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Performing the trade show: The case of the Taipei International Cycle Show



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ABSTRACT

The compound noun 'trade show' defines a place where the interconnected activities of trading and showing both take place. Whereas the earlier literature on trade shows mainly focused on trading aspects, recent contributions have begun to explore the ways a "show" is staged and the excitement it may generate. In this paper we take this exploration further by applying several themes that connect performance theory with the economy, including the liminal space constituted by a trade show, the pre-performance of a show, the somatic experience, the performance of brands and brandscapes, the drama of novelty and innovation, and the role of mimesis. These themes are then taken up in the context of the Taipei International Cycle Show which is the world's leading bicycle manufacturers' trade show. Various forms of performance are central to an understanding of this show and an essential part of the trading relation. In many cases trade is not consummated at the show itself but subsequently if the show performance succeeds in creating the possibility of new commercial links between buyers and makers.

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1. Introduction

When William Shakespeare declared that 'all the world is a stage' he was several centuries ahead of contemporary social thought which has come to accept that many of our daily activities are culturally inflected and consciously performed (Goffman, 1959; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Simmel, 1991). The field of performance studies, with a focus on the display of culturally coded patterns of behavior (Carlson, 1989, 2004; Butler, 1988, 1997) has expanded rapidly in the past two decades to encompass a number of the social sciences, including geography (e.g. Clark et al., 2004). In the context of trade shows this implies that the performance that goes on at them, and the identities of the many players connected with the show, need to be set alongside their characterization as places where buyers and sellers deploy economic logic (Busch, 2007). Perhaps, for smaller retail-oriented trade shows and for permanent trade shows selling utilitarian products such as the huge wholesale fair at Yiwu in China, viewing trade shows as a market place is sufficient (e.g. Herbig et al., 1997). But for trade shows aimed at being an exciting nexus of relational events in the formation of global production networks where innovations and the latest fashions are launched, there is a need to parse the "show" aspects of a trade show to gain a fuller sense of what generates the buzz, the excitement, and the local transfer of knowledge among the cluster of

attendees (Bathelt and Glückler, 2003; Bathelt et al., 2004; Jansson and Power, 2010; Storper and Venables, 2004).

The trade show is a place of performance where the various actors, be they buyers, sellers, politicians, cities, brands, countries, spectators or passers-by, all respond to the stimulus of the trade show not just in a commercial sense, but by performing themselves, and by responding to the way that others act. Thus returns on investment in a trade show should not be measured in terms of short-term purchases, but in terms of much broader criteria. In a few cases the show can enter a world of fantasy and become simulacra where, according to Baudrillard (1994), the real world merges with a simulated world, such as San Diego's Comic-Con where many enthusiasts re-create their fantasy world by dressing as their favorite comic character (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003). Although few trade shows engage in such pantomime, the great majority of them present goods and services that are packaged and performed in ways that reflect the currents of contemporary culture.

We approach this topic in five stages. First we examine the plural activities of the show. The next section presents a preliminary theorization of trade show performance. These inter-connected themes include the liminality of trade show spaces, the pre-performance that precedes the show, the somatic experience of the show itself, the branding of artefacts and the brandscapes they create, the demonstration of innovation, and the mimetic character of the booths and stalls and the staff employed in them. These themes all have geographical pertinence at the trade show. We then outline the context of the show we have chosen for illustrative

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purposes, namely the Taipei International Cycle Show (TICS). The fourth section briefly summarizes the methodology we adopted. The final empirical section then explores the six themes proposed in the context of TICS.

2. The plural activities of trade shows

The initial performance of an innovation at a trade show can be a decisive step in the social construction of a technology (Bijker et al., 1987). In a neoliberal world where wealth and income inequalities have been growing substantially over the past 30 years, there has emerged a moneyed class that actively searches for innovative consumer goods confirming their social and economic status; as Veblen (1899) noted long ago, exclusivity and innovation are more important than price to such conspicuous consumers. It would be wrong to assume, therefore, that trade shows are essentially a place for making deals, and that everything else is subsidiary. In fact in this age of globalization, sophisticated electronic communication, breathless reporting of novelty by the media, and real-time tracking of every market perturbation, we endorse the conclusion of Clark et al. (2004) that elements of commerce and finance have themselves become entertainment and that as a result performative aspects have gained greater priority. Of course trade is in most cases the long-term goal, but trading outcomes, as Power and Jansson (2008) note, are frequently an indirect result of all the other activities that surround a trade show. We have observed eight major activities at trade shows.

First, of course, there is trading. Transaction cost theory (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975; Scott, 1988) provides a rational explanation of this: a trade show brings together for a short period a large number of makers and buyers, often in global trading circuits (Power and Jansson, 2008), who engage in intensive negotiations over products, prices, specifications, delivery dates, and quantities, and in knowledge creation and exchange (Maskell et al., 2006). For buyers and sellers, the alternative is to travel from one potential transaction to another to discuss a possible deal. At trade shows transaction costs are kept low by the co-presence of sellers and buyers. The existence of this transaction space is not to argue, however, that the trade fair is predominantly a place of pure economic calculation among strangers (Callon, 1998), but rather a platform for the rituals that culminate in deal signing.

For certain types of trade show the demonstration of technologies may be as important as the products, both for makers and for buyers. At comic book conventions, for example, sophisticated systems for desk-top publishing are presented to self-publishing authors, as are new fabrics and programmable sewing machines at quilting shows. Revealingly, we have seen manufacturers make *in cognito* visits to competitors' booths to investigate their rivals' new technologies. The rapid expansion of the web has facilitated the diffusion of codified knowledge about new developments such that trade show participants are much more likely to know in advance which innovations they need to investigate to gain more tacit knowledge.

Third, trade shows are a magnet for the modern consumer. In an age of conspicuous consumption, being knowledgeable about the latest fashion, design, gadget or whatever is a source of status, hence the ability of some leading trade fairs to attract large numbers of people (Crewe, 2011; Entwistle, 2006). A number of these visitors might be described as *technical flâneurs* (Tester, 1994), others as *designistas* with skills in visual communication: they are anxious to be current with selected aspects of technical modernity and fashions, indeed some are willing to allocate much of their discretionary spending to purchasing goods that place them at the cutting edge of fashion or technology (Rantisi, 2004).

Perhaps surprisingly, trade shows also serve as recruiting grounds. Several years ago, an employer we interviewed at a multi-media trade show in Toronto stated that she attended specifically to listen to as many product presentations as possible with a view to hiring either presenters or people in the audience who demonstrated their superior knowledge of the field. People are sought either for their technical competence, or for their ability to communicate and sell a product. Since many of the entrepreneurs attending trade shows in China and Taiwan are primarily Mandarin-speaking, they often search for good English communicators (the language most widely used at international trade shows) to handle face-to-face negotiation on the trade floor.

Fifth, being places of entertainment, excitement and of buzz (Bathelt, 2008; Bathelt and Schuldt, 2008; Schuldt and Bathelt, 2011), trade shows attract both the media and personalities who crave for the attention of each other. We view buzz as generally positive inter-personal reactions to current events that may be made orally, via social media and via the immediate newscasting media. In the world of commerce, it usually becomes a measure of goodwill towards the event, product, innovation, brand or whatever is being marketed. Thus when a major new technology or product is introduced at a trade fair there is a palpable sense of excitement among attendees. Prominent personalities may be invited to perform products to the media and to the public. The show therefore becomes what Bourdieu (1990) calls a spectacle in which many significations may arise, relating to the products or services offered, the show hall itself, the city or region in which it is located, the new technologies vividly displayed, and the skills of the performers. The spectacle often extends to show-related activities ranging from firework displays to jazz performances. Indeed in some cases publicity agents may plant fake or exaggerated stories to attract media attention (Schweitzer, 2009).

Trade shows (like the theatre) may be as much about place marketing as selling the product itself (McKinnie, 2007a,b). The private sector or the state plays a developmental role in promoting a city as a center of trade related tourism, either by building a trade center, or investing in promoting their city as a trade-show mecca. This is particularly the case in China where a number of cities have flooded the market with trade centers, not all of which have been a commercial success (Jin et al., 2010). Las Vegas, in contrast, having developed a large casino-hotel complex, was easily able to promote the extension of tourism into hosting trade shows and since the 1980s has been the largest convention and trade show center in the United States (Heiko, 2006).

Seventh, for exhibitors trade fairs are frequently about promoting brands, as opposed to firms or industries (Jansson and Power, 2010; Pike, 2009). Their objective is brand recognition, with their name and logo prominently displayed, as it is at the community, cultural and sports events that they sponsor. Celebrities are often employed to market a brand, with brandscapes carefully constructed to re-enforce a corporate image and to emotionally connect consumers with brands (Rinallo et al., 2010).

Finally, firms attending trade fairs seek to build trust among trading partners. With the expansion of global trade, and hypermobility in some of the links connecting trading partners who do not have a long history of trading with one another, trust over such issues as quality, delivery dates, and payment become important (Gao et al., 2012; Lash and Urry, 1987). A firm can build trust by being a regular exhibitor: it indicates continuity in a world of economic instability. For Robert Putnam (2000) and others examining social capital, trust is needed if trading partners spanning the globe and communicating in different languages in different time zones under different political systems, are to work together effectively. The trade show is a societal space used by many exhibitors to establish trust in their trading relationships (Skov, 2006).

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