Hot & Heavy: A search for new futures amidst the beat of a broken-down washing machine

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Abstract

There is no denying that across all continents and industries, we are living with climate change and that systemic change needs to happen in order to minimise the impact of the Anthropocene. The interactive multi-art experience *Hot & Heavy* explores queer new worlds where domesticity has been made strange, appliances are defamiliarised, and the casual horrors of human production lines and capitalist consumption are vividly transformed. *Hot & Heavy* emerged out of a creative research process guided by Theory U as a theoretical framework. The creative practice project aims to make visible issues of transnational labour, heteronormative individualism, and the ecological impacts of consumerism. In *Hot & Heavy,* we use digital technologies, projection, and digital instrument design to heighten the audience experience. The queer dance floor becomes a metaphor for community, diversity, inclusivity, and a safe space to explore new beginnings. Collective performance is used as a practice of shifting from 'ego-systems to eco-systems' – a transformational space where the audience moves from individualism to collectivism.

Keywords

Theory U, Systems Theory, Critical Performance Art, Discobedience, Activism, New Interfaces for Musical Expression.

Introduction

In 2023, the Copernicus Climate Change Service reported the hottest October globally on record (since 1940). [9] From where we write in Queensland, Australia, 80 massive bushfires blaze as an early warning for the season ahead. [1] There is no denying that across all continents and industries, we are living with climate change and that systemic change needs to happen in order to minimise the impact of the Anthropocene. If we are not talking about climate change within our industry of electronic art, we are dwelling in a realm of delusion.

The electronics industry is built on low paid, feminised transnational labour, using the extractive process of mining to produce the electronic tools we have become reliant upon to create. [22, 23] Electronic art is supported by football field sized bunkers storing our software, digital artwork and NFTs on servers that require massive amounts of fossil fuel.

[13] Technology might just save us, but it must first address its environmental impact and transition towards sustainable energy sources.

At the same time, artists are well placed to bear witness to this current climate. [15] To use creativity and storytelling to explore alternatives and communicate the issues. To inspire, motivate and recruit for the climate movement. These are all tools readily available to the artist that can be effectively utilised at this crucial point in time. According to Boulton [6]

> Under the global Future Earth initiative, a team of around 60,000 scientists and social scientists has been assembled to understand and report on the physical, tangible dimensions of the problem. I argue we need 60,000 arts and humanities experts to focus upon the intangibles – the communication, engagement and meaning-making aspects of the problem.

As digital artists who remain critical of our own work and ecological impact, we collaborated with a team of changemakers, dancers, musicians, and community members to create a new multi-artform performance work, entitled *Hot & Heavy.* The work emerged out of a creative research process guided by Theory U as a theoretical framework. [10, 11, 20] In *Hot & Heavy* we have attempted to create a performance space that highlights the relational dimensions of capitalism. The work makes visible issues of transnational labour, heteronormative individualism, and the ecological impacts of consumerism. We are indeed, as Rainford [18, p.4] has argued, 'indebted to the structures' we are criticising, for without patriarchal capitalism there may be no factory in sight. It is from within this place that we (audience and performers) try to witness, agitate, and co-create, speculating on possible alternative futures. *Hot & Heavy* is positioned in the field of research associated with the Presencing Institute community and is in conversation with works that attempt to foreground social, political, and environmental issues as a means of social transformation. [10, 11, 15, 17, 19, 20] In this paper, we give a brief background of Theory U and the methodology used to create the work *Hot & Heavy*. We then provide an analysis of the outcomes and discuss potential future opportunities for the next iterations of the work. Throughout the article, we employ a series of reader notes that invite you, the reader, to engage with additional content that was created throughout the development process.

Theory U

Theory U posits that through an engaged, experiential process of critical reflexivity, human actors are able to become self-aware and develop empathy for each other and thus be able to connect to and be part of radical collective change-making. Informed by methods of systems thinking, action research and awareness raising, it has been developed by the Presencing Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. [17] According to Scharmer [20, p.x], Theory U creates a framework and method for exploring and "implementing awareness-based change". With an awareness of the self and the greater systems at play, we can collectively co-create radical systems change. [20]

Methodology

Throughout the creative development process of *Hot & Heavy,* we explored how to build safe containers for play and exploration and to create moments of social acupuncture within a live interactive performance space. [14, 20] The research project was driven by the following central research questions: 1. How can relational constellations of labour be felt and exposed in the creation of an interactive audiovisual experience? 2. How can we co-create an enduring collective experience and speculate upon possible futures?

Over a twelve month period a core creative team engaged in three creative development periods that culminated in a live multi-artform experience and performance. This iterative cycle of development and play allowed the creative team to reflect upon the complex interaction of technology, aesthetics, context, and awareness. The research was informed by reflexive practice at each prototyping phase as we each sought to understand our own blind spots and how these may be used within the experience to create moments of critical reflection and awareness for the audience. Focus groups within the core team were used to explore themes of labour, capitalism, heteronormativity, climate change and speculative futures. Key learnings from these focus groups were then embedded within the design, performance, aesthetics, and sonic elements of the experience.

Taking inspiration from contemporary works such as Sleep No More and the Counterpilot Collective, *Hot & Heavy* attempts to transcend traditional performance spaces and create opportunities for audiences to interact with and become part of the performance. [2, 8] Using a range of digital technologies and techniques in sound, sculptural projection, and movement, we designed the media art elements to highlight the messaging and create opportunities for audience immersion. The work aims to provoke reflection and inspire action in response to urgent climate challenges posed by the Anthropocene.

Outcome

Reader note: we invite you to watch this [short documentary video](#) before reading the next section. This video was filmed over the two public performances of *Hot & Heavy* at the Cairns Festival and will provide a visual reference for the text in the following section.[1]

Hot & Heavy premiered at Cairns festival in 2023 to a live audience. The venue was a repurposed oil tank in the Tanks Arts Centre in Cairns, Far North Queensland, Australia. Following a site induction and through structured invitation by professional performers, the audience was split into four groups and invited to perform a series of tasks in four discrete performance spaces that mirrored the lifecycle of a product in a capitalist system. Each space represented a moment within the lifecycle of a domestic product: 1) the factory; the constant creation of capitalism's merchandise 2) the domestic; yearning and worship for the shiny new product 3) the landfill; built-in obsolescence 4) the void; post purchase regret. These spaces ran simultaneously in ten minute rotating cycles, repeating four times.

Figure 1. The factory washing line. [4]

Digital technologies were used in myriad ways in each performance space to create opportunities for connection to the thematic elements and immerse the audience in the environment. In the factory space, for example, sound design, acoustic instrument design and projection mapping were all used to bring attention to the labour involved in the construction and assembly of everyday household items. Washing lines were strung high above the audience and filled with three rows of white business shirts, representing the power and status of white-collar workers in a patriarchal capitalist system. [7] Images of factory workers were projection mapped onto the shirts on the line and revealed the 'nimble fingers' of the transnational labourers who work alongside robots and plant machinery in often dangerous conditions to create the technologies of a modern world. Lines of text were also projected onto washing lines that the audience

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Figure 2. Massive Choreography – Agitate. [5]

could interact with, allowing words such as; long hours, repetitive tasks, and back pain to be revealed (see Figure 2). The soundscape in the factory space was created by layering and modulating audio samples of industrial environments. The inherent rhythms in the samples conformed to a steady beat and were augmented by live percussive hits created by the audience interacting with lo-fi acoustic iron instruments. Sounds were generated by hitting and scraping an iron on a bare metal ironing board. The percussive soundtrack was led by a video loop of a projected factory supervisor, who demonstrated the required gestures.

Following Theory U, the artistic intent behind the first four performance spaces was to create immersive technologically mediated environments where audiences could see and experience the labour, providing an opportunity for critical self-reflection on their role in the capitalist system. [20] Further, we aimed to reveal the patriarchal capitalist structures that have created offshore labour markets where workers are hired based on gendered essentialist stereotypes of women workers being obedient and having small enough hands or nimble fingers to work on the construction of small electronic components. [16, 22, 23]

In the final performance space, the dancefloor, the audience was brought together as a collective, to co-create and speculate on possible futures. Here we wanted to provide the audience with a framework for transformation and drew on the core creative team's personal experience of performing live music for a queer dancefloor. Queer music and dance spaces have historically been a critical space for identity formation and collective power. [12] In *Hot & Heavy* we use the queer dance floor as a metaphor for community, diversity, inclusivity, and a safe space for audiences to explore

collective new beginnings. For example, the massive choreography work entitled *Agitate* invited the audience to sing and dance together, creating a giant washing machine inspired whirlpool of resistance to capitalist and patriarchal structures. The audience formed concentric circles around a central movement facilitator and were invited to move together as a collective (see Figure 2). It is on the dance floor that we create community and an overwhelming sense of the power of the collective. A camera suspended above the dance floor projected the live feed of the movement onto a large projection screen behind the band stage, allowing the audience to visually reflect on the power of the collective movement. Only through the cyclic and circular movements of the entire cast and audience was the transformation made possible.

We used technological and performance elements in the dancefloor space as a practice of shifting from 'ego-systems to eco-systems' – a transformational space where the audience moves from individualism to collectivism. [20] The familiar was made strange by hacking and repurposing items from the domestic space. [3, 16] Washing machines on wheels were fitted with small pickup microphones and used by performers in a drumline. Irons and ironing boards were hacked and fitted with a range of sensors to modulate and create parts of the music of the live electronic band. [16] Through repurposing gendered domestic objects such as the iron and ironing board, we create a chance for audiences to witness transformation in action.

Reader note: We invite you to watch the instructional video for Agitate that was shared with audiences upon purchase of a ticket to the show. We encourage you to learn the choreography and embody *Agitate*.[2]

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[2] https://youtu.be/iwl86yP8KBw?si=ulYp13kR6kZcT9Hw

Opportunities

Hot & Heavy largely sits within an engaged performance space and has the potential to connect and mobilise communities. In future offerings of the work, we hope to create an additional *After Party* experience in partnership with local social and environmental organisations. The *After Party* would enable audiences to reflect on their learnings and identify opportunities to use these in their lives and communities in the future.

There also exists an opportunity for the massive choreography piece *Agitate* to be used as a form of discobedience. Extinction Rebellion used choreography performed to the popular disco song Stayin Alive by the Bee Gees, to mobilise thousands of people in the streets of Melbourne in 2019 in a 'Disco Disruption'. The non-violent action aimed to disrupt regular business and bring awareness to the group's call for immediate action on the climate emergency. [21] Finally, immersive, and interactive technologies could be further developed to enhance the transformational experience of the audience.

Conclusion

Through the creation of *Hot & Heavy*, we have identified the need for ongoing creative practice research that transforms theoretical perspectives into creative outputs. Creative works have the potential to bridge the gap between academy and industry and to contribute to social and climate change movements. Works that use creative technology to enhance the experience of the audience, address social and ecological issues and also challenge us to speculate upon future possibilities. *Hot & Heavy* will continue its iterative cycle of development, using Theory U as an applied framework to steer discourse where communities come together to agitate and co-create queer new future imaginings.

Acknowledgements

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Author Biographies

Patty Preece

Patty Preece is a musician, electronic music producer, Ableton Live certified trainer and sound artist who works with hacked domestic objects to critically explore aesthetic and relational hierarchies at the intersection of sound, gender and technology. Preece's practice spans performance, instrument design, production and most recently installation. This Cairns based artist creates performance ecosystems using discarded domestic steam irons, ironing boards, DIY sensors and electronics. Their live performances engage with augmented domestic objects, noise and the relationship of performer, instrument, and context. Preece's creative practice research explores themes of labour, instrument design, sonic cyberfeminisms and sound art. Preece has a Master of Research and is an associate lecturer in the CQUniversity Bachelor of Music program.

Melania Jack

Melania Jack is a queer, multimedia artist working within music, digital art, projection art & mapping, and performance. The conceptual framework of the visual elements of Melania's projects employs a glitch feminism lens to explore themes of gender socialisation, equity, and labour. Imagery drawn from popular culture and social media is sampled and collaged to explore these themes. Projections on familiar domestic materials (tea towels, irons, ironing boards) are used to create windows into the unseen labour. Melania has a Master of Creative Industries and is the programs coordinator for NorthSite Contemporary Arts.