEURIAL EFFORTS TO DEFINE AND ENHANCE PARTICIPATION IN “NON-PARTICIPATORY” ARTS

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Abstract

What does “participation” mean in the context of presentational art forms like live theatre, dance performance or classical music? Is, as has been suggested recently by the James Irvine Foundation and researchers from WolfBrown, “participatory art” only that art in which the audience engages by becoming an active artist? What are the implications of such a shift from one of the major arts funders in the United States, and are they warranted? Increasing research indicates that the simple act of watching a performance event—spectating—is, in fact, participatory. Research into brain activity during such events and studies of performance on subsequent reasoning, emotional maturity and empathy indicate that the act of watching an artistic work requires an extraordinary amount of participation and attention on the part of the spectator, and ultimately dictates that so strongly articulating a spectrum of participation in which traditional presentational art as relegated to a lesser position is premature. Rather, a holistic approach being led by a small but growing group of entrepreneurs who straddle the divide between artist and arts administrator has begun to take root, working to augment and increase the impact of presentational art without sacrificing its presentational aspects.

Introduction

There is an opera that I have never seen that I still dream about. It only happened once, in a desert, thirteen years ago. I envision the flat of the land, dusty and chilly even in the summer, rolling out to the left and right, dotted with encampments, and in its midst, a monolithic opera house and 400 performers uniting to create a massive-scale, site-specific mythic piece of art about voodoo and what was called *Life and Death in a Ceremony of Mystery and Sacralization* (Gasperini, 2012). It was uniquely collaborative, blurring the line between player and watcher, spectator and participant, and in the end, the players burned the entire opera house down in an orgy of celebration. I will never see it, but it occupies me even still, with its imposingly grand scale, its complex ambition, its radical wall-busting form, its immolation. Is it possible to feel like a participant in a piece of theatre without having actually been there? Is it possible to be there and not feel like a participant at all?

Le Mystère de Papa Loko was a centerpiece of the 1999 Burning Man festival (Gilmore, 2010). Organized by San Francisco-based producer Pepe Ozan, this second-to-last in a string of giant-scale operas sounds absolutely absurd on paper—and I’m honestly not sure I would have “liked” it—but I find myself, especially today, as the theatre industry resorts to increasingly smaller-scale works for fear of financial ruin, strangely enamored with the ambition, the scale, and the goal of the work. Papa Loko sought to transform people through art, thereby following in the long tradition of theatre, music, sculpture and fashion, all of which are irrevocably infused into the very core of Burning Man. Much of the transformational magic of Burning Man, per Lee Gilmore (2012), centers on its ability to change people’s lives.

“What is the alchemy of transformation?” Gilmore asks, “How are their lives changed?” (2012). Gilmore notes that Burning Man offers a particularly powerful venue for large-scale theatre, in part because of what she calls “the slippery border between theatre and worship” that exists there (Gilmore, 2010, p. 85). Art at Burning Man is treated as a corollary to a type of religion or spirituality, whether consumed or created, and a high level of permeability between the artist and the audience is expected. “You can’t not participate at Burning Man,” Gilmore notes—though that simple statement belies the complexity of the event’s ethos (Gilmore, 2012).

Pepe Ozan and his collaborators created a massive, performance-specific opera house in the middle of a captive audience, miles from other competing activities, and mounted a performance in the middle of the night when nothing else of note was occurring. They invited literally hundreds of people to perform in (or simply watch) the opera, an original creation built specifically around themes important to (and drawn from) the Burners who populated Black Rock City. They removed the barriers to attending by

making the performance free, the food/drink/drug policy lax, and the dress code optional. They welcomed everyone, performer and patron alike, through the same flaming gate and onto a large, inclusive stage. And at the end, the entire assemblage was encouraged to dance and sing and celebrate together as the gigantic opera house was ignited, burned and collapsed in the night air.

And yet, per Gilmore, “Some Burners saw the operas as not only non-participatory but also too long and boring to boot” (2010, p. 83). If that, then, is deemed “non-participatory,” then what is a “normal” theatremaker to do?

Context

Audience participation has not always been a stated goal of live theatre. The modern European canon and its later American counterpart have gradually assimilated into them an expectation of partition between artist and audience, of a consumptive act by one group of people of the virtuosic art of another group. This, of course, has not always been the case—Shakespearean groundlings talked through performances, ate and threw food, and offered advice to the actors during the event. Nor is it the case even today in many cultures throughout the world. But for perhaps the last few hundred years, a strong strain of what might on the surface be deemed “non-participatory” theatre has emerged in Western art, coincident (or not) with the delineation of theatre as an elite art form for the wealthy few. But those wealthy few can no longer sustain the arts field, and for many theatre artists, they are exactly the people who they don’t want to talk to—a tension that has created, in the past few years, a situation where, as an arts field, we sit at a crossroads in terms of participation that can be scary (or energizing) to think about.

Participation has moved from something esoteric into the middle of the mainstream for arts administrators, artists, funders and government officials. More than that, a term the definition of which was previously abstract and variable from theatre to theatre has been solidified and, arguably, narrowed—most recently in the wake of the James Irvine Foundation’s publication of its new arts funding strategy and its main supporting document (Brown & Novak-Leonard, 2011). Irvine’s strategy, emerging from California’s most generous arts funder and one of the most consistent and enduring arts funders in the country, centers around the goal of promoting “engagement in the arts for all Californians” through participation (“New Arts Strategy Overview,” 2011). The strategy elaborates on this concept of engagement with three points:

We seek to increase arts engagement in three ways:

1. Who is engaging in the arts: We aim to increase engagement by low-income and/or ethnically diverse populations that have been traditionally underserved by arts nonprofits.
2. How people engage in the arts: We aim to expand the ways Californians engage in the arts as active participants – by making or practicing art. This could include the use of digital technology to produce or curate art.
3. Where people engage in the arts: We aim to advance the use of diverse, non-traditional spaces for arts engagement, especially in regions with few arts-specific venues. (“New Arts Strategy Overview,” 2011)

Worth noting particularly here are the five words closing point two: “by making or practicing art.” “Participation,” for Irvine, is, simply put, rolled up in “creation”—a conflation that, while this new policy is described by Irvine as a “natural evolution,” has given some in the presentational arts fields pause. Of particular concern is the relegation of “traditional” presentational art to something less worthy, less able to be “engaging” or “participatory” than the making or practicing of art—the closing of the door on “traditional” presentational art (i.e. theatre in a dark room with a stage and locked seating) as ever being “participatory.” Further, both the policy and the paper explicitly put a higher value on the participatory rather than on what is delineated as “spectating” (p. 4).

This argument emerges out of an analysis of our current culture, in which increased access to technology and egalitarian means by which DIY artistic experiences can be instantly shared across vast distances has meant that “people are thinking about the experience of culture differently than in the past,

placing value on a more immersive and interactive experience than is possible through mere observation” (p. 6).

Brown & Novak-Leonard (2011) point out that while 74 percent of people saying they participate in art in some way, younger generations are much more likely to consume their art outside of the traditional nonprofit structure, in more informal settings (p. 6). Further, they suggest that “[p]articipatory arts practices, whether technology-based or physical, are integrating art into the fabric of peoples’ everyday lives, their neighborhoods and their value systems” (p. 6). The authors outline much of the ongoing discussion concerning the actual value of art, and then say: “Missing in this debate is a dispassionate, critical assessment of the relative benefits and value of participatory arts practice versus receptive participation (i.e. spectating)” (p. 9). The authors highlight a few studies that detail the benefits of their narrowly-defined participation (i.e. practice or creation), particularly in children, but give relatively little attention to the other side of the question they pose, namely what the value of “receptive participation” might really be. Receptive art, after all, is a form that has existed since time immemorial (imagine, in an image borrowed from Arlene Goldbard (2012), a cavewoman curling her shadow into the shape of a bear against the cave wall to tell others about its dangers)—so devaluing it on principle seems hasty.

While Brown & Novak-Leonard make a heartfelt point of saying that they are not advocating for the demise of presentational art forms, the clear directives of their paper, which then were adopted by the Irvine Foundation for their new arts policy, delineate a “Yellow Brick Road” at the end of which is the complete breakdown of the barrier between artist and audience. The Emerald City, in this case, is a place where “receptive participation” is replaced, in the best situations, with “participatory arts practice.” Brown & Novak-Leonard warn of a day when “attracting the next generation of audiences and visitors will require a transformation of programming, not just better marketing. Even then, when new audiences appear on the scene, they will be different. Fewer will want to sit still in uncomfortable seats, and more will demand a larger role in shaping their own experience” (p. 11).

This effort to elevate participatory art so singularly has been met with consternation from the more presentational corners of the arts world, though honestly not much of that consternation has been put to paper—perhaps in deference to the importance of the commissioning entity and the researchers in the arts ecosystem, and the desire not to offend. Irvine is, after all, one of the largest arts funders in the country, and Alan Brown is one of the most prolific researchers working on arts engagement today. Even so, angst exists, and it often formulates around what this proscribed shift away from virtuosic presentation means for the future of presentational art like live theatre, dance and classical music. What is the future for these forms if this thinking catches on? Will it be, as arts consultant Rebecca Novick (2012) worries:

The beginning of a de-investment by funders in the presentation of conventional plays in conventional venues? Is the implied suggestion here that we should never do a conventional production of Hamlet again? Is the talkback after the show now more important than the production? Do high school students actually receive more benefit from participating in a production of Hamlet than from seeing one? (p. 172)

Neural Responses to "Presentational" Art

Before panicking too much, and before completely banishing presentational art to the wings as outmoded and flat, it is worth delving into the concept of “participation” and trying to truly understand what it might mean if more broadly defined than simply as “active practice.”

In 1993, Rauscher, Shaw & Ky first described what has now become known as the Mozart Effect. In their experiment, groups of college students were given a set of IQ-measuring spatial reasoning tasks. Prior to completing the tasks, they were asked to do one of the following for 10 minutes: listen to Mozart, listen to a relaxation tape, or sit in silence. By a relatively large margin, those who listened to Mozart immediately prior to the test scored higher than those in the other two treatments. Mozart had, at least temporarily, made those students smarter. This sparked a more nuanced, science-based analysis of art’s effects on consumers including a study in which researchers working with macaque monkeys accidentally identified a class of neurons in the premotor cortex (in the front of the brain) that have come to be known

as “mirror neurons” (Berrol, 2006, p. 303). These neurons, which are correlated to a similar set of neurons in human beings, are called mirror neurons because “like a mirror image, the same set of neurons are activated in an observer as in the individuals actually engaged in an action or the expression of the same emotion or behavior” (p. 303). In the intervening years, mirror neurons have become a hot topic and are being studied in relation to a variety of developmental factors, including social and cognitive development, attachment, empathy, social cognition and morality (Berrol, 2006). As artists, perhaps this rings a bell. Before humans could speak, research suggests that the speech interpretation centers of the brain were “a mechanism of recognizing actions made by others” (Rizzolati & Arbib, 1998, p. 190). Choreographer Paul Taylor connects the dots, noting, “I can feel steps that someone else is doing in my own body” (Berrol, 2006, p. 313). And this phenomenon is not simply the purview of experts in the form.

Last year, I was invited to sit down and speak about impact and excellence with the leaders of 25 or so of the country’s best professional choruses at the Chorus America conference. In the follow-up conversation, one of the leaders discussed the peculiar power of live choral music to create something he called “lift,” which he described this way: “My goal is to make the guy in the trucker hat in the back of the room come down at the end of the show and tell me, with surprise, ‘I...liked it. I really liked it. I don’t know why...but I liked it’” (Lord & Albright, 2011).

Another leader put it this way:

I think when we’re doing what we do well, we stop existing for the people listening. They’re not seeing an individual singer; they’re not even seeing the whole group of singers. We all just blur and disappear, and the song emerges out of us like a bright light, and it washes over the audience and they get lost in it. There are no singers, when we’re doing well, there’s just the audience and the art. And when it’s over, they may not know why, but they’ll leave and say, ‘Hmm, I really enjoyed that. That was really good.’ (Lord & Albright, 2011)

I would argue that such captivation—a term borrowed from Alan Brown’s research into intrinsic impact that, ironically, investigates the engagement potential of presentational art—is actually a sign of “participation” on the part of the spectator, in that it has the absolute potential to transform personal ideas, instill a respect for the wider world, create a memory and, perhaps most centrally to Irvine’s initiatives, create active engagement. More fundamentally, captivation also takes work on the part of the audience. In Christian worship, this deep, profound connection is called “communion,” which Merriam-Webster defines as “an act or instance of sharing” (n.d.). The Oxford English Dictionary more flowerily defines the term as “shared participation in a mental or emotional experience” (n.d.). In this way, at least, the arts and religion are both aiming for the same thing.

Just as both partners in a tennis match must be engaged whether they are currently hitting the ball or not, human-to-human interactions, whether between individuals or among groups, often involve a level of participation that belies a lack of direct “making.” By looking at the brain activity of a listener and a speaker, researchers at Princeton University have shown that listeners who most successfully remember communications and can recount them later actually physically sync with the speaker on a brain-to-brain level (Stephens, 2010). These are the mirror neurons mirroring. The brain activates as though it were doing the activities being described. In a variety of areas of the brain—areas associated with auditory comprehension, speech production, language processing and comprehension of social relationships and status—the neural activity of speaker and listener actually “couples” during a communicatory event.

At its most successful, this neural coupling allows individual listeners to actually anticipate what’s coming (Stephens, 2010); in the best couplings, the listener’s brain pre-activates in areas that predict where the speaker’s brain will light up. Complete absorption in the activity at hand leads to more satisfaction, more attention, and better retention of the event once it is over. In other words, captivation—participation on the part of the spectator—makes things stick. This finding has been confirmed over and over in various presentational art settings through Alan Brown’s intrinsic impact studies. Most recently, analysis of a 19,000-response stable sample set of survey responses to intrinsic impact questions revealed a .70 positive correlation between captivation and the overall “summative impact” of the performance

(Brown & Ratzkin, 2012). Using R-squared analyses, the researchers showed that captivation ratings explained almost 50% of the variance in summative impact (2012). In other words, being captivated and engaged is highly correlated with a higher level of comprehension and a better ability to process and recount what has happened. The same research also, incidentally, shows that captivation is highly correlated with a stronger, more impactful and more memorable experience. Neural coupling is physical evidence of effort, work and participation on the part of the spectator.

While much of this discussion of mirroring—at least regarding theatre—is still hypothetical, brain activation research with music has moved far beyond those initial studies of the Mozart Effect. Researchers, for example, have examined the “shivers down the spine” phenomenon that accompanies listening to music by measuring brain activity changes during those moments that gave the subject chills (Blood, 2001). The results of this work showed that those moments of great pleasure (the chills) created structural changes in the brain—the pleasure was manifest, the change was physical. The paper concludes:

Music recruits neural systems of reward and emotion similar to those known to respond specifically to biologically relevant stimuli, such as food and sex, and those that are artificially activated by drugs of abuse. This is quite remarkable, because music is neither strictly necessary for biological survival or production, nor is it a pharmacological substance...The ability of music to induce such intense pleasure and its putative stimulation of endogenous reward systems suggest that, although music may not be imperative for survival of the human species, it may indeed be of significant benefit to our mental and physical well-being. (Blood, 2001, p. 11823)

For what is viewed as a largely passive group, then, the brains of the audience are actually very active during a presentational arts event. This isn't surprising, if you think about it. What is it like when you're in a really good theatrical event? Your body and your brain are on a sort of stationary rollercoaster—you experience emotions, physical responses, things both so big you can't ignore them (a jerk when surprised) and so small you'd never notice (an eye twitch, a smirk). Art conveys copious information and allows an individual to transport himself to another place, feel an old memory, relieve tension, gain energy and remember complex concepts. (Overy & Molnar-Szakacs, 2009). As another researcher notes, presentational art (in this case, music), “is clearly not just a passive, auditory stimulus, it is an engaging, multisensory, social activity.” (Overy & Molnar-Szakacs, 2009, p. 489).

Participation, then, occurs in art forms across the spectrum. There is an equal need for arts experiences that rely on active creation by the audience and for arts experiences that instead engender (and enhance) the participation that is already occurring between audience and actor on an unconscious level simply by virtue of the form. Expanding the idea of participation to include presentational art creates a new and rising need for a particular focus and expertise that has not been highlighted before, namely of someone to examine, elaborate upon, and maximize the participatory aspects of presentational events within the core frame of a presentational piece of art.

Entrepreneurial Approaches to "Presentational" Art

In the 1990's, George C. Wolfe, former artistic director of the Public Theater, one of New York City's major theatre institutions, devoted mostly to developing new work, was repeatedly quoted discussing what theatre was for him. Wolfe believed that theatre was:

...people sitting in the dark watching people in the light talking about what it means to be human... [It brings] something into their lives that they cannot create on their own by virtue of what they have shut off... [I]t gives us a feeling of being alive. And if we can't do it in our relationships and our work, or in the way we move our bodies, we'll do it in the darkness of a theatre. (Kondazian, 1997)

At the Wallace Foundation-funded Beyond Dynamic Adaptability conference in San Francisco in 2011, Michael Rohd, the artistic director of Portland-based Sojourn Theatre, directly engaged with the Wolfe story:

I used to agree with that. That when we gathered together in the dark and watched, we all breathed together and united. I don't believe that anymore. I don't think there's anything inherently communal about sitting in a group in the dark and viewing something that someone else has prepared for you. I think there are a lot of situations where people sit alone and experience other people's narratives, but that isn't building community, and I'm not interested in that. (2011)

Rohd, who represents a new strain of artistic facilitator entrepreneurially mining this more nuanced "participatory" strain of theatre, creates elaborate, audience-centric and audience-specific works designed to engender deep social engagement and political activation. He takes it as his mission to explode the form, get strangers to interact and make the brain work in new ways. While he doesn't sugarcoat his angst about the flat, "in the dark" nature of much theatre produced today, he's also, crucially, not willing to simply cede "participation" to other types of art—though he is equally cognizant of the amount of change the theatrical form might have to go through to get there. There is, in his writing and thinking, a strain of laying out certain formal ground rules that ultimately do make theatre presentational even as the participatory is filtered all around it as well.

In addition to his work with Sojourn, Rohd, with seed funding from the Center for Theatre Commons at ArtsEmerson, has created the Center for Performance, Public Practice and Innovation, where he hopes to further explore the expansion of the theatrical form without sacrificing some of the form's basic tenets. Of late, Rohd has been working to define what "civic practice" means in the context of artmaking. He has defined civic practice as "activity where a theater artist employs the assets of his/her craft in response to the needs of non-arts partners as determined through ongoing, relationship-based dialogue" (2012b). As evident from that definition, Rohd is unapologetic about the functional use of art as a means to an end, namely the dialogue and civic engagement for which the art can serve as a catalyst. Crucially, Rohd doesn't immediately jump to audience-as-artist as the only way for that engagement to occur. Rohd, by making the conscious effort to inspire action in the audience, believes he is adding a new layer of participation and engagement to the form—but that "activity" isn't artmaking in the moment, it is action that occurs over a longer trajectory, like activism (2011). His goal is to create deep, prolonged engagement with particular constituencies—engagement that activates actual change. As an arts entrepreneur in his artistic practice and as a rising thinker and consultant with other arts organizations, Rohd's belief in the healthy creative disruptions that can occur through theatre leads him to find it frustrating to hear artistic leaders describe participation in the presentational arts as "when people lean forward in their chairs." Here, Rohd and Brown & Novak-Leonard essentially agree.

For Brown & Novak-Leonard, the prescription for getting away from people straining in chairs and towards what they indicate are truly "participatory activities" takes the form of the Audience Involvement Spectrum, a "simple framework developed to describe different ways participatory arts programs work, and the various entry points for participation" (Brown & Novak-Leonard, 2011, p. 4) that was developed by Brown & Novak-Leonard as part of *Getting in on the Act*.

The Audience Involvement Spectrum

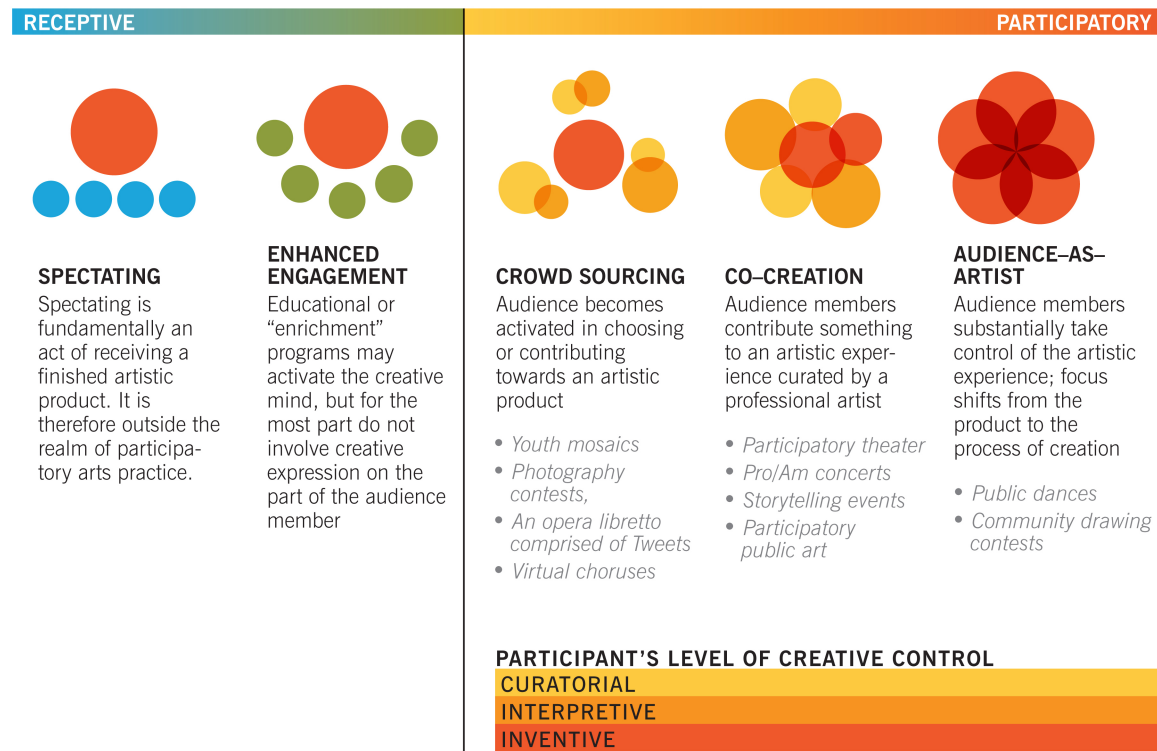


Figure 1. The Audience Involvement Spectrum. This figure is taken from *Getting In On the Act* (Brown & Novak-Leonard, 2011) and illustrates a progression from receptive to participatory arts as measured by creative control by the audience.

The Spectrum (Figure 1), reprinted here with permission, illustrates what the authors articulate as a “progression of involvement” from left to right—“receptive” to “participatory,” “spectating” to “audience-as-artist.” It shifts from blue, flat imagery to red, overlapping, visually exciting imagery, passive to active, cool to warm. It divides the spectrum with a strong vertical strike and a color break. In explicitly offering a progression in this way, it connotes a “right” and a “wrong.”

Rohd, instead, has presented variations on a three-stage progression that, while it also favors participation over passivity, does so without passing judgment on form:

There’s *interpretation*: that’s the leaning forward and engaging in participation by interpreting your own experience.

Then there’s *commentary*: that’s being given technological tools to be involved in discourse around the event either during it or before and after.

And then there’s *impact*: that’s layers of participation where you impact dramaturgically what happens in the trajectory of the event.

The other fields are past number one, and they’ve been practicing number two for years. Number three is where the real action is. But we can’t get out of number one. People hold very tightly and very conservatively to two boards and a plank, the story, catharsis. (2012c, p. 313, author emphasis)

Whereas Brown & Novak-Leonard’s figure, both visually and in the interpretive language, places a lot of emphasis on problems of form (i.e. proscenium-style versus “public dances”), Rohd’s progression presupposes an ability of all art forms to move through the entirety of the spectrum given enough

intentionality on the part of the art presenters, regardless of what the environment is in which the art takes place. Any piece, any form, can reach the “impact” stage with enough intentionality.

As Rohd has continued to refine his definitions of civic practice, he has layered further nuance into the rubric (2012a). For example, in discussing an organization in Stage Two (“Commentary”) above, he indicates a process that looks like this:

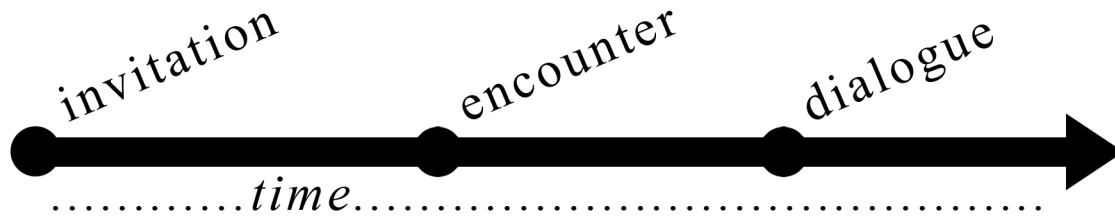


Figure 2. Rohd’s Spectrum of Civic Practice in Theatre. This figure illustrates Michael Rohd’s three-stage progression of civic engagement through art over the course of a civically-minded arts experience. Illustration by the author.

As the artistic event progresses in time, audience members are invited into an encounter or series of encounters with the art, the ideas in the art, and their own particular preconceptions and reactions, and then are encouraged into a dialogue that is part of the artistic event. For example, during the 2011 production of *Prometheus Bound* at the American Repertory Theater in Boston, artistic director Diane Paulus, in producing this new musical work about “the first prisoner of conscience” (Paulus, 2012a, p. 360), partnered with Amnesty International to create a subsequent event each night that was a dialogue with the audience about a particular human rights abuse (Paulus, 2012a). She had trouble getting either the artistic partners on the project or the audience to take the second half of the evening seriously as anything but a tacked-on “talkback” until she consciously shifted the vocabulary; when she began calling it the “second act,” people treated it as a part of the artistic experience. The dialogue became integral to the complete experience, the participation was heightened, and the impact of the work was increased without sacrificing the core theatrical context in which the conversation was created (Paulus, 2012b).

As theatre progresses into Stage Three of Rohd’s continuum, “Impact,” he envisions a less linear relationship between invitation, encounter and dialogue. Stage Three works are made up, essentially, of periodic segments of each of the three components, occurring in varying orders and for varying lengths of time—but all still tied to a presentational piece of art (Rohd, 2012a).

Despite the radical progression he outlines, Rohd believes that participation can exist inside a relatively traditional presentational frame—he may not believe in “two boards and a plank,” but Sojourn’s work is decidedly theatrical, decidedly narrative, and decidedly presentational. Even while crafting a Stage Three piece like *On the Table*, which starts in two towns fifty miles apart and culminates in two bus rides to a field and an organic, local meal, Sojourn still works from story, from scripts, from structure. Even while engaging his audiences through interviews, open rehearsals, and prolonged feedback loops, the company ultimately invites them in as consumers of a particular piece of art. And finally, even while there may be opportunities for (or expectations of) active participation (in *On the Table*, during the bus ride, audience members were expected to call another audience member they didn’t know and relay the story so far in their own words), the art is ultimately the art, presented by the trained artists (Rohd, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). There is adventure in what they do, yes, but there’s not “choose your own adventure”—the control of the event remains with the artist, even as the experience of the audience is augmented, expanded, empowered.

Of course, in a way, Rohd and Brown & Novak-Leonard are looking at two slightly different questions. Brown & Novak-Leonard, first and foremost, are attempting to understand a type of “participation” the ultimate goal of which is to allow the audience member to become, essentially, the artist. As noted in the bottom right of the Audience Involvement Spectrum, the goal is participation as

defined by “creative control.” An assumption is being made that ultimate impact is to be had only when an audience member takes up the paint brush, does the dance steps, and performs the monologue.

Rohd instead works within the confines of the theatrical form to make an experience that is participatory in that it inspires thought, action, effort and conversation. As Rohd says, “I want the show to be a play with a story, but it also needs to be a piece of applied creativity where an audience goes through the process of collectively imagining better ways to have public discourse” (2012c, p. 314).

Perhaps the most obvious difference in these two philosophies is the role of the trained artist in the work. While theatre artists may be historically poorly compensated, they are nevertheless mostly highly trained, expert in their field. In this context, the idea of relegating them, essentially, to facilitators of amateur (audience) art (or even to exclude them altogether) seems both dismissive of their expertise and reductive to the form. By defining “participation” ultimately as allowing/encouraging the patron to overly interrupt, dictate, or shape a virtuosic artistic work—or more problematic still, by simply removing the artist from the equation (by, for example, having a group of audience members read a script out loud to each other) one may indeed increase what is being called “active participation,” but one does so, arguably, at the expense of awe at art done expertly.

Discussion and Alternatives

Creative control, in Brown & Novak-Leonard’s definition, manifests most purely in moments when the audience “substantially take[s] control of the artistic experience” and in which “there is no conventional ‘audience’ at all because every person is involved in creating, doing or making” (2011, p. 4). Interestingly, Brown has written repeatedly and at length about the intellectual, emotional, social and empathetic impact that presentational art has on an individual watching it, even in the complete absence of creative control (Brown & Novak, 2007; Brown & Ratzkin, 2009; Brown & Ratzkin, 2011). Working with arts service organization Theatre Bay Area, Brown and colleague Rebecca Ratzkin developed a set of survey questions and an online dashboard tool that allow arts organizations to graph the impact that audience members are experiencing through self-reported surveying, and have published multiple reports outlining the increased empathy, intellectual engagement, social bridging and bonding, and aesthetic appreciation that seems to manifest in the individual spectator.[1]

While it is arguable whether “engagement” and “participation” are synonymous, they certainly overlap substantially in this context (so much so that the Irvine Foundation states on its website, in bold text, “Our new goal is to promote engagement in the arts for all Californians.” (“New Arts Strategy Overview,” 2011)) Ultimately, both terms are being employed primarily as trajectories towards the overall impact of the arts experience: what is the change it makes in a human being for the better? The Irvine Foundation is not simply interested in participatory art for its own sake—it seeks art that “strengthens our ability to thrive together in a dynamic and complex social environment” (“New Arts Strategy Overview,” 2011).

This goal is valid and valiant and crucial to the success of our society. The question, however, is whether, as Getting in on the Act argues, the crux of that effort—the installation of “participatory” art at the center of future funding endeavors, and the elevation of the active audience member over the receptive one—is truly the best and only way to encourage the type of accessible, transformative artistic experiences that will lead to the “vibrant, successful and inclusive societies” that arts program director Josephine Ramirez speaks to in her embedded video introduction to the new policies (“New Arts Strategy Overview,” 2011).

In attempting to instigate deeper, more meaningful arts experiences, one must take some time to dissect what makes an arts experience deeper and more meaningful. As abstracted forms, often divorced nearly or totally from a physical product that one can take home, the arts traffic in memories more than they traffic in utility—and it is those memories that drive future activity (whether you’re talking about buying another ticket or being a better human being). We are selling what Alan Brown has called “artistic dividends”—future good feelings, deep thoughts, transformative impulses that ideally recur long after the art is over (Lord & Brown, 2012). This is a concept that resonates strongly with general marketing theories on hedonic consumption. In 1982, Elizabeth Hirschman and Morris Holbrook defined

“hedonic consumption” as “those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of product usage experience” (Hirschman, 1982, p. 92). The subjective, emotion- or pleasure-driven aspects of consumption drive consumptive habits as much as, if not more than, objective facts about a product do.

Nobel laureate and behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman’s spin on hedonic consumption is wrapped up in his theory of the “remembering self” referenced previously:

Most current measurements of audience satisfaction focus on aspects of the experience: were the seats comfortable, was traffic bad, how were the bathroom lines, etc. These are the realm of the “experiencing self,” and they are all very valuable markers to understand, but ultimately they and a thousand other things swirl together in the mind to create the memory of the experience. Memory is what is held onto by the “remembering self,” and while it’s a subtle difference, psychologically it’s very important: people choose or don’t choose to repeat an activity based on the abstract feelings and impressions that are packaged together in a memory. This is part of why you can have a delicious dinner at a beautiful restaurant, but if the waiter is rude, the entire experience is tainted.

Essentially, in terms of decision-making, the remembering self is the one and only. As Kahneman described [when presenting this research at a TED conference], “The remembering self [is]...the one that makes decisions...the experiencing self has no voice in this choice. We actually don’t choose between experiences, we choose between memories of experiences. And even when we think about the future, we don’t think of the future as experiences, we think of the future as anticipated memories” [(Kahneman, 2010)]. (Lord, 2012, p. 38)

The basis for hedonic consumption is that memories of pleasure drive future searches for pleasure. It is as true for art as it is for fatty foods, sex, drugs, friends, activities or, indeed, products of any sort. We do not, for example, buy Starbucks because it is better coffee; we buy Starbucks because of the experience of buying Starbucks—it makes us feel part of a club, sort of special, and personalized, and in so doing it gives us pleasure. As Kahneman notes: “Memories are all we get to keep from our experience of living, and the only perspective that we can adopt as we think about our lives is therefore that of the remembering self” (2011, p. 381).

The nature of memories is that they are not, generally speaking, made up of the minutiae of an experience. Unless you are gifted with a photographic memory, it is likely that your memory of most experiences comes down to a few strong flashes and a general feeling, often an emotion like happiness or excitement or fear. In the case of art, we have often left this packaging of the memory entirely or almost entirely up to the audience member—we present them with the art, and then give them the onus of doing the rest. If we were to begin to think hedonically, as it were, we might instead start pondering our patrons’ memories as we, the makers and marketers of the experience, want them to be packaged, and we might spend more time attempting to affect them as a method of increasing engagement and, arguably, participation—with the ultimate outcome of increasing the likelihood that the remembering self will set on our anticipated memory. Manipulating the particular hedonic qualities of a piece of art, plainly put, is an entrepreneurial business opportunity as well as a civic and social welfare imperative. We are memory makers in the arts, and by getting more conscious about what the structure of those memories are, the strength, scope, and accessibility of them, we can, in a way, increase the engagement and impact of an arts event.

Notably, hedonic consumption is not an activity that requires the consumer to directly create. Listening to music, for example, is an extremely emotion-laden experience, and tastes are structured around the relative levels of pleasure we get from different genres (Lacher, 1989, p. 370). The act of consumption engages the consumer, which begs the question: Rather than turning presentational art inside out, making the audience the artist and the artist simply a facilitator of an “active” experience, could we not achieve similar, or even stronger effects, by investing more deeply in making our presentational arts experiences more engaging, enhancing the duration and power of the memory and impact of that work

before, during and after it is complete? Might not there be, in that endeavor, an opportunity for a new type of professional, an entrepreneurial role for someone who can engage with both artist and audience, who can craft experiences to explicate and amplify the art's impact the way that a dramaturge has often functioned to clarify and amplify the art itself?

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company has recently innovated in this direction by creating a new department, the department of connectivity, which is tasked with creating opportunities that amplify the impact of the arts experience and enhance the connection between the art, artist, and audience. Its inaugural director, Rachel Grossman, states:

[Connectivity] is meant to be a mixture of art and commerce...circling around the hypothesis [that] community integration plus audience engagement [leads to] community investment and growth (where community equals staff, artists, audience, board, and "stakeholders"...who have an interest or investment in the topics a given play wrestles with). (Grossman, 2012a)

According to Woolly Mammoth's director of artistic development, Miriam Weisfeld, the point of connectivity is to "empower audiences with a range of interpretive tools" (Weisfeld, 2012). The effort, in this case, is about facilitating what Weisfeld calls "analysis" and avoiding "evaluation"—it becomes about helping and encouraging the audience to parse their arts experiences as audience members, not necessarily about directly creating the art itself.

Interestingly, connectivity, at least as refined at Woolly Mammoth, has not thus far been meant to "help the audience 'understand the work'" (Grossman, 2012a). Instead, Grossman specifically identifies the process as "a mixture of art and commerce," and later goes on to note that connectivity is directly about helping the audience "experienc[e] authentic personal resonance with the work and/or the theatre." It is, in fact, a process of magnifying the engagement, impact, and participation that is already occurring, applied inside the frame of a presentational experience (Grossman, 2012b).

Grossman has now moved on to creating deep, participatory theatrical experiences through her company dog & pony dc. In writing about dog & pony dc's philosophy, Grossman articulates yet a third spectrum to consider, one in which, as she says, "on one end of the spectrum, the audience is simply a witness; at the opposite end, the event cannot move forward without audience propulsion" (2012a). Within that spectrum, Grossman's work sits squarely right of center—dog & pony dc attempts to engage the audience in actually devising the performance night-to-night—even as the event itself remains theatrical and presentational. In discussing Beertown, dog & pony dc's latest original work, for example, Grossman is quick to point out that there is a script, of sorts, in that there are certain events that must happen in a certain order. There is a beginning, middle and end, even as the event, structured as a town hall meeting in which the audience, as "townspeople," negotiate with each other about what objects to place in a time capsule, is highly improvisational and heavily dependent on that "audience propulsion" Grossman talks about (Grossman, 2012a, 2012c). Grossman, both at Woolly and through dog & pony dc, continues to develop new tools and tricks for augmenting and expanding the audience's experience, and it only seems a matter of time before such work will be seen as a legitimate consulting expense on the part of companies seeking to enhance the artistic impact of their work, with correspondingly large-scale implications for the theatre field.

Conclusion

In a communication two weeks prior to his death, following a run-in with the French government over a proposed radio broadcast, theatre legend Antonin Artaud wrote about why he would re-devote himself to the theatre (a goal he, sadly, never achieved). In his words are a truth that most theatre artists simply take for granted—that at its crux, theatre is engaging, impactful, transformative and participatory not only to the maker, but to the receiver as well:

and from now on [I] will devote myself
exclusively
to the theater

as I conceive it,
 a theater of blood,
 a theater with which each performance will have done
 something
 bodily
 to the one who performs as well as to the one who comes to see others perform.
 (Vrtis, 2011, p. 117)

As a spectator, you, just like the artists on stage, “feel the room,” the tension, the humor, the camaraderie. You process an extremely complex cocktail of physical, visual and auditory stimuli. Whether you are conscious of it or not, you are dissecting power relationships, following leitmotifs sprinkled through the work, tracking multiple narratives (often based on experiences that are not your own) and on and on. Your breathing changes, your pulse changes. And your brain activity changes, too.

Observing is how we learn everything we do. It is how we learn to use a spoon, it is how we learn to stand, walk, ride a bike. We watch our parents to learn how to live with others. We gain empathy from seeing empathy in action, we gain prejudice from seeing prejudice take place. Theatre, and all the arts, are like an incredibly concentrated perfume, pulling in all of the most valuable things we hold within ourselves as human and placing them on stage for an audience to see.

A mounting body of research must serve as a reminder that bestowing the label “participatory” is more complicated than simply testing the rigidity of the partition between the artist and the audience. Whatever spectrum is used in that context should exist without value judgment, because even if a patron doesn’t move a muscle during a presentational artistic event, neural and psychological research indicates that all sorts of participation is occurring. The storytelling mode that is so central to live theatre is literally causing brains to hum in tune, to transform, to engage, to crackle with common electricity, creating a flickering synchronicity across audience members that allows us all to experience something together and engage in communal discourse—even while sitting silently.

Can we augment that, make it more, within the confines of the theatrical form? Yes, and a new strain of artist/administrator hybrids entrepreneurially becoming expert in exactly that “connectivity” will shortly proliferate in the field, generating all sorts of new participatory variations inside the presentational form. But even without shifts like those advocated by Michael Rohd, even without the immersion and involvement created by Rachel Grossman and her compatriots at Woolly Mammoth and dog & pony dc, even in the most traditional of traditional presentational theatre experiences, this art is participatory. Live performing arts require the audience members to exert themselves, to stretch, to explore, to make connections both inside themselves and with others in the room. Rather than simply discarding presentational art because such art is less of an easy fit with younger and more diverse audiences, we should attempt to understand how such constituencies might be coaxed into the process, given the stories they want to see, provided adjustments to the form that make it more accessible without sacrificing all to the altar of a sing-along Sound of Music.

Early in “Getting In on the Act,” Brown and Novak-Leonard note,

We all are shaping our culture. We all are creating what is meaningful, vibrant and real—the amateurs and the experts, the institutional and the individual, the privileged and the disenfranchised, the mainstream and the alternative. ‘We’ is collective and social, yet often very personal. It is participatory, active and interactive. (p. 4)

Absolutely. Stipulated. But within that context, it is equally important to remember that there is a role for the expert to play, there is a role for the presentational to play. Getting in on the Act and the new Irvine guidelines for arts funding argue strongly for exploding some of the old structures of theatre and all the arts—an argument that is good to hear and important to listen to. We should be experimenting with our forms. Doing so keeps us fresh and provides opportunities for those with an entrepreneurial spirit to create new, multi-layered experiences. We should be using new technologies and new methods of understanding and disseminating our work to see what more we can do to make this world a better place. Doing so, for those who are comfortable taking up that mantle, will make presentational art more vibrant

and varied and accessible. But we should not be made to feel that simply by nature of being presentational, of relying on trained experts to carry stories of common experience to engaged listeners (in a dark room or not), we are not engaging—nor that those listeners are not participating. They are not somehow less-than, somehow less affected, somehow less transformed. Thousands of years of form and function, noble ritual that has existed since before language, a common construct of the storyteller and the listener—these should not be thrown aside as “less than” simply because everyone can now more easily tell stories for themselves.

Participation comes in many forms. Let us celebrate them all.

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