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# Play, Process, and the Unknown

## Towards an embodiment of thought at The School of Making Thinking

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The School of Making Thinking (SMT), established in 2011 in New York, is simultaneously a residency programme for artists and thinkers, an experimental college and a nomadic investigation into intentional living. SMT was founded with the intention of exploring non-traditional connections between art and thought. Discontent with detached academic dialogue, SMT seeks to probe and understand philosophical enquiries by inhabiting them. At once embracing and resisting structure, SMT encourages experimentation by providing infrastructure for alternative modes of making, thinking and being. By uniting intellectual enquiry with both creative practices and embodied experience, the project actualizes a more wholly integrated artistic-intellectual expression and pedagogical experience. Through a summer residency programme, nomadic events and conferences and artist-run classes in New York City, the organization's vision embraces play, process and the unknown to facilitate the embodiment of thought.

### UNKNOWING AND CRITIQUE AS A CREATIVE ACT

An attitude of openness to a multitude of possibilities is at the core of SMT's pedagogy, and is expressed through its commitment to play, process and the embrace of the unknown. All SMT programming emphasizes process over product. This divests artists and thinkers of their attachment to constant production, exhibition and formal aesthetics as the measure of their value, and opens up space for play, games and ritual. This process-oriented

environment is inherently improvisational, spontaneous and beyond disciplinary confines, necessitating an orientation that embraces the unknown. Lived experience is acknowledged as essential to the act of creation, and thereby our school has been especially compelling to those with performative leanings.

To comprehend SMT is to begin with the unknown, work through process and arrive at play. These elements function within a recurring and cyclical rhythm, creating a fluid infrastructure for discovery. In 2014, an iconic summer residency session entitled 'Unthinking/Unknowing' utilized somatic approaches for entering the post-structuralist thought of Gilles Deleuze. Taking place in and about a yellow



■ 2013 resident Terri Chiao's installation *Willow Hut*. The artist describes the hut as 'a space for the experience of gentle phenomena, both natural and cultural'.  
Copyright Terri Chiao, 2013



■ Anna Wolfe-Pauly's immersive, participatory river performance, *The Blue Suit Experiments*, 2014. Copyright Anna Wolfe-Pauly, 2014

Victorian house in the rural Catskills for nearly three weeks, Canadian Deleuze scholar Danièle Bourque led a series of group exercises.

Instead of reading any text whatsoever, a group of fifteen artists and thinkers were led through

an extremely physical portion that was focused on exploring specific Deleuzian ideas (concept, percept, affect) through an experiential exploration of the unknown, all in the attempt to enter into relation to thinking and unthinking. (Bourque, 2014)

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze writes: 'Something will happen. Something is already happening' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 152). This frank articulation of the present moment encapsulates SMT's ethos. There is a constant whiff of wild possibility, warmly companionable, reminding both the individual and the group that it is necessarily already in motion. There is constant moving through processes that come into view only as they shift, unravel and repeatedly coalesce abstractly and in context of the mundane.

Approaching and existing within the unknown requires process-based work and exploration. The cultivation of process over product is embedded in all SMT activities. In summer 2015, SMT ran a summer session entitled 'Re-re-make: An immersive performance lab', which was very interested in carefully exploring process-based creation. The session description reads:

Because we are interested in questions of process and how to incorporate a culture of feedback into the session, we expect participants to present work a number of times throughout the session. As a group, we will ... create 'response art works' as an alternative to the traditional art school critique model of viewing work ... No one in the session will be an artist in isolation; rather we will live within each other's work and process. (The School of Making Thinking 2015)

The result of this session was a prismatic performance conversation, spoken in the language of the participants' experience and perspectives. This structure not only allowed for an alternative to spoken forms of critique, but created a landslide of synchronicity, spontaneity and inter-connectedness. This session took strong cues from the work of Matthew Goulish, who offers an alternative model of critique, in which criticism can itself be regarded as creative and can 'achieve a life of its own as a way of understanding' (2000: 47). He describes the process of understanding as fraught with creative decision-making:

How do we understand something? We understand something by approaching it. How do we approach something? We approach it from any direction. We approach it using our eyes, our ears, our noses, our intellects, our imaginations. We approach it with silence. We approach it with childhood. We use pain or embarrassment. We use history. We take a safe route or a dangerous one. We discover our approach and we follow it. (Goulish 2000: 46)

Goulish intimates that these endless paths to understanding require the act of entering the unknown. The work of understanding is inherently an artistic one, requiring curiosity, creative processing and a willingness to enter unthought, unseen places. The creative act is inescapable, for as soon as we respond to anything, that very response is itself a creative act. Critique is no longer felt as a limiting factor, but, rather, as a generative mode. Within this model of valuing critique as process, a 'process over product' ethos emerges rather clearly. Process-based art is nurtured in this environment. For example, Anna Wolfe-Pauly mounted *The Blue Suit Experiments* during the summer of 2014. Her process of the project is as follows:

I led people one-by-one down to the Beaverkill River and asked them to put on an 8XL bright blue work suit. I talked to them about haptic perception, the process of recognizing objects through touch. I asked them to read the water and to let the suit act as a tool for gathering information. I transcribed interviews (with each participant) and developed poems from the words exchanged in those conversations. From here I created an interactive installation with a set of instructions in which one-by-one people were invited to get in the blue suit, climb into a large bucket filled with water, put on headphones, listen to the river, and read the book of poems. (Wolfe-Pauly 2014)

Process-based projects such as Wolfe-Pauly's value ephemeral, emotive, cognitive, and sensory experiences; often, they do not produce a lexicon of convenient 'gallery objects'. This emphasis on process is coupled with an ideological rejection of art-market-driven commodity fetishism. Rather than allow the 'value' generated at SMT to be determined and regulated by such markets, SMT encourages individual response and reckoning. Following this disposition, the organization's infrastructure costs are kept as low as possible to allow for wider accessibility, and to encourage shared responsibility on a shoestring. Thus far, corporate sponsorships and patronage relationships have been completely avoided in lieu of crowd-sourced funding that facilitates these summer programmes. SMT is thereby a non-profit, volunteer-run organization that strives for a horizontal power distribution. As such, no premium is placed on established systems of accreditation, and alternative systems of value-creation are constantly investigated through the programming.

However, a critique arises: does a volunteer-leadership structure mean that the directors must inherently approach SMT as a bourgeois, utopian leisure project? The subsequent issue of compensation and sustainability has created an ongoing struggle for the largely working-class, majority female board of directors, each of whom must seek alternative sources of income to support their lives while simultaneously running SMT. (The sole male leader in 2016 is its executive director.) Despite taking much inspiration from radical feminist, Marxist and

queer ideologies, this contradiction in ethics versus action shows that the organization is far from acting as a force of radical anti-oppression among its directors.

One could argue that this institutional structure of privilege affects the economic and racial demographics of the SMT community as a whole. Although the co-directors aspire to resolve this matter, resolution has been in stalemate for several years. Does this revelation mean that SMT is effectively a playground for the elite? These are issues that SMT continues to grapple with, even while affirming the transformative power of play.

#### THE POLITICS OF PLAY AND THE ROLE OF RITUAL

In *Performance Theory*, Richard Schechner distinguishes between play as a "free activity" where one makes one's own rules' and can enter into their 'private fantasy world', and ritual, which is 'strictly programmed', expressing 'the individual's submission to forces "larger" or at least "other" than oneself' (1988: 13). SMT participants often experiment with and create their own living rituals, testing Schechner's continuum by finding (for instance) fantasy and self-made-rules in ritual, and submission and reverence in play, thus collapsing the distance between the two.

■ Josephine Decker performing during her 2011 residency. Copyright Josephine Decker, 2011



In 2011, a few of SMT's inaugural residents questioned this continuum. Performance artist Adriana Disman and performer/director Josephine Decker co-created a project entitled 'Performing the Sacred in Everyday Space', which sought to

explore ways of sanctifying different spaces, objects, and people within the physical environment of SMT through ritual ... How does the sacred interact with the everyday? How can we create something sacred outside a religious framework? Who has the power to sanctify within daily life? Within art? (Decker and Disman 2011)

By inviting co-residents to participate in intimate performances, ritual was used as a means to question power rather than activating a sense of play.

In 'Touch Piece', Disman created a private one-to-one, three-hour long performance prompted by a sign next to her nude and blindfolded body: 'You are invited to place the palms of your hands / anywhere on this body for as long as you choose. / No one will be told of your actions' (Disman 2011). Her waiting gesture, sitting in silence with her arms outstretched on her knees, set the tone of the ritualized environment. The intimacy of touch became a ceremony, placing the visitor as the meaning-maker of the ritualized exchange.

Simultaneously, artist Mollie McKinley began a project during the same session titled 'Existential Marina', with Disman as one of the performers in the piece.

Performers Disman and Finbloom are positioned in a rowboat filled with water, lodged in a patch of ferns on the edge of a forest. Stranded at this site, they engage in repetitive and absurd ritual movement. Engaged in quiet intimacy, undertones of alienation arise ... The pair climax in disconnected rituals, moving with each other and without each other. Interspersed into this scene of crescendo, the two lie together in quiet repose, gently wrapping one another in a fishing net. (McKinley 2012)

While absurdly playful on the exterior, the video also serves as textural enquiry into the intimacy of sacred experience. The projects of Disman, Decker and McKinley integrate process, play and collaboration through the performance of ritual, while drawing attention to the status of the female within ritual contexts. In her feminist critique of liminality, ritual and play, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that the female 'outsided' (outside religion, outside patriarchy) experience is continuously a liminal one, rather than one that moves through the structures of ritual that Victor Turner lays out. Her critique frames a specific way to approach the ritual-based projects of 2011, and SMT in general:

My work ... thus indicates that Turner's notion of liminality (ritual) ... is applicable only to men ... The problem seems ... to be that the dichotomy of structure and chaos, from which liminality or *communitas* is a release, is a special issue for elites, for those who in a special sense *are* the structures. A model which focuses on this need for release as *the* ultimate social-psychological need may best fit the experience of elites. (Bynum 1984:121)

Play becomes a mercurial mechanism, often employed ritualistically to dismantle otherwise impassable power structures and ideas. The emerging self-critique of SMT also reveals the pitfalls of a utopian space that struggles to exist within a capitalist, patriarchal society. But true to how the act of critique functions at SMT, we begin to see another, generative aspect of how structure and play engage the larger group experience at a summer session.

By engendering an awareness of structure and embracing willingness to play with it, SMT's participants are able to excavate internal worlds; they become aware of the dynamism

■ Mollie McKinley's *Existential Marina*, single channel video, 2012, starring Adriana Disman and Aaron Finbloom. Copyright Mollie McKinley, 2012



of a sociality beholden to shifting rules. Both are a means for encountering the unknown, whether individual or collective, and allow for observation of how various levels of control change our experience as well as our environment. In this way, creating a fluid context for rule-making, SMT allows for an exploration of alternative realities.

Teachers and staff at SMT are expected to structure and anti-structure time such that there is ample opportunity for free time and play. The group must always choose to experiment with their own structures or lack thereof. The improvisational is nourished within planned activities, such that pockets of spontaneous activity may at any point emerge. Derek Bailey notes that free improvisation creates opportunities 'to renew or change the known and so provoke an open-endedness' (142) that cannot exist within idiomatic improvisation, which is bound by particular conventions. For this very reason, the structures of SMT are malleable and no two classes or summer residences are ever repeated or identically structured, such that SMT's very own conventions do not foreclose the possibility of the open-ended.

Within this open-endedness lies the hope that we, as artists and thinkers, may, in the words of Gary Peters, use improvisation in order to transcend the 'outmoded structures and threadbare pathways [of culture history and past time] through acts of spontaneity that inhabit the moment, the instant, the pure futurity of the "now"' (Peters 2009: 17). The weight of the past is lifted by this 'celebration of the moment' (142) in which SMT seeks to immerse its participants. This aspect of improvisation was concretely encouraged by Hollis Witherspoon's (2013) workshop, 'Unlocking the Present', which combined the principles of Viola Spolin, the People's Improv Theater, and Sanford Meisner.

Alongside this emphasis on openness and experimental structures is the expectation that SMT participants will rigorously push the boundaries of their practice. Destructuralizing through play, process and the unknown should



serve, rather than devalue, self-evaluated criticality and intellectual rigour. SMT summer residents are chosen with regard to the strength of their work as well as their interest in experimentation and breaking boundaries. To this end, critical acclaim and so-called recognition are largely irrelevant. As Winnicott has noted, 'A successful artist may be universally acclaimed and yet have failed to find the self that he or she is looking for' (1971: 73). Winnicott points to the 'non-purposive state' (74) as the experience required in the search for this self. This seems to nicely parallel Huizinga's idea of play, or 'free activity' that stands 'quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly' (Huizinga 1971: 13).

SMT summer resident Mitsuko Brooks describes her project 'Nomadology-and-recreating-a-home' as a 'transcendent piece' in which her 'sculpture no longer functions as a three-dimensional art object to be displayed, but as an object I become one with' that may be entered and is intended to 'speak to those who feel at odds with themselves, and potentially enable them to experience' a 'meditative, ethereal moment' alongside a sense of home-coming (Brooks 2013). Brooks' work encapsulates and concretizes the immersive and ongoing quality of the search for the self.

■ 2013 resident Hollis Witherspoon presents her final project, 'Illustrated fictionalized ethnographic performance (Adult Storytime)'. A process-based work, based on the dreams of the other SMT participants over the course of a session. Copyright Hollis Witherspoon, 2013



■ Mitsuko Brook's 2013 project 'Nomadology-and-recreating-a-home'. Stretch gauze fabric, thread, wire. Copyright Mitsuko Brooks, 2013.

#### PROCESS-BASED VALUE

SMT is largely inspired by the consensus-driven and alternative power structures of Black Mountain College, and in turn by their own inspiration, the Quaker meeting. During the 2014 summer residency session 'Wilding', UK artist and session teacher Charlotte Turton introduced a variation on that theme; a checking-in process that has been repeated as a ceremony by other SMT leaders in subsequent years. Checking-in involves devoting a few hours, at the opening and closing of a residency or session, to coming together as a group. Each person present is invited to speak for as long as they wish, sharing their thoughts by responding to a specific question, and in return they receive supportive, silent listening from the rest of the group. No one is coerced to speak and those who do only do so when ready; thus, the in-between silence can stretch on indefinitely. There is also an opportunity to respond to others, with the opening check-in focusing on sharing and the closing check-out on reflection. Despite the long hours needed to complete the process, an almost electric sense of trust and togetherness is established.

The experience of mutual sharing has, in SMT's history, created a stronger sense of fellowship and mutual responsibility, which proves to be important in cultivating

a willingness to share the mundane tasks distributed among the group, including cooking and cleaning. Again following the model of Black Mountain College, SMT emphasizes 'the social responsibilities that come from being part of a community, yet tried to see to it that personal freedom wouldn't be sacrificed to group needs' (Duberman 1973:42). Indeed, 'All aspects of community life were thought to have a bearing on an individual's education – that is, his growth, his becoming aware of who he was and wanted to be' (ibid.41).

Among the collapse of the mundane and the curricular, the intimate encounter may be seen as a paradigm for an exchange of power that gives each party involved substantial attention and control. This levelling is important for creating space in both authorial and ideological fluidity. At SMT, anyone can emerge as teacher or student, and participants are actively encouraged to offer and curate activities.

#### STRUCTURES OF INTIMACY AND VULNERABILITY

The vulnerability required to take part in these communal, intimate and 'anarchic activities' (Turton 2014), such as the speaking circle, is not to be overlooked. SMT explicitly challenges social and personal boundaries. Intimacy is cultivated for the sake of a deepened mutuality, and this has taken many forms. A classic summer residency activity is the paired walk, in which everyone is randomly assigned to a partner, and the next hour is devoted to a half-hour walk in one direction, during which only one person speaks while the other listens



■ (right) Michael Borowski's 2013 project, 'Gesture Devices'—a project integrating a series of theoretical questions through intimate and directed interactions between participants. Copyright Michael Borowski, 2013

(responding if appropriate), and, in turn, during the half hour walk back, the initial listener speaks while the first speaker listens. What emerges alongside a new relationship is an awareness of the act of listening itself. Allowing for a deepened mutuality, each partner is seen, heard, acknowledged and affirmed through the bond of intimacy.

In the summer of 2014, SMT resident Georgia Wall explored such intimacies through *An Ode to Sharon and Agnes Via Bill*, a film project that collapsed the boundaries of work and life:

During my time at SMT I was a friend, a lover and an artist ... If I could open my mouth and have those three words come out at once that would be ideal. I made a movie that was a poem – specifically an ode – an ode to my friend and Agnes Martin but also about an ex-lover. (Wall 2014)

SMT's cyclical infrastructure of play, process and the unknown is meant to lead its participants to an embodiment of their ideas, and of thought in general. Stanley Keleman makes a distinction between the bodied and the embodied, in which being bodied is 'to have the gift of having a body that has been formed somewhat automatically and genetically or through society' (Keleman 2011: 3). Meanwhile, being embodied 'is actually forming the body, differentiating our responses ... creating its behavior. It's creating, it's experiencing and it is giving shape to it so that it is a personalized response to situations' (Keleman 2011: 3). An embodied mode of being allows for an awareness within the act of creating oneself, an attention to formation that has immediate self-reflexive results.

In the 2015 summer session 'Time as Structure, Text as Substrate', participants were asked to choose a text prior to arriving at SMT that they wished to engage with through their practice during the residency. These texts laid down the thematic contours for the experience, and were shared with all as a way of entering one another's work. These texts percolated through the community and became the fodder for conversation, daily action and performance. These chosen texts were very explicitly embodied, wrapped up with the identities

and the creative work of their chooser, and interfacing with the others present. This was such an overt aspect of the session, that during an organized comedy night, residents Dominick Talvacchio and John Montani presented an interview on the subject of text:

*Are you textually gratified?*

I spend a lot of time with text! It's pretty insatiable ... I'm into text with all kinds of people.

*Would you say you're textually promiscuous?*

Whoever is willing and excited about it, I'll engage. As long as they're into it. Whoever comes to me with a text they're not excited about ... – *Low text drive.*

Low text drive, exactly. It's all about keeping the text fresh ... What is that thing that makes a text texty?

*It's so hard, because so much about textuality isn't about text at all. It's elusive. It's one of the things that makes you come back to the text.*

(Talvacchio and Montani 2015)

Besides bringing the entire room to uproarious laughter, this skit conveyed a simple truth about this session's experience: text became a primary medium for embodied exchange. Through the cyclical nature of arriving back at the questioning, and back at the text, the self and text fuse. The cognitive process is lived, observed and understood through the body, and shared experience (laughter, becoming text) is revealed to be as deep a tool for insight as any.

■ An outdoor screening of Georgia Wall's video, *An Ode to Sharon and Agnes via Bill*, 2014, featuring SMT co-director Sharon Mashihi. Copyright Georgia Wall, 2014



Embodiment of thought is not a final, static outcome in the cycles of discovery that reveal themselves at SMT. This embodiment is in a dynamic state of flux, a temporary possession, a theoretical site communally visited and revisited. A rich ouroboric rhythm arises through SMT's own conflict of ideologies and infrastructure, its engagement with lived philosophy through community and intimacy, its reverence of the processes of thinking and artistic creation, its devotion to play and ritual as sites for empowerment and epiphany and its relish for the generative nature of questioning and critique. This complex, unresolved and fertile site of anarchic integrity pushes, reveals and deconstructs the limits of being. There are always more questions to be raised; there is much left unknown. Here exists a space to feel through the darkness, towards full and active questioning that unites thinking and making.

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