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On Children

Editorial

ADELE SENIOR & THE INSTITUTE FOR THE ART AND PRACTICE OF DISSENT AT HOME

So, what does it mean to compose a journal issue that attempts to look at our relationships with children under the problematic title ‘On Children’? The writing between these pages undoubtedly carries with it an attendant anxiety about objectifying, naming and otherwise categorizing children. Yet, at the same time, the focus of the title ‘on’ children deliberately sets out to occupy a gap in theatre and performance scholarship that Nicholas Ridout called to our attention over a decade ago: ‘the question of children as theatrical performers is a topic in its own right, and awaits further study’ (2006: 98-9). Extending Ridout’s invitation to take seriously the appearance of children in a theatrical setting, ‘On Children’ hopes to foreground this problem of writing about children without reducing them to research objects. It does this by exploring the multiple roles that children occupy in relation to performance: children as collaborators, researchers, philosophers, activists, artists and political agents. In naming children as such, the contributions presented here cannot escape the violence of categorization. However, the process of creating this issue puts into practice the tension at the heart of performance research ‘on’ children, pushing back at the very boundaries of academic practice by actively including children as co-editors, contributors, designers and ‘peer’ reviewers.

‘On Children’ seeks to open up the possibilities for how we perceive and work with the child, children and childhoods in performance. It occupies the difficult terrain between acknowledging the material differences instituted by the terms ‘adults’ and ‘children’ and managing the risks of essentializing these socially constructed categories without paying due attention to the way in which such labelling depends on assumptions about age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, etc. As an embodied practice that can reaffirm or challenge said assumptions, performance offers an important area of exploration and critique about the (in)visibility, labouring and relational aspects of children and children’s bodies. As such, performance can offer new insights into questions of children’s agency and power.

As an editorial team, we are a performance scholar (Adele Senior, 34 years old) and an ‘Institute’ of two artist-academics (Gary Anderson, 45 and Lena Šimić, 43) and their four boys (Neal 17, Gabriel 15, Sid 10, James 4). ‘On Children’ emerged from a number of different provocations that arose out of this collaboration, which began with an event called ‘Against Children – The Kids are Revolting!’ hosted by the adults of the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home in Liverpool in 2016. This was later followed by an international symposium entitled ‘With Children: The Child as Collaborator and Performer’ hosted at Leeds Beckett University in 2017. This binarized

tension of being with and without children is enacted in the pages that follow. It happens through the adult issue editors' inevitable hierarchized control of the content interrupted by the (edited and unedited) participation of the children included within its making process. The voices of our child co-editors, facilitated by their mother/scholar Lena Šimić, take the form of reflections 'On Adults' here in the Editorial; the children's brutally honest feedback sent to our Artists' Pages' contributors during the peer-review stage; and the artworks and research submitted by children to the Artists' Pages and intergenerationally co-curated by Lili Osborne (12), Neal Anderson (17) and Alan Read (61).

On Adults: Adults never believe children. They are not more honest. Children are safer than adults and can cope without adults, not the cooking but mentally. They cope with things like breakups. (Sid)

Throughout the process of putting this issue together our child co-editors have distrusted us ('you're only doing this to further your careers!') and we have similarly questioned their judgement when disagreeing with their reviews of a proposal or a contribution ('I think Sid watches too much Tracy Beaker, the CBBC TV series'). Not wanting to disrupt the kids during exam periods or to spare them the exhaustion of reading the whole issue, we have problematically reduced articles to 'key quotations' to ensure their consultation in writing this editorial. Meanwhile, our young co-editors' active cooperation has been offered generously and continually felt by us (the adults) as a means of productive disruption. At the 'Against Children' event they barged through the door anyway, ate our food and broke the flow of our conversation. During the symposium, the child delegates tested the boundaries of every health and safety precaution put in place, interrupted speakers and, perhaps inevitably, 'stole the limelight'; while also listening, offering their thoughts and supporting their adult and child co-presenters. Their understandings and 'misunderstandings', not to mention their keen eyes on the Artists' Pages, have been fruitful and creative. Indeed, they have managed to make us look again at adult presumptions in their responses to some of the writings published here:

On Adults: Nothing bad ever happens? To children? Well, I broke my nose, school's been invented and I fell down the stairs. (Sid)

On Adults: [Very angry and bothered] No child breaks toys! (Sid)

Such responses have reminded us that there is a wider discourse about children and performance to be had beyond what the well-established fields of applied theatre and socially engaged practice have already taught us about working with children. 'On Children' is divided into two main sections with the first containing Articles and Artists' Pages and the second offering Essay Reflections, all of which are framed by this Editorial and an Afterword. In his opening essay Alan Read restages Arjun Appadurai's call for 'research as a human right' (2013) to consider the potential of child-led research to give way to a politics of possibility, rather than a politics of probability common to a

neoliberal context that reduces the child to the object of research. Read offers us some material examples of children's 'radical inclusivity' as researchers – while at the same time troubling the very idea of research – to point towards a future of hope after Munoz (2009); a future that helpfully counters the prevailing positioning of the innocent child in academic discourse as the symbolic foundation for heteronormative 'reproductive futurism' after Edelman (2004). Child-led research follows Read's article in the form of contributions to 'Build Your Own Keynote' by our youngest authors Neal Anderson, Hedda Fletcher-Watson, Minny Fletcher-Watson, Elisabeth Anna Mastrokalou and Lili Osborne. Collated in response to Read's contractual outsourcing of his keynote speech at the 'With Children' symposium in Leeds – and for which each child researcher received a portion of his fee – these pages make visible children's labour as researchers and artists and were intergenerationally designed by Neal Anderson, Lili Osborne and Alan Read.

While Read's article and the children's research that follows it move us beyond the figure of the child as innocent, this conceptualization of the child continues to haunt and is the subject of many of the articles presented here. As Gabriel complains:

On Adults: How the child represents the adult but in a purer form is the general vibe I'm getting [from the issue] when maybe people forget that those children became those adults and that doesn't make them more innocent – only younger versions of those adults. (Gabriel)

Issue editor Adele Senior suggests that the pervasive romantic discourse of the child as innocent and in need of protection continues to dominate the way we see children in performance but has recently been challenged in contemporary performance and live art practice with children across the UK and Europe. Focusing on Grace Surman's choreographic work with her daughter Hope, Senior's article re-situates the historical theatrical practice of children impersonating adults – what Marah Gubar refers to as 'age transvestism' (2012) – as a contemporary performance strategy of adult/child crossing that resists the binarized aspects of the adult gaze towards the child onstage. The concept of childhood innocence is further discussed in reference to Robin Bernstein's idea of 'imagined childhood' (2013) in Kritika Mondal's meditation on Gotipua, a popular dance tradition from India's Eastern state of Odisha that is performed by young boys dressed as females. Mondal suggests that through virtuosic choreography, the male performers' physicality and cross-dressing, Gotipua enforces performed traits of childhood, including innocence.

Meanwhile, Isis Germano examines how thirteen teenage performers in Lies Pauwels' *Het Hamiltoncomplex* (2016) intentionally disrupt and productively fail to meet adult spectatorial expectations of the child as innocent. In her reading of *Het Hamiltoncomplex*, we see the beginnings of an important dialogue that is still in its infancy (sic) between queer theory and children in performance, which also informs Yvon Bonenfant's contribution to this issue. Bonenfant discusses how children's voices are often policed and restricted and considers how performance practice can facilitate a

space for children's queer voicings – such as alinguistic and extra-cultural sounds – to be heard. Questions of power are at the forefront of Bonenfant's argument, which recasts children's agency in terms of generating 'intersubjective vocality', while for Sarah Hopfinger child performers' agency is differently theorized in terms of how children 'do' the ecological in performance. Drawing on her own practice-led research and literature on vital materialism, Hopfinger proposes that approaching intergenerational performance as a form of 'just-doingness' – or task-oriented practice – enacts the human–nonhuman entanglements at the heart of the ecological.

Other approaches to working with children in performance include reflections from Chiara Guidi – founding member of *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* – on what she calls the Errant Method, presented here as an interview edited by Cristina Ventrucchi. With its roots in the Italian verb *Errare* meaning wandering and making mistakes, Guidi's method – which experiments with fables, games and stagecraft – challenges us to think beyond prescriptive pedagogical work with children in theatre and instead privileges not knowing over knowing, process over product. Meanwhile, Bryoni Trezise reflects on the 'viral child' in the digital world to illustrate how children rehearse themselves through dance-song covers (such as *Frozen*'s 'Let It Go' and Sia's 'Chandelier') while somatically incorporating their gestures into lived experience. Trezise's theorization of the figure of the viral child – who is shaped by the social, economic and identitarian pressures of communicative capitalism – is a timely provocation to consider how children's digital futures are entangled with issues of embodiment and the affective economies of commercialism.

The Artists' Pages in this issue capture performance practices with children that echo the recent paradigm shift in childhood studies from perceiving children as socially and biologically unfinished bodies (Shilling 1993) towards children as agents who are shaped by but also have the capability to shape society (James and Prout 2015 [1990]). In Andy Field's one-to-one performance *Lookout*, a child performer and an adult spectator look out over a city or town and together imagine its future in a way that takes seriously children's capacity to metaphorically rethink a site anew. Further to this invitation to imagine things differently, the Artists' Pages also document the practice of students at an elementary school in East Vancouver, who become the artistic and commercial producers of a candy bar that responds playfully to the politics of corporate confectionary making in Hannah Jickling, Helen Reed and Big Rock Candy Mountain's *SOUR VS SOUR*. These Artists' Pages resist the temptation to see the children included within them as socially and biologically incomplete and instead acknowledge children's position as creative cultural producers and makers. Gigi Argyropoulou closes the Articles and Artists' Pages section by inviting us to contemplate what children have to teach us about politics. By offering 'glimpses of an elsewhere' in contemporary experimental performance practice, Argyropoulou wonders whether children are capable of instituting radical societal and political imaginaries within the context of the global economic crisis.

The Reflections offer a range of different perspectives of seeing and making work with children as a curator, artist-parent, feminist scholar and child-less spectator. The section opens with a 'Plea for Transgenerational Research in Live Art' by Sybille Peters and the Theatre of Research. Peters, the creator of PLAYING UP, a game based on seminal live art pieces that adults and children are invited to play together, makes the case that intergenerational exchange promotes children's agency as citizens and permits the questioning and critique of governance. Elena Marchevska's essay also recognizes the political potential of contemporary performance or live art with and for children by reflecting on the specific ways that Bryony Kimmings' That Catherine Bennett Show (2014) and Caroline Bird's Under 10's Feminist Girls and Boys Corner enact feminist pedagogies, in dialogue with verbal responses from four young female spectators who encountered them. In contrast, Antje Hildebrandt provides a troubled reflection on her experience of encountering child performers in Tino Seghal's work, situating questions of the politics and ethics of perceiving children as 'art objects' by focusing on the adult spectator rather than the perceived benefit to the children involved. The penultimate essay in the issue is Michael Pinchbeck's meditation on the contributions and reflections of his own children, Dylan and Lydia, to the installation Sit with me for a moment and remember – a work about memory, family and loss.

The final offering of On Children is an Afterword and provocation from issue editor Gary Anderson of The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home. Through both mythical scenes and real dialogue, Anderson invokes encounters with his four sons as 'philosophers/artists' (Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, Louis Althusser and Joseph Beuys) in order to take the assumption that 'children ruin everything' to its philosophical conclusions. Questioning his own parenting, which sees his children as 'in development' – a position he situates in relation to the dominant legal, psychological and social framing of children as 'not yet ready' (Piaget 1972 [1966]) – Anderson destabilizes dominant, teleological conceptualizations of children as 'in progress' and invites adult readers to exist in a state of ontological confusion about (their own) children.

On Adults: In my experience of being a child, looking after my child-brothers and babysitting children, I've found children to be just as immoral as adults. The only difference is that adults understand what they're doing. However I do think children understand what they are doing too and people underestimate this and then jump to the conclusion that what they do is innocent – when really, it's not. (Gabriel)

While Gabriel's response reiterates the Piaget- inspired discourse of the child as not-yet fully- developed even as it challenges it, we cannot ignore the questions of perceived morality, innocence and understanding that he evokes here. This issue is an invitation to think about and beyond these questions towards and with children rather than simply for them, if only as a reminder that adults don't always understand what they are doing either.

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