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## **Contesting agendas of participation in the arts**

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### **Abstract**

Forms of participatory practice have become ever more widely employed across the arts in recent years, operating across various institutional settings and social contexts. It is misleading, however, to assume that a single agenda binds these developments or that they serve the same social values and interests. Veils of common terminology can conceal important differences of political intent and ethical integrity. Conceptions of art, artists, culture and community vary widely, while terms such as participation, engagement and co-creation are rarely well defined. This article draws on current research into UK cultural and artistic leadership, as well as established theories of participation and action, to explore the complex power relations that underpin participatory discourse. It critiques policies and practices that claim 'participation' as an automatic methodological virtue, questioning the positive connotations of participatory language, particularly in relation to shaping assumptions of shared interest. It argues that there is a need for improved critical self-awareness on the part of artists involved in participatory projects and processes, discussing possible frameworks for analysis of the relevant power relationships.

### **Keywords**

art

participation

engagement

power

discourse

cultural leadership

## **Introduction**

Participation and engagement have joined a roster of concepts which have been pressed into so many forms of service in the political arena that much of their meaning has started to leach out of them. Many such terms – community, sustainability, creativity, innovation, quality – owe their overuse to the fact that they can be very hard to apply negatively or pejoratively, as Raymond Williams once noted in relation to ‘community’ (1976). These words imply certain sets of values – almost invariably positive values. To be associated with these terms is to borrow their credibility. They can function not just as ways of describing particular settings or practices, but as justifications of purpose, proclamations of alliance with unopposable values. The terms become ends in themselves. They are ‘fundamentalisms’, to use the term Pascal Gielen has applied to ‘creativity’ (2013), bypassing analysis by way of familiarity. For this reason, however, they can also become masks for the operation of power.

This article is concerned with the tensions, politics and power relations that lie behind and within the discourse of participation in the arts. It argues that there is a need for these issues to be brought much more systematically to the surface in planning processes and debates about practice. In the midst of day to day project work such considerations can seem at best inconvenient and at worst irrelevant, but they are crucial to determining the value, effectiveness – or even legitimacy – of any participatory project.

The terms ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’ imply a particular kind of relationship to action. To participate is to participate *in* something – a something that is, by implication, pre-existing

– not of the participant’s making. Participation implies a set of circumstances, or at least a process, already defined by others, at which the participant arrives. A participant joins, but does not initiate. Engagement, similarly, suggests that there is an original state of non-engagement, which the process of engagement seeks to overturn. In each case, the participant or subject of engagement is an outsider to the original state of affairs. This is not to denigrate the concept of participation: in a sense, this initial outsider status is an essential point of departure for us all. The political philosophy of Hannah Arendt offers a useful conceptualization of this. In Arendt’s theory of action, it is recognized that life pitches us all into a set of circumstances that are not of our making, which by our actions we change, creating new circumstances in turn for others to encounter, leaving our own story unfinished in the process. For this reason ‘nobody is the author of his own life story’ (Arendt 1998: 184), we are all instead ‘agents’, encountering and responding to situations as we find them, part of a unending web of relationships formed of action, exchange and re-encounter. This is our human condition. The issue is what kind of agency we have in formulating our response; how much change is possible, which possibilities are limited, and by whom. A power relationship exists in all our processes of engagement and involvement. There is an inevitable political dimension to such work because, as Arendt puts it, ‘the political realm rises directly out of acting together’ (1998: 198).

Understanding the political dimension of participation in the arts involves challenging its ‘fundamentalisms’. If concepts are used uncritically, we may forget that there can be welcoming or inhospitable communities, that sustainability and innovation may be in tension, or that quality sometimes becomes exclusivity. There can also be qualitatively different forms of participation, meaning that some form of critical framework is needed for the range of art practices, policies and commissions that claim the term as a methodological virtue. While participatory language may be used to imply common interest and inclusion, participatory interventions are variously experienced by individuals and communities as opportunity, imposition, invitation or exploitation, as has been noted by writers across

multiple discourses (Arnstein 1969; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hope 2011; Walmsley 2013). Artists, as agents in these processes, must exercise critical judgement to understand the constraints of each given situation and what is implied for their practice.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on a body of research investigating 'cultural leadership' as a discourse and policy area in the United Kingdom. This research is concerned with who has influence in shaping the circumstances of cultural production, including consideration of the values and assumptions built into the language of policy and the relationship between the arts and democracy. It builds explicitly on previous research around the idea of 'the artist as leader', which distinguished between the forms of leadership shown by artists in their art forms, within organizations, and in the public sphere (Douglas and Fremantle 2009). Exploring the relationship between the arts and the public has inevitably led to encounters with the politics of participation and engagement. The research has included a series of semi-structured interviews with a range of organizational leaders across the arts in England and Scotland. Interviewees were selected on the basis of the combined perspectives represented in their experience, both as individuals and as a group. Policy-makers and company directors were chosen who had previous experience of working as practitioners or at community level, while the freelancers had previously worked within major institutions as producers, funders or strategists. The article draws specifically on interviews with writer François Matarasso, community arts organizers Emma Tregidden and Dawn Fuller, and local authority cultural chief Cluny Macpherson.<sup>1</sup> Their empirical outlooks are related to relevant literature on cultural participation and policy, including Matarasso's own work.

Researching from the context of an art school (Gray's, Aberdeen) has generated additional conversations with researchers and practitioners actively engaged in different forms of participatory and co-creative work. Ideas developed from the research about the forms and politics of arts participation were tested in a workshop with researchers at Gray's (May 2014)

– including artist Helen Smith, curator Caroline Gausden and research coordinator Professor Anne Douglas – before being presented for discussion at a collaborative seminar in Utrecht at the International Perspectives on Participation and Engagement conference the following month. This work was informed by the group’s involvement in three AHRC-funded Connected Communities projects.<sup>2</sup> It allowed the debate of a possible taxonomy of participatory arts, testing definitions and highlighting the assumptions lurking within our shared vocabularies. One of the more common assumptions equated participation with community empowerment, giving it a positive ethical charge as an essential component of cultural democracy. All of us, however, could readily conjure examples of creative projects that claimed forms of community involvement but remained geared to the needs of the commissioners, funders and organizers rather than the participants. There was also a perceived tension between the idea of an autonomous artist and participatory processes of co-creation, particularly in social art practice where the final product is presented under the artist’s name – issues that have been considered at length by successive artist-researchers at Gray’s.<sup>3</sup> These forms of dissonance gave shape to the present enquiry. What questions must be answered – by commissioners, artists and communities – for participatory art practices to have integrity?

### **The rhetoric of engagement**

The gap between the rhetoric of engagement and the practical operation of power in participatory processes has been influentially explored by Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (2001) from the perspective of development studies. They identify two main strands of critique of participatory approaches in the development industry, one based on technical limitations and methodological challenges, and the other centring on theoretical and political issues, raising more fundamental conceptual problems with the overall approach (Cooke and Kothari 2001: 5). It is this latter level of critique that I suggest needs to be more widely applied in the domain of participatory arts, as analysis from within the sector, such as the Artworks project research commissioned by Creative Scotland (Consilium Research &

Consultancy 2012a, 2012b; Nicoll 2014), typically focuses on practical self-improvement and is necessarily limited to Cooke and Kothari's first strand of critique.

A further feature of Cooke and Kothari's analysis that may ring true to those working in the arts is that private criticisms of participatory processes are at odds with the public positions of individuals and organizations, which tend to conform to a kind of professional 'orthodoxy' (Cooke and Kothari 2001: 1-2). There is little incentive to publicly challenge the received wisdom of participation's supposed virtues within a sector for which participatory work is a key part of the economy and which invests in promoting its benefits. This parallels what Eleanora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett have termed the 'slide into advocacy' in debates about cultural value, which they see as a result of the work's publicly funded status (Belfiore and Bennett 2008: 10).

A classic taxonomy of the modes of participation in public life is the 'ladder of participation' developed by Sherry Arnstein (1969). Stemming from an analysis of Community Action and Model Cities programmes in the United States in the 1960s, this model discerns eight basic levels of participatory involvement. *Manipulation* (1) and *therapy* (2) represent processes that entirely serve the interests of the power holders, concealing the real operation of power and enabling them 'to 'educate' or 'cure' the participants' – which Arnstein labels 'non-participation'. *Informing* (3) and *consultation* (4) respectively allow citizens an ear and a voice, providing a contact point with actual processes, but lack follow through or 'muscle', as power holders are still not obliged to adjust their actions or respond to participants' interests. *Placation* (5) occurs when participant mobilization or involvement can no longer be ignored and allows at least an advisory role for citizens, which is arguably what is implied but not necessarily delivered by many consultation exercises, setting up but not fulfilling expectations. Even at this level, traditional power holders still make final decisions, and Arnstein characterizes levels 3 to 5 as 'tokenism'. Full-scale participation or 'citizen power' only occurs at the top three levels, with citizens working alongside or within executive



structures through *partnership* (6) or *delegated power* (7) or even taking full responsibility for fundamental decisions at the top level of *citizen control* (8). This model remains valuable in identifying key distinctions between the rhetoric of engagement and the actual operation of power. It marks out an axis of influence and control, justifying the fundamental observation that 'participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless' (Arnstein 1969: 216).

This relationship of participation to power is central to how the quality of any process of participation in the arts can be assessed. Matarasso saw this when researching the social impact of participatory arts projects in the mid-1990s, identifying 'the involvement of participants in setting objectives' as one of three core measures of the work's effectiveness (1997: 95).<sup>4</sup> Matarasso also observed how variably such principles were applied in practice, with his various case studies showing anywhere between 12% and 65% of participants having an involvement in planning.

### **The agendas of participation**

Participation and social engagement have become increasingly common elements in professional arts practice in a number of dimensions in recent years, as various authors have recognized (Jancovich 2011; Hewison 2014; Matarasso 2015). Artists have been employed in ever more diverse contexts in pursuit of social, economic, educational or therapeutic benefits, while pressure has increased on the publicly funded cultural sector to broaden in-house audiences and engage actively with external communities (Hewison 2014: 63–70). Substantial training provision now exists specifically for artists working in participatory settings, with Scotland alone counting 31 undergraduate, seven postgraduate and sixteen dedicated further education courses by 2011 (Consilium Research & Consultancy 2012a: 15).

The development of arts participation and engagement work as a priority in cultural policy in the United Kingdom is principally associated with the New Labour administration from 1997 onwards. Simultaneous with that election, as Robert Hewison has noted, was the publication of Francois Matarasso's report for Comedia into the social impacts of the arts (Matarasso 1997), which subsequently informed the work of the government's Policy Action Team 10 on art, sport and social inclusion (Hewison 2014: 71–73). This led to the rise of what Leila Jancovich has termed 'the participation agenda', with attempts to broaden the base of cultural sector decision making as well as to encourage a greater range of people to take part in and enjoy the arts at the grass roots (Jancovich 2015). However, Jancovich also identifies a gap between the rhetorical claims of a New Labour policy shift towards participation in the arts, and empirical data, including the UK's large-scale Taking Part survey, showing that little actually changed in practice (2015: 9). This echoes Ben Walmsley's (2013) analysis of 'co-creation' as a model of participation in the arts, which finds that while such work deepens engagement for a few, it does not provide a convincing route for policy-makers to widen involvement or democratize the arts. Walmsley identifies further problems of definition, with a lack of consensus about what is meant by the term co-creation or how its processes are constituted (2013: 115). The perception of a gap between policy and practice also emerges in a research interview with Matarasso, who contends that the rhetoric of participation in New Labour cultural policy after 1997 was not matched by a corresponding shift in the prioritization of resources (2013b). According to this argument, while participatory practices did benefit from an overall increase in funding during this period, this simply represented an equivalent slice of a larger pie. The proportion of arts funding dedicated to inclusion did not decisively shift and nor did the outlook and priorities of cultural sector organizations.<sup>5</sup> Jancovich pinpoints a similar problem 'where the arts feel obliged to justify how they are addressing policy without adopting the values which underpin it' (Jancovich 2015: 9). She also observes that the post 2010 shrinking of the funding pie has brought cuts to participatory organizations and a resignation from Arts Council England staff that 'social inequalities will continue to be replicated in arts funding' (2015: 10). This

suggests that, in Arnstein's terms, the arts establishment commitment to the participation agenda has never gone beyond the level of placation.

A further implied assumption of 'participation' is that involvement in the activity is necessarily useful and worthwhile for the participants. In public funding schemes participants typically become 'beneficiaries' in the official language (Arts Council of Wales 2014; Big Lottery Fund 2014; Arts Council England 2015). This presupposes that participatory activity is designed predominantly in terms of the interests and priorities of the target group, an assumption that it is far from safe to make in any given situation. As Jancovich has concluded:

the existing funded arts organisations tended to define the participation problem as a deficit on the part of the public who needed to be coaxed into engagement through education programmes or concessionary prices, rather than a deficit on the part of the cultural offer they provided. (2015: 5)

It is of course possible for participatory work to be constructed in ways that mitigate the outsider relationship of participant to process. If the worst case scenario is that a participant becomes an accessory – an instrument in a process owned and controlled elsewhere – then attention needs to be paid to ownership and control. A research interview with Dawn Fuller and Emma Tregidden, artists and community activists from Leeds organization Space 2, finds them grappling with these issues and struggling to find language that can describe their work without disempowering participants:

DF: We're very much moving down this road of co-production, in terms of how we deliver our art projects, I suppose. Or facilitate. 'Deliver' is going to become the wrong word. So much of the language we're using now is going to –

ET: Change.

DF: It will have to shift. But it's certainly around, it's around co-production principles.

And this down here is about coming back to this: creator, curator and consumer...

So people can be any one, or any two, or even three of them at any given time –

ET: Or even the commissioner.

DF: Or – exactly. Moving on to actually, anybody – artist, participant, or audience – could become the commissioner. (Fuller and Tregidden 2014)

This emphasis on co-production is an attempt to establish equal status for the participant in both procedure and description. The term recurs throughout the interview. While the challenges of working with vulnerable social groups are acknowledged, Space 2 devotes significant energy to facilitating participant leadership. Tregidden emphasizes that this approach includes participant input on the language used to describe it: 'co-producing and co-designing work; therefore the language will need co-producing and co-designing' (Fuller and Tregidden 2014). This reflects an urgent need to preserve relationships and project an appropriate image of the organization's purpose:

DF: As the practice changes it needs new language to reflect that... So if we say we're a 'community arts organisation', you know, that grounds us somewhere we don't want to be for other people. Even 'participatory art'... we quite like that, but we need to wait and see how the Arts Council kind of brand that, because that might not be again how we want to describe what we do. (Fuller and Tregidden 2014)

For a small organization this is no semantic issue but one that affects funding relationships and survival. This highlights the need for greater precision in deploying and interpreting the limited number of terms available for a highly nuanced area of work.

### **Art, participation and democracy**

There is an important relationship between participation as a goal or strategy in artistic processes and participation as a democratic principle. Participation is a keystone of democracy. At a minimum this means voting in elections, but ideally it means a far deeper involvement in policy-making and citizen influence on the choices that affect them. This principle has both ethical and practical aspects: morally, it speaks to the human right of self-determination; practically, it should lead to better or at least better tolerated decisions, demonstrating attention to public interest and consent. As public policy theorist Mark Considine observes: 'no public programme or decision can survive for long without public acceptance and none can easily prosper without public support' (2005: 186). Alternatively, as Michel Foucault once put it, rather more bluntly: 'power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself' (1990: 86).

Depending on circumstances or interpretation, participation and public engagement programmes can therefore appear either as a mask of power, deceiving people into believing that their interests are being served, or as the heartbeats of a vital democratic ideal. The difference lies in the integrity of the process through which participation occurs. The mere fact of participation is not itself a sufficient indicator for a truly democratic process.

Similar issues are applicable to participation in the arts. Some forms of participation – for example, the outreach and educational work of publicly funded cultural institutions – stem at least in part from the need for such organizations to justify their subsidy by reaching beyond 'elite' or class-specific audiences. This 'crisis of legitimacy' of arts organizations can be seen as a cultural sector parallel to the democratic deficit of mainstream politics (Jancovich 2015: 5). Other forms of participation, meanwhile, aim at giving creative expression to voices unheard or unrepresented within political power structures, highlighting particular social issues or minority cultures. For Dawn Fuller, co-production is 'democratic art' (Fuller and Tregidden 2014).

This conception fits well with the analytical concepts of ‘cultural democracy’ and ‘the democratisation of culture’ (Hope 2011: 176–77; Jancovich 2011: 73). Each of these can include practices that include participation, but they come ethically and politically from different places. The ‘democratization of culture’ refers to processes where the ‘official’ culture, typically represented by large and well-funded institutions, is made accessible to non-participating communities, often in the belief that it will do them good. Cultural democracy arises when communities produce and communicate their own forms of critical culture. Crudely, cultural democracy is obviously ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’, but the crucial distinction is its reflective approach, producing questioning or ‘wrong’ forms of participation, in Sophie Hope’s usage, where the given frame of the participatory process is challenged or exceeded by the participant (2011). This chimes with an important point raised by Gielen relating to modern cultural expectations of creative projects: ‘creativity is often equated with problem-solving, which is something else entirely than causing problems or, rather, *problematizing* issues, a task that was until recently reserved for the artist or dabbler’ (2013: 38).

Even where an artist or participant group might be granted aesthetic autonomy within a project structure, there may be hidden expectations that limit its critical potential, particularly if it is intended by commissioners that something celebratory, unifying or inspiring is going to result (the ‘right’ form of participation). In this case the expression of complexity, dissent, or discomfort may be unwelcome. If it is made to feel so, then a power structure has been revealed.

These concepts are useful as radar for detecting some of the more patronising, clumsy or class-colonial approaches to democracy and culture – the manipulations and the therapies. They are also an interesting lens through which to look at the term ‘engagement’, or rather that concern of public authorities, ‘non-engagement’. It is easy to see how non-engagement with official culture can exist, or non-engagement with the work of individual arts

organizations. It is also relatively easy to see how strategies for tackling this can be devised on the 'democratisation of culture' model. These generally involve educating the community and demonstrating to them what they're missing. The UK's New Audiences programme (1998–2003) was arguably a national scale enactment of this approach, which produced little tangible success (Hewison 2014: 74–75). It takes a different mindset to approach non-engagement in terms of cultural democracy. If a community has established ways of producing and sharing symbolic meaning, together with a legitimate critical perspective on the prevailing cultural conditions, then it makes little sense to describe it as culturally 'non-engaged'. The disconnect that may nonetheless exist between this community and certain cultural institutions has to be rethought. It becomes apparent that the 'non-engagement' is mutual. Whatever process might be attempted to overcome this has to be a genuine two-way street. If the institution wants to see a change take place in its relation with the community, then it has to be prepared to change itself in the process, perhaps in fundamental ways.

It is not always immediately clear, however, which of these paradigms is at work in a given situation. The motivations of public authorities and the virtues of their programmes can be mixed, and more than one agency may be involved. Individual motivations may be at odds with institutional circumstances. Well-intentioned officers and artists attempting to work alongside communities may be hampered by inherited commissioning criteria, inadequate resources or short-term processes. Conversely, even hasty or cynical consultations may be imaginatively transformed by creative and opportunistic community organizations. The response to a process may subvert it, which is why authorities often find that carefully planned interventions produce effects that are not only unexpected but in fact the exact opposite of what they anticipated, as has long been observed (Sieber 1981: 3–9; 21–26). This points to a further component of Arendt's theory of action: its essential unpredictability or boundlessness, 'where every process is the cause of new processes' (1998: 190). Action engenders endless chains of reaction. The outcome of action in the public sphere always

depends on other people. This suggests that whether the motivation of any process can be traced to 'cultural democracy' or 'democratisation of culture', its subsequent value will depend on unfolding social dynamics while its political character may evolve. Not only are the agendas of participation various, but they are mutable.

If the effectiveness of the participation agenda as a direction in cultural policy can be called into question, it has still generated new strands of work for artists, while contributing to an expanded discourse around engagement and community involvement of which projects such as Artworks are a part. Developments in both policy and practice have therefore moved arts participation debates well beyond their origins in networks such as the British community art movement. Indeed, Matarasso argues that the tendency for the term 'community arts' to be quietly dropped in favour of 'participatory arts' since the 1990s is an important de-politicization of this area of work, moving it 'from radicalism to remedialism' (Matarasso 2013a: 2).

### **From radicalism to respectability**

John Fox, founder-director of the activist English theatre company Welfare State International, has viewed this shift more optimistically. Writing in 2002, he notes the distance participatory arts work had travelled since the company's founding in 1968, particularly in terms of respectability:

Now it is rare for street performers to be arrested, as was common in the early seventies... Now there are hundreds of excellent entertainment and music festivals, local authority play buses, community art agendas, lantern parades, fire shows... Today, the concepts of 'access', 'multi-generational' and 'diverse' participation are built into every arts-funding guideline. (2002: 7)



The situation has changed again in recent years and many of the play buses are off the road. However, the funding guidelines remain and the relationships of institutions to participatory forms of art making have been transformed from mutual suspicion to mutual expectation. The promotion of participation is expected of authorities; in turn, authorities expect participation to deliver certain benefits. The fact that money is tight serves, paradoxically, to intensify this relationship rather than to dismantle it, according to another former street performer, now Leeds City Council's Chief Officer for Culture, Cluny Macpherson:

if you see something which doesn't appear to be benefiting everybody then it's challenged... there are fundamental questions around why are the cultural expressions at a local community level not afforded the same status, sometimes funding, as what could be caricatured as high art. So there's a sort of... pressure within that to recognise who the beneficiaries are. (Macpherson 2014)

Participatory arts organizations are required to connect with agendas across the public service spectrum and budget holders demand tangible results on their own terms. This is part of what drives Dawn Fuller's concern about language: 'we have to communicate with lots of different sectors who do not necessarily understand the language that we might use within the arts. They might not necessarily value the arts, either' (Fuller and Tregidden 2014). Even where the arts are valued, involvement with official agendas may come at the cost of any potential for the work to incorporate radical or critical stances. Welfare State International has itself been subject to criticism on this score (Jackson 2011: 57). The hazard of gaining respectability (and funding) is to be instrumentalized. This can be seen in the translation of subtle arguments for the social benefits of participation in the arts into blunt government targets during the New Labour era (Hewison 2014: 72–76). Socially engaged artists report finding themselves engaged in flawed processes, encountering contradictions between the aesthetic and social roles they are expected to play in relation to the differing

expectations of commissioners and participants (Rooke 2014: 4). These mixtures of motivation and intent complicate analysis, undermining categorical judgements about the validity or otherwise of any one form of practice. The artist, as much as any participant, is an Arendtian agent, entering into circumstances not of their making and contributing actions that others may complete.

During the past generation or so, participatory and collaborative forms of work have also become established as legitimate strategies in the world of fine art. Serious critical consideration is now given to experimental practices working to bring social and aesthetic priorities together in new forms of art and activism (Jackson 2011; Kester 2013; Mesch 2013). Following a different trajectory to traditions of community art or participation in established forms, this work extends the envelope of participatory practice and accommodates a new set of conceptual concerns amid strangely familiar terminology. These practices raise additional questions about autonomy, ownership and the relationship of participatory process to artistic production. If a community is involved in creating work which is then presented under a lead artist's name, has it been exploited? If the work subsequently acquires value, who has the rights? Is there a risk that the emergence of this work as a career option attracts artists with only a superficial or short-term commitment to potentially vulnerable participants? How can artistic autonomy and social engagement be successfully balanced? Ethical, legal and aesthetic issues collide and overlap in the debate over quality criteria for such projects, but they echo older arguments. Traditional community artists would also recognize the tension between quality of process and product, and they have their own problems with short-term commissions, as has been noted in a recent report on community practice for the Arts & Humanities Research Council (Rooke 2014: 4).

### **The qualities of participation**

The discussions with artist-researchers during the May 2014 workshop at Gray's set out to explore whether the relational (and therefore political) features of different arts practices

employing participation could be usefully separated and defined to form a broad taxonomy of engagement. This, it was proposed, would include classic 'community arts'; 'outreach and education', as practised by many publicly funded arts organizations; 'socially engaged art', the new forms of fine art and activism; 'instrumental art', the processes through which art is put at the service of social or economic priorities; and also 'amateur art', the choral societies, drama groups, writers and painters who undoubtedly 'participate' in art but who sit largely outside institutional structures.

Each category would have to be defined in terms of who initiates the work, who might take part, the nature of any professional involvement, the point at which participation occurs, who is involved in defining what 'quality' might mean, what forms of value or outcome are generated, and what criteria might be used to determine success or failure. In this way, not only the proliferation of participatory forms could be demonstrated – the expanded field of ways through which the participation of non-art professionals in art making now happens – but also a sense of the contradictions concealed by the umbrella term 'participation', the differences of intent, motivation, ownership and opportunity dividing these categories of practice. At first glance this seemed useful, but as we tried to agree general characteristics for different practices, it quickly became apparent that none of the proposed definitions held much water. Although the group represented many years' experience of developing participatory projects in various settings, we struggled to produce concrete examples which fully corresponded with the attempted theoretical definition of what 'community arts' should be. Everything seemed to be an exception. There were also plenty of exceptions to the 'outreach' model, with significant diversity of philosophy and practice. Meanwhile, between four different researchers we had four – or maybe more – ideas of what 'socially engaged practice' might mean; and we were by no means agreed that, whatever it was, it should even be called 'socially engaged practice'. The concept of 'instrumental art', while recognizable to all of us as something which many public programmes might produce, seemed to describe a tendency in commissioning rather than an identifiable form of practice. 'Amateur art'

seemed marginally less contentious but still overlapped with 'community'. The list was gradually dismantled.

It might have been possible to revise and revamp these categories but, after the discussion, this seemed unlikely to be worthwhile. The problem lay in trying to pin fixed relational characteristics to terms that had themselves been coined as umbrellas for diverse activities. The terms wanted to be inclusive but the definitions did not. What became apparent, though, was that, while a political taxonomy of practice might be a red herring, the analytical criteria through which we had been discussing them were far more relevant. They reflected the range of political, economic, social and technical pressures that have contributed to developments in participatory work, such as the democratic deficit, issues of justification and continuity of funding, the requirement for arts organizations to build community relationships, and the technical or methodological changes in the way creative work is being produced and presented. This provided a logic for organizing the key questions in terms of a classic PEST analysis:

<p>Political (ownership and power relations)</p>	<p>What is the project's fundamental purpose (to what issue does it respond and by who is this defined)?</p> <p>What are its success criteria and whose interests do these serve?</p> <p>What kind of language is being used (have the terms been defined and agreed)?</p> <p>At what point in the decision-making process does each party get involved (how much is decided before the artist and/or participants are invited to contribute)?</p> <p>Can the project ask critical questions or problematize issues (what's off limits and why)?</p>
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	Who has the final say over content (power of veto)?
Economic (funding and resource input)	<p>Who is paying for the work?</p> <p>What demands are made of participants (time, energy, ideas, emotional commitment)?</p> <p>Is an adequate overall timescale allowed?</p> <p>Does the work connect with other processes or initiatives?</p> <p>Who recruits or manages the professionals (to whom are they answerable)?</p>
Sociocultural (relationships and needs)	<p>Who is included/excluded, and who has decided this?</p> <p>What relationships are to be developed and who has responsibility for maintaining them?</p> <p>Are any existing relationships put at risk?</p> <p>Who assesses the needs or capacities of the participants?</p> <p>Who assesses the needs or capacities of the artists?</p>
Technical (process and methodology)	<p>How and by whom are the content and techniques chosen?</p> <p>Who defines the format and outcomes?</p> <p>Which elements of the work can be changed, and what is the process for agreeing this?</p> <p>How and by whom is the work to be evaluated?</p> <p>What happens when the project ends?</p>

These issues cannot be addressed in the abstract for any of the group of umbrella terms, but need to be answered separately for each individual activity, which lays claim to the values of 'participation' or 'engagement'. It is not through external labelling, but only through intrinsic examination by these criteria, that the politics of a process can be identified. What are the motivations of a piece of work and who has control? Only in addressing these questions is it

possible to remain alert to the possibilities of co-option (of the language and implied values of 'participation') or exploitation (of any given participant group). For artists, who are often 'negotiating complex sociopolitical agendas and ethical obligations', it is surely vital to understand these circumstances and the interests their work may be serving, given the contradictions can arise between 'the fit, or lack of fit, between commissioning intention, artistic intention, and local needs and desires' (Rooke 2014: 4).

## **Conclusions**

What is asked of artists working among the structures and relationships integral to contemporary participatory practice is something extremely difficult. They are required not only to have technical expertise and vision in terms of their art form, but also to navigate complex social dynamics, balancing their own principles with conditions set by funders or commissioners and with the needs and expectations of participants. The entire circumstance may be inherently unsatisfactory, depending on its political background; there may be incompatible expectations among stakeholders or mismatches between available resources and expected results.

Even non-involvement, quite apart from its economic implications for a professional artist, fails to constitute an adequate ethical response, as it abdicates responsibility for intervention and concedes any potential for wielding positive influence. There are no ideal situations. Artists involved in participatory work and committed to social change necessarily take on the negotiation of tensions and imperfections. Conversely, funders and commissioners with declared commitments to cultural democracy must work out how high on the ladder of participation they dare operate. These issues are matters of skill, leadership and judgement on all sides, depending on individual situations rather than fixed criteria. There is no best practice guide for ethical engagement with funding and commissioning. At most there are some tools which can be applied to assessment of the conditions. Beyond that, it is a

question of reading and responding to live situations. Acting in the face of uncertainty is a permanent challenge for artists, policy makers and participants alike.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The wider programme of work on cultural leadership included twenty interviewees.

<sup>2</sup> These include Smith's Collaborative Doctoral project, '*Understanding organizational change through arts: A methodology for art as a social practice*' (2011–2015) and Douglas's involvement in *The time of the clock and the time of encounter: pathfinders for connection* (PI Siebers, 2012–2013) and Co-producing legacy: what is the role of artists within connected communities projects? (PI Pahl 2014–2015). Smith, Gausden and Douglas develop practice led research in which live projects with community partners form a key element of methodology.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Suzanne Lacy, as part of the *Working in public* seminar series edited by Anne Douglas ([www.workinginpublicseminars.org](http://www.workinginpublicseminars.org)), and Chu Chu Yuan, in her practice-based Ph.D. *Negotiation-as-active-knowing: an approach evolved from relational art practice* (2010–2013). Related issues of authorship are also discussed by Kester (2013: 3–4) and Jackson (2011: 48–49).

<sup>4</sup> The other two were 'the quality and equity of its evaluation procedures' and 'its ability to use the results of evaluation effectively' (Matarasso 1997: 95), reinforcing the importance of critical self-awareness.

<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps telling that, after four years of New Labour, the government's upbeat progress report could show that, for Sport, £750M was already committed to deprived areas, while the equivalent bullet point for the Arts Council could only note

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that it had 'produced a strategy' for social inclusion (Department for Culture, Media & Sport 2001: 5).