

MAP

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ORTONANDON: THREE GO ADVENTURING AGAIN

Deborah Jackson's essay examines *Three Go Adventuring Again*, a two-video installation by Ortonandon—sisters Katie, Anna and Sophie Orton. Accompanied by props inviting participation, 'Family Patterning' and 'How to Die' were first exhibited in August 2015 at Summerhall, Edinburgh.



Entrance to Ortonandon: Three Go Adventuring Again Summerhall Fringe Festival, Edinburgh 2015

The first of the two videos, 'Family Patterning', collates a series of vignettes that resist any unified narrative. Echoing the Theatre of the Absurd [1], Ortonandon's 'Family Patterning' shares concerns that the human situation is essentially absurd and devoid of purpose and is an attempt to explore, and indeed restore, the significance of myth and ritual in their respective cultural contexts. Ortonandon approach this by assuming dramatic elements to produce a performative film that presents a world that cannot be logically explained.



Blue Peter's 21st century Tracy Island: 54321 Thunderbirds Are Go!



Ortonandon, 'Family Patterning', 2015, video still

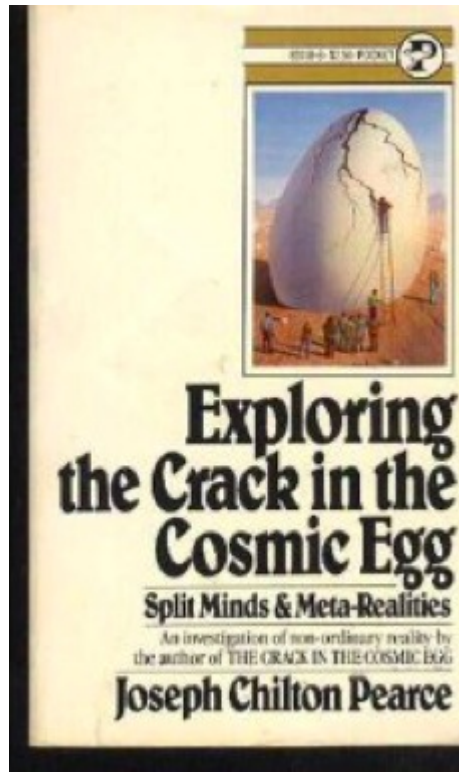
We watch the sisters perform ritualised activities involving gestures and objects within an imagined sequestered site. Within the frivolities at play in 'Family Patterning' there is a rich and cultivated investment in symbols. They begin with a shot of a papier-mâché mountain, ad-hoc in both its spirit and assemblage and resembling an abandoned attempt to make Blue Peter's infamous do-it-yourself Tracy Island playset inspired by the children's science-fiction television series, *Thunderbirds*. Next, we are confronted with the three Orton sister's heads protruding through this makeshift mountaintop, unavoidably referencing the three protagonists in Samuel Beckett's *Play*, 1962-63. Like Beckett and his fellow absurdist playwrights/dramaturges (e.g. Tadeusz Kantor and Jean Genet), Ortonandon don't just proclaim absurdity, they embody it.



Samuel Beckett, Play, 2012, American Conservatory Theater

It is significant in all of Ortonandon's work that they are sisters and of course the title of this work 'Family Patterning' alludes to this. Not only are the sisters formed from the same matter in reality, but all three appear here as part of the same mountain formation, appearing like the U.S. Presidents' representations at Mount Rushmore, memorialised and static. Mountains themselves are also symbolic of conquering, overcoming, hard work, willpower, and the ascension over petty circumstances. Indeed, all family relationships can sometimes be challenging. Here it may be useful to consider the sibling relationships being highlighted and commemorated.

Psychology study refers family patterning to the lifetime of history that related members of the family bring to each interaction, the subconscious patterns and dynamics that are at work. Ortonandon's choice to make collaborative artworks signals the value they place on the intuitive and tacit understanding of one another, exploiting this to provide a sense-making framework that informs how they create work together. This embodied awareness, patterns of behaviours, and the shared histories formed growing up together, also have the potential to provoke. As in all families, this trio is adept at eliciting a reaction from one another. So what is being proposed by this three-headed mountain? Are Ortonandon encased in an unmoveable mausoleum or can they break free of their subconscious family dynamics and patterning?



Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg*, 1971

Perhaps the clue is in the next shot—a painted and cracked egg. We might consider the egg through the frame of Surrealism and its common usage to symbolise the prenatal and intrauterine, employed as a symbol of hope and love. However, beyond this rather literal reading, it also calls to mind the American author Joseph Chilton Pearce’s enormously popular New Age classic, *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg*, 1971.[2] In his text Pearce explores how we experience the elusive relationship between our minds and the world and, in particular, the way we structure our reality through language and belief. He states that we have an absolutely unlimited possibility within us, and an equal amount of self-imposed limitations. Suggesting that we live in a second-hand reality and what we believe about the world we project onto the world, Pearce makes the point that the world is in our own heads much more than it is ‘out there’.

It is at this point that Ortonandon abandon their constraints and restraints and wig out to Dead Or Alive’s 1985 number one hit ‘You Spin Me Round (Like a Record)’ from their album *Youthquake*. Notably, this album takes its title from the fashion, musical and cultural movement of the 1960s that signalled a noticeable shift in the norms of a society due to the influence of a powerful youth culture. Both *Youthquake* and the sisters’ triumphalist dance are emancipatory flashpoints. Ortonandon dance in circular freestyle around their faux mountain, which evokes memories of the song ‘She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain’. Their expressive gestures recall a mix of body movement workshops, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, and the highly influential choreographer Yvonne Rainer’s matter-of-fact delivery (just doing a movement, rather than ‘performing’ it). Significantly, Ortonandon wear masks as they perform the almost ritualistic dance, a possible re-enactment of an invented childhood event. Here the use of masks not only disguises their identities but also serves to pronounce their own key role, that of giving a sense of continuity between the present and the past.



Yvonne Rainer, 'Trio A: The Mind Is a Muscle, Part 1', 1966, still

Continuing the action, the following scene is set to *The Lovin' Spoonful's* TopTen 1965 hit 'Do You Believe in Magic' (according to the lyrics, the magic referenced in the title is the power of music to supply happiness and freedom both to those who make it and those who listen to it). Like all the scenes in 'Family Patterning', this is set against the backdrop of a chroma key (a green screen most commonly associated with CGI film sequences), but still no scenery is inserted, allowing us to continue to superimpose our own fantasy settings.

Ortonandon appear in frame, each presenting a length of brightly coloured, ornate flower print fabrics and proceed to enact a theatrical tableaux, creating still images with their bodies. There is a visual connection with Bunraku, the traditional puppet theatre of Japan where the puppeteers are in full view of the audience, but are dressed in black to symbolise that they are to be taken as 'invisible'. However, Ortonandon's opaque illusionism highlights their physical presence. Dressed in black, set against the saturated green, their physical presence is not masked as they revel in creating physical patterns in a combination of shapes, lines, colours, and forms.



Traditional Japanese Bunraku performance



Ortonandon, 'Family Patterning', 2015, still

With this visible assertion of their presence and the decorative fabric adorning their static frames, a feminist reading of the work is inexorable. The fabrics too, self-consciously demonstrate their own objecthood. There is a history within art of reclaiming the patterns of quilts and wallpapers and printed fabrics from the domestic domain, stereotypically associated with women, most notably by the American Pattern and Decoration movement, known as P&D, 1975-1985, formed from a close group of artists who were friends, friends of friends or students of friends. Significantly, this group was engaged with the liberation politics of the 1960s, particularly feminism. They also resisted the then dominant Minimalist movement in art and instead emphasised pattern and all-over decoration.



Joyce Kozloff, Hidden Chambers, 1975-76, Hudson River Museum

Read in the context of 'Family Patterning', we can also think about pattern as a 'device' that can be both beautiful and perhaps, also, claustrophobic (as both an abstract concept and physical construction). It can define and obliterate, emphasise or belittle. Ortonandon perceptively use these patterned artefacts to create fluid and unexpected relationships to cross both metaphorical and actual boundaries.

'How to Die' is a short instructional video in which Ortonandon define the arbitrary rules of how to play dead to the ambulatory spectator invited to play along. Farce is encouraged. Ortonandon enact a repertoire of death rattle melodramas, performing a series of actions that

conform to the fantasy of dying, as when they clutch their chest as if having been shot. They immerse themselves in an imitated world, enjoying showing-off their theatrical demises.

There is a long tradition within the history of art, devoted to the iconography of death and our complex and contradictory attitudes towards it. The memento-mori painting 'The Ambassadors' by Hans Holbein, 1553; Jacques-Louis David's 'The Death of Marat', 1793; Frida Kahlo's 'Girl with Death Mask', 1938; Damien Hirst's 'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living', 1991 are all examples of this.

Whilst death is one of the few experiences common to all people and all societies, how different cultures at different times in history conceive of death, and how this has shaped our behaviours and practices, varies.



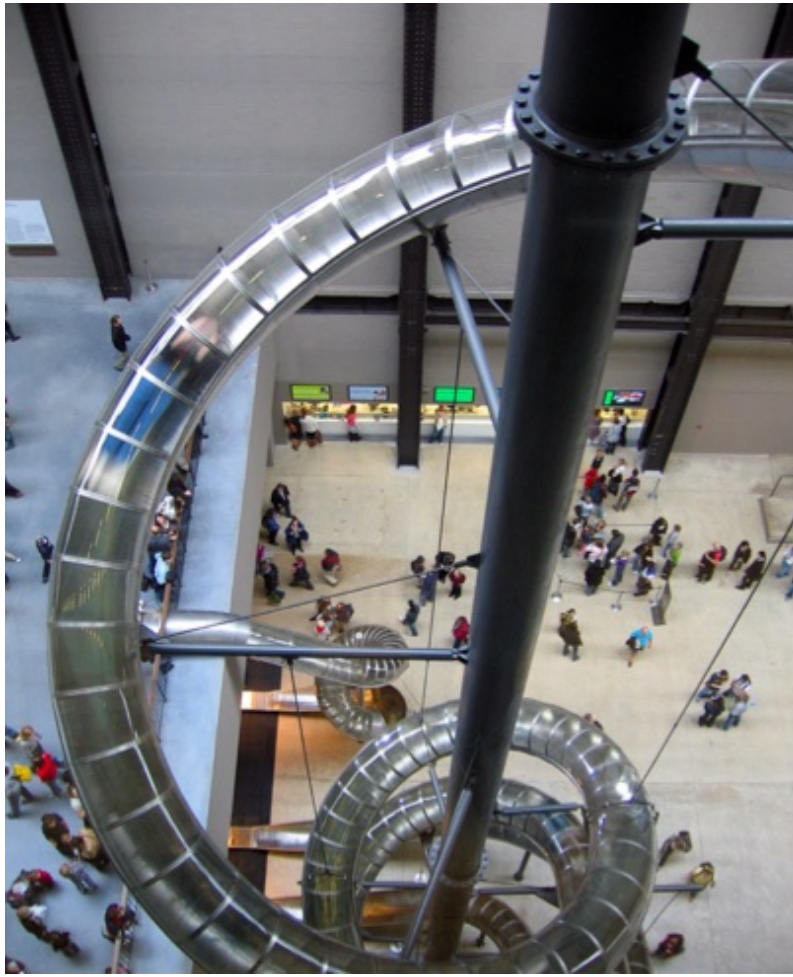
Jacques-Louis David 'The Death of Marat', 1793



Frida Kahlo, 'Girl with Death Mask', 1938

Play is also familiar to everyone and is often used as a point of reference or metaphor in art with an acute awareness of its complex conceptual connotations. Additionally, terms like play, playground, playful, have become a part of the common vocabulary in contemporary art. The intention is often to disrupt the traditional role of passive observance usually assumed by audiences, allowing them active participation. However, an artwork is a finished product, it does not become 'interactive' when it is played by the audience. Similarly, play is often reductively conflated with art, perhaps because both have a group-binding function.

In philosophy, this tradition of understanding art in terms of play was initiated in the 18th century by Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Judgment* [3] and continues into the 20th century through E.H. Gombrich's *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* [4]. Most recently, the assimilation of play in participatory art can be attributed to French curator Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* [5] where play is a key theme underpinning his thesis, as exemplified by Carsten Höller's 'Untitled (Slide)', 2011.



Carsten Höller, 'Untitled (Slide)', 2011

However, in their incitement for you to make-believe and pretend to simulate your own death, Ortonandon are more accurately referencing the avant-garde experiments of Dada and Surrealism, Fluxus, performance and public art practice, all of which tend to blur the boundary between art and life. All, including Ortonandon, can be considered to employ strategies of play as analogues to art practice, as metaphors for creativity, and as models for art criticism in order to reconsider their practice and to expand their critical strategies.

At the forefront of 'How to Die' is the realisation that we strive to avoid death. We initiate indirect ways of extending ourselves into the future such as glory, reputation, historical impact, children, and of course by achieving immortality through the legacy left by making art. However, with its humour and irreverence 'How to Die' encourages us to celebrate everyday actions instead of static art objects.

Three Go Adventuring Again works to conflate the Orton's heritage and upbringing with our own childhood memories. It explores how intuition applies to the production and apprehension of art, working without (or against) discursive thinking or ratiocination—beyond a reasoned train of thought. The installation makes use of, and plays, with cultural signifiers and posits the potentials of ritual and art as catalysts for transformative experiences.

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Bathsheba, St. Andrews, Barbados. Photo credit Jessica Carden

[1] The Theatre of the Absurd refers specifically to the works of European and American dramatists of the 1950s and early 1960s whose works express the idea that the human situation is essentially absurd and devoid of purpose. Camus, Albert. (1942) *The Myth of Sisyphus* . UK: Vintage; Reissue edition (1991)

[2] Pearce, Joseph Chilton. (1971) *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg: Challenging Constructs of Mind and Reality* . USA: Julian Press; Reissue edition (1988)

[3] Kant, Immanuel. (1790) *Critique of Judgment* . UK: Oxford World's Classics Reissue edition (2008)

[4] Gombrich, E.H. (1963) *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* . UK: Phaidon

[5] Bourriaud, Nicolas. (1998) *Relational Aesthetics*. France: Les Presse Du Reel