



REDEFINING FAILURE

THE VALUE OF REFUSAL IN PARTICIPATORY ARTS IN THE PARIS *BANLIEUE*

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ABSTRACT

THE EXPECTATION FOR PARTICIPATORY ARTS TO EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE TARGETED COMMUNITIES MIGHT LEAD TO THE CONCLUSION THAT NON-PARTICIPATION IS FAILURE. BUT IS IT NECESSARILY FAILURE? FOR ARTISTS NAVIGATING “ENTANGLED TERRITORIES” (HALVORSEN, 2017) AND “COMPETING NARRATIVES” (THOMPSON, 2009) IN THE MULTI-CULTURAL PARIS *BANLIEUE*, NON-PARTICIPATION OR REFUSAL IS AN INEVITABILITY THAT NEEDS TO BE EMBRACED. DRAWING ON THEORIES OF PARTICIPATION FROM THE FIELDS OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED PERFORMANCE, SOCIOLOGY, GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL STUDIES, THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE VALUE AND NUANCES OF INVISIBLE, MINIMAL, PERIPHERAL OR CONDITIONAL PARTICIPATION ENCOUNTERED IN THE NARROW SPACES FOR MANOEUVRE BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS’ CONFLICTING AGENDAS. IT ARGUES THAT REFUSALS DO NOT NECESSARILY NEGATE THE WORK, AND THAT ATTENDING TO, AND REDEFINING, THESE MOMENTS MAY BE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING NOT ‘HOW TO GET PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE BETTER’, BUT HOW TO PERCEIVE NON-PARTICIPATION AS AN ELOQUENT AFFIRMATION OF AGENCY AND A SIGNIFICANT PARTICIPATION IN *SOMETHING ELSE*.

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SARAH HARPER IS AN ARTIST CREATING WORK WITH URBAN ARTS COMPANY FRICHES THÉÂTRE URBAIN. BASED IN PARIS, HER WORK CENTRES ON LONG-TERM SOCIALLY ENGAGED RELATIONAL, PARTICIPATORY ARTS AND COMMUNITY THEATRE IN RESPONSE TO CRITICAL SOCIAL CONTEXTS WITHIN MULTI-CULTURAL SUBURBS. HER CURRENT PHD RESEARCH, AT QUEEN MARY UNIVERSITY LONDON, FOCUSES ON THE REASONS PEOPLE DO NOT OR CANNOT PARTICIPATE IN SUCH PROJECTS, AND WHAT REFUSAL MIGHT MEAN IN THE FRENCH *BANLIEUES*.

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Introduction

The expectation for socially engaged, participatory arts projects to effectively engage participation and contribute to evidence-able social change might lead to the logical conclusion that non-participation is failure. But what does it mean when someone does not participate? Is it necessarily a failure? If so, who or what has failed? The artist, for failing to engage? The inhabitant, for lacking community spirit or artistic taste? Or is the cultural proposition meaningless or inappropriate? Is it really a *failing* to not want to participate or could it be seen, in certain contexts, as an affirmation of agency, a demand for something different?

I will reconsider the failure implicit in examples of non-participation encountered running projects in multi-cultural Paris *banlieue* (suburbs), with urban arts company *Friches Théâtre Urbain*.¹ Among reactions ranging from silent disdain to violent refusal or obstruction, I focus on moments of participation that were so minimal or conditional as to be invisible, and perceived, at the time, as refusals. Looked at closely, these moments reveal conflicting narratives latent in their context, or systemic misassumptions within an attentive and elastic process. Thinking through the possible value of these refusals, I draw on sociological theories of participation, art reception and the value placed on types of participation within socially engaged performance, geography and cultural studies. Reviewing common suppositions of what 'good participation' looks like, I shift the limits to include the invisible, minimal, reluctant or conditional, and ultimately suggest the non-sense of using participation as a measure of value or "conceptual tool" (Harpin & Nicholson, 2017, p. 15).

I am not focusing on failures of artistic quality, or one-off disasters like the set collapsing, an installation trashed or stolen in our absence, or an event interrupted by torrential rain. Neither will I address procedural failures such as funding cuts bringing a project to an abrupt halt, or a project chronically underfunded, compromising its aims from the start. The subject here is artist-led, place-making projects to foster community cohesion or resilience, considered by participants and funders to be 'successful', in which many people did engage, and within which I examine those who did not, and why that might be.

Drawing on my lived experience, this "narrative enquiry" (White & Hede, 2008), allows "the fertility of the specific as the site of productive thinking" on and around the moment, the anecdotal (Gallop, 2002, p. 156). Supporting data are an extensive archive of videos, photos and recorded interviews, cumulated snippets of life witnessed over ten participatory projects from 2008 to 2018. While I focus here on particular anecdotal incidents, the extended timeframe with multiple projects in neighbouring suburbs has permitted repetition of circumstance and patterns of evidence to emerge. Longitudinal sociological studies of the *banlieue* by Kepel (2012), Schiff (2015) and Truong (2018), and of participatory democracy by Carrell (2013) have clarified or corroborated my understanding of contexts. Likewise, shared experiences with artists working on similar commissions (*Collective Random*, *Décor Sonore*, Nicholas Frize, *Gongle*) or academics observing the work (Braets, 2012; Haedicke, 2016) have informed my thinking about the practice.

As a white, non-Muslim artist, I am visibly and culturally an outsider to the communities I work with, who are mostly *magrèb-hin* (North African) or from sub-saharan Africa. I can never be totally accepted into a local hierarchy, only accepted by it. My English accent, however, betrays me to advantage: not being part of the French establishment has enabled me to be welcomed into neighbourhoods where the feeling of being 'other', 'left out', or overlooked by the state is so prevalent. Mine is a "relational practice" (Bourriaud, 1998), and getting to know people is central to my artistic process. My analysis is inextricably dependant on these relationships and as lead practitioner my overarching view of the work provides a depth of knowledge simultaneously compromised by its subjectivity.

Gaining inner access to a community, on which genuinely participatory work depends, starts with a period of slow immersion, alone or with one other collaborator. The fragility of my solitude lends security in localities where outsiders are not welcome. Truong (2018, p. 14) refers to the importance of "revisiting", citing Back's (2007) "art of listening". I see this as building a neighbourly presence, over time, in the public spaces of a *quartier* (neighbourhood): the mini football pitch, playground, corner shop, bus-stop, launderette, or *kébab*. It involves hanging around, dawdling, buying something, or doing my laundry, while engaging in conversations, which are sometimes recorded, if it feels right. Many people I meet like to talk and I have learned the art of neighbourly chit-chat. Conversations become material for co-creating art that in some way reflects back lived experience, while acknowledging that people are re-framing their reality *for me*, sharing only what they want me to know. Depending on the emerging artform, I am joined by photographers, landscape-gardeners, performers, costume, sound or video designers, all collaborators with whom I have worked for over ten years.

There is a distinct lack of diversity within urban arts collectives in France, despite the commitment to inclusivity fundamental to projects linking art and territory. Cultural projects initiated from within a *quartier* are predominantly *animation* (socio-cultural activities) or sport. Current key debates over whose culture receives funding (Jancovich, 2017; Stevenson, 2019), the disconnect between cultural offer and cultural demand (Anberrée, 2015), or the legitimacy of artists being “parachuted in” to suit commissioners’ agendas (Hope, 2011) are issues uncomfortably embedded at every level of my experience.

My observations are rooted in the context of Seine-St-Denis, a department cumulating France’s highest poverty indicators with massive urban regeneration, resulting in fast population turnover. In Aubervilliers, 37% of the population are of foreign nationality, 36% are less than 25 years old, and 24% are unemployed (rising to 38% among the under 25s).² Disaffection with school, the stigmatisation of employers’ prejudice towards Seine-St-Denis post-codes and high numbers of single-parent families mean that drug trafficking and *le business* (crime) are the most tenacious employers of youth (Truong, 2018). Here, precisely for their potential for “soft social engineering” (Bishop, 2002, p. 5), whose benefits were identified by Matarasso (1997), seized on by politicians (Smith, 1998) and challenged by Belfiore (2002) and Bishop (2002), neighbourly, utopic initiatives, led by artists to transform, albeit temporarily, public space and civic interaction are widely commissioned and endorsed.

My response to commissions to poeticise or reclaim disaffected spaces and contexts fractured by building sites, community conflict or memories of past violent events is through a language of domesticity (Koch & Latham, 2013). Relational, *place-making* projects start with domestic actions of gardening, cooking, tea-drinking, or chatting on street corners or empty plots where convivial spaces to meet are few and far between. Within these casually structured encounters, non-participation is an inevitability that needs to be embraced, and attending to refusals can allow a deeper understanding of the fragile socio-political contexts, as well as highlighting limits, or irrelevance, in the practice. A project’s rejection might affirm an agency arguably vital to the ‘community cohesion’ and ‘active citizenship’ that the project was commissioned to foster. My concern here is not ‘how to get people to participate better’, but how to appreciate their non-participation or refusal, not as failures to participate, but rather as eloquent, constructive and valuable acts of participation in *something else*.

From cultural democratisation to participation in *le vivre ensemble*

In France, cultural policy conceived as a response to *le vivre ensemble* (community cohesion) and social marginalisation proposes participation as part of the solution. Saez (2008, p. 23) identifies the roots of this in *l’Education Populaire*, a movement begun in the 19th century to take art and education to the people, and to include the masses in one “unifying common culture”. In 1959, under de Gaulle, France’s first Minister of Culture, Malraux, introduced access to culture for all with *la démocratisation culturelle* (Anberrée, 2015; Saez, 2008), founded on the theory of the ‘*choc électif*’: the potential for revelation that contact with an original artwork of *quality* could inspire. This raised the question of what to do with ‘*le non-public*’, those unresponsive to the elitist, bourgeois culture which, “pretending to be universal”, in effect maintained the legitimisation and cultural privilege of those selecting which art should be democratised (Urfalino, 2011, in Anberrée, 2015, p. 60). Malraux was challenged in May 1968 and following the *Déclaration de Villeurbanne*, written by *Maisons de la Culture* and theatre directors, the idea of *démocratisation* was replaced with one of mediation. So began, or was strengthened, the cleavage between the social or pedagogic and the artistic, “a hard doctrinal battle between creators and mediators” (Saez, 2008, p. 24), which has rumbled on ever since. In the 1970s, Jacques Duhamel’s politics of *développement culturelle* attempted to reconnect art to people’s everyday experience and to wider social issues, notably extending the state art fund, the “1% *artistique*” to all new public buildings. The 80s and 90s saw acceptance of a more anthropological *démocratie culturelle*, with an institutional rehabilitation of *all* cultures including “traditions and customs as well as popular creativity and local practices” (Chatzimanassis, 2013), hitherto not considered ‘art’. In 1981, “*Opérations anti Été chaud*” was a targeted effort to bring cultural *animations* into poorer *quartiers* as a direct response to violent rioting in Vénissieux. This evolved into the inter-ministerial scheme *Politique de la Ville*, still today a major funder of culture in *quartiers* identified as *Zones Urbaines Sensibles*.³ Cross-sector projects to address urban inequalities target security, employment, housing, education and social cohesion through participation of the population. Artists working with its support need to prioritise and evaluate the social aims of their projects over and above the aesthetic, as well

as quantifying and qualifying the participation achieved.

This compares to a similar political shift in 1990s British social and cultural policy which firmly turned towards inclusive cultural and democratic participation. The “joined up solutions to joined up problems” of New Labour’s 1997 Social Exclusion Unit (SEU1) aimed to “help improve government action to reduce social exclusion across all departments” (Belfiore, 2002, pp. 92–93).⁴

Carrel (2013, p. 16) points to *Politique de la Ville*’s “top-down” invocation of participation as “a condition of success” calling for active citizenship in French local democracy and urban development. *Conseils citoyens* (citizen councils) and community consultations preceding renovation programmes are mandatory but, offering little effective power, are unsuccessful at attracting a representative cross-section of a community. She deplores scenarios of “*participation inutile*” (pointless participation), where agency in decision-making is unclear or inexistent and democracy breaks down as ‘dialogue’ empowers those who master specialised language, reproducing existing inequalities.

A societal shift in France, observed by Lextrait (2001) and Saez (2008), has seen art, artists and art-spaces turn from the auto-referential to the relational, closer to people, leading to a proliferation of artist-led *projets de territoire*, quirky participatory street-level neighbourhood projects, giving “the illusion [...] of an art without mediation” (Saez, J-P, 2012, p. 2). These alternative practices, including my own, have over the last 15 years reconnected art, social and territory, defending urban relational practice as an artistic choice, and embracing ‘*l’action socio-culturelle*’, for so long disdained by and separate from the artworld.

Is only ‘good participation’ good?

Arts participation is widely argued to be beneficial to health, happiness and agency (Arts Council England, 2010; Belfiore, 2002; DCMS, 2016; Freire, 1970; Matarasso, 1997). As Harpin and Nicholson affirm “[t]he assumption of the de facto value of joining in has been tenaciously held” (2017, p. 2), and *Plaine Commune*, major commissioners in Seine-St-Denis, see art and culture as “fundamental building blocks in the construction of the individual and the communal”.⁵ Yet creating art within commissions addressing social inequity or exclusion means navigating a tricky terrain of compromise and co-option into others’ agendas, with participation held up as evidence of success. There is considerable scepticism of the degree to which participation in arts or governance affords agency (Arnstein, 1969; Bishop, 2012; Carrel, 2013) and “on what terms” (Harvie, 2017, p. 3). Belfiore and Bishop question the capacity of the arts to effectively address social exclusion, doubting the good this added responsibility does for the art itself. Belfiore recognises this as a “new stress on the subsidised arts” (2002, p. 92) while Bishop expresses her “profound ambivalence” at art’s instrumentalisation (2012, p. 5) and the ethics of process as insufficient. Anberrée (2015) scrutinises the recurrence of a cultural offer disconnected from a population who are not consulted, while Stevenson et al. (2017) point to both participation and the “problematization” of non-participation as institutional strategies to legitimise the choices of those receiving or distributing funding, leaving marginal or so-called ‘hard-to-reach’ publics increasingly disenfranchised.

The projects I will discuss here, inserted into the fabric and place of everyday life and local cultural practices, resist where they can, allowing the participation framework to become more nuanced, casual and complex to define; multiple entry points dehierarchise participation, allowing for intentionally variable degrees of investment. They expand the consideration of what type or degree of participation has value. This casual participation upends the model of venue-based arts where cultural participation is often evaluated as that of *attendees* rather than as co-developers of the work, where engagement depends on an individual’s degree of social or cultural actualisation, involving multiple decisions, expectations and self-motivations to know about an event, to find out how to get there and to feel invited.

Urbanist Sherry Arnstein’s “Ladder of Participation” (1969) critiques participatory consultations which prove token or manipulative as opposed to empowering, while philosopher Joëlle Zask (2011) differentiates the manipulated from the active “*prendre part*” (to be part of), “*apporter une part*” (to contribute) and “*recevoir une part*” (to share in). Carrel’s (2013) study of local politics differentiates “*l’injonction participative*” (commanded participation) from “*participation citoyenne*” and “empowerment”. Applying these hierarchies to participatory arts implies that agency is equated with creative control, so that

participating actively as producers or makers of art has more value than as consumers or observers. But Harpin and Nicholson affirm that “it makes no sense to make sharp distinctions between participation (active, rebellious, critical) and non-participation (passive, receptive, docile)” (2017, p. 4), and as I unravel the multiple reasons for non-participation embedded in the contexts or hidden agendas of the projects themselves, I too find these distinctions restrictive. They exclude significant elements of a project, in which clear hierarchies of value give way to a much more nuanced, even confused spectrum.

The “ordinary participation” offered by Miles and Ebrey (2017) or the “mundane activities like shopping, taking the dog for a walk, or meeting up with friends” of the research project *Understanding Everyday Participation* (Belfiore et al., 2012-2018) offer a wider frame, more appropriate to my relational projects that ‘pop-up’ on street corners asking no more of participants than to drop in on their way to somewhere or something else. My work accommodates tentative and casual participatory gestures, taking a very loose approach to what constitutes participation and whether it is ‘good’ or not. The invitation to *join in* the neighbourly “bricolage” of a “village imaginary” (Miles & Ebrey, 2017) is a way of reappropriating public space, in commissioner-speak, to ‘rekindle a sense of belonging’, by putting the material conditions in place for comfort or warmth of welcome to be felt. The contradiction of inviting a visiting artist to invite local people to feel at home *chez eux* (in their own homes) is further complexified in that many potential participants are recent arrivals from sub-saharan Africa, finding themselves in parts of a city not yet perceived as ‘home’, and within existing, mostly *maghrébin*, second or third generation immigrant communities already struggling to identify with the ideology or politics of the French state.

My invitation to create ‘place’ is also to make art ‘as we go’. However informally introduced, the quality of the artistic product is crucial in a milieu where, often, the *a priori* is that it will be rubbish. Art-works may be a film, a herb garden punctuated by sound installations or performance, an artwalk, a tasting exchange, a photo-exhibition on walls of a *cité* (housing estate), or snapshots, informally scattered on a table or projected onto someone’s tee-shirt. Identifying an artform as a potential meeting point for a group mixed in age, origin and habits, incorporating existing vernacular practices, and reflecting or transposing local concerns is a significant cultural process in itself. In effect, the important consultation highlighted by Anberrée is embedded into the art process itself. Hence the need for a *place* to contain and to give the work sense (Harvie, 2017; Mackey, 2016; Massey, 1991). Turning wastelands into places of infinite possibility, “*lieux infinis*” (Encore Heureux, 2018), where undefined creativity can develop is the central, relational, artistic act. The place is the structure that allows people in and the art is a journey we go on together, in which we ‘see what happens’ in a temporary community of interest.

As Koch and Latham point out there is “hard work” in “domesticating public space” (2013). Cultivating the trust needed for ensuing co-creativity involves developing a neighbourly presence: invitations to participate are open to passers-by, fostering casual involvement through curiosity without boundaries set by time or inscription. Return sessions are by personal invitation, texts or phone calls as relationships grow. *Le vivre ensemble* can be achieved, when it is achieved, through the simple act of being present, or alongside.

In this relational, place-making work, I argue that all types of participation have value, including non-committal ‘hanging round the edges’ and even non-participation. Hope points out that wealthier residents are rarely expected to develop community spirit (2011, p. 102) and focusing participatory projects on disadvantaged neighbourhoods makes the assumption that ‘poor people’ have spare time that needs to be filled. Yet, often, the more precarious the context, the busier life is. Participation can imply carving out time from work, shopping, childcare or job-hunting. If someone plans to attend but doesn’t get there, is that participation or non-participation? If they turn up but don’t *take part*, is that still participation? Someone who might come only once might contribute a valuable story, drawing, or idea, which is developed by others. People are busy, unsure, mistrustful or reluctant. Countering reluctant participation involves a methodology of patience, of being vague or inefficient rather than ‘inspirational’, of waiting and stepping back, allowing the forms or ideas to come from others, avoiding Bishop’s “delegated performance” (2012, p. 4). It involves not worrying how many, or even whether, people participate, allowing for alongside-ness and embracing refusal.

In the examples that follow, non-participation may be seen simultaneously as valuable participation, with just a slight shift in perspective. They are knotty, anecdotal moments that demand a recognition of what did not happen, or what did happen, but went unseen.

Peripheral participation: the sports club

Geographer Ben Halverson (2017) describes as “entangled territories” the invisible conflictual grids established by those seeking to “reclaim the city as a space for autonomy or dignity”, a lens through which to look at the political refusal to participate of a sportsclub in the northern suburb of Stains.

Je prends ma place! (I Take my Place, 2016) was a response to an open call by *Plaine Commune* to create a participatory inauguration to celebrate local re-appropriation of public space after urban renovation involving the demolition of a tower-block, and a lengthy re-build. A local community worker redefined this to me as the need to “heal” a sense of institutional abandonment, which was rife in the *quartier*. The result was an intergenerational performance written and performed by 40 inhabitants, two classes of schoolchildren, myself as director, sound technician, costume designer, stage manager, two assistant director-performers, twenty live sheep and two shepherds. Days of casual chatting and twelve hour-long recorded interviews about the *quartier* informed the piece’s historical, anecdotal and imaginary *tableaux*. Performed in the new square, it was attended by neighbours, the mayor, directors of *Plaine Commune*, the *Région Île-de-France* and the property developers.

Creating a participatory performance in August is difficult. The face of the *cité* changes with many returning *au bled* (family village). It was hot and I roamed the streets looking for anyone to engage in conversation. Twice a week, twenty African and *magrèbhin* men and women descended onto a handball pitch, set up an obstacle course, loudspeakers, and trained hard to hip hop music, filming themselves on a Go-Pro. Afterwards a table was set up, a barbecue lit and others appeared bringing plates of *merguez* (spicy Halal sausages) and cakes. Surprised by this explosion of energy and hoping to involve them in the project, I started chatting to them. In a later recorded interview a group spokesman, and local *grand frère* (big brother),⁶ reminisced about his childhood in the *quartier* and of a concrete fountain in the form of three large African masks, “*les grands têtes*”. Dilapidated and considered ugly by the architects, they had been relegated to the side of the new development, yet they were “one thing everyone loved” on this bleak estate.

When I asked if he and his group would consider taking part in the show he refused saying they would never participate in the event if the mayor was present. The mayor, originally from this *quartier*, grew up with many of the *grands frères* currently feeling excluded by the council. Some have criminal records from drug dealing or delinquency in their youth. “But” he said “we’re forty now, we have kids ourselves, we’ve changed, but there’s no place for us, no jobs – our word counts for nothing here.” In a chicken and egg stand-off he added that they would not apply for grant-aid for their association. “If they’re not going to help us, we’ll do it for ourselves.” The mayor is seen to have let them down, to have ignored their status, to have lacked respect. And in their opinion, they are all “losing [their] grip on the next generation” because this institutional lack of respect for the elders permeates younger adults and teenagers. This “entangled territory” gradually revealed a history of tension and mistrust. Painful stories behind the *quartier*’s regeneration tell of tower blocks demolished to disperse the drug trafficking, of sons murdered in stairwells with no one daring to respond to the cries and families devastated by substance abuse, but he concluded, we would not be telling those stories in our ‘celebration’.

Members of the sports club did, however, come to the show, hanging to the back of the audience, some involving themselves peripherally by surveying the barbecue. Afterwards they came into the performance arena, snapping each other in macho poses in front of the replica statues we had made, as if in front of a national monument, later posting numerous images on the club’s Facebook Page (Fig. 1).⁷



Figure 1

Members of the
sports club in the town
of Stains, 2016.

Photos: clstraining93 facebook page

This community within a community, developing in opposition to local government as a result of exclusion from it, generated a political refusal to participate. The anthropologist Weeks observes that groups whose “collective existence [is] threatened, and who construct out of this a community of identity which provides a strong sense of resistance and empowerment [...] act politically on that basis” (in Bauman, 2001, p. 100). Balfour (2009) argues for the humble aims of a “theatre of little changes”, and although refusing participation in the show, their participation in the day was a barely visible little change, validating the process as well as contributing the authentic, intimate detail of the statues to the story. The presence and posing of members of the club suggests that their refusal to “take part” did not efface their state of “being part of” the community (Zask, 2011), and a temporary cohabitation with the mayor was facilitated momentarily by the playful event and the irresistible tug of nostalgia and valorisation of their past. The joyful, unfrontational space of our show, within which the dialogue was microcosmically moved forward between the group and the mayor, permits me to reframe their initial refusal as a valuable, minimal participation incrementally working towards social cohesion.

The sports club did not want or need an outsider-artist to bring them together with the rest of the town. Their refusal to participate with the mayor or me was an expression of commitment to their institutionally unrecognised club. In an example of Anberrée’s disconnect between offer and demand, a theatre initiative was funded rather than approaching a vibrant local sports association in a *quartier* where physical fitness is highly valued. In retrospect, participation was used to guarantee the presence of a local public for the politically motivated speeches that preceded our performance, given by the long list of institutional stakeholders, prioritising their own agenda.

Minimal participation: the Sinti

James Thompson speaks of a “competition of narratives” (2009, p. 23) that incoming artists have an ethical obligation to understand. Commissioners may assume participation to be desired and beneficial, but many communities I am asked to work with are not remotely interested in participating with initiatives outside of their primary circle.

Disengagement with the rest of society is a lifestyle practiced by the Sinti-Manouche (central European Romani) whom I worked alongside, if not *with*, in a ‘no-go zone’ in Montreuil. Our project *L’Espwar est un Temps Boisée* (Hope is a Wooded Time, 2012-2014) re-activated the aboricultural heritage of a densely overgrown hectare of wood, part of *les murs à pêches* in Montreuil, a centre for growing espaliered peaches in the 19th century. After falling into disuse, plots were squatted by Sinti caravans over fifty years ago. Their tradition of collecting scrap metal means they sort through mangled steel and old cars on the streets, giving the area, for outsiders, an abandoned and menacing air. Faced with conflicting pressures, the council made an open call for urban agriculture initiatives for this area of town blighted by fly-tipping and neighbourhood tension.

Our project was unanimously selected by the council for its attentiveness towards neighbourhood relations as well as for its valorisation of a plot with no agricultural potential. Using the densely tangled wood as a poetic site of encounter and enchantment, a discreet path was landscaped through the undergrowth, inviting preservation and respect of what was seen as “a tip”. Its maintenance proposed a collective activity to foster tolerance between Sintis, recently arrived Roma families in a rudimentary camp on a nearby parking lot, and ‘native’ French neighbours. Over two years, we held artistic, scientific or poetic rambles, with sound, sculptural and gustative installations, focusing on Sinti histories and their relationship with the wood itself.

Sinti families invited me into their caravans to record stories of their youth, included in sound installations on the trail (Fig. 2). My neighbours avowed they were “looking out for my security” but, expressing their pride in keeping amongst themselves, they would not participate in any of our group events. During public visits they would watch silently from their caravan doors, arms folded. Then, occasionally, a family would come as we were packing up, and asked to be shown round, to listen to their own voices describing the wood of their childhood.

Their acceptance of me as an artist-neighbour, their sharing of stories, their proud posing for photos and their very conditional participation in a private tour were significant, although minimal. Cultivating this acceptance had taken hours of wandering, chance street meetings, and my waiting for their invitation. It could not be planned, nor budgeted. A by-product of the municipality’s commission was to ‘clean up’ and render the area more appealing and though we diligently and lovingly landscaped the wood by hand, the Sinti continued to use it as a toilet and for fly-tipping. Their participation was strictly on their terms, and

did not involve community cohesion, nor any bourgeois landscaping of their street, *theirs* only as long as no-one else, and no real-estate prospectors, saw any value in it. Their uneasy questions about “when they would be moved on” or worse, “housed”, to which I had no answers, revealed one of Thompson’s competing narratives. While we may have tentatively celebrated the Sinti with artistic reframing of their intimate knowledge of the wood, the project was what Nicholson (2005) terms an “unwelcome gift”. It was not in the Sinti’s interests to participate in the literal or cultural cleaning up of their *quartier*. Commissioned in part for their ‘benefit’, our project would contribute to a gentrification of the area, and ultimately in their ejection from their home.



Figure 2 One of the Sinti neighbours giving an interview. Montreuil, 2013, reproduced with permission from the author.

Conditional participation: the Snack-Van

Among *banlieue* youth, adherence to a local rather than a national identity can be regarded as an attempt at reclaiming autonomy in a context of little agency. This identity manifests itself on a daily basis as a discreet but persistent ‘control’ of the streets of a *cit  *. Any incoming initiative into a *quartier*, artistic or otherwise, needs an implicit *laissez-passer* from certain community members. Without this, it is refused because of territorial control.

In 2011, I was asked to engage with youths from rival gangs in Asni  res and Gennevilliers in response to violent territorial confrontations and the death of a young adolescent that had shaken both towns. Councillors sought us out, as artists known to work on the street, to engage with the young people involved. All were aware that the youths would be unlikely to participate in anything except their current feud. *Lieu Commun* (Common Place) lasted two years, funded by the directors of Culture and *Politique de la Ville* of both towns, and involved a team of video, sound and graffiti artists led by myself and photographer Juliette Dieudonn  .

Due to elevated tensions, it was critical that we were perceived as free agents without association with either council. In-depth conversations with residents, community leaders and teachers were followed by pop-up outdoor *salons* in both towns with no prescribed function. These complexified with the fitting-up of a working snack-van as a mobile, cultural and social focus to navigate key estates on both sides. *The Snake*, as it was christened, was revamped, rewired and repainted, on street corners, with families and kids lending a hand in informal open work-sessions, and once finished, residents became both consumers

and servers as they wished. A locus for photo-studios, open mics, journalism for a neighbourhood paper and outdoor cinema nights, all the while fulfilling its primary function of café and social meeting place. We slowly collected film, photos and stories for a monumental, culminating installation *Bienvenue chez nous!* (Welcome to our Home!), which transformed the metro station, celebrating the personal and the local on the site of the fatal attack two years before.

In terms of engaging the particular youths involved in the fighting, the project was a significant failure. For different reasons than the Sinti, but equally entrenched, most young men from 15 to 25 in the *banlieue* have a firmly developed culture of disengagement with the rest of the community. We listened to parents admitting to feeling stressed and paralysed. Mothers expressed fear of their physically larger and stronger teenage sons. Teachers admitted to having no 'control' over the cyclical almost mythical rivalry between the two towns, and no-one could remember exactly how it started. Most said it was territorial and drugs related, and though many of the boys involved were too young to be formally part of a drugs 'gang', it was no secret that trafficking and organised crime ran the estates. Some youths were clearly scouts and would survey the entrance to the *cités*, others would just hang out with them, on street corners, in the entrance halls of flats or in cellars co-opted to smoke weed in when it rained. On a hot day twenty youths would gather out of nowhere to roam, armed with sticks or metal bars, looking for something or someone that had riled them, often the police, because "they'd heard something". Usually the trail would go dead and the group would dissipate, leaving the scouts kicking the walls and squinting at the empty streets. Essentially many of them had nothing to do, and nothing they wanted to do, apart from gravitate towards the echelons of power within the *cit  *. School and study were opted out of long ago and since hanging out in the *cit  * was a firmly gendered activity, the girls were elsewhere.

Into this context our snack-van appeared (Fig. 3), combining basic urban art tactics of incongruity and surprise, with a trio of white, visibly non-Muslim artists, who most youths, inventing an improbable though imaginative scenario, assumed were the police, with the snack-van being a "front for surveillance".



Figure 3 *The Snake snack van in Gennevilliers, 2012, reproduced with permission from the author.*

In the *cit   du Luth*, in Gennevilliers, we intentionally parked *The Snake* near the meeting point for cruising cars arriving to deal. Its revamping had been observed from afar but snubbed by the drug-dealing youths we were missioned to engage. We were heavily surveyed by the dealers but, building a certain respect through long hours customising the van with families in front of their eyes, we were not ejected. But they kept their distance; only when it was up-and-running did the disaffected lads start coming for coffee, strawberry milk or hot chocolate. They sent a scout first to test us out. And then they all came in a wave, filling

the terrace, making it their own. When we explained that they could not openly smoke weed on the café terrace, they walked off with all the chairs and sat down the road, laughing. After stern negotiation, it was agreed that we would bring other chairs and tables for the opposite pavement so that they could smoke amongst themselves. This use of the 'opposite pavement' was minimal and conditional, but significant participation. Another of Balfour's "little changes", their participation was conditional on having a privileged place in the project that accorded them status and respect. The café that arrived on their doorstep was pleasurable, but like the Sinti, they did not want to mix. They wanted, and got, *service à part* (exclusive service). Passers-by remarked that the area seemed calmer. I suggest this was the normalising effect of a café terrace in a bleak street previously devoid of anywhere to sit. The youths were participating in a new social *mise en scène* that we were commissioned to produce. Urban anthropologist Delgado might consider this a "mirage of civil utopia" responding to "an innate municipal desire for docile and normalised consumerist occupation of public space" (2011, pp. 20–21), but I value it as highly significant, minimal participation which started to break their cycle of systematic refusal, while avoiding the co-option of visibly 'joining in'.

Although tension remained high throughout most of the project, the snack-van's power was in its symbolism: everyone knew it was shared, that it navigated the two towns and 'belonged' to both, which provoked much discussion, confusion and verbal challenge. The kids, incredulous that we would go to "the others", would vie for our fidelity, but although the intercommunal newspaper was regularly ripped up or set alight, the van survived and became cherished by almost all.

The project's large almost unwieldy steering committee, from both councils, met with us regularly, tirelessly analysing the work. This implication from people who had agreed to remain at arms length, very much "outside the room" (Blanche, 2014, p. 11), actively helped *build in* many of the "preconditions" which Blanche has analysed as essential for quality in participatory arts, particularly realistic expectations and the 'buying in' and trust by all parties (2014, pp. 19–20). Although Asnières took the work no further once the immediate crisis had subsided, Gennevilliers re-commissioned four more projects over as many years. All these projects were successful with adults and families, yet failed to engage the disaffected youths we were commissioned to involve. Gennevillier's directors observed the failure, discussed it and continued to put their faith in projects which could only achieve incremental advances, acknowledging that the important dialogue of offering and being refused was a part of, and did not negate the work.

Private participation: the Photo Studio

The snack-van's photo studio was a regular activity. With a backcloth and lights installed on the side of the van, Juliette took a series of portraits. Prints were offered to participants the following week as part of our affective relational exchange and, only if the sitter consented, exposed on the other side of the van. To propose portrait photography within a street project was provocative. In the *banlieue* the photograph is a *captured* image primarily associated with surveillance and control and the mere presence of our camera reinforced the belief that we were police and not artists. This capturing of another demands careful negotiation; a photograph's very existence can be seen as evidence of trust. The rarity of the *taken* photograph as a celebration of identity, as opposed to the 'selfie', is presented here as a symptom of racial tension and social inequality, an example of Phelan's "unmarked" (1993). Mistrustful, the youths would not easily engage, but two examples of photos that cannot ethically be reproduced here reveal a private and personal participation on their own terms.

A young man, on the edge of the group who regularly drank coffee on the opposite pavement, hung about watching the studio one day. Hesitantly he asked if we could take a photo for him and a while later he returned with a very old man. They posed with solemnity. Most would laugh, hold two fingers above their mates' heads or fake falling off their chairs. When he collected his print a few days later the young man stared silently at the photo in his hand, tears welling and explained "This is the only photo of me and my father together". Proud of his portrait, he could not "risk ridicule" in the *quartier* by having it exposed on the side of the van.

Another day a woman well-known in the *quartier* asked if we could take a photo for her son in prison, of his friends, for his birthday the next day. The studio usually attracted only a very slow trickle of people, each portrait subject to long negotiation, both before and after. But within half an hour this mother rounded up about thirty young men gathered into the middle of the street for an extraordinary ephemeral event. The result was a joyful, jumping, screaming, chaotic image. When we asked the

mother if she would like a large print, she refused saying photos were prohibited in prison and happily took away her photo on a sheet of A4 paper folded into eight and stuffed into her back pocket.

These two private, almost secret, uses of our photography studio were tender, yet invisible moments of participation. The affective significance of these two unseen photos is at once participation and non-participation. For Juliette, the group photo was one of several times she felt her art reduced to the equivalent of hack-work for the local newspaper. A quick, flurried image taken on the hoof, of the volatile, impatient group, traffic horns tooting, there was no time (and little necessity) to turn it into an artwork. The importance was the number of young people in the shot and the message of solidarity it sent to their mate in prison. These were instances of specific participation on the community's terms. Without particularly contributing to our event, this private participation served to re-inforce family and community in a way we could not have predicted, were not part of, and which could not be co-opted into any participatory success of the project.

Conclusion

The DCMS' Taking Part survey (2018–2019) cites the most common barrier for adults visiting arts events as "I'm not interested" and Stevenson *et al.* (2017, p. 94) observe that "non-participants" may simply "have made an active choice to use their time in another manner". Within the parameters of these projects embedded into people's daily lives, cultural engagement is revealed around the edges, and even in opposition to the work. Rather than arguing participation's emancipatory potential, I have pinpointed examples of refusal as agency, revealing participation in other activities, value systems, or communities: the Sinti's isolation as a defense against incoming gentrification in Montreuil; the sports club's investment in the autonomous "market value" of muscle mass (Truong, 2017, p. 71) in Stains; or the street-hierarchy imposed by the drug-dealers to maintain their localised freedom to trade in Gennevilliers. Participation in an art project which may involve weakening one of these existing critical communities or cultural practices would counter specific local needs.

Determining, from the outside, whether participation has effectively taken place, and whether it has been 'good', 'passive' or 'manipulated' may risk false judgements through incomplete awareness of competing local narratives or political agendas. It may serve to compound a "problematisation" of non-participation to legitimate cultural policy, as revealed by Stevenson *et al.* (2017). Participatory projects provoke refusal. It is part of their dialogic function. Observing carefully how and where a community attributes value is a more useful evaluation of the work, than quantifying and qualifying participation, or non-participation. It moves us towards a more fluid, open practice that Harpin and Nicholson identify as "an ecology of mutual doings and beings" (2017, p. 14).

The reality in Seine-St-Denis is that the "prerequisites" for quality (Blanche, 2014), or "happy participation" (Carrel, 2013) are rarely all in place simultaneously and their absence needs to be continuously and relentlessly navigated. The making of sense happens in the social interactions surrounding an artwork (Djakouane & Segré, 2017, p. 4) and, as a practitioner, the difficulty is to recognise and understand the significance of what is happening, as it happens, and to adjust, change tack, or let go accordingly. A good relationship with a commissioner risks becoming one of mutual comfort, "too close to the powers [we] may want to question" (Balfour, 2009, p. 352) to effectively call out systemic contradictions of intent. Failure is made inevitable by an insistence that inhabitants take responsibility for an urban environment where investment has been economised for future financial benefits, or when artists are co-opted to 'sanitise' public space or re-inforce a contested political status quo, or where engaged community members, such as the sports club, exercise refusal as their only accessible space of resistance.

The nuances of refusal discussed here reveal the need to take into account the small windows of possibility for socially engaged art negotiating no-go zones, territorialised space and peripheries, confronting head-on any theoretical discussion over when the social should be put aside in favour of the aesthetic, with the blunt response: *when it can*. They flag up the non-sense of visible participation as a measure of success. Recognising the refusals as agency, or as cultural or political expressions of alternative value systems, or lucid responses to commissions perceived as instruments of austerity or gentrification may dig the foundations of an ethic and aesthetic which may not be quite so easily co-opted by real estate or politics.

This paper has examined examples of practice in which imperceptible successes might be located within apparent failure. Within the ethical and political dilemmas of these contexts, it might be the very limits, the smallness, and the tiny space of openness within which relational practice exists that ensures its under-the-radar radicality.

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(Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the French are my own.)

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.friches.fr>
- 2 INSEE 2019. Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, cited in Plaine Commune Développement, CFP, 2019. *OPERATION : 6001 – Port Chemin Vert*, archives, Friches Théâtre Urbain.
- 3 ZUS - Sensitive Urban Zones. 751 *quartiers* identified by the state, renamed *Quartier Prioritaires des Villes*, (priority neighbourhoods) in 2015.
- 4 For further extensive literature on UK policy, not the focus of this paper, see particularly Belfiore and Bennet (2007), Harvie (2013), McAvinchey (2014), Hughes and Nicholson (2016), Jancovich (2017).
- 5 *Plaine Commune, intercommunality of* St-Ouen, Aubervilliers, Epinay-sur-Seine, l'Île Saint-Denis, Saint Denis, La Courneuve, Stains, Pierrefitte, and Villetaneuse. <https://plainecommune.fr>
- 6 An older male community member, exerting influence, order and morality on younger generations.
- 7 CSL Training, Stains, <https://www.facebook.com/csltraining93/>