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## The gestures of participatory art

by Sruti Bala, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018, 168 pp., ISBN 978-1-5261-0077-1

Eugene van Erven

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**The gestures of participatory art**, by Sruti Bala, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018, 168 pp., ISBN 978-1-5261-0077-1

With *Gestures of Participatory Art*, Sruti Bala, an Associate Professor in the University of Amsterdam's Theatre and Performance Studies programme, makes a valuable contribution to the growing discourse on applied performance and participation in the arts. While she acknowledges that participation as a concept has become somewhat tiresome, in her book she attempts to demonstrate that it hasn't yet exhausted its usefulness. In doing so, she employs a rather broad understanding of participation, which in her mind ranges from one-off ephemeral audience participation to long-term active involvement in creative processes, from video games to citizen journalism, flash mobs, audio tours, experimental site-specific performance and theatre of the oppressed (TO). From this diverse spectrum, which stretches the applied theatre field to include engaged performance (Cohen-Cruz 2010), Bala chooses four women-centred projects for closer scrutiny. Only one of these (a TO workshop in rural India) falls within the more conventional domain of applied performance. She buttresses these extended case studies with a solid theoretical foundation and adds a host of expected and unexpected references in her discussion of each separate project.

Unlike many other studies on the subject, Bala does not provide a historical overview of participatory or community arts as a genre. She regards this as a futile exercise given the diverse genealogies of this practice in different parts of the world or across different media. For the same reason, she does not provide a checklist for determining what is or isn't a proper participatory project, or, for that matter, good art. It is 'more intriguing', she argues, 'to explore why a certain term is preferred, to which tradition it is affiliated, in what way it is problematised, and how this choice of terminology tells us something about the underlying or assumed politics of participation' (Bala, 47). But while this remark opens a door to a potentially fascinating comparative approach, Bala unfortunately does not pursue it at any great length. And, despite her promise not to delve into genealogy, she nevertheless finds it necessary to provide a brief (and incomplete) history of Latin American *creación colectiva*. At the end of her theoretical chapter, however, Bala makes good on her checklist refusal. She critiques Claire Bishop's (2012) 'imperative' (278) prescriptions for good art, which, Bala believes, privileges a certain class or social position and simultaneously universalises this position. Unlike Bishop, Bala is convinced (as am I) that art that is ameliorative or gives priority to engagement with the social can also constitute good art.

Bala is equally critical of evidence-led impact studies of participatory art, because its potential is not calculable according to the logic of a causal benefit analysis. Following James Thompson's (2009) plea for focusing on affects rather than measurable effects, she favours instead a total approach to a continuum of activities that includes workshops, rehearsals, performances/public presentations, after-talks and other post-show events and activities. Conspicuously absent in this argument, however, is Cohen-Cruz (2005) who, in *Local Acts* makes a similar case.

Central to *Gestures of Participatory Art* are four case studies, which Bala analyses and interprets based on data which she collected through observation, interviews with artists and participants, and deconstruction of project documentation. To avoid the pitfall of measuring social impact of participation or 'restricting the discussion to formal, aestheticised, medium-specific lines' (Bala, 15), she employs the concept of the gesture. Its unstable existence somewhere

in the interstice between image and act, or as temporary bodily accompaniment to a thought process prior to its verbal expression, is useful to more poetically explore the dynamic relationship between people's participation in the creation or consumption of an artwork and their participation in civic life without falling into the trap of one-on-one causality. In her analysis of a lesbian performance project in Central America, which was performed in city theatres as well as in rural community centres and female prisons, she explicitly warns against such simplistic causality: more applause for the play in urban environments doesn't equate with greater acceptance of homosexuality in cities than in rural areas. A much more precise and comprehensive study needs to be made, Bala argues, of which elements in the project affected which persons that came in contact with it and under which circumstances (the actresses themselves and their social network, men, women, youngsters who saw the play and their contexts, Latin American or European sponsors of the initiative, venues that refused to book the show, etc.). Unfortunately, Bala stops short of providing the kind of all-inclusive critique that she advocated earlier, because she never personally witnessed the performance and its prelude and aftermath on the ground in Guatemala. As it was, she relied on a personal interview with one of the actresses who visited Holland and on a documentary film to speculate on what may have been the gestures contained in this emancipatory enterprise.

Bala, who is an experienced TO facilitator in her own right, writes with greater authority about a community theatre workshop for rural women in Tamil Nadu, India, which she attended as a participant-observer in May 2013. During the two-day process that she attended, Bala observed several instances of unexpected participation. These might have been overlooked in conventional scholarship as a badly executed process or over-interpreted as acts of transgression. Bala prefers instead to interpret them as gestures that resist formalisation without necessarily opposing it. Here she turns once again to James Thompson in her call to break through the romantic, idealistic notions that underpin much applied performance. Rather than insisting on cohesion and reconciliation she prefers a less neat presentation of confusing, different sides in a conflict, without resolving them. Bala's gestures of participation fit into this thinking. They represent the other side of the formal conditions of participation:

The unexpected gestures of participation are attempts at reimagining and reformulating in aesthetic and theatrical terms the larger, sometimes deafening call for citizen participation. They are thus neither a rejection of nor a co-option into a pre-determined regime of participation, but an embodied engagement with it. (Bala, 96)

Embodiment becomes quite literal in Bala's discussion of the unusual work of Lebanese performance artist Lina Issa. Working in Amsterdam and unable to travel to her home country because of a residency permit complication, she asked a colleague to go to Lebanon in her place, performing quotidian tasks there that Issa had given her (e.g. kissing her aunt). The results were documented and integrated in an intimate performance in which elements of the experience (e.g. excerpts from a diary) were shared with an individual audience member. In order to theoretically unpack this form of participation – which is very different from other types of replacement in theatrical settings like forum theatre – Bala draws on Brecht's *Gestus* concept. She explains it, as clearly as I have read anywhere, in terms of interrupted theatrical proceedings, like a stranger suddenly entering a family row, or like Issa's colleague entering a family situation:


It is effective as a gesture precisely because it dwells in that twilight zone between speech, image and act; it belongs neither to the realm of authenticity nor to the realm of artificiality, it is both beyond linguistic expression as well as inseparable from it [...] a hint at sharing an experience, pointing towards what must remain external to the gesture (Bala, 112)

Bala's fourth and final case study involves a site-specific performative experience in which, in different German and Austrian cities between 2005 and 2009, participants were invited to spend the night in a tent pitched in an unusual location, like the top floor of a skyscraper or a putting green of a golf course. Participation consisted mostly of sleeping (or trying to). Bala, who didn't participate in or directly observe the event, contacted one of the artists and a handful of participants several years after the fact. In her questions to them she focuses particularly on how they experienced their participation. Unlike the *dérives* of Situationists and interactive aspects of Fluxus and Happenings events, which challenged artistic conventions and unwitting participants, audiences in this German-Austrian project were treated gently and hospitably and were made carefully aware of the artists' intentions (Bala, 125). In retrospect, most of the participants remember an impressive number of details of their performative sleepover, which leads Bala to conclude, somewhat vaguely, that the essence of their participation consisted in their reflection on the terms of their participation (133).

In *Gestures of Participatory Art*, Sruti Bala analyses the dynamics of participation in four very different projects, two of which she witnessed directly and two which she reconstructed based on interviews, questionnaires and documentation. Her interpretive approach required methodological experimentation: a mix of performance analysis, ethnography, audience research, social development studies and a careful contextualising reconstruction of the details that happened around and beyond the performative events she investigated. By insisting to consider participation and impact, the aesthetic and non-aesthetic, together rather than as binary opposites, Bala does not resolve the tension between these pairs; but she does succeed in exploring the complexities in their relation. Moreover, by conceptualising participation as a gesture, she potentially liberates it from the stranglehold of impact measurement and the stalemate in the debate between the tyranny of participation camp versus those who champion it. As such, this book is a useful resource for applied performance courses, as well as for facilitators and scholars struggling with the concept of participation.

## References

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Eugene van Erven  
 Utrecht University, The Netherlands  
 Email:  e.a.p.b.erven@uu.nl

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**Performance and civic engagement**, edited by Ananda Breed and Tim Prentki, Cambridge, Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, xix + 312 pp., €89.99 (Hardcover), ISBN 978-3-319-66516-0

'To perform' is a verb and as such it is something we do. We do things with our bodies. This book takes applied performance in a new direction by exploring what happens when we