

# The artist as host: participatory performance in hybrid space

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I will present a case study from my practice-as-research enquiry into participatory performance in real and virtual space. *The Romantic Encounter* was a participatory event I devised in a real and virtual café simultaneously, to test the roles, relationships and responsibilities of the artist and the active audience. I will unpick some of the elements of this performative intervention, specifically, the invitation, the performance roles, and the site, and will consider hospitality as a framework for participation.

## KEYWORDS

Participation, Performance, Collaboration, Site, Social, Reciprocal, Virtual.

## INTRODUCTION

Cooking a curry for gallery visitors, offering personal tours of a city or hosting a speed-date in a real and virtual café, are just a handful of the convivial acts performed by artists with the intention to engage audiences, to encourage reciprocal relationships, social exchange and new collaborations or to be playful in private and public spaces.

Participatory performance celebrates and activates an audience or public, encouraging them to participate and perform in response to an invitation, a site or situation and to work together collaboratively. Here, the artist creates an installation, a platform or a situation to act as a catalyst for collaboration and exchange between the artist and audience, but most importantly between those who actively participate. In this context, I propose that the artists' role becomes that of a 'host'; offering an experience or a dialogue to the audience who become 'guests' and are invited to reciprocate. Collaborators are often enlisted as co-hosts to support the artist, and all are encouraged to respond creatively, resulting in live and unpredictable sets of collaborations. This has led me to consider, if the roles of

artist and audience share similarities to that of a host and a guest, can the model of hospitality be adopted as a framework in which to analyse participatory performance and the collaborative relationships they develop? And how does participatory performance in a virtual or hybrid space change the performative roles, relationships, and responsibilities of the participants?

## THE ROMANTIC ENCOUNTER

### Writings of a host

On Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> October 2010, Lee Rosy's café, an independent café in Nottingham city centre and a replica café in Second Life, become the site and stage for encounters and performances in the physical and virtual.



**Figure 1:** *The Romantic Encounter* Virtual Stage, 2010

As artist and researcher my role as host begins by writing and distributing a public invitation to provoke, intrigue, and attract participants to encounter a new experience in a hybrid space. The public invitation reads:

*"You are invited to The Romantic Encounter, taking place at Lee Rosy's Tea Café in Nottingham on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> October, between 6.30pm–8.30pm...*

*For one night only the real and the virtual will mingle as Lee Rosy's becomes the stage for your chance romantic encounter with an avatar. Make yourself up, dress to impress or come in disguise – arriving between 6.30pm and 8.15pm – and remember, press F3 to blow a kiss... RSVP to book your encounter."*

The invitation is intentionally ambiguous and intends to ask prospective participants to consider their 'performance' before they arrive at the café for their 'romantic' encounter. To my surprise and amusement I receive two separate emails in response to the invitation, informing me of their decline of my offer, clearly stipulating they will be spending that evening with their wives. I realise as host, perhaps the need to specifically invite couples to come together and perform individually. I invite three couples and all accept, perhaps with the understanding that this is a performance, not a real date. Guests continue to RSVP and a week before the event, all 36 scheduled encounters are fully booked. My co-hosts and I work tirelessly to prepare the real and virtual site for performance; six tables for two, each with a candle, flower, milk jug and sugar bowl. The café counter, till,

shelves, floor, walls and ceilings are replicated in the virtual space while the six avatars receive a makeover in preparation for their performance. Profile photos of each avatar are printed and placed in envelopes with an invitation to perform. On the afternoon before the performance I meet to confer with my fellow café hosts, who will welcome and wait on our guests during their encounter. The real café and the virtual café meet, the avatars are woken up, the hosts tie their aprons. It's 6.25pm and the guests begin to arrive. *"Hello and welcome to Lee Rosy's Café, I will be your host, Mariela, please take a seat here. In this envelope your avatar identity will be revealed, this identity is anonymous. To walk use the arrow keys, to speak type into the dialogue box and to gesture use the gestures menu. Please let me know if you have any questions. When the bell sounds, it is the end of your encounter. Can I get you a hot drink?"* All six participants are seated, the performance begins and the real and the virtual begin to mingle, as the participants inhabit and perform in the real and virtual café simultaneously. The bell sounds to mark the end of the encounter and new guests are welcomed and seated; and we repeat this every 20 minutes.



**Figure 2:** *The Romantic Encounter* Hosts in the Physical Café, 2010

### **Performative roles**

*The Romantic Encounter* was a complex participatory event, with a number of roles and possibilities for performance and collaborations in both the physical and virtual café.

As the artist-researcher, my role was to set the context and parameters for

participation, to set out my lines of enquiry and what I aim to test out through this action research.

Artist Peter Dunn described the artists' role as that of a 'context provider' rather than a 'content provider'. (Kester, 2004, p.1) Here, the carefully devised, yet open context provided by the artist, offers the audience the opportunity to receive, interpret, and contribute freely. The openness of the work is an integral characteristic of artworks that unfold through a process of participatory performance, and in this context the model of hospitality becomes an appropriate framework for participation.

As the host, I invited guests to participate, but gave no clear instructions of how to perform once in the space, this openness is important in developing creative collaborations. Instead, subtle indications were given to evoke the feeling that the café was a stage for performance: the written invitation; the first introduction of myself as Mariella their host; and the envelope given to each guest, revealing their avatar identity.

This performance was an intervention, situated in the everyday, in a social space in the real and virtual where we constantly perform to others, as ourselves or as an avatar. Richard Schechner writes: "And what is performance? Behavior heightened, if ever so slightly, and publicly displayed; twice-behaved behavior." (Schechner, R, 1993, p1)

Participants performed behaviors as their avatars through movement and conversation. Conversations between the avatars in the virtual café were written, textual conversations and were publicly displayed on each screen; these were mostly short sentences consisting of ten words or less. Participants discussed dance moves, the music being played in the real cafe, and the clothes they were wearing. Most conversations were introductory or enquiring into how to function in the space, how to; sit down, jump, fly and dance. This exploratory form became their collective experience, but due to the unfamiliarity and to the group chat conversations, rather than one-on-one conversations, this rarely developed further before the bell sounded and their encounter ended.

When interviewed, participants were asked if they performed in the virtual café as their avatar by behaving differently to how they would do in real life. The difference between gesturing as an avatar and speaking as an avatar became clear. The gestures that the avatars performed were pre-programmed and the participants were making their avatars move, dance and gesture by simply clicking a button and seeing what happened, so these types of movement were not a personal performance, they were a form of experimentation in a new environment. The dialogue shared however was a much more thoughtful action, a more embodied experience in which they considered the presentation of their identity to others, and attempted to behave in a 'heightened' way, in response to the aesthetic of their avatar. This was a personal challenge, some participants reviled in the opportunity to perform as an anonymous avatar, most often when performing as the opposite sex, while others couldn't identify with their avatar and so projected themselves onto the avatar. Many of the participants didn't consider their participation to be a performance, until being asked to reflect on what they did and why during their encounter.

### **Site-specific engagement**

The importance of the participants to be situated in both the real and the virtual café simultaneously for the event was to offer a collective sensual experience of an environment, including the temperature, smells, music and background sound of the café or the taste of the tea and coffee which could be used to start a conversation.

The intention was to engage participants by inviting them to become guests of the work – where they could have a unique experience or take something away from a transient event, similar to the guests of a party. There were implicit protocols within this relationship with the artist, as there are with any host-guest relationship, it is ultimately the artist/hosts decision to expect something from their guest and to decide to what extent a collaborative relationship is made available. In this event I was offering a unique and intimate experience to a small number of

participants to share a short encounter in a hybrid space – between real and virtual, to perform as another identity and test their own boundaries of performance. The open invitation was offered to participants to interact freely and creatively, which can be uncommon within much gaming and interactive art, which is based on a simple input-output task, and to make it their own experience. However, due to the participants unfamiliarity of Second Life and perhaps Lee Rosy's there was too much information to learn and experience before being able to participate creatively, and many mention in the description of their encounter, starting to have a conversation with one other avatar when their session time ended. A few participants were directed by what they thought they *should* be doing in the space or were led by the actions of the other avatars in their group, by copying dancing or leaving the café.

In the context of contemporary participatory art and this event the audience and their participation becomes the work, it is a work that is live, experiential and transient. Although the artist designs the platform for participation it is a collaborative event in which the participants can take their own personal experience from it, share a collective experience and be one of few that have experienced the artwork – as the documentation of it becomes a trace of something that occurred and that cannot be fully captured. The performance is participatory, there is intentionally no stage or limelight for the artist-performer. In *The Romantic Encounter* the scenario of a speed date and the social site of the café, were methods used to familiarise an audience, to make them feel more comfortable to participate creatively. The heritage of participation lies in the 1950s and 1960s, including the Fluxus, Happenings and Situationsist movements in North America and Europe, which attempted to bring art and life closer together and challenge the traditional hierarchal role of the artist, author or director by encouraging active audience participation. Claire Bishop explains how the practice of participation appropriates social forms as a way of bringing art closer to everyday life and in this process “strives to collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and

amateur, production and reception”. (Bishop, 2006, p.10)

Through the participatory performance, one of the outcomes that was generated collaboratively was a script, this is from the live conversation between participants, and maps the activity through the six ‘scenes’ of participation, highlighting many of the differences in conversation and performance in a virtual space and between avatars who are meeting for the first time in the hybrid café space. This is presented here, as it will be the starting point for the next practice-research enquiry into participatory performance in hybrid space.

## **The Romantic Encounter**

### **Scene 3**

Lee Rosy's Café, Second Life. Minny is standing behind the counter making tea, Alley is dancing provocatively, Bashoo and Doonot are looking at the cake counter, Crossly and Veritee are milling around, and the girl with the red dress enters the café.

Minny. Hi

Aeony. Hey!

Veritee. Hi Aeony, love the dress!

Alley. I got pure dances

Crossly *starts to dance*

Crossly. Sweet moves Alley

Alley. I like yours

Alley. Is that the boogle?

Alley. \*bogle

Aeony. Hi, do you come here often?

Bashoo *turns to face Aeony*

Bashoo. Who me? Yeah, this is my favourite cafe

Aeony. */twirl starts to twirl*

Aeony. Want to /dance Bashoo?

Veritee. Anyone know how to sit down?

Minny. Veritee - cmd click & select Sit down

Minny. Sit here

Veritee *jumps up and sits on the counter*

Veritee. Hi, Doonot, How are you?

Alley. Hey!

Doonot. Mighty fine thanks : )

Crossly. I don't know what I call it, it's dance4  
 Bashoo. Dance 4 is like a mad dance! ?  
 Doonot *walks behind the counter*  
 Alley. Hey! Get lost!  
 Minny. Anyone fancy a cup of tea?  
 Veritee. Coffee please!  
 Minny. Milk?  
 Veritee. Yes please  
 Alley. Doonot, what on earth are you doing behind here?  
 Alley. In your errrr dress?  
 Doonot. Coming to show you my tats  
 Alley. Scottish dress?  
 Doonot. And this nice belt I am sporting  
 Alley. You're so strong!  
 Crossly. Doonot, you look like Slash  
 Bashoo. Any vegan cake on offer Minny?  
 Crossly. */stretch stretches and flexes his muscles*  
 Crossly. Check out my manly muscles!  
 Alley. They aren't as hot as Doonot's!  
 Minny. Veritee - cmd click & select coffee  
 Veritee *sits back and sips her hot coffee*  
 Veritee. Thanks for the drink :)  
 Veritee. It is quite lovely here...

### HYBRID PERFORMANCE SPACES

As new technologies and paradigms emerge, artists test new ways of activating audiences, "structuring radically new possibilities of feedback between spectators and the environments they could inhabit". (Salter, 2010, p.304) In Peter Salter's text *Entangled; Technology and the Transformation of Performance*, he returns the focus, more aligned with the participatory events of the 1960s, to interaction in physical and social space that involves a multitude of untrained performers and ultimately changes the emphasis from computer-human to inhabitant-performer-environment. (Salter, 2010, p.306) The immersive and public space that emerges here becomes a hybrid space with new possibilities for activating audiences.

Eric Kluitenberg, researcher in the field of the significance of new technologies for

society, explains how we are living in an environment in which the public is reconfigured by a multitude of media and communication networks interwoven into the social and political functions of space to form a 'hybrid space'. He outlines the importance of designing free spaces and activist strategies to encourage public and private action within this hybrid space. (Kluitenberg, 2006, p.8) Even the physical spaces that we inhabit daily, including offices, shops and cafés, are now networked, located and recorded using digital technologies. A number of our daily social routines now reside in the virtual space; from social networking websites and online chat rooms to shopping malls and cafés in virtual worlds like SecondLife; a free 3D virtual world where users can work, socialize and connect using voice and text chat. Convergent and mobile technologies mean we can now connect, inhabit and perform in these spaces whilst remaining on the move. Geotagging, using Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to track and locate our physical latitude and longitude coordinates can be uploaded continuously to our networks to update others on our activities and movements. A hybrid space, then, can be understood as "a space in motion and an interaction between perceived, conceived, lived and virtual space. This space is formed not only by materiality and social and political actions, but also by digital technology." (Kraan, 2006, p.39) This space creates new platforms for artists to invite participation from a new, virtually residing public, who are already active audiences and users of web 2.0 and part of a contemporary participatory culture that encourages dialogue and participation, and makes users think about their 'profile' and how they present themselves and perform in these spaces.

How we perform in virtual space differs to how we perform in real space. There are many opposing psychological arguments for this which are set out clearly in Monica Whitty and Adrian Carr's text *Cyberspace Romance: The Psychology of Online Relationships*, which consider our interaction in virtual spaces, the way in which we present ourselves, and how we form meaningful relationships. "Cyberspace is a unique space. It is a space where one can be playful with presentations of self. It is also a space

where one can 'play at love'. (Whitty and Carr, 2006, p.1)

The virtual spaces in which we reside range from social media networking websites and internet blogs, to chat rooms and immersive environments, including SecondLife, in which we, in the form of avatars, can work and play; performing as ourselves, or as others, speaking to strangers anonymously and therefore with less repercussions. Whitty and Carr consider the effects of forming relationships in virtual space:

*We believe that playing at love in cyberspace can be both a liberating and a debilitating experience, and how much so depends on the individual and how he/she interacts within the space.* (Whitty and Carr, 2006, p.56)

Although virtual spaces and digital technologies are becoming more familiar and often part of many people's daily lives, it can still be a mysterious and exciting phenomenon when you experience a new, real-time virtual space where you can dance in public, talk openly to strangers, or where you can visually connect with friends across the world. As an artist, I am interested in these virtual spaces as platforms for participatory performance and will be continuing to enquire into this through practice-as-research investigations in hybrid space.

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