

Inside the circle: The spatial dynamics of contemporary street performance in Australia

by

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(Australia)

Abstract

This article is based on a year's interviewing, observation and filming of street performers practising their craft in Australian cities. It transcends the more visible aspects of street performance and investigates the under-researched area of spatial dynamics in contemporary street performance in Australia. By documenting and analysing the spatial conventions used consciously and instinctively by street performers, I have identified a unique use of space, which directly contravenes traditional human movement in the 'urbanscape'. This paper links the common social perception that street performers operate 'outside the circle of expectation' with their use of physical circles to manipulate their audience. Additionally, this study charts the relationship between the performer and the audience, and examines how this performance genre has traced itself on to the Australian cityscape.

Abrégé

Cet article est basé sur une année d'entretiens, d'observations et de film d'interprètes de rue pratiquant leur art dans des villes australiennes. Il transcende les aspects plus visibles du spectacle de rue et recherche le domaine ignoré des dynamiques spatiales dans le spectacle contemporain dans la rue en Australie. En documentant et en analysant les conventions spatiales utilisées consciemment et instinctivement par les interprètes de rue, j'ai identifié une utilisation unique de l'espace, qui s'oppose directement aux mouvements humains traditionnels dans le 'paysage urbain'. Cet article lie la perception sociale commune que les interprètes de rue fonctionnent 'hors du cercle prévu', avec leur utilisation de cercles physiques pour manipuler leur audience. En outre, cette étude délinée la relation entre l'interprète et l'audience, et examine comment ce genre de spectacle s'est gravé dans le panorama urbain australien.

Sumario

Este artículo se basa sobre un año de observaciones, filmados y entrevistas con interpretes callejeros que practican su arte teatral en las ciudades Australianas. El artículo trasciende los aspectos más visibles de la actuación callejera e investiga el área casi inédita de las dinámicas del espacio en la actuación teatral callejera contemporánea en Australia. Con el documentar y analizar las convenciones del espacio usado conscientemente e instintivamente por los interpretes callejeros, la autora ha podido identificar un uso único del espacio, el cual contraviene directamente los movimientos humanos tradicionales en el 'urbanscape' o escenario urbano. Este artículo conecta la percepción social común que los interpretes callejeros desarrollan 'fuera del círculo de expectativas' con su uso de círculos físicos con el fin de manipular su público. Además, este estudio elabora un plano de la relación existente entre el interprete y el público, y examina como este genero de actuación se ha venido trazando sobre el escenario urbano Australiano.

Author's biography

Joanna Clyne is a graduate of Monash University. In 1998 she was awarded a Sir John Monash Dean's Scholarship, which enabled her to complete a BA with first-class Honours in Theatre Studies. The same year she was also a recipient of a VCE Premier's Award for Theatre Studies. She is a qualified secondary teacher of drama, history and English, and has performed across the fields of theatre, performance art and film for many years. Joanna is a book reviewer for the History Teachers' Association of Victoria and intends to commence her PhD in Theatre Studies and History in 2007.

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Street theatre is not taking the walls and roof off your regular theatre show. It is a different beast altogether, with its own terms and conditions. (Coult & Kershaw 1990: 31)

A different beast altogether

Street performance does not subscribe to the same physical theatrical conventions as indoor theatre. Once the physical parameters of the theatre building are removed, performance begins to be shaped and moulded by other factors, such as incidental spaces and sounds which cannot be controlled or moderated. 'Legitimate' theatre operates on the premise that the audience chooses to attend the performance with preconceived expectations of where they will sit, how they will behave and what they will see. Street performance, however, is enacted in real time and place to an unsuspecting audience, thereby significantly diminishing the boundaries between the illusion of the theatre and the reality of the outside world. This article investigates the physical circles that street performers trace on to a cityscape dominated by structured angles, through their unusual command of spatial convention. Rather than focus on the performative characteristics of this genre, I have adopted a theoretical and sociological approach, which aims to document the structure and spatial mechanisms of the contemporary street show, as it is performed in Australia. In addition to this, I conducted interviews with ten street performers working in Australia. From the results of my combined research methodologies, I will attempt to determine whether street performers are aware of the effect spatial dynamics have on their interaction with the audience, and the degree to which this informs the construction of their work.

The research for this article was conducted within the ethnographic tradition. The prime factor which qualifies street performers for consideration as an ethnographic group is their many shared characteristics, which have evolved from working in a field which is both a profession and a lifestyle. By combining my observations and interviews with existing theoretical frameworks on spatial relations such as Hall (1966) and Schechner (1988), I will document and reveal the many hidden psychological and sociological forces at play in this under-researched performance genre.

The circle

Street performance is an art form defined in many ways by space and shapes. The circle is a significant motif in street performance dialogue, both physically and figuratively, and is not congruent with the geometrical circle. At the 2002 Fremantle Buskers' Festival, I was fortunate to observe Australian living sculpture Standstill Theatre. In the tradition of living sculptures, the artist's performance comprises an elaborately costumed character who stands in a public space and juxtaposes periods of almost ossified stillness with small, carefully measured movements. Unlike the static nature of real statues, living sculpture street performers dispel notions of reality and convention by bringing to life intrinsically inanimate objects. Standstill Theatre's costume

consisted of a futuristic space suit and heavy white makeup which attempted to conceal all aspects of his humanity. This was particularly significant, as his performance was created to evoke ideas on the modern propinquity of humanity and technology. The suit, which he designed himself, contained several electronic devices which emitted futuristic sounds to complement his movements. Standstill Theatre began his act by standing on a box, not unlike those on which real statues are often positioned. His appearance caused a small group of spectators to congregate, after which he began to animate his character through small, measured movements. Suddenly, Standstill Theatre stepped down from the block and began to move towards the audience in an almost menacing manner. Interestingly, the reaction of the audience was divided. While some spectators stood their ground and allowed this futuristic man to approach them, others felt that their personal space was being invaded and quickly moved away with disconcerted expressions.

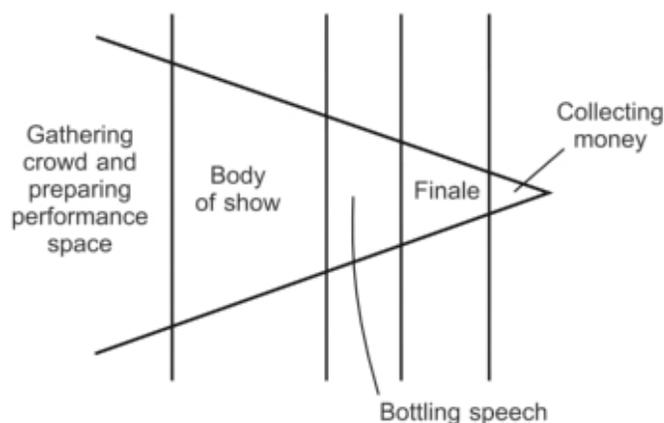
In many ways, Standstill Theatre's performance mirrored his opinion, expressed when interviewed, that street performers 'operate outside a circle of expectation'. However, at the same time, street performers practise their craft within a physical circle of their own making which defines the parameters of their show and distinguishes them from every other person on the street. In any context, the circle is a very democratic shape. Unlike the triangle, which suggests a hierarchical ordering with a leading power at its tip, or the square, which is often linked in expression and literature to a conformist nature, the circle denotes equality. This is demonstrated in stories such as King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table where King Arthur took his seat among his knights at a round table which has no head and therefore acted as a symbol of their unity.

Circle shows are predominantly enacted by a solitary performer — usually male, between the ages of eighteen and 40. As its name denotes, the circle show acquired its title through the tendency of the audience to congregate in a circular pattern around the performer or performers in the pitch. This configuration gives the performer the ability to interact freely with the spectators while entering into what Australian circle show artist Ross Vegas describes as a combination of 'visual comedy and audience manipulation'. Circle shows are typically reliant on interaction with their audience in the form of volunteers, and are linked by their common theme: a synthesis of humour and spectacle laced with impending danger. Because of their profession, many street performers live unconventional, unstructured lifestyles, causing their audience to believe that their shows will mirror these same principles. From observing a wide spectrum of street shows, I became aware that circle shows are actually highly scripted, formulaic and adhere to a distinct set of performance conventions.

As in a play or film, street performances operate on a series of events and climaxes which are best charted in a diminuendo configuration (see Figure 1). The duration of the circle show is approximately 45 minutes. The first fifteen minutes are allocated to gathering an audience through creating spectacle or simply announcing the impending show, interspersed with laying out props and setting up the performance area. The next 20 minutes are dedicated to the body of the show — a combination of comedy, spectacle and tricks — after which the performer does a 'bottling speech' by way of asking the audience to put money in their hat at the conclusion of the show. The final ten minutes are taken up by the performer's 'finale': the big and often dangerous trick promised to the audience during the first fifteen minutes. The shape of this diagram clearly demonstrates how all the elements of a circle show are designed towards the final objective of collecting the money. In many respects, the formation and density of the circle directly reflect the

audience's appreciation, and are often indicative of how lucrative the show will be for the performer.

Figure 1: Diagram of a Circle Show



Stepping into the circle

Although the terms 'busking', 'street theatre' and 'street performance' have been expanded to embody almost any form of dramatic or non-conventional activity in a public place, I have elected to focus on a fairly specific sub-genre of this craft. I have limited my discussion to living sculptures and circle show performers, who are defined by their inclusion in street performance festivals. The data was collected over the period of twelve months at a number of street performance locations throughout Australia, including the Fremantle Buskers' Festival, the Melbourne and Adelaide Fringe Festivals and other established street performance pitches in Sydney and Melbourne. I chose observation as my initial method of data-collection due to its unobtrusive and non-reactive attributes. According to sociologist Kellehear (1993), the prime advantage of observation over interviewing is that it reports *actual* behaviour as opposed to *self-reported* behaviour. As both performances and interviews were videotaped with the permission of the performers, I became aware of this when discrepancies emerged through comparisons between performance footage and interview footage. However, the most significant advantage of observation was that, through repetitive and impartial viewing of a performance, I could better strip away the contents and reveal the primary mechanisms and spatial dynamics of the acts.

In addition to observation, I also interviewed ten street performers in order to gain an emic viewpoint on the effects and structures of their craft. All informants for this research were approached and interviewed on the street or at public performance festivals. As the focus of this project was to obtain qualitative rather than quantitative data, I did not deliberately 'sample' a selection of the street performance community, but simply interviewed any performers who made themselves available to me. For reasons intrinsic to the genre of street performing, the majority of my informants were males between the ages of eighteen and 40. Many chose to be referred to by their act name, so I have extended this courtesy to all performers referred to in this article in the interests of both consistency and privacy. While many of my informants were members of

overseas acts, they all shared the common characteristic of performing in Australian street performance festivals.

Spatial conventions

When interviewed, Standstill Theatre suggested that, because street performance is not contained within the architectural structure of a theatre, it is a performance genre beyond the grasp of theatrical convention. While street performance does not subscribe to the same parameters as indoor theatre, it has instead, over the years, formulated conventions, terminology and, most significantly, a spatial configuration of its own. While, on the surface, street performance appears only to provide a lively aesthetic to dispel urban monotony, there are deeper, hidden mechanisms at work. From my observations of street shows, it became evident that the spatial dynamics utilised by street performers could successfully be discussed in relation to the field of proxemics and Richard Schechner's (1988) theory of eruptions.

Proxemics

Proxemics, the study of humans in relation to their environment and each other, was an area of study first popularised by anthropologist Edward Hall (1966). The name 'proxemics' evolved from the word 'proximity', and is defined as 'nearness in space or time'. Essentially, this field has been used to study marginalised aspects of non-verbal communication such as how humans behave in public spaces and how they position themselves in relation to others. It is for this reason that it became an effective means through which to examine and document the many ways in which street performers manipulate the audience within their performance zone. Hall's text addresses the concept of *biotope* — the ethnographic term for the notion that, due to cultural and technological evolution, humans now have the freedom to live in a world of their own physical and social making. A study of hoboes in America by sociologist Nels Anderson furthers this notion through the suggestion that, although urbanscape is initially a human construct, constant exposure renders humans products of their city. As he writes:

The city, more than any other product of man's genius and labours, represents the effort of mankind to remake the world in accordance with its wishes, but the city, once made, compels man to conform to the structure and the purpose he himself has imposed on it. If it is true that man made the city, it is quite as true that the city is now making man. (Anderson 1923: xxiii)

When interviewed on the movements of living sculptures, Standstill Theatre introduced the idea that humans only move within a limited range of what is possible in terms of physical expression. In accordance with the theories of Hall, this can be attributed to the restrictive characteristic of our urban surroundings. For reasons of spatial economy and practicality, the Australian cities in this study — like many modern urban regions in the world — are dominated by straight walls. Metropolitan areas such as Melbourne were designed in a grid pattern and predominantly comprise a series of straight lines, angles, corners and fixed features such as buildings around which pedestrians must negotiate a pathway. Traffic lights, stop signs and barricades also have the effect of inhibiting freedom of movement in the city. As Standstill Theatre remarked: 'People think that the street is open and easy, but it's actually an incredibly controlled environment.' The consequence of such unyielding urban planning is that the configuration of the city essentially dictates the movements of its inhabitants.

According to Hall, one of the key academic developments in the field of proxemics was made by physician Humphry Osmond, who developed the terms 'sociofugal' and 'sociopetal' to describe

how the positioning of obstacles in spaces can influence the levels of interaction between people. ‘Sociofugal spaces’ are designed to deter interaction between people, as they often promote rapid movement or physical isolation. The Bourke Street Mall, Melbourne’s foremost street performance pitch, is a prime example of a sociofugal space (see Figure 2). Designed as a thoroughfare, the street is very wide to assist with the flow of human traffic. The fixed features of the street area include a strip of shops along each side and a tramline running through its core. Hall maintains that cars are ‘space munchers’, as they require an uninhibited space to move through — an effect similarly generated by trams passing through the Bourke Street Mall. Framing the tramline is a patterning of benches situated back to back and widely spaced with the effect of limiting conversation, while the walkways are devoid of obstacles in order to disinhibit movement, creating a thoroughfare effect. As Cohen and Greenwood comment on the effect of the city structure: ‘It all seems designed to hurry us in and out.’ (Coult & Kershaw 1990: 9)

Figure 2: Bourke Street Mall



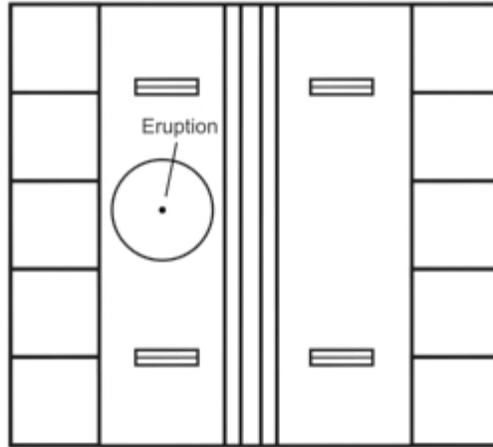
In direct opposition to the sociofugal space lies the sociopetal space, which has the effect of encouraging people to pause or congregate. Despite its apparent aesthetic similarities to Melbourne’s Bourke Street Mall, Adelaide’s Rundle Street Mall — another established street performance pitch — is a prime example of a sociopetal space. Its narrow width, clustered seating and lack of vehicle access provide it with a more intimate ambience. Circular pitches are marked in blue paint by the city council, a relic from the honour line which marked the route of the John Martin’s Christmas Pageant (Figure 3). Consequently, it is a space that is more tolerant of the alternative spatial configurations of street performance.

Figure 3: The blue ‘honour line’



In many ways, street performers have the ability to turn a sociofugal space into a sociopetal one, as they effectively manage to construct a circular formation in a location designed in accordance with angles, lines and squares (See Figure 4). While street performers often succeed in improving the dynamics of the often alienating and soulless urban space, they are regarded by many as an obstacle. However, as circle show performer Fire Fox said of the Melbourne City Council's attitude towards street performers: 'The reason the council say they cancelled [circle shows] in Bourke Street is that there isn't enough room for it, that we block traffic.' While this allegation is true of street performance, it does not necessarily mean that it is a negative attribute. Hall's research (1966) constantly reinforces the often unconscious effect that spatial configurations can have on human behaviour. He concludes that continual presence in sociofugal spaces has the adverse effect of alienating the individual. He theorises that, by eradicating a sense of society, many residents become less community-minded and more likely to commit crimes and display anti-social behaviours. By transforming sociofugal spaces into sociopetal spaces, street performers would seem to be serving a very subtle but important social function, making them valuable assets to the community.

Figure 4: Diagrams of street performers in the city



As Standstill Theatre proclaimed of the effect of the street performer on the urban environment: 'You're going out there and trying to change the dynamic of the street.' In many ways, living sculptures exist in complete anarchy when it comes to all the spatial conventions of the city. The majority of all urban monuments depict deceased male heroes, leaders and city fathers. Paradoxically, however, the majority of street artists observed creating living statues were females who undermined the intrinsically static characteristic of statue by adding levels of movement into their performance. As Hall writes: 'Sculpture adds a dimension to space, particularly if it can be felt, nibbled, patted, leaned against or climbed upon.' (Hall 1966: plate 18)

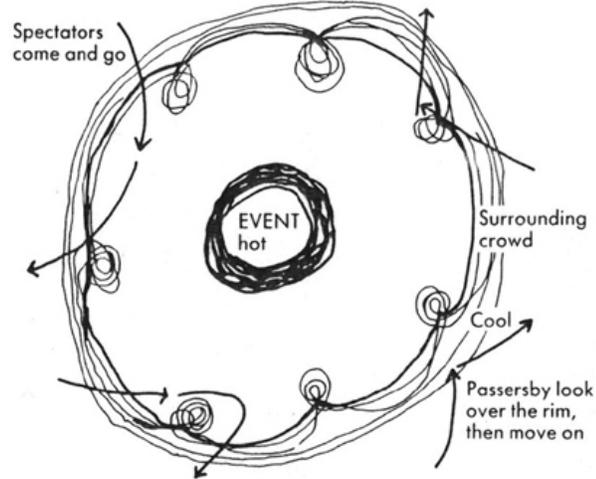
A point much emphasised by Hall is that spatial relationships are culturally determined and can vary enormously between countries. When interviewed, street performers consistently stated that, when performing in countries such as India, where people live and move in closer proximity, their shows are viewed by their audience at a closer distance than in a country such as England, where infringing a personal zone is a breach of social etiquette. This suggests that the proxemics of a show are initially determined by the audience rather than by the performer. As Sydney mime artist Charlie Chaplin articulated: 'The audience will always dictate for you who you are, what you are and what works best for you in your act.' Consequently, despite the fact that many of the street artists I observed came from other cultures, the spatial considerations of street performance enacted in Australia were always determined by Australian social norms, spaces and audiences. However, the onus is on the street performer to recognise and manipulate the spatial expectations to their own advantage.

Eruptions

'Eruption' is a term which was coined by Richard Schechner (1988) to describe how people position themselves around a social abnormality:

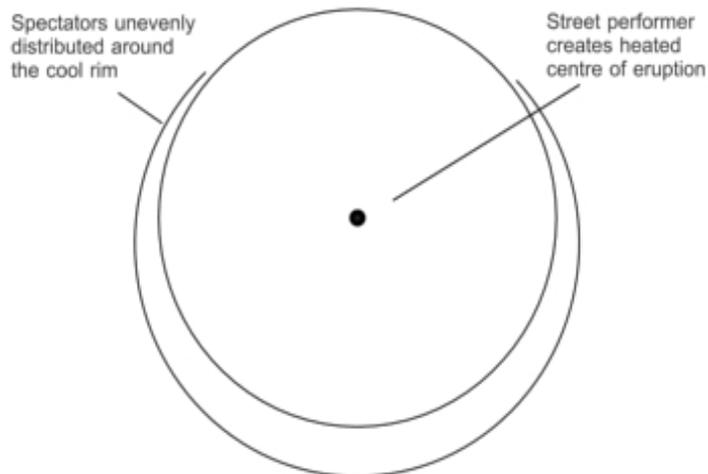
An 'eruption' features a heated centre and a cool rim, with spectators coming and going. The eruption occurs either *after* an accident or during an event where development is predictable such as an argument, or the construction or demolition of a building. (1988: 158)

Figure 5: Diagram of Schechner's eruption



Source: Schechner (1988: 158)

Figure 6: My diagram of a street performance eruption



Schechner's theory of eruptions was developed in the 1980s to define the process of social observation which occurs at a public spectacle such as a car accident. Despite this, his ideas have a high level of concurrence with my findings on the social dynamics of contemporary street performance. While Schechner did not formulate his theory of eruptions in accordance with street performance, its characteristics perfectly underpin the spatial mechanisms of a street show, where a group of observers will congregate around the 'rim' of the spectacle. Although circles usually evoke fully formed eruptions, the audience is rarely evenly distributed, but collects more densely to the front and sides of the performer. Taking this into account, performers will often set up a show with their backs to a wall, thereby saving them the difficulty of playing to all directions of the circle. In legitimate theatre, the performers rarely need concern themselves with ensuring that the audience remains in the performance space, while in street performance the

ability of performer to create an eruption generally ensures the presence of spectators and consequently dictates the success of the show. As Sue Fox of the Welfare State Street Theatre Group explains:

There is an honesty in the contract between street theatre performers and audience. That's why it is a trade to work on and be proud of. As performers you KNOW when it is working — you never get a bored indulgent audience. (Coult & Kershaw 1990: 31)

This realisation by street performers has eventuated in the instigation of a varied and creative series of eruption-devising techniques. Canadian street performer Space Commander, whom I encountered at the 2002 Fremantle Buskers' Festival, initiated his show by walking out into a motor vehicle thoroughfare holding two large arrows, which he pointed to himself, consequently defining himself as the central attraction. At the same festival, German gymnastic act Lucy Lou generated an audience by changing into her performance costume in front of the crowd. In his article 'How are we Perceived?' street performer Steven Ragatz (n.d.) emphasises the importance for street performers of communicating to the audience a respect for the space in which they work. English circle show performer Beautiful Stu achieved this by producing a dustpan and brush and sweeping out the area within the circle.

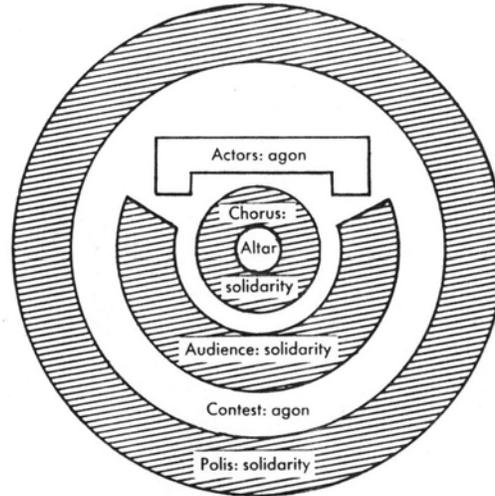
Circles and eruptions have a long history in connection with performance. Through examining the structure of ancient Greek Amphitheatres such as the fourth century theatre situated at Epidarus (Figure 7), a similarity in audience formation to the circle show can be observed, suggesting that an eruption is indeed the natural configuration for viewing a performance.

Figure 7: The theatre at Epidarus



Source: Boardman (1992: 279)

Figure 8: Schechner's diagram depicting the shape of an ancient Greek amphitheatre



Source: Schechner (1988: 160)

To a slightly lesser degree, this same shape is evident in the architecture of the Medieval and Elizabethan theatres, where the audience members were able to watch not only the performers, but also themselves in the daylight. As Schechner writes: 'The spaces are uniquely arranged so that a large group can watch a small group — and become aware of itself at the same time.' (1988: 12) The effect of the audience being able to see itself is still an important feature of modern street performance in Australia, in that it provides the individual audience member with a model of how to behave during the performance. The more modern indoor theatre, however, has changed its shape to include a proscenium arch stage and, more importantly, a hierarchy for both performers and audience. Instead of performing at ground level, the performer has been elevated and the audience seated in the stalls, balcony or gods according to their financial status. As in the ancient Athenian theatres, the contemporary street performer is equally accessible to all audience members, regardless of class or wealth, making it truly a theatre of the people. Although eruptions frequently occur in organic environments, Schechner maintains that, due to their circular form, they appear to more advantage in highly urbanised settings where they create geographical dissonance with the square contours of the urbanscape.

Breaking the eruption

While the successful creation of an eruption ensured the presence of the audience, it had the adverse effect of creating a spatial rift between the performance and the audience, thereby deterring their financial contribution. In her autobiography *Dreamtime Alice*, Australian street performer Mandy Sayer (1998: 56) recalls that:

It took me weeks of working the streets before I understood that too much space could be a liability. It enables the audience to hang back, making it difficult to connect with them; also, they become timid about stepping forward and throwing money into the hat.

When interviewed, most street performers acknowledged that they utilised psychological tactics to manipulate their audience into conforming to their own spatial laws. Beautiful Stu expressed that, while marking out a performance zone with either rope or chalk on a street or pitch had

become a regulation of most city councils in Australia, it could also be a useful tool for maintaining control over a collective audience. By dictating to them where they were required to sit, the performer was able to establish him or herself as an authority figure. He also observed that some performers would change the parameters of their space by moving the rope in the duration of the show, in the belief that it reinforced their authority and forced the audience into recommitting to the performance. As circle show performer Miss Fire explained in an ABC Radio National interview for *Street Story* in March 2002:

Sometimes I just shift around my audience in the middle of the show, not for any practical reason. I tell them I want you to come here because of this. But it's a psychological barrier, if they come forward to you then they're committing to your show.

A common device used as an eruption-breaker by a majority of street performers is the age-old tradition of requesting a volunteer from the audience. The transferral of a person from the rim of the eruption to its nucleus temporarily rearranges the spatial dynamics of the performance. Australian circle show performer Ross Vegas is an artist who is very conscious of the role that spatial dynamics play in his performance, and is constantly devising new ways to innovate them. In the initial stages of his show, he would choose a small boy from the audience and place him right at the heart of the eruption, while he stepped back into the 'cool rim' of the circle and blended in with the crowd. Then he would announce to the crowd:

I want you to help me play a big trick on all the people here in Fremantle today. When [name of small boy volunteer] stands in the centre of the circle and starts to blow soap bubbles with this pipe, we're all going to do this (mimes overtly enthusiastic applause). So when all the people standing over there hear it, they'll do this (mimes person elbowing their way through the crowd to the front row of the rim) to see what we're all cheering about. But when they get to the front, all they'll see is a small boy blowing soap bubbles.

Through this spatial substitution, Ross Vegas was ultimately creating what can be termed an 'artificial eruption', given that the volunteer was not the original spectacle around which the cool rim was formed, although his presence would have added to the density of the audience.

A less extreme variation on this technique is a general request to the audience to borrow an object essential to the performance of the trick. The most successful practitioner of this was the East Indian Magic act performed at the Fremantle Buskers' Festival, where the magician requested that a watch be lent by an audience member, which he would then subsequently cause to disappear. Essentially, this transaction provides a physical communication between the rim and the eruption; when an object is lent, it reveals a confidence in the performance and also the degree to which the audience are willing to participate, as the desire to see the object returned will cement their continued presence. The use of objects borrowed from their audience is most frequently used by fire artists, who request that an audience member provides a lighter with which to light their poles. While a seasoned performer will generally have their own lighter in easy reserve, I witnessed a performance on Sydney's Circular Quay where an inexperienced performer failed to establish a relationship with his audience and consequently received no lighter at his request.

Conclusion

This research has documented the spatial mechanisms of contemporary street performance in Australia and determined that degree to which proxemics and awareness of spatial dynamics have

indeed influenced the practice and evolution of this performance genre. As an ethnographic group, street performers have demonstrated their awareness of the significance of the circle through their discussions of spatial techniques when interviewed. This is also evident in their development of the terminology used in their professional dialogue such as ‘circle show’. Interestingly, this term appears to be a neologism, as it does not appear in the earliest historical accounts of street performance in Europe. However, this ability to manipulate spatial configurations does not entail that all street performers have a sociological understanding of spatial theories. Rather, it suggests that they have learned to harness and utilise their performance space through experience and their observations of fellow performers. Street performance is a craft which develops through imitation of other performers, oral tradition and peer teaching. While the content of the show is often unique to the individual performer, the structure and spatial rules are often treated as formulaic procedures which are shared throughout the street performance community and play a role in defining it as a specific performance genre.

While street performers in Australia conform to a great many performance conventions within their genre, I have established that they simultaneously practise a form of sociological and spatial anarchism which contrasts with traditional human movement in the public domain. As humans, we are reluctant to cause spectacle in public places. However, street performers deliberately break this taboo by orchestrating a spectacle and consequently inviting a congregation of humans around themselves. This investigation of the spatial dynamic of street performance attests to Hall’s theory that space is a hidden force which, although rarely acknowledged, exercises much power over human behaviour, movement and reaction in both life and art. While it is not often associated with performance practice, an understanding of spatial dynamics and an ability to utilise it effectively are essential, although rarely acknowledged, factors of street performance — a craft which challenges our circle of expectation.

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