

Let-act: Challenges of Collaborative Multimedia Performances

Dr Zlatko Baracskai

University of the West of England
Bristol, UK

zlatko.baracskai@uwe.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper is born out of experiences in technical and artistic avenues of multimedia art. The plurality of media often calls for collaboration of artists and technicians to work together towards sometimes undefined goals, to experiment. Certain recurrences in such endeavors have led to formulating ideas that seem to have a broader applicability in contemporary art critique. A performance characterized by proposed trends I shall call a let-act and I will try to paint a picture of how inevitable it actually is. The reasons for choosing an initially vague name are many and will be unfolding in the body of this essay. Suffice it to say for now, that the main difference to a traditional performance is the dissolution of content significance. In this sense I am proposing that there are major changes happening as performers publicly present art that goes beyond being fixed, beyond open, into a new realm. This new art can also be described as arbitrary amalgamations that tick the boxes of funding bodies, and that refrain from challenging their audiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

In preparing this paper the observations described relate to projects that will remain anonymous in order to allow this writing to have the charm of a semi-fictional prophecy, freely using extrapolation and exaggeration. It would be futile to try and escape the personal perspective and emotional relationship to a *let-act*; the former keeps unfolding and the latter is likely to remain best described as love born out of frustration. Thus I hope that contrasting views and implied judgments will leave the readers free to neutrally observe the idea of a *let-act*, and see if they have ever encountered something similar. Crucially the proposed criticisms and correlations do not imply causation, they aim to induce reflection and inspiration.

2. RECEPTION

Audiences attending a *let-act* may greatly vary in background and expertise. Significant majority is drawn by

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the invitation to attend novel artistic expression through technology or by being active or explorative in the field. Hosting institutions or chosen locations may attract local communities attracted to the idea of site-specific productions. Personal acquaintances of the collaborators and organizers form the crucial supportive base, as the popularity of the *let-act* artist does not attract fans in large numbers.

2.1 Event

A *let-act* is an artistic production that involves collaboration of diverse artists and is often conceived and produced in an immediately preceding workshop. This is the main reason that audiences of a *let-act* are rarely attracted to the actual artists. Acquaintances and regular venue visitors might form a large portion of the audience joined by random oddity seekers. These events depend thus largely on the institutional support securing adequate performance spaces and thus promote themselves as active, explorative and inclusive to the community.

2.2 Duration

The temporal structure of a *let-act* does not necessarily conform to characteristics of traditional performance for seated audience. Forthcoming of the artists from backstage or behind the curtains is often obliterated by the audience attending the completion of construction, last-minute implementations and a technical rehearsal of what is to come embodied in restarts due to system failures. Audiences may arrive at different times so the build-up becomes gradual and casual. In this way the audience is free to come and go, pay attention or be distracted at any point in time – a freedom and self-focus they much enjoy. In order for a *let-act* to truly flourish there should be no necessary or scheduled termination of the event. People having accommodation at the venue for a few days might indeed provide for true culmination of artistic experience and social interaction. Indeed, I suggest that the artistic experience is removed from the artistic traditions and is induced through the attendance and self-awareness of audiences. Art has thus gone through the phases of communal ceremony, self-exhibition, definition of content, reinterpretation of most successful content, and opening of the forms to finally reach the point of mere organization of attendance.

2.3 Value

In proportion with the explosion of novel technologies there is a shift of value from engagement with artistic traditions to the, bluntly put, novelty in art. As an example, a virtuoso violin performance can be widely appreciated due to obvious physical effort and acoustic craft as well as due to basic acquaintance with musical tradition. As a contrast to that, presenting intermittent noises from chaotic behavior of feedback based audio circuits would be much more difficult to understand or appreciate for general audiences. Thus every outing relies on some and possibly remote tradition, and when a tradition cannot offer value to audiences, then beyond novelty they establish appreciation through corporeal and social values. Absence of tradition supports the ongoing affirmation of superficiality in culture, which mass-production necessitates. The value is thus removed from art and finds refuge in the presentation context and description-value. Thus, the symbolic counterpart of art defeats its actual presence.

The true face of this transformation is the convergence to agreement, the uninhibited activity of the psychological mechanism of seeking cognitive ease. Audiences tend to assume a single truthful reading, which is to be approached through averaging of experiences. This average of preferences makes the quality of art proportional to the breadth of following, liking if you will. The engagement born out of this collective interpretation is what the artists call feedback, which is the democratic vote of the audience. The impact of feedback will be discussed in the chapter on artists, so let me now further discuss the new values that are characteristic a *let-act*.

2.4 Novelty

Audiences often seek novelty. Beyond the obvious novelty of multimedia tools we are looking at the novelty of yet another moment and its forthcoming descriptions. Also, *let-act* artists tend to open up their work allowing audiences to become collaborators in the event through an act of judgment and/or interactive settings. Artists being thus servants is historically omnipresent while their autonomy was arguably shorter lived, and so we can witness them having to serve novelty. Artists are servants again, less so monetarily and more so psychologically, as the *let-act* is a form that miraculously avoids criticism or despise. Audiences sacrifice their critical stance for the symbolic value of, and the actually agreeable, attendance. That is arguably worth doing in a disconnected society. Critical approach is thus threatened with exclusion, as the authenticity of social cohesion is winning; we must be equal now. So the novelty becomes a safe post-hoc declaration of a social reconnection.

The transformation under discussion is thus a clear departure from dominance of unidirectional passive observation of events on stage. The traditional setting where the performance is born out of centuries of developmental dialectic and requires decades of isolated study is actually alienating for both the audiences and the artists. Tradi-

tions furthermore require audiences to be familiar with the scope of technique and expression, in order to fully understand the art. New art technology brings physical ease of production that has few constraints and little tradition, so along with the attitude of the audiences this helps art to become a multi-sensorial entertainment.

Without the need for virtuosity or even an instrument, a collaborative *let-act* can fulfill many of people's needs to foremost include: social gathering, pleasurable sensory load and catharsis. Interestingly, one of the first pieces produced on the *World Wide Web* was "*The World's First Collaborative Sentence*" [1] exhibiting content that bears great resemblance to a *let-act*, essentially just a bunch of elements with little internal coherence in a very clear, possibly impressive setting. As the *let-acts* are frequently dependent on funding bodies, it is exactly the developed setting that bears interest while the content produced yields no further institutional appreciation. Unsurprisingly, one can observe myriad fruitful collaborations¹ in such settings, but what I call a *let-act* is a modestly successful and haphazard instance from a critical point of view, while wider audiences generally enjoy this lightweight form of performance. A traditionally successful collaboration could be seen as a many-to-one-to-many structure whereby i.e. a film director is inspired by and collects ideas from his team to then distribute it back to them. A *let-act* excludes this mid-way convergence and promotes a many-to-many structure whereby collaborating artists democratically agree on the components of the piece. This also stands in contrast to traditional one-to-many structures in music or architecture whereby a sole author distributes all the instructions to have the piece produced or interpreted. John Cage has already reached beyond this tradition; "composer is simply someone who tells other people what to do. I find this an unattractive way of getting things done. I'd like our activities to be more social – and anarchically so"[3]. But a *let-act* might not be what he had hoped for, as it is rather democratic instead. His vision I would call a none-to-many structure in this taxonomy, as an attempt of true decentralization, which has had to fail, as an author cannot remove himself from his own creation or thought. Aleatory pieces are invariably attributed to an artist.

2.5 Social Value

The social implications of observing and appreciating art often overrule the subjective experience. This becomes very obvious in the prominence of cultural outlets that are intrinsically linked to certain genres in popular music, including clothing, behavior, political convictions etc. Social identity is inseparable from art, but it seems that the former is more sought. The described self-affirming characteristics of a *let-act* become the main force attracting them as they acquire a proof of their identity. A *let-act* is thus explorative, open to new techniques, intellec-

¹ Some wondrous collaborations have taken place that tick all the boxes without a sign of described issues [2].

tual, socially inclusive and prone to liking. This set of attributes indeed describes an idealized character in a capitalist democracy, thus attracting audiences that have a sense of striving to display moral perfection defined through the current social paradigm. The mixed personal sentiment that is possibly apparent in this subchapter derives from the schism between the fear of herd mentality and the charm of unity among people.

Paradoxically, it seems that the social value is recursively defined as the value that is socially most valuable². This type of feedback in the growth of value could account for the culture of hypes, the cultural avalanches and viral propagations that we live by. There seems to be a threshold of popularity that can be reached through marketing (money) and upon crossing it, a cultural phenomenon inevitably becomes widely sought and appreciated. Accordingly, the most expensive form of film production is an affirmation of the exact hierarchy that can afford producing it. Consequently, the ultimate objective in art becomes its ranking. Luckily, audiences just tend to agree and the distribution technology allows it all to spread effortlessly. The whirlpools of agreement are now made by artists as they learn the tricks from marketing experts.

2.6 Corporeal Value

Now that we have dealt with apparent novelty and social value characteristic of a *let-act* let us turn attention to the corporeal value. Here we consider how the body as a sensory instrument perceives such an event. Let me draw a parallel to a basic sensory activation of taste buds. In appreciating taste, it seems, most people have a set prejudice over what gives them pleasure and the food consumption becomes guided by this conviction. The stronger the conviction the less we can assume true pleasure in consumption. Similarly, a performance addressing multiple sensory channels in a generally pleasurable fashion becomes easily consumable as the socially supported prejudice determines the sense of quality. The corporeal would reside in the pleasurable aspects of the sensory stimulation but it actually seems overwritten by addiction through its social value. As an example, it seems that not a single tobacco-addict has liked the first few puffs; nevertheless, the apparent pleasure of smoking observed in others becomes fully internalized. Unconscious psychophysical mechanisms that deliver pleasure and appreciation are traditionally triggered by familiarity and harmony; it is of our age that we are predominantly satisfied by internalizing marketed attitudes. Thus the corporeal value is subdued to culturally promoted sources of pleasure or desired pain, and ultimately subdued to the recall value once the event becomes a memory asset. Neurologists seem to agree that the effect of cognitive recall can trigger the same psychophysical response as an actual event.

² The call for critical reflection in art is thus left unheard: “Nothing is to be accepted unexamined just because it is available and was once held valuable” [4].

Added to that the ability of the observer to keep polishing the memory each time it is recalled makes the content of a *let-act* even less significant as it becomes a memory.

The defeated corporeal value then resurrects through physical activity of the audiences. Passive observation is clearly not the choice the body would make if it had a say. Commonly sought in collaborative workshops is thus audience participation or interaction. The idea of securing amusement by making audiences act proves handy to bridge the gap between intent and content that would traditionally amount to decades of skill development. In the event of a *let-act* the interaction of artists is readily exposed as crucially artistic, further supporting the insignificance of content. Participation of audiences in open workshops or performances eases the corporeal tension of artists’ stage presence that in turn resonates with audiences’ increasingly playful attendance, and ease of identification. The critical awareness of audiences gets readily circumvented as they interact, as in the video games. However, repeated interaction, or practice, yields skill; the articulatory space opens and enables artistry of the audience uncovers the increasingly unnecessary focus on artists in a *let-act*. Bringing the audience to the stage, or obliterating the stage as a means of separation, improves their self-image, helping the approval of the art form.

2.7 Attendance

It is key for a *let-act* to mobilize an individual or a group of people willing to organize attendance to given presentative intent. Rather than the content of presentation, it is the attendance that increasingly becomes the source of artistic experience as the saturation with media in our age clogs the previously less loaded sensory channels. Instead of merely observing, in order to have an artistic experience, audiences must get more involved, which often is the point of workshops and interactive settings. The value of the experience is increasingly determined by the value of memories of attendance that become more valuable than the fleeting experience. Thus the *let-acts* reach the ideal of no critique, and fulfillment through descriptive rather than experiential assessment. A successful *let-act* is the one that lends itself to be described with common language. In mainstream media the ultimate descriptive toolset is the one of celebrities, the widely acknowledged royalties of this age. Accordingly, disco clubs became stages for people to actually dress and act like celebrities. Thus the roles are swapped as the author of the self-uplifting experience becomes the spectator and more so as the artists and the organizers become servants to monetization and thus to the will of the consumption statistics, remaking successful productions. Thus the celebrity culture enjoys a short-lived culmination with no despire in sight. Dismissal is demonstrated merely through lack of interest and isn’t made explicit.

The curiosity of a *let-act* lies in how it is a sponsored art form that is thereby free to attend while the servitude to audience resembles elite customer service. The greatest

business in this age is selling people the improvement of their self-image, and thus a *let-act* sells the identity of a connoisseur. It happens through serving public events that free them from cognitive load or sensory challenge, events that nurture the image of adventurous mind and aesthetic while providing nothing more than a juxtaposition of artistic elements that affirm the cultural status quo.

3. PRODUCTION

The sponsors or the organizers of a *let-act* invite the artists to collaborate and produce an event. Depending on the budget and interest there can be a great variety of people involved. Both open-calls and invitations can equally produce a *let-act*, as the crucial characteristic is event-specific production in contrast to exhibition of previously finished pieces.

3.1 Creation

As the focus turns to attendance and away from the live production itself, the content of the presentation freely becomes a selection rather than a creation, as customary in DJ performance. This impression is increased by the abundance of instances of similar artwork; re-instantiation becomes the interpretation of our age. Larger audiences find simpler acts more accessible; humans are easier fulfilled by replication of the familiar than by the exploration of the unknown, or the awe for the unknowable. The theory of evolution through mutation supports the sense of varied replication being the most natural of the processes. The act of producing art is thus relieved from having to be an overarching omnipotent big bang or *gesamtkunstwerk*. Art now succeeds with a good combination of elements at hand. Arguably, the human condition based around replication compares as safe in contrast to the pressure of seeking innovation³. Selection is safe, and art now hardly needs conceptual progress, and it has very little headroom to surpass the excellence embedded in the tradition. Logical positivism has suffocated the expansion of the ideal in how it assumes a conceivable and reliable reality, thus is the (re)production of matter at value while the ideas are valorized only through their actual manifestations. Monetized artistic (re)production serves its consumers the sense of acquiring experience and the commodity of pleasurable recall. Consider the myriad of common phrases that actually put the speaker in the position of unquestioned authority; I like, it was interesting, it made me feel good, made me think etc. Modernist virtuosity and conceptualism are literally becoming of the past. Present fear-mongering media and financial dependency contribute to the existential insecurity of artists who therefore create increasingly safe art that audiences easily embrace. It is clear that the side-streams are full of artistic freedom, but here we deal with gentrification of alternative forms.

³ The distinction made between novelty-art and variation-art (craft) is attempted to be made without value judgment.

3.2 Design

A *let-act* gives artists freedom of content with little direction and time available. Each of the collaborating artists has to promote one's own contribution, which yields bottom-up development. Concept of design is rooted in the distinction between creation and the creator, which could be replaced with a model of growth. Growth need not have an author who thus bears responsibility for the produce. Environment grows itself within itself without external force. The open form that has once conceptually stimulated art seems to have defeated the sense of direction and purpose. Every artist could be considered but a link in the chain of history, as an artist inevitably reacts in the prescribed, socially sensitive way within a collaborative workshop setting. Moving away from top-down design shifts the focus to the organismic production that does not necessitate self-awareness and perspective. The concept of the designer stands in contrast to the evolution; in contrast to the process of natural selection from abundance of replications. The contemporary human ego might be dissolving underneath the collective following necessity. So the critical approach becomes but a rant in the scheme of hype-defined qualities. Once the design is out of the creative equation the critique disappears accordingly, as every stage of evolution is a-priori the optimal self-configuration of the system.

3.3 Arbitrarisation

There is a striking difference between traditional improvisation and creativity in a *let-act*. Far from being the mastery of real-time design, the improvisation in a *let-act* may be called *arbitrarisation*. It is thus the selection of elements in a democratic setting that now replaces the overarching design with a web of compromises. As such, where improvisation had elements of tradition to deal with, *arbitrarisation* has social elements that it must conform to and in doing so the depth is sacrificed for breadth. In this setting the artists need to have the capacity to act without preparation or a defined goal while succeeding in providing for mutual affirmation. There is thus little chance of true innovation, which might further indicate distancing from improvisation⁴. In this sense the *arbitrarisation* needs no vocabulary, no language and thus no particular excellence in articulation as it mainly thrives on direct transmission of creative motivation. Capacity to truly improvise might be considered a product of tedious practice in transposing design into real-time⁵. *Arbitrarisation*, however tends to consist of selection of available components within a concept that lends little challenge for cohesion. *Arbitrarisation* thus brings people closer together through its reliability and transparency of intent, which ultimately facilitates access to wider audi-

⁴ Paul Patton links improvisation to invention by stipulating "...the coming about of something which does not belong to the existing order of possibilities" [5]

⁵ "Only someone who is well prepared has the opportunity to improvise" [6]

ences⁶. The joy of entertainment is thereby exalted as the burden of puzzling tradition and challenge seeking become of the past. Almost everyone is able to arbitrarise oneself into this festival of creative action, except the conservatives who would rather attend a carefully crafted piece constructed of utter skill.

3.4 Collaboration

Usually the first, additive stage of *let-act* collaborations is *brain-storming*, quite the opposite to *brain-focusing*. This, often collective, endeavor produces sets of building blocks that are deemed valuable in a loosely given setting. Assembly of these elements likely yields a piece that is fragmented and resembles an arbitrarily formed yet collectively considered juxtaposition as previously described. The promotion of chaotic expansion and traversing of the associative field indicates the lack of hope for a unifying artistic concept. *Brain-storming* carries the potential of incorporating unexpected elements that could prove challengingly experimental, but these get discarded through aversion towards contrarianism and anti-social elements. Thereby the *let-act* becomes the art-form of safe associations and accountable moral, a politically correct display of cross-affirmation.

The next, subtractive stage is the selection process, of which the averaging tendency increases with the amount of participants. The collective selection inevitably becomes political as charisma proliferates; as the ideas are accepted based on interpersonal resonance. Collective selection with few design principles amounts to tacit voting⁷ that reflects the emotional and status-bred relationships between participants. Hereby the *let-act* promotes the rise of amateurism and developmental moderation in art. This should not be taken pejoratively as it is rather apparent that the isolated hermits and artistically distant individual lends no direct benefit to the society at the time of creation, whereas the collective resonance fulfills the audiences and the monetary cycles in tandem. The collective selection further breeds affirmative interaction to contrast the critical reflection traditionally important in art. Saturation with affirmation indicates fear of criticism, fortunately the development in media deployment strategies have already excluded harsh critique and there is almost nothing left except appraisal meant to stimulate consumption. Thus is the playfulness of selection process maximised for the benefit of the audiences who may now safely enjoy art. Thus, through the safety from opposition is the possibility of dialectical development left behind. And so we can democratically praise leadership devoid of responsibility thanks to nominally distributed authority.

⁶ As Michel Waiszisz justly claims that the audience, most-of-all perceives the effort of the artist.

⁷ Experiments have shown that the voting procedure relates to primordial instincts of humans and escapes reason altogether [7].

3.5 Agreement

When artists collaborate in open form they tend to seek agreement. This intent breeds a certain charm inducing deeper connection to the audiences, increasing social cohesion and distancing from alienation. The charm of unity guides the artists in how they choose the elements to include in their co-authorship. The collective and possibly blinding agreement that causes thinkers like Adorno to scream in agony seems to win the battle against the dialectic that necessitates antithesis. Through observing this regression it might seem that dialectic synthesis is an illusion bred from self-absorbedness. The dialectical discourse suddenly seems reversed in time, the synthesis is what precedes thesis and antithesis, as the endless chain of reconciling oppositions never yields true unity.

3.6 Sponsor

Sponsor can be an individual, a group or an institution that has the privilege to channel resources for producing a *let-act*. Sponsors have the role of organizing the workshop and the performance, sometimes they offer a topic or a concept to tackle, but these activities are often even more arbitrary and administrative than the ones assumed by audiences and artists. The sponsor has to make sure that the production is to be liked but the deep conditioning of the artists has far stronger necessity to be liked than any external authority or existential threat could impose.

Absence of an author is viable⁸ as long as the *let-act* has a sponsor, someone who lets artists act. The sponsor might or might not consider the insertion of funds or securing the commitment of selected artists to be authorship. Similarly the artists often agree to accept collaborative authorship regardless whether they feel in service to the sponsor or if they feel autonomous. The decisions that are to be judged objectively are often made in service of archetypical reinterpretation and satisfaction, which further frees the audiences from a truly authoritative act. Professional presentation loses significance to the extent that failures are met by sympathy from the audiences who enjoy to thus have their own failures wedded with collective sympathy as well. Thus a *let-act* is a content-free interpersonal affirmation that brings us emotionally closer, for which purpose the critical stance is preferably suspended. This is the natural decay of authoritative tension due to necessity brought by craftsmanship being further obliterated by generative and self-organizing principles.

A *let-act* is thus not about authoritative projection upon material⁹, the outcomes need not be truly unique. Both

⁸ Condition to authorship is well argued to be at least the decision of completion [8]. As such open pieces seem indeed to have partial authors as the inventor of the rules disregards the detail of instantiation.

⁹ The demise of author and the critic that was anticipated in abstract terms [9] is now becoming true beyond just the erasure of roles.

authorship and material might be vaguely present and easily replaceable, particularly in the case of voluntary collaborations of amateurs. The keywords that secure wider support for such workshops are contemporary clichés that relate to beneficial impact in the society and technological achievement. This becomes thus the art of democracy adopting its processes as its creative procedures, based on collective approval that gradually replaces artistic decision. Democratic production of art relies on artists' intuition to follow the group, secure their place, define others' perception of themselves and ideally lead the democracy by ruling over others in the name of it. Through forcing debate the sponsors seek a democratic resolution of whom and how to let act. Once the participants are chosen they normally open the palette of media to employ. Novelty of technology can easily override the possible lack of virtuosity in articulation. Artistic avenues have insufficient time to develop and in conjunction with the psychology of the 21st century people, instant gratification often defines the outcomes of collaboration in art.

4. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Ultimately, sponsoring a collaborative workshop might seem not more than organizing a party. As such, it is the much-needed party where attendees can reaffirm each other in the commodification of pleasure far remote from challenging and hermetic art production that lurks from the dark. The lightness involved in amateurism can be truly liberating. The rise of *let-act* stems from the necessity to become free from the burden of finesse traditionally used to induce admiration. As such it often emerges in overly regulated societies that are wealthy enough to grant institutional sponsorship that in turn necessitates the descriptions of positive social impact. From obsessed striving we can return to the playfulness of institutionalized children. If the environment is familiar enough not to induce shyness or fear then one can experience pleasant states of belonging. The need for this regression is rooted in the cultural conditioning to assume utterly serious stance towards adult life. Supervision in a kindergarten is thus akin to sponsorship in democratized art. At its best with least intervention, the duty is to prevent conflict.

4.1 Progress

What seems regress is from another perspective a spiraling progress that curves back to a previous historical stance. It is liberating to see and produce art beyond its antithetical relationship to ancestry. In order to achieve a perspective I have both praised and renounced this in order to stir uproar in this metaphorical battlefield packed with distracted and entertained soldiers. This move was of the old sentiment of critically reflective art, which is giving way to the striving for mass satisfaction in art. The current point of progress is to develop community art that

serves social cohesion,¹⁰ which is a political tool. So this stage of development, just like every stage of evolution is the optimal self-configuration of the system and is therefore progress, regardless of the re-instantiation of previous states and the destruction it may consist of.

4.2 After-party

Catharsis was mentioned as a part of outcomes that a *let-act* delivers, but it has not been discussed yet, and rightly so, to lend itself to elevate the completion of this paper. It seems that the actual cathartic moment became the experience of recall. Broadest artistic success is obtained by producing an arrangement of common symbols that is intriguing in its narration. A member of audience might have more descriptors available to describe a multi-media event than a solo recital. Thus the after-party of the event becomes cathartic in that it lends purpose and validity to the past experience. A potentially endless series of recollections then mutates to better suit the desired experience of the audience. This dynamic process of re-owning the commoditized experience suggests that artistic experience becomes even more so of the beholder, by cherishing and sharing the memory. As such, appearing and seeing all the *let-acts*, and writing this paper was just great.

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¹⁰ "We admire from a lonely distance that art which is not private in character but is characteristic of a group of people and the fact that they are in agreement" [10].