

The Ritual in Expanded Performance Project

NOTE: I am focusing my definition of "expanded" to mainly express the virtual elements of performance as this has been the most obvious form in which performance has changed in 2020. My fuller research looks at other definitions of "expanded".

Some initial thoughts on ritual

The ritual does something. At least it is meant to.

It does something that the doer imagines is difficult to achieve without that ritual.

For example, transcendence; floating above the normal, the mundane.

In this way a ritual is like a tool. It *is* a tool.

But a tool for what?

For the transformation of time. Consider a birthday; what is a tool for if not the recognition of time in a person's life or a tool for justifying the celebration of life. If only life were so... pure.

For the readying of the spirit.

For the carrying and continuation of culture.

For the submission to a culture. By choice or by force.

For the telling of a story through action. A personal story or a collective one.

Like all tools, a ritual can be used or abused. It can be repurposed and corrupted. It depends on where you are standing.

Some initial thoughts on art

Art too is a tool.

At its most innocent art is a tool for connecting with a story, a past, a future or an emotion that cannot be communicated as powerfully in other ways.

Or subverting, changing, and reimagining the story, the past, the imagined future.

That is the intention at least.

Often it fails.

It is both the slave and master to culture.

(But we live in a time and place of many cultures?)

When it fails, the artist can claim is the fault of the audience:

They are not ready; physically, emotionally, culturally, intellectually, historically.

Or maybe it fails because of the artist.

The audience says:

The artist lacked skill. They do not have their finger on the pulse; they have been cheated by history.

Art often fails retrospectively. It can also succeed in the same way.

We look back and we are embarrassed.

That tune now sounds pedestrian or too melo-dramatic.

That taste is limited for all the wrong reasons.

The subject matter is inhumane. Maybe the artist themselves were inhumane and so we can no longer live comfortably with their produce, their art.

That performance was perhaps too contrived, and we were blind at the time.

The technology had not yet developed to what it is now.

Art can also fail pre-emptively.

Something about it tells us it is just a fad.

Et cetera.

Ritual and art

Ritual depends on art. They are conjoined twins.

The objects of ritual, the visuals, the smells, the imagination of world beyond the present moment.

Art looks in the mirror and finds it is a continuation of, the end point of, a memory of, an anticipation of ritual.

This is most true when it is a performance.

The dance which is let loose becomes a devotion.

The music that is unbounded is an act of magic, a tribute to the transcendent, the untouchable.

The ritual seeks to connect to something besides the scientific reality of now. The coffee cup is no longer a ceramic vessel for liquid. It becomes an entrance into awakesness.

Art too seeks to connect. The perfectly performed play is no longer a group of people moving around in a room saying imaginary things. It becomes a portal into a universe beyond the possibilities of everyday existence.

Art can connect through objects as can ritual.

Some objects are intricate and painfully rendered through the human genius and hand.

Other objects are extracted from nature unaltered. They are placed simply on some altar, religious or otherwise.

Placed there a certain way to say a certain thing at certain time.

To allow passage to a new reality, or a half-remembered reality.
A crucifix above the door or a hat worn a certain way.

Question 1

So, what is a ritual? Really what is it?

I read the books.

The old ones which form the foundations of our language of ritual are written by men; mostly wealthy men from Europe. But everybody has rituals?

Even the ideas on the birth of theatre are tied to Greece and Rome etc. Is this story relevant?

I discard the books.

What do the people say?

I ask them.

Those of a religious leaning define ritual in a way similar to the books.

Others see it is simply doing something a certain way.

Whatever a ritual is, it becomes obvious that it's definition will never be definite. It is for the performer to determine.

The performer. The performers...

INTERLUDE

A virus has hit the world.

We can not do our rituals in person with other people outside of our homes. Not legally at least.

A virus has hit the world.

We live our collective rituals through our screens.

A memory comes to mind: a man walking through the street on a South American town with a crown of thorns and carrying a cross, his back bleeding, a crowd of the devoted following him up a hill. Is the town La Paz? It's an old memory from when I was boy. I was not there. I watched it on TV. It was Good Friday. My family being Catholic watched the footage in reverence. I no longer actively possess faith. But I get it. Whatever faith it is. The year was some point in the early 1990's. In some way we were collectively taking part in this ritual.

Was this a form of expanded performance?

Birthdays take place on screens.

Funerals take place on screens.

Work happens on screens.

I am engaged in a fellowship on which I have never physically met my fellow fellows.

And yet it happens.

Some workers are deemed key workers, others are not.

From some magic pot money is given to those who do not go to work.

I remember a definition of a ritual being something that does necessarily achieve something tangible.

I ask myself, if so many people can stop working and yet the economy can keep working, are most of our jobs in the western world inessential to life? Do we do them as mere rituals?

Question 2

Can the ritual, and by extension the performance, ever really live online?

Of-course it can.

But can it draw out the same emotions and connections?

The collective ritual that is; the ones we perform together?

In another way, is it possible to come together online in the same way that we can in physical contact?

The obvious is no.

But the wheels are moving. We are now on a path to experimenting.

I realise this is what my research is actually about. How can the performance of rituals in an online space match up, subvert, reinvent, erase, corrupt the rituals we are used to performing in the world of concrete and trees and carpets and smelly toilets.

I decide to investigate which parts of a ritual can be transferred into the world of the virtual. And which parts will always be missing.



online-possible

- Visual
- Audio



online-impossible

- Smell
- Touch
- Taste
- Energy

I want to
smell the
incense...
on my phone.
xx

Controlled experiment

I put on a performance.

November 2020.

Old Gardiner Haskins building; the loading bay; industrial; all about to be gentrified.

Theme: the making of home as a ritual.

Question: What is possible in a real-life performance that could never happen online with current technology?

We move through real space.

There is dust. The smell of old paint.

There is an audience of 40 people.

A man comes to wish me good luck. His perfume is strong. It gives me an idea for a line to add to my performance.

Through careful planning we are able to improvise with apparent ease. That's the hope.

The music starts before us 3 actors come on stage. The sound echoes through this cavernous industrial space. It's electronic dub. There is a crackle, the speakers struggle somewhat.

Note: sound is alive; it is a bio-physical expression of vibration. The sound we hear in this building can never be repeated. It is made by the speakers as much as it is by the people in the room, their presence, the walls, the materials, the volume of this space.

There is a drum of real wood and goatskin. It is beaten. It produces more than sound. It produces emotion. It hurts my fingers and palms to beat it this hard. This emotion is transmitted to the audience.



By hearing
my sound
do you
feel
me?

There is a large canvas on the floor for the audience to collectively colour and create art with. How possible is this online?

Bricks are broken with hammers. The audience does this to the beat of the drum.

Paint is made from the brick dust.

The canvas is painted with real brushes by actors and audience.

One actor gives birth to a brick.

The audience come closer.

I perform a bastardised form of Bhutto, the dance form that arose in Japanese last century. There is scraping on the crumbly concrete floor, some dust flies up and audience member coughs.

Etc.

Afterwards the audience chats to the audience, drinks beer, exchange phone numbers. The actors too.

One audience member says "It's the most alive I've felt at a performance this year." This is a year in which most performance has moved online. This expression of gratitude affects me. I wonder about my research.

Perhaps audience member X has not yet learned to equalise the online with the tangible.

Or maybe the online is still too far from the tangible to truly arouse the same emotions.

Or maybe the 2 will never be equal. What would that equality mean?

(The Royal Shakespeare makes use of motion capture and other technologies to stage a version of a Midsummer Night's Dream. I remember watching Richard III at the Tobacco Factory. The space, the rubbing of shoulders, the smell.)

Post-performance

Afterwards I think of books. Do they not sometimes transport us further than our own mothers telling us the same stories?

I investigate the history of novels...

I investigate the history of performance. There is not history of performance. There are many many histories of performance. The history that is written is overwhelmingly European or North American.

I speak to my family about performance in Zimbabwe. Close family members used to perform spiritual dance forms. Photographs are shared. To an anthropologist these performances would have been seen as "rituals".

I recall my village at harvest, the drum beat, the dust, the heat, the sweat.

I recall witchcraft. I read up on witchcraft in the UK. I speak to a woman who cleanses people's houses. I ask her if she could perform the ritual of home cleaning remotely. She says no... but maybe.

I recall an interview in September with somebody who hosts Japanese tea ceremonies. She refused to do the ceremony online. What about the smells?, she asked me.

Another experiment

We host a gamelan ritual at my house. Gamelan is performed through a multiplayer instrument from Bali. It is played by over a dozen people but as one instrument.

By limiting the ritual to one based purely on sound I hope to find whether or not this ritual/performance could transmit to a virtual space.

Again there are many elements of the gamelan that I cant envision happening online.

INTERLUDE

In the news they start speaking of zoom fatigue.

I find out about online addiction as something the EU is putting money towards.

Conversations

I join a breakaway group from the Expanded Performance Cohort. It emanates from the idea of Rabbit Holes existing through online audio experiences; falling through into other worlds through "adaptive podcasting".

We talk about nature connection through enhanced audio experience.

We talk about the possibilities of adaptive podcasting to create a more dynamic audio experience.

I speak to programmers working with similar technologies.

Another performance

I collaborate with a sound artist and videographer on a performance at Strange Brew in town.

The thinking is: create a physical performance and find a way to put it online in a way that "expands" it.

In preparation for the performance I take apart a piano and rebuild it as a parody of an "African throne". It forms the centrepiece of the stage set. The audience walk around it and touch it.

We find videos of elephants and the colonial history of pianos and we project them onto a circular screen that is moved around to a different position after each act.

I have splashed whisky on to the floor so that there is an alcoholic smell in the air which relates to the story we are going to tell.

The performance happens.

The mixing of the physical with the electronic feels powerful. Neither feels like a distraction from the other.

Many elements of the piece do not convert into a purely visual/audio piece. Work in progress...

And yet another performance

I gather theatre makers from around Bristol in an online space to provoke them to perform rituals in the real lives.

They go off and do their rituals and return two weeks before Christmas to share their experiences.

They agree that they would rather meet in person.

Concerns and questions

If performance comes to be filtered through exclusive technologies who truly has the option to take part? Is the virtual leading to a more democratic form of sharing performance and art, or does it bear the possibility of greater inequality?

Thought: Once we have invented a tool, we want to use it at all costs. Instead of questioning the impact of technology on children's lives in the pandemic, we framed the have nots as being tech poor, and that in fact the solution to the inequality in tech access was to provide all children with a screen. Other solutions could have involved having a broader conversation about what young people should be learning. What economy does their education aim to serve, and is regardless flawed in such a way that we fall through a rabbit hole of greater inequality with every new "tool" that's invented. Are we forever chasing our own tails?

Does the movement of performance into virtual space neglect the environmental impact of electronic information transmission and storage? The extractive practices that allow us to be depended on screen devices for access to entertainment are largely ignored.

Do we need a manifesto of sorts for "expanded performance" to work alongside an ethical framework that is inherently environmentally aware, is aimed at reducing not increasing inequality, etc? Indeed, many forms of expanded performance in a ritual context have the potential to be more inclusive. How do we engineer this inclusivity into all production?

How can the virtual find its own path to new forms of connection that do not seek to replicate or replace physical connection?

If cheap technology is dependent on some form of exploitation, human or environmental, what journey does expanded performance need to take to not be locked in to extractive and hierarchical forms of capitalism?

Do we need new rituals?

What is the economic implication of expanded performance and what does that mean for who can perform and how?

What next?

Working with 2 theatre groups to create a connective form of responding to audio-described rituals through physical performance. To create a platform in which the audience acts in the real world in response to what they witness in the virtual..

Submitting an Arts Council application to kick-start this process as well as begin the process of answering the questions above.

Creating a manifesto of compassionate performance platforms based on the above concerns and questions.

