PERFORMING STRUCTURE: FINE ART AS A PROTOTYPE FOR PARTICIPATION

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The art project *Performing Structure* (www.performingstructure.se) deals with the performance of organizational systems like democracy in a place structured by globalization. An art exhibition in the public space is employed as a way to better understand the conditions for democratic participation. In this work-in-progress, artists work in relation to research regarding e-democracy using the concept of art as a method to explore the context.

Fig 1. Stage. Scene 1, 2011, Johanna Gustafsson Furst & Kista Theatre, documentation of installation detail, Copyright 2011 Johanna Gustafsson Fürst.

Fig 2. Reconciliation, 2011, Shiva Anoushirvani, still from video. Copyright Shiva Anoushirvani.

Fig 3. Mapping Falun, 2007, Åsa Andersson Broms, documentation of process, Copyright Per Eriksson

1. Introduction

In a recent overview of the research on e-participation, Macintosh, Coleman and Schneeberger [1] show that a more informed discussion regarding the importance of form and structure in democracy is needed in the technological development in the field. As, e.g., Sæbø, Rose, and Skiftenesflak [2] point out; current research on e-participation lacks innovation in the sense that most software is adaptations of existing technologies. Furthermore, the Internet is treated as a distinct artifact and technological solutions are mostly taken for granted. These approaches have seldom been successful regarding broad and representative citizen involvement, and in particular not in more socially complex areas. Moreover, Dahlberg [3] notes that a belief in the ability of technology to shape a neutral place for deliberative discussions is omnipresent in the discourse on Internet and democracy.

We are skeptical against a technology strongly influenced by a liberal notion of democracy as an egalitarian sphere for reasoning, rather than, e.g., a Foucauldian notion of hegemonic discourse shaped by power relations. The question then arises whether there are other complementary approaches to the field. Our approach is more along the line with Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons [4] suggesting that socially embedded research could give way to more robust forms of knowledge production.

Therefore, we have recently started an art and research project exploring how an unconditional conversation about the common and socially shared space can take place in practice. In contrast to a technology driven approach, the argument is that art projects can be used as forms for both investigating and creating multimodal mediated participation. Furthermore, thematic art projects can be used as a way of prototyping for participatory democracy. Artists' actions, installations and role-playing create a direct

confrontation and interaction with a specific place and its inhabitants to explore the dynamic relationships that constitute its context. The notion of art creates a certain focus and expectation of seeing something beyond the everyday perception. We would like to see art as what Metzger [5] calls a "democratic technology" – an informal context that provides an unconditional opportunity to try different positions and opinions.

Since the participatory turn in the 1960's, art that more directly includes the audience in the performance or the process has been thoroughly investigated. [6-7] Today, participation as an aesthetic component is common in the nomadic context of contemporary art. However, we think that too often, the critical potential in participatory art is reduced to symbolic gestures. We want to overcome this by situating a participatory art project in a local context and connect it with research on e-democracy, and thereby create a possibility for the art project to inform the research and vice versa. The conceptual starting point for Performing Structure is the recognition of the need to examine the norms and beliefs forming the basis of the structures and communication patterns that current technologies co-create. We are interested in the "doing" of democracy within science, and what the bases for democracy looks like. The focus is on the daily conversations in small and large groups and the mechanisms that shape these conversations.

2. The concepts of art as techniques

In participatory design, a multitude of art genres are used as a way of involving users in the process, such as probes, scenarios and role-playing. Here we won't emphasize any particular artistic genre; instead we use different concepts of art as a way of exploring the conditions for a participatory democracy grounded in a particular context. Ourtechniques for exploring different perspectives on e-democracy include:

1. Subjectivity – to compare the site with other global nodes through artists' personal experiences.
2. Conflict – to emphasize diversity and conflict rather then consensus.
3. Pain – to use the artwork as a memory-work, a technique for understanding underlying conflicts and detecting norms and behaviors.

2.1 A SUBJECTIVE COMPARISON BETWEEN KISTA-RINKEBY AND OTHER GLOBAL NODES IN PROCESSES OF RESTRUCTURING

The notion of subjectivity is strong in the avant-garde concept of art. We can reach a contextual understanding beyond statistic generalizations by departing from the individual artist's subjective understanding of a certain situation. We situate the art project at Kista-Rinkeby, which is the home location for the e-democracy researchers. This is one of Stockholm's more expansive suburbs, and a central location for global companies primarily in the information industry, and both Stockholm University and the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm have chosen to place parts of their operations here. It is also home for programs, such as the government-funded Spider (The Swedish Program for ICT in Developing Regions) which, among other things "exports" e-democracy to developing countries. Kista-Rinkeby is characterized by extreme local segregation, and those living there are not generally the same ones working there. The unemployment rate among the local residents is high as well as the proportion of immigrants. The place illustrates the new divisions created by globalization, where diverse socio-economic worlds become wrapped up in each other and where the state's ability to balance differences has declined.

Here, technology has not decreased but increased disparities as the importance of social and cultural capital has increased in the networked economy in general. The latter is not unique to Kista–Rinkeby and in order to compare the site with other global nodes through artists' personal experiences, we invite artist from different peripheral nodes heavily restructured by the global system. One participating group is The Khoj International Artists' Association in Delhi, an arts organization where artists work in dialogue with the space at the intersection between art, society and urban development. The Moldavian artist Stefan Rusu uses art as a way to talk about social and political phenomena. He is also the leader of KSAK Center for Contemporary Art in Chisinau, Moldova, and has developed art projects throughout Europe, the Middle East and Asia, focusing on processes and changes in post-socialist societies. The Lithuanian artists Nomeda & Gedimina Urbonas also explore post-Soviet notions of changing national identity, and the conflicts and contradictions caused by the new economic and political conditions. They started JUTEMPUS interdisciplinary program for art in Vilnius, and VOICE, an online publication on media culture. In Kista-Rinkeby these artists will work in close relation to local Swedish artists and local organizations.

2.2 CONFLICT AND DIVERSITY AS A TOOL

Unsurprisingly, and as various social media has demonstrated, communication technology, is not necessarily alienating. It can instead support previously fragmented groups to keep together and provide the means for new communities with a shared interest to form and interact. Technically, it seams to be easier to lump together similarities rather than differences, and to design services that offer us new products and friends based on our previous choices. The technology thus niches us, shatters us, and makes the common areas of understanding lesser and easier to avoid. It is difficult to get along with "the other." But in order to develop an understanding of the common it is not enough to talk only to people who think and act like us. A technique that is not based on combining equals but different varieties appears here as a discursive democratic utopia. In the choice of artists, we have therefore tried to see beyond our own aesthetic practices while creating a heterogeneous group of artists. By bringing together artists with different experiences and modes of expression, we are promoting a situation of conflict where the individual artists' subject positions are questioned.

Conflict is also a recurrent theme in art, where the individual artist is supposed to be in conflict with the collective system. An avant-garde artist breaks with the norms and differentiates himself from ordinary men and previous art. Standard in these settings is that an artist's role is created through a differentiation process, where an outsider is opposed to the norm; Avant-garde in contrast to the conventional; painting in contrast to performance, and so on. We take another direction in this project and depart from our different perspectives; deconstructing the norms that create a difference while looking for a common denominator. To avoid locking into just one perspective, ten invited artists and artists groups approach the subject from a multitude of angels such as community art, urban installation art and activist art. The artists are using locative and interactive media, as well as more traditional artistic techniques. The particular art genre is not important here; a common denominator is that the artists work with situation-specific emancipatory art projects that in various ways relate to the physical and mediated public sphere. Therefore, we do not emphasize a particular artistic method, but rather the *actual meeting* between the artists and the procedures for dealing with differences. Using the thematic exhibition as a framework, different artistic perspectives create a triangulation of methods where a more diverse and complex picture of the situation can emerge.

2.3 THE COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EXHIBITION AS A MEMORY-WORK

Through the joint development of a theme, the group exhibition works as a special form of knowledge building. This has similarities with Frigga Haug and others' method of *memory-work*, [7] i.e., a qualitative method that uses the memories of a group of researchers to investigate norms and social structures. This use of personal experience as a tool for academic analysis is based on Husserl's systematic attempt to examine the subjective unconscious where he argues that we can reach a general understanding of a phenomenon by understanding the individual's experiences. [8] The idea behind the memory-work method is that memories often derive from situations where we have experienced a taboo or a cultural constraint that caused a conflict. But to get to the underlying experience that caused the memory, one must see through cultural norms and behavioral patterns. The memory-work method is specifically intended to reach to the underlying experience. To achieve this, one begins by describing the individual's own conscious memories. The collective analysis of each memory is then intended to identify the underlying conflicts and to detect the cultural norms and behaviors involved, i.e., the very reason for why the memory has become a memory.

In the project, we consider the similarities between the memory work approach and the thematic group exhibition and develop our own method of collective knowledge production. Within the framework of the arts organization *Association for Temporary Art [a: t]* Åsa Andersson Broms , Nils Claesson and Karin Hansson previously carried out a series of thematic art projects and exhibitions related to the information society and the changing conditions for democracy: *Best before - on the Information Society*, Tensta Konsthall (1999), *The Art of Organizing*, Gallery Enkehuset (2000), *Money - a commentary on the new economy and Public Opinion* at the Kulturhuset in Stockholm (2001, 2002). Central for the work is the collaboration between the artists and the ambition to create something beyond the multiplication of the single parts. This way of working with a thematic art exhibition has many similarities with the qualitative research method of memory-work. The artist most often departs from his or her subjective experience of the chosen theme and focuses on the elements that he/she thinks are interesting. What is interesting most often means some form of unresolved conflict that chafe at the individual or societal level. The motivation for making art is to a great extent about the need to express a subjective experience/interest on a structural level where others can read it. The collective process in a group exhibition, where artists share their ideas and reflections with each other, works at its best as a collective memory-work where the discussion of ideas creates an understanding of underlying conflicts and detects the inclusion of norms and behaviors; the very reason that the art has become an art work.

The planed exhibition is developed in the group of artist trough a collective memory-work.

3. Artists and art projects in process

Most important in the project is the invited artists personal engagement in the theme and interest in a joint development of the underlying ideas. To reach beyond symbolic gestures of community the privileges of the artist as well as researcher are examined and questioned.

To mention some of the ongoing and planed art works within the project: A project that already takes place in the Kista-Rinkeby area is Thomas Liljenbergs' *Kista Art City*, where a joint art project creates a starting point for a wider discussion about community participation and notions of belonging among the citizens of Kista. Shiva Anoushirvani's work takes place at the intersection between art, activism and performance. As part of the artist group RAR: Rapid Art Response she develops the project *Dear Citizen*in

collaboration with Husby Arthall. Here acts of democracy are taught through performance and role-playing.

One aspect of the theme is how technology can (or cannot) demonstrate and change social structures, and thus operate in an emancipatory direction and to broaden democratic participation. The artist Johanna Gustafsson Fürst, together with Kista Theatre explores communication technology applications related to a specific location. In the project *I'm Your Body* they use mobile GPS technology to create a parallel public place within Kista-Rinkeby.

Mass-distributed collaborative processes such as crowd-sourcing and open source are also an aspect of the technology that is interesting from a democratic participatory perspective. This is the field of Karin Hansson's work, *Actory*, a collaborative groupware based on the sociology of the art world, developed together with students at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm and researchers at Stockholm University.

4. Art as Prototypes for Participation

To conclude, this project contributes to the discussion about artistic research by showing how situation-specific art can be viewed as a qualitative method for highlighting and exploring discursive practices. Through a triangulation of different artistic perspectives the themed and collectively generated art exhibition creates a diverse and complex picture of notions such as participation and democracy. The artistic work is an iterative process where concrete images, scenarios and situations create a direct communication with the site. We want to see the project as a construction of prototypes for alternative societies as well as a laboratory for participation. Following a rich tradition of participatory art, we empasize the artists' capacity to listen, interact and respond. Art is not something that comes in from above or outside. Instead it should be grounded in the activities at the site, creating meaning beyond the context of contemporary art.

An important practical input into the project, is achieved through the activities undertaken by local organizations such as Kista Residential College for Adult Education, Husby Association for Arts & Crafts, Husby Yard and Rinkeby People's House. The artists within the project are working in direct relation to existing activities. During the spring and summer of 2012, a number of art projects will be carried out in the public and semi-public space in Kista-Rinkeby.

References and Notes:

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