

Slide 1: SWAPPING THE PLEASURES

Hello

Slide 2: BACKGROUND

I'm David Collins. And I am a visual artist with around two decades of experience creating publically commissioned work.

In the mid 1990s my work became more collaborative and could be characterised as Social Practice.

Slide 3: ART AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

This is an approach which Swedish curator Maria Lind has defined as *“art that involves more people than objects, whose horizon is social and political change”*

My work generally starts from a personal concern or question. I then engage in a collaborative primary research process based around conversations. And conclude with some form of site-specific visual outcome.

Slide 4: SALSA

For the past 12 years I have also been an enthusiastic amateur social partner dancer.

Dancing mainly Afro-Latin styles.

I initially danced Salsa...

Slide 5: KIZOMBA 1

...then in 2010 I started learning and dancing Kizomba, a dance which originated in Angola in the 1980s and is danced to music sung in Portuguese. It is widely danced in Lusophone countries in Africa and here in Portugal. Over the past decade it has become popular across Europe.

Slide 6: KIZOMBA 2

Kizomba has many similarities to Tango: it's based on walking; followers often dance with their eyes closed; leaders control virtually every aspect of the follower's body movement. As with all Afro-Latin dance forms the music and dance steps are fundamentally interlinked. Kizomba is both the music and the dance.

Slide 7: KIZOMBA 3

This is a bar in Leeds where people are dancing Kizomba for pleasure. They are following certain rules of behaviour. Some of these relate to the performance of gender-roles. My project attempted to change some of these rules in ways which allowed people to enjoy themselves in new less-restricted ways.

From the start there were tensions between my practice as an artist and my participation within the world of social partner dance. My work as an artist has frequently addressed issues of gender and sexuality, whilst the Afro-Latin social partner dance culture has been described by dance researcher Britta Schneider as one where *"...it can be asserted that there is a strong tendency...to construct a binary, heteronormative gender identity."*

These tensions provided the genesis for the artwork at the heart of this paper.

Slide 8: MODELS OF GENDER

In studying the representation and performance of gender in social partner-dance it was necessary to engage with the model of gender which is prevalent there. This is a binary model where gender is produced directly by the physical sex of an individual's body and where bodies are limited to male and female.

Slide 9: GENDER AS PERFORMANCE

I personally subscribe to a more fluid notion of gender which draws heavily upon Butler's assertion that *"Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid, regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance."* Seen through this lens, the dance class environment, offers a virtually text book example of gender roles being taught as a form of performance. Indeed, *Pietrobruno makes explicit reference to Butler's theories when stating that "...through their teaching and promotion of gender identity as performance, salsa dancers in Montreal inadvertently show that sexual identities are cultural constructions."*

Slide 10: RESISTING THE GENDERED EMBRACE

Initially, in 2012, I began researching the relationship between dance-roles and gender-roles within the broader context of social partner-dance.

Building upon this, I began looking at initiatives aiming to resist the fixed correlation between dance-roles and gender-roles. The literature around Kizomba and Salsa written in English is limited, but by broadening my focus to include other forms of dance I found numerous initiatives including Same Sex Ballroom and Queer Tango.

These provided extensive examples of female leading and male following and generally had their origins within the gay or LGBTQ communities.

Slide 11: WOMEN LEADING IN MAINSTREAM KIZ

There is also a widespread phenomenon of women learning to lead in dance classes. This is facilitated by the common occurrence of greater numbers of women than men attending, which allows women to opt to lead without disrupting the balance of the class. Men are far less likely to learn to follow, but many experienced male dancers will learn a little, and most male teachers can also follow.

Slide 12: A SIGNIFICANT ABSENCE

So, given there are women who can lead and men who can follow where are the opportunities for social dancing beyond the heteronormative model. ie. for women to lead men.

I found a small number of claims that in a particular dance scene, or city, or club, there is, or was, a lot of role-reversal dancing. On closer inspection, the activity reported largely involved men dancing with men, or women with women. Where claims were made that women were also leading men, it was generally clear this was not truly 'social' dancing. Rather it involved dancers practicing skills, or engaging in a form of showing off, generally in the form of parody. As shown in this example.

Slide 13: COMMENTS ON WOMEN LEADING MEN

There is clear evidence of resistance to the image, of a man being led by a woman. Whether this, or other reasons, explain the near-total absence of heterosexualised role-swapped social dancing, it is clearly a significant absence.

Slide 14: MISSING OUT ON INACCESSIBLE PLEASURES

This comment from an interview with one of the UK's leading male dance teachers sums up the nature of the absence I had identified.

"I guess I never, or rarely, relax into a follower's role... Maybe I need to try it more. Maybe I'm missing out."

From here, my aim became to create an opportunity for this to happen. I wanted to know if dancers would enjoy it.

Slide 15: WHY KIZOMBA

As I moved into a practical phase, I choose to focus on Kizomba for several reasons

1. The dance has a high contrast between leading and following modes ie. followers have very little room for interpretation, with their movements entirely determined by the leader.
2. It was my most regular form of social dance
3. There were no records of previous attempts to role-swap in Kizomba at the time

Slide 16: PLEASURES OF FOLLOWING KIZ

For female followers in Kizomba the pleasures reported are very subjective and inwardly focused.

Particularly this final comment: *"I can completely loose myself to the leader. Nothing else enters my head when following kizomba."*

Slide 17: PLEASURES OF LEADING KIZ

For male leaders there's a concentration on the connection with their partner and the music.

Slide 18: SEXUAL & ROMANTIC EXPRESSION

In addition there is good evidence to suggest one of the key pleasures social dancers take from the activity is "the possibility of sexual frisson in the dance". This was directly addressed in an article on the website Tango Voice, which explored the ways in which gay dancers responded to Queer Tango social dances, which are open to all genders and sexualities. It concluded that dancing with a partner whose sexuality is "incompatible" with one's own has "significant consequences on the possibilities for interaction" and can limit the "consensual expression of sexual feelings during the dance".

Slide 19: INITIAL PROJECT AIMS

My aim became to create an opportunity for dancers who generally chose to dance within the mainstream heteronormative Kizomba scene, to experience the pleasures of the opposite dance-role without giving up the pleasures offered by dancing with their usual opposite-sex partners.

This would be a social practice artwork in the form of an intervention into the social Kizomba scene in Leeds.

Specifically this involved a series of three, weekly classes where women were taught to lead men.

Slide 20: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SOCIAL PRACTICE 1

The resulting project was rooted in theoretical approaches to art and design which advocate the use of creativity for social benefit.

The perennial question asked of this practice is whether the work is, or is not, art. For me, this is addressed most directly by Nato Thompson when he states "I don't want an art that points at a thing, I want an art that *is* the thing." This approach places the social value of the practice at its centre.

Slide 21: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SOCIAL PRACTICE 2

The social practice work presented here, was created in response to the critical concerns of an individual artist. Its form is derived from conventional social dance classes, and its theoretical concerns are aligned with those of social and political activists who challenge conventional ideas about gender and sexuality. It claims its legitimacy from its aim to produce social, rather than aesthetic, value. To use "*art as a means for creating and recreating new relations between people.*"

Slide 22: RECRUITING DANCERS

The first public step was to recruit some social Kizomba dancers. This is the message I initially sent in early 2013, to around 40 women and 20 men. 18 women and 8 men responded wanting to take part.

Slide 23: PARTICIPANTS

In practice the actual participants available on the dates of the course were those shown here.

Slide 24: KIZ ROLE SWAP AIMS

I set two overarching aims for the classes

1. Create a supportive and non-judgemental environment in which to teach women to lead men and men to follow women
2. Create a relaxed and comfortable environment where men can be led by women in a post dance class social setting

Slide 25: DANCE CLASS FORMAT

For the dance class structure I utilised a traditional binary heteronormative definition of gender as used in conventional classes then swapped everything along the axis of gender

Slide 26: EVERYTHING CHANGES BUT NOTHING CHANGES

So that....everything changed but at the same time nothing changed

Slide 27: DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The Data Collection Methods were:

An online questionnaire after the classes finished

And participant Observation during the classes and within the Leeds Kizomba community during and after the period of the classes.

Slide 28: KEY RESULTS 1

1. Female and male social dancers were interested to learn and experience the other dance role

Slide 29: KEY RESULTS 2

2. Given a supportive heterosexualised but not heteronormative environment men were happy to learn the following role without resort to parody or banter

Slide 30: KEY RESULTS 3.1

3. Men had an overwhelmingly positive response to the experience of following

Slide 31: KEY RESULTS 3.2

Here are some responses from Male Followers

They are pretty much summed up by the final comment *"I learned why followers love kizomba"*

It was definitely the case that the men found it relatively easy to access the same pleasures women had associated with the following role

Slide 32: KEY RESULTS 3.3

All the male respondents say they would actively like to continue following after the course. Three report they have been lead by women in social dance situations.

Slide 33: KEY RESULTS 4.1

All the male respondents say they would actively like to continue following after the course. Three report they have been lead by women in social dance situations.

Slide 34: KEY RESULTS 4.2

Here are some responses from female leaders and as you can see they present a more complex picture:

Several enjoyed having the opportunity to control the musicality of the dance and interpret the music in their own way.

But there were also several references to leading being "harder than following" and a "big responsibility" compared to the immersive pleasures of following.

Slide 35: KEY RESULTS 4.3

Most of the women have lead socially since the course. They have danced as leaders with both men and women and give positive feedback on the experience:

Roughly half say they would like to continue leading socially. Only one woman says she now enjoys both roles equally with all the others stating a clear preference for following.

Slide 36: KEY RESULTS 5

5. Women and men found pleasure in dancing in role-swapped couples in social environments

Slide 37: MEN FOLLOWING SOCIALLY

A lot of enthusiasm is apparent about this from the men in particular. There are several unambiguous references to following being "fun" and one man says he "prefers" following.

Slide 38: WOMEN LEADING SOCIALLY

Whereas the women are more uncertain of the new pleasures they have been given access to.

Here the first talks about lacking the confidence to lead for very long, and the second whilst enjoying leading longs to get back to following

Slide 39: ONE YEAR LATER RESPONSES FROM ONLOOKERS

A year after the classes finished, I sent a second questionnaire. One question asked how onlookers had responded to seeing the participants dancing with swapped roles in social situations.

This first rather positive comment is from a man about being observed following

Slide 40: ONE YEAR LATER RESPONSES FROM ONLOOKERS

The second one is from a woman leading. The reference to the observer knowing something "wasn't quite right" emphasises the counter-cultural nature of this performance of social dance with swapped roles.

Slide 41: ONE YEAR LATER RESPONSES FROM ONLOOKERS 2

This final comment from a woman about receiving a "negative glare" when seen leading a man, serves as a reminder that even such a simple act as changing the dance-dynamic between two people when social-dancing, can be perceived as an unwelcome threat to gender norms.

This kind of reaction emphasises the strength of the heteronormative conventions that still apply on the Kizomba dance floor, and the difficulty of finding a space to challenge them.

The Role-Swap course was a tiny intervention which hopefully created a few positive ripples within the Leeds Kizomba dancing community. An attempt to reimagine the possibilities of expression within the mainstream: the same couple dancing to the same music but with a different dynamic.

Slide 42: BEYOND THE ROLE SWAP COURSE – DISCOVERING NEW DANCE POSSIBILITIES

In the year after the course, I continued to experiment with role-swapping with several female partners. We found that once we had dropped the fixed connection between gender and dance roles, the next convention to challenge was that of a consistent leader and

follower. We realised it was surprisingly easy to swap roles back-and-forth during a dance. And that by doing so, a far more dynamic interplay was accessible. We found that the swapping could be intuitive and creative, and this added greatly to the pleasure of dancing together to Kizomba music.

As an example, this slide shows a move where over four beats the lead is swapped from myself on the right to my partner on the left.

Slide 43: FINAL THOUGHTS

Looking back at this project six years later, I am struck by the fact, that it is the only artwork I have created, which involved no visual outcomes whatsoever. My subjective experience of making it was very similar to that of making other works, but I am aware the major difference is that, other than in this kind of context, I never talk about it as an artwork. I explained to the participants at the time, that it was a research project driven by personal curiosity. This was accepted as an entirely coherent rationale, which was never questioned by them, other than to ask more about what my specific aims were.

Slide 44: FINAL THOUGHTS 2

I have long been an advocate of Mavidorakis's, assertion that successful public art should claim its "legitimacy without invoking the notion of art". That it should function on its own terms, within its social context, without the need to draw additional significance from the context of art. This work gave me increased confidence in the value of this idea. And increased confidence in discussing my work as Social Practice, rather than as Social Practice Art.