

Emancipating the Spectator: Participation in Performance

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Abstract

This article is an artist facilitator's response to audience collaboration in Manuel Vason's *Still Image Moving*: a participatory community art project which took place in Bristol, December 2010. The response is one of scepticism towards the rubric of audience 'empowerment' in socially engaged art, but it aims to be constructive in assessing what space there might be for such an empowering practice to emerge. By addressing empowerment in relation to authorship, concepts of ownership and different ways of conceptualising the audience within the artwork, this article looks to examine the possibilities for an equal and empowering collaboration between artist and participating public. With reference to examples from *Still Image Moving*, this article looks to establish a personal and critical reflection on the mechanics of the relationship between Vason and a participating public by drawing on the documentation of participant responses and a theoretical framework on the themes of ownership, authorship and empowerment.

This article discusses *Still Image Moving*, a participatory community project by Manuel Vason in Bristol, December 2010. The project was co-produced by InBetween Time Productions and the Bristol City Council Neighbourhood Arts Team. In this project, Vason and a team of artist facilitators took to the streets of Bristol to engage passers-by, inviting people to participate in the creation of an image with Vason. These images were projected at the end of each day on the side of a shipping container that was home to the project, as well as on large central buildings in Bristol.

Still Image Moving visited four urban Bristol communities over twelve days: the city centre, Bedminster, Stokes Croft and St Paul's. The intention was to engage non-traditional arts audiences by creating an interactive intervention in urban Bristol communities. The project engaged 'artist facilitators,' who approached potential participants and engaged them within the project, as well as helping them generate ideas for their image. InBetween Time Productions described the role of the artist

facilitators as helping to ‘get members of the community involved’ in artistic endeavours whilst ‘deepen[ing] the encounter’ between artists and potential collaborators (‘Call for Artist Facilitators’). I was one of the artist facilitators and attended a two-day workshop with Vason, which made clear the importance of the encounter with each individual participant. Vason specifically explained that a successful interaction did not necessarily need to produce an image that could be projected. I also introduced a feedback structure, consisting of 3 questions¹ on a consent form that all participants completed, as well as the opportunity to interview participants and the artists involved, in order to examine the experience of the participants. Drawing on the documentation, this article examines the politics and ethics of collaboration with an audience in *Still Image Moving* in the light of my own experience as an artist facilitator.



Fig. 1: Mat Kauhanen, *Still Image Moving* (2010). Courtesy of Mat Kauhanen and Manuel Vason

¹ These questions were: What does the image represent for you? How would you describe your experience in creating the image? What level of artistic ownership do you feel over the image you created?

This is Mat Kauhanen. He is losing his hearing after having been a DJ for 12 years. The day before this image was taken he found out that his hearing will get progressively worse and that he will be completely deaf in 5 years.

The 'empowering creativity of collective action' (Bishop, 'Social Turn' 179) is often taken for granted within participatory work, specifically work set in a community environment. The aims, description and outcomes for this work, which sets up a collaboration between artist and participants, often overreaches reality and is rarely critically examined or evaluated.² I would like to suggest that the aims and ambitions of collaborative work, specifically socially engaged and community practices, are in need of careful scrutiny. A strategy to evaluate a project and analyse the experience of the participants is needed, particularly if the outcomes are to be described as 'empowering.' This notion of empowerment needs to be examined critically, in order to discover whether we can believe in the 'magic formula' of social collaboration and participation to automatically produce it, or whether it is dependent on less tangible circumstances. With Claire Bishop, perhaps we ought to be wary of how socially engaged art is documented, particularly when such documentation 'asks us to take its claims of meaningful dialogue and political empowerment on trust' ('Social Turn' 183).

With the rise of participatory, relational, collaborative and experiential practices, where audience participation is arguably the end product of the work, it is necessary to critically analyse these practices, as both artists and scholars, by discussing the experience of the participant. Supporting the idea that a collaborative experience offers more than visual engagement alone, Dwight Conquergood (149) advocates an engaged and embodied experience as creating participatory knowledge.

² This being said, companies such as WildWorks are currently exploring new methodologies of evaluating this type of community practice (personal communication, 22/09/2011).

The participant-performer relationship is key to any discussion of experience or empowerment and most works simply invite the participant to accept and interact within the parameters of the art project (Beech n.p.).

The terminology ordinarily used when discussing socially engaged and community work is problematic (as indicated with reference to Bishop above), with words such as empowerment being emotive and difficult to pin down. Although this phraseology is often used within project descriptions for funding bodies and organisations, it is too generalised and suggests the work is solely created for social impact (Bishop, 'Social Turn' 180). Although this article attempts to examine notions of empowerment, it will divide this term into ideas of agency, authorship and ownership in relation to *Still Image Moving*: elements which can produce a sense of empowerment.³ The concept of authorship is key to this discussion, as it attempts to assign the role of artist to the participant. I hope to elucidate how the artist consequently functions as a co-author and facilitator to the collaboration process.

Empowerment and Authorship

In *Still Image Moving*, the audience were supported in their collaboration by a group of artist facilitators. The facilitation, although consistently positive and supportive, juggled two opposing perspectives: helping the participant to fill the opening left in the work for the participant to make decisions, and the artist's desire to create the most interesting image possible. In response, Vason and the artist facilitators created an improvised and responsive methodology, adapted to each participant and his or her need.

³ In Bishop's *Participation*, she acknowledges three continuities behind the 'empowering' participatory impulse: the creation of an active subject, authorship and collective responsibility (12).



Fig. 2: J. Alexander in *Still Image Moving* (2010). Courtesy of J. Alexander and Manuel Vason.

This is J. Alexander. She wanted to do ‘a very powerful image,’ but had no ideas to start from. Looking around the container for inspiration, she liked an image of four hands framing a face. Vason suggested recreating this image, which was agreed on. As they were getting ready, J. rolled up her sleeves so they would not be seen. In doing so, she revealed a series of scars on her arms. Vason asked if she would mind the scars being in the image, suggesting to her it would make it more powerful. This raises the problematic ethical issue of the artist potentially manipulating the participant to create the image he wanted, which could end up being as much a disempowering as an empowering experience for the participant. Whilst I acknowledge the potential for coercion created within the artistic frame under the authority of Vason as an artistic-enabler, I would argue that the supportive environment in which such decisions are made ultimately downplays the threat of coercion. J. said she was happy to show her scars and Vason directed the gesture in the final image. In this process, J. chose the image to recreate, and it was adapted in response to her physicality to become an image that, although directed by Manuel, was inspired by J. This links back to the theme of authorship; the artist as the sole creator is complicated by means of dialogue. What emerges is an improvisatory model of authorship premised on artist and collaborator interaction.

To put the project into context, it is useful to see how Vason’s ‘performance photography’ might feed into an understanding of authorship. *Still Image Moving* is an interesting project in relation to Vason’s practice, representing a handing over of authorship and agency to the object/subject of the photograph. Before working with performance artists, Vason trained as a fashion photographer. This type of photography has a strong tradition of treating the bodies of the models as objects.

Body and performance art, as well as performance photography,⁴ has the opposite approach to the body displayed within the work; the work is 'owned' by the performance artist.

Vason has worked with many performance artists and challenged the boundaries of collaboration in performance photography. In *Live Gallery* (2001-2003), participants in sites such as a swimming pool, hospital and homeless hostel were invited to have their portrait photographed and displayed in the building. In *Exposures* (2002) and *Encounters* (2007), Vason collaborated with a series of performance and live artists to create images inspired by their practice, rather than directly of the work that they produced.⁵

Still Image Moving hands over agency in a similar way to *Encounters*, but to a different kind of collaborator. It invited the (non-artist) inhabitants of four Bristol communities to participate, as in *Live Gallery*, but to create something in collaboration that reached far beyond a portrait. Photography was both the tool for participation and the product of that interaction. In conversation with me in October 2010, Vason said that the project aim was to create a space for people to tell their fantasies and thoughts, which would then be developed into a theatrical photograph performed to camera. Many participants had no experience in performance or photography and over half of the audience came to the project wanting to participate but without an initial idea. Here Vason would converse with the participant. This conversation would be translated into a theatrical photograph, partly inspired by the props and images within the shipping container and the sites and locations available

⁴ Philip Auslander proposes two forms of performance photography: documentary (representing the traditional relationship between the event and the documentation) and theatrical (a record of a performance that never took place (2). Theatrical photographs are often referred to as 'performed photography.'

⁵ Some of these images depart from the current practice of the artist. Alice Maude-Roxby has written about these collaborative images, arguing that from intense collaboration and 'drawing from the conceptual and aesthetic vocabulary associated with the artist's practice, a new work is realised' (54).

nearby. The vital difference between the collaborators in *Encounters* and those of *Still Image Moving*, is that the former possessed a conceptual and aesthetic vocabulary, whereas the latter came (mostly) without preparation, creating an unequal standing with the artist. This inequality arose mostly from the difference in preparation and experience of creating theatrical photographs. Also cultural hierarchy often assumes that a creative vocabulary influenced by popular culture, rather than the academic study of art and philosophy, is less prized, which can leave participants hesitant or reluctant to collaborate.⁶

The discussion of a term like ‘empowerment’ to describe the result of socially engaged and community practices is consequently challenging, in part because of the difficult issues which arise around the relationship between empowerment and authorship. The rise of this type of work can be attributed in part to a government interest in funding work that improves social conditions and engages communities, beside the fact that many artists prize engagement with perceived social ills quite apart from this.⁷ Within much socially engaged practice, the work created by the artist is constituted by an engagement with a participating public, rather than any final object or performance. Paul O’Neill discusses participation as an end product, arguing that ‘the function of the artwork is to create situations of potential agency for the co-productive processes initiated by the artist’ (4). In order to examine these situations of potential agency and their result or effect on the participant, it is necessary to interrogate procedures, forms and consequences of collaboration, rather than solely examining the ethical treatment of the audience members.

⁶ This was apparent in the response of the participants in *Still Image Moving*, both within conversation with the participants as well as their written responses. For a contextual discussion, see Dave Beech’s *Include Me Out!*

⁷ For examples, see Grant Kester on WochenKlausur in his *Conversation Pieces* and Bishop on Santiago Sierra in ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.’

Generally, empowerment appears to describe the engagement of the community or participants in the project, but also promises something more ethereal, alluding to a positive result in the lives of the participants. This promise is rarely analysed, described or critiqued, other than commenting on the way the audience was treated. This seems to assume that providing the audience is treated with respect, their lives will be improved. As an artist facilitator in a project like *Still Image Moving*, I would suggest that proving the realisation of such a promise can be fraught with difficulty. Instead, a critical focus on the content of the work, together with the structure and site for the audience, would be more productive, combining the sites for potential agency with the audience response to the opportunity presented.⁸

We might define the kind of authorship at play in *Still Image Moving* as 'collaborative.' *Still Image Moving* intended to focus on an exchange with the participant, with photography as the means to facilitate this engagement. Socially engaged projects such as this offer the participating audience the chance to collaborate with the artist and co-author the work. This is often described as placing the audience in the place of, or alongside the artist, and helping the audience express their latent creativity. This means that the work is created and viewed by a network of audiences, participants, collaborators and spectators, with the boundaries between each appearing to collapse. I wish to define participants and collaborators in *Still Image Moving* as individuals involved within the project, where spectators are those viewing the outcome, or process, of the work. The audience is the overall group of people involved within the project, whether they are participating or spectating.

If we contrast participation with collaboration, where does that leave the audience in this work? *Still Image Moving* attempts to collaborate with its

⁸ Bishop ('Social Turn' 179.) also indicates a move away from a simple ethical critique, calling for an approach that allows work to be discussed as critical art, whilst taking any social effect produced into account.

participating audience. Collaborators are distinct from participants. As David Beech suggests, collaborators ‘share authorial rights over the artwork that permit them, among other things, to make fundamental decisions about the key structural features of the work’ (*Include Me Out!* n.p.). Decisions over key structural features of the work are more difficult to share than the decision about the content of an image, especially when a collaborator joins late in the process (it would have been impossible for an audience member to decide where the images were to be projected, for instance, due to technical and logistical issues). Moreover, each photo is a part of the overall work, for which the possible situations have already been constructed and authored by Vason. The project then is situated in between Beech’s definitions of participant and collaborator, extending an open invitation to collaborate, but within the (wide) parameters of the project. *Still Image Moving* invited a collaboration of ideas in order to complete the project with the participant, whose behaviour was facilitated. Instead of being a beholder or respondent to the work, the participant was an active agent in the process. The exchange was more important than the final photograph. The project attempted to position the participant on the same level as the artist, to suggest an equal collaboration and a handing over of agency to the participants: an aim fraught with difficulty.

Audience and Ownership

A criticism of participatory work like *Still Image Moving* is that it frequently asks more of its audience than it is capable of giving.⁹ The artist assumes (or hopes) that the audience member will be able and willing to fill the place that has been left in the work for the participatory act, but the artist has still authored the situation: ‘The point ... is that participation always involves a specific invitation and a specific formation

⁹ See Dave Beech’s *Include me out!* n.p.

of the participant's subjectivity, even when the artist asks them simply to be themselves' (Beech, *Include Me Out!* n.p.). *Still Image Moving* dealt with this issue in a positive way, by allowing the participant to contribute to different capacities, with a team of artist facilitators to assist. This collaborative act attempted to hand over agency and, significantly, offered ownership of the image to the participant. *Still Image Moving* had a large opening in the work for the participant to make decisions about the concept, framing and content of the image whilst attempting to create a flexible situation. This resulted in a range of images that were a collaborative effort between the artist(s) and the participants, with the minimum amount of prescribed parameters. The collaboration, and with it the promise of authorship, agency and ownership, lay in the decision-making process. This is where potential agency is created, by offering the opportunity to take decisions on the content, subject and location of the photograph created.



Fig. 3: the Jutton Family in *Still Image Moving* (2010). Courtesy of the Jutton Family and Manuel Vason.

This is the Jutton family. They came to participate without preconceived ideas and conversed with two facilitators about family activities, playing games such as visual consequences, which led to a suggestion of doing a physical version of the game by the facilitators. At this point, Vason joined the process and suggested doing a take on a Victorian portrait. The family agreed and Vason suggested objects for each of the family members to hold. The idea originated from Vason and differed from the initial suggestion that had been directly inspired by what the family had said. The participants went along with this idea and subsequently adopted it as their own. Although they described it as the photographer's image in their feedback, they also said that in placing the dog at the centre and the choice of props for the kids, the image was very representative of their family. This exemplifies how the project created room for a variety of interactions. Participant collaborators took part in the creation of an image, acted as performing subjects in the process of taking the photographs, and ended up enjoying the additional role of spectator to the projections of the images.

There were two distinct participating audiences in *Still Image Moving*: passers-by and those in the know, and this impacted on the process and images created. The passers-by required more assistance to make decisions, and it would be the artist who would suggest and respond to any ideas and frame the image. Those in the know, who were often artists themselves, had been able to prepare ideas and were better placed to collaborate in the process, using their aesthetic vocabulary. This presented a collaboration that was more equal, as there was creative input from both sides from the beginning. For those like the Jutton family, the decision making process was less equal, although the final product still reflected its subjects and did produce a sense of ownership of the space. The participants stated in their feedback that when they walk down Gloucester Road they remember the project and it makes

them smile. 'Ownership' has been a recurring theme in my documentation of *Still Image Moving* so far, even in those instances where participating subjects could be said to have had very little impact on the creative process. With most encounters, Vason suggested and responded to ideas and themes that fitted within his aesthetic vocabulary, leaving many participants agreeing to his suggestions, rather than arriving at ideas together.

After the image was finished, the participants were asked how much ownership they felt they had over the image created. Of the seventy seven answers:

- 9 stated they had no ownership
- 13 described it as 'some'
- 25 said half, 50% or 'shared'
- 17 stated 'a lot'
- 8 felt total ownership

The responses were therefore wide ranging, with some recognising the process as collaborative, others feeling they only 'took part in creating' the image and some stating that they 'came up with the ideas' and therefore felt complete ownership. This varying response even happened within groups, with members giving differing feedback on their perceived levels of ownership. There were two groups that participated which were bigger than the others. The responses of one group (of nine participants) to their claims for ownership ranged from 'none, maybe 2%' to 'entirely' and 'our original idea that we moulded.' Within the other large group (of five participants), one person claimed to be 'the main character' whereas the rest stated none or little ownership of the image.



Fig. 4: Jordan Johnson in *Still Image Moving* (2010). Courtesy of Jordan Johnson and Manuel Vason.

The image above is particularly informative in documenting how participants might have been encouraged to feel ownership over their image. This is Jordan Johnson. He spent a day with the project, bringing a broken Play Station 3 which had ‘transformed into an ugly paperweight’ for him. He had a clear idea of wanting to smash it, to show his dissatisfaction with his technological dependence. Vason suggested setting fire to it, but he was adamant that he wanted to smash the PS3. He bought a sledgehammer, and through further discussion decided it would be more dramatic to add flames to the destruction. Vason directed the image, including lights and flash, to get the precise moment of destruction. Jordan’s response to the collaboration was very clear; he felt very present within the process and that the idea originated from him, but that the artist did the ultimate framing, as Vason arguably possessed the skill and experience in that area. When asked what level of ownership he felt, he replied ‘I hope that part of myself is conveyed within the image yet the framing and final impression is that of the artist.’ He felt that the person doing the

framing was allowed to sign the work, though in a conceptual framework it was his idea that authored the work. It is this preliminary claim to authorship, within the broader frame of Vason's collaborative offer, that encourages collaborators to feel a sense of ownership over the resulting image.

Different types of ownership need to be separated here: ideological ownership, authorial ownership and legal ownership. Within many socially engaged projects, the ownership of the project will be presented to the participants in an ideological sense, to both engage them and attempt to leave a legacy. Authorial ownership defines the artist behind the work and who is allowed to sign it. Legal ownership is related to the ways a work can be distributed and displayed.

Still Image Moving showed a clear attempt to hand over ideological authorship, agency of representation and legal ownership to the participant. This was done in two ways: firstly, an invitation was extended to collaborate on the image, supported by the facilitating artists, and, secondly, each participant was required to sign an Attribution Share Alike Creative Commons license¹⁰ to allow for the image to be projected in public.¹¹ A digital copy of the image was also emailed to the participant. This symbolically reiterated the ownership of the image by allowing the participant to publish, remix, tweak and build upon the image, as well as being credited on any publications of it. This recognises the importance of giving the audience member agency over their own image and offers them some degree of ownership over the project by allowing them rights over their photographed image that models might otherwise have been denied. This is a departure from other projects by Vason, whose documentary photographs of performances are consistently credited

¹⁰ This license is often compared to open source software licenses. Further detail of the Creative Commons licenses can be found at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/>.

¹¹ This was a requirement set up within the project, as the law only requires this type of protection when photographing children under 16. Where children under 16 were involved, their parent or guardian was required to sign the license for them.

to him. His collaborative images within projects such as *Encounters* are credited to the artist and Vason, as the photographs in *Still Image Moving* are credited to the participant and Vason. There is a significant difference between these two projects, which lies in the power structure. Vason has set up the exchange before the participants become involved. Unless the participant comes with a full idea, which is literally represented, the artist will put a significant amount into the final product. Vason's images possess a certain style, something visible in all the images created during the project. This becomes problematic when positioning the audience as artist. This questions whether it is possible to place the participant in the artist role, and whether this creates critical art or an ethical process within a community project.

All this suggests that the idea of ownership is complicated: something not quantifiable by the process of the project, which invokes a highly personal feeling and response. All the images I was involved in as an artist facilitator were co-authored on different levels. The final result in each originated in the participant's raw idea or inspiration. In each case they also had agency over their representation through the collaborative process, the choice of the final image and the agreement to project the final image, through the signature on the Creative Commons License.

Conclusion

As suggested, a way of evaluating socially engaged practice that combines the ethical treatment of the audience with critical evaluation of the final work is necessary. This methodology needs to examine participant authorship within the project and claims to 'empowerment,' their ownership of the final work, the status of the audience as participants or collaborators and the audience response. It needs to be a critical response to the work, which takes into account both process and final work (one

possible dual approach uses what O'Neill describes as a time-based approach of the process together with the traditional art-object critique of the work produced (8)).

Returning to the contentious term of empowerment, and whether this is a useful term to describe or promote socially engaged work and community projects, I would argue that the term empowerment is too ambiguous. As Bishop ('Social Turn' 183) has stated, it puts too much emphasis on social collaboration as being inherently positive, creating an uncertain term unsuitable for critical examination. The idea of ownership is already something very personal, as indicated by the participant responses. It would be more productive to analyse the effect of a project in terms of the potential agency created, the balance of ownership and the offer of authorship, combined with the audience response. As Bishop ('Social Turn' 180) argues, community work has been mainly critiqued on the ethics of audience participation and not as a work of critical art. Socially engaged practice requires a different approach to critically presented work, but this needs additional evaluative criteria.

Still Image Moving created potential for participant agency by giving them the opportunity to author the photograph, offering various forms of ownership over the final image and presenting the process as a collaborative endeavour. The overall framework of the project was pre-decided by Vason, but the parameters for participation were wide. Some participants took up the offer of authorship over the project more than others, but this made it possible for anyone to engage on a level they felt comfortable with. The legal ownership, with the use of the Creative Commons license, is something that more socially engaged work could employ, in order to make it clear to their participants that the work created is, at least partially, theirs.

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