



Reaching out with *One One One*

A case study on how the environment and context affect the audience experience



One One One_Corpus

Foto: Niklas Frost Iversen

By Nina Gram

The modern dance company Corpus, a part of The Royal Danish Theatre, recently performed the piece *One One One* in different locations in Copenhagen. The production visited the Mads Nørgaard store at Strøget, Ofelia Plads, the courtyard at Kunsthal Charlottenborg, and the hospital Riget.

One One One is based on a simple concept: one chair, one dancer, and one audience. On the chair a sign saying 'take a seat' invites audiences to sit down, experience and (to some extent) participate in the performance. The performance starts as soon as someone sits down. The person in the chair is instructed to keep eye contact with the dancer in front of him/her. The dancer interprets the contact and translates it into movement. The participant in the chair can end the performance anytime by standing up. *One One One* is created by choreographer Ioannis Mandafounis.

This setup can be seen as an example of an outreach production in the sense that it takes a performance out of the art institution and presents it to people in locations where they work, where they pass by, where they rest and recover, etc. We therefore found it interesting to explore the audience reactions to this production performed in these different settings. We carried out the study at Riget and Strøget because these locations differed the most from the art institution. Kunsthal Charlottenborg and Ofelia Plads are in their essence closer connected to the theatre and the art world in general.

In this report, we describe how we designed and carried out our study. Further, we reflect on audience and participant's feedback and Corpus' creative leader Tim Matiakis' visions, as we consider the way in which outreach in fact reaches out.



Survey design

Our aim with this survey was to openly explore the experiences that this piece afforded and furthermore to specifically study, if art experiences outside the art institution could motivate people to purchase theatre tickets. We interviewed 22 audiences watching the performance, 8 participants who sat in the seat, and the artistic director of Corpus, Tim Matiakis. Furthermore, we talked to a few of the dancers and got their perspective on how it is to work with a production like this.

Interview questions

We worked with a semi-structured interview design. We wanted to touch on certain specific topics (see the questions below), but we mainly let the informants control the conversation in the sense that we talked about the aspects of the performance and the situation they found relevant. The questions below were covered in most conversations:

- What do you think about what you see?
- How does it make you feel?
- What do you think about placing art and dance performances in this particular setting where you normally wouldn't expect something like this?
- Do you watch or participate in dance or other types of performance in your daily life?
- Does an experience like this make you want to go to the theatre or watch performances more often?

The Method

In this study, we are not testing a new method. Our aim was not to start long and in depth conversations with the audiences and participants. Instead, we sought answers to the specific questions mentioned

above and wanted immediate reactions to the performance. Methodologically, the challenge here was to establish a present and meaningful connection to the audiences while filming the conversation. We see again and again how the camera easily can create a distance between the conversing partners. As if the camera creates a more formal frame where audiences mistakenly might feel that their replies should be thought through and completely analyzed. We thus focused on creating an atmosphere and a connection that supported the notion that every immediate answer was welcome and interesting. We did so for instance by communicating to informants that it might be difficult to put these experiences into words, and to accentuate that we were interested in their uncensored thoughts and feelings.

An additional tool to create this atmosphere is focused listening, which we have mentioned [here](#) and [here](#). If we want the participant to open up, we must make him/her understand that we are genuinely interested in his/her experience for instance by matching or mirroring their emotions and energy level.

Case descriptions

At Mads Nørgaard på Strøget

The dancers appear from the Mads Nørgaard store and place the chairs in the middle of the busy shopping street Strøget in Copenhagen. Only moments after they set up, the first woman sits down and the performance begins. Over the next three hours a continuous stream of people sit down and get up, flowing through different experiences and participating by engaging and connecting with the dancers. To my surprise, quite a few of the people passing by are eager to participate. It is a varied group of people sitting down in the chairs: old and young, tourists and natives, frequent cultural



consumers and a street singer. In a circle around the performance the curious spectators are watching.

I start the interviews by talking to Tim Matiakis (watch the full interview in the video linked below). He described the production as a generous piece – an experience that is simply given to you. The aim is that *One One One* in a democratic way reaches across social boundaries. Furthermore, Matiakis explains that this production represents The Royal Danish Theatre in a new way. It is important for the theatre to reach out to new audiences and to expand people's ideas of what The Royal Danish Theatre is and can be. Matiakis is aware that he is presenting an artistic, physical exploration in an untraditional frame and to an audience that might not know what to do with it. The performance may thus challenge both the dancers and the audience. These ambitions will be discussed later in the report.

Reactions from the observing audience

I talk to 15 observers of the performance at Strøget. They had different experiences, but all of them enjoyed the fact that they could 'stumble upon' an experience like this without having to plan it. Approximately 10 of these reported having a very positive experience with *One One One*. They commented on the skills of the dancers and they particularly enjoyed experiencing the connection between the dancers and the people sitting in the chairs. The rest of the observers found the performance difficult to understand and the movements to be somewhat silly. They asked if it was ballet and they seemed to search for a specific explanation for the dancer's movements and for an overall framework that would explain what was going on.

Reactions from the participants in the chairs

I talked to five participants and all of them were very positive. They enjoyed the experience, and many of

them were moved by the connection with the dancer and impressed by the dancer's ability to translate this connection into movement. One girl in particular explained how she felt that the dancer expressed her feelings and told her story through his dance. Others found it more challenging to describe this very sensory experience. They kept saying that it was *good* and *interesting*.

At The hospital Riget

The performance at Riget takes place in a very particular setting. A courtyard in the middle of the hospital where patients come to relax and to be with their relatives, and where the employees go to eat their lunch and have a break. The chairs are set up in the corner of the courtyard, and initially it is difficult to find people who want to sit in the chairs. After a while, a couple of patients sit down and later on a few employees also find their way.



Reactions from the participants

I talked to three women who sat in the chair. The first one (a patient) had read about the performance and she was prepared and understood the concept. She was very impressed by the dancer's skills and mesmerized by their movements. The two following participants (a patient and a relative) were also very enthusiastic and pleased with the experience. They kept saying that it was a great shame that the chairs stood empty for a lot of the performance. It was challenging to get people to sit down here at Riget.



Reactions from audiences

I talked to 13 audiences, 11 of whom were employed at the hospital. None of them were particularly pleased with the performance, and most of them independently said that they thought the dancers were mental patients. "We see a lot of crazy people here", as one nurse put it. This both indicates that it is difficult to quickly understand and decode this style of dancing and this particular setup.



However, the employees reactions says even more about the context of the performance. Most people sitting in the courtyard didn't expect there to be an artistic event that day, It was clear from our conversations that most of them were in a professional mind set – even those who were on their lunch break. This affects their 'readiness to receive' the experience that is offered to them. One employee mentioned that a traditional ballet would have been easier to digest for both the people at work and for the patients. This woman would thus prefer beautiful entertaining art experiences, which she immediately knows how to interpret and understand instead of an unknown artistic framework, that requires connection and contemplation on her part.



This insight is in line with our other surveys at The Royal Danish Theatre, where we see that new audiences are attracted to more traditional productions – popular operas and traditional ballets etc. A reason for this could be that this new audience want to get to know the traditions within an art form before they feel ready to watch productions and pieces that experiment and break with these very traditions.

Reactions from the dancers

Before leaving, I spoke with two of the dancers, who gave me insight into the experience with the production from their perspective. They described how they could feel the exact moment of connection with the audience. Sometimes people gave them a lot to 'work with' and opened up quite easily. Other times the participants were more closed off. One dancer even explained that quite a few participants would leave the very moment a connection was finally made. This speaks to the difficulty of intimacy and connection both in the various settings and in general.





What did we learn?

Our primary learning from this study is the massive impact the setting has on the reception of a performance. *One One One* at Strøget was a very different experience compared to the performance at Riget. Riget's courtyard was filled with people who were either affected by a specific (probably challenging) situation in their lives or people at work, who were ready to act in a professional manner if an acute situation required it. In theory the hospital setting could be the perfect frame for an intense, generous, and personal art experience, because people in these situations could be expected to be in need of inspiration and connection. However, it is also an intense and extremely professional context where it might be particularly difficult for the audiences to open themselves up to the artistic experience.

With that said, it seems that the reactions could have been somewhat different if the employees and patients had been more informed of the performance in advance. In that way they would have been better prepared and perhaps in a slightly different and more open state of mind.

How does outreach reach out?

When reflecting on our learnings it is important to keep in mind that this study is based on only one specific production and a few performances. Nevertheless, this material enables us to start a reflection on how outreach and the participatory aspects of the performance work in these specific contexts. In relation to this it is interesting to return to Tim Matiakis' descriptions of *One One One*, to discuss in what way the piece is in fact *inviting* and *democratic*.

As Matiakis mentioned, *One One One* may invite everyone around it to participate, but from our audience interviews we also saw that the production

points out how some people find it natural and easy to engage with an experience like this, whereas others have difficulties understanding it and thus feel uncomfortable when confronted with it. This calls attention to the question of the undemocratic aspects of *One One One*, which are interesting for our exploration of how this particular example of outreach is experienced. Associate professor Birgit Eriksson has interesting reflections on this combination of participatory art practices and the question of democracy.

...when it comes to differences and inequalities of participation, it seems to me that participatory artistic practises bring something valuable to the table. What is interesting in experiments with participation is when they attempt to establish meetings, conversations and social relations, which can work as micro utopia in a societal context dominated by market forces, standardization, and neo liberalism [...] For instance serving soup for the guests at a gallery is not only reserved for an exclusive group. As an artistic act it also ignores its own exclusivity. If participatory artistic forms of practise are to [...] point beyond the elitist aspects of both the communicative and creative utopia, they have to confront these utopia's problems – one of them specifically being their exclusivity.¹

Part of what Eriksson explains here is how the way these micro utopias point at power structures (or in this sense at differences in cultural capital) can be an important quality of participatory performances. Instead of insisting that a performance is democratic just by being present in a public space, we should embrace how this presence in fact points out that we all have different possibilities and points of

¹ Eriksson, Birgit: "Mellem kommunikation og kreativitet – deltagelse som æstetikens missing link?" in *Kultur & Klasse* vol. 43, 2014, p.46 [the quote is translated from Danish].



departure for the way we relate to and engage with art, culture, and the world in general.

Eriksson elaborates by stating that participatory art practices should demonstrate how participation isn't always a "feel good thing". Partly because there is always something that hinders participation, someone who doesn't participate, and some things we shouldn't participate in (Eriksson, 2014 p.47). From this perspective the difficulties at Riget served a purpose in it self even though the chairs stood empty for many minutes and many of the observers didn't appreciate the possibility of a dance experience that day. Not only did it teach us (The Royal Danish Theatre) something about the importance of communication, context, and framing. It also taught us quite a lot about the people in this hospital. - About their state of mind and what they did and didn't need during their break in the courtyard. It taught us that even though this experience was available to them, the audience and participants were not mentally or energetically available for *One One One*.

This perspective raises a new question: Is this insight and this type of artistic quality something that lies within the scope of The Royal Danish Theatre? And perhaps more important: Does the audience perceive these aspects and qualities of the experience?

These are far too broad and complex questions to answer here, but what we are left with, after this study of *Corpus* reaching out with *One One One*, is that when a piece like this is presented in a informal, public space it really has the potential to create an impact for individuals and to change people's perception of The Royal Danish Theatre. - Even though not everyone passing by feels comfortable enough to engage. But isn't that democratic in itself? - To give people the choice of engagement and connection?



Does a new audience lead to new customers?

It is nothing new that strategies for audience development often involve some sort of outreach, where art is placed out of the institution in order to come in contact with people who wouldn't usually visit the theatre.² The natural question to ask in extension of this study is whether these audiences, who came in contact with The Royal Danish Theatre through an unexpected experience with *Corpus*, will purchase theatre tickets in the future? In the interviews we carried out, we explored this correlation, and even though it is based on only 22 interviews, the answers were pretty clear: The audiences were impressed and intrigued by The Royal Danish Theatre, but this singular experience doesn't make them run to the ticket offices in itself. However, this does not mean that initiatives like this are invalid by any means. It was clear that their thoughts about the institution had changed and almost all of them were surprised that the theatre presented performances like *One One One*.

Watch our video from *One One One* at Strøget [here](#).

² For more on this perspective see for instance [Lindelof, Anja Mølle: "Publikumsudvikling – Strategier for inddragelse eller institutional udvikling?"](#) in *Kultur & Klasse*, vol. 43, 2014. This article asks explores when an initiative serves the aim of attracting new audience and when it should be considered development within and for the art institution. It gives insight into what strategies within audience development actually work.