Sharing the process: a consideration of interauthorship in the performing arts

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Abstract

This paper argues the case for wider recognition of the role of co/inter-authorship in the performing arts with specific reference to the work of shinkansen, a unit for performance media production. It further proposes that interactions between new technologies and the performing arts have acted as a catalyst for the understanding and appreciation of collaborative processes and exchange in the arts.

Keywords: co-authorship, collaboration, digital arts, inter-authorship, performing arts, process

1 The individual and the group

Since its inception in 1989, *shinkansen*'s[1] work has promoted processes of co/inter-authorship. This stems from the belief that almost all performance work is realised through processes such as these, but that the culture of the single authorial voice has meant that this has not been a feature that has been recognised, or even at times, acknowledged.

The name *shinkansen*, derived from the Japanese high-speed train and meaning 'new main line', is anonymous and implicitly points to the collective nature of the working processes which have evolved over the years into a highly sophisticated structure, which is fluid and malleable as the occasion demands. The engagement of *shinkansen* with digital technology, 2 years into its development, reinforced the almost instinctive attraction to group processes of co/inter-authorship. This occurred because many of the pioneering developments in digital areas were only possible through deep collaborations between those with technological expertise and those with an arts background. Few practitioners had the necessary cross-disciplinary expertise and so a significant feature of digital work at that time was the dependence on the combined efforts of people working in teams. Perhaps most significantly, this teamwork, this collaborative process, was explicit - the individuals who made up the teams had to acknowledge their dependence on each other, which focused attention on collaboration as a way of making artwork.

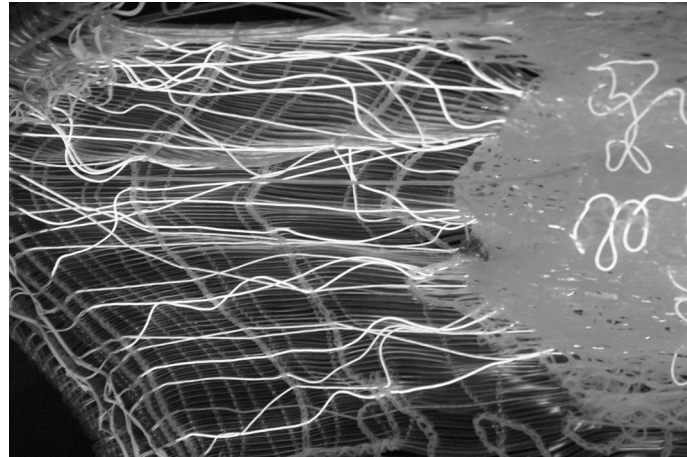In direct opposition to that trend however, stands the seemingly eternal, romanti-

cised vision of the single artist, perhaps not always starving in a garret, but nevertheless, acting as a kind of individual spirit medium, a channel to a view of the world simultaneously personal and universal. Even recent changes in the arts funding system reflect this view, as the Arts Council England's (2003) designation of the 'individual' artist as a priority area. However, emergent, digitally influenced interactions did not allow the ideology of the single author to be maintained and challenged the doctrine by putting forward notions of collaborative endeavour and shared ownership. Of course, *shinkansen*'s view is that processes of making work in the performing arts are, and arguably always have been, collaborative, and it is only the culture of the single voice and the cult of the star performer and/or creator, which have conspired to conceal this simple fact. Consider the credits as a film ends and compare this with almost any theatre programme; the absence of the many people who work together to realise work in the live theatre speaks volumes. In many other areas of life, from science to industry, people are organised into teams, and it is the team, not just the individuals who make up the team, that is acknowledged as critical to the success or failure of the venture.

A key development therefore, arising from the interaction between digital technology and the performing arts, has been the growing awareness of collaborative processes, and even the celebration of collaboration as a dynamic mode of creating innovative work. The Art and Science Laboratory, based in Santa Fe, also "seeks to facilitate networks of interdisciplinary resocialization" (2003) and notes the importance of the social role of the artist, the importance of collaboration and the dangers of disciplinary specialisation. They too, contribute to the innovating and liberating discourse that digital technology has enabled in the performing arts. Interestingly, some debates appear not to have touched the traditional or even the contemporary manifestations of

the performing arts. The debate that rages in the digital world regarding ownership for example, and the ethical considerations that arise from such claims, is hardly raised in the world of theatre-based performance. While the ethos of the internet has spawned initiatives such as open source and the copy-left movement, the opposing dynamics of commodification, originality and the divinely inspired artist, continue to hold sway in the theatre.

It should be acknowledged that the world of digital artmaking is not without its tensions. The recent initiative *Future Physical*[2] raised issues of how best to form and manage teams appropriate to the presentation of participatory installation work. But largely these debates acknowledge the role and importance of teams as exemplified by UK based groups such as *Blast Theory*[3]. There are exceptions to the performing arts culture of the individual creator, but equally the recent past reveals a number of collaborative initiatives which have slowly been realigned to reflect an individual, and to present work which is strongly associated with, if not owned by, an individual artist. While this may be an effort to adapt to the current economy of arts production, it is arguably at odds with some key traditions associated with performing arts practice; traditions associated with oral story telling, folk dance and, in more recent times, with certain improvised forms of performance. In all of these there is no sense of a single individual owning the work, neither is the work diminished by this pooling of individual energies into a collective whole; rather the collective endeavour is seen as intrinsic to, and a key feature of the performance. This ethos of collaborative engagement informs virtually all of *shinkansen*'s work in clear contrast to the performing arts tradition of valorising the individual. This was exemplified in the previously mentioned *Future Physical* initiative, the last in a series of themed projects that have taken place over the past 15 years. The process for these collaborative ventures is founded on a

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Figure 1. *txOom* project, Great Yarmouth, December 2002. Photographer: John Chapman.

methodology developed by *shinkansen*, the framework of which has remained remarkably robust, even though the outer skin continues to mutate, seeming at times to change the form almost beyond recognition.

2 The process

Each project involves the process of sharing or pooling knowledge, experience and thinking which is signalled from the outset by a very simple interauthorship agreement; a kind of contract that each person signs before beginning work. This sets the broad outline and goals of the project, the themes of the research and puts in place a structure to realise them. But vitally, it encourages from within it, the co-evolution of the project by the participant who have ranged in number from 15 to 60 in a series of projects, which have taken place across Europe and North America. In most projects the individuals are from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, which enhances the gathering, sharing and exchange and this was true of *Future Physical*. The process of sharing and exchanging typically begins six months before the participants gather, through email and e-forums as well as telephone contact. The spirit of the web as a network of connectivity informs the project, both through the use of networking strategies within projects and by ensuring that networks remain in place as each project ends.

After gathering, the participants elect to join subgroups called 'pods' or 'cells'. These subgroups have particular responsibility for specific areas of the work. The aspect of learning, or knowledge exchange, is key to the unleashing of creativity and it is vital that each group represents a range of previous skills and experience. The recent graduate in dance or performance might be engaged in the construction of a telematic link, learning from those with digital skills; later in the day, those with digital expertise might be making a movement phrase, taking the lead from those with performing skills, including the recent graduate.

An overarching, guiding principle for each project is that each individual teaches and learns at some point, through a peer to peer exchange. While one pod may demonstrate a particular hierarchy arising from the focus of the pod and the experiences of its members, each person will subsequently shift to another pod in which they will undoubtedly have a different role. It is important therefore, that participants are comfortable with the kind of fluidity of identity that stems from this process and that they are willing to exchange freely with others. Marcos Novak (2003) commented recently on the need for not only 'fluid architecture' and 'transvergence' but also a freedom of identity and this issue has been a recurring theme in the work of some digital artists. The *shinkansen* process incorporated this concept some time ago and has built up a body of expertise in enabling creativity through allowing identity and role to be changeable and malleable, mutating to meet the circumstances. While scholar/artists such Sarah Rubidge propose a fluidity of identity in relation to the work, *shinkansen* builds this fluidity into the process of creating, building on ideas of the performative in identity. In each project there is also, from the outset, a pod with responsibility for documenting the project as it unfolds. This not only ensures that the process of the work can be available after the life of the project, it also stimulates a kind of reflexivity of practice which allows spontaneous and intuitive forces to be at play, while ensuring a space for conscious observation of the events.

Figure 2. *Future Physical* launch (September 2002) linking ICA, Norwich Arts Centre and Colchester Arts Centre through the use of telematics. Photographer: John Chapman.

3   The process director

The role that Boddington takes is called 'process director' a term that has been coined to indicate a leadership role characterised by a facilitating, enabling style of engagement, which ensures an empathic and listening mode of participation. The role is both task and relationship oriented, and at times on larger projects there will be up to 3 process directors, often with specialist artform skills.

The focus of the process director is first on the 'pool': that overarching, shared, fluid, often inchoate gathering of ideas/content that emerges in embryonic form over the course of the project. At the early and middle stages of the process the critical factor is to ensure the maximum participation/inclusion of each individual and subgroup, without allowing any major imbalance in the development. The paradigm is modelled on weaving, the plaiting or braiding of strands to create a single cord, which has discernible, constituent filaments, but whose whole is clearly greater that the sum of its parts. The act of weaving changes over the project from the enabling and facilitating to a more dramaturgical role as the work progresses. It is perhaps, a fact of time-based work involving groups who are also bound by time, that a dramaturgical agency is required at particular points. The sensitivity of this engagement is offset by the shared knowledge of the interauthored nature of the project - the group ownership of both the process and the emergent product guards against any hegemony of either a personal or ideological nature. The fluidity of each individual's involvement

also allows the role to be negotiated constantly and is contingent on the role that the individual will be performing at any one moment. Group work of this depth has many advantages for the individual and the group itself. The inclusion of everyone involved in a project in its ownership, enables a high level of commitment and trust and a proactive culture spontaneously arises. Although problem solving can take longer, it most often produces better solutions. Mutual support and feedback are extra benefits often quoted by artists who usually work as solo authors and who are relieved by setting aside the burden of isolation.

Changes in attitudes, feelings and behaviours are facilitated by group debate and skills learnt in collaboration are often transferred into other settings by individuals beyond the project. There are many examples of this from the more than 4000 artists who have taken part in *shinkansen* projects, and many long-term collaborative partnerships have developed. Currently *shinkansen* is extending the principle of collaboration to include the audience or end-user. The goal is the engagement of a creative user, an audience that actively participates not just in interpreting the work, but also at times, in shaping it. This is a development which is central to the future of the performing arts and, in spite of the overly narrow focus on the individual artist, the performing arts offer a central theme focused on the human experience and the human body as agency. This perspective is intrinsic to all of *shinkansen*'s wide ranging projects and, while dealing with telematics, wearable computers and issues of cyber life, there is also a fundamental reaffirmation of the importance of the human as the measure of all things. The principle that sparked the renaissance centuries ago needs to be at the centre of digital developments if they are to have meaning beyond the convenience of time saving devices that free us to a life of ever-greater consumption, or beyond a vacuous novelty in place of the experience of art. Therefore,

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Figure 3. *Future Physical* BIO-TECH network exchange group, February 2003. Photographer: John Chapman.

the strand of new technology that formed and informed *Future Physical* was woven equally with the strand of human communication that pooled the energies of the teams that created and presented work, and developed a regional, national and international network of exchange. The measure by which *shinkansen*'s work is judged should primarily be the extent to which people have been engaged, directly and indirectly, in the process. The acknowledgement of each person's role as author, and on the ultimate authorship of the group is based on a recognition of the truth of human interaction; the curious bumping together of individuals, groups, ideas and knowledge which becomes the engine of creativity. The energy of exchange once unleashed, fuels a network which endures long after the project has passed, a testament to the vitality of the interauthorship process and a reminder of the human at the centre of creative work.

Notes

[1] *shinkansen* is a London based unit for performance media production, which has a 15 year history as cultural innovator in the field of sound and movement Further information is available at: www.shinkansen.co.uk.

[2] *Future Physical*, a two year programme of work supported by the Arts Council of England, East and based in the East of England, was developed across 2000 - 2003. Programme activities placed the human body at the centre of digital interactions and included a public events programme of commissioned works and international co-productions, as well as a series of specialist InterChange gatherings for process, research and debate, workshops and commissioning opportunities. Further information is available at: www.futurephysical.org.

[3] *Blast Theory* is a UK based artists' group making interactive performances, installations, video and mixed reality projects. Further information is available at: www.blasttheory.co.uk.

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Ghislaine Boddington is a performing arts specialist in dance and technology. She is a co-partner of shinkansen, research and production unit with whom she has directed over 40 group projects exploring concepts of identity, interauthorship and global digital connectivity. Ghislaine is the artistic director of *Future Physical*, a strategic arts programme co-conceived by *shinkansen* and East England Arts from 2001-2003. See http//www.futurephysical.org

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