

Tonight Matthew, I'm going to be Dickie...

(Or, at least, that's how it turned out but I didn't quite know it yet.)

Down to my last £2.60 on my final day in Edinburgh, I leave the house for a day of looking at art – always a reliable, cash-free option! After spending an hour (yes, an exceptionally long time) with Elodie Pong's¹ video piece *Secrets For Sale*², I find my mindset is well and truly altered. I feel unnecessarily harsh for dismissing so lightly the slightly awkward and incredibly timid lad I passed earlier on the steps of the RSA holding a handmade sign that read "Free Hugs". Maybe I am as guilty as anyone of orchestrating intimacy in the search for a feeling of true communication with my fellow human beings.

At first glance, Elodie Pong's piece may seem to be treading a well-worn path, formed as it is around the hackneyed pretence of sharing secrets with strangers, a genre that could be described as 'confessional' artworks. However, I would argue that *Secrets For Sale* offers an alternative approach to these ideas. Pong carefully sets up a situation where audience members cum participants are invited to enter into a contract with the artist, trading their secrets for cash, in an elaborately constructed environment that initiates a acutely intimate transaction. The participants, or secret-sellers, seem particularly thoughtful. Their secrets are not given away casually, as they are required to consider what they are agreeing to at each stage of the process. They can choose varying levels of anonymity, how much to reveal and how much to retain and, of course, can choose whether or not they actually tell the truth.

Maybe it was that many of the subjects of the video are French speakers (for me, immediately engaging), maybe it was that it was shown in the RSA on a relatively small monitor with headphones (which meant only one viewer at a time could watch the video piece), or maybe it was the deadpan narrative method in which the video documented each stage of Pong's original installation, that allowed me as a viewer to put myself in the place of the participants.

You can see a trailer for the piece at
<http://www.elodiepong.net/secrets4sale1.html>

After a short detour to the galleries on Cockburn Street, I make my way to the Forest Fringe³ – a not-for-profit artist-run space that has been putting on a BAC assisted microfestival for the last number of years in parallel to Edinburgh's increasingly corporate and, at times, utterly overwhelming annual Fringe.

¹ See <http://www.elodiepong.net/>

² See <http://www.elodiepong.net/secrets4sale1.html> & <http://www.boxproductions.ch/secrets/blog/>

³ See <http://www.forestfringe.co.uk/>

Once I have dutifully handed over my ID (in a procedure incredibly reminiscent of Janet Cardiff's *Missing Voice: Case Study B*⁴ audio piece at the old Whitechapel Library), I am presented with an MP3 player, headphones and a map to the nearest Tesco Metro. The spoken introduction to Rotozaza's⁵ piece *Wondermart*⁶ prepares me for the micro-theatrical culture jam that follows on my trip around this particular supermarket, where amongst other things I find myself stalking an Italian-looking woman, standing for too long with the door of the (last remaining functioning) freezer cabinet open and later, uneasily contemplating the theft of a 7p pack of 'basics' strawberry jelly, all because of my willingness to follow the spoken instructions played through my headphones.

Even though I know I can disregard any of the requests that are made of me, something about the situation makes me feel satisfyingly uneasy and I am glad of the opportunity to 'play' with the space I so often visit out of necessity and a sense of duty. I start to wonder if anyone else in the shop is also doing this piece, whether the security guards have clocked and are trying to decode my suspicious behaviour and whether anyone does actually go to supermarkets to pick up women like people used to talk about in the mid 90s.

On my return to the FF, the girl on the door convinces me to write in the visitors' book and reluctantly I agree to do so. Before I manage to step outside again, she has also signed my up to 'see' a show at ten to six, saying that she'll waive the usual £5 deposit because she trusts me. With only the scantest of details – that they'll "tell me exactly what to do", I return at the allotted time.

Rotozaza's piece *GuruGuru* takes place each hour, for this week only, for an audience of five, who also (as it turns out) take on the role of performers of the piece. Each 'participant' is given a name sticker (this is when I become "Dickie") and the group are shown a sign outlining the groundrules for the piece. We don't know each other and (I think) we don't know exactly what will happen. Much like Breathe's offering *Just To(o) Long(?)*⁷ at the Fringe in 2007, being an audience member for *GuruGuru* comes with a certain level of implication (you need to 'play along' to a certain extent and speak in a voice loud enough for others to hear) and a feeling of responsibility to not reveal the exact details of "what went on" to other after the event.

Without giving away too much, I can tell you that for 50 minutes, I sat on a named seat ("Dickie" to correspond with my name tag) in a non-confrontational group therapy style C-shape/semi circle with the other four participants, facing a TV monitor, while we were each sporadically given instructions for what to do and say via headphones. And I thoroughly enjoyed it.

⁴ See http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/missing_voice.html

⁵ See <http://www.rotozaza.co.uk/home.html>

⁶ See <http://www.rotozaza.co.uk/Wondermart.html>

⁷ See <http://www.breathartists.co.uk/#/just-too-long/4524691495>

As someone with a strong dislike for enforced participation and ‘organised fun’, this may seem to be quite a turn up for the books, but there could be a number of factors that contributed to this. Refreshingly, *Rotozaza* choose to keep the workings of their technology on-show – each of us in the room can easily see and work out that what we are hearing through the headphones is individual and unique to us, but synchronised with the rest of the group and the TV monitor. This creeping awareness of the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the piece actually serves to increase its potency. For example, when I overhear what I’ve identified as a special prompt sound on “Eddie’s” headphones, I know he’s going to do a particular gesture – what could, at first, be read as a technical flaw (sound overspill) is actually a really useful device to remind each of us in the room of the ways in which the situation is constructed.

It is this same set of constructs that give me a feeling of uncertainty (the good kind of just-about-to-fall-in-love or anything-could-happen full-of-possibilities uncertainty) and simultaneously a strange comfort, in the knowledge that I can do whatever I want in this situation. The giving over of control to ‘being instructed’ means that any action or sound I make can be attributed by the other participants to the instructions, whether or not it has actually been triggered by them. I realise early on that it is not the quality of my delivery that is ‘on show’, nor how well I ‘play the part’, that I can relax and that the piece is almost better when it is very underplayed, heightening the sense that at any minute things could go wrong, could fall apart, could get messed up. The piece unfolds into exactly the kind of performance I enjoy, with quite ordinary people saying quite ordinary things in an increasingly un-ordinary situation, carefully engineered by the artists. And they successfully manage to construct a sense of temporary community without even being in the room – impressive!

To describe *GuruGuru* as excessively manipulative and choreographed in minute detail sounds far too Machiavellian, but I can’t stress enough how beautifully un-theatrical and low-key this piece manages to stay. It appeals to my fondness for Erving Goffman’s⁸ writing, Frenchmottershead’s⁹ notion of “microperformance”¹⁰ and my dislike of all things showy, affected, precious or melodramatic. Through the artists’ care and attention to detail, we, as participants, find ourselves in a situation where it would almost be impossible to ignore ideas about how, when and where we each ‘perform’ in our daily lives. By relieving us from the pressure to ‘perform’ (in a very normal, everyday sense, as Goffman argues we do at all times when we are ‘in company’), our awareness of how much acting/directing/choreographing we might each be involved in, in any given normal ‘non-performance’ situation, is heightened.

The careful balance between absurdity and mundanity also allows for a blurring of what might seem real, and what might seem fictitious. I catch myself

⁸ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erving_Goffman

⁹ See <http://www.frenchmottershead.com>

¹⁰ See <http://www.frenchmottershead.com/extra/microperformance.html>

manufacturing tiny fictions, actively “filling the gaps” without necessarily wanting to – I actually start to believe that the person with the name sticker “Angel” and I *do*, in fact, have some kind of history (we don’t – this man is a stranger to me). Maybe I’m too open to suggestion (perfect Derren Brown fodder), or perhaps this piece is just operating very successfully in the cracks between what Goffman would term ‘front’ and ‘back’ – an intimate kind of honesty and dishonesty.

Then, all too soon, it’s over (we were warned it would be a very quick 50 minutes), I walk out onto the street again, peel off my temporary name tag, discarding my alter-ego and I’m back to reality, to real life, whatever that is.

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