

MATERIALS

Bored with Strangers: A Site-Specific Museum Theatre Piece

Christine Gwillim, Samantha Provenzano, and Lauren Smith



Performers Lina Chambers and Kirstin Cutts lead audience members across the University of Texas at Austin Campus during *Bored with Strangers* on April 11, 2017. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

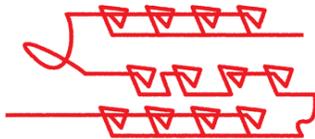
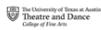
Bored with Strangers, a site-specific, travelling museum theatre piece, premiered at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin in 2017 as a collaboration between the Department of Theatre and Dance and the Blanton Museum of Art. Billed as a “walking tour” between the Winship Drama Building and the Blanton Museum of Art, the piece drew inspiration from visual artist Nina Katchadourian’s work for performance vignettes that took place across the half-mile separating the theatre and museum. Following two guides, the audience travelled across campus, encountering short performances that included found sound, dance, and participatory visual art. At the tour’s conclusion, audience members visited Katchadourian’s exhibition, *Curiouser*, at the Blanton Museum of Art.

Christine Gwillim is a PhD candidate in performance as public practice at the University of Texas at Austin. Her doctoral research focuses on territorial practice at contemporary performance festivals. **Samantha Provenzano** is a theatre maker who focuses on work for young audiences. She holds an MFA in drama and theatre for youth and communities from the University of Texas at Austin. **Lauren Smith** is a middle school English teacher in Austin, Texas. She holds an MFA in drama and theatre for youth and communities from the University of Texas at Austin.



Close-up of performer Lina Chambers wearing the *Bored with Strangers* lanyard during a performance on April 12, 2017. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

The piece, which positioned the audience as both theatre patrons and museum-goers, connected site-specific theatre, an audio tour, and a conceptual art exhibition to everyday university experiences. It offered an opportunity to examine familiar university spaces through new eyes. After the performance, many attendees noted that their view of campus had permanently shifted. The performance enlivened banal places and connected disparate academic institutions in a quest to connect theatre and art for audience members, passersby, performers, and museum staff.



Bored With Strangers

An Interactive Walking Tour
inspired by Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser

April 11, 12, and 14
12:00-1:30 pm

Traveling from the Winship Drama Building



to The Blanton Museum of Art

Lauren Smith	Clarissa Smith	Ilex O'Rear
Scott Provenzano	David Thomases	Kirstin Curtis
Christine Gwillam	Gaby Sugjoman	Lina Chambers
Alaina Morris	Jada Collins	Hatotha Small
Ally Tudeligan	Iana Fronczek	

THE COHEN NEW WORKS FESTIVAL PRESENTED BY BROADWAY BANK

APRIL 11-14, 2017
STUDENT CREATED. STUDENT PRODUCED.

Bored with Strangers promotional poster. Poster design by Khristian Mendez for the University of Texas, 2017.

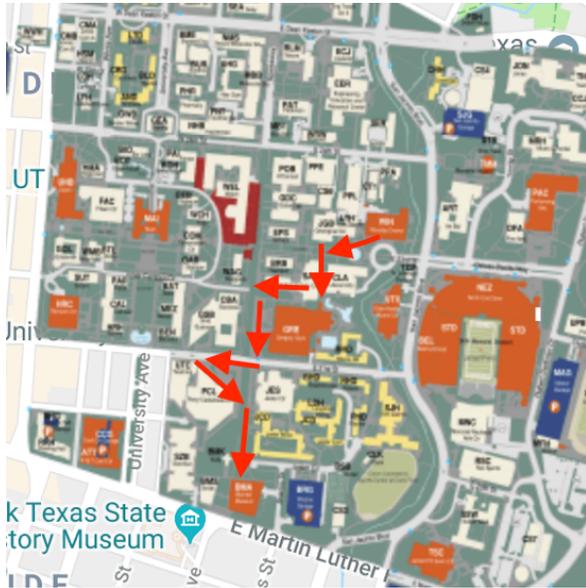
As we travel through this article, we will introduce you to the university, the museum, and our process. We will then take you on a simulated tour with images, sound, and a narrative that positions you, the reader, as the audience member in this remembered performative tour.

Beginnings

In the spring of 2016, we, the three codirectors of the piece—Christine Gwillim, Sam Provenzano, and Lauren Smith—partnered with the Blanton Museum of Art, UT’s campus art museum, to create an exhibition-inspired performance. We developed *Bored with Strangers* to coincide with a mid-career survey exhibition of Nina Katchadourian’s work titled *Curiouser*. The Blanton’s Modern and Contemporary Art curator, Veronica Roberts, and the artist worked together to develop the exhibition, and it has since toured to the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University and the Brigham Young University Museum of Art. Katchadourian is an Armenian-American artist whose work encompasses performance, video, photography, sculpture, and sound. She uses humour to explore the relationship between humans and nature and the concept of boredom to animate mundane objects. One of the primary ways she activates “boredom” as a concept is in the collection “Seat Assignment,” which she created entirely onboard an international flight, exploring ways to pass the time.

Curiouser coincided with the Cohen New Works Festival at the University of Texas at Austin, so creating a piece based on Katchadourian’s art seemed like a natural fit. The Blanton’s education staff, which often partnered with university courses, was excited about the prospect of a theatre piece that might draw students into the museum individually or in small groups. The museum wanted to engage student audiences who were not required to attend the museum as part of their classwork. Keeping this goal in mind, while also considering security regulations and existing programming at the museum, we landed on the format of a “campus tour,” a guided experience bringing students and community members from one side of campus to the other.

A “campus tour” is also a regular happening at UT, and observing one of these tours sparked our idea for this format. Picture fifteen or so high school seniors meeting for the first time, awkward and embarrassed, but mostly in awe of the enormous university campus before them. They trailed behind their sweaty, nervous parents, all led by a charming and well-rehearsed undergraduate student guide. While the students and their parents were ostensibly on the tour to learn about the University of Texas, and their body language conveyed occasional attentive listening, it was also punctuated with frequent watch-checking, awkward avoidance of the other families on the tour, and occasionally getting left behind because of picture-taking or staring into space in a different direction from where the tour was leading. The combination of reactions (undivided interest paired with utter boredom and a sprinkle of confusion) made us wonder about what possibilities could arise when you are in an only half-engaging situation with people that you don’t know. What do (could) you do when you’re bored with strangers?



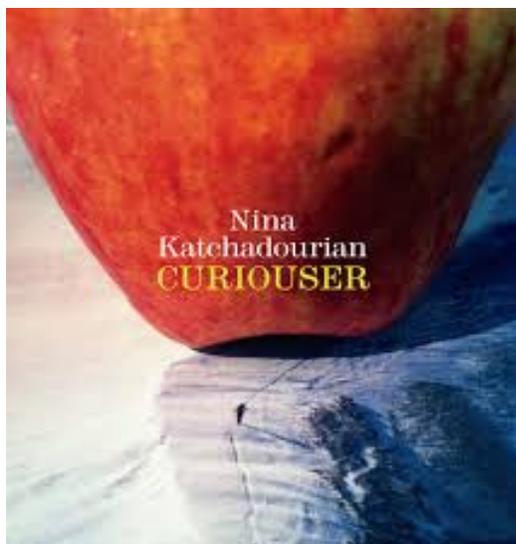
Follow the red arrows across the map to outline the performance path on the University of Texas at Austin campus. Map courtesy of the University of Texas, 2019. <https://maps.utexas.edu/#/utm>.

The tour was part of the Cohen New Works Festival, a biannual student-curated interdisciplinary art festival hosted by the Department of Theatre and Dance. It began at the festival's home, the Winship Drama Building. After departing the building, audiences journeyed across campus to the Blanton and encountered performance vignettes and interactive installations along the way.

In addition to creating the performance itself and responding to the museum's hopes for the piece, we—as directors and researchers—wanted to explore the experience of both the creative ensemble (the actors and musicians who devised and performed the piece) and the audience. As we crafted our rehearsal process and eventually observed spectators at the performance, we considered a number of guiding questions: How do audiences construct meaning? How can visual art and performance interact and supplement each other? How might site-specific performance play a role in creative place-making? How might this type of work support connections between cultural entities? How can art provoke us to re-examine seemingly mundane daily spaces and experiences with wonder?

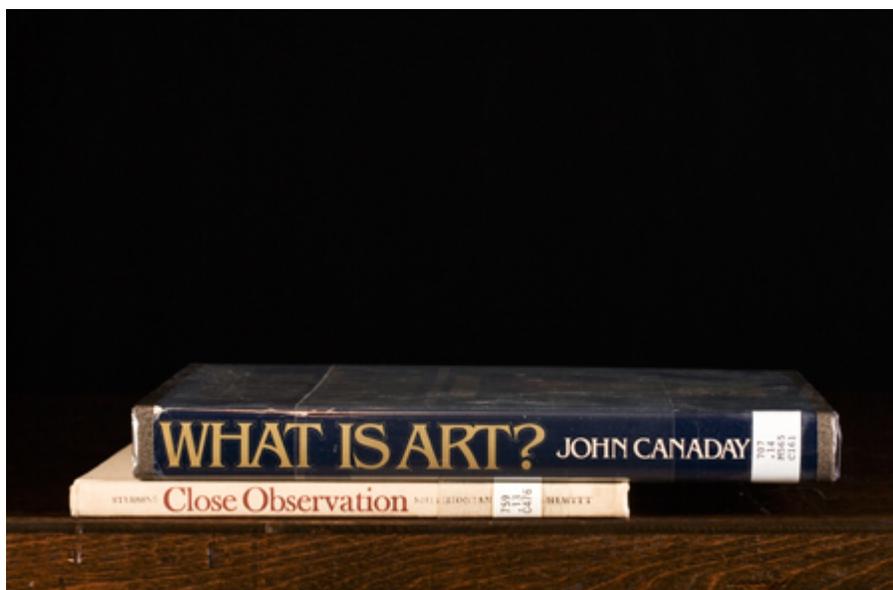
Starting with the Art

We began our process with a hybrid dramaturgical/art historical approach to the exhibition. For the first two weeks of rehearsal, we shared two or three of the series within *Curiouser* with the cast. Christine presented images of the artworks, videos of the artist talking about the work, context from the artist's website, and notes from the curator. After this analysis, the cast chose a collection that resonated with them, and in small groups, quickly devised short performances based on that collection. Rehearsal by rehearsal, we introduced the cast to each of the series in the exhibition, then narrowed our scope to focus on certain collections that resonated with both the cast and the university campus.



The Blanton provided us with a rough draft of the exhibition catalogue (Roberts, Kastern, and Horodner 2017), cover pictured here, ahead of the book release to provide curatorial context for the exhibition. Cover artwork: Nina Katchadourian, *Mountain Climbers (Apple)*, 2011.

Sorted Books served as the initial inspiration for our devising process. In this ongoing project, Katchadourian studies a personal or public library collection and constructs short narrative images based on the titles of the books present. Her first sorted book was “What is Art? Close Observation” (Katchadourian 2015).



Nina Katchadourian, *What is Art?* From the series *Special Collections Revisited*, 1996/2008 (“Sorted Books” Project, 1993-ongoing), C-print, 12½ x 19 inches. Collection of Al Shands, Louisville Kentucky, promised gift to the Speed Museum, Louisville, Kentucky (Roberts et al. 2017, 95).

This particular sorted book phrase came to underpin the entire performance. We were inspired by the provocative phrase of this stack and also Katchadourian’s process making each set of sorted books. We spent weeks scrutinizing the university campus—looking in nooks and crannies of buildings we’d never entered, listening to and recording sounds, and walking back and forth between

the museum and our rehearsal space in the Winship Drama Building. Katchadourian’s website (2015) descriptions of her process helped us to imagine an intentional and site-specific interaction with the university campus:

The process is the same in every case: I sort through a collection of books, pull particular titles, and eventually group the books into clusters so that the titles can be read in sequence. The final results are shown either as photographs of the book clusters or as the actual stacks themselves, often shown on the shelves of the library they came from. Taken as a whole, the clusters are a cross-section of that library’s holdings that reflect that particular library’s focus, idiosyncrasies, and inconsistencies. They sometimes also function as a portrait of the particular book owner. The *Sorted Books* project is an ongoing project which I add to almost each year, and there are hundreds of images in the ongoing archive to date.

We were excited by her simple yet methodical approach to each collection: examining, reading titles, sorting, refining, staging. It aligned with our own devised approach to performance creation, which involves convergent and divergent thinking and refinement. We included sorting in rehearsals and directorial planning, using the sorting method to narrow down location choices and find resonances between her artwork and places on the university campus. One rehearsal ended in a performative book sort that was the culmination of Lauren and Christine searching the Perry-Casteñada Library stacks for book titles that resonated with the exhibition.

Similarly, the *Talking Popcorn* series helped us to discover the sonicity of our campus and the museum. Katchadourian (2015) describes the series as

a sound sculpture that evolved out of my interest in language, translation, and Morse Code. A microphone in the cabinet of the popcorn machine picks up sound of popping corn, and a computer hidden in the pedestal runs a custom-written program that translates the popping sounds according to the patterns and dictates of Morse Code. A computer-generated voice provides a simultaneous spoken translation.



Nina Katchadourian, *Talking Popcorn*, 2001. Popcorn machine, black pedestal, red vinyl base, microphone, laptop with custom-written Morse code program, printed paper bags, popcorn, 90 x 90 x 72 inches (Roberts et al. 2017, 71).

Talking Popcorn was a series that excited the entire cast and served as an inspiration throughout the process. However, audience members might have easily missed its direct influence on the performance itself. The tour began with a sequence of Morse code that asked audiences “What do you hear?” In case they missed this question, we included the written code on a souvenir bookmark

for each attendee to take with them. The use of coded messages aligned with Katchadourian’s focus on the idea of art as close observation.

Audience members were given a bookmark at the end of the performance to take home. The bookmark served as a museum ticket and granted attendees free access to the exhibition directly following the performance. The front image included one of the books from our own book sorting during rehearsal, and an invitation to participate in the museum’s interactive book sorting inside the exhibition. On the back, we included the Morse code that started the audio tour. Each bookmark was hand threaded with red yarn that was used throughout the performance and mirrored the red thread Katchadourian uses in many of her works.



Photos by Sam Provenzano, authors’ collection, 2017.

The series *Mended Spiderwebs* is part of a set of collections that Katchadourian calls “uninvited collaborations with nature” (2015) in which she alters natural objects in an attempt to be helpful, but with the result of doing more harm than good.



Nina Katchadourian, *Mended Spiderweb #19 (Laundry Line)*, 1998, C-print, 20 x 30 inches. Collection of Nick Debs, Eastman, MA (Roberts et al. 2017, 81).

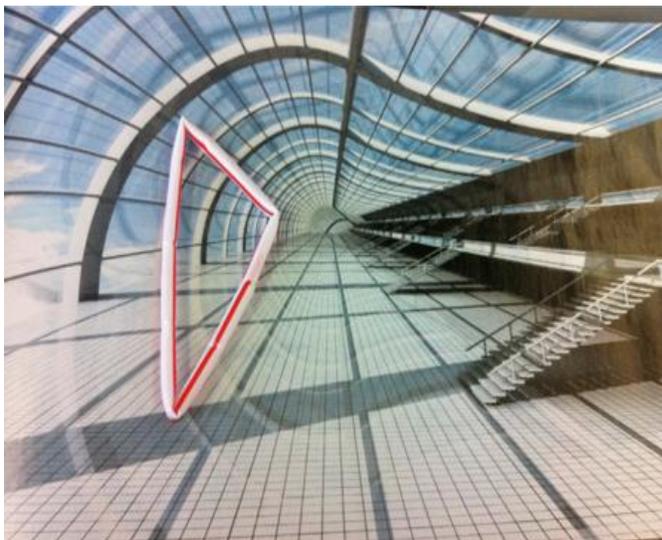
The Mended Spiderweb series came about during a six-week period in June and July in 1998 which I spent on Pörtö. In the forest and around the house where I was living, I searched for broken spiderwebs which I repaired using red sewing thread. . . . In the process, I often caused further damage when the tweezers got tangled in the web or when my hands brushed up against it by accident.

The morning after the first patch job, I discovered a pile of red threads lying on the ground below the web. At first, I assumed the wind had blown them out; on closer inspection it became clear that the spider had repaired the web to perfect condition using its own methods, throwing the threads out in the process. My repairs were always rejected by the spider and discarded, usually during the course of the night, even in webs which looked abandoned. (Katchadourian 2015)

The University of Texas campus, known fondly as the Forty Acres to students and faculty, has a large squirrel population, wooded areas, and lush vegetation including leafy plants and succulents that are often overlooked as part of the university ecosystem. Katchadourian's approach to *Mended Webs* helped us think critically about how our performance might disrupt nature, therefore becoming an opportunity to frame natural spaces on campus differently for our audiences.

Much like *Sorted Books*, the process of Katchadourian's largest collection, *Seat Assignment*, encouraged the team to limit our palates and to create with what was readily available at the university. We chose only four props for the performance: red yarn, cardboard boxes, the books mentioned above, and black pull string backpacks.

Seat Assignment consists of photographs, video, and sound works, all made in flight using only a camera phone and improvising with materials close at hand. The project began spontaneously on a flight in March 2010; the material generated on the nearly 200 flights since then constitute the raw material of the project. *Seat Assignment* is born from an investment in thinking on your feet, from optimism about the artistic potential that lurks within the mundane, and from curiosity about the productive tension between freedom and constraint. (Katchadourian 2015)

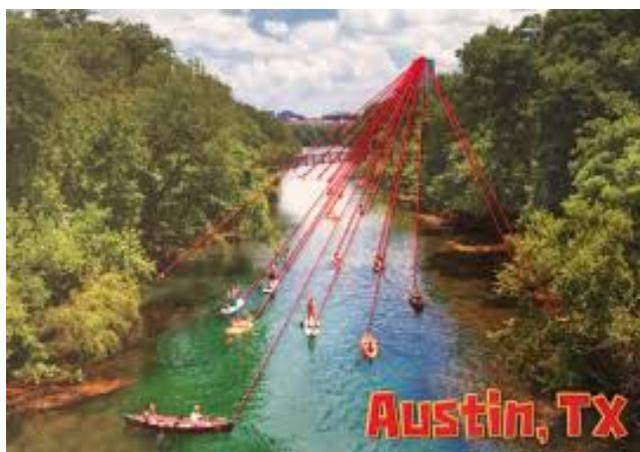


Nina Katchadourian, *Future Airport*, 2012 ("*Seat Assignment*" project, 2010-ongoing), C-print, 19 x 24 inches (Roberts et al. 2017, 50).

Katchadourian's statement about mundane curiosities seemed to parallel, for us, the mindless task of commuting across a university campus. It drove us to reframe boredom as an opportunity to notice one another and our surroundings. Additionally, the series *Paranormal Postcards* helped us to translate our newfound perspective into something we could share with our audiences.

An ongoing project, at present consisting of over 200 postcards, where various elements in the image are connected by stitching through the card with red sewing thread. The cards are then grouped, and the groups are then connected via an elaborate network of dotted red lines made of graphic tape applied to the wall. A “world view” of extreme and almost paranoid interconnectedness emerges. As with many of my map works and chart pieces, the project seems to suggest some underlying coherent research or guiding principal, but the piece ultimately speaks more about taxonomy itself.

Each time the project is exhibited, I incorporate postcards from the city or town where it is on view so that people can recognize a local point of entry. This project began as a response to a long layover with a postcard purchase from a gift shop in the Oslo airport in 1998. (Katchadourian 2015)



Nina Katchadourian, *Austin*, 2017 (*Paranormal Postcards* 2001-ongoing). Mounted postcards, red sewing thread, red graphic tape on wall, dimensions variable. Roberts et al. 2017, 1.

The postcard pictured above was the one that Katchadourian made for the exhibition at the Blanton. See if you notice how we used it as inspiration later on in the tour.

In the Rehearsal Room

Along with the analysis and interpretation of the artworks, we led the ensemble through provocations based on Katchadourian’s themes and art-making methods. Meeting three nights a week for eight weeks allowed us time to play and explore ways to make performance inspired by the visual artworks.

Early in the process, one of our ensemble members, who had a degree in dance and experience with site-specific performance, led a rehearsal workshop that asked the ensemble to devise 1–2-minute performance pieces in 5–7 minute sections of rehearsal. She gave the group a checklist of items to include in their performance (a movement in unison, a repeated gesture, some kind of music) and encouraged them to find nontraditional performance spaces and audience configurations. This method aligned well with the devising practice that the three-director team brought to the process and helped us to establish a shared vocabulary, as our ensemble included performers with backgrounds in dance, music, technical theatre, education, and traditional theatre. It also allowed us

to set the expectation that each member of our ensemble would share their unique expertise with the group.

Once the ensemble had devised, based on neutral prompts, we combined those physical explorations with our interpretations of Katchadourian's artworks. The ensemble explored different performative forms (dance, creative movement, song, and found sound, to name a few) as aesthetic responses to the elements of the artwork.

Situating in Space

Once we decided which pieces inspired performative moments and then improvised and refined a number of those types of performative pieces, we explored UT Austin's campus to locate oft-overlooked locations that could house the performative moments. We were on the hunt for indoor and outdoor settings that either begged to become performance spaces or could use some creativity to make them less dreary. We wanted the cast to find spaces that excited them, keeping in mind differently-abled audience members, regular campus foot traffic, and areas that required special permitting. After exploring as a directorial team, we invited the cast to do the same over the course of a week's rehearsals. We asked them to consider the following questions:

- What locations make you feel curious?
- What places make you want to look closer/stay longer?
- What spots feel out of place?
- Which ones resonate with the Katchadourian collection you have to work with?



Ensemble members brainstorming locations, vignette ideas, and pieces of art, then moving them around to create a narrative, using a method inspired by Nina Katchadourian's book *Sorting*. Photo by Lauren Smith, authors' collection, 2017.

We played with objects that we'd passed hundreds of times without looking twice. We divided the cast of nine into groups of three and came back to share discoveries, like this bulletin board wall!



A bulletin board wall on a walkway with heavy student foot traffic outside the Gregory Gymnasium on the University of Texas at Austin campus. Photo by Lauren Smith, authors' collection, 2017.



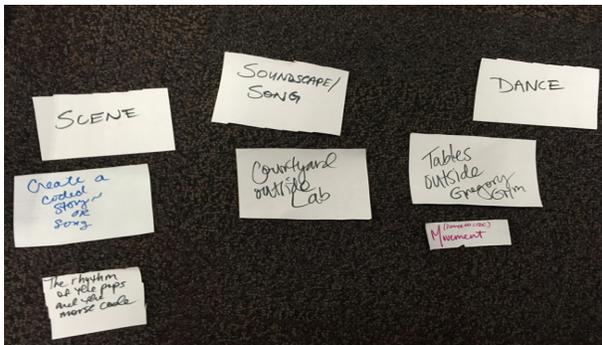
Performer Natasha Smalls hides behind the wall during an evening rehearsal in February 2017 after suggesting it could be used as a curtain. Photo by Lauren Smith, authors' collection, 2017.

We often rehearsed at night, so we reminded the cast that our performance times were set for midday during regular museum operating hours. The dramatic evening light wouldn't be re-creatable! The skyway pictured below was brilliant at night, but less striking midday: just the type of space we hoped to enliven with the performance. The ensemble had never noticed or been on the skyway until our evening rehearsals. The space was ripe for discovery and performative activation.



A skyway connecting two university buildings over an outdoor walkway, lit up during a February evening rehearsal. Photo by Lauren Smith, authors' collection, 2017.

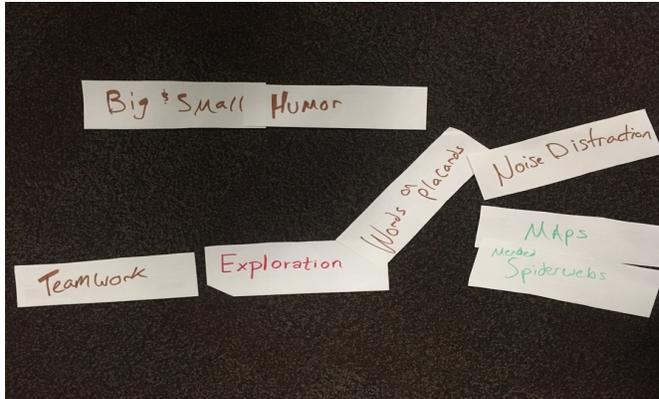
After discovering and documenting locations, we used notecards to imagine possible paths and scenarios for the performance. We saved these throughout the process to help us eventually craft an arc for the piece.



Performative modes and university locations written on small sheets of paper for easy reorganization. Photo by Christine Gwillim, authors' collection, 2017.

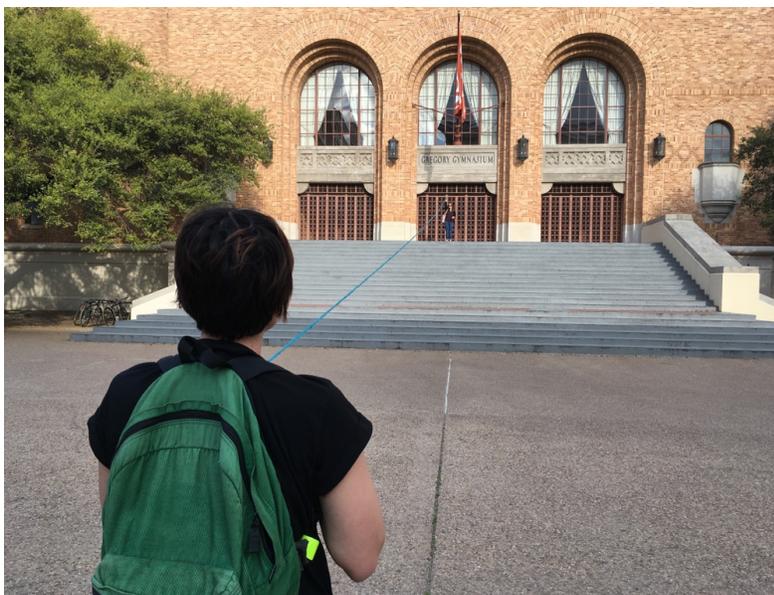
We combined locations, collections from the exhibition, and methodologies and themes we'd gleaned from Katchadourian's practice, such as "humans ruining things" and noises as distractions. It was important that audience members could directly connect every vignette to something they would see in the exhibition, and equally important that our performance not replicate Katchadourian's work. One of the collections in the exhibition that we did not use, her *Flemish Portraits* series, has been widely reproduced on social media, so the Blanton staff discouraged us

from focusing on the series since it already had a viral presence online. We wanted to encourage audience members to make their own connections to the art when they viewed the exhibition and believed that offering a performance that showcased our ensemble's connections *to* the work rather than replications *of* it would be the most successful tool to achieve this goal.



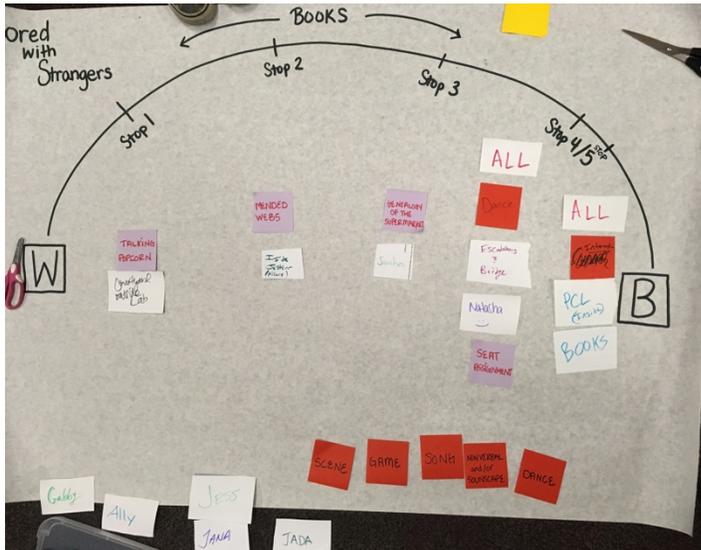
Themes from Katchadourian's practice arranged by cast members in relation to particular locations on campus. Photo by Christine Gwillim, authors' collection, 2017.

In order to further explore Katchadourian's work and feeling particularly inspired by the *Mended Webs* and *Paranormal Postcards* series, we took yarn that we found in prop storage to one rehearsal. We proceeded to imagine what each place might look like if we added a series of string lines. We didn't end up using this particular staircase, but you'll see how we incorporated the concept of string connections below. This served as one way we tied our performance, both literally and figuratively, to the exhibition inside the museum. Though it isn't as noticeable in photographs, red was a dominant colour in the exhibition, and one we rarely saw on campus. So, we switched out the teal yarn for a bright red one that matched the colour of Katchadourian's thread in the *Paranormal Postcards* and *Mended Webs* series.



Samantha Provenzano and Lauren Smith hold teal yarn to connect the Gregory Gymnasium to the Speedway walkway on the University of Texas campus. We ended up using this method of connection, but not the staircase pictured due to permitting issues with the location. Photo by Christine Gwillim, authors' collection, 2017.

After asking cast members to look for spaces to activate, we asked them to explore the campus sonically: finding both new spaces around campus that sounded delightful, curious, or surprising, and discovering sound-based elements of the locations they had already selected. The cast recorded sound clips, which we used to build the audio tracks for the performance. We then reconvened and mapped together all of our locations and artworks to create a path from the Winship Drama building to the Blanton Museum.



A map of the performance arc on paper that was cocreated by the cast and directors during March rehearsals. Photo by Christine Gwillam, authors' collection, 2017.

Approach to Rehearsal and the Three-Director Model

Having a three-person directing team (what we jokingly called the “three-headed monster”), each with their own skillset and experience, allowed us an ongoing spectatorial perspective throughout the creative process. At any given moment, while one or two leaders led the ensemble through devising activities or structural considerations, such as the map above, the other leader(s) could step back to take a wide-angle view of the overall project.

Our three-person approach also disrupted some elements of the traditional theatre director power dynamic. For instance, we modelled collaborative decision-making in the rehearsal room, frequently checking in with each other during breaks and in the midst of devising exercises. We also encouraged the ensemble to adopt similar decision-making in their own devising groups, as well as to observe other groups' performances and offer constructive feedback. As we worked, we often framed our direction as open-ended questions or suggestions, allowing space for the ensemble members to bring their ideas and perspectives into the conversation rather than simply following instructions from us. The result was a collaborative and flexible ensemble, which proved invaluable when it started pouring rain fifteen minutes before our first scheduled performance. The cast quickly donned plastic rain ponchos and adjusted scenes to avoid puddles, to help the audience move safely across wet surfaces, and still committed to the emotional and physical demands of our choreography. Ironically, the three directors were more nervous about the bad weather than the cast who performed in it. The flexibility of the collaborative model ended up leaving enough space for the piece to bend to conditions beyond our control.

Now that you know a little bit about the process and the piece, we invite you to come on the tour with us. You will notice that some of the images below show our first rainy day performance, photographed by the Cohen New Works Festival official photographer, Lawrence Pert on April 11, 2017, and others were taken the following (sunny) day by attendee Zoë Crabtree. We've interspersed photos from both days throughout the photo tour to exemplify the elasticity of the performance and the ways in which weather conditions influence the aesthetics of site-specific performance.

Upon arrival, each spectator received a lanyard. One side included a key, using emojis that outlined the hand signal the guides would use. Since technology is often tricky, we also instructed our audience members to hold up their lanyard if they experienced technical difficulties. Christine followed the group, playing the audio on a separate device so at any point she could hand over an iPod cued up to the correct place in the audio track or help folks who joined the tour mid-performance cue up in Soundcloud, ensuring the audience member wouldn't miss anything.

Signs and Symbols

Please come this way



Headphones IN



Please stop



Headphones OUT



3..2..1..Play



Symbols printed on the backside of each audience member's lanyard, with a small-scale version of the poster design on the front. The lanyards helped us distinguish who was a ticketed audience member and who joined the tour spontaneously as we walked across campus. The symbols helped audience members remember what hand motions to look for throughout the performance. Lanyard design by Sam Provenzano, authors' collection, 2017.

Join us for the tour! For the next several pages, we invite you to plug in a set of headphones, listen to our audio track, and imagine yourself as an Austin local, likely a fine arts student or faculty member, taking an hour off from homework or grading to walk across campus to the university art museum, the Blanton, a place you've likely not been in a few months. We'll describe the tour phenomenologically in the hope that you can get a sense of what it was like for those sixty or so minutes in April 2017.

Grab your headphones and meet us outside the F. Loren Winship Drama Building. You might want an umbrella—there’s rain in the forecast, and it’s a balmy 80 degrees, so don’t overdress.



Audience members huddle under umbrellas as guides Lina Chambers and Kirstin Cutts introduce themselves on April 11, 2017. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas, 2017.

Get to know the two guides. They will give you all the instructions you need along the way. Pull up the audio track, but wait for the guides to signal when you should hit play.



Performer Lina Chambers introduces herself as one of the tour guides to the audience on April 12, 2017. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors’ collection, 2017.

Follow the guides to the first stop on the tour, and remember to watch your step on the pebbled concrete—it’s surprisingly slick when wet.



Audience members walk away from the F. Loren Winship Drama Building following the tour guides to the next location on April 11, 2017. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas, 2017.

Following the guides closely, travel under a bridge, past a performer drumming on a metal sign (below) that points to the Laboratory Theatre, one of the four main theatre spaces at UT.



Performer Jess O'Rear taps out a Morse code message on a metal sign with wooden drumsticks. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

As you walk into the loading zone, three other performers (below) move into the space and create a soundscape using found objects and the architecture of the space. Watch until the cacophony ends, then follow the guides into the basement of the Geosciences Building—a space rarely frequented by fine arts students and faculty.



Performer Jada Cadena taps a Morse code message onto a cement-filled parking bucket with sticks from the parking lot. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.



Performer Jana Fronczek taps out a different Morse code message with a rock from the parking lot onto a vent on the side of the Winship Drama Building. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.



Audience members watch performers tap Morse code on found surfaces between the Winship Drama Building and the Geosciences Building on April 12, 2017. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

You might remember Morse code from Nina Katchadourian’s series *Talking Popcorn*. The performers you just saw were tapping out a message for the audiences using objects they found in the space. If you aren’t a Morse code expert, don’t worry! You’ll receive a bookmark later in the performance that spells out the code for you to translate the message at home.

Wait with the guides for the elevator. Put in your headphones and hit “[play](#)” at the signal. Exit the building through the glass doors and catch a glimpse of the sound artists from the last piece up ahead. You’ll recognize them by their red socks that match the guides’.



Guides Lina Chambers and Kirstin Cutts wait with the audience for elevators in the Geosciences Building, one of many moments in the performance that invited audience members to reflect on mundane daily tasks, like waiting for an elevator with a group of (mostly) strangers. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

Make sure not to get lost in the throng of students crossing campus during lunchtime.



Performers Jada Cadena, Jana Fronczek, Jess O'Rear, and Clarissa Smith walk from the Geosciences Building to the Skybridge on April 12, 2017. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.



Guides Lina Chambers and Kirstin Cutts lead the audience to the Skybridge, following the other four performers. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Stop when the guides stop. Look up and look closely: you can see three dancers performing on the Skybridge above your head that connects two buildings.



Audience members look up at performers on the Skybridge that were pointed out by the guides seconds before on April 11, 2017. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.



Performers Natasha Small, Gaby Sugiaman, and Ally Tufenkjian dance on the Skybridge, their outlines barely visible without looking closely. The audio track plays “The Eyes of Texas” as the audience watches from below. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors’ collection, 2017.

You might also recognize the tune playing on the audio track; it sounds like “Working on the Railroad” but is actually the UT song “The Eyes of Texas.” They’re always watching. The song has a sinister sound and helped us to draw out some of the more disturbing themes in Katchadourian’s work, such as the ill effects of human interventions into nature.



Performers Natasha Small, Gaby Sugiaman, and Ally Tufenkjian press up against the glass of the Skybridge as the audience passes under them. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors’ collection, 2017.

When the dance ends, follow the performers into the Student Activity Center.



Performers Jana Fronczek Jess O’Rear, Clarissa Smith, and Jada Cadena walk ahead of the guides and audience into the Student Activities Center. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

Be sure to stay with stay with the group. It can get crowded in there.

Something looks familiar here . . .



Performer Jada Cadena plays *Cat’s Cradle* next to students in the hallway of the Student Activities Center as the audience walks by. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors’ collection, 2017.

And here . . .



Performers Jess O'Rear and Clarissa Smith play *Cat's Cradle* next to students in the hallway of the Student Activities Center as the audience walks by. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

And here...



Performer Jana Fronczek plays *Jacob's Ladder* next to exit of the Student Activities Center as the audience exits the building. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Follow the guides through the building to exit on the other side. Notice the line of small boxes lining the sidewalk once you get outside. Follow the first guide and stop when they tell you to!



Performer Kirstin Cutts motions for audience members to stand by a box one by one as they exit the Student Activities Center. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Pick up your box at the guide's signal and hold on tight!



Performers Kirstin Cutts and Lina Chambers demonstrate to the audience how to hold the boxes properly. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Follow the guides' lead!



Performers Kirstin Cutts and Lina Chambers instruct audience members to tug on the string hanging out from the side of each box. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Keep holding the box as the guides come by and slip a small loop at the end of the string onto each of their fingers. As you hold the box, red yard unfurls from inside while the guides slowly back up, each with ten loops of thread attached to their hands.



Performer Kirstin Cutts slips the loop at the end of the string hanging out from the side of each box onto her fingers, attaching ten strings to her fingers while Lina Chambers does the same with the other ten audience members (not pictured.) Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Slowly the guides climb a set of stairs, pulling yards of string out of the boxes in your hands. As they climb the stairs, the yarn creates a perspective inspired by Nina Katchadourian's series *Paranormal Postcards*.



Performers Lina Chambers and Kirstin Cutts move in unison, pulling the strings from the boxes and creating long lines that connect their movement to the architecture of the building as they ascend the stairs. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.



Performer Lina Chambers pulls the strings attached to her fingers as she slowly backs away from the audience members holding the boxes of string. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.



Performers Lina Chambers and Kirstin Cutts meet at the top of the stairs, combining their yarn threads. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Watch the guides get in on the performance as they perform a short dance piece . . .



Performers Lina Chambers and Kirstin Cutts disappear behind the ledge as the audience holds boxes and watches. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

and sneakily switch places, to the audience's delight!



Performers Kirstin Cutts and Lina Chambers re-emerge, having switched places and crossed their yarn threads. They stop to admire their creation. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Set down your box, leaving the installation there for other passersby to enjoy.



Performer Lina Chambers takes the boxes from the audience and drops them on the grass. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

As you leave the boxes, look carefully, or you just might miss a moment like one of these!



Performers Clarissa Smith and Jess O'Rear work to untangle a mass of yarn in a stairwell just around the corner from the boxes. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Begin to seek out the visual gems hidden in plain sight. Follow the guides along the path, and make sure not to miss the sharp right turn. You'll notice a curious assembly of dancers, string, and trees.



Audience members follow the guides into a wooded area. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.



Performers Gaby Sugiaman and Natasha Small wrap red yarn around a tree as they dance. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.



Performers Ally Tufenkjian and Jana Fronczek create a giant Cat's cradle as guide Lina Chambers leads the audience by. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.



Performers Ally Tufenkjian and Jana Fronczek create a giant Cat's cradle as performer Gaby Sugiaman reads a book. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

You might have noticed some additional audience members have joined us at this point. Their curiosity was piqued as they sat at the lunch tables and may now be following along.



Performers Ally Tufenkjian and Jana Fronczek create a giant cat's cradle as performer Gaby Sugiaman reads and walks through the dance. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

When the dance concludes, follow the guides across the street to the next stop; make sure to look both ways!



Performers Lina Chambers and Kirstin Cutts lead audience members up 21st Street. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

Who's that, off in the distance, waving from the bridge?



Audience members walk up 21st Street as performers Jada Cadena, Clarissa Smith, and Jess O'Rear wave at them from atop a bridge. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Look closely at the hand signals; they match the ones the guides have been using for “stop” and “go!”



Performers Jada Cadena, Clarissa Smith, and Jess O’Rear wave a halt signal from atop a bridge. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors’ collection, 2017.



Close-up of performers Jada Cadena, Clarissa Smith, and Jess O’Rear waving a halt signal from atop a bridge. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors’ collection, 2017.

After a giant game of “Red Light Green Light,” you make it to a passage under this bridge. Follow the guides to the escalators and keep a close watch. You never know who might be coming the other way.



Audience members pass one another on an escalator leading to the top of the Perry Castañeda Library. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

Watch the guides' signals closely; they will tell you to take out your headphones and pause your recording. Something surprising is about to happen . . .

Take your spot along the ledge and look below. A cello player is in place, and a dancer emerges.

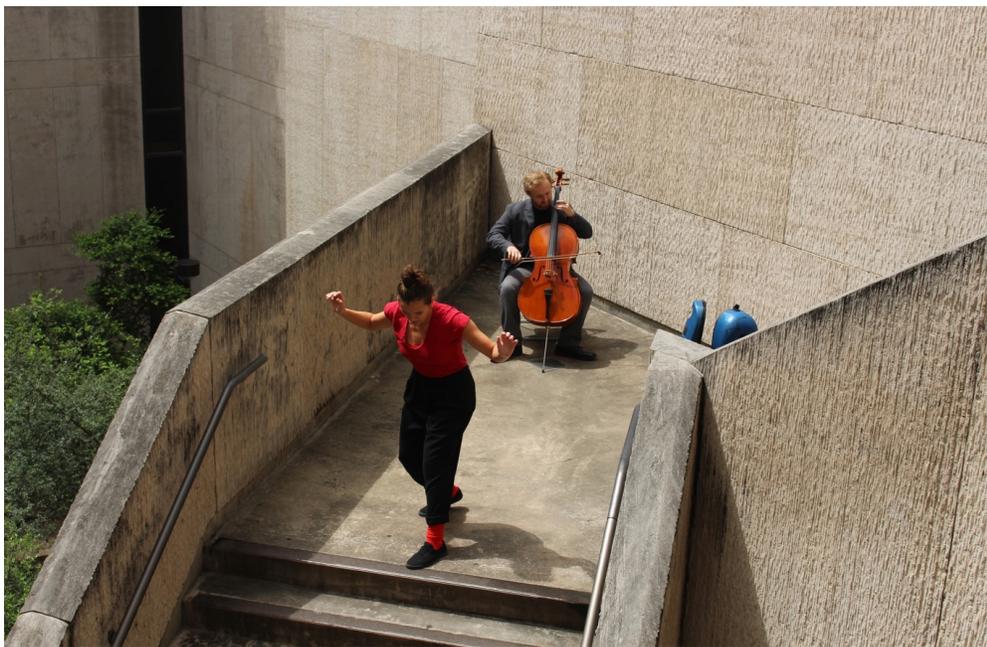


Performer Lina Chambers and audience lean over a banister to watch a performance below from the top of the Perry Castañeda Library. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

This section of the performance included live cello, but we recorded and remixed it for later in the audio tour, so if you haven't finished track one yet, pause it and skip [to track two](#). Listen to the music and scroll slowly through the next two pages. Imagine yourself outside, huddled next to strangers. You've been walking for nearly thirty minutes. This is your first chance to take out your headphones and hear the ambient sound around you. You're surrounded by tall concrete buildings and looking down on the performance below.



Natasha Small dances accompanied by David Thomases playing cello as audience members watch from the stairs above. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.



Natasha Small dances accompanied by David Thomases playing cello. Photo by Zoë Crabtree, authors' collection, 2017.

This piece was inspired by Katchadourian’s *Seat Assignment* collection, in which she added unexpected items to flat images from airplane magazines. The performers superimpose beautiful things (lyrical dance, a classical instrument) onto a utilitarian landscape.



Natasha Small dances in the rain, which drastically changes the tone of the dance on April 11, 2017. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

Skip ahead on the audio to [this section](#) (timestamp 3:01) to catch up with the tour. Follow the guides to the next stop: the library! Pause near the poetry section and look closely; whom do you see?



Performer Jess O’Rear finds a book from the library stacks and shows it to the audience. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.



Performer Gaby Sugiaman sets the book she's been reading next to the one Jess set down. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.



Guide Lina Chambers pulls a final book out of guide Kirstin Cutts's backpack to complete the sentence the other performers created with book spines. Photo by Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

The final text of our interpretation of the *Sorted Books* process was constructed from books from UT's main library where this vignette took place. The final text read as follows:

THE BORED MEETING
RIDING WITH STRANGERS
LANDSCAPE INTO ART
ARTS WORLDS
ARTS EXPLOSION
ARTISTIC VOYAGERS
TAKE MY WORD FOR IT
ART ON CAMPUS
LET'S GO TO THE MUSEUM

As you turn toward the front door of the library and head out to the Blanton Museum, you will hear [this](#) (skip to timecode 7:29, inspired by Katchadourian's "Sky Mall Kitties" song).

The tour ended in the exhibition. Take a look back at *Curiouser* and see if you notice anything new.



The cast posing for a selfie in the Perry Castañeda Library after our final performance. Photo by Jada Cadena, authors' collection, 2017.

Spectator Experiences

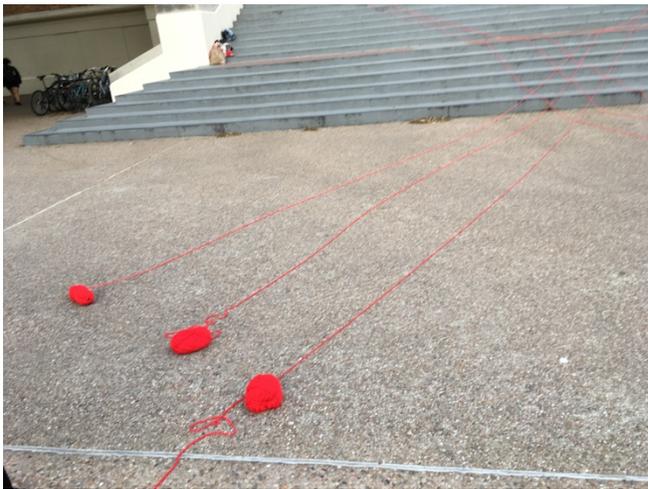
We considered audience experience throughout the creative process, deliberately seeking ways to surprise and provoke new ways of thinking both about the exhibition and the university campus.

Here's some feedback we got from our IRL audience members:

[Another attendee and I] were talking afterwards how when walking back to Winship, we felt like it was all a dream or in our imagination and it never even existed. We walked by the same spaces and they felt different . . . like they held the memory of the play but had somehow returned to a new normal—not quite the same as they were before.

[The] piece gave me space and such beauty to reflect and be. Thank you again for inviting me—I am definitely going to experience campus differently now.

I can honestly say I have never had a museum experience that was so participatory, and few that were as much fun. . . . I thought the connections to the *Curiouser* show were beautifully thought out and one's experience of the show will be enhanced by [the] piece whether or not one has seen the show previously. The images created for us on the tour were beautiful, moving, and funny by turns, and they were integrated by a soundtrack that wove together bits of the soundscape we were actually moving through—ending with an inspired passage that wove everything together. This is something I will remember for a very long time to come.



Yarn left out during a rehearsal in front of the Gregory Gymnasium. Photo by Christine Gwillim, authors' collection, 2017.

What We Learned

The process of creating this journey across campus left us with a number of lessons, curiosities, excitements, and questions to pursue further in future projects. Some of our major take-aways are detailed below.

Collaboration is Great. Inter-institutional Collaboration is Even Better

Because of a number of institutional and logistical factors, primarily related to scheduling with the directors, performers, and Blanton education staff, our ensemble members didn't have many opportunities to interact directly with our museum partners. While we, as the directors, were in regular communication with the Blanton staff and shared their thoughts, suggestions, and needs with the group, the ensemble members only received communication from the museum filtered through us. When we spoke with our ensemble after the process, they expressed that they wished they could have worked directly with the Blanton so they could consider institutional needs and interests throughout the devising process. While the possibility of this fuller collaboration during *Bored with Strangers* was limited, we encourage organizations or individuals interested in this kind of work to prioritize finding at least one opportunity for ALL collaborators to be in the room together.

Three Directors: Leaning In and Stepping Back

Our “three-headed monster” directing model taught us a lot about the utility of shifting between perspectives during the creative process. While not without its challenges (our ensemble members let us know that sometimes they found it difficult to know who to listen to during rehearsal), this model allowed us to do something of critical importance for a site-specific, travelling piece. At any moment, one of us could lead the ensemble through the rehearsal, focusing on the details of movement, sound, and story, while one or two of us could step back, looking at big-picture artistic, representational, accessibility, or logistical questions for the piece as a whole. We were also able to step into the role of spectator as the ensemble honed their performances, experiencing first-hand what we would ask audience members to move through during the performance. This leaning in to the details combined with stepping back to look at the larger aesthetic and audience experience proved extraordinarily useful and wouldn’t have been possible in the same way with a single leader.

When the Audience is Integral, They Should be Integrated Throughout

We set out to create an experience in which the audience was one hundred percent integral to making the performance come to life. Many moments of the tour could not have happened without the audience (most notably, the box choreography). While this approach was successful in a number of ways, we learned very quickly when our first spectators arrived a week before our first public performance that having their input much earlier in the process would have been to our advantage. This initial group of observers included a small, invited audience of university students, mostly focused in the arts, who were willing to help us work through logistical elements of the performance, such as pulling the string from the boxes, before we hosted members of the public. As is true of most live theatre pieces, the addition of the audience changes the piece considerably, and the logistics of moving the audience from place to place and making sure they had the information they needed to engage fully in the performance make this adage even more applicable to *Bored with Strangers*. In future iterations of this piece, we would certainly plan to engage small test audiences starting early on in the devising process and make time to listen carefully to and document their feedback along the way. We would also highly recommend this for any piece, museum theatre or otherwise, that includes considerable audience interaction as part of the experience.

Moving Forward

As we continue to explore the role of the spectator in site-specific work, this three-headed Monster is interested in examining other overlooked outdoor spaces for their performativity, imagining ways to invite audiences into cultural heritage institutions that resist hierarchy and various -isms, and collaborating with artists and audiences to make visual art feel more accessible.

It seems apt that we end our essay with an homage to Nina Katchadourian, given the many ways her work enlivened our performance and continues to inspire our practice. In an interview preceding the opening of *Curiouser*, Kat Sampson, a reporter for the alumni magazine *Alcalde*, asked Katchadourian how she hoped her audience would leave the exhibition. She replied:

Certainly “curiouser,” to give you the obvious answer. I want people to go back into the world and be more engaged with it. One of the things that makes me happiest is when people say “I saw your show and the next day I noticed x, y, and z.” This may be very specific to 2017 at this moment, but the world is going crazy and it feels like this country is going crazy to me. I’m very appreciative of when people tell me my

work made them feel hopeful and happy. I feel very moved by that response and I feel incredibly privileged if I can provide that for people right now, too. I hope they feel joy. (Sampson 2017)

Acknowledgements

The Bored with Strangers Team includes:

Codirectors: Christine Gwillim, Sam Provenzano, Lauren Smith

Ensemble Cast: Jada Cadena, Lina Chambers, Kirstin Cutts, Jana Fronczek, Jess O’Rear, Natasha Small, Clarissa Smith, Gaby Sugiaman, David Thomases, Ally Tufenkjian

Sound Design and Musical Composition: Jada Cadena, Christine Gwillim, Jess O’Rear, Dave Thomases, Ally Tufenkjian

Costume Design: Jana Fronczek

Graphic Design: Khristian Mendez-Aguirre

Data Collection and Research: Kara Mavericks

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Sampson, Kat. 2017. “Curiouser and Curiouser: Blanton Museum Hosts Artist Nina Katchadourian.” *Alcalade*, April 20, 2017. <https://alcalde.texasexes.org/2017/04/blanton-museum-exhibit-curiouser-hosts-contemporary-artist-nina-katchadourian/>.