

The Boy Who Cried Banana: What happened during *The Transmission*

One of the first hurdles I encounter when confronted with participatory art is the invitation to participate. There is always the risk that the artist will use the invitation to validate their own position of power, and as an audience member, I will inadvertently let them do so. 'The only true intervention would be for someone to step out of the crowd and shout, "No, no, *I* am the artist, you must do what *I* tell you to do, you must play *my* game"',¹ argues Greil Marcus, before asserting confidently that, 'such things have never happened'. But what makes him so sure?

Participation is certainly a tricky practice. If I am perceived as heckling (unvalidated participation, without or beyond an invitation) I may be removed by the venue staff; the institution will usually back the artist they have programmed over any problematic audience member. If the rest of the audience feels like I am preventing them from experiencing the work of an artist they are expecting to see, they may well tie me up and gag me in a corner in order to allow the show to go on.

Despite these difficulties, it turns out 'such things' do happen. *The Boy Who Cried Banana* is a video about just such an intervention that took place during *The Transmission*, a performance by Diego Chamy and Mike Majkowski. *The Transmission* was based on the idea that Diego would describe a performance that he had seen to Mike and Mike would perform it according to what he understood from Diego's description. They chose the participatory performance, *BANANA*, by Orion Maxted. They invited Orion to the event without telling him about the idea and planned to credit him at the end.

With Diego's description in mind, Mike begins the performance by taking various objects out of a box, holding them in the air and shouting "Banana!" After a few minutes he invites people from the audience to come up on stage to hold the objects and join in with his shouting. While the energy in the room is warm, most participate without enthusiasm. After a while, Orion Maxted, stands up from the front row and walks out of the room. He then reenters, goes on stage and claims that he is the author of the performance and that the audience is experiencing a "bad copy" of his work. He uses photographic documentation of *BANANA*² on an iPad to prove it, which acts as a form of validation, allowing him to compete with Diego and Mike's position as the artists. Orion's action makes the previously well-defined roles of Performer and Audience, ambiguous. As the distinction is blurred, there is a shift in power.

Orion follows his initial interruption by trying to clear the stage, asking the participating audience members to return to their seats. Only at this point do some of the participants show eagerness to stay, one person asking why he should sit down, stating "I'm having fun". Another participant returns the question, asking Orion if he would mind sitting down.

1 Greil, M., *Lipstick Traces: A secret History of the 20th Century*, Faber & Faber, London: 2001, p101

2 <http://www.banana-bananabanana.blogspot.co.uk/>

Of course, anyone is free to intervene in any way at any time, but due to the balance of power, before Orion's interruption, the audience seems trapped between two options: get up on stage and participate or refuse to participate and stay seated. As soon as Orion asks people to return to their seats, the possibilities for action seem to multiply. The option of not participating is removed, because staying seated is participating according to Orion's aim. In the end, after Mike leaves and Orion sits down, a couple of audience members stay on stage, talking among themselves and handing out the objects to the rest of the room, attempting to continue the show.

On the one hand, it is possible that Orion's actions were carried out with an awareness of the context and the intention to produce a better, more interesting performance. On the other, Orion describes that at the time his emotions were high and that his main aim was to stop the performance. However, these two positions are not mutually exclusive and it's impossible for even Orion to know how their interplay affected his behaviour, because, while he might have been driven by anger or frustration, he is also an experienced performer who has an ingrained understanding of the dynamics of the performance situation.

Nevertheless, I am interested to know where Orion's frustration came from, and what motivated him to make clear to the audience that *The Transmission* was a copy of *BANANA*. He says he remembers thinking, "I have to let people know that this isn't my work, or it was more like it was my work, but it was a bad copy of my work." This sentence demonstrates the difficulty of distinguishing difference and similarity; influence and plagiarism; and appropriate and inappropriate appropriation.

The idea that making something entirely new is impossible, that intention and interpretation are disconnected and that the artist's touch is not inherently valuable, are all emphasised in contemporary art education and discourse, but the way that art is produced and distributed is reliant on authorship. The artist's role as author is rarely seen as complicated, despite common knowledge that artists have differing roles in the production of their work. We know that Damien Hirst doesn't paint his own paintings, but there are still forgeries. Here lies the paradox. A supposedly unique body of work is attached to an artist's name, and the visibility of their name alongside their work is what leads to further opportunities, opportunities that are offered specifically to them. While I am not suggesting that Orion was consciously thinking about his future career when interrupting, I believe the structures within which we live are deeply engrained in our thinking, intuitions and impulses. We live in a society where most things are based on individual identity and ownership and we have built up habits of protecting those things. So while we can theorise about The Death of the Author³, *The Boy Who Cried Banana*, puts theory into practice, revealing attitudes about ownership and intention through lived experience. Interestingly, as Orion points out, in the end no one wants to claim authorship for what happened during *The Transmission*.

3 Bathes, R., *The Death of the Author*, 1967

Another important point revealed through Diego, Mike and Orion's conversations to camera, is that the artists and audience members had relationships beyond the performance situation. The people involved were not only connected by occupying the roles of performer, heckler and audience member, but also by being friends, acquaintances, partners, ex-partners, neighbours, colleagues etc.. These relationships, which existed outside the frame of the artwork, affected the choices made within it. An example specific to this situation is the fact that many of the audience members knew Diego's past work, in which he often uses plants to interrupt the show. This kind of knowledge prompts expectations, and is potentially what led to many people believing that Orion was an actor, giving him the feeling of being trapped within the spectacle of the performance with no escape. The more he insisted he was not a plant, the more the rest of the audience was convinced he was, a situation that might not have occurred if Diego's name had not been attached to the performance.

These kind of details are, more often than not, neglected by theoretical writing on participation. Generally we are left merely discussing the mechanics of the framework and an anecdote or two. For that reason I enjoyed Diego, Mike and Orion's attempt to map out some of the motivations for the choices made, and to think through the consequences of those decisions from the personal perspectives of those involved.

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