# The Art of Curiosity



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Visual Culture

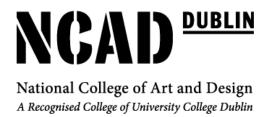
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Date: 15th January 2024

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#### i. ABSTRACT

This essay explores the interconnectedness of curiosity and participatory art, studying the profound relationship between the two within the context of contemporary art practices. Drawing inspiration from William James' assertion in "The Principles of Psychology" (1890) that curiosity is fundamental to human understanding, the essay posits the hypothesis that participatory art not only depends on curiosity but also cultivates it through active engagement.

With reference to and critical analysis of four distinct participatory artworks this essay aims to emphasise the intermingling of curiosity within participatory art. Chapter two speaks about evoking curiosity through sensory input and focuses on Eva Rothschild's *Boys and Sculpture* (2012) and John Cage's *4*"33 (1952), while chapter three focuses on the curiosity linked to emotion and vulnerability through the work of Lee Mingwei with *The Mending Project* (2009) and Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964).

#### ii. INTRODUCTION

In his 1890 publication The Principles of Psychology (1890) Philosopher and Psychologist William James suggested that curiosity was the human desire to understand the world around them. (Kidd, C. and Hayden, Benjamin Y. 2015) In this essay we will explore the necessary links between participatory art and curiosity in reference to four major works of contemporary participation art. These pieces reference performance, observation and interaction as a style of participatory art, and each elicits a unique response from their audience and participants.

The research is split into three chapters, each with a unique focus point regarding the hypothesis that curiosity is instricily linked to participatory art. The first chapter poses the question of how curiosity is relevant in regard to participatory art and discusses the terms 'Curiosity', 'Belonging' and Participation'. This chapter seeks to set the foundations for understanding curiosity as a concept. The second chapter focuses on how participatory engages our senses and how curiosity arises from that with reference to Eva Rothschild's Boys and Sculpture (2012) which reevaluates the conventional "do not touch" rule in place in most modern art galleries, encouraging physical engagement and curiosity, and John Cage's 4"33 (1952), which explores auditory stimuli by presenting silence as the composition. With Cage being quoted as saying there is "no such thing as absolute silence", the piece prompts the audience to be curious about their surroundings and truly listen to the idle sounds surrounding them. The third chapter explores the significance of vulnerability and emotion provoking curiosity within contemporary participatory art pieces, with the examples of Lee Mingwei's The Mending Project (2009), which invites the viewer to activate the project in both a physical and emotional sense, and Yoko Ono's Cut Piece (1964), an art piece that plays with the participants morality and curiosity as they choose to partake in the piece and slowly destroy her clothing.

This essay aims to demonstrate the curiosity that thrives within participatory art, but also the curiosity bolstered by witnessing and taking part in it. The demonstration of how active engagement activates the art work and transforms the audience into participants. The exploration of sensory experiences, emotional vulnerability and the human need to 'know' contributes to the understanding of the complex interplay between curiosity and the contemporary art practice of participation. Not only does participatory art depend on curiosity to truly activate it, but it cultivates curiosity further through the practice and participant response.

#### Chapter 1 - Exploring Curiosity and Participation

# 1.1 Contemporary Curiosity

Curiosity, in its simplest form, is the inbuilt need within us that desires knowledge and "to know." (*Robert Henman, 2017.*) In contemporary art, it is vital to be curious in order to continue discovering new techniques, material and inspiration, as well as when you are observing art. Curiosity is particularly important in regard to participatory and interactive art, as the viewer becomes an active element of the work.

Robert Henman in the essay *A Reflection on the Method of Research into Curiosity* (2017) suggests that the "human desire to understand" starts early in life and continues until the end. We are naturally born curious and strive to satisfy this evolutionary need "to know." Henmman continues to hypothesise about our evolutionary reason for curiosity. If we consider that humans have the ability to adjust to their environment naturally, the evolution of curiosity could suggest that humans can gain a further understanding of their environment through curiosity prompted experiences. This theory is corroborated by Elias Buamgarten in their 2001 publication *Curiosity as a Moral Value*. Buamgarten states that curiosity is the "desire to know" that is an integral part to our humanity, He suggests that we as humans possess a "curiosity about the wider world" which is the driving force for our "need to know."

How does participatory art foster our curiosity as viewers and participants? As mentioned above, the human "desire to understand" is a motivator for partaking in participatory art works. As a member of the audience you observe the piece, though as a participant you experience the art and chrome a collaborator. (Stott, T. (2015) *Play and Participation in Contemporary Art Practices*.)

# 1.2 The Need to Belong

The need to belong is a motivator for humans to maintain interpersonal relationships both intimate and socially, it becomes significant to our overall well being, as documented by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943).

Pardede and Kovač (2023) wrote in the publication *Distinguishing the Need to Belong and*Sense of Belongingness hypothesised that as humans crave a sense of belonging, the social acceptance from strangers triggers a positive psychological effect. Perhaps this is the

motivator behind the pull to interact with and participate in contemporary art, the fear of exclusion. (Pardede, S. and Kovač, V.B. (2023) Distinguishing the Need to Belong and Sense of Belongingness).

In the 1995 Publication *The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation*, Roy Buameister and Mark Leary discuss their theories surrounding belonging as an intrinsic human motivator. Within their research they argue the hypothesis that belonging developed as a way to ensure social safety and security, to form a bond with multiple people within a group would have assured our ancestors of their safety.

Belonging is in this case, another motivator for curiosity, as the need to know could possibly assure oneself of their sense of belonging, thus satisfying a basic need.

#### 1.3 Participatory Art

Participatory art originates from the early twentieth century Dada and Futurist performances that were created to "provoke, scandalise and agitate the public." (*Participatory art, Tate*). The concept of "activating your audience" and having them take part in the work is a crucial element of participatory art. (Kaitavouri, K., 2020 'Typology of Participatory Art', in *The Participator in contemporary art* pp. 24–25.) Participation in a piece can be activated in several different ways, such as direct interaction, passive participation, voyeurism, all of which aim to capture your curiosity. The Museum of Modern Art describes Participatory Art as often "incorporating elements of performance and improvisation."

This type of art depends on the interaction between artist and participants. Whether their participation was intentional or not and regardless of their reaction to the artwork, they are fulfilling the artist's artistic vision. (Kaitavouri, K., 2020 'Typology of Participatory Art', in *The Participator in Contemporary Art* pp. 25).

The Participator in Contemporary Art (Kaitavouri, K., 2020) describes the two main aspects within Participatory Art, "The Target" and "The User."

"The Target" is the unsuspecting participant. Pieces which activate this engagement activate their audience without warning, playing with their role as participants and as the audience until they are one and the same. Consider John Cage's 4'33 (1952). Their reaction to the piece becomes the artwork. This style of participation provokes curiosity for the piece as it progresses, encouraging the participant to continue the interaction. In many cases the

audience may not even be aware they are within a created reality, and that their directions and curiosity is being documented to be presented to a further audience until the piece is complete. (Kaitavouri, K., 2020 'Typology of Participatory Art', in *The Participator in Contemporary Art* pp. 25-27).

"The User" is the willing participant. The User is invited to experience art at their own discretion and chooses to activate the work. An example of this would be Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1965). The audience's willing interaction with the piece becomes the art, as well as the outcome of their participance.

The use of documentation is crucial for artworks of this kind, as once the activation is complete the art will cease to exist outside of what has been documented or any tangible results of the intervention. (Kaitavouri, K., 2020, in *The Participator in Contemporary Art* pp. 36).

# Chapter 2 - Facilitating Curiosity in Contemporary Art through Engaging the Senses

### 2.1 Eva Rothschild, Boys and Sculpture (2012)



(fig.1) Rothschild, E. (2012) Boys and Sculpture. Whitechapel Gallery London.

Eva Rothschild's video piece titled; Boys and Sculpture (2012), commissioned by the Whitechapel Gallery, is a 25 minute video which focuses on a group of eleven boys aged six to twelve years old. Rothschild records them as the group wander the exhibit, firstly looking at the work, later touching and inevitably dismantling the sculptures entirely. What started as a static art exhibition quickly becomes a playground of curiosity and exploration as the boys begin to truly engage with the work through physical interactions. In the video piece it is clear that once given the opportunity to engage with the work through play and touch, the boy's creativity and curiosity grew alongside their confidence. What was once an artwork becomes footballs, swords and props for the boys to act out their imaginations. (Children's Commission, 2016, n.p.) One of the boys who took part in the filming explained it as such; "then I just made a lollipop, some people used the sticks as swords, some people used... you know the big sculpture things as footballs." (2:37, *Making of Eva Rothschild's Boys and Sculpture*, 2012)

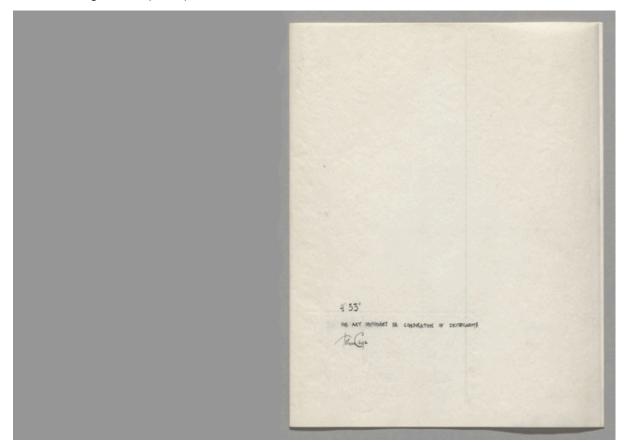
Rothschild's take on the traditional "no touching" environment directly opposes what art galleries demand, in turn encouraging curiosity for the "what if" of interacting physically with the sculptures. In 'The Making of Boys and Sculpture', the boys are quoted saying "because when you go into a gallery and you see sculptures, you're not allowed to touch them" (1:10, *Making of Eva Rothschild's Boys and Sculpture*, 2012), the boys happily explain how fun it was to interact and "destroy" the art work, and that once they discovered they were allowed interact with the pieces physically, they didn't hold back. Their honest and natural curiosity for not only the art, but for the consequences of altering and "destroying" the work is clear to see in their initially hesitant reactions, before they give in. The freedom given to the boys in this piece allows them to not only visually explore their environment, one that in many cases would be familiar to boys aged six to twelve years old, but to physically explore and engage with it and further their understanding of the art through sensory stimulation.

The response the boys have to the work once they can fully engage through touch is reminiscent of Pavlov's tests, where he observed dogs' responses to unknown stimuli. He called this the "what-is-it?" reflex. (Kidd, C. and Hayden, Benjamin Y., 2015). This response can be put into the context of Boys and Sculpture through the interactions between the boys and the work. "What-is-it?" turns to "what-happens-if?", and when no negative consequence comes from their initial response, they allow themselves to be curious and learn through the sensory stimulation provided by the piece. In turn, their curiosity becomes the art, and as such it is important to acknowledge the documentation through film and video for Rothschild's work. Referencing *The Participartor in Contemporary Art* by Kaija Kaitavouri, the use of video documentation transforms the situation from boys playing in a gallery to an art piece dedicated to peaking curiosity through freedom, senses and play. The situation becomes a performance that is "delegated by the artist to amateurs." (Kaitavouri, K. (2020) *The Participator in contemporary art*)

Boys and Sculpture provokes curiosity from both participant and viewer. In one case you have the young boys who are taking part in the video, who are documented as they explore their surroundings and engage with the pieces through feel, sound, look and play. Though they choose to play, their curiosity into the material and their ability to use it within their games is clear to see throughout the video. On the other hand you have the viewers who interact with the work through the documentation alone. They are witnessing the piece in a strictly visual sense, while also observing the boys' interactions with it. The anticipation and curiosity of what the boys may do or say next encourages us to continue watching through to

the end. Rothschild also plays with this concept in the video The Making of Boys and Sculpture, where the boys who participated and their corresponding class group came to watch the documented video of the piece, who expressed their own curiosity at the results of their peers' participation. (*Making of Eva Rothschild's Boys and Sculpture*, 2012)

# 2.2 John Cage, 4'33 (1952)



(fig.2) Cage, J. (1952) 4'33.

When considering the sensory experiences that peak our curiosity it is essential to mention auditory stimuli. Sound, or the lack of it can be very powerful as shown in John Cage's piece 4'33.

Premiered in 1952 at the Benefit Artists Welfare Fund concert in Woodstock, New York, 4'33 is a four minute and thirty three second long, three movement piece of silence. Which is how pianist David Tudor performed 4'33, opening and closing the lid of the piano to mark the progression between the three movements. The score itself is composed of multiple vertical lines that represent the time of four minutes and thirty three seconds visually. (MoMA Highlights, 2019)

Defining it as "the absence of intentional sound", Cage suggests there is no such thing as absolute silence. (Frieling, R. (2008). This piece engages the senses in a completely different way than Eva Rothschild's Boys and Sculpture, with the focus point being the sounds of the audience, who become the unsuspecting participants in the art. Cage sought to peak their curiosity and attune the audience to the sounds of the world around them rather than provide the music they originally anticipated. The MoMA article on this work explains Cage's goal to encourage his audience to be curious and observant, and to appreciate the ambient sounds of society, therefore his silent piece is inherently different each time it is performed, and can never be recreated. (MoMA Highlights (2019) *John Cage. 4'33"*)

Through subverting the expectations of his audience, Cage transforms the piece from a liner composition into a performance piece involving all attendees. Not only does this succeed in engaging the audience, but also encourages curiosity and inquiry from the viewer of the documentation of the work. This is clear through the various debates regarding the honest intentions of 4'33 as a musical piece rather than contemporary art. Is it intended to be satirical? (Gann, K. (2022) *From No Such Thing as Silence*). Regardless of the intention, the impact on the unsuspecting participants becomes the artists and their response becomes the art. Cage describes his thoughts on the performance as such:

"What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began patterning the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out." (John Cage, MoMA Highlights, 2019)

Those who willingly stayed throughout the performance chose to become a participant, in return they are provided with the answer to their curiosity about the piece, as that is what the basis of curiosity stems from, the need to know and understand. (Baumgarten, E. (2001). Those who remained experienced the piece through sound, and through the quiet almost meditative atmosphere created.

Chapter 3- Experiencing Vulnerability and Emotion in Relation to Contemporary Art through Participation.

# 3.1 Lee Mingwei's The Mending Project (2009)



(fig.3) Wong, A. (2017) The Mending Project. Viva Arte Viva 2017.

Lee Mingwei's interactive mixed media installation titled The Mending Project was first shown publicly in 2009 in Lombard-Freid Projects, New York and later shown in the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017.

The Mending Project is an interactive installation in which Lee Mingwei uses thread, colour and sewing as the medium to interact with his participants. (Lee, M. (1970) *The mending project: Lee Mingwei (2009)*.

When visitors arrive they are met with a long table accompanied by two chairs opposite one and other, on the wall are various coloured spools of thread, which the visitor may choose from. Visitors bring a damaged or worn item of clothing they wish to have mended, and once a thread is chosen Lee Mingwei begins to stitch the item for them as they converse. The interaction has two distinct aims; one being the conversation between the artist and the stranger, encouraging curiosity and honesty, while the other aim is to mend the article

provided to the artist. The act of mending in itself offers a sense of care and safety, which encourages deeper, meaningful conversation. Visitors are then asked to leave the mended clothing, which is still connected to the wall via the thread and stacked on the end of the long table, until the duration of the installation has ended, where they can collect it on the final day.

According to the book The Art of Participation 1956 to Now by Rudolf Frieling in partnership with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art suggests that many pieces in this style can only be fully realised by "the involvement of many," in reference to the public. He goes on to say "collaborative practices of this type are geared toward the goal of motivating the public to join in" and to "activate the context in which these works unfold." It is safe to say that The Mending project does just that. The initial visual alone invites visitors to take part and indulge their curiosity.

The emotional aspect of this project also seems to attract a lot of curious participants, as Lee Mingwei describes the intimate conversations he and his participant have for the duration of repair. "I would invite the person to sit with me and share a personal story about why this piece of clothing or who they are..." (3:09, *The Mending Project*, 2017). An interaction as vulnerable and thoughtful as this one can challenge the preconceived notions of interactive art pieces many people may harbour due to media they've consumed, which elicits curiosity within a participant or viewer as their original expectations are met with a new outcome. Kaija Kaitavuori explains it well in the book The Participator in Contemporary Art (pg.12) "The relationship between the artist and the participators can vary from total manipulation to true collaboration," Naturally the participants and audience would be curious to see the intention of their participation, and in regards to The Mending Project it is safe to assume that their participation is voluntary, intimate and collaborative.

Lee's work is dependent on the participation of the public, he requires the damaged clothing to repair and display just as much as the project requires the vulnerable and intimate interactions of those participating and the artist himself.

# 3.2 Yoko Ono, Cut Piece (1964)



(fig.4) Yoko Ono, Cut Piece. Performance at Carneige Hall, New York, 1965

Cut Piece is an emotional performance displaying incredible vulnerability by Yoko Ono. The artist sits motionless on stage in an expensive suit with scissors in front of them, while members of the audience choose to join the performance and cut pieces of the suit and corresponding underwear off of the artist's form, leaving her nearly nude. (Frieling, R. (2008) *pp.108-109*) The artist's dedication to remaining still and passive as those who participate remove her clothing piece by piece is what lends itself to the viewer's curiosity, the question of "how far will this go?" lingers throughout the piece. This question is linked to the direct actions of the participant. If they choose to cut a large section, multiple pieces at once, or fabric hiding intimate areas, this directly impacts the performance and puts the artist in a further state of vulnerability.

Similarly to The Mending Project, Cut Piece is quite emotional for both the artist and those participating. While Lee Mingwei's piece focuses on the intimacy of mending and conversation, Yoko Ono's work chooses to emphasise the vulnerability and participant's choices. It is the choice of the audience to partake, and if they do so they must make a choice of where to cut the fabric on the artist's body, which section to expose. Ono's piece concludes at the discretion of the performer, which, similarly to the previously mentioned piece "Boys and Sculpture", provides a curious audience a reason to participate until the piece concludes, once again toying with humanity's innate 'morbid curiosity' for where the 'line is drawn'. (Baumgarten, E. 2001)

#### iii. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has explored the intricate relationship between curiosity and participatory art, revealing the profound impact of engaging the senses and experiencing vulnerability in contemporary art practices. Curiosity, as an inherent human trait, serves as a driving force for active participation in cooperative art, with a natural desire to understand and explore the world as suggested by Robert Henman in his 2017 publication A Reflection on the Method of Research into Curiosity.

The exploration began by delving into contemporary curiosity, emphasising its significance in the context of participatory and interactive art. Drawing insights from Henman's research(2017), the essay discussed the evolutionary roots of curiosity, suggesting that humans, through curiosity, gain a deeper understanding of their environment. In regards to Participatory art the 'deeper understanding' the participant receives is the satisfaction of activating the work. From this the essay highlighted that a 'sense of belonging' acts as a motivator for curiosity, as social acceptance is a basic human need according to Maslow (1943). With reference to its early beginnings in Dadaist and Futurist art this essay discusses participatory art within the concepts of "the target" which is the unsuspecting participant, and "the user", who is the willing participant, as they are referred to in *The Participator in Contemporary Art* (Kaitavouri, K., 2020).

The subsequent chapters explore notable participatory art pieces and how curiosity is cultivated and facilitated by them. With focus on the senses chapter two describes the work of Eva Rothschild's *Boys and Sculpture*( 2012), and John Cage's 4"33(1952), both of which challenge traditional art settings and emphasise the use of one's senses to peak curiosity and active the piece. In chapter three the concept of vulnerability and intimacy is explored through the works of Lee Mingwei's *Mending Project* (2017), and *Yoko Ono's Cut Piece*(1964). Both pieces invite the audience, with minimal guidance, to partake in the piece. Both pieces include the artist taking part, and encouraging deep thought and vulnerability. They play with the concept of morbid curiosity and emotional curiosity.

In examining these diverse artworks, it became evident that participatory art not only activates the curiosity of the participant, but also intrigues the viewer through its documentation. It highlights the importance of engaging the senses, whether through touch, sound, or emotional connection, as a means to stimulate curiosity in your participants.

In essence, participatory art serves as a dynamic platform for exploring and satiating our innate curiosity, offering a profound experience that transcends traditional modes of art consumption. As viewers become participants, the boundaries between observer and creator blur, creating a symbiotic relationship where curiosity propels the artistic process tenfold.

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