The Stagehands of Subversive Spaces: Site-Specific Performance and Audience Labour

by

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Abstract

This dissertation develops a theory for analyzing the role of audiences as aesthetic resources in contemporary site-specific performance and relational art. Collaborating with three Canadian companies as a participant-observer, interviewer, and in some cases, documenter, I develop case studies that track flexible stage-audience relationships in public spaces. By analyzing how companies Radix Theatre Society, Bluemouth, and Mammalian Diving Reflex put spectators to work in sites like IKEA showrooms, disused warehouses, and theatres, I advance a method that attends to the doubled practice of the spectator as worker and witness. This framework, which I term *bifold spectatorship*, articulates how audiences constitute theatrical worlds through direct physical engagement with the cultural criticism and formal experimentation that artists stage. Folded into the event, spectators literally compose the scene of the action, and enter into what I call *critical proximity* with the discourses that shape the performance. As participants interact with and directly query the artistic expressions that they patron, they answer a challenge to perform that is typically reserved for professionals. Such novel participation begins with a hail that interpellates audiences into the action as subjects and even sites of performance. Adapting the concept of the casting call, or what I coin site-casting,
miscasting, and central casting, I show how spectators are aligned with the exigencies of the site; “mis-placed” or miscast by artists (provoking performance anxiety in participants); or cast to play a role they already perform in their everyday lives. In addition to these critical frameworks, I challenge the established narrative of “liberating the audience” by forwarding a multi-sited genealogy of site-specific performance that confronts the romance of freeing spectators from stage conventions. In examining the ethical problems that arise when audiences are made responsible for representation, The Stagehands of Subversive Spaces extends debates within site-specific performance to wider conversations in performance studies about ethics, subjectivity, and audience reception.
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INTRODUCTION
Bifold Spectatorship, A Doubled Entity

_The ‘self’, the ‘I’, is always defined by the ways it is ‘doubled’ by ‘another’, not a single or commanding ‘other’ or Doppelganger, but simply any of a number of possible forces._

— Tom Conley, _Deleuze: Key Concepts_ (171)

The emergence of audience labour in contemporary Canadian site-specific performance recasts spectatorship as a doubled entity.¹ Analyzing how companies Radix Theatre Society, Mammalian Diving Reflex (MDR), and Bluemouth realize the possibilities of this “off-stage” labour, this study explores how spectators find themselves in and of the theatrical world as doubled subjects. By this I mean that the work of audiences as witnesses and interpreters of the stage is combined with their direct participation in those stage conditions. I call this doubled practice of aide and witness to the action _bifold spectatorship_. These spectators enter theatrical worlds as players who through performative acts support the aesthetics and embody the politics of the event. This engagement with the performance can range from physical tasks such as walking and holding props, to conversations, roles in social dramas, and group choreography. Imported into the expressive territory of the performance, bifold spectators (even as they undertake symbolic labour) signal the presence of the putative real. As the various case studies throughout this dissertation show, the “literal” presence of audiences is a vital point of play for artists who create or stage site-specific work. Placing the audience in the field of representation, putting them to work in a space usually defined by their physical absence, artists use audiences to highlight the architectonics of space and representation. Such is the case with Bluemouth’s _What The Thunder Said_ when a spectator, tasked with
holding a small picture frame, also holds up the temporary apparatus of the stage. Standing behind the frame (and excessively outside its dimensions), a performer addresses the audience in a large warehouse with no stage, seats, or lighting. (Later, these same audience members will be selected and organized by the company into teams to play a game of softball in the warehouse.) Here, spectators are not at odds with the theatrical world but have been folded into, and support, its ephemeral terrain. This folding of the audience invites a collision, and ultimately, dissolution between spectator and stage that is the focus of this study.

As direct participants, bifold spectators find themselves entangled in signs they produce but over which they hold little power. And yet, if spectators are merely facilitators of, or a site of meaning for, artistic production why do they patronize such “dictatorial” artwork? And why do artists working within disciplines like theatre, dance, and visual art, and artistic practices such as site-specific performance and relational aesthetics, increasingly desire to use spectators as stagehands? This project is motivated by a need to understand how spectators enter and embrace performance contexts that script them as assistants to, and participants of, artistic creation and production.

Looking primarily at the role of bifold spectatorship within site-specific events—a practice that explicitly maps the spectator in relation to the site—we learn that bifold roles are formed as much by spatial conditions as they are by artistic intention. In fact, we cannot inquire into how spectators perform double duty as theatrical agents independently of the sites they occupy. Why? Because the bifold spectator does not so much “step into” the site, social drama, or role as constitute it through her ongoing physical presence and participation. The site-specific events in this study show us that
spectators are not bounded subjects but are in continual negotiation with theatrical space. Here, Tom Conley’s larger observation about the porous nature of subjectivity resonates with our relational view of spectatorship: “Subjectivity becomes an ongoing negotiation of things perceived, both consciously and unconsciously, within and outside the body” (171).

**Radix, Bluemouth, MDR**

This expansive view of spectators as negotiators of theatrical worlds—that is, as subjects who are not neatly divided from but entrenched within the artworks they perceive—is inspired by the work of Radix (Vancouver-based), Bluemouth (Toronto-, Montreal-, and New York City-based), and MDR (Toronto-based). From the mid- to late 1990s to the present (2011), these independent companies developed or staged, and continue to stage, original productions in disused warehouses, barbershops, parks, rundown hotels, boiler rooms, local diners, city intersections, subways, elementary schools, big box stores, and conference rooms. Rarely conforming to the conventional uses of these places, the companies temporarily repurpose walls into projection surfaces for images, use countertops as places to dance, treat indirect noises as compositional material for soundscapes, and travel to intersections, homes, and strip malls to interview strangers and collect “material” for shows. Key to this treatment of purpose-built sites as a multiplicity of spaces are spectators and other participants not traditionally “qualified” to perform onstage. These participants not only assist in restaging the site as a theatrical world (through their presence and labour) but they too are made to double as a site of performance. The residency of these participants in the creation process and production is common to all three companies who, despite their diverse artistic approaches, actively
engage and resource spectators as bifold participants. Throughout this study, these companies will be key to how we map genealogies of site-specificity, theorize the changing role of spectatorship, question the ethics of participation, and point toward emerging sites of creation and production online.

Hails

The work of the spectator who labours as bifold witness and participant often begins with a hail. In chapter two, “Site-Specific Spectators,” the site of my theorizing on audiences, I develop a framework of various casting calls, or what I term site-casting, miscasting, and central casting. This framework addresses the many hails site-specific artists devise to insinuate audiences into the action as doubled subjects. These casting calls are not the same as professional calls, which circulate among actors who vie for parts. The audience does not audition for parts but are hailed into bifold roles much the same way subjects are interpellated into the social world (i.e., audiences are addressed by way of language, gestures, and objects in everyday life). In chapter two, we primarily examine the use of material hails through both props—nametags signal “conference goer,” keys “hotel patron”—and sites—hair salons signal “client” and IKEAs not only signal but compel “shopper.” These objects and sites not only initiate spectators into the work as role players but situate them at the centre of discourses on consumerism, desire, age, and authenticity. Whether object or site, casting calls produce roles that are largely citational. No audition is necessary since spectators are always/already familiar with the performative identities of shopper, student, or salon client.

Bypassing the audition, casting calls assign and align spectators with the apparatus of the site and the exigencies of the social drama. Productions by Radix such as
The Swedish Play and Assembly, and social acupuncture events by MDR such as Haircuts by Children, and Slow Dance with Teacher rely on both “muscle memory” and materiality to structure their calls. The embodied knowledge(s) that compose rituals and social dramas mean spectators need no instruction on how to attend a conference or slow dance. Similarly, the “spatial stories” encoded in sites require no primer on how to “act” at a convention or high school dance. But like hails in everyday life, these calls inaugurate rather than solidify a process of interpellation. That is to say, simply because someone hands you a nametag and addresses you as a conference attendee does not guarantee instant compliance or even citational competency. What it does do, however, is establish a horizon of expectations against which spectators interpret (and potentially subvert) theatrical worlds as bifold agents. Thus casting calls set the stage for participation that ranges from treating spectators as composition and content to engaging them as co-creators.

However, just as a casting call can situate spectators within the logic of the site or scenario, artists can also misplace, or, more appropriately, miscast subjects. In putting spectators and participants where they don’t belong, the potential of failing to play the role with fidelity—to live up to the challenge to perform—can become a palpable if not defining element of many of the performance events in this study. Particularly telling is the performance anxiety—the fear of failing to master the part—that runs throughout the social acupuncture work of Mammalian Diving Reflex. In Haircuts by Children, for example, artistic director Darren O’Donnell notes the unmistakably “somber mood in the salon” as elementary school children cut and style the hair of adults. Other events reveal how performance anxiety drives spectators and participants to mimetic exactitude in
order to maintain their roles. For example, Professor Andy Houston cast in *Slow Dance with Teacher* makes sure to dress for the part, so that his jacket and tie verify his real life credentials. In still other events, performance anxiety provokes mimetic excess. Discussed in chapter three, interview subject Tony Clements, questioned by MDR artists about his life as a homeless person and panhandler for *Diplomatic Immunities: Round Four*, tells tall tales about criminality, convinced the ensemble are in search of a violent rendering of street life. Thus the casting call inspires wild stories from the very subject who performs the role in “real” life. Calls may be constructed and performances imaginary but as participants reveal, the stakes of maintaining a performative veneer are high—especially when companies make those participants responsible for their stage worlds and cultural criticism.

**The Ethics of Bifold Risk**

As the casting calls above demonstrate, spectators who assume the challenge to perform find themselves in the crosshairs of risk and responsibility. In making art possible, audiences do not simply perform their part or task but embody and produce the relations and forces of power that underpin the work. Ethical problems often arise when the claims made about the effects of power are denied by artists. In such cases, participant risk is framed in performance and critical texts as no risk at all but an issue of competency and agency. Chapter three, “Risk and Response,” examines how the challenge to perform can quickly turn into an (un)ethical matter. It focuses primarily on the art-activist work of MDR—a company that deals explicitly with dramatizing power relations between artists and audiences. MDR exposes the habit of treating ethics as a concept divorced from the flux of relational experience. An ethical position is what one
claims after the performance, in textual spaces such as O’Donnell’s *Social Acupuncture*. The logic (and the priority) is that no matter the risks the “show must go on.”

Examining the work of MDR and its contested relationship with audiences shifts the generic terrain of the study from site-specific performance to what critic Miwon Kwon would likely call “community specific” or relational art events. Whether or not it is acknowledged as a necessary power of performance, conduct is an essential factor in relational art because it brings together subjects of different backgrounds and status in an effort to foster new relationships—new forms of conduct. In having, for example, children and adults gather for a meal at a local restaurant, such as in MDR’s *Eat the Street*, relational art fulfills what Nicolas Ridout in *Theatre & Ethics* calls a “postmodern ethics.” Following philosopher Emmanuel Levinas this ethics “encourages the spectator to stop seeing the performance as an exploration of his or her own subjectivity and, instead, to take it as an opportunity to experience an encounter with someone else” (8). Hans-Thies Lehmann in *Postdramatic Theatre* frames this encounter as an “aesthetics of responsibility” in which spectators “have to take responsibility for the manner of their participation in the theatre” (103). Taking issue with the localization of responsibility onto the spectator, I argue that the demanding contexts of numerous relational events often twist the aesthetics of responsibility into a display of bifold response-ability. While the “fragility of the other” is still very much in play, these vulnerabilities are staged using the stories and bodies of spectators and participants who are central to the events. Throughout the chapter, I show how this material use of subjects can potentially sensationalize difference as a point of theatrical shock and impact. Valuing spectator alterity for what it might yield theatrically can rupture relational conduct among those
subjects who did not anticipate their “fragility” would be made representable. In the most troublesome cases, such conduct either goes unacknowledged or is passed off as a matter of performance competency. In the case of the latter, the structuring assumption by companies is that spectators should implicitly know they have the “right to refuse” an invasive question, possess the ability to walk away from an encounter, and recognize that, after all, it is “just a performance.” Emphasizing the intrinsic capacity of spectators to respond to performance conditions places the liability of the event on their shoulders. If they cannot supply performance competency by manifesting an ability-to-respond then the failure of the event lies with them. What our discussion on ethics demonstrates is how spectators often have to work against, and even reorient, the performance conditions to suit their own aesthetic renditions of contact and community. This reorientation might occur through the use of such conventions as storytelling and costume, but, as chapter four shows, it can also occur through the use of web utilities where spectators can circulate text and images within networks that have no relation to the event. In many cases, these responses set the performance on another course altogether, one that facilitates community and inquiry online.

**Online Sites**

In chapter four, then, “Parallel Participation,” I turn to examine a set of participatory encounters that refer beyond the immediate performance to digital sites, and consider how the ever-expanding terrain of social media, blogs, and company websites—characterized by rhizomatic or “decentred connections” (Colebrook xxvii)—has transformed the parameters of the art(ist)-audience relationship. As a space structured through proliferating social networks, digital environments such as Facebook enable
performers and audiences to refocus the live event as online participation. Companies like Bluemouth, for example, use discussion posts and animation clips to conceptually restage their touring production, *Dance Marathon* in between runs. In other cases, volunteers and spectators for the production use blogs to link their participatory experiences to broader communities and daily practices that are only tangentially connected to the event. These participants actively deterritorialize the event by converting their immediate experience on the dance floor into reflections that, in the case of Cara Spooner’s post for *The Dance Current*, facilitate inquiry into contemporary dance trends. Online, the doubled position of bifold participants is established through the ways in which subjects rejoin their participation to other sites of expression where they share—and circulate—their experiences.

In addition to how subjects transpose their experiences to online formats, this chapter also returns to a discussion of casting calls. First addressed in chapter two, the audience hails I evaluate largely concern those that take place at the site of the performance, and how they are used to cast the audience into the event. In chapter four, the study shifts to focus on online casting calls that precede the event. By examining the digital environments with which audiences engage in advance of the performance, chapter four identifies how social media and company sites are used by artists to enable *networked hails*. Here, interpellation is not strictly linked to the identities that compose the theatrical world but to social relations that exceed the event. In the case of Radix’s *Portrait of a City* the casting call situates participants in urban and online ecologies. Because participants are hailed as potential urban archivists online, they are also
interpelled into the ecology of the company site which links visitors to its production history, performance footage, and other related materials.

The range of hails documented in these pages show that the interpellation of bifold participants encompasses not just the performance but the “total” event. As online casting calls illustrate, hails can be external to the production and distinct from those calls that participants embody in performance. Interpellation in these cases is not permanently structuring but shifts throughout the course of the event, revealing the subjectivity of spectatorship to be constantly in motion.

**Bifold Boundaries and Folded Play**

The making and unmaking of bifold spectatorship across multiple sites compels participants to “double” or step into relation with themselves as the performing other. This study’s concern with how the audience is reterritorialized as the other confronts us with the problematic aspirations of participatory performance. Striving for an intersubjective encounter with non-professionals—particularly one that promotes mutuality through performance—is a messy and imperfect ambition. Not surprisingly, the critical implications of examining these perfectly messy relations has multiple, and even contradictory meanings in this study. The principle way in which I have sought to address how these meanings are constructed in creation and performance, namely, bifold spectatorship, requires outlining both what the concept evokes and pries open. For some, the very invocation of the concept, bifold, may appear to reify a dualism between onlooker and actor. In this formulation, the relation between spectator and traditional stage performer is enacted as an oppositional tension that the audience member dramatizes and perhaps even reconciles through her participation. Taking up the
challenge to perform thus legitimizes the binary between audience and performer since it reveals that the “true” residency of the spectator belongs “outside” the imitative structure.

Certainly, in those events that prioritize the importation of an “authentic” (non-specialized) stage presence, we witness how such a dualism between participant and professional not only occurs within but structures the most tendentious of performance events. More than a novel display, the authentic presence of the spectator is an organizing force in creation and production. Whether challenged to have their hair cut and styled by a child, engaging in group choreography for a dance marathon, or tasked to collect the sounds and stories that compose their neighbourhoods (as material for a show), spectators give a piece of themselves for art. These literal and metaphoric pieces are often treated as emblems of authenticity that artists use to compose theatrical worlds. The instantiation, and ultimate dissolution, of the interpreter/actor divide is thus a formal strategy, a way of treating the witness as a site of composition and content.

The bifold concept explicates those scenarios that depend upon binary modes of thought to support the ways subjects become aesthetic resources. In charting these dualisms between performer and witness, inside and outside, I hope to expose their ethical, dramaturgical, and phenomenal effects on audiences in site-specific performance. And while I have no reluctance about critiquing the binaries that the companies in this study rely upon, I also recognize what it makes possible in creation and production. Eve Sedgwick, in her introduction to Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, and Performativity, articulates why the censure of binary thought does not actually repel the force of dualisms:

[I]t’s far easier to deprecate the confounding, tendentious effects of binary modes of thinking – and to expose their often stultifying perseveration – than it is to articulate or model other structures of thought. Even to invoke non-dualism, as
plenty of Buddhist sutras point out, is to tumble right into a dualistic trap. I’ve always assumed that the most useful work of this sort is likeliest to occur near the boundary of what a writer can’t figure out how to say readily, never mind prescribe to others: in the Jacoblike wrestling – or t’ai chi, as it may be – that confounds agency with passivity, the self with the book and the world, the ends of the work with its means, and, maybe, most alarmingly, intelligence with stupidity. (italics in original, 2)

In as much as the concept of the bifold is used to address the clash, and dissolution, of dualisms it also articulates, following Sedgwick, “other structures of thought.” Through a model of what I call critical proximity, a bifold or double position elicits thinking about the constitutive (as opposed to strictly oppositional) relationships between onlooker and performer as well as subject and site. Throughout chapters two and three, I explore how companies transform the act of critical distance into one where spectators directly query the assumptions that make up our social world. Audience labour is not simply a matter of delegating critical acts to participants but is an encounter with those acts that occurs through such kinesthetic operations as touch and movement. By coming into contact (or proximity) with the discourses that are being dramatized, spectators navigate the artwork through what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call a “smooth space,” a space perceived through direct physical engagement. Laura Marks in Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media explains that smooth spaces are necessarily experienced at “[c]lose-range” and “navigated not through reference to the abstractions of maps or compasses, but by haptic perception, which attends to their particularity” (xii).
Spectatorship at “close range” shifts the parameters of bifold from one of binaries to that of “beside.” Once again, Sedgwick helps illustrate how doubled subject positions command a range of analytical possibilities that do not end at opposition:

Beside is an interesting preposition because there's nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. *Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who's shared a bed with siblings. *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations. (italics in original, 8)

In addressing site-specific spectatorship as an experience of “beside” we not only examine how audiences parallel, differentiate, identify, and mimic through their doubled position, but how in having the witness lie beside the participant, the spectator beside the site, we learn how such roles slide, embrace, and *fold* into one another. Within the smooth space of touch, the bifold spectator connects or folds inside and outside, referent and representation, by acting as the theatrical surface in which these realms meet. We witness the surfaces of spectatorship most explicitly in productions like Radix’s *Assembly*, and Bluemouth’s *How Soon is Now?* as well as *Dance Marathon* where the participants compose a kind of animate *mise en scene*. In materializing, or acting as the very material that reveals the social world to be historically contingent, audiences actualize the cultural criticism and formal experimentation that characterizes the work of the companies in this study.
The potential of bifold spectatorship to develop into a folded one of co-creation and play takes its critical inspiration from Deleuze’s concept of the fold, specifically the way in which folding reveals the divide between self/other, or in the case of this study, witness/onlooker as “two sides of a single surface” (Conley 172). For site-specific spectators, the theatrical world is not out there, assessed from the “outside,” but is co-extensive with the same time and space of the artwork. The implications of a co-extensive terrain for spectators are that they are both in and of the theatrical world. Beyond sharing the same space, the audience is “part of an interconnected, complicated, single expression” (59), to adapt Anthony Uhlmann’s words. Artists take self and other as the very condition and potential of performance, and in so doing, transform how we perceive alterity. Throughout this study, companies like Bluemouth exemplify how relations between self and other press up to one another in ways that compel novel interactions with subjects, sites, and performance conventions. In works such as How Soon is Now? when spectators graze the hands and fingers of a criminal before his murder trial, or Dance Marathon when certain spectators are blindfolded and led through a dance in which they lean into, twist, and withdraw from the artists, the relations of self and other close in on one another in a way that actualizes new possibilities between them.

**History and Heterotopia**

The work spectators make possible highlights their role within artistic practice as dynamic. As chapter one, “Historical Transgressions, Contemporary Tactics” shows, the treatment of audiences as active agents of expression has long been a preoccupation among those artists staging environmental and site-specific artwork. My focus on bifold spectatorship emerges primarily out of an examination of those art practices. Tracking the
dramaturgies—and ideologies—that shape modernist experiments we learn how these forces continue to influence the contemporary relations between artists, audiences, and sites. The historical reach of these art practices is felt in the continuing drive (on the part of companies today) to reconfigure the logic of the site through counter-hegemonic or “heterotopic” play. The use of spectators to contest sites as witness-participants reveals that bifold participation is tied, from the very start, to the task of reimagining place.

In chapter one, I analyze the work of Radix, MDR, and Bluemouth by adopting what Jodi Dean calls a “backward gaze.” Following the “contingent turns of history” (Gutting), I map a multi-sited genealogy of site-specific performance in English language Canada that includes canonical interventions such as “environments” and “happenings” in the United States and overlooked precursors such as the non-historical docudrama in Canada. My exploration of avant-garde and “alternate” movements in visual art and theatre concerns how, historically, modernist artists sought to transgress boundaries between art and site, spectator and stage. These transgressions are emblematic of what I call the popular narrative of site-specific performance. As the story goes, artists, restless to create or perform their work “outside” the circumscribed space of the gallery or theatre, set out in search of everyday or purpose built sites. No longer tied to the formality of the white cube exhibition space or stage, artists engage in flexible interactions with audiences who become central to the work as direct players as well as witnesses. Reflecting upon this narrative throughout the chapter, I argue that this rebellious account too often stalls in a self-satisfied stance of spectator and spatial “liberation” just when artists, scholars, and art-activists should be asking what the ethics of such engagement with “real” people and “real” places engenders.
Contemporaneous with modernist experiments in the white cube gallery, as well as theatre in purpose built or “found” sites, is an intellectual history that parallels this break from the formal space of representation. As Shannon Jackson observes in her introduction to *Professing Performance*: “The [performance studies] narrative focuses on [Richard] Schechner’s generative interactions with the anthropologist, Victor Turner, who took the study of performance beyond the proscenium stage and into carnivals, festivals, protests, and other cultural rituals of an intercultural world” (8). Schechner’s now controversial interaction with, and use of, non-Western cultures, as well as his experiments in environmental theatre, form the basis of a performance continuum that places theatre within a larger set of cultural practices. Outlining collective activities and events in *Performance Theory*, Schechner states: “Theater is only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on – through to play, sports, theater, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude” (xvii).

Concurrent with the emergence of performance studies, and Schechner’s theory and practice, are critical interventions in poststructuralism. Foucault’s 1967 lecture “Of Other Spaces” is significant for the way it interprets imagined space as a constitutive cultural force. In step with site-specific critics, I focus on Foucault’s conceptual formulation of “heterotopia,” a site where “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). And while these contestations and inversions are potentially transformative they do not set out to disestablish existing spatial orders. As M. Christine Boyer explains, heterotopias operate
through a “double logic”: “by their very imaginations and illusions heterotopias sustain the normality of everyday space and yet they negate these illusions, replacing them with other imaginary, but more static places […]” (54). The “static” nature of heterotopias is, in part, due to the fact that many of the counter-sites Foucault details, whether they be museums, cemeteries, or gardens, are what Tom McDonough calls “Enlightenment typologies of architectural and urban form” (321). These places may possess the potential to stage radical counter-sites but they are defined first and foremost by order and rationality.

And yet despite (or because of) this “double logic,” critics of site-specific performance almost exclusively seize upon the notion of heterotopia as an imaginary counter-site. Remapped as a spatial theory that articulates temporary and ephemeral rather than “static” cultural expressions, the normativity of heterotopic space is treated as a point of re-appropriation. (The success of these counter-strategies is another matter altogether.) It is this vibrant clash between symbolic and material orders that makes Foucault’s heterotopia a key critical path for site-specific performance. As a discourse that situates the imaginary within everyday locations, heterotopia is used to express how site-specific artists stage theatrical worlds in purpose-built sites. Characterized as co-existing with and countering already existing places, site-specific works, critics propose, do not suspend reality but acquire meaning through engagement with “real” places. Andrew Houston and Laura Nanni exemplify this analytic approach in their editorial introduction to the special issue in Canadian Theatre Review on “Site-Specific Performance”:

[…] site-specific performance happens in real spaces, where the practices of representation (the performance) no longer fill a void; rather the performance
offers the virtual [heterotopic] point from which we may experience this space – more as a process than as a mimetic image – creating relationships with the site that challenge how we look at the space, ourselves and all the various relationships between the ‘virtual point’ and that which surrounds it: between what is illusion and what is real, between process and product and between the performer and the spectator. (7)

The emphasis on relationships over equivalency (or mimesis) transforms heterotopia into an “active” territory where space is composed through encounters. Building upon this discourse, I examine artwork that self-consciously engages in both imagined and constructed orders. But I also take my own “detour” on this critical path. I show how the counter-sites of site-specific performance not only puncture the spaces of the real and the virtual (thus challenging how we understand those spaces), but, in many cases, put forward new figurations between subjects and structures. These figurations provoke a critical becoming where participants encounter and even model new sites of social and political relations.

The hybrid communities to emerge from these relations are informed by the work of de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*. His views on cultural pluralism are pivotal to site-specific scholarship because they illuminate how subjects rely upon what he calls “tactics,” creative acts that elude the circuits of surveillance and institutional power, in order to make place habitable. Just as I embark on my own heterotopic detour—revealing how contemporary site-specific companies deterritorialize the art(ist)-audience relationship and circulate new dynamics of reception—this study also takes a tactical detour. I detail how tactics are made theatrical in site-specific performance by recharging the invisible, unknowable operations of individual users as visible and self-conscious (or knowable) acts that are collectively facilitated by participants.
Focusing, and revaluing, tactical operations and heterotopic play establishes useful ways in which to assess how spectators and sites facilitate the innovative theatrical worlds of contemporary Canadian site-specific performance. The multiple contexts that inform this project are motivated by the ways in which the hybrid term, “site-specificity” enables (and inspires) analysis across conceptual locations. The benefit of thinking about performance across innumerable historical, critical, dramaturgical, and ethical sites is that it allows for a manifold reading of aesthetic practices that, however divergent and multiple, are inextricably linked. As a result, many of the case studies in these pages including The Swedish Play, Assembly, Haircuts by Children, Diplomatic Immunities, Slow Dance with Teacher and Dance Marathon are resituated from multiple perspectives. The outcome is that productions resonate across this study in numerous ways: The Swedish Play, for instance, exemplifies heterotopic play (chapter one) and audience choreography (chapter two); Dance Marathon is analyzed as a performance event (chapter three) and an expression of online culture (chapter four); and Diplomatic Immunities resonates as a historical product of docudrama (chapter one) and an exemplar of relational aesthetics on the contemporary stage (chapter three). In this regard, the structure of this dissertation follows the lead of its subject, the bifold spectator, and the ways in which she is always “doubled” by “any of a number of possible forces” (Conley 171). Exploring the effects of those forces on spectators and sites is the aim of The Stagehands of Subversive Spaces.

Notes to Introduction

1 I borrow this concept from Elspeth Probyn who, in the opening pages of Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies, proposes that “self”: is a doubled entity: it is involved in the ways in which we go about our everyday lives, and it puts into motion a mode of theory that problematizes the material conditions of those practices. Unlike
the chickens which are presumably sexed one way or the other, once and for all, a gendered self is constantly reproduced within the changing mutations of difference. While its sex is known, the ways in which it is constantly re-gendered are never fixed or stable. One way of imaging this self is to think of it as a combination of acetate transparencies: layers and layers of lines and directions that are figured together and in depth, only then to be rearranged. (qtd. in Pile and Thrift 4)

2 For information about the companies' mandates and production histories visit their websites: radixtheatre.org, bluemouthinc.com, and mammalian.ca.

3 Social acupuncture is a set of participant-driven performance events that use already existing social scenarios, relationships, and locales (such as hair salons, elementary schools, and neighbourhoods) to “induce” “atypical encounters” between strangers. See Darren O'Donnell’s essay on social acupuncture in Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia, pages 10-97.

4 See “I HAVE TO LET IT OUT!” by Eva Behrendt about how companies like Berlin-based Rimini Protocol outsource their performance expertise to what they call “experts of the everyday.”

5 In One Place After Another, Kwon critiques this “locational identity” as a desire within late capitalism for an experience marked by difference:
   Certainly site-specific art can lead to the unearthing of repressed histories, provide support for greater visibility of marginalized groups and issues, and initiate the re(dis)covery of ‘minor’ places so far ignored by the dominant culture. But in as much as the current socio-economic order thrives on the (artificial) production and (mass) consumption of difference (for difference’s sake), the siting of art in ‘real’ places can also be a means to extract the social and historical dimensions out of places to variously serve the thematic drive of an artist, satisfy institutional demographic profiles, or fulfill the fiscal needs of a city. (emphasis in original, 53)

6 In “Heterotopia unfolded?” Hilde Heynen considers what she calls the “fundamental ambiguity” of heterotopias. She observes that heterotopias:
   […] might harbour liberating practices, but one should question whether the liberation applies to everyone who is involved. They might provide places for transgression and excess, but it seems very well possible that what is transgression for one actor means oppression and domination for another. Indeed heterotopias seem to be the spaces where the interplay between normative disciplining and liberating transgression manifests itself most clearly. They therefore seem to be able to flip from one side to the other. They can easily be presented as marginal spaces where social experimentations are going on, aiming at the empowerment and emancipation of oppressed and minority groups; they can as easily be presented as instruments that support the existing mechanisms of exclusion and domination, thus helping to foreclose any real possibility for change. (321-322)

7 This contemporary rendering of heterotopias resituates them as “assemblages,” in the tradition of Deleuze and Guattari. In Deleuze: Key Concepts, J. Macgregor Wise explains: “Assemblages create territories. Territories are more than just spaces: they have a stake, a claim […] Territories are not fixed for all time, but are always being made and unmade, reterritorializing and deterritorializing. This constant making and unmaking process is the same with assemblages: they are always coming together and moving apart.” (italics in original, 78-79).
CHAPTER ONE
Historical Transgressions, Contemporary Tactics: The Restless Narratives of Site-Specific Performance

Audience labour occurs against the backdrop of theatrical events that increasingly rely upon the participation of “off-stage” subjects like spectators. Such artworks, and the companies that create them, thrive on the potential of participation to express something new about everyday sites. Whether this “something new” re-imagines a purpose-built site, transforms the art(ist)-audience relationship, or innovates how we perform within the boundaries of everyday life, spectators are figural to such transformations both as supporting players and co-creators. This chapter examines how the work of both spectators and artists demonstrate historical imperatives and contemporary concerns. The artworks we will discuss carry the historical imprint of what Miwon Kwon calls the “idealist space of dominant modernism” (1), and the contemporary impulse to actively restage this idealism through the creation and production of “reorganized,” tactical, and subversive social relations. Pivoting between modernist ideals and contemporary reconfigurations, this chapter surveys how spaces are enacted through a cultural practice that is inseparably linked to the participation of spectators and other non-professional subjects: site-specific performance.

This foundational discussion of site-specificity draws upon the work of contemporary Canadian companies Radix, Bluemouth, and Mammalian Diving Reflex (MDR). These groups exemplify the range of intersecting genealogies and critical practices that make up site-specific performance in English-language Canada. Two distinct cultural arenas the companies commonly draw upon include: (1) people and places in everyday life; and (2) performance conventions such as multimedia, movement,
music and sound art, and, in some instances, scenography more closely modeled after installation art than the stage. Key to this combined use of art and the everyday are spectators and participants who aide in the temporary transformation of purpose-built structures into theatrical sites. These subjects are not only used to challenge real and representational orders, but they themselves are transformed as animate sites where subversive cultural, political, and social commentaries are performed. What the work of Radix, Bluemouth, and MDR demonstrate is that the “site” in site-specific performance refers to more than just a location but a field of social relations. As sites of ephemeral expression, artists and audiences alike not only make representation possible, but to borrow the words of Bill Readings, they “make us aware that there is something other than representation” (18).

**Types, Terms, and Suffixes**

The co-presence of the real and the representable in everyday sites have generated a proliferation of critical terms that use *site* with an attendant suffix. The most common term, which has its basis in the field of visual art, is the one we have used, and will continue to use, throughout this study: *site-specificity*. However, the terms site-responsive, site-oriented, site-based, site-related, and site-generic, among others, are also widely used. This ever-expanding vocabulary reflects the types of spaces (or spatial orders) with which site-specific artists frequently engage in both creation and performance. While there is little consensus or uniformity from artist to artist, or article to article, on the definition or application of these various site-specific categories, terms such as site-based, site-related, and site-generic suggest that the site is being used as a “found” space that houses an already existing performance. The architecture and geography of the found space may inform and inflect the performance but it shapes the
work in its production rather than creation.¹ (Warehouses, parks, and fields represent the
favoured “found” spaces of many site-based, -related, and -generic productions
undertaken by companies such as Radix and Bluemouth.) On the other end of the
spectrum, site-responsive and site-oriented suggest that the performance does not precede
the site, but that the site is as foundational to its process, as, for example, the dramatic
text. Site-responsive and -oriented further suggest that the performers and audience
“respond” to the dimensions, noises, and materials of the site in a manner that is intrinsic
to the process and product.² While found and responsive uses of sites can remain
autonomous from one another, there is more frequently a “negotiation,”
“interpenetration,” and mutually determining experience between found and responsive
orders, or between what Andrew Houston refers to as the “found and the fabricated.”³

Perhaps more cynically, Miwon Kwon explains that the flood of suffixes,
categories, and definitions that are used to describe site-specific work represents an
attempt to recuperate a practice that “has been weakened and redirected by institutional
and market forces,” which has reduced site-specificity to a fashionable label that is
indiscriminately applied to a diverse range of artistic genres, practices, and events (2).
But rather than add to the expanding vocabulary of terms as a way to combat the
increasingly diluted use of site-specificity, this study will, for the most part, use the term
“site-specific” as an endorsement of two practices: one artistic, the other scholarly.

The Artistic. The use of the category “site-specific” is an alignment with Radix
and Bluemouth, who identify their work as such on their websites, in interviews,
promotional materials, print reviews, and grant applications.⁴ While Mammalian Diving
Reflex does not identify as a site-specific company, they self-consciously engage in an
artistic practice that prioritizes the link between people and place. To borrow Nina Möntmann’s description of contemporary participatory artworks that are situated in public places: “Rather than merely taking place in the public sphere or being placed there, this is art that is public by its very nature” (14). The status of MDR’s work as public positions their process and production within a politics of location where new types of social relationships are enacted within everyday environments. The company’s negotiation with the structures of the everyday thus joins the imperatives of site-specificity with artistic models of community-oriented performance. MDR’s unique approach to performance is described here as “site-specific” or “relational”; however, when I make reference to all three companies in this study I use the term, “site-specific.”

The Scholarly. Scholarly approaches to the term site-specific vary. Nick Kaye treats it as a “substantive, transitive, and intransitive” process; Miwon Kwon, as a “problem-idea”; Mike Pearson, as two complex orders “that are of the site and brought to the site”; Andrew Houston, as an act of “social geography” or an invitation to create “heterotopic” spaces. Though approaches to the term site-specific vary, these scholars all analyze the art(ist), spectator, and site relationship, as an interdisciplinary cultural practice rather than a circumscribed genre. Here, we can immediately point to Kwon, who, in the introduction to her study, One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity, does not consider site-specificity “exclusively as an artistic genre” but as an urban practice that intersects with other disciplines, discourses, theories, and histories; or a “cultural meditation of broader social, economic, and political processes that organize urban life and urban space” (2-3). Similarly, this study of site-specificity in the work of Radix, Bluemouth, and MDR will revolve around several historical and
theoretical processes such as heterotopia, nation, city, docudrama, and the cultural pluralism cultivated in everyday practices through “tactical” play. The definition of site-specific performance as an event that occurs in non-traditional venues will change as it is analyzed through a historical movement, theoretical model, or particular production.

**Expanding the Genealogy**

Despite the various historical, theoretical, creation and production models that reveal site-specific performance to be a contextually contingent practice, certain models are repeatedly positioned as the “assumed” or “natural” precursors and frameworks. The historical links that are usually bonded to site-specific work are oriented around the *avant-garde* traditions that emerged in New York City and other American metropolises in the late 1960s and 70s. They focus on the innovative work of theatre practitioners, visual artists, dancers, and musicians who were not only interested in using “non-art” spaces, materials, and movement vocabularies but were eager to test the established relationship between art and site.6 One such historical link, which has been well documented and analyzed by, among others, Kwon, Suzanne Lacy, and Grant Kester, includes minimalist art (sculpture, canvas, non-art materials) exhibited in white cube galleries, as well as outdoor installations and land art. These art practices led to the subsequent “dematerialization” of object-based art into performance practices like site-specific art, new genre public art or relational aesthetics. Another strain of American *avant-garde* visual art that contributed to performance subgenres, such as relational aesthetics, as well as performance art, but more directly influenced existing disciplines, such as theatre, are “environments” and “happenings.”7 These events are said to have initiated environmental theatre, which adapted the “found” objects in environments and
happenings to the context of “found” sites. The work of Radix and Bluemouth owe their use of flexible actor-audience relationships to environmental theatre, and through their interdisciplinary weaving of theatre, film, media, dance, and music in non-traditional sites continue to extend and innovate this tradition.

While the fields of environmental theatre and visual art are valuable historical links, they represent an incomplete picture in the context of site-specific performance in English-language Canada in general, and the work of the three companies in this study in particular. The role of the Canadian docudrama, for example, (contemporaneous with environmental theatre) is just as formative to the social acupuncture work of Darren O’Donnell, artistic director of MDR, as the traditions of American theatre and visual art, but it remains a largely unanalyzed historical link to MDR’s work. Andrew Houston’s edited volume, Environmental and Site-Specific Theatre, draws such linkages between docudrama and site-specific performance by contextualizing such work within a collection of reprinted process diaries by artists, performance texts, interviews, and articles that span over forty years and include contributions by docudramatists as well as environmental theatre artists. Similarly, in the Canadian Theatre Review (CTR) issue on site-specific performance, co-edited by Houston and Laura Nanni—which includes articles by Bluemouth and O’Donnell, and a published performance text by Radix—other genealogies are hinted at outside environmental theatre. The work of Bluemouth and Radix, in particular, demonstrates that the role of “found” sites, such as disused warehouses, not only stands as an index of environmental theatre, but is also a geographical index of the shift from national to transnational economies (or Fordist to post-Fordist economies).

In the 1960s, when cities could no longer ride the prosperity
of the post-war economic boom, governments transformed industrial urban cores into “consumption and entertainment centres.” By the 1990s, when nearly every major urban centre had been outfitted with a waterfront, super mall, and entertainment complex, the spectacularization of cities intensified, as neoliberal economic strategies privileged the development of gentrified, cultural centres, for the “comfortable” middle class, over basic social services. The temporary occupation by Radix and Bluemouth of the “ghosted” sites of Fordism, such as warehouses and stripped office spaces, and the local cultures that once flourished around these sites, such as diners, barbershops, and old hotels implicates these companies in a geographical shift that is starting to be considered in the context of English-language Canadian theatre and performance studies. What remains largely unanalyzed is how groups such as Radix, Bluemouth, and MDR perform these various geographic, urban, environmental, documentary, and visual genealogies: What kinds of theatrical worlds and cultural criticism do they make possible?

**An Artist-Centred Discourse**

Because site-specific artists tend to be the archivists and scholars of their own work they actively shape how their works are historicized and theorized. In many regards, it is a discourse largely comprised of the artists themselves (the CTR special issue on site-specific performance was almost entirely made up of artists and artist-scholars). This situation is somewhat unique in the context of theatre scholarship but it is a hallmark of modernist *avant-garde* artists who have historically documented their work and traditions through manifestos, diaries, letters, and essays. Examples of site-specific works such as *Theatre/Archaeology* by Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape* by Pearson, contemporary performance texts like
Certain Fragments by Tim Etchells, and art-activist works such as Social Acupuncture by Darren O’Donnell follow in this tradition. Their texts are a combination of analysis, history, polemic, documentation, biography, and semi-diaristic reflection.

Despite their divergent styles, approaches, and interests each work tells a personal history that also rehearses the popular narrative of site-specific performance. The story begins with an artist or group of artists that grows restless with the circumscribed space of the theatre. They set out in search of everyday sites to create or perform their work. Their temporary occupation of streets and structures results in an evocative re-imagination of space through theatrical conventions and flexible performer-audience configurations. In recounting their physical experiences within the site—the materials or refuse left by previous occupants, the direct and indirect noises, the lighting, worn surfaces, and architecture—“representation” often becomes too narrow a word to describe the process and product. Artist-scholars thus draw upon a range of categories and relativized distinctions between representational and real orders: Pearson and Shanks, and Houston, use post-structural categories, such as “heterotopia,” a virtual world that stages the current and potential realities of the site; O’Donnell relativizes the real through his social acupuncture work so that, in his words, “the aegis of art” is brought “out into the world and use[d] […] to blanket traditional non-artistic activities” (33); Lucy Simic, co-artistic director of Bluemouth, describes her company’s work as “a reaching through” into the space of the real. It is here, at the “sites” where the real and representational join, collapse, superimpose, interpenetrate, and “reach through” that the story of site-specificity often rests and revels in its subversive status. But it is at precisely these “sites” that another point of departure is required. Such a departure begins by
asking: Who benefits from the reinvigoration of place? Do companies that re-imagine places through theatrical conventions engage sites in an interactive way or do sites simply become valuable interfaces to achieve states of cultural deviance? Do artists have at best a transitory responsibility to the sites that they occupy? Or does the artists’ relationship to the site approximate tourism where performers and audiences enter a locale for theatrical novelty and adventure and then leave?

The questions about a performance group’s relationship and responsibility to the site are not separate from those of audiences. Just as the story of site-specificity re-imagines everyday sites, it also re-imagines the role of audiences. The unique involvement of audiences in site-specific work as interview subjects, occasional set movers, and stage participants, and their equally unconventional configuration in the site, which can range from being scenographically integrated into the event, walking after the performers, touring streets and homes, and being bussed to-and-from different city districts, appears to overthrow the tradition of spectatorship in which audiences are immobile, “distant” receivers of the theatrical experience. But, again, the story of site-specificity “ends”—or stalls—with the “liberation” of spectators, just when it should be asking if the audience is truly liberated from their traditional roles, or if it only appears that way because they now have the added responsibility of acting as aides to those artists staging subversive acts.

Establishing Critical Parameters for Site-Specific Discourse: “Of Other Spaces”

Confronting the romance of the liberated spectator begins, first, with an analysis of the “counter-sites” in which they find themselves. The concept of a counter-site where performers engage in subversive performances is often discussed through the critical lens of Michel Foucault’s 1967 lecture, “Of Other Spaces.” This lecture is a useful analytical
tool in site-specific discourse because it parallels the first point of departure in the popular narrative of site-specific performance: an artist or group of artists grows restless with the space of the gallery or theatre, and ventures “outside” these circumscribed spaces into everyday places, which they transform through performance. What underlies this narrative is a dialectic between the (autonomous) space of art in the playhouse or gallery and the (integrated) space of art in everyday sites. This dialectic between the playhouse and the site finds a critical affinity in Foucault’s lecture and what he calls a “heterotopia.” The lecture establishes its own dialectic between utopias and heterotopias: while utopias are ideal or perfected “sites with no real place,” heterotopias are experiences, forms, rituals, and traditions that occur in “real” places (Foucault 24). What sets a heterotopia apart from places such as shops, offices, and commuter trains is that it has more than one strict purpose. It is a place “in which the real sites […] within the culture” can be found (Foucault 24). Not simply a container, a heterotopia is a meeting point where sites are “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). But beyond their multi-purpose and representational function, heterotopias, such as “privileged or sacred or forbidden places,” can also act as sites of transformation (Foucault 24). Since playhouses, galleries, and site-specific performance events are representational, and potentially transformative spaces, they all fall under the rubric of heterotopic sites. They are not opposed to utopias and heterotopias since they are all “real” sites that have the potential to stage “all the other real sites […] within the culture.”

The Second Principle: The Changing Function of Heterotopias

If the story of site-specific performance involves creating a theatrical or virtual world in an everyday site then we must consider how such a plot twist can occur. In other
words, how does the function of an everyday site change through performance? And what challenges does the “everyday” present to modern and contemporary theatrical traditions? These questions can be analyzed through the wider critical parameters of Foucault’s heterotopia, specifically the second principle in which he states: “[A] society as its history unfolds can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another” (25). The “precise and determined function” of existing heterotopias, such as the playhouse and gallery, are treated primarily as vessels for art—“perceived as a blank slate, a tabula rasa” (Kwon 11)—in which artists insert their work. However, in site-specific performance this neutral view of the site is replaced with an engagement in the place of performance.¹⁴ The space of art is made to “function in a very different fashion” when it shifts from the playhouse to an everyday site because it is treated as content as well as a container.

The use of an everyday site as a theatrical convention, rather than a neutral frame, is as much an ideological decision on the part of artists as it is a strictly formal one. Here, Miwon Kwon’s observation about the changing function of the modern gallery also applies to the changing function of space in modern and contemporary performance:

The modern gallery/museum space […] with its stark white walls, artificial lighting (no windows), controlled climate, and pristine architectonics, was perceived not solely in terms of basic dimensions and proportion but as an institutional disguise, a normative exhibition convention serving as an ideological function. The seemingly benign architectural features of a gallery, in other words, were deemed to be coded mechanisms that actively disassociate the space of art from the outer world, furthering the institution’s idealist imperative of rendering
itself and its values ‘objective,’ ‘disinterested,’ and ‘true.’ (emphasis in original, 13)

The separation of galleries and theatres from everyday life, their deliberate status as “outside of all places” (a defining trait of all heterotopias) is not, to reiterate Kwon, a benign feature. It is an active separation from the everyday in which the architectural design masks a universalist ideology through neutral markers. In contrast to the gallery and theatre, the space of performance in site-specific work is not only associated with everyday life (because that is where it takes place) but it intrudes onto life, announcing its status as art in a way that the universal architecture of the gallery or playhouse attempts to suppress.

Radix Theatre Society’s 2003 production, *The Swedish Play*, performed at the Coquitlam, BC, IKEA store, is an example of a work that is situated in an everyday commercial place in a manner that exceeds the use of a site as container and engages the use of site as content. Treating the model living rooms, kitchens, and bedroom sets as stage sets, Radix layered their theatrical heterotopia (a series of scenarios and installations) onto IKEA’s commercial utopia (the model furniture sets). This superimposition of the theatrical heterotopia and commercial utopia became a way to engage—and critique—consumer culture through the store’s own big box architecture and mass produced furniture. As actors played out silent vignettes accompanied by abstract narration, broadcast over individual headsets worn by the audience, the spatial subtext of IKEA’s showroom (“You, the consumer will live in a constant state of inadequacy unless you purchase the requisite bed, table, or sofa.”) was brought into relief through Radix’s overt use of theatricality. Because the space of art was shared by both the audience and the actors, the spectators were physically implicated in the stage action.
How audiences chose to navigate the site, and which abstract narrative they chose to tune into on their headsets—Radix set-up a low band radio station especially for the show that broadcast “tragedy” and “comedy” stations—not only complemented the show but *completed* it. The changing function of the space of art in the context of site-specific work like Radix’s is motivated by a desire to construct sites where cultural commentary about the constant state of self-inadequacy created by commercial culture can be enacted in everyday sites.

**The Fourth Principle: The Role of Time in Heterotopias**

One of the defining features of site-specific work that stages culturally subversive commentaries and acts is the location (such as an IKEA store), which is temporarily “invaded” and repurposed by an artist or company. This temporary reuse of the site exemplifies the fourth principle of heterotopias, which are composed of chronologies, time lines that are both short and long, or what Foucault terms “heterochronies.” On one end of the spectrum are the “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time,” such as museums and libraries. These institutions engage in a “perpetual and indefinite accumulation” of “all times, all epochs, all forms, [and] all tastes” in a single, “immobile place” (26). On the other end of the spectrum are heterotopias of time “in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect,” such as fairgrounds and “vacation villages” (26). Foucault explains that the heterochrony of “absolute temporality” is typically a clandestine space situated on the geographic and social periphery. He describes “fairgrounds […] on the outskirts of cities” that are occupied by nefarious citizens who defy physical, sexual, and scientific categories: “wrestlers, snakewomen, [and] fortunetellers” (26). The peripheral and even illegitimate status of these fair workers links
marginal sites, temporary events, and illegitimate behaviour to other temporal heterotopias like site-specific performance. Outside of a handful of productions by Radix, who have produced shows in established commercial sites, a majority of site-specific work in this study takes place in peripheral locales throughout urban cores. The subversive acts that companies stage in warehouses, funeral parlours, boiler rooms, and porno theatres are not subject to the same level of surveillance or control as an institution, since they are “here today, gone tomorrow.” Similar to the museum or library, which indefinitely accumulates documents, the playhouse indefinitely accumulates its own set of textual traditions. In addition to archiving playbills and scripts, the playhouse also archives tradition through the embodied display of performers, as well as the receptive traditions enacted by audiences. The efficacy of one’s contestation and inversion of norms (the qualities that Foucault says make up a heterotopia) is therefore limited in the playhouse by the heterochronic principle of indefinite accumulation. Thus the challenge to norms must take place outside institutional parameters where art is not under surveillance and counter-cultural acts have more efficacy in an “actual” place.16

The Sixth Principle: The Relationship Heterotopias have to Other Spaces

Site-specific work is also defined by the sixth and final principle: “The last trait of heterotopias […] unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory […] Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (27). Instead of creating a space of perfection (“another real space”), site-specific performance occupies the pole that is not partitioned
but integrated with reality. This integration with the “real” is not a seamless merger of illusion and reality, nor is it an attempt to set up a “rival” reality (Foucault uses the example of a colony as a “rival” place); rather, it is, in Foucault’s words, meant to expose every site “as still more illusory.”

The use of illusion to query those norms that underpin reality describes the artistic agenda of MDR. Their most successful performance event to date, *Haircuts by Children*, involves training a class of elementary school children in an inner city school to cut and style hair for adults in a salon. The haircuts are free and the adults are comprised of spectators who turn out for the event. The company, often in co-production with a festival or gallery, rents out a local hair salon near the children’s school, and enlists the hairstylists who work at the salon to train the children in preparation for the performance event. The performance event is not separate from the reality of the salon, since the children are there to cut hair and the spectators are there to receive a cut; but neither is it fully integrated with the reality of the salon, since MDR, the school children, and the spectators have entered a spatial order and assumed roles and relationships that do not exist for them outside the performance. Rather than complete autonomy or integration with reality, the salon turned performance event is a parody of reality: it mocks the existing site by populating it with children and spectators rather than stylists and clients. The power relations between children and adults, amateur and professional, participant and performer are temporarily disordered. But the reality that is ultimately mocked—and the authority that is tested—is not the hair salon, stylists, and customers but the treatment of children as helpless, inferior versions of adults. MDR uses the everyday space of the salon to create a temporary heterotopic site that challenges how we conventionalize
children by creating a space where children exhibit the skills of a professional and relate to adults in non-traditional ways. Thus the heterotopologies that concern function, time, and illusion, aid in articulating the theatrical worlds and cultural criticism that MDR, Radix, and Bluemouth stage in purpose-built sites.

**Establishing Historical Parameters for Site-Specific Discourse**

In focusing on the principles in Foucault’s lecture, and applying the language of “Of Other Spaces” (namely the term heterotopia) to elaborate contemporary performance events such as *Haircuts by Children* and *The Swedish Play*, I want to implicate the work of the companies in this study into a multi-disciplinary movement the emerged in the late 1960s and 70s throughout Europe and North America. During this time, scholars, like Foucault, in continental philosophy, the social sciences, anthropology, and the emerging field of performance studies, as well as activists, in movements like the Situationist International, and artists, in the fields of visual art, music, dance, and theatre were all engaged in projects that focused on contesting the political, social, and aesthetic norms that dominated their fields. This contestation of norms often took on a spatial dimension: in activism and art, for example, dérives through city streets, interdisciplinary “untitled events,” and traveling players who put on community docudramas to dispute government policy were all attempts to “spatialize” one’s agency within urban, artistic, and political contexts. But, often, this contestation of norms was paired with unsettling “universal” outlooks. Foucault’s own lecture, for example, attempts to forge a link between heterotopic sites and universality through his very first heterotopic principle: “[T]here is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias. That is a constant of every human group” (24). This universal, heterotopic principle is tied to
notions of cultural authenticity, which are expressed in the lecture through a string of disconcerting references to “primitive societies” and “ancestral” traditions, as well as a rash of Orientalist citations that include the purified “Moslems” and “the huts of Djerba.” Yet Foucault was not alone in overlooking the cultural specificity of non-Western cultures and traditions. Modern anthropologists such as Victor Turner, famous for his studies of how central African “tribes” expressed larger social patterns that all groups share also took the same view of non-Western peoples. Environmental theatre artists such as Richard Schechner, who collaborated with Turner in scholarly contexts, used rituals from New Guinea as the dramaturgical basis for shows such as Dionysus in ’69, overlooking cultural specificity in favour of creating trans-cultural theatrical spaces that would lead to spiritual transformation and social change. And while in English-language Canada, docudramatists drew on rural and remote communities in South-Western Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland rather than non-Western groups and traditions, their methods and aims were the same: to link the theatrical sites they constructed through performance with an “identifiable base” of national characteristics that would be instantly recognizable to Canadian theatre audiences.

We can summarize the historical link between contemporary site-specific companies such as Radix, Bluemouth, and MDR and the multi-disciplinary movement in the late 60s and early 70s, that paired heterotopias with universal ideologies, through three factors:

(1) Everyday people and places. The wing of MDR’s company dedicated to social acupuncture echoes the (non-historical) docudramas from the early 70s that used living
subjects, communities, and landscapes as vital dramatic source material for their performances.

(2) National portraits. The non-historical docudrama, and its use of people and places, is informed by a desire to locate sites of cultural authenticity and to convert those sites into national “portraits”.

(3) Urban ecologies. If in the docudrama, sites of cultural authenticity were brought to the theatre so that representations of rural and remote people and places stood as metonyms for nationhood, then in the site-specific performance events of MDR, as well as Radix and Bluemouth, accessing cultural authenticity has become a matter of stepping out into the city and becoming part of the ecology of urban cores (which includes its citizens, architecture, streets, neighbourhoods, and so on).

1. The use of everyday people and places as vital dramatic source material. In the 1960s and 70s, Canada marked part of its centennial celebrations with the large-scale building of playhouses across the country that were to function as each province’s regional theatre. This state-funded expansion of the theatre industry manufactured a neocolonial theatre culture that privileged British and American plays, playwrights, and even practitioners who were often “imported” to manage key artistic positions. In response to the “regionals,” as well as the Stratford and Shaw festivals, a counter-movement of artists and companies variously referred as the alternative and alternate theatre movement created “indigenous” texts that emphasized “Canadian” themes.21 Within the alternative movement, companies such as Toronto’s Theatre Passe Muraille, Newfoundland’s The Mummer’s Troupe, and Saskatoon’s 25th Street Theatre combined a politically tendentious style known as documentary theatre with collective creation—an
anti-hierarchical playmaking method that relied on an ensemble of performers rather than a playwright to generate material for productions. Depending on the docudrama, material would be culled from historical sources or through first-hand observation and interviews. Notable productions such as Passe Muraille’s *The Farm Show*, 25th Street’s *Paper Wheat*, and Mummer’s Troupe *Buchans: A Mining Town*, involved mostly city-dwelling ensembles insinuating themselves in rural and remote communities in South-Western Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland for weeks at a time. During their stay they amassed observations and interviews which were presented on stage as sympathetic impersonations of “townsfolk.” Many scenes highlighted the dominant social and economic concerns of the community. And the ensemble members’ own personal response to what they had observed and experienced, and who they had interviewed was often integrated into the show.\(^22\)

This playmaking method—going out into a community, collecting information, having a personal response to the information amassed, and turning that information into a production—transferred into contemporary practices, and is most evident in the work of MDR. Their series, *Diplomatic Immunities* draws together an ensemble of artists from different disciplines (performance art, lighting design, arts administration, etc.), who travel into city districts and neighbourhoods to conduct interviews with strangers. These interviews are recorded along with images of the neighbourhood, and then converted into a mix of anecdotes, scenarios, and themes for the stage. The interviewed strangers feature on stage as static images of “city folk” that are projected onto wall-sized screens. In front of these images stands the artist-researcher who restates and redacts “facts” from the interview. Following this summary, a clip from the interview is played. But this
presentation, particularly the act of “speaking for oneself” (via video) is immediately deconstructed in performance. The stranger’s video clip and summary by the artist are treated as “layers of representation” rather than an authoritative portrait. This deconstruction is most visible in the performers (or artist-researchers) themselves who are subjected to the same process as the interview subjects. Standing centre stage (at first as statically as the visual images of the strangers, projected moments before), the performer must listen to other artist-researchers restate and redact “facts” about her (usually a personal story), and is allowed only a brief amount of time to “correct” what has been said—something which the street interview subjects are entitled to do if they attend the performance, which is rare. The audience is then invited to ask the performers questions about the “material,” and, if they wish, to “complete” the research process—stepping onto the stage to be interviewed by the performers and other audience members.

In an interview, O’Donnell states that it is the personal response to the material, in performance, that is central to the staging of Diplomatic Immunities (the quote is worth repeating at length):

We discovered pretty soon, after a few earlier attempts at what was more documentary, that what’s important about this work is what’s happening in the theatre. The first time we did Diplomatic Immunities, all the encounters had happened beforehand (on the streets), and we were just recounting it to the audience. We had to plug a hole, and that hole was that there wasn’t much happening between the people in the room (the performers and spectators) … Brian Holmes, who writes for the University Tangent, in Paris, says that the problem with relational work is that the activity, in this case, the art, occurs – not in the gallery or the theatre – but at the site of the encounter. How do we make the theatre the site of the encounter? We have to interview each other about our response to these people [city-dwellers] and share details about our own lives.
We’re the material. We’re the subjects. We have to make something happen in the room: talk about each other, misrepresent each other, correct each other and get the audience to ask us questions. That’s not what we did the first time. When we studied Parkdale, we didn’t interview each other at all. We just focused on the neighbourhood, and we ended up being crappy documentarians. (original emphasis, ellipsis, Zaiontz 89-90)

Site, in the work of MDR, does not simply function as a physical location but as a politics of location: MDR uses the existing social relationships that constitute a site (such as a theatre or street corner) and repurposes that site into a space of encounter where atypical behaviour can be enacted. In Diplomatic Immunities, the documentary tradition is both adapted to a politics of location that treats sites as spaces of change, and is re-located to the city, among strangers or “city folk.”

And, finally, to the theatre, among the spectators, who, along with the material amassed in streets and neighbourhoods, becomes the site of the performance.

2. Accessing sites of cultural authenticity (docudrama). The entire exercise of artists insinuating themselves into a community, treating that community as “source material,” and then “translating” that material back into the theatre, which is used to widely disseminate “findings” to audiences, not only describes the task of Diplomatic Immunities, and documentary theatre, but the task of modern anthropology. These contemporaneous practices are not entirely separate since both involved the transposition of “exotic” (rural, remote, and in the case of anthropology, non-Western) people and places into discrete systems of representation (theatres) and knowledge (ethnographic accounts). Both documentary artist and ethnographer were searching, through their own unique systems for cultural authenticity and they were doing it by intervening or insinuating themselves into a local culture. In the case of those docudramas that focused
on living subjects, the authenticity of local cultures became an antidote for a postcolonial sense of dislocation. The docudramatists were national artists without an “indigenous” dramatic canon, so by staging living subjects and landscapes, they located their dramatic origins in present day Canadian “folk.” In a 1973 interview, former artistic director of Theatre Passe Muraille, Paul Thompson states: “In The Farm Show and Under the Greywacke, we went out into a community and tried to bring back a kind of living community portrait or photograph, filled with things that we observed and they would like to say about themselves” (my emphasis, Johns 30). For Thompson and the various Passe Muraille ensembles that stepped outside the theatre to access a “community,” in order to “bring” it “back” into the theatre, local people became sites of dramatic material that facilitated the ensembles’ creation of nation.

3. Becoming part of the urban ecology: city space as sites of representation.

In the genealogy from docudrama to site-specific work there is a shift from local cultures, as metonyms for the nation, to local cultures as metonyms for the city. Radix and Bluemouth, in particular, use streets, neighbourhoods, and purpose-built structures (infiltrating parks, hotels, and boiler rooms) to stage theatrical events that are, in and of themselves, metonyms for the city. Other contemporary performance events are implicated in this desire to “stand in” for the city, to become part of the urban ecology, by producing works that are as archetypal, ambitious, and even as wide ranging and massive as the city itself. Artistic and activist initiatives at the grassroots level, such as Spacing magazine, the uTOpia publications through Coach House books, [murmur], Newmindspace, as well as municipal and corporate sponsored events, such as Nuit Blanche and Live with Culture are all examples of cultural acts and activities that attempt
to be synonymous with the city rather than simply reflect upon it.\textsuperscript{28} Instead of remote locales and locals, audiences experience landscapes (streets and neighbourhoods) that are “already known” or familiar to them but are defamiliarized through performance, publications, Situationist style events, festivals, and so on.

In Bluemouth’s 2002 production, \textit{Lenz}, a collectively created, interdisciplinary production performed at the formerly run-down Gladstone hotel, in Toronto, Bluemouth did not simply implicate the city into the performance through text, sounds, and gestures but implicated its performance \textit{into} the city. Unlike attending a performance at a playhouse, the spectators of \textit{Lenz} entered a space of representation whose primary purpose was as a functional—and contested—part of the west end streetscape. When audience members arrived at the Gladstone, they assembled in the lobby where they were given colour-coded keys. Each colour had a different combination of rooms and floors so that the theatrical scenarios, which consisted of a film installation, choreography, and monologue, could be witnessed in varying orders (thus the audience’s “stay” at the hotel was not confined to one room but to a combination of rooms and floors). Lucy Simic, co-artistic director of Bluemouth, describes why creating a theatrical site in the city rather than outside or apart from it not only differentiates it from performances in the playhouse but also makes the performance itself synonymous with one’s experience of the city:

We choose locations that are a functioning part of the city’s landscape, locations people have walked by and wondered before they came to the show and may continue to walk by long after the run. When someone tells me, ‘I walked by the Gladstone Hotel and it reminded me of your piece’ (referring to \textit{Lenz}) it means the work has become embedded in the \textit{life memory} of that location and is integrated into the location’s history. Although I may walk by a theatre and remember a show I’ve seen there, the theatre remains a theatre, fulfilling its
 Whereas a park, a porn theatre, an old hotel or a funeral parlour remains haunted by the works performed there. (Bluemouth Inc., “Please Dress Warmly, original emphasis, 17)

Simic’s combination of the words “life” and “memory” are particularly relevant in relation to the Gladstone hotel. When Lenz debuted, spectators traveled to a place—a section of the Queen West neighbourhood where the hotel is located—on the cusp of social, economic, and architectural change. At the time of the performance, the hotel was in serious disrepair and its occupants (many of them elderly, suffering from drug and alcohol abuse, and living on the social fringes) were facing eviction due to the physical state of the building and its recent change of ownership. In many regards, the Gladstone’s state of disrepair was as much a part of its theatrical appeal to Bluemouth and its audiences as its status as “a functioning part of the city’s landscape.” To search out those sites that show the scars of history, in spite of a culture obsessed with the confinement of history to memorial sites and institutions, exemplifies the kind of city Bluemouth chooses to implicate itself within and stage.

**Environmental Theatre**

While Bluemouth performs forgotten and repressed city histories as in Lenz, they also replay a formal—environmental—history through their scenographic choices and flexible actor-audience configurations. For good reason, the historiography of site-specific theatre frequently hinges on the emergence of environmental theatre in the United States, in the late 1960s and early 70s. It is assumed to be the “natural” precursor to site-specific theatre because its scenographic approaches have carried over almost intact to contemporary site-specific performance groups such as Bluemouth and Radix. Many of these approaches are outlined by Richard Schechner, founder of the
environmental collective, The Performance Group, and academic guardian of the environmental theatre movement, in his article, “6 Axioms for Environmental Theater,” which formed the basis of his 1973 text, Environmental Theater (expanded and revised in 1994). The very first line of the essay, and first axiom, offers a way of analyzing performances in non-traditional venues. It states that all the material conditions connected to the production or event such as “audience, performers, text (in most cases), sensory stimuli, architectural enclosure (or lack of it), production equipment, technicians, and house personnel (when used)” should be taken into account when performing or analyzing a work (41). He places these elements in a spectrum or “continuum of theatrical events.” On one end of the spectrum is “Impure; life” and includes public events and demonstrations. On the other end of the spectrum is “Pure; art” and includes traditional theatre. (Happenings and environmental theatre are said to fall in the middle.) Schechner’s continuum between the “pure” and “impure” demonstrates that the story of site-specificity—particularly that point in the narrative where artists have infiltrated the everyday site to the extent that distinctions between the representational and the real destabilize—belongs to the larger, on-going story of the modern avant-garde. It is a story that centres on how far one can test the limits of the distinction, “representation.” But as a purely formal history of types and uses of space (Schechner’s essay outlines types of theatrical space, visual focus, and actor-audience proximity), the six axioms and theatrical continuum repress an ethical problem in environmental and site-specific performance that can be summed up in a question posed earlier in this chapter: Who benefits from the theatrical reinvigoration of everyday, purpose-built places?
A characteristic that divides environmental and site-specific theatre, and thus shows who benefits from the reinvigoration of everyday place, is company organization. The environmental movement is notable for its messianic and fascistic personalities who claimed to work collaboratively, but like Schechner, organized, wrote, and directed the performances and thus led the reinvigoration of place through their artistic visions. For this reason, environmental theatre bears most directly on artists and companies, in English-language Canada that were contemporaneous with the movement itself—the “older” Canadian vanguard such as R. Murray Schaffer and Hillar Liitoja. Both Schaffer and Liitoja exemplify the environmental movement more faithfully in company organization and ideology than contemporary site-specific companies.\textsuperscript{31} (Schaffer’s productions, in particular, have reflected the multidisciplinary movement that expressed universal outlooks through his adaptation of non-Western rites and rituals into environmental epics.\textsuperscript{32}) While the rites and rituals of environmental theatre were supposed to be collectively transformative and lead to a trans-cultural reinvigoration of place, environmental productions often resulted in the alienation of audiences and female performers. When actual participation in environmental work did occur it often expressed the repressive, gendered dynamic that underpinned the rhetoric of collective transformation—confrontational, even violent moments—whose marginality was rehearsed in Schechner’s own environmental literature as footnotes and extra-textual commentary by performers.\textsuperscript{33}

**The Role of the Audience in Environmental Theatre**

The creation and performance of radical spaces in environmental theatre required those people on the margins of the production, the audience, and those in the social
margins, such as female performers, to assume the roles of passive participant. Their roles as aides to the production underlined the unspoken hierarchy that made a rhetoric of collective liberation (and transformation) in environmental theatre possible. Christopher Innes explains that “group” liberation, at the heart of infamous environmental productions such as The Performance Group’s *Dionysus in ’69*, based on Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, was supposed to guarantee a non-hierarchical experience for everyone involved in the performance event. Economic, social, cultural, ethnic, and gender roles would ideally be abolished over the course of the performance through a series of scenes that were designed to act as threshold or liminal states that celebrated collective living, radical politics, and free love: “[A]ll the members of a community actively participate[d] […] which symbolically or even actually transform[ed] the status and identity of the group, depending on the degree of participation” (174). The problem was that this group transformation was underpinned by inequitable relationships in which women and audience members had to rehearse an alienated condition in order to create the “environment” of free love. The Caress scene, in *Dionysus*, for example, was “dropped after three months” because, in Schechner’s words, “[t]oo often performers—especially the women—felt used, prostituted” (*Environmental Theater* 42).

Additionally, critics, such as Stefan Brecht who recorded his experience as a spectator of *Dionysus*, write that audience control rather than collective transformation turned out to be the defining receptive experience of *Dionysus*: “He [Schechner] has directed the Group with a view to controlling the audience. A peculiar interaction between it & the Group is such that the audience can only be *responsive* & that only feebly & making a fool of itself. No stimuli for audience initiative, no opportunities for
creative participation or spontaneous interference [...]” (original emphasis and style, 162). Brecht’s comments reveal that The Group was autonomous from the interests of the audience (registered in his remark about the performers wanting to control, not interact, with the spectators).

**The Challenge to Perform: The Role of the Audience in Site-Specific Performance**

The control exercised by environmental artists on audiences through rites and rituals has been converted, in various ways, into an altogether different type of (controlled) interaction by site-specific companies. One such way, seen most frequently in the work of MDR, is giving the audience the challenge to perform. As discussed earlier, this challenge is organized through everyday social situations and scenarios that have been repurposed into “atypical encounters,” such as *Haircuts by Children* and *Diplomatic Immunities*. Similarly, Bluemouth has also converted audience control into a challenge to perform, but the challenge is organized through the framework of “play going” or play reception rather than everyday social situations. One of aims of the company (that is a constant in every production) is to surprise the audience; confound their expectations “right at the top of the show.”

This overturning of expectations frequently involves the participation of the audience, such as in *What the Thunder Said*, when several audience members are enlisted in an indoor softball game. In the work of Radix, audience control manifests itself less as a challenge to perform and more as a challenge to “facilitate.” In the *Swedish Play*, for example, audiences, roving through an IKEA store wearing headphones, facilitate the completion of the production through their reception of the “comedy” or “tragedy” soundtracks. Critic Andrew Templeton writes: “The soundtracks were designed to obstruct any sense of narrative development. They
were meant to create unease and to stop the audience from assuming its traditional role as passive spectator” (4). This push toward audience engagement aligns Radix’s work with the minimalist sculpture and painting in the white cube gallery, in the late 60s and 70s (where Kaye and Kwon locate the beginnings of site-specific art). Minimalist art threw the attention back onto the viewer by attempting to efface from the art-object any formal expectations (i.e., composition, naturalistic or conceptual representation, artwork as apriori). This effacement is similar to the way The Swedish Play “obstruct[ed] any sense of narrative development” by denying the “theatre going” public a key expectation: a good “yarn” or story. Radix’s use of the audience as agents that facilitate and “complete” their texts therefore more closely reflects the aims of minimalist art rather than the controlled audience experiences of environmental productions. In the following section on “reorganizing spaces” we will discuss how site-specific companies like Radix not only reconfigure the role of audiences but, by challenging the stability of social positions, they also overturn how we perceive everyday spaces.

The Shift from Containing to Reorganizing Spaces

If in the late 60s and early 70s, groups of scholars, artists, and audiences circumscribed spaces, defined and outlined them like containers that could be stepped into, in order to create alternative national and social realities, then treatments of space have since shifted to the temporary invasion and reorganization of already existing spaces.35 Contemporary companies such as Radix, MDR, and Bluemouth are implicated in this shift. All three groups occupy already existing sites with the view to temporarily establish theatrical ones. This involves treating space as a set of socially constructed relationships where everyone (their characters/roles, audience, bystanders) and
everything (site, city) function as a point of theatrical encounter. Within these encounters cultural norms are not only critiqued but they are regularly unanchored from the very qualities that make them neutral.

Radix’s productions under co-artistic directors Paul Ternes and Andrew Laurenson have repeatedly used the social relationships that are constituted in the theatre and in everyday sites, to challenge the neutrality and functionality of cultural norms. Their 1999 and 2000 productions *Box* and *Box*², directed by former Radix co-artistic director Stephen O’Connell (founder and co-artistic director of Bluemouth) were performed at run-down diners in Vancouver and Toronto. The production had the performers, with the exception of one actor who played a customer who busks outside the restaurant, take on the positions of a busboy, waitress, and manager, and had the audience take on the roles of diner customers. But rather than use the roles of busboy, waitress, and manager to reinscribe the authenticity of their surroundings (stage a naturalist production), Radix’s production challenged the functionality of their lower working class positions and made the dialogue that would conventionally occur between servers and customers, as well as the “operation” of the restaurant itself, secondary to songs, movement sequences, and non-linear text. In “Scene Nine: Doris Day Dance Break,” the ensemble turned their standard tasks (serving food, eating, cleaning, etc.) into highly stylized gestures that pushed the diner out of the realm of conventionality and neutrality and into the realm of theatricality:

PHIL [diner manager], DORIS [waitress] and ALBERT [busboy] begin a dance sequence that moves throughout the diner, perhaps dishing out slices of pie to some of the customers. The movement is a mixture of repetitive diner tasks and
the bizarre; DORIS waltzes with a mop, JIMMY [customer] stirs a massive bowl of porridge, PHIL freezes at the cash register […] (114)

The same roles or jobs that are used to keep the diner running are reorganized, as each character uses the objects that define their roles (the workers engage with their instruments of labour and the customer, Jimmy, with his meal) in ways that do not conform with their intended uses. The characters’ reuse of the objects shifts the theatrical situation into what the script calls “out of diner reality” (111). Additionally, the production reorganizes the role of the audience as physically distanced viewers by superimposing the role of diner customers onto spectators, and scenographically integrating them into the event by positioning them in the diner booths and stools.36

In contrast to the environmental vanguard, which created spaces outside the everyday through the appropriation of non-Western traditions, Radix occupies an already existing set of cultural practices (that is banal and occurs in local restaurants rather than exotic, remote locales) and temporarily reorganizes its customs and operations. This temporary reorganization not only enables Box² to act as a commentary on the deadening nature of menial work in customer service environments, but to do so in the actual environment. The company uses the tools of the built environment (diners), and conventionalized cultural moments (“eating out”), as well as the tools of the theatre (audiences and performance conventions) to facilitate their cultural criticism and creation of an innovative theatrical site (“out of diner reality”) in Box².

“Out of diner reality” serves as an example of what Michel de Certeau might refer to as tactical uses of everyday space. In his seminal work, The Practice of Everyday Life, de Certeau develops concepts such as tactics, space, and place to describe how “ordinary” people reorganize everyday places by engaging in creative acts. His delineation between
space and place in “Part III: Spatial Practices,” allow us to examine how companies adapt tactics from the realm of the everyday to the realm of performance. In analyzing how artists and companies reorganize and re-potentialize everyday places we will discuss why such concepts have been so foundational to site-specific discourse.

Space and Place

This dissertation joins those scholarly works on site-specific art and performance that use de Certeau’s critical delineation between space and place. Generally speaking, space is a polyvalent unity that is constantly in motion, while place stabilizes and restricts possibilities to a definable number of choices. This delineation is often used to analyze how artists and ensembles appropriate and reorganize everyday places in order to create sites of cultural difference. One of the ways that de Certeau describes the relationship between space and place (that is valuable to site-specificity) is through the relationship between the Saussurean conception of speech (parole) and language (langue). He proclaims that: “space is like the word when it is spoken” (117). Space is where one engages in acts of “enunciation;” it is the site of dialects, slang, abbreviations, finishing other people’s sentences, and so on. In more traditional formulations, we might consider space the site of informal, everyday speech and “place” the site of “proper” language, or the linguistic “ideal” that pre-forms the individual speaker. But in de Certeau’s formulation, space and place do not exist purely as binaries but as dependent and mutually defining properties.

Other kinds of spatial “speech acts,” such as city walking, which have been widely referenced in site-specific discourse, similarly reveal the mutually constitutive relationship between space and place. In the instance of the city walker, the “lived” space
of enunciation is filled daily with turns, detours, and internal maps between “here” and “there.” But like speech, city walking is not an “inferior” version of some ideal, but a mobile and transitory act that realizes the possibilities of place (brings a place into being) through its various uses. De Certeau’s spatial calling card—“space is a practiced place” (117)—not only means that the status of a “proper” place (i.e., an upscale neighbourhood, site of government, corporation, school, playhouse, gallery, etc.) depends upon spatial practices for realization but that place itself is constituted through spatial acts. In this way, de Certeau’s critical framework offers a way of evaluating site-specific performance through the constant transformation, movement, and play of spatial practices. Andy Houston writes: “In every site-specific or environmental theatre project, the artist must spend a lot of time walking around experiencing the site; trying to gain some insight into its inhabitants, its workings, its reality, but also trying to imagine how it might possess a life not yet realized” (“The Third Space” vii). De Certeau’s critical delineation thus underlies the project of the companies in this study: to expose the instability of “proper” places in order to foster cultural difference, contested commentaries, and formal experimentation. In a period defined by what anthropologist Marc Auge calls “non-places,” pre-fabricated sites and exchanges designed solely for temporary occupation and interaction, creating spaces of cultural difference is more pressing than ever. But it has also become an increasingly complex task, not least because place—or “non-place”—can no longer be defined through the “proper.” The sites of proper places are now defined by their generic rather than their specific qualities. As a result, the companies in this study have necessarily reversed de Certeau’s spatial calling card in their performances, so
that the project of site-specific work has become a matter of transforming and endowing the hair salons, IKEAs, and non-descript warehouses with specificity.

Tactics

Specificity, as Houston notes, is how a place becomes populated with “a life not yet realized.” And in the context of de Certeau’s study, specificity is authored by everyday citizens. Or, more precisely, “users” or tacticians. Three characteristics of tactical behaviour—invisibility, unknowability, and collective operations—can be said to overlap with site-specific staging practices. These tactics model how the specificity of the everyday opens up expressive possibilities for audiences and performers alike. Analyzing how tactics are adapted to performance first necessitates explaining how they operate in the realm of the daily:

Tactics are invisible. Tactics are “invisible” actions carried out by individual subjects while in the throes of daily life. De Certeau contends that tactics are a response to the centrality that vision holds in Western culture: “[O]ur society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey” (xxi). But beyond the pervasiveness of visual culture as a measure of all things, specifically how successfully a citizen can exemplify consumer culture, is the use of vision as an instrument of discipline. Western culture has become a “grid”; a complex network of surveillant technologies, procedures, and institutions that mediate how citizens behave. Without recourse to an alternate space or heterotopia in which hierarchies are suspended, subjects must engage in invisible acts or tactics as a mean to subvert the constraining orders from which they cannot escape. Tactics occur when we are in the midst of everyday operations: the time-sensitive
determination to make a detour while walking, infuse a conversation with slang, or add a new spice to a recipe are all tactical expressions that use dominant systems (i.e., city infrastructure, supermarkets, language) in ways that innovate and reconfigure them. The subject is not reduced to systems of consumption and control but uses those systems to facilitate temporary, non-localizable moments of creativity. That is why de Certeau refers to tactics as an “art” (rather than a codified system) where citizens constantly insinuate their inventive acts (their cultural difference) into hegemonic structures.

**Tactics are unknowable to their “users.”** If tactics are practices that elude—and constantly transform—hegemonic structures of consumption and control, then they are equally elusive to those citizens who carry them out. The inventive acts that users commit do not register as “insurrections” against dominant structures because they are simply considered different “ways of operating,” or “ways of using” (30) the streets, dwellings, markets, and language that they inhabit. And because these “ways of using” are not autonomous operations, a tactic “does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight and self-collection […]” (emphasis in original 37). A tactic cannot accumulate knowledge because it has no place—“the space of the tactic is the space of the other” (37)—it is a temporary and provisional act that is context-specific to everyday operations. Because tactics are invisible they cannot register as knowledge in the systems of visual culture which measure and control activities through observations, images, and words. Thus users are blind to their own inventive acts.

**Tactics occur on the level of the individual but reflect collective “ways of operating.”** In his introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau foregrounds his study by stating that his focus is not on the individual but on how the individual
expresses collective practices: “[E]ach individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of […] relational determinations interact” (xi). He further explains that he is not interested in the “authors” of tactical acts, the operations of individual users, but on the different ways of operating itself. The effect of privileging the collective over the individual is made clear in his chapter “Walking in the City,” which opens by describing crowds of city walkers in Manhattan who blindly author temporary “urban texts” through their individual routes, detours, and cutting-across. De Certeau demonstrates that it is through the collective practice of walking that pedestrians create (and recreate) the city: “Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these “real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city”’’ (97). The individual user unknowingly facilitates the “larger” collective practice of shaping and reshaping a place.

**How Site-Specific Companies Adapt Tactics**

While de Certeau uses tactics—invisible, unknowable, and collective operations—to describe the “art” of quotidian practices such as walking, talking, and cooking, tactics can also be used (and adapted) to describe another “art,” the art of site-specific performance. One of the facets of tactical operations that is adapted in site-specific performance is the transformation of tactics from invisible and unknowable operations to visible and knowable ones. Because this “art” is representational, belongs to the realm of performance, tactical operations cannot avoid exposure from vision nor can they remain unknowable to their users, performers and audiences alike. To represent or depict people, things, and environs is to throw one’s self under the spotlight and engage in extra-daily acts (i.e., formal conventions such as line delivery, rhythm, pacing,
beginnings and endings, and so on). Equally, to watch and hear the depictions of other people and situations, to create meaning from what one sees and hears on stage, is also an engagement in extra-daily acts that relies on “reading” the show for pleasure, meaning, and identification. But how does a tactic remain “tactical” once it is exposed? One way to consider such tactics is to overlap the language of performance and the language of de Certeau rendering invisible tactics “performative” and visible tactics “theatrical.”

Michael Sidnell’s definition of performativity as “the quality which in its ingenious form, actor-training seeks to sublimate” (98), conforms closest to an infiltration in proscenium arch theatre. When performative acts occur they usually take the form of unaccounted for disturbances such as a subway rumbling underneath a playhouse or ambulance sirens roaring in the distance. Stanton B. Garner refers to this external noise as the “urban repressed;” those auditory discordances that we try to ignore in order to maintain the stage illusion before us (96). On stage, mistakes such as fumbling a line of text, or tripping over a piece of scenery, are the internal equivalents of external streets sounds; but they have the added pressure of professional embarrassment and must be ignored if the show is to go on. Ultimately, the view of performative acts as marginal instances that do not belong in the theatrical order differentiates them from the social and political concerns of tactics. However blind, tactics are not mistakes but attempts to fashion a creative ethos within the homogenizing constraints of daily life. In the instance of much site-specific work, performative acts maintain the intentionality of tactical play but without its blindness. The location of the show comes to stand as a deliberate gesture rather than as a point of repression or potential disturbance. The performance site is a spatial order that at the very least is acknowledged and at the very most is actively used
by its temporary occupants (artists and audiences). Rather than repress and stamp out performative factors—from direct architectural features to indirect noises, the refuse left by past owners, or the layers of dirt, paint, and rubble on various surfaces—companies such as Bluemouth and Radix incorporate these aspects into their show. These previously bracketed-out structures, noises, and materials signal a type of infiltration in performance that does not surreptitiously enter a production but is included as a deliberate theatrical component.

Interestingly, the “location” of tactical operations for site-specific companies and de Certeau’s everyday users are the same: tactics occur in everyday places and in everyday situations. In fact, the very act of infiltrating an everyday place (a locale that is purpose-built such as a diner or hair salon) and converting it into a site of performance can only be defined as tactical, particularly if the infiltration of everyday places is combined with the overturning of everyday situations such as waltzing with a mop or having a child cut your hair. (If the company were to enter a diner or salon and simply “replay” the actions that occur in those places then space would not be reconfigured or reorganized.) This infiltration of both everyday places and situations brings us to another facet of tactics—they occur on the level of the individual but reflect and engage in collective “ways of operating.” This aspect of tactics is, for the most part, maintained in site-specific performance but there is one alteration: if the individual unknowingly engages in a way of operating (i.e., finds a new path to work), or blindly authors a group text (i.e., shapes the place of the city through her route along with other pedestrians), then in site-specific performance the spectator is deliberately used by the ensemble to facilitate the writing of the “text” and thus the creation of their theatrical site.
In *Box*, Radix constructs a simple but effective moment that is emblematic of how site-specific companies deliberately use spectator interaction to create formally innovative spaces (or “texts”) that are infused with cultural criticism. In “Scene Eight: Phil’s Big Dreams,” the waitress, busboy, and manager deliver a birthday cupcake to a customer they call “counter four:”

DORIS: *(singing)* …Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you!
DORIS and ALBERT: Happy birthday, dear counter four.
*(ALBERT elbows PHIL to join in.)* Happy birthday to you!
DORIS: *(To birthday customer.)* Make a wish. *(ALBERT snaps a Polaroid of the customer blowing out the candle.)*
PHIL: *(To birthday customer.)* That’ll be a buck for the cupcake. (113)

The spectator is positioned as a referent ("counter four") that is instantly recognizable to audiences who have witnessed or experienced the conventional birthday restaurant ritual. The scene reduces the spectator to an everyman—a figure which Michel de Certeau says is equivalent to “nobody” or “nemo” (2). Just as the medieval character Everyman is a metonymic vehicle, a nemo who performs the medieval belief system, so too is the spectator in *Box* transformed into an everyman who performs the genericity of consumer culture. In blowing out the candle and posing for the Polaroid, Radix temporarily robs the spectator of her name, her most immediate marker of identity, and locates her in a recognizable cultural moment (restaurant birthday ritual). The company’s commentary on consumption demonstrates how the individual, as a locus of collective practices, can be adapted from lone tactician to a spectator who facilitates the writing of a theatrical text.

**The Over-Emphasized Role of Dialogism in Site-Specific Discourse**

The spectator as tactical—and theatrical—facilitator highlights one of the central truisms in site-specific performance and scholarship: that site-specific performance is an
interactive or reciprocal event between performance and the site. Wales-based practitioner Mike Pearson, who has created site-specific work since the 1970s through collaborations, most famously with the disbanded Brith Gof troupe, and more recently as a solo artist, provides a substantive (and thus frequently cited) definition of site-specific performance in his interdisciplinary study with Michael Shanks, _Theatre/Archaeology:_

Site-specific performances are conceived for, mounted within and conditioned by the particulars of found spaces, existing social situations or locations, both used and disused […] They rely, for their conception and their interpretation, upon the complex coexistence, superimposition and interpenetration of a number of narratives and architectures, historical and contemporary, of two basic orders: that which is of the site, its fixtures and fittings, and that which is brought to the site, the performance and its scenography: of that which pre-exits [sic] the work and that which is of the work: of the past and of the present. (23)³⁸

In installing “two basic orders” within site-specific performance, Pearson establishes a dialectic between “that which is of the site” and “that which is brought to the site.” Caught in the art(ist)-site relationship, or the two basic orders that Pearson outlines, are the spectators. Like the performance event, the audience can belong to the order that is of the site, brought to the site, and, of course, oscillate in between. In the case of MDR, and their social acupuncture work, the spectator, as previously discussed, is treated as the very site of the performance. In _Haircuts by Children_ and _Diplomatic Immunities_, for example, the spectators’ presence completes the performance, and facilitates the “writing” of a culturally rebellious scenario where children, city bystanders, and spectators are positioned centre stage. In the case of Radix, spectators typically belong to the order that is imported, or brought to the site, and then promptly integrated into the overall performance event, such as the audience turned diner customers in _Box²_.

Bluemouth frequently occupies the category of oscillating between the two orders, such as in *American Standard* when a spectator shifts from witnessing the show to receiving a cut and shave from a performer.

While Pearson acknowledges that the “complex coexistence” between the two basic orders can lead to a “superimposition and interpenetration” of performance and site, it overlooks the fact that the site, or more accurately, the community in which it belongs, may not be desirous of being implicated in a dialectic or dialogue with the performers and production. So while there is little doubt concerning the role of a site in shaping the conditions of a performance event, we need first to consider if an “invitation” by the community (to dialogue) has been extended to the artist (whatever form that may take). Or, conversely, if the community has accepted an invitation by the artist to dialogue. Of course, there are performance situations where the invitation, such as MDR’s *Home Tours*, which involves a group of participants knocking on doors in a selected neighbourhood and requesting a tour from the inhabitant, is the very issue that is being contested and performed. (The inhabitant’s response, her acceptance or rejection, becomes a statement about ownership and the boundaries between public and private spaces). But in those cases where the site—not the invitation to perform in the site—is what is at stake, then without a dialogue, we risk replicating larger power dynamics in which people are “managed” and sites are treated as performance “destinations” where audience members travel in order to experience cultural authenticity.

The companies in this study demonstrate that questions of community engagement are not simply reserved for scholarly debate. Artists must confront these questions in their own process and practice. We know, for example, that groups like
MDR that engage in research-based performance, or companies like Radix and Bluemouth that develop work within a variety of different locales (and localities), must negotiate their artistic vision in the context of a community. Whether that community is constructed through ethnographic research, or forged temporarily over the course of a production, it functions as more than a convenient backdrop for the artist’s imaginary but as a site of social formation and, in the case of MDR, a site of social action. By expanding their collaborative networks and sites of performance to include more and different types of communities these companies confirm that social relations are as much a part of the object of site-specific performance as re-imagining the terrain of purpose-built sites.

The distinctive use of “off-stage” subjects and sites by groups like Radix, Bluemouth, and MDR show the ways in which performance events are shaped by historical understandings of community that are adapted and fused to contemporary critical strategies. These include the transcultural—and utopic—frameworks of docudrama, heterotopia, and environmental theatre as well as the re-use of de Certeauian tactics, and, more recently, contemporary “spacing” movements in cities across North America. The foundational discussion on site-specific performance outlined here indicates the shared discourses and dramaturgies of companies, and the key, constitutive role that subjects and sites play in the construction of theatrical worlds. The next chapter shifts from mapping the genealogies of site-specific performance to exploring the variety of ways in which audiences are corralled into performances and put to work as theatrical stagehands, facilitators, and co-creators.
Notes to Chapter One

1 For a definition and analysis of “site-generic” performance see Sam Stedman’s article, “The Power of Site Un-Specificity”; for an application of the term “site-based” as a “found” space see Gay McAuley’s article “Place in the Performance Experience”; for an analysis of site-specific art events that fall under the rubric of “site-related,” see Kathleen Irwin’s “Arrivals and Departures: How Technology Redefines Site-related Performance.”

2 For a definition and analysis of “site-responsive” performance see Paul Couillard’s article “Site-Responsive”; for an application of the term “site-oriented” in the context of visual art, land art, and relational aesthetics see Miwon Kwon’s One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity.

3 See Andrew Houston’s “Deep-Mapping a Morning on 3A: The Found and the Fabricated of ‘The Weyburn Project.’”

4 On their About page, Bluemouth describes their work in the following terms:
   As a not-for-profit performance collective, bluemouth inc presents continues to explore formal issues related to site-specific work: compositional counterpoint between the properties of film, movement, sound design and spoken word; a temporal installation integrated within a challenging setting; and an ongoing adjustment of the relationship of the performance to the spectator. (bluemouthinc.com/about.html)
   For a review that takes the challenges of Bluemouth’s site-specific mandate into consideration see Paula Citron’s analysis of Bluemouth’s spring 2007 production How Soon is Now?, staged in a Toronto warehouse, at Dupont and Lansdowne Ave.
   Separately, on Radix’s About page they state:
   For the most part Radix productions are staged outside of traditional venues in an attempt to highlight the theatricality of unusual sites, and to look at ordinary spaces with a heightened perception. These site-specific performances incorporate dynamic physicality, seductive visual imagery, and provocative content, often experimenting with the audience’s role within the performance. (radixtheatre.org/about/)

5 For a substantive, transitive, and intransitive definition of site-specificity see Nick Kaye’s Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation, pages 1-12; see Kwon’s One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity, page 2, in which she applies the notion of a “problem-idea” to site-specificity; see Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks’ Theatre/Archaeology, page 23, for a definition of site-specific performance that treats art and site as mutually determining factors; see Houston’s introduction to Environmental and Site-Specific Theatre, pages vii-xix, for a treatment of environmental and site-specific theatre as an act of social geography informed by the work of Edward Soja’s Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places; see the introduction to the site-specific performance issue of Canadian Theatre Review 126 (Spring 2006), “Heterotopian Creation: Beyond the Utopia of Theatres and Galleries,” pages 5-9, co-edited by Houston and Laura Nanni, for an analysis of site-specific performance as an expression of heterotopic space.

6 See Kaye’s chapter, Site, in Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation, pages 91-123; see Kwon’s chapter, “Genealogy of Site-Specificity,” in One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity, pages 11-32; see Susan Leigh Foster’s “Walking and Other Choreographic Tactics: Danced Inventions of Theatricality and Performativity”; see Suzanne Lacy’s edited volume, Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art; see Grant Kester’s introduction and first chapter, “The Eyes of the Vulgar,” in Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art, pages 1-49.

7 See Michael Kirby’s Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology; see Allan Kaprow’s Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life.

8 See Richard Schechner’s Environmental Theater.
9 See Bluemouth Inc. “Please Dress Warmly and Wear Sensible Shoes”; see Radix’s Box²; see O’Donnell’s “Home Tours”.

10 In City Stages: Theatre and Urban Space in a Global City, Michael McKinnie writes:
Fordism, as its name implies, arrived when the assembly line became the dominant method of organizing a production process for the purposes of mass-producing standardized commodities. Fordism denotes a system of economic production organized on the basis of routinized, manufacturing labour, where international trade occurs largely between Western nation-states. In most Western countries, this period stretched from the 1920s to the late 1960s. Post-Fordism […] occurs when international capital floats freely across national borders, structuring production, labour, and trade according to the needs of transnational financial speculation. (7)

11 See David Harvey’s The Condition of Postmodernity; see Edward Soja’s Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions. See also Michael McKinnie’s edited volume, Space and the Geographies of Theatre for an anthology that contextualizes English-Canadian theatre through the framework of cultural geography.

12 See Houston and Nanni’s introduction to CTR 126, pages 5-9; see Pearson and Shanks’ reference to heterotopia as a practice of cultural hybridity in Theatre/Archaeology, page 28.

13 See Bluemouth Inc.’s “Please Dress Warmly and Wear Sensible Shoes.”

14 This quote from Kwon explains the difference between the role of space in the gallery and the role of space in site-specific art. Her reference to the traditional role of the art gallery as a “blank slate” where art is inserted bears directly on the traditional role of the playhouse and stage as an “empty” space.

15 The double reality of the IKEA sets and The Swedish Play’s scenarios reinforces Mike Pearson statement that “[S]ite-specific performance recontextualizes […] sites: it is the latest occupation of a location at which other occupations — their material traces and histories — are still apparent” (Theatre/Archaeology 23).

16 Theatrical space outside the playhouse has a seductive quality because its status as an institutional and traditional activity is no longer visible. This lack of visibility makes it appear as if one has separated oneself from the institution and its practices simply by separating oneself from the physical environment. But can a shift from representational to non-representational space challenge the dominant functions that are associated and inscribed within the playhouse? Of course, a change in location cannot efface training, funding structures, gender and cultural differences, but a change in locale (to a functional place) does force company members to reconsider standard approaches to theatrical space, audience configuration, and as Radix’s Swedish Play demonstrates, approaches to plot and narrative.

17 In her introduction to The Archive and the Repertoire, Diana Taylor writes:
From the wing commonly referred to as the ‘dramaturgical,’ anthropologists such as Turner, Milton Singer, Erving Goffman, and Clifford Geertz began to write of individuals as agents in their own dramas. Norms, they argued, are contested, not merely applied. Analyzing enactment became crucial in establishing claims to cultural agency. Humans do not simply adapt to systems. They shape them. (7)

18 Debord’s “Theory of the dérive,” a short piece published for the Situationist International journal, provides guidelines for how to engage in walks throughout the city as a means to actively fragment consumer society or what he calls “spectacle space”; the ‘untitled event’ references the 1952 interdisciplinary piece staged by John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and others at Black Mountain college, and is seen as one of the definitive precursors to 60s environments and happenings; and the docudrama that disputes government policy references the work of the Newfoundland Mummer’s Troupe who traveled to Gros Mourn to stage a work that depicted the community’s response to stop the federal government’s resettlement and establishment of a national park.
See Victor Turner’s *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play.*

In an interview, former artistic director of Theatre Passe Muraille, Paul Thompson states the purpose of ensembles immersing themselves in remote and rural communities:

I keep talking to the actors about texture work because one of the things that is missing in Canadian theatre in general is an identifiable base for the characters. Instead, there’s a kind of general base and you see too much of what I call movie-acting where, for example, if you want to do a small town character, everybody’s trying to be Paul Newman in *Hud* instead of going out to a small town and sitting around in the corner drug store, finding out how people really are there, catching their rhythms and building off that. (Johns 30)

See Denis W. Johnston’s *Up the Mainstream: The Rise of Toronto’s Alternative Theatres.*

In *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada*, Alan Filewod writes: “The Canadian documentary tends to document experience rather than facts, and the actor generally has a first-hand relation to the material of the play” (17).

See my full interview with O’Donnell, “Urban Research, Collective Report, Audience Encounter: Darren O’Donnell discusses the benefits of Talking to Strangers in *Diplomatic Immunities.*”

This adaptation and re-location of the documentary tradition as a politics of place resonates with Richard Sennett’s (empathetic) articulation of cities and citizens in *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*. Through the lens of sympathy and empathy, Sennett puts forward new models of social relations within cities the prioritize difference. He explains that while sympathy arises out of shared moments of mutual trust, that “deny moral value to difference” (230), empathy arises out of the recognition of, and need for, difference. Sennett proposes that empathy can be used to model an ethical relationship between self and other that encourages “disorder.” *Diplomatic Immunities* expresses this model of difference by deliberating seeking an encounter with the other that is disorderly and productively antagonistic. Contrary to MDR’s empathetic theatre, the docudrama tradition engages in a sympathetic encounter with the other in order to create a “national portrait” that is contingent upon sameness.

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In “An Ethics of Engagement: Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer,” Anthony Downey outlines the link between anthropology, or more specifically, the practice of ethnography, and contemporary dialogical work:

It would seem […] that ethnography does indeed have much in common with contemporary collaborative practices and art in general: they both reify a reality that has an impact upon the viewer/reader (however unquantifiable); they involve experience and its interpretation (which, in turn, implicates the conditions of reception); and they are both apparently concerned with self-reflexive practices and aesthetic merit. In sum, both have an abiding interest in reproducing and representing experience, not to mention the distinctions (or relationship) to be had between ‘ethnographic authority’ – figured here in terms of ethicopolitical praxis – and ‘artistic authorship’ or aesthetics. (596-597)

In *Performing Canada: The Nation Enacted in the Imagined Theatre*, Filewod explains that historically, nations have defined themselves through “originary myths” that depict the trials of an emergent, pre-modern race in an “immemorial time” (2). However, in the case of “postcolonial constructs such as Canada” there exists no unifying racial mythology because its national origins are located in a “legislative act” that officially separated the colony from the British empire. Filewod explains that countries such as Canada “have been marked by recurrent crises of ‘identity’ in the absence of an enabling transhistorical myth” (2). Further, this crisis replays itself on the level of representation as theatre artists struggle to define themselves in the absence of dramatic origins.
In Collective Encounters, Filewod explains that historical and documentary dramatists in Canada have always been ideological and nationalistic: “the self-appointed task of the Canadian historical dramatist has been to promote a specific ideology […] that has been overtly nationalistic” (5).

Visit Spacing Magazine at spacing.ca; see uTOpia: Towards a New Toronto; and volume two, uTOpia: The State of the Arts: Living with Culture in Toronto; visit the [murmur] site, a project initiated by Shawn Micallef, Gabe Sawhney, and James Roussel, at murmurtoronto.ca; see Laura Nanni’s article about [murmur], “Anecdotes off the Map: Sites Archived, Revisited and Replayed in Toronto and Montreal” Canadian Theatre Review 126 (Spring 2006): 71-77; visit Newmindspace at newmindspace.com; visit the municipally-funded campaign, Live with Culture, at livewithculture.ca; see R.M. Vaughan’s “Live without Culture: An apology, on the occasion of a recent art project” in uTOpia: The State of the Arts: Living with Culture in Toronto, pages 24-27; visit Scotia Bank sponsored Nuit Blanche at scotiabanknuitblanche.ca; see Carl Wilson’s “The party line: Toronto’s turn towards a participatory aesthetics” in uTOpia: The State of the Arts: Living with Culture in Toronto, pages 324-334; see Laura Levin’s “TO Live with Culture: Toronto and the Urban Creativity Script.”

The company also performed along the buried Garrison creek, in Toronto’s west end, which became the map for their ambitious, award winning, 2003 trilogy, Something About a River.

Schechner’s six axioms include: 1. The theatrical event is a set of related transactions; 2. All the space is used for performance; all the space is used for audience; 3. The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in ‘found’ space; 4. Focus is flexible and variable; 5. All production elements speak in their own language; 6. The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of the production. There may be no text at all.

In The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning, Ric Knowles describes how Schaffer and DNA artistic director Hillar Liitoja purposely sought out the modernist American vanguard tradition to which environmental theatre was connected. Liitoja apprenticed with director Richard Foreman of Ontologic-Hysteric; and both Liitoja and Schaffer adapted and subscribed to the writings of modernist poet Ezra Pound.

See Schaffer’s The Princess of the Stars in Environmental and Site-Specific Theatre, pages 13-21.

See footnote fifteen in “6 Axioms,” and actor Ciel’s extra-textual comment, in the non-paginated Dionysus in 69, about an audience member literally “swiping” at her naked body during the show.

This quote is from Stephen O’Connell. He is specifically referring to the opening scene of What the Thunder Said, remounted as part of the 2006 SiteLines Festival, in lower Manhattan:

The opening gesture also seems to have taken on a greater importance in most of our work. It is important and useful to the collective to somehow disorient the audience at the top of the show in order to prepare them for an experience that right off the bat says, ‘this is not a conventional piece so all bets are off’. (O’Connell e-mail).

See Anthony Vidler’s Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture.

Radix’s “pre-show” directions for Box² demonstrates how they navigated ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ orders before the audience had even arrived:

Pre-show, JIMMY plays guitar outside the diner, busking for change. He appears to have nothing to do with the show. DORIS, ALBERT, and PHIL work in the diner, in character, greeting and serving the audience, the customers. The diner is operating as normal; some customers may be in the diner already and it should be explained to them that a performance is coming up and they are welcome to stay but will have to buy a ticket fifteen minutes before show time. (bold in original, 110)
In the following passage from Auge’s 1992 study, *Non-Places*, he describes the types and scales of non-places:

A world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity); where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral […] (78)

It is important to note that this understanding of site-specificity emerged from Pearson’s work within the local performance culture of rural Wales. Since the early 1970s, Pearson has staged (and continues to stage), multidisciplinary site-specific works in Wales that address the cultural politics of place through myth, history, and personal stories.

*The Weyburn Project* by Knowhere Productions is an example of a sustained engagement with the site and its former workers. See Andrew Houston’s “Deep-Mapping a Morning on 3A: The Found and the Fabricated of ‘The Weyburn Project.’”
CHAPTER TWO
Site-Specific Spectators: Stagehands, Facilitators, and Co-Creators

We know in any case that recent architectural theory has begun to borrow from narrative analysis in other fields and to attempt to see our physical trajectories through [...] buildings as virtual narratives or stories, as dynamic paths and narrative paradigms which we as visitors are asked to fulfill and to complete with our own bodies and movements.

— Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (42)

Spectators perform a unique set of roles in contemporary Canadian site-specific performance. They may find themselves holding props, touring through a home or business, slow dancing with a stranger, or fielding questions from fellow audience members. Whatever their role in creation or performance, the self-conscious inclusion of spectators into the event marks a convergence between the traditionally distinct space of the audience and that of the artwork. The implications of this spatial convergence are three-fold: first, the spectators’ intervention into the artwork extends their role, so that their traditional position as witness and interpreter diverges to include that of stagehand, facilitator, or co-creator; second, as participants in the performance, site-specific spectators often function as both the “sight” of artistic attention and the physical “site” of the performance (in some productions and events, spectators thus serve as the equivalent of an “animate” mise en scène); third, as a corollary of being propelled into the spotlight, audiences are regularly treated by practitioners as both composition and content. In short, certain site-specific performance contexts compel spectators to perform “double-duty”: audiences retain their traditional role as spectators but have the added responsibility of labouring as aides to the performance. Using a mode of analysis (and subject position) I call bifold spectatorship, this chapter examines how audiences become workers in site-
specific performance contexts. The labour that spectators undertake folds them into the ephemeral terrain of the performance so that they are both in and of the theatrical world. As participants who witness and forge the event, bifolding spectators help stage theatrical encounters where cut and dried distinctions between subject and object are challenged, become a site of play, and, in some instances, dissolve.

Examining the ways in which spectators are pleated into the event raises questions about how contemporary artists remap the dynamics of reception. What conditions must a company establish in order to transform spectators into both witnesses and facilitators of the stage action? How, for example, does a spectator get “cast” into the action—become a “doubled” subject—in a way that not only comments upon but constitutes the performance event? What does the immersion of the audience as witness-participants signal within the context of a given performance, site, or to those subjects simply passing by, external to the action? What does being “part of the show” add to the piece and, by extension, the experience of reception? And what kinds of communities (however temporary) are forged in the process of participation? Other questions directly concern dramaturgy in “spectator-specific” contexts. How do artists choreograph conventionally immobile spectators into a portable collective? How can the “bodied space” of the audience dramatize the theatrical worlds and commentaries of artists? And how can physical contact between spectator and stage be used to rattle the binaries of subject and object, self and other?

Drawing upon the work of Bluemouth, Radix Theatre Society, and Mammalian Diving Reflex (MDR), I will tackle these questions through four case studies that spotlight the spectator as a bifolding participant. Beginning with “The Stagehand:
Spectators, Frames, and Opening Gestures,” this chapter examines the work of Bluemouth, and their original, collectively-created production, *What the Thunder Said*, first produced in Toronto, in 2003, and remounted, in New York City, in 2006. Bluemouth, in both their initial production and subsequent remount, devoted considerable pre-production time to devising openings that folded the audience into the dramatic action of *What the Thunder Said*. Co-founder and co-artistic director, Stephen O’Connell, refers to play openings in Bluemouth productions as the “opening gesture.”

Play openings are generic formal structures that extend across companies and play genres. However, the attachment of a “gesture” to an “opening” implies a dramaturgy that is particular to Bluemouth (and signals their background in, and employment of, modern dance). While the “opening” represents a formal initiation into a representational space, the “gesture” functions as a hail, an interpellation. It is a signal to audiences to respond in a way that extends beyond interpreting the action to that of assisting, facilitating, and co-creating the stage action. The opening gesture in *Thunder* is established through the use of frames that spectators are requested to hold, peer into, crawl through, dismantle, and even find themselves temporarily enclosed within. This engagement with frames in *Thunder’s* opening establishes a bifold spectatorship that, in the 2003 premiere production, is used to comment on the *limits* and *limitations* of the stage frame; and in the 2006 remount is used to allude to film, photography, and literature that concern “entrances” into imaginary worlds.

Putting spectators to work as stagehands who aid in constructing fictive worlds positions the audience as animate tools rather than actualized players. Even companies such as Mammalian Diving Reflex, which strive toward what they term as “aesthetics of
“civic engagement”—a practice that puts audiences and other “off-stage” subjects at the centre of the performance as participants—do not forfeit their artistic autonomy to spectators. Their rhetoric of audience enfranchisement lives in an uneasy tension with their performance events which limit the role of audiences to that of facilitators and co-creators.

In this study, the myriad ways in which MDR, Radix, and Bluemouth reel the audience into formal networks is described by adapting the language of the “casting call.” In “Casting Calls: Site-Casting, Miscasting, and Central Casting,” I examine how companies cast the audience into the performance event. Companies play upon the expectation that audiences will arrive ready to handle tickets and programs and so use these objects as entry points to implicate spectators into the stage action. The materials aid in the construction of a cognitive moment that signals to spectators in the following way: “You will be both the content of the stage space as well as its interpreters.” The treatment of audiences as stage elements is discussed within the context of three types of casting calls that are regularly employed by the companies in this study: site-casting, miscasting, and central casting. Site-casting aligns audiences with the purpose of the site and can be instanced in productions such as Radix’s The Swedish Play (2002) and Assembly (2007) where spectators gather in an IKEA showroom and a downtown conference room and are “cast” as shoppers and motivational lecture attendees. While site-casting links spectators and sites, the focus of miscasting is oriented solely around participants who are parachuted into parts they are clearly unqualified to possess. An example is MDR’s Haircuts by Children (first produced in 2006), which puts school-aged children (who have been provided with basic lessons on how to coif hair) in the role
of hairstylists, who then offer their cutting and styling services free to the mostly art going public. The childrens’ and adults’ proximity to and embeddedness in a miscast scenario is grounded in a receptive experience that I call *critical proximity*—one in which participants interact with and directly query the artistic expressions they witness. This examination of casting calls and critical proximity extends to central casting, which is exclusive to the work of MDR. The company regularly devises scenarios in which they search for and cast audience members, and other potential participants, who already “play” the role that is being performed in the event in their everyday lives. In *Slow Dance with Teacher* (2007), for example, a casting call was sent out by way of email soliciting teachers and professors for the event. However, the durational, all-night performance that MDR established pushed the roles of student and teacher into the realm of the metatheatrical and made them parodists of their own actions.

The dancing bodies who participated in *Slow Dance* represent just one type of organized movement that companies draw upon and spectators embody. In “Choreographing the Audience,” I examine the range of ways in which spectators are “choreographed” to move through purpose-built sites. Performance events such as Radix’s *The Swedish Play* (2002) and MDR’s *Home Tours* (2005) show how audience tours through domestic settings transform those sites into spaces of consumer critique and “group” ethnography. The everyday act of walking enables spectators to stitch together stories through the tours and detours of a big box store, a run-down hotel, and private dwellings that, in turn, facilitate complex commentaries about the relationship between public and private space.
The final case study, “Audience as Animate Site,” examines how spectators are treated as theatrical environments. Focusing once more to the work of Bluemouth, I will examine their use of the audience as *mise en scene* in the productions *American Standard* and *How Soon is Now?* What emerges in this comparison is how audience bodies can be used to reconfigure binaries such as self/other and container/content that underpin representational space. Folded into the event, the spectator is the surface and substance of the theatrical encounter. This immersion in the theatrical world marks a sensuous spectatorship in which the contact audiences make with performers, objects, and sites produces the theatrical environment.

But, first, before we analyze how a spectator becomes a bifold participant through operations such as opening gestures, casting calls, choreography, and animate sites, there remain two crucial points of contextualization: site-specific art and role play. The legacy of early site-specific art in contemporary performance is exemplified by the practice of artistic absorption, which brought the beholder into the artwork as a vital point of encounter. To adapt the words of Birgit Kaiser, artistic absorption marks “difference without entailing separation” (212). In contemporary performance contexts, what typically follows or joins artistic absorption is role play or what I identify as stagehands, facilitators, and co-creators. These supporting roles reveal how audience labour is mobilized through theatrical display.

At this juncture, I should note that my examination of site-specific spectators through the roles of stagehands, facilitators, and co-creators is not an attempt to taxonomize the work of the companies in this study, nor is it an attempt to totalize the
audience experience. Rather, it is an attempt to shed light on common practices, and take stock of dramaturgies that extend past the life of a particular production or company.

**Stagehands, Facilitators, and Co-Creators**

The most common role in which site-spectators are enlisted is that of stagehand. The treatment of spectators as stagehands highlights those instances where audience members are insinuated into the stage action as docile assistants. Spectators may be tasked with holding a prop such as a picture frame in Bluemouth’s *What the Thunder Said* or a newspaper in their one-man show *American Standard*. While traditional stagehands go about their tasks concealed (invisible aides to the theatrical world) site-specific spectators are deliberately on display. This not only makes their tasks visible but transforms their very labours into a site/sight of representation.

Likewise, facilitators may also find themselves engaging in tasks. However, their role is not limited to that of assistant or aide to the performers but includes performing in pre-scripted theatrical scenarios. For example, Mammalian Diving Reflex’s *Slow Dance with Teacher* slots spectators into a durational scenario in which they dance to “top 40” pop ballads with “actual” high school teachers or university professors. In this event, spectators are both tasked with dancing and with facilitating a critique on the unspoken power dynamics that exist between students and teachers.

Finally, in the case of those spectators who are positioned as co-creators they too engage in pre-scripted theatrical scenarios, but their participation not only fulfills the transgressive commentaries that the companies wish to stage, but also shapes the course of the event. Once again, MDR’s participant-driven events serve as an example. *Home Tours*, performed in Toronto and Calgary, has participants tour neighbourhoods and
randomly knock on doors, requesting domestic tours. The occupant, in providing a group tour of his or her home, shapes the physical and narratological trajectory of the performance event by deciding which rooms, objects, and stories they wish to share. The roles of stagehand, facilitator, and co-creator thus reveal how audiences “double” as bifold witnesses and labourers of artistic production.

This sustained study of the use of site-specific audiences as composition and content will show that bifold spectators cannot be divided from their performance contexts. The roles of stagehands, facilitators, and co-creators can be drawn upon in the space of a single show, or, the roles themselves can often blur so that spectators may juggle several parts at one time. So while it may appear constraining to categorize the complex activities of site-specific spectators, my application of these roles will in fact bring to the fore the reception practices of Bluemouth, Radix, and MDR. In doing so, it will show how these companies relate to spectators, and how these social relations function across different productions, artistic mandates, and purpose-built sites.

The Beholder in Visual Art: The Legacy of Crossing into the Space of Representation

Radix, Bluemouth, and MDR owe their treatment of audiences as composition and content to the emergence of site-specific art in the late 1960s and early 70s. Critics such as Miwon Kwon and Nick Kaye explain that early site-specific art—which Kwon explains includes “land/earth art, process art, installation art, conceptual art, performance/body art” and so on (13)—was indivisible from its surroundings. As a result, if viewers wanted to behold site-specific art then they had to enter the work, since vision alone could no longer capture their experience. Crossing into the space of representation, the beholder became part of the formal network of the piece. Visual art, now defined as much by the time of the beholder as the space of the work, transformed into a
contextually contingent event defined by both subject and site.\textsuperscript{6} In site-specific art, the eye of the beholder was reunited with her body, so to speak, as well as the space and time in which her body was enmeshed. The consequence of this “reunion” between eye and body was the “break-up” of the identity of the modern art viewer. This identity was premised on an all-encompassing gaze in which the modern art goer remained in control of what she saw and therefore what she experienced. Her unidirectional gaze guaranteed that she \textit{absorbed} the artwork into her domain. Site-specific art, in contrast, derails the stability of the subject by dissolving the boundary between beholder, form, and the context in which the piece is produced. Rather than absorbing the work, in site-specific art, the beholder becomes absorbed \textit{into} the work.\textsuperscript{7}

The work of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s \textit{Discours, figure} is useful for the ways in which it articulates oppositions such as art and beholder as \textit{figural} encounters that do not stall at contradiction but foster what Bill Readings calls “co-presence” (16). As Readings explains in \textit{Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics}, “the figural opens discourse to a radical heterogeneity, a singularity, a difference, which cannot be rationalized or subsumed within the rule of representation” (3). By destabilizing the opposition between sign and referent, art object and viewer, artistic expression is pried open as an encounter with difference (the figural) that cannot be reduced to the representable. Those spaces and subjects previously thought incompatible now form the material for a resistant and co-creative event.

The figural viewer—part of a signifying process that “puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself” (Lyotard qtd in Readings 18)—is used by site-specific artists to elaborate a politics of representation.\textsuperscript{8} By bringing (or absorbing) the
beholder into the frame, site-specific artists frequently use the performative status of the viewer (as a subject who, traditionally, does not “signify” because she is autonomous from the artwork) to highlight the apparatus of art. As artists re-direct their labour to emphasize the conditions that circumscribe their work (be they institutional, cultural, political, sexual, or racial) they also focus on those subjects, those beholders that through their encounter with art manufacture its meanings. The consideration of the beholder, their function within the gallery, and their inclusion into the art, creates a space within the frame where the expectations and pressures that bear upon (and are encoded within) a work can be exposed, commented upon, and, ultimately, reconfigured. Thus the legacy of early site-specific work is not only defined by the suspension of boundaries between artwork, beholder, and site (namely, the gallery), but the establishment of a self-reflexive and co-creative relationship between the beholder and the frame.

The Stagehand: Spectators, Frames, and Opening Gestures

The entry of art goers into early site-specific art essentializes the double duty of the contemporary site-specific spectator as interpreter and doer of the action. Parallel to the site-specific art goer and their co-creative relationship with the frame is the emphasis paid in theatre and performance studies to the relationship between spectator and stage. Studies by Richard Schechner, Marvin Carlson, Susan Bennett, Ric Knowles, and others have examined how spectatorship, as both a subject position and social experience, is manufactured through material conditions that not only shape the expression on stage but the “total” experience of attending the theatre. These scholars examine the means by which we travel to the theatre, the neighbourhoods that we travel to, the amount of money we pay for our tickets, with whom we choose to attend the theatre, where we sit, as well as well as the reviews, programmes, and other paratextual materials that frame
and constrain our understanding of the event. These conditions are also fertile ground, I would argue, for the site-specific artist. In framing contingencies such as economics, geography, architecture, marketing, and criticism as stage worthy, spectatorship is internalized by companies as an element of the performance.

The “opening gesture” in the work of Bluemouth dramatizes many of these material conditions and thus stages how spectatorship is produced. It performs the critical inquiries that scholars have posed about spectatorship and turns them into tools for performance. The question, for example, about how audiences travel to the theatre becomes a site of formal consideration in several Bluemouth productions. In their 2003 premiere production of What the Thunder Said, the company arranged for transportation by way of a school bus to an unspecified location—a cavernous warehouse space in the west end of Toronto. The novel fashion in which the audience was moved en masse to the performance not only highlighted but transformed the material act of traveling to the theatre as part of the performance event. Since there was no formal seating, once the audience filed into the warehouse they stood or sat as a clump. Through the aegis of the spectator, Bluemouth turned traveling, locating, and situating spectatorship into a formal strategy.

The audiences’ entrance into Thunder stands in contrast to how an audience traditionally gathers to witness and interpret an event. Audiences make an unspoken formal agreement with artists that they will remain immobile, separate, and unobtrusive while artists engage in actions, relationships, and locales that are constructed to give the spectator full visual and auditory access to the representation. It is this well-crafted “veneer” that Bluemouth, through their use of spectators and opening gestures, regularly
punctures. Stephen O’Connell, referring to the “opening gesture” in the 2006 remount of *Thunder* explains:

> The notion of what lies beneath or behind the social veneer is obviously a motif for Bluemouth. The opening gesture also seems to have taken on a greater importance in most of our work. It is important and useful for the collective to somehow disorient the audience at the top of the show in order to prepare them for an experience that right off the bat says: ‘This is not a conventional piece, so all bets are off.’ (22)

Because convention all too easily tips into conventionality, Bluemouth deliberately scrambles the horizon of expectations associated with openings. The 2003 production, in Toronto, and the 2006 remount, in New York City, play with the assumptions that both artists and audiences “pile onto” the frame; and, furthermore, how audiences gain entry into the frame as bifold spectators.

**The “Prologue”**

In *What the Thunder Said*, the use of audiences to dramatize the expectations that are bound to the theatrical frame begins in the “Prologue” when the character, Uncle Bob, walks toward the audience carrying a small picture frame. He selects someone from the audience and asks that they hold the frame for him. Once he is satisfied that they are holding the frame in exactly the right place, he stands behind it so that it frames his face perfectly. (21)

The “small picture frame” that Uncle Bob has the spectator adjust (“in exactly the right place”) and eventually hold as he directs his lines to the rest of the audience, draws attention to two formal components that are normally concealed in performance: the apparatus of the stage and the audience. Through simple “gestures,” the use of an everyday object (picture frame) and everyday acts (walking, adjusting, holding), Uncle
Bob not only makes the semiotics of production and reception visible, but in the process of drawing attention to the tools and people that make meaning in the “theatre” he also brings them together in a novel way. The contact Uncle Bob establishes between hand and frame signals the convergence of two loci of the theatre—spectator and stage—that are traditionally distinct from one another. Folding spectators into the action at the very top of the play, the company thus unravels the binary between symbolic and non-symbolic subjects and territories.

At the same time that these subjective and spatial orders are being pleated into one another (as those who usually observe from the “outside” are brought “inside”), the company maintains an emphasis on exteriority. That is to say, those subjects traditionally “exterior” to the representation, the audience, hold the frame, and, in so doing, perform their exteriority at that moment. We can contextualize this exteriority as dramatizing what Bill Readings calls the “difference of exteriority” which is when language and locations, or in the instance of Thunder, subjects and sites, are not reduced to what they reference or designate. Rather, exteriority creates the possibility for an encounter that exceeds a one-to-one correspondence. Thus the moment of deliberately excessive significance that opens Thunder establishes a horizon of expectations in which a single gesture not only designates meaning but sets a co-creative process in motion.

**Sites, Sights, and Signs**

The choreographer of Thunder’s opening gesture, Uncle Bob, uses the interrelated set of signs and players at his disposal to allude to (and parody) a number of genres and traditions. Standing behind the “perfectly” adjusted picture frame, Uncle Bob quotes the visual art genre of portraiture. However, unlike a canvas or photograph, he is not pointing toward a referent that exists outside the frame but is positing himself as an “original.”
This “original” artwork is constructed with the help of audience members, who, in holding and beholding the frame point out his objectified status as performer. But Uncle Bob is not simply being looked at; he is also looking back at the audience and interacting with them. In spotlighting his object status as a performer Uncle Bob also brings the semiology of the stage into focus. As a performer on “stage” he is a sign within a sign system. By having the audience hold up the frame he points toward their role in constructing those signs and objectifying the player. By serving as the portrait himself, Uncle Bob both demonstrates—and parodies—how a body or an object becomes a site/sight of artistic attention.

As in early site-specific work, the boundary between art and site, or, in the case of *What the Thunder Said*, performer and spectator, is indivisible. But while the novel conditions of the performance site in *Thunder* appear to have temporarily suspended the boundary between the literal and the representational, its absence is not a guarantee of its erasure. With the assistance of a spectator, Uncle Bob assumes the role of parodist and makes the miniature “bargain basement” frame perform the work of conventional stages (the proscenium-arch theatre). The small frame reveals how even in a cavernous warehouse with no seating, no conventional stage, and so on, formal expectations are still very much at work.

It is these expectations that Uncle Bob seeks to scramble. Rather than plunge the audience into a fiction that has been constructed in advance of their arrival, he demonstrates that creating art is both a collaborative and self-reflexive process that involves spectators. His opening lines emphasize this theatrical engagement with audience members: “Here we are. The moment we’ve all been waiting for. Swelling with
potential” (21). Uncle Bob mirrors the immediate condition of the audience with the statement: “Here we are.” His reference to the here and now, and the expectation built into the opening line also alludes to the spectators’ collective journey (by way of bumpy bus ride) to the performance site. The “we” that have assembled “here” to view this show have traveled to the site as a group. The moment we stepped onto the bus our intra-city pilgrimage was absorbed into the realm of the symbolic.

However, the declarative, “Here we are,” not only simulates the present condition of the audience—ready and waiting—but it is also a theatrical tease. Uncle Bob does not follow up the statement, “Here we are” with the promised representation but with more descriptions of the audiences’ expectations: “The moment we’ve all been waiting for.” Followed by: “Swelling with potential.” The sentences do not unfold into the requisite fiction but are piled on top of one another in anticipation. Each sentence promises a flight into representation only to deliver us back into the space of the audience. The description of the audience’s present condition as spectators, the use of the small picture frame, and the unmediated contact with the spectators (directly approaching them) at the top of the show thus stages an “eternal” present rather than a fictive stage world.

Using spectators as unconcealed stagehands, Uncle Bob, beholding the presence of the audience, assesses how best to channel the untapped “potential” that stands before him. Once again, the small frame performs a symbolic function as its adjustment and readjustment represents (in miniature) the process of arriving at an artistic product. This displacement of the art onto the spectator in the opening demonstrates that the “art of making art” in the work of Bluemouth occurs as much at the site of the performance as in advance of the show. As Uncle Bob’s finicky adjustment of the frame suggests,
constructing a representation is full of trial and error. Convinced that his opening address is “too eager in […] presentation” he scraps the careful adjustment of the frame and states: “Maybe I should begin again.” The opening begins to resemble a rehearsal more than a finished product as Uncle Bob restages the moment with the help of yet another spectator:

Uncle Bob stops and walks toward another person in the audience carrying the picture frame. He selects them and once again asks that they hold the frame. Once he is satisfied that they are holding the frame in exactly the right place he continues. (21)

In roving from one spectator to the next, Uncle Bob relativizes the frame (unhinges it from its neutrality as an empty container for the art) by bringing it into contact with different spectators. Moreover, in restaging the opening, by approaching yet another spectator to hold the frame, Uncle Bob is testing the limits of the proper even as he claims fidelity to convention: “I’ve used all the proper products; followed all the proscribed procedures” (21). Such methods, like the frame itself, reveal themselves to be too “small” and reach their capacity in the undifferentiated environment of the site.

Thunder in New York City

In the 2006 remount of Thunder, the small picture frame, which makes prominent the condition of the audience as exterior to the representation, was no longer part of the opening, nor was the bus ride to an undisclosed site. The picture frame and bus ride could not be reestablished in the new venue, a stripped office space in the former AT&T headquarters, a historic landmark building in lower Manhattan. The office space turned performance site meant that audiences waited for the show to begin in the AT&T lobby.
Remarkable for its art deco extravagance, the lobby is composed of copper colored tiles, togaed goddesses gracing the ceiling, and a commemorative plaque for those fallen AT&T workers who had served in WWI. Teeming with symbolism, it stood in stark contrast to the performance site, which appears to have been gutted of any signification: a gray, dust-filled room with uneven cement floors, exposed wires, and concrete pillars that made for difficult site lines. With the facilitation of spectators, Bluemouth acknowledged this division between the gilded lobby and raw interior in performance. Adapting the concept of the frame and bus ride to the New York remount, they reversed their focus on “exterior” soundscapes, players, and sites and instantiated a series of interiors.

Frame as Enclosure, Window, and Trap Door

The raw, interior performance site, however, was not what the audience witnessed at the top of the show. In the Thunder remount, spectators do not immediately step into the space but enter something equivalent to an antechamber space, an impersonal white-walled room constructed by the company (once again, referenced in the script as part of the “Prologue”\(^\text{12}\)). As the audience crowds into space, which allows for standing room only, it becomes increasingly clear at the top of the show that a full-scale ensemble production in a room “the size of a service elevator” (21) is an impossibility.

This moment—piling audience members into an impossibly small space—has its dramaturgical basis in the initial Toronto production. Rather than initiate spectators into the theatrical order by way of an antechamber space, the Toronto production uses a small
frame. Both antechamber and frame are notable for those bodies which they can—and cannot—contain.

Fig 2.1 The antechamber space constructed by Bluemouth. (Top Left) The entrance into the space; (Top Right) Observe the grate installed in the far left corner. It is behind this grate that Second Cousin first appears and addresses the audience. (Bottom Left) The back of the ante chamber space (including the grate and stepladder). The walls were removed and used as surfaces to project images. (Bottom Right) The side panel through which Second Cousin enters the ante chamber space. Photos by Keren Zaiontz.

When, for example, Uncle Bob enters the cavernous Toronto warehouse with the small frame, which he has the spectator adjust “in exactly the right place,” his perfectionism is instantly contradicted by the fact that the rest of his body stands, rather excessively, outside the frame. The spectator-stagehand who stands unconcealed, literally holding up the field of representation, can be contrasted against those spectators in the New York remount who become absorbed into the frame. The antechamber space does precisely what the small frame in the Toronto production (deliberately) fails to do; it attempts to contain the spectator within its field of meaning. The antechamber contains a number of smaller frames that function as miniature windows and doors. Once all the spectators have filed into the room, the floodlight hanging from the exposed ceiling dims. The
character that greets the audience this time, Second Cousin,\textsuperscript{13} does not immediately enter the antechamber space but stands outside the room and peers into the space. It is the spectators who are now treated as if they are in a frame as Second Cousin peers into the space to evaluate the spectators. By shifting the focus of the theatrical space from the performer to the audience Bluemouth gets the audience to unwittingly stage its own opening gesture.

Like Uncle Bob, Second Cousin delivers the same opening lines with his face positioned behind a small frame, but rather than a picture frame he stands behind a rusted, patterned grate set high in a ceiling corner. He illuminates his face using a flashlight so that the audience witnesses a silhouette. The audience’s first “sight” of the performer is thus a collection of light, pattern, and shadow rather than a visible figure who can be witnessed in his physical totality. While Second Cousin’s light-and-shadow delivery uses the conventions of existing traditions (such as text and switching from house to stage lighting), rather than display art, the white walls display the spectators; and rather than display performers, the patterned grate obscures Second Cousin’s status as the traditional sight/site of attention. When Second Cousin eventually opens the grate to reveal his face and address the audience below, their static position within the three dimensional frame (the audience is standing, listening, waiting) becomes the spatial and textual object of his address. The spectators’ entrance into an impersonal white room followed by a display of light and shadow plays upon expectations about what (artwork) and who (performers) are traditionally supposed to appear at the site of a performance.

No sooner is Second Cousin finished his lines when he disappears from the spectators’ view and “reappears through a panel at the side of the room” (21). He stands
amidst the audience, continues his lines, and then selects a spectator, with whom he disappears through the small panel. The panel and grate operate similarly to the small picture frame in the Toronto production, but while they retain the same size as the picture frame, they are used as windows and trap doors. The frame is reconfigured so that one can literally step in and out of it and therefore move between the space of the audience and that of the performer. The frame in the opening gesture thus functions as much as a site of liminality, or space of transition, as it does a field of representation.

The company’s use of the frame as a liminal space can be read through the themes of present and absent boundaries. The frames, initially a site designed for audience and performer display (for appearance) transform into a place of shadows, where one disappears from view one moment and then reappears the next. Second Cousin extends his disappearing act to the audience when he vanishes through the small panel at the side of the room with one of the spectators. Moments after vanishing the walls are dismantled and the “raw performance space” is revealed to the rest of the spectators. As the spectator travels through a small frame (the side panel) while the remainder witness the dismantling of the large frame (the white room), the audience witnesses—and becomes part of—the “magic” of appearance and disappearance. In this “magic act,” this moment of transition from one room to the next, spectators serve as both the stagehands and the site of artistic production.

“Transitions” as Sites of Artistic Production

As stagehands of this magic act, spectators aid in the transition between lobby, antechamber, and performance site proper. This movement between “interiors” stands in contrast to the Toronto production, which transported the audience between “exterior” sites by way of (coincidentally) the Magic School Bus Company, a local bus company in
Toronto that Bluemouth rented for shows on more than one occasion. In 2003, the bus moved the audience from the meeting site at Factory Theatre, which acted as the outdoor lobby for the Summerworks Festival, to Bluemouth’s performance site.14 (Blindfolds were placed on the seats of the bus, and audiences could apply them and engage in a city-wide appearing and disappearing act.) In the New York production, audiences shifted from passengers to players. Stephen O’Connell explains the company’s motive to theatricalize the transition from lobby to performance site:

We felt like there needed to be a transition from the lobby, with its overwhelming golden Art Deco décor, before entering into the raw performance space. We also thought the [opening] gesture needed to reflect the ideas of the piece while marrying those ideas with the location we were given by the LMCC [Lower Manhattan Cultural Council]. We played around with what we thought would be the expectations of a person when you open one of those doors. We wanted to play upon that expectation and subvert it at the same time. (22)

The audiences’ physical engagement with the transition implicated them in an intertextual community—a space of cinematic and literary allusions to the “innocents” who open doors and stumble upon the extra-daily. Whereas in the Toronto production, the company used the opening gesture to mirror the condition of the audience back to themselves (creating an eternal present through a series of opening lines), in the New York production, the company used the opening gesture to insinuate the audience into a tradition where characters shift from the space of the everyday into the space of the extra-daily. The patterned grate, for example, that sits high above the audience in the impersonal white room was inspired by the Hollywood classic, The Wizard of OZ.15 When Second Cousin opens the grate and addresses the audience below he recalls the discerning munchkin who eventually lets Dorothy and her companions into the land of
OZ. The transition from the everyday into the theatrical, from Kansas into Technicolor, can also be considered a transition from place to space (from, as de Certeau describes it, the “proper” to the polyvalent). Later, the dismantlement of the walls to reveal the raw performance site evokes yet another allusion, this time to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Through their movement between rooms, the audience travels down a “rabbit hole” into an imaginary world where the materials from the everyday world, the white walls, are used as surfaces for the imaginary world to project images such as desert roads and forests. The audience is brought into a tradition of “innocents” who gain admittance into a theatrical world through their direct participation as well as interpretation.

**The “Epilogue”**

The innocents of *Thunder*, the spectators, are led out of the performance site by the same guide who admitted them into the action, Second Cousin. He ferries the audience out of the stripped office space (and thus out of the defined theatrical order) and into the final scene, aptly titled “Epilogue” in the script. However, this closing is not without its own set of “gestures.” An architectural symmetry is established between the “Prologue” and “Epilogue” as the audience is directed into another impersonal white room, this one built into the site rather than constructed by the company. Their movement into and out of the theatrical order is thus book-ended by antechamber spaces. And like the antechamber space at the entrance, the site of the Epilogue also functions as a frame that encloses the audience. While the Prologue in both the Toronto and New York productions assimilates the audience into *Thunder’s* theatrical world—an assimilation that occurs most vividly when spectators stand within, hold, or walk through frames—the Epilogue meditates on this experience of being absorbed into the action. This meditation
on audience absorption extends to include a statement on the experience of audience reception itself—its assumptions, expectations, and attendant rituals.

The “Epilogue,” much of which is quoted here, expresses the experience of spectatorship through the coded description of changing seasons. (The change from winter to spring, for example, is described as an “arrival” into a new space—“the world to come.”) This description of the seasons shifts to a statement that weaves together the themes of labour, pleasure, and reward:

SECOND COUSIN. When a bitter winter dies we celebrate, dreaming of the world to come. Not everyone has the stamina to wait for the arrival. They wish to welcome it with banners and trumpets. They don’t want to see the tedious labor involved in change giving birth to itself. It’s difficult to adjust and the rewards are imperceptible at first. We must fight for its survival. We must protect the process from reversing on itself. (56-57)

Second Cousin’s image of “banners and trumpets” references an opening gesture that is connected to the spectacle of a royal entrance. Banners and trumpets are decorous representations that are used to signal and enforce the authority of those in power. Spectacle, as Second Cousin describes it here, is both associated with ritual and hegemony. Those who are described in the Epilogue as lacking the “stamina to wait for the arrival” of spring—meaning those who lack the patience to change the status quo—will be lulled by the familiar spectacle of banners and trumpets. The Epilogue is, ultimately, an anti-theatrical statement; or, to be more specific, it is against a particular type of theatre that does not involve—or ask that its audiences engage in—“stamina,” “labor,” and “change.” It should be noted that in contrast to the familiar spectacle of “banners and trumpets,” change is described as birth, as a “tedious labor.” Second Cousin thus brings the antipodes, spectacle (banners and trumpets) and reality (labour)—or
theatricality and performativity—into focus at the close of Thunder. One of the intents here, in the Epilogue, and in all of Thunder, is to demonstrate that spectacle and reality are ultimately at their most potent when they converge in restless tension with one another.

This convergence of spectacle and reality leaves little space for ease and passivity. It is a convergence that, to borrow Second Cousin’s words, is “difficult,” “imperceptible” to quantify, and calls upon us to “fight” for and “protect” its “survival.” It is this very convergence between two distinct orders that Second Cousin, in his final lines, manages to align with Aristotelian drama:

SECOND COUSIN. I wonder if I’m living for an improbable future and giving up on the little happiness I could wring from this life. But pleasure without effort is something I question. I want to take for myself a well-earned pleasure. I want to control the reward, for fear of being rewarded something I’d loathe to repeat. I’m still working on deprogramming my acceptable responses and trying to find what lies underneath. (56)

Second Cousin’s statements about “pleasure without effort” and “a well-earned pleasure” replicates the Aristotelian dictum that theatre should “please and instruct.” The dictum, however, is here aligned with theatrical innovation, not, observing a set of rules, or, as is stated in the Prologue, observing a set of “proper and proscribed procedures.” The hope is that the “well-earned pleasure” of innovation will prevent the repetition of something that Second Cousin would “loathe to repeat,” namely, habit and formula.

Fear of repetition in the context of the theatre, a medium which depends upon repeatable acts in order to instantiate itself is, of course, ironic. But for Second Cousin, repetition is both linked to formula (“acceptable responses”) and a particular type of appearance that obscures “what lies beneath.” This conveniently points us back to a quote
by Stephen O’Connell, used earlier in this chapter, in which he states that “the notion of what lies beneath or behind the social veneer is obviously a motif for Bluemouth.” Appearance, here, in reference to “social veneers” is disarmed by Bluemouth through performance.

Once spectators have filed into the small room in the “Epilogue,” Second Cousin, standing amidst the audience, recruits those nearest to him to use their hands, arms, and shoulders to raise him above their heads where he pauses in silence, arms spread eagled. This imitation of flight, normally presented on stage as a trick of appearance (think Peter Pan and the awe induced by watching characters fly across the stage) is constructed by the audience who not only see the “wires” that support Second Cousin but are the wires. Following this physical gesture and his speech, Second Cousin leads the audience out of the room and onto the street. The company then meets the spectators and takes their curtain call on the sidewalk. Having traveled through a set of interiors (the lobby, the performance site), spectators arrive at a curtain call that projects them back into an exterior landscape, the “outside.”

**Casting Calls: Site-Casting, Miscasting, and Central Casting**

As witnessed in Thunder, using spectators to break with convention is rarely improvised or left to chance. Because audiences are deliberately called upon to construct —and comment upon—an artwork, their status resembles that of an animate compositional tool. However, unlike other performance devices, audiences cannot be galvanized (used to compose the event) in advance. Companies must conceptualize how the interaction and use of the audience will unfold prior to their participation. (Spectators, in rehearsal, thus take on the role of the *spectral*, as ghosts that will take flesh upon arrival.) Furthermore, companies must find a way to signal to audiences that both their
presence and their interaction are necessary to complete the event. In order to instantiate this bifold spectatorship, I argue that an act akin to a “casting call” regularly occurs at site-specific performance events.

The assignment of role, or the casting call, does not, however, occur with an audition. Companies need not audition spectators to play the role of “spectators” since they are already well suited for the part. Moreover, rather than an idiosyncratic incarnation of a role (usually linked to a character), spectators are more closely aligned with compositional tools used by the companies than they are to autonomous performers. Their role as aides to artistic production thus puts them in a separate line of work than the artists. So how then is the audience cast into the action? The casting call can be said to occur through implicit and explicit “hails” to the audience. These hails can take the form of an object (i.e., audio headsets and nametags in Radix’s *Swedish Play* and *Assembly*) or dialogue (i.e., audiences approaching teachers in *Slow Dance*). Such materials may have links to both symbolic and non-symbolic worlds so that those same objects that canopy spectators into theatrical worlds as players also maintain their position as audience members.

**Site-Casting: The Swedish Play and Assembly**

We can locate three types of casting calls that arise in site-specific performance: site-casting, miscasting, and central casting. These frames help to describe how bifold spectatorship is produced across different companies, artistic visions, and sites in this study. Site-casting describes those instances where the audience stands in as participants for the theatrical worlds that the companies construct. Implicated in a scenario they would conventionally view and interpret from a distance, audience members perform the collective role of “spectators,” but once cast are also assigned a role that is usually
aligned with the purpose of the site. As a result, audiences in site-specific performance often double as spectators as well as shoppers, hotel visitors, conference attendees, jury members, and diner customers. Like the role of spectator, these parts represent collective rather than individual subjects.16

Fig. 2.2. The Swedish Play. Coquitlam, BC, IKEA store, 2002. A sign at the entrance informs shoppers that spectators and performers will be in their midst as participants engaging in “invisible theatre.” Photo: stills from live recording.

It is this collective function that companies like Radix seize upon in productions such as The Swedish Play. Set in a Coquitlam, BC, IKEA showroom, The Swedish Play, performed in 2002, uses artifice in order to highlight our unmediated (or “real”) consumer surroundings.17 The casting call in The Swedish Play occurs through the distribution of an audio headset which spectators don for the entire performance. Their use of the headset positions them as “spectators” even as they circulate from one model set to the next surveying the furniture like “regular” shoppers. Moreover, one can easily identify the audience as part of a formal network because they are spatially distinct from regular shoppers in the way they travel as a group, stand, pause, and interact with the model sets. Because the production takes place during business hours, performers on the
sets are not permitted to speak so the headsets both enable a theatrical space within the flow of the showroom and link the worlds of the spectator and performer. The headsets themselves do not relay any one recording, rather audience members tune into a low band radio station that alternates between broadcasting “comedy” and “tragedy” tours. The audio tracks are deliberately opaque and consist of “a collage of sounds and samples, including discourses on theatrical forms, post-modern theory and sound clips from old movies” (Templeton 2). The privileged position of standing outside the work, something that audio headsets usually enforce in institutional contexts such as museums and galleries, is here used to cast the audience into the role of “spectators” who are as much a point of curiosity for those shoppers passing-by as the performers who occupy the displays.18

While the spectators’ initiation into a formal network occurs through an explicit hail by way of headsets, Radix also engages audiences in implicit hails that directly reference, or are part of, the performance event. This engagement with objects related to, or part of, the production not only links audiences to the symbolic world but implicates them within the narrative. In Radix’s 2007 production Assembly, for example, first staged in a hotel conference room in downtown Vancouver, audiences put on nametags before entering the room.19 The assignment of the name tag, and, by extension, role, initiates spectators into a theatrical order that encourages “reading” the event from the perspective of an insider (in this instance, a devotee of the motivational speaking industry). Participants necessarily fold back on prior experience, or more likely cultural references, in order to fulfill acting as a participant in a motivational session. Once spectators are seated, the house lights remain on so they can see one another as fully as the performers
who make their appearance in headset mics and pressed business suits. Standing at the lip of the small raised stage, the Radix ensemble makes eye contact with each spectator in the room. As the audience bears the weight of their extended scan and earnest head nods, the purpose of the name tags becomes clear: the audience is being implicated as followers of a “self-help” movement and have arrived in search of a morale boost air tight in its promises of fulfillment and prosperity.

After meeting the gaze of each spectator, the motivational speakers announce: “We want you to feel more alive. We want you to feel more satisfied. We want you to feel like you are all parts of a whole” (Radix, Assembly 48). Each line is rhymed off by a different speaker until the sales pitch climaxes into, “Let’s Go!” followed by the arm-pumping rock-anthem, Eye of the Tiger. The Radix ensemble, rather than immediately plunge the audience into a fiction, performs a gesture similar to that of Bluemouth’s What the Thunder Said and mirrors the condition—and desires—of spectatorship back to its audience. The desire to be invigorated by art (“feel more alive”), fulfilled by its medium and message (“feel more satisfied”), and grounded in community through collective participation (“feel like parts of a whole”) point toward the horizon of expectations that often circulate around spectatorship. Because the audience is positioned as attendees of both the performance and the motivational conference, they facilitate the dramatization of a parallel between the art of the motivational speaker and the art of the theatre actor. By casting the audience into the action the Radix ensemble transforms their horizon of expectations into a site of theatricality.
Miscasting: *Haircuts by Children*

Fig 2.3. *Haircuts by Children* postcard. “In the future, every child will be given a pair of scissors and invited to shape our destines.” (Left to Right) Amahayes Mulugeta, Stan Bevington, Dailia Linton. Photo by John Lauener; design by Cecilia Berkovic.

Dramatizing—and thwarting—expectations with the help of those subjects who sit in anticipation of it not only characterizes the work of Radix but it is also the hallmark of Mammalian Diving Reflex and their social acupuncture events. These events bridge activism and art, occur in public places, and are participant-driven (spectators, passersby, and non-professionals function as the basis of the performance). The scenarios in which participants perform and interpret the action are often, deliberately, events in which they have been *miscast* for the part. Similar to the art of site-casting, miscasting assigns participants to roles; however, these roles are not always aligned with the intended use of the site. Moreover, participants may be tasked with performing an act that they may not be qualified to perform, such as cutting and styling hair in MDR’s *Haircuts by Children*. These on the spot, “demand” performances can be thought of as a challenge to perform. I use the word “challenge” because the spectator, traditionally a witness and interpreter in
the non-symbolic space of the theatre, is not only invited—or pushed—into the realm of the symbolic, but in instances of miscasting is given the challenge to assume the role of the professional. However, these bifold spectators automatically enter the work as a ramshackle imitator of the professional. Because their presence on stage is more curious than credible, the witness-participant who takes on the challenge to perform highlights the unspoken division between amateur and professional. Thus, when it concerns the art of miscasting, the audiences’ success or failure at being able to model the artistic activity they are assigned is precisely what is on display.²⁰

To be miscast implies a “lack”; it implies that a player is in some way unsuitable for the role (i.e., the player does not look “right” for the part). The ability of the performer (her “fitness”) is inevitably what is under question. However, MDR pushes off this notion of lack to create something altogether new. The company takes this question of performer competence—the failure of “mastering” the part—and not only uses it as a point of display but repurposes it to encourage critical distance on the part of its spectators and other participants. We understand critical distance to mean those hierarchies, divisions, and social roles that are made strange or unfamiliar when represented on stage. Because participants in social acupuncture events compose the form and content of the performance, critical distance between spectator and stage transforms into that of critical proximity.

In Haircuts, which first premiered at the Milk International Children’s Festival in Toronto, in 2006, children and spectators took centre stage in the performance event.²¹ The company trained a class of ten year-old children to cut and style hair and provide free haircuts to the public at a local salon. While the event was open to the general public, it
was programmed and marketed in festivals and thus largely attracted an art savvy crowd. A spectator could either schedule an appointment for a free cut or simply visit the salon to watch the action. O’Donnell gives a sense of the general mood of the salon: “I’d expect the scene to be relatively anarchic, with hair flying all over the place but, in reality, with kids taking the responsibility so seriously, the mood in the salon becomes almost somber. The kids focus total attention on the task at hand” (“Greasing the Glue” 4). O’Donnell’s emphasis on the (unexpected?) focus that the children possess, their dedication to “total attention on the task at hand,” is an attempt to overturn the view of children as distracted subjects, and, in the process, rattle the binary of “serious adult” and “hyper child.”

Entrusting a child to literally shape one’s personal image contests the notion that children cannot be trusted with roles or activities of any real consequence. In place of real action children are encouraged to “play” since pretending (among other things) poses no threat to the “real” world. As pretend-play crosses into the space of the real barber shop, the miscasting of children as stylists in the actual surroundings of a shop transforms private childhood play into public artistic practice. O’Donnell, in his remarkable art-activist book *Social Acupuncture* states: “Play holds abundant possibilities for public intervention, and bringing together atypical playmates also holds the potential for examining typical and problematic power dynamics” (84). Through the use of children, play or artifice is recuperated from its childish, apolitical antics and is used to demonstrate that it has the capacity to expose social relationships and roles which are accepted as universal or natural. The comedy of children cutting and styling hair is thus the comedy of *displacement*—putting children, spectators, and artists (who create,
organize, and run the event) where they don’t belong. The most glaring players in this comedy of displacement are, of course, the children. The unsuitability of their doubled role as children-stylists, the lack of fitness implied in their ability to cut and style hair, serves to magnify the position they permanently occupy in everyday life.

However, because the spectator sitting in the barber’s chair not only makes an object of herself but also becomes an audience to her own performance, the act of critical distance that is staged can be thought of as an act of critical proximity. This critical proximity has its roots in Brecht’s alienation effect (or _verfremdungseffekt_). Susan Bennett, in her discussion of how the alienation effect changed the modern stage-audience relationship, explains that _verfremdung_ is used to expose relationships, objects, and institutions that we consider natural and reveal them to be historical. By using _verfremdung_ to reveal, for example, our attitudes toward children, these assumptions are drained of their “givenness.”

While O’Donnell does not refer to the alienation effect in his writings, his work is guided by a desire to make familiar relationships both inside and outside the context of the theatre, _strange_. The exposure of power dynamics is to prepare the ground for political change. O’Donnell and producer Natalie De Vito (and former producer Naomi Campbell) are particularly committed to the political “enfranchisement of children” and young people. Social acupuncture events like _Haircuts_ are “framed as a call to allow children into the political process” (O’Donnell, “Social Acupuncture” 85). _Haircuts_ and all social acupuncture events belong to what MDR describes as an aesthetics of civic engagement: “an approach toward art-making that views the public sphere as a place of
dialogue and inspiration, and the demystification and democratization of the arts an urgent priority” (Mammalian, “Ontario Arts Council Operating Grant” 3).

An aesthetics of civic engagement requires the audiences of MDR performance events to also function as its participants. The participants’ status as amateurs, as players incapable of compelling artifice, is used to construct a deliberately miscast situation where their non-specialized activity is the focus of the display and the site of a new encounter between child and adult. However, this display also speaks to the docility of the participants who do not transform from amateurs into artists but function as facilitators who enable the performance of a socially transgressive scenario.

**Central Casting: Slow Dance with Teacher**

The stubby kid fingers and sheared tresses that compose *Haircuts* are markers of a challenge given by the company to perform. And it is the participants’ commitment to the event that constitutes the drama on display. NOW Magazine critic Ibi Kaslik confirms this view of MDR’s social acupuncture work and writes: “[L]ose your faith and the performance will die. That’s to say, the success of the show depends on the audience’s intellectual and emotional commitment” (qtd. in Mammalian, “Canada Council Operating Grant” 3). We can add to this list the participants’ physical commitment to the performance since it is their corporeal status—their position as bodies in a live event—that not only allows them to witness but complete the action.

While an aesthetics of civic engagement advocates for a democratization of the artistic process, what emerges instead is a commitment on the part of its participants to the performance (recall O’Donnell’s statement about the “somber” mood in the salon and “total attention to the task at hand”). In this final elucidation of the casting call, central casting, we examine MDR’s fall 2007 performance event, *Slow Dance with Teacher* in
which participants are cast into roles they possess (or have possessed) in everyday life. Here, two types of hails are issued: a general call for teachers, and an “on-site” call for students. In *Slow Dance*, one’s commitment to the role assigned by the company becomes a point of parody as the key facilitators of *Slow Dance*, the teachers, strain to play the part with “authenticity” even though they possess this role in “reality.”

Fig. 2.4. *Slow Dance with Teacher*. The Great Hall, University of Toronto, 2007. (Left) Photo by shun78, “nuit blanche 2” (Flickr.com); (Middle) Photo by les_bons_bons, “nuit blanche 07” (Flickr.com); (Right) Photo by Mammalian Diving Reflex.

The bodies that composed *Slow Dance with Teacher* involved two dozen high school teachers and university professors who answered a general casting call circulated through the company’s electronic mailing list: “TEACHERS wanted for a Nuit Blanche Performance. Wanted: 24 Teachers for a 12-hour performance on the night of September 29. Any kind of teacher. Sense of humour essential” (Mammalian, Email 2007). Those teachers who answered the casting call found themselves in the Great Hall. Located in Hart House, a student centre, built in the neo-Gothic style, at the University of Toronto, the Great Hall houses stately portraits of former deans and chancellors along the perimeter of its imposing wood paneled room. The Hall was just one of many rooms that had been converted into an installation or performance space as part of Nuit Blanche, an
Barbara Fischer, the curator responsible for Hart House, titled the events that took place at Hart House, _Night School_. MDR made full use of this scholastic allusion by populating its designated performance space with teachers and students.

On the surface, the insertion of teachers and students into the Great Hall does not appear out of step with its wider university surroundings. Nor is the appearance of people “slow dancing” all that incongruous either since the hall is regularly rented for private functions. But, upon closer inspection—and engagement—the “original” arrangement of the space had become magnified, made _strange_ by the company, its participants who answered the casting call, and the audiences who entered it. The portraits, normally unlit, each had their own spotlight; the dancers, which involved teachers and art goers, swayed back and forth behind thick velvet stanchions; and the hall itself reverberated with top 40 “slow dance” music. During the event, teachers approached the art goers who stood on the other side of the stanchions and solicited them for a dance. The premise behind these this all-night event was, in the words of MDR’s promotional material, “to let you do what you always wanted to do.”

The punchy tag line markets the promise—and fulfillment—of forbidden desire. And while there is not room here to address the ethically murky question of _whose_ desire is being expressed in a relationship where the teacher holds the balance of power (see chapter three), what is pertinent to this argument is the way in which the casting call, once again, uses participant and spectator bodies to flirt with real and representational orders. This flirtation, which we spoke of in terms of critical proximity between subject and role in _Haircuts_, is used by MDR to both emphasize the position children occupy in
everyday life (as inferior versions of adults), and to encourage a de-hierarchized dialogue between adult (spectator) and child (stylist). In contrast, the critical proximity that *Slow Dance* produces between subject and role is not as concerned with making what appears natural strange as it is with parodying the natural, the “original.” Through an extended, durational commitment to the role, teachers engage in mimetic shift work (each group of teachers worked in five hour shifts) that collapse the distance between the object of parody (the symbolic teacher) and the parodist (the “actual” teacher). Moreover, the participation of art goers once again signaled the convergence of referent and representation in the same subject since most of the participants were “actual” students at the University of Toronto. In *Slow Dance with Teacher*, the “original” parodies itself.

Because their participation required that they play the part, for many teachers who participated, their credentials did not signify commitment enough. For example, Andy Houston, who worked the midnight to 5AM shift, was compelled to *dress* the part: “I wore a tweed jacket and brogue shoes I have rarely worn since the days when I was a sessional instructor. I’m not sure exactly what my motivations were, but I guess I thought my costume should be in keeping with the Great Hall surroundings, or perhaps I thought, much as in the days of being a sessional instructor, this outfit might lend me a sense of credibility” (“*Slow Dance with Teacher*” 105). Houston’s focus on credibility through costume rather than academic accomplishment exposes how spectacle regularly props up the authenticity of our everyday social roles.

The strength of a spectacle like *Slow Dance* lies in its ability to organize the movements of performers, participants, and spectators with an effortlessness that borders on docility. (The dancing bodies of *Slow Dance* are so compliant or *disciplined* to
respond to the demands of the event because they are so familiar with the ritual. This organization of mass movement needs little if any rehearsal in the traditional sense because the company is tapping into an embodied knowledge that is collectively known to all who engage in it. Unlike traditional choreography performed by skilled dancers, the choreography that “students” and “teachers” perform is discursive. That is to say, it draws upon movement that preforms the subject. Like the motivational attendees in *Assembly*, the roles and movement in *Slow Dance* necessitate teacher and student to fold back upon previous experience or cultural reference to assume their parts.

**Choreographing the Audience**

The audiences’ immersion in site-specific events as interpreters and objects of artifice has a portable dimension in the work of all three companies who often choreograph the movement of audiences *through* performance sites. Bluemouth co-artistic director Lucy Simic observes that audience movement through a site is not indivisible from the piece itself: “By directing their [the spectators] movement through the performance, we are asking them not only to travel through the site, but to travel through the content of the piece as well” (Bluemouth, “Please Dress Warmly” 161). There are several ways that a company can choreograph the movement of audiences as they “travel” through a piece, and by extension, a site. An audience, for example, can flow *en masse* from station to station in a single site; their movement can be dispersed so that they surround the action; they may be asked to sit for one scene and then stand in the next; or they may be called upon to do a combination of all of the above. In order to use the mass-movement of an audience to theatricalize a space, spectators engage in, to borrow the words of Elin Diamond, “a doing and a thing done.” In site-specific spectatorship, “the doing” is the ritual of attending the theatre—the ritual makes the
subject into a spectator—while “the thing done” is the deliberate attempt to innovate that ritual to use the audience as stagehands or participants and thus transform their experience into a bifold spectatorship.

As audiences take on the portability of crowds and travel through a purpose-built site, the materials of the site (i.e., walls, floors, acoustics) and the materials of the art (i.e., visual projections, lighting, music, performing bodies) are stitched together by the mobile spectator to construct a theatrical event. The examples of *The Swedish Play* and *Home Tours* demonstrate how the choreographed movement of audiences, specifically their movement through domestic interiors, constructs innovative theatrical worlds by creating narratives and anti-narratives through mass movement.

Radix describes the movement of spectators in *The Swedish Play* (2002) as “invisible theatre,” because in critic Andrew Templeton’s words, it “involve[s] performers and audience members moving [silently] through the ‘performance space’ during store hours” (4). This restriction means that performers on the sets are not permitted to speak and/or disrupt the flow of commerce. The tour through IKEA does not deviate from the path choreographed by the store, which is designed so that shoppers experience a series of utopian interiors that encourage fantasies of domestic tranquility. However, the movement through the model sets does include one crucial alteration: audiences assess rather than fantasize about the model sets. This assessment occurs through a theatrical display that involves wordless, abstract vignettes and audio tours that function as “meta-texts” on the experience of consumerism.
In the words of *Swedish Play* sound designer and Radix collaborator, Andreas Kahre: “The ‘strategy’ employed was to overburden the dynamics of browsing by superimposing its faux fantasies of the future selves with a meta-text that acknowledged them to be a ruse—employed simultaneously by us and by IKEA” (311). The net effect of the audio tour and showroom vignettes is a “disruption of the sensible,” to borrow the words of Jacques Rancière, where IKEA is revealed to be as much (or more of) a symbolic medium of escape than the Radix performance. These alienating strategies are used to encourage the audience to, in Templeton’s words,

consider the artificiality of the showrooms and, hopefully consider the processes at work below the surface of consumer culture. It is fair to say that companies like IKEA are selling lifestyles as much – if not more – than practical products. The messages contained are loaded with implied criticisms of the individual and the notion that shelving units might contain our salvation. (4-5)
As Templeton argues, *The Swedish Play* reveals that the way in which we secure our “salvation” lies not in our encounter with one another but in things.30

Occupying the doubled role of spectator and shopper, audiences facilitate the company’s commentary on our compulsion to endlessly collect things, and, in doing so they reveal the illusory power of “practical products” in our everyday lives. In helping Radix stage their cultural criticism, the doubled spectator doubly objectifies IKEA as a site of multiple and overlapping forms of conduct. The showroom is a space where one literally acts as a consumer who follows the “correct” codes of looking, desiring, and buying, but, in this instance, it is also a space where subjects query their social world through critical acts. By engaging in both types of conduct, the audience helps to unsettle the space of the IKEA showroom and resituate the store as a site of theatrical representation: IKEA in *quotation marks*. Fidelity to consumerism and things now jostles alongside a performance of those things that inaugurates a new form of conduct in the showroom—one where contact with shelving units is exceeded by the face-to-face encounter staged in the showroom.

*Home Tours*, an event organized by Mammalian Diving Reflex (MDR), can be said to begin its curious ambles where *The Swedish Play’s* audio tour ends. Its spectators tour those sites where the frozen domestic settings of IKEA have been installed—in actual homes. The company circulates an email in which they invite “audience/participants to walk through random neighbourhoods, knock on random doors, and ask for a quick peek” (O’Donnell, “Home Tours” 62). Throughout 2005 and 2006, MDR and its participants strolled through neighbourhoods in Toronto and Calgary in search of homes in which to do domestic walks. The movement of outdoor rambles
indoors repurposed the inside as places that could be toured (recasting the inhabitant as a tour guide and the home a tourist site). The reception of home dwellers who greeted anywhere from two to ten MDR participants was far from uniform. While home dwellers in the Mount Royal neighbourhood in Calgary lodged complaints with the host theatre, Alberta Theatre Projects, residents in the Annex neighbourhood in Toronto were more hospitable and, in one instance, gifted participants with basil from their back yard. In those instances where a home tour was provided, the trajectory through the premises was determined by the resident.


Because it occurs in a domestic space, the movement of the audience in Home Tours constitutes a more vulnerable engagement with subjects and sites than The Swedish Play. While the Radix audience can revel in the ironic subversion of the IKEA “thing-world,” because they intervene into a commercial site that belongs to the global marketplace, in Home Tours, the audience intervenes in a site that belongs to a person or family, and experience that site through a roving encounter with them. This form of domestic display, which, to some, clearly felt like a home invasion, points to the unparalleled level of responsibility that is required of participants who “double” as
cultural tourists. Since the felicitousness of the tour relies almost exclusively on conduct between resident and audience (host and guest), the exhibition of the home is made in and through the intersubjective contact between these parties.

The encounter between home dweller and audience is tied to a performance ethnography that brings together strangers to restage scenarios that resemble everyday cultural practices with a difference. By “blanketing” what O’Donnell calls “traditionally non-artistic activities” as performance (i.e., strolling through a neighbourhood), MDR engages different social groups in artistic production. The object is to foster, and bring together, a community that is composed of different knowledge bases, material circumstances, ages, and expertise. This community is performed (and brought into being) through cultural practices that largely reconfigure, and parody, the everyday. Not surprisingly, as demonstrated by those residents who refused to provide tours, cultural differences set the stage for a potentially charged encounter. In *Social Acupuncture*, O’Donnell argues that if we desire a more crucial comprehension of the other then we must be willing to “feel uncomfortable,” and experience socially awkward moments. While courting difficult and even risky intersubjective scenarios is a staple of a broad range of relational artworks, including *Home Tours*, the particular issue of concern is the kind of social formation produced in the private space of a home. How do we measure if touring someone’s place is a respectful way of knowing the other, particularly if the structuring assumption of the work is discomfort and antagonism? While on tour, are we supposed to imagine ourselves as home dwellers in the style of empathetic ethnographers, or are we there to have a taste of the other? Ultimately, the desire “to knock on doors and take a quick peek” suggests that any site can be made representable, and any subject a
site of display. *Home Tours* is interesting for the way it interpellates residents as dramatic subjects (or subjects of dramatic interest), and points to an insatiable appetite in relational and site-specific performance to mine even our most private spaces for aesthetic merit.

The tours described here indicate that companies, despite their disparate artistic visions and geographical locations, share similar approaches to how they implicate audiences into their productions. Spectators not only experience the piece by traveling through it but they also help dramatize those sites through their mass movement. That is to say, crossing into the space of representation, the beholder becomes part of the formal network of the piece. Moreover, these events uncover how a spectatorship that is structured through interpretation and participation facilitates provocative commentaries about domesticity, lifestyle, and our desire for the authentic in urban sites. Using the audience as form and content, but also as fellow travelers, attests to the import, if not the centrality, of the spectator as a reflexive and co-creative presence in the neighbourhoods and model sets they temporarily occupy.

**Audience as Animate Site**

Of the defining characteristics of site-specific performance, physical contact between audiences and performers, audiences and objects, and audiences and sites constitutes one of its most exhilarating aspects. Physical contact and proximity to performance does not simply exhilarate because it is a relative novelty but because it reconfigures audience presence into a theatrical convention. In this final section, we will examine how spectators, when recharged as form and content for performance, are used as theatrical environments. In order to illuminate how the role of spectators diverge to become that of an animate *mise en scene*, several binaries that underlie how theatrical space is frequently represented and understood will be addressed within the context of
two Bluemouth productions, *How Soon is Now?* and *American Standard*. The arrangement of audiences into theatrical environments enables the binaries of self and other and container and content to be tested in ways that reveal space, specifically theatrical space, to be far from absolute. Rather, theatrical space proves to be a site of mutual production where performers and participants are not distinct from the stages they occupy but through physical contact are shown to produce those stages.

The entanglement of the audience in site-specific performance, often as facilitators of the event, is rarely by chance, and in the instance of Bluemouth, is part of its artistic object. The audience's unique role is bound up in one of the key thematic concerns of the company which is to dramatize mad, even threatening others. In Bluemouth productions, the other rarely encounters the audience in an intact or integrated state. From their 2001 premiere production, *American Standard*, a collectively created one-man show about seven American “archetypes,” which includes the figures of a terrorist and immigrant; to *Lenz*, which centres on a homeless man suffering from mental illness; to *What Thunder Said*, which stages squatters, tramps, and dispossessed family members; to their 2007 production *How Soon Is Now?* which adapts the tale of Peter and the Wolf into a parable about the village scapegoat, the company's repertoire can be viewed as an extended meditation on otherness. In all these productions the “bodied space” of the audience highlights and complicates the conditions of these characters.

Two examples from *American Standard* and *How Soon is Now?* are especially pertinent because of the unique placement of the performers and spectators. In both instances, the audience can be said to function as the characters’ theatrical environments. In *American Standard*, the terrorist archetype, performed by Stephen O'Connell, does not
perform in front of, or amidst, the audience but hangs above them from a harness directly outside of the performance space, as a wall sized screen projects images in the background. His face in ghostly white make-up, his body dangling from what appears to be a noose, the terrorist speaks to the audience “below” while composer and core member Richard Windeyer hammers out a persistent drum beat.

In the 2005 remount of *American Standard*, performed in a warehouse in downtown Toronto, spectators were positioned along the perimeter of the performance space. The terrorist engaged the audience in a series of questions, and opened by asking, rather casually for a man in a noose: “Excuse me. Do you have a minute? Do you have some spare time?” (11) This exchange quickly unfolded into a darker, more violent set of
queries: “Would you rob a bank if you needed the money? Would you kidnap a child if you had nothing to lose?” (12) The terrorist, in asking the audience if they think themselves capable of becoming the threatening other, expresses what the scenographic arrangement of *American Standard* makes all too clear. Sitting as an immobile group while the terrorist hangs above them like a spectral presence, audience and terrorist dramatize “us” versus “them”—self and other—through the placement of their bodies. What this mutual production of theatrical space illustrates is that the construction of the other, or as Michael Taussig puts it, “alterity,” is, in his words, “every inch a relationship, not a thing in itself” (130).

As audience and terrorist show, us and them may be divided but they are not static. Through the use of live feed and newspaper both sides labour together to construct these positions. As the terrorist speaks, his movements are projected onto the back of a paper held by an audience member.\(^{32}\) A live feed (operated by a company member) projects the image of the terrorist which serves to instantiate him in two places at once. By making contact with the terrorist through his image the audience’s space in turn functions as the terrorist’s space. In other words, the material presence of the spectators is how the terrorist gains access to the “real” space of the audience. Our contact with his spectral appearance is what gives him his terroristic reality. His material lack thus illustrates how the threatening other is in part the creation of the self’s fearful imaginary. The spectator who labours as stagehand helps show that it is the internalization of the threatening other into our collective imagination that manufactures his presence as everywhere and ever present.
The ubiquity of the terrorist archetype—dramatized through his multi-sited appearance—creates a ripple effect. One cannot reframe the self/other divide without it fanning out to other binaries such as container and content. In this divide, space is typically understood as autonomous from those subjects who occupy it—a distinction anchored in the assumption that the stage is an empty vessel for the art.

However, if a stage subject—such as the terrorist—is simultaneously in more than one location then the container spills out, so to speak, its contents dispersed everywhere. This dispersal of the subject into every space implies that bodies are not distinct from their containers, quite the opposite. *Bodies produce their containers.* In his chapter on “Spatial Architectonics,” philosopher Henri Lefebvre grapples with the division imposed between bodies and spaces. He asks: “Can the body, with its capacity for action, and its various energies, be said to create space?” He answers that “each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space” (170). Here we can expand Lefebvre’s statement to include mediatized bodies as space and as that which produces space.

The digital body of the terrorist archetype stands in contrast to the all too “real” body of the wolf in Bluemouth’s 2007 production *How Soon is Now?* The figures of terrorist and wolf are useful to compare because they insinuate the audience (as a theatrical environment) into the plight of the threatening other in almost oppositional ways. While the audience in *American Standard* is used to construct an innovative theatrical world that is underpinned by appearance, spectators in *How Soon is Now?* are implicated in a theatrical scenario underpinned by materiality. This shift from appearance
to materiality changes the role of the audience from docile stagehands that prop up newspapers to that of co-creators who interact with the performer.

Bluemouth sets the conditions for an animate *mise en scene* in the third scene of *How Soon is Now?* when spectators enter a cloistered, pitch-black room, single file (which necessitates ducking through a low entry way).33

Fig. 2.8. *How Soon is Now?* Dupont and Lansdowne warehouse site, Toronto, 2007. The Wolf (Stephen O’Connell) hangs inches above spectators. Photos: stills from production recording.

As they stand immobile in the dark, shoulder-to-shoulder, dangling just above their heads from a harness is the wolf. A work light illuminates the performance space to reveal him hanging upside down. Unshaven, bare-chested, arms suspended above his shoulders, the “savage” body of the wolf is initially still. When contrasted against each another, the wolf and terrorist effect different relationships with the audience who in turn facilitate different “spatial” stories about the threatening other.

Right side up, the terrorist tells a story of *acting upon* innocents, of willful destruction, and uses the space of the audience as a site to be infiltrated. The terrorist’s movements oscillate between static, angular gestures that have the quality of electric shock to arms and legs in full motion, walking at full speed but going nowhere fast. Upside down, the wolf tells a story of mock accusation and treats the space of the
audience as a site of contact. When he first releases his upper body into the mass of people below there are audible gasps and expressions of surprise as spectators do not expect the locus of the action to be taking place both above and within their midst. Through a series of non-sequiturs—“gray skies, winter skies […] small town, cold town”—he stitches together events and images that bear the quality of dream or, to be more exact, nightmare. His body, suspended and bound, is nonetheless unpredictable, shifting from still and hanging to curious—he holds the gaze of those spectators immediately around him—and violent—he swings back and forth in the grip of the harness, yelling.

Clearly desirous of contact, his arms and fingers, which are curled around his head, frequently stretch out to touch the audience. An audience member in turn responds by holding his hand, and, in some instances, spectator and wolf touch one another’s faces. The intimacy of these gestures is not confined in their affect to form (that is, novel interaction between performer and audience); rather, the gestures have an ethical dimension within the story. In the scene following the wolf’s monologue, the audience sits in judgment on him, positioned as jurors and witnesses. Throughout the mock trial, black and white images of a bloodthirsty crowd are projected onto a large screen, drawing an unsettling link between community and mob. The sensuous contact made between wolf and audience alters the view of the other so that those threats that circulate around him, and those accusations thrust upon him, are drained of their potency.

In place of threats, and perhaps most pointedly, in place of collective paranoia, is contact. Contact with the wolf—whose very physical position is at odds with his larger community (those spectators who will soon be cast as jurors)—overturns paranoia. It
transforms fear of the other into mutuality by taking those binaries encoded in space, such as container and content, and challenging their division. In How Soon is Now? the container, rather than being a purpose-built site, is situated as an unindividuated mass (the audience) that envelops the wolf. The audience is a sensate container, a group witness to the wolf’s fragmented tale.

But this container also functions as the content of the theatrical scenario. Here, Walter Benjamin’s image of the animate site in “Convolut M” of The Arcades Project is useful for the way it proposes that “space winks at the flâneur” (419). In How Soon is Now? space not only winks but touches back. The audience’s space, rather than treated as “flat,” a site lacking a physical dimension, is acknowledged as a space composed of bodies. Moreover, these bodies have a formal function within the performance. The gestures of “winking” (looking, gazing at one another and the wolf) and touching which make-up the scene point toward Stephen O’Connell’s observation that “space,” and, specifically, within the work of Bluemouth, bodied space, “can create a beginning, middle, and end.”

Conclusion

In assessing how spectators are put to work, I want to focus briefly on the draw of alterity in these site-specific performances. The works described here place audiences in direct contact with the other, which we know ranges from contact with threatening others, as compelling staged by Bluemouth, contact with consumer others in Radix’s Swedish Play, and contact with quotidian others in events like MDR’s Home Tours. These experiences of alterity, which audiences willingly facilitate and co-create, overlap with what Hal Foster calls “pseudoethnography.” Such an approach describes those artists—
as well as critics and historians—who collaborate with communities in ways that ultimately prove limiting due, in large part, to inadequate institutional support, which places temporal and financial constraints on the kind of work artists can do outside the gallery or theatre. Foster postulates that these conditions set the stage for the spectacularization of the other who serves as a projection of the artists’ (and sponsoring institution’s) imaginary. “[T]he artist, critic, or historian projects his or her practice onto the field of the other,” notes Foster, “where it is read not only as authentically indigenous but as innovatively political!” (307). If the pseudoethnographic impulse (that is, the method of projecting authenticity onto subjects and sites) is indeed enacted in the works discussed here, what do we make of the audience’s involvement as fellow travelers and labourers? Are they too pseudoethnographers who expand and project their dreams of authenticity and subversion onto the other? In these works, otherness is more than a play of projections. The willingness of audiences to other themselves as the site of performance and the sight of attention speaks to a potential turn from pseudoethnography to sensory ethnography, where alterity is not “out there” but co-extensive with how one physically encounters subjects and sites. The challenge of performance, for artists and audiences alike, may lie beyond rattling distinctions and performing with theatrical acuity, but in the necessity to be aware of cultural differences as differences rather than spectacularizing effects. The question remaining is how these performances might set up the necessary parameters for a sensory ethnography wherein difference is troubled rather than consumed. The answer—and entry point—begins by situating sensuous operations beside, or in relation with, two key ethnographic methods: reflexivity and dialogism.
Notes to Chapter Two

1 The most well-known terminology associated with the spectator who doubles as participant is that of Augusto Boal’s “Spect-Actor.” In his preface to Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal writes:

   By taking possession of the stage, the Spect-Actor is consciously performing a responsible act. The stage is a representation of the reality, a fiction. But the Spect-Actor is not fictional. He exists in the scene and outside of it, in a dual reality. By taking possession of the stage in the fiction of the theater he acts: no just in the fiction, but also in his social reality. By transforming fiction, he is transformed into himself. (xxi)

   The “doubled” position of the Spect-Actor echoes that of the bifold and folded figures of the site-specific and relational works in this dissertation. However, the difference is that while Boal’s theatre implicates the spectator into the action with the aim to secure her emancipation, companies such as Radix, Mammalian Diving Reflex, and Bluemouth implicate the spectator as aide, facilitator or co-creator who dramatizes cultural critique, helps stage formally innovative moments, or engages in forging new communities.

2 O’Connell makes this reference about the “opening gesture” in the textual commentary that accompanies Bluemouth’s What The Thunder Said, page 22.

3 See Darren O’Donnell’s Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia, pages 26-45. O’Donnell outlines a series of art-activist performance events devised through Mammalian Diving Reflex in which spectators and passersby both aide, and become assimilated into, art events designed to encourage novel social interaction between strangers.

4 In her essay, “Spectacles of Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence, and Historical Memory at U.S. Holocaust Museums,” Vivian Patraka makes an observation about the museum goer that parallels the receptive experience of audiences in many site-specific productions: “There has to be a cognitive moment when the spectator realizes she is doing it (spectating), when she realizes she is in a doing” (101)

5 I here adapt Birgit Kaiser’s words from her paper, “Two Floors of Thinking: Deleuze’s Aesthetics of Folds,” in which she notes: “Leibniz’s notion of the fold and his theory of perception can think difference without entailing separation” (212).

6 Modern art critic Michael Fried evaluated this shift in visual art from object to event in his 1967 essay, “Art and Objecthood.” It is in this essay that he includes his three well-known propositions about the state of minimalist art:

   1. The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater.
   2. Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater.
   3. The concepts of quality and value – and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself – are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theater. (163-64).

   Number two is the most regularly cited proposition because, for Fried, those minimalist artists that highlight the functionality of art (the status of art as art), take away from the qualities of the art object itself. I would argue that the assignment of role in contemporary site-specific performance, the casting of the audience into the stage action, has shifted the emphasis of Fried’s observation from art object to spectator. Since artists in site-specific performance are already well ensconced in the “degenerated” condition of the theatre, their interests lie not only in the site but in the compositional potential of those “other” bodies in the room, the audience. Thus, in the context of this study, audience intervention not only signals a collapse of real and representational orders but it signals a reconventionalization of spectatorship into “formal” participants.

7 Allan Kaprow’s work is emblematic of absorbing the beholder into the art. His early piece 18 Happenings in 6 Parts, first performed in 1959, is an event designed solely for participants and does not include “rehearsal, audience, or repetition” (Kaprow qtd. in Kaye 109).
Bill Readings explains that the figural makes possible an encounter between spaces that were previously thought to be incompatible:

Lyoard’s version of deconstruction is an attempt to make [...] [the] co-presence of radically different spaces into something more than a contradiction or an impasse. The opacity of the signifier is not a pure objecthood outside language, a simple beyond of representation. Rather, it is the mark that representation only functions by virtue of a necessary and impossible encounter with its other, the encounter that is the condition of the figural. The figural is that which, in representation, makes us aware that there is something which cannot be represented, an other to representation. In this respect it is like the immemorial, that which cannot be remembered (made the object of a present representation) but cannot be forgotten either. (16-17)

For samples of how scholars account for theatre as a “total” event see Ric Knowles’ Reading the Material Theatre, Part I: Theory and Practice; Susan Bennett’s Theatre Audiences: A theory of production and reception, Chapter 3, “The Audience and Theatre”; and Marvin Carlson’s Places of Performance: the semiotics of theatre architecture.

In the 2003 production Uncle Bob was performed by Robert Tremblay, who played the role in the premiere production and later that year as part of Bluemouth’s trilogy, Something About a River.

The performance site in which Bluemouth rehearsed and performed is managed by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, which operates a number of rooms on the lobby level of the AT&T building. They designate these rooms “swing spaces” and provide grants for companies to both rehearse and perform in these sites. (For an overview of the program visit their web page: lmcc.net/art/swingspace/overview/) What the Thunder Said received a grant from the LMCC to work in the swing space and in the summer of 2006 presented the show as part of Sitelines, a site-specific performance series funded by the LMCC. (For an overview of past and present programs visit the Sitelines website: lmcc.net/art/programs/2008/sitelines/)

See Bluemouth Inc.’s What the Thunder Said, pages 22-25.

In the 2006 remount of What the Thunder Said the role of Second Cousin was performed by Greg Shamie.

The Summerworks Festival is an annual juried festival that takes place in theatres and off-site venues throughout downtown Toronto. In recent years the festival has grown to include music and commissioned performance showcases. Visit summerworks.ca for more information about the festival.

An observation made by the members of the collective in an interview with the author (24 July 2006).

We might consider site-casting an example of blind casting since spectators are cast, or depending upon how you view it, “acted against” equally, regardless of race, class, and gender. All of these casting calls or treatments of the audience force the question: What role does race, class, and gender play in these various casting calls?

In “The Aesthetics of Disappointment,” an interview with dramaturge Heidi Taylor and Andreas Kahre, the sound designer for The Swedish Play (and long-time Radix collaborator), Kahre describes the event in the following terms:

[...] Radix installed performers who “enacted” the encounter, with results that ranged from entertaining to grotesque, demonstrating just how unstable an interdisciplinary ‘performance system’ must be in order to successfully hold tensions such as these without collapsing them into the dichotomies of comedy/tragedy, actor/audience, or to provide a critique of theatrical convention rather than an instance of it. (Kahre and Taylor 311).

Radix’s description of The Swedish Play insists that it is the shoppers who are on display rather than the spectators. They categorize the show as “invisible theatre” and state that: “Performers and audience members travel through the store along with regular shoppers who generally have no idea that a
performance is taking place right before their very eyes. In fact, the shoppers themselves are often the performers without even realizing it” (Radix Theatre Society, *The Swedish Play*). It is my contention, however, that the headsets, mass movement of the audience throughout the showroom, and the performance of the scenes themselves draws a line around the show in a way that marks it as anything but “invisible.” Radix sound designer Andreas Kahre supports this view by noting that:

Their [Radix] desire to accommodate larger audiences shifted the critical balance between the ‘witness’ and the ‘witnessed,’ and all but obliterated the chance of discovering the poetic nexus—observing real shoppers making real choices against a field of auditory events invoking a state of epistemological crisis. (311)

19 Radix’s *Assembly* was first staged in the Pacific Palisades Hotel in downtown Vancouver, in 2007. It was the culmination of three shows or experiments. *Experiment I: The Abandoned Body* (2005) took place in the boiler room of the Shelley building (where Radix and other arts organizations lease office space) as part of LIVE: Vancouver’s Performance Art Biennale. *Experiment II: The Fractured Mind* (2006) took place at the Vancouver Art Gallery as part of FUSE (a monthly performance art showcase); and *Experiment III: The Shattered Soul* took place in the Chapel, a repurposed arts venue as part of HIVE. Visit Radix Theatre Society’s web site (radixtheatre.org); select the “Past Events” page and the links, “Experiment 1, 2, and 3.” Following the 2007 production, the show was remounted in Montreal as part of Theatre Lachapelle in February 2008. It was showcased as part of the PUSH International Performance Festival in 2009.

20 An example of the curiosity of spectator display is the “Gimps” scene in *What the Thunder Said*. Two buskers enter the performance space and select four audience members to participate. The audience members are then choreographed to “sit down and lie with their backs on top of the knees of the person next to them […] in the shape of a table” (Bluemouth, *What the Thunder Said* 41). The spectators hold this position while the buskers dialogue about a boat on the brink of sinking. When the spectators are no longer able to endure the position and collapse the buskers arrange for them to take a short curtain call before they return to join the other audience members.

21 Since its premiere in 2006, *Haircuts* has been showcased in Los Angeles as part of the Outpost for Contemporary Arts’ Fair Trade Festival (2006); New York City’s Performa07 Festival (2007); Birmingham, England’s Fierce! Festival (2007); Vancouver’s PUSH International Performing Arts Festival (2008); Portland’s Time-Based Art Festival (2008) in collaboration with the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art’s; the repurposed Dublin Docklands, in Ireland, in co-production with the Dublin Dockland Authority (2008); the Universal Cosmic Murmur Festival (2008) in Bologna, Italy; the International Festival of Contemporary Art (2008) in Terni, Italy; the Sydney Festival in Australia (2008); the Mysteria Gallery in Regina (2010), the Norfolk and Norwich Festival, UK (2010), the Cork Midsummer Festival in Ireland (2010), the London International Festival of Theatre, UK (2010), and the Perth Festival in Australia (2010). Visit the Mammalian Diving Reflex website (mammalian.ca) and select the Social Acupuncture pages that profile the 2006-2008 *Haircuts* events at the festivals and events listed above.

22 The *Haircuts* manifesto attached to every poster, postcard, brochure, and email states:

In the future, every child will be given a pair of scissors and invited to shape our destinies. In the future, every child will be granted full citizenship rights; invited to vote, run for office and drive streetcars. In the future, children will teach and adults will learn; a playground will be built on every battlefield; candy will be free and rotten teeth will be replaced at no cost to you, the consumer. In the future, children will be powerful creatures able to cross the street without looking both ways, and hold their breath underwater forever and ever (Haircuts postcard).

23 Bennett quotes Frederic Jameson’s *The Prison-House of Language* in which he observes that:

The purpose of the Brechtian estrangement-effect is […] a political one in the most thorough-going sense of the word; it is, as Brecht insisted over and over, to make you aware that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical: the result of change, they themselves henceforth become in their turn changeable (58).
For publications that discuss how children can be integrated into political, civic, and social arenas see O’Donnell’s “The Gardiner Garden: visions of provision” in GreenTOpia, co-authored with Marney Isaac; “Greasing the Glue and Gluing the Grease” in The New Quarterly; Social Acupuncture; sections on BeachBall41+All and Haircuts by Children, pages 81-85; and “Toronto the Teenager: why we need a Children’s Council” in uTOpia.

In “Toronto the Teenager” O’Donnell lobbies for a place for the child within the political process:

Barring children from full political participation not only makes no sense when we consider the rights of the child, but also when we take into account the greater good. Excluding a huge segment of the population -- a segment in the midst of forming views and attitudes that shape their behaviour for the rest of their lives -- is a narrow-minded act that can only serve to limit our own possibilities as adults […] Imagine a polity comprised of representatives of all age groups, a polity where the practical concerns and political opinions of the six-year-old are considered as valid as those of the sixty-year-old. It’s safe to say that for most of us there’s a knee-jerk recoiling from such a bizarre idea. But in this age of so-called human rights, what could be more bizarre than structuring a society so that the individual is deprived of basic political participation for the first quarter of her life? That seems more ludicrous than the incredible proliferations of playgrounds we could expect if six year-olds were elected to office. (164)

Nuit Blanche is a corporate-sponsored, city-wide art festival that took place in neighbourhoods throughout Toronto. The festival websites, scotiabanknuitblanche.ca includes an event history and archive of previous festivals.

Of all three companies in this study, MDR draws most heavily upon what is described in performance studies as “restored behaviour.” In Performance Studies: An Introduction, Richard Schechner explains that restored behaviour is composed of the “habits, rituals, and routines of life” and can range from the structured ritual of attending the theatre to the fleeting gesture of waving goodbye (28). These collective acts are separate from us (they are not of our invention), however, they comprise and continually shape our identities (28). Through performance events such as Slow Dance, MDR taps into the restored behaviours of its participants and audiences with the aim to critically distance them from these acts. This critical distance occurs, ironically, through, a sensual immersion in the environment and scenario established by the company.

See Theatre/Archaeology and the section on scenography: performance and the manipulation of space (place and site), pages 20-21.

In her introduction to Performance and Cultural Politics, Elin Diamond explains that what separates “the doing” from the “thing done” is that, in the instance of “the doing,” the subject engages in a (performative) repertoire of stylized, repeated acts while in “the thing done,” the subject innovates that repertoire.

Michael Taussig’s observation about the commodity fetish supports this viewpoint. He writes: “fetishization resulted from the curious effect of the market on human life and imagination, an effect which displaced contact between people onto that between commodities, thereby intensifying to the point of spectrality the commodity as an autonomous entity with a will of its own” (22).

In Social Acupuncture, O’Donnell speculates:

I wonder if there might be […] a way to induce encounters between individuals where we bring the aegis of art out into the world and use it to blanket traditionally non-artistic activities—activities in which power differentials are at least tacitly acknowledged and the artistic manoeuvre [sic] is to either reverse or erase them temporarily in a gesture of antagonism that contributes to rising social intelligence. (33)

The company took the same material they used to project images onto the wall-sized screen and inserted into the back of a newspaper.
Once again Bluemouth audiences found themselves in an antechamber space not unlike that of audiences in *What the Thunder Said*.

O’Connell made this observation in spring 2007 workshop organized by Bluemouth in Toronto (Dupont and Lansdowne warehouse site).

See Hal Foster’s article “Artist as Ethnographer?” anthologized in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*. 
Chapter Three
Risk and Response: The Ethics and Efficacy of Bifold Participation

In site-specific performance, the necessity for the audience to respond as witnesses and concrete players makes them indispensable on both sides of the footlights. They not only engage with the artwork as interpreters but they are regularly recruited in the creation and production of the very performances that they witness. Because audiences complete and compose the event this study describes their role as a “bifold” spectatorship—one in which spectators are both witnesses of and aides to the action in creation and/or performance. To view site-specific spectatorship as a “double-duty” enables us to analyze how spectators interpret and facilitate artistic production. The lens of bifold spectatorship is focused through the subject positions: stagehands, facilitators, and co-creators. In chapter two of this study, these roles are brought to bear upon the work of Mammalian Diving Reflex (MDR), Radix Theatre Society, and Bluemouth Inc., in order to examine how spectators and passersby are mobilized to stage the innovative theatrical worlds and cultural criticism these companies construct.

In this chapter, I extend my analysis past the ways in which audiences are positioned as stagehands, facilitators, and co-creators to how they respond to the risks of being absorbed as bifold participants in creation and performance. I consider the consequences of interpellating spectators into specific subject positions and ask what responsibility artists or companies have to audiences once they “hail” them into the event. To unmoor the audience from the space of the referential is to risk that the bifold participant will “reterritorilize” the event in a way that is not anticipated. The question that then arises is how do the companies in this study respond to the potential of a
resistant or perverse spectator? And what kinds of constraints do artists create in order to contain their participatory and immersed audiences? All three companies in this study have their share of anecdotes about spectators whose responses did not conform to the modes of spectator address they established in creation or performance. (Surely, the iconic audience member who disrupts a performance is the heckler.) While aberrant displays of spectatorship exist across all performance genres, in site-specific performance moments of resistance, perversity, and unique responses constitute more than a disruption of a suspended reality. The double-duty of the bifold participant, and the potentially deviant responses she generates, can be used to examine the theatrical and critical efficacy of companies such as MDR, Bluemouth, and Radix.

However, beyond tracking what idiosyncratic audience responses can tell us about a creative process or performance event, of equal import to this chapter is what audience responses enable in creation and performance. The responses of site-specific spectators are used to both mediate and open spaces of formal innovation, political critique, intersubjective exchange, and cultural difference. The performance of these ideals abounds in multiple risks for bifold spectators who embody the radical environments, conventions, and acts of the artists’ imaginary. But aside from these embodied risks lie ethical ones that make the road to a more efficacious performance and reception far from smooth. In wrenching open spaces of formal, critical, or relational risk there is no guarantee that the very discourses artists are trying to overturn through the help of their audiences will not prevail in performance. In fact, putting the audience in a position of risk can lead to the very foreclosures and exclusions that site-specific companies wish to reconfigure. Thus this chapter examines how the risks that structure site-specific creation
and performance, and the responses of audiences to those risks, shape the theatrical worlds and commentaries that the companies construct.

**Three Participatory Modes: Dances, Interviews, and Polls**

This study locates audience response in the work of MDR, Bluemouth and Radix, in Western *avant-garde* performance traditions such as performance art, relational aesthetics, art-activism, and site-specific performance that emphasizes what Claire Bishop calls the “social dimension of participation” (*Participation* 10). In the opening lines of her introduction to the anthology, *Participation*, Bishop argues that such artworks and practices use “social forms” as a means to “bring art closer to life” (10). She cites everyday acts of conviviality such as pub gatherings and social dances, as well as commercial places such as hotels and cafes as examples of how social dramas and sites are appropriated for artistic purposes. Through their own unique appropriation of sites, games, rituals, and roles—IKEA stores, softball games, dance marathons, interviews, and styling hair are examples of participation in this dissertation—the companies in this study contribute to the “social dimension of participation” in artistic practice.

Of the many participatory practices that the companies engage and stage, three representative modes—dances, interviews, and audience polls—provide entry points into an analysis of audience response. These three modes enable us to examine the diverse ways in which spectators are addressed; the performance conditions that mark their participation; and the vulnerabilities or *risks* that attend such bifold participation.

In the participant-oriented, durational events, *Slow Dance with Teacher* (2007) and *Dance Marathon* (2009), MDR and Bluemouth stage social dramas that “star” dancing bodies. Through the social scenarios of the high school dance and the
competitive atmosphere of the dance marathon, we glimpse into participatory modes that fold the bifold participant into the scene of spectacle. Because folded participants literally compose the scene of the action, they enter into critical proximity with the plenitude of discourses that constitute the social role and scenario turned performance event (i.e., gender, sex, age). As strangers grip one another’s waists under the glare of spotlights or launch into choreographed hand gestures for the pop anthem, YMCA, their movements and gestures simultaneously embody the conviction of the practices they perform and question the very cultural, social, and political paradigms that bring their bodies into timed step. Questioning the power of paradigms occurs through the intersubjective exchange between dancing bodies—the exchange between self and other on the dance floor. I contend that the embodied scenarios of dance in participatory events transform the relationship between self and other into a heightened activity that not only takes on an artistic and critical function within the performance event but defines the very stakes of the event.

Like dance, the interview is a participatory mode that constitutes “another order of materiality,” to borrow the words of Monique Wittig, that situates subjects in relation to one another through dialogue. Organized by MDR, events such as Talking Creature (2003), Q&A (2003), and Diplomatic Immunities (2006-2007) are made up of interviews between artists and audiences, passersby on the street, and specific interview subjects, as well as exchanges between and among spectators, that reveal dialogue to be MDR’s principle mode of participation. Ranging anywhere from a few minutes to several hours, interviews are part of a larger attempt to bring artistic production and reception into dialogue with one another, firmly aligning company practices with the genre of dialogical
The company emphasizes this commitment to conversation between artists, art-goers, and participants beyond the theatre in their artistic mission: “We create work that dismantles the barriers between individuals, fostering a dialogue between audience members, between the audience and the material and between the performers and the audience” (Mammalian Diving Reflex, “About Us”). This focus on interaction redefines artwork as an intersubjective exchange and exemplifies Grant Kester’s observation that dialogical aesthetics “anchor[s] discourse not in some fixed representational order but in a process of open-ended interaction that is itself the ‘work’ of art” (87). Such fixed orders of meaning, however, can be difficult to trade for open-ended exchange when artists are trained to produce artistic products, continue to present in galleries and theatres, and receive their funding from arms-length arts councils. Moreover, the egalitarian claims of an artistic mission (the assertion that barriers can be dismantled wholesale) can often remain unrealized in practice because they overlook the power relations between subjects. What emerges in our examination of interviews in MDR is a tension between claims of “open-ended,” equitable exchanges and deeply entrenched power relations between spectators and performers.

While interviews are the participatory province of MDR, audience polls and surveys are a mode of participation that all three companies employ in processes and production. The use of polls and surveys can yield a diversity of theatrical and critical responses from audiences, but the polls themselves are remarkably similar in content and tend to fall into two camps: tallies of general demographic information and polls that take an inventory of gratuitous habits, and immoral acts, as well as characteristics that only a handful of spectators would admit to in public. In the case of the latter, the questions
deliberately expose audience members, others them in a way that aligns them with the alterity of the performing subjects. This search for alterity through audience polls is used in MDR’s *Diplomatic Immunities* events. While polls and surveys are traditionally used to generate information about groups, MDR’s polls, in particular, work in the opposite direction and scout for the most singular subject in the room (i.e., the spectator who admits to the most sexual partners, the poorest person in the room, the wealthiest, and so on). In other words, the poll functions as an “on-site” scout or casting agent that pinpoints a singular subject who, upon stepping on-stage to be interviewed, transforms the theme of the poll into a relational situation characterized by personal stories, opinions, and his or her physical stage presence.

**Five Participatory Events in Two Parts**

These three participatory modes are treated in two separate but mutually intelligible sections. The first section focuses exclusively on the work of MDR and what they call their social acupuncture wing—creative processes and performance events that repurpose social dramas and quotidian acts such as talking and walking with the aim to encourage participation between strangers. Because MDR draws upon all three participatory modes discussed in this chapter; consistently works across expert and non-expert groups; mounts work in playhouses and gallery spaces as well as streets and schools; and organizes participatory situations that engage both the quotidian and the spectacular, their work with audiences demands extensive analysis. Representative examples from three social acupuncture events between 2005-2007, *Slow Dance with Teacher*, *Halloween Q&A*, and *Diplomatic Immunities: Round Four* are discussed not as
a genealogy but as an index of how audience response shapes the critical and creative worlds of the company.

The documents used to assess how participants, spectators, and passersby of MDR respond to being transformed into the locus of performative and theatrical risk are interviews, blog posts, video documentation, transcripts, and the art-activist manifesto by MDR’s artistic director, Darren O’Donnell, *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance, and Utopia*. A critical text that possesses many of the creative and polemical underpinnings of social acupuncture, the volume (composed of a three-part essay, “Social Acupuncture,” and play, *A Suicide-Site Guide to the City*) contains theories, reflections, and documentation about the community art movement to which social acupuncture belongs (relational aesthetics), and some of the “early” artistic interventions attempted by O’Donnell, former producer Naomi Campbell, and associate members of the company.

What emerges across this multi-sited examination of literature, documentation, and participatory events are three key interrelated tensions: (1) *The rhetoric of community expressed by O’Donnell in interviews and essays and the realities of the performance conditions*. There exists a gap between social acupuncture practices and the claims made about these practices; namely, that they encourage social transformation, participant enfranchisement, and empowerment through dialogic exchange. While the tension between the realities of performance and the rhetorical claims made about them are a dialectic that presupposes the creation and production of artwork in this study, in the instance of MDR, this negotiated tension is not a neutral precondition of their artwork but a politic of art and community. The social acupuncture events discussed demonstrate how
theory is shored up—“assigned” to practice—when participants face “unanticipated” (and largely uncriticized) risks in performance. (2) A discord between representation and response. There is a consistent denial regarding how representation in social acupuncture (and its conventions, roles, and structures) shape audience response. Participants are positioned as autonomous agents who can detach themselves from aggressively flirtatious dance partners, improper questions, and the highly mediatized performance environments in which they find themselves. When participants fail to meet the demands of the event their responses are assessed in terms of performative competency (i.e., participants should simply know “it’s just a performance”) rather than performance efficacy. The power relations that structure social acupuncture events are thus displaced onto the participant who is assigned an inflated response-ability to not only produce the event but also swallow its risks whole. (3) Display over dialogue. While the aim of social acupuncture is dialogic exchange through social participation, it is the participants rather than the exchange generated between them that often becomes the object of display. The imperative in events such as Diplomatic Immunities: Round Four to represent cultural difference (in this instance, homeless subject, Tony Clements) is sidelined by performance conditions that instantiate the subject as radically other. Genuine dialogical exchange is sidelined as the difference of the participant is not only emphasized but sensationalized. These three interrelated tensions between rhetoric and reality, representation and response, and display over dialogue reveal a persistent struggle in social acupuncture events to contain the contradictions that permeate its ethics of representation.
The second section of this chapter continues to consider the role of ethics in relational work of MDR and widens its critical focus to include the participatory events of Radix and Bluemouth. As in part one, three events, staged slightly later, between 2006-2009 hold our attention: Diplomatic Immunities at the playRites Festival (2006), Radix’s Assembly (2007), and Bluemouth’s Dance Marathon (2009). While comparisons are drawn between the use of audience polls in Diplomatic Immunities and Assembly, it is an asymmetrical analysis as interviews in Diplomatic Immunities and box steps in Dance Marathon are treated as independent cases. Like part one, the documents used to assess the participatory events are comprised of a diverse mix of performance footage, artist interviews, and play texts. But whereas the first section assesses MDR’s participatory practices alongside the critical writings of O’Donnell, part two draws comparisons between productions and assesses documents such as manuscripts of polls and surveys from performances, footage of participant interviews, and interviews with artists.

In part two, manuscripts, footage, and interviews are used to focus on the conditions of direct participant address (i.e., the types of questions posed to participants). What is uncovered in assessing how participants respond to direct address are a set of observations about community and alterity in site-specific performance. (1) The employment of adversarial audience address to “shock” a community. In Diplomatic Immunities (DI), O’Donnell and the other artist-researchers use audience polls and interviews to explicitly “shock” the audience through antagonistic and derisive address. This adversarial stance not only speaks to O’Donnell’s use of antagonism as a building block of relational work in particular, and community formation in general, but it is part of a canonized tradition in modern theatre and artworks that oblige artists to deride their
patrons (I elaborate upon this point when I discuss the use of audience polls in *Diplomatic Immunities*). However, such address departs from the tradition of modernist works since *DI* artist-researchers involve the audience as participants that facilitate an on-stage critique about themselves. (2) *Surveys and Solipsism.* In Radix’s *Assembly*, audience surveys and polls occur in a site that is absent of community, the conference room. This absence is theatricalized through audience address that reduces the theatre-going public to a show of hands about issues and themes that over-emphasize the needs, wants, and aspirations of the “I.” There are no subjects that form a collective but only individuals detached from political and social engagement; no public spaces, but only vacant sites and institutions (in this case, the personal motivation industry) that encourage scrutiny that goes no further than the needs of the “I.” (3) *Community and contact.* In *Dance Marathon*, the dichotomy between individual and group is performed through the body of participants who compose the dances and games that structure the competition. The inclusion of spectators as competitors in *Dance Marathon* sets the stage for a durational event (roughly four hours in length) that emphasizes the kinesthetic as well as the aesthetic. Sections in *Dance Marathon* such as the blindfold box step, which pairs planted competitors (artists) with a dozen blindfolded spectators point toward what co-artistic director Lucy Simic calls being part of, or integral to, the theatrical “image.” The dancing bodies of the competitors are thus made indistinguishable from the theatrical structure in which they participate.

**Part I: Mammalian Diving Reflex**

The extensive involvement of audiences in “socially-oriented projects,” to borrow Claire Bishop’s words, whether as recipients of polls, interviews, or dances best characterizes the social acupuncture work of MDR and their repertoire of art-activist
interventions. Because their projects mobilize audiences, participants, and passersby with the aim to aestheticize their responses, audience engagement occupies a key role in MDR’s creative processes and products. As subjects interpret and engage in artistic and critical labour they put their very materiality (voice, body, physical presence) at stake. They are the corporeal “scene” where the creative possibilities that the artists imagine are staged. Thus in order to access and experience the art participants must put themselves at risk.

In his art-activist manifesto, *Social Acupuncture*, Darren O’Donnell describes how risk structures the performance events that the company conducts between strangers. He realizes early on that without imposing risk upon participants and spectators—or as this study has described it, the “challenge to perform”—there can be no event. O’Donnell describes MDR’s first social acupuncture event, *Talking Creature* (2003), which involved art goers corralling strangers and “inviting them back” to an art gallery “for an unstructured, unagendaed conversation” (55) as an experience underpinned by risk:

[N]ervousness prevailed at the onset of the experience. But once the strangers had been lured back, there was absolutely no need to facilitate the conversation, no need to provide a topic or structure. In fact, the conversation sparkled, almost manic in its urgency. The catalyst was the act of risk-taking; the energy invested in approaching strangers, or in turn, trusting the stranger who had approached you, provided the forceful dividend of a surprising ease. (my emphasis, *Social Acupuncture* 54)

Risk-taking not only creates the conditions of performance but it cleaves open spaces of atypical encounter. All of this, of course, is contingent upon how participants and spectators respond to risk. In other words, simply because you construct performance conditions that position spectators as subjects that participate in interviews or dances does
not necessarily mean they will respond in this way. Spectator address can anticipate but cannot guarantee spectator response.

O’Donnell’s choice to take specific creative processes and performance events such as *Talking Creature* out of the theatre stems from a desire to puncture the everyday with risk. He turns to what he perceives as a more politically capacious form of performance, and in the process develops an “aesthetics of civic engagement” in which artists work with “institutions that form – at ground level – the fabric of the city” (*Social Acupuncture* 24). MDR, under the auspices of its former producer Naomi Campbell and current producer and artistic associate, Natalie De Vito, have maintained traditional partnerships with theatres, galleries, and festivals, and initiated new partnerships with inner city public schools, as well as having established an administrative base at the Centre for Social Innovation, an office facility in downtown Toronto for businesses, non-profit organizations, and individuals dedicated in some manner to “an idea that works for the public good.”

These new partnerships, which position the company within the larger arenas of community and activism, and thus integrate MDR into larger “social circuits,” are as much a response to critical debates as they are to personal frustrations with the minoritarian status of theatre. In *Social Acupuncture*, O’Donnell examines the literature that developed around relational aesthetics in the early 2000s; specifically, arguments and inquires raised by Nicholas Bourriaud and Claire Bishop. While he sides with Bourriaud’s belief that “‘the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real’” (30); he is equally mindful of Bishop’s critique that “efforts to create conviviality and
supposedly democratic spaces tend to reinforce already existing social circuits – complete with the same exclusivities, cliques and in-crowds” (31). From these debates O’Donnell proposes a composite dramaturgy: he answers Bourriaud’s call to intervene into the “real” by making the very “exclusivities, cliques and in-crowds” that Bishops warns of the source of his artwork. Thus the main compositional element that O’Donnell uses to bind Bourriaud and Bishop are “very real” power dynamics which form the basis of events such as *Slow Dance*, *Halloween Q&A*, and *Diplomatic Immunities*.

The balance O’Donnell strikes between Bishop and Bourriaud’s views is remarkable in its resemblance to the criteria of many traditional dramatic structures that emphasize action, conflict, and character. However, O’Donnell arrives at the conclusion that conflict underpins social acupuncture through the door of social relevancy. Summarizing Bishop’s opposition to Bourriaud, he writes: “Bourriaud ignores the fact that a vibrant social sphere is one that can openly acknowledge and even generate antagonisms – that democracy is dependent on friction rather than feel-good” (*Social Acupuncture* 31). O’Donnell not only uses this friction as the entry point but as the model for his own work. In the section titled, “Discomfort, Antagonism and Talking in Galleries,” he discusses the issue of “social discomfort” in relational aesthetics and argues that discomfort must be accommodated if collective transformation is to occur. Discomfort is thus a stepping-stone to a more crucial comprehension of the other.

The link between discomfort and comprehension belongs to a modality of spectatorship that Grant Kester, examining modern *avant-garde* art traditions, calls the “conscious-altering encounter” (153). The imperative here is to have art-goers engage with works that encourage a state of becoming or transformation. The artist thus has an
ethical responsibility to create works that transform art-goers in order to deepen their social, political, or depending on the work, phenomenal understanding of the world. What this emphasis on understanding presupposes is that the spectator arrives in a state of insufficiency that can only be remedied by the artist and her artwork. This presupposition of lack is adopted by O’Donnell, who, in describing the trajectory of social acupuncture writes: “As any system experiences a shift into higher complexity, there will be a time when it feels like there has been a drop in understanding” (Social Acupuncture 50). It is, however, O’Donnell’s combination of a critical becoming and non-Western traditions like traditional Chinese medicine that marks his approach as part of a modern avant-garde tradition: “Like real acupuncture, social acupuncture can be uncomfortable, but this is a good thing. The dispersal of holding patterns, of energetic excesses and deficiencies, will usually generate discomfort, the social equivalent of confusion, a necessary part of any learning process” (Social Acupuncture 50). The drop in understanding and the discomfort that attends it followed by a march towards “higher complexity” represents the utopic arc of social acupuncture. By risking discomfort, one fulfills the epistemological project of social acupuncture and enters into a state of becoming that is tied to community and civic engagement.

But despite the utopic emphasis on transformation the conditions of performance weigh heavily upon participants. In social acupuncture, the risk which participants undertake is treated as theirs and theirs alone. The risk-taking that structures audience reception is, in other words, regarded as separate from the conditions of production. Even O’Donnell’s observation, which describes the role of participatory risk in early social
acupuncture events like *Talking Creature* as a “catalyst,” defines risk as that which stimulates and precedes rather than structures the event.

An example that crystallizes the containment of participatory risk in relation to the very production that the bifold subject embodies, and thus labours to produce, is MDR’s 2006 release form for *Haircuts by Children*. Before a participant could receive a haircut from one of the school aged children trained to cut and style hair for the event, she or he had to sign a waiver. Certainly in an event such as *Haircuts* where participant bodies, beards, and hairstyles quite literally shape the performance a waiver is a sensible way to circumvent complaints from potentially “unsatisfied customers.”
However, the release form is also an indicator of how and to whom MDR assigns risk. A waiver makes certain—insists through its legal authority—that all responsibility lies with the participant. But how can this insistence on personal responsibility be reconciled with the rhetoric of conversation and community? For the bifold participant to assume full responsibility means that she somehow functions separately from the event in which she finds herself immersed. Sealing the risks of performance to the participant raises questions when the ethics of representation emphasizes intersubjective exchange. If representation shifts from a vital immersion in the events to shouldering the risks of those events then the emancipatory claims made about the spectacle or aesthetic communication turn doubtful. The event is no longer (or perhaps never was) about mutuality and responsibility to the other but about the response-ability of the participant to live up to the challenge to perform.

**Slow Dance with Teacher**

Two accounts of MDR’s 2007 social acupuncture event, *Slow Dance with Teacher* testify to how company responsibility becomes a performance of participant response-ability. Among the dozen participants who “slow danced” to a continuous arrangement of recorded pop ballads were Jane Wells and Natalie Alvarez. Both Wells and Alvarez participated as teachers in the event and their distinct experiences are examined alongside each other here. A durational, all-night event, *Slow Dance* was part of Nuit Blanche, a corporate-sponsored festival that features live performances and installations throughout the downtown core over the course of one evening (from sunset to sunrise.). In her online piece, “Brief Exquisite Encounters,” Wells explains that “with each change of song” teachers “approached the audience clustered on the other side of the ropes and invite[d] someone to dance.” Like the other instructors who answered MDR’s
“casting call”—an email soliciting teachers and professors was circulated by way of the company list serve—Wells enlisted as a participant in advance of the event. Those men with whom she swayed under a spotlight, however, were strangers, cast on site, so to speak, as they drifted into the Hall. Wells describes what transpired between herself and her dance partners over the course of a single pop ballad:

We would begin our dance, I would initiate conversation, and chatting would ensue. But I began to feel distinctly a subtle pulse, a current running between our simple get-to-know-you conversation and our hands on each other’s bodies. Even dancing with the men with the lightest, shyest touch, barely holding my waist, I felt the pulse. Maybe it was the pulse of possibility, but it changed something in the way we were speaking. People talk to you differently when they are touching you.

Wells recounts an evening of slow dancing observable to more than just other couples tottering on the dance floor. While her admission of intimacy through conversation and contact rings of a remark reserved for a private journal, both diary and dance function well outside of the familiar contexts of personal reflection and social function. The intimacy she recounts occurs behind thick velvet stanchions in the glare of a spotlight that captures each “light” and “shy” touch between herself and the nearly forty partners with whom she danced from midnight to 5AM. Moreover, her description of the evening extends beyond a constituency of one (the diarist) to an online audience, the readers of Zoilus, a Canadian arts and culture blog maintained by Toronto-based journalist, Carl Wilson. While the banal “chat,” awkward arrangement of hands, and “subtle pulse” that Wells describes typically belongs to the lexicon of the slow dance, in MDR’s Slow Dance these gestures—an intimate encounter in a social space—take on a public function. The participants replay a social drama within the context of participant-
oriented performance. Because it unfolds in an artistic context, the “pulse of possibility” that Wells tracks from one partner to the next is as much a creative spark between slow dancers as it is a physical one.

Slow Dance belongs to a repertoire of performance events that not only exhibit or stage representational objects or codes but (ideally) get strangers talking. “The focus of most of Mammalian Diving Reflex’s social acupuncture is public discourse,” writes O’Donnell, “talking between strangers in the public realm – because of my belief that it has the potential to affect other systems” (Social Acupuncture 51). By “other systems” O’Donnell means the discourses that shape the self: politics, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and age. What takes precedence over “building a character” is contact with, or critical proximity to, a character in performance. The “actual” teacher, for example, who performs the part of “teacher” in Slow Dance does not engage in the quotidian labour of educator but makes an object (or becomes an object) of that very role. Her physical contact with “students” and phenomenal contact with the performance brings the discourses (the “other systems”) she depends upon in everyday life into focus. Parody—the “actual” teacher winks at her theatrical other—extends to communication as teacher and student (ideally) dialogue about how discursive pressures, expectations, and assumptions shape the roles, “teacher” and “student.” Thus talking (or slow dancing) with a teacher means both participants and spectators engage in cultural and critical work that expands and reconfigures how subjects relate to themselves and one another.

By all accounts Wells is a social acupuncture success story: her online post demonstrates that strangers are capable of communication that extend beyond surfaced exchanges. And yet, the subject position she inhabits for five hours, and, crucially, the
structural relationship within which she positions herself make the part of “teacher” subsidiary to the role of female “love interest.” While she does what is expected of her (physically) she does not do the critical work of dramatizing institutional hierarchies between teacher and student. Her online post, which briefly summarizes the scenario devised by MDR, analyzes the event itself through the lens of a different social drama. Instead of teacher and student, she positions herself within the rubric of heterosexual companionship. In Wells’ words: “I was […] trying to project a charming but authentic presence, something on the edge of flirtation, just enough to draw the men out but not overwhelm them, a little pull to step forward into a moment of mutual revelation.” In a non-participatory context, her reincarnation of the role of teacher into “one-hit” heterosexual companion could be read as an interpretive strategy—a way to access and understand the performance event from a gendered perspective. While here it remains an interpretation, it is also a mode of production.

In Slow Dance and other social acupuncture events, to interpret is to create. Audience reception not only counts as the individual work of the spectator, it shapes the work of art. Thus, in deciding what is meaningful to her, Wells also molds the artistic production. Even her choice of dress reveals a desire to rehierarchize Slow Dance from a commentary about institutional conduct to radical gendered companionship. While participants such as Andy Houston, whom we discussed in chapter two, aimed to dress the part of teacher, and thus maintain parodic fidelity to the conditions of performance, Wells performed in steel-toe boots and cut-off jean shorts. Her dress and online post engages in a non-compliant participation, or what, following film theorist Janet Staiger,
we might term a “perverse” participation—she interprets, and, to a certain extent, authors the event on her own terms.  

Wells’ perverse participation demonstrates how a bifid participant can be positioned as a co-creator in a performance event. Similarly, the spectators who enter the Great Hall show how participants take up the role of facilitators and fulfill the task of dancing in a social drama. However, these distinctions went largely unrecognized in performance. The knowledge that Wells, Houston, and Natalie Alvarez possess about social acupuncture as both performers and scholars did not necessarily aid their experience in performance. Of importance is their choice to immerse themselves and contribute to the all-night event. Their involvement in a durational performance speaks to a particular kind of participant unique to MDR’s process and production. It is not uncommon for a participant who enters into the company’s work to be a stakeholder in theatre and visual art communities as either an arts worker, academic, or avid art goer. Part of the MDR’s “artistic mission” is to draw upon its existing communities through dialogue. Pointedly, the group’s inventive performance titles, which directly cite its communities, participants, and subjects, such as Haircuts by Children (2006), Slow Dance with Teacher, and Parkdale vs. Queen Street West (2008), to name a few, speak to the notion that production, the “work of art,” lies in the co-creative encounter between diverse subjects.  

On the surface, the division between the teachers and those spectators who filed into the Great Hall at Nuit Blanche appears “fair,” or, at the very least, in line with the kinds of equitable exchanges that social acupuncture events hope to promote between strangers. But if we consider that it is the teachers who must continuously meet the
challenge of the exchange and maintain the event with each pop ballad then that equity suddenly appears asymmetrical. Seen in another light, for example, Well’s perverse participation can be viewed as a tactic employed to manage the random men clutching her body over a five hour period. Thus we can view the lack of division between participants as a matter of ethical conduct.

Fig. 3.2. Left: Slow Dance poster (black-and-white print of Alvarez). Right: Nuit Blanche spectator photo of Slow Dance participants. Sources: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery website, Hart House (left). b-real’s Flickr photo stream (right).

The ethics of being “manhandled” characterizes the experience of Natalie Alvarez. Unlike Wells (and, in the previous chapter, Andy Houston), Alvarez did not commit to the event as a “character.” While Wells and Houston drew upon the characters of heterosexual companion and teacher, Alvarez, significantly, did not think she had to play a character but only herself: “It was framed as this charmingly quotidian encounter between ‘actual’ people. Nothing about it was framed as a performance. I didn’t anticipate that I would be the object of spectacle; that I would have to help in the suspension of collective disbelief.”

At first, Slow Dance was to place performative responsibility at the feet of the Nuit Blanche spectators, not the teachers. Spectators were to be selected by burly security guards who would decide whether to grant or deny their request to dance with the
teachers who stood waiting behind the stanchions under softly lit spotlights (designed by Rebecca Pichemack). Alvarez described how the event changed course upon her arrival:

[W]e were to ask people—which is a completely different kind of power relationship. It’s one thing to invite people, have people raising their hands, eagerly saying, ‘Oh, I’d love to dance.’ As opposed to having to actually go up to someone, which brings back all of your high school horrors. The high school dance, having to ask someone to dance with you, and face the possibility of rejection. Or, face the possibility of someone all too eagerly accepting your invitation and then not wanting to stop dancing with you. I felt incredibly vulnerable having to go up to strangers and ask people to dance with me.

On the surface, compared to Wells, it appears as if Alvarez could not “hack” the durational demands of Slow Dance. Appraising them side-by-side it looks as if one could draw upon an inventive interpretive strategy and the other could not. However, rather than posit that Wells possesses some superior degree of performative competence, I contend that their responses to the risks that structured the event have more to do with the negotiated tension in social acupuncture between theory and practice, and, crucially, how that tension is invoked in ethically tenuous moments in performance. While Wells was willing to rehierarchize the event by way of character, Alvarez, in engaging as “herself,” could not legitimize Slow Dance, or give it the appearance of legitimacy, in the same way that Wells could.

As the evening wore on, the situation only proved more tenuous, and the concrete emotional realities of the social drama began to set in for Alvarez:

[...] It was a real endurance test. I was appealing to Darren, ‘I can’t do this. This is really stressful for me.’ Because there were real emotions at stake. And there was real vulnerability that I hadn’t anticipated. [...] Darren actually tried to quell my anxieties by saying, ‘Natalie, it’s just a performance, relax.’ What are you
saying then? I didn’t anticipate that I could remove myself from the whole situation by just slipping into a character position and make it easy for myself. […] Those weren’t the terms under which we were invited into the scenario. It wasn’t as a performance. I found it interesting that he appealed to the terms of illusionism to help get over my anxieties of very real person-to-person encounters that were happening.

Alvarez’s appeal to O’Donnell, her exhaustion and thus inability to legitimize the scenario, caused O’Donnell to maintain Slow Dance on her behalf. “He started grabbing people from the audience […] forcing them to dance with me, which was even worse in a way. He started soliciting people on my behalf when I just got to a point of psychological exhaustion, which is really interesting.” O’Donnell’s intervention returns us to the mode of reception that treats the spectator not as she is but as you would like her to be. In this instance, the viewer-yet-to-be is not in a consensual state but a physically managed one. O’Donnell imposes an enforced becoming in Slow Dance by grabbing and soliciting people. His tactic resembles the anterior authority of a theatre director who traffics the movements of his performers on stage. His emphasis on the maintenance of form reveals that social acupuncture is at times more invested in the maintenance of its theatrical world than in collaboration and feedback from its participants. The subordination of aesthetic communication to theatricality means that when ethically cornered the lived experiences of the audience can be dismissed as metaphorical (“it’s just a performance”). But in reverting to such binaries O’Donnell betrays the complexity of MDR’s efforts. Surely the desire to position bifold subjects into roles already familiar to them in daily life speaks to a wish to expose such roles, and the sites in which these roles operate, as fictions that stand in the way of “real” (intersubjective) communication. In the end,
however, the company overlooked their responsibility towards its primary participants who were forced to manage the risks of the event through a display of response-ability.

**Halloween Q&A**

Throughout *Social Acupuncture*, O’Donnell affirms that the import of dialogism lies in the formations (social, political, and institutional) from which it seeks to demystify and liberate subjects. This emphasis on “freeing” subjects from entrenched roles is often evaluated in terms of social transparency. But as his account of *Halloween Q&A* (2005) shows, conversation, particularly conversation focused on the confession of personal detail often spirals into a scene of interrogation.

Performed at Toronto’s Gladstone Hotel as part of the larger fair and festival, Canzine, MDR “installed an apocalyptic cityscape with a video component that situated the subject in the middle of all the destruction” (*Social Acupuncture* 64). The model-sized cityscape was of lower Manhattan during 2001, and included the former World Trade Center twin towers, charred but still standing. A screen installed above the set was linked
to a live feed, and fixed onto the model city. An interview subject stood behind the set so that on screen he appeared to tower above the city. A line of questioning ensued that attempted to match the visibility of the subject with an interior legibility. Following the original Q&A format O’Donnell explains that: “I and anyone else in the room could ask the subject anything we wanted, though any question could be refused” (Social Acupuncture 64).

Like the waiver for Haircuts, MDR insists on a release clause (the right to refuse) that insures company credit for the efficacy the event generates, but divests itself of the risk that enables this very efficacy to flourish (i.e., rebellious commentary about children as inferior versions of adults; or, in this instance, a rebellious commentary about terrorism and post 9/11 politics). The right-to-refuse implies that the performance conditions have no bearing upon how subjects do or do not answer:

This licence [sic] to say no emphasized the responsibility and power of the subject. This might, at first, appear self-evident, but in the heat of the moment […] there’s a concern that things can go awry – someone unwittingly blurting out something they may regret. But, regret it or not, the subject must take full responsibility. (Social Acupuncture 60) The suggestion here is that a responsible subject can rise above (transcend) the “strange power dynamic generated in the room” (Social Acupuncture 60). But if the subject can detach herself from her circumstance, if as O’Donnell states, “the subject […] cornered with improper questions […] just has to say no” (Social Acupuncture 60), then what is the role of the performance conditions in social acupuncture? This question is especially pertinent in Halloween Q&A which positions the bodies in the room around a cityscape in the aftermath of a terrorist attack. “Though not convinced the project could bear the full weight of the metaphor, I was […] trying to tacitly refer to the proliferation of
interrogation in the post-9/11 world, hoping that, for the attentive, the reference might be worthwhile” (*Social Acupuncture* 65).

The kind of subject that O’Donnell describes is far from a relational one but an autonomous one who must be “competent” enough to derive meaning from the (inferred) stage signs. Because the receptive competency of the subject is linked to the production (whether she “gets it” or is simply baffled by the work) the stakes for understanding are high since, again, personal reception is collective production. Unlike the autonomous art goer of modern art, the bifold participant can not as easily siphon off production from reception. While the former witnesses an *a priori* work that does not depend upon the facilitation of the viewer for its production the participant in social acupuncture facilitates and composes the production. Thus, bifold participants are guided by the conditions attached to the performance rather than autonomous manipulators of them.

In short, viewing *Q&A* and social acupuncture events on the whole as a limitless relational exchange omits its artificiality. In *Halloween Q&A*, O’Donnell attempts to pass off the form of the event as a vehicle that enables the subject to be stripped bare rather than an aesthetic characterized by tactics that venture dangerously close to personal violation: “I wanted to ask people scary questions, granting myself full licence to break every rule of propriety with the expectation that people would take full responsibility for themselves” (*Social Acupuncture* 64). This inflated responsibility is represented through a unitary subject, multiplied and mediatized by way of a live feed, who sits as an object of spectacle and curiosity for her fellow spectators among the simulacral ruins of lower Manhattan.
In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau examines how ideology disguises its symbolic production by claiming its practices are transparent. His chapter on “Spatial Practices” focuses specifically on the ideology of surveillant culture and its claim to know all by seeing all. De Certeau’s passage on “Walking in the City,” which includes his pre-9/11 description and subsequent critique of Manhattan from atop the former World Trade Centre, provides us with a productive comparison to *Halloween Q&A*. Both de Certeau and the bifold spectator in *Halloween Q&A* position themselves “above” the city. But while de Certeau narrates from up above—“Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center” (91)—MDR participants admit to their personal realities at “street level” (a room in the Gladstone Hotel), as mediated figures who hover above a citation of the city (model sized set). While de Certeau’s visual survey of the city can be classified as the more “authentic” view (when compared to *Halloween Q&A*), he deliberately problematizes his experience of being “lifted out of the city’s grasp” (92). Far from genuine, he considers his view an “analogue of the facsimile produced”; a “fiction of knowledge” motivated by a “lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” (92).

Freezing the city at the time of the 2001 terrorist attacks, and miniaturizing its scale—which dramatizes de Certeau’s notion of the viewer as a “solar Eye” that “look[s] down like a god”—MDR appears in-step with de Certeau’s critique. Additionally, the company’s model city citation now carries the weight of an extinguished referent whose influence is measured by the force of its absence. So while de Certeau temporarily appropriates the voice of an elevated “voyeur” who details the “pleasure of ‘seeing the whole’” (92), the post-9/11 voyeur sees only the *hole* where the World Trade Centre
once stood. However, the two representations of the World Trade Center diverge when the obsession with personal admission in *Halloween Q&A* fails to lend itself to a dialogic encounter and more closely apes the experience of surveillance. While *Halloween Q&A* can be said to operate at “street level” it never, to borrow de Certeau’s words, makes it “below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (93). The attempt to see the whole by unearthing traumatic holes (and generate a transparent moment of communication through events defined by both sexual violation and physical violence) overlooks the scopic ideology that mediates its message. In sum, shining a light on the secrets of bifold participants sparks neither communitarianism nor critique.

Following the *Halloween Q&A*, when spectators were no longer bound to the dictates of the event, O’Donnell “received several angry emails.” In his words:

The most common concern in the complaints was the inequitable power dynamic in the room – I’m a relatively straight white male – and the trauma the work could have caused had the subjects been people with lower thresholds, one email suggesting that suicide could be a potential outcome. (*Social Acupuncture* 65)

Left unchecked, the ethical duty to “shock” and antagonize participants into relational engagement can, according to O’Donnell’s own admission, harm rather than emancipate participants. But while his admission of potential harm registers the criticisms of his participants, and shows his willingness to document both his successes and failures, it does not go far enough. Ultimately, the failure of *Halloween Q&A* to manifest community or critique is framed as a spectator problem. The issues rest not with O’Donnell but those bifold participants who lacked the response-ability to manifest the critical “lesson” of the work.
**Diplomatic Immunities: Round Four**

In *Diplomatic Immunities: Round Four* (2006) we turn our attention to one of the last “cross-overs” that MDR attempted between their play “wing” and their social acupuncture “wing.” Of the three social acupuncture events under discussion in part one of this chapter, *Diplomatic Immunities (DI)* involves the spectator in its creation and production as a collaborator and site of content. In the fall of 2005, seven artist-researchers, O’Donnell, Campbell, Faisal Anwar, Ulysses Castellanos, Misha Glouberman, Rebecca Picherack, Tanya Pillay, and Beatriz Pizano, began meeting peripatetically over a period of nine months. They went against the city-dwellers impulse of anonymity and ventured into neighbourhoods, elementary schools and subways to talk to strangers. The collaborators posed every conceivable type of question to passers-by, recorded their exchanges on video and then interviewed each other in the context of their street encounters. Each show included audience interviews as willing spectators took to the stage to be poked-and-prodded by both *Diplomatic Immunities* collaborators and audiences. A general Q&A (which came to be known as the “Second Act”) followed each performance and allowed audiences to question the collaborators about their street findings. These events were staged as “one-offs” at Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times’ Tallulah’s Cabaret. Not unlike a staged reading which receives a single viewing and is then thrust back into the creation mill for further refinement, each round ran for a single evening, and successive rounds modified and experimented with the amalgam of anecdotes, still images, and audience interviews that composed the event.

In January 2006, the artist-researchers sat down with Tony Clements, a homeless man who panhandles outside of O’Donnell’s and Naomi Campbell’s apartments. Following this process-based Q&A, I asked O’Donnell why MDR shifted the focus from
neighbourhood patrols and interviews with dozens of city dwellers to a four-hour sit-down with a single stranger:

Instead of blitzing people in the streets for fours hours, I wanted to deepen the content by talking to one person – and bring them inside because it was winter. I wanted to stay warm, right? So, we decided, we’ll talk to him in here. If we have a discussion, we won’t be able to see him, because it’s dark outside, and it will look shitty unless there’s really strong, available light. So, our thinking was that we’ve got to shoot some lights on him, and maybe we can fuck around with some effects and put a green screen behind him. And – I don’t know anything about this – so we bring in these big fuckin’ honkin’ lights and a green screen, and, suddenly, the place is very different. And that was unanticipated, which is, you know, not considered on my part. (89)

What proved so unexpected about the “big honkin’ lights” and green screen was that these modes of production simultaneously increased the magnitude of O’Donnell’s humble dwelling and reduced Tony to a performance. As O’Donnell states, initially, the artist-researchers were to accumulate a representation founded on a multitude of voices from a particular city, neighbourhood, or institution. The problem with collecting snapshots of the multitude is that the exchange, however genuine in its attempt at dialogical engagement, must conform to the temporal limits of the street survey. O’Donnell’s apartment was to serve as a place to “deepen the content” since “blitzing people in the streets” limited responses to, at most, a couple of minutes. Working in the apartment was an attempt to work “outside” those limits by moving inside. But while it was not bound by time constraints the interview inadvertently stepped into another formal trap. The use of lights, camera, and a green screen rendered the apartment a blatant site of artistic production. The sole object of these televisual modes was Tony. He alone sat in front of a camera (a microphone clipped to his jean jacket), behind a screen, and under
hot lights. Across from him sat the seven artist-researchers, outside the glare of the “big honkin’ lights,” barraging him with questions. Tony’s response to these performance conditions was to enact a referent that matched the formal cues in the apartment. (Formal cues that were, in O’Donnell’s words, “unanticipated.”) He interpreted the mediatized environment as a space of criminal interrogation and presented a “wall-to-wall narrative” of risk.

Tony’s tales did not fit the theme of *DI: Round Four*, poverty and the poor. He did not respond to the hail of “documentary” subject and provide a snapshot of life-on-the-street. Instead of sympathetic pictures of street life he generated elaborate crime stories. He described his work as a cheque forger, a body removal worker, his failed stint as a fake police officer, his work as a drug dealer, and thievery of Rolex watches, jackhammers, and flatscreen televisions. Following his interview, O’Donnell stated that his stories provoked divisive responses among the artist-researchers:

Some people thought Tony was a liar. And some people thought he was telling the truth. And some people were a bit in-between. Amongst those people who

Fig. 3.4. *Diplomatic Immunities: Round Four* interview subject Tony Clements. Photos: Ulysses Castellanos.
thought he was a liar, I think there was a need to protect their view of the world, where this kind of wall-to-wall narrative, filled with petty but extreme criminality, is just not how the world works. And, you know, it’s much safer for people to believe that he doesn’t do that, that he has no power, that he can’t call in all these favours, and maybe now he can’t. Someone said, ‘I don’t believe a (homeless) guy whose out there doing that can call anybody to get somebody’s tongue sliced.’ Well, maybe, but the world is filled with stories of people who used to have power, who don’t have power anymore. (Zaiontz 90, ellipsis in original)

It is most curious that when a company of artists comes face-to-face with a would-be con-artist that the central preoccupation is authenticity. This preoccupation is in part due to the ethnographic impulse that underlies the work. The interview subject of an ethnographic account offers a report of daily and extra-daily events to a researcher who then orders that reality into representation (a qualitative study). The artist-researchers in *Diplomatic Immunities* follow the same trajectory by shaping the “raw” (authentic) interview material for the stage. However, Tony disrupted that model by offering up invention rather than authenticity. That he did not do what was expected does not necessarily mean that he deliberately subverted or resisted the “hail” to take-up his homeless identity among a group of interviewers who have homes, but that he took up a position as a storyteller among storytellers. O’Donnell states: “We didn’t expect all the crime stories – all the candid crime stories – that was, I think, a surprise that that was *all* he wanted to talk about. At the same time, it’s understandable. He was obviously savvy enough to want to give us good stories” (Zaiontz 89).

That Tony aggregated dozens of crime stories over four hours is less a precondition of him being a great liar than it is a response to him having been put on display. Performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood examines the ethical
implications of representing cultural difference and warns against falling into what he describes as “The Curator’s Exhibitionism,” which is a commitment to display over dialogue.¹⁹ Genuine dialogical contact cannot occur if the difference of one is emphasized over the difference of the group. Conquergood quotes Frederic Jameson who states that when one establishes “‘from the outset, the radical Difference of the alien object from ourselves, then at once the doors of comprehension begin to swing closed’” (63).²⁰ If over-emphasizing difference seals off comprehension (knowledge) from the anthropologist then it seals off something equally powerful from the relational artist: dialogue.

The vulnerabilities that attend a homeless existence cannot be demonstrated, and thus open up a dialogue about poverty and the poor, if the conditions are defined by sensationalism. We have to take O’Donnell at his word when he describes “the big honkin’ lights” as unintentional particularly because the seven rounds that led to the full-scale production in 2007, Diplomatic Immunities: The End, were workshops. The company was working towards a a dramaturgy for how to take encounters with strangers and turn them into a performance. We can, however, push O’Donnell and MDR on their interview technique. One of the hallmarks of relational aesthetics is its emphasis on dialogue, but instead of dialogue Tony was subject to a series of questions. The artist-researchers’ withdrawal from an intersubjective exchange essentially forced the con-artist to invent material for the artist-researchers.

The bright camera lights that illuminated Tony and tipped the interview into an interrogation influenced the set design: the ensemble used a live feed to project black-and-white mug shot–style images onto a screen above the stage. The camera slowly
panned over the faces of the artist-researchers, sitting in single file on a bench, which evoked a criminal line-up. In O’Donnell’s words:

At the start (of the last *Diplomatic Immunities*), before we had any lights on, I wanted this pan of everybody on stage. It was dark so we put on “night shot.” There was this assumption that once we put the lights back on that we had to take night shot off, but, actually, the night shot increases the theme of criminality. So it looks like a security camera and wanted posters and all that kind of stuff. (Zaiontz 92)

Tony’s response was “cited” in performance as the artist-researchers were now the ones up for interrogation. However, this process does not represent a straightforward or equal distribution of questions (and questioning) from Tony to performer to spectator. Social acupuncture may be utopian but it is not egalitarian. There is a division of labour between participant, performer, and spectator that is bound by hierarchy, convention, and the conditions of the performance. But this labour is simultaneously performed and disguised. On the one hand, the performance event stages labour as every anecdote and image is presented as the “unadorned” research findings of the artists. On the other hand, there is an insistence that the actions and performance itself are marked by a freedom from labour—by play rather than “work.”

The power of play forces us, once again, to consider how social acupuncture engages with its relationship between theory and practice. The work of Mary Louise Pratt and her incisive analysis of interpretive strategies in reader-response theories aides us in our own examination of audience reception in social acupuncture. Pratt draws upon an observation made by Louis Althusser, that I repeat here, about the reduction of theory to practice:
Left to itself, a spontaneous (technical) practice produces only the ‘theory’ it needs as a means to produce the ends assigned to it: this ‘theory’ is never more than the reflection of this end, uncriticized, unknown, in its means of realization, that is, it is a by-product of the reflection of the technical practice’s end on its means. A ‘theory’ which does not question the end whose by-product it is remains a prisoner of this end and of the ‘realities’ which have imposed it as an end. (29)  

Althusser’s critique crystallizes my own verdict about the theory of social acupuncture as a mode of inquiry or as rhetoric that is frequently used to validate rather than question the practice. O’Donnell and MDR make recourse to representation as ideologically impotent when a participant bristles against the aims of social acupuncture. In those instances where dialogue or dance does not result in empowerment but alienation or wild falsehoods the bifold participant makes rude contact with her identity and status as always/already (i.e., always already homeless, always already “woman,” and so on). This contact with oneself, so to speak, reifies rather than expands the repertoire of one’s subject position.

What our examination of *Diplomatic Immunities: Round Four, Halloween Q&A*, and *Slow Dance with Teacher* shows is that if the participant is interpellated into a subject position in creation or performance that renders him or her an object of spectacle rather than an interlocutor of aesthetic communication then the corollary will be a bifold participant preoccupied with managing the risks of performance. This “risk management” may manifest itself through the assumption of character, storytelling, docile responses, and direct appeals to the relational artist himself to intervene into the event. Such responses, however creative, fail to achieve the aims of social acupuncture (non-hierarchical engagement, open-end dialogue, and mutuality). What is missing is a dramaturgy of boundary and consent: an ethics of representation that places the
participants and spectators before the expression and content they must generate and uphold.

**Part II: Community, Alterity, Representation**

Yet despite measures such as waivers, the right-to-refuse, claims that events are “just a performance” and unanticipated risks such as “big honkin’ lights”—measures, claims, and risks that are invoked to reduce participation to “play” when events turn sour—these explanations are seen as operating independently from the aim of forging community through conversation. Indeed, it is as if community as theorized in *Social Acupuncture* is a wish to refuse (or untie oneself from) ideology. Certainly O’Donnell’s imagistic touchstone of community, the 2003 Eastern seaboard blackout in North America, is recounted as a moment of “unfettered” interaction that freed citizens from entrenched roles: “People, freed from power – in both senses of the word – were jettisoned from their familiar social circuits, and social hierarchies wobbled, affording a glimpse at anarchism” (*Social Acupuncture* 51). But audiences, as part two of this chapter shows, are not the easiest of collectives to anarchize. As MDR’s *Diplomatic Immunities* reveals, audiences have their own ideas about what constitutes community and collective values. Face-to-face with an ensemble of artists, spectators may willingly engage in audience polls that question and even undermine their collective values, but continue to hold tight to their own norms by simply placing their views in reserve.

**Diplomatic Immunities: playRites Festival (2006) – Audience Polls**

The aim of audience polls, which range across companies from innocuous questions about pop culture to a more brazen inventory of spectators’ sexual practices is used to initiate alternative theatrical and critical spaces through group exposure. (We discussed the exposure of the individual subject in events such as *Halloween Q&A*, but in
this instance, the exposure is collective and the response reduced to a “show of hands.”) Using polls and surveys to expose audiences departs radically from the more traditional use of polls and surveys in business or institutional contexts. It not only repurposes the poll as a form of audience address but it mocks its validity as a tool that can yield knowledge about groups and their practices.22

In the Diplomatic Immunities (DI) production at Alberta Theatre Projects’ 2006 playRites Festival, polling revealed itself to be an untrustworthy epistemology that was stripped of its assumed authority through none other than the pollster-performers themselves. The polling methods in DI are of a deliberately suspect variety. One of the key pieces of technology is an overhead projector, wheeled onto the stage, and used to record and instantly disseminate results to the audience. The crude presentation of the projector implicitly links the low-grade, out-dated medium of the overhead with the message of inaccurate poll results. And as the numbers are tallied and projected on the screen the pollsters themselves add to this picture of inaccuracy. From the start, their methods are deliberately “slap-dash” (they stop counting and simply guess); their assessments are closer to editorials; and their address to the audience is at turns playful, aggressive, and calculating but rarely, if ever, neutral.

The first poll of the evening, which follows personal stories told by each member of the ensemble, and a montage of Calgary streets scenes set to music, is a survey of audience ages (Under 15, 18-25, 26-41, 41-60, 60+, 80+), marital status (single or married), spectators with children, home owners and renters; a tally of spectators who identify as atheists; those spectators who consider themselves poor, middle class, rich; those who consider themselves beautiful; and, among other questions, those spectators
who admit to kissing a dog on the nose. Layered onto the inaccurate tallies posted on the overhead projector is a live feed of the DI audience. A camera pans the room capturing the raising and lowering of hands, the lively reactions to the ensemble’s deliberately miscalculated tallies, and the visible discomfort on spectators’ faces of being projected (and magnified) onto a wall-sized screen. Thus the transposition of spectators into the space of art first occurs through technological mediation. That is, before select bifold participants physically step upon the stage, they are projected into the theatrical space.

Standing in front of this layered display, which bears the quality of a mobile façade, is the ensemble: Terrance Houle, Viki Stroich, Darren O’Donnell, Naomi Campbell, Jennie Esdale, and Tarik Robinson. Unlike the audience who are captured on camera as a collective the ensemble is atomized, staggered across the stage: Campbell records the numbers, O’Donnell sits upstage at a computer, Houle addresses and polls the audience down stage centre, and Stroich, Robinson, and Esdale stand, arms crossed or in pockets, assessing the sea of spectators as if it is they who are the theatrical object and not the ensemble.
The poll transforms the room into a body politic defined by age, family, economic status as well as more playful (and even facile) characteristics. While these points of address surface as themes in the course of the show it does not immediately function as an induction of stage themes but as a mode of self-conscious recognition. The poll and its line of questioning transform the audience from an unindividuated mass into a particular theatre going community. Community formation by means of polling theatre audiences is a controlled means of production that emerges through a show of hands. The demographics of age, income, and marital status are not an innocent collection of information but an inventory.

In Jacques Rancière’s “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art,” he describes the relational artist as “an archivist of collective life” (89) and explains that: “The artist takes it upon himself [sic] to make visible, in art’s reserved space, th[e] arts of doing that exist throughout society. Through th[e] double vocation of the inventory, critical art’s political/polemical vocation tends to become a social/communitarian vocation” (90). As managers of inventory, relational artists transform artistic representation (and its sites of exhibition such as galleries and theatres), so that in addition to critique and formal experimentation art also acts as a forum that initiates dialogue among art goers. In the instance of MDR, the inventory artists compile in DI is of the audience in the room. Not unlike visual artists who appropriate everyday or “found objects” for relational purposes, DI artist-researchers scout, assess, and catalogue the audience and thus function akin to animate “found objects.” Framed as objects of spectacle, DI spectators, by way of the live feed and overhead projector, are transposed into the “reserved space” of the stage in order to foster dialogue.
The image of spectators reflected back to themselves through a live feed means that like the demographics on stage, audiences partly compose and are an object of what they see. But dialogism is not only preceded by a display of data; it is also preceded by an assessment of the subjects in the room. DI artist-researchers engage in a “cruel” accounting of the demographics they collect. This cruelty is expressed through an inverse heckling; many of the artist-researchers (in both their address and response) openly deride the audience. When, for example, a majority of spectators in the playRites production raise their hands to acknowledge that they are homeowners an audible guffaw is made by the ensemble. Similarly, when it is learned that a majority of the audience falls into the age category 41-60, members of the ensemble reply with an exasperated, “Woah!” Among those artists who engage in the most alienating spectator address is O’Donnell. When, during a poll on sexual orientation most of audience counted themselves as heterosexual he quipped: “Always a straight crowd here at Alberta Theatre Projects” (Diplomatic Immunities: playRites). O’Donnell then followed up with a question about monogamy: “Any monogamous people in the house?” When a majority of patrons raised their hands he heckled: “Yeah, losers. Losers and liars.” O’Donnell and the other artist-researchers who explicitly register their shock and derision address the ATP audience with the aim to critique the homogenous and conservative character of the spectators. When community reveals itself to be composed of mostly bourgeois Calgary citizens then its empowerment is no longer a relational ideal. The pursuit of fostering community now turns to “shocking” community. Whether they are desirous of it or not the DI audience at ATP is being implicated in an ethics of representation.
As discussed in part one of this chapter, the use of theatre to liberate audiences from normative values is one of the long-standing characteristics—and self-appointed duties—of the modern avant-garde artist. Grant Kester explains that this duty, which obliges the artist to approach representation as a shock treatment or baptism-by-cruelty, liberates art goers from the clichés that constitute their existence. (As stated earlier, O’Donnell’s own metaphor of social acupuncture as an invasive but necessary approach that “break[s] system-wide holding patterns” (48) is an extension of a vanguard tradition that deals in shock, cruelty, and defamiliarization.) Kester, who cites John Rajchman’s study, *The Deleuze Connections*, discusses how Gilles Deleuze widens the criticism that circulates around modern avant-garde art by framing aesthetic violence as an ethical issue. It is the ethical duty of the vanguard artist to use representation to expose the clichés that hold up our values and point toward avenues of cultural difference and transformation. Modern vanguard traditions not only exemplify but represent our very movement toward the transformation of “self to other, of the individual to the group, of image to object” (Kester 152).

The object that the audience makes possible through their physical displacement and exposure is linked to the division the DI ensemble stages between individual and group. Employed as the backdrop against which the artists stand, the audience is implicated in a figure-ground relationship in which their collective image serves a “normative” landscape. Standing in front of this backdrop, staggered across the stage, atomized and adversarial, is the DI ensemble, who, as if in quotation of a late Romantic warrior cry, structure the performer/audience relationship as the bohemians versus the bourgeoisie.
The artists use this division between themselves and the audience to other themselves—to reinforce the position of the artist as the site of alterity within the theatre. And yet, the folded position of the audience, their surplus presence on stage, means that the possibility to take up the position of the other is not remote. In fact, the transformation of the audience into the performing other occurs through the very mode of address (i.e., audience poll) that highlights them as conservative. The audience polls simultaneously aggregate tallies of middle-aged home owners and in the process scouts for the most singular person in the room.

Assembly: The Pacific Palisades Hotel

The art-activist aesthetic that defines MDR’s work can not be said to be the imperative of the other two companies in this study, Radix and Bluemouth. And yet, the Radix 2007 production, Assembly, structured as a series of episodes (eleven in total) that range from motivational speaking sessions and performer-generated monologues to new media and performance art installations, owes the creation of many of its devised, “interactive” scenes with audiences to the influence of Q&A and Diplomatic Immunities.
Owing in part to the talents of its former producer, Naomi Campbell, between 2006-2008, *Diplomatic Immunities* toured to festivals such as Calgary’s playRites Festival, the Magnetic North Festival in Ottawa, and to the World Performing Arts Centre in Lahore, Pakistan. Having staged formal and informal relational events connected to *Diplomatic Immunities* in Vancouver (as well as events like *Haircuts by Children* in Victoria and Vancouver) the co-artistic directors of Vancouver-based Radix, Paul Ternes and Andrew Laurenson were able to both see and participate in MDR’s work and, in the process, adopt aspects of the company’s aesthetic, namely modes of spectator address such as polling, into their own work.

In a 2007 interview, Paul Ternes describes the influence of O’Donnell and MDR on the creation of *Assembly*:

The improvisations that we used to generate new material [in *Assembly*] centred around a sense of stripping down character. A sense of the relationship between performed emotion and real emotion. And that’s where some of the stuff that I’ve seen of Darren [O’Donnell] comes to mind—polling each other, polling the audience, using our own names—finding that fine line between characterization and something that was self-scripted. Could we create characters that were self-scripted, that weren’t total fictions or vice versa? That was the stuff that we were working on in the studio.

The devising of *Assembly*, and the “stripping down [of] character” that Ternes describes, shares both O’Donnell’s rhetoric and his approach to performance. While MDR events like *Q&A* and *DI* possess no traditional characters—there is no line between character and performing subject—there is a line between social roles or “talking honestly” that bears similar qualities to character and performing subject. For example, in *Social Acupuncture*, O’Donnell states: “When talking honestly about ourselves is the goal of
spectacle, the spectacle loses its power as such, and we are the only thing left” (61).

In Assembly, the stripping of prohibitions in order to access the “real” on stage, and the multiple displays of emotional and physical transparency that define the first half of the show, do not occur (as it does in MDR’s relational work) in place of representation. What Ternes calls the “real,” or the “self-scripted,” functions in relationship to representation. In other words, Assembly uses social acupuncture methods to test not erase the boundary between character and performing subject. From the top of the show, the line is always a point of play, so that the motivational speakers who greet the audience as “characters” introduce themselves using their “real” names. As Ternes points out in the interview, it is the ensemble not the audience who take on the challenge of mining their personal lives as aesthetic material (hence his question: “Could we create characters that were self-scripted?”)

The aim then of surveying and polling the audience is to set the stage for a display of performer-generated risk. In the first instance of audience address, scene two, “Motivation,” Billy Marchenski jots down a quick list of “what people want,” (personal goals, aims, and desires) and engages in a tightly scripted improvisation that leads directly into the monologue of the next motivational speaker.23 As Marchenski tells a “self-scripted” anecdote about faking an ankle injury in an elementary school race, the initial laundry list of goals and desires generated by the audience sits in contrast with his own detailed admission of failure. The anecdote highlights the line between the said and unsaid and reveals that while there are sites and even social systems (such as motivational industries) devoted to articulating our “dreams” there exist few places where we can narrate our failures or “stories of shame.”
The transparency of this story informs the next self-scripted scenario. Oriented around personal opinion and beliefs, cravings and indulgences, and even scatology, the poll stems from the worldview of the over-emphasized “I”:

EMELIA. walks into the audience. Who believes in love at first sight? Hands in the air. Who here believes in the one? Your soul mate? Lie on a beach, or hike up a glacier? Who here loves to dance? Who here smokes pot? Loves the ganja. What about e, anyone here do e? Who lies, little small ones even? Who prays? Who asks god for help? Who wants to have sex with someone in this room right now? Who picks their nose? Who pees in the shower? Who’s afraid that they will grow old alone? Who stands up to see what’s in the toilet before they flush it? Everyone should have their hand up right now. Who here has shit their pants as an adult? (Assembly 53)

The responses themselves are not measured, captured on screen or tallied, for example, as in DI. The aim here is not to dialogue with or even editorialize the audience but to incur a stage mood that establishes emotional transparency for the ensemble. Thus surveys and polls in Assembly highlight the way in which a social acupuncture method designed for audiences can be absorbed into a creation and production process for an ensemble.

While the audience facilitates emotional candidness, they are excluded from an “authentic” display of transparency and reduced to a show of hands about questions that veer into the realm of the narcissistic. Ultimately, the use of questions to service the public admissions of the performers and their characterization as motivational speakers are not intended to create a picture of community, nor, as in DI expose (and potentially rupture) the stultifying values of a comfortable middle class audience, but to indulge its audience (and dare I say themselves) in a narcissistic address. Significantly, polling in the context of a production that is in part about the culture of self-motivation, and the
privatization of public gatherings, reveals the narcissism and superficiality that underlies the contemporary scrutiny of self.

Transplanting the theatre-going public into the site of the conference room, the Radix ensemble does not address the spectators as a community but as individuals. (In chapter two of this study I describe how the performers begin the show by nodding and making eye contact with every spectator in the room.) Polling in *Assembly* is not about gathering or “assembling” a community portrait but about addressing spectators in the absence of community. One of the key material signifiers that reveals community to be absent is the site itself, the hotel conference room. Ternes says the choice to stage *Assembly* in a conference room was motivated by a conceptual desire to inhabit the rooms of society’s deal-makers where public policy is made without the consultation of the public: “When people meet, when the G-8 meets, when the WTO meets, they get together in these convention centres and these hotel meeting rooms; that’s where we assemble now. When we get together now it’s not so much parliament it’s these back rooms, right? So we thought, well, that was probably a good place to put this as far as looking at what it is to be in relationship with each other as a society.”

The limited and limiting audience response, which reduces community to a set of over-individualized queries and a show of hands, points to a larger project of depoliticization. The polls considered thus far, for example, which take account of everything from scatology to demographics, construct a “community portrait” characterized by individual obsessions and desires. Soul mates, property ownership, and sexual desire prevail as the defining characteristics of the urban communities that Radix and MDR poll.
Diplomatic Immunities: playRites Festival (2006) – Audience Interviews

The pursuit (and exposure) of individualism through the audience poll warrants our attention because it both establishes a particular type of community and goes in search of a particular type of subject. Unlike Radix, whose polls stressed individuality but did not single out a spectator, the DI ensemble at playRites (2006) included polls that culminated in identifying and interviewing the poorest and richest persons in the room as well as the most sexually adventurous. The ensemble uses the poll in DI as a searchlight, or what this study refers to as an on-site casting call, that looks for a unique—and in some cases, aberrant—spectator with the intent to interview him or her.

In DI at playRites, the Q&A is part of an evening of events that feature spectators in the playhouse, recorded interviews with passersby on streets, neighbourhoods, and mass transit; “snapshots” of citizens from a diverse range of communities and ages, as well as pre-recorded interviews, parts of which are screened in the theatre. The spectator interview emerges out of this patchwork of representations, which in this production is comprised of dozens of communities in Calgary. But unlike the “person-on-the-street” quality of the recorded interviews, the stage subject in Diplomatic Immunities’ various Q&As is selected from the audience and must field questions from both the ensemble and fellow spectators. This “live” interview is not framed in advance as a casting call; the audience does not know that the ensemble uses polls and surveys to search out unique interview subjects. Nor are spectators aware that upon their stage entrance the ensemble vacates the stage, enters the auditorium, and lobs questions at them from off-stage.

It was mid-way through the performance of DI that the ensemble, in search of an interview subject who engaged in unusual “sexual activity” (O’Donnell’s words), rolled out the overhead projector and polled the audience on its sexual orientation, number of
sexual partners, and types of sexual relationships (i.e., monogamous, poly-amorous, three-way). But the poll, rather than immediately wrenching open a scene of risk, revealed a rather staid picture of the audience who confined their “show of hands” to the categories heterosexual and monogamous. Rather than interpret the poll results as a sign that the theatre has no place in the bedrooms of its spectators, O’Donnell interpreted the audience reserve as audience conservatism and berated Calgary spectators for neither admitting to nor engaging in “riskier” sexual practice. (Recall the observation O’Donnell made from the lip of the stage: “Any monogamous people in the house? Yeah, losers. Losers and liars.”)

In the midst of spectators who could not or would not meet the challenge of DI’s performative risk and admit to their sexual dramas, the questions themselves become a point of theatricality. Pushing the inquiry of “sexual activity” into the realm of provocation, the poll culminated in asking the audience if they were currently in a “three-way” relationship, had ever participated in an orgy, or if anyone identified as a “pervert.” The extremity of this audience address revealed a unique interview subject at the very close of the poll. Interpellated as the radically sexual other, the spectator who agreed to the onstage interview, “mister sixties man,” is identified by, and, until the final minutes of the interview, reduced to his sexual activity. Alternatively referred to in the interview by O’Donnell as “sixties man,” “orgy guy,” and at one point simply, “orgy” the interview subject is as much an object as he is subject of ensemble and audience address.

Following the audience-wide survey, the questions directed at “orgy guy” continue the gratuitous streak of the poll. Inquiries about quantity and duration predominate: “How often did you do it? How many partners?” Over and above the
assignment of sexual distinction through questions and names is the visual field of the bare stage: Sitting down stage right, his face projected onto the backdrop, “sixties man” is inserted into an aesthetic motif established in the previous Q&As and now Diplomatic Immunities. Through names, questions, and scenographic arrangement he is constructed as a specific site—a location in which the sexually risky sixties is mined and dissected for its unusual practices, numerous partners, diseases, and sexual preferences.

Pushing sixties man on the issue of sexually transmitted diseases and infections, O’Donnell overlooks his own participatory failsafe, the right to refuse questions:

O’DONNELL. So, this orgy…was it just the one time or?
SPECTATOR. No, of course not. It’s the sixties, what can you say? I used to live in a commune. We did it fairly frequently.
O’DONNELL. Where was the commune?
SPECTATOR. Up the coast of Vancouver—on Vancouver Island.
[…]
O’DONNELL. Back in the day, was there a concern of transmitting diseases? Was it a safe orgy or?
SPECTATOR. What do you say about a safe orgy? Sure, syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, the whole bit.
O’DONNELL. You mean you had all of them?
(audience laughter)
SPECTATOR. I actually managed to avoid that.
ENSEMBLE MEMBER. (from off-stage) Oh, you know what we forgot to say? We’re allowed to ask anything and he doesn’t have to answer anything…You should just know that about life anyway.
O’DONNELL. Yeah, yeah. Exactly. So have you ever had any sexually transmitted diseases?
SPECTATOR. Not that I’m aware of.
O’DONNELL. Crabs?
SPECTATOR. I’m a very boring fellow.

O’DONNELL. Anyone here ever have crabs? (to audience) Do you have any questions for this orgy guy? Any questions? Nobody is curious about how an orgy works? (Diplomatic Immunities: playRites)

So if the right to refuse is indeed a “given” of situations in both the theatre and life then why state it as a right, even in passing? Surely its interpolation (“Oh, you know what we forgot to say?”) into the queries posed by O’Donnell about diseases and infections is not, ultimately, about the protection of the interview subject’s rights. As in other Q&As, stating the right-to-refuse both dispenses responsibility onto the subject and transforms the very concept of responsibility into a point of display rather than dialogism. To refuse address, or as the excerpt above demonstrates, to avoid address (“I’m a very boring fellow”) represents an ability to respond in a coercive scenario structured by asymmetrical power relations.

The interview subject himself, and fellow audience members, realized the limits of the interview before the DI ensemble. While the questions yielded some known quantities (i.e., specificities such as numbers of people), the inquiry could not surpass the unknown (the lived experience of participation in a counter-culture and residence in a commune). However, even after the interview subject’s sexual singularity proved unproductive, O’Donnell continued to grasp for questions and lashed out at the audience for refusing to do the same: “Anyone else? I can’t believe we have an ‘orgy’ visiting here and no one has questions they want to ask him.” The insistence that the audience not only produce their own address to “orgy guy” but maintain an emphasis on his sexually radical past meant that following the accumulation of sexually risky facts and details the Q&A stalled. It was both “sixties man”—willing to reply but unwilling to sensationalize—and
the audience—willing to whoop, holler, and laugh, but unwilling to labour for the Q&A—that ultimately forced O’Donnell himself into the position of responsibility. Forced to inquire beyond body counts and diseases, O’Donnell posed questions of efficacy to the interview subject:

O’DONNELL. What do you think about life since then? I mean, that kind of thing is not so prevalent. Do you think we live in this terribly conservative way and it’s not all that easy anymore? I mean the sixties were this sort of mythical time. Do you feel that it’s got super conservative?

SPECTATOR. Oh, certainly it has. But that’s fairly standard as libertarian generations get older they always tend to swing toward fiscal, political, and sexual conservativism. We’ve seen that happen over history. That’s a given. The part that bothers me is that I thought we were going to liberate a lot of the human race. Let people, women, men, bi-sexuals, whatever, be judged on themselves. And it’s slipping back into that situation where they are being forced into roles. And I can’t really say I like it very much. (Diplomatic Immunities: playRites)

The nostalgic response of the interview subject speaks directly to the historical predecessors and ideals that inform the present work of social acupuncture. The effort to construct community in the theatre and create new modes of existence through the aegis of art is shown to be an extension of a larger counter-cultural tradition. As a member of a now defunct community, a community in past tense, “sixties man” is not simply an archive of hedonistic pleasures past but an audience member who bears all the marks of having attempted to live in a permanent “anti-structure.”25 Having lived “off the grid,” his experience resonates with the anarchism O’Donnell experienced in miniature when, in 2003, the power grid along most of the Eastern seaboard failed. But unlike the temporary mass power outage that O’Donnell experienced, the interview subject had an extended engagement with an anti-structure (or what the first chapter of this study, after Foucault,
termed heterotopia.) His admission in the Q&A of the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, drug induced states, and jealousy among partners on the commune (not transcribed here) provides insight into the realities that accompanied the anti-structure. Moreover, these details reveal that the idealism of anti-structures cannot undo the concrete realities of existing structures.

The unique viewpoints of “sixties man” make manifest the vision of community that Stephen Arnott outlines in “Solipsism and the Possibility of Community in Deleuze’s Ethics.” Arnott writes: “Community is not to be built on the basis of some universality, even a concrete one but instead may be built only upon an affirmed pluralism, which provides the context for the greatest possible originality, uniqueness, and singularity” (121). It is the differences rather than similarities within community (and among communities) that all three companies repeatedly express and privilege in their work. Thus far, the representation of difference has occurred through the scouting out of singular spectators through interviews and audience polls. These participatory modes illuminate the “unknowns” that both define and surpass all communities. Whether it is the unknown spectator in the room with a radical past or the unknown performer who, “stripped” of character, shares his “story of shame,” difference is located in a subject. At the moment of utterance, or raising of hand, the subject as a site of difference reveals alterity to reside in all groups. The issue of ethical conduct arises, however, when “siting” the other in polls and interviews inadvertently raises rather than reinvigorates the dichotomy between individual and group. What participants such as “sixties man” show is that the creative responses of spectators and participants can (almost in spite of the
conditions of their address) open up spaces of difference through their stories and physical presence.

**Dance Marathon**

In Bluemouth’s *Dance Marathon* (2009), we move from locating difference in the subject to locating it in the structure of the performance event. *Dance Marathon* is a durational event that involved both spectators, core company members, and associate artists participating as dance competitors in highly choreographed and task-oriented events—the artists work as both “plants” and unconcealed performers who may or may not be in “character.” By all appearances, *Dance Marathon* appears as occupied with the exceptionality of individuals as the other events described in part two of this chapter, since the event “choreographs” a community of competitive subjects. The 2009 production, commissioned by the play development program, Fresh Ground, and produced by the Harbourfront Centre’s Worldstage Festival, in Toronto, foregrounds competition right in the entrance of Harbourfront’s Enwave Theatre, as spectators form a line-up in the lobby. Swirling around the spectators’ pre-show chatter is a kind of adrenaline reserved for the dressing room. Poodle skirts, pointy knee-length boots, and shimmery tops sprout out of winter coats. These spectators have anticipated that they will be on display this evening. At the front of the line audience members are handed a number which they pull over their outfits like thoroughbreds preparing for a race. The casting call for *Dance Marathon* is complete. The spectators are now also dance competitors.

Alongside the emphasis on the social role of “competitor” in *Dance Marathon* is also a larger preoccupation in Bluemouth’s work with the movement and involvement (or “journey”) of participants through the piece. This emphasis on what co-artistic director

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Lucy Simic calls the “experiential” involvement of participants often emerges through games and tasks. While subjects may be singled out and “challenged” to participate, their subjective imprint (that is, the manner in which they structure the event as dance competitors) functions as part of the larger kine(a)esthetic imprint of the piece. What participants open up through the idiosyncratic movements they are instructed to make is an alternative theatrical experience that confronts the critical and creative possibilities of the performance. In a 2009 interview, Simic, citing What The Thunder Said, discusses the participation of spectators in a way that also informs our discussion of Dance Marathon:

[…] I feel like we enter into an unspoken agreement [with the spectators] and they learn very quickly that they are not going to be singled out, made to strip naked, and quack like a duck […] No, they’re going to be playing a game of baseball and then, suddenly, someone else switches. Or they’re going to be one of four guys who are holding some kind of sculpture up while something else is going on, so they’re not even necessarily the focus of attention. But somehow their competitive skill, their need to compete and hold up the sculpture, as opposed to the one who breaks that sculpture, in some way informs the theme of that show, which is about competition, wanting to be included, group dynamics, and politics, to a certain degree even, our socialization.

Simic frames the participation of spectators as competitors. The “risks” that spectators engage in, the individual fitness they demonstrate, occurs as part of a “group dynamic.” Spectators, in other words, display their athletic agility in the context of collective action. In the two participatory scenarios Simic describes, the baseball and physical sculpture scenes, there is no hierarchical difference between spectators. They are all facilitators of the stage action. Subjects may compete against each other but no one person has the advantage, or, more to the point, no one is “singled out” or acts as the sole “focus of attention.” The individual stakes required to demonstrate physical competency
are high—and, certainly, Dance Marathon capitalizes on this aspect of participation—but the athleticism that Simic describes is constituted through collective situations, games such as a baseball; so who or what we witness, the to-be-looked-at-ness of participants, is dispersed among the bodies in the site. This dispersal of the gaze onto the novelty of the event rather than the individual subject folds the bifold spectator into the larger participatory scenario. In this final example, I propose the emphasis on structure over the singularity of the individual subject prevents the ethical breaches that marked many of the relational events staged by MDR such as Halloween Q&A and Slow Dance.

Fig. 3.7. Scenes from Dance Marathon. Sources: Video stills of Dance Marathon at Harbourfront Worldstage in Toronto (2009). Centre photo by Sabrina Reeves.

Dance Marathon is instructive for the way it distributes risk among the “competitors” who make up the performance event. The equal distribution of risk means the insistence on personal responsibility is tied as much to the order of the group (and, by extension, the event) as it is to personal response-ability. At the top of the competition, the mistress of ceremonies (core member, Sabrina Reeves) states that the conditions of the performance event depend upon all competitors to comply by the same rules:

INTRODUCE REFEREE+FLOOR MANAGER / ALL RULES
SABRINA REEVES. Alright, are we feeling warmed up? Can we step it up a notch? Good, because I already see about half the room breaking Rule #1. I think this would be a good point to introduce our referee. This fine gentleman in the
black and white stripes is your referee for the evening and he has the full weight of my authority behind him. He may choose to give you a warning, or he may not. But either way, if he says you’re out, you’re out! NO arguments.

Here are ALL of the rules:

1) Your feet must be moving at all times.

2) Knees may not touch the floor, floor may not touch the knees – any configuration that involves you on your knees on the floor and you are out.

3) You will be able to change partners during the doh-see-doh’s. When we say doh-see-doh, you switch partners.

4) If you lose your partner in a derby, you have until the end of the derby to grab a new partner. If you do not find a partner in this time you are out.

5) Picking fights with other couples is strictly prohibited and will not be tolerated. In fact, foul play of any kind will not be tolerated.

6) You will be given a 5 minute rest period every hour, if you opt out of your rest period, you may not make it up at another time.

7) Sexually explicit behaviour is strictly prohibited.

So, quite simply – there are two ways you can be eliminated. One is by breaking any of these rules…and getting caught. The second way is in our official elimination rounds. (Dance Marathon n.p.)

Since risk lies with all participants one enters the theatre not at one’s own peril but as part of an event that requires each competitor to bear responsibility for the other. Some risk, particularly that which violates personal boundary and consent, has no place in the event. However, aside from the zero tolerance emphasis on “foul play” the rules and introduction of the referee do not necessarily go hand-in-glove. One can follow the rules to the letter and still be eliminated by the referee and “official elimination rounds.”

Because performance competency underlies the form of the durational competition (only the strongest and most physically supple will survive) much of the discourse of the play revolves around undoing the solidity of competitive culture through the very bodies of
competitors. On the surface, the form of *Dance Marathon* urges competition, but it is the contradictions of competition that the company wishes to stage.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Fig. 3.8.** Blindfolded competitor dancing with Simic. Source: Video still of *Dance Marathon* at Harbourfront Worldstage in Toronto (2009).

**Blindfold Box Step**

Roughly forty-five minutes into the competition, following a brief, dictatorial lesson on how to do a box step by a gymnast (played by Simic) from a fictitious Eastern bloc country, Balkanistan, a dozen embedded dancers blindfold audience-competitors with whom they are paired and proceed to dance both with and around them. The steps the dancers make around the competitors are bound by spotlights focused solely around the blindfolded couples. In a performance environment that emphasizes the spectacularity of the dancing body through conventions such as a display screen, as well as performers such as the referee and mistress of ceremonies, the competitor experiences her dancing body as part of a larger event. Simic describes her interaction with one of the participants during the blindfold box step:

> My [own] partner had left and this woman said: ‘I don’t have a partner!’ She kind of came to me. When the blindfold came on she was really awkward at first, trying really hard to learn the dance. She wanted to learn it from me because I was showing people how to do it as my character [Ramona]. And when the blindfold came on she said, ‘Oh my God, I can really hear.’ She started listening to the
music more. She was actually better able to do the dance and she commented on how it’s easier with her eyes closed. […] It’s interesting, I wouldn’t have expected that. I didn’t even think that people would talk during the blindfold section and that she kept talking through the whole thing was really unusual for me.

The blindfolding of the subject is more than a “trick” of performance. Through intimate interaction with a stranger it transforms participants so that they are inseparable from the event. Despite the spotlight positioned on the couples, and blindfold on the spectator-competitors, the blindfold box step was not the focal point of display. While the event takes place in one location its scenic design is multi-sited. A low rise stage occupies the centre of the theatre and holds a variety of performers and technicians including the mistress of ceremonies dressed in a milky white floor gown, a four piece band, and two technicians. Additionally, making endless loops around the stage on roller skates is the Dance Marathon referee who searches for static bodies on the dance floor to eliminate from competition.

Because blindfolded participants constitute one point in a multi-sited display, risking blindness to engage in an alternative theatrical experience is not conflated with risking performance. Folded into the event, blindfold participants are not the locus of the attention because they are inseparable from the larger performance. This inseparability opens up the possibility for folding to not only function as a point of concealment, a blindfold, but as a point of movement.29 During the box step, the embedded dancers stop the blind participants, position them in the centre of the spotlight, stand behind them, and have the spectators lean their weight back into the bodies of the dancers, in the style of contact improvisation. Bifold participants rest their frames in the bodies of the dancers who then prop the participants back to standing and sway from side-to-side in front of
them. The swaying transitions into a box step that circles around the spectator-competitor. Thus risking blindness becomes the precondition for a formally innovative choreography that enables amateurs and professional dancers to move together.30 Those participants who perform the critical and creative possibilities of the event gain perspectives about their own physical and aural apprehension ("Oh my God, I can really hear"). Dance Marathon paves the way for an alternative spectatorship that (through critical proximity) emphasizes difference through contact rather than discomfort.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how audiences and other types of participants respond to the risks of being absorbed in the processes and productions of companies like MDR that engage in relational work, and, to a lesser extent, site-specific companies such as Radix and Bluemouth that use relational aesthetics to pursue formal experimentation. The case studies assessed here are not systematic explanations of participation in contemporary performance, but, instead, illuminate how bifold subjects respond, and rise to, the challenge of artistic production. It is the specific choices of the participants (documented through first person accounts, interviews, and transcriptions of performance events) that allow us to speak of the ethics of participatory performance from example. A study of ethics “in use” enables us to account for the incongruities between how companies interpellate participants and how those participants react to the summons to perform. Thus, the ways in which artists call upon participants to occupy specific subject positions as motivational attendees or competitors not only constitute a dramaturgy of participant immersion but an ethics of interpellation. How bifold subjects respond to the “hail” of performance—the ways in which a teacher, homeless man, and veteran counter-culturalist take up to the summons of the dance floor or interview—is more than a
reaction to the theatrical world but an active part of its production. Their participation reveals that the movement toward mutuality and cultural difference is full of detours and false starts. That the companies in this study strive for these ideals in spite of the difficulties that arise in creation and performance contexts makes this very dialogue on participatory ethics possible. Their work implores us to imagine artistic models that not only integrate but value conduct as an essential aspect of audience labour.

Notes to Chapter Three

1 In “Performance as a Moral Act,” Dwight Conquergood adroitly summarizes the many aims of dialogic performance:
   This performative stance struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another. The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another. It is a kind of performance that resists conclusions, it is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue between performer and text open and ongoing. Dialogical understanding does not end with empathy. There is always enough appreciation for difference so that the text can interrogate, rather than dissolve into, the performer (65).

2 Grant Kester and Claire Bishop also discuss the problematics of arts funding in relational art. While Bishop argues that the aesthetic outcomes in relational work need to be prioritized over their social effects—so that art is not co-opted by political, social, and economic imperatives—Kester argues for the import of socially engaged artworks because they produce ethical, community-focused relationships. Whichever side of the debate, artists seeking state funding to support their work must, in many cases, demonstrate that their work not only holds social, but “entrepreneurial”, benefit. Jen Harvie, in “Democracy and Neoliberalism in Art’s Social Turn and Roger Hiorn’s Seizure,” notes that UK “relational art practices such as Seizure may inadvertently legitimate diminishing government investment in the arts and, simultaneously, reinforce neoliberal, entrepreneurial, opportunistic, elitist ideologies founded on social inequality at a dangerous moment when those ideologies are politically dominant” (121). This statement also speaks to the situation in Canada and the US where arts grants are becoming an increasingly politicized source of funding.

3 While specific communities (in this instance, theatre goers) constitute a community, the emphasis of my argument is how the “non-place” of the conference site encourages a stage mood that reduces the community in the room to an “assembly” of narcissistic individuals.

4 O’Donnell describes the inventive casting call he devised for Talking Creature:
   It was simple: a call for participants was made via email, in newsletters and, in the case of the Power Plant, an ad in NOW magazine. The text stated: ‘The Talking Creature is a participatory event examining the art of conversing with strangers in public. The Talking Creature examines this anxious dynamic in an ordered but random fashion, with the conviction that unfettered and fearless conversation between strangers is fundamental to freedom’” (Social Acupuncture 52).

5 Visit the Centre for Social Innovation website and click on their “About” page which details the philosophy of “social innovation,” its members, as well as details about how the centre is organized and funded.
Power dynamics and the conflicts they produce compose the crux of most traditional play texts. In his *Dictionary of the Theatre*, Patrice Pavis, for example, defines the “dynamics of [dramatic] action” as “the emergence and resolution of contradictions and conflicts between the characters and between one character and his [sic] situation” (11).

Kester outlines a spectrum of reception in modern avant-garde representation:

On the one hand we have the hapless dupe, immersed in a world of vulgar kitsch and awaiting the adjudication and correction of the artist. And on the other we have the liberated viewer-yet-to-be, whose existence is promised by the utopian potential of the ‘authentic’ image. In between lies a conscious-altering encounter with the avant-garde work of art, which free sensory experience from the chains of reified thought (153).

Social acupuncture takes its cue from Chinese medicine, specifically, the practice of chi and acupuncture. O’Donnell discusses how the physical body in Chinese acupuncture is viewed as a system defined by energetic excesses and deficiencies that may manifest as muscle or joint pain, chronic disease, or fatigue. Needles are inserted in specific points of the body to encourage blocked energy flow locked in a “holding pattern” (Social Acupuncture 48). The individual body and its attendant excesses and deficiencies are used as an analogy for the social system or the “social body.” Like the physical body, the social body suffers from energetic imbalances. In O’Donnell’s words: “an excess of power or opportunity held by one group – white people, for example – is contingent on a deficiency in other parts of the social body […] pain, restricted mobility, and worse. Classicism, racism, and sexism can all be read this way” (Social Acupuncture 47). Similarly to needles in Chinese acupuncture (a needle applied to one part of the body releases pain held in another part), the community-based artwork of social acupuncture acts as a “small intervention[n] at key junctures” to “affect larger organs,” that is to say, institutions, social relationships, and political hierarchies that privilege certain groups over others.

That dialogue often has a vital after-life as a blog post (Jane Wells), academic article (Andy Houston), email exchanges with the artists, or as images on file sharing and social networking sites like Flickr and Facebook, as well as interviews like the one I conducted with Alvarez.

In her introduction to *Perverse Spectators*, Staiger defines perverse spectatorship in the following terms:

Perversion can imply a willful turning away from the norm; it may also suggest an inability to do otherwise […] The term perverse also keeps me from necessarily assuming that deviance is politically progressive. Sometimes it is; sometimes it is not; each case must be described and evaluated with care and within the historical intersection in which it exists. (2)

Listed on their “social acupuncture” page, Mammalian’s website (mammalian.ca) includes project descriptions and images of these events.

The company’s first Q&A event took place in Toronto at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre (2005). O’Donnell summarizes the event which he and Campbell devised for the Tallulah Cabaret stage as part of the Rhubarb! Festival:

During the performance, we drew names and brought individual audience members onstage, inviting the rest of the audience to ask them questions for five minutes. There were a few rules: to gain admission to the theatre you had to submit your name, but if called, you had no obligation to participate—but you had to state this publicly. Also, the audience could ask the subject any questions they wanted, but the subject had no obligation to answer. (Social Acupuncture 59)

In early Q&A experiments, O’Donnell worked with teenagers in an attempt to expand boundaries around how we know the other. Recounting his experience of conducting Q&A in the “classroom and hallways” of two local Toronto high schools, he observes: “Relatively meaningless interaction with only curiosity as a motivating force gave the students an opportunity to get to know each other outside of entrenched identity dynamics” (Social Acupuncture 62).
Canzine is an annual one day event, hosted and organized by Broken Pencil Magazine. It is “Canada's largest zine fair and only festival of underground culture. The event features over 150 zines from across Canada, as well as all day underground film and video open screening, panel discussions, readings and more.” (This information was originally accessed on the TO Live With Culture website, which no longer exists. The site has been replaced with a blog about local arts events.)

Of the view from atop the World Trade Center, De Certeau writes: “His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was possessed into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god (92).

In 2006, I was involved in DI: Round Four as a participant-observer. I sat in on the interview with Clements, compact creative process, and production. Following this “round,” I conducted a lengthy interview with O’Donnell about his social acupuncture work. Part of this interview was published in Canadian Theatre Review’s “Views and Reviews” section as “Urban Research, Collective Report, Audience Encounter: Darren O’Donnell Discusses the Benefits of Talking to Strangers in Diplomatic Immunities.” In this chapter, my analysis of DI: Round Four redacts parts of the article and interview and extends it into a larger analysis about the role of ethics in representation that looks to non-experts for its source material.

In my interview with O’Donnell he explains that: “In our play wing, we make plays. In our social acupuncture wing, we do events that are not theatre-based...all stuff that involves strangers talking to each other” (original ellipsis).

The eight rounds culminated into the 2007 full-length touring production, DI: The End. Through interviews and personal stories, it staged a dramaturgy of the quotidian. In chapter one of this dissertation, I detail the dramaturgy of Diplomatic Immunities and contextualize the event as part of a larger docu-drama tradition that flourished around the time of Canada’s centennial. (See chapter one, “The use of everyday people and places as vital dramatic source material.”)

Conquergood outlines four ethical breeches or pitfalls in the field of performance ethnography: (1) “The Custodian’s Rip-Off,” when a researcher acquires the customs, stories, and rites of a particular group and uses or reframes that material without the consent of the group or participants; (2) “The Enthusiast’s Infatuation,” universalizes the specific experience of the other by indentifying with their unique cultural, social, and political position. Moreover, the ethnographic researcher “trivializes” the “distinctiveness of the other” (62) by collapsing the specificities of time, place, and language into generalized statements like “Aren’t all people really just alike?” (62); (3) “The Curator’s Exhibitionism” is the flip-side of the “Enthusiast.” Rather than subsume the difference of the other into the self, the ethnographer sensationalizes the difference of the other and, as a consequence, exoticizes the other; (4) “The Skeptic’s Cop-Out” is described as a “paralyzing skepticism” (64) in which the ethnographer refuses to engage or participate in the cultures of other peoples because the researcher is not a member of those cultures. Conquergood views this final ethical pitfall as the most morally reprehensible because it forecloses any possibility of knowledge or intercultural dialogue.

See Fredric Jameson’s “Marxism and Historicism” in the Autumn 1979, volume 11 issue of New Literary History.

See Louis Althusser’s “On the Materialist Dialectic” in For Marx.

In Publics and Counterpublics Michael Warner critiques the use of polls as a system that “passes as public opinion” (72):

Polling, together with related forms of market research, tries to tell us what the interests, desires, and demands of a public are, without simply inferring them from public discourse. It is an elaborate apparatus designed to characterize a public as social fact independent of any discursive address or circulation. As Pierre Bourdieu pointed out, however, this method proceeds by denying the constitutive role of polling itself as a mediating form. […] [Polling] lacks the embodied creativity and world making of publicness. Publics have to be understood as mediated by cultural
forms, even though those forms, such as polling, work by denying their own constitutive role as cultural forms. Publics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them. (71-72)

Warner’s evaluation of polling as public expression with “none of the open-endedness, reflexive framing, or accessibility of public discourse” (72) is dramatized by Mammalian, Radix, and Bluemouth’s mock use of polls which aim to reveal arbitrary, surfaced “publics.”

23 The following passage is an excerpt of Marchenski’s motivational address to the audience:

BILLY. What I’m here to do right now is—I’m like the wet nurse…I’m the guy whose job is to help you identify what it is you want. So we’re going to make a list. What do you want? I’ll start. I want to meet my biological mother. So I’ll put ‘MEET BIO MOM.’ What else? Just call them out. Billy begins to write down a list on an easel based on audience responses. Improvises with the audience. Once the page is full of items, he tosses the pen.

Billy interacts with the audience getting them to call out their desires. […] (Assembly 49)

24 In an interview with Paul Ternes (Andrew Laurenson was also in attendance for the conversation), Ternes states that another key reason for staging it in a hotel was for the purposes of touring it nationally and internationally:

[In our conversations about where else we could do this, the idea started to float around about putting it in a hotel conference room as a kind place, that has both a familiar setting and an unusual setting for this kind of performance. […] It also served a double purpose of being a location that we could then present to festivals as an easy to tour site-specific show. Doing work that’s site-specific is difficult to tour, trying to find derelict warehouse spaces in every city, and to install in those places, I mean given the time factor is difficult. Every festival that we would likely format with would have a relationship with a hotel and we could then pitch this show as being a show that we could install in the hotel that they’re dealing with.

25 I take this term from anthropologist Victor Turner who posits that subjects who engage in liminal activities (such as ritual) enter into a communal state where everyday hierarchies and relationships are suspended. He terms this state of “comradeship,” where hierarchies no longer apply, communitas or anti-structure. “[L]iminality is found everywhere; in all manner of social and religious phenomena, in the counterculture of the times, and in the arts” (Barfield 476).

26 Dance Marathon premiered in 2009 at the Harbourfront World Stage Festival in Toronto; was co-presented with Buco del Lupo as part of the 2010 Vancouver Cultural Olympiad at the Roundhouse Arts Centre; toured to the 2010 Cork Midsummer Festival in Ireland; presented as part of 2011 Incubator Arts Project’s Other Forces Festival in New York City; the 2011 Dance Massive Festival in Melbourne, and, shortly after, the 2011 Ten Days on the Island Festival, in Launceston, Tasmania; co-presented with the Harbourfront Centre, in association with Traverse Theatre and Royal Lyceum Theatre at the 2011 Edinburgh Fringe Festival; and will be part of the 2011 Dance Umbrella Festival at the Barbican Theatre in London.

27 There are two varieties of performers that audience-competitors interact with in Dance Marathon. One type foreground themselves as performers who, like the audience, have a toe-hold in both symbolic and non-symbolic realms. These include the mistress of ceremonies (Sabrina Reeves), the evening’s songstress and post-competition interviewer (Ciara Adams), drummer and tongue-and-cheek presenter of sponsors (Richard Windeyer), and the marathon referee (Daniel Petrow). The other type of performer is more entrenched in the maintenance of the theatrical world and includes twenty-one embedded dancers who are paired with spectator-competitors, as well as characters which include an aspiring actor from Coquitlam, BC (Stephen O’Connell), and a dictatorial dance instructor from a former Eastern bloc country (Lucy Simic).

28 In conversation with Simic (May 2009), I asked her why Bluemouth gravitates toward the inclusion and immersion of audiences in their work. She answered straightforwardly:

Because they’re there they can participate. It makes sense that if we’re doing a trial scene that there would be witnesses [How Soon Is Now?]; or if we are doing a dance marathon that there
would be competitors – some embedded and some not. And, then, with the baseball game [in Thunder], I mean, we could play the baseball game without them but I mean if it would be an easy, “follow these tasks,” why not include them in that image as well, so that some people also get to participate in playing baseball?

I borrow the term “fold” from Deleuzian thought as a concept that helps me move away from treating the condition of the spectator-participant as a binary. The writing of Charles Stivale, and his analysis of the fold in Deleuze Key Concepts, was particularly useful in thinking about a “folded” spectatorship. At one point in his elucidation of the fold, he writes: “[I]t is clear that the fold is what opens the otherwise closed condition of the event in its traditional philosophical sense. It includes the perception of the world as an open whole in flux and movement” (179).

The participants’ risk establishes an image that is later paralleled by the performers. For example, following the blindfold box step, O’Connell, during the competitors’ first ten-minute break, danced solo blindfolded. Daniel Petrow held a light source above him so that he had a spatial sense of his movement throughout the playhouse. Because the competitors attempted it first, O’Connell’s physical risk (dancing solo blindfolded) was not simply a moment of virtuosic display, but had a dramaturgical (and phenomenal) connection to the challenges of his audience-competitors.
Chapter Four
Parallel Participation: Bifold Audiences and Artists in Cyberspace

Previous chapters examine audience and participant involvement in site-specific performance, and reveal the very bodies of these players to be an important “scene” of action. Spectator and participant bodies can be choreographed, cast into roles, and made to compete in ways that not only comment upon but constitute the performance event. We know these corporeal scenes to be structured by risk because they challenge audience members to perform—a challenge that ranges from supplying one’s physical presence to composing a stage image or environment, to engaging in conversation and contact with other participants or artists. The case studies discussed so far show how the risks of performance, and the responsibility to maintain, or, in some cases, shoulder, the spectacle are not separate concerns for audiences. Indeed, risk and responsibility often define the “double-duty” of spectators who, in witnessing and facilitating the performance, accommodate an ethics of representation that can demand disclosure and intimacy in order to maintain the theatrical worlds and commentaries of companies.

The aim of this chapter is to explore sites connected to but not immediately governed by the risks and responsibilities of live performance events. Of central concern are three digital environments—blogs, social networking sites, and company websites—and the kinds of engagement by audiences and artists these sites generate. In environments beyond the immediate space of the performance, spectators and practitioners can be found to extend their onsite participation to online formats. These “other” sites, where audiences and artists produce articles, commentaries, and casting calls online, are relevant to our understanding of bifold participation—when the
subjectivity of spectators diverges to include that of facilitators of the creative process or stage action. On digital terrain, every subject is a bifold participant who witnesses and labours for her online content. As Jodi Dean observes in *Blog Theory*: “For the internet to function at all (as is abundantly clear in Web 2.0 and 3G mobile networks) people have to use it, add to it, extend it, play with it” (114).

Dean’s observation reveals that the internet is a space of both leisure and labour. Online subjects, she argues, labour to generate individual impact with each photo, post, and status update, and derive pleasure from viewing the ways in which this content contributes to the likes of newsfeeds and photo streams. Thus social media participants are just as crucial to the functionality of online worlds as bifold participants are to theatrical worlds. The bifold terrain of social media is fertile ground for companies like Bluemouth, Radix, and Mammalian Diving Reflex that wish to treat web utilities and web sites as more than supplementary sites—spaces to document, review, or publicize the performance event. In fact, the companies in this study, and their audiences, treat digital sites as a parallel territory where the “live” artwork facilitates online content and communication.

Practitioners and participants treat the artwork as a referent that catalyzes the very social relationships that define their networking experiences. Whether users post a production photo as their “profile picture” on a site like Facebook, or microblog about a production on Twitter, the performance content supports the insistent sociability that characterizes social media. But what becomes of the artwork as it turns to facilitate “relational processes” online? Moreover, how do we understand the actions of those audiences and artists who transpose their corporeal experiences to digital platforms? In
those contexts where the physical bodies of devisors, participants, or spectators are mediated by online networks can we speak of a continuity of subjectivity from performance site to website?

By exploring how subjects restage the performance event in social media contexts, or, in some instances, the idea of the performance event, we learn how digital networks are not only used to catalyze social relationships but spark creative possibilities within a digital environment. Thus this chapter argues that “participatory technologies” enable a parallel mode of bifold participation, one where artists and audiences, rather than aid theatrical worlds and commentaries, facilitate self-inquiry, community, and creative possibilities online.

**Online Utilities: The Uses of Posts and Pages**

The constant shifts, emerging applications, and ongoing changes to social media that characterize the World Wide Web necessitate contextualizing what is available to online users during the research phase and writing of this chapter in 2009 and 2010. At the time of writing, the web is host to a range of diverse activities including blogs, and micro blogs like Twitter; Podcasts; social networking sites like Facebook; video sharing sites, the most popular and prolific being YouTube, whose iconic slogan insists that you “Broadcast Yourself”; photo sharing sites such as Flickr, and, most traditionally, “official” web sites representing organizations and people. While social media and the internet constantly develop and change, these digital sites represent some of the locations both formal and informal where the pulse of participation and reception beats long after the curtain call.

The perspectives of the individual participant and playgoer constitute the first set
of examples in this chapter and concern those subjects who engage with the event “post-production” as bloggers. Among those blogs that are pertinent to this study are periodicals that supplement their print publications through online forums and reviews, as well as 365-a-day sites, where a blogger generates content on a specific topic or theme every day of the year.⁴ Examples of 365-a-day blogs include visual artist Lisa Congdon’s *A Collection a Day* which use photos, hand drawings, and paintings to document her myriad collection of “real and imagined” objects such as vintage doll hands (Day 260), nautical flags (Day 117), hat pins (Day 176), and bingo cards (Day 31).⁴ More popular blogs like *New Dress A Day* not only document objects and activities but use the site to publicly declare a self-challenge, in this instance, to shop for one year for “pieces that have been used and worn already,” and then tailor a dress or pair of pants “that had its’ [sic] moment back in 1976 and give it another shot today, decades later.”

In this chapter, I will draw upon a 365-a-day blog and periodical site to discuss post-production participation in Bluemouth’s 2009 premiere production of *Dance Marathon*. First staged as part of Harbourfront’s World Stage Festival, *Dance Marathon* casts the audience as competitors in a constructed, and, at times, highly choreographed scenario of a “real-time” dance marathon, which runs roughly four hours in length. It was on periodical review sites like *Dance Current* and personal websites such as *a dance a day* that I found responses to *Dance Marathon* from the perspective of a dancer who acted as one of the many “plants” in the performance and a spectator who participated as a competitor. These entries, posted between February and June 2009, reveal an expansion of participants’ and spectators’ interpretative terrain to a digital environment where the event is elaborated into a site of learning. As Neal Harvey, Helena Grehan, and Joanne
Tompkins observe in “‘Be thou Familiar, But by no means Vulgar’: Australian Theatre Blogging Practice,” blogs are cultural spaces that expand where theatrical critique and artistic debate take place. Drawing upon the work of educational researchers that study academic blogs, Harvey, Grehan, and Tompkins, support the view that blogs are vital spaces of qualitative analysis. They point to educational researcher Jill Walker who notes:

One way of looking at weblogs and emerging forms of scholarly discussion and work is that they are the popularization of research, or a new form of dissemination. If they allow ideas to be worked through it is in the same way as informal conversations in the breaks of a scholarly conference do, or perhaps at best they can replace or augment the debates that ideally (though usually not really) take place in the question sessions after traditional scholarly papers are presented. (qtd in Harvey, Grehan, and Tompkins 117)

The view that blogs popularize research is also transposable to the performance blogs discussed in this chapter. Cara Spooner’s blog for The Dance Current post refocuses an event like Dance Marathon from the peripheral perspective and movements of the dance plant. In rehearsing and reflecting upon her role as a supporting player, Spooner also takes on the position of the informal researcher who shares her experience of participatory performance with other dance “insiders.” Her alternative account shows how a practitioner of participatory performance makes use of digital space by reflecting upon her embodied experience. Because the spaces of social media provoke reflexivity, the online participant can treat embodied experience as a line of flight that departs from the event to facilitate the blogger’s preoccupations. This departure from the event exemplifies Natasha Myers’ posts on a dance a day, whereby she reconceives her experience in Dance Marathon from one of competitor to improviser. Her improvisations
inform a daily practice of which blogging forms a part. Myers’ reception of *Dance Marathon* expands from an interpretive experience within a live production to an online experience that enables her daily practice.

Just as spectators and participants extend their full-bodied participation in performance events to online formats writing blogs, the groups in this study also make use of the various networks and formats in cyberspace. Companies use social networking sites like Facebook to promote their productions, solicit participants through casting calls, and develop work online. Some of the main applications Facebook offers its over five hundred million users are personal profiles that link to other users called “friends” as well as networks and groups; a news feed where individuals and groups microblog, or post status updates that include links to articles, videos, music, and photo albums on individual profiles; and, among other features, an online chat function and internal mail. Two Facebook platforms—event pages and group pages—are especially pertinent for the ways companies such as Bluemouth use them to communicate and create online. On these pages, the ability to “look each other up” transforms company activities such as casting calls into a feature that is as much in service to the interactive display of Facebook as it is to the creative work of the companies.

Examining the (re)use of Facebook event pages as casting calls builds on this study’s interest in how companies interpellate subjects into the bifold role of witness and aide to the performance event. Casting-calls are a mode all three companies employ in advance, or at the site of the production, as a way to implicate audiences and participants into specific roles. Our discussion in chapter two of *central casting*, a blanket search for audience members that already “play” the role the company wishes to stage (i.e.,
teachers, or children), cited email as a common scouting method. In addition to listservs, we can add event pages and company websites to the ways in which groups use electronic applications to access and scout for direct participants. Each of these interconnected media shape the content of casting calls in different ways. What emerges, in comparing calls for participants across social media and sites—and how, in some cases, these differ from what spectators and participants might find in non-digital settings such as a street level poster—is the reconfiguration of online casting calls as nodes or points of communication. In digital contexts, the participant calls not only provide production information but demonstrate links to a community or set of communities.

Of interest are three online casting calls by Bluemouth, Radix, and MDR that promise personal, civic, or professional development in exchange for dancing, talking, and researching. I zero in on the primary, but in no way exclusive, platforms the companies use to solicit participants in productions between 2009-2010. These include Bluemouth’s use of Facebook to draw in volunteer dancers for Dance Marathon, and Radix’s use of their company website in order to attract spectator-participants for their fall 2010 event, YVR: Portrait of a City. Between these digital casting-calls is a material counterpoint: MDR’s use of street posters in order to attract senior citizens for You Can Have it All. The street poster reveals the differences between networked casting calls and those posted on public boards and utility boxes. Each of these media offer spectators and participants a different type of accessibility to the company and promise creative and convivial engagement through performance.

While the different hails that make up electronic and concrete sites point to how potential participants interact with companies (and their content), another area of the web
worth exploring are the interactions that take place between company members who develop work online. This final section examines how Bluemouth made unconventional use of a group page by attempting to repurpose the networking application into a developmental forum. Titled Olympic DM, company members used discussion boards and test videos to reimagine the 2010 remount of Dance Marathon for the Vancouver Cultural Olympiad. This use of online applications turned the production into an object for them to reflect upon, a point of reflexivity that took the artwork into the space of anecdote. Removed from the site of the premiere in Toronto and projecting forward to the Roundhouse venue in Vancouver, the developmental process came to resemble a story told and retold from the different perspectives of company members. Some online discussion posts by associate artists like Cameron Davis imagined the event as a critique of visual culture where live feeds surveilled the movements of spectator-competitors. These posts and videos envisaged the visual capture of audience participation by an ocular authority that tracked the physical movements of competitors.

Creative work on a social utility governed by interactive display requires transposing the very skills that companies demand of their audiences in performance events to online contexts. In order to imagine the potential direction of a show, for example, company members assume a bifold position of sender and receiver, so that their content functions both as a point of visible display and a mark of interpretation. Participatory technologies thus constitute a parallel mode of interpreting and doing akin to what is demanded at the site of the performance. Online, the live event acts as a signifier that facilitates research and self-knowing, demonstrates community, and reconfigures the very parameters of the artwork.
Post-Production Participation, Part One: The Dance Current Blog

As a mode of digital participation blogs take inquiry into the space of both the popular and the daily. The blog is an informal site of knowledge that, in the instance of the bilingual Canadian dance magazine, The Dance Current, is a place where specialists and those with an interest in Canadian dance can learn about the regionalized dance scene, and, crucially, learn from each other. Blog posts on The Dance Current site are linked through “Features,” “Interviews,” and “News” on the magazine website and cover a diversity of genres including modern, ballet, Indian, belly-dance, dance theatre, and multi- and interdisciplinary performance. The Dance Current also co-hosts the blog, Thinking Out Loud: The Study Group,7 with the Toronto-based company, Dancemakers, and is host to two additional websites, Destination dance-danse,8 which lists dance performances across Canada, and dance passport,9 a “video blog [vlog] dedicated to highlighting dance on the web.” Information about the current print edition, reviews and responses to productions, forums, subscription packages, bios of regular contributors, information about the publication, and links to Canadian dance organizations, companies, and festivals are also available on The Dance Current site.

The Dance Current blog is a public space that engages an online readership who, judging from the specialized content and contributors, constitute an “expert” public. More than an online supplement, the blog is an interconnected resource where dance experts not only learn from each other but (re)perform the issues that make up Canada’s regionalized dance community on digital terrain. Between January 2008 and June 2010, the blog published thirty-nine posts, the majority of which (twenty-four) were published in 2009. These posts appear in order of date, and like most public blogs contain archives on every page of the site. Material is published in both French and English, although, a
majority of posts appear in English. These posts include interviews with artistic directors, choreographers, dramaturges, and dancers, some of which are reprinted from, or in some way connected to, the print publication, and featured in the section, “In the Studio.” The blog also publishes topical articles on national and international dance, a regular posting called “Tips for Teachers” (published mostly in French), calls for Dance Current web and print writers, job postings, and the occasional recipe. In short, these articles treat the blog as a site to think about dance from the perspective of an expert or “insider.” However, The Dance Current blog not only represents a destination for followers of Canadian dance but produces a geographically and culturally distinct knowledge about professional dance through interviews, analysis, and “tips” by contributors. In this way, the social media site both exemplifies the popularization of knowledge to a digital environment—expanding the possibilities of “where we go to learn” (Reid 194)—and shapes how we understand Canadian dance.

The Dance Current conforms to three blogging formats—personal, topical and advice posts. These overlapping formats characterize Cara Spooner’s June 2009 blog post, “Participatory Performance: Looking On From Inside.” As one of two posts published in June of that year, it is a mix of both the personal and the topical. Placing her perspective (and narration) at the centre of the event, she provides an “on the ground” account of her direct participation, and facilitation of audiences in Dance Marathon. In a prefatory statement by The Dance Current (not common to any of the other blog posts), the editor notes: “The concept of participatory or interactive art has been rising in dance performance of late. Toronto-based dancer Cara Spooner was an ‘insider’ participant in the Bluemouth event and here recounts her experience” (italics in original). Participatory
performance is framed for online readers as a current trend in the contemporary Canadian
dance scene, a “buzz” worth reading about.

That being said, Spooner’s first person account of her experience as an embedded
dancer does not entirely depart from print articles published about Dance Marathon.
Melanie Bennett’s “So They Think I Can Dance: A Review of Bluemouth Inc.’s Dance
Marathon” in Canadian Theatre Review narrates her attendance from a spectator-
competitor’s perspective. Similarly, Bruce Barton’s article for Performance Research,
“‘Stop Looking at Your Feet’ bluemouth’s Dance Marathon and inter/actual
dramaturgy,” which situates the piece and the company in the traditions of postdramatic
theatre, relational aesthetics, and performative realism (17), is in part told from an
insider’s perspective since Barton acted as the developmental dramaturge for the
production.10 Like Bennett’s and Barton’s, Spooner’s article is included in a performing
arts periodical; the difference, as already noted, is that her publication through The Dance
Current blog situates her writing within the culture of the blogosphere and the online
formats of personal testimony and topical trends. Characterized by immediacy, the
unique ability to self-publish, and a self-organized readership, who may, as I did, access
the article via links from an external website, the post expands where we go to learn
about participatory performance.

I should note that Spooner is not a regular blogger – her post is a “one-off” – nor
does she provide a review of the production, which is typical of many performing arts
blogs. Moreover, her reflection “from inside” is a statement of her personal experience
and not the authorized voice of the core ensemble. Planted dancers were brought into the
World Stage production following a two-year devising process that took place in New
York, Montreal, and Toronto. But it is precisely her position in the performance as a facilitator that makes for such a vivid account. Because we read the event from her perspective as a plant in the competition, we are privy to the unofficial script of the supporting player. However, in this instance, the cast that Spooner supports is largely composed of audience members, who, in addition to the Bluemouth ensemble, numbered two hundred per evening. As Spooner indicates here, her choreography was contingent upon the dancing bodies of spectators:

My focus isn’t winning; it’s the participants’ experience. To intentionally integrate them into the complexity of the show and allow them to fully experience the Dance Marathon’s potential is my sole purpose. I play a supporting role (along with the other planted dancers and Bluemouth members), assisting the protagonists on their journey in the marathon. We blindfold them, we teach them dance steps, we play with their emotions, break out in spontaneous choreography, whisper monologues into their ears and direct their focus to multimedia screens. We support the event; they live in it.

The job description of supporting player, which speaks directly to the interests of this dissertation in participatory stagehands, facilitators, and co-creators, includes a variety of tasks both kinesthetic and theatrical. These tasks revolve around animating the audience, the “protagonists” who through various tasks act as the competitors in the marathon, and maintaining the kinetic dynamism of the event through group choreography, blindfolds, and games. Such tasks represent a shift in the focus of this study, which documents, and argues for, the ways in which audiences aid in constructing the theatrical worlds and rebellious commentaries of a given company. In the instance of Dance Marathon, it is the artists, specifically facilitators such as Spooner, who labour on behalf of their audiences and “assist” them “on their journey.”
The participatory event that Spooner “supports” and her subsequent reflection online in a performance blog are not distinct from one another. That is to say, there is a link between the conditions of an audience-centred event like Dance Marathon and personal/topical blogging. Namely, both can be said to “stage” the individual subject—the writer’s voice, or performing body, and physical as well as narratological trajectory that compose the corporeal and textual scenes which makeup production and post. Thus Dance Marathon lends itself to the “post-production” space of the blog precisely because both event and blog are concerned with assigning value to individual impact.

Using the identity of “competitor,” Dance Marathon stages a performance oriented around individual subjectivity. The spectator does not simply identify with the situation but has a physical stake in the event. The basic expression of this bodied spectatorship is the number each spectator-competitor wears until eliminated, and matched “in foot shapes taped on the floor” (Spooner). The spectator-competitor is an accounted for, tested, and monitored throughout the evening, and as the numbers dwindle through various elimination rounds, competitors vie to be “number one,” the last couple standing.

Numbers also shape the world of the blogosphere and the identity of “blogger.” Similarly, these numbers concern standing out, or vying for distinction in the saturated textual world of the blogosphere, which search engine Technorati currently indexes at “[m]ore than 133,000,000 blogs” (Bradley). Bloggers can track the number of readers who visit their site, rank in “top ten” lists, or receive wide circulation through blogrolls, comments, and guest blog posts, to name a few strategies. Scholar and blogger Jodi Dean discusses the import that “stats” might have for the average blogger: “The one who blogs
is more than just, say, a data-processor. She is also creative, a journalist, commentator, artist, pundit, celebrity. When typepad [blogging service] feeds me my stats, it is feeding me an identity [...]” (“Critique of Blog.Reason”).

The hypothetical “day job” of the blogger is, so the argument goes, less definitive to her subjectivity than her online identity as writer. The bifold subjectivity of the data-processor, who in the blogosphere “is also creative, a journalist,” resonates with the kind of site-specific spectatorship I describe in this study. Spectators, I argue, perform a “double-duty,” one in which they are both witnesses of and aides to the action in creation and/or performance. While the data-processor-blogger and spectator-participant obviously enact different bifold subjectivities, it is worth considering them in relationship to one another because both become subjects of impact when they enter representational sites. In the space of the blog and performance, these subjects have an audience, and view themselves as players in a social drama of political, cultural, and artistic significance.

Cast as a “plant,” Spooner’s visibility as a performing subject emerges not at the site of performance like spectator-competitors, but in the representational space of the blog. Despite the complete immersion of all participants, Spooner’s blog post shows how the duties of the stagehand/facilitator are viewed as actions that produce meaning only when they facilitate the performing other. She describes two instances where plants were largely overlooked when dancing independently of the competitors:

There were two allotted ‘rest periods’ in the show during which most audience members moved to the lobby to eat popcorn and re-hydrate. The select few who chose to stay in the theatre experienced a different event than the others. As the participants rested, subtle choreography performed by the planted dancers eventually emerged. Rolling on the floor, and slumping and stretching movements made it difficult to tell if the choreography was planned or not. Some audience
members would walk right through the group, completely unaware. The fact that this tiny section was only seen by a select few each night was not a disappointment to Bluemouth Inc. Each participant experienced the show completely differently. […] Their own intimate interactions occupied their attention and perhaps the dance they shared with their partner was far more meaningful than seeing the rest period dance, or watching a duet […]

Even when the embedded dancers, which numbered more than a dozen, assembled to perform a dance they occupied an unmarked position from those spectators in the lobby or still others who did not register a performance in progress. Certainly, the liminal space of the rest period and “subtle” or semi-quotidian choreography reveal Bluemouth’s preoccupation with performative and theatrical moments and the ways in which these modes productively collide. But it also points to the uneven preoccupation spectator-competitors often have with their own experience in the marathon. In a May 2009 interview, Bluemouth co-artistic director Lucy Simic discusses how this absorption into the world of the competition seized even those spectators who had an intimate familiarity with the company’s work:

Angela Rollins, who is on our board, talked about her experience in Dance Marathon at Harbourfront Centre, which, by that point, had even more situations where the audience is creating their own experiences in the piece, dancing. […] For Rollins, she wanted even more opportunities to be the protagonist of her own evening of Dance Marathon. She saw herself as the lead in her own play, and the person she was partnered with was the supporting character of her experience. Sometimes she understood why we would interrupt that and create these situations, possibly it was the tasks like the derbies, the eliminations, the exit interviews, but there were times where she was unsure as to why we were interrupting her play.
A spectator such as Rollins, caught up in her own performance, positions her dancing body at the centre of the event. The tasks and dancing partners “support” her experience. The implications for plants such as Spooner is that they must find an audience in post-production spaces such as blogs, or in sites where the spectators are not directly invested in the competition, in order to assign their dancing bodies signification. Spooner’s post, narrated largely from the perspective of a plant, and situated in the thick of the performance, does not depose the competitor as “protagonist of her own evening,” but it does give speech to her experience as a “supporting player.” That which was missed in the lobby or passed by in the theatre is framed and textualized for the online reader. Moreover, the structure of the post, organized around three rules from the competition, and the style, such as the opening, which employs performative writing to replay the event, folds the reader into the performance in a way that mirrors the spectator-competitor’s immersion into the marathon.

Spooner’s “insider’s” account is best suited for a readership of “insiders” like The Dance Current’s who would be curious about the conditions of professional dancers in a participatory performance. Her post opens up a space of reflection that ultimately instructs readers about an emerging mode of spectatorship structured through amateurism and a quotidian dance vocabulary. Her personal/topical post, while stylistically distinct, belongs to a larger body of informal research on The Dance Current, such as the feature, “In the Studio” on the amateur group Old Men Dancing, a link on the dancepassport vlog to Acid City Magazine, which features group choreography of citizens performing basic disco moves at Toronto’s Yonge-Dundas Square in Light On Your Feet: Disco Night, as part of the 2009 Luminato Festival, and notes from Thinking Out Loud: The
Study Group on “YouTube and ideas of amateurism.” These articles, links, and notes represent a growing body of online research about (and from) those participants involved in the multi-faceted arena of participatory performance.

**Post-Production Participation, Part Two: a dance a day blog**

Spooner’s blog post, which details her support of the dance movements of competitors, is a professional account on a site that circulates “practitioner knowledge.” However, we know that blogs support a broad range of knowledges that stretch the authority of who can debate what and how. Among those subjects expanding the boundaries of expertise in digital space are spectators. While online formats mediate and even manage the experiences of users through specific applications and standard page layouts, these formats are used to facilitate a receptive experience that extends the parameters (and very structures) of the performance event into other sites. One such example is Natasha Myers’ blog, *a dance a day*, part of a subset of blogs and other internet related sites that engage in 365-a-day projects. Using mostly photos and captions to document aspects of daily life, these projects initiate a particular type of self-fashioning that prioritizes personal experience. *a dance a day* uses the format of year-round self-performance and pushes off it to take up epistemological questions such as: “what constitutes a dance? what is a beginning? a middle? or end of a dance? what are some of the many places a dance can arise from? why dance? where can dance happen?” (punctuation in original).

Between December 2008 and December 2009, Myers, an anthropologist based at York University, in Toronto, improvised a different dance each day that ran no more than a few minutes in length. Many of these “tiny dances” or what she calls “improvisational conversation[s]” occurred in the private space of her study, but some also moved out into
local parks, or were performed during trips out of town, on the Brooklyn bridge, in fields, and along streets in her local Toronto neighbourhood. The dramaturgical elements consisted of physically responding to and embodying texts that she herself generated or drew upon from novels, poems, and critical works such as Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet*, and theatre theory like Elin Diamond’s *Unmaking Mimesis*. These dances were rarely witnessed by others (save for her house cat, Alice, the occasional passerby, or a friend) and were framed as “daily practice” rather than public performances. Because Myers acts largely as her own audience, the blog entries are deliberately more accessible than her dances. In this reverse performance, where the archive itself is the public event, Myers reflexively scripts her disappearance through media such as line sketches and paragraph-long text entries that reflect upon and allude to rather than correspond to her corporeal expressions.

There is, however, one blog entry that contains two slightly unfocused photos of Myers, the second of which includes her spinning on a dance floor with a partner. Posted on Friday, February 6th, 2009, “#47, dance marathon” represents Myers’ only improvisatory dance that is shaped by and enveloped within another live performance rather than a text. In entry #47, Myers does not describe her own dancing in nearly the same type of poetic detail as her other posts, but uses succinct, almost formulaic language: “Danced my ass off. Barefoot. Getting down with friends on the dance floor.” Rather than the specificities of Myers’ own dancing, her description is largely displaced onto the text and movement of several of the core members of the Bluemouth ensemble: “My mouth was agape at the final performance, when the Mistress of Ceremonies [Sabrina Reeves] delivered a 10 minute poem/story about the rain, women, love, the
weight of stones and wolves. She set my heart aflame. I still remember #25 [Stephen O’Connell] whose blindfolded solo just caught me. Still reeling.”

Myers is, of course, “still reeling” in the figurative sense, but the event has inspired her daily performance blogging practice. The subject position of “competitor” does not remain on the dance floor but is carried over from the dance floor to the virtual space of the blog. In her entry, Myers identifies herself by her assigned competitor number and speaks to her direct investment in the competition: “I was #30, tragically eliminated at one of the last rounds.” But as consuming as her role is, it does not confine her experience or reception to the teleology of event—last couple standing wins. Her position as a bifold participant, as a facilitator of the event, and as a witness of it, is not limited to the fanaticism that characterizes major sports spectatorship or direct competition, but is open to the theatrical breaches in the competition, such as O’Connell’s blindfold solo, and those scenes that announce themselves as formal “play,” such as Reeves’ extended monologue. She is without doubt the “protagonist of her own evening” but this does not oppose her ability or desire to observe theatrical display. In fact, her post reveals that her physical immersion in the event offers a heightened perception of Dance Marathon. Because her relationship to the piece is experienced both through affect (i.e., “set my heart aflame”) and embodiment (“I was #30”), that inseparability from the event changes her very perception of it as an aesthetic object whose author-ity resides solely with its artistic devisors. Like the subjectivity of “competitor,” authorship over the event can travel to other sites such as the self-focused space of the 365-a-day blog.
The day following entry #47 and Myers’ participation in Dance Marathon, entry and dance #48, titled “what level of experience are you committed to having?” continues to push off Bluemouth to facilitate her improvisational contact and online reflections. This question can be found on the group’s website, bannered at the top of each page, along with the company’s name, so that it is continuously posed to visitors as they move throughout the site. Myers takes the question that Bluemouth poses to visitors and puts it to herself as an “answer” that she then uses to facilitate a dance improvisation in which her physical articulations stimulate perception and mindfulness:

I ask a question: ‘What is my path through all of this?’ And the answer is: ‘What level of experience are you committed to having?’ I’ve heard this before (bluemouthinc.com). It resonates now in new ways. I emerge from the journey and begin a dance. Feeling a surge of power. Extraordinary power. Limbs long, wide, expansive. Rooted. I stay with the sensation until my limbs release and my body crumples inward. Released.

It is a warm, melting night. 5 degrees Celsius. The city is humid, the sky bright and overcast. Alice wanders through the house crying as I journey and write.

(parenthetical reference in original)

Myers’ self-focused project does not draw a line between (or around) Dance Marathon and dance a day; rather the dances are treated as part of an event-based spectrum where a question that directly concerns the challenge of a Bluemouth event is used to provoke Myers’ own performance of self-knowing.

The question of “commitment” posed to visitors on each page of the company site is accompanied by an unsettling image: a man, silhouetted, hanging from a noose. A largely concealed citation (save for those like myself who have closely followed the company’s work), the image is from Bluemouth’s 2003 collectively created piece American Standard; the silhouetted figure is a character from the play, a terrorist (now
dead) who addresses the question of experience directly to the audience. Because he invokes the rhetoric of a motivational speaker, the character mocks introspection and individual “experience” by positioning himself as a motivational guru—he asks the audience: “On a scale from 1 to 10 ask yourself how would I [points to himself] quantify the quality of your life?”20 The terrorist, literally rendered null-and-void by the noose, performs a scenario in which experience can be quantified, and the very question of “quality of life” dislocated from the experience of living.

However, on the website, despite the fact that the image accompanies the banner as “wallpaper” so that it too appears on each page, the question is no longer an indictment of individualism and the rhetoric of personal empowerment. Rather, it is an invitation, and an address to a particular type of spectator who might be interested in a “level” of personal engagement and direct “commitment” to a performance. As of late May 2010, the homepage contained four short videos, including two from Dance Marathon productions in Toronto and Vancouver that showed spectators in the grips of competition. The question, resituated on the website in relation to the videos, thus configures spectatorship as an embodied event. It is a dare-devil address that returns us to the concept raised in chapter three of spectator response-ability, which is the notion that participatory scenarios with their implicit challenge to perform can often, unwittingly, turn into displays of spectator competence (i.e., the ability to dance, answer skill testing questions, or sustain the demands of a durational event). In the instance of the website and Dance Marathon, however, response-ability, rather than the repressed or unspoken text of the event is framed as the very issue to be dramatized and, ultimately, interrogated.
Certainly Myers’ blog entry on *Dance Marathon* attests to the implicit demands of competition, however theatrical, to perform optimally. Further, her brief blog entry shows that those commentaries made in *Dance Marathon* about personal ability and peak performance are the province of the artistic devisors. In other words, the spectator in *Dance Marathon* rehearses response-ability, witnesses the company’s various commentaries upon it, but (like most productions) must reserve her own discrete articulation following the event. Online, this articulation can depart in a number of different directions to facilitate personal reflection and self-representation. Thus on *a dance a day*, the very the question of risk aides the self-inquiries and creative possibilities of the performance blogger.

**Three Online Casting Calls: Social Media, The Street, and Company Sites**

Both the blogs in “Post-Production Participation” demonstrate that inquiry, whether it takes place on a 365-a-day or periodical site, facilitates online modes of bifold participation. The spectators and dancers that labour and leisure in these digital spaces may actually identify with the event in order to engage in virtual dialogues that stretch past the production proper. However, blogs are here one among many forums where participants and practitioners engage in online expression. Facebook, perhaps the most ubiquitous of social media sites, is also a parallel space of subjectivity where identity is manufactured through content. On Facebook, you are your information: no user can post information anonymously, or, for that matter autonomously, from her online identity. This networked display is key to Facebook applications such as event pages, which Bluemouth used to solicit volunteer dancers for *Dance Marathon*. In hailing potential participants through the event page the company demonstrates linkages to a regionally
diverse set of collaborators. A counterpoint to this interconnected hail is MDR’s street poster solicitation for the relational piece, *You Can Have it All*. Contrasting the event page and poster we see how the content of casting calls are affected by the media in which they are presented. Moreover, in scrutinizing the conditions of web pages and posters we learn that the pressures of interpellation vary from city streets to digital sites. The hail of the street poster interpellates through intervention—signaling through the street noise to potential participants. MDR’s street intervention is compared to yet a second online casting call: the Radix company website, which interpellates through incorporation. In *YVR: Portrait of a City*, the company solicits participants by proposing to incorporate their memories and experiences of Vancouver, which is characterized as a “disappearing” city, into a multimedia event. The range of hails discussed, from those that demonstrate online communities, to those that intervene and incorporate subjects into artistic practices, show the relationship between interpellation and community in the construction of participatory performance events.

**Event Page: “Call for Dancers and Actors for Dance Marathon”**

Social media like Facebook possess a range of hails to both potential participants and those “friends,” fans, and artists already dedicated to a particular company’s work. Often, a subject may find herself addressed with the challenge to perform right in her email inbox or Facebook newsfeed. Such was the case in early February 2010, when Bluemouth co-artistic director Stephen O’Connell posted a status update on Facebook that appeared as one of several items on my daily newsfeed. Initially situated between a friend’s update about a demanding fitness instructor, and my sister-in-law’s anxiety about
driving a standard vehicle, O’Connell’s post was not a personal update but a call in bold for “DANCERS AND ACTORS FOR ‘DANCE MARATHON.’”

I clicked on the call which took me to an event page, a Facebook application used primarily to invite friends to everything from housewarming and birthday parties to public demonstrations, plays, and corporate events. However, the event page, while no doubt a promotion for the 2010 production of Dance Marathon at the Vancouver Roundhouse Arts Centre was not a general invitation to potential spectators turned competitors. Rather the event page was a casting call for volunteer dancers. (The very role of supporting player or “plant” which Cara Spooner and a dozen other dancers performed in Toronto when the production first premiered in 2009.) The company repurposed the event page as a call for interdisciplinary artists to participate in Dance Marathon. The page details Bluemouth’s 2010 production partners, Vancouver-based company, Buco Del Lupo, and the producing festival, the Vancouver Cultural Olympiad. Additionally, it includes the type of performer Bluemouth is in search of: “[A]ctors with some movement training as well as dancers with either Modern or Swing experience who have an interest in interdisciplinary theatre.” While there is no
remuneration for the role of embedded dancer, professional development is emphasized
as one of the benefits of performing in Dance Marathon: “Dancers and actors will have
an opportunity to work closely with this international collective [Bluemouth], gain
valuable experience working with both movement and text, and be part of a truly
invigorating piece of theatre.” These advantages are situated alongside the working
conditions which are framed as “interactive, duration-based […] [and] inspired by the
physically grueling spectator sport of Depression-Era North America.”

How did these demanding conditions effectively recruit participants? One answer
is Vancouver’s independent performance scene. Direct contact with spectators, mutual
observation of performer and audience, and even endurance are exemplary of local events
such as the HIVE festival, the Vancouver Art Gallery sponsored event, Fuse, and the
annual Dancing on the Edge Festival. Thus the participatory milieu of dance and theatre
in Vancouver ground descriptors in the call such as “interactive” and “duration-based.”
But just as influential as the performance milieu is the Olympic context, and the
distinction of being on an international stage as part of the Cultural Olympiad. Therefore
the casting call, which foregrounds difficult working conditions as the very terms of its
appeal, not only promises the dancer a part in the performance, but a role in a larger
cultural phenomenon.

The use of a web utility like Facebook to scout for dancers and promote a large-
scale cultural event, one that promises “an Olympic volunteer opportunity unlike any
other,” is fitting. Both social media site Facebook and Dance Marathon put the individual
subject at the centre of an interconnected experience defined by networking and
participation. In “Facework on Facebook: The Presentation of Self in Virtual Life and its
Role in the US Elections,” Stefeen Dalsgaard notes: “With the advent of MySpace and Facebook […] the person as the centre becomes the holistic entity defining and encompassing his/her own sociality if not ‘society’” (10). This user-centrism is similar to the centrism that defines Dance Marathon and the spectator as the “protagonist of her own evening.” In addition to this link between the sociality of the web and spectator-centrism is how Facebook transforms the very casting call into a node or connection point. In other words, the event page acts as a site of interconnectivity between users.

The casting call as a site of connection and promotion is exemplified in the various applications that form the event page. The central application for users invited to an event is the option to RSVP on site. Once users indicate their availability this status is publicly registered in sidebars that confirm which “guests” are “attending, not attending, or maybe attending.” Guests can post comments on the event page “wall,” and these typically concern why or why not they can attend. In the instance of the Dance Marathon event page, however, there is little purpose to the RSVP option since it is suggested that users contact Buco del Lupo for more information about volunteering. Because the page administrator, in this case Bluemouth co-artistic director, Stephen O’Connell, can make his guest list public so users see who else is invited, the RSVP application assumes a social (as opposed to both social and functional) purpose. The application becomes a way for Bluemouth to demonstrate its relationships and literally display its immediate community of associate artists, interested onlookers, and potential volunteers. So, for example, two friends listed as “not attending” the event on the afternoon I visited the page were dancers Elijah Brown and Sandrine Lafond. Involved in the second workshop phase of Dance Marathon in Montreal, where they are based, Brown and Lafond are not
potential volunteers but associate artists of the company. In placing a casting call on an event page the purpose of the call extends into a display of company identity.

Because the event administrator made the event page “open,” these guests could “share” the page with other friends or “export” the invitation to another site. The guest list of associate artists, colleagues, and supporters as well as the open status of the event exemplify Dalsgaard’s observation that “the fundamental aspect of displaying who one is by displaying one’s friends [which] is common to all of the social networking sites” (10).

Other event and group pages Bluemouth created to directly promote Dance Marathon to spectators garnered interest from literally thousands of Facebook users. For example, for the Toronto production, O’Connell states that “almost 3,000 people were...
contacted about the show through [F]acebook.” However, following the productions in Toronto, Cork, Ireland, and Vancouver interest “seem[ed] to have dropped off”—for example, the Bluemouth group page currently includes a modest 290 members. The seesaw of numbers, from a casting call first distributed to a community of forty networked artists and acquaintances, promotion to thousands of potential spectators, and a group page with hundreds of members, points toward the way users understand and relate to online content. Such content certainly communicates a “buzz” or a trend, and can effectively lobby potential patrons, but, as witnessed in the repurposed casting call, online content can also express what Jodi Dean calls “reflexive communication,” when we produce and engage in “communication for its own sake” (95). This commitment to reflexive communication over functionality may explain why few of those directly invited to the event page needed to know about the call for volunteer dancers. The call was a summons to a particular, interconnected community to confirm their membership by adding the page to others, forwarding it, or posting it as a status update in their news feed. While the casting call for Vancouver volunteers promises a direct way of knowing physical endurance in the context of the Olympiad the page itself extends—and confirms—the way Bluemouth, and its community know each other in a digital terrain.

**City Streets: “Are you over 65 and still thinking about sex?”**

I wheel my bicycle along Wellington Street during the lunch hour rush in downtown Toronto’s financial district. Swift-footed walkers in business suits weave around my cargo looking through and past me. Pedestrians on these streets treat one another as city static, a noisy backdrop of passersby and car horns against which the privileged signal—the signal of the cell phone, blackberry, or iphone—transmits a
disembodied voice or text. Content to be interference, I amble along in the mode of the flâneur, not fighting distraction but welcoming its many guises in the form of steel and concrete edifices, street food, and city walkers. Perhaps it is because I am already a distracted observer, “reading the street,” to borrow Franz Hessel’s words, that the poster on the utility box catches my eye. “Are you over 65 and still thinking about sex?” The question, which parodies medical studies that scout the general public for research subjects, is posed in bold under a company name, Mammalian Diving Reflex. Energized by this irruption of the familiar on Wellington Street—it is not every day, after all, that an independent theatre company one researches makes their presence known in the financial district—I take out my cell phone, snap two photos, and message myself the images.

Fig. 4.3. A solicitation to seniors: Mammalian Diving Reflex’s call for You Can Have it All

Unlike the event page, the street poster is not a site of networking but a piece of information that is extraneous to a social network. With no “proper” place on the street to publicize its message, posters are not the “valid letters” that compose the scene of the city but noise which most pedestrians overlook (or “read” past). Unlike the aggregate flow of information on the Facebook newsfeed, or similar sites, which work through linking content, the street poster must interrupt the flow of the walker, literally stop the
pedestrian in her tracks, in order to capture her attention. However, the poster not only encroaches on the street, taking up illegal residence on a utility box; its question encroaches on the private lives of passersby. The explicit inquiry of the poster attempts to signal through the static in order to (graphically?) hail those passersby “over 65” into a creative contract: “Mammalian Diving Reflex is […] making a show about aging and sexuality, and would like to talk to you.”

The request to talk (“just talk!!”), framed here as an interview with the company, obscures the participatory labour of the event. The conversations between MDR and those subjects who responded to the casting call took place between the summer and fall of 2009 and culminated in two evening performances at the University of Toronto’s arts and recreation facility, Hart House, in mid February 2010. Entitled You Can Have it All, and presented by the university-run Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, the evening featured the results of these conversations in sessions that included personal anecdotes, the research subjects themselves talking about their sex lives, a film screening, and questions from the audience. Like Bluemouth’s call for Dance Marathon plants, MDR’s call for senior citizens in You Can Have it All is a specialized search for volunteers who can inhabit and constitute the event. But the participation and testimony of seniors not only composes the event, it facilitates MDR’s larger inquiry into age, competency, and expertise. In the promotional material for the two-part evening, these participants were referred to playfully as “The Council of Expertly Aging Experts on Aging” whose ages combined represented “over 595 collective years of making it happen” (Mammalian Diving Reflex, “You Can Have It All”). The difference, however, between soliciting these specialists and those on the dance floor is that while Bluemouth reaches out to an existing
community in the hopes of attracting volunteers, MDR reaches out to strangers in the hopes of attracting, and forging, a new community. That is to say, the street poster addresses a still imagined community between MDR and self-selected senior citizens.

Michael Warner, in *Publics and Counterpublics*, proposes that texts which are addressed to imagined subjects, or what he refers to as “unrealized addressee[s],” are constituted through the peripatetic rhythms of the strangers who find them: “Without the idea of texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people, we would not imagine a public as an entity that embraces all the users of that text, whoever they might be. Often the texts themselves are not even recognized as texts […] but the publics they bring into being are still discursive in the same way” (68). The street poster—partially torn and encroached upon by another poster by the time I eyed it on Wellington—summons a subject into a social drama with no less veracity than a networked event page. The difference between poster and event page thus lies in what Warner calls the “constraints of circulation” such as the “means of production and distribution” which influence who is hailed, where that subject can access the text, and to what interpretive communities she belongs (73). These circulatory constraints shape both the networks of known relations that structure the casting call on the event page and the still imagined network of unknown strangers that structure the call on the street poster.

Because the poster addresses an unknown public its destination can fall into any number of hands, or camera phones, for that matter. I am not the “imagined addressee,” to borrow Warner’s words, the senior citizen who *still* thinks about sex, but I am the immediate public of the poster. And I form its public neither by happenstance nor by the shock of a semi-titillating question but as a subject who understands herself as part of an
on-going conversation on participatory and relational performance. It is that very cross-section of communities that is not only the hallmark of MDR’s work but relational work on the whole. In her introduction to Public’s special issue on “New Communities,” Nina Möntmann states: “Bringing together individuals with different knowledge and experience in a collaborative process is the essential factor that distinguishes projects with experimental communities from […] a community […] rigidly defined by one specific feature” (14). It is precisely this diverse set of subjects that MDR seeks to assemble through their street search. The poster does not represent a lack of digital savvy on the part of the company, which makes use of Facebook event and group pages, Twitter, and boasts an extensive website, but is a way to access a broader public. These subjects are being hailed on the street because they may not make use of social media like Facebook. MDR’s casting call is therefore a counterpoint to digital casting calls both in terms of who it attempts to interpellate and the way in which it goes about hailing those potential participants.

**Websites: YVR: Portrait of a City**

If MDR’s street poster calls out to an imagined set of participants, and Bluemouth’s event page confirms an existing community through its network of “friends,” then company websites like Radix Theatre Society do both: they imagine and confirm the participation of potential spectators. One such example is Radix’s call for YVR: Portrait of a City, a co-production with Vancouver’s Roundhouse Community Centre slated for the fall 2010. The company describes the project as part “media installation,” part “performance piece,” and proposes to work with participants to “explor[e] the changing faces of the city of Vancouver.” The casting call, located on the Radix homepage, states that the company is “looking for Vancouverites of all ages and backgrounds who are
interested in sharing their stories, sounds and images in a fun and relaxed atmosphere […] no experience is necessary.” The material that participants generate will be assimilated into the production as “a ‘community archive’ that will be the environment for an interactive media performance.” Built into the online casting is the anticipation of a face-to-face encounter with other “Vancouverites,” “prominent […] artists,” as well as a performative engagement with the city through “sound walks,” “storytelling,” and “paper theatre.”

Radix’s casting call is emblematic of a site-specific dramaturgy that positions its spectators as amateur agents who facilitate the theatrical worlds and critical commentaries of the companies. But in addition to highlighting the potential of spectators as facilitators and co-creators, Radix’s online casting call points to the possibility of a performative pedagogy in which spectators “[l]earn about paper theatre, audio and media art” (my emphasis). Similar to MDR’s Haircuts by Children which teaches children to cut and style hair in advance of the performance event, participatory instruction in the context of a creative process expands the very notion of when interpretation begins, where it takes place, and who is responsible for it. Additionally, what audiences and participants interpret and aestheticize in the work belongs in the everyday world, whether it be the city in YVR or one’s physical appearance in Haircuts. This emphasis on learning about and expanding everyday experience transforms the hermeneutic horizons of audience reception in a way that privileges spectators’ embodied experience of the event in creation and production.

In YVR subjects are asked to “make their memories part of the media installation,” to aid rather than compose the performance event with their memories. The subject is not
addressed on the grounds of intimacy (*Still thinking about sex?*) but civic responsibility. In “a city changing faster than it can remember itself” the subject through her participation can prevent the disappearance of the city. Here again we return to the concept of spectator responsibility as *YVR* participants are called upon to preserve the ephemeral metropolis before it passes away. Interestingly, it is not *YVR* that is defined as an ephemeral event—the defining trait of live performance by contemporary scholars and artists alike—but the city and its citizens. In calling on potential audiences to participate in sound walks, paper theatre, and multimedia, to make the disappearing city more permanent, Radix situates its participants as instrumental to saving what is on the verge of disappearance.

For those potential *YVR* spectators solicited online, actual participation begins with virtual participation. This participation on Radix’s company website differs from social media such as the event page on Facebook where users interact by linking their profile to events, websites, or photos. While visitors can post comments and contact the company by email, user-generated content is not the focus of the company website. Rather, the site is oriented around an engagement with already existing content such as still images, video excerpts of past productions, information about upcoming performances, interviews with, and articles about Radix, a page outlining the company history, mandate, and description of practices, and links to other contemporary theatre, dance, site-specific, and interdisciplinary groups in Canada, the States, and UK.
In this way, the Radix site, much like other “official” company websites, constitutes a performance ecology, a network of images, video, text, and external links that, beyond functioning as a public archive, is underpinned by social relations and creative processes. Thus interacting with the company on digital terrain is never simply about accessing one production, web page, or image. Pointing and clicking on a link, that is engaging with the hypertext that composes the site, signifies a parallel mode of audience interaction, one that incorporates the user into the medium of the site.

If the casting call on the Radix website is part of the ecology of the company site then, to return to the counterpoint of the street poster, the call on the utility box is part of the ecology of the city. While both city and site are public spaces of mobility (traversed by walking and surfing), they produce different types of address—they call out to subjects in radically different ways—that reveal the companies’ relationships to spectator-participants. These differences can be understood along the lines of interpellation and incorporation. The street poster in search of seniors calls out to an
individual in the hopes of assembling an interplay of voices, a community with which to
dialogue openly, and explicitly, about sex. The call hails the subject, and stops her in her
tracks, because she identifies with the discourses of the casting call (i.e., aging, sex, or
relational aesthetics). The city is a site where text, whether it be posters, billboards, or
signs, makes itself visible through intervention.

On the Radix site, the call functions through invitation rather than intervention. The YVR call can, in part, invite rather than intervene because it occupies “proper” or
“official” territory. For site-specific companies like Radix which have dedicated office
space but no official “home,” no playhouse from which they regularly produce work, the
website is the official site—and voice—of the company. Because it possesses the weight
of an institution, the call need not depend upon an antagonistic, singular address to hail
potential participants (Hey, you! Thinking about sex?), but more closely approximates job
ads that invite you to join our team!

The relationship between interpellation, or in the instance of YVR, incorporation,
and the types of publics that companies like Radix wish to address, show how discourses
of identity are used to attract potential participants. The roles of civic advocate, volunteer
dancer, or age expert discussed in this chapter are framed as subject positions that
promise creative expression, professional development, and a pluralistic community
rather than temporary roles people might assume for an evening and leave at the site. In
the instance of online casting calls, Radix and Bluemouth show how production-related
content, mobilized for the purposes of identity production online, can be used to either
demonstrate community or be promoted as the very material that saves community.
Devising Online: Olympic Dance Marathon, The Group Page

Fig. 4.5. The “wall” of the Olympic DM group page.

The parallel communities and publics on Facebook are especially interesting for the ways they reconfigure online platforms for creative purposes. Bluemouth’s use of Facebook to devise work demonstrates how a company makes use (or reuse) of applications like group page as a site of development. The Olympic DM group page has sixteen members (the page is accessible by invitation only) that include core members, arts administrators, collaborators from previous projects and companies, and invited onlookers like myself. The page itself contains five sections: a “wall” with images, sketches, and test videos; “info” including a short description; a “discussion” page with links to four topics posted between July and September 2009; photos, which include sketches of the Roundhouse Arts Centre in Vancouver; and video, twelve short clips, most of which are posted by associate deviser Cameron Davis, who, at the time was experimenting with the role of motion tracking in Dance Marathon. The purpose of the page is a “public workspace for Olympic Dance Marathon […] The intention of this
group is to offer an opportunity to share ideas and post opinions about the further development of ODM [Olympic Dance Marathon] for the [sp] Vancouver 2010.”

Following the February 2009 première in Toronto at the Harbourfront Centre, and the June remount the same year at the Cork Midsummer Festival, in Ireland, (in a Spiegel tent), the group page was an attempt to dialogue about, and rethink the piece for the cultural Olympiad context and Roundhouse venue. The page also represented an attempt to negotiate geographical distance since core member Sabrina Reeves is based in Montreal; core members Lucy Simic and Stephen O’Connell, and associate member Daniel Pettrow, work out of New York city; core member Richard Windeyer and associate members Ciara Adams, Cameron Davis, Chad Dembski, and David Duclos are based in Toronto; presenters for the Roundhouse production, Buco Del Lupo are based in Vancouver; and new collaborators made in the Cork production, such as Douglas O’Connell are based in Ireland.

The key use of the group page by core and associate company members is the discussion board.28 Message boards are standard across social media and are typically used to comment on a video, article, image, link, status update, or blog post. Individuals post their opinions, and these posts are organized and accessed in date order. However, not all discussion boards generate content as a response to existing online material. Some, such as the Olympic DM page, are forums where individuals gather to discuss a specific issue or set of issues. Depending on the site and privacy settings of the page, discussion boards can be public or, like Olympic DM, are restricted to a membership. In the instance of the Facebook group page, discussion boards can manage more than one discussion or “topic” at a time.
As a site of development, the *Olympic DM* group page transforms the discussion board into a space for devising interdisciplinary performance. The company uses the board to debate choices such as the creation of a new ending, to reconceive the role of film and video, and to work through nuts-and-bolts issues such as submitting grants, giving priority to technical concerns, and scheduling. This digitization of the devising process changes the terms of the developmental dialogue. On a group page, the creative process is dated, threaded, archived, and confirmed as a digital text, image, sound file, or video. In the absence of a face-to-face encounter that occurs in a specific site the embodied, and what Lucy Simic describes as “experiential,” process transforms into one of reflexively linking information.

The separation of the devisor from the site and experience of face-to-face collaboration makes the artwork an object to reflect upon, question, and reimagine. This engagement with the production as object reorients the performance-based skill set of core and associate members around the conventions of an online platform. In interview, Simic identifies the skill sets of company members as largely immersive and embodied:

The majority of us are more experiential: Stephen [O’Connell] and I are dance trained, Richard [Windeyer] is a musician and composer, and Ciar[ə] [Adams] a singer. Not that actors [referring to Sabrina Reeves and Daniel Pettrow] aren’t experiential, but I think that the training is more linear than it is in dance or music. With dance you are *feeling* your body traveling through a piece. […] So that’s partially why the site-specific thing is so big in dance because you experience through your body the physical landscape and then the performers dancing in these landscapes. Also, environmental sound: Richard is very interested in rich acoustic spaces as places where performances or installation can happen.

On an online platform such as a group page, the “experiential” enters the website as anecdote. Performance and place enter as a story told to an audience (other group
members) who too have traveled through and physically experienced the piece. To adapt Clifford Geertz’s now canonical observation about observing a Balinese cock-fight: *Dance Marathon is a story Bluemouth tell themselves about themselves.* Thus through discussion, test videos, and images, the practitioner becomes as much an observer of the event as an artistic devisor. These overlapping roles are not unlike the very spectatorship the company produces in *Dance Marathon*, since audience members are assigned the role of competitors and thus facilitators of the art. They too must tell themselves the story of the competition through their direct participation. Company members make contact with a parallel bifocal position on digital terrain, since participatory technologies demand that subjects labour for and interpret the content of their stories. In “Revisiting ‘mass communication’ and the ‘work’ of the audience in the new media environment,” Philip Napoli confirms the double-duty of online users who must generate their own tales, and is quick to point out the connection between the “creative work” of the user and economic development: “[T]he new media environment empowers the audience to serve as both receivers and senders of mass communication. Specifically, the notion of the work of the audience, which may have been a bit more tenuous when the work being monetized was isolated to media consumption, becomes more concrete in an environment in which the creative work of the audience is an increasingly important source of economic value for media organizations” (511).

It is within this online environment, where social networking is largely an iteration of corporate labour, that a contemporary company like Bluemouth can be found devising, promoting its productions, and, like other users, posting personal photos, links, and videos. But new media or Web 2.0 technology not only shifts the terms on which
groups like Bluemouth creates but shapes what content is devised. Because anecdote prevails over “on site” experience the concrete theatrical world serves as a referent that facilitates a discussion about creative possibilities. While particular sections and production details are discussed, the “overall” event—namely, spectator/performer dynamics, film and video, and scenography—dominates the discussion board. In posts, the total event stretches backwards and forwards, since Bluemouth collaborators reflect upon production choices in Toronto and Cork, and strategize about choices for the upcoming run in Vancouver. Ciara Adams exemplifies this backward-and-forward movement in a post where she suggests treating “video, sound, and lighting” as closer to an arrangement than a set of coordinated technical components:

The more I think about it and read any ideas on video/film the more obvious it seems to me that we need to really score the relationship between video, sound and lighting. I think the lighting could be very helpful in drawing attention to video- my memory from the stage in Cork is that the lights never stop moving- I know this is not actually true, but I think there might be space for all lights to seize apart from the film, and all sound to stop, or something quite dramatic- almost as if we could use the film to re-explore that old idea of creating some kind of moment of surprise for the audience.

In the movement between what was staged and the potentiality of what could be, the devisors of Dance Marathon turn on themselves. Simply put, they reflect on their aesthetic choices. Collaboration folds inward as a way to explore new production possibilities.

In certain instances, this folded reflection and production, driven by opening up new creative registers in Dance Marathon, changes the kind of tale that some company members wish to tell. Multimedia artist Cameron Davis, who made extensive and varied
use of the page, posting both discussion and test videos, used these forums to reimagine the show as a tale of surveillance. In a post on “Video Development,” Davis outlines six key ideas on “content”30 he developed in discussion with Richard Windeyer, including an idea titled, “Surveillance / Lab experiment:”

The idea that [...] my role would be as the moderator of an experiment, and the cameras set up throughout the space are to observe the dance marathon experiment in action. The video would then always have a darker purpose as a monitoring system, as well as having the ability to disseminate subversive messages taking its cue from the Hipshake voice (‘Do you know where your girlfriend is?’ sort of thing). That would likely be a text element but there could also be a[n] image strand to that as well via juxtaposition of images.

Davis uses the digital space of the group page to experiment with what a “darker” use of video might look like. In four test videos titled “Surveillance,” each under one minute, he experiments with motion tracking, first, in front of his own computer monitor and then with dancers rehearsing for the Vancouver production. In a longer video, titled “lobby surveillance,” he overlays footage from the Toronto production of spectators in the Enwave lobby with a blinking “record” sign, tracking box, and bolded coordinates such as “CAMERA 1 9PM.”

In reconceiving the role of spectator-participants in Dance Marathon as monitored subjects, audiences shift from “protagonists in their own evening” to those who produce legible content or data for “the dance marathon experiment in action.” On the group page, their participation—physical movements, responses, and investment in the competition—is imagined as actions that facilitate the medium of the highly surveilled marathon. Participation in Dance Marathon is not unlike that of social media; both appear personal and governed by individual impact when in fact, participation, in
both cases, is used to maintain and facilitate the medium of these interactive sites. Here, Jodi Dean’s observation about social media users—wrapped in the language of Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*—resonates with Davis’s highly monitored conceptualization of *Dance Marathon*: “[I]n choosing for ourselves, in participating in the production of the spectacle, we might contribute to our own capture” (109).

Testing the creative possibilities of capture in performance was largely thwarted by material constraints. The alternative conception of *Dance Marathon* stalled on the level of the post and test video. Stephen O’Connell explains:

> [T]he motion tracking was used a bit during the Olympic *Marathon*. It was something Cam started working on based on our discussions around using the video more as a tool for surveillance. However, its use in *Dance Marathon* was pretty crude. He used a number of different actors in Isadora that track motion based on variables like color, intensity of light and sudden motion. It is something we had hoped to develop further if we had received a grant from the Canada Council, but we never received the grant. (7 May 2010, Email)

This gap between the creative possibilities enacted on digital terrain and the financial realities of remounting the production were not the only frustration of the Facebook group page. Eventually, members wanted a forum that allowed for more immediacy and fluid interaction. In O’Connell’s words: “[F]acebook seemed like a great tool for collaboration at first but ultimately it was unsuccessful. In the end the group was resistant to collaborating on [F]acebook and much more interested in emailing and ichats” (7 May 2010, Email).

Despite its limitations, the *Olympic DM* group page demonstrates how social media is expanding how artists—specifically those groups working in spectator-focused contexts—are using participatory technologies to facilitate their collaborative processes.
These pages are part of a multi-sited devising process that took place online and in person. While there are only sixteen members on the group page, these posts are public records in a way that can rarely be said of developmental collaboration in a site or rehearsal hall. On an interactive group page, that, in this instance, remains online long after the developmental dialogue, the posts, video, and images enter into semi-public circulation. In this way, the user-generated material is as much the property of the Facebook group page, the space of encounter, as it is the collaborators who post a comment. Online display provokes Bluemouth artists like Davis to experiment with the visual capture of community through discussion posts and test videos. His use of the group page reimagines Dance Marathon as a production where spectator display is surveilled by an ocular authority. Digital space encourages a retelling of Dance Marathon that parallels the foreclosures of online culture.

**Conclusion**

The retelling of an event is indicative of the many re’s that constitute online participation. Re, invoked here as *again*, points toward the fundamental recycling, or more precisely, recirculation of information. To recall Dean, users of social media and the internet engage in “communication for its own sake” (95). This drive to communicate is motivated by the pleasure of generating and circulating content. Dean proposes that online leisure and labour are akin to an affective intoxication (a high) that comes from contributing to the participatory flow of content:

> Blogs, social networks, Twitter, You Tube: they produce and circulate affect as a binding technique. Affect, or *jouissance* in Lacanian terms, is what accrues from [...] the endless circular movement of commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in new friends and followers, layering and interconnecting myriad communications platforms and devices. Every little tweet or comment, every
forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand-out from the larger flow before it blends back in. (95)

This interconnected flow, which no doubt fetishizes connectivity, is an intoxication of the re. The “high” users get from interconnecting is clearly reflexive since, as this chapter shows, it involves remapping subjectivities, indulging in self-reference, reconfiguring referents, and experimenting with visual regimes.

We know that digital space, specifically the space of blogs and social networking sites, remap embodied experience so that posting content not only reflects but reconceives the subjectivities of audiences and artists. This remapping is exemplified in the role of the performance blogger: the dancer who online is also a researcher (Spooner), and the academic researcher who, pushing off her marathon performance as a spectator, is also a dancer (Myers). These blogs illustrate that the space of social media and the internet, with its implicit demand to “Broadcast Yourself,” is defined by an excess of self-reference. This overt referentiality characterizes Facebook event and group pages, which not only encourage the visual display of networks but provoke experimentation with visual regimes. So while Bluemouth’s use of a public event page stages a networked community, their use of a member-restricted group page experiments with the surveillant implications of this interconnected display. The transformation of the artwork into a sign that can be distributed among a number of different posts and pages points to the mobility of the event when transposed online. But, interestingly, it also reconfigures the sign from event to archive. For instance, Radix’s call for participants in YVR: Portrait of a City, positions the multimedia event, composed of paper theatre and soundwalks, as more monumental than the city of Vancouver, “changing faster than it can remember itself.”
Here, the city as sign rubs up against discourses of disappearance that not only position digital space as a site where “performance remains,” to borrow Rebecca Schneider’s phrase, but where performance begins and progresses. Participatory technologies—encoded with referents, retellings, and reflexivity—reveal that the “creative work of […] audiences” (Napoli 511) not only forms the basis of contemporary mass communication but can be found at the site of performance.

Notes to Chapter Four

1 I borrow the expression “relational processes” from the introduction (page 13) to Ned Rossiter’s study, Organized Networks: Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions.

2 “Participatory technologies” is Jodi Dean’s term in Blog Theory to describe Web 2.0 applications such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and blogs that call upon viewers to generate content.

3 I should note that websites such as the 365project (http://365project.org/), which focus on photo documentation, reveal how the phenomenon of 365-a-day blogging are increasingly tied to commercial development. When users on this site purchase an account they must agree to the terms and conditions, which include “reserv[ing] the right to use your name and/or company name as a reference for marketing or promotional purposes on the http://365project.org/ website and other communication with existing or potential 365 Project customers.” This particular site not only centralizes year-long photo blogs but is networked to Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, Google, and MSN.

4 On A Collection A Day, Congdon outlines her year-long challenge: “This is a blog documenting a project that will span exactly one year, from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010. On each of those 365 days, I will photograph or draw (and occasionally paint) one collection. Most of the collections are real and exist in my home or studio; those I will photograph. Some are imagined; those I will draw or (occasionally) paint.”

5 This figure is from technology columnist Ivor Tossell’s article, “Facebook: Can’t love it, can’t live without it,” published in late July 2010.

6 The most common role in which site-spectators are enlisted is that of stagehand. The treatment of spectators as stagehands highlights those instances where audience members are insinuated into the stage action as docile assistants. While traditional stagehands go about their tasks concealed (invisible aides to the theatrical world) site-specific spectators are deliberately on display which raises their tasks to that of an aesthetic function. Likewise, facilitators may also find themselves engaging in tasks, however, their role is not limited to that of assistant or aide to the performers but includes performing in pre-scripted theatrical scenarios. Finally, in the case of those spectators who are positioned as co-creators they too engage in pre-scripted theatrical scenarios, but their participation not only fulfills the transgressive commentaries that the companies wish to stage, but also shapes the course of the event.

7 The “Welcome” sidebar on Thinking Out Loud: The Study Group summarizes the history and mandate of the group:

In May 2009, the symposium Reading Writing Dancing was held at York University in collaboration with The Dance Current magazine and the Society for Canadian Dance Studies. In a
roundtable meeting, we discussed the future of critical discourse about dance in Canada. One recommendation involved launching in-person meetings and discussion groups at various scales. Thinking Out Loud: The Study Group is one such initiative. We meet monthly in Toronto […] and we're extending our conversation virtually through this blog.

8 The *Destination dance-danse* site describes itself as a “a national hub for dance performance listings from across Canada. The site is multipurpose, functioning as a promotions tool, an audience development initiative, a professional community planning service, and an editorial resource for *The Dance Current* magazine.”

9 The “About Us” page of the *dance passport* site describes some of the activities on the vlog: “Currently, we feature dance artists and activities in Canada, along with other interesting finds and announcements. Clips include rehearsals, interviews, behind the scenes footage, performance sneak peeks, and more.”

10 The company name alternates between lowercase “bluemouth” and uppercase “Bluemouth.”

11 Steffen Dalsgaard confirms the competitive dimension of blogging and notes: “With the array and multitude of websites available today, survival is a matter of being found. Many websites have a ‘hit counter’ that reveals how often they are visited. Entities that desperately need and hence want to be found may be private enterprises dependent on promoting themselves as brands. These also increasingly advertise via social networking sites, where information is passed on via one’s network of friends (see boyd 2006)” (10).

12 *A Dictionary of the Internet in Computing* defines blogrolls as “A series of blogs that are displayed on a Web page. Often these are displayed in some scrolling element. Usually a blog is included because it is of interest to the visitors to the Web page in which it is embedded.”

13 The three rules that Spooner structured her post around are: “Rule #1: Your feet must keep moving at all times;” “Rule #2: You may be eliminated at some point throughout the evening;” “Rule #3: You cannot rest until the allotted rest period.”

14 Visit *The Dance Current* “Features” blog, which includes “[i]nterviews and commentary published by *The Dance Current*,” and select November 2009 in the blog archive. The piece is titled “In The Studio: Old Men Dancing, Do Not Resuscitate.”

15 This video is titled, “Disco Night @ Luminato + DANCE TIP #5,” on the dance passport site and can be located at http://dancepassport.ca/?q=node/676.

16 These notes are posted under the March 2010 study group.

17 I borrow this expression from Susan Melrose’s keynote address, “The Curiosity of Writing (Or, who cares about performance mastery?)” which addresses what she call “Spectator Studies” in the academy and the relationship between interpretive structures in scholarship and the creative processes that make up live performance.

18 On her “About” page, Myers outlines her year-long challenge as a “journey” and “daily practice”: “welcome to this 365 day journey. beginning on the solistice, december 21, 2008, i will begin a new daily practice. i will craft one dance a day for 365 days. these will be tiny dances. spanning two minutes at the most. each dance will be an improvisational conversation with a scrap of text or a found object. i will document each dance with a simple line drawing that remembers a gesture in the dance, or the arc of movement that runs through the dance. i will post drawings, texts or images as they arise. […] my aim is mindfulness in movement, aliveness in creativity, and responsiveness to the world. and i extend an invitation to you to create your own 365 day project. (punctuation in original)
19 The Deleuze and Guattari dances, entitled “dance #66, dancing with d & g,” and “dance #124, pedagogical gestures,” took place on February 26 and April 24 2009; the Haraway dance, “dance #155, infolding,” was performed on May 25 2009; and the Diamond piece, “dance #65, reading on mimesis,” was February 24 2009.

20 The question in American Standard is part of a larger motivational address to spectators:
   On a scale from 1 to 10 ask yourself how would I quantify the quality of your life?
   Is it a 10?
   Or is it say around a 2?
   What you need to do is redirect your focus.
   What level of experience am I committed to having?
   Do I want to associate myself with a 10 or a 2?
   An 11! Wow, well then we need to define a new strategy. (12)

21 Linked to the event page was the promotional article for Dance Marathon, “Shall we dance?” located on the Vancouver Cultural Olympiad website.

22 Like Walter Benjamin, Franz Hessel, in his 1929 work, Strolling in Berlin, treated city life and the street as a text to be read and interpreted: “Flanerie is a kind of reading of the street, in which faces, shop fronts, shop windows, café terraces, street cars, automobiles and trees become a wealth of equally valid letters of the alphabet that together result in words, sentences and pages of an ever-new book. In order to engage in flanerie, one must not have anything too definite in mind” (qtd. in Frisby 81). Note: Hessel’s entire text has yet to be translated into English.

23 The Facebook event page inviting Mammalian’s “friends” and followers to You Can Have it All, described the performance in the following terms:
   As expected, assumptions crumbled. We learned, among other things, that most women over 65 can garner the love interests of a steady stream of young men, it’s possible to have an orgasm without an erection, you can be 80 and still attract the sexual interest of people under 30 and, at 75, it’s still not too late to figure out how to come.
   But most important of all, we learned that aging can yield a way of being in the world that is open, generous and fearless. Facing the final leg of life can bring out the best in us. Mammalian Diving Reflex wants to stand on top of the tallest building in the world and shout out this discovery out to the universe. (Mammalian Diving Reflex, “You Can Have it All”)

24 Artistic Director Darren O’Donnell’s Twitter feed (handle, darrenodonnel) mixes personal “tweets” with professional plugs for Mammalian Diving Reflex events. The feed also includes audio interviews conducted by O’Donnell called “Tiny Talks,” which include a range of artists, activists, and strangers that frequent the Parkdale coffee shop, The Common.

25 A site that extensively maps the core artists of YVR and the phases of the project is Andreas Kahre’s YVR project page located at http://www3.telus.net/xenography/YVR_Project_Page.html. Unfortunately, work with these collaborators and the implementation of the project phases fell through as little funding for the YVR could be procured following the 2010 Olympics. Kahre was forced to reduce the scale of the project to a single evening of conversation and potluck.

26 Peggy Phelan’s discussion of female performance artists in Unmarked: The Politics of Performance, outlines one of the more popular theorizations of performance and the ephemeral, focusing specifically on the subversive potential of performance art’s non-reproducibility.

27 The group page includes core members Stephen O’Connell, Sabrina Reeves, Lucy Simic, and Richard Windeyer; associate members Ciara Adams, Cameron Davies, Daniel Pettrow, and Chad Dembski; Vancouver collaborator and co-presenter Jay Dodge (Buco Del Lupo); Worldstage administrator Laura
Nanni (who has ? on previous projects) and producer Tina Rasmussen; artists from previous projects and companies, Andrew Laurenson (co-artistic director of Radix), and London, England-based collaborator, Douglas O’Connell.

28 Listed below are the four “topics” created between July and September 2009. They are archived on the Facebook discussion board by title, number of posts, and latest entry:

4. “thoughts on film (douglas design).” 6 posts. Created on July 31, 2009 at 5:00am. Latest post by Cameron Davis. Posted on August 15, 2009 at 12:11am


Conclusion
The Pulls of Participation

Through researchers, artists construct the stages where the manifestation and effect of their skills are exhibited, rendered uncertain in the terms of the new idiom that conveys a new intellectual adventure. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story. An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators.

— Jacques Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator (22)

The twinning of artist and researcher as intellectual adventurers, the power of whose journeys are released and find their most dynamic use through a community of narrators and translators, reveals the tracks of my own story as an “active interpreter” of site-specific performance. When I first undertook The Stagehands of Subversive Spaces, the artistic expressions I witnessed by companies in purpose-built sites affected me precisely because they courted uncertainty and engaged in what Rancière, in the epigraph above, refers to as “new idiom[s]”. I knew implicitly that I found my proximity to the event, whether moving through a site, or being implicated in a theatrical scenario, personally exhilarating but it was when I developed my own scholarly “translation” of these events that I realized the larger relevance of such participation for contemporary performance practices. From interviewing artists, documenting productions, observing creative processes, analyzing staging practices, and examining social media and company websites, a complex account of participation emerged. As an active interpreter of these materials—convinced that no one outlook could illuminate the manifold aspects of an art practice—I drew upon visual art and theatre history, poststructural theories on the relationship between space and subjectivity, the ethics of representation, and the study of dramaturgical structures to develop my own multifaceted “story” of spectatorship. My
story, or, more precisely, critical account, articulated how participants such as spectators carried out and expressed the artwork of companies.

I began my own account by first confronting the spell of another story. The draw of this particular tale lay in its telling of liberation and reinvention. Artists drawn to the romance of the everyday see in sites the potential for formal experimentation, and see in spectators a group of facilitators who can contribute to the creation and production of the event. Depending on the version you encounter, some stories (productions) claim to “liberate” spectators from their traditional role as witnesses and even treat them as collaborators. The relational work undertaken by Mammalian Diving Reflex reflects this liberatory practice by engaging in dialogue with spectators in events like Diplomatic Immunities, as well as collaborating with specific communities, most notably, ten-year old kids in Haircuts by Children. Still other versions focus on reterritorializing the spaces they occupy into a site of play. Radix, for example, transforms a diner in Box² into a theatrical “dream” world, and, in How Soon Is Now?, Bluemouth reconfigures an abandoned sound stage into a courtroom. And yet more accounts indicate how this very reinvigoration of place relies on spectators to engage in a variety of work including that of urban archivists, such as in Radix’s YVR: Portrait of City. These and other productions served to create a “snapshot” of participation in the context of contemporary Canadian site-specific creation and performance that revealed the range of ways in which companies put audiences to work as artistic aides and observers. But these works also testified to how spectators regularly reconfigured their “doubled” position within and beyond the immediate performance remapping the event as “their own story.”
My evaluation of performance, audience labour, and place raised questions about
the use of everyday subjects and sites as aesthetic resources, and the responsibility artists
have both to those spaces they occupy and those spectators they position as stagehands.
In proposing answers to how companies reimagine the art(ist)-audience relationship this
dissertation gave rise to new lines of inquiry and, specifically, two broad reception-
focused questions that I wish to pursue here. First, is it possible to speak of, and identify,
an emancipatory spectatorship? Second, what drives audiences and other “experts of the
everyday”¹ to support and extend the artwork as stagehands, facilitators, and co-creators?

Can we identify an emancipatory spectatorship?

I raise this question because time and again freedom from the traditional
authorizations of performance (be it formal, social, or ideological) appeared to be the
unspoken promise of many of the works assessed. What we found is that direct access did
not always equal liberation. Often, spectators who took part in an event as players were
“cast” in order to support the aesthetic practice or critical commentary of the companies.
And yet the assumption—or, more rightly, aura—surrounding the liberated spectator
remains. As discussed in chapter one, the aura of emancipation is in part a modernist
legacy that continues to shape such contemporary practices as site-specific performance
and relational aesthetics. In such movements as environmental theatre, site-specific art,
and the multidisciplinary emergence of happenings, artists set out to free the audience by
any disruptive means necessary, including shock and cruelty.

Certainly, the disruption, or as Rancière states throughout his writings, the
“partition of the sensible,” constitutes a magnetic force in the works I describe. But not, I
would argue, because disruption promises liberation but because it offers *invention*. The
relational and site-specific works I examined leave an opening, a gap of potential that
participants fulfill through tasks, touring, and role play. Invention calls for a range of
duties and responses that confront participants with practical demands. These practical
responsibilities to uphold the event rarely signal freedom but they do point to the
potential of creative response. By helping to create something new participants stretch
self-determination in all directions. They engage in perverse, subversive, and
transgressive practices even at those very moments when complicity appears to dominate
the stage. For example, a participant in Bluemouth’s *Dance Marathon* complied with the
terms of the event but engaged in a perverse spectatorship by willfully restaging *Dance
Marathon* as a personal drama: “She [the spectator] saw herself as the lead in her own
play, and the person she was partnered with was the supporting character of her
experience” (Simic). In other cases participatory deviance was motivated by a desire to
situate the personal as political. In *Diplomatic Immunities* the spectator who was invited
onstage to dialogue about his experiences on a Vancouver Island commune subverted the
gratuitous terms of the discussion into a dialogue about cultural difference and utopia. In
those instances that involved transgression artists and participants alike committed
deviant acts. We know from events like MDR’s *Diplomatic Immunities* that artists are
quite capable of heckling audiences simply by commenting on their participatory
responses; or, as the ensemble members in Radix’s *Assembly* demonstrate, artists can
openly evaluate spectators by simply gazing back at the audience without saying a word.

These transgressive instances force us to consider if it is in fact artists who desire
agency from the authorizations of the performance contract. Is it they who aspire to
liberation, an aspiration they displace onto audiences? In Nicholas Ridout’s *Stage Fright,*
Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems he discusses how the modern actor is straight-jacketed by the stage-audience relationship:

[T]he actor is, at least theoretically, more vulnerable to the economic power of the audience than actors of an earlier period might have been. On the one hand, it is the economic power of the entertainment consumer in general that has strengthened in the modern city, and the audience as a body can therefore be more readily identified as the immediate source of employment, and on the other, increasing specialisation means that the economy offers fewer prospects for the out-of-work actor seeking alternative employment. (51)

Ridout’s observation provides us with a motive for artist liberation. The claim throughout this study has been that participants, namely spectators, facilitate formal and critical possibilities in performance. But do they also facilitate new economic conditions? If it is the audience who seeks “employment,” or in some instances are put to work (by way of interpellation), then how does this change the terms of the contract between performer and audience? Can the artist be said to take on the position of temporary employer? In an “experience” economy where consumption revolves as much around self-generated exploits, as well as material accumulation, the displacement of labour onto audiences and other participants serves as an adaptive economic tool for artists. The participatory events they create meet the demands of a culture (and a market) that desires immediate engagement—one where pleasure and effort draw the consumer in as working participant.

**What is the draw of participation?**

This, of course, is a question I explore and address throughout this study. Yet it continues to provoke my curiosity in these final pages because direct engagement abounds in stunning incongruities where the claims of self-actualization lie beside the
experience of complicity; where the collective demands of the event rest alongside, and even spark, instances of singularity (i.e., spectators share personal histories on stage or blog following the event); and where theatrical acts parallel the quotidian in ways that pry open the ideological “giveness” of those gestures. That these experiences occur alongside rather than in opposition to one another enables a dynamic participatory event that exceeds the “idealist imperatives” of an artwork, or the “proper” uses of a site. The ideal and the proper are confounded by the experience of beside because such engagement engenders numerous “truths”. This multiplicity of experience points toward four pulls of participation worth retracing here.

1. The space of art is shared. A key draw of participation this study uncovered was the invitation by artists to share the space of art. The study showed that spectators frequently welcomed this invitation because it offered what I call a critical proximity to the production. Shared space both opened up the possibility for spectators to make contact with what they physically perceived, as well as, more complexly, to make contact with the plenitude of discourses that shaped the event. As Bluemouth co-artistic director Lucy Simic suggests, in performance, the shared space of audience and performer can range from an internalized “fourth wall” to directly addressing the audience:

As a group [Bluemouth], we feel that we want to challenge ourselves, that we want the audience to participate, and unarm them, not by pulling them onstage, but by inviting them. Most of the time, it’s a fourth wall with surround sound, or a three-dimensional fourth wall where we are performing next to an audience member. Maybe we’re looking at them, or directly addressing them, empowering them to answer (or not answer), but not make them feel like we’re putting them on the spot. I don’t think that anyone [spectator] wants to do that.
The experience Simic describes of performing *beside* spectators reveals how shared space does not collapse power dynamics but, in this case, remaps them as sensuous operations. For instance, the “surround sound” fourth wall remains a convention but is used to revive rather than strictly demarcate theatrical space through sound design and composition (by member Richard Windeyer). Furthermore, the felicitousness of shared space depends upon an awareness of conduct and the knowledge that performers have the power to “directly address” or put spectators “on the spot”. Playing with proxemics, or what Hans-Thies Lehmann in *Postdramatic Theatre* calls the “shared energies” between performer and participants,\(^2\) initiates an ethics of representation that must account for the presence of the spectator.

Reconfiguring interpretation as an act that is contingent upon physical contact and spatial proxemics positions the spectator as a participant who is in and of the theatrical world. As spectators travel through a site, or communicate directly with a performer, they interpret by intervening into the performance. Thus the way they understand or derive meaning from the artwork is intimately tied to their constitutive presence within the event.\(^3\) Productions like Radix’s *Box*\(^2\), which implicates spectators into the action as diners at a local greasy spoon, indicate how companies transform audience presence into a site of play. In this instance, spectators undertake the part of aesthetic helpmates, blowing out candles as customers in a “restaurant” birthday scene. The task of the spectator is spotlighted, made theatrical, and situated within a commentary about social ritual and consumption. *Box*\(^2\) shows that when it concerns the labour of participants in purpose-built sites no task (as I argue in chapter one) is “blindly” performative. Because the work of the spectator self-consciously “doubles” as play—within a site that “doubles”
as performance—mundane diner routines are repurposed as shared sites of (dis)play. What Radix makes visible is that audience intervention is rarely a free pass to unmediated expression, but is often in collective service to the cultural criticism or theatrical innovation that companies set out to stage. And, yet, the service work in which audiences engage does not narrow the experience of “close range” reception to one of division of labour. Spectator work is less a matter of specialization within the group than it is an awareness of the shared capacities of theatrical space.

2. The pleasure of work. In works like Bluemouth’s *What the Thunder Said* the pleasure of labouring as an unconcealed stagehand is in part derived from experiencing (first hand) how that work contributes to a transformative artistic process. Spectators help to reterritorialize the function of everyday spaces and this act of re-creation (and recreation) puts them in contact with what I called, in chapter two, the “magic of appearance.” When, for example, in the Epilogue to the 2006 remount of *Thunder* a performer enlists spectators to raise him above their shoulders in imitation of flight, spectators become part of the apparatus of the stage, since it is they who function as the performer’s stage “wires.” The labour enacted here constitutes a moment of mimetic “magic,” a force which Michael Taussig in *Mimesis and Alterity* cautions us not to underestimate:

To ponder mimesis is to become sooner or later caught, like the police and the modern State with their fingerprinting devices, in sticky webs of copy and contact, image and bodily involvement of the perceiver in the image, a complexity we too easily elide as nonmysterious, with our facile use of terms such as identification, representation, expression, and so forth—terms which simultaneously depend upon and erase all that is powerful and obscure in the
network of associations conjured by the notion of the mimetic. (italics in original, 21)

In a production like Thunder, mimetic power resides in the paradox between the magic of appearance and the (unconcealed) acts of the spectator who doubles as stagehand. While historically thinkers such as Karl Marx argue that the act of being in contact with one’s own labour blots out the auratic qualities of the product one creates, I would counter that the work described here is unique precisely because it draws its power from proximity to the process and relations of labour.

Within the context of blogs, event pages, and discussion boards generated online, audiences and artists alike actively labour for their online leisure (chapter four). Jodi Dean argues that this conflation of production and consumption generates an affective high in users who contribute to constant informational flows (Blog Theory 87). Proximity to one’s labour shifts from a (potential) incursion of alienation to a constant (unique) performance of self in which status updates, photos, and texts are used, in the words of Lauren Berlant, to “eventalize the [everyday] mood” (qtd. in Dean 98). We can adapt Berlant’s observation to those audiences and artists who “eventalize” their theatrical experiences when they extend them to online formats. Their participation is used to both forge community in the shared space of social media, and draw a line around their involvement in a unique event.

3. **The non-reproducible quality of the event.** The notion that labour and leisure combined hold the potential for a unique experience brings us to another draw of participation: the non-reproducible quality of the event. We have seen that artists are not alone in their drive to construct and experience an “authentic” performance event. Spectators are just as curious about what sites, as well as people, can be made to
(uniquely) do, and as the unconcealed stagehands in Box² and Thunder show, regularly participate in the doing. This “direct access” performance is often tied to urban exploration as spectators become tourists in their own cities through the aegis of the theatrical work. In events like Mammalian Diving Reflex’s Home Tours, where participants walk through neighbourhoods and request domestic tours from home dwellers, Radix’s All Flesh is Grass, which takes spectators on a “field trip” to “an empty lot just north of the city's train station” (All Flesh is Grass, 1998), or Bluemouth’s Lenz, where spectators make their way through the rooms and hallways of a “down-and-out” hotel, the authenticity of the local settings (all “one of a kind”) stand as markers for a unique experience.

It is worth noting here that events that engage in urban “fieldwork” are increasingly becoming staples of mid- and large-scale arts and cultural festivals such as Toronto’s Nuit Blanche and Luminato Festivals, Vancouver’s PuSh Festival, and Montreal’s Festival TransAmériques. Commissioned or co-produced by festivals, artists stage a range of participatory events that include site-specific performances, installations, dialogical art, and audio tours where spectator-citizens are actively encouraged to treat their urban cores as “places to play.” The desire for an authentic experience—utilized for the purposes of economic development—becomes inseparable from urban competition, gentrification, and the creative promotion of place. The result, Miwon Kwon observes in One Place After Another, is that art serves the (accumulative) needs of capital: “Production of difference […] is itself a fundamental activity of capitalism, necessary for its continuous expansion. One might go so far as to say that this desire for difference,
authenticity, and our willingness to pay high prices for it only highlights the degree to which they are already lost to us (thus the power they have over us)” (159).

Those artists that restage the everyday in the hopes of regaining what is “lost” often confront the ethics of what Kwon calls “relational specificity”: the knowledge that space is made up of uneven social relations whose actors live beside, between, and next to one another (166). As Bluemouth’s Stephen O’Connell testifies, by performing Lenz in a hotel occupied by marginalized people he had to confront his (theatrical) use of place through face-to-face encounters with occupants:

In the hotel, what happened sometimes is that the room that I was in spilled out to the hallway and then, on occasion, people who lived in the building would open the door and enter the image [mise-en-scene]. And sometimes they would get nervous and walk back in and make a comment. But on a couple of occasions there were people who, either they were intoxicated or confused, so they would want to engage further. And that’s a real fine line to negotiate as a performer in the moment, where you have forty people watching you, and then you’re confronted by something spontaneous, and a lot of people are there just to see that happen. They’re really excited to see, what are you going to do now? (my emphasis, May 2009, Interview.)

The desire for a unique experience in the hallways and rooms of an inner city hotel holds the potential for a novel (and potentially violent) exchange between artist and local. One with which, O’Connell suggests, “a lot of people” would be complicit in order to secure the irreplaceability of their artistic experience.

But is a lack of intervention on the part of audiences strictly a desire for novelty? And does it signal a failure to act responsibly? In Performance, Ethics, and Spectatorship in a Global Age, Helena Grehan pursues these queries and argues that an ethical position is not always reducible to the binary of intervention/complicity. In her analysis of a
youtube video that captured a young man being tasered by security guards at a US Democratic Party “town hall,” she suggests: “Spectators may have felt that intervention would inflame the situation even further and that this would not assist Meyer [the victim]” (174). She proposes that an ethical spectatorship is a critical attitude where intervention plays but one part:

[S]pectators must respond and participate […] as active, questioning, at times resistant and at others willing participants in a meaning making process. When this happens […] practical responsibility has valiance and the power to both generate and sustain, at least momentarily, […] [a] sense of [intersubjective] connection. It might also begin a process of ethical reflection about both response and responsibility and the significance of these for individual spectators and for audiences more broadly. (175)

The practical and reflective demands of reception that Grehan describes reveal the multifaceted work of the contemporary spectator. Moreover, it highlights the necessity of evaluating that work as a process where audience response unfolds over time through self-reflexive actions. Be they televised “town halls” or site-specific productions, Grehan and O’Connell’s accounts ask us to consider if there is a right time to act, or if conduct, even within the time sensitive constraints of a performance event, constitutes an ontological condition that exceeds any one moment.

4. The pleasure of risk. Inherit[ing] the ethical uncertainties of the event signals yet another contradictory pull of participation—one that can inspire commitment in spectators or incur a feeling of unease. Within this push-and-pull we witnessed how Bluemouth framed risk as a personal challenge asking spectators on their company website: “What level of experience are you committed to having?” In productions like Dance Marathon the promise that personal commitment will yield a unique adventure is
inscribed within the parameters of the four-hour participatory event where spectator-competitors dramatize scenarios of individual endurance and competition.

Radix events, in contrast, often conceptualize as well as enact risk. In productions such as *Fever*, spectators are made the object of peril, put into quarantine, as if at the centre of a public health crisis. But even as audiences are attended to as if at risk—“lying on an army cot and […] attendants provid[e] hands-on care”—they engage with abstraction: “the patients’ listened through headphones to a lyrical narration inviting them to contemplate their own mortality and life's accomplishments” (Radix, *Fever 2010 (HIVE)*). Commitment to the event is not a matter of *response-ability*, but to re-invoke Grehan, “ethical reflection.”

While audiences in the work of Radix rarely engage in risk management, the participants of Mammalian Diving Reflex often find themselves navigating unpredictable performance conditions. Here, the pull of participation rests in the promise of a unique intersubjective encounter with a new community. In receiving a haircut from a child, conversing with senior citizens about sex, or dialoguing with a homeless person we deepen our comprehension of the other. In events like *Haircuts by Children* the result has been a series of international collaborations that, since 2006, have drawn together elementary school children and art goers throughout North America, Europe, and Australia. Other events, however, leave aside the “care” of the spectator or participant, even as they claim to forge community. In performances like *Slow Dance with Teacher, Q&A*, and *Diplomatic Immunities* the unspoken message to participants and spectators is that you “perform at your own risk.” Exposed to invasive questions, sexual advances, and an open evaluation of their personal information—often by the artists mediating the
community exchange!—the events risked becoming at best a tedious performance, at worst a damaging encounter.

Claire Bishop’s recent examination of participatory aesthetics and what she terms “outsourced” or “delegated” performance resonates with this study’s interest in the risky business of putting participants to work. In her essay, “Outsourcing Authenticity: Delegated Performance in Contemporary Art,” she explains that such performers “may be specialists or nonprofessionals, paid or unpaid […] [who] undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time in a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following their instructions” (111). Bishop uses the corporate rhetoric of “outsourcing” to analyze those contemporary artworks that make participants the site and source of the performance. However, she forwards a carnivalesque model where labour is not a regulatory or economic force but a disorderly one that uncrowns the relationships within the gallery or installation space. This treatment of outsourcing emphasizes risk rather than its minimization or containment:

Repeatedly in the literature on economic outsourcing we find the same message: delegating business involves relinquishing some (but not total) control, yet the stakes—increased profits—are always dependent on minimising risk. I would argue that outsourced performance in an artistic context is at its best when […] it exacerbates this risk, when the relationship between artist, performer and viewer is ever more improvisatory and contingent. This is not to say that the resulting work will be more wholesomely collaborative or co-authored, although this may be a result. (119)

Provocatively, Bishop argues that when we factor abuses of labour into our analysis of the artwork we miss the point of the work. Artistic import does not hinge upon the “manipulation and coercion” (122) of participants: “The criteria for judging this
work should not be its exploitation of the performers, but rather its resistant stance towards the society in which it finds itself and the modes of subjectivity produced therein” (122-23). But what are the dangers of detaching the “resistant stance” of the artwork from its effects upon delegated performers? Do we risk pitting the abstractions of artistic vision against the work of stagehands (and thus prioritize intension over effect)? What Bishop’s thinking overlooks are the important insights we gain from focusing on participatory conduct. Throughout *The Stagehands of Subversive Spaces*, I looked closely at the doings of participants precisely because they revealed the “politics of aesthetics” that underpinned the artwork. My approach to the mutually productive relationship between stagehand and spectacle reflects what Henri Lefevre calls “lived space,” which Rebecca Schneider explains is an “an always mobile negotiation between monumental, emblematic structures and their intimate or microspatial engagements” (emphasis in original). By zeroing in on the experiences of the participant this study did not overlook the magnitude of the artwork but uncovered how participatory labour communicated the imperatives and disjunctions of the event.

**Subjectivity and Spectatorship**

The method pursued in this study uncovered how audiences became participants, or bifold and folded stage subjects, by examining the ways in which their roles (as facilitators of the artwork) shaped the terrain of the “total” event. It articulates a set of overlapping subject positions—namely, those of stagehands, facilitators, and co-creators—that participants assumed throughout from pre- to post-production contexts such as social networking sites and bus rides to shows, group interviews, and blog posts. These roles exemplify Deleuze’s observation in *Foucault* about how discourse, and in this instance, performance, gives rise to the participatory subject: “What comes first is a
ONE SPEAKS, an anonymous murmur in which positions [and sites] are laid out for possible subjects: ‘the great relentless disordered drone of discourse’” (emphasis in original, 47). The process of assuming these subject positions and sites is a complicated, and potentially “relentless[y] disordered” affair, not only because of the expected (and sometimes unexpected) challenge to perform that characterizes the performances in this study, but because, as already noted, such participation required spectators to apprehend the stage world as both observers and subjects of that world. We know that such proximity to the artwork brought with it the risks of intervening in a “scene” or event typically reserved for professionals, and responsibility for what played out within the course of that event. This view of audiences as both witnesses and players, or what this dissertation calls bifold participants, extends established studies like Susan Bennett’s *Theatre Audiences*, which—in addition to discussing productions that emphasize direct participation and counter-hegemonic art practices—argues for the need to assess the role of socially and culturally constitutive forces that exceed the individual spectator and dramatic text. My own investigation of the production-reception relationship “reads” the social phenomenon of spectatorship through roles, and the hails, casting calls, and collective scenarios that underpin them. By analyzing how audiences actualize performance events through these frameworks, this study joins the more recent conversations in the fields of contemporary art, theatre, and performance studies focused on participatory aesthetics. Erika Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance*⁶ (published in 2004, translated into English in 2008) and the co-edited volume *The Double Agent* (2009), which includes co-editor Claire Bishop’s paper, “Outsourcing Authenticity,” indicate critical accounts that both historicize and theorize
the “craft” of the contemporary spectator and participant through the delegation of roles and tasks.

Yet despite the potential discursive applicability of the frameworks I outlined in *The Stagehands of Subversive Spaces*, this study has its limits. My focus on developing models for understanding how “off-stage” subjects are implicated into theatrical worlds (as players that support and transform the artwork) restricted my analysis to representative companies. As a result, my exploration of independent theatre scenes within Canada was often limited to references to such mid- and large-scale festivals as Toronto’s Summerworks Festival or Nuit Blanche. How might the framework of roles, or the concept of the challenge to perform, change if applied to a particular region as opposed to a set of companies? It would be worthwhile exploring how the conceptual models outlined in this study would shift if the cases focused on an independent arts scene like Vancouver’s, which produces a wealth of participant-oriented site-specific events. Moreover, such a focus would increase our knowledge of the emerging dramaturgies and staging practices that treat spectators and other participants as a material and interactive presence within the event. And, beyond this potential focus on urban scenes, what about participatory performance in purpose-built sites outside urban cores?7

The regional analysis I propose represents a key area of future study that extends from a group of companies to a local terrain or milieu—a study that, ideally, would develop into an intra-national analysis of participatory scenes. Such a project necessitates that the researcher assume an “emplaced” and relational approach to the environment and its social actors. Like the bifold and folded spectators who interpret through doing, the
researcher must also risk her physical presence and pleat herself into the “total” event and its environs. Borrowing the language of geography, we might think of this emplaced method as “fieldwork.” In “Describing Landscape: Regional Sites” David Matless explains that: “The history of geographical field teaching […] is one of performative field cultures, with encounters with a region carefully staged, viewpoints gained, perspectives assessed, land uses surveyed. Innovations in performance and in wider art practice […] may thus curiously come to resemble old-style geographical teaching method: fieldwork, walking, survey, transects, local study” (79). The “performative field cultures” show how landscapes are accounted for in and through their uses. Transposed to performance, this “old-style” method, which prioritizes measurement and use-value, is repurposed as a social experience characterized by mobility, sensuous contact, and role play (or “viewpoint”). Certainly, the many tours and detours engaged by Radix, Bluemouth, and Mammalian Diving Reflex attest to this use of fieldwork. The difference, however, is that their “field cultures” do not set out to account for, but subvert, the built environment with the aid of audiences.

Ultimately, those spectators who take up the challenge of working in the “field” leave behind the nostalgia for the “private” subject who escapes through the symbolic medium of the artwork. Such a figure, separate from the theatrical world, cannot account for the fungibility of spectator and site as well as spectator as site in contemporary site-specific performance. Nor can it account for those artists who work to collapse distinctions between fictional events and “real” sites. It is my hope that this study not only acknowledges how audience and sites are put to work, but how the conflation of producer and receiver provokes an aesthetic experience that exceeds the possibilities of a
given event. Participation may constitute an imperfect offering—one that too often veers toward exploitation and misconduct—but, however risky the task or role, it signals an invitation to step into a space of inexhaustible potential. To repeat Uncle Bob’s opening address to spectators in Bluemouth’s *What the Thunder Said*: “Here we are. The moment we’ve all been waiting for. Swelling with potential” (21).

**Notes to Conclusion**

1 This is Berlin-based Rimini Protocol’s recuperative term for the artistic collaborators with whom they work in productions like *Best Before* and *100% Berlin*, who have no professional training.

2 This observation about the shared capacities of space is not limited to site-specific work but encompasses contemporary traditions like post-dramatic theatre. For instance, in his chapter on “Dramatic and postdramatic space” Hans-Thies Lehmann observes: “If one reduces the distance between performers and spectators to such an extent that the physical and physiological proximity (breath, sweat, panting, movement of the musculature, cramp, gaze) masks the mental signification, then a space of […] tense centripetal dynamic develops, in which theatre becomes a moment of shared energies instead of transmitted signs” (italics in original, 150).

3 In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that the interaction between audiences and artists in contemporary performance traditions is a constitutive process structured by what she describes as a “feedback loop”:

the performance’s aesthetic process is set in motion by a self-generating and ever-changing autopoietic feedback loop. Self-generation requires the participation of everyone, yet without any single participant being able to plan, control, or produce it alone. It thus becomes difficult to speak of producers and recipients. Rather, the performance brings forth the spectators and actors. Through their actions and behavior, the actors and spectators constitute elements of the feedback loop, which in turn generates the performance itself.

4 The 2011 PuSh Festival, for instance, programmed several ambulatory works including Neworld’s *PodPlays*, Buco Del Lupo’s *La Marea*, and Urban Crawl’s *City of Dreams*, all of which involved audiences and participants touring the city in creation and production contexts.

5 Can Bishop make this claim about overlooking delegated abuse because she looks primarily at relational work within contemporary art contexts? Relational encounters in (and connected to) the gallery, for example, are of a different stripe than those in (and connected to) the theatre. Generally, in gallery contexts, there is not the same kind of sustained encounter (over an evening) between spectator and artists as in the theatre. Moreover, within the gallery the performer has presence as, and is often aligned with, objects (particularly those works which Bishop describes); whereas in the theatre the performer is both a stage object and subject with whom we, the audience, might identify.

6 Evaluating the reception conditions of contemporary performance, or what she refers to as “experiments,” Fischer-Lichte outlines three processes that resonate with the mode of analysis in this dissertation:

The staging strategies or game instructions devised for such experiments consistently play with three closely related processes: first, the role reversal of actors and spectators; second: the creation of a community between them; and third, the creation of various modes of mutual, physical contact that help explore the interplay between proximity and distance, public and private, or visual and tactile contact. Despite the large diversity of these strategies (within a
production, in the productions of one director, in the productions of various directors), they all have one feature in common: they do not – if at all – simply depict role reversal, the creation and collapse of communities, proximity and distance. Instead, they actually create instances of these processes. The spectators do not merely witness these situations; as participants in the performance they are made to physically experience them. (italics in original 40)

An example of a site-specific company that has actively engaged with rural spaces and themes is Knowhere Productions which, since 2002, has mounted works throughout rural Saskatchewan in abandoned mental health facilities, brick plants, and in churches. See Irwin and MacDonald’s anthology, Sighting/Citing/Siting which documents their 2006 work, Crossfiring / Mama Wetotan.
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