Improvisation and Social Aesthetics

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It seemed fitting that these good improvisations so often began in the blurred space between lunch break and performance, between the everyday and the fantastic. —Tim Etchells (1999, 52)

This is how Tim Etchells, artistic director of Forced Entertainment, the quintessential postmodern British experimental theater company, sums up the alchemical interaction between sociability and aesthetics at the heart of theatrical experimentation. The “between” is the subject of this chapter, which will explore the multifaceted ways in which social relations are revealed or reconfigured by being placed in the service of aesthetic practice, “between the everyday and the fantastic,” in the contemporary making of theater in Britain.

Most works for the theater depict social relations at the level of narrative, focusing on family, friendship groups, or other power structures. Further, the making of the modern theater, from Schiller through Brecht to the happenings of the 1960s, has frequently been motivated by a desire for social change (Kershaw 1992; Rancière 2009b). Nevertheless, the social relations specifically produced within and by the conventional spatial codes of the theater itself are rarely remarked on by theater scholars. These conventions form the backdrop to this discussion of the place of improvisation within dramaturgical practice in theater, which argues that theatrical aesthetics frequently rely on an oscillation between improvisation in the moment and
prearranged composition, resulting in performance dramaturgies that seek to imply spontaneity while nevertheless firmly structuring audiences’ experience. The theatrical aesthetics described in this chapter thereby problematize the assertion of a “relational” aesthetics as a distinct—and recent—category of art (Bourriaud 2002). That is, I argue that the use of social relations as a tool in the production of aesthetics is not merely a recent phenomenon, as implied by the rhetoric of relational aesthetics. Instead, this chapter examines how questions of the social are key to understanding the operations of theatricality within any given historical moment. To do so, I examine the influence of modernist aesthetics—against which Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics—on theater. This leads to a discussion of how the discourse of theatrical improvisation functions in this context, and how it offers a space for acknowledging social practice.

Three distinct works in which I have been involved as a director, dramaturg, or writer will then illustrate varying ways in which the sociability of improvisational practice can be placed in service of aesthetic structures: Discombobulator (2009–10), an interdisciplinary performance that incorporated dance, live composition of electronic music, and video; Four Men and a Poker Game (2008), an adaptation of Brecht’s short story; and 3rd Ring Out: Rehearsing the Future (2010–11), a multimedia audience-interactive performance. Each incorporates a response to the conventional organization of social relations in theater, and each differently demonstrates how the conflicting histories of modern aesthetics and the social in theater might be brought into dialogue.

Aesthetics against the Social in Modernism

In theater, the reminder through the incursion of the social through the presence of the audience that art’s putative autonomy is a cultural construct returns over and over to disturb the sovereignty of the work. This is the ground of modernist antagonism to theater and becomes no less than a call to arms in defense of art in Michael Fried’s widely cited formulation:

The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than within theatre itself, where the need to defeat what I have been calling theater has chiefly made itself felt as the need to establish a drastically different relation to its audience. (The relevant texts are, of course, Brecht and Artaud.) For theatre has an audience—it exists for one—in a
way other arts do not; in fact, this more than anything else is what modernist sensibility finds intolerable in theatre generally. (Fried 1967, 163; emphasis added)

What Fried (1980, 109) calls “theater” is the acknowledgment of co-presence in the structural relation between artwork and audience. In his later full-length work, Absorption and Theatricality, Fried uses the term “absorption” in opposition to theatricality. He terms any invitation by an artwork to a social relation in the viewer’s present, “theatricality.” He makes extensive use of the eighteenth-century French theorist Denis Diderot’s writings on painting to suggest that the primary condition of possibility for absorption is non-reciprocity between the expressivity of the artwork and its reception by the viewer. Implicit in Fried’s argument is the notion that an artwork’s “awareness” of being spectated lays bare in an embarrassing way the relationship of service between the product and the consumer of that product. Fried quotes Diderot at length on a painting depicting Susanna and the Elders: the nude subject remains modest not only because she hides herself from the other figures depicted but, crucially, because the painting is composed to make it clear that the subject does not “know” that her nakedness is being revealed to the viewer of the painting (96–97). On this view, the artwork remains autonomous only as long as the social relations in the here and now that bring it into being are sublimated or denied.

However, attending to the aesthetic practices of the theater of “Western industrial or post-industrial modernity” (Ridout 2006, 6) reveals their specifically social character, belying the distinction between aesthetics and social relations posited by Fried. One of the reasons that theater consistently fails to live up to the attempts of practitioners to dispense with any acknowledgement of social interaction in the here and now is that it is in the nature of theater to be real as well as representational: “[Theater] is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that are what they seem to be. In theater, image and object, pretense and pretender, sign-vehicle and content, draw unusually close. . . . In the theatre light is brightness pretending to be brightness, a chair is a chair pretending to be another chair, and so on” (States 1985, 20). Using this at once doubleness of theatricality, contemporary theater increasingly acknowledges its capacity not only for representing social relations, but also for shaping the sociality of the occasion. In these moments, we hover between experiencing the stage as itself and as a signifier. Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout (2007, 104) suggest that exploitation of this both-and feature of theatricality lies at the
heart of the operations of the contemporary Italian director Romeo Castel- lucci's theater. “Then, everything became very clear,” they write. “The veils
had been lifted, and we looked straight into the wide open space of a marble
box in which every action seemed to have its own proper name and to need
no explanation. In English, there is a phrase with which one can signal one’s
approval of this kind of straight-talking: calling a spade a spade. Suddenly,
this theatre seemed to be presenting spades as spades. Each action of the
episode took place, as it were, in broad daylight.”

Nevertheless, while embodied performance provides an ideal ground
for explorations of aesthetics beyond Friedian high modernism, and has
been embraced in contemporary art discourse as such, the history of the
nineteenth-century and twentieth-century theater was one of social prac-
tices designed to corral an audience toward the type of absorbed attention
that Fried cited much later as a precondition of aesthetic experience. Au-
gust Strindberg (2008), the late nineteenth-century Swedish playwright
and theorist, developed a program for an “intimate theater” that is exem-
plary for modernist theatrical works that display a desire for independence
from their audiences. Strindberg’s aim to diminish sociability in the theater
of his time—with techniques such as darkness in the auditorium, banning
boxes and applause during performances, and stopping actors from direct-
ing their lines specifically to the audience—was directly linked to the belief
that such interaction would be detrimental to absorbed attention, allow-
ing an audience to “escape from the suggestive influence of the dramatist-
hypnotist” (68–69). Such absorption involves a self-forgetting, an immer-
sion in the time posited by the fictional realm in place of real physical time
(Fried 1980). In this, paradoxically, the audience enters the theater to leave
the present moment of the social behind—or, at least, relegate it to periph-
eral vision. In a standard proscenium arch or end-on space, everything out-
side the triangle inscribed in space by the gaze trained on the theatrical
scene—with the eye at the apex—is excluded. Absorption in the onstage
action within the literal and metaphorical frame of theatrical representation
dissolves the social position from which the subject is seeing.

The “small stage and a small auditorium” were particularly important in
the founding of Strindberg’s “intimate theater” as a solution to the funda-
mental problem of realism in large spaces. To be seen and heard, the scale
of the actors’ gestures and vocal projection must be commensurate with the
size of the whole theater space and not the size of the imagined space of the
fiction. Therefore, a large space is always overtly “for” the audience rather
than apparently independent of it. This concern with how the relationship between actor and audience might disturb Strindberg’s (2008, 66) desired illusion of artistic autonomy extends to disciplining not only the audience but also the actors: “I do fervently wish that vital scenes should not be performed next to the prompter’s box, as duets designed to elicit applause, but rather located to that part of the stage the action dictates.”

The trend throughout the mid-twentieth century in Britain was generally toward designing theaters and encouraging audience behavior to set social interaction aside in the focus on mimetic action onstage (Rebellato 1999; Shepherd and Womack 1996; Wiles 2003). The changing behavioral code for theater reception corresponded with a shift in the class base of theatergoing audiences from working class to middle class in the early to mid-century (Shepherd and Womack 1996). Dan Rebellato identifies a particular moment in which the cultural dominance of this theater was cemented: in the attitude of the directors, writers, and actors at the Royal Court to its audience in the 1950s and 1960s. No longer regarded as “patrons,” who were “exercising an assumed right because that role made them the arbiters of taste” (Kershaw 2004, 299), Rebellato (1999, 111–13) convincingly demonstrates how audiences at the Royal Court were treated as “clients,” assumed to lack a specialist knowledge that would enable them to make valid judgments—the dark side of the Royal Court’s championing of the artist’s “right to fail.” In the case of the Royal Court, the text of the play rather than any given production was regarded as the artistic object (101–2). The elision of the “literary” play and its theatrical production allowed for an ideological unity of the artwork that was, however, threatened if the audiences’ presence had to be taken into account: “The Royal Courtiers wanted their unique and self-present moments of pure expressivity to be seen—in other words, they wanted an audience—but if an audience is required, how can the ‘original’ object be complete? A theater that requires an audience’s approval locates that audience on the interior of its texts, allows it to mark an absence within the text, requiring completion and confirmation. . . . But if that text is already complete, the audience is exiled to a position of pure exteriority, leaving the integrity of the text intact” (110–11).

The Court’s founder, George Devine, commented that “the Royal Court ideal is to be likened to an art gallery or a literary magazine” (Rebellato 1999, 113), explicitly allying the Court with other arts that traditionally focused on individual genius rather than creative collaboration. Devine’s aspiration to emulate such artistic practices, which privilege individual author-
ship and artistic autonomy, offers a direct denial of the permeability of social and aesthetic practices specific to theater.

The conventions of the modern theater are directly related to attempts to deny the sociality of the theatrical event. These conventions include sitting in the dark in rows facing the stage, in silence, with minimum interference from other spectators in the aural or visual field. Nevertheless, over the course of the twentieth century innumerable companies, performances, and events have formulated methods to overcome these conventions, seeking a mode of theater that does not separate stage and audience. From the anti-institutional avant-garde practices of Surrealists, Dadaists, and Futurists, to Brechtian epic, to the socialist theater companies that took theater directly “to the people” in Britain of the 1960s and 1970s (Kershaw 1992), theater makers consistently have sought some form of direct social engagement with audiences. In some cases, the shift toward an acknowledgment of the sociality of the occasion is manifested in a move toward performances that return the job of framing the event to the audience by offering a spatial dramaturgy that allows audience members to wander at will through a series of arenas in which a loose narrative is being generated. In the production of Faust by the British performance company Punchdrunk in 2007, for example, a several-story warehouse offered multiple opportunities to choose how to experience the performance. As spectators, we “know” that a representation of the story of Faust is taking place somewhere in the building, but we are not always there to see it.

In coining the phrase “relational aesthetics” in the late 1990s, Bourriaud offered a rubric within aesthetic theory for the categorization of works that saw social relations as material from which the very artwork could be constructed, laying claim to the practicing of social relations as art in the broadest possible sense. The aesthetics of autonomous art, as represented by Fried and other modernists, such as Clement Greenberg (1993), correspond to what Bourriaud (2002, 14) delineates as the “assertion of an independent and private symbolic space,” where the term “private” is equated with the individual imagination. It is against this “private symbolic” realm that Bourriaud defines the openly socially participatory function of “relational aesthetics.” Yet the naming under a single rubric of a multiplicity of practices that encode different formulations of social relations has been rightly criticized for suggesting that in the context of standardized practices in late capitalism, attention to social relations is in itself a positive, political act (Bishop 2004). Further, whether due to the failure to overcome or the refusal to deny
social contingency, theater aesthetics could be said to have been always already relational, always rehearsing the possibility of social communities.

Improvisation in Theater

Improvisation plays a key role in the history of theater as a socially oriented practice. Some go as far as to describe all acting as in some way a process of improvisation (Frost and Yarrow 1990, 1), while the contemporary philosopher David Velleman (2009) has used improvisation in acting as a model for considering moral action. Perhaps it is the difficulty of defining the boundaries of improvisation within established theater practice that accounts for the lack of theoretical writing on theatrical improvisation when compared with musical improvisation. Most often discussed in the context of “how-to” practical handbooks, the idea of improvisation in theater is consistently allied, often implicitly, with sociability (Frost and Yarrow 1990; Nachmanovitch 1990; Spolin 1973).

The definition of “improvisation” given by Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow (1990, 1) encodes the commonly assigned attributes of the activity: of spontaneity, the foregrounding of the human, and the alertness to the specific moment in space and time of the performance; “the skill of using bodies, space, all human resources, to generate a coherent physical expression of an idea, a situation, a character (even, perhaps, a text); to do this spontaneously, in response to the immediate stimuli of one’s environment, and to do it à l’improviste: as though taken by surprise, without preconceptions.” The success of improvisation on these terms is equated with an Artaudian infusion of life into art: “Where improvisation is most effective, most spontaneous, least ‘blocked’ by taboo, habit or shyness, it comes close to a condition of integration with the environment or context” (2). Theater practices that focus on improvisation as the primary condition of performance have often sought to dissolve the division between performers and audiences, encouraging participation from spectators: from Ken Campbell’s “improvathons” to Keith Johnstone’s “Theatresports” (1999). The director, teacher, and actor Viola Spolin of Chicago was one of the earliest practitioners in the twentieth century to formalize game playing into a system for theatrical creativity. Having trained as a settlement worker at Neva Boyd’s Group Work School in Chicago in the 1920s, Spolin developed theatrical improvisation techniques as part of her work as a drama supervisor in the late 1930s for the Chicago branch of the Works Progress Administration’s Recreational Project (Robinson et al. 1989). Spolin’s (1973, 4) stated aim
was to help “both teacher and student find personal freedom.” Her procedural guide espouses a humanist credo that is common to much discussion of theatrical improvisation as emancipatory and productive of selfhood. Like Frost and Yarrow, Spolin privileges the impression of spontaneity fostered by improvisational action: “Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other peoples’ findings. . . . The intuitive can only respond in immediacy—right now. It comes bearing its gifts in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act, involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us” (4). From the vantage point of the present, statements such as this (see also Crickmay and Tufnell 1990; Polsky 1998) mystify improvisation’s relation to the social (Mermikides and Smart 2010), disregarding the many pressures brought to bear on any occasion of apparent immediacy. Nevertheless, what is revealed by such descriptions of spontaneity is the orientation of attention in time toward the present: “Attention is focused on the moment when things take shape” (Frost and Yarrow 1990, 2; see also Crickmay and Tufnell 1990). The “community” that is thereby established, however temporarily, is generated through interaction in the present.

However, the orientation of participants’ attention is trained not on the sociality of the occasion but on the co-production of a (temporal) construction that is not conceived of as social: the theatrical event. Co-attending in this way to construction requires listening and reciprocity, practices that are highly valued within social paradigms in Western culture. In her research on jazz, Ingrid Monson (1996, 73) has examined in detail how metaphors used by jazz musicians point to the parallels between social and aesthetic practice through their use of terms such as “talking,” “conversation,” and “saying something” as common designations for “good improvisation.” These terms actively emphasize the “interpersonal, face-to-face quality of improvisation” (78). Monson’s examples suggest how notions of spontaneity are reciprocally related to perceptions of (lack of) effort required in improvising together (80), while pointing to the effort required to set up the conditions in which such spontaneity becomes possible:

Nearly every musician who talked to me mentioned the importance of listening in good ensemble playing. Listening in an active sense—being able to respond to musical opportunities or to correct mistakes—is implicit in the way that musicians use this term. . . . Listening affects what musicians
decide to play at a particular moment. . . . This spontaneity is absolutely central in the jazz improvisational aesthetic. (Monson 1996, 84)

The importance of listening—of paying attention to one another—is mirrored in the discourse of improvisation in theater. The director and teacher Chris Johnston (2006) prefaces his guide to improvisation by quoting Miles Davis: “Play what you hear, not what you know.” Tina Bicât and Chris Baldwin (2002, 7) suggest as a prerequisite for collaborative devising the injunction that “each member of the company must listen and talk to the others with trust and attention,” to enable them to be “sensitive to the dynamics of intense collaborative group work.”

Spontaneity is here equated with the social present; stories of emancipation through improvisation and stories of improvisation as equivalent not to “art” but to “life” both trade on the same binary of art as autonomous and improvisation as heteronomous—that is, a social act. The values attributed to “liveness” often entail that the uniqueness of any given performance is emphasized over that which is repeated (Auslander 1999). Indeed, the idea that performance is unrepeatable, ephemeral, and exclusively shared by those present at the time connects with performance art’s emphasis on entropy (R. Ferguson 1998) and with Peggy Phelan’s (1993, 146) famous claim that “performance’s being becomes itself through disappearance,” leaving “no visible trace” and thereby evading commodification. Although Phelan’s ontology of performance allows for the radical contingency of such structuring—that is, the ever present awareness in performance that it could go wrong, it underplays the desire inherent in many performances, not only in theater but also in performance art—that it should go right. The work to make performances repeatable is not merely the result of theater’s compromise with a capitalist economy (Rebellato 2006; Ridout 2006). It also implies an attempt to wrest a precarious stability for temporally contingent artistic practice in the face of inevitable entropy.

Although from the perspective of practice I would therefore contest the privileging of the ephemeral in performance, like many other theater makers I can remember moments of extraordinary improvisation in rehearsal—moments that could be reenacted or reconstructed but never with the same degree of affect. From long-running West End plays to internationally franchised musicals, there are significant—and commercially dominant—parts of the theater sector that are distinctly more focused on product than process (Rebellato 2009, 39–46). Improvisation in theater has long been key to countering performance art’s charge of the deadliness of theater, supposedly
brought about by the commodification of the event and resulting in a “Mc-Theater” (39).

There is, on the other hand, a fine line between improvisation as constructed within a performance aesthetic, thereby implying spontaneity, freedom, and non-repeatable liveness, and the threat of a collapse of the construct into sociality. This is illustrated by the description provided on the British theater company Forced Entertainment’s website of the performance Bloody Mess in 2004. Forced Entertainment has long challenged the “rules” of dramatic theater, yet the company tacitly relies on social rules for how audience members have become used to engaging with theatrical performance: keeping still and quiet to enable absorption in the moment, not interacting with the scene played before them, and so on. The description of Bloody Mess enacts the performance’s rejection of dramatic structure by merely listing its components, working by accumulation:

A strobe light flickers, pointed at the ground. A pair of clowns in smeared make-up start an ugly fight that threatens to take over the stage. . . . A delinquent cheerleader dances and yells. A woman weeps in a fit of operatic grief then stops, changes costume and starts again. The strains of Deep Purple or maybe Black Sabbath blast from the [public address system] only to be replaced by the Bach Cello Suites. A bloke starts to tell the history of the world from the Big Bang onwards but is quickly interrupted. A sound check. An interview. A seductive monologue. Rock-gig roadies creep across the stage—bringing disco lights, new speakers and a microphone that no one really wants.4

What we see at work here is representation destabilized; the notion of a precise and repeatable dramaturgy, destabilized; and a revelation of the being here and now of performance, of the potential for failure. Yet the provocative note at the end of the text is less, or more, than a joke: “Genuine audience members only. No drunks. No timewasters.” Only the performers, and not the audience, are allowed to improvise. If the audience members are as cavalier with the social rules of theater as Forced Entertainment are in their testing of traditions of representation, mimesis, and narrative, then the edifice collapses into a “real” mess. It is a condition of the aesthetic of performance that its contingency is held up to view—contained within the geometric frame of representation. For Forced Entertainment, if the audience were actually to join in, the performance would no longer be art.

The pleasure taken in the live, the improvised, is partially relief from the effort of construction, and partly an acknowledgment of the precariousness

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of any attempt to create a stable structure. Overt improvisation can further operate as a tacit (and sometimes delusional) claim that we are all “in it together.” Some twentieth-century theater architects have sought a balance between an aesthetics of distance and an appreciation of the social dimension of theatergoing. In this they conceptualize the former as an “other” to the latter, each with its distinct form of spatial operation, in which architectural features that enable social interaction require defending against the hegemony of architectures that focus attention solely on the stage (Leacroft 1949; Mackintosh 1993). It is therefore not as an “other” to but as constitutive of theater aesthetics that improvisational practices have particular force within the creation of rehearsed structures. As Monson demonstrates, certain kinds of social engagement are a prerequisite of the aesthetics of improvisation. Improvisation is enabled through a complex interaction among social principles, harnessed for aesthetic production, which effect the conditions of possibility for attention to be focused on invention in the moment. The discourse valorizes spontaneity, yet habit, genre expectations, and a shared language of improvisational techniques all feature as the building blocks of potentiality in the creative present, whether or not they are acknowledged as such (Heddon and Milling 2006).

Case Study I: Discombobulator

A first example of an integrated practice of sociability and aesthetics in performance work in which I have been involved as dramaturg and director was specifically organized around, and thereby commented on, the conventions of the theater of modernity in which the audience is imagined as silent—if not altogether absent. Discombobulator (2009–10) illustrated how, in theatrical performance, improvisation is often dependent on containment within a structured frame and is produced spatially and temporally through implicit, and sometimes explicit, rules. The pleasure is partially determined by the recognition that improvisation functions like a riff, a flourish of spontaneous invention that plays on a preordained structure, rather than a collapse into the time scale and improvisational nature of life. Discombobulator used the conventions of a proscenium arch theater space—notably, the pictorialism of audiences’ orientation to a framed scene, the darkness of the auditorium, and the convention of staying silent. Both dance and music were partially improvised, with movement within a specific sphere of light triggering electronic music through the use of motion-capture technology. The music produced thereby was then manipulated and recomposed live. Simulta-
neously, the music gave signals to the dancer, Ben Duke, within the schema of the storytelling. As a result, the improvisation within each element became reciprocally related and, due to the simplicity of binding sound directly to movement, potentially indiscernible to an audience as improvisation. Invention here was overtly delimited by a set of pre-agreed parameters for what constitutes aesthetic practice.

*Discombobulator* thereby offered a short theatrical essay on agency and lack of it, in which by means of motion capture technology, a dancer appeared to dance into existence a vast backdrop image of a virtual world that would start to disappear again whenever he stopped moving. Duke’s improvised movements also generated the watery sounds that opened the performance. The dancer appeared to discover his agency through the generation of sound, concurrently with the audience. His naïve testing, pleasure, and confusion—in relation to the apparent sonic responsiveness of the air around him—produced ripples of laughter in the audience in an age-old technique that is familiar from clowning traditions. The virtual world, displayed on a backdrop covering the entirety of the back of the stage, appeared to imply a paradise beyond an old, broken-down house façade, with a door that would disappear whenever Duke moved out of the light and toward it. Once his efforts had apparently “fixed” the image, virtual versions of the dancer began to appear. Sometimes the virtual figure would appear to interact with the real figure; then it would be multiplied into three virtual versions, each of which turned and stared at the real figure.

Improvisation was used to imply entrapment within an aesthetic structure—the live struggling against the machinery of the theater. *Discombobulator* offered a direct response to the particular space in which it was first performed: the Teatro Piccolo Arsenale in Venice, a cavernous hall into which a traditional proscenium arch, a pictorially orientated space, had been built. Castellucci describes the “violence” of such purpose-built theaters when discussing the Municipal Theater in Marseille: “The relation to the public is very hard and violent because it is obliged to offer up ‘spectacle’; everything is prepared in such a way that something has to happen. There is coercion; there is a relationship of violence in this waiting for the ‘spectacle.’ . . . There is no possibility of passage or circulation between the audience and the stage, there’s a clear separation” (quoted in Kelleher and Ridout 2007, 204). *Discombobulator* used the “violence” of a space that holds every action up as “spectacle” as the frame for an interactive mechanism that then thematized the limitations of human agency. Within this framework, the improvised appeal to the audience achieved a poignancy that was
both comforting and impotent. The tension between the pre-structured and the improvised resulted in a final sequence of frenzied movement that ultimately brought physical collapse. The live body fought the machine-like mechanism of theater and lost.

Case Study II: *Four Men and a Poker Game*

In addition to being used to destabilize performance, this doubleness of theater—which plays both on presence (in the theater, in social time) and on aesthetic distance (the bridge to a fictional realm)—can also be harnessed to use social relations among the audience members to reinforce the aesthetic construct. This was the case with *Four Men and a Poker Game* by Brecht, a short story I adapted and directed for the stage with the composer and musician David Paul Jones. The story itself is a parable of capitalism figured through four champion swimmers playing poker on a ship from Havana to New York. The harnessing of pre-established social relations to aesthetic effect was predicated on a reconfiguration of the spatial relationship between audience and performers, away from the conventional form used in *Discombobulator*. The performance setting of the story was a backroom bar; the audience sat at small tables throughout the space, with a passageway left for the Glaswegian actor David McKay to use as he moved among the audience. Jones played his own score, which was largely pre-composed but allowed space for musical improvisation. The composition was tightly enmeshed in the rhythm of the performance as a whole, at times appearing to take the story to a more abstract level. The story itself was told by McKay rather than acted out, but this telling was situated quasi-dramatically, in that the audience were “cast” as punters in the bar, listening to a man telling a story to live piano. This gentle fiction established the situation of storytelling in which the audience participated, providing a framework for listening.

The performance relied both on the maintenance of the social rules governing audiences’ behavior that apply in standard theater spaces, but not in bars (i.e., that the audience would not move about or talk to one another and would attend to the story), and on the capacity of small improvised acts of engagement between the performer and individual audience members to elide the actual space and time of the theater with the fictional realm indicated. Improvised interaction included the preamble to the telling of the story, additional invented text delivered to individual audience members, and the deliberate making of eye contact. The improvisation both estab-
lished the fiction of the bar and made the telling of the story occur not in some fictional other time but in the here and now.

Improvisation in performance can collapse the distance implicitly posited by the aesthetic structure between the time frame of the fiction and the actual time of experiencing in the theater. The concentration of the actor and the audience is aligned, in concert, focused on the present moment rather than on memory or reconstruction. This is facilitated by a turn to the social relations of the theater within the aesthetic frame, performed through a sleight of hand that reconfigures social time as aesthetic time. Nevertheless, in the schema of *Four Men and a Poker Game*, it soon became clear that the audience would not be coerced into interacting as co-performers, for the here-and-now set-up for the storytelling functioned merely as a holding place for a move into an imaginative realm that was created almost entirely aurally. Indeed, the social proximity of strangers in a formation at once familiar from a social perspective (a bar) and unfamiliar from a theatrical perspective (other spectators were always directly in each audience member’s visual frame) provided encouragement to retreat into the private imaginative realm generated by the focus of the storytelling. The lighting shifted in the course of the performance, from lighting the audience strongly—emphasizing the sociability of the space—to isolating the actor in light, with the audience now in shadow, as the grip of the mental projection created by the story took hold.

This interplay between the social and the fictional did, however, foreground the vulgar reality of the monetized relation between performer and audience (cf. Rebellato 2006; Ridout 2006). The audience pays and the performers perform—the story will be told from start to finish. The decision to insert a break in the storytelling about a third of the way through not only paid homage to Brecht in its disruption of any absorption in the imagined world of the story, but also acted as a reminder of the contingency of performance. This disruption took the form of a cigarette break—for the actor but not for the audience. Jones stopped playing the piano, and McKay left the playing space to smoke a cigarette, which he had to do outside due to smoking regulations. About half of the audience could see what McKay was doing and almost invariably would discuss this loudly enough for the other half of the audience to know what was happening. In his review in the *Herald*, the critic Neil Cooper identified this moment as interrupting “the flow.” As intended, it did not “work” aesthetically; instead, it disrupted (and revealed) the service culture that underlies social expectations.
of performance. (During one performance in Glasgow, someone muttered loudly about not having paid for a ticket to wait while the actor had a fag break.) It further served the performance by offering a semblance of spontaneity for the rest of the performance and infusing the aesthetic construction with a fragility or non-inevitability that shored up the tension of the storytelling. This playfulness is fundamental to the experience of improvisation—the knowledge that it could be different, that what is being performed is contingent on the moment at hand.

Case Study III: 3rd Ring Out

3rd Ring Out: Rehearsing the Future (2010–11) goes much further than the previous two examples in playing on the porousness of social and aesthetic relations. It works from the premise of the apparently relational toward an immersion in a fictive scenario that functions in line with the aesthetics of tradition that Bourriaud terms “private, symbolic.” 3rd Ring Out is at once a performance, a game, a simulation, and an artistic event, eliding artistic and social practice in the production of an emergency planning–style rehearsal for a climate-changed future. It takes place in two shipping containers, the interiors of which resemble smart emergency planning cells. Split into groups and ushered into separate containers, spectators experience an interactive simulation of events that unfold as a result of climate change; the scenarios are led by two performers who play “team leaders.” At key points, the audience members vote on decisions that then affect the course of the narrative. The performance toured to five locations in the United Kingdom in the spring of 2010; in each location, the scenario was adapted so that the narrative was specific to, and offered an accurate projection of the future of, each city in which it was performed. The fictional scenario took the audience forward into a future of global warming, from now until 2033, exploring the potential human consequences of climate change. It used scientific research to imagine how the world might be altered and what impact this might have on the United Kingdom. The production offered an interlinked web of potential catastrophes with far-reaching geopolitical consequences, such as mass migration and competition for resources.

The act of watching and interacting with the performance could be understood as itself a social practice, in the form of an exercise or rehearsal of the sorts of ethical dilemmas that might arise on the basis of problems caused by a destabilized climate. The project had a rather different genesis from its current focus on climate change. It emerged from a series of investigations
into rehearsing for disaster, which began with looking at Cold War models of exercises that tested civic administration systems for post-apocalyptic governance, and moved on to explore contemporary emergency-planning procedures, including plans for dealing with terrorism. The research also encompassed interviews with people experienced in rehearsing responses to nuclear attack.

A major influence on *3rd Ring Out* is *Stages of Emergency*, in which the theater historian Tracy Davis explores Cold War nuclear exercises through the paradigm of rehearsal and performance. Davis’s discussion of how these procedural rehearsals extend into everyday life in the present was an important catalyst for the project. Davis (2007, 2) suggests that civil defense has been “resurrected as homeland security”—that is, “Our small gestures—globalized through compliance at foreign airports and corporate offices, on public transport and in gatherings of all kinds—occur on a massive scale and are habituated into routines. . . . The mantra of the ‘what-if’ keeps the gestures fresh.” Davis here extends the concept of “rehearsal” beyond the specialized functions of emergency planning, suggesting how such practices now suffuse everyday life, with their function as rehearsal rendered invisible. This characterization of such practices, in combination with our research for the project, had powerful implications for both the structure of *3rd Ring Out* and its politics. First, Davis’s point reveals how these procedures can be construed as rehearsals for civil obedience. Anyone who flies regularly or visits public institutions in London or New York is well versed in obeying instructions to remove items of clothing, open bags for searching, and so on, regardless of any opinion on the part of the individuals searching and being searched as to the point or the efficacy of these actions.

What this suggests is that “belief” as such is not important in relation to such rehearsals; rather, what matters is compliance. This was precisely the most surprising and intriguing aspect of the research into Cold War exercises for *3rd Ring Out*: the interviewees who had participated in such rehearsals often did so regardless of their beliefs in the efficacy or otherwise of the exercise—or, indeed, their perception of the likelihood of the outbreak of nuclear war. It also seems clear that, from American “duck and cover” procedures for schoolchildren in the 1950s to British “protect and survive” leaflets in the 1980s, it was widely believed that these activities would not adequately respond to the catastrophe unleashed by a nuclear bomb. Davis (2007, 10) quotes a director of the U.S. Federal Civil Defense Administration, who told Canadian officials in 1955 about his conviction that, having seen footage of a test of the new hydrogen bomb, “‘Duck and Cover’ [is]
dead. You don’t duck from the explosion of a nuclear weapon, you die, that’s all.” However, this lack of belief in its efficacy did not prevent participants from taking the rehearsal itself seriously. The “if” of the “what-if” did not need to be particularly stable to—as Davis puts it—“keep the gesture fresh.” Whether you pass through airport security and mentally mock the inadequacy of the procedure, see it cynically or paranormally as a fear-mongering exercise on the part of governments, or believe wholeheartedly in its capacity to deter terrorists is irrelevant as long as you comply.

Returning to *3rd Ring Out*, this observation remains an important structural point, but one that can be framed in a more positive light. *3rd Ring Out* grafts the kinds of compliance afforded by theater etiquette onto the compliance required for the participation in such rehearsals. Aided by the “as-if” symbolic space of performance, the emphasis on practicing, rather than believing, sets to one side a technical debate over likelihood and probability that continues to choke popular discussions of climate change. Instead, the practicing focuses on the relationship between procedure and action: by voting, the audience participates in the ethics of decision making. Even if as an audience member you are simply obeying instructions, at the very least you will have rehearsed your attitude to the rehearsal—dystopian, utopian, or merely cynical.

Furthermore, and returning to the question of improvisation in performance, from discussion with emergency planners it seems that the most effective exercises are not those that prescribe precise courses of action, but those that are effectively guidance notes for improvisation. The scenarios provided to the civil servant “players” of nuclear war exercises look uncannily like the sort of instructions provided to actors when improvising a scene in rehearsal. The methodology of Katie Mitchell, a former associate director of London’s National Theatre, suggests that actors require a certain set of tools to be able to improvise well. In relation to the scene at hand, they need to know what their aim is, what the situation is (this includes the setting and the relationship with one another in the scene), how long they have, and where they are (Velleman 2009). These are precisely the elements provided to civil servants in briefing documents for nuclear exercises: instructions for improvisation.

In the blurred space “between the everyday and the fantastic” (Etchells 1999, 52), it is clear that it is the underlying conditions for improvisation that are key to its artistic efficacy. For 2011, one of the containers was converted into an installation and conversation space—a “strategy” cell—while performances took place in what was now characterized as the “emergency”
While the performance “rehearses” short-term responses to an emergency, the installation improvised strategies for alternative, and sustainable futures. The installation also offered a discursive space that was more explicitly “relational” than the performance. The opportunity to respond immediately to the provocations offered by the performance by suggesting ideas for the future of the city was welcomed by audiences at the Watford Imagine Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2011. What became clear in the Watford iteration of the installation was that an invitation to the audience members to improvise is not sufficient. The reliance of improvisational practices on pre-structured relationships was revealed by a general habitual recourse on the part of the audience to opinion poll–type responses to the question of a better future, from “more police on the high street” to “more hospitals.” In the absence of an explicit “art” structure, the social relations reproduced borrowed from think tank or Council consultation–type events. The challenge for this aspect of 3rd Ring Out became to harness the patent enthusiasm for being offered a forum for response (hundreds of responses were gathered in Watford) to an alternative practice that moved into less familiar and more creative territory. To this end, for the Edinburgh performances, seven artists from the city or nearby were invited to respond to suggestions made by the public for the city’s future. Their creation of a network of consequences integrated the suggestions from the public into a comprehensive and imaginatively appealing projection for Edinburgh’s future.

While the response to the installation revealed a hunger for community engagement, 3rd Ring Out problematizes the simple equation of participation with community that is explicit in Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics. An apparent community within the performance is established through the performers’ continuous acknowledgment of the twelve audience-participants, intensified by their physical proximity in the small space of the shipping container, sitting around a shared table. However, the anonymous voting disrupts the chimera of consensus that participatory theater can foster. While the codes of dialogue among strangers might soften or disguise disagreement in the desire for a polite and ultimately impersonal consensus, the requirement to make a private decision for each vote, which then may or may not reflect the majority view, opens up the possibility of dissent. The voting outcomes repeatedly acknowledge that groups of people who experience performances together are not communities that express a joint identity. This was felt particularly acutely by some audience members in response to the question within the scenario of whether to accept refugees. Participants would share anecdotes of their shock when the majority
of others at the same performance, for example, voted against refugees, a difference of opinion that implied a rift in a socially liberal consensus about human rights and that therefore challenged preconceptions about the values held by their fellow theatergoers. *3rd Ring Out* not only did not promise an emancipatory community politics or indulge in fantasies of the audience as a collective social body, but it demonstrated the fallacy promulgated by Bourriaud of assuming that such vague goodwill, constructed from the etiquette governing behavior in theaters (or, indeed, in art galleries), can ultimately be equated with genuine community.

Notes


3. For an excellent and succinct account of the historical antagonism between theater studies and performances studies, see Ridout, 2006, esp. 5–10.


5. After the brief hegemony of proscenium arch and end-on spatial configurations in the mid-twentieth century theater, shifts toward more “inclusive” spaces in the twenty-first century include the building of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s new theater at Stratford-upon-Avon, modeled architecturally on a Renaissance courtyard theater, which both privileges interaction with the audience and satisfies a trend towards the historical “authenticity” fostered particularly at the reconstructed Globe Theatre in London. Both of these refer back to earlier historical periods in which engagement between audiences and the stage were the norm. The architecturally flexible Young Vic in London, built in 1970 as a temporary space and refurbished permanently in 2004–2006, is another example of a socially “inclusive” space, while the majority of London fringe theaters offer alterable seating and an undeniable social proximity.

6. *Discombobulator* was a fifteen-minute-long interdisciplinary piece made over ten days for a workshop performance at the Contemporary Music Festival of the Venice Biennale 2009. It was performed in London at the Purcell Rooms in 2010 as part of the annual international dance festival, Dance Umbrella.


9. *Four Men and a Poker Game*, adapted and directed by Zoë Svendsen from a translation by John Willet of Brecht’s short story “Four Men and a Poker Game,” with music composed by David Paul Jones; performed by David McKay at Northern Stage, Newcastle, and The Tron, Glasgow, November 2008.

11. 3rd Ring Out toured the United Kingdom in May–July 2010, performing at the Norfolk and Norwich Festival; in Newcastle, in association with Northern Stage; in Cambridge, in association with the Junction; at the Pulse Festival in Ipswich; and at the Greenwich and Docklands International Festival in London. In 2011, a new version of 3rd Ring Out was presented at the Watford Imagine Festival and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.


13. For extensive examples of nuclear exercise briefing documents, see British National Archives, HO322/309, LAB12/1028, LAB12/1019; Cambridge Library Local Studies Collection, W12–0702F/C45.8.


15. 3rd Ring Out was performed six times a day, with the installation open to the public for eight hours on June 24–28, 2011, at the Watford Imagine Festival. It was then presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, situated on the Grassmarket, August 18–28, 2011.

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