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## **Exploring radical openness: A porous model for relational festival performance**

**Dr Alice O'Grady**

### **Abstract**

Popular music festivals are convivial spaces where paradigms of play and participation proliferate. 'Exploring radical openness' investigates the concept of relational performance where encounter and dynamic exchange are prioritized. Drawing on extensive practice-led research conducted predominantly within the UK festival circuit, it provides a model for interactivity that not only acknowledges the inherent unpredictability of festival sites but also exploits it in the pursuit of inclusivity and radical openness.

### **Keywords**

festival

interaction

participation

relational performance

play

radical openness

### **Introduction**

Despite the global economic downturn, popular music festivals continue to flourish, with many of them (particularly those that align themselves to the underground or alternative markets) subscribing to an ethos that circulates around principles of radical conviviality,

inclusivity and open paradigms of play. Perhaps the best known example of such events in the United Kingdom is Glastonbury that has, over the past twenty years in particular, provided a type of blueprint for other music festivals that acknowledge and promote alternative and eco-friendly lifestyles as well as subscribing to the broad principles of creativity and free expression.<sup>1</sup> Stemming from the hippie heritage and infused with values of tolerance and liberalism, these festivals are not simply a spectacle of youth. They are attended by all ages and provide a range of activities and entertainment that is largely based on communal participation, ethical sociability and playful license. They can be conceived as bounded spaces of play that revel in the joy of the here and now whilst keeping the mundane and banal at bay (see O'Grady 2012 for a fuller discussion). Whilst advertised predominantly as music events, the musical line up is only part of the festival's draw. The chance to experience a contemporary form of carnivalesque that situates the festival-goer as an active part of the spectacle is a significant part of the event's attraction for many. It is these events that represent opportunities for 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 2001) and deviation away from normative social behaviours that provide the context for this discussion.

The focus of this investigation is the plethora of interdisciplinary performance experiences and opportunities for interactivity that lie beyond the formal music programming of the main stages and that contribute to the overarching paradigm of active participation. At its simplest this might be the Cerne Abbas Giant, a stick man stilt-walking through the festival eliciting responses from the crowd by manipulating the expressions on his cartoon face and surprising them with his neon phallus.<sup>2</sup> At the other

end of the spectrum it might involve entire arenas and elaborate installations such as The Rabbit Hole at Glade where underground tunnels lead to secret parties and entry is gained by answering riddles and interacting with characters such as the White Rabbit or Alice.<sup>3</sup> Conceptualized as 'relational performance' (O'Grady and Kill forthcoming) this practice relies on audience intervention and co-creation to bring it into existence. It is based on live exchange and interaction within spaces of conviviality. This concept draws upon Nicolas Bourriaud's oft-cited work on relational aesthetics (2002) where intersubjectivities and encounter form the very basis of the art event. Relational performances are experienced as 'encounter' insofar as they provide a meeting point for human exchange that is framed by, and expressed through, semi-structured performance. At festivals these performances are rarely formally announced, allowing spectators and would-be participants to chance upon them unexpectedly as the event unfolds. Rather than railing against its lack of formal programming, relational performance can revel in its marginal positioning, resting as it often does within the 'psychotopological cracks' (Van Veen 2002) of the festival structure. Occupying a space under the radar of officialdom and situating itself between categories and distinctions, the work is afforded a type of openness that can be exploited in the pursuit of radicalism. It provides a space where, in Dwight Conquergood's words, the 'hegemony of textualism' might be challenged and where 'finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, co-experienced and covert' might be reprioritized as local, vernacular knowledge that is grounded in active participation and personal connection (Conquergood 2002: 147).

As a type of liminal practice that plays consciously with the ‘in-betweenness’ of things, relational performance contributes to the festival-goers’ heightened sense of ‘event-ness’ as it promotes a performance ethic that prioritizes spectator experience and encourages embodied participation; it is a negotiated and co-created activity that is framed by the messy, unpredictability of the festival environment. These performative encounters create bespoke moments of engagement that become woven into the very fabric of the festival experience and continue to be mythologized long after the event has ended. Previous research has shown that it is these moments that become deeply embedded in our memory of the experience (and the transmission of it to others) more than the headline acts that perhaps drew us to the event in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Constituted by face-to-face, embodied encounters that take place within a context that is committed to achieving ‘the vibe’ (St John 2009) within the present moment, it is not surprising that the form this practice takes is intimately connected to the place and space in which it occurs. There is a direct link to be traced between the spatial–temporal dimensions of the alternative festival context, its cultural positioning as licensed hedonism in times of increasing austerity and the type of radically open performance work that emerges from it.

The arguments constructed for this article draw on the findings of two separate phases of research as well as complementary ethnographic work conducted within the music festival scene in the United Kingdom, specifically at events including Latitude, Kendal Calling, Beatherder, Solfest, Bearded Theory, Shamaia, Alchemy, Glade, Waveform and Nozstock. Whilst far from providing a definitive survey of festival performance as it exists at this time, I intend to explore the notion of radical openness in relational

performance and to provide a model for interactivity that stems from specifically situated praxis at festivals. The model considers the structural and formal implications of making work for settings where audience-performer boundaries are already deliberately blurred and conventions of spectatorship reconfigured as a deliberate response to the context from which it emerges. The model is not only important in terms of understanding festival performance. It can operate as a tool for devising, analysing and theorizing any type of performance practice that has openness and relationality as key ideological concepts and can be applied to settings where the ebb and flow of participation and interaction mediates and shapes the structure of the performance itself.

### **Two strands of festival research**

The latent performance culture of festivals has developed over time and is certainly not a new phenomenon although theorization of it is fairly scant. Scholarship on festivals tends to sit within cultural tourism and event management or concerns itself with particular scenes or single events, most notably Glastonbury (McKay 2000) or Burning Man (Gilmore and Van Proyen 2005; Doherty 2006; Chen 2009). My research perspective here utilizes conceptual frameworks from performance studies and draws on extensive practice-led research that was conducted in two phases between 2006–2009 and 2010–2011. The first phase constituted creating a series of interactive walkabout performances with my company ...floorSpace... These pieces were performed at a range of festivals in the United Kingdom over a three-year period, events that were chosen specifically for their allegiance to underground aesthetics and counter-cultural values. These small-scale events were characterized largely by electronic dance music and owed

much of their heritage to the free party movement in the United Kingdom during the early 1990s where partying and protest became inextricably linked (see McKay 1998). This research examined the structural implications of making performance work for 'messy' spaces of play such as these and developed a model for analysing audience interaction in this context (O'Grady 2009) that is further developed here.

**Figure 1:** ...floorSpace... performance ensemble. *Tea Party*, Shamina, August 2008. From left to right: Jason Wilkes, Melanie Jenkins, James Worthington, Andrew Roberts (Photograph Alice O'Grady).

The second phase of research was funded by the UK Research Council for Arts and Humanities (AHRC) as part of the Beyond Text strategic programme, a £5.5 million initiative dedicated to investigating visual communication, sensory perception, orality and material culture as key concerns for twenty-first-century scholarship and the wider community (Beyond Text 2008–2009).<sup>5</sup> The 'Environments for Encounter' project was conducted in collaboration with Urban Angels Circus, a small touring performance company making aerial work for both community and corporate settings.<sup>6</sup> This second project continued to explore the improvisational and structural strategies required for making and performing relational work at music festivals. However, in direct contrast to the practice of ...floorSpace... the intention here was to create a highly decorative, physical environment that would sit within the festival grounds. In addition, rather than operating as walkabout performance this piece was static, situated as it was on an oval platform underneath a large, semi-circular scaffold rig that allowed aerialists to perform

at height, thus creating a physical environment into which audience members could enter and interact with performers and fellow participants.

**Figure 2:** *The Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste*, July 2010, Kendal Calling Festival. Left to Right: Alice Robinson, Deborah Sanderson, and two festival-goers (Photograph by Caroline Bonser, copyright Beyond Text).

*The Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste* (2010–2011) toured to three different festivals over the course of two summer seasons in order to examine the impact of different festival contexts on audience participation.<sup>7</sup> This included looking not only at the sociocultural variations of festival events but also at the impact of geographical, spatial and environmental changes and how these altered the way festival-goers engaged with the work.

**Figure 3:** *The Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste*, August 2010, Bestival. Left to Right: Matt Rogers, Alice Robinson, Deborah Sanderson, Rebekka Kill and festival-goer (Photograph by Michael Seymour, copyright Beyond Text).

### **Festival as a context for performance**

At the turn of the twentieth century Peter Behrens, Georg Fuchs and Max Herrmann argued for the repositioning of performance as an event and urged that theatre once again become festival (see Fischer-Lichte 2008: 161–63). Here they rallied against a



form of theatre that relegated audience to stillness and silence, calling instead for greater emphasis to be placed on celebration, ritual, communality and physical participation. More than a hundred years later it is possible to suggest that festival has, to some extent, become a type of theatre (or immersive environment) where these things are made possible. The festival site is a context that is imbued with and driven by certain aspects of theatricality and implicates its audience (i.e. festival-goers) in its production as well as its consumption. Competition to be distinctive in the festival market is fierce and increasingly festival organizers are looking to the world of performance for inspiration. Interactive theatre pieces that include elements of street theatre, clowning and walkabout, circus, installation, and other hybrid theatrical practices are being built into popular music festivals in response to the demand for bespoke or 'boutique' experience. Framed as chance encounters these unanticipated, individualized moments of performative exchange go some way towards ensuring lasting and memorable encounters that make up the personal mythology of the event for the individual. The aesthetic of these encounters has its roots in well-established forms of popular entertainment but also combines the central concerns of many avant-garde performance makers who have sought to use concepts of participation, co-creation and space as ways of radicalizing an art form and its audience.

Vicki Ann Cremona contributes to the growing scholarship on the relationship between theatrical events and festival culture (Cremona in Martin et al. 2004; Hauptfleisch et al. 2007) by analysing the festival as a theatrical event (2007). She examines the process of 'festivalization' whereby participants move from the 'ordinary' dimension to the 'extraordinary' realm as indicated by alterations in appearance and behaviour. Entering

into 'festival mode' participants may dress differently, wear face paint or masks, adorn themselves with elaborate costume and modify the way they interact with others in an environment driven by extreme conviviality and tactical hedonism. In these spaces participants are already 'altered' to a certain extent even before they encounter performance that seeks to set in train other processes of transformation. By temporarily relinquishing some of the trappings of every day life and committing to living in close proximity to others in tented villages and towns for the course of a weekend, the festival body is somewhat unharnessed from convention and primed for embodied experiences that lift them above quotidian existence.

**Figure 4:** *The Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste*, July 2010, Kendal Calling. Left to Right: Deborah Sanderson, festival-goer, Alice Robinson (Photograph by Caroline Bonser, copyright Beyond Text).

Certain elements imbue festival with a sense of uniqueness that is both provocative and potent in terms of its effect on behaviour. J. Martin identifies these elements as the significance of site and the physical space in which the festival takes place, the type of communication that occurs between audience and performers, and the durational quality of the event. Each is of central importance to its performative outcomes (Martin et al. 2004: 102). In addition to the clearly demarcated, official performance spaces of any festival – the main stages, the cabaret tents, the circus fields, the DJ booths – the wider festival frame also operates as a performative space where relationships and identities

between participants can unfold in a less-regulated (although often predictable) manner. It is in this frame, in spaces that lie beyond the architecture and physical materiality of formal performance spaces, that relational performance finds its natural home.

This lack of material structure, however, it is not without its challenges for performers.

The space of the popular music festival is essentially characterized by mobility.

Attendance at any festival in the United Kingdom, particularly when the weather is bad, will involve considerable amounts of walking. A festival audience is an audience on the move and, as such, performance has to move with it.<sup>8</sup> Mobile or walkabout performance has a long history in festivals with companies such as Natural Theatre Company making work for large-scale events such as Glastonbury for over 40 years.<sup>9</sup> This type of work has its historical roots in carnival, processional performance and street theatre. The practice does not enforce or assume any conventional—spatial relationship between actors and audience, thereby allowing for greater possibility of interaction and encounter that is multi-directional and embedded within the convivial milieu of the site rather than restricted by conventions of a theatre architecture that insists on a particular spatial arrangement and communication paradigm. However, a mobile audience is fickle and its attention span short. If it fails to be sufficiently engaged, it will continue to walk on in the quest for something more novel or entertaining. Openness is not without its pitfalls.

Another challenge presented by the festival as a site for performance is that the everyday activities of talking, eating, shopping and so on carry on regardless of what imaginary, fictional or fantastical enactments might be occurring at the same time. Without the framing mechanism of the theatre space it is not always clear where the boundaries of the

performance might be. Indeed with many festival-goers in elaborate fancy dress displaying exaggerated and heightened behaviour formal performance might go completely unnoticed amidst the busy, vibrant and animated *mise-en-scène* of the theatricalized festival.

As relational performance seeks to engage festival-goers physically and promotes co-creativity and co-authorship through improvisation, the practice provides opportunities for individuals to revel in their own 'festival performances' and further facilitates processes of the festivalessque as participants try out and play with identities that are distinct from their everyday persona. The work is rarely officially programmed but finds itself weaving in and out of numerous other festival activities, seeking out playmates and informal collaborators to create unique relational encounters within the wider framework of theatricalized social interaction. Despite occupying a marginal position in relation to the programmed musical acts these encounters are nonetheless critical in adding flavour, colour and character to an event, creating bespoke experiences for festival-goers who discover the performances as the festival progresses. They animate the space and imbue it with a sense of the unexpected, further promoting the idea (if not the reality) of the festival as open space where anything might happen. A festival experience that is open to possibility is not simply enormous fun, although that is a key part of the festival experience. It has a socio-political dimension inasmuch as it signals a particular way of thinking about space. In many ways this type of practice chooses marginality as a way of occupying Soja's *Thirdspace* (1996), a radically inclusive way of understanding spatiality and a transcendent concept that constantly expands to encompass the presence of 'an-

Other'. It situates itself as an expression of resistance against rehearsed, fixed and fixing hegemonic discourses of practice. An ethic of radical openness chimes with related work on democracy (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), the marginal politics of bell hooks (1991) and the destabilization of identity (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). These discourses insist on a genuine open future and conceive of space as a process in which we all have our part to play. As Doreen Massey argues 'conceptualizing space as open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming, is a prerequisite for history to be open and thus a prerequisite, too, for the possibility of politics' (Massey 2005: 59). Borrowing from this position and toying with the phraseology for a moment, my argument is that although perhaps masquerading as a weekend escape where permissive fun, licentiousness and hedonism reign supreme, through its commitment to play, participation and performance the festival might also operate as a covert space for the politics of possibility.

Hakim Bey's notion of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) is of significance here (Bey 1991). The TAZ is a temporary space, a 'liminal heterotopia' (Rietveld 2010: 72) that eludes the formal structures of control; it is a space where individuals can make use of 'productive incoherence' (Levin 1989).

Revolution is closed, but insurgency is open... And – the map is closed, but the autonomous zone is open. Metaphorically it unfolds within the fractal dimensions invisible to the cartography of Control. And here we should introduce the concept of psychotopology (and – topography). (Bey 1991: 103)

This is not to suggest that all festivals align themselves with this paradigm. Quite the opposite is true with many festivals being explicitly marketed, branded and sold as a commercial product, one that sits within a context of unbridled consumerism and consumption that characterizes late-capitalism of the western world. However, what is paradoxical about festivals, particularly those that position themselves in opposition to the mainstream, is that as liminoid constructs they can prompt alternative ways of being and doing, can give rise to creative experimentation and can offer temporary liberation from the strictures and routines of the everyday. In this modelling alternative festivals (and the relational performances and encounters that arise from them) can be seen as the 'creative crucible[s] for the democratic sphere' (Massey 2005: 153) and, as such, offer a vehicle for collective, negotiated activity that is tied up also with the expressive resistance of mainstream ideology. Massey goes on to argue that space be considered as the product of interrelations, in other words it is constituted through interactions. Furthermore, if space is the product of interrelations, this proposes a relational understanding of the world and a politics that stresses the relational constructedness of things (Massey 2005: 10). Undoubtedly the alternative/underground festival site throws up opportunities for multiple interactions and is predicated on interrelations between individuals, artworks and physical environment. In Massey's model the festival itself might be conceived of as relational practice. It is then pertinent to ask what happens when you put relational performance inside relational space? What complexities and challenges are presented for makers and performers of such work? How do participants make sense of the complex patterns of interrelations that circulate the artwork, intersect with it, punctuate it and influence how it might be received?

### **Spaces within spaces: Openness and the pragmatics of control**

On a summer's day beneath the dark foliage of an ancient oak tree in a deer park in England's rural Lake District, a stage is set. In contrast to the vivid green of the tree's leaves and the chestnut brown of its sturdy trunk, the small, low-lying stage is draped with luxurious lengths of cloth of various shades of cream, white and gold. Cushions and pillows are strewn on the ground creating an interior space of comfort, opulence and indulgence in the open air of the park. White and red silks hang from the tree's upper branches. They sway gently in the breeze and curtain the space as if to suggest we might be peering into a courtly chamber or place of magic. A gold hoop dangles from a structure overhead that is adorned with golden ivy, satin ribbons and clusters of fruits. Ornate chandeliers hang from lower branches, their crystals tinkling as they move.

At times this space is empty and silently offers an invitation for passers by to rest a while and enjoy its comforts. At other times four figures sit motionless within the space having approached it with deliberate and synchronized movements reminiscent of the deer that normally walk these fields. Like the space itself these characters are also dressed in white, cream and gold. They wear billowing sleeves, flowing skirts, embroidered corsets, white wigs and gold ruffs, jester's hats and pantaloons. Their faces are painted white; their lips are red and their cheeks are marked with beauty spots. They sit and they wait, silently looking out into the middle distance, acknowledging those who stop and contemplate the image before them with a smile, a wave or a nod. Presently the joker will climb the gold structure and appear to sit within the tree's bows, looking further across

the fields before slowly descending upside down using only the silks for support. This is the Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste where the characters have been waiting for Madame's arrival for 360 years and nothing happens until onlookers decide to help with the search.

**Figure 5:** A silent provocation to onlookers. *The Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste*, Kendal Calling, July 2010. From left to right: Rebekka Kill, Deborah Sanderson, Alice Robinson (Photograph by Caroline Bonser, copyright Beyond Text).

As passers-by become intrigued by the unexpected scene of opulence that lies before them, some stop to watch and try to work out what might be about to unfold. Some begin to interact with the characters, nodding or waving back. Some are enticed to move closer as golden platters filled with fresh strawberries, chocolates and grapes begin to appear from behind the drapes and are offered as gifts to those willing to help in the search for Madame. Slowly spectators cross the threshold and become participants as they enter the space, settle onto the cushions and begin to converse with the characters who explain their predicament. Participants are asked to share secrets with the characters in return for treats. They are examined, quizzed, physically tested and dressed up to see whether they resemble Madame and might even perhaps *be* her. And so the performance ensues, immersing participants in a fantasy world that transports them to another time and takes them on an imaginary journey that is co-created, negotiated and open to the prospect of possibility in terms of its form, content and exchange.



**Figure 6:** Festival-goers are fed strawberries and the interaction unfolds. *The Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste*, Kendal Calling, July 2010. From left to right: Rebekka Kill, festival-goers, Alice Robinson (Photograph by Caroline Bonser, copyright Beyond Text).

At this point, it is worth remembering that the intimate, courtly scene I have described is taking place under a tree at a music festival. There is loud, bass-heavy music thumping out of the main stage that is only a few hundred yards away. This is competing with all the other music tents that are blasting out their own tunes. Lowther Deer Park, where Kendal Calling festival is situated, is filled with around 10,000 people, many of them teenagers celebrating the end of exams with great exuberance, careering around the site on the look out for excitement and new experiences. There are burger vans, beer tents, food stalls, market stalls, prams, pushchairs, mud, music, shouting, laughing and all the other noises and displays of excess that are part and parcel of a music festival.

Conducting relational performance in these settings presents an interesting dichotomy between the pursuit of openness and the pragmatics of control. Rather than deny this tension, it is critical we expose it, play with it and build performance strategies that allow for greater understanding of it, not only within the festival context but in other settings where notions of what is open (and to whom) and what is closed (and why) are of socio-political significance. Creating performance for such settings has led to the development of a formal, structural modelling that provides a framework to help performer-

practitioners navigate their way through the pragmatics of this type of practice and which can be transferred to other activities and practices where dialogue, interaction and collaboration with participants is sought. It provides a means of articulating how relational performance operates in dynamic and fluid environments and serves as a tool for talking about the mechanics of relational performance. It exemplifies the ways in which the work can oscillate between states of openness and closure in order to maintain its core and prevent it from being overwhelmed by the challenges presented by the festival's extreme social, cultural and spatial dynamics.

### **Conceptualizing practice: The porous spheroid**

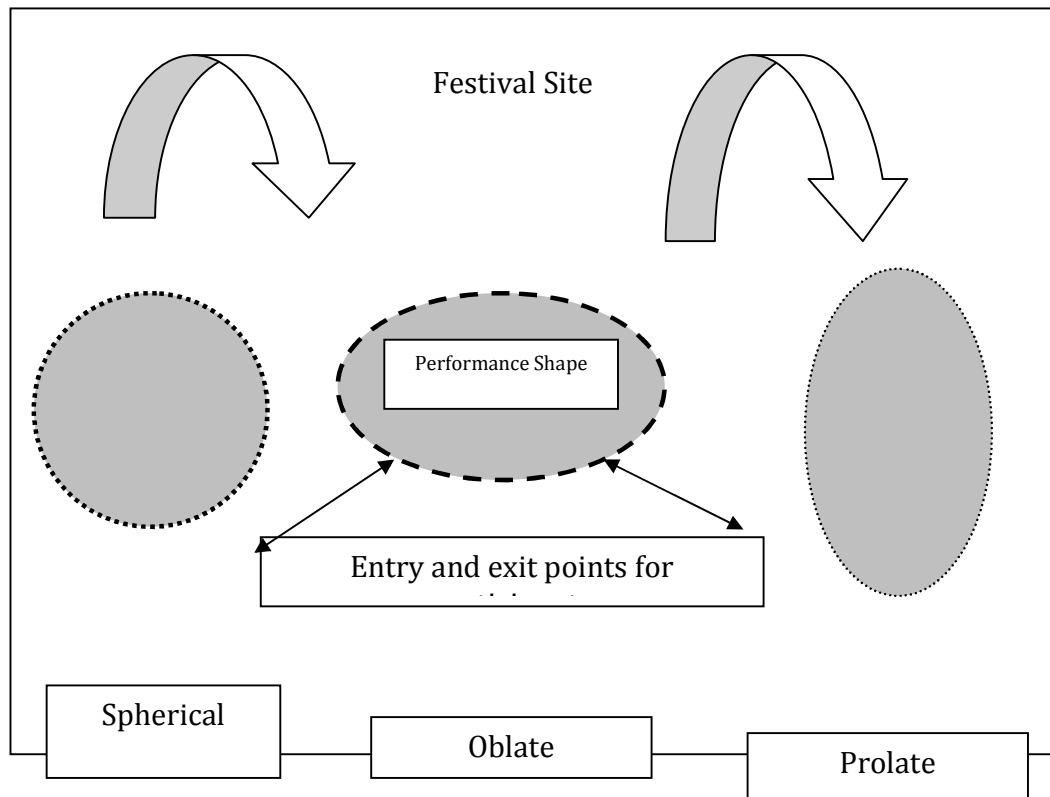
The model emerged as a direct result of touring festival performance with ...floorSpace... over the course of three years.<sup>10</sup> At this time it provided a graphical representation of the intention or core participatory ethic of the work and served as a tool for understanding the logistics of performing work that needed to be elastic and malleable. Made up predominantly of undergraduate students ...floorSpace... was a company with a fluctuating membership and varied experience that required a clear and transparent articulation of intent to make the mechanics of the work transparent. During this period seven original pieces of mobile, relational performance were created for a range of festivals across the United Kingdom.<sup>11</sup> Each had a different visual aesthetic based on elaborate costuming and exaggerated characterization but each followed a similar principle in terms of structure and objective. Each piece had a narrative premise that would unravel according to how the company interacted with festival-goers once out

'in the field'. One piece, simply known as *Tea Party*, involved a group of English aristocrats from the 1930s taking an afternoon stroll through the countryside before settling down for a picnic, complete with cucumber sandwiches, earl grey tea and cake. With a butler in attendance festival-goers were invited to join the group, share the picnic, listen to some poetry and develop characters and narratives of their own in relation to the detailed back stories already devised by the ensemble. Here audience members would gradually move from being spectators to performers by virtue of their own improvisations and contributions to the unfolding family drama around the picnic cloth.

**Figure 7:** Festival-goers join the in the tea party and improvise with the ensemble. *Tea Party*, Beatherder, July 2009. From left to right: Ali Campbell, Luke Brinsford and festival-goers (Photograph Alice O'Grady).

For each piece the company was equipped with a set of performance tools that could be deployed at various times and in different sequences in order to elicit a range of playful responses from the crowd encouraging them to interact with the performance, to become involved in it to some degree and, ultimately, to become part of the performance, thus taking some ownership of how the narrative, or parts of it, then developed through improvisation and collaboration. The performers' tool kit consisted of a range of tightly rehearsed, choreographed sections; detailed narratives, scenarios and character work required for extended improvisation; a series of subtle signals and cues between company members to communicate logistical issues or problems; and a range of strategies, props, costumes and toys for engaging spectators in play and encouraging participation.

The purpose of this work was to develop a performance concept that could operate effectively in a space of conviviality, encapsulate the underlying sociocultural frameworks of that environment and be inclusive to participants whilst maintaining a satisfactory and satisfying performance shape for those wanting to observe at a distance. This set of intentions became conceptualized as the porous spheroid model.



A spheroid is a geometrical shape that is similar to a sphere but it can be elongated, like a rugby ball (prolate) or flattened like a Frisbee (oblate) depending on the rotation of its ellipse. It can also remain spherical. The concept here is that whilst the performances have a definite shape to them, this shape is mobile and fluid. In its spherical form it can metaphorically roll around the space or festival site. It can be viewed from a number of different perspectives and angles and does not prioritize any notion of 'front'. It does not have sharp, delineated edges that may suggest chronological or narrative-driven structuring where corners are turned as the action develops. Rather, the shape circulates around the chosen playing space, finding moments in which to rest. In the instance of the 1930s picnic this might involve long periods of time where the company are literally

walking through the festival, chatting to each other and engaging spectators in polite conversation before finding a perfect spot for a picnic. In the case of the *Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste* where the performance unfolds on a staged area and is less mobile, rather than physical movement it signals instead a rolling around of possible avenues of improvisation before settling with one line of narrative or one participant's investment in the piece.

The process of flattening and elongating responds not only to the physical conditions of the space, where performers may need to coalesce in a tighter formation due to space restrictions, but also to the psychical conditions of the site. In other words, the performance may spread out or tighten up depending on how willing participants are to be involved in the work and how well the performance is being received by observers in the immediate surroundings and to what extent participants are beginning to take control of the developing narrative or physical performance. In the example of the *Tea Party*, the performance began in prolate formation whilst performers, working through rehearsed dialogue and physicalization, established themselves as a collection of characters with a defined purpose. Performers stayed physically close together so that the ensemble could be recognized as such and the intended imagery be conveyed to onlookers. The prolate shape keeps performers in tight formation and helps to signal the company as an ensemble rather than simply a group of costumed festival-goers. The distinction between these two categories is increasingly blurred as more festivals operate fancy dress policies and festival-goers go to considerable lengths to respond to the festival's chosen theme through costume. This can often be of great benefit to the concept of shared performance-

making as participants, if they are already costumed, have taken independent steps to enter the performative mode and encountering the ensemble provides them with the vehicle to explore it further through improvisation.

Once the basic premise of the tea party had been established, the fiction progressed with festival-goers invited to sit and share tea, cake and cucumber sandwiches with the characters. As festival-goers willingly joined in with the picnic, improvising with the company and formulating their own characters, the performance shape was able to loosen further and spread out into the oblate shape. Intentional gaps were left by the performers (both in terms of the developing narrative and in their use of physical positioning around the picnic cloth) so that more participants could enter the fiction in some depth and take greater control of it. In response to their participation the performance shape was able to stretch outwards and, at its most elastic, performers could wander away from the picnic cloth and into the open spaces of the festival, leaving participants to carry on the performance without them.

The oblate formation stretches the performance, allowing it to become more open. Performers are located at a greater distance from each other, perhaps literally in terms of physical proximity as described above but also metaphorically in terms of maintaining control of how the piece will progress. By opening up space between members of the ensemble the performance shape is loosened and opportunities for interventions by or interactions with audience members arise. This elongation allows for a greater blurring between the 'rehearsed space' of performance and the 'improvised space' of the festival

as the performative frame is widened and, in many ways, is the ultimate expression of radical openness where multiple interrelations are made possible. However, whilst this configuration affords greater opportunity for participation and interaction, it is also the moment at which the sense of ensemble is at its weakest and the performance concept at its most vulnerable. Whilst it was extremely satisfying to watch the ‘performance’ carry on and participants happily improvise with each other, responding in role and developing new storylines without any members of the ensemble intervening, this state could only ever be temporary. Performers had to be aware how far the piece could be stretched before it became necessary to reform, regroup and offer further input, thereby bringing the performance back to a spherical shape from where it can once more freely circulate.

In addition to the spheroids being prone to shape shifting, their structure is porous. It is punctured with holes that allow for penetration or various points of entry for others to access. The ‘point of entry’ might be the moment someone takes a sandwich and chooses to sit down to join the picnic or it might be the point at which a spectator removes their shoes, crosses the threshold of the stage, dons an ornamental ruff and enters the world of *The Heavenly Court*.

**Figure 9:** Crossing the threshold. A festival-goer becomes immersed in the fiction. *The Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste*, Kendal Calling, July 2010. (Photograph by Caroline Bonser, copyright Beyond Text).



These holes, gaps or permeable layers are prone to fluctuation as the company improvise and negotiate their way through the work, making collective decisions from within the performance as to when these opportunities for audience intervention and interaction may be made more visible. The model is intended to operate in such a way that participants may enter and exit the performance structure at different points and may choose to stay within it for varying lengths of time. Some participants in *The Heavenly Court* enjoyed the experience so much they stayed in the environment for approaching an hour – conversing with the characters, sharing stories and secrets, even on one occasion staging the renewal of their marriage vows as members of the ensemble swiftly adopted the role of handmaidens and bridesmaids. Others chose not to become physically involved, preferring instead to remain in observer mode, although this stance had its variations too. Some stood close enough to hear what was going on and would even converse with the characters informally without committing to stepping across the threshold (in other words, rejecting the porosity offered by the model). Others preferred to keep at a distance and, although they would not be able to hear any verbal exchange, their attention was held merely by the ebb and flow of participation from other members of the audience as they moved in and out of the performance itself.

Clearly managing the ebb and flow of participation prompts questions around issues of control and ownership that haunt all interactive work and not only that which is situated in environments that are somewhat risky, edgy and unpredictable. To what extent is there an irresolvable tension between radical openness and an art form like performance that traditionally relies on known outcomes (however partial)? As Beryl Graham points out,

the successful interactive artist works in much the same way as a good host at a party (1997), taking care of the guests, involving them and ensuring their needs are met. The host has a responsibility to the other guests and must reserve the right to control proceedings to a certain extent to ensure a successful event. To host one has to be in a position of power. In order to retain control of your status as host, the role of guest needs to be demonstrated and maintained and the uninvited excluded. In other words, in order to be hospitable one has also to be inhospitable, a Derridean possible-impossible *aporia* (Derrida 1995). So what happens when gatecrashers turn up to the party and start smashing the plates? The host has to close the doors. In a festival environment where alcohol is often consumed to excess, the metaphorical smashing of plates is a distinct possibility. The pragmatics of this practice means that, despite all ethical intentions to remain open, inclusive and responsive to participation, there are times when closing down the invitation to play has to happen in order to maintain the integrity of the artwork, to safeguard the performers and to protect other participants. During the course of the research we encountered a number of instances where the open invitation to play was abused. At times spectators took the opportunity to storm the stage for ‘a Facebook moment’ without any intention of engaging with the piece; performers were, on occasion, touched inappropriately; people under the influence of alcohol refused to leave the stage but monopolized the action threatening to derail the performance entirely. Deploying the tightness of the prolate shape allowed the ensemble to re-establish the boundaries of the performance, ensuring that the ‘play’ could continue. Although these occurrences were rare it brought into focus the tension between openness and closure and the extent to

which a performance concept can adapt (or shape shift) to take into account the unpredictability of human interaction.

### **Power play: Gaming, openness and questions of ethics**

The ethical considerations of any practice that involves physical participation and embodied interaction are multiple, particularly when that practice seeks or claims to be radically open. As previously demonstrated the pragmatics of making performance work that invites participation, improvisation and co-creation requires there to be some mechanisms in place for facilitating that process, and some of those strategies may involve having to close down or restrict entry to an artwork that endeavours to be open. How are these decisions made, by whom and on the basis of which criteria? These questions are critical in that they point towards political issues relating to equality, access and inclusion and their direct opposites. For artists seeking to explore radical openness concerns circulating around power and control are significant aspects of the work and have to be confronted, however unpalatable. Any performance that disrupts the conventional frame of spectatorship throws an audience into crisis and thus, perhaps momentarily, disempowers them. Reactions to this can be varied depending on the audience expectation, prior knowledge and willingness to engage with something that is uncertain. Audience members are unable to respond automatically as they have to work out first what frame is in operation (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 48). Am I viewing this through a theatrical frame or a social frame? Is this rehearsed or improvised? What is my role in this and how am I expected to respond? In the festival, where there is no theatrical

architecture to help us decode what is being observed, multiple readings are entirely possible as there are a number of different frames in play contemporaneously. In relational performance theatrical and social frames overlap, intersect and bleed into each other in ways that can, at times, confuse and disorientate. Once the disorientation has passed and the theatrical and the social are acknowledged as equal interlocutors, what is generated is a performative encounter that is unique to the place, people and environment from which it arises.

Whilst discussed within the context of the popular music festival, it is clear that this conceptual modelling can have a range of applications and learning from it can be brought to bear on a number of different practices. As a model that deals with negotiated action, the porous spheroid can be used as a tool to analyse processes where multiple frames are in place and as a methodology for exposing how those frames relate to each other. It highlights the ever-present tension between openness and closure in any human encounter and utilizes that tension as a fundamental dynamic for managing the ebb and flow of participation and investment in interpersonal exchange. It can be used not only as a tool for developing interactive performance but also as a way of understanding other social-cultural processes where power sharing, negotiated learning and dialogue are critical to the project of radical openness.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The United Kingdom has a long tradition of popular music festivals that situate themselves in opposition to the notion of mainstream society. Despite its commercial success, the best known of these is Glastonbury. Since the introduction of the Criminal Justice Bill that effectively ended the spate of free parties and outdoor raves that occurred in the late 1980s to early 1990s, many festivals have emerged that feature a strong commitment to the aesthetics of Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC). To varying degrees these festivals acknowledge and promote alternative and eco-friendly lifestyles as well as subscribing to the broad principles of DIY culture and a techno-anarchic ethic. Examples of these include Glade, Waveform, Sunrise, Alchemy, Shamania, Shambala.

<sup>2</sup> Video of the Cerne Abbas Giant can be found at <http://www.myspace.com/thecerneabbasgiant>.

<sup>3</sup> Information about the Rabbit Hole at Glade Festival 2012 can be found at <http://www.gladefestival.com/the-rabbit-hole/>.

<sup>4</sup> Research into transmission and memory at festivals was conducted by O'Grady and Kill as part of 'Festival performance as a state of encounter', a Research Network initiative

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funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) between 2008 and 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Further information on the Beyond Text strategic programme can be found at [www.beyondtext.ac.uk](http://www.beyondtext.ac.uk).

<sup>6</sup> Urban Angels Circus is an aerial circus theatre company based in the city of Leeds, UK. Further information about the company can be found at [www.urbanangelscircus.com](http://www.urbanangelscircus.com).

<sup>7</sup> The original intention in this project was to choose music festivals that would offer a certain amount of contrast in their sociocultural positioning. Ideally the research would have compared an urban festival with a rural one; a family friendly festival with an over 18s event; a rock festival with a folk festival. In reality the festivals had to be chosen due to the place within the summer schedule, the availability of the research team and the willingness of the festival management to accommodate the project. The festivals attended were Kendal Calling (2010), Bestival (2010) and Cactus Festival, Belgium (2011).

<sup>8</sup> The imperative to be mobile in these spaces raises some interesting questions about inclusion for people with physical disabilities, particularly in relation to the paradigm of participation as argued here. Despite the obvious challenges presented by the terrain,

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particularly in adverse weather, most festivals offer additional facilities for people with reduced mobility.

<sup>9</sup> The Natural Theatre Company is one of Europe's leading practitioners of street theatre and outdoor arts. They have been making and performing work for over 40 years. They specialize in walkabout performance using incongruous characterization to achieve comic effect. Further information on the company can be found at [www.naturaltheatre.co.uk](http://www.naturaltheatre.co.uk).

<sup>10</sup> The work of ...floorSpace... is described and analysed at length by O'Grady (2009) in her doctoral thesis 'Underground club spaces and interactive performance'.

<sup>11</sup> Members of ...floorSpace... were predominantly undergraduates from the B.A. Hons Theatre and Performance degree at the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds, UK. The project began in 2006 and new members were introduced to the praxis via research-led teaching and practice-based research at various festivals and club nights across the United Kingdom. ...floorSpace... performances included *Tea Party*, *VIPs*, *Backstreet Dogs*, *Alien Tourists*, *Freak Safari*, *Cleaners* and *Way to Make a Living*. These were performed at various UK festivals including Shamina, Kendal Calling, Beatherder, Nozstock and Magic Loungeabout.