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AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Abstract

Audience Engagement is a challenging concept. There is no one shared definition and can be an ambivalent term especially when put in relation to the aim of ‘diversifying’ audiences. The article aims to contribute to the understanding of how Audience Engagement can be both framed and implemented as a process which is able to foster and give value to cultural diversity. To this end, we firstly provide a framework of culture and arts as a space of citizenship while discussing key issues that set the stage for an understanding of Audience Engagement as a process of cultural participation and promotion of cultural diversity. In the second part of the article we present an ongoing action-research, implemented in the project “Performing Gender- Dancing in Your Shoes-DIYS” (Creative Europe 2020-2023). The initial insights presented in this essay enrich the understanding of Audience Engagement, by shedding light on the role of co-creation and of cultural operators (organizations and artists) in the mediation of a “constitution of a cosmopolitan imaginary”.

Keywords

Audience Engagement; cultural participation; cultural citizenship; mediation; co-creation; aesthetic cosmopolitanism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Audience Engagement is a challenging concept. There is no one shared definition. It is an “expression used in practice and literature in a very different and not codified way, like the many expressions that belong to the semantics of Audience Development”¹.

Engagement itself is a “loose and vague concept”², particularly when used in isolation. Complementary to this, scholars have underlined how the field of cultural policies is characterised by a risk of deliberate ambiguity³, since the excessively vague use of

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¹ A. Bollo *et al.*, *Study on Audience Development. How to Place Audiences at the Centre of Cultural Organisations*, EU Commission, 2017, 55.

² B. Walmsley, *Audience Engagement in the Performing Arts. A Critical Analysis*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 9.

³ C. Gray, “Ambiguity and Cultural Policies”, *Nordic Journal of Cultural policy*, 1, 18 (2015): 66-80.

terms makes it difficult to discuss the outcomes of a policy. This is especially a risk when Audience Engagement is put in relation to the aim of ‘diversifying’ audiences.

Moreover, we argue that Audience Engagement run the risk of being conceived as a mere way of marketing audiences to ‘fill the theatre’, often under pressure to attract financing.

In this contribution we do not set out to provide a conclusive definition of Audience Engagement, nor are we interested in pursuing a prescriptive approach. On the contrary, the article aims to contribute to the understanding of how Audience Engagement can be both framed and implemented as a process which is able to foster and give value to cultural diversity.

This research assumes that engagement is not only a matter of reaching out to audiences, rather it is a process that deeply intersects issues of social and cognitive justice⁴, and cultural citizenship⁵.

To this end, we firstly provide an overview of a number of perspectives that can contribute to framing culture and arts as a space of performative citizenship⁶ while discussing key issues that set the stage for an understanding of Audience Engagement as a process of cultural participation⁷ and promotion of cultural diversity.

In the second part of the article we will present an ongoing action-research, implemented in the project “Performing Gender- Dancing in Your Shoes-DIYS” (Creative Europe 2020-2023). In particular, we discuss a number of initial insights, concerning meanings and practices of Audience Engagement that are emerging in this phase of the project.

2. ART AND CULTURE AS A SPACE OF CITIZENSHIP

“While citizenship is defined as the formal, legal frameworks that underpin belonging to a nation, cultural citizenship refers to the informal, cultural dimensions that facilitate belonging and enable one to contribute to, and shape, the dominant culture”⁸.

There are different modalities in which these informal dimensions of citizenship can be performed. Our attention focuses in particular on the sphere of arts and cultural expression as a space of cultural participation and, in a recursive way, of enactment of citizenship⁹ and cultural diversity.

To shed light on this view we will refer to a number of complementary perspectives.

The first concerns what Dahlgren¹⁰ defines as *civic cultures*, cultural resources that citizens can tap into in order to participate and ‘become citizens’. Civic cultures are also

⁴ B. De Sousa Santos, *Another Knowledge Is Possible. Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, London: Verso, 2007.

⁵ G. Allegrini, “Prospettive di analisi della dimensione culturale del welfare di comunità”, in *Welfare culturale. La dimensione della cultura nei processi di welfare di comunità*, edited by G. Manzoli and R. Paltrinieri, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2021: 91-114.

⁶ E. Isin, G. Nielson, *Acts of Citizenship*, London: Zed Books, 2008.

⁷ R. Paltrinieri, “Il valore sociale della cultura per lo sviluppo delle comunità e dei territori: cosa significa partecipazione culturale”, *PANDORA*, 8, 9 (2019): 122-125.

⁸ R. Khan *et al.*, *Multiculturalism and Governance. Evaluating Art Policy. Engaging Cultural Citizenship*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2017, 4.

⁹ L. Iannelli, P. Musarò, eds., *Performative Citizenship. Public Art, Urban Design, and Political Participation*, Milano: Mimesis International, 2017; P. Hildebrand *et al.*, eds., *Performing Citizenship. Bodies, Agencies, Limitations*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

¹⁰ P. Dahlgren, “Reinventare la partecipazione. Civic agency e mondo della rete”, in *Comunicazione e civic engagement*, edited by R. Bartoletti and F. Faccioli, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2013: 17-37.

part of a broader civic environment which operates as an enabling environment, since it can structure the opportunities of participation. Social capital, the organisational resources of a group or a community, but also including institutional trust, are factors that can inform this type of civic environment.

The second concerns what Appadurai¹¹ defines as “cultural capacities to aspire” which determine the possibility of re-appropriation of representations and the creation of alternative scenarios about how issues, categories, solutions are socially and discursively constructed. This process deeply intersects with a process of *imagination*, that can set up a transformation of cultural and cognitive repertoires, questioning which types of representation are reproduced, opening up new meanings and actions. These capacities are not distributed evenly in the society due to social inequalities, and they are also strictly connected with the possibility to dissent.

A complementary perspective is the idea of “le partage du sensible”, elaborated by Rancière, which is concerned with how ideas, abilities and experiences are distributed and shared. Indeed, as stated by the author: “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time”¹². In this sense politics consists in the reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible through the setting up of “scenes of dissensus”¹³.

As underlined by Papastergiadis¹⁴ imagination is a “world picture-making process”. And “through the perpetual function of the imaginative world picture-making, aesthetic is always cosmopolitan”.

The term Cosmopolitanism has been conceived “as both the product of an idea of world and ideal form of global citizenship”¹⁵. However, various interpretations of universalism have been developed by different theoretical approaches to cosmopolitanism. As the author points out a key contribution comes from a critical approach, since it tries to address the terms of equity and also to sharpen the focus on the logic of exclusion, thus rethinking universality through diversity. This interpretation sees universalism as based on an essential multiplicity and thus on the idea of dialogue¹⁶ and mutual interaction between context-bound positions. Universalism in this perspective is shaped by “the interminable process of cross-cultural dialogue”. The focus is therefore on dialogue between alternate interpretations. This version of universalism is key to frame a critical theory of cosmopolitanism since it postulates an “iterative process where cosmopolitanism is conceived not as a state that is comprised of fixed categories, but as the ongoing activity through which multiple identities communicate with each other within an arena of mutual recognition”¹⁷.

As stated by the author, it should however overcome a “deliberative” interpretation of cosmopolitanism and look at the “signs of an aesthetic cosmopolitanism”. Thus, the

¹¹ A. Appadurai, *Le aspirazioni nutrono la democrazia*, Milano: Et al. Edizioni, 2011; *Il futuro come fatto culturale: saggi sulla condizione globale*, Milano: Raffello Cortina Editore, 2014.

¹² J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, London: Continuum, 2004, 13.

¹³ J. Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*, London-New York: Continuum, 2010, 69.

¹⁴ N. Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, Malden: Polity Press, 2012, 90.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶ E. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, London: Verso, 2002.

¹⁷ Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, 88.

focus is on the “aesthetic interest in others and difference” and on the “imaginary constitution of cosmopolitanism through aesthetic practices”¹⁸.

3. AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT, CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AND THE PROMOTION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Audience Engagement is usually considered as a part of a broader strategy of Audience Development. The latter term was originally used in the field of cultural marketing. Nowadays it is broadly seen as an approach aimed at placing the public at the centre of everything the organization does and at making the arts widely accessible¹⁹.

The European Commission has invested heavily in promoting cultural access through the Creative Europe project (2014-2020).

Within that framework Audience Development has been defined as:

a strategic, dynamic and interactive process of making the arts widely accessible. It aims at engaging individuals and communities in experiencing, enjoying, participating in and valuing the arts through various means available today for cultural operators, from digital tools to volunteering, from co-creation to partnerships. Audience development can be understood in various ways, depending on its objectives and target groups.

Access is also connected with the different types of publics to be reached²⁰. These include:

- Audience *by habit*: people who habitually attend and/or participate in cultural activities. Here different strategies are possible, like audience education or taste cultivation to increase and diversify content and attendance.
- Audience *by choice*: people who are not used to participating due to a lack of opportunities or inadequate financial resources.
- Audience *by surprise*: people who are hard to reach/indifferent/or even hostile who do not participate in any cultural activity for a complex range of reasons, related to social exclusion factors, education and accessibility.

This classification encompasses three main aims. The first aim is *Widening*, which entails increasing audience numbers through attracting a public with the same socio-demographic profile as the current audience and attracting new audiences. The second is *Deepening*, which refers to enhancing the experience of the current audiences and/or encouraging them to discover more complex art forms.

Finally, *diversifying* refers to attracting people with a different socio-demographic profile to the current audiences, including people with no previous contact with the arts.

This interpretation of Audience Development sheds light on a number of significant aspects: the necessity of taking into consideration *different types of publics*, the importance of implementing *different modalities of participation*, the focus on the *access* to culture, the *relational dimension* implied in Audience Development – between cultural organisations and publics.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

¹⁹ Bollo *et al.*, *Study on Audience Development*.

²⁰ The classification reworks the proposal of Kawashiwa: N. Kawashima, “Beyond the Division of Attenders vs. Non-Attenders: A Study into Audience Development in Policy and Practice”, Working Paper, Coventry: University of Warwick, 2000.

As part of this type of Audience Development process, engagement in literature is defined in two main ways.

The first considers it as a step in the Audience Development process²¹. The first step is the *reach* phase (*outreach*), aimed at attracting existing or potential publics mainly through promotional activities which are designed to break down material barriers, as well as symbolic barriers, by working on the overall organization of the cultural offer, by focusing on information and communication, on times, costs, and venues of the offer.

The second step is properly the *engage* phase which aims to activate a significant context of fruition, of interaction and of experiencing art, through different activities that range from art education (e.g. encounters with the public before or after a performance), co-curating (e.g. a board consisting of young critics) and co-creating²².

The second definition refers to the idea of a “ladder” indicating ever-increasing degrees of involvement²³.

Brown and Novak-Leonard²⁴ propose an Audience Development spectrum based on the distinction of two main phases. The first is defined as receptive and ranges from the idea of being a spectator in strict sense of the word to the creation of an enabling environment for engagement through various activities, mainly in the field of art education. The second is the participative phase, based on three main types of activities:

a) *crowd sourcing*, which basically refers to a consultation or in making a contribution as participants with ideas and creative contents, to an already defined artistic product;

b) *co-creation* which coincides with participatory artistic practices, thus with contributing to an artistic process curated by an artist;

c) activities that coincide with the idea of ‘the *audience as artist*’, where audiences can take the control of the artistic process. Thus, these three types of activities foresee three different levels of “creative control”: *curating*, *interpretative* and *inventive*.

We argue that the interpretation of engagement as outlined here poses a number of issues that need to be critically addressed in order to avoid a mere marketing approach and to favour engagement in relation to cultural diversity. In particular: the issue of access and its relationship with cultural participation and mediation; the role of cultural organizations and the way of framing the relationship between them and the audiences.

These issues will be discussed in the following sections of the article.

3.1. *Access, mediation and cultural diversity*

Access can be an ambivalent term. Indeed, it can be informed by different types of paradigms, which are often in tension with one another: the idea of the *democratization*

²¹ A. Bollo, “Cinquanta sfumature di pubblico e la sfida dell’audience development”, in *I pubblici della cultura. Audience Development, Audience Engagement*, edited by F. De Biase, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2014: 163-180.

²² We will deeper analyse co-creation in the second part of this contribution.

²³ This idea of ‘laddering’ the intensity of involvement is consolidated in the literature on participation. See: S. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation”, *Journal of American Institute of Planners*, 35, 4 (1969): 216-224; N. Carpentier, “The Concept of Participation: If They Have Access and Interact, Do They Really Participate?”, in *Performative Citizenship. Public Art, Urban Design, and Political Participation*, edited by L. Iannelli and P. Musarò, Milano: Mimesis International, 2017: 25-49.

²⁴ A.S. Brown, J.L. Novak-Leonard, in partnership with S. Gilbride, *Getting In On the Act. How Arts Groups Are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation*, San Francisco: James Irvin Foundation, 2011, 15-18.

of culture, that focuses on the *access to an existing culture*; and the idea of *cultural democracy*, which is based on the promotion of creativity through the appropriation of the means of cultural expression and of cultural production, as well as the idea of culture as a place for the recognition of “otherness”²⁵.

These ideas regarding the democratization of culture can also be seen in relation to an interpretation of access mainly as access to the cultural offer, thus stressing a more passive role of audiences in consuming arts.

The concept of cultural democracy, on the contrary, helps to shift from an idea of ‘access to cultural offer’ to ‘access to *cultural experience*’, thus opening up a more active role of audiences.

From this point of view the consumption of culture is understood as an interactive meaning-making process, involving a symbolic and narrative dimension. This also means that we can consider Audience Engagement as a process which is able to foster cultural participation, framed as the possibility of participating in knowledge production²⁶, and as a process which is able to promote “the imaginative world picture-making” mentioned in the first part of the article.

This understanding of access can deeply influence the practices of Audience Engagement.

Indeed, it suggests rethinking the way in which cultural organizations see themselves in their relationship with audiences.

The (out)reach activities, or the activities oriented towards enabling the engagement described above, can foster a more diversified cultural consumption. However, it is from the perspective of cultural participation that a further step can be implemented, asking cultural organizations to look at themselves in a more decentralized way, not only in relation *to*, but also in relationship *with* audiences.

This position of cultural organizations can be translated into two main practices of engagement. The first concerns the activation of *contexts for the engagement*, by considering how much participation ‘makes sense’ in different types of places. In urban sociology this perspective coincides with an ecological approach that sheds light on the relationship between participation and the social interactions that occur at different spatial scales, the latter seen as ‘relational environments’²⁷.

In the field of arts and culture Brown and Novak-Leonard²⁸ propose we take a look at the “ecosystem of culture”, which is made up of different types of venues seen in relation to each other: purpose-built arts venues; community spaces such as schools, places of worship, recreational facilities, libraries and other neighbourhood venues; outdoor public spaces such as parks, sidewalks and streets; virtual spaces, including websites, blogs, posts and games; the home.

A second practice of engagement refers to *mediation*. Mediation in the art field²⁹, and in the context of Audience Engagement, is usually framed as *mediation of art*. Ac-

²⁵ L. Bonet, E. Négrier, “The End(s) of National Cultures? Cultural Policy in the Face of Diversity”, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 17, 5 (2011): 574-589.

²⁶ R. Paltrinieri, G. Allegrini, *Partecipazione, processi di Immaginazione Civica e sfera pubblica*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2020, 33-90.

²⁷ D. Ciaffi, A. Mela, *La partecipazione. Dimensioni, spazi, strumenti*, Roma: Carocci, 2006, 81-124.

²⁸ Brown, Novak-Leonard, in partnership with Gilbride, *Getting In On the Act. How Arts Groups Are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation*, 7.

²⁹ For an account of Audience Development in the field of intercultural dialogue see: P. Musarò, *Atlas of Inclusion. Performing Arts, Intercultural Dialogue and Audience Development*, in *Right to the City, Performing Arts and Migration*, edited by R. Paltrinieri et al., Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2020: 66-86.

tivities of art education or co-curating activities mentioned above are part of this view. The attention is on the development of capabilities in codifying, de-codifying, negotiating meanings, and in the appropriation of aesthetic principles of an artistic practice or performance. This is also called the “work of the spectators”³⁰ based on the idea of the “performativity” of being a spectator³¹.

Alongside this interpretation of mediation, we can identify another perspective which looks at art as a *space of mediation*. This perspective can be found in particular in the debate regarding heritage studies. According to Pecci³² cultural heritage can be seen as “mediator of relations” where differences can be explored. A step further is proposed by Grechi³³ indeed, she underlines that what is needed nowadays is a process of “re-mediation”, by welcoming a change of the medium that means to set up a change of the relationship between objects, spaces, bodies, publics, cultural operators. In this sense remediation can creatively become a way to produce counter- narratives and also to make visible invisible narratives.

3.2. Culture of engagement and the role of cultural organisations

The issues explored up to this point suggest that Audience Engagement should be framed as a broader process of fostering cultural citizenship and participation, in which a key role is played by cultural organisations. It has been also stressed that a number of critical aspects should be addressed in terms of paradigms and practices. Thus, we can maintain that there is a need to examine the ‘culture of engagement’ performed by cultural organizations and influencing the practices of engagement.

In particular, this culture of engagement should frame the publics not simply as the “focus” of the organization’s attempts to develop effective Audience Development strategies, but as *partners* in a process of *exchange* that takes place in the cultural and artistic fields³⁴.

On one hand this view goes beyond an “audience focused” approach mainly oriented to a product-target vision, while on the other it does not coincide with a totally “audience led” approach based on the idea of “audience as artist”. On the contrary Walmsley proposes an idea of audience centered organizations that are engaged in fostering artistically-led process, based on “an open culture of engagement by developing ‘artistic exchange relationships’ with audiences and treating them as creative partners”³⁵.

Finally, this culture of engagement entails attending to a multiplicity of relationships – between cultural organizations and the various publics, but also those between organizations, artists and publics – in horizontal terms. In this perspective it is possible

³⁰ M. Reason, A.M. Londelof, eds., *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2016.

³¹ L. Gemini, R. Bartoletti, S. Brilli, “Il lavoro dello spettatore dal vivo: capitale culturale ed esperienza. Il caso del pubblico del Rossini Opera Festival”, *Sociologia della comunicazione*, 56 (2018): 43-64.

³² A.M. Pecci, “In between. Riflessioni situate su pratiche partecipate di mediazione dei patrimoni culturali”, in *Rimediare, Ri-mediare. Saperi, tecnologie, culture, comunità, persone*, edited by F. de Biase, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2020: 151-162.

³³ G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2021, 31.

³⁴ Walmsley, *Audience Engagement in Performing Arts*, 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

to refer to the idea of ‘Ecology of culture’, as a metaphor³⁶ that underpins a non-hierarchical view, based on the interdependence of elements that make up a system of culture, and incorporating concepts of collaboration and reciprocity.

4. “PERFORMING GENDER-DANCING IN YOUR SHOES”:³⁶ AIMS AND METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

“Performing Gender-Dancing In You Shoes” (PG-DIYS)³⁶, is a three-year Audience Development project, funded by the Creative Europe program. It is aimed at developing a bond between cultural operators in the field of dance and performing arts and their local communities through a discussion on gender in the European dance system. The project is coordinated by Gender Bender- Cassero LGBTI Center based in Bologna (Italy) and the partnership includes 11 cultural organizations (dance festivals, LGBT+ associations, universities, production centres) from 8 European countries – France, Hungary, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, United Kingdom.

In particular, it has the following aims:

1) improving the access to creative works in the field of dance, focusing on youngsters, the elderly, migrants and underrepresented LGBT+ groups, adopting an intersectional perspective;

2) exploring which kind of Audience Engagement practices can promote empowerment of marginalized groups and forms of solidarities, thus developing tools, languages and best practices that are able to create a space where cultural diversity can be experienced;

3) involving cultural organizations, dance makers, audience communities, policy institutions and academics in co-design and co-creation processes to deconstruct social and cultural dynamics, such as privilege and power³⁷;

4) pursuing a capacity building of cultural organizations, particularly in relation to a co-design and co-creation approach, as well as through the sharing of practices with local bodies and other cultural organisations;

5) promoting awareness of gender related issues (such as power relations and structures) and of the value of a co-creation approach at policy level in the field of art and culture.

In this context the Italian University partner – the Department of the Arts of Bologna University and its cultural laboratory, DAMSLab – is carrying out an action research³⁸ with the double aim of elaborating approaches to Audience Engagement based on co-design and co-creation, and able to value differences; understanding the social impact of those practices. The research foresees 4 main steps.

0. Planning: sharing the research plan as well as key concepts and assumptions;

³⁶ J. Holden, *The Ecology of Culture*, Report commissioned by Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Cultural Value Project, Swindon, Wiltshire, 2015.

³⁶ <http://www.performinggender.eu/>

³⁷ The project foresees a yearlong community dance practice that will lead to a production approach, with the involvement of one rooted community dance maker per partner and a travelling dancemaker. After a residency in their own country, they will make a residency abroad.

³⁸ K. Lewin, “Action Research and Minority Problems”, *Journal of Social Issues*, 2, 4 (1946): 34-46; P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum, 2007. In this context we can also refer to a Public Sociology practice: G. Allegrini, “Sociologia pubblica e democrazia partecipativa. Una proposta di analisi critica”, *Quaderni di Teoria Sociale*, 1 (2019): 61-84.

1. Exploring: collection of data by each partner concerning their specific context of intervention, previous experiences of co-design and co-creation, participative observation during the project meetings; in depth interviews and working sessions in small groups³⁹.

2. Action-Observation: translation of the shared knowledge into action; progressive understanding and systematization of practices; in-depth case study “Gender Bender – Cassero” with a participative observation of the overall process of Audience Engagement and through qualitative tools such as focus groups and interviews; social impact assessment⁴⁰ within the approach of the Theory of Change⁴¹, with an ex ante, itinere and final quantitative and qualitative data collection.

3. Sedimentation: co-design sessions of a final handbook, among the partner and with local communities; systematization of data for social impact analysis and dissemination activities.

It should be stressed that the project is still ongoing. In this contribution we want to shed light on a number of insights emerging from the “exploring” phase, in particular in relation to the interviews and the working sessions in small groups, and from the initial part of the “action” phase – in particular concerning the participative observation during the co-design process with the Italian partner Gender Bender-Cassero and the two Italian dancemakers. Thus, we are not aiming to provide a systemized presentation of results, but an outline ‘sketch’ of a number of key issues and dimensions. In the following section we will present and discuss our initial findings, in the context of what have been discussed above.

5. AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AS MEDIATION OF IMAGINARY CONSTITUTION OF COSMOPOLITANISM

In the theoretical part of the article we propose to look at the arts as a space of “performative citizenship” and aesthetic practices as an imaginary constitution of cosmopolitanism. From this perspective we also proposed to frame Audience Engagement as a way to pursue this type of “world-picture making process” where cultural diversity is considered.

The PGDYS project has embarked on this path of reframing Audience Engagement. In particular, we maintain that the project is fostering an understanding of Audience Engagement as *a mediation of an imaginary constitution of cosmopolitanism*. This implies an auto-reflexive posture of cultural operators, which is being played out on a daily basis in the PGDYS project.

The following analytical dimensions concerning the role of cultural organizations

³⁹ The interviews revolved around how the cultural organisations interpret Audience Engagement, how they have already experienced co-creation processes, how they see their role in these processes. A number of key issues emerged from the interviews which have been discussed in working sessions in small groups with artistic directors, audience developers and project managers in relation to the project. These sessions have been conducted with the “World café” methodology.

⁴⁰ Social impact of arts is a contested concept in the literature. There is no space for a satisfactory account of this issue here. Key references of the debate are: E. Belfiore, “Art as a Means of Alleviating Social Exclusion: Does It Really Work? A Critique of Instrumental Cultural Policies and Social Impact Studies in the UK”, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 8, 1 (2002): 91-106; J. Holden, *Capturing Cultural Value. How Culture Has Become a Tool of Government Policy*, London: Demos, 2004; F. Matarasso, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*, Stroud: Comedia, 1997.

⁴¹ S. Hearn, A.L. Buffardi, *What Is Impact. A Methods Lab Publication*, London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016.

and the practices of Audience Engagement which emerged from the research constitute a first outline of this reframing path.

5.1. *Human-centred approach*

In presenting the idea of a culture of engagement we stressed that cultural organizations should be audience centred, thus playing a role in a type of exchange that occurs in the artistic field between creative partners.

More specifically an interpretation of the role of cultural organizations has emerged from the interviews that seems to go further. This is the idea of a *human-centered approach* based on dialogue and horizontal relationships:

[...] even when you are just programming you are doing a human specific approach when you put different values on top instead of the ones more related to a transactional relationship, in which hierarchies are staying in place and in which you can talk about topics but are strictly “for the artist” and audiences or people living in your cities are “targeted” as audience.

We are trying to make these relations between the three parts (organization, artist and audiences) more hybrid. Re-arrange power, trying to recognize hierarchies and questioning them, we try to build trust as a pre-condition and the process is more important than the outcome (Interview, Boulevard Festival, NL).

This new arrangement cuts across different activities, from programming to production, deeply influencing the relationship with the artists:

[...] with the artists we were more intimates in the conversation, more in the process, figuring out the process together. Normally they present the project to us and we talk about very pragmatic results, we take in the program and sell the ticket. They shared a lot of personal thoughts [...]. We had a lot of conversations [...], so these conversations were really human, and the process was growing and growing, and everybody had to wait, our producer had to wait, the marketing staff also, the financial control as well, everyone had to change the way of thinking, so the organization had to change the structure in a way. Everybody had to adjust a little bit. Maybe this is also the human part of it. You have to have the patience, the confidence, the loyalty to the artist and the other way around. This is very human! (Interview, Boulevard Festival, NL).

A key aspect of this approach is the *focus on the process instead of the product*.

One aspect is the work we do with dance choreographers to see what we create can lands, how we can connect with people in a broader sense [...] and it's more about the energy of artist, way of thinking, way of working, way of coping with social issue, and it is less thinking in the finished production. We see that a lot of choreographers we worked with have the necessity to share their process and this is in itself also the product. So is a kind of a continuous research they are doing and what they are really aiming for is “how I can get people involved in the same processing, material, in finding answer to question” [...] (Interview, Dans Brabant, NL)

Concerning the relationship with the audiences, this way of working results in the implementation of outreach activities geared to take care of relationships, instead of ‘marketing audiences’, as described in the first part of our contribution:

And in connection with audience: to reach the people, going in the cities, with flyers putting them in the houses, local newspapers, we had to drink a lot of coffees, we had to do a lot of things to make people encounter [...] (Boulevard Festival, NL)

This overall interpretation of the role of cultural organisations and of the practice of Audience Engagement involves a dimension of *values*:

[...] people being valued, working from what is the room and who is in the room and what they are bringing to the process; the working with artist is really about understand how to do that [...] this person-centered approach has to do with understanding how you bring partners to the table and you then develop those relationships, is something about the co-organization of values (Interview, Yorkshire Dance, UK).

The values dimension also appears important in relation to the broader system of the dance sector, where practicing *solidarity* can be played out, in some way deeply influencing the market in the direction of its *humanization* and pursuing *collaboration* rather than competition, in the perspective of an “ecology of culture” that we referred to at the initial part of this article:

[...] with this new landscape (the contemporary dance system) we felt that the choreographers were in a vulnerable position in the whole structure [...] we started a way to organize more stable position for choreographer and by sharing with them also the policy and making them responsible for projects [...] it's another way of thinking, way of organizing, of dealing with questions [...] we are now inviting them to take part in our artistic board, are choreographers with which we cooperated for long time [...] in the beginning we said that we were there to support the choreographers in finding stable and independent position and we worked with them until they found their own structure, own money, but we also saw that then there will be a concurrency, that is not bad, but we say that now the aim for us is not to make them independent, but to create a field where ‘we are strong together’ [...] here we share, so it is not about independent position, but is about a position in the field [...] is a circular way of thinking and working then a linear (Interview, Dans Brabant, NL).

5.2. *Community, belongings and assemblages*

A second analytical dimension concerns the interpretation of community not as a permanent entity, but rather as a temporary community, enhanced by different types of encounters that can develop different modalities of belonging. Related to this interpretation, is an inspiring perspective elaborated by one of the partners, which sees the formation, through the project's community dance practice, of a “Company of people” where multiple identities can communicate with each other (Interview, Yorkshire Dance, UK).

This idea of community recalls the idea of an “interpretative community”⁴² engaged in meaning-making and imagination processes. As stressed in the working sessions this process also implies the creation of spaces for divergent meanings, while also working to build a dialogue, ‘dancing in other shoes’.

A key related concept that informs the whole project is that of embodiment, which underlines the connection between performative act and gender constitution, thus rec-

⁴² Walmsley, *Audience Engagement in the Performing Arts*, 236.

ognizing that the body bears cultural meanings. “The body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities”⁴³. This implies viewing acts as constituting meanings. Butler⁴⁴ maintains that “the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts”, thus the attention from this perspective is on the “ways gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts”. The exploration of this process of embodiment is therefore oriented, in the project, to create an encounter of differences.

This idea of community has also been widely discussed in the co-design meetings between the Italian partner Gender Bender-Cassero and the two choreographers (one rooted and one traveller).

In particular, one of the issues discussed is the difference between the idea of a community of people that decide to work together because they have common interests, and a community that “recognizes the intentions through the doing together” (Field notes, co-design meeting) thus “a community that is in the way of becoming a community”, constructing in this way “cultural instances and relations” (Field notes, co-design meeting). Or, as stated during the interview “an alliance that is based on the process”. This idea of community is also seen as linked with the “permeability” of the organization itself in the relationship with the city (Gender Bender-Cassero, interview).

A path to take in this direction that came up during the co-design meetings is the idea of working through a *progressive assemblage of possible encounters* between different groups, places in the city, and also welcoming moments of conversations, acting, and doing things together. As Papastergiadis points out the concept of assemblage “alludes to the multiplicity and heterogeneity of agents that intersect and interact within a social space without presuming that this collision of differences leads to either their assimilation into the pre-existing hierarchy or the elimination of their differences. On the contrary, assemblage allows attention to focus on the critical and creative trajectories that arise from the incorporation of external agents”⁴⁵.

This reframing of communities as a place for multiple forms of belonging and encounters through transformative acts and assemblages can enrich what we have stressed above when discussing art as a space of performative citizenship.

5.3. *Questioning “co-creation”: the combination of autonomy, collaboration and mediation*

In a previous part of the article we referred to co-creation as one of the practices that inform the participative dimension of Audience Engagement, underlining that different types of agency can be pursued in Audience Engagement. We also argued that to orient the engagement of audiences as active subjects it is necessary to frame access to culture as access to cultural experience, the latter involving an interactive meaning-making process, a symbolic, narrative dimension. Ultimately, this means that a broader process of cultural participation understood as participation in knowledge production is at stake.

It is under this aspect that the concept of co-design and co-creation has been widely

⁴³ J. Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, *Theatre Journal*, 40, 4 (1988): 520-521.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 521.

⁴⁵ Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, 189.

discussed in the action research. The former has been defined as a type of collaboration at the level of planning activities. The latter as an active involvement in the artistic process of creation, thus foreseeing a dialogue between the artist and the communities, at the level of artistic composition and at the level of co-production of meanings and representations.

The view that co-creation can be an ambivalent dimension has also emerged⁴⁶. In particular, it has been stressed that “there is a difference between evaluating the structure and influencing the process” (Working sessions in small groups). From this point of view a challenging question has been posed: “how much are we ready to run the ‘risk’ of co-creation?”, having in mind that a radical principle of co-creation should be respected: “Nothing for us without us”.

Finally, the idea of co-creation has been put in relation to a constantly changing relationship between autonomy (of the artists and of cultural organization as well) and collaboration that implies power sharing between artists and communities.

The perspective explored among the partners is really close to what Kester⁴⁷ underlines with the idea of *dialogical aesthetic*, that is informed by a process-based approach aimed at activating a context rather than providing a content.

It also sheds light on another potentially ambivalent dimension, that is of the *mediation*. In the first part of the article we stressed that mediation of art is one of the practices often used to facilitate access to culture. While this is an important way to create an enabling environment for participation, we also proposed a shift toward culture and art as a space of mediation, we could say as a relational arrangement.

However, in both cases the scientific debate on participation has stressed that it can also be an arrangement for control and “governmentality”⁴⁸.

By taking this risk seriously during the action research the role of audience developer foreseen by the project has been discussed (Working session in small groups). In particular, it has been stressed that the practice of mediation doesn’t mean working the divergences out but welcoming them and creating safe contexts for active listening. Curiosity and trust are two words used to describe this process of mediation.

This perspective resounded in the word used by one of the Italian choreographers: “I don’t want to pass down my artistic language, or in the words of Donna Haraway I don’t want to look at the mirror and see myself, I would like to be surprised and discover the process with the participants” (Co-design meeting Gender Bender-Cassero).

Using the words of Papastergiadis⁴⁹, this understanding of the role of artists can be framed as a “shift from the position of the artists as a producer to the artist as a collaborator in the construction of social knowledge”. And from this perspective we can also say that “Artists and public participants are engaged in the mediation of new forms of cosmopolitan agency”.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

⁴⁶ G. Allegrini, “Artistic Practices and the Constitution of Public Sphere: An Explorative Inquiry, in *Right to the City, Performing Arts and Migration*, edited by R. Paltrinieri et al., Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2020: 124-141. See also: C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso, 2011; C. Bernardi, G. Innocenti Malini, *Performing the social. Education, Care and Social Inclusion through Theatre*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2021.

⁴⁷ G. Kester, “Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art”, in *Contemporary Art Since 1985*, edited by Z. Kucor and S. Leung, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

⁴⁸ E. Swyngedouw, “Governance Innovation and the Citizen: The Janus Face of Governance-beyond-the-State”, *Urban Studies*, 42, 11 (2005): 1991-2006.

⁴⁹ Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, 11-12.

This contribution explores the relationship between Audience Engagement and the promotion of cultural diversity.

Firstly, we proposed a number of perspectives to frame arts and culture as a space of performative citizenship, and as a process involving an imaginary constitution of cosmopolitanism through aesthetic practices.

From this perspective we discussed Audience Engagement as a process of cultural participation and the promotion of cultural diversity, proposing a route toward going beyond Audience Engagement as a mere marketing process.

We also examined the potential ambivalence that Audience Engagement can bring. In particular, we discussed the dimension of *access*, arguing that It should be informed by an idea of cultural democracy, based on valuing cultural diversity, instead of an idea of democratizing an existing culture. The idea of cultural democracy can also encourage a shift from the idea of ‘access to cultural offer’ to ‘access to *cultural experience*’ which involves an interactive meaning-making process and a symbolic and narrative dimension, thus recognizing an active position of audiences. This way of framing the access lay the groundwork for an understanding of Audience Engagement as a process of cultural participation, meant as participation in meaning making and knowledge co-production.

We also argued that it is necessary to critically question the broader culture of engagement, fostered by cultural organizations. In particular, we maintained that they should be able to see themselves in a ‘decentralised perspective’ and engaged in multiple types of relationships – with artists and publics – within a creative exchange, based on values such as reciprocity and collaboration.

Finally, we reworked these perspectives through the insights that emerged from the action research implemented in the context of an Audience Engagement project.

Even though this project is still in progress, we argue that these insights have already opened up a path for a reframing of *audience engagement as production and mediation of a cosmopolitan imaginary*⁵⁰, by giving space to multiple and divergent interpretations and by going beyond the ‘patronizing’ approach that can often emerge in processes of participation and collaboration. The project will be analysed further by pursuing this line of thought.

It will also involve investigating the collaboration between the different actors as a collaborative artistic network engaged in a redistribution “of agency in the production of social meaning”⁵¹, or as in the words of Rancière⁵² in the reconfiguration of the partition of the sensible or in Appadurai’s⁵³ words in the redistribution of the capacities to aspire.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁵² Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*.

⁵³ Appadurai, *Le aspirazioni nutrono la democrazia*.