

## *Participation in Social Media: Authoring Authority*

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### **Abstract**

This paper argues that while active participation within social media, as rightly pointed out by Claire Bishop, has completely merged with the Spectacle. With the form of participation becoming increasingly simulated cybernetically, there is a lack of critical awareness of the problematic nature of active participation in today's age of social media.

The turn to participation, where we are now explicitly invited and expected to interact across a multitude of various social media platforms represent another problematic twist to Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle, or to borrow Boris Groys's term, have contemporary society truly become a 'spectacle without spectators'? Retracing participation through the lens of artistic praxis from Kaprow's Happenings to Brechtian Epic theatre, I argue that participation within social media, because of its cybernetic form, is a form of collaboration with the very logic of production in social media. In a way similar to the limits of participatory art, where the act of inviting or allowing participation itself further cements the said artist's position of authority, the paradoxical nature of authority in social media is likewise similar, for it is precisely the participation of the audience, that allows the existence of social media in the first instance, thus authoring authority. It is precisely such a paradox that makes it imperative for the reconsideration of theoretical concepts such as the Spectacle, and the rethinking of what it truly means to be actively participating.

Keywords: Social Media, Spectacle, Participatory Art, Active Participation

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## Introduction

“For the first time in history, the media are making possible mass participation in a social and socialized productive process, the practical means of which are in the hands of the masses themselves.” (Enzensberger, 1974, p. 15)

I begin this paper with this quote from the German Marxist theorist, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, written in 1970s, yet particularly pertinent even today. One might imagine, without the authority of his name and the date stamped there, the words, left by themselves, seem to gravitate towards the new media situation we find ourselves in now, in this age of social media. After all, we are now able to participate ‘socially’ in a rather debatably ‘productive process’ on media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs etc. and the practical means to do so has been significantly reduced to simply having Internet access.

Then however, Enzensberger was referring to the media form of traditional media such as radio, television and film. In particular, he quotes Bertolt Brecht, saying if radio can be radically transformed from a means of distribution to a means of communication, this would allow the listener to not only hear but speak too (*ibid*, pg. 14). Enzensberger problematizes the state of television and film as the media formats of both prevents speech (of the audience). Because there is no way for the viewer to reciprocate, it prevents communication and thus, one is unable to escape what he terms the ‘consciousness-shaping industry’ of the mass media. Enzensberger goes on to highlight the liberating potential of new media, the ability to ‘reverse the circuits’ to enable speech, and ends with a call of participation, for everyone to use new media to become Authors (of history), to challenge the authority and hegemony of mainstream media in an attempt to unleash the revolutionary potential of new media (*ibid*, pg. 36).

With the rather recent trends in popular media discourse on the topics of the Arab Spring revolutions, the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia, the Gezi Protests in Turkey, there is almost a compelling urge to believe in this simplistic narrative of new media empowerment. In this paper however, I am more interested in examining the historical precursors of this narrative of participation in media as empowerment that today presents itself as a ‘new’ solution. I will argue that there is a pressing need to (re)consider and evaluate the implications of this sudden urge or need to ‘participate’ that is increasingly mediated (‘simulated’) via new media technologies. This ‘hegemonic teleculture’, the very idea of participating from a distance, through new media, has become so dominant and infiltrates even this conference such that I could have been physically present back in Singapore and yet ‘presented’ my paper virtually. I would also like to situate my arguments within the context of the general structural dynamics of capitalist culture, firstly since Enzensberger claims that resistance to the hegemony of capitalistic culture can be found in the ‘egalitarian structure’ of new media, and also because there seems to be a tendency in cultural studies literature and contemporary art discourse, which I will be looking at later, to neglect the role of the structure of neoliberal capitalism in the analysis of new media technologies.

In order to understand this central role of ‘participation’ and how it evolves and involves the spectator, I would like to retrace the concept of participation in the media to the early 1960s in the context of participatory and interactive art discourses, since

this notion to empower the audience through participation bears much similarity to a long-standing strategy or tradition in art during that period, particularly invoked by American artist Allan Kaprow's Happenings which spurred the advent of participatory art itself. The use of audience participation preceded Kaprow's Happenings and had already existed in art movements such as in Futurism and Dadaism, where audience participation was seen as key to collapsing the distance between performer and audience. For example, in the second Dada exhibition in 1920, Max Ernst placed an axe next to his art work, so that the audience could use it to destroy his work if they did not like it, offering the audience a chance to explicitly and directly intervene in the exhibition.

Kaprow sought to popularize his 'Happenings' and in his movement, art was primarily driven by the role of audience activity, and interactivity was crucial. The basic premise, as Kaprow describes, is to "increase the responsibility of the observer" with a view on "eliminating audiences" altogether so as to transform them into participants (Cornwell, 1992, p. 204). As Susan Sontag explains: "Happenings, while action driven, have no plot and is a series of actions and events". It "shuns continuous rational discourse" and do not take place in a conventional stage, but rather in "dense object-clogged setting which may be made, assembled or found, or all three" (Sontag, 1962, para. 1).

### **Resisting the Spectacle**

Across different forms of artistic mediums, there was a similar drive towards activating the audience and theatre in particularly wrestles with this antagonistic tension between the Spectacle and the spectator. Since theatre is charged with making its audience passive<sup>1</sup> though its very essence is supposed to consist in the self-activity of the community, it tries to reverse this effect either through the Brechtian's paradigm of Epic theatre, or the Artaudian theatre of cruelty scheme. Brecht sought not only develop actions or audience participation but also to reveal conditions "as they are" so as to induce a certain recognition in the audience, reviving a "Socratic practice" where the end result is an audience that is reconfigured into one that questions and thinks, deriving a "lively and productive" consciousness (Benjamin, 1998, pg. 4). Artaud's theater of cruelty on the other hand, functions similarly to Kaprow's Happenings, where spectators are forced to leave their positions and become active participants in a collective performance.

Much of such artworks and theory or praxis behind these artwork were influenced by Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle<sup>2</sup>, particularly because Debord introduced a theoretical concept of the spectacle which most artists interpret as a totalitarian form of media saturation of images that renders audiences passive and alienated by the effects of capitalism, yet saturated with desire of 'false' needs.

As Claire Bishop points out: "For many artists and curators on the left, Guy Debord's indictment of the alienating and divisive effects of capitalism in *The Society of the*

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<sup>1</sup> See Rancière, Jacques, (2009), *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London.

<sup>2</sup> See Debord, Guy. (2005) *Society of the Spectacle*, Oakland: AKPress

*Spectacle* (1967) strike to the heart of why participation is important as a project: it re-humanizes a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production” (Bishop, 2011, para. 1). For Boris Groys, “The ideology of modernity—in all of its forms—was directed against contemplation, against spectatorship, against the passivity of the masses paralyzed by the spectacle of modern life” (Groys, 2009, pg. 4). Participatory art not only rehumanizes their participants but was also seen as a radical approach towards challenging the authority of the artist, precisely because the participant is elevated to the status of a co-creator of the artwork, granting the participant a certain level of authority.

Most of such artworks work towards this capability to reject or disrupt the passivity the culture industry induces. Yoko Ono, for instance, was one such artist. Identified with the Fluxus movement, she created a significant amount of art that required active and direct participation from her spectators. In one of her more prominent work that exemplified the concept of audience participation entitled *Cut Piece*, she invited audience members to come on stage, use a pair of scissors and cut off pieces of her clothing as she sat on the stage motionless facing the audience. Ono’s *Cut Piece* demonstrated how active participation of the spectator was able to reverse the artist’s position of authority, since the artist’s role (Ono) became an entirely passive one in relation to the audience, demonstrating the potential of the critical reversal of circuits that Enzensberger valorizes.

Yet Bishop raises a provocative thesis when she suggests that ‘far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it’. She draws this conclusion based on her analysis of Anthony Gormley’s *One and Other* (2009), a project (she consciously avoids the term art but mobilizes *The Guardian*’s term ‘Twitter Art’) that allowed participants to continuously occupy the empty fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square in London to perform anything they like for one hour at a time for one hundred days. *One and Other* received 34,520 applications for 2,400 places and final participants were chosen by a computer based on a proportional geographical spread and a gender split. The performance of the participants were random and ranged from a dressed-up Godzilla destroying a cardboard replica of the London skyline, to a pitched tent with cameos from a live chicken and two large blow-up dolls and a nude girl who was eventually asked by the police to cover up. Participation in that instance indeed appeared to encourage an absurd form of spectacle, rather than denounce it.

The spectacle, as Bishop elucidates, the “social relationship between people mediated by images” - is “both pacifying and divisive, uniting us only through our separation from one another” (Bishop 2006, pg.12). Gormley’s *One and Other* then, by virtue of being a ‘live’ event that is broadcast as images ‘live’ to a fragmented public that led to much *activity* on Twitter (further forms of mediated participation), could be argued to be a spectacle encouraged, rather than opposed, by participation. It relies firstly on a cybernetic form of mediated participation, granting this selected 2,400 participants a pseudo form of authority on stage, while the true form of authority, the artist who designs this system, seemingly disappears, yet his authority is somehow relegated to this ‘participatory system’, who chooses who gets to participate, for how long, etc. Participation, in a sense, becomes automated and systemized.

Perhaps we could raise the question of whether the spectacle has already become what sociologist Ulrich Beck terms a 'zombie concept', a "category that governs our thinking but is no longer able to capture the contemporary milieu" (Slater & Ritzer, 2001, pg. 262). For, wouldn't it be the case that any event that connects a social community but depends on cybernetic participation and spectatorship being technically mediated, be a form of spectacle? Wouldn't any art that utilizes new media technologies or offers cybernetic participation create an aporia since it paradoxically connects a community socially yet further isolate and alienate individuals at a distance?

The paradoxical relationship between author and authority, is also present in Kaprow's Happenings and other forms of participatory art. Not all forms of participation will necessarily result in a higher sense of responsibility for the spectator and hence a less authoritarian role of the artist. If we were to probe deeper into the possibilities of 'true' audience intervention in Kaprow Happenings, Dinkla reveals that such possibilities might have been far and limited. For instance, consider the example of Kaprow's Spring Happening, which was presented in March 1961 at the Reuben Gallery where spectators were confined within a long box-like structure that looked like a cattle car. Peep-holes were installed in the wooden walls of the structure from which spectators could the external events. After the Happening was over, the walls collapsed and the spectators were driven out by someone operating a power lawnmover.

Johannes Schröder's analysis of this Happening suggests that contrary to the idea that the participants were capable of enacting any action by free will, there was absolute control by the organizer and as such, the Happening did not seem to be a step toward viewer participation, but a "precisely elaborated artistic act that guarantees the integration of the participations as a material" (Dinkla, 1996, pg. 282). Dinkla further criticizes the idea of participation in Kaprow's Happenings because the audience were never fully 'unprepared' and participation was always scripted, with instructions present that controlled the participant's behaviour. As Kaprow himself writes, "all persons involved in a Happening be willing and committed participants who have a clear idea what they are to do," for half-hearted and reluctant forms of audience participation risks the whole artwork itself (Bishop, 2006, pg. 105). This led Dinkla to conclude that most of Kaprow's Happenings were still somewhat "staged" and thus "participation is located along a fragile border between emancipatory act and manipulation" (Dinkla, 1996, pg. 283)

This coincides with Falk Heinrich's analysis that participatory art therefore is a form of interactive system because as Heinrich explains, it simulates emergent social interactions and communicates this pretense very clearly (Heinrich, 2014, pg.118). Such systems can be understood in terms of cybernetics, as there exists an operating script declaring the forms of participation. Consequently, Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* could likewise argued to be performed to an operating script, where her artwork conveyed the precise instructions of the action of cutting up the performer's clothes. Ono, according to Heinrich, could terminate the interactive system at any time by leaving the stage entirely.

## **The cybernetic form of participation in social media**

This almost perfectly mirrors the scene of social media. Social media is built on an interactive system rooted in cybernetics. The forms of mediated participation, as basic as the 'like' or 'share' button, are pre-programmed operational scripts or steps for users to follow. Facebook greets me with a message, "what's on my mind", explicitly inviting me to participate in producing information such as 'status updates' which allow further participation by other participants.

At once, as a Facebook user, I am simultaneously activated to be both consuming and producing, or 'prosuming', according to Alvin Toffler. The user of social media networks therefore resembles both an activist and creator, fuelled by this expectation to disseminate and democratize creativity, prompted by the potential to become a producer. One is therefore compelled to think that Enzensberger's vision has been fulfilled, since anyone can become an Author and producer on social networks, commanding a certain authority. This however recalls French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's rebuttal of Enzenberger's ideas, for he suggests that Enzenberger conflates reversibility and reciprocity (Baudrillard, 1981).

Simply put, traditional mass media can also reversely offer speech to audiences through radio phone-ins, letters to the editor, or incorporate consumer feedback sessions but this does not equal the true symbolic exchange of communication. While it appears now that the category of consumer and producer has been somewhat transgressed within social media, as Baudrillard criticizes, the fundamental cybernetic structure of sender-message-receiver that underlie the structure of the mass media, and I argue in new media as well, is still very much preserved. The media, in order to reproduce to the masses, requires this simulated form of communication, and similarly because of such a logic, mass participation, can only be simulated and cybernetically mediated. This, as Baudrillard points out, fails to allow for the ambiguity of true exchange.

Indeed, one may further question the efficacy of the concept of the spectacle when, in the age of social media, the binary category of passive and active has already collapsed. One may no longer be a passive observer under the panoptic gaze of social networks owned by major global digital corporations such as Facebook, Twitter or Google, since every single action of the user is being monitored, captured and used to create data, such that every user on social media has *no choice* but to become an active user. Could we not also question whether the user or Author, produced by social media is not in fact, at present, also the largest, 'active' contributor to the capitalist system?

There is no real 'need' to participate in social networks but there is a need to raise the question of whose interests does it serve to participate in social networks such as Facebook or Twitter? It is perhaps no coincidence that economics today focus valiantly on the 'creative industries' and targets a new type of consumer, the creative consumer who participates in social networks perhaps because they are under an illusion that they are now artists or Authors. Large companies and even non profit movements pay special emphasis to utilize such Authors as resources, particularly in the processes of crowdfunding, since they can exploit them for free.

Not only is there a close proximity between participation and spectacle as identified by Bishop, there also exists a close proximity in the uneasy relationship between author and authority. In participatory art, there is a certain tension as the artwork is only deemed complete when spectators are willing to be complicit participants. While the artist is the one who has to invite and perhaps even allow the very act of participation, it is precisely the same act of participation that cements his or her authority as the artist of the artwork. More than that, the very gesture of voluntary participation authors the authority of the artist. Likewise, mediated participation within social media follows this very form, for it is precisely the participation of the user, by virtue of him or her being an active and willing producer on social networks, that authors the authority of social media and allow social networks to proliferate. Without the willing participation of users, social networks would cease to exist.

The technological fantasies of participation, in cool (all senses of the word) media might be firmly tied to certain romanticized notions of emancipation but the limits of cybernetic participation have to be closely considered. Perhaps the irony that plagues the age of participation in social media is such that in the past, one might think one only needs to participate to dispel the illusion of the spectacle; now, in order to participate, one might need to be spectacular. Slovenian Žižek captures the problematic notion of participation perfectly when he suggests that this ‘need’ to construct ourselves as an active participant, instead of being in opposition to the alienating effects of contemporary capitalism effectively renders us as further complicit and subservient to the needs of neo liberal capitalism so as to ensure its own successful functioning (Žižek, 2006, pg. 334).

According to Žižek: “The threat today is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to “be active,” to “participate,” to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, “do something”; academics participate in meaningless “debates,” and so forth, and the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from all this. Those in power often prefer even a “critical” participation, a dialogue, to silence—just to engage us in a “dialogue,” to make sure our ominous passivity is broken.” (*ibid*)

He cites Alan Badiou’s thesis: “It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent.” Žižek paraphrases Badiou and argues that doing nothing might be better than to “engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly, through acts like providing space for the multitude of new subjectivities, and so on” (*ibid*).

He employs a unique term to describe this cybernetic form of activity or active participation today, calling it an “interpassive” mode of participation, rather than interactive form of communication. He argues that in this ‘interpassive’ mode of participation where we are constantly ‘actively’ participating in various aspects of socio-ideological life, it is not participation to ensure any kind of social change but rather, participation to ensure that nothing will happen, and that nothing will change at all (Žižek, 2006, pg. 342).

Zizek proposes that the “proper radical political gesture”, the act of defiance and resistance to the contemporary condition today instead might be to be ‘passively aggressive’ rather than ‘aggressively passive’ (*ibid*). Participation in social media then, even when one thinks one is creatively resisting, becomes a form of collaboration with the very logic of its production. Instead of blindly following this cybernetic turn to participation, perhaps we could passively contemplate the reconfiguration of the spectacle, and the spectacular, in the age of social media technology.



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