

Beyond the Nostalgia of Political Spatial Practice

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Sometimes, one could argue, in order for democracy to emerge, democracy itself has to be avoided at all cost. In order 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 that is no longer reliant on the often ill-defined modes of operating within politically complex and consensus-driven parties or given political constructs, but instead formulate a 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 being read through romantic notions of negotiation, inclusion and democratic decision-making. However, it is precisely this often-unquestioned mode of inclusion being used by populist politicians as a mode of campaigning for retail politics. Hence, it does not produce critical results as criticality is being challenged by the conception of majority. Instead, this force will act as a catalyst, to imagining 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, we must 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 egalitarian society. Usually, the simple fact that one proposes a structure or situation in which this bottom-up inclusion is being promoted, the political actor or agency proposing it will be most likely be understood as a “good-doer”, social actor or even philanthropist. 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. 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?

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 legitimization. The former may be of interest not out of disbelief of democratic principles per se, but out of sheer interest in critical and productive change.

One could argue that this model inhabits 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 bastardize 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 internalized political struggle. Such model, we could then argue, is that of Crossbench Practice.

This will become an on-going project. And this project shall begin now. As a first step, we must attempt to open up a new language of practice, a field of operation rather than confronting an existing one. Within this frame, we will 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, yet again others 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 organized nor in a field, but in form of a galaxy: a relational model that challenges political romanticism in order to open up the potentiality for a more diffused form of work.

Within a series of case studies conducted over the past years, this pamphlet is the third component within a tripartite structure that attempts to question existing notions of participatory practice, resulting from increasing gradients of political disillusionment: the first one simply questioned it (*Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice*¹). The second one kicked it (*The Violence of Participation*²). The third one, which may be titled Crossbench Practice, 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 presented 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 we must 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 conflicts. The city – and, indeed, the progressive institution – exist as 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 that of 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”. Like the original meaning of the Latin word *conflictus* (fight), spatial conflicts represents a clash of interests in using space. Spatial planning is often considered as the management of spatial conflicts. But who should do what, when and how? 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 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 operating from outside existing networks of expertise, leaving behind circles of common proficiency attempting to overlap with other post-disciplinary realities. Instead of aiming for synchronization, such 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 for the benefit of being able 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 of mapping out 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 Crossbench Practitioner that is 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 the context of and into conflict with

the UK's New Labour model or indeed the even more consensus driven Dutch Polder model. Within the larger remit of late twentieth century philosophy, the writings of Jacques Rancière and Edward Said could be examined, most specifically Representations of the Intellectual³. 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 thoughts about the notion of collaboration by Florian Schneider. German politician Joschka Fischer's biography may 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 an historic survey nor a report from the front lines of activism, but – at best – a self-generated concoction of diversified support-structures to demystify romanticized participatory practices: a confined voice that allows us to differentiate the existing discourse further 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 neither be 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 lay 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 a model of departure. It may start to create the necessary friction in order to both stir debate and move forward practice. If there was only a single objective of this experiment, it may be to develop a common understanding and starting point as to where we can start to disagree from: a theory of how to participate – without squinting at constituencies or voters, but 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. At times, developed through concrete situations and projects, which Simon Critchley would call “situated universality”⁴.

This text is based on the book *The Nightmare of Participation – Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality* (Sternberg Press, 2010).

1 - Miessen, Markus and Shumon Basar (eds.), *Did Someone Say Participate, An Atlas of Spatial Practice*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2006

2 - Miessen, Markus (ed), *The Violence of Participation*, Berlin & New York: Sternberg Press, 2007

3 - Said, Edward, *Representations of the Intellectual* (The 1993 Reith Lectures), New York: Random House, 1996

4 - Critchley, Simon, *Indefinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London: Verso, 2007, p. 42

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