

GOLDSMITHS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

## **The Active Audience**

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*Biopolitics and Aesthetics*  
CU71027A  
28th April 2015

# The Active Audience

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28th April 2015

## Introduction

Participatory art has been important for almost a century and it is more present than ever despite their rebranding to “interactive” art. Because of the need for the audience to complete the artwork in this context, Michel Foucault’s notions of biopolitics are well suited for this task. In this essay I will focus in his notion of subject and explore what constitutes an *active* subject in order to compare this notion to the hybrid actor/spectator that emerges from this form of art. I will give a broad analysis that could potentially apply to most of the different forms of participatory art and in the end focus on *The Human Project* by Dora García to give a detailed account of how the active subject emerges from this participatory art project.

## The Foucauldian Active Subject

Foucault cannot be read without bringing to mind the concept of *biopower* which he broadly defines as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of political strategy.” (Foucault 1977-78) This notion of biopower obliges Foucault to better explain the role of people in politics, not those who lead but those who are led by the ones exercising the power, and he sees fit to name them *subjects*. It is not within the scope of this essay to trace the evolution of the subject in Foucault, but it is important to bear in mind that this is not a concept which he clearly defines in one sentence or even in a single book and it is not a fixed concept either, quite the opposite, it evolves throughout Foucault’s writings. In this section the idea he

developed in his latter works will be analysed, where he calls for a subject who is free and exercises his or her freedom, and can be recognised as an *active subject*.

In *Subject and Power* Foucault explains “three different modes of objectification” to become subjects (Foucault 2002, p.326-7):

The first is the modes of inquiry that try to give themselves the status of sciences... the objectivizing [sic] of the productive subject... second... the objectivizing of the subject... divided inside himself or divided from others... Finally... the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject.

The third form stands out from the first two in the sense that it is the only one that explicitly requires a person to *turn him- or herself* into a subject instead of simply *being* subjectivised. Foucault does not give any immediate explanation of what he means by this and only hints that understanding power relations is essential for understanding the subject, however he does explain that the “term ‘power’ designates relationships between ‘partners’... an ensemble of actions that induce others and follow from one another” (ibid., p.337), and hence it is better to “approach the theme of power by an analysis of... *power relations* and not power itself” (ibid., p.339) because “[p]ower exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action” (ibid., p.340). As the objectiviser of the subject, the definition of power relations is still vague and the implications of a subject created by these relations has to be better understood to shed some light on the definition of the subject.

Anderson (2010, p.129) gives an insight by arguing that “the subject constituted by power is the one who obeys,” and this point of view is apparently shared by (Foucault 2002, p.331 my emphasis); he gives “two meanings of the *word* ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own by identity by a conscience or self-knowledge,” and makes clear that the two “suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.” But solely reading this can be misleading and give the impression that the obedient and subdued subject is a passive one, which is not true. Connolly (1985, p.371) mentions that, “the subject... is not ‘dead’: It is very much alive and very much the effect of modern disciplinary institutions.” and if we agree on this we can turn to Edwards (2008, p.23-4 original emphasis) who sees this as a positive thing “because discipline does not turn people simply into passive objects. Indeed, discipline as a form through which power is exercised cannot work unless subjects are *capable of action*, even

if this capacity is not the same as that identified by those who insist on human free will” and hence “these docile bodies must also be *active subjects*.” A link from power relations to active subjects has been achieved but further analysis is needed to understand what is meant by “subjects capable of action.” Gordon (1999, p.414) provides an ontological reading of the subject that is useful in this context:

From an ontological perspective, however, humans are free, and this ontological freedom which can be construed as the condition of possibility of the subject cannot be taken away by means of power—it is not a property that can be limited, constrained or molded [sic] by the web of power relations. Rather, it is the condition of possibility of power itself.

It is now time to return to Foucault with better tools. There are two quotes I want to bring forward which I think should be enough to end the discussion on the active subject. When he writes that “[p]ower is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are ‘free’ ” (Foucault 2002, p.342) he does not only imply, as Gordon argues, that power cannot take the subjectivity away but that freedom is necessary for the exercise of power. Furthermore, “[w]hat defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions” (ibid., p.340). If power were to be forced directly upon others, and Foucault gives the example of a chained slave, it would cease to be a power relation and become a “physical relationship of constraint.” Therefore, active subjects can only be so insofar as they exercise their freedom and *actively* take part in a power relation; they choose to be subjected. This is what is meant by *active subjects*.

## **Participatory Art**

Participatory art is not easy to define, Dezeuze (2010, p.1) explains that

participatory practice can take many forms: it can be an object to be worn or to be touched, a score to be performed, a collective performance in which the artist may or may not participate, an environment to be entered or a sequence of spaces to be traversed, a digital image to be clicked on, or a combination of one or more of these features.

If we are too strict in reading *Death of the Author* (Barthes 1977, p. 147) when he says that “[t]he reader is the space in which all the quotations that make up a writing are

inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination," then it could be argued that the reader participates in the writing and can be easily extrapolated to different art forms. Thus, it would have to be said that participation in the arts has been there since art appeared for the first time.<sup>1</sup> Duchamp and Lebel (1957, p.78) argue in the same direction: "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act." I will not take such a broad definition because it would be unworkable. Instead, I will present some attempts toward a definition that is more suited for an analysis of the role of the audience in participatory art.

On her introduction to the collection of essays on the topic edited by her, Bishop (2006a, p.10) identifies "the most important precursors for participatory art took place around 1920" giving the example of the "Paris 'Dada-Season' of April 1921 was a series of manifestations that sought to involve the city's public." She also identifies two historical approaches of participatory art: "an authored tradition that seeks to provoke participants, and a de-authored lineage that aims to embrace collective creativity; one is disruptive and interventionist, the other constructive and ameliorative"(ibid., p.11). Lastly, she identifies a "desire [in participatory art] to create an active subject, one who will be empowered"(ibid., p.12). It is not hard to make the connection with Foucault's notion of active subject, she even uses the same words, but this relationship can be further extended: the participatory arts can be seen as a "disciplinary institution" whereby the spectator is transformed into an active subject to fulfil their role in the artwork.

When it is hard to define what something *is*, as is the case with participatory arts, a good alternative is always to find out what it *pursuits*. Attempts to define what participatory art looks for have been made by critics as well as artists. The avant-garde, for instance, produced numerous art works that demanded participation from the spectators; Bürger (2006, p.147) describes that "historical avant-garde movements negate those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, individual production, and individual reception as distinct from the former," and the distinction between the artist and the audience can be also included in that list. Dinkla (1996, p.279) explains that "[i]n Futurist performances and manifestos audience participation was an implicit or explicit means to reduce the distance between performer

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<sup>1</sup>When that might have happened is an interesting but off-topic question

and audience—either by spatial integration or by provocative address.” A more recent *raison d’être* for participatory art is given by Almenberg (2010, p.5 original emphasis), he argues that “[i]n Participatory Art, neither the object nor the beholder is the focus of the situation. Rather, the focus is the very *act of creating*.” Nevertheless, there are things that all forms of participatory art have in common. Going back to Bishop (2011, p.2), she notices that “[p]articipatory art in the strictest sense forecloses the traditional idea of spectatorship and suggests a new understanding of art without audiences, one in which everyone is a producer. At the same time, the existence of an audience is ineliminable,”<sup>2</sup> and Eco (2006, p.39) emphasises that “it [participatory art] installs a new relationship between the *contemplation* and the *utilization* of a work of art.” An issue that arises is that communication between artists and spectators is not always successful, as Kaprow (2006, p.102) noticed: “Audiences... took Happenings for charming diversions, but hardly for art or even purposive activity,” thus defeating the purpose of the artwork.

Before moving to specific examples an analysis of the implications of participatory arts will be provided. The relationship between the artist and the audience in this kind of art is never a clear nor an easy one; Bishop (2011, p.4) comments that there always exists “tension between equality and quality, between participation and spectatorship, and between art and real life.” That these are no different from the tensions that exist in Foucault’s power relations between a subject and a government, although to name art as government could be going too far. It could be argued that participatory art does not construct and maintain the power relationships performed by the artists. Eco (2006, p.36) talking about interactive or unfinished scores mentions that “the ‘work in movement’ is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. [The performer] always remains the world intended by the author.” Although this may well be true for participatory compositions—even when thinking of works as radical as John Cage’s *4’33”*, the world is still the artist’s—different forms of participatory art do not fit that description and the artworks can go in a direction not calculated by the artist. Dezeuze (2010, p.14) writes that “[t]he history of spectator participation is haunted by cases in which implicit contractual agreements were misinterpreted or altogether breached.” and presents as an example the destruction of Hirschhorn’s *Deleuze Monument*. Yet rather than weaken the argument, they

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<sup>2</sup>There is a clear relationship between McLuhan’s concept of the *prosumer* and the audience in participatory art again, not the scope of this essay.

strengthen it. The audience in this instance fits the description that Anderson (2010) gives, where in a power relationship that can create active subject, “[t]he subject is not stepping outside of power to establish spaces of resistances. Rather, inside these relationships of power themselves, resistances demand to be created;” people do not step outside the boundaries created by the artists, yet they produce resistance to the artwork, to the power relationship, establishing their role as active subjects in the participatory art relationship.

### **The Human Factor**

Aside from the very brief references to artworks given while describing participatory arts, and some given to describe it, I will now focus on the artwork of Dora García’s and explore the power relations generated between the artist and the participating audience, specifically on *The Human Factor*.

*The Human Factor* is a performance project which took place during May–July 2004 in the city of Terrassa, in Spain. During this time different performers and volunteering participants, who she conveniently calls ‘agents’, engage in a conversation via email. No one apart from García was aware who the agents were—an agent did not know the other participants—and using the information everybody shared with the artist, she designed performances in public spaces which would gradually reveal to the public in the city and online how many and who the agents were (García 2004). All of the correspondence is now available on her website as part of the project.

García does not hide her intentions to “perform power” upon the participants. In her description of the project, she clearly states that “the goal is to ‘use’ the performers to help me discover the city through them.”<sup>3</sup> In no way does she present this as a cooperation, instead as Gordon (1999, p.399) writes referring to Foucauldian theory, “subjects acquire identity as a result of the interplay of power relations taking place within the system.” It is made more clear when she describes the specific ‘roles’ that are to be played: “there are “agents” and “superagents” where the difference is that “the superagent has more information available about who the agents are. . . whereas the agents do not know who the superagents are,” and the role of the superagents is to “discretely control the agents.” This structure now becomes a strict and sophisticated system of monitoring and regulation of the participating audience on two fronts: directly through the mailing system or

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<sup>3</sup>All the correspondence is available only in Spanish from <http://doragarcia.org/elfactorhumano/diario/index.html> and all of the translations are mine.

indirectly through the superagents. García's role in the performance can now be equated to that of a governing body since "[g]overnment is the disciplining into a form of life *freely accepted* that works by shaping subjectivity through the 'educating' of subjects who would otherwise remain 'undisciplined' "(Edwards 2008, p.26 original emphasis). Defining the performance this way brings the participants closer to Foucault's notion of active subject since "in becoming subject to particular disciplinary regimes, people also become active 'subjects' " (ibid., p.25) and more so because every participant has willingly accepted this regime for the time of the performance. This kind of performance demands a lot from the participant and puts them in a delicate position; Dinkla (1996, p.283) writes that "participation is located along a fragile border between emancipatory act and manipulation" and if we use Rancière (2008, p.18) definition of emancipation which is "the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look," then we end up with a perfect description of the complicated relationship of García and her agents in this artwork. It is always clear that she is in command but participants also have certain freedoms, and her performance is most successful in "exchang[ing] the position of passive spectator for that of scientific investigator or experimenter"(ibid., p.4) because it is *designed* this way; the whole purpose of the performance is for agents to discover who the the other participants are.

There is plenty of evidence that suggests that participants in the Dora García's artwork *The Human Factor* could be regarded as "active subjects" following the definition given in the previous sections. This is just an example but most of her work follows a similar line along the role of the participant, although it can be more constrained at times. Even though this is just one artist, many other works in participatory art follow this line and could be analysed in a similar manner, thus exhibiting the high correlation between participatory art and Foucault's power relations.

## **Conclusion**

Foucault's notion of the "active subject" is never given as a definition. Moreover, not even a specific definition of a subject within his context has been found, he only gives a definition of what the *word* subject means. Another thing he provides are strategies for *becoming* a subject and during his later writings it becomes clear that the subject cannot be by any means passive, quite the opposite. In order for a subject to come into existence the relationships of power must not be exercised by forced coercion if they are to be more

than only physical relations; the subject must be allowed to exercise his or her freedom, “it is essential that subjects become empowered” (Edwards 2008, p.26) for active subjects to successfully derive from power relations. It is clear that these conditions are met in the works of several artists, including Dora García, where participation is asked of the audience and they willingly accept to take part in the project. However, there are forms of participatory art that do not request participation and rather *take* it from the audience. A somewhat passive example would be Julian Oliver’s *Men in Gray* project where two people with briefcases walk around areas with open wireless networks and intercept the packets being exchanged, i.e. all the information transmitted through the networks, and images and text are displayed in screens fitted on the sides of the briefcases so people literally see their screens walking past them. There are also more aggressive instances like Jan Mlčoch’s *Night* where a girl was brought, who did not know was going to happen, to a “strange office in a strange building,” he questioned her for an hour and then let her go in a clear reference to secret-police investigations (Bishop 2012, p.148). This is a line worth further investigating because it is more difficult with these artworks to define whether the participants are indeed *active* subjects since one essential element is removed from the mix: the subjects’ freedom.

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Words in headers: 14

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Number of headers: 6

Number of floats/tables/figures: 0

Number of math inlines: 0

Number of math displayed: 0

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