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Who creates the narrative? The case of RE/F/r:ACE, a participatory media artwork in city space

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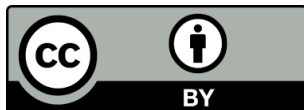
Abstract

This paper discusses the roles of artist, author, participant and spectator within the context of participatory media art events, with reference to RE/F/r. ACE, a participatory video project developed by Andy Best-Dunkley, Merja Puustinen and Victor Khachtchanski. RE/F/r.ACE enables participants to easily contribute their own images as raw material to the ongoing flow of visual and audio narrative projected into the public city environment. Situating the project within an art historical context, the paper discusses the social and political coding of the architectonic urban environment, and the rules and norms relating to, and controlling, our everyday use of public space. When the notion of free "open to all" public space is under threat from ongoing commercialisation and gentrification of urban centres worldwide, RE/F/r.ACE is an example of one attempt to draw attention to this transformation in a creative, positive, and artistic manner.

Keywords: Narrative, Participation, Public art, Performance, Empowerment

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RE/F/r.ACE is a participatory video art work for public city space. Passers-by in the street and an online audience upload images that instantly affect the projected image, as they are combined, layered and animated with others. Interaction is both deliberate and coincidental. Thus, voluntary activity and physical presence become significant elements in terms of content creation. Our actions, presence and movement all affect the social cohesion of the city-moulding the urban experience as a whole. It is us, the users of public space who give significance, meaning and interpretation with our actions to the other dwellers in the city.

Figure 1: RE/F/r.ACE performance at Unitarian Church, Brighton, UK on 16th September 2015. Photograph: Ray Gibson.

Participatory art works in public space can illuminate important political and philosophical questions. Who is the city for? Is it a site of spectacle for tourism, or a place for living, for work? Who has the legitimate right to appear in the public space? And how does one become a visible and legitimate user of urban space in contemporary society? The speed and function orientated hierarchies of design imply that playing children, people with disabilities, youngsters with little money, elderly people or the unemployed, who would have time and may just wish to pass the time of day, are not welcome in this environment.

Henri Lefebvre regards the capitalist system as a colonialisation of both the producer (worker) and consumer (as one and the same person). Exploitation, once directed at the colonised territories, is now focused on the everyday life of populations in the industrialised nations. Where once every aspect of life was symbolic – every action, every thing, had meaning, in contemporary life symbol has been "condensed into monuments" to power (Lefebvre 2002, 308–309).

For Lefebvre everyday consumer behaviour is defined by this symbolism. Thus the basis of consumer behaviour, and the desired outcome of neo-liberal market led economics, is understood within this paradox. The citizen is slave to his own actions: producing, consuming, and believing in 'the system'. More and more the shopping centres, which define contemporary urban life style, are privately owned, publicly accessible spaces where the usual laws and regulations are superseded by privately enforced rules. If you do not conform, you will be excluded.

Art context

By the late 1950s the hegemony enjoyed by abstract expressionism was beginning to face sprouts of resistance as a younger generation of artists began to look outside the closed domain of art for inspiration. Writing in 1958, Allan Kaprow envisioned a new kind of art as the real legacy of Jackson Pollack's oeuvre, an art that dealt with everyday life itself:

> "Pollack, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. …. Objects of every sort are the materials of the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists" (Kaprow 2003, 7–9).

Kaprow magnificently foretold the development of a multitude of relational forms of art making that would not emerge until many years later, and are indeed still current today.

It is clear that Kaprow and artists who followed after him sought to engage their audience within a carefully orchestrated situation which would produce an experience for the viewer. Indeed, it was particularly this spectacle that drew the

wrath of both Greenberg and Fried towards what the latter described as 'literalist' art. While artists such as Judd and Morris championed the size and scale of these works, Fried saw only empty spectacle: "the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder" (Fried 2003, 839).

A later generation of artists from another continent, the Young British Artists who emerged onto the art scene in the 1990s, employed a combination of conceptual and shock tactics in their work, consciously employing the media's (usually negative) reaction in their working process. Using the language and visual forms of past art genres mixed with a knowing understanding of inter-contextual relationships, these artists set the scene for what writer and curator Nicholas Bourriaud has called "relational aesthetics", art works that employ inter-human relations as much as formal and aesthetic concerns. Bourriaud writes:

> "The artist's practice, and his behavior as producer, determines the relationship that will be struck up with his work. In other words, what he produces, first and foremost, is relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects" (Bourriaud 1998, 42).

Bourriaud sees relational aesthetics as the contemporary projection of the modernist avant-garde, a logical continuation of Greenberg's positioning of abstract expressionism. The work of art has a social and historical context, but its role is not to engage directly with society; Art is disengaged, it has its own space. For Marx, the essence of human existence are the inter-personal relationships which each of us creates in society. In our current neo-libertarian globalised world, the dominant ideology demands that we are each individuals making our own way. The whole concept of class struggle, of identification and belonging to some intrinsic grouping is almost outlawed. Thus these inter-personal relationships are all we have left to utilise in our day to day struggle to survive.

The Political

Since the beginning of the current financial crisis in 2008, the art world has seen a renewed interest in the political. Writer and critic Claire Bishop has drawn strongly on Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001). In her 2004 essay "Antagonism and Relational aesthetics" Bishop introduces her argument against the "feel good" convivial relational aesthetics art practices of artists Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick, comparing them unfavourably with what she sees as the "tougher", and therefore "better" art of Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn (Bishop 2004). Bishop extrapolates Laclau and Mouffe's

argument for antagonism in politics to the art world and art practice. For her, the artist must be confrontational to both the art audience and to society. For Bishop, "socially engaged art" must fail precisely because it lacks this antagonism. Sierra sums up both his own position and that of Bishop when he states:

> "I can't change anything. There is no possibility that we can change anything with our artistic work. We do our work because we are making art, and because we believe art should be something, something that follows reality. But I don't believe in the possibility of change" (Santiago Sierra: Works 2002–1990 2002, 15).

Bishop argues that the avant-garde artist must take a confrontational stance to society, the audience, and any potential collaborators. For her, even if social change is desirable it is not the role of art(ists) to achieve this change. Referring to the "Ladder of Citizen Participation" (Arnstein 1969). Bishop states that:

> "The most challenging works of art do not follow this schema, because models of democracy in art do not have an intrinsic relationship to **models of democracy in society**" (author's bold)(Bishop 2012, 279).

Continuing, she writes:

> "At a certain point, art has to hand over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved" (Bishop 2012, 283).

For Bishop it is impossible for art to function as a tool for social justice, empowerment and change. Shannon Jackson takes issue with Bishop's approach. Rather than approaching participatory art practices through the narrow lens of the visual art world, Jackson views these works from the perspective of theatre and performance as well as community and social arts, the later both anathemas to Bishop who seems to find it very difficult to accept any work that possibly compromises the authenticity of the 'author' through a genuinely collaborative creation process. Jackson draws up what she calls a 'critical barometer' to illustrate Bishop's over dominating criteria for art that should be "critical, illegible, useless, and autonomous":

> 1 Social celebration versus social antagonism
> 2 Legibility versus illegibility
> 3 Radical functionality versus radical unfunctionality
> 4 Artistic heteronomy versus artistic autonomy (Jackson 2011, 48).

By focusing her critique on artists operating within the confines of the art world with its cosy, familiar audiences and existing status in society, Bishop ignores strategies that are inclusive, empowering, and challenging.

This is the paradox of poetic terrorism – to act politically without being political. For Jacques Rancière the act of protest in a globalised neo-liberal economy is an act of self-conscious irony. The overwhelming power of the system "makes any protest a spectacle and any spectacle a commodity" (Ranciere 2011, 33).

Nora Sternfeld asks, in relation to curatorial practice and art education (by definition participatory):

> "..the point here, … is to connect the question "Who is speaking?" with that of authorized authorship—"Who has the power to define?"—and to ask how the powerful distinction between the production and reproduction of knowledge can be radically broken down" (Sternfeld 2013).

Sternfeld is particularly concerned to question the power relationship between the curator/educator/artist/activist and their supposedly less well-informed/educated collaborator/participant/students. Sternfeld draws on Brecht's play The Mother (1932) to illustrate how education should, in the best of cases, be a reciprocal exchange of knowledge rather than a display of power by the teacher. Learning for the sake of it is rejected and in its place is empowered learning – learning with interest, learning for a reason. Sternfeld raises important questions for those interested in open participatory collaborations of any kind, especially through the term she refers to as the "unglamorous". Those moments, topics, or incidents that the 'facilitator' would really rather wish didn't exist – but do. This is the true face of participation. In particular "the Disagreeable" can cause the liberal-minded pause for thought. Having created a free space for interaction between ideas and people, to be suddenly confronted by racist, sexist, and other bigoted opinions is a shock. Should we use our bourgeois position of authority to silence this bogeyman, or uncomfortably leave it un-challenged, a silent presence in the room?

An Artistic Experience

Despite our socio-political and research related ambitions, RE/F/r.ACE is not an attempt to visualise a theoretical, technological or political agenda. It is an art work. With RE/F/r.ACE, we bring the individual members of the audience together as a collective through a shared experience of a magical and surreal urban ritual which reaches beyond the repetitive expectancy of the thoroughly banal and commodified experience of the public space. This artistic experience acts as glue which bonds the individual members of the audience around a temporarily shared, re-possessed and transformed property – the urban landscape.

We aim to activate our spectator/participants through a magical, surprising, chaotic event that challenges their every expectation of that urban space they are in. RE/F/r.ACE is more related to other performative traditions, such as happenings, street processions and rave culture rather than following simply generic media art traditions. As artists we prefer raising puzzling feelings and evoking questions rather than providing simple answers. In our view, art has other value propositions which cannot be reduced to measuring instrumental usability for emancipation or as a solution provider for deep social problems. But art does have the power to wake up, touch and make people feel and think differently.
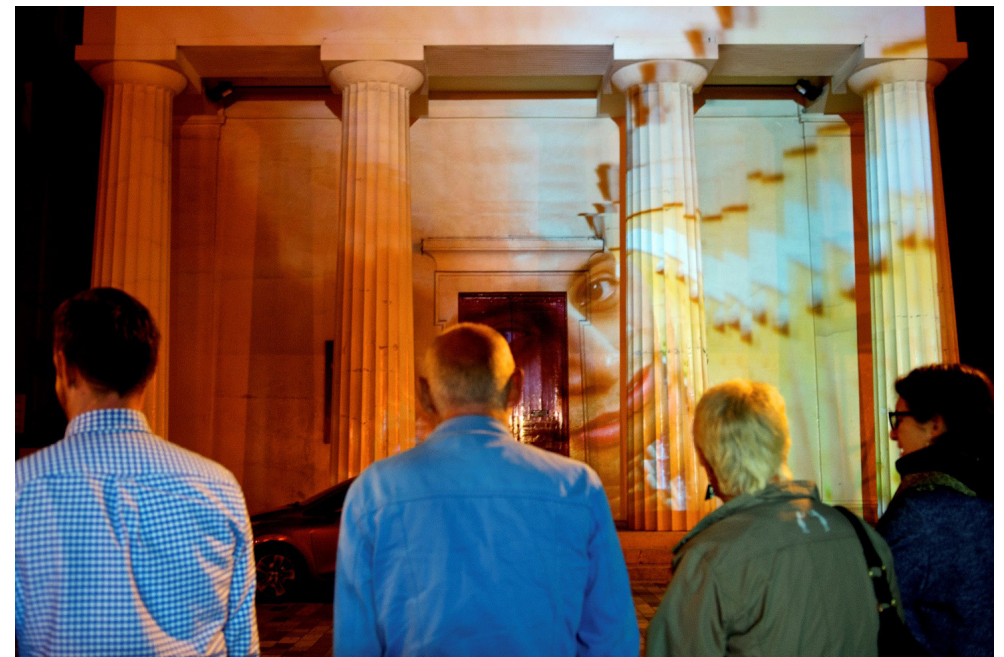

Figure 2: RE/F/r.ACE performance at Unitarian Church, Brighton, UK on 15th September 2015. Photograph Ray Gibson.

Through art as its means and end, RE/F/r.ACE is a performative happening which aims at a temporary but critical transformation of the mental qualities of urban space at the level of the audience experience, in which the passive consumer and

bystander role changes to the role of a self-reflective and actively participating co-author in the event. The most subjectively identifiable part of one's body, the viewer's own face, becomes part of the artistic experience of refracing the city by layering virtual imagery of the art work over the fixed and given city structures. RE/F/r.ACE therefore disturbs the virtual but imaginary safety of the city experience as designed around consumerism, as well as the reassuring presence of continuity of power and selected narration of historical events as represented through design, material choices and portrayed symbols of power.

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