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I Performance and Participation

Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson

Getting stuck in

In September 2015 the labyrinthine corridors of the Queen Elizabeth Hall on London's South Bank were opened for *Memory Point(s)*, an interactive performance developed by Platform 4 that documented and evoked the lives of people living with dementia in an assemblage of beautiful vignettes and installations. As part of the Secret Southbank Centre programme, audiences were led underground through the concrete corridors of its brutalist architecture to witness fragmented shards of memories almost forgotten, to rediscover the joys of a dressing-up box and to join a tea-dance, each experience capturing and framing the multi-sensory qualities of everyday life. In one of the theatres above, an audience was sitting in the dark, watching Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, a play set in Botany Bay in 1788 that represents the redemptive power of participating in theatre. In nearby Shoreditch Town Hall, audiences were invited into dreamthinkspeak's *Absent* at 15-minute intervals throughout the day to experience a haunting narrative of loss and soullessness, a journey that was played out in the old town hall's atmospheric basement rooms.

This snapshot of three performances illustrates some of the different approaches to theatre-making and modes of participation that are shaping contemporary theatre. Audiences who attend the theatre in the twenty-first century are often asked to wear outdoor clothing or don masks or blindfolds; they may find themselves on tours through basements, being costumed in backstage areas, lured into atmospheric city spaces not designed for theatregoing or handed electronic devices with which to vote or play. Contemporary theatre-makers are grappling with innovative methods of participation, finding that the appetite for new forms of cultural engagement presents creative opportunities. Yet audiences who prefer to remain seated in more conventional theatre buildings are also, of course, participants in the live event; their attention is felt by actors and affects the experience of the performance. All audiences – whether they are walking through tunnels or sitting on upholstered seats – might be swept along by the emotion and atmosphere of the performance or

find themselves resistant or immune to its contagious affects. However construed, the relationship between performance and participation is intricate and multifaceted, and it increasingly raises questions about how contemporary theatre-makers and audiences are negotiating this complex interplay. If performance is always already participatory, and if participation itself is an inherently performative notion, how might this conceptual terrain be understood without reducing participation to another *theatra mundi*, bounding imprecisely across all cultural milieu?

Performance and Participation: Audiences, Practices, Politics reflects our shared perception that the twenty-first century is redefining the political relationship between performance and participation, with profound and sometimes contradictory consequences for theatre-makers and audiences. Historically, participation in performance was widely associated with democracy, with agency and with protest, or with the popular, the unruly and the countercultural. For much of the twentieth century, participatory forms of performance were regarded as a rebellious counterpoint to the disciplinary spaces of conventional theatre by the modernist avant-garde, and in industrial economies, popular theatres of the Left harnessed the energy of collective participation to resist to the constraints of a hierarchical society. Across the world, applied theatre has used participatory strategies to encourage a whole range of social benefits, such as grassroots activism, health education and development activities, where it is assumed that 'bottom-up' or 'people's participation' in decision-making processes automatically ensures greater representation and extends civic engagement and community involvement. The assumption of the de facto value of joining in has been tenaciously held. The significance of cultural participation (and non-participation) in theatre has often been expressed as binary divisions between active / passive, liberated / constrained, democratic / hierarchical, mobile/fixed, empowered / oppressed and so on, with clear judgements made about their egalitarianism or emancipatory potential. Our contention in this book is that these dichotomies reproduce patterns of thought that were associated with a previous industrial era and that new forms of creative engagement reflect a deeper cultural shift evident in post-industrial networked societies, challenging tired debates about the instrumental or intrinsic value of participatory performance and extending far beyond the contemporary fashion for actor and audience interactivity. This book thus investigates a broader contextualisation for participation, engaging with the contemporary moment by considering how the cultural and political vocabularies at stake in the term 'participation' are entangled.

In theatre and performance studies, the implications of this cultural shift have been widely observed. Shannon Jackson, Jen Harvie and Claire

Bishop are influential voices in this debate, all of whom respond to the ways in which different forms of participation and engagement are curated as part of what Jackson memorably described as the 'social turn' in contemporary performance art. Jackson's analysis of the ways in which performers become 'fabricators' of shared real-time events demonstrates the multiplicity of aesthetic registers that have become harnessed to socially engaged art (2011: 12–13). Harvie contributes to the debate by placing contemporary performance in the context of neoliberalism, observing cultural trends in London that frequently require audiences to engage in different forms of 'devolved' collaboration (2013). Claire Bishop's critique of participatory performance as a form of impoverished and manipulative social work (described as 'artificial hells') resonates throughout this book, and many authors gathered in this collection respond directly or indirectly to her call for a 'more nuanced language' to discuss socially engaged art-making (Bishop 2012: 18). What emerges from all these perspectives – and from debates between the relational aesthetics furthered by art critic Nicolas Bourriaud and by Grant Kester's communitarian dialogic art – is that participation in the theatrical event inhabits a paradox (Bourriaud 2002; Kester 2011). Participation is politically pliable, and it can no longer be taken for granted that its dramaturgical strategies carry specific political meanings or social imperatives. Nor can it be assumed that to participate is to claim space and voice in ways that might be considered 'empowering' or anti-authoritarian. Gareth White has responded thoughtfully to this impulse, considering audience participation as an aesthetic 'invitation' that is experienced in multiple ways (White 2012: 221–235). Others are more polemical, including Ben Fletcher-Watson, who has observed that the liberating potential of participation in theatre with very young children swerves towards a tyrannical mode of hegemonic practice (Fletcher-Watson 2015: 24–38).

One of the central interventions of this volume is to (temporarily) dispense with distinctions of dramatic form (immersive theatre, live art, scripted play) or participant group (amateur, professional, community) as primary navigational tools for theatre and performance practice. By uniting playwriting, marathon running, ecological one-to-one performances and immersive theatre through the mechanic of felt experience, the authors gathered in this book seek to understand the agency of participation as an embodied practice rather than a thing that is done to, or by, others. Rather than analysing the power in terms of its resistance or acquiescence to specific disciplinary structures, this way of thinking acknowledges that the sensing subject is also a priori a participant in the networks and flows of power that shape everyday life. Cultural geographer Hayden Lorimer,

writing about the relationship between performance and cultural theory, summarises the implications of this new attention to affective subjectivities for the politics of representation:

[T]o more traditional signifiers of identity and difference (class, gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, disability), have been added another order of abstract descriptors: instincts, events, auras, rhythms, cycles, flows and codes. (2007: 92)

Thus understood, rather than positioning participation on the positive side of fixed binaries, this conceptual framework suggests that it makes no sense to make sharp distinctions between participation (active, rebellious, critical) and non-participation (passive, receptive, docile). This book seeks, therefore, to contest the binary between participation and non-participation in an attempt to expand the horizons of perception and thought about the business of cultural 'doing'. Across the spectrum of practices investigated in this book, the creative negotiation between participation and performance rearranges aesthetic registers and theatrical codes, dismantling oppositions and making power not only visible but audible, tangible, felt.

The book is curated into three sections: Recognising Participation, Labours of Participation and Authoring Participation. Rather than developing a general theory of participation that might constitute a new strand of audience studies, each section critically engages with productive questions about how different forms of performance speak to the political dynamics of participation. Chapters might be read sequentially or, because there are many shared motives and recurring themes, as a conversation across and between the sections. In this introduction, we shall outline some of the broader conceptual and political questions that recur in this book. We shall begin by considering questions of recognition and move to address labours of participation and authorship. When woven together, these three themes capture the social and the aesthetic possibilities of theatre and articulate some of the conceptual dynamics between participation and performance.

Acts of recognition: Do you see what I mean?

Is participation an action or a way of seeing and perceiving? How far does the act of participation necessitate a witness? What systems of meaning make an individual or group behaviour visible or invisible as participatory? What social gestures fall silently outside the echo chamber of modes of doing

and being that might be considered 'ordinary'? In short, how is participation recognised, and who or what conditions the terms of this *doing*? This book is interested not only in acts of participation, but also in how they are recognised and felt as such, by whom they are recognised and why that may matter. This seam within the volume is studded with questions of making space for who or what may not be immediately heard, sensed or seen, and there is also an interest in how artistic practices seek to redistribute power by dismantling and troubling terms of participation that have become mundane or quotidian. In thinking through if and how one might recognise participation, the authors collectively move beyond a transactional reading of bodies and behaviours and towards a messier ecology of senses and sensing. That is to say, rather than simply arguing that there is a better way to 'see things', these essays embrace a more unsteady, intersectional understanding of participation. In this sense, as opposed to thinking about how participation might be represented and clearly recognised in a given performance, this book looks down the opposite end of the telescope in the hope of glimpsing a constellation of practices that together comprise a political ecology of participation.

By trying to excavate a new territory of thinking with respect to political action, the authors consider the relationship between resistance, participation and non-participation. Recognition is inherently political, and gestures that recognise those who have been historically marginalised or disenfranchised are potent symbolic acts. Following the analysis of the politics of recognition led by the philosopher Charles Taylor towards the end of the twentieth century, Nancy Fraser argued for a 'new constellation' of the political, in which cultural recognition is not considered separate from material inequalities; both economic redistribution and cultural recognition are necessary for social justice. She argues for 'parity of participation' based on an awareness of the political force of misrecognition:

From this perspective, recognition is a remedy for injustice, not a generic human need. Thus, the form(s) of recognition justice requires in any given case depend(s) on the form(s) of misrecognition to be redressed. Everything depends in other words on precisely what currently unrecognized people need in order to be able to participate as peers in social life. (Fraser 1998: 5)

Dawn Fowler's anxieties about the dismissal of 'women's work' speak to this concern to dismantle culturally defined hierarchies and re-shape social relations. Alison Jeffers is similarly concerned with the political implications of what she describes as 'long-held and cherished community narratives' in Northern Ireland, suggesting that recognising different forms

of authorship through the process of play-making can shift perceptions. The dislocation of participation from the individual to the collective (in its broadest meaning), from belonging to diffusion and from the past to the present, has significant implications for what it means to act politically.

An interest in the practice of reflexivity runs throughout the book, and it is often harnessed to a political sensitivity to the wider environment. Some authors capture this impulse by careful attentiveness to listening and by analysing how performance can encourage attunement to the human and nonhuman worlds and sensory alertness to its flow and rhythms. For Deirdre Heddon, the intricacy, intimacy and silence of one-to-one performance with artist Adrian Howells' inspired deep attentiveness, a labour of love that she describes as a kind of 'entangled listening' to the vital forces of the world that are both human and more-than-human. Similarly, there is Stephen Bottoms' acute awareness of the river's agency in Shipley, Yorkshire, where he wove local residents' stories into a performance designed to raise awareness of the risks of flooding. In common with Colette Conroy's concern with participants, onlookers and environments in the context of marathon running, Bottoms, drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze, also attends to the plural registers of participation involved in performative journeys. Arguing that all three ecologies of 'the environment, social relations and human subjectivity' have meaning-making force, he explores how the river asserted its vitality in performance. Throughout this book, there is a recurring interest in how patterns of participation conjoin the artistic with the social and temporal, in which the materialities of landscape, place, objects and performance are not just props or a backdrop to the dramatic action, but integral to it, casting an assertive presence.

The chapters gathered in the section Recognising Participation explore how participation, in varied activities – live art, marathon running, immersive theatre-making and playwriting – occurs in the intervals between things. Participation is, then, less an action than an encounter and a perception. As Heddon demonstrates in her encounters with Howells and as Conroy argues in relation to long-distance running, the political imperative to reconceive participation along sensual and sentient lines is urgent. Indeed, both Conroy and Heddon make cases for an expanded perception of recognition that takes account of the full range of environmental registers immanent in performance. Challenging the idea that intimate performance with one other participant constitutes a one-to-one encounter, Heddon suggests that the experience of listening offers opportunities to become attuned to the more-than-human world. Likewise, Conroy lingers in the hinterlands between opposition and relationality and between difference and interdependence. Here she broadens the aperture and invites one to look through, rather than at, participation.

A second thread that swerves through this thematic cluster is an interest in moments of misrecognition. Where is the locus of power situated when participatory actions are read and (mis)understood? Whose judgements about understanding or misunderstanding are recognised? For both Colette Conroy and Anna Harpin, it is politically important to disentangle intention and reception. Whether it is the running body or the non-verbal body, there is a pertinent question to be asked about how difference and resistance are framed and narrated. If alterity is too readily perceived as a form of protest (whether intended or not), what are the consequences for the notion of non-participation? That is to say, are bodies that appear different (wilfully or otherwise) read as somehow non-participatory in and of themselves? If so, and if difference becomes constrained by the very legitimisation of some forms of participation, does this paradoxically render non-participation a nonsense and impossibility? Jarvis's exploration of Analogue's *Re-enactments* also articulates the dramaturgical impossibility of non-participation and reflects upon the consequences of this for the theatrical offer that the piece makes. How much does this theatrical management of participation by the company invisibly erase or mask the actions of those participants opting out of the encounter?

Debates about recognition call, then, for a move away from participation as the practice of joining in and instead towards a radical presumption of participation and an attendant, hospitable and curious embrace of the political terms of such encounters. Radically, this book responds to the contemporary call to attend to affect – not as a subset of human sensibility but as a relational force that exists between bodies, objects and technologies. Participation, as affective encounters, brings together the sentient with the spatial and environmental. This dance between the affective agency of environments, social relations and subjectivities is evident throughout this collection, offering insights into an expanded meaning of perception and recognition. Many authors recognise the potency of environmental agency. This complements human-centred narratives of participation, capturing an urgent need to recognise not only interpersonal political subjectivities but also nonhuman and more-than-human relationalities.

Labours of participation: Working it out

A central debate in this book attends to how participation, as a mode of audience engagement, disrupts conventional divisions of labour between audience and artist and how, in the process, agency – as a political act – is

experienced, denied or exercised. Throughout this collection, authors are concerned with the ways in which participation brings social and artistic labour into dialogue and how practices of participation might disrupt or affirm social relations or political antagonisms. Participatory performance demands a reassessment of how far the labour of social criticism that has been so long associated with the arts has been lost or redistributed and of whether some forms of immersive theatre-making are becoming little more than a commercial theme park.

There are two key perspectives on labour debated in this book, both of which connect to our discussion of the political dynamic between the aesthetic strategies and social implications of participatory performance. First, there is a consistent perception that the performative qualities of participation reflect wider social changes in which the value of creative labour is being redefined, and in a climate in which the political has become increasingly aestheticised. As the philosopher Chantal Mouffe points out, this way of thinking has political implications for the relationship between art and politics. Writing about the radical potential for the arts in what she describes as an era of ‘post-political consensus’, Mouffe argues that

I do not see the relation between art and politics in terms of two separately constituted fields, art on one side and politics on the other, between which a relation would need to be established. There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art. ... [It] is not useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art. (2007: 11)

The essays in this book critically interrogate this proliferation of the political, offering new appreciations of the customary labour of the artist as social critic. Second, many authors critically read the creative relationality between participation and performance by engaging with theoretical positions that trouble conventional distinctions between subject and object, human and nonhuman, and dismantle narratives of cause-and-effect.¹ There is a strong post-phenomenological current running through this book, where the everyday labour of participating in the world is understood as part of a broader political ecology, framed by multiple, contested and material assemblages, flows and networks.

Authors in this book respond, either implicitly or explicitly, to the ways in which twenty-first century economies are redefining links between creative labour and political agency. The new spirit of post-industrial capitalism, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello describe, has appropriated the energy of the countercultural movements of the 1960s, a time when

cultural participation became particularly associated with social freedom and personal liberty. They argue that the anti-hierarchical aesthetic strategies associated with the brave new world of the mid-twentieth century have been used in the twenty-first century to support modes of self-regulation required by contemporary capitalism:

[C]reativity, unbridled self-fulfilment; the authenticity of a personal life as against hypocritical, old-fashioned social conventions – these might seem, if not definitely established, at least widely acknowledged as essential values of modernity. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 419)

This pattern of beliefs has not only changed ways of living; it has also altered patterns of labour, replacing the disciplinary practices of the Fordist period with more fluent and participatory forms of self-management, autonomy and creative entrepreneurship. Repetitive labour of the industrialised workforce has been eroded in the affluent West, leaving not only an increased commercial demand for creative labour, but also greater workplace precarity. In this political climate, creativity is becoming increasingly commodified, and the arts have become associated with urban regeneration and gentrification as well as social criticism. Noting this trend, Mouffe argues that in a society in which political questions have been reduced to solving technical issues, the criticality of the arts still has strong potential to ‘disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character’ (2007: 13). In relation to theatre, Adam Alston elegantly summarises the political ambiguity surrounding participatory performance in his chapter in this collection. He writes that participation tends to be seen ‘either as an intervention in the material networks of capitalism, or as a complicit feature or effect of the political ideologies that facilitate capitalist hegemony’ (150).

It might be tempting to respond to this apparent aporia by reasserting traditional binaries that defined the relationship between participation and non-participation in performance, adding subcategories to further distinguish between forms of participation: commodified/consumerist versus politically disruptive/communitarian. Authors in this book resist this approach. Instead they offer readings of how the commercial imperatives associated with some forms of participatory theatre can be recognised and reimagined, as well as aesthetic strategies framed in ways that offer social and political agency. James Frieze navigates this paradox in his discussion of dreamthinkspeak’s immersive performance *One Step Forward, One Step Back* in Liverpool Cathedral. Recognising that the performance took place against a backdrop of urban regeneration, Frieze argues that the process of participating in this promenade

performance encouraged contemplation, a mode of engagement that has often been neglected in favour of more visible forms of activity.

The chapters gathered in the section Labours of Participation demonstrate explicitly different ways in which participation works. Helen Nicholson's chapter addresses participatory practices in which conventional divisions of labour are reassessed and where clear-cut distinctions between professional, amateur and community artists are contested and eroded. Her chapter examines the affective labour of non-professional performers, raising questions about how the social and communitarian ambitions of professional theatre-makers can be aligned with innovative contemporary performance practices. Dawn Fowler's chapter takes up the debate by addressing the labours of activism, and she attends to the performative qualities of craft activists, known as 'craftivists'. In her examination of the gender politics of quiet and slow craftivism, Fowler unbinds some of the established hierarchies of silence and voice, political doing and political being, activism and pacifism. Fowler's concern with the dynamic between political activism and craft opens questions about the authority of anonymity and how an unsigned or unacknowledged creative intervention can carry political weight. Adam Alston takes debates about agency in a different direction, demonstrating that the marketing strategies of immersive theatre use secrecy as an alluring commodity to tempt audiences to buy tickets, but he also argues that in the hands of innovative theatre-makers, secrecy can also be politically progressive. Revitalising the cultural labour of artists as social critics, Alston directs his attention to Erving Goffman's frame analysis as a strategy to think through the politics of participation. He applies Goffman's concept of 'keying' to performances that invoke secrecy, suggesting that performative activities that are temporarily 'bracketed' from everyday life might shape and alter perceptions. When put in conversation, this section throws into relief how the labour of audiences and artists is reciprocally and mutually embedded in their commercial, political and social environments. In each of these chapters and elsewhere, authors offer a rich set of debates that show how the materiality of performance engages the immaterial labour of audience members, suggesting that the political is not only discursively constructed but also found in gaps and silences and in the rhythms and flows of the performed event.

Authorship and authority: Who's doing what?

Participation promises authorship. It is marked, sometimes erroneously, by the offer of impacting on the affective shape, atmosphere or political direction of the performance. Authorship may construct an illusion

of audience autonomy that operates to serve the spectacle of a highly controlled or choreographed experience. Similarly, the technologies of performance may mask tacit hierarchies of knowledge, power, labour and cultural value. In such transactional exchanges, audiences are permitted an illusion of being *with*, rather than *at*, a performance. Audience members sometimes describe having ‘done’ a certain performance: Have you done *The Drowned Man*? The question implies agency. Even in applied theatre and socially engaged performance, participants’ contributions are often carefully curated. So what is at stake when artists hand over aspects of authorship to their audiences? How does this distribute authority?

While working in markedly distinct theatre forms, each chapter in this book puts authorship in recession. A central strand of the debate does not simply replace the authorial vision of artists with participation-as-authorship; rather, questions of authorship are placed in the context of wider political debates about agency, refusing stale distinctions between collective or communitarian forms of participation as authentic and emancipatory, and authorial artistic vision as necessarily manipulative and authoritarian. Authors in this book are remarkably consistent in their refusal of this stereotype, asking pivotal questions about how the dynamic between authority, authorship and participation might be reimagined in the material relationality of performance. This ambition relates to Jean-Luc Nancy’s analysis of community, whose work is invoked by Heddon in this book. In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy questions the ways in which authorship implies an ontological separation between human agency and the nonhuman world – a position that, he argues, places particular stress on the world as it is represented by humanity. Instead, as Heddon notes, Nancy proposes a social ontology in which ‘being-with’, as a relational force, replaces the apparent autonomy of individual authorship. The relationality of authorship is similarly debated by Helen Nicholson, who finds both fragile hierarchies and productive tensions between the authorial vision of professional artists and the non-professional performers they sought to engage. As Liam Jarvis points out in his reflections on his work with his company Analogue, it is often the case that the shared creative labour of participants – however understood – invites responses that are multi-perspectival. Rather than defining audiences as heterogenic or curating responses that depend on a generic ‘we’, he suggests that there is a precise and detailed analysis of how participation is nuanced and perceived in multiple ways.

The authors gathered in the collection cumulatively interrogate the day-to-day manner in which ideas of ‘I’, ‘We’, ‘You’, ‘Them’, ‘Human’ and ‘Nonhuman’ are constituted as relational entities, perceived emotionally

and affectively, as well as experienced cognitively. Writing in her volume *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues that emotions do not really belong to anyone:

So emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘We’ [the crowd] have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and ‘We’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others. (2014: 10)

Ahmed proposes a direct relationship between feelings and citizenship, arguing that citizenship is, in many ways, ‘a technology for deciding whose happiness comes first’ (2014: 225). The political constellation sketched here of affect, emotion, citizenship and participation strikes at the heart of the political concerns of this volume. Following Ahmed’s suggestion that emotion is not individualised as a ‘thing’ that belongs to an individual but rather as an interrelational connection, this book raises questions about how far participation might be understood along similar lines – not as an action or activity but as an assemblage of peoples, objects and environments. Moreover, if there is a moral register to emotional governance, then perhaps the ability to *feel right* or *feel the right way* conditions an ability to participate politically in a wide ecological field. This concern is picked up by Harpin in her interrogation of the disciplinary structures and institutional practices that govern apparently acceptable modes of being in the world. In her exploration of mutism, she invites the reader to reflect upon how we might tune in to embodied practices of listening in new ways. Here and elsewhere, the volume investigates how the performative practice of participation necessarily attends to notions of agency, autonomy and authority.

In the section *Authoring Participation*, authors Stephen Bottoms, Alison Jeffers and James Frieze consider various theatrical and performative strategies through their multifaceted interrogations of ‘doing’, both as individual and collective modalities of engagement. Bottoms’ exploration of a Batesonian understanding of humility cracks open the conversation about what might constitute participation. In this chapter, a hospitable letting go of notions of authorship and authority serves to shore up, perhaps paradoxically, a more robust sense of meaning and political purpose in the community in which he is a visitor, a guest and sometimes an interloper. Perhaps the greatest sense of unease about the promise of authorship lies in debates about immersive theatre, where participatory practices can be experienced at their most obviously coercive. James Frieze tackles this unease by turning his attention to the ‘forensic turn’ in the

interactivity of promenade performance, arguing that following a 'story-trail' of clues as part of an immersive theatrical experience constructs a misplaced perception that knowledge of the world is 'all-deducing'. In the work of dreamthinkspeak, Frieze finds a lacuna in which new forms of authorship might be perceived.

Alison Jeffers' analysis of authority as potential for positive articulation of power strikes at the heart of many of the debates about authorship in this book. The politics of authorship and authority operate in a very tangible way in Jeffers' chapter about community plays in Northern Ireland, where she considers the contribution of 'non-specialist' members of the locality to performance-making. By bringing their local knowledge of Northern Ireland's troubled history to the process, participants redefined orthodox understandings of the past, finding new confidence in their identities and reshaping temporal relationships with their communities. For Jeffers, a reworked concept of authority challenges the 'cause-and-effect narratives' that dominated community arts in the late twentieth century, providing a refreshing opportunity to shape and authorise community stories in performance. By unhooking authorship from creativity here – and elsewhere in the book – authors consider how participants are invited to rethink the political implications of when and why they might choose to act. Taken together, this book documents how the extraordinariness of the theatrical event frames everyday relational encounters between people, places, artefacts and histories, as well as where holding the theatrical moment long enough enables participants to attend to new political imaginings.

Practising politics

At the heart of this book lies an interest in how the political is being redefined in performance and how different forms of participation are reshaping questions of agency as relational practices rather than as individualised acts. Questions of authorship, creative labour and cultural recognition are all situated in the political realm, and this book offers insights into how they are mutually embedded in diverse and performative practices of participation. The book does not advance a unified position or land upon a coherent definition of the term; rather we seek to expose the degree to which participation is a contested practice.

One of the recurring debates in this volume questions what counts as politics, and unsurprisingly, the essays draw currency from different theoretical positions. Invoked in this book is the work of Gilles Deleuze,

Gregory Bateson and Jean-Luc Nancy, brought into the analysis of the political to assess questions of authorship and relationality within and across human agency and nonhuman actants. For other authors, the work of Jacques Rancière, Erving Goffman and Chantal Mouffe offers opportunities to inflect the political with new frames of analysis that address the homogenising ‘we’ of consensual politics, replacing its drive for sameness with a respect for the open-handed representation of antagonism and recognition of difference and alterity. What is missing here, crucially, is the deterministic view that power and control are always exerted externally, and as a consequence, there is an understanding that everyone is somehow implicated in participating in the biopolitical flows and networks of political power. The political philosopher William Connolly captures this impulse in ways that resonate with the political debates articulated in this book:

[T]o alter the networks in which you participate is eventually to alter the relational mode of desire coursing through you. ... [W]hen the next round of action by you or your assemblage expresses that altered quality either or both may be poised to take a more adventurous political stance or accept a new level of ethical responsibility than before. You may be ready to listen to a new mode of inspiration to which you were previously tone-deaf. This is how, on the positive side, spirals of involvement between desire, action, ethics and politics work. (2010: 116)

What is at stake here is an awareness that such ‘spirals of involvement’ articulate with *the* political, but they do not carry *specific* political meanings or imperatives. It makes the labour of participation explicitly political, but also and always paradoxical and ambiguous. It is this very ambiguity that makes it all the more important to exercise vigilance, as Mouffe warns, over what, and who, is considered legitimate or welcome participants and who is left outside or excluded.

Performance and Participation: Audiences, Practices, Politics marks a paradigm shift in that there is a palpable move away from understanding participation as an invitation and a response and towards a recognition of participation as an ecology of mutual doings and beings. This not only shifts attention away from a cause-and-effect structure but also deliberately and radically redistributes the conditions of social and cultural engagement. By sweeping a diverse set of debates regarding participation and performance into a shared arena, this book encourages a more politically charged and nuanced debate about what we – as academics, theatre-makers and audience members – actually all mean when we talk of participation.

Indeed, a central intervention that the book makes is to render the diversity of conceptualisations associated with participation legible, and open for critical scrutiny. The book has, therefore, attempted to linger over the question of what is at stake when participation is used as a conceptual tool. Alongside its decentring of the individual as the locus of action and agency, the book illuminates the ways in which participation is an interpretive encounter rather than a self-evident action. Noting the significant resurgence of critical and cultural interest in notions and practices of participation, the book forms a reflective response to why the contemporary moment appears somehow to *need* participation. The chapters offer, of course, not the conclusion but rather the beginning of an entangled conversation about the politics of getting stuck in.

Endnote

1. For a more detailed analysis of this concept, see Helen Nicholson, 'A Good Day Out: Applied Theatre, Relationality and Participation' in Hughes, Jenny and Nicholson, Helen, *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 248–268.

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