

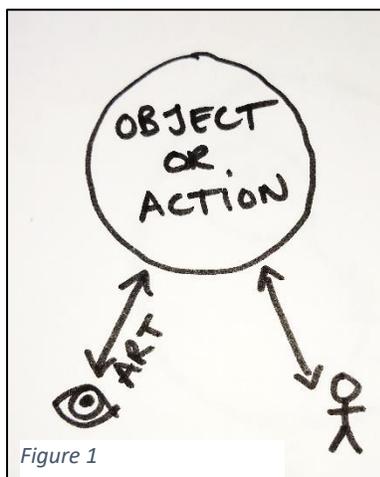
What is the value of “participation” for museums and galleries? What form does it take and what are the possible critiques? Chooses a theoretical framework from the set readings and apply to one or more event / program from the galleries visited.

In this essay I intend to define the term participation, firstly by identifying the types of participation I have observed within several different museum and gallery contexts, and then the ways these can be classified or arranged to enable understanding of their significance and impact. I will go on to consider a range of models for ascertaining the “value” these forms have, and I will do this with reference to current theorists as well as my own experience.

### **What is participation?**

It is certain that since the social turn (Bishop 2006) and latterly the educational turn (Janna et al 2000), in contemporary art, where the concerns of artists and galleries have moved towards the relational rather than the aesthetic, the galleries’ and artworks’ interaction with the audience has become increasingly important; this refers not only to the content and interpretation of the artwork, but also as a requirement that is often attached to its funding (Carnwarth & Brown 2014).

Bishop (2012) attributes the growth in what could be defined as Social Art, or art that involves participation, in whatever form it may take, to the exponential growth of Commercial Art: The myriad of images and pictures that are used in the world of advertisement and promotion in commercial, capitalist society. With so many images everywhere, Bishop believes that artists have moved on from the purely aesthetic to concern themselves more with the social. There is a division between the sales-based art world and the longer term socially engaged “projects” based practice that has a significant presence in art schools, museums, galleries and journals (Bishop 2012). For the purposes of this essay I shall be addressing this social focus in exhibited art, as opposed to art produced for commercial sale.



In an attempt on settle on a definition of participatory art, it is necessary to consider its widest definition: that all art is participatory as it requires a viewer, or “a Disembodied Eye “ to be seen to exist as art at all (Kwon, 1997 pg. 86). More specifically, O’Doherty (1986) suggests art needs to be in a space where the viewing can take place; that not just an eye is required, but that eye be in the head of a person and that person be in the same space as an object or action for that object or action to become an artwork . That “The Eye looks down on the Spectator; the Spectator thinks the Eye is out of touch with real life (O’Doherty 1986 pg. 50). Sheikh (2007) then defines this relationship further by suggesting that it is the “agonism”, a place of negotiation and interaction between the object or action and audience that creates the art in the object or action. (Fig 1)

It is of note that commercial galleries do not tend to consider participation beyond this initial mode: art requiring an audience to be art, ideally a disembodied eye with cash in its pockets. For this essay I shall

set this aside in my consideration of “participation”. If participation is necessary for art to exist, then its value is implicit in the existence of any art.

Despite these initial clarifications, the term “Participation” is still very general. When referring to participation for museums or galleries, are we referring to participatory art or participatory activities? Galleries and museums often both host or present participatory art, and many have participation programs that exist either in combination with the art or discrete to it. Terms like “education”, “schools”, “public”, “learning” and “participation” are used differently and interchangeably in different theoretical frameworks and by different institutions.

### **Types of Participation**

Having spoken with staff on the participation programmes at the Whitechapel gallery, Gasworks gallery, Saatchi Gallery, and researching online the programs at Tate Galleries and the Royal Academy, as well as my experience as an arts educator, I have identified several groups of activities that are termed “participation” or “participatory”.

#### People visiting art and having an experience (fig 2)

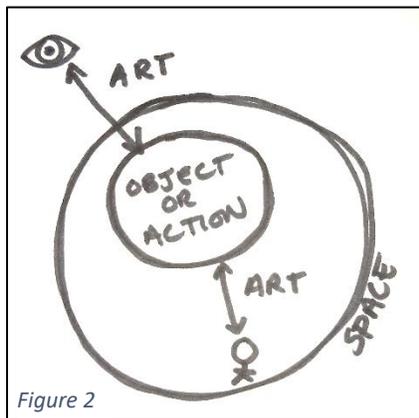


Figure 2

In the most basic terms, this is when a museum or gallery is open to the public and the public come in and observe actions or objects. The types of attendee to the gallery are further refined in Morris Hargreaves McIntyre and Rijksmuseum segmentations and pen portraits (Scott and Meijer 2009) from research undertaken at Tate galleries. These categorisations overlap somewhat with the other sorts of participation I have identified, but only in terms of those attending exhibitions. As I am extending my reference to all gallery or museum attendance or interaction with artwork on site, adopting these here could be detrimental to the clarity of my argument. Specific actions can be taken by marketing or participation departments within the gallery to increase attendance by groups

who may not normally attend a gallery based on the thematic content of artwork. For example, the Gasworks Gallery will often attract visitors from the culturally diverse area they are located in into exhibitions by artists of the visitor's own country or culture of origin.

#### People visiting the space for additional content (fig 3)

Galleries and museums often program additional events around a specific exhibition. These can both encourage attendance from regular attendees as well as encourage groups who would not normally enter the gallery. These might include films, performance and talks to accompany the exhibition where the audience does not participate other than as spectator. However, other activities labelled as “events” may well fall into another category.

Figure 3

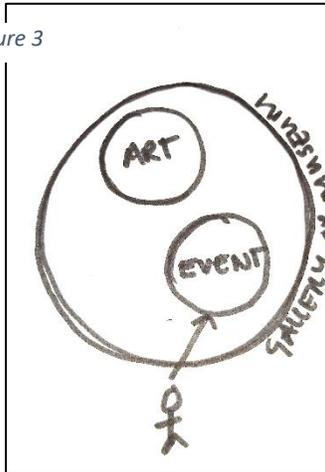


Figure 4

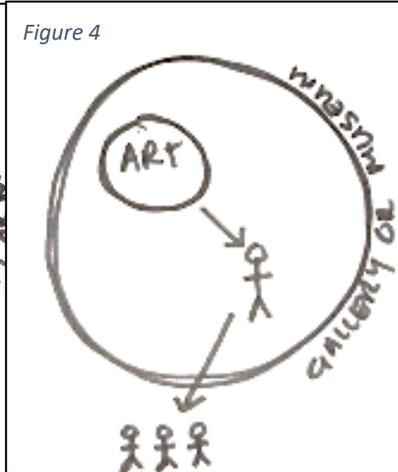
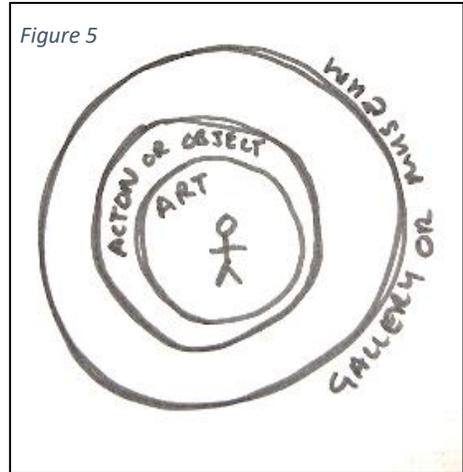


Figure 5



#### Educational activities (fig 4)

These can take a wide range of forms, but I have listed them as one form of participation as they are often identified by being the remit of a specific “education” or “schools” department or team. These departments organise and oversee events that involve children or young people coming to the gallery to learn something, often about the artwork or being creative. However, this can also include learning about something else in the vicinity of some artwork, and this could also be classified as “hosting”.

Since the requirement of public funding for many institutions has focused on the participation of young people “the gallery educator population has exploded, so much that in major metropolitan areas, it is likely you are never more than a few feet from one” (Howell 2009, pg. 146). This is evidenced by the number of galleries and museums providing dedicated space for education activities rising from 36% to 77% between 1994 and 2006 (Howell, 2009).

#### Taking part in an artwork as a material (fig 5)

Bishop (2012) asks “what artist isn’t socially engaged?” (pg. 2) and uses a definition of participation in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material in her writing. The participants’ physical presence completes the artwork, and it could not be in existence without them. For example, Mark Dion’s “Thames Tate Dig”, an army of volunteer’s mudlarked alongside Dion to collect items from the Thames (Howell 2009).

The fact that these are people, thinking sentient beings, and not clay or paper can complicate this sort of participation and this relationship between artist and participants can become contentious, the intent of each group perhaps not always being in line with the other. O’Doherty (pg. 76) says “In these arenas order (the audience) assays what quotas of disorder it can stand. Such places are, then, metaphors for consciousness and revolution. The spectator is invited into a space where the act of approach is turned back on itself. Perhaps a perfect avant-garde act would be to invite an audience and shoot it”.

Knížák (pg. 135 in Bishop 2012) theorised the difference between two types of audience participation – ‘enforced action’ and ‘spontaneous reaction’. And that they could be defined as ‘active’ (someone attending an activity where they know they will be used – e.g. Spencer Tuniks gatherings of nudes to be photographed.) and ‘passive’ (where participants are drawn from the unknowing public – e.g. Angela

Frasers “Museum Highlights” where she posed as a gallery guide and the unknowing and un-consenting public followed her tour of inconsequential gallery accoutrements.

#### Taking part in an artwork as a creator (fig 6)

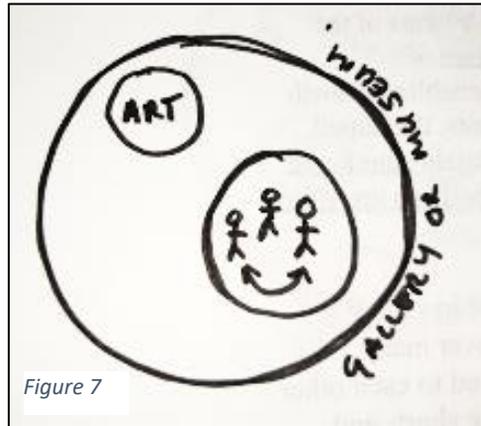
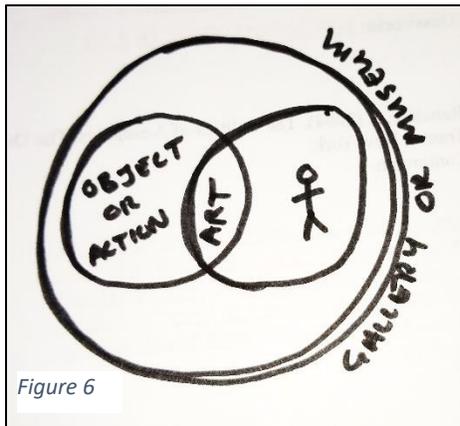
In relation to this form of participation and the previous category, O’Doherty has used the same words to identify a binary idea of “active and passive” spectatorship, and “more recently – the false polarity of ‘bad’ singular authorship and ‘good’ collective authorship” ( O’Doherty 1986, pg. 8). Whether good or bad, this form of participation is where the participants are not just a material in someone else’s artwork (whether though their simple passive presence or active creative act) but are supported to take the role of artist themselves.

For example, the Gasworks gallery has recently re-launched their participation program to move away from an “education” model where people came into the gallery for short sessions, but to one where an artist was selected and then chose to work in the long term with a group of participants to enable them to make their own artwork. The wording on the gallery website regarding the project is of note:

“Between November 2018 and July 2019 artist Jacob V Joyce *and* OPAL (Out and Proud African LGBTI), an African Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex, human rights activist charity, developed a number of creative activities exploring issues of isolation, racism, black history, and LGBTI+ struggles and liberation.” [my italics for emphasis]

#### Being hosted at a site (fig 7)

A gallery hosts a group within their space but there is no overt active participation in the art works present. It still has participatory value as it can be the first instance of people entering the space and being exposed to opportunities to participate which they may take up later.



### **Organisation of Participation**

Having identified these forms of participation in galleries and museums I began looking at the way they are organised together, many sit within the same departments within their organisation and their relationships between themselves and other elements of the institution can change their meaning for, and impact on, participants.

In their organisation and description of their participation activities galleries and museums often make a binary split between artists and their artwork (which may use participation as a material), and the public. (Fig 8)

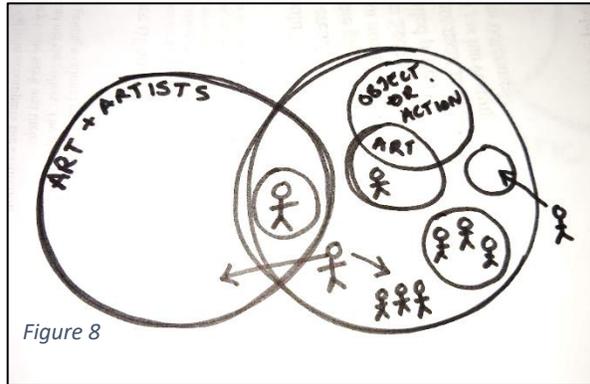


Figure 8

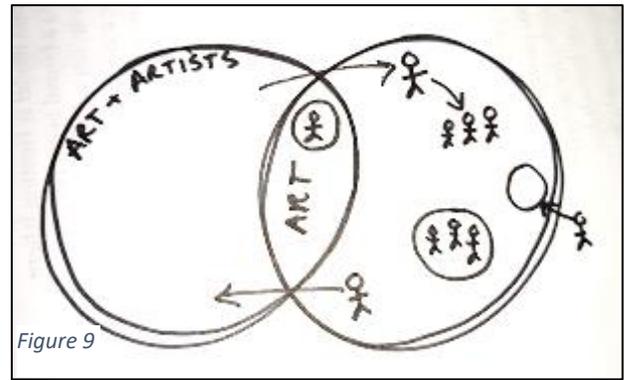


Figure 9

In their ten-year strategy document for 2020 – 2030: Let's Create (2019) the Arts Council define experiences of art as: Cultural or Creative; one experiences an artwork or creates an artwork. Here the division is instead made between artists and their artwork and participants who make new things, and the public having experiences, which includes being used as a material (fig. 9).

While this structure is more useful in terms of understanding participation, when thinking about the value of that participation is it is it appropriate to put artists making artwork and participants making artwork in the same section? Is an artist in residency in a gallery or taking part in a long term program of artistic development, comparable to someone coming into an institution to take part in an opportunity to create something in one day, the same in terms of value of participation?

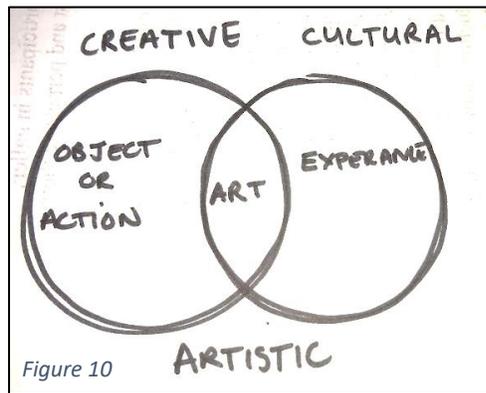


Figure 10

In her 2010 address "Is everyone an artist" Bishop introduces the idea of art and the creative act being discrete from each other and the possibility of artists utilising rather than instigating the creative acts of their participants. In his 1967 work "The Creative Act" Duchamp identifies the "art coefficient". While we are all capable of a creative act, or making something with intention of meaning, the person having a cultural experience, has a role to play in that made item becoming "art". That "In other words, the personal 'art coefficient' is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed"

(Duchamp, 1967). This relationship is what elevates a creative act and that both are required for the formation of an artwork (fig. 10).

### The value of participation.

If we take this model of cultural and creative participation, the value they have can be also have a duality. If an artist makes artwork, lots of people in an audience get to experience it. Less people get the creative experience, more get the cultural experience. The separation from the act of creation appears

to dilute the value of the cultural experience. However, more people can experience it, resulting in an apparent parity in value of the experiences. Any small inequality can be legitimised by the fact that some investment is needed in the creative, else there would be nothing creative in existence to culturally experience.

The Arts Council have adopted participation as a measure of value for money, for return upon their investment of funding, and that the money they spend should impact on as many people as possible. This is a change from previous policy:

“In 1951, the Secretary General of the then-Arts Council of Great Britain characterized the Council’s mission as growing ‘few, but roses.’ We have come a long way since then. With this Strategy, we hope to prepare the ground for a blossoming of creativity across the country – and to acknowledge that the surest way to fill the future with every variety of flower is to recognise that we can all be gardeners. (Serota, 2019 pg. 2)

Participation has become a variable that can be measured in order to see how many people are benefiting from investment in creativity and culture, therefore “the arts”. This results in a necessity to widen participation, to increase the number of people impacted in any way by the publicly funded artwork. To see a return on investment.

The Arts Council is not alone in this quest for increased participation. Gasworks gallery’s other main funder, the Paul Hamlyn foundation, states that they will not fund: “Projects where the key outcome is solely artistic and does not address the fund’s purpose to widen access to and deepen participation in the arts”. Even Gasworks current self-evaluation project, designed to provide them impartial reflection on their current projects, has a participation remit. While evaluation of a project would traditionally be completed in house against the criteria of the funders (Arts Council 2018), Gasworks evaluators Future of the left (FOTL) propose that they will: “share their findings so far with the launch of their Midpoint Report, opening up the conversation about the things that they are getting right and wrong”. Therefore, the evaluation of the participation programme has become a participatory event in and of itself.

This banking model that asks institutions to increase participation in return for funding has its issues. Many projects with value, either cultural or creative, do not necessarily have a high level of people participating or provide the immediately apparent return on the initial investment in artists creative development. Some art works have a more subtle or complicated evidence of cultural or creative experiences.

### **Alternative models of value in participation**

Ranciere recognises art as a form of education, and education as political. His theories in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) see the traditional teaching model as a banking model, where the teacher supplies knowledge to the student who benefits from its acquisition. He relates this not only to the school, but to ‘the integral pedagogicization of society—the general infantilization of the individuals that make it up’ (Biesta 2010, pg. 550). Ranciere identifies more recent developments in education as an alternative to this model. Teaching has moved towards a format of learner and guide, but still assumes that the learner has something to learn, is deficient in some way, that the learner is constructed in terms of a lack, and that that lack cannot be addressed without the intervention of the educator. Ranciere’s ideal

model of education is one where the teacher (or Ignorant Schoolmaster) is in the same position as the student and their only role is to encourage the student to speak out the truth of the knowledge and understanding they already have.

“[T]hat it is only when we engage in teaching without explanation that it may be possible to emancipate rather than stultify”

“The only thing that is needed, therefore, is to remind people that they can see and think for themselves and are not dependent upon others who claim that they can see and think for them.” (Biesta 1991, Pg.543).

In short, emancipatory schoolmasters do nothing more and nothing less than demanding that their students make use of their intelligence (fig 11).

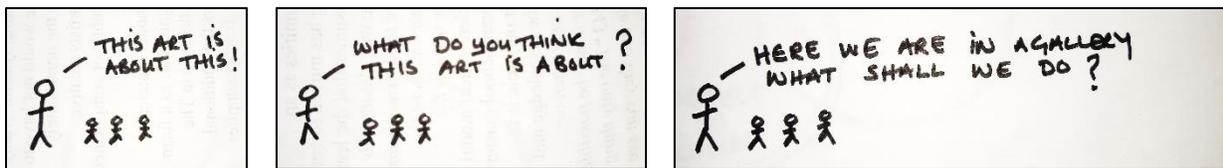


Figure 11

The aim here is that the Ignorant Schoolmaster approach will illicit an authentic response to the artwork by the student or audience, and that this may be recognised just as noise (Ranciere 1991), someone saying the wrong thing, by the already cultured in attendance. However, if it is what the viewer thinks, it is correct. Truly participatory art or artistic experiences do not try to turn the audience in to a learner who needs to learn how to correctly respond to the art, but recognises the authenticity of the reaction, not as noise, but as speech.

Ranciere calls this ‘the Distribution of the Sensible’ (Ranciere 2004). Everyone can take part in the sensible (sensible in terms of what can be sensed) as everyone can sense. In this case, this is in terms of artwork, however the theory applies across society. If you can sense something you can have a reaction to it. If that reaction is recognised as valid (as speech not noise) then ‘authentic’ participation is increased. Therefore, the public’s involvement in the creative and the cultural and the artistic will increase their opportunity to speak and benefit the development of an emancipated society.

This is a development of Althusser’s idea about the ideological state apparatus - as opposed to the repressive state apparatus - where he suggests that the ruling classes control societies’ ideology, and that this is done through the state apparatus of schools, churches, galleries, museums and other cultural institutions (Althusser 1970). Participation programs can give other parties opportunity not only to experience the work in their own way, to speak about them (revealing or supporting alternative ideologies) but also provide opportunity for them to create new work to be experienced. Participants in gallery programmes can go on to become artists and perpetrate their voice and ability, to “speak”.

Considering these complex and intersectional theoretical frameworks, it seems that another model as opposed to a banking model could be more effectively used to describe the complex value of participation.

In “Let’s Create” (2019), Serota suggests the alternate model of the garden. But he uses it bluntly, desirous of a garden that can be annually harvested, rather than one that nurtures singular roses. Let us

consider, instead of a commercial vegetable garden where seeds are planted and by the end of the funding cycle the fruit are harvested (someone comes to an exhibition and is exposed to some culture, or is creative, and has therefore gained that experience and the arts council is valid in funding that institution) could we instead use the model of a flower garden, where value can be more dependent on time and investment. A garden allows for fallow times, needs nourishment and results in a harvest at different interludes, rather than constant, regular, even production. Someone may, over the years, revisit a garden, as a gardener or as a visitor and they may enjoy the view, or harvest the vegetables.

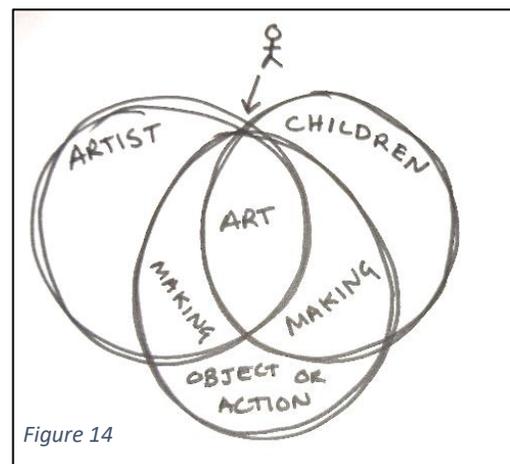
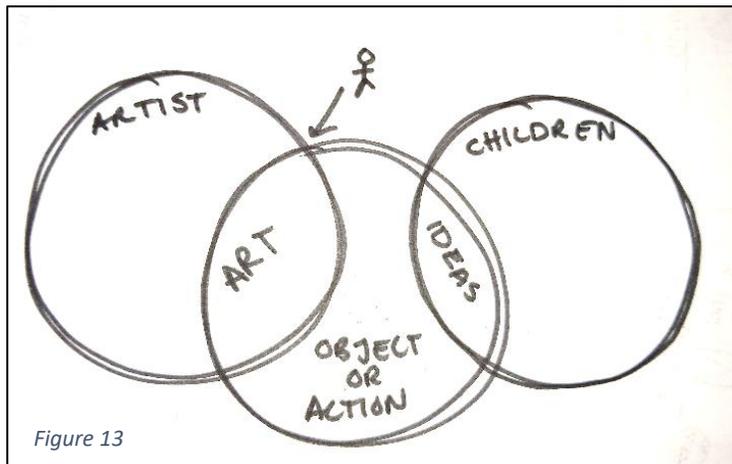
Rivane Neuenschwander's *The Name of Fear* project, (fig. 12) as part of the Children's Commission program at the Whitechapel gallery in 2015, is an interesting example to look at in relation to these models. Firstly, the terms used at the Whitechapel in their "learn" programme can be inspected. Firstly, the use of the word "learn" rather than "participation". This could suggest the Rancierian idea that there is something to be learnt by the participants in the "learn" programme. While this program includes cultural live art events, creative long-term projects, opportunities, and opportunities for artists' its terminology is a little confusing. The children's commission for examples, is not for children to participate in, or learn anything from, they are at most participants as material, and in fact some of the projects seem to simply take childhood as an abstract subject.



Figure 12 Image Credit: Richard Eaton

In "the Name of fear" Neuenschwander harvested ideas of fears and anxieties from a group of children. They were idea generators for her, like Bowie's use of William Burroughs 'Cut up technique' (Rae 2019). Although they got to participate in this phase of the project, they were then absent for the interpretation or germination of those ideas into garments. The gallery display was then made at the Whitechapel Gallery, and while the garments were displayed, they were not to be worn or touched rather like a flower arrangement. A room full of child sized capes just ready for wearing and yet they were only to be worn in a contained and documented fashion for an additional video to accompany the

exhibition on the gallery website. At all stages the children were secondary to the work and their participation relegated to the website and not the gallery. Ironically the children in question in the Childrens Commission got only a cultural experience as an audience of something that had utilised their creativity (fig. 13).



This project perhaps could have been more of an opportunity for authentic creative participation if Neuenschwander had taken a more 'Ignorant Schoolmaster role' and supported and nurtured the learners to design their own cloaks, allowed them and other audience members, especially other children, to wear and model them in the gallery and made their responses more central to the exhibition; creating a garden to visit, a place where growth and creativity are taking place in real time rather than documented for later edited viewing in a gallery / vase (fig. 14).

In wider participation terms, the artist would benefit from the creativity of the children as children have a creative experience in a gallery and parents are encouraged to visit the gallery space. People with interest in children's issues but not art might visit the gallery. All of these are more long-term seed sowing strategies, but in a garden model the extended period of germination, nourishment, tending and enjoyment in place is more fruitful than the immediate payoff of just harvesting immediately with no investment in long term outcomes.

From discussions at the Gasworks Gallery we considered that despite all the efforts of participation, education, learning and public teams across the art sector, the most authentic participation activity is hosting, where there is no agenda and no guidance. At a hosted event people come to a gallery space where there is art with no instruction or expectation to experience it. It therefore cannot be a correct or incorrect experience.

The Gasworks meeting room (fig. 15), which is used by community groups for non-art related meetings, and without the presence of Gasworks staff, has several works on the wall. What conversations will happen in the tea breaks? Participants in the meetings may or may not know they are in a gallery space, may or may not care, may have a response or may not, is unknown because this form of participation is not measured or recorded. We may know how many people entered the room, but perhaps one more question on a user feedback form could reveal some extremely useful information.



Figure 15

E.g.:

Was the room set up as requested?

Were the tea and coffee provided ok?

What did you think of the art in the room?

This engagement might lie fallow for many years before the individual returns to the vaguely remembered gallery, or this small seed of participation may result in a leaflet for an event being picked up and immediate engagement, the knowledge might be spread widely to others who then become participants, or suddenly flourish with the addition of the fertiliser of additional arts experience after some time.

To return to Andrea Frasers 1989 work “Museum Highlights”, the difficulties and pitfalls of trying to intentionally utilise audience as a material in an artwork are apparent. As part of her institutional critique-based practice Fraser staged guided tours of a gallery space showing the insignificant elements of the gallery as artwork. The audience was necessary for the artwork to exist, but the work soon developed a dual audience, one duped by the passive performance, and one aware of its happening going to view the duped as an active participant (Knížák pg. 135 in Bishop 2012). This created a layered audience with both materials in the work, with one knowing and one ignorant of their role. A “division between first- hand participants and secondary audience (‘temporary community’ versus ‘outside public’), and the division between artistic goals and problem solving / concrete outcomes” (Bishop 2012, pg. 19).

In this example the significance and impact of the “the mediating object, concept, image or story – is the necessary link between the artist and a secondary audience” (Bishop 2012, pg. 9) was usurped by the division between the two elements of the audience. The artwork was lost in the participation. If participations value is in enabling growth cultural, creative or otherwise in its participants, the duped were likely to have their willingness to attend such an event again reduced and the knowing audience has their feeling of superiority perpetuated.

### In Conclusion.

Not one single form of participation is correct or has more intrinsic “value”. In fact, the term can cover many disparate activities, some that cannot be compared to each other in any meaningful way. These activities can have short-term and long-term value to both artists, institutions and the participating public. Perhaps it is best to concede that for the best value from participation a gallery or museum needs to provide a range of opportunities for different participation from different publics. Some may take time to germinate and need fertilising, some will become pervasive weeds, some are grown to replenish the soil and others will bear fruit.

The recent pandemic and subsequent closure of galleries and museums has now revealed some further issues around participation. When entry fees and travel are no issue, when we can attend an exhibition if we have an internet link, what are audiences choosing to access? It will be interesting to see data produced during this time, but also the anecdotal information gathered. Will we go to see an exhibition if it’s not an opportunity to also meet with a friend? Do we want to visit the virtual gallery without the attached coffee shop and the behavior licensed there (Ratnam 2009)?

Many galleries are developing online participation program with a focus on “making” that was not apparent in previous participation offerings or are being forced to offer participation without in-person guidance from an artists or arts educator. The Royal Academy’s twitter requests for a silly dog show the delight in the untutored, the un curated and the immediate (Twitter, 2020) (fig. 16).

Are we now throwing wildflower seeds into our garden, and while we cannot tend it, will they will finally over grow the pruned roses?



Figure 16

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Institution websites:

Paul Hamlyn foundation [www.phf.org.uk](http://www.phf.org.uk)

Gasworks: [www.gasworks.org.uk](http://www.gasworks.org.uk)

Whitechapel: [www.whitechapelgallery.org/](http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/)