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Chapter 7: Can I join in? Playful performance and alternative political realities

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Abstract

Extinction Rebellion's ten-day London occupation in April 2019 marked a turning point in the United Kingdom's growing awareness of the impending climate crisis. Alongside the activist group's disruptive repurposing of public spaces as areas for play to occur, participatory guerrilla street theatre groups led activists in collaborative, improvisational play throughout the occupied spaces. This participatory protest extolled the world-making potential of play, reflecting shifts in contemporary political theatre practices towards what can be termed the post-immersive; works that reclaim participatory theatre's activist roots by imagining and rehearsing alternative political realities in the theatrical space. Drawing on Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's metamodernism, this chapter examines the central oscillation between silliness and seriousness in these activists' and theatre makers' playful response to crisis. Applying John Jordan's claim to the ability of political play to propose alternative realities, this chapter also importantly critiques the exclusion of particular demographics from the creation of such realities, with Extinction Rebellion's fetishization of arrests precluding minority ethnic and working-class activists from taking part. If playful, participatory protest can propose alternative political realities, who is able to engage in the creation of these new worlds? Who can join in?

The climate is at a crisis point. Headed by activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR), international protests and disruptions have proliferated the awareness of a global climate emergency that will soon culminate in a "mass extinction of our own making" (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a). However, in this time of unprecedented crisis, moments of playfulness have emerged as integral protest strategies, reflecting emergent methodological shifts in contemporary political performance practices. This is particularly evident in an aesthetic shift in the performance practice of a number of 'fringe' theatre companies in Britain who utilise collaborative, playful participation to create a "liminal world between the actual and the imaginary" (Wright, 2006, p. 30), where alternative political futures can be investigated and rehearsed within the theatrical space.

The mapping of these performance methodologies builds upon Andy Lavender's understanding of a current "age of engagement" (Lavender, 2016, p. 21), through which he develops previous scholars' (Barber, 1998; Bishop, 2012; Harvie, 2013; Kester, 2005) tracings of trends in contemporary performance towards "nuanced and differential negotiations, participations and interventions" (Lavender, 2016, p. 21). This development of playful interaction across both fields is built upon a historical interplay between community-focused performance practice and activism, from Joan

Littlewood and Ewan MacColl's agitprop Theatre of Action in the 1930s, and John McGrath's formation of 7:84 in the 1970s, through to the direct-action-as-performance (cf. Jordan, 1998, p. 132) of activist groups such as Reclaim The Streets in the 1990s and the tactical carnivals of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) in the 2000s (cf. Bogad, 2016, p. 112), amongst many others. I contend that a recent, increased utilisation of *silliness* as an aesthetic and activist tool that extols the world-making potential of play – as expressed in the activist performances addressed within this chapter – also reflects wider shifts in a contemporary, post-postmodern cultural structure of feeling, as per Raymond Williams (1969, p. 17), that has been linked (cf. Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010) to Jerry Saltz's observation of contemporary art's own acceptance that it "may seem silly, even stupid […] but that doesn't mean this isn't serious" (Saltz, 2010). Both the playful aspects of XR's protests alongside developments in 'fringe' theatre towards post-immersive (cf. Lopes Ramos et al., 2020), politically driven theatre practices reveal an increasing variety of playful responses to crisis. These playful responses, however, do not appear to be ironic or apathetic. They do not use play as a method of avoiding harsh truths. Rather, these activists and performers extol the power of play as a progressive political tool by embracing both the silly *and* the serious. As such, I contend that aspects of XR's protest strategies, alongside characteristics of certain participatory performance practices, develop John Jordan's (1998, p. 133) assertion that playfulness "proposes an alternative reality".

Participation in these playful practices, however, does not equal democratic involvement. As such, the following analysis considers both the costs of participating within such processes, particularly for minority ethnic activists in the case of XR's protests, and the structural and temporal limitations of play as a strategy for democratic 'world-building', both in the context of performance as activism and participatory theatre practices; calling into question who can *join in*. Whilst this chapter does not seek to cover the interconnected history of performance and activism, it illustrates connections between recent aesthetic and methodological processes in both contemporary activism and political performance. Such processes are part of a wider cultural shift towards what has been defined as the metamodern (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010) in that they are forms of protest that both embrace the ironic absurdity of contemporary crises, including the seemingly inescapable climate apocalypse, whilst simultaneously sincerely striving towards a solution. This is playful, performative protest that oscillates between seriousness and silliness.

Occupy London! (again!)

The Extinction Rebellion movement began in Britain in early 2018 on the premise of employing "non-violent civil disobedience in an attempt to halt mass extinction and minimise the risk of social collapse" (Extinction Rebellion, 2020a) caused by the impending climate crisis. The grassroot campaign's clearly communicated set of demands (Bigford, 2019), combined with social media friendly campaign strategies and a strong brand identity that "balanc[es] joy and anger with a tongue-in-cheek approach" (Spinach, 2019), enabled XR to quickly grow into a global movement comprised of autonomous affinity groups; a "decentralized mass movement of concerned citizens" (Knights, 2019, p. 11).

Following XR's initial declaration of rebellion that October, their international movement began in earnest the next April, with a large-scale London 'takeover' that was intended to "cause as much economic disruption as we possibly could" (Knights, 2019, p. 10) – blocking five high profile locations in what the group labelled "several days of creative, artist-led resistance [in order to] force the Government to take urgent action" on the climate crisis (Extinction Rebellion, 2019b). As smaller scale protests occurred in cities throughout 33 countries, the London group succeeded in shutting down Oxford Circus, Marble Arch, Waterloo Bridge, Piccadilly Circus and Parliament Square for ten days, with protestors peacefully disrupting everyday city-life through what was billed as a "full-scale festival of creative resistance [including] people's assemblies, art actions, stage performances, talks, workshops, food and family spaces" (Extinction Rebellion, 2019c). Whilst heavily relying on tactics

developed from the organisers' previous experiences at the 2011 Occupy protests, this 'festival' conjured a decidedly more playful form of protest than previous London occupations.

Entertainment at the end of the world

Throughout XR's London takeover, a number of spaces held by the protestors were reformatted as areas for playful acts to occur; skateboarding ramps replaced the usual cars on Waterloo Bridge (Montague, 2019); a pink sail boat blocked Oxford Circus, becoming "an improvised DJ-set-cum-pulpit" (Volpicelli, 2019); trip-hop band Massive Attack played a set at Marble Arch; yoga groups spread cardboard mats over roads where, later, groups "of all ages and backgrounds [were] dancing and laughing" into the late evenings (Taylor and Gayle, 2019). "Were it not for […] the fact that we're slap bang under Marble Arch […]", wrote Kate Wills (2019) for local newspaper *The Evening Standard*, "this could be a boutique festival".

Jeffry Juris posits that the "ever-growing influence of infotainment" (2014, p. 242) coupled with increasingly diminishing cultural attention spans means that contemporary activists are increasingly "under pressure to constantly innovate in order to develop protest performances that maintain public interest and remain emotionally compelling for participants" (Juris, 2014, p. 242). In 2011, Occupy London "failed to live up to the extravagant expectations it had excited" (Sotirakopoulos and Rootes, 2014, p. 174), becoming unable to sustain its own momentum, "especially when attention was diverted away from the main event towards violent incidents and small-scale rioting" (Sotirakopoulos and Rootes, 2014, p. 174). In their contextual analysis of Occupy, Sotirakopoulos and Rootes note that the "precarious and uncomfortable" (2014, p. 175) conditions of Occupy London meant that, whilst the intention was for the protest to occupy the space indefinitely, the majority of protestors never actually intended to stay for long. Whilst XR's London occupation eight years later differed from Occupy's in that it was intentionally limited to a ten-day period, it also applied, as co-creator of the Occupy movement Micah White predicted, a "creative re-orientation towards collective behaviour" (White, 2017, p. 14) in that, through a focus on maximal, sustained disruption, public spaces were reframed as welcoming, sustainable and playful. XR termed these areas 'cultural roadblocks'; "defining cultural features of newly emerging micro-communities" (James and Ruby, 2019, p. 115) which aimed to engage as many members of the public as possible, and, importantly, *sustain* that engagement. "We had the crowd's attention; now we had to make sure we kept everybody entertained" (James and Ruby, 2019, p. 117). XR's repurposing of these London landmarks as cultural roadblocks reformatted them as spaces that allowed for traditional forms of protest whilst providing entertainment by which they could keep such protestors engaged. These transient skateparks and guerrilla gardens, however, also served as viral internet marketing material – "traffic-stopping photo opportunit[ies]" (James and Ruby, 2019, p. 119) that widely promoted a seemingly communal atmosphere which appeared to welcome and encourage new members to come to protest and to play.

(Performing) play with the police

In order to shield these new political playgrounds, circles of protestors sat around makeshift perimeters, willing to be arrested in order to protect the occupied areas. Building on the importance of sustaining their occupation, XR's arrest-based strategy, in this respect, aimed to minimize "the chance that the police will shut down our actions before these actions have reached a critical mass" (Legal Team, 2019, p. 136). In central London, the number of protestors far outweighed the number of police. Coupled with the fact that it required between two to four officers to safely remove protestors from their position, as soon as officers separated one protestor from the circle, two more were ready to take their place. Police became forced "into a protracted waiting game" (Montague, 2019) of numbers that they could not win. A game that was accompanied by cheering from the protestors when one of their own

was removed from the circle, just for another to swiftly replace them. Another arrest made = another point scored.

As Jay Griffiths explains, this "self-sacrificial idea of arrest is at the core of Extinction Rebellion's strategy" (Griffiths, 2019, p. 96), building on a history of change brought about by those willing to be arrested for non-violent civil disobedience, from the suffragettes to civil rights activists. Reflecting the intention behind their cultural roadblocks, this action served to prolong the occupation of the group's political playgrounds whilst simultaneously publicising XR's message. Organiser Roger Hallam asserts that "the action itself is not important [but] it's the going to prison that's got cultural resonance" (*The Guardian*, 2018). With over one thousand arrests over the ten-day period, the protests had "completely confounded an already stretched police force" (Knights, 2019, p. 10) and arguably shifted the public opinion so much that, in a few days, the UK government declared a climate emergency.

Whilst XR's arrest-based tactics prolonged the sustainability of their playful acts of protest during this occupation, as well as amplifying their message through the sheer amount of "people [who] were ready to lose their liberty because [they] want some change" (*The Guardian*, 2018), they were inherently exclusionary. As Sanna Thöresson's critique of XR's handbook *This Is Not A Drill* (2019) makes clear, "the strategy of courting arrests is exclusionary, as identity markers such as race, gender, ability, and class have a very real effect on how those arrests are carried out and experienced" (Thöresson, 2020, p. 4). The group's reliance on arrest-based tactics specifically precludes working class and minority ethnic individuals, particularly black Britons, who "face far higher risks when dealing with the police" (Josette, 2019). Whilst XR state that they acknowledge the police to be "structurally racist" (Legal Team, 2019, p. 136), their requirement for participants to "seek arrest, calmly and willingly" (Griffiths, 2019, p. 96) evidences an inherent racial and class privilege, limiting participants to "a coterie of privileged activists who can afford the expense and time getting arrested" (Smoke, 2019). Thöresson (2020, p. 32) critiques XR's failure to apply an intersectional lens to their occupation of public space, stating that it reproduces "a hegemonic structure of racial oppression by erasing other narratives [and] portraying their own subjectivities as universal". As protestor Ben Smoke reflects, XR's use of arrests "undermines those who are the poorest or most oppressed in our society whose lives are ripped apart by it" (Smoke, 2019).

XR's seemingly playful interaction with the police, in this respect, can be critiqued as privileged and performative self-criminalisation; a "[f]etishisation and glorification of arrests" (Parekh and Rehman, 2019). The protracted back and forth between police and protestors in the April 2019 London protest may have enabled a more sustained occupation of certain public spaces for that period. What remains to be seen, however, is whether this arrest-focused civil resistance model will support or detract from the further longevity of XR's activist agenda. Roger Hallam asserts that "breaking the rules gets you attention" (Hallam, 2019, p. 101) and that XR's main goal, in this respect, is to raise public and political consciousness of the climate emergency. The exclusionary nature of these tactics, however, and their positionality within the state's power structure – on whose terms they work within – leads to questions about the long-term efficacy of this form of activism (cf. Harwood and Hudson, 2019). Performance theorist Richard Schechner states that the "difference between temporary and permanent change distinguishes carnival from revolution" (Schechner, 1993, p. 83) and, as John Jordan asserts, the "playfulness of direct action proposes an alternative reality" (Jordan, 1998, p. 133). However, when the rules of the game limit who can play, any alternative reality proposed risks reproducing a hegemonic, exclusionary power structure that is "inherently incompatible with the ecological and egalitarian model we need to achieve a just transition to a fair, clean energy economy" (Hewett, 2020). Whilst XR's intention in utilising play is of transformative world building towards a more egalitarian society, the exclusionary nature of the tactics used in this world building, the acceptance (and utilisation) of the terms of the state through a focus on arrests, and the group's initial failure to critique these terms, carries such racial and class hegemony into any configuration of a proposed alternative reality. Following similar critique, XR have acknowledged their "mistake [in] presenting the experience of arrest and jail time as something straightforward – rather than acknowledging the

stressful, intimidating and sometimes deadly experience marginalised people face at the hands of the police" (Extinction Rebellion, 2020b). However, in reference to the "Can I join in?" question posed in the title of this chapter, the answer, in this case, unfortunately depends on your level of privilege (cf. Saunders, Doherty and Hayes, 2020).

I do not intend for this critique to detract from the urgency and validity of XR's message, and other activists and scholars have already provided suitable routes forward for the movement, including Payal Parekh and Asad Rehman's *Intersectional Strategies for Rebellion* (2019). Despite these inherent problematics, however, XR's London occupation was a successful tipping point in the British political system's and public's increasing acceptance of the urgency of the climate crisis. The approaches used to achieve this built upon previous tactical performance strategies, such as those used by Reclaim The Streets (cf. Jordan, 1998) and CIRCA (cf. Bogad, 2016), and aimed to avoid the Occupy movement's previous shortcomings in regards to sustained protest by focusing efforts on encouraging and enabling continual, playful engagement (between those who were able to engage in such). XR's reclaiming of public space as areas for playful acts to occur encouraged continual participation from protestors, whilst their protracted 'game' with the police enabled these political playgrounds to continue for that period of occupation. However, this 'game' is flawed. In utilising tactics that exclude ethnic minority activists through such tactics' cooperation with the state, XR limit who is able to join in such prefigurative play. This racialised exclusion precludes the development of an alternative, egalitarian reality through such play; a factor in opposition to the importance of dismantling systemic racist structures in working towards a decarbonized global economy (cf. Hewett, 2020). As Parekh and Rehman (2019) assert, mass arrests are not inherently integral to successful disobedience movements. If XR were to shift their principle focus away from individual arrests, a tactic that "plays into a neoliberal focus on personal pursuit and exceptional action, rather than building community" (Parekh and Rehman, 2019), and move towards disruption through inclusive events that actively encourage elements of fun, such non-discriminatory, world-building play could engender the egalitarian, alternative realities required in the fight against the climate crisis.

The XR regeneration game

Flitting between the cultural roadblocks, a group of people weave through the crowds. They move as one, their actions shifting fluidly. Shapes within the group materialise and then dissolve. They dance wearing crowns of rosemary, reaching to the heavens. At Parliament Square, an annoyed passer-by confronts them, and they become cats. He begins to bark at them, and they become mewling kittens. Slowly, he backs down, showing his own 'paws' and offering a soft meow. Later, they raise their hands to the sky and a young man abandons his friends to see what's going on. He finds himself joining in with them impulsively. "What are you doing, mate?" his friends laugh, watching him from afar. "I don't know", he replies, "I'm just – doing it!"

Whilst several performative protest actions took place throughout the London occupation, such as the Red Brigade's silent, mournful marches, or April de Angelis's medieval-style play *Mrs Noah* (2019), the XR Regeneration Game, headed by performance artists Lucy Hopkins and Marisa Carnesky, placed emphasis on participatory experience over performance. The pair based the game on theatre maker John Wright's (2006) methodologies of play in ensemble-led performance which champion forms of non-hierarchical improvisation. In one such exercise, the group of participants find an action, "like somebody raising their eyebrows […] or just grinning inanely at each other" (Wright, 2006, p. 38), for the whole group to follow, before jointly finding the chance to shift to a different action. Wright emphasises the exercise's inclusivity, in that a participant need not be inventive but can, if they wish, be only reactive; "your job is to let the action develop naturally" (*Ibid.*, p. 38).

Hopkins and Carnesky's application of Wright's methodology was intended to explore how the pair, as performance artists and facilitators, could enable a "physical practice of attitude" (Hopkins, personal

communication, 10 June 2020) throughout XR's occupation, with the game attempting to embody "how we have to transform society – an abstract condensed" (Hopkins, personal communication, 10 June 2020). The nature of the game asks participants to be aware of each other as a group; to find a consensus; to not dominate the game as an individual; to continue to listen to one another and adapt accordingly – embodying a number of the values XR upholds in their revolutionary proposal (Ross, 2019, p. 177). In this respect, the XR Regeneration Game extolled equal participation within play. The pair envisioned the game as a "tool" (Hopkins, personal communication, 10 June 2020) on the streets to embody, explore and rehearse such values. In this respect, the game aimed to enable a space for the facilitators and participants to create a small-scale social system based on connection, cooperation and equality. "The beauty of it is that we're not led through it", Hopkins (personal communication, 10 June 2020) later told me, "it just happens".

The pair began the game at different sites each day of the April 2019 London occupation, interacting with crowds of protestors who, if they wished, would become participants. As the protests progressed, Hopkins and Carnesky realised that handing further agency over to the participants enabled the pair to take a step back as facilitators of the exercise, stating that it was "incredibly difficult to manifest and contain" (Hopkins, personal communication, 10 June 2020) when placed in a position of authority. As such, they began to instruct protestors via social media to meet at one of the occupied landmarks at a specific time each day wearing a certain colour. This allowed the participants, rather than the facilitators, to initiate the exercise as soon as they saw other protestors dressed the same. Carnesky remembers one moment where herself and the participants began "rolling on the ground with one eye on the police and one eye on each other. The police were confused and bemused, was this harmless fun or protest? They couldn't quite work it out" (Carnesky, personal communication, 10 June 2020). Through this bemusement, the game became another tool in which XR were able to maintain a non-violent approach, with the group inserting themselves into "particularly tense areas" (Hopkins, personal communication, 10 June 2020) and using the game as a de-escalation tactic. "It closed things down", Hopkins told me, "You can't maintain that [violent] vibe if you've got people humming at you with their hands [in the air]" (Hopkins, personal communication, 10 June 2020).

Despite this shift in application, the XR Regeneration Game succeeded in allowing space for protestors to exist within Wright's liminal play world (2006, p. 30) in which new forms of coexistence and cooperation can be tested and explored. Upon reflection, Hopkins and Carnesky are considering reframing the exercise as activist training; "a game for affinity groups to meet each other and to begin to work together" (Hopkins, personal communication, 10 June 2020). However, the fact that the game began to be "played spontaneously around the protests" (Hopkins, personal communication, 10 June 2020) without their facilitation evidences the impact and applicability of the game structure. The game itself did not become limited to a de-escalation strategy or training exercise. Instead, as all good games do, it spread amongst the political playgrounds.

Silly but serious

XR's invitation for others to join in with their playful participatory protest, and the Regeneration Game specifically, reflects performance theorist Andy Lavender's observation of the importance of engagement and participation within contemporary performance. He relates this trend historically and aesthetically to an emergent post-postmodern paradigm, as contemporary theatre makers come to understand that the "tools [postmodernism] introduced proved limited in dealing with new scenarios that changed our relationship […] to realities and their expression" (Lavender, 2016, p. 19). As Lara Shalson observes, the continued historical intersection between communities of theatre makers and activists has meant that "theatre and protest have long been fruitful collaborators" (2017, p. 18). Whilst there are marked differences in aesthetics, intentions and outcomes between theatrical protest (such as the performative elements of XR's takeover detailed above) and political theatre (plays and performances taking place in theatrical institutions), the overlaps between these forms allows for the

observation of a joint aesthetic and methodological shift as part of a wider cultural and political development away from, and out of, the postmodern.

In *Tactical Performance* (2016), activist and academic L. M. Bogad traces these shifts in contemporary forms of protest towards what he defines as "serious play". In his analysis of his own experience as part of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA), he describes their use of clowning and improvisational comedy in protests at the 2005 G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, as "not 'street theatre', *per se*, but a form of improvisatory and creative direct action" (Bogad, 2016, p. 115). Through their use of slapstick, song and "improvised foolery" (Bogad, 2016, p. 118) as part of a tactical carnival that acted to remove riot police, the Rebel Clowns were able to facilitate a space in which "it appeared that the fearless silliness and serious play could dispel the intimidating power of the state" (Bogad, 2016, p. 115). Bogad's analysis is historically situated alongside, and embedded within, recent political and cultural shifts that suggest a move away from postmodernism. Whilst Mark Fisher (2008) observed that the postmodern apathy partly induced by capitalist realism (a development of Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek's assertion that it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism) had fully embedded itself in our cultural and political realities by the peak of the postmodern era in the mid-2000s, a number of theorists have now observed (Eshelman, 2008; Bourriaud, 2009; Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010; Turner, 2015; Schulze, 2017) that a rather different structure of feeling has emerged across contemporary political and cultural forms. For cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, this includes the unexpected "figure of utopia" reappearing "across the arts in the past few years, often alongside a renewed sense of empathy [and] reinvigorated constructive engagement" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2015, p. 55).
Vermeulen and van den Akker's now seminal use of the term metamodernism (2010) to describe this structure of feeling speaks to an oscillation between what they "may call – and of course cannot be reduced to – postmodern and pre-postmodern (and often modern) predilections" (van den Akker and Vermeulen, 2017, p. 11) – a paradigm that allows for a seemingly pre-postmodern revival of authenticity, romanticism and affect, whilst not "forfeiting all that we've learnt from postmodernism" (Turner, 2015). Such a revival is not a return to the trappings of pre-postmodern metanarratives. Rather, it offers a form of "informed naivety" or "pragmatic idealism" that "describe[s] the climate in which a yearning for utopias, despite their futile nature, has come to the fore" (Turner, 2015). Whilst the irony and apathy (cf. Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010, p. 6) of postmodernism worked to actively enforce capitalist realism through a culturally and politically embedded cynicism, emergent strategies in contemporary performance and protest practice indicate a disaffection with such apathy, a renewed (yet sceptical) sense of hope; both an (ironic) sincerity and (pragmatic) idealism (cf. Turner, 2015).
Vermeulen and van den Akker's understanding of this shift draws upon art critic Jerry Saltz's observation of emergent post-postmodern artistic patterns that simultaneously embrace, or oscillate between, silliness and seriousness (Saltz, 2010). XR's use of play as activism, alongside Bogad's "serious play" (2016) as tactical performance, whilst building upon a historical development of such activism, also reflects this wider metamodern oscillation between the silly and the serious, the ironic and the sincere. It is an artistic and political mentality that matches the seriousness of the climate crisis with the silliness of clowns kissing riot shields (Bogad, 2016, p. 113), of groups rolling on the floor together wearing rosemary crowns, of building skate ramps in the middle of the road and inviting police to come and play on them (*Newsflare*, 2019).

These trends towards performative and participatory play in modes of contemporary protest have developed together with reflective shifts in contemporary political theatre practice. Building on a history of interplay between activist performance and participatory theatre methodologies, further developments in British political theatre practice – particularly that of emerging companies or those on the fringes of the theatre circuit – utilise and develop new modes of participatory, playful protest which consciously embrace an oscillation between the serious and the silly. By employing Wright's (2006, p. 30) liminality, these performance modes enable, as per Karen Jürs-Munby's analysis of postdramatic political theatre, "space for alternative realities to come into view" (Jürs-Munby et al., 2013, p. 23). These performances develop through and beyond what has come to be known as

participatory or immersive performance to, instead, exhibit what Lopes Ramos et al. term the *post-immersive*; a theatrical form that, in part, includes performance participation manifested as "a collective thinking event centred on what it is to be a human being living in late capitalist societies" (Lopes Ramos et al., 2020, p. 196).

Performing play and playing politics

The stage is littered with the remnants of two rival nations. One has been almost obliterated by the other, its land repurposed by the adjustment of 'The Line', a thick rope that intersects both the stage and audience. Throughout the show, the audience have worked with these nations' leaders to establish and map their new lands' backgrounds, history and geography, all whilst completing challenges and gaining points. The nation with the most points controls the adjustment of The Line; gaining more and more ground until, at this stage in the show, the winning nation occupies most of the theatre space; the other few remaining audience members now only inhabit a mere slither of the stage. As reviewer Marianna Meloni describes, it is at this point at which the game begins to feel like a social experiment, when "all of a sudden, aggressive reactions are provoked from both sides [of the audience, and] the previous light-hearted approach to the first skirmish changes as we realise that peace is irreparably broken, [fighting] for an identity that a few hours earlier didn't even exist" (Meloni, 2019). When audience members of the losing nation seek refuge by crossing The Line, they are met with "alarming and yet very familiar" (Meloni, 2019) disapproval from their new neighbours, who state that they have no space left.

By drawing on current contextual signifiers surrounding issues of anti-immigration, nationalism and the re-defining of borders, participatory theatre company Hidden Track facilitate the co-creation of new realities within a play-world that, as revealed at the close of *Drawing The Line* (Meloni, 2019), prove all too recognisable. The piece is at once altruistic in its use of performance processes that compel an audience to interact socially and playfully with one another and intrinsically aware of the paradoxically unobtainable reality of the "fleetingly 'collective' theatre situation['s]" (Jürs-Munby et al., 2014, p. 23) ability to enact democratic participation or progressive, political change. As Jen Harvie critiques, "participation is not intrinsically politically progressive" (2013, p. 10) and participation in a process is not equal to democracy. Yet, although theatrical, playful engagement does not necessarily enact utopic change, the liminal play-world may open up space for such alternative realities to be imagined and, possibly, put into play – thereby reclaiming participatory theatre's "radical origins" (Lopes Ramos et al., 2020, p. 197) through collaborative gaming structures.

Hidden Track investigate how "game mechanics can play out the political scenarios that we are living through" (Bonwick, personal communication, 18 June 2020), aiming to create playful structures that allow participants to simultaneously escape such realities *and* reflect upon them. For Associate Director Anoushka Bonwick, the company's use of 'silliness' forms an essential part of a participatory structure which allows a collective audience to address "difficult to talk about and emotionally charged topics" (Bonwick, personal communication, 18 June 2020) in a cooperative way – aiming for the audience to have had *fun* investigating issues of political and social division, despite having created a rather bleak reflection of their current political condition by the end of the *Drawing The Line*.

Similarly, Pavlos Christodoulou, of performance collective Dirty Rascals, stresses that their own application of participatory theatre practice emphasises the importance of the "smaller act of the people who are in that room" (Christodoulou, personal communication, 24 June 2020) cooperating within a play-based structure, over wider political change. Such emphasis reflects Lopes Ramos et al.'s assertion that post-immersive theatre "should validate intimacy, tenderness, empathy and care [with] the individual becom[ing] a part of a temporary community" (Lopes Ramos et al., 2020, p. 196). Christodoulou describes Dirty Rascals' work as stemming from a desire to "bring people together in a space in a way that feels like how a lot of people talk about theatre but wasn't how [he] experienced

it" (Christodoulou, personal communication, 24 June 2020). The collective's work varies from knitting-as-activism (Crimson Wave: Craft the Resistance, 2019) to monthly workshops to test collaborative, playful performance structures in which participants work together to imagine new political futures (Turbulence, 2017). For Christodoulou, when all participants – audience and performers alike – "know the rules and everything is transparent … there becomes a kind of agency which comes out of how you then respond given that you're now on that level playing field with everyone" (Christodoulou, personal communication, 24 June 2020). Such practice reflects Harvie's critique of conventional participatory theatre's social efficacy being "modest at best, relying on shared negotiation of space, some discussion or storytelling" (Harvie, 2013, p. 58) in that Christodoulou aims to facilitate structures that do, as per Harvie's provocation, "model social relations which are relevant to contemporary lived experiences, offering contexts to explore and understand those experiences" (*Ibid.*, p. 59) through an openness about the limitations of the participatory form in terms of both democratic participation and effective world building. Dirty Rascals aim to "disrupt the yuckiness" (Christodoulou, personal communication, 24 June 2020) of pedagogic political performance and, instead, facilitate a collaborative structure that is "much more about finding a way to answer a question together with people that I don't *have* an answer to" (Christodoulou, personal communication, 24 June 2020). Reflecting Hopkins and Carnesky's use of collaborative improvisation which encouraged open, ensemble-focused play as a "physical practice of [political] attitude" (Hopkins, personal communication, 10 June 2020), Dirty Rascals use ensemble gaming to question political structures and collaboratively investigate alternatives. For Christodoulou, the power of "silliness is to be able to engage in something with full commitment and without self-consciousness" (Christodoulou, personal communication, 24 June 2020). It is within this liminal play-world (Wright, 2006, p. 30) – which might be silly – that new futures can be imagined, explored, rehearsed and performed.

As an antidote to the corporatisation of immersive theatre practices, Lopes Ramos et al.'s *Post-Immersive Manifesto* (2020) proposes that "participation and co-creation, not consumption, should define audience experience in late capitalism if performance can become a strategy to prepare us for survival" (Lopes Ramos et al., 2020, p. 203). Whilst differing in aesthetics, the participatory practices explored in this chapter share common roots with contemporary applications of Augusto Boal's theatrical methodology the Theatre of the Oppressed through its aim to "democratize the processes and practices of theatre making, allowing self-expression, creativity and development through theatre" (Silva and Menzes, 2016, p. 44). In this case, however, they also share inherent problematics regarding participation. As Malaika Cunningham explains, "the extent to which participatory theatre manages to achieve adequate representation and inclusivity is highly variable" (Cunningham, 2020, p. 69), and whilst play-based participatory performances and post-immersive practices which focus on co-creation might allow for 'new futures' to be explored within a liminal play-world, such opportunities differ from traditional democratic spaces in that there is a "cost barrier, alongside cultural and social barriers related to *who* attends the theatre in terms of age, class and race" (Cunningham, 2020, p. 69). Issues within the theatre sector as a whole, echoing issues of exclusion in XR's arrest-based protest strategy, impact on how such practices can be honestly defined as effective and equal participatory 'playgrounds'. As Cunningham makes clear, "for participatory theatre to function as a useful democratic space it must be open and inclusive for a broad and diverse audience" (Cunningham, 2020, p. 70), with Lopes Ramos et al. also emphasising the "crucial role that diverse types of audience members must have in the development" (Lopes Ramos et al., 2020, p. 204) of future post-immersive practice.

Perhaps, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on the theatre and arts industry in Britain, advances in digital participation can break down traditional access barriers, with companies such as Hidden Track and Kill the Cat adapting their playful participatory practice to an online medium. Part interactive game, part political experiment, Kill the Cat's climate-focused *The House Never Wins* (2020) became an "existentially high-stakes, Zoom-video-call game of blackjack [and] infectiously fun silliness" (Hunter, 2020) at the beginning of the first UK-wide lockdown in spring 2020. With performances 'hosted' by venues across the United Kingdom as a form of 'digital tour', and many

venues subsidising tickets through a 'pay-what-you-can' format, participants were no longer limited by locality or expense, other than the cost of digital access, in order to take part (Kill the Cat, 2020). Co-directors Dylan Frankland and Madeleine Allardice also emphasise the importance in their continual work to improve access to digital participation for participants with different abilities, varying digital proficiencies, political literacy and other access requirements (Frankland and Allardice, personal communication, 12 November 2020). If participatory, playful performance is to continue as an activist tool, it is imperative that practitioners address the limitations around who is able to join in. As post-immersive practices re-radicalise performative gaming structures and the world-making potential of play, who gets to participate in the co-creation of these possible worlds? As Lopes Ramos et al. rightly question (2020, p. 196), who creates such practice, and who is this practice for?

Possible futures

The playful, political, participatory performance explored in this chapter builds on a well-documented history of collaboration between theatre and activism and begins to reflect Lopes Ramos et al.'s (2020) manifesto for a post-immersive theatre that reclaims participatory performance as radically activist. Whilst XR's tactics are critiqued for being exclusionary in terms of race and class, a shift in the group's focus away from arrest and towards their facilitation of playful spaces within a protest framework, including, but not limited to, the XR Regeneration Game, could create further inclusive, communitive structures of playful civil disobedience. Such structures manifest a silly/serious post-postmodern aesthetic (Saltz, 2010) through their use of imaginative play, and playful performance, as strategies of protest. In this way, these modes of contemporary protest and performance echo Vermeulen and van den Akker's metamodernism (2010), oscillating between the ironic and the sincere, the silly and the serious.

Vermeulen and van den Akker's metamodernism takes its prefix from Plato's metaxis, which Voegelin relates to the Greek demi-gods, whose existence oscillates between god and man; "order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence" (Voegelin, 1989, p. 119-120) – an in-betweenness (cf. Allern, 2002, p. 79) of extremities; fiction and non-fiction, mortality and immortality. In this respect, metamodernism embodies a back and forth between pre- and postmodern predilections such as sincerity and sarcasm, or irony and enthusiasm (cf. Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2017, p. 11). By coupling this with Gavin Bolton's assessment of Augusto Boal's use of the term metaxis as an "interplay between the actual and the fictitious" (Bolton, 1984, p. 141), I draw a link between the metaxy of metamodernism and Wright's (2006) liminality of play. Whilst it is not clear whether the approaches used by these contemporary performance makers and activists offer a concrete way forward, each are creating participatory actions that facilitate a liminal space of metaxis through the 'in-between' of play and protest, performance and participation, seriousness and silliness, in which possible new futures, modes of thinking and ways of working can be created, rehearsed and, quite literally, put into play.

An embracing of the possibilities of play has become a repeated contemporary response to the overwhelming weight of a convergence of crises, whether ecological, economic, or political. In examining this response within the framework of political performance, it is through artists' embracing of 'the silly' that 'the serious' can be addressed. In developing the methodology of play to create a liminal world, performance artists and activists such as Carnesky and Hopkins, and political theatre companies such as Hidden Track, Dirty Rascals and Kill the Cat, facilitate games that function as speculative rehearsals for the revolution. In the face of overwhelming odds, as Anoushka Bonwick explains, "we need to be playing, thinking and imagining together to work out how we've got to where we are, and how we can come together to move forward" (My Theatre Mates, 2019). If current problematics regarding representation and inclusivity in both protest and participatory performance can be addressed through an essential and urgent intersectional re-structuring, then it is through joining

in with these games that we can come together to protest, play and imagine new futures. After all, we deserve a little fun - the world is ending, so what have we got to lose?

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