Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Performance Research
A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rprs20

Walk This Way

The role of the artist from creative placemaking to communitas

Rob Eagle

To cite this article: Rob Eagle (2024) Walk This Way, Performance Research, 29:2, 106-111, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2024.2417572

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2024.2417572

Published online: 14 Feb 2025.

WALK THIS WAY

The role of the artist from creative placemaking to communitas

ROB EAGLE

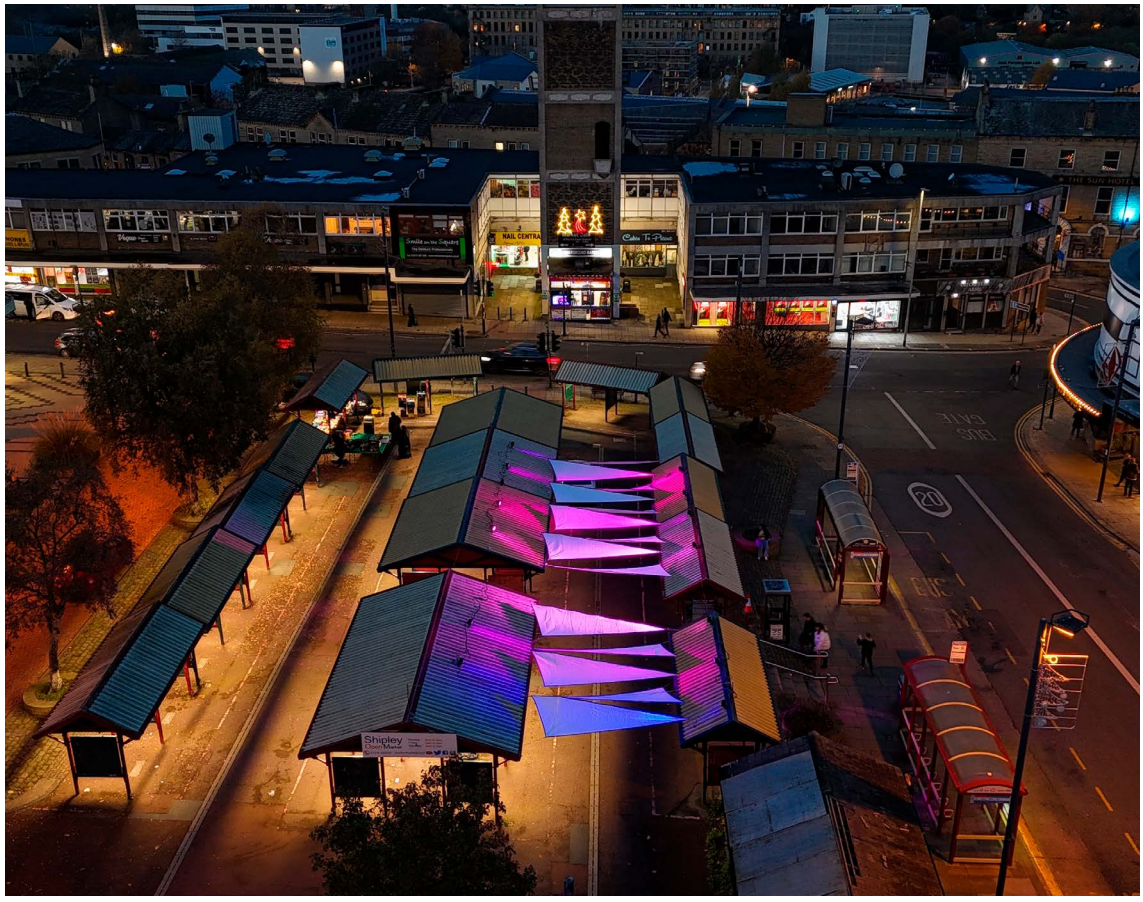


Figure 1. *WALK THIS WAY* at night in Shipley Market. *Photo Tom White, Hover Hawk Media*

'We don't normally get art things like this here.'

'It's nice to see something, *any*thing, really, happening here.'

'What's the point of it?'

These were the range of reactions from the residents of Shipley, a post-industrial town in the north of England, to the light and music installation *WALK THIS WAY*.[1] In 2023, I was commissioned to create *WALK THIS WAY* for Shipley's outdoor market as part of a light festival. Through dance workshops with young people in the town, my artistic team and I generated both the visual and audio content. Residents' curiosity, shrugs of indifference and full-on enthusiasm towards the work prompted me to ask myself: what *is* the point of creating work outdoors in a small town?

Most of my recent creative practice has taken place with theatre or dance companies and within cultural venues where audiences choose to enter and engage with the arts. Creating a large-scale outdoor installation for a town centre, by contrast, prompts some users of that public space to question the work's value or usefulness. However, Shipley is not just any town; it is where I live. When artists make public work in the communities in which we ourselves live, we make ourselves accountable (and

[1] Video of *WALK THIS WAY* in Shipley Market: https://bit.ly/3OfyqgT.

PERFORMANCE RESEARCH 29·2 : pp.106-111
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2024.2417572
ISSN 1352-8165 print/1469-9990 online

vulnerable) to those who fill the streets we walk down every day, those who sit beside us in the cafe, those who live in the flat next door.

For me as an artist, creating participatory performance and digital media work in the place where I live is an opportunity to meet and connect with others in my community. I am an immigrant and someone who has moved many times in my life, so I struggle to articulate where I'm 'from'; I am the sum of all the places I have lived and all the connections I have made with people along the way. I am aware of how I might be perceived: a queer, white, 40-year-old with colourfully painted nails and an indeterminate Mid-Atlantic accent migrating somewhere between Ohio and Britain. *WALK THIS WAY* was about making work in, with and for the community where I now live.

Shipley sits within the metro district of Bradford, a city whose council had commissioned *WALK THIS WAY*. In an attempt to promote social cohesion and revitalize the economies in towns such as Shipley, the council has positioned arts and culture at the heart of their regeneration strategy – and part of that involves commissioning local artists and artist-led groups. This strategy can be understood in terms of 'creative placemaking', which invites 'artists and arts organizations to use their artistic creativity for the good of their communities' (Markusen and Nicodemus 2019: 11). Among the growing body of literature on creative placemaking since the 2010s, most studies have focused on cities, not towns or rural communities, and 'on audiences, visitors, communities, citizens and participants rather than directly on cultural workers or artists' (Wright *et al.* 2023: 13). These are two gaps I am modestly addressing in this artist's page through examining my position as a local artist and the relationship between an artistic work and the town in which I live. I also join others (for example, Bedoya 2013; Wilbur 2015) in questioning who exactly benefits from creative placemaking. Not everyone in a place will equally appreciate or gain value from community-focused artistic activities. As I experienced in making and installing *WALK THIS WAY*, the perceived value of an artistic intervention can be contested among members of a community.

While I did not believe the installation alone had the potential to inspire social cohesion or spark economic renewal in the town centre, I had hoped that in some small way the work could evoke joy and playfulness within my own community. In making *WALK THIS WAY*, I employed the definition of community not as a vague sense of imagined membership (which is especially fractured in post-industrial environments) but from Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito (2010), who traces the etymological and philosophical roots of the Latin word *communitas*. According to Esposito, communitas is a process of gifting without a guarantee of reciprocation. To be part of a community is to owe that group something. As such, I am framing the creation of work within the town where I live – a process full of challenges and contested values – as an act of artistic communitas.

THE CREATIVE PLACEMAKER AND GIFT-GIVER

Shipley as a town is comprised of fragmented contradictions and uneasy juxtapositions. Families of South Asian heritage live alongside white working-class families – both demographics united by the industrial legacy of the mills that once provided employment across the region but shut decades ago. Many of the shops sit empty, ghostly reminders of a once thriving high street, contrasting with the groups of young people spilling out of the bustling local college and dance studios. Pockets of deprivation abut middle-class neighbourhoods and a genteel nineteenth-century village, Saltaire, designated a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. While Shipley operates as a town with a post-industrial centre, surrounded by farms and countryside, it also serves as a commuter hub for those working in the nearby city centres of Bradford and Leeds.

In the centre of Shipley stand the tired old stalls of the outdoor market that have seen little upkeep in thirty years (fig. 2). An imposing brutalist clock tower looms over the market square; the clock has not functioned properly for decades. Throughout the twentieth century,

Figure 2. Shipley Market before the installation. *Photo Rob Eagle*

the market was valued as a civic space at the heart of a community, a centre for the exchange of goods and a meeting place for locals and traders. After a major supermarket chain nearby expanded its offerings to become a one-stop shop in 2003, the market traders and other small businesses around the market could not compete. The market square is empty most days of the week. During the evenings, it is mainly a passing-through space that people cross on their way to the supermarket or the adjacent bus stop. Now, the market is scheduled for imminent demolition.

Since 2021, Bradford has followed other cities in staging a two-day winter light festival, BD is Lit, including performances and installations in surrounding towns, like Shipley. At best, light festivals offer artists an opportunity to create work with city streets as their canvas, and audiences have an incentive to leave the house in the evenings during the cold, dark time of the year. Indeed, festivals vary between offering meaningful experiences of art and performances and rendering the city into a playground of consumption and social media posts (Dell'Aria 2021: 28). The Instagrammability of a light festival might pull in thousands of visitors to a city centre with an injection of tourist money over a weekend.

Urban policymakers often hope that light festivals boost a city's night-time economy and help foster a sense of place (Skelly and Edensor 2021). As cities develop strategies of promoting arts venues and festivals to attract investment and a dynamic 'creative class' (Markusen and Nicodemus 2019), these festivals form part of cultural engagement activities. In Britain policymakers have employed strategies of creative placemaking, often in line with Arts Council and UK government guidance, in the hope of promoting what they term 'pride of place' (Howcroft *et al.* 2024). But how ought two days of performances and installations among twinkling lights contribute to residents' social unity and meaningful engagement with arts and culture?

As an artist, I was sceptical that my installation could inspire Shipley residents suddenly to find pride in our crumbling, long-neglected town centre, especially when we are so fragmented as a community. However, according to the Ancient Roman understanding of the term, communitas does not require that a group of individuals is united by a shared interest or identity (Esposito 2010). Rather, what those in communitas share is a debt to one another. For the Romans, subjects were 'united by an "obligation," in the sense that we say "I owe *you* something," but not "you owe *me* something"' (Esposito 2010: 6). Building on Esposito and others, performance scholar Dorota Sajewska (2021) applies the concept of communitas to theatre. Sajewska (2021: 25) argues that the ephemerality and collective nature of theatre renders it 'useless' in material terms. A performance, from the performers to the audience, is not about the creation and exchange of goods but a gift of a shared experience. For both Esposito and Sajewska, acts of communitas ultimately subvert the primacy of the individual, reminding us of our obligation to the collective.

As artists, one gift we can give our community without expectation of reciprocation is art. While I was commissioned by the district council, I did not expect anything in return from my community for this contribution to the market in our town centre. In understanding the role of an artist in local creative placemaking, we can look at the example of creating *WALK THIS WAY* as an act of communitas.

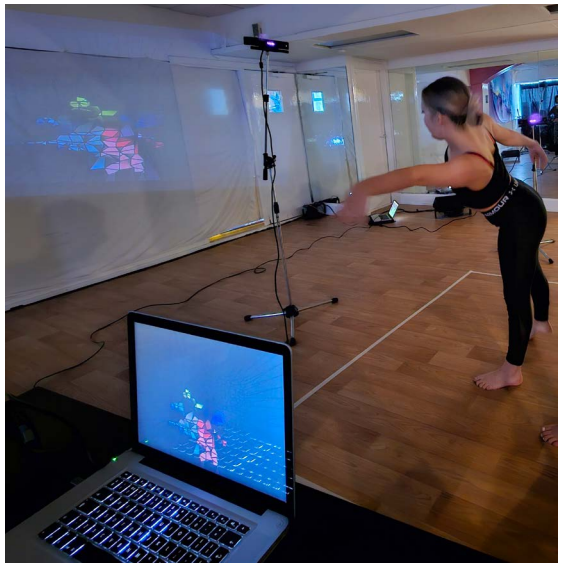


Figure 3. Dance studio workshop – dancers interacting with The Veldt system.
Photo Rob Eagle

Figure 4. Dance studio workshop – a dancer moves in front of the Kinect, generating the colourful geometric shapes projected on the wall in front of her.
Photo Rob Eagle

In autumn 2023, my artistic team and I held two sessions of movement workshops with young people in Shipley. My project collaborator, composer and creative coder Marcus Dyer, and I had been developing a system called The Veldt that we would use in the workshops. A Kinect (a 3D depth sensor) sends movement data to The Veldt app, which generates colourful geometric figures. That data then translates to a live music composition. The generative nature of the application means that, as more participants interact with the system, the data set grows, and the music composition changes.

We facilitated the movement workshops with art and music students at a local college and young dancers in a local dance studio (fig. 3). More than sixty young people aged 10 to 16 participated. In groups of two, three and four, they moved in front of the Kinect, walking, standing, dancing, embracing and waving their arms about. The dancers improvised individual and collective movements, responding to the music and the visuals. They explored what visuals and music their movements might provoke: a hand raised might change the key; vertical movement from crouching to standing might trigger the sounds of more instruments, resulting in a dramatic, loud crescendo. The Veldt became a catalyst for expressive movements that gave instant feedback in colours and sound. Participants danced *with* the system, performing the biggest movements they could to provoke a reaction.

From the material recorded in the workshops, Marcus distilled twenty-nine minutes of music and corresponding light data that would loop in the installation on the market. The Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) data of that programme translated to fourteen light-emitting diode (LED) lights projected onto triangular strips of fabric covering the market stalls over four metres wide and thirty metres long. Speakers hidden in the eaves of the stalls provided spatialized music down the length of the installation. The installation was a transmediation of the young people's movement that the Kinect had captured in the workshops. The colourful shapes generated in the workshops became further abstracted, their red, green and blue (RGB) values deconstructed and projected onto the sails in the market.

In the process of installing and running the work in late October, we met the last remaining market traders and Shipley residents who use and walk through the market. Watching people smile as they moved through the installation, I also answered questions about the concept or the technology behind it. There was one group of 60-year-old working-class men who drank in a nearby pub most nights and used the empty market as their smoking area. One of them, Richard, asked me: 'Where are you from?' I replied, 'America – via Scotland, England – now Shipley.' And that was the start of regular chats every evening we were in the market. Richard especially liked the music and pledged that he and 'the lads' from the pub would look after the

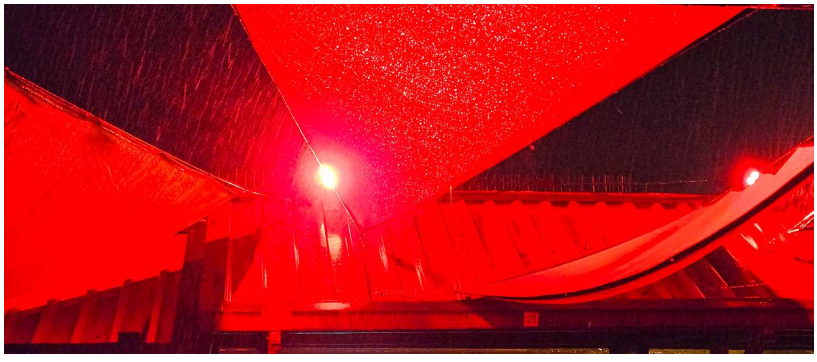
installation when we were not there. It felt as though we were handing the installation over to them; it was theirs now.

Figure 5. The market as a passing-through space at night with *WALK THIS WAY* installed.
Photo Rob Eagle

The Bradford Metropolitan District Council who had commissioned the work asked to extend it from the two-day light festival to a month-long presence in the market. Two violent storms blew in off the Atlantic, one after the next, battering the installation (fig. 6). Sails snapped loose, lights failed and amps blew in two of the speakers. The work was never stable but changed with the weather, and the visitor experience of it changed dramatically in rain, frost and snow.

Such a work in flux is a perpetual becoming and, given the destructive contribution from the storms, an un-becoming. What had begun as a short-term installation – participating in an ephemeral two-day festival – had become a much longer engagement. It became a regular evening experience for those who normally hurry across the market on their way to the supermarket or bus stop. This was communitas for me, a gift to my community without reciprocation.

Figure 6. The installation battered by brutal autumn storms.



OUTCOMES BEYOND FAILURE OR SUCCESS

While investment in arts and culture under a strategy of creative placemaking can lead to benefits for communities (Markusen and Nicodemus 2019), no singular, temporary artistic intervention can reinvigorate a town centre that has been in slow economic and social decline for decades. It is naïve for artists or even urban policymakers to believe that occasional support for arts and culture – especially two-day light festivals – can rescue a dying high street.

In performing an act of artistic communitas, I did not expect anything personally in return from my community. There were, however, three 'successful' outcomes, if they can be defined as such:

1. Artistic risks – the project provided an opportunity for me to take and share artistic risks. I did not know how the workshops would go or how the installation would weather the storms. The entire process (and project itself) felt perpetually vulnerable and on the verge of collapse – a fitting metaphor for modern Britain. That state of (un)becoming also made the work dynamic, open and exposed to the brutal honesty of those using the market space.

2. Engaging young people through workshops – according to feedback from the young people, they 'had fun taking part' in the movement workshops and enjoyed contributing to something that would be exhibited in their own town. The workshops facilitated a space to dance and play and to reimagine what our neglected town market could be. The participants were excited that the music composition and colours they generated would appear over the local market square. Teenagers all over Britain find themselves increasingly physically isolated, disconnected from one another and their communities. These workshops provided an opportunity, however brief, for connection with one another, and those collective movements in front of the Kinect in the workshops translated to the programme that played twelve times a night over four weeks on the market.

3. **Unexpected connections** – *WALK THIS WAY* became a point of connection among me, young people in Shipley, the market traders and the older men who use the market as their smoking area. If art can play any role in creative placemaking, *WALK THIS WAY* demonstrates how the making *process*, more than the finished work itself, might provide a spark in building communities. How different this town would be if these kinds of workshops and community-based methods were a regular occurrence.

CONCLUSIONS: THE HARSH TRUTHS OF COMMUNITAS

Among the council's lofty strategies of creative placemaking in centring arts and culture as key to social cohesion and economic renewal, I viewed my role quite simply as an artist as offering one small contribution to my own community. I had hoped that, in facilitating workshops, participatory art-making could also become an act of community-building. But how could I know if those using the market space would want, need or even accept the installation?

As we were deinstalling the work, I spotted something scrawled on the sign. In black pen was someone's honest feedback: 'COMPLETE CRAP'. It made me laugh. This person obviously did not like the gift I offered. Unwittingly, by adding their own text to the sign, they too were participants in the becoming of the work. They did not have to like the work, but somehow they felt strongly enough to offer their own contribution. Occupying civic space, *WALK THIS WAY* was now their work as much as it was that of the lads from the pub, as much as it was the Council's and as much as it was that of the workshop participants and mine.

WALK THIS WAY was also a reminder of what a modern fragmented community is: more than a shared feel-good sentiment or a vague sense of shared identity, community can hold a polyphony of voices and contested meanings. This is *real* creative placemaking, beyond government cultural engagement strategy, with all its messiness and contested values. The conversation among artists, community participants and audiences that happens in the creation – in this case, the becoming and un-becoming – of a work does not always have a neat and tidy resolution.

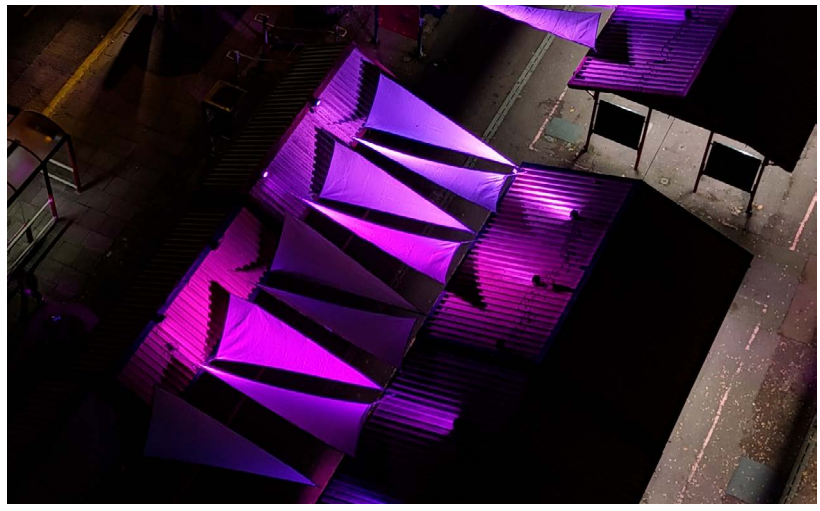


Figure 7. *WALK THIS WAY* from above.
Photo Tom White, Hover Hawk Media

REFERENCES

Bedoya, Roberto (2013) 'Placemaking and the politics of belonging and dis-belonging', *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader* 24(1), https://bit.ly/3XpycYC, accessed 18 September 2024.

Dell'Aria, Annie (2021) *The Moving Image as Public Art: Sidewalk spectators and modes of enchantment*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Esposito, Roberto (2010) *Communitas: The origin and destiny of community*, Stanford, IL: Stanford University Press.

Howcroft, Michael, Marsh, Nicky and Owen, Joseph (2024) 'Levelling Up, affective governance and tensions within "pride in place"', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and space* 0(0): 1–19, DOI: 10.1177/23996544241268342.

Markusen, Ann and Nicodemus, Anne Gadwa (2019) 'Creative placemaking reflections on a 21st-century American arts policy initiative', in Cara Courage and Anita McKeown (eds) *Creative Placemaking Research, Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge, pp. 11–27.

Sajewska, Dorota (2021) 'Toward theatrical communitas', *Pamiętnik Teatralny* (Theater Diary) 3: 15–56, DOI: 10.36744/pt.846.

Skelly, Gail and Edensor, Tim (2021) 'Routing out place identity through the vernacular production practices of a community light festival', in Cara Courage, Tom Borrup, Maria Rosario Jackson, Kylie Legge, Anita McKeown, Louise Platt and Jason Schupbach (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking Routledge*, London: Routledge, pp. 258–68.

Wilbur, Sarah (2015) 'It's about time: Creative placemaking and performance analytics', *Performance Research* 20(4): 96–103.

Wright, John, Tully, Kyla and Podgorski, Ava (2023) *Research Digest: Culture and placemaking*, Leeds: Centre for Cultural Value.