
Josephine Machon
j.machon@mdx.ac.uk

Introduction

This afternoon I offer a broad, introductory musing on some of the questions posed by this conference. As the references indicate, more in-depth discussions of some of these thoughts have evolved and exist in previously published work. My overriding concern today is with art as experience, audience experience, specifically, the immersive arts as experience. A point of departure within this is immersive theatre and its opportunities for participation, which includes some thoughts around immersive events and the experience economy. In prioritising experience over the experience economy, a way of structuring my reflections that has naturally emerged, both literally and figuratively, is through hands and tactile interventions; first hand experience, all hands on deck, hand holding, being at hand, to the more ambivalent ‘on the one hand and then the other’ in some of my more noncommittal musings.

Experience, audience and ‘Immersive Theatres’.

From the outset, I emphasise that a great deal of theatre is experiential and works on its audience in a visceral manner; immersive practice is just one strand of that. Indeed, qualities attributed to ‘the immersive’ have described interdisciplinary, sensory and participatory performance work occurring in places outside of traditional theatre venues for a long time. This inheritance may have some bearing on its overuse and misapplication nowadays. Of course a primary reason for its misapplication is the term’s marketing appeal, indicating a received wisdom around ‘consumer desires’ for ‘experiences’ that abounds in relation to cultural activity, which underpins Joseph Pine and James Gilmores’ tenets of the experience economy (1998).

Where I believe the term is appropriately employed, (and I provide a more detail on this via the ‘scale of immersivity’ in Immersive Theatres) is where a performance event establishes an ‘in-its-own-world’-ness, achieved through a sensitive handling of space, scenography, sound, duration and action. Clever preparation techniques, such as intricately designed waiting rooms as antechambers or soundscapes that
merge the real world you are leaving behind with the world you are entering. The audience is incorporated in concept and form in these bespoke worlds; an element that is a defining feature of immersive theatre. It ensures that bodies and physical interaction are prioritised, sometimes in relation to the performing bodies of the artists but always in terms of the perceiving bodies of the audience members, whose insertion in and interaction with the world shapes the outcomes of the event.

The second defining feature of this work is that some kind of ‘contract for participation’ will be shared between audience-participant and artist in order to enable full immersion in the world. These ‘contracts’ set up the mechanisms by which the audience member is invited and guided to interact as they journey through the piece. Expertise in the handling of these conventions, involving a strong understanding of the principles behind the invitation to participate, is vital if the desired experience and outcomes are to be achieved. These contracts may be explicit in the form of written or spoken guidelines shared prior to entering the space, or may be implicit within the structures of the immersive world, unfolding for individuals as they travel through the performance (lights and sound beckoning you to a central point of action, silent attendants in role indicating pathways one way, denying access another). Usually these contracts are a combination of the explicit and tacit. In necessitating active, physical participation these regulations are very different to the rules and conventions expected in any spectatorial, theatre production where the audience/performance relationship is defined by the delineation of space (auditorium/stage) and role (static-passive observer/active-moving performer). I should add that I am not placing a value judgement on these alternatives, simply highlighting the differing accepted etiquette, experience and outcome that results from these set-ups.

Immersive contracts will encourage varying levels of agency and participation according to the parameters of the event. Agency here is primarily related to the aesthetic experience and usually compositional; where your actions have influence over your individual artistic experience and resulting narrative or thematic constructs. In addition to compositional agency, in some instances, as with Coney’s work, individual decision making and action will impact directly on the structure and outcome of the event, which may well continue on into social agency at some level.

In regard to the ‘in-its-own-worldness of the event, a concern arises when artists indulge in an assault on the senses without careful discipline and considered form
(see Machon 2013a, 40-43,107). It is right to be wary of immersive practice that, as Jen Harvie puts it, prioritises ‘experience over content’ (55) as this relates to how effectively those contracts, within the handling of the overall form of the work, have enabled the audience participant to willingly jump on board and share responsibility for the various outcomes of the event. Here then, artistic intention and expertise is always important. Intention, integrity and expertise also has some bearing on how far the immersive experience produced can be entered, experienced and valued as, a work of art. If the immersive experience is conceived, developed and framed as an artistic performance, if it intends to work as a sensual, philosophical, creative project rather than, say, a sales ploy or a branding stratagem, there should be a strong degree of critical engagement with the immersive form in order to explore and express a depth of feeling and thinking that exists in the conceptual, thematic and narrative ideas underpinning the work.

Whether implicit or explicit, contracts for participation constitute acts of caretaking by the artist and are vital in terms of securing the constructs and governing principles of the world, facilitating a willingness to participate on the part of the audience member and establishing structures by which the safety of participant and artist alike is supported. Individual responses to these contracts, which shape subsequent external activity and consequent interpretations, means no two participants can have exactly the same experience, as no two individuals are exactly the same, although there will of course be shared qualities therein.

**Experience, audience and interpretation**

In regard to these individual responses I note how often first person, descriptive recall is employed in much contemporary analysis of immersive work, demonstrating the value placed on audience-participant’s subjectively-critical responses. This is a stance usually taken by artists in the process of analysing their own practice, especially in relation to the documentation of practice-as-research. Similarly, blogs have become an interesting source of critically reflective insight to this practice from the perspective of audience-participant. This first-person recall that plays such a big part in the analysis of this work, is of consequence here. If, as John Berger suggests, ‘objectivity is what is left when something is finished’ (420) then this recourse to a subjectively-critical/critically-subjective perspective might evidence the way in which these experiences continue on, are worked through and articulated. Such a perspective is necessary because the work and a participant’s response to it, cannot
be neatly tied up. In both academic and populist arenas then, experiential analysis has worth and weight, and directly results from the aesthetics of immersive participation.

In light of this, I want to focus on immersive practice as experience, over and above immersive practice as part of the experience economy. John Dewey in Art as Experience, first published in 1931, explains ‘[e]xperience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living’ (36). Experience here then is a sentient process of ongoing, interactive exchange between agent and environment. Dewey continues, where any activity, including an artistic event is ‘so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation….It is an experience’ (37, emphasis original). The connotations of ‘consummation’ are significant here in relation to audience appreciation. It immediately summons the sexual, the sensual; experience as activity undergone coupled with experience as a consummation that lingers. Here then, any embodied, subjective critical analysis that might ensue becomes critical consummation, rather than interpretative completion.

Immersive art as a sensual experience in which the audience is physically involved establishes its own sentient processes that result in consummation rather than cessation. It establishes endpoints that can burgeon out, like a rhizomatic pattern, and become a starting point for a new experience of the work through embodied analysis as much as any repeat visit to the work that might occur. During and following the event, immersive performance, like sex, takes you into your body, your imagination, perhaps your fantasies. These experiences and their outcomes, again, like sex, can be as individual and diverse as those engaging in the act. Therefore any impact on the social will of course reflect that diverse individualism in its outcomes and in its reach.

**Immersion, interaction and cultural institutions**

Immersive events located within a culturally inscribed space usually embrace the ‘placeness’ of that space, its history, social interactions and relationship dynamics (see Machon 2013a, 130-136 and Doreen Massey, 2010).

The artistic explorations of the theatre practitioners within the actual and figurative architecture of these cultural institutions; give us physical and imaginative access to
that space and its histories, its philosophies, its mission for public engagement. By exploring the imagined realms of that space, allowing that to resonate with the actual history of the place, a special type of access is granted. It invites, to varying degrees, the audience participant to feel part of the space and its placeness. At best, as with the events created by Louise Ann Wilson or WildWorks (both working with landscape as sites of cultural heritage), participants become acutely aware that they are citizens of ‘this place’. In differing ways, as with these examples and my proceeding illustrations, immersion in space and as place points towards some kind of an ideology of participation, which is attached to embodied engagement (see Machon 2013a, 37-8, 229-259).

Stephen di Benedetto describes how;

Artists who harness more than our eyes and ears encourage us to wake up, to be alert to the world around us, and to interact actively with the objects and creatures around us. It is an invitation to live, to feel, and to be part of a larger community  (Di Benedetto 2007, 134).

Following this, artists who generate such a relationship with cultural spaces can enable audiences to view, and interact with, the space and its objects correspondingly. Arguments for seductive tourism involving potential profits for the cultural institution and brand proliferation for the artistic company might naturally coexist as an accompanying outcome. Yet cynicism here must be kept at bay by the original aims surrounding the forging of the relationship, the initial conversations that inspire and lead to the eventual collaboration. What are the potential issues surrounding branding in such instances if it is attached to artistic and ideologically sound ambitions in addressing a remit for a cultural institution while extending the reach of the company? How might the recognition of an artistic ‘brand’ cause a shift in thinking around the value (beyond the economic) of art? What are the values of art-as-experience in an experience economy?

To think these questions through, I turn to two recent and very different experiences I have had, both of which came to mind in relation to the themes of this conference because they have been underpinned by a relationship between immersive artists and cultural institutions. I refer here to Punchdrunk Enrichment and The National Maritime Museums’ collaborative project Against Captain’s Orders and Lundahl & Seitl’s work with The Royal Academy of Art and Steinway Hall.
A Voyage Around my Son, Against Captain’s Orders, August 2015.

With this example I am aware that the value I place on this work is bound up in someone else’s experience - that of my six year old son. A vicarious pleasure in his response triggered from the moment we stepped into our assigned, small wooden, navigators’ boat and he let go of my hand…

In March 2015 Against Captain’s Orders opened to the public and ran through to the end of August 2015 – taking in two school terms plus Easter and Summer school holidays. A blog, composed in a register to target (and whet the appetite of) a young audience, serves as an archive of the project. It sets out its aims to offer experiential access to the artefacts and through this the remit of the museum. It identifies how Punchdrunk's approach addresses the museum’s own strategy for public engagement.

NMM: History is often seen as fixed, immovable, distant…We need to inspire our visitors, particularly the young ones, to see history differently. As something that is alive, actively shaping who we are and the world we live in and, importantly, being continuously reshaped by us. History can’t stay trapped in the past, trapped behind glass, it needs to be prodded, poked, challenged, explored. A visit to a museum shouldn’t be the end of a story, it should be the beginning of one. It should be exciting…[Punchdrunk] asked ‘Like an adventure?’ … ‘Exactly. We need to create an adventure’ (Our Journey Into The Uncharted' blog entry, 17 July 2015).

The blog reveals why and how the relationship was cultivated, based on mutual desires to reach an audience and explore the educational potential of collaboration. Although the doctrine espoused in Pine and Gilmores' theories could be argued to lurk within it, embedded more explicitly in its language are ‘outreach’ aims on both sides. It underscores that this is public art, funded by public investment, addressing modes of public engagement.

The following excerpt provides illustration of the prioritisation of the artistic experience underpinning the adventure;

© Josephine Machon
PD: The power of that fiction is enough to stir a real, emotional response in you… the story of Drake’s Drum… [we] use it stir their emotions. Wake them up. It gets their imaginations going and from that point on they’re ready to explore… (‘Our Journey into the Uncharted - The Fiction’, 24 July 2015)

Interestingly, in terms of stirring a response and the artistic fusion of historical fact with narrative fiction, the ‘room with the drums’ is vivid in my son’s recall of the event. This was a key moment where he felt brave, relevant, in it with the others, bound up with the imagination, fantasy and curiosity surrounding the adventure. It puts me in mind of Tassos Stevens’ lovely phrase that sums up the imaginative potential of immersive experiences that establish worlds that exist ‘in that gap between “what if” and “what is”’ (qtd in Machon 2013a, 201).

The invitation to interact with the scenographically altered space is key to activating curiosity. As Juhani Pallasmaa, a Finnish architectural philosopher, argues, unlike the fourth-wall set up of many traditional theatre experiences, which frame the event to make it an ‘art of the eye’ and ear rather than facilitating a sense of ‘human rootedness in the world’ (2005, 19), the fact that participants in this nautical world are surrounded by it and voyaging through it, ensures that some sense of ‘rootedness’ in the world of the event is felt. Against Captain’s Orders encouraged ownership of the imagined museum world and its inhabitants, which, in turn, suggested we could take a similar ownership of the ‘real world’ of the museum. I think that this is a point for further debate. That said, it certainly enabled my son to comprehend, ideas and histories from ‘the inside’. Historical motifs and stories were translated through objects, scenography, underscored by sound, facilitated by performers. It granted physical access to the historical artefacts and playfully reinforced the scholarly discourse of the museum. And this is another case in point – it could it have been used to shed light on the problems of charting history from only one cultural perspective, to highlight institutional responsibility within this. Again, an offshoot for another time and, in light of the project blog, an acknowledgment that this factor was outside the remit of the ‘adventure’ so it would have gone ‘against orders’ to do so.

As regards this invitation to interact, despite having been reminded to hang back by the performers in role, I noted my own desire as an adult to find the clues alongside the children. In this piece I became aware of parental responsibility as letting go, not ‘handholding’— a need to remove yourself, limit your interactions in order to allow for your child’s experience. This piece is not for adults. There are no opportunities for
drifting, idling through, you are not given an option to spend ponderous time in a room, to dwell in and on the stories it tells, as in signature, full-scale Punchdrunk events. Of course not. This is not a signature, full-scale Punchdrunk event. A different quality of experience is shaped and intended; it offers an invitation for you to immerse yourself in your child’s experience in a large-scale Punchdrunk Enrichment event, focused through an institutional remit, requiring set timings, for a younger audience.

‘Creating something that gives the children ownership over maritime history and inspires them to explore it on their own terms has never been in question’, project writer Simon Davies writes in his contribution to blog (Our Journey Into The Uncharted Blog – Do you Dare? 18 August 2015). Certainly, from my vicarious perspective, this was achieved to an extent. Immediately following the event my son was adamant that Gloriana, the Queen’s barge, alongside the helm of The Cutty Sark had been in our final room with us (a room where the many artefacts of the museum had been washed up, like historical detritus left following a storm, a room that we too would be shut up in for 100 years if we didn’t solve the clue to escape). When we left the room and returned to the foyer he exclaimed, ‘look see, we did it, the barge is back’ and in his recollections more recently he maintains this boat was in there. It wasn’t. Of course this is anecdotal evidence, but I think of it as subjective recall that demonstrates how the world of that adventure blurred into the real world of the museum for him. Perhaps the project would have really fulfilled its brief if we had been allowed to climb into Gloriana before we left…

I take great pleasure in my son’s ‘belief’ in the world, his willingness to embrace the ‘what ifs? and why nots?’ of the adventure and its playful devices that linger on in his memory. To clarify through another anecdotal aside; we were at the cinema recently and to get children to stop fidgeting and talking and parents to turn off mobile phones, they used a pre-recorded tannoy that spoke as if directly to members of the audience. My son believed that he had been singled out as the ‘boy at the back picking his nose’ – he recalled this when reflecting on Against Captain’s Orders – immediately relating this to the booming, against-the-clock instructions, where he had felt similarly directly spoken to, directly involved. This was a mechanism for participation that remains with him, implicating him in the action and outcomes. His recollection demonstrates a holding-on to how that device was thrilling, how it made
him feel part of the event.

So from Against Captain’s Orders, where an absence of handholding was notable, to Lundahl & Seitl’s Symphony of a Missing Room (2014) and The Memory of W.T Stead (2013), where the historical weight and aesthetics of each cultural institution resonated throughout and handholding was a vital component of the experience. Touch and the anticipation of touch remain vital to my corporeal memory of that experience. You will note how my descriptions and the terms of my analysis shift in tone as a consequence.

**Voyages with myself through Symphony and Stead**

Martina Seitl and Christer Lundahl formed Lundahl & Seitl, based in London and Stockholm, in 2003. The research process that underpins their work investigates perception, time and space (architectural, global and currently, astronomical). Lundahl & Seitl's work in Britain to date incorporates binaural soundscapes through headphones coupled with a distinctive choreography. The combination of movement and sensual technologies establishes an unusual interplay of the real and the imagined for ‘the visitor’ - Lundahl and Seitl's term for audience members.

*Symphony of a Missing Room* (Lundahl & Seitl, June 2014)

Is an hour-long piece for six at a time, sited in a museum or gallery (here, The Royal Academy of Arts). As one of the six visitors, an assistant gives me clear instructions regarding the technicalities of the event and the fact that I'll always be kept safe. This assistant then leads us up the stairs to the central hall where an older, male guide instructs us to seat ourselves on one of the stools, placed equidistantly, with attention focused on a canvas hung on the far wall. Headphones are put over my ears and a pre-recorded soundscape merges with the ambience that previously existed in that space. Through these headphones an ethereal, Scandinavian voice instructs me to notice things, artworks, people and a woman ahead who then leads us to another room where I’m blindfolded by whiteout goggles and, still led by the voice in my headphones, placed in the care of disembodied, delicately dancing hands. This invisible dancing guide and her audio companion, physically and imaginatively take me through a series of scenarios and rooms, created by the sensations of movement, sound and (unbeknownst to the visitor) white light shone onto these
goggles as much as actual travel through the space; engaging me in a dialogue between the sensual, the spatial, the recollected and the imagined.

*The Memory of WT Stead (Lundahl & Seitl 2013)*

Is an intimate piece for six people that took place at Steinway Hall, London. Side by side with members of my group, sharing smiles, I’m seated on a stool at a piano where assistants set me up with the wireless headphones and the whiteout goggles. This time my narrator is an elderly male, the voice of William Thomas Stead, the investigative journalist and short-story writer, who uncannily anticipated his own death on an ocean liner in his 1892 story *From the Old World to the New* (20 years later Stead boarded The Titanic). His narration is accompanied by an evocative soundscore; echoes of piano music, the creaking of ship timbers, all underscoring the gentle hand-to-hand guidance which leads me through rooms, up stairs, places my fingers on a keyboard, the metal strings of the piano. Often I am left to stand still, feeling the sway of my body aboard ship, the rhythm of temporality itself flowing through me between past-present-future. Goggles at times are removed so that I might engage with my environment, vision still manipulated by the dim lighting and shadows that further facilitate the otherworldly state, then returned for the journey to my destination to be finally removed when I reach it; a darkened room with the rest of the group, sat haphazardly in close proximity to the classical pianist Cassie Yukawa. She and her piano are the only objects in the room that are illuminated. She begins to play György Ligeti’s [Jet LEE-getty] *Etude Pour Irina*, slowly, slowly, becoming progressively frenetic. As the music builds to its crescendo the light has narrowed until only her hands and the keyboard are visible. Isolated in this way her hands become inhuman, mechanical, blurring in the light at the speed with which she plays. The piece dramatically ends and we’re in darkness listening to the vibration of the final notes suspended in space and time.

Lundahl & Seitl’s practice is firmly rooted in a haptic methodology that relies on tactility and sound to activate imagination. I use ‘haptic’ and ‘hapticity’ (Greek, *haptikos* and *haptesthai*, ‘to grasp, sense, perceive’, ‘lay hold of’), in relation to the performing/perceiving body, alongside tactile as the latter tends to connote only the surface quality of touch. Haptic emphasises the tactile perceptual experience of the body as a whole (rather than merely the fingers) and also highlights the significance of kineasthetics (the body’s locomotion in space) and proprioception (stimulation produced and perceived within the body relating to position and movement of the
Haptic perception encompasses the sensate experience of an individual’s moving body, and that individual’s perceptual comprehension of the moving bodies of others.

Seitl’s choreography in these two pieces involves the most delicate interplay of touch between performer and visitor; hand to hand, fingertip to fingertip, palm to palm, hand to shoulder, palm to back. The overriding experience of this contact creates a whole-body sensation for the visitor of floating in the space while anchored through the body, tethered by the feet. It is facilitated by a highly sensitive response from the performer, a relationship developed from the dynamic initiated on first contact then nurtured through a balance of coaxing and offering trust, shared between guide and visitor. It relies on the potency of hand-holding as a primitive and authentic means of communicating. It is an embodied negotiation made possible by the dancers being open to the unpredictable as they advance the haptic intervention that, in turn, keeps the visitor (literally and figuratively) on her toes.

Seitl’s developed her method from early investigations with dancers involving long rehearsal processes that, to quote Seitl, ‘took the performers into a deep state of being - within the self’ (in Machon 2013a, 174, emphasis original). Seitl’s investigations into ‘meeting the body of the visitor’ (qtd in Machon, 2014b), led her to reverse the traditional theatre relationship by blindfolding audience members who then, partnered with a dancer, would be taken through similar exercises resulting in the audience ‘visiting the experience’ facilitated by the performer (qtd in Machon 2013a, 176). The term ‘visitor’ thus emerged from these early explorations as much as it chimes with ‘visitors’ to exhibitions.

In regard to this heightened awareness of being, the Latin root of presence is important here. Praesens, meaning ‘to be before the senses’ (praee, ‘before’, sensus, ‘feeling, sense’) whereas, the word ‘present’ accounts for a state of being or feeling via tactile proof where Praesent - (from praeesse; prae, ‘before’ and esse, ‘be’) is understood as ‘being at hand’, being in reach, ‘being before’. ‘Being at hand’ is pertinent to any immersive world that invites the participant to engage through touch, especially the work of Lundahl & Seitl. The hand-to-hand interchange brings the visitor to a state of embodied mindfulness. Modes of perception shift from a reliance on external sight and sound to a prioritisation of proprioception, kinaesthetic awareness and an intensifying of inner sight. It arouses a strange temporality, a feeling of being suspended in time while engaging in an ongoing present. My
physical interactions with guide, space and object activated, as Seidl puts it, ‘a heightened sense of presence, the kinesphere around the body’ (qtd in Machon 2013a, 180). I felt that I was dwelling in time and space. This underpinned a conscious state of being with(in) myself and extended out to the architecture and artefacts of the cultural spaces inhabited.

In each of Lundahl & Seidl’s productions, I became ‘attendant’ involving ‘presence and participation’ (see Di Benedetto,126) by giving attention to the bodily ways in which perception came to bear; praeSENT and participating and feeling and thinking through it in the moment - not simply in attendance as in ‘in servitude’ to the work. From the initial gentle submergence into the world via the soundscape I noticed space, scent, texture, story, in a whole-body fashion. The moments of suspension in time and space exaggerated the ongoing present, increased expectancy, elicited an experience of being within and between my own body, another’s body, the artistic encounter and the tones and textures of the histories and values of the cultural space in which I dwelled. At both Steinway Hall and the Royal Academy of Arts, there were points at which I was sighted in rooms removed from public view and became acutely aware (by noticing the activity, scents and surfaces in those moments) that these were sites of toil and craft, as much as sites of esoteric exchange.

In both Symphony and Stead the audio and physical guidance provided a template that inspired my imagination to improvise within the parameters set. Both pieces underscored how human bodies are fleshly museums; archives of image, words and experience. Pertinent to the concerns of this conference, the wider themes of both pieces open up ongoing contemplations of the way art and culture is consumed; what is selected for us, what is stored away from us – what is publically owned, privately bestowed, what happens to art and thought that is unseen, forgotten. With each piece I became sentiently aware that the architectural space travelled through was itself submerged in and shaped by its history and the history of the objects it houses.

As this suggests, during and immediately following a Lundahl & Seidl experience I can feel how the sensuous world of my body has been the material of the work and the manifestation of its themes. The traces of this in my embodied memory influence my continuing intellectual interpretations of the work. The theories behind as much as the methods involved in Symphony and Stead, encourage a looking-in-to-look-out within me. The philosophies surveyed within the form and themes of the performance
allow for a consummate objectivity to be borne out of this subjective experience.

**Immersive aesthetics, creative collaboration and embodied interpretation**

Immersive work, to varying degrees according to the parameters of the world inhabited, requires bodily attention in immediate interpretation as much as it can inspire an unusual and, possibly, lasting intellectual engagement. This is the case even where that attention is playful, practical and educational as opposed to where it moves toward the arcane. Sensory elision, especially between sight and touch, directly impacts on the nature of perception and the corporeal memory that one has of the work in any subsequent processes of recall, including reimagining and analysing the work. This is important to remember when contemplating work that prioritises touch; handling artefacts, holding hands, as a primary mode of invitation to participate and vital method of communication. Pallasmaa suggests that ‘the creative state is a condition of haptic immersion where the hand explores, searches and touches independently’ (2009, 72, emphasis added). In this respect, Punchdrunk Enrichment and Lundahl & Seitl, in very different ways in the works cited, grant access to that creative state. They draw attention to the ways in which the audience member is the most vital collaborator during the event, shaping its forms and outcomes, and subsequent to it in any act of appreciation of that work. The creative state in these examples is literally placed in the hands of the participant – the hands-on explorer navigating his way through an adventurous journey and the moving improviser, feeling (in all senses of the word) her way through rooms, memories, philosophies and time.

The praesent experience – the participant’s physical body responding within an imaginative environment – is a pivotal element of total immersion and a defining feature of immersive theatre. The experiential nature of immersive practice prioritises the making-sense / sense-making processes of human perception and interpretation, where emotion and intuition hold their own weight in meaning-making. Interpreting the work becomes a whole-body pursuit, which can result in a layered comprehension (see Machon 2011 or 2013a, 103-113).

**Conclusions…**

So to finish with pluralised ‘conclusions’ as consummation - thereby embracing ambivalence…holding onto one hand at the same time as the other…
The examples I have reflected on here demonstrate how immersive practice can invite, on the one hand a spirited, embodied adventuring and physical puzzle-solving in Against Captain’s Orders, and on the other, a more esoteric coaxing out of states of attentive being in negotiating the journey through Lundahl & Seitl’s worlds. Both illustrate how full immersion always involves skills in improvisation on the part of audience member as much as the artists. They evidence ways in which acts of immersive participation have evolved the idea and the practice of audience. This artform encourages those of us who work in the realm of performance creation and analysis to examine the myriad ways that one might participate as an audience member. Interactive and experiential practice, whatever the form, whatever its lineage, continues to rewrite the rules of audience engagement. Where we might maintain some of the audio-visual desires of the audience-spectator, any active participation encourages, perhaps forces, us to become improviser-performer-collaborator at any given moment, involves us in the production of our own experiences and requires that we transfer physical, emotional and intellectual energy within the world of the event. In so doing it makes us partially responsible for the creative state. In reworking the form and function of audience, immersive theatres open up opportunities to explore the audience-participant’s contribution as a practitioner in this work. Audience as collaborator becomes practice-as-research. Testing and finding models for the ways in which these relationships are most effectively achieved and identifying the diverse and potentially socially impactful ways in which this can be a force for change is a tantalising prospect.

Secondly, immersive performance and sites of cultural heritage are well suited. Unsurprisingly, partnerships between site-responsive, participatory arts companies and museums are not a new thing. Museums are archives of artefacts and experience. They hold worlds, reveal histories, have unique stories to tell. They are dimensional and temporal. They require imagination in the act of comprehending the information they share. It is fun to engage in work that celebrates the stories, the aesthetics and the remit of these places. What power might lie, then, in troubling their inherent histories and relationships, revealing the politics and problems as much as the pleasures that exist in these spaces? Especially when these are spaces and places that we, partly, own.
Thirdly, in regard to the relationships evolved between artists and institutions in work such as these, if we argue that these are framed and influenced by an experience economy rather than artistic, philosophical or educational enquiry, might we be missing the point of the project. If we think of the audience only as ‘prosumers’ following Harvie’s appropriation of this term (from Alvin and Heidi Toffler, see Harvie 2013), fulfilling individual needs by producing what we want to consume, without thought for others within the experience, without thought for the art, without thought for the concepts underpinning the art - as only consuming without being nourished - if we focus on arguments around experience economy and leave out the experience itself, the quality of experience and its possible outcomes, then might we not be doing an injustice to the intentions and achievements of the immersive form as a site of cultural enquiry rather than a mode of experience economy.

And so I’m left thinking…
About immersion in a cultural space that might inspire creativity and really push the possibilities of writing and rewriting the cultural stories of that space.

I’m thinking about the big girls and boys getting in there first. About 12 year olds vs six year olds and how this might feed into debates around interactive practice and opportunism (with a big nod to Adam Alston on that note).

About the lessons this may learn us related to engagement and democracy and in-it-togetherness.

About the message that was put in a bottle, the joy of the vicarious-brave, the Gloriana that was there but that wasn’t there and was there when we left.

About the dappled sunlight in a courtyard that wasn’t there but was so present in my imagination and how that is now housed within me as a memory, as an experience.

About hands and handholding and the feel of that touch.

About handholding as a political act in Rosana Cade’s Walking Holding and wishing, really wishing, I’d been there and done that.

About holding and feeling and experience in art.
About the value placed on experience as art.

About value, desire, experience and how far I’m responsible versus how far the state is responsible for the commodification of the art, which I may not know much about but I know that I like.

About the value and values of cultural engagement and its price.

About the creak of floorboards, smell of polished wood and soft ivory, sheet music, sepia prints, the zing of the wire and mellow give of the keyboard on that old Steinway piano.

About art being art because it makes you think and because it makes you feel.

About artistic experiences that make you feel like you’re part of a community, during the event, following the event, by just knowing you’ve been there and done it together, by knowing someone else did that too and one day you’ll share that experience and how it remains with you still.

So I’m thinking about human contact and the many ways in which interactive art embraces this.

I’m thinking about human contact in art and the repercussions of this.

I’m thinking about human contact and the power of holding hands.

And I’m thinking that I’ll hold onto that thought and let go and leave it there…

References


**Performance References**

Leach. Lift Festival at The Royal Academy of Arts, London. [Date experienced: 5 June].


Web references
Lundahl & Seitl: http://www.lundahl-seitl.com/
Punchdrunk: http://punchdrunk.com/