Reinstating the artist’s voice: Artists’ perspectives on participatory projects

Katya Johanson
Deakin University – Melbourne Burwood Campus, Burwood, Australia

Hilary Glow
Deakin University – Melbourne Burwood Campus, Burwood, Australia

Abstract
Claire Bishop argued that the ethical lens applied to socially engaged arts practice encourages ‘authorial renunciation’ in favour of collaboration and limits the opportunity to expose such practice to critical reception. This article responds to Bishop’s implicit call to envision an artist-centred framework for participatory arts by identifying the motivations and beneficial discoveries that artists make when they seek out the creative involvement of others. Based on interviews with Australian performing artists who have established socially engaged practices, the article aims to bring about a form of ‘authorial reinstatement’ into the value system around participatory arts practice. It identifies a range of motivations for artists who establish socially engaged or participatory practice, from self-developmental to altruistic; and from arts-focused to community- and society-focused. The article argues that using these motivations to inform indicators of achievement for participatory practice provides new opportunities for critical interrogation of those practices.

Keywords
artistic quality, participatory arts, relational arts

The arts sector has witnessed a rise in the putative importance of public or social participation in arts practice, if not a rise in participatory practice itself. The Australia Council survey Arts Nation, reported that in 2013 over one-third of the Australian population was actively and regularly engaged in making art, including creative writing, playing music...
or singing, making visual arts or crafts, theatre and dance (Australia Council for the Arts, 2015: 11). An even higher rate of participation of 49 per cent was observed in the United Kingdom through the 2013/2014 Taking Part survey (DCMS, 2015). Yet the term participation almost automatically provokes criticism, which derives either from a sense that claims to participation are disingenuous, or from the view that the very emphasis on participation causes artistic quality to be compromised. It is argued that the political aims behind the projects – to represent the interests of marginalised communities – outweigh artistic achievements, leading to poor artistic quality (Bishop, 2006, 2012). There is a tension between the enthusiasm for participatory arts among public institutions on the one hand, and a scepticism on the part of critics and some artists about both its political and artistic value on the other (see Bishop, 2006; Kay, 2012: 3; Rancière, 2009). Given this ostensible preoccupation with social outcomes and scepticism about artistic value, it is not readily apparent why artists choose to do participatory arts projects.

As is common with a subject that has both industrial and sociological interest, the existing literature tends to be bifurcated between academic studies – the primary purpose of which is critical observation of the existing order of relations (such as those of Bishop, 2006, 2012; Papastergiadis, 2012) – and industry-based literature that aims to influence policy and shape advocacy campaigns (such as those of Blanche, 2014b; DHA, 2014; Kay, 2012). The article aims to bridge this bifurcated approach by turning the focus of the discussion on the theoretical and practical framing of participatory arts practice, and establishing the value participatory practice has for arts practice and the arts sector, rather than its community, social or health benefits. Until the absence of professional artists’ voices is addressed, the tendency among critics to dismiss participatory arts as the poor cousin of ‘professional’ productions – developed by trained artists and performed to predominantly passive audiences – will continue. Establishing a critical framework to guide the review of participatory practice is a necessary precondition for appreciating its quality, and one means to do this is to identify and effectively embed into practice the qualities that artists see participatory practice as embodying. The article therefore asks professional artists – whose voices are largely missing from the literature – about their experience of participatory arts practice. It uses small-sample research interviews to identify the recurring values that underpin performing artists’ motivations for their own participatory practice, with the aim of providing a starting point for a framework for future critical review.

While we argue below that participatory practice has a range of values for artists – from social/political to artistic – it is the artistic values we wish to highlight, because as Bishop (2006) describes, these are too rarely identified by critics and commentators. In our empirical study of artists’ motivations for initiating or participating in participatory practice, the artists we interviewed saw such practice as breathing life into an artworld that is otherwise insular, stale and staid. Rather than being inimical to artistic quality, participatory practice may actually be essential to it.

**Defining participatory arts**

Cultural sociology documents the difference between the potentially narrow political construction of ‘community’ – which provides collective identity but also constraints, as it may watch ‘over the deeds, the conduct of life and the attitudes of the individual’ – and
the notion of the individual who has the will and agency to transcend boundaries and adopt fluid identities (Simmel, 2002: 33). This difference is reflected in the shift from the historically dominant notions of community arts and community cultural development to participatory arts, at least rhetorically. The history of participatory arts has been dominated by the discourses of community arts and community cultural development, which regard participation as achieving the needs of communities that are otherwise considered to be disadvantaged. As Kelaher et al. (2014) note, community art has ‘sought to contribute to civic dialogue by provoking a deeper understanding of social issues’ and by promoting community leadership, civic dialogue and social change (2014: 133). Such purposes have defined the framework for participatory arts, which is often seen as a means of delivering an enhanced understanding of and connection to social issues (2014: 135). The term ‘community’ in the arts came to encompass art as a worthy intervention to remedy social, health or wellbeing problems. Since the late 1990s the term ‘community’ has itself shifted to refer less to ‘a targeted social group whose disadvantage can be redressed by cultural participation’ (Brook, 2014: 283) and more towards a ‘space of personal exploration and voluntary identification’ (2014: 284).

How ‘participation’ is defined is ‘inconsistent and not always clear’ (Jancovich, 2015b: 14), as it tends to range across every kind of interaction people might have with the arts, from passive reception as an audience member (e.g. Boorsma, 2006) to critical interventions (Bala, 2012: 237), to creative involvement in the production of the art activity itself (e.g. Brown and Novak-Leonard, 2011) or making a contribution to the commissioning, designing or programming of the activity (e.g. Jancovich, 2015b). In addition to a lack of clarity about what the term ‘participation’ refers to, when it comes to participatory arts practice, multiple alternative terms are used. Bishop describes how ‘relational practices currently go by a variety of names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based or collaborative art’ (2006: 1). To this list we could add ‘relational aesthetics’ and ‘connective aesthetics’, as well as the abstract nouns describing the process, rather than the product: co-creation, co-production, collaboration.

The extent of participation is also multifaceted: it includes audience member, creative participant in production, or political participant in commissioning, programming or implementing an arts project. In the United Kingdom at least, the term ‘participation’ is often used to indicate efforts to increase the accessibility and breadth of appeal of publicly funded cultural offerings as opposed to the depth of engagement (see Jancovich, 2015a). More people are seen to ‘participate’ in the arts when more tickets are sold and more survey respondents report having read a book or visited a gallery. Even when we agree that participatory arts require more active participation than this, there is a vast scope. Some cases of participatory arts are driven by a community in search of creative expression, and the artist is commissioned to facilitate this; in others it is driven by the creative vision of an artist or arts organisation, who pulls together a group of participants – perhaps fleetingly, perhaps with a long-term sense of a common mission – to achieve it. In yet other cases, the lines between professional artist and non-professional participant is much less clear: the autodidactic band leader engaging semi-professional musicians, for example. Nor is there necessarily consensus within an arts project about its participatory status. Fan fiction may not be considered participatory from the author’s
perspective as it riffs off the products of his or her imagination, but the fans may well regard themselves as participating, and they are – with each other if not with the author. This multiplicity of terms and interpretations presents a stubborn obstacle for research and collective mobilisation: interviewees from 23 arts organisations in the UK’s North East Pathfinder program, for example, used 23 different terms to describe their practice, and the program finally selected the phrase ‘arts in participatory settings’ for its study on the grounds that it appeared to be the term that ‘fewest people objected to’ (Kay, 2012: 4–5).

The definition of participatory arts practice used here is the creative participation of people who would not ordinarily or formally identify as artists in producing the arts activity, alongside self-identified and professional artists. Their activities may include writing, curating, producing, choreographing, performing, etc., but not simply being audience members, ticket sellers, ushers, reviewers and so on.

**Perceptions of quality in participatory arts practice**

The non-professional status of participants means that participatory arts practice has a tenuous claim to artistic quality in the existing literature. Perhaps the most high-profile of critics of participatory or relational art is Jacques Rancière, who regards relational aesthetics to be hamstrung by a need to achieve consensus among the communities represented, thus preventing it from achieving ‘radical disensus’ (Papastergiadis, 2012: 158). Rancière argues that participative arts practices use ‘the blurring of boundaries and the confusion of roles to enhance the effect of performance without questioning its principles’ (Rancière, 2009: 21). This blurring of conventional boundaries, roles and forms in participatory arts can result in yet another form of ‘consumerist hyper-activism’ delivering for participants more choice but no purpose (2009: 21).

The rise of participatory arts as a defined project is often considered a result of the dramatic shifts in global politics in the late 20th century, although with long-reaching historical roots (Bishop, 2012; Papastergiadis, 2012). Claire Bishop (2006: 1) suggests that such practices followed the fall of Communism, as a way of engaging the left’s vision of an interrelated political and aesthetic radicalism. Nikos Papastergiadis too highlights the potential contribution Rancière saw relational aesthetics as making, by identifying ‘a radical explosion’ in art forms that are explicitly ‘activist, dialogical, interventionist and tactical’ since the early 1990s. Papastergiadis (2012: 155) considers this to be a response to globalisation rather than the fall of Communism. He identifies a ‘collaborative arts practice’ (2012: 166) that provides a vehicle for examining contemporary tensions and questions. For Papastergiadis, this new social aesthetic is engaged with ‘the critical transformations of neo-liberalism [which has] coloniz[ed] the life-world of consumers’ (2012: 157).

Such colonisation might also be the cause of the failure that Leila Jancovich draws attention to in British cultural policy: the failure to ‘bring democracy to culture’ (2011: 271). Jancovich argues that Tony Blair’s New Labour government did little to change the organisations that receive cultural funding or the social composition of those who ‘participate’, who remain largely ‘white and middle-class’ (2011: 271; see Jancovich, 2015a). Jancovich’s research with local government cultural authorities began with the premise that arts managers resist political participation from the public on the presumption that
the public is inherently risk-averse (Jancovich, 2015b: 16). For some critics, this persistent limitation in opportunities for participation in the arts is structural. Reminiscent of Bourdieu’s correlation of cultural capital with social distinction (1984), for example, Holly Arden (2014) argues that the ‘mainstream arts industry’ depends on disparity: the assignment of artistic ability, taste and access by ‘putative gatekeepers’ on the one hand, and the association of the participating ‘public’ with a pejorative perception of ‘non-professionalism’ on the other (2014: 114).

Others are critical of participatory arts’ impact, identifying a lack of critical attention to issues of quality and seeing this as the result of the need to prioritise instrumental outcomes (Badham, 2010; Bishop, 2006; Walmsley, 2013). Miwon Kwon describes site-oriented art work that is preoccupied with redressing social or health ills as tending ‘to treat aesthetic and art-historical concerns as secondary issues’ (1997: 91). Participatory arts practices are judged on ethical criteria deriving from the collaboration they involve, so that aesthetic considerations are subordinated to the subjective experience of participants. There is no place for the critic (Webb 1980: 208), and there is also an ‘ethics of authorial renunciation’, so that artists who appear to direct a collaborative work rather than allow it to emerge consensually are accused of egocentrism (Bishop, 2006: 2). In considering the merit of participatory arts, emphasis is ‘shifted away from the disruptive specificity of a given work into a generalized set of moral precepts’ (Bishop, 2006: 4).

In this way, the arts are polarised into practice that aims for artistic quality and activity aimed at creatively involving the public. This habit discourages artists from speaking critically about the participatory work they initiate because there is no framework for considering quality; and it casts a negative influence on the reputation of artists who choose to work in participatory settings and the time spent by communities who choose to work with them (Consilium, 2012). In 2014, in research funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, DHA conducted a survey of 868 arts practitioners in the United Kingdom, to investigate aspects of their participatory practice in order to identify how such practice might be better supported.

Fifty-six per cent of artists who responded to the DHA survey reported that ‘too many people’ in the sector did not value participatory practice (DHA, 2014: 29), and that it was seen as a ‘lower value fallback option’ for work (Kay, 2012: 5). Lowe (2011) and Kay (2012) argue that the lack of a shared sense of quality in participatory arts or a framework for making excellent work ‘must harm the perception of the work’ because it is not possible to articulate what distinguishes good practice.

When they are asked, Blanche (2014a) suggests, artists state that they are motivated in participatory arts projects by a desire to generate positive impacts for participants, including the benefits of self-expression. This view of artists’ motivations or experience is consistent with research on the job satisfaction of artists more generally, which finds a range of non-pecuniary, and arguably non-instrumental, reasons that keep people working as artists even under common conditions of low pay and high unemployment (see Brook, 2013).

The research underpinning the present article takes its impetus from Blanche’s call for attention to be paid to artists. Our aim was to find out what artists’ purposes and experiences are in initiating or becoming involved in participatory practice, and how they describe the quality or value of participatory practice either in relation to their own practice or to the artform in which it sits. In order to draw out the detail of these motivations
and experiences, the research took a qualitative approach, using interviews to allow the researchers to understand something of the judgements, perceptions and tools used by these actors to make sense of the socio-cultural field in which they operate.

**Research design**

The present study required a small-sample research method in order to draw findings both about (1) the range of practices that artists consider to be participatory and the range of values ascribed to them, and (2) their own personal experiences of participatory arts practice. Informed by the DHA study, this current project used 16 semi-structured interviews to draw out the motivations and indicators of quality and value that artists hold in their participatory practice. Interviewees were selected on the basis of their previous background and practice in producing participative arts projects which had been funded by local government. The interviews were generally between 30 and 45 minutes in length, and conducted via telephone.

The aim of our interviews was to build a conversation about participatory arts; however the interviewers avoided couching the value of the arts projects in terms of social or artistic outcomes, choosing instead to leave it to the interviewees to identify their aims in producing work to enhance public participation, and their views of what makes for quality or high quality in arts participation practices. Interviewees were not asked to provide demographic information, but analysis of their responses to the first question, ‘Can you tell me about your artistic practice and how you came to be involved in participatory arts?’, indicated that they were all mid-to-late career artists. Although no effort was made to select one art form over another, interviewees were predominantly from the live performing arts. Arguably, participatory practice is more common in the live performing arts, where it has a long history of formal recognition that can be traced back to Augusto Boal’s use of ‘simultaneous dramaturgy’ in the 1960s (White, 2013: 15).

The thematic analysis commenced in the data collection phase as we looked for patterns in the data related to the research focus. The development of themes from these patterns was aided through the process of coding of data (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). The data was coded in terms of respondents’ comments in relation to five themes: definitions of participation; the quality of public participation; motivations for initiating participatory arts projects; skills required to lead such projects; and interviewees’ understanding of quality. Exemplar quotes from respondents have been used to demonstrate the themes in the following discussion.

The study is limited in that it is biased towards artists with a positive experience of participatory arts practice. The fact that artists agreed to participate in the interviews suggests that they were likely to want to share their experiences of participatory practice and this may have had an impact on our understanding of the artistic limitations of participatory practice.

**The value of participatory arts practice for artists**

The artists interviewed all stated that they were interested in increasing public participation in their practice. Many of the interviewees stated that this aim was central to their
organisation’s mission or objectives, while others identified that participatory practice was important to their communities. For example: ‘I think the arts are a great meeting ground for people and we don’t have many opportunities for that in the West [of Melbourne] … so for me, the work that I do is about how to gather people and create spaces for people to gather.’

Several of the artists interviewed volunteered ambivalence about the connotations of terms frequently associated with participatory arts. For example: ‘I think often when we talk about community arts, or community engagement or community access, there’s a view that this could be synonymous with average or low-quality art, and I don’t necessarily believe that is true.’ The use of ‘necessarily’ in this statement suggests a hesitation about the value of practices associated with participation. Others described struggling with poor definition: ‘I catch myself saying “community” a bit too much. I feel the definition in my head is really clear when I say it but sometimes it’s not that clear in helping me articulate what I’m interested in.’ In both these statements, there is a suggestion that the terms used to describe participatory practice are inadequate or misused, but that there is a potential set of activities that falls under these terms that deserves to be ascribed more value.

**Artists’ motivations and experience in participatory arts practice**

When asked to explain what motivated them to initiate or become involved in participatory arts practices, interviewees identified motives that ranged across artistic and social objectives. These objectives have been categorised below, but it is first worth noting that, in many cases, the artists’ most important motives emerged only after initial involvement in a participatory arts practice. For example, one interviewee who began a participatory project as a relatively successful, mid-career dance artist left her individual practice to devote herself to participatory projects. She described a project that began this transition, involving the participation of elderly residents of a coastal town. She describes how the work became ‘more and more exciting’, and ‘it started to sort of overwhelm my interest in performing [independently] … Now it’s become something that I really want to commit a lot of my life to.’ She described the value of the project as lying, first, in the creative and physical challenges of developing dance sequences for people with limited mobility, which represent greater challenges than those provided by professional dancers, and, second, in her observation of the tangible positive benefits it had for participants’ emotional wellbeing.

Many artists reported a similar encounter with participatory practice that ‘converted’ them to the belief that such practice was so professionally satisfying that it became their chief focus. The depth of commitment the interviewees expressed to participatory arts, and the fact that this commitment was often the outcome of initial experiences in such arts projects, is consistent with the DHA’s survey of artists in Britain, which found that among artists who work primarily with communities or participants from the public, the majority (67%) rated this work as most important to their practice, as opposed to other aspects such as ‘performing/undertaking commissions/exhibiting’ and ‘teaching’ (DHA, 2014: 16). The DHA survey was unable to identify
what the characteristics of participatory arts practice were that made it so central to the professional lives of artists. Our interviews sought to identify these qualities. The various motives and experiences that respondents identified fell into five categories, as described in the following sub-sections.

**Improving artistic practice for the individual artist or organisation**

For individual arts projects, participation offers a means of assisting artists to road-test their artistic products with audiences prior to the project’s completion (see Payne, 2008). Examples from our interviewees include: ‘I am trying to create works that people read and they are also impacted by in some way. What I do now starts off in a passive way and then it can build into more engagement or activity.’ Offering audiences a practice and drawing them into a greater level of engagement provides a process of experimentation around the value of that practice. However, more significantly, some interviewees believed that the social participation provided them with knowledge or inspiration that improved their own practice. This activity often represented a form of professional development. For example: ‘I am doing projects as a form of learning and discovery for me … I am seeking out interactions.’ While this motive was essentially exploratory, in other cases artists reflected that their experience of working in participatory projects had unleashed or increased their own artistic capabilities. Examples include:

I found a real freedom and delight in being able to just take time to explore the moment, and sharing that time, and then letting that evolve slowly without this desperate end point where you would be judged or enjoyed by a lot of people. (Participant 1)

I find sometimes this feeling that I’ve got to teach as well, and after I work there is a kind of buzzing energy from the engagement. I just want to follow that energy and that kind of sparks me on as a practitioner. (Participant 2)

In the first description, the respondent suggests that participatory practice represents an alternative to the strictures of traditional performance, and the pleasure of working with people who are not there to ‘judge’ but to participate alongside the artist, which is ultimately liberating for artistic development. In the second declaration, the teaching quality that accompanies participatory arts practice is itself energising.

These examples emphasise the contribution of others’ participation to the artist’s creativity, innovation and enjoyment. With few exceptions (e.g. DHA, 2014; Kay, 2012), personal artistic motivations such as these are rarely acknowledged in the literature, where – as Bishop points out – the preoccupation is with their impact on social goals, and artistic merits are sidelined. The artists interviewed are all too ready to describe the value of public participation for their own learning and professional development. As one of our interviewees said: ‘There’s no point engaging people in crap art just for the sake of engagement – good art is doing more than just engaging people.’ ‘Good’ art here, we assume, refers to arts practice which is aesthetically satisfying or related to skill development for both artist and participants.
Improving the quality of the arts sector

Some interviewees expressed feelings of negativity about what they considered to be conventional arts practices, and saw participatory arts practice as essential to invigorating the sector and restoring its cultural relevance to contemporary audiences. For example: ‘I feel that if we’re going to sustain the social relevance of theatre, it’s important to actually talk about issues of civic relevance. I feel like we’ve lost the civic discourse in our theatres. It’s just entertainment, and two-dimensional.’ For the interviewee, participatory arts practice addresses a vulnerability in professional arts practice and thereby improves the quality of the arts experience, as much as it contributes to dialogue. It is not only outwardly beneficial to the communities it involves, but inwardly beneficial to evolving arts practice. The interviewee quoted above in this paragraph was highly critical of performing arts practice for its failure to engage with the social and political issues that its audiences experience and felt that this neglect risked making the arts socially irrelevant. Participatory practices that were based on a community’s conception and establishment of projects that reflected their current concerns and interests is essential to the sustainability of the arts.

In some instances, participatory arts were seen almost as a form of research and development for the performing arts: by bringing audiences into the conception and production of an event, participatory practice facilitated innovation. A possible explanation for this may lie in the findings from Jancovich’s (2015b) research with Contact Theatre in Manchester, where staff involved in participatory production saw it as opening theatre practice to risk-taking and interesting work because participants – young people in the area with little prior experience of theatre – came without preconceived ideas about what theatre should be. This was demonstrated by a respondent in our study who explained how a single interaction with a boy while he was working collaboratively with hearing-impaired children on a theatre production was the source of inspiration for a new, collaborative production:

I asked L … what show would he like to see and he wrote ‘The Blood!! Death!! Show’. And I thought, ‘Yes, I want to see this show now, and I want to make this show. I want to make it in collaboration with 9- to 11-year-olds.’

In other responses, participatory practice is regarded as a source of development for arts organisations. Artists saw themselves as providing a bridge between communities who were unfamiliar with conventional arts organisations, and the organisations themselves. Describing her efforts to bring public housing tenants into one of Melbourne’s major theatre companies, for example, one artist explained about the theatre: ‘They’re not against community involvement; they just don’t understand it.’ Bringing communities and professional arts organisations together provides a form of professional development and a bulwark against otherwise mounting obsolescence for the organisation.

Giving or sharing artistic skills with others

Other interviewees were motivated by the knowledge that they held valuable skills that could be passed on to, taught to or shared with others. One artist illustrated this:
Have you seen the movie *Taken*? There’s this famous scene where Liam Neeson picks up the phone and the kidnappers have his daughter. But he says: ‘I spent my life acquiring very specific skills and I’ll find you.’ And I think of that when I think about [my work]: I’ve spent my life acquiring these very specific skills and now what I’m interested in is the transference of those skills in creation of that work.

The interviewee’s description also suggests that an interest in participatory practice reflects a particular stage of maturity in an artistic career:

After almost ten years of doing what I love, [I am] now creating a framework allowing other people’s stories [to go] on stage and putting the spotlight on them, and facilitating kind of a creation of an artwork that is about their stories.

In doing so, he nonetheless suggested that the act of teaching also improved his own understanding of his craft, an observation that many teachers will identify with.

Another artist, who leads a collective of comedians with disabilities, also described her need to facilitate others to develop artistic skills and to allow for the emotional growth that accompanies this development:

As an emerging artist with a disability … if you’ve been excluded from things in various ways your whole life … then to get up on stage, to write a piece that’s really from your heart … to work with the idea that people are watching you and you may be brilliant … is to work from a space of terror in the beginning … and then exhilaration.

**Addressing abstract or general social issues**

Consistent with Papastergiadis’s view of participatory practice as a vehicle for a cosmopolitan imaginary, other interviewees saw participation as exploring or reframing social issues. There is both a mobilisation and an exploration element to this activity. In relation to mobilisation, participatory arts practice addresses a need for greater interaction or communication on the part of participants. For example:

The arts [are] a great meeting ground for people no matter who they are … The work … is about how to gather people and create spaces for people to gather and feel things and discuss things.

In relation to exploration, artists also saw participation in terms of how the input of several people with a diverse range of interests could allow the artistic product to provide new insights into shared social problems, or to challenge audience expectations. The aim in these projects was to generate reflexiveness about social issues, rather than to redress disadvantage. One artist who worked with residents in a public housing estate that was threatened with demolition said:

If we’re pushing diversity further and further out [of our cities], then what will our cities look like in future? … It would be interesting if [the arts project] could actually propose some kind of answer to how we are all going to live together.
Behind this rumination is a valuing of the knowledge and perspective of the housing estate residents in influencing the performance. As Scott Brook (2014) observed about the changing discourse around community in the 1990s, here the community is not seen principally as a target social group whose disadvantage can be addressed through the arts project, but rather as a resource for new ways of thinking – extending problem-solving to the minds of those who have not, historically, been given a substantial role to play in addressing Papastergiadis’s ‘critical transformations of neo-liberalism’ (2012: 157). Similar examples were put forward by other interviewees. For example, one artist explained to the primary school students with whom she worked: ‘When people get together, often the story is better because it has everyone’s ideas in it.’

**Addressing local or immediate social issues**

Other projects were motivated by an identification – often by the artists themselves – of a specific social issue that the project could address. In these cases, artists were motivated by the goal of social engagement. For example: ‘It is about getting arts participation with a certain segment of the community, those that would not find participation easy … We’re particularly targeting the kids that don’t have those kinds of opportunities.’ The artists who identified social engagement as a motivation for their participatory practice also frequently volunteered that their success in doing so brought positive reinforcement. For instance: ‘A good quality outcome is when you’ve got the majority of kids for whom their life has changed … I get responses from people saying, “Since my son has been doing your workshops, he’s a different person.”’

**Facilitating play as an artistic practice**

Finally, there was an emphasis on play in artists’ discussion of the skills and value of participatory arts. One artist emphasised this in relation to skills: ‘It’s about being able to be playful and encouraging, and allowing space so it is not just about performing and being watched. It’s about sometimes teasing, sometimes leading, sometimes following.’ Another artist described her movement from solo to participatory practice: ‘I completely changed my approach and made it much more about being in the moment, and having permission to play … I realised how important that is, because I’m constantly feeling as if there’s not enough levity in everyday life.’ The fact that she ‘completely changed’ her approach to her artistic work suggests that the interviewee’s participatory practice facilitated play specifically into her artistic practice.

**Discussion**

As the first half of this article demonstrated, issues around quality in participatory arts practice are complex. Yet the failure to identify quality in participatory practice risks giving it an inferior reputation in relation to other arts practices, which may discourage artists with high profiles for artistic quality from becoming involved and make it difficult to assess the quality of the projects produced. It is often argued that the success of participatory arts practice relies on increasing the participatory aspects of a project, both in
terms of depth of participation (from the conception to evaluation of the project) and breadth of stakeholder groups. In her discussion of ‘quality lenses in participatory arts’, Blanche argues that the analysis of quality requires an understanding of different stakeholder perspectives, including participants, artists, the commissioner or partner, the group, and project facilities. Each of these lenses emphasise different elements of quality (Blanche, 2014b: 9–10).

Focusing on artist intentions and experience gathers insights into the ‘quality lens’. Interviewees saw participatory practice as contributing both to their own artistic development or professional fulfilment as well as to the social and cultural relevance of the arts sector, and considered participatory practice as a forum for the collaborative exploration of social issues.

The first of these qualities – artistic development and professional fulfilment – is seen chiefly in the artists’ description of aspects of participatory practice that are not found in their own individual practice, in particular the kinds of challenges that working with non-professional artists and specific communities presents. The dance artist working with elderly people saw the participants’ limited mobility not as an obstacle but as a valuable artistic challenge. Several artists spoke of the fact that, where non-professional participants actively contribute to the creative process, their lack of prior expectation means that participatory practice is inevitably focused on exploration rather than outcome, which has the potential to broaden the artists’ own scope of creativity. An aspect of professional development is the quality of play that artists found in working with others, particularly when they lack preconceived ideas about what, for example, the arts might be. In terms of professional fulfilment, interviewees mentioned their appreciation of the opportunity to teach, and identified this teaching as increasing their engagement in the experience.

Each of these qualities of professional development and fulfilment may be seen in the economic context of artistic labour, which is often characterised by insecurity, part-time conditions and serial portfolio work (Murray and Gollmitzer, 2012). The precarity of artistic labour reduces the capacity for the ongoing giving and receiving of formalised professional training, while the need to shift from one project to the next with a focus on production diminishes opportunities exploration and play – the very features that participatory practice appears to informally provide.

The second tranche of qualities that artists described were broader social and cultural contributions. The contribution that participatory practice can make in revitalising the conventional (artist-to-audience) arts sector is one of these: just as artists professionally benefit from working with non-professional artists, so too does the arts sector benefit from involving non-traditional audience members in participatory activities. Finally, and most familiar to the theoretical work on participatory practice, is the quality of providing a forum for the exploration of broad socio-political issues, as the different perspectives that people bring provide a resource for new ways of thinking.

The quality of play, described in this article as a discrete category of motivation, also forms a thread throughout the motivations described above. It is present in the descriptions of participatory practice leading to experimentation, imagination and exploration, story-telling and risk-taking. Although the arts are often considered a site of play (see Sutton-Smith 1997), the sense given by the interviewees who specifically mentioned play is that participatory practice increases playful qualities. Other examples given in
this article also suggest a valuing of the playful qualities that participants bring to an arts projects, such as the inspiration provided by a child in ‘The Blood!! Death!! Show’. Here, play is defined as activity motivated primarily for enjoyment’s sake, where the tangible end-goal (the completed monopoly board, the house of building blocks, the theatre production) is not the primary purpose, and which brings people together. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) also define play as free movement within a rigid structure, and use the metaphor of a car’s ‘free’ gear movement within the ‘rigid’ steering structure. The example of the dance artist working within the constraints of her elderly participants’ limited mobility is an example of such freedom within constraint.

Play is a common and effective means of bringing people together, and it is also often a condition for the kind of experimentation associated with creativity. Yet it is rarely recognised as an indicator for quality, and may in fact seem inimical to quality assessment values such as assessment, standards, benchmarking, codes of practice, competencies and quality assurance.

Conclusion

This article has addressed a gap between theoretical assertions of the place of participatory arts practice in reimagining the political and social forces of the contemporary era, as driven by artists (see e.g. Bishop, 2006, 2012; Papastergiadis, 2012), and empirical research on participatory arts practice that reduces the motivations and benefits to those of the communities who are invited to participate. This article has proposed that artists’ motivations for participatory practice fall into five categories. These motivations include the development of individual or organisational practice and of the sector as a whole – both of which rely heavily on a sense of play; an interest in training or the sharing of artistic skills, an interest in addressing broad social conditions, and an interest in addressing specific or local social conditions. To integrate these qualities into our review or framework for considering participatory arts practice is to ensure that artists bring commitment and an expectation of quality to their work.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Katya Johanson https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7332-4645

References


**Author Biographies**

Katya Johanson is Associate Professor of Arts and Audiences at Deakin University, and Associate Dean, Partnerships and International, for the Faculty of Arts and Education. Her research interests include arts and cultural policies, the impacts that the arts and cultural experiences have on individuals, communities and nations. She is a founding member of the International Network of Audience Research in the Performing Arts (iNARPA).

Hilary Glow is Associate Professor and Director of the Arts and Cultural Management Program at Deakin University. Her research is in the areas of audience engagement, evaluation processes for arts organisations, the impact of arts programs on people’s views of cultural diversity, barriers to arts attendance, and audience measures of artistic quality. She is co-founder (with Dr Katya Johanson) of Cultural Impact Projects a research group within Deakin University addressing the issue of the socio-cultural impacts of arts and cultural practices.