

## The space of the performance

*DRY RUN part 3: Scale of Emergency* marks a return to a particular approach to live work (previous adopted in our piece *Low Profile presents: One of Us*) where the space of the performance and positioning/framing of the artwork, artists and audience come into question. Rather than offering a situation where there is a clear demarcation of who is performer and who is audience (as in a standard theatre set-up), *Scale of Emergency* aims to complicate these relationships. We (LP) are interested in ‘unphotogenic’ performances – ones that work with (or are defined/ limited by) the scope of the task, as opposed to the scope of the camera – and the idea that the artist does not need to adopt the position of scenographer as a default. If the artist-as-scenographer’s primary concern are the visual aspects or “look” of the work, it would suggest that they are working from the premise of a space (the space where artwork and audience meet) that is to be constructed, updated, transformed and filled – a space that the artist must master, take-over and make their own.

In pieces like *Scale of Emergency* (and *One of Us*), rather than designing and building “environments” in which artworks can happen (where positions of ‘artist’ and ‘audience’ are re-enforced by particular markers like scripts, stages, lighting, costume, props, microphones – and one of the main activities of the audience is looking), we have chosen, instead, to design and build “encounters”. These artworks-as-encounters revolve around (or focus attention on) language acts, conversation, speaking, things happening ‘out loud’, reading, writing, questioning, processing and decision-making. While there are visible traces of this process (the texts written on post-its), and decisions about how things will ‘look’ have been made (consideration for how to install the target diagrams, design of bookwork etc), the main activity of the audience in the artwork-as-encounter is not simply looking.

John Dore’s *Primitive Speech Acts* identify/classify children’s utterances as realizations of one of nine primitive speech acts:

1. labelling
2. repeating
3. answering
4. requesting (action)
5. requesting (answer)
6. calling
7. greeting
8. protesting
9. practicing

(Dore, John – ‘Holophrases, Speech Acts and Language Universals’ *Journal of Child Language*, April 1975, 21-40)

In the space of the performance, attention is drawn to each of these types of speech act, with both artist and audience involved in interrogating the ideas of ‘scale’ and ‘emergency’ through an active process of observation, comparison, repetition, telling and verification. In this way, simple divisions between the positions of ‘artist’ and ‘audience’ are complicated to develop a far longer list of interchangeable positions that may include:

Audience  
Referee  
Player  
Visitor  
Onlooker  
Spectator  
Reader  
Viewer  
Addressee  
Listener  
Speaker  
Observer  
Bystander  
Watcher  
Participant  
Outsider  
Insider  
Witness  
Contributor  
Contestant  
Accomplice  
Performer  
Artist

In a way, the ‘task’ at hand (for the artists to collect and order emergencies to produce a comprehensive scale of all possible situations of emergency) acts as a kind of red herring – an epic task that could never be completed – but its function is to set up a space that draws attention to our (LP and audience members) attempts to deal with the ‘excess’ we experience in our everyday lives and the processes of questioning, filtering and decision-making we are engaged in, rather than the production of ‘answers’. (cross ref: *DRY RUN part 2: How to save your skin when disaster strikes without warning* and *DRY RUN part 4: MacGyver’thon*)

## Responsibility

During the performance, we (LP) are often asked “Who wrote that one!?”. The set-up of the performance means that there are a number of ways in which we accept responsibility for, and ‘take on’, or adopt the situations of emergency (as documented on the post-it notes) as our own. The task itself (the instruction) sets up this idea of ‘collecting’ emergencies and the process of generating a collection. This frames our activity as ‘gathering’ rather than just thinking these emergencies up (authoring), or solely drawing on our own experience. Similarly, when we are talking with people about things they might identify as situations of emergency, we (LP) are the ones to write these down onto the post-it notes.

By taking on this action (inscribing the post-its), we offer an anonymity to those we speak to which allows for (and encourages) a series of switches in who accounts for these admissions – once someone has suggested (verbalised, said “out loud”, made public) a particular situation/emergency, it becomes part of a shared collection (added to the mass of post-it collected) and those who have made suggestions don’t need to feel singled out on hearing a comment like:

*A bird flying in your face, who wrote that? That’s hardly an emergency! Ha!*

As well as expressing dismay at the emergencies displayed, bystanders, participants and contributors can also take-on, identify with or adopt any of the texts as their own. As those ‘in charge of’ the activity of collecting, we (LP) accept ultimate responsibility for these texts.

*I reckon these are all your emergencies, they’ve not really been suggested by other people, you two wrote them all!*

In a way, much like the list of things we ‘have’ just in case (in the performance *Just in Case*) all of these, and none of these, emergencies are “ours”.

Keeping hold of the post-it notes and the markers also means that any contributions have to be filtered or mediated via the artists/performers in conversation, suggesting that some kind of agreement has been reached about what is or isn’t an emergency. In this way, we act as referees, filtering information and sanctioning decisions. It also means that we can keep the text displayed focussed on what we are actually aiming to draw attention to. However, we try to retain a light touch in this filtering with the manipulation of suggestions (source material) kept to a minimum, usually just discussions over phrasing. We are trying to take each thing seriously while finding ways to rule out sheer ‘fantasy’ - the difference between the feeling of ‘that would never happen’ and ‘that would never happen’. This can be a difficult distinction to make. At one point I am asked, “How is it that zombies are real and Klingons are not?”. I am keen not to disregard things from fiction outright (as it serves as a useful source, shaping many of our (human’s) ideas about/ways of understanding the world), but maybe we can limit our conversations to rule our things from a fictional universe, in favour of things that have the possibility to exist in our own?

At the point where we cease collecting and begin to map the severity, variety and scale of the emergencies, we (LP) take responsibility for where these things are placed on the diagrams and are called on to defend these choices. In this situation, in may also be useful to think about the artists as the ones who have agreed to ‘take on’ something unpleasant or hazardous so the audience can be relieved of this - in a similar way as the situations of *HTSYSWDSWW* and *MacGyver’thon* where we (LP) take on the duration/endurance element of the task, so the audience don’t have to.

## Conversations

As a part of setting up the encounter, we (LP) have had to find ways of starting the conversation. Simply by being there attending to the task is often enough to initiate the question “What are you doing?”. The bookwork (and the short explanatory/ interpretive text displayed in the space) act as another way to frame the activity undertaken in the space of the performance – offering a certain amount of information (a clue as to what is going on, rather than a schematic or full explanation), prompting a further reading of what in the space (existing pos-its, listening-in to conversations etc) and begin the process of commenting on, suggesting, challenging decisions and so on.

We are interested in finding gentle ‘ways in’ to what could potentially be a difficult/ awkward situation – an approach that is not pushy and is non-threatening. It is not our intention to antagonize (artist and audience are not antagonists, in opposition or conflict with each other) and we don’t need to win the argument (there is no argument and no contest to win). We hope that this provides an alternative to an agonistic approach.

We are also involved in subtly prompting/guiding/leading the audience. In our experience of making/showing the piece, many people tend towards ‘safe’ areas, maybe as an avoidance of thinking about the possibility of ‘really bad things’ happening and maybe as they are a bit scared to reveal something to a stranger (especially if it could be judged as giving something away about oneself, or they are discussing a taboo subject). As we want people to consider a whole range of situations of emergency, at times we need to steer the conversation into more unpleasant or uncomfortable areas (rape, murder, mugging, plane hijack and so on). We are also interested in trying to achieve a balance between seemingly insignificant emergencies (eg running out of biscuits or dropping a birthday cake) and likely or practical emergencies (eg car breaks down or hand chopped by by an industrial saw), or emergencies with a sense of slight melancholy (eg falling in love with your best friend or being the one who has to go for help) or absurdity (eg a bird flies into your face).

At Arnolfini, we became quite aware of the dangers of making something ‘interactive’ – skirting round the edges of naff-participation style projects (public consultation, outreach projects etc). We are faced with the challenge of how to resist these associations while appropriating/adopting their aesthetic. What we are doing is not some kind of ‘greeter’ activity, or some kind of education project ‘for the kids’. We could easily get drawn into “doing the interpretation of the work” instead of simply presenting it. As an attempt to resist this, and as a strategy to consciously avoid getting drawn into the ‘what does it mean’ type discussion, we developed useful responses like :

*We’re interested in talking to people about emergencies, preparedness and this idea of dry runs.*

This served as a way to reiterate ‘what it is’ we are doing, focusing attention on the action/activity, rather than answering the ‘what it is about’ type questions.

## Aesthetic decisions: working with installation

Each of the situations in which *Scale of Emergency* as been made/shown - development (Liverpool), installation (Plymouth) and re-making (Bristol) – have offered different possibilities for the installation of the work. In Liverpool and Plymouth, the installation of post-it notes on diagrams has been shown alongside another performance work from the DRY RUN series (*HTSYSWDSWW* in Liverpool and *MacGyver’thon* in Plymouth). This is a new experience for us (showing works alongside each other) as our live works have previously operated only as ‘stand alone’ pieces (by their nature of being live). We intend to experiment further with this idea of presenting works together and it seems

to be made easier (and reflect the concerns we are working with) in the context of working in series – the interrelationship of these works provides more scope for developing ways to ‘weave’ these strands together in interesting ways, or finding ways to develop ‘micros’ of these pieces to create some kind of ‘catalogue’ piece.

For each of the occasions of showing (for different spaces/contexts), we have executed a different type of ‘finish’ for the work. In Plymouth, the circles of the diagrams were carefully painted on the wall and the post-it notes were subtly ‘fixed’ to the wall to prevent audiences tampering with their ordering over the duration of the exhibition. These decisions made reference to the context of showing the work (in a static state) in a gallery space where there are implied ‘rules’ or ‘expectations’ about how work is presented (high quality finish) and how audiences are expected to behave (do not touch). In contrast to this, when presenting the work as an ‘intervention’ in Bristol, the rough-and-ready nature of the posters give a suggestion that we could just pitch up and do this anywhere, that this work is ephemeral (hear today, gone tomorrow) and that it ceases when we are no longer there to activate it.

The space of the installation also offers useful ways to deal with the issue of duration in this piece. The instruction talks of spending “sufficient time” on collecting emergencies – suggesting that you continue until you give up, get bored, run out of time or have to do something else. The duration of this ‘collecting’ could be infinite or go on forever as you could never write down all the possibilities. We need to, therefore, set an arbitrary period in which we collect in the emergencies. At Arnolfini, the posters providing a neat self-contained space for the piece:

*When we have filled this whole space, then we’ll have to start plotting them onto the diagrams.*

## New possibilities and leftovers

The process of developing *Scale of Emergency* has also led to a new set of useful ‘leftovers’ and sets of questions:

- » How could we further refine the aestheic? (making reuseable plastic target sheets, pasting the posters onto walls like flyposters etc)
- » What are the possibilities of increasing the scale of this work? (filling a whole room with these diagrams and post-its etc) (some densely covered, some sparsely – the sheer number of the scales and emergencies, the number of possibilities for juxtaposition of the post-its)
- » How can we use the texts (the collection of emergencies) that are generated? Would these function as new texts for other pieces? How could they be transcribed and re-used in other ways?
- » What are the possibilities for developing other pieces that explore DRY RUN through installation?

### *DRY RUN part 3: Scale of Emergency*

This was developed (and first shown) as part of a short residency at The Royal Standard (an artist-run space in Liverpool). In this space, it was installed alongside the performance *‘DRY RUN part 2: How to save your skin when disaster strikes without warning’*. The resulting ‘emergencies’ were transcribed and re-installed as part of the exhibition Proximity Effect at Plymouth Arts Centre (a publicly funded art gallery in Plymouth), which occupied the same space as the performance *‘DRY RUN part 4: MacGyver’thon’*. A third version of the piece was made/shown over 7 hours as part of the We Live Here live art weekend at Arnolfini (a major publicly funded art-space in Bristol), where a new set of ‘emergencies’ were generated with the help of a passing audience.

*DRY RUN part 3: Scale of Emergency* addresses our concerns/ engagement with ideas around preparedness, dealing with excess (ordering, filtering and attending to) and scale (human endeavor and the discrepancies between understanding the world in micro and macro senses). It also acts as a space to further research some of the following issues:

- » **The space of the performance** (framing and positioning of the work) (modes of attention and engagement) (processing as an aesthetic)
- » **Responsibility** (anonymity) (ideas about provisionality and authoritative-ness) (who decides what an emergency is and where it is placed on this scale?)
- » **Conversations** (generating a text live) (conversation – like/unlike a dialogical practice?) (how do you start the conversation?)
- » **Aesthetic decisions / working with installation**

This piece of writing will set about examining each of these areas, drawing out some of the main conceptual and practical issues explored dring the making/showing of this piece.