Rehearsing Utopia: participatory arts, democratic cultures and food

Lunch Talk, Stadsacademie
26th March 2024

On the 26th March 40 land & food workers, activists, academics, and artists gathered at the University of Gent to discuss the role of performance and food-based art in the environmental movement. We made summer rolls together, we ate soup and salad, we heard about examples of this work and the ideas which underpinned it, and we made new connections.

*Below is the written version of the Lunch Talk given by **Dr Malaika Cunningham**, an artist and academic based in Yorkshire, UK. She has worked in participatory arts across the UK, Europe, & Canada, predominately with her company The Bare Project. She is a fellow with The Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity with whom she recently completed a three-year post-doctoral position with Artsadmin in London. Her arts practice and research looks at the overlaps between participatory theatre, democracy, and environmental justice.*

In Amitav Ghosh's book The Great Derangement he argues that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture and thus of imagination" (Ghosh, 2016, p.15). He observes that most of our artworks and literature which address climate change are branded as 'science fiction' — "as if climate change and its impacts are so farfetched that they should sit in the same category as aliens and space travel" (ibid.). Yet, the impacts of climate change do not exist in some distant future, they are here with us today. And despite the overwhelming evidence of the existential threat of climate change, alongside overwhelming evidence of its *causes* — namely high carbon, extractive, and polluting economies — we continue to live as if nothing much need change. We continue to pursue and herald Gross Domestic Product (or GDP) growth as the bastion of success of a country.

Even within our sectors (which in this room is broadly the not-for-profit sector, the arts sector, and higher education) what is harder to measure in quantitative terms — such as joy, connection, health, beauty - is either given a monetary figure, or simply ignored. But perhaps this is unsurprising — it is easy to measure money, and we are rehearsed at it. So it can be hard to remember, as economist Simon Mair puts it, that:

> "The laws of economics are not actually laws. It may be the case that stopping fossil fuel production without changing the economy would cause significant harm. But this is an argument for changing our economic laws, not continuing fossil fuel production." (Mair, 2023, p. 173)

With all these urgent and enormous issues before us, democracy, at first glance, may seem badly suited to addressing these existential crises. And it's clear that many of the world's biggest democracies are doing a pretty terrible job. In light of this, some form of eco-authoritarianism might feel a very appealing option. Let's hand over control to Amitav Ghosh and Greta Thunberg. They'll solve the crisis and implement the unpopular and long-term policies, which we will need to continue living on this planet.

I have certainly felt this. This feeling comes partly from the crisis narrative. That if we can just cut our carbon emissions, we can stop the climate crisis and save the world. I see in my mind a kind of action movie where a hero swoops in and saves the day, and everything goes back to normal. As if sustainability or 'solving the climate crisis' is a one-off fix, rather than a long-term process, which will require long-term adaptability and reflexivity. As if our current 'normal' isn't the problem.

When we dig a bit deeper there is a lot of evidence to suggest that democracy is actually crucial to addressing complex and existential threats like climate change (*some great writers on this include Marit Hammond, John Dryzek & Graham Smith – I've included references to their work below*). A recent study by the University of Gothenburg (Acheampong et al. 2022) showed that autocratic regimes lag significantly on climate action. Further to this, Climate Assemblies and citizen cabinets across the world have consistently shown more radical and progressive climate policy than their governments. For example, in France, their national climate assembly voted to prohibit the construction of any new airports and phase out domestic flights altogether with a majority of 88% (Willis 2021). In the UK the climate assembly one of the recommendations was to use between 20-40% less agricultural land for livestock (ibid). These assemblies are selected through sortition – which is the same process juries gets selected and involves recruiting participants from a representative cross-section of adults living in a specific location. So, these assemblies are not made up of the 'usual suspects' and those already engaged in these issues – but a range of people from all sorts of backgrounds and political perspectives. What this evidence points to is that having *more* democracy, rather than less, is what we actually need to address existential threats like climate change.

The representative democracies we have right now across Europe and North America are deeply flawed. They have been hollowed out over decades of privatisation, an erosion of trust in politics and politicians (partly due to a neoliberal ideology of 'taking the politics out of it' and partly due to corruption), as well as concerning increases in corporate lobbying power. (*Wendy Brown is a brilliant author on all this – again, I've put a reference to her work below*). This comes at a time when environmental governance research, such as the examples listed above, shows that participatory, deliberative and inclusive democracy is our best option in addressing the interlinked threats of climate change and social inequality. Yet the hollowed, beleaguered democracy we have is not fit to face these challenges.

The democracy we need is:

- **Genuinely equitable:** When Alexis de Tocqueville wrote Democracy in America in 1835 he commented on the simple justice of the philosophy of 'one person, one vote'. This basic democratic principle has been entirely eroded through corporate lobbying and party donations. Steps must be taken to get corporations out of government – which may in part come from anti-corruption legislation, but should also come from radical changes in our economic system.
- **Deliberative**: with multiple opportunities for citizens to be involved in policy making at every level of government – through initiatives like citizens assemblies or the citizens cabinet which took place here in Ghent in 2017/18.

- **A culture of democracy**: whilst formal assemblies are a crucial part of the picture, there is a risk they will (and have been) assimilated into status quo politics. Governments tend cherry pick the recommendations which emerge, and the agendas which these assemblies address are set by those in power. If we are also to holistically address structural injustices and existential socio-ecological transformation, we also needs democratic spaces beyond the conventional formal assemblies. Spaces which are untethered to governmental agendas, which are open to all, and which are radical and imaginative.

This last requirement, 'a culture of democracy' is what I want to talk about now.

Informal deliberative democratic spaces hark back to an Arendtian notion of the public realm. A public, democratic culture which is pluralist, collective, imaginative, and critical. Hannah Arendt has a lovely metaphor to describe the public sphere as a table – which feels particularly apt as we sit around these tables here together, eating. The public sphere is this table between us. Each of us bring something to this table and we each have our ideas and perceptions of what this table needs and what we want from it. This table is what connects us – our relationship to each other in this space is oriented around the table. It is also what keeps us apart – it is *between* us. Crucially, Arendt says that this table has been here since before we all arrived and will be here long after we go – others will inherit this table from us however we leave it (1958, p. 52).

Our time at the metaphorical table, the public realm, is about deciding how to live amongst each other well, how to support each other. It is also about the future, and in what state we will leave our public realm and our natural resources to those who come after us.

After decades of the erosion of the public realm via privatisation and neoliberal policy; after the acceptance of a widespread insipid message that 'we are consumers, not citizens' (Brown 2015); when even our voting systems feel like choosing between brands in the shops; after all this, we don't really know how to be at this table, and most of us have very few opportunities to do so.

This is where I think participatory arts and food-based practices come into it. They can give us a place at this table for playful, imaginative, reflective interventions which help us connect with others and reconsider how we want to live.

I'm going to speak specifically to participatory performance practice today, with a lot of food-based practices woven through them. I'll give a couple examples from my own work which I hope will demonstrate the opportunities, as well as some of the knottier issues tied up in considering the democratic value of this work.

I believe that participatory artistic practices can offer:

1) **alternative opportunities for political expression** beyond adversarial, verbal debate which implicitly prioritises the contributions of educated, white, men

2) **a space for playfulness and disruption,** what Augusto Boal might dub 'a rehearsal for the revolution' (1979).
3) **build connection** between strangers or a space for different kinds of conversations to happen between friends and family.
4) **Imagination**! Radical and entirely unrealistic ideas for the future are welcome within artistic practice. And in that way, we have an opportunity to sit outside the assumptions of our current lived experience. This perspective is crucial to making change. As Amitav Ghosh says 'the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture and thus of imagination' (p. 15). Can these spaces offer us an opportunity to develop our imaginative capacities & in so doing, begin to change the culture?

Case 1: The People's Palace of Possibility

The People's Palace of Possibility is an interactive performance-based artwork which asks how we find hope and energy for the future, when we feel so much anger and despair about the world today. Myself and The Bare Project theatre company began working on it in 2019, but due to the pandemic and social distancing, it was initially delivered as a postal and digital artwork in 2020 and 2021.

This version consisted of several packages received by participants over the course of a roughly two-month period for each 'tour date', which followed the story of Rose (the protagonist) discovering a secretive society called 'The People's Palace of Possibility'. Within the story, the audience was invited to join the society through a series of prompts and activities – some of which took them into hidden webpages, and others which took them out into the streets of their local communities to commit 'tiny acts of utopian vandalism'.

Photos of some of the post we sent out for the postal version

This postal/digital version engaged with over 600 participants, who heard about the piece via local arts centres and community networks. Once participants had signed up, they were then invited to recruit 'someone you have disagreed with' to take part with them. So people then signed up their mothers, neighbours, and one even signed up their plumber! For this work people sent back photos and audio clips responding to different questions and provocations. You can see them here: https://palacearchive.co.uk/

Since last summer we have been touring a live version of The Palace across the UK. In each place we go we stay for a month, working with local activists and artists to curate a programme of events and workshops within the space. This is what the Palace looks like now:

The People's Palace of Possibility at What Shall We Build Here Festival, Artsadmin June 2023. Photo by Sophie LeRoux.

People can wander into the installation and engage with the Palace Library which holds a huge amount of audio extracts from recordings we have gathered from hundreds of

Someone giving an interview to the Palace DJ, Rose. Photo by Tom Dixon.

participants over the course of this project – answering questions like 'what do you think about when you think about the future', 'what makes community' and 'why are we all so tired'. A key part of each residency is the Palace Radio, which records and broadcasts live conversations with passers-by and workshop participants onto an online radio station.

Food is at the heart of this project and almost every event hosts some sort of meal, and many conversations about food justice – which has varied greatly from place to place. In the Highlands of Scotland it was about massively concentrated land ownership and whether we should all be eating lots more venison. In Rotherham it was about food waste from supermarkets and the co-current rise local food insecurity. In the Palace, there is a weekly Palace Feast, which is a big, shared meal and performance event.

Getting ready for some lunch at Lyth Arts Centre, Highlands. Photo by Tom Dixon

In terms of its democratic potential as a project, I want to talk about two closely interrelated aspects of the work – its playfulness and its imaginativeness.

The **playfulness** with which the invitations for disruption in both the postal and live versions is a key part of the artistic design, as well as the political ambitions of this project. Political theorist Bonnie Honig (2013, p.228) argues,

> "...that centre of orderly politics is actually deeply dependent on the energy and animation and frankly, the fun, that come from gathering together around issues that are affectively charged … they also provide the imagination and fantasy of possible and alternative futures that bring people into politics, sweep them up into movements or give them a reason to participate.[1]"

For many, the initial motivation to get involved with *The Palace* was because it 'seemed fun', 'it seemed a bit different', or 'I wanted to do something creative' (quotes gathered from feedback interviews with audiences & participants). This sense of enjoyment and intrigue also motivated people to continue participating; to return to *The Palace* for multiple events, or to continue to respond to the packages which arrived through their door.

Political and social change are slow and complex and, arguably, to sustain it - the work of democracy must also be enjoyable. A wonderful artist, Katy Rubin, once said to me that she 'would not come to the revolution if it was not fun' (Cunningham, Rubin & Woods, 2024).

Playfulness can also be useful in terms of supporting disruption, as through humour and play there can be greater safety in disrupting norms. Augusto Boal, founder of Theatre of the Oppressed (1979), argues that there is symbolic and prefigurative power in the symbolic act of disruption – even within the fictional and playful space of artistic projects and performances. He argues (interviewed by Morelos, 1999) that, for the audience member,

> "...that getting up on the stage (participating in the action of the story) is a transgression in itself and is a symbolic transgression of all the other transgressions she has to make. Because, of course, if the oppressed is going to fight not to be oppressed, inevitably she is going to make some sort of transgression."

For Boal, the political value of these disruptions and transgressions comes from the act of entering the space of 'meaning-making' (i.e., the stage), and altering the outcomes of the story depicted. Similarly, in The Palace the invitation for these 'tiny acts of utopian vandalism' offered a playful opportunity for protest and to voice political feelings – to change the story in ways which mirrored the change participants wished for beyond the fiction. For example, one participant described their son's experience of the postal version of the piece:

> "I think it was the first time he'd sort of sat down and critically thought, 'Well if I don't like that, if I did this, how might it change something, and what might happen?'" (feedback interview, 2022).

This playful disruption is also invited and supported by the **imaginative qualities of the piece.** The fictional aspects of The Palace, and its arresting physical design of the live version, took participants outside of their lived realities, and from this position, some were then better able

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[1] Whilst Honig is referring to protest movements, I believe this sentiment may also be applied to socially engaged performance projects like *The Palace.*

to imagine alternatives. In the contributions and interactions we gathered during this project, it was clear that many people felt able to offer us radical and system-level demands on how society could be structured. In a 'palace' of 'possibilities' those who took part were invited to explore and demand their wildest visions for society, rather than limited to what seemed reasonable or possible within current structures. You can see some of these ideas and visions in the ever-changing [Palace Archive](#).

The Palace was partially inspired by the work of Ruth Levitas, who presents utopian thinking as a method by which to reimagine what is possible in our society; 'a beacon of hope and possibility, calling us to account and standing in judgement over the present' (2017, p.13). Levitas argues that utopian thinking can support us in reframing radical ideas (like those posited by participants in The Palace) as genuine possibilities, which 'can be reconstructed as political goals to work toward'. By using the term 'utopia', Levitas implicitly critiques the narrative that alternatives to the status quo are naïve and unrealistic. She argues that radical, impossible and outlandish ideas – such as (by definition) utopias – are all necessary for democracy, as it is through our exploration of these ideas, and our attempts to enact them, that political change can occur.

'Utopia' has become a bit of an uncomfortable place for me in talking about the role of the arts in democracy. Sometimes there is a voice of doubt in my head when I'm thinking about the role of the arts in response to significant social and environmental crisis. When we are in the crisis – unable to put food on the table, unable to feel safe – I fall back into this question of whether there is a use for democracy and for the arts. Is the utopianism within the participatory artworks I've discussed here leave us remote from the actual struggle? I had a conversation with the artist Sarah Woods about this dynamic and she referred to some of this work as 'flaccid nirvanas' (Cunningham, Rubin & Woods, 2024). Sometimes, when we drift too far into future visioning, we become untethered from reality, and remote from those struggling. And we have to start from the struggle, or these projects run the risk of floating off into meaninglessness.

This might be where utopia's strange opposite, yet mirrored cousin **nostalgia** comes in. Like utopia, nostalgia is fundamentally a feeling of yearning for a world different from our current reality. Similar again is nostalgia's impulse for something which cannot really exist, but which we, nonetheless, reach for. Svetlana Boym (2007) defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy."

Nostalgia was originally conceived of as an illness. It first appears as a term in the 1700s in relation to pathological homesickness amongst soldiers. At this time it was considered an illness which primarily afflicted the Swiss. Military doctors speculated that it might have something to do with the impact of 'unremitting clanging of cow bells' during mountain-bound childhoods – perhaps, they speculated, this caused some sort of damage to the inner ear which led to these pathological feelings of homesickness (Davis, 1979).

Obviously, unlike utopia, nostalgia yearns for the past, rather than the future. We have seen it be weaponised by populists and the right across the world to define how they would rebuild

society. 'Make America Great Again', 'Let's take back control', 'Flanders is ours again'. All these slogans suggest that there was some moment in the past which was better than what we have today, and we just need to return to that and everything will be fine. And the left baulks at this. Because these slogans also dog whistle racism, sexism, colonialism, and hierarchical & rigid class structures. And for these reasons we mistrust the nostalgic impulse, feeling instead that we must do something new. Perhaps because the past holds so much oppression, there is an impulse to escape from it fully.

Nostalgia is also a response to fear. Sedikides (2004) describes nostalgia as 'a stock of emotions and experiences which people turn to in order to cope with their existential fears'. We seek comfort in an imagined past when the future feels overwhelming. It is a search for identity and meaning in a hyper-mobile world which is changing very quickly – in which 'home is no longer necessarily where the hearth is' (Davis, 1979).

With this in mind, could there be something in the yearning power of nostalgia which helps us to ground utopian thinking? In which we could lean into the feelings of home and safety, without racist tropes, which might help us to re-tether our 'flaccid nirvanas' to the real struggles and fears people are facing today? Maybe there is an easier way into thinking about alternatives to our current cracked up system in looking backwards, than in looking forwards. This could be really useful – depending on what we take from the past.

What I'm drawn to within artworks is often rooted in some kind of nostalgic impulse – there is a deliciousness for me in folklore and mythology, or that pleasing bittersweet feeling we get with certain music, and, of course, food. Food is so important to nostalgia. Our preferences are partly determined by nostalgia, and food can bring back very real transportation to another time through smell and taste. With this in mind, I want to talk about another artwork I have been working on for the past few years, which emerged from my own personal nostalgia for big, chaotic, shared meals.

Case 2: The Potluck

During my practice-based research residency with Artsadmin in London I designed a series of potlucks to explore the role of food and performance in creating democratic spaces. I wanted to create a space for people to gather in which there was a sense of joyfulness, criticality, and collective ownership.

Potlucks were a big part of my rural Canadian childhood, and because my memories are hazy, I'm certain I idealise them. This history gives me a strong nostalgic pull to the smell of bonfires, the fiddle, the sound of waves, cold pasta salad and buttery corn on the cob. The COVID lockdowns perhaps gave this nostalgia a special power. By 2021, I had an almost physical longing for the conviviality and informality of tables lined with plates of food shared with a room full of friends and strangers. And this nostalgia also allowed me to make a connection between these events and questions I've been asking myself about democratic spaces: how can we create a space which is truly collectively owned? Which is, just a little bit, hosted by everyone?

People eat and take part in a small interactive performance by Zoe Svendsen at the first potluck I hosted - the Utopia's Potluck, at Toynbee Studios in 2021. Photo by Christa Holka

In the Potluck series I curated at Artsadmin, like today, everyone who came suggested an ingredient to 'add to the pot' – this partly grew from the COVID restrictions at the time making it impossible everyone to bring a dish. But this also harked back to an older tradition of potlucks in which everyone would bring along an ingredient for the pot, rather than a full dish. Each event was themed – utopias, method, and rest (this last one I worked on with Jennie Moran). Alongside ingredients, some guests would also bring 'toasts' – small interventions and interruptions around the theme of the night. We had poems, tiny theoretical speeches from economists, games, performances, and even a very lovely honey tasting. I also experimented with different ways those gathered could contribute to the creation of the meal itself. At one we all made a salad together as people arrived, at another we kneaded dough which then appeared later in the meal as flatbread.

Kneading dough at the Rest & Slowness Potluck, Toynbee Studios 2022.

All this was to shift the emphasis away from myself as the 'host', and offer space to others to take over the direction the event went in.

I don't think that I have properly found the right balance of performativity, the practical requirements of serving a meal, and the meaningful sharing of 'hosting' yet. Beyond the facilitation of the event itself, the right balance will also depend on the context, those gathered, and the space. But I'm learning a lot and am continuing to explore the format.

In the interest of sharing this space (and because we can smell the soup now) I will wind up and hand over to all of you for your thoughts, reflections and questions.

Overall, I think that this arts-based and food-based practices, despite their limitations, can offer us something akin to sitting at Hannah Arendt's table and being together in the public realm – which we must do if we're going to face the existential issues we face together in an equitable and sustainable way. We have so few moments to be together, particularly amongst strangers, which are not about a monetary exchange, and which are both political and playful. Yet these spaces are crucial to creating the kind of democracy I outlined earlier in this talk. These spaces offer both a rehearsal for a different way of living, as well as a step towards change.

Thank you!

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