

Beyond Necessity

Can we save performance, or rather, can performance save itself?

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The impact of recent financial cuts to the arts and culture sector has left many artist-led, not-for-profit organisations reconfiguring their working models so as to carry on regardless. Considering the situation from a positive perspective this shock to our economic system presents interesting challenges and change. The flip side to this rusty coin is that survival is contingent; only *some* of us will work out how to re-source and re-deploy our skills effectively in order to remain afloat.

The fragility of it all is just too depressing, but in a way, not an unfamiliar state to be in. Those of us who identify ourselves as performance artists, or, advocates of performance have become masters of self defence; buffering polite but prejudicial and hierarchical attitudes towards this precarious form. The uncertain qualities bestowed upon performance are simultaneously its friends and its foe. If we are not careful, the romanticised disappearance that makes performance what it is can conveniently and covertly be used to turn performance against itself; trading in an economy of loss makes people scared to invest. In times like these, when money is tight and difficult decisions are having to be made the latter, more negative invocation seems to stick. In the case of Live Art and Performance Art particularly, its insubordinate, transgressive and anarchic tendencies make it difficult for an increasingly mainstream and most often commercially driven cultural industry to accept. The concern being that performance art won't make a monetary return on investment.

Poor performance, always defending itself. So how does performance address this predicament? How can performance negotiate the market without compromising its politics or fundamental principles? As performance artists we have developed the skills to express our ideas whilst utilising the ultimate unruly object and the most fluctuating of economies – those of time and the body. Therefore, despite our worst fears we are very well placed to exercise these embodied skills in other areas; in the re-conceptualisation of our organisations and funding strategies. So what do alternatives to monetary investment and institutionalised systems look like if practiced as forms of art themselves – as economies of time and the body? What are the aesthetics of hard graft and how can this labor be championed as an artistic practice instead of one of slavish and reluctant subordination?

'O U I Performance' (York), 'Art Evict' (London) and ']performance s p a c e[' (London) are examples of organisations who are embodying these questions and performing their politics. As illustrative examples only they are representative of a much wider network and a more nuanced set of problems. Constituted as artist-led and not for profit; organisations of this kind have difficult and conflicting relationships with money. They are in the market for art, not in the art market and so their currency is manifested as sweat equity as opposed to financial equity. As stated in 'Trashing Performance' (2010 - 2011); the current theme of the 'Performance Matters' (2009 – 2012) research project¹, a focus is placed on work that 'enjoys, or suffers from, a troubled relationship to establishment culture.' Note the juxtaposition of '*enjoy*' and '*suffer*'. Is it possible that performance forms that deliberately negate mainstream and institutionalised funding systems have had to learn to enjoy suffering? Or, is it that narcissistically, we as performance artists enjoy to suffer? This notion has been a nagging question recently, spurred by dance maker Gillie Kleiman's provocation that, 'We must think more about why we are making what we are making and whether it is worth our time and effort' (Kleiman, 2011). Since time is so clearly not money are our

physical efforts futile, even perverse Sisyphean tasks? Not coincidentally, artists themselves begin to appear like Sisyphus, executing endurance testing, task based actions; both as performance and in order to make performance happen. As artists, we are intertwined by a network whose connections, at least from the outside, might appear purely professional. On the contrary, now more than ever this relationship has become personal. Although geographically disparate, the physicality of the exchange between O U I Performance, Art Evict and]performance s p a c e[has been crucial in the establishment of a tangible, supportive community. The work of donating time and energy between our organisations is considered a performative action - making art happen becomes an art in itself.

So how in such difficult circumstances are organisations such as this negotiating the thorny subject of money in different ways albeit for common goals. Nurturing a relationship with Arts Council England and other funding bodies is one common route to making what we are making. On paper, and with the validation that a funding logo affords, this is of course a very positive thing. However, there is a common misconception that in order to obtain these funds, organisations have to forfeit their principles by practicing the rhetoric of Arts Council speak. Since foundation in 2010, O U I Performance ² have been awarded Arts Council England, Grants for the arts funds and have therefore experienced this potential trade off first hand. However, in order to do what we feel is becoming increasingly important, i.e pay artists for their work, we have mastered and even enjoyed the fine art of asking. Organisations engaging with this strategy seem acutely aware of the potential problems within a culture where artists are not paid for their work. Performance artist and curator Jörn J. Burmester, calls this the 'pay to play festival' (Burmester, 2011), a model that potentially does not recognise the time, effort and skill of the artist.

In stark contrast, there are organisations who have never received

funding, nor have they ever applied; they don't miss the money because they never had it in the first place. As such, they have successfully circumnavigated the system so that they will never be reliant upon it. Situating themselves just as far outside of the mainstream system as you can get, ArtEvict ³, a collective based in London are a perfect example of this. Using squats and empty, disused buildings the work happens without any money changing hands. Organisations who embrace this model are, as Kleiman states able to 'enjoy the freedoms that lack affords' (Kleiman, 2011). The not getting paid bit is in fact the point and is demonstrative of the fundamental principles of performance art; that the exchange happens in the event of meeting between the artists as a form of *communitas*. The artists rewards for their time, effort and skill reside in this, perhaps, more valuable affective economy. Having experienced these rewards first hand, the depth of this exchange is one that cannot be quantified in monetary terms.

For some organisations, monetary funds are crucial, not just to fund a curatorial programme but to pay for the physical space that houses its community and hosts its events. In this instance, the temporality of cash flow problems are ever pressing and ever present in the perpetual cycle of monthly rent.]performance s p a c e[, an organisation situated in an industrial building in Hackney Wick, East London are an example of this. ⁴ Like so many organisations they have applied to Arts Council England, respective local councils and other institutional funding bodies having been unsuccessful on all counts. Consequently, countless organisations such as this are exploring other, innovative ways of raising money. Crowd funding, or crowd financing as it is less favourably known is a prevalent example. A further example is the]performance s p a c e[fundraiser, 'Beyond Necessity' (2011) which presented a programme of performance, video and panel discussions by national and international performance artists in order to raise enough funds to secure it's survival when closure was imminent. The concern for organisations such as this is that whilst raising profile and

awareness, these fundraising models reap monetary rewards that are dangerously contingent and short term. The fragility of our organisations has begun to mimic the temporality of performance itself; only in this case the ephemerality of loss happens without the romance.

It is for this reason that certain fundraising strategies make us understandably nervous; yet seem absolutely necessary when faced with little or no other choice. These solutions only go some way to realising the sustainability and longevity that not-for-profit, artist-led organisations need and deserve. Is the time, effort and skill necessary to organise such events relative to the funds that they ultimately raise? Can we save performance, or rather, can performance be used effectively to save itself? The answer has to be yes.

This is a call to arms raising questions pertinent to all of us. It is not just directed to those of us who run organisations and make performance but crucially, to the audiences who engage with them. How long can performance survive on such fragile funding initiatives? How can organisations focus on developing and strategising their long term futures if they are only able to project their thoughts to the short term; the immediacy of day to day/week to week survival? Essentially, how long before the riches of sweat equity; those deposits of time, energy and skill run out?

Performance theorists use the term 'active spectator' to describe the shared and often inter-subjective relationship between the audience and artwork. Beyond theorising, now more than ever the *active* bit, conceived literally as 'action' becomes crucial. If we want to save performance we must be willing to put our hands in our pockets *and* roll up our sleeves to make it happen. We can have a share in the sustainability of organisations such as these by investing with our physical and creative skills as much as with our purses. We, the art community are replete with resources even if financial ones are

deplete; practising this ideology is a rich currency and a powerful performative action itself.

References

Burmester, J.J. (2011). 'An open letter to Nxxx Mxxxxxxx', <http://www.performerstammtisch.de/>. Accessed on 04 June 2011.

Kleiman, G. (2011). '10 Postfundingism Pleas', <http://www.bellyflopmag.com>. Accessed on 04 June 2011.

Performance Matters. (2011). 'Themes: Trashing Performance' , <http://www.thisisperformancematters.co.uk>. Accessed on 04 June 2011.

Further reading

ArtEvict - www.artevict.com

]performance space[- www.performancespace.org

O U I Performance - www.ouiperformance.org.uk

1. 'Performance Matters' (2009 – 2012) is a creative research project co-directed by Dr Gavin Butt from Goldsmiths, University of London, Prof. Adrian Heathfield from University of Roehampton , and Lois Keidan of the Live Art Development Agency.
2. Founded in 2010 by artists Victoria Gray and Nathan Walker, O U I Performance (York) is a not-for-profit, artist-led organization curating performance in the UK with a national and international profile.
3. Founded in 2009, ArtEvict (London) is a community of artists facilitating a critical yet open platform for emerging and established artists working in performance art.
4. Founded in 2010,]performance s p a c e[(London) is an artist led non-profit organisation curating performance and provides studio and project space, acting as a place of research and dissemination outside mainstream education and gallery structures.