

## A Work in Progress: Participation and the role of the public as seen in the photography of Gina Osterloh and Farrah Karapetian

Pejman Shojaei<sup>1</sup> and Susan Laxton<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Art History and History

<sup>2</sup>Department of Art History

### ABSTRACT

Participation within contemporary art is a movement that has made itself very prevalent in the past two decades. Artists create situations and events that require the participation of the viewers to activate the work of art. Taking on aspects of performance and social engagement, participation allows for the viewers and audience of the artwork to become integral players in its conception. Photography as a medium is no exception to this new model, with participation, social engagement, performance, and new modes of installation indicating photography's expansion into a more cross-medium discipline. Through their photography, Gina Osterloh and Farrah Karapetian use different dimensions of participation in the production of their work to investigate identity roles and group formation within a larger context. Through the erasure of the self and the body, these two artists' work grapple with different scopes of identity and body politics. Public participation is used to examine these issues of identity politics and the concept of "post-identity" within a contemporary setting. Through photography, the production process, which is in essence the art itself within these artists' bodies of work, can be reproduced and displayed in such a fashion that it allows for some permanence to the very temporal production process.

**Keywords:** Contemporary art, participation, photography, identity politics, post-identity, performance art, installation art

### FACULTY MENTOR

**Susan Laxton**

*Department of Art History*

Professor Laxton interests range across the alternative art practices introduced by the European avant-gardes of the 20th century, among them photography, collage, photomontage, and automatic or chance-based processes – all practices that emphatically challenged the conventions of traditional mediums like sculpture and painting.



**Pejman Shojaei**

*Department of Art History*

Pejman Shojaei is a graduating 4th year student at UC Riverside double majoring in Art History and History. He has worked at the California Museum of Photography where he recently curated an exhibition and has been producing public programs for UCR ARTSblock through the Gluck Fellowship Program. Pejman has also participated in the Getty Multicultural Internship Program at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. He is interested in different dimensions of performance and participation within contemporary art and will be continuing his studies within Art History. Pejman would also like to thank Professor Susan Laxton for her support and mentorship throughout his research.

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The practice of participation within contemporary art has seen a great rise within the past two decades. Taking on aspects of performance and social engagement, viewers and audiences of the artwork have become integral players in the body of the work. Art historian Claire Bishop writes, “artists [are increasingly seeking] to create situations and events that invite spectators to become active participants, in dialogue both with their context and with each other.” Photography, especially, has embraced participation from process to installation. Participation, as it operates in the photographs of Gina Osterloh and Farrah Karapetian, combines aspects of performance, installation, and social engagement. These two artists’ images use different dimensions of participation to investigate identity roles and group formation within a larger context. The public’s role strategically tackles identity politics through the use of the body and the erasure of the face. The final image brings a sense of permanence to the temporal production process. These two artists’ work stands on the margins of more conventional definitions of participation, thus challenging stable notions of identity.

Osterloh’s practice is photographic, but it also incorporates aspects of installation, drawing, and performance. Contemporary photography practice today has initiated a movement where photography exists secondary to a more complex constructed body of work. Art historian George Baker describes photography as being “foreclosed, cashiered, abandoned—outmoded technologically and displaced aesthetically.”

Contemporary photography embraces the expanded field by using the multi-media capabilities of other modes of representation. Osterloh’s body of work consists of constructing large-scale, handmade sets lined with hand drawn patterned paper. In her most recent project at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), *Group Dynamics and Improper Light* (2012), Osterloh moved her studio into the main gallery of LACE. Every aspect was on display for the public, encouraging a dialogue between artist and audience.

This series engaged with the public, including project sponsors, gallery employees, visitors, and random pedestrians. Only the tracings of their shadows are present in the photographs. Osterloh outlined individual’s shadows

using a strongly cast light; due to the angle, the shadows were often oblique and abstracted the figural representation. The paper used for tracing and the set are identical, thus the figures became uniformly depicted and even further abstracted from initial recognition. Osterloh presented her participants as a cohort in a non-hierarchical order and photographed the set with the newly added figures. As seen in Figure 1, the final image has extremely flattened the background and foreground. The photograph challenges the viewer by colliding the lines of the set and the lines on the figures. The three-dimensional installation simmers down to a singular image.

Through the use of a large format camera, Osterloh captures more details of the set. The patterned paper forms an illusion, condensing the multiple layers of the photograph into just one. The positioning of the figures, juxtaposed with the pattern, creates a sense of continuity between the background, the set, the foreground, and the figures. From seated to standing figures, children waving to the elderly sitting and even to a person with a pair of crutches, all members of the community were invited to participate. Their faces and bodies, which act as markers of their identity, are completely masked by the patterned paper. Their subsequent uniformity defies signs of social inequality. Traditionally, within art, the benefactors and sponsors of an artwork are made visible within the narrative of the image as a display of economic status. Osterloh’s work criticizes the security of economic and social symbols by presenting not only the public supporting her work, but also the public viewing it.

Osterloh’s work proposes an attack on traditional portraiture. Kris Cohen comments on Osterloh’s reappropriation of this by saying that, “[her portraits] generate a different kind of realism, one in which vision connects less securely to knowledge, classification, and distinction. By flattening the difference between the materiality of representation and the materiality of things, bodies become scenic and the scene absorbs rather than presents its subjects.” Osterloh camouflages her public by rendering them wholly unidentifiable. They become part of the background and lose their own stance within the photograph. Osterloh describes this process as an act of resistance and a refusal to be named. It suggests the public exists within a larger setting and

context but is also inherently invisible and marginalized. This fugitive quality exposes the specific politics of identity interwoven within Osterloh's work. Because of the way that the public is represented—so starkly and with complete anonymity—the participants are treated as equals and their backgrounds and identities disappear. Erasing faces dissipates possible recognition, collapsing any stereotypes or anxieties associated with the groups and presenting a collective anonymous front standing as a construct for what comprises the larger public sphere. The masking of the public allows for the representation of a more egalitarian existence in Osterloh's photography.

Osterloh approaches representation passively, by refusing literal figural depiction. While she can be seen as manipulating her subjects through different modes of abstraction, she capitalizes on the negation of their visibility and incorporates chance into the field of representation. Members of the public appear veiled with the same abstracted pattern and they blend in not only with each other, but also into the background. The use of shadow within Osterloh's work allows for a "new technique of reproducing reality," more specifically for the person used, to live on but only veiled through certain markers of abstraction. The lack of physical presence brings a sense of universality where viewers of the final photograph are not restricted from a larger understanding of the concepts because of the re-contextualization of portraiture. Osterloh's project at LACE can be seen as debasing modernist notions of art viewership through the presentation of the larger public sphere in a non-hierarchical order within her practice and photography.

The use of shadow is also an integral part in Farrah Karapetian's *(Re)enacted* (2012) series. Karapetian's work includes reenactments of historical and more contemporary social and political events with the use of the public's participation during the production of the photographs. Straying away from traditional photography, Karapetian uses camera-less photography through the use of photograms. Through this, she explores the role of the pictorial space and its infusion with the sculptural space. By eliminating the camera, Karapetian uses light and shadow as the only proponents in creating a photograph. She obstructs visibility and forms narratives through this method of abstraction. Literal figural representation is completely replaced, due

to the nature of the photogram, with a more abstracted figural representation through the extreme use of shadows. In her studio practice and residency projects, Karapetian turned the space in which she was working into the camera by completely obstructing any light from entering the room and applying photographic paper to the walls. The participants would then pose in front of the paper in a very tableaux-vivant style and Karapetian would expose light. Their posed stances would then be made permanent onto the photographic paper, which would later be developed. The events that Karapetian chooses to reenact are those that have some type of sociopolitical pull within contemporary events.

The use of the public was essential in Karapetian's photograms. Throughout her residency at the East Los Angeles College, Karapetian used college students and trained them by showing iconographic images from past protests. By presenting images from previous protests, Karapetian was familiarizing the participants with the stances and poses they could take while at the same time presenting constructed notions of the identity of protesters through images from the media. As seen in Figure 2, the final image that is created is extremely pared down and abstracted. The image negates the participant's identities and through the use of their shadow, they are presented solely as flat planes of colors. The aesthetics of the original photograph/event are transformed into an extremely minimalistic quality where the recreation exists in a quasi-monochromatic format. Because of this level of abstraction the viewer is presented with an image that is less charged with historicity.

This abstraction allows for the viewer to be able to identify with the image on a more empathetic level. Lisa Cartwright explains, "the concept of empathetic identification is an alternative to the model of identification; it is tacitly based on the idea of feeling what the other feels, imagining oneself to be the other." Empathetic identification encourages the viewer to feel the "otherness" of the participants and facilitate those feelings within oneself. Upon viewing the photographs, the audience does not solely identify themselves with the actors and actions being depicted, but is able to experience the intersubjectivity and the multisensory feelings that are associated within the photograph.

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The events and moments being shown are reenactments from photographs of riots and protests, and it is through her photograms that Karapetian resurrects these moments to exist on a different sphere. Resurrection within photography, as described by Roland Barthes, does not necessarily cause for the event to come back to life through the photograph, but allows for its essence to still be able intact.

It acknowledges the death of the event depicted, and as forceful as it may be, reminds us of the agency held by its subject and our links and associations to those events and subjects. Barthes' thoughts on resurrection addresses the fact that the moment being depicted has in fact passed, but through the photograph the event is able to exist even after its departure. In Karapetian's photographs, by defamiliarizing the viewer from the actual event through the act of abstraction, the event becomes only visible through its shadows. The hyper-politicized meanings associated with it are lost; the photograph can then stand detached from the immediate politics of the event and address the issues of intersubjectivity.

The use of photograms aligns Karapetian's work closely with Osterloh's; they passively approach modes of representation and issues of identity. They create unspecific sets and rooms that do not allude to any particular location or ideology. By removing the setting from its specific context, they both construct a more utopian concept of their location and of identity. Karapetian's work, similar to Osterloh's, completely masks the participants identities through the erasure of their faces and allows for them to exist in an almost limbo stage where they are represented only through shadows and movements. By rendering the groups anonymous, the viewers are able to identify more closely with the image not only through empathetic identification, but also through projective identification.

The abstracted quality of the photograms and the lack of identity that follows leave the viewers with the power to project themselves directly on the photogram. This passive mode of representation—which is a stepping away from the authoritative position of the artist manipulating his or her subject—allows for a wider understanding and association of the image and the concepts that it is trying to achieve. For Karapetian's (*Re*)enacted series, the veiled

victims and oppressors exposes the universality of the nature of protest and the forced sentiments that one feels upon viewing the photograph. The concept of projective identification works closely with Barthes' ideas on the power of photography. Barthes writes, "photography, like all other representations whether linguistic or pictorial, communicates by means of culturally formed signs and symbols belonging to a socially shared image repertoire."

Our understanding and feelings towards the topic are ruled by our own knowledge and the influence of the media through its dissemination of images. What one feels upon viewing the image is something that has been constructed within us long before the image was ever presented. Due to the fact that the viewers are able to project themselves onto the photogram, the feelings and sentiments that haunt our own understanding of the image becomes that much more powerful due to our entrance into the work of art.

Osterloh and Karapetian both use participation within their photography to address issues of identity and representation. Through different dimensions of passivity, they create utopic and almost fantastical notions of what identity could be and different ways it can be represented. The theoretical approaches that inform their work intersect with the concept of post-identity.

Post-identity's primary assertion is that identity is a construction and that within a contemporary society, our understanding of identity should exist outside the sphere of sociopolitical influence. Identity should not be influenced by race, gender, sexuality, etc., and should be much more organic and personal in its formation.

The theory itself is flawed; admitting that society is "post-identity" is a heavy statement that holds little to no truth within the contemporary culture of today. It debases previous notions of identity politics that were so prevalent before and loses legitimacy for that very reason. Post-identity provides a "too-good-to-be-true" way of thinking that is lacking conceptual depth. However there are certain parts that can be applied to the works of Osterloh and Karapetian. The concept itself can be seen as being liberating and removing pre-constructed notions of identity out of our minds within their photographs. Within art, these utopian concepts of the post-identity

form alternate approaches to reality that provide conceptual solutions to the politics associated with the body and identity. These alternate realities allow for a conceptual reimagining to take place within the visual discourse of art.

Osterloh and Karapetian both take similar approaches to identity but their end goals are somewhat different. Osterloh's work debases modernist paradigms of art viewership through the presentation of the larger public sphere in a non-hierarchical order within her practice and photography. She collides different social classes, "art world" and "non-art world" people to stand singularly. She approaches post-identity by stating within her photographs that even though the people represented are all different, their identities are societal constructs. Karapetian, by making events anonymous and employing shadow, enacts both empathetic and projective identification. In this way, she examines the role of protest culture for participants and viewers. By making her subjects anonymous, Karapetian de-politicizes protest events and places them outside a specific cultural context. These two artists take on more traditional notions of identity politics and repackage them using different strategies, which allow for them to envision a more utopian concept of identity construction.

Osterloh and Karapetian's grasp of identity politics and the formation of post-identity thoughts comes from, and is extremely contingent on, the participation of the public within their work. Participation generally requires the involvement of the audience or viewer of the art to take action, thus enacting the action in consort with the art. Osterloh and Karapetian use different dimensions of participation during the production of the artwork to create the action that is so very central to the larger thematic message. Contemporary art is continually evolving and addressing different issues that have some type of gravity within our collective culture. Participation allows for the artists and the public to interact with the material in a different way and it enables a larger critical discourse to occur within the context of art.



*Figure 1:* Gina Osterloh, *New Family of Chance*, 2012, 25x30 inches, archival photograph



*Figure 2:* Farrah Karapetian, *Riot Police*, 2011, 9x13 feet, unique chromogenic photograph from performance

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## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Bishop, "Viewers as Producers," in *Participation*.
- <sup>2</sup> Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field," 123
- <sup>4</sup> Cohen, *Body Prop*
- <sup>5</sup> Mizota, "The Space Between: Gina," KCET Artbound. In an interview with Sharon Mizota, Gina Osterloh states that the obfuscation of the identity through the use of the patterned paper negates the participant's visibility and brings forth a fugitive quality of hiding in the shadows.
- <sup>6</sup> Stoichita, *Short History of Shadow*, 189
- <sup>7</sup> Modernist notions of art include self-reflexivity, medium-specificity, harboring the genius of the artist, etc. Osterloh's work denies all of that through the exposure of her studio practice, the use of multiple mediums, and the non-autonomous nature of her photography with the gallery visitors and walk-in's.
- <sup>8</sup> Chou, "ELAC Space Shows Art That's," EGP News.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>10</sup> Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship*, 2
- <sup>11</sup> Intersubjectivity relates to the psychological relationship between people and according to Edmund Husserl, also conjures up elements of empathy that allows for the viewer, in the case of these photographs, to observe the figures represented as subjects rather than objects.
- <sup>12</sup> Barthes, "Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography," in *Philosophers on Art*, 196
- <sup>13</sup> Projective identification, as defined by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein—in the context of Karapetian's photographs—is when the viewer casts forward feelings that they have associated with the event being depicted but cannot access them normally outside the confines of the photograph.
- <sup>14</sup> Barthes, "Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography," in *Philosophers on Art*, 202
- <sup>15</sup> Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity*, 216  
"Post-identity is the claim that race and ethnicity are no longer factors that affect social, material, economic, and political circumstances and to demonstrate that identification is individually determined, culturally and socially constructed, and, above all, not political."
- <sup>16</sup> Roof, "Thinking Post-Identity"