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My name is Colin, and this is Simon

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Abstract

In fragments of conversation, and in excerpts from their blog, choreographers Simon Ellis and Colin Poole talk about how their first collaborative process grappled with identity, responsibility and uncertainty in performance. This article, 'My name is Colin, and this is Simon', written in collaboration with writer Elizabeth Boyce, draws these fragmentary texts together, but does not attempt to definitively sum up Simon and Colin's work together. Instead, it gives just a glimpse into their time in the studio – itself an open-ended dialogue.

Elizabeth Boyce | Simon Ellis | Colin Poole

Colin Poole and Simon Ellis barely knew each other when they decided to collaborate. Yet even before they met in the studio, they set out to make their working process even less familiar, less comfortable. In their words: more 'dense, frightening, fun and difficult' (Ellis and Poole 2009b).

They began imagining how they could take an unaccustomed stance in relation to the audience that would, eventually, gather to see their duet, *Colin, Simon & I*. 'I wonder if Colin and I can be both onstage and in the wings – casting comment from within the space?' asked Simon, in his and Colin's process blog (Ellis 2009b). That was a thought sparked by film-maker Bill Forsyth when he castigated his younger self for being 'too full of irony' and 'hiding in the wings' (Ferguson 2008).

It's a position that must be easy for a director like Forsyth to assume, from behind the camera, but not so for Colin, a long-established independent artist in UK dance theatre, and Simon, a New Zealander whose artistic research in the United Kingdom and Australia includes live performance, dance and installation. They are accustomed to being in the audience's sights.

Colin and Simon are not the first performers to want to implicate the audience in the act of performance – they know this through their encounters with Blast Theory, Baktruppen, Jérôme Bel and others – but in the studio they began to frame this desire with talk of 'responsibility'. They grappled to understand how they could make an audience acknowledge their part in the contract between the watchers and the watched.

Their blog reveals something of their tussle with this problem. In *Small Acts of Repair* (Bottoms and Goulish 2007), Goat Island distinguishes between two types of audience: ecstatic and informed', records Simon. 'Colin talked of developing "enough space and bait and framing for them [the audience] to start doing the work" [...] Colin: "This is the deal, we are not standing in the wings commenting." [Later he said: "The only way to come out of this alive is to go in with all guns blazing"]' (Ellis and Poole 2009c).

Colin and Simon presented *Colin, Simon & I* at The Place, a centre for dance and performance in London, in September 2009. It was part of 'Touch Wood', a season of works in progress that comes about every second year when, as part of its 'Choreodrome' programme, The Place gives its studios free of charge to artists for research and development – with an emphasis on risk.

The space afforded by 'Touch Wood' became, for Colin and Simon, a space 'to question rather than to entertain' – so writes Sally Marie in the 'Touch Wood' blog.

> The capital 'R' of risk was headed by Colin Poole and Simon Ellis, with their conceptual games, which felt in the watching as if we, the audience, were complicit in some kind of dialogue rather than being danced to. It was oddly absorbing, and somehow smiley and slyly on the edge. Not everyone liked it, but lots of us loved it.
>
> (Marie 2009)

I wonder if Colin and I can be both onstage and in the wings – casting comment from within the space?
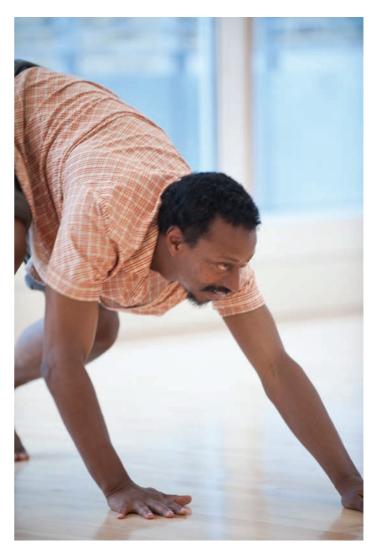
Figure 1: ©Richard Worts | www.dashdigital.biz.

Elizabeth Boyce | Simon Ellis | Colin Poole

In fragments of a conversation with the writer Elizabeth Boyce, and in excerpts drawn from their process blog (http://colin-simon.tumblr.com) (Ellis and Poole 2009a), Simon and Colin talk here about how they grappled with identity, responsibility and uncertainty in performance. This article draws these fragmentary texts together, but does not attempt to definitively sum up Simon and Colin's work together. Instead, it gives just a glimpse into their time in the studio – itself an open-ended dialogue.

Who we are and who we're meant to be: Identity and performance

'Before we begin, we'd like to clarify who we are and who we're meant to be'.

(Ellis 2009a)

Elizabeth: In *Colin, Simon & I*, you appear as yourselves – Simon Ellis and Colin Poole, the performers. But you also mislead the audience about which of you is Simon and which is Colin.

Colin: We thought we were being very sincere. But ... because there's confusion, I think people are forced to make a decision, to be responsible for choosing something.

Simon: [The audience] has a choice to ignore, to play along with the game, to shift between ignoring and playing along ... I would whisper, 'My name is Simon,' to Colin and then Colin would say, out loud, whatever I was saying. He'd say: 'My name's Simon'. Then I'd say, 'This is Colin,' whispering to him. And he'd say: 'This is Colin'.

Elizabeth: What happens to Colin and Simon during the course of the work?

Colin: I think that first invitation to view us as Simon and Colin is quite gentle and confusing, and I enjoyed that kind of confusion. After the invitation, and a certain episode where we get close in a tense and aggressive way, we then turn that invitation into more of a demand on the audience and make it clear again, or reaffirm, the context of the viewing – that Simon is the guy with the blue eyes and Colin is the black guy. And that's how we instruct the audience to view us.

Elizabeth: In the title *Colin, Simon & I*, who is 'I'?

Colin: I cannot remember how we made up our minds, but there was a difference between 'Colin, Simon & Me' and 'Colin, Simon & I', and how they might be read differently.

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My name is Colin, and this is Simon

Figure 2: ©Richard Worts | www.dashdigital.biz.

Elizabeth Boyce | Simon Ellis | Colin Poole

Simon: 'I' won because of the play on 'eyes', because we were asking people to look at particular things in the work. We were actually saying, 'You can only look at this person'.

Colin: I'm sure there were some deeper conversations going on about the privilege of 'I' over 'me'.

We're looking at you: Implicating the audience

Elizabeth: There's a note on your blog: 'Clarifying what we mean by responsibility through viewing' (Ellis, Poole and Bannerman 2009). What do you mean by this?

Simon: For my part, [a similar] question has been driving my practice for a long time – what is it that audiences bring to watching? How can I subvert watching? How can I play with the experiences of audiences? When we first talked about collaborating, I think it's fair to say that we were both really interested in what audiences bring to watching: the degree of passivity they bring; the expectations they bring. I'm not sure we knew how we were going to do it at all but I think we were both interested in bringing their watching into the foreground – so, bringing their responsibility in terms of 'making meaning' into the foreground.

Colin: I started with what was implied in the request for 'the other' to be responsible in their viewing. I was thinking more about the relationship of audience and performer. How can they see us for what we are, in the here and now? Of course, then the issue comes up of how incredibly difficult it is to 'uncondition' [sic] your mind of all those preconceptions and prejudices, filters, expectations, myths, assumptions. So, it's a starting point to say: 'Here's an ideal and now here are the material conditions'.

Elizabeth: In the space of the theatre, or of performance in general, where does power typically lie?

Colin: Usually there is some kind of convention in terms of who acts and who witnesses. I think we were quite eager to question that. So, quite early on, we were thinking about different ways of getting the audience to participate in the performance. We thought about moving them around a bit, and then I think we realized that we could try to make their lives a bit easier while still retaining this idea of a more active participation in the role of observer.

Simon: There are jokes about how much audiences dislike audience participation. There's the world of pantomime, and those kinds of things, where of course [audience participation] happens. But this

How can I subvert watching?

How can I play with the experiences of audiences?

terrain is much more where [the audience] are being pulled into questioning why they are choosing some things over others.

Colin: I think what we were doing was setting up a frame of reference for certain things to come much more to the fore in the relationship [between performers and audience]. We did not allow the lights to go down in the audience. They did not really know when it began. We were going to make it complicated for them to understand how it was going to finish. And everything in between was just going to be kind of familiar and then unfamiliar. We are talking, but who is talking? I'm looking, but then I'm winking. Everything is just familiar enough for people to question what they are looking at and what they are witnessing. I think that questioning was really one of the key things we wanted to bring about – how we can invite people to read a situation and, in a sense, to participate, rather than to passively just absorb and accept.

Simon: To wait to be moved.

What comes out of talking: Discourse as rehearsal

I'd started the day thinking we were going to organize ourselves for the showing, but we began talking about the last scene or 'cell' for the work and didn't stop until fifteen minutes before we were scheduled to begin. This has been a common situation … we start talking about the ramifications of various actions or words and then stay with that line of thinking. The discussions are not easy – we have quite distinct ways of thinking about dramaturgy, and also the 'personal' within the structure or form-content of the project. The discussions are frank, complex, and often heated. They have made me think a lot about what processes of negotiation are involved in collaborations. This is so different from the idea of making compromises, something that Elizabeth Boyce and I considered in detail as part of a residency at Performance Space [Boyce & Ellis 2005] in Sydney in 2005.

(Ellis 2009c)

Colin: I have to say it was an experiment ... We did not find it that interesting to 'dance'. That's why we talked so much. [Laughs]

Simon: One woman, who had not seen a lot of dancing, came up to me afterwards. Her question to me was 'As choreographers, how do you end up *there*?' We effectively stopped rehearsing and just ended up having discussions for about six hours a day. That evolved over time – as we got deeper

Elizabeth Boyce | Simon Ellis | Colin Poole

into understanding the consequences of what we were doing and imagining what might happen. These discussions became more complex and so that became a kind of a method. Because we were not rehearsing – we were just talking – there was not a physical rehearsal process. And so that meant that when we went to perform, we were performing, effectively, concepts – things that were incredibly well thought out but that had not been practised (well, a tiny bit – we had a showing).

Colin: We started to change our investigations from sensory explorations to just minimal engagement with an idea, from abstract starting points. We moved in the space but we started moving for a different reason – to stay within the confines of a question. And I think that shift invited more and more reflection and clarification.

Simon: It would have been easier just to let go of this concern for what audiences are responsible for. But I think we were pretty dogmatic in saying, 'No, let's keep at it. There's no point in just turning out a little dance number at the end and effectively letting go of that'. We just kept on. It was not particularly easy.

Elizabeth: It's a very interesting practice that you have set up here because, in a sense, it relates less strongly, perhaps, to the history of choreographic practice than it does to the history of philosophical practice.

Colin: It's dialectic.

Elizabeth: What comes out of all this talking?

Colin: Well, what came out of the talking was the event, for a start. What came out of it was a negotiation through that dialectic – us having to negotiate, every step of the way, our responsibility for viewing each other and being with each other.

A feeling becoming a form: Performing uncertainty

> 'A question to become a feeling, a feeling to become a form, a form to have an audience'.
> (Poole 2009)

Colin: There was no uncertainty about the structure – it was just the content that was uncertain. The structure was very set. They were loosely knotted together, these cells.

We are talking, but who is talking?

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Elizabeth: And the uncertainty existed within them?

Colin: Yes.

Simon: [Towards the end of the work] I was having a conversation with the audience about an argument that Colin and I had during rehearsal. I said, 'Would it be better if I put some music on? Here, I can dance it to some music'. The first time that happened was when we had a showing. Instead of spending the day rehearsing for the showing, we spent the day having quite a heated discussion about what it meant for Colin to 'disappear'. I think it is fair to say that we disagreed. Colin was saying that by going into the audience he effectively disappeared and I was saying, 'You don't disappear, you just are no longer visible in the space'. Actually, it does not matter what the reality of that is but what we decided for the showing was that I would somehow reflect on or reiterate this argument. The first time that happened, in the showing, I did feel incredibly awkward about it because I was not quite sure what I was supposed to say. I was not quite sure what I was aiming at. I was not quite sure what Colin wanted from me. So there was a tremendous amount of uncertainty about what I was supposed to be doing and what were the implications of what I was doing. When I went to do it in 'Touch Wood' at The Place it was more familiar to me.

Elizabeth: So you were enacting the feeling of being awkward, rather than feeling it?

Simon: Yes. How do you perform failure? Effectively, you cannot. As soon as you try to fail, and you fail, then you have succeeded in your efforts to fail. [This recalls Matthew Goulish and Tim Etchells' 'Institute of Failure' in which they celebrate the act of failing in performance (Etchells and Goulish 2002).]

Showing up: Who are we watching?

'You see … Colin is black, and I am white'.

(Ellis and Poole 2009b)

Colin: One of the disputes we had was that I felt [Simon's] awkwardness was comfortable. [To Simon] I was not convinced by your awkwardness at failing or disappearing anyway. The problem that we had was that if I was going to disappear then you were going to appear. But you wanted to disappear too. But I had spent the whole show disappearing. And so the deal was: I disappear,

'A question to become a feeling, a feeling to become a form, a form to have an audience'.

My name is Colin, and this is Simon

Figure 3: ©Richard Worts | www.dashdigital.biz.

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and you appear. That is the real heated debate we were having. I felt [Simon] was evading the appearing.

Simon: It is not that I was awkward about showing up. I did not want to be left onstage alone, because we had created a situation where I was present and Colin was absent, even though he was onstage with me. And so when he left, all it did was to underline his absence, and then it underlined my presence as this blue-eyed boy and so I felt very uncomfortable about the implications of that.

Colin: We explored a narrative – a kind of colonial narrative. That really is what our time was spent discussing, and the idea that Simon would explore 'the other' in that narrative, and I would collude with that. Appearance and disappearance became very concrete metaphors (as concrete as a metaphor can be) of what we were actually discussing and experiencing, and actually living out together. [To Simon] That article you sent me by David Williams [2009, Australian performer and writer, discussing gender equity] – you know what, he showed up for this privilege of being a man. That is what I wanted. That is the balance.

How do you perform failure?

Simon: When you say about me showing up for my privilege, I cannot disagree with you. You are right. But I did not know how to articulate that or represent that in a performance. I mean, how do you represent that without it being twee? But still, it remained my story. That is the paradox of it – it is about me showing up.

This initial development of *Colin, Simon & I* was supported by a 'Choreodrome' residency at The Place in London in the summer of 2009. To read more, go to the Colin & Simon blog: http://colin-simon.tumblr.com (Ellis and Poole 2009a).

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Simon Ellis is a New Zealand-born independent performance maker and performer with a broad practice founded on choreographic traditions. He has a practice-led Ph.D. (investigating improvisation, remembering, documentation and liveness) and is currently senior lecturer in dance at the University of Roehampton in London. His choreographies have included site-specific investigations, screendance, installation, webart, and more conventional black box works. Recent projects include *Anamnesis*, and *Desire Lines* for Place Prize 2010, www.skellis.net.

Elizabeth Boyce | Simon Ellis | Colin Poole

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Colin Poole was born in London and trained at the Laban Centre, Alvin Ailey and the Central School of Ballet. He has worked with many of England's leading dance companies and choreographers, including Phoenix and Images, Rambert Dance Company and numerous British independent companies and choreographers. His works include *Symbiosis* (1996), *Mothertongue* (1997), *Bad Faith* (2000), *Nobodies Perfect* (2001), *Cool Memories* (2001), *The box office* (2004) and *Smoke* (2005). Colin was commissioned for the Place Prize 2008. In 2009 he was commissioned to make *4s:Kin* – an all male quintet for State of Emergency.

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Elizabeth Boyce is a writer and editor who first worked with words within contemporary art practice. She trained in Fine Art (Painting) at RMIT University, in Melbourne, her birth city. Over ten years she exhibited installations and works on paper that increasingly integrated text, until writing and editing became her primary practices. At the same time, she began writing for artists in disciplines including installation and dance. She has since worked in publishing, now lives in London, and still writes for artists and arts organizations.

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