

One hundred and ninety-two thousand, two hundred and forty-eight steps: curating the Site Specific Performance Festival at PQ2019

It shouldn't have come as a surprise that I did a lot of walking during the Site Specific Performance Festival. Having worked on site-specific performances for twenty-five years I know that you have to cover a lot of ground when you are outside of the controlled environment of a theatre building, but I was fairly shocked to find that I had walked One hundred and ninety-two thousand, two hundred and forty-eight steps (approximately ninety-one miles/146 km) during the Festival, particularly as temperatures had reached sweltering levels.

Most site specific work involves artistic and practical negotiations around the complexities of a site, and as festival curator I saw it as my responsibility to work with the artists and the production team to find satisfactory solutions to any problems that occurred. Complications could involve, having to negotiate with other users of the place where the work was intended to happen or unexpected changes to the topography and I have found that these things are never entirely possible to predict before actually arriving to work in the space. No amount of planning can eliminate all of the possible problems that might occur and so some flexibility is always required, and this usually involves a fair amount of walking.

The festival took place outdoors in the Prague Exhibition Grounds, the adjoining Stromovka Park, and the city of Prague. The works shown were selected from the three hundred entries that we received as a response to our open call and ranged from intimate participatory experiences to large spectacles, and incorporated theatre, dance, performance art, storytelling, costume, music, sound, installation and new technologies from around the world. The chosen works reflected the diversity of site specific performance. However, with the financial and logistical difficulties of companies from around the world visiting Prague before PQ 2019 it was often not possible to create the work entirely from and for the site, which is how many have defined true site specificity (Kaye 2000, 1; Wilkie 2002, 150; Aronson 2018, 174). In fact, many of the works would be better defined as 'site-generic' (Wilkie 2002, 150) in that, although they all responded to or highlighted the PQ site and the behaviour that took place in it in some way, they could have occurred in any similar space.

Having worked in site specific performance for many years I have seen the use of the term 'site specific' change significantly. It was originally understood as a catch-all label to signify that a performance would not take place in a darkened theatre with the audience in an auditorium (see Pavis, Carlson, and Shantz 1998, 337–38). But as the field has expanded other labels have been developed; such as site-generic and site responsive, and, it could be argued, 'immersive performance' (see Aronson 2018, 199). It is clear, that in common with most words and terms that we use to try to define our practice, the definition of 'site specific performance' is slippery and elastic and changes over time. My own definition of 'site specific performance' is based on the work I have been doing with Seven Sisters Group since 1994. For us, 'site specific' means that the work is created in the site and for the site, and could not be moved to another location because it is so enmeshed in that particular place (see also Wilkie 2002, 149). However, certain works in the festival have made me reconsider my personal definition. Sometimes the site specificity was not about the performance itself but about the outcome of that performance; how the audience's attention was focused onto their environment in works such as *Porous City* or *I Can't Even Make a Flower* or the community that developed around *The Hole* all of which I discuss

below.

The process

For the artists who were unable to visit the locations before the start of PQ 2019 we provided videos, maps, photos and descriptions of locations. I also had discussions with most of them as to what space I thought would work best for their performance. This meant that we had fixed locations for all of the artists before they arrived. The exception was for works that involved travelling through the site or those that wanted to choose a different location each day and therefore needed to see the space before they could decide on a route. However, even for those who had selected a site before arrival it was not possible to fully understand the tangible and intangible aspects of a space until they could physically be in it. These included, for example, what else could be seen or heard nearby, what the flow of people was like in and around it, what the terrain was like underfoot, how the light changed at different times of day and night. Meteorological factors also had an impact on performances – wind, rain and extreme heat were all things that forced adjustments to locations or timings.

When working in a site, no matter how much planning you do, things are going to change; unexpected events might pop up in the space, large objects might suddenly appear there, or locations you thought were secured fall through. Usually this is because the spaces have many different people who control them or who have interaction with them, and it is unusual for these people to have any experience of the process of the creation or realisation of performance. They don't think that what they are doing will have an impact on anyone else, but they can cause a lot of disruption and tension for the artists and performers. During the course of the *Site Specific Performance Festival* there were occasions when workers pumped water across a performance area for several days of the rehearsal period, a mini- digger gouged out a trench along the side of field used for a part of a show, and a lively DJ set took place next to a rather ethereal performance by Paravan (Cyprus). In addition, sites that we thought had been confirmed fell through due to various misunderstandings.

I probably should have been able to predict the increase of physical activity from my past experience of working on a single site-specific performance as a designer/director to that of curating a large number of performances for the festival. It could be expressed in a simple formula: The increase in the number of performances x the potential for misunderstandings = increased walking activity for the curator. Each negotiation involved walking to meet the artists, walking to the site with the artists, possibly walking around the larger location with the artists to explain the facilities (or lack of them), later on walking to the site a few times to check the artists were settled in and all was going well, possibly walking to find the person who could solve a problem that has arisen, and finally walking to the site to watch the performance. In retrospect it is easy to understand how I clocked up ninety –one miles.

The performances

Without being able to visit their sites before the start of PQ 2019 many of the works addressed the site specificity by drawing attention to their surroundings or to the public's behaviour in that location. Here are just a few examples of some of the many works selected.

Porous City (Etheridge & Persighetti, UK), was a walking performance in which photographic temporary tattoos depicting textures, buildings, patinas, and viewpoints were applied to the

hands of the audience who were gently led on a walk to find and align their tattoo image with a real detail or viewpoint in the space. Although the concept had taken place in other locations previously, the artists carefully connected the performance to Prague Exhibition Grounds. They researched the site before and during their stay, chose the tattoo images and developed text that related closely to their localised findings.



Lining up temporary tattoos with real details in the space, Porous City (Etheridge & Persighetti, UK)
Photo: Vaiva Bezhan.



Lining up temporary tattoos with real details in the space, Porous City (Etheridge & Persighetti, UK)
Photo: Vaiva Bezhan.

In *Takigawa* (Tetushi Higashino, Japan), a bizarre waiter on roller skates interrupted the mealtimes of café customers by asking questions and creating a drawn response to their answers which was then presented to them as a gift. His intention was to address immigrant labour and the value of art. In the original performance created in Japan, Higashino would act as a waiter, bringing a customer a drink and then present them with an artwork he had drawn on their bill. The intention was that they would be persuaded to buy the artwork for the price of a beer for him. All the cafes at PQ were self-service and so he had to adapt the performance to this new arrangement. Instead of bringing food and drinks to the table he asked customers about what they had ordered and created a drawing for them that was informed by their responses. The reactions of the customers/audience ranged from irritation to hilarity, but through his disruption of their activity he encouraged them to (re)-consider their surroundings and raised questions about the accepted behaviours of the place where the work was sited.



Higashino and his daughter posing as waiters in *Takigawa* (Tetushi Higashino, Japan), Photo: Vaiva Bezhan.

In *I can't even make a flower* (Kaisa Illukka, Finland) Illukka chose a site each day in which she would select and embroider a wild flower. Quietly and unobtrusively sitting and embroidering for several hours she would attract the attention of passers-by and direct their eyes towards a particular, sometimes tiny, natural detail of that specific location. This in turn would provoke thoughts and conversations about the importance of the natural world. The linen fabric that Illukka worked on recorded embroideries of other performances, both in Prague and in previous locations. This acted as a provocation for wider discussions about the diminishing diversity of natural habitats, for flora and fauna across Europe, for example.



Kaisa Illukka embroidering in Stromovka Park, I can't even make a flower (Kaisa Illukka, Finland) Photo: Vaiva Bezhan.

The aural qualities of the site were explored in *Remember Me* (Sharon Reshef, Canada). Reshef created binaural recordings of locations around the Prague Exhibition Grounds before PQ 2019 started. She then created an app which directed audiences to these exact sites where they could listen to the sounds from the past which became layered with the sounds of the present moment. For those who took part, this intimate experience initiated questions about the relationship of sound to time and history.



Audience members listening to *Remember Me* (Sharon Reshef, Canada) next to a mirrored cube in the PQ main hall. Photo: Vaiva Bezhan.

Another way of highlighting the site was to draw audiences into a shared experience within the space by inviting participation in knitting, digging, walking, storytelling or dancing. The joyous *Engi-Mon* (Scale Laboratory & Jun-Maki-Dou, Japan), for instance, gathered audiences in a procession that culminated in crowds of people energetically dancing, singing and laughing together on the Krizik Pavilion rooftops in the Prague Exhibition Grounds as dusk fell over Prague. Based on the Japanese traditional 'Bon-Dance' in which it is believed the ancestors' spirits return to this world to visit their relatives, Scale Laboratory interpreted the dance in way that exuberantly connected the audience with one another.



Crowds gathering around the performance of Engi-Mon (Scale Laboratory & Jun-Maki-Dou, Japan), Photo: Vaiva Bezhan.



Starting to dig the hole, The Hole (The Hole Collective, Australia/Canada), Photo: David Kumermann.

In *The Hole* (The Hole Collective, Australia/Canada) passers-by were invited to watch, or to help, a team digging a hole in the Exhibition Grounds. The hole was dug over three days and then filled in, leaving practically no trace. This seemingly pointless and futile three-day exercise was surprisingly engrossing. I found it hard to tear myself away, intrigued by the artistry of the process and of the hole itself. I was also fascinated by how others responded to it. Some would just pass by, others would ask questions. Many people joined in and still more would watch and chat sociably. A young boy cycled past on the second day, then cycled back and spent the last two days with the team. Despite the international make up of the audience and the collective no shared verbal language could easily be found between them and the boy but nevertheless he threw himself wholeheartedly into the project. Through what little words could be shared it emerged that he was a Syrian refugee. At the end of his first day with the team he went off for a while, then came back and placed a bunch of wild flowers in the bottom of the hole. At the end of the third day, a 'filling in ceremony' brought together as a community all those who had gathered to watch and take part in the digging of the hole. At the very end of this unexpectedly moving ceremony the Syrian boy planted his flowers on the top of the filled in hole. *The Hole* could have happened anywhere but the relaxed and hospitable attitude of the Hole Collective encouraged people to respond in whatever way they wanted to. Whether we dug or watched we felt camaraderie with the others taking part. The fluid community that was created was specific to this location at this time. It probably meant something different to everyone who participated, and yet it focused us and provided an opportunity to be together in that space.



The filling in ceremony, *The Hole* (The Hole Collective, Australia/Canada) Photo: Vaiva Bezhan



Dancing down the wall of Mama Shelter Hotel, Vertical Dance (The Flock Project, Hungary),
Photo: Alžběta Jungrová

The scale and pace of performances varied between the immediate gratifications of the spectacular to more complex pieces, like *The Hole*, that required more time to engage with. There were for example breath-taking performances such as *Vertical Dance* (The Flock Project, Hungary), that opened the *Site Specific Performance Festival* with performers dangling from ropes and dancing down the ten-story wall of the MAMA Shelter Hotel¹. At the other end of the scale, with so much going on at PQ it took dedication from audiences to leave the hustle and bustle of the exhibition halls and follow *Night Walk* (Sam Trubridge, New Zealand). This performance consisted of a two metre-high plastic ball with a man inside it that rolled across the park until it deflated. It was a strangely unsettling and moving experience. The natural flow of the ball moving through the landscape over thirty or forty minutes, with the plastic sheeting rippling in the breeze, was occasionally jarred when the sphere stopped or changed direction reminding us that this was a performance with a human being inside the globe. Following this through to the end you could see the effort that went into walking inside the plastic dome, until eventually, ripped and torn, it would deflate. Then Trubridge would emerge and take the ball so he could mend it overnight in order to repeat the walk the next day. Taking time out with performances of this nature was highly rewarding as they allowed us, as an audience, to experience our own shifting viewpoints, feelings and thoughts about what we were watching and the environment we were in.

¹ Reminiscent of American dancer and choreographer Trish Brown's experiments with ropes and harnesses in New York in the nineteen seventies.



The inflated plastic ball of Night Walk (Sam Trubridge, New Zealand) in Prague Exhibition Grounds. Photo: David Kumermann.

Many of the performances crossed over several categories, like *Panorama Kino* (Tomoskar, Switzerland) in which passers-by could be observers, participants or the audience inside their revolving theatre. The ingenuity of the piece meant that the small 'audience' had one extraordinary experience, and a far larger number of people in the vicinity, 'observers', had another equally joyful and enchanting one. For the audience inside the rotating theatre everything that was viewed through the framing device of the panorama window became part of the performance, so that even a passing truck or seated couple were given significance. Over progressive rotations what the audience viewed began to merge incidental activities with humorous scenes that the company hurriedly set up with willing passers-by. These scenes increased in complexity and hilarity climaxing with a fabulous dancing flash mob. Those simply observing the performance witnessed the amazing Panorama Theatre company preparing for the scenes and, through sheer energy and enthusiasm, persuading and charming the public into taking part.



Audience inside the revolving theatre, Panorama Kino (Tomoskar, Switzerland), Photo: Vaiva Bezhan



Passers by joining in the performance outside the revolving theatre, Panorama Kino (Tomoskar, Switzerland), Photo: Vaiva Bezhan.

In Conclusion

Despite so much walking, and some stressful moments, curating the festival was a joyful experience. It was rewarding to see the enjoyment, participation and curiosity of the audiences, as well as to witness the camaraderie and networks being formed between all the artists taking part in the *Site Specific Performance Festival*. The artists were almost unfailingly calm and flexible in the face of some nail-biting problems. Perhaps they could sense the determination and effort that the production team and I put into making things work for them to the best of our abilities. Or perhaps they were well used to the vagaries of the processes of site specific work, in which you have to learn to embrace and encompass the positive and negative aspects of locations. There comes a moment in almost every site specific performance event when a point of understanding and respect is reached between the site, its regular users and the performance makers. Often for the users this occurs when they actually see the performance and finally understand what the strange preparatory activities and odd requests have been about. For the artists, spending time in the location gives a greater appreciation of its details and existing life and of how their performance intersects with these. I hope that for the audiences each performance, through very different means, allowed them to experience the complex, interlocking layers of the sites, to consider new ways to look at and behave in the spaces, and to create new memories about them.

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