



now don't go crying,
they're just a bunch of
stuck up art snobs

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Thank you for Laughing

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Set-Up

Whilst trying to work out how much my own art practice is to do with being funny, I find myself querying the subject of laughter in relation to Live Art. I write this article therefore in an effort to gather and document some of my initial thoughts and research and in doing so, broaden what started as a personal artistic endeavour.

I am interpreting what it means to a performer to be funny and what it means to an audience that they laugh. I am attempting to decipher the language of giving and receiving funny moments, and questioning the presence of laughter in the context of performance. In particular I am proposing a correspondence between laughter and live art, providing examples and suggestions of how this relationship might be utilised. Henri Bergson explained laughter to be 'a strange, isolated phenomenon, without any bearing on the rest of human activity'. An analysis of laughter should then sit interestingly within the subject of Live Art which is also deemed more eccentric than its comparable traditional art forms, 'to be surprised by the unexpected, always unorthodox presentations that the artists devise' (Goldberg)

The radical nature of Live Art comes from a post-modernist approach to rebuilding traditional moulds. Its re-structuring function has manifested various threads of art forms (performance confronting theatre, noise art resisting music). It has opened up the seams of previously separated and easily definable art forms; giving artistic vocabulary to alternative practices such

as ritual, celebration, body art and the everyday; 'a permissive, open-ended medium with endless variables' (Goldberg)

Representing many different kinds of practice injected with an element of live (performance, time-based systems, interaction) Live Art is by design tricky to define. However, when reading Tim Etchell's 'Step off the stage' I stumbled across a description that is of particular suitability to this enquiry. He suggests:

'a theatre that thrives on the unstable and on the trembling, on the thrill of live decisions on the collision of different materials and different narratives'

These words amongst others were performed by Etchells at the opening symposium of SPILL festival in 2007 and documented in an almanac published by the Live Art development agency. Materialising from this context, it is intended to illustrate something about Live Art but could also illustrate something about Laughter. Picture if you will 'a trembling' as the physicality of laughing, the 'unstable' moment of 'live decision' as the spontaneity of it, the 'thrill' as the pleasure it exudes, the 'materials' and 'narratives' as the various mechanisms working together to set it off, and finally the 'collision' as the triggering punch-line.

It is not only from Etchells words that I come across such parallels between Live Art and Laughter. There are other connections as well as disparities that I am negotiating and will develop further on. But for now the resemblance above captures the sort of quirky phenomena of both entities, and this I anticipate, provides an apposite starting point.



Hard (2008) -
Nathan Walker
Mixed media



Death to Grumpy
Grandads
(2002) . Anne Bean

Delay

I started to think about laughter in relation to my own performance practice which has in the past been labelled as 'funny'. It is interesting - in respect to receiving and giving feedback - what effect that will have on both the artist and their work. Particularly intriguing in regards to expressing that something is 'funny' is that the feedback is in the form of laughter, and can be given in the moment of the event itself. It too is a live and physical form of communication:

'this particular logical relation, as soon as it is perceived, contracts, expands and shakes our limbs, whilst all other relations leave the body unaffected' Bergson

That is not to say that alternative kinds of feedback (empathy, distaste, compassion, intrigue) cannot be read or sensed by a performer during the event, but rather that they are not so audibly expressed. In fact if a person had a sudden urge to shout 'Get off', 'I love you' or 'Well done' it is likely to be a more rowdy event, like a music festival. But laughter on the other hand is delivered, built-up and reverberated throughout even the stuffiest of theatres. Anybody and everybody will, if tickled, laugh.

Sigmund Freud suggests that what the joker delivers is a 'psychical relief' for both himself and his audience. By behaving in a childlike manner, by desiring and drawing out pleasure, the joke will materialise from and thus expose his unconscious. Freud portrays how the act of performing funny has an instinctive and automatic function; that is just as human as its reactor - the act of laughing.

If telling jokes is an innate quality of human routine and if art is meant to be reflective of life, then it makes sense that humour has a historical relationship within the arts and that it is particularly prevalent when there is a live audience. A communication is set up and it is the audience that Freud suggests completes the

transmission of the joke, 'it achieves general relief through discharge'. The psychical liberation is thus received, recognised and fully and finally delivered in an outburst.

The art of funny is extraordinarily likeable. It seems greatly to please people and to affect them in a way quite unlike other forms of expression. This appears to be the case whether the comedy is intended or not. If a person attends a performance advertised as a comedy, she expects to laugh and is therefore satisfied when that happens. If the same person attends a performance that is not advertised as a comedy, but is nevertheless induced to laughter, it is arguable that she may equally be satisfied because (although not expected) the act of laughing in itself is a pleasurable experience.

Bergson suggests that we laugh when there is a degree of empathy or recognition towards the performing fool 'these madmen appeal on the same chords as within ourselves'. The flawed clown figure has a familiarity that we understand in the same way as we have become accustomed to certain kinds of recurring gags or comic etiquette. Examples of these would be the proverbial pantomime characters or the identifiable structure of a joke as 'set up, delay, punch-line'

I fear a generic function for laughter that acts upon these accustomed etiquettes and structures. If laughter happens purely because it fits - we go to the theatre, we are quiet, we sit down, and we laugh at the punch-lines - then laughter is hardly epitomising the fact that it is live and human.

Because laughter is often accepted by performers as a sign of appreciation from the audience, this almost detaches them from having any other critical standpoint on what they have seen. It is often heard the phrase 'at least they laughed' as if that somehow makes up for everything and anything of what performing is about. With this in mind, it is reasonable then to suggest that some laughter has in affect, produced a sort of

laziness in both performer and audience. There is also a breakdown in communication between audience and performer during some of these funny moments, and the interaction appears a little dated. The audience let their guard down by allowing themselves to laugh but the performers do not. The conversation ends there and the performers do not react to us laughing (which in real life would happen). This peculiar communication needs to develop in a less rigid format especially considering the ubiquitous use of humour across art; in some cases it is not being used to its full potential.

If laughter is unconstructive, lacking in creativity and becoming a bit stifled then what grounds does it have to be present in performance that comes under the genre of live art, which by its own definition goes against those things? I am arguing for a revival of laughter and feel that there may be a new opening for performed humour within the field of live art. Before I delve into examples of this, perhaps it is important to understand my own perspective of what exactly laughter is.

Like love, laughter can occur as a sort of falling, lack of control or almost weakness. It takes affect on us humans, exudes pleasure and can therefore be taken for granted that we enjoy it. Laughter somehow commits me to the moment. It is one of the few instances where I can submerge myself in a little ovation for that one funny thing. Nevertheless I wonder how many of us actually take note of laughter enough to prioritise it, to acknowledge its affect. It is only when I try to describe it that I stumble across its profundity:

Punch Line

Both laughter and Live art are fundamentally real and focus on the human as a subject and object. Laughter takes on physicality, and Live Art (because of its emphasis on the live) features the presence of the body. It is specifically the double employment of the body as the artist and the art (a site, canvass, object

as well as interacting, doing, creature) that propels its significance to the art form. A development of the use of laughter within live art and beyond theatrical farce is to utilise it as a double employment of the body, to disembodify it in fact, as a subject and not simply an effect.

In 2002, artist Anne Bean reformed her performance group Bernsteins in order to re-create the 1973 piece 'Death to Grumpy Grandads' as part of the WhiteChapel Gallery's Short History of Performance exhibition. The piece was an hour-long act of laughing; the performers sitting on chairs in a circle with the audience forming an outer circle beyond this. It starts with the performers entering and sitting on whoopee cushions which in turn set them off laughing.

A complex production of laughter thus ensues from one performer to another, from performer to audience and back again. The laughter is at first triggered by the Whoopee cushions as comedy props; although it may also be set off by the performers (reunited after thirty years) finding humour in this bizarre task of remembering, reproducing and re-connecting with each other. Or, because it is the task in hand, it may have started falsely by a pretend laugh that made someone else really laugh, entering 'the slippery area where authentic response and self-conscious theatricality merged' (Bean) .

The bubbling and resonating sounds of the inner circle soon spread to the edges of the outer circle so that laughter is chaotically flowing all over the place. This also presents a multifaceted role for the audience who (also facing each other in a circle) can see each other like they can see the performers and seem to be doing precisely the same activity as the performers. They could just as well be laughing at each other and this poses the question, would they carry on laughing after the performers leave?

Bean's piece works the use of laughter within live art in a way that captures the physicality of laughing

as an everyday bodily function, spreading and communicating in various means. She portrays an undefined sense of funny as one is at a loss as to who is laughing at whom? Who started laughing? What were we laughing at? And what are we laughing at still? By prompting these questions she shakes up and tests the interactive qualities of live art, and the role of laughing as both a reaction and performance tool.

I witnessed another alternative engagement with laughter as part of the Red Ape event at the Plymouth Arts Centre. The piece was 'Hard' (part of a trilogy 'Hard Poor and Dead') performed by Nathan Walker. Walker comments on his work as 'not to do with being funny...Although sometimes people do laugh at it.' This ironically suggests that his work is somehow affected by humour and laughter, despite not being immediately obvious or (as he implies) intended. This disposition subverts the condition that laughter is an achievement and separates the act of laughing from the act of clapping. If artists step back to consider why audiences laugh when we are not supposed to, this might present an alternative method of working with what is or is not funny. It may also persuade overlaps between art that frames itself as serious, and art that frames itself as funny.

In hard Walker allows this intrigue to seep into the work. The first example of this is that he himself laughed quite unexpectedly. He was awkwardly holding himself from a beam on the ceiling attempting to jiggle metal nails out of his pants and onto the floor. We laughed because he was in a comically uncomfortable position and attempting to do something that is difficult. However, the sight of Walker's own quietly amused smile affected this moment much more. The ridiculousness was emphasised because he himself was acknowledging it.

Pretending to be flawed is not that funny anymore, but getting your self into a position of real flaw, exposing this and accepting that you are performing it, somehow is laughable. An element of seriousness was put aside,

forgiven for a moment so that we (him and us) could release a small chunk of appreciation (not just for the work but for the sake of laughter). It moved it beyond a superior sort mockery (correcting a fool), and bought us in to a closer degree of intimacy; as if we were all dangling from a beam with nails falling out of our pants, chuckling away with neighbourly empathy.

Coincidentally, at the end of the performance I heard him say to somebody 'Thank you for Laughing'. I do not think that Walker neither feigns, desires nor requires laughter, but he does play with it. By smiling he opens up his face and exposes something otherwise inaccessible.

Live Art deals with laughter in an alternative way (as it deals with every other theatrical device; making it not art, not theatre, but something else - the very nature of what it is). There are many connections between laughter and live art that provoke issues of the body in performance art, confront the subject versus object and unsettle the roles of audience and performer. In particular I am addressing the act of laughing rather than the act of being funny and suggesting playing, prioritising, sensing and wallowing a bit in being tickled.

Engaging in this you will find that what is happening is tickling you more and more, in the places where you feel it most, in the places you don't normally allow to be tickled for fear of what might happen. This is the correspondence between live art and laughter, the bubbling productivity of an equally engaging and edgy game. It is the alternative moments of humour where the performer makes them-self laugh or when the impact of a resounding punch-line is tested and stretched that puts laughter as a subject of innovation and somewhere beyond theatrical farce.