

PREFACE

PERFORMANCE/RISK RESEARCH AND THE FOCUS ON PARTICIPATION

Risk continues to be a preoccupation both within and beyond the art world and discourse around risk commands attention across the full range of disciplinary fields, not least in response to new levels of threat and terror currently experienced in numerous countries across the globe. Since the influential issue of *Performance Research: On Risk* was published in 1996 it has become well recognised that risk is a key term in performance theory and, arguably, a standard feature of all live performance regardless of any particular claim of being “risky”. Nonetheless, risk in performance has become very “on trend” of late and has garnered much interest in the popular press, the professional sector, and within scholarly debate. Performance/risk is an emerging field that is starting to develop a critical mass. *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice* gathers up the threads of this discourse, weaving them together to present a comprehensive and critically formulated perspective focusing on participatory performance practices where risk, vulnerability, and degrees of unknowing play an integral role in multiple and complex ways.

In recent times risk in performance has been variously celebrated and exaggerated, magnified and manipulated, fetishised and criticised. This collection takes *Performance Research: On Risk* (1996) as a starting point from which to consider how, some twenty years later, risk has been reconfigured, re-presented, and in some instances repackaged for

new audiences with a thirst for performances that promote, encourage, and embrace risky encounters in various forms. The chapters bring together established voices on performance/risk research and draw them into conversation with next-generation academic-practitioners in a dynamic reappraisal of what it means to risk oneself through the act of making and participating in performance practice where both process and outcome might be shared, co-created, and negotiated. The collection focuses its attention on performance practice where spectators are involved, implicated, and integrated into the aesthetic via embodied participation. The collection is intentionally promiscuous and spans a range of practices that might seem otherwise to belong to very different traditions but are nonetheless tied together by their preoccupation with spectator involvement and open forms of engagement. It casts its net wide and, in so doing, offers an eclectic mix of exemplars. It moves from provocative live art in politically charged South Africa to community-based dance with recovering addicts in the UK, and from intimately autobiographical expressions of vulnerability to provocative, physical interventions in urban space. It does not seek to give a definitive answer to what it means to risk oneself in performance as this changes from instance to instance and from person to person. Instead it sheds light on a number of works that exemplify an emergent field of practice that is defined by its mobilisation of risky participation rather than by a singular disciplinary focus. It takes into account the work of performance scholars with diverse intentions, motivations, and experiences for whom risk and precarity are central concerns and seeks to move the debate forward in response to a rapidly changing world where risk is higher on the political, economic, and cultural agenda than ever before. How does risk in performance speak to that agenda and how might it offer a way of understanding and challenging the politics of vulnerability that permeates contemporary life?

ORIENTATION AND PERSPECTIVE

I come at this project on risk from the perspective of an educator and performance maker who has always seen openness, chance, and possibility as the necessary characteristics of human encounter and meaning making. Standing in opposition to all that appears fixed, predetermined, and finished, I embrace the risks associated with leaving gaps, spaces, cracks, and crevices for people to explore. In both my dramatic and

pedagogic practice I intentionally create chasms and rifts for people to excavate and interrogate but not without helping them develop the tools required for such an undertaking. For me, navigating the unknown is an essential part of the creative process, indeed any process where development, progression, illumination, enlightenment, understanding is seen as a joint mission, a journey undertaken alongside others and where either the destination, the outcome, the precise route, or even the reasons for the journey are not yet fully realised in the minds of the travellers. To embrace risk in this way is not only a question of aesthetic choice, a playing with form, and a structuring of technique, it is also a political stance that indicates commitment to openness as meaningful encounter and exchange between humans.

Of course, risk is relative and not all risk taking leads to positive outcomes. One person's unthinkable risk is another person's day job. Sometimes we take risks because we want to, sometimes because there is no other choice. Sometimes we are placed at risk by other people or by sets of circumstances beyond our control. This is also true in the field of performance. We can choose risk as a strategy and embrace it, or we can walk away from it. We can attempt to pin down the theatrical moment as tightly as we can to avoid the unexpected, rehearsing and repeating until each showing is as similar as possible to the next, or we can build in uncertainty as part of the aesthetic encounter. The spectators, participants, performers, and theatre makers in this book have all turned towards risk and, in various ways, harnessed the vulnerabilities it produces. Why? Perhaps the simple answer is because there is, potentially, something to be gained from risk taking in this context. To embrace risk is to be open to uncertainty, to weigh up the odds, and to welcome the possible. The zone of proximal development is widened with each new moment where surrendering oneself, albeit momentarily, teaches us something about living, about humanity, about the here and now of existence.

Within the frame of performance, risks may not always be as profoundly life changing as, say, a banker gambling with a country's economy or a family boarding a flimsy boat that has a 50/50 chance of reaching land. Nonetheless, an analysis of the potential gains to be had in voluntary risk-taking practices provides potential insight into systems of cultural value currently at play. As ever, it remains important to ask the following questions: What is currently at risk and what is worth risking? What are the returns on the risks we choose to take and how have those

risks altered since the turn of the millennium? Writing in 1999, Tim Etchells reminds us of the performer's commitment to risk and investment as being linked to "passion, politics and rage" (1999, 49). Since that time the world and its understanding of risk have changed. The participatory turn shines the spotlight on audience investment and the world is now full of co-creators, co-collaborators, and co-producers of meaning within the performance frame. The sharp rise in performances that claim to be aesthetically, psychologically, emotionally, structurally, socially, politically risky through their willingness to implicate audiences in the action perhaps signals a yearning for feeling, for rawness, edginess, livid and vivid experience that is missing from other spheres of daily life. This book does not blindly celebrate risk. Rather it tries to better understand its dimensions, its intentions, and its applications within the frame of performance and against the backdrop of a world that has, by necessity, been forced to adopt a different stance in relation to risk.

KEY TERMS

A key term explored in the book is the concept of "**risky aesthetics**". Under this umbrella contributors examine an array of performance practices in which participants and performers are involved with practice where the outcome is not fully known and where there is some degree of surrender, or relinquishing of control in the presence of others. This might involve the sharing of personal stories in front of other audience members, interacting with performers in one-to-one, intimate situations, or being interrupted by performance as it unfolds on the street. In the openness, in the gaps, in the margins of uncertainty, spaces and moments of potentiality are made possible. Depending on the context, the framing of the work, and, ultimately, the participant perspective, "risky aesthetics" might be perceived variously as unpredictable, exposing, daring, thrilling, sensorial, erotic, challenging, experiential, embodied, visceral, threatening, unnerving, uncertain, organic, processual, co-authored, relational, dialogic, sensitive, intimate, exploratory, experimental, chaotic, personal, collective, individualised, social. The collection touches upon all of these potential lines of flight and draws attention to a global shift wherein artists, performers, and spectators utilise risk in performance as a way of commenting on, grappling with, and critiquing how risk is experienced in the day to day.

Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice explores risk across the spectrum of participatory performance and gives special attention to the concept of “**critical vulnerability**”. It examines how the core characteristics of openness, uncertainty, and varying degrees of exposure contribute to an aesthetic paradigm where risk is deployed as an intentional tactic, a strategy of engagement, or a critical tool for the shared making of meaning. It investigates the ways in which practitioners embed risk into their work and foregrounds the challenges, implications, and consequences of working with real feelings of vulnerability within the frame of the imagination. In work that asks us to share personal anecdotes or to make use of past experiences, possibly painful ones, to create new material, we risk exposure. By crossing the threshold and moving from our position as spectator to that of participant we take a leap of faith and put our trust in someone else—the artist, the facilitator, our fellow participants. Participatory performance courts vulnerability in multiple ways and, in applied theatre practice for example, is often targeted at participants who might already be classified as “vulnerable” or as being “at risk”. The idea that vulnerability can be mobilised as a critical tool offers a challenge to this perspective. At a time when “being vulnerable” has taken on new meaning in the context of global events, particularly the European migrant crisis, financial instability, and the increased terror threat from extremist groups, this collection offers a different take on vulnerability and reclaims it as productive exposure. Creating spaces in which participants might experience vulnerability *critically* becomes a deliberate aesthetic choice that foregrounds notions of openness, accountability, and trust (however precarious, contentious, and slippery those terms might be).

The underlying purpose of this book is to interrogate the ways in which the experience of risk in performance offers a means by which we may scrutinise the tensions between vulnerability and agency. It explores how and why performance practitioners create work that is intentionally risky and asks why audiences are increasingly drawn to this form. What are the personal, professional, and creative benefits of working within a risky aesthetic? What is at risk in these practices and to what extent is the risk real, perceived, or imagined? What are the gains of working within a paradigm of performance that prioritises embodied experience and risk? What are the challenges and how are they overcome? What strategies do performance practitioners and/or programmers deploy in order to facilitate, manage, and respond to participation with a variety of audiences

where open engagement, embodied experience, and risk are core principles? What are the ethical considerations arising from such approaches?

The desire to harness new insights through the immediacy of participation draws on the two distinct legacies of performance art and applied theatre. The participatory impulse runs through the veins of both traditions and yet rarely are they considered alongside each other. The book moves intentionally between these two histories, weaving together practices, theories, and debates about the nature of participation across a broad spectrum of practice in order to consider what this might expose and reveal about our attitude to risk in the world at large.

VOLUME OUTLINE

The collection is made up of ten separate chapters that are grouped into three sections and cover the broad themes of ethics, intimacies, and identities. These themes are pertinent to all performance that works through the paradigm of participation and, therefore, run as seams throughout all the chapters. There is much overlap between them and, in many ways, the chapters can be considered as portable across sections. Certainly the question of *ethics* is pertinent to any work that uses risk as a participative tool and so this is where the collection begins. Readers may take those ideas forward into the next section that deals with *intimacy* and the experience of closeness and shared understanding which, in turn, leads to a potential reconsideration of *identity*, both individual and collective. The intention behind these groupings is to shine a spotlight on a particular aspect of participative practice but also to see the themes as an accumulative way of interpreting the implications of risk taking in this context.

My introductory chapter surveys a range of sociological perspectives on risk and connects them to the growing literature on risk and precarity in performance studies. It positions participatory performance as a form of strategic openness and considers the interplay between agency and vulnerability in practice that plays with conventional distinctions between performer and spectator. I propose a new category of voluntary risk taking, namely “edgeplay”, and consider how this offers a way of thinking imaginatively through risk in other domains.

In the first Part, “The ethics of risky aesthetics: moral codes, being decent, and doing it right”, the authors consider the ethical dimension of performance practice where risk is a key feature of the work. Lourdes

Orozco offers an analysis of two contemporary productions by Simon McBurney and Robert Lepage that deploy a confessional performance mode. She argues that the narrative strategies used in both productions articulate alternative ideologies to that of the so-called risk society as formulated by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Bree Hadley explores the ethical challenges presented in the work of politically motivated artists who utilise public participation as a way of putting the prejudices of unwitting spectators on the spot and in the spotlight. She examines how activist artists attempt to expose the participants' own role in constructing an exclusionary version of the world by placing them at risk in order for growth and change to occur. Coming from a very different perspective, psychotherapist Clark Baim examines the risks, responsibilities, and ethics associated with applied theatre practice when personal stories are used, and proposes a model for safe practice, the "Drama Spiral". This model functions as a practical tool for facilitators working with the real-life experiences of participants, many of whom may be vulnerable and working in a therapeutic context.

In the second Part, "Performing intimacies: flirting, whispering, and sharing stories in the dark", Matt Hargrave investigates the shifting dynamic between performance as vulnerability and vulnerability as performance, using Torque Show's production *Intimacy* to illustrate the discussion. Drawing on critical disability studies, he proposes a poetics of vulnerability and argues for the interruptive value of vulnerability across the social and aesthetic domains. Bruce Barton picks up on the contemporary trend for risk taking in participatory performance and proposes that audiences are perhaps more willing to accept the risk of failure and, in fact, see this as the location of intimacy. He considers how the "intimate equilibrium" between participant and performer can be maintained in work that accepts the "poetics of failure". Barton uses two of his own projects of Vertical City to work through this idea and incorporates Pil Hansen's dramaturgical perspective to illuminate the self-organising patterns of interaction prevalent in the work. From an interdisciplinary perspective that combines human-computer interaction (HCI), interaction design, and performance, Jocelyn Spence, Stuart Andrews, and David Frohlich examine the role that risk, intimacy, and dissonance play in the transition from everyday conversation to a performance that is intentionally and consciously aesthetic. In their chapter they argue that risk taking and vulnerability can offer potential points of entry into intimate, transformational performance experiences that are digitally mediated.

And finally in the last Part, “Risking the self: identities, playing with risk, and encountering the edge”, *Rat Western* examines the aesthetics of resistance by South African artists Brett Bailey, Gavin Krastin, and Igshaan Adams, who all include delegated performers or participatory audiences in their work as a way of complicating the political power dynamics of racial classification. She examines what John Taylor calls the “zone of contact” between the viewer and the viewed and explores the notions of authenticity and sincerity in three contrasting performances that all problematise the construction of identity. With a similar interest in authenticity, Zoe Zontou addresses the complex relationship between addiction, performance, and aesthetics and argues there is a connection to be made between risk taking in drug addiction and risk taking in performance making. Echoing Clark Baim’s chapter, she asks what happens when drug addicts dance their personal stories on stage and what political ground can be gained by challenging the juxtapositions that exist between the stigmatised and the artistic body. Brazilian scholar André Carreira completes the collection by offering insights into practice that uses the city as a type of dramaturgy and considers the risks involved for both performers and passers-by who participate in performance that unfolds within the seams of contemporary urban space.

A FINAL WORD

The contributors to this book come from a range of cultural and disciplinary perspectives. Risk in each context is understood, undertaken, and experienced differently. The collection embraces that difference and does not attempt to find common ground but rather exposes and reveals the multiple and varied perspectives on risk and risk in performance that are part of the developing global discourse on this topic. The book draws attention to participation across a similarly diverse set of practices. It is the opening up of performance making to the possibility of chance, uncertainty, and potential, activated by the involvement of others, which underpins the intention of this book. We hope you find within its pages new tools, strategies, and ideas about risk taking and participation that shed light on what it means to be open, engaged, and involved in a world that seems preoccupied with borders, boundaries, and exclusions.

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