The Embarrassing Act of Becoming a Street Performance Audience

Jon Back

Uppsala University

Kyrkogårdsg. 10

Box 513

75120 Uppsala, Sweden

jon.back@im.uu.se

Abstract

The paper deals with engagement with information technology in public space by comparing it to how street performers deal with similar situations. One key example is presented. In this example, the importance of the difference between street-as-street and street-as-stage is presented, and the unease or embarrassment, this causes the audience is discussed.

Author Keywords

Street performance; engagement; embarrassment; public place

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation: Misc.

Introduction

The urban street landscape is a malleable space, used for multiple purposes and shared between people that use it differently. As information technology is increasingly brought into focus in our everyday environment, we can expect it to play a role also in the various practices in the urban landscape. We are particularly interested in supporting disruptive and playful practices, as a means of empowerment in everyday life.

**Example:
Arkadia Trying to Get an Anchor**

Arkadia is setting up his equipment. The people who are to become his 'anchor' walk past. The performer has not yet noticed them (or at least not acknowledged that he has).

The performer makes a sound (a combination of laughter and applauds) on his sound system. The potential 'anchors' stop and turn around to watch.

However, subjecting oneself to being the first revolutionary is endeavouring and embarrassing. In this paper, we look into how street performers engage with their audience as a way to re-shape public space into a scene, and in particular on how audiences respond and co-create the scene. The work builds on previous studies of street performers in Covent Garden [3,4], studies of crowds and spectators [10,11], as well as practitioner knowledge from within the field of street performance [2,9,12]. Most of this work focuses on the performers. In this article, we instead focus on how audiences react and respond to the performer.

Usually, the (pedestrian) street is used for certain purposes, like walking, window-shopping and talking to friends. Performers, on the other hand, use the street for something out of the ordinary, creating a stage to perform a show. If someone decides to stop and watch that show they are, together with the performer and the rest of the audience, creating a new use of that street. They socially construct a stage for the performer to perform on. This can be tied to an understanding of physical space as being socially constructed [6,7,8]. Based in Goffman [5], "embarrassment has to do with unfulfilled expectations". When a participant senses what *ought* to be appropriate, even though it does not occur, this can create a feeling of unease or embarrassment. This happens with the first members of the audience, the ones who are among the first to stop to watch that show. These frequently seem to be uncomfortable, or embarrassed, as there is yet no common understanding of the street as a stage. At this time, the street *ought* to be used for walking or other street activities. Later, when the audience starts forming, the people who stop instead become part of a group, and the space becomes more easily understood

as a temporary stage. This behaviour can be compared to other work, primarily on public displays, where people attracting more people has been referred to as the honeypot effect [1]. Unlike public displays, the street performers can interact directly with their audience, and not only through a set interface.

The reported study uses an ethnographic approach, meeting with, observing, interviewing and to some extent working with street performers. To be able to study the actual shows in detail, audio and video recordings have been made from several occasions. In this article the focus is on only one specific video recording, used as an example to inform the reader.

A 'Typical' Performance

There are different types of shows, but most of them follow a similar basic structure. A typical performance starts with the performer setting up. Already at this point the performer makes noises, such as holding a monologue, playing music, or honking a horn. The space that is intended to become a stage is marked out, and the first curious people slow down to see what is happening. Next, the performer connects with an 'anchor', the first secured audience member. As the anchor and the continued performance attracts the interest of more and more people, the next step is to form an 'edge', the first full line of audience. At this point, the performer initiates the real performance, the main part of the show, moving towards a finale and finally delivering 'hat-lines' (talking about being paid). When the finale is concluded, the hat is passed around. In this paper, we focus on the methods used to get the first audience to stop (securing 'the anchor') and the first formation of a 'real' audience (forming 'the edge'),

As the performer turn away and continue to notice other people they stay on, this goes on for 30 seconds, after which he turns back to them saying "I have to do something…"

The performer puts down his ropes (to form the stage), while the potential anchors stay and watch. As he finishes, he turn to his audience (or rather to where there would be an audience if they had gathered yet), saying with a loud voice:

and on how the audience handles the uncomfortable situation of *maybe* watching a show.

An example: Arkadia in Stockholm

This example is a show with a street performer named 'Arkadia'. The performance was recorded in the Old Town of Stockholm on a day when several performers decided to go out together. In the recordings, some of the performers are visible watching this show. This is unusual in the common decision to go together, but as a few places are seen as the best, it is not uncommon for several performers to end up in the same spot.

Getting the Anchor

The first interesting observation in this example is that Arkadia makes two attempts at creating an anchor. The first fails, and the second succeed. In both situations, there is a group of two, in the first a male and a female in their twenties, in the second two female teenagers. Both times, the (potential) audience members walk past the spot of the performance, gradually slowing down while matching the speed to their company. They eventually stop about five meters away from the performer. The performer has put ropes on the ground, marking his planned stage area, and both groups stop a couple of meters away from the ropes. At the time of stopping, the performer has not yet contacted them.

In the first (failed) attempt, the performer approaches the audience by nodding and waving to them. He then raises his voice and presents to the generic (but yet fictive) audience: "Ladies and gentlemen, in a couple of minutes on this very place [short pause] a show is about to begin." This is when one of the potential anchors turns around (slowly as to see if the other will follow) and walks away.

In the second (succeeding) attempt, the performer (while talking loud for himself) says that a show is about to begin in a couple of minutes. Right after, he turns to the group that already has stopped, looks at them and says: "Oh, hello, where are you from?"

There seems to be two main differences between the two situations: First, in the successful attempt, the performer has already stated that the show has not yet started and that it will take a couple of minutes, before he engages in social interaction. This group is thus informed about what is going on before engaging with the performer. Furthermore, in the succeeding attempt the audience is forced into social interaction by answering a question. In the failed attempt, they do not interact with the performer apart from a slight nod, acknowledging that they are watching him.

Forming the Edge

Once the anchor is in place people seem to be more willing to stop, and the performer does not give everyone personal attention. Still, similar interactions to the previous more detail examples occur. Most people stop by gradually slowing down from walking, rather than stopping completely and resolute. Very few move right up to the performance, but rather stay some distance away. A common behaviour is to stop to watch while pretending to do something else. In other video recordings, we found groups of people window-shopping on the opposite side of the (walking) street, looking a little bit into the window but mostly at the performance, as an uncommitted way to watch the show. When these individuals were approached by the performer, who typically would ask them to move closer, most would either do as they were asked or leave the performance altogether. A third type of

– I'm going to try to get those laughs for real.

(Raising his voice)

– Ladies and gentlemen, in a couple of minutes on this very place [short pause] a show is about to begin.

[Speech goes on to describe what is going to happen]

The performer start this speech turned towards the anchors part of the invisible audience and turned around towards the left during it. On the word 'about', the potential anchors move away, starting with the male, who starts to turn his head as the word 'place' is uttered.

audience members stayed back but was still committed to watching the show. These people stayed in place when they were asked to come closer, but still interact by shaking their heads in response to the request.

The Semi-Audience as a Performance

What we see from the examples above is that there is a performance aspect to being an audience in the street. As someone just walking by a street performance the act of joining an audience, and thereby helping to treat the street as a stage rather than a street, is out of the ordinary and draws attention. Hence, the act of watching may become uncomfortable. It is unclear how this should be done, as the street is not what it *ought* to be [5]. This is particularly true for the early audience that are watching a show that does not yet exist.

In the video material, three different 'levels' of audience can be discerned. The 'first row' is the people standing by the rope. They actively perform being the audience and will interact with the performer. The 'second row', standing further behind, consists of people who have not yet decided to stay or move on. They are clearly watching the show but are less committed to it. Finally, the 'lurkers' stand in the background. They acknowledge there is a performance going on, but are unwilling to participate. In order to stay out of being an audience, they move in and out of focusing on the performance. The participation model sketched here has similarities to the 'honeypot effect' documented for public interactive screens, and the levels of engagement can be compared to the different modes of engagement with those displays (direct interaction, focal awareness, and peripheral awareness) [1]. The engagement in the performance and the physical proximity of the audience to the performer

seems to be related. Where an audience member in the first row can be talked to, joked with and so on, the people behind are harder to get to interact. This is an area that could be further explored in future work.

References

[1] Brignull, H. and Rogers, Y. Enticing people to interact with large public displays in public spaces. *Proc. INTERACT*, (2003), 17–24.

[2] Cellini, J. *The Art of Street Performing*. 2004.

[3] Gardair, C., Healey, P.G.T., and Welton, M. Performing places. *Proc. Creativity and Cognition*, ACM (2011), 51–60.

[4] Gardair, C. Assembling Audiences. 2013.

[5] Goffman, E. Embarrassment and social organization. *American Journal of Sociology*, (1956), 264–271.

[6] Goffman, E. The presentation of self in everyday life. 1959. *Garden City, NY*, (2002).

[7] Harrison, S. and Dourish, P. Re-place-ing Space: The Roles of Place and Space in Collaborative Systems. *Proc. CSCW*, ACM (1996), 67–76.

[8] Harrison, S. and Tatar, D. Places: people, events, loci–the relation of semantic frames in the construction of place. *CSCW 17*, 2-3 (2008), 97–133.

[9] Hustle, D., Wells, J.E., and Gazzo. *The Art of Krowd Keeping*. Penguin Magic, 2006.

[10] Reeves, S., Benford, S., O'Malley, C., and Fraser, M. Designing the Spectator Experience. *Proc. CHI*, ACM (2005), 741–750.

[11] Reeves, S., Sherwood, S., and Brown, B. Designing for crowds. *Proc. NordiCHI*, (2010), 393–402.

[12] Talksalot, J. *To Lure With Spectacle and Our Mysterious Society*. Leaping Lizard Publishing, Orlando, FL, 2007.