

In conversation with Ed Fornieles

Ed Fornieles is a multimedia artist whose work examines the habits, rules and protocols through which we come to define ourselves and within which our identities are made up and made real. To explore and model these social processes, and the power structures they reproduce, he often uses installation and immersive performance.

His latest work *Cel*, currently on show at Carlos/Ishikawa, responds to the present crisis of patriarchal masculinity and takes the form of an immersive role-play in which participants act out the story of an alt-right group who have formed an IRL group in which to enact their online ideologies. On the occasion of the show, Guy Mackinnon-Little spoke to the artist about critical empathy, cancel culture and LARP [Live Action Role Play] as an ideological position.



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To begin, could you contextualise *Cel* a little. What are some of the dynamics contained within the work, and what were you hoping to explore with them?

Cel is an immersive role-play that was played over three days with ten participants. The core subject is how masculinity is shaped and how aggressive hierarchical structures tend to produce certain types of behaviour. In the context of *Cel*, it happens to be an alt-right group who are trying to embark on a program of self-betterment. I think for the participants that took part, and for myself, the closest thing it reminded us of was being a kid at school. In terms of the intentions behind the project, a lot of it was trying to unpick my own personal experiences and the brutalisation of childhood, and coming to terms with what the effects of that kind of behaviour might be – how individuals might come to repress their emotions and the subsequent knock on effects of that.

What are some of the gameplay mechanics? How do you navigate consent in a space like that?

There's a lot of trust involved. You can't do this stuff without a lot of understanding and shared knowledge between the participants. I worked for like two weeks before, workshoping with everybody. We deployed a lot of the LARP safety protocols – what we did with *Cel* isn't that strange in the LARP community, it's just another LARP. The first one is that you're responsible for yourself, which means you need to communicate what you're feeling. If you're uncomfortable or in pain, you need to communicate that to the other participants. And then you move into things like "cut". If you say "cut" all action stops and you get checked in on. If you say "break", the intensity of the action around you slows down. We keep playing, but back off to give people some space. Then there's the "okay" symbol. If you make the okay symbol during the performance, that's a non-verbal signal that you're okay with whatever's happening, you can deal with more intensity and you want to push yourself further. That's a really powerful device.

The default cultural response to many of the patterns of masculinity you're describing is condemnation or "no-platforming". Why is it important to engage with and enact these positions? There's an anxiety that empathy risks becoming a tacit form of endorsement

I believe we need a diversification of strategies. In a lot of cases, no-platforming is a very valid and important thing to do – calling groups and individuals out on their behaviour – but if we're going to move forward, it's important to also approach the matter with critical empathy. People are born out of their context. No one can escape that, and unless a discourse is available for men that allows them to find a positive identity – something more sensitive that perhaps comes from a feminist background – we're going to continue seeing a lot of

people going the other way. This project is largely in response to the rise of figures like Jordan Peterson who have mass support online and who encourage repression and violent behaviour, or at least the possibility of violent behaviour.

There's a context that makes the rise of those figures possible –



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the so-called crisis of masculinity and broader patterns of social alienation under neoliberalism. We're adept at critiquing these structures, but less able to imagine how to effectively intervene within them. Is *Cel* in some ways a model for probing these structures and mapping out alternatives?

Role play is very much about gaining an understanding that isn't just conceptual, but extends to the body and lived experience. I think there's something very profound about that. But I would also say that with *Cel*, there are no final answers. The first half of *Cel* is the embodiment of this kind of brutalising structure and the second half is trying to cope with the effects of that when that system is taken away. During play, we really tried to focus on themes of regression, vulnerability and empathy. Without those things, it's hard to start feeling out an alternative. Although it's obviously important to critique these structures, you can't exist in critique alone. We need productive, creative acts as well.

The critical distinction between *Cel* and the sort of online spaces it's responding to seems to be exactly that attention to context and embodied experience. A lot of our online experience is characterised by visceral and immediate responses which are totally devoid of any kind of contextualising structure to absorb or mediate them. LARP seems to be the antithesis of this context



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collapse, a kind of context design.

The context structuring was most of the work. It's often said that reality is just bad LARP design. Though I don't really use the term LARP, I've learned a lot from LARP discipline. I worked on the show with a LARP designer Nina Runa Essendrop, who was fantastic. One thing that LARP has contained within it, and that I've tried to make present within the show, is you have immersive experiences and then you have reflective, critical experiences. For participants, you need to make sense of what's just happened to you and you need to digest this often quite traumatic moment you've just experienced. Bringing that aspect is really important – it's not just the embodiment of something, it's the analysis of it too.

What was your experience returning to the world after *CeI*?

I feel really changed by the performance. The work is very personal in that it's confronting things in my life like feeling repressed for many years and not being able to engage with my emotions. In a strange way, *CeI* became a really cathartic process. After the performance I feel emotions a lot more easily. I've been able to cry for the first time.

That capacity to expand your own self-experience seems to be the unique value of this form. The same effect wouldn't be possible if say, you were to release *CeI* as an App Store game.

It's so strange. Enduring *CeI* I was forced into this thing called "playing to bottom" which means letting yourself go to the most demoralising place possible and allowing the group to attack you. I cut off all personal connection with anybody and gave up on the idea of having friends, and that made me super powerful. Suddenly the tables turned. That's a huge amount of understanding as to why somebody becomes alienated – its a coping device and a tool. To really feel that is terrifying. Luckily the performance only runs two days so I get to decompress and reconstruct myself, but that knowledge remains in some way.

Something that stood out to me listening to some of the [debriefing sessions](#) from *CeI* was how one of the participants talked about how he would at times merge with his character and at other times dissociate from the game in a kind of out of body experience. This kind of simultaneity seems to provide a space to understand yourself in a way that starts to move beyond inherited and innate models of identity.

Right. One thing that role play has taught me about myself is how I, being a person in the world, will be shaped by the rules, protocols and conventions surrounding me. It's very rare or unlikely for someone to think outside of those expectations. Role play, if you do it enough, allows you to see yourself in relief almost. You see yourself as in motion, being shaped. I think that if we are going to fight aggressive, toxic masculinity or any form of inequality, we need to start looking at these protocols through which people define themselves.

Were there particularly transformative moments in the performance?

Being pinned down and shaved was very intense, and then also being waterboarded. During the waterboarding I was making the okay symbol to make sure that everybody knew that I was comfortable with what was happening and complicit at every stage. Nina was very present as well, moving the towel when I needed it. But I was happy that I could go there. I was happy that I trusted these people enough that it felt safe.

You're embodying this very intense, aggressive model of masculinity, but in doing so you're also exposing yourself to a huge amount of vulnerability, which is in some way the antithesis to that.

Exactly. I would argue that role play is almost a solution, or not a

solution, but at least a counterpart to some of the themes in the work. You're coming into contact with other people with whom you're in constant negotiation. I think patriarchy is defined by the will to dominate. In role play, you can perform a dominating role, but it's always a give and take negotiation. Your reality is always built on shared understanding.

I almost believe in LARP as an ideological position in itself. Instead of an ideology grounded on some fundamental identity that is non-shifting, LARP purports that we are in our lives capable of reaching out to other people, bodies and ideas to further our understanding of ourselves and others. There is a discrete ideology that sits behind all this: intersectional feminism. That's my position. That's the return point. But LARP is a way to get there via concrete experience and embodied knowledge.

Ed Fornieles's *CeI* continues at [Carlos/Ishikawa](#) until 20 April 2019.



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