

PolySensorium Tells Your Fortune

An Action Art Object

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PolySensorium is a group of scholars and artists who sponsor experiential knowledge creation in academic settings. For the 2016 Trans*Studies Conference, PolySensorium created a workshop based on the premise that knowledge, like gender, is simultaneously collective, imagined, and embodied. Academic conferences typically prioritize individual performances of more or less abstract ways of knowing. We especially appreciated the Tucson organizers' commitment to including activist and artistic participants. Because it's never only about ideas and never only about material practices, trans being offers rich opportunities to connect different ways of understanding change and agency. The things we do with our bodies are also things we know about how and where we can push the limits of the possible. And so our workshop was designed to explore shared, embodied forms of understanding and what these can contribute to trans studies.

We felt that embodied explorations were particularly critical at this conference as part of our preparation for forming an international trans studies association. We don't want a trans studies association that treats bodies as objects to study or ignore, or that reproduces the disproportionate status accruing to academically trained English-language speakers. We want a discipline that treats physical experience and understanding as central, rather than incidental, to the project of generating a body of knowledge—and that foregrounds the inter-relational aspect of embodiment. Out of these concerns we created a studio workshop for generating bodily knowledge/knowing.

This workshop was called the Trans Agency Studio. We invited participants interested in sharing their understanding of embodied social and individual change through structured verbal exchange, physical movement, and gently intentional touch. Our exercises explored how our lived experience of transformation

and persistence inform a collective vision of what trans studies could be and do. What experience of collective physical copresence and mutual recognition can strangers create and share in an air-conditioned professional space? What could we accomplish together if our whole selves were often welcomed and involved?

At the close of the workshop, when people were sharing about their experience, we distributed our action art object to the participants. This object is a takeaway fortune-teller designed by Maxe Crandall and Zach Ozma.

The fortune-teller is a simple paper toy many people remember from adolescence. Because fortune-tellers are inherently participatory and tactile objects, they provide a playful opportunity to literally get in touch with what we can collectively imagine into being. In this way the object reflects our workshop's interest in considering and cultivating trans agency. We offer it to you as a way to extend this invitation to people who were not present at the Trans Agency Studio, a small gesture of inclusion to anyone who cares to copy (or cut out) the paper pattern, fold it, and play our game with another person.

When the printed paper is folded and put to use by two players, the fortune-teller as an object materializes our understanding of agency as playful; it captures some of the creativity involved in dreaming up new bodies, new lives, new ways of being in the world. It also captures some of the randomness of the results!

Directions for Play:

- Player 1 holds the object with two hands (thumb and two index fingers in each pocket). Player 2 asks a question about the future, then chooses one of the four outer panels.
- Player 1 spells out the chosen word, moving the panels in a pinching and pulling motion with each letter.
- Next Player 1 chooses a drawing from among the middle panels and offers a word for what they see. Player 2 spells out this word, again moving the panels with each letter.
- Player 1 chooses a drawing again. Player 2 unfolds the fortune-teller to read the message under the chosen drawing. This is Player 2's fortune.

The fortune-teller is a toy—it's meant to be played with any way you can imagine. When we call the fortune-teller an "action art object," we are drawing attention to the way the actions we take in the moment of play help us reflect on action we have taken and action we might take. While its primary intention is to stimulate and sustain imaginative reflection, like the workshop it has a social function as well. These toys are made to be used in pairs. Those of us who played with fortune-tellers in middle school typically used them to explore one another's hopes for the future. We preserved this memory in our version but added an



Figure 1a. PolySensorium fortune-teller (inside)

intentional ambiguity to it: each step of our fortune-teller requires interpretation. It isn't always clear when you're asking a question and when you're getting an answer. Sometimes you have to decide which word might describe an image with many possible valences. Part of the reason for this is that the questions we ask as trans adults are complicated, and part is that we cannot answer them alone; the fortune-teller's ambiguity, and embrace of the poetic, is meant to stimulate conversation between the people playing with it.

As an object, then, the fortune-teller activates trans agency as inseparable from sociability. It is also a device for extending the time of the workshop. We wanted to give people something to hold, something tangible to activate the memory of the interactive physicality of the workshop. So our agency toy has a trans-temporal dimension: it carried embodied knowledge into the future of the conference and beyond, while it also serves as a backward-looking record and

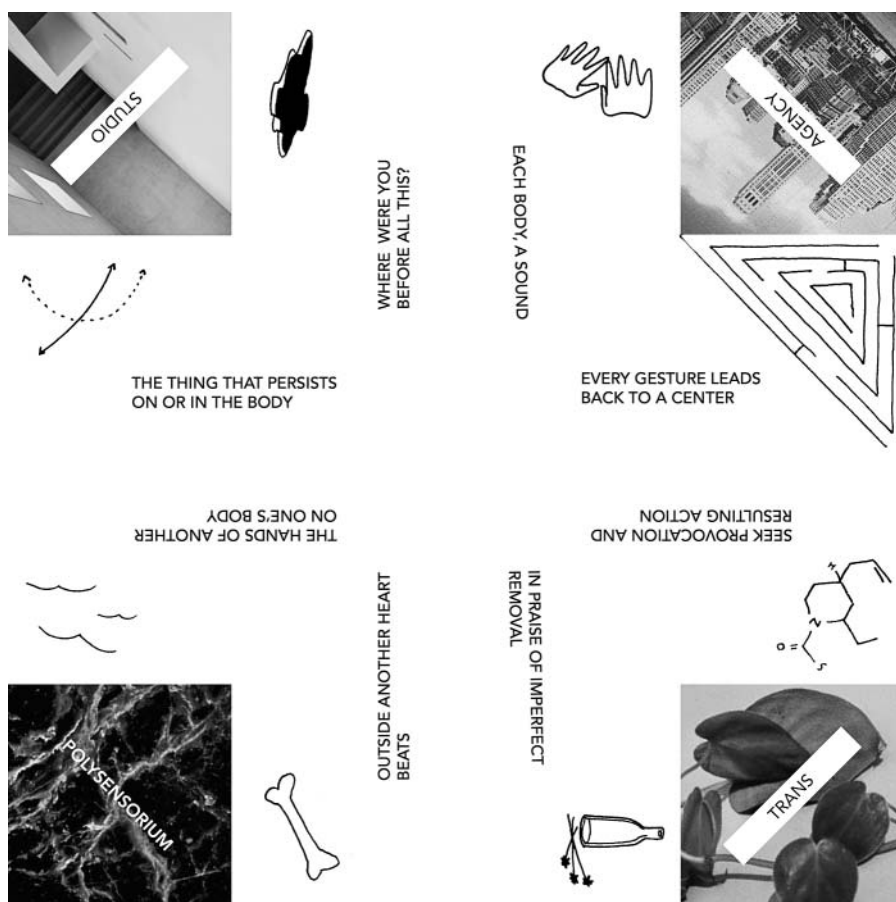


Figure 1b. PolySensorium fortune-teller (outside)

trace of our gathering at the Trans*Studies Conference. It also takes time. The toy's material layers, folds, and geometries invite multiple approaches and therefore hold the promise of prolonged engagement. In this way the fortune-teller enacts how our futures are bound up in other futures.

The contents of the fortune-teller repeat this exploration of trans agency as connected to trans temporalities. One side of the object contains the text of an intentionally fragmented manifesto, in which the boundaries of bodies render pronouns into collective agreements, and political elements mobilize different tenses. Some passages gaze into a time to come, casting anxieties and hopes in a science-fiction future tense that emphasizes the combination of technological and creative agency involved in becoming-trans. Other passages speak from and to old bodies, old selves. The manifesto's temporal complexity thus expresses aspects of our experience of memory and the "ongoingness" of embodiment. We do not

always know how to connect our embodied trans knowledge to a source or a moment, whether past or future. Both the workshop and the fortune-teller claim the project of stitching time together as a part of being trans.

We are offering our object in *TSQ* to extend and distribute the experiments of our workshop. We invite you to play.

PolySensorium is a collaborative performance group of scholars, artists, and activists. We craft embodied interventions into academic settings, creating topically pertinent, site-specific conceptual structures and movement scores that support our workshop participants in exploring their collective capacities for critical feeling.

Julian Carter teaches embodiment theory and practice at the California College of the Arts. He is the author of *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1890–1940* (2007); his writing appears in *TDR*, *GLQ*, *TSQ*, and the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* as well as numerous anthologies. He is PolySensorium's principle instigator.

Doran George —dancer, choreographer, academic—passed away unexpectedly as this issue went to press. Doran devoted themselves to exploring intimacy and deconstructing notions of the natural body in performance and in life. They are sorely missed by their colleagues in dance and disability studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, by their international community of artists, and by all of us in PolySensorium.

Maxe Crandall teaches in the Program in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Stanford University. His novel about AIDS archives and cultural trauma, *The Nancy Reagan Collection*, is forthcoming.

Selby Wynn Schwartz, a writer and dramaturg, focuses on dance and the politics of embodiment. She teaches at Stanford University, works with the Artistic Ensemble at San Quentin Prison, and is beginning a project with Prison Renaissance. Her book on drag dance is forthcoming.

Zach Ozma is a poet, potter, and social practice artist living in Philadelphia. His practice aims to engage participants in a pleasant homosociality. Ozma is involved in a long-term embodied research practice in the Louis Graydon Sullivan Archive. His first book of poetry, *Black Dog Drinking from An Outdoor Pool*, is forthcoming.

Acknowledgments

We were inspired to use the fortune-teller as a political form based on one distributed by the What Would an HIV Doula Do? collective. We are grateful for their work, support, and cooperation.