

Mark Wilsher on the Cultural Olympiad and the politics of participatory public art projects

Out of Many, One

Yoko Ono
Smile 2010



Twenty-first century buzzword, political panacea, web 2.0 paradigm: it seems impossible to avoid ‘participation’ these days. Morgan Quaintance set out a common three-part definition of participatory practice in *AM354*, and even redefined the audience’s private imaginative engagement with art in these terms. I wouldn’t want to attempt another definitive taxonomy here as the range and messy reality of artists’ projects would ideally resist such neat categorisation. There is one particular model, though, that bears some discussion at this point, especially in light of its current official validation in a range of contemporary institutional and Olympic projects in the UK. Among the big name exhibitions, landmark commissions and laughable mayoral follies that litter the landscape this year, a group of projects aiming at mass participation have also been commissioned. And it is the particular model of these projects given the governmental seal of approval that gives a clear indication of the new and rather conservative orthodoxies that have come to surround participatory public artworks.

In Quaintance’s article, as also in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s defining historical survey exhibition of 2008, ‘The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now’, the role of the audience is analysed in very broad-brush terms. Do we press a button to ‘interact’, or take part in a social situation? Do we have to manipulate an object with our hands or immerse ourselves in an all-encompassing environment? As Quaintance suggests, these are bodily, almost mechanistic ways of defining our experience. I, too, am more interested in what the audience is meant to experience through its participation. The model that I want to develop here is essentially a simple one, and yet, by considering it through several different metaphors, a variety of qualitative aspects of the audience’s experience and investment in the works can be explored.

The performance duo Lone Twin’s *Boat Project*, 2012, is a good example, and its status as an officially sanctioned Cultural Olympiad artwork (it is one of 12 Arts Council England Artists Taking the Lead regional commissions) indicates that this model fits neatly with current ideological priorities. In this project, ‘the people of the South East’ are invited to contribute wooden objects to the artists, anything from a coat hanger or a kitchen spoon to a table top. The stories associated with each donation are recorded and documented to form an archive of the area’s history. The artists then take this group of over a thousand objects and cut, slot and laminate them together to construct a full-sized seaworthy boat that will be taken on a journey around the UK’s south-east coast from Chichester to Margate, finally ending up at the landlocked Milton Keynes. The specific structure that I am interested in is this: the audience participates by contributing

a range of heterogeneous objects carrying some personal meaning, which are then brought together in one clear image or symbol that is provided by the artists. The participatory element is obvious and upfront. Anyone is invited to get involved, and their involvement requires no special skill or particular investment of time or energy. The final outcome has a strong symbolic image that defines the project from the start and motivates the participants. It is the total image that 'ordinary people's' contributions end up creating that is meant to give the project its narrative or meaning over and above anything else. Lone Twin's artwork is, then, about voyage and discovery or adventure. Other Olympic projects in a similar vein include: Dumbworld's *Nest*, 2012, in Belfast (another Artists Taking the Lead commission), where items collected from local people will be assembled into a giant nest that is the centrepiece of a range of live and musical commissions, and Yoko Ono's *SMILE*, 2012, at the Serpentine Gallery, where people are invited to upload photos of themselves smiling to form a massive online film. The projects' common structure is clearly one that is aligned with certain institutional ideas about participation, and a fairly orthodox relationship between artists, commissioners and the public.

Such official validation is a long way from Group Material's now seminal exhibition 'The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)' of 1981, for which the artists went from door to door around their 13th Street neighbourhood asking to borrow artworks with 'sentimental, cultural value' right off the walls of kitchens and front rooms. Everything that was submitted was included, so magazine covers sat next to religious icons, family photos next to a 'Rope Man' made at high school. Writing about similar works that involved the public at this time, Lucy Lippard sometimes compared them to a potluck dinner, where everyone brings a dish to share and the resultant feast is an unpredictable mixture of this and that. In contrast, the type of participatory projects that are being commissioned today seem to require a more definite end point that unifies the contributions under a powerful visual symbol, something that Liam Gillick has described as 'an easily exchanged conceptual singularity'. For all their ostensible open-endedness and inclusivity, it seems that ultimately a strongly branded image is a safer bet for expensive large-scale Olympic projects.

Ono's *Smile* makes admirable use of web 2.0 technology (we are invited to upload our JPEGs via Instagram – recently acquired by Facebook for \$1bn) and its digital basis is apt in many ways. Aren't all these individual contributions a little like pixels in themselves, after all? Each one is a tiny component of a much larger whole. As we watch the film online or in the gallery, and as one snapshot fades gradually into the next, any one of them might be swapped for any other and the overall effect would remain the same. It is the end result that is important: the form that the artist has imposed from the beginning. A



Group Material
'The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)' 1981
exhibition of artworks
with sentimental value
borrowed from local homes
in New York's 13th Street
neighbourhood

pixel is such a tiny part of the whole that changing this one or that one has no obvious effect. But are there not other cases in which the individual's participation can be said to actually mean something?

One alternative model that explicitly foregrounds the significance of the public's participation is to be found rather unexpectedly in the work of Antony Gormley. In parallel with his familiar semi-figurative sculpture he has returned at many points in his career to large-scale projects that require the help of many people. His series of 'Fields', 1991-2003 – expanses of small clay figures, each one moulded by willing hands to a rudimentary template – are almost literal representations of the masses in the various global locations where the pieces have been realised. The traces of expressive fingermarks in the clay of each little 'gorm' are easily read as signifiers of individual participation. More recently, the 2,400 people who took their turn on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square for *One & Other*, 2009 attracted attention, but it was the 80ft-high *Waste Man*, 2006, sited in Margate's Dreamland fun park, that most clearly relates to the discussion here. Gormley provided a strong final image: a huge figure (naturally) constructed entirely from old furniture donated by the people of Margate that would be set alight at the culmination of the project to form a spectacular part of Penny Woolcock's *Margate Exodus*. As the pagan image of a burning man suggests, people were invited to treat it almost sacramentally. Speaking in Alison Graham's Channel 4 film *Waste Man*, Gormley appeals to a crowd for objects that are linked with 'important moments in your lives, that can be carried by an object and the burning of the object might release you from the pain they're associated with, or might just be a kind of breaking-free'. The stories associated with the donated furniture were not documented in this case, although it is clear from the film that many people gave things that meant something powerful to them. Gormley intended that his work would actually help people to release themselves from the pain of the past by the transformative act of burning their fetish objects. The relationship between public, object and artwork is one of sympathetic magic here, where the objects themselves were invested with significance and in fact carried that significance off with them to be burnt on the pyre. There is a similar sacrificial feel to Lone Twin's boat, which will take its component objects off on a final voyage over the horizon.

A less romanticised, and more politicised, harnessing of this structure can be found in Ai Weiwei's Unilever Commission at Tate Modern in 2010 (Reviews AM343). Rather than appealing to an unknown public to donate items, here Weiwei orchestrated the cogs and gears of international capitalism in order to draw our attention to its mundane realities. Unilever's £250,000 was funnelled

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through the artist to 1,600 workers in the Chinese city of Jingdezhen, which has been a major centre for the production of Imperial porcelain for centuries. For two and a half years, as a film displayed alongside the installation explained, men and women sitting around makeshift tables filled bucket after bucket with 100 million porcelain seeds, each of which was given a skilful paintjob with the flick of a brush and twice-fired. It was a fantastic demonstration of the mechanics of world trade and industry. Compared with Gormley's almost humanist 'Fields', the individuals working away to produce each tiny seed were apparently the classic alienated labourers: producing tightly specified products to order for an unknown and distant destination. The work's potent symbolism, however, recalling communist metaphors of sunflowers and nationalistic symbols, overcame this critical reading to appeal to wider populist notions of individualism and individual representation.

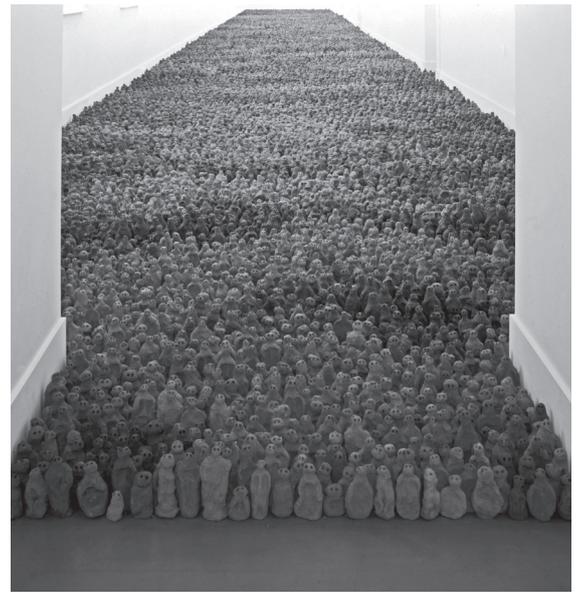
This is perhaps the key to the appeal of such projects in the current political climate. George W Bush and Tony Blair's belief that democracy could be forcibly exported around the world has meant that the ritual of voting has been promoted in the West as the *sine qua non* of 21st-century nationhood. As an adjunct to this, the jargon of 'inclusion' demanded that individual citizens, once granted rights by virtue of simply being alive, were now forced to actively perform their inclusion in what the political writer Ruth Levitas has called the 'theatres of community'. Officially sanctioned public arts projects now often function as these ideologically loaded spaces in which people can publicly perform their role as active citizens. When thinking about Lone Twin's boat, or Dumbworld's nest, it is the form that seems to take precedence over the actual content. Does it matter if they build a boat or a bus? A nest or a table? It only matters that something is built. Looking at the project websites and associated social platforms it is clear that what counts is the process of participation itself.

Nowhere is this political imagery more clearly demonstrated in physically symbolic terms than in the great symmetrical obelisk that is the Washington Monument in Washington DC. The tallest true obelisk in the world, it is also unusual in being constructed out of many small blocks that include donations and commemorative stones sent from all US states and territories. At its ceremonial dedication in 1885, the Honorable Robert C Winthrop noted that this represented 'our cherished national motto, *E Pluribus Unum*' ('Out of Many, One'). A person in every state could truly feel that they had some direct investment in the monument when they considered the stone representing their part in the greater whole.



Ai Weiwei
Sunflower Seeds 2010

Antony Gormley
Field for the British Isles 1993



This is perhaps the simplest, most straightforward representation of participation. But a contemporary critique quickly problematises the whole organising structure on the basis of its top-down, hierarchical imposition of order. When the end result is preordained the specifics of an individual's participation are surely meaningless. Adding another stone to the monument (or piece of wood to the pile) just feels tokenistic. Whether by accident or intent, however, this is the model that seems to have become the new orthodoxy in large-scale public commissions. People's memories and desires might be recorded and archived, but no one is permitting them actually to have any say in how things evolve. At one level this is probably because it is a resolutely physical metaphor. Contemporary art might well be based on ideas but the world still asks for something to touch and see – Gillick's 'singularity' again. This is a shame because so many interesting artists have been working for many years now in more abstract, sophisticated ways.

If there is a hidden agenda, however, it is to give the people the illusion of power by letting them, in effect, vote for the status quo. This is the reason that a spectacular culminating image is at the same time important and irrelevant. It is crucial because, like a boat or a nest or a giant burning man, it gives the work an inspiring and clearly definable end point. There is something for everyone to work towards. At the same time, as I have suggested above, these image-based narratives are more often than not pretty much interchangeable. The amount of emphasis put on their participatory aspects means that the whole generative process becomes just as important in any final reading. It doesn't really matter to any assessment of a project what the outcome is.

The question is, of course, does any of this matter? If the public get to take part and see their contributions add up to something, and the artists get to open their working practices out to wider participation, what is the problem? It seems to me that

the official validation of this particular model has the negative effect of actually obscuring more progressive alternatives: genuinely collaborative works that might take their actual direction from the public's involvement in a real rather than in a tokenistic manner. The emphasis on materiality is a retrograde denial of social relationships. Other models and processes of more nuanced collaboration or alternative systems don't stand a chance among the official programme of crowd-pleasing spectacle and public showmanship.

Moving to recent political activist practices, it should not come as a surprise that the initial Occupy Wall Street action was in part initiated by contemporary artists including Tania Bruguera. Working on a long-term residency among marginalised citizens of New York (as she described in an interview in *Frieze* 144), her politicised art has merged utterly with grass roots activism, one of the results being the innovative urban campsites that sprang up virally across the world. This is a clear contemporary alternative to the standard mode of representational parliamentary democracy where, as is often remarked, no matter who you vote for it is always a politician that gets in. The message is simple and straightforward: participation must be meaningful or it runs the risk of becoming a tokenistic sideshow that leaves real issues unaddressed. ■

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