

## Assembling the Audience-Citizen (Or, Should Each Person Be Responsible for Their Own Paté?)

Jenn Stephenson

One way to think about audience participation is as an economic exchange. Audiences give something, usually money, to get something, a ticket, which they use to access an experience of some kind. In theatre in the age of the social turn, audiences give more than just money. In immersive environments, audiences give their bodies. We contribute labour as we explore the world of the performance. In groups, we act as scenography or as “supernumeraries” for other immersed audiences. Audiences become collaborative and are recast as co-contributors to the performance. Through our actions, we become actors. Audiences place lemons in an alleyway (*B Side*), write spontaneous poetry (*Off Limit Zone*), set up chairs and tables for a party (*It Comes in Waves*), or alternatively use those tables and chairs as a barricade for an insurgent demonstration (*Counting Sheep*). Audiences also give ourselves in intangible ways, by revealing personal stories (*Lost Together*), sharing memories (*Landline*), or declaring ideological positions (*Foreign Radical*). Contributing labour, be it physical, emotional, or intellectual, in exchange for the pleasures of a boutique, customized, intimate and affective experience, for better or worse, enmeshes audiences in a seductive neoliberal framework where the work of artistic creation is being downloaded while at the same time providing that Do-It-Yourself authenticity that we desire. Audiences are caught in a zeitgeist of compelled narcissistic entrepreneurship (Harvie 2013; Zaiontz 2014; Alston 2013; Schweitzer 2017; Ridout 2006). The audience is an agent.

Another way to think about participation is to think about obligations and rights. This is still a variation on give-and-get, but with a bit of a twist. Under Rousseau’s social contract, the exchange is indirect. I give some of my freedoms, more or less voluntarily yielding the autonomy of being in a state of nature, so I can get the benefits of co-existing with others. This polity is shaped by relationality, driven by a shared collective goal for creating the best possible world for as many people as possible. In a chapter in *The Politics of Decentralisation* (1994) called “Citizen Participation: Theory and Practice,” the authors make the point that local authorities should not only be concerned with improving the quality of public services but also the quality of government (Burns, Hambleton, and Hoggett, 153). This meta-argument is very engaging. Not only should civic structures strive to make a better world, but along the way, there should be better ways of making a better world. Citizen participation is often cited as a central technique for improving governmental decision-making processes. Participation is good for the polis. When more people are involved in making decisions that affect their community, better decisions will be made. If the collective gathering of an interactive theatre event mirrors a society in miniature, the audience are citizens.

In her book (with the best title ever) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Claire Bishop (2012) takes up this question of how participatory audiences are (or are not) citizens. She writes, “It is tempting to make an equation between the value of a work of art and the degree of participation it involves turning the ladder into a gauge for measuring the efficacy of artistic practice” (279). The ladder that Bishop refers to is Sherry R. Arnstein’s ladder of citizen

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participation, conceived in 1969. This model, which describes eight levels of civic participation from non-participation (rungs 1 and 2: “Manipulation” and “Therapy”), to degrees of tokenism (rungs 3 through 5: “Informing,” “Consultation,” “Placation”), to degrees of citizen power (rungs 6 through 8: “Partnership,” “Delegated Power,” “Citizen Control”), has been very influential in the intervening decades on theories of governance and planning. In what is a core argument through her writing, Bishop actively resists the valuation that a work of art is de facto better because it involves more participation. A work of art is not a democracy, and so more and higher levels of participation are not essentially good. Dismissing the application of a direct analogy, Bishop gestures toward an alternative. She describes participatory performance as “a continual play of mutual tension, recognition, and dependency—more akin to the BDSM model mentioned in Chapter 8 [of *Artificial Hells*] or even the collectively negotiated dynamic of stand-up comedy—rather than a ladder of progressively more virtuous forms” (279). I agree that the parallel construction of participatory performance with democratic society does not quite map, and yet I am struck by her key characteristics of participatory theatre experience: mutual tension, recognition, dependency, relationships that are collectively negotiated. This is what human societies are too. Engaged citizenship of a democracy is also defined by mutual tension, recognition, dependency, and collective negotiation of how we are together. The outcomes of participation—theatrical or political— need not be always happy or ameliorative. We can have dissensus, but the drive toward a better way of being together persists, in my opinion. There is no return to nature, and we are stuck with each other.

Before considering a case study that illustrates a potential audience-citizen that resists Bishop’s denigration of this impossible combination, I want to loop back to unpack how a participatory work of art is or is not an egalitarian society founded on rights and obligations. The central point of attraction that pulls audience participation into correspondence with democratic citizenship is that word “participation.” Political participation, manifested primarily as engagement with the electoral system, either through voting or by standing for election as a representative (and by myriad ways of supporting these two functions), is the lifeblood of democratic society. Participatory audiences are voters, insofar as we make choices about where to stand and what to look at. But this role is almost entirely reactive. The basic role dynamics between elected government officials and citizens AND artists and audiences, although superficially similar, are fundamentally different. Power is held by politicians and by artists; they are makers and givers—they are the initiators of policies and ideas that shape experience, whereas citizens and audiences are receivers. Where audiences diverge from democratic citizens is in the transferability of that power. Audiences do not stand as representatives. There is no mechanism for audiences to assume the mantle of power. In this respect, politicians are in a fundamental way interchangeable with citizens. A foundational principle of democracy is that anyone can become a representative of the people. (Obviously, there are persistent systemic barriers to this being true in practice, but the principle holds.) An elected representative is just that, a representative—a placeholder for the community at large, selected through the direct exercise of political franchise. Setting aside the fact that artists are not elected, the important part is that they are not representatives. They are not just like us. The power of the elected leader is contingent, held in trust, whereas the “power” of the artist is innate to being an artist and is not transferable in the same way. Artists, arguably, have special skills in creating and communicating messages and experiences. Or at least, skill aside, the responsibility for the vision behind that creation is what makes an artist an artist. The work of the artist is given to the audience, not done on their behalf. The distinction is central. It is this condition that perhaps places a definitive limit on audience power/control at the top rungs of Arnstein’s ladder. If the work of the artist is entirely displaced by the work of the

audience, is it still a work of art? Arguably there is an upper limit where theatre ceases to be theatre. Everyone can be a representative. Can everyone be an artist?

With this question in mind, I want to turn to a production where participation by audience-citizens in the making of art-society is not the end, nor even the process; turning the play into a self-reflexive pretzel, it is the theme. *The Assembly* asks how we navigate what we give and what we get when it comes to making space or limiting space for free speech. This is the policy question of what is good for Canadian society at large. But the play also asks what is good for theatre, examining its own processes in how the verbatim makers make space or limit space for the curated speech they have previously collected and for spontaneous “raw” audience speech. In this way, our experience of form aligns with content. A critique levelled by Bishop against participatory art is that it is apolitical (apart from what she describes as a “loosely defined anti-capitalism”). *The Assembly* does have a political project—being better participators; that is, better audiences and better citizens. Its political project is politics itself. Its theatrical project is theatre itself. Returning to Bishop’s criteria, how do we exist in tension, recognition, and mutual dependency, marked by collective negotiation in the polis and in the theatre?

*The Assembly: Episode 1* is the creation of Porte Parole and playwrights Annabel Soutar, Alex Ivanovici, and Brett Watson. Building on the company’s past practice in verbatim performance, *The Assembly* brought together four Canadians from diverse ideological perspectives for a conversation. That conversation was then curated, recorded, and edited for re-performance by four actors. Intentionally seeded with strong personalities with diametrically opposed points of view, the ensuing conversation was heated and hostile, both originally and in its verbatim replication. But this is not the part that I am going to address here. About three-quarters of the way through the performance, this verbatim restating of the debate is interrupted. The actors step out of their roles and cede the table to the audience. They exit and the house lights come up. For the next twenty minutes, self-selected members of the audience approach the table, sit, and speak. Inspired by Lois Weaver’s Long Table practice, everyone is welcome, and one chair must remain empty so that anyone can join at any time. In my discussion here, I want to pay homage to the ephemerality and nightly uniqueness of this scene, so I will only address the events of the performance documented in the one archival version that I have. I offer four key moments.

### **I. “So I thought / Each person should be responsible for their own paté.”**

A flip bit of banter between Alex and Brett in character as themselves as the Porte Parole moderators about how *hors d’oeuvres* ought to be prepared for the original four subjects in *The Assembly* becomes a bit of pointed theorizing about how artists hold power and how they might cede that power to audiences. I want to read the above quote as a comment on the debate about whether those in the assembly have full control over their own representation or even if they are to be represented at all. This plays out in *The Assembly* principally through the ethos of verbatim editing. Early in the interview transcript, Alex and Brett ask the four how they would like to be represented. If they were to be portrayed by someone famous, who would it be? But also, they are asked if they would prefer to be anonymous or given a pseudonym. In these questions, however, we also become aware of the negative space, of how the four have relinquished control over their words and their images. Being ventriloquized and embodied by four actors, in the donation of verbatim, they both lose and gain audibility and visibility. They are represented theatrically but not as citizens. By contrast, audience members who come to the table represent themselves in direct democracy. They

are not subject to the control of verbatim editing. Their words are raw. Their scene comes closest to the pure democracy of anarchy that Shane (one of the original four subjects) advocates. And yet, there are so few of them. The time the audience members have been granted and the limited spaces at the table are still under the constricted control of the play and its makers.

## 2. The Coup de Théâtre of Shane

From the perspective of this iteration of *The Assembly*, the play is not about free speech and how we speak, but actually about how we listen. During the Long Table section, there is an electric moment during the performance I am discussing here when the “real” Shane (a self-identified queer, Jewish anarchist) steps out of the audience and joins the table. He is soon joined by the actress Tanja Jacobs (as herself, although inevitably ghosted as her verbatim character Valerie, an outspoken right-wing nativist). The audience laughs (nervously?), perhaps half expecting a flaming “rematch” between Jacobs-as-Valerie and Shane, since that is what we have been watching up to this point. Jacobs is clearly irritated with Shane, but when she chastises him, it is not about content, but about form—not for his views, but his continued dominance of the conversation. She informs the audience that this the second night that he has come to the table “and began his remarks with the identical language” [part 2 14:08] (self-replicating verbatim?). She berates him: “You’re not really here to listen to anyone else’s view. And I feel betrayed by that. . . . I’m disappointed that you are sitting here and saying the same thing again. . . . Would you like to respond to that?” He replies, “Would you prefer I listen?” “I would prefer you listen to other people. Maybe make a space for other people to sit here” [part 2 14:20]. She schools him in how to be a better citizen, a better audience. He returns to his seat in the house. The majority of the citizens in this miniature society of the theatre are listeners, not speakers. “Audience” means listeners, from the Latin *audire*. In this general state, audiences and citizens are similar. In the specific scene of the Long Table, however, audiences of *The Assembly* manifest citizenship in another way as they are potential speakers and that potential is important as it connects to the principle of interchangeable representation.

Remarkably, when these audience-citizens self-select and come to speak as representatives, they talk about how to listen.

### 3. “Listen to the people that are angry but also listen to us speaking calmly. ‘Cause it takes a lot of energy to speak calmly even though I’m furious. And I have a lot of things to be furious about. But I’m not taking up too much space. And I don’t want to.”

The second last audience-citizen representative of the Long Table is a self-identified Indigenous man. He places a firm and repeated emphasis on the value of distinguishing the emotion of the content (anger) and the emotion of the style of speech (calm). Connecting to Bishop’s criteria, he first exhorts us to listen as an act of recognition, to recognize the speaker—“the people who are angry”—and also to recognize how they are speaking—“listen to us speaking calmly.” Listening, the way he frames it, is founded on recognition, literally re-cognition, knowing again and with intention in that act. It seems deceptively passive but is not. He identifies a productive tension between calmness and anger, between the rightful source of anger and the respect to be given to the control of calmness. Also, he marks the tension between talking, taking up space, and listening, ceding space to others. He points to the essential need for that balance in tension. Recognition and tension are Bishop’s first two characteristics of participation that I am linking to audience-citizenship.

**4. “Our problem really is can we listen to each other . . . even if they are really angry and it’s not the right way to project how we are feeling I think we should still listen to them, understand what they are saying. . . . Try to adapt our words to other people’s ears.”**

The final speaker begins by introducing herself: “My name is Alicia. And I’m thirteen.” Alicia speaks to Bishop’s second two characteristics—dependency and negotiation. She picks up the previous thread about listening and acknowledges the essential relationality of listening. She notes that a person becomes angry because people aren’t listening to them, and in our anger, we don’t listen to others. She recognizes this conflict and calls it a “contradiction.” Contradiction is a perfectly apt word choice being from its roots—“against” plus “speaking.” Alicia’s contribution articulates precisely the participatory exchange model of citizenship; we give so we can get. We adapt our ears to other people’s words, so even if what they are saying is hard to hear, we need to try to listen. The move to listening shifts the focus away from a conflictual mode of trying to change people’s minds and instead turns to the connective tissue of co-existence, acknowledging our mutual dependency in the theatre and in the polis. This again points to the meta-objective of participation, improving the methods by which we go about improving the world.

Considering *The Assembly* as a meditation on how to be a better audience-citizen, and focusing on shared interactive characteristics of audience participation and civic participation, it is evident that there is fertile ground here for developing a theory of participatory performance that acknowledges both its political potential and its aesthetic qualities as art. Addressing Bishop’s concern, it is possible to move beyond a directly linear quantitative valuation of participation as good simply because there is some, to a critical analysis of citizenship as a theme of participatory performance work, revealed in the relations between form and content.

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