

# Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)  
is the institutional research repository for  
Goldsmiths, University of London*

## Citation

Alston, Adam. 2013. Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, agency and responsibility in immersive theatre. *Performance Research*, 18(2), pp. 128-138. ISSN 1352-8165 [Article]

## Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/28090/>

## Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk).

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk)

## **Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre**

Adam Alston

Immersive theatre is an emerging theatre style broadly premised on the production of experiences. As this article looks to establish, experiences are rendered an aesthetic site of equal, if not greater significance than the immersive environments which arouse them. But this premise, I believe, is contingent on privileging a particular kind of participation: one that I term 'entrepreneurial participation'. This is a kind of participation based on self-made opportunity. I will be thinking through this suggestion in what follows, theorising how immersive theatre shares particular values with neoliberalism, such as entrepreneurialism, as well as the valorisation of risk, agency and responsibility. Firstly, I will address how immersive theatre is particularly susceptible to co-optation by a neoliberal market given its compatibility with the growing experience industry; secondly, I will expand on this assertion by looking at how immersive theatre mirrors a neoliberal value set, focusing on the audience's perception of risk. These two discursive strands will form the basis for establishing what values are shared between the immersive theatre style and neoliberalism and articulating how that sharing might impact on theorising participation in an immersive theatre context. A more optimistic, but ultimately sobering evaluation of those values will be offered in conclusion.

### **Towards a Definition of Immersive Theatre: Hedonism, Narcissism and the Experience Industry**

Pinpointing just what constitutes immersive theatre is a difficult task, but it might be broadly identified as theatre which surrounds audiences within an aesthetic space in which they are frequently, but not always free to move and/or participate. At best, the immersive label is flexible. However, the extent of that flexibility jeopardises terminological clarity. Perhaps, as Gareth White suggests, immersive theatre is 'an

inviting but faulty term to use to describe the phenomena it currently designates' (White 2012: 233). After all, what theatre is not immersive once the lights of an auditorium are dimmed, or the site of performance is reoriented from a theatre stage to an environment, installation, or a site-specific location? What is more, there are alternative terms to describe much the same kind of theatre. Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, for instance, has commented on the rise of interest in 'the theatre of experience' in the Netherlands and Flanders over the last few years (Groot Nibbelink 2012: 416). This latter descriptor, though, seems to suffer from much the same problem: namely, potentially unlimited applicability.

Perhaps the ambiguity of the immersive label is the very reason why the meme has replicated so rapidly internationally. Then She Fell (2012), a performance by Third Rail Projects, recently contributed to a rising interest in immersive theatre in New York, following suit from the British company Punchdrunk's internationally acclaimed Sleep No More (2003) arriving in the same city in 2011, after a run in Boston (see Worthen 2012). New York-based Woodshed Collective's The Tenant (2011) followed a few months later. The Brazilian theatre collective Zecora Ura have also risen to prominence following their overnight immersive performance Hotel Medea (2009), which premiered in London before touring to Rio de Janeiro. What might today be identified as immersive theatre is clearly not localised to the United Kingdom, but it is the UK that, nonetheless, has been at the forefront of its evolution. Battersea Arts Centre, Camden People's Theatre and Camden Roundhouse, to name only three noteworthy London theatres, have, in their various ways, been championing the immersive theatre style. Punchdrunk are perhaps the most famous immersive theatre company, claiming to have 'pioneered a game changing form of immersive theatre' (Punchdrunk 2011) following Sleep No More, Faust (2006) and The Masque of the Red Death (2007), among other performances. But as pioneers, Punchdrunk are certainly not alone. Shunt, dreamthinkspeak and many other British companies have also contributed to the rising visibility of immersive theatre in UK theatre programming, bolstered also through international festival programming in the UK -- most notably at the 2012 LIFT festival. Of course, these different companies and organisations all have their own unique take on how audiences are to be immersed. However, if an adequate theorisation of immersive theatre is to be achieved, then a clear, working definition ought to be offered.

Once spectatorship is acknowledged as an embodied and potentially affective activity, all theatre and performance is, or at least has the potential to be, an immersive activity. In defining immersive theatre, it seems likely that its distinguishing attributes will be differences of degree, not kind.

Immersive theatre might be distinguished by the sensory acts which it demands of audiences, such as touching and being touched, tasting, smelling and moving -- this latter often (but not always) being characterised by freedom to move within an aesthetic space. To a limited extent, all such acts are, or at least can be present in other modes of theatre spectatorship. Simon Bayly's list of 'hyperactive, symptom-like behaviours' demonstrated by theatre spectators generally is illustrative, including everything from 'virulent outbreaks of laughter', to 'coughing, sniffing, sweating, twitching, fidgeting, mumbling, whispering, rustling, creaking, shouting out, heckling' and 'crying' (Bayly 2011: 42). In any theatre event, the audience is not static, nor even silent, for even the slightest movements, breaths and gasps demonstrate a range of engagements: from leaning back in yawning apathy to the shifting forward of the engrossed spectator in fear that even the slightest breath might shatter tension or frustrate fellow spectators. The sensory acts performed by immersive theatre audiences, however, tend to amplify such inherent qualities of spectatorship -- sometimes to a very great extent. And this great extent ought not to be underestimated. For instance, a whisper into the ear of a neighbouring spectator might become a more developed and audible process of reflection during the performance; a fidget finds its counterpart in a stroll, a sprint or a dance; in short, the demands made of audiences to do something in an immersive theatre event are stretched and magnified and, as I hope to demonstrate, the implications of this stretching and magnification are both manifold and significant.

When speaking of the audience in immersive theatre, the risk of generalisation is ever-present. At any one time the audience tends to refer to an audience: an audience that is difficult to theorise given its polyvalence. Nonetheless, there are general, but potentially illuminating observations which might be made of immersive theatre audiences, most fundamental of which is that the audience is an audience of participants. Echoing Michael Fried, participation is in many ways extorted from immersive theatre audiences. As with Fried's reading of minimal, or 'literal' sculpture, immersive theatre demands of its audiences a 'special complicity'

with an aesthetic situation (Fried 1968: 127). This special complicity, on the one hand, is aroused by immersive theatre environments that surround audiences completely. On the other, it is stirred not just by something like the silent presence of another person, as Fried would have it (128), but by such a person as they appear in flesh and blood: a thinking, moving and potentially speaking actor which, more often than not, breaks silence with an explicit or ambiguous demand to do something, complete with that demand's affective capacity (cf Nield 2008: 535). In both cases, audiences are faced with at least the threat of being condemned to participate. It is in this sense that participation might be seen to be extorted. Being inescapably implicated within a situation, together with the demand to do something, even if that something is simply to negotiate how and where to spectate, is what makes immersive theatre an especially close ally to literal/minimal sculpture. And this over and above the theatre, more generally speaking, that Fried famously feared so much. In what follows, then, references to immersive theatre's audience is to be understood in these terms, as one comprised of participants implicated in a situation which is not fully at their command.

Juxtaposed with participation being extorted in this way, however, is the fact that immersive theatre audiences are not bound to observe from any one site, such as a theatre auditorium. Rather, should they be willing and able to take advantage of the kinds of movement demanded of them, audiences might reap the benefit of multiple viewing perspectives in what may well be several viewing positions. In this respect, it is clear that immersive theatre finds its precursors in promenade and site-specific/-generic/-sympathetic theatre. But, as I have argued elsewhere, immersive theatre might be distinguished from its precursors in the following way: 'participating audiences are often constructed as something other than audiences within the theatre event, not just by the offer from actors to join them on whatever "journey" the performance offers, but also through the gaze of other spectators' (Alston 2012b: 197; see also Nield 2008: 535; Machon 2009: 57-58). This observation is fruitfully developed in the context of Fried's writing, for the 'construction as something other' is revealed as a demand, either implicit or explicit, and that demand, politically speaking, seems likely to impact on the multiple viewing perspectives which may or may not be at the audience's disposal. This demand, then, as I go on to describe

later in the article in terms of entrepreneurial participation, may well end up jeopardising the extent to which free roaming can be practiced as such.

Immersive theatre also appeals to hedonistic and narcissistic desire: hedonistic, because the experiences are often pleasurable, with pleasure often sought as an end in itself, as a site of self-indulgence or even eroticism; narcissistic, because the experience is all about you, the participant. Attention tends to be turned inwards, towards the experiencing self, accompanied by a persistent reaching towards a maximisation of experience, underscoring the potentially indulgent meaningfulness of that 'special complicity' of Fried's. Affect and emotion become sites of reception, as do participatory acts. The pleasure of participating is often rooted less in the aesthetic stimulus as it is in the participatory response which becomes its own site of aesthetic appreciation: a site which is both within the spectator and projected outwards through acts of participation, which subsequently become sites of reception. It ought not to be underestimated that immersive theatre is often fun, thrilling, exciting or even perceived as risky. In sum, immersive theatre is about experience, in the loosest sense of the word. And the pleasures of experience, even of experiences which might otherwise be defined as negative -- anxiousness, fear, guilt, shame, embarrassment, etc. -- might end up being felt as positive, stimulating or challenging attributes of encountering an event. The point is that a pleasurable or challenging experience is not just a fortunate by-product of the theatre event, but is, in many respects, immersive theatre's raison d'être.

It is these aspects of hedonism and narcissism, in the context of experience production, that most clearly render immersive theatre susceptible to co-optation by profit-making enterprises. The demand for both has been historically persistent and, as is well known, where demand emerges supply swiftly follows. The experience industry refers to a grouped set of businesses that produce and usually look to profit from the provision of memorable or stimulating experiences, such as theme parks, strip-clubs and role-play adventures (Hillaert 2010: 434; cf Pine and Gilmore 1999). Immersive theatre -- identified earlier as correlating with the theatre of experience (Groot Nibbelink 2012: 416) -- seems particularly susceptible to entering the experience industry. Like the strip-club, there are intimately erotic encounters on offer, such as a one-on-one speed date in Ontroerend Goed's Internal (2007). Like the role-play adventure, immersive theatre often casts its audience, such as a

trapeze artist in Il Pixel Rosso's The Great Spavaldos (2012). And let's not forget the hands-on, themed environments of Punchdrunk. Their contribution to the 2009 Manchester International Festival, It Felt Like a Kiss (2009), is even described on their website as being like a 'disorienting whirl of a fairground ghost train' (Archive 2011). Consequently, immersive theatre is susceptible to the superficiality and reproducibility of the experience industry, in part undermining the extent to which Peggy Phelan famously defended theatre's non-reproducibility (Phelan 1993: 146). Supposedly tailor-made experiences are churned out for a production line of participating cultural consumers, perhaps most typically evident in the rise of one-on-one theatre festivals in recent years. What is perceived to be a unique experience may end up being at least fairly reproducible. While performers may input improvisatory contributions into a participatory encounter, this tends to be set against knowing a familiar performance structure, or at least knowing better than the participating audiences. The non-reproducible element comes largely from the consumer narcissistically investing their own personality and desire. The reflection appears unique to each participant, but the mirror remains much the same. It is this kind of narcissistic investment on the part of audiences which economists like B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, in different terms, suggest characterises the supply and demand chain in contemporary, primarily northern and western economies. It is this kind of investment in experience, which is a demand, that is apt to be pounced upon as a viable business opportunity (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

In sum: immersive theatre is a participatory theatre style broadly premised on the production of experience. These experiences tend to depend on a range of sensory stimulations and a number of viewing positions often partly determined by the audience's movements within a space or set of spaces: a determination that sits in close relation to participation being extorted, as a consequence of the audience being implicated in a situation. Experience may well be hedonistic, or even narcissistic in character, bolstered by receiving the fruits of one's own participatory effort as well as the efforts of others. Audiences are consequently rendered as producing receivers in spite of the fairly standardised aesthetic stimulus which prompts investment within the performance. One consequence of this would seem to be a promotion of individualism, even though this promotion may well take place within groups of audience members. Finally, audiences are likely to find themselves

functioning as something more than an audience, either as a character cast within a given world, or as some kind of hyper-self, even a pastiche of oneself once confronted with a range of participatory demands pining towards some kind of revelation. But how does this relate to neoliberalism?

## Immersive Theatre, Risk and the Neoliberal Ethos

I am part of a devised theatre company called Curious Directive: a company which, incidentally, does not refer to itself as being an immersive theatre company. Curious Directive engages with science in a range of theatre, museum and festival spaces. For a piece called Olfactory (2012), however, the company worked on a project for the Lyric Hammersmith's Theatre in the Square season. This performance certainly bore resemblance to, or even mimicked the immersive theatre style. The piece was for an audience of one and explored the human sense of smell in a short, seven minute performance. It was made in collaboration with a theatre designer with experience in architecture in order to create a purpose-built, intimate and experientially arousing setting for audiences.

Curious Directive caught the interest of the advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi as part of a research campaign to prepare an immersive theatre experience integrating Smirnoff Vodka as a consumable part of the aesthetic. They wanted to find out more about how immersive theatre, particularly performances using the one-on-one format, like Olfactory, might be able to help market the vodka brand. Ultimately, although I am sure Saatchi and Saatchi would frame what follows differently, the campaign was to instrumentalise theatre to promote Smirnoff with audiences ending up as unpaid marketers, despite the free performance on offer. This is part of a trend in contemporary advertising, loosely fitting into what Bernd Schmitt and others call 'experiential marketing' (Schmitt 1999; Lenderman 2006), in which immersive companies like Punchdrunk are already imbricated following their promotion of Stella Artois Black in both The Night Chauffeur (2010) and The Black Diamond (2011) (see Alston 2012b). If we are to speak of theatre's co-optation by the corporate sector, then immersive theatre's compatibility with the experience

industry would be a good place to start. The appeal of immersive theatre, then, one characterised by hedonism and narcissism, might be engendered not just as a selling point, but as a means of selling something else. This is not some advert accompanying theatre, with brands appearing on promotional material, but the rendering of theatre as the advert itself, fully co-opted.

It is at this stage of the argument that immersive theatre's relationship to neoliberalism begins to take form most clearly, but before specifying why: what is neoliberalism? Neoliberalism became institutionally effective in the 1980s through the politics of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US.<sup>[note]</sup><sup>1</sup> It is a theory of political economy which champions entrepreneurialism, individual freedoms and loosening of state control over the so-called free market. David Harvey describes neoliberalism as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade' (Harvey 2005: 2). However, put simply, whilst all are supposedly free to act and trade as sovereign individuals, some end up more free than others, chiefly because of the relationship of capital accumulation to power.

To help articulate how neoliberalism relates to immersive theatre, I turn to Jen Harvie's observation that socially engaged and relational art risks being co-opted by an elitist, neoliberal agenda (Harvie 2011: 114). She suggests that socially engaged and relational art rewards the 'enterprise, entrepreneurialism and opportunism of both artists who must find appropriate sites, resources and audiences with which to make their work and audiences, who must seek out the art and make the requisite pilgrimage to experience it' (Harvie 2011: 120-121). In immersive theatre, it seems to me that the key neoliberal values of 'enterprise, entrepreneurialism and opportunism' might be fruitfully applied to participating audiences. Punchdrunk's The Masque of the Red Death might be used as an example. In this performance, Edgar Allan Poe's short stories were taken as a point of departure in developing a remarkably detailed set of immersive environments across several floors of the Battersea Arts Centre. Masked and cloaked audiences were free to move throughout these spaces, largely

---

<sup>1</sup> See Shannon Jackson's clearly articulated and concise account of a more complicated 'genealogical puzzle' (Jackson 2011: 21-25).

at will, stumbling across choreographed routines and looped scenes -- an example being the macabre murder of a bandaged human figure in a small, painfully intimate space. Some of these looped scenes would be for one audience member only, taking place behind locked doors guarded by ushers. The point I want to make is that for these looped scenes to be experienced, the audience needs to be savvy enough to know how and where to find them. Sometimes this savvy attitude involved remaining in one place for the action to arrive, whilst at others it meant meandering through the seemingly vast recesses of the BAC before stumbling across a scene or wandering character. When I questioned other audiences after the performance, they claimed to have seen next to nothing of the more intimate elements of the performance, always at one step removed from the action.

As Harvie notes, artistic practice that promotes individualism and self-interest tends to 'exacerbate inequalities' (Harvie 2011: 121). I contend that immersive theatre is emblematic of this, for participatory opportunity is often unevenly distributed. Of course, this may well be part of the attraction and it is precisely this attraction which is easily capitalised upon. It comprises another part of the demand for immersion highlighted earlier in this article in relation to hedonism and narcissism.[{note}]<sup>2</sup>

The uneven distribution of participatory opportunity is what may well render an experience of immersive theatre especially meaningful or exciting. However, for present purposes, I want to explore how this uneven distribution can be seen to relate to another understanding of the experience that seems so central to engaging with immersive theatre. This exploration might help to eke out further how immersive theatre relates to the neoliberal ethos. As Richard Sennett explains, our English word for experience is somewhat blunt compared to its German counterparts, erlebnis and erfahrung: 'The first names an event or relationship that makes an emotional inner impress, the second an event, action, or relationship that turns one outward and requires skill rather than sensitivity' (Sennett 2008: 288). It is this second sense of the word that might nuance our engagement with experience which thus far has been preoccupied with erlebnis. In The Masque, as with most of Punchdrunk's work, a limited number of audience members are whisked off by an

---

<sup>2</sup> This attraction is most clearly evident in the blogposts of superfans obsessively attending performances of the New York run of Punchdrunk's Sleep No More (Silvestre 2012).

actor for a range of one-on-one performances within a performance. This isolation of an individual from the broader audience, in order to offer them a private showing for their own, personal enjoyment, is an isolation premised on selecting the few who are either fortunate or, significantly, savvy enough to reap the benefits of being in the right place at the right time. The opportunity to exploit this selection process may simply be the product of luck. But those with enough experience (erfahrung) of Punchdrunk's work are more likely to be ahead of the game when it comes to exploiting participatory opportunity (cf Silvestre 2012). If there is a guiding rule behind Punchdrunk spectatorship, it is this: take responsibility upon yourself to make the most of what is available.

Drawing on my own experience of The Masque, if I had not had the disposition or will to hunt out performance by opening doors and climbing stairs, undoubtedly spurred on by the rewards I had grown to acknowledge were procured in doing so (erfahrung), then I would never have discovered a cabaret bar in the upper reaches of the BAC -- a discovery that was, for me, a highlight of the performance as a whole. The point of recalling this experiential snapshot is not to question whether or not such an effort is taxing, so much as to demonstrate what values are mobilised in having to actively hunt out such a performance within a performance. In other words, if an audience member demonstrates what I am calling entrepreneurial participation -- a neologism, borrowed from a fundamental tenet of the neoliberal ethos, which describes self-made opportunity -- then rewards are likely to come their way. Acting on experience (erfahrung) is rewarded with experience (erlebnis).

This critical alignment of neoliberal ideology with immersive theatre, particularly Punchdrunk's immersive work, does not end with the promotion of entrepreneurial participation and its rewards. Of all the values shared by both neoliberalism in the market and immersive theatre, both within and outside of the experience industry, risk appears most prominent. The rest of this section looks to address the complex ways in which this is so, working towards an understanding not just of how risk functions both within a risk-assessed theatre space and outside of it, but of risk perception in particular. To this end, the increasingly popular field of risk research in the social sciences proves a useful touchstone.

Risk designates the close relationship between time, uncertainty and daring. When I speak of risk-taking in immersive theatre, I have in mind how audiences perceive and invest in risk: an investment partially alluding to thrill, as well as risk's historical relation to the rise of capitalism, as explored by a number of prominent sociologists (Bernstein 1996: 1; Luhmann 1993: 13; Lyng 2005: 21; Reith 2008: 59). One reason why risk might be perceived by audiences in a risk-assessed theatre space is because of the functioning of risk perception. The psychometric paradigm, developed by the Oregon Group (comprised of Paul Slovic, Baruch Fischhoff and Sarah Lichtenstein), takes risk perception as a point of departure for theorising how we recognise risk and, consequently, constitute something as risky. As Ortwin Renn and Bernd Rohrman summarise, the psychometric paradigm looks

- to establish 'risk' as a subjective concept, not an objective entity,
- to include technical/physical and social/psychological aspects in risk criteria,
- to accept opinions of 'the public' (i.e. laypeople, not experts) as the matter of interest,
- to analyse the cognitive structure of risk judgments.

(Renn and Rohrman 2000: 17)

According to advocates of the psychometric paradigm, there is no such thing as an objective risk, such as the risk of avian flu, for it is a concept always and forever mediated through a thinking, feeling, emotional, affected and experience-bound subject (Slovic 2000: xxxi). Avian flu, to retain the example, is a risk likely to be perceived differently depending on one's prior experience of illness, family and friendship networks, knowledge of avian flu in the context of how that knowledge has been mediated and a number of other potential contributing factors too numerous to list.

Drawing on this perspective, to perceive risk in a risk-assessed theatre space is not to misperceive risk. To take a few examples from immersive theatre practice: daring to be bathed in Adrian Howells' The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding (2011); daring to be kidnapped in Blast Theory's Kidnap (1998); daring to say yes to strangers in the street in Look Left Look Right's You Once Said Yes (2011); daring to touch, to taste, to dance on countless different occasions... Daring ranges from the confrontational to the trivial, but in all instances there is a sense of

putting oneself on the line, often in the presence of others. These examples suggest that it is possible for risk to be encountered in immersive theatre, provided the appropriate mediating factors are in place, such as exposure within a given society to risk in all its guises (such as intimacy, abduction and trust in strangers), emotional and affective dispositions, education and framing of knowledge - not to mention the influence of a number of heuristics ranging from availability, or ease of recall, to anchoring (using prior knowledge or experience to judge and act upon a new risk scenario) and hindsight (Slovic, Fischhoff and Lichtenstein 2000; cf Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

The point I want to make is that risk perception is not some second-order category of risk. Significantly, risk perception might be another contributing factor to the appeal of immersive theatre, not to mention a contributing factor to the likelihood of it selling. In both instances, as I hope to demonstrate, the factor in question is one imbued with the neoliberal ethos.

For David Jubb, artistic director of the BAC, a venue which for some time has been at the forefront of immersive theatre programming, risk is central to many participatory and immersive experiences: there is first of all the risk of not understanding the protocols of a given theatrical practice; there is also the risk of participatory rules being unclear which, Jubb maintains, results in a need for a structure to hold, or at least guide audiences through an event; and there exists a tension between risk and chaos that is key to navigating participatory risks for audiences (Jubb 2012). I would add that the taking of participatory risks also relates to the production of affect and emotion. Embarrassment, awkwardness, guilt and shame become potential risks for participating audiences, particularly when, to recall Sophie Nield, the participatory offer is made and one finds oneself 'awaking to the actor's nightmare of being on the stage, and not knowing the play' (Nield 2008: 535). It is these latter kinds of risk which relate so strongly to the themes of hedonism and narcissism, for pleasure, particularly affective pleasure, might well be at the heart of seeking such experiences as ends in themselves, whether that be the pleasure of being challenged or the pleasure of thrill, or the erotic.

We might figure affective risks, especially, in terms of 'edgework': a word coined by Hunter S. Thompson, but applied by Stephen Lyng to practices of

voluntary risk-taking which explore boundary negotiation achieved through highly sensitised 'embodied pleasures' (Lyng 2005: 18). Interestingly, edgework is characterised by Lyng as having an 'other world' quality, a quality which is undoubtedly shared in the 'other worlds' constructed by immersive theatre designers and which, purportedly, 'can be fully understood only by actually participating in it' (Lyng 2005: 24), provided we recognise that 'edgework does not allow one to transcend the extant social reality of consumer society; the experience merely represents an extension of that reality' (Lyng 2005: 33, emphasis in original). This is a crucial recognition, particularly in the context of this article. While risk-taking may well have the potential to undermine or radicalise existing social conditions (and I believe this is possible for audiences to engage with through theatre and performance), it is also susceptible to co-optation by the very institutions which many edgeworkers might seek to transcend. As Harvey acknowledges, a key tenet of neoliberal policy is to socialise risk, thus transferring responsibility onto the shoulders of individuals and away from the state (Harvey 2011: 10). In this sense, the transcendence of neoliberal social conditions potentially aspired to, but not necessarily achieved by edgeworkers, can be seen instead to valorise risk, colluding with risk's socialisation (see Owen 2009). What is more, the various successes of the experience industry testify to the capacity for business to appropriate desire for risk, even democratising that desire once danger is absolved or minimised, allowing for the enjoyment of perceiving risk to take over from the material reality of danger within a given space.

This is an important contextual exposition if the relationship of immersive theatre to neoliberalism is to be grasped, for it begins to flesh out how easily risk might be commoditised while also hinting at the potential for immersive theatre to align with the neoliberal ethos. Baz Kershaw and Dan Rebellato have documented the rise of consuming audiences in theatre generally, typified by the accumulation not just of cultural capital, but merchandise which boasts to others, 'I was there!' (Kershaw 2001; Rebellato 2009). In the case of risk-taking in immersive theatre, however, that boast might be reformulated as 'I dared!' In this sense, immersive theatre resembles adventure companies who remove the component of danger from what might otherwise be considered risky activity in order to render it marketable. The risk becomes accessible through commodification. It is difficult to think of risk, as

danger, operating at all in such circumstances, but it is not so much risk-as-danger which is co-opted, as it is a desire held by some to enjoy the perception of risk as a hedonistic thrill -- and this is, as demonstrated above, the same as stating that it might constitute a risk. Commercial enterprise can consequently emerge to profit from pleasure-seeking. No wonder, then, that advertising agencies like Saatchi and Saatchi are turning towards immersive theatre; it is commodifiable given its apparently neoliberal value set, rendering the transition from the artistic to the business sphere fairly smooth -- and, after all, risk, for some, is sexy. Where there is a desire for the sexual, in any of its manifestations, there is usually an industry for it as well, no matter how niche.

#### Conclusion: Risk and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre

Of course, the discussion so far only tells part of the story. According to neoliberalism, individuals are meant to be held responsible for their own entrepreneurial risk-taking as state intervention within markets is steadily dissolved. However, recent history tells another story. Institutions such as the Bank of England have infamously absorbed responsibility for economic risk-taking, dissolving exposure to uncertainty for those taking the risks, providing less of an incentive for responsible risk-taking. If responsibility is a part of neoliberal theory, then neoliberal practice has plenty to answer for. What emerges is a schism between neoliberal ethos and practice, ideology and realpolitik.

While participation may well be extorted from immersive theatre audiences, risk may still be negotiated once exposure to uncertainty renders the risk-taker vulnerable to a gain or loss. This is not necessarily a physical vulnerability, but could be an immaterial, subjective vulnerability. Unlike the neoliberal market, for audiences of immersive theatre the relationships between risk-taking, agency and responsibility are more likely to be left intact. I have touched on this point elsewhere, arguing that a sense of exposure or vulnerability aroused through audience participation might in fact foster a sense of mutual vulnerability between performers and audience: a mutuality, or accountability, that is largely passed over under the auspices of

contemporary neoliberalism (Alston 2012a). The point is that a live participatory encounter encourages both performers and audiences to face up to the consequences, potential or actual, of acting in a shared space. Hence, the risk of participating (perhaps manifested in feeling the threat of vulnerability), arising from an awareness of agency, may well promote a desire for mutual responsibility premised on an uncomfortable recognition of accountability for one's actions. This could potentially demonstrate a radicalisation of the shared political value set between immersive theatre and neoliberalism that I have been describing in this article.

However, perhaps this potentially productive exposure of audiences is less likely if the audience is masked and cloaked, as is the case with much of Punchdrunk's work. It may also be the case that exposure is at risk of being played upon, as the example of Ontroerend Goed's Internal demonstrates. Internal began with a one-on-one encounter with a performer, which either involved engaging in some kind of physical intimacy, or revealing aspects of oneself which one presumed (if lacking experience (erfahrung) of the company's work) might have been revealed in a trusting and safe environment. Towards the end of this performance, these intimacies and revelations were revealed to an entire audience by the performer, without the consent of those unfortunate enough to have trusted the performers. This kind of ethical breach is telling of the audience's disposition to trust complete strangers in aesthetic space, on the presumption of it being a safe space. At the same time, it demonstrates a disregard for the personal that some may find unethical. Such an ethical breach is not strictly a risk. This breach of trust, particularly if the audience is caught unaware, can only be figured as a risk if the audience were aware that such a breach was a possibility (as opposed to something which does not figure as a possibility, and conceding the risk of infinite possibility). In short, though, exposure certainly has its negative side once exploited, which is not to say that such negativity is without the possibility of productive confrontation.

It should be noted that responsibility is not necessarily positive if premised on exposure. As Harvey writes, under neoliberalism the social safety net is reduced because 'Personal failure is generally attributed to personal failings' (Harvey 2005: 76). Personal responsibility, it might be argued, comes at the cost of social responsibility. The audience members left behind in Punchdrunk shows -- lost in

myriad corridors and one step behind the action -- goes some way towards illustrating how this might also apply to immersive theatre. Whilst Jubb maintains that in Punchdrunk's work participation is equitable, despite everyone having a different experience (Jubb 2012), there is also an inherent disparity which occurs as the consequence of luck and being in the right place at the right time on the one hand, and entrepreneurial participation on the other: that is, acting upon entrepreneurialism, a quintessentially neoliberal ideal, in order to capitalise on the range of encounters on offer.

Perhaps entrepreneurialism in this context is in fact a mirage; perhaps a 'fictional interpretive "freedom"' is urged, as W. B. Worthen writes of Punchdrunk's New York run of Sleep No More, which in fact conceals 'the work of two of its constitutive agents: the means of production behind the scene', typified by costumed ushers blocking entrances to private one-on-one spaces, 'and the reciprocal means of production' that each individual is supposed to exploit as free-roamers in the space (Worthen 2012: 95). However, even if entrepreneurialism in the audience ultimately finds itself thwarted as the means of production stifle its potential fruits, the entrepreneurial spirit which leads audiences to blocked entrances remains an ideal which is ultimately valorised in Punchdrunk's work, as well as in comparable immersive theatre practice.

In conclusion: immersive theatre encourages opportunism, the perception of personal autonomy and favours those with the capacity to act upon it. There are correlations between such values and those of neoliberalism, but the value sets potentially differ in how risk relates to responsibility, for the business sectors which align with neoliberal ideology have at their disposal mechanisms to absorb responsibility. It is certainly possible and demonstrable that the relationships between risk and responsibility might be radicalised in immersive theatre, but it is also useful to question this relationship by acknowledging how exposure might be exploited and participatory opportunity unevenly distributed. What is at stake here is a politics of participation. If individualism ends up prohibiting an equal distribution of participatory opportunity, something which is the concern of both neoliberalism and immersive theatre, then surely the time has come to reassess participatory ideology on both sides.

## References

Alston, Adam (2012a) "Damocles and the Plucked: Audience Participation and Risk in Half Cut", Contemporary Theatre Review, 22(3): 344—354.

---. (2012b) 'Funding, Product Placement and Drunkenness in Punchdrunk's The Black Diamond', Studies in Theatre and Performance, 32.2: 193—208.

Archive: It Felt Like a Kiss (2011) <http://punchdrunk.org.uk/>, accessed 14 August 2012.

Bayly, Simon (2011) A Pathognomy of Performance, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bernstein, Peter L (1996) Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk, New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Fried, Michael (1968) 'Art and Objecthood', in Gregory Battcock (ed) Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, Berkley: California UP: 116—147.

Groot Nibbelink, Liesbeth (2012) 'Radical Intimacy: Ontroerend Goed Meets the Emancipated Spectator', Contemporary Theatre Review, 22(3): 412—420.

Harvey, David (2005) A Brief history of Neoliberalism, Oxford: Oxford UP.

--- (2011 [2010]) The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism, London: Profile Books.

Harvie, Jen (2011) 'Democracy and Neoliberalism in Art's Social Turn and Roger Hiorns's Seizure', Performance Research, 16(2): 113—123.

Hillaert, Wouter (2010) '(Long) Live the Experience: Reflections on Performance,

- Pleasure and Perversion', in Lisa Wiegel, Lisa Uytterhoeven and Peter M. Boenisch (trans), Lourdes Orozco and Peter M. Boenisch (eds) Border Collisions: Contemporary Flemish Theatre, Spec Issue of Contemporary Theatre Review, 20(4): 432—436.
- Jackson, Shannon (2011) Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics, London: Routledge.
- Jubb, David (2012) Interview with the author, The Biscuit Factory, London, 4 August 2012.
- Kershaw, Baz (2001) 'Oh For Unruly Audiences! Or, Patterns of Participation in Twentieth-Century Theatre', Modern Drama, 44(2): 133—154.
- Lenderman, Max (2006) Experience the Message: How Experiential Marketing is Changing the Brand World, New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers.
- Luhmann, Niklas (1993) Risk: A Sociological Theory, Rhodes Barrett (trans), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Lyng, Stephen (2005) 'Sociology of the Edge: Social Theory and Voluntary Risk Taking', in Stephen Lyng (ed.) Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking, London: Routledge: 17—49.
- Machon, Josephine (2009) (Syn)Aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nield, Sophie (2008) 'The Rise of the Character Named Spectator', Contemporary Theatre Review, 18(4): 531—544.
- Owen, Louise (2009) 'Performing "Risk": Neoliberalization and Contemporary Performance', Diss, Queen Mary, University of London.
- Phelan, Peggy (1993) Unmarked: The Politics of Performance, New York:

Routledge.

Pine, B. Joseph II and Gilmore, James H (1999) The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Punchdrunk (2011) [www.punchdrunk.org.uk](http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk), accessed 22 November 2012.

Rebellato, Dan (2009) Theatre & Globalization, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reith, Gerda (2008). 'Living with Risk: Chance, Luck and the Creation of Meaning in Uncertainty', in John Welchman (ed.) The Aesthetics of Risk: Volume 3 of the SoCCAS Symposia, Zurich: JRP Ringier: 57—78.

Renn, Ortwin and Rohrman, Bernd (2000) 'Risk Perception Research: An Introduction', in Ortwin Renn and Bernd Rohrman (eds) Cross-Cultural Risk Perception: A Survey of Empirical Studies, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers: 11—53.

Schmitt, Bernd. H (1999) Experiential Marketing: How to Get Customers to SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT, and RELATE to Your company and Brands, New York: the Free Press.

Sennett, Richard (2008) The Craftsman, London: Penguin.

Silvestre, Agnès (2012) 'Punchdrunk and the Politics of Spectatorship', Culturebot, <http://www.culturebot.net/2012/11/14997/punchdrunk-and-the-politics-of-spectatorship/>, accessed 16 November 2012.

Slovic, Paul (2000) 'Introduction and Overview', in Paul Slovic (ed.) The Perception of Risk, London: Earthscan: xxi—xxxvii.

Slovic, Paul, Baruch Fischhoff and Sarah Lichtenstein (2000) 'Cognitive Processes and Societal Risk Taking', in Paul Slovic (ed.) The Perception of Risk, London: Earthscan: 32—50.

Tversky, Amos and Kahneman, Daniel (1974) 'Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases', Science, 185.4157: 1124—1131.

White, Gareth (2012) "On Immersive Theatre", *Theatre Research International*, 37.3: 221-235.

Worthen, W. B (2012) "The Written Troubles of the Brain": Sleep No More and the Space of Character', Theatre Journal, 64: 79—97.