

## **IETM Ljubljana May 2008**

### **notes and thoughts**

By Dr Mark Leahy  
Dartington Campus  
University College Falmouth

A sunny week in Ljubljana where I caught up with people I hadn't seen for some time, in an intense flurry of seeing thrilling and varied work, thinking about the work of the students I was travelling with, and being excited by the ideas raised in panels and discussions and conversations ...

one particular question that struck me came in part I feel from the city's location in central europe, between east and west, between the europe of the Schengen group and the former warsaw pact, centred between the atlantic rim and the mediterranean and the baltic and the black sea; this was the consideration of the topic of neo-liberalism, an important topic which is hardly addressed in the UK and Ireland ... perhaps we are unable to see it as we are immersed in it, we so understand this position to be the norm that we have nowhere to observe it from ... do we need to step out of that pond and stand temporarily in slovenia, or further east to see what we swim in?

I saw a selection of performances across theatre / dance / live art. Some of these had particular relevance to the work I have been doing with the students on the MA Contemporary Arts Practice and Dissemination (MACAPD) programme. I was attending the IETM meeting specifically in connection with that course and with our partners at Maska.

The production by Janez Jansa of 'Pupilja, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilchecks' engaged with a number of themes and topics that we have been working with. The question of the archive and the reperformance in relation to live art was raised by this work. What is it to make a performance again? what is it to make someone else's work over into another making? what is it to gather and reshow archive materials? this is different from the remake (different from Gus Van Sant's *Psycho*, or American versions of Japanese horror films) this remaking is a reversioning that presents itself as always unable to be the original, and to have both a nostalgia for that first action, but also a demand that the new action has a relevance for now. This is not simply a history lesson, showing us in the audience what things were like in the old days, this is not historical reconstruction like in the Yorvik centre where people 'live' as Vikings, rather the importance of the performance is for now, and uses the earlier work as a score. The presentation also showed reconstructive techniques using a variety of types of data, verbatim testimony, recollection, public records, private archives, memory, chance ... the role of the audience, or the position in which we were placed by the work (even before we were explicitly drawn into the action through voting) was as a witness to the skill at remaking, and as witness to the skill in performing, as well as a critic of the achievement of a match, or of a convincing remaking. The involvement in the decision on the fate of the chicken was then an underlining of our complicity in the event as a whole, as the cause of this, as the reason for its happening (again).

The performance 'Viva Verdi' by Via Negativa also complicated the position of the audience, and directly set out to challenge or discomfort us. The audience were addressed directly, and again were witness to physical acts that might be labelled 'authentic' as there was no way to hide them, or to dismiss them as illusions. The performers were physically sharing the space with us, even in the proscenium space of Cankerev Dom, as the house lights remained on, as we smelt the piss, and heard the gasps of the players ... but they also became players in another theatrical or performance tradition, of circus, of vaudeville, of the fairground ... and the real actions and the real sweat and breath were offset or set off by the spoken narratives which could not be easily resolved into truth and fiction. The audience were necessary as the beholders of the (re)presentation, and as supporting the financial model of exchange involved.

The cost of being a dancer, the financial basis of a performance, of a company, of the making and consuming of arts was also raised in the piece *Chères Chères* [choreographed by Maja Delak] (where 'dear' and 'dear' were punned on). Again the 'real' and the 'symbolic' or illusory were played against each other, materials were used without symbolism (the honey poured into the dancer's mouth) and materials were used symbolically (coins / money) and some objects were used as both (the cactus in the pot – acting both as a personal possession, someone's plant, and as a stand-in for the desert, for a paella western, and perhaps as a symbol for a dried up heart). The dancers in the piece also maintained such a double aspect shifting between being figures (bodies on stage, in space, in motion) and being characters (prim interpreter, sexually driven player). The audience were kept on one side of the footlights, with an additional boundary of b/w monitors showing live-feed from cameras positioned within the performance space. These images mediated the figures/characters further, offering discreet views of bodies, of angles on action that isolated them for watching, again making the audience somehow complicit in their attention to the costs of / the efforts to/ the consequences of performance.

The audience were further involved in the performance 'Memories are made of this' directed by Goran Sergej Pristaš, where each group or even each member of those who were present at the event clearly had a distinct experience, this is always the case for an audience, but it was underlined by the action of this piece. Again the question of working, of the artist making work, of the nature of art working was raised. What is the value of this work of the performer? What is it to make work? How is this work measured? Memory operated in the performance as one currency, where we were asked to consider how we remember, how we recognise elements that recur or are repeated or remade in various ways. This was performed in mirroring, in acting out of representational actions, in deploying and displaying gestures, and in words sounds and images. The proximity of the dancers/performers made the audience member very conscious of their bodies, of how they breathed, how it might feel if they hit against you. These same dancers were also disembodied on screens and by lights, disintegrating them into visual information.

These questions of value and cost, of the value of work, of creative work as labour, of the recognition of work as work, were raised in the Panel B3: Publishing in Liquid Times. The initial topic for this panel touched on matters of distribution of texts, of dissemination of textual and other materials. How is live work distributed, and how can the web be used to disseminate practice and comment? The discussion moved to

consider other means of exchange, of bypassing 'official' or 'authorised' channels, and to consider how areas of the world at different levels of economic development might share information, might extend links and projects. Narratives of development as inexorable, and as inevitably positive were questioned. In terms of criticism and of comment, instant messaging modes and fast turnaround of comment may leave little space for reflection and generation, if everything becomes reactive. There were a number of positive notes from the panel, with networks of connections operating internationally between performers, thinkers, makers, writers; with creative responses in non-governmental groups that were generating creative material to one side of official culture but without being validated through opposition. A concern was raised that ways of continuing to fund the generation of making, to fund time and space and possibilities, needed to be identified, that were not wiped out by creative output being shared for free. How does the creative maker survive financially while remaining outside a simple commodity model of exchange? This in a sense was the question 'Publishing in Liquid Times' arrived at. If there is an answer it must involve a mixture of means of being paid, of ensuring that work is recompensed, that the place of creative work is given value in society.

One of the other topics I began to think more on during the IETM meeting was the position of NGOs and their place within cultural development, and their relation to other kinds of institutions. In particular in relation to academic institutions as that is where I operate. I think that the possibilities of mutually supportive and beneficial relationships are possible between these two different sorts of structures, where the flexibility of the NGO can be joined to the resources of Universities. These resources may be space and time for making, or they may be partnership in funding applications where the work done in/by the NGO can gain academic credits and where the skills and experience of the NGO personnel can transfer to students and researchers.