

**OLU TAIWO**

## **Re-conceptualizing Street Arts in a Digital Age: Knowing the world through embodied cognition and social media**

### **Abstract**

In this paper I will explore some pedagogical shifts in the practice of street art at a global level. In particular, I will examine how managing the changes in social demography, with its continuing shift from passivity to interactivity, have changed the behaviour and sensibility of what we expect and want to experience from a social event.

### **Re-conceptualising Street Arts**

The competencies and skill sets necessary for a street artist are wide ranging. In order to work effectively in public spaces, practitioners must remain attuned to their perceptual faculties in order to 'look', 'collect' and 'store' data sets; in other words, to observe facts about the public context in question. These data sets are grouped within regions that connect to a dynamic relationship of vectors that symbolise the relationship between the three points of a triumvirate: the artist, the audience and the environment.

Data sets are specific skills that facilitate competencies for a developing street artist. These sets include the following considerations:

- The artist - with respect to pace and behaviour at a specific location, they need to assess what the band width of normality is as well as understanding the distinctions between how we create fascinating events through: mobile and static worlds through installations, walk-a-bout characters, or mobile animations and theatrical performances.
- The audience - an awareness of the public as a space creator with competencies in the physical skills of non-verbal communication in order to assess how to devise degrees of audience participation appropriate to the piece
- The environment - since the public space is a product of social activity and public space is multipurpose, information arranged from data collection from the location's repérage becomes imperative. Repérage is a French word that signifies a special detailed anthropological, historical and sociological analysis that maps of the location in a space.

Other sets are created that are secondary to these regions due to their symbiotic interactions via the vectors. The artist has to process these data sets by identifying patterns, visualising scenes and devising events based on the knowledge, models

and creative visions of their practice. Raw, unprocessed facts about a particular artwork – which are underpinned by a specific socio-historical context as well as the artist's intentions -- have to be processed, manipulated and organized into information that is expressed as a creative public event. While outlining a detailed description of the competencies and skill sets that are required of a street artist is beyond the scope of this paper, it remains clear that digital social media has radically shifted the impact of how embodied skills are understood critically as well as how they are disseminated and acquired globally. This makes street art the perfect domain in which to interrogate some of the issues surrounding digital pedagogy.

How can we reconceptualise the relationship between knowing the world through embodied cognition and online audio-visual content with the aid of some new artistic dimensions? By this I mean, because we, the public, have creative access to time-based artistic dimensions (4AD) and interactive artistic dimensions (5AD), is it time to rethink how we can gain embodied knowledge?

These new artistic dimensions shift form from what is fixed in temporal space, to fixed networks and strategic behaviours; to what Steve Benford calls 'Trajectories of interaction'. Human computer interactions HCI, provides an evolving context where fixed labyrinthine networks control the trajectories of interactivity but not the individual local experience (Taiwo, 2011: 5).

When practices are disseminated in new ways as a result of the interactive frameworks via web 2 structures within the Internet, they help to facilitate new trajectories of interaction. There are an increasing number of websites available for the distribution of videos showing researched practice using social media. These video demonstrations can make the embodied knowledge of a researcher explicit, with video techniques being framed pedagogically in the second person. Social media may thus be used to disseminate technical strategies and creative practices, which straddle cultural, intercultural and transcultural frameworks. This reflects an ambition to acquire new skills and understandings with regards to most embodied techniques, which can facilitate the performance of particular movement skills within contemporary artistic practice. Cultural fluidity and flexibility with respect to ethnic and indigenous associations are of course nothing new; however, there is a quickening of this hybridizing activity, in addition to which there is an increase concerning the factors that make up a performance matrix with respect to an individual's practice. Desire to practice occurs with inspiration and provocation, motivating us to engage with rigorous reflective effort in pursuit of acquiring, developing and employing techniques for performance and political action. Consequently, watching audio-visual examples of practice online may enhance the tuition by a master on a particular subject as well as provoking us to take actions – both performative and political.

**Politics: Embodying the role of social media**

I delivered a keynote lecture in Slovenia at the ANA DESETNICA in July 2013. A few days later, I was invited to an open panel debate entitled 'Art and Demonstration: The Role of Street Theatre in Mass Protest'. I was interviewed straight after the debate to comment on Slovenian National TV. This was regarding the public's creative response to political developments concerning corruption at the heart of government as well as anger at the austerity measures currently gripping the country. Mass demonstrations were triggered right across the country with a strong focus on street arts. What was interesting with regards to social media was that in response to the events, the now Ex-Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa, who has been convicted for corruption, tweeted: 'protesters are nothing more than Zombies!' The public outrage triggered a creative response where protesters dressed as Zombies and with masks on the streets.



Figure 2: Street protesters in Slovenia's zombie-led uprising hits Ljubljana, in response to the Ex-Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jans's tweet. Photo by Bojan Stepančič, February 2013.

The response of the street protesters is a classic example of holding a mirror up to the government's political assumptions where social media mobilised a speedy response from an internet savvy public. In the interview, I tried to articulate and guard against a need to turn art into a function for political propaganda. I wanted to highlight the sovereign nature of art practice, which at best holds paradoxes providing parables to facilitate debate. The point here is that art does not need a role, it can have one of many: to sell a product, a political idea or a service or event. Essentially, however, art is an expression of humanity and that is its power.

### Letter to the World III: A performance in Cardiff

After performing at the World Stage Design 2013 in a work called *Letter to the World III*, I reflected on the impact of current technology as it is underpinned by social media and what effects this might have on social networks and professional practice. This minimalist outdoor/indoor movement video installation piece was choreographed by Chase Angier (USA) and designed by Marketa Fantova (USA) with Evelyne LeBlanc-Roberge (Canada). It was good to be focusing on learning new material and to be directed within an ensemble. The challenge however, was the fact that Chase, the Choreographer, works in the USA at Alfred University upstate New York. It became clear that our solution would be for me to learn the piece via vimeo and to have regular Skype meetings to clarify any issues concerning content and procedure. All the videos were framed in the second person and addressed to me directly with a substitute performer performing my part. The piece was designed as a multi-site specific video/installation/performance event performed in three stages at three different locations. First was at a bus stop, outside the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama where the showcases and conference were held.



Figure 3: *Letter to the World III*, part 1: in a bus stop in Cardiff, WSD 2013. Olu Taiwo is on the right in this image. Photograph by Evelyne LeBlanc-Roberge.

The performative elements in the piece intended to communicate the concerns of the three artists: Chase, Marketa and Evelyne. The performance addressed our changing relationship to public spaces and how we hold on to digital devices that record audio-visual content, interfacing with our corporeal interactions.



Each performer held a white box with a video of performers dancing, depicting a particular mood in poetic language. At the bus stop, we held, in our boxes, our different moods characterized by the style and expression of different pasts associated with the recorded video played on five separate iPads. Our physical performances in the three parts were reflective and minimalist with a touch of understated melancholy. It was interesting to witness from the perspective of a performer how some audience members would gravitate to the videos playing inside the boxes as if to find the secret to our pensive moods, while others would stand back and witness the complex yet minimalist choreography with its paradoxically unified language. The majority ironically took out their mobile smartphones to take moving and still pictures of the scene.



Figure 4: *Letter to the World III*, part 2: in Bute Park, Cardiff, WSD 2013. Image by Evelyne LeBlanc-Roberge.



Figure 5: Video playing in my character's box, as seen in *Letter to the World III*. Image by Evelyne LeBlanc-Roberge.

The second part of the performance took place at Bute Park, behind the main building of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. Individually, we performed on five square white mats pegged down to the grass. In this configuration we highlighted a performative paradox by moving together in close proximity in a synchronised way while simultaneously appearing distant and in virtual disconnection as our boxes played the same looped video. We moved between designated postures, separate and trapped within self-imposed, clinically austere environments. The audio-visual metaphors created through our work represented how we have by-passed the natural tributaries of normative embodied social interaction. This articulated the potential dangers of close proximity that become detached when interfacing with each other in an embodied poetic manner.

The last and final part of the performance installation took place in the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama's café atrium, which was the most difficult but poignant aspect of the installation. This spatial arrangement highlighted the act of viewing the viewer and being viewed as performative. Although this was evident in all three parts, it was most evident during this final presentation.



Figure 6: *Letter to the World III*, part 3: at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama's café atrium, Cardiff, WSD 2013. Image by Evelyne LeBlanc-Roberge.

There is an irony about the audio-visual metaphor behind the piece *Letter to the World III*, which is that the five white tables were like oases of calm; objects of design for melancholic contemplation in amongst the hustle and bustle of the café atrium. People would stop and look into the box not fully aware that they had become an intricate part of what is being read for other members of the audience further afield. The dimensions of each of the video boxes were determined by a key icon for digital communication, the iPad; this further enhanced ergonomic familiarity.

### **Digital Research in the Humanities and Arts**

Working virtually across the Internet is fast becoming the norm for distance collaboration, so there is nothing new about this process. However, *Letter to the World III* did highlight an interesting paradigm shift, which was the central reason for me to start a doctorate in performance philosophy in 2000. What was interesting about the piece and why I wanted to be involved was that the subject was concerned with the social trade-off between digital and biological communications, as well as how the aesthetic content of the piece was a minimalist expression of 'design' and 'movement'. However, the subject for me reinforced a deeper question, themes that we explored in the DRHA 2013 conference at Winchester this summer. The focus of the conference was the need to re-conceptualize the ways in which we engage with digital technology, in particular with regard to the speed with which we are now exposed to new devices that facilitate new behaviours. As societies around the world face fundamental ecological, demographic and economic changes, we are forced to

re-evaluate our relationship with the natural world and our digital resources. Also, as the next generation of digital natives start to design new interactive futures, the old paradigms of knowledge exchange and social interaction are making way for socialized gaming and crowd sourcing. The focus of the DRHA conference was to re-imagine new and contemporary ways for designing digital engagement through looking at possible events and social practices that lay just around the corner. An interdisciplinary process was an assumed strategy in the conference so that we could focus on how we can, using contemporary technology, map the emerging digital and social landscape. The piece *Letter to the World III*, as an aesthetic parable, offered a particular artistic lens with which to examine some of these possible innovations.

### **Labyrinthine Matrix**

Towards the end of April 2013, I directed a project for the British council and the European Union via Erasmus, which was to conduct an intensive programme based on street art involving Universities from Turkey, France and the UK. The project was instigated by the inspirational performer/producer/academic John Lee who runs the pioneering streets degree program at Winchester University. I proposed the theme 'Labyrinth' as a starting point to underpin the dramaturgy of what was to be a student devised piece under my supervision. In this project, we explored the strategies behind my current performance research, which is the creation of impromptu events that create performative experiences situated somewhere between playing acoustic and digital music as well as a subtle flash mob installed in specific socially constructed sites. The performances in this event were not 'theatrical' but were rather defined as performing a play for an invited audience. However, we did have 'theatrical elements' as we moved poetically into the social contexts in and around the City of Winchester including the high street, the Cathedral Gardens, The Brook Centre and the Abbey Gardens. Part of the process was the re-conceptualisation of how we read these public spaces. Lefebvre argues that these spaces are representational spaces, which occur as a result of cultural and sub-cultural group practice; the spatial practice of most 'inhabitants' and 'users' desire, by social necessity, to express and symbolise their shared social life. Social space is a social product, declares Lefebvre, which by its nature is intertextual:

Thus representational spaces may be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs (Lefebvre, 1994: 39).

Social networks, via social media, thus continue to create new social spaces, facilitating new metaphorical labyrinths to symbolise.





Figure 7: 'Exit Factory', a street performance devised by Turkish, French and British students. The venue here is the Cathedral Gardens, Winchester. Image by Chloe Lis.

Technically, labyrinths are distinguished from mazes, in that labyrinths have a single route towards a specific centre with twists and turns. However, in the labyrinth there are no dead end branches and therefore no choices; the entrance is the same as the exit. This can metaphorically signify contemplation, perseverance and focus. A maze however, is a puzzle in motion that is full of choices underpinned by chance, some of which lead to dead ends. Metaphorically, this refers to a complex of branching frameworks, a means through which we pass from one place to another. This is where the entrance is different from the exit. How we construct our spaces to be read and lived in can thus be subtly interrupted by inter-cultural performances that challenge what each space signifies. For this intensive program, we understood the definition of a labyrinth as a devised map tracing singular and personal pathways through a maze of potential choices. The journey of the students was focused as a group toward the central goal of producing a series of performed events where the concept of a labyrinth was used as a metaphor to explain the participant's holistic journey towards the finished product in the city centre. The construction of the group's understanding was an essential ingredient in achieving this. To be more specific, it represented a focused internal journey toward the centre of the student's experience of devising and their reflective reverse journey back out again. This was achieved by leaving a real-time reflective thread on a Facebook project page, as well as being realised through our embodied memories stored in the group's sensorium. In order to make the return journey back and forth through the labyrinthine matrix, the students were expected to keep notes, take pictures and videos every day and post them on the 'Exit Factory Facebook project page'. This was used as a way to share and critically reflect on their

learning processes, with particular focus on their transcultural experience. We posted lectures, ideas and comments in real-time. This had the effect of strengthening the bonds in the international social network.

Object as Process	Creative Practice	City Centre	Social Media
Creative Practice	The nature of practice	Creative re-invention	Personal Creative practice
City Centre	Purpose	The nature of the City	The City's web presence
Social Media	Creative program Via collaboration	Communications between subjects	The nature of Social media

Figure 8: Table showing what the Maze Matrix consisted of, including Creative practice (Production): The path taken in the maze, City Centre (Scenography): The maze and Social Media (Reflection): Laying down the reflective thread.

Considering how I learnt the movement material and the effort qualities that underpin performative presence in the piece *Letter to the World III* – as well as when we examine the artistic responses regarding the demonstrations in Slovenia or the transcultural communication involved in the intensive program in Winchester – skills of embodied cognition within the collaborative process need to start with embodied imitation; non-verbal observation and mimicry. To be more specific, we are talking about a non-verbal attunement that opens up channels of empathy with a desire to understand, respond and interact.

### **The Embodied Practice of play and Mirror Neurons**

In my practice as research, I use the critical description of a 'physical journal' to discuss the writing and rewriting effort sequences underpinned by our embodied cognition to create strategies for improvisation. This is primarily based on different cultural techniques. The definition of a 'physical journal' is: a person's embodied knowledge and memory, which requires an organisational intelligence to project their presence through a lived body. 'Physical journals' are the result of lived corporeal projections that are realized through embodied cognition. With our efforts, we can write and rewrite new performative information into our living bodily systems via our brain's neuroplasticity and the virtual processes that reflect an intentional attunement associated with a shared embodied space. As Vittorio Gallese puts it:

When we confront the intentional behaviour of others, according to my hypothesis, embodied simulation, a specific mechanism by means of which our brain/body system models its interactions with the world, generates a specific phenomenal state of "intentional attunement". This phenomenal state in turn generates a peculiar quality of familiarity with other individuals, produced by the collapse of the others' intentions into the observer's ones. Embodied simulation constitutes a crucial functional mechanism in social

cognition, and it can be neurobiologically characterized. The different mirror neuron systems represent its sub-personal instantiations. By means of embodied simulation, we do not just “see” an action, an emotion, or a sensation (Gallese, 2006: 20).

In other words, our efforts and perceptions can excite the synaptic pathways that configure our movements. Mirror neurons can underpin the actions and observations through play, utilising imagery, mime, our perceptions and our visual system, which is linked to our motor system. These systems are activated by different degrees, depending on the level of specialised embodied knowledge, both in terms of seeing someone performing a particular skill and interpersonal knowledge gained by trust and empathy.

Physically, we can critically reflect on our neuromuscular skills by observing a professional performer online as well as in the process of articulating and sequencing movement through embodied practice. We can sharpen our ability to critically reflect on neuromuscular skills by developing a kind of grammar for proficient observation, movement and practice. These include physical practices such as Alexander technique, Tai chi chuan and yoga as well as vocational practices like engineering, agriculture and nursing, where the cognitive procedural connection between knowledge and practice is vital. When describing the intentional attunement between performer and audience, it is useful to use the term ‘tele’, taken from the practice of psychodrama as conceived by Jacob Levy Moreno in 1921. His work was based on the therapeutic force of spontaneity and creativity in the labyrinth of life. ‘Tele’, which is psychological contact at a distance, can be defined here as the free emotional flow between the player in role, both physically and psychologically, via the mirror neurons of the performer and audience. This facilitates an exchange of emotional messages, a unity of action, time and space that applies to both theatre and psychodrama. To facilitate this intentional attunement, we must employ an extra daily practice to unblock issues related to our own personal mirrors in order to create a state of dynamic neutrality at the edge of potential and danger.

## **Conclusion**

Embodied observation may thus be clarified through listening to data provided by the outside world in order to collect a range of relevant facts within one’s sensorium. As artists, we need to observe the first point of call within any given contextual framework whenever we want to see and conceptualise new patterns. This may be noticed either intuitively or consciously. Contemporary audio-visual communication and digital archives can provide an excellent resource for teaching different techniques for this kind of embodied cognition, whether it is via skill acquisition or devising strategies. This method can have the effect of preserving global techniques for the future, democratising particular skill sets and improving access to embodied techniques worldwide.

## References

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## Biography

Olu Taiwo is a senior lecturer at the University of Winchester. Olu teaches in street arts, visual development and contemporary performance in a combination of real and virtual formats. He has a background in fine art, street dance, African percussion, physical theatre and martial arts. He has performed in national and international contexts pioneering concepts surrounding practice as research. This includes how practice as a research strategy can explore the nature of performance and the relationships between 'effort', 'performance' and 'performative actions' as they occur in different arenas. His aim is to interrogate 21st century interactions between body, identity, audience, street and technology in an age of globalisation through practice-led-research.