The Interactive Object – Undermining the Artist and Empowering the Audience.

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> [In interactive performance] the audience is lifted out of their seat of distanced contemplation and placed in the limelight of subjective physical involvement: addressed as a storyboard controller, co-author, actor or self-performer. (Zapp 77)

Interactive performance has developed significantly over the last century ranging from Duchamp's *Rotary Glass Plates (Precision Optics)* (1920) (Rush 201), which required the audience to revolve a metal axis and view the spinning plates from a metre away, to the performances of Stelarc's *Prosthetic Head* (2002) in which the spectators could engage in a dialogue with the object of Stelarc's art (Dixon 564). In more recent years the use of objects in interactive performance has enabled artists to question whether the audience's voice can be relocated into the performance constructs that traditionally avoid active participation. By 'objects' I mean artefacts that play a primary role in an artist's work, and 'interactive materials that place greater emphasis on audience and performer dialogue' (Fenemore 6) than on the more traditional performer-to-performer dialogic activity. In this framework the object is not just a functional artefact that supports the performance or artist; it acts as a catalyst that incites the audience to make artistic decisions that directly influence the performance. In this way, the object allows the audience to move away from 'distanced contemplation' (Zapp 77) in order to create a personal journey during the performance.

Because the object allows the audience to be lifted out of their voyeuristic role and shifted into the seat of the creator, the artist's role becomes increasingly more difficult to define, particularly when objects demand more attention than the performer. The shift from the 'traditional' performance roles is not necessarily the result of audience interaction with performers. Instead, the relationships between object and audience, and

object and performer, provide a performance interface that supports the audience's voice through the subjective engagement with an object.

Using the performance *Opportunity Costs* as a framework, this paper explores the role of the object and how it challenges the traditional performance construct of performer and audience. The definition of traditional performance constructs may usually be framed within the codes and conventions of the physical and metaphorical barrier located between the performer and the audience. However for the purpose of this paper, Anna Fenemore's analysis of viewing traditional performance articulates my definition better: 'spectators always look according to their individual preference/tastes, but at a more social level they know where to look in normative performance: straight ahead at the lighted patch. In doing so they make a conscious and intentional choice to "obey" [...]' (11).

The Object Shift in *Opportunity Costs*

In June 2008, Alison Llewellyn-Jones and I devised an interactive performance titled *Opportunity Costs*, at Kingston Communication Stadium (KC Stadium), Hull. The piece was commissioned for Hull's Business Week, an event that was used to celebrate business within the Humberside region. This celebration took place over seven days, with six-thousand business people (delegates) from Humberside invited to engage with events, conferences and network opportunities. The physical performance took place on the last day of the conference week and was placed within the boundaries of a pathway that was located between the conference centre and the KC Stadium. Our brief was to create an interactive performance that reflected the contemporary financial market. As artists we wanted *Opportunity Costs* to encourage the delegates of Hull's Business Week to take risks at a time when ventures were financially 'more risky' than usual.

Alison and I carried five-hundred balloons (our objects); besuited, we stood and faced the six-thousand delegates walking towards us, and waited to engage them. Even though, in our suits, we were indistinguishable from the mass of business bodies that surrounded us, we still had a presence. The balloons that hovered above us acted as a marker to our location, mapping our presence: 'a visual picture [was] created through the relationship of visual objects' (Fenemore 6). We engaged the delegates by 'selling' them our objects, but the exchange here had no monetary value. Instead, we offered the delegates the ability to make decisions that encourage a private performance, or to be more explicit, we offered the delegates the ability to create personal narratives. In return we required their time, the few accumulated seconds it would take to document their risk. Within the currency of these traded seconds, our aim was to encourage the delegates to write a risk on to our balloons which they felt to be achievable, if slightly too precarious to take, in our current financial climate.

The role of the object in *Opportunity Costs* is to aid the transmission between 'watcher' and 'doer': it allows the audience to customise their performance. The object is used as a guide, to establish or remind the audience of the rule of our performance, which is to use the balloon, 'the object,' as a chronological guide that counts down the time left to action the risk. We have no way of knowing whether the delegate has used the guide, however, we realised that this is not as important as the interaction and the claim of ownership the audience member experiences over the object.

Once the audience member has claimed ownership, by documenting their risk on to the balloon, two separate temporal structures are created; the *chronos (χρόνος)* and the *kairos (καιρός)*. *Chronos* is the chronological measurement of our day-to-day living, the time spent engaged in our dialogic activities. Conversely *kairos* is the unmeasured time located 'outside [of] space-time' (Stone 1), it is the process of allowing narration; to

accumulate the *chronos* moments together in order to create small personal narratives. Despite their Greek origins, the terms are used in this paper as a way of identifying a dichotomy between the chronological and the metaphorical. The physical *chronos* time exists within the performance boundaries established by the performer; the subjective personal narratives that are created once the audience member engages with the object, are located within the *kairos* structure. The position of the object in relation to this dichotomy depends on who is claiming ownership of the balloons.

When the performer is claiming ownership, the object is located within a sequential *chronos* structure. The term '*chronos*' is appropriated in Robert Smithson's art where 'time is frequently represented as the quality of the mobility of discussion' (Coleman 5). This is understood further through the chronology of 'daily time' which Coleman identifies as Smithson's conversation with daily activities such as picking up the paper and staring out the bus window (5). In *Opportunity Costs* it reflects the fragility of conversation as the performers try to engage in dialogic activities with multiple prospective audience members. The performers never actually manage to conclude the performative action of discussion because the audience always moves on to experience their own personal narrative with the object.

Once the audience claims ownership of the balloons, after having written on the object and engaging with the *chronos* time structure, the object shifts into the *kairos* structure where the audience chooses the right time to act on their risk. This term can also be found in Smithson's work, where after he engaged and created his art, the collection shifted into an accumulated period of time in which Smithson's personal narratives could be viewed. In considering Smithson's personal narratives, Coleman's suggestion that '*[k]airos* can be further understood within its usage in the Greek phrase of "once upon a time": *mia fora kai ena kairo*' (17), indicates Smithson's metaphorical movement outside

of the boundaries of his established physical site. When the audience in *Opportunity Costs* decide to engage with the object, like Smithson, they make the decision to create their own narratives. These narratives are a result of the audience engagement with the accumulated seconds located in the *chronos* structure through the physical engagement with the object. The *kairos* timescape takes into consideration both the moment the decision is made to document on the balloon, and the personal narrative that still exists after this event.

After leaving the uncompleted work, audience members continue to engage with their object. Simultaneously, the performers engage with a new prospective audience, creating a cycle. The repetition of engaging with an audience and then losing them, so that they can continue their own private performance with their object not only emphasises Smithson's notion of fragmented discussion, but also places the artist in a slightly uncomfortable position. We are in a perpetual state of never completing work; there is no end to the performance; the subjective experience of 'feeling' like performers stops because we are not engaged in the development of a performance narrative. We realise that the object in this process problematizes the roles of performer and audience; when the object is removed from the sequential *chronos* site it undermines the performer by allowing the audience the choice to take creative power and consciously decide to disobey the traditional performance constructs.

Rachel Zerihan identifies the intimate nature of audience creative content, and contemplates how the 'One-to-One' performance construct echoes Barthes' 'Death of the Author.' Zerihan continues with her analysis of intimate performances and the role of the audience by suggesting that in 'One-to-One [performances] we are lifted out of the passive role of audience member and re-positioned into an activated state of witness or collaborator' (1). Although *Opportunity Costs* is not strictly a One-to-One performance,

as it continues outside of the performer's space, the same constructs that Zerihan highlights, particularly the re-positioning of audiences, exist in some form within *Opportunity Costs.* Although the term 're-positioning' suggests a movement away from traditional performance constructs, which *Opportunity Costs* adheres to, it also suggests a geographical location or point of view which may be indicative of One-to-One performance, where the artist is still the main presence within the work itself. However, the interactive performance of *Opportunity Costs*, and other works such as Blast Theory's *Rider Spoke* (2007), and Palmer and Popat's *Dancing in the Streets* (2005), create an engagement between audience and object that is more than a shift of intimate perspectives and re-positions: they empower the audience and move them into the new role of creator.

Zerihan's articulation of the term 'audience' suggests passivity and invisibility, and, if we compare both these terms to Steve Dixon's discussions of Cyber Theatre, we can suggest that both passivity and invisibility negate the performance constructs of interactive work because the audience's engagement is limited. The lack of engagement in traditional performance structures is due to the fact that 'the performance space [in interactive work] share[s] far more than in conventional performance environments, since the spectator is also a visible participator' (Dixon 509). Dixon's use of the term 'visible participator' is contentious; the term 'visible' could simply infer a presence within the performance. In traditional performance constructs the performer is able to adjust and develop techniques to manipulate the feeling of the audience; if the audience is not responsive the actor will manipulate his or her technique further. This dialogic activity, although not wholly associated with what we assume to be interactivity, does initiate a conversation that positions the audience 'visibly' within the space. Although on certain levels the audiences do participate and are 'visible' within traditional performance

structures, they are unable to enter into a *kairos* state; hence, they cannot significantly change the course of the performance, or develop a personal narrative, but remain un-activated. Conversely, if the performance construct does activate the audience and locates their voice (and not just their physical presence) within the work, they are then reconfigured into the role of creator; consequently the term audience then becomes redundant and a new terminology is needed to articulate their role within the performance.

An obvious term to adopt here would be Boal's concept of the 'spectactor.' The techniques associated with this term are employed in both 'Forum' and 'Invisible' Theatre, in which an interaction from the audience is required as the 'spectator ceases to delegate power […] and theatre is transformed from passivity into action' (Dixon 562). As Dixon observes, a shift of power from the performer to the audience is needed in order to reconfigure the passive audience into the active state of 'spectactor'; this shift of power from audience to performer is similar to that in O*pportunity Costs*. To make a direct comparison between Boal's concept of 'spectactor' and *Opportunity Costs*, we are able to see that both take into consideration the shift of power from performer to audience. This is particularly evident if we highlight Dixon's comment on Boal's views on the rejection of Aristotelian notions of theatre: the values of the world are imposed on the audience who project power onto the characters on stage (Dixon 562). This delegation of power hinders the audience's ability to choose,[1] which in turn negates the essence of the 'spectactor' and *Opportunity Costs*.

In *Opportunity Costs* and Boal's Forum Theatre, the audience thinks for himself, and because of this empowerment he has the ability to make choices. However, unlike

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[1] Although the audience's ability to choose in traditional performance is hindered, it is not diminished. It should be noted that the audience can choose to stay or leave the performance. They can also choose to listen or ignore, but the difference between the choices in traditional performance and *Opportunity Costs* is that the audience are unable to enter into a *kairos* moment when engaged with the performance.

Forum Theatre, the object in *Opportunity Costs* allows the audience to continue their performance outside of the designated performance space. It should be noted, however, that the object's role in allowing a pluralism of performances is not consistent in all interactive performances that are object-oriented. Blast Theory's work, *Rider Spoke*, (2007), allows the participators to use a Nokia N800 (a Linux based internet tablet which functions as the object of engagement), and a Mountain Bike to navigate London. Via the Nokia N800, '[the participator is] given a question and invited to look for an appropriate hiding place where […] [they] will record the answer' (Blast Theory). Only when the rider has finished navigating the city, and has found a new location that has not been used by another rider, can they engage with the object and record the position of their location. The element of choice, or *kairos*, that the Nokia N800 allows does not exist outside of the artist's performance space. Therefore the object does not allow the audience (the cyclist) to make choices regarding their own performance outside of the artist's physical *chronos* infrastructure. For this reason, Boal's term 'spectactor' may be neatly applied to the audience members of *Rider Spoke* (2007) as although they are audience members who do not 'delegate power' to the performer, they are unable to complete a deep personal narrative with the object. 'Spectactor' therefore, does not accurately describe the audience in *Opportunity Costs*, because the term does not explicitly suggest the objects' ability to create a multitude of performances and performance sites that exist outside the artist's *chronos* infrastructure.

Taking into consideration the analysis of Boal's 'spectactor,' the new terminology needed should reflect the myriad of performers and performance spaces that the object allows. The term '*part*icipant' suggests a holistic performance concept that also implies that a myriad of subjective, individual performances is needed. In *Opportunity Costs*, when the audience removes the object from the adopted performance space, they are

reconfigured into the role of *part*icipant; the process allows them to become an active and visible member of the performance. The term *part*icipant highlights a micro-performance role located within the boundaries of a greater holistic conceptual performance. On their own, the *part*icipants engage in a performative action, but when placed within the conceptual frame of *Opportunity Costs*, they play one *part* of a performance that consists of five-hundred separate *part*s, located in a myriad of spaces, and not necessarily in the initial physical space of the KC Stadium.

Conversely, we, the performers, see ourselves as guides for the *part*icipants and we encourage an engagement with the object so that the *part*icipants can make choices that affect their own private performance. We help them to use the object to aid the shift from their *chronos* infrastructure to their *kairos* timescape. We do not see ourselves as artists or creators of content, but as *facilitators* of performance. The notion of the facilitator is important because it implies a third party that aids the development, rather than creates the journey, of the performance work. The facilitator acts as the communication bridge between object and *part*icipant, giving the *part*icipant the skills needed to engage fully with the object and thus allowing the performance to extend outside of the facilitator's performance space.

The Object: Reconfiguring the Accidental-*Part*icipant

As a result of the introduction of the object to the audience, the performance becomes the privilege of the *part*icipant, and exists outside of the facilitator's space. The object acts as an anchor which still defines the conceptual boundaries of the performance, whilst allowing the content of the *part*icipant's performance to exist and develop. This is also the case in Blast Theory's work with technology and mobile communication devices, which are customised for each participant. But what becomes even more interesting than

the personalisation of the object and the performance are the implications for artistic practice that the shift of control from artist to audience may have, and the role the object may play within this shift. Blast Theory's interest in the development of artistic practice through interactivity interrogates the traditional roles of performance, and enables the artist to explore the relationship between object, artist and participant, and the effect that this relationship has on the way traditional performance constructs are perceived.

Although the comparisons between the object in *Opportunity Costs* and *Rider Spoke* (2007) are limited in regards to the way they were used and their physical description, the objects in both performances pose two concerns: how do the companies see themselves as artists; and how is the audience voice to be incorporated into the performance structure via the process of undermining the performer. In an interview with Sabine Breitsameter for *AudioHyperspace* (2004), Matt Adams attempts to discuss his perception of the artistic role of Blast Theory and the incorporation of audience voice through interactive objects:

> [We] see [Blast Theory's work] on a number of levels. One has to do with undermining the artist as the central creative role in artistic production, and problematizing this idea that the artist is the central creative role. I have unease about the idea of professional artists and consumers of art and those kinds of polar oppositions that are often set up. Blast Theory have always been very fascinated in trying to bring the voices of our audience into our work, and enable structures that allow that to happen. (Breitsameter)

The 'de-centring,' or the undermining of the artist is crucial for the development of interactive performance and the object's relationship with the *part*icipant. Although problematizing the polarity of artist and consumer, which as Adams says forms part of the de-centring process, it is the element of audience choice through the engagement with the object that truly undermines the artist.

The element of audience choice is well positioned in Palmer and Popat's light installation titled *Dancing in the Streets* (2005). This performance involved the unaware

public in York shifting into the role of accidental-*part*icipants by interacting with light shapes projected onto the public streets.² This de-centring process allowed 'participants [to bring] their own independent choices and modes of engagement to the work as they [discovered] the rules and worked out how they wished to interact with them' (Palmer 308). The notion of accidental-*part*icipants was firmly established in Palmer and Popat's concept; the public were intentionally involved and deliberately framed within the artist's conceptual arena. Conversely, in Wang Jin's *Ice.96 Central China* (1996) this was not necessarily the case.

Wang Jin's thirty metre long ice wall, containing six hundred separate frozen blocks of ice, was unveiled in a public square in Zhengzhou, China opposite a newly built shopping mall. 'Encased within these ice blocks were more than a thousand commodity items, ranging from cell phones, cameras, TV sets, to watches, gold rings and perfume bottles' (Cheng 151). Jin's aim was to use the ice as a symbol of rationality, he wanted to purify the commodities (Jin 200) and in turn 'reference China's post-1978 push for modernisation, industrialisation and economic reform' (Cheng 152). This time-based art was designed to slowly disappear and leave the remaining commodities for passers by to pick up. *Ice.96 Central China* (1996) was in no way meant to be engaged with as an object-orientated interactive performance. However, what Jin had not taken into consideration was how the object, the ice wall and the commodities located within it, would undermine his creative authority. The ten-thousand spectators that came to view the unveiling engaged in a *chronos* time structure by arming themselves with hammers, rocks and other tools so that they could dismantle the ice blocks prematurely. Once they had freed the commodities, they entered into a *kairos* timescape and engaged in their own personal narrative by walking away and engaging with the object, which will then act as a

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² The interactive lights were powered by heat sensitive cameras located in buildings looking over the street. The images the lights projected onto the floor included a football, butterflies and knots that interacted directly with the public when they walked through the sensors.

reminder of their performative actions.

The *kairos* time structure located within *Ice.96 Central China* (1996) allowed the accidental-*part*icipants to engage with personal narratives located within the process of competing for the 'prizes.' But it was the unintended 'choices' of the accidental-audience that made their dramatic movement to accidental-*part*icipant. As a result of this shift Jin was then reconfigured from artist to the – unintentional – accidental-facilitator. Although on the surface the choices of the accidental-*part*icipants might be viewed as blatant vandalism, their performative actions are still located within the conceptual framework that Jin was developing; the reference to post-1978 industrial China, which strengthened the accidental-audience's conceptual shift from within the performance. The audience's physical shift in *Ice.96 Central China* (1996) was further developed as the *part*icipant took the object and walked away from the site, leaving the space empty – the object essentially made the art itself disappear.

Once the balloons in *Opportunity Costs* and the commodities in *Ice.96 Central China* (1996) had initiated all shifts from artist to facilitator and audience to *part*icipant, the facilitator's role as the third party became surplus to the performance. The performance that we had created in the beginning finally disappeared. In our 'costumes' (used in the loosest sense of the term) we merge into the established environment of Hull Business Week: as the last few delegates, dressed in suits wander past the facilitators, we blend into the background, our suits and absence of balloons emphasise further our ability to be, simultaneously, absent and present.

Conclusion

Opportunity Costs is not a performance that was designed to be watched by an audience, but a performance that has been constructed as an experience to allow the voice of the

audience to be heard through the engagement of an object. Once the audience shifts into the role of performer the role of audience is removed. The performance was intended to empower the audience; to allow them to take ownership of the creative content that is usually developed, in traditional performance constructs, by the centralised artist or author. It is the object that gives the audience this power; however, it does not actively convince, it is not aggressive, and in *Opportunity Costs* it did not have a voice. But by the very act of writing on it, the object forces a shift from audience member to creator. As a result of this, the artists themselves are reconfigured into a third party that guides performance rather than performs it. The role of the facilitator and the *part*icipant's engagement with the object means that, although the artists own the concept, the creative content, is out of their artistic control.

Although the notion that the object undermines the artist has negative connotations, *Opportunity Costs* provides the facilitators with an unusual positive experience. The object provides us with an arena that allows the ability to experiment with what is meant by, 'to be a performer,' in the changing landscape of interactive performance. It helps to re-mold the titles that we had given ourselves. We feel uncomfortable with labels such as 'artists,' 'performers,' and 'directors,' not because we aim to demonise traditional performance constructs but because these terms suggest creativity within the conceptual framework. The term facilitator, however, allows us to 'open out' the performance structure and encourage the audience to become artists. We are not substituting the traditional performance constructs; we are proposing an alternative experience that initiates choice through the exchange of an object. As facilitators we provide the arena or interface and, in revisiting the words of Andrea Zapp, allow the audience to be 'placed in the limelight of subjective physical involvement: addressed as a storyboard controller, co-author, actor or self-performer' (77).

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