

# INTERRUPTING FLOW:

RESEARCHING PLAY, PERFORMANCE AND IMMERSION IN FESTIVAL SCENES

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

ALICE O'GRADY  
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS (UK)

## ABSTRACT

This article explores some of the challenges of conducting research associated with play within the context of EDMCs, with particular reference to the complex social and spatial dynamics of popular music festivals. The essential premise is that clubbing can be conceived as a form of play and, as such, can offer access to the experience of flow. The article considers the epistemological complexities of the researcher's own immersion within the play event and adopts practice-based research methodologies developed in performance studies as a way of acknowledging and critiquing the significance of felt experiences and embodied knowledge. It considers the practical and ethical challenges of researching a phenomenon where intrusion is not only inconvenient and impractical but effectively collapses and destroys the very object of attention. The article introduces the concept of *autoethnographic flow* and argues that, whilst such immersion is often viewed with suspicion by other disciplines, it is particularly pertinent to EDMC scholarship as the research stance offered here intentionally embeds the researcher within the research context and uses this positioning as a key element of research design.

KEYWORDS: festival; play; performance; practice as research; flow; autoethnography; immersion

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Alice O'Grady is Associate Professor in Applied Performance at the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds, UK. Her research deals with interactive performance and play theory, particularly within underground club culture and contemporary music festivals. Much of her work is site-sensitive and examines the relationship between space, context and identity. She is a member of the International Advisory Board for *Dancecult* and has recently joined Graham St John as section editor for From the Floor. Email: <[a.ogrady@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:a.ogrady@leeds.ac.uk)>

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## INTRODUCTION

THOSE OF US WHO CHOOSE TO research nightlife are, I suspect, asked to justify our research interests and our methodologies rather more than colleagues in other subjects. “Researching play” can, at times, be confused with “playing at research”. Conventional wisdom would say that academic research is, by its very nature, serious business. It attracts public money: it must be measurable, accountable and, increasingly, able to deliver impact. What, then, if the very focus of the research appears to be a challenge to all that is serious? What if it resists measurement and playfully slips through the cracks of categorisation as “the joker in the neuroanthropological pack” (Turner 1983: 233)? How does one write about fun seriously and how does one embark upon play with a view to turning it into “valuable” research that demands to be taken seriously?

Undoubtedly my own fieldwork visits to places such as Ibiza, Goa and numerous clubs and UK festivals over the past years have elicited a few raised eyebrows among fellow academics and even members of my own clubbing community, who often find it hard to reconcile what they consider to be my opposing work/play identities. My fieldwork often seems to be discussed by others (friends and colleagues alike) as if it resides permanently within inverted commas. For them, my weekends are often spent “doing research” rather than doing research. My aim here is not to attempt to justify my approach or my working practices but to unpack some of the epistemological issues relating to conducting fieldwork in spaces of play, and to explore how methodologies deployed in performance studies chime with those adopted by scholars of EDMC who have long since recognised the significance of embodied participation and the importance of the immersed body as a way of gaining new insights into nightlife experiences.

Over the past decade, my research has considered how play and participatory performance might provide key lenses to understanding ecstatic experiences in underground dance scenes and has investigated how performance might be deployed to augment the latent creativity, collectivism and communality that is often cited by participants as a central part of the clubbing experience. To pursue this, I conduct fieldwork at clubs, parties and festivals and situate myself as a participant within those environments as an intentional research strategy. My relationship with festivals, and the psytrance scene in particular, pre-dates my life as a researcher quite considerably. For many years these spaces functioned primarily for me as a type of adult playground, a work free zone that I inhabited purely for pleasure. Now, as someone whose professional life is tied up with the underground dance scene, the distinction is far less clearly drawn. Having conducted fieldwork in this context over a prolonged time, my investigations have produced in me a curious and largely unresolved tension where my work and my play are inextricably linked. Indeed I operate in a context that exemplifies the widely acknowledged collapse of the work-play binary and which characterises the notion of “new cultural work” as explored by Angela McRobbie (2002). In my own context, whilst admittedly no longer in direct opposition, work and play do still have unique, and sometimes competing, voices that both require my attention at different

times and in different ways. For me, work and play are in constant dialogue and result in an often tiresome, but undoubtedly productive, conversation that I have since come to accept as being at the nexus of my research.

As early as 1932, English educator and philosopher L.P. Jacks suggests that the division between work and play is not insurmountable and that a merging of the two activities is preferable:

A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and his play, his labour and his leisure, his mind and his body, his education and his recreation. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself he always seems to be doing both. Enough for him that he does it well (Jacks 1932: 1).

I cannot claim to be “a master in the art of living”, but there are indeed times when my labour and my leisure merge and a state of equilibrium is achieved, an experience that can then be reflected upon and put to use at a later date for research purposes. To resist slipping into any deep chasm that might separate work and play, I find the better option is to attempt to elude definitions and categorisation and instead accept a plurality of intentions and identities where work and play can co-exist and interweave. In research terms, what does this mean, how might it be achieved and what new insights might work/play hybridity afford?

Research methodologies in the field of performance studies might provide an answer insofar as they offer “performative-sensitive ways of knowing” (Conquergood 1998: 26) that contribute to an epistemological pluralism. These ways of knowing pose a challenge to conventional methods of knowledge production and yet, over time and with considerable effort from pioneers in the field, have become accepted as valid processes of inquiry that take into account the vagaries of the subject matter and its particularities. Researchers of contemporary performance and researchers of EDMC find commonality in their commitment to notions of liveness and bodily presence,<sup>1</sup> the primacy of “being there”, or what James Thompson calls a “horizontal method for researching” (2009: 134). In this model, the researcher is situated alongside colleagues, participants and audience members, acknowledging that they are part of the transaction that is under investigation. The gap between researcher and researched is diminished and relations are distributed along a horizontal axis rather than a vertical one. Many of us conducting nightlife fieldwork would subscribe to this concept of horizontality and recognise it as a means of validating and harnessing our own felt responses to the events we experience.

## RESEARCH METHODS IN PERFORMANCE: AN OVERVIEW

THE DISCIPLINE OF PERFORMANCE studies has long since recognised that performance does not only occur within theatre buildings. The work of Richard Schechner from the 1960s onwards has been particularly influential in demonstrating the interdisciplinary scope of performance. Starting with a continuum that encompasses play-games-theatre-ritual

(Schechner 1969: 85), it is now widely understood that the category of performance can be conceived as a web that incorporates rites, ceremonies, shamanism, popular entertainment, art-making processes and, for our purposes here, festival (Schechner 1977). Whilst most would agree that not everything *is* performance, most things can be studied *as* performance (Schechner 2002: 30) and it is the knotty paradox of *is/as* performance that characterises my own research territory.

My fieldwork is conducted along two routes. First, with my company ...floorSpace... I devise work for both festival and club spaces that *is* performance, recognised as such by virtue of its deliberate scenography, dramaturgy and choreography (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> As well



FIGURE 1. ...FLOORSPACE... PERFORM *TEA PARTY* AT SHAMANIA FESTIVAL, UK.  
PHOTO CREDIT: ALICE O'GRADY (2008).

as devising and directing this work, I also occasionally perform with the company as a way of understanding the practice from within. With much of the material being improvised and the work co-authored between performers and festivalgoers, the opportunities for play within this framework are vast. Adopting the role of player-performer becomes a critical research tool and a way of generating embodied knowledge about how play and performance operate on the dance floor. The second arm of my research involves me considering what goes on in festival and club spaces *as* performance; displays of behaviour that provide insight into how cultural codes and conventions are constructed, shaped and negotiated.

Dwelling within the in-betweenness of performance studies calls for a suitably diverse set of research methods that need to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate its range. To take this into account, there has been a surge of creative approaches to research practices that challenge conventional research imperatives. As Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson point out, there has been an attempt in performance studies to develop imaginative methodologies that “trouble the boundaries between creative practice and critical analysis, between epistemology and ontology” (2011: 2). As part of a broader international trend known as “the practice turn” in the 1960s, performance studies has witnessed a paradigm shift where the “scholar-poet” re-emerges as the “practitioner-researcher” (Kershaw et al. 2011: 63). Towards the end of the 2000s, “practice as research” (PaR) became an established and widely recognised method of enquiry both at doctoral and post-doctoral level (see PARIP 2008), with a number of scholarly texts published on the subject within a short time.<sup>3</sup>

The discipline is now awash with terms such as “practice as research”, “practice-based research”, “practice-led research” and “research-led practice”. With slightly different inflections, they all indicate the “radical dis-location of ways of knowing” (Kershaw 2009: 107) that mirror the shift away from logocentric and modernist paradigms and towards practice and action-based investigation (Kershaw 2009). Practice as research has a tendency to be collaborative and is characteristically diverse (Kershaw 2011). In line with much EDMC research, it engages with notions of space and identity, spectatorship and participation, bodies and technology. It can involve a mixture of processes and outputs including live performance, writing, online material, video, DVD, observation, participation, intervention and site-specific work. In line with this diversity and as previously outlined, my own fieldwork combines two distinct but complementary approaches, namely making performance work for festival spaces and inhabiting the festival space as a participant in order to reflect on the experience of it from within. Here, play is used both as the focus of my research and as a research methodology. The methodology involves me being at play in order to better understand it and also uses play strategies for performance pieces that operate in a more formal, structural sense for onlookers and participants.

As Kershaw and Nicholson point out, in performance research it is common for relationships between the researcher and the researched to be “fluid, improvised and responsive” (2011: 2). Roles, functions and distinctions become blurry and subject to change. This is a situation that all EDMC scholars would readily recognise, operating as they do within settings that prioritise relationships, friendships and networks. As a festival

player-practitioner-researcher I occupy both the role of researcher and of the researched, oscillating between these two positions and, at times, situating myself within them contemporaneously. My embodied experience of festivals is a critical tool for informing and shaping the manner in which I subsequently devise playful performances that are created to augment the festivaesque experience for others. First hand sensations of thrill, excitement, risk, transcendence, flow, connectivity, unity and so on are reflective experiences from which to build new creative work. This pluralistic approach, whilst not without its challenges and pitfalls, offers a complex and nuanced understanding of festival play and performance and the sense of personal enjoyment and fulfilment it can provoke. Dwelling in the play mode and revelling in its immersive properties is an indispensable tool for understanding how the innate qualities of play are harnessed through performance and offer a potential route for promoting social well-being and cohesion.

The shift towards “performative research” (Haseman 2006), which presents an alternative to qualitative and quantitative paradigms, indicates a post-binary approach where process, action, creativity and reflexivity are key components to generating flexible understandings *in* the world (as opposed to fixed knowledge *of* the world). This again reflects a similar stance and approach taken within the field of EDMC scholarship. Practice as research (PaR) in the performing arts “pursues hybrid enquiries combining creative doing with reflexive being” (Kershaw 2011: 64). It presents fundamental challenges to established processes of knowledge-making in the academe by placing creativity at the heart of its research methods and by allowing those creative acts to embrace contradictions. In my own practice with ...floorSpace..., being immersed in the creative moment generates new knowledge about the processes of playful engagement that cannot be gathered from observation alone. New insights concerning the role of intuition, instinct, non-verbal signals, the dynamics of group behaviour, the psychical dimensions of space, all come about through practice. To agree with Barbara Bolt, out of creative practice comes “a very specific sort of knowing, a knowing that arises through handling materials in practice” (2007: 29). Theory arising from practice where emergent knowledge enters into dialogue with existing practical and theoretical paradigms—what Bolt calls “praxical knowledge” (2007: 34)—is particularly useful for scholars like myself straddling the domains of performance studies and EDMC. The textures, sounds, colours, smells, spaces, feelings, conversations and encounters experienced during a festival (and during a festival performance) constitute an intimate and personal “handling of material” from which my own theorising emerges in conjunction with existing frameworks and previous experiences.

Personal and intimate knowledge of play can only be achieved by placing oneself firmly within the play frame. In researching play one must be prepared to allow play to take its course and to embrace the risks, emotions and primary experiences that ensue. In 2008 at Shamania, a small-scale psytrance festival in the north of the UK, I took the decision to conduct fieldwork from a position of player-performer. Having devised a walkabout performance piece with ...floorSpace... entitled *Way to Make a Living*, my understanding of how the show operated within the festival space was predicated predominantly on external



FIGURE 2. ...FLOORSPACE... PERFORM *WAY TO MAKE A LIVING* AT SHAMANIA FESTIVAL, UK. A PIECE OF PRACTICE LED RESEARCH THAT INVOLVED THE AUTHOR AS PERFORMER (CENTRE) AS WELL AS ARTISTIC DIRECTOR. PHOTO CREDIT: ALICE O'GRADY (2008).

observation. On several occasions I followed the company as they performed, documenting the work using still image and video, and recording reactions from the crowd. I watched performers closely as they interacted with festivalgoers, and subsequently developed ideas about how particular strategies for engagement operated and how effectively they had been applied in practice. A key element of the company's work was to develop a sense of *complicité* within the ensemble—a shared understanding of practice that develops between company members when they work and play together from within the performance and negotiate ways forward through an implicit appreciation of each other's physical presence. Full appreciation of how this worked in practice from the performer's perspective could not be gained by observation alone. Nor could it be achieved by interviewing the performers and participants or by analysing the video documentation and still imagery (although all of those methods were adopted as well). The handling of this material could only be done through embodied practice, a type of knowing that is held by the body. It was not until I performed with the company myself and became a playing/working part of the ensemble

that I was able then to truly understand what the research “felt” like.

My appreciation of how strategies for engagement might be deployed developed, as did my implicit understanding of what playing through performance might mean and how it was achieved through affect. At Shamania, we headed out as an ensemble into the dark fields and dance tents of the festival site dressed in sharp suits and armed with brief cases, fake ID cards, toy phones and a range of tightly choreographed set pieces intended to baffle, amaze and engage the dancing crowds. The intensity of performing demanding physical work in a festival site where people’s expectations, interpretations and responses can be wildly unpredictable was exhilarating to say the least. I experienced at first hand the considerable risk performers are exposed to working in this environment, managing a range of audience responses in role without breaking stride and coping with the practical challenges of performing in deep mud, darkness and limited space. As well as giving me invaluable insight into the mechanics of *complicité*, the experience was also enormous fun and cemented some very special relationships—a common outcome from both EDMC scholarship and performance studies that is rarely discussed in writing—in case having fun in some way invalidates or trivialises the research.

Acknowledging the presence of the affective researcher allows the play of imagination to inform and shape the research design and alters both the process of research and its outcomes. Binaries that separate intuition and intellectualism, emotional experiences and scholarly knowledge are effectively dismantled. There were elements of *Way to Make a Living* that I came to “know” primarily through the body rather than through the distillation of language. This knowing later informed much more ambitious creative projects that took greater risks in terms of audience engagement and processes of interaction. As Kershaw and Nicholson suggest, “dwelling in the ambiguous space between binaries invites inventiveness” (2011: 2), and it is this inventiveness that characterises fieldwork conducted in performance and EDMC studies as both require from the researcher flexibility, responsiveness, adaptability and an ability to improvise as the ebb and flow of the event, performance or festival develops.

Research in this vein mirrors the paradigm shift “between modernism and postmodernism, between a world organised around the (apparent) stability of binaries and one in which multiplicity, complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity rule” (Kershaw 2011: 84). It can be understood as analogous with the Deleuzian rhizome in which any point can be linked and where there are “multiple entryways and exits” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21). The rhizome is “an interstitial space, open and vulnerable where meanings and understandings are interrogated and ruptured” (Irwin and Springgay in Cahnmann-Taylor 2008: 106). In a similar way, underground festivals operate as spaces of play where meanings are malleable, liminal zones that offer the promise of subjunctivity and alterity (O’Grady 2012). They are ambiguous spaces where codes and binaries break down and people playfully adapt conventions of identity, dress and behaviour to construct new spaces of radical conviviality. The multitude of options, possibilities and outcomes this presents offers a fluctuating terrain for the researcher that resists precise capture but offers tantalising potentiality.



## THE MESSINESS OF RESEARCHING PLAY

PLAY IS NEVER STRAIGHTFORWARD; night time play even less so. It twists and turns, slipping through the cracks of experience, eluding fixity and confinement. It is an inveterate shape-shifter. Play can mutate from light to dark in an instant. Play can be highly visible, consensual and mutually defined or it can lurk in the shadows, making mischief and overturning rules as soon as they are made. Play does not always announce itself and players don't always come clean about how and why they are playing. Researching play, therefore, requires a suitably malleable set of strategies that can cope with such slipperiness and deal with play's innate ambiguities. To research play we have to accept that the process is likely to be messy and that, as researchers, we are likely to, and should, find ourselves embroiled in the chaos and confusion that play can provoke. We should embrace the sense of embodied immersion that play demands and deploy it as a fundamental research tool. Pedro Rebelo and Franziska Schroeder suggest that performance technologies reclaim the messiness rejected by modernism as they deliberately set out to subvert order and celebrate deviance. For them, performers function as the instigators of the "messiness" of play (2006: 6-8). Subversion, deviance and messiness are terms that hover close to any study of nightlife and are unavoidable components of thinking about how we might research play in this context.

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution. . . . In the swamp are the areas of greatest human concern (Schön 1983: 42).

My practice falls under the umbrella term of applied performance, that is performance work that is applied to a specific context or group of participants to achieve a particular outcome or shift in attitude, belief or behaviour. As it is people-centred and context-specific, applied performance practice and research operates in inherently unstable, messy, uncertain and complex settings (Hughes et al. 2011: 193). This is particularly true in the swampy lowlands and muddy fields of the UK festival scene. Traditionally, applied performance is participatory and involves members of the public or specified groups as constituent parts of the research. The participation is normally predicated on a set of agreed parameters and shared outcomes but applied performance in a festival setting is very different. Audiences are usually accidental, perhaps randomly wandering past or becoming part of the performance piece without knowing its underlying intentions or status as a research project. Participants are self-selecting and diverse, their input unpredictable and their responses difficult to capture.

In work devised specially for festival spaces, passers-by choose to become physically involved for a host of different reasons—exhibitionism, curiosity and sheer exuberance included. Their reasons for participating are as varied as the behaviours they display. Sometimes they become involved unintentionally, failing to automatically place or "read" the work, placed as it is outside the framing architecture of conventional theatre space. This was certainly true for *The Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste*, a performance made for

the Environments for Encounter project and funded by the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK) as part of the Beyond Text strategic programme.<sup>4</sup> Here we created a piece of relational performance that was predicated on playful improvisation and the trading of secrets in return for treats.<sup>5</sup> The opulent space was created as a deliberate contrast to the festival site. Festivalgoers were invited to step into the play world, to interact with the courtly characters and to join them in the quest to find Madame Fantaisiste for whom they had been waiting for over 300 years.

During *The Heavenly Court of Madame Fantaisiste*, the two girls seen in Figure 3 had been walking through the festival and unwittingly found themselves embroiled in an interactive, durational performance lasting for well over an hour as their bemused and reluctant friends watched from a distance, convinced that the two had been “chosen” on the strength of their appearance. In reality, the girls were initially drawn in by the performers and enticed onto the stage area where they became enveloped by the fictive world that had been created for them. Their involvement was instinctual and playful. They grabbed at grapes that were gently dangled out of reach just above their heads by a performer suspended in the trees. They coyly gave away snippets of information about themselves in return for luxurious



FIGURE 3. URBAN ANGELS CIRCUS ENGAGING FESTIVAL-GOERS IN *THE HEAVENLY COURT OF MADAME FANTAISISTE* AT KENDAL CALLING, UK. THE PIECE WAS COMMISSIONED FOR THE “ENVIRONMENTS FOR ENCOUNTER” PROJECT FOR BEYOND TEXT. PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE BONSER, COPYRIGHT BEYOND TEXT (2010).

chocolates and were encouraged to divulge secrets in return for more. They allowed themselves to be teased, to be treated and to take part in an elaborate game of willing make believe. Their participation was not shaped by the research agenda as they did not notice any of the extended research team who were engaged in note-taking, photographing, filming and interviewing their friends about what was unfolding. The two participants were made aware of its status as a research project once their participation was over and, with some embarrassment, gave rather guarded responses to a follow up interview that ultimately failed to capture the rich and sustained engagement they had had with the piece. The manner in which they responded in interview not only underlines the limitations of such data collection in these environments but also reminds us of the need to find methods that articulate lived experience more effectively. The girls' actual, embodied play revealed more than their self-conscious answers to pre-formulated questions could ever hope to.

While unpredictability is a crucial quality of all theatre and performance research, it is particularly apparent in work involving participants. Instability and randomness is accentuated within festival spaces, as they are largely unscripted, improvised and subject to fluctuation due to the way they are populated spaces where high jinx and hedonistic behaviour is the *lingua franca* and where people's behaviour may be significantly altered due to the influence of intoxicants. To deal with these potential fluctuations, improvisation becomes a research tactic as well as a building block of performance practice that constitutes the research. Considering the role of "decomposition" as a key principle of applied performance research, Hughes et al. describe the point at which moments of practice and research "disintegrate or are unmade as part of an encounter with exceptional experience, and positions these moments as a troubling and potentially enriching part of a research process" (Hughes et al. 2011: 188). Decomposition in this instance connotes processes of regeneration where, in effect, the project as originally conceived may dissolve, thereby potentiating new and unanticipated directions.

For cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner, "knowing is a process not a product" (1966: 72). Processes are by their nature intuitive and exploratory and do not always follow simple linear directions. Practice as research is "innovative process" in action (Kershaw 2011: 64). In PaR, it is usual to move through cycles of doing and reflecting on doing that, in turn, create a "hermeneutic spiral" of progress and understanding (Trimingham 2001: 42). This spiralling model became an intrinsic part of the fieldwork conducted for *Environments for Encounter*. *The Heavenly Court* was toured to three different festivals (Kendal Calling 2010, Bestival 2010 and Cactus 2011) and went through a number of iterations over the course of two years, following the hermeneutic spiral of understanding that Trimingham describes. The cycle of doing and reflecting happened not only within each festival site, with the show being performed usually three times over the course of the weekend, but also between festivals as the work responded to changing environments, locations and cultural contexts. Reflections, both group and individual, were filmed on site immediately before and after each performance and during rehearsal sessions between events that were often booked months apart. Participants who had engaged with the performance were selected



FIGURE 4. FILMING PARTICIPATION IN *THE HEAVENLY COURT OF MADAME FANTASISTE* AT BESTIVAL, ENVIRONMENTS FOR ENCOUNTER PROJECT FOR BEYOND TEXT. PHOTO CREDIT: MICHAEL SEYMOUR, COPYRIGHT BEYOND TEXT (2010).

for interview *in situ* and their responses digitally recorded. To meet the demands and rigours of ethical review, participants were given information sheets detailing the purpose and intention of the research. They were required to sign consent forms and to respond to questions around anonymity and confidentiality—all necessary processes but hardly conducive to the lively atmosphere of a music festival. As we did not want the research imperative to interfere with their participation, consent was gained after participants had left the performance space. If they agreed to the interview, we could use their responses as case study material. If they declined, then we were left with still imagery and our own interpretations of their engagement.

Conversations that emerged informally at the festival once the adrenalin of performing had subsided were transcribed retrospectively. Meetings were held under canvas and around camp fires, footage was reviewed and uploaded onto extra rugged hard drives, notes were scribbled, photographs taken, stories shared and added to the mix. This process was far from linear. We became immersed in a constant cycle of what became known as “re-hearse/searching”: revisiting what we thought we knew, narrating to each other what had occurred during each show, how we felt about what had taken place and how these insights might bring to life new ideas for subsequent performances.

Reflexivity can be understood as one of those “artist-like processes” (Steier 1991: 4), where there is continual looping and iteration between the research material and the new responses it generates, which is then fed back into the practice, and this was certainly the case within our project. When we began *Environments for Encounter*, the research imperative was to investigate how changes in festival context and culture might alter participant behaviour and the performed outcome of the piece. However, as the project developed, it became apparent that other factors played a much greater role in determining how the piece was received. Where the performance was located within the festival site profoundly influenced how people responded. Located under a vast oak tree at Kendal Calling gave the piece a magical feel and invested the characters with ethereal qualities, which in turn gave the ensuing interactions a mischievous, spritely flavour. By contrast, being located on a busy thoroughfare between the main arena and the campsite at Bestival made for more raucous and robust exchanges with larger crowds gathering, who demanded greater spectacle from performers and participants alike. Other factors including prevailing weather conditions, the time of day and whether the show took place at the very start or towards the end of the festival when tiredness and festival fatigue have set in, all altered significantly the way participants took part.

An acceptance of the inherent messiness of play drove this project. We knew that our findings would only come about through allowing play to happen in an organic, unfettered fashion with participating individuals who brought their own play agendas into the play world. The ensemble improvised at various times with exhibitionists and introverts, hordes of young children and groups of over-excited teenagers, intoxicated adults in various states of altered consciousness, festival virgins and festival veterans. Each encounter provided a moment of decomposition and regeneration that has seen the performance develop into quite new and unanticipated areas. What became apparent through practice was that the performance offered bespoke opportunities for human intimacy and one-to-one exchange within an environment constructed intentionally to stimulate the imagination. At this point the therapeutic potential of the performance began to take seed. *The Heavenly Court* has since been used by Urban Angels Circus as a vehicle for working with mental health patients to facilitate their communication skills and to provide them with a safe environment in which to play creatively. Now that the performance piece exists as a commercial product, the company is able to explore new outlets for the work and can seek to maximize its capacity for personal, bespoke experience that began within the festival context. Twelve months after the final performance the iterative process continued as the new understandings generated in those fields across the UK and the European mainland spiralled off into new directions and found new applications.

## FESTIVALS, PLAY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF FLOW

EDMC scholars have established that clubbing can be read as a form of play (Malbon 1999; O’Grady 2012) and argue this form of play offers a route through which the sensation of flow might be experienced. Spanning the course of a weekend, festivals frame themselves as hedonistic playgrounds where the carnivalesque attitude predominates. They offer an

extended period of play for participants and often provide activities such as roller discos, fair ground attractions, mazes, face painting, fancy dress opportunities and so on to heighten this aspect. Being at play, letting loose, cutting free are all sensations central to the experience of festival. Reaching the point at which a festivalgoer feels they are able to experience a sense of flow in the dance space is perhaps the ultimate goal. Ecstatic experiences on the dance floor can feel “oceanic” (Malbon 1999: 106) and clubbers can feel swept up by the swell of the crowd as they relinquish their sense of individuality and allow themselves “to go with the flow” and lose themselves in the intensity of the moment. As flow theorist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi states, those experiencing flow,

concentrate their attention on a limited stimulus field, forget personal problems, lose their sense of time and of themselves, feel competent and in control, and have a sense of harmony and union with their surroundings. . . . Some people emphasise the movement of their bodies; others try to maximise emotional communication; still others respond to the social dimensions of the activity (1975: 182-3).

Whilst a sense of control and competence is emphasised within his modelling of flow, an alternative interpretation of the oceanic flow of the club experience is the category of play known as “illinx” (Caillois 2001). Illinx is experienced as vertigo, dizziness or euphoria and is produced by certain types of games that induce a temporary disruption of perception and “inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind” (Caillois 2001: 23). This form of flow is associated with being out of control, of revelling in the very sensation of letting go.

As with play, true understanding of the flow state comes from our direct experience of it. Being fully immersed and losing our sense of self, either through harmonious concentration or through relinquishing control, provides a route through which flow might be achieved. However, the experience of flow in any context is far from automatic. As an ethnographer of the flow experience, the frustrating reality is that I often find myself anxious or edgy at the point where those around me are experiencing the opposite feelings of immersion, pleasure and play. At the start of any EDM event I can find myself locked into an internal dialogue that sets about analysing what is occurring to the extent that I can find myself psychically dis-located, an external observer rather than a fully engaged part of the dancing community. Scrutinising how the space has been laid out, assessing the quality of the aesthetics, noting the interaction between sonic and visual elements, identifying prevalent styles of dress or changes in musical structure—all useful activities in “scientific” research terms perhaps but hardly conducive to immersing in play and achieving a state of flow. This intense period of close attention does ease as the night unfolds and I allow the physical sensations of being part of the dancing crowd to draw me in. However, it is perhaps an inevitable consequence of researching play and flow that a set of questions begin to interrupt my participation precisely at the time when I should be “going with the flow”. Do I belong anymore? If I do belong, on whose terms is that belonging constructed? On what grounds is my belonging predicated? Do I belong as a researcher or as a participant and to what extent are people

aware of this potentially troubling duality? Rather than allowing this difficulty to blight the research, acknowledging it and finding ways around and through it are critical.

Buckland's (2002) approach in *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World Making* is useful here, as she teases out some of the issues in conducting ethnographic research in gay clubs in downtown Manhattan when she herself had used these types of clubs as the site of her own world-making before they became the object of her research. She states "the only way to begin to get to grips with any physical practice is to do it" (2002: 9-10) and thus immerses herself in the culture and engages all her senses to experience it holistically. The lens of performance is particularly useful in that it allows her "to zoom in on what these social actors do and zoom out to explore its effects" (Buckland 2002: 9). Whilst Buckland's method suggests an optical narrowing and broadening of focus, my own approach is predicated more on physical embodiment. Rather than zooming in and out, it is perhaps better described through processes of characterisation. In performance terms, the idea that an actor can embody dual identities through characterisation is common. As an actor, when I take on a role and "become" a character I am both "not me" and "not not me" simultaneously (Schechner 1985). The double negative here indicates that, whilst we may be adopting the voice, physicality and emotional register of a fictional someone else, we are still "us" at the core. Whilst there may be some personal sense of regret that I can never entirely switch off my internal critical dialogue, there is a different sense of flow that can be achieved when cognition, physicality and experience work collectively. Flow is not only achievable during play activities. It can emanate from an interweaving of labour-leisure that is easily identified by those of us conducting nightlife fieldwork. To return to Jacks for a moment and ignoring the gendered specifications of his narrative whilst we do so, what is important is not the category of activity but the idea that the individual "pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing" (Jacks 1932: 1).

## RESEARCHER'S BODY: IMMERSION AND INTERRUPTION

WE FIND A LIVING body that inhabits situations intimately; it interweaves the realms as a matter of being, and is often lost out there in the textures, the senses, the flesh, the histories and the meanings that come from the flowing excesses of the lifeworld. Yet it also carries personal history and prereflective sediments of historical meanings that shape its openness. One could say that embodying is where being and knowing meet (Todres 2007: 20).

In the discipline of performance studies, the body adopts a central and critical role in terms of how we understand performing, spectating and making meaning. Where conventional philosophy established itself on "a profound somatophobia" (Grosz 1994: 5), performance research prioritises embodied knowing and a "noetic sense of the immediate, the intuitive and the bodily" (Freeman 2010: xiv). If we are to understand festival as performance then we cannot ignore the researcher's body in relation to these processes. For Parker-

Starbuck “the researcher’s body becomes a conduit through which ideas are discovered and presented” (2011: 223). Buckland describes the body (both hers and that of others in the club with her) as “the prime reference point” (2002: 10). For her, the body is the “location of experience and knowledge” (2002: 10). It offers her snapshots of experience rather than conclusive analyses. As a researcher who is quite literally out in the field, acknowledging the significance of my own bodily experience of an event is critical. Whilst immersed in the festival as participant, I deploy a type of mindfulness that takes into account my own bodily engagement with my surroundings, internally noting how my senses are responding to unfolding events. As a performer-player-researcher, how images, sounds, spaces, people, ideas are encountered first hand forms a dynamic narrative that is later recorded either digitally using a flip cam or in written form during the festival itself. This autoethnographic approach incorporates drawings, notes, sketches, snippets of dialogue as well as more conventional prose-based accounts of what was experienced and is accompanied, where possible, by still image and video footage. In certain situations where documentation of this kind is either prohibited or inappropriate, it is always the primary experience of each event and the multi-perspectival reflections that emerge from it that provide the critical data. Creative responses to the lifeworld of the festival space provide a type of research documentation that is rich, nuanced, layered and takes into account the rhizomatic nature of the event itself, where Deleuzian creative lines of flight might bring about new ideas, new concepts and new modes of understanding.

Immersion in play produces a particular type of knowing that is personalised, intimate and unmediated. It offers a type of knowing from within, a practical handling of lived experience that cannot be achieved by other means. However, for the fieldworker there exists a tension between doing and reflecting that is common in other fields where knowledge is developed through practice. Paul Allain advises against any attempt at simultaneity in this respect and instead favours total immersion with a mindfulness of the processes of reflection that must, by necessity, come later. Talking primarily about performer training, he considers how the practitioner-researcher must be able to navigate and negotiate different modes of being in the work as it unfolds or being able to stand back from it when one has emerged on the other side.

We need to be able to train with conviction and practise without inhibiting analysis, so that when we emerge the other side, when we stand back and judge we can speak with embodied insights. Reflection can barely be done within the flow of the work, because it is always enough just to do. We need to allow ourselves to be immersed, and yet also to know when and how to reflect (Allain 2006: 24).

Similarly, the internal processes of knowing when to immerse and when to reflect are pivotal in festival research. Unlike other nightlife research, where participation in an event may last approximately 6 to 8 hours and reflection can be done relatively soon after the event has ended, festivals occur over a longer period of time, even up to a week. Arguably, to be immersed for this length of time means opportunities for *in situ* reflection may be



lost. On the other hand, periodically interrupting immersion in the event in order to adopt a reflective stance fundamentally alters how the festival is experienced. Again, in relation to performance practice, according to Pitches (2011: 143), what is “paramount is that the dialectical tension between strategic thinking and experiential engagement is managed both with consciousness and care”. The careful and conscious management of engagement and reflection characterises my own fieldwork and yet these two processes are rarely so neatly divisible. In the messy, unpredictable, hedonistic, contingent playing space of the festival, doing, being and reflecting tend to merge, blend and fold in on each other in new and surprising ways. Navigating this shifting territory and making productive use of that journey becomes synonymous with the task of conducting research in this context.

As many EDMC scholars identify with the culture they research and situate themselves as participants of a particular scene, tacit knowledge becomes an integral part of the research experience. Tacit knowledge is developed through experience where “we know more than we can tell” (Polanyi 1983: 4). When we know something tacitly we are unconsciously aware of things before we can consciously attend to them (McKinney and Iball 2011: 119), and this unconscious knowing shapes how we behave, think and feel in the club or festival environment and filters our experience in particular ways that must then be deconstructed. Schön states that skilled practitioners habitually move between modes of tacit “knowing in action” and “reflection in action” to develop their practice (Schön 1983: 49,54). What is critical is how we make that tacit knowledge accessible to others for the purpose of research. For Robin Nelson, testimony of witnesses or “experiencers” is key (2006: 113), although clearly insufficient as a stand-alone methodology. For him, embodied knowledge must be brought into dynamic dialogue with other forms of knowledge that arise from critical reflection on the practice and its conceptual framework (2006: 114). The conscious triangulation between embodied or tacit knowledge, reflection on practice and reconsideration of existing theoretical frameworks would seem to provide a particularly secure underpinning to such fieldwork and addresses the concerns of those who doubt the validity of “doing research” in parties, clubs and festivals.

Undoubtedly tacit knowledge raises the problem of what Freeman calls “ineffable content” (2010: 2), that is those feelings, concepts or experiences that cannot be adequately explained in words and can only be known internally by individuals. As he points out, “in the context of practice based research ineffability is premised on the notion of embodiment as an existential condition; one in which the researcher’s performing (doing) body is the subjective source for experience” (Freeman 2010: 3). And here lies the tension. Whilst the felt experience may well be a valuable aspect of research, it does not necessarily provide us with a straightforward or linear method of articulating and disseminating our findings. Instead it entangles us in creative processes of being, doing and reflecting on being and doing that can be complex, affective and inherently messy. In a changing research environment where new methodologies, practices and approaches are becoming recognised and validated, it becomes imperative that the most appropriate methods of articulating new knowledge are found. In our postmodern world of mashups and multimedia, interactivity

and interdisciplinarity, a variety of platforms, methods and media need to be put to use. As researchers it is our responsibility to make explicit that which is implicit, to reveal our experiences and to make them accessible in the pursuit of developing future understanding however partial, pluralistic and unstable that might be.

## CONCLUSION

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL, PRACTICAL AND ethical challenges of researching play within the context of festivals are varied. Festivals are dynamic spaces that are unpredictable, chaotic at times and framed as temporary zones of licensed carnival, hedonism and heightened behaviour. People at play generally do not want that play disturbed and do not want to be confronted with questionnaires, cameras and voice recorders. Interrupting play in order to reflect upon it destabilises it and threatens to collapse it entirely. This presents a challenge for the researcher whose task it is to gather data and come back from the field with “evidence”, and so new tactics are required that implicate the researcher’s body profoundly. Traditional research methods are largely inappropriate in festival settings and alternative approaches are required that challenge conventional ideas of knowledge production. Methods developed in Performance Studies research help close the gap between the researcher and the researched, placing emphasis on embodied knowledge, participation and praxis. These approaches are pertinent for EDMC scholarship, where the researcher is often deeply embedded in the context and communities in question and grappling with ideas of space, identity and co-presence. Performative research and practice-based methodologies locate the researcher firmly within the research frame and acknowledge embodiment as a legitimate and insightful way of generating new knowledge. Using play as both my research focus and as my methodology provides a unique perspective on the lived experience of festival play and the role it currently has in contemporary culture. However, this approach is not without its difficulties and, in the festival context, problems around immersion and flow come into sharp focus. Conducting fieldwork in these contexts, one must constantly negotiate the shifting sands of the physical and psychical terrain and embrace the questions it throws up around identity, identification and participation. Rather than treating these issues as distinct, impermeable categories that result in the creation of unhelpful binaries such as work and play, immersion and interruption, order and chaos, what is preferable is that we treat them as organic processes that may fluctuate over the course of the festival. Furthermore, just as the festival can provide a space for the playful reworking of identities, it is possible to see how playing betwixt and between states can be an effective research strategy that invites creativity and imagination and one which is fit for purpose.

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## NOTES

- 1 Philip Auslander's work (2008) is useful here, as is Peggy Phelan's (1993).
- 2 Since 2006, I have been making performances for festivals with my performance company ... floorSpace... The company is comprised of a fluctuating ensemble of undergraduate students from the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds, UK. Performances devised by the company are mobile, walkabout shows that are highly participatory and co-improvised with festivalgoers. The company has performed at a range of small-scale UK festivals including Shamania, Beatherder, Nozstock, Magic Loungeabout and Kendal Calling.
- 3 Alleque et al. (2009), Riley and Hunter (2009), Smith and Dean (2009), Freeman (2010) and Kershaw and Nicholson (2011).
- 4 Further information on the Beyond Text strategic programme can be found at <[www.beyondtext.ac.uk](http://www.beyondtext.ac.uk)>. A short documentary of the Environments for Encounter project can be viewed at <<http://youtube.com/watch?v=AddLA252VV4>>
- 5 The concept of relational performance draws heavily on the work of Nicholas Bourriard and his idea of relational aesthetics (2002). This concept was developed as part of the activities of the Beyond Text research network Festival Performance as a State of Encounter that ran between 2008–2010 and was a precursor to the Environments for Encounter project.

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