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Participatory art: ceramic and social praxis

The art historian, Claire Bishop, has identified participatory art as a significant field of activity since the early 1990s. She notes that, in the course of its ascendancy, it has been variously referred to as 'socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art ... collaborative art, contextual art and (most recently) social practice' (Bishop, 2012, p.1). However, while such participatory projects have recently increased in number, the desire to directly engage with the public has numerous artistic precedents.

In the field of ceramics-orientated art practices, the first 'Incontro Internazionale della Ceramica' held in Albisola, Italy, in 1954 included a participatory event in which ceramic artefacts, such as plates with figurative elements and sculptural creatures, were made experimentally, collectively, and non-hierarchically by a group of artists, amateurs and children. The making took place at the workshop of Tullio Mazzotti, AKA Tullio d'Albisola, and was instigated by members of the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (IMIB)¹, including former CoBRA members Danish artist Asger Jorn and Belgian-born, Dutch artist Corneille, as well as the Chilean Surrealist painter Roberto Matta. The resulting collaborative works were exhibited as-if goods in a local street market, the idea being to create a vernacular form of outdoor exhibition and point of sale, and of a kind that was increasingly being displaced by capitalist consumer culture (Kurczynski & Pezolet, 2011).

Jorn's text *Notes on the Formation of an Imaginist Bauhaus* (first published in 1957) presented the educational philosophy behind such an event, asserting that:

The direct transfer of artistic gifts is impossible; artistic adaptation takes place through a series of contradictory phases: Shock — Wonder — Imitation — Rejection — Experimentation — Possession ...

... Our practical conclusion is the following: We are abandoning all efforts at pedagogical action and moving toward experimental activity (Jorn, 2006).

An example of a participatory project from the 1970s - this time involving mainly skilled practitioners - is Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* installation, created between 1974 and 1979. Although Chicago devised the project alone, it subsequently required the input of numerous ceramicists, textile artists, graphic designers and other skilled contributors for its realisation, plus the 20 researchers who compiled the names of 999 high achieving women from throughout history who are commemorated on the artwork's Heritage Floor. Therefore, in addition to the changing paid personnel that made up the core studio team, the work was created by hundreds of volunteers working under Chicago's guidance.

The Brooklyn Museum's website pages relating to the current display titled *Roots of The Dinner Party: History in the Making*, point to the existence of three large 'Acknowledgement Panels' displaying black-and-white photographs of the 129 members of the creative and

¹ The IMIB merged with another avant-garde group, the Letterist International, in 1957, to form the Situationist International.

administrative team along with their names, occupations, specific role and length of involvement in the project, with the last panel listing the names of an additional 295 individuals and organizations who also made significant contributions.

The inclusion of this information is caused by the way in which participatory art has been assessed by curators and critics. Claire Bishop notes that, rather than comparing participatory art projects with other social practices with similar goals,

'the tendency is always to compare artists' projects with other artists on the basis on ethical one-upmanship – the degree to which artists supply a good or bad model of collaboration – and to criticise them for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to 'fully' represent their subjects ... This emphasis on process over product ... is justified on the straightforward basis of inverting capitalism's predilection for the contrary. Consensual collaboration is valued over artistic mastery and individualism, regardless of what the project sets out to do or actually achieves' (Bishop, 2012, pp. 19-20).

In other words, projects which foreground empathetic identification with participants, as was the case with the Imaginists' event, facilitated by the Mazzotti ceramics workshop in Albisola, are most likely to be judged as 'good' models of collaboration. However, projects that are clearly authored, and which appear to need the skilled or unskilled input of volunteer participants, such as Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, are often felt to be 'bad' models, principally because authorship is equated with authority rather than egalitarian intentions.

Indeed, a sense of ethical discomfort is still present in discourses surrounding *The Dinner Party*. In a recent Guardian newspaper article, Nadja Sayej states that the current Brooklyn Museum exhibition will challenge the view that Chicago exploited her collaborators, quoting the artist saying:

'There's been a lot of misunderstanding about my collaborative process and how the studio was structured ... There was a core group of 20 or 25 people and some even got paid, so it's not even true they were all volunteers ... There were people who came in and out for short periods' (Sayej, 2017).

In 1967, Asgar Jorn's fellow Situationist, Guy Debord, coined the term "the society of the spectacle" to describe the situation where the masses are felt to be merely passive onlookers under the dominance of the forces of consumer capitalism, rather than actively involved agents. Rancière, however, has sought to examine such perceived contradictions between the active and the passive, as well as other binaries that are raised within supposed ethical stances on participatory projects, such as between the individual and collective, the author and the spectator, between real life and art. He suggests that emancipation, or a sense of agency "begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting: when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection."

Therefore, according to Rancière, political (and ethical) questions relating to contemporary art cannot be grasped in the grid of opposition, but in an analysis of the boundaries and

status changes that are perceived between opposed paradigms such as the paradigm of art as a resistant, autonomous form and that of art entering into the realm of everyday life.

In Bishop's reading of Rancière, what is taken to be the exemplary ethical gesture in art is a strategic obfuscation of the political and the aesthetic. Rancière writes:

'By replacing matters of class conflict by matters of inclusion and exclusion, [contemporary art] puts worries about the 'loss of the social bond', concerns with 'bare humanity' or tasks of empowering threatened identities in the place of political concerns. Art is summoned thus to put its political potentials at work in reframing a sense of community, mending the social bond, etc. Once more, politics and aesthetics vanish together in Ethics.'

Alan Kane is a British artist whose practice is concerned with blurring the boundary between the artist and the viewer. His work challenges the system of hierarchies that privileges certain artistic forms over others, notably the distinction between high art and more common cultural activity. His *Home for Orphaned Dishes* (2011) was conceived as a Children's Art Commission for the Whitechapel Gallery, London. Its starting point was a large collection of studio pottery that had been amassed over many years by a friend of the artist. The works in the collection, which included examples from numerous well-regarded and now deceased ceramicists, were presented anonymously, identified as representing 'a shift in taste in the 1960s and 70s towards a craft revival, with the handmade look becoming a fashionable alternative to slick modernist design.' The unnamed collector was said to see the pots 'as legacies of the work of William Morris and the Arts & Crafts Movement' and to have 'felt compelled to rescue these unloved objects'. Exhibition visitors, particularly parents and children, were encouraged to do the same: 'to hunt out ceramics ... in charity shops, car boot fairs, garden sheds, attics and backs of cupboards' and to bring such 'orphaned finds' to the gallery to be labelled, categorised and displayed alongside the original collection. By framing the pots in such a way, Kane not only managed to distance himself from the work (and from his high status as an artist), but also to create a sense of equality, where one person's 'find' and donation to the collection was entirely equal to another's. The reward to participants was to have their individual contributions, along with their accompanying narratives valued by a leading gallery known for its exhibitions of experimental and innovative art, but which also takes seriously its founding mission to be 'the artists' gallery for everyone'.

Yet, the project fundamentally relied on the exhibition as the prime focus for the participants. Given that the ceramic artefacts it elicited were supposed to be 'unloved' – surplus to requirements – and therefore unlikely to carry personal meanings for the donors, one might ask if the project would have any lasting social impact? Or did it just offer the chance to temporarily think about issues of consumption, taste and waste?

There have been further iterations of the project since it was acquired by the British Council Collection. Now known as *The Home for Orphaned Dishes*, the collection has since expanded as a result of presentations at the Oriel Myrddin Gallery in Camarthen, Wales in 2013 and at the Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan in 2015.

The Whitechapel Gallery also hosted an iteration of the American artist Theaster Gates's *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* in 2013, as part of a larger exhibition titled *The Spirit of Utopia*, whose aim was to 'speculate on alternative futures for the economy, the environment and society.' It can be described as a public performance, with a skilled potter engaged in a transfer of skills and knowledge with their apprentice. However, wider participation was not encouraged, aside that is from one-to-one conversations between potter, apprentice and visitors concerning issues of making and process, the frustrations of learning something new and demanding etc etc. Gates's contribution was laudable in many ways in its demonstration of the benefits of the social exchange of ideas, of gaining new skills, and as a metaphor for the positive transformations that people can make in society 'through the poetics of making and the intimacy of relationships'. However, it has also been criticised on the ethical grounds of Gate's general absence, having passed on instructions to the gallery to set up the parameters of the project and supplying a set of examples of artefacts to make and daily production targets for the potters. This iteration was also criticised on the grounds of presenting the master-apprentice relationship in 'a goldfish bowl', and thus as a mere spectacle to a passive spectatorship. But is the dichotomy between passive spectator and active participant that stark? Or, could such a live performance sew some seeds of interest? Encourage the viewer to make something too?

The aim of Clare Twomey's, *Manifest: 10,000 Hours*, 2015, commissioned for the new Centre of Ceramic Art at York Art Gallery, was similarly to examine 'cultures of making and skill and the historical learning of skills'. 10,000 hours is, reputedly, the time it takes to become a skilled maker/craftsperson. The resulting work, displayed on a tower-like structure, comprised 10,000 slip-cast bowls that were made by hundreds of unpaid participants in temporary public workshops held around the UK. The moulds and materials were provided free to the participants who - with the help of a team of technicians - learned and practised the slip-casting process; depending on the time they had available they were able to make several bowls. Workshop participants were also invited by Twomey to personally mark or sign the bowls they produced before they were taken away for firing. While again, it may be argued that the artist has maintained ultimate authorship of the project by providing the moulds and controlling the final presentation of the work, each participant's contribution to the final display was acknowledged on an adjacent wall panel. As with Alan Kane's *Home for Orphaned Dishes* and Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, a significant reward for the participant was to know that their contribution was valued and that they are viewed as stakeholders in the final statement.

Another recent project titled *Time Present and Time Past*, 2016, was conceived by Twomey for the William Morris Gallery, London. For this, members of the public were invited to apply to work as apprentices to a skilled master painter to create a large tile panel featuring Chrysanthemum, one of William Morris's famously intricate designs. To achieve the necessary tile ground, Morris's design was photographed and then given to the company Johnson Tiles, based in Stoke-on-Trent, to digitally produce an accurate representation of his original artwork. Johnson's also assisted in the testing of the gold lustre to achieve the correct consistency for the tile painters to achieve a perfect finish. The tile panel was then mounted on a workbench and installed in the gallery, transforming the space into a live studio for 68 days. Each day a new volunteer apprentice was able to learn the craft of ceramic painting under expert tuition, helping to slowly realising the design before the eyes of gallery visitors. The work, therefore, became a means of learning a new skill and working

practice. As a collaborative and participatory production it also served to demonstrate to the onlooker something of Morris's socialist ideal of art, as one that 'should be common to the whole people' and 'an integral part of all manufactured wares' (Morris, 1891). As with *Manifest, 10,000 Hours*, this installation raised the idea that skills have to be passed on from one person to another and how practising a skill can connect us through time and space to other people. As Morris observed, 'The past is not dead, but living in us.'

The stated purpose of Tate Exchange, now in its 2nd year, is 'to invite the public to test ideas and explore new perspectives, illuminating the value of art to society.' Clare Twomey's *FACTORY: the seen and the unseen* opened at Tate Exchange on the 5th floor of the Blavatnik Building at Tate Modern on 28 September this year for a period of 2 weeks.

As they entered the space visitors passed by pyramids of clay logs and a lace panel representative of the relationship between human and machine innovation that was made by the artist on the last working Leavers looms in the UK. In week 1 of the project, on reaching the reception desk each visitor received a time card to clock-in to the factory, then donned a worker's apron before making a free choice of one or more work tasks: weighing clay, making decorative bone china flowers, or joining an industrial production line for the slip-casting of tableware.

The project created a temporary community of people consisting of the factory's managers, plus Tate staff in various supporting roles (all paid professionals), the workforce trainers (in the main art student volunteers who had been additionally trained by Twomey), and the far larger self-elected workforce of gallery visitors.

Having received their training and having made a clay artefact, at the end of their work shift the visitor-participants were able to exchange the fruit of their labour for one produced by a fellow worker from shelves of fired and unfired items – before clocking off and leaving the factory. Each pot or flower produced by a worker was given a numbered ticket, and the item they selected was also numbered. Visitors were encouraged to record that number in a *FACTORY*-related phone app to create an 'Object Community' map, which others could also access to find out where in the world their object was destined to live.

Philippa Norcup and Jean Gleave are skilled ceramic flower makers, both of whom have a lifetime of experience working in the factories of Stoke-on-Trent, where they were accustomed to making 360 blooms a day. Now in their 80s, Philippa and Jean took the role of workforce trainers in Twomey's *FACTORY* to pass on some of their knowledge and making skills to the public.

All the moulds, clay slip, shelving, carts, trolleys and roller tables were loaned by the tableware manufacturer Dudson of Stoke-on-Trent, who also advised on the practicalities of production. On the slip-casting production line the factory managers and workforce trainers organised the participants to work on a series of tasks: They might begin by pouring slip into a mould and, while that was firming up, they were instructed to move along the line to learn how to trim the excess clay from a pot ready to be removed from the mould, before removing the bands from yet another mould and freeing the pot. Any desire on the part of the worker to see through the making process on a single pot from start to finish was politely but firmly discouraged with the reminder that they were working on a factory production line.

In the second week, the production lines ceased. Visitors could still visit the FACTORY to see the now redundant work stations, the making activity replaced by a soundscape of voices of earlier visitors and participants reflecting on their experiences of work and how communities are built through working together. The blackboard behind the former production line recorded the activities of the previous week and the numbers of participants. In week 2 visitors were invited to sit at the former production line, within the soundscape, to fill in cards, responding to themes and questions about their thoughts on:

Material & Production

Knowledge & Production

Transformation & Production

Value & Production

And these too could be exchanged for a fired or unfired pot or flower. As the cards gradually replaced the objects they left traces of the thoughts of hundreds of individuals, and these could be read by others, in turn affecting them.

When considering the critical reception of all these projects I wonder why it is they still seem to attract polarising ethical discussions, ones concerning active or passive involvement, or, the presumed status of the author versus that of the spectator, the individual and the collective. Following one of Rancière's strands of thought, the question I pose is what other circumstances do they serve to mask? Or draw attention away from?

What critics often seem to miss is that these kinds of projects provide points of interchange; invite a multiplicity of voices; they offer forms of open discussion and the increasingly rare experiences of working as a community with materials and objects.

Such projects also seem to incorporate ideas from Asger Jorn's short list of how people become invested in making – through experiences of "Shock — Wonder — Imitation — Rejection — Experimentation — Possession ..."

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