



Participatory Art for Invisible Communities

P A I C

**edited by
Irena Sertić**

Participatory Art for Invisible Communities

PAIC



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Contents:

I. PARTICIPATION, CULTURE AND EMANCIPATION

8 Participatory Culture in Knowledge Society

- Irena Sertić

44 The Transformative Impact of Participatory Arts

- Simon Taylor

53 Participation, Culture and Community: Opportunities for Community Cultural Management

- Judit Font

58 Helene Thuemmel

59 Power to the Viewer

- Randall Packer

67 Meetings on the common ground

- Anna Dot

74 Artistic methods for user participation – Participation

- Kenneth A. Balfelt

II. PARTICIPATORY ART

98 PAIC Framework: Participatory Art “Scenario” and “Narrative”

- Irena Sertić, Josipa Bubaš, Kristina Steinbock, Peter Purg, Ramon Paramon

110 Aesthetics of Collaboration

- Ramon Parramon

121 Consensual Art: Methodologies Applied in Participatory Art

- Miquel García Membrado

130 A Village Growing Cultural Ambition: The Case of Two PAIC Workshops in Osek, Slovenia 2016-2017

- Peter Purg

144 Participatory Video Then and Now: Critically Positioning Practice (again) Between the Transformational Intentions and the Shifting Policy Agendas - Jacqueline Shaw

157 Torresoto Visual: A participatory Video Project in the District Context

- Inma Parra

164 Selam Selam

169 Tools and Challenges: Artist’s Reflection on the Implementation and Execution of Mass-Participation Projects in Residential Communities

- Carly Schmitt

179 Questions I can’t answer

- François Matarasso

181 Does the impact of participatory arts endure over time?

Longitudinal research and strengthening the case for participatory arts and media

- Tiffany Fairey

187 An Attempt to Delineate: Sheelagh Colclough in conversation with artists Charlotte Bosanquet and Sally Young, Belfast, 2018

- Sheelagh Colclough

193 Sensorial Theatre Sensorium: Participation as Interaction with Audience

- Barbara Pia Jenič

199 Un-doing the war via participatory practice

- Nela Milic

204 Participatory arts and peacebuilding: Embodying and Challenging Reconciliation

- Tiffany Fairey

215 The dynamics between artists and Participatory Art projects

- Kristina Elisabeth Steinbock

220 Tools and Methods in Participatory Art Practices: How Transitional Space Contributed to Children's Sense of Belonging in the 'Belong' Project, Jelling, Denmark

- Lucy Read, Rachel Faulkner and Amanda John

227 Participatory Arts building community connections: Laboratori Social Metropolità. Sabadell (LSM)

- Anna Recasens

236 Give Youngsters a Voice: Tools and Methods in Participatory Art practices

- Bálint Komenczi and Balázs Rózsa

III. PARTICIPATION: PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION

244 Playful Imagination and Artistic Hospitality: open spaces for exploratory and emancipatory learning

- Daniela Brasil

256 Participatory Art as Pedagogy for Contextualized Learning

- Carolina Blatt-Gross, Ph.D.

266 Postgenerational gazes

- Judit Onsès, Carlos Canales, and Àngel Garau

IV. PARTICIPATION AS STRATEGIC TOOL IN MUSEUMS

274 Connecting School, Museum and General Public Through an Arts-based Performative Research

- Judit Onsès & Anna Majó

283 Reconstructing MNAC: Participation and Accessibility in the National Museum of Contemporary Art of Romania

- Urša Valič

MEETINGS ON THE COMMON GROUND

Anna Dot

Abstract

The north-american mathematician and computer scientist Warren Weaver was one of the first enthusiasts of the machine translation technologies. On a memorandum written in 1949 he compared the experience of translation with the meeting of individuals, who were first closed in their own towers, on a common ground. Weaver imagined that it should be in this «great open basement, common to all» (1949, p. 11), where communication with those who have also descended from their towers should be easy. The author used the figure of the common ground to theorize on the possibility of a universal language that could be used in machine translation processes.

However, this is not the reason why we have found interest on the analogy described by Weaver. Instead, we have revisited it to establish a dialog between the possibility of meeting on a common ground and the notions of normality and engagement which, according to Indian literary theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, are essential for any encounter and exchange between different-status individuals to happen (Spivak, 1995, p. xxv). By doing this, we put emphasis on acts of care and affection which may ensure a closer and long-term approach between non-identicals while transgressing the norms of political correctness. At this point, we defend the potential of the artistic practices to generate a participatory context where normality, affection and engagement are the main characteristics of that common ground where encounters may be possible. In this order of things, the artist is seen as the one who can work on the tasks of building the scenario and caring for all the agents that are supposed to meet on it.

This paper is based on the study of the Translation Studies literature but also on the analysis of some artistic experiences of participatory practices led by Spanish projects such as Nyamnyam and Deriva Musol.

Keywords: common ground; secret encounters; affection; engagement; translation.

Descending the towers

In 1954, engineers and computer scientists working for IBM in the United States carried on the first public demonstration of a machine translation experiment. In it, a series of sentences written in Russian were automatically translated to English by an IBM 701 computer. One of the translated sentences was: “International understanding constitutes an important factor in decision of political questions” (IBM, 1954). This phrase could be interpreted as the main statement which motivated all economic and human investment in research on the automation of translation in the West during the Cold War. In a context of conflict, the possibility of understanding between non-identicals meant, as well, the possibility of political action in response to the state of conflict.

In fact, a similar approach was already uttered in 1947, by the American mathematician Warren Weaver, one of the earliest enthusiasts about translation technologies and at that time director of the Natural Sciences Division at the Rockefeller Foundation. In a letter he wrote to Prof. Norbert Wiener (the so-called father of cybernetics), Weaver argued about the significant role that translation, conceived as “the communication between peoples”, had in any project for the creation of a “constructive and peaceful future of the planet” (1949, p. 4). Two years later, in 1949 he wrote a memo-

randum to thirty of his influential contacts in which he described translation as a world-wide problem that could be solved by “the use of electronic computers of great capacity, flexibility and speed” (1949, p. 1). Weaver’s expectations on the effectiveness of the automation of translation was based on the belief that all human languages share a same structure; that there is a level “where they exhibit common traits” (1949, p. 11). To illustrate this, he used the following analogy:

Think (...) of individuals living in a series of tall closed towers, all erected over a common foundation. When they try to communicate with one another they shout back and forth, each from his own closed tower. It is difficult to make the sound penetrate even the nearest towers, and communication proceeds very poorly indeed. But when an individual goes down his tower, he finds himself in a great open basement, common to all the towers. Here he establishes easy and useful communication with the persons who have also descended from their towers. (1949, p. 11)

The (ideal) common ground

Even though Weaver’s image makes quite a lot of sense to me, the theory that it is supposed to illustrate has not really been of use to computational linguists and computer scientists working on translation technologies’ development. As far as I am concerned, a linguistic structure common to all human languages has not yet been found. However, in the subtext of Weaver’s description of the towers’ scenario I find the fo-

llowing series of ideas which, although may not lead us to an “international understanding” by automatic processes and computational means, at least may pave the way to the setting of a scene where communication between peoples could take place:

- Beyond each one’s cultural identity and distinctive social features, there are traits that we all share as human beings.
- Communication between peoples may be possible not only by means of verbal utterances, but also by other sensorial experiences.
- The sharing of the common traits between non-identicals are acts of political implications that can have transformative consequences on many social levels.
- In order to have a conscious, shared experience of the common traits between non-identicals, each subject must get down to a deep level of her own distinctiveness. Moreover, she must be willing to move across the uncertainty that may generate the meeting with other, sometimes different and even incomprehensible, features of cultural distinctiveness.
- Meetings on the common ground transgress norms of political correctness; errors and accidents are tolerated and even welcome.

At this point, we could simply describe that “great open basement, common to all towers” as a common ground where encounters and exchanges between peoples are possible. It would be as an independent football field that neither belonged to any local team, nor was mediated by any arbitrator. As such, it would be a place where each subject could easily recognize the action that was taking place and felt free to participate of it at any moment, in her own way, regardless of her cultural and social distinctiveness. The Indian literary and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak used the notion of “secret encounters” to refer

to meetings and exchanges to which non-identical individuals have been invited to engage by some kind of authority. Think, for example, of the teacher that on the first day of the course invites all kids in her group to do a picnic in the park, as a non-mandatory activity, in order to improve the kids’ relationship between one another. According to Spivak, encounters of this kind are only possible “when the respondents inhabit something like normality” (1995, p. xxv). For this, I would understand that those invited to take part in the action should feel that there is nothing that they may do incorrectly; they should get a sense of familiarity with the task at hands. Moreover, it is important to add that the particularity of Spivak’s secret encounters is a slight individual feeling of not being fully comprehended; even though one may be willing to reveal something, there may be “a sense that something has not got across” (1995, p. xxv). I would say that this is due, precisely, to each one’s distinguishing features that differentiate her from all the others who also descended from their towers to the common ground.

Common traits: Walking, talking, cooking, eating

Even though the fact of being something “common” is supposed to be the specific characteristic of the common ground, I cannot make sure the place is really frequented. Norms regulating life and action at a global scale instituted by dominant social systems do not make it easy for secret encounters between non-identicals to happen, at least not in the sense that Spivak gave to this notion. There is, however, a bit of light coming from the terrain of the arts. Some call it “participatory arts”, and some others just call it “art”. Regardless of how you would like to tag it, I am referring to a certain kind of collective experiences of the com-

mon ground that have been set by artists. Before getting further into theory, I will share two of them with you.

First, it was the walking and the talking. It was back in 2013, when ACVic, the local arts center of Vic, hosted the project *Deriva Mussol* (its literal translation would be “owl drift”), led by artists Jordi Lafon and Eva Marichalar with the collaboration of the *Aula de Teatre* (a theater group) of the University of Vic. They wanted to collectively create a theatrical proposal that would take place in the streets of Vic. Besides this desire, the only thing they knew is that they wanted to open the process of creation to everyone, so that everyone who wanted could participate in it. In order to do so, they invited people to go deriving at night with them through the streets of Vic to wherever the walking would take them. Even though a feeling of awkwardness may awaken to some people when hearing or reading the word “derive” (I would not say it is a really “common” word), in fact, the instructions were so simple that they could be reduced to two keywords: night, walk. Nothing else. The invitation was



“Deriva Mussol’s night walk”. Image: courtesy of the artists.



“Deriva Mussol’s *parlem*”. Image: courtesy of the artists.

communicated by ACVic. Everyone was invited. By doing this, they had set up a common ground for secret encounters to happen. At least once per week, different peoples, of different ages, coming from many backgrounds and with different interests walked together without any other expectation than simply this: walking together.

There was nothing that could go wrong. The possibility of doing something wrongly did not exist. Even the common civil laws and social rules of political correctness where almost forgotten thanks to the fact of walking by night guided by curiosity, spontaneity and a playful attitude. Streets were empty; no one was watching. They did 12 derives. Some people went just once and it was okay. Some people participated in all of them and it was also okay. In any case, as Marichalar wrote, a stable group of 10 people was progressively constituted (2013, p. 29). Each deriving session was complemented by another session, called “Parlem” (“let’s talk”) dedicated to talking about the experience. All the members of the group met around a table and shared whatever they wanted to with the others; photos, videos, drawings, maps, thoughts,

whatever. After the 12 sessions they had an idea for a theatrical proposal that took finally place and that was presented to the public as a street art performance. From my point of view, the fact that this performance was useful to communicate and share the project with more people is something secondary, if we compare it to the importance that it had for the group of walkers and talkers as a self-representation. In other words, it was a representation of, precisely, themselves as a group; a kind of family.

Then, it came the cooking and the eating. It happened in 2014 one day that I had left my house with the idea of getting to somewhere called Nyamnyam, where the presentation of a theater series had to take place. I had seen the event on Facebook. When I arrived to the so-called *espai Nyamnyam*, I found myself in an apartment in Barcelona surrounded by unknown people who in a very relaxed and familiar way cooked and ate. I knew I was not in the wrong place because I remember reading what seemed to be the theater series' program written with pencil on the living room's white wall and I recognized some artists amongst those who were cooking, eating and very informally chatting. Someone invited me to have a drink, to grab some food from the table, and I smoothly got into the action, not without losing a strong feeling of weirdness and misplacement. Finally, I got to know the hosts: Iñaki Álvarez and Ariadna Rodríguez. I understood something like those two artists wanted to do something with art and food and it would consist of a theater series entitled "Todo lo que me gusta es ilegal, inmoral o engorda". During half a year, each month an artist or a group of artists would be working at Nyamnyam and every Thursday, at lunchtime, there would be theater or performance sessions and attendants would also have lunch.

Because it all happened at Ariadna and Iñaki's home, around a table, while having lunch, it was easy for attendants to get engaged into action, even though nobody was really asked to do so. What getting engaged to those sessions at Nyamnyam meant was not only participating in the artistic proposal that took place, but also to do very familiar actions like helping to serve the dishes, or clearing the table. However, as nobody was asked to do anything in particular, as it happened in Deriva Mussol's walks, there was nothing that could go wrong. The public was not a public but people around a same table eating and living together an experience. From my perspective, the role of the artists invited to work in Nyamnyam consisted mainly on setting the scene of what we have been calling "a common ground"; a place where secret encounters could happen. The relationship that the attendants to those sessions have with one another and even with Ariadna, Iñaki or the artists that led each session is one of closeness and familiarity.

Settings of the common ground

Whether it was Warren Weaver seeking for "international understanding" to happen, or it was the teacher inviting the kids to a picnic, they both should think of certain details that would determine the limits of the common ground: a date and time for the meeting to start, the place where it would take place, or the guests. In other words: they would have to set the scene of the common ground. In fact, it was what Deriva Mussol or Nyamnyam did and still do. Because both projects acted as invitations to take part into a simple activity, no further rules were necessary for any of them to be developed with the participation of whoever

ver wanted to take part of it. Instead, it was a consequence of the balance between each one's freedom of engaging or not in the activity and the feeling of familiarity after a certain number of sessions (walks with Deriva Mussol or lunches at Nyamnyam), that a set of unspoken rules of the action taking place on the common ground slowly flourished. Rules that were fluid, temporal and unstable. Rules that emerged as a choreography of the habit. Rules that were fragile and contingent; they depended on each subject's participation, mood and engagement.

A project that seeks the participation of non-identical subjects should be open to the unexpected, otherwise participants may feel easily judged, frustrated or demotivated, and they may easily give up. In fact, in contrast to normal, institutional norms that rule our life as citizens, rules of the common ground grow from interpersonal exchanges motivated by the feelings and acts of care that emerge when individuals become members of a group dedicated to share common traits; experiences such as walking or eating together. These are rules that do not come from a higher authority but are generated by all the members of the group. These conditions bring normality and produce engagement. Setting the scene of the common ground where these dynamics can take place requires a certain disposition to work with uncertainty. I would say that this is something artists are specially good at. As Canadian theorist Stephen Wright has argued, «art tends to know intuitively and by definition that other worlds are plausible, flattering itself as being one of the more sophisticated launch pads for world multiplication» (2013, p. 8). Setting a common ground is building the scenario for those other worlds, which we may still ignore, can exist. The potentiality of each common ground depends on the value that the artist

gives to each individual's everyday practices or, as Wright has described them, those practices “employed to navigate daily life and to sustain relations, the practices which are at the heart of social transformation long before we are able to name it as such” (2013, p. 25).

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