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| <b>Title</b>             | ‘Playing the game’: authenticity and invitation in Ontroerend Goed’s Audience   |
| <b>Authors</b>           | Wilson, A   |
| <b>Publication title</b> | Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies   |
| <b>Publisher</b>         | University of Wales   |
| <b>Type</b>              | Article   |
| <b>USIR URL</b>          | This version is available at: <a href="http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/37544/">http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/37544/</a> |
| <b>Published Date</b>    | 2015  |

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## **‘Playing the Game’: Authenticity and invitation in Ontroerend Goed’s *Audience***

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### **Abstract:**

Ontroerend Goed’s *Audience* is a theatre performance exploring the varying divisions between an audience, a crowd, a community, witness and mob. This article considers the responses of audience members to this performance, focusing on a pivotal moment of abuse. It reveals a plurality of ways in which individual spectators may experience the same event. In doing so, it explores how audience members experience such moments in terms of the perceived ‘authenticity’ or otherwise of theatrical abuse. It further considers the tensions between the kinds of participation that are offered by this performance and how this is taken up by audiences, showing how ‘non-activity’ can itself be seen as a kind of participation.

**Keywords:** Audience participation, Ontroerend Goed, abuse, authenticity, responsibility, representation, theatre

### **Introduction**

This article interrogates audience behaviour during the performance of *Audience* (2011) by Belgium-based theatre company Ontroerend Goed. Described as ‘theatrical provocateurs’ (Love, 2014), the company has acquired notoriety following their continued exploration of the audience/performer contract. The audience member, frequently positioned at the centre of Ontroerend Goed’s performances, has had their mobility and sight restricted (*The Smile off Your Face*, 2004), their confidence betrayed (*Internal*, 2007), and judgment passed on them by strangers (*Game of You*, 2009). Continuing in this tradition, *Audience* confronts its audiences with their ‘own reactions to violence’ (Radosavljević, 2013: 171) by staging an act of abuse, the authenticity of which is left deliberately ambiguous. In this moment the audience is encouraged to ‘consciously observ[e] the self in the act of observing, i.e. self-reflexively watching ourselves watch’ (Park-Fuller, 2003: 289). This self-reflexivity is

facilitated within the show by the presence of a camera, which captures live-feed images of the audience as they watch the performance, and projects these images above the stage. By provoking spectators to either intervene or stay silent, and then to reflect on the ramifications of this decision, the performance unsettles the boundaries between an audience, a crowd, and a mob, exploring the relationship between individual agency and collective action.

In investigating audiences' responses to this performance I draw on the results of a qualitative questionnaire that gathered a small number of particularly rich responses, as well as a panel discussion hosted by Soho Theatre and a post-show talk that took place in Budapest. Through these methods I have been able to relate the comments of different audience members to my own retrospective experience. Via this mixed methodological approach I hoped to find out how different kinds of audience participation might be captured and interpreted, with particular focus on how silence, employed by certain audience members, may have functioned as a form of active participation despite appearing at face value to be a sign of passivity.

### **'Eating popcorn may annoy our neighbours': about *Audience***

I attended the performance in August 2011 at St. Andrews and St. George's West Church as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The audience was guided into the performance space and invited to hand in coats and belongings, which were duly hung on clothing rails lining two sides of the stage. The scenography was 'end-on' with a steep seating bank facing a raised stage. The performance began when a female performer introduced herself and the company, observing the audience from the front of the auditorium, and delivered a prologue reminding us of the rules and conventions of audience protocol. She spoke casually and confidently, with an understated charm that established a certain connection between herself and the auditorium. 'We should try to keep the coughing to a minimum. Eating popcorn may annoy our neighbours. If we keep clapping at the end the cast will return' (Gardner, 2011).

During the prologue a camera had been conspicuously set up on stage by someone who I imagined to be a stage technician. When the camera then proceeded to be operated by this person, I realised that he was in fact a performer in the company. In silence he began to capture the impressions of the audience as we sat back and gazed at our projected selves. The performers' silent voyeurism was both unsettling and compelling. Disembodied voices sounded from the auditorium, offsetting the sense of unease by seemingly vocalising the thoughts of the people caught on camera. Although not immediately apparent, the voices came from performers stationed in and behind the seating bank who were improvising the thoughts of the people being filmed. In varying tones and accents, comments such as 'please don't film me!' or 'I knew I should have put something nicer on...' undercut the silence as the camera panned up and down the rows of seats, zooming in on particular items or parts of the body.

The male performer operating the camera finally fixed on a female audience

member. He proceeded to strike up a casual conversation with her, which quickly descended into a form of taunting. The performer informed the audience member that she could stop the taunting if she agreed to spread her legs. The audience were also promised that the bullying would stop if we collaborated with the persecutor and asked her, as one, to spread her legs. The performer, we were informed, wished to re-create the famous 1866 painting of *L'Origine du Monde* by Gustave Courbet, and it was this that seemingly justified his demands: the woman should spread her legs, we were told, in the name of art. Of course there is, potentially, a flawed logic to the performer's request: if the women agreed to perform this act as a way of stopping the personal insults being made towards her it would be motivated through manipulation, not free choice, subsequently perpetuating the abuse insidiously. Indeed, the act itself would be, for many women I imagine, a form of public humiliation, rather than aesthetic gratification or emancipation. It is this particular moment of abuse that is the focus of this paper, and I will return to the ways in which audience members responded later on. Before discussing the findings of my audience study it is worth outlining in more detail the format of this performance as a whole.

The moment of bullying was followed by a kind of fashion parade, in which the performers donned the coats of audience members taken at the start of the show, riffled through bags and displayed their contents on stage. Party streamers then fell down from the ceiling and the performers danced maniacally to loud music, inviting us to 'join in the fun'. At the end of the show a video montage was screened depicting crowds in varying situations, including football matches, political rallies and religious ceremonies. These final images reinforced the show's central questions. What is an audience? What is the relationship between an audience, a crowd, and a mob? How might coercion of a group occur in the face of charismatic power? The montage asked us as audience members to reflect upon our own behaviour during the course of the performance; to consider the demands made on us by performers and how this might relate to wider instances of mob behaviour. In doing so, *Audience* asked its participants to question the extent to which the traditional 'performance contract' trades in operations of power and manipulation, and the level of individual agency allocated to the audience member.

### **The audience as interlocutor**

I would suggest that Ontroerend Goed's performance can itself be seen as a kind of audience study. Whilst not strictly methodological in scope, the production nonetheless both reflects and resists practices of ethnography. It is 'the audience' that is the specific object of study here, examining the ways 'it' behaves in relation to codified traditions and asking what happens when the basic 'performance contract' is tested or challenged. The 'naturally occurring setting' (Brewer 2000: 10) in which the 'field work' takes place is the 'end-on' configured theatre space, with the audience raised on a bank of seating facing the main playing space.

Interestingly, this more traditional configuration was a radical departure for the company. In *The Personal Trilogy* (*Smile off Your Face, Internal, Game of You*) the work

seemed to emphasise the individual rather than the collective behaviour of the audience, explored through scenographies that deliberately subverted the audience/performer division. Performances ranged from one-on-one encounters to group therapy sessions, and from performances in cubicles to game-type experiences. In *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry*, anthropologist Michael Jackson describes how ‘traditional empiricism [...] draws a definite boundary between observer and observed, between method and object’, whereas ‘radical empiricism denies the validity of such cuts and makes the interplay between these domains the focus of its interest’ (1989: 3).

In many ways, both approaches seem to be in operation within Ontroerend Goed’s *Audience*. On the one hand, the boundary between observer and observed is maintained through the demarcated playing space of the performers and the configuration of the audience as a collective object of study. However, on the other, in the moments when performers are stationed amongst the audience there is a seeming attempt to instigate participation. Also, whilst much of the performance occurs within the clearly delineated spaces of auditorium and stage, the performers address the audience directly and engage them in conversation. In this manner the role of the audience can be said to shift between the domains of observer and observed: a tension between what German philosopher Michael Theunissen describes as ‘other as theme’ and ‘other as interlocutor’ (in Madison and Hamera, 2006: 354).

The opening prologue of *Audience*, in which the protocols for generic audience behavior are outlined, serves to immediately situate its audiences as Theunissen’s ‘other as theme’: an existing or fixed subject available for objective study and unchanging in the face of such study. This plays on the idea of accepted audience action as has been eloquently addressed by American theatre director Diane Paulus:

Essentially, the audience is expected to quietly receive the event, only making noise at solicited moments. The audience is governed by an unspoken code of behaviour: pay attention, don’t talk to the person sitting next to you, don’t even think about whipping out something to eat [...]. Silence is a premium, so unwrap your candies now before the show starts and be sure to turn your cell phones off. And God forbid you should ever talk back to the performers. (2006: 334)

However, this safe ground – whereby audiences are free to relax in the understanding that they know what is expected of them, and what they will be expected to give back – is quickly revealed as unsteady. This comes through particularly powerfully during the pivotal moment of abuse, when spectators are asked to join in with bullying the female audience member into re-creating Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du Monde*. This instigates a shift from the audience as ‘theme’ to the audience as ‘interlocutor’, emphasising their complicity in the action and demanding that they intervene.

During the show I watched, in 2011, nobody spoke up in this moment, myself

included; and in the months afterwards I became interested in finding out *why*. How could my and others' silence be judged or understood? An underlying preoccupation of the show is to question the ways in and extent to which audiences can be considered malleable. In many ways, my own overall reticence to actively participate was driven by a resistance to this feeling of being manipulated: I did not speak up for the abused audience member; I was the last to rise from my seat during the 'party moment'; I hung on to my possessions at the start of the show. My reluctance followed a logic whereby I did not want to become a 'player' in what I perceived to be fictional scenarios disguised as reality. I did not 'buy into' the party moment, especially in the wake of the apparent abuse that it followed. And, whilst initially ambivalent, I was pretty sure that the insulted audience member was a 'plant' of some sort. I was interested in finding out how other audience members reacted to this moment, particularly in light of whether they believed that the abused woman was either a performer or a 'real' audience member like them, who had come in off the street and been caught unawares.

### **Investigating audiences' responses**

My main method of enquiring into audiences' experiences was a qualitative questionnaire, which can be viewed in the Appendix.<sup>1</sup> The call for responses was posted in April 2012 on the SCUDD (Standing Conference of University Drama Departments) mailing list, an online community of theatre, drama and performing arts professionals, most of whom work in the Higher Education sector. Just seven people responded to this initial email and agreed to fill out the questionnaire. Unsurprisingly, the occupations of these participants included a teaching instructor, theatre director, lecturers, theatre-maker, theatre professor, and actor/freelance trainer.

Admittedly this is a very small sample, and one that, moreover, is drawn from a pool of potential respondents who might be expected to exhibit particular knowledge of performance activity. In choosing to respond, these spectators may also have felt that they had opinions to express or ideas to explore about the performance, thereby capturing particularly considered responses. What follows must therefore be seen as an effort to provide a foundation for further work than any real attempt to make claims about this production's audiences as a whole. However, through analyzing these particularly rich responses I have been able to gather a sense of how different audiences engage with ideas of participation in performed acts of abuse.

Five respondents had seen the performance in Edinburgh in 2011, eight months before completing the questionnaire. A further two respondents saw it during a later run the same year at the Soho Theatre, London, four months before participating in the research. There is, however, insufficient evidence to suppose that any of them were at the same event, which might have been useful in terms of producing direct comparisons. The gender mix was relatively balanced, consisting of three women and four men. Six out of seven respondents provided their age, ranging from twenty-eight to forty-three.

Despite the similar occupations of the respondents, the questionnaire produced

mixed responses. Just two out of the seven respondents (R3 & R4) told me that they had personally confronted the abusive performer. One describes how he felt the company had ‘crossed the line’ in this moment. During the show he had not considered that the woman might be a plant, but in retrospect he acknowledged that she might have been. Significantly, he qualified this with the firm statement that ‘whether [the abuse] was staged or not, it was successful’. This was because it had seemed ‘real’, he said, and had therefore managed to outrage him because what he was experiencing had seemed unethical (R3). Meanwhile, the second person (R4) describes how she was compelled to intervene by ‘the need to know whether the woman was a plant or not’. Without this knowledge she ‘didn’t feel safe as an audience member [and] wasn’t able to trust the judgment of those making the show’: a result of feeling ‘duped & cheated by the actors’ (R4).

For some audience members, then, the question of whether or not the insulted woman was an actual audience member or a plant was an important motivating force in deciding whether or not to speak up. There were signs that for people like R4, quoted above, to discover that the woman was a performer would be to remove responsibility from themselves as audience member to the planted actor herself. This was certainly true for another respondent, who talked about how she decided not to get involved after she successfully decoded the abused woman as a performer:

When the abuse started it was unclear to me if the victim in the show was an actor or not. After her face was projected onto the screen behind the bully, I knew immediately she was a plant. My background in theatre made this fact easy to decipher. Her neutral expression betrayed none of the nervousness or embarrassment inherent to any singled-out, genuinely unsuspecting audience member. She had the control and poise of an actor. With this realisation, I felt no protective instinct towards her. She was playing a role and had agreed to participate in the process. Knowing she was an actor, the bit that followed was tedious and similar to a poorly designed after-school anti-bully exercise (R1).

However, for other people, even if the woman *was* a real audience member they felt they still wouldn’t need to protect her because of the fact that it took place in ‘theatre’ and not ‘real life’ (R1). This audience member insisted that ‘a distinction must be made between what an actor acts out on a stage and real abuse’ (R1). For this respondent, in *all* theatre performances (and other kinds of event) ‘spectators have the choice to engage in disturbing content or walk out of the theatre, avoid the movie, or change the television channel’ (R1). In a similar manner, R6 describes how he ‘didn’t feel the need’ to speak out, because this was a performance and he ‘wanted to see what would happen if [we] didn’t play the game’ (R6). Of course, in some ways every participant is playing the game set out by the company by simply entering the theatre space. The option of not ‘playing the game’ was, arguably, only possible by the ‘act’ of walking out of the theatre (or indeed not attending the event) – as I shall discuss shortly.

Correspondingly, R5 describes how ‘the attempts to provoke audience responses all seemed a bit too obvious and manipulative’, and how ‘the more ‘resistant’ thing was actually not to respond at all - rather than to play into the company’s hands and start reacting’ (R5). R7 describes a similar experience, explaining her lack of physical or verbal participation as being due to it ‘seeming like a stitch-up’, because ‘regardless of the content of what anyone actually said, the company had a way of making them look like mindless idiots’ (R7). She goes on to describe how ‘everyone who shouted back at the actors somehow sounded [...] self-righteous’ and how ‘there didn’t seem to be any room for any genuine exchange’:

What struck me about the framing of the experience was how ultimately disempowered the audience were in the iteration of traditional power relations between watcher and watched. The company retained a panoptic, lofty overview and the audience remained divided, atomised, diminished. Each audience member who responded to taunts or questions came across as shrill, fatuous, self-important and ultimately impotent. Like game show participants who appear drab in their day attire next to the glamour of the Quizmaster & assistants’ eveningwear, the audience is constructed here as puppets to the company’s will (R7).<sup>2</sup>

This can be usefully counterpointed through reference to a recorded panel discussion, ‘Ontroerend Goed’s *Audience: Has Theatre Gone Too Far?*’, hosted by Soho Theatre on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2011 and posted online after the event. Here, the panel consisted of leading industry and theatre professionals (artistic directors, critics, programmers, producers and actors). Importantly, the performances at Soho Theatre followed the extensive Edinburgh Fringe run, which had caused a great deal of media controversy and widened awareness of the show itself. Subsequently, one audience member described in the panel discussion how her perception of the show had changed as a result of being forewarned about the way the performance contract would be re-negotiated (SP1). An American audience member also described how her decision to intervene was driven by boredom rather than morality, describing how she wanted to ‘move the piece along’ (SP2).

Finally, R2 describes how nobody intervened because the show that he attended didn’t have ‘that kind of atmosphere’. Here, the audience ‘all just joined in when asked – like children at a kids’ party’ (R2). In explaining this further, he described how he had seen the show at the Edinburgh Fringe and how in this circumstance ‘everyone was up for it and ready for a laugh – although at people’s expense’ (R2). He goes on to recount how ‘since lots of people got picked out there was a communal atmosphere’ (R2). There is perhaps a case to be made here that at the Fringe this show might not be so unusual in terms of picking on audience members: this is a tenet of many stand-up comedy acts, after all.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, what is interesting here is how different audiences responded to this as a ‘theatrical’ event. Some respondents, like those quoted above, seem to be confident in their ability to see



through the fiction/non-fiction display. However, importantly, for these people it seems to have been less important to establish the authenticity (or otherwise) of the audience member/performer, as it was to unveil the general untruth of the theatrical event itself. For these respondents, the inherent inauthenticity built into the theatrical situation meant that the abuse of this woman – whether a performer or not – was experienced as unreal and therefore lacking the capacity for harm.

It is worth comparing this to a post-show discussion that took place in Budapest (2012). One woman – a fine art graduate – described how the moment of abuse particularly touched her, as it reminded her of an incident in a life-drawing class she had attended where the model experienced a similar kind of humiliation and no one (including the graduate) had defended her. She had deeply regretted her lack of involvement in the incident, describing how she thought of herself as the ‘one who always stood up’ (B1). She does not mention whether this compelled her to speak up for the woman in the performance or not, but instead comments on how it was ‘important’ for her to experience the event. In response, one of the theatre programmers hosting the discussion comments on how the performance is for many a kind of lesson: that ‘be[ing] members of an audience that doesn’t stand up’ can teach you something about yourself (B2, 2012). In the same discussion, Devriendt also describes how one audience member who attended the show had regretted not speaking out so profoundly that the following night he sent his son, who proceeded to ‘stand up’ at every opportunity. What is interesting here is the symbolic nature of this gesture. There were signs that for both of these audience members the power of the theatrical encounter lay not in the possibility of causing/preventing authentic harm to others, but in the ‘safe’ symbolic space it can offer. Through standing up to ‘performed’ abuse it might just be possible to redeem ‘real’ past (or indeed future) wrongs.

In the Budapest post-show discussion Devriendt described how he disliked making ‘nation-specific’ generalisations about the audiences to whom the show has played. However, he did observe that audiences within the UK, on the whole, seemed to protest more readily than those in other European countries, ‘playing the game’ and accepting the ‘theatrical frame’ (Devriendt, 2012). This suggests that Devriendt considers ‘speaking out’ or protesting against the actions of the performer to be an act of ‘play’ within the context of the performance. However, my findings have raised questions as to whether such acts of protest were actually motivated by acceptance of the theatrical frame, as Devriendt claims. For many respondents who considered themselves to be knowledgeable about the theatrical frame, it was exactly this feeling of being aware of the contrived nature of the experience that caused them to resist taking part. When R2 describes how nobody intervened and how the audience ‘all just joined in when asked – like children at a kids’ party’ he seems to be suggesting a level of play which is in contrast to Devriendt’s ‘playing the game’. Similarly, for others, ‘speaking out’ was the result of *not* understanding the theatrical frame, arising from a belief that the abuse was ‘authentic’ rather than theatrical illusion. In this sense, some instances of (non)intervention can be understood in direct opposition to the idea of ‘playing along.’ The paradoxical nature of this will be explored in

the final section, when I consider the options for intervention offered by the performance. I first consider what the findings discussed above say about where the lines of audience responsibility might be drawn. If a performer volunteers to be the subject of abuse or humiliation, is the audience in any way responsible for the experience they endure?

### **'Authentic' abuse**

In answering the question that closed the previous section, it is necessary to consider the relationship between 'reality' and 'fiction' in terms of performative abuse. This section suggests that *Audience* offers a fascinating case study by which to explore audiences' responses to the perceived 'authenticity' – or otherwise – of theatrical acts of bullying. As Freshwater describes, the term authenticity

is supremely slippery, as well as being over-stretched. Its association with genuineness, honesty, integrity and uniqueness meant that it was widely adopted as a term of approbation at both ends of the cultural spectrum during the twentieth century (2012: 3).

However, despite its ambiguity and 'scholarly circumspection' (Freshwater, 2012: 3), authenticity is nonetheless increasingly employed as a marker of judgment by audiences who often use the term as a synonym for 'good work'. As this section explains, many of the responses to *Audience* discussed above were inflected by the respondents' perception of the 'authenticity' of the insulted woman. While some audience members experienced the abuse in terms of representation, removing responsibility from themselves on to the performer herself, others felt that to implicate themselves in the action would be to contribute to something 'real'. In her discussion of performative abuse, Lisa Fitzpatrick suggests that the dramatic framework itself ensures that any act of violence 'is framed, is separate from the actual world, and will be resolved somehow within the logic of the fiction' (2011: 5). In such instances

The audience sees the representation of pain and suffering, and may experience a visceral response, but as long as the trappings of performance are present [...] then the pain and violence usually stand for something outside themselves. (2011: 5)

If the woman is a plant, then in some ways this scene becomes just like any staged moment of violence within a play. For instance, in witnessing the rape scene between a soldier and protagonist in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, audience members are not expected to stop the immediate action in order to protect the protagonist. Rather, the question of responsibility extends beyond the confines of the performance: in the case of *Blasted*, in terms of the ways in which large-scale global conflicts can induce microcosmic acts of brutality outside the immediate confines of a war zone. Culpability is therefore divided between the personal

(the fictional soldier) and the political (the wider 'real' culture that exists beyond the confines of the drama). In such performances, audiences are generally expected to act as interlocutors not within the performance situation but outside the theatre's walls. Similarly, audience members are not compelled to grab the gun in Chekov's *The Seagull* in a bid to prevent Konstantin from committing suicide.

However, more experimental forms of live performance have sought to destabilise the boundary between reality and fiction in order to test audience complicity within the moment of performance. For example, in Marina Abramovich's iconic *Rhythm 0* (1974) there was an effort to experiment with audiences' willingness to take action (whether to harm or to protect) within a performance situation. Within this piece Abramovich placed a selection of 72 objects onto a table and invited audience members to use them on her body in whatever way they chose over a duration of six hours. Whilst initially tentative, some participants became progressively violent, with one audience member finally holding a loaded gun to her head and potentially endangering her life. This action was intercepted by another spectator who removed the gun. While in *Rhythm 0* Abramovich essentially contrived the situation by setting out the array of objects, the gun included, and putting herself as a performer in the middle of a potentially dangerous situation, the actions that took place had real effects as a result of the decisions made by the audience. And whilst the action of holding a gun to Abramovich's head may never have been intended to cause genuine harm, the experience it created must have *felt* real, certainly for Abramovich and for the spectator who intercepted the action.

To situate this in the context of *Audience*, when R3 described how the moment of abuse was successful 'whether this was staged or not', for this respondent it was because the abuse *felt* real that they were compelled to take responsibility for the woman's wellbeing. In other words, for some audience members the abuse was experienced as real whether or not the woman was a performer, because even if she were a plant she was still a person: a real body without, necessarily, the 'trappings of performance'. For this respondent, action resulted from the way the experience felt 'emotionally real', as often experienced in more representational forms. This differs from experiences of 'interpersonal realness' more commonly found in pieces such as the Abramovich performance. Both forms have the potential to serve as motivating forces for audiences to take responsibility, both for their own actions and for those of others.

For other people, however, *Audience* did obfuscate the traditional dramatic / non-dramatic division, evident through responses which experienced the event simultaneously as both fictional and non-fictional. Even when the event was experienced as 'unstaged', with the performers seen as attacking an unwitting member of the audience, the fact that the event took place under the theatrical umbrella meant that many people still experienced it as false and, subsequently, as Fitzpatrick suggests 'separate' from those experiencing it. This sense of the false can be exacerbated by the political, geographic or social context of the performance when, for instance, 'real' outside forces intervene to widen the gap between reality and fiction. To offer one particularly powerful example of this, one person situated

his own lack of intervention by explaining that the performance he saw took place on the night after the London riots. After this, he said, the show's 'political message looked a bit out of touch with UK realities - almost a bit tame [...] compared to what was happening on our streets at the time' (R2). However, for other people, what was important was the symbolic act of standing up to abuse. Here, the power of theatre lies in its ability to allow audiences to address past or future wrongs in a simulated environment.

In this sense, while they are very different, what all these responses do is to problematise representation as simplistically authentic/inauthentic, revealing a complex tension between the real and the contrived. In her article 'Intolerable Acts' Anna Harpin explores theatrical experiences of trauma, suggesting that

If theatre, in particular ways, wears its unreality on its sleeve, then it is important to attend precisely to how this form interacts with [...] questions of truth. This is not to suggest that theatre and performance are uniquely alive to the meta- realities of artistic practice. Rather it is to pause over the specific modes of disassembling truth that take place in performance spaces. (2011: 105)

Studying the responses to Ontroerend Goed's *Audience* has involved a similar 'pausing' over the specific ways in which truth can be dissembled within theatrical experiences. The final section now considers the options for intervention that were offered through *Audience* in light of contemporary debates about participatory performance practices.

## Conclusions

In her article 'The Rise and Fall of the Character called Spectator', Sophie Nield (2008) describes how

[w]ithout the protective apparatus of characterisation, rehearsal, fictive otherness, perhaps we risk staring into the black hole of the theatre itself, mute, stage-affrighted, awaking to the actor's nightmare of being on the stage and not knowing the play (2008: 535)

This raises interesting questions about the invitation to participate in a live context. For instance, In Ontroerend Goed's *Audience*, even if an audience member were to believe the woman to be real, and to be experiencing a form of bullying, the prospect of speaking out might potentially still be stifled by the self-consciousness inherent to the live framework. To offer another example of this: in response to the question 'How did you feel, as an audience member, during this show?', R5 mentions the importance of audience configuration, describing how the stage arrangement isolated audience members, which he compared to a similar show – Tim Crouch's *The Author* – where the audience was 'sat in facing rows so that you become conscious of being looked at by other audience members all the time',

achieving ‘a self-consciousness for viewers without putting any one individual “on the spot”’ (R5, 2012). Physical arrangement and the sense of ‘immediacy’ provoked was therefore a contributing factor in the behaviour of some audience members.

In her article ‘Audiencing the Audience’ Linda Park-Fuller foregrounds the varying approaches to studies of audiences, discussing how ethnographic methodologies increasingly provide a means of ‘consciously observing the self in the act of observing, i.e. self-reflexively watching ourselves watch’ (2003: 289). Park-Fuller is, I suspect, referring primarily to the ethnographers who carry out the research and not (as am I) to the subjects being studied. To return this to my own experience, the live-feed projection of the audience seemed to heighten my presence as an audience member/performer, increasing my self-consciousness and potentially affecting my ability to ‘act’.

What I have taken away from this performance is lingering retrospective consideration of the ways alternative action to that chosen on the night might have been possible. In a similar manner to how lines of argument are often conceived after the moment of conflict, the show left me battling with the possibilities of what *could* have happened if I or others had tested the alleged freedom offered by the performance, alternatively intervening and challenging the performers in their handling of the unexpected and testing the extent to which choice was really possible. Indeed, ‘speaking up’ when you believe the abuse to be false may be seen as implicating oneself as a performer in a fiction, which for many people is a scary prospect. As revealed in this article, choosing to speak up can be to appear exhibitionist, self-important and, ultimately, inferior in comparison to the performers, who seem to have well-rehearsed strategies for combating reactions.

Gareth White describes how it is common for audiences to be aware of the contrivances of the participatory ‘invitation’, and how a level of suspicion often pervades both the practitioners’ motives and what might ensue as a result:

The experience of perceiving and accepting an invitation is, at basis, an experience of self-agency, but it will often contain moments when an intuition occurs that a route has been pre-planned for us, that our actions have been pre-conceived. At moments like this self-agency is inflected with something different, with a feeling that it is diluted. (2013: 185)

This has been usefully addressed in relation to *Audience* by Duska Radosavljević, who identifies a similar limitation in the methodology employed by the company to facilitate the audience experience:

The audience members’ agency is left entirely to their own judgment and it seems that [...] the ambiguity created around the ‘performance contract’ understandably creates a sense of double standards and consequent audience indignation, which can only be resolved intellectually through post-hoc reflection. (2013: 171)

In 'Practising Participation', the performance duo Lone Twin describe how within their participatory work 'there has to be a real (and perfectly normal) sense that people can ignore the prompt and tell you where to stick it' (Whelan, quoted in Lavery and Williams, 2011: 10). Ontroerend Goed describe how, while each performance of *Audience* provides a choice in terms of audience response, if 'everybody re-acts or nobody reacts it doesn't matter' (Devriendt, 2012). In this performance, not participating (or remaining silent) during the abusive moment therefore did not signal 'non-participation' but rather complicity in the actions of the performer. In not speaking out you were implicitly enabling the insults to continue. However, choosing to speak out could lead to accusations of 'playing the game', which is itself a form of complicity. During the abusive moment, the available options seemed limited to the following: 1) persuading the woman to spread her legs to end the offensive insults; 2) confronting the performer directly and asking him to stop; 3) remaining silent; 4) walking out of the theatre; or 5) diverting the attention in some way. Subsequently, I left this performance feeling that the consequences of my decisions (whether to remain silent, or to speak up) had already been circumscribed in advance. This left little room for what Lavery and Williams describe as 'a relation of non-relation' (2011: 8).

Like White, Freshwater describes how such instances are all too common within much contemporary work, where 'performances which seem to be offering audiences the chance to make a creative contribution, only give them the chance of option A or B'. She goes on to describe how such strategies can be as 'disappointing and mendacious [...] as governmental consultation exercises' which appear to facilitate public exchange but in fact legitimate decisions preordained by those who hold the power (2011: 406). This paper has begun to investigate how people feel about the kinds of power they are asked to wield, as participants in *Audience*. How did they respond to the invitation to become interlocutors through performance, and what were the limits and forms of agency they felt they were offered by this act? In addressing these questions this paper has drawn on issues including self-consciousness, authenticity and responsibility. What remains intriguing is the question of why different audience members may experience the same occurrence in different ways. This article therefore aims to lay the groundwork for further research, particularly focusing on a wider and more varied audience demographic, in order to continue to investigate audiences' responses to performed acts of abuse.

### **Biographical Note:**

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## Appendix: Questionnaire

Occupation:

Age:

Gender:

When / where you saw the show:

1. How would you describe your participation within this event?
2. Did you 'speak up' / confront the performers at any time during the performance? (physically / verbally)
3. If so, what compelled you to do so?
4. If not, why not?
5. Did you think that the woman being insulted was a 'plant' / actor?
6. If so, did this affect your decision in terms of whether or not to 'act' ('defending' the woman)
7. Did anything notable / surprising happen in the performance you saw?
8. How did you feel, as an audience member, during this show?
9. Did you take anything away from this show? (did it mean anything to you?)
10. Any other comments...

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> I have given each recipient an identification number for reference purposes, with questionnaire participants referred to as Respondents 1-7 (R1-7). Participants in the Soho Theatre panel have been given the prefix 'S', while participants in the Budapest post-show discussion have been given the prefix 'B'.

<sup>2</sup> Respondent 7 also published her response to *Audience* on her blog, and confirmed prior to publication that she was happy to be identifiable. See Sarah Gorman 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Devriendt describes how a similar situation experienced by his girlfriend in a stand-up comedy event had prompted the conceptualisation of the show.