

Spectating or participating- letting go of the binary

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Tuulia Soininen

Spectating or participating – letting go of the binary

In this essay I explore the dialogue between spectating and participating. When does someone go from being a spectator to a participant? I explore these questions in relation to a participatory solo piece *Terveisiä Matkalta* (2022) choreographed and performed by me. I have toured with the piece in Finnish care homes in 2022-2023 with Pirkanmaa Dance Center.

“Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.” (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Article 22 section 1)

I would like to emphasize two words: people have the right to *participate in* culture and to *enjoy* the arts. Participating in culture is a human right and by aiming to create participation with my dance performance and workshop I am hopefully enabling the care home’s residents’ human rights in my own little way. I want to emphasize the word *enjoy* the arts. I find pride in being a professional and performing in a care home. I believe it is matter of equality that art professional work with people who have less access to art.

I arrive to the entrance of a care home and search for a staff member to ask what the space is I will be performing in today. I am guided to the space and start preparing it. Already I am greeting the residents and answering questions of what is about to happen and engaging in conversations about their own dance experiences. Once the space is ready, I go to change my costume and warm up. Then I start the dance piece. I have created the piece around older people’s memories and some of my own. I intentionally wanted to include participatory elements within the performance. I start the piece by greeting the audience verbally which often results in me receiving comments and greetings back. The first piece of music is a traditional song *Kulkurin valssi* (Tanner, 1916) which often leads to people humming, singing along or tapping to the familiar rhythm. Other planned participatory

actions include me walking amongst the audience and greeting them by curtsying, handing a post card to one of the audience members and having set points of stopping for applause. The piece is followed by a dance workshop where we all dance and move together. After the workshop I stay to chat for a while with the participants about whatever they feel like sharing in the moment.

Within the context of this piece when does the participation begin? What is the moment of the audience becoming a participant? Is it when the workshop begins? Or is it when I walk in the door? To start exploring this, let us dive into the dilemma of participation.

Helen Nicholson discusses what is the contemporary significance of cultural participation. She points out that often participatory performances are so short, and the participatory acts are limited and controlled and thus it would be naive to expect a strong sense of authorship from the participants. (Nicholson, 2017).

Including a certain demographic in making of an artwork does not automatically mean it is participatory. For example, Jérôme Bel's *Disabled Theater* (2012) was created with a theatre company of people with disabilities. In the performance the performers have been given six set tasks to perform in front of the audience. In her article Sarah Gorman criticizes that the opportunities given to the performers to participate in the performance are limited and strictly controlled by the choreographer's vision. Thus, the voice that is heard is not the people who are participating but actually of the choreographer behind the piece. (Gorman, 2017).

As a choreographer creating participatory pieces this an interesting question. I believe in my responsibility as a choreographer to adjust my practise to suit the people I work with. But how much am I willing to negotiate my own choreographic voice? Am I willing to let go of my own aesthetic or opinions? Do I want to step back and take more the role of a facilitator in the process? How far does the participation reach into the creation process?

Stephen Bottoms argues how seeing participation as democratic can be problematic since it always by definition leaves someone to the outside. (Bottoms, 2017). To quote Riina Hannuksela's lecture "Who is in this room, who are not and why?" (2023). For example, did the tickets cost, is the space wheelchair accessible, what language was the performance

promoted in? Nicholson points out also the question of which participants or performers in the working group get paid and who do not (2017). Bottoms additionally reminds that when discussing democracy, it is unlikely that the voices of non-human participants, the voice of our environment, have been incorporated (2017).

In Liam Jarvis' participatory piece *Re-enactments* (2012-14) the audience becomes re-enactors by wearing headphones and receiving instructions to re-enact the narrator's life. The audience sometimes made the choice not to follow the instructions they received from the narrator. Analyzing his piece Liam Jarvis reflects on what it means not to participate:

“Non-participation can be something that we *do* (or an active choice of what *not to do*), but furthermore, it can also be a state through which one's doing is not enough in itself to feel that we are participating.” (Jarvis, 2017, p. 60) [emphasis in original]

So, if non-participation can be doing, not doing or simply an experience of not participating how can we tell from the outside if someone is participating? Colette Conroy defines a participant as: “a person having an experience” (2017, p. 91). Me claiming my dance piece is participatory might not be true at all because I cannot speak for the experience of all the participants in the space.

So now we have arrived to a dead-end. Does true participation exist if someone is always left to the outside? Is participation artificial and controlled by the artist? When I hold the workshop, I might give an option if the people would rather do option 1 or 2, or I encourage them to choose a mental image where they can go in their imaginations. But really it was me originally who planned it, they have a very small say in what the content is. And we cannot presume if someone is dancing that they actual feel like they are participating. So, how can we know if is there really any participation at all?

While leading the dance workshop after the performance I notice myself making presumptions of why some people are not dancing with me or why someone is not smiling and perhaps regarding this experience not being as successful as with the people who are “actively participating”. I am constantly learning to let go of these presumptions having had interesting conversations with the participants afterwards. They might tell me they enjoyed simply watching other people dance, or they wanted to focus on listening to the music or

they were engulfed in a memory. Or sometimes they are physically not able to move a certain part of their body. Them not moving, does not mean that anything is not happening or that they are not participating. They actively chose not to do something. They rather chose to focus for example on listening, watching or remembering.

Participation comes in many forms. I took part of a lecture on ethics and negotiations within community dance work by Riina Hannuksela and she discussed the central idea of striving to create agency for the people as makers and not seeing them only as objects of the doing (2023). We need to be able to expand our view of participation to hear alternative narratives and solutions.

I believe in order to see participation in its own terms, we need to let go of the binaries, such as active/passive, object/subject, bad/good. Claire Bishop sees especially the binary of active/ passive as problematic:

“The binary of active/ passive is reductive and unproductive, because it serves only as an allegory of inequality.” (Bishop, 2012, p.38)

She argues that the inequality derives from seeing the “passive” spectator who does nothing as inferior to the “active” performer who does something. Or on the contrary seeing the performer as inferior to the spectator since they are able to look and contemplate critically from a distance. (Bishop, 2012).

Jacques Rancière also challenges binaries regarding the spectator. He criticizes how viewing is seen as opposite to knowing and acting and thus regarding the spectator as someone who is passive and does not know. He views the spectator not being someone who needs to be activated. He emphasizes how the spectator already interprets, makes connections, feels and understands everything in relation to their past experience. (Rancière, 2009)

My personal experience of being an audience member also speaks to this idea. I am not passive, I make meanings, connections, empathize, feel and analyze. So, as an artist I do not see the starting point of saving the passive spectator by activation as very useful. In my piece rather than thinking about activating people, I rely on quiet forms of participation, such as listening, remembering and reflecting.

Deidre Heddon examines listening as a form of participation in regard to experiencing Adrian Howell's one-to-one performances. In the piece *Garden of Adrian* (Howells, 2009) the spectator is invited to take a journey through a garden guided by the artist. The spectator is invited to listen with all of their senses by touching, tasting and listening. Listening becomes an active way of being, of participating with the environment. (Heddon, 2012).

"[T]here is a palpable move away from understanding participation as an invitation and a response and towards recognition of participation as an ecology of mutual doings and beings" (Harpin & Nicholson, 2017, p. 14)

With this quote in mind let us look into how I originally created my dance piece. For background research, I spent time in care homes. I got to know a little bit of the residents' everyday life and activities. I followed the work of dance artist Sini Muranen, who is a culture instructor in care homes in Kangasala, Finland. Her work entails organizing art and culture activities with the residents. In other words, I participated in parts of the residents' lives in care homes. Would you look at that: who is the participant now? It could be argued that when I go to the care homes to dance, it is me who is actually participating for a short moment in the community's life rather than vice versa. Or rather, it is both at the same time.

To create the piece, I gathered memories by interviewing residents in care homes. I combined these memories with some of my own and the piece is a dialogue between these. Thus, the piece could not exist without the participation of the residents. Nor could it exist without my contribution as an artist.

Participating can be as Alison Jeffers puts it "giving people a go" at trying out something but also: "retributions of power, initiated by developing an understanding of existing power structures and distributions of authority" (Jeffers, 2017, p.219). Jeffers gives an example of the latter: the community play *Crimea Square* (Cochran, Dougan, Egan, Haslett, Nicholson, 2013) in which the community members wrote their own stories about their local history but worked in collaboration with the playwright Jo Egan. The play would not have been created without the expertise of the artist nor the locals.

“The relationship between artist/ participant is a continual play of mutual tension, recognition and dependency” (Bishop, 2012, p. 279)

The relationship is interdependent and complex. Rancière states that theatre could not exist without the spectator (2009). For this mutual moment to exist, both the artist and the participants are equally needed.

In conclusion, addressing participation is not straightforward. Is it only an artificial set up? Does true participation really exist when someone or something is always left to the outside? We cannot know the experience if someone feels like they are participating. However, I do not see these questions as obstacles for creating participatory work. Rather they are questions that are inevitably present while working with it. Participation comes in as many forms as there are people. So, the question also is: is it possible to create a performance without any participation at all? So, to go back to the beginning; when does someone go from being a spectator to a participant? Spectating and participating are not contradictory but can exist simultaneously. Spectator is not necessarily a participant, but they can be. Participation is a complex ecology of relationships. I suggest seeing participation beyond binaries. I am not only a participant or an artist nor a subject or an object nor passive or active nor a spectator or a participant. I am to some extent all of these simultaneously.

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