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Street Performance: The unintended consequences of festivals

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Introduction

Many describe France as 'the Mecca' for street performance and, worldwide, artists and festival organisers can only dream of the 10 million euros granted by the Ministry of Culture to street companies and festivals; and of the 1000 groups and 250 festivals (or events) dedicated to street performance. Unfortunately, all earthly paradise includes its version of hell, and after 40 years of existence, street performers and organisers in the French context are still struggling to win acknowledgement from the wider cultural sector and public authorities. This chapter will address the issues that have contributed to this difficult situation, one in which some festivals, as 'one shot big events', play a perverse role, albeit perhaps, unwillingly and unwittingly.

The first festival in France that was entirely dedicated to street performance was that held in Aix-en-Provence in 1973. It was called *Aix, ville ouverte aux saltimbanques* (Aix, city open to street acrobats). It presented a mixed programme that ranged from traditional buskers through to young artists who aspired to work in venues/places other than theatres, galleries, museums, cultural centres and their middle class audiences. These were artists who wanted to perform for people who never or rarely attended formal cultural activities; to provide them with artistic experiences that were part of the 'rhythm of their daily lives', not as part of a more formal arts experience as may be enjoyed in a theatre or gallery.

Over time, street performers developed, through their work, their particular identification with their audience, whom they described as 'citizens' or 'public-population'. This has led them to proclaim themselves to be the 'champions' of this cultural practice, and, from this perspective to argue that such

forms of arts engagement are of fundamental importance, deserving of critical attention and dedicated funding. To some extent this ‘special pleading’ has resulted in other parts of the cultural sector (theatre, dance, visual arts) relegating street performances into a category of ‘play’, ‘ephemera’ or ‘animations’ (‘activities’), to be bracketed with more socio-cultural activities, i.e. as non-professional in their approach to and use of the arts.

Street performers also claim to be the ‘champions’ in the use of public spaces, where they have to interact with other users such as pedestrians, cyclists, motorists and other drivers; in both urban and rural contexts; city centres as well as suburbs; and involving heritage and more contemporary sites and locations. To a certain extent this is true but the logistical challenges of working in such spaces have led some performers and companies to relocate into more sheltered and protected spaces such as courtyards or even to perform indoors.

In addition to questions about where to perform, the sector soon had to address the fact that busking on the streets provided very few artists with a steady or adequate income especially those who described themselves as professional street performers, i.e. those for whom it was their job. The sector’s response was to diversify the market, but others tried to protect themselves from those ‘public spaces’, hiding in courtyards even in 1986, 13 years after the first festival in Aix, *Eclat, European festival for street theatre* was created in Aurillac, followed the next year by *Chalon dans la rue* in Chalon-sur-Saône and by *Viva Cité* in Sotteville-les-Rouen, and so on. So that today *Le Goliath* lists 250 events dedicated to street performance in France. *Le Goliath* is published by Hors Les Murs which is France’s national resource centre for street arts and circus arts, established in 1993 by the Ministry of Culture, it develops and supports artistic practices ‘outside the walls’ through information, documentation, training, study, research and publications (for further information visit: www.horslesmurs.fr). These 250 events include big festivals, which attract audiences of up to 400,000, as well as smaller local celebrations in villages. But the biggest festivals now also operate as showcases (or supermarkets as some artists describe them) where the organisers of smaller events can see new work and negotiate with performers to bring the performances they like to their cities, villages, etc. But this symbiotic relationship has not, it will be argued, delivered long term success (though many are happy with the system).

This chapter will continue with an analysis of the key features of this process and examine whether the role played by the big street festivals is beneficial to the artform and ultimately to the companies and organisations themselves. It will present a range of research data that suggests that the process is still in

development and that aspects of the current policy, infrastructure and funding have actually had a perverse and negative effect on the nature of street art, and led to a way of working that has weakened the link between performers, companies and people, their daily life and the places where they live; the direct opposite therefore of what the pioneers in this field of work set out to achieve.

The audience

Street performers and organisers claim that they achieve a unique connection with people who never (or rarely) attend cultural activities in formal venues (e.g. theatres, concert halls, museums). But research is showing that at big street festivals this is only partly true. In 2004-5, the street arts network, Eunetstar, commissioned a study of street festivals in eight European countries (Gaber 2005) which revealed the following demographic for the audience:

- ◆ 64% of the audience identified themselves as middle-class, educated people, employed in professional or non-manual work and who were frequent consumers of cultural activities.
- ◆ 10% of the audience at these festivals identified themselves as working class, having lower educational qualifications and less frequent attendance at cultural activities (but it should be noted that they were present in higher numbers at street festivals than in more formal, building based venues).

However, a lack of precision in how research data should be interpreted, in particular the extrapolation of evidence collected only from the audience at the big festivals to the whole sector including local celebrations, has led some advocates of street art to make claims that are not supported by the research evidence.

In a study published by Hors Les Murs (2011) the disparity between claims and reality is obvious. Many street performers and festival organisers claim that their events and performances are attended by more people than attend conventional theatres, exhibitions or concerts. At first sight the research data appears to confirm this as 62% of the French population say they have attended a street performance in their life and 34% during the last 12 months (compared with 16 % for theatre and 12% for ballet and contemporary dance). However, the figure of 62% includes those who have attended a national celebration such as La Fête Nationale (on 14th of July) or a local celebration or activity (such as a jumble sale or a charity party, or a 'kermesse' - a formal but local celebration) in a public space where they were able to enjoy live music