

Article 2: Working The Boundaries

Published in Animated Summer 2001

Summary

A commentary on the creation of a piece called VeilSAFE - an installation which toured in 2000/2001 in collaboration with Designer Caroline Broadhead. The project was created on a housing estate on the outskirts of Birmingham called Castle Vale. Our working theme was the 'Veil'. We immediately began to play with words and the interaction of concepts between the 'Veils we were wearing' and the Vale we were in. During this period, architecture and the idea space-sensitive work was beginning to influence Claire Russ. This and the following article can be seen as the early stages en route to her current work with architects and new architectural spaces.

When artists work the boundaries, the issue of inclusivity or exclusivity has to be thought afresh for each situation. As choreographers work the boundaries of spaces and take dance out of a theatre context, is there a need to think again about the experience of the audience, as they are no longer following pre-ritualised theatrical procedures? How can a viewer experience the dance and the dancer at close proximity from a place of safety? And, what if the success of a residency takes in to account the architecture of the recipient space, and the experience of recipient residents? Last October, **Claire Russ** and **Matthew Hawkins** travelled to 'The Vale' to create VeilSAFE in tandem with installation artist, Caroline Broadhead. The outcome was a space sensitive work with conceptual depth and entertainment value. Here Claire explains.



Castle Vale or 'The Vale' is an estate on the outskirts of Birmingham, which originally housed its residents in high-rise blocks. Now, as part of a regeneration scheme, housing is at ground level with gardens and communal public areas, wide streets, bright coloured railings and splashings of contemporary public art. You know you are 'on the Vale' when you pass a large architectural metal structure placed in the centre of a road junction, forming an artistic gateway to it. Apart from this, main roads, fields and wasteland mark the boundaries. For some, there is little reason to come 'off the Vale' as it offers many amenities.

Castle Vale School is one of Birmingham's Artsites where a number of artists have been invited to work. This is reversing a historical lack of art activity and such a status seems to give local residents and students a sense of pride, perhaps relief even, that life can hold more than the search for jobs and money. In our space, there are

modern stained glass windows, also created as part of the Year . The caretaker too is used to setting up for performances and working to an artist's brief; he also enjoys attending the shows. We are impressed. We are made very welcome.

'Welcome to 'the Veil'... yes, come in. you are now 'on the Veil', please find a place anywhere you like ... anywhere you like ... yes spread out ... feel free to come close ... oh hello ... my goodness you look so different without the beard. I didn't recognise you ... Pardon me I thought you were RoIf Harris ... he looks a lot like you when he's relaxing at home ... welcome ... yes come in ... I like to know if I'm 'on the Veil' or 'off' it. do you? ... Yes come in.'

In VeiISAFE , dance and text are interspersed. The performer (Matthew Hawkins) engages with the audience and comments on the themes, pulling out certain concepts - for example safety, protection, identity - and talks around them. The script, written by Matthew, takes a sentence or topic expressed rather dryly by me or our research literature, and works it up through his identification with it.

Visual artist Caroline Broadhead and I have already worked on the installation; a series of unusual 'veils', now to be worn, danced, animated and manipulated. We suspend a continuous veil, to mark the boundaries of the room leaving space for the audience between it and the wall. The audience are therefore also veiled whilst the fine net creates a fragile space sensitive boundary. A veil can be something which covers, conceals or separates. Often this results in our attention being drawn sharply to the veiled subject. A pair of black net 'gloves' and a tailored leopard skin print net suit therefore sit comfortably in our family of veils. Matthew passes within centimetres of the audience. Their veil protects them, so that they can enjoy an intimate relationship to the performer with little concern that a boundary will be crossed.

In addition to a large but lightweight roll of netting, we carried with us on our journey a CD of Richard Strauss' dramatic pseudo-striptease The Dance of the Seven Veils from the opera Salome . Most importantly, we also brought our casually, handpicked, unconventionally worn comfortable clothes, which help identify us as artists. We could therefore be suitably distinguishable presences in the school, likely, to be confused with neither students nor teachers.

'A glove like ours is romantic, no? Bus conductors. Remember them? With their cute, fingerless gloves ... perfect for handling small change.

Queen mothers, dentists, a boxer. Each goes hand in glove. This is my deep glove of art, and it's just right for a function like this.'

Are they protected? The early stages of our warm-up class coincide with lunchtime at Castle Vale School. We begin late and work on into the quiet of the evening. Like much of the school, our small hall is panelled with half window, half plasterboard sections. We are working through exercises and stretches when the school 'bell' sounds, a loud buzz, which cuts into our activity. Whilst we double our concentration, a flood of students pours onto the concourse outside and begin letting off steam. They

quickly become aware of us and peer through the glass. Questions begin to be fired at each other and at us through the thin glass. Who are we? Who has got us in? That is ballet dancing! Our presence, as we come up out of a quadrupedal back stretch to a bipedal stance receives a frenzy of protestations. This may be because we did not stop what we were doing, or visibly react, and further because our upright stance may have communicated confrontation and the threat of domination. Emotions are running high as the situation catalyses. The walls are kicked and the windows banged on until they threaten to give way. My heart is beating fast and the walls no longer seem much of a safety net. Our viewers are confused and angry. We took a balance, which must have disturbed the equilibrium between inside and out, and someone gave one final and almighty kick, which must have hurt badly. I wonder if the students are safe from the effects of observing dance artists in action.

I do not feel unstimulated by the potential for communication, which the knocking and aggression brings with it. Conflict or reaction can often be positive and enlightening. As part of our responsibilities as artists in residence Matthew and I take every opportunity to talk to students about what we are doing, and encourage people to come to the show but in this instance we have unwittingly played femmes fatales, cooped up in an impenetrable veil, beaming out mystery and allure but unable to deliver.

***'Are we divided when we could be bisected?
Am I protected?
Does gauze just point at the forbidden?
Does a dire deterrent make it urgent that I immerse myself in
detergent? Meanwhile, why don't you sweep across the
mausoleum in your long gloves, hat and veil having elegantly paid
your discreet respects? Moreover showzover.
Leave me now. Don't forget me, but do leave me. I'll be fine - I
like it here. Leave me.'***

Finally we do deliver to a substantial audience. On the night of the show the ritual of the performance, the strength of the work and Matthew's delivery wins the audience over. There are a few contributions from them, both invited and uninvited. The William Tell Overture plays on a mobile phone accompanying Matthew in what we had intended as a silent moment. It follows a section we call the 'heroic' so it is wholly appropriate. Matthew marches to the rhythm, and to the amusement of the owner expresses disappointment when it is switched off 'Oh! Pity ... I was working with that.' An after show talk reveals an appreciation of the layering and depth of the piece.

Our student group, under the direction of Birmingham based choreographer Ruth Jacombs, surprises us at every turn. They have visited us in rehearsal a number of times, and have contributed a lively commentary. They bring to life a catalogue of great ideas of their own. Masked heroes engage in cartoon like combat, a large sheet creates a shared veil with personalised eyeholes at varying heights. What's the time Mr Wolf is played wearing lampshade- like headdresses for comic effect and some young women explore a face veil revealing only the eyes. They perform first and then

come to watch our show.

He stands in a man-sized silk box, a protective veil, an exclusion zone, a place of comparative solitude and respite. He dances in it, his glove-veils brushing the silk walls, and reaching to connect the seamed corners through deliciously sequential articulations of his body. He executes a low turn and the rectangle becomes round as the air whips up around him. He wears it like a ball gown, sweeping across the mausoleum, then jumps round and round, perversely winding it about his head until he is so veiled he cannot see. He is breathing heavily, his body is exposed, and he puts his trust in the audience.

'Now answer me this right. How do you know it's me when I can't see a bloody thing?

My anonymous body and legs can hack away at proven harmony and allure.

But I can't see if you mind!

Undercover of darkness you might be: running amok in the aisles, getting friendly in the banquettes, unscrewing the fancy ashtrays, or savouring the aftertaste of popcorn.

Well, were you? ... savouring the aftertaste (of popcorn)?'

Wherever there is veiling or unveiling the issue of trust arises. There is vulnerability in such a change of state. The above moment in VeiISAFE brings awareness to the audience's potential to destruct and the vulnerability of the performer is pivotal in the structure of the piece. In VeiISAFE, the audience's veil is a fine negligee of a boundary, which can be violated at a tweak of some threads, though no one ever has. With this in place, the viewer experiences the dance and the dancer at close proximity from a place of safety. The threat of violation either way may flash up as a possibility, but after all, this is a performance, a 'show', there are rituals pertaining to the theatre, which prevail however radically the space is re-worked. The audience know where they stand! Or do they?

Our rehearsal viewers clearly do not. There is no unveiling, and no ritual to protect them. When artists work the boundaries, the issue of inclusivity or exclusivity has to be thought out afresh for each situation. As choreographers working the boundaries of spaces and taking dance out of the theatre, we have to think carefully about the experience of the audience, as they are no longer following pre-ritualised theatrical procedures. We can extend this thinking to the success of a whole residency taking in to account the architecture of the recipient space, and the experience of recipient residents.

Most artist residencies working the boundaries are performative. For much of it the artists are an 'art item', an unusual novelty, whether we like it or not, even when having tea. Pockets of communication give real dialogue but the 50s architecture of many institutional buildings means that there is much viewing, much visibility, but not so much unveiling. This will not change overnight so we should pre-empt it. We are ambassadorial and have a potentially inspirational role to play so we could and should

plan this better and imagine the experience of all parties, and try to nurture it as much as possible. (This is a note to myself) Oh! Yes, and it would be great to have some newly thought out architecture for learning institutions as part of regeneration programmes.

'I had to bring myself all the way over here to know that I'm safe.

What a relief to know that one's grace is nontoxic, not leading to disorder. I don't want to feel like an old tower block laced with deadly asbestos awaiting demolition. And I'm not here to destabilise things.

No. I'm just discovering my safety net and I love to feel protected.

When I'm 'on' in a show, dreary life is at bay. Nobody can call me or bother me with bills. I'm not on call.

Under the cover of darkness, the audience is protected too. Here you are protected from me - the artiste at the art face. You're in a form of suspension - just here to be loving the show.'

Claire Russ, artistic director, Claire Russ Ensemble. Extracts written by Matthew Hawkins. VeilSAFE is choreographed and directed by Claire Russ. Contact Gwen van Spijk on +44 (0)1926 339640 or email gvs@spa-arts.demon.co.uk

© Claire Russ Ensemble