

Aesthetic tensions and transversal politics in participatory arts practices

Melis Cin¹

Abstract

This reflective piece examines the role of participatory arts as sites of resistance and activism amid increasing global restrictions on civic space, expression, and surveillance. Drawing on over 15 years of experience in Turkey and Sub-Saharan Africa, I explore two key tensions in participatory video-making: aesthetic concerns that may distort political messages and the ignored potential of exhibition spaces as ongoing arenas for transversal dialogue and social change. I advocate viewing participatory arts not merely as research tools but as powerful channels for collective intelligence, activism, and political advocacy.

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¹ Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, United Kingdom, [m.cin \[at\] lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:m.cin@lancaster.ac.uk)

As global politics tighten control over civic spaces, restrict freedoms of expression, and intensify surveillance of everyday interactions, it becomes crucial to ask: can participatory arts practices serve as alternative sites of resistance and transformation, or do they simply mirror the fractures and tensions of our increasingly complex political landscape? In reflecting on my experiences, I often find myself feeling that the current spaces for expression are increasingly constricted globally — surveillance and censorship make it difficult to express oneself openly. This is indeed in stark contrast to the environment I was raised in, where, despite the challenges of that time, there were more opportunities for genuine expression and dialogue without the constant fear of surveillance, which has deepened my understanding of the importance of shared spaces for collective voice and activism. Also, my feminist advocacy and identity have always been rooted in collective action, co-creation, and the power of thinking and working together. Rather than approaching participatory projects, particularly the participatory arts I have been involved in over the past 15 years in Turkey and Sub-Saharan Africa solely as academic research, I see them as vital sites for activism and advocacy — spaces where voices pushed to the margins of the society can be heard, where ideas evolve through co-production and co-curation. For instance, the participatory videos we conducted with women in Turkey to bring everyday gender inequalities into the public space (Cin and Süleymaoğlu-Kürüm, 2020), the graffiti we co-curated with Tonga youth in Zimbabwe to promote political advocacy (Mkwanzani et al., 2021), the photovoice projects with refugees and local youth across Turkey, South Africa, and Uganda as a form of political participation against epistemic erasure (Cin et al., 2025), or the heritage-based participatory art workshops with Tonga women aimed at revaluing and reclaiming their cultural heritage in response to historical silencing and colonial legacies (Masungu et al., 2025) are just some of the long-term participatory arts projects I have carried out in partnership with communities to foster a culture of activism, advocacy for justice, and collectivity. It is this mindset that guides my interaction with new digital tools and participatory methods, recognising them as more than research tools, but as channels for collective intelligence and sites of change.

In this short reflective piece, I will explore two persistent tensions I have encountered particularly in participatory video-making, a form of participatory arts. While much has been written about the complexities of participation, power, representation (Gistly, 2015), or on complexities of co-production both in the process and dissemination of participatory arts (see Phillips, et al., 2022; Cin et al., 2024), here I focus more narrowly on two aspects that continue to provoke questions for me: i) the aesthetic concerns that arise in co-curation — particularly when visual choices risk overshadowing the political intent and ii) the often overlooked potential of exhibition and screenings as ongoing spaces for transversal dialogue. These two aspects indeed form the crux of participatory arts methodologies as they pertain to the production and dissemination phases.

Participatory video-making, as an art-based form of civic engagement, offers a powerful space for collective storytelling and social critique. Yet, during this process, I grappled with a persistent tension: the desire to create aesthetically compelling videos often seemed to overshadow the imperative to give space to the political voices. Although I often encounter concerns about overshadowing political voices when working with artists from other art forms — as mentioned above, such as photographers and graffiti artists who tend to view participatory arts-based research more as an art project than as a socially engaged artistic research, I have also come to realise that the co-researchers (conventionally referred to as participants), who are not necessarily artists themselves, also prioritise the artistic aspect in a way similar to artists. As a researcher engaged deeply in co-curation with co-researchers — mostly with women or youth experiencing disadvantage — I became well aware that our early discussions on the content or the political message that needs to be embedded in the videos, often held in reading sessions we have prior to the production stage for intellectual exchange, were overshadowed by concerns of aesthetics: how the stories should be visually, artistically and aesthetically presented. I observed that concerns around the visual quality of the videos often took precedence, with the participants sometimes hesitating to include raw, imperfect shots for fear that they might dilute the authenticity or impact of the feminist messages. An emphasis on aesthetics — crafting polished, visually appealing narratives — began to overshadow the pressing issues we aimed to highlight everyday gender inequalities and structural and epistemic injustices. This aestheticisation of content risked shifting attention away from the discomfiting realities that participatory research seeks to confront and eventually transform. Such tensions are indeed not unique to my work; they are well documented in arts-based research literature (Cin

and Mkwanzani, 2022; Boydell et al., 2012). While arts-based research centred around embodiment, aesthetic and different ways of knowing (including uncovering of often undervalued knowledges), a methodological overemphasis on aesthetic form can sometimes elevate style over substance. This has placed me and the co-researchers in a recurring dilemma – are we engaging in ‘arts-based research as process’ or ‘arts-based research as product’ (Boydell et al., 2012, p. 3)?

Throughout the co-creation, co-researchers often receive training in artistic methods — producing videos, scripting, storyboarding, and storytelling — all valuable skills in expanding creative agency. Yet, I sometimes felt that this emphasis on technical and artistic skill-building overshadowed the political and intellectual engagements at the core of our projects. The drive for producing visually and aesthetically compelling content (even when well-intentioned) can inadvertently silence or smooth over the very disruption.

Recognising and navigating this tension is essential — not to resolve it entirely, but to remain critically attentive to how aesthetic choices can both illuminate and obscure the political commitments at the heart of participatory arts research. There is a constant negotiation between message and medium, and between participation and production; these are deeply political choices that shape what is seen, what is heard, and ultimately, what is remembered.

While aesthetic and political tensions shape the co-creation process, they do not end with the production of the videos. They take on new dimensions during the exhibition and screening phase – another critical, yet often overlooked, aspect of participatory arts-based research. In my view, during the production stage, so much effort is often dedicated to the creation and aesthetic concerns that the exhibition spaces appear to be seen as less important when it comes to sharing the work widely. Therefore, as I mentioned above, the dissemination of the artefacts is the second challenge I encounter in participatory arts projects. When the participatory videos are completed, the exhibition and screening phase becomes a crucial moment where co-researchers engage in dialogue and conversation with an audience. These moments of public sharing are not simply about showcasing the final product; they are spaces of encounter where co-produced artefacts are brought into conversation with policymakers, researchers, community members, and the wider public. In these spaces, the videos (or the artifacts) often took on new meanings, becoming catalysts for transversal dialogue that extended beyond the research context. As I have argued elsewhere (Cin et al., 2024), far from being the endpoint, the screening and exhibition stage is where critical engagement is cultivated and publicity generated, with co-curation inherently reflecting transversal politics shaped by cultural, political, and embodied experiences of co-researchers. For me, they are the most important phase of the participatory studies because during the screenings and exhibitions, this transversal engagement extends to a broader audience and public. As Yuval-Davis (1999) argues, in these encounters, co-researchers come into contact with individuals holding different worldviews, creating space for an epistemological process where multiple truths emerge through dialogue across diverse positions. Importantly, this interaction is characterised by a recognition of difference that occurs in a non-hierarchical way while also acknowledging the differential social, economic, and political power relations that influence these interactions. Also, screenings of participatory videos serve as spaces where individuals from diverse social and political backgrounds come into contact, allowing for the recognition and negotiation of differences in positioning, identity, and values within a non-hierarchical setting. These dialogues foster a dynamic process of sharing and learning, exemplifying how transversal politics enables ongoing, participatory transformation by embracing the fluidity and complexity of social divisions and perspectives. This indeed, as expressed by Meskimmon (2020) in the sphere of art, is an act of democratic solidarity building and creating affective coalitions. This is not to say that those spaces are always free from power relations, epistemic frictions, and tensions, as the conflict is a very inherent part of such discussions, especially when they involve politically sensitive, controversial, or contentious issues. However, despite these inherent frictions, such discussions in public spaces remain vital for challenging existing power dynamics, fostering critical consciousness, and opening up possibilities for collective understanding and change — even when disagreements and tensions are an inevitable part of the process. These tensions and conflicts within public discussions are not simply obstacles but fundamental elements that enable the ongoing process of dialogue, negotiation, and transformation, as they reflect the complexity of social divisions and the multiplicity of voice, enriching the collective effort to build democratic solidarity and forge new, affective alliances.

Understanding and navigating the aesthetic dilemmas of co-curation and embracing the transformative potential of exhibitions as sites of transversal politics reminds us that participatory arts are not just about making visible; it is about making meaning, making space, and making change through contested, collective, and creative engagements. It is not perfection but provocation that carries the weight of change, reminding us that participatory arts is not the end of the story, but the opening of a conversation still unfolding.

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