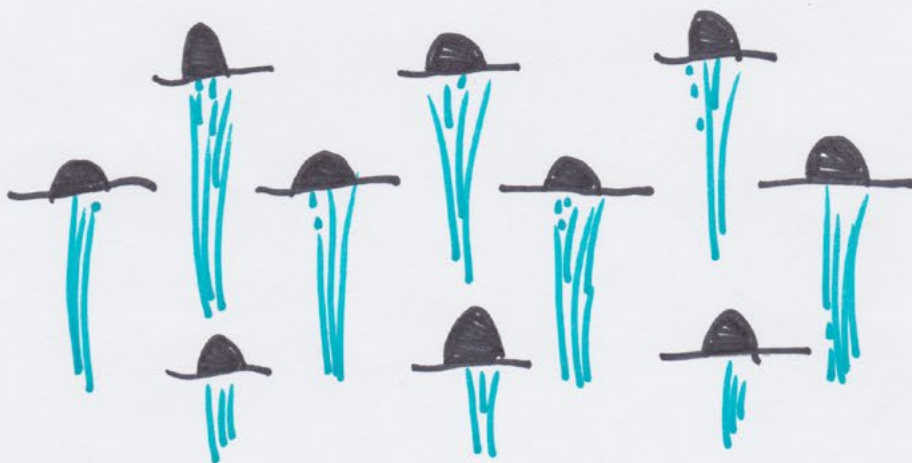


Public Fountain Hat Dance

Rest a hat on top of each jet of water

Let the hats balance and dance with the fountain until they fall to the ground.



Ruth Proctor: Sympathetic Magic

At the top it's a different story.

At first we see nothing: a creased blank sheet of paper, and next to it an evenly grey photograph that seems to have been an accident of timing or exposure.

Relax. We're going to fall backwards.

Earlier in the day, Ruth Proctor sits down with a pad of paper and a pen, hurriedly writing down some of her memories and impressions from learning from a stunt instructor how to fall from a scaffold tower. She does not write of the fall itself, landing safely in a large foam bed, but of the sensory readying for that act: *'No one moves until this moment... No, not ready. No one jumps. It's too loud to hear anything else. [sic.] Just seeing and communicating with the body.'* After filling a page of the notepad with looped blue writing, she immediately pulls out an ink eraser and proceeds to rub out any trace of the writing above.

Later in the day, Proctor is sitting outside, pointing her camera phone at the sky. The cloud coverage is complete. A solar eclipse is happening for just over four hours, technically visible in our part of the world, so she attempts to film it. A passer by approaches: 'Can you see anything?' 'No, I'm just pretending to film something,' Proctor replies, and continues filming. In the end, a representative still taken from the video is a nondescript, impenetrable, solid grey.

Both the empty photo and sheet of paper evidence a particular kind of disappearing trick. Each provides documentation of Proctor's actions; admittedly, both are almost entirely useless as documents, stubbornly unwilling to fully disclose their sources. But their reticence and their continued material existence are still telling – they are not simply exercises in futility, and still contain some sort of trail, however scant. A crumpled corner, the indent of the pen, or a few words of a hint of what lies behind the grey curtain. Proctor's actions and performances are often fragile, a momentary push or trigger, as if staging a dare. We find common elements drifting through her work: wind, water, smoke, light; all are used as intangible, moving, quickly dispersed actors in temporarily staged instances. These emerge, as if by accident, from her actual work: an extended and continual set of searching, trying, failing, trying something else, and happy half-accidents.

So what are we doing here, chasing after smoke? In Proctor's actions and attempts, there are often decisive moments; it is just that some of those decisive moments are self-erasing, or just plain impossible to document. Each of these might produce some trace, whether a memory, a jotted down note, or some of these even happening to find their way into drawings, photos, films, and staged performances. Proctor, in many ways, takes part in the traditions of the everyday games of the performing artist, whether documented walks or Fluxus-like

happenings. For many of these artists, however, the presence of the body, specifically the body of the artist, seems to be a priority – indeed a privileged focus, asking the audience to observe and heed the particularities of that one artistically-activated skeleton. In Proctor's work, however, it is exactly this issue of presence that is at stake. How do we understand an experience that is, by



Smoke Walk Test, 2012

He goes on to claim mimicry as a form of incantation, an example of sympathetic magic. Sympathetic magic, enlisted by anthropologist James Frazer in the *Golden Bough* as one of the basic principles of magic, is the proposition that, as Frazer put it, 'like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause.'² Proctor's invocations of Tommy Cooper in previous works become all the more apt; her form of sympathetic magic is one that creates empathy, activity, attention and care.

its very nature, temporary? The paradox returns in her work as a constantly re-opened set of questions. Like the series of postcards that Proctor has sent to herself from around the world: writing, in one place, '*I am here, but I am also there,*' and weeks, sometimes months, later, receiving the card and reading the lines again. What these activities, and their ephemeral documents, cumulatively seem to address are those necessary contradictions of trying to capture and hold on to our fleeting, momentary experiences.

At this point, it is worth noting: There are many Ruth Proctors. Or, more to the point, there are many possible Ruth Proctors. Whether in a black wig, wearing a multicoloured cape as her alter ego *Super Ruda*, or in works that draw from her previous life as a competitive ice skater, or taking on, whether in person or by proxy, the roles of magicians, dancers, stunt doubles, race car drivers and aeroplane pilots in her work, the work of Ruth Proctor is filled with the many lives (some true, some imagined, some only slightly different, and some let go of or forgotten) of Ruth Proctor.

In some sense, it is a dressing up, a make-believe, a form of mimicry of other professions and roles in order to imagine for a moment what it might have been like if another choice had been made. Proctor's use of other possible lives suggests an affinity to the way the French writer and Surrealist sociologist Roger Caillois saw mimicry, as something which dissolved individual subjectivities. Looking at the way kids might take on a character for a game, or the leaf-like appearance of some insects in order to blend in to their environments, he described mimicry in one essay as 'depersonalisation by assimilation to space.'¹

A few months ago, one Ruth Proctor dropped her phone on the ground, shattering the screen. In the middle of texting her mother, the phone began producing its own messages:

'Hello, I agol
&)&&&)&)&ghfhghglsslhflhglfalfglalhdlglgjlg-
ggdfggdghadllgadalgalldlaglflfalgd
afllh
adllgag hlfaig
A gala
Ago ga
Galah ago
Aa gasgljajjddjj ajjj
D a'

An email, with similar content and marked only to be sent to the recipients 'mm' and 'mmk' has remained in her outbox since then. Rather than discarding the produced texts as the by-product of technological annoyances, Proctor chose to treat them as an attempt at communication, as sound poems of sorts that were perhaps written by another Ruth Proctor. The texts were printed onto opaque transfer sheets, waiting to be scratched onto another surface.

A few months later, Proctor is cycling in figure eights. She decides to cycle to a photo booth, wearing a black outfit with a human skeleton printed on the front. She finds a photo booth at a train station, but doesn't have any change. She goes around to three ATMs, none of which work, before finding one that does. Eventually, getting the needed pound coins for the booth, she returns to find it is out of order. Returning home, the journey instead becomes

this typed sentence: 'Friday the 13th – December – 2013, Cycling around Hackney on a white Raleigh racer in a skeleton outfit in the rain.'

In the meantime, Proctor keeps finding playing cards on the ground; a ten of clubs, a seven of spades, a Queen of diamonds. Collecting them, she begins to suspect it might be another message, a way to tell a fortune, whether her own or another's. She passes a fortune teller in the streets of Turin, asking her for a palm reading: the teller is astonished, giving a long and detailed account in Italian. The fortune, however, she could neither remember nor understand.

Roger Caillois had also, in later writings, developed a set of categories for the types of play that humans and other animals engage in: *mimicry*, as we have seen, alongside *agôn*, a competitive game in which skill decides a winner, such as athletics or chess; *alea*, a game of chance in which fate decides the winner, like roulette or slot machines; and lastly, *ilinx*, or vertigo: 'an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic on an otherwise lucid mind.'³ What is remarkable is that Proctor's work draws on all four categories, swapping and sliding between them. The skills of a stock car racer are turned instead to drawing a squealing, tyre-burned set of circles on the roof of a Peckham multi-story car park. A tap dance troupe are instead put to reproducing the sounds of a rainstorm recorded in Colombia in 2010. A set of found stones with holes in them, collected over the years with the promise that each one could hold a wish, become a set of portals to places where those wishes might have come true. On the surface, to those bystanders casually observing, these might seem like whimsical activities, but specific intersections of chance and skill are crossed with elements of depersonalisation and a revelling in that 'voluptuous panic': Proctor's open-ended explorations, daily interruptions and mistakes become a model of play *par excellence*.

Encountering some of the off-chance results of this swirling activity and innumerable dead ends is just the tip of the iceberg. Within exhibitions of Proctor's

work, we can only try to re-perform the moment, as mundane or fleeting as it was: to think about finding the stones and picking them up, to animate the photographs from walks and fountain performances. Through small, unassuming incantations and communications Proctor asks us to imagine the distances, motions, and potential latent in their presentation. It is in that imaginative act, accepting the shortcomings of each document, that these mixed up forms of play become a means to knocking at the door of potential other selves, to projectively glimpse other spaces where anything might have happened – to access other realities, other Ruth Proctors. And in a quick slight of hand, it is not Proctor but presence itself we are asked attempt to heed. Despite the performance anxieties and sensory contradictions, Proctor turns our encounter into a series of humble meditations on being, in all its mistakes, negligences and quick coincidences. Each Ruth Proctor becomes a proxy, stand-in and metaphor for the flights, both real and imagined, of our own bodies and body-bound experiences. We can never actually re-capture or hold on to a moment; but with sympathetic magic, we can imagine its potentials resurfacing sometime, somewhere, for some one.

Chris Fite-Wassilak

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1. Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary P 1 sychasthenia," trans. John Shepley, October, 31, Winter 1984, p. 30. (Originally published in *Minatoure*, 7, 1935)
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