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TESTING IN PERFORMANCE

WHAT IS IT?

A participatory performance[1] is an event with a beginning and an end, in which participants are invited to interact with performers. As an artistic format it has been developed in between experimental theatre and live art practices (Fischer-Lichte/Roselt 2001, Umathum 2005). It can be used and further developed as a format for *Participatory Art Based Research*. Artist-researchers[2] host the event, devise its settings und presentational elements, initiate interaction and provide specific protocols and means for doing things together. The format is devised to present, test and critique hypotheses concerning phenomena, problems and potentials of being together. Rehearsing participatory performances means forecasting and simulating public interaction. In consequence, the participatory performance as such partially becomes a rehearsal[3] itself: It can be understood as a try-out – a "preenactment" (Plischke 2020) – in which concepts for a wider understanding of public interaction and cultural practices can be tested and alternative models of being together can therefore be rehearsed. *Testing in Performance* can be used for opening art-based research to a wider public, making its processes transparent and inviting the public to take an active part in developing new public practices.

The modes of participation[4] can differ widely; participants are invited to perform a range of roles suggested to them. Depending on the set-up and their own choices, they can be observers, experts, they can be tested, or they can become co-researchers. They are invited to try out acting in and interacting with unforeseen or unusual settings.
In consequence, impulsive action and intuitive decision-making can take place in the fra-

CONTEXT

1   Participatory performance: Participatory art describes a form of art that includes the audience in the creative process or in the performative event as co-producers. Its origins can be traced to the Futurist and Dadaist performances from 1910 onwards. Later, in the 1950s, Allan Kaprow designed performances as happenings, where the audience was invited to participate in producing the event. Although participatory art has its origins in a fine art context, the art form is inherently linked to theatre and performance, as people constitute the central artistic medium and material. Participatory performance tends to aim at group dynamics, social situations, and providing tools for claiming participation in social and political contexts as well (Bishop 2012).

2   Researchers/co-researchers/participants: Researchers within PABR are those who are involved in the whole research process from beginning to end and are responsible for the shape and progression of the process.
Co-researchers are invited to collaborate and join the research process for shorter or longer periods of time.
Participants are invited to join the research only at certain points, for instance during its public presentation, and are involved in different ways. In order to organise participation on equal terms, it is crucial to recognise and acknowledge the different questions, interests, responsibilities, capacities and availabilities of the different co-researchers and participants and to define their role within the process.

3   Rehearsal: In the performative arts, rehearsing can be understood as an act of practicing, for example learning specific skills or practicing to play a specific role, and running through different possibilities of solving an artistic task. Beyond that, the rehearsal is also understood as a moment of testing. In its frame of (pre-)presenting and watching, one always forecasts the audience's view and reaction. Rehearsal and performance can fall into one, if, for instance, a test version of a specific form of assembling or a certain form of acting is publicly presented. In both perspectives, the rehearsal can be understood as a procedure to acquire knowledge. Rehearsing is an artistic practice

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mework of a theatrical as-if setting. *Testing in performance* often requires a performance space that is less formal than conventional theatre settings.

In *Hello, March! Collective Walking Performance for Followers and Pacesetters* (2017)[I], Liz Rech, for example, used a participatory performance in public space to investigate the act of marching in political demonstrations. Rech invited participants to join the performance of different modes of marching and holding objects to examine their performativity in artistic political demonstrations.

WHAT IS RESEARCHED?
Research topics include questions of group dynamics, social processes, practices and/or codes of behaviour. Intuitive implicit cultural practices and incorporated knowledge that would not come to light in a questionnaire or by mere observation of the everyday can be tested and observed in shared action. The performance assembles a group of

people that are willing and interested to act with and/or perceive each other. The performance setting offers the option to amplify or dissect actions that, in an everyday context, are layered with other practices. In isolating different patterns of actions, the participants' are given a choice between them. Researchers can then analyse which elements lead participants to choose a specific course of action, for instance external elements such as a particular spatial formation, or internal dynamics such as picking the easiest option.

Testing in Performance can also take the form of assigning a task to participants. The range of different knowledges of the participants will result in a spectrum of possible solutions. The process of translating the subject matter into the performative setting and acting it out together in rehearsal is already an act of research. In going public, the test results from rehearsals are shared and tested by and with participants. Rech for instance presented the first outcomes of her research on marching in protests and demonstrations in her performance *>>> Marching Session I-VI_____ >>>> (2016)[II]*, which was framed as a lecture performance to an audience. In a second step, she invited the audience to follow her on stage to

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I Hello, March! Collective Walking Performance for Followers and Pacemakers (2017): Hello, March! was a participatory walking performance in public space where performers mingled with the audience within a parade through the urban area of Hammerbrook. The march served as a means of temporarily recapturing public space and experimentally creating temporary collective identities. The space traversed was changed and marked by the performers and the participants, performing to music and carrying along big colourful objects. Since people did not previously know each other and did not have experiences as a collective, Rech offered different tasks and formed affinity groups, which created confidentiality and allowed people different levels of participation.
Liz Rech, *Hello, March! Collective Walking Performance,* 2017, Hamburg

II >>>>> Marching Session I - VI_____ >>>>> – An Interactive (Lecture) Performance for Followers and Pacemakers (2016): Liz Rech explored the topic of marching as a potentially

that is characterised by collectivity, performativity and different uses of media (Plischke 2018, Matzke 2012).

4 Participation: From an art perspective as well as from the perspective of political critique, certain types of participation arouse the suspicion of merely simulating participation, while at the same time promoting neoliberal concepts of governance and self-discipline. Participation can be misused as an instrument of power instead of being used to distribute knowledge, resources and control. It is precisely the artistic experimentation with new forms of assemblies and participation that opens up a field in which art and academia can differentiate between different types of participation and discuss them using concrete examples, while also proposing other forms of (political) participation   (Burri/Evert/Peters/Pilkington/Ziemer 2014).

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test her findings in a participatory marching session and afterwards answer her questions in a questionnaire. Here, the timing was crucial: If successive commands were given too rapidly, the whole marching group would fall apart, which highlighted the importance of timing and rhythm when guiding marching participants.

Difficulties such as these, which can occur in preparation and in the public performances, are often important results[5] of the research process. The format offers the possibility to collect quantitative data about how many people are deciding for one option or another, or qualitative data about how they interact with a certain task, problem or setting. *Testing in Performance* can also be complemented with a questionnaire or interviews with participants to pair the observable results (for example from a video-based movement-action analysis) with the experiences of participants and performers (Lippens 2007: 104–06).

emancipatory practice through a workshop series and an interactive lecture performance. In seven workshops, she explored relating topics (such as march and objects, march and sound, march and choreography.) The different co-researchers came from diverse backgrounds and contributed their special knowledge and set focal points within the different research fields. The interactive performance itself dealt with the practice of marching movements through a lecture and a workshop. Participatory marching exercises tested some of the results together with the audience. After two parallel workshops with the audience, each of the groups performed in front of the other in the theatre space. Their experiences were documented by a question and answer session.
Liz Rech, >>>>> *MARCHING SESSION I – VI _____ >>>>>– An Interactive (Lecture) Performance for Followers and Pacemakers,* 2016, Hamburg

ARTISTIC MEANS

The format *Testing in Performance* is often a hybrid between research and artistic practice. Both dimensions need to be productively linked. The research aspect calls for a clear concept of what is tested and how results will be gained and documented[6]. The artistic practice provides framing, impulse, inspiration and flow to keep audiences engaged and willing to participate. This includes an introduction that creates interest in the proposed activity and prepares audiences for their participation.

5 Knowledge production: PABR formats and designs are governed by the pursuit of a question, a desire, a need or by the attempt to find a solution for a problem. This initial framing poses a functional background for the researchers to evaluate the outcomes of the performative events and research activities, and therefore produce specific answers to the functioning of hypotheses or working solutions. For the evaluation, several moments of presenting, analysing, reflecting and discussing results are implemented within the operational steps. Results can include solutions, knowledge, theories, practices, artefacts, feelings, etcetera. Many outcomes can be verbalised or visualised, but some manifest in a way that eludes the discursive grasp. Knowledge production within PABR means that explicit and implicit forms of knowledge are valued equally. The researchers try to choose forms of presentation and analysis that make these forms recognisable. It has to be made clear that this analysis is one of many possible research narratives. Besides, there might be diverse research narratives that can be known and recognised, but also some that remain unknown to the researcher. PABR is distributed knowledge.

6 Documentation: How processes of PABR are documented depends on each project and cannot be determined in a general way. Researchers are advised to put documentation measures in place that help to store and translate processes and outcomes for those contexts in which she wants the project to proliferate. Documentation should be intertwined with moments of presentation and of gathering research material. Each project should develop a documentation method appropriate to the project, which may consist of several forms of documentation. Performances can be

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Such an introduction can take the form of a lecture that explains the research question[7] in relation to the setting and possible activities. In a less transparent approach, researchers can create an alternative or even fantastic reality for audiences to engage with, without sharing a clear intention for the research. Creating situations that arouse interest and pleasure can engage audiences to join activities on many different levels. A safe space and a low threshold are needed to support participation. Using the theatre apparatus can motivate and guide attention. Often, there is not only one theatrical focus but instead there are distributed, parallel actions and plural focal points: Music and flexible spatial settings help participants overcome performance pressure. The different options for interaction can be coordinated by the spatial set-up, by a master of ceremonies, by performers who act as guides, facilitators, role models or *agents provocateurs*.

Hannah Kowalski framed her performance *Yes No Maybe* (2013)[III] as research and gave an opening lecture on the topic: In her 'theatre of decision-making'[IV], Kowalski invited participants to explore the role of performance in the act of voting. For her performance, she created and suggested new ways of voting such as navigating golden rolling chairs to fields on the floor marked 'yes' or 'no' or using lights and laser pointers to vote. As a master of ceremonies, Kowalski led through the performances, explicitly asking the audiences to evaluate the suggested ways of voting.

POTENTIALS, PROBLEMS AND OUTCOMES

The potential of the format *Testing in Performance* is that it can be used for presenting research results to a wider public, as well as inviting them to test research results

III Yes No Maybe (2013): The open areas of the Gängeviertel, a self-organized housing and culture project in Hamburg, were supposed to be developed and Kowalski intervened into the planning process with ideas of school children (8-9 years old) for making the public places more attractive for children. The children's suggestions were presented to the various actors of that development process – activists from the Gängeviertel project, the architects and city planners in charge – and voted upon in the Yes No Maybe assembly. For the voting procedure, Kowalski, together with five artists and a school class, developed five different decision-making procedures to vote on the different designs.
Hannah Kowalski, *Yes No Maybe,* 2013, Hamburg

IV Playing Decision-Making (2014): In this participatory lecture performance Kowalski wanted to find out if the motivation to take part in collective decision-making increases when using different kinds of decision-making procedures. In order to inquire into voting processes, she tested different decision-making formats with children and adults on as-if decisions: voting by lights, voting by standing in different fields on the ground, voting with laser pointers, voting with gestures, voting on an unstable decision-making platform (Entscheidungsebene) and voting with a digital online tool. A questionnaire was added, in which the participants were asked to evaluate the different procedures.
Hannah Kowalski, *Playing Decision-Making,* 2014, Hamburg

documented by video recordings, whereas collections, archives and media artefacts may become their own documentation. However, the collective activities are fleeting and perceived differently by each participant. The same event can be evaluated differently from the outside than from the perspectives of the performing participants. For comparison and evaluation purposes, these different experiences need to be represented in some form: collective writing, questionnaires, drawings, transcriptions of discussions or interviews, formal responses, and so on.

7 Research question: General research questions frame the direction of research and unite the heterogenous participants with their different agendas. Deriving from a given practice, need, problem or interest, the field and subject matter are defined. After mapping out the current state of research, as well as identifying factors and actors relevant to the given context, an appropriate research format can be chosen to approach the research question.

themselves and in cooperation with the researchers, who are in turn testing the participants' actions and choices.

Since it is performed in a limited amount of time, the performance can easily be documented by video and later reviewed. Following the tradition of performance analysis, the observation of the performance and the events that have taken place supports the research argument. Furthermore, the potential repetition of testing in a series of participatory performances generates differentiated results. It allows for a comparison between different kinds of interaction observed for different groups of participants and for different contexts in which the performance has taken place. If the testing is carried out only once in a single performance, irregularities and coincidences can distort the research result. This can happen easily when most of the participants are friends of performers, students, or performers themselves. Repetition of the testing can highlight an overarching pattern and help identify exceptions. Moreover, seemingly irrelevant small events can come to the forefront when they reoccur in repeated performances.

Problems can also arise with the initial framing of the participatory performance in question: If the invitation for an action/activity is unclear or vague, audiences will remain in a passive role and no interaction with or participation in the setting can be observed. If the invitation is too narrow, audiences will act according to the demands of the setting and the assumed intention of the initiators. Each research team has to find a framing that navigates the fine line between explanation, invitation, between indicating or determining activities and creating a space where anything is possible.

In *x/groove space* (2016)[V], which was part of the *groove space*-series, Sebastian Matthias tested everyday urban choreographies in Tokyo, Japan, and in Düsseldorf, Germany. Initially, it was assumed that Japanese audiences would be quieter and more respectful in the interaction with performers. Only a series of performances in Japan and Germany was able to prove this cultural stereotype wrong.

V **groove space series (2014-16):** The performance series /groove space was an artistic experiment in various cities. The organisational principles of club dance identified in Matthias' research on groove were transferred into the performing arts context as choreographic structures and helped to artistically investigate urban spaces. The groove spaces applied the observed dynamics of the club as a choreographic means. Hence, groove space investigated how audience movements could also induce movements of the performers and test if a groove dynamic could be created outside of the club context.
Sebastian Matthias, *groove space series,* 2014-16, Berlin/Zurich/Freiburg/Jakarta/Düsseldorf/Tokyo

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