

Live Art, potential and changing the world

by Mary Paterson

At its core, art is about potential. Or, in the philosopher Brian Massumi's words, "the aesthetic has to do with the overfulness with potential of what actually happens, and the renewal that comes of it."¹ Art does not make meaning, it explodes it. Art does not tell you what to think. It inspires you to think again.

If Live Art is a strategy, rather than a medium, then this is its strategy: to think differently. Whether it takes the form of a whispered choreography of books in a library, a pop concert that never reaches its climax, or a walk through the city at night led by a teenager, Live Art intervenes in the day-to-day machinery of life. Precisely because it is 'live' – embodied instead of displayed, experienced instead of reproduced – this approach interrupts the micro-performances of culture, and creates alternate worlds.

Often, when Live Art or its strategies are particularly effective, it is not known as Live Art anymore. Jeremy Deller's Turner Prize winning *Battle of Orgreave*, for example, is a film and an archive of the re-enactment of a bloody confrontation during the 1984 Miner's Strike. It is performative, multi-layered, self-critical, interdisciplinary, expansive; and known, simply, as 'art.' The 'bail-in' actions co-ordinated by the #ukuncut movement occupy bailed-out banks and turn them into more community-minded recipients of public funds – schools, libraries, hospitals. These protests playfully imagine an alternate world where people are prized over profit; the protests are known, simply, as 'politics.'

Sometimes, this relative anonymity can give Live Art a spurious sense of marginalisation. In fact, it is proof of the opposite. Live Art is everywhere. Each time one of its ideas is assimilated into the language of the mainstream, it's a sign of Live Art's strategic success. And it's also a spur to Live Artists to dive back into the pools of the in-between and the yet-to-be-defined, in order to invent new pockets of potential.

If there is a threat to this strategic slipperiness, this ability to disrupt meaning by swimming between established ways of thinking, it is the so-called 'experience economy'. The experience economy is capitalism's latest adventure in the conquest to commoditise and, like Live Art, it thrives on the generative potential of ideas and experience – or appears to. But of course, all of capitalism's ideas are the same idea: money. And all of its performances are the production of capital. Artists, luckily, have a wider repertoire.

To return to Massumi: "The question is to experiment with modulating complicity, to learn how to inflect [capitalism] towards other kinds of emergences which, at the limit, might be

¹ 'Movements of Thought' Brian Massumi and Adrian Heathfield, in *No Such Thing as a Rest* Adrian Heathfield and Hugo Glendinning (Live Art Development Agency, 2013)

capable of composing a purely qualitative alter-economy of life-value.”² Even when potential is commoditised, then, Live Art has the power to change. This is a powerful position, indeed. It means that Live Art can sit in the same warm chair as capitalism (and its trailing robes of influence and control), and still imagine difference.

Like Massumi, I’m interested in a purely qualitative alter-economy of life-value. And I’m interested in any technique that opens up spaces for difference and dissent. But you don’t have to share my politics to believe that Live Art can change the world; you don’t even have to like any of the changes that Live Artists have made, so far. The radical potential of this loose affiliation of practices we call Live Art is simply their desire to entice you and everyone you meet into the act of thinking.

What will change? It’s yet to be discovered.

Written for WEATHERING THE STORM, the Annual Live Art UK Associates Gathering, Thursday 12 February 2015, at Watershed, Bristol, UK.

The Gathering was curated and produced by the Live Art Development Agency and In Between Time, for Live Art UK, and considered the idea of the Storm as a metaphor for change.

Live Art UK is a national network of 24 venues, festivals and facilitators who collectively represent a range of practices and are concerned with all aspects of the development of the Live Art sector across the UK. The Live Art UK Associates represent a wide cross section of presenters and producers from across the UK who engage with, but are not necessarily primarily dedicated to, Live Art programming.

Live Art UK is supported through the Live Art Development Agency’s status as a National Portfolio Organisation of Arts Council England.

www.liveartuk.org

www.thisisLiveArt.co.uk

www.inbetweentime.co.uk

² *Ibid*, p. 16