

# Festivalisation of cultural production: experimentation, spectacularisation and immersion

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reasons that the growth in arts festivals that has taken place since the 1990s has changed the nature of the cultural market and, consequently, is a major cause of the growth in the production of particular sorts of artworks that suit festival settings. Based on interviews and discussions with festival directors and arts producers, participant observation as a producer and audience member, primarily in the UK, together with examples from the literature, this paper explores the question of whether festival aesthetics and specific features of festival production and exhibition are changing the nature of the artwork produced in response to festivalisation. Three festival experience dimensions that are increasingly prevalent in the performing and visual arts are explored: experimentation, spectacularisation and immersion. It concludes that the festivalisation of cultural exhibition poses new management challenges and opportunities to produce innovative kinds of work that retain their aesthetic power.

### Keywords:

Festivalisation

Spectacular

Immersive

Cultural  
production

## Introduction

Festivals are an increasingly common feature of cultural life. Not just outdoor greenfield music festivals such as Sonar or Glastonbury, but also city arts festivals and large outdoor events and parades (Quinn, 2005 & 2006; Klaic, 2007). As such, festivals are a growing market for artists and this paper seeks to understand whether the nature of the work being produced is changing in response to festivalisation.

Négrier defines festivalisation as "the process by which cultural activity, previously presented in a regular, on-going pattern or season, is reconfigured to form a 'new' event, e.g. a regular series of jazz concerts is reconfigured as a jazz festival" (2015: 18). This reconfiguration can be seen to be a response to industrialisation processes across the arts, heritage and creative industries that have altered institutional and artistic forms, types of consumption and roles within the production process. The terms cultural producers and cultural managers are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to the people responsible for the management and financial aspects of realising an artistic work or programme and bringing it to an audience. In their examination of new business models in the cultural industries, Jones and Thornton consider the interplay between aesthetics, entrepreneurship, and production strategies, concluding that "[i]nstitutional entrepreneurs do not start from scratch but piece together and recombine cultural elements available in society in ways that often involve creative discovery as well as happenstance" (2005: xiii). Peterson and Berger (1975) stress the importance of industry dynamics in encouraging or suppressing innovation and diversity. Their research into the music industry identified the potential for innovative small labels and producers to puncture the homogeneity and dominance of global media companies. In an era of disruptive technologies and a tendency towards global monopoly amongst technology companies, there remains pressure to innovate, and festivals appear to be one of the answers that has emerged. Festivals differentiate the live experience in a market dominated by virtual entertainment opportunities and downloading (Connolly & Krueger, 2005; UNESCO, 2016); they offer economies of scale and specialisation in marketing, ticketing and site management; and in the case of outdoor events, festival capacities might be larger than most indoor venues, meaning festivals can book bigger headline acts (Nordgård, 2016).

In addition to these managerial considerations there remains the question of whether there is something inherently attractive about cultural festivals and festivity (Knudsen & Christensen, 2015; Morgan, 2007; Klaic, 2009). Bielby, Moloney and Ngo (2005) identified that there has been little consideration of aesthetics in the literature on popular culture in general, and there is a particular gap in the consideration of the relatively recent effects of festivalisation on the work that art-

ists produce. Based on interviews and discussions with festival directors and arts producers, participant observation as a producer and audience member, primarily in the UK, together with examples from the literature, a number of changes have been noted in the types of cultural works on display at many festivals. These changes appear to synthesise the aesthetics of festivals with the economics of experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). For the purpose of this paper, these are defined as spectacularisation, the increasing use of large scale, loud and impressive art works and events; immersive experiences, that appeal to all of the senses and engage participants in the production; and experimentation with new forms, technologies, business models or relationships with communities and places. Such works appear to draw on and add traditional expectations of festivals as sites for social disruption, experimentation and (dis)play.

## Festivity, sociability and professionalisation

Festivity can be thought of as a time and space for celebration and play that is distinct from everyday life (Jordan, 2016). Pieper (1999 [1963]) distinguishes festive periods from times of mundane labour. Falassi (1987) emphasises the spatial rituals associated with festivals, such as decorating the site, fencing it off or opening normally restricted spaces. Decorating the festival venue removes as many reminders of the humdrum world as possible, creating a message that this space will, for a limited time, obey different rules, welcome different people, symbolise something new or other; something festive.

During the last decades of the 20th century jazz, rock and pop music festivals were incorporated into the commercial music industries' touring schedules and festivity itself became a commodity to be promoted to niche markets seeking experiences and escape from the everyday world of work and commerce (Morey et al, 2014). Anderton's (2011 & 2015) analysis of the relationship between lifestyle segmentation, music festivals and commercial sponsorship describes the importance of festivity in helping brands to activate a sense of shared identity amongst festival-goers and a product. The music festival marketplace is, as a result, becoming deeply differentiated with festivals, too, creating brand identities such as Glastonbury, Sziget, and Festival International Benicàssim (FIB) that appeal to loyal audiences and become part of their personal identity (Bennett & Woodward, 2014). Festivals, including Rock in Rio (Brazil, Portugal, Spain and the US), WOMAD (UK, Australia, Chile, New Zealand and Spain), and the Flow Festival (Finland and Slovenia) have sought to monetise their brand names by running international editions (Martin, 2016). Economies of scale are a key factor in the growth of Festival Republic, which produces or partly produces more

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than 10 large scale festivals each year in the UK alone, including Latitude, Download and T in the Park (Moirey et al, 2014). Other producers, such as Boomtown and the Secret Garden Party, are differentiating their festivals by developing unique aesthetic identities through commissioning new works or encouraging participation from festival-goers in designing and co-creating themed zones or making artworks for the site (Robinson, 2015; Bowditch, 2010).

Making work specifically for festivals requires an understanding of audience motivation, an area of interest in the events management and tourism literature (Getz, 2010; Glow & Caust, 2010; Robinson, Long & Picard, 2004), and indicate that festival-goers have different motivations to audiences for theatre, exhibitions or classical concerts (Fabiani, 2011). The social and experiential facets of festivals emerge as important attractions, indicating that, at festivals, audiences have an altered frame of mind and are looking for an affective and symbolic intensity in the event design and programme that differentiates the festive time and place from everyday life (Cummings & Herbert, 2015; Lash, 2010). This paper maintains that artists and cultural producers are responding to these expectations by creating multi-sensory, immersive and spectacular works that create festival-like experiences, both for the growing festival market and for conventional forms of cultural exhibition. Archer (2015) and Fabiani (2011) are amongst those who feel that artists and audiences mix more freely in a festive environment, creating a sense of community and involvement that is lacking in theatres, galleries and concert halls. This sense of sociability, of involvement, of the festival being co-created, is enhanced by the fact that many festivals encourage volunteering as a practical management solution to the need for large numbers of staff during the festival itself and because they perceive the festival as having a role in developing and encouraging community participation (Autissier, 2015). There is not the space to examine this social dimension in detail in this paper, which is focused on exploring the question of whether festival-specific aesthetics are changing the nature of artworks that are being produced and consequently, the nature of work available in the cultural market. Social and policy factors are, however, important in explaining the attraction of festival experiences to producers and participants and hence the growth in the festival market.

For Comunian (2015) festivals act as communities of practice, connecting artists and cultural managers in similar ways to conferences and trade fairs (Moeran & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2011). The Mladi levi Festival in Ljubljana, Slovenia, for example, seeks to maximise this social and artistic mingling through creating “opportunities where [they] could invite artists to stay with [them] for as long as possible” (Koprivšek, 2015: 119) in order to develop relationships with each other and the city. The festival holds an annual picnic for artists and its volunteers and encourages the use of a bar as an after show meeting place. “It was exactly at these places that a great many friendships and new co-operations came into being” (Koprivšek, 2015: 119). Festivals bring together significant numbers of cultural practitioners from all sections of the production cycle. They act as hubs in cultural economy networks providing practitioners with professional development prospects, cementing professional norms and expectations about how the sector should operate, and making and agreeing on judgements about aesthetic values that lead to some artists and artworks being promoted and others rejected (Moeran & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2011).

These studies, in their various ways, all point to the fact that there is something inherently different in the way that festivals produce and present work and in the way that audiences experience that work. This paper is an attempt to describe the aesthetic responses that artists are making to festivalisation and to understand the impacts these might have on the shape of the cultural marketplace, and the consequences for professionals working in festival production.

### Experimentation

The arts and creativity are inextricably linked in the popular imagination and are held up as exemplars for businesses seeking to increase their levels of innovation and creativity because of the iterative production techniques, openness to learning from experiences, an intensity amongst collaborators and avoidance of preconceived notions and rules (Austin & Devin, 2003). Artists play with conventions, invert expectations and push boundaries in an attempt to create something original that resonates with audiences. Festivals, too, mix the traditional with the experimental, the conven-

tional with the new. For O'Hagen festivals "may be particularly suitable 'testbeds' for innovation, due to the particular characteristics of festival production. By and large they contain a number of events and productions and under such circumstances it is likely that audiences will be more prepared to attend innovative events" (1992: 62). The festive rejection of everyday rules, sensual and temporal intensity and unmediated co-presence produces an atmosphere of openness to experience that which is qualitatively different, resulting in a willingness to take risks that is attractive to artists and firms developing or selling new products and services. Former chief design officer of Philips Lighting, a company at the forefront of LED research, Rogier van der Heide, a co-founder of the Amsterdam Light Festival, saw the opportunity to work with artists on pieces commissioned for the festival as a part of the firm's research and development activity, for example (James, 2015). Elsewhere, research institute i-DAT has developed a digital technology that measures the mood of audiences by capturing facial expressions and analysing mood and emotion in the users' social media posts by using an app that gamifies the evaluation process (i-DAT, 2015). The app has been tested at Cheltenham Festivals and Liverpool's Flux Festival, as the researchers found that festival audiences were particularly open to experimentation and risk.

Festivalisation, therefore, appears to offer cultural producers and artists more freedom to experiment, to try new ways of making work in new venues for new audiences. Commissioning new artistic works is an experimental feature that is common to many aesthetically-led festivals, whether they celebrate a historic tradition, or explore contemporary and commercial genres. John Cumming, director of the EFG London Jazz Festival; William Galinsky, artistic director of the Norfolk and Norwich Festival; and Ben Robinson, director of greenfield music festival Kendal Calling, discussed their distinctive reasons for commissioning new works during a conference on 22 May 2015 (Cumming, Galinsky & Robinson, 2015). There were four themes that emerged: art form and artist development, exploration of distinctive local identity, market competition for artists, and the creation of a unique product to attract audiences to the festival.

For Cumming, festivals have a responsibility to experiment by commissioning new works because "without it the art form doesn't move forward. It's the lifeblood". London Jazz Festival formalised its commitment to commissioning when it invited 21 artists to make new work for its 21st edition in 2013. Saxophonist Courtney Pine, one of those commissioned, explains the importance of being invited: "Musicians who are improvising and looking for inspiration need a springboard to help them – and commissions give them the opportunity to present new work" (London Jazz Festival/Serious, 2015). Evidence from the literature supports Cumming's observation that audiences are more likely to take artistic risks within festive environments than they are when seeing a concert means

buying a ticket for one event and making a specific trip (Morgan, 2007; Gelder & Robinson, 2009; Uysal & Li, 2008; Archer, 2015). For Cumming this means that festivals are ideally positioned to "celebrate an art form's existing repertoire, but also to celebrate the right to fail". Pianist and composer Alexander Hawkins explains the distinction between performing at a festival and at other concerts: "The chance to perform a commission comes along with a festival and the commission gives you an opportunity to do something new and something different from the day-by-day gig" (interviewed in EFG London Jazz Festival – 21 Commissions, 2013).

John Cumming suggests that festivals need stories, a narrative that runs across the festive period. Commissioning new works means he can bring together artists and shows he otherwise would not have thought of. In 2014 he invited jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, a rare opportunity that stimulated him into developing a South African theme tied into the 20th anniversary of South African majority rule. The festival commissioned a new work from a South African big band to enhance the experience, and supplemented the programme with talks and panels discussing democracy and South African culture. The festival environment gives an artistic director more space to develop a programme than would be possible with a weekly jazz club, or traditional theatre programme. The intensity of festival programming places concerts, exhibitions, and plays in juxtaposition to each other, so one might still be resonating as the next event starts, producing unexpected insights, nuances and reflections. According to Cumming, festival audiences who have already committed to attend a performance by a known artist are more willing to try something new whilst they are there. Something new and something different echoes festivity's sense of being a time and space that is distinct from everyday life.

Something new and something different also enables festivals to compete for high-profile artists in the increasingly competitive field of live music. As it has become more difficult to make money from recorded music, the live music field has grown exponentially, a fact that was prophesied by David Bowie in 2002 when he said that recorded music would become as available as running water, leaving live performance as the main source of revenue for musicians (Krueger, 2005; Connolly & Krueger, 2005). And, although live event numbers have grown, the number of superstar headliners has not. Festivals are forced to either pay ever increasing fees for names who guarantee ticket sales, or to find inventive ways to build relationships with musicians. Commissioning them to make new work is one method discussed by Comunian (2015) and Glow and Caust (2010), who each highlight the role festivals play in helping artists to launch their careers and develop professional networks. Other festivals, such as Meltdown at London's Southbank Centre develop partnerships with artists who are then asked to curate the festival. Notable Meltdown curators have included David Bowie (2002),

Patti Smith (2005), Pulp's Jarvis Cocker (2007), Yoko Ono (2013) and Talking Heads frontman David Byrne (2015). Each curator provides access to their contact book and who would turn down an invitation to perform from singer Scott Walker (2000) or dance music producer James Lavelle (2014)?

Galinsky feels that commissions are important because they are made for a particular place, reflecting and adding nuance to local identity. In 2015 the Norwich and Norfolk Festival staged *Wolf's Child* by immersive theatre company WildWorks. The specially created, site-specific show took place in woods surrounding a 17th century manor house in Norfolk and was inspired by the true story of a man from the area who spent two years as a fully integrated member of a wolf pack in Idaho. In places such as Norwich, which is on the eastern edge of England and does not have its own producing theatre company, such commissions have social and public policy dimensions: they create a unique reason to visit or live in a place by filling that gap and telling the community's stories. Narrative layers are provided by the experience of attending the event itself, the rediscovered tales and insights provided by artists who are seeing the place from a new or different perspective.

Ben Robinson is also interested in the pulling power of commissions; in his case, to a music festival held in the remote and beautiful Eden Valley in the Lake District National Park in Northeast England. Kendal Calling has piloted an immersive art trail in the woods at the edge of the festival site. The woods became an additional – unique – attraction, adding a surprising feature to the visual and experiential design of the site. The trail, which saw Robinson and his team working with visual artists for the first time, was funded by Arts Council England in an attempt to access audiences who do not normally visit art galleries. The result, *Lost Eden*, is inspired by folklore from the Eden Valley. Audiences are encouraged to co-create new stories in the tale of a legendary lost people, the Carvatti, who inhabited the area. Wandering through the site, participants encounter themed costume parades, bespoke art works and giant installations and sumptuous creatures (Kendal Calling, 2015). The trail creates a link between the music festival, which could be sited in any green field with sufficient access and facilities, and this specific place.

The potential of festive-like events to influence place identity is a key element of many outdoor commissions being undertaken by cities seeking to rebrand or enhance communal identity. During a panel discussion at the Cultural Exchanges Festival in Leicester, February 2015, Shona McCarthy, the direc-

tor of the Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture 2013, underscored the importance of culture in the city's peace process. New shared traditions and symbols of common identity are essential if divided communities are to find commonality. And large-scale spectacular outdoor experiences ensure that all communities feel that they can participate. The Amsterdam Light Festival, an annual display of commissioned works, sees the city's waterways as a stage. Works are developed for specific sites and suspended over the canals. Works such as Irma de Vries' 18-meter-high Canal House (2015-2016) reflect Amsterdam's unique architecture, while others make links to contemporary issues or Dutch research. Bianca Leusink's *Buckyball: Get Connected* (2015-2016) grew out of a partnership between the artist and the University of Twente and MESA+, a nanotechnology research institute. Shaped like a carbon atom, the hexagonal faces depict works by Leusink and information about Twente's innovations. Yet, despite the specificity of Amsterdam Light Festival's commissioning process, the works made for sites in the city can now also be seen in other cities on the developing light festival circuit, which is a good example of the spectacular aesthetic associated with festivals.

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### Spectacularisation

A spectacular is something highly visual and larger-than-life. Festivals have always sought to appeal and sometimes overwhelm the senses. Indeed, this is one of the reasons that the arts have traditionally been incorporated into religious festivals. Contemporary sites, whether urban or greenfield, are decorated with flags, banners and lights. And, as with carnival or South Asian *mela*, the audience adds to the spectacle by dressing in bright, colourful costumes, creating the atmosphere of a very special occasion that is different from the everyday (Robinson, 2015). Kaushal and Newbold use the word *tamasha* to describe the bawdy, striking and exuberant style of performance found at *mela*, arguing that it enhances "the spectacle to convey greater emotion and to establish a greater level of empathy with audiences" (2015: 220).

What is new is the tendency of art works themselves to be spectacular, at festivals and, as a result of the high costs of production, increasingly in other festivalised environments, too. Giant puppets by French company Royal de Luxe have been seen on the streets of China, South Korea, Chile, Portugal, Sweden, Iceland and Mexico as a key ingredient in city marketing and place-making strategies. In 2006 the company's show *The Sultan's Elephant*, toured the streets of London as part of the city's attempts to renew its sense of com-

munity in the wake of the previous year's tube and bus bombings. Chenine Bhathena, senior cultural strategy officer at the Greater London Authority, explained at a seminar at De Montfort University on 2 March 2016 that *The Sultan's Elephant* had awoken London to the possibility that the city's streets could be a playground for its citizens, paving the way for pedestrianisation and leading to retailers calling for festive spectacles to drive high street regeneration. The creation of a spectacular event brings together artists, businesses and civic authorities in a shared endeavour that challenges each group's attitudes and perceptions.

More recently, American artist David Best created a 22-metre-high wooden structure he called a temple in a park in Derry/Londonderry in Northern Ireland in the summer of 2015 as a symbol of peace from the sectarian Troubles. The structure references a Protestant tradition of lighting large bonfires to celebrate a victory of the Catholic King James in 1690. Members of both communities came together to build the temple, and to leave messages inside. After a week, the *Temple of Grace* was put to the torch and burnt to the ground in a symbolic act of healing<sup>1</sup>.

Perhaps the best example of this trend to spectacularisation is the proliferation of light art festivals across the globe – Sydney, Australia, Singapore, Kobe and Nabana no Sato in Japan, Amsterdam, Berlin, Ghent in Belgium and Durham in the North East of England to name a few of the better known examples. Whilst some of these festivals commission new and site-specific works, others rely on light artists adapting existing works. Janet Echelman's 1.26, a net of colourful LED lights was first seen in Denver in 2010 during the Biennial of the Americas. It has since toured to Sydney (2011), been suspended above the Amstel river during the Amsterdam Light Festival in 2012-2013, above Marina Bay in 2014 for Singapore biennial light festival and has appeared at the Lumiere festivals in Durham in 2015 and London in 2016 (Echelman, 2015b). In a statement on her website, Echelman describes her work as exploring

*the cutting edge of sculpture, public art, and urban transformation (...) By combining meaning with physical form, it strives to create a visceral experience in diverse city environments, accessible to all. These sculpture environments embody local identity and invite residents to form a personal and dynamic relationship with the art and place. Each project becomes intimately tied to its environment through the use of local materials and working*

*methods, thus strengthening neighborhood connections and promoting a distinctive civic character (Echelman, 2015a).*

The emergence of a light festival touring circuit is leading some to question how they maintain their unique sense of place, whilst developing competitive advantages. Amsterdam Light Festival's commissioning processes for the 2015-2016 edition included clauses giving the festival ownership of the works for the first time. The purpose of this was twofold: to allow the festival to develop an income stream from loaning works to other festivals and cities, and to ensure control of these loans so that the Amsterdam Light Festival retains its distinctive elements as a tourist attraction.

In all these examples, the sheer scale of the event has provided an artistic spark and acts as a metaphor for their desire to be inclusive, to involve the community, raising doubts about Debord's argument in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1983) that the highly visual had been co-opted by the market, with spectacular events being inauthentic and manipulative, made solely to sell products. There are, indeed, market pressures associated with festivals, and spectacular festival events and art works. Spectacle can be found in the use of festivals for city branding and tourism,

but it is clear from the cases above that place-making, community engagement and aesthetic judgements are just as influential, with market mechanisms being co-opted in order for artists and festival organisers to fund the artistic works rather than promote unrelated goods.

## Immersive experiences

David Bowie foretold the rise of the immersive experience in an interview with the BBC in 1999, where he described live events as places where "the audience is at least as important as whoever is playing (...). It's almost like the artist is there to accompany the audience and what the audience is doing" (1999: 8 mins 50 secs). Pine and Gilmore (1999) described this trend as the experience economy, a market where products and services are sold by associating them something affective or memorable, often an event that appeals to physical sensations and shared experiences. "The rise of the experience economy can be seen to as a result of contemporary life being lived in and through

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see <http://templederry-londonderry.com/>

a mediated and mass mediated world where people come to desire 'real' experiences, physical sensations, and contact with human beings" (Newbold & Jordan, 2016: xv).

Robinson (2015), O'Grady (2015) and Anderton (2015) each considers the participative, experiential and immersive nature of festivals to be something that distinguishes them from arts events held in theatres and concert halls. Fabiani (2011) contends that festivals create unique opportunities for encounters between artist and audiences unencumbered by the usual rules that separate performers from audiences in theatres and concert halls. For artists, particularly performing artists, festivals are rare opportunities to meet with and see their contemporaries' work, something that is difficult if they are on tour, or performing most evenings, meaning that audiences are more likely to include other performers. Combined with an increase in event numbers, the intensity created by the decoration of the site, and programming throughout the day and night, festivals can create a sense of what Turner called *communitas* – an "unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *communitas*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (Turner, 1969: 19).

Increasingly, those ritual elders, the festival's curators, directors and producers, are encouraging carnival-like participation in the production of work. In her work on the Burning Man festival in Nevada, Chen (2011) discusses the way in which spectatorship is replaced with concepts of prosumption and co-creation in which audiences are, explicitly, involved as producers of the festival's programme as well as the consumers. There is no main stage or concert programme. Participants are invited to make and stage the festival themselves. For Robinson, the no spectators principle that guides the festival's design and marketing messages means that there is a "fusion of practices based around this ideal [that] obligates festival-goers to contribute to such an extent that perceptible differences between the producers and consumers of the event are largely eliminated" (2015: 166). Symbolically, participants are called *Burners*, a practice also employed by the UK's Secret Garden Party (*Gardeners*), which mixes the traditional concert-style music festival programme with participative zones inspired by the Burning Man ethos. Shambala, which takes place in a secret site in England, resists publicising the acts booked for its stages. Its "Our Principles" (Shambala Festival, 2015) web page promotes the idea of the festival participant as the star rather than the acts on stage:

*Our passion is to encourage creative participation. Shambala is a canvas upon which diverse groups have autonomy to create and offer their ideas and create a rich tapestry of experiences in music, art and performance. The idea of the "Shambalan" being just as important as the entertainment we provide is an essential part of Shambala's nature.*

As in *mela* (Kaushal & Newbold, 2015) or traditional pre-Lenten celebrations such as Mardi Gras, striking and colourful costumes are increasingly visible at festivals. Indeed, festivals such as Bestival, Standon Calling and BoomTown Fair encourage participants to wear fancy dress associated with themes or festival zones. Costumes, generally considered to be children's wear in most of the Western world, are a form of performance and play that places the festival-goer on a par with professional actors as part of the entertainment for other participants.

Participation is increasingly found outside the festival environment, too, and takes a range of forms. Conceptual artist Marina Abramović, for example, routinely involves the public in her work, whether sorting pieces of rice into piles, or sitting opposite her for five minutes in silence. The context is controlled by the artist/producer and the public are, briefly, actors within it. Bishop coined the term "social turn" to describe what she saw as "the recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration, and direct engagement" (2006: 179), much of which she felt was at least partially politically motivated, a factor that can also be found in festivals. Shambala's principles explicitly refer to a desire "to discover and share ways of moving to a sustainable future" and "to be a place free of corporate influence" (2015), the latter being considered to remove agency from festival-goers. The Woodstock Festival in Poland is run as a thank you to charity volunteers and offers co-creating opportunities, including a virtual game version of the event (Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity Foundation, 2015).

Immersion in the festive world is a significant part of festival's otherworldly attractiveness (O'Grady, 2015). Participants are distanced from everyday life through spectacular décor and sensual excess, allowing them to shed their cares and give themselves up to the experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Knudsen & Christensen, 2015; Falassi, 1987). As discussed above, festival-goers are actors whose costume is part of the event for others. Volunteers, too, become involved in festival production in larger numbers than elsewhere in the cultural sector, enjoying the opportunity to meet artists and see backstage (Puchkova & Elkanova, 2016).

As festivalisation has taken hold, the desire of audiences to be immersed in a production appears to be influencing artwork in other settings. Whilst immersive theatre is not entirely new, there has been a noticeable appetite for productions that involve audiences as characters or witnesses since Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* – a film noir style adaptation of *Macbeth*, where audiences explore a series of rooms in the McKittrick Hotel and happen upon scenes reminiscent of the Shakespeare play – opened in New York in 2011. Other examples include a musical adaptation of *War and Peace*, called *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* and *Leviathan*, a production of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* in which the audience play the ship's crew, or graffiti artist Banksy's anti-theme park, Dismaland (Banksyfilm, 2015). For prac-

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tioners such as Mark Storer, immersive theatre has a political agenda. His 2012 *A Tender Subject* was a promenade performance devised by gay prisoners that asks audience members questions about why they make the judgements they do. Placing audiences within the action changes their relationship from spectator to actor, with agency and responsibility for the subsequent events, just as Bowie predicted.

Large scale immersive installations have also become a feature in art galleries such as the Guggenheim in New York and Tate Modern, which has commissioned several for its sizeable Turbine Hall. Arguably some of these, such as Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, a gigantic indoor sun, are spectacular rather than immersive; exhibited primarily as a means of attracting visitors. Others, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's 1997 *Untitled (tomorrow is another day)*, create an environment in which the audience become actors in the piece. The exhibition saw the Cologne Kunstverein opened 24 hours a day so that visitors could live in the artist's recreation of his New York home. Participants could cook, sleep and even have a shower. More recently Carsten Höller's *Decision* at the Hayward Gallery in London<sup>2</sup> uses mirrors, Upside Down Goggles, and twisting enclosed helter skelters that audiences can slide down' to disorientate, disrupt and undermine the logical, scientific paradigm that he believes dominates Western understanding (Adams, 2015). Immersion in these artistic worlds, like immersion in a festival world, invites participants to play in an environment that rejects the disenchanting rationalism of everyday life.

The creation and success of these works is dependent on the existence of audiences willing to take risks and wanting to experience altered states. As more and more people have immersive experience at festivals, the risk of programming this kind of work in other settings is reduced, making it possible for artists to tour works that might have been confined to one-off events. Architects of Air, a UK company, produces what it calls monumental multi-coloured inflatable sculptures out of plastic. These luminaria are immersive tent-like environments that, as the sun shines through the coloured panels, become infused with coloured light. Combining the visually spectacular with a calming soundtrack and a unique environment, the luminaria are explicitly marketed as immersive experiences for festivals and cultural venues, and have become a commercial success. There have been 22

designs that have toured in more than 40 countries, with nine currently available, providing permanent work for artist Alan Parkinson and a team of six in the workshop, plus temporary construction and event staff (Architects of Air, n.d.), a clear indication that immersive experiences are now part of mainstream culture.

### Conclusions

Festivals are unique environments in which to enjoy cultural events and experiences. Each is different from the next, yet there are features that distinguish the festive from the everyday and festivals from other forms of cultural production and exhibition. Traditional expectations of festivals have been immersive and spectacular environments, fewer distinctions in status between artists, audiences and participants, and place-specific events and themes. As the number of festivals has expanded, artists and producers are adjusting to this new market. It is becoming possible to identify shifts in cultural production, to see a festival aesthetic in types of work that are being produced and it is leading to new production methods. These raise a number of issues for cultural managers and for artists, just as digitisation has created the need for new business models within the music and movie industries. For some, there may be concerns that festivalisation is driven by market factors rather than aesthetics. The examples considered, however, offer examples of a mixed economy, a cultural ecosystem that combines private and public sector actors, market and public policy objectives. Artists are also responding to festivalisation by creating art works that are experimental, spectacular and immersive, sometimes seeking commercial success, sometimes to make a political statement, yet at the same time prioritising aesthetic criteria by being thoughtful, moving, or simply beautiful.

Festive environments are created as sites that are clearly distinct from everyday life, places where social norms can be turned on their heads and identities played with. In such spaces, audiences, participants and artists appear to feel freer to experiment than in other settings. At their most experimental, festivals can become cultural laboratories, giving practitioners room to try out new works and ideas and festival-goers a chance to sample art forms they

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see <http://carstenholler.southbankcentre.co.uk/>



would generally be wary of, or to see emerging artists. Whether or not acts or artworks that are successful in a festival setting also thrive in other environments when audiences might have more conservative tastes is open to question.

Artistically, the need to be eye-catching in increasingly busy and distracting environments poses problems for artists whose work is quiet, small in scale, or demanding of sustained commitment in order to understand it. For those who know Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for example, Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* provides an experience that is layered with meanings unavailable to those who don't. Négrier (2015) regards festivals as entertainment, experiences that anyone can enjoy regardless of their level of cultural capital, a view that is similar to Debord's (1983) arguments about spectacle. If festivals become the dominant mode of production, will the opportunity to learn about a genre or art form over a sustained period be limited? Yet the examples of spectacular and immersive artworks discussed in this paper indicate that artists are responding to festivalisation in ways that are thoughtful and thought-provoking, that ask questions about place and society that are just as interesting as more traditional works.

There are, however, practical considerations in regard to spectacular events. Large-scale performances are inevitably expensive to produce and, despite the intentions of the artists, may be distorted by funders and sponsors with city or brand marketing priorities. The need to make events eye-catching simply to be heard above the noise in the marketplace, whether that marketplace is a festival, or the increasing competition from the virtual world that is providing cheap access to the best (and worst) of global culture, is also a pressure facing cultural managers. Some are using the festival model as a solution to this problem. But if more and more venues and cities focus their resources on festivals or spectacular events, it will create a dilemma for smaller-scale producing companies: can they continue to commission new, quiet, unspectacular plays from unknown writers, or will they, too, have to bow to market pressure and choose projects primarily for their ability to attract attention?

As festivals have become more mainstream, so too have immersive and participatory arts. This is a phenomenon that is both rationally commercial – the immersive experience cannot (yet) be digitally replicated, you do have to be there – and a meaningful, af-

fective response to the demands of contemporary life. Artists and participants are seeking playful, sensory, surprising experiences that bear little relationship to their everyday lives. But marketisation is not the only reason for this phenomenon. Artists are also employing immersive techniques more often found in commercial leisure and marketing fields to reflect upon and critique society, to highlight individual social and political agency. Just as festivals can provide alternative visions of society (Bakhtin, 1994 [1965]) in which the personal is political, so too can immersive and participatory art experiences.

The practical production processes of festivals differ from those found in venues or touring companies. The particular relationship that festivals have with place is highlighted in their commissioning of site specific works. Norwich and Norfolk Festival and Kendal

Calling have commissioned work related to local myths, and added to the local myth making in doing so. Theatres and concert halls are constrained by maintaining a building and selling tickets for a regular season of events, but festivals have the flexibility to explore new sites and create links between venues, places and communities in new and playful ways. For those that produce one festival a year, or even biannually, there is also the time to build relationships and develop larger, more complex shows.

For artists and producers, festivals pose different challenges and offer different opportunities to those facing venue managers and touring companies. There is the need

for new production skills. One outdoor events producer admitted that she had recently fulfilled a professional ambition of hiring a crane when she co-ordinated an event at a ruined castle. On a practical note, crane hire is not a skill often taught on cultural management courses, but perhaps it should be. ISAN, the network for street arts organisations in the UK, publishes advice for its members; Guidance Document Two is entitled *Guidance on the Use of Cranes for Performance* (2014). Large scale performances are, effectively, building sites that are then opened to the public. Specialist festival businesses with relevant production know-how such as Festival Republic, or the Without Walls consortium in the UK that commissions outdoor arts for festivals, are growing and thriving, indicating strong demand. Cities are using festive techniques such as spectacularisation, experimentation and immersion, to create shared experiences and identities as part of high street regeneration, community

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development and place-making. When the practical demands of closing roads meets the symbolic power of an artistic experience, the results are not limited to the liminal festival space. Lucy Neal, one of the founders of the London International Festival of Theatre expressed it best: "we need celebratory social spaces to look backwards and forwards in time, where our collective knowledge, intuition and a sense of wonder at what is possible can come together" (2015: 6).

The economies of scale Nordgård (2016) identified in music festivals also apply to the growing street art and light festival circuits. But these raise questions about commodification and standardisation. Elsewhere, questions are being asked about the ownership of intellectual property. Some artists have withdrawn from Amsterdam Light Festival's commissioning process because they want to retain ownership of their works. The festival itself, whilst admitting that it wants to own the art works in order to maximise the return on its investment, is not entirely commercially orientated. It is also keen to maintain its uniqueness, its place identity by ensuring key works do not lose their connection to the city as they tour. The creation of a touring circuit for light art is a new phenomenon and, as yet, the rules of the game are still being negotiated.

Festivalisation is both a response to and a cause of changing audience expectations and production processes within the cultural marketplace. New experimental, spectacular and immersive art works are being created for festival settings, settings that respond to society's need for live social experiences and time away from the everyday as much as they do to commercial imperatives driven by new technology. These large, expensive works become catalysts around which new festivals and events with a festive aesthetic are conceived, reshaping the cultural ecosystem in their wake.

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