A Fluid Aesthetics of Audience Participation
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Bios
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Abstract
The past decade witnessed many developments in audience participation, amongst others an evolution from immersive performing arts – which emphasise individual sensory experiences – to participatory performances – which highlight group dynamic experiences. Such performances generate a distinct aesthetics that can no longer be captured using terminology developed for immersive performing arts. To address the lack of theoretical knowledge to understand this aesthetics, this article offers a terminology that focuses on the tacit processes of audience-performer interplay. In our view, this interplay is a vital element of participatory performances, for instance, those by Katrien Oosterlinck (Belgium): it has become one of the main aesthetic materials. To analyse how this interplay is crucial to a fluid aesthetics, we (1) develop a definition of audience participation as an artistic medium, (2) introduce the notions of attunement, misattunement, and disattunement to address the volatility of such interplay, and (3) consider the role of the performer’s skills in moulding the aesthetics.

Keywords: participatory performance, audience participation, affect, artistic medium, tactical ability

Abstract
Publieksparticipatie kende het afgelopen decennium veel ontwikkelingen, waaronder een evolutie van immersieve podiumkunsten – die de nadruk leggen op individuele zintuiglijke ervaringen – naar participatief werk – dat de nadruk legt op groepsdynamische ervaringen. Dergelijke groepsdynamische voorstellingen genereren een specifieke esthetiek die niet langer gevat kan worden in de terminologie die werd ontwikkeld voor immersieve podiumkunsten. Om tegemoet te komen aan het gebrek aan theoretische kennis om deze esthetiek te begrijpen, biedt dit artikel een begrippenkader dat zich richt op de onuitgesproken processen van de wisselwerking tussen publiek en performer. Volgens ons is deze wisselwerking van vitaal belang voor participatief werk zoals dat van de Belgische theatermaakster Katrien Oosterlinck: die interactie is namelijk een van de belangrijkste esthetische ingrediënten waarmee ze werkt. Om beter te begrijpen hoe bepalend deze wisselwerking tussen publiek en performer is voor de creatie van een vloeiende esthetiek (1) ontwikkelen we een definitie van publieksparticipatie als artistiek medium, (2) introduceren we de begrippen attunement, misattunement en disattunement om de vluchtigheid van deze wisselwerking te kaderen, en (3) bekijken we de vaardigheden die de performers aan de dag leggen bij het vormgeven van deze esthetiek.

Keywords: participatieve performance, publieksparticipatie, affect, artistiek medium, tactische vaardigheden
Introduction

Since the 2000s, the literature on the aesthetics of participatory performance has highlighted the audience’s sensory experiences – e.g. their tactile, olfactory, or auditory sensations – such as the work of Josephine Machon (2009, 2013, 2016), Rachel Zerihan (2006, 2020), Gareth White (2012, 2013), Luk Van den Dries (2007; 2017), Teri Howson-Griffiths (2020), Catherine Bouko (2013, 2016), and Liam Jarvis (2016, 2019). This focus stems from the rise of immersive theatres, which comprise multisensory performances (i.e. including the audiovisual as well as touch, taste, smell, and kinaesthesia) that immerse the audience into a dramatic environment and generate sensuous aesthetics (Machon 2013). In the past decade, however, participatory performances have evolved from multisensory settings that draw attention to individual sensory experiences to performances that revolve around group dynamics. Examples of such performances include the work of Emke Idema (Netherlands), Lotte van den Berg (Netherlands), or hello!earth (Denmark). We can equally see a similar evolution in the work of several companies, such as Rimini Protokoll (Germany), who moved from the format of single-player mobile phone theatre to voice-navigated multiplayer games and walks; Ontroerend Goed (Belgium), who reoriented their creations from one-to-one settings such as The Smile of Your Face (2003) and A Game of You (2010) to multiplayer games and rituals, such as YES (2017) and Funeral (2022); and à l’envers (France), who originated in the sensorial and labyrinthic tradition of Teatro de los Sentidos (Spain) and evolved to more social and open-air constellations. To address the distinct aesthetic evolution towards performances focused on group dynamics rather than on singular spectatorial experiences, we propose a terminology rooted in an affective perspective on audience participation.

The proposed terminology originates from a three-year accompanying study on the practices of the performing artists Katrien Oosterlinck (Belgium), Sarah John (Australia/Denmark), and Seppe Baeyens (Belgium). For this study, we engaged in the empirical field for a long time to systematically detect patterns in artists’ approaches to guiding audience participation, specifically to better understand the aesthetics of audience participation in their work. Within the scope of this article, however, we solely focus on the practice of Oosterlinck, even though the terminology could be applied to a wide range of performance works beyond this single case study. Oosterlinck creates participatory performances at the intersection of image and movement, combining the visuals and motions of carefully crafted objects with the imagery of the audience’s still and moving bodies. The performances make tangible what relations are present between those bodies. We concentrate on Oosterlinck’s particular practice to support our detailed theoretical discussion of what we will describe as ‘a fluid aesthetics’ of audience participation.

As mentioned, the terminology was developed via accompanying research, which is a participatory methodology in which the researcher accompanies the research subject – in this case, the artist Oosterlinck – in their practice (Christensen et al. 2016; Crois 2022b). The accompanying relation goes beyond the method of participant observation and allows for joint experimentation in, reflection on, and interpretation of practices. An accompanying approach differs from other participatory research (Berghold and Thomas 2012) by emphasising the actual encounter of research partners in the knowledge production process to access and use different types of knowledge, such as somatic and collective tacit knowledge (Collins 2010). It focuses on developing a non-hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the artist, who are both considered experts. In such research, the researcher alternates between the roles of, for example, participant in the interlocutor’s practice, dialogue partner, interviewer, co-designer of a community of practice, and research data analyst.
This article reports on a fluid aesthetics underpinned by affect theory and deals with three central topics: (1) the development of a definition of audience participation as an artistic medium, (2) the introduction of the notions of attunement, misattunement, and disattunement to address the volatility of the audience-performer interplay, and (3) a consideration of the role of the performer’s skills in moulding the aesthetics. Before delving into the theory, we introduce the work of Oosterlinck through one of her notable performances, Imagine Moving Rocks (IMR) (2017). The following description of the performance aims to illustrate the type of participatory performance and audience participation under review.

**Imagine Moving Rocks**

IMR is a participatory performance made for a black-box theatre, created by Oosterlinck for eight to twelve people. The performance invites audience members to communicate with each other through their bodies, by moving and making images. For instance, they move small stones while seated around a table; they place their bodies in the theatre space; or they show each other the visual representations of their personal space. Their actions are driven by the voice of the performer, who facilitates the play from the first moment they enters the black box to the moment they eventually leave the performance space and re-enter the world.

The performance begins in a reception room that functions as an in-between zone between the outside world and the play world of IMR. In this (de-)compression room, audience members take off their shoes, leave their belongings, can take a glass of water, get to meet the crew (i.e. the performer and technicians), and are introduced to the performance with the following introductory text:

Imagine Moving Rocks is a play, an environment in which you can explore your interpersonal relations. It’s a zone where you communicate with each other through body language and by making images. I guide you step by step through this experiment. I present the rules, you play the game. I present options and you make choices. You make the journey yourself. Today, you are visiting this performance space, but not to watch me; to watch yourself and your company: each other.¹

The audience members then move to the main performing space and take seats at a round table. They look at a display of small stones — artefacts made of white pebbles and brightly coloured tape. The performer continues explaining the role of the stones:

These are the stones of Imagine Moving Rocks. Observe them closely. You can also pick them up and try to place them on different sides. Eventually, you choose one stone. Put the stone on your hand and look at it from all sides. It’s as if you are meeting your stone. Can you recognise a character or a quality in it? What is specific about your stone? Try to capture this in one word. When you’ve found a word, show your stone to the others and say it.

Each audience member chooses a stone, for which they imagine a characteristic quality. They hold them up and voice the quality: for example, ‘calm’, ‘in waiting’, ‘sunny’, ‘content’, ‘spikey’, ‘complex’, or ‘sleepy’. After this, the performer gives the following instructions:

¹ All quotes from *Imagine Moving Rocks* are provided courtesy of Katrien Oosterlinck.
In the next phase, the stones can explore different positions on the game board. It goes like this: one stone starts by taking a new position. Can someone do that? Then, all the other stones react by also choosing a new position. All at the same time. Then, we wait and observe the new situation until one stone decides to move again and then all the others react. And it continues like that.

The performer gathers the stones, and an audience member scatters them across the table on a tiny, 20 by 20 centimetre stage, as if they were throwing dice. From this starting position of the stones ensues different rounds of moving the stones in a choreography with twelve people — generating various constellations. This leads to the following step:

In the next game, all your stones are going to look for a position that feels good to them. Now the movement happens one by one, so only one hand can play at a time. You only touch your own stone, and the order is random. You move your stone whenever you think there is a better place. Your stone can also take a break at any time, outside the game board on the table or in your hand.

Fig. 1: Audience members showing their rocks to each other by holding them up in their hands in Imagine Moving Rocks, by Katrien Oosterlinck, 2021, © Elvira Crois.
In response to these instructions, the rocks begin to move on the table. Hands wait, impel, hover, stir. The minute negotiations continue until, according to the players, each rock is content with its position on the tiny stage and in relation to the other rocks. After this scene, the audience moves from sitting at the table to standing on a large white rectangular floor. There, each person takes a position in relation to the other audience members, the same position in which their rock landed in the final constellation with respect to the edges of the tiny stage and the stones of the others.

During the main part of the performance, the audience is situated on the white floor, while the performer verbally offers various invitations, opens possibilities, and identifies what comes next. For instance, the performer guides the audience through an internal body scan (reminiscent of mindfulness practices) or lays the groundwork for the audience to explore their personal space. For this exploration of personal space, each audience member receives a transparent pliable 1 by 1 metre square of plastic onto which they solidify boundaries by taping down shapes in yellow, pink, or black: either as a closed circle, a porous square, or an unidentifiable, three-dimensional shape.
Next, the audience leaves their space to physically explore each other’s shapes and to build bridges between their different personal spaces by extending their limbs. As a result, the play marks a cartography of social bonds. The audience moves across the floor and looks at the movements of others until they arrive at a final constellation.

In IMR, the audience is constantly searching and choosing how to approach the invitations, impressions, and interactions prompted by the overall performance set-up. They act and move; watch and perceive; hold their bearings, while sometimes losing them. The games in IMR are as much about looking and observing as they are about showing and performing. In other words, the participation of the audience comes from their ability to be affected and to affect everything happening around them.

To better understand the fluid aesthetics present in a performance such as IMR, we first develop the notion of audience participation as an artistic medium, which we position – following the British theatre scholar Gareth White – ‘alongside more familiar elements such as spoken language, choreographed movement and scenography’ (2013: 10–11). Light, sound, and scenography are not the only artistic media of performance. The bodies and interactions of the audience are, as we explain below, also an artistic medium.
Audience Participation as Artistic Medium

Following Gareth White, we stress that to understand the aesthetics of performance, one must understand the artistic media used to build this aesthetics (2013: 11). After all, it is the artistic medium that is shaped into the form of the work of art. Artworks labelled ‘participatory’ derive their aesthetics largely from audience participation. Therefore, this article considers audience participation as an artistic medium through which participatory performance can be analysed. This approach somewhat deviates from other perspectives on participatory performance, for even though audience participation is often considered a distinctive feature of participatory performance (see, e.g. Alston (2013), Sakellaridou (2014), Breel (2015), Bala (2018)), it is rarely explicitly perceived as an artistic medium in its own right. In our view, the reason for this relative lack of attention to the mediality of audience participation is twofold: first, the presence of the audience as the recipient of the performance is so obvious that one can forget that the audience itself can be (part of) the artistic medium; second, following Marshall McLuhan (1994: 18), we assert that on any occasion, it is difficult to recognise the different artistic media nested within a larger medium when paying attention to the content. For example, in performance, multiple media (such as light, sound, and scenography) are nested within the overall set-up of the performance, and without these grounding media, the piece could not exist. However, these grounding media tend to disappear in favour of the performance as the overarching medium that carries the content. In other words, as observed by the Danish communication scholar Jesper Tække (2003: 5), even though light, sound, and scenography are clearly perceptible, they can become invisible when focusing on the content.

In the next paragraphs, we propose a working definition of audience participation as an artistic medium. To elucidate the constitutive elements of audience participation, we draw on the work of Jesper Tække (2003). He rejects the perspective of endless nesting of one medium into another, in which a medium only serves to convey the message of the next medium. Instead, he defines the notion of a medium by distinguishing between four terms: (1) medium, (2) form, (3) substratum, and (4) material content.

Tække first draws a distinction between the notions of (1) medium and (2) form, noting that a medium consists of loose elements that forge a form (2003). To this end, he draws on the work of the Austrian psychologist Fritz Heider (1959), who developed a theory of mediation in which the medium is understood as a loose coupling of elements between the potential and the actual. Once these loose elements become a rigid coupling, they assume a stable form. Since a form is the crystallisation of loose or potential couplings into a rigid or actual coupling, a medium is always needed (Tække 2003). A medium thus functions as the basis for the emergence of form.

![Fig. 4: Loose and rigid couplings in a medium, 2022, © Elvira Crois.](https://example.com/f4.png)
Tække makes a second distinction between the notions of (3) substratum and (4) material content. Drawing on Brügger, he explains that the loose elements of a medium are the substratum and the material content. The substratum is the carrier, or that part of the medium in which the material content is placed in or on (Brügger 2002: 51). When the substratum and the material content occur in a potential coupling, they constitute a medium. When the substratum and the material content pass into a rigid coupling, they become a form. The relation between the four notions can be clarified using the following example from Tække: ‘The oral medium has air as its substratum, waves in it as the material content, and language as the form in this medium’ (2003: 9).

We extend Tække's terminology to include that which moves the material content: the (5) catalyst. In the example of the oral medium, this is a person's voice. In the case of audience participation as a medium, the catalyst is, for instance, the performer's actions. W. J. T. Mitchell acknowledges that the impulse that moves the material content is an important aspect of a medium. He points out that the singularity or specificity of a medium is not reducible to 'its material, technical support, but includes the practices, skills and purposes to which it is put' (2017: 13–14). To illustrate this, Mitchell gives the example of a recipe: a medium should be regarded not as a specific ingredient or even a list of ingredients but as the specificity of a recipe. It is the way that different elements are put together – paint with brushes and canvas, ink with paper and writing, or pixels with purposes – that is constitutive of medium specificity (2017: 14).

The catalyst is an important addition to Tække's definition of a medium, as it establishes the connection between the role of the performer and the aesthetics of a performance. In the practice of Katrien Oosterlinck, the performer's actions are imperative in moulding the medium specificity of audience participation in the case studies examined. These actions include speaking, moving, gesturing, touching, object handling, and drawing. This arsenal of options available to the performer can be used in response to the audience. Summarizing the terminological framework developed so far, we can state that when audience participation is considered a medium, the substratum is the presence and bodies of the audience and other agents (such as the performer) while the material content covers the interplay between them. The form, then, arises when the coupling between the presence and interplay of the audience and the performer becomes rigid, when it is negotiated into composition. The catalyst consists of a performer's actions that move the substratum and the material content from a potential coupling to an actual coupling.

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2 The notions of substratum and material content were coined by the Danish media theorist Niels Brügger (2002).
Fig. 5: The interplay between the audience and another agent as the material content of audience participation, 2022, © Elvira Crois.

This detailed definition of audience participation demonstrates the entangled relation between audience and performer. This entangled relation supports our understanding of audience participation and its fluid aesthetics: since the medium involves human relations, it is not consistent. Although the mechanisms of audience participation can be predicted to some extent, the volatile and affective nature of audience participation as a medium makes that the form of the performance is also constantly changing. As such, the aesthetics of participatory performance typically fluctuates, rather than establishing a definitive aesthetics in advance.
Oscillating between Affective Zones

Next to understanding the different components of audience participation as an artistic medium, a fluid aesthetics of audience participation also requires an understanding of the different forms between which it can fluctuate. While audience participation can take various forms, we will focus specifically on the forms we characterise as attunement, misattunement, and disattunement as they take shape in the work of Katrien Oosterlinck. These forms are categorised as affective zones that emerge through affects generated by the interplay between audience and performers. This perspective is underpinned by affect theory, which contemplates how affects — defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as autonomous entities (1994: 164) distributed across bodies, technologies, and structures — circulate between bodies like vibrations, growing and weakening in intensity. The affective zones of attunement, misattunement, and disattunement, then, assemble various affects going back and forth between an audience and the performers as a form of audience participation. Below, we discuss the different zones of attunement, misattunement, and disattunement through examples of the work of Oosterlinck.

Misattunement and Attunement

In an interview conducted by Elvira Crois, one of the authors of this essay, Katrien Oosterlinck talked about a session of the performance Imagine Moving Rocks that showed how the audience made a clear movement from what we are calling the zone of misattunement to that of attunement. She remembered a session at the STUK Arts Center in Leuven (Belgium) where the audience consisted of temporary residents of a psychiatric hospital:

They entered the space and threw their backpacks against the wall. We were on the fifth floor, it was really hot and they had to be there, come to the theatre — something some of them had never done — as part of their programme. They radiated a sense of ‘I do not understand this place and I have no business here’.

According to Oosterlinck, the initial atmosphere of complete disinterest stood in stark contrast to IMR’s final scene which invites all audience members to shuffle in twilight until they find comfortable spots, which can include physical contact with one another. During this scene, the audience member who initially showed the most resistance remained in a corner, seemingly rigid, arms crossed. It was only when the lights slowly faded back that this audience member moved to the group to make a physical connection. In our interview, Oosterlinck explained that this session was one of the most intense examples of an audience member beginning as completely ‘out of it’ or even ‘against it’ but gradually moving towards ‘in it’, which could be characterised as a movement from misattunement to attunement.

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3 Affect is entangled through the world and attaches itself to (among others) people, non-human actors, environments, institutions, organic and inorganic materials, technologies, ideas, fictions, sensations, relations, activities, aspirations, and other affects (Salter 2015: 81; Sedgwick 2003: 19). Through their circulation, affect has the potential to influence and move other bodies in body and mind (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012: 116; Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 1).

4 All statements by Oosterlinck are extracted from interviews conducted by Elvira Crois on 2 September 2020 and 8 September 2020. Translations are made by the interviewer.

5 All statements by Oosterlinck are extracted from interviews conducted by Elvira Crois on 2 September 2020 and 8 September 2020. Translations are made by the interviewer.
At the outset, it seemed that the group, and in particular the one audience member, did not consent to engage fully with the proposals of the performance. Such an attitude whereby a person chooses to be unaffected — which Bruno Latour describes as to feel, act, and speak in an unswerving manner despite the actions of others (2004: 210) — is at the core of misattunement. According to the American psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, misattunement is an experience ‘in which we feel only my way works, only my experience matters, the other is doing something to me’ (2018: 51). To move someone out of this zone — as in Oosterlinck’s anecdote — is arduous work and does not necessarily follow a smooth course, but it is not unmanageable. Affective zones are not rigid. They are bound to break down at some point to evolve into something else, such as the zone of attunement.

What we understand as attunement is described by Oosterlinck as being ‘in it’ — a moment where the air becomes ‘thick’, a sense of belonging together. Attunement is a form of communication in which both parties get to know something of the other’s experience, even if they cannot yet put it into words. It is a transition in which people tune in to a shared mood or disposition (Churchill 2012). Drawing on the work of the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin (2018), we define two types of attunement: *rhythmic* and *differentiated*.
The term ‘rhythmic attunement’\textsuperscript{6} refers to a rhythm between people ‘that brings about the sense of union or in-sync-ness’ (Benjamin 2018: 51). This type of attunement occurs through a binding connection, i.e. on the basis of similarity or recognition, and shows resemblance to one of four types of attunement described by the cultural geographer Julian Brigstocke and anthropologist Tehseen Noorani as ‘conceived as a form of embodied relationality and interconnectedness that capacitates individual empathy and grounds the possibility of coproduction’ (2016, 1). It is a zone of direct, diffused, and flowing communication between a person and their environment and implies ease. In IMR, rhythmic attunement is often observed when the eight to twelve audience members know each other well. In this case, the group has already established a mode of engagement outside the performance which they can rely on in IMR: they draw on shared experiences and collective dynamics to feed their play.

The term ‘differentiated attunement’ refers to attunement achieved through a bridging connection, i.e. a connection in difference. Through the symbolic realm, differentiated attunement allows one to express one’s own intentions while engaging with the other. As Jessica Benjamin describes, through the ‘ability to hold difference in mind’, a position is created ‘in which more than one subjectivity or reality or perspective can co-exist’ (2018: 51). This attuned tension of difference is reminiscent of the concept of ‘dissensual common sense’, formulated by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2010). As a result of negotiating dissensus, the position of dissensual common sense recognises the disparity between, on the one hand, ‘a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it’ and, on the other hand, ‘several sensory regimes and/or “bodies”’ (Rancière 2010: 139). Beyond a relation of consensus or conflict, dissensual common sense — similar to differentiated attunement — accepts the autonomy of one’s own perception when dealing with that of another: an autonomy that is neither static nor rigid, and still desires to engage with and be affected by the other. In IMR, differentiated attunement tends to occur among audience members who do not share a common pool of lived experiences and references. Such a group requires prolonged immersion and more negotiation to find a common groove.

However, knowing each other beforehand is no guarantee of rhythmic attunement during a performance. Perhaps people know each other but, because of differences between them, still require a conversation, either explicitly or tacitly, to find a common zone of differentiated attunement: for instance, because they do not experience the same level of comfort with the performance setting. As mentioned earlier, when an audience member is wary of the required participation, chances are higher of dwelling in a zone of misattunement as they do not want to involve themselves. Or perhaps the audience does not disengage but gives the performance a chance by taking an observant position, whereby they ‘wait and see’, slowly probing the water instead of diving in head first. In such a case, the audience inhabits not a zone of attunement but one of disattunement.

\textsuperscript{6} The notion of rhythmic attunement correlates with psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's notion of 'flow' (1990) or what movement theorist Thomas Hanna calls 'the full parasympathetic state of blissful osmotic openness' (1987).
Disattunement

Next to oscillating between zones of attunement and misattunement, the audience might also shift in and out of ‘disattunement’, a notion introduced by one of the authors of this essay (Crois 2022a). While we understand misattunement as a zone characterised by an unwillingness to relate, disattunement is as a zone characterised by wanting to relate but moving at different frequencies. In this sense, being out of sync does not automatically equate to misattunement: there is another zone in between. Like attunement, this affective zone occurs between different entities: between the audience and the space, objects, a piece of storytelling, or the performer. Here, we focus on disattunement between audience and performers.

What we call the zone of disattunement is also addressed by Oosterlinck. She explains that, generally, this zone recurs in certain scene changes in IMR. For instance, when the audience is seated around the table during the stone game, a feeling of ease tends to set in. Nevertheless, the moment the audience moves away from the table to step onto the large white floor in the middle of the space, they often become nervous again. At that point, they receive the instruction to close their eyes. To some of them, once more, this feels more comfortable; to others, the discomfort only increases. The journeys of the audience members falling in and out of tune go very differently.

The sense of getting nervous or feeling discomfort is an indication that the audience moves towards or into disattunement. They no longer have a clear sense of orientation and feel disoriented instead. They extend their bodies into space in the attempt to make the strange familiar, yet they fail. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s notion of disorientation, disattunement can be described as a zone ‘of facing at least two directions: toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home’ (ibid.: 10). It is a transient zone of uncertainty that reminds us of one type of attunement described by Brigstocke and Noorani as bringing us into contact with ‘lost futures, haunted presents, and even different versions of ourselves’ (Brigstocke and Noorani 2016, 1). Dwelling in disattunement may be confusing or troublesome, but the zone is ripe with potential because, even though what is desired does not exist in present things, its potential is at the horizon. Moreover, this zone of multidirectionality offers the opportunity for redirection. We argue that the zone of disattunement — neither out of engagement nor in full attunement — is crucial since it makes up a large part of each performance.

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7 According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the prefix ‘mis’ is added to a word ‘to show that the action referred to by the verb has been done wrongly or badly’ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/mis>, and the prefix ‘dis’ is added ‘to form their opposites’ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dis>.

8 This description is based on how somatic practitioners Ondrea and Stephen Levine describe disattunement: ‘Even in a growth-oriented, spiritual relationship, there are times when a couple is out of sync. Growth experiences, sometimes very subtle, sometimes quite enormous, may occur in various ways at different times, each aspect of the personality healing at its own rhythm and rate. Different energy movements, healings, openings, closings, can cause two individuals momentarily to communicate at different frequencies. A disattunement may occur as one partner breaks through one aspect of inner conflict and confusion, while another is preparing for its own great leap through other mind fields. The work to be done is painfully clear. And nothing but mercy and awareness can do it. These moments of disattunement were most often received by two hearts willing to go beyond old clingings and fears, which cultivated a gratitude and trust so inexplicably deep that confusion about each other’s essential intentions rarely arose. Experiencing love expands naturally and without effort’ (Levine and Levine 1995: 89).

9 All statements by Oosterlinck are extracted from interviews conducted by Elvira Crois on 2 September 2020 and 8 September 2020. Translations are made by the interviewer.
Oscillating

The affective zones described above are not always opposed to each other, nor do they have strict boundaries. Instead, they often overlap and occur simultaneously. The co-existence of and oscillation between affective zones is central to our understanding of a fluid aesthetics of audience participation.

At the beginning of this article, we asserted that the interplay between the audience and another agent, such as the performer, is the material content of the artistic medium ‘audience participation’. To mould this audience participation, different strategies are in place within a performance. Spheres of light, landscapes of sound, storylines, movement scores, and the arrangement of spaces offer languages through which directions are communicated. Yet since each performance differs as a result of the changing audience, it is important to emphasise that the aesthetics of Oosterlinck’s work is not determined a priori by the chosen dramaturgy. Moreover, as we have established, affective zones not only differ between sessions but can also vary within a single session of a performance. For instance, it is highly unlikely for attunement to be maintained throughout the entire performance. The audience and performers move in and out of attunement, and attunement shifts among agents: one moment an audience member may relate more to an object, and the next, more to another audience member. Because of its shifts in interplay, audience participation oscillates between various affective zones, such as attunement, misattunement, and disattunement. This aesthetic variety in a single session bestows upon the participatory performance a fluid aesthetics.

Whereas the audience-performer interplay is not always overt in IMR — as the performer is seated next to the playfield — the performer’s role becomes more abundantly clear in Oosterlinck’s more recent performance Tactile Talk [TT] (2021). TT is a non-verbal performance that invites the audience into a landscape of multicoloured foam rocks of all shapes and sizes. Guided by a group of performers, the audience (ca. 35 people) is introduced to the language of the rocks. The performers extend gestures as invitations to choose rocks and to build or become part of a construction of rocks and human bodies. As such, both performers and audience members go through several frames of non-verbal dialogues, in which they attract, extend, lead, follow, sync, converse, and flock. These dialogues sometimes unfold one-to-one, as participants move from one partner to another, yet at other times, a silent conversation emerges among several people at once.

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10 This aesthetic variation on a micro scale is different from the aesthetic variation when comparing different artists or performances within the oeuvre of a single artist. This aesthetic variation draws chiefly on differences in dramaturgical choices. Take, for instance, the profound distinctions between the position of the audience in the work of Punchdrunk (UK) and in that of Adrian Howells (UK), even though the works of both artists have been categorised as immersive theatre (Machon 2013). Howells’s work illustrates this nicely: the one-to-one promenade performance 14 Stations of the Life and History of Adrian Howells (2007) requires a different interaction with the audience than the one-to-one, physically intimate performance The Pleasure of Being Washing/Feeding/Holding (2010). Therefore, we propose to widen the commonly accepted view that different practices of making and receiving art imply a distinct aesthetic by acknowledging the aesthetic variation within a single work (White 2013: 10).
TT is an example of what the Greek drama scholar Elizabeth Sakellaridou identifies as a case of participatory performance with dynamic audience participation. In such performances, the relationship between audience and performers is ‘renegotiated every single moment and for every single performance’ (Sakellaridou 2014: 22). The invitations generate a wide variety of audience responses, which, in turn, become the basis for performers and audience to explore their dynamics. In events of dynamic audience participation, the realisation of the artist’s intentions becomes more complicated because the invitations allow more risk and test ‘the limits of compliance and voluntary participation’ (ibid.: 22). Instead, the realisation increasingly relies on the performer who responds to an unfolding pattern of action. In a similar vein, Jorge Lapos Ramos and Persis Jadé Maravala — who are both experts in interactive theatre — contend that few participatory works achieve a meaningful aesthetic experience, i.e. an experience in which the audience moves between forms of audience engagement (2016: 168). According to them, the failure of achieving the artistic intentions originates in the performer’s lack of expertise to manage intimate interactions with the audience in tandem with a compelling unfolding dramaturgy (ibid.: 168). This assertion leads to the third and final part of our discussion, in which we will assess how the performer’s skills are a catalyst in shaping a fluid aesthetics of audience participation by moving the audience-performer interplay through different affective zones.
Fig. 8: The invitation of a performer by offering the audience a rock in *Tactile Talk*, by Katrien Oosterlinck, 2022, © Elvira Crois.

**Holding a Conversation with the Situation**

As we have established so far, the artistic medium of audience participation is fickle and subject to change depending on the dramaturgical conditions as well as the actual circumstances of a particular performance. While oscillations between attunement, disattunement, and misattunement can be involuntary, they can equally be driven by the performer. In this regard, the performer’s skills are crucial to moving and moulding the artistic medium of audience participation in these affective zones. More specifically, to move with the audience through these affective zones, performers should be able to adopt what one of the authors of this essay has termed a ‘tactical ability’ and which involves ‘the performer’s adaptive actions to the contingencies of the situation that are a catalyst for audience-performer interplay’ (Crois 2022b: 67–68). This ‘tactical ability’ includes several steps: the performer makes a proposition, reads the situation, listens to the audience’s response, recognises what the audience is doing – however subtly – and adapts to the contingencies of the performance situation. To find out what a situation and an audience require, the performer reads the minute cues of the audience, such as the way they hold their bodies, as well as the tone of their voices or the shifts in their faces. Based on this input, the performer makes a judgement about what the situation needs and responds in the way they deem most appropriate. Thus, the performer becomes a catalyst that moves and moulds the audience-performer interplay, which consequently steers the aesthetics of audience participation as oscillating between different affective zones.
To illustrate how the role of performers is crucial in steering the fluid aesthetics of audience participation, we can refer to a particular instance of performing TT for a group of high school students. The scene goes as follows: the audience stands around the playfield of TT, gazing upon six piles of multicoloured foam rocks that are spread across the floor. A performer steps up to an audience member with a rock and invites them into the landscape to make a change. It is the start of rebuilding the landscape. More performers welcome the audience to join ‘the garden’ and tend to it. The six piles are dismantled, and rocks are moved and morphed into a new scenography. While audience members join the garden or observe the unfolding actions from within or at the side of the playfield, a clique of pupils clumps together, scoffing slightly at what is happening. In this moment, the performer had to choose the best course of action to get them engaged: leaving them to observe the others until they find their own way in or going up to them to offer a rock. The latter option could have been disarming by opening up the sceptical micro-group dynamic but, in this case, it pushed them into even greater resistance.

At the same time, another group of pupils who joined the rebuild was deeply involved in playing along, living their wild ninja fantasies by attacking each other with the longest foam rocks they could find. This micro-dynamic of rhythmic attunement can be highly enjoyable for the students involved but equally disrupting for the other audience members. If necessary, the performer can join the play. Without breaking up the group or interrupting the play, the performer’s mere presence can already shift the affective zone as the newly formed group has to re-establish a dynamic. The performer can also shift the dynamic by moving their rock less violently, slightly slower or quirkier, or not changing the dynamic of the movement but simply stopping the rocks from hitting each other, keep them floating in midair. If the rocks are not harmed and the atmosphere is not violent, perhaps, the play does not require moderation but serves as inspiration for the performer to merge different groups into a bigger rock-led play.

Such tactical ability of the performer can be described as to ‘hold a conversation with the situation’, which derives from educationalist Donald Schön (1983). Schön uses the notion to describe how practitioners in any field address situations of uncertainty, instability, and uniqueness: the practitioner cunningly studies the given circumstances and adapts adequately. In such uncertain situations, there is a back-and-forth: the practitioner defines the situation, the situation ‘talks back’, the practitioner shifts and responds to the situation’s back-talk (Schön 1983: 79). When practitioners are able to hold a conversation with the situation, they know what to look for and how to respond to what they find (ibid.: 60). According to Schön, each practitioner holds a conversation with the materials of a situation. For an architect, it may be the spatial environment. For a painter, it may be the canvas and paint. For a midwife, it may be the pregnant human in front of them. For performers in a participatory work, it is – among other things – the audience.

Performers cannot assume that the audience already enters the theatre space curious and ready to be affected. They must remain attentive to what the situation tells them, in all its subtlety. The performer is responsible for attending to the audience, maintaining an attitude of listening, in concert with the unfolding dramaturgy. When performers master their tactical ability, they respond to what happens fluidly. Even though they always risk failure by misjudging the situation, the performers with the expertise to hold a conversation with the situation will be able to create extra aesthetic variations in audience participation.

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11 Performance of Tactile Talk on 25 October 2022 in the cultural centre c o r s o in Antwerp.
Conclusion

Rather than attributing one specific aesthetic to the performances of Katrien Oosterlinck, this article argued for an aesthetics characterised by oscillating between different affective zones. We consider these forms to arise from the medium of audience participation as specific manifestations of the interplay between the audience and other agents, such as objects, scenography, a piece of storytelling, technology, other audience members, or the performer. This interplay can move through the affective zones of attunement, disattunement, and misattunement. We defined ‘attunement’ as an affective zone in which people are willing to be affected by each other and can connect through similarity or difference. By contrast, ‘misattunement’ is an affective zone in which people are unwilling to be affected by each other and disregard the opportunity to connect. Finally, ‘disattunement’ is an affective zone in which people are willing to be affected by each other but move at different frequencies.

The three zones we have identified are manifestations of audience participation through which the audience and performers wander during a performance. For instance, an audience member can start out not wanting to be present in the performance but gradually move towards a zone of disattunement, in which they are curious to engage. Perhaps an audience member who is engaged in silent conversation with multiple people simultaneously hovers in rhythmic attunement with one person and in differentiated attunement with another. Or, an audience enters the performance in sync with their surroundings but shifts to disattunement when they are constantly overlooked by the performers. An audience can even swing to misattunement: for example, when the performers discount the audience’s need to observe instead of physically interact and persist in their invitations despite clear declining gestures.

For performances such as Tactile Talk, we showed that aesthetic oscillation is highly affected by the performer’s tactical ability, which we defined as the ability to hold a conversation with the situation. The performer responds to the volatility of audience participation and moves the audience-performer interplay through different affective zones, depending on what the situation requires. As asserted by Crois elsewhere, ‘in each encounter, specific in time and space, it is a constant search for the performer how to get from a “mere” gathering of people to an encounter where something genuine emerges through the negotiation of relations’ (2022a: 93). This emergence of something genuine does not automatically equate to the affective zone of attunement. As illustrated by the example where the performer shifts the rhythmic attunement of the ninja play to a zone of disattunement, attunement is not always the highest goal; it is merely one affective zone. Instead, something genuine involves accepting and addressing the fluid aesthetics of the performance.


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