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What Happened?

An Examination of "PLAYDATE," a Cellphone-Oriented, Neighborhood-Wide, Beyond-the-Stage Play in and About Downtown Brooklyn

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Kenneth Pietrobono

Kuan-Yi Chen

John Matturri

Seth Cohen

Abstract

PLAYDATE was a cellphone-oriented, neighborhood-wide, beyond-the-stage play. Through GoPro cameras, the performance documented a cast of roving players as they performed sequenced tasks that engaged local businesses, public facilities, and various contingencies in Downtown Brooklyn, New York. The main cast and the audience were physically separated and only viewable via social media and GPS. Posts were digitally projected in the auditorium of ISSUE Project Room, a non-profit performance venue in Downtown Brooklyn. Viewers, however, could interact with the piece through their own social media accounts. By submitting comments, questions, and likes through their cell phones, viewers became part of the work and created individual perspectives with no single vantage point. In this transcribed conversation led by PLAYDATE director, Ying Liu, two players/performers (Kuan-Yi Chen and Kenneth Pietrobono) and audience members (John Matturri and Seth Cohen) share their experience of the play to figure out "What Happened" in PLAYDATE.

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Introduction

i. The Process

PLAYDATE is a scripted play performed by a diverse cast of ten players[1] equipped with GoPro cameras and cell phones moving through the streets of Downtown Brooklyn, New York.[2] Each player has an overlapping but divergent narrative visible only through their digital devices. The cast came from a variety of professional backgrounds. They were recruited through Craigslist ads, public street stands, social media advertisements and personal connections.[3]

The assembled players were individually interviewed by PLAYDATE director, Ying Liu, and were invited to rank a blind list of professions of other cast members based on their interests in collaboration. This exercise was designed as a platform for forming unexpected connections and fostering dialogue between people from disparate life circles who might not easily cross paths in real life. Based on these interviews and rankings, Liu paired each player with another collaborator and then combined those pairs into clusters.

The individual narratives were loosely based upon the players' personal and/or work-related experiences with Downtown Brooklyn. Prompted with fictional back stories for their interactions, each pair and cluster of players worked together to script dialogues for their semi-fictional personas. The finished scripts were similar to a busy day's to-do list that asked participants to interact with local businesses, public facilities and events occurring in the blocks surrounding ISSUE Project Room, a non-profit performance venue in Downtown Brooklyn, where their activities were being broadcast. Through these interactions, the cast members shared the philosophy and world-view that they had developed for their characters which, ultimately, revealed their own personal perspectives.

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[1] The director uses the term "player" to refer to the performers in PLAYDATE as it encompasses the idea of a "performer"–someone who takes direction or instruction from a director, as well as the concept of a "sportsman"–someone who responds and makes quick calls to different situations while adhering to the set direction.

[2] The GoPro cameras were provided by the director, Ying Liu. The players used their own cell phones, which varied in terms of capabilities and ran on a mix of iOS and Android platforms.

[3] Dave Wreck, security guard/veteran; Sean Forlenza, dog walker/musician; Isaiah "Zay" Baker, investment banker; Kenneth Pietrobono, conceptual artist; Catherine Ruello, retired arts administrator/artist; Julie Lin, municipal worker; Rachel Brooks, waxing specialist; Naomi Khan, college student/teen YouTuber; Kuan-Yi Chen, college professor; Nawan Bailey, psychotherapist.

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ii. The Event: Sunday, April 6, 2019 (2-4pm)

The event, "a hyper-cellphone-oriented performance combining theater and happenings, exploring themes of urban interconnectivity", started at 2pm with a live audience of 140 people gathered at ISSUE Project Room.[4]

Fig.1. Projected iPhone screen prior to the start of PLAYDATE inside ISSUE Project Room, 2019. Photo Credit: Cameron Kelly Mcleod.

Wearing yellow hard hats mounted with two GoPro cameras, and cell phones in hand, each player embarked on their unique, scripted actions throughout Downtown Brooklyn. While the first GoPro faced directly towards the player, the second camera was pointed outward, in alignment with the perspective of the performer. Every fifteen to twenty minutes players posted and live streamed on social media apps, such as

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[4] Audience numbers are courtesy of Nick Scavo, Marketing Director of ISSUE Project Room. The large audience was, in part, due to ARTnews listing the event as one of the "9 Art Events in New York This Week."

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Instagram and Facebook, while they executed the pre-scripted cell phone activities. The players worked within a rigidly constructed schedule, completing their own personal tasks across numerous narrative threads, while also observing a master schedule for the entire cast.

Together, the audience watched the ten players perform from an active projection of the 11th player's iPhone. The 11th player, Nick Scavo, the Marketing Director of ISSUE Project Room, was the only player in the same physical space with the live audience. He "deejayed" the other players' various GPS positions, posts and updates on social media, as they completed their tasks on the streets of Brooklyn. Simultaneously, he completed his own pre-scripted personal and professional digital errands on his cell phone, all of which was projected on a 30-feet high screen. Throughout the duration of the event, audience members were free to use their own cell phones to search for streams and post comments to the players.

Fig. 2. Naomi's Instagram livestream seen inside ISSUE Project Room, Brooklyn, 2019. Photo credit: Cameron Kelly Mcleod.

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Months after the performance of PLAYDATE, cast members Kuan-Yi Chen and Kenneth Pietrobono, audience members John Matturri and Seth Cohen and director Ying Liu met to reflect-back on the piece. The following are excerpts of their conversation.

Setup inside the Venue

YING:

Hi All, thanks for being here. I'd love to have each of you share your experience of PLAYDATE. Seth, perhaps we'll start with you?

SETH (PLAYDATE Audience Member):

When I walked in [ISSUE Project Room], there was a table with people asking for donations and mismatched bottles and jars where you could put money into. Then I walked in. It was dark. There was a projected iPhone screen. We sat down and didn't not know what to expect.

At the beginning, everyone was pretty astounded and was laughing especially when there was some confusion about the time on the iPhone. It was screwed up. Usually, it automatically updates if the time zone is changed, doesn't it? I didn't even realize that the phone time could be manipulated. Some audience members texted the cell phone of the performer about it and their texts showed up on the big screen.

JOHN (PLAYDATE Audience Member):

Yes, there was a considerable amount of that discussion between Nick and the audience through texting, noting that all Apple products share that particular time, 9:41. The large-scale iPhone screen we were looking at said it was 9:41 and that didn't change throughout the whole show. There was this feeling of not quite knowing the time. That seemed intentionally disorienting.
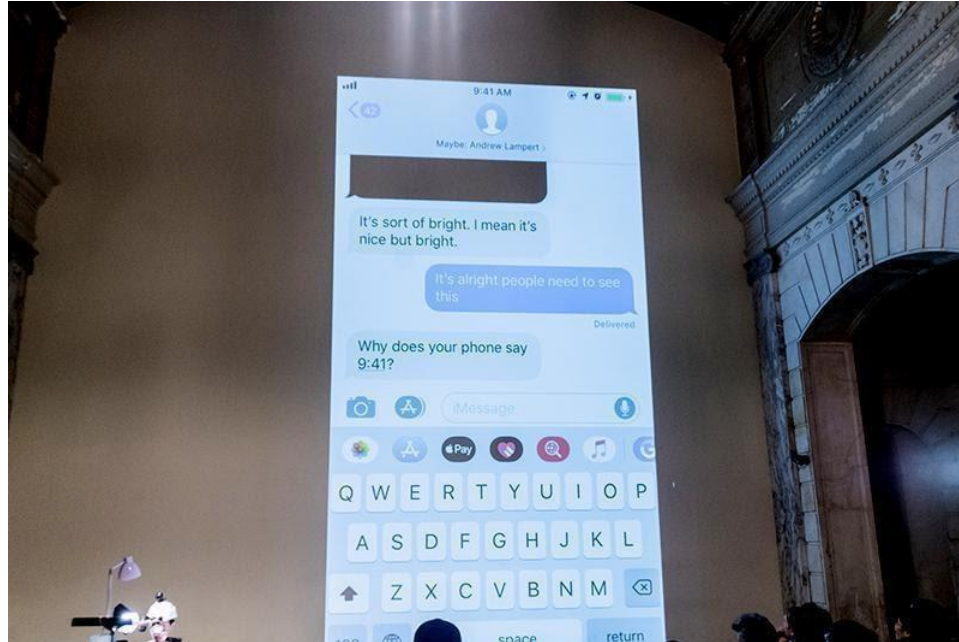
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Fig. 3. "Why does your phone say 9:41?" text from the audience, 2019. Photo Credit: Cameron Kelly Mcleod.

J. (cont'd):

For me, the performance started even before I entered the auditorium. I was following along on Instagram where Ying was posting stories about going out into the Downtown Brooklyn area and set up a little stand to recruit participants. She was looking for people from the area who wouldn't normally participate in this sort of thing.

On the day of the performance, as I walked in, I was immediately greeted by ISSUE Project Room staffers in the lobby. There was a little chant about whether you were going to pay or not, "If you have made Don't-Nations already, please don't hesitate to give Do-Nations." I was a bit early, so I waited there for a while, in what was kind of a transitional space between the streets outside and the auditorium.

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Fig. 4. "Do-Nations & Don't-Nations" table in ISSUE Project Room lobby, 2019. Photo credit: Cameron Kelly Mcleod.

Fig. 5. "Do-Nations & Don't-Nations" bench in ISSUE Project Room lobby (green trash can on the left is for "Do-Nations" and blue trash can on the right is for "Don't-Nations"), 2019. Photo credit: Cameron Kelly Mcleod.

J. (cont'd):

PLAYDATE took place in three spaces. The first was the outdoors in the streets of Downtown Brooklyn. That's where you were coming from, and also where the performers would later disperse to. The second was the

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interior of the auditorium. That's where Ying and her crew would feed what came from the outdoor performers into, and that's where the audience was present. The third space was the internet; this virtual space involved both performers and audience members inside and outside of ISSUE Project Room. In addition to the people physically present in the auditorium others could experience the piece through a social media stream, both with the ability to become part of the piece by submitting comments and questions through Instagram and Facebook.

Fig. 6. PLAYDATE audience (Seth, seated far right, wears a dark green raincoat; John, seated center front, wears a shirt with black-and-white stripes), 2019. Photo credit: Cameron Kelly Mcleod.

Once you were inside the auditorium, the first thing you noticed was this iPhone screen, massively enlarged and projected on the wall. It looked like a cathedral window. Next to it was a chair and, on the seat, a hard hat helmet with three GoPros. The hard hat was all white which gave it a clinical lab-like feel. Behind that, there were two tables with computers.

What I assumed was the real beginning of the show was when Nick walked out from the back, sat down, and put the GoPro helmet on his head. It was clear that he had the iPhone that was projected, and that it would be the point of transmission between what was coming in from, I believe, two main sources: the set pieces of the performers who were walking the Downtown Brooklyn streets and the flow of information from crew members, audience members present in the auditorium, and those who tuned in to the live streaming away from ISSUE.

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Fig. 7. Nick Scavo, Marketing Director of ISSUE, as the "cell phone player," 2019. Photo credit: Cameron Kelly Mcleod.

Fig. 8. Audience members participate in the digital media stream with their smartphones, 2019. Photo credit: Cameron Kelly Mcleod.

J. (cont'd):

The digital flow was constant and it cut you loose from the physical space. The information appeared and disappeared so quickly in front of your eyes to a point where you really couldn't follow. One thing that especially caught my attention, was that occasionally there would be a

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message on the screen: "RIP Brian Eno." Did Eno die? Was this from a credible news source? After going home and checking, it turned out Brian Eno was alive. The source of that message remained unidentified. And here's the other thing: some information had very clear sources but the rest didn't. When information came across, you tried to assimilate it as fast as possible. Yet you were never really on solid ground.

S.:
The toggling between the apps was really amazing, it was incredibly fast. There were so many apps on. Since I didn't grow up with this technology, I'm not a digital native, it was eye-opening to see someone have such a facility with an iPhone. It was also a two-way communication because the audience could participate with their own smartphones. It was nice to listen to the performers, to get their views on things and also see their expressions.

J.:
There was a periodic GPS map showing the streets, where each performer was located. The performers were spread out all throughout Downtown Brooklyn.

S.:
I thought that was one of the most important technological aspects of the show.

J.:
The dispersion made me feel that someone could easily wander off. Even as an audience member I, myself, felt lost in this complex dispersed space.

S.:
By the way, who was the lost performer outside?

KENNETH (PLAYDATE Player):
Me.

Y.:
How could you tell that Kenneth was lost?

J.:
Although it was unclear whether he was really lost, he did seem to be going away from the center more than the other performers.

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S.:

I saw texts asking "Where's Kenneth?" "Where's he going?" and then saw on the map a figure meandering around. All the other figures seemed to make sense, but with him I thought, "where the hell is he going?"

Y.:

There was this moment towards the end of the performance where Kenneth finally came live on Instagram streaming and everyone inside ISSUE cheered!

Failures

Y.:

Kenneth, what was your experience?

K.:

What I like about this project and Ying's process in writing the script is that by collaborating with so many different people she highlights the fact that everyone has beliefs about life and that everybody tries their best to live with commitment to those beliefs—sometimes the belief is simply committing to commitments. I set out a really difficult task for myself in wanting to embed really deep questions I have about politics, social life, philosophy and economies into a very narrow frame. Because of this I left the experience with a feeling of failure. I failed the whole time and did feel really lost. There was barely enough time to get through my tasks among so many distractions and instructions—it felt impossible even to communicate clearly any sense of who I am, what I believe or committed to. The number of tasks forced simply doing "enough" to achieve bare minimum—I'm a Virgo so I was miserable. On top of that, my old cell phone gave me a lot of trouble with so many apps running on it. Then there was a camera pointed at me and the idea I was being enlarged and projected in this room with all these people made me feel very vulnerable. It was a strange feeling being alone but, at the same time, in full view via the digital devices that were making me hyper-public in a way I didn't have control of.

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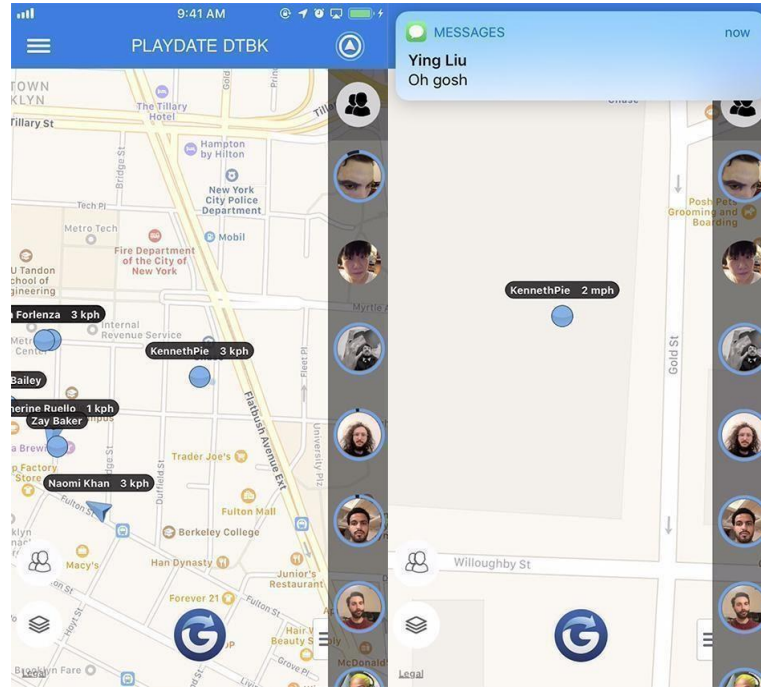http://escholarship.org/uc/ucdavislibrary_streetnotes

Fig. 9-10. GPS location tracking of players in Downtown Brooklyn, 2019; Kenneth moving at 2 miles per hour on Gold Street at Willoughby Street, 2019. Screenshots courtesy of Ying Liu.

Fig. 11. Kenneth on Instagram Livestream, 2019. Screenshot courtesy of Kenneth Pietrobono.

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Fig. 12. Kenneth on Bridge Street, Brooklyn, 2019. Photo Credit: Zhiyuan Yang.

K. (cont'd):

It's ironic that nowadays it's so hard to see failure on camera. In digital space, people can self-curate what parts of themselves they show. We are so used to only sharing and seeing successes and positives in social media that all the failure and non-workings are largely filtered out. Smartphones seem to offer assistance—you can live without knowing where you are or how to do something as long as you have a smartphone to do the work of knowing for you; and it works...until it doesn't. To me, the play and the technology, which seemingly captures so much, didn't actually capture my experience of failing. I had a full-on anxiety attack before the play and after I cried. I don't think those parts really made it in the frame.

S.:

Kenneth was one of the most important characters because, for the most part, he was the silent character. He was escaping and confounding communications. Sometimes the missing part, the break in the text, can become the focus of the work.

Fig. 13. Anxious Kenneth, 2020. Digital self-portrait by Kenneth Pietrobono.

K.:

It's so funny and great to have such different experiences encountering this lost or non-functional position. In traditional theater, if you're an actor on stage with people watching a controlled space, the amount of information is contained and designed to be accomplished in that space and time. As a performer, you can tell if something isn't working right away and fix it right there to continue telling the story on stage. You can still find a way to successfully deliver your message to the audience. But translating exclusively from the real world to the digital world has so many variables that the possibilities become uncontainable and being able to tell if it is "working" or not becomes really unclear.

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Fig. 14. Kenneth checks out the rooftop view from the 27th floor in Catherine's apartment building on Bridge Street, 2019. GoPro still courtesy of Ying Liu.

Collaborative Process

Y.: Perhaps we could rewind and take a look at the process that brought us here?

KUAN-YI (PLAYDATE Player):
We each had scripted interaction with several people in the cast. The pairings of cast members were determined prior to the script being written. I visited Ying at her studio at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) in February and she showed me a list of professions to choose from that excluded names, gender, and education. I remembered there were a few artists (including Kenneth), a dog walker, someone who works for the city, a security guard, a college student, a waxing specialist, a banker, and a psychotherapist. I picked the dog walker, the security guard, and the waxing specialist. I explicitly told Ying I didn't want to be paired with artists or college students because those categories of people were already in my life. My partner is an artist and a lot of my friends are artists. I teach at a college and I already have a lot of anxiety associated with being an underpaid adjunct professor. The thought of blending these core aspects of who I am with fiction was a bit stressful. In the end, Ying did pair me with a college student, Naomi. In the fictional storyline, Naomi asked me to write a recommendation letter for her. But my character didn't do a good job in terms of delivering it on time. I simply said "sorry" to her digitally. The experience was surprisingly interesting. Writing recommendation letters is supposed to be part of an educator's

job. A student asks you to vouch for them and help them move on to their next destination and, of course, you say "yes" and do it to the best of your ability. But adjuncts are not paid for this labor; every recommendation letter is written on unpaid time. The scripted narrative between Naomi and me, especially in terms of how I handled our correspondences, perhaps reflected my frustration toward such injustice. In the end, the half-hearted effort on my part didn't contribute to subverting the system. The empty promise only created frustration for the student. Students, like adjunct professors, are casualties under the same system.

Fig. 15. Kuan-Yi emails Naomi to apologize for missing the deadline for her recommendation letter, 2019. Screenshot courtesy of Naomi Khan.

K.:

Ying's system creates different loops that make it hard to know who you are speaking to. For example, the script I collaborated on with Ying and my scene partners, Catherine and Zay, was a month-long process during which we were really invested in constructing versions of ourselves and say real things in these fabricated scenarios. Zay and I constructed an entire scene about our feelings on the failure of art and criticism and its self-righteousness. We even discuss our own ambitions in life, the reality that not all things work out and how we find ways to cope with that. But those lines were only captured by the Go-Pro cameras and the feeds didn't play in the theater although they appeared in our social media posts. So you have two streams; one where you get to be articulate in a

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scene with someone but no one is seeing it, and one where you have to flatten everything into limited media posts that are unrehearsed. This digital self is what is shown. My phone, literally and figuratively, was not big enough to do this. It is old and all the apps kept crashing. My signal would go in and out and, even though my posts were all on time, they did not load. So I was trying to be present in the scene with my partner and remember my lines and, at the same time, managing the failures of my device while time is ticking and there are dozens of alarms going off simultaneously. So I completely lost which space I was supposed to save first, me in the scene or me in the phone? I felt completely unattached to the version of myself that was actually being seen inside ISSUE and it got to a point where I was just trying not to throw my phone off a ledge and walk away.

It was weird to be a part of something where I actually don't know what happened. I spent a month workshopping my lines but once this accumulation of mistakes got out of control, my anxiety took over. Once I was in the world of doing, it felt like everything I wanted to say didn't matter. Expressing beliefs became secondary to "doing."

In addition to the lines and digital assignments, there were a lot of instructions from Ying regarding the performance style we had to attend to; "you have to stand on one leg every time you talk;" "you have to form a 135-degree angle with your partner while talking;" and "walk very fast unless you pass something that's for sale, then walk slow and look, then walk fast again."

My "failures" led me to see how much work we do in real life to be coordinated and committed to being legible in digital life. We put hashtags on everything. We create our own filing structure so we can be constantly found. We mediate our experiences in standardized formats so they can circulate. We do this every time we take a selfie, write a hashtag or a tweet in a character constraint, edit a video for a time limit or submit to an image size ratio. With Ying we perform this rigor and arbitrariness in a physical way. PLAYDATE parallels the effort and rule-following we do in everyday life to become digitally legible—and I failed to the point of almost disappearing.

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Inhabiting Different Times and Spaces

KY:

I wanted to add on to what Kenneth talked about in regards to the belief system. I found it to be different for myself, or my experience with the concept. My fictional role was a professor-turned-director who was disengaged with her academic life but wanted to find new passion in theater making. In the script, I was to plan the staging of a piece about Downtown Brooklyn called "*Playtime*." I went about talking to people in the area and tried to recruit them for my fictional project. My character's job was asking the right questions about other people's belief systems, and how they are manifested in Downtown Brooklyn in a particular slice of space and time. In other words, my character had a tangential connection to Downtown Brooklyn but showed earnest interest in documenting and presenting its history and changes. As a player, rather than laboring over my own belief system, I felt that my biggest task was to elicit stories and responses from other players and to make the right decisions so we players, as a group, were on schedule. Naturally, such responsibilities became the source of my anxiety. When I tried to decide what to do when people didn't show up for a scripted encounter, or when I realized that I did something to interrupt the logic of the script, I felt I was *failing*.

Interestingly, that sense of failure stemmed more from my relation with the recording GoPros than from my relation to other performers and the audience at ISSUE. I remember this incident at Antonio's Pizzeria. I was performing a scene about encountering Dave and Sean for the first time and collecting their contact information for possible PLAYTIME auditions. According to the script I wasn't supposed to have Dave or Sean's contact stored in my phone at that point but suddenly Dave's email address showed up on my cell phone screen without me entering it in! There was so much panic.

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Fig. 16. Kuan-Yi collects Sean and Dave's contact information inside Antonio's Pizzeria on Court Street, 2019. Photo credit: Wayne Liu**.**

Fig. 17. Kuan-Yi recruits Sean and Dave for her play, entitled *Playtime*, 2019. Photo credit: Wayne Liu.

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Fig. 18. Sean, Dave and Kuan-Yi throw their arms in the air three times, kick three times, while shouting "Ha Ha Ha." Part of the PLAYDATE performance style regarding "laughing," 2019. Photo credit: Wayne Liu.

KY (cont'd):

I had to really think about Ying at that moment because she was editing the footage captured by the GoPro cameras. I thought, "okay, how can I find a way to let this continue so that Ying can do her post-production?" Eventually I decided to restart my specific part. In a way I was performing for post-production, at times more so than for the audience back at ISSUE, people on social media, or strangers on the street. This makes me think of the temporal dimension of the project as others have mentioned. How I moved my body during the performance and the decisions I made to correct mistakes I made, for example, was in response of me clumsily inhabiting both the performing time and the post-production time. It might seem contradictory, but I think this and the heightened focus on other numerous to-do tasks took me out of the immediate context of Downtown Brooklyn.

This wasn't the first time I wore those GoPro cameras, but it does not mean I worked with them seamlessly. My understanding of them remained more symbolic than functional. In other words, I know the conceptual role they played in the project, but for the technical part, I had only a vague idea. When the cameras were on, I did my best to position my body for the camera even though I had no idea what exactly was captured of me and my point of view. I had to just trust. I trusted the devices that *something* would be caught as long as they were on. I

trusted our production team that everyone involved was doing their best to enable the devices. I also trusted the process that from whatever was captured or failed, we would eventually learn something. It was open-ended in that way.

Fig. 19. Kuan-Yi takes a selfie with Shake Shack, a trendy chain burger restaurant, in the background, which took over Antonio's Pizzeria's old spot, a prime location on Adams Street in Fulton Mall, 2019. Photo credit: Wayne Liu.

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Fig. 20. Kuan-Yi's selfie, 2019. Photo courtesy of Kuan-Yi Chen.

Fig. 21. Kuan-Yi's constantly updating Instagram page during PLAYDATE, 2019.

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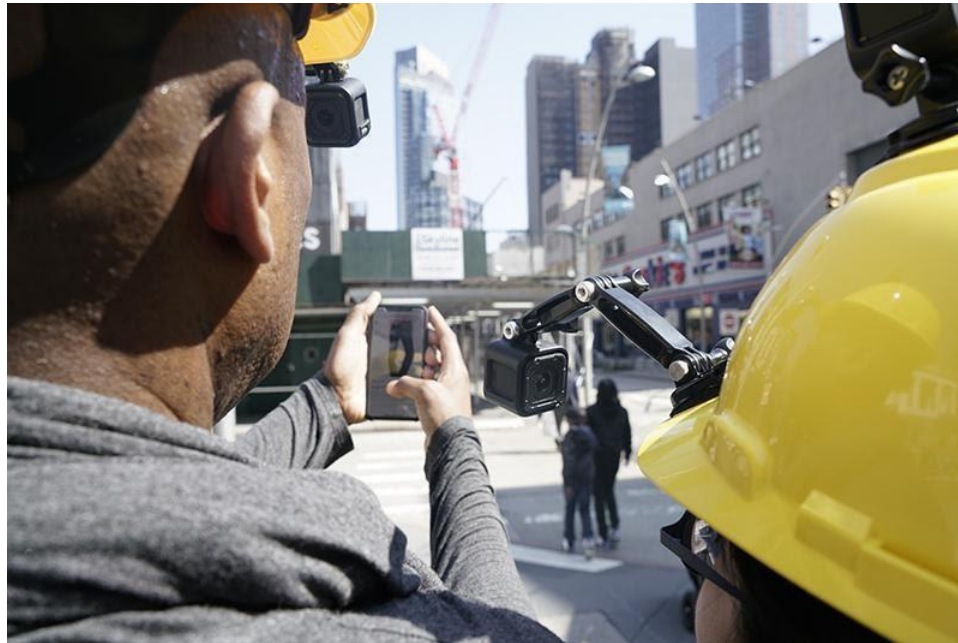Screenshot courtesy of Ying Liu.

Fig. 22. Nawan shows Kuan-Yi examples of preppy fashion brands on his phone such as Jordache, which were popular when he was attending nearby Brooklyn Technical High School about 30 years ago. Albee Square, 2019. Photo credit: Wayne Liu.

Fig. 23. Nawan and Kuan-Yi "walk very fast unless" they "pass something that's for sale, then walk slow and look, then walk fast again." Fulton Mall, 2019. Part of the PLAYDATE performance style regarding "walking," 2019. Photo credit: Wayne Liu.

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Parallels Between Performance and Real Life

S.:

When Sean and Dave had dialogue about factory made pizza crust versus hand-made pizza crust, I didn't know the trick to telling the crusts apart. So I got a useful bit of information. I think I had been to that pizzeria, it had really good and very classic, large New York slices. I was surprised to hear that it was factory made crust.

During this scene, I was thinking about the social class of the performers. I think about status and class a lot in that neighborhood where various social groups meet. You have Cobble Hill and Brooklyn Heights which are very rich and white. Then you have Fulton Mall—you know I'm making assumptions here—which historically was a working class African American shopping district and is now becoming increasingly filled with these folks from the surrounding areas. Although Ying has mentioned this is not a main aspect of her work, there are two characters in PLAYDATE that speak to this issue: one who is a gentrifier and one who is decrying the gentrification of the area.
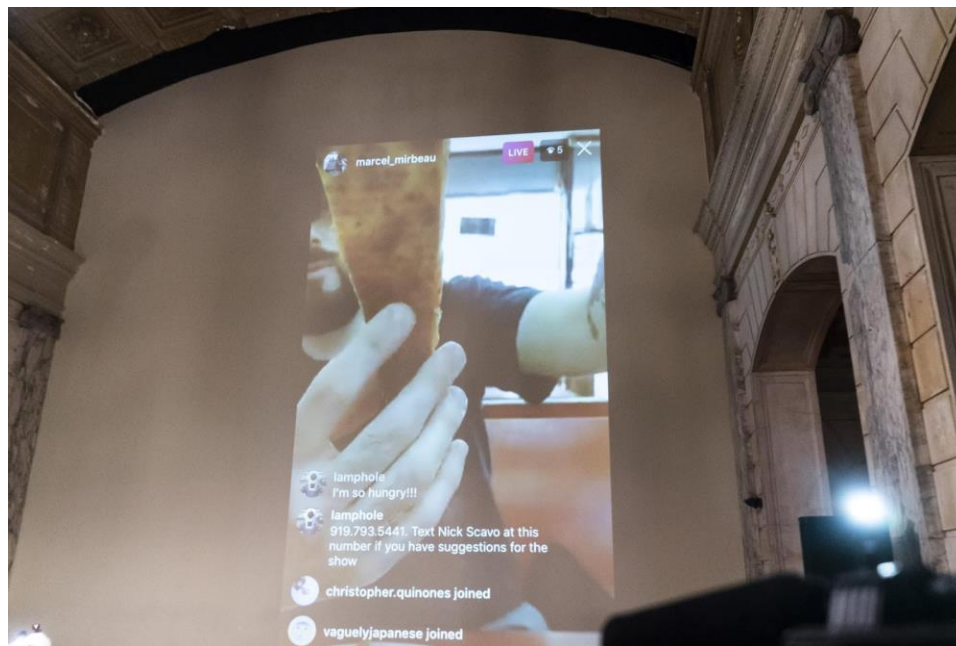

Fig. 24. Dave's Instagram livestream seen inside ISSUE Project Room. A pizza crust critique, 2019. Photo credit: Cameron Kelly Mcleod.

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Fig. 25. Sean helps Dave livestream to Instagram inside Fresh 99 Cents Pizza on Willoughby Street, Brooklyn, 2019. Photo credit: Zhiyuan Yang.

Digital Knowledge as Control

S.:

I want to talk about Kuan-Yi because I know that she's really central to Ying's pieces. She's perfectly located within the piece because she's worked with Ying so much and plays a character that is closest to the artificially opaque and stiff—almost Brechtian. Kuan-Yi's character was a little scary. She was so centered and unapproachable, but also a little goofy. Because her actions couldn't be anticipated, she was also unsettling. Kuan-Yi is a great performer. Very little of her warm personality came through when she was inhabiting her role. However, because other performers, especially Nawan, were untrained, their performances were informed by the qualities of being untrained performers, especially the physical manifestations of being nervous that came through in their body positions, voice, eye movement, etc. That made them at times difficult to watch. While the persona that Yi took on, allowed for a kind of dispassionate viewing which didn't necessitate any discomfort on the audience member's part. Another performer, Naomi, was also just really compelling to look at, and to listen to, maybe because she was the youngest person in the piece and her character was ambitious and hopeful.

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Y.:

Yeah, she was only 19.

J.:

Does Naomi make YouTube videos in real life?

Y.:

Yes, she does.

J.:

I thought so. Besides Kuan-Yi and Kenneth, one of the characters I focused most was on her. She presented herself as somewhat of a YouTube star, producing makeup and dating videos and the like. It seemed that she was using this performance opportunity for her own agenda. In her Instagram livestream, she heavily promoted her own YouTube channel. That gave me a sense that nothing was entirely in control in the performance, but allowed the characters to define what it is. It turned out in the end that all the livestreamed monologues from outdoor performers were in fact scripted. But the script is based on each person's life, correct?

Y.:

Correct.

Fig. 26. Naomi inside Sephora on Joralemon Street at Court Street, 2019. Photo credit: Jingzhi Wang.

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Fig. 27. Naomi enters Top Beauty on Jay Street at Fulton Street, 2019. Photo credit: Jingzhi Wang.

K.:

In the script, like me in real life, I was an artist working for another artist living in Queens and was looking to sublet an apartment in Downtown Brooklyn so that I could live closer to a production project during that period. I met with two strangers who were subletting their places in high-rise condo buildings. There were these little pleasures to say things like, "I'm normally against these high-rise buildings, you know...politically...but a roof terrace sounds great! And having a washer/dryer would be so nice!" I was interested in those tensions and conflicts of privilege because they are my own. I'm critical of displacement but also...a new building with a roof top would be nice! The way I interpreted the project made my personal biases very present because I didn't really imagine narrative distance. I was nervous about using those conflicts openly. If the biases were all mine, and if the Instagram handles were mine, and the belief structure is mine, then how am I supposed to trust that the audience sees a character and not my actual self? This character is so close to me because I allowed a lot of myself into it. The same anxiety came over me when I was choosing who I'd like to get paired with during the pre-production. Who do I want to work with? What conversations do I want to have and who do I believe would be a good partner for the topics I am interested in? Just from looking at the list of one-sentence descriptions of

the cast for possible pairing, at the bottom of my preferences was the waxing specialist for no reason than my own associations, which are totally not rational or fair. I went in wanting to talk about institutional structures and economies and aesthetics and who do I associate having these conversations with? My bias was very present.

S.:

I knew that it was all scripted but I was surprised how the script didn't totally adhere to who the characters were. And I can see that Ying asked a lot of commitment from the performers. Her shows are about that. She's really good at compelling people to do things.

K.:

An amazing thing about this project is "the production of willingness''; how is it that you produce the willingness of other people to commit to something and, beyond that, to work with people under imposed constraints? With Ying's play I began to think, is this something "coordinated" or is it just "coordinated *enough*?" Does something "work" or does it "work enough"? Being in it was like wrestling with the world, trying to do your commitments while expressing yourself and ultimately not being sure it was *enough*. How do we measure this? Do I know what happened, or do I know "enough" of what happened? Did it happen, or did it happen enough? It's interesting that ultimately no one has a full enough position to decide what "happened." In the end, maybe the thing that happened doesn't matter. What we coordinated around didn't matter. It's the coordination itself that mattered; the willingness to coordinate and be coordinated.

One amazing thing is that I am very close with my grandmother and I joked with Ying that she should FaceTime me in the play. I told my grandmother to FaceTime me at exactly 2:23 and that we could chat about anything for a few minutes and to ignore the thing on my head. The beautiful thing is, she did it and exactly on time. She never really worried about why. I simply asked her to and she took it as her commitment. And she did it. It still makes me smile.

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Fig. 28. Kenneth FaceTimes with his grandmother during PLAYDATE, 2019. Screenshot courtesy of Kenneth Pietrobono.

Afterthoughts

COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted how people connect and communicate with each other. Digital and virtual interactions have become primary modes of communication for a greater number of people. It feels timely and necessary to revisit PLAYDATE, as the shift of the viewership paradigm in the live arts world has become inevitable.

A year before the global pandemic and the digital turn it prompted, PLAYDATE exploited digital communication tools in order to closely interrogate how the architecture of a shared experience as a group has shaped and evolved in the digital era. Taking a stance apart from the traditional structure of theater which typically utilizes a fixed vantage point of the audience facing the stage for a set duration, PLAYDATE

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extended the performance field out of those parameters by using everyday experiences and technologies that encompassed fragmentary and often incomprehensible narratives. PLAYDATE's decentralized format and digital mediation denied everyone—whether as a player or an audience member—a position to fully know what "happened" during the two-hour performance. Yet, what is revealed from the conversations after the "stage curtains" were lowered is a collective experience despite everyone having different observations and feelings. The questions, thus, raised here open up a space for further discussions on the future of human digital communication, content consumption and audience participation.

PLAYDATE will continue to exist in multiple formats. A documentary film and a book-length experimental report of the performance are in the works.

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About the Authors

Ying Liu (PLAYDATE Director) is a Brooklyn-based multimedia artist born and raised on a small island named Zhoushan in the East China Sea. Her evening-length, hybridized works often mix consumer technology such as VR, GoPro and GPS, and fuse mediums including theater, dance, video, and performance art with DIY props and an exuberant sense of play. The diverse, multi-generational casts of her projects range from bankers, municipal workers, sociologists, DJs, psychotherapists, and scientists—sometimes all in the same performance. Highlighting the shifting, participatory nature of viewership, mediated in real time by everyday use of technology, her practice reveals how experimentation is most fruitful when it escapes predetermination. Poking at the traditional boundaries between performer and spectator, she stirs together contradictory forces of memory, spatiality, and the inherent friction of sociality. Emily Harvey Foundation (NYC) has presented her projects in numerous solo showings including performative screening *(O Ppl Prefer) Techshting A(ny)way* (2014), *Don't Be Shy, Man! - a hybrid show inspired by Stuart Sherman's poetry* (2014), and an evening-length dance performance *Now We Start from the Arm* (2016). In summer 2017, she staged HANG OUT, a site-specific, three-episode play in Manhattan Chinatown's Sara D. Roosevelt Park. MAKE A FOUNTAIN, a 302-page catalog accompanying and documenting those performances, was released in 2018. She was a resident artist at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in 2018-19 and at ISSUE Project Room in 2019, and was a 2020 fellow at Institute for Public Architecture. Her most recent projects included PLAYDATE, a neighborhood-wide outdoor play in and about Downtown Brooklyn, and PIGTAIL - *A Swivel Stool Dance™*—both commissioned by ISSUE. She is currently a Jerome Hill Artist Fellow 2021-2022.

Kenneth Pietrobono (PLAYDATE Player) is an artist and researcher in New York City. His ongoing work as founder and director of Uncertainty Labs—an artist-run think tank on nonknowledge, social objects and their misconstruction—frames rhetorical abstractions (and their inaccuracies) as a core condition of the failure to regulate wealth and influence beyond sovereignty. Using research and collaboration, Pietrobono examines inabilities and inaccuracies in complex systems and works to generate proposals for new abstractions in the pursuit of "knowing together." He is a fellow of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) residency program (2018-2019) where he met Ying Liu.

Kuan-Yi Chen (PLAYDATE Player) teaches at the College of Staten Island. As a sociologist, Chen has researched on Asian American family ties, motherhood, and care work. She performed in Ying Liu's *Don't Be Shy Man! - a hybrid show inspired by Stuart Sherman's poetry* (2014), *Now We Start from the Arm* (2016), HANG OUT (2017), PLAYDATE (2019), and PIGTAIL (2019). She contributed to MAKE A FOUNTAIN, a book-length experimental report on HANG OUT.

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John Matturri (PLAYDATE Audience Member) was raised in Newark, lives in NYC, and for several years has maintained a studio in Newark. After graduate studies in Cinema at NYU and Philosophy at CUNY-Graduate Center, he taught both philosophy and film at Queens College for many years. He participated in photographic workshops with Lisette Model and Ken Heyman, and his practice greatly benefited from collaborations with many prominent experimental artists, including Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith, Richard Foreman, John Zorn, Stuart Sherman, and Shelley Hirsch. His interest in montage led—particularly after a hiatus associated with his philosophical studies—to a shift to structuring images and words into arrangements and sequences on panels and walls. After an initial Emily Harvey Foundation residency in Venice, Italy, in 2007, his work has centered on various modes of presentation of still images based on extensive photographic city archives. Matturri's work has been shown at the Brooklyn Historical Society Museum, Downtown Whitney, Collective for Living Cinema, The Phatory, June Bateman Fine Arts, Newark Public Library, and the Archivio Emily Harvey, among other venues. He appeared in *Don't Be Shy, Man! - a hybrid show inspired by Stuart Sherman's poetry*, directed by Ying Liu in 2014, and contributed to her 2018 catalog MAKE A FOUNTAIN.

Seth Cohen (PLAYDATE Audience Member) is an arts manager and artist living in New York City. He graduated University of Wisconsin with a BA in English and received an MFA in painting from Maryland Institute College of Art. As an arts manager he served as an associate director of Exit Art, a historic non-profit arts space whose goal was to exhibit artists from previously under-represented communities. He is currently a Project Manager for Public Art Fund, a non-profit arts organization whose mission is to bring free contemporary art to a broad audience in New York City and beyond. As an artist, he continues a dynamic practice composed of sculpture, painting and fiction writing and has exhibited in local and national venues. His work has the winking pathos of a cartoon villain who carries a fake bludgeon flecked with real blood. Recognizable and strange, his works all come from his investigations into humor, humanism and psychoanalysis as well as a core belief in the restorative abilities of catharsis. A long-time friend of Ying Liu and completist observer of her work, he is a contributor to Liu's upcoming book-length experimental report on recent performances, *Heavily Prescribed Good Times*.

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