

Experimental ~~Comedy~~ Training Camp

by Kari Cwynar 



Life of a Craphead, *Doored*, 2012
PHOTO: YUULA BENIVOLSKI; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS



In September 2012, two performance artists - Ieva Misevičiūtė and Michael Portnoy – arrived at The Banff Centre to lead a thematic residency titled “Experimental Comedy Training Camp”. Joined by comedian Reggie Watts, cartoonist Steven Johnson, and curator Mai Abu ElDahab, they worked with 20 young artists over six weeks, devising a rigorous structure for this “training camp” that included daily improv sessions, movement workshops, experiments in the break-down of language and frequent performances in the “Experimental Comedy Club”.

Three months later, there were reports of a new performance series in Toronto: *Doored* – a monthly comedic variety show hosted at Double Double Land by Life of a Craphhead, the collaborative duo of Amy Lam and Jon McCurley, who had just returned from “Experimental Comedy Training Camp”. While in Banff, they met a number of artists – Neil LaPierre, Bridget Moser and Fake Injury Party – who all ended up back in Toronto; they had also become accustomed to performing every week using the structure of stand-up – seated audience, mic, short performances. This was the genesis of *Doored*, in giving a newfound group of performers the opportunity to perform regularly. The format may be the only predictable element of *Doored*, but as it turns out, its success depends on it. Lam and McCurley were cognizant that audiences can be wary of performance art, given its unpredictability; for example, when it will start, how long it will last, whether there will be seating. In other words, performance, which is often lauded as interpersonal, real-time engagement with others, can be thoroughly inhospitable. They were drawn to comedy for its structure and clear relationship between the audience and the performer, and this was as much for the benefit of the artists as it was for the audience. Lam and McCurley’s own experience as performance artists in Toronto taught them that their opportunities were limited to Nuit Blanche, Power Ball, Massive Party, and festivals like Rhubarb or 7A11D. This resulted, they said, in impossible situations, “like, ‘Do an 12-hour performance all night long’ or ‘Perform for people at a party who have access to an open bar...’ or

once a year you have the opportunity to do something in a theatre or gallery space. You also get asked to perform on buses, on the street... we got asked to do a performance on a canoe (!!!). Which is fine, but then it’s hard to do consistent work that you can build on...”¹ Having begun their careers as performers at comedy shows because of the structure and consistency, Lam and McCurley were now eager to host performance artists and audiences in the same way.

One year later, back in Amsterdam, I was in the audience at the Goethe Institute, finally watching Misevičiūtė and Portnoy perform live; together they prank-call tellers at Citibank, engaging them in absurdist conversation, testing the limits of language and the willingness to seek meaning on the part of a customer service representative. It’s painful, insulting, intriguing, and utterly difficult to classify. Fast-forward another year, and Misevičiūtė and Portnoy are back in Canada, where they lead another residency for emerging performers at Banff, this time titled “Confuse the Cat,” oriented around the very appropriate topic of confusion.

In Toronto and elsewhere, performance artists have been increasingly turning to the rituals of comedy and vice versa – comedians are stretching the boundaries of that genre, adopting the experimentalism allowed by contemporary art. Or, as Life of a Craphhead name it: “It’s funny that performance art is constantly getting compared to other things, or that its definition is so permeable... it’s kind of like if something tips into being unacceptable, then it becomes performance art.” One sees performance-cum-comedy everywhere: In 2011, the pre-eminent performance



Michael Portnoy, still from *27 Gnosis*, 2012, performance with Ieva Misevičiūtė and Johnnie Moor
PHOTO: HENRIK STRÖMBERG; COURTESY OF DOCUMENTA (13)

art biennial Performa hosted a segment titled *Performa Ha!*, a live contemporary comedy series, as well as the film series *Not Funny: Stand-Up Comedy and Visual Artists*. Writing on *Performa Ha!* for *The New York Times*, reviewer Ken Johnson questions the hybrid genre: “Comedy must at least be funny, and if it is not, it fails. Must comic performance art be funny? Can it be called art if it aims primarily for laughs?” Ultimately, though, he remains committed to the belief that comedy must be funny. But must experimental comedy be funny? What if it takes place under the guise of performance art and is presented in galleries by self-defined artists? What if we removed the word comedy from this sub-category of performance art, just for a minute? It’s not that the work isn’t funny – it often is – but it warrants discussion beyond the element of comedy, which is so often the first and easiest descriptor. Misevičiūtė, Portnoy and contributors to *Doored* are investing in a particularly indeterminate vein of performance art. It reflects a re-investment in language, the limits of communication and a re-calibration of the elements of performance. If slapstick is purposefully clumsy, this is intentionally precise.

Defining their version of “experimental comedy” for a project in Brussels in 2012 – the second edition of their collaboratively produced variety show *Alligators!* – Misevičiūtė and Portnoy claim to work through “a new conceptual lens of ‘experimental comedy,’ which is the injection of the sublime, the blatantly inscrutable, the abstract, the primal, the operatic, the choreographic, the theoretical, the improbable, the generative, the post-rhythmic, etc., into the frame of stand-up.” Funniness or humour is never mentioned, nor is performance. These constitute the backbone of the work, but not necessarily the goal.

Misevičiūtė and Portnoy both came to visual art via other disciplines, and this exterior training is palpable. Misevičiūtė began performing as a child clown, before spending eight years in academia, earning Master’s degrees in Cultural Analysis and Political Studies from the University of Amsterdam. Throughout, she also studied

theatre and visual art, and she began working increasingly with sculpture and performance. This academic training is important; it returns in Misevičiūtė’s rigorous close readings of each medium she chooses to work with. Whatever this may be – theatre, dance or sculpture – the genre as we know it provides only a starting point or framework: the “standard” against which she pushes. Her latest project – currently in development – is titled *Tongue PhD* and follows from her interest in ways of gathering knowledge. It entails colliding methods of academic research with the internal and the corporal; with the tongue as an organ of knowing. In an earlier work, *Vocabulary Lesson*, 2009, Misevičiūtė explicitly references Dadaist poet and artist Tristan Tzara’s architectural costumes; Dadaism – an interdisciplinary movement hinged on performance and poetry, reactionary to horrors and societal decline around World War I – is an important precedent to keep in mind. Both Misevičiūtė and Portnoy’s work, as well as that of many of the artists associated with “Experimental Comedy Training Camp” and “Confuse the Cat,” bear the imprint of Dadaism – in absurdist performance, linguistic experimentation and oblique social critique shrouded in poetic language.

Primarily, though, Misevičiūtė is a performer whose work is rooted in the post-war Japanese tradition of *butoh*. She uses her careful study of the experimental dance technique to “create an anthropomorphic state of being and different states of intensity.” Throughout, she says, she is trying to be genderless. Though funny – giving her performances titles such as *Lord of Beef*, *I Will Rip Your Arms Off*, *SSSSSSSSSSSS* and *Slow Loris* – Misevičiūtė shows a deeper investment in gesture, movement and body than in comedy as such. *Butoh* is a very internal way of learning, highly purposeful and involving significant physical endurance: “Western theatre really goes from form to content, whereas *butoh* you fall into steps because there is a deeper reason – or a state that prescribes it.”²

Portnoy studied English and Creative Writing, and also trained as a dancer. Until 2006, he was primarily involved in the worlds of performance and dance, and in the physical

theatre scene in New York. It warrants mentioning that an infamous early moment in his life as a performer was *Soy Bomb*, where, hired as a back-up dancer for Bob Dylan's Grammy performance at Radio City Music Hall in 1998, he went rogue, tearing off his shirt to expose the word SOYBOMB scrawled on his chest while dancing erratically and completely unhinged until he was dragged off the stage. This is a notable precursor to his future career as a performance artist and self-titled "Director of Behaviour", which he includes on his CV as an early work. At the time still engaged as a choreographer, Portnoy was soon receiving invitations to visual arts projects – a more expansive realm in which, he says, he could use a wider array of media.

Portnoy's artistic ethos is made manifest in his concept of "Relational Stalinism" – it signifies, roughly, the possibility of participatory art-making that up-ends the supposed democracy of relational art, imposing restrictions and unforeseen changes on its audience via a dictatorial "Director of Behaviour". Most recently – at DOCUMENTA (13) and again at the Kitchen in 2013, Portnoy staged *27 Gnosis* – a near-impenetrable game of word play for two teams, lead by The Rigid Designator (Portnoy) and Modifa the Modifier (Misevičiūtė). Taking place in a lilac-coloured dome – or "ontic sphere" – it has been described by writer and participant Dan Fox as an "inter-disciplinary fusion of sculpture, architecture, performance, music, perfumery, audience participation and dance," in which the Rigid Designator and the Modifier implore participants to rebuild language from the broken, untethered, nearly unrecognizable vocabulary they provide. Portnoy comments that "this is me poking fun at 'knowledge production.' And artistic research, and all those terms. From the Greek definition of *gnosis*, we're after experiential knowledge, rather than theoretical knowledge, or epistemology. A kind of dense, robust, poetic knowledge."³

Partners and frequent collaborators, Misevičiūtė and Portnoy teach together and have lead both Banff Centre residencies together. Over the course of their teaching, they've noticed a great deal of interest in performance emerging in the art academies, but few of the young artists who engage with it have basic training in voice, anatomy and stage presence. This gap in performance education produces a type of performance in which reading is predominant, or in which artists will claim an "interest" in dance but will remain on the surface of the discipline. Misevičiūtė and Portnoy address this lack of formal training through their workshops at various European art schools, and more explicitly, in staging a "training camp".⁴

Like *Doored* would later do, "Experimental Comedy Training Camp" closely mimicked the structure of the comedy show. "[It] was very improv-based. There were club nights every night and you were only allowed to think of your act one hour before," says Misevičiūtė. Toronto-based artist and "Training Camp" participant Bridget Moser described the residency's intensity with two anecdotes: one night, after the comedy club, Portnoy and Misevičiūtė spurred the group to keep improvising, relentlessly, for an additional two hours; then, during the final week, they intended to put on improvised performances every night, but they had to stop after three nights: there were holes in the wall and someone had a concussion.

Did they talk about comedy? Instead Moser remembers discussions of the sublime and other topics that liberated comedy from the "joke-to-laugh" relationship. For Portnoy especially, comedy is more antagonistic, not merely a conduit to laughter. Recall, for example, the Citibank performance described above. Moser herself reacted to the shock tactics of one particularly aggressive male artist

amongst the residency participants; she snapped partway through, deciding, "Fuck you, I'm going to make people uncomfortable, too."

At Banff, the frequent workshops on the elements of performance proved important in developing a vocabulary for performing and stage conduct. Misevičiūtė would bring everyone into a conference room full of rolling office chairs; the group would do things – anything – with the simple yet often-overlooked intention of identifying one's default modes of moving and talking. Portnoy's workshops were language-oriented, asking, for example, "How do you permute an idea, how do you complicate an idea. How do you make it dumber?" Moser calls the residency an undeniable turning point, after which she became a performer. Through the workshops she became more aware of her movements in time and space; she began recording her rehearsals, fine-tuning each gesture to take place on stage or before the camera. She moved to Toronto, where other "Training Camp" participants were convening and *Doored* was beginning. Two years on, Moser's performances bear a precision of movement and a focused, nuanced engagement with her surroundings. One can see similarities in Misevičiūtė's butoh training – and Moser, too, trained as a dancer – with all aspects carefully choreographed. There is a pervasive feminist sensibility, of a body willfully entangled; a willfulness that smacks, in turn, of the rhetoric of self-improvement and lifestyle branding. Along with the familiarity of the objects and consumerist language she employs, comes the surprise of encountering poetry in such a way. Moser has since performed to over-full audiences at Mercer Union, the Rhubarb Festival and often at *Doored*.

Doored's repetitive structure nurtures frequent guests – like Neil LaPierre, the only artist who has appeared in every iteration. But Lam and McCurley also have a knack for recognizing potential new performers. In 2012, when they were invited to participate in the first *Doored*, Sebastian Butt and Charlie Murray (two-thirds of the currently dormant collective CN Tower Liquidation) were makers of performative objects, videos and scenarios – but never performance itself. Butt and Murray's first performance centred on the "nub sequencer" – a rotating platform of objects, in which each object was a character that Butt and Murray would "sing" as it came around. There were never any explicit rules to be humorous, but it was embedded in the work of the artists who came to *Doored* to perform.

Last summer, before departing for September's "Confuse the Cat", Butt and Murray were early in the arduous process of memorizing German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters' epic 30-page sound piece *Ursonate*. They had scored it phonetically across the wall of their Toronto Island studio and, when prompted, would recite in unison, "*Fumms bö wó tää zää Uu, pögiff, kwii Ee*", stretching their voices and adding resounding, thumping emphasis where they saw fit. Schwitters' "Ursonate" roughly translates to "primordial sound" – as in fundamental, in line with Misevičiūtė and Portnoy's interest in returning to basic teachings of language and movement.

Compared to "Experimental Comedy Training Camp," the residency structure was more relaxed for "Confuse the Cat". Instead of a strict comedy show format, there was the weekly "Fobfusk Club", in which each act was seven minutes and, notably, without rules. For the first iteration of the Fobfusk Club, Misevičiūtė and Portnoy simply told participating artists: "You have seven minutes to give us your confusion." By the final week, some participants were mastering increasingly complex performances, while some chose to screen video work, and others reportedly played Bartleby.



TOP:
Bridget Moser, still from *Hold
Please*, performance at Doored
14, 2014
PHOTO: YUULA BENIVOLSKI

BOTTOM:
Sebastian Butt & Charlie Murray,
still from *THFT WOM KRELM BO*,
performance at Doored 18, 2014
PHOTO: YUULA BENIVOLSKI; COURTESY OF
THE ARTISTS

Like “Training Camp”, “Confuse the Cat” unfolded through a series of workshops, with Misevičiūtė again teaching movement and gesture and Portnoy language. In the first workshop, they laid out the terrain of confusion, using it as a way to access an alternative form of knowledge, “to build worlds together”. The next workshop focused on schizophrenic language, and involved giving each participant a try at prank calling Citibank. Portnoy’s motivation for this exercise was in “balancing sense and nonsense”; in the fact that Citibank will “desperately try to find sense in whatever you throw at them”.⁵ In this case, residency participants would call and Portnoy would give prompts from what he termed speech phenomena in schizophrenic language: “the referral to the self”, “stilted language”, “completely jumping off topic”, “word approximations”, etc. The third workshop featured the movement and speech techniques that Misevičiūtė and Portnoy usually teach at art schools, which they describe as “synthesizing William Forsythe’s technique with action theatre with trying to systematize the way we improvise”. Portnoy has previously described the Forsythe technique as “thinking about every point on the body as a point of inscription.”

At the “Fobfusk Club” one Friday night near the end of the residency, it was clear that Butt and Murray had developed a new fluidity as performers and collaborators, now deep in their own particular visual language. Speaking over one another, they told me how performance figures as a constituent among other elements of their work and how they are attempting – literally – to build a language. The goal is to adopt the precision and confidence that allows anyone to enter, however obtuse the language may be.

The phrase running through this still-ongoing series of performances is *THFT WOM KRELM BO*, sturdy and satisfying gibberish in the style of Schwitters. These “words” are the building blocks of their language in development, which currently constitutes 15 words with corresponding movements and visuals. *KRELM*, for example, is gelatinous; it is always, in each performance, in the process of being defined; but it can’t be described linguistically – its definition requires motion and non-verbal sound. *BO* is a network or communicative portal between minds; it follows an arc and then attaches to the forehead of an audience member – it’s about defining language with action and passing it on. According to Butt, *BO* is about “testing the creation of weight,” and of “giving the audience something that is real, because you believe so much that these things are physical and real.” In exploring the different ways of saying these 15 words, they’re assessing where language comes into contact with improvisation – figuring out the changing states of language and objects in “the act of reacting, phrasing, creating sentences”.

By way of a conclusion, I’ll admit that I’ve developed an aversion to the word comedy when coupled with performance art. It too often refers to humour for humour’s sake, and has become the default catch-all descriptor for work that, while funny, digs its roots more deeply in the elements of performance, communication, the body or in the performer-audience relationship. The latter is especially worth noting in performance art, where historically audiences have been ignored. Performance art that borrows the structure of comedy gears itself naturally, willfully towards its audience, adopting a recognizable format that allows for experimentation without alienation.

Reflecting on why the significance of *Doored* is flattened when described simply as comedy and performance, Murray comments on “the culture of wanting to know how to designate,” though, as he says, so much of *Doored* is uncharted. Butt interjects, “But these systems have always

existed. The format of the comedic performer alleviates the performer, but also the audience. Neil LaPierre really gives that.” Murray chimes in, “Oh, we’re getting into Neil’s emotions again!” He returns to *Doored* every month, taking advantage of the repetitive nature of the comedy bar to develop his persona – in the vein of a recurring soap opera.

It all sounds surprisingly simple, and there is indeed something very much about the everyday, the “human condition” in this line of work. Everything is fodder: from the precise ways in which our bodies move in public space, to the idiosyncrasies of language and gesture we blindly adopt, to the objects we keep around us – chairs, tables, neck pillows, Lazy Susans – and the people we encounter, be they bank tellers, game show hosts, bell-ringers, doctors or linguists. Notable forbear of the genre, performance artist and comedian Michael Smith speaks of the influence of Samuel Beckett on his work, who introduced him to the notion of “loading down” – of paring down each character to an essential, intentional voice. This kind of work relies on the audience’s interpretive imagining. As Schwitters once said of *Ursonate*, “You yourself will certainly feel the rhythm, slack or strong, high or low, taut or loose. To explain in detail the variations and compositions of the themes would be tiresome in the end and detrimental to the pleasure of reading and listening, and after all I’m not a professor.”

Kari Cwynar is a curator, writer and editor based in Toronto, where she is Director of Kunstverein Toronto and Assistant Editor of *C Magazine*. She writes on contemporary art for publications and catalogues, and contributes regularly to *Frieze* and *Metropolis M*.

Endnotes

- 1 Amy Lam and Jon McCurley in email conversation with the author, December 2014
- 2 Ieva Misevičiūtė in conversation with the author, October 11, 2014
- 3 Michael Portnoy, in conversation with Jovana Stokić, *BOMB Magazine*, May 28, 2013
- 4 Michael Portnoy in conversation with the author, October 11, 2014
- 5 Ibid.