Towards authentic digital scenography:
A mixed methods study of Australian performance design and audience perception

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Why *authenticity?*

The search for authenticity is one of the main drivers for building relationships and retaining audiences in cultural organizations.

Rentschler and Radbourne (2008, 241)

The greater the perception of authenticity, the greater the audience enjoyment.

Radbourne, Johanson, Glow and White (2009, 27, 20)

Authenticity is now sought after within the performing arts.

Schulze (2017,1)

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Defining Authenticity – Three Constructs

In Rixon, Moyle, Hutchison & McKinney, 2021

TRUTHFULNESS

"The truthful application of vision technology *in relation/subject to the context* of the directorial, dramaturgical and scenographic intent of the work. Is it an afterthought, or is it essential to the core of the work?"

Radbourne et al. (2009, 20) Au et al. (2016, 29) Van Leeuwen (2001, 393) Newell et al. (2011, 224)

BELIEVABILITY

"The capacity of the vision technology to achieve believability, meaning and representation, relative to the work. Does it feel natural and genuine, or does it feel fake or forced?"

Radbourne et al. (2010b, 365) Vannini and Burgess (2009, 104) Vincent et al. (2016), Auslander (1997), Aykol et al. (2017), Henderson and Gabora (2013, 2524)

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

"The ability of the vision technology to evoke an emotional response within the audience. Does integrating vision technology increase the audience's emotional engagement?"

Radbourne et al. (2009, 20) Au et al. (2016, 29, 41) Turner and Schutte (1981); Henderson and Gabora (2013) Aykol et al. (2017)

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Grappling with the 'posts'

Authenticity in a post–*modern/structuralist/truth/digital* context?
(Kinghorn 2020; Scheer & O'Gorman 2021; Causey 2016; Cramer 2015; Jarvis and Savage 2021)
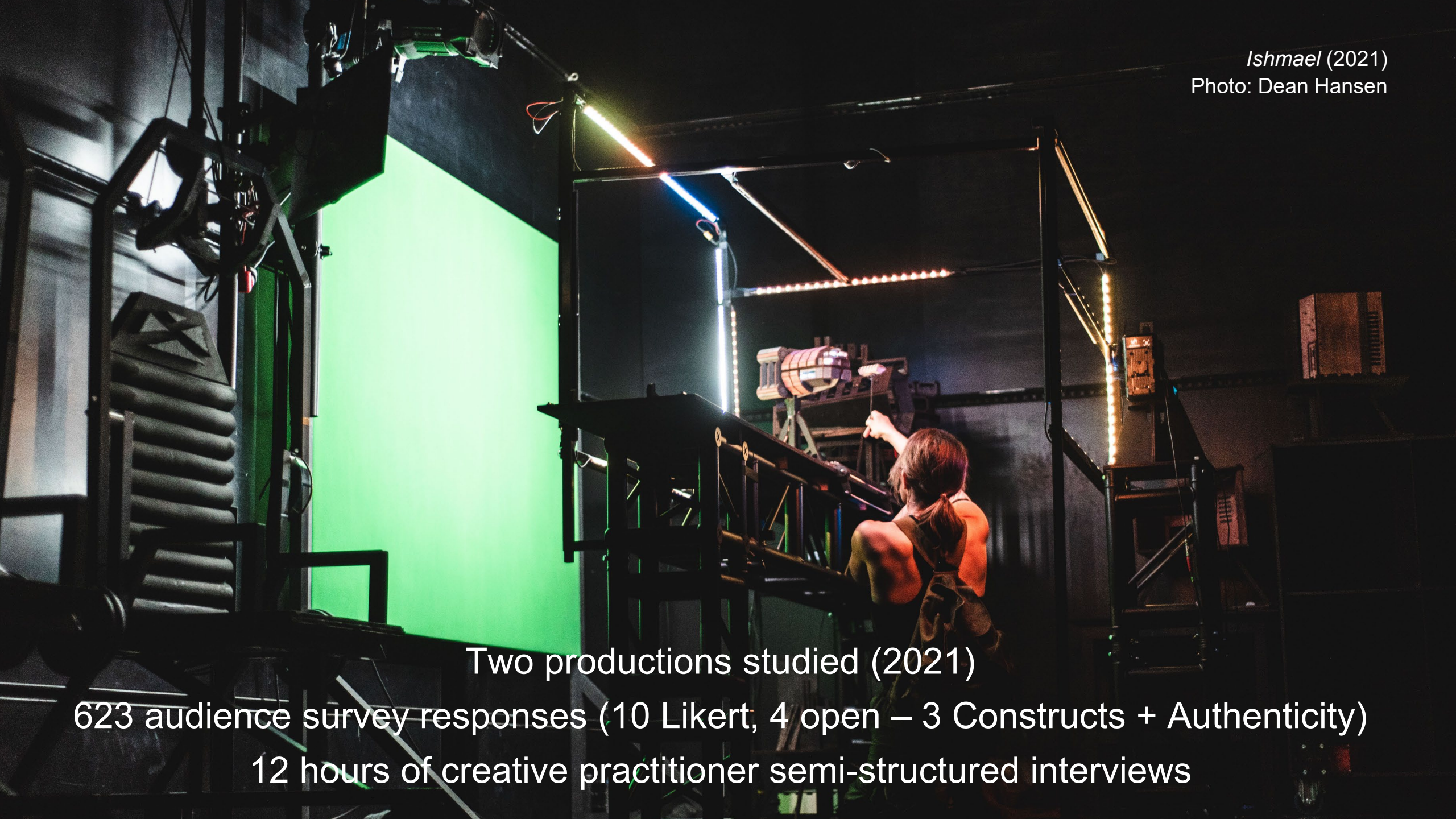
Metamodernism

Metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.
Vermeulen & van den Akker (2017 5-6)

Metamodernism allows for authentic experience that is not parody or nostalgia but is genuinely real while everyone knows that it is fake.
Schulze (2017)

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Two productions studied (2021)

623 audience survey responses (10 Likert, 4 open – 3 Constructs + Authenticity)

12 hours of creative practitioner semi-structured interviews

Research Design

Convergent parallel mixed methods design
(Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011)

Two 'cases'/productions

Boy Swallows Universe (Queensland Theatre 2021)
Ishmael
(Dead Puppet Society 2021)

Stage One + Stage Two
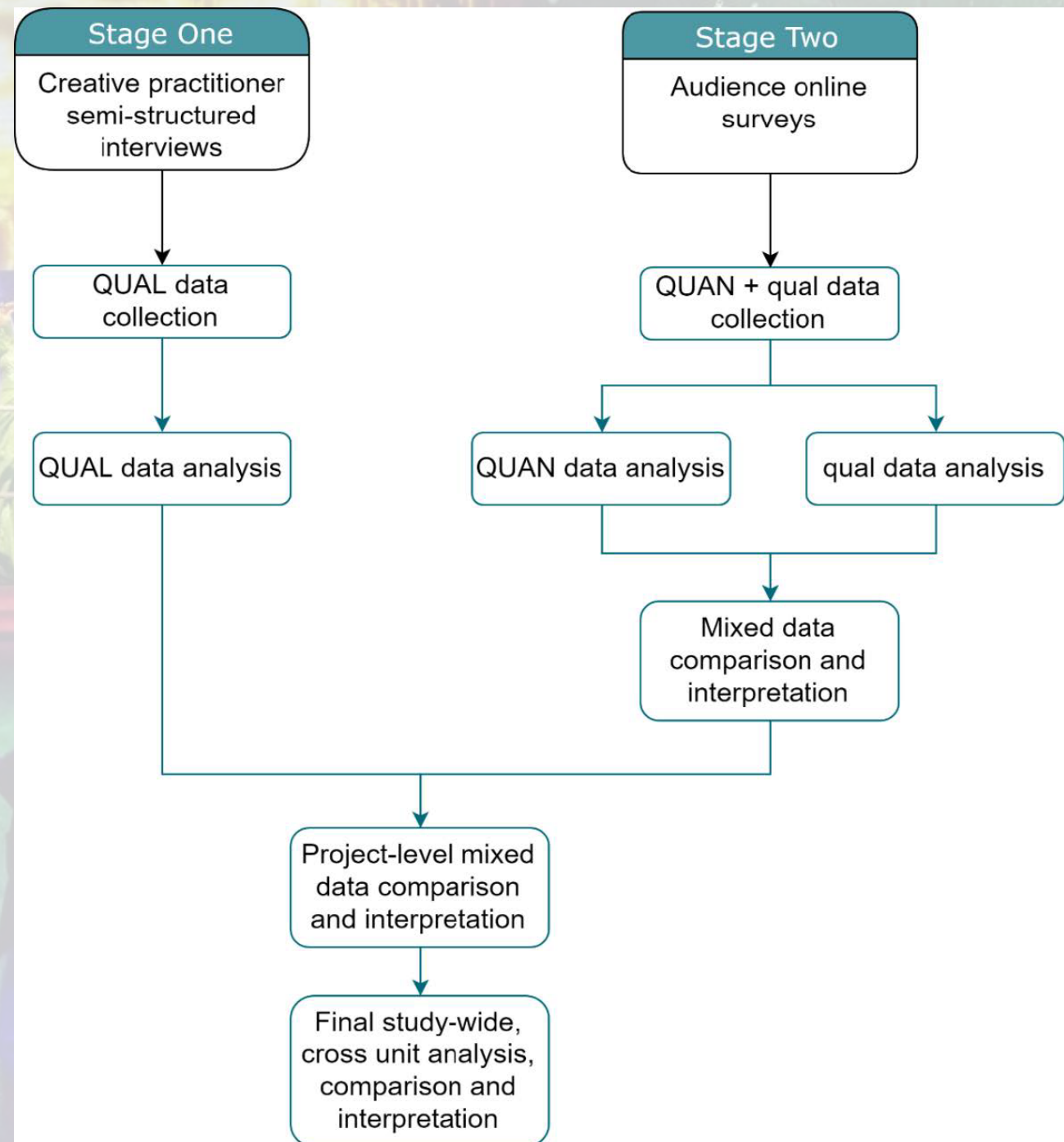
Ishmael (2021)
Photo: Dean Hansen

Boy Swallows Universe (2021)
Photo: David Kelly

From *defining* to *understanding* authenticity in a Metamodern context

Audience & Practitioner data

TRUTHFULNESS → *True to a creative choice*
"Real"-ness
"Alive"-ness

BELIEVABILITY → *Genuine/Honest*
Representation
Recognition

EMOTIONAL
ENGAGEMENT → *Believable relationships*
Emotional engagement
"Being in the World"
Resonance

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Understanding authenticity in a Metamodern context

Beautiful Contradictions from the audience

It felt "real"
BSU Participant 132

"Real" and honest. True to the feelings & intention of the work.
BSU Participant 107

Authenticity meaning 'true' to the spirit of a particular identity / place / time. Representation of an experience that feels 'lived'
BSU Participant 268

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Understanding authenticity in a Metamodern context

Mixing the data – The nexus of emotional engagement + Authenticity (audiences)

Crosstabulation of ENGAG1 & AUTH1 (Boy Swallows Universe)		Considering the previous descriptions of authenticity, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: "I felt that Boy Swallows Universe was an authentic performance" (AUTH1)					
		Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: "The way projection was used in Boy Swallows Universe made me feel connected to the performance" (ENGAG1)	Strongly agree	**194**	31	7	2	0	234
	Somewhat agree	20	13	3	0	2	38
	Neither agree nor disagree	2	2	2	0	0	6
	Somewhat disagree	0	0	1	0	0	1
	Strongly disagree	2	1	0	0	0	3
Total		218	47	13	2	2	282

Crosstabulation of responses to ENGAG1 and AUTH1

"Projection will never feel as authentic to me than a real life set. It has no soul when contrasted to living bodies and actual objects on stage."

"An authentic performance would have been less disjointed emotionally. I was disappointed that so much of Eli's journey was lost in the adaptation."

"I felt that the realistic cinematic nature of the projection design deadened the audience's sensibility. We did not have to question or imagine but just accept"

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Understanding authenticity in a Metamodern context

Mixing the data (in progress)

Statistical testing (binary logistic regression) to understand how factors like age, theatre attendance, and familiarity with the original book impact perception of authenticity

AGE

- Under 18
- 18 - 24
- 25 - 34
- 35 - 44
- 45 - 54
- 55 - 64
- 65 - 74
- 75 - 84
- 85 or older

ATTENDANCE

- Once a week
- Once a month
- Once every few months
- Once a year

BOOK

- Yes
- No
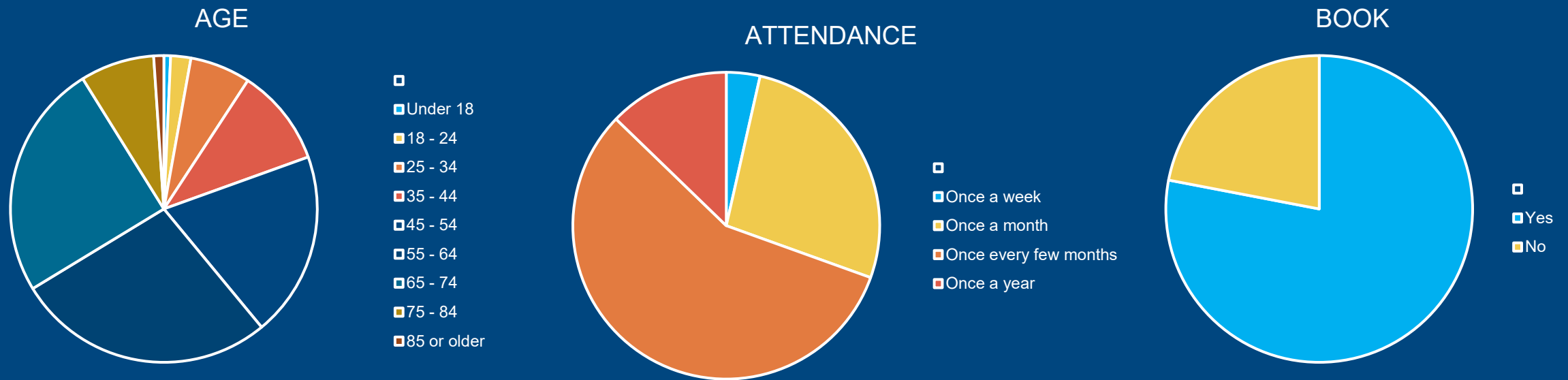
Pie charts displaying percentages for demographics data age, theatre attendance, and familiarity with the book *Boy Swallows Universe*

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Understanding authenticity in a Metamodern context

Mixing the data – Authenticity + integration (audience & creatives)

"Can't identify one moment, <u>projection integrated completely</u> with the performance" (69, QENGAG2)

"I had not thought about this before but the <u>projection was integral to the set so there was no particular moment</u>" (111, QENGAG2)

		Considering the previous descriptions of authenticity, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: "I felt that Boy Swallows Universe was an authentic performance" (AUTH1)					
		Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Did the use of projection in Boy Swallows Universe effect your enjoyment of the performance? Choose from the following: (ENGAG2)	"I enjoyed the performance more because of the way projection was used"	**194**	34	9	1	2	240
	"I enjoyed the performance a little more because of the way projection was used"	20	11	3	1	0	35
	"I enjoyed the performance about the same amount as I would have without the projection"	3	2	0	0	0	5
	"I enjoyed the performance slightly less because of the way projection was used"	1	0	1	0	0	2
Total		218	47	13	2	2	282

Crosstabulation of responses to ENGAG2 and AUTH1

"With this particular work, <u>we knew that we had to create something that was interwoven. It was the sum of all of its parts.</u> That if you were to take an element out, that the other design elements wouldn't necessarily have the strength to tell that moment or the impact to tell that particular moment" (Craig Wilkinson)

Timing + Process + Collaboration + Restraint + Balance + Integration

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Understanding authenticity in a Metamodern context

A (provisional) Authenticity Framework

Shared language

Believable relationships between technology/space/text/body

Develop a conceptual framework

Trust/Respect/Open to feedback

Representation

Understand your colleagues & their craft

Reactive, Flexible, Agile

"Real"ness

"Authentic" Digital Scenography

Grounded

Genuine

Honest

Justified/Knowing your "Why?"

The perception of a "truthfulness" – to text, to self, to life

Flexible role boundaries

"Being on the same page"

Proximity/Perception of presence

Emotional resonance

Emotional engagement

Markers
Keys

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For more see:

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