

Rehearsing for a climate-changed future: practising not preaching for environmental accountability

Zoe Svendsen (corresponding author)* zoesvendsen@mac.com
University of Cambridge (research fellow)
Lucy Neal (Transition Town, Tooting)

‘We are what we imagine. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined’ Navarre Scott Momoday

In 2009, Tipping Point, a UK organisation devoted to bringing together scientists and artists to confront climate change, awarded a Commission Award to *The Trashcatchers’ Carnival* and *3rd Ring Out*.¹ This piece explores questions that evolved from these works in the attempts to bring together art and climate change: we were each involved with one of these projects (Neal - *Trashcatchers*; Svendsen - *3rd Ring Out*). Whilst the origins and outcomes of the projects were very different, each can be conceptualized- and ‘troubled’ - through the idea of ‘rehearsal’: trialing the challenges of a climate-changed future, and using art to explore other ways of living.

The Trashcatchers’ Carnival

The Trashcatchers’ Carnival was a community-wide celebration of Tooting (London, UK) stories. Produced by Transition Town Tooting and led by artists Project Phakama and Emergency Exit Arts, recycling was used as a metaphor for change, creating beauty from rubbish.² In the context of a Transition Town the Carnival asked a thousand ‘carnivalistas’, young and old, to imagine a positive vision of what Tooting would be like in the future. ‘Transition Towns’ equip communities for the dual challenges of climate change and shrinking supplies of cheap energy (peak oil), focusing on relocalisation, reducing carbon emissions and building resilient, creative, happier communities. Started in 2006, there are now over 1800 ‘transitioning’ communities worldwide (see www.transitionnetwork.org.)

Through building bridges between community groups, artists, residents’ associations, schools, traders, police and local authority staff, a sense of endeavour and shared ingenuity took hold. Could we create a carnival out of ‘trash’? How creative, resourceful and resilient a community were we? Discussion of climate change can often make us feel guilty - how could working creatively with others by contrast make us feel good, even noble?

An abstracted sense of a possible positive future was therefore translated into the concrete challenge to build a carnival from scratch. The carnival would ‘open’ the busy A24 road to celebration; month by month an ambitious artist led-venture to ‘take to the High Road’ gave rise to a sense of excitement and purpose. Yet with permission to close the road ultimately unforthcoming, at the 11th hour we claimed a right to direct action to secure access. On 4th July the carnival, now technically a ‘protest’, reclaimed the road that runs through Tooting from ten million vehicles a year.

¹ <http://www.tippingpoint.org.uk/>

² See www.transitiontowntooting.org; <http://www.projectphakama.org>;
<http://www.eea.org.uk/>

Despite such difficulties we never lost sight of the intention of the Carnival: to celebrate, at a time when there could be little to celebrate: climate change and depleting resources. Early on, children from one of the primary schools, Fircroft School, announced they would be animals in the carnival 'so people understand humans are not the only beings on the planet'. There was little room for sentimentality, as workshops included talks and films on the 'challenging realities' of both climate change and peak oil. Not an obvious starting point for joyous celebration, but results were surprising.

We focused on beauty, poetry and a narrative for Tooting that came directly from the participants themselves, shaping six-metre high characters: the Lady of Tooting, the Giant Gardener, the Sankofa Bird (carrying a seed of the future and able to look forward and backwards in a single glance). Inspired by the work of environmental activist and deep ecologist, Joanna Macy, gratitude was also invoked.³ And amongst the joy, a space for loss was created which gave the event a poignancy and depth: 'Safe with Earth's terrible beauty' read one of the banners. When Suzy Gablik refers to the 're-enchanting of our culture' she is possibly referring to what was happening that day: a co-created knowledge that can succeed in transforming a precarious sense of future into a potential hopeful future? In this context art has a useful role to play, where personal creativity connects to a social, moral and ecological responsibility (Gablik 1991, 8-12).

3rd Ring Out

3rd Ring Out is a theatrical event created in two especially adapted shipping containers, both kitted out inside as smart emergency response cells. The performance toured the UK in May-July 2010, traveling to five locations: Norwich (Norfolk and Norwich Festival), Cambridge, Ipswich (Pulse Festival), Newcastle (Northern Stage) and London (the Greenwich and Docklands International Festival). In 2011 it was presented at the Watford Imagine Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Co-directors Simon Daw (design) and Zoë Svendsen (dramaturgy) with sound designer Carolyn Downing and a team of performer-devisors created a part-live, part computer-generated simulation of an emergency caused by climate change. Set in 2033, the scenario offers an interlinked web of potential crises with far-reaching geopolitical consequences such as mass migration and competition for resources. Participant-audiences of twelve are 'cast' as an emergency planning team, responsible for an area of their city as designated on a map on a table down the centre of the emergency response cell. As the scenario unfolds, participants vote individually to decide how to respond, determining the direction of the performance. In 2010, the scenario was rewritten to make it specific to the city in which it was performed.⁴ Using the same scenario of a heatwave followed by a flood, in 2011 the geographic location was the Suffolk coastline, exploring questions of agriculture, fire risk, the elderly isolated in rural locations, water scarcity and a shutdown at Sizewell nuclear power station. Meanwhile, in the second container, now named the 'strategy cell', an installation/open space enabled the public to put forward ideas for the future of the city in which performances were located; creating an alternative future to the one explored in the emergency simulation.

We initially developed the scenario through a Creative Partnerships project in Norfolk, with school students aged thirteen and fourteen. From climate scientists and geographers to Council Climate Change officers to emergency planners, a wide

³ <http://www.joannamacy.net/>

⁴ See www.3rdringout.com / www.metisarts.co.uk

network of individuals offered their expertise and assistance to enable us to make our scenarios plausible.

In the process of creating 3rd Ring Out, it was the idea of 'rehearsal' that precipitated the engagement with climate change. Rehearsal is at the very least a question of going through the motions, but those motions leave a residue, a kind of muscle memory; the all-important non-declarative memory not of 'knowing that' but 'knowing how' (Squire and Kandel 1999, 14-15). The structure of the performance was originally inspired by Tracy C. Davis' reconceptualising of Cold War exercises as 'rehearsals' (2007, 4-5). A previous project had researched exercises conducted during the Cold War enacting scenarios of nuclear apocalypse.⁵ As theatre-makers we are tasked with the creation of imaginary worlds. These events are ordinarily conceived of, and culturally categorized as, art or leisure. We were intrigued by these extraordinarily complex exercises and their creation of 'as-if' fictions for a very different purpose: to facilitate disaster response. The decision therefore to explore scenarios resulting from climate change stemmed from the question: what might impact sufficiently on our future that we would need to practise for it?

Rehearsing the future

The nature of the overwhelmingly engaged response, both to 3rd Ring Out⁶ and to *The Trashcatchers' Carnival*, implies that one reason that climate change remains disputed is that the scientific, technical, cultural and moral complexities of the solutions proposed appear to divest us of individual agency. Here, the metaphors borrowed by psychology are telling. The experience of the state of shock or numbness experienced in trauma has been described in psychology as a state of 'scriptlessness'; that is, the loss of a programme for action (Campbell, Brunell and Foster 2004). Psychotherapist Rosemary Randall suggests that the impact of a sense of loss in climate change narratives is underplayed, and cites the fear of loss as one cause of public apathy or even denial in response to climate change (Randall 2009, 119). By re-enfranchising the imagination of participants, these projects start to make the connection between the challenge and solutions: and in doing so they offer a psychological 'script' for action. Whilst 3rd Ring Out was more explicitly a 'rehearsal', the Carnival created a 'critical event' (Woods 1993, 1-13) that stays in the memory, affects our learning, triggering people's belief that change is possible. In this way it can be said that we produce a memory of the future (Geus 1997, 30-48); another way of describing a 'script' for action.

Ultimately both projects manifest the desire not 'to go unimagined': climate change is reclaimed as a challenge to live differently, more thoughtfully, more ingeniously. A comment from a year nine student at St. Bede's School in Cambridge on 3rd Ring Out acts as a reminder of how climate change sharpens the critical relation between art and reality, between the 'what-if' and what's really at stake, and invites us to keep on practising:

It was a kind of game of seeing the future and it could happen so although you could have fun with it now and see what happens if you make this decision, in the

⁵The Bunker Project: www.thebunkerproject.info

⁶ See www.3rdringout.com ;
<http://ashdenizen.blogspot.com/2010/07/fingers-on-button.html?showComment=1279902588504>

future people aren't going to be able to see what's going to happen, because it's not a game then.

References

Campbell, W. Keith; Brunell, Amy B., and Foster, Joshua D. 2004. 'Sitting Here in Limbo: Ego Shock and Posttraumatic Growth', *Psychological Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 22-26

Davis, Tracy C. 2007. *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press)

Gablik, Suzy. 1991. *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc.)

Geus, Arie de. *The Living Company: Growth, Learning and Longevity in Business* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 1997)

Randall, Rosemary. 2009. 'Loss and Climate Change: The Cost of Parallel Narratives', *Ecopsychology*, vol. 1, no, 3 (September), 118-29

Squire, Larry R. and Eric R. Kandel. 1999. *Memory: from Mind to Molecules* (New York: Scientific American Library)

Woods, Peter. 1993. *Critical Events in Teaching and Learning* (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd)