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Come Together: An Exploration of Contemporary Participatory Art Practices

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Visual Arts

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COME TOGETHER: AN EXPLORATION OF CONTEMPORARY PARTICIPATORY
ART PRACTICES

(Thesis format: Integrated Article)

by

Karly McIntosh

Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Art History

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Abstract

This thesis examines the growing trend of participatory art practices employed in the installation works of contemporary artists Roman Ondák, Ann Hamilton, Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett. It focuses on how three art installations use interactive and collaborative methods, each within a different exhibition setting, in order to include and communicate with the public audience. The first chapter discusses how Ondák's *Measuring the Universe* draws on shared experience to encourage viewers to interact with the installation within a large art gallery. The second chapter considers how Hamilton's *the event of a thread* creates a social event between participants and performers using an alternative gallery space. The final chapter explores how Brown and Garrett's *CLOUD* uses public contributors and participants throughout its development to include the public audience and to reconsider the urban space. Overall, the thesis illustrates how contemporary artists are using fun and relatable everyday elements to engage with the public, establish their audience as a community, and comment on larger social situations.

Keywords

Participation, social, public art, interaction, engagement, community, installation, contemporary art, collaboration

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Introduction

When Nicolas Bourriaud published his seminal book *Relational Aesthetics* in 1998, in which he identified an emerging contemporary artistic practice focused on “human relations and their social context,” he sparked a critical discussion about the increasing popularity of participatory art that has continued to gain attention in the art world to this day.¹ In her 2012 book, *Artificial Hells*, art historian Claire Bishop noted a real and noticeable swell in participatory and collaborative artistic practices internationally since the 1990s.² Many supporters of participatory art argue that due to the “near total saturation of our image repertoire [...] artistic practice can no longer revolve around the construction of objects to be consumed by a passive bystander.”³ As a result, an increasing number of contemporary artists have been creating works that activate and engage the viewer directly in the various stages of art-making.⁴ Though not all participatory art involves a social element, much of it does invite viewers to interact not only with the work itself, but also with other people, whether performers included in the work or fellow lay participants. These practices thus establish a social situation within the environment of the work, emphasizing the interactive experience of the participant rather than the physical elements of an object to facilitate that experience.

Maria Lind identifies socially-engaged art as “simultaneously a medium, a method, and a genre;” a definition that can refer to a wide range of work, from the more activist in nature to the more relational or community-based.⁵ Though the specifics of the

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 113; Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), 2.

² Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ Claire Bishop, “Participation and the Spectacle: Where are we now?” in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 36.

⁵ Maria Lind, “Returning on Bikes: Notes on Social Practice,” in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 49.

work may vary dramatically across the spectrum, at the centre is a desire to alter, “the traditional relationship between the work and the viewer, between production and consumption, sender and receiver.”⁶ Previously stable relationships and clear, long-performed roles are no longer fixed where social art is concerned. Art centred on providing an interactive opportunity asks more of the average viewer, requiring a higher level of physical, emotional, and social engagement in order to fulfill the work. These works aim to establish an active viewer, one that is “empowered by participation.”⁷ Lind further suggests that the “collaborative turn in art” means that the social genre becomes “an umbrella for various methods such as collective work, cooperation and collaboration.”⁸ In the case of many such interactive works the artist yields at least a portion of their “authorial control” to what some would consider a more “democratic and egalitarian” relationship with the viewer or additional collaborators who also contribute to the actual creation of the work, and thus become involved in the production process at a much earlier stage than would normally be the case.⁹

Participatory and collaborative efforts are by no means entirely new. Such methods have been used for decades within the historical avant-garde in order to involve and excite public audiences.¹⁰ Often, however, the goal of contemporary participatory art is no longer simply to activate the viewer as it was for previous movements, although that remains a crucial aspect of contemporary works. Rather, artists increasingly take their efforts further to establish their audience as a community in itself.¹¹ Artists are using the interactive and social situations they create to provide opportunities for viewers to

⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁷ Claire Bishop, “Introduction,” in *Participation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 12.

⁸ Lind, “Returning on Bikes,” 49.

⁹ Bishop, “Introduction,” 12.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of the historical predecessors of contemporary participatory artists see Bishop, *Artificial Hells*.

¹¹ Claire Bishop asserts the concern of community has become more present since the fall of Communism, though its roots are in Marxism. Bishop, “Introduction,” 12.

participate in a shared experience and forge a connection through everyday relatable elements, establishing a social bond with others in the environment of the work itself. In certain settings, these efforts draw on a pre-existing community, for instance at art festivals that involve and make art available to the local community. In other settings, participatory works strive to create a sense of community on their own by drawing on either a past or present shared experience that allows participants to relate to and connect with each other.

Interactive and social works have been hotly contested and often criticized in recent years as they have slowly gained popularity. Several critics have voiced concerns over the trend, suggesting that participatory and social works provide only a temporary intervention rather than a lasting effect on exhibition spaces and participants.¹² Another critique of works that focus on creating social situations suggests that social interaction within the context of an artwork frequently becomes a goal worthy in itself when works should be communicating more to the viewer; a perspective which some, including Claire Bishop, suggest often results in a lack of criticality and contradiction.¹³ Bishop is wary of participatory projects replacing activism and political critique while being “insufficiently radical.”¹⁴ These critiques make considering the possibilities and limitations of participatory art all the more important. Many interactive works do not provide radical criticality, but instead quietly suggest the need for a re-evaluation of societal practices. As Bishop suggests, it is necessary to remain conscious of the fact that the fun aspects of participatory works can often steal the spotlight and overshadow criticality. While some works are merely intended to create a social situation, albeit temporary, others can and do offer a platform to challenge and reconsider contemporary social interaction and what constitutes a social bond. In many instances social works inspire reflection regarding why

¹² Maria Lind identifies this as well as other common concerns with social artworks in “Returning on Bikes,” 50.

¹³ Claire Bishop voices these criticisms in “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (Autumn, 2004): 51-79. Hal Foster discusses similar views in “Chat Rooms,” *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Shannon Jackson summarizes the views presented in Bishop’s essay “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” in *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 47, 58.

such bonds are present, relevant, and worthy of consideration in the rapidly changing contemporary moment. Creating connections amongst people within the context of art carries considerable implications for both the art world and public social space. These connections provide a unique opportunity to assess contemporary art's ability to comment on and affect relationships between the public, their environment, and the institutions that serve them.

The following chapters examine three different participatory installations exhibited in three distinctive settings. Roman Ondák's participatory work *Measuring the Universe* (2007) has been exhibited in several large public galleries around the world. The installation invites gallery viewers to have their height measured and marked on the gallery wall by attendants. Chapter one explores how *Measuring the Universe* uses the common ritual of measuring to engage the gallery audience, and how it functions within the institutional setting. The second chapter looks at Ann Hamilton's installation at New York City's Park Avenue Armory titled *the event of a thread* (2012-2013). Taking advantage of the Armory's vast exhibition hall, *the event of a thread* includes a field of swings that viewers are invited to swing on, which in turn causes a large piece of fabric hung in the centre of the hall to move. In addition, Hamilton included performers in the hall for the duration of the exhibition. While two readers read aloud with their voices transmitted through speakers, a writer positioned at one end of the hall wrote in response to the installation's atmosphere. Hamilton's work utilized the alternative exhibition space of the Armory in order to highlight the social connections facilitated there and establish a new kind of audience. Finally, the third chapter considers Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett's interactive installation *CLOUD* (2012), created with the help of collaborators for Calgary's inaugural Nuit Blanche. *CLOUD*, true to its name, is a large sculpture of a cloud made up of thousands of light bulbs attached to pull cords. The cords hang down from the work inviting public viewers to pull them in order to turn the light bulbs on and off. Situated in a public space within an art festival context, *CLOUD* draws on its relatability to the public to reconfigure the social and urban space of the city.

Each chapter investigates the various techniques used by the four artists to engage public audiences and establish an active relationship between themselves, viewers, and

the artworks. In addition, a consideration of the three different exhibition styles assesses the possibilities and limitations of each space in terms of its ability to relate to and reach the public. The wide variety of works and practices included within the sphere of participatory art allows for display in all sorts of exhibition spaces. With one shown in a large gallery, another in a large-scale alternative exhibition space, and a third in the context of an art event on a public urban street, each of the works discussed here establishes a very different atmosphere and relationship with its public audience. A consideration of each distinct space can provide a more comprehensive view of the way participatory works both rely on and draw from their environment, and how space can inform and even enhance relationships within these kinds of installations.

Participatory works address the public audience, aiming to meet people where they are, draw them in and establish a relationship with them. Forming a connection with the average person by finding a common ground, participatory works attempt to communicate something real about human experiences, the environment, and our own lives and interactions. Each viewer brings something unique to participatory art as a result of his or her widely varied experiences. The most successful participatory works can acknowledge and make space for people's differences, while also strongly accentuating the commonalities that unite people. By embodying and speaking to the average person's experience, participatory art shows its value in revealing and facilitating real physical, emotional, and social experiences that reflect a deeper link. The connections and relationships between each aspect of the participatory experience establish the relevance of this artistic practice for a contemporary audience and time period. While there is merit to the criticism that the fun and games of participatory art is often the aspect that is most noticeable, these works are capable of addressing real and changing relationships between the public, their art institutions, and their urban environment. In each of the three works discussed, their playfulness serves to attract initial interest and attention that can then be diverted to the deeper commentary being made and the social meanings within the works. Catching the public's attention through playful interactive elements and holding that attention by establishing connections, participation reinvigorates contemporary art's position in society in relation to the general public.

While *Measuring the Universe*, *the event of a thread*, and *CLOUD* do play into the flashy and playful stereotype of contemporary art to a certain extent, beneath the surface each of these works is able to relate to its audience, speak to the human condition through real experiences, and occupy an important space, bridging the gap between the average person and the contemporary art scene. These kinds of projects are relevant and important today because of their ability to communicate. Using relatable elements allows people to attribute their own meaning and connect the experiences or concepts addressed within the work to their own lives and memories. As an artistic practice that not only addresses public audiences but also includes them directly, participation involves the public in the art world in a real and tangible way. Participation provides a new and unusual context for people to connect with each other, as well as the exhibition space and larger art world, thus re-establishing and reimagining the relationship between artist, viewer, and artwork.

Chapter 1

1 Connection Through Shared Experience in Roman Ondák's *Measuring the Universe*

Roman Ondák's *Measuring the Universe* was first installed in Munich's Pinakothek der Moderne in 2007. The participatory installation began as an empty white room in the gallery and evolved with each visitor. Inside the room, gallery attendants invited viewers to have their heights measured. The attendants thus became collaborators in the interactive performance by taking on the role of intermediaries. Gallery attendants communicated the artist's intention for the work, asking visitors if they wished to be measured. The presence of each consenting viewer was then marked on the wall with a line indicating height, name, and the date of the interaction. In what can be described as an ongoing performance, attendants measured participating viewers by placing a hand over the top of the participant's head to determine their height, then marking the wall with a black felt-tip pen (Figure 1).¹⁵ The attendants maintained aesthetic consistency by following an established pattern. The viewer's height was first marked with a short, horizontal line, followed by their first name, clearly printed. Following a comma, the date was then written after the participant's name in a numerical day.month.year format separated by periods (Figure 2).

¹⁵ Bernhart Schwenk, "Measuring the Universe," in *Roman Ondák: Measuring the Universe* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2008), 4.



Figure 1: Roman Ondák, *Measuring the Universe*, 2007. View of installation at Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Germany. Photograph by Ernst Jank. http://www.flashartonline.com/interno.php?pagina=articolo_det&id_art=439&det=ok&title=ROMAN-ONDAK (accessed June 1, 2014).

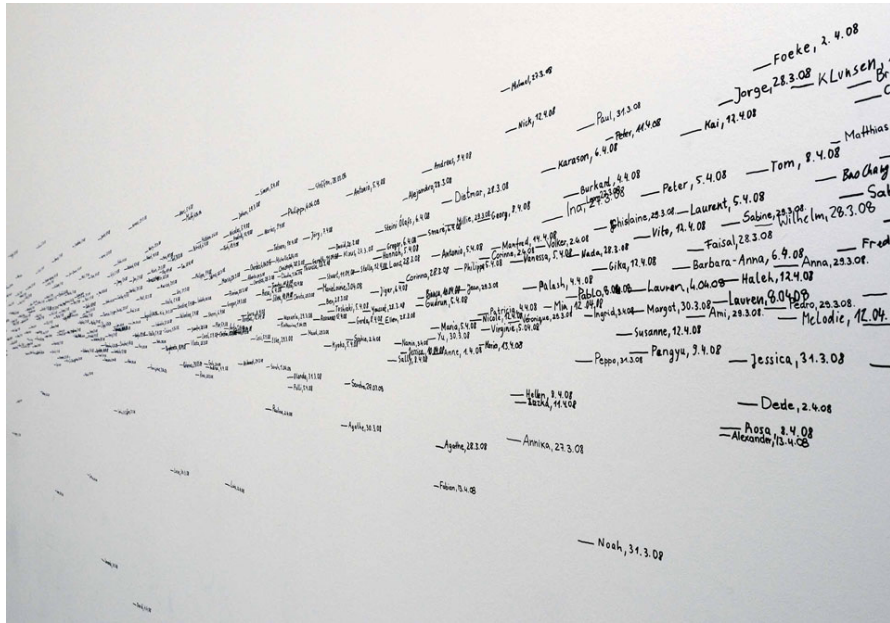


Figure 2: Roman Ondák, *Measuring the Universe*, 2007. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographer Unknown. <http://artdaily.com/news/31402/MoMA-s-Performance-Exhibition-Series-Continues-with-Roman-Ondak-s-Measuring-the-Universe> (accessed June 1, 2014).

Though the room began as a white void, by the end of the exhibition tens of thousands of visitors and attendants had marked its walls. As the number of visitors grew, the individual markings began to blur together. Names written on top of names inevitably merged into one another to form a single large black band around the space of the gallery (Figure 3). Though individual names were still somewhat visible above and below, the increasingly intense black band in the middle implied an average height where names became indistinguishable in a common blur indicating human presence and collective contribution. After its initial installation in the Pinakothek der Moderne, *Measuring the Universe* appeared in several other major international art institutions, including New York's Museum of Modern Art, Tate St. Ives in England, and Le Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris.

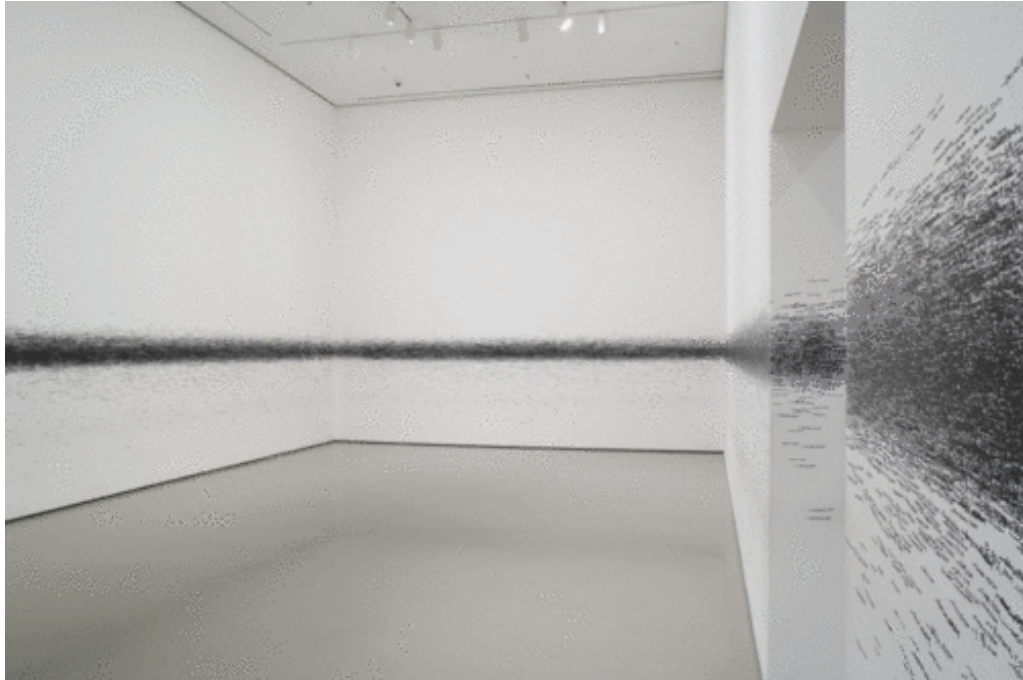


Figure 3: Roman Ondák, *Measuring the Universe*, 2007. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographer Unknown.

<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/980> (accessed June 1, 2014).

Roman Ondák is a contemporary Slovakian artist with a growing reputation in the art community. He represented Slovakia at the Venice Biennale in 2009, and his work has been shown internationally in several major art galleries and exhibitions. He often works in installations, many of which are site-specific and are sometimes described as interventions. Ondák tends to use somewhat simple, relatable concepts and actions in his works, which make them highly accessible to a public audience. For example, another of his participatory works entitled *Across that Place* (2008) involved the simple action of skipping stones across the Panama Canal. He used stone skipping, an action often performed by children, to comment on a larger historical site-specific situation.¹⁶ Ondák's work often exemplifies how a simple gesture such as skipping a stone or marking a person's height can address bigger social and political issues while remaining

¹⁶ Magali Arriola, "Quivers of an Unproductive Gesture," in *Roman Ondák: Measuring the Universe* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2008), 80, 82.

fundamentally accessible to a large public audience. For instance, *Across that Place* provided an expression of reunification for a country that was divided to create a shortcut between two oceans in an effort that resulted in thousands of deaths.¹⁷ In addition, the action of skipping stones “unsettled the social codes one usually associates with the innocence of early age by transferring them into a politically significant context.”¹⁸ In *Across that Place*, as in *Measuring the Universe*, Ondák used an “everyday action” to “[strive] against a larger-than-human [...] situation.”¹⁹ This chapter examines how *Measuring the Universe*’s participatory nature allows viewers to become active collaborators by physically and emotionally interacting with the work and rethinking the role of the artist and audience. Through their interaction, participants engage in an opportunity to share in a collective affective experience while also contributing to an evolving relationship between the art gallery and the public that reflects shifting exhibition practices. *Measuring the Universe* comments on the disconnectedness of our contemporary lives and a desire for firsthand social connections by engaging and bonding participants in an interactive ritual and shared experience.

1.1 Participatory Art

As an installation work, *Measuring the Universe* functions through viewer engagement. Art critic Claire Bishop has defined installation art as that “into which the viewer physically enters” so that they are “embodied” and able to experience the space rather than simply view it from a detached position.²⁰ In her book, *Installation Art*, Bishop references the work of fellow scholar in the field, Julie Reiss, who asserts that the viewer is necessary for the full creation of an installation work.²¹ Bishop outlines the development of installation art from its beginnings in the 1960s when artists wished to

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 82.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

²¹ Julie Reiss as quoted in Bishop, *Installation Art*, 6.

alter the traditional relationship between themselves and the viewer, and to create a more complete and sensorial experience for viewers.²² As a result, installation artists started to work in a manner that made space a crucial component of the artwork as well as, or in the place of, distinct, tangible objects – a practice Ondák has adopted in his work.²³

Installation works create an environment that encourages viewers to use more of their senses to better experience the work and sometimes even become involved in the installation themselves. For instance, *Measuring the Universe* establishes opportunities for viewers to speak with gallery attendants, physically touch the gallery wall, hear and perhaps even smell the other participants or the felt-tip pen used to mark their height, and finally to see the aesthetic creation of their contribution in relation to the rest of the work. As a result, viewers are able to engage with the installation, physically moving through and interacting with the space using all of their senses, rather than simply view the work in a detached and distant manner.

While *Measuring the Universe* is a stand-alone installation, it should also be considered in relation to a history of participatory and collaborative works. Since the early twentieth century, avant-garde artists have been breaking with tradition by utilizing various methods of collaboration and viewer involvement in their practice. In her book, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Claire Bishop identifies three crucial moments in art history that look toward a participatory art. First, Italian Futurism, a movement began by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909, engaged in non-traditional kinds of spectatorship, often trying to overwhelm its audience at Futurist events and provoke them into reaction.²⁴ Then, after the Russian Revolution, Russian artists began to embrace mediums that would be more accessible to the masses.²⁵

²² Bishop, *Installation Art*, 10-11.

²³ Ibid., 10.

²⁴ Italian Futurists held many events that included various types of performances intended to bombard the spectator. The first of these events took place on 12 January 1910, and the Futurists continued the practice for many years. See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), 41-42, 44.

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

Prolekult theatre offered mass spectacle and types of performance that exemplified characteristics found later in participatory art, and which better reflected the Russian political state after the Revolution – accessibility and notions of collective authorship, for example.²⁶ Finally the Dada movement, which emerged during the First World War under the guidance of André Breton, held public events that relied on viewer participation.²⁷ Similar aspects of participatory art were found in movements later on in the twentieth century, including Fluxus happenings and the Situationist International, spearheaded by Guy Debord.²⁸

Each of these twentieth-century movements, as precursors of contemporary participatory art, foreshadowed audience inclusion and collaboration in artistic production. In addition, these movements often included some kind of re-evaluation of how art production relates to society.²⁹ In recent years, several theorists and art historians have noted a growing interest amongst artists in elements of participation that evolved from the audience-focused practices of earlier Modern Art movements. Grant Kester, a prominent figure in the field of relational and collaborative art, identifies widespread shifts in contemporary art practice that favour collaboration.³⁰ Kester also claims that contemporary art has seen an increased focus on the art-making process rather than on the finished object, a focus that lends itself to the inclusion of participatory elements in exhibitions and installations.³¹ Although the mainstream art world often privileges the traditional art object, which is easy to commodify, Kester asserts that in recent years

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 41, 71.

²⁸ Boris Groys, “A Genealogy of Participation Art,” in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, ed. Rudolf Frieling, et al. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 27.

²⁹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), 3.

³⁰ Grant Kester, *One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7, 9.

³¹ Ibid., 7-8.

major art institutions have increasingly accepted collaborative and participatory works.³² Other critics and theorists, including Boris Groys, similarly suggest that collaborative as well as interactive approaches to art have become important in contemporary art practices, echoing Kester's views.³³

While audience participation is a key aspect of *Measuring the Universe*, the significance of the work is not limited to its method. It also responds to and challenges the increasingly prevalent role of technology in social interactions. In his critical and somewhat controversial text, *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud suggests that as our world continues to modernize, social functions are increasingly mechanized, which, as a result, “gradually reduces the relational space.”³⁴ Technological developments such as bank machines, for example, and more recently online banking, have steadily replaced bank tellers, and what were once daily interactions between them and the public.³⁵ In the last few years, services have been increasingly digitized. Companies like Netflix are becoming more popular, eliminating the need to physically visit a video store or go to a cinema. As a result of these developments, interactions that were once a part of daily social life have become obsolete.³⁶ Bourriaud suggests that contemporary artists have noted the decreasing number of face-to-face social interactions in our world and have begun to “move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue.”³⁷ He further insists that art has become “a state of encounter,” and that an exhibition can be considered an “arena of exchange.”³⁸ Bourriaud's notions of encounter and exchange come to life in

³² Ibid., 9.

³³ Groys, “A Genealogy of Participation Art,” 19.

³⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 17.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 17-18

Measuring the Universe's social and physical interactions between participants and each other, participants and gallery attendants, as well as participants and the artwork itself.

Bourriaud's prioritization of subject over object in *Relational Aesthetics* addresses the kind of work increasingly produced in the realm of installation and participatory art. In the aftermath of *Relational Aesthetics*, many works appeared that Bishop suggests were less interested in a relational "aesthetic" and more concerned with a collaborative method and viewer participation.³⁹ As the object itself has become less significant in the creation of participatory installations, the traditional reverence for the art object has receded. Ondák clearly blurs the distinction between the subject and object in *Measuring the Universe*. The work relies on participants who contribute to its creation. In this way, they become part of the work itself. There is no longer a distinct binary of subject and object present in the participatory installation. Ondák's work pays particular attention to the creation of social interaction as opposed to a highly valued tangible object.

1.2 Changing Museum Practices

Measuring the Universe's interactivity is part of what Hilde Hein asserts is a shift in museum practices and visitor behaviour. Traditionally museums have been regarded as conservative environments in which visitors maintain what Hein describes as an "attitude of respectful decorum."⁴⁰ Institutions have been the official caretakers of objects that are considered valuable because they are historically and culturally significant. However, Hein suggests that near the end of the twentieth century, many museums, like so many participatory artists, began to shift their focus towards the subject and away from the traditional object.⁴¹ Rudolf Frieling similarly suggests that museums must react to the new participatory techniques artists are embracing, and should likewise include such

³⁹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2.

⁴⁰ Hilde Hein, *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently*. (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2006), xx.

⁴¹ Ibid.

elements in their exhibition practices.⁴² In recent years, many museums have adopted the changes proposed by Hein and Frieling providing more opportunities for interaction and engagement through interactive-style exhibitions and additional programming such as summer camps and community events.⁴³

A participatory installation such as *Measuring the Universe* allows for physical and even emotional engagement with art in a way that traditional museum models of behaviour and object-reverence cannot. *Measuring the Universe* requires visitors to physically mark the work and the gallery itself, an action that would be discouraged in a traditional gallery setting. The physical component of *Measuring the Universe* contributes to the erosion of barriers that have customarily been in place between the viewer and the works in the traditional art gallery. The participants' physical connection allows them to become a part of the work through their presence. As they take the time to wait in line, get measured by an attendant, and mark their name and the date of their personal contribution, participants establish a relationship with the work and by extension with the gallery space. By visually and physically merging an aspect of one's personal identity with the artwork, the participant inherently connects with the installation and thus both experiences it and relates to it on a deeper emotional level.

Measuring the Universe allows each visitor to have a subjective experience of the work. Every participant brings their own personal set of memories and associations to the installation and consequently walks away with a unique personal experience. Ondák's work communicates no set, universal truth. No participant will draw exactly the same meaning from the work or have exactly the same experience of being measured as the participant who is measured next to them, because no two people will have the same past experiences or memories of measuring or being measured as children that frame the work's significance for them. Naturally, one could say that the viewer brings their own experiences into their reading of all works of art. This freedom of interpretation has

⁴² Rudolf Frieling, "Introduction," in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*. Rudolf Frieling, et al. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 12.

⁴³ Hein, *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently*, xx.

become more prevalent with the increasingly common use of streamlined museum labels that provide only the artist and title of the work in an effort to allow viewers to experience the work without external influences to guide their interpretations. However, this particular installation's need for the corporeal re-enactment of measuring physically echoes past experience and consequently has increased potential to emotionally resonate with participants. Re-enactment can often trigger memories of previous instances of such actions. Thus, *Measuring the Universe* participates in what Hein describes as a gradual shift in museum practices away from formality and universal knowledge, and towards a more subjective experience.

To some extent, Hein overstates her claim that a traditional museum experience provides a universal framing, because it is inevitable that viewers will bring their own interpretations to works even within the traditional museum setting. However, she does this in order to provide a contrast with contemporary participatory works. The highly interactive nature of Ondák's work contributes to growing attempts to encourage public engagement in the arts by fostering an environment of personal connection. *Measuring the Universe* furthers the concept of subjective interpretations through re-enactment, as participants are encouraged to relive a past experience through the installation and be reminded of and engage with their own memories of such experiences.

There are several clear benefits of exhibiting *Measuring the Universe* in large art institutions. A large institution draws in a bigger public audience than a smaller exhibition space would allow, and legitimizes the work through its own significance as an established museum space. However, despite these benefits there are also limitations that need to be taken into account. For instance, there is the possibility that traditional museum behavioural models, often upheld by large institutions, might cause visitors to hesitate when considering whether or not to interact with the work. In addition, museum admission prices are often expensive, and as a result many potential visitors might be excluded from displays at major art institutions.⁴⁴ Thus, there is an aspect of elitism in

⁴⁴ Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," in *Artforum International* 44.1 (Sept. 2005): 282.

exhibiting *Measuring the Universe* in major institutions that detracts from the relational aspects of the work.

The art venues in which Ondák exhibits *Measuring the Universe* also contribute to the commodification of the work. Stewart Martin has considered how participatory art relates to capitalism by critiquing Bourriaud's theories of relational aesthetics through Theodor Adorno's view of art as autonomous and linked to commodity.⁴⁵ For Adorno, autonomous art is established through its irreducibility and is in fact "anti-social."⁴⁶ Adorno criticizes the "illusion of autonomy," and suggests that art has become a "fetishized commodity that aspires to be valuable independently of its use, and thereby valuable in its own terms" within the culture industry.⁴⁷ Martin outlines the opposition between Adorno and Bourriaud by explaining that Adorno asserts art is critical because it is non-communicative and objective, whereas Bourriaud suggests the opposite.⁴⁸ Martin critiques Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics for its apparent disregard for the "commodified and objectified form" of relational works.⁴⁹ He suggests that Bourriaud's view of art resists exchange-value and is critical of capitalism, as Bourriaud's relational art refuses "commodity fetishism."⁵⁰ Martin's account of Bourriaud's utopian view in which art is a social exchange without exchange-value is in opposition to "Adorno's defence of art as the 'absolute commodity.'"⁵¹ In Ondák's case, the work is a social exchange that does possess exchange-value. The commodification takes place at the level of the institution as most galleries charge admission fees for visitors to view and participate in the experience of *Measuring the Universe*. Although there is no physical

⁴⁵ Stewart Martin, "Critique of Relational Aesthetics," in *Third Text* 21.4 (July 2007): 373.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 374.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 374-375.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 374, 376.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 379.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 376.

⁵¹ Ibid.

object to buy or sell, the commodity in the case of Ondák's installation becomes the service or use of the work, which happens to be the viewer's social experience.

As Bourriaud mourns decreasing public social interactions, what remains of these interactions is commodified in institutional art settings. The impermanence of Ondák's installation only emphasizes its value. *Measuring the Universe* is a work made up of social interactions and consequently there is no lasting, tangible art object at the end of the exhibition. Although the work was documented before it was de-installed from the Museum of Modern Art, when the exhibition ended the black markings on the walls were painted over in white leaving no physical trace or presence. This form of installation does not reaffirm the traditional reverence for the valued art object, but instead provides and celebrates experience. The installation's physical impermanence highlights the fact that the object, the physical and aesthetic element of the artistic creation, is secondary to the social aspects of the work, a trait Bourriaud associates with relational works.⁵²

Measuring the Universe reflects the impact of capitalism on contemporary society. The work re-directs attention away from the physical object, which is inherently linked to consumer culture, and instead highlights a physical experience. Like Bourriaud and Kester, Claire Bishop argues that the continued growth of consumerism and capitalism has caused a sense of alienation in contemporary society.⁵³ Rather than providing something new and flashy, the work returns to a simple interaction, which highlights human connection, sharing experiences rather than things. However, perhaps contemporary art's shift in focus, as exemplified by *Measuring the Universe*, is not in opposition to capitalist culture, but is rather in tune with it as a symptom of a greater societal change. The gradual shift away from goods and towards experience is part of what Pine and Gilmore have labelled the "Experience Economy."⁵⁴ Pine and Gilmore

⁵² Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 42.

⁵³ Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," in *Artforum* 44.6 (2006): 178-179; Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁵⁴ Joseph B. Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011), 8.

assert that the economy is undergoing a progression from a focus on commodities and goods, to services, and finally to experiences.⁵⁵ They suggest that patrons have developed a desire for experiences that will engage and stay with them. As a result, many aspects of consumer society should be and have been redesigned to be increasingly experience-based.⁵⁶ Thus the evolving trends in museum practices identified by Hein and Frieling as progressively favouring subjective, participatory experiences are not isolated, but in fact appear to be part of a larger societal shift in priorities. Since engagement is more likely to result in satisfied museumgoers in this evolving economy, the gallery itself needs to cater to the needs of its public in order to inspire its continued patronage and support. Similar shifts within the art community, identified by art historians like Bourriaud and Kester, towards increased inclusion of collaborative and interactive elements could in fact be positioned within this Experience Economy as a natural progression within the capitalist economy for artists focused on the experience of the viewer. *Measuring the Universe* and other contemporary participatory installations are not necessarily contrary to our consumerist desires. Rather, this kind of work can be seen as a response to our desire for new experiences. If society no longer places a high value on commodities, one might say that participatory installation artists are both reflecting and catering to the shift in public demand to provide an experience that has a different value.⁵⁷

1.3 Authorship and Participant Contribution

In addition to Ondák's reworking of customary subject and object divisions, he also challenges binary distinctions between the artist and the viewer through the viewer's physical contribution to the creation of the work itself. Including participants in the creation of the work essentially undermines the traditional role of the artist as individual creator.⁵⁸ Grant Kester argues that following the collective tradition found in the guilds of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 19, 45.

⁵⁷ Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 54.

⁵⁸ Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 19.

the Middle Ages, the emergence of the individual creative genius is associated with the history of modernism.⁵⁹ The traditional notion of the artist as sovereign subject means that the artist, as creative genius, must be set apart and above the masses as part of the process of distinguishing a “high” culture from the popular culture.⁶⁰ However, Ondák’s work very consciously rejects the notion of artist as sovereign in both his method and his subject matter. *Measuring the Universe* addresses a relatable subject using a simple visual aesthetic and process, a person’s handwriting in black on a plain white wall. Ondák gives over part of his role as creator to the public, who, as a result, became collaborators in the installation. Bishop has identified this integration of the viewer as part of a desire to dissolve the traditional boundaries delineating the three separate spheres of artist, viewer, and art object.⁶¹ Indeed, participatory installations such as Ondák’s reconceive that relationship to remove the distinction between the three as the viewer takes on a stronger role and responsibility in the life of the work.

The role of the gallery attendants in the formation of Ondák’s installation must also be considered in terms of the power relationship the work constructs. Ondák, in fact, removes himself from the interactions and the physical development of the work throughout its duration in the gallery space. He reduces his authority as the ultimate creator of the work by handing over responsibility to the attendants so that they can facilitate the work’s progress. *Measuring the Universe* is thus “made” by the actions of the attendants and the presence and contributions of viewers over time. Ondák has performed his role as artist by creating the idea for the work and planning its fulfilment, in a way similar to the role of the artist within the Conceptual art movement. Conceptual art gained popularity in the 1960s by creating art that privileged the idea or concept of a work over its material aspects. Sol LeWitt, a leader in the Conceptual art movement, has suggested that conceptual works require the artist to make all of the decisions and plans for the work in advance, so that the actual work can be acted out or constructed without a

⁵⁹ Kester, *One and the Many*, 3.

⁶⁰ Jones, *Seeing Differently*, 32.

⁶¹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2.

lot of effort.⁶² In this practice, the concept itself becomes the mechanism that creates the artwork.⁶³

Early conceptual artists sought to redefine the role of the artist, as well as the parameters of the artwork, and thus considered the artwork as something that need not be a fixed object created for the purpose of visual pleasure.⁶⁴ They suggested that art could also be considered as a social practice, and not necessarily as the creation of one individual artistic maker.⁶⁵ When the focus of artistic creation is on the concept, other contributors can carry out the concept to completion. Ondák's efforts to redefine the roles of the artist and viewer became a powerful aspect of his work. As one review of the exhibition mentioned, his installation effectively foregrounds the audience rather than his own role as creator.⁶⁶ Participants maintained a certain amount of agency in their own individual contributions to the work, as they were able to choose exactly where on the wall they wanted to be measured and have their presence marked.⁶⁷ There remains, however, a clear ritual nature to the detailed actions performed by the gallery attendants marking the visitors' heights on the walls. The attendants use the same approach, the same action of measuring with their hand, the same writing utensil, and the markings are made in the same format each time a visitor is measured. Ondák specifically designed the performance to remain consistent over the course of the exhibition.

If Ondák is indebted to some aspects of Conceptual Art, his work also moves in new directions. Conceptual artists were trying to establish a new art practice that redefined the parameters of the traditional hierarchical relationship between artist,

⁶² Sol LeWitt, as quoted in Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002), 38.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002), 53.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁶ Laura Cumming, "Roman Ondák – Review." *The Observer*, Sunday March 20, 2011. Accessed 20 August 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/mar/20/roman-ondak-oxford-chilean-miners>

⁶⁷ Schwenk, "Measuring the Universe," 9.

viewer, and art object. Ondák goes even further down this path than the Conceptual artists in order to enhance the experiential quality of the work and its resonance with the viewer by relying on participants to fully realize the work and to create their own subjective meanings for it. His efforts show a desire for interaction and engagement with the installation on multiple levels, which is not necessarily a component of all Conceptual works. Thus, participatory works extend their focus towards participants' contributions and experiences rather than the pure, immaterial concept itself. In this respect one might argue the artist is using people or viewers as his medium.⁶⁸ The viewers become the "art" in a sense. When one observes the gallery wall, one can see more than just the visible black markings. The people whom those markings represent are the true subjects and objects of the work, and they also form the overwhelming visual experience of *Measuring the Universe*. Though, as the work grows it often becomes impossible to decipher individual names, it is clear that within the blurred markings each name makes an important contribution to the piece as a whole.

Although thousands of participants' names were marked on the walls of the gallery throughout the exhibition, the attendants could not physically measure and write the names of every human in the universe. *Measuring the Universe* emphasizes its own limitations with its ambitious title. There is an aspect of presence and absence in the installation as it aesthetically plays with visibility and invisibility. The work physically draws attention to important features of the gallery space that are not typically noted in artworks. Without the contribution of participants, the work consists only of blank walls and gallery attendants, components that are traditionally subservient to the art object. Furthermore, the title of the work evokes a project on a scale that would be physically impossible within the space of the gallery. One cannot help but note the billions of names present within the larger universe that are not represented in the work. The work has an inherent incompleteness in its inability to meet the impossible task set by its title.⁶⁹ The

⁶⁸ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 284.

⁶⁹ Roman Ondák, "BOMB on the Inside: Roman Ondák," interviewed by Richard J. Goldstein and Hannah Kahng, YouTube video, 4:14, posted by "BOMBmagazine," July 9, 2009. Accessed July 11, 2014. <http://bombsite.com/issues/1000/articles/4220>

apparent absence suggests that the work will never be finished, even though it is performed over and over again in large galleries around the world.

At each of its gallery installations, *Measuring the Universe* has consistently enticed tens of thousands of visitors to interact with the work and contribute their names.⁷⁰ The sheer number of participants who voluntarily took the time to get measured suggests a significantly positive response to the work, as does the number of photographs taken of the process. Ondák has stated that he did not anticipate that viewers would want to document their contributions to the installation by taking their own photographs, both of their names on the wall and of the process of being measured (Figure 4).⁷¹ By documenting their own participation, viewers indicate an emotional engagement with the work, wishing to preserve the experience in order to revisit it at a later date. The extensive amount of personal documentation also reflects the changing function of photography as a medium. In contemporary society, the ever-growing presence of social media outlets has become one of the determining factors of behaviour, particularly amongst youth. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Tumblr allow users to document their actions and upload personal content into the digital public sphere. Social media encourages and facilitates the constant sharing of information and personal experience by providing a quick and easy way for users to tell friends and followers where they are and what they are doing by sharing images and videos. The availability of technological outlets for social interaction provides an extension of the participatory art experience that allows others to interact with the work by viewing, virtually ‘liking,’ and commenting on the work and the experience. When considering the prevalence of social media in contemporary society, the frequent use of personal photography within the exhibition seems to indicate a desire to share the installation and the photographer’s interaction with a social network. Thus, personal documentation, unanticipated by the artist, suggests a further social engagement with the

⁷⁰ “TateShots: Roman Ondák, Measuring the Universe,” YouTube video, 2:58, posted by “Tate,” September 8, 2011. Accessed July 11, 2014. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGhtSR3G8os>.

⁷¹ Ondák, “BOMB on the Inside: Roman Ondák.”

work in the virtual social sphere, which can be considered an additional indicator of a successfully engaging interactive installation.



Figure 4: Roman Ondák, *Measuring the Universe*, 2007. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographer Unknown.

<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/980> (accessed June 1, 2014).

1.4 Affect, Ritual, and Shared Experience

Names joined together to form one unified form suggest a common experience. Though *Measuring the Universe* is characterized by its use of measurements and its relation to the larger concept of space, one of the most crucial aspects of Ondák's work is the shared human experience that taps into a sense of nostalgia, even collective memory.⁷² As children grow it is a common impulse to track their development constantly taking place both physically and emotionally. Pinakothek der Moderne's contemporary curator Bernhart Schwenk has asserted that routinely measuring a child's

⁷² Schwenk, "Measuring the Universe," 4.

height is an action parents frequently use to visibly demonstrate changes over time. Martin Clarke, former Artistic Director at Tate St. Ives, recalls that in talking about the installation Ondák has stated that like many others he measures his own children against his doorframe, and it is that “very simple, very universal thing of measuring your children as they grow up,” that he expanded into a large-scale installation.⁷³ As the everyday action is intended to measure children as they grow and change, so the installation itself grows and changes over the course of the exhibition, continually measuring and documenting the participants. It is a common ritual for parents in contemporary Western society to document their child’s growth visibly on the wall or a chart in their family home. Thus, it is likely that the majority of visitors to the *Measuring the Universe* installation would be able to identify with the work on at least this level. Whether you are a parent recalling your experience of measuring your child, or you recall your own experience as a child being ritually measured, Ondák very effectively highlights the ritual in his work.

In this respect, *Measuring the Universe* relies on a sense of nostalgia and the personal experiences of the viewer in order to establish emotional relevance. Personal memories of childhood and family members are doubtlessly tied to strong emotions, commonly of love and joy. Thus, there is an aspect of affect at play within the installation. While it is difficult to define the concept of affect, it is essentially the unconscious forces or influences in formulating feelings and emotions.⁷⁴ Affect is a force of expression that can be transmitted from other bodies, genetics, or the social environment.⁷⁵ In *Measuring the Universe*, aspects of the installation environment and other participants can trigger certain feelings and emotions, perhaps of love or happiness, thereby influencing participants’ experience. Generally a ritual such as measuring a child is a loving gesture that suggests concern for the well-being and healthy development of

⁷³ Martin Clarke speaking in “TateShots: Roman Ondák, *Measuring the Universe*.”

⁷⁴ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 95.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

the child. Consequently, the majority of the participants likely experienced positive emotional responses when they engaged with the work. However, those who had a more difficult childhood or family experience may not react as positively to the installation as it could inspire feelings of pain and sadness. Even if there were a few viewers who did not have personal experiences with ritual height measurements and did not grasp the full nostalgic undertones of the work, there would nevertheless be potential for some kind of emotional response as they would still have the opportunity to participate in the installation and thus be included in a larger collective experience. Curator Nato Thompson suggested that affect has an influential role in creating meaning in this unique blend of art with real life.⁷⁶ Similarly, Kester asserts that participatory art practices are capable of producing different forms of knowledge, knowledge that would be enhanced by affective responses.⁷⁷ The production of knowledge and the potential emotional triggers provide powerful possibilities for viewers to engage make connections in *Measuring the Universe*.

Ondák includes elements of everyday life through the celebration of a domestic ritual. In the repetitive actions of *Measuring the Universe*, Ondák mirrors the ritual of parents tracking the growth of their children. Typically, parents measure their children in the same spot in the home, marking their various heights on the wall with a line and a date. We as humans have a general desire for routine, and as a result our daily lives are often marked by routines.⁷⁸ Professor and theorist Rita Felski has observed that the concept of the everyday involves such repetitions and is a democratic concept in that everyone, rich and poor, takes part in these domestic rituals.⁷⁹ Our lives are littered with all kinds of routines and traditions such as making coffee in the morning and reading the newspaper before work, having a specified date night, or eating a traditional holiday meal

⁷⁶ Nato Thompson, "Living as Form," in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 32.

⁷⁷ Kester, *One and the Many*, 10.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 79.

with family. The repetition of a ritual is a very human desire; it enacts a sense of stability and sameness. Routines are also a means of organizing the world we live in and building identity.⁸⁰ *Measuring the Universe* addresses these aspects of the everyday ritual through establishing some sort of order in our environment by “measuring the universe” individual by individual, all with their own identities.

In the foregrounding of a domestic ritual, Ondák brings the personal and private experience into the space of the gallery. However, Ondák is not the first to highlight elements of the ordinary in an effort to remove the barriers between art and real life. Since the emergence of conceptual art in the 1960s, elements from everyday life have been a common feature in art.⁸¹ By having the public perform a typically private domestic ritual within the space of a major art gallery, Ondák asks visitors to draw connections in very tangible ways. In addition, by having the performance take place in large institutions, he lends credence to a ritual that is generally not celebrated. The simple task of measuring your loved ones as they grow can be full of meaning and emotion to so many people; something intangible that is revealed in a beautiful and touching way. *Measuring the Universe* celebrates the personal moments and memories that so many share and that are evidence of our personal as well as our collective growth and development. The aesthetic experience of having one’s name blended and joined with the names of thousands of other people who shared the same experience of contributing to the work, and who likely participated in similar personal rituals with their own families, inspires a kinship. *Measuring the Universe* physically and aesthetically connects people together.

Measuring the Universe aesthetically reflects common experience amongst participants, as well as the play between similarity and difference that is a key aspect of the work. No matter what the participant may physically look like, their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, each contributor leaves the same black line on the gallery

⁸⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁸¹ Claire Bishop, “Introduction,” in *Participation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 10.

wall with a name and a date, thus eradicating many social differences. In a world where racism, sexism, and homophobia are still sources of hatred and even violence between people on a daily basis, Ondák's installation suggests that we are not so different from one another. When one observes the black markings of the installation, the most powerful visual is the band around the wall. The eye does not follow the outlying markings easily; it is more commonly drawn back to the visually dominating and even overwhelming thick black band. In a way, the installation addresses difference by establishing an average amongst participants. The work draws attention to an average height, visually emphasizing the similarity between the participants, who represent the larger human population. While this effect can very well create a bond between those whose name and height blend in with the others, it is possible that the work could also result in taller or shorter participants feeling excluded or singled out if their markings do not fit within the black band of average participants. The uniform black lines provide an equalizer for many social differences, however, the inclusion of participants' heights is a visual difference and potentially problematic aspect of the work that could create feelings of discrimination and inequality amongst certain participants who do not fit in to the work's efforts to create a social bond.

One must consider that the more utopian concepts within the installation are just that, idealistic, and thus are subject to real world limitations in their manifestation. On the other hand, the visible names above and below the central black band do contribute an element of individuality to the work, a reminder that the installation and larger universe are created by the contributions of individuals. While some markings are visible outside of the larger band, all contribute and are still visually connected to the others through the uniformity of the markings, regardless of their individual placement. By participating in the installation, the viewer asserts their individuality while at the same time identifying themselves as part of a larger collective whole. We are unique, we each have our own names and heights and stories, but we are very much the same in our humanity. We live in the same world, share many of the same experiences, and we are all capable of human connection. In a utopian manner, *Measuring the Universe* seems to communicate the idea that we are all connected; our lives are intertwined as demonstrated by the black lines that join together to form one cohesive form.

1.5 Conclusion

Ondák's *Measuring the Universe* effectively inspires participants to engage with the installation in tangible ways as they assert their connection to the work, and consequently to the gallery by physically marking their names. In addition, the emotional connection sparked by the collective nature of the work and the personal connection that occurs when viewers relate to the installation by supplementing their own personal memories of ritual measuring adds another level of investment. The many layers of engagement within the installation create an active viewer who is far more likely to walk away with a lasting interest in the arts than if they had merely viewed passively from a distance. At a time when arts budgets are being cut and government support for the arts is under threat, soliciting such engagement seems ever more crucial in contemporary art practice.

In a nostalgic sense, the increasing focus on the social in exhibitions such as *Measuring the Universe* harkens back to a time before the alienation of modernity, to a time where social interactions were a much more regular occurrence and people didn't need to be reminded of the important benefits of human connections. Memories can often outlast objects. In today's society, people generally do not intend to keep things for an extended period of time. Things break, or a newer and better product is released, and many objects end up forgotten or discarded in a culture that is perpetually creating more and more waste. By rejecting the material and highlighting the immaterial, *Measuring the Universe* emphasizes the larger societal yearning to return to a common humanity, and facilitates a refocus on people and social connections. Ondák's work participates in a shift in contemporary art because it aims to connect people and to show a shared humanity that extends beyond the material to speak to deeper connections. *Measuring the Universe*'s relationship to the evolution of consumerism and commodification is an important comment on contemporary society and the need to refocus on social experience. The emotions and relationships created by *Measuring the Universe* are representative of society's recent efforts to regain the face-to-face social connections that have been lost in a world of online social networks.

Chapter 2

2 The Social Event in Ann Hamilton's *the event of a thread*

Art historian Shannon Jackson and curator Maria Lind are two of several arts professionals who propose that in recent years there has been an increased interest in “exploring the durational, embodied, social, and extended spatiality of theatrical forms” in art.⁸² In fact, art historian Claire Bishop has identified an exponential increase in emphasis on social conditions in artworks internationally.⁸³ The popular practice of creating social situations rather than tangible art objects has been labeled “the social turn.”⁸⁴ In the social turn, the “intersubjective space created through these projects becomes the focus – and medium – of artistic investigation.”⁸⁵ There is a wide range of work within this social turn that spans projects with an activist agenda similar to social work, such as Atelier Van Lieshout’s portable abortion clinic (2001) or Lucy Orta’s workshops to teach the unemployed new skills (1995-), and more conceptual projects like Ann Hamilton’s recent indoor swing installation.⁸⁶ Jackson suggests that these works are “social practice,” a term that “combines aesthetics and politics” for events that are social in nature.⁸⁷ Works within the social turn create an environment that fosters social interaction for participants both amongst each other and with the work itself.

Ann Hamilton is one of the several contemporary artists creating works in a variety of media that focus on social possibilities and creating environments that foster human connection through interaction. Hamilton’s work has been characterized as “a

⁸² Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2; Also, Maria Lind referenced in Jackson, *Social Works*, 2.

⁸³ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), 2.

⁸⁴ Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,” in *Artforum* 44.6 (2006): 179.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Jackson, *Social Works*, 12.

meditation on the body and its negotiation of the space and things around it.”⁸⁸ Though she has a fairly diverse body of work, consisting of photography, sculpture, video, printmaking, performance, sound works and public projects, Hamilton is most recognized for her large-scale installation works. Her immersive environments create a multi-sensory experience for the viewer, which in one of her most recent installations, is further enhanced by the inclusion of interactive elements. While some of Hamilton’s earlier environments often contain performers executing repetitive actions, her latest installation extends even further to allow the viewer to be an active and embodied presence, and even a contributor, within the work by performing actions on their own.⁸⁹ As a participatory work, Hamilton’s *the event of a thread* (2012-2013) constitutes its audience as a community in ways that differ from conventional exhibitions.

For an entire month, from December 5, 2012 to January 6, 2013, viewers could participate in Ann Hamilton’s installation, *the event of a thread*, at New York City’s Park Avenue Armory. The Armory’s recently converted exhibition space in the historic drill hall is vast, providing the perfect setting for one of Hamilton’s large-scale immersive installations.⁹⁰ The work consisted of a massive white silk curtain suspended in the centre of the hall and surrounded by a field of swings hung from a system of ropes and pulleys (Figure 5). The artist invited viewers to swing on the many swings, and as they did the white fabric, connected to the swings through the rope system, shifted and reflected the movement of the participants (Figure 6). Because participants were continuously swinging, the curtain remained in constant flux, reacting solely to the pull of the bodies interacting with the environment in a collective feat.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Niamh Ann Kelly, “Ann Hamilton: The Irish Museum of Modern Art,” *Art Monthly* 256 (May 2002): 39.

⁸⁹ Roberta Smith, “The Audience as Art Movement: Ann Hamilton at the Park Avenue Armory,” *New York Times* (December 6, 2012), par 8. Accessed March 11, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/07/arts/design/ann-hamilton-at-the-park-avenue-armory.html?pagewanted=all&module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar>.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, par 9.

⁹¹ For a more complete visual overview of the multi-faceted installation with accompanying commentary by the artist see “Ann Hamilton: “the event of a thread” | “Exclusive” | *Art21*,” YouTube video, 4:58,



**Figure 5: Ann Hamilton, *the event of a thread*, 2012-2013. Park Avenue Armory, New York. Photographer Unknown.
<http://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/projects/armory.html> (accessed June 1, 2014).**



Figure 6: Ann Hamilton, *the event of a thread*, 2012-2013. Park Avenue Armory, New York. Photograph by James Ewing. http://www.armoryonpark.org/photo_gallery/slideshow/ann_hamilton (accessed June 1, 2014).

While the swings and large white curtain formed the central and largest feature of the installation, Hamilton included additional elements that added to the immersive and multi-sensory experience of the work. At one end of the hall were two readers seated at a large table facing a caged flock of homing pigeons (Figure 7). As they read aloud from long scrolls, the readers spoke into microphones, sometimes taking turns and sometimes in unison. Their voices were then transmitted through speakers concealed in forty-two paper bags placed throughout the space. The words read aloud came from concordances that included texts by several prominent writers, including Aristotle, Emerson, and Darwin, and poets, such as Ann Lauterbach.⁹² Concordances, or alphabetical lists of key

⁹² Smith, "The Audience as Art Movement," par 12.

words used in a given text along with their immediate contexts, lack narrative. Deprived of a cohesive argument or story, the steady rhythm of the words thus becomes the most accessible aspect of the text. At the opposite end of the space sat a writer. Though the writer faced away from the activity in the central area of the hall, they were able to see what was going on in the space behind them through a mirror that moved in relation to the movement of the fabric. As they sat, the writer wrote in response to the movements and sounds going on behind them, as well as the more general atmosphere and condition of the environment in the hall. The people performing the roles of writer and readers changed regularly, however, the tasks performed remained consistent throughout the course of the exhibition.

Though Hamilton has greatly expanded her practice over the years, she began her art career in textiles. She received her B.F.A. from the University of Kansas in textile design, and later an M.F.A. in sculpture from Yale University.⁹³ Her background in weaving can be seen very clearly in *the event of a thread* as Hamilton not only physically wove together the central white curtain of fabric suspended by an intricate system of ropes, but she also merged different materials, performers, and concepts in making the work.⁹⁴ All of these seemingly disparate components may not immediately sound like they go together, but when you step back and take in the greater picture of the installation you can see that Hamilton has carefully and intricately woven together a beautiful tapestry of people and social interactions, displayed within a social space. Hamilton used the unique space of the Park Avenue Armory's vast hall to create a social environment and inspire a large public audience to participate and engage with the work through everyday, relatable elements and actions.

⁹³ Smith, "The Audience as Art Movement," par 7.

⁹⁴ Ibid.



Figure 7: Ann Hamilton, *the event of a thread*, 2012-2013. Park Avenue Armory, New York. Photograph by James Ewing. http://www.armoryonpark.org/photo_gallery/slideshow/ann_hamilton (accessed June 1, 2014).

2.1 Time and Memory

Hamilton's installation plays with the notion of time in ways that give the illusion of documenting its passing, while it also attempts to create a situation in which time is suspended within the paradoxical space of the exhibition. One of the ways *the event of a thread* plays with time is the routine for opening and closing each day. At the end of each day a vocalist performed a song as the pigeons were released from the small cages in front of the readers to fly up to their large cage in the ceiling. The song was recorded to vinyl, and then played the following morning to begin the new day, thus returning "the recent past to the current moment."⁹⁵ Over time the recording of each additional vocalist accumulated and eventually, the individual voices joined together in a "chorus."⁹⁶ The action of recording and replay, with the addition of each record to the chorus of vocalists,

⁹⁵ Ann Hamilton, "The Event of a Thread," in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance Art*, 35.2 (May 2013): 73.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

marked the coming and passing of another day physically and audibly. Viewers were constantly reminded of the steady and inevitable passing of time, and the changes that the process can effect as each day's iteration was slightly different from the one that came before it. However, Hamilton used the opportunity to further play with the concept of time as the repetition of the song also suspended time by prolonging the moment of that one song for the duration of the exhibition. The repetition connected each day to the next while creating an ongoing loop that continuously returned to the song with each passing day – a routine performed consistently over time.

As the music addressed the concept of time at the beginning and end of each day, Hamilton used the actions of both the readers and writers to foreground and even further play with the constant presence and effect of time throughout the exhibition. The readers' words provided a clear, ceaseless rhythm that echoed the rhythm of the swings moving back and forth, while it also called to mind the pendulum of a clock and thus the passing of time.⁹⁷ Although the rhythm of the spoken words suggested time's passing, Hamilton undermined the association through the texts' content. Because concordances deny any cohesive story or narrative progress, the listener is caught up in a time loop within the seemingly ever-present space of the installation. There is no audible forward movement. Similarly, the writer remained consistently in tune with the present moment. Although their constantly evolving account of the exhibition provided a cumulative record of the passing of time within the space of the installation, by continuing to record and comment on conditions in the moment, the writer remained focused entirely on the present and did not reflect on time passed. Consequently the writer remained suspended, like those on the swings, within the space. Thus, the juxtaposition of the readers and the writer's actions at opposite ends of the hall effectively foreground how Hamilton plays with and even manipulates the viewers' and also the performers' perception of time within the enchanted space of the experience.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 73.

While the musical, read, and written contributions to the installation were all important components of the larger whole, perhaps the most interesting and visually striking aspect was the field of swings in the centre of the hall between the readers and the writer. About the swings Hamilton says,

I can remember the feeling of swinging—how hard we would work for those split seconds, flung at furthest extension, just before the inevitable downward and backward pull, when we felt momentarily free of gravity, a little hiccup of suspension when our hands loosened on the chain and our torsos raised off the seat. We were sailing, so inside the motion – time stopped – and then suddenly rushed again toward us. We would line up on the playground and try to touch the sky, alone together.⁹⁸

By having participants engage with a common playtime activity that many experienced as children, or perhaps even as adults, Hamilton attempts to recreate the illusion of time stopping within the manufactured environment of the installation. Just as “time stopped,” when Hamilton, and countless others, reached that moment on the playground swing-set, free of gravity before the fall back to earth, the passing of time is suspended within the playground atmosphere created in *the event of a thread*. Participants swing higher and higher into the air in an effort to reach that magical moment where time seems to physically stop for a few gravity-free seconds suspended above the ground. While the installation allowed children to participate, one of its great contributions as an art project was that it not only sanctioned but also encouraged adult play within the gallery context, as the majority of participants within the gallery were adults. The tremendous experience of freedom generated by the installation is a unique characteristic and benefit of the Armory as both a gallery and public space. Within the exhibition space, the artist invited

⁹⁸ Ibid., 72.

participants to escape their everyday lives and responsibilities for a short while and relive a youthful experience through the action of swinging, physically manipulating and even stopping time for just a second within the powerful installation environment. The writers' and readers' manipulations of time bracketed the physical, interactive space of the swings where participants were invited to escape the restraints of time and embrace the suspension of disbelief. Returning to a childhood activity and perhaps even a child's mental state in which the passing of time, an inevitable source of stress for many adults, is interrupted for a few brief seconds, contributed to the installation's idealistic and playful appeal.

In addition to time, Hamilton's installation very clearly alludes to the presence of memory, especially in her writing about how she drew inspiration for the work from her childhood experiences with swings. Memory is closely linked with time, and is unique in its ability to manipulate the concept of time in a larger sense. While physically interacting with the swings, one might recall memories of childhood playing in the playground as Hamilton does, of simpler times, of the weightlessness and light-hearted attitudes of younger days, striving to swing higher and higher before being pulled back down to earth. Memory is not only a factor in the installation's creation of nostalgia through swinging, but also in the inclusion of the readers who provide the soundtrack for the majority of participants' experiences in the hall. Hamilton has said that she remembers sitting on her grandmother's lap when she was a child, and as her grandmother read to her, she would sit and listen to the words and the turning of the pages, watching birds out the window.⁹⁹ For adults, the majority of the installation's audience, reading is perhaps a more immediately relatable way to connect to the work. Reading is certainly a much more common adult activity than swinging on playground equipment. However, the installation includes this everyday action in a way that recalls a childhood experience. Having someone else read to you for an extended period of time is a more common occurrence for children than for adults. The installation's inclusion of readers takes the participant back to that childhood mindset of listening to someone else read, perhaps a

⁹⁹ Ibid.

family member or teacher, and even back to a carefree childhood attitude in which someone else bears the responsibility of action within the nostalgic space of the hall.

Reading has a power to transport us to another world, to escape our reality in an intimate and shared moment, much like a recalled memory.¹⁰⁰ The power of memory is that it allows one to experience the present and the (remembered) past in a simultaneous and connected moment. In this instance time is not a linear progression, but rather a suspended moment. Similarly, reading requires the reader to be present in two moments at once, the one described in the text and envisioned in the imagination, and the present moment of the reader's reality in which they are performing the action of reading, or in the case of the installation, listening. Simultaneity, evoked both in the act of reading, and more clearly when recalling a past memory, involves a clever and playful manipulation of the participant's experience of time.

Each participant in *the event of a thread* no doubt brought their own distinct memories from childhood – swinging, playing, reading aloud – or maybe more recent memories of performing such activities with their own children or loved ones. Even if some of the installation's participants had never experienced such things before seeing the work, they were nevertheless joined to other attendees by the common experience in the present and the creation of a memory within the Armory installation, and thus they all shared a common connection through Hamilton's work. Each viewer's subjective experience of the work allowed for a more intimate and even emotional interaction with the space. Memory made the experience within the space of the installation both subjective and collective in an interesting juxtaposition, in addition to being a suspension of reality. Hamilton skilfully used the simple construction of swings, boards hung from the ceiling by two ropes, to weave an emotional connection between viewers and create a common, multi-sensory experience within the environment. As Hamilton points out, swinging within *the event of a thread* is a collective endeavour since the installation

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

allows participants to be “alone together.”¹⁰¹ Though the participant may be making the physical effort of swinging alone, they are surrounded by others experiencing and sharing in the exact same phenomenon, which suggests a commonality among participants as each participant’s movement contributes to the movement of the whole construction. Regardless of their individual subjective experiences, the collective experience of manipulated time within the installation space remains unique.

2.2 The physical and aesthetic social event

The large white curtain, the focal point at the centre of the hall, acted as a screen, its physical properties visually emphasizing the work’s social aspect. Instead of a traditional screen in the sense of a surface onto which images are projected, the fabric visually showed the collective contributions of the participants as their movement registered on the material itself. The fabric’s focal position and size allowed it to draw the visual attention of the space as visitors entered and engaged with the exhibition. Every participant’s contact with the physical material registered on the cloth in some way, and that is the event of the thread itself. Hamilton says, “The shifting weather of the white cloth is generated through collective action. A common activity perhaps reveals our kinship with bees, ants, and cranes; all united as Aristotle’s ‘social animals,’ undertaking the same action for the elevation of the whole.”¹⁰² As the caged pigeons flocked together, so the participants swung and experienced together. Hamilton believes that like the birds, “this kind of quality of solitude and being in a congregation or group of people [...] is actually very comforting and something that we need.”¹⁰³

In his seminal text *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud suggests that art, especially relational works, are a “state of encounter,” while the exhibition is an “arena of exchange.”¹⁰⁴ The terms that Bourriaud outlines as relational are certainly applicable to

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Hamilton, “Ann Hamilton: “the event of a thread” | “Exclusive” | *Art21*.”

¹⁰⁴ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 17-18.

Hamilton's work, since as an installation and interactive work *the event of a thread* creates an environment where viewers become active subjects. In the environment of the installation participants are given the opportunity for a physical, emotional and in particular, a social encounter with the work. Photographic and video documentation of the installation shows viewers pushing each other on the swings, sharing their seats, walking around others, talking with each other, and in some cases lying on the ground squished right up against each other. As these social exchanges occurred, both the readers and the writer emphasized social connection and communication through language. While the readers faced and addressed the caged flock of birds, it was the humans present in the hall who were able to understand the words spoken by the readers and experience a shared connection through language and humanity in contrast to the birds. Just as the flock functioned as one entity – individuals drawn together in closeness by a social bond – a similar relationship formed amongst the participants in the space of the installation, drawn together in a physical closeness and sharing in their experiences of the spatial conditions. The birds do not understand the communication taking place, but most of the viewers do, and in that they experience a connection. Thus the inclusion of the flock of pigeons provides more than the simple marking of time through their flight from cage to cage at day's end, emphasizing the notion of social collectivity present in many aspects of the installation.

While most viewers do not have a choice as to whether or not they participate in the performers' communication, either hearing the readers or being a part of what the writer records, they were able to choose the extent to which they participated, or did not participate, with the interactive swings. Frieling has described participatory art as "an open invitation," in which a viewer's choice to participate in the work or not is equally valid, since observing the participation of others is, in fact, an acceptable and necessary form of engagement.¹⁰⁵ Viewers who chose not to swing on Hamilton's swings nevertheless contributed to the work through their mere presence within the space,

¹⁰⁵ Rudolf Frieling, "Introduction," in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, ed. Rudolf Frieling, et al. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 13.

walking around, or lying on the ground, observing others and choosing to use the space in ways they saw fit. In addition, Hamilton included a window from the installation space onto the public space of the street outside, Lexington Avenue (Figure 8).¹⁰⁶ This window allowed people on the street to observe the environment of the installation and also connect with those within the exhibition space through the physical removal of the barrier between exhibition space and public space. Interestingly, the street view of the installation also allowed those who wished to merely view the installation the opportunity to do so without paying the twelve-dollar admission fee.¹⁰⁷ The inclusion of a street-level window did not fully remove the cost-barrier that might prevent lower-income members of the public from experiencing the work, however, it was a step towards a more open exhibition space. The window created an additional opportunity for all members of the public to view the work and participate in some way by extending the public space of the installation.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, “The Audience as Art Movement,” par 16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.



Figure 8: Ann Hamilton, *the event of a thread*, 2012-2013. Park Avenue Armory, New York. Photographer Unknown.

<http://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/projects/armory.html> (accessed June 1, 2014).

The actions of the participants as well as the performers all contribute various layers of social interactions to the installation. As a result of the inclusion of staged and performative elements in the work, there was a risk that the social connections it aimed to create might be viewed as forced, inauthentic, or even utopian in nature. Some artists and art critics claim that people who view or engage with social works of this sort, and have what they see as meaningful social experiences within the installation environment, in fact engage in social interactions that are not entirely natural or reflective of the real world. Hal Foster asserts that the “very idea of community has taken on a utopian tinge.”¹⁰⁸ Like Bourriaud, Foster suggests that “[participation’s] privileging in art might be compensatory – a pale, part-time substitute” for a decline in participatory and social actions in other aspects of contemporary life.¹⁰⁹ Bishop voices similar concerns and suggests that practices that aim to establish “a harmonious space of inter-subjective

¹⁰⁸ Hal Foster, “Chat Rooms,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 194.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

encounter” threaten to reduce the capacity for criticality.¹¹⁰ Such critics support the notion that social interaction has become idealized as something nostalgic and of the past in our ever-modernizing society. While it is easier than ever to live a life of minimal interaction with other people due to popularized technologies such as online shopping, often these everyday social exchanges are still a regular occurrence, and perhaps it is too soon to discuss them as remnants of a dying way of life. Playground equipment is still maintained in public spaces, and people still interact in such spaces. However, Hamilton’s installation draws attention to the importance of these experiences with the aim of inspiring people to consider them in a new light. Bishop suggests that this kind of installation does not encourage criticality, and although there will be many that simply view the installation as a fun, playground-like work that creates a temporary space for play, others might be inspired to more critically consider the state of such social encounters outside of the exhibition space as well as the ability for art and its exhibition settings to facilitate new social interactions and connection within the space.

The characterization of social interaction as an out-dated concept has resulted in its increasing celebration in works that attempt to recreate what were once mundane activities. Foster goes on to say that to some relational works “will sound like a truly final end of art, to be celebrated and decried. For others, it will seem to aestheticize the nicer procedures of our service economy.”¹¹¹ If interactions and activities that used to be seen as normal, everyday actions, such as swinging on a swing or sitting on a park bench are now considered art, what is the distinction between art and life? Is there even the need for distinction anymore if everyday activities are considered art? The intersection of art and the everyday is not a new concept. In fact, it goes back a century to Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), which proposed that a common urinal was worthy of exhibition. Contemporary participatory works such as *the event of a thread* that draw on the celebration of the everyday have been a trend in the art world for decades, engaging the

¹¹⁰ Jackson, *Social Works: Performing art, supporting publics*, 47; and Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 79.

¹¹¹ Foster, “Chat Rooms,” 195.

audiences and bringing attention to the importance of social connections. Everyday objects are effective equalizers, as most visitors to the exhibition would have experienced the everyday material components of the installation such as swings, pigeons, and benches. Thus, the inclusion and celebration of everyday objects and interactions provide an entrance point for the general public to connect with the work, since they are able to relate to certain common aspects of it and gain some sort of understanding of the installation. Not only is there beauty in the everyday, but also our shared experiences with everyday social situations provide collective experiences and memories for participants to draw from in order to engage with *the event of a thread* and with the other participants. If encouraged to engage socially within the context of the art exhibition, perhaps participants will be more inclined to engage socially outside of the gallery space, in the real, public world.

Although there is certainly an element of required interaction within the installation, the possibilities of interaction are not entirely limited to the intended performative actions. Though participants were clearly encouraged to swing on the swings, they maintained a certain level of agency in their actions. Some participants did choose to swing and thus move the fabric curtain with their motion, but some just sat on the swings either alone or with others. However, even as early as the opening of the exhibition, visitors began to use the space in their own way, making it their own in ways Hamilton did not anticipate.¹¹² One of the ways visitors interacted with the space was to lie down on the ground beneath the fabric and watch its movements, often for long periods of time (Figure 9). The result was a large cluster of people lying beneath the curtain, focusing their attention on its movement, an action which foregrounded and even enhanced the social aspect of the work by enabling another form of human connection and physical interaction. In addition, some participants chose to hold the speakers hidden in the paper bags up to their ears to more closely and intimately experience the audio elements of the environment (Figure 10).¹¹³ This close interaction with the speaker

¹¹² Hamilton, “Ann Hamilton: “the event of a thread” | “Exclusive” | *Art21*.”

¹¹³ Smith, “The Audience as Art Movement,” par 15.

suggests a desire for clear and more intimate communication. The fact that people wanted to fully experience the various components, particularly give their full attention to what the readers were trying to communicate, suggests an openness to social engagement. The unanticipated choices of action also indicate that the space created by the installation was not purely a forced social situation. Rather, it shows that the work created an environment in which people felt comfortable enough to interact on their own terms as well as in the ways suggested by the artist.



Figure 9: Ann Hamilton, *the event of a thread*, 2012-2013. Park Avenue Armory, New York. Photographer Unknown.
<http://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/projects/armory.html> (accessed June 1, 2014).



Figure 10: Ann Hamilton, *the event of a thread*, 2012-2013. Park Avenue Armory, New York. Photographer Unknown.

<http://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/projects/armory.html> (accessed June 1, 2014).

2.3 The Park Avenue Armory

The exhibition space itself permitted a certain freedom, which participants took advantage of in their interactions. The Park Avenue Armory's vast 55,000 square-foot drill hall provides a massive space that is unusual in galleries. Typically gallery spaces are much smaller in size, and provide ample wall space so that there are plenty of areas to exhibit paintings and more traditional art mediums. However, as Foster says, installation has become the "default format" in contemporary art, with an increased number of artists choosing to create installation works in an effort to provide a more immersive experience for the viewer.¹¹⁴ The Armory's uniquely large size provides the perfect space to exhibit

¹¹⁴ Foster, "Chat Rooms," 192; Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

large, social installations, as it allows a significant number of people to be present together in one space and thus provides an opportunity for greater social interaction than more typical, smaller galleries. In addition, the venue's history as a civic and social space provides a distinctly social-minded atmosphere very different from the more conventional art spaces.

The Armory was built in 1861 for the volunteer militia of the Seventh Regiment of the National Guard, which was made up of some of New York's most prominent families.¹¹⁵ The building was intended to function as "both a military facility and a social club" to help protect the city and its citizens, as well as provide a space where those citizens could gather and socialize.¹¹⁶ In 2007 the Armory began a new life as a cultural centre, bringing various performances and large-scale, immersive installations to the public. As it is today, The Park Avenue Armory provides a unique space to exhibit unusual works of all art forms that exceeds the limits of typical exhibition spaces, and in doing so it has become a true cultural space. Traditional museums and galleries have a history of required social conventions and behaviours that have sometimes been seen as restrictive to viewers' freedom to move in and interact with the space.¹¹⁷ While the traditional museum is made up of a series of rooms that the viewer wanders through, passively viewing works from a distance, the Armory's drill hall has an entirely different atmosphere of openness and flexibility that constitutes the audience differently than a conventional museum space.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière identifies typical spectatorship as observation held in contrast to the ability to act, and he suggests that a spectator must defy this opposition.¹¹⁸ He recognizes that spectators do in fact perform actions to a certain extent by viewing and interpreting what they see, and by comparing it to other

¹¹⁵ Park Avenue Armory, "About Us: Building History," *armoryonpark.org*, accessed March 11, 2013. http://www.armoryonpark.org/about_us

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Hamilton, "The Event of a Thread," 70.

¹¹⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 2, 13.

things they have seen. In this way, they participate in the spectacle even when denied the ability to physically act on it.¹¹⁹ He further suggests that the spectator's personal interpretation and unique individual experience with the work is the source of their power and engagement.¹²⁰ Rancière asserts that, "an emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators," as they actively contribute to their reading of the work.¹²¹ Hamilton's *the event of a thread* creates a space for Rancière's emancipated spectator by encouraging viewers not only to participate physically in the work, but also to observe and inhabit the social space. In addition, as Rancière suggests, when viewers engage with a work's memory stimulants, they have the opportunity to integrate their own personal and subjective interpretation of the work, translating it in their own way to resonate with their own experiences. By encouraging subjective interpretation and personal engagement on a large scale, Hamilton enables an audience that is emancipated, possessing the power that Rancière advocates and embracing their ability to act.

Rancière also addresses the performance space in terms of its ability to create an engaging experience for the spectator. He asserts that the separation between performer and spectator should be removed, and the performance should identify with the street or everyday life in order to enhance the performance experience.¹²² For Rancière, when "living bodies onstage address bodies assembled in the same place, it seems that that is enough to make theatre the vehicle for a sense of community, radically different" than the typical exhibition relationship with the spectator.¹²³ He asserts that contemporary artists are no longer interested in just creating an artwork, but rather they are looking to escape the typical museum setting for the sphere of everyday life.¹²⁴ The Armory, with its grand openness, and as a renovated civic space, establishes a much different environment for

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹²¹ Ibid., 22.

¹²² Ibid., 15.

¹²³ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 53.

the spectator, closer to that of a public street or gathering place than a museum setting. This feeling is only enhanced by the window onto the actual street, which allows for the inclusion of the outside world. This unconventional exhibition space allows viewers to experience Hamilton's installation in a setting that is more social and less hindered by established behaviour patterns than those offered by traditional galleries. The audience has more freedom to engage with the work, the space, and each other. Because of the unique social quality of the Armory's exhibition space, *the event of a thread* is more likely to initiate genuine social interactions and to create a more authentic reflection of real social situations. Moreover, it may draw in a larger public, less comfortable with more traditional museum settings.

To physically enter the space of the installation is to participate in the creation of a public, communal space within an art context that references and reactivates the site's history as a civic and social space. The Armory's 2014 season includes an eclectic mix of arts programming, including an immersive concert experience with the popular band The xx, a staging of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* by Kenneth Branagh and Rob Ashford, an opera, and a large-scale visual art installation by artist Douglas Gordon.¹²⁵ This melange of cultural activity provides an opportunity for the public to encounter both high and popular culture in a unique space, and makes engaging art experiences accessible to a wider audience. Someone that enjoys a concert at the Armory might be more likely to come back to see an art installation or a theatrical performance. The space provides a great opportunity to dissolve some of the boundaries that have existed between different viewers and appeal to a larger and more varied audience.

In speaking to the PBS show *Art21* about *the event of a thread* Hamilton said, "it's sort of become like a park."¹²⁶ A park is a space of gathering, of community, and of relaxation, and that is truly what the exhibition hall became for the duration of the installation. A park is also a space of natural interaction and freedom. While there are

¹²⁵ Park Avenue Armory, "2014 Season," *armoryonpark.org*, accessed February 25, 2014. http://www.armoryonpark.org/programs_events/2014_season

¹²⁶ Hamilton, "Ann Hamilton: 'the event of a thread' | 'Exclusive' | *Art21*."

certain typical activities that parks encourage, such as playing on playground equipment, they also allow people to spread out, sit down, walk around, come and go as they please, and of course socialize and interact with others and the space itself in their own unique ways. The installation space also visually resembled a park, or public area, with the inclusion of dark benches placed around the perimeter of the hall, which allowed viewers to sit and observe the action around them.¹²⁷ Thus, it is apparent that Hamilton's comparison of *the event of a thread* to the public space of a park is one that rings true, and also speaks to the distinct social quality of the Armory's exhibition hall. While discussing social works and the scholarship surrounding them, Claire Bishop has said that for socially engaged art enthusiasts, "the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanizes – or at least de-alienates – a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism."¹²⁸ Though Bishop is sceptical of such an admittedly idealistic view of social works, one can imagine that through sharing in *the event of a thread* in the large and immersive space of the Armory, and experiencing the work physically, emotionally, and socially, participants were reminded of a common humanity, a shared connection re-established within the exhibition space.

2.4 Conclusion

Ann Hamilton's *the event of a thread* plays with and juxtaposes notions of time and experience, and in doing so, knits together elements of the past and the present, reality and memory, the subjective and collective, to create the larger fabric of a social event. Hamilton draws heavily from everyday relatable concepts, actions, and materials, such as time, reading, and swinging, and combines them into a "kinetic, relational performance" that works together as one large, seamless unit.¹²⁹ She uses and manipulates concepts of time, memory, performance, and the social gathering in order to create an immersive environment and to actively engage the viewer on a physical,

¹²⁷ Smith, "The Audience as Art Movement," par 16.

¹²⁸ Bishop, "The Social Turn," 179.

¹²⁹ Lisa Dent, "Ann Hamilton," in *Art in America* 100.11 (December 2012): 175.

emotional, and social level. Though at first glance each component of the installation may seem distinct, closer examination reveals they are all connected and each contributes to the larger meaning and experience of the work as a whole. For instance, the manipulation of time within the installation allows for a suspended or prolonged collective experience of social interaction and connection as time is briefly stopped within the enchanted exhibition space of the drill hall. While the performances of the vocalist, caged pigeons, readers, and writer both mark and alter the passage of time, the element of the social is a constant presence perpetuated within each activity.

In *the event of a thread* every participant contributes to the success of the installation and the larger collective experience. In her artist statement for this installation, Ann Hamilton says, “If on a swing, we are alone, we are together in a field. This condition of the social is *the event of a thread*. Our crossings with its motions, sounds, and textures is its weaving; is a social act.”¹³⁰ One might elaborate to say that if on a swing, we are alone, we are together within the immersive, social space of *the event of a thread*, joined by the weaving talents of Ann Hamilton and the pull of shared human experiences. As Rancière says, “what the artist does is to weave together a new sensory fabric by wresting percepts and affects from the perceptions and affectations that make up the fabric of ordinary experience. Weaving this new fabric means creating a form of expression of the community.”¹³¹ Hamilton has woven the fabric of a social space of interaction for the community within the hall of the Park Avenue Armory.

¹³⁰ Hamilton, “The Event of a Thread,” 73.

¹³¹ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 56.

Chapter 3

3 Engaging the Public Audience in Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett's *CLOUD*

Many people have memories of lazy summer afternoons as children spent lounging in the soft grass or sitting on sidewalks, staring up to watch the clouds float across the sky. Reaching our hands up in the air to identify shapes and forms in the clouds as they changed could provide hours of entertainment, until those clouds turned dark and soon invisible as night put an end to the game until the next day. Artists Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett have created a way for both children and adults alike to prolong their engagement and fascination with the natural wonder of clouds into the darkness of night. On September 15, 2012 Brown and Garrett lit up the night of Calgary's inaugural Nuit Blanche festival with their performative installation, *CLOUD*. A large-scale, interactive sculpture, *CLOUD* consists of six thousand light bulbs of various sizes and shades arranged together on a hand-bent steel substructure and secured with chicken wire (Figure 11).¹³² Brown and Garrett arranged a mixture of both new and burnt out incandescent light bulbs around the outside of the work, which they then backlit using two hundred and fifty compact fluorescent bulbs inside the structure.¹³³ At a height of fourteen feet, the eighteen-foot-wide and ten-foot-deep structure was supported by a single central shaft in the centre, creating lots of room for participants to gather beneath it (Figure 12). The work's large size also allowed it to be easily seen from all around the city's public plaza where it was located during the night of the event (Figure 13).

¹³² Caitlind r.c. Brown, "About Cloud," *incandescentcloud.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/aboutcloud/>; and Caitlind r.c. Brown, "Getting Down to Business," *incandescentcloud.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/2012/08/15/getting-down-to-business/>

¹³³ Brown, "About Cloud."



Figure 11: Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett, *CLOUD*, 2012. Nuit Blanche Calgary. Photographer Unknown.
<http://incandescentcloud.wordpress.com/2012/09/27/sleepless-night-nuit-blanche-calgary/#> (accessed June 1, 2014).



Figure 12: Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett, *CLOUD*, 2012. Nuit Blanche Calgary. Photographer Unknown.
<http://incandescentcloud.wordpress.com/2012/09/27/sleepless-night-nuit-blanche-calgary/#> (accessed June 1, 2014).



Figure 13: Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett, *CLOUD*, 2012. Nuit Blanche Calgary. Photographer Unknown.

<http://incandescentcloud.com/2012/09/27/sleepless-night-nuit-blanche-calgary/#jp-carousel-880> (accessed June 1, 2014).

Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett, based in Calgary, Alberta, work with a wide variety of mediums in their artistic practices. Brown graduated from the Alberta College of Art and Design in 2010, and in addition to her artistic practice, is involved with a team of artist-curators based in Calgary.¹³⁴ Garrett studied music at Mount Royal University, and is a musician as well as an artist. He also has experience with machines and mechanics, which he employs in the physical assembly of his collaborations with Brown.¹³⁵ In addition to *CLOUD*, Brown and Garrett have created several projects for their Celestial Series that use similar elements, including *SOLAR FLARE* (2013), an interactive light installation triggered by motion sensors and suspended over a pedestrian walkway in Calgary.¹³⁶ Their most recent work in the series is *NEW MOON* (2014), an

¹³⁴ Caitlind r.c. Brown, "About the Artists," *incandescentcloud.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/about-the-artist-2/>

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Caitlind r.c. Brown, "About Solar Flare," *solarsunflare.wordpress.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://solarsunflare.wordpress.com/about/>

interactive light sculpture of the moon created for downtown Lexington, Kentucky's Triangle Park that participants interact with by turning a wheel beneath it.¹³⁷ Brown and Garrett's collaborations utilize domestic waste and aim to establish community participation and interaction.¹³⁸ They use everyday materials and public audiences to inspire citizens to engage with their cities in new ways, drawing attention to the urban environment the works are situated in and the social interactions that those spaces can facilitate.

CLOUD repurposes common materials and invites viewers to reconsider everyday objects and actions by interacting with them in a new art context. The functional light bulbs are attached to pull strings that hang down from the structure. During its exhibition, the audience can interact with the work by standing underneath *CLOUD* and tugging on the cords. The strings are arranged in various lengths with some reaching down almost to the ground so that participants of various heights and mobility are able to grasp them and interact with the work. By pulling the cords participants can turn the working light bulbs on and off, causing the sculpture to flicker with the collective actions of multiple participants. *CLOUD*'s interactivity turns its audience into "a collective, co-authoring, participatory social body," which Claire Bishop asserts is a main objective of participatory art.¹³⁹ As an interactive work *CLOUD* also adheres to Bishop's belief that participatory works aim, "to restore and realize a communal collective space of shared social engagement."¹⁴⁰ In this chapter, I show how Brown and Garrett's *CLOUD* functions as a work of public art, and why this type of new public art is an important means of generating public engagement. The installation calls attention to the public it serves and engages them through its exhibition location, authorship, and interactive

¹³⁷ Caitlind r.c. Brown, "NEW MOON: First Phase," *incandescentcloud.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/2014/02/09/new-moon-first-phase/>

¹³⁸ Brown, "About the Artists."

¹³⁹ Claire Bishop, "Participation and the Spectacle: Where are we now?" in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 36.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

elements. From its creation and development through to its exhibition, *CLOUD* fostered a sense of community by involving the public as collaborators.

3.1 Collaboration and Criticism

CLOUD is a collaborative installation as well as an interactive one. The artists came up with the concept and the design, and were also the main constructors. However, they were not the sole makers of the work, and have been open about the fact that *CLOUD* is a product of collaboration due to its size and technical requirements. They solicited help from a team of skilled contributors to create the functional, cloud-like light bulb installation. Others advised on and suggested the best materials to use. Brown and Garrett worked alongside carpenters, welders, metal shop technicians, engineering consultants, and volunteers thus making *CLOUD* a true group effort.¹⁴¹ The number of people who came together to assemble the structure imbues the work with a sense of community, echoed in its inclusion of the social throughout the various stages of its development and display. From conception to realization the installation relied on collaboration and community support. In his writing about collaborative practices, John Roberts argues that, “the processes of collaboration are in the widest and non-contentious sense, then, constitutive of art as a social practice, even if these processes are invariably hidden or dissolved by the artist.”¹⁴² Not all of the contributors to the work are immediately apparent in *CLOUD*; however, their involvement remains as evidence of the work’s essentially social nature.

Curator and critic Okwui Enwezor believes that a collective work such as *CLOUD* “complicates modernism’s idealization of the artwork as the unique object of individual creativity. In collective work we witness the simultaneous aporia of artwork

¹⁴¹ Caitlind r.c. Brown, “Cloud Credits,” *incandescentcloud.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/cloud-credits/>.

¹⁴² John Roberts, “Collaboration as a Problem of Art’s Cultural Form,” *Third Text* 18.6 (2004): 557.

and artist. This tends to lend collective work a social rather than artistic character.”¹⁴³ *CLOUD* as a collaborative work embodies a social character through its embrace of collaboration in all stages of its creation and display, and its rejection of the traditional role of the artist(s) as individual creator(s). Behind the scenes, collaborators contributed several of the key elements of *CLOUD*'s structural design. Brown has revealed that it was at the suggestion of one of their contributors that they used chicken wire to secure the outer layer of light bulbs to the steel substructure, because it allowed them to screw the light bulbs in across a large surface.¹⁴⁴ Contributors were also responsible for determining what kinds of light bulbs were used in the sculpture. Though it might seem strange to include so many burnt out light bulbs in a work that is intended to light up, the decision had many practical benefits. Since the installation was of such a large scale, requiring thousands of light bulbs secured together, engineers advising on the project suggested that using only working light bulbs might be visually overwhelming for viewers, especially those in close proximity to it.¹⁴⁵ Several thousand illuminated light bulbs only a few feet above participants' heads would make interaction with the work very difficult. In addition, the inclusion of burnt out bulbs gives the sculpture a more natural appearance, one that is less blinding and more like a real cloud.¹⁴⁶ The burnt out incandescent bulbs effectively diffuse the light from the white fluorescent bulbs behind and give *CLOUD* a softer appearance more akin to that of an actual cloud.¹⁴⁷ If you consider natural clouds, they shift and form shapes, and they have fluctuating opacities rather than one solid hue. As the sculpture's cords are pulled, some lights flicker while

¹⁴³ Okwui Enwezor, “The Production of Social Space as Artwork: Protocols of Community in the Work of Le Groupe Amos and Huit Facettes,” in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2007), 223.

¹⁴⁴ Brown, “Getting Down to Business.”

¹⁴⁵ Caitlind r.c. Brown, “Donate Your Burnt Out Incandescent Light Bulbs,” *incandescentcloud.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/2012/07/25/donate-your-garbage-well-make-it-into-art/>

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Brown, “Getting Down to Business.”

others remain dark allowing for the light to vary across the sculpture, creating a more spontaneous and natural visual effect, similar to that of a lightning storm.

In addition to their team of collaborators, Brown and Garrett also enlisted the help of the general public in the installation's creation. In order to obtain the necessary materials for the installation, Brown and Garrett held a "Light Bulb Drive" in which they asked members of the general public to donate their own burnt out incandescent light bulbs.¹⁴⁸ The artists sought contributions from the general public through various media, including an announcement on the artists' blog, a mention from the local newspaper, and interviews on radio.¹⁴⁹ The public responded with generous donations that provided the immense number of bulbs necessary to cover the entirety of the sculpture. Several people brought donations directly to the artists' homes, while others contributed to a donation box set up at the Alberta College of Art and Design. In addition, companies and municipalities, including Fort Calgary, Home Depot, and the City of Edmonton, all made donations.¹⁵⁰ By asking for help in this way, the artists included the public in the project not only in the traditional way of viewing the completed work, but also in the early stages of its creation. Thus, the public audience became contributors, collaborating in the material construction of *CLOUD*, and then interacting with its physical components upon completion and installation.

Brown has blogged extensively about her design and creation process for this project and several additional projects undertaken since completing *CLOUD*. These updates provided supporters with a way to remain involved in the project keeping them informed about the work, progress made, and any difficulties encountered along the way. The blog also acted as a direct means of communication in order to solicit public

¹⁴⁸ Brown, "Donate Your Burnt Out Incandescent Light Bulbs."

¹⁴⁹ Caitlind r.c. Brown, "Clouds and Clouds," *incandescentcloud.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/2012/08/17/clouds-and-clouds/>

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., also Caitlind r.c. Brown, "Bulb Tests," *incandescentcloud.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/2012/08/28/bulb-tests/>; and Caitlind r.c. Brown, "Enter the Grind," *incandescentcloud.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/2012/09/06/enter-the-grind-2/>

contributions by providing information regarding the work's exhibition and the need for light bulb donations. Through her blog, Brown provided a behind the scenes look at the process of creating *CLOUD*, with pictures and written commentary from the original designs, through the struggle to assemble it, and to later incarnations. These updates allowed the online public audience to watch the development of the project, and develop an interest and investment in the work's creation and life. Since *CLOUD* was only intended to be shown for the one night event in downtown Calgary, the Internet updates also provided the opportunity for both local and international supporters to follow the project's development beyond its Calgary exhibition. Those that donated bulbs or went to view and interact with the work during Nuit Blanche could see the impact of their contributions and how *CLOUD* has since been displayed in different locations around the world. The Internet allowed for direct communication with the public, and consequently a relationship developed between the work and the public audience beyond the short, direct experience of the initial exhibition.

In her book, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Claire Bishop sees social artwork as a means of rethinking the relationship between the artist, the viewer, and the artwork. The artist, instead of sole creator of a work, becomes, "a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as viewer is now repositioned as a co-producer, or participants."¹⁵¹ Brown and Garrett worked with both their team of contributors and the larger public in order to create an installation made, in a sense, by the public and for the public. The public actively participated, both physically and socially, in *CLOUD*, with its physical materials and construction, and in the public space of exhibition, so that the work was very much a part of the public social landscape

As an installation that aimed to include and engage the community, *CLOUD* is a work of public art. Artist Jochen Gerz, who also creates public works through

¹⁵¹ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), 2.

collaboration, describes the concept of public authorship as “an attempt to call attention to public art’s essential cultural function – that is, its relation to the ‘public.’”¹⁵² Gerz suggests that, “by making *art* the site of social dialogue, and redefining art as development and process rather than the production of super-valuable objects, public authorship consciously invests itself in the socially symbolic function of public art, and therefore maintains a general appeal to the kinds of *cultural significance* cultivated in the artworld.”¹⁵³ Gerz believes public art can have a positive effect in providing cultural and social opportunities for the community. Public authorship allows the audience to become a part of the creative process and life of the work, in this case, reinforcing *CLOUD*’s celebration of the social through collaboration. *CLOUD* constitutes its public audience as a community that contributes and is actively engaged with each other and the surrounding environment through involvement with the project.

While there are many professionals who support collaborative works, Professor Stephen Wright presents a common criticism that artists engaged in such projects provide “usually very contrived services to people,” or persuade the public to participate in “some frivolous interaction, then expropriate as the material for their work whatever minimal labour they have managed to extract.”¹⁵⁴ In the case of *CLOUD*, the work could be described as a service in some sense as public art within a festival context, which is a service that provides entertainment to participants. In addition, the social situation created by the installation could be considered a “frivolous interaction,” as it provides no clear tangible or necessarily long-lasting result for its collaborators or the public space it occupies. It merely creates the potential for a short-term physical, social, and emotional connection for those who choose to interact with the work and the other participants, which is perhaps a less obvious kind of service. Those that had a positive or amusing experience with the installation may be more inclined to consider public space or contemporary art installations differently in the future, but there is no guarantee, and at its

¹⁵² Jochen Gerz, “Toward Public Authorship,” interview by Stephen Wright, *Third Text* 18.6 (2004): 649.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 652.

¹⁵⁴ Stephen Wright, “The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration,” *Third Text* 18.6 (2004): 534-535.

base, pulling a string and turning on a light bulb is just a mundane action in a somewhat unusual context. The work does in fact rely on volunteer labour as the main material for the work, though the mere extraction of labour is not the aim of the inclusion of participation, but is rather the means to an end of engaging the public audience.

Hal Foster has also criticized contemporary collaborative projects. In the past, he says, collaborative projects were often activist in nature, centred for example on the many collectives involved in AIDS activism during the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁵⁵ However, today the simple gathering of people seems to be the goal for collaborative artists rather than enacting actual change, and Foster believes this simple act is too often seen as “good in itself,” suggesting that art should be doing or communicating more.¹⁵⁶ Wright shares Foster’s concern, arguing that, “when art forsakes the impotence of its autonomous realm, when it quits the artworld for the normative realm of political activism and collaboration, what is needed is a clear understanding of why people collaborate at all.”¹⁵⁷ In the case of *CLOUD*, the desire to engage the public in a new way and to reactivate, or perhaps illuminate, the social aspect of the public space as one in which all types of people can contribute and interact drives the work. Wright states,

What I am trying to suggest is that in order to avoid the performative pitfalls of art conventions on the one hand, and of co-optation by capital on the other – in order, that is, to bring about conditions that will make collaborations ‘fruitful and necessary’ – we need an almost pre-modern understanding of art, breaking with the institutionalised trinity author-work-

¹⁵⁵ Hal Foster, “Chat Rooms,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 194.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Wright, “The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration,” 543.

public; an understanding that grasps art in terms of its specific means and not its specific ends.¹⁵⁸

The collaborative work does not necessarily need to produce a distinct object or meaningful result, but it is the means, the process of collaboration with an engaged public audience, that intervenes and defies traditional role distinctions and conventions as Wright suggests, which in itself is a “fruitful” endeavour.

3.2 Relatability and the Everyday

One of the ways that *CLOUD* engages its audience is through its use of common, real-world elements. Many aspects of our real world are consistently overlooked or taken for granted despite their crucial role in daily life. A work like *CLOUD*, entirely rooted in the everyday world, draws attention to these elements including the public street, a gathering of people, the weather that has a daily impact on our lives, and the basic light bulb, and causes viewers to see and perhaps appreciate these things in a new context. Jochen Gerz addresses the use of everyday elements in art when he suggests that, “There is less and less perceptual difference between art and non-art; art uses the same tools as non-art, such as advertising, communication, and information.”¹⁵⁹ Breaking down the distinction between high art and the real world, the inclusion of the everyday allows the work to communicate to viewers in terms that are easily grasped and understood. As Gerz suggests, works like *CLOUD* erode the difference between art and non-art by communicating with people of all different walks of life and backgrounds in terms that are universally relevant and in doing so, have the potential to engage people who may not otherwise interact with the art world. *CLOUD* fits with Suzanne Lacy’s definition of “new genre public art.”¹⁶⁰ Lacy defines this type of art as “visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 545.

¹⁵⁹ Gerz, “Toward Public Authorship,” 656.

¹⁶⁰ Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 19.

diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives [that] is based on engagement.”¹⁶¹ As a work of “new genre public art,” *CLOUD*’s use of common elements allows it to communicate with its audience in terms that are easily understood and that will resonate with people’s life experiences.

CLOUD draws heavily on elements of the everyday in both its physical components and its subject matter. Light bulbs are a highly recognizable and relatable object to a wide range of viewers, and as such they assist in enticing people to engage with the installation. Using light bulbs as the central material opens up the work to additional interpretations, since as common objects they have been included in many colloquialisms. For instance, a light bulb illuminated above a head signifies an idea in Western culture.¹⁶² The work visually represents creativity, and the power that results when people come together, communicate, and share ideas. Another association Brown identifies is that of someone having their head in the clouds, which is an expression commonly used to describe a person who is, “imaginative” and “full of ideas.”¹⁶³ Symbolic elements of the sort representing creativity displayed over the heads of the citizens of the city speaks to the conception of public space as a place that can foster and facilitate creativity for the betterment of the community and larger public sphere. The image of citizens beneath a cloud of illuminated light bulbs suggests that the public should establish and embrace a collaborative creative community willing to work together to create space for the arts within their urban environment.

Brown has suggested that the physical sculpture could have been created using any type of materials, however, the use of light bulbs gives *CLOUD* a more realistic visual connection to the clouds of the real world.¹⁶⁴ Real clouds are a recognizable, visible aspect of, and even regular influence on, our daily world as they directly impact

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Brown, “Donate Your Burnt Out Incandescent Light Bulbs.”

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

the environment we live in. The installation's inclusion of both working and non-working bulbs gives the work an inconsistent surface, varied in its shade and light, much like a real cloud that moves and changes shape with the shifting winds and temperatures of the earth and atmosphere. *CLOUD*'s size and height also mimic the feeling of looking up at the sky and at clouds that seem like giants to someone on the ground – an image and a feeling highly relatable to everyone regardless of appearance or background. As Thomas Hirschhorn has suggested, art should be universal.¹⁶⁵ *CLOUD* creates an obvious and clear reflection of the natural world, and even the mechanical pull cords that hang down resemble rain falling from a storm cloud towards the ground below. However, the work creates an image that goes beyond the natural world, since, as the light bulbs are illuminated, the “‘lightning’ tracks [the participants’] progress through the space and [represents] the social ‘electricity’ between people.”¹⁶⁶

One of the interesting aspects of *CLOUD*'s reflection of the natural world is the way in which it plays with and even challenges the natural dynamic. Clouds are one of many governing influences on our daily lives. Whether it is by controlling the amount of sunlight that filters through, or the rain and snow that fall, everyone experiences the impact of ever-present clouds. However, within the space of the installation, representational natural forces do not influence the lives of participants in such ways. Those that choose to interact with the work can instead exert their power over the cloud and symbolically take control of these natural elements. The weather as depicted in *CLOUD* bends to the will of the participants as they control how the work is illuminated.¹⁶⁷ In a demonstration of control, the action can also represent participants having power – power to change their world when they come together through collaboration.

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Hirschhorn as referenced by Kate Crehan, *Community Art: An Anthropological Perspective*, (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2011), 189.

¹⁶⁶ Global Tech Review, “A light bulb cloud,” *Pauley.co.uk*, accessed April 15, 2014. <http://www.pauley.co.uk/techreview/inspirations/story.php?t=a-light-bulb-cloud>.

¹⁶⁷ Brown, “About Cloud.”

An aspect of the work's exhibition that was not anticipated was the collaboration that occurred after the work was completed and installed at Nuit Blanche. Video documentation of *CLOUD* at Nuit Blanche Calgary shows participants working together to make the lights flash in unison.¹⁶⁸ As people struggle with the many pull cords and try to determine which lights are on and which are off, the video shows them communicating with each other to coordinate the simultaneous and collaborative action of turning the whole cloud off, and then on at once. When the participants accomplish their collective goal the video shows them celebrating with cheers and clapping, a joyful outburst that indicates a positive response to the work, the environment it established, and the interactive experience of the public audience. The installation inspired teamwork and a sense of community amongst Nuit Blanche participants as they worked together through communication to accomplish their goal. In the video, participants can be seen interacting both with the object and with each other as they help each other to manipulate the sculpture, thus embodying a sense of community and collaboration that echoes the social heart of the work. *CLOUD* shows that if given the opportunity, a work can inspire a public audience to collaborate and work together with other citizens to transform the city through their engagement with art. It is an example of community building and the influence that art can have on such endeavours.

3.3 Nuit Blanche, the Public Space, and Accessibility

While *CLOUD* was designed to easily and effectively engage a public audience, its initial exhibition location within a main urban area as part of a public art festival was a crucial element in establishing the work's accessibility. *CLOUD*'s instalment in downtown Calgary's Olympic Plaza placed the work at the heart of public, urban space. As a public park created for the city's 1988 Olympic Winter Games, Olympic Plaza features special scenic elements including a pond and waterfall that provide an oasis in the bustling city centre. The area also serves as a free public skating rink in the winter, a gathering space with a seating area, and a space for special public events, such as

¹⁶⁸ Caitlind r.c. Brown, "CLOUD: An Interactive Sculpture Made from 6,000 Light Bulbs," *Vimeo.com* video, 1:25, posted by Caitlind r.c. Brown 2012, accessed July 11, 2014. <http://vimeo.com/49748983>

festivals.¹⁶⁹ The Plaza provided an ideal central location for Calgary's inaugural Nuit Blanche event in 2012, which took place in some of the main downtown areas of the city in an effort to make contemporary art a part of the urban space for the public.

Nuit Blanche began in Paris, France in 2002. The overnight public art event was established with the intent of making contemporary art accessible to the general public by situating it within the public space of the city.¹⁷⁰ For one night a year the festival turns the streets of the city into the setting for contemporary art installations and performances that consistently draw large crowds. As the Paris Nuit Blanche grew each year with increasing public support and engagement even in less than perfect weather conditions, it also increased its size with more works occupying more city space.¹⁷¹ The success of the festival in Paris inspired similar events in additional cities, first in Europe, and then in North America with an event held in Toronto for the first time in 2006.¹⁷² Nuit Blanche has since spread, with similar events held in urban centres across the globe, which continue to draw massive crowds. The most recent event in Toronto received what is estimated to be more than one million attendees.¹⁷³ Its growing popularity and widespread global influence suggests that the all-night public art festival is becoming a “new-millennial art phenomenon.”¹⁷⁴

While Nuit Blanche Calgary is a new and still small event, the first festival drew more than ten thousand viewers to the downtown core exhibition areas, including

¹⁶⁹ The City of Calgary, “Olympic Plaza,” *Calgary.ca*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/Parks/Pages/Locations/Downtown-parks/Olympic-Plaza.aspx>

¹⁷⁰ Paris, “Historique Nuit Blanche,” *paris.fr*, accessed March 20, 2014. http://www.paris.fr/pratique/culture-patrimoine/nuits-blanches/historique-nuit-blanche/rub_6806_stand_19173_port_15521; Scotiabank Nuit Blanche Toronto, “Event History,” *scotiabankNuitBlanche.ca*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.scotiabanknuitblanche.ca/about/event-history.html>

¹⁷¹ Paris, “History Nuit Blanche.”

¹⁷² Scotiabank Nuit Blanche Toronto, “Event History.”

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ David Balzer, “Wayne Baerwaldt on Calgary's Nuit Blanche,” *Canadian Art* (12 September 2012). Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2012/09/12/nuit-blanche-calgary-draft/>

Olympic Plaza, and due to its initial success it is likely to only increase in size and attendance.¹⁷⁵ The majority of the media response to Calgary's first Nuit Blanche was positive, with many reviews citing Brown and Garrett's *CLOUD* as the hit installation of the event, and one even stating that it was the reviewer's favourite Calgary event of the year.¹⁷⁶ Attendees were invested in interacting with the works exhibited. One reviewer recalled a two-hour line of people waiting for their turn to ride BGL's *Carrousel* (2012), a carousel constructed from recycled fences and barriers, and powered by acrobatic Parkour athletes.¹⁷⁷ The public's dedication to supporting the city's festival and interacting with the works on display in their urban environment indicates that Nuit Blanche Calgary's 2012 event was successful in engaging the public audience. The large turn out affirms the community's interest in and positive view of the integration of contemporary art installations into the public space of the city.

Nuit Blanche occupies an interesting and seemingly contradictory space, being both an urban setting, as a festival in the everyday street, as well as one that exhibits fine art at the same time. Local artists as well as celebrated international artists are able to come together to provide the public with the opportunity to experience new and current works of art on their own terms, in their own everyday space. Nuit Blanche also celebrates the city that hosts the event as it draws attention to the city's public spaces and landmarks, attracting people to those spaces with the glamour of the festival and inviting the community to reconsider their significance to the city life. For instance, *CLOUD*'s location in Olympic Plaza on the edge of the reflecting pool allowed for a striking

¹⁷⁵ Nuit Blanche Calgary, "About," *nuitblanchecalgary.ca*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.nuitblanchecalgary.ca/about/>

¹⁷⁶ The Huffington Post, Alberta. "Nuit Blanche Calgary: Giant Light Bulb Cloud A Hit At City's First Ever Nighttime Festival (PHOTOS)." *Huffingtonpost.ca*. September 16, 2012. Accessed March 20, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/09/16/nuit-blanche-calgary-gian_n_1888422.html; Sarena Dharshi, "A Look Back at My Favourite Calgary 2012 Event – Nuit Blanche," *The Huffington Post Alberta*, January 6, 2013. Accessed March 20, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/sarena-dharshi/calgary-2012-event-nuit-blanche_b_2397674.html; Stephen Hunt, "Huge Crowds for Nuit Blanche," *Calgary Herald*, September 15, 2012. Accessed March 20 2014. <http://blogs.calgaryherald.com/2012/09/15/huge-crowds-for-nuit-blanche/>

¹⁷⁷ Dharshi, "A Look Back at My Favourite Calgary 2012 Event – Nuit Blanche"; Nuit Blanche Calgary, "BGL," *nuitblanchecalgary.ca*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.nuitblanchecalgary.ca/archive/bgl/>

reflection of the thousands of light bulbs on the water that drew attention to the pond while also highlighting its ability to reflect the beauty of the surrounding city (Figure 14). In such ways, Nuit Blanche entices people to revisit and reconsider familiar urban sites within a fun, festival atmosphere that is different and perhaps more vibrant than daily life. Meanwhile, artists try to overcome the potentially superficial nature of a public spectacle. As Carol Becker, Professor at Columbia University’s School of the Arts, suggests, “artists are both attempting to circumvent the spectacle and to reclaim the urban space for the coming together of its inhabitants.”¹⁷⁸ Becker goes on to say that, “engagement is the only antidote to the spectacle. And the reinvention of public space is the only antidote to its disappearance.”¹⁷⁹ Nuit Blanche, as a special event, draws people to gather and interact within public space in ways that are not typical, collaborating and interacting in close quarters with strangers in the exhibition space, and coming together to share an experience with the artwork.



Figure 14: Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett, *CLOUD*, 2012. Nuit Blanche Calgary. Photographer Unknown.

¹⁷⁸ Carol Becker, “Microutopias: Public Practice in the Public Sphere,” in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 68.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

<http://incandescentcloud.com/2012/09/27/sleepless-night-nuit-blanche-calgary/#jp-carousel-901> (accessed June 1, 2014).

There is a strong possibility that people feel more comfortable interacting with art in the context of Nuit Blanche than an art gallery, as they encounter works in their own everyday environment. Those that would not typically attend an exhibition at an art gallery might be more inclined to stop and participate in an interactive work they come across in their everyday life on familiar city streets. Reaching people where they live, coming to them rather than waiting for people to come to the gallery, events like Nuit Blanche increase public art audiences and the chance that people will just happen upon an art installation. Several Calgary food trucks were also present at the festival to cater to late-night participants, enhance the experience, and reinforce the casual and natural elements of the daily urban environment.¹⁸⁰ The interactive nature of the works typically exhibited for the event invite a sense of play that is not always present or possible within traditional gallery spaces as viewers are invited to have fun with the installations. Nuit Blanche Calgary emphasized the element of play in BGL's *Carrousel* that invited attendees to let loose and have fun while interacting with a work that reimaged a traditional amusement-park attraction. In addition to the carrousel, *CLOUD* contributed to the festival's fun environment by providing the opportunity for participants to pull as many hanging pull-cords as they wanted in whatever manner they chose.

The festival is intended to be as accessible as possible for public audiences. The *Calgary Herald*, the local daily newspaper, labeled the city's Nuit Blanche an "all-night, all-ages, free interactive art festival," highlighting the inclusivity the event strives for.¹⁸¹ The night-time hours cater to the free time people have after the work day is over. In addition, the festivities are free to attend, so that people of all levels of income can

¹⁸⁰ Dharshi, "A Look Back at My Favourite Calgary 2012 Event – Nuit Blanche."

¹⁸¹ Stephen Hunt, "Night time is the right time for Nuit Blanche," *Calgary Herald*, September 12, 2012. Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.calgaryherald.com/entertainment/festival-guide/Night+time+right+time+Nuit+Blanche/7233233/story.html>

participate. The notion of accessibility is a concept central not only to Nuit Blanche, but also specifically to *CLOUD* itself, featured in all the most prominent aspects of its creation. In her blog, Brown stated that accessibility became an important central concept through the process of creating the installation.¹⁸² The main idea behind the Light Bulb Drive, for example, was to inspire “typically non-arts community members [to get] involved with a piece of art.” And since a used light bulb is something almost everyone has access to, they did.¹⁸³ *CLOUD*’s use of relatable materials and interactive design, as well as its commitment to involving the public, all speak to a desire to reach people who would not usually engage with art or go to a gallery. Brown and Garrett’s work makes clear strides towards increasing the public art audience and inspiring new engagement with the arts in Calgary through the Nuit Blanche framework, which provides the perfect exhibition environment for artwork to reach out to the public in the public space.

It is easy to get caught up in the benefits of Nuit Blanche as a public arts festival for its ability to reach a large number of people and allow them to interact with art in a new setting, yet *CLOUD* and the event itself both have limitations that need to be taken into account. Brown addresses some of the popular concerns with interactive art in her own writing. She has suggested that interactive art is often criticized for being trendy, and for its nature as spectacle. Many viewers focus on the fun of interaction while not giving enough attention to the conceptual elements of the work.¹⁸⁴ Brown’s concerns echo those of Claire Bishop, who similarly fears that the aim to create a fun and social environment through interactive works threatens to reduce their critical aspects.¹⁸⁵ Brown suggests that the responsibility falls on the artist to create works that engage the viewer without

¹⁸² Caitlind r.c. Brown, “Where to begin?” *incandescentcloud.com*, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/2012/09/03/where-to-begin/>

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Caitlind r.c. Brown, “CLOUD at GLOW + Contemplating Interactivity,” *incandescentcloud.com*, November 12, 2013, accessed March 20, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/2013/11/12/cloud-at-glow-a-brief-essay-about-interactivity/>

¹⁸⁵ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” in *October* 110 (Autumn, 2004): 79.

sacrificing either conceptual criticality or physical interactivity.¹⁸⁶ Brown and Garrett are hopeful that the less obvious social meanings embedded in *CLOUD* resonate with viewers in addition to the aspects of play and excitement.¹⁸⁷ Brown suggests that, the benefits of public engagement outweigh the risks and challenges inherent in making interactive art.¹⁸⁸

Despite the hopes that artists like Brown and Garrett have for their work, however, some critics of interactive art have warned of the possibility that meaning and intention might be co-opted by neo-liberal agendas.¹⁸⁹ In the context of the existing imbalanced economy, Professor Jen Harvie argues that the social potential of such works may unintentionally amplify inequality rather than promote democratic access. Harvie suggests that it is important with works like *CLOUD* to consider the relationship between public art events, participatory works, and neoliberalism. Harvie further asserts that the performative and social potential of socially engaged art practices may be inhibited by their contexts.¹⁹⁰ Participatory works can be co-opted by the neoliberal agenda, which in the existing imbalanced economy actually amplifies social inequality rather than the democracy typically associated with such works.¹⁹¹ Harvie suggests that it is important for artists and viewers of participatory art to be cautious about how such practices can, in fact, promote elitist neoliberal dominance.¹⁹² One of the ways in which Harvie believes participatory and collaborative works can play into neoliberalism is in their reliance on

¹⁸⁶ Brown, "CLOUD at GLOW + Contemplating Interactivity."

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Jen Harvie outlines the neoliberal agenda as one that provides freedom to do as they choose, and thus it appears to be intrinsically democratic. However, our current global economy is severely unequal and thus while many can do as they wish there are many that cannot. Thus, Harvie suggests that neoliberalism not only reduces democracy, but also exacerbates both social and economic inequality. See Jen Harvie, "Democracy and Neoliberalism in Art's Social Turn and Roger Hiorns's *Seizure*" *Performance Research* 16.2 (June 2011): 114.

¹⁹⁰ Harvie, "Democracy and Neoliberalism in Art's Social Turn and Roger Hiorns's *Seizure*," 114.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

volunteer contributions, which she argues can contribute to the naturalization of exploitative, stratified economies, echoing Foster's concerns regarding labour expropriation.¹⁹³ While *CLOUD* relied on contributors from light-bulb-donors to engineers in order to create an accessible, collaborative, and social event, those volunteers were not compensated for their contributions. It is necessary to consider the problematic aspect of how these practices can actually counter the very ideals they seek to promote. In addition, social art practices, "may inadvertently legitimate diminishing government investment in the arts," by providing a temporary event to fund instead of established art institutions.¹⁹⁴ Although public art events provide many benefits for their audiences, art institutions continue to play a crucial role in serving the community and providing a permanent environment in which the public can encounter art, which temporary events cannot replace. Harvie's concerns need to be taken into account when considering the role of participatory art and public art events in our communities. While Harvie's belief in the vast social and aesthetic potential of these socially engaging practices is well founded, as demonstrated by *CLOUD*'s successful engagement of its public audience and collaborators, so is her assertion that artists and viewers must remain aware and cautious of the context in which these practices can unintentionally benefit the neoliberal agenda.¹⁹⁵

Calgary's Nuit Blanche met with largely positive response, however, as the festival grows with time and continued interest, problems can easily arise, as they have with the larger Toronto event. With a large, public event it becomes difficult to deal with what can quickly become an unruly crowd. In journalist Joel Eastwood's opinion the art festival is increasingly becoming a drunken brawl with violence and vandalism as

¹⁹³ Ibid., 121.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 114.

unfortunate by-products of a large public audience.¹⁹⁶ Eastwood worries that a line has been crossed where people now treat the event as an excuse to get rowdy.¹⁹⁷ However, he also references the opinions of people involved with the event's organization and artists who suggest that while some people attend in order to have a good time, for the most part participants are respectful, and those few who are on the rowdy side are not entirely unexpected in an environment created to be fun and open.¹⁹⁸ While these problematic aspects of Nuit Blanche need to be evaluated, there remain many additional benefits of the art festival, for both the city and its citizens. Public events, like Nuit Blanche attract people to the city. For example, in Toronto the most recent Nuit Blanche is estimated to have brought over one-hundred-thousand out-of-town visitors to the city, who help to boost the local economy.¹⁹⁹ The crowds and widespread public support for such events suggest a public that is invested in the arts, and Nuit Blanche provides a fun and exciting environment for people to interact with contemporary works and support the arts within their local community.

3.4 Conclusion

After its initial exhibition at Calgary's Nuit Blanche, *CLOUD* trended on twitter and gained widespread international attention in the arts media.²⁰⁰ Its positive reception and success with both the general public and the international art world resulted in opportunities for a second version of *CLOUD* to be exhibited in a variety of locations across the world, including Russia, Europe, the United States, and most recently,

¹⁹⁶ Joel Eastwood, "Nuit Blanche: Art festival or street party?" *The Toronto Star*, October 8, 2013. Accessed March 20, 2014. http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2013/10/08/nuit_blanche_art_festival_or_street_party.html

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Scotiabank Nuit Blanche Toronto, "Event History."

²⁰⁰ Julia Williams, "Calgary Artists Create Chicago Installation," *Avenue*, July 9, 2013, accessed April 15, 2014. <http://www.avenuecalgary.com/blogs/calgary-artists-create-chicago-installation>

Singapore (Figure 15).²⁰¹ In addition, Brown and Garrett were commissioned to design a new version of *CLOUD* for permanent installation in a Chicago Bar (Figure 16). Titled *CLOUD CEILING* (2013), this third incarnation of *CLOUD* uses motion sensors instead of pull cords to turn the light bulbs on and off, allowing the work to respond to movement and human activity in the bar beneath it. *CLOUD*'s ability to build relationships with its public audiences means it easily translates to each of its various exhibition settings in very different areas of the world. Its successful exhibition in such a variety of locations is a testament to the work's relevance and relatability. Its reference to weather and the natural world is something people of all cultures and backgrounds understand and can identify with, while its use of light bulbs is also prevalent in most areas of the world. However, the most integral and perhaps relatable aspect of the installation is its social nature.



Figure 15: Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett, *CLOUD*, 2012. Signal Festival, Prague. Photographer Unknown. <http://incandescentcloud.com/2013/10/22/cloud-at-signal-festival/> (accessed June 1, 2014).

²⁰¹ Caitlind r.c. Brown, "CLOUD in Moscow," *incandescentcloud.com*, November 29, 2012. Accessed March 30, 2014. <http://incandescentcloud.com/2012/11/29/cloud-in-moscow/>



Figure 16: Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett, *CLOUD CEILING*, 2013.

Progress Bar Chicago, USA. Photographer Unknown.

<http://incandescentcloud.com/2013/06/18/cloud-ceiling-at-progress-bar/> (accessed June 1, 2014).

The importance of contributions from many people in the creation of a community is a crucial concept that is likewise easily understood in a variety of societies and social contexts. Stephen Wright has stated that, “lone individuals existing outside the relationships and interactions that constitute them are an utter fiction: the self, like society, is multiple; we are plural rather than singular.”²⁰² Created by and for a local public audience in the artists’ hometown of Calgary, *CLOUD*’s relatability and emotional connection has allowed it to grow and transcend, to communicate with a global public audience, and connect people from different corners of the world who come together to read about, tweet about, and interact with a light bulb cloud. As Claire Bishop has stated, participatory art, “aims to restore and realise a communal, collective space of shared social engagement.”²⁰³ Brown and Garrett, along with their collaborators, have succeeded in establishing their audience as both a local and global community, willing to engage

²⁰² Wright, “The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration,” 543.

²⁰³ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 275.

with art, each other, and their own local public spaces through *CLOUD*'s interactive and accessible features.

Conclusion

Stephen Wright argues that, “free collaborative interaction is an essential dimension of human existence.”²⁰⁴ Though Bourriaud has suggested that social interactions have become less frequent due to ongoing technological developments, the social remains an essential aspect of daily life, and thus it is not surprising that social interaction has become an increasingly common subject of artistic creation.²⁰⁵ Participatory, collaborative, and social projects highlight the common interactions of daily life through art. Artist Dan Graham suggests that, “All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that’s more social, more collaborative, and more real than art.”²⁰⁶ Roman Ondák, Ann Hamilton, Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett share Graham’s vision of making art that reflects the real, using relatable subject matter in their installations to engage their public audience and inspire social interaction.

As Claire Bishop outlines in *Artificial Hells*, participatory, collaborative practices are not new and have appeared in art movements throughout the twentieth century.²⁰⁷ She suggests that the recent participatory trend should be considered as a “return to the social, part of an ongoing history of attempts to rethink art collectively.”²⁰⁸ At the same time, museum experiences in general “are being fundamentally rethought.”²⁰⁹ Pine and Gilmore assert that society is no longer interested in consuming goods and services, and as such, goods are becoming increasingly “irrelevant.” Experiences are what people now

²⁰⁴ Stephen Wright, “The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration,” *Third Text* 18.6 (2004): 545.

²⁰⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 17.

²⁰⁶ Dan Graham as quoted by Claire Bishop in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), 1.

²⁰⁷ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 3.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Joseph B. Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011), 37.

desire.²¹⁰ This international market shift is reflected in the art world where both artists and art institutions are creating and exhibiting works that emphasize the experience of the viewer. These practices encourage viewers to become participants or collaborators who engage with and experience the art rather than visually consume objects. Pine and Gilmore assert that a key aspect of experience is “the kind of *connection*, or *environmental relationship*, that unites customers with the event or performance.”²¹¹ Artists such as Ondák, Hamilton, Brown and Garrett all aim to produce that bond within the event of their work, and in doing so, create new relationships for participants between themselves and others, the artwork, and the exhibition space.

Participatory projects like *Measuring the Universe*, *the event of a thread*, and *CLOUD* are significant because they attempt to constitute their viewers in a way that allows deeper engagement and creates a connection, or community, amongst participants even though these projects do not escape neoliberal agendas. Reflective of the contemporary historical moment, these works both respond and contribute to the shift in value towards experience and connection that ideally has a more lasting emotional impact, as the goal is to create an experience that resonates with the viewer so that they will remember it for years to come. This personal connection is more valuable to today’s viewers than physical objects. In addition the relatability of the work speaks to the desire for a connection that encompasses a widespread audience. Ondák, Hamilton, Brown and Garrett have created communities of varied viewers capable of establishing a link between each other through the artwork as they share in the experience of it. In a world that is rapidly changing, and with the development of new technologies that are then integrated into our daily lives, it is important to investigate the ways in which artists are both preserving and reminding their public audience of the connection found in shared human experience. It is also necessary to assess and document the artistic trends happening now, determine their precursors and examine how these practices function within art, public, and global communities.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 19, 39.

²¹¹ Ibid., 45.

While all of these projects were initially exhibited in Western countries, several have since been installed in non-Western countries. In addition, the four artists featured are of three different nationalities, Slovakian, American, and Canadian. The international background and exhibition of these works reflect the prevalence of participatory and social works on a global scale. Participation is not an isolated trend, but rather a practice that has been increasing over several years all across the world. In addition, the continued international exhibition of *Measuring the Universe* and *CLOUD* speaks to the relevance of these works and their ability to communicate to a wide audience. As an international phenomenon, it is clear that participatory works have a mass appeal that translates to a large, international audience. A key factor in the overall success of these projects is their commitment to extensive relatability despite the broad range of contexts they are exhibited in. It is that relatability that entices viewers to become participants and connect with the work beyond the surface level.

Measuring the Universe, *the event of a thread*, and *CLOUD* aim to speak to the human condition, breaking down barriers and establishing a connection between all kinds of people through the human elements of each work. Whether it is everyday materials or a common childhood experience, elements of the real allow participants to make a connection with the work and relate it to their own past experiences, providing an element of nostalgia. Every participant will have distinct, personal memories triggered by the works' references to real life, but despite their differences all can experience the nostalgic element in the works that inspire a deeper emotional engagement, different but the same. Each of the installations examined here include some element of the nostalgic created, for example, by common memories of childhood play. By linking the nostalgic component to play, the participant is enticed to relive childhood experiences through re-enactment. Play, and by extension memory, are two of the more prominent ways all three installations engage their respective audiences through their subject matter and physical materials. The fun elements of each installation serve as an entry point, a hook to draw the viewer in, allowing the artist then to comment on more serious and critical social issues. Play, as an immediately appealing quality, entices participants to initiate contact with the work and begin establishing a relationship, which the nostalgic elements then build upon. With social works, where the ultimate goal is to communicate and interact

with the public audience, it is crucial to catch people's attention in a way that makes them want to engage further with the more critical meanings within the work.

Nato Thompson proposes that socially engaged art “[defies] discursive boundaries, [and] its very flexible nature reflects an interest in producing effects and affects in the world, rather than focusing on the form itself.”²¹² He further asserts that this type of art has “produced new forms of living that force a reconsideration and perhaps a new language altogether.”²¹³ Thus, in contrast to Bishop's critique that participatory works lack criticality, Thompson suggests these practices force people to think about aspects of our world and even rethink the way we go about our lives. Participatory works that reference and are very much situated within the real world are capable of going beyond traditional boundaries between people, spaces, and institutions, and creating real, affective responses within the public sphere. Some of the tactics used by these installations have the potential even to reach people who might not typically interact with art through their exhibition context or their fun and playful, relatable elements. While there are limitations to each installation and their respective exhibition contexts, *Measuring the Universe*, *the event of a thread*, and *CLOUD* each provide an engaging experience for a large public audience.

At a time when financial restrictions often result in budget cuts to the arts, our current economic climate requires a public that is interested and invested in the arts in order to retain support.²¹⁴ The greatest assurance of public support is establishing a public that is engaged with the art world, and art capable of effectively communicating with that public audience is more likely to engage them. By inspiring their audience to engage with the art world in a tangible way through social events that make the viewer part of the art object, artists are ensuring that the public remains invested and involved in the arts. In

²¹² Nato Thompson, “Living as Form,” in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 32.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ James Adams, “Ontario budget cuts funding to arts community,” *The Globe and Mail* (March 28, 2012), accessed April 1, 2014. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/ontario-budget-cuts-funding-to-arts-community/article4096260/>

addition, exhibiting art in ways or settings that are not necessarily traditional, for instance in a refurbished drill hall turned exhibition space or the public street, can entice a large public audience while also enriching the public sphere where people live their real, everyday lives. As the social continues to dominate the public art world and expand its presence in public space through, for example, an increasing number of public art festivals and engaging public museum practices, one can hope that such works will find support from a public willing and able to participate and fully engage with the arts on a physical, emotional, and social level.

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The full act can be found online at:

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