

Reactor: FUNCTION VI
The Primary, Nottingham
20th October 2012



At 6pm the doors to Primary swing open and we are greeted by members of Reactor. Nothing much is said at this point, but the hustle and bustle of the audience entering the venue creates the energy required to feel like the start of a very special event. It has been seven years since the last Function event, and judging from the initial reactions of the crowd it is a very welcome return to the local art scene.

Minutes later Bruce Asbestos appears on top of the roof, launching into a list of thank yous and praise for the group prefaced by the ambiguous statement that he, himself is not a member of Reactor, nor a secret member of Reactor, and certainly not a secret member pretending not to be a member of Reactor. This manifesto of uncertainty is a fitting introduction to Function VI as it perfectly encapsulates one of the overriding feelings that members of the audience will experience during the evening.

The promotional material, website, and e-mail that have been sent out have already set our expectation level. As an audience we are already anticipating to be made to feel uncomfortable, uncertain, and in extreme circumstances undressed. It isn't really this that concerns us however, but rather it is as to the intensity of the prospective event we are speculating in our minds. Will I be forced to do things? Will I be given a sense of choice? Or will everything rely on my polite compliance to the formulated rules of the space?

As a performance savvy audience member I like to think myself as adventurous, willing to engage, and if required test the durability of the work to address fundamental flaws that may plague the event. Function VI did not bring this out of me. Perhaps it was because I found myself half expecting to have my senses hijacked at any given moment, or maybe because my polite art gallery sensibilities kicked in whilst roaming the loosely structured studio gallery environment.

It is all systems go as two separate groups from the audience members are led into the building, a boarded up and abandoned former primary school. Members of the team prise open the doors with crowbars, and with the thought of Pandora's Box at the forefront of my mind we proceed to enter.

We are now standing inside what is essentially a cloakroom. There is a singular sleeping bag strewn across the floor, as though a member of the Reactor team has been living in the studio space. A record player still spinning a completed LP, and a UV light (remember this for later) complete an image of solitary desperation. I remember this in detail as I had much time to ponder over its existence in the room whilst each of the members checked in their unique root vegetable (an entry requirement) as you would do a coat in a nightclub. This being a Function event however saw the transformation of this process into one of an ambiguous ritual. Between the Turnip-headed attendant to the drum beater in the back room this sense of ceremony complimented the increasingly jovial attitude of an audience currently being plied with apple cider punch.

Was this perhaps the neutralising or pacifying of an audience ready to be creeped out (and due to good preparation subsequently finding themselves not)? Or was it simply a social bonding event to pass the time whilst everybody was checked in?

Ambiguity, uncertainty, the unknown.

Post cloakroom we are led back out into the car park where Stuart presents the first *soup appreciation* performance of the evening. The appreciation has ritualistic elements focusing heavily (and in a wonderfully deadpan manner) on the pretext of wine tasting. This performance was to be one of several soup appreciation performances during Function VI; Personally I had the pleasure of experiencing three of the four of these events across the evening.

"You will notice that at the end there was a swallow; that is the normal end to the process" Stuart casually imparts as he finishes off his singular shot of Campbell's Tomato soup.

After several audience members have had the opportunity to experience a shot of soup we are herded back into the venue with the request that we partner up, hold hands, and close our eyes. Now, I reason with myself, the mood must be in for a change. At this stage our instructions are polite and graciously requested and as such it seems that not everyone feels it best to follow them.

Filing back into the venue with our eyes closed and holding a strangers hand I am preparing myself to be subjected to all manner of performance based horrors and to even feel somewhat violated, but no – at least not yet. Instead Bruce has wedged himself, a speaker system, and a walkie-talkie into the corner of a wall half way up the stairs. Using a recorded rhythm he addresses us in a quasi-beat poet manner, "The beat is 60bpm this is the average resting heart rate of a healthy human." The meditative trance of the beat, mixed with Bruce's carefully chosen words is relaxing and almost comforting. So much so that one member of the audience appears to pass out cold. Maybe they're a stooge and it is all part of the performance, or maybe it's actually real – oh shit *IT IS* real!

No harm seems to have been done and as Bruce re-instates his audio dominance over the space he requests that Reactor 'open the doors' in a manner not too dissimilar to a medieval gatekeeper allowing entry to wary travellers.

From this point we are exposed to the open studio aspect of Function VI. Stretched out before us is a series of rooms, tunnels, nooks, and even crannies to explore – all featuring a blend of permanent installation work, and transient performances by members of the Reactor team. Most of these performances seem to occur without prior warning, though on occasion it seems that members will make announcements of impending special events and their locations.

In this type of open ended performance environment I am constantly looking for the seams, the frame, and the distinction between the art that Reactor have deliberately placed in the space, and the sense of art that is organically created through the population of the venue itself. To this end there is a man stood behind me in the queue for the toilet holding a small axe – I am certain that he is a member of Reactor subtly trying to unnerve me (and possibly others as well). I have also spotted another man walking around the venue with his hands down his trousers sporting a wry grin on his face, though him I am not so sure on.

To the right of me is a bar selling a manner of appropriately named beverages and to the left a corridor leading to a room that Bruce appears to be preparing for a performance. It is too early for a drink I figure so I decide that I will go and check out what Bruce seems to be doing. Entering the room situated at the end of the hall Bruce has a tripod (complete with operational video camera) uncomfortably resting on his body whilst he strides around the room. The camera appears to be filming his head in the manner a Facebook user may take a self photo to add to their profile.

Bruce begins his performance to a sizable audience by telling us about his recent time in Australia and specifically his experiences of an Aboriginal smoke ritual. He highlights his disappointment at the lacklustre and somewhat cynical demeanour of his shamanic guide.

"We wouldn't usually use paper to start the fire and we certainly wouldn't use these matches." So why, asks Bruce, was he doing just that then?

Not three minutes into his recital a member of Reactor interrupts him to make the announcement that there is an Aunt Nazi performance about the begin downstairs should we

wish to break our current engagement. Surprisingly most of the audience members decide to leave for the new event, but I decide to stay. Perhaps it is my 'see it through' attitude, an overwhelming sense of politeness, or just my empathy for a performer who has just had half of his audience poached; but stay I do.

Once this debacle is over Bruce continues his story, moving on to mental exercises for the group, and eventually to a semi-incomprehensible cat poem punctuated by the bashing of a large metal pan. It is unpleasant; Bruce knows it, we know it, Bruce knows that we know it but somehow we don't seem to mind, and more than anything we find the way it is delivered to be equally amusing and endearing. Once the pan bashing ceases and the audience leave the room I debark to see where the rest of the group disappeared to earlier, and after wondering down the stairs find them engaged in what I could only gather (missing the first half of the performance) as the re-enactment of conversations previously integrated into the Function series.

There are several other rooms with team members performing in a seemingly endless loop. These include a masked performer emulating sexual acts involving a plastic toy gun, a glow stick, an abused teddy bear, and the UV light mentioned earlier. In another a solitary performer huddles over on the strobe-lit flour covered floor and in various others is Stuart peddling his soup appreciation seminars like a travelling sales demonstrator.

By this juncture I am wondering if I have experienced everything on offer for the evening, until a member of Reactor enters the vicinity requesting that we sign up for the next available performance by Philip. We are warned that attendance to the performance will be on the proviso that you attend naked, and though the performance will not be filmed or observed by those not taking part it will require all members to disrobe fully in order to attend. Regardless of what was to happen in the forthcoming performance this provided an expansive conversation topic for the audience members – Would it be something I/we would be comfortable with? Would it truly be necessary? Is it perhaps only a way to deter people from attending a limited numbers event? Regardless of whether you chose to attend or not the work had already had some impact on the audience members simply through its premise, an absent performance causing direct social impact on a local scale.

Not long after this the dispersed audience members are re-gathered downstairs ready to exit through the back doors. The performance is not yet over and before we leave Function VI behind we are to witness a ceremonial departure to the event. Stood in the centre of the car park are a group of what could perhaps best be described as neo-druids. They set aflame a fiery circle in dramatic fashion to delimit the area of their ritual, and with increasing volume and tempo proceed to initiate a member into their order. The ritual consists of what is essentially a mix of baptism and water boarding, and in suitably dramatic fashion the ignition of an animal heart which is rammed into the chest folds of the initiates' clothes completes the process. As the flames die down and the atmosphere turns to one of social interaction once more we spot the turnip headed cloak room attendant on the roof. It is a couple of moments before we realise why he is there, until the celebratory *whoosh* of a firework flies up into the night sky.

Stood outside in the wake of the fire circle we are fortunate enough to experience the warm sense of camaraderie that is usually only conjured up on 5th November each year, and feels like a fitting conclusion to what has been a triumphant return. Function VI has been a gracious host and the event an insightful and engaging act of voyeurism into the possible future of Nottingham based art collective Reactor.