

Proposal for Artist Talk – “Counterpilot Made You Do It”

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Abstract

Counterpilot is an award-winning collective of transmedia performance-makers based in Brisbane. Over the past decade, they have developed a unique practice of interactive performance that activates audiences with a refreshed perception of time and space. In this artist talk, director Nathan Sibthorpe will introduce Counterpilot’s practice to the ISEA community by sharing three key performance works – *Crunch Time* (2018), *Truthmachine* (2019), and *Pigeon Fool* (2024). Sibthorpe will discuss a theoretical framework from a makers’ perspective, framing the works in relation to traditions of autoteatro, notions of intermediality, and the neuroscience of time. Through this discussion, Sibthorpe will highlight ways in which Counterpilot’s practice evokes the curatorial themes of ISEA 2024, particularly in relation to the audience’s experience of relative time and intermedial space.

Keywords

Live Performance, Autoteatro, Intermediality, Perception of Time, Neuroscience, Transmedia Storytelling, Temporal Shifts, Place-making, Artistic Practice, Participatory Art.

Counterpilot

Over the past decade, Counterpilot has developed a unique practice of interactive contemporary performance that uses rich technical design, heightened gameplay, and transmedia storytelling to activate participants as central protagonists. By provoking a unique interpersonal experience that demands presence, Counterpilot aims to create a refreshed sense of our immediate present. Live performance exists only in the here and now – this practice seeks to emphasise the here-ness and now-ness of our circumstances in order to challenge our participation in everyday civic life.

In this artist talk, director Nathan Sibthorpe will introduce three key performance works that have defined Counterpilot’s body of work. Alongside these exemplars, Sibthorpe will discuss a theoretical framework that has informed the practice from a makers’ perspective. Key concepts regarding autoteatro, intermediality, and the neuroscience of time will serve to illustrate a rationale for performance that seeks to recontextualise time and space.

Theoretical Framework

Counterpilot is greatly influenced by the tradition of automatic instructional theatre established by Ant Hampton and Silvia Mercuriali as ‘Autoteatro’. [4] In these works,

instructions delivered to unrehearsed participants serve as “trigger[s]” for a subsequently self-generating performance”. [4] Without imposing fiction or artifice, the participants are empowered to act as authentic performers both for each other, and for themselves. The resulting experiences are inherently self-aware and valorise the ephemeral nature of performance – each moment is unrepeatably authentic.

In contributing to the evolution of this form, Counterpilot plays with complex media design as a way of heightening the circumstances around audience instruction. These relationships can be better understood with Chapple & Kattenbelt’s observations about intermediality, where the “bodies and minds of the audience” serve as sites of meaning alongside any other media present in a performance work. [2]

Counterpilot works exist only in the space between form and audience. This speaks to an intermedial space that is only made available for participants to occupy during the temporary circumstances of a performance. A sense of place defined by theatricality.

In further examining here-ness and now-ness, Counterpilot also draws influence from the neuroscientist David Eagleman, who suggests the human brain is incapable of perceiving any given moment with true immediacy. [3] Though we may assume our perception of the world is a live feed, our brain in fact has to accumulate various sets of sensory data which process at varying different speeds. We can’t synchronise data from our assorted sense systems immediately, so our brain has to create “a retrospective interpretation of what happened” about a tenth of a second after the reality of its circumstance. [3] We’re caught in a lag, but we don’t notice it because we’ve never known any different.

Given that “now” isn’t something we genuinely experience, Alan Burdick suggests it’s something we have to construct – the *feeling* of now. [1] Time without sensory stimulation can’t be clearly perceived – but theatre serves to fill our time with something that demands we perceive it. An elaborate declaration of *now*. A quality of presence that may feel somehow larger than life.

Through implicating an audience in heightened circumstances where they are a primary site of meaning, Counterpilot is recontextualising time and space. In this way of being together, Counterpilot challenges participants to observe their own participation, and to reflect on the ways in which they relate to stimulus and to each other as human beings.

Key Performance Works

This dynamic can be seen most notably in three of Counterpilot's interactive performance works – *Crunch Time* (2018), *Truthmachine* (2019), and *Pigeon Fool* (2024).



Figure 1. *Crunch Time* – Production photo by Dave D'Arcy

In *Crunch Time*, twelve participants share a five-course meal around a projector-mapped dining table. [5] Between each course, they democratically vote on every ingredient to be used for the next dish. The resulting ingredients are delivered to a nearby kitchen, where a guest chef does their best to fashion the choices into an edible meal. Guest chefs are rarely trained – instead of culinary professionals, the project co-opts guests from public positions of leadership. Politicians, artistic directors, and CEOs are typically the face of the experiment, bearing responsibility for making the meal work.

Throughout the performance, participants watch the guest chefs through live video on their plates. Voting rounds are conducted with fast-paced animation and responsive tabletop objects. A disembodied voice instructs the proceedings, but otherwise participants are given ample space to connect with each other over a meal, and to encounter the themes of democratic discomfort on their own terms.



Figure 2. *Truthmachine* – Production photo by Kate O'Sullivan

In *Truthmachine*, one brave participant volunteers to be interrogated while hooked up to a working polygraph machine. [6] Biometric sensors turn their body's physiological state into a live soundscape, which is heard through headphones by the remaining participants. Between rounds of questioning that seek to invoke social shame, the audience act as a jury, considering results from the polygraph machine and voting for whether they believe the subject-in-question has been telling the truth.

Seeking to interrogate notions of truth in a post-truth world, the performance gradually introduces all participants to the history of the polygraph machine, including scientific debunking and tips for how to cheat on a lie detector test. The significance of these ideas is served in the context of real interpersonal tension, as the circumstances of the performance smash political ideas together with personal stakes. Here, Counterpilot uses an air of playful danger to make the abstract philosophical notions feel tangible.



Figure 3. *Pigeon Fool* – Production photo by Kate O'Sullivan

In *Pigeon Fool*, a performer is transformed into an AI-powered metahuman, which is then trained to host a gamified Turing Test for up to sixteen players. [7] Each participant is given the opportunity to play as their real selves, or to default to an automated bot for their participation. A series of questions ask the human players to demonstrate their humanness through acts of creativity, empathy, emotion, and memory. These answers are then intermingled with responses generated by the AI.

In the style of a dystopian game show, all players use bespoke computer consoles to guess whether they are perceiving human responses or bot answers. Headset mics allow for participants to discuss their instincts with each other at different times, which creates space for the themes to emerge conversationally. It's only when tasked with defending their instincts, that participants find themselves discussing the heart of the work in their own words – looking for traces of evidence that might speak to humanness in the way we behave, or questioning whether we have anything at all that the machines can't somehow simulate.

Conclusion

In each of these performance works, Counterpilot subvert the real social circumstances of the audience, appropriating them as an integral site of meaning alongside other intermedial forms. The effect of this is to create a refreshed sense of time and space, and to promote a refreshed self-awareness in this unique context for being.

In conclusion, Counterpilot's practice embodies the essence of ISEA 2024's central themes by crafting experiences that subvert conventional perceptions of time and space. Through these interactive performances, Counterpilot challenges audiences to not just witness but participate in a dialogue between the immediate and the eternal, the ephemeral and the enduring. Counterpilot's commitment to creating a space where participants can critically reflect on their perceptions of reality aligns with the symposium's pursuit of innovative art forms that are grounded in technology and societal impact.

Acknowledgements

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Performances

[5] Counterpilot. 2018. *Crunch Time*. Darebin Arts and Entertainment Centre, Melbourne.

[6] Counterpilot. 2019. *Truthmachine*. RCC Fringe, Adelaide.

[7] Counterpilot. 2024. *Pigeon Fool*. Queensland Museum, Brisbane.

2019-22); *Crunch Time* (Next Wave Festival & Metro Arts, 2018) and *Spectate* (Metro Arts, 2017).

Nathan has three Matilda Awards including the Lord Mayor's Award for Best New Australian Work (2018), the award for Best AV Design (2017), and the Judge's Award for "pushing artistic boundaries" (2022). Nathan was also the recipient of the Dr Don Batchelor Award for Drama Research at QUT (2017) and a Sydney Theatre Award for Best Production for Young People, with *I've Been Meaning to Ask You* (2022).

Nathan was previously Queensland Theatre Company's Geek-In-Residence in 2012-14. He sometimes teaches performance studies at QUT, where he holds a Masters Degree in contemporary performance.

Counterpilot is an award-winning collective of interdisciplinary artists based in Brisbane, Australia. Together, we create interactive performance works - activating audiences with new technology, rich design, and transmedia storytelling. Counterpilot seeks to transform the familiar, juxtaposing rich fictional worlds against a backdrop of the everyday.

By subverting real social circumstances, we co-opt our participants as authentic performers. In this way we are harnessing what we believe to be the most exciting thing about theatre - the live audience. Our works enable participants to observe themselves responding in real ways to hyper-real situations. We seek to provoke change through acts of trouble, mischief and low-key chaos. We play in the space between people, and we poke at the tensions that bind us.

Counterpilot is directed by Nathan Sibthorpe, with Core Creatives Christine Felmingham & Mike Willmet. Since 2022, we have been the Company-in-Residence at Metro Arts.

Author Biographies

Nathan Sibthorpe is a contemporary performance-maker and video designer based in Brisbane, Australia. He is best known as the director of Counterpilot – the award-winning collective of transmedia performance artists responsible for: *Adrift* (Metro Arts, 2022); *Truthmachine* (Sydney Festival, Brisbane Festival & others,