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# WITH CHILDREN: A PROPOSAL TO CHANGE EVERYTHING



EASTVIEW SEV #2, OIL, ACRYLIC, SPRAY PAINT, COPPER-LEAF AND PEN ON PANEL, 96 X 216 INCHES, 2010 | Kim Dorland

I have accidentally become a bit of an expert on the niche artistic practice of collaborating with children to create performance work for adult audiences. My life and career have been irrevocably altered by this simplest of things: the inclusion of children—and not even my own children. I don't have any children. I don't want any children. I just want to work with them.

I believe that working with children and young people could contribute toward tempering the ideological shit-storms the world seems to be in on all fronts: religious, economic, environmental, racial,

gendered, and the rapidly evolving family form. This, then, is a proposal—utopian as all hell—understood not as a planned destination, but a target that has the potential to produce unexpected social forms that are nicer, fairer, friendlier, and way more fun.

I founded my performance company Mammalian Diving Reflex in 1993 and spent the first thirteen years making edgy, very child-unfriendly work. In 2005, all of that came to a sudden, peculiar, spectacular, and most welcome halt with a single project.

*Haircuts by Children* was created in collaboration with a single class of Grade 5 students at Toronto's Parkdale Public School. It's exactly how it sounds. The project was an instant international hit. To date, it has been performed in over thirty five cities around the world and still tours today. Since that time in 2005, I've primarily collaborated with children, creating a large body of work and presenting different projects in about eighty cities around the world.

Working with children has been very good for the company, my young collaborators, and me, which is

why I'm now working hard to help others adapt their practice in the same direction.

If the proposition of working with children triggers visions of sugarplum fairies awkward performances, or earnest skits about bullying, gender identity, on-line safety, consent, or other (admittedly important) issues—don't worry. Collaborating with children can also produce edgy—and oftentimes funny—boundary-pushing, politically charged work, the kind of work that tends to be valued in the contemporary

performance and visual arts scenes.

The quality of this work is due, in part, to the atypical, but strong artistic skills of the children. However, mostly it's due to simply refraining from making work about sugarplum fairies at all and, instead, engaging with complex, challenging ideas, while not underestimating the intelligence of the children.

Young people are, for the most part, disenfranchised and powerless, in many situations little better than prisoners counting down the days to release. And they recognize this. They understand that they are subject to an authoritarian regime, whether they buy into the situation or resist it. When I was in school, I used to draw a circle for every minute left in the class, divide the circle into four, and fill each quarter in as every 15 seconds passed, gripped by a boredom that was physically excruciating. The recognition that the status quo is "adulterian," that children are very often forced to do things against their will, is generally understood to be a compromise that all must accept in exchange for eventual autonomy in adulthood. But what kind of autonomous subjects is eighteen years of servitude likely to produce? Probably not particularly healthy ones.

Working with children in the arts and cultural sectors, in a manner that maintains a large space for their participation, and demanding that adults abide by a few simple rules—like no shushing, for example—can be understood as a pilot for a vision of a very different role for young people in the world. This is a vision of them not as prisoners of their age, but as contributors of an expertise emanating from their particular youthful capacities: a vision that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child considers a "new social contract".<sup>1</sup>

Working with children utilizes two different understandings of their role in the collaboration. On the one hand they are like any adult collaborator, with the ideas they bring to the table and their opinions about the work we're creating. On the other, they are themselves, in effect, artistic material. Their presence alone and their role in a relational dynamic with the adult audience produce outcomes that, if framed nicely, can be aestheticized. This means working with them to create effects beyond what we co-develop, effects that rely on their presence alone as simply who they are and nothing more, their presence as these things we've all agreed to consider "children." This extra effect occurs with their knowledge and consent, but it's not negotiable because it cannot be negotiated; they're children, and there's nothing but time that's going to change that.

So there are the effects we agree on—crazy haircuts, for example—and then there are the effects that their mere presence generates as they run the salon.

Children force adults into a fascinating corner, where adults are denied all but two options: at any given moment, they can negotiate with the children in a non-hierarchical way, listen to the kids' concerns, and work together in a way that is agreeable to all. Or, conversely, adults can resort to commanding the children, telling them what to do, usually framed in terms of two ideas: expediency and for-their-own-good.

In other words, children force adults to be either anarchists or authoritarians, leaving no other options.

In the world of adult-to-adult negotiation, there are shades of grey: negotiations are complex, and getting people to do what you want comes in many sophisticated forms including immediate or future payments, job promises, fame, or just the idea that whatever you're suffering through will have important ramifications for your future. The older we get, the more sophisticated become the ways in which people try to sit us down, shut us up, and get us to focus on our work. With kids, most of these fancy ways to motivate don't work. Kids are way too smart for that.

I do mean that. But we have to understand "smart" quite differently. It's not about analytical accuracy applied to experience, producing generalizable insights; instead, it's about being smart in a more passive way: kids' smarts are at the level of *being*. Kids are much more able to just *be*.

But it's not as if children lack focus or anything like that. It's just that they resist being incentivized by an abstract future and must be rewarded immediately, the experience of being focused often the reward itself. Think of the times, as a child, when you were lost in play for hours adopting roles and characters, playing in the sand and making complex worlds, or digging deep holes at the beach and watching water miraculously appear from below. The ability to focus is not the issue: it's a question of what is considered important to focus on.

My work with children and young people took an even more surprising turn in 2010 when, after five years of working with Parkdale Public School on thirteen projects, a student contacted me. 14-year-old Sanjay Ratnan was looking for stuff to do over the summer, so we formed The Torontonians, a collective of teens and adults, most of us based in Parkdale, Toronto, and committed to the idea of creating artistic work for adult consumption. But, more importantly,

the collaboration yielded a methodology for collaborating with young people that I've distilled into a set of principles and am now implementing in other areas of the world.

When describing Mammalian's projects to adults, there is one recurring misconception: the erroneous belief that the work is for the children's edification—to build their confidence, to share skills with them, and to prepare them for a more successful future. This is the basic requirement for most funding for this kind of work, and I get it, but feel it's a limited paradigm. It's a view rooted in an understanding of the child as a work in progress toward the finished state of adulthood. Since the 1980s, however, sociologists of childhood have opposed this, adroitly arguing that any given child, at any given moment, should be understood as a complete, whole, and competent individual, bringing their own range of abilities and capacities to the table, like any other person.<sup>2</sup>

In this view, then, the work with children is not at all about educating or improving them in any way: it's about *creating great work with them*, deploying the effects of their presence in exciting and beautiful ways. If anything, the intention is, in fact, to edify *the adults* by introducing children into their professional, social, or cultural worlds, and asking them to deal with the kids—not as equals, because we are very different and do have different competencies—but in a way that forcefully *excludes* any coercive behaviour, a basic expectation in all collaboration.

At the center is the simple idea of the child's *full participation* in all matters affecting them—and there are a lot of these. It's not an original idea, and is most succinctly expressed in the 1989 *UN Convention of the Rights of the Child* (CRC), an international treaty ratified by all countries but the USA.<sup>3</sup> The CRC is a radical document which, if fully implemented, would render the world unrecognizable.

But why do that?

Especially since commanding them to get out of the dangerously tall tree, for example, is a lot easier and quicker than climbing up to have a discussion about the issue.

Why do it?

To topple capitalism, of course.

Rather than tossing a wooden shoe into the gears, I'm proposing to invite children in to help craft and design those gears, believing that viable alternatives will emerge. But what do we replace capitalism

with, you might ask? The same thing that people have been desperately asking for almost two centuries, with many attempts coming up short, and some coming up violent, and others coming up completely totalitarian.

The answer: with nothing.

It's not about replacing it in oppositional manoeuvres that, if the past is any guide, are likely to draw a violent response from vested interests, but about morphing current economic relations through the demand for the participation of people (children) who are simply just *not that good* at capitalism, but who have other skills that can lead us to the emergence of new ways of organizing things.

The idea of inviting children into all decisions affecting them needs to happen carefully and ethically. But luckily we have a pretty good set of principles to start with in the CRC. To that end, in 2011 I wrote the *The Mammalian Protocol for Collaborating with Children*, based on ten<sup>4</sup> of the treaty's articles that I feel are relevant

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for my artistic collaborations with children. It is a framework for creating a space for children and responding to their contributions, even the disruptive ones.

The biggest target of the *The Mammalian Protocol* is, again, not the child, who would undoubtedly be affected for the better, but the world of *adults*, which, if it were to incorporate the full participation of children, would also be radically altered. To actually respect children's rights as defined by the CRC would be a monumental task, involving a complete restructuring of the family, the household, school, the market...you know: society. It would take a ton of money and a lot of time. It's just not expedient.

But its expediency that, in fact, has got to go; it has too long governed the actions of adults in relation to children. The addiction to expediency, the little lies we tell kids to make the things happen that we're convinced must happen, is a significant trait of our society. It's evidence for our love of speed over our love of what

is right, our embrace of convenience even as it's often clearly unhealthy, our constant drive toward efficiency. If we want the full inclusion of children, all of this will have to be scaled back.

The great thing is that we don't have to do anything to figure out how to make this happen. *We just have to include children.* Their sets of abilities will dictate the parameters because they are experts in this respect; we just have to make sure they're at the table at every turn. If the inclusion of children becomes a marker of fairness and good practice, then slowing down will be a natural outcome.

The Torontonians, the collective I formed with the youth in 2010, quickly grew in size and importance. By the summer of 2012, there were over fifteen core teen members, a number of peripheral ones, and a bunch of adults. We made videos and performances; gave talks; appeared on panels; toured to Nova Scotia, the UK, Germany, Latvia, and Hamilton; and attended

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conferences in Montreal, Hamburg, Heidelberg, New York, and Windsor. But most importantly, the collaboration morphed yet again, and I started calling it a "succession plan," with the goal to give the kids the keys to the company. This plan slowly became a model as the principles the youth and I we were intuitively developing together emerged and became concretized in the Mammalian Succession Model of Youth Labour Engagement (the Mammalian SMYLE). The SMYLE understands youth engagement as not only a laudable vision focused on boosting confidence, sharing a broad range of skills, and generally nurturing a new generation of cultural workers, but as a *literal attempt* to train the kids to take over *our specific jobs, our specific organizations*, in a reinvigoration of the apprenticeship model.

Succession is the goal, giving the kids the company, the plan, while still accepting that this is only possible on the tiniest scale. The deal is that, regardless, the sector *behaves* as though it's possible at a larger scale and tries hard to make it happen.

I do want this proposal to be taken seriously by those in the cultural sector to—as I mentioned—make the world a better place, but that vague, abstract, and subjective idea—a better world—is unlikely to motivate with any force. So, additionally, I also want to appeal to people's basest, most material careerist impulses. In fact, not only am I appealing to them, I'm *encouraging* them. I hope you have a shit-ton of success with your projects, travel the world, and earn a living for yourself and your team—most importantly the youth.

These are the core principles of the SMYLE:

**1 COLLEGIALITY //** (Chavez & Soep, 2005)<sup>5</sup> When I work with young people, they are my colleagues. Therefore the work we create must be equally important to both parties and have the potential to affect all of our lives. Practically, this means that this work is not off to the side of my company's main programming, over there in the youth wing. In fact, it comprises a good chunk of our primary offerings.

**2 SOCIAL CAPITAL //** Implied in the concept of collegiality is the idea of social capital. Networks are absolutely central to many industries, particularly arts and culture where jobs are more likely to flow from who-you-know. Therefore I make great efforts to connect youth with my adult colleagues in the industry, and I do this through the ancient art of socializing—the "party" being my key methodological instrument, together with its famous variant, the "dinner party."

**3 FRIENDSHIP //** A network is nothing but a bunch of people shaking hands and talking jargon, until you inject it with friendship. My adult colleagues and I are friends with the young people in a very real sense, sharing our lives and watching each other's back. We're building this company *together*. Believe me, as a middle-aged man, I am aware of the multitude of alarm bells that get triggered by the idea of friendship between adults and young people during this very paranoid time. But friendship can be forged without putting a single hair on anyone's head at risk. I've been doing it for years. It just needs to be done right and, in particular, with a *good number of adults*, to ensure accountability.

**4 DIVISION OF LABOUR //** It's really important to understand that I'm not suggesting that children and adults are the same. In fact, I'd never even suggest that any one person is the same as another;

there are differences, some of which are prevalent enough to be called tendencies, if not a provisional reality. Collaborating with children is best when we're deployed as a *team*, with everybody assuming responsibility for the area for which their expertise is best suited.

In the case of artistic production, generally speaking, children are great at producing content, while adults have a much better grasp of form. However, the content offered by young people tends to be of a different sort than is currently valued, which is usually highly refined, conceptually complex, and very much fabricated. Instead, I'm interested in the content produced by young people during their day-to-day activities and natural tendencies: *things they like to do*.

Adults, on the other hand, possess some high falutin' book-learning, an understanding of art history, and the ability to wrap their heads around the fact that, among other things, a urinal entitled *Fountain* and signed with a pseudonym can be a work of art. This division of labour and approach to teamwork is at the heart of the SMYLE.

**5 PRESENCE AND PROXIMITY //** To whatever degree is possible, the youth engaged should be proximate to the adult organization and individuals, sharing a neighborhood, living in relatively similar conditions, dealing with the same traffic patterns and grocery stores.

**6 MODEST NUMBERS, BUILDING SLOWLY //** It's important to start small, with an abundance of resources directed at modest numbers. Over time, and quite organically, other youth can be recruited—but through the efforts of the youth themselves.

**7 PERFORMATIVITY //** We are reliant on performativity, a concept that is often mistakenly used as a synonym for performance. Originating in speech act theory, a performative act is more precisely an act that brings things into being through the stating or performance of these things. The classic example is the statement "I now pronounce you husband and wife" (or hubby/hubby, wife/wife). In that instance, suddenly a set of social relations are triggered that have major material implications for the lives of those just hitched. I try to bring real things into being through my interventions, so instead of making a show about children's rights, for the duration of a project I give children the space to do what they want: I try to materialize these rights for real.

The youth and I create very unusual social circumstances where generosity and equity are the norm, this rhetoric rooted in our lives in a public way. To do this, I drag the youth around the globe, insisting that they are at the table before anyone's sure what is actually on the table.

Evaluating outcomes, a tricky task at the best of times, becomes more sophisticated and in some ways easier. Instead of the typically useless exit survey where the kids knowingly tick all the boxes expected of them, the SMYLE presents another site of study: the organization and the adult individuals. Typically no one asks the adults how working with children has altered *their* lives, but that should be a central question. If after implementing the SMYLE the adult's friendship circles, and their knowledge of music, of memes, of how to maximize their cell phone—their understanding of the world—has not radically changed, then: fail! The SMYLE is a two-way street, and all involved should be affected.

I am proposing the arts and cultural industries as a site to pilot and prove the efficacy of the idea of the full participation of children and young people, for a few reasons: First, the field abounds with interest in communication and dissemination of ideas—the sector is filled with natural propagandists. Secondly, there are plenty of precedents for the inclusion of children in arts and culture—as audience, as creators, and as part of their learning process. Thirdly, there are provisions in labour law that, uniquely, allow children to work in these fields.

Afterwards, the sector can facilitate the participation of children across other aspects of the world, to the degree that the kids are interested. I imagine this as actually forming a small industry in and of itself as the cultural sector expands its responsibility—not to mention its revenue streams—by advising others on how to do this. Artists might not be too keen to jump on this one because its relation to artistic creativity is limited, but it doesn't need to be artists; they're not the only creatives within the sector.

To date, I've been working with the crew in Toronto for eleven years as they zipped through their teens, with most of the core turning twenty this year, 2016. The effects on the youth and the company have been profound, and I'm just starting to grapple with measuring the outcomes and adapting the model to other locations.

Our first partner in reproducing the SMYLE was

the Ruhrtriennale, a massive seven-week music, art, and performance festival in the Ruhr region of Germany. Some of the two hundred young people who participated have subsequently been invited to work on other projects with other artists and, with the leadership of Ruhrtriennale dramaturge, Cathrin Rose, have formed their own collective Mit Ohne Alles<sup>6</sup>, modeled after The Torontonians. A slightly diverse group to begin with, it became even more diverse as we managed to convince an additional forty teen immigrants and refugees to collaborate with (and eventually join) the collective and create *Millionen! Millionen! Millionen!*, a devised<sup>7</sup> performance work. Like the young people in Parkdale, they are getting more and more involved with the Ruhrtriennale and other cultural organizations in the area, making more work, travelling around Europe to appear on panels, and doing their school co-placements at the festival.

The second application of the SMYLE began in August 2014 with the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) in the UK, where we are working with thirty children from Tottenham's Northumberland Park School and its sister school, The Vale, which educates differently-abled kids. I've identified what I think are the necessary and sufficient conditions responsible for the SMYLE's success in Toronto, distilled them down, and am condensing and reproducing the trajectory we developed in Toronto—which took 10 years—to one that is scheduled to take five.

There are ethical questions here, as always. If this thing is at all successful, the following question arises: is what they stand to inherit worth inheriting in the first place? I'm going to say a firm "yes" when it comes to the intrinsic value of arts and culture, so much so that I'm not even going to discuss it here. What I'm more concerned with, particularly if I'm going to invite young people to eventually assume fiscal responsibility, is the financial viability and quality of life for the sector. At this time things are looking okay, with a number of scholars finding evidence that work in the sector is not only growing considerably faster than the overall economy, but the jobs appear to be more resistant to economic fluctuations than service and manufacturing occupations.<sup>8</sup> But the deal is that, unlike the jobs in these sectors, success in arts and culture is dependent on who-you-know, something that favours children who have access to a milieu familiar with the field. The kids with parents comfortable with the sector are immediately more advantaged than the children of recent immigrants, for example, who have to work too hard to take the time to sort this out. The SMYLE can be understood as a corrective to this and

has particular relevance for populations that do not have this luxury.

Some artists can get quite huffy in response to this proposal—which, with replication and generalizability being at its core, is closer to science than art—and I've been occasionally challenged at talks or in online forums and told that scaling up or replication is evidence of instrumental, authoritarian, technocratic control and oppression.<sup>9</sup> Some of the crazy graduate students at CalArts even denounced the idea as "globalization," with a couple of them actually storming out of my talk.

The swear word often used for what I'm proposing is "instrumentalization": the deployment of the cultural sector to solve ills it did not create, and for which it is hardly equipped to handle or fairly compensate. This trend is well advanced in the UK, where education departments in publicly funded galleries are more and more acting like de facto mental health clinics. Rather than opposing this instrumentalization, I am more interested in what American theatre scholar Shannon Jackson calls "infrastructure avowal," a wilful stepping in where the state has stepped out.<sup>10</sup> I'm good with that, happy to be instrumentalized by whomever, confident that I'm smarter than any authoritarian technocrat, and that this proposal, in particular, is a stealth manoeuvre, focused on the kids—and who doesn't love to help out the kids?—but really targeted at much more recalcitrant social problems.

Therefore, the new social contract that would result from a comprehensive application of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* is one that could not help but improve the world for everyone.<sup>11</sup> That this has the potential to thread unified and healing views through other ideological deadlocks is supported by the fact that the treaty is so widely ratified. The presence of kids can help us agree on even difficult issues, a view the committee supports, with the assertion that children have the potential to aid understanding among cultures and societies by approaching questions of morality and ethics in very different ways. Someone's religion is not likely to cause much anxiety when there's a game of tag to be played, and fairness—the accepting of equitable redistribution—is totally logical to most children.

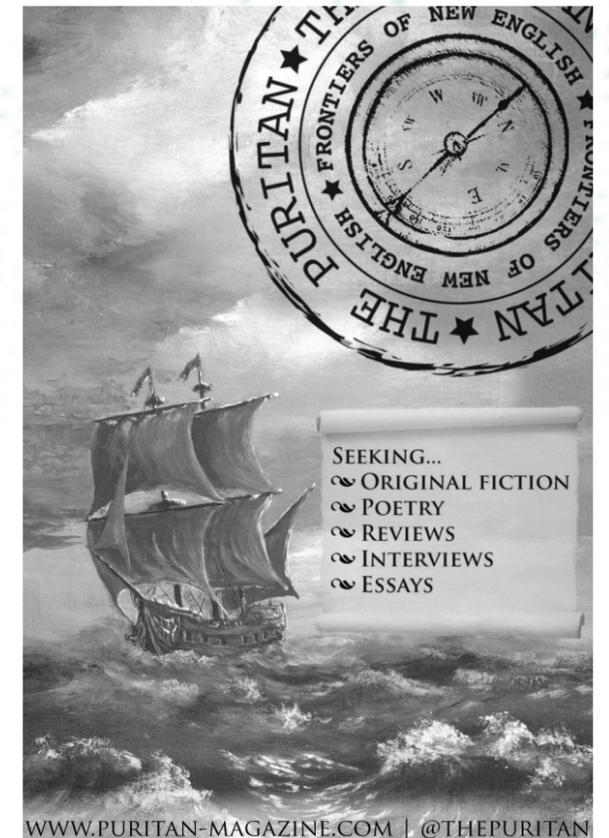
At this point, the development and deployment of the SMYLE has had great results. Beyond the success of the company, an international community of collaborators and friends both young and old is emerging: a supportive network that understands artistic social engagement with children as not only viable, but beautiful.

I often hear parents remark that the arrival of children triggers a reordering of priorities away from, among other things, an obsession with career toward a concern about quality of life. Personally, having wrapped my career around the presence of children, I agree, my career having morphed into something so much more interesting: a playful tinkering toward a better world together with the kids. As a child, I swore to myself that I would rather die than become the kind of hypocrite I considered so many adults to be. I still think I have a chance to avoid this typical and banal hypocrisy, but I believe there's only one way to do it: with children.

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