

Beyond Utility: Pointless Play as a Portal to Dialectical Becoming

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Value and Playful Potentiality*

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Introduction

This chapter explores “pointless play” as a dialectical methodology for human development and social change through an analysis of *The How of Performance Activism*, an international, ensemble-based workshop. Drawing on the work of Fred Newman (Newman, 1996; Newman and Holzman, 1997, 2013) and Lois Holzman (2013, 2017, 2021, 2025) and informed by Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Marx (1978), and Wittgenstein, (2009) I argue that development is not the result of knowledge acquisition but an activity of collective creation. In this tradition, human beings are understood not primarily as knowers, but as performers who build environments in which new ways of being can emerge.

Organized around three provocations—*There is no what without how*, *Don't get trapped by knowing*, and *We can play with anything*—I examine how participants engage in improvisation, dialogue, and performance to create developmental environments in real time. Through detailed scenes and script-based vignettes, the analysis shows how process and product, tool and result, are inseparable; how “unknowability” functions as a generative condition for transformation; and how play becomes a rigorous, collective practice rather than a recreational activity.

In this chapter I suggest that what appears “pointless” from an instrumental perspective is, in fact, politically and developmentally significant. By not organizing activity around predetermined outcomes but around the ongoing creation of relational environments instead, participants transform discomfort, silence, and even heaviness into shared material for growth. In doing so, they enact a form of grassroots power grounded not in certainty or mastery, but in the capacity to create with others that which does not yet exist. Because the argument of this chapter concerns activity rather than ideas alone, what follows begins not with further explanation but by entering the workshop itself.

I. A Portal into Play

The Zoom screen fills with faces. *Naima* by the jazz musician John Coltrane is playing softly. We look, really look, at one another. Someone scrolls through the pages of Zoomsquares, pausing on each. Some smiling, some still, a few crying quietly. The instruction was simple: *Look*. Five minutes of looking. Already, something is happening.

We Are From

*We are from the space in the living room
between the TV and the coffee table,*

*where we sat crisscross applesauce
and watched the world on TV.
We are from brick streets lined with murals,
where saxophones play and poetry spills from open mics like gospel.
We are from beautiful environments
fraught with chaos
We are from Brooklyn and Nigeria,
from Ontario and Georgia,
from water like glass and dirt under our fingernails.
We are from our ancestors and our transcestors,
from love and play as freedom,
from intentional togetherness as a radical act —
fought for through rupture and repair.
We are from the in-between and the beyond,
from whatever legacies gave us this moment*

*(Poem co-created by the 2025 participants of
The How of Performance activism)*

Thus begins *The How of Performance Activism (The How)*, a two-day workshop grounded in a dialectical and performative approach to human development and social change developed and articulated over the past five decades by the philosopher and activist Fred Newman and the developmental psychologist and activist Lois Holzman. Their work did not begin as a theory to be applied, but as an ongoing set of experimental practices or efforts to create with others new ways of being and relating. The theory has emerged from and in turn informed these practices, in a continuous movement between activity and reflection.

This methodology draws on and reworks a range of intellectual traditions. From Vygotsky (1978, 1986) comes the understanding of development as a social, activity-based process; from Marx (1978), particularly his early philosophical writings, the insight that, ‘...the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived only as revolutionary

practice' (Marx 1978: 144); and from Wittgenstein (2009), the recognition that meaning is not simply used but made in and through our activity with one another.

In this tradition, human beings are not primarily understood as knowers who first understand the world and then act upon it, but as creators and performers who develop through collective activity and the building of “stages” (akin to theatrical stages) where new forms of life can emerge. This work also resonates with relational and performative theories that challenge the separation between observer and world (e.g., Karen Barad, 2007; Kenneth Gergen, 1991), suggesting that meaning emerges within ongoing processes of interaction rather than existing prior to them. Drawing from, and moving beyond, the revolutionary energies of the 1960s and 1970s, this work is grounded in a recognition that the content of our politics cannot transform the world unless we also transform the form — the how — of our relating.

Out of this recognition emerged a practice grounded in dialectics and performance: a playful, improvisational, and often challenging search for new conceptual and practical tools. Across decades, this work has taken form in schools, youth programs, therapy groups, political organizing, and performance ensembles — each functioning as a laboratory for collective development (Holzman, 2017).

Within this broader landscape, performance activism began to emerge in the early 2000's as an international movement across many contexts as people experimented with performance, play, and collective creativity as ways of responding to the limits of more traditional approaches to change (Baron-Cohen, 2020; Diamond, 2007; Friedman, 2022; Holzman, Malta, and Carrijo,

2024). What connects this work is a shared recognition: that the human capacity to create — to improvise, to build with others, to make something where there was nothing — is central to transformation (Friedman, 2022).

The East Side Institute (2025)ⁱ, which began in New York City and now operates primarily virtually, is one of the places where this emerging movement has found a home — where it has been recognized, nurtured, and brought into conversation. An international center devoted to developing new approaches to human development and social change, the Institute hosts *The How of Performance Activism*. Each year, it gathers artists, educators, community organizers, therapists, and activists from across the world, people searching for ways of working that move beyond the familiar. In February 2025, participants arrived from twelve countries, speaking multiple languages and ranging in age from twenty-five to eighty-five. A few had been engaged in this work for years; most were encountering it for the first time.

People arrive at *The How* with questions — about organizing, burnout, despair, possibility — and yet the workshop does not respond with prescriptions. Instead, it offers a process: an invitation to build something together without knowing in advance what it will become. The play here is “pointless” in a specific and rigorous sense. It resists the demand that activity justify itself through predetermined outcomes, aligning with a dialectical critique of instrumentalism in which activity is not organized around producing a product but around creating new forms of collective life (Newman & Holzman 1997). In this sense, play is not valued for what it produces but for what it makes possible — for its capacity to open developmental space.

It is within this context that *The How of Performance Activism* unfolds. Across five sessions, the international ensemble engages in improvisation, dialogue, poetry, movement, and performance — not to achieve an outcome but to discover what kind of ensemble they might become. The workshop is guided by three provocations offered by Holzman:

1. There is no what without how
2. Don't get trapped by knowing
3. We can play with anything

Each of these provocations functions both as concept and as invitation: a way of orienting the work and a set of activities through which the ensemble creates itself. In the sections that follow, I explore how these provocations take shape as lived, collective practices through which people experiment with becoming. This chapter attempts to stay faithful in form to the methodology it is sharing. Rather than proceeding linearly from theory to example, it moves between scene, reflection, and concept, allowing analysis to emerge from activity. At times, I write these moments as scripts (taken directly from the transcripts) to convey the performative, improvisational quality of the workshop, where conversation itself is something participants actively create.

II. There Is No What Without How

The first provocation — *There is no what without how* — sounds simple. However, it challenges the assumption that meaning, truth, transformation, or even “the work” exist as something

separate from the activities that create them. This provocation asserts a dialectical view: there is no product apart from the process that produces it. Tool and result emerge together.

Lois's provocation echoed one of the central ideas in her and Newman's work: that process and product, tool-and-result, are inseparable (Newman and Holzman 2013). This dialectical approach refuses the idea that things unfold in a linear sequence of cause and effect, and instead understands process and product as emerging inseparably from the ongoing activity that is always creating something new. In this dialectical understanding of human activity, development doesn't move from one stage to another. It happens in activity, and it is itself activity. What people create together changes them, and who they are becoming shapes what they can create. The question then becomes: How do we perform this inseparability in collective practice? How do we organize environments where the how is not a means to an end but the very material of change?

Scene 1: Becoming Environment Builders

That inseparability of process and product came alive during the session led by Gloria Strickland and me. In addition to being on the faculty of the East Side Institute, Gloria was for many years a leader of the All Stars Project, a youth development program that has been central to the development of a tool-and-result methodology. We invited the adult *How* participants to re-enact a transcript from one of Gloria's workshops with young people in the All Stars. The transcript had been shaped into a script, and the reenactment became an activity through which participants could engage the work performatively rather than analytically.

Because this vignette includes participants performing that script — and, in doing so, creating something new with it — I present it here in script form, with characters labeled using pseudonyms for the young people from the original All Stars workshop followed by the pseudonym for the adult participants from *The How* who were performing them (e.g., Destiny/Hal). Following the script, I share the discussion that emerged among the adult participants immediately after the reenactment.

LOCATION: A large room with chairs in a semi-circle. Gloria stands in front, engaging directly with the group.

GLORIA/GLORIA: I thought I'd start with something important. We have orientation next week, and part of today is about preparing for that. But really, today is about *you*. This group. This *ensemble*. Because I see my responsibility as your development specialist. You're charging us with the job of creating an environment where you can grow. This program is 14 weeks long. In a way, we invited you. But the fact that *you* said yes, that *you* showed up today, that puts the responsibility back on *me* and *us* to figure out how we are going to give what we have to give so that when you come out of this — not just these 14 weeks, but when you step into your internships, next year, the year after — that you could look back and say: *No matter whether I was there one day, or ten, or fifty-five... I was on a development path. I was on a journey of growth.*

(beat)

And part of that journey means being challenged. So, I need you to give something to me. I need you to support me... so that I can make things harder for you. (Scattered laughter.)

MALIK/TIFFANY: (grinning) That actually sounds great.

GLORIA/GLORIA: Oh? Tell me more.

JASMINE/CANDACE: Well... because in life, challenges are what make us ready for the real world.

GLORIA/GLORIA: So, you're saying if I push you, that's good?

JASMINE/CANDACE: (nodding): Yeah.

[Several other young people answer similarly.]

GLORIA/GLORIA: Anybody *not* sure about being pushed? Anybody feeling, "I don't know about this?"

[A pause. Then, hesitantly, Samuel/Eva raises his hand.]

GLORIA/GLORIA: OK, please stand up and tell me more — whatever you were going to say. Thank you.

[Samuel/Eva hesitates but stands. A murmur moves through the group.]

SAMUEL/EVA: I like to be comfortable. I don't like to be uncomfortable.

GLORIA/GLORIA: I understand that. I appreciate that. No. Stay standing up. Let's have some dialogue.

[There is chatter in the room as the group reacts. Gloria raises her hand for quiet.]

GLORIA/GLORIA: [to the group]: Now, I want to have a conversation with everyone sitting. You see, Samuel stood up and said, "*I like to be comfortable. I don't really want to step out of my comfort zone.*" I asked him to get back up — which means I asked him to take another step *into* discomfort. You realize that, right?

[Scattered voices: Yeah...]

GLORIA/GLORIA: So, in order to create an environment where he can take that step — where I can *push* him — I need the ensemble to be *attentive*. I need that energy and focus. Because this is not easy to do. But I'll tell you what it *is*. It's *growthful*.

End Scene

During the debrief with the adult *How* participants, Eva, who played Samuel, raised a question: *What if Samuel had said, "I'm uncomfortable all the time. Why would I want to make myself more uncomfortable?"* Gloria paused and then invited Eva to try it out. "Why don't you be Samuel," she said. "I'll be me, and let's see what happens."

SAMUEL/EVA: [speaking quietly] I'm uncomfortable all day. I'm more than uncomfortable. I don't know if I have any more uncomfortable left.

GLORIA/GLORIA: I hear you! Yeah, I get it. So many situations are designed to make you uncomfortable. You probably think I'm crazy for asking you to be more uncomfortable. But I'm not asking you to do that today. What I'm asking is: can you stay with us, keep sharing what you're sharing, even if it's that you don't want to move? Because that might be your way of giving and perhaps growing.

When they finished, Gloria asked *The How* participants what they saw. One man said, "You gave Samuel control over the discomfort. You made it something they could choose, not something imposed." Another added that what changed the moment was that Gloria *saw* Samuel — saw the fullness of his experience and the history in his words — and responded from there. She didn't try to erase his discomfort; she reorganized it, turning it into something the group could hold

together. The shift came not from comfort, but from attention — from *how* she related to what she saw.

This conversation opened up a different understanding of what it means to build an ensemble. Rather than something to arrive at — a space of comfort or cohesion — the ensemble emerged as an activity: the ongoing work of creating an environment in which people could stay with what they bring, including discomfort and pain, and make something with it together. Discomfort, which in the world is often a marker of oppression, could become — through the *how* of the interaction — a shared activity for development. As Gloria put it later, “At All Stars, we build with everything. Even a decision to stay uncomfortable. We believe we can create with everything there is.” The moment didn’t erase the politics of pain; it reorganized it, transforming unchosen suffering into a space of potential collective power.

At the conclusion of the session with Gloria, we explored another activity that gave the experience of “howness” in a different register: “The Amazing Silence” exercise. In this paired activity, one person starts a conversation by sharing something meaningful with their partner (e.g. something they are worrying about or a recent experience that excited them), then both people sit in silence for ten seconds. The second person responds, followed by another silence, and this continues for several minutes. For approximately 10 minutes they build a conversation together punctuated by these silences.

At first, many of the participants found it uncomfortable. They worried about the timing, about saying the right thing, about whether we were doing it “correctly.” The silences felt long. But as

we continued, something shifted. The exercise started to feel less like a break in conversation and more like a form of conversation itself. The silence began to hold meaning. It became part of the dialogue, part of the *how*. When we returned to the full group, people shared what they had noticed. One participant said, “I usually listen to respond. This made me listen to be with.” Another said, “The silence wasn’t empty; it gave weight to what was said.” Someone else described how it felt to “trust that the conversation didn’t need to be filled — that it could just breathe.”

Both activities — the reenactment and the paired silences — made palpable that the *how* and the *what* are inseparable. The environment and the activity build one another; each invitation, hesitation, silence, and collective adjustment is both the tool and the result, the process and the product of our becoming. This is the practical power of the provocation: *there is no what without how* is not a slogan but a way of working, a disciplined attention to how we are co-creating in real time. And it leads directly to the next provocation — *Don’t get trapped by knowing* — because once we embrace this inseparability, we can also notice how quickly we try to name it, fix it, or turn it into something already known. The work is to keep creating, to stay in play.

III. Don’t Get Trapped by Knowing

“Don’t get trapped by knowing.” Lois offers this phrase as both invitation and challenge. It sounds simple, but as a method it is radical. It calls into question one of modernism’s deepest assumptions: that the world, and we ourselves, can be known. In the dominant story of what it means to be human, knowing is our defining act. *I think, therefore I am*. To know is to exist, to be rational, to stand apart from what is and make sense of it. But in the practice of performance

activism, this stance becomes a trap. To stand apart is to separate ourselves from the ongoing creation of life, to become spectators and critics of a world we are already shaping.

This critique resonates across a range of contemporary and philosophical traditions. Karen Barad (2007) challenges the assumption that observer and world exist as separate entities that can then be brought into relation, arguing instead that they are always already entangled — that what we take to be distinct objects, subjects, and causes emerge through our practices of engagement. Similarly, Bayo Akomolafe (2020) questions the impulse to stabilize the world through explanation, suggesting that our efforts to define and fix reality often obscure its ongoing movement and relationality. From these perspectives, separation and causality are not simply features of the world, but ways of organizing it, ways that can limit our capacity to respond to its complexity.

To not be trapped by knowing, then, is not a call to ignorance or to abandon learning. Knowledge, expertise, and study remain vital — they are part of what we bring into our play. What is challenged is the identity of the knower: the stance that positions us outside the world in order to explain it. When we perform, we rejoin the activity of life itself. Knowledge becomes one of the materials we create with, rather than the boundary that defines what is possible.

Unknowability, in this sense, is not a failure of cognition but a condition for becoming. As Newman and Holzman argue, we must give up knowing in favor of performed activity (Newman & Holzman 1997). Development is not driven by what we know, but by what we create together. Holzman's more recent work makes this shift explicit: 'while the answers are unknowable, the

path to creative discovery is not' (Holzman 2021: 45). It is this openness — this refusal to fix meaning in advance — that makes transformation possible, whether personal, social, or historical.

In the context of *The How*, Lois does not explain unknowability. She performs it. Her facilitation of the following activity embodies the dialectical method itself, a way of working in which tool and result, method and meaning, come into being together. This afternoon, she picks up a pen.

Scene Two: The Pen

Lois holds the pen up to the camera. “What is this?” she asks. “A writing instrument,” someone says. “An airplane.” “A facilitator of communication.” “A microphone.” “A magic wand.” She echoes their words back: “A magic wand. A mysterious way of covering your eyes. A boundary. An offering. A key to freedom.” More voices join: “A poetry wand.” “A two-dimensional bridge.” “A birth companion.” “A red badge of courage.” “A therapist I could afford.” Laughter fills the room. “A weapon and a salve.” “A solution to boredom.” “Plastic and rubber. Ink.” Lois keeps repeating the offers: “A choice. A reservoir. A companion. A funny moustache. One that reveals. The lion keeper’s object.” After 10 minutes she said, “Thank you, everybody. Give yourselves a round of applause.”

LOIS: How did you hear, as we went on? Did you notice anything about how you were hearing what people were saying?

JESSICA: It was an invitation away from literalism.

MARYANN: I was hearing the silence after the statement... taking a pause to really think about what the person was saying.

BRENDA: I heard the three provocations... it opened the door for us to explore our creativity with no end. There was no right or wrong. It gave me a certain freedom.

OSCAR: It was vicarious survivorship — all the ways that people's shares made a way to survive into being in the present.

EVA: There was like this beat developing, of people coming in and out... what we were creating because of what else we were hearing. How we were creating what we were creating — that's the how again.

LOIS: There's the how again — how we're creating what we're creating. With a very intimate relationship to the what.

Lois then reads the poem *Ode to Things* by Pablo Neruda (1994), her voice lingering on the lines about “the smoothness of door handles, worn by hands” and “the soap that slips away in the water.” When she finishes, she says, “Let's try it. Go into your groups and make your own ode — to a thing.” The participants disappear into breakout rooms. Minutes later, they return and begin performing their odes.

Ode to the mug, chipped and warm, you hold our mornings steady.

Ode to the spoon — silent voyager of soup, carrier of comfort.

Ode to the door handle — for opening, and never asking where.

Ode to the pillow, keeper of dreams and tears.

Ode to the pen that writes us as we write with it.

Laughter, clapping, and emojis fill the screen. Afterward, Lois asks, “How did you hear what people were sharing, in their odes? What was that like for you?”

BRENDA: I heard the provocations again. I heard *Don't Get Trapped by Knowing* and *There is No What Without How*. We were the how and the what. It was like we were playing with what we already live inside of.

JESSICA: We were celebrating things that were never meant to be celebrated. We were bringing them back to life.

EVA: I was thinking about how we kept creating what we were hearing — like we were building with the sounds.

OSCAR: It's a kind of decommodification... We take these ordinary objects that capitalism has made invisible, and suddenly they're alive again because we're in relation with them.

LOIS: Yes. That's why we must engage the forgetfulness at its roots: the commodification, the product, the thingification of everything. We don't have to stay in that. We can reconnect to that we created all these "things" and that we can and will continue to create.

Ode to the Things We Made (abridged from the original poem created by the workshop participants)

Ode to the mug, chipped and faithful,
to the spoon that holds soup and silence,
to the scarf that knows the curve of my neck,
to the key that opens and forgives.

Ode to the pillow, keeper of dreams,
to the door handle, patient with our comings and goings,

to the pen that writes us as we write with it,
to the tiny screen that became a stage.
Ode to the things that stayed with us,
that reminded us we are still makers,
still shaping the world with our hands,
our breath, our laughter, our listening.
(Workshop collective, 2025)

In this activity, the workshop didn't talk *about* decommodification — it performed it. Objects became relations; things once inert became alive through collective making. Knowing was re-organized into activity, ownership into participation. “Don't Get Trapped by Knowing” was not an argument but an event, a moment of shared creation in which the world itself felt newly possible.

IV. We Can Play with Anything

The third provocation — *We can play with anything* — may be the most radical of all.

It is not an exhortation to be cheerful or to turn everything into a game. It is a methodological claim: that human beings, as creators, can make meaning and possibility out of whatever exists, even, and especially, the unplayable (Holzman 2013).

Play, in this sense, is not recreation. It is how we stay human in an inhumane world (Freire 2000; Lobman & Rich 2022; Newman & Holzman 1997). It is how we continue to create with what is, rather than be defined by it. In a moment when despair, violence, and collapse feel totalizing, this way of working asserts that *the material of our lives — our pain, exhaustion, and confusion — is*

itself playable. To play is not to escape reality but to re-enter it as makers.

Across the five sessions of *The How of Performance Activism*, this provocation took form through a series of collective experiments. Participants played with alienation, heaviness, with poverty, and with the imagined future. Each activity was both an encounter with what already is and a rehearsal for what might be, not as fantasy but as collective composition, as the ongoing making of life. The following two scenes explore two such moments.

Scene 3: Performing Heaviness

The provocation *We can play with anything* first came alive through the shared weight of heaviness. Early in the workshop, Po-Sheng, an activist from Taiwan, volunteered quietly, “I often feel heavy as a leader. I don’t want to bring that heaviness to the young people I work with. So, I perform light. I try to be positive for them.”

CARRIE: So, when you perform lightness, what does that look like?

PO-SHENG: I smile more. I talk faster. I act like everything is okay. But when I’m alone, it comes back.

LOIS: It comes back.

[LONG PAUSE]

PO-SHENG: Right now, I feel heavy. Especially now, it’s midnight here. That’s my heaviest time.

CARRIE: You could also perform heavy.

PO-SHENG [looking surprised]: Perform heavy? I already am heavy. Why would I perform that?

CARRIE: When an actor gets up on stage and he's performing an angry character — and he's angry already — he's had a fight with his director and he's mad, and then he gets up on stage... My guess is, he has to perform angry even though he already is angry. So, I don't think they're the same thing at all. I think they're very different things.

LOIS: Ah, it's very different to perform it.

The group agreed to try. In our zoom boxes people began to make movements and sounds.

Separately and together, we began doing performances of “heaviness”

THE HOW PARTICIPANTS: The weight of the world is so heavy. Things just get worse and worse. Waiting ... wait and waiting.

Voices overlapped; sighs and long breaths filled the space until it dissolved into silence. People pick up on each other's words and movements and creatively imitate, add on, built intensity.

After about 6 minutes, Carrie says, “And Scene...”

LOIS: That actually felt pretty good.

JALISE: No, I didn't like it... I guess it felt too easy... I feel very similar to Po-Sheng, where for me the performance is lightness... the heaviness doesn't feel like it needs to be performed... I just felt like I wasn't performing that. They were just real... like, I should just log off, maybe I'll go to sleep, cancel my plans tonight. It didn't feel like I was performing; those were my actual thoughts... So that was hard for me, because I don't love that... my default would be to not show up, to not have come today... it feels like the performance is to push myself to not do that.

HAL [a long-time activist and flautist]: Well, that's sometimes the case with performance, Jalise... you find yourself performing something that is currently in your life. When I was in high school I worked really hard to learn a very challenging and

aggressive and long piece of music to play with a friend who was accompanying me on the harpsichord. At the last minute my accompanist backed out, he chose not to work with me. I remember performing, putting all my anger in the piece and it ended up being a tremendous performance. Even though what I really wanted to do was take my flute and shove it up his nose. The performance of my anger was not the same as my ‘natural’ anger.

Pause

PO-SHENG: I feel lighter.

LOIS: The heaviness moved.

OSCAR: Yeah, it moved.

Silence again. No resolution, only a collective recognition that something had shifted. The heaviness, once private and isolating, had become an ensemble act. By performing what already was, the group transformed burden into relation. The feeling did not disappear; it *became playable*.

Scene 4: Nobody Rushes the Moon

The morning of Day Two opens in a different key. Steven invites the ensemble into an activity that feels almost childlike, though it is anything but simple. He asks everyone to begin with the phrase: “Imagine a world where...” and to offer whatever comes; not to argue for it, justify it, or explain its feasibility, but simply to build with it.

People begin slowly. One voice offers, “Imagine a world where nobody has to prove their worth.” Someone else: “Imagine a world where everyone has what they need.” The offers

accumulate: fragments, longings, jokes, memories. A world where “kids lead the adults.” A world where “we can hear each other’s thinking without fear.” A world where “time bends.” A world where “joy isn’t rationed.” Each offer shifts the environment, making more room for the next one.

Steven does not explain what they are doing. He creates the conditions for the ensemble to become something new, not through consensus, but through the activity of imagining together. He reminds the group of a simple direction: “Take what’s given. Build with it.” The ensemble continues. Someone says: “Imagine a world where we don’t start with crisis.” Another: “Imagine a world where care is the first thing.”

The group is not designing policy or drafting vision statements. They are playing with possibility. They are doing what children do when they perform being pirates or parents or astronauts: not practicing for a future role but *creating a shared world* in which they can be other than who they already are. It is not escapism; it is the creation of a new ensemble, a new “we,” even if only for a moment. Steven then sends everyone into breakout rooms to ask a second question: “How do we get to the worlds we imagined?”

This question shifts the activity. It brings the ensemble into the dialectic of becoming, the performance of moving toward. In the small groups, people talk about “slowing down,” “listening differently,” “creating more play,” “stopping to ask what we need,” “working as if we already lived in that world.” The specifics matter less than the way the groups use each other’s offers to keep building.

When the ensemble returns to the main room, Steven asks what it was like in the breakout rooms. The group begins to talk about the experience: what it felt like to imagine without rushing to fix, to imagine collectively rather than individually, to let each offer reshape the environment.

JALISE: It was energizing... like the future had texture.

MARYANN: It felt possible... because we weren't arguing about what's real.

HAL: I felt like we were being the world we imagined.

BRENDA: It felt like we were creating the ground as we were walking.

EVA: I didn't know you could feel connected through imagining.

The activity becomes developmental through the dialectic between the content of the imagined worlds and the ensemble's ability to create an environment in which imagination becomes a shared practice and material for collective becoming. The group is discovering that they can play with the future the same way they played with heaviness and with poverty: by creating the stage on which it can move. The session ends with a final prompt: "What do you want to bring with you from this imagining?" Someone answers: "That we can create the possibility of something we don't yet know." Another: "That we don't have to rush the moon." Everyone breathes.

The ensemble has not solved anything, but something has shifted. The group has performed a world that does not yet exist, and in doing so, has made a different world a little more possible. This is the culmination of *we can play with anything*. Not because imagination is easy or detached from reality, but because in its collective form it allows us to stay human in the face of what is. It is a refusal to be trapped by what exists, an insistence that we can still make something with each other.

In this activity, as in all the others, play is not an escape from the world but a method for the ongoing creation of it. The ensemble does not leave with a blueprint. They leave with something more fragile and hopefully more powerful: the felt experience that together we can create what does not yet exist out of what does.

V. The Rhythm of Becoming

In writing this chapter, I discovered that there is a rhythm to *The How* — uneven, collaborative, always in motion. While there is a plan for the weekend, nothing unfolds in a straight line. Sessions loop back on one another, conversations sprout sideways, a gesture offered in hour one becomes the material for something unexpected in hour ten. The structure is not ornamental; it is methodological. Development here is not the execution of a plan but the cultivation of conditions in which something unplanned can take root.

Participants have described the experience as “layered,” “slow but alive,” “moving in several directions at once.” This rhythm is integral to the work. Instead of driving toward clarity, we wander together, letting the activity organize us. A phrase leads into a poem; a question about activism becomes an invitation to sit in silence; the heaviness of the world becomes material to perform with rather than a problem to solve. The workshop is, in this sense, a living system — one that grows through relational contact and shared improvisation.

My role, like that of every faculty member, is to be in the process. I am writing as someone who was both shaping and shaped by the ensemble. To write dialectically is to let the analysis emerge from the activity, just as the activity emerged from what came before. The text you are reading

now participates in the same process: it is not only a commentary on *The How* but one more branch that has grown from it.

Taken together, the three provocations form a methodology for collective becoming. *There is no what without how* reminds us that nothing exists apart from the activity that produces it. *Don't get trapped by knowing* challenges the assumption that to know or to analyze is what drives transformation. *We can play with anything* shows us that play, far from being a break from harsh reality, is a way of making something with that reality. That social transformation is created with and out of our histories, our limitations, our imaginations, our heaviness, our poverty, our longing.

What grows inside this environment is relational capacity: the ability to stay in motion with others, to create new paths rather than search for existing ones, to treat difficulty as workable material. The workshop's rhythm brings into existence a form of grassroots power that is not about scale or ownership but about the steady, shared labor of cultivating something new with whoever is present. *Becoming*, in this sense, is not a goal. It is the rhythm we practice, the daily work of tending to an environment where new shoots can emerge, even in soil that has long been made barren by certainty, scarcity, or despair.

VI. Conclusion — Beyond Utility

Throughout these sessions, the pointlessness of play reveals itself as anything but empty. It is a political necessity, a way to interrupt the machinery of what already exists by creating something that does not yet have a name. Play, as organized in *The How*, is collective path-making: an

insistence that we can create new forms of life even when the world insists on narrowing what is possible.

The methodology offered here — process without blueprint, making without mastery, ensemble without sameness — is profoundly non-dualistic. It resists the pressure to choose between critique and construction, between analysis and imagination. Instead, it gives ordinary people a way to build environments in which development becomes a shared activity. People do not wait until they trust each other; they build trust by creating together. They do not wait to know what to say; they craft a conversation by speaking and responding. They do not wait for the right conditions; they make use of the conditions they have.

This is grassroots power: not spontaneous, not sentimental, but rigorous in its relational demands. To play in this way is to take responsibility for the environment we are shaping. It requires attention, risk, generosity, and the willingness to build with whoever and whatever shows up. In a world organized around individualism and utility, this is its own quiet form of defiance.

And so the workshop ends the way it began: by making something together that did not exist before. A collective imagining. An offer. A practice run at becoming human with each other in a different way. The ensemble does not arrive at a final product; it grows a network of beginnings. Sprouts of possibility. Unfinished paths. A tangle of roots moving outward in every direction, not upward toward a single, perfected vision, but sideways, making space, finding nourishment,

crossing and recrossing the lines between us. Not a map of the world as it is, but an environment in which a different world might take hold.

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