PARTICIPATORY ART REDEFINES THE PUBLIC: FROM INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE TO CRITICAL SPATIAL PRACTICE. TOWARDS A TRANSMISSION THEORY ON EDGEWARE ROAD, LONDON.

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay we will attempt to undertake a reading of the way in which Hannah Arendt’s conceptualisation of ‘public space’ as ‘the space of appearances’ can provide a critical basis upon which to consider how participatory art practice attempt to mediate a city. In order to ground this a little bit more firmly within an urban site, the essay will describe three galleries on the eastern side of Edgware Road in the Church Street Ward, which address urban residents and local issues as participants within art practice. To detail the differing ways that these galleries facilitate ‘makes space for appearance’ by locating, assembling and curating public space, and how this addresses ongoing negotiations about ‘regeneration’ throughout Westminster borough. The text will be interspersed with email correspondence describing the process of writing the text and the development of the ideas behind it.

Email, 22.29, September 21st from Tom Percival: “…if we’re going to write together, we’ll have to work out the best way to share documents, ideas and arguments. I think it would be a good idea for you to take read this piece by Suzanne Lacy called ‘Truisms about Art’: particularly number 22 ‘don’t run people’s lives for them’…”

In Seyla Benhabib’s the Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt (2003), the author demonstrates why she is one of the most cautious and determined of Arendt’s readers. She writes that Arendt’s 1958 book, The Human Condition, should be considered as part of a broader ‘dialogue’ with Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology. This dialogue firstly take up the task of setting up a series of oppositions between their philosophical manoeuvres, with Arendt being concerned with, what Benhabib calls ‘the life of action’ to ground political philosophy, distinguishing it from with the ontological grounding that Heidegger offers with the ‘thrownness’ and givenness of being’. This action would come from a diverse grouping of persons working together to undertake political action as collective praxis. Arendt writes, “the only true actors in the modern world are scientists and artists,
and neither of these groups can be seen as furnishing the space for a renewed political community” (quotes in Kohn 2002, 124-125).

Arendt’s pessimism about the role of such ‘true actors’ is startling. We might want to outline how such an opposition continues to be at play in the way that Heidegger’s hierarchical phenomenological structures have been taken up in the work of Object Orientated Ontology philosophers, who work up aspects of Heidegger’s ‘tool making’. Arendt has largely been ignored as a valuable interlocutor to the Heideggerian notion of the ‘life of the mind’ and with the rising prominence of a ‘tool-making’ ontology associated with Actor Network Theory and Object Orientated Ontology, an epistemic disprivileging is demonstrated by ignoring Arendt’s contributions to a ‘praxis metaphysics’. We can read Arendt’s contributions to thinking spatial politics as providing a point of departure for Judith Butler’s work on political boundaries, but strangely not other ‘reluctant moderns’ (Butler 2012; Latour 2013).

In this sense, the background to this essay is to introduce the question of why Arendt’s schematic plans for how to think through the ‘conditions’ of heterogeneous public space, which takes ‘action’, ‘labour’ and ‘commoning’ as vital ontological categories, and has not been renewed importance for theorists of urban space, politics and community-making?

Email, 22.19, September 23rd, from Tom Percival: “I have some more truisms for this piece. Truism number 5 about the Mediated City: The city is never not made in the making. Truism 17 about the Mediated City: It’s very easy to get lost when you’re GPS locatable. It’s surprising hard to stop writing them, I might make a piece with them inserted into ‘urban crackers.’”

Email 09.33, September 25th, from Tom Percival, “I’ve got a lot of work to do, the council are coming by, they want to review all of the public art projects that we have been doing, and I am going to have to stay in the gallery all weekend as we have a show running. Check out the application for the next round of internships. Titles of the applications: B. Scott, Interested in night work, shift work, sleep deprivation etc. Magda is interested in working with 'minority' groups. I think she will be hosted by the Arab Advice Bureau but this hasn't been confirmed yet. Matt is a sound artist interested in working with a deaf-blind group and making work in response to a site being developed next to Finsbury Park station. He was talking about putting sensors in the new buildings concrete floors and walls, so that they would have live vibration/sound data to work with.”

In Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt (1989), Leah Bradshaw describes Arendt’s argument about what make political action not just possible, but realisable, writes that, for Arendt “action and speech are the supreme expressions of civilization, for they reveal plurality and freedom as constitutive elements of a distinctly human existence” (Bradshaw 1989: 2). Jerome Kohn notes that for Arendt, “life cannot be fully achieved by labourers, workers, or even by great artists, by anyone who strives to attain ends, whatever they may be, to which their own activity is a means” (Kohn 2002: 124-5). Instead of such a means-ends rationale, it is the ‘connecting of activities’ within a ‘world of appearances’ that ‘renewed political community’ may be achieved, not as an ‘end-state’, but part of the ongoing production of spaces for free action in concert with others.

As Arendt provides a historical analysis of the way that city-spaces, dating this to the Greek polis, allowed citizenship to be conferred onto its residents, produced the legal concept of private property
and differentiated territory as public, private, and social, we might note some limitations to the application of Arendt’s critique to contemporary cities. A principal danger in thinking through Arendt’s work on ‘public space’ as the ‘space of appearance’ lies in way that the metaphysic constructs a political philosophy that is firstly critical of the ‘modern production of space’ – that is, through collapsing public space being replaced by the ‘social’ – so as to put forward a particular form of liberal modernism that is naturalised through its origination within Greco-Roman law (Arendt 1998: 40). Arendt using this as a starting point for a broader critique of the intrusion of ‘social concerns’ that prevent ‘political action’, instead, which making way for ‘administration of life’ through statistical reasoning and the obviation of citizens’ freedom to act in concert with others.

As Arendt sets up an opposition between the ‘social’ – which she describes as emerging during the early 20th century so as to stifle public debate and political action – and the ‘public’, there is some value in exploring the usage of these two categories in the practices of a group of contemporary artists working in urban spaces. Such art practice responds to a form of ‘critical engagement’, which we will be calling, in general terms, ‘participatory art’. Such practice is often said to include forms of Social Art Practice, Site-Specific, Critical Spatial Theory, Community-based Art, New Genre Public Art, Institutional Critique, and Social Aesthetics, associated with artists working since the 1960s, such as Hans Haake, Suzanne Lacy, Jenny Holzey and Andrea Fraser (Buchloch 1990; Fraser 2005; Kwon 2004; Lacy 1995). Although this encompasses a wide variety of activities, valuations of the utility of technology to facilitate public involvement, and points of departure for discursive orientation, there is growing recognition of the prominence of these artists’ works and performances in major US and UK public galleries (King 2013). For the purposes of this essay, we will be using the shorthand, ‘participatory art’ to provide a provisional definition of such art as: attempts to (re)-mediate (im)-mediate social relations through participatory techniques with common spaces which privileges the enactment of embodiment, voice and performance.

Email 11.03, November 20th from Tom Percival: ‘got a lot of work and someone is coming, not sure if I have time to work on the paper this weekend. I was supposed to have the day off but again, have been called back into the studio… but you have to read this piece by the IPPR about the ‘relational state’, totally collapsing the centrifugal forces of central planning, bureaucracy, and impersonal governance.

Claire Bishop in writing on this ‘social turn’ in contemporary art practice has reflected upon it as the production of ‘artificial hells’. Bishop critiques participatory art for a mixture of reasons, including its reduction of public politics to a set of spectatorship roles, leaving residents as helpless without the insertion of artists into urban spaces; also involving the instrumental use of artists for social and economic development, as new kinds of ‘community-making practitioners’ and ‘co-opted apologists’ for the withdrawal of the state and democratic governance (2012). Bishop provides a definition of this turn by writing:

“To put it simply: the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long- term project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a ‘viewer’ or ‘beholder’, is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant” (2012: 2).
Whilst such practice borrows from the 1960s critique of institutional structures, undertaken by artists such as Hans Haacke, this turn into a radical reconceptualization of the production of art. We might want to draw one implication out of this, following Arendt, that this re-drawing of the work of art with a new set of participants to work as co-artists, signals another aspect of how the production of art, though it is structured through flexible working relations and increasingly global circuitries of capital, produces a strange kind of public space. And although critiques of the ‘art world’ or ‘art industry’ has been central to analysing how Art practice facilitates the production and accumulation of semiotic-capitalist value and the branding of global cities, wherein London takes in Shoreditch, Haggerston, Hackney, to the commercial galleries in central London. This allows for the realisation of Richard Florida’s utopian ‘creative class renewal’, as new channels with which to ‘commodify culture’ and produce ‘artistic and cultural spaces’ are opened up (Florida 2012; Jessop 2004). This vision of a ‘project-led, collaborative, site-specific, negotiation with the everyday lives of urban residents’ ties closely to the ‘projective city’ that Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello write about in their 2005 book, ‘The New Spirit of Capitalism’:

“This city is founded on the mediating activity employed in the creation of networks, making it valuable in its own right, independently of the goals pursued or the substantive properties of the entities between which the mediation is conducted. From this standpoint, mediation is a value in itself, or rather, in the conceptual framework employed here, a specific status of which each actor is liable to take advantage when ‘putting people in contact’, ‘making connections’, thereby helping to ‘construct networks’” (2005: 107-108).

Email 01.04, December 14th from Tom Percival: “I’m no longer convinced that we can make this argument work about ‘public space’, Arendt doesn’t seem to offer enough scope to articulate what ‘contestation’ and ‘appearance’ might mean, it hangs too loosely in her prose. Perhaps we need a more legalistic definition that might give us firmer ground upon which to draw out analogies, or even the council’s definition of ‘public art’ in our contracts. Sorry, got to go to sleep, we have a technician coming in to set up Saturday’s piece early tomorrow.”

But does this critique simply apply to the production of ‘public spaces’ in the galleries mentioned at the beginning of the essay? Can it be said that the encouragement of ‘co-participants’ in art works leads to a particular, in Boltanski and Chiappo’s terms, kinds of economic advantage to be drawn from ‘making connections’ and ‘establishing networks’, or for Bishop, to the production of non-portable, commodifiable products, but site-specific projects? To answer this, we will look at the ‘social aesthetics’ of inserting art into ‘public space’ around Edgware Road.

The first piece art to mention is the exhibition of Liu Xiaodong at the Lisson Gallery from September 2013 to November 2013. As the press release for the exhibition describes:

“Over a period of six weeks, Liu documented his encounters with Londoners, much as he has done previously, while living and painting among residents of Tibet, Japan, Italy, Cuba and Israel. Focusing on three local businesses, two pubs and one Middle Eastern coffee shop, Liu produced one near-life-size oil on canvas and eight acrylic photo-paintings at each location” (Lisson 2013).
One of the pieces in the exhibition was a film made by Sophie Fiennes, director of *Bridget Jones Diary*. The film follows Xiadong as he paints some of Edgeware Road’s residents and workers, at their workplace, in the street, or in their home. Xiadong says that, ‘My only goal is to confront people and see them as they really are’ (Lisson 2013). This mode of confrontation, with realism in the background, and paintbrushes in his hand, allows him to position himself as a spectator within the ‘givenness’ of a neighbourhood and to give it oil and acrylic form. With a private view attended by Anthony Gormley and fashionable art-world impresarios, packed into a room to watch Xiadong narrate a film at the sites of the paintings: restaurants, kitchens, streets. He says over the footage of one of the pubs:

‘Drank too much, came back and crashed out. Woke at 6am with nausea and vomiting. It lasted until 9am then stopped. Arrived at the ‘green restaurant’ to paint Dom, the bartender. Painted this British guy until 2pm, in one fell swoop. After eating some fried fish, I sat on the side of the road exhausted unable to raise my head. I felt terrible.’

Following this, the film tells stories about the lives of each of the subjects of the painting, the circumstances that arose during the weeks painting, scraps of impressions from the news, his relationship with gallery staff and curators. One scene shows Xiadong painting in the ‘Middle Eastern coffee shop’, and soon after beginning the painting, the staff deciding not to participate any longer and go back to work. Xiadong has to start again, cross out their forms, and begin concentrating on the décor, the colouration on the ceiling, the detailed fabric of the chairs, the layout of cutlery and glasses on the table. Something in this moment turns the orientation of the exhibition, providing a particular kind of realisation that there are a set of ethical constraints on participation that the film has made visible but also needs to elide so as to concentrate on the painter. It allows the viewer to forget that ‘what kind of participation art might allow is just as crucial as its facticity.’

Email 15.43, January 12th, Tom Percival: “I just got an email from ParcelForce saying that US customs have found my package and it will get to the Whitney Independent Study Program on time. P.S., there was this quote floating around from Arendt and it seem useful, or, at least stimulating for this: “The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is […] where I appear to others as others appear to me.”

Another model of organising public participation is demonstrated in the approach taken by the Showroom Gallery and the Centre for Possible Studies. The Showroom, describing itself as ‘operating at the intersection of art, participation and research’ held a meeting on the 11th of January 2013 on the politics of crèches in art schools, called ‘Crèche Course.’ The all-day event invited participants to discuss their experiences in art schools where their children were excluded from the premises, the lack of recognition that students may be parents rather than simply educational consumers, and how ‘cultural workers’ can begin to organise a movement to reform education institutions, such as the Royal College of Art and Chelsea School of Art. By organising small discussion groups, presentations by campaigners, former students, education specialists, teachers, nursery nurses – with the program director from the Centre for Possible Studies in attendance. As such, the course addresses the functionality of educational spaces, the history of art school policies on nurseries, crèches, and ‘education spaces.’ By drawing connections between private concerns about public spaces, it allowed
articulations which confronted actually existing practices without reducing them to a particular formal statement, instead, ‘putting people in contact’ so as to (re)-mediate inequities, policy slippages, and institutional blind-spots.

To return to Arendt’s claim that ‘public space’ allows ‘space for appearances,’ we might not be too hasty when drawing a distinction between two forms of art practice that attempt to mediate the city, firstly with a painterly eye in a commercial gallery, secondly with an activist eye in a participatory space. If we had more time it would be fruitful to begin to discuss the ways that these two galleries also implicate themselves within Westminster Council’s neighbourhood regeneration, or ‘renewal’, plans for the ‘Church Street Ward’ and the surrounding area. We would be able to draw out some of the emerging complications, contestations and contradictions inherent in the program which allows for residential participatory in planning process, with a narrowly define public consulting held during Church Street ‘Vote Week,’ between May 8, 2013 to May 16, 2013, and what kind of ongoing participation this allows. Or even how the production of a new ‘regeneration actor,’ the role of the ‘community connector’ is currently being used by the Vital Regeneration charity to facilitate public consultation. In short, the problem with neatly aligning participation with mediation in city spaces is a qualitative issue of attending to what spaces are allowed to appear, how residents might insert themselves into them and contest the vision of ‘community renewal.’

Email 14.22, January 15th, from Tom Percival: “Ha ha. I’ve got one last truism for the piece, someone said it the other day in a meeting with the artist and the council officer: ‘when cities set up spaces for communication they don’t have an adequate theory of transmission.’ You better summarise the fact that Arendt was quite pessimistic, which doesn’t cause a withdrawal into the necessity for privatising individual concerns.”

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Bibliography

Fraser, A. "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique." *Artforum,* 2005: 278.