

'Meeting differently': Indian Independence Day celebrations in the digital diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Highly programmed, digitally-enabled outdoor public spaces for social gathering and cultural performance are now common features of urban environments. These spaces are popular because of their low barriers to entry, and because they facilitate casual, serendipitous encounters between a range of different publics. Entering one of these spaces is to inhabit an 'ambient' participatory mode: multi-centred, mobile and multi-sensory, conforming neither to the formal viewing experience of 'the audience', nor to the casual, distracted disposition of 'the street'. Their success in terms of widening public engagement and stimulating urban vitality has informed major policy shifts in creativity-led urban regeneration and creative place-making. However, a deeper understanding of the kind of cultural participation they shape eludes prevailing critical and evaluative frameworks. This article is based around a large-scale event celebrating India's 70th year of Independence held at Melbourne's Federation Square. We use ambience as a conceptual tool to expand common notions of cultural participation, revealing the complex socio-spatial relationships that coalesce through the event. Capturing 'ambient participation' reveals, in Paul Carter's (2005) terms, the potential of these networked spaces to 'model a different kind of political community, to open up a place of meeting differently' that exceeds the celebratory rhetoric around global mass culture, normative frameworks of multiculturalism, and romantic notions of community.

1. Preamble

On Saturday 12 August an event to mark India's 70th year of Independence is held at Melbourne's Federation Square. Every inch of the space is packed with people. Most are of Indian background and have likely travelled a long way from the outer, south-eastern suburbs where many from Melbourne's Indian community have settled since arriving in Australia (City of Greater Dandenong, 2017). The crowd is concentrated upon the Square's large screen and the stage below, where the event's biggest drawcard, guest of honour, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, is speaking. The former Miss World and international Bollywood star is in a dazzling white gown, one arm around her young daughter. Around this luminous pair, officiating and making welcoming remarks, is a collection of foreign dignitaries and drab governmental officials, including Melbourne's Lord Mayor, the Indian Consul General, the Indian High Commissioner to Australia, and the Victorian Minister for Narre Warren North (see Fig.1).

You can stitch together a sense of the full event experience through the hundreds of videos uploaded to YouTube. The most watched feature

the official speeches. Others show the Bollywood dance competition, which formed part of the proceedings and was sponsored and live-streamed by Telstra, Australia's largest telecommunications provider. The most dynamic videos film the moment when Aishwarya Rai and her daughter sweep through the crowd to the centre of the Square. Aishwarya raises the Indian flag and sings India's national anthem, her face tilted upward in patriotic devotion. A shower of tickertape fills the screen, bathing the tightly bunched crowd in a paper mist of green, white and orange. Most remarkable in this amateur footage is the visible density of digital devices circulating around the primary action. Your eye is drawn to countless small screens, tablets, phones and digital cameras held high over the crowd of heads, a spontaneous choreography rising at moments of high ceremony or drama, falling and rising again in a monitorial wave. If you are watching the event on YouTube, you might note the circularity of vision here: the moment of digital capture viewed through the captured footage itself, digital and human eyes bound together across time and space.

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2. Introduction

The celebration of Indian Independence Day at Federation Square is a complex event that lends itself to a range of disciplinary framings.¹ It would be entirely appropriate to consider it through the lens of digital engagement (Budge & Burness, 2018), or through the growing field of mobile media and screen studies (Gómez Cruz & Sumartojo, 2018; Hjorth, 2007; McQuire, 2016; Papastergiadis et al., 2016). Equally, it could be viewed through the parameters of state multiculturalism as a performance of cultural difference and migrant inclusion in the nation (Jakubowicz & Moustafine, 2010). Rather than subscribing to any one of these disciplinary frameworks however, Indian Independence Day is being examined here, not only as a celebration of cultural difference, and not only to exemplify new practices of mediation in public, but as an opportunity to grasp something of the expanded profile of participation in public spaces today.

This expansion in the material conditions and subjective experience of culture in public spaces is conceptualised here as ‘ambient participation’. Drawing on related studies (Papastergiadis et al. 2016, 2020; Yue, 2021), we argue that ambient participation expands understanding of the participatory potential of public space, capturing something of the iterative and relational dynamics involved in the formation of publics in the media-saturated, socially-networked and culturally programmed spaces that are increasingly centres of public culture in contemporary cities. The term *ambience* has been employed descriptively by media

scholars to communicate how the designed interfaces of twenty-first century urbanism influence subjective experience. ‘The ambient’, says McCullough (2013), ‘suggests some recognition of a whole, like noticing a forest and not just the trees’ (17). Ambient conditions create new forms of embodiment, and alter the feedback between modes of awareness, information and environment.

Ambient participation might be understood as a by-product of the ambient urban environments that McCullough and others describe (see Arnold & Levin, 2010; Jaaniste, 2010; McQuire, 2016). We use the term to draw attention to the expanded spatio-temporality, modes of awareness, and channels of informational exchange that shape how culture is experienced in public space today. One effect of the expansion of urban cultural experience is a confounding of *cultural value*. Ambience participation blurs the categories of cultural production and circulation that have historically informed the way we account for culture (Bennett, 1998; MacDowall et al., 2016). Sociological studies of the arts and culture argue that classification defines how culture is valued (Bennett et al., 1999; Wolff, 1993). Socially constructed distinctions – between low and high-brow culture, between popular and elite, or mainstream and minority cultural forms, between commercial and state subsidised culture – have informed how culture is administered and resourced, and this in turn has influenced how culture has been differentially and unequally socially distributed (Bennett et al., 1999). Ambient participation throws these stratified classifications and distinctions into question: anthropological, aesthetic, national and global definitions of culture are



Fig. 1. Screen shot from YouTube video: Aishwarya Rai raises Indian flag to celebrate Indian Independence Day at Federation Square. Video by Abhishek Thakral.

¹ Indian Independence Day at Federation Square was held on Saturday 12 August 2017.

all relevant to its reception and interpretation, and yet each alone can only partially capture its significance. In the open public spaces where people congregate, socialise and engage with culture, new networks of mediation, social connection and curation confound the categories that

usually organise both cultural and political understandings of participation. For Indian Independence Day, an event that was at once a diasporic national ritual, civic festival, expression of global popular fandom, local community performance, and node in a transnational network, participation assumes an unwieldy status. Such an event clearly draws on discourses of state multiculturalism and social cohesion, which promote participation as a way of managing difference in the nation (Victorian Government, 2018). But it can also be examined through a cosmopolitan perspective in which participation performs multiple belongings (Gilbert & Lo, 2007). In this sense, attempting to understand Indian Independence Day through the concept of ambient participation expands common notions of access to culture, while at the same time, destabilises the criteria for evaluating the performance of cultural spaces and determining their value to public life and social policy objectives.

In arguing for constructive engagement with ambient participation, this article seeks neither a retreat into a melancholic critique of the loss of bourgeois notions of cultural purity, nor adopts a celebratory mode of anti-elitism and diasporic vitalism. Rather, we seek to understand the implications of this kind of participation for the ways we recognise and govern the emergent forms of sociality arising from a culturally diverse, digitally networked world. This aim informs our methodology. Cultural precincts like Federation Square are increasingly being evaluated through metric-dominated cultural and economic impact studies, often conducted by private cultural consultancies (Phiddian et al., 2017). Such studies claim to measure cultural impact through the aggregation of participants' individuated judgements or sentiments – whether these are captured through customised surveys or through the scraping of social media data. Although widely adopted by the funders and managers of cultural precincts, these methods fail to capture the emergent forms of cultural life, which, we feel are most crucial about these spaces. In addition to reducing impact to a static moment detached both from the layered history of place and the 'initial conditions' which brought the space into being (Carter, 2005), cultural impact studies cannot account for the relational nature of participation. We argue that the 'impact' of ambient participation is more than the collective sum of individual experiences. Rather, it resides somewhere in the dynamic, mediated interactions between people, sensory stimuli and environmental setting (Wyatt et al., 2021).

For this reason, constructive engagement with ambient participation requires a mixed methods approach, which, in conversation with theoretical accounts of ambience, can reveal its relational qualities. We employ here a combination of digital ethnography, policy analysis, content analysis, and interviews with some of the key stakeholders who designed both the physical, and governance structures of Federation Square. Importantly, interviewing participants of Indian Independence Day itself was outside the scope of this research. Such data would support insights into the socio-political significance of ambient participation: What it means for a minority community to be centred within a multifaceted celebration in public space and how public celebration relates to a broader politics of inclusion and exclusion; Whether participants' intense social media exchanges fostered a new, hybrid sense of community, or reinforced an existing ethno-cultural form of belonging. Our methods do not address these questions. What they can demonstrate however, is the way that ambient participation emerges through interactions between formal (top down, professional) and informal (bottom up, vernacular) practices to create a new kind of cultural engagement. Architectural design, institutional policy, and curatorial practice interact with existing forms of community performance and emerging social media practices, with the potential of bringing new kinds of publics into being.

Identifying these interactions is central to how this article makes a contribution to wider scholarly understandings of the participatory potential of cultural precincts. While governments and investors often promote their value in terms of building community or enhancing civic belonging, cultural precincts have largely been dismissed as sterile and

elitist (Tregear, 2014), 'creating spaces of middle-class consumption and enclaves of exclusivity' (Stevenson, 2004, p. 122). Rather than affirming either one of these positions, our multiple data sources help to reveal a more complex account of the interplay between social objectives, commercial value and cultural production. We use Paul Carter's (2005) phrase 'meeting differently' to deflect from the idea that a space like Federation Square simply reaffirms existing notions of community, publicness, or culture. For a country like Australia, increasingly interconnected with the Asia-Pacific as an economic trading partner and local diasporic community (Rizvi & Louie, 2016), spaces which anticipate meeting differently, might stage conditions for the recognition of more complex forms of belonging and exchange than are available in official national or policy narratives. In particular, analysing Indian Independence Day reveals how intersecting networks of mediated communication wove Melbourne into the Asia-Pacific: not as a pre-existing geo-political location, but, as an 'ongoing process, a contested project with uncertain outcomes' (Ang, 2013, p. 4). We first make an account of Federation Square and the conditions of emergence that laid the foundations for ambient participation. Second, we elaborate the dynamics of ambient participation and suggest its utility for analysis. Finally, we apply these analytical insights to the Indian Independence Day event, revealing how it exceeds and confounds available frameworks for cultural measurement and evaluation.

3. Federation Square

Opened in 2002 at the southern tip of Melbourne's central business district, Federation Square is a public artwork, cultural precinct and an experiment in architectural design. Designed by Bates Smart and LAB Architecture, with direct reference to the post-representational style of Daniel Libeskind, the space features a public open plaza surrounded by a deliberately disjointed patchwork of buildings. These host several major cultural institutions as well as a variety of commercial tenancies including bars, cafés, restaurants and specialty shops. The space is playful and rich in suggestion. To walk upon the gently undulating sandstone tiles of the public plaza is also to trace the patterns of movement and imaginative connection inscribed in Paul Carter's artwork, *Nearamnew* Fig. 2. This artwork features recessed text set within a larger whorling pattern formed by the marbled colours of the Kimberley sandstone paving. The pattern reflects both Indigenous bark etchings of the flooding waters of Lake Tyrrell in Victoria's Mallee region, and the night sky of the southern hemisphere (Carter, 2005). The buildings surrounding this metaphoric lake and sky are sheathed in a flinty skin of stone and metal. With their odd angles, the sheer chasms separating surfaces, the design follows Libeskind's aesthetics of non-linearity, echoing his expression of complexity and randomness. The effect denies the visitor a coherent sense of structure or inherited form, instead opening up multiple lines of passage and movement that feel somehow improvised.

Federation Square was named to commemorate the federating of states in 1901 that became modern Australia. One of the new nation's first acts was to legislate the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, restricting non-Anglo European migration, which become the foundation of the 'White Australia Policy' (Gibson, 2002, p. 153; Morleton-Robinson, 2015, xii). In his account of *Nearamnew* Carter (2005) elaborates how, rather than commemorating the historical event of Federation, the Square's naming cued a more open-ended exploration of what federating means as a system of governance. '[G]lobal, regional and local decision-making processes weave through one another. Entering into a dependent relationship with one another, individually weak units gain strength to be different – and independent' (4). He writes how the Yarra River, which borders Federation Square, is itself a significant site of Indigenous federalism.

I showed that, before the Yarra was banked and its adjoining swamplands were drained, the local water economy had been

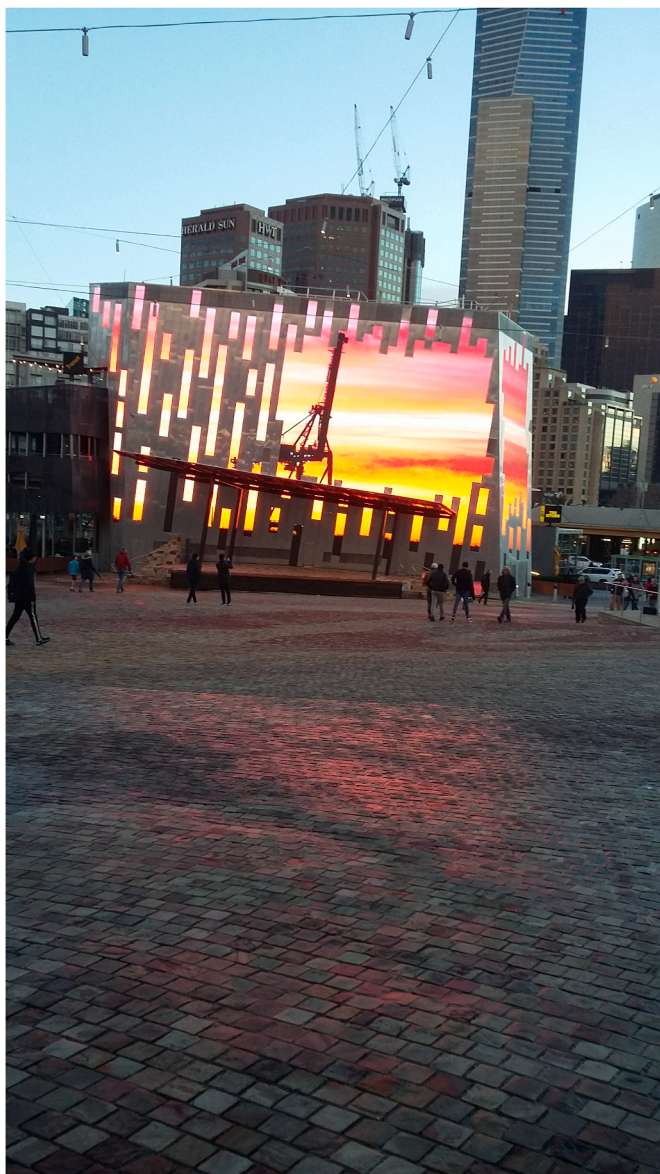


Fig. 2. Federation Square depicting the large screen and part of the whorl pattern of *Nearamnew* which comprises the ground design of the main plaza. Photograph by Danielle Wyatt.

federal, global inundations intermittently overflowing to feed and preserve a network of local creeks, waterholes and billabongs. I pointed out that the former political and social organisation of the Kulin peoples of central Victoria had been federal. The Federation Square site was an extra-territorial space set aside for inter-tribal business, a pre-Federation ‘Canberra’. (14)

Invoking the logic of this history of pre-colonial governance (rather than simply representing a lost past), Carter’s design intentions depart from the representational tropes and commemorative devices that conventionally confer meaning to public spaces. In *Dark Writing* (2009) he suggests that the design and planning traditions of colonial Australia have followed a pattern of erasure. Place is treated as a tabular rasa upon which to write a history of colonial progress. ‘To erase is to destroy by additional covering: they coat the surface of a whitewashed official tablet anew, and, once the lines condemned to disappear are covered up, there is a space ready for a new text (39)’. Resisting this tradition, Carter’s contribution to the design of Federation Square sought to make visible the connections between this place and the histories of

movement, marking and governance that have brought it into being: not only the territorial distribution of the Kulin nations, but also, their cosmic reflection in the southern sky. An oblique connection might be made to Indian Independence Day which begins by recognising its non-inevitability. It is not insignificant that an event celebrating Indian nationhood should be staged in a public space named for the very moment of non-white exclusion from the nation. Ambient awareness – ‘some recognition of a whole, like noticing a forest and not just the trees’ (McCullough, 2013, p. 17) – animates relationships otherwise excised or marginalised from public memory. It is in this sense that Federation Square was intended, as Carter suggests, to ‘model a different kind of political community, to open up a place of *meeting differently*’ (2005, 9, our emphasis).

As a proposition, ‘meeting differently’ is more than symbolic. It flows over into some of the more quotidian and practical elements of the space. Featuring one of the world’s first public large screens, Federation Square pioneered a new way of relation to the urban environment, seeking to combine an open public plaza, digital assets, and public programming, within a multifaceted precinct of cultural institutions and commercial venues (Papastergiadis et al., 2016). Federation Square brackets one end of Melbourne’s Southbank precinct, a cluster of theatres, galleries, recital centres, concert halls and arts schools that form the institutional centre of Melbourne’s reputation as a world-renown city of culture (Yue et al., 2014). It holds more than 1600 events a year (Federation Square 2016, 5) and over its seventeen years of existence has hosted elite arts festivals, small community events, public protests, vigils, public ceremonies and celebrations, public screenings of sporting events, commercial marketing campaigns, corporate events, and experimental public art installations and performances. Large-scale events like Indian Independence Day sit within a spectrum of use, from incidental, unscripted micro encounters at the scale of the individual, to mass gatherings involving highly curated, choreographed and deliberate cultural engagement.

While Federation Square frequently hosts large-scale events, it is more commonly sparsely populated, with modest cultural, community or commercial offerings dispersed thinly across the plaza. A pilot ethnographic study indicates that people are attracted to the ‘open-ness’ of this space (Papastergiadis et al., 2020). They wait and pass the time. They use the free WiFi or post photographs of themselves on social media. A few might notice the whorling pattern of *Nearamnew*, but most are not there for a ‘cultural experience’. Rather, culture is encountered distractedly and incidentally in the flow of other intentions: an art installation glimpsed between bursts of conversation; an image on the large screen catching your eye as you wait for a friend; a community festival you pass on your way to another destination.

Federation Square’s proximity to the city’s central transportation hub and its open-ness to Melbourne’s iconic city laneways contributes to its participatory qualities. According to Don Bates, one of the lead architects of Federation Square (transcript 2018), the space was designed as a ‘compound figure’ rather than a discrete and enclosed structure. The architects developed a porous design with ‘lots of edges’ that would allow arts and cultural activity to ‘bleed into other things’. Since the 1950s and 1960s, the construction of arts precincts has been dominated by an ‘enclave’ mentality, which separates culture from the activities of everyday life. Bates notes that the arts precincts of Melbourne, Brisbane and London:

they’re all on the Southbank. And then you can look at places like the Lincoln Centre, or the Kennedy Centre in Washington, again, these clear, distinct enclave conditions where the notion, primarily of kind of elitist art production and reception is seen as necessarily not part of the city, as if the city’s commerce and day to day transaction of the city is a contamination to the purity of the art. (Bates, 2018).

By contrast,

The good thing for us about Federation Square is it's part of the city. It's not in the grid, I mean that's a different condition that we dealt with from a design point of view, but effectively by being on the north side of the Yarra [River] it's really embedded or at least incredibly adjacent to the city as a place of business transaction and so forth. (Bates, 2018).

Federation Square was in step with other social and cultural shifts taking place in Melbourne during the 1990s. Bates describes a city that was becoming increasingly 'alfrescoed', where the street was more than just a conduit to get somewhere, but was becoming 'actually a destination in its own right' (transcript 2018). At the same time, the City of Melbourne was undergoing substantial demographic change. A government-led plan to repopulate the inner city with residential dwellers brought new life and stimulated a night-time economy to what had been a dreary, nine-to-five office and retail centre (Shaw, 2014).

In addition, cultural policy began, gradually, to recognise and support programs of cultural participation beyond funding the hard infrastructure of elite arts institutions. Kate Brennan, former CEO of Federation Square, was, in a prior role responsible for writing the City of Melbourne's cultural policy. The new policy 'went from treating art as an object, to something which was really about the expression of the social energy that fills and drives the community' (Brennan transcript 2018). At a state level, Victoria's state arts policy, *Creative Capacity +*, released in 2003, recognised Federation Square as 'herald[ing] a new phase of our cultural life consistent with Victoria's growing reputation in new media, innovation and the arts as part of the knowledge economy' (Arts Victoria, 2003, p. 6). One of the policy's three overarching strategic goals was to create 'a culture of participation', enacted through the development of creative communities – identified particularly as culturally diverse communities, youth, and regional and rural communities (Arts Victoria, 2003, p. 12). This was consistent with a growing emphasis in arts policy on diversifying 'arts audiences beyond the educated middle classes who have consistently been key consumers of art in western societies' (Noble & Ang, 2018, p. 298).

Concurrent with a growing policy emphasis on expanding access to culture, Federation Square reflected global trends in recalibrating public culture through the discourse of creative industries. Where public culture had historically been funded to bind a nationally imagined community, creative industries policies refracted public culture through an economic lens, articulated to the development of new markets and programs of urban revitalisation (Cunningham, 2002; Luckman, 2018; O'Connor, 2016). These social and policy shifts ushered in new formats and spaces for engaging with culture and the arts. Cultural activity was released from the 'enclave' of the institution and dispersed more widely across the city where it would be encountered by new publics. As in the culture-led development programs of the UK and North America, culture has become integral to the economic competitiveness of the creative city where it has become linked to city branding and lifestyle consumption. Recontextualised in this way, conceptions of culture have shifted from modernist ideals of aesthetic autonomy and Enlightenment notions of distinction, to associations with sociability, play and pleasure.

This redistribution of culture has been subject to familiar critiques. Debates condemning the instrumentalising of the arts for urban regeneration and as a catalyst to increase middle-class consumption are well-rehearsed (Luckman, 2018; Stevenson, 2004; Zukin, 1991). Federation Square could easily fall within this critique. The Square is managed by a hybrid public/private company with the state being the single shareholder and a board authorised to manage the public asset independent of government funding (Matthew Jones transcript 2018; Yue et al., 2014). One of the unique features of Federation Square at the time of its design however was the refusal of a binary logic that envisioned either a commercial precinct or an elite cultural enclave. It was envisaged that the balance between cultural activities and commercial interests would be moderated by a Civic and Cultural Charter, that was not only instrumental in the design brief for the project, but has an ongoing role

in shaping 'the civic and cultural community aspirations for the Square' (Brennan transcript 2018; see also Federation Square, 2013).

For one of its co-authors, Kate Brennan, the Charter 'described the role that Federation Square needed to play in nurturing and developing the civic and cultural life' of Melbourne (transcript 2018):

How do we engage with community? How do we provide a platform for multiculturalism? How do we get sufficient leasing in place to make sure that we've got enough funds to do that? [...] How do we get our tenants to behave in a way that is different from behaving in the main street? How do we start making all of these things work to be a place which is going to be the civic and community heart of Melbourne? (Brennan, 2018).

For Brennan, if Federation Square was the 'heart of Melbourne', its lifeblood was the existing practices, ceremonies and celebrations of the city's multicultural communities:

I think when we got to the point as a team at Fed Square, trying to think about what does a public space, mean, our reference was probably enriched much more strongly by the experience of multiculturalism in the city. It was almost as if people from different cultural backgrounds and their celebrations and practices almost erupted into Fed Square. And Fed Square was there, and the Thai community wanted to come and have its festival there. And Buddha's birthday. It seemed to be a logical place to have a civic celebration of Buddha's birthday. And that kind of vivid, energetic celebration of both cultural practice and, I'll use the word spirituality rather than religion, for a lot of multicultural groups really almost self-defined how this space might respond. So some of the things were really good that happened at Federation Square almost happened a bit accidentally. It's like you open a bridge and people will walk across it. Federation Square opened, and people did stuff. (Brennan, 2018)

Importantly, Brennan's account inverts narratives of the top-down relationship between state-sponsored culture and expressions of cultural diversity. In these narratives, it is state policies around 'access and participation', and the programs and facilities funded under these agendas, that create the space for diverse constituencies to participate in culture (Gibson, 2001; Hawkins, 1993). In Brennan's recollection, it was the impetus of 'people from different cultural backgrounds' – their celebrations, rituals and everyday practices – that 'almost erupted' into Federation Square and 'self-defined how this space might respond'. Brennan aptly captures the subterranean space 'community', (particularly multicultural community) cultural activity has historically occupied within the prevailing hierarchy of cultural value: marginalised within public funding structures (Hawkins, 1993), excluded from formal networks of recognition (Gertsakis, 1994), and separated from what counts as 'mainstream' cultural participation (Noble & Ang, 2018, p. 298). It was this 'vivid, energetic', yet undervalued culture that shaped the corporeal and common notions of what participation looked like in Federation Square and forged what the space would come to mean to a wider public. Importantly, what Brennan and others could not have anticipated is the degree to which these participants would also become vehicles for the embodied tools of digital communication and active agents in the virtual platforms of dissemination that mark a networked public culture.

Two general observations follow from these origin stories. First, the expanded participation that Federation Square invites is neither exclusively bottom-up nor top-down. In many ways, it is an unexceptional space that simply formalises (through design, cultural policy, and institutional practice) cultural activity already occurring organically, 'on the street' and in the community. Second, these origin stories have bearing upon how we constitute the relationship between an event like Indian Independence Day (the particular) and ambient participation in general. As 'eruptions' of cultural activity into a prominent public space, individual events become, not only exemplars of ambient participation, but *constitutive* of it. As they accumulate in public memory, they write

the space into being, and in this writing, tell a different story about the city and its inhabitants. It is in this sense that we might say that Federation Square models Carter's vision of federalism: it is less a platform upon which diverse actors appear, than a weaving infrastructure that enables complex relationships and processes to 'weave through one another', giving weaker actors – like diasporic communities historically relegated to the cultural margins – the 'strength to be different – and independent' (2005, 4).

4. What is ambient participation?

A 2011 study of annual visitation levels across Melbourne's Southbank Precinct indicates that visitation at Federation Square was almost as high as the visitation levels for all of the other enclosed arts venues combined ([Infrastructure Victoria, 2016](#)). We can infer from this data that these open, out-door settings are increasingly popular with publics. Correspondingly, the cultural encounters that occur here should attract similar critical attention to those of the museum or gallery. They should inform the broader interpretive frameworks through which we measure cultural participation and articulate the value of culture ([Belfiore, 2015](#); [Bennett et al., 1999](#); [MacDowall et al., 2016](#)). However, this participation has not been given due critical attention – neither for the ways it challenges prevailing frameworks for accounting for culture, nor for its potential to shape a more inclusive and relevant public sphere ([Papastergiadis & Wyatt, 2019](#); [Yue, 2021](#)).

Discussions of cultural participation have traditionally been confined to public institutions like libraries, galleries and museums. The design and arrangement of objects and performances within these institutional settings have long conditioned expectations of the Western cultural experience. Drawing from Foucault, Tony [Bennett \(1998\)](#) has argued that, since the nineteenth century, these spaces have functioned as disciplinary technologies, conscripting publics into dominant narratives of empire, nation and civilisation, and canonical understandings of culture and 'great art'. These metanarratives are instilled through the way participation is choreographed via a range of physical features, from text panels on a museum wall, to the unidirectional screen of a cinema, to the clear threshold between foyer and gallery, or between commercial and cultural spaces. These features direct the gaze, muffle the voice, and regulate the body through pre-determined, linear flows of movement that combine to govern interpretation and impart a unified narrative. Navigating these spaces requires specific cultural knowledge and a conditioned understanding of the conventions of behaviour and reflection that constitute the cultural experience. Despite their status as public institutions offering universal access, the embodied cultural knowledge required of visitors to these spaces makes them, in Bourdieu's terms, markers of cultural capital, and as such, truly accessible only to an exclusive audience ([Bennett et al., 1999](#), p. 230).

Significantly however, elite galleries around the world have begun to recognise and respond to the broad public appeal of new formats of cultural exhibition that depart from the formalities of the traditional gallery experience. Organised around spectacle and entertainment, these formats blur distinctions between elite and popular culture, involve programming beyond the white cube gallery space, and invite interaction with the artwork through 'Insta-friendly installations' ([Suess & Budge, 2018](#)). In 2013, *Melbourne Now* marked the first of this style of exhibition at Melbourne's premier art gallery, the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). *Melbourne Now* pioneered a different kind of blockbuster, one which was free to the public, showcased a wide array of local and contemporary art, and incorporated art into open-air festival-style programming.² While the NGV has highlighted the participatory appeal of this kind of cultural engagement through raw metrics – the hashtag

#Melbourne Now was used over 20,000 times; 500,000 feet danced on the dance floor ([NGV, 2014](#)) – there has been little institutional or critical attention to what is distinct about this engagement. It is thus all the more important to attend to the specific dynamics of ambient participation in order to apprehend how they give shape to, or reveal, new forms of public culture beyond institutional and governmental frameworks of understanding.

The media-saturated, informal and semi-permeable qualities of spaces like Federation Square (or an exhibition like *Melbourne Now*) involve very different knowledges, expectations of sociality, and conventions of movement to the traditional gallery. In external, networked environments, points of focus and paths of movement become more fragmented and more complex. Participation flows across a hybrid plain of digital and physical platforms, involves deliberate and incidental encounters, and a blurring of social, commercial and cultural activity. We can situate this kind of participation within a rich body of contemporary urban and media scholarship. Scholars in screen studies ([McQuire, 2008, 2016](#); [Papastergiadis 2016](#); [Gómez and Sumartojo 2018](#)), mobile and social media studies ([Goggin, 2013](#); [Greif et al., 2012](#); [Hjorth, 2013](#); [Papacharissi, 2014](#)) and studies of ambient urbanism ([Jaanieste, 2010](#); [McCullough, 2013](#)) have sketched various outlines for the way networked, digital technologies have reconfigured the spatiality and temporality of urban experience, rerouting the flows of communication, affect and intimacy that shape social relationships and organise public expression.

Within this literature ambience emerges as a concept involving three interlinked dimensions. First, ambience presents an expanded cartography of urban experience, stretching the terrain within which participation happens. Crossing over the threshold of physical and digital space, the cartography of ambience lacks a singular authoritative viewpoint and instead introduces multiple vantages for the participant or observer. Informational and interpersonal exchange is dispersed across physical space, public screens and individual mobile devices (each with their own multiple platforms), creating a spatiality that accommodates multiple intersecting and competing plains of activity. Second, ambience presents a new temporality of experience involving simultaneity and co-presence: media and mediation is intrinsic to the experience of urban space, and not a belated by-product, disseminated after the fact. The immediacy of mediation produces an urban environment that is 'a "relational space"' where 'images, experiences, and things are deeply interconnected' ([Papastergiadis et al., 2016](#), p. 213). This relationality creates a recursive environment, generating real-time feedback loops through which practices of mediation become co-constitutive of the event or experience itself ([McQuire, 2016](#)). Finally, the cartographic and temporal dimensions of ambient environments create a new phenomenology of experience. In [McQuire's](#) words (2016), examining the interweaving of publics with digital media we might 'elaborate new experiences of "becoming public" that emerge at the junction of digital networks, embodied actors and urban places' (95). This 'becoming public' might relate to the way networked spaces expand the composition of publics beyond face-to-face forms of presence. But it might also refer to the (inter)-subjective experiences of public-ness: the qualities of feeling, sensing and acting that characterise participation in highly mediated, iterative settings. Ambient environments make qualitative changes to the experience of being-together-in-public. They create on the one hand, opportunities for an expanded or intensified sense of sociality and engagement, and on the other, disperse attention more thinly across a multitude of shifting sensory inputs ([McCullough, 2013](#), Chapter 3).

The multi-dimensionality of ambient participation makes it difficult to account for in the instrumental methods – like footfall measurement or cultural and economic impact studies – routinely used by government, cultural institutions and commercial stakeholders to evaluate the impact of cultural infrastructure. Such methods, and others, like satisfaction surveys of audiences, or the audience segmentation and brand recognition indicators tested by market research, are insufficient for

² This style of programming has now become recurrent within the NGV through a Triennial of contemporary art first held in 2017/2018 and again in 2021.

capturing the distributed nature of ambient participation. They say nothing of the relational effects, or meanings attributed to the participatory experience. These limitations are recognised by managers, curators and designers of cultural precincts. Brett Wood-Gush, principal urban designer at the Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority, responsible for the design of a new cultural precinct in Perth, expressed his frustration thus: 'I have always thought that there must be more to (city) life than this. Picking two days and counting people moving in space and marking their stationary positions; then relating that to quality of space' (private communication 2017).

As Audrey Yue (2021) has argued, new methods are needed to test the claims by funders and government of the 'transformative capacities' of these spaces, whether they 'enhance place-based belonging' or 'foster stronger communities' (166). Extending upon this, we are interested in the more open-ended question of how to make visible the new publics taking shape in the culturally heterogeneous and networked public spaces of a city in the Asia-Pacific. The public that 'presences' at Indian Independence Day productively exceeds the multicultural framing of diversity that has historically sanctioned and delimited the public expressions of non-Anglo celebration in the nation. But how we attribute value to this public is ambiguous. Conscripted into urban development agendas, circuits of global marketing, and networks of political diplomacy, the entangled nature of this cultural performance challenges both normative bourgeois definitions of culture, and social democratic claims for the public value of cultural participation. In short, if the Indian Independence Day event can only be grasped according to already established categories, then the emergent activities that blur or exceed these conventions will be dismissed or ignored. To illustrate this tension and dissonance, we map the different forms of engagement occurring at and around this heavily attended event, identifying how ambient participation exceeds the methods, tools and concepts through which cultural participation is routinely understood.

5. Indian Independence Day

The dispersed, hybrid and mobile organisation of public participation apprehensible at Indian Independence Day reflects three dimensions of ambience: the cartographic, temporal, and phenomenological. Here, participation happens across the subjective realm of embodied encounter, the infrastructure of built space, and the mediated digital platforms, that collectively encompass real-time feedback between live and mediated experience. It is an environment that creates the conditions for an ambiguous kind of participation, one in which the public is at once present in the moment and distracted, and in which public behaviour shifts between conventions of audience, co-producer, market and publicity machine.

The cartography of this experience can be described through a range of intersecting socio-spatial dynamics. While the live audience appears, at a superficial glance, to be a gathering of Melbourne's Indian community, this community is also constituted through its engagement in a range of relational networks. As a celebration of Indian nationhood, Indian Independence Day directly appeals to diasporic Indian communities, addressed through official national ceremony and formally marked by the presence of the Consul General and High Commissioner. Reportage of the event featured in the local Indian media (Jabbal, 2017) but also in Melbourne's daily mainstream newspapers (*The Age*; *Herald Sun*). The ethno-national community is interwoven with a second relational network organised around filmic engagement. Indian Independence Day was cross-promoted through the Indian film festival, held at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, one of the main cultural institutions on Federation Square. Aishwarya Rai's celebrity functioned both to attract local audiences – who visibly cluster around her at the live event – and to connect to international audiences as a globally recognised symbol of Bollywood and celebrity culture. The corporate-sponsored Bollywood dance competition, judged by Indian dancer and actress, Malaika Arora, and involving 20 local dance groups

adds a 'glocalised' relational network (Bauman, 1998).

Indian Independence Day coalesces out of this layered set of networks. However, it can equally be characterised through the dynamics of flows (Papastergiadis & Wyatt, 2019). Centripetal, centrifugal and horizontal flows function together, dramatically complicating the one-way relationship between artwork and spectator, or performance and audience. During the celebrations, lateral bonds of co-presence – people literally rub shoulders in the dense crowd – co-exist with the centripetal magnetism of star-power, nation and culture to pull various related communities together and focus their attention within a shared public space. Additionally, the ubiquity of device-based filming, and the large volume of videos and photographs shared across YouTube, Twitter and Instagram, demonstrate how the event also operates centrifugally. Hundreds of videos of the celebrations were uploaded to YouTube, although only a few were explicitly tagged as 'Indian Independence Day'. Most commonly, these videos feature the official speeches, the flag-raising ceremony and the Bollywood dance competition, suggesting that for the crowd, the event signified, variously, official, nationalist, popular and personal forms of connection to culture.

Around 240 tweets relating to the event were posted on Twitter, the vast majority with images attached. A further 200 images were posted on Instagram. In addition to snapshots of the celebrations themselves, most of these images, across both platforms, feature people coming and going from the event, meeting friends, buying food. These online archives overlay familiar touristic images of Melbourne – its laneways, trams, bars, cafés and Federation Square itself – with the quotidian, lived exchanges and encounters of event participants. As such, participants inscribed generic city branding with traces of everyday cosmopolitan experience. Content is pushed outwards through these online platforms, not only connecting national, transnational, filmic and fan communities, but recoding Melbourne within the Asia-Pacific and making it legible through a 'complexly syncretic sense of place' (Martin & Rizvi, 2014, p. 3).

From a temporal perspective, the manifold small screens capturing the event might be understood as 'conversational media' (Grief et al., 2012, 12) sustaining and creating various imagined communities in real-time. But the exchange of myriad images, comments, 'up' and 'down' votes across platforms extends the duration of this public, prolonged after the event, through the sharing of sentiments, sensibilities and opinions. In this case, these range from expressions of Indian patriotism, 'Jai hind', to both love for and misogynist judgements about Aishwarya Rai: 'Aishwarya is a good mother'; 'Aishwarya is about 45 and her overall looks despite her heavy make up betrays her age'. In their density and synchronicity, these mediated exchanges extend the 'eventness' of the event, providing both evidence and amplification of the spectacle as an intensity of data pathways, dispersed across media platforms, communities and geographies, and enduring over time.

Theorisations of ambient urbanism have highlighted the way participation in networked public space stretches real-time face-to-face participation across bodies, time and space. Less analysed is the way ambient environments exceed the terms through which the meaning and value of public participation is traditionally classified. When we designate the activity of Indian Independence Day as *cultural participation*, we signal that the distinctiveness of these kinds of events are constituted by more than their technological or mediated qualities. We would extend Zizi Papacharissi's claim (2014) that networked spaces require a reconfigured mapping of the public sphere beyond the dualisms of public and private culture. In this light, the vast media archive generated by Indian Independence Day, comprising of tweets, images, videos and online debates, can be seen as a formative part of the public event. These 'superfluous' elements have no official presence and were not integrated into the program of the day. However, Kate Brennan suggested that these media flows are now part of the 'experience of the public domain' and as such demand some curatorial treatment. 'Particularly given how things are so rapidly evolved, its kind of contingent on people who are in charge, to actually try and think of some ways to create a greater

meaning' (transcript 2018).

Contemporary understandings of the new formations of cultural value do not easily square with the 'access and participation' agendas prioritised in cultural policy and cultural management discourses. Emerging in the 1970s out of the community arts and multicultural arts movements, 'access and participation' was an oppositional discourse; it extended access to culture to constituencies explicitly framed as marginal, excluded from both elite and mass cultural forms (Hawkins, 1993, p. 162; see also Grostal & Harrison, 1994). These cultural values are no longer consonant with the promiscuity of participation characterising contemporary cultural engagement in an event like Indian Independence Day: where traditional forms are interwoven with celebrity and popular culture; where community, far from languishing on the social periphery, is articulated through wider global networks which advance a range of commercial, political and cultural agendas.

For cultural scholars, cultural participation has historically been theorised within a Bourdieusian schema of cultural taste in which the consumption of discrete and bounded cultural forms – popular music, literature, ballet, television – correspond with the accumulation of cultural capital within a hierarchical axis of value (Bennett et al., 1999; Bennett et al., 2009³). While usefully revealing the way state-sponsored culture aligns with middle-class regimes of taste, this scholarship has not addressed the situated nature of cultural participation (Miles & Gibson, 2016), nor the ways in which new media and digital networks collapse the boundaries between formal, popular, commercial and subcultural forms, upon which theories of 'distinction' rest.

Mapping the distribution of participation at Indian Independence Day reveals the way personal experience is interlinked with and amplified by cultural communities of taste, narratives of national(ist) belonging, and commercial strategies of marketing and publicity. Where culture has historically been valued in bourgeois terms for its civilising benefits and independence from the market and the state, at Indian Independence Day cultural participation is intertwined with instrumental objectives around commerce, cultural diplomacy and civic branding on the one hand, and with more social democratic ideals around inclusion and community on the other. It is difficult in this context, to separate the political from the communal, the official from the informal, the independent from the commercial. The absence of stable categories complicates the task of proponents of public participation – scholars of the public sphere and public culture; governmental policy discourses; designers, artists and cultural institutions – in claiming these activities for public benefit. This mixed space, geographically dispersed and hybrid, and discursively porous, is what we contend with when we try to make an account of ambient participation.

6. Epilogue

Federation Square is at a pivotal moment in its history. In December 2017, the Victorian State Government announced that one of the Square's buildings would be demolished to make way for a purpose-built Apple 'flagship' store (Wahlquist, 2017). Government ministers claimed that Apple would breath 'new life' into Federation Square (Eren cited in Wahlquist, 2017), and Don Bates defended the decision, arguing that it 'respects and expands on the original vision for the site' (Bates cited in Wahlquist, 2017). Apple no doubt not only envied this central location – which already boasts 10 million visitors a year – but were even more conscious of the vaster numbers who would see its almost universally recognisable logo, captured through the constant flow of digital images emanating from that site. Yet the overwhelming public response to the 'Apple decision' was negative. Prominent architects, public figures and concerned citizens lined up to condemn the state government for its secretive decision-making process, and for selling the Square out to a tax

avoiding, multinational brand (Bonnice, 2017; O'Brien, 2017; Reed, 2017). Although commercial activity was always intended to be 'part of the mix' at Federation Square, for many, inviting a global behemoth into the heart of Melbourne's public life signalled a betrayal of the Civic Charter and a retreat from the values of public spiritedness that they believed the Square embodies.

In April 2019, the 'Apple decision' took a new turn: the state's application to demolish part of the Square to accommodate the Apple store was rejected by Heritage Victoria. Publishing their rejection of the application, Heritage Victoria noted that this issue had attracted the highest number of public submissions. They found that Apple's proposal would result in an 'unacceptable and irreversible detrimental impact on the cultural heritage significance of Federation Square' (Australian Associated Press, 2019). While this rejection now makes the prospect of the Apple store unlikely, the ill-considered decision-making process leading to this point illustrates the precarious status of ambient cultural participation in the public realm. The fact that the decision was made without public consultation and without anticipating the fallout and public resistance, suggests that those in government and in senior decision-making roles failed to recognise the cultural relations these spaces generate. Heritage Victoria's decision hinged upon the heritage value of the building proposed for demolition. But as Paul Carter's artwork makes clear, the Square mobilises a long history of meeting, exchanging and culture-making that is the true heritage of this place, the thing that makes gatherings like Indian Independence Day possible and vitalising in the present. It is this intangible, mongrel cultural heritage that is most vulnerable.

The increasing prevalence of spaces of ambient participation requires that we formulate a sharper sense of why culture matters and what currently *matters* to publics as culture in ambient times. A renewed approach to the politics of culture is even more vital in Australia's contemporary conjuncture of neoliberal governance, the increasing diversity of its cities, and a national hunger to access the vast cultural markets of the Asia-Pacific. In this article, we have tried to shed light on some of the implications of this emergent public culture, largely based upon the perspectives and ideals of white Australian academics and institutional stakeholders. We acknowledge that our insights here are only partial. Doctoral research by Jonathan Daly (2020) involving extensive ethnographic fieldwork with multicultural communities in Melbourne, Toronto and Copenhagen revealed that these communities have very different responses to public spaces like Federation Square. Design features celebrated by architects like Don Bates did not necessarily make Daly's respondents feel more welcome or socially included. In fact, many felt alienated by the formality of the space and preferred largely unmediated, low-design spaces as sites of intercultural gathering and comfort. Just as Federation Square is an important space for multicultural performance, it has also become a significant site for First Nations cultural performance, protest and public memory. But further ethnographic research with First Nations communities would be required to evince how Paul Carter's symbology – drawing Federation Square into an Indigenous history and cosmology – relates to the lived social and political aspirations of First Nations people, or whether the multicultural placemaking celebrated by Kate Brennan might be in tension with efforts to decolonise settler colonial narratives of place. What we present here though is a clearer sense of the dynamics and form of ambient participation. The next challenge is to determine if and how it can be captured in ways that are meaningful to government, policy-makers and those charged with making and managing the public realm.

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³ See also Australian Cultural Fields: National and Transnational Dynamics. Accessed 2 May 2018. <https://westernsydney.edu.au/ACF/home>.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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