



Whoop Dee Doo, Uh-Oh: A Whoop Dee Doo Thing, 2012. Image courtesy of Megan Mantia.

Universal Children:

Helen Reed interviews

Whoop Dee Doo

HELEN REED works with specific groups of people such as Twin Peaks fans, lesbian separatists, and high school art teacher candidates. In each project, collaboration is a working process from which the artwork emerges. Reed favors collaborators that reflect her interest in participatory culture, affinity groups, and fantasy-based sub-cultures. Her projects take vernacular form such as television shows, publications, postcards and other forms of easily transmittable and dispersed media, so as to circulate back into the communities from which they are generated.

Reed has exhibited work at Prefix Institute for Contemporary Art (Toronto), apexart (New York), Smack Mellon (New York), Portland Art Museum, Seattle Art Museum and La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse (Montréal). She holds a BFA from the Emily Carr University of Art and Design (Vancouver), an MFA in Art and Social Practice from Portland State University.

WHOOPEE DEE DOO is a non-profit organization that works closely with underserved youth, adolescents and adults through workshops, community collaborations and live variety shows. Through our programming, Whoop Dee Doo strives to not only break down stereotypes and barriers between age, gender, culture and sub-culture, but to form and foster unique collaborations between unlikely pairings of community members that ultimately blossom into exceptional and meaningful interactions. Through our workshops, Whoop Dee Doo creates a wholesome environment for creative expression outside the boundaries of a classroom or museum, teaching children that art is a safe and appropriate outlet for feelings that may be difficult to articulate. Through our community programming, Whoop Dee Doo collaborates with performers and artists of all backgrounds and specialties- from science teachers and Celtic bagpipers to traditional clogging troupes, West African dance teams, Tibetan throat singers, body-builders, barbershop quartets, and Chicano punk bands. This chaotic mix creates an unexpected and endearing experience, and invites a cross-generational and cross-cultural dialogue.

I first encountered Whoop Dee Doo at the Time Based Arts Festival in Portland, Oregon. In collaboration with a group of youth from the Caldera arts program, they created a DIY body world, complete with digestive tracts, circulatory systems and a belly button maze crafted out of foam, fabric and paper maché. Whoop Dee Doo functions as a faux public access television program; the immersive environments that they build become the stage for a live taping of their thematic variety shows, which are later edited and uploaded to their website. The shows contain a diverse array of performers, often focusing on local talent, as well as skits and competitions that involve the live audience. The mixture is funny, absurd, challenging, exciting, and often awkward. When the camera pans across the crowd we witness an amusing mixture of enthusiastic children, puzzled parents, and costumed performers, including a deadpan werewolf, a wet clown and a walking bag of popcorn.

Whoop Dee Doo provides an innovative model for working with children. Within the positive and fun environment of the variety show, the unexpected can, and often does, happen: body builders dance to Ricky Martin songs in Speedos; a West African Dance troupe creates choreography to the sound of a punk band; and kids jump on stage to show off their double jointed elbows. There is an almost total lack of inhibitions and limitations. Watching the show in the presence of children who lack our adult notions of acceptable behaviour, Whoop Dee Doo's work makes me wonder just whose limits we cater to when we "childproof" culture for young people.

I talked with Whoop Dee Doo at Jaimie Warren's studio in Kansas City, Missouri, as members Jaimie Warren, Matt Roche and Erin Zona attempted to make 30 Halloween costumes in one day.

HELEN REED: So I wanted to start off with a question that you have probably answered a million times: how did Whoop Dee Doo start?

MATT ROCHE: It started as a gallery show; we were trying to do a fake public access talk show for children.

JAIMIE WARREN: It was at the Greenlease Gallery at Rockhurst University. We didn't work with kids yet, but there were kids there and it was made to be a show for kids. It was structured like a variety show. In the beginning it was more chaotic, with a lot of different artists doing a lot of different things. I think lately Matt's been more of a director, curating and making an aesthetic for the show; working with a dozen

artists at a time, knowing what they do, navigating who should do what, and making it look cohesive.

Now we are trying to do more collaborations. For the Time Based Art Festival a lot of the acts were different sorts of collaborations. We had this basic theme of the body, so we

“ We thought about having these Japanese Butoh Dancers do something with a tapeworm. But they came to us and said that they wanted to do poop. It was a good match because you don't usually find Butoh dancers who want to make poop costumes. They created a dance that was based on the digestive system.

asked people if they would alter what they do to suit this theme. We thought about having these Japanese Butoh Dancers do something with a tapeworm. But they came to us and said that they wanted to do poop. It was a good match because you don't usually find Butoh dancers who want to make poop costumes. They created a dance that was based on the digestive system.

There was this West African dance troupe called Kukatonon who performed with a punk group called Million Brazilians. We had them collaborate because Million Brazilians' music is fast paced. The West African dance troupe, which is all 12-15 year old girls, created this new dance to a Million Brazilians' song. So, that is another thing we are trying to do with the shows, we're trying to make new connections that might not normally happen.

How do you find these groups of people to work with? And do you sometimes feel like you have to push people to participate? One of the things that I appreciate about the Whoop Dee Doo shows is that they can be pretty gross and perverted, and I wonder if this ever freaks out your performers.



Whoop Dee Doo, Uh-Oh: A Whoop Dee Doo Thing, 2012. Image courtesy of Megan Mantia.

MR: I mean we do a lot of gross stuff, because we think it's funny. It makes people uncomfortable sometimes, but kids really respond to gross stuff.

JW: Yeah, we have good intentions with everything, we never intend to make people feel uncomfortable, but there is definitely a bit of boundary pushing going on, but it's not for shock value or anything; it's not to offend anyone.

MR: Yeah, there is definitely nothing we do that we think is inappropriate for a kid, because it's always the parents freaking out, not the kids. In the Baltimore show there was this blob that people were talking about.

JW: Her name was Jumbo.

MR: At one point we made this big ring pop. We had a bunch of ring pops as a transitional thing, as one act was going off and another on, and Jumbo said she was hungry and wanted some candy. We brought out this ring pop and started licking it and then we threw ring pops into the crowd. And as harmless as it sounds, it wasn't meant to be anything gross, but there were a number of adults...

JW: Well there was a giant tongue...

MR: Yeah, this tongue and a giant ring pop and they were like, “Oh...” They were projecting something onto it that wasn’t there, and that the kids weren’t seeing. It was just a funny visual thing, this big blob and candy. I remember once we had this bunny costume, and we put this white piece of cloth on the bunny like a diaper. A viewer took issue with it because she thought it was some sort of sex fetish thing, like a furry thing, and we were like, “Oh my god, what can we do that’s not going to be taken the wrong way?”

JW: Because that honestly didn’t cross our minds and you know adults can put sexual undertones onto anything.

MR: And there are things that we do that are more obviously going to push some people’s buttons. We had a heavy metal hugging contest. There was this black metal group in Sweden named Pagan Rites and they came on the show for a little bit and performed and then lead a hugging contest.

JW: We made a huge agreement that they wouldn’t throw any pig blood on the kids.

Laughter

HR: Is that something that is a source of stress for Whoop Dee Doo? As adults we tend to project our own preconceived notions and anxieties onto things, and perhaps we might even be a bit paranoid.

JW: I think so. One of the first shows we ever did, we had this Christian fiddling band. The mom who brought the fiddlers in the mini van saw a drag queen at our show and so all the fiddlers left; they didn’t perform. And we did this show in a fake cave that this artist made, and there was this kind of Toddler and Tiaras-esque group called *Hollywood or Bust*, there was controversy with that style too: six year olds in full make up and tiny outfits.

Yeah, their moves were intense.

MR: There are definitely stressful elements. There are times where people think we are intentionally trying to be controversial. Though, we are just trying to make the most entertaining show by finding the best local performers we can get involved.

ERIN ZONA: I was standing backstage in the Portland show, we just had Colin Self, a drag queen on and some kids that had been performing were arguing over whether or not Colin Self was a girl. It turned into kind of a heated moment. Then one of the kids went up to Colin and said, “Are you a girl? Because I heard you were a boy.” They ended up having this whole conversation about gender, and the kids walked away from it realizing that gender is complicated. That’s something that happens at a Whoop Dee Doo show that is not on the screen. There is a lot that happens live with the audience and behind the stage that you don’t see on the videos.



Sometimes there is this climate of extreme safety around children and maybe these are our own projections about what is and isn't appropriate for kids.

Sometimes there is this climate of extreme safety around children and maybe these are our own projections about what is and isn't appropriate for kids. I think in some environments that are specifically "for kids" the encounter that you just described might never have the opportunity to happen because people might think kids aren't ready to see a drag queen yet. How do you decide what is appropriate for the show?

MR: There are definitely things that we don't put on the show; we do draw the line at nudity. We wouldn't let someone come out

onto the show buck-naked. Some people might look at the *Pagan Rites* thing and find it disturbing, but I wouldn't let someone go on the show and do something that I found disturbing. I wouldn't ever put anything on the show that I thought would keep these kids up at night.

JW: Yeah, I think we are aiming for weird in a very memorable way. I like to think about it as the stuff that you see when you are six and then suddenly you are 25 or something and you have some weird flash back, and you are like, "What the hell was that?" My ideal would be that every show does that for the kids, that they would be totally confused by it and have the strangest memories.

EZ: Memory is something I think about all the time. When we've thought of a skit or a piece of the set, it is almost like we create it with the expectation that the only thing that will last is the memory of it, though we do record it. It's like we do expect the memory of it to be the final product.

HR: I love watching the shows online and it is interesting for me to hear about the kinds of encounters that happen live, as well as behind the scenes. How much of the experience am I missing when I watch the online shows?

JW: I feel like there is a lot, but it's not stuff you could document, really. Like when we were talking about the tense moments, or the questioning moments, or when we were talking about the preparation work with people. Those are big parts of the show, us working together, the kids working with the acts. There is so much preparation. There are a lot of magic moments that happen, but I don't know if these moments are meant to be documented.

MR: It is the other stuff that is really interesting, like the writing, the way we put things together, the way that we make the sets. When I see the videos, they are almost hard for me to watch, because of the memories of actually being in the environment and knowing that there is so much more to the experience. The audience part doesn't show up that well on the videos either, there is so much more interaction.

I think part of the issue, when we talk about taking our videos offline, is that we know that the Internet presentation does not do justice to what happens in the live performances. When we put the videos online, it

makes it look like those videos are the end goal. We feel that we might be giving the impression that we are trying to create Internet webisodes. But these are secondary. Really it is the other way around, the videos are secondary.

HR: Would the live shows happen in the same way without the videotaping?

MR: Well I definitely think that filming the show affects the way that the crowd participates. The cameras are a reference point that most people have; they make the audience ready to perform. I think that filming can affect the show in a really good way; it promotes participation.

EZ: Well we've also talked about not recording them at all, but going through the motions of recording it. Although, I'm not sure that we could bring ourselves to do that.

MR: I think we could, maybe for one show. I would still like to see all the ways we could do the show. Like all the ways we could do it as a fake TV show and then a real TV show.

JW: PBS is a huge goal for us and I think that's what we are going to try next. It opens Whoop Dee Doo up to such a huge audience. And maybe it is not an art audience we are catering to, because really it is always galleries and museums that support us. But PBS opens it up to the everyday family; this would be a dream to us.

PBS is huge.

JW: Yeah, well it would be local. Our local PBS has asked us to present a pilot to them and then if they did air it, you can send it out to other PBS's and then the hope is that the national PBS would air it. That would be a National broadcast, and that would be amazing! That's a huge goal.

If Whoop Dee Doo broadcast on television, would you consider it a kids' show? And if so, are there any kids' television shows that you would consider influential for this kind of programming?

JW: I don't think that we think about Whoop Dee Doo as an actual kids' show. On PBS there is a difference, kids' programming is very much ABC and 123, which is not what we are. There are very specific criteria for kids' programming. I think that in the ways that they categorize shows, Whoop Dee Doo would be more like arts and culture programming, because it is not educational in that kids' programming way, it is for adults and kids.

MR: Yeah it is not educational in that way, but I do think about Whoop Dee Doo as a kids' show. As a young child, I watched a lot of shows that weren't for my age, because they were visually interesting. I was a big fan of SCTV and The Marx Brothers. I think about those two shows a lot. And those wouldn't be considered children's programming, but I don't think people would look at them and say that they are adult programming, either. I don't think that we would ever qualify as educa-

tional programming. But I think that Whoop Dee Doo is totally appropriate for kids, and I think that it is just as important to have this sort of unleashed weird presence as something for kids to watch, I think that these things are good for kids to see. For our own purposes we could call ourselves a kids' show, but for PBS, they have a certain number of

hours for kids' programming, and certain hours for arts and culture programming.

JW: Yeah, kids' programming is all *Dora the Explorer*, it's pretty much all cartoons.

The ways in which certain things are deemed to be “educational” and other things are not considered “educational” is interesting. Some of the Whoop



Dee Doo encounters that you guys are describing, particularly the scenes of momentarily confusion at the live shows, I feel like that these kinds of things are the basis of education in some ways.

Dee Doo encounters that you guys are describing, particularly the scenes of momentarily confusion at the live shows, I feel like that these kinds of things are the basis of education in some ways. The times when you become confused and disoriented and then you have to think or explore a little bit more. Which is not the same thing as, “Now we are going to learn the ABCs.”

MR: Yeah, I think that is completely true. But it makes total sense if you're publicly funded and you are going to call something kids' programming that there would be certain perimeters that you would have to set. *Blues Clues* is a show designed to help kids retain information, and it is perfectly set up to do that. So, if you are going to choose one kids show, why not choose one that has really easy to prove results, rather than something we would do? It makes total sense to me why we wouldn't be able to be considered “educational” in that way.

Right, Whoop Dee Doo doesn't have that kind of structure at all. But it does present a wide array of performers and perhaps encourages a kind of enthusiasm and curiosity. Speaking of the variety of the variety show, what is the wildest combination of performers that you have had on the show?

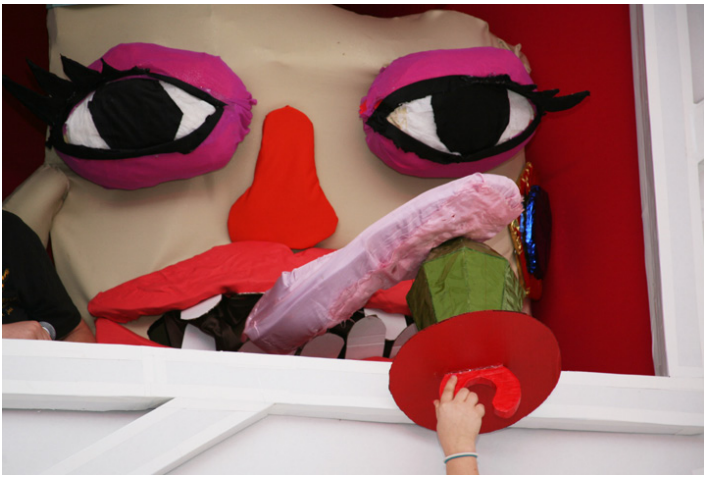
EZ: We had the Baltimore Police Honour Guard walk into our set and they had their rifles, which we argued about, whether or not they should have those...

JW: Discussed, not argued.

EZ: Yeah, discussed. They usually carry flags and they did a flag presentation.

JW: The technical name for it is a presentation of the colours of the flags. So they agreed to present Whoop Dee Doo's colours.

EZ: They agreed to use these flags that we had all made, but to top it



Whoop Dee Doo, Uh-Oh: A Whoop Dee Doo Thing, 2012. Image courtesy of Megan Mantia.

all off they agreed to walk in to the Star Spangled Banner that Matt had created in a MIDI version.

EZ: But anyway it is like the weirdest version of the national anthem and they are carrying these weird flags and it is very much a confusing moment for the beginning of the show, and I thought it was just perfect.

JW: It was amazing, because it was totally extended. I thought that it would have lasted 45 seconds but it stretched to 3 minutes, so it was this totally elongated distorted version.

MR: The Baltimore Police Honour Guard are not usually considered performers but they do have a very performative aspect to what they do. Finding people who aren't usually performers and bringing them on the show is really hard.

Are you ever curious about after the show, about conversations between parents and kids? Do you ever hear about the kinds of conversations that your audience has after the show?

JW: I feel like it has always been a goal, but there is also a reason we

are not doing it, or maybe it's because we don't have time, but I don't know. We've always talked about it, like someone giving feedback but it is always hidden, but we have a tons of friends who are fourteen so we could totally get them to be incognito.

HR: Do you have regular kids in Kansas City who are involved with Whoop Dee Doo? Or are you always working with different groups of kids, depending on where you travel?

JW: When we had our space, we had kids who were regular with Operation Breakthrough. After we did Caldera I think we discovered that high school was where it was at for us. We had never worked with high school age kids, and it was a match made in heaven. I think we've only done high school age since then and in Miami, we have some high school age kids lined up.

The organization we are working with is a really important organization for low income families in Kansas City, but it was just too much for us, in what we were trying to accomplish in terms of how many kids they would have to give us. There were times where we were literally given 48 kids at once; it was more like babysitting at times. And there was not the funding at times; we didn't have the funding here or from an organization to have a small group where you can really make an impact.

How do the collaborations between the kids and the other performers get worked out? It sounds like at Caldera you had the Caldera youth and The National Guard just sit down in a room together and brainstorm a skit. Is that generally how it works?

JW: I think that is generally ideally how it works. It's such a difficult thing to make happen because there are so many variables. We never have funding to give people for their time, and I think having little gestures with funding would make such a huge difference. It is something that we are striving for. We are dealing with people who are not used to performing, so sometimes it takes a lot of convincing, and it takes a lot of time to build trust and especially not just for people to be on the show but to collaborate. It's a difficult process, but it is totally worth it.

Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me, Jaimie, Matt and Erin!