

Preamble

I'm going to talk about:

How participatory performance can sometimes be cruel to participants.

In fact, however, how it is sometimes cruel to participants by leading them to take part in acts of cruelty.

I'm interested in a kind of strategy used in participatory performance.

And a way of thinking about the ethics of participation. Though not a programme for ethical practice.

And in a way that the aesthetics of participation intersect with ethics.

Particularly in the way that it asks us to become audiences to ourselves.

I'm also interested in how these performance situations provoke us to think through theories of meaning-making, mind and subjectivity.

I have some examples, I'm going to describe moments that I have found provocative in some recent performances in London.

1.

I will begin with an example.

Myrtle takes us aside, away from the rest of the party, and asks my advice. Her marriage to Joe is dead in the water, and the rich Tom Buchanan has promised to take her out of the gravel pits, the dirty, poor, dead-end district she lives in. He has promised to buy her a dog, and has given her a dog leash as a sign that he will keep this and his other promises. What should she do, she asks us? We talk to her, 'Joe seems nice ... he's a good man', we say. But she tells us that his niceness isn't enough for her, that she's given too much of her life to Joe and that Buchanan is her one chance to change things for herself, to live the rest of her life the way she wants to.

The event I'm telling you about is an immersive *Great Gatsby*, performed by The Guild of Misrule in an old industrial building in South East London. As this conversation happens I am aware that something bad is in store for Myrtle, as not-so-clear memories of the story swim into my consciousness. There's something more to come than being let down by the evidently uncommitted Buchanan, and a few minutes later I remember the story, and that she is the one who will be run down by Daisy Buchanan, driving Jay Gatsby's car, I can think of the clever lines I could have invented for myself in this scene: 'Be careful, Myrtle, be careful of these rich men, and their big cars...' But that's not what I say, and the dialogue is awkward, I don't have any good lines, and I don't quite know how to be with her, or who to be, with her.

But there is something interesting in this interactive gambit in which she invites me to care about her. She makes a demand on me. But, unfortunately, it happens to be a weak one, with little space for me to fill with action that brings to life any of the care that I *do* come to feel. The small group of us that have been talking to Myrtle return to the party with her, to join in the dancing, and to watch her fate unfold.

So, let's have a more interesting example, from another show.

Some children have invited us into their underground community in the cellars under the carpet factory, with a vague mission to fulfil to help them replace the numbers they have lost, as children have grown up and have been sent out into the wider world. There are riddles to be solved and a red rope to follow through a subterranean forest. We find ourselves in the company of a child made of carpet, who asks if we are 'the kind ones'. We learn that she is the product of the children's attempts to create new children to re-build their population, but an unsuccessful result. Her request is chilling: 'sew me to sleep', she says. There is a flap of carpet hanging next to the hole through which the child performer's face peeps out at us through a cone of blue rug. There is a needle attached to it, so that we can pull it over and sew it shut. We are being asked to euthanise a badly made child, as an act of kindness.

And we do. Giggling and looking wide-eyed at each other, we watch as one of our number follows the instruction, and sews the child to sleep. And we leave the

room with furrowed brows, wondering what's just happened, what kind of a show *is* this?

It's called *The Doves*, a piece made by London-based company Coney, with 6-11 year old children, but for adult audiences. It takes place in the same building as *The Great Gatsby*, but is an altogether stranger proposition, a piece in which children's imaginations have been allowed to follow their bizarre and morbid impulses.

2.

So: we give death to a child that asks for it as kindness. If, as I have speculated, this begins with a character asking me to care for her, have I fulfilled that request? Have my actions amounted to a demonstration of care? Of course even a cursory ethical reflection says not - the caring action would be to explore, and to insist on, a way to make her life liveable.

But it is not easy to say why we don't do that: there doesn't seem to be space for it, the impetus of the scene seems to be to do as we were asked, we just don't think it through. All are beside the point, I think. We are given a small space in which to respond, and whatever we do becomes part of the show, part of our experience. I would be very unhappy if my complicity in this action were taken as a genuine ethical decision, but I am impressed at its *aesthetic* impact: at this point in the show I am shocked, troubled, and I am in a different state of mind and body, in anticipation of what else might come after it.

There's a particular kind of ethico-aesthetic effect at work here, that I want to look more closely at. We are asked to care for the children, in our role as adult guests in their world, but it is a thin role, not thoroughly developed, and neither is this caring relationship. I think it is just as important that we care for the actual children who have made the piece and perform in it – we are likely to indulge them in the strange things they ask us to do. But it's not just these kinds of conscious care that I want to focus on, but also the emotion of care that might arise in me, or you, as spectators, and as participants with things to do. Caring is not just a thing that we do, it is a thing that happens to us, and happens between us. Caring - in one of its forms - can be thought of as a function of empathy, and empathy (we are told in several different conceptual languages) is an embodied process. Care happens to my body, and yours, and between them.

3.

Another moment from *The Doves* might illustrate this - as well as providing an image of it. In the climactic moments of this short performance, one of the riddles set for us earlier in the show becomes important: we have been told that our 'spit and bits' will help the children to solve their problem. It transpires that to make a new child - without sewing them together badly from bits of carpet - they must be conjured magically from a pile of refuse with the addition of samples of hair, fingernails and spit from visiting adults. This is a slightly fraught process for us, the visiting adults, to facilitate - who has fingernails and hair they don't mind cutting? Who isn't squeamish about spitting into the plastic pot offered to us? Our commitment to the truth of the moment is wafer thin, there is hilarity and alarm at the presumption of these children (the real child performers and performance makers, not the fictional feral imps). But we care enough about the show they have made to play along. We have joined in, and we will continue to do so.

The child that appears, apparently newly created, from under the rubbish pile immediately dashes into the middle of our group, grabbing hold of the tallest man among us. He seems to have been adopted as a parent, and the child seems to want protection from all of us. However, we are told our other child-guides that if we want to leave the underground labyrinth we must leave the child behind. We refuse this. A physical struggle ensues as we try to force the door to the outside world, and we fail. We lose the magical child in the confusion, and then submit to the demands of the others, and file out of the building with veils over our heads, chanting strange things s we have been told to do.

It's a puzzling and troubling experience. A piece devised with and by children that portrays cruelty to children in a surreal but also quite direct way, and as far as I can tell with no easy route - perhaps no route at all - to a satisfying way to help them. The suffering children of this fiction are magical, but they are still children, played by children, close up.

But that is what makes it a rewarding and challenging experience. I don't just spectate the trouble, it happens to me - I play a part in choosing whether to 'sew to sleep' the carpet child, and I feel bad about it. I give a bit of my fingernail, *donating a tiny part of my body* to the performance, but more importantly *the entirety of my body is right there throughout*, feeling the shocks and dilemmas, the performance happens on and in my body. Though I choose, with my fellow participants, the inadequate course of action that we take, I don't choose to care. The affective response of care happens to me, it happens physically to me in my body. And it becomes part of the event, part of the performance. What I propose is that we should not treat it as part of my response to the experience, but part of the experience that has been planned and staged for me. The performance happens with me in an intimate relationship to it, but it also happens through me, so that I am an audience to what I do, but also to what I feel.



4.

We attempt to take care of a child who has thrust himself upon us. Let's briefly look at a way of theorising what the performance has exploited to make this happen.

In cognitive psychology, CARE is seen as one of six basic emotional states (alongside FEAR, RAGE, PANIC, PLAY and SEEKING). In performance studies we have come across this taxonomy in Bruce McConachie's *Engaging Audiences* where he says that it is by addressing, and engendering these basic emotional states that theatre engages us in the circumstances of a performance: theatre employs the same emotional architecture as everyday life. This is the case in immersive theatre, too, but in a stronger form to the extent that the provocation of these affects may happen at very close range, through other people who appear to at an even more human scale than when we witness theatrical as a more conventional, non-participating spectator. An affect such as CARE might also be provoked more intensely and more immediately because it is transitive, it is oriented towards an other, and that other might make demands on us.

Performance depends on care in the form of empathy, in the most fundamental way. We watch performance because we are interested in other people, and we are drawn into stories because we feel a need to know what happens to people, what's going on for people. McConachie treats empathy as synonymous with 'mind reading', a term that has been adopted in cognitive psychology for the process by which we become involuntarily aware of other people's mental states. But since his book there's been a diversification of ideas in cognitive studies, so that some make a distinction between *empathising* processes and *mentalsing* processes: framing our talent for feeling the state of other bodies as something different to our impulse to imagine the content of other minds.

We might see it in intermixing layers: one is the ever present and involuntary mind-reading processes that are involved in our base-level perceptions. This means caring that there are other people around, and projecting their relevance to us, most fundamentally in terms of how they might be a threat to us, to our basic homeostasis, but also in terms of our social thriving. But along with and intermixed with this, is the empathic process, our awareness of another's *feelings*, their comfort or distress, and their disposition towards us. Our affective taking on of some of that discomfort, and caring because we feel some of what another feels, without having to stop to think about it. Thus, sometimes care comes to the body and not the mind. Sometimes we are affected by another's situation without consciously caring, let alone making a conscious choice to care or to act on that care. We find ourselves relating to others in ways that we don't choose or plan, and that can be reciprocated in mutually reinforcing direct unconscious communication. This is affect as Brian Massumi interprets it in *The Politics of Affect* – that can appear as a flow of energy among bodies rather than a response that belongs to one individual body. All this is *prior* to the potential for the conscious taking up of empathy, the choice to dwell on another's plight, to empathise in the sense of actively concerning ourselves.

Is this what's happening in the examples I've outlined so far? I think CARE, as a basic emotional frame may be present, but it is confused, muddled up with other feelings, with some FEAR and some PLAY, and mediated by conscious thoughts, both contradictory and complementary. CARE as an affect, and empathy and mind reading as cognitive processes, might be a basis for care as a good choice, but in each of these cases in a different way, the conversion of these feelings into a participatory performance of care has failed to happen. Paul Bloom, in *Against Empathy*, says that empathy is like a spotlight, a narrow beam that works to quite precisely exclude the bigger picture, illuminating only individuals and small groups that we focus on. And worse, it tends to illuminate only those that we are inclined to identify with, those that we care about. So, have I and my fellow audience members failed because our empathic spotlight fails to shine on the carpet-child? Perhaps. Is this a failure in performance terms? I don't think so.

5.

Theatre can tell us stories of the failure of care, or inspire us to find time to care, or even contribute to the repair of care-less situations. *The Doves* might be thought of as a show about the failure of care. Let's look at an example from another show, where care is explicitly the subject matter, yet where the same strategy seems to be put to work.

Access All Areas' are a London-based company that make performance with adults with learning disabilities. The company's artistic director, some other practitioners and administrators are non-disabled, but the disabled performers are paid and credited as fellow professional creative artists. Their recent production - *MADHOUSE re:exit* – was devised from their concerns and interests, and deals with issues of care directly, in an immersive form. It is a guided tour, but with two kinds of guides giving two kinds of tour. One is made up of the staff of Paradise Fields, a 'cutting edge, truly modern care facility', who show us around as guests. They give us leaflets to read and games to play to relax us, but the mask slips at points when they forget whether they are referring to service users, patients, or inmates, and they get confused when equipment breaks down and they are interrupted by 'patient 36'. This enigmatic figure is our other guide. He appears on screens - replacing the marketing video - and in holograms, and then in a variety of flesh-and-blood avatars that could be showing us a series of individuals and their experiences of social care through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and up to the present. But what these avatars show us is nothing literal, there is a man in a bird cage, dancing and ceremoniously handing out feathers to members of the audience before being restrained and put into a straightjacket. There is a woman dancing like a jaguar in a forest scene, alluding to Olmec cults that celebrated children with Down Syndrome as having supernatural powers.

In a scene called 'The Eater', Dayo Koleosho presents himself as a version of Patient 36 within a sterile, hyper-modern space, separated from the audience by a screen. He sits in a white room, behind a white table, wearing a white overall and a transparent plastic mask. The audience are prompted to interact with him as in an arcade game, with tokens to put into a coin slot, and are told to feed him peas through arm-holes in the screen, (a reference to Woyzeck's alienation and abuse the hands of medical professionals, perhaps). When the game is active, he moves like a coin-operated automaton, mouth open grotesquely, his features made inhuman by the plastic covering his face. For our first attempt at feeding him we are given spoons, but we are impossibly far from him and the players are confused, unable to fulfil our task. We fail and red lights flash at us. The second round gives us small syringes, filled with green pea juice instead of whole peas, and it's clear that we have to squirt the juice towards Patient 36's mouth. Again, we fail, and people's puzzlement is turning to discomfort. At round 3 the syringes are much bigger, and it's possible to squirt the juice across the table and to hit him with it. The white room is covered in green liquid, and so his masked face.

The discomfort of this scene is similar to that of the carpet-child. The game asks us to play at doing something *wrong*. We've become old-fashioned, oppressive care workers. Koleosho's costume is reminiscent of a straightjacket, and his grimace, combined with the plastic mask, dehumanises him. He is being force-fed, and we are the force-feeders. We could refuse, but then are we refusing Koleosho's performance? What does he want us to do? We have to accept the complicity offered to us, to play our part and feel bad about it.

6.

My argument, in the first place, is about how care is put to work as a tool of the immersive theatre maker, and is a facet of immersive practice when it is under way. However in this case the performance makes more direct reference to the important business of real care, of the work of care and the lack of care in the contemporary world. Theatre artists like those of Access All Areas make work that investigates it, advocates for it, and tells us of its histories. The power of the experiences offered could be conceived as creating a practiced experience of care, of working the muscles of care, in a fairly literal sense. They could be about producing images of care, the lack of it, or misdirected care, in a theatrical frame. The participants of MADHOUSE are certainly among the vulnerable people in society that depend on others, differently able to give an account of themselves and to represent their own interests: they deserve care.

The characters of *The Doves* also deserve care, as well as the young people who create it. There is a sense of danger about that piece, of carelessness, that makes it a very peculiar example of theatre by young people. But in the case of MADHOUSE there is an explicit agenda, that asks for a better caring response. In ethical terms it articulately asks for a conscious, rational approach to the care that is required by the people who have made it, and by the people they represent, in several ways. It deploys empathy, and even pity, in several ways, but that isn't the dominant tone, and certainly not the basis of its demands on us as audience, and on the government it speaks to. The final scene has Cian Binchy in a baby-grow, offered to us by Paradise Fields as an example of their service users' unavoidable dependency. But Binchy's persona is laconically furious and ironic, and leaves us in no doubt that the government is at fault for his continued infantilisation. For all that an audience participant is asked to remove his supposedly soiled nappy, an uncomfortable moment in its own way, the satirical tone in this scene is quite different to the troubling complicity I have experienced in Koleosho's scene.

The programme for the show includes the company's 'living manifesto' for a better life for people with disabilities. There are two versions of the programme, the first a parody of a leaflet for Paradise Fields. The form of the leaflet is quite convincing, and its satire quite subtle - there are quotes from 'service users' that get progressively more ironic: "Paradise Fields' cutting edge technology gives my mother time off for herself, knowing that I'm connected to the world wide web and no longer alone', (OK, connecting people and giving them a measure of independence through technology...); 'The Active Citizens programme at Paradise Fields provides me with support by people who have chosen to give up their work for free', (ah, so there's a heavy dependence on the voluntary sector...), 'If it wasn't for Paradise Fields and its flexible service, I wouldn't leave my house for the 1 hour a week I now thankfully do', (oh, so the gains are marginal at best). In the leaflet, the 'service users' face away from the reader, in the programme they turn towards us.

This is a campaigning piece of theatre: it has messages. On my visit in February of this year, when I leave the performance, my fellow audience members are debating which MPs they might be able to invite to see and experience it. It is successful in these terms, but I want to return to my analysis of its structure as an experiential art work, and how the troubling moments it draws us into operate in a different aesthetic register.

7.

Catharine Malabou's *Self and Emotional Life* is concerned with how continental philosophy should respond to the discoveries of contemporary neuroscience. She makes comparisons between Antonio Damasio (one of the leading figures in popularising the importance of neuroscientific understanding of how the brain works, and how the brain becomes a mind and a self), and philosophers like Derrida and Deleuze, through their respective treatments of Descartes and Spinoza, as the original thinkers of *affect*. Damasio sees Descartes as having made fundamental errors, and Spinoza as having made discoveries ahead of his time, and through both he argues for the importance of affect (or feeling/emotion) in thinking of all kinds, conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational.

Malabou's tracing of affect through Deleuze brings about a re-connection of the word to its other more everyday meaning:

Generally speaking, an affect is a modification. Being affected means to be modified - that is, altered, changed, - by the impact of an encounter, be it with another subject or an object. But, what exactly, is modified by this encounter, and why does this modification create an emotional, and not immediately cognitive, phenomenon? This is because the encounter does not trigger any faculty or sense or logical structure; it touches - and thus reveals - the very feeling of existence. (Malabou -p.5)

In this sense affect is what makes a change in the feeling of existence, and furthermore this is how the subject becomes conscious of itself, how the transcendental logical form of the grammatical 'I' is able to refer to a changeable, empirical, 'I' that feels. 'The self has access to itself through its own otherness or alterity' (p.6). In the formulation I have used above, in English, I 'find myself' feeling and doing things that I do not choose, that arise from my physical response to the presence of other human bodies. 'I find myself' appears to denote the sudden awareness of my situatedness, but it also echoes what Malabou reads in affect's role in self-awareness. Affect results in an auto-affection, in the awareness of oneself as a thing, a thing having feelings. This is a fundamental crux in the understanding of subjectivity - the question of where, and how, the self becomes aware of itself. Famously for Descartes this happened through the soul's presence in the pineal gland, where it makes contact with the embodied self. For Derrida auto-affection is infected with hetero-affection, so that we meet our self as something other, as 'an unknown me in me' (p.20). This echoes what Malabou calls 'the deconstructive aspects of the neurobiological redefinition of the subject' (p.26), in which subjectivity is a changeable, plastic structure, with no centre, but emergent out of a collection of dynamic, interrelating processes. For Damasio it is the maintenance of homeostasis that drives the emergence of consciousness, as the affective milieu of the body's situation constructs *the feeling of what's going on*. Again, it is the response to something outside itself that brings consciousness into being.

Damasio's most famous conclusion is that it is the feeling quality of this affective basis of consciousness that allows us to make decisions, that feeling isn't a distraction from rationality, but fundamental to it. I think this is useful to any consideration of the meaning of participatory performance, not just because it re-frames how meaning emerges in any situation, but because for experiential art in particular it is the situation itself that is constructed around our own active spectating bodies, addressing meaning of this kind directly rather than at a distance. To be clear, any performance *works with* the affective interrelationship between people (with atmosphere, which might be another way to talk about this), but in participatory performance this should be expected to be more intense, and potentially more complex.

8.

This Derridean perspective is also especially interesting to me, as it draws attention to another particular of participation: that we are audiences to ourselves, as well as partners in the creation of moments of performance. When I take part in the negotiation about what to do with the carpet-child, or how to feed the robot-inmate, I am aware of my own actions, and that these actions (and inactions) are part of something else as well as the interaction itself as an ordinary social exchange. As well as 'what do they want me to do?', I'm presented with 'what should I do in this show?', 'how do I look when I do this?', and 'is what I did part of the show?'. In my first example, this leads to 'did I just euthanise a child!'

Uncomfortable moments like this don't just stage a problem, they stage a problem with me in it, and they stage my reaction to being in that problem. Sometimes the image of ourselves that we encounter through this will seem a stranger. Someone who's done something unexpected and perhaps unimpressive, unethical. The Derridean insight that we are always strangers to ourselves is writ large at these points. And I think that perhaps this is an argument for the manipulations that performance makers indulge in, in this work, when they (we, you, as performance makers) are cruel.

As an aside, to articulate this cruelty more clearly – I can tell you about two small boys in the audience group with me at the start of *The Doves*, within the same range as the children who had created and performed it. After the episode with the carpet-child, they were *very* upset. 'I want to go now! Now! Now!', I heard the older of the two say to his father, as we left them behind, moving on the next strange encounter. Their affect was quite different, they couldn't read the doubleness of the carpet-child or manage the playful conceptual blending of threatening atmospheres and absurd stories that the adults could. The affect was overwhelming to them and it wasn't their fault. The performance didn't care for them, because it was aimed at them. But when theatre makers judge the challenges they offer us well, they care for us as an audience by giving us challenging things to experience, by respecting that we want to be tested, and in participatory work to be tested personally and up close. Sometime that means being cruel. If, as Alfred Jarry put it:

It is because the public are an inert and obtuse and passive mass that they need to be shaken up from time to time so that we can tell from their bear-like grunts where they are - and where they stand' Jarry. Getting shaken up by these performances isn't about letting Jarry and the artists hear my bear-like grunts, and see where I stand, but about letting me see for myself where I am, and how I stand.

The contemporary audience is less obtuse, and often eager not to be inert or passive. There are audiences that are hungry to for these challenges. The possibility to work with different capacities for inhabiting situations of conflict, and letting affective trouble inhabit us, depends on surprise, and also on the only-partly-

informed consent that we, as audiences give to be messed about with like this. It also adds an inflection to the inherent narcissism that Adam Alston has directed us towards in immersive theatre. These moments are especially 'all about me', but they don't show me in a good light.

What is to be done with this idea? In the sense that in participatory performance we are especially aware of ourselves, there might be a magnification of the fundamental encounter with ourselves as other, and the basic difficulty in recognising what it is to be a conscious subject.

But is there more to it when we consider what it is to care, to be in a relation of empathy, with someone, and with someone in a situation, regardless of whether that situation is fictional or real? For Malabou (and she tells us, for Spinoza and Descartes), the first affect is *wonder*, followed in order by 'joy, sorrow, love, hatred and desire' (p.9). Wonder is an expression of surprise, of the newness of the encounter: '[w]ithout the capacity to be surprised by objects, the subject wouldn't be able to have a feeling of itself' (p.9). But not all new encounters are pleasant, so Malabou names its opposite *consternation*. We might then, call the affects felt when undergoing uncomfortable, unexpected experiences in participatory theatre, varieties of consternation.

9.

Malabou also sees affect in the way that Brian Massumi does, as taking place at 'an entirely ontological level', prior to and not requiring the mediation of subjectivity. Affect happens without our awareness of it, without even becoming emotion. For Massumi this is an energetic process, of flows between bodies, not a matter of the experience of a conscious subject, but preceding it. Affect is its own driver, its own process and end product, and the experience of subjectivity only a side effect or passenger.

In these terms the empathising process, the cognitive empathy through which we find ourselves aware of other people's mental states is a level up from the primary affective tonality of a situation. Other bodies are present to our bodies, their faces to our faces. The tonality that arises is more than the background to how we make meaning out of a situation, it gives the key within which we achieve understanding of a situation. It is the premise which our body understands, and from which we as conscious subjects have the luxury of elaborating something more explicit but not necessarily more articulate.

So: I am in a small room in a cellar. I'm with a group of strangers, but I have already travelled a little way with them, laughed with them. I'm aware I could bump my head or trip, I could bump into someone or get in the way. I could say something stupid or try too hard to show that I'm an expert in immersive theatre. I'm aware that these others with me are nervous like I am, but that they also sense the essential safety of the situation. This strangeness doesn't amount to existential danger. The mix of half-conscious threats lurk in my mind, but are already at work in my body: according to this theory, my body is assessing the threat, and the opportunity, making base-level adjustments that maintain homeostasis, keeping itself within a tolerable range for survival, and for the ready response to real threats should they arise. My body also continually adjusts to the other human bodies near me, shaping my perceptions of what they might want or need from me. It's from within this milieu that my body appraises the new situation of the child wrapped up in blue carpet. A child that seems unhappy, one that calls on an impulse to care, that calls on the cognitive empathic process by which I am aware of its distress. But I can cope with this, I can frame it as a fiction, even if it is a strange one. It is when I find myself as one of the causes of that child's death that something more powerful takes place, when I become aware of a negative wonder, or a consternation, as I am inhabited by an unresolved, negative dialectic that happens to me, and through me.