

Post-Relational Paranoid Play in Reactor's *Big Lizard's Big Idea* Project

By Daniel Oliver

Abstract

This article emerges from my work as a performer and guest collaborator in *Big Lizard's Big Idea* (2009-10), a participatory art project devised by the UK collective 'Reactor'. I examine the entwining of playfulness with paranoia in *BLBI*, employing a psychoanalytic understanding of 'play' developed by Donald Winnicott and the Lacanian dissection of contemporary modes of 'enjoyment' developed and supplemented by Slavoj Žižek (Winnicott 51-70; Žižek, *Lacan* 103-04). Reactor, through their unabashed Disney-esque character 'Big Lizard', simultaneously invites us to play and intervene in our playfulness, providing an uneasy relationship with our experience of the motivations, claims, stakes, characters, and purposes behind the invitation. I demonstrate that this paranoid experience intervenes in some recent discussions around participation and social engagement in theatre and performance. In conclusion, I argue that the multi-layered, complex and playful paranoia facilitated by Reactor might give us insights into our own complicity in the structures in which we are embedded.

During the ten years that I have worked with, for and alongside the UK art collective 'Reactor', I have had various conversations in which it has been suggested that they 'get people to do stuff'. This is a claim often made by those who avoid participating in Reactor projects. The point of origin for this article lies in a desire to critically engage with this claim's uneasy suspicion and implied accusation of manipulation and conspiracy. This has developed into an engagement both with the paranoid assumptions about agency and honesty in Reactor's on-going practice and with the paranoia that, I claim, Reactor encourages participants to playfully immerse themselves during individual projects. Through this critical approach to paranoia and playfulness in Reactor's practice, I put forward questions and provocations that contribute to current thinking about agency, control and authorship in contemporary collaborative and participatory performance.

The article emerges from a wider project of critically engaging with participatory performances that trouble recent discussions around audience participation and social engagement in theatre and performance. In line with this, my reading of Reactor's practice positions their work as 'post-relational'. This means that Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics*, which collects together art works that foreground 'interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts' (8), serves a backdrop to my engagement. In using Alex Farquharson's term 'post-relational' to describe Reactor's practice, I am suggesting that their projects extend, critique and complicate Bourriaud's work. Particularly important is the absence of explicit fantasy, fiction or theatricality in 'relational aesthetics' and the favouring of conviviality as a productive experience (32). Claire Bishop's response to Bourriaud's celebration of good feeling in 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' and her favouring of practices that she defines as 'Relational Antagonism' is, therefore, another key referent in my argument. Bishop's monograph, *Artificial Hells*, examines the development of participatory art from the hostile provocations of Italian Futurists in the 1910s through to the seemingly benevolent experiments in delegation and exploitation that occur at galleries and biennales in the twenty-first century. In her conclusion she summarises this development as follows:

From the audience's perspective, we can chart this as a shift from an audience that demands a role (expressed as hostility towards avant-garde artists who keep control of the proscenium), to an audience that enjoys its subordination to strange experiences devised for them by an artist, to an audience that is encouraged to be a co-producer of the work (and who, occasionally, can even get paid for this involvement). (277)

My own framing of the experience offered to participants by Reactor incorporates a complex and contradictory overlapping between the latter two perspectives. The mixture of enjoyment and subordination in Reactor projects is key to the experience of paranoia and play that I attribute to them. Reactor participants, I argue, are able to play at subordination, to critically reflect on where that subordination emerges from and to confront their potential co-production in that subordination. These experiences loosely follow the definitions of clinical, critical and constructive paranoia that I outline below.

However, I am particularly drawn to work that is not so easily categorised in terms of convivial or antagonistic approaches to participation and collaboration. Such

work, I claim, prompts us to re-evaluate how we read the conviviality or antagonism in participatory works that display a clear preference for one or the other. This is part of my reason for engaging with the playful experiments with paranoia and the potentially paranoid experience of playfulness that I observe in *Big Lizard's Big Idea* (2009-10), one of the participatory art projects devised by 'Reactor'. To clarify, my use of the term paranoia refers, firstly, to the unnerving sense that something more is going on than appears. In other words, that there is a discrepancy between what we are being told or shown is happening and what is *actually* happening. Secondly, it refers to the belief that there is a single agent, or group of agents, who control what is *actually* happening: who develop and perpetuate a hidden, but totalising concept and agenda.

My examination of the complex entwining of playfulness and paranoia in *Big Lizard's Big Idea (BLBI)* is read through my own navigation between the psychoanalytic understanding of 'play' developed by Donald Winnicott and the Lacanian dissection of contemporary modes of 'enjoyment' developed and supplemented by Slavoj Žižek (Winnicott 51-70; Žižek, *Lacan* 103-04). This admittedly awkward conflation is, I argue, appropriate, because Reactor offer their own awkward vacillation between Winnicott's figure of secure, maternal benevolence and the insistent, contradictory, demanding figure of the Lacanian big Other. Thus, on the one hand, when I describe something as 'playful' I am referring to its connection with frivolity, experimentation and fun; with not taking things too seriously and being open to pretence. However, on the other, as my argument develops through the theories of Winnicott and Žižek, my use of the term 'play' begins to flicker between two awkwardly conflicting definitions. The first of these is the productive developmental activity reliant on the presence of a benevolent other and a supportive, clearly defined system. The second is the meeting of a demand for non-seriousness and enjoyment from a tyrannical master in a fragmented structure of incompleteness and contradiction. Thus, there is an uneasy ambiguity around whether participants in Reactor projects are participating under the auspices of a Winnicottian Mother, or the injunctions of a Lacanian Other. Throughout, I address the various paranoid positions that might emerge in response to these Mother/Other figures.

The appropriateness of my application of psychoanalytic theory here is captured in Žižek's description of the desire by many in the 21st Century to bury it 'in the lumber-room of pre-scientific obscurantist quests for hidden meanings' (*Lacan* 1). The

appeal of psychoanalysis here lies primarily in the fact that an ‘obscurantist quest for hidden meanings’ would, I suggest, make for a pithy description of the experience offered by the *Big Lizard* project and stands as a dominant definition of the types of paranoia that this article discusses. Thus, in employing psychoanalysis, I am rigorously and playfully performing a response to what I see as the project’s core invitation. The ultimate aim of this response is to demonstrate how a paranoid position is not only about investigating and revealing hidden structures and characters, but can also be unwittingly complicit in constructing and perpetuating them. Thus, overall, my psychoanalytic engagement with the various forms of paranoia present in *BLBI* argues that the project might, like Žižek’s psychoanalysis, provide a space for play in which we can dwell upon the contemporary, insistent and ‘strange ethical duty’ to ‘enjoy’ and, more importantly, confront our complicit role in its perpetuation (*Lacan* 104).

My experience of the project comes through my role as a performer and guest collaborator in *BLBI*. I describe this position as Collaborator/Performer-Participation-as-Research (C/PPaR), taking my cue from the term ‘Spectator-Participation-as-Research’ (SPaR) that Deidre Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan use to describe their work on One to One performance (122). My collaborative role allows me to immerse myself in the layered experiences and the complex and intensive production of the project and, in my position as academic researcher, I reflect critically on the work from within it. It is important to note that I had no role in the conception or initial development of *BLBI*, and was only brought in once it had been fully mapped out and the *BLBI* world was ready to populate. However, I am aware that the combination of my own critical engagement with paranoia and my relative ‘insider’ position allows for a playful performativity in which I am displayed as a partial, shadowy insider. In line with this, it should suffice to state that any performance of a fidelity to the illusive and frustrating impenetrability of this project merely serves to reconstruct some of the affective qualities and mysteries of *BLBI*. No ‘holding back’ of information is actually occurring.

Introducing Reactor

I interviewed members of Reactor for the *Reactor 2006-2011* DVD and used the opportunity to discuss their playful experiments with participation.¹ Adopting the term

¹ This interview is available as an extra in the ‘Munkanon’ section of the *Reactor 2006-2011* DVD.

'fun' to refer to the play that Reactor facilitates (the term 'fun' occurs throughout the texts and scripts of *BLBI*), I asked core member Niki Russell how relevant he felt it was to their practice. In his answer he concluded that it was 'relevant', but compared the invitation to have 'fun' in *BLBI* to an invitation made in the *Munkanon* project, which also took place at the Donau Festival in Austria in 2009. In my interview with Russell, he describes how, in *Munkanon*, participants were invited to go on 'the ride of a lifetime'. He went on to assert that despite this invitation, there 'isn't really a ride is there. Well there is. You end up in a car for a bit, then you end up in a space where there's no real ride. You're kind of sat down, or you're doing this or that'. He concluded that this is similar to *BLBI*, which is 'presented as fun, and then the activities don't really equate to that'. This clearly demonstrates a deceptive relationship with promotion and a playful attitude towards participants' expectations. However, in the same interview, Dan Williamson interjected into Russell's reply, undermining the simple and reductive idea of a mere bait and switch attitude towards experience, by insisting that 'when you look back at the *Munkanon* documentation, clearly people *are* having a lot of fun with these kind[s] of activities'. Finally, ex-member (and only successful secret member – see below) Jonathan Waring contributed by critiquing the position of the 'casual observers' that Reactor have worked hard to exclude from their projects, but who inevitably peer in and make assumptions about the kind of play that people are engaging and the agency they have in doing so. He stated that he thinks this concern with other people's playfulness is 'very characteristic of a particular moment that we're in where people worry that other people look like they're having fun, but they might have been tricked into having fun'. Thus, we have at least two layers of paranoia in relation to Reactor and Reactor's projects. Firstly, there is the paranoia of participants who develop an understanding that there is a level of deception and, secondly, there is the paranoia that observers and non-participants have about the agency and understanding of those participating and the motivations of those in charge. In other words, those who remain outside the project might develop concerns that those on the inside are not being appropriately informed on what is *really* going on. To summarise, Reactor admit to having a deceptive relationship towards playfulness. They invite us to play their game, but are deceptive and slippery in their disclosures of what this game entails. However, they also insist that this deception does not mean that people are not actually playing, suggesting that outsiders should be wary of making

assumptions about the agency and understanding participants have or do not have as they play. Hence, whilst, in my understanding, they invite participants to play a complex and multi-layered game of paranoia and investigation, they are simultaneously dismissive of the potential paranoid, critical readings of participants' experiences that emerge from those who have not participated.

Reactor is a UK based art collective with two current 'core' members: Niki Russell and Dan Williamson, as well as one 'guest' member, Stuart Tait. Russell and Williamson have been part of the original collective since it was established in 2002. Tait joined in 2009 as a 'guest' member. It is possible that there is a secret fourth member, but they won't tell me.² The potential existence of a secret member is just one of the ways that Reactor construct a sinister, yet playful experience of deception, opaqueness, paranoia and conspiracy, both within individual projects and within the wider project of cloaking and mythologising the methodologies of their ongoing practice. For example, they also collaborate closely with a vast menagerie of guest artists, performers and curators, thus ensuring an on-going confusion as to who is and who is not a member of Reactor in any given project.

Reactor are, they claim, an 'art group that assembles new, collective realities in which audiences and Reactor members co-participate' (reactor.org.uk). They go on to describe the creation of projects that 'explore the ways in which cohesion of social groups is maintained through shared belief systems and collective action' (reactor.org.uk). In 2002 they emerged in Nottingham as a larger artist's studio group. At this point and until 2005 they curated events that brought together a range of Live and Installation artists who specialised in interactivity and participation. However, the group shifted their approach in 2005 with the *Total Ghaos* project (2005). *Total Ghaos* was a three-day participatory and immersive role-play, based on a fantastical totalitarian system that took place in a disused warehouse in Nottingham. The project saw the beginning of a practice in which Reactor worked collaboratively to construct densely detailed interactive art events that have claimed to 'leave no room for the passive observer' (Reactor, 'Microprojects').³ The events absorb participants into a

² Each year, on the 11th November, Reactor attempt to recruit a 'secret member' through a covert initiation procedure called 'Martinmas Interviews'. Secret membership lasts for one year. Whilst it is unknown if there is a current secret member, or what the role of this member entails, they have declared that for the six years before 2013 no-one was capable of filling the gap (Reactor, *Martinmas*). There has only ever been one secret member that I know of.

³ This claim currently appears online in a description of their work provided in reference to the workshop 'Reactor Microprojects' that they ran at Bluecoat, Liverpool.

series of experiments that are enacted with a serious tones whilst consisting of farcical activities. They are unsettling systems of ideology, politics, belief and frivolity. The result often feels something like an amateurishly improvised adult role-play game organised by a covert and suspiciously motivated collection of individuals.

The key questions that emerge from this practice pivot around agency, authorship and accountability. To what extent are participants given access to an understanding of the project they are in and what their role in it is? How much agency do participants really have in authoring and developing the project and how much of the project is tightly pre-authored by Reactor? Who is accountable for the ethics in a project when its authorship is fragmentary and unfixed? Instead of working towards providing clear answers to these questions, my response here is to examine the potential efficacy of provoking and encouraging the sense of paranoia that they imply. In reference to current discussions around agency and emancipation in participatory performance, the key point here is that Reactor not only cause us to worry about the agency of participants, but they also create immersive role-plays in which participants are encouraged to play at worrying about their own agency.

Big Lizard's Big Idea

Writing in the wake of Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, Alex Farquharson's article 'Common People' describes an emerging 'post-relational aesthetics' that sidesteps 'the art institution altogether or simply uses it as part of the continuum of public spaces, albeit one increasingly penetrated by the logic of capital' (n.p). As I demonstrate below, *BLBI* fits this description, explicitly foregrounding the penetrating 'logic of capital' through its conceptual and aesthetic references to the commodification of experience. The public locations, contexts and concepts of *BLBI*, whose participants have sometimes remained uninformed and potentially oblivious of the event's existence as an 'art' project, adheres to the side-stepping of art-institutions. In applying the term 'post-relational' to *BLBI*, I would extend the definition to include the kind of fictional, fantastical and theatrical scenarios not often found in relational art, but, as demonstrated, crucial to the engagement with paranoia that Reactor offer. Thus, as stated above, my use of the term 'post-relational', developed from Farquharson, is used here in order to position Reactor's practice as a development of and intervention into the practices and concepts that Bourriaud documents and collates.

Anyone walking through Newcastle city centre in November 2009 would have passed by a mobile stage adorned with, and surrounded by, inflatable palm-trees, fold-down tables, green balloons, stickers, banners, bunting, childish crayon drawings, and a plethora of badges, banners and posters depicting a large cartoonish lizard and the words 'Big Lizard's Big Idea' (Fig. 1). Here they would have been approached by one of several individuals dressed in chinos, blue plimsolls and a Hawaiian shirt over a t-shirt with an image of the cartoon lizard on the front. This member of Big Lizard's 'entourage' would have invited, encouraged and coerced them into finding out more about the 'Big Lizard' character and to get involved with the 'Big Idea'. The tone of the conversation would have been reminiscent of uncomfortably over-familiar encounters with street-based charity fundraisers, passive aggressive sales-people, sinisterly benevolent spreaders of religion, or scientologist stress testers. The potential participant might have become awkwardly aware of the occasional use of clumsy and unsubtle physical and verbal persuasion techniques. Series of questions to which he or she could only answer 'Yes' would be followed by 'So do you want to come on board with the Big Idea? Yeh?' All sensible queries on what this Big Idea is are met with evasive, unconvincing analogies – 'The Big Idea is like a big bowl of soup. I once tried to drink a big bowl of soup all at once and I caused a terrible mess' – and the insistence that the only way to really grasp what the Big Idea is, is to come 'on board' and get involved. Importantly 'having fun' is a key lure in the collection of participants. This is evident in the cartoonish aesthetics of the work, the crass colourful costumes, the description of the mobile stage as a 'fun' bus and the frequent use of the word 'fun' as bait in the entourage's conversations with potential participants.

The first step for a participant wanting to 'get down' with Big Lizard and the Big Idea is to go up onto the mobile stage, sit at one of the tables and draw a picture of him or herself and Big Lizard 'doing something'. Hours later, having fully committed him or herself to pursuing Big Lizard's Big Idea and enthusiastically engaged in a series of jolly team-building games, childish micro-performances and esoteric one-to-one encounters, a participant could attend a 'champagne party' in a function room at Newcastle's Theatre Royal.⁴ As a guest at this party, they might find themselves in

⁴ The games and scenarios of play experience by participants include hula-hoop and speed-stack competitions, a secretive ritualistic encounter with an alien oracle called 'Raman-Caa', being a guest in a television studio for the hand-puppet-based 'Big Lizard's Fun-Time Message Show', getting one's tongue checked and measured, and donning a cardboard Big Lizard mask and joining other participants and Big Lizard for a celebratory parade through Newcastle city centre.

fancy dress, or playing blindfold-musical-chairs with nine other people they only know through their involvement in the project that day (Fig. 2). Alternatively, they may be re-



Fig. 1: 'The Fun Bus'. *Big Lizard's Big Idea* (2009), by Reactor. Wunderbar Festival, Newcastle. Image courtesy of Reactor.



Fig 2: 'Champagne Party'. *Big Lizard's Big Idea* (2009), by Reactor. Wunderbar Festival, Newcastle. Image courtesy of Reactor.

-cruited to host this party, organising games, decorating the room and keeping the champagne flowing. Either way, it is unlikely they would be any closer to gathering an objective and totalising understanding of who Big Lizard is, what he or she represents, or what his or her Big Idea might be. They might also be questioning why, and for whom, they have engaged in the activities and encounters that they experienced throughout the day.

The Wunderbar Festival in Newcastle, UK, hosted this second occurrence of *BLBI* in November 2009. The project had previously occurred at an alternative music and art festival in Austria and was subsequently redeveloped for Schirn Kunsthalle's *Playing the City 2* art festival in 2010. Reactor describes the project as being 'centred on a Disney-esque mascot, whose irrepressible "fun" persona examined the nature of such characters' (reactor.org.uk). Their website goes on to explain that 'members of the public were encouraged to get involved with the Big Idea through fun and games and a "wholesome" – but ultimately illusive and empty – message' (reactor.org.uk). Thus, an initial response to this claim might suggest that Reactor is a slightly smug facilitator of a frustratingly Sisyphean role-play game, amusing itself as enthusiastic participants struggle over and over to make connections in an insistently nonsensical micro-society. This in itself, I suggest, can be appropriately framed as a paranoid response, relying, as it does, on the presumption of the existence of a clandestine group of deceptive individuals with a clear agenda of trickery and self-amusement.

Paranoia

I read *BLBI* as a playful microcosm of Frederic Jameson's postmodernism, in which attempts at 'cognitive mapping' are undermined by a non-representable totality and an experience of partial, fragmented and disparate cultural logics, occasionally resulting in paranoid conspiracy theories (Jameson; Lewis and Khan 13; Kellner 156). In my use of Farquharson's term 'post-relational', I position *BLBI* in a 'continuum of public spaces' that are 'increasingly penetrated by the logic of capital' (Farquharson n.p.). Jameson's definition of postmodernism suggests that this 'logic of capital' is partial and fragmented. Importantly, instead of trying to resolve this fragmentation, allowing us to cognitively map ourselves through the provision of an easily consumable message, concept or ideal, *BLBI* further immerses us in this experience of partialities and the ominous sense of a non-representable totality. References to our pursuit of the consumable and blameable conspiracy theories that Jameson refers to make up a key

part of the material of *BLBI*. The use of a costume that resembles a 'Grey' (the infamous perpetrators of alien abduction) at the champagne party, the pseudo-psychological tests disguised as games and the (clumsy) attempts at hypnosis-based manipulation techniques all work to immerse participants in a world of recognisable clandestine knowledge and secret agendas.⁵ Participants are offered the opportunity to play at paranoia, potentially recognising and performing themselves as obsessive conspiracy theorists, wildly connecting dots in order to access the 'truth' of the 'Big Idea'. The most prominent of the conspiracy theories referenced in *BLBI* is what Tyson Lewis and Richard Khan describe as the Reptoid Hypothesis: the belief, most commonly associated with controversial ex-football commentator David Ike, that the world is secretly run by big lizards.

Thus, there is a sense of conspiratorial paranoia built into the fictional world of the role-play, where participants are asked to play at the paranoid pursuit of knowledge, 'discovering' the fantastical theories, back-stories and characters that lurk behind the *BLBI* micro-system. Of course, layered on top of this 'fun' paranoia, internal to the project itself, is the more realistic drive to understand the actual agenda of Reactor in relation to the agency and understanding of those who choose to participate. This exemplifies the layering of a playful 'clinical' paranoia with an unsettling 'critical' paranoia, definitions outlined by Douglass Kellner in his discussion of *The X-Files (Media Spectacle)*. Kellner's 'critical paranoia' is a means to 'map the forces behind political, social, and personal events' (140). Participants might employ this critical paranoia when thinking through what this participatory project is for and who the 'forces' that might be gaining from their participation are. 'Clinical paranoia' is less judicial and rational, instead disassociating itself 'from a reality principle' and retreating into a 'solipsistic world of persecutorial or occult fantasies' (140). The merging of *BLBI*'s references to far-fetched fantastical conspiracy theories with the very real questions about the desires and motivations of the collective Reactor (whomever they may be) facilitates a complex response to the work's play with critical and clinical paranoia. Thus, the project is ambiguous about whether participants should play at being concerned about the fantastical characters and fictional systems of power that run the *BLBI* system (to play at 'clinical paranoia'), or be genuinely concerned

⁵ For a discussion and critical socio-political exploration of the prevalence of such conspiracies in recent decades, see Jodi Dean's *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*.

about the motives of the covert collective of people facilitating, encouraging and defining that play (to harbour and employ a critical paranoia). In other words, participants are not sure if they are really being duped by an art group, or just being asked to play the role of participants being duped by a Big Lizard. Not only might those who are participating worry about their agency whilst playing, but they also have the opportunity to *play* at worrying about agency. Of course, as participants step in and out of the project, whether physically, or through the manner of their private thoughts and interactions, they play across the critical and clinical approaches to paranoid investigation.

For me, this productive paranoia offers a welcome departure from the one-dimensional, didactic facilitation of conviviality or antagonism found in much recent participatory and relational work. It is productive primarily because it encourages one to maintain a critical uneasiness in response to work that is insistently either feel-good or feel-bad. Paranoia opens us up to the possible agendas that are obscured through the warmth of everyone getting along or the titillation of an ethical conflict. One way of accounting for the uneasy and deceptive relationship with agency and play in *BLBI* is to view the work in relation to the ‘feel-good positions’ that Claire Bishop sees in the work of artists such as Rirkrit Tirivanija and Liam Gillick (79). These ‘perennial favourites’ of a few curators on the international art scene were, for Bishop, complicit in a ‘cozy situation’ in which ‘art does not feel the need to defend itself, and it collapses into compensatory (and self-congratulatory) entertainment’ (79). Bishop is critiquing Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’ here, which describes a ‘set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space’ (Bourriaud 113). Farquharson’s notion of the ‘post-relational’ implies that Bourriaud’s artists are still too caught up in the art institution, not yet side-stepping the context of the gallery; Bishop’s concern, however, articulated in *Artificial Hells*, is that relational work refuses the ‘secondary audience’ of art gallery attendees (9). For Bishop, participatory art needs the ‘mediating object, concept, image or story’ that links the processes of the project to a ‘meaningful product’ (9). After the participation has ended, Bishop, it seems, demands an aid in our ability to cognitively map its ideas, experiences and possibilities. Of course, this is exactly what Reactor refuse.

One of Bishop’s many concerns about the dominance of process over product is, as demonstrated in her response to the work of Tirivanija and Gillick, that ‘having fun’

is *all* that is occurring ('Antagonism'). When a secondary audience is not catered for, the risk is that people turn up, have a nice time and leave again. A swift glance at the *BLBI* project is more likely to inspire this kind of criticism than encourage ethical concerns about the agency and understanding that participants have whilst playing. This is exemplified in my experience of many potential participants who declined to get involved because they presumed, on seeing the Fun Bus, that the project was 'for kids'. It was often not until individuals began participating, whether through extended conversations with entourage, or full engagement with the activities on offer, that the experience of potential deception emerged. This creates a flipped version of the critique of worried observers that Jonathan Waring put forward in the interview described above (*Reactor 2006-2011*). Here, instead of being concerned for participants, outside viewers, similarly to Bishop, see mundane playfulness. At the same time, those playing worry about their agency in doing so. Paranoia shifts from the unknowing outsider who naively 'gets it' to the insider-participant whose developing proximity to the core of the project only increases its obscurity

This refusal of a secondary audience is essential to the potential socio-political efficacy of *BLBI* and the experience it offers participants. It provides a context in which participants can play whilst simultaneously developing pleasurable 'clinical' and productive 'critical' paranoia in response to that play. It does not require that play ends and then someone else looks at documentation and works out what was *really* going on (a situation that is, of course, near-impossible in postmodern culture where there is no end of play or outside expert). In the following section, I employ psychoanalytic theory in order to argue that *BLBI* offers a space in which a contradictory flickering between facilitator and commander and a clumsy pursuit of unattainable levels of playfulness and enjoyment allows for this simultaneity of play and productive paranoia.

Reactor's Play

As stated above, my definition of the 'play' (referred to more often as 'fun' in the project's texts and scripts) on offer in *BLBI* emerges from select elements of the observations and analyses of child development developed by Donald Winnicott and the dissection of contemporary modes of Lacanian 'enjoyment' developed and supplemented by Slavoj Žižek (Winnicott 51-70; Žižek, *Lacan* 104). The personification of these vying psychoanalytic characters in the overseeing persona of

'Big Lizard' goes some way to explaining why the entourage were consistently non-committal when describing the reptile's gender (Fig. 3). In the following I describe how, on the one hand, 'Big Lizard' is the maternal facilitator essential to Winnicott's play and, on the other, how he or she is the dictatorial paternal figure, pushing us to fully enjoy ourselves and taking pleasure in our inability to do so (Fig. 3).



Fig 3: 'Big Lizard's Parade'. *Big Lizard's Big Idea* (2009), by Reactor. Donau Festival, Austria. Image courtesy of Reactor.

The element of Winnicott's observations and analyses that is important here is the crucial third stage of a child's development in relation to play (51-70). To summarise, after the first stage, in which baby and object are merged, and the second, in which the presence of a mother figure facilitates a repudiation and re-acceptance of the object as separate from the subject, comes the third stage, in which a child is 'alone in the presence of someone' (63-64). It is here that play emerges, reliant on a person who loves; a 'person who loves and who is therefore reliable is available and continues to be available when remembered after a period of being forgotten' (64). It is important to note that this does not need to be the female mother. Winnicott is describing an essential outsider, a maternal figure whose presence allows for us to play in a state of solitude, whether we grow up with a mother in that role or a different adult. I suggest that *Big Lizard's* 'entourage' sell themselves, the character of 'Big Lizard', and the elusive concept of the 'Big Idea' as an enmeshed collection of omnipresent, benevolent (M)Others that facilitates our play within the *BLBI* game. Thus, in *BLBI* the figure of the maternal Other appears not as a single adult agent, but as a mixture of characters,

concepts and structures which encourages productive play. Play relies on the participant's ability to recall and dwell upon the relationship of their actions to the maternal Otherness associated both with the character Big Lizard and with the enveloping nature of the project itself. Alongside this, whilst many of the activities on offer rely on an interaction and engagement with other participants, there is also the potential for the development of an internal, solipsistic investigation of the relationship of individuals' actions and encounters to an elusive character (Big Lizard) and concept (Big Idea). Thus both the character 'Big Lizard' and the elusive but omnipresent concept of the 'Big Idea' provide the Winnicottian notion of being 'alone in the presence of someone' (64).

However, the corporate sheen and ever-present sense of ulterior motives and undeclared desires simultaneously constructs a counterpoint to this benevolent, maternal Otherness. Big Lizard also emerges as a pantomimic version of the tyrannical superego that Žižek suggests bombards us, in contemporary times, 'from all sides with different versions of the injunction "Enjoy!"' (*Lacan* 104). In my reading of *BLBI*, a persistent, demanding figure who makes impenetrable demands exists alongside Winnicott's facilitator of play. It is, of course, not always clear which one of these figures participants are dealing with.

For Žižek, the contemporary liberal capitalist subject *must* be able to fully enjoy 'from direct enjoyment in sexual performance to enjoyment in their professional achievement or in spiritual awakening' (*Lacan* 104). For Freud, guilt was caught up in the violation of moral inhibitions; now we are made to feel bad when we are unable to enjoy (Žižek, *Lacan* 104). My observation of this demand in *BLBI* is essential to my argument. The injunction 'Enjoy', overwhelmingly enwrapped in guilt and duty, has the potential to stop us reflecting on what we are enjoying and the effects of our enjoyment. However, in the following I suggest that *BLBI* has the potential to allow us to experience this demand for enjoyment whilst simultaneously being critically paranoid about what it really wants from us.

In *BLBI* (as in the socio-political context it lampoons), 'Enjoy!' is not a directly spoken demand, and its consistently implicit nature make it difficult to pinpoint an example. The persisting encouragement of enjoyment, fun and untroubled pleasure is built into the structure and aesthetic of the project. In order for us to fully participate in *BLBI*, to get closer to the elusive 'Big Idea', we must give ourselves over to enjoyment.

And whilst we might receive looks of disapproval from fellow gallery- or theatre-goers if we're seen to be having too much fun, in *BLBI* the peer-pressure is geared towards getting carried away with it all. Aaron Juneau, in his review of a more recent Reactor project, *Green Man and Regular Fellows* (2011), captures this when he concludes that 'instead of stiffly sipping red wine and trying hopelessly to talk about Deleuze, I held hands with strangers, gave a grown man a piggyback and danced and howled with wonderful irregularity to the jingling of tambourines. Cheers!' (n.p)

Of course the superegoic injunction to enjoy is cruelly complicated through its emergence at a time when the objects offered for our enjoyment are 'more hampered than ever' (Žižek, *Lacan* 37). Products and experience are domesticated, rendered undamaging and safely virtualised, so that we are deprived of the truly enjoyable properties that might shift the experience from a mundane pleasure to a Lacanian *jouissance* (38). As Žižek demonstrates, we live in a system of 'coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol' (38). Reading the play on offer in *BLBI* through this Žižekian context suggests an awkwardly multi-layered experience. Firstly, the project insists that we overcome our inhibitions, fully and unabashedly participating in silly games with strangers, floppy hugs with Disney-esque mascots and sugar and champagne fuelled partying in fancy dress. However, this push to 'let yourself go' is undermined by the family-friendly aesthetic, as well as the occasional overwhelming collections of infants surrounding Big Lizard and the Fun Bus. These reminders of responsibility, decency, and apparent innocence might hinder an adult participant's ability to fully let go and enjoy playing. Thus, after all this, Reactor's play emerges as a split between the injunction to fully, uncontrollably enjoy and the limited, hampered, 'decaffeinated' fun that is actually on offer.

It is these 'splits' between what's offered and what's experienced that are essential in generating the productive paranoia in Reactor's projects. For example, the Winnicottian aims I observe in the project are unavoidably enmeshed in deception and failure. It is absurd to suggest that an art project and its characters can provide the safe and encouraging context for play that an adult caregiver can for their child. For all the gleeful infantilising elements of the project's aesthetic and tone, it is still an art piece aimed at adults. Of course, the important element of the Winnicottian theory of child-development that I am working with is the essential relationship between the ability to productively and confidently play and the non-intrusive presence of a facilitating, benevolent other. However, my potentially reductive application of this psychoanalytic

theory should foreground an important split that re-occurs in *BLBI* and throughout Reactor's projects. This is the unnerving disparity between an enunciated invitation (to indulge in safe, infantile, productive play) and the position of enunciation (the impossibility of authentically facilitating this experience for adults in an art piece). In his foreword to the second edition of *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Žižek discusses this split between enunciated and enunciating subjects in relation to Joshua Piven's and David Borgenicht's bestselling handbook, *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. The book, which gives tips on surviving such scenarios as alligator or lion attacks, is, Žižek claims, 'totally useless in our social reality' (xcii). Thus, whilst 'the situations it describes are in fact serious, and the solutions are correct – the only problem is: *Why are the authors telling us all this? Who needs advice like this?*' (xcii). Similarly, the peculiar discrepancy between the Winnicottian aims I observe (the benevolent facilitation of productive play) and the realities of setting up a 'fun' bus for adults on a public high-street reflects and leads to a questioning of authorial intentions and motivations: *Why are Reactor providing this? Who needs to play like this?* This split, also evidenced in Reactor's confessions in my interview and the uneasy questioning it encourages, plays an essential role in the nurturing of paranoia in relation to the collective. To summarise, this brief psychoanalytic approach to play in *BLBI* observes a lovingly facilitating, omnipresent, but un-intrusive 'mother-figure' alongside an unnerving 'father-figure' who insistently permits and implicitly prohibits our playing. Again, these two figures related to the structure and concepts of the project itself, as well as being personified in the character 'Big Lizard'.

Conclusion

Eve Sedgwick discusses the problems of celebrating paranoiac pursuits of knowledge, quoting her HIV activist friend on the conspiracies around the epidemics history: 'Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things – what would we know then that we don't already know?' (123) In line with this dismissal, I admit that it might well be over determining the socio-political efficacy of the work to suggest that *BLBI* offers a space for practicing an essential paranoid investigative attitude towards invitations of frivolous play and enjoyment in the socio-political world outside the project. There is, however, a clear satirical edge to the project, which mocks the contemporary subject's

uneasy relationship to the manic injunction ‘Enjoy!’ and the impossibility of fully enjoying the banalised, decaffeinated experiences on offer. Ideally, participants might, after experiencing *BLBI*, develop their own critically paranoid relationship towards the motivations that lie behind the demand for enjoyment. Findings from these critically paranoid investigations might even lead to useful tools for resistance or change, even if that just means finding ways to refuse to participate when we feel unsure about the ethics of what we are participating in

However, I suggest a more productive and realistic outcome might be a confrontation with our own complicity in the perpetuation of this injunction. This relies on an understanding of a third type of paranoia, a constructive paranoia. If ‘clinical paranoia’ is a kind of affliction in which we obsess about the activities of malevolent others and ‘critical paranoia’ is the insistent pursuit of answers around who is really running things and what they are up to, then a ‘constructive paranoia’ enables us to escape the fact that there is no ‘hidden subject who pulls the strings’, by constructing the myth of a ‘consistent, closed order’ (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 18-19). It is this constructive paranoia that arises in respect to the contradictions, fragmentation, contingencies, and splits in the fictional world of *Big Lizard* and the real world of Reactor. Our paranoia constructs the Others for whom we attempt and fail to enjoy. When we ask ‘*Why are Reactor providing this?*’ in response to a contradiction between a position of enunciation and an enunciated position, we rely on a fantasy of a consistent, self-knowing subject as ‘author’. By resisting this fantasy and allowing for inconsistencies, fragmentations and splits to emerge in their existence as the author ‘Reactor’ and in the temporary systems they construct, Reactor remind participants of the role of their own paranoid fantasies in holding things together, in keeping things going and in defining what and who these ‘things’ are.

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