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Embrace the Change Even When You Don't Know Where It Will Take You

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Embrace the Change Even When You Don't Know Where It Will Take You
Reflection on Week-long Workshop Performance of Project Area X and the Two-year-long
Planning

Senior Project Submitted to
the Division of Arts
Of Bard College

by
Mengchen "Perry" Zhang

Annandale On Hudson

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Dedication

To everyone that I have encountered, whether we are still in touch or not, still on good terms or not. Thank you for bringing me to this very moment.

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The Bard College Theater and Performance Art students, Class of 2022, and those who came before me, and after me.

Jeff Vandermeer, the inspiration for the entire piece.

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Introduction

This is my personal journey on exploring how theater can be something that transcends how it's being done now, maybe with all 5 senses, overtime, and blurring the lines between reality and fiction.

Reflection

2020 has been a rocky year for many of us, in our daily interaction and in things that are much bigger. Looking back on two years ago, I was very excited to create a site specific immersive piece and a pilot episode for my other intended major-Film and Electronic Art. As the global pandemic runs its course, it was unclear whether a live performance with real audience in the same space was a possibility. Fast forward to a year later, after my second attempt in moderating into film failed, with all the passion I have for the adaptation project, I don't want to give up on making things sci-fi related, on top of that, the policy for live performance was changing rapidly. Going from no performers in the same space to only audience members need to wear a mask when in a closed space over only the course of a few months. As the policy keeps loosening up, a lot of the design that was initially necessary for the audience to be that close to the performers became extraneous. But many items still fit the theme for the show (i.e. the hazmat suits and goggles for both the performers and the audience to wear, outdoor installations that look like symbiotic creatures growing on the branches for the exterior, etc.). Now the new challenge is to repurpose those resources while fitting them into a new narrative. In the following pages, I will share how it all started, how it became what it was and where it's going

It all started when Alex Garland made an adaptation of Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*. I've always had a huge interest in science fiction, and that book, which at the point I have yet to read, was considered impossible to be adapted into a film. I watched the film, it was good for

what it was. But I wanted more. So I read the book, all three of them. *Annihilation* is the first book of *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy*. The series unwraps an uncanny world that corrupts consciousness, form and the mechanism is unknown, impossible to analyze. Even in the end, It brought all the characters to accepting there may never be an answer, because they are all a part of it now. The sheer amount of information the book offers cannot fit into a film, as the third book explain how the world in the book became what it became, to make it a limited series where multiple episode can be created while give the time it takes for the audience to be on the same journey the character in the books were living through. Intending to produce two projects, I wasn't going to make the pilot episode long, and it would have been one of the earlier chapters. After my first attempt in film moderation was not accepted, I need to put the book down. At the same time, my original plan for my Theater and Performance Art project idea was not realistic at all due to covid. I wanted to have the audience be guests at a dinner party to watch the relationship between the characters unfold, while dividing the Old Gym theater into an apartment with multiple rooms, so each audience could piece together a different narrative based on which character(s) they follow and interact with. The keyword here is immersive. But covid-19 has become a real fear for public safety, and if the performers and the audience are stressed, it would go against the very reason I create works-that people can have a joyride while I explore new possibilities with new artforms. Covid-19 has made a lot of items that were distant from our daily lives suddenly visible and present. My mother was panicking and sent me some hazmat suits, but I didn't wear them since Bard College was one of the safest places to be-low population density, people are leaving campus. As the college spent time making adjustments, I scraped my plan and made a new one.

Area X is a book about how a person's mind directly becomes a space that still operates on some principles of the individual's beliefs and thoughts. An immersive theater piece that gives people a peek into someone's mind. This is what I want to do. But the first book, *Annihilation*, is basically the diary entries of the biologist, (not to be mistaken for Ghost Bird in the second book of the series, *Authority*), and the third book, *Acceptance*, has too many timeline shifts and narratives, so I decided to pull my raw material from the second book where not only most of the scene happens indoors, but also narrates the story from third person perspective with a chronological timeline. Not needing to piece the story together like doing a jigsaw puzzle will reduce the workload.

The next step is to figure out what are the scenes I want to curate. The timeline in the book stretches through a few weeks, but I need to keep the piece under 25 minutes. The most dramatic scene in this book is when all hell breaks loose when Area X corrupted the Southern Reach research facility. But without any context of what is Area X and what is the Southern Reach, the audience will be confused. So I wanted to combine texts from the debriefing sessions between Control-the new director of the Southern Reach and Ghost Bird-the doppelganger of the Biologist in the first book created by the mechanisms of Area X. Having the Southern Reach Compromised moment as the grand finale of the production when most of the scene is just dialogues that mentions some basic facts about the worldview of the piece to make it easier to process for the audience.

The rough ideas for the whole show were whipped out pretty quickly. For site specific pieces/immersive pieces, set, props, light, sound and the scene became more 3D. And to bring people into the world, set, being what people see before the performance starts comes first into my mind. My idea for the set is basically a research facility either built out of a shipping

container or a tent, with isolation cells from interviews, quarantine cell for Ghost Bird (one of the two key character), research labs where samples, artifacts, footage, files, journals from expedition team members who have been inside of Area X where the audience can take a closer look.

With the set planned out, I decided to add some minor characters like the guards who can walk outside of the facility, some researchers inside to explain the study that was done on Area X by the Southern reach to give some background, and then lead the audience to the mainstage-the interrogation room that blocks the audience from being directly exposed to “Area X personals.” The size of the set was yet to be determined. But to make it easier to build a set, I wanted to keep it small (5-8 audience at a time, a total of 13 people in the space) which could fit in a large shipping container not too tightly.

After the function of the set is determined, smaller interactive pieces for both the performers and audiences. The research lab equipment was a part of the plan, which I didn't workshop for this round during the final showings. The tricky part is to figure out what falls under set and what falls under props when what part of the set will be interactive is yet to be determined.

Another part that was ambiguous. For the grand finale of the show, I want to utilize the soldiers as set changers when the performance piece inside the research facility. I want the set to be built in an area near the woods. After the audiences get escorted into the set, “the soldiers” can close the entrance and set installations that look like fungi and other organic creatures that drastically change the environment. Some ideas are gluing melted CD discs and reshaping them into flowers, or attaching them to sticks so they look like moss or mushrooms that grow on it. Creating human-shaped installations with branches, bark, cobwebs and twines among other

natural/synthetic materials was another idea. I want them to look like they are growing from the trees, bushes and tall grass around where the set is. When the performance inside the built set is over, having an alarm sound trigger the next part where the soldiers come in, escort people out of the research facility, and they will view the changed exterior.

The blueprint of the show is clear to me, but the feedback I got from many people was that it was confusing. I took a step back and now see that because of my deep research on the book, I know what world I'm trying to bring to people, but never thought of how it will be perceived from the spectator's end. I decided to navigate my process through the audience perspective. First, they arrive at the designated location, and then walk for 2-3 minutes to the research facility. After the door is closed behind them (which is the same time as the exterior of the set will be changed), a contract will be delivered to them for them to sign (this is explaining the basic rules for the audience to participate, such as turning off electronic devices, or not to take off masks at any point, but reframed in a way that fits the logic of the piece), and then they can ask questions to some performers(which I need to create skits for). An example would be, should an audience member ask a "researcher" the response from that character would be "these are journals from the expedition teams. And if Control(the character who is the new director of Southern Reach) is the one being asked, he will respond with "that's classified information." Then 8-10 minutes into the interactive part, the audience will see control putting on a hazmat suit, go into the interrogation cell, as Ghost Bird enters from her cell (kind of functions as a backstage but due to its immersive nature, it needs to be a part of the set). From this point on, the audience will watch the scene through the transparent fabric(vinyl, plastic, etc.) this will take between 10-12 minutes. By the end of "the interrogation", red lights flashes, alarms go off, the researchers will try to calm the audiences, and Control will say "the quarantine has been

breached, we are all exposed to it, do as they say. And the “soldiers”(who would have finished changing the exterior) will guide the audience back and out of the exterior set.

One important piece is still missing. For immersive theater, the audiences don't necessarily need to be in the play, fly on the wall would still be an option. But for an interactive piece, my audiences need to have a role in the world. But with the scenes I want to do, many characters would require the audience to know the world of the book, which would cancel out my effort to explain the world through interactions with the actors and watch the performance. So I dive back into *Authority*, and extracted this one important piece of information-the government is cutting the budget for the Southern Reach, because they have not been able to resolve the mystery of Area X, nor can they control it. This idea came across my mind: if I give the audience the role of a evaluator sent from “The Central,” that they are here to evaluate if the budget for the Southern Reach should be cut further, linking it back to the plot of *Control* uncovered information from *Ghost Bird*, so “the Southern Reach have some breakthroughs.” This one last element completed the logic of the world and patched up the plothole.

With the skeleton of the show, I can fill in the details. In order to shrink a world that took more than 600 pages to explain down to a 25 minute performance will require me to know the world like the back of my palms. In order to do so, I need to break the book down like breaking down a rotisserie chicken. Separate the bones, skins and the meat and have them serve in different functions. First, I took out all the interview dialogues between *Control* and *Ghost Bird* in *Authority*, and then pulled from all three books to create character bios, draw charts with characters and events to create a larger timeline which helps keeping the story cohesive. Then last but not least, the verbal descriptions of the environment/characters/visuals/sounds are put together and color coded to distinguish the Southern Reach(interior) and Area X(exterior).

Knowing this is an ambitious plan, I knew I needed to delegate. Looking for collaborators can be challenging, and venturing into new territories is asking people to take a leap of faith with me. Especially since I only know how I want things to be, but I have no clue on how to get there. I have very little experience designing a closed set from scratch. Nor will I have the energy to finish up the sheer amount of work in a year. I had experience in costume design, but that will take up the majority of my energy for 2-3 months before the show. So as sad as it is, I have to also give that job away. I started looking for creative talents on campus, pitching the idea to every person I know, and asking them to ask their friends. A few months later I found a set designer, a prop master and a costume designer. Yet a lot of roles still need to be filled in. The team I have right now are all creators. Roles in management, crafting, and experimenting is yet to be found. We had weekly meetings, discussing what to do next. Looking back, there were many miscommunications. For example, I wanted them to come up with their design based on the images and the concepts I give them, but they wanted me to offer more details, or even provide the design so they can just make it. Two of the three didn't stay with the project till the end, but the one that stayed ended up becoming a reliable collaborator.

Now I want to coil back to the images I provided. I created a moodboard slide show for all my creative team to use as references for style, color, texture, shape, etc. We also had meetings weekly so I could check on progress and get feedback from them. I explained why I chose certain images, how I want it to be used. This communication became much easier as the project progressed. Unfortunately we lost a lot of momentum due to personal reasons or conditions of my collaborators. Luckily, I was able to solidify more details on how I want the show. But without tangible evidence of progress(sketches for designs, script samples, rehearsal videos, etc.), my peers and my advisor expressed concerns about the scale of the project and my

ability to complete it. 2020 didn't only change how I live my life, but also changed my perspective on a lot of things. I told everyone that I have the vision, so Now if I can finish everything, that would be incredible. But if I can't, I'll show what was done. If I have a full outdoor set, I'll do that. If not I'll find an indoor space to show the performance, and show some design, maybe even models of it. If we have enough actors we'll do a full show, if not then we'll just workshop some scenes. I shared this with my team to ease the pressure.

At this point, the progress of my senior project has reached its halfway benchmark. And for my midway presentation, I give them a pitch-styled talk as if I am turning the book into an amusement park. A feedback from multiple faculty members was that my pitch was interesting and extremely dramatic, maybe that should be my project. I misinterpreted this comment as if the pitch was more interesting than my idea, which sent me down into a little spiral. But they were right about one thing. After spending a lot of the time with the book, rereading, marking, drawing sketches, I realized that even though the idea is complete, nothing has been tested. Things never work the same way they do in my mind. Unless I get everything right on the first try, it's impossible to make that much progress in just 4 short months. I also need to save some energy for my other classes, and the time I have is barely enough for a full crew of professional theater makers. If I don't want to compromise my vision too much, I'll have to accept the resources(time, money, people) that are offered won't be enough for me to complete this project. So I shifted my project to a new direction.

Moving forward past winter break, I found a production manager, which was the best thing that happened to me and to Project Area X, and yes, it was the title that somehow came up. But you win some, you lose some. My set designer dropped out of the project without telling me, and my costume designer also had to withdraw from it due to personal health conditions. But

with a manager, I can sit down and discuss what each person can do, and what person we are missing, what needs to be done, at what time, etc. While I keep creating more detailed plans like how to melt CDs, and how to use twines to make sculptures attached to trees, my manager can just send out an email to recruit people for the project. The once fallen apart weekly meeting is back on track, A new costume designer joined the team. At this point me and my team had regained some momentum.

My manager also shifted towards a collaborator. We designed the elements of the set. I ditched the idea of building a set outdoors. Because there is electricity involved, there's a lot more safety and logistical problems that need to be solved. I applied to the old gym to be the performing space. So now with a much bigger performing space enough for 6-8 times bigger than how I initially envisioned, we had to readjust our plans. Now the clock really starts ticking. 5 weeks away from moving into the old gym, the new team finally had an official conference. We discussed progress, problems, and plans. Afterwards my production manager and I had another meeting to discuss what we should do each week. First, I spent 20 minutes giving him the plot of the book, and the latest version of Project Area X.

Now with 6 weeks in total, I broke the time into two parts-the first two weeks will be making purchases for everything online and in person, everyone gives me a shopping list of what they need, the quantity, and when they need it. I then met with the production manager, so we created a list, placed the order, and for two weeks I was either on my way to Micheals, Joann or Walmart, or picking up packages from amazon and Ebay. Then I deliver it. Being in charge of a project is such a different experience for me. I like to involve myself into projects that I am in, but when it comes to my own, I seem to be providing a playground for other people. It seems that I don't actually get to make the thing. And the transportation here is not exactly convenient.

So my shopping trips ended up taking longer and a lot of plans like material workshops ended up getting pushed back.

Staying on the topic of problem solving, putting out casting calls 6 weeks before the show turns out to be a bit late. We held 3 auditions but we didn't find anyone. While the outdoor installation application was also delayed because we didn't hear back from them for 2 weeks which throws off the timeline by two weeks, and at this point it's too late to restructure the show into a complete piece. I decided to test things out in a series of workshops with whatever we have made, and follow the advice of my advisor, create a speech to give people so they also get the pitch experience.

The piece was broken down into 4 phases with different projects being rolled out. In phase 1, we put out installations made from the CDs and wires and twines, and start a social media account to encourage people to look for them. These are three separated projects: Project CD bubbles, Project human figures, and project scavenger hunt. The idea is to have people take pictures and submit it to the account, and create conspiracy theories. Phase 1 is the introduction of Project Area X.

Phase two is the transitional space as we add more sculptures. I want to film performers wearing a glow-in-the-dark iridescent costume and walk through the woods in the distance, and film it in home footage style. This is Project crawler. This project has two parts: the film and the crawler. The description of the crawler has a psychedelic quality, when you look at it at different distances, you see different color and shape and layers of the crawler. From a distance, it looks like a mixture between a boar and a slug that leaves traces of mucus. The crawler was once human, and when approached, through all the floating organisms that surround the crawler, the crawler is just Saul Evans, but yellowish green glows under his skin, and when looking from

afar, the light is more blue. And corruption of forms of hands can be seen. Project crawler carries into later parts of the production, so this one was subjected to change. The second project for phase 2 also happens to be a video project-Project expedition team 1. This is the only video that was mentioned in the second book. It showcases how Area X slowly corrupts the mind of the team members, and then progresses to changing their physical form, with the lighthouse in the background. The mood slowly shifts from people joking about nothing, camping, taking samples to more glitches, more disconnections on the radio. Eventually the team leader was screaming at her doppelganger while the doppelganger screamed back at her with the crawler glowing in the back and color the entire frame in yellowish light. Then cut to the next shot, where the camera holder was speaking gibberish to another expedition team member while he answered in perfect English. This video would have been released through a link on the social media account as a “hacked into the system and declassified file.” Phase 2 functions to push the mystery further and deeper. Where the footage is shot will also be a clue for the location of the final phase of the performance.

Phase 3 is the actual performance. This is the phase that contains the most project, and the most physically demanding one. The first project is a durational performance done by the performers who will wear hazmat suits to seal the entrances to the Old Gym theater with caution tapes and start building the set, signs of restricted area will be put up. And the tape will be taken down when the set is finished building. Project Southern Reach is the immersive experience workshop, where audiences are invited to put on the hazmat suits and get food from the dining services and eat in the “designated dining area” inside the old gym. The performances are all put under Project Control. The idea is to release a schedule of Control’s weeklong plan as the character takes over the Southern Reach. When things are scheduled, a performance will happen

inside the old gym, which has now been “repurposed” for the Southern Reach. For example, If on the schedule, “debriefing with the biologist at 10 am. Control will go to the dining service in hazmat suits around 9:45 am, return to “the Southern Reach” and finish breakfast at the dining area around 10:15, and go back to “the director’s office” reading documents for 10-15 minutes. Once it reaches 10:28, the assistant director will knock on his door, and he will go to the quarantine interrogation room, and Ghost Bird will be brought in by a researcher, and then the scene will be performed. Utilizing existing services at the site for a site-specific immersive piece can help audiences get a more subtle shift, and blurs the line between the performance and reality.

Phase 4 is the final phase. It is entirely integrated with all three previous phases’ projects. For example, Project Southern Reach will keep progressing throughout the weeklong performance. Dried and fresh moss will be integrated with the mossgreen carpet on the floor, and grows denser each day. To achieve that, every time when no audience member is in the space, a little more moss is sprinkled on. Other independent projects that we workshopped on that didn’t get made on time were also thrown into this phase. My production manager created a soundscape where he and his friends read the preaching text from the crawler and overlapped the audio. We play the sound on low volume and gradually increase it over each day. Project breach, as “the Southern Reach” gets more corrupted, and as Control’s relationship develops with other characters, they will use the scheduled performance time to perform things that aren’t necessarily on Control’s schedule. For example, “meeting with the assistant director on day 1 of phase 3 will be a meeting in Control’s office as the schedule suggests. But on day 4, Control and Grace may leave “the Southern Reach,” walk to the parking lot, and have a private conversation. But everything will still start at Control’s office to create less confusion. And on day 5, Project Gloria

will happen. This is the original climax scene that had been with Project Area X when the first draft of the project was developed. Gloria, the previous director of the Southern Reach, will walk into “the Southern Reach” and bring Area X to it. Control will run away in panic, and other characters will stay with Gloria. And the final project will be a bonus scene where Ghost Bird and Control will be the lead, and creatures in Area X(Including Project Gloria)will be lurking in the woods. This scene happens where the Second video project in Phase 2 is filmed, so the project can end where it started and won’t be announced through Control’s schedule.

Above is the breakdown of the project if the circumstances are ideal, but the actual execution was far from what we are expecting. So me and my collaborators played by ear and stayed in touch everyday. Because we didn’t get approved by Buildings and Grounds at Bard College, we delayed the installation to the week of phase 3, which is when we already started with the set. This messes up the entire timeline for the workshop. So on day 1, we started with a 2 minute long video of a person wearing a hazmat suit that caution taped the side exit of the old gym, and uploaded to the Instagram account. A happy accident occurred during this combination of social media and project Southern Reach. When the clip was uploaded, a glitch turned the video into pixelated green and purple abstract shapes that the content is still identifiable. Having the uncorrupted original footage, I shared the video with some friends who have been intrigued by it. I shared the original video with some friends in private after they followed the Project Area X account, and told them this is the declassified version of it.

On day 2 of moving into the old gym, we caution taped all the set areas that weren’t finished. And I picked up the unfinished costumes from my costume/special makeup designer because her health condition has gotten to a point where she needed to be hospitalized. With the material we had, we completed the set building, changed the light and tested the sound project

which sounded great in the old gym. We wrote “portable speakers for outdoor installations for next round of workshop” which probably won’t happen in years. But as we do more, what works and what doesn’t is becoming pretty obvious. The good news is that my production manager found a performer, who can do a scene between Control and one of his colleagues, Whitby. The scene happens in the office, and the shower curtain we used is transparent but blurry enough so it wasn’t a big issue for our performers to have the script in their hands without ruining the magic of theater. I had one visitor who put on the hazmat suit but refused to go into the dining service and get food and come back.

Day 3 was the day when I set up a mattress behind “Control’s office” because a new idea popped into my head at the last minute. Realizing that Control’s Office is similar to how a real office is set up, an important prop was finally made by my prop master—an undying plant in a pot with a rat placed in it. In the book, the plant was a sample collected from Area X, and Gloria, the precious director kept it in her drawer. I realized that this could be an opportunity to have the audience explore the space when performance isn’t happening.

On day 4, I successfully convinced a friend to test the hazmat suit project. We got the food and went back to “the dining area.” an idea to justify putting audiences into hazmat suits just occurred—the Southern Reach hires them for an experiment. Participants will sign the contract, put on the suit, and get food. And then go out to designated areas to “collect data.” But since I haven’t acquired the artificial/natural installation pieces, this idea will also have to wait for the next round of the workshop.

Day 5 is the first day when both my performers were available. And the experience of eavesdropping on a conversation was working very well. So for future performance workshops, I’m planning on writing a lot of small scenes between characters, and making the set more

interactive. So between scenes the performers can give them small tasks to complete. Such as cleaning the office floor, which will give certain audience members a chance to see some of the hidden items. And to have the scavenger hunt as a task that everyone needs to do, the final hidden performance might become easier for the audiences to find. This will add a layer of treasure hunt on top of the scavenger hunt. This is also the day when the installation pieces finally arrived. So after finding plants that can blend well with the pieces, we took pictures and announced the scavenger hunt at midnight. The installations stayed up even after the show was closed. Unfortunately, because it was announced through the social media account we didn't have a chance to develop a decent following.

On day 6, which is the largest and the longest session of the weeklong workshop. We ran the scene for various groups of people. And the pitch was constantly changing as more ideas were inspired. I eventually closed the door at midnight, and played the sound once more on full volume. Then worked on a new project- The mural project. This was described in the second book when Control Discovered a mural that he was also a part of-but half rabbit. This is one of the side projects that belongs to phase 4 but the idea didn't come to me until a week before moving in day. I closed the project at 6 am on Monday, and have gotten more feedback than I could wish for. But by then I need to spend some time reflecting, like I am doing now, and plan for the next round of the workshop.

For me, the problem was never to stay on track, because it has been a path that nobody has walked before, and I have a way more cohesive plan than I had a year ago. And I am pleasantly surprised by the fact that even after finishing Project Area X, I want to continue to see it grow, and become something new, like the world that was described in the book, like Area X.