

Participation to the People!

Locating the Popular in Rimini Protokoll's *Home Visit Europe*

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ABSTRACT

Home Visit Europe by Rimini Protokoll is a performance without performers, only an audience taking part in a game in a private home. As such, it is one example of the participatory strategies that currently have a strong presence in contemporary theatre practices changing how we, as audience, engage with theatre. It is emblematic then that 'participation' is an emergent concept in theatre and performance studies with a rapidly growing body of work on the topic. This article sets out to explore how the idiom of the popular can shed light on some of the central issues in the discourse on participation: that is to say, the relationship between the artist and the audience, authorship, and the relationship between the aesthetic and the social dimension of participatory work. I will be using *Home Visit Europe* in the context of Bergen International Festival of 2015 as a case study, drawing on an audience research approach combined with a critical reading of the work. The conceptually stringent and tightly ordered dramaturgy of *Home Visit Europe*, where the audience take turns responding to a set of questions and tasks, demonstrates how problematic the concept of participation can be to describe theatre practices, as the term risks overstating the influence that the audience have over the aesthetic product. In this sense, contemporary participatory strategies resemble popular theatre's conflict between established aesthetics, critical standards and popular grounding. A resemblance that brings the paper right to the core of the discourse on participation, which concerns the ideological ramifications of the 'participatory turn'.

KEYWORDS

Participatory theatre; Spectatorship; Audience participation; Rimini Protokoll; Home Visit Europe; Popular theatre; Participatory turn; Jacques Rancière; Theatre games.

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INTRODUCTION

Audience participation is part of a larger shift that emphasises what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls, the 'production of presence' that, according to Lehmann, rather than mimesis is an essential characteristic of post-dramatic theatre.¹ Today, we find audience participation in a range of theatrical expressions in commercial as well as experimental theatre, and a renewed interest in the participatory strategies not only in the turn of the century avant-garde movements but also methods used in community theatre and didactic theatre from the 1960s onwards. This, however, is not an isolated phenomenon. Media theorist, Henry Jenkins, describes a shift towards participation going on in all fields of society as a 'participatory turn'.²

I build my discussion of participation on media theorist Nico Carpentier and sociologist Carol Pateman's understanding of participation as related to distribution of power,³ Theatre researchers' Gareth White's concept of participation as an 'aesthetics of the invitation',⁴ and Astrid Breel's⁵ typology of audience

¹ Lehmann 2006, 141.

² Henry Jenkins 2014.

³ Pateman 1970, 70-71.

⁴ White 2013.

⁵ Breel 2015.

engagement are used to frame the participation in *Home Visit Europe* within a theatre discourse.

An important contribution to the study of participatory practices has focused on showing how the participatory turn is embedded in the cultural economy of a post-industrial experience economy. Now, numerous articles and publications demonstrate how participation no longer belongs to a specific political agenda. Most prominent of these is perhaps *Artificial Hells*,⁶ Claire Bishop's major historical overview and critique of the discourse on participatory art. This is a shared perspective of a number of theatre and art theorists such as professor in theatre and rhetoric Shannon Jackson's writing on social art and performance practice,⁷ as well as theatre and performance scholars Jen Harvie⁸ and, recently, Adam Alston⁹ to name a few. Harvie and Alston show how participatory strategies engender a form of entrepreneurialism and individualism in the audience that they understand as an expression of neo liberal ideology, criticizing how certain forms of participatory art and theatre accommodate cuts in budgets for arts and culture and the gentrification of inner cities. In the context of this article I particularly draw on Bishop's critique of the legitimizing function of audience participation in my discussion of Rimini Protokoll and *Home Visit Europe*, and the context it was performed in, in Bergen, Norway in 2015.

Another emerging strand of the rapidly expanding body of research on participatory strategies is a growing focus on the embodied, affective experience of the audience. This is present in many of the essays in the newly published anthology *Performance and Participation*; see for instance Deidre Heddon's essay "The Cultivation of Entangled Listening".¹⁰ Other scholars have turned to audience research as methodology for work on audience participation, like the abovementioned Astrid Breel whose focus is on audience agency. In his introduction to a section on audience participation and qualitative methods in

⁶ Bishop 2012.

⁷ Jackson 2011.

⁸ Harvie 2013.

⁹ Alston 2016.

¹⁰ Heddon 2017, 19-40.

the Journal *Participations* theatre and audience researcher Mathew Reason writes, “What is needed are not competing over-statements of idealised or imagined possibilities, which too easily become straw figures for alternative artistic preferences to support or repudiate. A criticism with relevance to Rancière’s writing, which is not only largely divorced from actual theatre practice (a point made by both Freshwater 2009:17 and White 2013:22) but also entirely from actual audiences. Instead what is required is a serious focus on reception processes, and an analysis of the manners in which actual audiences engage with different kinds of audience-performer relationships to produce different kinds of experiences.”¹¹ It is not difficult to find artistic strategies that are manipulative, coercive, and audiences that are ideologically complicit when investigating the relationship between audience and artists in terms of power and ideology. However, such a framing risks overstating the effects of artistic productions limited in time and space and in the process victimizing an audience that are capable, critical, and independent, even though they might temporarily bracket these capabilities to engage fully.

In an attempt to gain an experience-based understanding of audience participation while also looking beyond the individualized experience, I propose audiences’ embodied experience as something to take into account alongside abstract philosophical arguments on perception and the politics of participation. In other words, the research goals are not as in audience research primarily to understand audience behaviour and experience, but to enrich the performance analysis with multiple points of view. This article is an attempt to combine perspectives and methods from the above briefly outlined positions and discourses, but ultimately belonging to the tradition of performance analysis. Methodologically, it mirrors how theatre companies attempt to revitalize their discourse, here the performance tradition, by incorporating the audience. There are shared ideals of inclusiveness at the roots of both art and social research, but the participatory turn, a turn towards the popular, may not always live up to these ideals in practice in any of the fields. The participatory turn can also

¹¹ Reason 2015.

symbolize art and research's dependence on the audience, stemming from increasing pressure on both art and humanities to build a broader legitimacy in the public. Although there is not space in this article to explore this particular perspective further, we see here the conflict between populism and democratization that is intrinsic in participatory practices across society and culture.

When using the concept of the popular as an optics to study audience participation in *Home Visit Europe*, I take a cue from Jason Price's emphasis on the political aspect of the concept of the popular. In *Modern Popular Theatre*,¹² Price locates the popular not only in the mainstream or folk expressions, but also in more marginalized theatrical expressions. Rather than define *Home Visit Europe* as a form of popular theatre, I deliberately use the word 'optics', viewing 'the popular' as a way to explore and question the way that Rimini Protokoll uses their audiences' participation as artistic material.

After this brief outlining of the theoretical framework of the article, I will describe the methodological approach in more detail. I go on to discuss the participatory dramaturgy of *Home Visit Europe* in light of the popular theatre of the workers theatre movement and then turn to some of the findings from interviews with the audience. Dramaturgy is, in this context, understood as how the artists organize the audience in time and space comparable to how a conventional performance organizes theatrical material such as actors, scenography, and music. Ultimately, I will discuss how participatory approaches function as a political legitimization for experimental theatre practices and the limitations of a participatory aesthetics and the idiom of the popular.

METHODOLOGY UNDER THE PARTICIPATORY TURN

"15 people become part of a performance in a living room that interweaves personal stories and the political mechanisms of Europe. How much Europe is in us all?" This is how *Home Visit Europe* is introduced on the project website. Shannon Jackson uses the expression 'theatrical delivery system' to describe

¹² Price 2016.

the different relational and spatial organizations of theatre performances,¹³ and, in this case, the theatrical delivery system is a game. It takes place around the dinner table of a private home, and is structured like a board game complete with five levels, comprising pre-defined tasks and questions, and a prize at the end. These elements are non-interchangeable, resembling the script of a conventional performance.

Each audience member, to avoid conceptual confusion I will call them 'players', takes turns responding to tasks administered from a small device, resembling a homemade bomb, or, a more peaceful association, the insides of a cashier's till. The device is passed around clockwise from person to person, spitting out receipts that are read out aloud for the other players to either answer or to vote on, or responded to by the individual player. "Have you ever been, or are you member of a political party?", "In the last ten years who has got into a physical conflict or fight with someone?", "Who is afraid of the future?" These are among the questions that can be found on the project website as the response from the 'polling' levels is gathered from each performance, creating an artistic variant of what social research exploring the values and identities of European citizens could look like.

In the fifth competition level, the players are divided into teams of two and among new tasks confronted with questions, tasks, and answers from previous levels, and asked to administer or revoke points based on previous behaviour from the other teams. The teams can make alliances, but may lose points if other teams make different choices or vote against them. In the end, a cake is divided according to points gathered, potentially leaving some players entirely without any cake while the winners help themselves to a big slice.

A reason to focus on Rimini Protokoll and *Home Visit Europe* is their willingness to engage the audience into their artwork in ways that relate immediately into their audiences' lives. Using regular people and audiences as a raw material for their performances, while playing with the theatrical delivery form is a balancing act between the popular and the experimental. Interestingly, a similar

¹³ Jackson 2011, 172.

balancing act is typical for Bergen International Festival, in Norwegian known as 'Festspillene in Bergen', the institutional frame of *Home Visit Europe* in Bergen. The festival is the largest of its kind in the Nordic countries. It comprises both music and performing arts, and it traditionally has balanced between entertaining a broad audience, preserving the classical tradition, while also presenting experimental work. The balance between the popular and the experimental has traditionally led to a polarized critical reception of the festival.

Local arts institutions predominantly curate the performing arts program. In the case of *Home Visit Europe*, BIT Teatergarasjen (Bergen International Theatre) was the co-producer and curator and the performance was commissioned through *House on Fire*, a collaboration of ten European programming venues supported by the Culture Program of the EU, and co-produced by an additional three venues.¹⁴ The network invited Rimini Protokoll to create a project on the topic of Europe, and, after its initial run in Berlin, it has been performed over a period of one and a half years in twenty-one different European cities, as well as in Cairo. At the time of writing, the performance has also been shown three times in the United States of America.¹⁵

One of the methodological approaches of my PhD project is to understand audience participation by drawing on the engagement and experience gained by multiple encounters with the performances I look at. While I also interview artists, curators, and facilitators in this case study, I will in this article draw on thirteen in depth interviews with audience members taking part in *Home Visit Europe* lasting between forty minutes and an hour. Specifically, I have focused on what I see as central discussions, ideas, and concepts in the academic field, translating them into questions that are possible to ask in an interview situation. The interviews intended to locate what is individually meaningful in the experience, how the participatory dramaturgy affects the experience, and to what extent discussions around concepts, some of which I see as central topics in the

¹⁴ <http://www.houseonfire.eu/about/>.

¹⁵ See full list of performance dates here: <http://www.homevisiteurope.org/en/index.php?id=3>.

theoretical discourse, appear on an individual, experiential level in the informants' reflections.

In this paper, I have chosen to focus on two dichotomies clearly standing out from the material. The ensuing analysis is framed by Jacques Rancière's writing on criticality and deconstruction of the notion of active and passive spectatorship in the essay *The Emancipated Spectator*,¹⁶ and Claire Bishops writing on the troubled relationship between the aesthetic and social dimensions in participatory or social art, and its discourse.¹⁷ Thus, in combination with the theme of the performance, the 'talk' centred around the personal experience of taking part, but also on the critical, social, and political potential of the performance. The reader will notice that conceptual simplification is necessary to transfer complex theoretical discussions and critique into an experience based analysis. Though this way of appropriating existing perspectives to my own research, on the one hand, can be considered a weakness of the article, it, on the other hand, enables me to discuss audience participation in *Home Visit Europe* from multiple perspectives within the scope of one article.

Interviewees were self-selecting, recruited with help from BIT, who invited the audience to sign up on a list after the performance if they were interested in talking to me about their experience. Quite unexpectedly, there was a lot of interest, and I managed to interview only around one fourth of the people who signed up. Availability rather than representation shaped the compilation of the 'sample'.¹⁸

¹⁶ Jacques Rancière discusses the politics of theatre and exteriority of spectatorship in Rancière 2009.

¹⁷ Bishop 2012, 18-30.

¹⁸ In the group of participants I interviewed, eleven were between 25-45 of age, and three 45-60. One interview was not included in the subsequent analysis as the audio recording was faulty. I spoke with three men and eleven women, something that gender wise coincides with the population of the run of the performance, but age wise lacks representation by the older participants that took part. The gender and age diversity is visible in the pictures of the individual home visits in the Bergen run that are posted on the project website. To see pictures of the Bergen "Home Visits" click on the first Bergen date and "scroll" by clicking the arrows for the next date <http://www.homevisiteurope.org/no/index.php?id=5&city=Bergen>. Only one

I started with open and descriptive questions before moving on to themes that were more clearly theory led. The questions were direct, specific, and open to the extent possible when related to complex theoretical concepts. For instance, I asked, “How would you describe the experience if telling it to a friend?”, “How did you experience the possibility of having a different opinion and making divergent choices from the rest of the group?”, “Is it possible to retain a critical attitude when you are participating in a theatre or art project like this?”, “To what extent did you feel like you could influence the outcome of the performance?” I tried to formulate the questions so that they related to the concrete experience, and followed up on the informants’ line of thought, rather than following the original order of the interview guide. I also stressed my interest in the individual experience, coming back to ‘how was this for you’ if informants started generalizing.

Much like in *Home Visit Europe*, I served coffee and tea to create a welcoming atmosphere. The fact that the interview guide was developed after having seen an iteration of the performance contributed to what I think the informants felt was sharing an experience, although I only talked about my own experience a few times. As the participants took turns receiving challenges and questions, there was ample time during the performance to observe others, and to notice and reflect on one’s own behaviour and feelings. This is noticeable in the highly self-reflexive interview material. Although the respondents were able to discuss abstract questions on critical distance, the richest answers come from more experience-oriented questions, starting with ‘how did you’. The interviews intended to open up the experience of participating in *Home Visit Europe* from multiple points of view and, while informed by current discourse, I tried to avoid testing the resonance of specific theoretical positions as it would alienate the informants and move focus away from the experience.

participant had never heard of the programming venue before, an additional two had never visited, while five had visited several times and six were frequent visitors. All had completed higher education, and two of the interviewees were themselves theatre artists.

The study bears some resemblance to Breel's research that combines a phenomenological and hermeneutical approach.¹⁹ The interviews were transcribed and analysed looking specifically at how informants articulate concepts that appear in discourse on participation. Approaching audience experience and theoretical texts as different levels of discourse that are interesting to place into dialogue, it has been meaningful to frame the study as an experience based discourse analysis, rather than audience research.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION AS REPRESENTATIONAL STRATEGY IN THE WORK OF RIMINI PROTOKOLL

Rimini Protokoll is one of Europe's leading theatre companies. Established in 2000, the last decade has seen their work constantly touring international festivals and venues with site-specific interactive audio-performances, as well as performances set in theatre spaces with non-professional actors, referred to as 'experts of the everyday'. The proliferation of their work make them a point of reference for theatre companies, theatre, and festival directors. Rimini Protokoll's performances are also commonly referenced in the discourse on participatory practices although, according to Helgard Haug one of the founding artists, they do not see their work as 'participatory theatre'. Rather audience participation is a consequence of their wish to challenge formal aspects of traditional theatre.²⁰ This distinction also informs my research, which does not understand participatory theatre as a genre, but a dramaturgical strategy of how to involve the audience as co-creators of the event.

Gareth White's definition of audience participation is "the participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the action of a performance."²¹ This broad definition opens for looking at participation as a phenomena that is historically and culturally contingent and across genres. While emphasizing action as central to audience participation, White acknowledges that audience perform actions in many different ways in the theatre; his examples are intellectual involve-

¹⁹ Breel 2015, 372.

²⁰ Helgard Haug. Interview, Berlin, May 2015.

²¹ White 2013, 4.

ment and the rituals of theatre such as applause.²² Erika Fischer-Lichte's concept of the autopoietic feedback loop²³ is another example of the inherent participation found in performative events. In this article however, I follow White in his attempt to distinguish dramaturgies of audience participation that he calls, an 'aesthetic of the invitation', focusing on the type of activity that, as White puts it, "...feels different to the person who does it and to those who witness it."²⁴ In other words, analyzing *Home Visit Europe* through the concept of audience participation is not an attempt to pigeonhole the company in a genre that the artists themselves are not comfortable being placed into. Nonetheless, the term participation is productive because it opens up a discussion of the role of the audience and the power relations that are at play in the work, and how this particular invitation is experienced.

The performances of the widely successful group are situated within the economy of the international touring circuit that is embedded in an experimental theatre tradition, but also within that of the experience economy and festivalization of the arts. Their work contains aspects of the self-referential discourse typical of contemporary post dramatic theatre. For instance, questioning the relationship between reality and fiction, and conventions of representation. Their work refers to current affairs and alludes greatly to contemporary popular culture. In *Home Visit Europe* for instance, the reference to the political situation in Europe and the practice of playing board and computer games frames the event thematically and dramaturgically. However, Rimini Protokoll's work has pried open the conventions of the professional theatre scene in a number of ways. They are among the pioneers in placing amateurs on stage and have become well known for working with and on the authenticity of the layman – or the 'expert of the everyday';²⁵ for instance, by casting traditional Egyptian muezzin singers in *Radio Muezzin*,²⁶ rather than letting professionally trained actors

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Fischer-Lichte 2008.

²⁴ White 2013, 4.

²⁵ Dreyse and Malzacher 2008.

²⁶ http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project_3767.html.

represent them. The *100% City* performances,²⁷ in its many iterations world-wide, stages the performance as a public meeting where performers are selected based on statistical representation.

What sets *Home Visit Europe* apart from these performances is that the audience replaces the performer altogether, what Jen Harvie describes as ‘delegated performance’²⁸ or, paraphrasing Jacques Rancière, a redistribution of places.²⁹ *Home Visit Europe* is also the first of Rimini Protokoll’s performances to take place outside of a public or semi-public space, instead taking place in private homes. The experts of the everyday, the statistical representation in *100% city* performances, and, by no means least, the audience participation in *Home Visit Europe*, can be understood as representational strategies that diverge from the dramaturgical conventions of theatre and performance. The participatory representational strategy is a ‘one to one’ representation, directly addressing and engaging the life world of the participating audience on an individual level.

Replacing professional actors with audience, as Rimini Protokoll does in *Home Visit Europe* and performances like *Situation Rooms* and *Call Cutta*, has some affinity with the popular amateur theatre movement that appeared as part of the agit-prop movement of the Russian revolution, but without the propagandist agenda. According to Jason Price, Platon Kerzhentsev, who led the Proletkult theatre division, “strongly believed that amateurism was important and that Proletkult performances should be constructed out of the experience of its worker members.”³⁰ Building on the life experience of the participating audience and promoting increased political agency for the working class is also the justification behind involving ‘the people’ in participatory practices such as Brecht’s *Lehrstucks* and, later, Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

Price places an emphasis on the popular and its relationship to power. He writes: “While all popular theatres will be people-focused in some way, the

²⁷ http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/projects_title.php.

²⁸ Harvie 2013, 29-30 or chapter 1.

²⁹ Rancière 2009, 15.

³⁰ Price 2016, 37.

people may not always be fully in control of those theatres.” Participatory strategies contain the same paradox, in fact you can meaningfully exchange the word popular with participatory in the citation above. According to Nico Carpentier, participation has an intrinsically political nature.³¹ He uses sociologist Carol Pateman’s distinction between partial and full participation, where partial participation is “a process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only”. Full participation is “a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions.”³² Community and didactic theatre have a long tradition in involving the audience in aesthetic decision-making, thus furthering the political ethos of the worker’s movement that sought to hand the means of theatrical production over to the people. However, audiences seldom influence the aesthetics of professional theatre and performance work on a structural level. Theatre production is, in predominant institutional practices, still an autonomous process where audiences don’t encounter the work until the premiere, not counting test runs with audience. In understanding *Home Visit Europe* as a form of popular theatre because of its attempts to directly represent ‘the people’, there is a use for the concept of participation, not primarily to differentiate between ‘conventional’ dramaturgies and an aesthetics of the invitation, but to discuss the micro-political negotiation that is the relationship between the artists and the audience. I will approach the influence and the role the audience plays in *Home Visit Europe* through audience experience.

REVISITING *HOME VISIT EUROPE*

What kind of invitation to participate is extended in *Home Visit Europe*? The elements that the players can control and the elements that vary from each performance are the stories and personal information that they individually decide to share with the group and its moderators. In the article, “Audience Agency in participatory performance: A methodology for examining aesthetic experience”,

³¹ Carpentier 2015, 9.

³² Pateman 1970, 19.

Astrid Breel distinguishes between four different types of audience involvement in theatre. There is “interaction (where the work contains clearly defined moments for the audience to contribute within), participation (where the audience’s participation is central to the work and determines the outcome of it), co-creation (when the audience are involved in creating some of the parameters of the artwork), and co-execution (where the audience help execute the work in the way the artist has envisioned)”.³³ Just like White’s concept of the ‘aesthetic of the invitation’, Breel’s categories are useful regardless of genre and style. Instead of placing participation on a scale where some practices are more politically legitimate or better art than others, these categories indicate a sliding scale of authorship and dramaturgical flexibility, a multitude of potential relationships and ways of relegating power from the artist to the audience.

In the in-depth interviews I conducted, the informants point out that the structure largely determines what happens. They also express a feeling that their contribution provides a content that would be different if someone else replaced them. As one of the informants put it: “There are no other performers in the room. Here, we play out, yes, we *are* the game.”³⁴ When you understand Breel’s categories as dramaturgical, the relationship between pre-determined structure and audience contribution places *Home Visit Europe* in the ‘co-executed’ category, but on an individual experiential level, it is much less clear-cut what it means to affect an outcome. This becomes clear when the informants talk about how the performance changes if you are not willing to share and be active; the experience is considered more interesting the more you engage. The players might not influence the dramaturgical structure, but the energy and the relationships that occur in the performance depend on them. Thus, responsibility for their experience is placed on the individual participant. The entrepreneurial aspect of delegated performance, framed by Adam Alston as an expression of neoliberal values, potentially emphasises social and cultural inequalities, which

³³ Breel 2015, 370-371.

³⁴ Interview, Bergen, June 2015, informant 5.

is a familiar problem of socially engaged avant-garde art; it is often the audience most in the loop who have the most interesting experience³⁵.

A number of players distinguish between an active and passive audience experience, framing the participation in *Home Visit Europe* as an active one. In this sense, they confirm that audience activity, in an 'aesthetics of the invitation', is one that feels different to the audience. "I was attracted to the idea that you sit around a table and talk about something as a game, or a form of theatre. I think it's interesting that you create a meeting place where you don't just sit next to each other in the dark, but you have to relate to the other, I don't know if I would call them spectators, but, yes, audience or participants in a more active way."³⁶ This is a quote from one of the interviews where the informant specifically establishes a difference between the two modes of spectatorship, and the informants generally value participation in performance seeing it as a more active engagement with the theatre than conventional modes of theatrical communication.

One of the 'problems' with audience participation, according to Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator*, is that the audience engrossed in the action are unable to question the principles of the performance.³⁷ In other words, there is a lack of critical distance, and the radical potential of the performance is lost. However, this is one of many generalizations where Rancière privileges a traditional form of spectatorship on the assumption that participating audiences cannot act and simultaneously think. When sitting down around the table with fourteen strangers in *Home Visit Europe* you become both an observer and a performer. The pre-determined elements, like the questions about European identity and citizenship, or the myth of Europe and historical facts read aloud, resemble, as mentioned above, the text of a performance. Together with the answers of not only the other participants, but also your own, this material is interpreted as the performance and game moves along.

³⁵ Alston 2016, 129-139.

³⁶ Interview, Bergen, June 2015, informant 6.

³⁷ Rancière 2009, 21.

The questions are personal, creating a high degree of self-reflexivity among the players, also encouraged by the structure that lets each player have their turn at a task and question. The social situation and performative aspect of the situation make the players self-conscious, which also adds to a self-reflexivity. During the performance, players take stock of how they relate to the game's structure and performance content, to the other players in the room, and many also to the fact that there will be other people playing *Home Visit Europe* in other European cities. This conscious act of observing- and being observed may be uncomfortable at times, for some players more than others, but most of the informants spot the intentionality behind the questions and the competition, recognizing a thematic content. While it is likely that players can also feel conflicted or provoked by the social pressure to take part and the lack of openness in the dramaturgical structure, the informants I spoke to seem to accept and appreciate the element of discipline and the sense of security this afforded. They do not seem to perceive this as a significant loss of autonomy, agency, or criticality, perhaps because they are able to pinpoint and question the principles of the performance. The artistic intention of Rimini Protokoll to explore diplomatic procedure through confronting their audience with a social encounter with strangers is not lost on the players who appreciate how the company manages to juxtapose political and ethical dilemmas with individual competitiveness.

In a performance such as this, it is difficult to distinguish the aesthetic from the social, rather it can be seen as a convergence of these dimensions. Part of the artfulness or aesthetic dimension of *Home Visit Europe* that informants explicitly value is how it stimulates reflections on one's own relationship to other people, not only to the community of the group, but also potential similarities and differences with imagined players in the city and in Europe. On the one hand, the informants evaluate their experience along familiar critical criteria, for instance, how well the performance concept produces interesting stories, emotional affect, and intellectual challenges, as well as reflection and discussion after the event. On the other hand, the social situation and quality of the interpersonal encounter is also a part of the critical valuation of the performance.

Informants talked at length about how a congenial atmosphere helped them be active, a few questioning if a lack of conflicting opinions and values produced a less interesting aesthetic experience.

Home Visit Europe has several of these double layers, one is simultaneously watching and being watched, playing the game and being played by it, the symbolic aspect of the rules of the game and their practical dimension. In *Home Visit Europe's* aesthetics of the invitation there is also a double action, both the artists' extending the invitation and the audience's decision to accept the invitation. One of the informants explains why she perceives the players' limited influence as a positive quality: "How the structure, concept or design in that game goes far in controlling how we should behave towards one another... that is something I find interesting as an art experience. I really like things that problematize relational things. I think it is a very good concept in how the social rules of behaviour produce relations. I find it highly relevant in my life."³⁸ While the invitation here is found in the game structure, which is generally understood as the artistic or aesthetic dimension of the performance, the act of accepting is framed in social terms; the informants do not see themselves as performers, nor do they generally wish to be.

PARTICIPATION TO THE PEOPLE

The form that the audience participation takes in *Home Visit Europe* can be found in as diverse phenomena as television game shows and competitions, public meetings, board games, the incessant information gathering through simple polls online, or on our phones, or even at the security check at airports. In principle, the recognizable extra-theatrical references and structure makes it possible for almost anyone to take part in this and other performances by the company. I see in them a convergence of popular entertainment established on familiar references and an avant-garde attempt to create a new theatre for the people, and to break down the barrier between art and life. Helgard Haug of Rimini Protokoll explains their interest in audience participation as a result of

³⁸ Interview Bergen, June 2015, informant 4.

their wish to challenge the formal aspects of traditional theatre. Bracketing artistic intentions, *Home Visit Europe* can also be understood as a populist cultural strategy for avant-garde theatre institutions that are increasingly marginalized. Today, legitimacy is hardly achievable through continuous aesthetic revitalization, so institutions reach out to new audience groups to gain broader political legitimacy.

In Bergen, like in Berlin and other cities, *Home Visit Europe* was shown in private homes in different parts of the city, and in an effort to diversify the audience, the festival found several homes outside of Bergen. The performance was what International festival/Festspillene call, the 'Satellite-program', an outreach initiative targeted towards audiences living outside the city of Bergen. One performance was planned on the island of Sotra 19, 4 km outside Bergen, two in Indre Arna, which is a suburb in the municipality of Bergen only 7 minutes away by train, and in the island municipality of Austevoll, which is a 42-km drive. These settlements have seen an increase in population growth and urban development during the last few years, due to their proximity to Bergen. According to Rune Salomonsen, who is in charge of audiences for BIT, inhabitants in these locations are not a part of this theatre's ordinary audience. Offering something freely to the public in their own neighbourhood does not necessarily mean that they show up. Two performances in Indre Arna were, in the end, combined into one, while the only performance in Sotra was cancelled, as well as one of the two in Austevoll, showing that it was easier to draw an audience to the sites i.e. homes in the city. This says something about the complicated relationship between context, form, and perceived relevance. All performance is intrinsically linked to its institutional context, even when it is situated beyond the walls of the theatre. Inviting audiences to participate, therefore, does not necessarily dissolve possible prejudice in an audience or a population.

Home Visit Europe informants are conscious of the ideological implications of the performance expressing and problematizing that the people taking part largely resembled a traditional theatre demographic, consisting of middle-class people with a higher education, politically leaning to the left. One of the inform-

ants reported feeling an unease about the homogeneity of the group reflecting on the social differences that cultural institutions can reproduce. At one point in the performance, she had asked herself if the artists purposefully wanted to show the players how similar they were.³⁹ The informants with a background in arts tended to correlate the homogeneity of the group with a less challenging and critically charged performance. Others experienced the politically loaded questions and the competitive aspects of the performance as challenging enough, valorizing the congenial aspects of the performance and the chance to meet likeminded people as a quality in itself. Thus, it's possible to read out a more positive story from the interviews. All the informants speak in positive terms about the ability of *Home Visit Europe* to establish a well functioning forum for social exchange, several even suggesting they had met people they would have been interested in staying in touch with. The shared experience is emphasized as a tangible outcome of the theatre experience, and the fact that many other groups of people, not only in Bergen, but also in other countries go through the same process, encountering the same questions and dilemmas was considered an added dimension. One informant mentioned that she felt connected to Europe just by knowing that this was taking place in homes in other countries, while several others had spent time on wondering what players in other countries had answered, and had either already visited the website with the growing database of audience responses or planned to.

While the current cultural climate actualizes the debate on participation and instrumentalism, it is a simplification to reduce the discussion of the participatory turn to a traditional dichotomy between autonomy and instrumentalism. Placing the performance into different demographic contexts serves artistic intentions, potentially creating more diverse dynamics between players and exploring different social situations. Furthermore, playing in different parts of a city, in addition to different countries, feeds into the documentation side of the project with statistics that the performances gather from polling the participants. In other words, this should not be understood solely as an institutional outreach

³⁹ Interview Bergen, June 2015, informant 7.

and audience building strategy, or cynical artistic scheme. Focusing on audience experience is, paraphrasing Helen Nicholson,⁴⁰ a way to avoid looking at audience participation only in a negative framework of neo liberal politics and state instrumentalism. *Home Visit Europe* is meaningful to its' players in many ways, as a social meeting place, as a transformative aesthetic experience, as a learning experience and model for pedagogical practice, as inspiration for artistic practice, and even as inspiration for active citizenship.

THE LIMITATIONS OF PARTICIPATORY AESTHETICS AND THE IDIOM OF THE POPULAR

The main objective of this article has been to examine the participatory strategies of *Home Visit Europe* through the idiom of the popular. In Claire Bishop's chapter on the Historic avant-garde in *Artificial Hells*, she describes debates that arose from the radical avant-garde's attempt to engage the masses as the beginning of a persistent clash of criteria, between: "an art of formal innovation that has relevance beyond its immediate historical moment, capable of speaking to both local and future audiences, versus a dynamic culture that involves as many workers as possible and in so doing provides an ethically and politically correct social model".⁴¹ By looking at *Home Visit Europe* as a contemporary embodiment of avant-garde popular theatre, this clash of criteria becomes apparent and points to the limitation of the idiom of the popular in this case study. The participatory dramaturgy of the game-like performance is a formal quality that is at once innovative, but also makes it accessible to a wider public; as mentioned anyone can, in principle, take part. However, as a theatre performance restricted by the institutional context it is presented in and that theatre companies depend on, it is apparent that it appeals to a limited demographic, and that this has consequences for the aesthetic dimension of the performance.

⁴⁰ Nicholson 2017, 107.

⁴¹ Bishop 2012, 63.

There is also a limitation to the concept of participation, as I have shown in this analysis of *Home Visit Europe*, as the artists remain in control of the dramaturgical structure and, in that sense, the outcome.

In this article, I have tried not to hold theatre artists responsible for solving the challenges of marginalized theatre institutions, or living up to ideological standards formulated by critics and researchers like me, who do not have to make pragmatic decisions in order to be able to produce and show my work in the way most theatre makers must. Being aware of the clash of criteria, the conflicted relationship between the aesthetic and the social, between established critical valorisation, and a participatory turn, which is a true turn to the people, is a critical dimension that I hope to carry with me in future research so that I can meet performances with realistic expectations.

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