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LUCAS IHLEIN argues that ‘interactive’ arts practice means more than pressing buttons; and assembles a gammy billy-cart to prove his point.

Much has been made of recent advances in new media art — particularly the development of ‘interactive’ and ‘immersive’ environments and installations. Melbourne’s Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) and its German sibling Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie [ZKM] pride themselves on supporting artists who experiment with new ways of overwhelming our senses with sound and image. The public (so the marketing department tells us) is hungry to see futuristic interfaces between human and machine. Yet how many of these artworks succeed in engaging museum visitors beyond “press here and see what happens”? How often is it that a simple, old fashioned conversation is more rewardingly ‘interactive’ than the choose-your-own-adventure style new media works to which we are increasingly exposed?

Around the same time that ACMI launched its teched-up exhibition *2004: Australian Culture Now* in Federation Square, CLUBSproject inc, an artist-run venture above Melbourne’s Builders Arms Hotel, presented *multipleMISCELLANEOUSalliances* (mMa). Taking place in July, mMa was an ongoing series of “art conversations” taking the form of “collaborative events and activities [...] by and between people whose practices construct, explore, and enact multiple social relations”. The most sophisticated items of ‘new media’ in mMa were video cameras and television sets — all of which have been more or less available as artists’ tools since the early 1970s.

Among the myriad of old media projects at mMa was *Splint*, a kind of organic Meccano set made by Jason Maling and Torie Nimmervoll. Described as “the way of the stump and the strap”, *Splint* is a toy/tool-kit, hand-made from wood, rope, and leather that deliberately comes without instructions or hints.

Nimmervoll and Maling rarely present *Splint* within an art gallery context, which they claim can restrict free play and participation (they prefer to work in schools or public places). Gallery visitors usually come with a tentative not-sure-if-I-can-touch inhibition, which they learn from the conventional presentation of art. *Splint*’s makers set arbitrary (and often silly) tasks for themselves and willing participants to carry out — usually within an urban context. For instance, “use the apparatus to scale a tall, sheer wall”.

When I arrived at CLUBS my friend Damien was already sniffing around *Splint* — he was instinctively drawn to it, but wasn’t sure exactly how to tackle its mysterious inventory of spare parts. The elements of the kit seem very much like found industrial tools for the engineering of a car. They look like something ‘proper’ — something extremely well made with a (hidden) intended purpose. The kit is divided up into “cells” — each cell contains wooden disks, various lengths of rope, spiral-carved “stumps” (much like medieval cricket stumps), and a leather harness and hexagonal mat. All are engineered to withstand the hammering they receive from enthusiastic users, and are often repairable when damaged or worn out.

*Splint* lends itself to — and almost demands — collaboration. Soon enough Damien and I were diving into the metal cases containing the stumps and rustic-smelling sisal rope, and attempting, in our uncritically-masculine way to make our own ‘billy-cart’. This playful, absorbing construction task kept us going for a few hours, and even when our makeshift vehicle ended up in the pits, with a tragically split chassis, Maling didn’t chastise us — “I guess we’ll retire that piece,” he said with a shrug.

Cleverer than us were a duo of (also male) theatre designers who set about designing a comfy and functional chair out of the versatile kit. The dedicated pair, concerned not just with the use-value, but also the look of their piece of furniture, gave themselves the limitation of not using any knots. Such aesthetic concerns are very much a part of the *Splint* experience. The kit comes complete with a “self-assessment” system — a blackboard (pictured) upon which participants can rate their own

progress — using criteria like “environmental negotiation, utility, gameplay, geometry, physical negotiation, and aesthetics”. And Maling and Nimmervoll have kept a log of results at regular intervals during the evolving life of Splint.

One of the most important products of Splint is also one of the most intangible: the collaborative relationship which stealthily develops between the two or more ‘players’ as they work on a common task. This was evident in the knotted brows of the chair-makers as they quietly tackled problem after problem with the utility of their ad-hoc furniture, while not wanting to sacrifice the aesthetic decision to avoid knots. Splint is thus a tool for learning, not only about physical construction, but also about how to negotiate joint decision-making in a (self-determined) task. This educational aspect renders the kit ideal for workshops with children — and watching them work with the elements of Splint helps Maling and Nimmervoll improve its materials and design in a constant process of evolution.

When I returned to CLUBS a few days later, I found our billy-cart had been recycled by subsequent participants into a harness and rope ladder for scaling the exterior wall of the Builders’ Arms Hotel — a MacGuyver-style emergency exit system from the bustlingly sociable art venue.

Each time I visited mMa it was jam-packed and chaotic. Groups of artists seemed to be cooking up projects in every corner, and newcomers were warmly welcomed to join in. Soup was doled up as you walked in the door, and free tea and coffee were available. These humble, hospitable gestures may seem minor, but I don’t doubt that they were as thoroughly discussed and orchestrated as any of the other rich and interactive elements of mMa.