

INTERVENTION, YES. PARTICIPATION, MAYBE

1.

From the point of view of an Open Dialogues distant participant, and reading the blog hosting this article, New Life Berlin crystallizes around an exhibition. The format exhibition, so to speak, is the point of entry. Ironically - as I'm co-responsible for the exhibitions programme of an institution - I used to be sceptical about the format exhibition. I thought that a book, for instance, would be a more efficient and practical tool to both spread and host knowledge. After years of arguments and experience, I'd say exhibitions can be a precious host of knowledge. But a lot depends of the way they are delivered.

An artistic event, in its ideal form, would allow the reader to make her/his own story out of the material offered. This rarely happens, and I include my work in this critique. It's far more common to have a certain line of exposing things; alternative types of information if the producers' purpose is political, different aesthetic approaches if they're pursuing other goals (commercial or institutional). We, producers of art (and festivals) have agendas too, and there's no way around it. We do one thing, to get another one. I might work on counter-information, or viable ways to deliver knowledge, or on expanding conventional artistic methods. In any case, my exhibitions would aim to read things differently to mainstream sensibility, inviting the viewer to read along, making my ideas circulate.

I'd argue that this sort of approach is not the same thing as offering the possibility to read things in a certain way. What needs to happen, for an exhibition (festival) to work in that sense? One thing would be not to pass on to the visitor, or reader, something we consider important as statement. It's true we're all here because there are things we want to say, and that we want to make public. But to transfer knowledge to someone seen as not-acknowledged might ultimately result in a sort of inverse propaganda. Can we call this intervention?

2.

Jacques Rancière, darling of the political artist of the last decade, says we need to be aware, since we're not. Aware about what? I'll put it very bluntly: there is no gap between producer and audience, since each part knows something the other doesn't know. This is what he writes, and that's nothing new. (Umberto Eco in 1962 based his 'open work' essay on the same argument.) What's important, in my view, is that awareness is the essence of participation. A festival centred on this idea needs to prove, if any, one thing: there is no need to fill a gap, since the gap in knowledge is the normal condition, and not something to correct.

I wonder at this point, what is the aim of a participatory art event? Does it mean that it allows participants (artists and audience) to read each other knowledge at the same level? With the same weight? I admit the difficulty of putting into practice the awareness mentioned above. To reach a point in which everyone is on stage and ready to perform, might take more than art

and literature are capable of. It might take time, a lot of time. To get each other's knowledge, we need to get access. To get access, we need to generate points to enter and participate in culture. We need to find the key to enter, and possibly more than one. Passion is one key. Irit Rogoff speaks about passion as a principal means to get access. Passion for something is what unlocks the potential in the spectator and producer alike.

What else? Necessity, maybe. It can be a powerful drive to enter culture. Perhaps physical necessity, more likely social necessity. The push to go beyond the values of the environment we grew up within. But hey, here again books rule. The question of access cannot be separated by that of the gates, and of the gatekeepers. James Rifkin wrote – guess – an entire book on that; perhaps not surprisingly, he also fell short of his own predicament.

Rifkin gives the examples of precisely the book as a metaphor for the gatekeeping policy: anyone can write a book (provided s/he has access to the means), but will stumble upon the first gatekeeper: the publishing house/Internet bookseller that can distribute the book. Once past the first, there's the second gatekeeper: the editor/marketing person. S/he might never grant access to the book, for whatever reason (economical or ideological), therefore blocking access. If even the second level were to be passed, our author will come across a third level: the reviewer/critic (in print or online), who might never review the book, therefore denying the book to a potential audience. This is how it works, in publishing.

Interestingly, these considerations are published in a book. So it goes. For Rifkin the metaphor doesn't really work. What about New Life Berlin? Is it a gatekeeper or a point of access? An opportunity or a limitation? The book is an efficient image for cultural production and participation in general, and especially for the notion of being on stage and performing: like in a festival. It gives the idea of the work behind; it discloses on one hand, the difficulty of making us all 'aware' (since one only is writing and many are waiting to see the book on sale). On the other hand, it shows the very possibility that exists for anyone to read something, and possibly, something that wasn't planned by the author. The possibility of an island. I wonder, in our case of the festival, which role can harness passion to push that gate. And which one harnesses necessity.

Meanwhile, I will keep reading/writing/making exhibitions ;-)

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