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# Editorial: Participation's Norms and Storms

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## PARTICIPATION, OWNERSHIP & AGENCY

*In May 2023, there was an invitation across twenty-four hours for three hundred girls, women, and non-binary folk to join Leeds2023 and Women of the World festivals in "Raising the Barn" – an event that would result in the participatory construction of a temporary venue on Cinder Moor, Leeds – to form a site for a programme of activities during part of the year-long festival. The invite was intended to "celebrate women's achievements and awareness of gender equity" (from Leeds for Learning, 2023). The barn was to be a temporary structure that would house events, gigs, and workshops for children as part of the city's autonomously run "city of culture." Participatory construction was a means of generating community buy-in to the site, as well as engaging people in the activities they would later feel a sense of ownership about.*

*This collective "barn raising" could be seen as an exemplar of "Norms and Storms" in participation: initially in the claims that are professed about community building, and then in the realities of construction. Twenty-four hours of work by community members who pulled together prefabricated panels in pouring rain is hardly a demonstration of creative authorship. There are many reasons the participation was not "actual building" but assembling, including health and safety, and community members likely not having existing construction skills. The barn raising launches us into a core question in the social and participatory arts: What does it mean when artists delegate delivery to non-experts? When is participation a gimmick, and when is it an authentic invitation?*

Some of the discursive weight of participation and engagement was foundational to the intentions of this invitation. One critique could also be that such participation correlates with the proliferation of free labor that voluntary roles require, which seems in tension with the claims to representation made, an issue explored in Sruti Bala's important work on the gestures of participatory art (2018).

We take as a starting point for this special issue the "buzzword" status of participation (Leal, 2010), whereby "taking part" has generated a status quo in both civic and cultural spheres that can render some taken-for-grantedness within project design, approaches to practice, and also research about participation.

## WHY "NORMS AND STORMS," AND WHY NOW?

In this special issue, our "Norms and Storms" framing enables us to attend both to the (explicit or implied) rules that govern how taking part plays out *and* the unintended consequences of participation. This special issue emerges in a context of the proliferation and popularity of

participatory approaches. "Co-production" and "public engagement," for instance, are two institutionalized initiatives that have gained prominence in the UK and across Europe in recent years. Though prevalent in development discourses for decades (Leal, 2010), participation has been taken up with vigor post-2009 financial crisis, under austerity, with nation-states shoring up inadequate resources by "consulting," engaging, and fostering imaginaries of outsourced citizenship. Where states fail to acknowledge the implications of cuts, a gap appears, into which step all manner of institutions. Schools run feeding programs; artists pitch for activities to service plummeting mental health; city managers invite playful public participation in planning sessions about urban regeneration; and patients are invited to participate in their general practice to give the impression of better healthcare. These kinds of initiatives are certainly better than nothing, but there's not always a full sense of how arts and culture are replicating the projects of neoliberalism and furthering forms of liberal subjecthood.

The tensions evident in our contributions emerge at the particular conjuncture of neoliberalism in its desire to co-opt agency to ultimately achieve assimilation and control (Bala, 2018; Gamso, 2022; Harvie, 2013; Leal, 2010; Miessen, 2011). This tension is visible at several levels – in cities, in institutions, and in artistic practice. Each of these contexts presents different "cultures of participation" (Eriksson et al., 2020), invited, but seemingly pre-imagined.

In the urban context, participatory decision-making has been implemented in various ways, either in relation to Cities of Culture projects (Campagna, 2022; Tommarchi et al., 2018) or culture-led development and regeneration (Biondi et al., 2020). In these processes, local administrations often mimic capitalist practices, transforming private citizens into "customers" or "stakeholders" (Holdo, 2024: 18).

Cultural institutions have developed a range of participatory practices, including both participatory public engagement with specific groups as representatives of "the public" (e.g. Vermeulen et al., 2019; Knudsen, 2016) and participatory design, as in the case of London's Unicorn Theatre remodel, which children wanted built out of chocolate (Designing with Children website, nd; Magee, 2005). However, participation in institutions can also appear in the form of critique and conflict, especially in cases of tensions between the artists' and institutions' values (Bishara 2021 on the Fuck MOMA collective; Gamso, 2022; Harney & Moten, 2021, Evans 2015).

The radical roots of participatory pedagogies (Freire, 1996) inform both the evolution of participatory arts (Bishop, 2012) and their political nature (Nicholson and Harpin, 2017). The tension between the political, the desire for change, and the limits of participation often characterizes the work of artists who engage in participatory practices (Hope, 2022; Nicholson, 2022). According to Hope (2022), the promise of transformation and inclusion seemingly promised by participatory arts can be uncritical and, as such, an inevitable failure. Furthermore, there are implicit rules that pertain to what constitutes "good" participatory arts projects and which ones are to be considered failures (Cartiere & Schrag, 2022; Schrag 2022). Similar norms exist on the side of audience participation, especially when it comes to defining what constitutes a "reasonable" audience that is able to follow the artist's invitation "correctly" (Sedgman, 2018, 2023; Walsh & Ledgard, 2013; White, 2013).

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*Both of us own Guerrilla Girls merchandise (ally has two T-shirts, Alice a pin and a bag). The Guerrilla Girls are an activist group that formed in the 1980s in the US with the aim of creating a storm in the art world: they wanted to finally see the work of female artists celebrated and recognized in museum and galleries. Their interventions in these spaces were ferocious and ironic and, most importantly, unwelcome (Demo, 2010). They critiqued and questioned the rules of the game as a collective, participatory voice with the aim of devising new ways for women to participate in the arts. Their work still continues today, when they're widely celebrated for their activism, and it is possible to find their merchandise in many museums.*

> *This is an ironic fate for this movement. Museums will gladly sell their T-shirts, but still do little to increase women's representation in museums (National Museum of Women in The Arts, 2023). The image of women wearing a gorilla mask that is printed on our accessories reminds us both of the value of storms, and of the inevitability of their co-optation into norms.*

We lead the Participation Research Group at the University of Leeds, where we held a symposium in Spring 2023 called "Participation: Norms and Storms," inviting artists, practitioners, and scholars to share their ideas on how this twin concept could prove generative for a critical discourse on participation. This special issue takes forward just some of the many fruitful ideas shared at that symposium. Next, we outline the conjuncture that informs cultural participation, and introduce some of the thinking about norms and storms, before introducing the papers in this special issue.

## SOME NARRATIVES OF PARTICIPATION: INTENTIONS AND OUTCOMES

Across the examples mobilized in this special issue are voices that justify participation in some of these ways. "We assume that participation will make an initiative better" (this is particularly pernicious in local government, which then does very little to increase/ change their practices based on feedback from participatory projects). "We want more people to get involved/ to come through our doors" – use participation. "We want to increase a sense of belonging" – bring in participatory artists. "We want to produce an illusion of agency" – participation. "As organizations we want to present the sense that we have listened to diverse views" – participation. "We want to claim we are inclusive" – participation. Research contexts are subject to the same concerns. "We want to produce an illusion of decentering but still maintain inequity in terms of recognition or authorship". "We encourage co-production but rarely resource it fairly". "We maintain a power differential between paid workers and 'participants' whose time is valued often only in snacks (and the benefit of 'taking part')." These are some of the narratives that shape, promote, and distort ideas on participation in which interventionist or instrumentalized approaches can reinforce "repressive myths," as Kennedy Chinyowa explores (2015).

In the field of cultural policy, these narratives are particularly complex and difficult to untangle. Bonet and Négrier describe a "participatory turn" in contemporary cultural policy, dictated by an evolution in governance models, an increasing synergy in economic and cultural models, and a rise in commons-oriented politics (2018). Participation, however, is not a new concept: as argued by François Matarasso, "Cultural participation has been the norm in most places and times" (in Bianchini et al., 2020, p.105). Like any other norm, its application has changed significantly in different historical and geographical contexts, often favoring specific kinds of participation and groups of people over others (Bianchini, in Bianchini et al., 2020). The issue of cultural participation has often been addressed as a "deficit" (Jancovich and Bianchini, 2013); a lack of engagement in specific, state-sanctioned and, most often, state-funded cultural activities is a problem to be solved, finding ways to convert "non-participants" (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2021). This model reinforces the stereotype of "cultural deserts" (Gilmore, 2013) and overlooks "everyday, quiet and vernacular participation" (idem, p. 94). This deficit model is usually associated with the concept of "democratization of culture," which, according to Bonet and Négrier (2018), marks one of the fundamental paradigms of cultural policy. The shift to less hierarchical approaches, focused on communities' cultural agency, marks the rise of the cultural democracy paradigm (idem). Cultural democracy gained popularity in the UK in the 1970s and focuses on communities' own agency (Kelly, 2023; Jeffers & Moriarty, 2017) and cultural capabilities (Gross and Wilson, 2020). It is connected to participatory ideas such as co-production; however, the democratic quality of these processes is often difficult to assess and

define (Verschuere et al., 2018). Indeed, among the norms of participation upheld by cultural policy, we can find an unsettling imbalance of power and accountability in the delivery of participatory arts projects. Socially engaged artists who are commissioned to deliver participatory work often feel the onus of acknowledging participants' caring needs and addressing them, a task that goes well beyond the remit of their work and the funding they receive to deliver it (Belfiore, 2022). As a result, socially engaged artists find themselves attempting to mitigate complex, structural forms of marginalization and deprivation with the only resources they have – their time and their care – while the mechanisms for arts funding do not allow for the flexibility in timescale and resources that participation requires (idem). The competitive nature of arts funding and the fear of reputational damage also prevents artists from speaking about failure in cultural participation, limiting their opportunities to learn and bring about change (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2023).

Participation itself is indeed a difficult term to define, and prone to serve a wide range of agendas, as discussed in Arnstein's "ladder of citizen participation" model (1969); not all these agendas, however, are designed according to principles of cultural democracy. As examined by Zamorano and Bonet (2020), cultural policies in illiberal democracies use cultural participation as a tool to strengthen nationalism, political clientelism, and the exclusion of marginalized communities. The relationship between democracy and cultural participation, therefore, should not be taken for granted. Participatory policymaking initiatives remain scarce, and are often focused on tokenistic consultation rather than democratic deliberation (Jancovich, 2017), using tools like participatory budgeting (Jancovich 2017; Négrier 2020; Lechelt and Cunningham, 2021; Holdo, 2023). Even the engagement of a wide range of people does not prevent the complexity of their voices becoming manipulated into a simplistic narrative that serves neoliberal, growth-oriented agendas (Lechelt and Cunningham, 2021). This means that people whose background does not match that of the group in power have limited opportunities to let their cultural values, preferences, and modes of engagement influence policymaking. Instead they are presented with a set of norms of cultural participation that they are expected to abide to. The alternative is to be classified as a "non-participant," and to be virtually removed from the perimeter of the state-sanctioned cultural arena. This power imbalance is aptly described by Norma Sternfeld as follows:

> After all, a democratic understanding of participation entails being able to participate in the decision-making process that determines the conditions of participation, decision-making and representation. Participation is not simply about joining in the game, it is also about having the possibility to question the rules of the game: the conditions under which education, the public realm and representation within institutions happen (Sternfeld, 2013, pp.3–4).

If the politics of cultural policy remain unquestioned, they become static and fossilized. Cultural participation is thus presented as a depoliticized concept or, as explained by Dinardi (2015), a safe panacea to use to serve all sorts of instrumental purposes. In this way, the political nature of cultural policy exists hidden in plain sight, an invisible monolith that must not be perceived, lest someone finds a way to make it crumble.

Lastly, Jancovich and Stevenson highlight severe problems with learning from failure in cultural participation (2022). Aside from the aforementioned issues related to arts funding, ineffective evaluation mechanisms, tensions between accountability and advocacy, and a general discomfort with talking about or even acknowledging failure affect cultural policy's ability to learn and improve its approach to participation. All this contributes to its inability to change (also see Farber & Anifowoshe, 2022). Participation is the norm, as stated by François Matarasso (in Bianchini et al., 2020), and cultural policy will treat it as such; but storms are not accepted, or even acknowledged.

## NORMS: PLAYING BY THE RULES

Participation is regulated by specific rules and codes of conduct that determine acceptable and fair behavior. These sets of implicit and explicit rules, according to Kirsty Sedgman, are shaped by the ideas of "reasonableness" and "common sense" (2018). Sedgman's analysis of theater audience behavior highlights how these are far from being unproblematic or politically neutral:

> in setting the boundaries of reasonable behaviour, when does common sense becomes uncommon? Who gets to decide the limits of appropriateness and to police their transgression? Whose desire and comfort does the status quo prioritise, and whose disadvantage does it entrench? And within the arts specifically: is the aesthetic experience really so valuable as to be worth its exclusionary cost? (Sedgman, 2018, pp.83–84).

While rules are necessary to ensure participatory processes, they can exclude people who do not conform to the idea of "reasonableness" from taking part. Furthermore, challenging those norms can result in innovative and inclusive practices that can broaden both the scope and the impact of participation.

Pablo Alejandro Leal's informative work on participation in development studies expands on how participation can reproduce the status quo requires co-optation – particularly in terms of how it has been rolled out in service of sustainable development goals, for instance. He says that in order for participation to be adopted within the field of development:

> it first had to be modified, sanitised, and depoliticised. Once purged of all the threatening elements, participation could be re-engineered as an instrument that could play a role within the status quo, rather than one that defied it. (2010: 95)

As a result, participation can produce a set of norms (formal conventions, tools, approaches and discourses) that are taken up by practitioners in a technocratic way.

Wholesale adoption of participation can be uncritical, nostalgic, patronizing, and, as Markus Miessen (2011) claims, indicative of the evacuation of political responsibility as it seeks out consensus (Harvie, 2013; Kester, 2012). If participation has its norms, our contributors are also interested in work that investigates breaking the rules of participation. Indeed, as Markus Holdo asks, "What is at stake?" that is "beyond the values commonly associated" with participation? (2024). In his research, he seeks a corrective to the mere presence of participation, toward building awareness of "whether people use new spaces for participation to renegotiate what democracy means in practice" (2024).

## STORMS: MESSING UP THE GAME

How participation in arts and culture, or interdisciplinary participatory research, is informed by implicit rules or norms is counterposed by how these norms are challenged or broken by "storms" – which could be failures (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2022), disruptions (Sedgman 2018), dissensus (Rancière, 2010), or overthrowing the whole premise entirely (see Harper's contribution in this issue). Immersive performance making that invites participation can create storms when spectators decide to participate in the "wrong" way – in other words, when they take up a different invitation to what is ostensibly offered (Walsh & Ledgard, 2013). Withdrawal of labor according to the implicit rules of the cultural institutions – strikes, occupations, sit-ins – are all examples of ways that artists have "participated" outside of the norms of their roles. For instance, in 2021 artists mobilized around a collective "Decolonize This Place" to demand accountability from board members associated with

Jeffrey Epstein (see Bishara, 2021; Gamso, 2022). Actions by collectives such as the "Art not Oil" protestors likewise stretch the image of "storms" regarding how museum and gallery visitors are meant to behave. For them, "norms" are meaningless in light of climate catastrophe.

Taking up Helen Nicholson's warnings of the limits of participation, we must also conceive of the

> risk that community programs, however well intentioned, represent a form of cruel optimism to aspiring performers if a 'good-life fantasy' is ignited by the experience but remains unattainable (Berlant, 2011, 43 discussed in Nicholson 2020, 305).

This theoretically beloved formulation by Berlant asks us to think of the mutually constitutive ways that affects, materialities, and outcomes can be bound up with one another (and therefore, not always distinguishable). In cruel optimism, we experience the both/and formulation that we propose must be considered in how we study participation: how might research engage with its promise but also attend to its (unresolved) tensions?

## NORMS AND STORMS IN RESEARCHING PARTICIPATION

While the contributions presented in this issue come from a range of different academic traditions, they engage with similar concepts and tensions, highlighting how the contemporary debate on cultural participation is a transdisciplinary one. Some of the tendencies we note as researchers engaging with participation include conflating public engagement with active participation (Jancovich, 2017). There can also be elisions between participation and representation, and conflations of participation, civic engagement, and the liberal subject (Bala, 2018; Gamso, 2022).

The well-known debates speak to the loss of the radical, transformational drive of participation (Bishop; 2012; Hope, 2022; Kester, 2013). We have encountered research that explains participation as agency while perpetuating reliance on weak evidence (Chinyowa, 2015; Jancovich & Stevenson, 2022). This can be attributed to the persistence of evaluation-style methodologies, even in journals that are about aesthetics and creative praxis – which can lead to reportage that highlights "success" or reproduces only "good stories" rather than the often more complex issues in participatory approaches (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2022; Leal, 2010; Nicholson, 2020).

Our contributions run the breadth of positions between upholding or critiquing participation, in either "direction": how norms are established and maintained, or else, how they are dismantled, or how they raise critique when they are encountered. Sarah Harper's article details the "disruptive gestures" (Bala, 2018) that can be discussed as resistance to taking part, or, as she carefully puts forward, strategic refusals to be co-opted into forms of participation, place-making, and citizenship. In the context of a Parisian *banlieue*, these interventions do not entirely account for contestation, violent erasure, and urban "forgetting." Her article sets up how what can seem like indisputable norms and storms in participatory arts projects can be understood differently upon reflection.

Next, Francesca Sabatini analyzes the work of the Bologna-based political collective Làbas in deconstructing narratives and imageries surrounding homeless people, a group that is constantly excluded from political, civic, and cultural participation. This article illustrates the collective's effort in dismantling the norms related to the representation of homeless people by giving them the opportunity to represent themselves through the means of photography, causing a storm in criminalizing discourses that affect this group.

Aidan Jolly, Wendy O'Connor, and Cristina Justino do Nascimento bring together an analysis of Collective Encounters' group of "Radical Researchers" who explore the production of what they call "spacetime." Drawing together a range of ideas from Theatre for Social Change (TfSC) practices,

the article addresses how diverse groups across Liverpool engaged in reflection about collective participation and a "spatial vocabulary of power."

As our central collaborative piece in the special issue, two scholars engage in a dialogue about norms and storms. Alice Borchi and Leila Jancovich examine the value of cultural participation and how it has been interpreted, co-opted, or translated in the field of cultural policy, and reflect on the role of politics in this scenario.

Continuing with a focus on the institutionalization of participatory approaches, Layla Khoo offers an interesting account of how participants were able to subvert the norms designed and implemented by a cultural institution, providing new and unexpected forms of engagement. This example of a "storm" brings to light tensions between dialogue and agonism in participatory practices, with relevant implications for artists and cultural organizations.

Lastly, Daniel Skentelbery explores how a subculture of cosplay both configures itself as resisting gender norms, yet at the same time reproduces them through the enforcement of gendered beauty standards, the sexualization of female-presenting characters, and homophobic and transphobic attitudes. Cosplayers who have a creative approach to the representation of the gender of their characters, therefore, find themselves questioning whether they can showcase their art safely, either online or in real life.

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*In prior research that addresses some of the issues we are concerned with, Sabatini (2022) illustrates the case of OperaCamion, a touring opera project directed by Teatro dell'Opera di Roma that brought opera to different urban areas in Italy using a truck as a stage. She illustrates how audiences both internalize norms related to cultural participation and also are able to come up with their own creative storms. As recounted by Sabatini (2022), in Danisinni, on the outskirts of Palermo, Sicily, when the OperaCamion set up its stage in a local square, the local audience brought their own chairs from home, thus recreating the normative experience of theatre-going – sitting down, in an orderly and comfortable fashion. At the same time, children in the audience, who were sitting closer the stage, did the unthinkable: they started responding to the characters on stage, directly participating in the opera in a way that one might connect to the experience of a British Christmas panto.*

Throughout this special issue, this interplay of norms and storms seems to have an implicit message: letting the audience decide if and how they want to participate might be risky, but it might also lead to the creation of a unique cultural experience and of a more authentic way to think about participation.

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