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Agency

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Meaningful agency

Agency as a concept is regularly mentioned in relation to audiences, particularly when the work discussed includes participation or is aimed at engaging specific communities, such as socially engaged practices (Alston 2016; Frieze 2017 Hadley 2017; Harpin and Nicholson 2017; Harvie 2013; Tomlin 2019; White 2013). Participatory performance creates a structure for participants to materially contribute to the work by adding to or changing something within the performance that impacts on other participants present. In analysing participation, it is useful to differentiate between the work as a structure and the individual live performance: the structure is created by the artist and consists of predetermined content and an interaction design that indicates how participants' contributions impact on this structure; whilst the individual performance is a live experience that includes the participants' contributions. This perspective helps the understanding that each performance will be materially different, due to the specific contributions made by the participants present, whilst each of the performances has the same underlying structure and system through which these contributions become part of the performance.

This chapter will critically examine the concept of agency, starting with a full definition and an exploration of the different types of agency within participatory performance. I argue that agency becomes meaningful when it is perceived by the participant (not when observed from the outside) and that an act of agency gets its meaning from the context it happens within, which highlights the importance of audience research in understanding how participants find meaning within their actions. Finally, I propose that the term 'conducting' is a respectful and accurate way to discuss audience or participant agency within a performance.

Some participatory practices explicitly aim to 'empower' the participants by 'giving' them the agency to contribute to the performance or make decisions, in a variety of ways. This way of using the term 'agency' shows two common assumptions:

- That we can determine someone else's agency from the outside through observation;
- That it is possible to increase the agency of participants, which presupposes that they lack it and that the nature of agency is such that it can be provided as something that is external to them.

These assumptions ignore the agency that participants already have as they enter the work and instead suggest that this agency is provided by the artist through engaging in the work, which risks patronising participants.

This chapter outlines a more nuanced understanding of agency that demonstrates that everyone has it, however agency exists within systems and structures (such as society) that can inhibit or conduct a person's ability to meaningfully exercise it.

An inclusive approach to understanding agency is to view a participant's individual agency in the context within which it is situated, which will constrain and enable their actions and decisions in specific ways. In this perspective, if a participant is not able to enact a change it is not due to a lack of agency on their part, but rather it is a result of the restrictive situation in which they find themselves. Participatory performance is well placed to examine the contexts in which our agency is situated through its aesthetics and systems that determine how participant contributions become part of the live performance.

I will discuss *The Money* by Kaleider (2013) as a case study to explore meaningful agency in participatory performance. *The Money* is a participatory performance based on a deceptively simple premise: a group of participants have two hours to collectively decide what to do with the (real) money that is on the table in front of them. There are two types of tickets available for prospective audience members, which hint at the two roles on offer within the performance: you can be a Silent Witness or a Benefactor. You are able to change roles during the performance, which is explained in the rule booklet that is read aloud by a participant at the start. Benefactors need to come to a unanimous decision, demonstrated by them all signing the pro forma within the time limit, whilst Silent Witnesses observe. The intended plan for the money needs to be legal and if no unanimous decision is reached then the money rolls over to the next show. The final sentence in the rule booklet (read aloud by a participant) presents the objective: 'what can we do together that we cannot do apart?'

The Money raises several key questions about the different types of agency and choices on offer within participatory performance: How does the choice of *how to take part* differ from decisions on *what action to take* within the work? How does agency depend on the other participants present in the room and not just the system created by the performance? How can agency be meaningful within a structure that is governed by very clear rules?

Agency

The basic definition of agency is having the ability to make decisions and act in a way that might impact on or change the situation (Anscombe 2000; Davidson 2001 [1980]; Schlosser 2015). This general definition does not differentiate between different types of agency, for instance physical movement and an intentional act with consequences for other people's lives. Agency is a complex notion as it is inherently linked to our embodied experience of action as well as our perception of ourselves in relation to others and our context (Gallagher 2005, 2007 and 2012; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008; Bayne 2008). From a cognitive perspective, agency refers to 'the perception that I (or you or he/she/[they]) caused the movement that just occurred' (Hallet 2011, 62), which means that the intention for the action as well as the event need to connect within the participant's perception. This emphasis on perception is significant and highlights the importance of capturing and understanding participants' experiences (for instance through audience research).

A phenomenological perspective on agency enables a focus on how agency is experienced because it highlights that agency depends on 'the agent's consciousness of agency' (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 158). The sense of agency that I might have for my actions is dependent on my being aware of the connections between my actions, the context these are situated within and the change that might happen as a result. Unless I can perceive these connections, I will not experience a sense of agency. This perspective focuses on the experience of agency, whether this perception is based on an intentional action with a clear desired outcome or one without a sense of what the action might achieve. My sense of agency can consist of a pre-reflective, unconscious awareness of what I am doing in the moment or it might include a more explicit perception of my action in relation to the reasons for taking that action, which involves planning and reflection. Phenomenological, or experienced, agency consists of three aspects: the intentional aspect, the bodily sensation, and a reflective attribution (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 166), and we can see how each of these aspects manifest in *The Money*:

The *intentional aspect* refers to a decision I might make, for instance to change role from Silent Witness to Benefactor so that I can join the discussion. The *bodily sensation* comes from the physical nature of acting, including the sensation of holding and ringing the handbell and placing my £10 contribution on the table, whilst the *reflective attribution* describes the retrospective connection I make between the result of my action in the performance and my original intentions (even if these were subconscious). This reflective process connects my actions with the reason for becoming a Benefactor, such as being able to vote down the suggestions being made that I see as frivolous and instead suggest a charity to support.

The phenomenology of agency is complicated and multi-layered, making it difficult to separate out these three aspects within one's experience, and Gallagher highlights that this ambiguity exists in both the definition and the experience of agency (2012, 26). It is the reflective attribution aspect in the experience of agency that connects an action taken or a choice made to its meaning, which derives from the situation and the response to the action. For instance, my action of walking over to the handbell on the table in the middle of the room with £10 in my hand is given meaning in *The Money* by the situation, where the rules state that ringing the bell and placing at least £10 on the table means that my role has shifted from Silent Witness to Benefactor. This meaning is given further depth through my reflection that I was unable to remain silent whilst the Benefactors discuss their plans, which is what led me to take the action. It is the perception of the connection between an action, the context and the responses from the others present that provides the meaning for an act of agency.

Agency in participation

Examining agency in the interaction design of *The Money* highlights two types of agency within participatory performance: agency of engagement and narrative agency (See Figure 1). *Agency of engagement* is found within participants' ability to choose how to engage with the work through their decision on what ticket to buy as well as the option to change between the Silent Witness and Benefactor roles throughout. Each of these roles comes with its own rules on what actions are considered appropriate within the performance context and set expectations on what an act of agency might be able to achieve. Although it seems that only Benefactors are able to materially change the performance outcome, at the end of the performance the performer (who has been sitting quietly at the back) reads the signed pro forma and asks the Silent Witnesses to confirm that this was indeed a unanimous decision that was taken. If the Silent Witnesses disagree then they can overturn any plans written down.

Narrative agency arises out of actions and decisions taken by participants and their reflections that weave these decisions into the overall narrative of the performance as they perceive it (like voting on ideas or signing the pro forma). Agency of engagement and narrative agency are bound up together within the embodied experience of the performance, which combines the pre-reflective, embodied aspects of intentional action with a reflective dimension that ascribes specific reasons to a participant's actions and connects these to the performance context. In *The Money* a participant might buy a ticket to be a Silent Witness, because they are unsure whether they want to be a participant, but decide to ring in during the last 10 minutes of the performance to vote on the suggestions and refuse to sign the pro forma if they strongly disagree with the final

decision. Their sense of agency, therefore, will incorporate the reflection on their action in relation to the performance context, which focuses on the intended outcome to be achieved through that action: deciding to become a Benefactor and influence the show's outcome. *The Money* exemplifies the difference between being able to choose how to take part (agency of engagement) and the ability to take actions that impact on the performance (narrative agency).

[Figure 1]

Participants' actions and reflection on their effects combine in narrative agency to form a significant part of their meaning-making process, which can be broken down into four categories for a nuanced understanding (See Figure 1). Researchers on agency use the categories of reactive, interactive and proactive to differentiate between situations where participants respond within established parameters and those where they add something that did not already exist within that context. In participatory performance we can see the same categories of responses:

- *Reactive agency* describes a situation where a participant is faced with a clear choice – for instance voting for a suggestion made by another Benefactor or deciding whether to sign the pro forma. Reactive agency is directly guided by the affordances in a situation, which will detail the options to choose between;
- *Interactive agency* is more open and describes a performance moment where participants are given a specific request but where the options for responding are open – such as making a suggestion on what to do with the money that responds to the question posed at the start. This kind of response combines information provided by the work with the participant's own perspective;
- *Proactive agency* refers to actions that are not a direct response to an invitation but are self-initiated by the participant. In participatory performance this can be difficult to incorporate into the work if these actions move too far away from the narrative or performance structure. Pro-active actions can be experienced as disruptive or subversive by the artist or other participants (when they appear to move in a different direction from where the performance is trying to go) and can result in a situation where the work restricts participants' agency. The clear and open rules of *The Money* mean that very few actions would be outside of the scope of the performance structure; as a result most acts of proactive agency in the performance are subversive and likely to get restricted, for instance a participant's suggestion to burn the money (which is illegal).

In addition to these three categories I propose the term *creative agency* to describe the specific situation within participatory performance where a participant contributes something that did not

already exist within that performance, but which remains appropriate to the context of the work and therefore can be easily incorporated. In *The Money* an example of creative agency is proposing to use the money to restage the same performance for a group of young people who do not have much access to theatre ordinarily, convincing the other Benefactors that this is a realistic plan and getting them to sign the pro forma. An experience of creative agency is significant in a participants' experience as it feels as though this is what a participatory performance asks of those attending: to contribute something that is new and that will be appropriate to the context (and so move the narrative forward). In addition, an act of creative agency is easier to perceive for the participant as the performance moves into a direction that is distinctly in response to something they suggested or contributed, making it more likely to be experienced as meaningful by them.

Meaningful agency

Agency is situated in perception, which highlights the importance of distinguishing between agentive acts (where you observe someone else taking an action that appears as though they made a decision) and the experience of agency (where a participant reports feeling like they made a choice, however small). A nuanced understanding of agency arises out of the knowledge that agency becomes meaningful when a participant experiences it, together with the distinction between an act of agency observed from the outside and an experience of agency located within an individual's perception. The latter also highlights the importance of audience research (or qualitative research beyond a performance context) in developing more nuanced perspectives on agency, because solely observing others' actions is a method unable to provide us with the appropriate insight. The meaning of an action arises out of its context, so to analyse agency within participatory performance we need to take a contextual approach:

- Agency is situated in the context of the performance, for example the invitation in the work to the participant in part determines the level of agency (i.e. reactive or creative);
- It is essential to be clear on the location of agency and whether it was observed in participants' behaviour or if there is insight into their perceptions of agency;
- The rhetoric surrounding agency is problematic and conceives of agency as something that someone can distribute to others, who are perceived to be lacking in it. Rather than 'giving' a participant agency, participatory performance 'conducts' participants' agency by either restricting or enabling it through the performance design.

'Conducting' agency as a term aims to create more precise language and an inclusive approach to understanding agency, by highlighting that participants do not lack in agency, rather their agency might be restrained by the context they find themselves in (whether in life or in a performance). *The Money* illustrates that agency depends on both the system present within the performance as well as all of the other people there: the success or failure of any suggestion depends on getting the other Benefactors to agree, to sign the pro forma, and on the Silent Witnesses confirming that it was indeed a unanimous decision. Whether a participant wants to support a charity, spend the money on lottery tickets or put the names of the Benefactors in a hat and draw a winner to take all the money home, their agency is conducted through the structure of the performance and curtailed by the opinions of the others present in the room. However, it is precisely those other people, the rules and the structure that provide the meaning for the participant's action because these ground it within a specific context that they are able to affect.

This contextual approach also emphasises that agency is not absolute but is fundamentally dependent on context, whether we look at participatory performance or real-life situations. The ability to choose how to act or respond within a performance does not necessarily bring any agency (or empowerment) as agency in participation can be very effectively faked. Even in performances where your actions genuinely impact on the work (such as in *The Money*), this still happens within a structure that is largely predetermined. This perspective on agency would be troubling if we assumed that participation equalled 'genuine' power; instead it resembles the agency that we experience in everyday situations. Our agency is always curtailed or structured by the systems we live in. For instance, the choices we are able to make are increasingly circumscribed by a neoliberal, capitalist society, meaning we mainly get to choose what to buy and where. This makes a discussion of agency in participation, and particularly of meaningful, contextual agency, significant beyond the context of participatory performance and leads to a consideration of agency not as a direct route to empowerment but as a deconstruction of the power relations within which it operates.

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Figure 1:

