

**Affect's Role in Participatory Artistic Practices:
And Why We Try To Avoid It**

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ABSTRACT

Participatory Art is distinct from other types of art purely due to its implication of the viewer within the work – its participatory nature. Engagement with the viewer in this way causes an affective response within the viewer *even if the viewer choses not to become a participant* – because by declining the individual has already become involved to a limited extent. Beyond this decline to the participatory invitation, once a viewer switches roles to that of a participant they are affectively engaged within the work. Many critics of participation would argue that this close involvement leaves the participant unable to remain impartial or to be able to respond to the work from an academic or critical standpoint.

Lingis' (2000) text will be drawn upon as a means of exploring the importance of affect in relation to storytelling and history, and I will further this connection to affect's importance within art. Massumi (2002) will be used to introduce the autonomy of affect, and through this autonomy I will complicate the intentional stirring of affect, or its manipulation. However, Massumi (2002) also brings in an argument for the importance of attempting to articulate and explore the realm of affect – even though it is outside of the rational. Berlant (2010) will offer us an angle from which we can question the merits of affective attachment and potentially offer an additional reason for disengagement – in affective attachments *and* in participatory art practices. As an example I will discuss the work of the artist Oliver Herring, specifically focusing on his project TASK (2002-present), as an exciting case of participatory art which makes use of affect to create a situation in which the viewer shifts to the role of the participant – and through this experiences intensely affective, and potentially transformative moments on a collective, or shared level.



Herring, O. (2002) Documentation of *TASK dans le Cour Vitree*, Ecole Superieur National des Beaux Arts, 25 participants, Organized by Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac: Paris, France

Introduction

Imagine the following scene:

You're back in that moment at school; right after the teacher has asked a question. That sinking feeling kicks in – you know it's about to happen – no one has volunteered to answer the question and the teacher is about to force one of you to come up with something – on the spot – forcible participation.

That feeling – the *affective* response – is what I plan to argue makes participatory art distinctly dissimilar to other types of fine art practices. In theory, yes you could say 'I'm not sure' and get out of participating in class in the same way that the viewer can say 'I don't want to participate' and remain a viewer instead of transitioning to become a participant. Yet, what the declining viewer doesn't know is that by saying 'I am not going to participate' they are already engaging in a form of

participation – they have been made to have an affective response leading up to their denial. Throughout this text I will dissect this affective response, considering its possible intention, and attempt to understand the largely un-participatory art community. There seems to be a distancing in hopes of remaining impartial and unaffected, which relates directly to writing about affect that in turn attempts to further the discourse (Berlant, 2010). Claire Bishop (2012, p.6) talks about this desire to remain impartial in the introduction to her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, “The more one becomes involved, the harder it is to be objective – especially when a central component of a project concerns the formation of personal relationships, which inevitably proceed to impact on one’s research.”

Participatory Art

At first glance, participatory art seems to be a quite self-explanatory category within fine art. We might assume that like *painting* uses *paint*, *participatory* art is about *participation*. Well, on a basic level it is; participatory art is a category within fine art, which *allows for* the audience to contribute towards the making of a work of art or towards the performance of an artwork. *Allows for* is a phrase which is a necessary preface to the basic assumption of participation – it does not require that the would-be participants actually do participate, as was discussed within the introduction. Bishop (2012, p.38) discusses participation in a similar manner when she dissects the binary understandings within many areas of art, one of which is participatory/nonparticipatory, or as she describes it “the binary of active/passive”.

The definition I have proposed, which includes 'allows for', helps to nullify 'impartiality' as a means by which one can or even should abstain from participating in participatory art. If we are all defined as participants within participatory art, i.e. a denial to participate is an acknowledgement as a participant, then there becomes no exit clause by which a viewer can stand outside of participation to be able to claim objectivity. We will return to this objectivity/impartiality later in our discussion of Lingis. For now, this definition primarily allows for a situation in which we might *all* feel free to participate. Oliver Herring's TASK might be one such example in which this free-for-all participation can and does occur.

Oliver Herring and TASK

Oliver Herring is a German artist who lives and works in New York City (Art21, n.d.). His practice is largely participatory and performative, as his work relies on volunteers who want to have an experience as a participant in a (sometimes) live performance (Art21, n.d.). This participation, in these instances is not the work itself, but a necessary means to a performance, and it is the documentation of the collaboration that becomes the artwork in many instances. However, his most wide reaching achievement in the field of participation is easily his project simply entitled TASK, which has been going on in different iterations since 2002 (Herring, 2013). A key difference between TASK and Herring's other performances is that there are no spectators in TASK, if you are invited to attend (in the instance of a TASK Event), or if you come to a TASK Party, by entering you are agreeing to adhere to the rules of participation. Here's what Herring's website says about TASK:

“All TASK structures, the events, parties and workshops rely on the same basic infrastructure [sic]... and the participation of people who agree to follow two simple, procedural rules: to write down a task on a piece of paper and add it to a designated ‘TASK pool,’ and, secondly, to pull a task from that pool and interpret it any which way he or she wants, using whatever is on (or potentially off) stage. When a task is completed, a participant writes a new task, pulls a new task, and so on” (Herring, 2008).



Herring, O. (2007) Documentation of *FluxTASK*, Fluxspace; 400+ participants: Philadelphia, PA

Herring (2008) goes on, in “What is TASK?”, to describe TASK’s potential to set up a situation in which anything is possible. Reading through some of the tasks that have been written and completed, there seems to be one thing you can count on happening – you *will* receive a task that elicits some sort of affective response. Some tasks from the *Hirshhorn Task Event* included: “Find out everyone’s first name and

their age and read this information from on top of a ladder. | You are 'Safety officer' for the first 15 min. of the performance. Find ways to insure 'safety' on stage. | Fly" (Herring, 2006). We can see that some tasks are practical, while others are impossible. The beauty of TASK is that the person who pulls out a task is encouraged to complete it in any way that they see fit – it is open to interpretation.

Affect Theory: A General Introduction

Affect isn't emotion. That's where most introductions begin (e.g. Seigworth & Gregg, p.1). The common break down of reaction within Affect Theory is into two steps, pre-cognitive (affect) and a conscious awareness of our response (emotion) (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, and Frosh, 2011). In his book, *Feelings*, Frosh (2011) complicates the discussion further with an acknowledgement of affect, emotion, feeling, and mood as terms we use to describe our understanding and emotional engagement with reality. He also acknowledges the complicated nature of the discussion, and that many authors seem to blur the lines of these ideas; some even establishing contradictory definitions to one another (Frosh, 2011, p.2).

It is clear then, that such a simple division between affect and emotion falls short – so for clearness, and as a place to start, we will hold on to the slightly more complicated definition of affect through Massumi's (2002) understanding: affect holds autonomy; it is powerful because it is so overwhelming and pregnant with *intensity* (Massumi, 2002, p.24). We might also consider theorist Lauren Berlant's (2010, p.112) understanding of affect, which can be grasped from this poignant moment in her chapter 'Cruel Optimism' from *The Affect Theory Reader* in which she describes affect as: "transformative experiences of attachment whose effects are frightening,

exhilarating, the only thing that makes living worthwhile, and yet a threat to existence itself.” But, first things first, we should consider the importance of affect, and begin to understand why we are so inarticulate in our understanding of it, which is largely due to it’s lack of presence in our understanding of history (Lingis, 2000).

History’s Erasure of Affect (on Lingis)

Alphonso Lingis (2000) does not tell us about affect, he shows us affect through the narrativization of an experience he had while visiting an island – Te Pito O Te Henua, to be exact. Through the phenomenological retelling of events, which reads mostly as a beautifully descriptive story, Lingis brings us into an experience of affect. More importantly, he shows us the importance it holds. Thus, the exact experiential events¹ are not what I would like to focus on; what we need to investigate deeply is what he reveals through the telling.

Lingus (2000) gives us an idea of how affect and history have gone from having a deep connection to becoming seemingly oppositional. This text makes clear the importance of emotion and affect within the context of the history of a group of people.

“In listening to the tales and in reading the chronicles of their people, men and women found their hearts pounding and their brains fevered with the audacities, hopes, loves, and hatreds of heroes and heroines who were dead.

¹ The narrative of the chapter relays the story of the people of Te Pito O Te Henua, who originally created roughly one thousand giant carved statues from the volcanic rock on which the island is built; the statues are called the *moai*. “The "mystery" of this island, kept up by anthropologists applying for funding, by travel writers and tourist brochures, was created by the Westerners who came upon the island, saw the statues, looked at the islanders, and concluded that the present inhabitants could not have created the statues” (Lingis, 2000, p.4). The real erasure of their history was due to raids of the island, enslavement of the indigenous inhabitants, Catholic missionary activity, and the subsequent theft and destruction of their historic artifacts (Lingis, 2000, p.5).

The historian may decipher those emotions on the texts, monuments, artifacts, and ruins he finds. But the modern historian writes dispassionately... He is not writing in order to feel again and make his reader feel again the torrential emotions of men and women long dead.... And he thinks that if emotions focus the mind, they also limit it" (Lingis, 2000, p.14-15).

Historians might have tried to erase affect from their midst, but affect cannot be separated out from the human experiences they are trying to retell (Lingis, 2000, p.15). Lingis (2000) shows us that when it comes down to it, affect is what humans remember. They don't recall the facts and figures, they resonate with the emotions they felt and understood through an experience. This is connected to limited recall of descriptive details of an event, but instant recall of feelings and emotions, which we will see later in Massumi (2002, p.23-24).

Lingis' (2000) article itself makes use of the narrative structure as a means of relating to the reader the feelings of a situation and a *specific* history. Our understanding of history and storytelling have become separated out, whereas in the past they might have been intermingled – remembered and understood as they were experienced – through emotional connection. If history has erased affective understanding of the events that led us to where we are now, how are we to understand how affect is influencing our current circumstances?

More drastic yet, Lingis (2000, p.18) proposes that our feelings and emotions have an impact on others – that they have a power – in their ability to “distract, detour, maneuver, and command.” The potential for affect has been weeded out of historical writing so thoroughly that we forget that the actual people history is about

suffered, loved, lost, thrived, were angered, afraid, and experienced such a vast array of other things.

What does this affective view of history hold for us in the context of our discussion? Does the understanding of history in an affective way enable us to understand our present situation more fully? What does this connection between affect and history have to do with our discussion of participatory art, specifically Herring's TASK? After we bring into the discussion Massumi (2002) and Berlant (2010) we should have a clearer image of affect's role in shared experience and why this matters to the bigger picture.

Manipulating Affect's Intensity (on Massumi)

Massumi (2002) structures his chapter, 'The Autonomy of Affect' in his book *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, around a number of examples or narratives into different ways we might conceive affect. I would like to focus our attention on four angles that Massumi (2002) gives us to anchor our understanding of affect. The first of which is a consideration of storytelling, its memorability, and its ability to elicit a response – what he calls intensity – or affect (Massumi, 2002, p.24). This intensity is different than emotion, based on an experiment that Massumi (2002, p.24) describes, because it clearly does not line up with happiness or sadness per se. This anchor acknowledges that emotion and affect are different things, and that what Massumi refers to as 'intensity' does not equate easily to a specific emotion.

The second anchor is a description of a physical phenomenon within the brain – a delay in reaction that seems unexplainable – it is a ½ second gap in the recognition of a bodily reaction to a stimulus. This gap is not in actuality an empty moment, but

in reality it is 'overfull' (Massumi, 2002, p.29). This can be seen as a metaphor for the distinction between affect and emotion – affect is the pre-stage, the inarticulate-able. This ½ second gap is so overfilled with the affective response that the body cannot respond with enough capacity to acknowledge the occurrence – it can only take it in. This second anchor shows us that besides being distinct from emotions, affect is larger than emotions.

Our third anchor is a section about feedback – this section discusses and introduces the 'autonomy' of affect (Massumi, 2002, p.35). This autonomy is the main point of the chapter, and the rest of the argument builds up to this point. We can see that there are huge implications to fact that affect has autonomy; it can enact change on its own once it has been given the initial nudge (Massumi, 2002, p.35).

Our final anchor can be found in the final section of Massumi's (2002, p.39-44) chapter with two stories about former presidents of the United States of America. First is Ronald Regan with his dual issues of an inability to speak and an inability to convey meaning with his body language – a winning combination non-the-less of affective proportions – confidence (Massumi, 2002, p.38-41). Massumi (2002, p.41) describes confidence as the illusion that affect might be controlled or contained; the feeling this conveys is powerful and influential. The second 'story' is a discussion of Clinton's attempts to transform healthcare in America (Massumi, 2002, p.44). It describes the power that affect can have over politics, economy, and power (Massumi, 2002). It is clear that affect is not just an idea – it is a force, one more powerful than we give it credit for when we conceive of it as 'emotion.' This final anchor is the one that hits the hammer on the head; affect not only has autonomy, but that autonomy can in turn be manipulated (Massumi, 2002).

The chapter forms a basis not only for understanding affect, but also for pinpointing its key characteristic: intensity that transforms into autonomy (Massumi, 2002). This autonomy is at the basis of understanding a shared affective moment of the kind we might find in participatory art. The experience takes on a life of its own; the feeling in the moment is so large that it becomes something outside of the individual. It has autonomy of its own, and it can affect real things – it has real consequences. Massumi (2002) makes clear that if there are these real consequences to affect, then we need to understand it, we need a discourse about it, and most importantly *we cannot ignore it* because if we do its manipulation can go unchecked.

Affect's Cruelty: Disengagement and Survival (on Berlant)

Berlant (2010) offers a different, more pessimistic (or realistic) viewpoint on affect through the form of what she calls 'Cruel Optimism'. This term, which holds the title of her contribution to *The Affect Theory Reader* is a recognition that our affective attachments are usually detrimental, but more than that they are simultaneous detrimental and *necessary* for our conception of ourselves as whole, hence 'Cruel Optimism' (Berlant, 2010). Throughout this text, Berlant (2010) considers three examples that might encompass Cruel Optimism, or at least clarify for the reader what she is articulating with the term, along with the ramifications of it. As quoted earlier on, Berlant (2010, p.112) suggests that these affective attachments (to things, people, places, etc.) hold the potential to be transformative – they are “the only thing that makes living worthwhile, and yet a threat to existence itself.” This is a powerful claim for affect, but from all we have gained about its importance through our reading of

Lingis (2000) and Massumi (2002), it is clear that affect *is* powerful, and that our engagement with it is essential if we are to understand its force within the world.

Berlant (2010), however, suggests something different. She offers us an opt-out – she suggests that the only way to be truly safe from the cruelty of Cruel Optimism is to retreat into fantasy, where we cannot be damaged by the failures of others (Berlant, 2010, p.112). In her description of the book *Was*, Berlant (2010, p.113-116) reminds us of the totalising damage that affective attachments can have when they are of the cruel sort². This might offer us insight into why many viewers attempt to disengage with participatory art. Yes, it offers us a possibility of connection and a transformative experience, but if we do not have the words or history to understand it (Lingis, 2000), then we might be fearful to do so. We might also, have been so badly hurt in the past, that even though the offer of a transformative moment is present, we must guard ourselves in any way possible from a potentially harmful experience (Berlant, 2010).

Actual Affective Moments (Participatory Art's Intensity)

After reflecting on Lingis (2000), Massumi (2002), and Berlant (2010) we can return to Herring's work with more insight, and a better vocabulary to understand the events that transpire at a TASK event, party, or workshop. We can see that in the initial gesture of choosing to participate that there is the hope for an affective moment of Berlant's (2010) sort, but is the transformative moment actually present? It seems that in the combination of the initial response and the participation in an activity which allows for a questioning of assumptions and initial readings, that quite possibly,

² *Was* is a book that Berlant draws upon as an example to articulate cruel optimism. She describes the book as being about the failure of affective attachment, and while the stories themselves are not necessary for our understanding of Berlant's theory, they are horrifically sad descriptions that involve child abuse and the subsequent insanity that can come from such atrocities (Berlant, 2010, p.113-116).

yes, something happens; something affective, visceral, autonomous, and maybe even transformative.

We can see that the shared experience of the unknown, through the form of the tasks, allows for a common level of exhilaration, and at minimum a shared affective experience for the participants of TASK. It is unclear whether this is transformative in any long term sense, and maybe it is a form of Cruel Optimism to believe it might be, but there is an intensity, and there is a momentum. From the set-up of TASK, we can gather that the mood of the tasks might change, according to the particular affective experiences of the individuals in order to form a coherent experience – i.e. if malicious, embarrassing, or disturbing tasks are given, more tasks of this kind might come, but since the tasks are usually playful, challenging, and comic, the shared affective experience stays lighter, or at least of the more enjoyable sort. Herring (2006, p.1) discusses this in a letter he wrote to the *TASK at the Hirshhorn* participants: “Someone, (a writer for the Washington Post), asked us why there wasn’t more anger on display, more confrontation? You had that option.” He goes on to suggest “we have so many opportunities to feel anger and frustration and express it in so many ways, that an outlet to tap into something positive was needed far more” (Herring, 2006, p.1). We know, however, that not all participatory work is as benign as Herring’s. There is though, a momentum in participatory art, something different to other types of art we might experience in a more static, less involved way. Now that we can relate to the experiences of participants, and that we have connected this to a theoretical understanding of affect, we might move forward to the concerns of ‘why it matters’.

So, why *does* it matter?

Frosh (2011) offers us examples of how affect works on a broader scale than merely that of the individual, and how it can act as a shared cultural phenomenon, which might clue us into the value that articulating affect can hold.

“...Think of feelings of nationalistic pride, for example, or the waves of emotions that might ride through a polity after a tragedy of some kind. Think too, of how the media operate to influence and perhaps even manipulate emotions; how elections are fought, wars declared, riots provoked” (Frosh, 2011, p.9).

After Lingis (2000), we might see that a reawakening of the connection between experience, learning, history, and affect through participatory encounters like Herring's TASK allows for a more extensive transformation and a broader connection between these seemingly disparate dimensions in other areas of our lives as well; art holds this potential.

In another essay by Massumi (2010), *The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat*, he not only emphasises the autonomy of affect, but by tapping into this autonomy he exposes affect's power to trump logic, over and over again. Throughout each section of this essay, he picks apart the exact logic that is being undermined and manipulated through a number of jarring examples (Massumi, 2010, p.56-57, 62-63). Understanding how this happens and picking apart the autonomy that affect holds allows us to at least attempt to defend against its misuse, and potentially to prevent widespread panic and 'gut feeling' decision making in many important areas of human behaviour.

While Massumi (2010, p.52) is particularly focused on political ramifications of affect and what he calls 'the political ontology of threat,' there are wider applications to the questions that he raises. Artists are interested in affect because it surrounds us everywhere, in our small individual decisions and our larger societal ones. Affect affects us – more than we're willing to admit sometimes. It has the power to grow into something larger than the individual feelings. It can overtake us, and our rationality. This implication for culture is clearly present within the political, but also present in all other areas of life. Herring's TASK shows us just how wide reaching the affective autonomy can be, and we might consider the ways in which the assumed response gains momentum and takes on a powerful potential of its own outside of logic, in TASK, but more importantly all around us.

Conclusion

It is quite obvious that there is not a conclusion to the discussion of affect, and that there is not yet a definitive reading of the texts we have considered, and it could be argued that there will likely never be. What is certain is that there is more to be done in regards to this rich relation between participatory art and its connection to affective experiences, especially on a collective or shared level. This text has only considered one work in regards to this connection, and has focused on a very isolated reading of that work for the purpose of consistency and coherence.

Many other theorists have something to say about affect, and many more works or art, or even types of art, could be explored for their affective concerns. Better than a conclusion, is a brief summary of what has come before: 1) participatory art is different from other types of art because it is implicitly tied up with affect; 2) Lingis

(2000), Massumi (2002), and Berlant (2010) gives us tools to navigate participatory art's connection to affect; 3) we need to regain a vocabulary to articulate affect because it has been taken out of our everyday understanding (Lingis, 2000); 4) this connection is clearly important as affect holds autonomy and has real consequences, one of which might be manipulation (Massumi, 2002); 5) affective attachment can be cruel and retreat might be the only escape from pain, but to not engage is essentially to stop living (Berlant, 2010); 6) art, especially participatory art, can offer us insight into affect because it reflects the real situations we encounter in our everyday lives; 7) affect matters and we cannot neglect it in our understanding of the human experience.

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