

## Chapter 13

### Resisting Explanation: The Politics of Audience Development and Possibilities of Form

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Over the last 20 years or so, activities that fall under the banner of audience development have become increasingly prevalent. Post-show discussions, photographs and writings from rehearsal rooms, as well as interviews with artists will frequently be found circling events of performance. Given that so many audience development initiatives involve sharing processes of creation, it's a phenomenon that throws into question the relationship between the work art does and the work of making art.

In this chapter, I will discuss the nature and impact of some of these adornments to events of performance, particularly choreographic practices presented in traditional theatre settings. I will focus on certain marketing and audience development activities in the United Kingdom whilst drawing on artistic practices from across Europe. The dominant mode of occurrences of audience development discussed here is one of explanation, typically of how a performance came to exist. I suggest such practices therefore encourage spectatorial engagement with artistic practice in relation to the labour processes, expenditures of effort and the personalities behind the event. As a result, the occasions and materials of audience development can imply that art derives value from the efforts and procedures engaged in making it, inferring the artwork itself as somehow insufficient. In addition, I express concern that these initiatives can have a homogenising effect on spectators' relationships with artworks by channelling their attentions towards stabilizing explanation and away from aesthetic experience, inherent to which is a degree of 'ungrounded knowing'. My assertion is that a preoccupation with creating comfort for viewers does not always enhance what is at work in a performance so much as extend ideologies and political concerns that are external to the encounter it offers. The works I discuss in this chapter were largely presented at a time when the writing of Jacques Rancière came to prominence in certain fields of dance, theatre and performance studies, and I will briefly characterize my concerns through his proposal of consensus as a force of discipline or management, one that proffers agreement by discounting those who disagree (Rancière 1999).

In contrast to these claims about some practices of audience development, in the second part of the chapter I recall my experience of watching the work *Low Pieces* (2009–11) by French choreographer Xavier le Roy. This stage piece includes two

instances of conversation between spectators and performers that, whilst enacting a form associated with audience development activity, extend the choreographic operations at work in the piece by permitting space for disorientation. At other moments its dancers enact shapes and behaviours that are indicative of groupings of non-human organic and animal matter, simple theatrical gestures that destabilize the idea of a fixed subject whose unique identity is located in her body, and point to the realm of aesthetic procedures at work in configurations and appearances of social organization. I suggest that *Low Pieces* troubles the move to consensus as a force of discipline by inviting ambiguity and uncertainty in how bodies relate, whilst employing forms for collective co-existence typically used to signify inclusion and conviviality, including the pre- or post-show discussion.

### **Hold My Hand and I'll Take You There**

Audience development has become a common term amongst UK-based arts funders, venues, companies and independent makers. Any organization or individual who has applied for funding through Arts Council England<sup>1</sup> (ACE) since the mid-1990s will know that planning for audience development is a requirement for application and is understood to mean '[...] increasing the range of audiences not just increasing the numbers of attendees' (Arts Council England 2010). Encouraging variety as well as quantity of audiences is essential to the Arts Council's remit to enable as many people as possible to experience arts events, stated in their mission of 'Great art and culture for everyone' (ACE 2010 & 2013). The organization suggests this might be achieved through a variety of activity including 'marketing [...] involvement in decision making, education, customer care [...]' (ACE 2016). The level and nature of ACE's concern in this area is also evident in the numerous reports and measures of statistical data it produces on the subject. Since 2005, it has conducted the annual survey 'Taking Part', which collects information about children's and adults' attendance at arts and sport events, socio-demographic information and data about motivations and barriers to engagement. Statistics from this survey have been used to create reports ranging from audience segmentation guides to socio-demographic analysis: ACE's commitment to measuring, describing and creating means to augment the numbers and types of people encountering art is clear.<sup>2</sup>

It's a commitment that has fed into the work of individual artists, companies and venues, often overlapping with publicity activities. An example of this in dance in the United Kingdom is *The Place Prize*: a biennial competition for UK-based choreographers to create an original contemporary dance piece. The prize was run from 2004 to 2013 by The Place Theatre in London and from its inception involved a series of publicity components that sought to promote the award whilst making it more inviting to a wider public. Initial application for the prize required submission

of a three-minute video detailing the proposed project; as part of the publicity campaign semi-finalists' application videos were made public via the theatre's website, alongside a series of group and individual portrait photos and biographical information. In the first year of the prize, a short film was broadcast on national television about each of the finalists, including an interview with each choreographer about the processes and inspirations for making their work, alongside rehearsal footage. During the 2012–13 edition of the prize, The Place commissioned a filmmaker to document the journey of semi-finalists which includes similar footage and is available to view on The Place's website. Each of these activities – the portrait photos, the biographies, the rehearsal footage and interviews – involve foregrounding the work as a result of an individual's, or a group's, process of labour; they say who the maker is and how they make. They function as audience development because, through offering descriptions of how a work came to be, and of its authors as familiar people, they seek to make the performances less intimidating to people for whom art is difficult to access. How do such procedures impact on practices of making and encountering art?

If we return to statistics, one outcome is the questionable impact on attendance. In April 2011, industry magazine *Arts Professional* reported the latest results from the Taking Part survey as revealing 'six years of audience development work has not upped engagement levels' (2011) and in June 2015 that 'engagement with the arts across England as a whole has been static' (Hill 2015). The 2015 report showed there had been a statistical fall in the proportion of adults engaging with the arts at least once, yet there were multiple pockets of growth such as an increase in engagement in rural areas, and in those aged 65–74 years (Hill 2015).

Whether numbers of attendees has been affected or not, ticket buying patterns have, and here I'll turn my focus to the post-show discussion. Typically offered as means for spectators to garner a closer relationship with the performance just encountered, post-show discussions usually include a brief interview about the work with its lead artist/s before questions are invited from spectators.<sup>3</sup> The Royal Shakespeare Company describe their post-show talks as 'an informal way of finding out more about the production, the actor's process and what it's like to work for the RSC', (RSC 2016) whilst Candoco Dance Company invited audiences at Bristol Old Vic to '[j]oin [...] a discussion around the themes of the work and the making process' (Candoco 2016) following a presentation of their programme *CounterActs*. Discussions based on these terms of sharing process have become common across forms of performance in the United Kingdom and they are popular with audiences. In a conversation with Toni Racklin, Head of Theatre at the Barbican in London, she explained that for any production they present that includes a post-show discussion – which is a high proportion – the evening that hosts it will always either sell the

most tickets or be the first to sell out. (I've not found any data collection to suggest whether this is because audiences particularly value post-show discussions, or because they take the option that gives more for their money.) So, whilst the results of the Taking Part survey state that numbers of arts attendees has not increased, those who do attend are engaging with events such as the post-show discussion. We might then assume that the main contribution of these audience development initiatives is in affecting *how* people engage with the art they encounter.

### **Give Me a Reason**

The examples I've given, The Place Prize publicity and the post-show talk, are cases of widely practiced audience development activities that typically employ explanation of the personalities and labour involved in making an artwork.<sup>4</sup> As materials and events that both precede and follow the occasion of performance, these explanatory modes seem to promote a clear method through which to practice the engagement they seek to encourage – if an event of performance is crowded by elucidations on its making processes, a viewer could be forgiven for attending to these aspects of the artwork over others. Further, the repeated assertion of processes of making carries a suggestion that it is in labour processes that the value or purpose of art resides, as opposed to its less recognizable or uncertain affects. Whilst explanations of making processes might offer viewers a degree of clarity through which to relate with an artwork, they also invoke particular dynamics of relation. In his writing about emancipated spectatorship French philosopher Jacques Rancière draws on the experiments of eighteenth-century educationalist Joseph Jacotot, to describe the corrosive effects of explanatory modes of education. Rancière articulates the fundamental model of explanation as requiring the master (who knows) and student (who does not know but wants to know), which can only function according to the constant reassertion of the student's lack of knowledge, making it a practice of stultification (2009: 14). I'm suggesting that the cumulative effect of so many explanatory forms of audience development might contribute to restricting spectators' potential scope of engagement, not least by distracting them from types of affect that cannot be so readily explained. That's to say, by following the lead that has been set by materials surrounding the encounter, spectators might feel encouraged to search for recognizable explanation rather than spend time with the particular qualities of not-knowing, or ungrounded knowledge, which a performance might provoke.

It certainly seems possible, then, that an outcome of the types of activities I describe here could be a homogenisation of spectatorial engagement, and that some of the forms of these activities, in turn, affirm roles, behaviours and dynamics that are readily recognisable. For example, the post-show discussion typically offers a space

in which the artist/s and interviewer will be on stage and spectators in the auditorium. Everyone is visible under house lights that illuminate an exchange between people whose roles are clear both from their location in the room, and their part in either asking or answering questions. Similarly, whilst The Place Prize did not host post-show discussions it included a procedure for audience voting, the results of which were projected on a large screen in real time and informed shortlisting and awards. Here, spectators' roles as individual recipients of the performance are made public through a visual representation of another aspect of their role – their judgements – which could be expressed within the parameters of the voting mechanism (viewers could rate each piece). The post-show discussion and audience vote both serve as spectacles of participation by making public a version of the spectator's role and behaviour in relation to the event of performance. Their basic forms create an image of simple exchange rather than an unpredictable meeting: the artwork presents the labour of the artist that the spectator receives and judges on a scale of one to four. It's an image of interaction defined by recognizability, clarity and stability. As behaviours and images, they offer little or no space for qualities of affect that might be uncertain, confusing or time-taking.

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Such qualities of lucidity can be readily found in images of ideal or utopian societies depicted throughout Western political thought, particularly in nineteenth century Europe. Friedrich Schiller (1793) described an instance of English court dance as a metaphor for the perfect society, having observed how its graceful interweaving of dancers created a collective form undisturbed by collision. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1758) imagined ideal events of harmonious community in his descriptions of winter balls and summer fêtes, in which his portrayals of individual types of social role are so detailed as to read like stage directions. The image of a stable and harmoniously functioning society is achieved in each case because every person knows her place, and can be seen to be fulfilling her place through behaviour associated with its qualities, leading to supposedly comfortable interrelation. These depictions are indicative of what Andrew Hewitt has described as a tradition of thinking about social order that derives its ideal from the aesthetic realm and seeks to instil that order at the level of the body (Hewitt 2005: 3). Hewitt's concept of social choreography as 'the centrality of the aesthetic to the elaboration of social configurations' can also be seen at work in the increased public appearance of audience participation in artworks (Hewitt 2005: 4).

The evolution of the types of audience development described above corresponds with the promotion of a connection between the arts and social policy under the New Labour governments 1997–2010. During this period, claims for art's power to alleviate aspects of social deprivation were supported in publications like those of independent consultant François Matarasso, understood to have influenced policy

under New Labour, who claimed that ‘the real purpose of the arts ... [is] to contribute to a stable, confident and creative society’ (Matarasso 1997: v, vii). Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport 1997–2001, echoed Matarasso’s sentiments when he said ‘[...] culture and creativity can help to shape a *real* sense of community, can help to develop the links between the individual and society [...]’ (Smith 1998: 17). Their focus was on experiences that equipped the individual to be more confident or entrepreneurial in their contribution to social exchange.

Whilst Smith and Matarasso focused their attention on participatory arts practices that involve viewers in behaviours beyond watching and listening, or in which watching and listening can be clearly regarded in turn, the audience development initiatives discussed above were seen to offer comparable modes of participation for artworks that are not *recognizably* participatory in their main form, such as choreographic works in theatre spaces. Smith’s and Matarasso’s ‘stable society’ notes no productive role for uncertainty or difficulty; these are qualities to be fixed and made graspable. As Hewitt’s social choreography, they are dealing in a social aesthetic driven by neoliberal ideology and party political interests, one which will only conceive people/bodies as appearing and relating in terms that perpetuate an understanding of singular roles that contribute to stable social order.<sup>5</sup> In this model of thought, people/bodies must realize those terms, rather than the terms of social organisation respond to the potentials for how people/bodies might appear and relate with each other. This propulsion towards the stable and graspable is indicative of Rancière’s idea of post-political consensus in which each thing and person has its proper place, a concept that functions according to a false presupposition that everyone has equal access to discussion and expression of agreement. It does not acknowledge the impossibility of participation for those whose voices and appearances have been precluded from the prevailing network of organization, that ‘there is no part for those who have no part’ (Rancière 1999: 14). Maintaining stability is given priority over ensuring equal access, making consensus a form of threat.

Xavier le Roy’s *Low Pieces* destabilizes the claims of hegemonic images of social appearing and relating. While the piece appears to present forms that indicate recognisable characteristics of collectivity or sociality, it embraces the potentials for bodies to host multiplicity in how they might be individually identified and collectively relate.



Figure 1: Xavier le Roy, *Low Pieces*, 2011. Photo: Vincent Cavaroc. The opening scene of *Low Pieces* at Southbank Centre, London.

### ***Low Pieces***

In late 2010, as I entered the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London to watch *Low Pieces*, I quickly noticed a row of nine performers sitting near the front of the stage calmly watching the audience take their seats. Despite the noise of conversation there was a muted quality in the room, possibly created by the carpet covering the stage. The performers looked very relaxed and wore comfortable looking clothes. When all of the spectators were seated one of the performers, whom I recognized as choreographer Xavier Le Roy, invited the audience to join them in a conversation for fifteen minutes after which the lights would go out, signalling that the piece would move into its next section. No theme or direction was offered to guide the conversation.

I was not moved to speak at this moment and felt sure that I would not at any stage. But others spoke and an awkward exchange progressed between some audience members and performers, beginning with and never veering far from the topic of conversation and whether they were actually having one.

The lights went out and some spectators continued to speak into the darkness. I momentarily felt a sense of coming home to my thoughts and my body. A few minutes passed before bright stage lights were swiftly raised.

There were a group of naked performers sitting together on the stage. They reclined in different positions and at different levels, facing various directions. Each

was wearing headphones with what appeared to be some kind of mp3 device hanging around their necks. Now and again one of the performers made a small jerk and would periodically repeat that action. Sometimes the occurrence of the gestures would increase and briefly appear to present group coordination, but mostly the individual subjects appeared unconcerned with each other. Their flesh was bright under the stage lights; they seemed very naked. The common shapes and textures and mechanics of their bodies made it clear that these were animals of the same species and so this gathering, despite its disjointed individual gestures, appeared to be social. We watched them for around ten minutes when there was another blackout.

The lights came up to reveal more naked people onstage but arranged differently. They were spread across the stage, some sitting alone with their torsos curved over, others lying on their sides, all still. I could not see their faces. They looked like a landscape, perhaps of boulders on a beach, or rocks and gnarled bits of wood on a plain. Again I saw their nakedness; I looked at their folds and creases of skin. When I focused on these details the fact that they belonged to human bodies, to people, shifted to the back of my mind.

Another blackout.



Figure 2: Xavier le Roy, *Low Pieces*, 2011. Photo: Vincent Cavaroc.



The lights rose quick enough to catch a couple of naked bodies roll and join two groups, all of whom lay on their sides and backs with a leg or arm or two extended into the air. The motion of the bodies that rolled flowed into the gentle sway that held each of the extended limbs. They reminded me of clumps of seaweed underwater or tall grass in a field. Now and again an external force appeared to move through the limbs, like a rush of water or a breeze, causing a collective and buoyant tilt before the individual strands returned to their gentle sway.

More darkness followed.

Now the naked people looked like lions. Some were on all fours, holding still with a lowered gaze, others reclined their weight onto one hip whilst holding their torsos upright, leaning on straightened arms with the tips of their fingers tucked under. Occasionally one of them would walk on all fours and others might gradually begin to follow, lazily shifting their weight shoulder-to-shoulder and hip-to-hip. Now and again one performer would nuzzle another. I thought how skilled they were at this physical mimicry.

More darkness followed and this time it stayed. Another conversation occurred amongst performers and spectators. Again, reference was quickly made to the nature of the exchange and whether it constituted a conversation. We learned that when spectators had continued to talk during the first blackout it had complicated cues based on sound and that this had not happened in any previous performance. The lights came up to reveal the performers wearing the clothes they had worn at the start of the piece standing in a row and facing us. They thanked us and we applauded.

### **You Are So Many Things to Me**

The central scenes in *Low Pieces* featured performers in the state of display through which I could most clearly identify them as human, they were naked, and therefore showing the physical attributes of a human animal. However, simply through the positioning and actions of their bodies I was able to recognize a range of other identities too. But this was recognition tempered with ambiguity – I saw boulders *or* driftwood, seaweed *or* tall grass, lions *or* some other type of large cat – I recognized types of form rather than specific ones. As I shifted between perceiving this never fully committed range of additional possible identities my attention to their human classification took a quieter role. In *Low Pieces*, the act of stimulating spectators' processes of recognition to fluctuate between seeing the material of human bodies as human and as signalling several other unstable identities points to the generative

capacities of our bodies, as well as to the political and ideological concerns that must inform singular, hegemonic images of human sociality.



Figure 3: Xavier le Roy, *Low Pieces*, 2011. Photo: Vincent Cavaroc.



Figure 4: Xavier le Roy, *Low Pieces*, 2011. Photo: Vincent Cavaroc.

Either side of these scenes are the periods of conversation that bookend the piece. They are conversations inasmuch as spectators are invited to join performers in discussion. The first of these occurred under the house lights of the theatre and fulfilled the format of most pre- or post-show discussions. However, lacking a chairperson or the aim to extract particular thoughts, it was a confusing, wandering mixture of silences, questions and statements that, despite bursts of coherence, were frequently inaudible, jarring and ignored. The second conversation, in darkness, took a similar path. Xavier Le Roy's act, then, was one of inviting and hosting uncertainty in our attempts to communicate *as a means of production*. Yet this was not an attempt to produce recognizable categories of information or social roles, but the conditions that would produce 'production itself'. It is far from the practice of rendering recognisable the artist's labour process (and social role) offered by the post-show discussions described in earlier sections.

This is not to suggest the conditions of conversation were untouched by the matrices that organize our daily lives. The nature of co-production I describe can only be understood as 'difficult' or 'wandering' according to existing linguistic structures, and likewise the shared preoccupation with how a conversation should progress refers to dominant ideals of this form. Similarly, my immediate certainty that I would not speak belied a number of contextual factors. Amongst these was the meeting of theatre's viewing conventions with the division of work and leisure. It felt fair to assume the performers had prepared for this event and were trained and paid to deliver it, whereas I had spent money to occupy my work-free evening in watching them do so. This meeting of producers and consumer recalls Nicholas Ridout's description of a modern theatre shaped 'by the organised and pervasive division between work and leisure', which prompts moments of awkwardness when the economic exchange at its heart becomes apparent (Ridout 2006: 3). If, as a consumer in theatre, I am filling my private time in which resides my private self, then it is that intimate part of my personality I risk introducing to the public realm unprepared, whereas performers fulfil their public, working duty beyond which I assume exists a more intimate self.<sup>6</sup> So I was at least partly allied to others in the audience, but of course numerous spectators did speak, many of them repeatedly, presumably unhindered by a similar quality of risk. As Jen Harvie has pointed out, those participatory arts practices that extend an open invitation to the public often result in people who already carry most cultural capital providing the summoned action (Harvie 2014: 46). The invitation cannot be equal when some are more socially entitled to speak than others before they have entered the auditorium. Indeed, my silence in the face of what I saw as the performers' responsibility for the show's unfolding might indicate my own entitlement to complacency. Clearly, then, within moments of the piece beginning, my awareness of my role in relation to those around me had been comprehensively exercised. The audience/performer

discussion did not adhere to a politics of consensus that affirmed existing and recognisable roles for those present, but at least partly provided conditions in which spectators might encounter the complex knot of linguistic and social structures that inform our senses of self and others and corresponding behaviours.

In the conversations the bumpy quality of exchange marked the failure of conversation for some, yet at the same time efforts to enact it. Concerns about the nature of conversation reflected a desire on the part of many spectators to preconceive what they were doing in order to do it appropriately. Likewise, when I watched the naked scenes I looked for and named recognizable identities in response to this bare theatre; however, with time, I experienced those multiple events of recognition (the seaweed *and* the tall grass) as fluctuating *and* co-existent. Just as the conversations offered established social form as holding the potential to produce new experiences of social relation, the naked scenes revealed that bodies are similarly generative, as the performers' actions implied multiple uncertain identities. The structural form of conversation, and of common features of distribution and gathering in the naked scenes, *as well as* the material body as site for identity and relation, were all destabilized from their typical deployment in everyday social organisation, enabling spectators to encounter their potential as forms that can be re-contextualized and dis-ordered, that can host multiple meanings and generate less acknowledged and new experiences of relation.

*Low Pieces* drew on existing terms and images for social appearing, and social practice, in order to open a space in which bodies could generate more expansive experiences of relation, including the capacity to host multiplicity. A space in which terms of affect typically offered as negative (and avoided in explanatory audience development practices) might be sources for knowledge and potential. This is not to say we should all nuzzle each other like lions, nor create disagreements for the sake of fulfilling recognizable terms of relating – this is the kind of prescriptive mechanism the piece undermines. Rather, it offers an experience of responding to what occurs in the conditions of encounter. We might take this experience also as a proposal, or an alert, to the many potential ways we might exercise relation beyond those that organize our everyday.

*Low Pieces* not only creates conditions in which people might encounter our capacities to host multiple unstable suggestions of identity at once, but implies that we are already capable of meeting these states of fluctuating multiplicity without falling into a state of collapse. It offers conditions for experiencing uncertainty and ambiguity, of finding our way through an encounter based in not-knowing (the direction of the conversation; the specific identities of the naked performers) in resistance to images of society, or explanations of artistic labour, that serve to

homogenize. In my concerns for how explanatory modes of audience development appropriate artists' labour into ideologically driven narratives of consensus, I do not suggest that artists' labour is separate from the economic and social conditions in which we live. The contrary is true. However, when certain categories of audience development appropriate artistic processes into explanatory practices that support certain models of social organisation – models that seek to establish clarity, consensus and recognizability – then the scope and potentials of what comes from those artistic processes is denied. *Low Pieces*, like a number of contemporary choreographic practices, offers a particular and temporary proposal for how we might gather and be in relation. Perhaps it is from inside such acts of proposal that we can discover new terms of invitation for audiences.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As well as through its fellow organizations the Arts Councils of Wales, Scotland and Ireland, although the focus of this chapter will be ACE.

<sup>2</sup> For further examples see the 2008 report *From Indifference to Enthusiasm*, an examination of patterns of arts attendance and analysis of social demographic factors by sociologists including Tak Wing Chan and John Goldthorpe, and the 2011 publication *Arts Audiences Insight*, an in-depth segmentation guide to types of adult arts attendee, created as a support tool for marketing and publicity.

<sup>3</sup> Post-show talks sometimes have more explicit intentions than outlined here. For example, the 'scratch' model practiced at Battersea Arts Centre in London is designed to facilitate the development of new works by seeking specific feedback from a general audience.

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<sup>4</sup> Jen Harvie has pointed out that these gestures of introduction are limited. She considers visual arts and performance practices that engage delegated labour, but only acknowledge some practices of labour publicly. For example, artist Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* at Tate Modern acknowledges workers involved in creating a crack in the floor of the Turbine Hall, but does not state the nature of their labour. Harvie goes on to suggest, counter to my argument here, that this decision attempts to deny art as labour, and works to mystify the collaboration inherent to that labour, preserving class hierarchies in the process (Harvie 2013: 41, 49).

<sup>5</sup> The participatory projects examined by Matarasso in his report *Use or Ornament* (1997), led to the identification of specific outcomes for participants, such as enhanced confidence, skill-building and education of individuals which in turn led to improved social contacts, employability and social cohesion.

<sup>6</sup> Ridout is informative again here on the phenomenon of stage fright as signalling a similar anxiety of private disclosure on the part of performers (2006: 35-69).