

Work in Progress: Audience Engagement and an 'Aesthetic of Unfinish' in Richard Schechner's *Imagining O* (2011/12)

This article examines what Richard Schechner called 'dispersed performance' in his 2011-2012 production *Imagining O*. Performed under Schechner's direction at the University of Kent, Canterbury, in June 2011, and re-imagined for the 2012 International Festival of Theatre in Kerala, India, *Imagining O* was an immersive exploration of two texts – Pauline Reage's erotic fantasy *The Story of O* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, focusing specifically on the character of Ophelia. The Canterbury production was presented as a 'work in progress', a term used to suggest a yet to be completed performance made developmentally or prematurely available for public viewing. However, I will argue that this work also represented a form of performance that is inherently 'unfinished', embracing the 'work in progress' as an aesthetic and dramaturgic principle and not just a practical excuse.

Imagining O invited the audience to find their own pathway through the performance; they were in charge of their place in the space, and though sometimes guided, participants could choose their proximity and position. In some instances interaction was demanded, and various levels of agency, intimacy, and improvisation were manifest in the encounter. By presenting this work as 'unfinished', and embracing an aesthetic of 'unfinish' within the structural, dramaturgical, and spatial composition of the work, *Imagining O* required the audience to collaboratively generate the performance text. Being 'unfinished' may imply a deficiency, with connotations of failure to complete or as being in need of improvement, but the term is used here to suggest an availability of potential and possibility.

The idea of an aesthetic based on an understanding of the 'unfinished' has previously been discussed in relation to digital media (Lunenfeld) and the relationship of the real and the virtual (Fenske). In his essay 'Unfinished Business', which appears in the book *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays for New Media*, Peter Lunenfeld declares the digital aesthetic to be an 'aesthetic of unfinish', for the 'business of the computer is always unfinished' (2000: 7). Lunenfeld suggests that the computer will make us face our fear of unfinished business and celebrate an 'aesthetic of unfinish'. Celebrating the unfinished is 'to laud process rather than goal - to open up a third thing that is not a resolution, but rather a state of suspension' (2000: 8). While Lunenfeld's aesthetic is presented in relation to new media texts and digital interfaces, it holds value as a frame through which to understand the process and emergence of immersive and participatory performance practice.

To explain the 'aesthetic of the unfinish' he addresses the threads of story, space, and time as accessed through new media interfaces, characterising each as unfinished in various ways. 'Unfinished spaces' refers to the virtual realities and on-line matrices that are intimately navigated by users as they drift through virtual space. By 'unfinished stories' Lunenfeld refers to a blurring of the boundary between text and context. Closely linked to our sense of narrative is our perception of time and our natural tendency to 'narratise' experience. Lunenfeld suggests that the shift in narrative toward an aesthetic

of unfinish alters our sense of time and affects even our sense of death, for the inevitability of plot is the move towards death. The question is posed, 'Will loosening the plot – as the aesthetic of unfinish implies – affect this trajectory toward mortality?' (2000: 20). It is this dream of avoiding death that Lunenfeld suggests evokes the urge to overcome the fear of unfinished business.

The texts addressed by Lunenfeld manifest in digital technology as structurally 'open', a concept most clearly examined in Umberto Eco's revolutionary *The Open Work*. Eco details an artistic form employed in works that appeal 'to the initiative of the individual performer, and hence, offer themselves not as finite works but as 'open' works, which are brought to their conclusion by the performer at the same time as he experiences them on an aesthetic plane' (1989: 3). Eco claims that any work of art is never really 'closed', as every work of art is open to a variety of possible readings and is the source of an infinite number of experiences (1989: 24). The 'open work' however may still be considered structurally whole. Eco also proposes the notion of 'works in movement', which 'characteristically consist of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units' (1989: 12). Works in movement are artistic products which present an 'intrinsic mobility, a kaleidoscopic capacity' (1989: 12).

The 'unfinished' work is not simply 'open' but is in process, a 'work in movement': while the open work provokes active interpretation, the unfinished work or work in movement requires interactive collaboration. *Imagining O* invited audience members to collaboratively build the performance text through their encounter with the performers, space, and dramaturgy. In this sense, *Imagining O* followed the principles of 'Environmental Theatre', a concept suggested by Schechner in 1968 to describe his work with The Performance Group. Environmental theatre refers to participatory performance practice that uses space in accordance with its own properties, and is characterized by Schechner's through his 6 axioms: (1) the theatrical event is a set of related transactions; (2) all the space is used for both performance and for audience; (3) the theatrical event can take place in both 'transformed space' and in 'found space'; (4) focus is flexible and variable; (5) all production elements speak in their own language and are equally valuable; (6) the text need not be the start or goal of a production, indeed, there need be no text at all (1968: 41-64).

Imagining O was certainly environmental as broadly defined by Schechner, particularly in its treatment of classic texts, audience participation, and performance space. However, it also involved what Schechner called 'dispersed performance', with many performance groupings taking place simultaneously so that individual audience members followed different trajectories through various performance events. At all times the audience were acknowledged, their contributions both invited and accepted, for as Schechner asserts, 'Participation is legitimate only if it influences the tone and possibly the outcome of the performance; only if it changes the rhythms of the performance. Without this potential for change participation is just one more ornamental, illusionistic device; a treachery perpetrated on the audience while discussed as being on behalf of the audience' (1994: 77).

To enable the audience to instigate change, the content of the performance has to be perceived as unfinished until the moment of encounter, as

structurally incomplete and dramaturgically in process. The notion of an 'aesthetic of unfinish' builds on, and contributes to, Schechner's concept of 'environmental theatre' with focus on audience collaboration and the emergent performance text. The following case study re-perceives Schechner's environmental theatre through a lens of an aesthetic of 'unfinish', and explores the 'unfinished' elements of *Imagining O* with particular focus on the dimensions of body, space and story.



Figure 1: *Imagining O*, Kerala, Feb 2012. Dir. Richard Schechner. Photo: Ken Plas

Imagining O

Directed by Richard Schechner with Assistant Director Benjamin Mosse and Movement Director Roanna Mitchell, the show involved what Schechner labelled 'dispersed performance': it included ensemble performances with the entire cast, small group performances that took place simultaneously with the audience split and moving between groups, and individual performances that audience members could choose to encounter. A disturbing figure in a wedding dress with the head of an owl was a constant reference point throughout the work, facilitating audience participation and guiding their focus. The piece explored themes of subjugation, loss, addiction, power, submission, sexuality and vulnerability. It presented a vision of Ophelia commanding her audience as the queen she would never become (Figure 1), then moved into a reading from the *Story of O*, that was ironically comic as the storytellers delighted in the naughtiness of the text, accompanied by a soulful saxophone and a cast of dancers whose subtle sexuality reflected the ambiguity of adolescence (Figure 2). The audience was then divided into six groups, and each group was lead to a series of three small scenes – there were six scenes taking place simultaneously and each group visited three of the six. Then the audience and all the performers came back for dramatic group scene in which O and Ophelia inhabited the same space and confronted their madness, forced to face their past, their choices and their sense of worth and worthlessness.

At this point the audience were asked to complete one of three tasks in what came to be called the 'gate-keeping scene' that would reward them with a map of the next performance space. The second half of the performance left the audience to navigate, in their own time, various dispersed scenes. In India, this part of the performance took place in an entirely different building: lit with candles and mostly open to the night, the building had many small rooms, pathways, nooks (Figure 3). In this space, the audience were invited to become part of the performance, to directly participate. One performer invited participants to write down something they had lost which she would read, acknowledge, and in return gave them a folded paper flower with her own intimate text enclosed. Another performer, blindfolded, led individuals through the space, whispering intimate nothings from the texts in their ears. Other performances in this building were less directly interactive, but here the audience were acknowledged, looked at, spoken to, touched, enticed, and the performance shared. The show ended outside, the audience standing around a river, in which many 'Ophelias' drowned many times (Figure 4).



Figure 2: *Imagining O*, Canterbury, July 2011. Dir. Richard Schechner. Photo: Ken Plas

Unfinished Bodies

Thematically, the work explored the way in which these two characters, O and Ophelia, were in their own ways 'unfinished' and their bodies made open to the world. While not necessarily fundamental to the work in progress

aesthetic, the notion of the unfinished body offers an extension of the aesthetic of unfinish as described by Lunenfeld, as it moves out of the virtual and into the material. The unfinished body manifests in *Imagining O* both within the content of the texts and in the realization of these texts via the performers' bodies. Ophelia is on the cusp of maturity, unfinished in terms of identity and sexuality, her growth and direction shaped by political and familial power structures. O chooses to make her body available, to open it to the world and submit to the control of others: 'What her lover wanted of her was simple: that she be constantly and immediately accessible. It wasn't enough for him to know that she was: to her accessibility every obstacle had to be eliminated [...]' (Pauline Réage, 1972: 77).

O submits to the rules of the men who enslave her: 'Your hands are not your own, neither are your breasts, nor, above all, is any one of the orifices of your body, which we are at liberty to explore and into which we may, whenever we so please, introduce ourselves' (Pauline Réage, 1972: 25). Hers is a body with permeable boundaries, accessible, and grotesque. In *Rabelais and his world*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the concept of the body in a Rabelaisian novel:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separate from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits [...]. The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world (1984: 26-27).

In a different way, Ophelia and O are both at the same time open and reaching out, and 'blended with the world'.

The performers explored this 'unfinish' as manifest psychologically and physically, and characterisation was never complete but was distributed, dispersed, and perpetually unfinished. Performers moved in and out of both roles, O and Ophelia, with facets of each character represented by different performers. In various ways, the performer's bodies were made available to the audience. From the outset, the private was made public, the performers bodies were exposed, and personal space was dissolved. Audience members could rub moisturizer onto the naked back of a female performer, brush another's hair, and 'spin the wheel' to determine a body part and a paint colour a performer would then explore. Within the 'peep room', a wooden construction inhabited by performers with spy-holes for the audience to look through, a performer privately prepared her body for public consumption, putting on make-up and perfume, doing her hair, dressing and undressing.

The performer's bodies were, to use Umberto Eco's phrase, 'in movement', presenting a 'kaleidoscopic capacity' to suggest themselves in continually renewed aspects to the consumer (1989: 12). They were grotesque, made available, open, intrinsically mobile and perpetually unfinished. At the conclusion of the production, the performers proclaim, 'I was not born, I was written', echoing Simone de Beauvoir's declaration that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (1949: 281). Judith Butler, commenting on de Beauvoir's statement argues 'If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself

is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end' (1990: 33). Through the characters of Ophelia and O, *Imagining O* explored this constructing, with the performer-character bodies in a continuous process of unfinish, the always becoming-woman.



Figure 3: *Imagining O*, Kerala, Feb 2012. Dir. Richard Schechner. Photo: Ken Plas

Unfinished space

The audience-performer encounter began with the entry into a shared space. Two or more bodies meet and the proxemic, kinaesthetic relationship between them initiates the interactive exchange, preceding text, speech, and story. Richard Schechner articulates his understanding of the participatory space:

To borrow from Mao, the audience is the water in which the fish, the performers, swim; when the audience advances, the performers should fall back. The audience must be permitted to control the space, to actually sense that it is their space' (1971: 73-74).

Schechner's vision of the performance space as dynamic and in flux explains the unfinished performance space of *Imagining O*. It was under constant negotiation; individuals and groups would lay claim to certain territories at various points, and then these territories would shift, dissolve and open. Although in the second half of the piece individual audience members were

given the opportunity to interact with a single performer, there was no private space. These 'intimate' encounters took place in full view of other spectators and so the individual participant would 'perform' their reactions and interactions with the performer for others who were watching. Similarly, the performers were always spectators, viewing both the audience's responses and the encounters of other performers.

The *Imagining O* audience was invited to navigate their own journey, in charge of their position and proximity in relation to the performers, within a dynamic and unfinished performance space. Peter Lunenfeld uses the term 'unfinished space' to explain the particular experience of 'drifting' that users experience as they navigate virtual space. Lunenfeld clarifies that the 'digital derive' is 'ever in a state of unfinish, because there are always more links to create, more sites springing up every day, and even that which has been catalogued will be redesigned by the time you return to it' (2000: 10). The dispersal of performance within *Imagining O* epitomized this understanding of unfinished space, with the performance environment constantly changing and responding to the navigation of participants who, as they direct their path through the work, enact a type of derive. *Imagining O* was not unique in this sense, but can be related to 'immersive theatre' that includes the work of Punchdrunk, Shunt, and Dreamthinkspeak. What was unusual in *Imagining O* however, was the extent to which audience engagement varied throughout the show. In many sections, audience navigation was unrestrained, but there were other examples of structured audience participation, including a ticketing process that enable audience members to access different performances, one-to-one performances, a 'peep room', and the required undertaking of certain 'tasks'.

To accommodate and encourage this diversity of participatory modes, the performance space was in constant state of flux. The rules of the space were continually adapted, and the boundaries redefined. Heightening this sense of unfinish and the instability of the space, tv screens, computer screens, and projections littered the buildings, showing both pre-recorded films of the performers in scenarios that dramaturgically extended the exploration of the two texts beyond the here and now of the performance, and the live feed of both performers and audience. Live and recorded sound was used to pierce the fabric of material space, and 'listening stations' were offered with headphones and pre-recorded sound clips. The intermediality of the performance environment further emphasized an infinitely 'plastic' performance space. Abstract expressionist Hans Hoffman, in his recognition of a 'plastic' space', defines plasticity as the transference of three dimensional experience to two-dimensions (1967: 72). The intermediality of film, projected live feed, and mediated sound enables a four-dimensional experience in three-dimensional space.

The concept of plasticity has been utilised in a range of practical and theoretical fields, from Hegelian philosophy, cognitive psychology, expressionist painting, and telecommunication theory. The adjective 'plastic', as explained by philosopher Catherine Malabou, actually means two things: 'on the one hand, to be susceptible to changes of form, malleable [...] and on the other hand, having the power to bestow form, the power to mould, as in the expressions "plastic surgeon" and "plastic arts"' (2000: 203). So 'Plasticity [...] describes the nature of that which is at once capable of receiving and

producing form' (2000: 203). *Imagining O* was shaped by the space in which it was performed, the architecture molding the work and determining the audience's journey. The architecture was performative, and the performance space determined only through audience encounter. In the large group scene in the middle of the production, a figurative and literal 'tipping point', the performers undertook choreographed movement in and around the audience members, with the self-positioning of audience members, and the force of the individual performer's movement, demanding a renegotiation of the fluid performance space.

The term plasticity is most commonly used to suggest flexibility or elasticity. In her introduction to the concept of Plasticity within philosophy, Malabou argues that, in its first instance,

Plasticity is clearly intrinsic to the art of "modeling" and [...] by extension, plasticity signifies the general aptitude for development [...] Plasticity is, in another context, characterised by "suppleness" [...], as in the case of the "plasticity" of the brain, yet it means as well the ability to evolve and adapt (2000: 204).

For the performance space to be able to evolve and adapt, it has to be considered, to a degree, unstable or unfinished, inherently performed, and completed only in the moment of performance. As performers, there was an understanding that the space was flexible and would have to be improvised through a process of give and take. Hoffman contends that plasticity derives from tension between forces and counter-forces, what he called 'push, pull' (1967: 51), and the unfinished space of *Imagining O* was established through this tension.

The production opened with performers dispersed throughout the building, sitting with their underwear around their ankles, and verbally playing with a single line of text. In both Canterbury and Kerala, the audience took advantage of the stasis of the performers to stake their claim over the space, exploring nooks and corners, and testing the limits of their freedom in the space. In India, the first half of the performance took place in a large warehouse-like building and audience members surrounded, challenged and invaded the solitude of the performers; shocked when the performers jumped to life and reclaimed the space. Later, in the dispersed 'one-to-one' performances, the 'tension between forces and counter-forces' existed not between audience and performer, but between the dynamics of movement, pace, and trajectory of the various dispersals. The space here was not static or empty, but dynamic, forceful and negotiated by both audience member and performance.



Figure 4: *Imagining O*, Kerala, Feb 2012. Dir. Richard Schechner. Photo: Ken Plas

Unfinished Stories and Emergent Text

Imagining O was structured in a way that allowed the audience to piece together moments and stories – the work offered many micro-narratives that the audience accumulated through time. In his discussion of ‘unfinished stories’, Lunenfeld focuses on the dissolving boundary between text and context that allows for the never-ending extension of the ‘paratext’, a term used by narratologist Gerard Genette (1987) to refer to the discourse and materials that refer to and contextualize the narrative, but exist outside the narrative object. The blurring of the boundary between the text and the paratext confuses the limits of where the story begins and ends. *Imagining O* blurred this boundary in numerous ways. The performance began before the audience arrived and continued after they had left. There were various films presented within the work that showed pre-recorded performances, scenes that occurred outside of the building and extended both the fictional and performance world beyond the space-time of the production. Sections were repeated; once scene was presented both as live performance and as a prerecorded film, and another scene was presented twice, with a clear pause in-between in which the actors changed clothes, had a drink or water, and

caught their breath. This was a pause too for the audience, to contemplate and reflect upon what they had seen so far.

However the dramaturgy was most noticeably 'unfinished' in its capacity to accommodate audience participation and contribution. In the second half of the show there was a much more dynamic, two-way flow of communication between performers and audience members. Here the performances were structured with some pre-scripted material, but the work was left more open, encouraging a creative and considered audience engagement. An audience member describes his experience: 'I was surprised that when I spoke to dancer, she replied. And she asked me about my father, and we had a conversation while she led me by the hand into another space' (James, 2012). Unlike the aforementioned 'gate-keeping' scene, which demanded a singular response, the 'dispersed' performance elements left space for audience members to respond in their own way and in their own time. As creative interaction developed momentum, intimate, unplanned performances would take place.

Postgraduate performer Krysta Dennis, who performed in the Indian incarnation of the production, described an unplanned encounter that became a shared ritual: after finishing her dispersal, which involved her painting her body as instructed by a small group of audience members, Krysta explained, 'I had gone to wash the paint off, ready for the final scene in the river. And one member of the group followed me to the basin, which I had not expected, and we had this silent exchange as I washed' (Dennis, 2012). The key word here is exchange, and by embracing an aesthetic of unfinish, *Imagining O* created the possibility of an exchange that was emergent. The emergent manifests as more than the sum of its parts, and an aesthetic of unfinish brings an audience into an emergent relationship with the performance that not only involves interpretation but also dialogue, movement, action and reaction. A complex, kinaesthetic system was established that involved the performer responding to the audience member's signals.

Some interactions involved the audience offering textual content, for example, in one dispersed performance audience members could write down the name of something they had lost and this text would become the basis of dialogue with a performer. In *Canterbury*, participants were led into an unlit room and invited to disclose intimate secrets about themselves in the anonymity of the dark: some participants were uncomfortable and left the space, others observed in silence, while many revelled in the opportunity to relate the themes of the production to their own experiences. Other interactions involved non-verbal communications – eye contact, touch, proxemics. Performers responded to audience reactions and an intimate feedback, feedforward communication system was established. Performance artist Adrian Howells describes this kind of relationship within his own work. He explains intimacy as manifesting in his works by 'eye contact, how long it is held, and the distance of it; by physical proximity, which often doesn't involve any touch at all; the quality and experience of silence; shared breathing rhythms; the sharing of personal information, confessions and secrets' (in Zerihan, p. 36). It was through the acknowledgment of these details, these often spontaneous somatic reactions, as well as through deliberate and overt participation, that an emergent performance text was generated.

The 'Unfinished' Work

An aesthetic of unfinish positions the artwork as a negotiation, bringing the participant into an emergent relationship with performers and texts, that involves not only interpretation but physical action and reaction. Audience presence, movement, proximity and verbal contribution is captured and re-presented within the medium of the performance, and such contributions cannot be prefigured or anticipated. The ideal of emergent exchange, facilitated by an aesthetic of unfinish, reconciles the problematic tension between seeing the audience as individuals, and seeing the audience as a collective. Individually, audience members engage in complex processes of exchange but the way that such exchanges manifest, effect other exchanges and contribute to a larger overall mechanism.

The idea of environmental or 'open' performance may be positioned within the field of Relational Art and recognized by Nicholas Bourriaud's notion of Relational Aesthetics. Relational art 'takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and private symbolic private space' (Bourriaud, 2006:160), and functions via encounters and meetings, rather than through objects. Claire Bishop describes relational art as 'work that is openended, interactive, and resistant to closure, often appearing to be "work-in-progress" rather than a completed object' (2004: 52). Unfinished performance may be considered 'relational' in that it is interactive, functioning via encounters and meetings. It also positions performance itself as in flux, rather than as merely open to interpretation and reassessment.

However, the interpretation of the 'unfinished' as an aesthetic avoids issues of community and the collective production of meaning that is fundamental to Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics. Relation art, as described by Bishop, is 'entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience. Moreover, this audience is envisaged as a community' (2004: 54). Bourriaud suggests that artists whose work derives from relational aesthetics initiate 'modes of social exchange, interaction with the viewer inside the aesthetic experience he or she is offered, and processes of communication in their concrete dimensions as tools that can be used to bring together individuals and human groups' (2004: 165). An aesthetic of unfinish somewhat inverts these priorities, bringing individuals together and provoking audience interaction so as to explore emergent dramaturgy and evoke an aesthetic experience on both a social and an individual level; the bringing together of a community is not the end aim. It also avoids issues of value with regards to interpretation and critical distance versus interaction and participation.

Imagining O first took place in Canterbury as a 'work in progress', perhaps a little premature and unpolished, however it embraced this instability and 'unfinish' as a dramaturgic principle. Bodies were made available and characterization dispersed, the performance space evolved, and narrative emerged: the performance text was a process of negotiation between performer, participant, text, and environment. An aesthetic of unfinish leaves open the possibility for multiple, varied, spontaneous, and culturally mediated responses, and does not, as Ranciere warns, 'presuppose an identity between cause and effect' (2009: 13). *Imagining O* made space for both contemplation and contribution, intertwining relational effects, dramaturgic

strategies and audience participation to open up the performance to unforeseen possibilities. Employing an unfinished dramaturgy, *Imagining O* cultivated contingency and emphasized the emergent nature of performance.

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Biography

Rosemary Klich is Lecturer in Drama and Theatre at the University of Kent. Her co-written book *Multimedia Performance* was published in 2012 and she has published articles and chapters in the fields of postdramatic theatre, intermediality and new media performance. Her current research includes the investigation of interactive spectatorship throughout the last century and contemporary examples of interactive practice including games, new media and intimate performance. She is a member of the 'Intermediality in Theatre and Performance' working group of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) and the Centre for Cognition, Kinaesthetics and Performance at the University of Kent.