

Radical rhythms unleashed

In the wake of the 2011 London riots, the participatory project Unleashed was created and performed at Barbican Centre, November 2012. Here, **Maia Mackney**, Collaborative Doctoral Award Holder at Barbican Guildhall and Royal Holloway University of London, considers issues of ‘authorship’ and collaboration, and reflects on the ways participants redefined their sense of self, and challenged societal perceptions and stigmas

The Barbican’s response to a climate of uncertainty

Barbican Centre is situated in the heart of the affluent City of London but on the borders of some of the most financially disadvantaged of East London’s boroughs. In August 2011, the UK saw the worst case of civil unrest in 30 years as rioting broke out across the country. East London boroughs of Hackney and Barking were particularly badly affected by looting, arson and violence. The causes behind the rioting have been a contested topic by the media and politicians. Some have asserted that cuts in public funding and services, the anger at the shooting of Mark Duggan by police and a growing feeling of resentment amongst disenfranchised youth, escalated to incite a violent protest. Others have been quicker to blame the, mainly young, rioters, resulting in the world media homogenising the young people, condemning them as ‘feral scum’.(1)

The London Riots, and the subsequent stigma attached to youth and gang culture, was the cultural and political context behind the development of the participatory project Unleashed at Barbican Centre in 2012. There seemed to be an absence of young people’s voices in the post-riot analysis and this became a starting point for a creative process which would culminate in the performance of Unleashed. Barbican Centre’s response to this volatile cultural context was to provide the opportunity for grass roots creative reflection around these issues.

Devising Unleashed

In August 2011 members of Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning’s five youth ensembles, Young Poets, Drumheads,

Drumworks, Future Band and Young Film Makers, were invited to take part in Unleashed, a professional, participatory production devised over 18 months and performed by young people between 8 and 24. It involved a creative team of 40, 128 young ensemble members alongside 24 dancers from the youth arm of London hip hop dance company, Boy Blue Entertainment. It was directed by Walter Meierjohann and co-directed by Kenrick Sandy.

Each ensemble developed work separately in rehearsal with intensive laboratories to generate more concentrated cross-ensemble work. To begin the process the young people brainstormed their associations with growing up in the city, their memories of the riots of 2011, their experience of gangs and their dreams for the future. They then worked in creative dialogue with each other to develop the content of the piece.

Performing Unleashed

Unleashed exploded onto the Barbican Theatre stage with a ferocity and joy, which were both angry and hopeful. The cast represented London’s cultural diversity as the audience was led through the narrative. They told us stories through dance, film, music, spoken poems and verbatim reveries, of London, of postcode gangs, of cuts in youth funding, of poverty and isolation, of the London riots, and of their aspirations for the future. The staging was minimal allowing the large chorus of drummers to provide a dynamic setting for the action and an electric atmosphere. The drummers conveyed something of the vitality and noise of life in London as well as supporting the more frightening moments of territorial battles between

rival gangs. Something of the terror of the London riots was captured through films showing flames and explosions. Moments of calm depicting the dreams and aspirations of these young people complemented the bustle of this piece and spoke of individual stories.

Celebrating difference

Unleashed explored the identity of these young people. It raised questions as to how this project might have helped them to redefine their sense of self in a social climate that is often unprepared to embrace difference. The grass roots development of the piece led participants to comment that “we don’t really feel that we have a creative platform to express our views, and this project allowed us to do that”. (2) Unleashed responded to a feeling amongst the participants that some sectors of society and, in particular, the media, were homogenising young people of East London. At the heart of this project was a sense that the participants were redefining their identities through the process of devising, and through performance, challenging perceptions by asking the audience to see them in a different light.

Performing identity

The performance satirically articulated the differing representations of the identities of these young people. One of the first scenes of Unleashed showed a throng of young people in a dance sequence depicting the fractious relationship between rival gangs vying over territory. This introduced us to a central theme of the piece by responding to the media stigma attached to youth and gang culture. Aggressive arm movements, breakdancing and body



Unleashed, Barbican Centre. All photos: Mark Allan, 2012

popping metaphorically represented a dangerous war of postcodes. This scene was interrupted just as the main fighters were about to hit each other, by a slow motion sequence led by spoken word artist Kieron Rennie, who eloquently described the need to seek solace in an otherwise isolated world, a world in which opportunities for young people are increasingly scarce. He explored the idea that gangs represent an, albeit dangerous, stability and sense of family some lack at home.

The characterisation of the gangs seemed to be intentionally two-dimensional. Both gangs, differentiated only by costume, looked like they were playing their parts and copying their peers in a way that spoke of a level of choreography in real life. The result led me to question if the participants were telling us about their own understanding of self or lampooning that of the politicians and media who analyzed the aftermath of the riots. In contrast Rennie depicted an articulate and aspirational young man in a position to offer much to the world:

“But we will rebel; we will not wear the negative stigmas you believe should be our clothes.”(3)

The next sequence contrasted the way in which politicians and the media articulated the factors contributing to the riots with the participants’ own views. Numerous pianos became lit to reveal the youngest cast members sitting on top of them, reflecting on their experience of the riots. The innocence and insight of their comments not only sat in stark contrast to the aggression of previous scenes but also the damning and at

times patronising analysis of the riots by MPs Michael Gove and Harriet Harman, which was projected on a large screen behind the stage. The young people told us that:

“I remember seeing the police use force.”
“I remember seeing a man steal rice and thinking how poor and unhappy he must be to need to steal rice.”
“I think they will riot again. There is still so much to protest about. If the economy doesn’t change...”
“Yes, if the government doesn’t start to get to know their youth.”(4)

Rennie’s poem, Just Listen, exemplifies the homogenising by society of East London youth:

“I live in a society where,
You wear a hoodie and you’re perceived to be YOB.
Any congregation of young people is esteemed to be a gang.
We are always put into boxes
Viewed as statistics
Thus society ignores our individual characteristics.
We are said to be all the same.”(5)

Unleashed became a way for participants to respond to this stereotype making Unleashed inherently hopeful.

Following the publication of Claire Bishop’s *Artificial Hells*(6), a book which raises the idea that participatory arts have been seen to be renouncing ‘authorial vision’ in favour of collaboration and dialogue, it has been argued that the sector has become de-radicalised. Bishop believes that there has been a shift from 1960s discourses of participation, creativity and community, and that “these terms

no longer occupy a subversive, anti-authoritarian force”. This she believes to be to the detriment of the aesthetic.

Challenging this assumption the collaborative ethos of Unleashed neither polarised high quality production values with grass roots development, nor equated slowness and dialogue with ‘best practice’. The atmosphere during the lengthy and dialogic devising process was no less radical or provocative than the high impact, politically charged performance itself. The process and performance allowed for a slower approach to the radical without excluding the excitement and significance of a faster, instant impact temporality in art. As such, Unleashed questioned traditional understandings of authorship within participatory practice resulting in a subversive and nuanced performance that was, quite literally, unleashed upon its audience.

Info

[youtube.com/watch?v=FD0ILSM5-eQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FD0ILSM5-eQ)
www.barbican.org.uk/education/project-showcasing/unleashed
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References

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- (3&5) Rennie, Kieron. Just Listen, 2012. Unpublished Poem
- (4) Unleashed. Dir. Walter Meierjohann Prod. Barbican, 2012. DVD
- (6) Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. 1 ed. London; New York: Verso Books, 2012.