

‘en route’: Audience Works, Social Aesthetics, and Place-Identity

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Abstract

Practices of art (and architecture) have recently turned toward theories of relationality, embodiment, and affect. This has been accompanied by a shift towards both discourses and design practices that emphasise doing things with space and engaging with what spaces do. Hence, the aesthetics of the city and its spaces can be seen to engage socially with the agency of its audience in a reflexive choreography. Using a contemporary work of live art theatre as a case study, this paper focuses on what we might learn from urban audiences who do things in space, and the agency that arises from live art in urban environments. ‘*en route*’ is an audience work conceived by Melbourne-based ensemble ‘one step at a time like this’ – a walk with an iPod through laneways and buildings in the central city. Using interview material from audiences who have performed *en route* in Melbourne, Brisbane, and Adelaide, this paper describes and analyses the effects of a site-responsive performance without actors, set, or lights that awakens its urban audiences from their blasé state of distraction. *en route* is explicitly architectural and social: it is about bodies inhabiting space, the direct and affective experience that connects subjectivity and space, and about place and identity as mutually constituting each other relationally.¹

Introduction

While aesthetics in the West has long been the domain of philosophical interest in the meaning and value of artworks such as painting, sculpture, and literature, the term ‘social aesthetics’ is reflective of a shift in focus towards processes of

¹ The author would like to thank the members of ‘one step at a time like this’ for providing video interviews with *en route* participants in Melbourne, Adelaide, and Brisbane, which form much of the material for this paper. Any mistakes in the transcriptions rest with the author.

production and reception. This is occurring more broadly within the humanities, the social sciences, and, in recent times, in art, architecture and design, with cultural production and practices across these fields evaluated in terms of the social relations they sustain, constrain, or enable. The conceptual strands bearing social aesthetic traits can be found in the work of John Dewey,² who formulated aesthetics as a dialectic between artworks and the experiences they invoke, and later in movements such as Surrealism and Situationism. Though the methods and aims may have differed, the emphasis in such movements was on processes intended to transform potentials for experience through new ways of being and communicating, generally with the purpose of foregrounding agency over passivity. This assemblage of the aesthetic and the social, though not necessarily directly drawing on these movements *per se*, is also a fundamental element of ‘performance theory’ developed through the collaboration of director Richard Schechner and anthropologist Victor Turner.³ For Schechner and Turner, echoing sociologist, Erving Goffman,⁴ all of life is performance, with a dramaturgical or performative understanding of the social tied to a social understanding of the possibilities of theatre with the two iteratively informing each other. More recently, in the visual arts, curator Nicholas Bourriaud introduced the term ‘relational aesthetics’ to emphasise practices that take “the whole of human relations and their social context”⁵ as their point of departure.

The domain of social aesthetics is thus a broad one covering practices across a range of fields of cultural production. Central to the value of such social or relational aesthetics is the issue of identity and the forms of subjectivity implicated in such work. Art historian Claire Bishop is a notable critic of relational aesthetics and the assumption that the form of such work is necessarily interactive, participatory, and mutable.⁶ For Bishop, echoing Dewey, an artwork need not be interactive with an audience for it to have social effects and lasting impacts on experience more generally. Moreover, Bishop’s critique takes issue with the presupposition of a centred, unified

² John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Milton Balch & Co., 1934).

³ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge), 17-19.

⁴ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

⁵ Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans., Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Methieu Copeland (France: Les presses du reel, 2002), 113.

⁶ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (2004): 51-79.

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subject able to engage in the convivial forms of community that are a mark of the works promoted by Bourriaud. Bishop argues that for a relational work to have value it must engage with a more contemporary subject whose identity is multiple, decentred, and in a state of becoming. Rather than work that instantiates a happy sense of commonality, she calls for more challenging relations of conflict, contradiction, and alienation to be assembled. Bishop also calls for a deeper evaluation of relational works in terms of content, process, and experience beyond the mere observation that some art works have a predominantly social dimension as their aesthetic.⁷

In what follows, a contemporary work of live art theatre is presented as a case study to examine the forms of subjectivity—in this case articulated through the lens of the concept of place-identity—evidenced in the experience of audience-performers as a way of understanding what social aesthetics as an approach may yield.

Audience Works

Since the 1980s, the term ‘live art’ has been used to refer to acts of performance by artists, alone or in groups, in fields as diverse as visual art, experimental theatre, and dance. Audience works are an immersive form of theatre where the audience are the co-performers of the work, either as participants engaged directly with actor-performers, or without – enabled by a situation or frame created by the artist. Performances framed in this way can take many forms and utilise a diverse range of settings, props, technologies (increasingly mobile communication tools), and rules for constraining and enabling action akin to games. In terms of its use of space, non-traditional performance spaces are most often used, ranging from domestic interiors to institutional, commercial and retail spaces, to various kinds of public space. The emphasis in audience work is on the agency of the participants and the (inter-) subjective experience gained by being immersed in the performance itself. While this is an expanding field, this form of theatre is still regarded as something of a fringe practice, given its experimental and often hybrid nature. Its essential characteristic is to place the audience within the performance, to experience the risks as actors do, to become the subject of the dramaturgy rather than remaining observers of it beyond the safety of the ‘fourth wall’. As such, the affective and embodied dimensions of performativity come to the fore within the subjective experience of audience members undergoing the dramatic potentials of the work as enacted by them, rather than the more passive role in relation to performance assigned to audiences in conventional theatre.

⁷ Bishop, “Antagonism.”

Relational Architecture – *en route*

In a parallel vein, the recent turn in architectural history and theory towards theories of relationality, performativity, embodiment, and affect has been accompanied by a shift in focus onto architectural discourses and the design of spaces, which emphasise doing things with space and what spaces do. Here, architecture is the choreographer, and the agency of its occupants is rarely a central pre-occupation, or if present, plays a minor role in what the architecture affords. The present paper inverts this bias in architectural history and theory and looks at what might be learnt from its occupants doing things in space, and the agency that arises from immersive performance of live art theatre in urban environments. In what follows, the effects of ‘*en route*’—an audience work conceived by Melbourne-based ensemble ‘one step at a time like this’—are described and analysed. A walk with an iPod through laneways and buildings in the central city, *en route* is a site-responsive performance without actors, set, lights, or script, which has won awards and toured to great acclaim around Australia and internationally. *en route* is explicitly architectural and urban; it is about bodies in space, the direct and affective experience of making connections between subjectivity and space, the effects that such performance has on audiences who perform the work, and about place and identity as mutually constituting each other performatively and relationally. Using interview material from audiences who have performed *en route* in Melbourne, Adelaide, and Brisbane, this paper critically analyses the effects of *en route* on its audience – an audience at work.

Place-Identity

In linking architecture, urban space and performance, a central concern of this paper is the concept of place-identity. First delineated by Proshansky,⁸ place-identity was conceived as a “sensitizing construct, bringing to fruition earlier calls for an ‘ecological conception of self and personality’”⁹ and described as a “pot-pourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of setting.”¹⁰ Place-

⁸ Harold M. Proshansky, “The City and Self-Identity,” *Journal of Environment and Behaviour* 10:2 (1978): 147-169.

⁹ Kevin Dixon and John Durrheim, “Displacing Place-identity: A Discursive Approach to Locating Self and Other,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 39 (2000): 28.

¹⁰ Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff, “Place-identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3:1 (1983): 60.

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identity was further theorised by Korpela to have come into being reflexively through the early experiences of individuals in familiar environments such as home, school, and neighbourhood via attempts to regulate such environments and sustain a coherent sense of self and reveal that sense of self to others.¹¹ As such, place-identity has the hallmarks of the enabling constraints of performance as theorised by Goffmann¹² and heavily drawn upon by Turner and Schechner in their elaborations of ‘Performance Theory’¹³ to whose insights and practice live art theatre owes a great deal.

Performative Architecture

While interest in performative architecture arose about the same time as Schechner’s work, Andrews¹⁴ introduced the term specifically to refer to architecture as scenography for bodily motion, where buildings are shaped by and for particular uses. Kolarevic and Malkawi¹⁵ added two further understandings of performative architecture – the performance of the building as a realised design in itself, and the performance of the building in terms of the effect it has on its occupants, and more broadly, the culture of which it is a part. More recent interest in performativity and architecture has developed the work of philosopher Judith Butler to analyse discourse about performativity in architectural criticism.¹⁶ It is in this context that this paper seeks to present a view from a place between these takes on performativity, one that responds in part to the call from Geography¹⁷ for new methods in spatial research that attempt to go beyond the traditions of archive, fieldwork, and interview and to rework academic practices themselves as performative.

¹¹ Kalevi Mikael Korpela, “Place-identity as a Product of Environmental Self-Regulation,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 9:3 (1989): 241-256.

¹² Erving Goffmann, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

¹³ Richard Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory, 1970- 1976* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977).

¹⁴ John Andrews and Jennifer Taylor, *Architecture: A Performing Art* (Guildford: Lutterworth, 1982).

¹⁵ Branko Kolarevic and Ali Malkawi, *Performative Architecture: Beyond Instrumentality* (London: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁶ Jan Smitheram, “Spatial Performativity/Spatial Performance,” *Architectural Theory Review* 16:1 (2011): 55-69.

¹⁷ Nigel Thrift and John-David Dewsbury, “Dead Geographies – And How to Make Them Live,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18:4 (2000): 411-432.

Blasé-Identity

To take a step back slightly—and to place the problematic of this paper, and of the particular audience work in question—in an older theoretical context for a moment, the experience of architecture was problematised by Benjamin as being related to issues of mode of attention and habit:

Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction. The laws of its reception are most instructive ... Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception – or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. The latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion.¹⁸

Even earlier, Simmel¹⁹ noted the ‘blasé’ mentality that was a product of urban living, a specifically urban form of place-identity that comprised a protective, desensitised shield against social encounter or engagement with spatial differentiation beyond the utilitarian and instrumental. To step back into the current period, the potential for distraction of attention from architectural appreciation, or in this case, a sense of place and identity, has been additionally problematised by an ever-increasing presence of information and communications technology immersion in all aspects of everyday life. Highly aestheticised architecture and urban design are now potentially everywhere, whether virtual or actual, with a multiplicity of soundtracks of our own and others’ making to choreograph their reception. The world has become captured by what Thrift refers to as the “security-entertainment complex,”²⁰ where phenomenological encounter of all kinds has become a form of constant entertainment and distraction, a world where traditional methods of social research find it increasingly hard to provide critical insight. Against this, Thrift posits experimental art practices as having the potential to aid the socio-spatial

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (London: Routledge, 2000), 336.

¹⁹ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, eds David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997).

²⁰ Nigel Thrift, “Lifeworld Inc. – And What to do About it,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29:1 (2011): 5-26.

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sciences in developing new modes of research practice. And so, to return to the here and now: enter stage left, *en route*:

Take one. Take your time. You will need your eyes. Take two. Take Three. Take your time. You will need your eyes. We recommend you use them.²¹

Melbourne (and Other Invisible Cities)

Melbourne is the city in which *en route* was conceived during 2008-2009, and a brief description of the city now follows to contextualise the work. Melbourne—the capital of the Australian state of Victoria—is a multicultural city of about four and half million people, and for the most part is a sprawling low-density suburban form with a concentration of high-intensity land uses and high-rise buildings in the centre. The central city is based on a colonial grid roughly a kilometre wide by two kilometres long. The layout comprises a repetitive sequence of major and minor streets interlaced with a network of narrow and irregularly spaced service lanes (locally known as ‘laneways’) that evolved as the city developed rapidly during the Victorian era – and being largely unplanned, incorporated a wide variety of buildings and activities in close proximity. After several booms and busts, by the 1980s, central Melbourne was predominantly a commercial environment that was empty in the evenings and on weekends. However, a range of state and local government interventions, combined with market opportunism, have adapted the legacy of the Victorian grid-and-lane layout and retrofitted many older industrial and commercial buildings, transforming the central city with a large and growing residential population, a thriving arts, live music, and club culture, and an increasingly diverse range of cultural precincts. Prominent among stereotypical images of Melbourne (but not inaccurately so) are intimate bars and cafes situated in graffiti-covered laneways (still used in many cases for service) off the main axes of wide civic streets that are often as not crowded with pedestrians in a place that has become renowned for subtle but effective urban design. While Melbourne is the place *en route* made its debut, like the different cities in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* that are multiple versions of a single city drawing on the myriad of potential relations between a city and its audiences, the multiplicitious attributes of Melbourne’s place-identity that allowed *en route* to be developed have been transferred in alternative configurations to the other places where *en route* has since taken root.

²¹‘one step at a time like this’, *en route*, track 1, Melbourne, 2009.

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en route is an audience work devised by theatre company 'one step at a time like this' (hereafter called 'one step'), a Melbourne-based ensemble who have collaborated since the late 1990s. *en route* was first performed at the Melbourne Fringe Festival in 2009 and has achieved remarkable success. one step received two Green Room awards for the Melbourne season of *en route* and were similarly celebrated at the Adelaide Fringe Festival, and have since had seasons in Darwin, Brisbane, the Edinburgh Fringe, Chicago, Launceston, the 2012 London Cultural Olympiad, Seoul and the Auckland Arts Festival. In most promotional material, *en route* was described as a "love song to your city, in which the private and the public, imaginal and concrete, intersect and overlap."

If I told you I loved this city;
love the way it opens it [sic] ways and lanes to me,
love the way it takes and absorbs me without making a fuss;
love the way it winds my walking to its contours,
gives resistance to my dreaming –
would you be jealous?²²

The problem that the work seeks to pose answers to is twofold: on the one hand, how to create a performance that required no actors, set, lights or stage; and on the other, how to move people through urban space to end up in café in a heightened contemplative state, alert to their setting and the people around them, to inculcate an audience place-identity where the urban environment came alive to them in new ways. Julian Rickert, creative director of *en route*, sets the agenda for the piece as art through it being "a constructed (framed) experience which aims to extend the range of one's inner (emotional and imaginative) life (beyond its everyday range)."²³ The transformational intent of *en route* is manifest in its construction of a frame for seeing the city and its inhabitants in new ways. Somewhat ironically, the primary device used to achieve this re-framing is the iPod – the almost ubiquitous mp3 player through whose headphones most users enforce their own distraction from, and blasé passage through, urban space.

²² 'one step at a time like this', "en route," accessed April 25, 2011, <http://www.onestepatatimelikethis.com/enroute.html>.

²³ Julian Rickert, "art, the everyday and everything else," January 16, 2010, accessed April 25, 2011, <http://onestepatatimelikethis.com/enrouteblog/archives/826>.

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Between 19 and 25 there is a narrow door. Do you want to open it?²⁴

en route Melbourne comprises a walk from one edge of the central city grid to the other through a series of laneways, streets, and interior commercial spaces. The route was the product of lengthy fieldwork and experimentation, and in every subsequent city a similar process of field research, discovery, and experimentation is undertaken to ensure that, in each instance, *en route* is a site-responsive work.

Audiences listen to a carefully prepared soundtrack that provides some of the instructions for the route, along with music spliced and overlaid with snatches of dialogue, personal reverie, and occasional short poetic excerpts on the act of seeing from Merleau-Ponty and Rilke.

I do not look at chaos, but at things – so that finally one cannot say if it is the look or the things that command.²⁵

I am learning to see. I don’t know why it is but everything enters me more deeply and doesn’t stop where it once used to. Have I said it before? Yes, I am beginning. It’s still going badly. But I intend to make the most of my time.²⁶

Audiences are also asked to engage directly with the space of the city by sitting on buildings, writing on walls, listening to sounds from shops, entering via back doors, finding a way to dispose of a \$2 coin they are provided with, following clues chalked on the ground and in hand-drawn maps, and at one point, by running through a crowded city street holding hands with a stranger. The range of ways that audiences are ‘moved’ through the route mean that a variety of affective states are produced and different kinds of situations must be negotiated. Additional instructions are conveyed by SMS and mobile phone communication.

Play track 5 as you walk slowly through inside of GPO. Feel free to window shop on the way. Exit through other side.²⁷

²⁴ ‘one step at a time like this’, *en route*, track 3, Melbourne, 2009.

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining Chasm,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (London: Routledge, 2000), 165 [Adapted by ‘one step at a time like this’].

²⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (London: Penguin, 2009).

²⁷ ‘one step at a time like this’, *en route*, SMS message.

The soundtrack is discontinuous, and audiences can move at their own pace, playing, stopping, or replaying tracks at will, and even, getting lost. Mostly, *en route* takes about an hour, sometimes ninety minutes. The musical components of the soundtrack are compositions by local musicians, carefully sequenced to create affective and cognitive connections of different kinds relative to the spaces being traversed and the particular activity that will occur in them. Being site-responsive, the details of the soundtrack, route, and activities within *en route* are varied according to the morphology and culture of the city in which it is being performed, a re-calibration of the performative frame to the affective (aural, tactile, optical) and spatial affordances of each place.

Play track 12. You are now looking for a café with a window seat. Somewhere you can look out from behind glass at people on the street.²⁸

Audiences at Work

en route's final section has audience participants inside a café, seated by a window, with a cup of coffee, looking out onto a busy street watching passersby while listening to an excerpt from Rilke's novel *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, musing on the mutability of identity:

There are multitudes of people, but there are many more faces. Because each person has several of them. There are people who wear the same face for years. Naturally, it wears out, gets dirty, splits at the seams. They never change it. Never have it cleaned. It's good enough, they say. And who can convince them to the contrary. Of course, since they have several faces, you might wonder what they do with the other ones. They keep them in storage. Their children will wear them. But sometimes it also happens that their dog goes out wearing them. And why not? A face is a face.²⁹

Which becomes an opening for the *en route* interlocutors to invite the audience member to consider, from their semi-panoptic viewpoint, the degree to which their looking is really a desire to be watched, to be noticed, to be subject to the collective gaze of the throng passing the window, thus inverting the injunction to attentively gaze that started the performance. The final track comes to an end with a repetition of the slightly enigmatic, but comforting words:

²⁸ 'one step at a time like this', *en route*, SMS message.

²⁹ Rilke, *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.

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This is the end of this route. To notify *en route* central, text or call now. Take your headphones off, somebody will be with you shortly. You are still *en route*.

And then one of the interlocutors appears and asks, “How did you go *en route*?”

Audience Interviews

The author was an audience member in the opening season of *en route*, and found the exit interview to be as much a part of the experience as the journey through the city itself, rather than an adjunct to it. Many of these interviews were recorded by one step over several months for their own purposes, and they were provided to the author for transcription for this paper. The short discussions that arise from this exit-interview situation are revealing in their consistency on the one hand, and also for the experiences that audiences report. One of the most common responses is one of sheer enjoyment and aliveness, with most audience members in a state of relaxed, yet heightened awareness; a state of grace in which to reflect on their experience *en route*:

I just found it a really wonderful experience to be on. I got to watch things a lot more intensely than I normally would. It showed me parts of the city that I knew were there but I’d never actually spent time looking at, or visiting and taking that time was really good. I’d really just like to sit and stay in that state for a while now.³⁰

The sense of having time, making time, and of timing itself became quite pronounced in many participants.

It’s one of those things were you don’t feel like there’s any rush. Is there a right time, or is there a wrong amount of time? At times, you just go ‘I’ll just go back and look at that again’ and you don’t get to do that in the theatre very often ... just like reading a book, you can go back and open the pages again

My senses were working in a way that they don’t usually, I was in a different space, I was there as the watcher and the observer, so I was in it, but I wasn’t in it, you know?³¹

³⁰ *en route* participant interview 127_0234, Melbourne.

³¹ *en route* participant interview 126_0231, Melbourne.

As well as this increased sensitivity towards the external environment in both spatial and temporal dimensions, audience members often reported a heightened reflexivity about their own process of seeing and being in urban space:

being directed to think about those parts of the city, in ways that I hadn't before through the text and the music that you were including, allowed my mind to go off in very tangential ways to my usually really focused state of mind, where I want to get from A to B in the shortest way from A to B.³²

just to really walk through the city and think, 'How am I reacting?' and listen to the sound and instructions coming from two different sections. But it's really nice the way that you've just gotta surrender! Which is just such a beautiful way to do what you've got to do when you go to theatre.³³

Because it was part of the Fringe Festival, billed as theatre, many audience participants (who were also in many cases, seasoned theatre-goers) likened their experience directly to that of being at a conventional theatre, speaking of the sense of being both inside and outside of themselves and of the performance itself simultaneously:

I'm actually a participant in the city, I'm one of these people sitting here in their own world trying to define something in the city, but not finding it. Which was interesting, because in this situation I was sort of out of it but in it, which I guess was why it was a theatre experience, and how you give yourself over to the theatre experience.³⁴

And as such, this allowed participants to frame their encounters within *en route* as if everything was staged for them as a piece of theatre:

I just had all these amazing experiences, like, really quite surreal, it was all these weird experiences, it was almost like they were staged, but of course they weren't staged.³⁵

³² *en route* participant interview 327_0288, Melbourne.

³³ *en route* participant interview 327_0289, Melbourne.

³⁴ *en route* participant interview 126_0231, Melbourne.

³⁵ *en route* participant interview K_211109, Melbourne.

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In addition to the theatrical understandings of their experience, many audiences also noted the way that *en route* exposed them to the manner in which their own sense of place and identity was a product of the dynamic interaction between their sense of themselves in connection with their environment:

It was like I was almost the primary focus of it, which was incredible, because you’re exploring the city but you’re exploring yourself within the context of the city.³⁶

It altered time. It sort took away a layer of busyness, of doing. I was in the city experiencing that spatial form and I was, it was like a set ... it was like I was being introduced to it in a different way, it was re-orientating me, into partly an older experience of the city that I’ve had, almost a virginal experience.³⁷

It was good, it was discovering about the city, and about self-discovery as well, actually a bit of going back to my past and just remembering things I used to like to do.³⁸

The sense of self-discovery through exploring the city was manifested in a number of ways. For some, the sense of embodiment engendered through doing things in space fostered an ambivalent sense of belonging:

It just seemed like Adelaide felt more textural, I wanted to touch and interact more with the city than I usually do when I’m walking around, so I felt more in touch with it all, more a part of it, as opposed to someone who’s just here shopping or catching up with friends. I felt like a part of it, but also a bit of a voyeur.³⁹

It was more than looking, it was actually feeling and being, and it was breaking boundaries, which, you see what you want to see and you feel what you want to feel, and this was pushing me beyond those boundaries and I was beginning to find new areas, and in fact, it was quite disturbing, in a good way, but disturbing.⁴⁰

And for some, *en route*’s framing as ‘art’ provided a sense of legitimacy to act with much greater authority in urban space than they would normally

³⁶ *en route* participant interview 106_0018, Adelaide.

³⁷ *en route* participant interview 126_0184, Melbourne.

³⁸ *en route* participant interview 106_0021, Adelaide.

³⁹ *en route* participant interview 106_023, Adelaide.

⁴⁰ *en route* participant interview 106_0027, Adelaide.

allow themselves, sometimes fabricating rationales for which no justification had been provided, or in fact, existed:

I was taken places where you wouldn't feel like you're allowed to go. There was a certain 'Am I allowed to do this?' But of course, I knew that, I rationalised that obviously they've asked for permission for people to be just wandering around the Hilton Hotel.⁴¹

I felt authorised, but not responsible ... I can say 'I'm just doing this weird art thing and they told me to do it'.⁴²

Understanding *en route*

What is clear in the threads of experience told through these short interviews is that audiences work to perform *en route*; it is not a passive, interpretive experience, but rather a performative one that opens up relations and exposes the relationality of place-identity. Audiences make affective, cognitive, and embodied connections in time and in place, and in doing so, achieve a shift in their sense of self and the place they are occupying, and of what is possible for them and for that place. The act of doing *en route* opens up for audiences, in remarkably self-reflexive ways, the performative relationality of their place-identity as a series of processes of assembling multiple affective-cognitive-relations between personal, cultural, and environmental domains. That is, connections between their body/senses, music/texts, and urban space through the action of doing things in specific places.

Unlike many works conceived under the rubric of social or relational aesthetics,⁴³ *en route* does not at once appear social, in the sense that its primary effect is not to set in motion a series of social relations per se. It does, however, enable its audiences to "re-think the social dimensions from which [they] basically structure [their] everyday lives"⁴⁴ and is reliant on the institution of theatre as a frame to enact the performances that bring this about. It is useful here to draw on the insights of Victor Turner from his work on

⁴¹ *en route* participant interview 108_0088, Brisbane.

⁴² *en route* participant interview 24112009_001, Melbourne.

⁴³ See a comprehensive survey in Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, or a series of examples described in Lars Bang Larsen, "Social Aesthetics: 11 Examples to Begin With, in the Light of Parallel History," *Afterall, London* 1 (1999), http://www.aleksandramir.info/texts/larsen_afterall.html, accessed April 25, 2011.

⁴⁴ Bang Larsen, "Social Aesthetics," 2.

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ritual and social drama⁴⁵ as a way of understanding what *en route* does. For Turner, all rituals comprise three phases – separation, liminality, and integration. These three phases occur in *en route*. Before the route commences, audiences are separated from their everyday lives by setting aside a time for it, and then, once arriving at the set meeting place, taking on the accoutrements of their audience-performer role through the acceptance of special devices whose function is also symbolic in nature: an iPod and prominent headphones that mark the wearer and place them in a sequestered acoustic environment, and two small envelopes with cryptic wording that impart special powers that the bearer will need at some as yet unknown point on the route. Additionally, the one step member (who does not give their name) provides the audience member with a mobile contact for ‘*en route* central’ in case they get lost. This creates the sense, amplified along the way during the route, that some omnipresent and guiding power is watching over the proceedings.

Once on their way, as the interview material demonstrates, audience members are in a liminal state, ‘betwixt and between’ provisional versions of themselves and the city they are walking through, not quite fully in it or of it, even for those who have lived or worked there for a long time, yet more fully conscious of it and themselves than usual. Not all of the experiences are pleasant, some are personally confronting, and audience members become aware of their own liminality to some extent as they observe their own attempts to construct meanings for what they encounter, as if for the first time: the sovereign subject paradoxically troubled by the apparent divisions and *lacunae* it finds within itself. And finally, the route becomes a pilgrimage to that most everyday (at least in Melbourne) of ritual sites – a laneway café, where the final stage of the drama—integration—occurs. In a quotidian environment, accompanied by a cup of coffee, the headphones (symbols of the liminal) are returned and a conversation with a member of one step who is genuinely interested in the experience of the route serves to re-integrate the audience member into everyday life, but in a state of grace.

While there is clearly no overt religious overtone or symbolism anywhere in *en route*, the framing of the walk as ‘art’ is significant. As evidenced by some of the interviews, ‘art’ gives both audience members and one step heightened forms of authority. ‘Art’ authorises audiences to transgress social boundaries, to enact agency beyond the norms and conventions of behaviour in both public and private space; one step is given a panoptic power

⁴⁵ Mathieu Deflem, “Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner’s Processual Symbolic Analysis,” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30:1 (1991): 1-25.

to monitor performance and direct participants via SMS messages and the other symbolic devices it provides to audiences. In such an interpretation, *en route* works as ritual in a similar manner to which all theatre accomplishes social drama, although its mode of performance is very different from conventional theatre.

For architectural and urban theory, the issue of place and place-identity has been highly contested since the 1970s when it first entered the field of design through the discipline of environment–behaviour and environmental psychology studies at a similar time to its emergence in humanistic geography. Much of the contestation centred on questions of the degree to which place and place-identity were regressive, conservative approaches for disciplines whose primary focus is change, along with the difficulty of reconciling qualitative and quantitative values within design methodologies. Put simply, these issues revolve around a dichotomous view of the relationship between people and their environment, rather than a relational one that sees issues of place, senses of place, and identity as assemblages that emerge from the mutually constitutive relations between them.⁴⁶

en route was not conceived as piece of architectural or urban research, but as a piece of theatre aimed at achieving powerful effects in its audience. This paper has been written by an audience member who, while doing *en route* in 2009, enjoyed not only the kinds of experiences that other audience members have, but also, sensed that here in the space of a carefully choreographed hour there were ways of enacting the kind of theory that has taken hours of painstaking research to elucidate, draw out, and argue for across countless books and papers on the subject of place and place-identity. While the level of factual information that is transmissible via *en route* is negligible—its primary effect is affective—what it does achieve is a shift in participants’ understandings about the way their sense of place, and with it their sense of identity and power, are iteratively constructed in performance. There are lessons in that for all of us.

⁴⁶ Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2006); Kim Dovey, *Becoming Places: urbanism/architecture/identity/power* (London: Routledge, 2010).