

## Review

Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ISBN-10: 1137354631. £18.99 pbk.

How can an invitation to participate be understood as an art and the audience the medium? Formulating a set of aesthetic theories to answer this question and many others about participation, Gareth White's book is a welcome addition to a growing body of literature addressing the 'social turn' inflecting contemporary artistic practices, particularly in the performing arts. Responding to and building on works such as Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* and Bruce McConachie's *Engaging Audiences*, as well as complementing Josephine Machon's recent *Immersive Theatres*, White's book productively fills a particular gap.<sup>1</sup> White concentrates on the *invitation* of participatory actions, a heuristic linchpin to participation, yet something surprisingly under-examined in this emerging field. He interrogates performance practices that invite spectators to cross participatory thresholds through an ambitiously interdisciplinary framework to 'suggest the grounding for a broad-based theory of audience participation' (116). Necessarily limited, the monograph leaves many problems and questions open for further critical consideration – some that I hope White returns to in future work.

In the acknowledgments, White states that the origins of his project are found in his PhD thesis at Goldsmiths, and the book's structure carries strong echoes of this. In Chapter 1: 'Process and Procedure', White borrows from sociology, most of all from Goffman and Bourdieu, to conceptualize the distances and differences between performer and participant across which exchanges are to occur. This establishes a structural understanding of the complex maps performer and participant must navigate. White then employs Janet Murray's digital design concept of 'procedural authorship' to argue how the crafting of participatory performances can result in 'material of a different kind, more carefully shaped and manipulated, more productive of signs and affects, more complex as a site of perception and action' (p. 195). In other words, the audience becomes the manipulated medium.

White's focus, however, is beyond understanding the construction of mere formulas for participation and privileging the craft of the 'procedural author' (although there is much to be extracted here). He is deeply concerned with the complex and sometimes contradictory experiences of participants and how this also shapes and creates particular

participatory resonances. Accordingly, White provides performance examples where he analyses from his perspective as a participant as well as a procedural author. The plurality of White's observations as well as the spectrum of performance examples he supplies (including applied theatre, performance art, street theatre, immersive theatre, and much more) makes the book an enjoyable if exhaustively expansive read. But the variety of White's examples demonstrate the variability and diverse intricacies of participatory performance practices while simultaneously managing to thread them together with unifying theoretical principles.

Another helpful term White offers is the 'horizon of participation', developed from the field of reception theory - building on Gadamer and Jaus, to articulate the existing level of understanding a participant might possess – and all the assumptions therein. The key to interaction, White argues, is understanding how the horizon represents 'a limit and range of potentials within that limit, both gaps to be filled and choices to be made' (p 59). 'The horizon that participants perceive', White contends, 'maps out the possibility of their agency in the event [...] It will also serve to show the control that the procedural author has over the participants, as the horizon is established primarily by the invitation to participate, and by the relation between the event and its context [...] (p.60). It is the interactions within the event – and White's articulation of this - that demonstrate how understanding the 'horizon of participation' can illuminate extremely nuanced aspects of participatory experiences as well as their ethical implications.

In addition to exploring what role risk and (ir)rationality play in participatory performance (features of chapters two and three), White employs a phenomenological approach in chapter four. In 'Accepting the Invitation', he offers an exceptional consideration of the intersubjective limits and potential of participatory theatre experiences by focusing on the idea of feedback loops and the sometimes blurry lines between spectating and acting. In the concluding chapter, White returns to the ethics of performance and reframes Rancière's *Emancipated Spectator* before asking 'whether a participatory spectator can be an emancipated spectator in Rancière's terms'. White's answer is that 'a participant can be a spectator to their own actions in a variety of ways, re-encountering themselves [...] facilitated by the distance that can open up when subjectivity has become an aesthetic material' (p.206). Although White's assertion will in itself invite participatory counter arguments and resistance, his well-executed focus on 'the continuity of the participant's social being' will give theorists and practitioners much to chew on and to digest.

White leaves the scope of his subject quite open, refusing necessarily to set a tight frame around the participatory forms he discusses at risk of limiting the potential application of the aesthetic theories he sets out. Although White's highly commendable work here can indeed apply across many disciplines, his somewhat understated focus on western – particularly British – forms of participation reflect a narrow cultural and critical lens. In this manner, the critical reflexivity White demonstrates so well in the majority of the book leaves a few curious gaps. For example, if White builds on Janet Murray's ideas, what

type of digital participatory forms could be pointed to, included, or re-framed? This seems an especially fertile and relevant area that is under-acknowledged. White's book provokes a productive reconsideration of the dynamics and aesthetics of participatory art forms beyond theatre, so I also found myself questioning how White's chosen delivery format might be more reflexively unpacked. How does an invitation to participate manifest itself in a book?

In contrast to Machon's polyvocal inclusive approach in *Immersive Theatres* that dialogues more with practitioners, White's project is focused less on including or inviting voices as it is on rigorously pulling together theoretical strands to elucidate the mechanisms and meaningfulness of participatory art. On this count, the book is an important contribution to the subject and succeeds as a provocative invitation in itself, one that hopefully initiates a shift in discourses about participatory art.

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London; New York: Verso Books.

Machon, Josephine. 2013. *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*. New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

McConachie, Bruce A. 2008. *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*. New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.