

Markus Miessen's *The Nightmare of Participation* gives a good kicking to received notions of participation. In many ways the target is too easy: the body of participation is pretty moribund anyway and is left gasping with such lively boots being stamped over it. For this reason I am less focused here on the critique, and more committed to what may come out the other side.

The hole that *The Nightmare of Participation* continually skirts around, and sometimes puts a foot into, is that of the oppositional dialectic. Something's wrong? Find the opposite. Move towards higher truth. Consensus bad, agonism good. Expert professional bad, disinterested amateur good. The trouble with this method is that it both leaves the bad side unscathed to get on with its normal business, and also, by framing parts of participation as bad (and I agree that the consensus is an impossible term), it might chuck out some of the constructive aspects of the term. The battered baby is washed away with the gurgling bathwater. There is a danger of reading *The Nightmare of Participation* in this negative light – indeed the hyperbolic title encourages us so to do.

If consensual participation is such a monster, then where does that leave other notions of participation? The answer given is lopsided, in that it concentrates so heavily on just one side of the process, namely that of the facilitator/curator/outsider. What is missing is the voice or presence of the other side – of the insider, of the people, of the agonists. It as if the specter of participation is so threatening that these other presences must be suppressed, because they represent the ground of participatory practice.

The other baby in danger of being washed away in the dialectical rush is that of any form of expert knowledge. Whenever I approach participation, I do so with the brilliantly succinct warning of Gillian Rose ringing in my ears: “the architect is demoted but the people do not accede to power.” She is here referring to the poverty of certain forms of ideologically driven “community architecture”, in which any knowledge – including that of the architect – is deemed to be a form of power and therefore must be dissolved. The only role left for the architect is that of technical facilitator and skills provider; all other forms of knowledge-based action are disavowed. As Rose notes, this ends up in a lose-lose situation. The architect is indeed

ritually demoted, but the people are left grasping for air, bereft of any help in envisioning spatial futures.

I am sympathetic to the danger of falling into these dialectical traps. My book *Architecture Depends*¹ has been criticized exactly for setting up straw men (many the same as those in *The Nightmare of Participation*) in order to better defeat them. Better then to avoid such oppositions altogether, and just start reconstructing the future from the mess that is inherent, as Miessen notes, in any given situation. To do this, one has to bring the presence of the insider more firmly into the picture, and also allow some forms of specialized knowledge, and with it judgment, to be deployed.

A clue as to how to do this is given on the penultimate page of the text, when Miessen introduces “three positions with which modes of proactive participation can become meaningful: attitude, relevance, responsibility.” But, coming so late in the book, we are left hanging as to what these could actually entail. So I will attempt briefly to sketch what one version of what they might mean, and how they imply a necessary engagement with the other presences that are left silent in the book.

ATTITUDE

Attitude is informed by two conditions: generosity and curiosity, both of which imply openness to the issues and desires of others. They do not close things down to the consensus of the commons, but demand alertness to alternatives. As Miessen notes, “the venturing out of both the notion of expertise and discipline is crucial in order to remain sufficiently curious towards the specialized knowledges of others.”² In our formulation of *Spatial Agency*³ - some of which resonates with Miessen's arguments and much of which illustrates them – Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and I identify three key components: spatial judgment, mutual awareness and critical awareness. For the purposes of this argument, it is mutual knowledge that is core.

1 Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (MIT Press, 2009).

2 Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare Of Participation* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2001), 196.

3 Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011) See also the website: www.spatialagency.net.

Generosity means a willing acceptance, in both directions, of each party's knowledge; curiosity means being open to being surprised by that knowledge. For Anthony Giddens, mutual knowledge is "practical in character," but also founded in the interstices of the everyday rather than on the high planes of expert enlightenment.⁴ An acceptance of such mushy forms of knowledge is only possible with an attitude of generosity and curiosity. Generosity in as much as the professional steps off their crafted podium and onto the level playing field of open discourse, welcoming the imprecise (in expert terms) formulations of the insider as the sharpest insights into the given context. Curiosity because of the willingness to first see, and then allow things to happen otherwise (which is another defining feature of Giddens' agency).

RELEVANCE

The relevance of any given project is only found when it is informed by the multiple voices of the insiders. The irrelevance of so much architecture, and of pseudo-participation, is created exactly in their lack of engagement, as they pursue their abstracted and individual obsessions. Relevance counters the generalized abstractions and melds the individual with the contested collective. A project is only relevant if it is alert to its particular context and with this the imprint of the agent is not exactly dissolved, but certainly transformed, each time. It is for this reason that Nishat, Tatjana and I prefer the term agent over that of curator or facilitator. The curator's identity is to a greater or lesser extent demanded in the making of a project, whereas agents are less concerned with identity than they are with action. Relevance also suggests a forward looking, transformative trajectory, because that is what makes a project relevant, and so gets away from the danger of the 'critical' project, which too often circles around its own internalized, irrelevant, concerns. Relevance thus goes hand in hand with intent.

4 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution Of Society: Outline Of the Theory Of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 4.

RESPONSIBILITY

I am often asked about how, in the face of all the multiple contingencies and dependencies of architectural practice, one makes judgments. My answer is two stepped:

"Through intent."

"But what guides that intent?"

"The responsibility towards the other."

The latter is a direct quote from Zygmunt Bauman; it is his short and unforgettable definition as to what constitutes ethical behavior.⁵ Responsibility here is not to oneself (which is how Aristotle's ethics are centered in terms of the good behaviour of the good self) or to one's profession (which is how the professional "codes of conduct" suggest ethical behavior is to be found), but always to the other. The 'Other', usually capitalized and apostrophized, has become a standard term for the alternative and the forgotten. It is not in this sense that I employ it here, because that may shunt the debate into the margins. Marginal positions are often heralded as the radical alternative, but there is the concomitant danger that being marginal also sets one up to be dismissed by the centre, so the power of the margins is never realized. Although resistance has historically been developed around the edges, when the centre has been found wanting, as it so spectacularly was in the late 2000s with the storms of economic collapse and environmental crisis, then one has to question whether the centre still has the authority to label things as marginal. The others that I refer to here are therefore not those on the fringes, but the multiple voices that go into the making, occupation and reception of the spatial environment. It is spatial agents' responsibility to act for and on behalf of these others.

5 Zygmunt Bauman, *Alone Again: Ethics After Certainty* (London: Demos, 2000).

These very brief sketches of versions of attitude, relevance and responsibility may allow a different version of participation to emerge. Participation is not going to disappear as a term or a need, so it is best to allow it to develop on its own terms and be brought back into the centre of the debate. The King is Dead! Long Live the Queen!

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