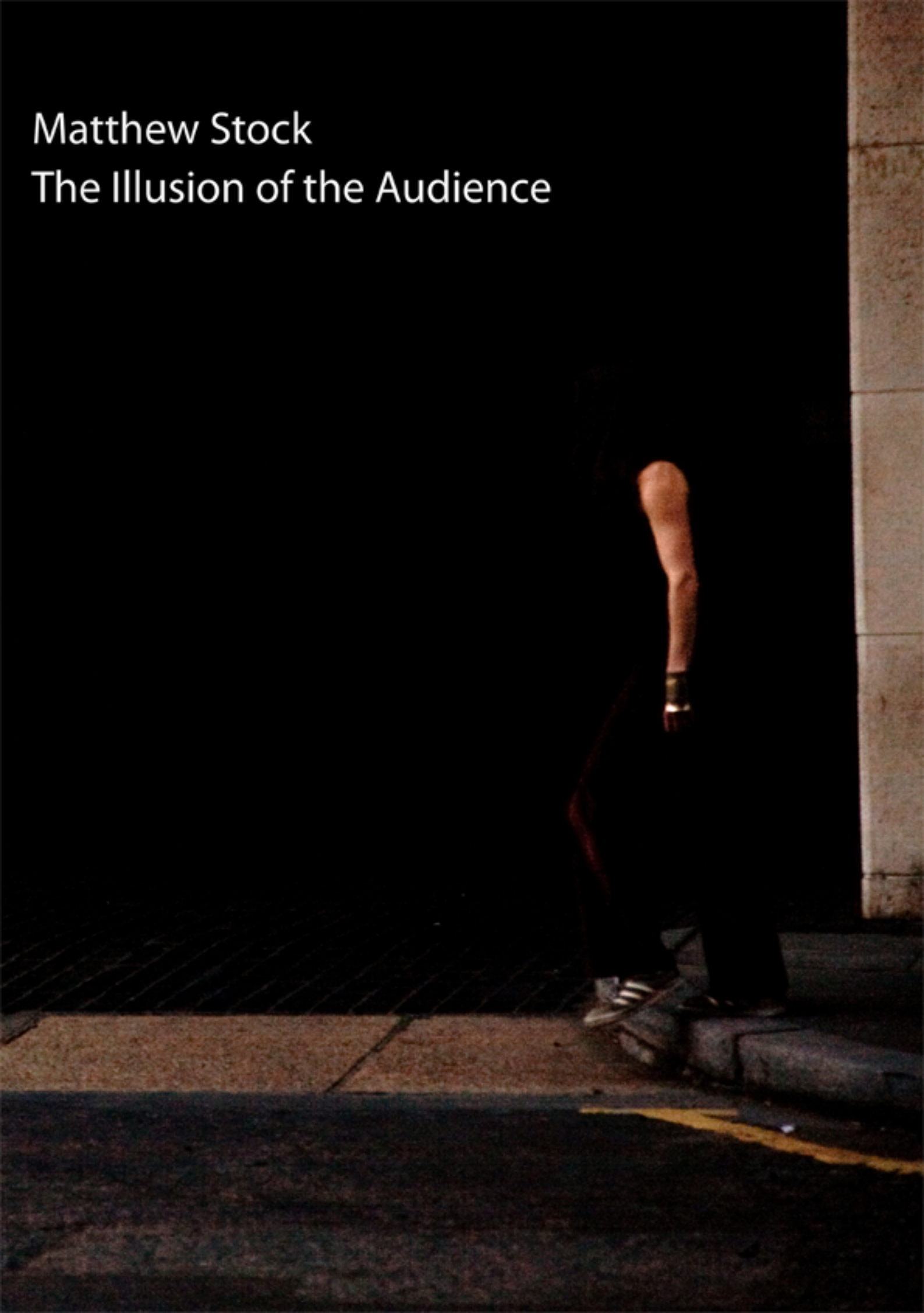


Matthew Stock  
The Illusion of the Audience



# **The Illusion of The Audience**

Matthew Stock, Part Time Year 2, MA Fine Art Research Paper, 2009

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## Introduction

The audience's experience of a work of art is, in the most part, dependent on what they bring with them and what they understand about the work. There are, however other factors to consider, for instance, the artist's intentions and how the work has been hung or positioned within the physicality of the museum or gallery. Together these all function as deciphers towards this experience and ultimately some kind of understanding. There exists a distance between the work and the viewer and within this distance the interpretation of the work exists. This distance allows for thought, procrastination, misunderstanding and perhaps hope. Recently though this critical space has begun to be questioned, its boundaries are now being blurred, and it's not just the artists that are instituting this change, I believe the viewers are becoming equally complicit. What has caused this preoccupation with the viewer, the work of art and the space? I believe that it has to do with the term participation.

There is an emerging concern within contemporary art practice with involving the audience in a participatory manner, in other words, to physically engage the audience with the work. In my own work I talk about just this point. What I am proposing with this paper is to understand this new emergence, from the perspective of the audience. Of course, this idea is not a new idea at all, but what is new is the way contemporary art is speaking about the audience.

What I will be looking at are a series of artworks, interventions and projects that use, as a fundamental part, the audience. These will also serve to divide the paper into three parts; the audience, the participant and the community.



In part one I shall look at the stance, the gaze and the perception of the audience. In part two, I will focus on participation and the possibility of transference of authorship from the artists to the audience. In the final part I wish to discuss firstly, whether this emergence separates the artist from the audience, and secondly what is meant by the emerging use of community and the gallery's affect on this?

## Part one: The audience

I am revolving around within this white cube; my self and two others are lazily circumnavigating this artwork. Weaving in and out I synchronise my steps with another, I glance at her and smile, and she smiles back. In this moment we exchange glimpses of each other's thoughts and emotions about our presence within this space. Or, at least, I hoped we did, it could have been wind. My attention is once again drawn to the small image of the young women, hung uncomfortably low on the gallery wall. This woman is in the process of emerging from a swimming pool, her expression is hard to work out, but right now I am wondering if it is indifference. Her bare shoulders and slicked back hair are showered in water droplets caught in perpetual motion. Her image is not alone, there are others that are the same size and all hung the same. They are showing the same emergence, the same expression, and the same image. Actually that is wrong, every single one of them is in essence the same but ultimately completely different. This one over here has different eyes. While with this one on the opposite wall, the head is at a slightly different angle. This is why I am spinning; I am trying to see all the images at once. I wonder, in considering these images I am also being forced into considering my self and the self of others? Almost immediately I realise I am alone with the work, my fellow audience members have moved on and out of the room. I stand still arms folded, the images are observing me, and I try to stare back in a futile attempt to meet their gaze. My eyes fall to floor in defeat; I leave the room in the opposite direction to which I entered.

The above is my experience of Roni Horn's piece *You Are the Weather* that was shown at Tate Modern in mid 2009. This beautiful set of 100 close-up

photographs of a young woman has an extraordinary effect on the audience. This is achieved, firstly, through Horn's repetition and manipulation of similar images and it's also to do with her method of deploying these images. At the Tate these photographs were positioned in groups of 5 to 8 on opposing walls. In this way it had the effect of:

“...insisting that one's sense of self is marked by a place in the here-and-there, and by time in the now-and-then” (Horn, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/horn/index.html>).

This is an interesting beginning for my discussion of the audience, as it points directly towards the position that they embody, both within the physicality of the gallery and the interpretation of the work. So what indeed is the audience?

In May 2009 The Whitechapel Art Gallery chaired a discussion about just this point. The debate was called *The Gallery as Protagonist* a provocative title, and as it turned out a very provocative debate. While this discussion was primarily concerned with an award-winning play called *England*<sup>1</sup> by Tim Crouch, the other panellists, Ois Keidan (Director, Live Art Development Agency), Nicholas Ridout (Department of Drama, Queen Mary, University of London and Chair) and Ian White (artist, writer and curator), were more concerned with how this work affected the criticality of the audience and the gallery space. One point, in particular, that was made by White, I found to be

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<sup>1</sup> England, by the way, is the story of a heart transplant, and the telling of a culture inside another's culture. The story is told by two gallery guides, who lead the audience a merry dance through the internal spaces of the Whitechapel Art Gallery.

very intriguing. This was in response to a question posed by Crouch, specifically asking about the role of the spectator within the contemporary gallery. White's response was the following:

“As far as spectatorship in the museums, what I would say about that, is I think that there is... ummm... that the way we imagine people looking in a gallery, this act of looking is precisely that it is imaginary and its about an imaginary relationship...”<sup>2</sup>

Imaginary, is he saying that the spectator is imaginary? At first I though he was, but in fact he is talking about the idea of a 'traditional spectator' or one who stands and says, “this is the object that we look at, this object is by this person, it means this thing” (White, 2009). This is the illusion: understanding that the act of looking and being is actually about the 'occupying of the space with things'. White is also saying something else here; by acknowledging that the spectator is just in a space with things, he is also pronouncing the denigration of the artwork.

Roni Horn is also championing this same stance with her work, but interestingly, I feel that she is playing on this idea of illusion by opening up a critical space in which spectators can locate themselves in the moment. In other words, this is about the emancipation and respect towards thinking visitors.

Jacques Ranciere, in his unpublished essay *The Emancipated Spectator* (video syndication network, 2004, [www.v2v.cc](http://www.v2v.cc)) is very emotive in the way he speaks about the spectator. He argues that the spectator adopts a passive

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<sup>2</sup> This is a transcript

stance; its function is to look 'without any capacity of intervention'. This looking is, Ranciere continues, the opposite of knowing:

“....it means being in front of the performance without knowing the conditions of its production or understanding the reality that stands behind it” (Ranciere, 2007)<sup>3</sup>

In this instance, spectatorship can be viewed as being a very negative stance to take; a passive ignorant body is supposed to be separated from the ability to understand and engage. Ranciere's mode of enquiry is mainly from the viewpoint of the theatre; for it is the theatre that can be employed to be the saviour of the spectator. This passivity is being altered, firstly, by the very thing that created it, the theatre and, secondly, by the spectators themselves.

‘On the one hand, the spectator must be released from the passivity of the viewer....He must be pressed to abandon the role of passive viewer and to take on that of the scientist who observes phenomena and seeks their cause. On the other hand, the spectator must eschew the role of the mere observer who remains still and untouched in front of a distant spectacle. He must be torn from his delusive mastery, drawn into the magical power of theatrical action, where he will exchange the privilege of playing the rational viewer for the experience of possessing theatre's true vital energies’ (Ranciere, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

So it can be argued that this altering of the spectators default state is reliant on both the spectator and the theatre being complicit. What is interesting then

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<sup>3</sup> This is a transcript of a speech given by Ranciere in Frankfurt 2007)

is how this exchange will be performed both literally and physically. Both parties will first have to understand their own position and then seek to understand the position of the other, so as to bring about theatre's redemption. Ranciere speaks in length about knowledge and its transference from the action on the stage to the spectator. Knowledge is indeed power; with it the spectator does not merely get closer to the meaning of the performance, but also, and crucially, this knowledge will create a critical distance between the work and the spectator's understanding of the work. This distance is by no means a negative space:

“We learn and teach, we act and know as spectators who link what they see with what we have seen and told, done and dreamt”  
(Ranciere, 2007)<sup>3</sup>

The spectator, who is able to appropriate this with prior learning and build up his own translation, is also able to interpret this knowledge. For Ranciere, the final emancipation of the spectator will be in the relinquishing of the opposition between active/ passive and capable /incapable.

Ranciere's statements on theatre, remind me of Michael Fried's essay on minimalism, 'Art and Objecthood' (1968). Here Fried describes the works of Donald Judd and other minimalist artists as inherently theatrical; thus they do not belong in the arena of art and must be cast out. This theatricality denigrates the art by, what Fried calls, its stage effect. To put it a different way, these works, through their size, their positioning and their demands on the viewer, were not occupying the space of art, for they spoke about

themselves as objects. For Fried this idea of a minimalist object was more closely aligned with the encountering of a human form:

“In fact being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded by the silent presence of another person”(Harrison, Wood, 1995, p826)

In stating that minimal art is anthropomorphic, (i.e. Evoking human form), is a very interesting one, for I believe this distinction changes the works and they then become actors on a stage.

This distancing that Fried says is so important exists (unlike Ranciere) to enable the passivity of the viewer, who should not be implicated in a theatrical situation, but be as a subject towards the work of art. In this way Fried is saying that ‘art and theatre are at war’ (Harrison, Wood, 1995, p828). Within this wonderfully emotive statement, the essence of his argument emerges: theatre (and thus minimal art) creates work for the moment that exists for the audience for a specific duration of time. Modernist painting and sculpture exist for a ‘continuous and perpetual present’ the audience’s experience of the work has no duration at all.

### ***Notes on the Audience***

I started this paper with the idea that the passivity of the audience is an inherent stance and it’s the artist who wants to problematise this. What I have come to see is that Ranciere’s idea of passivity is, in contrast, wholly active and fully engaged in the deciphering of any perceived knowledge that will ultimately free the audience. Therefore art must aim to become more

theatrical. In response to this, and as flip side, is Fried's concern: minimal art evokes theatricality and is thus denigrating the work of art, turning it into propaganda. This adds up to an interesting cocktail of thought, which leads me nicely into the realm of participation.



## Part Two: Participation

I stand motionless; in front, the space opens before me. There is a stillness here that is different from all the other spaces I have come from, its like there is a sudden drop in the air pressure. I am drawn towards the words scrolling up a large screen. The words read:

***The man steps in behind them, hands rummaging in his coat.***

***He takes a crossed leg seat.***

***The girls giggle in unison.***

***Reading, embarrassed.***

***Another slips in behind them, obscured.***

***A woman, shadowing the blonde girl in front***

***She steps out into the light smiling***

***Heels tap across the floor into the dark***

***The two friends retrace their steps***

***Three women huddle in the dark***

I stand transfixed, a bottle of water held loosely in my hand, I decide to change my vantage point. Then these words appear:

***The man stands to the left holding a bottle of water***

***He moves to the right and looks across the room***

I smile and move forward into the void that exists between my self and the large screen.

***The man realizes his situation and with an internal energy and a New found sense of confidence he steps forward and holds out his Hands***

It seems that the words are mine; whatever I do appears on the screen. What words shall I make appear next? Perhaps I will stand on one leg. No that is too easy. Or I could run around in a circle. No again almost expected. Oh dear I find myself in the centre with nothing to do; I will step back and observe from a distance.

***He realizes his nakedness and with courage diminishing he steps Back and returns to his first position.***

I am starting to feel somewhat perturbed; it's like being back in school after being found out by the headmaster. The words were right, I had lost my confidence; I think I will leave now. I then notice the woman sitting at a small desk, poised in front of a laptop, her white face illuminated by an old fashioned reading lamp. It's clear to me now, the words are written by her because she is looking at me.

***He looks across and moves purposely out of the room  
Two women enter, one carries a red bag...***

Claire Bishop, in 2008, organised an exhibition in London at the ICA called 'Double Agent'. The above is my experience of an artwork in this show called *Instant Narrative* (2006-2008) by Dora Garcia. What I hope to question in this second part of this paper is the path that has led from Fried's thinking towards those artworks that utilise the idea of theatre and those who have started to talk, since the 1990s, about the audience in terms of participation. What is meant by this term participation? According to Bishop, it is: 'situations or events that invite the spectators to become active participants'. (Bishop, 2006, back cover).

My focus is drawn to the words 'situations or events', this terminology conjures up interesting ideas around form, structure and subjectivity. These words also signify a past history, from Dadaism of the 1920s, towards Brechtian theatre's concentration on the space between the actors and the spectators in the 60s, and lastly the desire of the Situationists for the public to bare witness to their mock trials.

Bishop's stance is to contextualise participation into three distinct concerns, 'activation, authorship and community' (2006, p12). The first concern is the desire to create an active end user, one who is empowered to change habits, movements and social stances and who is able to comply with the options offered by the work of art. The second is the pushing of the work's boundaries by the redistribution of authorship; this end result is one of greater diversity, and chance. The third supposes community as a dysfunctional group who are set free by instigating a collective involvement towards a common goal.

In Garcia's work, *Instant Narrative*, the viewer looks first at the work then, through the transference of knowledge is drawn towards looking at the self then, finally, returns to the work to experience it through participating with it. This looping has the effect of making the audience the focus of the work and thus a participant.

There is also another transference happening within this work and that of authorship. Roland Barthes' essay '*The death of the Author*' (1968), offers an interesting viewpoint around this very idea of authorship. The author is a product of the ego, far in advance of the narrator and, for Barthes, the author

is the suppressor of language. This singular voice seems, at first, to be confiding in its reader a personal explanation of the text, but this is an illusion. To write is to create language and through this act, to create a performance, which, in turn, negates the author. The writing and the person who writes experience the same space and time, unlike the author who invariable exists before and will exist after the words are written. This need to suppress the author will bring about a fundamental change in the written form and allow it to express it self.

‘Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text’ (Barthes, 2006, in Bishop, C, p44).

This removal also has an effect on the reader, wonderfully described by Barthes as the ‘birth of the reader’. The reader is now the one in control:

‘The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost: a text unity lies not in its origins but in its destination’ (Barthes, 2006, p45).

The space offered to the reader is one of total interpretation, by this I mean that the reader processes this new information through the knowledge gained from external experiences. In many ways it can be said that they are in possession of everything that has gone before and everything that is now.

Vito Acconci’s *Proximity Piece*, performed over 52 days in 1970 at the Jewish Museum, New York, involved him selecting specific audience members, sneaking up on them and invading their personal space. This interference had the effect of altering the individual’s pre-ordained path and also,

importantly, it transferred Acconci from the position of the artist into the position of the spectator. In other words, by looking and taking up this position he is offering up authorship to the audience. In this way, it does not matter that the selected public were not overtly aware of his presence; the work just involved them in the production of it. The work physically diminished the space between spectator and author and also brought into focus another important element, which is the gallery (Bishop, 2006). I find this work very emotive, but I can't help but wonder its position. On the one hand, I am confronted with a humorous work that evokes theatricality; that in turn allows for audience participation and, possibly, the emancipation of the audience, but, on the other hand I can see a work that undermines the audience; denigrates them in to pawns and this is solely because of this theatricality (picture of the work).

Boris Groys, in his essay '*A geniality of participatory art*' (Groys, 2008, in Frieling, Groys, Atkins, Manovich, 2008, p18) takes an opposite position to Barthes and Ranciere. He suggests that participation does not demand the death of the author, but rather increases his/or power.

“....this dissolution of the self into the masses, grants the author the possibility of controlling the audience - whereby the viewer forfeits his secure external position, his aesthetic distance from the artwork, and thus becomes not just a participant but also an integral part of the artwork. In this way participatory art can be understood not only as a reduction, but also as an extension, of authorial power” (Groys, 2008, in Frieling, Groys, Atkins, Manovich, 2008, p23).

Groys was looking at the writing of Richard Wagner and specifically, a piece written in the aftermath of the 1848 revolution, *The Artwork of the Future*. Wagner's fury at the uprising's defeat led him to write this seminal paper, in which he states that the typical artist of that time was an egoist and a man against the proletariat; the art of the future will, by contrast, be for the community and against the ego. He went on to say that the artists should abandon their proposed media and join fellowships. How true and relevant this still seems today. Groys interprets Wagner's use of the term 'communist society' as a 'participatory society', which is created through the "necessary death" of the individual. This is to say that the artist should forgo his/her spirit, or ego and enter into partnership with the very substance of life, the stuff which to Wagner is the source of truth. Groys again interprets this substance as the audience. In considering this and the work of Acconci, I can begin to see value in Groys' misgivings about participatory art's emancipation of the audience. Acconci's selection and manipulation of the audience is a controlling mechanism, which increases his authorial power.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres is, possibly, another advocate of this controlling power. His series of works, called *Untitled*, encouraged the audience, through repetitive and communal acts, to take and keep one of his works, such as a lithograph print, in doing so the work was taken from the gallery and ceased to exist.

With this gradual diminishing and the eventual disappearing of the work, Gonzalez-Torres is not only questioning the status of the art object in galleries, but also the functioning of the audience.

“What position should be adopted when looking at a work that hands out its component parts while trying to hang on to its structure? ”

(Bourriaud, 2006, p.39).

This idea of positioning has an interesting controlling aspect to the work. Gonzalez-Torres is offering, as a gift, pieces of his work for the audience to take and do what ever they want with (in some cases it is pertinent to eat it, as in the sweets). The audience encountering this work has to make a decision. Shall I, or, shan't I? No matter which choice is made, Gonzalez-Torres will stay in control. To take the work, is to be complicit with its questioning of the art object, but to not take the work and to decline the gift, is still complicit because the artist offered the choice in the first place.

### ***Notes on Participation***

Is *The Death of the Author*, a necessary response to contemporary thought? It has an interesting lineage with Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk* or *total work of art* and is a wonderful example of how it should be. Barthes' expansion is a beautiful piece of writing that sets out a modernist way of thinking. The opposite position of the author, becoming more dominant and controlling, is another concern, but maybe it is not the demon that might at first appear. Could it be a necessary evil? The participant is seen as an integral part to the creation of the work. Acconci's act of looking and his positioning may reveal more about the artist's need for the audience than it does about any denigration of it. In the same token Gonzalez-Torres needs the audience to physically remove his work for his critique to function.





### Part Three: Community

“Write your name here. Your signature here and date it there!”

I was, if truth were told, very hung over, ever so slightly unsteady on my feet and my usual cognitive processes were not working so well. So it came as some surprise for me to be in the presence of such a burley guard, in such a nice museum. I looked at the piece of paper again and then back at the guard.

“Have you another pen please, mine has run out?”

“Si!”

I crossed out my mistakes and put in their place what I hoped would be the right answers. I wished for this to end soon, for the queue behind me was getting rather large. I also suspected that the guard really didn't like me very much. I handed over the form; sadly it was still wrong! Luckily the guard had lost all patience with me and, with growing irritation, let me pass through into the gallery space. The sound was the first thing I noticed, then the feeling of apprehension rising up through my feet. No, that was not it. I was reminded of the feeling experienced you find yourself on the edge of a precipice. Is it fear maybe? Before me was a maze, which I sensed was not that difficult to navigate; but what concerns me is the physical make up of this space. I have to walk on broken glass and weave between hard industrial structures, which look more intent on piercing the skin and trapping arms and legs than offering a path through. The noise is the sound of the other participants as they tentatively walk on the glass and slowly feel their way through. Excited, but not necessarily fearless, I enter and push onwards towards the barbed wire,

through the steel beams and over the railway sleepers with protruding rusty nails. I ignore the feeling through my shoes, the sensations up my legs. I sneak around the chains, step over the gate and steam past a broken glass wall, through onto the exit and out into safety. "Well that wasn't too bad at all was it?" With these words I try to convince myself.

The above is a description of my experience *Através* (Through) 1983-87/2007, by Cildo Meireles, which I saw at Barcelona's Modern Art Museum (MACBA). This work is a labyrinth of grilles and meshes in which the floor is made up of broken glass, and obstacles break up the physicality of the space, some areas are closed off and impenetrable. Meireles speaks of this work as aiming to confront the fears and beliefs of the participant. The act of looking is the forbearer in this work, more so than the physical body. In this act of looking at the work the participant is reflected back.

I wanted to start with this work, because the fears that it forced me to confront are those of a community, life, death and religion. It also speaks about the structure of the gallery and the how this affects the audience's experience with the work. The form, that I had struggling to fill in at the entrance, is a health and safety waiver created by the museum. Should I, or anyone else, get hurt by the sharp edges and broken glass, the museum would not be liable. This would never have been a prerequisite for Meireles.

Reflecting back to the beginning of this paper, to the talk given at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, White spoke about how the gallery/museum structure affects the spectator and how he/she approaches looking at the art object. He speaks about this being a product of a promenading space:

“One of the perfect demonstrations of the gallery as a promenade space is made explicit in the architecture of Tate Modern, where the exhibition spaces are relatively small on the whole, so you move through them as objects on a conveyor belt. But then, almost equally proportioned are these common areas on each floor, which step downwards towards a glass wall that looks over a ceremonial entrance hall. So you are encouraged as much to look at people arriving and hanging out in an installation buying tickets as you are in contemplating an art object in space.”<sup>4</sup>

The way that work is laid out in galleries, the promenading structure and the resulting occupation of the space say a lot about the theatricality that some galleries now adopt. I can think of no better example of this than *The Weather Project* by Olafur Eliasson (2004), shown in Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall. I went to see this work and was witness to a very strange phenomenon. Moving amidst the spectators, were around fifteen people all walking in single file and dressed uniformly. They snaked around and over the other spectators, who were also engaged in the collective action of lying on the floor and moving their arms and legs out and away from the body (some were also having a picnic at the same time). This group of fifteen eventually stopped, turned sideways and held their position; after a few coordinated head-turns they moved off, walking as one, and matching each other’s oddly strange footsteps. They continued like this for ten or so minutes until they reached the far end of the Turbine Hall, where they came to rest. Abruptly they departed and moved off in different directions.

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<sup>4</sup> This is a transcript of Ian White’s talk by the author.

Located in this description are two different collective acts. The first is a possible performance by a transient group of fifteen people and the second is a mimicking effect created by the spectators themselves. These acts are possibly a direct response to the promenading structure of the gallery, which heightens the spectator's sense of theatre. This, in turn, transforms the spectator from individual into group member who, as such, have the power to influence each other's responses.

In a collection of interviews by Hans Dieter Huber, Dan Graham speaks about the audience in the following way:

“I began with the idea of the audience as a community group as representative of art as a social community” (Huber, 1997, p5).

As the audience experiences a work of art, they also have to adopt a particular stance to adequately appropriate the artwork, and thus identify themselves with it. George Herbert Mead has described this observational positioning as ‘the *me*, in contrast to the *I*’ (Huber, 1997, p54). Mead is referring to the audience as a social unit; the *me* is pertaining to how they interact together and their social norms. But he is also referring to the personal identity of a particular audience member (the *I*), with his/her own differences and individual thoughts. Huber is suggesting that artwork is experienced as a social interaction. As such it can “shape, strengthen or change viewers’ social identities by reflecting them back from the perspective of the picture and offering them the experience of a social difference” (p62).

Reflecting on this idea of the audience's positioning I am reminded of an artwork called *Cut Piece* by Yoko Ono (1965). This work was performed in both London and New York. Ono invited the audience members to cut pieces

of her clothing and keep it, while she sat motionless for over an hour. This process ended up with her nearly naked. A similar piece by Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0* (1972), encouraged the audience to do what ever they liked to her, over a period of hours, with potentially dangerous objects that were placed on a table next to her. She too was left nearly naked, but also had scars from chains, marks from barbed wire and a loaded gun had been held to her head. These works dealt primarily and openly with social norms. Ono and Abramovic had replaced the art object with their bodies, creating a mirror for the participants, who through their own reflection saw themselves (the *I*); then by acting as one collective group (the *me*) they embarked on destroying these social norms in a brutal and almost mob-like mentality (Iles, C, 1996 in Welchman, J, 2008 p160)

These body centred performance artworks were all about provoking shock in the audience by putting the artist in danger; the latter wanted to explore the gap between pleasure and pain. To understand this action it is necessary to understand the social and political environments of the 60s. Ono and Abramovic were influenced by the neo-Dada and later the Fluxus movements, which were responses to the changes that were sweeping across Europe and America, from the rehabilitation after the Second World War, to the ending of sexual repression. Fluxus considered the participation of the audience to be essential to its artistic position (Iles, C, 1996 in, Welchman, J (2008) p158-161). But does this use of participation, or rather its misuse, serve to denigrate the audience? What happens when the audience gets too close?

Ono's and Abramovic's particular type of *community of participation* artwork seems rather strange and abrupt when compared with the earlier examples, by Graham and Meireles. Nevertheless, they all share a commonality: they see the audience as a community and they allow that community to see itself, however unpleasant that turns out to be. I find it very interesting that Ono's *Cut Piece* is being re-enacted today, in 2009, by herself and other artists, thus allowing new audiences to experience it. What will this be? The initial impetus of *Cut Piece* was one of violence; in a re-enactment by Ono in Paris, 2003, it had changed to one of peace (Pellico, M in Frieling, R, 2008, p108).

Participation then is more than just the reactivation of the audience; it is about the realisation of a community. Ranciere, Bishop and Barthes all speak of this community. *Utopia Station*, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2003, took this idea of a community one step further. Its three curators, Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija, outlined their intentions thus:

“The Utopia Station is a way-station. As a conceptual structure it is flexible; the particular station planned for the Venice Biennial is physical too...filled with objects, part-objects, paintings, images, screens. Around them a variety of benches, tables and small structures....The station in other words becomes a place to stop, to contemplate, to listen, to see....it will be completed by the presence of people and a programme of events” (Nesbit, Obrist, Tiravanija (2003) in Bishop, C, 2006, p.184)

The curators envisaged a community who would exist specifically for the Utopia Station, they would arrive and sit in the chairs and possibly listen to a

seminar. This community will serve, not only define the station, but will define the theology.

This model is not just confined to the above example. Hal Foster remarks, in his essay '*Chat Rooms*', that artists, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Thomas Hirschhorn, aim to create artworks and events that 'turn passive viewers into a temporary community of active interlocutors' (Foster, H. 2004 in Bishop, 2006, p192), by introducing more and more familiar contemporary objects, e.g. TV shows, the internet and the everyday.

"Hirschhorn...wants not only to familiarise his audience with an alternative public culture but to libidinize this relationship as well"  
(Foster, H. 2004 in Bishop, 2006, p192).

Foster argues that this type of work mimics formlessness in society and may loose out in its final address. Will the viewer be able to decipher the work? In other words, will they be able to make of the work what the artist wishes them to?

"At times, 'the death of the author' has meant not 'the birth of the reader', as Barthes speculated, so much as the befuddlement of the viewer" (Foster in Bishop, 2006, p194).

### ***Notes on Community***

In approaching this idea of community, I initially thought that this was born out of individuals coming together to collectively experience a work of art. I now

understand that it has come to represent a kind of ideology regarding how artists would like their work to be viewed, experienced, looked at, and even talked about. Walter Benjamin offers an interesting insight into this, in his essay '*On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*'. He suggests that Charles Baudelaire is fixated with the shock of the crowd, which is due to the way he experiences life in a giant metropolis. In his poem 'Le Soleil' he imagines himself engaged in combat, fencing his way through his own words and his own prose. This work, for Benjamin, stands as a metaphor for Baudelaire's experience of walking in a metropolitan crowd. In dealing with this, 'we may discern the image of the fencer in it; the blows he deals are designed to open a path through the crowd for him' (Benjamin, (1999), p162).

Does this shock of the *crowd* also help us too understand Ono's, Abramovic's and Graham's use of *community*? Are they fighting the audience in the same way that Baudelaire is fighting his crowd?



## Conclusion

In dividing the paper into three parts my intention was to create conversations and arguments between these three manifestations. The audience, the participant and the community would be face to face, to attack and counter attack, in the hope of determining a winner. In contrast what I have found is that there are concurrent themes that permeate through all three, each one allowing a space for the audience to exist. To put it another way, the audience as a passive group looking at art is, I realise now, just an illusion (to coin Ian White's phrase). What may be real is the audience as a participant, the audience as a community, or the audience as subject matter. The conventional thinking of the viewer as looking at this art object and then moving over there to look at that art object is no longer valid. Barthes, Fried, and Ranciere all speak in different ways about the positioning of the audience being fundamental to how they interpret the work of art. This positioning brings back the question I posed at the beginning of this paper: how is critical distance manipulated? For Barthes, the critical distance is created by the death of the author. For Fried, it's the passivity of the audience that allows the artwork to exist for more than a moment and thus to become timeless. For Ranciere, it's located in the call for theatricality and participation. Mixed up within all these are the artworks, the stuff that the audience will go and see and experience.

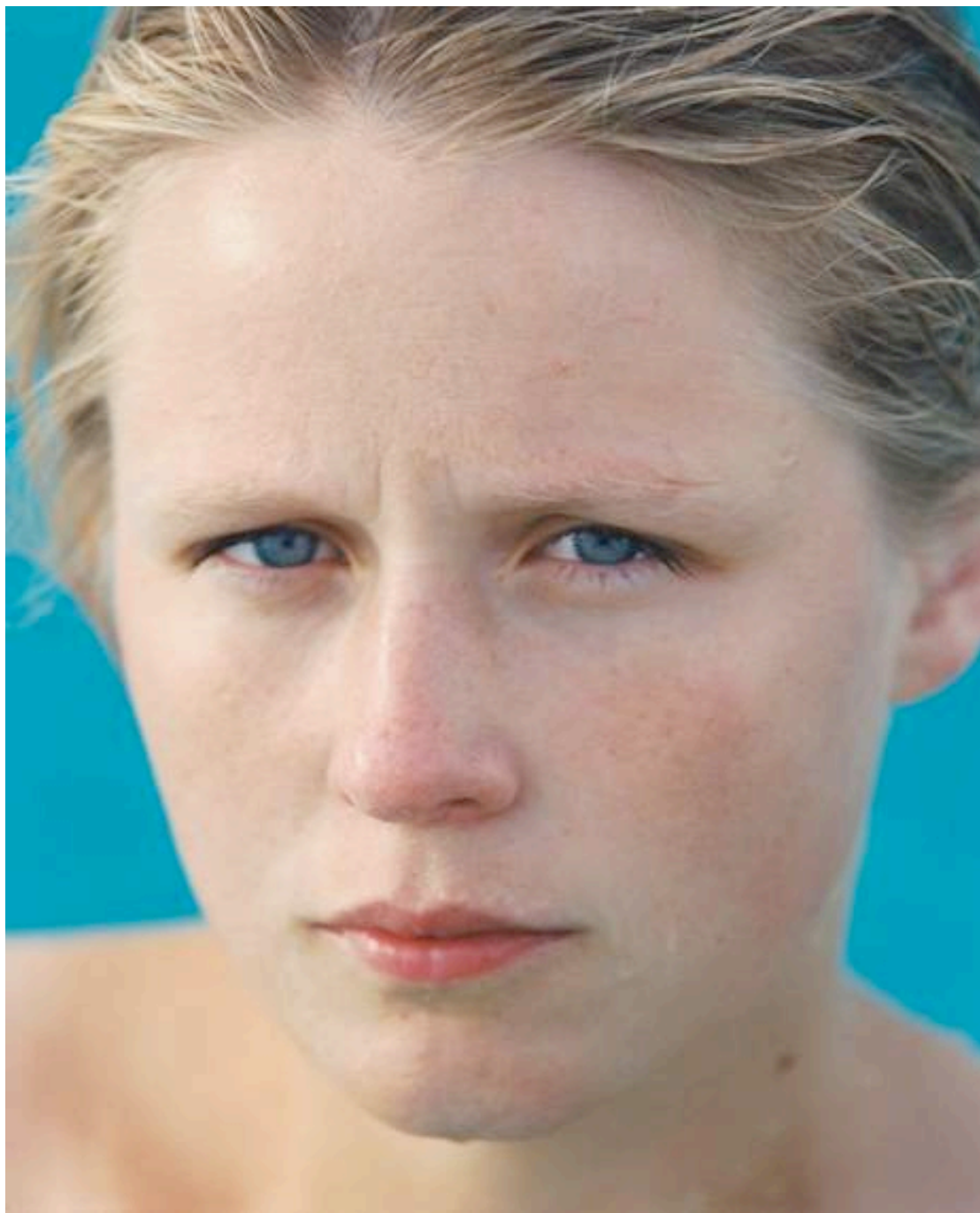
The gallery that creates a promenading space engenders its own theatricality for the purposes of engaging the audience more and more. Galleries want more than just the art objects to keep the audiences interested; thus they have seminars, talks by popular artists and curators; they even have

individuals working for them called *Participation Producers*, who, they tell us, are bringing the work closer to the audience. All these strategies, I could cynically say, are there to keep the audience in the gallery and to invite more in, so they will all spend money. Yet, I'm not entirely sure. For artists like Ono, Graham and Acconci have been using similar strategies for some time, so as to afford the audience the space for appropriation, the space for thinking and, potentially, the space for their emancipation. I believe that this was attempted with *Utopia Station*, where its three curators spoke of how they wished to create a community that existed solely for that time only. It could be argued that this was an elitist position, but I think that its intention was to create a community through its very structure alone, which is an interesting proposition. Given more time I would have liked to investigate this further, there are interesting questions concerning such beasts as artist's talks, artist lead tours and gallery-organised festivals.

As an artist who calls for audience participation in my artwork, this paper is just as much about finding out about myself as it is about revealing the audience. Like Baudelaire, I may fight the audience, try and denigrate them, want to manipulate them, or...well, what I am really trying to saying is, that I need them. All artists need the audience, but do the audience really need the artist?

## Plates

1









4



5



6



7









10



11







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6A



HELPERS AND  
COLLECTORS

6B

6C

SS1

SS2

DRIVERS WISHING  
TO ENTER  
LOADING BAY WITH VEHICLE

- 1 Press green button. When answered give your identity and company name
- 2 When shutter opens drive immediately into waiting bay and report to guard