Affect and the Participatory Event

By Camilla Jalving

Taking two works by Jesper Just and Randi & Katrine as cases, the article delineates a concept of participation based on ‘the participatory event’ and the affective, sensory and physical experience of the art work. In this way it challenges preconceptions of ‘active participation’ by representing a defence of participation on the terms of art itself.

I remember the transformer towers standing in the landscape. Like markers on the hilltops. A bit scary, with their humming and a danger sign on the side: high voltage, watch out! We watched out, and always cycled past them. Today most of these transformer towers have been demolished. The silence of the electric chip has drowned out their buzz. They were, however, temporarily resurrected in the total installation *Between Towers*, created by the artist duo Randi & Katrine for ARKEN Museum of Modern Art in 2015. A parade of 11 transformer towers recreated in plywood, meticulously painted and patinated, then installed at ARKEN. ¹

This is where this article begins. In a total installation of towers, which was not only monumental in the imposing exhibition hall, but also invited forms of participation that are relevant in the context of this publication.
In what follows I will explore these different forms in the hope of delineating a concept of participation based on the exhibition encounter – what I call ‘the participatory event’ – and the sensory and physical experience of the artwork. This concept of participation draws on theories of performativity and affect and – I argue – thereby expands the usual discourses of participation outlined in the introduction to this publication. These discourses are linked to the field of museology and specific understandings of democracy and participatory art. In this context, my contribution could doubtless be viewed as being on the edge of – if not going over the edge of – what can be defined as participation. Nonetheless, I find the approach relevant, partly because it is based on the actual practice of art as it unfolds in art institutions, and partly because it might have the potential to inform the exhibition practices of such institutions in a productive way. First and foremost, my contribution represents a defence of participation on the terms of art itself. It is a defence of the very objects of art and the agency they have, i.e. what they do and what they can make us do, think and reflect on – maybe before we are even aware that we are participating.

Installation shot from Between Towers by Randi & Katrine, 2015 Photo: Torben Eskerod
Back to the 11 towers. Some were grey and others were reddish, just as in real life, where the history of building transformer towers in Denmark extends over almost a century. The early towers were built of brick. Later they were constructed using steel plates, before disappearing entirely as high-voltage power cables went underground and the transformation of electricity was transferred to small boxes. In the exhibition the towers were positioned as sculptural objects, vast physical presences you could relate to bodily as you moved through the exhibition hall. The further you went into the exhibition, the smaller the towers became. The scale changed as you moved, like Alice in Wonderland crawling down the rabbit hole.

This obvious presence and physicality are not, however, the only elements of the vast installation. By entering the realm of memory, I argue, the 11 towers operate as much in a mental as a physical space. Between Towers invites not only physical participation, but can also invite participation of a more imaginary kind. For me personally, a trip down memory lane to the hilly landscape of my childhood where transformer towers were highly-charged markers—frightening and fascinating structures. For others they probably conjure up something different, or maybe nothing at all, given that transformer towers have a clear historical expiry date. The point here is not what is experienced by who, but that this form of ‘imaginary participation’ is generated by the works themselves, i.e. by the physical and material presence of the towers and the space they frame, the atmosphere they create, the scenography they provide, and the situation they create. In short, what they are and what they do.

**The Performative Space**

Everything the towers do can be seen as part of their performativity, a theoretical concept rooted in the linguistics of the 1950s, with the idea of the performative speech act and the power of language to constitute reality. Since then, performativity has also become a concept in art theory, applied to the actions and ‘performance’ of the artwork. It is therefore not primarily what the artwork ‘represents’ (its semiotic or iconographic content) but what it ‘presents’, i.e. what it ‘does’ and the situation it creates on the basis of its context and its viewers as the co-producers of
meaning. In theories of performativity, the meaning of an artwork – any artwork, given that the concept of performativity is not limited to a specific art form, but constitutes a methodological approach – is dependent on who sees it, when, and in what context. On the one hand, this makes any conclusive interpretation impossible, but on the other it creates space for the viewer’s own performative engagement and for a view of art that takes its engaging character into account.

Analysing participation in the context of performativity theory as I do here opens up for a much broader conceptualisation in which participation can be physical, phenomenological, or simply action based. The artwork is ‘created’ by the viewer through use, like a bench by Jeppe Hein, a smoke tunnel by Olafur Eliasson, or in this case when I walk through a row of transformer towers and bring the work ‘to life’ performatively through my memories, associations and bodily movements. Here participation is both a function of the processual installation of the towers, and their presence as objects that I can relate to physically. But it is also a mental process: I remember, add something to the story, imagine another world, imagine myself as someone else, or simply participate in the imaginary world of the work – the space between the towers, also
implied by the title of the installation. In other words, the work’s performativity and thereby its participatory element consists of what the work does, the situation the towers create, and the way I as a viewer contribute to the creation of the situation through my presence and physical as well as mental engagement.

**The Active Viewer**

The premise for including the performativity of the artwork in a discourse of participation is to reformulate the very concept of participation, but also to challenge the division of ‘active’ and ‘passive’ often central to discourses of participation. When participation or the participant is referred to in such discourses, there is frequently an implicit ‘non-participant’, a passive consumer usually formed according to a modernist template of the disinterested viewer that relates to the autonomous artwork in the Kantian sense of being distanced and disinterested. In his seminal essay ‘The Emancipated Spectator’, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière poses an interesting challenge to this active/passive dichotomy. Rancière’s main concern is ‘democracy’, which he links to sensory perception and the sites where we reproduce inequality (see Lise Sattrup’s article, pp. 133-149). ‘The Emancipated Spectator’ takes theatre and the ways it has related historically to the spectator as its point of departure. Rancière draws on Berthold Brecht’s concept of *verfremdung* and Antonin Artaud’s idea of ’The Theatre of Cruelty’ as different ways of challenging concepts of ‘the spectator’. However, he sees both relationships with the audience – the one based on alienating distance, the other on excessive proximity – as being centred on a false opposition between a passive spectator and an active participant, which in turn assumes that the spectator has to be ‘activated’. In place of this dichotomy, Rancière suggests that the act of spectatorship is in itself an activity, and that interpretation of the world represents a way of “transforming it”, of “reconfiguring” it, as he puts it. As he writes: ”The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He connects what he observes with many other things he has observed on other stages, in other kinds of spaces.” And, he continues:
“Spectatorship is not a passivity that must be turned into activity. It is our normal situation. We learn and teach, we act and know, as spectators who link what they see with what they have seen and told, done and dreamed [...]. We don’t need to turn spectators into actors. We do need to acknowledge that every spectator is already an actor in his own story and that every actor is in turn the spectator of the same kind of story.”

The performance theorist Matthew Reason puts forward a similar argument based on his experience of theatre. In the article ‘Asking the Audience: Audience Research and the Experience of Theatre’ he argues that members of the theatre audience, who to a large degree can be compared to visitors to a ‘traditional’ art exhibition, are active participants. They participate in an act, even though it is not a literal act. Reason draws on Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of the act of looking as a reflexive act, writing: “[T]he ’doing’ of the spectator experience is a perceptual and imaginative doing, a cognitive act which is often accompanied by awareness of the act of cognition. Spectatorship, in other words, is a form of active perception, where we are often (but not always) aware of ourselves looking.” Reason does not address participation directly, but his ideas add nuances to the dichotomous division of active/passive. If experiencing theatre is a “perceptual and imaginative doing”, then it does not make sense to talk about the spectator as active or passive, but rather to talk about different kinds of activity that are all based on different kinds of participation – physical, mental and cognitive.

The Agency of the Artwork
But why introduce an alternative participation discourse, when so many already exist? Primarily because existing discourses of participation – focusing on strategies for and tools of participation – do not always take into account the participatory element of the encounter with the artwork and the exhibition situation itself, i.e. the encounter with the materiality and affectivity of objects. Cultural history museums would appear to be a case in point here, since the principle of participation in the form of interactivity has apparently triumphed
over anything the objects themselves are capable of communicating. The museum researcher Michelle Henning comments on this development in her book *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory*. She argues that the emphasis on experience – based on an aesthetically focused model of experience – she sees as prevalent in cultural history museums, has resulted in a reduced focus on the artefact: ”The emphasis on experience displaces the emphasis on artefacts. This is a curious aspect of aestheticizing displays – the aesthetic originates as a discourse concerned with the concrete and the particular, with the sensuousness of the world – yet the concern with producing a life-changing impact overrides that encounter.”

She continues: “As museum design becomes about setting the stage for transformative experiences, objects become little more than props or stimuli”, a development that has only gained ground since she described it in 2006.

In other words, participation risks becoming an ‘external’ activity instead of being located in the artworks themselves. I write ‘artworks’ fully aware that the art museum and cultural history museum are different contexts for the museum experience, and that the objects they house are referred to as artworks and artefacts respectively, and are in turn met with different expectations. This influences how participation can be practised. But this only increases the need to insist on the agency of the artwork and its capacity to establish a space for participation. Because the artwork does ‘something else’ than other kinds of objects, partly because it appears in a different context and is received with different expectations, and partly because it operates with its own language and materiality. Like the transformer towers in the exhibition hall. Whilst they might just be standing there, they also determine my path. They bring memories to life. They touch me as I touch them. The gritty surface, the changing patina, the soft vibration of the electric hum. The idea of the agency of objects inserts another dimension between the artwork and the viewer, where it is no longer only the ‘user’ that participates, but also the artwork itself. Rather than being a passive object to be looked at, it is given an active role via its ‘performance’ and presence and the way it configures the space and my movements within it.
The Affective Turn

The concept of agency is closely linked to the concept of affect, and thus also to the concept of participation I want to explore here. One way of understanding affect is as somatic experience, for example when we get goosebumps, get dizzy, feel nauseous or are overcome by laughter. When agency and affect are so closely linked, it is because the agency of an object is dependent on the affects it produces, i.e. how it influences its surroundings. According to the art historian Ernst van Alphen “visual images not only function as providers of content or messages, but also are indispensable in raising feelings and working through them. When images function in this way, they are active agents, transmitting affects to the viewer or reader.”

A central hypothesis in the study of affect is that affects, as opposed to emotions, are not something we have, but something we are ‘in’. This difference reflects two ways of understanding emotions, which form the cornerstone of what has been termed ‘the affective turn’. Whereas one understanding sees feelings as inner, psychological phenomena belonging to the subject, the other sees emotions as outer phenomena, as contexts and events that contribute to the generation of subjectivity. As the literary theorists Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup write in the anthology Structures of Feeling:

”According to this distinction – now structuring much work within the field of affect studies – affect constitutes a dimension of bodily experiences and encounters, a dimension that remains, significantly, non-semantic and non-representational. In contrast, emotions are considered as somehow translated, signified and subjectified version of the elusive, pre-discursive affective matter.”

Focusing on affect therefore involves a shift from what they call ”the stable and acknowledged” towards ”the immediate and emergent.” In the current context, this corresponds to a shift in analytical focus from the transformer towers as culturally historical relics, to the situation they create. In many ways this shift corresponds to the shift in performativity theory from symbols and meaning to event and performativity, in this context to everything that is present in the encounter with the artwork.
The Affective Efficacy of the Towers

One thing is to identify affect, but to attribute qualities to it is something else. What happens to us when we are brought into affect? What happens to our surroundings? What happens to our actions? Something can definitely happen – or at least that is the idea that runs through most of the literature on the subject. If we return to Ernst van Alphen’s article, he distinguishes between affective reading and allegorical reading. Whereas allegorical reading usually draws on familiar and conventional meanings, affective reading opens up for what we do not yet know, or as he writes: ”affective operations and the way they shock to thought are what opens a space for the not yet known.”

’Shock to thought’ is the Deleuzian idea of the potential for something new to emerge in the affective encounter. Or as Sharma and Tygstrup write: ”When somebody is affected, this somebody is likely to change agency as well, producing new agency, affecting the environment in turn.” Being affected is “being struck by something that makes you change your direction or composure ever so slightly.”

This ’ever so slight’ change might seem far removed from the ideas of participation, democracy and empowerment that pervade participation discourses. And it is. It is vague and indefinable. But that is precisely because this is another kind of participation, which nevertheless is significant for the efficacy of artworks and for what art can do. I will now turn to another example of an art practise that can maybe point in the direction of what happens – or can happen – in the affective encounter.

Moments of Intensity

I am not sure where the ramp takes me. If this is the right way. If this is the direction I should be going in. Or if it even leads anywhere. But I put one foot in front of the other. Onwards. Upwards. The ramp is part of a large scaffolding system of bridges and steps installed in the basement of Palais du Tokyo in Paris as part of the Danish artist Jesper Just’s exhibition Servitudes (2015). As well as the ramp, the artwork consists of a series of video projections shown directly on the bare, concrete walls.

A young woman wearing mechanical ‘robot arms’ tries to eat a corncob. It is clearly difficult for her to control the mechanical movements, so she
keeps dropping it. It lands on the table, after which she tries again. A girl stands at the foot of the One World Trade Center. The camera pans up the vast building, standing like a monumental column. With gnarled fingers, the girl struggles to remove a stone from her pocket and starts scratching the glass façade of the building. In close up. Then from a distance. The camera zooms in and out. Zooms in on the girl’s face, her skin, her hand against the glass. Then the façade. Then the sky. High up. From the gnarled fingers to the soaring, straight lines of the building. In another video on a different wall, a beautiful young woman stands inside what is presumably the One World Trade Center. She is high up in the building. The New York skyline lies ahead of her. The gaze from above versus the gaze from below. If this woman is anyone, she is the perfect woman, caressed by the camera. The perfect body versus the crooked fingers. She speaks, but it is difficult to hear what she is saying. It is her face that dominates. As expression, as presence. Maybe. And maybe I am wrong. Maybe something else is going on. During World War II the basement of Palais du Tokyo was used to store pianos that had been confiscated from Jews in France. There is thus a historical context that can make itself felt, if you know about it. There are also stories about the One World Trade Center. Built on the site of the first World Trade Center, it houses the memory of terrorism and loss, what the artist calls ”a phantom limb” representing something that paradoxically no longer exists. But all this belongs to the realm of representation, and is less relevant here. Because this is not an attempt to analyse, but a process to identify some of the effects the video installation uses and that generate affect in me as I look, move on, look down, look up, try to find my bearings and lose my bearings, again. The affect is the product of a specific atmosphere in the work, which primarily stems from the work’s tactile surfaces, postures, looks, freeze frames, zooms and especially its soundtrack – a quiet piece of piano music. This can of course be translated into emotions and experiences like longing, sadness and loss, but key here is that it is not my sadness, not my loss, but rather the feeling of it that the work generates in me. The music has been recorded in the exhibition space and is played by the girl with the gnarled fingers – not without difficulty. In the last room of the
installation she is seen playing the piano, like a full stop, an interweaving of the sound of the work and the site of the work. *Servitude* addresses issues of the body and disability, something underlined by the ramp, which in the words of the artist is precisely to ”force the abled body to take a route typically reserved for the disabled.” My body’s usual patterns of movement are challenged and brought out of balance as I move around the scaffolding in the dark space, through which the artwork allows me to feel it on my own body. As a ‘user’ I am denied my usual navigational ability and movements. I am disabled. But the video installation is also affective at the visual level, in that the representations become states, perceptions or atmospheres that are deposited in my body. The use of close-ups of hands, faces and skin creates images that in the first instance do not ‘signify’ (or ‘represent’) but instead ‘touch’ (or ‘present’) through proximity and tactility: I sense how something feels in that through the act of vision, with the eye as a translating medium, I feel it myself. The hardness of the glass, the crispness of the corncob, the inside of the trouser pocket. A form of synaesthesia whereby an impression on one of my senses triggers a sense impression in another of my senses. I do not, in other words, *read* another’s body, I *feel* it on my own body. Feel how it could be to be that body – not just as a symbol or representation, but as a physical, sensory presence.

This could be seen as part of a general aesthetic experience. When, however, I also characterise it as a form of ‘participation’ it is to insist on everything that takes place in the encounter with an artwork that takes the form of intensity or heightened awareness. Because affect is precisely something that takes place *in between*. Between the agency of the work and my own agency. Or as Ernst van Alphen writes: ”The fact that affects should be seen as energetic intensities implies that they are *relational* and that they are always the result of an interaction between a work and its beholder. It is within this relationship that the intensity comes about.” To talk about affect as participation is obviously far removed from the ideas of decision-making often associated with the concept of participation. On the contrary, in the affective encounter I am to a large degree steered by and subject to the aesthetic impact of the work. Because even if, in theory, I can choose which direction to walk in and how I overcome
the challenges of the scaffolding, affect is something imposed on me. My emotions do not belong to me, but come from without. I am influenced rather than influencing. This does not, however – and this is a key point, which in this context refers back to Rancière’s critique of the active/passive dichotomy – mean that I assume a position of passivity. On the contrary. Through the affective encounter I enter a relationship with my surroundings through active, bodily and mental awareness.

From Art Practise to Exhibition Practise
Both Jepser Just and Randi & Katrine’s installations create affective spaces with high levels of intensity in which it is the artwork itself that generates the space for participation, and where participation is therefore not an external strategy added by the exhibiting art institution. The works, however, have very different approaches to the creation of such a space. Randi & Katrine work with memory and atmosphere, and Jesper Just with tactility and bodily sensation, but also with a conscious disorientation of the viewer. This disorientation is interesting in a participation perspective, because it articulates the moments when the works offer resistance, when you cannot find yourself, when participation is made difficult, when identification maybe becomes disidentification, and when what the work projects is precisely what you are not.

The question is how we can transfer the participation of art forms to the exhibition space? How can the practise of art inform, as I implied in the introduction to this article, the practise of making exhibitions? How can it not only create, but also inspire the art institution to create a framework for intense and affective encounters? There are, of course, a number of means available in the exhibition design toolbox. Scenography, light and sound are just some of the effects used in the production of exhibitions today, where the shift away from the sterility of the white cube has become standard in exhibition practises. There is also the conscious use of rhythm, including the concentration and dispersal of works, the modulation of the exhibition visitor’s movement with obstructions and openings, as well as the conscious use of the exhibition’s own ‘rhetoric’ and approaches, all of which can contribute to the cultivation of affective encounters. The issue, of course, is how to succeed in doing so. The experience economy
waits, as always, in the wings, ready to embrace the exhibition experience and make it part of its logic – and in doing so paper over the cracks, tone down any resistance, and grind the sharpest edges flat.

The Participatory Event
Just as important as asking ‘how’, is asking ‘why?’ Why work strategically with affect? Why not just let art generate affect – which I clearly think it has the ability to do, given my encounters with the works of Jesper Just and Randi & Katrine described above. Why also try to establish intensive encounters with artworks through exhibition design, flow and communication? Part of the answer lies with relevance. Affective participation in the exhibition encounter – the actual ‘participatory event’ – is one of the ways the museum can establish meaningful relationships with new as well as existing visitors. Another part of the answer, which I would like to emphasise here, is in a way about the exact opposite. About not attributing affective participation any specific efficacy, like generating ‘empowerment’ or stimulating ‘critical thinking’. It is possible that it has the potential to foster these and even other ideals. What remains, however, most important, is that we feel affect and let ourselves be affected and thereby create a realm of possibility for ”the not yet known”, as van Alphen is quoted as calling it above. This is where affect and ‘the participatory event’ relate differently to the discourses of social relevance that pervade the concept of participation. Not because affect aims to make us do something in particular, but because it lets us feel that there is something that can do something, and that something could potentially happen.

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NOTES


2 The term agency is currently used in a range of different theoretical contexts. Jane Bennett writing on affect uses the term ‘material agency’ to signify the active powers issuing from non-subjects, whereas Bruno Latour uses the term ‘actant’ as that which has efficacy and can do things. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010, pp. viii-ix. Here the word should be understood in its most basic sense as a derivative of the Latin agere (to do) and thereby as linked to action.


5 The art historian Amelia Jones characterises the disinterested viewer as follows: “While most art historians would prefer not to admit it, the practice of art historical analysis most often assumes certain values determined via an art historical model of a ‘disinterested’ judgment practiced by a learned interpreter who veils his investments in the service of objectivity.” See Amelia Jones, ‘Art History/Art Criticism: Performing Meaning’, in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, (eds.) Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 39.


Ernst van Alphen, ‘Affective operations of art and literature’, *RES* 53/54, Spring/Autumn 2008: p. 27.


The music played is Éliane Radique’s *Opus 17, Étude* from 1970.

For example by Nico Carpentier. See the introduction to this publication, as well as Maj Klindt’s contribution.


28 The relevance criterion, also outlined in the introduction, is one of the criteria addressed in more recent museology as part of the changed role of the museum, perhaps best summed up in Stephen E. Weil’s famous 1999 dictum: ‘From being about something to being for somebody’. Stephen E. Weil, ‘From Being About Something to Being For Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum’, *Daedalus. Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 128, 1999.