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## AUDIENCE EXPLORATIONS

# *Guidebook for hopefully seeking the audience*



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**Audience Explorations. Guidebook for Hopefully Seeking the Audience**

***IETM Toolkit***

by **Goran Tomka**

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# Foreword by IETM

Regularly discussed, largely (ab)used, often misunderstood: the term 'audience development' is undoubtedly a tricky one. It is understood very differently by different people and in different contexts; even within the same organisation, each staff member has a slightly (or very) different perception of actual (and potential) audiences - and what to do with them. Finally, many artists and professionals consider this term suspiciously, either as EU jargon or as a synonym for return on investment (the infamous attitude 'more bums on seats') - which indeed is the attitude of policy-makers, sometimes.

Starting with its title, this publication invites you to explore the complex and fascinating subject that is the audience, to question and complicate your understanding of them, and to rethink 'audience development' in terms of connection with fellow citizens, genuine exchange and 'togetherness'. Refusing to list one-size-fits-all solutions to magically increase your audiences overnight, this text presents a set of 'tools', exercises and suggestions to lead an autonomous exploration of your own (potential) audiences and to better connect with them, according to your own mission and values.

Enjoy a refreshing read that will give you not only valuable practical tools, but also new motivations to engage with your audiences.

# About the Author

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He has also been active as a trainer, activist and cultural producer working for several cultural organisations in Novi Sad, Belgrade and Berlin and giving workshops and leading seminars with numerous activists, entrepreneurs and professionals in Armenia, Bosnia, Germany, Greece, Lebanon, Serbia and Slovenia. He contributes regularly to scholarly and professional debates on audience engagement and cultural policy via journals and conferences.

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# 1

## *Audience as an assumption*

It's a tricky thing, 'audience'. What is it actually? People waiting in their seats for a show to begin? Or the crowd that performers imagine while preparing to get on the stage? Is it me when I am enjoying a performance or is it just other people around me? Are audiences those people that reporters say were 'thrilled' last night? And what about those who wouldn't agree? When the play is over what happens to the people who were part of the audience a minute ago - are they audiences no more? Is being an audience one's own choice, or is it a tag that we hang on each other? Is talking about audiences saying more about the audiences or about those who speak of them?

The moment one starts thinking about 'the audience', it becomes fairly easy to end up in trouble. It's one little word that we expect to do so much for us. We use it to explain the diverse and complex inner and outer worlds of so many different people we often know very little about. Thus we end up trying to catch a swarm of butterflies with a single net. As a loose and vast social formation, actual audiences are inherently instable, endlessly shifting, dissonant and elusive. As Stuart Hall famously remarked, we are finally all, 'in our heads, many different audiences at once and can be constituted as such by different programmes'. No wonder many suggest we should just forget about it and find some better word.

However, this is not a game of Scrabble, so changing words won't help. We have to deal with it and all the troubles it brings. The crucial problem lies in the fact that audiences – the way we imagine them or speak about them – most often serve as a screen for projecting various desires, imaginations, interests and agendas. What makes 'audience' a good projection screen is precisely that they have very little universal and clear meaning as well as the fact that they don't have their own articulated voice. Actual audiences are fluid, ambiguous and temporary. However, when programming, planning, managing and evaluating, we need something more solid and fixed. Something we can actually rely on to make claims or predictions (I will come back later to the reasons for this and whose need it is). This is where imagination, stereotypes and generalised theories kick in. We move on with our agendas by providing simplified substitutions that make sense to us.

However, this is not a particularly new development. From Aristotle to Adorno, commentators were always prone to judge audiences easily, yet severely. In fact, the quest to interpret audience behaviour and change it according to one's own needs is just one of many strategies of social and political struggle. Take Enlightenment thinkers as an easy example. Just look at how one of the Encyclopaedists thought about audiences of his time:

'It has been noted that in a parterre where one is standing, everything is perceived with greater enthusiasm. The anxiety, the surprise, the emotions of the ridiculous and the pathetic, all of this is livelier and more rapidly felt. One would think, following the old proverb *anima sedens fit sapientior* [a sitting soul becomes wiser] that the calmer spectator would be more detached, more reflective, less susceptible to illusions; more indulgent perhaps, but also less disposed to those sensations of rapturous drunkenness that arise in a parterre where one stands.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Marmontel, J. (2003/1776). 'Theater Pit. *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*'. Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library.

*As a loose and vast social formation, actual audiences are inherently instable, endlessly shifting, dissonant and elusive.*

The way Marmontel interpreted audience behaviour was part of the wider project of enlightenment and rationality, which involved a long process of cultivation and conditioning of the audiences. As leaflets, newspaper articles and announcements from the stage proposed a new rational breed of theatre-goers, people were increasingly told what to do once they found themselves in the theatre. Architectural arrangements involved a position of the scene detached from the auditorium; the theatrical experience became a sedentary one, and a range of technologies were devised that focused the attention of the audience solely on the stage – lighting above all.

These technological developments often went hand in hand with the social repositioning of theatre, promoted this time by powerful industrialists. In what Paul DiMaggio called *sacralisation of arts*<sup>2</sup>, American *nouveau riche* slowly monopolised theatre and opera, and made them into highbrow, prestigious cultural practices for 'cultured audiences' by imposing codes for dressing and behaviour as well as pricing barriers. Even though these new arrangements didn't happen without a struggle (with many accounts of riots and unrest from the poorer urban majorities who demanded lower prices or more seats), in the end, audiences were both quieted and gentrified<sup>3</sup>. This is a classic example of the power of imagination and interpretation to change the world – well-behaved, quiet, elite theatre finally became a reality.

The twentieth century has had its own share of audience manufacturing. Big cultural powerhouses of wartime regimes are all too well known. However, after World War II, the grip that controlled cultural behaviour through commenting on audiencehood still hasn't loosened. Claims of anti-institutional movements that crossed all arts fields are just a reminder of the power of that grip. With memories of Parisian 1968 still fresh, de Certeau wrote about 'a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in thousands on the streets', not being able to speak, but only to 'murmur' and shine distantly like a starry night.

<sup>2</sup> See DiMaggio, P. (1982). 'Cultural entrepreneurship in nineteenth-century Boston - the creation of an organisational base for high culture in America'. *Media, Culture and Society*, 4, 33-50; and also Levine (1986). 'ROW / LOWBROW. *The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*'. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

<sup>3</sup> For a historical account of struggles of poorer Londoners for affordable tickets, see Butsch, R. (2010). 'Crowds, Publics and Consumers: Representing English Theatre Audiences from the Globe to the OP Riots'. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 7(1).

His heroes were voiceless audiences and his concerns had to do with the dangers of big structures speaking for them.

Such struggles are equally present today. Policy makers across the continent are pushing their agendas of access to culture and audience development as a proof that social equality is high in their priorities. They are commissioning, evaluating and granting to reach those goals (if only the same policies would be implemented by ministries of finance, cultural barriers might go away much more easily). By doing so, they are also producing their versions of audience narratives. After some time passes, we might be able to notice more thorough and visible change in the ways audiences are engaged. Whether we will like what we see remains a question. Meanwhile, big cultural infrastructures are fighting their own battle to win diminishing public budgets. They are producing narratives of disadvantaged non-audiences in order to be the ones to include them and win the favour of policy makers<sup>4</sup>. Finally, artists are struggling to find their share of responsibility and autonomy to shake, awaken, include and empower audiences.

*The quest to interpret audience behaviour and change it according to one's own needs is just one of many strategies of social and political struggle.*

There is nothing either strange or wrong about these struggles. What is important, however, is to understand various positions and motivations behind doings and sayings regarding audiences. Even more so, it is critical to leave enough room for new conceptions, descriptions, insights, findings and approaches about audiences to emerge. Instead of fitting audiences into existing boxes, let us explore and inquire - because existing recycled images of audiences are never as rich, confusing, diverse, inspiring and surprising as the real world of people coming for a show. This insight is a cornerstone of this publication. The text that unfolds offers tools for exploring the conundrum of audience theories and practices. It is a guide for walking the slippery slope of understanding the audience without ever reaching the ultimate goal. It is about learning rather than knowing and appreciating, and rather than controlling, audiences. In a way, it is a guide for enjoying an awkward position that might turn out to be very rewarding.

<sup>4</sup> Stevenson, D., Balling, G., & Kann-Rasmussen, N. (2015). 'Cultural participation in Europe: shared problem or shared problematisation?' *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 1-18.

But before I actually go into the pursuit of that task, I will conclude this introduction by briefly commenting on two usual ways of treating audience development theme in recent years. I find that both are not improving our understanding of audience engagement is (or could be) about, hence I want to distance this text from them.

The first folly I would like to distance this text from is the usual apologetic tone regarding the audience. Many recent audience-related texts end up saying a bunch of nice things about audiences much like talking about endangered species. Guilt seems to be deeply embedded in the cultural sector. Guilt of spending someone else's money without catering to their needs? It might be nice for a change to care, but will that actually help? Do audiences, whoever they are, need our we-are-sorry postcards? I don't really think they do. Maybe it is a far stretch, but that reminds me of the recent shift in environmental discourses from planet-needs-you to you-need-planet-dummy. Theatres need audiences - audiences sometimes, amongst other things, need theatre. Participating in a performance event is not the pinnacle of universal human existence, no matter how we feel about it. Claiming such a universal privileged place won't get us far.

Second, the discussion I am trying to propose is not the much debated active/passive divide. As Rancière<sup>5</sup> rightly points out, equating sitting and spectating with passivity is silly - the whole world could be spinning in our head while watching a show, listening at a concert or reading a book. Thinking that a prerequisite for emancipation or activation is to move one's own body or get someone talking is just another testament to how little we know about audiencehood and how easily we jump on popular bandwagons no matter where they lead. In fact, some of the most celebrated interactive or immersive pieces can be as dull and based on prejudices about audiences as any other piece.

The question I find much more important is rather how we can go about making socially-relevant, politically-engaging and emotionally-challenging performances for as many people as possible, without needing to create giant mechanisms of audience segmentation, typification and bureaucratisation that will probably serve the needs of audience developers more than those of audiences. Could we make an effort and stay away from easy, simplified and generalised notions of audiences and explore twisty, winding roads of audiencehood instead? It is a conviction of mine, as well as the assumption underpinning this text, that taking that challenge has led many performance artists and producers to some of the pinnacles of their art.

<sup>5</sup> There have been numerous attempts of circumventing this divide, but probably the best known trial is Rancière, J. (2007). 'The emancipated spectator'. *Artforum International*, 45(7), 270.

In the following pages these paths are explored. Like any other path, it misses many of the places that could be visited. Nevertheless it is a journey into interesting worlds of many dedicated actors, dancers, playwrights, producers and directors to whom I have had the luck to talk or to hear about. Their choice is highly contingent, even random, and there is no such claim that the text is an extensive coverage of the field. Instead, I hope for this text to be understood as one in many existing calls for rethinking the theatre and performance art world today in relation to audiences.

In the chapter titled Frameworks, existing reference fields for working on and thinking about audience engagement are outlined. The assumption here is that usual ways of thinking and talking about audiences are part of certain traditions of thought that I call reference fields. The Alternatives chapter presents the thinking and doing of several international theatre-makers and producers who find that problematising relations with audiences is an important part of their practice. Finally, in Tools, a series of possible tools are offered for those organisations and individual creators who would like to explore their audiences, as well as their assumptions, relations and imaginations about them. Overall, this structure aims to help readers to find their way in communicating and sharing their works to and with audiences.

*Instead of fitting audiences into existing boxes, let us explore and inquire - because existing recycled images of audiences are never as rich, confusing, diverse, inspiring and surprising as the real world of people coming for a show*



# 2

## *Frameworks*

As suggested in the introduction, thinking about and working with audiences is highly influenced by wider political, cultural and economic trends, theories and circumstances. Consequently, the current wave of interest in audiences is not as solid and unambiguous as is sometimes said. The participatory turn, as it is often called, is in fact an amalgam of different political, aesthetic or social ideas. Immersive experiences created by theatre companies like Ontroerend Goed, Rimini Protokoll or Punchdrunk; granting schemes that explicitly support audience development - from EU's Creative Europe and Capital of Culture to local authorities across the continent<sup>1</sup>; the range of publications by the EU Commission or European Expert Network on Culture and those of Wallace foundation in the US; rising scholarly interest in the topic<sup>2</sup>: all these have very little in common - apart from audience as a keyword. All these initiatives and many more are struggling to fit or steer the discourse and practice of audience engagement in the direction that best suits them. Those larger players might actually succeed in articulating their own approaches and legitimising them, while smaller ones are left with the choice to fit in or avoid them.

In any case, to navigate through various approaches, it might be beneficial to try and distil certain **patterns of thought** on the issue. In this chapter, I will focus on three overarching rationales for audience engagement, development or participation, each predating current debates and serving as a reference ground for future discussions. The basic premise is that no thinking, saying or doing happens in a social or political vacuum - it is always done in relation to certain domains in the society, or if you prefer, a certain centre of power that informs and shapes the action. Three commonly noticed centres relevant to the artistic world are the State, the market and the art world itself. The State is taken into consideration whenever we tend to think of audiences as citizens, no matter if later on one follows the patriotic path and tries to contribute towards the strengthening of the national sentiment, or if the road takes one to a more pluralistic direction where democratisation is the main concern. The second domain, the market, is referenced when one conceives of audiences as consumers, users or buyers, who approach, experience and evaluate a performance by consuming goods and services (or experiences if you like) at the cultural market. Thirdly, artists may try and ignore the previous two and base their reference points in the art world itself. Audiences are then more than anything spectators, listeners or participants who support the artistic endeavour, while their citizenship or consumerism is left behind in the cloakroom.

<sup>1</sup> This discussion will be mostly European - hence not to be equated with any kind of global overview.

<sup>2</sup> The Journal of the Performing Arts - Performance Research published a special issue on participatory theatre in 2011; Theatre Journal devoted a special issue on spectatorship in 2014; and last year's special issue of Participations journal is devoted to theatre audiences with a keen eye on participatory and immersive works in particular.

These three gravitational fields are familiar places in artistic discussions, and they should come as no surprise for most readers. Although the boundary between them is highly porous and thus arguable (in reality we are usually dealing with various hybrids and fusions), this typological approach can be useful to introduce a structure in the vast forest of discussion in this field. In the following pages, the historical and contemporary developments of each approach are sketched out in order to prepare the ground for the more pragmatic discussion on the actual engagement with audiences in the everyday work of performance arts.

## IN THE STATE WE TRUST

During the current humanitarian crisis across Europe, some governments more than others, have returned to cultural arguments to justify their restrictive and xenophobic policies. Probably the champion of such approach is Viktor Orban, Hungarian prime minister (closely followed by many other fellow politicians from Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, UK ...). He has repeatedly called for the protection of a Christian and European way of life, supposedly achievable by strengthening the national borders' protection measures. In such a setting, when 'the way of life' (and not only economic development) becomes important again, the cultural sector is called upon to remind citizens of what it means to be Christian or European. Consequently, as we were told recently at the inspiring opening of the Budapest IETM meeting, overnight new funds have been allotted for cultural and artistic purposes.

Without any doubt, current Hungarian political elites cannot be praised for innovation on this issue. The instrumentalisation of arts for political needs is as old as politics itself. What is however important for this discussion is that without dissemination and wide reception of works of art, culture cannot serve as a political instrument. It is no wonder then that some of the largest initiatives that looked into ways to increase cultural participation have been a part of extensive national or city identity-production policies. In this very limited space, I will only touch upon several historical and current audience-reach initiatives that evolved around various interests of States in the field of culture.

The starting point can again be the Athenian polis, which, in the contemporary language, was, it seems, quite keen on the cultural participation of its citizens. Amphitheatres were built with the idea to host all those who had a citizen's status; political leaders participated actively in the ritual and those citizens who could not afford it received a token to take part in theatrical events - access to culture at its very birth. The long tradition of festivals and carnivals that developed across centuries in every corner of the world can be read in a somewhat similar fashion - rulers wanted their subjects to be part of symbolically controlled public events. Similarly, at the

dawn of modern democracies, in the eighteenth century, artistic and political fields were much closer than we might perceive today. Many notable leaders of the French Revolution were in fact artists. The following excerpt from the writing of Jacques-Louis David, a painter and art commissioner of the French Republic, is just one example of the sense of duty artists felt for being part of the birth of the nation:

'The artist ought to contribute powerfully to public instruction [...] by penetrating the soul [...] by making a profound impression on the mind. [...] Thus [...] the traits of heroism and civic virtue presented to the regard of the people will electrify its soul and will cause to germinate in it all the passions of glory and devotion to the welfare of the fatherland.'<sup>3</sup>

The opening of the first public libraries, museums and galleries, the building of theatres and concert halls after the French Revolution can be seen in retrospect as the greatest act of audience building and democratisation of culture ever seen. However, rough times have also witnessed growing cultural participation. It is hard not to remind oneself of the importance that arts were given in numerous regimes that were preparing themselves for the Second World War. Hitler and Mussolini especially have seen art as inseparable from politics and counted on it to foster nationalistic sentiment.

After the grim days of World War II, it became clear to those in power that culture and arts had to be governed the same way as education or health care. In fact, many histories of cultural policy start (falsely) with the creation of ministries of culture during the Fifties and the Sixties, relying heavily on the concept of cultural democratisation. Nonetheless, this was a period in which cultural rights were greatly extended to many parts of society through festivals, new venues (*Maisons de la culture* across the Francophone world, *Kulturhäuser* and *Kunsthallen* in Germany and Austria or *Domovi kulture* in Yugoslavia and across the Soviet block) or other dissemination strategies. At the same time, it became obvious that the approach to the presentation of arts had to change. Animation, mediation, artistic pedagogy and active participation in cultural activities through community arts and amateur clubs grew out of the same concern about the exclusive nature of many forms of art. Some of these practices can be still considered as the foundations of contemporary approaches to widening the access to culture.

However, with the rise of neoliberal policies in the Eighties and Nineties, the reign of economic arguments for social development seems to have divorced the cultural sector from broader policies. With the subsequent cuts in arts funding, the game changed. In somewhat simplistic terms, political leaders stopped chasing cultural workers and instead, cultural workers started chasing politicians.

<sup>3</sup> Dowd 1951, 537 in Belfiore, E., Bennett, O. (2008). *The Social Impact of the Arts. An Intellectual History*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

*The audience development measures that are proposed stem neither from artists or cultural workers, nor from audiences and their cultural needs – two sides crucial for the magic of artistic experiences. They emanate rather from the current policy fashions and sensitivities of policy-makers for certain arguments (identity, social cohesion, ecology, etc.). The weakness of such approaches is that they often tackle political issues, while expecting social change, and these two worlds are often far apart.*

What we saw was a long and still ongoing struggle for public funding for the arts. Many cultural operators saw themselves for the first time explaining what seemed obvious to them – what is the value of culture in a society? Over the last three decades, this struggle has produced a series of research studies, initiatives and policy actions<sup>4</sup>.

The most notorious argument was that culture and arts create economic wealth, but many other justifications were thought of as well. The social cohesion argument looked for ways in which cultural participation can accommodate rising cultural diversities in the West and special approaches to developing audiences with diverse cultural backgrounds were devised<sup>5</sup>. Problems with the lack of national or supra-national identities were also tackled, most notably by the European Commission's attempts to develop European audiences, seeking the formation of European identity<sup>6</sup>. Finally, links with environmental policies were sought and an argument has been made that the cultural sector can indeed bring a positive change in ecological consciousness<sup>7</sup>.

What is striking about many of these initiatives is that the audience development measures that are proposed stem neither from artists or cultural workers, nor from audiences and their cultural needs – two sides crucial for the magic of artistic experiences. They emanate rather from the current policy fashions and sensitivities of policy-makers for certain arguments (identity, social cohesion, ecology, etc.). The weakness of such approaches is that they often tackle political issues, while expecting social change, and these two worlds are often far apart. Let us take as an example several influential attempts to consider the ways to broaden access to culture.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview see *'Cultural Value Project – final report: Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture Report'*, and IETM's *'Mapping of Types of Impact Research in the Performing Arts Sector (2005-2015)'*.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Arts Council England (2006). *'Navigating Difference - Cultural diversity and audience development'*.

<sup>6</sup> In Creative Europe programme or European Capital of Culture as well as many other funding schemes applicants are obliged to think of the ways in which 'Europeanness' is to be encouraged through audience development.

<sup>7</sup> See Dessein, J., Soini, K., Fairclough, G. and Horlings, L. (2015). *'Culture in, for and as Sustainable Development'*. University of Jyväskylä.

In these, cultural participation is strangely limited to those activities that are related to state-funded arts programmes. Commercial artistic activities, underground and counter-cultural art projects (graffiti and similar), DIY and private artistic practices (painting or making music at home), public arts and many others are excluded, even though they probably account for the majority of creative and artistic experiences of publics at large<sup>8</sup>. It is hard to imagine that those who advocate for such measures actually think that these are not important. Instead it is more plausible to think that the very goal of all this research – to justify public spending in arts – has set the filter in what is to be found.

The main issue with devising audience development approaches based on current policy issues is the direction of the decision-making. It starts with the internal problems of the cultural institutions produced by the policy (e.g. cuts in funding); then it looks into available discourses and policy agendas (entrepreneurship for example) and finally it develops audience development approaches to close the loop and to solve the initial problem. Although it can't be said that such approaches haven't given considerable results, there is a great threat that crucial problems such as the position of arts in school curricula or the relationship between poverty and cultural tastes will not be noticed/addressed. This is precisely because such approaches look into a certain type of citizenship currently valued as good or desirable, while other ways of being a citizen, or a human if you will, remain excluded.

*The very goal of all this research – to justify public spending in arts – has set the filter in what is to be found.*

<sup>8</sup> For a much more extensive overview of these kind of studies see White, T., & Rentschler, R. (2005, January). *Toward a new understanding of the social impact of the arts*. In AIMAC 2005: Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Arts & Cultural Management. HEC, Montreal.

## THE INVISIBLE HAND

Apart from state policies, the market (together with economic players) has been another most influential reference field for arts and culture, equally challenging and often troubling. Consequently, in the cultural field as a whole, there are few discourses as recurring as the one about the marketisation and commodification of the arts. However, it is no doubt that the current rampant neoliberalisation of societies across the globe has taken these processes further than ever before. For example, the concept of *creative industries* has offered an unprecedented celebratory picture of a world in which all creativity is bought or sold on the prosperous and free market.

However, the commodification of culture and arts has a much longer history. In fact, markets for cultural goods are amongst the first modern markets that were created in Europe. With what he calls print-capitalism, Benedict Anderson<sup>9</sup> stressed the importance of sixteenth and seventeenth century printing entrepreneurs who played a crucial role in standardising languages, spreading ideas across the continent and ultimately creating markets for books and other printed goods. It was those early cultural capitalists who laid the foundations of the large, diverse and powerful entertainment and leisure industries of the eighteenth century. In addition to that, it was precisely the rise of the market of cultural goods in the same century that enabled many creative people – writers, poets, actors – to become regarded as professionals in the first place and earn their bread as such.

Still, it wasn't until Adam Smith that the market received comprehensive theoretical attention and political and philosophical appraisal. Adam believed that the wealthiest nation on Earth of the day, Great Britain, achieved its wealth by stimulating the economic self-interest of individuals, which led to the optimal social division of labour and rising productivity. Influenced by physiocrats, he saw the market as the best way to govern production and consumption in society, one that, if free from intervention and monopoly, could be self-regulating (hence the famous 'invisible hand' of the market) and annihilate shortcomings of the centrally planned, government-dominated economy.

Although his economic and political theory was heavily debated and undermined, we currently see, and have seen in successive waves over and over again, the return of the idea that the market is the best solution for arranging not only productive relations, but social relations as well. The birth of marketing at the beginning of the twentieth century was one such wave. Under the stress to sell all the excessive products in their warehouses, entrepreneurs looked for ways of pushing their products towards customers as well as growing the demand for them. This was a primary interest

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities - Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

of marketing as a professional field, although it has grown today to envelop much more than product placement and promotion. Promoting the rise of the marketing field, Philip Kotler, the most well known marketing author of the previous century, wrote that markets are not only mechanisms for exchange and circulation, but for establishing value and worth in society: 'value is completely subjective and exists in the eyes of the beholding market', he wrote<sup>10</sup>.

It was precisely that beholding eye of the market, and those powerful elites who regulate and control it, that troubled many critics. In what is probably the most comprehensive critique of the culture produced for market distribution, Horkheimer and Adorno argued that such culture erodes the potential of the arts to serve as a critique of society and additionally creates an inattentive, intellectually lazy cultural consumer. Their critique was a rationale for many post-war cultural policy-makers across Europe, who took it as their mission to support the arts and enable them to be autonomous from market forces.

However, with the first economic crisis during the Eighties and onwards, accountability and managerialism, previously foreign to the art worlds, were imposed by national governments across Europe. As time passed, in addition to becoming more accountable for spending public money, cultural institutions had to earn increasing percentages of their incomes through the ticket office. This is when marketing departments became an unavoidable part of public cultural institutions.

At the same time, in the minds of cultural producers, the audiences of theatres, museums or libraries were imagined not only as citizens, but as customers as well. It meant that apart from attention to the educational, aesthetic and political dimensions of cultural or artistic experiences, even publicly funded organisations started thinking about the market value of such experiences, and the readiness of visitors and audiences to spend money for their engagement with works of art or cultural heritage. Pushed by the growing pressure to cut public funds for culture and arts, cultural institutions found themselves forced to consult marketing experts about advertisement, selling, product placement and so on; all in the hope to steer the invisible hand in their direction.

When 'audience development' first appeared as an explicit set of tools or an approach to working with audiences, it was marketing that was its cradle. Without a doubt, there is a wealth of marketing tools that are great for cultural organisations of all kinds, whether theatres, performing arts companies, venues or festivals. Learning about market communications, customer relationships, pricing strategies and so on can in fact strengthen the capacities of organisations

and even increase their creative and financial autonomy. It can even improve what audiences think and feel about the organisation and its openness, 'user-friendliness' and responsiveness.

However, applying marketing logic to artistic works produces numerous concerns. First and foremost, it equates audiences with being consumers or clients. It is the moment of consumption that matters the most, as well as the financial consequence of it. Following that, audiences are favoured in line with their potential to consume, promote, buy or donate, all of which belong to only one dimension of what it means to be human. Secondly, this approach puts forward the transactional logic in which individuals give and take to satisfy their own needs – audiences demand evening joy, artists offer it in return for the money or attention they need. As this may hold true in some instances, it is too simplistic to explain nuanced and complex needs, desires and interactions happening around the performance event. The supply/demand polarity doesn't hold sway in many kinds of theatrical works in which divisions are deliberately erased, or when audiences and artists occupy the same social space and aim for the same goals. By maintaining the division between demand and supply, the marketing approach disfavours the possibility of long-term meaningful engagement of audiences in the creation of work, as well as the shaping of the organisation. Thirdly, as discussed by numerous authors, adapting the 'product' of art to the demands of audiences bears not only the potential threat of 'dumbing down'. A much bigger problem is the undermining of the capacity of artistic experiences to explore new worlds because those experiences have to fit with the current tastes and expectations of the 'demand' – whatever it may be. Hence, imposing the rule of demand on artistic creation is detrimental not only to artists, but to those audiences who wish to experience something new, brave, different, or surprising.

<sup>10</sup> Kotler, (1972) in Lee H (2005). 'When arts met marketing - Arts marketing theory embedded in Romanticism'. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 11(3).

## FOR THE SAKE OF ARTS

'Artists are not social workers, teachers or nurses!' – she exclaimed while others nodded with approval. 'I want to be judged by artistic standards, not commercial' – he continued, and there was no one in the room who couldn't understand what they were saying. We have all heard these discussions and it is hard (and dangerous) to discard them as some kind of worthless childish lament. It is perfectly understandable to demand a space for one's own work and expression. Designers don't like it when their customers ask for more red colour in the design; doctors can get furious when patients tell them they disagree based on the health tips found via a Google search; teachers object when parents tell them how to approach their kids in the classrooms just as coaches do in their sports arenas. Claims to autonomy are as normal as the sunshine, so why is artistic autonomy so problematic?

In short, because it's hard to get. And this is no news. The arts field was never powerful itself in economic or political terms, thus it always had to cling to other fields to be sustained. Claims for the autonomy of the arts have been made from the very beginning of the arts as a profession, but most famously from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. Does that mean that the claims have always failed? No. Without them, today we probably wouldn't have liberal and free arts and artists in the first place. However, if these claims are repeated over and over again without new arguments reflecting current circumstances, they will lose their strength. So, it might be worth taking a look at several instances of such claims.

It was precisely in relation to the previously depicted fields – the market and the State – that the idea of an autonomous field of art was born. It was post-revolutionary France and the Enlightenment project had shown its other face. As Terror replaced Revolution in Paris and a market-oriented press proved to be a powerful tool of political control, discomfort grew in the artistic circles of the city. Théophile Gautier was just one of many artists who had found himself between two impossible alternatives – making art for the bourgeois tastes of new industrialists who had little respect and sensibility for the kind of art he had devoted his life to, or taking a job in some of the newspapers that struggled for high circulation and naturally didn't fancy poets. So he cried, 'art for art's sake is what we want'!

In fact, during the first decades of the nineteenth century a great number of artists across Europe sought a way to oppose two existing artistic camps: the bourgeois art of the salons and courts, and the useful art of realism<sup>11</sup>. Over the years, these artists suggested a way of evaluating art that is not based on any kind of external

<sup>11</sup> For more see Bourdieu, P. (1995). *The rules of art: Genesis and structure of the literary field*. Stanford University Press; and Williams, R. (1960). *Culture and society, 1780-1950*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books Doubleday & Company, Inc.

*Why is artistic autonomy so problematic? In short, because it's hard to get. The arts field was never powerful itself in economic or political terms, thus it always had to cling to other fields to be sustained.*

impact, thus creating art that aims not to be didactic, moral, or utilitarian. In order to do so, they had to refuse the appraisal of those fields and institutions that had power – State, court, wealthy patrons, or the growing readers on the market, but also the corrupt Académie. As Shelley wrote, 'contemporary criticism is no more than the sum of the folly with which genius has to wrestle'; while Flaubert argued: 'nobody is rich enough to pay us.'

Unsurprisingly, these artists were not quite into audience engagement as well. If art is freedom, audiences are the ones who take it away, who by the command of their own lazy tastes demand boring and dull repetitions. This antagonistic (and essentialist) struggle between the artist and his/her audience is very well expressed by Wilde:

'Now Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic. ... The work of art is to dominate the spectator: the spectator is not to dominate the work of art. The spectator is to be receptive. He is to be the violin on which the master is to play. And the more completely he can suppress his own silly views, his own foolish prejudices, his own absurd ideas of what Art should be, or should not be, the more likely he is to understand and appreciate the work of art in question.'<sup>12</sup>

This is a classic example of producing a discourse on the audience solely for the purpose of one's own position – actual relations and their diversity is not taken into account at all. Now, there are so many ways to both criticise and understand this position. Most artists mentioned here were rich, white men who could afford their own autonomy. Their insensitivity to others is shocking by today's standards, but then so many things from their times are shocking in the same way. However, I do not want to go into historical analysis here – what is important instead is to question the uses of the *l'art pour l'art* discourse in the later years and most importantly today. There are several usually obscured things that need to be taken into account when making similar claims today.

<sup>12</sup> Wilde, O. (2014/1900). *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. The Project Gutenberg eBook.

First, art for art's sake is today put in action to defend public spending for cultural institutions. In the original usage, it was anti-institutional. Back then, it was a call to undermine the role and power of artistic institutions as well as political, religious or economic institutions, not to strengthen them. It was development in the twentieth century that turned the arts for arts sake argument into an institutional struggle. It was that large cultural institutions saw this argument, together with the fear of Americanisation and commercialisation, as a possible tool to claim their own positions. How much it is about arts and artists and how much about sustaining large cultural bureaucracies is highly arguable.

Second, *l'art pour l'art* was not a product of disinterest for social affairs, as it is sometimes falsely perceived. It was a highly political and socially conscious manoeuvre. Romanticist poets like Blake, Shelley or Coleridge, to whom we often ascribe the art for art's sake claims, were in fact very devoted political thinkers. Art for art's sake was a certain form of a struggle for a different idea of a human being – a being that doesn't live according to the dictate of the market, to industrial or bureaucratic modes of production. It went as far as to speak of a separate reality – artistic reality – more imaginative and superior to the realities of the rational, modern world rising on the horizon. Creating an autonomous field of literature and arts (autonomous not meaning separated or under no influence) was in fact a consequence of this engaged attitude. The bottom line is that it is not disinterest or the quest for isolation itself that drove these artists away from existing reality, but rather a deep interest to create a new and superior artistic reality that would enrich the rest of society.

Third, often when *l'art pour l'art* discourse is used, the relations between artists and audiences are obscured. We could however understand original uses; ideas of active readers or relational aesthetics arrived much later. Now we know that imposing a single way to understand the reception of arts is a dead end – it is not only insensitive and irresponsible, but also impossible. All sorts of excluded, marginalised and discriminated groups (which amount to almost everyone) cannot and should not participate in cultural life according to certain rules imposed from the centres of intellectual power (being quiet and clapping is just the tip of the iceberg). Instead, artists, just like anyone expressing their views in a public space, have to deal with the ambiguity and fluidity of reception. Moreover, we also know that audiences can be much more than passive spectators in a way that enriches both their experiences, but also the creative process itself. So, going back to original arguments without taking into consideration new developments in thought makes the argument worthless.

In an ironic shift, using the logic of art for art's sake today works against the autonomy of arts. It creates boundaries that might be detrimental to the project. It excludes from the social relations those audiences who might just be in favour of whatever artists have to say. By way of doing it, it makes artists less sensitive to various uses and receptions of their work. As Shusterman writes<sup>13</sup>, this approach discourages the exploration of what artistic experiences actually mean in the everyday realities of audiences. It blocks us into a certain kind of aesthetics that might just miss what it means to experience theatre today. Moreover, by these exclusions it erodes open and meaningful communication, because for artists to communicate with their audiences, there needs to be a set of spaces and social networks where exchange happens. All these might be neglected in the quest for autonomy. Finally, the isolationist version of *l'art pour l'art* also suggests staying out of the similar political and social struggles in other fields, like ecology, science, political activism because they are foreign to the art world. However, they might be closer than we think.

It is a belief underpinning this text that there is ample space for arts to be autonomous while being accessible, or the other way around, to be engaged and not controlled. A possible way ahead would be to be aware of various groups that could join the struggles many artists are fighting for, audiences included.

*In an ironic shift, using the logic of art for art's sake today works against the autonomy of arts.*

<sup>13</sup> Shusterman, R. (2002). 'Pragmatic Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art', 2nd edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.



## NAVIGATING THROUGH THE FIELD

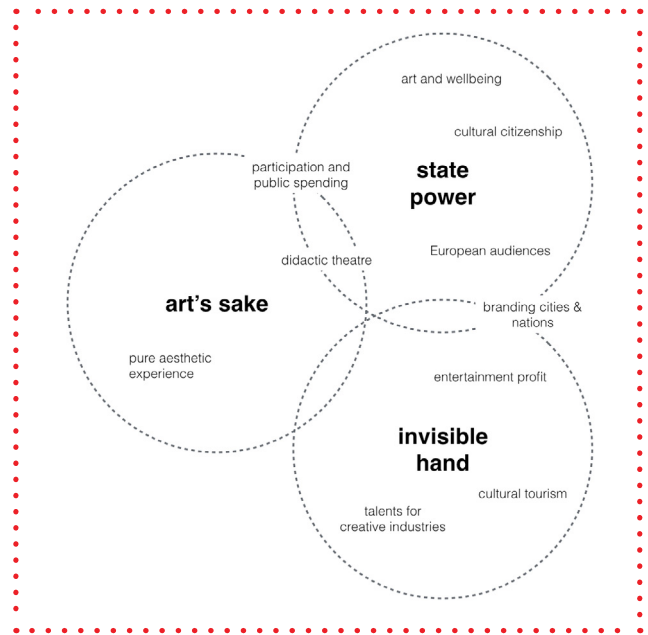
The previously discussed discourses might seem overly historical, old-fashioned and distant. However, they are still very alive, more or less disguised. To present this game of ideas more clearly, let's try to position various current approaches and policies of audience engagement together in relation to the three discussed reference fields – the State, the market, and the autonomous arts world.

What we see is three distinct discourses, slightly overlapping. Starting with the Art's Sake discourse, there are several theatrical traditions that developed conceptions of the audience based on the idea of the autonomy of the arts field. They either show distrust in interaction with audiences, such as naturalist theatre (and imagine a wall instead), or imagine a bunch of *tabulae rasae* ready to be educated or morally improved. In either way, there are a lot of fixed assumptions about audiences in the room.

The second circle is anchored to policy agendas that rely on culture and the arts for attaining various socio-political goals. As those come in waves, the goal of cultural participation also shifts (and audience development as a tool). In the Sixties and Seventies it was education, multiculturalism and cultural democratisation. Then came inclusion and intercultural dialogue. Recently, there is more and more government-funded research showing that cultural participation can be a good method to support happiness and wellbeing – these two being a new policy goal in recent years. Despite building national identity through participation in cultural activities is a sensitive issue (due to its potential to slip into nationalism), we are seeing more of that as well. On the EU level, the creation of European citizenship and common identity through cultural participation is another classical example. Anyone who has ever filled out an application for an EU fund, would know this under titles like 'European dimension', 'attracting European audiences' and the like.

Finally, audience development is also to be found in the economic space. It is where higher cultural participation is beneficial for the financial goals of various stakeholders (artists included). An obvious impact of higher participation is the increased cultural spending of citizens and the income of providers of cultural services. That might also go in hand with the intentions of some governments to decrease spending for the arts and deliver the cultural sector to the market. A thriving cultural life is also attractive to visitors, so it can also support tourism-oriented cultural offers of cultural venues and festivals.

There are also several approaches that are to be found at the crossings, thus belonging to several fields at the same time. One such approach is securing public funding for cultural infrastructure, which is rooted in both State and artistic agendas. As the European Commission explained at the outset of its Creative Europe programme:



'The digital shift, more educated populations, greater competition for leisure time, demographic change including declining and ageing audiences for some art forms, and the squeeze on public funding means that most cultural organisations face a more uncertain future than in the past. They cannot afford to stand still - there is immense pressure to innovate and adapt. Organisations need to develop their audiences and diversify their revenue streams, in some cases literally as a matter of survival, in others due to the priorities of public funders.'<sup>14</sup>

Another such approach is related to creative industries whose development is part of both the business sector and the State. Here, cultural participation (and audience development) turns into demand for goods and services offered by cultural and creative industries or the creation of a talented workforce for them. As Creative Britain's policy paper noted some years ago: 'For some, the opportunity to experience the highest quality art and culture in schools will be the key that unlocks their creative talents, opening them up to the possibility of a future career in the creative industries'<sup>15</sup>. Talents and career are keywords here.

There are also many approaches obviously missing from the picture. Various artistic practices that highly prioritise working with audiences as partners are out of this scheme because the way they approach audiences is a consequence of that direct relationship. The approach to the audience is not deduced from other policies

<sup>14</sup> European Commission (2012). 'European Audiences: 2020 and beyond'. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

<sup>15</sup> DCMS (2008). 'Creative Britain – New Talents for the New Economy'. London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport.



or ideals. Practices I have in mind are often found amongst participatory, immersive, one-on-one, community-based, interactive, self-guided, relational and similar performances. The next chapter is devoted to highlighting some of those approaches.

To summarise this chapter, each of the three fields produces a different version of the audience discourse. If embedded in the political debates of the day, audiences would be understood and treated as citizens along the lines of what a state would like the citizen to be. If the market is in charge, it will look at audiencehood as a pleasure or experience achieved through consumption, thus stressing the exchange value of artistic events. If *l'art pour l'art* is a guiding principle, audiences would be understood as a necessary nuisance; an obstacle and a threat for the freedom of art. Consequently, both creation and audience engagement efforts (if at all welcome) will try to push audience behaviours in a desirable direction. In all three cases, all other ways of understanding audiences, often less clear and simple to depict, are excluded. So, all three taken as exclusive explanatory mechanisms are wrong in their own ways.

# 3

## *Alternatives*

In this chapter I will showcase several approaches to thinking and working with audiences that dissent or problematise major discourses mentioned in the previous part. In fact, it seems that there is a growing dissatisfaction amongst theatre practitioners with being trapped in the arts/state/market triad. Naive as it may seem, it might make sense to try and step out of it, at least as a short excursion into a different world of the performing arts. We will review here a series of theories and practices that undermine, complicate, oppose or question in any sense the usual ways of understanding audience development or engagement.

## DIVERSIFYING AUDIENCES AS A QUEST FOR CHANGE

**Katie Keeler** is Director of [Theatre Bristol](#) and a freelance producer. She was formerly the General Manager of [Volcano Theatre Company](#) and Special Projects Officer in the [Performing Arts Department at the British Council](#). She is the Chair of UK's [Independent Theatre Council](#).

**Mel Scaffold** is Director of [Theatre Bristol](#) and former Development Facilitator for [Create Gloucestershire](#), an organisation instigating change in the arts sector through collective action. She has been project manager and producer with several venues and theatre companies including science inspired company [Theatre Science](#).

Diversity of audiences is part of the common triad of audience development: Broaden, Deepen, Diversify – a scheme originally proposed by McCarthy and Jinnett<sup>1</sup> and afterwards adopted internationally. It is aligned with other inclusive and intercultural dimensions of public policies related to culture and it often involves rethinking space, programme, promotion and pricing of performance events, in order to attract audiences who rarely or never attend them. However, diversity of audiences reaches into some of the deepest boundaries of a society. Finding solutions might be very contextual, as the following case from Bristol shows.

**Katie Keeler** and **Mel Scaffold** come from [Theatre Bristol](#), an online portal and collective of producers that is an indispensable part of the vibrant theatrical life of the city. In our discussions they reflected on the current state as well as the last ten years of evolution of the local scene. As they claim, diversity is currently recognised as the biggest challenge of the theatrical community. However, it hasn't always been like that, and the issue emerged both as a policy agenda as well as the autochthonous need of theatre-makers – for different reasons.

For many artists, the main concern of the previous period was to find collaborators, venues and audiences for the work they wanted to show. After numerous initiatives including local festivals, the founding of devoted media and opening of new theatre venues, the scene is moving towards a cohesive whole. As Katie somewhat proudly states:

<sup>1</sup> McCarthy, K. F., & Jinnett, K. J. (2001). 'A new framework for building participation in the arts'. *Rand Corporation*.

'There is a sense of community, collaboration and support and that is what draws people from other parts of the country to the city. There are less hierarchies than there would be in other places in the UK. It is also not a city where everything depends on one big venue or a couple of them to give artists opportunity in a kind of paternalistic relationship.'

Working together has become a part of the current local habit. As an example, it is quite usual for venues and companies to suggest shows of other venues and companies on their websites – something that was unimaginable only ten years ago. As a result, there is no shortage of audiences for Bristol's growing performance arts scene. However, as Mel points out:

'The big question is how many different types of people are seeing the work. I think that has changed to a lesser degree. There is a lot of work for white middle class audiences – and it is really a high quality work. And they are very well served and attended. But, particularly on the larger stages – the diversity of audiences is a massive challenge. I think that this will be everyone's priority over the next three years.'

The way the sector has tackled the issue so far has been mostly superficial. Although many efforts are invested in audience analysis and development, results as well as motives are questionable. As Mel puts it:

'They [public cultural institutions] are basically gathering data to secure their funding for the future – bottom-line. And they do that either by saying: 'we are doing it very well, give us the money' or 'we have identified this little gap here, we need more funding to address that gap'. Some venues, if there wasn't external pressure from arts councils, might be quite happy to have an audience that looks exactly the same as long as the room is full.'

However, the state of the scene has evolved to a point where theatre-makers are not only capable of handling bigger challenges, but are in need of such. 'Artists do not want their audience to be a mirror of themselves; they want to be in a conversation, they want a challenge', explains Mel. As such the question of diversity has risen as an artistically important issue. As Katie explains: 'They want to have interesting engaging relationships and meaningful conversations around their work'. And that cannot happen if they keep talking to the same people all the time.

Now, when diversity has become a true need of the scene, the question a lot of actors are pondering is how to reach it. So far, it has become somewhat obvious that diversity of audiences cannot be reached by better promotion only. Katie recalls a recent show that involved three older performers over the age of 65,

all former dancers and circus performers. 'You don't usually see these kind of bodies' – she notes. As a result, audiences were quite different than usual as well.

'In order to have different audiences, do you need to have different theatre-making communities?' – jokes Mel. Although the answer seems obvious and positive, it introduces the need for even deeper rethinking of the whole theatre-making system that involves education, employment, mobility, working conditions and so on. With education becoming increasingly exclusive, with living expenses on the rise, the arts as a well-educated and low-income profession is quickly becoming more exclusive. As Mel explains:

'The variety of different routes into the cultural sector - into the idea of working and having a life as an artist - is quickly diminishing. Faces we are seeing, voices we are hearing; everything risks becoming a monoculture. I could imagine that if we go on like this, in ten years it would be one white man standing on the stage. He is probably called Chris [readers outside UK can come up with their own name].'

The case of the Bristol scene tells us an important story. Audience development is a part of the wider entanglements of the performance arts world. The problems related to audience participation stem from the same conditions that shape other aspects of the theatrical system. Likewise, solutions have to emerge from those same actors, their capacities and intentions. Diversity of audiences, just like any other audience development goal, if treated honestly, is not another transient policy goal. It is a call to rethink some of the foundations of theatre-making in general. This is not to say that notions like diversity should not become part of policy agendas and strategic plans of big cultural players. Promoting agendas top-down has its important role. But if wider and specific local circumstances are not taken into account while trying to achieve those agendas, there is a high probability that they will turn into empty and meaningless policy fads. We will come back to these insights, as they are a revolving theme throughout the text that follows.



'Once Upon A Time' by Aga Blonska, produced by Theatre Bristol in association with Circomedia (photo: Steve Tanner)

## LEARNING TO BE TOGETHER

**Mariela Nestora** studied contemporary dance and choreography at the London Contemporary Dance School and Visual Design for Dance at the Laban Centre, London. She is a founder and choreographer of [YELP\\_danceco](#). She is a freelance dance and choreography teacher, also teaching improvisation and composition to actors at the experimental stage of the National Theatre of Northern Greece.

'You have a stage in which you are pretending that it is not happening – total denial. It is not happening to me or anyone else. Then you go to complete sense of rage and you attack with anything you have. Then you go through depressive mode and the world is black and pointless and everything is pointless. Finally you go through the point where you're just numb, you are totally numb. And some really oppose this numbness. You want to resist what is happening by doing and this doing is not a doing that is about the individual. It is a doing that needs people to happen. You want it to expand, to have ripples; to drag people along. People needed to be with other people, people wanted to be with other people in the hope that it will bring or open something up.'

**Mariela Nestora** is a choreographer and dancer from Athens, Greece. After spending her time working in London, she came back to Greece at the time when dance had started flourishing and there was funding from the existent Ministry of Culture. But it didn't take long until everything started going downhill. It was in 2011 that all funding to the independent dance scene stopped. Nestora found herself in a position unknown to her or her close collaborators before. She defines it as the times of 'coming together'.

'After the collapse of the state system of funding, many of us thought how to carry on with what we were doing. But in order to be able to carry on with our work we needed to change the way we make it and the way we think about our work. ... It was about uniting forces and learning how to be with other people, but also new ways of being together, of thinking together, new ways of making together.'

The whole turmoil produced the need for collectivity and togetherness – something that has marked Mariela's work in many ways since then. In one of her projects, called '[Untitled](#)', she collaborated with four other choreographers on a big co-choreographed work with every author coming in and out of a single thread in unexpected ways. Another piece, showcased at [IETM's plenary meeting in Athens](#) back in 2013, was the symposium '[Before and After](#)'.

Following an old tradition, performers served traditional food and discussed, together with audiences, what the whole crisis meant for all of them and where it could lead.

However 'making together' or being together is not always easy. As Mariela says, collaboration skills are not something Greeks are famous for. So, there were quite some struggles along the way:

'All of that was at the same time a hard and a really optimistic event. Because you could see that people would try to come together but they lacked the skills for doing that. You know, Greeks get so passionate about everything and they are quite expressive with things. They sometimes cannot wait while the other person finishes their sentence... But those were times when you found yourself in a place that seemed to look in the right direction, you realize what skills you are missing, and you educate yourself for the things you think you will need to go to the next page.'

What is important for this discussion is that, in the road of togetherness, classical divisions seem to lose their grip, including the audience/artist division. It doesn't mean that they disappear, but that some old ways of seeing and doing are undermined. As Mariela claims, these transformative experiences thoroughly influence the basic notions that constitute her work:

'The notion of the audience is by definition that you come together. Also, dance for me is an experience. It is how I like to make pieces. Whether it is a collective or my own work, it's all about the shared experience: between the performers, between performers and the subject, their individualities and the subject and the audience with the performers. It's not lines, it's just a huge curve that connects everything.'

As opposed to that, audience development, as it is commonly promoted, is about the interaction of two very different and distinct entities, one performing a development of the other. But togetherness is not about distinct positions. It is even less about linear transformation in a known direction. It is rather about all participants being affected by the shared condition. No wonder Mariela doesn't have nice things to say about audience development. In her words:

'There is this devastatingly annoying part of audience development that has to do with institutions and how to get money and funding. Just before you, as an artist, write in your own language, what you want to make and what you are working on, investigating... all of a sudden you have to write in somebody else's language.'

We could say that the languages Mariela refers to are the ones discussed in the previous section. It is again about the resistance to replacing artistic discourses with political and managerial ones.

So, rather than having institutionalized goals to fulfil, she would prefer the relationship with the audience to be artistic and exploratory. As she recounts, it is her own desire to meet different audiences. This is why she would present one of her works in a 'dodgy neighbourhood of Athens', one 'super-sleek piece' in a fancy venue and a third at the local community centre for people who haven't seen contemporary dance before. But if she has to perform this in order to diversify audiences according to some political agenda, that is where the problem starts.

It is easy to connect this with what Katie and Mel from Bristol said about the perception that audiences are in the jurisdiction of venues (institutions, as Mariela puts it). Audience development and engagement - the way it is staged by policy makers and pushed by all sorts of agencies - fails to capture the imagination of both artists and probably audiences as well. It is a highly bureaucratic intervention of setting rules and measuring success often without problematising the process, the outcome or the very need. This is not to say that big players should not think strategically about audiences, but rather to raise the concern that rationalising theatrical communications beyond a certain point might produce a counter effect. This is precisely what we will turn to next.



Maria Koliopoulou, Kostas Tsioukas, Iris Karayan, Katerina Skiada, selfportrait

## WHAT IS THEATRE?

**Stefan Kaegi** is a co-founder of Rimini Protokoll. He produces documentary theatre plays, radio shows and works in the urban environment in a diverse variety of collaborative partnerships. In 2010 Stefan was awarded the European Prize for Cultural Diversity. In 2011, Rimini Protokoll won the Silver Lion at the Venice Biennale for performing arts. In 2015 Stefan and Rimini Protokoll received the Swiss Grand Prix of Theatre.

**Stefan Kaegi** is one third of Berlin-based group Rimini Protokoll. Through their immersive, participatory, interactive performances, they slowly redefine the boundaries of Western theatrical practice. 'We intuitively had interest in what is now called immersive theatre,' says Stefan. 'The actor, as someone who has learned something and wants to show it, was never our main interest. We have always been interested in how other people could be on the stage'. Their stages have been filled by hundreds of people all over the world (quite literally so). But their stages have also moved as their performances include walking, dancing, riding in a truck... It is part of the quest for a more democratic theatre. A theatre that would become a two-way channel rather than a stage-audience shout-out.

The whole movement is nothing less than a revival of theatre for Stefan:

'I am glad that the theatre has found a way back into a wider definition of what it can be, and it has all started from the moment when the theatre began to question its format in the broader sense, not just what can happen within those 90 minutes on the stage – but what is the function of this all. This is something that maybe needs to go on for 24 hours...

The usual, celebratory narrative of participatory theatre often goes in two directions. One: participation is good because audiences get their voices heard in the creative process and that will attract them to theatre. Two: it is good because it builds strong communities. However, none of these would be what Stefan and Rimini Protokoll are after.

Actually, one of the underpinning drivers for audience development, namely the declining numbers of audiences, seems to be distant thunder for Stefan. As he says, there are more and more people willing to experience theatre in a new way. The diminishing number of tickets sold is a different story:

'That is typically a problem of the Stadttheater (local public theatres). They have this house and certain people are coming back always again to the same house and then they make research into them and find out, oh, they actually like what we do. That is why they are coming back. But then you are in a closed circuit; you are just reproducing the expectations that you project into audiences. I don't think it's something that you should do.'

Instead, 'you should bring up the content because it is exciting,' claims Stefan in a classical curatorial style. Does that imply a kind of disinterest for audiences? Not really.

'What we do often is that gradually rehearsals are being replaced by try-outs, because in the project like RemoteX the audience is such an important part of what actually is the thing going on, that we can hardly rehearse without an audience.'

In the practice of Rimini Protokoll, there is a clear distinction between caring for audiences and conforming to their expectations, no matter who they are. Audiences are a part of the creative process, but not as a target group whose liking should be the defining guideline of the artistic work:

'The question is only how understandable it is. Theatre is a big communication process and we are not interested in the misunderstanding which would happen even before audiences interact with the material [the performance]. Afterwards, you can do with the material whatever you want.'

Taking care of the ways audiences understand the event they should become a part of does not mean any kind of 'dumbing down'. It is rather caring for the one you talk to. As for the communities, they are at best temporary formations, a consequence, rather than a goal. Responding to my provocation that he doesn't care much about the potential of theatre to make cohesive, stable communities, Stefan responds:

'I am not about stability... the idea of destabilisation related to the artist is closer to me. I think people have enough of their mechanisms to go into their stability networks. These communities might be created temporarily, but I don't see why they should turn into perpetuated rituals. I think we need to talk about conflicts. It might create temporary harmonies as well, but also create places of interaction. I don't believe in it becoming institutionalized and expectable.'

Just as others have pointed out, there is a clear distinction of what it means to work with audiences as an artist or as community managers or a marketing director of a large venue. But this goes much further. The question is what is the role of theatre and performance arts in society:

'I have seen in the UK grants that actually force artists to be teachers; this has problematic sides. You only get money if you go to schools and you seem to be in a position to replace teachers. In Germany, during the refugee crisis, there were politicians installing special funds for artists to make projects with refugees. You suddenly get this vision of artists being a kind of an army that is sent to deal with the burning forest... On one side it might be overestimating the power or the social skills of artists. Of course good projects might come out, but it would be weird if the function of arts would be reserved for this particular purpose.'

Here with Stefan, we see once again a theatre-maker who does not subscribe to the idea of theatre being a building block of big proud scenes, nations, markets or any other giant self-perpetuating structure. It is much more about being democratic in a way to be able to question these structures and build spaces for communicating and envisioning different and opposing worlds as well.



picture from Rimini Protokoll's 'RemoteHuston' (photo: ©UH Cynthia Woods, Mitchell Center for the Arts)

## AWAY FROM SECURITY

**Farida Hammad** is currently the Strategic Planning Director at **Mahatat for Contemporary Art** (Cairo, Egypt). She is also an artist and focuses on the interplay between spaces of expression and creative social movements. Currently, she is combining elements of graphic narrative and public space through comic creation and workshops.

**Hanane Hajj Ali** is a Lebanese actress, activist and researcher. She is a co-founder and general assembly member of **Al Mawred Al Thaqafy**, international training and research centre from Egypt. She is also a founder of **The Cooperative Cultural Association for Youth in Theatre and Cinema**. Hanane is a prolific author and researcher on theatre, arts and activism in Arab region.

So far, the discussion has been mostly European. However, if we want to become aware of habitual things and experience something different, it is useful to step out geographically as well. **Farida Hammad** is a member of the **Mahatat for Contemporary Art**, a Cairo-based arts collective devoted to producing performing arts events in public spaces across Egypt. She has joined Mahatat recently, after finishing Media in Development studies in London. Why public art? 'I think that it is important to always feel like the streets belong to the people' - Farida responds and continues: 'Every time we do a performance I feel that we are doing something in the streets because we can and we should'. Street culture is not at all uncommon in Egypt. In fact being on the street is a large part of daily life, but as Farida claims, 'there is not as much creative use of public spaces'. As a consequence, performing in public spaces draws quite some attention.

For Mahatat, the goal of drawing attention is however not the attention itself. It is part of the wider struggle for public space. 'Revolution changed the way we see public spaces - now, there is more ownership of the street' says Farida. However, not everyone is happy with these new developments. Big cultural venues, Cultural Palaces as locals call them, play a marginal role in these struggles. Under the firm control of the Ministry of Culture, they are centralised and often exclusive. On the other hand, memories of streets becoming a political arena for dissent are still fresh, so there are many ways in which the streets are overseen by various law enforcement services.



To get out of elite parts of the town and to question the status quo, the independent cultural scene in Egypt is devoted to reaching out, traveling to smaller cities, suburbs, reconnecting with all sorts of new initiatives as well as old popular cultural traditions like storytelling. As Heba El Cheikh, co-founder of Mahatat, wrote recently in an article<sup>2</sup>:

‘By organising artistic interventions in public spaces, not only do we offer an entertaining, fun, and reflective experience to the audience, but we also create a reference, a new collective image and memory about certain art forms that existed in the public sphere that we are restoring from neglect and dust.’

Right there, in the messy reality of metropolitan street life, between surprised and enchanted publics, inert cultural institutions and moral control of the streets, one can find a very peculiar and thought provoking practice of open-air theatre.

Being out there in the uncertainty and chaos of public space, Mahatat’s performers and producers learn to walk the slippery ground of audience engagement. One of the ways to reach out, but also to learn and adapt, is to use local intelligence. Everywhere they go, they cooperate with local volunteers, or what Mahatat calls ‘ambassadors’ who work to support the organisation once they are with the public. This is how Farida explains their role:

‘They walk around; they speak to people and encourage them to come and join the performance. They also spread flyers about the performance. ... People often ask ambassadors or us what it is about, and these conversations are very important for us.’

However, their ambassadors and performers are not aiming to construct another layer of citizen amelioration, education and control. When citizens approach them, it is the conversation they are after. As she says:

‘Instead of responding with spoon-fed answers, we ask them back, ‘what did you think about it, how did you interpret it?’. This is how we approach quote unquote audience development, by giving them more questions than answers and trying to interact, rather than do the step-in, step-out performance thing.’

Looking from the perspective of Western theatre tradition, this might be tagged as instrumentalisation of arts – turning it into a tool for learning, dialogue or some sort of social and political change. However, looking from a different perspective, drawing lines between arts and society seems unacceptable.

**Hanane Hajj Ali** is a devoted activist and artist working with marginalised groups in the Arab region for more than a decade. In one of her recent cultural relief projects ‘Action for hope’, they offered ‘A toolkit for life’. Toolkit here stands for much more - opportunities for artistic expression and exploration for those who have found themselves on the margins of life. For Hanane, it is a way of art:

‘Because of the situation and turmoil and hundreds of thousands of refugees in the Arab world, artists are aware that they want to do something good, but also to talk about it, make positive controversies. They experiment. ... In such situations I don’t feel I can commit to arts in a way to find a residency and be cut off from life. ... I didn’t choose theatre for fame; I’ve chosen it to be able to relate to others.’

Going back to the topic of audiences, there seems to be a shared feeling among many theatre-makers in Arab world that working with citizens is not part of a pre-fabricated set of tools and How-To’s. It is a part of a wider questioning of the place of art and artist in a society. And along with the questioning of art forms and positions, comes the questioning of audience assumptions. In turbulent and risky circumstances, easy explanations are of little worth.



Project Wonderbox visiting outskirts of the city (photo by Rana El Nemr, courtesy: Mahatat)



# 4

## *Tools*

In the second chapter, we have seen several ways of thinking and working with audiences that cross boundaries, question rationales and undermine rules and habits. These are just a glimpse of the whole wide world of different approaches and conceptions of audience engagement in performing arts. Every performing arts organisation has a story to tell and many meaningful interactions with audiences can be a discovery itself. However, we need to be sensitive to hear these stories and brave to let go of well-known narratives. Speaking of which, the final chapter is just about how to become more attentive to audiences around us.

In the spring of 2015, a group of students and I set out to explore the audience of a large punk-rock music festival in Novi Sad, Serbia. Before we presented our findings to the organisers, we asked them to describe their audiences. Being an alternative youth-oriented cultural centre, what they had in mind was a well-educated, progressive, cosmopolitan crowd - basically an extension of their organisational values. Unsurprisingly, they programmed their festival based on this. In addition, the festival promotes 'European values' and commemorates the 9th of May (Victory Day) as the fall of Fascism. However, these messages are not quite vocal, since the assumption is that audiences already know all that. What we found out was that one fourth of the visitors occupied the exact opposite place in the society: they listen to so-called turbo-folk music that is often packed with nationalist sentiments. However, they like to be part of outdoor music events and they enjoyed the festival very much. It is needless to say that these findings triggered a lot of thinking inside the organisation.

This example shows that if audience engagement is to be taken seriously, some serious learning, exploring and discovering has to take place. There are however many obstacles to that.

First, just like the organisation above, or as in every other cultural or media organisation, you probably have certain assumptions about audiences as a part of your organisational culture. You assume that people watching your performance will respond in a certain way, that people entering your venues will behave in a certain way; that your Facebook followers will share and like certain things you post and so on. Actually, not assuming is hard to imagine. Assumptions are based on some concrete experiences as well as some theories or rationales that were discussed at first - the choice of which is a consequence of your current position, interests and memories as the one who assumes. In any case, one of the crucial properties of this meaning-making process is that it is habitual and often not reflected upon - assumptions are applied without saying (this is why some call that image of the audience that is not completely conscious 'the implicit audience'). Nevertheless, it is a powerful imaging mechanism that shapes the way an organisation communicates with its publics, the way it programmes and selects works of art or it arranges and uses its venue. As such, assumptions about audiences are part of a wider ideological struggle, which is why it is a good idea to make them transparent.

Second, as actual audiences - those outside our head and venues - were a neglected part of the artistic world for so long, there is a serious shortage of information and knowledge on that side of the creative process. Most performing arts organisations, especially smaller ones that massively contribute to the diversity of the whole sector, still cannot afford expensive audience research. But even in the case of the most informed organisations, audiences are shifting and changing the way they behave.

When you combine the first and the second issue: assumptions and lack of reliable information about audiences, what you often get is a very false image of the audience that does more harm than good. This is why learning about audiences should become an integral part of organisational cultures. This final part of the guidebook aims to help with that.

Before I jump to the toolbox part, I would like to set the expectations right. First, this is not an all-encompassing guide on audience development. Numerous handbooks circulating on the web are a testament to a great development in the field. Thousands of organisations across the globe are experimenting with new ways of engaging their audiences. Every one of them probably has a story to share. Hence, this is just a selection from the abundance...

Moreover, the tools to be found here below are not in a particular order, nor are they presented in a step-by-step guide style. I simply do not find it feasible that any single model can prescribe the work of so many and such vastly different organisations in all sorts of contexts. This is more a kaleidoscopic overview of potential tools to think about and fiddle with.

Finally, it is not an all-in one solution. Guides on audience development are popping up on a monthly basis (check IETM's devoted [audience bibliography page](#)). Now, I think it is time to recognize this richness and to distinguish specific themes, approaches and resources. So this text shamelessly evades very important tools and approaches and focuses on those that could help us learn more about audiences and include them in our circles.

*When you combine assumptions and lack of reliable information about audiences, what you often get is a very false image of the audience that does more harm than good. This is why learning about audiences should become an integral part of organisational cultures.*

## EXPLORING THE IMPLICIT AUDIENCE

While doing research recently at a local media and community house in the city of Novi Sad, Serbia, it became clear to me that every department had its own version of the audience's image. Marketing and sales staff described their audience as a middle-class income cohort with urban taste. Journalists underlined the engaged and political attitude of their audience. Editors and site moderators couldn't help but notice how desperately rude and shallow their audiences are. Those in charge of community events saw sociability and sharing as a key trait of their typical audience. Bringing these implicit assumptions about audiences around a single table was an exciting experience. These wide differences came as a surprise to them, since everyone thought they had more or less the same image – after all, they do share the same audience. However, they do not share the same experiences of interacting with their audiences and the ways to interpret them.

Making those diverse images the common property of all employees and partners might enrich everyone's way of thinking. So, creating a space and a time where all members of the organisation can talk about their experiences with audiences might prove a worthy investment. If you decide to do so, it is important to involve all the different people in those discussions. For example, in a large venue, bartenders at the cafe, ticket sales personnel and security staff have just the same amount of relevant information as the actors or directors do (if not more). There are all sorts of ways you could organise this and you should decide based on the needs of your own organisation. In case you need inspiration, however, here are a few examples.

### **Memorable moments**

People watching performances are most often a crowd out there. But there are moments that stand out from the background; moments that are worthy of a memory. These moments also have the formative power for the image of audiences. Try sharing these moments with your colleagues and staff. You can go ahead and arrange them in any way that seems sensible to you. Everyone can write a short story over a period and drop it in the box or hang it on a wall. Moments could be also drawn or recorded as audio and/or video narratives. In any case, hearing many different stories will greatly expand the usual image of the audience that each individual member has.

### **Farewell notes**

When you deeply care about something, the image of losing it is so powerful that exploring this terminal experience might distil what is really important about the thing. The thing in question can also be your organisation. Ask your employees or colleagues to write down

their responses on a single sheet of paper to the question: Who would miss your organisation the most (and why) if it would cease to exist tomorrow? Ask for concrete stories. That old lady who sees every première, how would she feel and why? What about the young couple? Or that family who shows up in a big group? What would they all do? Analyse responses. What stands out from the descriptions? Who showed up in the stories? Is it your audiences at all? What kind of audiences? How emotional or distanced, how nuanced or generic are the responses? Closer relationships with audiences supposedly produce richer, more personal accounts and vice versa. Keep in mind also that these stories will be just as much about audiences as about those reflecting on them, so this might be a good starting ground for thinking about organisational values and culture as well.

Another version of the same exercise is to imagine a farewell party for your organisation. Who would show up? What would they bring? What would they write in the book of farewell notes?

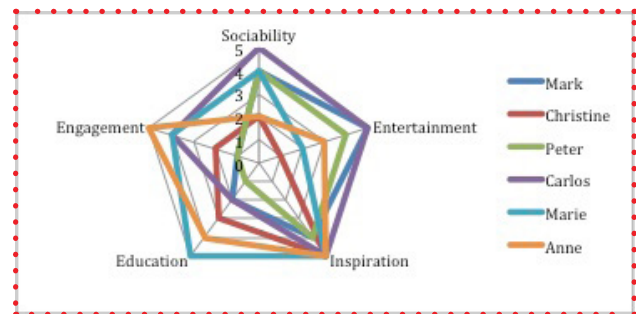
### **Webs of meaning**

The kind of exercises presented so far always reveal considerable differences in experiences and expectations. But beyond concluding that 'the audience is in the eye of the beholder', there are reasons to explore these differences (as any other). They often show the underlying structure of the social and political worlds we live in. As such, they can generate relevant insights for an arts organisation. To do so, you can bring together employees and give them predefined categories with which to rate prototypical audience members. Categories can also be discussed first and this exercise can be linked with the previous two by turning memorable moments or scenarios into categories. Let me clarify with an example.

Imagine a theatre venue run by five staff members with different posts. Based on current discussions and previous knowledge, they have agreed upon several key experiences that audiences are seeking. For the sake of the example these could be sociability, inspiration, education, entertainment and political engagement. Write those experiences on the paper in the form of a spider chart and ask all the staff members to fill in their own versions of the chart (see the picture at the next page). In the end, all marks are summed up (with or without the help of Excel or other tools).

In the case given above, the analysis could go on like this. Most staff members agree that inspiration is what audiences seek. Why is that so? Is that part of their organisational mission; is that what audiences leave as feedback most often; is that what they usually say when they advocate for their organisation, etc.? Other aspects are agreed upon less and differences could become a starter for conversations. For example, they could try asking Marie and Peter to discuss how important education is for audiences. How do they define education as well – is it a boring and patronising thing or

an inspirational one? Then, everyone could discuss sociability in the same manner. If things remain fuzzy, that might actually fuel everyone's interest in audiences. It could also be a good starting ground for inviting audiences for a similar kind of discussion. In that case, the audience could also define and explain what they feel and think about sociability, education, inspiration and what kind of choices would they make. Finally, the staff could see if they want to accommodate the venue, the programming or PR to better suit those aspects that the audience finds important.



Example of a spider chart

## EXPLORING ACTUAL AUDIENCES

Our own minds aside, learning about experiences, memories and perspectives of people coming for a performance is one of the foundations of any successful audience engagement programme. There are more and less common approaches, but all of them require time and often money, since most organisations don't have in-house resources to conduct research or analysis of great numbers of people. However, there are means of exploring without analysing and there are means of analysing without being overly scientific. Finally, it is about getting to know audiences, not properties of sub-atomic particles. The approaches that follow are suggested as relatively easy ways to do that.

### Research

Research, done properly, gathering and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data, is a time- and money-consuming activity. It is a powerful knowledge generator. Yet most performance arts organisations cannot afford it. Moreover, as an organisation shifts its trajectory, or if the context changes, audiences change as well. So, even large-scale research findings can have a rather short expiry date. This is why most of the tools here are not based on professional research. Still, having a skilled researcher around can be quite beneficial. This is why I would like to remind you of some ideas about how to have a more or less frequent stream of research findings without breaking the bank.

First, try looking from a researcher's point of view. Finding good cultural organisations as a basis for research is never easy. If you visit some research conferences or send a couple of emails and offer yourself as a partner, you could be surprised to find more potential researchers than you might have thought. On a similar note, there are more and more students doing their master's or doctoral studies on cultural management, marketing, audience participation and similar topics. So, try contacting sociology, management or arts departments at a local university. They might be just looking for their case studies. Finally, with the recent rise to prominence of audience development as a theme, research programmes and grants on the topic are getting more ubiquitous. Why not join

one of those (see the most recent [EU-wide initiative](#))? While some of these approaches could result in only partially usable material, it will surely shed more light on your audiences.

### Hanging out

What do you notice first when you enter [BIOS](#) – an independent theatre venue in Athens? A huge bar and coffee tables all around. Has drinking become the essence of theatrical experience? No (although [some would suggest otherwise](#)). And no, it is not due to stereotypical Greek, Balkan or Mediterranean lazy, coffee-drinking culture. Take another young theatre venue if you like – [Tobacco Factory Theatre](#) from Bristol – same story. Is it for financial benefit that these venues are there? Well, there's a bit of that as well for sure. Seeking financial autonomy is as old as the arts itself, so why miss a chance to earn some dimes. But crucial here is a wise insight that either theatre is a live social space or it does not exist on the everyday map of citizens. This is what sets it apart from watching television, reading a book or surfing the net at home.



Bar in Bios, Athens (source: [greece-is.com](http://greece-is.com))

However, many theatre houses are deserted places unless there are people coming in and out of the show. It is not about the aesthetics of the crowds here. It is rather about the experience of belonging to a group of theatre-goers and also about having opportunities to mingle, chat, learn, make friends (what sociologists would call weak-ties), all in the theatrical space. And it is also about spending time at the place where one is informed about upcoming shows, where organisation-related news is easily spread, where getting to know theatre-makers happens naturally and where it is also much easier to understand and value audience members and their experiences (but more on that below).

### Leaving traces

Recall your last visit to a performance arts venue. From the moment you enter it, to the moment you look for the way out, you are producing signs. By talking to a friend, commenting, ordering a drink, flicking through the programme, watching posters of upcoming plays, clapping, coughing, whoohooing or simply by moving your body in a certain way, you are telling a lot about your experience as an audience member. However, most of what you produce is ephemeral and lost the very moment it happens. This is what researchers call naturalized data and the good thing about it is its authenticity.

So, is there a way to keep some of it as audience feedback? Maybe not in its most spontaneous form, but there are certainly ways to make a venue more sensitive to these meaningful traces. At a recent workshop on audience engagement in Beirut, a group of cultural managers from the Arab world managed to think of more than fifteen ways that a single community hub in the city could collect feedback in nice and entertaining ways: napkins and menus for drawing and commenting; a hashtag blackboard wall to write on (and share); a photo booth for facial reactions after the show (and sharing again); an audio recorder for those who prefer to be vocal, and many more. Of course, stacking all these together would be madness, but experimenting with some of them might prove inspiring.

Enabling audience feedback to become part of the venue's ambience has additional benefits. Take a look at the photo from [Kiasma](#) - Museum of Contemporary Arts in Helsinki in the next page. On the way out of the exhibition, there is a white board with drawings and notes from audiences together with links to stay in touch. This is a common sight in many cultural organisations nowadays. What is interesting however is the door on the left. That little black board says, in four languages: Museum Director. We can only wonder what is the average speed at which the Director passes by the message board, but nevertheless, these responses serve as a reminder that some broken links need to be fixed<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Chris Dercon, director of Tate Modern in London once told he moved his office from top floors (one can only imagine the view of London from there) to lower floors to be able to stay connected with visitors and other staff.



Kiasma - Museum of Contemporary Arts in Helsinki (photo: Goran Tomka)

Finally, making your space sensitive and attentive to visitors is also an important welcome message to them. No matter what kind of interaction you opt for, the goal is to make a statement that cultural venues are not made of bricks, but of meaningful interactions that happen inside and around them.

### Buildings and audiences

Plato would say that the body is the prison of the soul. Now, that was millennia ago; new developments in philosophy, biology and neural science are working hard to bridge the mind-body gap. But that metaphor can still be interesting for our own case. Many arts organisations are synonymous with their venues (if they have one). When I ask my students to come up with a definition of theatre, some sort of 'a building in which plays are taking place' always finds its way into the selection. And yes, it is hard to imagine a healthy theatre life without theatre buildings. These venues are important landmarks, heritage and a sticker saying, 'Come to see the show here'. But as good as they are, they are also very selective by definition.

Back at IETM's Athens Plenary, I was moderating a panel on audience engagement with Jan Goossens from [Royal Flemish Theatre](#) as one of the speakers. He told a rather strange story. Once their venue was closed for refurbishment, they found themselves in a temporary space in the immigrant neighbourhood far from their usual visitors. So, while looking for new audiences, they rediscovered their mission as well and managed to create a programme that is both more diverse and more relevant for the city. However, during the discussion in Athens it became clear that this story is not that strange at all. Right after his speech a couple of participants told their own versions of the same narrative, only from other European countries.

And it's not only theatres. Some say that one of the most vivid periods of visual arts in Sweden was when the [National Museum in Stockholm](#) closed for refurbishment. While traveling to smaller cities throughout that vast land, the museum discovered a whole new world of audiences, spaces and opportunities.

Although this might sound too much, it seems that once the organisation is out of its usual routes, it struggles to reconnect to society, and the ones to benefit the most are precisely those who used to be excluded from the status quo. And no, I am not suggesting premature refurbishments, nor shutting down venues. But rather benefiting from the same kind of insights with thought experiments. What makes audiences enter or avoid your venue? Are there some barriers that could be removed? Who are the ones that are not part of your audience? Does it have to do with the programme, or is it the venue? In what ways are your programmes received at a different location? The goal is to become aware of the venue as an asset and a burden at the same time and to separate for a moment building from content, and see if there are some things that could be better arranged once things are back in place.

## EXPLORING TOGETHER

The previous two groups of tools shared a common trait – they conceive the audience as a relatively distant entity that can be explored (as groups of people or as an image). That is probably just the way it really is for most theatre-makers and venues. However, for those who look rather at audiences as communities (no matter how temporary) of potential collaborators and wish to involve them in various organisational and creative processes, the exploration of what audiencehood is about can be a joint endeavour. Several tools below might help in pushing that undertaking forward.

### After show talks

Talks after the show have grown to be both the most common and the most debated way of interacting with audiences in a direct manner. And it is not hard to see why. They are common because they are so simple and natural. We talk all the time about all sorts of things, so why not about theatre plays. But then, that quotidian logic falls to pieces and what we are left with is a stiff, highly hierarchical and sacralised experience. I remember once asking a theatre director during the talk if he had something to ask us as audiences. He seemed confused for a moment and then said no, as if I'd asked him if he has a goat for a pet. If we want to reinvent talks, and there are all the reasons to do so, those have to become easy and relaxed.

In her work on arts talk, Lynn Conner claims that 'Arts talk should be as common and as democratic as sports talk. Our societal goal should be to construct an interpretative culture about arts-going

that feels ordinary, familiar and whose boundaries are permeable and expansive'<sup>2</sup>. This should be a holy commandment for arts talks' moderators. Their role is to prevent any kind of hierarchy from forming and to enable discussion to run smoothly and without any pressure.

There are many ways to go around the awkward moments of silence as well. First, arts talks are not about explaining anything, nor are they press conferences, and they are not another chance for theatre-makers to take the centre stage and do some more performing. This is about audiences and their interpretations. The goal is to support their expression or understanding. Set the conversation mode and invite audiences to think in a conversational way well before the talk. Actually, it can even be before the show. [Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company](#) from the US did a wise thing and handed out fortune cookies to their audiences before the show with printed questions for discussion inside<sup>3</sup>. So, while watching the show, these questions stayed in the backs of their minds. Once the show was over, many more people wanted to exchange their views because they had already invested some time thinking about them.

Another great idea is to make discussion and interpretation a group thing from the start. In 2015, Fresh Arts Coalition Europe (FACE) initiated a [co-spectatorship programme](#) in which organisations pair one artist and one audience member to go see the show and talk about it. In such way, outsiders become insiders and can feel empowered to step in with their interpretations. A radical approach to theatre and talks is the example of Greek artists and their symposium form discussed earlier – the symposia. It is a performance turned into a talk and vice versa. As they define it, it is about togetherness and learning to share our existence. While they do it, they also offer a great connection with the imaginative and interpretative worlds of audiences and help remove barriers to the access to the creative process.

### Creative self-exploration

Speaking of creativity and barriers, talking is not the only way to share, neither it is everyone's preferred mode of human communication. At a workshop-like encounter, moderators from [Manchester's Library Theatre Company](#) asked their spectators to reflect on their experiences of a show by drawing their favourite scenes, reinventing some parts of the show or by coming up with a different ending<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Conner, L. (2013). 'Audience engagement and the role of arts talk in the digital era'. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>3</sup> See more about this and other cases in Brown, A. & Ratzkin R. (2011). 'Making Sense of Audience Engagement'. San Francisco Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> You can learn more about the project in Wilkinson, J. (2015). 'Disaffected ghosts: Theatre spectatorship and the production of cultural value'. *Participations*, 12(1), 133-153.



They did these exercises right after the show and, on several occasions, after time had passed. What they wanted to find out is the capacity of audiences to interpret and negotiate meanings around the staged piece (the show in question was not a participatory one itself). In line with Rancière's concept of the emancipated spectators, they found out that there is a lot of creative, analytical, critical and expressive thought happening in the minds of spectators during and after the show, no matter how still their bodies are.

Similar approaches can include all sorts of techniques and media. Probably a lot can be learned from museum pedagogy in this respect. Audiences could explore aspects of the performance by making their own photo journals, diaries, poems, or short videos. Impressions can be recorded in improvised phone booths on the way out of the venue and discussions about the play can also spill over into the digital sphere. It is best if these extended conversations are part of the artistic work. In Ontroerend Goed's play 'Internal', participants continue their relations with performers months after the show by sending letters, which end up exhibited at the entrance of the venue. All this helps engage audiences with the content they experienced in a direct and intimate way and creates learning and sharing communities around the event. For spectators or participants it is a chance to further explore their experiences; for theatre-makers, it is a way to understand the reception and meaning of their work.

### Co-creation

Next to talks and workshops, participatory works are synonymous with audience engagement. However, they could be both much more and much less than audience exploration, depending on the way they are staged. They are much more because, as a theatrical movement or even a form, participation changes theatre language, the aesthetics, well, everything. But participatory work can also fall short of exploration if participation is only about filling in tightly prescribed posts within the firm structure of the play without any real space for expression, reflection, imagination, exploration, etc. Knowing at the same time that there are tomes written on theatre participation, it's important just to highlight that participation can provide opportunities for exploration and contribute towards the creation of shared learning and living communities (no matter how temporary they are).

'100% City' is a global theatrical event – a documentary play with one hundred participants on stage, selected by their demographics by asking each new participant to find another one (sometimes called snowball or chain method), who show their lives and tell their stories related to political, social and economic issues of the specific city. While there is a difference between participants and audiences, the former are not usual theatre-people, which makes audiences diverse as well (because everyone invites their friends to see the show, of course). In such a way, the play is about audiences – their lives are staged through the documentary dramaturgical

process beforehand. This type of work, which starts with artistic research into the everyday lives of common people, is without a doubt a way to initiate an exploratory process for theatre makers and audiences alike.

### Co-programming

If audience engagement stretches from playful to serious, involving audiences in the programming process is as serious as it gets. It also means handing the most responsibility and power away. While it can be challenging, it is possibly the clearest message that an organisation wants to open up and share. However, the process can start slowly and build up as time progresses. At the beginning, the organisation defines the goal of the whole initiative and the target group and calls for the members of the audience board<sup>5</sup>. After its foundation, the board can be invited to respond and discuss existing events. Since board members should be non-professionals, these discussions will make them acquainted with the organisation, its internal functioning and external environment. They will also learn to evaluate programmes and discuss them in an open manner. Then, as they find gaps in the programme, some time and space can be devoted to their choices. That could be a Community Tuesday or Sunday where they will serve as curators of certain activities they feel would enrich the theatre's activities and bring it closer to the surrounding communities. This challenge can lead to a festival or some other semi-autonomous form. Along the way, the board can actually contribute towards much more than the programme. As they get involved in various organisational processes, they could offer valuable feedback on aspects ranging from ticket sales and merchandising to furnishing. But unlike casual visitors, they will spend more time and devote more attention to everything the organisation does.

On the downside, what you should be careful about is that the board overtime can shift into two undesirable directions. One is that they grow distant from their environments and lose touch. It is wise to change board members on some regular basis. The other is that the gravitational force of the organisation as such can suck them in and they might align too much with the usual ways of behaving.

Other than this, boards can be very beneficial. As Katie and Mel from Theatre Bristol mentioned, you cannot diversify the audience without diversifying creators. Audience boards contribute towards diversity on the production side. They are also an immediate and direct insight into worlds outside the performing arts. If they are chosen properly, to be a proxy to the wider communities they are a part of, they create much-needed communication channels for the organisation.

<sup>5</sup> See Take Over project for one example of setting up an audience board that aimed at rejuvenating audiences.

# 5

*To be continued...*



'It is essential to closely watch those who watch publics' – wrote Daniel Dayan<sup>1</sup>. The reason is that the way we think, talk and work with audiences is highly ideological. The more these practices are habitual and obscured, the more dangerous they become. This is why the villains of the story I have been telling from the beginning are simplified, generalised notions of the audience and prescribed ways of developing, engaging or including audiences in performance arts worlds.

Instead, I have tried to argue for complex, situated, contextualised and flexible articulations of audiences and approaches to audience engagement. Everything that has been said however is nothing more than the tip of an iceberg. One thing is certain. Beneath the surface of habit, more surprises are waiting and as we go deeper into the individual and collective world of audiences, spectators, participants and communities, assumptions are less and less valuable.

As a farewell, I would like to leave you with a short story told by Farida Hammad from Cairo's Mahatat for Contemporary Arts. It beautifully encapsulates some of the crucial messages of this whole publication:

'We had a dance performance in Port Said. It was a night performance in a local bazaar. And inside the bazaar there was a mosque. We gathered and waited for prayers to finish. It is disrespectful to perform during the prayer in front of the mosque – we would never do that, so we waited. After the main part of the prayer had finished, we wanted to start the performance. But we were very hesitant. There were still a lot of people inside the mosque who wanted to stay longer and pray. We were worried about what would be their reactions if we started. But just as the anxiety of our performers grew, the local imam saw us waiting and said to everyone: 'Ok everyone, we finished our prayer today. Let us grab our chairs and watch the performance.' So they went out of the mosque, took the chairs and joined our performance. We were in quite a shock. We had all those assumptions and worries about people who could be offended. But no, there are no expectations, no assumptions. It is just about being sensitive to people and areas we are performing and working in.'



Dance performance audiences in Port Said, Egypt (photo by Mohamed Kamal, courtesy: Mahatat).

<sup>1</sup> p. 44 in Dayan, D. (2010). 'Mothers, midwives and abortionists: genealogy, obstetrics, audiences & publics'. In U.S. Livingstone, 'Audiences and Publics: When cultural engagement matters for the public sphere'. Bristol: Intellect.