

# Boundaries of Participation

Ine Therese Berg

## Abstract

In this essay I explore three questions central in the current discourse on audience participation in theatre and performance. First, what do we mean when we talk about participation, and who is it really for? Second, are expectations that participation represents a democratization of the arts realistic, or is this an aspect of interactive and participatory theatre projects that is over-emphasized? And finally, how has critique against neoliberalist ideology come into the current discourse, and how relevant is this critique in the Norwegian context? I will not go into theoretical discussions on definitions and models of participation and interaction, or if theatre is always already participatory. Instead, I will focus on the ideals that are regularly attributed to participation, and the critique against participatory practices that have surfaced during the last decade. The text was originally developed as a keynote lecture for the 2021 *Join In - Participate in Your Life* conference in Bergen.

## About the author

Ine Therese Berg (PhD) is an associate professor in the department of Drama and Theatre at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Her doctoral research focused on audience participation in contemporary theatre. Amongst recent publications is the Arts Council report “Mobilisering for mobilitet. Fri scenekunst og formidling” in collaboration with Telemark Research Institute. Berg freelances as theatre critic, dramaturg and curator and has co-authored and edited several publications on Norwegian performing arts. She has previously worked as a curator of theatre history at Oslo Museum, advisor at Dance Information Norway and doctorate fellow at Oslo Metropolitan University.

E-post: inetberg@gmail.com

---

Teatervitenskapelige studier 2022 © Ine Therese Berg

Artikkelen er ikke fagfelleurdert./The article is not peer reviewed.

Nummerredaktører: Ellen K. Gjervan, Siren Leirvåg, Ragnhild Gjefsen, Ulla K. H. Kallenbach, Keld Hyldig

Ansvarlig redaktør: Keld Hyldig – [keld.hyldig@uib.no](mailto:keld.hyldig@uib.no)

Publisert av Teatervitenskap, Institutt for lingvistiske, litterære og estetiske studier, Universitetet i Bergen  
Bergen Open Access Publishing – <https://boap.uib.no/index.php/tvs>

ISSN: 2535-7662

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

## Boundaries of Participation

When I talk about the concept audience participation in lectures and discussions, I often begin by asking whomever I'm talking with what their associations are to "audience participation and theatre". Chances are that these are very different, depending on who I'm speaking to. A room of artists, cultural administrators, and drama pedagogues will have different reference points, not only depending on their own experience with participatory strategies in performance, but also according to the academic or artistic tradition and discipline that they identify participation with. What is certain is that the notion of participation is imbued with values. It is conceptually strongly related to the grassroot political movements of the 60's and 70's fight for democratization of society and institutions, and later to the networked cultures of the 80's and 90's that put individual freedom of expression at the centre. The last decade however, a substantial volume of critical scrutiny has surfaced and has been circulated widely, that connects participation to neoliberalist ideology where participatory strategies are used as tools of manipulation and exploitation of labour

In my PhD thesis *Negotiating the Participatory turn*,<sup>1</sup> I refer to Irit Rogoff and her idea that distinct styles or tropes that we call *turns*, are responses to particular problems that one seeks to resolve.<sup>2</sup> In the book *The gestures of participatory art* Performance theorist Sruti Bala elaborates on a similar point with regard to disciplinary distinctions of audience participation.<sup>3</sup> Bala suggests that different participatory practices seek to solve different problems. That means that a theatre for education practitioner in Dhaka, Bangladesh uses participation to different ends than an artist making performance art in a gallery in Bergen. They will have different ways of both understanding and facilitating participation. One of my own conclusions is that we need to be specific in how we engage with this concept, and to ask not only what kind of participation we are dealing with, but also who audience participation is really serving?

### Different discourses

Having introduced the complexity and controversy surrounding this concept, I will unpack some of the issues at stake in the current discourse on participatory theatre practices. I will focus on several different discourses that develop in relation to different artistic, political and pedagogical projects that I generalise as two overarching traditions. On the one hand are pedagogical and political practices like theatre in education, community theatre, socially engaged art, drama pedagogics, theatre for development, psychodrama, and different types of activist theatre. As mentioned, these historically emanate from radical political movements that sought reform or overturn of existing institutions, and empowering people through participatory artistic strategies. Augusto Boal is an influential figure in many of these practices. A critique of society and oppressive politics was his background and motivation for developing a specific set of tools and practices with political, and later personal empowerment and solidarity as central goals. Boal's methods, like invisible theatre and forum theatre, are intentionally developed outside of an art world context, instead seeking to bridge the schism between art and life and lodging the aesthetic into the everyday, involving people that for different reasons are disempowered.

---

<sup>1</sup> Berg, *Negotiating the Participatory Turn*.

<sup>2</sup> Rogoff, «Turning», 1.

<sup>3</sup> Bala, *The gestures of participatory art*.

On the other hand, are participatory practices that operate within the art and theatre institutions, as distinct works of art. These practices are today often described with terms like interactive theatre, immersive theatre, and of course participatory theatre. We could also include certain citizen theatre practices in this categorization. Such practices often seek to bridge the gap between actor and audience, activating the audience from a perceived state of passivity. Many of the practices where the audience replace professional actors and/or other jobs found in the theatre, rest on the authenticity of the so-called regular people, as demonstrated in the concept of *the expert of the everyday*. It was coined by the German theatre collective Rimini Protokoll to describe their cast of non-professional performers.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, immersive theatre is another theatrical “genre” of sorts, with a strong emphasis on participation. Immersive theatre generally works on heightening the sensory experience of the audience by placing them in the midst of the theatrical action in different ways.<sup>5</sup>

Describing these practices as two distinct fields is, as mentioned, a generalization, and there are many overlaps particularly in methods that are used to get people to take part. What is clear is that from a relatively experimental and marginal practice, audience participation has gone mainstream. In my opinion, one of the reasons the concept of participation is increasingly problematized, is that the political, radical values that initially were imbued in the term, do not necessarily align with the values of the many contexts that it now appears in. Imagine a local community theatre project run by people that live in the community, where the audience is mostly neighbours, friends and family, and the locals themselves make up the bulk of the artistic team. Such a project is organized very differently to a theatre project initiated by a theatre or a professional artist, where selected members of a local community are actively recruited into the artistic project, and where the finished performance will be shown in a regular theatre venue for a general audience. Both projects might align themselves with values like engagement, democracy and agency, but in which project do you think the participants are likely to have the most influence? Art and theatre institutions come with a set of expectations related to professional roles and artistic quality that often limit the influence participants have in the theatre-making process. In many cases audience participation in theatre has been de-politicized, and instead been aestheticized. Let me unpack this further, in terms of *power*.

### **The power in participation**

A political definition of full participation is according to political theorist Carol Pateman that all involved parties should be able to influence the outcome of the process, while in partial participation the final decision-making rests with one party only.<sup>6</sup> Although I don't think that full participation should be a normative ideal for all participatory theatre practices, I find this definition useful when discussing participatory projects both inside and outside the art institution. It's useful as a way of uncovering the power relations within a specific process, and to determine how intentions might match up to the realities. This is particularly important in participation that is initiated by an artist, pedagogue or other professional, or an institution, either a theatre, a non-governmental organisation, or a school. In these instances, the impulse to take part does not arise from the potential participants themselves, they are instead invited to take part within a fixed, pre-defined framework that they have more or less power to influence. In many cases, such as in a classroom situation, there is not necessarily a way to refrain from participation without being negatively sanctioned. In a theatre context non-participation could mean you as an audience might

---

<sup>4</sup> Malzacher, “Dramaturgies of care and insecurity”, 23.

<sup>5</sup> For definitions of immersive theatre see Machon, *Immersive theatres*, 58-69.

<sup>6</sup> Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, 69-71.

become extremely visible or miss out of the experience entirely. If your intention as an artist or a pedagogue is to use participation as a way of giving the audience increased agency, and to create a space that is more democratic, a reflection on your own role in setting the terms of participation is an absolute necessity. Using established methods of participation are not a guarantee that an open democratic and engaging process will follow. After all, Boal's invisible theatre is today used in safety training in the Norwegian oil and fishery sector, by artists that use the methods commercially.<sup>7</sup> This example is a reminder that an important step in starting a collaboration, is to think through the power relations that always already are inscribed in any room or context, and what conflicts of interest might arise.

From a positive, and perhaps utopian belief in what participation can achieve, the discussion has shifted towards a much more critical and often negative, or at least sceptical approach.

Overall, the critique of participatory practices centres around two different critical strands. First, that the ideals and positive connotations that we relate to participation such as *empowerment*, *agency*, *emancipation*, *democratization*, *engagement*, and *community* are often empty promises since the frameworks and context of the participatory practices do not necessarily allow for these complex and long-term effects to take place.

In recent literature on immersive theatre in particular, words such as *coercion* and *manipulation* are commonly used in analyses of such performances.<sup>8</sup> Typical examples of such manipulation and coercion are performances where audience are challenged to do different tasks, either with the promise of a more rewarding experience, or at the risk of looking like a fool in the eyes of other audiences. Some immersive performances have plots where the artists use different methods to enhance the feeling of excitement and risk of the audience participants, from locking them in, to blindfolding them, to leading them into mazes like routes in a city or a building. As is often the case with audience participation and theatre, the audience take part, but they have very limited choices. Nevertheless, the audience are often ticket buyers actively seeking out this specific type of theatrical experience, not specifically because they are seeking a democratic process. An artful manipulation might be welcomed as an aesthetic quality, after all contemporary art has often celebrated the provocative, uncomfortable and the challenging aesthetic experience.

In debates on applied theatre practices there are larger things at stake, because there might not be a way *not* to take part. A famous example at the extreme end that you might be familiar with is the Philippine Cebu prison inmates dancing to Michael Jackson's song *They don't really care about us*. This is criticized by Sruti Bala, among others, on the grounds that the prison inmates allegedly can't say no to take part in the mass choreography and be paraded in front of the world on YouTube, in what may be a publicity stunt masked as rehabilitation.<sup>9</sup> A common critique towards theatre for development, and other socially engaged theatre practices is in fact that an agenda from the outside is forced onto an existing community or marginalized group, leading to further marginalization rather than the intended empowerment. Such a critique is directed by several scholars at NGO funded HIV/AIDS projects on the African continent,<sup>10</sup> where methods like forum theatre is used as a tool to educate the public on safe sex, regardless of

---

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Norwegian company Splint. <http://www.splint.no/forside> See also lecture manuscript by Eli Rongved on working with forum theatre in safety training in fishery (in Norwegian) at [http://www.stamiweber.no/hefa2002/Forelesninger\\_pdf/Innlegg%20Eli%20Rongved%20pdf.pdf](http://www.stamiweber.no/hefa2002/Forelesninger_pdf/Innlegg%20Eli%20Rongved%20pdf.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, Frieze (ed.), *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, and Sherman, *A Strange Proximity*.

<sup>9</sup> Bala, *ibid.*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Chinyowa, "Participation as 'repressive myth'".

concerns that might be of more relevance to the local community – and the actors involved in the project. The problem here is the assumption of knowing what a community cares about and treating them as one group. It is an example where having too much of a specific message and predefined agenda is at odds with the democratic agency of the participants.

### Participation and ideology

Another critical perspective relates to a more art-specific set of concerns and is not so much related to disintegration of the ideals that we attach to participation. Instead, it has to do with the ideals that we attach to art, namely the idea that participation diminishes the quality and integrity of the artistic work, and furthermore that participation removes the critical distance of the participant to the work in question. Two central references here are Jacques Rancière<sup>11</sup> and Claire Bishop.<sup>12</sup> Their shared notion of aesthetic experience is that in the moment of engaging directly with the work in participatory theatre and art you lose track of the machinations of that work, thus you are not able to see through its ideological ramifications. In other words, the emancipated spectator is not a participating spectator, but one that is able to maintain a critical distance. As I argue in *Participation to the People*<sup>13</sup> this is however a theoretical argument that does not hold up to actual audience experiences of audience members of the performance *Home Visit Europe*, by Rimini Protokoll.<sup>14</sup> Although, it might be problematic to generalize from a limited number of audience interviews, it seems self-contradictory that Rancière's argument around the capable audience is negated by participation. Spectatorship in general involves shift between different modes of perception, between engagement and critical distance. Willmar Sauter's empirical research on audience reception and concept of theatrical events<sup>15</sup> supports the notion that performance is something that audiences process in its aftermath. That means even deep involvement and immersion has the potential to be followed by critical reflection. The point here is not to reject Rancière and Bishop's important and necessary deflation of the utopian dream of participation, but to find a more pragmatic middle ground that treats projects individually.

Rancière and Bishop have spearheaded a shift in the discourse on participation both in academia and to some extent in the practice field. In fact, we could in many ways say that connotations to the concept itself have undergone an ideological U-turn. In the book *Beyond Immersive theatre*,<sup>16</sup> British theatre researcher Adam Alston argues that audiences not only become self-conscious, individualistic, narcissistic, and that engaging with the immersive strategies of companies like Punchdrunk requires a form of entrepreneurialism. He succinctly describes masked audience members in *Sleep No More* hustling to make the most of their experience,<sup>17</sup> and this type of audience participation is analysed as representing a neoliberal ethos of individualism and productivity. Alston is concerned with “[...] how neoliberalism applies to immersion and participation of audiences who are encouraged to commit to an entrepreneurial form of productivity as an ultimate dimension of value and meaning.”<sup>18</sup> He relates this to the concept *experience economy* where individual enterprise and profit maximizing is at the ideological centre. In this perspective participation disguises itself as individual liberation but places the responsibility on audiences

---

<sup>11</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop, *Artificial Hells*.

<sup>13</sup> Berg, «Participation to the people», 176-177.

<sup>14</sup> Bergen, 2015, <https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project/hausbesuch-europa>.

<sup>15</sup> Sauter, “Who reacts when, how and upon what”, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Alston, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 129-140.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 129.

to make the most of aesthetic experiences, as we are individually responsible of making the most of all parts of life, health, career etcetera.

The creative labour of the audience participant is a central concept in the discourse on participation, and it is shared by scholars like Bishop, Alston, and Jen Harvie. In *Fair Play. Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, Harvie writes that many participatory practices depend on the creative, usually unpaid labour of the participants, who are often rendered invisible when the credit for the project is given.<sup>19</sup> This is seen as exploitative, and as contributing to undercut the need for proper public funding for art projects. When artists work with unpaid volunteers, and amateur actors that are also unpaid, when they make performances in public places and raise the attractiveness of the area, or take the responsibility of addressing social problems in a community, or when they collaborate with real estate investors who get tax breaks if they let artists use their often empty buildings for free, they are part of an economy where the art sector is no longer seen as a common good worth funding in itself, but is measured in how it contributes to the economy.<sup>20</sup> Even though this is a critical perspective well worth considering, I will put forward that it places individual responsibility on the single artist to resist an economic logic that we are all immersed in, not only in the UK, but globally. I would say that this type of ideological critique should not overshadow the artistic contributions that are possible to achieve through participatory strategies, that need not be *either* exploitative *or* emancipatory. Rather, audience participation can be something to approach with care, self-reflexivity, and perhaps also a grain of salt.

### **Participation is political**

It is no coincidence that the references in this essay are predominantly British theatre and performance scholars, as they represent particularly sustained research on participatory theatre forms, especially in the areas of applied and immersive theatre. As I see it, *one* of the reasons that there is large focus on this is the stimuli that both artists and institutions in the UK receive to work on audience outreach from funding bodies, like the Arts Council. Because there are cultural political incentives to support audience participation both in the UK and in many other European countries theatre and participation is today a political matter not only a question of aesthetic and dramaturgical strategies that carry ideological connotations. The choice whether or not to include elements of audience participation can influence artists chances of receiving public funding, as I show in the article “Norwegian Theatre – a blind spot on cultural policy’s participatory agenda?”<sup>21</sup>

Compared to countries like the UK and Denmark audience participation is on the cultural political agenda in a different way than in Norway, where it is sparingly mentioned in relation to the professional theatre scene. In other words, audience participation is not set apart as cultural political goal or expectation. Audience participation has been more common to see in theatre and dance for a young audience, than in performances for adults. However, the covid lockdowns and restrictions on social gatherings have led Norwegian artists and institutions to explore new sites for theatre production, and this has led to an influx of pedestrian performances, audio tours, and other performances that place the audience more at the centre of the theatrical action. Only some of these performances rhetorically frame the work with reference to participation and the ideals surrounding it, and perhaps rightly so. In my understanding and

---

<sup>19</sup> Harvie, *Fair Play*, chapter 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> Berg, “Norwegian Theatre – a blind spot on cultural policy’s participatory agenda?”.

use of the concept of participation, I suggest separating between interaction and participation, to better mark projects that, to paraphrase Pateman, allow the audience to influence the outcome of the performance. That is to avoid watering down the politics of participation, and to encourage a clearer understanding of what type of negotiations and power relations that are present in performances that seek to involve audiences directly into its action.

The consequence of the insights in this essay and in the research conducted in my PhD is that we need to take care when we use the concept participation, whether it is used for research purposes, in policy making and planning or to describe and frame artistic practices. This is particularly important in theatre for a young audience, or in contexts where participation is often intended to be a source of empowerment and learning.

## Bibliography

- Alston, Adam. *Beyond Immersive Theatre. Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Berg, Ine Therese. "Participation to the People". *Nordic Theatre Studies*, Vol. 29, No.2 (March 2017): 162-183. <https://doi.org/10.7146/nts.v29i2.104610>.
- Berg, Ine Therese. "Norwegian Theatre – a blind spot on cultural policy’s participatory agenda?" *Nordic Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (September 2019): 26–49  
<https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN2000-8325-2019-01-03>.
- Berg, Ine Therese. *Negotiating the Participatory Turn: Audience Participation in Contemporary Theatre and Performance*. Ph.D-thesis. NTNU. 2020.
- Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells*. London, New York: Verso, 2012.
- Chinyowa, Kennedy C.. "Participation as ‘repressive myth’: a case study of the Interactive Themba Theatre Organisation in South Africa". *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 20:1 (2015): 12-23, DOI: [10.1080/13569783.2014.975109](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2014.975109).
- Frieze, James (ed.). *Reframing Immersive Theatre. The politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Harvie, Jen. *Fair Play*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Machon, Josephine. *Immersive Theatres. Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Malzacher, Florian. "Dramaturgies of care and insecurity". *Experts of the Everyday. The theatre of Rimini Protokoll*. Edited by Miriam Dreyses and Florian Malzacher, 14-43. Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2008.
- Pateman, Carol. *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.  
doi:10.1017/CBO9780511720444.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London, New York: Verso, 2009.

Rogoff, Irit. "Turning". *e-flux journal*, Issue #00 (November 2008). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68470/turning>

Sauter, Willmar. *The theatrical event: Dynamics of performance and perception*. University of Iowa Press, 2000.

Sherman, Jon Foley. *A Strange Proximity. Stage presence, failure, and the ethics of attention*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.