

## **Scholars on a Picnic: Dada m'dada. DaDa mhm dada Da**

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### **Premise**



"If the world were clear, art would not exist." -- Albert Camus

This paper will explore the live performance of *Scholars on a Picnic: A Generative Ballet in Three Parts* through the lens of generative arts practice, algorithmic art, chance procedures and Dada montage. I will discuss the ways in which *Scholars on a Picnic* utilizes the theory and practice of Dada, as well as looking specifically at the philosophical writings of the absurd by Albert Camus.

### **1. Collaborative Live Art Performance**

As a visual artist, I began my career making work using traditional processes of sculpture using wood, metal, casting and assemblage. As I became focused on the process of making art rather than the product, my work then began to shift between disciplines such as performance, installation, video and object-making as well as using the Internet as a space filled with media objects that flow in a stream of information to be used as found objects that can be juxtaposed, assembled and deconstructed. My current artistic practice also explores my interest in auto-generated work, computer coding and network culture, as well as an iterative generative process involving painting, drawing, printmaking. I will now outline the collaborative live art performance entitled *Scholars on a Picnic: A Generative Ballet in Three Parts*, and then discuss the methodology of using chance and indeterminism in relation specifically to the Act 2 Entre'acte of *Scholars on a Picnic: A Generative Ballet in Three Parts*.

*Scholars on a Picnic: A Generative Ballet in Three Parts*, is a live performance that incorporates chance, algorithms and game play to determine its parameters. In the post WWII period two very different games were developed that demonstrate the precarious position we find ourselves in at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, stuck between possible world destruction (nuclear annihilation, climate change) and the potential peace (universal income, racial, religious and gender equality). We take as our starting point, the game *La Conquête du Monde* (The Conquest of the World) or as it was later called, *Risk*, the Game of Global Domination, which was developed in the late 1950s by writer/filmmaker Albert Lamorisse. Our second influence comes from the *World Game* or *World Peace Game*, an educational game developed by Buckminster Fuller in 1961 to challenge the notion of dominant nation states and to create solutions to problems like over population, world hunger, and now climate change. Our ballet is situated within the struggle between these two opposing possibilities, between brute force of capital/power and the peaceful sharing of resources and education, that are played out as both individual dilemmas and a societal call to arms. Our three protagonists, each representing a different philosophical approach to artistic/scholarly practice. I will be the 21st century dadaist, and my fellow performers Jay Needham, the ecological composer and Michel Leigh the feminist historian. We interact within the performance space using predetermined movements based on rules of play as we move through the two game concepts. Sounds are programmed using algorithmic processes incorporating chance and indeterminism to coordinate and determine who moves, how and for how long. Each of the three acts of the ballet are associated with specific historical moments in time, Act 1 Setting out the Picnic - The Battleground, 1755 to 1945, Act 2 Entre'acte - The Free-for-All, 2017, Act 3 Food Coma - Peaceful Slumber, 1957-1970.

## 2. Chance, Uncertainty and Contingency

“There is no such thing as chance. A door may happen to fall shut, but this is not by chance. It is a conscious experience of the door, the door, the door, the door.”

(From *Lieschen* by Kurt Schwitters)

The Act 2 Entre'acte of *Scholars on a Picnic: A Generative Ballet in Three Parts*, uses chance as a generative process organize the composition of live art events. There is uncertainty as to the sequence of events, as the work develops its own composition based on the laws of chance. Act 2 Entre'acte bridges the Dada anger and frustration at the chaotic global destruction of post-WWI Europe, and our burgeoning neo-Dada anger and psychological stresses of our present age of Brexit, the presidency of Donald J. Trump, rampant nuclear proliferation and climate change. We find ourselves in a continual state of alertness, sleeping less due to overwork and insomnia. We live in a time of false memories and fake news, where elected officials can repeat the lies so often we begin to forget the truth. What was a radical juxtaposition of images in a Dada photomontage has become the mundane method of acquiring knowledge in our daily existence as we experience the overload of networked information sending waves of data to our laptops, tablets, and cell phones. We live in a world today that seems to be organized by the cynical rules of the game of *Risk*, and not the optimism of Fuller's

World Game. In 1917, Dadaist Jean Arp composed a collage by shuffling torn scraps of paper, and gluing them down just as they fell. [ 1 ]



*Jean (Hans) Arp*  
*Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance)*  
1917. Torn paper, 19 1/8 x 13 5/8" (48.5 x 34.6 cm)

This work created according to the Laws of Chance, calls into question long-held assumptions about artistic authorship, originality and skill. This work is made from a process that embraces uncertainty to create a contingent object. Today the events of our daily lives feel absurd, random, uncertain and contingent. As Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, the first wife of artist Francis Picabia, said of Dada, "The ability of the unconscious to reconcile opposites is nowhere so evident as in Dada, for within a periphery of nonsense the ridiculous and the profound were made to evince each other: "Dada wished to destroy the reasonable frauds of men and recover the natural, unreasonable order. Dada wished to replace the logical nonsense of the men of today with an illogical nonsense. That is why we beat the Dadaist bass drum with all our might and trumpeted the praises of unreason... Dada like nature is without meaning. Dada is for infinite meaning and finite means." [ 2 ] The ballet *Scholars on Picnic* achieves a similar experience of this Dada cognitive dissonance of living in a world of logical nonsense while simultaneously wanting to replace it with illogical nonsense.

### 3. Chance Methodology

There are three methods of chance that I have used in my auto-generated visual art that has influenced the chance procedures in the development of the ballet, *Scholars on a Picnic*. I create digital collages by scraping the web using computational algorithms organized under the umbrella concept of *Cruft*, to then take apart, juxtapose, recycle, and interrupt the relentless flow of media on the Internet to reveal a relationship in which we don't simply consume media, but are also consumed by it. Chance is used in three different ways to auto-generate these *Cruft* .

#### 3.1 Random Event / Selection

Using the Internet as a large database of flowing information, my work simple goes out to the network and selects images, audio files or text from specific web sites. The constantly changing information inherently makes the scraped media a random event. For this example I will use the source image for an auto-generated work entitled *Darkling Cruft (an eye on dangerous)*. The computer program that generates this work captures an image every hour from surveillance cameras watching the streets of New York City. By the nature of a constant video feed, this selected image will always be random with various people and vehicles within the frame.



*Randomly selected source image from a New York City CCTV camera.*

### **3.2 Mutation / Transformation**

An analogy to a Darwinian form of evolutionary mutation, several source images are digitally manipulated and transformed into an animation. Nature itself is structured on indeterminacy, from evolutionary processes to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics which states that the more precisely the position of some particle is determined, the less precisely its momentum can be known, and vice versa.



*Started in 2017 with daily updates at 47 minutes past every hour  
Source: CCTV Cameras in the City of New York*

<http://www.robertspahr.com/work/darkling/>

### 3.3 Iterative Processes

An iterative process where either a digital or analog image is used as a starting point for a repetitive round of exploration and discovery. With each generation of new work, surprises develop, and with continued repetitions there is a risk of boredom. Pushing through this boredom, and continuing iterations can sometimes produce a new state of mind which can reveal new avenues of inquiry that were not at first apparent.



*Erebus: Watching the Dreams of Others #1*  
Woodcut print, 7" x 7"  
2017, Signed and dated on the back.

<http://www.robertspahr.com/work/erebus/>

## 4. Contingent Moments

The chance processes in both my recent auto-generated work and those generating compositional structure in the ballet *Scholars on a Picnic* create a contingent art object and live art experience. Their potential as art is in flux and this fluidity reflects our false memories, fake news, and a world where facts are contingent. This art work becomes a residue documenting this contingent moment as we bear witness to the breaking news coming out of Donald Trump's White House. In the age of Trump, there is no other news. "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest - whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories - comes afterwards. These are games." [3] There are so many distractions; reality TV; social media; and the 24/7 cable news cycle and we are in information overload as we experience a global psychological crisis. A crisis that the philosophy of "the absurd" seeks to describe. A world where we tend to seek a meaning to life, searching for its inherent value, only to discover our inability to find any.

## 5. References

1. *Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance)*. Jean (Hans) Arp. Retrieved November 13, 2017, from: [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/jean-hans-arp-untitled-collage-with-squares-arranged-according-to-the-laws-of-chance-1916-17](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/jean-hans-arp-untitled-collage-with-squares-arranged-according-to-the-laws-of-chance-1916-17)
2. Buffet-Picabia, Gabrielle. "Some Memories of Pre-Dada: Picabia and Duchamp" Edited by Robert Motherwell. The Documents of Modern Art series. Wittenborn. 1949. p. 294.
3. Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus, Absurdity and Suicide*. Vintage Books. 1955. p. 3.