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Doing Gender in Events: Feminist Perspectives in Critical Event Studies

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In the opening chapter of her book, Grabher beautifully weaves event and gender theory to demonstrate how gender must be taken seriously by event scholars. She immediately sets out her stall and critiques definitions of planned events to work towards a more nuanced definition, one that allows space for a gendered analysis. This book is not merely an analysis of the social and cultural impact of events in relation to gender. What Grabher seeks to do is to challenge received wisdom on what events are by placing gender at the heart of the analysis. As a result, what we see in this book is the discipline of critical event studies moving forward.

The work takes Hull's year as UK City of Culture as its central case study, exploring key equality themed events that were part of the official programming – Women of the World Festival, SKIN: Freud, Munck and Tunick, Assemble Fest, LGBT50, Freedom Festival, and Hull: A Portrait of a City. She provides a succinct overview of the UK City of Cultural examining the regenerative potential that such events have but also reminds us of the cultural dimensions of these types of events and how the culture of a place is negotiated through artistic programming. She highlights that more recently there has been an emphasis on the socio-cultural transformation potential of these events beyond merely the economic return. It is here that Grabher aligns her analysis. The work poses the question: *How are transformative ambitions engrained in the City/Capital of Culture event framework?*

The chapters proceed with a detailed overview of her unique methodological approaches. Taking a feminist ethnographic approach she triangulates artist, institutions, and audiences to develop a rich and in-depth analysis. Taking the 6 key events from the Hull 2017 programme she interviewed 'cultural actors' involved in their production alongside 'political actors' from Hull2017 Ltd, the institution responsible for the yearlong event. Most innovatively, she recruited resident 'observing-participants' who attended the events for the research. These participants documented and took part in reflection discussions with Grabher post-event.

In her first analytical chapter, Grabher explores how encounters of equality are experienced by audiences. In this chapter, drawing on her observing participants experiences she assesses how the audiences were able to interact with equality before, during and post event. She uses the idea of 'conversation' here to examine the collective experience but also internal conversations that audience members had with themselves in terms of reflecting on what the events made them think in relation to issues of equality. I found her examination of the role of applause here compelling. A small act that connected personal experiences to wider collective celebration. However, there is an interesting critique included around how these events can often become echo chambers challenging the impact that they can have on wider

issues of inclusion. Further, whilst the intention of these events by the cultural actors involved aspire to transformation there is an identification that the temporality of an event is limiting what can be achieved if there are no mechanism to continue the conversations.

The next chapter shifts the focus towards the performed events themselves and how equality is manifest in them. She examines two (co-existing) narratives around entertainment, which is after all what events provide, and comfort, where audiences were not pushed out of their comfort-zones and challenged in their thinking. It is observed that the 'safe' handling of equality issues can lead to a dilution of the messaging. She then moves on to explore the representational strategies employed and the risks of tokenism. However, there is a strong sense of responsibility identified by the cultural actors for producing work that reflects the world and diverse experiences within it.

The final analytical chapter addresses structural conditions within which the work takes place. She examines the festivalisation of equality, the commercialisation of celebration and the material conditions of the events themselves. It is in this chapter we see an important contribution to critical event studies in the phenomenological examination of event infrastructure. The idea of a normalising effect of equality through festivalisation is important here in that it brings these conversations into the mainstream yet there is a balance to be maintained to ensure that it is not done so uncritically. Indeed, this is picked up in terms of equality events being isolated to particular timeframes rather than being allowed to explore synergies across equality issues. There are also logistical considerations which hamper inclusion such as ticket prices and access to tickets. Further, the spatial arrangements of the events are considered here – where events take place and what this affords. How some spatial arrangements are counter to the events aims, such as VIP areas, were identified by participants as problematic. However, Grabher ends this chapter with an important point that warrants further investigation – the politics *and* the party need to be negotiated through event infrastructure to enable improved equality outcomes and experiences.

Grabher concludes the book with a call for a nuanced approach to exploring gender and events. She illustrates that events are situated practices and whilst she focused on equality themed events specifically, she acknowledges that this gender-sensitive approach needs to be taken across other event types. She also highlights that the lack of events during the pandemic further highlights their socio-cultural significance and their absence illustrated how events play an important political tool, not just entertainment. Her conclusion is also a call to arms to critical event scholars to think about the future research agenda. Events can provide an excellent lens through which to move gender scholarship forward as well as gender studies being an essential theoretical underpinning which events scholars should be engaging with (and teaching our students).

Grabher's work is meticulous and beautifully written. It will appeal to readers from undergraduate level and beyond. The accessibility of the text stands out but in a way that does not diminish the complexities of the arguments presented. I urge event lecturers to add this to your reading lists and I also recommend this book to scholars outside of event studies to understand the importance of events both socially and politically.