Participatory Audiencing and the Committed Return

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Abstract

This chapter reflects on the author's experience of Lundahl and Seitl's *Symphony of a Missing Room* as a jumping off point to consider the relationship between spectators and their experience of theatre and performance. In particular, it explore the nature of the exchange between audience and performance, asking how spectators actively participate in and with their own experiences. In doing so, it conceptualises the notion of the *committed return*, described as a process by which spectators enter into a participatory dialogue with their own experiences, and with themselves, through the liminal space between audience and performance.

The Experience Had Me

I am standing in the upstairs foyer of the Martin-Gropius-Bau arts centre in Berlin, awaiting the beginning of Lundahl and Seitl's *Symphony of a Missing Room*.[1] A man steps forward and fits a pair of headphones over my ears, cutting out the background hubbub of the museum around me. I am momentarily conscious of feeling exposed in a public place. A moment later I feel movement near my head and a pair of opaque snow goggles are slipped snuggly over my eyes, leaving me unable to see anything beyond a diffused glow of white light. Unable to see, unable to hear the voices or footsteps of those around me, I am isolated within the vibrating bubble of my own consciousness. Suddenly, I hear a voice through the headset, I feel a hand clasp my own and the experience begins.

For the next 30 minutes I am taken on a sightless tour, guided into rooms, led from space to space, making both a literal journey through the building and an imaginative one through a fragmented narrative that is played over the wireless headphones. A hand, sometimes two, takes mine and leads me, directs me, propels me – slowly at first, gaining my trust, instilling confidence, and then with greater fluency and speed until I am following my invisible guide rapidly, without hesitation and with complete commitment.

There would, I quickly realise, be little point doing otherwise. For while the surrendering control to the guiding hand of a complete stranger (complete to the extent that I *never* get to see his or her face) might seem like a major step, might feel like trust very quickly given, the nature of the work accelerates this commitment in two key ways. First in its projection of a sense of care: there is no sudden rush into uncomfortably fast movement, instead a steady accumulation in a manner that encourages trust. Second, and equally importantly perhaps, is a sense that if I resist or doubt then everybody is in for a miserable time. I, as a participant, would be miserable, lagging back, stumbling, continually worried about walking into something or banging my head when made to duck low. Additionally, and significantly given the sense of responsibility that audiences often report towards performers, my invisible guides would be miserable: frustrated at their inability to gain my trust and the lack of flow in the resulting interaction.

For the duration of the performance, for a sightless 30 minutes, I *commit* myself. I listen to the audio, attempting to following a haunting narrative and seductive voice. Truthfully, however, the most affectively powerful element of the experience is the very act of letting go – the act of commitment itself. I allow my guide to take me wherever they take me, I invest, I immerse, I implicate myself entirely into the work. There is a pleasure to this, a pleasure in submission, yet already I feel a tension and a loss of agency that stops me from taking full enjoyment from the encounter.

When the experience is over, the snow goggles and headphones are removed. I am in a different room, although in the same museum, and my smiling host from the beginning thanks me and directs me to the exit. I am returned to everyday life, to the damp streets of Berlin, and to the requirement of once again having to take responsibility for my own actions and movements.

Symphony of a Missing Room is an experience – in many ways an engrossing and exhilarating experience. I am tempted to reach for cliché and describe it as an out of body experience, but perhaps the reverse would be more apposite. It is an out of *mind* experience. For as I walk away from the Martin-Gropius-Bau, I am suddenly very much aware that although I committed myself to the work, something feels incomplete.

It is as if somebody has kissed me, but I failed to kiss them back.
Or somebody shook my hand, but my arm remained limp.

Or perhaps like hearing something of great importance – a confession, a poem, a prayer, a call for help – but not registering it consciously until I had left the room room and turned the corner.
You know that feeling? The feel of it being only *after* that you begin to catch up with yourself and start to wonder what happened…
I committed to the work, I invested in it, participated with it, immersed myself into its world, I enjoyed it – but as I walk away I realise that it feel less like *I* had an experience; and more like *an experience had me*.

What had not happened – or had not yet happened – is what I will conceptualise in this chapter as the *committed return*. To develop this proposal I will first travel through ideas of theatre as exchange and theatre as experience in order to construct a new understanding of participatory audiencing. That is: how do spectators participate in the doing of their own experiences? To illustrate what I mean by this I will detour away from *Symphony of a Missing Room* – which acts more as a provocation for this chapter than its focus – and consider four examples of spectator responses to performances that have emerged from my own participatory audience research. These, I propose, allow us to witness tangible instances of participatory audiencing, and to see how, through invested acts of spectatorship, audiences make a committed return to both the performance and their experience of the performance.

Theatre as Exchange

There is a lot about theatre that appears unidirectional – a one way flow of stimulus from the work to the audience, more akin to a broadcast than a conversation. Yet, theatre is often conceived as a reciprocal and multidirectional exchange between performer and spectators. Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, for example, describes theatre as 'what takes place between spectator and actor' ([1968] 2002, p. 32).

The most easily graspable elements of this exchange are the most tangible: laughter, gasps, boos, applause, the occasional standing ovation or demonstrative walkout. It is, however, possible to see less demonstrative acts of audience engagement as part of this exchange. Perhaps even silence also represents a kind of return – particularly because silence in large groups is otherwise so unusual – as vital to the exchange as the act of listening is to a one-on-one conversation.

For some – for some artists, some audiences, some critics, some academics – there exists a dissatisfaction with such limited audience/performance interaction. Silence. Attention. Occasional laughter. Dutiful applause. This all seems rather small beer, rather passive and well-behaved, rather disempowered. It doesn't seem much of an exchange. A fairly explicit manifestation of this dissatisfaction is found in Caroline Heim's 2016 book *Audience as Performer*, which celebrates both the rowdy audiences of Victorian-era theatres and emerging forms of twenty-first-century audience participation (including cultures of fandom, audience co-creation, audiences as critics, etc). Heim presents these hisortical practices as examples of political and creative audience empowerment in direct contrast to what she describes as the staid, cowed and controlled spectatorship that became the standard throughout the twentieth century. Twentieth-century audiences, she suggests, fell into a 'stupor' and needed to 'break out of their inertia' (2016, p. 80).

It is the pursuit of a more fundamental and reciprocal exchange between audience and work that, at least in part, underlies the contemporary growth of participatory arts practices. Whether framed in terms of 'immersive theatre', 'dialogical art' or 'relational aesthetics', there exists a simultaneous desire to both demand more for audiences while also requiring more *from* them in return. Nicolas Bourriaud, for example, describes how the purpose of the relational art work is 'to invent possible encounters' and 'create the conditions for an exchange, the way you return a service in a game of tennis' (2002, p. 22-23). There is in Bourriaud's proposition an almost romantic exposition of the democratic and emancipatory potential of relational art practices. Inevitably such celebration opens itself up for radical critique, not least in that there must necessarily be various degrees of intersubjective participation, not all of which are equally emancipatory. For example, while *Symphony of a Missing Room* constructed a possible encounter and required participation in a manner not unlike a game, it is important to think about the limitations of the act of audience interaction it facilitated. Useful here is Grant Kester's description of dialogical art:

> The possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience - a relationship that allows the viewer to 'speak back' to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the 'work' itself. (1999/2000, p. 3)

Reading this, and thinking about my experience of *Symphony of a Missing Room*, I wonder about the extent to which my interaction with the performance was complicit, perhaps even passive, as I immersed myself into the experience. I may have been part of the work, but was there any opportunity to 'speak back'? The work was clearly participatory, and could not have happened without by active involvement. However, the extent and nature of the

exchange is in some ways as limited – very different, but equally prescribed – as the that of the conventional audience that Heim condemns. Indeed, the status of the participant/audience in *Symphony of a Missing Room* could fit very accurately Jen Harvie's description of how contemporary participatory performances position spectators as 'infinitely replaceable supernumerary extras' (2013, p. 43), with the invitation being to commit absolutely to the relatively narrow enactment of a particular role. In committing myself to this work, therefore, I gained and lost. I gained the affective experience of placing my trust into the hands of an unknown stranger; I lost full autonomy over my experience and the meanings of that encounter. This is what I mean by my claim that while the experience had me, I had no opportunity to have the experience.

To Have an Experience

The difference might seem moot – I had an experience; the experience had me – but in many ways it goes to the root of concepts of an exchange and questions concerning the relationship between the self and the world around us. It has both ethical and phenomenological implications – the relationships between which are almost in tension. Thinking first in terms of the embodied and phenomenological, the distinction connects to what Rhonda Blair describes as one of the main areas of philosophical disagreement within the field of affect theory – concerning how affective and emotional experiences should be understood and 'whether they are primarily bodily or consciously registered' (2013, p. 141).

For writers such as Brian Massumi, the description 'the experience had me' is apposite and accurate to the manner in which affective experiences are 'prepersonal' (2013, p. xvi). That is, they take place before and beyond the grasp of our reflective, reasoning, self-experiencing mind. As a prepersonal intensity, affective experiences are primarily bodily and not under an individual's conscious control. By the time 'I' attempt consciously to grasp and have my own experience, it is already too late. My experience of *Symphony of a Missing Room*, therefore, was embodied, rather than cognitive; something that had impact upon me, but also simultaneously escaped me.

There is something attractive to this description, validating those elusive experiences of theatre and dance that exist in the performance encounter between body-and-body but which escape our ability to think or speak about our experience. Yet, while evocative of the phenomenological experience, there are considerable ethical and political challenges to this description, including to our sense of who we are and how we relate to both ourselves and to

others. In terms of my own encounter with *Symphony of a Missing Room,* I was left with a sense of lack, of something missing. This lack – I would suggest – is both affective and cognitive; both felt and thought. It remains an unreciprocated kiss, an unresponsive handshake, an unreturned conversation. It is as if part of me – and what makes me *me* – has been left behind.

Other researchers, in part responding to Massumi, have sought to produce a more integrated understanding of affective experiences, something I've explored in full in a recent chapter titled 'Affect and Experience' (2016). Here, I discuss how Ruth Leys critiques the model of affect theory presented by Massumi in terms of its fundamental re-establishment of a neo-Cartesian split between mind and body. Leys points out how affect theory presumes a separation 'between the affect system on the one hand and intension or meaning or cognition on the other' (2011, p. 443). Margaret Wetherell also explores ways in which affective and cognitive processes might be conceived as an assemblage, writing that 'any strongly polarized distinction between controlled versus automatic processes, or conscious verses non-conscious, is probably too simplistic' (2012, p. 65).

Importantly, Wetherell describes how while most brain activity is likely unconscious, when the situation demands it is possible to 'pay sustained attention' to such affective experiences in a manner that is transformative:

> paying attention strongly amplifies the patterns of activation, and is correlated with the experience of consciousness. It is likely then that much of what goes on non-consciously […] can be made conscious given enough time, information and context. (2012, p. 65)

The value of this description is that it returns us to an integrated sense of being and experiencing. It aligns with Vivian Sobchack's articulation of a phenomenology of perception as being an *ensemble*, in which the material condition of being human

> necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an irreducible ensemble. Thus we matter and we mean through processes and logics of sense-making that owe as much to our carnal existence as they do to our conscious thought. (2004, p. 4)

An understanding of the incompleteness of my experience of *Symphony of a Missing Room*, that sense of lack and of something being left behind, rests in these descriptions of experiencing within and through the ensemble of one's entire being. My participation in the

work entailed me surrendering my agency, resulting in a failure to enable a reciprocal exchange between myself and the work. Perhaps, however, in Wetherell's description of *paying sustained attention* – correlated, as she writes, with the experience of consciousness – it is possible to retrieve and complete this experience, to restore that lack through a committed return. It is this concept that I want to explicitly foreground and conceptualise next.

The Committed Return

By committed return I am not, specifically or necessarily, talking about a physical or tangible response from the spectator to the artist/performer. Rather, like Wetherell's description of paying sustained attention, the committed return concerns the spectator's relationship to their own experience of the work. It represents the manner by which spectators have agency and make their experiences their own. Through the committed return, spectators absorb the experience into their *lived* experience, making it – to use John Dewey's term – 'choate'. This follows Dewey's distinction, in *Art as Experience*, between the 'inchoate' flow of experiences – that is of things that simply happen to happen to us – and the composed, reflective and complete nature of 'an experience' (1935, p. 35).

The difference then is between the inchoate experience that just happens to happen, and the choate experience marked by a committed return. This concept finds parallels with Jacques Rancière's emancipated spectator, who 'participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way' and is empowered to make their own interpretations, to 'compose her own poems with the elements of the poem before her' (2011, p. 13). What is not entirely apparent in Rancière's description is whether it is necessarily the case that all spectators are inherently emancipated in all experiences – with emancipation being the inbuilt position of spectatorship per se. His statement that 'being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity' (p. 17) – cautioning against a quest for active participation in which spectatorship becomes lost in a form of 'consumerist hyper-activism' – suggests that emancipation is inherent and automatic. However, the notion that all acts of spectatorship are always emancipated runs against our own experience of the world. We know to our cost that spectatorship can become dulled, controlled, manipulatory, passive. While there might be some performances that resonate with us, that linger in our consciousness, there are many more that are routine, quickly forgotten or inchoate.

In a previous paper (Reason 2010a) I have borrowed the concept of 'countersignature', from Jacques Derrida by way of John Caputo, to consider how art – at least some art – seems to

provoke or require a response. The countersignature represents a 'return' from the spectator, a signing off to the experience. As Caputo writes:

> Texts, if there is anything to them, elicit, call for, and provoke other texts – responses, commentaries, interpretation, controversies, imitation, forgeries, plagiarisms, echoes, effluences, influences, confluences, translations, transformations, bald misinterpretations, creative misunderstandings, etc. (1997, p. 189)

A developed and sustained manifestation of this proposal can be found in Katja Hilevaara's concept of 'memory response', which she presents as a structure that enables responses that do not critique or evaluate a work but produce new performative acts. To produce a performative memory response for Hilevaara is to 'elaborate the work, embellishing and reaching past it, augmenting what is already there' (2017, p. 40). To this end a 'memory response' has a set of four loose and fluid rules:

> 1. Remember a performance moment that delights you.
> 2. Linger with the moment.
> 3. Make a short performance act in response to this moment using only your own personal experiences and everyday objects.
> 4. Document it. (p. 41)

In an echo of Goat Island's model of 'creative response', one of Hilevaara's inspirations, this process entails a transformation of the 'memory response' into a new performative creation. Certainly the new artworks that Hilevaara produces are evidence of a supremely committed response; there is no doubt this is emancipated spectatorship.

Hilevaara's proposal essentially incorporates processes of inspiration (a moment that delights you); of paying sustained attention (a lingering); and of doing (a mediating act through which we do our lingering). Hilevaara structures this process through performance, but it might equally be through other doings that require us to pause, slow down, reflect and linger on our memories and our experiences – that require us to project our experience *outside* of ourselves, and thereby begin to know it better *for* ourselves. Such processes hold the potential to enable Wetherell's description of paying sustained attention to experience in order to bring it into our consciousness and reflective knowing.

In the participatory audience research I have undertaken with spectators, this process of spending time with an experience through a mediating activity has been a recurring feature. It

has been most transparent when I have invited spectators to draw something they remembered from a performance (Reason 2010b), or when they have been asked to write poems in response (Reason 2012), or made collages or memory maps. It can also be present, however, in conversation, which is a performative process where meanings are not merely uttered, but made and brought into being (Reason 2016). Through inviting spectators to linger and spend time with their experiences, there is the potential to enter into a genuinely emancipated and participatory relationship with the performance and the experience of the performance. By genuine, rather than tokenistic or abstractly conceptual, I mean that it enables spectators to become self-aware of the meaning and impact of their emotional, imaginative and memorial lived experiences. It is this which for me represents a committed return: a process through which a spectator becomes more fully participatory with their own experience.

The following pages present examples of the committed return, illustrating moments of lingering, of paying attention, of realization and articulation. The examples traverse a range of audience research techniques, including extracts from interviews, memory exercises, drawing- and creative writing-based workshops. The responses presented are from child and adult spectators. To provide one throughline, all the examples are in response to dance performances.

Example 1.

Alex. Responding to *For MG: The Movie*

For MG: The Movie *is a 30-minute piece of minimalist contemporary dance, choreographed by Trisha Brown and performed by Scottish Ballet. A central feature of the work is a single dancer standing completely still in the centre of the stage for the duration of the performance while other performers move, circle and arc around him. Taking part in a workshop exploring the performance through visual art, Alex explores his experience to this central, stationary figure in a drawing made with chalk on black card.*

[insert figure 1 here]

Alex: I wanted to suggest, the thing of him being rigid and bits of him are being brushed away every time. Because his natural inclination must have been to kind of follow that movement. Everything around him must have been telling him to turn, and the whole thing relied on him being rigid. It's like a joke, what's an easy job when you're on stage?

I was just thinking it was so important that he remains completely *completely* still. Which made me really tired just watching the other girl running round. [Laughs]. That semi-sprint

style, that bleep test thing. But his kind of stillness was just as important I thought. It framed everything that everyone did on the stage while he was there. Just the idea of his resistance to the movement being as important as the movement. I just wanted to look at him.

I was trying to get it all really white. Cos I want to err, almost as if it was made of sand maybe and bits were being brushed off with the movement coming by and kind of twisting him but he remains rigid.

It was the stillness more than the movement that I really liked. I mean I haven't seen very much dance, I would actually like to start seeing more. I really, really enjoyed it, but I couldn't really take in, it was just kind of sensory overload, if you know what I mean.

Example 2.

Teigan. **Responding to *Echoa***

Echoa*, devised by performed by French company Arcosm, is a highly physical dance/percussion performance. A scaffolding structure provides platforms at different levels for a range of drums, marimba and xylophones, with the dancers and musicians using the instruments, the scaffolding and their own bodies to create a combined movement and soundscape. Teigan (aged 8) attended the performance with her class and took part in a visual arts workshop in which she was invited to 'draw something you remember from the performance'.*

[insert figure 2 here]

Teigan: There's a lot of pressure.
Matthew: A lot of pressure? On you to do the drawing?
Teigan: Mmhmm.
Matthew: I am sorry, why is there pressure?
Teigan: Because I can't draw tables, I can't draw some of the stuff, it's pretty hard.
Matthew: So you are trying to get it just right? So you've got the two different drum kits, and you've got all the different tables. And you've got the person standing right on the top of the right one, she went right on the top, and what's the bit here?
Teigan: That's the bit where they are nervous?
Matthew: The bit where they are nervous?
Teigan: Yeah, look [pointing] that's angry and sad, that's sweet, that's nervous…

As she continues to talk about her drawing Teigan points to the different colours she has used to draw the musical notes, explaining how they represent the different emotions she associated with different moments in the performance. Those in the top right hand corner (reddy purple in the original) were 'sweet', and associated with a scene where a male and female dancer moved slower together on a high table. The notes in the top left (blue in colour) were the sadness that came across in some melancholic xylophone playing. Those down towards the front (yellow) were happiness provoked by a scene when the performers were playing drums in dancing unison. Teigan then explained that when she was watching each bit she was feeling the same emotions: happiness, sadness, sweetness and so on.

Example 3.

Michael. Responding to *Hush*

Hush*, choreographed by Christopher Bruce, performed by Rambert Dance Company, features six dancers in Pierrot-esque circus costumes who present a quirky and playful re-imagining of family life. With music by Bobby McFerrin and Yo-Yo Ma, the performance has a light and humorous quality (Rambert describe the piece as 'light hearted and affectionate [it will] lift your spirits and keep your toes tapping'). Michael took part in a creative writing workshop in which he was invited to explore his experience of the work through poetry.*

Memory unspools from us.
We're a troupe of clowns
distracted by the buzzing
of an invisible wasp,

clapping our hands
in the vague direction of the noise
unaware of the cassette player
squatting like an elephant in the corner.

Our bones must be electric:
even as we sit here
perfectly still, our shadows
convulse on the walls behind us.

We've discovered the secret:
we're not really animals
but facsimiles of animals.
We are broken machines,

have always been broken machines,
though we played at being real
for so long we were beginning
to believe it ourselves. Please,

you who loved us, don't feel cheated.
Console yourselves with the thought
that if there is a last laugh here,
we're not the ones having it.

In this piece of writing by Michael, a creative writing student for whom this was his first experience of watching live dance, there are moments that are clearly recognisable to

somebody who had seen the performance, the distracting buzzing of an invisible wasp, the grotesque crowds at once both comic and horrifying and the general tone and atmosphere. All this, however, is transposed through the prism of language and Michael's own poetic imagination. Some of the results include a noticeably darker emotional palette and a stress upon dystopian imagery of people as machines or animals.

Expressed in a poetic register, the language is memorable – 'our bones must be electric' – arresting – 'squatting like an elephant in the corner' – evocative – 'we played at being real'. The result is at once interpretative, telling us what Michael thought the work was about, but also and more significantly affective, inviting us to feel something akin to how it made him feel.

Example 4.

Nick. Responding to *Romeo and Juliet*

Scottish Ballet's version of Romeo and Juliet *is choreographed by Krzystof Pastor to music by Prokofiev, with the classic narrative ballet placed in a stripped back 20th Century setting. Nick took part in a post-performance discussion group, part of which involved creating a 'memory diagram' focused around a particular moment in the performance. He selected the scene where Mercutio kills Tybalt.*

[insert figure 3 here]

Nick: Some of the fight scenes really stick in my mind. They were so engaging, my whole attention was on that, I have no idea what else was happening. It was like a fight between two completely different men, one macho and almost looking aggressive in his dress and in his hairstyle and everything and the other one was playful but still fighting, almost toying with him and almost smiling and laughing as he went about fighting. The ebb and the flow of the fights, not just in the two characters but also in the way that the rest of the crowd flowed with them as well. The sense of almost an erotic tension between the two at times as well and, actually, some of the almost street-fighting techniques that they used. It was very much... Some bits were almost brawl technique but yet it all flowed from one to the next, the way it was choreographed.

Return to Symphony of a Missing Room

My purpose in presenting these examples is less to analyse *what* these spectators say about the performances, which is variously interpretative, emotional, affective and evaluative.

Rather I am interested in how they represent concrete examples of audiencing – that is the doing of spectating – each one presenting an *act* of reflecting, engaging and responding to their own experience. Each is an act of what I have termed the committed return, in which they as spectators enter into participatory dialogue with their experience and with themselves through the liminal space between audience and performance. Illustrative of this, in one post-performance visual arts workshops, a participant described the process as 'starting a dialogue with my image', pointing us towards how aesthetic experiences are not only something that participants have and re-tell, but are also made and brought into being by processes of paying sustained attention. Experience here isn't only had, but also made.

As a conclusion I return *Symphony of a Missing Room*, and my reflection on leaving the performance that an experience had me, but I had not (yet?) had an experience. I have proposed that my partial alienation from my own experience was produced by a sense that it was not in fact my own, that I was merely a functionary within it. I was not participating as an irreducible ensemble (Sobchack) but as a replaceable supernumerary (Harvie). If theatre represents an exchange, then in this instance there was a lack of a space – space here being variously metaphorical, physical, mental, dramaturgical, temporal – through which an exchange (a spectatorial return; a committed return) could be made between myself and the work.

My final call, therefore, is that amongst our consideration of participatory performance (or those closely connected forms of immersive or interactive performance) we also need to consider what might be implied by participatory audiencing. A consideration of participatory audiencing requires us to shift from thinking about what performances do with (or do to?) audiences, but instead about what audiences do with and do to performances.

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[1] First performed in 2009, *Symphony of a Missing Room* has been presented in a series of museums in Europe. As a company, Lundahl and Seitl are known for producing work that is focused around impacting upon viewers' and participants' perception, often through immersive practices. Indeed, they describe the transformation of perception as being the intangible medium of the work, which is created 'inside the immaterial realms of conscious experience' (www.lundahl-seitl.com).