

SCAR: WOW FESTIVAL: SOUTHBANK CENTRE: 2018

Evaluation: Chrissie Tiller

Somehow managed to leave feeling uplifted despite how heart-wrenchingly tragic the stories are. An inspirational exhibition with some of the most remarkable women speaking. So beautiful and courageous in a way.

I'm so pleased SCAR is here raising awareness amongst the public. I have only come across these issues in academia but these stories need to be told, they need to be out there in the public eye.

All the men in the world need to see this + violence + all the women in the world need to see this + speak out about violence.

I loved how you have staged the story "lost" in newspapers

WOMEN. THANK YOU. THE COURAGE & STRENGTH IT MUST HAVE TAKEN TO STAVE A TORCH ON THE PERSONAL ABUSE & ATTACK YOU HAVE SUFFERED IS BEYOND MY COMPREHENSION. YOU ARE INCREDIBLE.

I was struck by the emphasis that these stories of Brazilian women have ~~no~~ been completely ignored despite being a ~~common~~ prevalent issue that affects so many women in similar ways. Strong work.

The stories individuals we heart blessing but as a collective narrative offer a force of redemption.

Everyone will walk away from this and remember it for the rest of their lives.
—X—

A very strong exhibition, anger, depression, compassion. But very emotional and it touched my soul! Congratulation for the big and difficult work you've been through. I hope it'll change something in that world! 

Powerful
Humbling
Sadness
Emotional
Important
Empowering

Tão corajosa e inspiradora ouvir, ver e ler o que essas mulheres tão dignas, fortes e inteligentes tem a dizer sobre as suas vidas e a vida do mundo todo.

dear women,
now you're planted
love, strength, hope
and pride in all
your hearts
we are one, and will
grow together - love and
London 

I loved how you have staged the story "lost" in newspapers

Thank you. This work is so important. My heart breaks for these women at the same time as being inspired by their courage and resilient hope for the future. Safety is a human right, a reality that too few women actually have access to. Victoria

men and women of the world - unite and fight for a world without inequality and violence - inspired by all these women and what they have achieved

Powerful, poignant.
Reminiscent of colonial, military history in S. Asia.
Rabca, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

How do you share two years of research into Violence against Women and Girls¹ that cries out to be heard, and responded to, beyond the boundaries of the academic paper or publication? How do you capture and re-present the vital data collected as part of this research, whilst also honouring the individual lives and stories of the women this data embodies? And how do you find ways to engage audiences at a Women of the World Festival in London with these stories? Or recreate for them a sense of the poverty and daily violence that faces women from Complexo da Maré, a complex of favelas in Rio de Janeiro that is larger than most Brazilian cities?

In asking Brazilian artist, Bia Lessa, to respond creatively to the findings emerging from the Healthy, Secure and Gender Just Cities project, People's Palace Projects hoped to commission a piece of work that would inform and frame the individual testimonies of the twenty women who took part in the in-depth interviews. A piece of work that would also recognise and acknowledge the contributions of the 801 women who responded to the questionnaires, the focus groups and the local support agencies and would stand as a piece of art in its own right.

SCAR

The resulting piece is a complex work that engages with and confronts its audience on a number of different levels. The impermanence and precariousness of the shacks that make up the favelas themselves are mirrored in a box-like construction that appears to be made of nothing but newspaper. The ever-present violence and on-going oppression of the state echoed in the form of toy soldiers who traverse the 'city of nails' outside this 'building'. If we seat ourselves on a pile of newspapers carefully positioned before these nails, we see the word Survival picked out in yellow. Is this there to offer a note of optimism or a stark reminder of the reality of these women's lives where survival is sometimes as much as can be hoped for? Audiences were equally divided.

The stories and testimonies of the twenty women themselves are plastered across the external walls of the temporary structure. Placed on top of the sheets of newspaper they suggest the contradiction of the many 'stories that are not told within them' and the 'invisible narratives', 'unrecorded and unseen' of these women's lives. Pages and pages of testimony cover and line the walls, the English summaries picked out in yellow. As Dr Miriam Krenzinger, one of the lead researchers in Rio, later explains, 'We did not want to cut them but wanted to include them in their entirety.' Even if many of the audience are unable to understand

¹ *Healthy, Secure and Gender Just Cities: Transnational Perspectives on VAWG in Rio de Janeiro and London*, with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, UK.

anything other than the translation they still stop to 'read' them. As one notes 'I don't understand it but just having the Portuguese text makes it authentic.'

The entrance to this structure is covered by a black curtain. Lifting it aside we walk into a small, dark vestibule. On the walls an image of Christ as Sacred Heart, a symbol, equally, of suffering and hope, surrounded by the significant objects the women have chosen: a china cup, a plate, a set of baby's clothes, a handbag. This is our portal into their lives.

In the main space are more newspaper seats, a video of women recounting their stories to an invisible interviewer. Their words translated and projected onto a wall. Images and voices overlap with each other, weave across the screen. Here is anger, forbearance, laughter, suffering, defiance and tears. Here is 'survival'. These are women as individuals and women as everywoman. Recounting stories of the 'unbearable and unfathomable' violence they have suffered at the hands of mothers, fathers, the state itself as well as partners, their faces remain strong and there is a sense of their resistance, their community and their power. 'This sense of resilience that comes from seeing all their stories' someone notes, 'is what made it finally life-affirming'.

The first person I speak to, after emerging from this space for the first time, is a young black woman. 'Sometimes when I saw these women speaking out', she tells me, 'I wondered, "did they make it up?"' then I realised this is what happens. It even happens in their families. They are not believed. And that's why it's so important we hear their voices. Because they are saying, "whatever has happened to me, I am still worth something"'.

Methodology

I am here in this space as audience and evaluator: experiencing and responding to the work personally whilst also trying to capture the responses of other people. It's a way of working I have sometimes defined as 'participant evaluator' or 'embedded evaluator' when I'm with a project longer term. For me it's about evaluation as a formative process. This is the first iteration of this piece of work and there is a willingness and openness to learn from everyone involved.

The question being asked is clear. Can an artist respond to and interpret research and the data collected through academic research in ways that make it more comprehensible, more immediate and reach wider audiences than if it had remained as a printed text? This is not to negate or question the value of the written report to those who need to grasp the assumptions it has made, examine its findings, understand the challenges and act on the policy recommendations. But rather to investigate the role of the artist as interpreter and translator of data and more formal knowledge – intervening in our experience, holding up a

mirror to our world, enabling us to see things differently and creating space for reflection.

I begin by noting things such as gender, ethnicity and age, whether people are alone, in pairs or small groups and recording the amount of time they spent engaging with the installation. I start to ask audience members about themselves, including where they have come from, how they came across the installation within a busy Festival, what kind of immediate impact the piece has had on them and sometimes whether it has prompted them to any action. As numbers increased, I also invited people to contribute their thoughts on post-it notes which were then displayed on a wall opposite the installation.

I was assisted in all of this by members of the People's Palace Projects research team, sometimes by suggesting people I might want to speak to, sometimes by adding their own observations of individual responses and sometimes with cups of coffee and the handing out of post-it notes.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Audiences

On the first day more visitors were women on their own, although there were some younger couples and one or two men by themselves. The women had mostly chosen to come and see the piece, having heard about it through the WOW programme, with a few knowing someone who had been involved in its programming in some way. The two days were different in terms of atmosphere as well as numbers attending. One was a week day, the other the weekend and this made a difference to who came, how they arrived there and how long they spent. On each of the two days I attended, however, there were around 150-200 visitors, of whom I spoke at some length to 25 to 30 each day. There were more women than men, almost equal numbers of people from the EU, Latin America and other countries as from the UK and almost equal numbers of older and younger visitors on both days. Although individual responses inevitably overlapped, I have divided observations into Day One and Day Two.

DAY ONE

It wasn't always easy for people, including me, to find the space. Comments included, 'It's quite hidden away', 'Signposting is poor', 'No-one seemed to be able to show me where it was', 'You wouldn't come across it if you weren't seeking for it'. The relative lack of passing traffic at the beginning of the day also kept audience numbers down. The black curtain at the entrance to the installation, although a recognised part of art gallery vocabulary, also seemed to act as a barrier for some people who 'didn't know if we could go in'.

But once there, on this quieter of the two days, many of the women, in particular, spent twenty minutes or more reading the stories on the external walls and then even more time inside the installation listening to the

spoken testimonies. This is *exceptional* in terms of length of engagement with one piece of work in a gallery.

Responses

There was a strong sense many had found the piece initially 'shocking', 'hard-hitting' or even 'overwhelming'. But these reactions were almost always quickly qualified by terms such as 'powerful', 'moving', 'striking' and 'inspiring' when people spoke about the whole experience.

There was surprise too, from those who knew something about Brazil and the favelas, that they hadn't known about these things beforehand. 'I'm teaching Geography and I'm teaching about the favelas but things like this are not on the syllabus...' Some people, especially young women from Brazil itself, of which there were a number, spoke about sensing their own privilege. 'I'm not an outsider but I didn't live that reality so it's still so hard to hear these stories...We need to ask who is responsible and think how we can have a better society. It's confusing. It's deep. It's brutal.'

Some asked questions about the impact of religious and other societal attitudes in making 'speaking out' and therefore 'escape' more difficult. 'When they spoke about their childhoods I realised it keeps happening – they speak of it chronologically – it gave it a kind of inevitability.' 'The recurrence of the violence from these women being children...it didn't seem as if there was any way of escape.' Others spoke about wondering if there was a cultural and even religious climate that might 'blame the victim' or encourage guilt and shame. A number were also concerned about not knowing what might have happened since these testimonies were collected. 'There's no evidence of what comes next...'. 'I wanted to know if anyone is helping.' 'Is anything being done about the brutality of the place?'. Others wanted to know how they might take action themselves, 'How can we help break this cycle?'

At the same time there was strong agreement these women were 'not only victims'. 'It's not all negative'. Many were struck by the women's 'amazing beauty and courage' 'When you see them talking...they look so strong', 'Their sense of humour comes across.' As many also noted, did the strong desire of 'each of them for different lives for themselves in the future and for their own children'. 'Education' one person suggested, 'has to be the answer.' Two young women in the charity sector wondered how, 'Sex education and birth control?' might help, 'When they have their babies so young. Many of them are mothers by 13?' Others spoke about admiration for the women's own 'growing literacy and desire for the learning and education of others.' And one young woman was delighted to tell me, 'There's a 65-year-old woman. I think she's called Marivalda. She wants to write a book of her life!'

For many the power of the piece, and its ultimate 'hopefulness and optimism', lay in 'the way in which the images and the words worked together' and the way 'the artist immersed us in these stories,' As one person

explained, echoing many others, 'the stories of individuals are heart-breaking but as a collective narrative they offer a source of redemption.'

Framing the Work

The other powerful contribution to the effect of the piece was the different ways in which it was framed. Those who have come to it through the WOW information desk have been given a leaflet summarising the research data and its recommendations – but also inviting audiences to 'add your voice'. For others this framing occurred through being invited to sit on the pile of newspapers and catch a glance of the word Survival. 'If you start by seeing the word SURVIVAL in the nails I think you probably go into the room and read/see the stories in a different way. The framing does matter.'

On both days this 'framing' also took place through the sharing of the testimony of two of the women and the researchers who had worked on the programme. This further contextualisation had a powerful effect on the audience. Many who witnessed the presentations spoke about the change hearing these testimonies had had on their perceptions. 'When I first went to see it, I cried because there seemed to be no support network and no-one to turn to. It seemed so hopeless. And then, seeing Marie-Lisa speak and seeing her with her daughter it felt different. Seeing the younger generation no longer being part of this and realising how the women are supporting each other and empowering each other made it all so different...'

For some people it was also important to be offered the possibility of 'placing the experience of the women' in the wider context of the realities of life in Brazil, and in the Maré, at this moment. A place where, as researcher Dr. Eliana Silva explained, it can feel as if 'democracy is disappearing' and where 'the violence of the military police' and 'the conflicts of the gangs' leave little space for the 'human rights of its citizen communities'.

A number of audience questions were about the depth and breadth of the research but many more focused on understanding how being part of the project may have helped the women. The researchers' explanation of their concern to recognise and honour, 'the potential of women to confront violence' enabled people to see beyond individually harrowing stories. Speaking about the women's valued objects, Dr. Krenziger made it clear most of them were chosen, and are therefore shared, 'as a symbol or story of a moment of empowerment – not the abuse.' Something the two women who have come to bear witness to their own stories support, 'I brought a handbag. It symbolised a division of the waters for me...', 'I brought the first clothes I bought for my daughter when, after a whole period of abuse, I separated from my husband.'

Both women spoke powerfully of having been strengthened through being asked 'to share' their story. One is now running 'an organisation for trans and gay people living in favelas.' The other 'no longer scared anymore,'

has been given 'the courage I needed,' and is putting her own time and energy back into Dr. Silva's Maré Networks project and the wider movement.

The piece also provoked tensions. One young woman from Ecuador was 'angry and disappointed' that Latin American women should be 'portrayed as sad and experiencing violence' without 'highlighting the political situation and explaining who has the power in this context and how economic circumstances affect this'. More than one young woman from Latin America suggested the UK needed to look at its own complicity, through its colonial past, for what had happened in many of these countries.

Some of the individuals I interviewed on this first day had a personal connection with the project which gave additional depth to their answers. Responding to the question some women had posed about the seeming lack of police presence, a senior officer from UK Community Policing was able to explain what he had witnessed of the challenges for Brazil's civil police in a country where the military police are the only ones with real power. It was crucial, he explained, to open up dialogue with the civil police, to support them in '*working with* rather than *for* these women', and to being to 'build up trust' when some sections of the police, mainly inexperienced and poor young men themselves, had a 'shoot first ask questions later' approach to policing these areas.

An academic who had worked for many years in other countries in Latin America, was impressed by 'the strength and resilience of Brazilian women' and could not necessarily imagine such 'openness, even bluntness' from women from other countries in the region. But what she particularly valued was the ways in which the mix of the visual image and the spoken word had brought together the research and the reality of people's lives. She spoke about the role of the artist as 'intermediary,' enabling people to grasp in a very immediate way what might have remained hidden in an academic text. It was at this interface between art, activism and academia that she felt change might begin to occur: arts and culture providing people with the voice they didn't possess anywhere else.

Day Two

Audiences on Day Two were more frequently in couples or groups. This was, after all, the weekend. There was more passing traffic – especially from a series of workshops on consent, more people were being encouraged to come by the front desk and the piece featuring in 'plugs' and on Twitter. There were also a number of people, often young men, who had happened on the piece whilst meeting friends or looking for another event. But who then stayed. One, on the way to meet friends at the Hayward Gallery, who knew 'little about the favelas or life in Rio' felt his friends should come and see it because was an important insight into 'what it is to be a woman.' Increased numbers had impact on the time people engaged with the piece, which was generally less. But there was frequently more debate going on in the space around.

Lessons had been learned from the previous day. The black curtain, which some had found a little intimidating, was tied back and more people entered the space with confidence. The same WOW volunteer had been placed in the video room and now had excellent knowledge of the thinking behind the piece, the stories connected to the valued objects and the use of the city of nails to create the word Survival. She became more like an interpretive facilitator and guide for many people.

Most people still found the piece, 'shocking', 'somboring' and 'harrowing' especially the widespread nature of these women's experiences and such 'similar stories of abuse and fear'. Yet, despite finding it 'uncomfortable viewing,' there was a general agreement that 'it's so important to give these women a voice, support and belief where they have had none before'. Many spoke about how 'moving', 'touching' and ultimately 'empowering' their overall experience had been. One man spoke of the 'forcefulness of bringing the stories together' as being something that made the piece finally 'uplifting': creating a sense these were women who wanted to 'embrace life!' More women spoke openly about finding their own connection with the piece. 'I come from a Portugese village and I saw this when I was growing up. But looking at many of these women I see they are my generation. That is what is so shocking.' One young woman from Brazil found it extraordinary that she had had to come to London to 'hear these stories' and was concerned that everyone, 'not only the converted' might come to see it when went on show in Rio.

Perhaps because people were in groups there was more open engagement with debate and with the politics. One young woman noted, 'I am from the middle class but when I go back my dad's family they have a maid. What do I mean by maid? Well, in many ways there is still slavery in Brazil, maids are black and often treated like slaves. It often seems, when I go back, like everyone who is suffering is black and everyone enjoying themselves is white.' Another that "I'm from Brazil and I'm a feminist and so it makes me realise how important feminism is, but I also wish it had also shown more solutions. We need feminism and we need change.' A young man from Trinidad felt 'Every man needs to see this all over the world. Let's face it. Men are still shit in my culture.' Some questioned the role of 'the disappeared fathers' but others were shocked it was 'not only fathers but mothers' and wondered what 'kinds of suffering and poverty' had brought about such violence within a society? More of the post-it note comments underlined the fact that the piece goes far beyond the situation in Maré, highlighting 'gender-based violence around the world'. 'Abuse' as one people explained, 'comes in every shape, colour, culture, community' and 'needs to end.' A number of writers spoke movingly about being 'a fellow survivor of domestic abuse' while others praised its role in bringing to light 'the plight of so many women across the world'.

Once again, hearing the testimonies of two of the women affected people's final sense of the piece. 'It was important to hear the stories of women fighting back and making a life for themselves'. On the second day

more also chose to stay and speak with the women, and the researchers and were keen to hear from Eliana about the local NGO dealing with these women's plight she has been running for 25 years.

More people on the second day, interestingly, also mentioned 'feeling fortunate' the UK has laws that 'protect women to some extent.' And the privilege of knowing 'there are places we can go to.'

SOME CONCLUSIONS

What Worked

SCAR - the Installation Itself.

- 'Powerful!' was one of the most frequently used words to describe people's experiences of SCAR. Along with people speaking of the 'courage and beauty' of the women who had shared their testimony. 'It speaks' as one of the women themselves noted, 'about the beauty and community that has given us strength. The human spirit that deserves to be seen.'
For many this power lay in:
- 'The bringing together of the words, the images and the testimony.' The strength of the piece, as one young black artist commented, coming from, 'The different layers... from the city of nails, to the stories on the outside of the container, to the women's significant objects to the videos/projections of words. All our senses involved. We were immersed within it.'
- Others described it as capturing, 'The sense of claustrophobia and all-consuming nature of this violence and how these women felt trapped, crowded and isolated in equal measures.' Noting 'The video really made you see the women and *feel* their stories. Highlighting the phrases gave it even more impact.' 'You know it's real, but seeing and hearing it like this, it becomes even realer.'

For some the power lay in the contrasting images contained within the piece.

- 'The poignancy of the objects women had chosen, so quickly followed by such strong and hard hitting testimonies.' And, over and over again, people mentioned the sense it had given them of the 'resilience and bravery of these women – caught in their faces in the videos - despite everything else we are being told'. Or what Dr. Krenzinger spoke of as, 'The expressiveness and sensitivity of the women's voices which often belies the horror of what happened to them.'

The Framing

The different framings of the piece clearly contributed to its impact in different ways.

- Having access to the printed leaflet was clearly important for some. But even those who mentioned it recognised how the impact of the research and data had come from the installation. 'I am so pleased SCAR is raising awareness amongst the public. I have come across these issues in academia, but these stories need to be shared and they need to be out there in a different way in the public eye.' 'It's

great that research can be shared in this way. The women's messages and stories are impressive and powerful. This way it can have real impact rather than just being stuck on a shelf: a report no-one reads.'

- The city of nails with its toy soldiers and its hidden word 'Survival' was a powerful introduction for others. 'It's like the city of favelas, isn't it? Survival is there but you have to look for it.'
- And for many it was the use of art to deal with such a topic. 'Art enables us to frame things. A way of shaping your life through a story or making something. As artist myself, I also want to respond.'
- But most impactful was probably the presence of the two women whose stories had been shared, and the sense the researchers were able to give people of the current situation not only in Maré but in Rio and Brazil itself. Many mentioned the 'bravery of these two women' and their insistence that 'the women of Brazil have to fight'. Learning that they had lost their fear through 'speaking out' and 'found their way in life' by creating community and 'wanting to help others to do the same' was especially affecting for many. 'I hope their courage in sharing their stories helps shape their lives.'

Partnership and Working Together

One of the things that came across clearly, from the researchers in particular, was the importance of the cross-sectoral and trans-disciplinary partnerships within this project. As Dr. Krenzinger underlined:

- 'Having Eliana (Dr. Silva) a past resident of Maré and founder of the Maré Networks NGO as part of our team gave us access to the community we would never have had as academics alone. It created a sense of trust within the community.'
- The triangulation of researchers, NGOs and arts and culture brought another level of meaning to the work. People's Palace Projects' commissioning of an artist to respond to the piece enabled a whole new audience to engage with what might have remained as shocking but 'dry' statistics.
- A number of people spoke about the partnership between research, art and activism as offering 'the possibility to imagine change'.
- The women were felt to be central to this sense of inspiration and optimism. 'The artist brought visibility. The women brought their stories.'

Addressing a global issue

Understanding the particularities of the experience of the women in Complexo da Maré was clearly central to the piece and of great importance to many. 'This was emotive and eye opening – in giving us an insight into the dangerous conditions Brazilian women are still living in.' But a significant number of responses were from people asserting:

- 'This isn't only specific geographically – although it also is.' Or 'It's about the impact of patriarchy. We need to look at our patriarchal societies.'

- Agreeing with Dr Krenzinger, many others also recognised 'There is a third layer where these stories cross. These are the stories of every woman' and acknowledged 'This violence goes beyond the territory.' Many spoke of the impact of SCAR as 'an excellent piece about the plight of women across the world. The items of significance/valued objects made you think more about the many survivors of GBV.' Others highlighted its 'contemporary and vital' nature and its 'intersectionality' and spoke of 'the importance of presenting GBV issues. Especially when it is 'still so common and widespread'.
- Once again, people echoed earlier thoughts that despite it being 'very uncomfortable viewing' as a piece the 'inspirational nature of these women and their stories' gave them hope.

What Could be Looked At.

Having headlined the last section 'what worked' – when there was so much that did - I am reluctant to head this section as 'what didn't'. Instead it feels useful to highlight elements of the experience that might be improved for another venue, looked at more closely and/or developed.

- The placing of the piece within the WOW festival was a positive in that it drew an audience already interested in the issues. But it did also mean the piece got a little lost amongst all the events.
- The placing of the piece within what felt more like a 'gallery' context did mean some people to whom it would also speak powerfully may have been excluded, especially those who, even in a women's festival do not feel comfortable in crossing the threshold of a large cultural institution. The ensuing danger of this is that this it leaves the piece speaking a little to the converted. Although this has been thought about and the placing of the piece and the invitation will be different in Rio.
- Within this there is a need to ensure those who do not already possess an understanding of the vocabulary and 'signs' of 'the gallery' are not dissuaded by things like the black curtain or the need for the piece to be 'curated' in some ways with greater labelling of features like the newspaper seat from which one could view the city of nails and the word Survival. The tying back of the curtain on the second day and the knowledge gained by the volunteer and others made such a difference. People were more able to contextualise the piece and often be more confident in their engagement with it.
- It might be important to find a way to capture the voices of those I interviewed independently, like the Community Police Officer and the Brazilian researchers, whose knowledge and expertise added to one's understanding of and the wider impact of the piece.
- It would also seem important to find ways to respond to a need for action from people. Many spoke of their desire to 'do something' after seeing the piece or to think 'How can we share it?' or 'How can we use it (help people) to begin to think differently about violence against women? Others might have valued guidance on where they might find help and support for their own circumstances.

And finally

The original question of whether ‘an artist could respond to and interpret research and data in ways that make it more comprehensible, more immediate and reach wider audiences’ was met with an overwhelmingly positive response: from academics and general audiences alike. The piece was consistently spoken of as a ‘powerful intervention’ in enabling us to understand these women’s lives and their stories. But also, to grasp and engage with the wider issue of GBV. Everyone who attended expressed a sense of valuing the opportunity to experience the piece and wished ‘more people could see it’. Most also felt it had offered them new insight and that its impact would be long-lasting.

As one young woman explained ‘This amazingly moving exhibition will stay in my memory. Such bravery and such resistance.’ Or, as an older man, sharing about how angry and appalled he had been by the women’s stories, insisted:

‘I am so pleased I caught this. I was waiting for my wife when I came across it. This piece should be shown in major galleries like the Tate. But it should also be seen in public spaces like Trafalgar Square. Everyone needs to see it!’