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Naïve comedy in a dangerous virtual world: Expanding theatrical presence with online devices.

Abstract

This paper discusses the process and resulting performance piece *So Pleased To Meet You*, which was created for the DRHA 2014 conference by myself and Pattern Fight Performance, with me as guest director. This practice-based research considers the impact of modern communication tools such as Chatroulette and Facebook as social and cultural licensees and asks how these devices open up possibilities for performance making. The piece is arguably attempting to combine what Matthew Causey calls the theatre 'born of illusion' and theatre 'issuing from the virtual' (2006: 97). When a (fictitious) bored customer services worker convinces (real) total strangers that she is a bioscientist undertaking cutting edge research, how does the presence of these socially networked 'performers' expand theatrical space? The dual performativity of the live character complicates and interrogates the use of pre-recorded projections as the audience suspend their disbelief and yet do not: they follow the doom laden narrative arc yet remain in on the joke(s). Jacques Lecoq's notion of the revelation of internal innocence will be drawn on to consider the mechanisms at play as the performer heads for disaster within a virtual spatial realm of her own making.

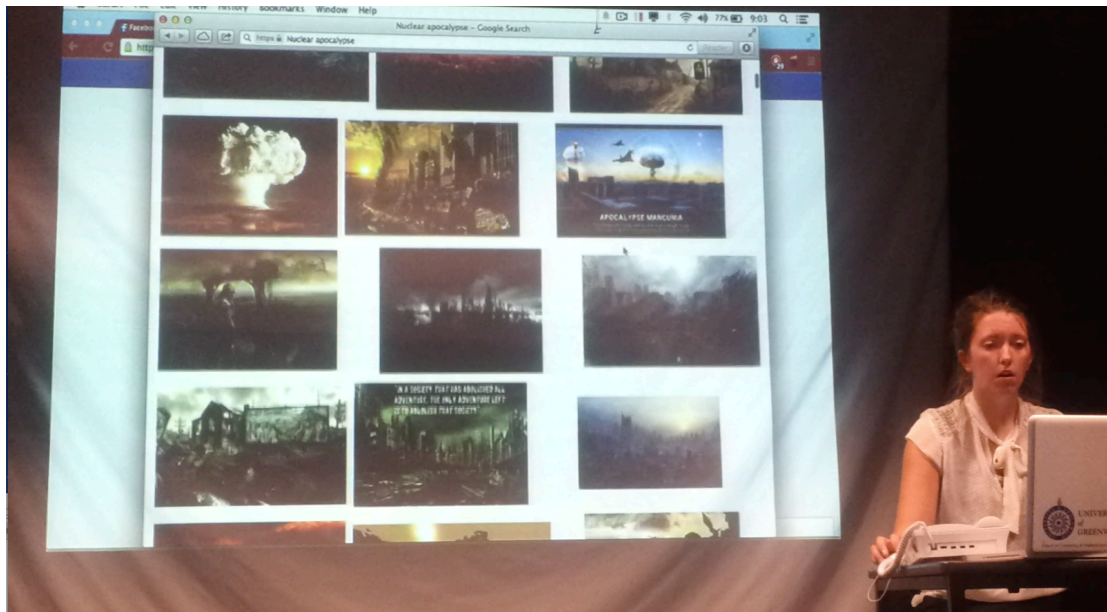


Figure 1: *So Pleased To Meet You*, 2014. Photo: Jillian Wallis.

Aims and intentions: Seeking strategies for online relief

If social media encourages a leap of faith in one's own abilities and knowledge, providing a confidence boost (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011) does it also invite a more resounding shift in self-perception and belief in how we might engage with the external world? Faced with a persistent pressure of instructions to

update our situation, add a new skill, tweet our comments, publicise our travels and effectively make our online presence felt, can we slip easily in and out of a more satisfying, apparently interesting and responsive persona? The internet's 'advocates and critics alike have long claimed "virtuality" as a space of identity play, construction, and tourism' (Tiidenberg et al., 2013). Does it follow that the anonymity of certain interconnective relationships can be used to licentiate an individual's imagined identity beyond that of a SIM or alter ego, one that holds a participating, physical presence?

As a theatre director who usually works with ensemble performance, I was intrigued to work on this problem in collaboration with Pattern Fight, a live art company whose solo performer interacts with digital animation, soundscape and projections on stage. As discussed by Chris Salter (2010), cross disciplinary approaches to performance making have historically sought to manipulate the audience's aesthetic experience in new ways, from the mesmerizing Wagnerian multisensory *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to Lissitzky's Constructivist view of 'the stage as an ideally controlled aesthetic milieu in which to rehearse the birth of a New Man within an artificially constructed technological environment' (2010: 20). Arguably less totalizing examples are available, such as the early experiments in projection, video and live performance of The Kitchen Videotape Theatre in New York in the 1970s when the Vasulkas mixed 'live video' and pre-recorded images, or Squat Theatre who also attempted to 'fragment the fragile line between fiction and [media] reality' with their conceptual double-takes (Salter 2010: 132).

Pattern Fight's work follows this flight path into the realm of contemporary digital theatre, with a feature that is relevant to an investigation concerning presentation of the self. The lone performer, Sarah Ruff, has a particular relationship with the audience that verges on stand up comedy, but in a surreal and often dark critique of the social landscape in which she finds herself; for example, when asking what does it mean to be a modern day spouse (*Bad Wife*, Pattern Fight, 2013). The other company member is Ed Currie, who designs the audio visual and animated media of that landscape.

So Pleased To Meet You aims to explore the psychological and ethical implications of simultaneously existing in a virtual and real domain. Taking advantage of the 'particularly significant' contribution of the internet as a source for creative collaboration and 'telematic real-time improvisations' (Dixon, 2007: 3), it asks how far can we play with the way we represent ourselves virtually? We focused on the online interactive site Chatroulette as a platform with which to meet and interact with random strangers because its worldwide reach allows free, cross cultural contact, and because the pairings of its tens of thousands per day users¹ is mediated by the platform so that the chance meetings will probably never happen again. This creates a feeling of hyper importance, in the moment intensity and possible danger, yet at the same time ephemeral pointlessness and indulgence. This is converse to other social media sites, which thrive on users building knowledge of each other over a sustained period of time. On the larger social network sites the users are 'primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network' (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). We employed Facebook entries within the

work to test these contrasting strategies as ways in which to make performance material.

The research intended to respond to the technical structure and capabilities of the sites: Chatroulette is constructed so that it is very easy to eliminate contact and cut to the next person. We wanted to explore this as a medium for introducing new 'performers' into the virtual and theatrical space, or forcing their exit. We were aware that the reputation of Chatroulette is that many users are visiting for a particular kind of (sexual or flirtatious) gratification, though this is contested². This feature was bound to effect the outcomes of the research and circuitously fitted with the scope of our interests: how would random connectivity help to satisfy one individual's desire, in this case to escape her usual persona?

Process and development: The status of Sophie Stace

In order to engage imaginatively with the chosen interconnective devices but work within the scope of the research interests, it was necessary to first establish a central character with an identity profile. From improvisation triggered by a real, hyperbolically worded job description, the fictional figure of Sophie Stace emerged. She is a Customer Services Advisor who deals with telephone orders for an undisclosed object in varying shapes and colours, entering the information onto a PC for her employers. Ruff's skill at comedy was exploited in this investigative work. For example, the character was almost shaking with boredom at her job but trying to be pleasant to customers on the phone. The term 'character' is applied here with caution, as Ruff maintains an audience-performer relationship in the theatrical clowning sense: occasional glances that invite us in, a certain physical awkwardness, a quiet inner turmoil as she copes bravely with the external world because the clown is 'in a permanent state of conflict, notably with himself' (Lecoq, 2002: 159).

Sophie's digital presence was developed alongside her physical and verbal manifestation: selfies were snapped outside her favourite retail outlets on her lunch break and the images posted on a newly constructed Facebook page. Creating a digital homepage for an imagined person, but one who also has the capacity for three dimensional, real time 'liveness' in performance, marked a curious stage in my understanding of, and belief in, Sophie. Presence in live performance can simply refer to 'temporal and spatial proximity between performer and audience' whereas digital, intermedial theatre complicates this presumption as the presence constructed is 'beyond physical proximity', reasons Russell Fewster (2010). Fewster goes on to say that social media presence is 'defined by participation, rather than shared physical or even temporal space' (in Bay-Cheng et al., 2010: 47). This subtle, transitional shift led us to forget momentarily that we as artists were perpetrating the character's existence in the first place, asking each other for 'her' birthday date, and the next day half expecting another Facebook comment to appear without our help.

Sophie's online status was updated in 'real' terms (posting her status 'At work, having ham sandwich') and later in the process, when her day dreams tickled

the truth, in terms that used exaggeration or outright lies such as when she imagines playing a beautiful Philip Glass concerto on her computer keyboard whilst a complaining customer is put on hold (then posting 'Just got my Grade 8 in piano'). As an external directorial prompt, I improvised the voice of an impatient phone customer, or perhaps it was an anxious voice in her head, bombarding Sophie with social media type profile questions such as 'What's your job title? How long have you worked here? What are your hobbies? Where do you want to be in 5 years time? How many likes have you had today?' This triggered the character's frustration further, bullying her into inadequate replies and increasing bewilderment. The provocations led to a scene at home where Sophie is drying up kitchen utensils and cooking popcorn but begins to demonstrate the objects as if they are her own designs for NASA funded self-defence equipment, explaining to the audience what each item can do in a war situation or in the event of a nuclear attack.

It was at this point in the process that Sophie's yearning to take a radical imaginative leap became convincing and that desire provided substance with which to enter the virtual world. Sophie spoke with detailed, scientific calm about her inventions, willing us - myself in research / rehearsal and later the audience in live performance - to believe the nonsense because she herself appeared to believe it, in that moment. The suspension of disbelief works because we want to escape with her into the fantasy, to support her raised ambitions, her unlikely Nietzschean 'will to power'³. So when these inventions, a metal soup ladle or a saucepan, were shown in Chatroulette rooms at strange angles and reported by Sophie to be part of bioscientific research, there was already an investment in their authenticity for us as theatre makers, and later, for the audience (see Figures 2 and 3). The 'passion for the Real' (Žižek, 2002:5) became a common motivator: the scientist persona wanting this to be an important display of actual government funded special equipment. Certain intrigued Chatroulette players believed her to be undertaking 'really interesting work' in her lab, as Z, a female player from the Ukraine typed into the conversation.



Figure 2 and 3: Frame on left seen by Chatroulette player as transmitted by webcam of 'a device used to repair human cells'; frame on right of actual soup ladle action. *So Pleased To Meet You*, 2014. Photo: Jillian Wallis.

Ruff performed around six hours of Chatroulette sessions in this guise, using spoken or typed communication with each player as permitted, with Ed Currie recording each session and providing technical design. Ruff was at first seated as she invited players to help her with her 'research' in the controlled visual frame of the webcam (Figure 4). As Jenny Korn (2013) discusses, the sudden immediacy of visual contact on the Chatroulette site means that users form fast social and cultural judgments:

identity performance is necessarily curtailed in the speedy context of Chatroulette which focuses on immediate, anonymous, one-time visual impressions in a non-commercialized, electronically-mediated environment. In Chatroulette, these impressions demonstrate the importance of the socially-enacted, embodied self in online encounters that center upon quick evaluations of the body presented through a screen, which manifests in how long parties stay attached together and in how parties react (Korn, 2013: 8).

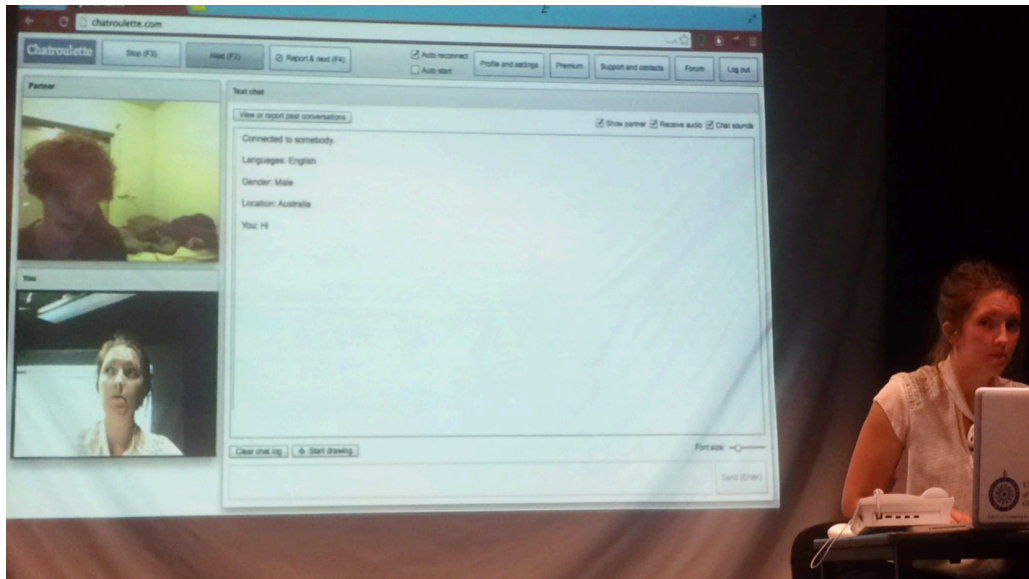


Figure 4: *So Pleased To Meet You*, 2014. Photo: Jillian Wallis.

Around half of the players who met Ruff as Sophie pressed Next at once, but many lingered long enough to ask questions such as *Where are you? What are you doing?* The laboratory setting was not questioned, quickly signified by Ruff's sensible attire and the clinical studio environment. There were one or two salacious requests after this initial chatting period, as well as one man who just wanted to play his guitar. However, some chatted over a duration that allowed Sophie's increasingly confident scientific research practices to emerge. We then expanded the frame of that player on to a projection screen so that the player could see their own live image and that of a full size Sophie, now in a labcoat, who interacted physically and vocally with the player so that they became a 'research' specimen for the remainder of the live chat (Figure 5).



Figure 5: *So Pleased To Meet You*, 2014. Photo: Jillian Wallis.

The improvised material now became ludicrous. Yet it remained convincing for certain players, as Ruff used kitchen utensils and low-tech electronics to measure, test and record data about the individual subject before their own eyes and ears. The kitchen spray and dishcloth, spatula and electrical hob did not read as such across the digital divide, nor did the sound of an out of sight hairdryer when Ruff informed player L (Figure 6) that his results were being processed through a machine.



Figure 6: *So Pleased To Meet You*, 2014. Photo: Jillian Wallis.

These extended chat sessions had a sensorial immediacy, despite (and simultaneously because of) the mediation of the digital platform. This is arguably in the realms of Artaudian theatrical truth where the spectator is 'thirsting for mystery' (Artaud, 1970: 56). In *No More Masterpieces*, Artaud suggests that modern audiences will believe in theatre's illusion 'on condition it

releases the magic freedom of daydreams, only recognizable when imprinted with terror and cruelty' (1970: 65). Stating that the purpose of the research is in human defence against chemical warfare appeared to heighten the players' curiosity, perhaps because it struck a nerve, a common fear worth facing. During the development of the material and the changing status of our central figure, it became evident that the response of the Chatroulette players fuelled Sophie's belief in her increased knowledge and professional capability, and reinforced her anxieties over physical, bodily security on a personal level and as a perceived global threat through nuclear warfare. Entering the territory of the ridiculous, verging on paranoia, was comedic but also made a tragic sense to us: put simply, feelings of inadequacy can make a person more susceptible to external online influences. Hence we now instigated Sophie's internet search around keywords such as nuclear attack and atomic explosions which released a visual display of the extremity of her fears and an expression of what might become her glorious, inevitable doom (see Figure 1).

Discoveries: No longer strangers and the joy of the slide

In the rehearsal process, the first time we re-played a Chatroulette session projected on screen but in the real time presence of Ruff acting as Sophie the scientist, an attractive performative tension was revealed. Watching as director, I felt the walls dissolve between virtual and actual spaces: this new space was somehow more expansive, as contemporary and previous time were included and the presence of another person who had once been a stranger in the room now added spatial and ontological depth to Sophie's world. The spaces made by the interface of the body with technology have been described as 'liminal', to be found on the 'threshold' of that which is physical and that which is virtual (Broadhurst, 2007).

For the IFTR Intermediality in Theatre and Performance research group, this 'in-between' understanding of such spaces has given way to a focus on the more concrete effects of different, identifiable relationships at play. For example, 'the 'inters' in interrelationships' produce a sense of difference because 'The manifestations of digital culture – the mediaforms, operational modes of devices, and cultural habits of consumers and users – not only inherently entail a relationship with an 'Other', but are structured according to a necessary interrelation with any number of 'Also-Others' (Bay-Cheng et al., 2010: 17). Both analyses may be used to comprehend the effects of combining the real and the virtual at a strategic point in the process. Sophie Stace's relationships with the media platforms as well as the Chatroulette users themselves, in combination with her internet use and the mutual dependency that is involved in such an activity, became the 'stuff'- the materiality of the work.

For us, this bringing together also clarified the two central concerns of the piece: pressure to improve your self representation and anxiety over the political state of the world (with nuclear threat as a final display). But crucially, this was a world viewed and reacted to both online and offline, indistinguishably. This informed how we edited, ordered and shaped the live and pre-recorded material into a 25-minute performance. In my practice as a

theatre director I want the audience to care about who they watch and at times find an emotional connection, while allowing devices such as comedy and fragmentary leaps in the narrative to keep us alert. Pattern Fight's near-cabaret, live art sensibility and digital practices already sit well with these ambitions for an engaging form of narrative disruption. However, in *So Pleased To Meet You* it is arguably the liaisons between Sophie and the virtual performers on Chatroulette (plus the unseen readers of her social media updates) that offer fresh possibilities and insight into multi media, or rather intermedial theatre, not least because of her deliberately naïve state and conviction that online and offline are all the same.

In *The Moving Body*, seminal theatre director and teacher Jacques Lecoq discusses how comic clowning only works when the performer allows personal inadequacy and failure: 'the less defensive he is, the less he tries to play a character and the more he allows himself to be surprised by his own weaknesses, the more forcefully his clown will appear' (2002: 155). Lecoq describes the innocence inside us that will come out when something goes wrong, when we mess up or somehow flop. The performer must give 'free rein' to that innocence whilst being in a permanent state of 'reaction and surprise' to the world around her (Lecoq, 2002: 155). This gives credence to Sophie Stace's open minded responses in the 'speedy context' of Chatroulette as described above by Korn when meeting players with incongruous intentions. The combination of this naivety and the potential horrors of a chemical warfare attack make the lone figure of Sophie laughable but eventually piteous as she travels towards disaster: the innocent is sacrificed to her own delusions, or very nearly. The psychological danger implied is thus not that of the predatory online stranger but the lure of a simulated self, virtually reinforced by interconnectivity into a more interesting, enjoyable persona, and the joy of the slide towards a permanent state of this glorious delusion.

The expanded presence of a cast that is concurrently real and simulated, referring here to Sophie as well as to the other participants, complicates and enhances our reading of the performance. Following Artaud's proposition that in art the presence of death makes life more vivid, Matthew Causey (2006) argues that in traditional, representational theatre we appear to be in the presence of truth because of the corporeal liveness of the actor. However, within this scenario we are always necessarily aware of death and that in fact 'the event of the theatre is made corporeal by its falseness, fraudulence and duplicity, which are its shining graces' (2006: 96).

In *So Pleased To Meet You*, the actor via the character conjures her own layer of illusion, so the double becomes triple: she is herself as someone else as someone else, and the gentle comedic edge through a naïve clowning connection to the audience keeps us aware that this is a play. Causey goes on to say:

What I am modeling is a recapitulation of Artaud's double, but the function of the double collapses in the event of the virtual. Everything *is* in cyberspace and thus nothing is ever *not-this*, not the double, not an illusion nor an appearance (2006: 96).

The Chatroulette participants are themselves also re-performed / lived, as partakers in the scientific experiments. The longer chatters gave their verbal permission to take part in Sophie's research, and for us to show this research at a conference (which was to be the DRHA 2014). Causey suggests the problem 'to experience the simulacrum is to be unaware of the corporeal nature of the body' and so perhaps the theatre needs to use virtual tools and strategies of the simulacrum to re-find and recharge its powers of illusion (2006: 98). I am attempting to wash together the old theatrical model containing a narrative arc and an actor who begins as a straightforward fictional entity with a fictional workplace, and virtual tactics and devices to permit the mere appearance of mere appearance of the simulated. This includes the images of nuclear explosions as a result of her online search into the subject, the Facebook lies she constructs about her ability to play the piano and where she went to university, and Sophie herself as the performance unfolds.

The contribution of the Chatroulette participants sits interestingly, awkwardly in both realms throughout: the players Z and L are brought to us in a format that *could be* live but is part of the known virtuality of online chatting. In this first performance, the synchronization of Ruff's live speech with what she typed on screen was not quite rehearsed enough to be precise throughout, so in the following Q and A some audience members who were unsure said that they took this as proof that it was not live. Others had figured out that Ruff was working with pre-recorded audio-visual material but enjoyed that knowledge: the likelihood that the conversations have previous duration gives the work another temporal layer. It could be now but we know, or strongly suspect, that it is not, and are thus in on the theatrical illusion and the technical trick, which we enjoy as it makes us complicit with the character who *is* in the now. We also know that the character is not a real bioscientist as she claims, and has convinced at least two of the Chatroulette players, so are twice in on that deception, or fantasy. This all feels quite outrageous and unbelievable: this is usually a site for flirting yet here is a Ukrainian woman believing that the edge of a metal soup ladle is a 'device which can project antibiotic hormonal secretions through the internet' and there is a guy from Australia allowing the outline of his face to be measured, agreeing to blink 5 times as instructed, to have a chemical swab taken from his tongue and sing a note into an electrical hob (Figure 7).



Figure 7: *So Pleased To Meet You*, 2014. Photo: Jillian Wallis.

Conclusion

The performed ending of the work needs further exploration in practice, perhaps because, to finish the trace back to Artaud, we ought not to ignore present day horrors but 'portray them as even more horrible' (Calder in Artaud 1970: 104). In this initial version Sophie as scientist no longer finds successful players with which to have instantaneous feedback, so a series of uninterested, momentary Chatroulette faces flicker by and the tempo of the piece escalates into near panic. She asks the audience for help and urges them to protect themselves with her saucepan lid and other paraphernalia against an aural countdown and images of atomic explosion. Should she combust into a thousand pieces on stage or does the ring of the office phone snap her and the audience back into the previous reality of the opening scene? Having chosen the latter, I found that in performance this was humorous but overly conclusive; a shame that she had not travelled further into her own combat zone as United Nations envoy or NASA scientist.

However, the re-appropriation and artistic subversion of the Chatroulette medium and its players had arguably become embedded into the work, as had the online activity through social media and internet search engines, and this had qualitatively expanded the presence of the theatrical material. The necessary and interdependent relationships at work in intermediality discussed above underpin this embodiment. Furthermore, the randomness and global reach of the meetings online allow an idiosyncratic license, a playful looseness for individual self re-examination in the company of others. Causey advocates notions of art and politics that are 'akin to Arendt's position of a non-sovereign, non autonomous freedom that is worldly, plural, and whose position is marked by its distance from mastery, far removed from the tyranny of absolute truth' (2006: 153). Ruff's portrayal of an inadequate feeling office worker who wanders into a virtually inspired other persona draws upon the haphazard innocence and connectivity-seeking nature of the individual for its impetus.

Notes

1 Since its official launch in 2009 and rise in popularity the following year, estimates of daily users on Chatroulette have ranged widely, reaching up to 1.5 million at its peak. Most estimated statistics agree that its numbers have declined rapidly since the additional requirement in 2012 of login details to access the site and due to competitors such as Chatrandom, which claimed 600,000 daily users in 2013 ('Chatrandom Surpasses Chatroulette', WebRTC World News Feed, 4 December, 2013).

2 A informal study by the Web Ecology Project for example estimates between 5-8% are using the site for 'sexual exhibitionism' in a sample of over 200 sessions in 2010 (Alex Leavitt and Tim Hwang 'Chat Roulette: An Initial Survey' (webecologyproject.org, 1 March, 2010).

3 Nietzsche describes how the will to power is essential and in human nature, even where individuals treat each other equally in society (1886: 259).

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Biography

Jillian Wallis is a Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Greenwich. She has a background in performing and directing, predominantly in theatre for companies with distinctive physical and visual styles. Jillian collaborates with contemporary companies as a theatre director and her research interests include the making of physical theatre. She holds an MA in Media Arts Philosophy and Practice, with practice-based research around intuitive logic, spontaneity, and the nature of play-time.