

THE COMPETITION:

BACKGROUND

Two competitors compete in a never-ending series of rounds of an invented game – governed by a complex digital machine that registers and displays the winning hits, as well as recording the event from four different camera positions and six different microphone positions.

The project is being created by artist and set/video designer, Simon Daw and dramaturg/director Zoë Svendsen, with sound artist Matthias Kispert, and dancers Sita Ostheimer and Chris Evans. It started with Simon's fascination with the tensions of fencing. Building the digital and physical apparatus to allow the competition to run itself takes it beyond fencing, to thinking about the relationship between the body and the machine – and how what we do in life is so often determined by rules, spoken and unspoken.



The directives given to the performers to spur their competitive spirit are drawn from popular psychology: from strategies for business performance, to a text that has the dubious status of being the most-borrowed book in prison libraries. We have discovered that self-help seems to divide into two types. There's beating other people: seeing others as adversaries to be manipulated or overcome. There's also improving oneself without reference to others: not letting others affect you; only assessing yourself against your personal goals. Underlying the former approach is the idea of other people as the enemy. Underlying the latter approach is a kind of solipsism. Both work well for our competition: in the situation of rule-bound combat, seeing your opponent either as an enemy or not really a person at all, seems to make the competitor more effective.

This matters because whether filmed, or set up live, the competition is always for real – in every moment of footage the audience sees, every 'round' they watch live, the competitors are genuinely competing, the machine is running, the score is being counted. The competitors accumulate short choreographic sequences learnt from previous rounds of the competition, and can instigate them when they wish – so even these moments of rehearsed control function ultimately as means to help them. If they want, they can call a forfeit – in which their opponent must carry out an action, often absurd, that will affect their play, continuing with it until the next hit is scored.

The competition is sometimes played out through an immersive video installation reprojected back onto the space in which it was filmed. Every four 'rounds' a live round is played – the mysterious figures seen in close-up on screens, monitors and the walls of the space, appear in the flesh and compete once again. Visitors can move around the space as they wish – exploring the different aspects of the machine, and watching the competition. Visitors are, for example, free to rifle through the record of Hansard on the control desk: we noted every instance of the word competition used in the House of Commons over the time we were setting up the installation at Shoreditch. It's a word that comes up in an unsettlingly wide variety of situations. Somehow there's something about this complicated digital self-perpetuating machine we've created that is like life.

THE PROJECT SO FAR

Visitors to the council chamber of Shoreditch Town Hall will find the municipal motto 'More Light, More Power' inscribed in the upper centre of the central stained glass window. It is appropriate for what we created – a machine for competing. In January 2013 we did a trial of the performance installation there, having researched its history as a place of debate and argument.

We asked our trial audience: 'what struck you most?', and 'what impression were you left with?' Their responses probably describe the project more evocatively than we can:



'the uncomfortable relationship between human & machine / technology. It's a fantastically powerful work – visually exciting environment with a stunning soundscape'
'the sounds of performers breathing under a microscope, like I'd been immersed in the rhythms of competition – aggression then retreating repeatedly'

'the body/machine element with almost sinister undertones'

'sounds of people fighting alongside the very automated sound of the adjudicators' voice and buzz when score made. Very graceful but deeply psychological. Beautiful production.'

'I felt I was walking into a different, high-tech world. Intense throughout'

'It was extremely focused and also overwhelming – and it was also disconcerting, the way one person winning took over the whole space'

'the ritualization, the sense of danger combined with the ritualization of the fight'

'I felt I walked into a future big brother where the game becomes the world that is strangely primitive / Concerned by how easily consumed I was by the idea. I like the intensity of the space. It is relentless which brings a level

of anxiety and inhuman anticipation'

'the intimacy of the sounds – the velcro, the breathing'

'the interesting relation between the machinic apparatus, 'athleticism' and the neoclassical space. It made me think about 'competition' as a governing value'

'Wow. Amazing'

'the arbitrary rules. The seriousness. The reality and the sense that they have been doing this all day. That life can be like that – and its crazy'

'the players are trapped in a loop and you can't help them'

THE FUTURE

Future presentations of the work will take place in further locations appropriate to the themes of The Competition. We are developing further the relationship between inner psychology and the atmosphere of the competition, and we are exploring how audiences might 'follow' the performers online before the event. We are seeking partners to co-develop the work to make it appropriate for a festival context, performed in a specific location.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Chris Evans.

A graduate of the London Contemporary Dance School, Chris began working with Hofesh Shechter during his final year. During the four years of devising and touring Hofesh's work, Chris also worked with Jonathan Lunn for "Reading Room" a piece co-written by Antony Mingella and performed with Alan Rickman, Dexter Fletcher and Juliette Stevenson. Before joining Gecko, Chris was part of "Lost Dog" in the Place Prize winning duet "It Needs Horses", and movement coach for Eddie Izzard for "Treasure Island". Chris' interests lie in physical theatre and motion capture, and he hopes that his dance career will always merge in and out of an acting career in the years to come.

Sita Ostheimer.

After graduating the University of Music and Performance Art in Frankfurt in 2001, Sita worked with choreographers, such as Martin Stieffermann, Itzik Galili and Christina de Chatel. During this period she created "Closing Time" and worked on the dramaturgy of "Sub Way" (chor. Corneliu Ganea). Sita joined Hofesh Shechter Company in 2008. She created "Noble thinking" (2011) and "Accompany" (2012). Sita is also working with Leah Capaldi (www.leahcapaldi.com), Nikki Amuka-Bird (National Theatre/UK), and filmmaker Tom Brown. She regularly holds professional workshops with a focus on improving awareness when improvising and how that affects totality in movement. She wants to support playfulness and bring confidence in creating and improvising.

Simon Daw (simondaw.com) creates installation/performance works as well as designing set, costume and video for the stage. Installation/performance works include: SLICE an international collaborative project featuring the work of UK and Pakistani artists curated by Simon, The interactive simulation of a climate changed future 3RD RING OUT that toured the UK inside two specially adapted shipping containers; WAVESTRUCTURES a performance in marshland using 1000's of chopsticks for the Aldeburgh Festival as well as HOPEFULLY IT MEANS NOTHING (Aldeburgh Festival), SEA HOUSE (Aldeburgh Festival) and NEW TOWN (site specific/Arches).



Matthias Kispert (www.matthiaskispert.com) is an electronic music composer, performer and artist living in London. As audio director of media artist collective D-Fuse, he is responsible for the sound aspect and the conceptual development of much of the group's work, including videos, installations and live cinema performances. He regularly collaborates with digital artists including United Visual Artists, Quayola and Jason Bruges Studio. His work and collaborations are shown globally, including USC, LA MOCA, TriBeCa Film Festival, Eyebeam (USA), Itaú Cultural, FILE, Multiplicidade (Brasil), Royal Festival Hall, onedotzero, ISEA, AV Festival, London Film Festival (UK), Hong Kong Arts Centre, I/O Gallery, Get It Louder (China), Gaîté Lyrique, Nuit Blanche (France), EMAF (Germany), Moscow Architectural Biennale (Russia), MU, STRP, Sonic Acts (Netherlands), MOD (Mexico), Dis-Locate (Japan), LEV (Spain), MIC ToiRerehiko (New Zealand). Matthias Kispert is a lecturer in Sound Art at the University of the Arts London.

Zoe Svendsen.

As Director of METIS (www.metisarts.co.uk), Zoë collaborates with other artists to create interdisciplinary projects that utilise small spaces to create immersive audience experiences. These have focussed on contemporary political subjects such as capitalism and poker; climate change; the relation between the real and the virtual. Directing/dramaturgy projects include 3rd Ring Out (UK tour 2010-11 www.3rdringout.com), which received a TippingPoint Commission Award and The Gate/Dance Umbrella commission, The Difference Engine. As dramaturg she works with institutions such as the Young Vic (The Changeling) and the National Theatre (Edward II). Zoë is also Associate Artist with Company of Angels, a script reader in the literary department at the National Theatre, and an honorary research fellow at Birkbeck's Centre for Contemporary Theatre.

The kit was constructed by Clio Alphas and the production photographs of the performance are by Joseph Alford.

PRODUCTION

The installation is produced by METIS (www.metisarts.co.uk) and has been supported by the Arts Council and Shoreditch Town Hall with project development supported by the National Theatre Studio.

METIS is a Cambridge-based performing arts company/network that creates interdisciplinary performance projects created through rigorous research. A fascination with maps, space, technology, travel and history drives our work in a range of media. Our work is characterised by its pursuit of expressive forms that connect with the contemporary world.

