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PHILIPPINE HOEGEN AND VEERLE SPRONCK

On a gloomy Friday afternoon, performance artist Philippine Hoegen and researcher Veerle Spronck seek each other out to try to crack some of the conundrums around ethics, aesthetics, care and connectivity that they encounter in their own practices. Rain falls thickly in both Brussels and Maastricht as they convene on Zoom. They decide to begin their conversation with the prickly term 'participation'.

Veerle Spronck: Philippine, how did your work become a form of participative practice?

Philippine Hoegen: About nine years ago now, I started working with another version or alter ego: David. David was a way for me to put into practice the notion of versions of the self – which is what I was working on at the time – in a very concrete way. He became part of my, or our, private and performative lives, hanging out with my friends, attending classes or meetings and performing. Very soon we came up against a dilemma, which was the difference in access to the body we were sharing: I had full agency in deciding when and if David 'took over', while he had almost none. I realize it might be a bit eccentric to call this participation, but exactly this problem of access is interesting when we're on that subject.

David addressed this power imbalance in a performance called *Dividing David* (2015), 'a performance of publicly relaying David's attire (beard, shirt, hairdo, etc.) and of collectively conjuring his becoming into the bodies that would host him' as Kristien Van den Brande later put it (2020: 13). David invites people from the audience to assume his properties, helping them into his garb, which they try out for a while and then pass on to a new person, allowing David to land in new and other bodies.

My own desire in this piece was, perhaps naively, to share the experience of becoming other with an audience, rather than only showing it. But what makes someone want to get up and

come play this game? 'What is the invitation?' Lilia Mestre, my mentor at the time, would ask.

VS: Yes, you touch on a complex matter: *why* would people care to participate in your work. You, as the artist, remain the one who decides what is going to happen. How did you address that?

PH: Well, then I kind of caught the 'participative bug' and soon after began working with a hybrid form of workshop-as-participative-performance, like *Fortress: Undo* (2017), which was performed with a group of students. The format offered a very clear structure, which, as a participant, you could follow to explore something for yourself: a method of working, or of doing research. And through which we created something as a group. It was meticulously facilitated; people were guided step by step until the point that a flow set in and the process took over. An event with a similar structure took place last year at Marres in Maastricht, called *Performing Work: Training the sense of the self* (2022).[1] The questions I focused on were initially: What do people need to be able to participate? What do they get out of it and how is their co-authorship of the collective work acknowledged and actualized? I went looking for ways in which the participants could co-determine the outcome of the piece in the form of its documentation. In *Fortress Undo*, there was a video camera that the participants could use however they wanted. They created a 22-minute film that served as outcome and documentation. At Marres, what people wrote down during the workshop became the script for a film that we made together in the moment: participants prompted two actresses to give voice to the words we had scribbled down, allowing us to hear our sentences become, through their mouths, a conversation. The films were shared with the participants.

[1] This workshop took place in November 2022, and was organized by Philippine in collaboration with Nirav Christophe and Carolien Stikker as part of Marres' series *Training the Senses*.

While I thought of these practices as participative at the time, I'm seriously doubting now whether that's justified. The mere fact that people are invited to 'do', might not be enough to constitute participation. In both cases, there was a site and a structure which people were invited into, and by which they were led through a process. While people are in charge of their own way of engaging, as long as they don't co-determine the basic rules for, and the direction of what we're doing and what we do with the outcomes, the term might become flattened to mean anything where people 'do' instead of only 'watch', which is a problematic binary to begin with as watching and listening, attending to, giving attention are also ways of doing. So, I'm curious how you see this Veerle. What is your experience and how do you define or apply the term 'participation'?

VS: The notion of 'participation', with all its complexities, took a prominent place in my research when I did my PhD on audience participation in innovative classical music practice between 2017 and 2021. During that time, I worked within a project called 'Artful Participation: Doing artistic research with symphonic music audiences', and it was my task to both empirically research how music practices were involving their audiences in new ways, and theoretically examine the notion of participation in the performing arts.[2] The notion has stayed with me ever since, because it impacts and complicates how arts practices are organized today.

There is an overwhelming amount of literature on 'participation' in a wide variety of fields: from the arts to research on nanotechnology. Anthropologist Christopher Kelty wrote the book *The Participant* (2019) in which he describes how the concept became increasingly popular over the course of the twentieth century. He writes that 'if needs be, participation is quickly defined: to take part, to share in or with, to enjoy in common with others, to share the qualities or characteristics of something' (Kelty 2019: 30). But he goes on to complicate that definition. '"Participation" is notoriously elusive – there are ladders, cubes and other multi-dimensional models that attempt to define it – but there is no

consensus about what it is in the vast, multi-disciplinary literature that analyses it' (8). What I find so relevant in Kelty's contribution to the discourse is that he shows that what the concept has in common in all the different contexts is that it has the potential to be a solution or tool for establishing more democratic and therefore (presumably) better practices (35–7).

I can connect this interpretation to the arts: there seem to exist implicit ideas about what 'good' participation entails. It is normatively charged: as Claire Bishop has famously discussed, increasingly since the 1960s we have art practices that are not only evaluated based on aesthetic norms, but also on social norms and values (2012: 189–90). And there this peculiar binary that you refer to comes into being. You have art in which the audience listens, watches, experiences as they always did, *and* there is art in which they 'participate' – which then means that the audience 'contribute[s], co-create[s], or interact[s] with artworks, artists, and art institutions' (Elffers and Sitzia 2016: 62; also see Spronck 2022: 22–33). In other words, the audience is then considered part of the artwork or performance, which has implications for the responsibilities you have as artist. One of my colleagues in *Artful Participation*, Ruth Benschop, pinpointed that this type of work (inviting others to co-create or contribute) requires care (2020: 67). I think she's right, but the notion of 'care' needs some further consideration.

PH: Hmm, yes, it's a term that's bandied around a lot right now. I guess we should clarify what we mean by 'care'.

VS: The definition I came across lately is the one political scientist Joan Tronto put forward together with Berenice Fisher:

> On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Tronto and Fisher 1990: 41)

As Tronto also notes herself, this definition includes contexts, humans, nonhuman

and the interrelations between these vast categories. Care is *not* individualistic. Rather, it's a networked activity (Tronto 1993: 103–4). Although I catch myself nodding in agreement whenever someone mentions Tronto's work, I'm not always sure what her ideas mean in practice. She writes: 'care is not a cerebral concern' (104). Care is a bodily practice that takes place in relations between people, things and so on. At the same time, literature about participation remains focused on finding the right *model* to explain it, rather than unpacking the ways in which it establishes relations in practice and analysing its underlying values. That is where, to me, the notion of 'connectivity' or 'artistic connectivity' becomes interesting to engage with (Hübner 2022). Whereas 'participation' is implicitly normative, 'connectivity' is explicitly so: '[c]onnectivity in our understanding is a concept that embraces ethical values, approaches of sharing, shared experiences and commoning/commonness' (27). What is helpful about the term is that it explicates not just the ways of working together (collaborating, commoning, etc.) but also on the basis of which values – *ethics* – are included. But how to make that work for us?

PH: I think we can draw on an ethics of care. You refer to Joan Tronto, but I began my enquiry into the ethics of care with Carole Gilligan. What she says is essentially: the autonomous, rational subject of liberal individualism, who is detached from context and more mind than body, is a delusion. A theory of ethics, according to her, must depart from our embodied vulnerability, relationality and interdependency, which necessitate care: 'An ethics of care directs our attention to the need for responsiveness in relationships (paying attention, listening, responding) and to the costs of losing connection with oneself or with others' (Gilligan 2011: n.p.).

VS: Maybe, maybe, Philippine, but this should be understood beyond only human beings, don't you think?

PH: Definitely!

VS: I'm reminded of the Belgian philosopher of science Vinciane Despret. What fascinates me about her work is that she thinks-with animals as well as scientists. Hers is a curious practice. For example, in 'Sheep do have opinions' (2006), Despret tells a tale about a primatologist – called Thelma Rowell – who observes the animals in front of her house: a flock of sheep. Despret, in turn, observes both Rowell and the sheep. In general, sheep aren't considered interesting for primatologists because they are assumed to not do much... But through the case of Rowell's research, Despret shows that it's a matter of finding the 'right' questions to ask in relation to whom you want to connect with. Basically, sheep are only uninteresting if you come into the field with questions that worked well for apes. Figuring out the right questions one should ask when connecting with sheep might require living outside of the city, getting up every morning to feed and be with them.

Finding, articulating, making these 'right' questions is hard. Crafting connections is hard. It asks you to be curious towards whatever you encounter, to be polite and to bend to fit the situation. To be interested, *really* interested, in what those you encounter find interesting themselves. What I find fascinating *and* challenging about this is that it forces the artist or artistic researcher to 'delay' their ideas of what the work and its result should look like. We don't know in advance what others might envision or desire... All of this is – indeed – bodily, practical, relational. And it takes time, it's inefficient and often uncomfortable. How do those things play out in what you're working on currently?

PH: What you're saying is really relevant to me right now! In my doctoral project called *Performing Working*, I'm questioning, among other things, why only waged work is valued and recognized as work.[3] I want to problematize the championing of that waged work above all other activities, and its status as a condition for citizenship and social participation. I look at the social exclusion that this causes for different people, and try to make diverse forms of hidden work explicit, exploring the value of that work and the dynamics of the invisibilization of those doing it.

[3] *Performing Working* is a Professional Doctorate project conducted in HKU (University of the Arts Utrecht) as part of a new, practice-led professional education line that started in 2023 within Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences, equivalent to a PhD.

A starting point for this exploration is illness: seeking to understand and make apparent what the work of living with illness – one's own or that of someone else whom one is caring for – is, in all its many facets, including the fraught relationship between illness and the labour market. Since February 2023 we've been working as a group of people with varied perspectives on, or experiences with, living with illness. We set out by using performative 'scores' – scores are a form of notation used in performance art, where a process, action or activity is described in the form of an instruction or a kind of protocol – to record skills and actions that the work of illness requires. The scores made those skills and gestures visible, readable and usable by others. Creating those scores together, exchanging through making, proved a fruitful and energizing practice for all of us. We could externalize ideas and experiences in different ways and on different levels. We collected the first outcomes in a small edition called *An Informal Manual for Illness* [*Een Informele Handleiding voor Ziekte*] (2023), which is co-authored by everyone who (co-)created the material for the book during our collective working sessions.

This collaboration, especially within a group of people with chronic illnesses whom I connected with through the UMC Utrecht [University Medical Center Utrecht], was conceived as a form of participatory research with me as facilitator and researcher creating structures to 'harvest' stories and insights. But from the very beginning, because of our way of working together which is explicitly co-creative, the difference between researcher or artist and participant became meaningless. We are clearly all creating, researching, questioning and making content. In that sense, we may actually have left participation behind, and entered into what might better be named a connective practice.

At the same time this throws the topic of work right back at us: who is working in this project? (All of us.) And who is being paid? (Me, some other people, but not everyone.) Shouldn't everyone actually be paid? And if not, what are they getting out of it then? What are our shared values on this topic?

VS: Yes, yes, yes, I feel that is incredibly difficult, right? And also, if you have articulated new shared values together, how do these then impact how you organize your practice? Do you actually make changes then?

In the background of Veerle's end of the Zoom, a cat is meowing loudly. Veerle is visibly distracted.

VS: Sorry, I really should check what she wants – give me a second.

PH: No worries!

Veerle runs into the kitchen, out of view for Philippine, who meanwhile gets up to open a window and check the state of the weather. A few minutes later Veerle returns.

VS: Sorry about that, she gets very confused when I sit talking at a screen for a long time, so then I have to give her some attention. Where were we…? Ah, yes, so connectivity, as I understand it, does necessarily imply that you try to also challenge the routinized ways in which we are used to organizing artistic practices. How do you see that?

PH: For me it means, again, re-understanding what it is we're doing together and coming up with a practice that fits, ethically. For good or for bad, in my case I have to say I tend to tackle the dilemmas or questions as we come up against them, addressing them through adjusting the strategies and practices in each new iteration. So we're developing ethics by 'doing' them.

Failing to address such questions – for example, not managing to move beyond the classic 'informed consent form' towards a collective agreement for commoning all the knowledge a group produces together, when the practice demands that, is not just an ethical failure but also an aesthetic one, I think. Claire Bishop, in *Artificial Hells*, critiques what she sees as a lack of criticality towards the aesthetics of, and aesthetic experience for a viewer, of much participatory and socially engaged art (2012). She makes a point of separating the ethical and the aesthetical, and in an interview she said: 'In my view there is no point celebrating an

"ethical" working process as a goal in itself. The overall meaning of the work has to be more complex than a mere celebration of how a work was implemented' (Bishop cited in Eschenburg 2014: 176). I disagree with that statement, because it presumes the 'meaning' of a work can be separated from how it is made, while intuitively I would say that that's exactly where the meaning is construed, put to the test in a way, or actualized. Where theory becomes practice.

Can we think about this in terms of social imaginaries? Could we say that what is tried out, which forms of working, living, creating together are being practised, *is* the aesthetic experience, and the 'meaning' we are seeking to create?

VS: I share your discomfort with Bishop's strict delineation between the aesthetic and the social, and I like that you suggest bridging them with the help of the notion of social imaginaries. Originally this is a philosophical concept, but I think especially its interpretation within sociology and anthropology can help us think about how the aesthetic and the social might be intertwined. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai positions imagination as a social practice:

> [N]o longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is somewhere else), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. (Appadurai 1996: 31)

This, to me, underlines that the arts *are* a form of social practice, because in the arts we do work (labour/culturally organized practice) to imagine and rehearse ways in which we can or may organize society differently.

PH: Hmm... That is interesting, Veerle, because that frames my own ethics of 'doing' as a type of 'rehearsing'. That means ethics are not a given, but the locus of the work, a process of discovery, something that's developed by, and

having consequences for those practising it, those affected by it and for the world in which it is practised. A process which practises and produces meaning by working with, and on – rehearsing and living the consequences of – a social imaginary driven by an ethics of care.

VS: However, this view does challenge the conception of art that Bishop subscribes to, and it also differs from Tronto's understanding too. She says:

> Among the activities of life that do not generally constitute care we would probably include the following: the pursuit of pleasure, creative activity, production, destruction. To play, to fulfil a desire, to market a new product, or to create a work of art, is not care. (Tronto 1993: 104)

This puzzles me. Can art not be a form of care? Or should we reconsider what art (making) is? Does Tronto suggest here that art strives to make something 'new' rather than to repair what is there? This view of art has been significantly challenged, for instance during *documenta fifteen* where the Indonesian notion of *lumbung* allowed artists to make, explore and organize artworks that were focused on co-creating new ways of being together (ruangrupa 2020; Hübner 2022: 17). So that brings me to the question: if art is no longer about making something radically new, but rather aims to contribute to communities, strengthen or repair bonds between different groups in society, and so on... Could it then be care?

PH: I think it can be. Indeed I think it must be. *documenta fifteen* offered a lot to learn from in this respect.

VS: This impacts our understanding of what art is, and more importantly, what it *does*. It's an idea of art as an activity to 'maintain, continue, or repair our world'. The concept of 'connectivity' may help us clarify how art can indeed contribute to and re-create our world through these activities – it enables us to focus on its ethics, the *why*, rather than on who participates and how. So, wait, shall I try to see what we have strung together the past hour?

PH: Yes! Please try!

VS: OK, OK, so we started with a concept we both worked with a lot in the past years: participation. It is a thorny one for sure, as there are lots of implicit ideas about 'good' participation. We need other concepts to explore the normativity of collaborative arts practice. Then we turned to connectivity, as this is a concept that helps emphasize the ethical and normative *work* that collaborative, participative or co-creative arts practices must do. 'Good' collaboration is not a given; it must be (re)created and (re)established in artistic processes time and again.

PH: That makes a lot of sense to me, and sounds like something I definitely aspire to practice. Negotiating, testing, rehearsing together the rules by which we want to play, and maybe live. That means that ethics are not about a pre-given set of norms, but they emerge in doing. It departs from our embodied vulnerability, relationality and interdependency. And rehearsing the ways in which we want to work together *is* aesthetic work. If you adhere to this understanding, creating and caring are no longer opposites – there is no strict delineation. It allows you to see art as an iterative and collaborative process that plays an important social role.

VS: Beautiful! We made a sort of conceptual quilt – stitching together all these little pieces.

PH and **VS** *decide to finish their conversation. They both leave with the sense of having cleared some terms and having made new connections. In the meantime, the rain has stopped outside, and the brightening skies call them out of the virtual space and into the fresh air.*

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