

# We Took Photographs

A choreographic residency between Paul  
Hughes, Hamish MacPherson and Simon  
Ellis in Sassari, Italy,  
6-20 May 2018

# 1. Nothing special

We didn't need to leave here with any clear outcome – a performance, an artwork, a firm plan for the future – but we're suspicious of relying on any vague appeals to unproductivity, of slowing down or lying fallow; of simply letting the richness of this process feed ourselves. We have a responsibility to consider how others might find value in what has gone on here.

It's not because we think that what happened here is special. But something did happen. Something that shook us. Something not yet nameable. Something that cannot be revoked. Something very messy, perhaps even dangerous. Something between three men working, living, playing, moving; eating at the edges of pride, shame and rejection. We inhaled and then exhaled into long silences, long spaces of listening and seeing. We groped (and perhaps were groped) in the dark. It was a little terrifying. We wanted to leave it, but we wanted to stay in it. It was seductive and repellent. Yet within the stress, the awkwardness, the silences, the fear, the jokes that didn't quite sit right and the expressed desires biting at cross purposes, we noticed something shifting. What shifted was not some romantic breakthrough or a sense of common purpose. Fuck breakthroughs. Fuck common purpose. It was darker and more fragile than the usual shitty tropes of collaboration.

So we ask ourselves: why would anyone be interested in reading this? We went on a residency together and stepped on each other's toes – this is hardly unique. But rather than shrugging this off, we think there might be some value in sticking with this writing; some reason to risk its earnestness and narcissism. That we might learn something in an attempt to stick with and articulate these feelings of shame, anger and grief. Something shifted, and the shift was fleeting and fragmented. How can we report on this shift; notice and communicate one's own trauma as-it-is-happening? And to whom are we communicating: before whose eyes are we trying to understand ourselves and make ourselves known?

## 2. Old Boys Club

A teacher (Simon) and a student (Hamish) get on well together. The student graduates, the teacher gets more students. The teacher invites the former student back to teach a class; he and one of the new students (Paul) get along too. They become friends. This new student also gets on with the teacher. The teacher leaves the university, and the new student graduates. All three – the former teacher, and the two former students – keep in touch: as pairs and sometimes even as a three. They talk to each other about their work. They ask for and offer one another advice. They are all white men, middle or upper-middle class. They are all interested in choreography, artistic research, power and race.

The former teacher has some colleagues (Igor Urzelai and Moreno Solinas) who run a space called S'ALA<sup>1</sup> in Sardinia, in a town called Sassari. He asks the two former students whether they would be interested in spending a couple of weeks there working together. They meet a couple of times to discuss this; they decide to go, but not to plan too much in advance about what they will do.

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1 s-ala.com

### 3. Building the floor as you dance

We play a game called Fluxx<sup>2</sup>. It's a card game without any fixed rules: each of the cards can change how you play, and even how you can win the game. Sometimes long and sometimes short, it is strategic, chaotic, ridiculous and fun.

Our collaboration begins a little like Fluxx; we start with nothing more than a desire to come together. The rules of how we will work together are yet to be set. The goal – to make a piece of work, to research a particular topic – is still open. As we go on, each of us suggests activities and ideas. Desires for certain outcomes are named, and then change. We find ourselves working in tandem at one moment and then at cross-purposes at another. We insist, we make compromises, we discard what we once thought was important. But unlike Fluxx, these changes and values aren't clearly represented by a deck of cards that sits between us. We discover and express the changes and values to one another through incompleteness, ambiguity, uncertainty and contradiction.

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2 [www.looneylabs.com/games/fluxx](http://www.looneylabs.com/games/fluxx)

What intuition do we call on as we try to make sense of these seemingly unfathomable desires? We notice our feelings of excitement, defensiveness and frustration. We ask one another for clarification, offering words, ideas and references to see if they resonate; or we keep silent and give space for the others to work out something between them. It's not a neat back-and-forth dialogue about some particular topic: it's quite dizzying. Perhaps past experience of movement improvisation makes this a bit easier for some of us to bear with; but it feels a bit like we are trying to build the floor as we dance.

Perhaps this is what we are doing here: paying close attention to the floor. As we figure out how we want to be together, we sift for shared values: it's a mess of pride, power, frustration, tip-toeing and toes being stepped on. We're trying to not take for granted the frameworks with which we think, and trying not to impose these frameworks on others. Without being able to see into another's head (or even our own, for that matter), we can only attend to the disjoints, uncertainties and the confusions. Without reaching for any particular conclusion, we hope to better understand how we encounter one another: how we support one another, or cause harm.

## 4. Joking

We are exposed as we try to make sense of our commonalities and differences, as we shift through ideas, acquaintances and allegiances. We make ourselves vulnerable and must protect ourselves. Small-talk, gossip, wit and camp offer not just pleasures, but tools for us to tentatively feel at the edges of each other.

But sometimes jokes are just too easy. We deflect, we defend, we protect, we pretend. Joking reveals judgement without ever having to call yourself a judge. Joking is a habit of avoidance between men. If I am joking, and if you are listening to my joking, then at least we don't have to know with any certainty what's really going on in the room. We can relax into the idea that we all understand what is happening without anyone really understanding what is going on. Diminish, elevate, postpone, prevaricate.

*The male, totally physical, incapable of mental rapport, although able to understand and use knowledge and ideas, is unable to relate to them, to grasp them emotionally: he does not value knowledge and ideas for their own sake (they're just means to ends) and, consequently, feels no need for mental companions, no need to cultivate the intellectual potentialities of others. – Valerie Solanos, S.C.U.M. Manifesto<sup>3</sup>*

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3 [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SCUM\\_Manifesto](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SCUM_Manifesto)

## 5. Risk

We don't even know yet that we are taking a risk. Oh sure, of course, anything new involves a certain amount of risk, and risk is valorised in the arts beyond belief. Fuck risk: we came here on a whim really. But then we found ourselves in what felt like irreconcilable places. These were places where each of us did not know whether to speak, whether to stay silent, or whether just to quit.

What are the stakes? Obviously everything we do has resonances and politics. It's not enough to shrug and say it doesn't matter, that it's just a residency. But equally some kind of indifference is required – some space from pressure, from knowing, from knowing the importance of what we're working with – if we are to be able to pick things up and test them in ways we can't yet fully understand: a permission for carelessness. But perhaps this is only a pretence at carelessness though. How much can a bunch of white men really permit themselves to not care? The privilege of carelessness – what are you not caring about, and who else is doing that work so you don't have to?

What's the risk? There's no risk, let's just try it. But of course, there is risk. There always is.

## 6. Portraits

We took photographs of each other. At first, just an idea to get something going. Then, in a desire to mark what was happening to each of us, as we began to recognize that something was happening to all of us. Hundreds and hundreds of photographs: playful, absurd, dark, overexposed, hot, cold, blue, red, serious, melodramatic, out of focus, in focus; you get the idea.

We asked one another: what might this rather than that image mean to the person before the camera? How do we want to see them? What can they not see in themselves, not bear to see? As we were being photographed we thought: what will they see in me? Can they see what I want them to see, how I want to be seen? How do they want to see me? As we photographed we said: shift your position. I like him like that. It doesn't look like him anymore. He looks so feminine. Are you comfortable? Can you take your shirt off? Do we need to try something else? Do you think we've already got it?







## 7. Openness

Of course we need to be open to stuff when working together, when making something together. Open heart, open mind, blah blah. But openness is a lie designed to make people feel good about themselves and about collaboration. Openness is a facade that you quickly learn how to perform, and that is very rarely questioned.

How open are we really? How closed do we need to get before we make ourselves available to what is really going on? If the goal here is that we can discover and commit to an idea, to a set of questions, to a process – then maybe openness isn't particularly useful. Openness means no decisions will get made, that we don't have to make any decisions; that there are things we don't need to say even if they are honest feelings. It might feel nice to be open, but we need to learn when to shut up, to put something to one side, and to work with what we are collectively privileging in the room.

To claim openness is to mask whatever it is that we are closed to. We need to be open about what is closed: being closed to things is necessary.

## 8. Touch

Wanting to touch, not wanting to touch. Not wanting to want to touch. Wanting the want to touch. Wanting touch to be simple, wanting touch to be just touch, wanting the work to be just work. Noticing wants while working. Working on wanting, on recognizing what I want. Working on noticing what I'm giving and taking, and trying to figure out what they understand from all of this: how they understand this touching, this hugging, this looking, these pleasures. This smelling and being smelled. Being pressed. Being shaken. Being flipped. Grabbing. Being grabbed. A demand to work intuitively. What training can I draw from when touching other men's bodies? Can one say: "I'm not sure I'm going to be able to act responsibly with this work"? There's embarrassment and fear, but it's not just internalised shame about my desires. Gay panic doesn't even need desire: just the possibility of it, the threat of it. Do I desire? What kinds of pleasures do I find in this? Sometimes it's not so easy to separate them out.

Can one say: "Ok, I risk being irresponsible here. I don't know for sure: but I will keep trying to notice and pause and let go and retry"? An opportunity to practice responsibility; to take responsibility of this irresponsibility. To test and learn other ways to touch and be touched by men.

And then: the generosity. To hear this, and to have continued to offer touch, to have been available for (casual, clumsy, absent-minded, unpracticed) touch. To permit complex touch as we try to address the complexities of touch.

## 9. The individual

My consciousness is the centre of my experience. How else can I act but from my own being? For sure: you and I are always entangled, and there's no easy way to cleanly separate out the individual. I am always in this flow of us, and my observations can only be in that flow too. But in this rush of togetherness, we also need to carve out some space to listen to what each of us is feeling and thinking. Not just so that we don't misrepresent ourselves. I need to have some understanding of what I really want here – or what I'm avoiding – before I can be sure of how and when I might be coercing you. Things can go so fast, especially when driven by the ever-present lure of wanting to appear competent or powerful or clever or kind: that I belong or that I can keep up. To protect one another, we might need to protect our ability to listen closely to what's actually happening.

## 10. Tip-toeing

After all the work we've done trying to attend to what has been going on between us, we can still feel something in the room. Something unspoken, something hesitant. Some things we can't look at or speak about or even really think about directly. We notice ourselves continuing to tip-toe.

It seems more than a little arrogant to expect any neat resolutions when dealing with the huge, subtle and explicit violences of masculinity.

How much can any one room take, and how much can we give? Given the other relationships in our lives, how much time and energy can we give to this three: does committing to this thing here mean I compromise what is over there?

## 11. Being men

I wonder what these things – all of them – have to do with being men, and more particularly white men. It's just so banal to speak from this position about shame, guilt, fragility, fear and rejection. Paul posted on the wall of the kitchen a piece of paper with the following words written on it: "men stop brutalising themselves". And on that same wall are these words by bell hooks in her book *The Will to Change*<sup>4</sup>:

*The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem.*

She also wrote:

*They have to be intimate with themselves, learn to feel and to be aware of their feelings.*

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4 hooks, bell (2004) *The Will to Change*. New York: Atria Books, p.66

If nothing else these two weeks we have felt things and we have seen each other feeling things. And as we felt more, felt differently, felt fear and rejection and shame, we took photographs.









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