Exploring Festival Performance as a State of Encounter

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Introduction

This article will provide an overview of a research network called 'Exploring Festival Performance as a State of Encounter' that was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of the Beyond Text programme.[1] It will outline the network's activities over a two year period, describe its scope and discuss the various approaches to research networking that were undertaken. The article will summarise the network's findings and discuss the key themes that have arisen. Whilst this article discusses particular modes of performance that occur typically at music festivals, the purpose of this article is to position the central concerns of the network within wider conceptual and contextual frames relating to convivial space and embodied participation. It will address the notion of encounter both as a performance strategy and as a methodology for research networking that brings academics and industry professionals into dialogue. For the purposes of this article the term 'festival' will relate to popular music festivals such as Latitude, Bestival, Kendal Calling or Solfest (all of which were represented in some way within the network). The term 'festival performance'

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[1] The Beyond Text programme and all its associated research activities can be viewed at www.beyondtext.ac.uk

will relate to the theatrically conceived, often loosely improvised and participatory performances that happen around the festival site rather than the performances of the headline musical acts on the main stages. The particular interest of the network was to investigate a type of practice that became identified as 'relational performance'. This concept will be discussed in detail later in the article.

Networking Across Sectors: encountering voices

Our project began in September 2008 and was one of fifteen research network and workshop schemes of the Beyond Text strategic programme, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Beyond Text is concerned with how performance, images, objects and sounds are made, transmitted and received in a technologically advancing world where visual communication, sensory perception and orality may be reconsidered and reprioritised (Beyond Text 2008). The aim of our project was to establish a research network in the area of festival performance for those with an interest in investigating the popular music festival as a potential site for emergent performance genres that work primarily through heightened visual and sensory modes of communication. Our objectives were to provide a time-bound framework of activities to facilitate discussion and generate ideas between network participants, to identify and map existing work in this field through dialogue, fieldwork, storytelling and archiving and, ultimately, to establish a festival performance hub based within the city of Leeds. A key ambition of the network was to develop a proposal for a further Beyond Text project that would enable some of the key findings from the first phase of research to be investigated through practice-based methodologies.[2]

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[2] During the course of the research network a further proposal was made to the AHRC and the research team were successful in securing a Beyond Text Small Grant entitled Environments for Encounter. This project ran

The research network 'Exploring Festival Performance as a State of Encounter' was predicated on the notion of collaboration and partnership, not only between the University of Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan University but also between network members who had an investment in festival development either as promoters, curators, performers or cultural critics. The network was set up primarily to explore how new forms of interactive, participatory and experimental performance have emerged within the UK festival scene and how these practices have become part of the USP for events such as Secret Garden Party, Shambala, The Big Chill and Glade. It sought to engage not only academics from a range of disciplines (including performance, broadcast media, cultural studies, sociology, music psychology and cultural tourism) but also those working within the industry. It involved established performance practitioners who had made work for festival spaces, bringing their expertise and cultural knowledge into focus and providing them with a forum through which they might disseminate their practice to performers of the future. Contributions from festival-goers were to form an important part of the network and to facilitate this a virtual network was set up using Facebook.[3] In broad terms the network adopted a 'learning by sharing' model (Thijssen, Maes et al 2002) and took a social-constructive approach whereby industry partners, academics, students and festival-goers contributed to the research by sharing experience and creating new knowledge through active learning. Those moments of encounter and exchange between contributors or, for our purposes here, transition, provided opportunities for discussion and reflection that deepened the research team's thinking in a way that would not have been possible without input from a range of different perspectives and positions.

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over a period of eighteen months in 2010 and 2011 and involved industry collaboration with Urban Angels Circus, a partnership that emerged directly from the research network.

[3] Whilst this Facebook group is now dormant, at the height of the project there were over 400 members who contributed to the virtual network, uploading festival images, text and stories that were then fed into the discussions at formal network events.

In terms of its subject matter, the research network was set up to look specifically at those performances that occur at festivals to one side of the well-publicised bands and DJs of the main schedule. These performances (or loosely structured opportunities for play) may not be the headline attraction but, nonetheless, contribute to a distinctive, additional layer of festival programming that may also include cabaret acts and comedy, workshops and children's events, healing spaces and market trading. Although these types of activity are sometimes thought of as added extras or peripheral to the main musical line-up, increasingly they are becoming recognised as establishing a festival's particular brand identity and are seen as integral to both the success of the festival and the way in which memories of the event are personalised and transmitted to others. Within this bustling space of social and communal interaction, a type of festival performance emerges that is often unannounced, informal and responsive to both the time and place in which it occurs. Rarely subscribing to the conventions of theatrical bifurcation, such performances usually require public engagement to activate them and, as such, provide an insight into the dynamics of the festival space as well as audience/performer relations, modes of engagement and playful behaviour. The network aimed to establish a definition of this practice and began to raise questions regarding the potential significance and impact these performances may have in terms of their contribution to the production and consumption of the festival experience.

Performance Practices and the Festival Experience

Festivals are cultural spaces where interdisciplinary arts practice proliferates and, in recent years, they have begun to represent a significant part of the cultural calendar. The notion of 'festival tourism' (Arnold 2000; O'Sullivan and Jackson 2002; Robinson et al 2004) is

becoming nuanced in a way that acknowledges the harsh economic climate of recent times and the potential of the festival market to generate considerable revenue. In Britain alone there were over 700 music festivals in 2010 and, according to the Mintel report from the same year, the UK music concerts and festival market is worth approximately £2.4 million per annum (Mintel 2010). Festivals are operating in fierce competition with each other and vying for sustainability in what might appear to be an over crowded market. Against a backdrop of far reaching cuts to the arts nationally, many festival organisers have responded to these pressures by encouraging the development and showcasing of varied and innovative performance practices. This has become both a strong marketing tool for organisers but also a key part of the festival-goer's experience in which playful performance frames how they access the event and actively participate in it. Pine and Gilmore's seminal publication, *The Experience Economy* (1999) is highly pertinent here. For them, 'staging experiences is not about entertaining customers, it's about engaging them' (1999: 30), shifting the emphasis from distanced spectatorship to active participation and involvement. It was the relationship between experience and processes of engagement stimulated by performance that drove much of the network's discussions. We were interested in exploring the way that festival performance through physical encounter contributes to the perception of the festival experience as personalised, unique or bespoke and how embodied participation is then captured, narrated and relayed to others as the event transitions from presence to memory.

Recent research has demonstrated that people's motivations for attending music festivals are complex and extend beyond the desire to simply listen to live music (Bowen and Daniels 2005; Kim, Usyal and Chen 2002, Li and Petrick 2006). Sociability, participation, togetherness and excitement are other key factors that draw audiences to these events, albeit against an aural backdrop of live music that, in itself, can provoke potent emotions and

memories. Festival organisers are keenly aware of the various reasons people might attend a festival and appreciate the significant experiences that can result from that attendance. As a response they programme additional activities that complement and augment the musical schedule in order to enhance the festival experience further. During the period of field work the research team came across a roller disco at Glade, a techno barber at Beatherder, hot tubs at Magic Loungeabout, fancy dress processions at Bestival, art installations, sound sculptures, fair ground rides, pamper parlours, inflatable churches, water zorbing, to name just a few of the activities that occur alongside the music. As part of this augmentation strategy, a proliferation of participatory performances of varying kinds are programmed into events to offer a richer, more sociable experience than conventional spectatorship can provide. As van Geijn and van Veen point out:

> The intellectual, artistic or emotional satisfaction that theatre can offer is no longer adequate for most people, they want more. People want to meet, communicate and experience something special together. So a festival these days should ideally not only be an artistic event, but also a social experience. (van Geijn, van Veen 2002: 11)

The heightened atmosphere and the general thirst for 'more' produces an environment of hedonism, spectacle, colour, noise and stimulation. Performance in these spaces has to find a way of competing with or complementing this milieu. As a result, many of the additional attractions at festivals that are performance-based draw on the more active and communally driven practices of street theatre, circus and carnival that incorporate anarchic sociability within their form. These practices are gaining currency within the festival circuit although there has been little analysis of their role at and impact on such events. Our research network began to address that gap and looked explicitly at the characteristics of these performance practices and how they sit within the festival context. We began to ask questions about the

shape, nature and purpose of these performances and how they might be considered as 'catalytic for local creativity and innovation' (O'Connor in Hartley and Haseman, 2000: 29).

Network Events and Activities

Over the course of the project we ran four network events. Rather than attempting to establish a consistent membership for the network that would meet on four different occasions over a two-year period, we took a very different approach. We wanted the four events to reach a diverse range of people with varying perspectives on festival performance and thus each was designed with a different focus and format. Each event was tailored to meet the needs of participants and reflected both the content under discussion and the questions we wished to pursue. The Beyond Text programme encourages novel approaches to research and, particularly given the subject matter under scrutiny, we were inclined to pursue perhaps less traditional formats for some of our network events, taking an approach that is more closely aligned to practice-as-research methodologies as a way of accessing performance and other embodied forms of knowledge.

The research network was launched at the University of Leeds in December 2008 and the first event followed a relatively conventional seminar format with invited participants made up of academics and individuals from industry who had previously collaborated with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on festival projects and student internships. This event served as a starting point for our discussions and opened up a space in which we were able to share our own experiences and stories of festival performance whilst at the same time allowing for some tentative theoretical framing of these accounts. In this event we encouraged a narrative/ storytelling approach in order to facilitate academic/industry interaction. Finding a shared

language that adequately expressed our own experience of festival performance was a critical step in bridging any perceived gaps between network participants and indicated our first, small step towards non-traditional approaches.

The second event was held in April 2009 and constituted a one-day practical workshop led by Deborah Sanderson of Urban Angels Circus[4] and Bev Adams of Faceless.[5] We wanted to explore festival performance from a practitioner-maker perspective and provide some theoretical framing to existing practice. The session was advertised nationally to recent graduates and early career practitioners who were invited to make a written application to the event with a statement of suitability. The session was held for eighteen delegates who devised performance work together and experimented with its application on the busy University of Leeds' campus. Working through practice, participants were able to explore the main practical considerations involved in making this type of work. Questions relating to strategies for engaging audiences effectively and dealing with unpredictability began to emerge and techniques were tried and tested through live performance as we shuttled backwards and forwards between studio space and outdoor performance space. The immediacy of seeing this type of practice-based research was highly rewarding and set up a dynamic feedback loop that cycled between the processes of rehearsing/planning, performing/experimenting and debriefing/reflecting. This approach has done much to shape the content and methodologies

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[4] Urban Angels Circus is an aerial circus company based in Leeds. They perform aerial shows and cabarets as well as performing walkabout characters, stilt work and living statues and have a particular commitment to bringing circus skills and performance opportunities to local communities. www.urbanangelscircus.com

[5] Faceless is a professional arts organisation based in Wakefield who are working towards access to the arts for all. They specialise in outdoor performance, community arts and event management and encourage creative, community participation in all their projects. More information about the company can be found at http://www.facelessco.com

of our further research for the Beyond Text Small Grant project 'Environments for Encounter' where we collaborated once again with Urban Angels Circus to investigate how changes in context impact on the performance and reception of interactive work.[6]

The third event took place over a two-day period in October 2009 and took the form of an interactive festival installation that was open to the general public. The event was planned to coincide with the end of the festival season and the return of students to the city, many of who represented a key resource in gathering and archiving stories of festival performance. In an attempt to create the festival aesthetic, two decorated yurts were erected inside Old Broadcasting House at Leeds Metropolitan University (a large open plan room close to the main entrance of the building) and the public were invited into the space to be interviewed, to share their stories in words or through drawing. Attention was paid not only to the stories themselves but how they were told and the meaning individuals attached to them as part of their own festival narrative. For this event we were keen to engage a broader public audience in the network's activities and were particularly focussed on utilising biographical research methodologies that can include auto-ethnography, oral history, epiphany, self story and difference (see Roberts 2002) to explore personal accounts of festival performance to fit with the Beyond Text's key strands of transmission and memory.

In a further attempt to broaden public engagement we experimented with using social networking sites (specifically Facebook) as a way of collecting archive material and extending the reach of the network even further. Not only was this useful in terms of

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[6] As a result of this collaboration a new piece of relational performance work was developed entitled 'The Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste'. This piece was toured to three separate festivals (Kendal Calling, Bestival and Cactus Festival in Belgium) between 2010 and 2011 so that an investigation of participant and performer behaviour and how it alters according to environment could be carried out.

identifying individuals who might be interested in our research and who may be able to contribute to it, but was also beneficial in that we used it as a means of gathering and storing research data. We capitalised on Facebook's existing and established protocols and asked group members to upload photos from festivals they had attended where they had participated in or witnessed festival performance. We advertised our events, started discussion threads, posed questions and asked for stories and anecdotes to be uploaded in the form of text. Furthermore, group members became our 'research scouts' and as they attended festivals they reported back via the Facebook group and uploaded far more material than we could ever have gathered ourselves. Whilst the Facebook group proved very useful in terms of its immediacy and its accessibility there are, however, some obvious drawbacks and limitations to any kind of virtual network that operates on a platform of this kind. The nature of how individuals use Facebook groups meant that initial interest was strong in terms of people joining the group but that 'joining' did not necessarily materialise into any further participation. Facebook, by its very nature, appeals to short attention spans and one click communication. There is no requirement for long-term commitment and thus the stakes for joining are very low. Without investment or physical, face to face participation of some kind, groups go dormant very quickly and the research trail runs dry.

The fourth and final event was held in March 2010 and focussed on bringing academics and festival curators, promoters and programmers together to discuss the central issues explored by the research network thus far. Our aim was to return to a balanced and mutually beneficial interface for knowledge sharing and production between industry figures, scholars and junior researchers as in the first event. Again we were keen to adopt storytelling as a strategy for moving discussions forward and for finding common links between participants. We encouraged members to share anecdotes of their own experience of festival performances that

they may have witnessed, participated in or performed for themselves. Bearing in mind all the usual caveats relating to subjectivity and veracity that accompany such qualitative approaches, the sharing of personal histories nonetheless provided a space for the evoking of memory that then transitioned effectively into the identification of common and recurring themes. Using evidence from the biographical narratives, the group then considered how festival performances might be organised along a spectrum that has distinct demarcation between performer and spectator at one end and total immersion at the other. Categories of practice began to emerge that included walkabout performance, processional, viral, participatory and relational work and this, in turn, provided a means of conceptualising the diversity of festival performance and its intended outcomes. What was distinctive about this final event was the subtle shift in roles and viewpoints that were evidenced by the deepening critical engagement with the subject matter. Having come through a process whereby practitioners were given the space to theorise and theorists were encouraged to explore ideas through practice, the discussions contained an appreciation and understanding of both the research imperatives and the industry drivers in parallel. The network facilitated a certain amount of role transition between participants, a shift that was helped along by working in different configurations of space (including studios and outdoor areas) and by utilising methodologies that incorporated practice, autobiography and storytelling.[7]

In summary, the approach of the network was to facilitate dynamic exchange between academics, industry professionals, practitioners and festival-goers through the use of a variety of socially conceived activities that mirrored the concept of encounter encapsulated by much of the festival performance work under investigation. The four events represented distinct

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[7] Whilst these approaches may be considered 'non-traditional' in some fields, they are used extensively within much practice-as-research conducted within the discipline of Theatre and Performance (see Kershaw and Nicholson 2011, Freeman 2010, Smith and Dean 2009).

opportunities for exploration but each folded in learning and development from the previous session to create an iterative process of understanding that culminated in the launch of the second project, 'Environments for Encounter'*,* immediately once the network phase had ended. This second project would not have been possible without the fruitful exchange of ideas, experience and expertise between research scholars, industry professionals and performance practitioners within the network phase that laid the way for further collaboration where mutual understanding of both theoretical paradigms and professional practices was critical to the research journey.

The next section of this article now begins to unpack some of the theoretical considerations and concepts emerging from the project and begins to determine the notion of relational performance and its relationship to cultural and creative engagement within festival contexts.

Festival knowledge: participation, embodiment and performance

The network was framed by two key themes as identified by the overarching Beyond Text programme; namely 'Embodied Knowledge' and 'Transmission and Memory'. Embodied knowledge is a type of knowledge where the body knows how to act, behave or carry out a task without having to articulate explicitly the mechanics of what is known. Knowledge of this kind, such as riding a bike or driving a car, is imprinted on the body and is what Merleau-Ponty describes as 'knowledge bred of familiarity' (1962: 166). It can be understood as a kind of infrastructure of thought in the body, a body-based axis of knowledge, a capacity for learning and knowing where the knowing subject is the body itself. The festival spectacle is immersive, participatory and is situated within and generated by the moving body of the crowd. A core component of this immersive experience is the acquisition of 'festival

knowledge' – how to behave and, indeed, misbehave. Much of the knowledge gained is unspoken, implicit and embodied. In the festival site we learn how to be, how to interact, how to watch and how to perform. At a festival, activated by sociability, catalysed by festivity, embodied knowledge is developed and transmitted between participants who characteristically view themselves as 'festival virgins' or 'festival veterans'. The transmission of embodied knowledge from expert to novice manifests in exaggerated visual practices such as costuming, fancy dress and festival fashion; shared dancing styles and crowd behaviours; communal living, eating and toileting; and goes some way to establishing a set of festival practices that are universally recognisable despite the great diversity of events on offer across each summer season.

Merleau-Ponty stresses the importance of experiencing the world via numerous senses:

> Our fundamental cognition of the world is not purely 'mental', a wholly intellectual operation – it is rather a function of all our sensory, motor, and affective capacities' (Merleau-Ponty in Crowther 1993: 103).

For him phenomenology reclaims the centrality of bodily experience and sensation (Parker-Starbuck 2011: 223) and it was this embodied festival 'know how' in relation to performance practice that the network was keen to pursue. As Nelson reminds us 'perception is always incarnate, context-specific and apprehended by a subject, and thus any knowledge or understanding is achieved through an 'encounter' in a subject-object inter-relationship' (2006: 110). The shifting relationship between performer and spectator and how it might be negotiated through embodied practice then became the focus of our attention. In festival spaces the boundaries between audience and performer are not always clearly delineated. Unfolding events are consistently subverted by participant-performers who utilise the festival

space as way of enacting their own performances, actions and interventions that, in turn, entertain, amuse and interrupt the experience of others. This creates a dynamic and fluid space of co-authorship and co-improvisation that is connected intimately to the context in which it occurs. This is both at the heart of that very specific type of embodied knowledge that is festival knowledge and the driver for festival performance itself.

Against this backdrop of fluidity and freedom, festival spaces are nonetheless tacitly rule-bound, with particular codes of practice and behaviours passed from group to group. These behaviours are played out physically (in our instance via performance) and thus become part of the festival's genealogy that is then documented, shared and digitally archived in ways that secure a participant's role in that particular event. At the most basic level, some festival-goers simply want to document their attendance at a festival. They often do not want to become performers or co-devise, but they do want their photo taken with performers in order to record their attendance and imply their participation. In other words they want to prove that they were there. A more complex interaction occurs when the festival-goer engages with festival performance, becomes physically implicated in it, and shifts from the role of spectator to heightened participant, or fully fledged performer, as they are observed by others in the act of performance. This process effectively narrows the gap of conventional spectatorship and blurs the boundaries between cultural producer and consumer.

In addition to oral histories, the transmission of festival 'know how' occurs also in the form of photographic or video documentation. Activities are recorded for individual or nostalgic reasons using personal devices such as cameras, mobile phones and shared on social networking sites such as Facebook, mySpace or flickr often contemporaneously with the

event itself. The way we record memories has changed fundamentally. Technology has made the 'personal' experience more readily publishable. In fact how one experiences the festival is tied up with how one intends to broadcast it later.

Undoubtedly the processes by which memories, anecdotes and personal stories are collected and transmitted have an impact on how those memories are shaped and how value is placed on them. George McKay talked about how his own notes were taken for his book *Glastonbury: a very English fair* (2000) and how he went back to notes he had made in the 70s and 80s in order to formulate his chapter on free festivals for *Senseless Acts of Beauty* (1996), a text that was published nearly 30 years after the original act of annotation and documentation. It is important to recognise that as a society our methodologies for 'note-taking' have altered dramatically since the 70s. With developments in mobile phone technology, memories that are worthy of documentation are predominantly recorded as images rather than as text. These memories are often made almost instantly public (via social networking sites) and published in a particular way that allows varying levels of access and comment. What was previously a private experience has become public. The recording and publishing has become part of the experience. How we represent ourselves and our experience of the events may have become as significant as the event itself. Utilising Facebook as a tool for archiving throughout the duration of the network allowed us to observe these processes of documentation, publishing and evidencing of shared experience at first hand. A few months later, finding our group had been 'migrated' by Facebook and littered with unwanted adverts and spam e mail, we were confronted with the disposable nature of this platform and the watering down of encounters to a mere 'Facebook moment'. This is a process that threatens to trivialise significant personal experiences, relegating them

to the realms of the banal and reminds us of the importance of adopting complementary methods of archiving memories in a more meaningful format.

The Concept of Relational Performance

The third theoretical frame that was key to our research and which is indicated in the title of the network itself is the role of sociability, conviviality and encounter within festival performance. As academic-practitioners working in the club scene as well as within festival environments, we were keen to pursue an interest in the workings of playful communities and how festival spaces might be operating as temporary manifestations of 'creative cities' (Landry 2008). Drawing on Heidegger's writing on festivity, Costa argues that 'the central mechanisms of transmission of tradition lie in the 'sociability' of the community that sustains and, at the same time, reflexively renews it by incorporating features of modern and contemporary life into the sociable framework of tradition' (Costa 2001: 544). He goes on to suggest that when a community reflexively adopts festivity as a tradition, it configures itself as being both artistic and playful. The prevalence of participatory performance within festival events provides the means by which the artistic and playful may find expression.

Nicolas Bourriaud in his influential 1998 publication *Relational Aesthetics* describes 'art as a state of encounter' (1998:18). Bourriaud posits a notion of relational art as 'art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space' (1998: 14). He characterises this as essentially urban, as a game, as immediate, as a life force, as specifically sociable or art as 'a state of encounter' (1998: 18). Whilst relational art might be an object located in a gallery, it

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might also be found in 'meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality' (1998: 28).

Drawing on this work, a primary outcome of the research network has been our development of the concept of 'relational performance'. According to our definition, relational performance is live performance often encountered in and emanating from unexpected places; in a dancing crowd, on a corner, in the campsite. Relational performance may occur on a stage but does not necessarily conform to conventions associated with the fictive space of the theatrical stage. Whilst it may occur without prior knowledge, warning or agreement from the audience, it requires dialogue, interaction or audience intervention to make it work. In some cases this type of work may have much in common with cabaret, burlesque, circus, street theatre and club performance but its emergence within the festival space gives it a particular contextual dimension which is related intimately to how festival-goers experience the festival space both physically and psychically. The work is often deeply improvisatory, playful and operates beyond the main musical events of the festival. These performances might be mobile or housed within a specific site or tent, carried out by professional performers or emerge from the crowd itself or from individuals who adopt an ambivalent position between festival-goer and performer.

Although we were more interested in the smaller scale, more intimate and meaningful incarnations of this type of practice there are some notable large-scale examples. The comedian Ross Noble (at Latitude Festival in 2008) asked a three thousand strong crowd to go with him to the vegan stall and order a pork pie. In this instance a huge crowd of people unexpectedly poured out of a tent and ran across the festival site with Ross Noble crowd

surfing along with them. Other examples might include the infamous Miniscule of Sound, a mobile performance that began in 1998 as a parody of the 'superclub' the Ministry of Sound and which continues to tour festivals internationally.[8] It heralds itself as the world's smallest nightclub, having a capacity of fourteen (including the DJ) and a dance floor of two square metres. Participants have to negotiate their way past the bouncers who playfully enforce strict door policies before letting anyone enter the nightclub itself where the performance continues, this time carried on by audience members on the dance floor in extreme close proximity to each other. Countless other companies provide walkabout performances for festival events that play particularly on comic incongruity or extravagant visual spectacle to engage passersby. Common to all of these, and more intimate performances is that in relational performance the performer no longer occupies centre stage; their purpose is to catalyse encounters.

The Impact of Relational Performance – what and whom does it benefit?

One of the key outcomes of the network was to begin to consider the potential impact of relational performance – both in terms of its contribution to the production and consumption of festival experience but also to the development of participatory performance practice. The academic-industry collaboration was central to the development of a critical framework that could then be put to practical use within research and professional settings. In our first network event we discussed a concept, posited by Charles Kriel, of 'numbness interrupted'. He described how as we wander around festivals from stage to stage, from activity to activity we lose the element of surprise. We become desensitised to our surroundings and context and begin to lose interest. This is similar to being in the Louvre gallery racing past famous

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[8] For more information and images of the Miniscule of Sound visit http://www.minisculeofsound.com/

paintings in order to take it all in as fast as possible. We become art blind. With their senses being continually bombarded, festival-goers experience a similar sensory overload that leads to a process of 'switching off' or numbness to their surroundings. By presenting the festival-goer with an opportunity to experience the de-centring of the performer a relational performance encounter can interrupt this numbness and re-activate their engagement with the event and their active role within it.

The spectrum of festival performance is broad and can include well-rehearsed and tightly staged theatrical performance by licensed artists, more loosely conceived improvised performances that require audience involvement and participation, and performances carried out by festival-goers themselves as they dress up, play up and become part of the wider performance that is the festival spectacle itself. In this sense festival performance can be understood as operating on a continuum; barriers between spectators and performers are eroded in these contexts to different degrees. Involvement, ownership and participation are potent characteristics of the festival experience and relational performance can be the means by which this is delivered. Relational performance raises questions about who is the 'maker' of the work. Festival-goers engaging in relational performance become co-authors of their own festival experience rather than merely consumers of a pre-packaged product. Roles blur and bleed. As the festival progresses over the course of the weekend this blurring and bleeding becomes more apparent. Festival-goers experience more relational performance, acclimatise to greater levels of interaction and begin to take on the role of participant-performer as they become immersed in the culture of the festival where performativity becomes the lingua franca. Gradually it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the difference between the professional performer and audience-participant. This lack of distinction

produces a state of flexibility and fluidity that provides fertile ground for the 'local creativity and innovation' with which we began.

Needless to say relational performance does not only occur at festivals. However, the festival context provides a special blurred environment where distinctions between audience and performer are unstable, negotiated and constantly changing. Festival audiences are in a particularly nuanced state (both physically and psychically dislocated) due to the playful framing of the festival event. This means performative encounters take on new significance and meaning. Set apart from the everyday, audiences are more receptive to the improbable, more attuned to the inconceivable and more likely to engage with the unexpected – all of which are key considerations for those making and booking work for these contexts.

At our final event Ben Robinson talked about the success of the Cumbrian Olympics at Kendal Calling, a festival he has organised since 2006. In this mock sports day children and adults are able to participate in the joint activities, watched and cheered on by audience members and hosted by overenthusiastic comperes. As well as providing a physical diversion away from the more traditional festival pursuits of drinking, eating and watching bands, this activity places the festival-goers centre stage. They are providing the entertainment for others and, as such, move fluidly between the roles of spectator, participant and performer. Undoubtedly the rules of these particular 'games' are perhaps more clearly delineated than other relational performance that relies on aesthetic interaction but, nonetheless, the function of it is clear. It operates as a form of nostalgia on the part of the adults, provides an opportunity for physical play and comedy, and acts as a vehicle for embodied knowledge to be transmitted between generations as adults and children engage together in the presence of

an audience. Audiences crave what they consider to be 'authentic' experiences, particularly in

relation to the consumption of music and the quality of 'liveness' (Auslander 1999). At a

festival, participants seek out opportunities for what they consider to be real time interaction

with those around them. The importance of 'being there' cannot be substituted fully by any

reproduced document such as a recording, a video or an image. The unscripted nature of

many relational performances helps to imbue the festival with a sense of authenticity; every

experience is personal and unique. What is encountered appears profoundly real and

meaningful and indicates deep engagement.

Conclusion

Throughout the duration of our research network we have been pursuing the nature and

purpose of relational performance within the festival context in order to identify the ways in

which these encounters might lead to deep embodied engagement that authenticates the

experience of festival as cultural artefact and situates the participant's role within its

production. Relational performance is performance that occurs when performers and

audiences engage in active and embodied dialogue through physical encounter where the

audience's involvement is the key motivation for the performed outcome. The encounter may

be unscripted by the performer, unanticipated by the audience member and largely

improvised by both, but the performed interaction adapts and plays with the conventions of

sociability that govern day-to-day exchanges. As well as acknowledging that the aesthetic

form of relational performance is one that is 'sociable, interactive and activated by audiences'

(Bourriaud 1998: 14), it is important to reiterate our stance that embedded within relational

performance there is an inherent efficacy. There is a purpose to relational performance that

relates to both the personal experience of those involved in the exchange in authenticating the

festival experience and to the positioning of the festival space as a context for cultural and

creative engagement. On one hand relational performance addresses the impact agenda insofar as it can demonstrate widening participation in the arts, increased audience exposure to contemporary performance and broad cultural engagement in terms of attendance figures at festivals loosely grouped around musical interest. However, it goes beyond that and moves us towards a consideration of what might be called 'deep impact' for those who experience it. Characterised as having lasting effect this is impact that is embodied and embedded in personal histories and collective memories. We conducted this research network by prioritising memory, experience and embodied participation. We chose methods that matched our subject matter and created spaces where academics, professionals and participants could add their perspectives, insights and knowledge in a variety of formats that did not prioritise written text. Festival performance is an international phenomenon that demands scholarly attention but those driving it must be brought into the debate and their insights utilised in the construction of a critical framework that aims to better understand the intentions, motivations and potential impact of a practice that reaches thousands every festival season.

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