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The free collective don't want you!

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Citation: BEECH, D., HEWITT, A. and JORDAN, M., 2012. The Free collective don't want you! *Public*, 23 (45), pp. 139 - 145.

Additional Information:

- This article was published in the journal, *Public [© Intellect]* and the definitive version is available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/public.23.45.139_1

Metadata Record: <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/12857>

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © Intellect

Please cite the published version.

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The Freee art collective says 'we don't want you'.

Dave Beech, Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan

ABSTRACT: [100 words]

Freee proposes a new conception of participation for art. We address current debates on art and participation, for example in the theories and positions of Grant Kester and Claire Bishop. These two positions set a polarized debate between a social and collaborative ethic in art, and the shock tactics of an avant garde art. For us, publics are not reducible to the individuals found in the marketplace or the political and cultural encounters of the spectacle (consumers, fans, viewers, customers, etc). A public has agency, which is why we prefer performative actants (Witnesses, Signatories, Advocates, etc).

KEYWORDS: Participation, Politics, Public Sphere.

BIOS: Dave Beech, Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan work collectively as the Freee art collective. Freee produces slogans, billboards and publications that challenge the commercial and bureaucratic colonization of the public sphere. Dave Beech is Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art, London, UK. His recent book *Beauty (Documents of Contemporary Art)* is published by MIT Press and the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London. Andy Hewitt is Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at University of Wolverhampton, UK. He is about to complete his PhD at Chelsea College of Art, London UK. Mel Jordan is Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Loughborough University, UK, and is also editor of *Art & Public Sphere Journal*.

"Participation" first became a buzzword as part of the New Left's critique of existing democracies in the 1950s and 1960s. It was then taken up by C.B. MacPherson in his theory of participatory democracy in the 1970s, but went missing during the monetarist 1980s only to return in the 1990s as a conspicuous feature of relational art. Participation in contemporary art resonates with political promise. However, when one considers that participation in the new art includes having dinner, drinking beer, designing a new

candy bar and running a travel agency, there seems to be justification in talking about a declining ambition for the politics of participation.

Can participation in art be anything other than a pale imitation of its original political promise?

Before we present our thoughts on how participation might be rethought to bring it into closer contact with political transformation, some of the ideological baggage that has attached itself to the concept of participation needs to be jettisoned. The merit of participation is hardly ever challenged today. We get some sense of how deep and widespread belief in participation has become by observing that it has come to seem absurd to suggest that less participation is better than more participation. Everything from the schoolroom to the Internet and from sport to the elimination of world poverty has, in the last twenty years, been reconfigured at various levels of intensity by the imperative to encourage participation. Participation has become a value.

Within the discourse on socially engaged art or 'art's social turn', conceptions of art and participation have been provided by theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, in his concept of Relational Aesthetics, and more lately in exchanges between Grant Kester and Claire¹ that interrogate recent trends in didactic and participatory art. This demonstrates divergent ideas of art and social relations between those that are convivial, ethical or agonistic. In the UK these affirmative ways of engaging with the social have been exploited by Third Way cultural policy whereby artists have been

employed to promote an ethics of participation in order to construct and manage publics and audiences.

The value of participation has not been restricted to the field of art, but has entered business, commerce, education and government policy. But participation has a dark side. It goes without saying that being invited to participate in a horrific event is a horrific invitation. The horror of genocide or exploitation is not dampened but amplified by an increase in participation.

By having its value inflated in recent years, participation has impeded the value of other forms of social encounter. One does not respond to the invitation to be a guest at a wedding by admonishing the happy couple for failing to invite you to participate more fully: "If I'm not getting married too, then I don't see the point in going!" The ethics of participation does not, as it stands, value the role of the guest, or other roles, such as the spectator, the thinker and the renegade.

The current ethic of participation (Bishop and Kester) homogenizes the spectrum of social encounters by arranging them hierarchically under full and equal participation, as if the only questions to be asked of intersubjective experience are the narrow political questions about who is in charge and how the people responsible have managed the process. In art this leads to a kind of athletics of participation in which artists and curators compete with each other to stretch their participatory process further, faster, deeper, longer, wider and stronger. If, however, we understand that participation is not a value in itself but depends entirely on the value of the project in which the participation takes place, then this muscular participation is, at best,

ambivalent. In fact, it is difficult to see anything but complacency and complicity with established vested interests.

Freee has been working for several years to develop, in practice and theory, new dissensual possibilities for participation. It is Freee's intention to initiate projects that produce a form of social encounter within the artwork that does not presuppose complicity with art and its institutions, or the institutions and interests of those who commission or host the work. This is why we conceive of our participants as counter-publics. We aim to bring art's "outside" into art's "inside." In order to achieve this, participation needs to be turned inside out.

We used to introduce our work by saying that we were interested in developing counter-public spheres. Since most people didn't have a clue what this meant we began to list the formats that we use in our counter-public work. We make billboard prints, performances, props, videos, installations and manifestos. We combine various formats in one work, in a process that we call "real montage" (an extension of conventional montage in which real objects and processes, not fragmented images and found objects, are brought together). This means that, unlike conventional montage, real montage requires that social experience be considered one of the elements brought together by the work. The social experience within the work, its mode of participation, has to be constructed.

Following Jean-Jacques Lecercle, who says "the author is only an actant, the concrete speaker being interpellated in that place by the structure,"² we think of this act of construction as the labour of constructing *places* for individuals (and groups) to

occupy. Lecercle shows how to see the participant as an *actant*. For us this suggests that one of the important political goals of artworks is to establish a new *place* for the engagement with art. The point is to build into the heart of the grammar of art's social relations those *places* that do not yet exist but are the reason why art continues to be an emancipatory experience. We only want the "impossible participant" – to devise a new place for the participant to occupy. One of the reasons why our "impossible participants" are impossible is that, within the current ethical consensus of neo-liberalism they are seen as not participatory enough. This does not deter us. Freee has tackled the problem of participation by trialing new participatory *actants* that, although less participatory in the conventional sense, are more vital.

Revolution Road: Rename the Streets! was a Freee project commissioned by Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, UK in 2009 as part of the exhibition "Generosity Is the New Political." One of the key elements in the work was the precise configuration of its social relations. First, the invitation we made was not open. Freee invited a small group of Wysing staff, artists and trustees to participate in an event. This was not an attempt, *pace* Miwon Kwon's category of "community-specific" art, "to foster social assimilation."³ Our aim was to subvert the hierarchy of participation. Not only did these people know the area, know each other and have experience in working with and alongside a vast range of artists, they were already a group, which meant that the initial dynamic of the social experience of the artwork would be structurally divided. The real division within the social configuration of the invitation underlined the *places* which the work orchestrated. The real individuals were converted into *actants*.

Revolution Road: Rename the Streets! consisted of a walking tour of Cambridge town, in which the participants wore bright costumes (including “Liberty bonnets” as worn by Jacobins) and performing scripted ceremonies. From the local Court building to King’s Passage, through residential, educational, retail and civic areas, every street, lane, road and square that the participants passed was renamed in a ceremonial ritual. Although this dialogue was scripted by the artists and took place as a call-and-response dialogue between the artists and the participants, the script which renamed the streets also **recast** the individuals in the ceremony: the artists were referred to as “the chalk-holders” and the participants as the “witnesses.” This second, explicit, but inconspicuous, renaming reconfigured the relationship between artists and participants as an encounter between *actants* in the process of transforming the world by renaming it. All the streets were renamed after key figures, events and institutions within English Jacobinism immediately after the French Revolution. The ceremonies included detailed expositions of the historical significance of the new name for the street, followed by an exchange in which the “chalk-holders” proposed a new name for the street and the “witnesses” confirmed this in a performative speech act of acknowledgement that a new name had been written in chalk on a blackboard which the “chalk-holders” carried along the walk.

The witnesses of the work were neither its audience nor its participants in the usual sense, they were more like witnesses at a court hearing or godparents at a christening – holding a semi-legal status, without which the performance would be a mere rehearsal or a sham. The witnesses played a vital role within the performative act

of renaming the streets of Cambridge. Since there was no permanent physical alteration to the streets – no monument, no vandalism, no replacement of the existing signs with new ones – the act must be remembered, documented, vouched for, and authorized. Just like at a wedding, the event was documented by photographers in both still and video format. Rather than treating the documentation of the work as external to it, this project cast the photographers as technologically-enhanced witnesses.

Thus the key idea that we take from Habermas is not the concept of the public within the public sphere, but the activity of publishing.³ As such, for us, the public is not an empirical body, nor a spatial concept. The public sphere is a *performative* arrangement; it is the activity of “going public” or “making something public” that fills these places with public life. And this is why the public can emerge in private, commercial and mobile spaces too, such as the coffee house, the magazine, the parlour, the Working Men’s Club, the political party and the pub.

We want to publish differently, not led by the market, academia, professional politics and so on. This is why so much of our publishing is temporary. This is even more explicit in *Revolution Road: Rename the Streets!*, insofar as the statements were read aloud and the names written on a blackboard only to be erased a moment later.

For us, publics are not consumers, fans, viewers, customers, taxpayers, citizens, identities, communities, clients, markets, voters, readers, victims. We prefer Witnesses, Signatories, Advocates, Spokespersons, Publishers, Badge-wearers, Distributors, Marchers, Recruits, Promise-makers, Co-conspirators, Accomplices. These alt-publics

are not necessarily more active, productive or democratic than the preferred publics of public galleries, public policy and public relations. What they share is that they are performatively inscribed into processes of publishing. We call for the re-organization of the grammar of art's social relations – an affirmative call to all to redistribute the *places* that they occupy.

Notes

Based in the UK, artists Dave Beech, Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan work collectively as Freee. Freee's recent projects include: *Petition to Ban All Advertising! (No More Renting Out of the Public Sphere)*, for "We are Grammar," Pratt Manhattan Gallery (New York, 2011); *Every Shop Window is a Soap Box*, for "Touched," Liverpool Biennial (2010); *You Can't Buy a New World*, for "When Guests Become Hosts," Culturgest (Porto, Portugal, 2010); *Fuck Globalization II*, for "Dorm," The Model (Sligo, Ireland, 2010); *Fuck Globalization*, a residency at Dartington College of Arts (2010); *Revolution Road: Rename the Streets!* Commissioned by Wysing Arts, Cambridge, and presented at Zoo Art Fair (London, 2009); *Changing Things with Words*, for "Abstract Cabinet Show," Eastside Projects (Birmingham, 2009); *Revolution is Sublime*, for "The Peckham Experiment," Space Station Sixty-Five, Camberwell Space (London, 2009); and *Spin[Freee]oza (Shop Windows and Balloons)*, for "On Joy, Sadness and Desire," SMART Project Space (Amsterdam, 2008). See www.freee.org.uk.

1. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), 53.

2. Miwon Kwon quotes Hafthor Yngvason in *One Place After Another* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 115.

3. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003).