

Live Art UK, Annual Networking Event
Great Eastern Hotel
14 September 2007

The theme of Live Art UK's Annual Networking event was 'audiences'. Fifty programmers, critics and curators – all interested in promoting Live Art and supporting Live Art UK - were gathered together to discuss, as our event notes put it, "the various and rich approaches to audience made possible through Live Art."

As a group, the attendees made up a fairly specific audience themselves – or so the helpful staff at the Great Eastern Hotel led us to believe. They spotted us individually as we entered the foyer (or even, in my case, as I was walking down the street) and led us into the plush surroundings of a first floor conference room. This was our base for the morning's speeches – from John Wyver, head of production company Illuminations, and Helen Marriage, co-founder of Artichoke and instrumental in bringing the Salisbury Festival to a world stage - as well as a performance lecture from (nobleandsilver). In the afternoon, we held break-out discussions that were interrupted by a performance of Yara El-Sherbini's pub quiz.

The day was a mixture of industry advice and refreshing reminders of what Live Art UK is there to promote – the work itself. John Wyver began by flagging up his ambivalence towards audience size and the capacity for communication. On one hand, he is disappointed that 'network media' has reduced audience share and forced traditional broadcasters to retreat to the middle ground – an arts series like the 1990s Tx would be 'inconceivable nowadays'. On the other, although the audience for Illuminations' DVD Series, 'The Eye' is small, it is also enthusiastic, measurable (as opposed to countable) and capable of giving feedback.

Helen Marriage also stressed the advantages of knowing your audience. She recommends identifying your audience and finding out the ways they communicate – be it through the Daily Telegraph or the Church of England. When she programmed the performance artist Bobby Baker to appear in the Bishop of Salisbury's kitchen, she didn't just provide a suitably domestic interior for Baker's work - she also gave local residents the chance to look inside the Bishop's kitchen. (It turns out they also loved the show.) This tactic is not confined to local audiences. On a much larger scale, the lack of pre-publicity for Royal de Luxe's *Sultan's Elephant*, a magnificent animatronic performance that took over Central London last year, meant that viewers 'discovered' the show, and spread the news through texts, pictures and word of mouth.

But while Wyver and Marriage talked about the ways in which audiences can be enticed (or otherwise) through how work is shown, it was left to (nobleandsilver) to ask what an audience 'takes away' from a Live Art event. In their case it was a microwave, for one lucky audience member, as well as the chance of a lift home in their new initiative 'Drive Art UK'. (nobleandsilver)'s lecture was a reminder of the artwork all these endeavours are there to promote, and it was also a parody of some of the ways that audience development is pursued within the art industry. One audience

member was given an audio guide, another was asked to contribute his home to the continuation of this lecture the following day; (nobleandsilver) showed a compilation video of some of their work – it included them interviewing their grandmothers, and footage of a man ejaculating over a radio – and an animation of the day’s event that characterised the attendees as angry sponges. Their lecture answered the kinds of questions often posed in the quest for audience development (what is the work? who is the audience? how will they benefit?) and their ludicrous answers examined the value of the questions themselves.

Yara El-Sherbini’s pub quiz also made the assembled audience examine their motives. Her questions – interspersed with the kind of trivia you’d find in any pub quiz – asked this group of artworld insiders to think about the ways in which cultural diversity is addressed in the arts. And there was nowhere to hide – El-Sherbini provided limited, multiple choice answers which meant that everyone was implicated in the contradictions, hypocrisies and injustices she identified in ‘cultural diversity’.

So where did this leave Live Art UK? The messages were not clear – should we be courting large audiences through traditional media, or celebrating the dynamics of communication with a small group of people? Should we cater to an audience or challenge them? And if institutional policy is inherently flawed anyway, what’s the point in trying?

All these contradictions surfaced in the afternoon’s break-out sessions, in which groups were asked to design a publication that addressed audiences and Live Art. Suggestions ranged from commissioning a supplement in *The Guardian* to creating a ‘living newspaper’ through word of mouth; content was drawn from the politics of the artwork to the experience of watching other members of an audience. The suggestions varied, in fact, just as much as Live Art does. Used to describe a wide range of practice, Live Art is always a problematic term, and the day proved that even a group of people connected through their affiliation with Live Art UK can’t agree on what it means.

This inherent diversity in Live Art practice was elided slightly by the commitment of the guests at the event – we were all happy to watch an animation of a piece of meat, followed by a DVD of a giant puppet in Trafalgar Square, and accept them both as successful examples of Live Art. But the speakers and discussion showed that this variation is not always understood by audiences. It may be difficult to describe what a piece of work ‘is’ but, as Marriage pointed out, you need to be able to tell people why they should see it.

There seems to be no way around identifying both the artwork and its potential audience – although that does not mean that there can’t be multiple definitions for both. As Bryan Biggs, director of the Bluecoat in Liverpool, suggested in his closing speech, if anywhere can be a site for art, then anywhere can be a site for an art audience. Likewise, if Live Art covers a variety of work, then its audiences will be just as various and diverse.

Mary Paterson, September 2007