OPINION

Cancel Culture or the Realpolitik of the Participatory Turn

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My argument is that the participatory ethos has contributed to cancel culture. I analyse various framings of cancel culture, as it is a complex phenomenon, one aspect of which concerns myth and ritual. I connect this to criticism of the participatory turn in contemporary art, which claims that participation is a public ritual that has been politically co-opted for different ends, such as producing fake consensus or the illusion of democratic engagement. To test my argument, I analyse my own cancellation, whilst being involved in Hungarian feminism, which in my experience has been a backwater in political parties and lobbies. I claim that the participatory turn has indeed been co-opted, either to represent participation, or as formats for politically instrumentalised subjectivation rituals. Cancellations take place when rituals of subjectivation and representation become sacrificial rituals, since sacrificing someone imbues participation with affect.

Keywords: participatory arts, cancel culture, culture wars, tactical media, art and politics

Introduction

The cornerstone of the participatory ethos is that *everyone is an artist.* Participatory projects not only blur the boundary between author and audience, and dissolve

hierarchies, they are often open-ended, without clear spatial and temporal boundaries. Such art can be either based on interaction with the social, built, or natural environment, or on dialogue or other forms of engagement with a community. I personally experienced the consequence of the political utilisation of such formats. My initial fear was of bland and boring art, but I ended up being the target of *cancel culture.* I realised the phenomenon is very much enabled by masking differences and hierarchies under the guise of participation. I am aware of the limitations of the autoethnographic method (e.g. Ellis & Bochner, 2000), so this paper is written from a theoretical perspective, and I reflect on my own experiences through the lens of arguments drawn from theory.

I did not set out with the intention of writing an autoethnography, and I was a participant and not a participant observer (although sometimes what I saw shocked me to the extent that I protected myself by assuming the position of an emotionally and relationally detached observer). I was not what Adler and Adler (1987) call a *complete member researcher* ("the convert researcher becomes the phenomenon"). I might have been a convert on the social level, but that was a compromise. Deep down I had my doubts about large parts of both the milieu and the ideology. If anything, I became what John Latham termed an *incidental person,* someone with an artistic background getting involved in non-art contexts.

In 2014, when I first started producing feminist tactical media, there would be calls (to some extent there still is) for artists to get involved with political movements. It was a trend, ranging from big exhibitions through the broader Occupy movement to other protest movements. I thought of feminism as a movement with political aims, such as the demand for equality of the sexes and institutional reforms, and I was mostly interested in feminist epistemology. However, the *feminism* I encountered in Hungary turned out to be a backwater of political parties and lobbies.

In the beginning, I was uncertain about how roles and professional distinctions were defined. Collaborations and projects operated without clear roles, blurring the lines between responsibilities, and the whole milieu seemed like one loosely organised collective. Often working under collective group names or engaging in unpaid and uncredited background research or creative consultancy, at one point, I found myself relinquishing my identity as an autonomous creator.

The setup might have seemed communal, but the transaction was not equal: usually, others (under random project names) at best provided me with skilled work, and at worst unskilled work or just distraction and burden; while I provided them with original ideas and access to art institutions and credibility. Yet I was naive enough to think it was a win–win deal – the network around me did not interfere with my creative visions, in fact sometimes they helped me with practical matters, and I provided them both with novel tools for visual communication, credibility, representation and opportunities. Based on such a transactional logic, when my *cancellation* started, I assumed the rational interest of my presumed *friends* and *collaborators* would want to protect me (if for no other reason than to exploit me further). I was, however, shocked when some of them joined the mob, which forced me to realise that I had fundamentally misconstrued what participation in the arts had really entailed. It was never just co-opting, but a fundamental misunderstanding.

Many argue, as I shall discuss below, that arts-based participation has been co-opted politically, but I argue that such co-optation stems from both internal and external dynamics, and has contributed to *cancel culture*. I stress that cancel culture is a complex phenomenon, and I do not claim that the participatory ethos is a deterministic aspect.

Cancellation: Possible theoretical framings, concepts and data

Cancel culture is defined by the writer Africa Brooke as "crowd-sourced abuse", and can be likened to pack hunting, where a group collaborates to pursue a solitary target, akin to fox hunting with a pack of dogs. It extends beyond English-speaking regions, with documented cases from Nigeria (Okoliko, 2021) to the Philippines (Velasco, 2020) and Hungary (Bajusz & Feró, 2021). The escalation of this phenomenon prompted over 150 American writers and scholars to voice their concerns about it through an open letter published in Harper's Bazaar during the summer of 2020. When Bari Weiss, a former editor and columnist at the New York Times, publicly resigned from her position, she stated in her resignation letter: "Twitter [currently known as X] is not on the masthead of *The New York Times*. But Twitter has become its ultimate editor" (Weiss, 2020).

The term *cancel culture* encompasses both a specific cultural phenomenon (the culture of cancellation) and the social and cultural milieu that emerges as a consequence. One aspect of cancel culture is *boycott,* where deliberate exclusion and the severing of ties are used to apply pressure to a target. Another aspect is *violence:* employing force as a means of coercion. Comparable forms of violence, such as bullying, a well-known type of group aggression often seen in school settings and commonly affecting children, is frequently handled as a juvenile issue within legal frameworks and educational resources. *Mobbing* is the adult version of bullying and is addressed by organisational research and anthropology (e.g. Harper, 2013). In instances of cancellation, a mob collectively targets a specific entity, whether an individual, an institution, or a cultural product, often coordinated through social media platforms. Hence, the digital sphere is significant as an analytical dimension of cancellation.

Building on my previous work (Bajusz, 2022), I will review the various discourses through which this phenomenon has been interpreted so far. Simkhovich and Naumov (2022) sketch out two main interpretive frameworks: a conflictological interpretation of cancellation, a form of either illegal or non-legal struggle for material and non-material resources, and a political-discursive perspective that interprets cancelling as a tool of cultural resistance to structural violence. Clark (2020), agreeing to such an interpretation, originates cancelling in the milieu of black and queer Twitterers. Some see this phenomenon (Velasco, 2020; Mueller, 2021) as a concomitant of a new kind of inherently networked collectivity linked to a self-perpetuating kind of online hate speech phenomenon. Many argue that public bullying is not a new phenomenon, it just happens digitally nowadays and therefore more rapidly (Velasco, 2020; Nicotra, 2016; Luu, 2019; Saint-Louis, 2021). Additionally, some contend that cancelling functions as both a domain and as a method of social control (Laidlaw, 2017; Posner, 2015).

There is a kind of religious, ritualistic interpretation (Beiner, 2020; Limberg & Arsov, 2020; Tiplady, 2019): cancelling as a ritual of *scapegoating* that Facebook generates (Kriss, 2020), a process through which a community is strengthened. Interpretations that focus on psychological dynamics (e.g. Henderson, 2019; Jussim, 2020; Mueller, 2021) emphasise the need for and potential gains in self-aggrandisement of the cancellers, the invocation of a moral framework and the role of social contagion. Supporting this argument, a growing body of research claims that trolls, those who seek to gain power online, are sociopaths and sadists (e.g. Buckels et al., 2014; March & Steele, 2020). Drawing on the research of Ng (2022), who claims that within the context of fandoms cancel culture is about controlling or influencing narratives, Lofton (2023) also frames cancel culture as a myth – a superhuman force, which controls the imagination.

There is also data available on the impact of cancellations, aiming to ascertain whether media coverage of cancellations represents isolated occurrences or if cancel culture indeed influences social reality. *The Arts Professional*'s survey (Freedom of Expression Survey, 2020), polling over five hundred individuals in the cultural sector in the U.K., indicates that eight out of ten respondents censor dissenting views that challenge *left-wing* orthodoxy. Whipple (2023), based on extensive interviews with 66 arts and culture journalists in the U.S., argues that while cancel culture serves as a form of gatekeeping, it also restricts freedom of expression. In a study conducted by Norris (2020, 2021), policy researchers (2,446 respondents from 102 countries) were surveyed, revealing a higher incidence of silencing and censorship of dissenting opinions among researchers whose views diverge from the prevailing ideologies of their respective societies. Norris argues that in affluent, politically progressive nations, individuals with right-leaning perspectives experience the impacts of cancellation, whereas in less affluent countries, it is those with left-leaning views who perceive these effects. Phelan (2023) argues the right may have been relatively successful in hegemonising the meaning of the term, using it to critique the left, yet it is also used by leftists to critique other leftists.

There is also data about similar phenomena. The best-known is probably the Milgram Experiment, which exposed how authoritarians lack an inner moral compass. Less well-known is the afterlife of the experiment: many participants were traumatised and sought compensation (Perry, 2013). There are publicised court cases (for example Nina Power and Daniel Miller, and Jon Rafman) that to some extent describe the networks and relations between cancellers and cancelled. There is research on the severity of the psychological consequences. As research psychologist Christine Marie (2023) describes it: "a brush with death". Personal accounts (e.g. the *fuckingcancelled* podcast) also describe severe trauma and shock. In my personal conversations with other cancelled individuals, they echoed my own sentiment: it was somehow incomprehensible and inconceivable. The most shocking thing about it was that it could have happened at all.

As Limberg and Arsov (2020) say: "It feels like the world has been turned upside-down. People are acting like they have no God but this is not true, because a God has been summoned: the Cancel God." There is an emerging discourse about mob mentality and cancellations (and connected to them the woke-identitarian milieu) as fundamentally non-secular (Beiner, 2020; Limberg & Arsov, 2020; Murphy 2019; Power, 2019; Eisenstein, 2021; Lovink, 2020; Tiplady, 2019). I share this view. In my case, what

culminated in a *sacrifice ritual* (a string of cancellations) was self-sacrifice rationalised and disguised through the rhetoric of participation and group-based working.

When describing the evaluation of socially engaged art, Claire Bishop (2006) also draws on a religious framework: "The discursive criteria of socially engaged art are, at present, drawn from a tacit analogy between anticapitalism and the Christian 'good soul'." In this schema, self-sacrifice is triumphant: "The artist should renounce authorial presence in favor of allowing participants to speak through him or her. This self-sacrifice is accompanied by the idea that art should extract itself from the 'useless' domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis." In case of cancellations, such a sacrifice culminates in the total sacrifice of a person.

Limits on participation

To begin, I will briefly survey the literature critical of participatory art's political entanglements. I do not make a distinction between participatory art, socially engaged art, or relational practice, but refer to them collectively as products of the *participatory turn*. At a glance, engaging the audience in the creative process may not sound overtly political. It is about artists producing a social environment in which people come together to be part of a shared creative project. This collaboration is public and it involves the representation or re-imagination of social relations and their political dimensions. I do not claim to be making a systematic survey of this emerging discourse within the scope of this paper. I will merely provide a brief characterisation of its most vocal representatives.

A broader critique claims that the participatory turn has been co-opted into neo-liberal agendas and used as a means of soft social engineering (Rodigari, 2017, references Claire Bishop, Shannon Jackson, Bojana Kunst and Gregory Sholette). This critique is not directed at the idea of the direct involvement of artists in politics itself. The most seminal critique may be by Claire Bishop (2006) who defined the participatory turn as an *ethical turn.* As artists engage with social concerns, critics (and sponsors) move from the register of aesthetics to the register of ethics and judge, for example, the quality of the artist's moral engagement. Art of this sort, according to Bishop, is not to be criticised, but to be judged on whether it is morally good or bad.

Bishop is a supporter of such art that can be very close to politics, creating an arena for raising socio-political issues without the burden (and reality) of actual politics. This is how co-optation takes place: such art can be used to substitute real civic participation and provide the illusion of *social inclusion* (Bishop, 2012). For a similar but more positive argument, see Art History Professor Grant Kester (2011). The American art critic Hal Foster (2015, p. 250) formulates a similar critique:

> "Sometimes politics is ascribed to such practices based on a shaky analogy between an open artwork and an inclusive society, as though a desultory arrangement of material might evoke a democratic community of people, a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian society or a deskilled artwork prefigure an anybody-can-be-an-artist world.

The problem is that collaboration is encouraged for its own sake, and it's a way to sneak in exploitative labor practices."

The architect and theorist Marcus Miessen (2017) has a practical approach, identifying the pitfalls of participation, and then suggesting some solutions to the arising dubious situations. Participation has become a "problem-solving ideology" (2017, p. 154), an end in itself: "Certain spatial and artistic practices have hijacked the notion of participation as a positive, unquestionable means of engagement" (2017, p. 111).

Chantal Mouffe's theory of *agonism* (2008) offers a framework in which the role of art is to provide a space for dissensus and lends it social visibility:

"According to the agonistic approach, critical art is an art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming to give a voice to all who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony" (Mouffe, 2008, p. 12).

In her 2010 article in *Artforum,* she uses the example of participatory artworks like the interventions at the Barcelona Contemporary Art Museum, which presented alternative models of decision-making in local political issues and framed them as counter-hegemonic interventions. Mouffe also posits (2008, 2010) that art should be used to foster such forms of democratic dissensus.

A Marxist-turned-libertarian sociologist, Frank Furedi, voices the opposite view. He not only critiques but refutes such a mode of participation and insists that the public does not participate in the arts, and the concept of participatory art obscures the fact that art is made by artists. Being an actual artist is "beyond the capacity" of most people. Thus, his argument is similar to that of Bishop: participatory art is a public ritual that creates the illusion of participation (Furedi, 2004, p. 131). This public ritual hurts art and politics: knowledge and culture become mere means of achieving economic and political objectives.

While I agree that such participation is a public ritual that can be, and often was, politically co-opted for a variety of purposes, such as producing fake consensus or the illusion of democratic engagement, I argue that this co-optation stems from internal dynamics – different aims and habitus of different fields. Cancellations are the step in exploiting people further.

An autoethnographical case study: How the participatory ethos feeds into cancellation

I had no idea about the realities of a political movement, and it would have never crossed my mind to join one. I sought to make tactical media art, inspired by feminist literature. Together with a friend and other collaborators, through NGO funding, my first project was abortourism.com, a tactical media site showcasing the differences between

reproductive healthcare policies and providing fictional travel packages for women in need of such healthcare. My co-author (a friend from art school, who nowadays runs a sustainable urban mushroom farm) quit as soon as we started to get involved with the media and NGO networks. As she told me, reflecting on that social milieu: "I thought I was getting into feminism, but that was hell." It should have been a wake-up call. I did not quit but got involved ever deeper within this entangled network of lobbyists, journalists, politicians and academics.

As expected, both myself and my work were attacked, but that was all manageable – until I drew the ire of a local *intersectional* community. Then it was a standard and predictable case of *cancellation,* a string of disproportionate and sadistic personal attacks. What happened on the level of stories was absurd and petty, but the dynamic was psychopathological: scapegoating, with aggressors posing as victims, made-up legal threats, gaslighting, stalking, lies and slander. Some of my so-called collaborators were worse than the mob – they wanted me to bear this like a saint (or rather a doormat). I was expected to cease to be myself, but instead to think of myself as a representative of the local feminist movement, whose interests were supposed to supersede my own sense of self-preservation and basic moral compass. In hindsight, I realised if *the left* means anything, it means a modus operandi, a networked mode of collectivity that surpasses individual autonomy and free will. When I first encountered leftists and leftism, they did not bother me because I thought the whole concept of the left was so vague that it did not mean anything. The concept might indeed have been vague, but the network-building activity behind it was real and top-down. In the lead-up to the 2014 Hungarian election and beyond, broadly unpopular left-liberal opposition politicians formed a coalition (*Összefogás,* literally meaning 'coalition') entangled with the largely transnationally supported and left-liberal NGO – *civic* network, strategically centred around female politicians. To compensate for their lack of popular support, they sought symbolic legitimacy by aligning with progressive causes such as feminism through collaboration with NGOs. Both my so-called collaborators and cancellers were part of this network, or at least the network tried to assimilate them, so that when I attempted to establish boundaries and defend myself, I only added to my list of supposed offenses.

At some point in 2018, I reported one of my cancellers for plagiarism. This was not a simple case of plagiarism but involved a reading of a 20-minute conference speech straight out of Google Books (translated from English into Hungarian), and running a column based on unreferenced Jacobin article translations. Bringing this to attention would have meant disturbing the network-building efforts and tarnishing the image of the *feminist–leftist* activist network. So instead, I was castigated and not the plagiarist. At that point, I realised that only representations of moral superiority or acceptable positions mattered. A researcher was not expected to produce knowledge, they only had to be a representation of a researcher and, above all, an obedient node in the network. I was bullied out of a so-called research group, whose members organised the conference where the plagiarist gave a speech. I was accused of being "unsafe" and "threatening" and, as a consequence, a fellow member of this organisation (who sat on stage next to the plagiarist whilst she read her speech from Google Books) wrote a letter about me, besmirching my character, yet failing to mention the cause of the conflict, that is, the

plagiarism. The letter contained a paragraph about how I was allegedly asked not to participate at events (to quote verbatim) "in the art field", as if that were an objectively existing entity and not an analytical tool. I have never heard of this ever happening before. It would never have occurred to me to ask this of anyone, and I had facilitated, visited and taken part in many art events before, unlike my self-appointed prosecutor (who is a macrosociologist of world system theory and an aspiring leftist movement leader). I realised then that he was projecting his own modus operandi onto the aforementioned art field. As if, from a ceramics workshop to the Budapest branch of the Ludwig Museum, cultural workers were consciously investing in the art field in the same way aspiring leftist politicians build their network, as emerging politicians forge platforms out of local grassroots movements.

At this point, I realised that the structuring axiom of this whole milieu is not shared belief, but shared interest. Through their donors and networks, they construct a parallel reality, an *alternative* to alternative, grassroots cultural infrastructures. Then through constructing and embodying identities, people become personally invested in a false consensus and protect this consensus to be able to maintain their identities and their aggrandised conceptions of self (see also Bajusz, 2019). Participatory arts projects are a means to recruit new people, subjectify them into this consensus (through assuming group identities) and also to spatially and temporarily extend the milieu. These are political, and not artistic goals.[1]

Leftism in my experience has meant the group subject, or the platform, the brand so to speak, through which individuals could acquire the power of the collective. To quote Daniel Miller (2020), another cancel culture target, who is currently (as of 2023) suing his own cancellers:

> "Imagine a mobile army of metaphors, rhetorical concepts, symbols and stratagems (invocations of privilege, assertions of victimhood, smears, etc.) available to legitimate grudges, channel private resentments, initiate conflicts or pursue private agendas. In flat, or insecure social ecologies, like social media or college campuses, it thrives, whereas in strictly differentiated systems, it is practically unknown. As conflict proliferates, its power increases, which generates further conflict, until there is nothing but conflict, at which point it devours itself. This is the Left, a distinct occult entity, or egregore invoked to focus and camouflage

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[1] Participation did not make these events and social milieus more accessible. For example, speeches at demonstrations were written and held by people with ties to political networks, so the modes of participation open for the activist network entailed things like protesting in costumes, painting slogans, or renovating community buildings. I cannot recall participants who did not have some interest or investment in the networks that were offering participatory events and opportunities. In a way, participation was like paying tribute. It followed a hierarchical and petty logic. Most of the participation I encountered entailed being a supporting cast for political agendas and actors. The support of the cultural scene offered symbolic legitimacy to ideas and organisations lacking a popular base. People were offered cheap or free spaces, or organisers were directly contacted by lobbyists who offered their resources. Agents of lobbies controlled grassroots organisations through such ostensible support. Also, under the guise of community engagement and supposed participatory *opportunities,* people were pooled into network hubs and were openly treated as free labour or bio-props. Encouraged participation meant being part of this network.

an individual's desire for power, or status, or sex, but whose own power is augmented the more frequently it is summoned. Ultimately it is the Left which wields power, not individual Leftists: they summon the Left to feel powerful, but this power remains with the Left."

This reflects how mobbing survivor and anthropologist Janice Harper (2013) emphasised the role of masking differences and hierarchies, for which the illusion of inclusion and participation was a tool in my case. I argue with Pippa Norris (2020, 2021) that ideology does play a role, as the political instrumentalisation (either capture or support) of participation is deeply ideological (i.e. collectivist, and the collective is the *actant*). I observed (and suffered) constructivist ideology in action – "everything is politics" meant assuming that life is based on power politics and extending power games. The collective actant *(left, feminism)* was supposed to have power over individual members. Through *politics,* I encountered the *critical* constructivists as described by Bruno Latour (2003, 2005): a social milieu with a consensus that all social relations are structured by power, and the *social* is nothing but the interplay of domination, legitimisation, fetishisation, reification. I was constantly lectured to that everything is politics. I naively thought it was supposed to mean everything has an ideological underpinning. But instead, it meant that everything was a power struggle. According to a social constructivist worldview, and the *all-is-politics* dogma, all value came from other people, so more and more was taken. Rituals of subjectivation and representation became sacrificial rituals, just as there is an emerging discourse recognising cancel culture as human sacrifice.

Again stressing the limitation of my autoethnographical observation, I would argue with the Girardian notion of the community's role in the sacrifice ritual that public cancellation is. In my case, most people did not join the mob, and I also observed that the same accounts became active during different cancellations of different people. I cannot provide precise figures, precisely because of the open-ended nature of participatory arts.

There is research on left-wing authoritarianism (Costello et al., 2022), and Robert Altemeyer (2008), one of the most prominent researchers of authoritarianism, argues that mob violence is authoritarian aggression. There is also research on how internet trolls are sadists, narcissists and sociopaths (March & Steele, 2020; Thomas & Egan, 2022), and also research linking extreme leftism to narcissism and sociopathy (Krispenz & Bertrams, 2024).

My cancellers had not been cancellers for years. I would say they were mostly just frustrated and annoying. For years, (some of them for over ten years) had been assuming a non-authoritarian character, from the resources (ideas, connections, enthusiasm) of many. Initially, I was unable to comprehend why they had turned on me. I reasoned with myself that they had got a bigger share of resources than they merited, so it could not have been envy. I had never hurt them. In fact, the illusion of real collaboration and co-creation was so perfect that once, when I dared utter "not everyone is an artist", my friend and actual collaborator (to whom I referred to in the beginning of this section) gave my lunch to a dog. This was at the core of participatory formats, an end-of-history ethos. As someone expressed it at that time "we should just party on until the end of times". It failed, as it assumed human nature is constructivist and performative. Finally,

I realised why my cancellers took revenge – I contributed to them getting into roles in life they were unable to really adapt to. I also elicited their envy, since I actually had that (autonomy and creativity), which they supposedly possessed, but actually lacked. Cancellations happen in the gap between opportunities and abilities. If we connect cancellations (mob behaviour) to authoritarianism (at the core of the authoritarian personality lies the lack of autonomy), and read it like an extended Milgram Experiment, we could argue that social media activated dormant authoritarian tendencies. In the same manner, arts-based participation and establishing an identity as creatives and thinkers failed to establish a really autonomous self in people who turned into cancellers. I emphasise again that most people did not become cancellers, and again stressing the limitations of autoethnography, I described these cases because they reveal the underlying logic connecting participatory arts formats to cancellations.

Conclusion

My assertion is that cancel culture is indeed tied to ideology, and that the participatory turn's flattening of difference, collectivism and constructionism feeds into that. In my particular case, having to pretend we were equal partners, equally capable of being autonomous and creative engendered envy and resentment, as people were put into positions that made them constantly prove themselves and their abilities. The easiest way to prove their worth was through belittling others, just as the easiest way to claim power is through sadism. Politics is about consensus, and creativity is not consensual. It is not evenly distributed among people, and the most creative ideas are not the ones on which everyone would reach a consensus. Not everyone has what it takes to be an artist. In this gap between reality and expectations and ideology is where cancellations happen.

Through my observation, I saw that participatory formats were at large empty (politically captured) rituals, but sacrificing someone imbued the participants with excitement (for those open to such excitement, such as authoritarians, sadists and sociopaths) and community bonding took place through scapegoating. I used to think that I was participating in a politically engaged network, as the boundaries between life and art shift and dissolve, but it turned into participation in a mystery play culminating in my total sacrifice. At this point, my narrative ties back to one of the roots of art: ritualism–ritual. Whether as cults (a sect with a set of rules governing life) or cultus (where members gather to participate in a given rite), both had a high entry threshold, similar to the elitist neo-avant-gardes that later became what is now known as contemporary art. There had been no open-ended, open-to-all *participation* in secretive cults, and not everyone could join and be an avant-garde artist, albeit for a few hours only. Similarly to the dissolution of the private–public boundary, the boundary between art and politics, the sacred and the profane has also dissolved. Yet, a lot of what happened in *workshops* and *gatherings* would previously not have been designated as profane representational activity in any way connected to *reasoned dialogue* or either consensus or dissensus.

Cancel culture revealed to me how far co-optation has gone. Art has ceased to be art. It has become discourse, *cultural capital,* or symbolic legitimacy (i.e. a tool in power games). The next level of what Romanian theorist Octavian Eşanu termed the "managed avant-garde" (2008), is a captured avant-garde. Not only controlling, to reference Mouffe again, "the fomentation of dissensus" (2008), but producing a make-believe version of it. It could happen, because it served existing needs, certain individual's insatiable need for power, and lack of capacity to truly engage with art.

A critical claim is that participation was hijacked for political purposes, such as representing participation. If the participants never really participated (as Furedi claims, 2004), using these formats itself was a political hijacking of art. My assertion is that the participants participated in something that was neither art-making, nor political engagement as dissensus (Mouffe, 2008). It was a subjectivation ritual that had been politically instrumentalised. The *politics* network I encountered generally considered art a means to political ends, such as gaining symbolic legitimacy, or at most a set of strategies for moral posturing, yet it generated much more than discourse and effects on the discursive register; performances, festivals, workshops and other participatory formats channelled affects and subjectified their subjects. The focus on discourse and *reasoned dialogue* hid the register where these events exerted effects.

Again, I would like to stress the limitations of autoethnography, but other data is likely to be biased as well. The Milgram Experiment is very well known, but a not-so-well-known fact is that many research subjects were traumatised, and sought compensation (Perry, 2013). Both practitioners and scholars should recognise that arts-based participation has the potential to extend into unpredictability and mysteries, and to the cruelty and depravity that is cancellation. I would conclude that the real hijacking was channelling art through participation to the register of politics, and where participation really has led was just where art began: cultus and ritual.

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