

## **First time demonstrator at ICF Aberystwyth 2015**

**Report by Jo Taylor**

The night before the festival opened, I had an interesting conversation with Velimir Vudicevic about his experience of demonstrating at an event in Japan. He told me that there it is normal practice for a separate speaker to discuss practice and process while the maker is left to create in silence: no speaking required. In most other parts of the world demonstrators are also required to be performers; to be accomplished public speakers, be entertaining, educational, perhaps academic or controversial, whilst producing an impressive piece of work. It was just as well I hadn't considered this in depth when I accepted the invitation to demonstrate at ICF 2015. I jumped in with both feet, as did they – I was a risk, how did they know I could do a good job? I'm a relative newcomer and had no experience of speaking on this scale; there was an assumed trust on both sides that I could deliver. I was surprised, thrilled and nervous upon receiving the invitation - feelings which stayed with me until the event. Surprised to be asked, without the reputation of the well known makers; thrilled, because it is a prestigious, well attended event, and nervous, because it is an exposing, public experience in front of a large audience.

In preparation I thought about how nerves affect my performance – as a bass player with many gigs under my belt I'm used to being on stage, but like the demonstrators in Japan, I never speak to the audience (or sing - I'm awful). My biggest concern was the opening ceremony. I was intimidated by the reputations of the other demonstrators and the size of the audience. Mind blanks can happen mid performance so in music I deal with this by writing down key changes and tape it to the back of my amp for a subtle glance if I get into trouble. That piece of paper is an enormous comfort.

The advice I'd had from most people was 'be yourself' and with this in mind I thought about my favourite lecture, from Simon Carroll, some years ago at Bath Spa University. He was a unique maker and speaker – informative, genuine, honest, funny, engaging: off the cuff and from the heart. To combine this intention with the potential for nerves I made the decision to read my introduction from a comforting piece of paper, which is less natural, but I scripted in my own voice and included some humour in the narrative. I didn't know anyone else when I arrived in Aberystwyth, and as I met the other demonstrators it was reassuring to find that

people I had admired for years were also very anxious. When the opening ceremony came and it was my turn in the spotlight I explained I was nervous and intended to read – the audience was accepting and the demonstrators supportive with acknowledging nods. When it was over I was relieved but pleased that I had got my points across coherently. It was an education to watch the range of ways in which the other demonstrators introduced themselves and addressed the audience.

My first joint demonstration in the main hall was with Gareth Mason. It was good to have a couple of hours in my workspace first, to connect with the making process and the audience as people drifted through. When the time came I was grateful to Gareth for taking the lead during the demonstration – his energy and confidence in addressing the audience with his thoughts allowed me to find my feet. He included me in the conversation as we touched on ‘more is more’, the decision-making process, knowing when a work is finished and when it has gone too far. Ingrid Murphy is a seasoned MC and a reassuring presence, asking timely questions and prompting audience participation, as such the 45 minutes flew by. Facing the second demonstration with Velimir on Sunday morning I felt I knew the drill, and barely noticed the camera looming at about 2 feet away.

My background as an evening class attendee, hobby potter, BA student, tableware maker, MA student and educator meant that many people in the audience could connect with some stage of my journey and it was a delight to meet and converse with them in my workspace. Having made public my professional background, I was surprised and delighted to meet another former police officer and several prison educators. There was much debate about the poor status of ceramics in mainstream education so it was heartening to meet so many people teaching ceramics outside of the school/college/university system, through community projects, independent and self funding teaching spaces. Having attended part of the PhD symposium it became clear that these independents are also a place for educators without MAs and PhDs, which are fast becoming a staple requirement of the university lecturer on the limited remaining ceramics courses.

There was a generous exchange of knowledge throughout; the atmosphere incredibly positive, the collective passion for clay was tangible. I enjoyed conversations with the other demonstrators and felt accepted, supported, as well as talking about galleries, techniques,

mutual friends, recommendations and the international ceramics scene. Upon reflection it is very unusual to find so many people working together being supportive and generous with such a lack of ego. Perhaps this is because there are so many possibilities in working with clay that there is room for everyone – we formed a diverse group with very little overlap.

Trust exists between all concerned – I was pleased we collectively managed to deliver, but risks were taken and the possibility of failure existed. Not only in terms of the obvious health and safety risks of the spectacularly pyromaniac nature of the firings but on a more personal level as I observed from demonstrator John Higgins. He had been incredibly generous and welcoming towards me, and being situated next to him I saw the notes, planning and nerves involved in preparing for his demonstrations. About an hour before his first demo a chance conversation sparked an idea and he ran with it, taking a huge risk introducing something he had never tried before in front of a considerable audience. I was full of admiration for this decision and although I didn't witness the act, I am sure it enhanced the audience experience as much as it moved his practice forwards when he pulled it off with aplomb.

My final task of the event was a 45 minutes long lecture on Sunday afternoon – I had decided to freestyle this talk feeling that if I read for this length of time it would be very difficult to 'be myself'. I'd had the opportunity to try the talk out in Belgium on a recent teaching trip and it had run to time so it was good to have had a 'Glastonbury warm up'. Thinking about Simon Carroll once more I decided I would aim for informal yet informative and occasionally humorous. I had notes that I completely ignored, but the piece of paper in front of me was comforting. Following a warm introduction from Jo Dahn I raced through my slides with great enthusiasm until I was stopped in my tracks by loud snoring which had reached a volume where it could no longer be ignored. This raised some giggles from the audience as someone gently woke the gentleman concerned. I couldn't resist a few one liners about thinking my Dad was in attendance (legendary for nodding off) before continuing with the talk and finishing in plenty of time for the numerous questions from the audience, for which I was grateful. The audience was relatively small and it is quite an intimate space so I was much more comfortable on this stage and rather enjoyed myself once I got going.

The downside of demonstrating is that you miss most of the events; I saw very little but was impressed by Brigitte Jurack's talk about her research and practice, and enjoyed the party

atmosphere at the performative firing events led by Rita Gardino & Sergi Pahissa. I look forward to seeing some of the filmed demonstrations when the links are available. As a first timer the experience was invaluable, I felt I learnt potentially more than the attendees, I was given the opportunity to reach a large audience and build my confidence in performing my art, and connect with others working at a high level within my chosen field.

Since my return I have reflected on the weekend's events and can pass on this advice for anyone approaching this kind of experience for the first time. I said yes to the invitation without hesitation as these opportunities don't happen every day, but think carefully if you are not happy in the spotlight, as it should be more enjoyable than stressful. Thorough planning and preparation is essential – know how you act under pressure and plan for it with appropriate back up techniques. Look after yourself as it's tiring and you need your energy - eat properly, have breaks, drink plenty of water, sleep as well as possible. Other demonstrators were surprised that I no longer drink alcohol (migraines), but it explained the fresh face in the morning where others felt a bit bleary. The experienced might happily work through a slight hangover but a first timer needs all the help they can get.

If you can practice your routine in front of an audience prior to the event it is a great way to iron out any issues and perfect your demonstration. I volunteered for several demos in the months prior to ICF, which really helped, and also got me used to answering questions about my work. I also planned my 'public face'. Using my bass playing experience I knew that if I wore the right outfit for the gig I would play that bit better in the same way that wearing a uniform gave me the authority to be a convincing police officer. 'Be yourself' was sound advice as we are all different and that diversity of delivery enhances the audience experience. I was also advised to 'keep it simple' and kept to my regular routine, which was comfortingly familiar when on stage – I left the big risk taking to the more seasoned demonstrators.

It was surprisingly emotional leaving the people and the site behind. I'm glad I took the risk and I was pleased to achieve speech and performance simultaneously. I was overwhelmed by the generosity and warmth from the attendees, staff and other demonstrators; this support affirmed my decisions to pursue ceramics further over the years and this latest decision to make public my methods and background. Further affirmation was not needed, but came

when a piece of my work was purchased for the Aberystwyth University Ceramics Collection, the icing on the cake of an unforgettable experience.

[www.jotaylorceramics.com](http://www.jotaylorceramics.com)



Jo Taylor  
Apricity ii  
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