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## (Re)Imagining the Polis: Audience Participation as Postdramatic Discourse

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How much is enough? The relevance of this question comes from individual expectations regarding value. What is value and how does it manifest through our daily interactions? There is a qualitative difference between the concept of *value* and individual and collective *values*. Is there such a thing as a common good when it comes to either? Values are a social construct formed through a process of analysis, dialogue, and assessment within any given community. Though each individual's value system has varying degrees of difference, an agreed-upon system of values is created within and through communication, communion, and coalition. In contemporary societies, it seems the importance of unified community values has diminished in favor of the individual due to the rise of late capitalism, consumer culture, mediatization, political polarization, and the various signposts of neoliberalism. Postdramatic scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann states, "It is a fundamental fact of today's Western societies that all human experiences (life, eroticism, happiness, recognition) are tied to *commodities* or more precisely their consumption and possession (and not to a discourse)."<sup>1</sup> Lehmann's assertion leads me to ask some striking questions relating to the theatrical practices that guide this essay. Namely, how have large-scale social systems of the contemporary era increasingly divested from community values, instead opting for smaller and smaller factions of identification? Without belief in a larger community good, what use is democracy?

This essay intends to offer a contemporary model for theatrical practice that documents and points to affective and effective discourse brought about at the intersection of performance events and participating audiences to form what Lehmann describes as a theatrical "situation" with political capacity.<sup>2</sup> Doing so points the reader toward a (re)imagined polis, where communal understanding developed through difference guides future potentials. This is done through a critical reading of the ethico-political capacity of engaged participation in the Foundry Theatre's production *How Much Is Enough? Our Values in Question* alongside a historical reading of evolutions in theatrical form. This production emerged during a heightened moment of political unrest across the globe in the fall of 2011. Looking back at that time, the production seems to have marked a form of politics within a theatrical sphere that mirrored the potentials arising in the participatory media ecology of the era. Like the digital media being used for political change,

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the production offered a model for democratic discourse and collective action, reimagining a time when theatre was the original form of social media.

Per Lehmann, the political capacity of theatrical communication evolved from one of reciprocity between the spectator and the predramatic spectacle of Greek antiquity, to one of unidirectional representation and reception of the dramatic in the modern period, lasting into the mid-twentieth century, and returning to its democratic roots through participatory politics—among other aesthetics—in the later part of the past century via postdramatic form. In Lehmann's last major work, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, he asserts:

[I]t has become increasingly clear that ancient tragedy should be described as *predramatic*; by the same token, tragedy in dramatic form represents a particular—and, moreover, a specifically European—phenomenon. . . . In the present, however, the conception and practice of the theatre has expanded considerably; in the age of media culture, it is only too clear that theatre should in no way be restricted to the dramatic paradigm that predominated between the Renaissance and the emergence of the historical avant-gardes.<sup>3</sup>

*How Much Is Enough?* represents a symbolic return to a predramatic form of politics framed within a set of postdramatic aesthetics, largely based in the delimiting of authorial manipulation in favor of activating the voice and agency of the audience through rhetorical questioning and dissensual participation. Although Melanie Joseph and Kirk Lynn published the work in *Theater* in 2012, the work is postdramatic in its necessity for active production in which the audience become coauthors of the political potential through their direct engagement. The production represents a response to the “exclusion of the real”<sup>4</sup> marked by Lehmann as a signpost for what the postdramatic moves beyond. When the dialogic action of the fictive universe transcends the “stage space”<sup>5</sup> to incorporate the daily realities of the audience through offerings of material participation, a break in the unidirectional reception function takes place, allowing a form of radical politics to emerge. These politics are absorbed and then reified through the actions of the spectators, both in the event and subsequently beyond the event, marking an efficacy that Lehmann and others<sup>6</sup> see as beginning to wane through theatre's use of dramatic form during the “caesura of the media society.”<sup>7</sup>

The script of *How Much Is Enough?* serves as a blueprint for engagement and the production as an experiential architecture for ethicopolitical exchange following Lehmann's final thoughts on postdramatic form.<sup>8</sup> Joseph and Lynn developed the work through a series of focus-group sessions with an intention to establish a set of questions and dialogic flow that would engage audiences in a democratic form of world and perspective building framed as a “repeatable, theatrical event.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout the production, three actors assumed the roles of interlocutors to help propel a loose narrative arc concerning the multiple ways the participant spectators look at and approach the world through their daily lives. When developing the production, the focus groups comprised “all sorts of people: working-class families in Queens, freegans in Austin, queer activists, radical health care workers, Wall Street financiers, GED classes, even a Buddhist knitting group” according to Lynn.<sup>10</sup> The production's audiences, like the focus groups, were intended to

encompass a plethora of diverging perspectives and opinions in order to develop a sense of community out of difference. They were asked to confront difficult questions regarding ethics, economy, society, friendship, love, and equality. Questions such as:

What is the most generous thing you've ever done?<sup>11</sup>

...

If you could have one more hour in the morning, to prepare yourself for the kind of day you would really, really value, what would you do with that extra hour?<sup>12</sup>

...

If a stranger looked at your schedule for a week, what are two or three things you think he or she would say you really valued? // What do you think a stranger might misunderstand about what you really value by looking at your schedule?<sup>13</sup>

...

How many of you think you can tell, just by looking at someone, if you would get along with that person?<sup>14</sup>

These questions are offered as distinct rhetorical interrogations of the participants with the hope they will spur further contemplation and discussion. In fact, this did occur in my own multiple times participating in the event.<sup>15</sup> Unlike a conventional dramatic structure, the script is written in a format without internal dialogue—there are no formal characters—and instead exists as a set of questions posed to the audience as crucial members of the performance situation. It simply offers a structure for an event that is beyond the constraints of dramatic theatre, where a division between audience and spectacle often defines the medium. While not formally the same, the audience participation is also representative of Boalian techniques for political revolutionary action in practice. These techniques are postdramatic, however, in that they offer not a specific pathway forward. Instead of one path, a multitude of potentials exist based on the composition of, and differences within, the participating audience, which allows the ethicopolitical messaging. Lynn explains that the script is also a text in raw form, that is somewhat flexible, as the “reader’s response”—the audience, in the case of the production—is more important than the “presentation of the questions.”<sup>16</sup> The asking of the questions is the primary motivator for building discourse and community among participants, and for the political underpinnings of the textual aspects of the script. The answering, brought about through discussion and interaction with others in the audience, becomes the postdramatic action where a (re)imagined polis comes to life.

Without the participation of the audience the event and writing itself is incomplete. This situation calls forth a civically minded performance frame, exuding potential structures for engaging with the audience as a contemporary polis and encouraging participatory dialogue that can lead to a democratic community of participant-spectators with the capacity to promote social and civic change. The production is also an example of how interpersonal dialogue created in performance can illuminate the way society determines systems of values. Of primary

concern in this analysis is how the performance engages with participation as a way of accessing and promoting ethical and community-based exchange as a form of postdramatic discourse. To best tease out how the script and production operate as both *pre-* and *postdramatic* material I must first unpack the historical trajectory of theatre as a civic and political agent for social discourse.

### Theatre as a Social and Civic Medium

Alain Badiou states, “We are made to believe that the global spread of capitalism and what gets called ‘democracy’ is the dream of all humanity.”<sup>17</sup> This capitalist “dream” has fueled the commodification of a multitude of economic, civic, and cultural spaces manipulated by daily media interactions where capitalism and democracy create an inherently antagonistic binary. All one needs to do is look at the tension between profit and public good playing out across platforms like Twitter (X) and cable news programming. The *I* of pure capitalism can never reconcile with the *We* of democracy in times of deep mediatization.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, it is the *freedom* of democracy, and the proliferation of seemingly unlimited choice found in deeply mediatized social structures,<sup>19</sup> that encourages the *oppression* of capitalism in the twenty-first century. This echoes what Baz Kershaw describes as the “paradox of cultural expansionism” and what I believe is the *paradox of choice* arising at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> To approach a renewed sense of communal agency, there is a benefit in reexamining the ways the theatrical audience is approached and, ultimately, theatre’s role as a form of social dialogue and media in both ancient and contemporary times.

One way to do this is to explore a model analogous to the evolving relationship between the Attic stage of ancient Greece and its socially activated audience. This relationship was one of praxis with a civic function, where a participatory conversation between the polis and performed actions concerning social/community values allowed for a dialogic mode of community formation based on an inclusion of the real. This discursive model was one of give and take and always in flux, propelling an integral feedback loop of ideas and ideals within both the audience and the state apparatus, as the two were intricately intertwined. It was in this model that the audience as polis “heard a polyphony of voices, claims, charges, defences, curses, prayers, and pleadings, and judged for themselves, as they did in the assembly and the courts.”<sup>21</sup> In this manner, it was a dialogic modality that “empowers debate and emphasizes the achievements, but also the failures, of persuasive speech.”<sup>22</sup> The political capacity of this relationship was fleeting due to a breakdown in social communication among the differing members of the warring tribes of the Attic peninsula. This breakdown was further exacerbated when the politics of governance and philosophy combined through the dialogues of Plato and Aristotle, representing the ideologies of the governing class. These dialogues—and specifically what would be considered the rules established in the *Poetics*—would eventually set a basis for the winnowing of democratic potential within theatre, in the name of drama that would become a prevailing model for nearly five hundred years. A model for the education of a so-called ideal citizenry became the standard during the Renaissance and continued through the various avant-gardes of the twentieth century.

As dramatic form became entrenched, theatre increasingly became estranged from processes of democracy, and its civically charged agency was drained. As Kershaw states, “Western theatres more often than not have discouraged democracy” in the contemporary era, and this is why “there has been so much experimentation in performance beyond theatre” in recent years.<sup>23</sup> The experiments Kershaw to which refers belong to the evolution of theatrical form beyond that of traditional dramatic narrative to that of the performative, the mediatized, and the experiential—each form fitting into the larger taxonomy of postdramatic aesthetics introduced by Lehmann. Each encourages new ways of communication with its intersubjective audience. According to Lehmann, because postdramatic theatre is no longer “subordinated to the primacy of the text”<sup>24</sup> and the “dominance of dialogue and interpersonal communication”<sup>25</sup> framed inside dramatic narratives, it offers a model of presentation that confronts the spectator, insisting on uneasy transactions of ideological discourse. This discourse is activated by removing the barrier found in the reception model of the dramatic in favor of an experiential and discursive format. This mode of theatre beyond drama acknowledges its role as participant alongside the spectator and its own historical context, and it models a logic similar to what Lehmann called the “‘predramatic’ discourse of Attic tragedy”<sup>26</sup>—a logic that exuded discursive interplay between the polis and performance frame as a holistic event. By acknowledging the power of the total event, or situation, spectators can engage in a crucial form of intersubjective politics beyond deterministic and propagandizing coercion found in a reception model.

The *predramatic* was a theatre existing before logical criticism and attempts to classify and identify existing practices for a formal purpose. The goals of Plato and Aristotle—and later the philosophers of the Renaissance interpreting the remains of Greek and Roman tracts—were to classify for the purpose of either defending or denouncing theatre as a public good. While these attempts may have been noble in intent, they were based on evaluating the effects of political messaging wrapped up in the dramatic structure and characterization. Little thought was given to the spectator’s active role within the event; rather, they were seen simply as passive vessels to receive the message presented to them. Lehmann argues that in the contemporary era, and through the formal aesthetics of the postdramatic, this has begun to change.

Theatre may still admit the division between actors and spectators as an option. However, this division is no longer strictly practiced; accordingly, new paradigms of spatialization may be taken up. Theatre is turning into interactive playings and doings [*gemeinsam gespieltes Spiel*], into electronically mediated communication, or into physically navigable installations; theatre challenges us to see and communicate differently. It may connect with visual media and the internet, documentation, and acts of protest. Frequently, it involves bringing to the level of consciousness—whether by “playing around” or direct investigation—the phenomenon of seeing itself in its manifold dimensions.<sup>27</sup>

The recent moves toward reincorporating the audience into the entirety of the event marks a symbolic return of the predramatic in the guise of the postdramatic. This is a form of theatre that can operate as communication without formal boundaries

dictated solely by text and internal dramaturgy, but instead requires a participating audience to complete the circuits of understanding.

Lehmann explains how the evolution of ancient Greek theatre slowly removed the inclusion of the spectator as participant. At first the diverse audience of tribes was fully part of the spectacle in its ritualistic format of dithyrambic choral odes. This participation was then replaced by a performing chorus standing in for the audience perspective.<sup>28</sup> When the first actors stepped away from the chorus, they created another remove in the form of individual voices. Lehmann stresses that the use of the chorus and the inclusion of “the seer,” such as Tiresias in *Oedipus* or Cassandra in *Agamemnon*, worked as mediators of the audience perspective.<sup>29</sup> Dramatic mediation, first through the chorus and then through isolated characterization, slowly overtook the direct ritual and civic functions of the participating audience. In each formal innovation within the theatrical frame of the fifth century BCE, political agency was siphoned away from the participating polis in favor of the controlling forces delivered through the author of the message. The playwright increasingly became the mouthpiece of the message, representing a shift toward hierarchical politics.

One could say that the predramatic was one of the first models of what we would today call social media. If true, how might we then define contemporary theatre as a form of media that works to engage the social? Theatre as social media is often defined through its political functions. These include social theatre as a “theatre with specific social agendas; theatre where aesthetics is not the ruling objective,”<sup>30</sup> and “theater that creates dialogue, invites audience interaction and intervention, empowers people to imagine and enact their solutions, and goes on to create even more dialogue,”<sup>31</sup> but also one that “does not seek *catharsis* but *metaxis* (pluralization). . . . In social theatre, the objective is to question society.”<sup>32</sup> In these examples, the recurring current of social theatre is the reengagement of the audience as discursive polis in the ancient Greek connotation. This is an audience invested in a public good, of which the action onstage is itself a part but also calls it into question. Social theatre is then a form that aims to address a lack of political efficacy and civic empathy, and that promotes a return to an audience engaged with the performance as coauthor rather than passive spectator. This coauthorship is dualistic in its ability to be a part of the event but also to coax the event out of the performance space and into the public sphere. In this context social theatre operates in a postdramatic manner, where the spectators are

require[d] . . . to become active co-writers of the (performance) text. The spectators are no longer just filling in the predictable gaps in a dramatic narrative but are asked to become active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning.<sup>33</sup>

Like the predramatic, today’s social theatre works to unify the spectator with the community at large by addressing the perceived ills of the community, however large or small. As Lehmann asserts, “More than anything, ancient tragedy makes characters elements in a process of question and answer.”<sup>34</sup> Social theatre today represents a return to a dynamic similar to one existing between the predramatic theatre and its polis, where the focus was on presenting ethical, moral, and political

questions to be answered through an agonistic, participatory process with the communal group of the audience. The theatrical event was more than mere performance: it operated as a discursive situation for the working through of community values.

If predramatic theatre on the Attic stage had a similar function as contemporary participatory social theatre, how did it interact and cooperate with its polis? According to David Wiles, “the unique qualities of Greek dramatic writing are bound up with the uniqueness of the Greek political experiment, which engaged the public as participants in rather than spectators of all public events.”<sup>35</sup> His argument points to an engagement with the polis that relied upon a social contract unique to the way Greek society behaved and operated. The polis was more than a collection of individual citizens. It was a highly diverse but cohesive social community in which each member had to rely on a common interest—safety in the face of foreign invaders—with the whole being more important than the individual, to achieve a democratic ideal. This was done through mutual understanding, amid great differences, born out of a necessity for survival. Understanding came about through rhetorical questioning and agonistic discourse. As a fragile yet working collective, an understanding of communal interests and values had to be cultivated using these tools. The process or architecture through which these values were deliberated and chosen developed alongside two distinct innovations in Attic society.

The formation of the rule of law and justice resting in the hands of the polis encouraged participation in discourse and decision making. Because no hegemonic power structure could unilaterally relegate law, forums for discourse were necessary. The law courts were one such place, but so too were the ethicopolitical rites embedded in the theatrical forum. In the courts, the use of rhetorical oratory allowed for the democratic body to receive and then actively discuss the possibilities of a value or situation. The polis, as democratic participant via discourse, could then prescribe which of the values were accepted as the norm. Likewise, Attic theatre festivals presented to the polis values via rhetorical and agonistic dialogue in tandem with mimetic action. The speeches delivered by characters were not true dialogue in the sense we have come to understand today. Instead, they were arguments in the same vein presented in the courts, with the chorus standing in as the polis’s surrogate. These were agonistic retorts intending to offer “fiercely opposed points of view”<sup>36</sup> on a social and civic problem that the polis must then decide. Jon Hesk states, “This city’s [Athens’s] democratic citizenry rarely watched a play which would not have unsettled their senses of social and political well-being.”<sup>37</sup> The works presented in the ancient festivals were intended to question the social, not simply represent realities. This was possible due to the unique sense of flux within the burgeoning democracy: nothing was yet fixed. Replicating the agonistic discursive style of the courts, the chorus operated as a surrogate for the audience. The agon–chorus relationship propagated a form of rhetorical dialogue in which the polis, as spectators, could investigate, contemplate, and apply values learned back into its communal existence. Effectively, the discourse on the stage became a way for the polis to communicate its evolving understanding of democracy. This was a theatre that reflected “the dynamics of social performance and the shaping of collective authority”<sup>38</sup> and “marks the emergence of a polis that recognizes



and confirms itself through the theatrical performance of communal practices.”<sup>39</sup> These practices questioned the polis, and in so doing required the polis to reconfigure its system of values.

The polis received moral and civic allegory through questions and arguments, which purposefully raised discourse surrounding value and ethics, questioning “the social, moral, political and ideological discourses of its audience.”<sup>40</sup> Political and social unsettling encouraged discourse at first through the choral interludes and then through the presentation of characters, narratives, and themes questioning Athenian ideals. The allegories presented on the Greek stage rarely offered solutions, but rather “took the form of open-ended social and ethical problems,”<sup>41</sup> which the polis would have to openly discuss and debate to help develop democratic systems of governance and community values. Conflict between assumed ideals and representational realities on the stage offered a form of aesthetic dissensus, opening up a gap between binaries of thought, allowing affective and effective political discourse to take place. In and through this gap the polis found equilibrium with which to enact democratic ideals that led to the first system of governance for and by the people.<sup>42</sup>

Amid the rising political strife and division of the early half of the fourth century, the political philosophers Plato and Aristotle would critique the purpose and efficacy of theatre, specifically its place alongside a governing structure. As community began to unravel, the ideological differences between the Athenian and Spartan peoples concerning how to govern became a central question within theatrical representation. As this occurred, theatre’s function as a medium of political discourse slowly began to shift into a medium for political messaging to beware. This directly led to Plato’s critique of all art, which Aristotle would then defend. The critique involved a conflicting ideology concerning how mimesis, as a reflection of society, influenced the polis as participant spectators. Mimesis was argued to serve as either a perverse or an enlightened reflection of the polis’s values. These values were placed onstage as “the very site of conflict,” which the polis understood as an embodied transformation of “the norms of social order”<sup>43</sup> explored via discourse in the assembly and courts.

### An Ancient Rupture (Re)surfaces

The waning potency of political agency in theatre has been theorized about plenty over the last century leading to a recent retreat from Aristotelean dramatic narrative, coinciding with the development of postdramatic form.<sup>44</sup> Form and structure are only a part of the problem; one must also examine the character and composition of the audience. Alongside the rise of dramatic realism and the technological influence of early film and television, most modern audiences developed behaviors that allow them to be thought of as passive watchers, having little active stake in their relationship with the theatrical medium. To better understand how this evolution occurred and to solidify an argument about the political value of postdramatic discourse as a corrective to political inefficacy, it is useful to briefly examine the primary political and philosophical forces that led to an entrenchment of the *dramatic* divorced from its participating audience.



Infamously, in Book Ten of Plato's *Republic*, poets and actors are exiled from the ideal system of governance for the very assumption that they present a corrupted version of reality that has the ability to affect democratic society negatively. Plato's contention was that this copying of reality could never attain the true impact of the ideal form. His account of mimesis demonstrated the inability of representation to portray reality accurately; instead, he warned of its potential to corrupt the spectator by staging a flawed representation of an impression. By modeling one's behavior on an adulterated reality, the spectator, whose power resided in the discursive interplay of the polis, could potentially degrade the values established during the formation of democracy in the previous century.

Research merging contemporary cognitive science and theatrical representation focuses on mimesis to tease apart the bioneurological effect of watching theatrical performance. Writing on the mirror neuron and its relationship to the act of spectating explains how this targeted component of the brain processes what we see and is "thought to be responsible for action understanding, intention, emotional attunement, communication, joint action, and imitation," each of which is "pivotal in theatre, since without them there is no fear, pity, conflict, dramatic irony, subtext, or even story."<sup>45</sup> Essentially, the mirror neuron may be integral to all conscious and unconscious processes related to corporeal and imagistic representation. Humans, and possibly other higher-order animals, replicate actions seen as biological processes hardwired deep within our cognitive function through emotion and sensory response. Through this research on cognition, Plato's wariness with mimesis has gained new energy. The postdramatic shift in contemporary theatre potentially can be explained by the exhaustion of mimesis's primacy as dictated by Aristotle. Lehmann explains, "During the Renaissance there was still a rivalry between a neo-Platonic notion of art oriented towards the 'poetic furor' and an Aristotelian notion of art oriented towards rationality and rules."<sup>46</sup> The Aristotelian notion surpassed the neo-Platonic, entrenching dramatic representation, that is, mimesis, as the preferred form of message delivery.

Aristotle modified Plato's position as a way of defending mimesis in art. To do this he had to alter its ontology. To Aristotle mimesis was not purely a copying of an existing reality but rather an act of artistic creation *interpreting* reality.<sup>47</sup> This caused an epistemological rupture between predramatic theatre and its novel reincarnation, drama—a rupture that inadvertently paved the way toward the waning potency of democratic agency within theatrical production. In Aristotle's defense, the purpose was to oppose Plato's denial of art as having a public good. Even so, with new *rules* established for *good* tragedy in place, the participating spectator was no longer truly necessary. Aristotle even went so far as to argue that performance itself was unnecessary for political effect. Although the framework of Aristotle's *Poetics* may have begun as a "pragmatic and descriptive text" critiquing preexisting theatre based on ritualistic representation, it would become a strict rulebook for the formation of dramatic literature.<sup>48</sup> As Lehmann states, its "observations were reinterpreted as normative rules, the rules as prescriptions, and the prescriptions as laws—description was turned into prescription."<sup>49</sup> Aristotle's observant classification of character—as the agent through which mimesis could surface inside a dramatic narrative—introduced an erosion between the symbiotic relationship of the spectator (polis) to the predramatic spectacle. The mutual affect

between the two slowly dissipated, encouraging a one-sided medium of information transfer. The disappearance allowed systems of governance less concerned with democratic equality to use the dramatic frame for politically coercive means by co-opting the voice of the author. With the removal of the participant spectator and therefore intrasubjective dialogue of a total event, drama became more advantageous as a one-sided megaphone for political coercion—a megaphone that could ultimately upend the concept of theatre as communal dialogue. Politically motivated narratives could evolve into intractable dicta without any form of interplay required for nuanced interpretation or discourse.

When drama modeled after the Aristotelian rules is used as a political tool it has the potential to take on the properties of propaganda. Aristotle's controversial addition of the term "catharsis" as a necessary outcome of tragedy removes the discursive element of theatre from the polis, effectively creating the binary of spectator and spectacle we have been left to question today. Once catharsis entered into the conversation, the need for discourse disappeared.<sup>50</sup> Lehmann explains "[t]hat tragedy, according to Aristotle, due to its logical-dramatic structure could even do entirely without a real staging, that it would not even need the theatre to develop its full effect."<sup>51</sup> As a precursor of the postdramatic, Augusto Boal spent much of his career attempting to correct this imbalance.<sup>52</sup> Discussing the Aristotelian "coercive" system of tragedy, Boal declares it only "functions to diminish, placate, satisfy, eliminate all that can break the balance" or equilibrium needed for discourse and political action.<sup>53</sup> Without the discursive potential of theatre, removed when the spectator-spectacle binary became the status quo, political efficacy has waned in contemporary drama, propelling many in the twentieth century to search for new models inside the theatrical, which marked the emergence of the first phase of the (re)imagined polis. In an effort to "reactivate the stage-audience exchange,"<sup>54</sup> Bertolt Brecht and then Antonin Artaud introduced the two primary theoretical models that prompted an eventual shift toward renewed focus on the spectator in the middle of the twentieth century. These models have served as the primary influences for most subsequent attempts to activate social agency through theatre by creating novel architectures that address what Jacques Rancière<sup>55</sup> calls the "paradox of the spectator."<sup>56</sup> The rise of these two models also opened the door toward Lehmann's postdramatic, where the breakdown between a unidirectional political messaging system allowed a return to a dialogical flow in which the audience in various ways becomes an active participant in the ethicopolitical process. This marks a symbolic return to the predramatic.

Before becoming a tragic taxonomy via interpretations of Aristotle's classification system, the public sphere of the Attic stage could serve as a "collective and compulsory ritual that was a self-representation of communities and an enforcement of shared and common values."<sup>57</sup> Likewise, at its best, today's social theatre approaches the spectator as part of a diverse though unified community. At its worst, the audience is a homogenized political body. Instead of approaching the audience as a single-minded whole, communal identification through *dissensual* discourse offers a useful way of promoting affective agency in our polarized times. Rancière explains how *dissensus* is a politics through which two opposing forces acknowledge differences so as to agree upon a communal identity and equality based in difference.<sup>58</sup> Dissensus is the opposite of consensus which inevitably

disregards the multiplicity of values that exist in a community by reducing and eliminating nonconforming voices. Instead, it requires the ability to take in the entirety of a population as members in an assemblage of equality. The dissensual polis is one where there exists no stratification or separation, even with acknowledged differences between members. It is not a utopian congregation where all agree on one beneficial ideology. Such an ideology would suggest a hierarchy akin to a cult of religion. Instead, it is a communion without an end point, with no goal other than displacing all other ideologies as final truth. Through acknowledging and celebrating difference, individual members of the audience gain the tools for the dialogic required to become a (re)imagined polis. Acknowledgment of this difference leads to a radical politics that disavows the logic of hierarchical structures. This mode replicates the ethical politics of participation embedded in mediatization and the dramaturgical nonstructures of the postdramatic.

Dissensus is useful because developing a large-scale communal identification runs counter to the neoliberal ideals existing in contemporary culture and promoted through our current mediated social channels. For unification to occur, a series of acknowledged differing values that are not antagonistic toward each other must exist that link the individual to the collective. The will of the collective can have more resonance than that of the individual, and if the individual can recognize their place in the diverse collective, the spectacle may transmit agency through the individual into the community at large. This agency becomes reciprocal and perpetual, inciting social and political change through its discursive logics. By engaging in this discourse with no predetermined goal, the performance situation can transmit what Chantal Mouffe describes as an “agonistic” logic through which a (re)imagined polis can address values and value.<sup>59</sup>

### Reassembling Spectatorial Agency: Dissensual Participation and Postdramatic Discourse

For Rancière, the mere act of watching is an active occurrence that is part of our daily existence and therefore inherently nonpassive. His argument is intended to address some of the misconceptions that come with activating the audience via Brechtian and Artaudian means. He states: “Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed.”<sup>60</sup> Though Rancière’s argument has been interrogated exhaustively over the past fifteen years, it is useful to use the above quote as a starting point when considering the political potential of contemporary participation as a mode of spectatorship that returns political agency to the audience and efficacy to the theatrical event. Rancière argues that the participating spectator is not someone that theatre makers need to create for political action to ensue. The participatory condition is already engrained in the fabric of contemporary sociality, and, as such, performance practices merely need to harness its potential.<sup>61</sup> A shift in theatrical form from the dramatic (unidirectional) to the postdramatic (dialogic) is simply needed to do this. The participating spectator has a unique capacity to engage with ethical and communal concerns to create a form of exchange with social and political capacity when their agency in the

theatrical event is acknowledged and encouraged. This ethicocommunal exchange is not one of transfer between two bodies but rather an action that makes “visible the broken thread between personal experience and perception” found at the center of any performance’s network of agency.<sup>62</sup> To participate is to become a political body and to challenge the formation and concretization of a hierarchical politics of power.

Though participation is at the core of many theatrical events, its material engagement has diminished over time due to the influences stated above. In the twentieth century, multiple theatre makers attempted to harness the capacity of participation to activate their audiences beyond the stupor induced by the cathartic model ultimately criticized by both Lehmann and Boal. Both of their arguments work as extensions of the foundations set by Brecht and Artaud. These artists-theorists built off the predecessors of the historical avant-garde, but their experiments with form created novel architectures for political activation. Unfortunately, their models still relied on a form of dictatorship induced by the primacy of the author via their dramaturgy and therefore were neither quite postdramatic nor truly participatory. Rancière argues that in each of their models the presupposition is that looking, the position primarily associated with the spectator, is passive; it is the opposite of acting and therefore needs to be reversed into something active. He asks us to instead consider the ontology of looking as an *active* function and then continues the argument by reducing Brecht’s and Artaud’s interventions to that of the spectator–spectacle binary. For the Brechtian model, Rancière argues, “He [the spectator] must be confronted with the spectacle of something strange, which stands as an enigma and demands that he investigate the reason for its strangeness. He must be pressed to abandon the role of passive viewer and to take on that of the scientist who observes phenomena and seeks their cause.”<sup>63</sup> Lehmann elucidates Brecht’s position as an attempt to “put the emphasis on theatre turning into an instrument, as it were, through which the ‘author’ (director) addresses ‘his’/‘her’ discourse directly to the audience.”<sup>64</sup> This discourse is unlike one based in equality. Instead, it refers to a discourse delivered with no expectation of active reciprocation. The audience in Brecht’s epic theatre is still subservient to the dictatorial address of the dramatic author. Addressing the lack of activation beyond theory or intellectual musing, Boal also argues that Brecht’s materialist orthodoxy “is not only that of interpreting the world but also of transforming it” and “has the obligation of showing how the world can be transformed.”<sup>65</sup> Showing diminishes the spectator’s agency to make up their own mind and determine their own methods for change. It also discounts their equal relationship as participant with(in) the theatrical spectacle. This is exactly what Boal’s experiments with political participation wanted to revise.

Rancière also finds faults in Artaud’s approach. Seeing a lack of political urgency and insisting on a break from the passivity of thought, Artaud introduced a contrasting approach to activating the audience, one that directly addressed the issue of author as dictator. According to Lehmann, Artaud’s critique illustrates how the actor “is only an agent of the director who, in turn, only ‘repeats’ the word prescribed to him by the author. . . . This theatre of a logic of the double is precisely what Artaud wanted to exclude.”<sup>66</sup> Rancière addresses the Artaudian model as a polar opposite to Brecht’s, thereby setting up a new binary: “The spectator must

eschew the role of the mere observer who remains still and untouched in front of a distant spectacle. He must be torn from his delusive mastery, drawn into the magical power of theatrical action, where he will exchange the privilege of playing the rational viewer for the experience of possessing theater's true vital energies."<sup>67</sup> Rancière critiques both models, asserting that they both lead to the same destination. Each method sets up an opposite yet equal hierarchy. His critique of these models comes from the power dynamics he sees portrayed between the spectacle and the spectator. He compares this binary to another set of equivalent oppositional binaries, including "collective and individual, image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-possession and alienation."<sup>68</sup> Each of these oppositions is attributed to a theatre that becomes a "self-suppressing mediation."<sup>69</sup> Rancière insists that inverting the power dynamics between the spectator and the spectacle by way of Brechtian or Artaudian paradigms leaves theatre in the same state in which it began: a medium for unidirectional transfer. He does not, however, offer a corrective.

Lehmann also calls attention to the problem with the Brechtian model on the grounds that it "becomes the basic structure of drama and replaces the conversational dialogue. It is no longer the stage but the theatre as a whole which functions as the 'speaking space.'"<sup>70</sup> In work that returns to the issue he critiques in the theatrical models, Rancière offers help by calling for dissensus, encouraging us to peer into the gap found in political messaging. Rancière explains how dissensus works as a form of emancipatory politics in this manner:

The essence of politics resides in the modes of dissensual subjectivation that reveal a society in its difference to itself. The essence of consensus, by contrast, does not consist in peaceful discussion and reasonable agreement, as opposed to conflict or violence. Its essence lies in the annulment of dissensus as separation of the sensible from itself, in the nullification of surplus subjects, in the reduction of the people to the sum of the parts of the social body and of the political community to the relations between the interests and aspirations of these different parts.<sup>71</sup>

It is through dissensus that spectatorial participation becomes a fruitful way forward in an era of polarization and constrained political relations. It is a process that allows the theatre event to return to a forum for public good and political efficacy that includes its audience in the fullest sense instead of simply instructing or preaching to a so-called passive crowd. They are not just activated; they are accepted as part of the whole. The following analysis of *How Much Is Enough? Our Values in Question* shows how a form of postdramatic discourse through audience participation utilizing dissensus and agonistic rhetoric offers a possibility to reimagine the political capacity of a contemporary audience as (re)imagined polis. The production is an example of how interpersonal dialogue through difference, created between open-ended questioning and material participation in performance situations, can illuminate the way audiences determine systems of values.

## A Question of Value

The participatory event was first produced in the tumultuous fall of 2011, first at American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) in Cambridge, Massachusetts and then

moved to St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn for a limited run, where I attended the production on two consecutive nights. This was a crucial time for revolutionary politics across the world, as the global recession that brought about the fall of the United States' financial system coincided with the rise of democratic modalities of protest and social activism prompted by new tools of digital communication and social media. Echoing the social communication model found in these digital domains, the production operated as an aesthetically framed town hall where the participant-spectators would enact the public sphere through their aesthetic participation. They were invited to sit at interspersed card tables in a community canteen setting to create connection and dialogue with each other prompted by the interactive performers. The participatory aspects of the production included the combination of rhetorical questioning and actual questioning that led to discussion between the participants at each table and between the "characters" and the participants. There were also multiple instances where participants volunteered to get up from their seats to engage in one-on-one events with the "characters." These direct modes of one-on-one participation included a dance, a hug, a mock interview, and other interactive moments of connectivity. Each different experience was intended to welcome the audience into the communal setting as members of a collective, though at times it seemed awkward for participants who were accustomed to watching at a "distance," where passivity equates with safety. The introduction of audience participation could, however, shake them out of their comfort zone and prep them for social action outside the confines of the artistic event.

At St. Ann's, the cast was comprised of three malleable character types portrayed by a woman and two men, each of different ages and ethnic backgrounds, offering an entry point into a community based in difference. Carlos was a late twenty-something white-presenting male with a young girlfriend who, he had just found out, was pregnant. He was worried about how he was going to pay to raise a child when he was not too far removed from childhood himself. Agnes was an Asian woman with a comforting demeanor in her sixties with grandchildren, wondering what would be left for them in the future. The last was a middle-aged African American man whose booming voice took on a gentle authority, and his ambivalence to place himself in any socioeconomic position was mirrored by his playful game of announcing multiple versions of his name before settling on Frank. He was the potential every person, an identity in flux. Remember, the script does not delineate characters; it simply offers a set of questions and stories geared toward audience engagement. It is up to the individual production to decide how the composition of the cast should speak and connect to its target audience, allowing for flexibility and true diversity. In this manner, the actors onstage serve as reflections of the audience and, like the ancient chorus, present problems for the audience to consider and possibly discuss as the agonistic characters themselves.

The audience was thus presented a collection of mediators whose messaging was not based on authorial dominance, and whose social, ethnic, racial, economic, and cultural diversity was offered as a mirror to the varied rest of us in the room. They asked the participants to stop and reevaluate both *value* and *values* by listening to, and hopefully comprehending, the multitude of varying other viewpoints and backgrounds in the room. Accompanying the trio was a character named the Googler, whose purpose was to search the Internet, finding facts and images based on what

was introduced by the cast and the participants as a visual reification of our sub-conscious thought processes. For example, when Carlos talked to one participant about his impending fatherhood, the Googler searched for and then projected data across multiple screens showing the average cost of having a baby delivered in the United States, with and without insurance. The Googler acted as a direct conduit to the digital sphere where our participatory condition was born. This crucial part of the performance was also not part of the script, giving credence to the postdramatic aesthetics of theatrical production beyond dramatic text.

Complex direct questions were asked to engage the participants, who were folded into the postdrama to converse with the actors and to reevaluate the ways in which they approach the world. The script has them ask a question like:

How much do you think the average glass of fresh squeezed orange juice costs these days?<sup>72</sup>

The question might sound simple, but not when follow-up questions force them to encounter those beyond their immediate social sphere who go unnoticed:

Do you think being a grove worker could ever be a dream job for you? // Why or why not? ...

Paint a picture of the average grove worker for me using your best judgment about the world by answering four quick questions:

- 1) How old do you think the average grove worker is?...
- 2) Do you think most grove workers are men or women?...
- 3) Do you think their hands start to smell like oranges during the harvest season?...
- 4) What do you think is the average annual salary of a grove worker? // Why?...

Good. Now, if grove workers got the same salaries and benefits as you do at your dream job, how much do you think the average glass of fresh squeezed orange juice would cost then?<sup>73</sup>

The participant's response introduces an ethical dilemma of value versus human cost. The last question returns the participant to their own personal sphere, which has potentially been changed:

What's the most you personally would pay for a glass of fresh squeezed orange juice today?<sup>74</sup>

That glass of orange juice becomes drastically more expensive if participant-spectators must first consider paying the agricultural worker an amount that they themselves deem a sufficient wage to live on comfortably. Prior to being asked about the juice, participants were asked what their hypothetical dream jobs would be. They had to explain to each other both the job and how much they



would expect to get paid to live comfortably doing that job. Juxtaposed against the juice question, they were pressed with a binary of their wants and needs versus the wants and needs of the grove worker as an economic and politicized Other.

This discourse is dilemma-inducing for participants, setting up a real-life agon. Can they comprehend the necessities of sociopolitical equity when it means possibly causing their own hardship in the name of lessening an Other's hardships? Through this process of participant deliberation, the production exemplifies the postdramatic and specifically the ethicopolitical exchange that often is attached to this form. As Lehmann explains, "In a similar way the spectator of postdramatic theatre is not prompted to process the perceived instantaneously but to postpone the production of meaning (semiosis) and to store the sensory impressions with 'evenly hovering attention.'"<sup>75</sup> This break from a prescribed dramatic narrative where one might be coerced to feel—for the characters and their plight within their fictive universe—but have no real skin in the game, induces participants to become part of the fiction and thus communal members of a democratic polis that extends beyond the theatre. This operates as an interruption of the real, which Lehmann encourages. By bringing the realities of the participants' daily encounters into the dialogue, it offers a moment in which "it becomes possible to *re-invest* the sphere of the real into the aesthetic domain which systematically is defined precisely by the exclusion of the real. Ethico-political responsibility re-enters into the aesthetic experience."<sup>76</sup>

The production offered an example of theatre as social media that intends to prompt potentials for change within the audience, and subsequently the entire public sphere, versus simply emulating the politics of propaganda found in other political performance. Christopher Balme states, "Theatre's role in the public sphere is threefold: as an interlocutor via its plays and productions; as an institution where it may be the subject of debate; and as a communicator where it harnesses various media channels to broadcast itself and its messages."<sup>77</sup> The participatory theatrical framework utilized in the production of *How Much Is Enough?* operates on each of these levels in the way it offers a dialogic set of interactions between the narrative and its participant-spectators. The frame itself acts as an agent of discourse and debate inside and outside any performance, meeting both the first and second requirements. By utilizing the Googler, the production in particular also harnessed both digital and analog (through acts of remembrance and nostalgia) modes of messaging and media, meeting Balme's third criterion. The way that the production included the audience in its crafting of narrative, however, is what allowed it to have potential efficacy. The questions prompted dialogue that offered a potential for actively altering the participants' perception regarding what is valued in human civic life and in what society at large finds value. The audience had to determine this themselves: they were not instructed what to think, only prompted to take the time and discuss what is possible. The production engaged the audience members not only as spectators, but also as a (re)imagined polis, and more importantly as members of a discursive exploratory civics/ethics committee. The series of question-and-answer sessions were interspersed with team-building events that were either encouraged through communication or limited by an insistence to make snap judgments about fellow participant-spectators. In these judgments the potential of dissensus emerged by allowing the audience to see that they were

both different and also not *so* different from their peers. Just like the polis in the ancient festivals, they may have had different opinions, and their politics might differ based on their tribe, but ultimately, they were seeking the same things: community, equity, understanding, safety, and respect.

Returning to Boal, there is often little lasting impact in the singular theatrical event intent on dramatic catharsis instead of intratextual dialogue with a participant audience. A structure that delivers a contained authoritative message without dialogue with its audience has little potential for sparking social change. Lynn argues, "Plays are a little passive-aggressive. They want the audience's undivided attention, but they frequently downplay the audience's presence and abilities, if not ignoring them altogether."<sup>78</sup> Simply, the cathartic process experienced in traditional dramatic structure is too individualized. *How Much Is Enough?* attempts the opposite of catharsis by subverting the spectacle-spectator dynamic that lulls one into political passivity. Like the ancient polis, the audience sees the semblance of themselves and the already understood conflicts of social life in the answers given by fellow spectator-participants. They are not told a story, fable, or lesson but rather are encouraged to write their own. The participant's answers help coauthor a narrative with the actors' prewritten lines inside the postdramatic frame. What is seen through participation is not exactly mimetic, but it does engage with one's past experience or action that is assumed to have some form of embedded universal truth. Through this supposed universality of experience, the questions stimulate unconscious emotional responses, like the empathetic effect of catharsis, but are subverted by requiring the participant to act upon it in the moment and beyond. These responses manifest physically as restored behaviors of already existing actions. The questions are not so esoteric or novel as to instill completely new thought; rather, they recall what was already in the spectator's subconscious, asking for an evaluation and ongoing action.

In production, the participants were given a laundry list of attitudes and multiple viewpoints, induced by their peers' answers to the questions, and were invariably influenced by each other's subjective opinions. A process was evoked that intended to encourage the participants to engage in dialogue not only in the performance situation but also beyond the event. There was no lesson to deliver or learn but rather an ongoing process of serve and return, question and answer, allowing deliberation in a manner intended to allow a dissensual evaluation and recognition of diverse values. Returning to Rancière, the understanding is that, even if the artist "does not know what she wants the spectator to do, she at least knows one thing: she knows that she must *do one thing*—overcome the gulf separating activity from passivity."<sup>79</sup> The performance introduced a new framework for encouraging emancipation from the passivity of simply receiving a message by engaging the audience as participants through postdramatic discourse.

The potential of *How Much Is Enough?* stems directly from the fact that the participants are not told explicitly what or how to think. This runs counter to much political dramatic theatre. It also echoes Rancière's pedagogical approach, laid out in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*<sup>80</sup> and reexamined in *The Emancipated Spectator*, where the place for knowledge lies in the space between the student and the master, and is not about a transfer from one to the other but instead is found in the interaction between the two. It is the place of reciprocal exchange

where spectator-participants in *How Much Is Enough?* are shown that there are multiple differing perspectives from which to gain knowledge, and that these perspectives are accessible only by understanding relationality and the sameness of difference. Dialogue is allowed in the rupture opened up between the participants and the dramaturgy, and within this rupture a multitude of ways forward emerge through dissensual discourse. Agreement or consensus is not necessary in finding a way forward—unlike in much political theatre of the twentieth century. Instead, by listening to the diversity of opinions and accepting a multitude of possible differing answers and attitudes, the potential for multiple possibilities is allowed to emerge. This multiplicity breaks down the hierarchies of one-sided political messaging and enables a form of progress that is dynamic, always in flux.

The intratextual dialogue created tangible agency for the participants either internally, as in the case of asking oneself “What is important?” or externally, through conversation with the other, asking “What do you think is important?” The new dialogic partnership included not only people in the room, but also the entire social world as a larger semblance of community. Participants could internalize the information presented and formulate their own expectations, which were then brought back out into the external and larger polis of their everyday communities.

Spectators asked to make change in the “Real”<sup>81</sup> through active participation within and beyond *How Much Is Enough?* gain agency in a way that postdramatic form intends: by “‘treading the borderline’, by permanently switching, not between form and content, but between ‘real’ contiguity (connection with reality) and ‘staged’ construct.”<sup>82</sup> Following the expectations of social theatre, developing dissensual and participatory dialogue in difference is a model that offers a rich and advantageous way to work through issues of diverse ideologies. In a time of deep political division, it offers a mode of communication beyond the antagonism deeply embedded in the dramatic model. It affords a form of pluralistic agonism following the radical politics of Mouffe, where the Other is seen not as an enemy per se but simply as a person with a differing viewpoint. One need not destroy the Other; just understand that every problem has multiple valid solutions.

Going one step further beyond Boalian techniques, this model harnesses the participatory condition to act as an effective preparation for the “rehearsal for the revolution.”<sup>83</sup> The revolution in this case is one where all prescribed social constructions are put into question in order to develop new ways of thinking together. The actors tell the participants that it is up to them to determine what is valid and applicable to their personal and subjective situation. The author and director of the production do not attempt to teach, persuade, or force a lesson on the spectators, but rather introduce a virtual guide to dialogue through the whole of the event. Part of this guidance is in the direct participation via audience contributions. Questioning assumptions elicits more power and potential action than confronting the audience with dicta.

At one point in a performance I attended, the participants were asked to write down their own sets of questions on small slips of paper to pass along to future participant audience members. Likewise, the audience also received slips from the previous nights’ performances to consider. These slips offered further questions, such as:

"What if no one owned land of any kind, if it were part of a commons?"

"What if citizenship weren't organized by country?"

"What if there were public squares in every neighborhood?"

"What if our government were a participatory, not a representative, government?"<sup>84</sup>

This engagement with the postdramatic is what allows the material to have ethico-political efficacy.

### Dialogue as Commodity

So far, I have lauded the production as a possible return to a model where the audience operates as a democratic polis with real agency; however, as an aesthetic and commercial event there are elements to criticize. As a question regarding the value of political theatre, participants were given the choice of how much we were willing to pay to see each performance at St. Ann's. I paid the minimum both times I attended the event. I could have afforded to pay more, but I was not willing to, given the option. What does this say about my assumed value in the production? What does it say about how I value theatre or, considering that I attended twice, how I valued interpersonal communication with strangers? What does it say about my individual values, or what I value for that matter? Each of these questions points to a current fault in the aesthetic medium. Increasingly theatre, both commercial and noncommercial, has become a commodity defined by more than just its creative and social capacity, and therefore the "power of performance may be sucked dry by the peripherals of theatre."<sup>85</sup> The perceived quality is increasingly connected to its glossy veneer and the experience one receives through the available merch, the location where it is performed, and its cultural cachet. These add-ons are simply an extension of the amenities considered crucial to the transformation of theatre as public good "into a service industry with subsidiary retail outlets."<sup>86</sup> Commercial tie-ins and the *amenitification* of the spectacle's environment—like the magical transformation of the lobby into Voldemort's domain between acts of *The Cursed Child*—live at the edge of the spectacle, and have become part of its meaning making. It can be argued that the contemporary spectator rarely goes to the theatre for emancipation, affirmation, or ethical fulfillment through art, but rather attends a consumer event surrounding the formation of an aesthetic project. This is even truer as we become more embedded in mediatized social life.

In the case of *How Much Is Enough?* the spectator was engaged in an expectation, assigning value based not only on the quality of the performance but also the space, the seats, the lobby, the program, the neighborhood in which the event took place, and so on. This was possibly the most misguided issue with the production, one that negated much of its potential. Setting up the quandary of value from the very beginning caused the participants' expectations to rise beyond what should be normative. Interrupting the dialogue concerning *values* before it could even begin, by introducing questions of economic *value*, the content of the production was superseded and overshadowed. The intention was noble: hoping to call to attention the value of art. I believe this backfired, however, by inadvertently promising that the production required a specific value beyond its offering of community and

public discourse. This is one way that this performance, and many others with political aspirations, differed from the model offered via the Greek polis, and even those of Boal. The participants entered the room already on the defensive, registering that the performance had become a commodity and not necessarily a model for a public good.

Without an entrance fee, a theatrical event becomes an ethical aesthetic journey and can return to being a civic ritual, like that of the polis in relation to the theatrical event. If Lynn and Joseph truly felt compelled to continue the dialogue, they might have considered introducing the value and commodity question into its ticket pricing differently. St. Ann's and the Foundry could have offered the show gratis and later asked the audience to pay something after they had determined the production's value through the discourse presented. This is a fundamental difference between social theatre in the Boalian sense and a subversion of social theatre offered within a commoditized system. One may argue that there are costs that need to be covered, and nothing is free in this world after all. Theatre was not free in the classical Greek system either: a social contract existed in which there was strong patronage by those with higher political and monetary capital. The polis included these patrons, who attended and participated as a civic and religious duty.

Interestingly, however, another act of participation concerning value was embedded in the production. At a point in the performance each group was directed to open a can sitting on their table and was told it contained money left by the previous participants. The members of the table could split the money and keep it, or add more to "pay it forward" to the next group. Here the participants were directly asked to place value on the connection to a future semblance of themselves. Though the aforementioned ticketing ploy might not have been ideal, this form of participation was memorable and effective. Both times I attended our table chose not to take but instead to add to the collection.<sup>87</sup> Returning to (and extending) Lehmann's quote that started my own questioning of theatrical efficacy and the value of social theatre, "It is a fundamental fact of today's Western societies that all human experiences (life, eroticism, happiness, recognition) are tied to *commodities* or more precisely their consumption and possession (and not to a discourse). . . . The totality of the spectacle is the 'theatricalization' of all areas of social life."<sup>88</sup> The quote's continuation is added here so that we ask: If all life has become "theatricalized" through commodification, and thus all citizens primarily exist as consumers, can theatre have the agency to promote social change and discourse in a truly effective manner?

## Conclusion

The model presented in *How Much Is Enough?* displays potential promise toward creating a reinvigorated theatrical public sphere using the aesthetics of the postdramatic and the political capacity of material participation. In this way it (re)imagines a polis with critical agency. Lynn defends the basis of the production by explaining the "spiritual dilemma we were wrestling with, which is in the text, is: Is the world the way it is because most of us don't live by our true values and need to reassess the way we live and the choices we make? Or is the world the way it is because most of us *do* live by our true values and need to reassess the values themselves in order to make better choices?"<sup>89</sup> The model the text and its dialogic production offers is

not perfect and can use amendments to operate most effectively and affectively, specifically within a commercial theatre paradigm. However, it presents an artistic step toward true democratic discourse beyond notions of individual freedoms and liberties. Rancière states, “if left to themselves, democracy and individualism would go in opposite directions.”<sup>90</sup> This is already happening at an alarming rate. Our media channels are divisive and attempt only to confirm our already fragile biases, inflaming polarization and a lack of community and cooperation that ties societies together. This could possibly be rectified through dissensual discourse that, as Alan Read explains, “allows for making visible something that was at odds with its milieu.”<sup>91</sup> Dissensual agreement built out of agonistic discourse allows individuals their freedom of choice and individuality while understanding their singular and collective role as democratic members of a community based on an understood equality in difference. Rancière says it best when referring to an “essence of equality [that] is in fact not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division.”<sup>92</sup> In the closing lines of the production *Carlos*, our soon to be parent, delivered these lines—among the few not presented as a question:

In 200 years we'll all be dead—everyone, not just my one friend, everyone I know, everyone I've ever seen, everyone alive right now on every continent all over the world. Even my little girl will be dead in 200 years. But we make the world together every day. I believe that what we valued will still be a part of the way the world is a thousand years from now—what we worked for, what we said, and how we listened to one another.<sup>93</sup>

Our task as humans, as members of society, of a proposed community, is not to just fight for equality and equity but rather to rise up and force an acknowledgment of the already existing equality in difference—reversing the current dominating consciousness of inequality through difference. We must learn to listen and to understand even when we might not agree. When this equality is finally understood, theatre may once again speak with resonance to a truly (re)imagined polis.

## Notes

1 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 183.

2 Hans-Thies Lehmann, “A Future of Tragedy? Remarks on the Political and the Postdramatic,” in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance*, ed. Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll, and Steve Giles (London: Methuen Drama, 2013), 87–109, at 107.

3 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Routledge, 2016), 208. To best understand this trajectory, one must connect Lehmann's multiple writings on the evolution of theatrical form cited in this essay as a whole.

4 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 42–4.

5 *Ibid.*, 151.

6 See Jürs-Munby, Carroll, and Giles, eds., *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*.

7 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 22–3 and 183–6.

8 *Ibid.*, 180–6.

9 Kirk Lynn, “Questions and Prayers: An Author's Preface to *How Much Is Enough?*” *Theater* 42.3 (2012): 43–7, at 47.

10 *Ibid.*



- 11 *How Much Is Enough? Our Values in Question*, written by Kirk Lynn and Melanie Joseph, produced by the Foundry Theatre, performed at St. Ann's Warehouse, 12 November 2011.
- 12 Kirk Lynn and Melanie Joseph, *How Much Is Enough? Our Values in Question*, *Theater* 42.3 (2012): 48–63, at 51.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 15 During my second night of participating in the production I recorded the audio for research purposes. There is some considerable difference between the printed text and the actual lines delivered by the actors that seems to be based on the nightly flow with the participants in the audience. This confirms another aspect of the postdramatic nature of the work.
- 16 Lynn, "Questions and Prayers," 47.
- 17 Christoph Cox, Molly Whalen, and Alain Badiou, "On Evil: An Interview with Alain Badiou," *Cabinet*, no. 5 (2001–2), <URL>[www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/5/alainbadiou.php](http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/5/alainbadiou.php)<EN>, accessed 18 May 2022.
- 18 *Deep mediatization* refers to the process where our understanding of reality becomes so entangled with processes of media that it becomes impossible to think of reality divorced from media. See Andres Hepp, *Deep Mediatization* (London: Routledge, 2020).
- 19 For a reading of Lehmann's "caesura of the media society" put into conversation with theories of political economics and capitalism, see Nicholas Ridout, "Media: Intermission" in *Postdramatic Theatre and Form*, ed. Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish, and Brandon Woolf (London: Methuen Drama, 2019), 96–112, at 99–100.
- 20 Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), 59.
- 21 Peter Burian, "Athenian Tragedy as Democratic Discourse," in *Why Athens: A Reappraisal of Tragic Politics*, ed. D. M. Carter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 95–117, at 98.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 23 Baz Kershaw, "Oh for Unruly Audiences! Or, Patterns of Participation in Twentieth-Century Theatre," *Modern Drama* 44.2 (2001): 133–54, at 138.
- 24 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 21.
- 25 Karen Jürs-Munby, in the Introduction to Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 1–15, at 3.
- 26 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 26.
- 27 Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 153.
- 28 For a further explanation of the evolution from dithyrambs to tragedies with choral components serving as participatory elements of Greek civic society see Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13–15, 51–60.
- 29 Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 144–56, at 155.
- 30 James Thompson and Richard Schechner, "Why 'Social Theatre'?" *TDR: The Drama Review* 48.3 (2004): 11–16, at 12.
- 31 Doug Patterson in Tony Kushner et al., "How Do You Make Social Change?" *Theater* 31.3 (2001): 62–93, at 67.
- 32 Guglielmo Schininà, "Here We Are: Social Theatre and Some Open Questions about Its Developments," *TDR: The Drama Review* 48.3 (2004): 17–31, at 24.
- 33 Jürs-Munby, "Introduction," 6.
- 34 Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 194.
- 35 David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.
- 36 Steph Harrop, "Greek Tragedy, Agonistic Space, and Contemporary Performance," *New Theatre Quarterly* 34.2 (2018): 99–114, at 102.
- 37 Jon Hesk, "The Socio-Political Dimension of Ancient Tragedy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, ed. Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 72–91, at 72.
- 38 Kevin Hawthorne, "The Chorus as Rhetorical Audience: A Sophoklean Agôn Pattern," *American Journal of Philology* 130.1 (2009): 25–46, at 28.
- 39 Paul A. Kottman, "Memory, 'Mimesis,' Tragedy: The Scene before Philosophy," *Theatre Journal* 55.1 (2003): 81–97, at 90.
- 40 Hesk, "Socio-Political Dimension," 75.



41 Ibid.

42 It is important to acknowledge that the voting members of the polis did not include women, resident aliens, or slaves, though there was a pluralistic form of thought where the input of these members of the demos impacted the actions of the “citizenry.”

43 Hawthorne, “Chorus as Rhetorical Audience,” 28.

44 See Boyle, Cornish, and Woolf, eds., *Postdramatic Theatre and Form*.

45 Amy Cook, “Interplay: The Method and Potential of a Cognitive Scientific Approach to Theatre,” *Theatre Journal* 59.4 (2008): 579–94, at 590.

46 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 160.

47 Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present*, expanded ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 17.

48 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 160.

49 Ibid.

50 The entire discussion about catharsis in theatrical history has been tumultuous because the word appears only once in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. This discussion could continue for pages here, specifically juxtaposing the idea in conjunction with Aristotle’s *Politics*. I refer you to the notes in Gerald Else’s translation of the *Poetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), at 97–9, for a brief commentary—or to Augusto Boal’s various works of political theatre.

51 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 41.

52 See Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. McBride and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 25–50.

53 Ibid., 47.

54 Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2d ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 21.

55 In the following quotes I have chosen to alternate between two versions of Rancière’s argument: the short plenary speech “The Emancipated Spectator,” presented in English in 2007, and his full-length book *The Emancipated Spectator*, first published in English in 2009. This choice is based on the wording (translated or not) and framing of the specific quotes within their respective sources.

56 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 2.

57 Schininà, “Here We Are,” 18.

58 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010).

59 *Agonistic* logics are those that are in opposition to each other while still being open to the possibility of seeing the truth in the other side. These logics align in some capacity with Rancière’s dissensus. See Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” *Social Research* 66.3 (1999): 745–58, at 754, and her *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2005) for a more detailed explanation.

60 Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator*, 17.

61 See Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth Learning* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Andy Lavender, *Performance in the 21st Century: Theatres of Engagement* (London: Routledge, 2016); and William W. Lewis, *Experiential Spectatorship: Immersion, Participation, and Play in Times of Deep Mediatization* (New York: Routledge, 2025).

62 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 186.

63 Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” *Artforum* 45.7 (2007): 270–81, at 272.

64 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 31.

65 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 103.

66 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 32.

67 Rancière, “Emancipated Spectator,” 272.

68 Ibid., 274.

69 Ibid.

70 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 31.

71 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 42.

72 Lynn and Joseph, *How Much Is Enough*, 57.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

- 75 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 87.
- 76 Lehmann, "A Future of Tragedy?" 100. Italics in original.
- 77 Christopher B. Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), x.
- 78 Lynn, "Questions and Prayers," 44.
- 79 Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator*, 12.
- 80 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
- 81 See William W. Lewis, "The Media Affects of Political Performance: Unmasking the *Real* and the *Now*," *GPS: Global Performance Studies* 2.2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.33303/gpsv2n2a6>, for a detailed analysis of how political agency emerges for spectators engaged with media and actual events.
- 82 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 103.
- 83 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 122.
- 84 Questions presented to my table during the 12 November 2011 performance.
- 85 Kershaw, "Oh for Unruly Audiences!" 144.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 I wonder how effective this would be today when it is increasingly rare to have available funds in a non-digital form.
- 88 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 183.
- 89 Lynn, "Questions and Prayers," 46. Italics in original.
- 90 Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), 39.
- 91 Alan Read, *Theatre in the Expanded Field: Seven Approaches to Performance* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), 158.
- 92 Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, 32–3.
- 93 Lynn and Joseph, *How Much Is Enough*, 63.

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