

Symptomatic Values beyond the Romantic

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Sometimes, one could argue, in order for democracy to emerge, democracy itself has to be avoided at all costs. To make decisions within any given collaborative structure, network or institution, conflicts can ultimately only be overcome if someone assumes responsibility.

Gustav Metzger once said: "I relate my approach to homeopathy, which puts poison in the system in order to generate energy to defeat the weakness". In this context, let us imagine a post-consensual practice, one no longer reliant on the often ill-defined modes of operating within politically complex and consensus-driven parties or given political constructs, but drawn instead from an understanding of the necessity to undo the innocence of participation.

We are currently experiencing a point of transition within participatory practices: within politics, within the Left, within spatial practices and – foremost – within architecture as its visible and most clearly defined product. Participation, both historically and in terms of political agency, is often read through romantic notions of negotiation, inclusion and democratic decision-making. However, it is precisely this often-unquestioned mode of inclusion that populist politicians use as a mode of campaigning for retail politics. Hence, it does not produce critical results as criticality stands challenged by the conception of majority. Let us instead imagine a conflictual reading of participation as a mode of practice, one that opposes the brainwave of the democratic facilitator, one that has to assume, at times, non-physical violence and singular decision-making in order to produce frameworks for change.

As a next step, let us challenge the idea that – in general – people have good intentions. Conventional models of participation are based on inclusion. They assume that inclusion goes hand-in-hand with a standard that is the democratic principle of everyone's voice having an equal weight within an egalitarian society. (Interestingly, the model of the 'curator', for example, is essentially based on the practice of making decisions and therefore eliminating choice, rather than boosting plurality by inclusion.) Usually, through the simple fact of proposing a structure or situation in which this bottom-up inclusion is promoted, the political actor or agency proposing it will most likely be understood as a 'do-gooder', a social actor or even a philanthropist. In the face of permanent crisis, both the Left and the Right have celebrated participation as the saviour from all evil, an unquestioned form of soft politics. But can we employ the idea of crisis to question our deepest assumptions? Should we rethink our values and devise new principles for action?

Let us imagine a conception of participation as a way to enter politics – proactively and consciously forcing us into existing power-relations by intent – as opposed to a politically motivated model of participation, which tends to propose to let others contribute to the decision-making process. The latter, we might think, is habitually stirred by the craving for political legitimisation. The former may attract attention not from a disbelief in democratic principles per se, but out of sheer interest in critical and productive change.

One could argue that this model inhabits a certain opportunism. Yes and no. It challenges the widespread default that majority equals judiciousness, while arguing for a pro-active citizenship in which the individual outsider to a given, inbred political structure can become a driving force for change, forcefully entering an existing discourse rather than opening it up to the floor. Remaining within the arena of ‘the democratic’, let us instead bastardise participation into a form of non-democratic practice, an opportunistic model of interventionism, in which interference is made possible due to the fact that one is no longer following existing protocols of internalised political struggle. Such a model, we could then argue, is that of *Crossbench Practice*.

Let us imagine this as an ongoing project. Let us begin now. As a first step, let us attempt to open up a new language of practice, a field of operation, rather than confronting an existing one. Within this frame, let us unleash a series of experiments that shall be conducted over time. Each of those experiments shall be directed towards the undoing of the innocence of participation. Some of them may be text-based, others set up as projects, others again as urban interventions or institutional models – small-scale, local test-grounds for change.

Each one of those projects to come shall be understood as particles within a galactic model in which planets are circulating around an empty void. This void may be loaded with a model for practice by the end of the experiment. The model may present and open questions neither hierarchically organised nor in a field, but in the form of a galaxy – a relational model that challenges political romanticism to open up the potential for a more diffused form of work.

Within a series of case studies conducted over the past years, this essay is intended as part of a pamphlet that is the third component within a tripartite structure that, resulting from increasing gradients of political disillusionment, attempts to question existing notions of participatory practice. The first in this series simply questioned participation.¹ The second kicked it.² The third, which may be titled *Crossbench Praxis*, will eventually propose an alternative.

What will be presented as a project in question is a theory of how to participate from outside existing power structures rather than inside-out. Where traditionally participation is understood as a bottom-up practice, the one being examined here sidesteps the democratic invitation process and enters the conversation mid-level, from the side, so to speak, exposing the often-concealed dead end of participation.

What is/are the alternative(s) to conventional confrontation based on the nostalgic notion of the barricade? How can one propose an alternative practice engaging in spatial projects dealing with social and political realities? What could such polyphonic practice potentially be? What is the mode of relevance of such work and does it always necessitate in ‘urgent relevance’? But let us not concentrate too much on the urgent as we might forget about the important.

A substantiated mode of 'scattered practice' could put life as practice into a format that uses, as a starting point, the will to act without mandate. Such self-initiated practice, outside of those existing economies in which there is a clear distinction between client and service provider, may enter and in fact produce an alien discourse or field of knowledge productively.

Spatial planning is often considered as the management of spatial conflict. Like the original meaning of the Latin word *conflictus* (fight), spatial conflict represents a clash of interests in using space: who should do what, when and how? The city – and, indeed, the progressive institution – exists as a conglomerate of social and spatial conflict zones, renegotiating their limits through constant transformation. To deal with conflicts, critical decision-making must evolve. Such decision-making is often presupposed as a process whose ultimate goal is consensus. Opposing the politics of consensus, critical spatial practice shall foster micro-political participation in the production of space, and ask the question of how one can contribute to alien fields of knowledge, professions or discourses from the point of view of 'space'. The future spatial practitioner could arguably be understood as an outsider who, instead of trying to set up or sustain common denominators of consensus, enters existing situations or projects by deliberately instigating conflicts between often-delineated fields of knowledge.

To enquire into the role of the architect and the role of the contemporary institution, existing models of participation may be in need of revision, both in terms of the culture of consensus and the ethos of compromise. We may detect a need for actors who operate from outside existing networks of expertise, leaving behind circles of common proficiency and attempting to overlap with other post-disciplinary realities. Instead of aiming for synchronisation, such a model could be based on participation through critical distance and the conscious implementation of zones of conflict. Within such zones, one could imagine the dismantling of existing situations so as to strategically isolate components that could be (mis)used to stir friction. Such practice would help to understand the effects of political, economic and social design components on space. Using the architect's expertise in mapping fields of conflict, we may generate an archipelago of questions that seek to uncover the relevance of spatial and architectural expertise and how, in the remit of institutions, they can generate an alternative knowledge production.

Rather than delivering a recipe, we may lay out a field of potential departures that might allow us to understand what and how an architect can contribute to the questions at hand, tracing some of the above elements in order to create a selective and operational view. What makes an architect's approach to investigating a situation different from the default approaches of other fields of knowledge? What is the value of an Uninvited Outsider, a Cross-bench Practitioner, when juxtaposed to a classical, market-driven consultancy methodology? Why the hell talk to architects in the first place?

Let us try to read the phenomenon of participation through a chain of variable spectacles, depending on the respective and diversified angles of observation. In regard to political science, the core relevant arguments of Chantal Mouffe and Antonio Gramsci may be put in context of and into conflict with the British New Labour model or, indeed, the even more consensus-driven Dutch Polder model. Within the larger remit of late 20th-century philosophy,

the writings of Jacques Rancière and Edward Said could be examined, most specifically the latter's *Representations of the Intellectual*.³ Concerning spatial practices, the practice of soft thinking in architecture could be read through Keller Easterling or Eyal Weizman. We can draw from texts by Marius Babias and Dieter Lesage to open up the field of critical discourse within contemporary artistic practices, as well as from Florian Schneider's thoughts about the notion of collaboration. German politician Joschka Fischer's biography may be hijacked in order to produce a case study to illustrate the intricacies of Gramsci's slow march through the institutions.

Let us hope that this imaginary methodology will constitute evidence for the question at hand. The resulting material may constitute neither a historic survey nor a report from the front lines of activism, but may at best be a self-generated concoction of diversified support-structures to demystify romanticised participatory practices – a confined voice that allows us to further differentiate the existing discourse while stimulating an already-heated debate. In fact, this may not even be a methodology but a nightmare. A nightmare with a productive end. It may be neither approved by academics, nor possibly will it be read by commuters on the train. It will probably not enter the canon of history or be available in a public library. And precisely there may lie the transition-point of opportunity: to produce a condition of politics by considering things before they exist – to speculate with force.

The perhaps autocratic model of participation that I will put up for discussion should not be understood as a blueprint for practice but as a model of departure. It may start to create the necessary friction in order to both stir debate and move practice forward. If there was only a single objective of this experiment, it may be to develop a common understanding and a starting point to begin to disagree from – a theory of how to participate without squinting at constituencies or voters, but by instigating critical debate and, at best, change. There may be two arguments here, one polemical and the other conceptually constructive, both stirred by pragmatic optimism and both, at times, developed through concrete situations and projects, which Simon Critchley would call "situated universality".⁴

Author's Note

This text is based on thoughts that are currently producing Crossbench Praxis (forthcoming, Sternberg Press, 2009).

Notes

1. (Eds.) Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar. *Did Someone Say Participate, An Atlas of Spatial Practice* (MIT Press, 2006, Cambridge, MA).
2. (Ed.) Markus Miessen. *The Violence of Participation* (Sternberg Press, 2007, Berlin/New York).
3. Edward Said. *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (Random House, 1996, New York).
4. Simon Critchley. *Indefinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (Verso, 2007, London), p. 42.