



THIS CLOUD IS / PHOTO: JUSTIN SPIERS



HOLY SHIT FOR THIS CLOUD IS / PHOTO: JUSTIN SPIERS



OFFLINE DATING SITES WORKSHOP /

COMMUNITY

# This Cloud is Queering!

## Caroline Plummer Fellowship 2016

BY VAL SMITH

In this article, val smith describes some of the practices to emerge during six months as the 2016 Caroline Plummer Fellow, and offers a small piece of reflection on future plans and how the fellowship has informed val’s choreographic practice.

*This Cloud Is Queering!* is a body of work I developed as the 2016 Caroline Plummer Fellow in Community Dance, based within the Dance Studies Programme at the School of Physical Education, Sport and Exercise Sciences, at the University of Otago.

My starting point was to explore the potentiality of touch, sensing, listening and moving practices in a process of mapping queer and trans folks’ experiences of public spaces around Dunedin. I invited local people from gender and sexual minority groups to participate in the project, employing somatic, improvisational, collaborative and site-oriented dance methodologies for developing pedagogical and performance ideas. What unfolded was a range of practices including: one-on-one walks, conversations, community building experiments, workshops, studio research, and outdoor site-oriented performance tests.

In a series of *one-to-one walks*, we retraced familiar walking pathways through the central city and suburbs, to share memories and stories of how we experience Dunedin’s public spaces as LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer, intersex, and other minority sexual and gender identities). I was interested in foregrounding conversation as a method, and paying attention to our unique ways of perceiving the world as we walked together. Our co-navigation of public space moved in relation to everyday issues such as inclusion and exclusion, harassment and violence, safety, agency, celebration, pride and shame, visibility and invisibility. Conversation touched on the importance of local queer culture and the significance of spaces for refuge, cruising, dating, congregating and reflection. The mapping of our perceptual tendencies revealed strikingly diverse auditory, visual, spatial, kinaesthetic and architectural awareness and interests.

*Sometimes Fruitcake* classes offered throughout the fellowship applied queer questions to contemporary dance practices. “For freaks, geeks, goths, fa’afafine, homos, bi, pan, straights, trans folks, takatāpui, not-dancers, drag artists, gender non-conformists, nudists, and our friends and allies”, the classes explored fake phrases, practices of hope and failure, realness bodies, flaming moves, somatic experiments and queer feelings.

*Off-line Dating Sites* was a series of workshops testing the premise of actually dating a site; predominantly outdoor urban locations. Participants in the workshops were invited to explore their boundaries around intimacy, using breath, awareness, contact and movement to figure out consensual parameters for relating with the public (and private) spaces. I am interested in shifting the way we might habitually focus on watching the dancer dance, to reconsider how we might see a performance space as an environment, and relate with things and places in our dance practices through a different perceptual lens.



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**HOLY SHIT!** was a performance installation work comprised of five fully functional gender inclusive composting toilets, made in collaboration with Dunedin artists Katrina Thomson and Leyton Glen. The work was developed in response to debate in the media at that time regarding 'the bathroom bill' in the U.S., where the basic human right to have access to toilets that match your gender identity was in question. This research led me to spend time in public toilets, developing a number of creative processes, including photographic and improvisational experiments that considered notions of clean, dirty, shame and pride from a queer perspective.

The Fellowship's culminating event, *This Cloud Is*, in partnership with Urban Dream Brokerage, occupied George Street's Underground Market for two weeks from 6-20 June in a participatory residency, and performance installation. *This Cloud Is* attendees were invited to roam and interrelate with 11 participatory stations spread around the huge disused underground market. Using the materials of perception, touch, movement, sound, light and cardboard, the event proposed 'queer space' as an ethos of uncertainty and unknowing; a space for experimental queer culture. The performance installation event involved collaborative contributions from 13 community participants including local performers and artists, and sound artist Eves who returned from Melbourne to perform live. In particular, we developed somatic processes of exchange through hands-on sensing and listening, creating a basis for a choreography of care, connection, and collaboration. I witnessed attendees crawl into small and dark spaces to listen or sense, lay down inside coffin-like boxes, relate to others through small holes in thin walls, allow their limbs to be fully supported by flimsy cardboard structures, construct strange assemblages from a mountain of boxes, and share stories, laughs, snacks and tea.

Considering the significance of 'community dance' from a queer perspective during the Caroline Plummer

Fellowship has stretched my choreographic thinking, pedagogical practice and methods of artistic collaboration. My hope is that the work facilitates more discussion about the potentiality of experimental approaches to developing queer community, and how dance educators and choreographers might communicate and socialise knowledge about non-conforming genders and sexualities through dance and performance. My future plans include a practice-led PhD project that develops an archive of queer somatic choreographic practices from one-to-one encounters and modes of intimacy in performance. ■



**Caroline Plummer Fellowship  
in Community Dance 2018**



The Fellowship supports a six-month project in  
Community Dance at the School of Physical Education,  
Sport and Exercise Sciences.  
It honours an outstanding student at the University,  
Caroline Plummer, whose ideas inspired its creation.

For further information visit:  
[www.otago.ac.nz/otagofellows/plummer](http://www.otago.ac.nz/otagofellows/plummer)  
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**Applications close 1 June 2017**