CITY OF MELBOURNE

ArtPlay Artist Learning Summary: Pushing the Limits

Date: Monday 24 September, 9am – 12pm

Venue: ArtPlay

Artist: Sibylle Peters

Presented by: ArtPlay[1] and Melbourne Fringe[2]

Background: Sibylle Peters is a Hamburg-based artist and researcher. She is the co-founder and artistic director of the FUNDUS THEATER/*Theatre of Research*[3], a theatre for transgenerational public exchanges, where children, artists, researchers and citizens of all ages meet to explore and change the world together. She was invited to present two works for Melbourne Fringe 2018, *Truth or Dare* and *Playing Up*, and to present an artist learning session at ArtPlay.

Sibylle began by explaining that Theatre of Research aims to make cultural studies relevant and accessible, and to challenge the idea that art has to be contained within a start and a finish. She asked the group what the limits are that we would like to push. Suggestions included:

- Parents' mindsets
- Our perceptions of children's understanding of the world
- Status
- Taboo topics
- Children's behaviour around difference
- Definitions of theatre
- Divisions between research, cultural education and art
- The binary conception of children and adults

Next, Sibylle talked about Theatre of Research:

Theatre of Research has devised instruments to create platforms of equal encounters between adults and children. It brings together children, adult artists and researchers to conduct collaborative research which, while acknowledging people's different interests and capacities, gives everyone equal agency through Live Art methods. Proceeding from the interests of children, the research investigates complex questions from cultural studies such as 'How is time socially constructed?'

Example 1: *50 Dangerous Things (you should let your children do)* was a work by children about danger and the politics of fear. Both the process and outcome used Live Art techniques to challenge and question the rules of safety around working with children and the effect over-protectiveness has on them. For example, the children learned about Yoko Ono's work, Grapefruit, in which, like a music score, instructions are given to a participant to make a work of art, rather than the artist making the work themselves. An example of this in *50*

Dangerous Things (you should let your children do) was the instruction for participants: 'Light a match and hold it until it goes out.'

This work was seen by Tate Modern, which approached Sibylle to write a resource for children to experience Live Art. The resulting resource, [Playing Up: A Live Art Game for Kids and Adults](#)[4], has been used as an instrument for large scale transgenerational public play events. These events bring Live Art to adults who experience it in a different way when they can share it with children. Significantly, the work also inspires strangers to work together, further challenging accepted ideas about public /private and safe/dangerous interactions. By demonstrating positive public interactions between strangers and generations, Playing Up provides an optimistic view of citizenry. See the [Playing Up website](#)[5] for more information about Playing Up, including children's comments about what Live Art is.

Example 2: Theatre of Research calculated that each work cost around €3,000 to make, so they gave 50 children a suitcase of €3,000 and asked them to make a show with it. The researchers and artists supported the children to do so and documented the process. An immediate potential source of conflict arose between the adults and children when the children wanted to spend €1,000 on sweets. Investigating the children's provocation further resulted in an interesting project that touched on the cultural, financial and biological story of sugar.

Example 3: [KAPUTT: The Academy of Destruction](#)[6] was made up of twelve 'professors'; six artists whose work involved destruction in some way, and six children who were 'experts in destruction' (i.e. children who were stigmatized as displaying destructive behaviours). The Academy were given twelve wishes of things they wanted to destroy with the public and took part in artistic and philosophical discussions around the meaning of destruction such as 'Can destruction be part of peace?' and 'What is peace in the mind of a young person?'

The project arose from working with the very diverse current generation of children in Germany, many of whom live in poverty and/or are immigrants. Destruction is part of their lives, but is marginalised. The project drew on artist Gustav Metzger's view that making destruction a taboo is dangerous as it is inevitably expressed in negative ways. The artists aimed to create a safe framework within which destructive practices could be explored and properly discussed. It involved pedagogues, researchers and artists, who worked towards developing a pedagogy and aesthetics of destruction.

Example 4: *The Ghost Insurance* began with children's wish to speak with ghosts and drew on the field of psycho-geography which investigates how the environment affects our feelings. Children mapped their feelings in their school, identifying places of happiness and places of conflict. They then tried to articulate those atmospheres and put the 'spirits' of the loci into jars. This was followed by a 'séance' in which children were able to discuss, in a depersonalised, theatrical context, the root cause of the conflict and what to do about it. The cultural inspiration for this work was the 19th Century tradition of 'trance lecturers' in which women were given a public platform to speak when they claimed to be channelling the voice of a learned male. Returning to school, the children then released the now neutralised spirit.

The research outcomes from this project, which brought together Live Art, children's wishes and cultural discourse, included a social/cultural report for the school and an ethnographic discourse about common anxieties.

Example 5: *Real and Other Pirates* was inspired by the first trial of pirates in Hamburg for 600 years, which highlighted the confusion between the myth and the reality of pirates. The project began by asking what modern piracy means for the German heritage of pirates. It culminated a show based on the answers modern Somalian pirates (living in hiding in Kenya) gave to questions posed by German children. The project thus created communication and understanding that would not have been otherwise possible. It also showed that the value of this work is not that adults empower children, but that alliances between adults and children empower us all.

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[4] http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/projects/playing-up-live-art-for-kids-adults/
[5] http://playingup.thisisliveart.co.uk/
[6] http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/projects/kaputt-the-transgenerational-academy-of-destruction/

Example 6: Children commonly express a wish to be rich but when examined further, the reasons behind the wish and the concept of wealth are complex and nuanced e.g. for some children being rich means being able to pay the electricity bill. The Children's Bank was created to research money and society's relationship to it. A 'currency' (voucher system) was created that children could use to buy limited goods gifted by around three dozen local businesses in Hamburg. The 'bank' was run by assemblies who decided things like how much money to print. See <u>Sibylle's guide to performing research</u>[7] for details about the impact of this project on the community.

Example 7: *Truth or Dare* was commissioned for Melbourne Fringe, 2018. It continues Theatre of Research's aim to create platforms for equality in which children are handed the 'means of production' e.g. the children collated the instructions that were given to participants, which positioned them as playwrights. Sibylle and her collaborators worked with children at East Reservoir Primary School. Collating the 'truth' questions gave children permission to ask things that they really wanted to know e.g. 'Why do we have separate bathrooms?' and 'Why don't we trust each other?'

Sibylle had invited the ArtPlay learning program participants to see *Truth or Dare* before session and then they also had an opportunity to respond to the children's questions in this presentation. They made the following observations:

- The physical environment of the Northcote Town Hall plaza was quite harsh (windy, cold, noisy and exposed), which led to an exaggerated performance style. It would be interesting to see the work in a more enclosed, intimate space. Sibylle noted that a quiet environment may help people to take the 'truth' element of the work more seriously.

- The whole project could be used as a useful way to train artists to work with children.

- *Truth or Dare* offers a fleeting experience of intergenerational artmaking, but short encounters can still have great impact.

- Although the children were encouraged to think about the relationship between adults and children the truth questions fell into several distinct categories e.g. questions about the physical world; questions about why children can't do whatever they want; questions about adult behaviour. Sibylle observed that this was, in part, because children tend to copy each other. The bank of questions will grow as the work is taken to other communities.

- Some of the original questions were not used in the final work. Sibylle explained that although she always works with what children offer, she would never use questions that refer to and would therefore embarrass individuals, such as the children's parents. The aim is to discuss, in a public forum, problems that we may all share, not to focus on the problems of individuals.

- *Truth or Dare* will eventually be published under a creative commons licence, so others can mount it in a sensitive way.

Further Reading:

<u>Tool kit for creating intergenerational Live Art projects</u>[8]

<u>Short biography of Sibylle Peters</u>[9]

A <u>Study Room Guide</u>[10] by Sibylle Peters looking at key issues and works in relation to Live Art by, for and with children.

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7 https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/uploads/documents/SYBILLE_TOOLKIT_WEB.pdf
8 https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/uploads/documents/SYBILLE_TOOLKIT_WEB.pdf
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