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Submission to the International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media:

'The Post-Immersive Manifesto'

Abstract

Over the past decade, 'immersive' has arguably been one of the most overused terms to describe theatre productions that aim to involve audiences in unconventional ways. With the mainstream success of specific 'immersive' productions, this trend goes beyond the theatre and arts industry. From games distributors to Westfield shopping centres, just about every organization seems to be discussing how 'immersive' events can give their product an edgier public profile or increase sales. The need for a post-immersive manifesto comes from an assumption that the use of the term immersive is not helpful. And, in many ways, the use of the word 'immersive' to describe theatre productions can often be detrimental to the contract of expectations set up with audience members, guests, players, participants. This experimental manifesto is the result of five years of partnership between Technoculture, Arts & Games (Concordia University, Montréal) and ZU-UK (G.A.S. Station and MA in Contemporary Performance at University of Greenwich, London).

Key Words

Immersive, Participatory, Public Space, Games, Intimacy

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A Post-Immersive Manifesto

Post-Immersive participation should validate intimacy, tenderness, empathy and care
over immersive spectacles.

Post-Immersive participation emerges
when the individual becomes a part of a temporary community.

Post-Immersive participation needs to be a collective thinking event
centred on what it is to be a human being living in late capitalist societies.

Post-Immersive artists have a responsibility to invite audiences to co-create.

Technology is not the Answer.
We should not care about WHAT is immersive, as much as we must care about
HOW is immersive, WHO is immersive BY and who is it FOR?

Post-Immersive performance must reclaim the shared public space for temporary communities.

The familiar must be hacked.

True audience agency is a myth
and produces a disjunctive effect between the real and the simulated.

Immersive Theatre: Participation as Consumption

Whatever the system we are asked to maintain – be it a democratic social system or a make-
believe system within a participatory performance – the continual expression of preference can
distract from, and thereby disable, questioning of the system as a whole.

(Frieze, 2016 p.5)

Immersive theatre is framed by the public relations machine as an opportunity for audiences to experience a performance in a mash up Wonderland-Narnia-Never Never Land-Hogwarts world, a world we all half remember wanting to visit when we were children. The adverts claw at the fringes of our childhood fantasies by promising us an aesthetic experience so real we'll think we've fallen down the best rabbit hole in town.

Participation is sold to us as an opportunity to absolve us of the cultural mourning for experiences we know in our bones we are missing out on. Mourning for what we're not doing is the most familiar ritual of late capitalist society. We are bombarded with offers to consume something different/the best night in town /the real deal/the genuine article/the one we've all been waiting for/an experience like no other/totally unique/something really special/a truly magical evening/a game changer/the future of theatre/an unforgettable experience. Audiences are promised an absolution from the mundane by entering into a collaborative, reciprocal, inherently social relationship with actors. But this is an illusion. Immersive theatre has become detached from its radical origins. Its appropriation by advertisers, events promoters and PR consultants has rendered it a shorthand for selling tickets to elaborate and expensive fancy dress parties.

Immersive experiences (note the vagueness of the term) produced by companies like Lollipop and Secret Cinema explicitly encourage consumption of food and alcohol as a way to participate in the world of the event by creating thematic interactions between stall sellers and audiences. These forms of social interaction have the sole purpose of selling overpriced items in line with the evening's theme. No care is given to designing an experience where feelings of empathy or intimacy are elicited between actors and participants. The inherent commercial nature of this form of participation does not allow for complex social interaction. It is a replication of prescribed behavioural norms most people would expect to perform at a themed party. Such art does not encourage participants to reflect thoughtfully on their experience, or indeed explore meaningful engagement with their fellow participants.

The pressure to conform to these norms in an immersive experience acts as an exclusionary barrier for marginalised identities. Replicating a form of social interaction that is contingent on participants conforming to normative standards of gender, sexuality, class, race, body-type or

any other cultural signifier requires them to play a role that is given to them by artists. No attempt is made by artists to empathise with the lived experience of the individual participant in immersive experiences.

This is an analogue of the unfreedom twenty-first-century citizens are trained to think of as experiences of true freedom; the freedom to choose between drinking beer or vodka or eating sweets or chocolates constitutes nothing more than the freedom to spend money. Commercial transactions symbolise the most common form of democratic participation in a neoliberal system. Participating on these terms in immersive performance replicates the injustices of reality in unreal worlds, consequently amplifying the same feelings of status anxiety and inadequacy economic inequalities late capitalist societies inculcate.

Part of the problem is when art's success is measured in market value terms. Artists and makers organised as creative businesses make friends with big sponsors (the corporate wink - co-opters who pretend to be an ally, but only use artist's work to increase their profit margins). The sponsor's desire for ambition, visibility and impact inevitably shapes what the artwork needs to achieve. These business agreements masked as philanthropy fail to recognise that an artist's biggest work is probably not their best work. The exploitation of artists and their work cheapens its cultural value. Artists are now required to create insincere art that contributes nothing new to the debate.

We must *count*. That's what we are told to be good at. Citizens are now drilled to be counters. We count incessantly. Count our money. Count our likes. Count our hits. Count our viewing figures. Count our calories. Count our steps. Count the hours of sleep we miss from lying awake at night terrified about who we have become.

So, why do we need a post-immersive manifesto?

Audience-players in groups of 4, work together to rescue the future from the 80's.
ZU-UK's Quest, Leeds 2019. Photographer: Lizzie Coombes

Between 2011 and 2014, feeling somewhat limited by the modes of production most commonly observed within the Arts Industries and Higher Education, Maravala and Lopes Ramos hosted a range of meetings, dinners, picnics and walks. They invited friends, neighbours, researchers, writers, critics, technologists, artists, activists, audiences and makers in order to explore new models for conceptualising, making and testing participatory audience experiences which could offer individualised invitations to audiences - as opposed to simply promising seductive immersive experiences.

However, it is particularly since the success of the overnight production *Hotel Medea* (2006-12) that ZU-UK directors have sought to redefine the way in which their work is framed, both within the press and academia. Often quoted as pioneers of immersive theatre, the company have consciously resisted the use of the term 'immersive' to describe the work due to the problematic

nature of what it usually means, the consumer behavior 'immersive' events tend to elicit, the audiences it usually attracts and those it excludes. That is why ZU-UK are now proposing this "post-immersive manifesto."

It had been two years since the final public performances of *Hotel Medea* at the Southbank Centre's Hayward Gallery. On the one hand the company was experiencing a peak in the press recognition between 2011-12 - with a feature in Grazia Magazine, four and five star ratings in major publications including Metro, Scotsman, The Herald, The Telegraph, and 'critics choice' in Time Out and Sunday Times - and receiving public acclaim in what was the fourth UK season of the production - tickets sold out months in advance and touts were illegally selling tickets at the door for twice their original price. But on the other hand the directors became aware that the work had accidentally become exclusive; to those who could afford it, to those 'in the know', to those who felt entitled to sign up to an overnight participatory production. ZU-UK had to accept that it was working with the wrong model and had inadvertently been co-opted into a problematic trend. ZU-UK decided to find other ways to resist the 'immersive' label as it is currently formulated.

Over the past decade, 'immersive' has become one of the most overused terms to describe theatre productions that aim to involve audiences in unconventional ways. But it doesn't stop there. With the mainstream success of specific immersive productions, this trend goes beyond the theatre and arts industry. From games distributors to Westfield shopping centres, just about every organization seems to be discussing how immersive events can give their product an edgier public profile or increase sales. The need for a post-immersive manifesto comes from an assumption that the use of the term immersive is not helpful in articulating a performance aesthetic or innovative methodology. More importantly for ZU-UK, the use of the word 'immersive' to describe theatre productions can often be detrimental to the contract of expectations the company wants to set up with audience members/guests/ players/ participants - the people the company wants to co-create a piece with.

On 25th January 2015, whilst at a Devoted & Disgruntled event in London, they had an opportunity to be in a context where a large number of arts professionals were gathering in the

same space and time and committed to discussions about the future of theatre and performance. They used the opportunity to meet peers who felt similarly angry at the irresistible rise of immersive theatre, and compelled by the need for a Post-Immersive Manifesto. Their dissatisfaction was shared by many, who similarly felt the term immersive was not enough as it usually equated to irresponsible and poorly conceived practice, and in fact was risking alienating audiences from theatre for life.

After developing work between participatory performance and interactive technology in the context of exhibitions (*Trade Secrets*, 2012), live performance (*Humble Market,* 2012-14), and public art (*#RioFoneHack*, 2015-), ZU-UK reached out to TAG in Montréal (Technoculture, Art and Games research centre at Concordia University) in 2015 to build a continuous relationship committed to investigating the role of game-design in audience experience. TAG felt like a group of misfits who, unhappy with their respective industries, had found in game design a potential meeting point for an alternative practice to emerge. ZU-UK were attracted to the potential of working with people fuelled by their dissatisfaction with the limits of their own disciplines.

As a result of the collaboration with TAG, ZU-UK started to explore what a post-immersive practice might look like by creating a new group of artworks for performance in public spaces, which so far have resulted in *Binaural Dinner Date* (2015-), *VR Goodnight Sleep Tight* (2016-), *Missing* (2017-), *Pick Me Up (& hold me tight)* (2018-), *Quest* (2019-). ZU-UK has also launched a new MA programme at the University of Greenwich and G.A.S. Station (Games & Arts Stratford) in East London as a centre dedicated to exploring new production models, sharing methodologies and re-framing our practice as well as supporting new work that operates in the intersection between theatre, performance technology and game design.

Fragments of ZU-UK's performances and collaborations haunt this post-immersive manifesto which is jointly written by members of ZU-UK and TAG. In our search for a post-immersive practice the authors of the manifesto hack the artworks in order to re-contextualise them as guidance for other artists and re-use them to learn something new that can help us get closer to a post-immersive approach centred on the human being. It is not too late to re-invent immersion

and remember why we thought it might be important in art's mandate to bring about real social change.

The Manifesto

The form of immersion ZU-UK creates is grounded in empathy between audiences and actors who experiment with experiences of intimacy, care and tenderness in performance. The fact that artists have probably always had their edgy work co-opted by the mainstream is not new but there's something about working as artists now that feels like living in a video game. ZU-UK feel like they're moving ahead by creating alternatives to the dominant ideologies, but snapping at their heels is the mainstream grabbing at their responses to the world, stealing and appropriating any radical ideas to be repackaged as cool.

And the REAL problem?
The real problem is that the alternative has become the mainstream. Late-stage capitalism is so crushing and so omnipresent that even irony is part of its vocabulary. The pursuit of intimacy, therefore, represents an act of resistance against commercially mediated social relationships.

The company focuses on creating collective experiences where strangers can meet - where it just feels good to come together in the simplest of ways, not distracted by fancy technology. With ZU-UK's *Binaural Dinner Date*, the dating scenario becomes an honest excuse to explore a version of yourself in a familiar environment. If you're lucky, the next simplest experience in performance is being seen and heard. But, if you are really really lucky… you can experience being touched by another human being. It is good to inflict optional damage onto your sense of embarrassment and shame; your sense of being a cliché; your sense of being interchangeable. Perceiving ourselves as part of a society liberates us, but despite our mutable social status we remain specific people having a specific experience in a specific place at a specific time in performance.

We live in a time when acts of resistance against economic, racial and sexual oppression are dismissed by the privileged as 'identity politics'. How grindingly dull is the narrative that white men have been emasculated by feminists. How puerile is the idea that conservative values are under threat at a time when rampant class inequalities across the developed world are accelerating. How vile is the argument anti-racist campaigns are attacks on free speech. How dangerous it is to think identity is non-political.

How many questions do you have to ask before you truly know someone? And who gets to ask?

Are you on the property ladder?
Are you politically gay?
Are you politically black?
Are you a multi-culturalist?
Are you patriotic?
Are you pro-CCTV?

Custodians of discourse - many of them amongst ourselves - would have us forget all politics is grounded in issues of identity. They would also have us believe we are only ever one identity. We are many identities. But neoliberalism is constructed to coerce us to act in the world as isolated individuals who must resist experiences of interconnectedness if we are to be judged as political agents.

Are you an old hippie?
Are you an old rocker?
Are you a rebel?
Are you anti-establishment?
Are you a puritan?
Are you an anarchist?
Are you a nationalist?
Are you a conformist?

On the one hand, we are told empathy is for wimps/liberal elitists/weaklings/ snowflakes/woke students/virtue signallers/social justice warriors/cultural Marxists/femi-nazis/beta-male feminists/remoaners. On the other hand, empathy is used as a shameless political tool. Did you clap for the NHS? We can't empathise with others while mentally/emotionally separating ourselves from them. When did we stop thinking of empathy as a political act? We need to resist the co-optation of empathy so as to act on it thoughtfully.

Should people be forced to speak English if they want to live in the UK?
Do you think parents should be able to hit their children?
Are you in favour of capital punishment?
Do you give money to charity?
Do you give blood?
Would you donate a kidney to a stranger who really needed it?
Have you ever fought for yours or someone else's rights?
Would you fight for your country?
Have you ever been on strike?
Do you believe people should pay to study in further education?
Do you make jokes at the expense of the poor?
Have you ever caused a revolution?
What do you give back to the world?

Post-Immersive participation should validate intimacy, tenderness, empathy and care over immersive spectacles.

Do you think celebrities are fair game to paparazzi?
Do you think most poor people are benefit cheats?
Do you think those on benefits should be made to work in the community?

The relationships produced through post-immersive participation are always in motion. Once the relationship becomes fixed it ceases to reveal new knowledge to participants.

Are you an avid consumerist?

Do you buy designer brands?

Do you send your children to public school?

Have you worked out your carbon footprint?

Do you think that we should abolish the monarchy?

Have you ever shopped at Ikea?

Do you believe in monogamy?

Post-immersive participation emerges when the individual becomes a part of a temporary community.

Membership is determined by an individual's capacity to influence the construction of the social codes undergirding these communities, not by the unfree choices they make over the course of a performance.

Do you listen to Radio 2?

Would you prefer to watch Newsnight or Big Brother?

Do you only eat organic range?

Do you go on protest marches?

Have you ever shopped at Primark?

Do you buy the Big Issue?

Would you attend a state execution?

Do you think the NHS should charge for treating smoking related diseases?

Do you think the NHS should pay for infertility treatment?

Post-immersive participation needs to be a collective thinking event about what it is to be a human being living in late capitalist societies.

Should all food be sourced and produced locally?

What's the hungriest you have ever been?

Have you ever been homeless?

Do you cheat on your tax returns?

Are you law-abiding?

Are you a leader or a follower?

Do you think religion should be kept out of schools?

Do you think we live in a nanny state?

Do you avoid taxes when you can?

Do you know your neighbours well?

Do you believe that Prisons should be for punishment?

Did you used to be working class?

Do you think Israel should get out of Palestine?

Do you think we should bring back National Service?

Have you ever earned an ASBO?

True thinking goes beyond what is known by opening up spaces for new ways of knowing and consequently being in the world. Further, different modes of knowing (through flesh, through text, through smell, through sound, through image) produce different ways of being in the world. This is the experience of freedom post-immersive practice seeks to make a reality.

Artists have a responsibility to invite audiences to co-create

It all starts and ends with the human. ZU-UK have long been fascinated by what it is that humans won't accept unless it is done to us by another human. But they are interested in where the limits lie with intimacy. What is it that we humans share when we come together for a collective event? Where is the tiny but significant space that we and our comrades might win our battles in? When does authenticity and sincerity become more important than financial gain? What does new research tell us about the correlation between human gut microbiota composition and close social relationships? What is the meaning of touch? Proximity, intimacy and touch are powerful forces in our daily lives. They play a huge role in our behaviours, our development, in our social interactions and our well-being. If we are looking at how humans interact and how we understand one another, then touch and proximity are often neglected in terms of how they shape

social interaction and how we use them to communicate. And yet they are key to genuinely co-creating new ways of being together.

Participation and co-creation, not consumption, should define audience experience in late capitalism if performance can become one strategy to prepare us for survival in the age of global terrorism, climate breakdown, social distancing and the ascendency of ethno-nationalist super-powers.

Immersion and participation have become social and artistic signifiers denoting a collapse of traditional relations between producers and consumers during the contemporary information age. ZU-UK articulated this in the past as the distinction between performers and audiences. Later, immersive technologies promised us that the audiences could become performers and the performers could be audiences. We could all be makers of collective immersive experiences. This invitation to participate prompted by interactive technologies and design would transform an event into an emergent network of social and material relations that never coheres into a discrete art-work. Art would become an event; always emerging and always changing. What happened to this promise?

The hope was that the blurring of the line between producers and consumers might draw attention to the ways performativity and social interaction might produce meaning itself. It's not that all the world's a stage, but rather the stage is an aspect of all the world. In this way, immersive artwork-events might bridge the gap between the sanctified aura of high art on the one hand and the crass commercialism of popular art on the other. If audiences are participants how can they be mere consumers? How can art be reducible to a commodity?

If immersive performance has failed us in this regard and fallen prey to the voracious appetite of cultural capitalism, then we must look for a post-immersive performance art to make good on the promise. Post-immersive performance, unlike immersive experience design, requires a deeper level of commitment and care from participants than the dominant scene currently offers. At the core is human social interaction and the constitution of a kind of performance collective, a temporary community. The use of technology, clever design and stage tricks cannot accomplish this. The human *facilitator* is still paramount. We used to call them actors.

It is precisely for this reason any artist or maker interested in creating post-immersive performances that will engage and be genuinely relevant to diverse audiences cannot ignore the crucial role that diverse types of audience members must have in the development, shaping and testing of the structured artworks presumed to create artful interactions between a diverse range of participants - especially those who don't usually engage with theatre, galleries, games. This is also true for artists who don't have the skills, the contacts or the background that usually allows for easier access for opportunities to make new work. Post-immersive performance is the poorest art, the lowest art. Because that is where it starts. It is accessible to those who want access to it, and relevant to those who seek opportunities to develop creatively, because it is composed by us all. As it is not serving the sponsors' checklist, it is also allowed to fail as many times as it needs to. As it is not committed to saving the artworld, or proving itself worthy to a small group in 'the know', it is allowed to grow and develop at its own pace - whether or not it is considered 'art'. It is genuinely innovative not because it is seeking to be the next new thing, but because it is unique to its context, its creators, its site.

Artists and makers can no longer ignore the multitude of barriers for participation that current mainstream models for participation tend to impose, especially in the realm of so-called immersive events. From overpriced tickets to circles of privilege, it is impossible for artists and audiences not to stumble upon a variety of barriers when it comes to industry opportunities to explore and develop new models of engagement with audiences.

As a brown skinned person diversity feels like something of a burden. How does it feel to be a problem? I'm a little tired of being made to feel awkward when the conversation turns towards diversity. I have to tolerate white people talking over and around me about how to attract and engage non-white people with their limited means. They are well meaning and over stretched and it makes me feel as much of an outsider as I did in the 1970s. As much of an incomer. I create work for people to feel like they can belong - the space, the cues, the warmth of an invitation to participate. People engage with the work as it develops, invited to test and co-create. Humans are at the heart of the work I make, so I make my work where humans are - in

cafes, in shopping centres, in car parks. Bad things happen when people can only go into institutions to experience art.

(Maravala 2019)

Technology is not the Answer. We should not care about WHAT is immersive, as much as we must care about HOW is immersive, WHO is immersive BY and who is it FOR?

Audiences are put to bed by a mother figure simultaneously live and via headsets in synchronised touch and movement. ZU-UK's Goodnight, Sleep Tight, London. Photo: Ludovic des Cognets.

ZU-UK have looked at multiplayer games as models to structure playful interactions between temporary communities in performance. Ultimately, the more personal, intimate and pervasive the audience experience, the harder it is to remain aware of the behaviours the structure may encourage, and those it might erase. Intimacy, empathy and belonging are a crucial gauge when

observing audiences and players interact with one another. Why would artists want to reinforce deeply problematic behaviours that pervade our everyday life? But the practice of these behaviours in performance must not be blamed on the audience . The artist is responsible for encouraging audiences to act as responsible agents or otherwise.

Part of the issue in the rhetoric around immersion has to do with forgetting the self that is at the core of participation. The rhetorics of escape that have always been endemic to mass entertainment in its collusion with capitalism are very strong with immersion. Look at the exponential growth of commercial virtual and augmented reality technology (VR) and immersion. The two are synonymous to such an extent that even if one is not using VR the artist is creating an experience that is as immersive as, or more immersive than, VR. Technology and its commodification have meant a race for artists to be more immersive than the other guy. To be immersed with a VR headset is to literally and figuratively escape the social and material space one occupies. It's a kind of irresponsible unfreedom that only the most privileged in our societies can afford.

For all immersive performance to be measured against this technological standard sets the tone for the impossibility of meaningful social experience and participation. The notion that only through technologized immersion might we achieve true communion as we are freed from our bodies, our differences, our conceits is an ideology as pure and as old as monotheistic religion. Real community is made with bodies in proximity, different, divergent and heterogeneous; anything else is a whitewash.

In short, playing with immersive technology is a dangerous game. But the perennial failures of VR are instructive. Its headsets are a potent materialization of the ideology we are meant to take for granted. The pain we feel when wearing the device is the weight of the immersive fallacy forcing you back into the social world that matters. Capitalism tripped up here. With the current technology the argument for post-immersion is as plain as the marks on your face when the VR joyride inevitably ends.

The key to post-immersive performance is not the 'escaping' or 'forgetting' of where and who one is, as an audience member (or cultural consumer), but rather 'a remembering' of who one is

relative to the experience taking place and the others experiencing it with you. The provocation of remembering provokes participant-audiences into 'taking responsibility' for their actions in that context; especially in relation to others! Immersion can never be used as absolution (literally and figuratively - a way to get away with murder).

Post-Immersive performance must reclaim the shared public space for temporary communities

> Immersive performance aims to provide, in everyday activities at the moment of the encounter, modest but pervasive communication, provisional social consensus and micro-utopias (Harvie, 2013, p.7).

Participation in a post-immersive context describes a form of social production scaffolded on a series of 'inter-acts' between artists and participants. Inter-acts are the series of micro-events that produce ZU-UK's performances. If the audience does nothing there is nothing to consume (other than the act of doing nothing). The principles and techniques driving the company's practice, expressed as the Dramaturgy of Participation (Lopes Ramos, J. and P. Maravala, 2016), are experienced as temporary relationships (expressed hereafter as inter-acts) between artists and participants, and at times between participants themselves. This stands in stark distinction to less participatory theatre and live art which is communicated to audiences (to then be interpreted and acted upon) rather than being produced by those audiences.

We have designed our methodology to ensure spaces are created in performances for diverse non-normative identities to be seen and to be present to the artists and to each other. As alluded to in the previous section, a crucial first step in creating these spaces is to make the terms and conditions of participation explicit from the outset. This makes people feel safe enough to allow themselves to be intimate with others who share the physical space. The skill of the artist lies in striking a balance between comfort and panic. Bookending the performance with a greeting and a goodbye acts as a straightforward but effective means of acknowledging the participant's presence and making them feel as though their experience is being facilitated with care and attention. This is one of the key roles of the amah in *Good Night, Sleep Tight*. Each participant is

walked to their bed and gently guided to change into pyjamas and get under the covers. This piece explores our earliest connections with our mother figure. The secular ritual of being put to bed is used in order to give participants a social frame they are immediately familiar with and thus immediately understand the basic social dynamics at play (child and mother).

Audiences are put to bed by a mother figure simultaneously live and via headsets in synchronised touch and movement. ZU-UK's Goodnight, Sleep Tight, London. Photo: Ludovic des Cognets.

Having these components in place from the outset fosters a relationship of trust between artist and participant. Without trust, the level of intimacy will remain confined to spatial proximity, which can actually prevent an audience from becoming critically distant from the event and make them turn inward and feel disconnected. Inter-acts such as being greeted and being put to bed in a public space blur the boundaries between the performance and the everyday. The participant is able to enter into the event gradually and without the pressure of completing unfamiliar tasks on demand. The risks are shared between the artist and the participant, and in

this way they collaborate in the scaffolding of risk over the course of a performance. Whilst inter-acts create a safe space for participants to explore the boundaries of intimacy, the ultimate responsibility for the experience must lie with the artist.

The familiar must be hacked

Character W in ZU-UK's Binaural Dinner Date watches as his date (a passer by in the shopping centre) abandons him in front of 9 couples, Stratford 2017. Photo: Ludovic des Cognets

ZU-UK's interest in hacking the familiar stands in direct counterpoint to the cult of the new, usually attached to marketing strategies which pervade communications that bombard consumers on a day to day basis. Similar to the use of 'immersive' as the best new thing, the experience-seeking desire some consumers have is usually explicated by cutting-edge technology as much as the newest artwork. As cultural hackers, ZU-UK are interested in existing secular rituals as familiar sites for people to meet. As a temporary replacement for ever shrinking public spaces

and chance encounters with strangers, rituals, places and objects can be activated to bring diverse audiences to behave in more thoughtful, intimate and unexpected ways.

Hacking is not transformation. It is re-invention. ZU-UK challenges the notion that everyday, mundane tasks such as dating lack meaning or significance. ZU-UK hack this secular ritual in *Binaural Dinner Date.* Just because going on a blind date can now be arranged with a quick swipe left doesn't mean it is an unimportant act. It is no exaggeration to say it could change your life. The discreet binaural earpieces participants wear throughout the performance create an intimate sonic universe between couples. Each table becomes a micro-utopia where participants play games, share secrets, and play out fantasies of who they are and what they might become - a space that allows strangers to see each other in their full ambiguity and complexity.

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*Binaural Dinner Date***:**

Congratulations on coming on this date. What an incredible act of belief in the human race. How will a date help you to know a potential life partner? How many questions would you need to ask of them to feel you really knew them? What questions could we possibly ask that would allow us to know the true nature of another person?

Citizens living in late capitalist societies are experiencing a crisis in their mental health.

Feelings of depression, stress and anxiety shouldn't be familiar.

Feeling worthless and fearful of the world shouldn't be familiar.

Feeling as though one is not living up to invisible expectations shouldn't be familiar.

Goodnight, Sleep Tight:

> **In dreams you are too tired to be you. Too tired to perform the exhausting repertoire that you've rehearsed since birth. You learnt your lines by rote, honed every single action and every day you are ready to take it from the top again. And so each morning you awake with desire to get it right, to be a good and meaningful person, to be, as simple as it sounds, happy. But the performance is exhausting.**

We are surrounded with messages telling us that these feelings are bringing us closer to a more ideal way of living. A culture that values pain over joy, alienation over empathy, stress over calm, is one that has lost faith in humanity's capacity to invent new ways of living together. So often we validate the web as a space where new realities can be imagined. It is imagined as a space where marginalised groups can become organised and resist against oppressive forces; as a space of global connectivity engendering greater empathy amongst humans separated over vast distances.

These are all noble ideals. But the growth of online digital media is concomitant with the erasure of public space. We need to be present to each other as fleshy humans in spaces not controlled by invisible algorithms. Pervasive media turns humans into content and locks us into informational systems not under our control. We perform identities contingent on crude affiliations to cultural tribes:

Performers are not, after all, as spontaneous as they may seem. A subtle steering mechanism designed into the software by commercial imperatives prepares the way. The desire to be seen is no less real for all that and the performance may well be improvised but one has to ask who built the set and encouraged the actors to take the stage.

(Floridi, 2014, p.23)

Audience participation can be read as an analogue for this process when one considers how artists invite them to co-create theatrical realities. But the choices participants make in immersive theatre can actually denude their status as critical agents.

Piecemeal participation can mitigate against wholesale participation by fragmenting choice-making modes and structures...The crux of participatory performance lies not in the object of our attention, what might normally be called 'the content', but in the ways that our attention is managed, the ways in which our engagement is co-opted with and as content.

(Frieze, 2016, p.22)

True audience agency is a myth and produces a disjunctive effect between the real and the simulated

[T]he principles by which we act and the criteria by which we judge and conduct our lives depend ultimately on the life of the mind. In short, they depend on the performance of these apparently profitless mental enterprises.

(Arendt, 1981, p.71)

Post-immersion does not equate to granting an audience full agency (which is almost impossible to define in any case). Over the past fifteen years, ZU-UK have observed that a tight set of instructions can create a common agreement between temporary audience communities. The freedom post-immersion engenders is more akin to the rules one adheres to (or tries to subvert) in games. Following a set of rules precludes absolute agency where participants create their own realities inside a performance. The proposition that greater pleasure is produced for an audience by transporting them into a simulated reality which their actions further embed them inside of is the immersion fallacy.

The immersion fallacy springs from the ideology of virtuality that originates in the 1980s and nineties. VR was marketed as a medium that made players genuinely believe in the reality of a simulated experience as distinct from the reality of the real world. This proposition is a fallacy because the player or participant can never shift into an altered state to the degree they *become* an entirely different person. Couching the invitation to participate in the language of unreality defenestrates a participant's status as a *moral agent*, which is a status all people hold irrespective

of their presence in a performance. Post-immersive artists must consciously have the image of the participant as moral agents in their mind when they are creating a performance in order to ensure they are not treating them as content to be managed.

Imagining people's alternative perspectives to yours is a prerequisite for moral action because the imagination allows us to *trans*cend the material conditions of reality. Performance in the imagination makes the future a perpetually potential space in its immutability, which is to say its unknowability. Post-immersive makes the performance of imagining alternative realities a collaborative experience in real space and time. The unknowability of the future makes us free to create it. When we imagine we evoke what is absent in our conscious minds. This absence is not a void but a space to exercise moral judgements about how we want to co-exist with fellow humans. But for this experience to be effective it must be carefully designed and managed by artists.

Clear boundaries from the outset can enable individuals to know what is expected of them, and therefore overcome personal fears of being exposed by 'getting it wrong'. The earlier audiences 'sign up' to a clearly articulated invitation, the quicker audiences can allow themselves to inhabit this agreed game-world, and become an active participant in it. Creating a contract of engagement from the outset can reduce gaps between audience members' feeling of ownership, entitlement and active engagement. Poorly defined instructions and promises of full agency can often create confusion, alienation and consequently further expose differences between audience members created by economic background, cultural background, levels of ability and other forms of privilege deferred by their inherited identity. Being truly empathetic to participants changing emotional and physical state over the course of a performance requires artists to be guided by a sense of care and attention to the presence of the individual participant, who brings with them a unique history and personal story, which has a profound effect on how they interact in a social environment. Artists are best able to show empathy with participants by creating structures where they are able to share knowledge of themselves in an environment that is not governed by invisible codes.

Conclusion / Final Thoughts / What's next…

It has taken us this long to begin to articulate potential answers and collectively identify further questions as the co-creators of this manifesto. Many attempts later, this is the first time ZU-UK's Post-Immersive Manifesto sees the light of day. It is not final. We hope this serves as an open invitation to individuals and organisations that feel compelled to contribute to the plurality of thinking and practice required to address the growing dangers of an increasingly problematic trend, and to put their money where their mouths are.

How can we resist the trendy 'windows of opportunity' that present themselves to us?
Are we committed to the long term research and development of an idea, however long it takes?
Should we find the content for the form, or find the best form for the content?
Who are we making work for?
And who are we making our work with?

Talking on a post-immersive approach to our work will certainly make things harder, take longer and need more thinking than if we were to follow simpler, cheaper, faster models.

We must not delude ourselves by press or industry approval.
We must not engage in the irresponsible use of resources for speed or convenience.
We must not serve as marketing machinery for larger corporations.
We must not give away our processes and methodologies to those whose sole aim is to increase mindless consumption.

It will make work harder in the short term.
But no one else will do it for us.

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