

Participatory art has been taking different forms since its rise. Blurring boundaries between art and life, opposing the surveillance of the state or working with the local, often marginalised communities, social practices seem to deal with diverse issues. However, all these artistic endeavours seem to have a common denominator – they rarely enter the realm of the invented or the surreal. Providing alternative framework for communal experience as a response to privatisation in the West, or creating a platform for individual experience to oppose the monolith of the state in Eastern Europe, participatory art more than other art forms remains in close relation with the reality. The rhetoric surrounding this sort of artistic endeavours emphasises their ability to produce authentic relations and collaborative shared experience. Often initiated and performed outside the framework of art institutions, activating participants from outside the art world, participatory art aims to be “a tool of dialogue and change”, which fights artificiality and focuses on the ‘real problems’¹ of the community. This rhetoric of ‘the realness and authenticity’ seems to stand in opposition to any artificiality, fabrication, lie, mischief-making and unreliability. Is there a place for fiction and storytelling in participatory, politically engaged art?

The paradox seems to lie within the semantics of the storytelling itself. “To tell somebody’s story” means to talk about life of an individual, to describe his/her experiences. The expression is often used when the individual is unable to tell the story himself because he is dead and/or forgotten or for some reason ignored by the world. In this situation the storyteller plays the role of a middle-man, who uses his privilege to bring the story – a memory of a person to the world. Apparently, in this scenario there is no place for fiction, the story and the characters are not invented, and the storyteller seems to be under moral obligation to convey the events with accuracy. However, “to tell stories” also means to confabulate. Expressions such as “she is just telling stories”² or “he made up a story” shift the semantic field of the term into the realm of fabrication.

In an attempt to outline the relation between the authenticity and fiction in participatory, politically engaged projects, it seems to be reasonable to focus on artists, who openly criticise the artificiality of social practices, which only include the participants from the art world. These criteria seem to be met by Polish artists associated with the concept of “Open Form” formulated by Oskar Hansen in 1958. Gathered under informal name of Kowalnia alumni, they often engage members of unrepresented minorities in their art projects. However, they never limit themselves to an attempt of an objective ‘report’ devoid of any commentary. They tend come up with an open initial structure – an ambiguously formulated question, a task, or a workshop, which can be freely interpreted by the participants.

Potential chapters:

- Self - creation of participants
- Mutable narratives – the role of misunderstanding
- Artist as a poacher
- Simultaneous narratives
- Role of the context

¹ Conrad, D., & Sinner, A. (2015). *Creating together: Participatory, community-based, and collaborative arts practices and scholarship across Canada*. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press. p. 64

² No, it’s not coming from pipes. I’ve lived here for a while, so I know when the pipes are shrieking. For example yesterday it was gurgling. But it started at 7:00. So it started happening earlier and earlier. Previously, it had been more discrete, with some respect and regard... So I had suspected it earlier and I was right... It was bearable when it was only swooshing. At 10.00 pm. Very feebly though... For a moment I even thought that I must have misheard that... But I have a sensitive ear. My mum also had good hearing. Once our neighbour’s daughter got ill and started choking in the middle of the night. Her own mother did not hear anything, but my mum, she’s been dead for 20 years now, she died during the surgery, her heart, unfortunately, didn’t make it, but she had a great heart for her whole life, for everybody, big heart, but it didn’t make it. So that night, in a flash, she had this feeling, even though she was in bed already, so she rushed off to the neighbour, knocked on the door: “Your child is choking”, and the neighbour was like: “Jesus Christ! That’s impossible!” Possible, possible. A minute more and it would have been too late, it was the last call- that’s what the paramedic said. And she slept like a log, her husband left her, but it was a few years later, apparently he had somebody else, no wonder, she was such a sleeping beauty, her child had one foot in a grave that night... So it’s not coming from the pipes. Cos I heard it and I think I also saw that when I was closing the door. When you close them you need to hold and then push, they don’t close properly. I called up a landlord about it, and they were like “it’s not our responsibility you need to do that on your own, get a handyman.” No, I’m not going to say exactly. But I saw what I saw.