Blast Theory's Rider Spoke

Isobel Joki
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Sometimes when you go to a show or an arts event you're not sure what to expect. Rider Spoke was that times a hundred. I knew this event would involve cycling around Leeds and answering questions, but that was really about the extent of it. I wasn’t prepared for the depth of the experience, or for the way it would encourage me to look at my city in a different way.

After a short briefing from Blast Theory at East Street Arts, I was handed a little hand held computer with earphones, a bike and a helmet and sent on my way. I started the programme going and listened as a soothing soundtrack played and a voice told me calmly to relax into the experience.

Within minutes I was cycling down little back streets I’d never been down before, the sun low in the sky and the roads quiet enough for me to take my time, look around, and enjoy my surroundings. It was eye-opening, the slight difference in perspective that a cycle and the sunshine and no particular route in mind made.

After a few minutes the computer asked me to cycle to a quiet place and describe myself. I rode until I found a spot where no one else had recorded a message, and nervously spoke into the microphone. Afterwards, I chose to listen to answers recorded by other people. It was marvellously intimate despite its anonymity.

A man told me he had a secret. He told me that the secret wasn’t his, it was someone else’s that had affected him, that he could feel it right up inside himself, and suddenly I could too; a hard, uncomfortable knot under my ribcage.

A woman described being run over aged fifteen, an abrupt end to her dance career but a diversion toward theatre studies. A young girl promised me that she would be brave, she would think of others, she would call her grandmother.

As I rode around I got more absorbed in the experience. I would look up after a confessional entry to find people walking past, although this didn’t bother me: after all, I was doing art. I realised my face was reacting to the stories I was listening to, but it didn’t matter what passers-by thought. This is so unlike me, it’s startling.

I hadn’t ridden a bike for possibly a decade, and I felt nervous about taking to the roads at first. But that part wasn’t difficult. It was the questions that held the challenge: make a promise, tell me about your relationship with your father, tell me what makes everything alright for you.

The anonymity helped; I didn’t feel constrained to answer a question in a particular way, or judge for my answers. I chose to immerse myself in the experience, answering the questions as honestly as possible, which was difficult and eye-opening at times.
As my hour finished, and I began to make my way back to the East Street Arts studio, I realised it was time to press the reset button on my relationship with Leeds. I go to the same places, I walk the same routes, I catch the same buses, I drive down the same roads all the time. It's time to rethink things.

Blast Theory’s Rider Spoke took place at East Street Arts on 6 and 7 July 2013.

The event is part of East Street Arts’ Julliana’s Bike programme.