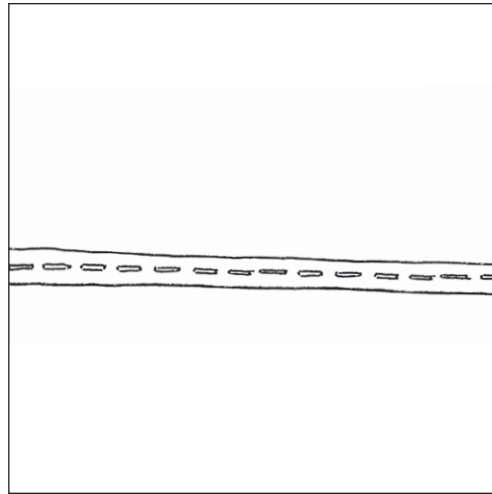


WHY DON'T WE DO IT IN THE ROAD



A PERSONAL GUIDE TO OUTDOOR
INTERACTIVE THEATRE

by Vida Cerkvėnik Bren



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Chapter 3 co-written by Samo Oleami

Illustrations by Robin Klengel

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PREFACE

Why Don't We Do It in the Road is a book for anyone:
... who enjoys creating outdoor theatre performances,
... who is interested in learning about it,
... who is interested in the mechanisms behind it,
... and for anyone who is ... well ... just generally interested in things.

The book has emerged from personal experience of creating theatre in the streets, squares, parks, villages, buses, hospitals, churches and even mountains. Although a personal experience, it is one that is embedded in the firm belief that art should be created collectively. Over the last decade the author, Vida Cerkenik Bren, has been at the core of numerous collective artistic processes. Following her graduation in theatre directing she, in 2006, co-founded Ljud – an international collective that explores the possibilities of artistic expression in public spaces through interactive performances and site-specific projects. Since then Vida has toured with Ljud around the world, directing, performing and teaching in more than 30 countries.

During her travels she and her fellow “Ljuds” have crossed paths with many like-minded artists: performers, directors and pedagogues as well as theatre critics, festival directors and academics. Their ideas and advice have enriched her views on making and understanding theatre and some of them can be found in this book.

So, what kind of theatre does Vida write about? There are many names for it: outdoor theatre, street theatre, theatre in public spaces, our friends in Italy call it “teatro negli spazi aperti”, in German it is “Theater im öffentlichen Raum”, in

Slovene “gledališče v javnem prostoru”. And there are other labels you can give it: “interactive”, “participatory” or “immersive”.

But rather than focusing on the labels, Vida writes about the theatre she strives for. It is a theatre that:

1. takes place outside of spaces that have been built for theatre and
2. comes to life in the interaction with the audience.

Her aim is to write *in favour* of such theatre and not *against* any other.

Why Don't We Do It in the Road is not intended as a comprehensive guide to outdoor theatre. It cannot and does not wish to cover all forms, practices and aspects of this type of theatre. Quite the opposite, it is a personal guide that sheds some light on the subject, but from a certain standpoint. Its aim is to inspire the reader and encourage his critical thinking.

The idea to jot down the thoughts and practical exercises that have been gathered over the last decade came two years ago when Ljud was invited by the RIOTE (Rural Inclusive Outdoor Theatre Education) partnership to prepare a “practical guide to creating outdoor theatre”. “Ljuds” took this opportunity to share their knowledge and teaching methods with the RIOTE partners – fellow theatre groups from Hungary, Italy, Romania and UK who share their passion for performing outdoors. The result of this process is the book you are holding in your hands.

Take it “on the road” with you and maybe we will meet you there.

Jurij Bobič, editor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

What you are about to read is the fruit of conversations and co-creative processes that took place over the last decade, so first of all I would like to extend a huge thank you to everybody – Mladen Bačić, Sanja Bačić Žmavc, Sebastien Fraboulet, Nika Gabrovšek, Jaša Jenull, David Kraševc, Majda Krivograd, Grega Močivnik, Matevž Pistotnik – Kuki, Jurij Torkar, Katarina Zalar, etc. - who was a part of this adventure.

Why Don't We Do It in the Road came to life as a collective working process – I am evermore grateful to Jurij Bobič, a first-rate editor and friend, and Mr. Robin, the illustrator, for all their inputs, proposals, ideas, encouragement, support and patience during the winter of 2019!

Special thanks go to Sergi Estabanell, Tom Grader, Samo Oleami and Sonja Vilč who contributed a great deal to the book's content. As well as to Géza Pintér and the RIOTE partnership for the opportunity.

I would also like to thank Werner Schrempf who supported the Ljud collective at its very beginning.

And thanks also go to the Beatles.

Vida Cerkvenik Bren

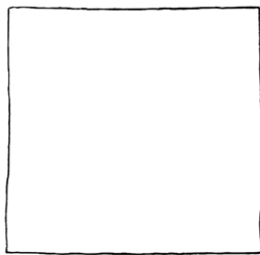
Warning: This book is full of second-hand knowledge. Don't hesitate to pass it on.

FOR ZORAN & SURI

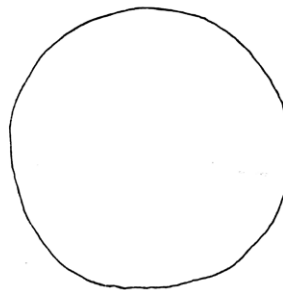
1 STAGE VS. STREET

Dear reader,

I would like to begin our conversation by presenting two simple characters that will be appearing throughout this book:



the square



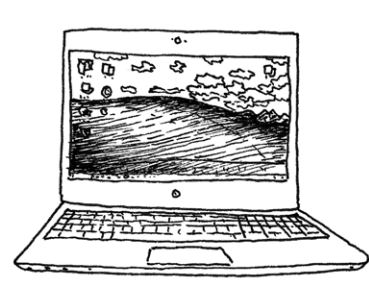
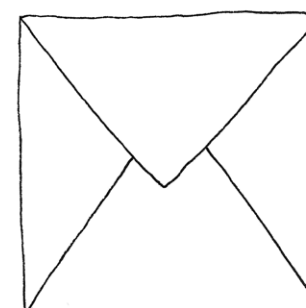
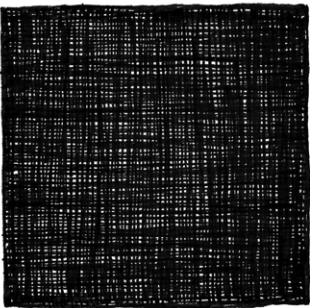
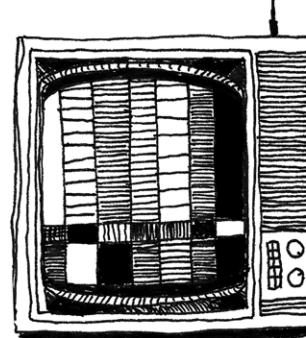
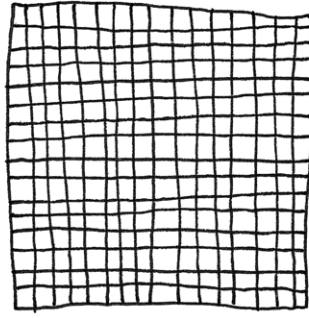
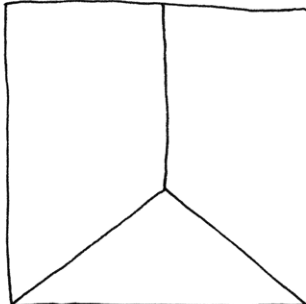
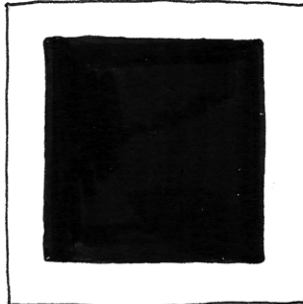
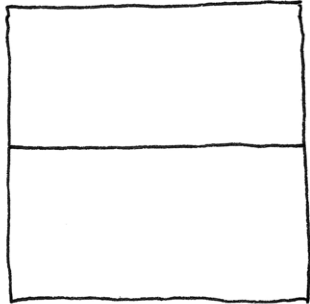
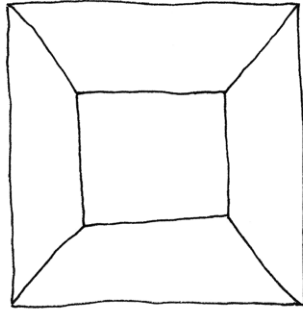
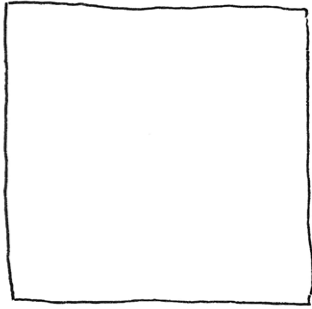
&

the circle.

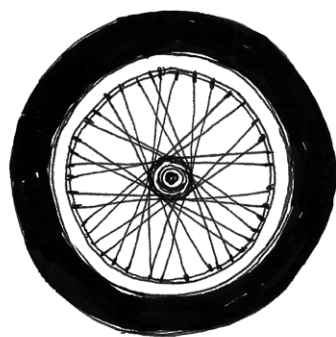
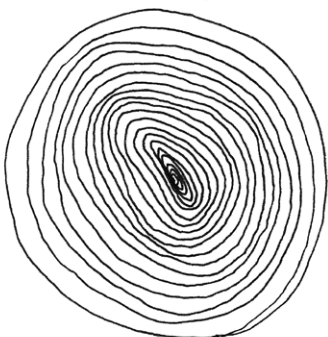
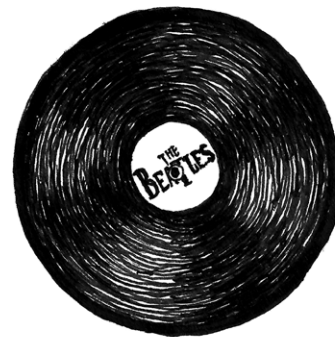
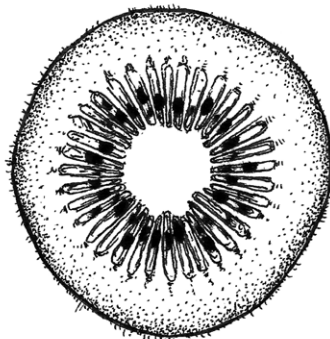
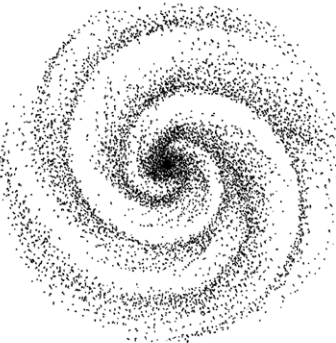
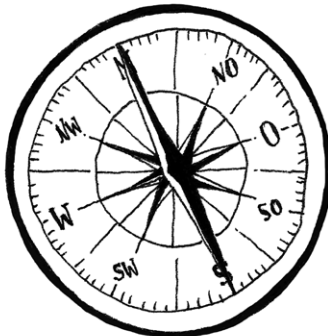
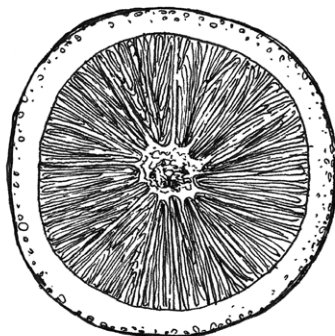
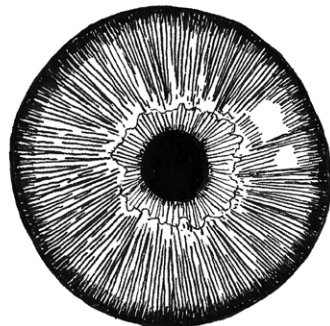
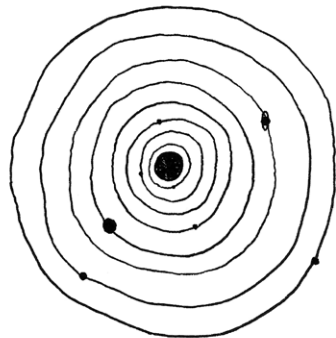
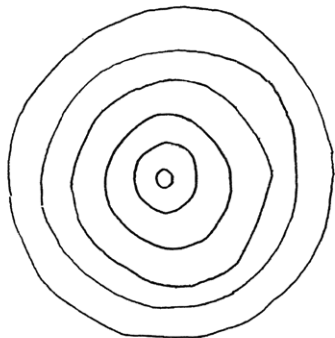
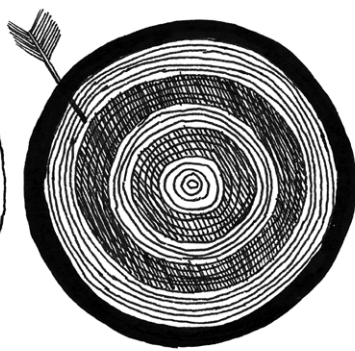
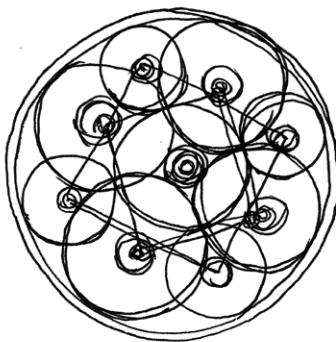
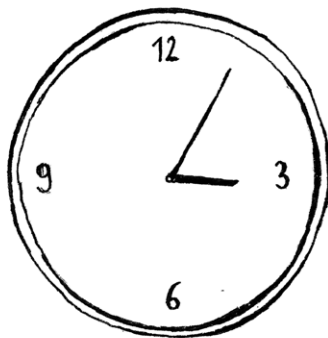
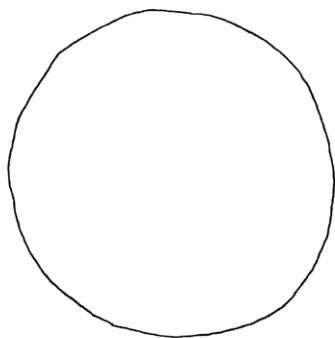
I see squares as windows through which I view the world that I am not a part of. A square draws attention to what is inside but excludes everything else.

A square can represent a frame through which we look at art – the frame of a painting, the screen of your laptop, a book, a cinema or the frame surrounding the theatre stage.

Our civilisation invented elaborate frames, both analogue and digital. We are used to perceiving art as well as life itself through frames: photos, videos, selfies, social media.



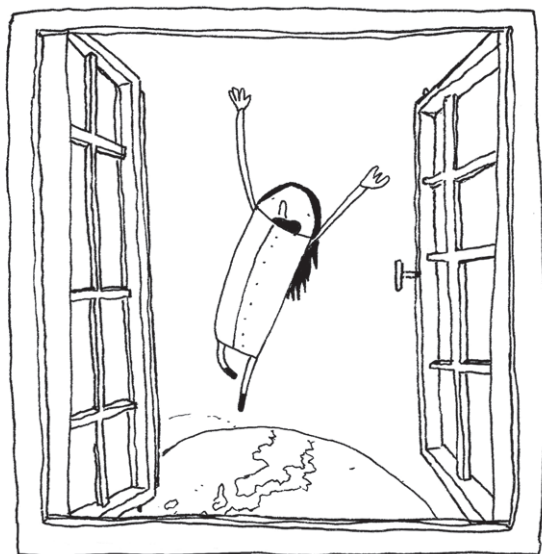
B u t
t h i s
book should
b e a b o u t
circles!

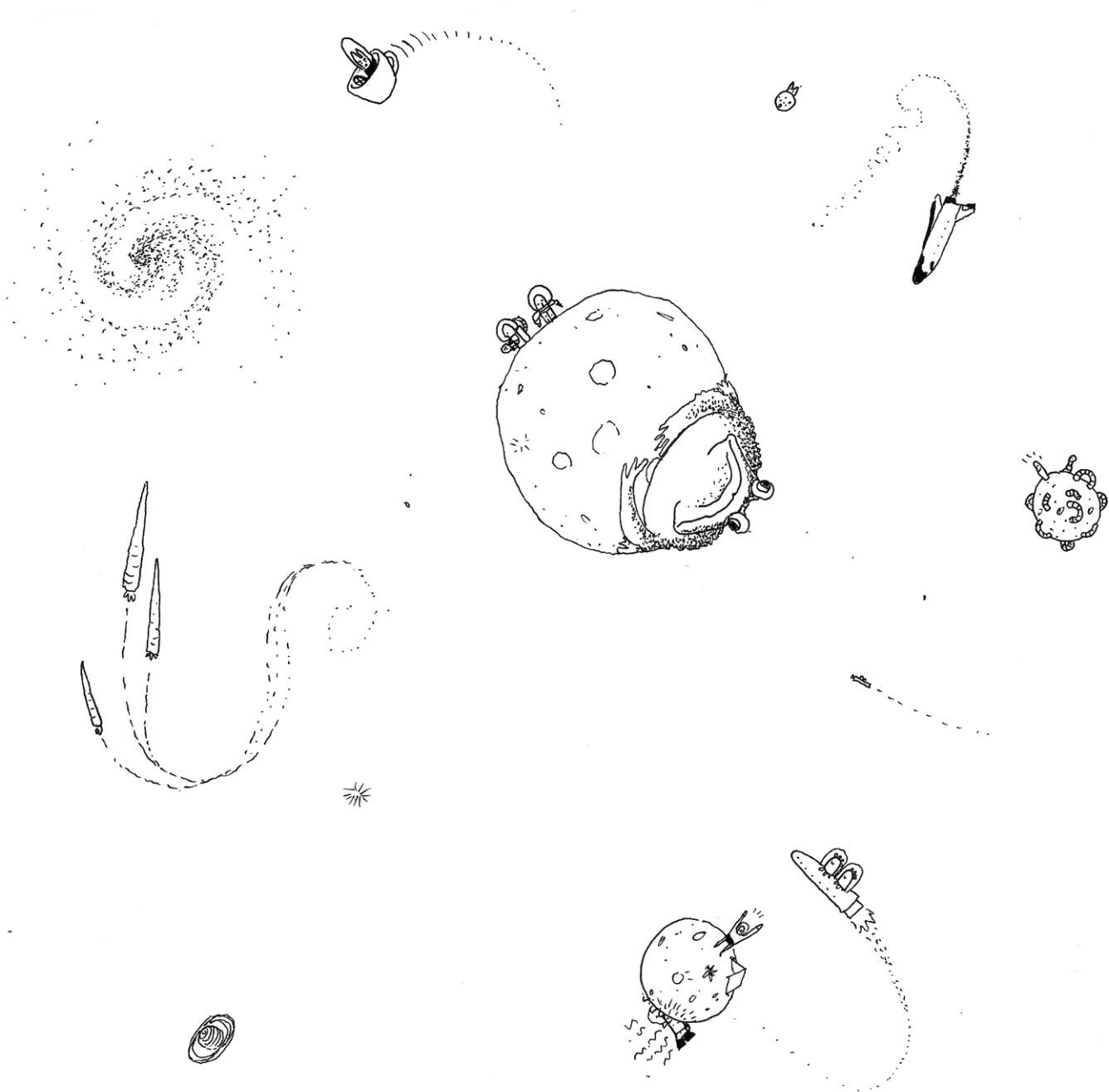


However, before we start talking about circles there are a few more things that need to be said about squares.

Squares can be useful for a number of things. If I want to draw a box, I draw a square. If I want to draw a robot, I draw a few squares. If I want to draw a fishing net, I draw a lot of squares. Any time I need to frame something, segregate things or establish a specific order I use squares.

Squares are good for rooms, a square means I am inside.





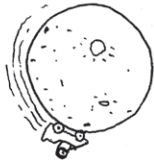
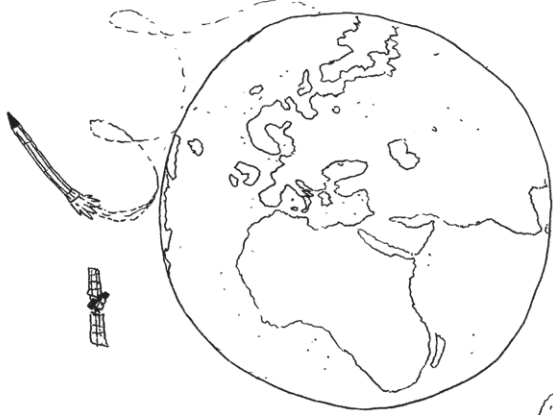
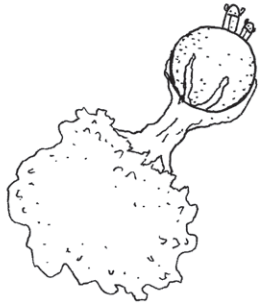


BUT IT'S
MUCH MORE FUN
TO BE OUTSIDE!

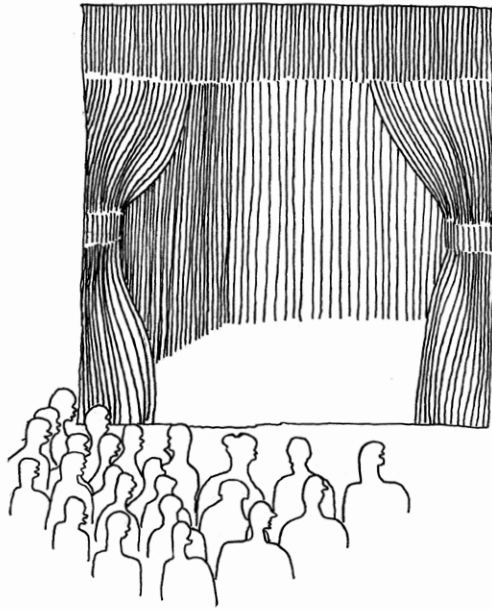


WELL... AS LONG
AS THE WEATHER
KEEPS UP.

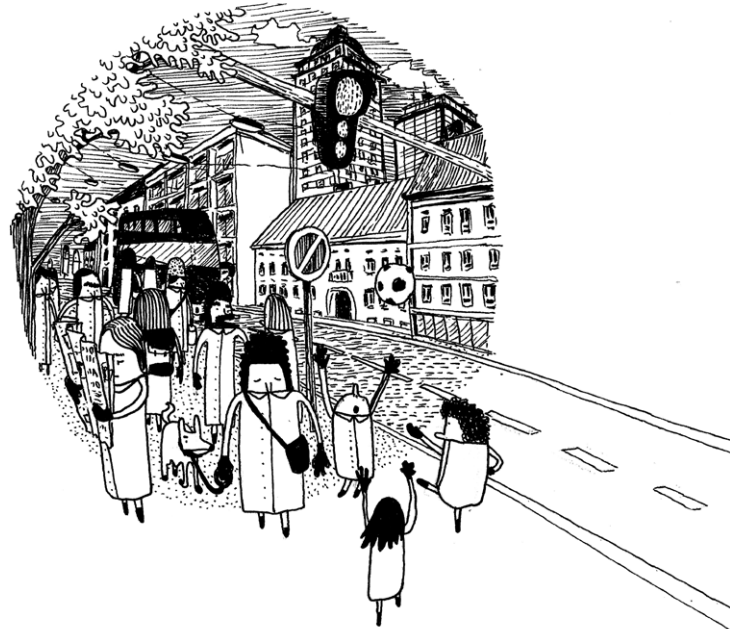
THERE ARE
SO MANY THINGS
TO EXPLORE AND
YOU NEVER KNOW
WHAT WILL HAPPEN!
I LOVE BEING
OUTSIDE!



I see the square and the circle as two different ways of creating theatre:



indoors



&

outdoors.

They also stand for two different ways of perceiving the world around me. Two different ways of trying to understand it.

The first way is through passive observation from a safe distance, analysing it and trying to comprehend it. The second is through active participation – through direct engagement which includes physical experience. So, trying to make sense of the world by letting myself go and becoming a part of it.

It all boils down to two sets of keywords:

CONTROL, VOYEURISM,
identification, hierarchy,
monologue, presentation,
clarity,
plan, REPETITION,
intention, **RESULT**,
PROMOTION, **product**,
INDIVIDUAL SPECTATOR.

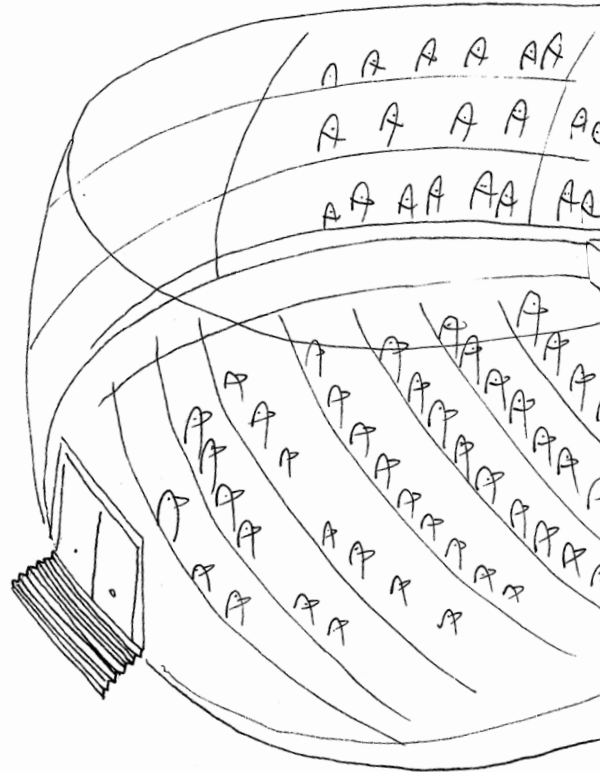
LETTING GO,
PARTICIPANT,
engagement, horizontal
organisation, **dialogue**,
interaction, **chaos**,
improvisation, HERE AND NOW!,
spontaneity, **PROCESS**, **INVOLVEMENT**,
exchange, TEMPORARY
COMMUNITY.

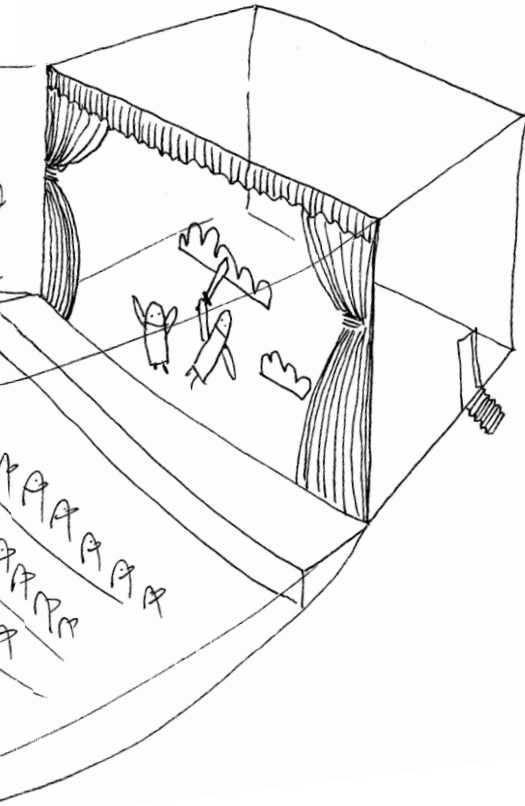
The first approach, illustrated by the square, represents the concept of theatre that originated in the 18th and 19th centuries and which is still alive today in contemporary national theatre houses.

Performances take place in purpose-built buildings also referred to as picture frame stage theatres.

These theatres are used by two sets of people: the actors and the spectators who come together in a slightly unusual way. Even though the spectators have come to watch the actors and the actors have come to perform for the spectators they do not want to meet eye to eye, specially not before the beginning of the performance. So everything in the theatre buildings comes in twos - identical pairs to be used by either the actors or the spectators, with visible and invisible walls in between.

If you are a spectator, you walk into the theatre through the main entrance; if you are an actor, you go in through the service entrance. At the main entrance, the spectators are taken past the box office to the cloakrooms, while the service entrance





takes the actors past the doorkeeper to their dressing rooms backstage. As a spectator, you are required to pay to visit the theatre; as an actor, you get a salary at the end of the month. Spectators drink wine in the visitors' bar, while actors treat themselves to the same wine at half the price in the in-house bar. The signs "left", "right", "stalls", "balcony", etc. help spectators find their seats. To prevent actors from getting lost, the maze of corridors and staircases in the other part of the building is equipped with flashing arrows and signs like "stage" and "quiet, please".

A curtain separates the stage from the auditorium. Once everyone is in their place – at a predetermined time – the lights go out and the curtain is lifted to reveal a gaping hole. This is what is known as the fourth wall. The fourth wall is invisible and is emphasised by the surrounding frame known as the proscenium arch – the window into the world of the theatre performance.¹

¹ I find it interesting that the development of this type of theatre was fostered by the invention and expansion of gas lighting in the 19th century. Prior to this, the auditorium was illuminated throughout the performance. Spectators would flirt, talk, and even eat and drink during the play.

All this is part of the dramatic convention.

It allows the artist to have better control over the artwork.

It allows the spectator to sink into the darkness, settle in a comfortable seat and forget that he is in an auditorium. He becomes a voyeur.



Just as if you were sitting at home watching the street through a square window, without being seen by the people in the street.

“ I am peering at the stage. The distance between myself and the events on stage remains unchanged. The outline of the proscenium arch ensures this, acting as a window through which I observe the landscape on stage which appears endless due to this window. The longer I gaze through this window from a safe distance, the more this distance fades away, dissipating until it has completely disappeared. Suddenly, I find myself in the midst of the developments, invisible and hovering mid-air right in the middle of the space, enjoying myself or suffering. I have the eyes of a bird, one on each side, allowing me to see the entire world. And when the world comes to an end at the end of the performance, this world disintegrates and I find myself back in the chair, the same chair number two in row thirteen left that has been creaking meekly under my weight the entire time. I haven't left the chair but I have nevertheless just returned from far away. This is what happens when I go to the theatre. ”

Meta Hočevar ²

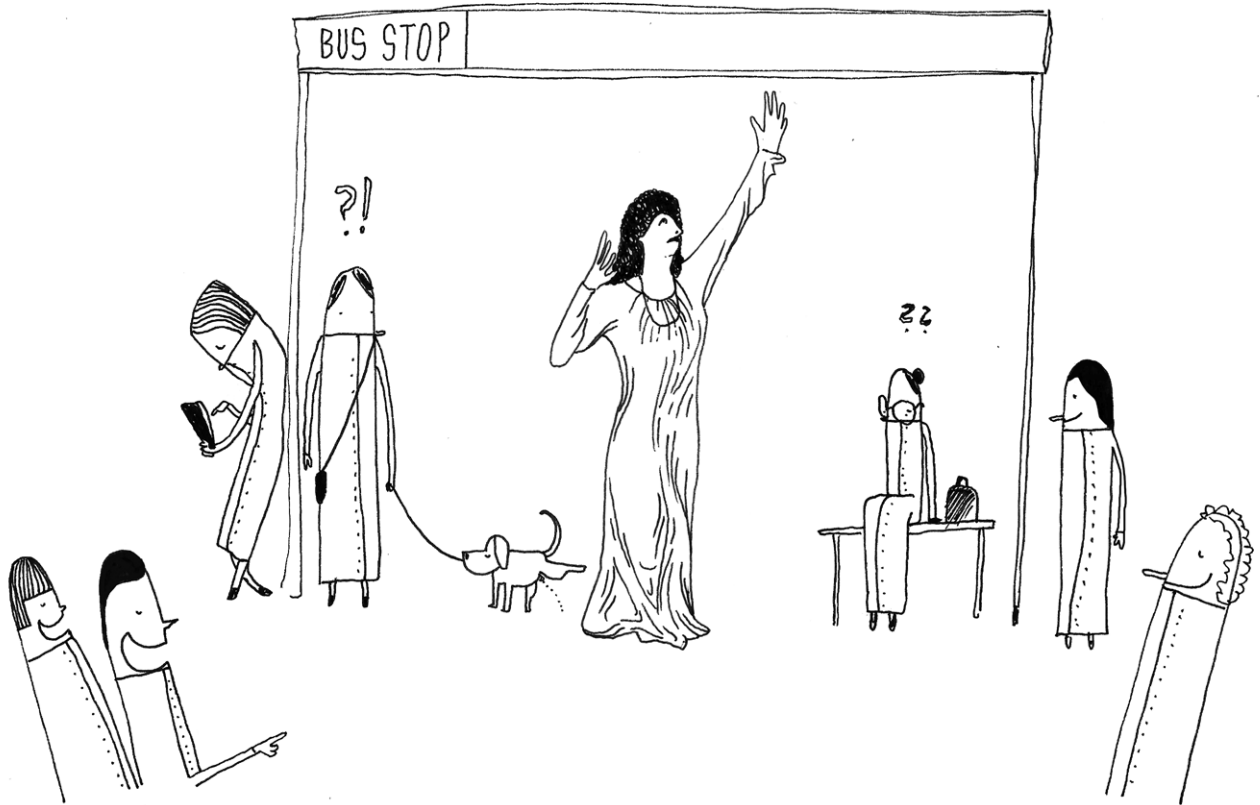
² Meta Hočevar, *Prostori igre* (Ljubljana: Mestno gledališče ljubljansko, 1998), p. 24. (Translated by Živa Petkovšek)

Imagine a great actress, for instance Sarah Bernhardt, graciously entering the stage.

The audience holding its breath, awaiting her gentle presence, a beam of light eager to catch her pale hand, the stage boards kissing her feet as she walks weightlessly wrapped into the mist of blackness, bringing a whole world of ambiguous emotions and unfulfilled desires to the stage. Each tiny movement of her eyelashes creates a tsunami in the hearts of the spectators.



And now, imagine her walking into a bar or a fish market or a...



Even with the same gestures, the same gracious hand and eyelashes, the same emotional charge, but without the pedestal – the stage, the lights and the fans – a tragedy can easily turn into a comedy.

The sky, the absence
of a roof above my head,
came as a bit of a surprise when
I first performed outdoors. We danced
in a completely flat field with the horizon
stretching all around us. You couldn't get
much more sky than that! If you tell anyone in
England you're making a show outdoors,
you will be asked, "But what if it rains?"
Never have I been asked, "But what
about the immensity of the
sky?"



Helen Aldrich, performer³

³ Helen Aldrich is a performer and artistic director of Broken Spectacle, a physical theatre ensemble, based in Totnes, UK (member of RIOTE partnership).



EXERCISE

Dear reader, before moving on to the next chapter try a simple exercise. (I know it sounds silly, but it will prove to be surprisingly rewarding!)

1. Look through the hole on the front cover of the book.
2. Close one eye and start moving slowly, observing different pictures appearing within the frame.
3. Move around and play with compositions, contrasts, sizes, colours, motifs, light...

2

GOING OUT OF THE BOX

Before I delve deeper into circles, let me tell you a bit about my background.

When I was studying theatre directing at the Academy in Ljubljana I had a feeling that theatre was no longer a topical social phenomenon: "...a place where people would gather, where ideas would be formulated and debated", a place that would make it "possible for people to be a part of something that expresses the different paradoxes and controversies of the society they live in."⁴

My dad told me that when he was young, in the 1970's, everybody in former Yugoslavia talked about certain theatre performances. I have found piles of reviews and letters to the editor in the basement of our school that validated his claims.

⁴ Sonja Vilč, *Collective Improvisation: From Theatre to Film and Beyond* (Ljubljana: Kolektiv Narobov, Zavod Federacija in Zavod Maska, 2015), p. 154.

But “WOW, that happened just like in a theatre play!” was not a sentence my friends would use to describe an extraordinary series of coincidences that life sometimes magically serves us with.

I can imagine, in Shakespearean times, an Elizabethan teenager shouting out...

...in the same way as I can imagine people in the Victorian era saying...



...but my friends would of course use the phrase that is common nowadays: “WOW, that happened just like in the movies!” Which gave me the impression that film was THE media of our times.

If I attend the cinema, the fourth wall is replaced by the screen onto which “*Titanic*” is being projected. I watch it and immerse myself, forgetting where I am, allowing the story on the screen to become my story. I travel at the speed of a cut from the deck of the Titanic to Kate Winslet’s cabin, from a close-up of Leonardo’s face to the sea – vast and endless, from an exterior to an interior, from 1912 to 1996. I travel far, but I do not move at all.

Since film managed to take over some of the key ideas and concepts of the dramatic theatre so successfully, many 20th century theatre reformists (Artaud, Appia, Brecht, Weill, The Living Theatre, to list a few) asked themselves:

What is it that film cannot do but theatre can?

Theatre always takes place *here and now*. Spectators and performers share the same time and the same space, therefore every performance is unique and both sides can interact in real time, “live”.

This is how my like-minded friends and I articulated the advantages of theatre when compared to film. In order to “(re)discover” the theatre’s potential we invested our hearts and minds into establishing

theatre as a game,

a ritual and

a social event.

In order to interact with audiences from all walks of life while freeing ourselves from the formal restraints of cultural institutions we decided to “hit the road”. We founded an artistic collective and called it Ljud. Not knowing much about outdoor performances, driven by youthful enthusiasm and idealism, we started touring the globe with our first street act *The Invasion*.

“ It all started when we met up for a coffee and somebody came up with the idea of an invasion of pink aliens – asylum seekers from outer space who wanted to establish contact with earthlings and become assimilated into our society even though they hadn’t a clue as to how they should behave on this planet.

Nobody had any idea that this act would flourish the way it did, that we would take it on tour all over the world and interact with such a variety of people: the Belarusians, Australians, Israelis, Iranians and Koreans to name a few. Doesn’t it all sound awesome?

Well, it is...but you also need to figure out how to survive the chaos of various cultures and unexpected reactions, flights, constant packing, early mornings, endless paint jobs, tensions within the group and the long absences from the “real” life in Ljubljana. And most of all, you need to figure out why you are doing all of this. ⁵ ”

David Kraševac, *member of The Invasion expedition* ⁶

⁵ Taken from an early draft of an article later published as: 'Invazije 2011', *Ana glasnica: Časopis za ulično umetnost*, December 2011, p. 3. (Translated by Živa Petkovšek)

⁶ Some of the pink aliens are still on the move today, 11 years later.

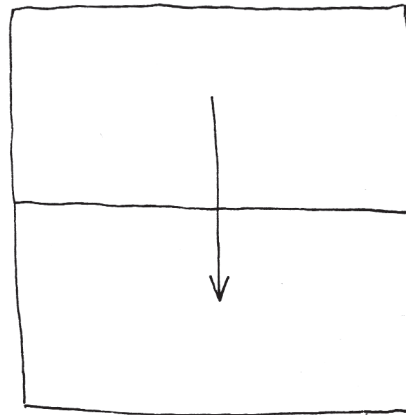
Invasions were my first step from the indoor “laboratory” into the “jungle” of chaotic, noisy, unforeseeable and overwhelming public space. As a director as well as a performer I was confronted time and time again with my preliminary plans and ideas crumbling down in the face of what life had to offer. So, I stopped fixing the “Mise-en-scène”, chasing the subtle undertones and other perfectionist drills used indoors. A different logic of communication had to be comprehended by us all – we were learning how to listen.

Dear reader, at this point, I would like to take you back to the metaphor of the square and the circle. In situations that I associate with squares and frames I imagine a flow of information running in a single direction from one side of the frame to the other (as illustrated below).

Whatever is happening **inside** of the frame is providing information to the observer who is on the **outside**.

Like a scientist looking at an experiment in a controlled environment.
A student listening to a university lecture.
A spectator watching a performance in a classic theatre setting.

To simplify we can call this setting:

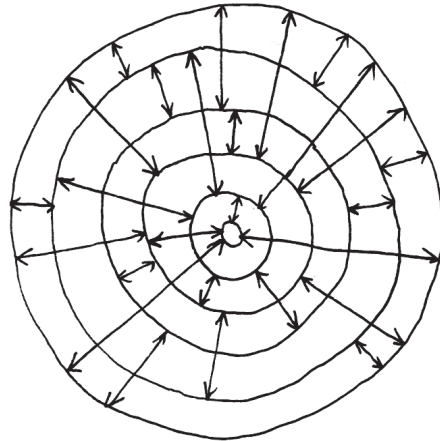


P R E S E N T A T I O N

Venturing into the street, we were faced with a situation that was significantly different from the one indoors. With no walls around us to protect us from the environment, our control over what the spectators see and hear was drastically reduced. In the absence of the fourth wall the border between us and the spectators was blurred – the audience was active, their reactions were the most precious and interesting part of what was happening. In other words, many spectators were curious not only to see us, but to see other spectators reacting to the aliens and their provocations.

As it turned out, a variety of different groups were involved in the performance of *The Invasion*: the pink aliens, the passers-by who were taken by surprise, the festival audience, excited teenagers asking whether aliens have capitalism on their planet and how they mate, a drunk guy feeding them beer, a little girl teaching them how to read a newspaper, city drifters and eccentrics identifying with the aliens as fellow weirdoes “not belonging to the crowd”, at least one angry xenophobe occasionally calling the police...

This new and complex situation did not fit the “square” logic of “presentation” (described above). Therefore, my colleagues and I came up with a schematic drawing depicting what we referred to as:



INTERACTION

Contrary to the square, the “target” diagram illustrates a flow of information (visual, verbal, audio, etc.) which is:

1. multiple (includes many separate flows of information simultaneously, given that more than two groups are involved)
2. bi-directional (in every interaction the information flows in both directions)

Like planets circling in their different orbits, some groups are closer to the “core of what is happening”, while others are further away. Even though the understanding of what is happening and the level of involvement may differ from one group to another, they are all interacting with each other.

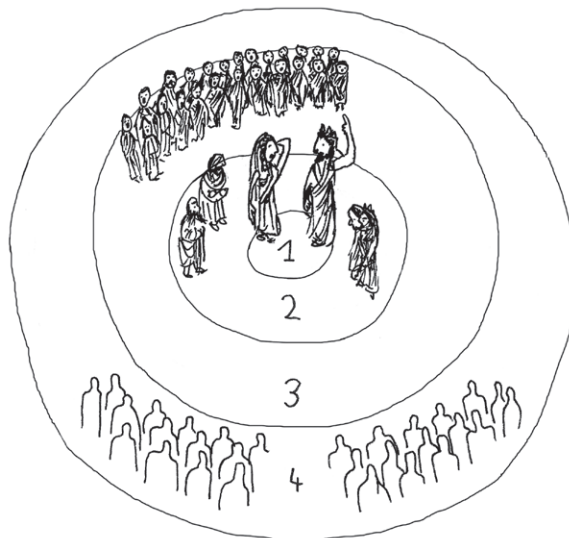
The information flow within the interactions can be difficult to trace and the content that is being communicated impossible to control. Yet a common core of communication

– symbolized by the bullseye of the “target” diagram on the previous page – is automatically formed whenever a group of people is involved in doing something imaginative, emotional or physical together.



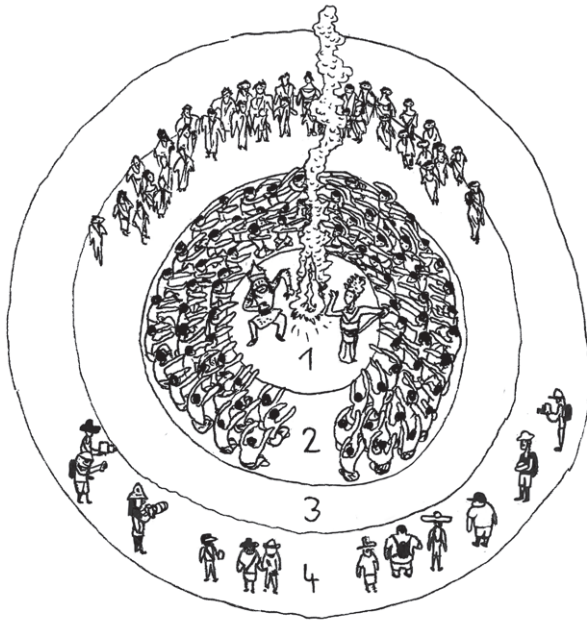
In the early stages, the collective Ljud focused primarily on interactive physical theatre in public spaces. Much of our work drew inspiration from the ritualistic origins of European theatre as well as from the theatre traditions found in Korean Pansori, Bali theatre and Japanese Butoh. The concentric circles that we were trying to build around our performances were inspired by these traditions and techniques.

ANCIENT GREEK THEATRE



- 1 PROTAGONIST & ANTAGONIST
(representing two conflicting forces)
- 2 OTHER CHARACTERS
- 3 CHORUS
(representing the inhabitants of the Polis, in the earlier stages of Greek theatre, most likely played by the audience itself)
- 4 THE AUDIENCE

BALI THEATRE / DANCE⁷

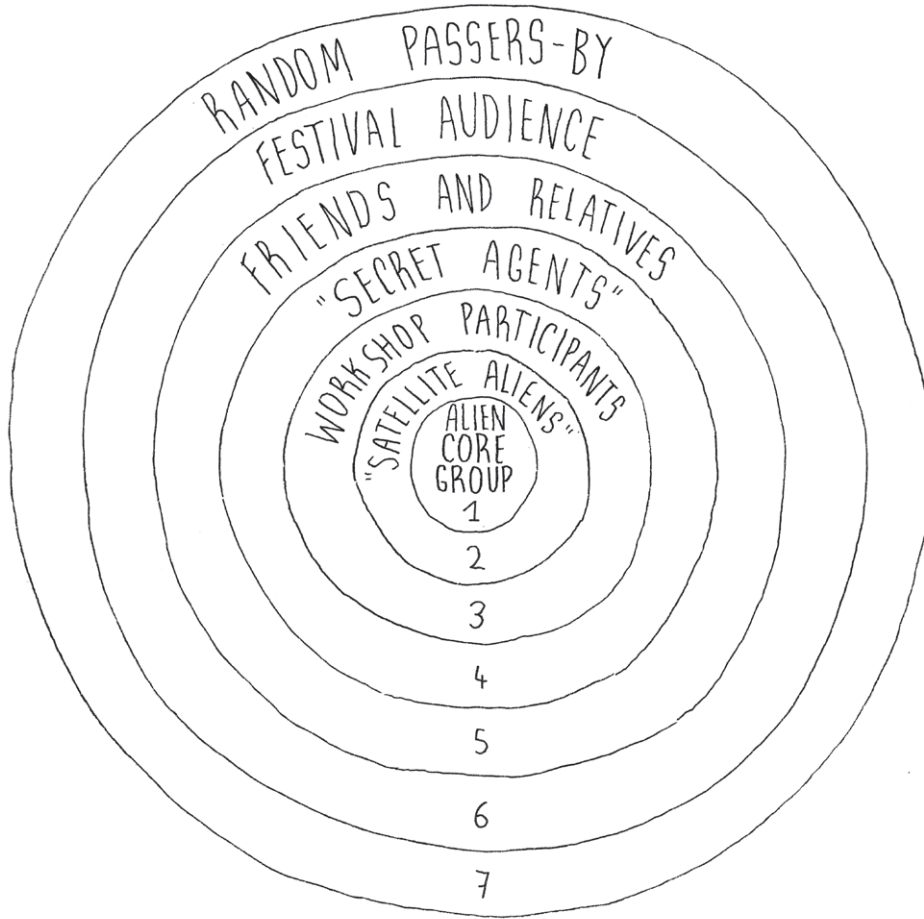


- 1 SOLOISTS, PRIEST
(sometimes acting out an episode from Hindu mythology)
- 2 CHORUS
(group of 50-150 men, young boys or girls – depending on the dance)
- 3 LOCAL AUDIENCE
(accustomed to the local stories and traditions, chanting along at certain parts of the performance, etc.)
- 4 TOURISTS

⁷ The numerous different dancing and theatre traditions found on Bali inspired a number of Western artists during the last century. Amongst the first was Antonin Artaud who described it in his *Le Théâtre et son Double* (The Theatre and its Double).

In Ljud, we were fascinated by the role of the (amateur) chorus and the audience actively participating in the performances. A similar form of active participation, albeit very different in content and atmosphere, can be found in our Western tradition, namely in the Roman Catholic mass. In this case, the congregation has an active role that is similar in form to that of the Chorus: they stand up, pray and say “Amen!” at the appropriate moments. An accidental tourist who only popped into the church for a quick glance, may not have this knowledge and would observe mass from a very different perspective.

THE INVASION



- 1 The alien core group necessary to pull off an *Invasion*
 - 2 The so-called “satellite aliens” who joined us on tours whenever they could
 - 3 Workshop participants – during our tours we held free workshops through which we engaged the locals to perform with us
 - 4 “Secret agents” – we asked some inhabitants to blend in with our audience and surprise them with a pre-arranged action at a specific moment
 - 5 Friends and relatives of the workshop participants who came to watch their loved ones perform
 - 6 The festival audience who came at an announced time to see the act
 - 7 Passers-by – like the tourist in Bali, they had no idea about what was going on
-

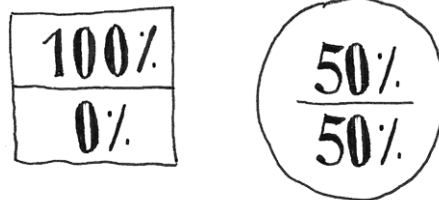
The final artistic impact as well as the final “message” of each edition of *The Invasion* depended on a synergy of various factors: ourselves, the local participants, the type of festival or venue where the performance took place, media coverage, the local socio-political climate, etc.

In Belarus aliens hanging from the nose of Lenin’s statue were regarded as heroes; in Szeget (Hungary) they provoked xeno- and homophobic reactions, dividing the public in two; in some Italian and French towns the aliens were viewed as merely

another carnival spectacle; when locked up in the Ljubljana ZOO, they raised issues about imprisonment; in Norway children tried to teach aliens not to shoplift; in Graz (Austria) individual spectators opened up to the pink creatures allowing them to touch and even kiss them, disclosing loneliness – an older gentlemen took an alien home and showed “it” his family photo albums.

But if artistic content unfolds through **interaction** instead of **presentation**, if the reactions and proposals of the active spectators are the most interesting part of it, who is the actual creator of the artwork - the artist or the audience?

Let’s assume for the sake of argument that they are both responsible for and contribute to the final outcome – the message or the content of the artwork – and that the contribution is shared fifty-fifty between the two parties, in contrast to the one hundred-zero ratio of the “presentation” in a conventional dramatic theatre.

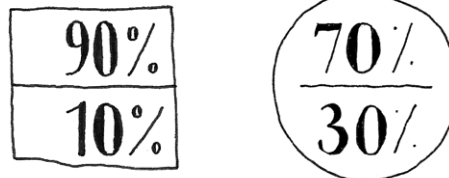


Of course, this over simplification is too simple to be valid. There is – and must be – a difference in the degree of responsibility borne by the artist who initiated an event and the spectators who were invited by the artist to participate in it. Even in an extremely open interaction in which the audience is far from being mere

“voyeurs” and has a direct influence on the outcome of the interaction, thereby determining the direction of the performance, the burden of responsibility still lies primarily on the shoulders of the performer.

Other factors should also be taken into account: even in the classical context, a viewer, a reader or a listener surely influences the reception of an artwork through his interpretation, prior knowledge and experience as well as through his physical presence (at least in the case of theatre).⁸ Fact is also that even in conventional dramatic theatre, information also flows in the opposite direction rather than only flowing in a single direction from the stage to the auditorium; actors on stage will perceive the atmosphere in the auditorium, sometimes they will wait for laughter to recede before continuing with their lines and they will be annoyed by loud snoring or coughing just like the spectators.

Taking all of this into account, we could modify the responsibility ratio. For example:



⁸ Some (performative) arts theoreticians would go much further and claim not only that the audience “influences” the reception, but that the audience “is” the reception. In this regard the content communicated to the recipient is impossible to control – also in the case of conventional dramatic theatre.

Or like this: $\frac{73\%}{27\%}$ or: $\frac{68\%}{32\%}$ or: $\frac{78.16\%}{21.84\%}$

However, regardless of the precise numbers, there is a clear difference in these two cases. In the case of the outdoor interactive theatre the degree of the direct influence that the artist would like his audience to have on the final artwork is greater than in the case of the indoor theatre.⁹ This influence encompasses both the level of reception as well as the level of the (co-)creation of artistic content.

In the case of participatory art, the artist's role is no longer merely to present a certain content (to analyse, judge, show, express, explain and teach), but to facilitate an experience that both the audience as well as the artist himself can participate in.

⁹ When referring to indoor theatre I have in mind the conventional plays performed in national theatre houses. Many other performative traditions take place in the same or in similar buildings: improvisational theatre, contemporary dance, clowning, nouveau cirque, puppet theatre, to name a few. Similar to outdoor interactive theatre these traditions use models of engaging audiences that differ greatly from the dramatic theatre's model.

On the other hand, one can find shows that are created with the dramatic theatre model, but performed outdoors (sometimes teleported directly from the theatre house onto a huge stage in a central city square).

Of course, there are many shades in between and nuances of where we could draw the line. For example, one could "measure" how much of the performance is improvised, or how much of its course depends on active audience participation. However, for the needs of this book a simplified division will suffice.

3

THE ART OF BEING TOGETHER

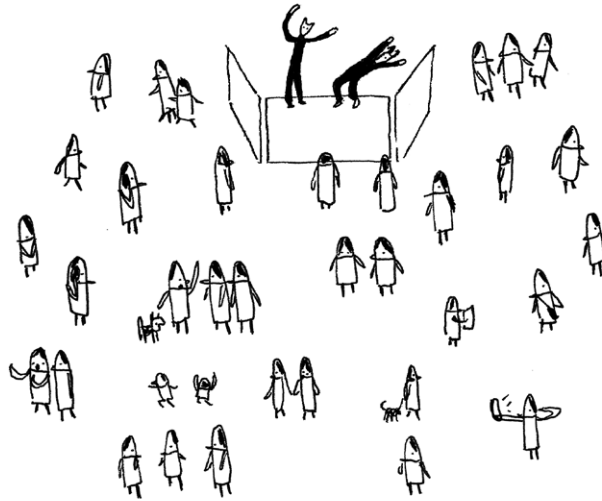
(CO-WRITTEN WITH SAMO OLEAMI)

“As a spectator in indoor theatre you always watch the performers from either the bird’s or the worm’s eye view.” These words by Goro Osojnik can be taken literally, since indoor theatres are built in a way that enhances the view from above (balcony) or below (stalls), but also metaphorically. Just like Gulliver never belonged, you, as a spectator never belong to the world of the actors’ play. You always view it as something smaller or larger than yourself. You are either a critic or an admirer, either a distant God dissecting other people’s destinies or a slug worshiping the actors as gods and wishing to be in their place. “Whereas on the street you always meet the performer eye to eye, on a human level,” as Goro would say.¹⁰

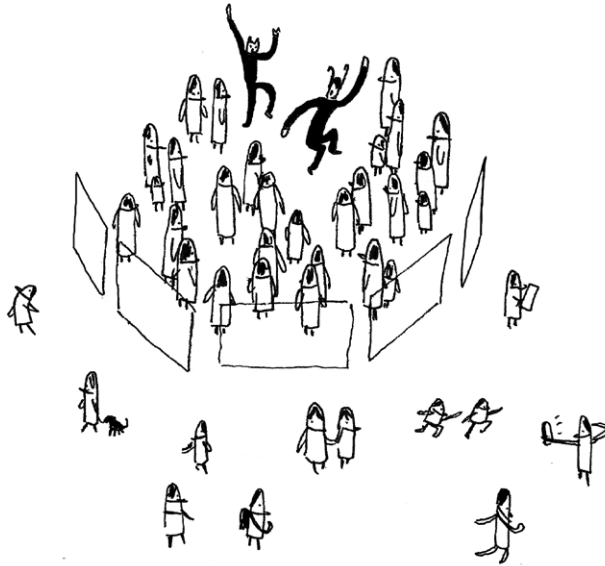
¹⁰ Quoted from memory. Goro Osojnik is one of the pioneers of street performances in Slovenia. He is active as a performer, author and director; he is one of the founding members of Ana Monro theatre and the director of the street theatre festival Ana Desetnica.

On the street the stage doesn't end where the audience begins; it ends where the audience ends.

The artistic strategies of the conventional dramatic theatre raise a barrier between the performers and the audience, creating a division instead of unity. If the street performers create an overly strong fourth wall they isolate themselves from the audience as you can see below...



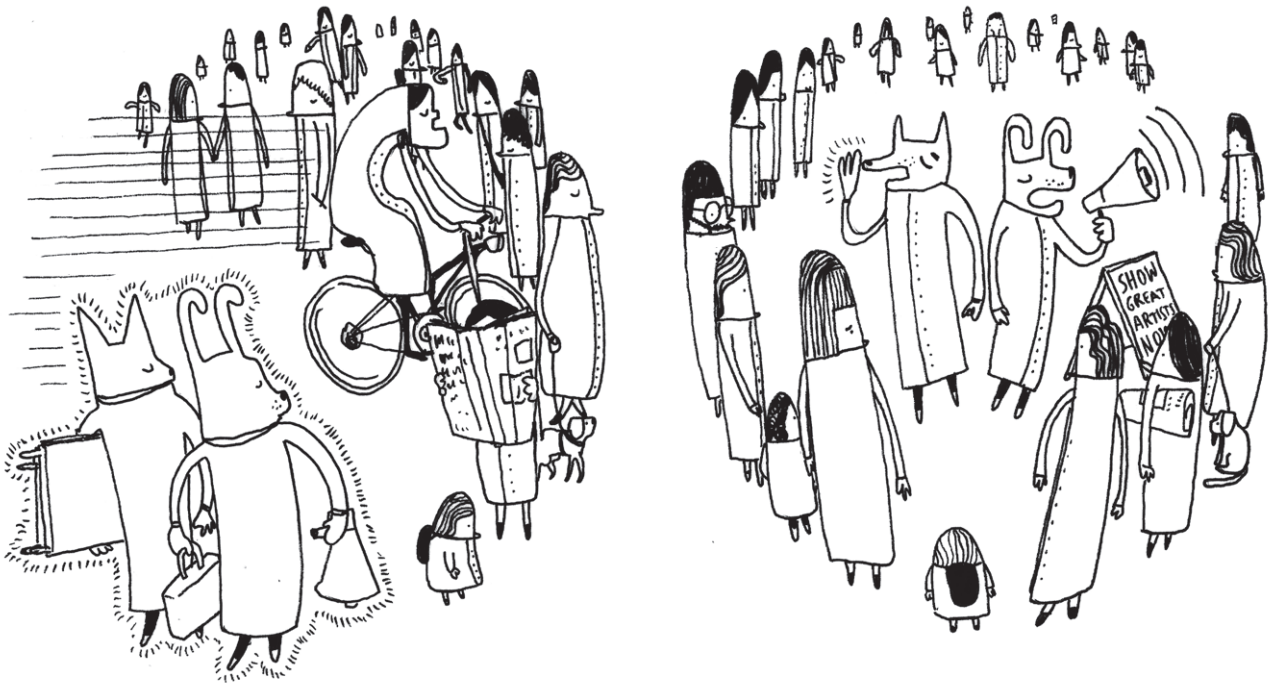
...when they should in fact isolate the audience from the street environment, bringing the spectators within the performance organism:



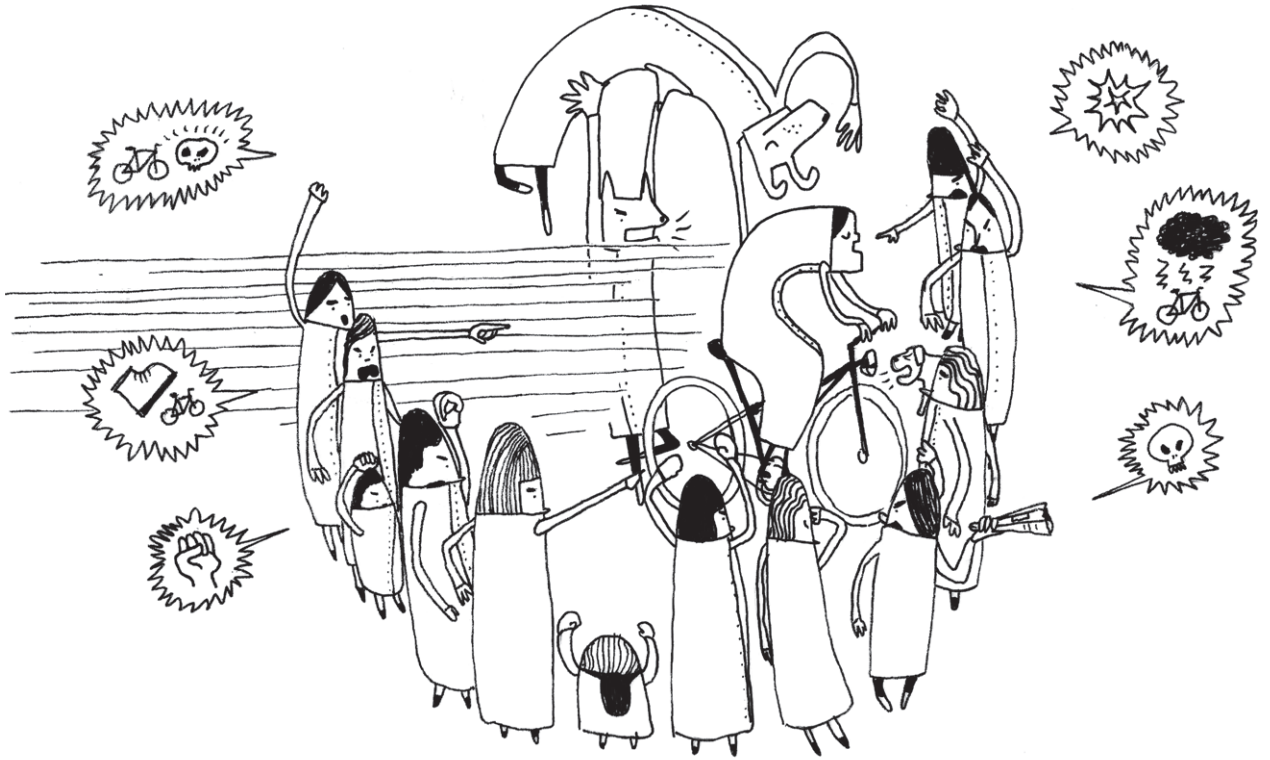
Contrary to actors in a theatre, who pretend they are not actors on a stage, street performers don't have to pretend that they are not on the street. They don't have to pretend that the audience is not there either; what they need to do is invite them in.

The longer people watch the act, the more they invest in it, which makes them more willing to immerse themselves in the act's narrative, which in turn makes the clashes with the environment funnier. Shared knowledge creates a temporary community of audience members during the performance – they are the ones “in on the joke”.

While a cyclist crossing the city
will not attract much attention...



...the same cyclist crossing the same spot after it has been turned into an improvised “stage” and a temporary community has been established, can cause quite a riot.



TRAFFIC BROUGHT TO A STANDSTILL BY A CRAZY PERFORMANCE

A truly unusual performance, performed by the Chilean clown characters Murmuyo and Metrayeta, which made the spectators and casual passers-by almost split their sides with laughter, caused eruptions of anger or at least discontent amongst the drivers, the targets of the satiric, at moments even absurd performance. Their one-hour long follies caused traffic jams throughout the centre of town. During their performance they rolled in the street and jumped around the roundabout in the main square, stopped cars, jumped into them, even 'stole' something for a brief second or pulled out a passenger from some

cars, sat behind the scooter drivers and drove in circles with them, and occasionally hit one on their helmet, wooed the girls, climbed onto the buses and more, and to top it all off they were also booked by the police. A gloomy driver, who obviously did not find their follies funny, was booed by the audience, and the policeman and policewoman who arrived at the scene astonishingly fast received the same reception, but after a discussion with the organizers they did not act, regardless of the chaos in the roundabout. Shocking, hilarious, crazy and unimaginable.¹¹

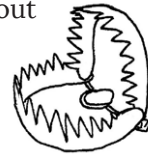
¹¹ Quoted from a newspaper article: 'Nori performance ustavil promet', Večer, 4. July 2013, p. 24. (Translated by Sunčan Stone)

Outside the audience and the performers are interdependent – they both need one another in order to be able to move from the street into the space of the (street) theatre.

The performers guide the audience and the audience should follow actively and willingly, so particular attention has to be paid to ensure that the audience does actually follow, giving it time to catch up and stay together.

TRAP

Too much textual/narrative information delivered too fast can leave the audience confused or alienated. In a street environment the audience is often unable to understand every word that is being said, let alone have the luxury of mulling over what they have heard without being distracted. It is also common for spectators to join the audience or/and leave a street performance mid-act, which makes detailed storylines even harder to follow.



On the street the focus is on *what* is going on and *where* it is going rather than *why* something is going on (backstory, inner motivation of protagonists). Or, as Craig Weston said:

“On the street you’re not a doctor because your character has a backstory, which includes a middle-class background, a degree, an office and a nurse with whom he is cheating on his wife; on the street you’re a doctor because you’re wearing a white coat.”¹²

Since public spaces are not primarily intended for artistic purposes, street artists must “negotiate” their temporary use as an art venue (or simply as a set for a fictional plot) with all of its users. In order to tempt passers-by into seeing the world from a different perspective, they must establish a relationship with them. The unpredictability of the public environment pushes artists into responding and adapting to it, taking things as they come, and breathing with their surroundings. Therefore, the artistic tools crucial to any street performer are those of **improvisation and interaction**.

What the performers and the spectators have in common is the *here and now* – they share the same space in the same time. They may share other things such as language, cultural values, type of humour, but what is certain is that if they come close enough, they will inevitably touch, and if they look into each other’s eyes, there will inevitably be eye contact.

Eye contact is one of the most powerful tools of interaction. Maintaining eye contact with someone can be an extraordinarily intimate, revealing, reassuring, trust building and connecting experience. A feeling of togetherness - not necessarily on the level of sharing a mutual vision, agreeing or having feelings for each other, but merely in terms of co-existing with others in the same space and time seems to be a prerequisite for a street act to unfold successfully within a busy street environment.

¹² Quoted from memory. Craig Weston is a street performer, pedagogue and author, a co-founder of The Primitives (Belgium), a theatre company devoted to bringing theatre to a wider audience, that has toured all across the world in the last 20 years.

I would personally even go so far as to say that this basic human contact between the performers and the spectators is a pre-condition and at the same time the universal deeper message of any street act.

As a theatre director Renzo Vescovi described it: “You find yourself on a sort of ground Zero with the audience – what is in front of you is a pure human experience. If we use Eliot’s words, audience knows that ‘human beings get born, live and love each other’ which is the basic knowledge of emotions. /.../ Background cultural knowledge is not necessary because there are elementary feelings that speak with innocence and straight to the hearts of the audience.”¹³

¹³ Quoted from an unpublished thesis by Alessandra Proietti from May 15, 2002 (Translated by Silvia Viviani). Renzo Vescovi was a theatre director, the founder and artistic director of TTB Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo – Accademia delle Forme Sceniche from 1973 until his death in 2005. TTB is a theatre group situated in Bergamo, Italy, which has been performing in public spaces all around the world for more than 45 years (member of the RIOTE partnership).



EXERCISE

Walk down a busy street and try to make eye contact with everybody who is walking towards you. Don't keep staring at the same person for so long that it would make him feel uncomfortable, instead switch to a new person. Still, try not to look away first.

Observe your own feelings and the people's reactions.

Try smiling while doing it. Try to get across a friendly, reassuring message, letting people know that your intention is harmless and that you are merely playful, not crazy.

Try adding words or a gesture to the eye contact (saying "Hello!", "Good day!", waving or taking your hat off are the classic moves, but if you have another impulse try it out).

4

THE KEY

In the conventional dramatic theatre the distinction between the play and reality is very clear. However, once we leave the theatre houses the distinction between fiction and everyday life becomes blurred. So how can the performers ensure that the audience will be “on board” and play along with the story or the fictional context they are proposing? What is more, how can the performers make the audience adopt the role that has been assigned to them?

Even though a street performer, let’s call him John, does not pretend during his performance that he is not on the street or that there is no audience surrounding him, he nevertheless does not behave like he would in his everyday life and does not cross the city in his usual manner. He imaginatively interprets the street situation and brings a special kind of reality into it. This shift of reality is often achieved through the character that the performer is playing, so we could say he is pretending not to be John but “a pirate looking for his lost ship”. But the shift of reality can also occur in a different way, by pretending that the street is not a

street but something else. For example, in Ljud's performance *Streetwalker, open air ready-made gallery*¹⁴ John does not pretend to be somebody else, instead he pretends that he is inside a contemporary art gallery and that the various elements of the street environment that surround him are works of art.

A theatrical intervention into a public space does not always take the form of a "theatre show". It can also take the form of an invasion of aliens, a film set, a promotional campaign for a non-existing product, a demonstration in support of the rights of reindeers, a funeral procession or an imaginary wedding.

In this regard I find it useful to look at a street performance as if it would be a play in the sense of "a game" rather than a theatre play. Therefore, the audience must obtain knowledge on what this game is about and what its "rules" are in order to be able to play along. For an easier understanding I will call this knowledge, this "set of rules", the "key to the game". By passing on this "key", the performer gives the audience the opportunity to interpret the street environment around them from a new perspective. This "key" opens the doors to a parallel reality and the audience can join the "magical circle of play"¹⁵. The "key" replaces the known dramatic convention of what is perceived as a part of the theatre play and what not. It gives a new meaning to the performers, their actions and surroundings as well as defines the spectators in a new way.

¹⁴ *Streetwalker, open air ready-made gallery* is a project by Ljud that expands on the concept of ready-made art by using existing everyday elements found in the city and turning them into works of art with the simple act of naming them, equipping them with artistic concepts and constructing a modern art gallery context around them. The project was first performed in 2010 and has toured worldwide since.

¹⁵ "The magical circle of play" is a term from *Homo Ludens*, written in 1938 by Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga. The book discusses the importance of the play element of culture and society and is a significant part of the history of game studies.

While visiting an outdoor arts festival a few years ago, I ran into an improvised “chapel” that had been erected in the middle of the field. I was intrigued by the sign Chapel of Love which was written above the entrance and all the people pouring in, so I joined them. As soon as I entered, a wedding dress was pulled over my head and I was going to be the bride for the day. They gave me flowers and congratulated me and I just walked forward – completely oblivious to what was going to take place. The audience was standing on both sides and everybody was playing their part. A groom was waiting for me at the end of the aisle – he was as innocent in the whole thing as I was – and we were married by a vicar. People were singing and celebrating, everybody entered in the same high spirits. This is how I was “married” to a complete stranger in the Chapel of Love.



Sarah Peterkin, audience member¹⁶

¹⁶ Sarah Peterkin on visiting the *Chapel of Love* which was a part of the Lost Vagueness cabaret theatre at the Glastonbury festival. Sarah Peterkin is the director of the Rural Touring Service at Take Art, an organisation dedicated to bringing arts to villages, towns and rural communities in Somerset, UK (member of RIOTE partnership).

In the performance *The Invasion*, outlined in chapter 2, the key to the play could be described as “Let's play aliens and earthlings!” In our case the aliens are friendly but unfamiliar with the rules of behaviour on planet Earth. They want to learn and assimilate. The role of the audience – as earthlings – is to teach and accept them.

A clearly defined and communicated key allows the audience to enter the game.

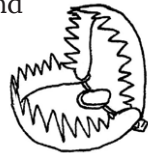
The passers-by who join the spectators at a later stage might at first wonder what is going on, but as soon as they figure out the key, they will understand what is happening. They will be absorbed in the play and become one with the rest of the group. At some point some spectators might even take the initiative (and the key) into their own hands and support the “parallel reality of the played game” with their own ideas, comments and made-up stories, inhabiting the role that was given to them.

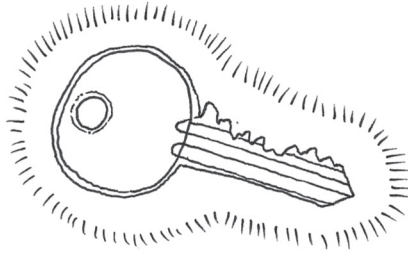
There can be many different keys, many ideas popping out when improvising on the street or when preparing a new street performance. But if multi-layered keys are welcomed in the indoor theatre situation, where they can enrich the performance and allow multiple readings of the play, a bunch of different keys will most likely only lead to confusion when applied in a street environment.

TRAP

Have you ever found yourself in front of a locked door with a huge bundle of keys in your hand, not knowing which key is the right one? This is how the audience of an interactive street performance might feel, when a performer leads them into an interaction but fails to provide them with sufficient information about the game he is proposing or the information is unclear, confusing or, even worse, in contradiction with itself.

Bear in mind that the street audience might not have planned to run into a street performance. And once they have bumped into one they are left without a clear convention of how to behave. Offering multiple keys will most likely lead to the alienation of the performer and a confused audience. So, once you have decided for a single key, a key that works, you are halfway there.





One of the recipes for finding a simple key to a street performance comes from Sergi Estebanell, a performer, director and mentor who often crossed paths with Ljud.¹⁷ As Sergi suggested, performers in search of a key might get one by answering the following questions:

1. Who are we?
2. What is our mission?
3. How are we organized?

The answers to the first and second question guide the decisions on costumes, props and the basic attitude of actors towards the environment. These are also the questions that the audience and the passers-by will be asking themselves as soon as they start watching the street performance.

In the case of *Kamchàtka*¹⁸, a well-known street act that Sergi is a part of, the two answers could be:

¹⁷ Sergi Estebanell is a director, producer and actor, active in several companies specializing in street theatre and site-specific performances. He is also an experienced clown trainer and street theatre mentor active throughout Europe.

¹⁸ Kamchàtka is an artistic collective of diverse nationalities and disciplines. In 2006 they started intensely training for street group improvisations and researching the subject of immigration under the artistic direction of Adrian Schwarzstein. In 2007 they performed their show “*Kamchàtka*” for the first time, a show which has since then become an international success.

1. Who are they? Foreigners from Kamchatka.
2. What is their mission? They are looking for a new home.

Such a key implies that the audience is “playing the role” of the local population, reacting to the newcomers who are pointlessly wandering around with suitcases containing all their belongings and searching for lost relatives, not knowing who to turn to.

One can imagine a street performance in which the audience would actually “play the role” of “an indoor audience”: they might become “a theatre audience”, “an opera audience”, “a circus audience” or “a cabaret audience”.

In such cases, the answers to the two questions could be (for example):

1. Who are they? Two retired fakirs.
2. What is their mission? To earn enough money to buy a new elephant.

As soon as the accidental passers-by stop on their everyday routes and start to form an audience for a street performance, their role, focus and status in the street environment changes – they take on the role of the audience bestowed upon them by the performance.



EXERCISE

Find at least 3 potential answers to Sergi's questions and imagine what such a street performance would look like.

1. We are

our mission is

2. We are

our mission is

3. We are

our mission is

Now choose one, **go out and play!**

P.S.: Nerds and advanced readers might wish to perform an additional part of the exercise and find 3 answers to Sergi's questions that you think will NOT work well in a public space.

As I am sure you have already noticed, some missions make it harder for the performers to establish contact with the passers-by than others. For example, hiding from people, being aggressive towards them or (probably the most difficult one) being indifferent to the people around you runs in opposition to the performer's goal of forming an audience with a common quest. Nevertheless, I am convinced that using the right amount of humour, clear virtuoso acting and clever "double play" directing even these could be pulled off somehow.

The third question Sergi asks i.e. **How are we organized?** refers to an issue that is perhaps only interesting for the performers, since this is not something the audience will be thinking about when watching a performance. How do the performers communicate and work together during an act (as well as before and after it) is a crucial question that has to be answered by any performing arts collective, particularly as this question has practical, strategic and sometimes even political implications.

Two basic answers to this question can be found in 20th century political history: **democracy** and **dictatorship**. In the case of a dictatorship, one of the performers decides in the name of the entire group and signalizes his decisions to the others so that everyone's action can continue in a common direction. Direct democracy, on the other hand, is a rare model not only in real life but also in theatre. Still, there are certain groups, Kamchàtka for instance, that practice it. In this form all performers have equal rights when it comes to starting or finishing an action within a performance; it also means that the responsibility for decision making is equally shared within the group.

Of course, a wide array of possible inner organisations exists in between those two extremes; there are probably as many as there are performances. However, some kind of rules or guidelines need to be agreed upon before going out to play. Through years of practice, a successful street group usually develops its own authentic "mode of functioning" in the street that takes into account the individual personalities and potentials of all of its members.

Even though the audience may not be consciously aware of it, the inner organisation will be noticed and will significantly influence the atmosphere, content and even the final "message" of the performance; certain ideas,

contents and missions will be brought to life more successfully in a certain inner organisation model.

I believe that one of the most important elements of street theatre performances lies in the group and the dynamics within it. The way people can work together without an institutional background, merely following their own rules and capacity of collaboration. In my opinion, one of the greatest challenges of mankind lies in our ability to collaborate in small groups.



Géza Pintér, performer¹⁹

¹⁹ Géza Pintér is an actor and cultural manager in the field of theatre. He is currently a member of Control Studio Association (based in Dunaszekcső, Hungary) which is the coordinator of the RIOTE project. He previously worked with Teatro Nucleo (IT), Antagon AktionTheatre (DE) and Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo (IT).

5 FOUR STEPS TO A STREET PERFORMANCE

In the previous chapter we introduced the metaphor of a special key which allows the audience to enter the so-called “magical circle of play”; a key that should be clear and easy to communicate. We could call this key the WHAT of the performance – as in: *What is the game we are playing?* Now we will focus on the HOW – *the way this game is being played with the audience.*

In order for it to be possible to “disseminate” the key efficiently within a turbulent street environment, my colleagues at Ljud and I have designed a simple protocol (of course, this is merely one of the many options):

FOUR STEPS TO A STREET PERFORMANCE :

- STEP NO. 1: GET ATTENTION !!!
- STEP NO. 2: INTRODUCE THE GAME
- STEP NO. 3: PLAY WITH THE AUDIENCE
- STEP NO. 4: LET THE AUDIENCE TAKE OVER

Given that there is no universal convention that would specify as to how the performances can appropriate public spaces and since public spaces are normally used for other purposes (such as moving from A to B, shopping, working, strolling, etc.) the performance needs to be somehow negotiated with the other users of the space. If you are a street performer, your first step will be to make the people realize you are there.

STEP NO. 1: GET ATTENTION !!!

One way of getting attention in a busy, chaotic environment is to **surprise** people by appearing where you are least expected (on the roof of a skyscraper, climbing out of a rubbish bin or jumping from a helicopter).

The element of surprise also makes people react spontaneously, outside of their established behaviour patterns and expectations about what art is or should be and how one should react to it.

Another way of getting attention in a busy street environment would be through a **visual appearance** that is in extreme contrast to everything surrounding it. Through a distinctive, unexpected **shape and/or colour**.

Standing out by appearing as a **uniform group** - e.g. having several performers wear the same or similar uniform-like costumes of a more ordinary shape and colour is another option (like in the case of *Kamchàtka* - the people with suitcases, described in the previous chapter).

size

Some say that matters and having seen Royal de Luxe's giant puppets that find it hard to manoeuvre across London's Trafalgar square, I couldn't agree more.²⁰

²⁰ Royal de Luxe is an iconic French street theatre company led by Jean-Luc Courcoult, started in 1979. In May 2006 their huge mechanical elephant and a giant marionette of a girl attracted an unbelievable crowd as the largest piece of free theatre ever staged in London. Numerous lamp posts and traffic lights had to be removed in order to allow the elephant through.

Another way of getting attention would be to have a different **tempo** to the remaining public space users – i.e. by moving at a

s l o w e r

or

~~fast~~

pace than the environment.

A uniform group moving in slow motion or standing still and suddenly moving very swiftly with an outburst of energy are two of the many “rhythm strategies” frequently used by street performers.

Of course, **BEING VERY LOUD** can also do the trick, as any street orchestra can tell you.

Behaving inappropriately is another strategy that we at Ljud always find amusing and cannot resist using on a regular basis. Jogging naked through the city, “stealing” a policeman’s cap, blocking traffic, or licking someone’s ice cream are harmless provocations which, when performed in the right way, can provoke laughter, relax the tension that surrounds taboos or simply snap the passers-by from their everyday “zombie routine”.





EXERCISE

Go to a public space and get attention.

1. First try moving faster than everyone else and notice how the people's heads automatically start turning your way.
2. Then try a slow-motion action (keep it going for a while, don't give up immediately).
3. Invite some friends to join you and try to do both of the above exercises in a larger group.

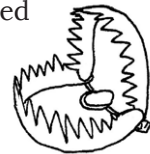
STEP NO. 2: INTRODUCE THE GAME

Once you have everyone's attention, the next step is to introduce the "game that is being played", reveal your "offer" to the audience. It is crucial that you do this as a part of the game, without stepping out and explaining, but rather by simply playing the game with your co-performers (or by yourself) until the audience catches onto the "rules". Give the audience some time to see what you are doing, don't worry and just keep going. After a while the audience will understand the world you are in. However, this does not mean that you should avoid interactions and pretend that the passers-by do not exist. As explained in chapter 3, this would put up a wall between you and your potential audience. At this point you don't need to initiate any interactions (unless your role cannot come to life without it).

To give you an idea of how this can be done, let me describe how we went about it in *The Invasion*: the aliens appear one by one, at a safe distance from the audience, giving the spectators enough time and space to observe and allowing them to figure out what the game is all about. During this time the aliens are investigating earthly objects such as benches, city lights, an empty Coca-Cola bottle... they are learning to deal with gravity, touch, etc. After a while, the audience figures out the different inner motives and behaviour patterns of each alien: one wants to smell everything, the other enjoys rubbing itself against objects or people, the third is very short-sighted and wants to inspect things from very close up... Only after they have introduced themselves to the audience in this way, do they start actively seeking interactions with the spectators.

TRAP

Dear reader, surely you can imagine how skipping any of these steps could cause the street performance to fail. However, leaving out the second step is the most common mistake. Trying to rush things is a normal human reaction to the nervousness that will typically arise after successfully gaining the attention of the crowd. But proceeding to a very intense interactive part of your performance as soon as you have got everyone's attention can make people feel attacked and confused, without a clear understanding of what you want from them and what kind of game they are being asked to participate in.



STEP NO. 3: PLAY WITH THE AUDIENCE

Once the audience has deciphered the “key” and is familiar with the role they play in the game, they can be encouraged to play this role more actively. Having a member of the audience volunteer to perform simple tasks or play minor parts that support the performance, thereby acting as a spokesperson for the audience, is a commonly used technique at this stage of the performance. Obviously, people should not be forced to do something they are not prepared to. But, if they take the initiative and become proactive, they should be rewarded and offered possibilities to go further.

If successful, step 3 will make the audience “open up”, making the spectators increasingly responsive and communicative, as well as less shy and restrained in applying the basic principles of the game to their environment. This is perhaps the aspect in which outdoor interactive theatre differs the most from a conventional dramatic performance. During a conventional performance nobody expects the audience to stand up from their chairs, make comments from the darkness of the auditorium or chant loudly, not even at the pinnacle of dramatic tension.

I felt the heat of a
burning torch in the “piazza”,
which was a part of our scenery, for the
performance started as the sun was setting. The
scene was about burning a “witch” who was to be
sacrificed to a goddess in the atmosphere of a medieval
South-Italian town. A beautiful, young Brazilian actress
was chained to a couch and carried to the place of
sacrifice. In the beginning the situation seemed real
and scandalous, as the people were excited and
some of them were yelling: “Burn her!” I could feel
the passion of the people next to us, suddenly it
felt like being in a war.



GÉZA PINTÉR, street performer

STEP NO. 4: LET THE AUDIENCE TAKE OVER

The fourth and final step of the protocol is optional. Street performers often do not go this far or it is simply unachievable. However, I find this part to be the most interesting of them all and in Ljud we usually put a lot of effort into making it happen.

At the end of every *Streetwalker* performance (mentioned in the previous chapter) the audience is asked to do exactly this – to take over. The spectators are given time to walk around the public space, find interesting elements within the street environment and describe them as artworks. In this way they can develop their own ideas, fictional stories, or gags with the use of the same key of play that was used during the performance. If necessary, they are assisted by our hostesses, who serve “wine for inspiration” and try to establish a comfortable homey atmosphere in which everybody feels relaxed and appreciated. However, all the creativity in this step comes from the audience. When the spectators finish describing their newly-found “works of art”, they publicly present them to the rest of the audience, to the incidental passers-by and to us – the performers, who have in this final step of the performance become mere passive observers. The roles have been switched and the game has come the whole circle.

In some cases, the enthusiastic audience members even take the key of the play home and enter the parallel world themselves or they pass the key on to others. We were very happy to hear that some of them prepared their own *Streetwalker* performances for their families and friends.

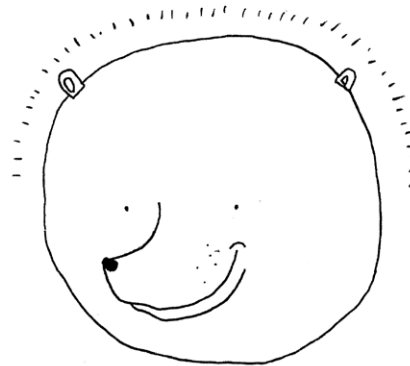
6

BECOMING A STREET NINJA

As we saw in the case of Sarah Bernhard in the first chapter, one should not assume that the skills needed on stage are the same as the ones required for conquering the street. In order to have any chance of success, a street theatre performance needs to begin by establishing its space within the street environment. This can only be achieved by an actor who is open to the space and the people surrounding him and is not focused primarily on himself, as is the case in drama acting to a certain extent.

Ravil Sultanov²¹, a Russian clown and innovator, once gave me the following advice: “When immersing yourself in an interaction with an audience your head has to be empty!”

Unlike the head of a drama actor which should be full, so that the actor can “bring the whole world to the stage”, embody a role, “radiate” an emotion to the extent that we forget that he is (merely) an actor on stage.



At first his advice seemed simple, even a bit trivial, but after years of observing, directing and performing on streets, his sentence kept coming back to me like a boomerang. And each time it returned another layer of his statement was revealed.

²¹ Ravil Sultanov is a graduate of the Moscow Circus Academy who runs the Bufeto Institute together with Nataša Sultanov. The Bufeto Institute is an artistic and educational NGO that organises the annual KlovnbuF International Contemporary Clown Theatre Festival in Ljubljana.

Why empty? Empty so that it can be filled with genuine thoughts, ideas and emotions triggered by the unique contact between the performer and the person(s) in front of him. Together they can create something out of nothing, in a way that has never been done before, which is a magical thing that can sadly not happen if there is already something there to begin with.

Empty in what way? As any Buddhist monk will tell you, freeing oneself of expectations, assumptions, worries about the future and regrets about the past is not an easy task. How to be mindful and present in the moment? is a question on many people's minds and as it turns out it also lies in the very heart of street performance and philosophy – which is probably why the nickname we, in Ljud, use for a street performer has a distinct East Asian flavour: “street ninja”. The state a street ninja should be in is the state of “relaxed concentration” as we like to call it in Ljud, even though it sounds like a contradiction in terms. In order to cope with the street flow one has to master the right balance between the two extremes: being completely relaxed (similar to the moment before you fall asleep) and being so focused that you do not notice anything around you (the state you are in during an exam).

In a way, street interactions also aim to empty the spectators' heads, helping them experience a shift in perception that is often accompanied by a feeling of inner relief, gratitude and amazement, allowing for spontaneous playfulness to be awakened.



EXERCISE

In order to practice the state of “relaxed concentration” I strongly recommend playing all types of games (team sports, board games, word games, etc.) as well as doing any kind of meditation (mindfulness, active meditation, yoga, Gurdjieff Movements, etc.).

While the state of ultimate alertness, readiness and openness to whatever happens is the desired state of mind for a street ninja, improvisation and interaction are two of his basic artistic tools.

In everyday language, the word improvisation is associated with a “quick solution to an unexpected problem” or “an action without a preconceived plan”, which might imply negative connotations in the sense of a solution or action that is less than ideal. However, in the universe of street art as well as many other arts, improvisation is a good word.

The general public is probably most aware of improvisation as an artistic technique in jazz music. However, in various ways and to a varying extent, improvisation is also a part of many if not all theatre and dance traditions. It is frequently used during rehearsals for developing ideas, brainstorming on how a scene should unfold or what physical manifestations should be given to a character, or simply as a way of making the group bond and get in sync with one another.

Certain schools of contemporary dance consider improvisation to be the only means of expression, as does improvisational theatre - a contemporary “theatre-making tradition with an elaborate set of acting, storytelling and directing techniques” where, as Sonja Vilč puts it, the quality “is not a matter of premeditated action, but of complete commitment to and immersion into what one is doing here and now.”²²

²² Sonja Vilč, *Collective Improvisation: From Theatre to Film and Beyond* (Ljubljana: Kolektiv Narobov, Zavod Federacija in Zavod Maska, 2015), pp. 161-163.

Sonja Vilč is part of the Narobov collective of “creators of living and live arts” from Ljubljana, which roots go back to classical theatre improvisation. She is a long term performer, pedagogue and thinker, as well as a regular co-worker of the Ljud group, performing as a guide in numerous *Streetwalker* tours around the globe among other.

Nevertheless, using at least some degree of improvisation is not merely an artistic choice, but a necessity when performing in a street environment, which is why any practical exercise, principle or technique taught by improvisational theatre schools represents a precious resource to a street ninja, whether a beginner or a master.

Furthermore, improvisation goes hand in hand with interaction. Improvisation is an essential ingredient of any genuine interaction, provided that the interaction is truly open rather than based on audience reactions that the performer has pre-planned and is now trying to coerce from the audience.

Unlike improvisation, interaction is rarely taught. Similar to horse-riding, the only way to truly master it, is through practice. Interaction is anything but a mechanical skill and is predominantly based on “expert intuition”. Even though it is a complex phenomenon, its basic principles are easy to comprehend. The two major things one should keep in mind when trying to understand it are sharing and experience.

Interaction can be regarded as not merely a means to an end, but rather as an end in itself. Through interaction the game is proposed to the audience, through interaction unsuspecting strangers turn into fellow players, forming a temporary community. In this perspective, interaction is not merely an attempt to be liked by the audience or to entertain the audience (as is perhaps the case with animation); at its full potential interaction is an open invitation to the other as a human being, as an equal.

Eye contact allows the performer to establish a relationship of trust with the spectator involved in the interaction. Through listening and observation, the performer builds on this relationship and brings it to the next level.

Being a part of a one-on-one interaction between a performer and an audience member feels like creating a common bubble with just “the two of us” within a crowd of many. Eye contact is the starting point of that bubble, the seed that provides the energy to keep the bubble alive. I use my eyes to reveal myself to the other and vice-versa. Once this contact is established we continue together step by step – my action, his or her reaction, my reaction, our common action. Any premeditated plan would destroy the balance. Given that we are equals, I am able to challenge as well as show respect to the other. In that moment there is nothing and nobody else, but the person I am interacting with (and there is nobody else for the person I am interacting with). Interaction is the most intimate way of performing.



Grega Močivnik, performer²³

²³ Grega Močivnik has been one of the most prominent performers of the Ljud collective from its very beginnings.

Performing in the streets calls for a shift of focus from a premeditated plan to the *here and now* (which requires the performer to improvise) and from the self to the other (which drives the performer to interact with the audience).



EXERCISE

1. You can ease your way into interactions in a public space with a quick and easy task. One that is familiar to passers-by, but can be developed in a surprising way. Take a prop to help you. For example, a camera or a mobile phone.
2. Once outside ask a stranger to take a photo of you (do that in a playful way, rehearsing the reassuring eye contact).
3. As long as it looks like the chosen volunteer has the time and is relaxed enough to do it, continue with your plan:
 - While the person is looking at the camera to find the click button put on a funny accessory (a bag over your head, a clown's nose or whatever you like) or ...
 - Freeze the moment the photo was taken and stay frozen to see what will happen or...
 - Invite the person to join you in the picture for a selfie. At the moment the photo is taken surprise him with whatever small, harmless act or gesture you find exciting. Keep in mind that it is

not about the gesture itself; your ultimate goal is to establish a genuine contact in a playful way, getting better at it every time you try.

P.S.: Be grateful to the passers-by for their cooperation and respectful of their free will.

P.P.S.: Just before you start with the interaction remind yourself of the following tips:

EMPTY YOUR HEAD (BUT DON'T LOSE IT!)!

EYE CONTACT!

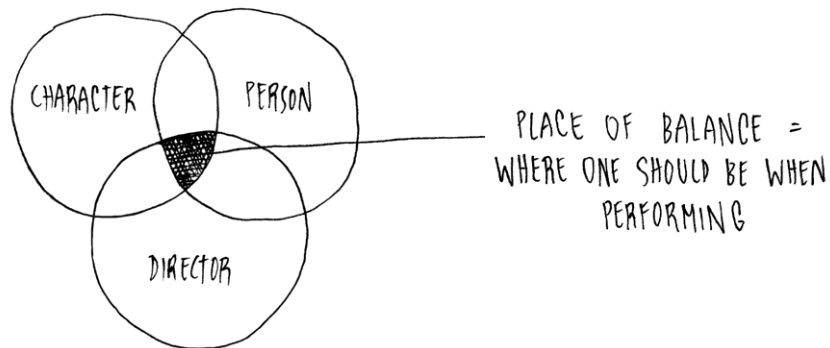
WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG,
CONSIDER IT AS A GIFT!

DON'T PANIC AND WHEN YOU DO PANIC...
DON'T PANIC ABOUT IT!²⁴

²⁴ Formulation by Jurij Konjar, a Slovene contemporary dancer (quoted from memory).

7 TOM'S ADVICE

I was given the second and most precious piece of advice on street performances by the Swiss-Australian artist and pedagogue Tom Grader. Over a cup of coffee, he explained his theory about the so-called CHARACTER/DIRECTOR/PERSON trinity.



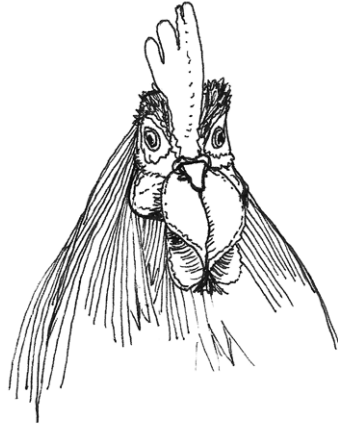
“While performing, try viewing yourself in front of a live audience not as one, but as three individuals: the Character, the Director and the Person cooperating, fighting or merely hanging around. The key to success is reaching a balance between the three!”²⁵

It took me a while to understand the value of his thought, which is useful in so many ways. It helped me understand not only the schizophrenic emotions and the cacophony of thoughts that stir within me when I perform outdoors, but also what goes on in other performers, as well as our group dynamics, relationships and personal growth issues.

I believe Tom’s trinity is so useful partially because it is an open system – it is a springboard from which you can start analysing what goes on within you at any moment during the performance. It may not lead you to a final answer carved in stone but it will shed some light onto the dynamics and complexity of your inner motivations, struggles, fears, blockages and impulses.

This is how I understand Tom’s tool after using it in practice for several years:

²⁵ Tom Grader, known by his artistic name Oscar, focuses on object manipulation and interactive contextual physical comedy. He writes for, contributes to and performs in numerous contemporary circus, theatre and street productions. As a teacher he is known for his innovative approach to creativity and physical comedy. In his original teachings Tom calls the 3 inner voices: Person, Character and Artist.



The character is the one that is being performed. It can be seen as the role that the actor is playing. The Character relates to your inner “player”; a child, a clown, an inner alien or a freak – driven by the universal human desire to be seen, to be in the centre of attention, to be a part of the game, to identify with a role, body, mask or emotional state, to play, to perform. It is the Character who is (or should be) seen on the outside, perceived by the audience. The Character is in charge of welcoming the audience and guiding them deeper into the act.

Taking into account the typical characterisation of animals in the European tradition the illustrator gave it the face of a cock.



The director represents the outside view and the ability to mentally lift oneself from one's own body and look at the situation from a distance, "from above". The Director, a.k.a. the Artist, is also a creative force, but with a creative potential as well as a stream of thoughts that are dramatically different from those of the Character. Thinking about relations is deeply rooted in the Director's mentality - relations in space (composition, visibility), in time (rhythm), between events (dramatic plot, story), between meanings (associative links, poetics, the absurd, lucid leaps) as well as human relationships. The message or the so-called artistic content is in the domain of the Director.



The person consists of one's personal memories, preferences, dreams, experiences, needs, values and beliefs which represent crucial building blocks in the artistic creation (to put it simply, it could be said that the material and motivation for artistic creation comes from the Person, is digested by the Director and performed by the Character). The Person is also the one within the trinity that is capable of empathy and responds to human emotions. In a sense, it is the Person's responsibility to be tuned to "the real life" that art is rooted in and yet separated from. The audience is eager to see the Person shine through the Character. Especially when a performer lets his guard down and allows some of his personal motives or subconscious instincts to break the surface (in spite of Person's best efforts to prevent this from happening). The Person also ensures that nothing goes seriously wrong (that nobody gets hurt or injured) and acts as the responsible adult keeping the other two in check. However, if the Person is too strong, he can become a party breaker and ruin the game in moments when taking higher risks or more time for the play to evolve would have been better.

One could imagine the trinity as three inner voices inside the performer. The dialogue between them during a performance could sound something like this:

OH, MY HEAD IS KILLING ME! WHY DID I GO TO THAT PARTY YESTERDAY...?

BEAR, CONCENTRATE!

I WISH, I...

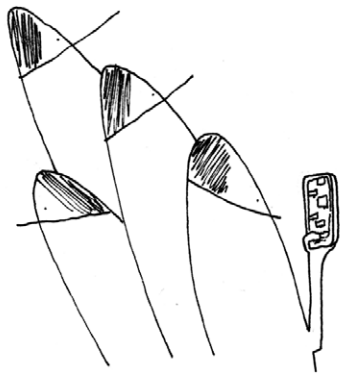


BEAR! WAKE UP! I NEED YOU!


MMM...



PLEASE, BEAR!! THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SCENE!



SHUT UP,
YOU TWO!
I'M TRYING
TO MAKE AN
IMPRESSION!
COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO!!



I'M NOT STEALING THIS CAP.
JUST BORROWING IT!!

HAHA, GREAT!
LET HIM RUN
A BIT LONGER.
THEN GIVE
HIM A KISS!

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I WOULD LIKE TO TELL YOU A PERSONAL STORY.
IT IS ACTUALLY A BIT EMBARRASSING. IT'S ABOUT THE FIRST TIME I HAD SEX...

PSSSST!!!
DON'T TELL THEM!
EVERY BODY WILL
LAUGH!!

BUT BEAR, THAT'S
THE POINT!

IT'S A COMEDY
AFTER ALL.



Within the context of the conventional dramatic theatre, the inner Director and the Person within the actor on stage are not as important.

The inner Director is replaced by an external author, director or choreographer. The Person is important in the creative process, but less so during the performance since there is conventionally no interaction with the audience, no risk-taking (unlike buses in the street, the swords and poison on stage are not lethal). There is also a clear division between the stage and the off-stage area which means the Person can be left waiting in backstage while the Character performs.

On the other hand, when performing outside, a mature Person and a clever inner Director are needed in order to juggle the diverse atmospheres, weather conditions, passers-by, dogs, children, drunks, church bells, police and other elements found within a public space.

TRAP

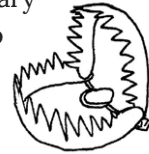
According to Tom, the key to success is not being the best in all three aspects, but reaching a point of balance. So, if one of the three inner voices is weak, the other two have to adjust and not take over, but lower their volume and wait for the weakest one to build more muscle. Otherwise, the effect will be “out of joint” and, what is worse, the weak part will always be overruled by the stronger ones and will thus have no chance of learning from its mistakes – and the vicious cycle starts.

Let's speculate...

We can all imagine how a weak Character can result in a bad performance, especially if a strong Person and Director push it to take on the main role instead of letting it play a minor part until it grows stronger.

Typically, a weak Person with a strong Character and Director can get caught up in their own ego, which makes them arrogant, big headed and a lousy team player with a reduced capacity for genuine interactions. Furthermore, this makes them a poor judge of what kind of provocation is effective and not merely insulting. Rather than touching the audience's hearts, their intellects will be bombarded with random philosophical, social or political messages.

A weak director is doomed to burn out in the street, wasting too much energy with little effect. He may appear promising at first glance, but he will find it hard to keep the audience's attention. Lacking the necessary cues and context to follow the development, the audience is likely to feel alienated and respond with patronizing looks and bored faces.



EXERCISE

Ask yourself which of the three elements is the weakest in your case and work on strengthening it so that you can improve your overall performance as a street performer.

If you need to enhance your Director, you can watch acts by other artists, analyse them (the audience's reactions, why something is funny or touching) and reflect on your own work; discuss your impressions and read books on art.

The Person grows through life experiences and other means of personal growth. The Character is strengthened through theatre rehearsals (of any school, style or method) and even more so by performing, performing and performing.

8

GO HOME AND PRACTICE, GO OUT AND PLAY!

Rehearsing street theatre on your own is a bit like rehearsing kissing alone. As Samo Oleami said: "...it takes touring and rehearsing on the street for a street theatre performance to fully develop its potential, as its performers get to understand the audience-performers dynamics specific to their show."²⁶

²⁶ Samo Oleami, 'Take a Story and Run with It: Review of a Street Theatre Performance.' *Trust Me, I'm a Critic*, [web blog], 4 August 2018, <<https://trustmeimacritic.wordpress.com/2018/08/04/running-away-in-an-r4/>>, (accessed 1 April 2019).

I would nevertheless like to devote the following chapter to some practical tools and useful guidelines for anyone embarking on putting on a street performance.

There are many things a street ninja can do before he goes out and performs, things like vocal training, physical exercise or practicing juggling, acrobatics, etc. At home one can come up with the idea for a performance, invent a situation or a plot, define the “key”, build a character, prepare the costumes, music, props ... But the true adventure only begins once the plan goes wrong! The most interesting and meaningful things in outdoor theatre are those that occur in the moment and resemble a short circuit running from the performance to its environment, from the performers to the audience.

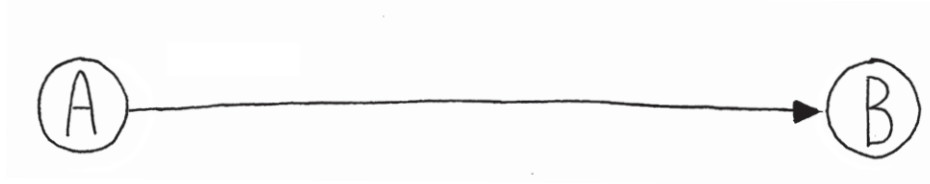
Jango Edwards²⁷ – one of the greatest clowns of our times – would go as far as to call all pre-planned plots, characters, tricks, and skills “armbands, useful only for as long as you are still learning how to swim”. According to Jango, the final goal would theoretically be to get rid of all prearranged content and simply be totally open when you go out to play – which he actually does.

Still, not everyone can be Jango, so although a completely fixed script is out of the question, having some kind of a plan or at least a map or a compass somewhere in the back pocket is recommended.

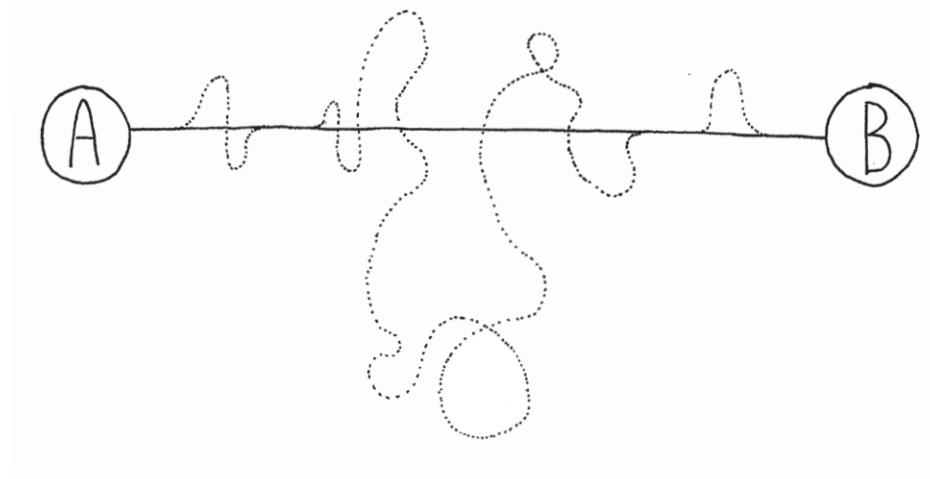
²⁷ Jango Edwards is an American clown and entertainer who has spent most of his career in Europe. Edwards' performances are mainly one-man shows that combine traditional clowning with countercultural and political references. Touring Europe for over three decades, Edwards and his shows have built up a cult following. Since 2009 Edwards also runs the Nouveau Clown Institute (NCI) in Granollers, Barcelona, a training centre specializing in the world of clowning.

A to B line

One way of creating a script that is useful within a public space setting is to define the so called “A to B line” of the performance (as explained to me by Jango Edwards). An “A to B line” marks a straight, clear path from point A - the start of the performance to point B - the end of it.



The task of a performer is to allow himself to be inspired by his surroundings (the NOW), move away from the safety of the straight line and improvise. However, at any point when the performer senses that the improvisation is not leading anywhere and the atmosphere is deflating, he simply returns back to the “A to B line” and stays there until the next impulse to improvise emerges.



This principle allows the performer to remain open (try new things, react to the developments, take risks) while simultaneously offering reasonable safety (avoiding the risk for the entire performance to be misunderstood on a bad day, missing a proper ending, provoking the audience to boo and throw rotten vegetables at the performer).

The “A to B line” can be developed into a more complex diagram, which is useful for a larger group of performers, enabling them to follow the same master plan. In this case a number of lines can be used (one for each performer) and a number of fixed points (C, D, E, F...) can be marked on the diagram to represent the beginnings and endings of the different stages of the performance.

The positive side of such a master plan is that at certain points during the performance, individual group members have the discretion to act independently and move in their own direction, only to later re-connect before moving to the next stage. This is particularly useful when the performers are not constantly in the same physical space.

Here are two examples from *The Invasion* that illustrate how this works: One of the versions of the performance starts with individual aliens operating independently at various points of the city. After attracting a crowd at their initial location, they meet at a pre-arranged spot on the main square, bringing their audience with them. In another version, the aliens start out as a group and then disperse to engage in individual interactions. Upon a cue shouted out (a pre-determined sound signal) by one of the aliens that has noticed an interesting development in the street, they would all come together again.

STARTING
POSITIONS

GATHERING 1

GATHERING 2
+
PARADE

GATHERING 3
+
SURPRISE!

PLAYGROUND

STEALING
THE CAR
(GRAND FINALE)

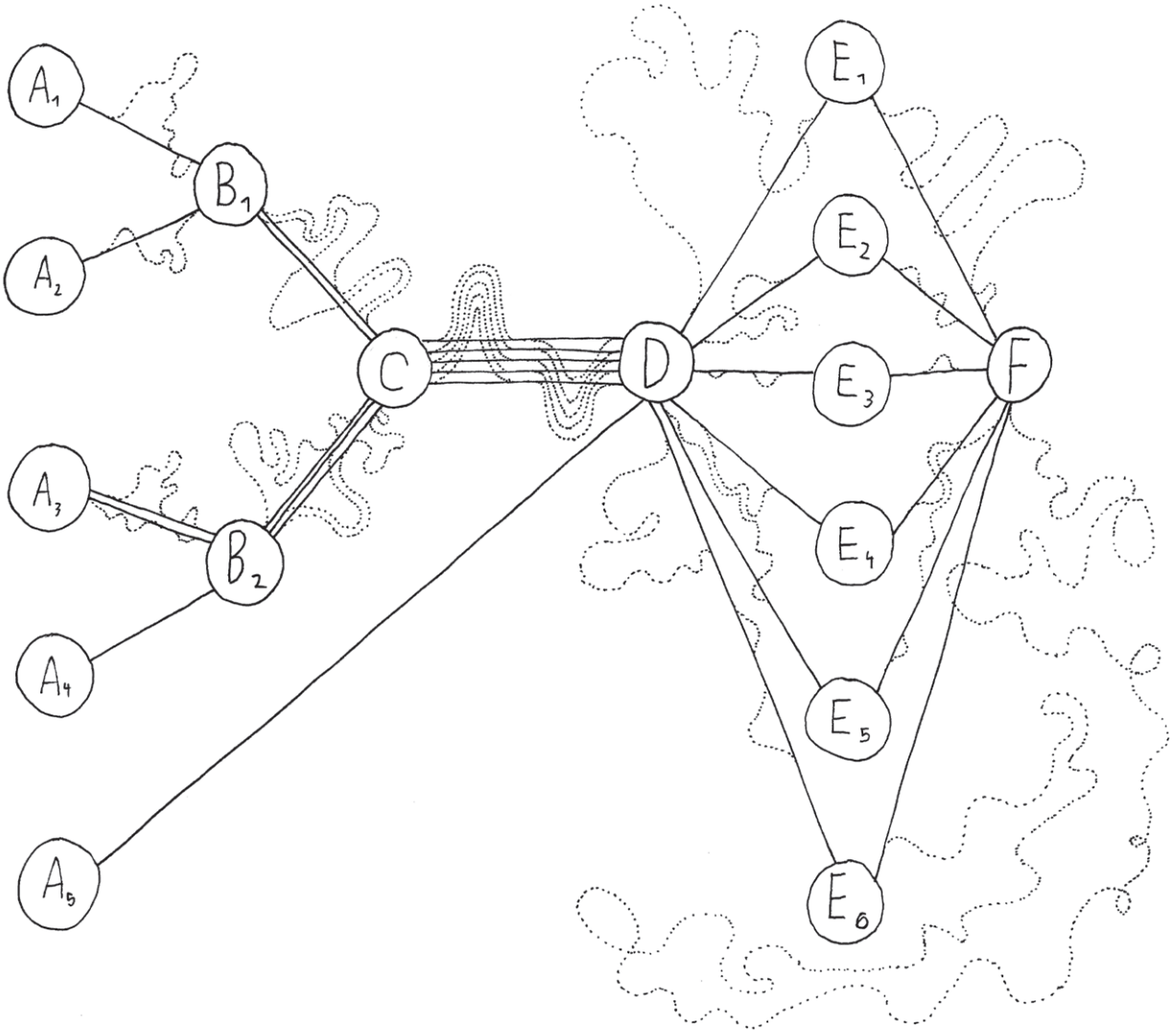
BALCONY

WINDOW

SIDE
ALLEY

ROOF
TOP

TRASH
BIN



THE "IF-TREE"

OFFER A BANANA

TO AN AUDIENCE
MEMBER

IF HE TAKES IT, WAIT TO SEE WHAT HE DOES WITH IT.

IF HE DOESN'T PEEL IT, TAKE

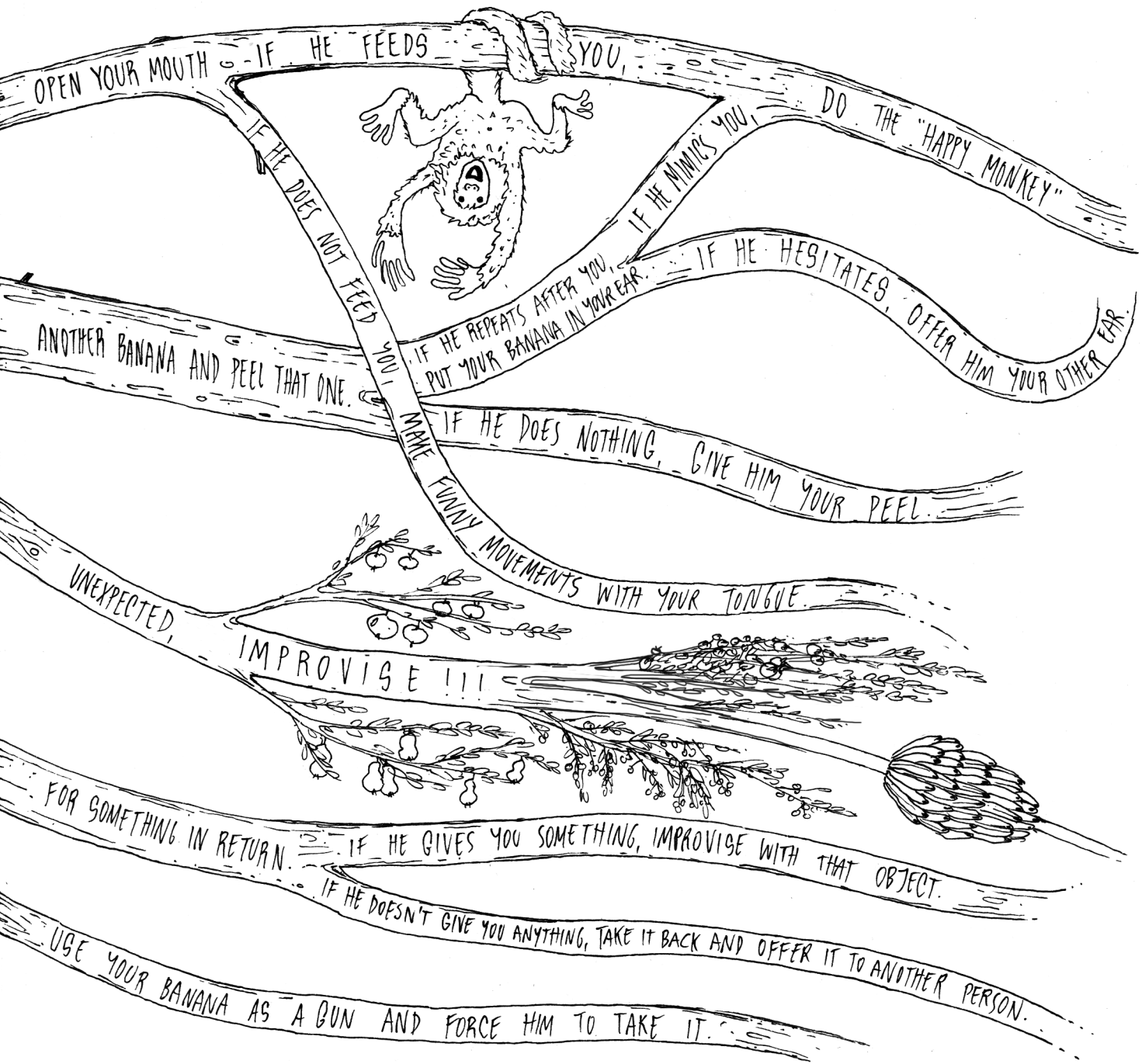
IF HE DOES SOMETHING

IF HE DOES NOT TAKE IT, OFFER AN APPLE

IF HE TAKES THE APPLE, ASK

IF HE REFUSES THE APPLE TOO,

The If-Tree is based on conditional thinking and deals with the possibilities of what might happen. It serves as a decision-making flowchart, which allows the performer to respond quickly to the developments based on past experience and the expected potential outcomes. In my experience, it is most useful as a plan for a single interaction, but it can also be applied to a performance as a whole.



OPEN YOUR MOUTH - IF HE FEEDS YOU,

DO THE "HAPPY MONKEY"

IF HE DOES NOT FEED YOU,

IF HE MIMICS YOU,

IF HE REPEATS AFTER YOU, PUT YOUR BANANA IN YOUR EAR.

IF HE HESITATES, OFFER HIM YOUR OTHER EAR.

ANOTHER BANANA AND PEEL THAT ONE.

IF HE DOES NOTHING, GIVE HIM YOUR PEEL.

IF HE DOES NOTHING, MAKE FUNNY MOVEMENTS WITH YOUR TONGUE.

UNEXPECTED,

IMPROVISE !!!

FOR SOMETHING IN RETURN.

IF HE GIVES YOU SOMETHING, IMPROVISE WITH THAT OBJECT.

IF HE DOESN'T GIVE YOU ANYTHING, TAKE IT BACK AND OFFER IT TO ANOTHER PERSON.

USE YOUR BANANA AS A GUN AND FORCE HIM TO TAKE IT.

An If-Tree is built with the use of two types of information:

1. unique ideas derived from the “key” or the WHAT of the specific performance (discussed in chapter 4) and
2. the so called general “public space logic”.

“Public space logic” refers to everything one might expect to happen within a public space. It has to do with the physical space and the public in it.

Through practice, a performer will notice that certain reactions of the public tend to repeat themselves. No matter how unusual, provocative or unconventional your proposal may be, the passers-by will react with:

- surprise, which might be followed by ...
- laughter (regardless of whether what you do is funny or not – laughter is a common reaction to the unexpected),
- excited and overwhelming approval (usually expressed by teenagers, city drifters, eccentrics and other social groups that might identify with a street performer as “somebody who does not belong to the crowd”),
- modest approval and slight interest (usually expressed by passers-by with a smile, especially on a sunny day),
- anger (there is always somebody who will not like what you are doing).

Just like the reactions of the passers-by, the architecture of any given public space usually comes as no surprise to a seasoned street ninja: benches, garbage containers, flower basins, bus stops, city lights, statues, traffic signs, shops, bars, billboards, houses, balconies, windows,

.....,
.....,
..... (please feel free to finish off the list).

After years of juggling with the previously described space-people-play elements one develops a so-called “expert intuition”, an instinct that allows one to react before realising why and do exactly the right thing at the right moment in order to create poetry from everyday street life.



One of the things that interest me the most in open-air theatre are the scenes in which we manage to blend with our surroundings and create the illusion that this is in reality a part of the developing story, of the performance, as if it is taking place in its' organic, natural setting. In these moments it feels like there is some kind of a unity between the actors, the natural setting behind, in-between and around them (castles, parks, statues, churches, forests, courtyards, graveyards... it can be anything!), and the spectators, who see something unfold in a real space, and therefore feel a part of it. It is when theatre goes out into the streets and directly to the audience that something magical happens!

Csongor Köllő, theatre director²⁸

²⁸ Csongor Köllő is an actor, director and acting trainer, a co-director of the Shoshin Theatre Association (based in Cluj, Romania), which organises the KaravanAct Festival – the theatre festival in the road (member of the RIOTE partnership).

POTENTIAL TRAPS OF THE IF-TREE

Solo or group interactions and/or improvisations based on an If-Tree can become mechanical, dull, lifeless and uninspiring if the plan is followed too rigidly. Following the plan is not the goal; the plan is there as a support tool that can help us achieve something else. One should not lose his playfulness and should keep his trust in the moment.

When considering the logic of the public space one must be careful not to take the generalisations too far. Otherwise you run the risk of no longer being truly attentive and missing the uniqueness of each moment due to premature conclusions. For example: imagine a typical businessman in a suit passing by your performance – your conclusion based on the public space logic will be that he doesn't have the time and is not the type to enjoy silly interactions, but looking at him twice might reveal a curious smile on his face and before you know it, he will take off his shoes and jump into the fountain with you, which is what actually happened to me once during an *Invasion* performance. Make sure you don't rely on stereotypes and overlook what is happening beneath the surface!





EXERCISE 1

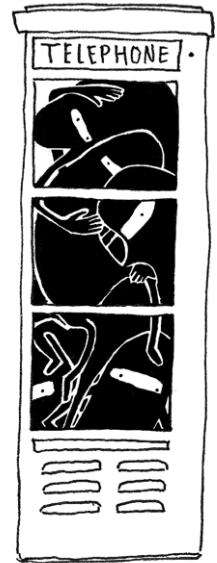
Go into a busy public space, sit down and observe!

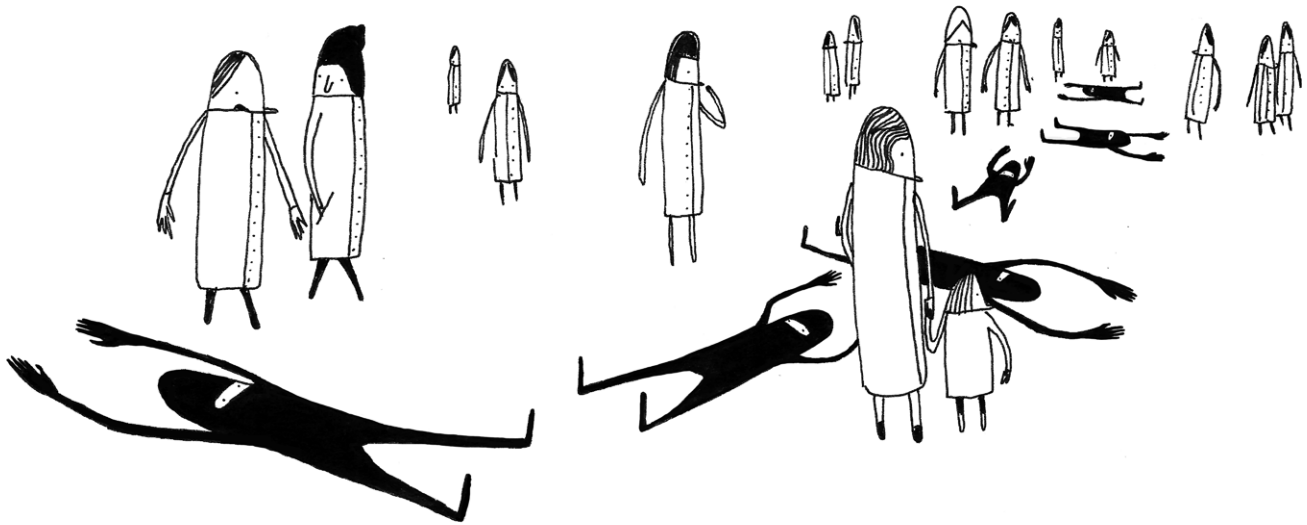
1. Pay attention to the architecture – imagine what this place looked like a few decades or even a hundred years ago. Which elements of the space are subjected to the most frequent changes? What is the main focus – the most noticeable thing in this space? Has this changed recently?
2. Now observe the people – who are they, what are they doing there?
Observe their paths and activities within the space.
How do the various groups interact, do they bother each other, do they even notice each other?
How would you describe the general atmosphere?
3. Take a pen and a piece of paper and draw the place (not only the walls, but also the life that is happening there).
4. Now let your imagination free and think of an unusual action that could take place there and would capture the people's attention, change the atmosphere. What kind of visual, sound, performative or other intervention comes to mind?

Enjoy imagining!

EXERCISE 2

In order to study the public space in action, find at least two friends (in an ideal universe there would be four), go out and create compositions with your bodies in public space.





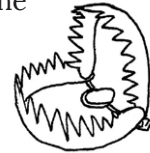
Tips:

- If you have more friends who are willing to participate, create two groups so that one group can observe the other in action. Once both groups have created their action, exchange comments and observations.
- If passers-by start casting puzzled looks in your direction, try making reassuring eye contact and smiling.
- If you are at a busy location or cannot handle the recurring questions and comments from the people, take a camera or a mobile phone and pretend you are taking a “crazy” photo.

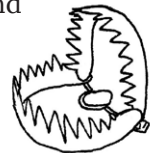
Before moving to the final chapter, I would like to point out two more traps that often happen when preparing and rehearsing for a street performance. These traps also apply to the creative processes of indoor theatre performances as well as art in general. However, they are particularly noteworthy in the context of outdoor theatre since falling into one of them might result not only in a poor performance, but a failed performance, which outdoors virtually equals to no performance at all.

ADDITIONAL TRAPS

“Kill your babies!” means you need to make a selection. At a certain point within the creative process you have to throw away the ideas that might be original, possibly even brilliant, but do not support the main idea (“key”) of the performance as a whole or even contradict it.



“Never start at the beginning!” Sounds like a paradox? It means that when planning a performance or a scene, your creative process should not kick off with the question: How shall I start? Think about the climax and where you want the events to lead. Figure out what it is that you want to achieve and work out the implementation of the peak moment. Once you know the answer to these questions, everything else is likely to simply fall into place. The only thing that you will still have to do is find the simplest and most efficient way of building your storyline up to that moment and of “climbing back down” – i.e. finding a conclusion and an ending.



9

STREET THEATRE AND BEYOND

First of all, let me say that I am delighted that you are still with me after 108 pages! Secondly, I would humbly ask of you to bear with me for the next 8 pages of somewhat speculative thinking in the form of an epilogue to our conversation.

Let's return to the question raised in chapter 2: Who is the author of an artwork when this artwork is a piece of interactive art in which the responses and proposals of the actively participating spectators represent the most interesting aspect? Who is the carrier of the message when we are dealing with an interaction rather than a presentation?

Please, make yourself a cup of tea, get comfortable and let me take you back to the beginning of our journey...



...to the circle.

The magical circle of play,
the ring of trust,
the wheel of fortune.

The drill square. The market square. The box.
The window. The frame. To "be square": To "get
everything square": To try to "square the circle"!
And, of course, to its inseparable opposite the square!

As a schoolgirl I imagined artists to be unique, exceptionally gifted individuals; geniuses whose ideas are and must be original. Much like a monotheistic deity (the creator of all things), this “grand artist” creates parallel worlds, turning chaos into cosmos. His masterpieces are comprehensive, organised systems in their own right that should not be interfered with.

As a teenager I learned about 20th century art. I could vividly imagine postmodernism mischievously knocking the genius artist from his pedestal and pasting the patriarchal moustache onto Mona Lisa’s eternal smile. I enjoyed the story of how Duchamp put the cultural institutions designed to safekeep ingenious creations on par with his urinal in 1917. He was not necessarily trying to equate the exhibition to a toilet as I imagined back then, but nevertheless, a re-evaluation of the basic concepts of art had been looming on the horizon already a hundred years ago. And even though it may seem that the mockery of “obsolete” values has now reached a dead end, 20th century art has made a not so subtle hint that the concept of the artist that had been in place since the renaissance was well past its prime.

Later on, as a member of the Ljud collective, I envisioned the artist as the initiator of an artistic event; as the one doing the groundwork, laying down the rules and launching a process that everyone else can join in. I pictured him as a good host, throwing a party at his home: he will move the tables to the side, blow the dust off the old record player and decide which cocktails to serve. Perhaps every guest will bring a bite to eat, one of the guests might spontaneously take on the role of a DJ, someone might lift everyone’s spirits by telling a witty anecdote; but at the end of the day, it will be the host who will prevent the cigarettes from being stubbed out in the flower pots. Should one of the neighbours call the police, he will be talking to the officers.

One of the key concepts of the conventional indoor theatre is that the sensory isolation allows the spectator to identify with the character in the play, thereby coming face to face with a situation from which he is excluded in his role of a voyeur. In my opinion this represents the crucial difference between interactive and dramatic theatres. Interactive street theatre does not create the optimal circumstances for identification to take place (also according to Samo Oleami). Instead, it provides the participants with the opportunity for a first-hand experience; they can learn about themselves and their surroundings and express themselves within the framework set by the artist. This takes place through an active involvement in the creative process that is in part designed and built by the participants themselves. They are no longer voyeurs behind closed doors, for they move to the centre of the development: they are physically present, moving in the same space as the performance and sometimes quite literally surrounded by the performers.

This view of performative arts changes the artist's role in relation to society. The artist is no longer merely someone who brings society's issues into view. The artist becomes an active part of society and his role is to also offer solutions or at least to establish conditions under which both problems and solutions will be easier to articulate. The artist acts as a facilitator who creates situations in which the audience can express themselves (in an intimate or public way).

As one of the founders of Ljud, the theatre director and performer Jaša Jenull²⁹, would say, "the potential of street art is not to put a mirror up to the audience



²⁹ Jaša Jenull is a graduate of the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television in Ljubljana and has been one of the key members of the Ljud collective between 2006 and 2015. Today he is the artistic director of the Third Hand Collective, which focuses on interactive art events in public spaces. Quoted from memory.



like Chekhov and his contemporaries, nor to place a hammer in the audience's hands as imagined by Brecht; it is first and foremost to provide the spectators with a megaphone so that they can express themselves."



I can imagine that the future role of the artist and artistic institutions will consist in establishing "spaces or zones that a person will enter as a stranger and exit as a friend."³⁰

When creating an environment that will allow for experiences outside of normal reach, encounters outside of the usual conventions, social roles and expectations I imagine that art will transcend the shackles of consumerism. Artists will view their audience as partners, artistic products as experiences, see prices in terms of barter, consider space as an environment and promotion as engagement. Thinking in categories such as "they", "for them" and "by us" will be replaced by thinking in terms of "we" and "together".

³⁰ Quoted from memory from Ben Walmsley's lecture at the BE SpecACTIVE! conference in Barcelona in 2016. Ben Walmsley, PhD, is a lecturer and researcher at the University of Leeds in areas related to art management, art marketing, audience research and cultural policy.

Nowhere have I seen this potential of art to turn the audience into the artist's partner rather than a consumer of his artwork to be greater than in street theatre.

In street theatre, the artist does not sell tickets, but instead mobilises the spectator to come aboard and join him in a shared experience. In most cases, the author and performer are in fact one and the same person who directly addresses the passers-by in order to gather an audience, with no assistance from intermediaries such as a PR department, the media or a manager. (Except in the case of street festivals, but that is a topic for another book).

The street is not, never has been and never will be reserved for the elites. It belongs to everyone; it is a meeting point where people from all backgrounds converge. Art within a public space can therefore reach everyone, including people who never visit cultural institutions – and there are many.

In addition to accessibility and the ability to merge diverse spectators into a unified audience, there is a third aspect to art in public spaces that I find even more interesting. It is the element of surprise. Walking the fine line between the everyday life and art, reality and fiction, what is *for real* and what is *just a joke*. Street theatre has the capacity to surprise us where we least expect it, prompting the most genuine responses: astonishment over beauty, being moved by human contact, enthusiasm over a skill, all unhampered by conceptual thinking.

But no matter how simple this sounds, there is a prerequisite for it all to happen: it takes a profound shift in focus from following a prearranged plan to acting in the moment, from the result to the process, from the individual to the community. This shift requires both the artist and the spectator to undergo a “personal transformation”. Letting go of control, allowing things to run their

course, acting on impulse, putting the other before yourself, remaining open to something that surpasses us. All of these are contrary to society's expectations of how we should live and how we should always know what we want, where we are headed and what we need to do in order to pursue our goals. As Sonja Vilč would say: "when we imagine it as a group of individuals, (a collective) merely reacting to and interacting with each other, without a plan and without even having the need to have a plan, it is nothing less than a cultural shock"³¹, that invokes fears of the unknown future and frustrations as one is unable to control the final outcome.

Much like a scientist trying to establish a controlled environment in which an experiment can be replicated to the last detail, it could be said that the conventional dramatic theatre endeavours to put on a performance that can be repeated as consistently as possible after the opening night. Fixed roles, lines and the *mise-en-scène*, even the length of the pauses between individual words and gestures (*micro-mise-en-scène*), everything should be as predetermined and as reproducible as possible. In such circumstances, concerns over any of the above risks become redundant. However, the routine of repeating over and over something that was once created out of nothing might deprive the performance of its authenticity and kill the joy of performing.

I am overcome by a wave of playful excitement every time I make my way to a city, a street or a park where I can share something that does not yet exist, with strangers that I have not yet met. Seeing the shocked faces of the passers-by gets my blood pumping every time: the shriek and giggling of a young woman who has just been

³¹ Sonja Vilč, *Collective Improvisation: From Theatre to Film and Beyond* (Ljubljana: Kolektiv Narobov, Zavod Federacija in Zavod Maska, 2015), pp. 163-164.

startled by a pink alien lurking behind the corner; concealed smirks brought on by a public campaign to sell dog poo; boisterous uncensored commentary; delighted cheers of children – it all makes me feel like we are finally all here again. It seems that the invisible walls between us have finally disintegrated.

And so, before we part our ways, let me address you one last time and invite you to join me on a journey. Let's leave the laboratory and venture into the jungle, equipped with advice of those who walked before us.

Make sure you are wearing good shoes!
And don't forget to take a snack!
Bon voyage, my friend!



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Vida Cerkvenik Bren graduated in theatre and radio directing from the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television in Ljubljana. She has conceived and co-directed several independent theatre, radio, puppet and contemporary dance projects. Before becoming one of the founding members of Ljud in 2006 she had worked as an artistic director of Šentjakobsko theatre in Ljubljana for 2 years. Since then she has co-authored and co-directed all Ljud's projects as well as co-lead its educational program.

A number of methods and exercises presented in this book stem from her pedagogical work. Over the last 11 years she has been one of the main mentors of the ongoing educational project *Ljud's Laboratory*. She has led workshops and “master-classes” across Europe and broader, in the last years also within the RIOTE partnership.

Samo Oleami is a Slovene theatre critic, artist and dramaturg. His original domicile lies in “contemporary performing arts”, but in his *Trust me, I'm a critic* blog he writes about all kinds of theatre, from improvisational, street, devised theatre, drama theatre to dance performances, live art, intermedia and even board games.

Robin Klengel works as a cultural anthropologist and artist in Vienna and Graz (Austria). He writes papers, teaches, draws and makes films in the field of artistic-scientific research of urban and digital spaces. He is a member of the board of the Forum Stadtpark and of the (zine) collective Tortuga. As a part of the LJUD collective he is active as an anthropologist, writer, performer and most recently also as an illustrator.

ABOUT LJUD

Ljud is an international collective of performers, directors, visual artists and anthropologists, based in Ljubljana (Slovenia), that explores the possibilities of artistic expression in public spaces. Since its formation in 2006 Ljud has created diverse interactive performances and site-specific projects: from live radio plays and silent movies to interactive hospital waiting rooms and alternative Christmas masses. The collective has toured the world with its projects *The Invasion* and *Streetwalker, open-air ready-made gallery*, with which they have visited over 100 festivals in more than 30 countries. Ljud's main focus lies on developing a reciprocal relationship with its audience, encouraging the spectators to become co-creators of theatre as a game, a ritual and a social event.

ABOUT RIOTE

Why Don't We Do It in the Road has emerged as a part of the RIOTE2 project that involves seven European partners. Funded by Erasmus+ the project brings together outdoor theatre groups and companies in a skill sharing programme and focuses on developing rural touring networks. The partners are Broken Spectacles/Dartington Arts (UK), Control Studio Association (HU), Kud Ljud (SI), Shoshin Theatre (RO), Teatro Tascabile Di Bergamo (IT), Take Art (UK) and Utca-Szak (HU). Visit www.riote.org for more information and useful documents including *Why Don't We Do It in the Road* (also available in Hungarian, Italian, Romanian and Slovene), the Rural Touring Handbook and links to RIOTE2 documentary films.

Why Don't We Do It in the Road
A Personal Guide to Outdoor Interactive Theatre

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Translation & proofreading by Sunčan Stone and Živa Petkovšek

Published by Kulturno umetniško društvo Ljud, Ljubljana

Free copy

Ljubljana 2019

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.