DISCUSSING NEGATIVE SPACE

10 QUESTIONS FOR RECKLESS SLEEPERS

KEVIN EGAN AND MOLE WETHERELL

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This is a book of conversations about the Reckless Sleepers' project, Negative Space. A sister project to their previous show Schrödinger, which can be viewed online here. It is a project that borrows, extends and re-invents certain materials and practices from Schrödinger but which also stands apart from it; developing a personality and agenda of its own.

This book contains recorded conversations between Artistic Director, Mole Wetherell, and company member, Kevin Egan; transcribed conversations from company meetings; and captured conversations from post-performance discussions.

Each conversation begins with a question. A question we ask of ourselves or a question that gets asked of us by an audience member. Sometimes we try and answer them, other times we take a tangential journey and end up somewhere else. Sometimes we get excited about the other ideas that the question brings up and other times we just can't find an appropriate answer. But these are all questions that allow us to start a conversation; that allow us to articulate something about the project that might not be as visible in what is experienced in the performance.

These conservations might offer an insight into the project, the company, the process or the development of ideas, but they might also help to understand how the process of making this particular project is entangled within a mesh of anecdotes, seemingly irrelevant memories and the excitement that comes from making work with your friends.

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Mole:
It was during a performance of Schrödinger when I started thinking about making another project. I always remember a moment when I throw chairs out of a hatch and I really liked the shapes that the chairs were making, and I remember thinking that it was a real pity that nobody in the auditorium could see this. I remember the conversation with everyone in a cafe bar in Aberystwth the following day and suggesting that we get together and make something new.

Kevin:
For me, the beginning of Negative Space was about a group of people who enjoyed working together. Who were comfortable with Schrödinger and wanted a new challenge, a new project, a chance to do something slightly different. We wanted to keep that energy and excitement of working together. We talked about changing parts of Schrödinger as we toured it, but thought that actually it could form the next project, because Schrödinger, we felt, had reached a good place. So instead we would take some of those ideas and thoughts about Schrödinger and use them as motivation for Negative Space.

Leentje:
I remember Mole saying he wanted to make a show that was entirely based on mathematics. And the second thing I remember, which I got very excited about, was when he said 'I could even see you and Leen knitting in the show'. I really liked that idea but it never happened. We used to annoy several other people by taking up any free moment with knitting – and that became a frustration – so that might have made it but it didn't. But it was very much about what happens on the outside of Schrödinger.

Rebecca:
I remember a conversation about showing everything the audience couldn't see.

Alex:
I remember there was a conversation about what Schrödinger would look like with the box turned around.

Rebecca:
That was the first idea – and then Kevin said well surely if we reverse it then the...

Mole:
...ceiling should become the floor... And I went 'Bastard!'. Because that would mean I would have to make a new model box with a floor. It was a really clear moment for me. Turning the Schrödinger set upside down just made complete sense.

Tim:
And whether the show is a prequel or a sequel to Schrödinger.

Mole:
We talked about the rules of Schrödinger, the mathematics and contacts and how we wanted to extend that, and expand it. Our work, generally, comes from somewhere else – you know it's our history, it's what we've worked on together. So, we took some things from Schrödinger and pushed them, but I don't recognise Schrödinger anymore in this.

Alex:
We started looking at the rules, but then, as time went on, it just got its own life – its own personality – it just moved away from Schrödinger on its own.

Mole:
And using the plasterboard was key and originally introduced as a cheap way of finding out where the doors and hatches of this new scenic structure might be, and of course once we installed this material and worked out its qualities playing with this material pretty much became our focus for four weeks. You know I'd draw little drawings of Tim being stuck, and then we'd try Tim being stuck, and now you see Tim being stuck – but that's an image that we expanded and developed – but there is stuff that we haven't used – there was a ball of string that Tim chased like a cat...

Kevin:
Which we used as a saw at one point didn't we?

Mole:
Yeah, but this was one of those things that got thrown away. But that was what it was like working with this material. We created, a massive bag of stuff, and then we have to start making a show... And put this thing in the bag, and that other thing goes in the bin.

2. What do we mean when we say the first week was rubbish?

Mole:
It wasn't really rubbish was it? It's just our code for saying we're not going to produce very much that's going to make it in the keep bag but that's ok, let's not worry.

Kevin:
I remember we spent a while playing with a ball of string at the beginning of the process. We used it to saw a bit of plasterboard and did the cat thing with Tim chasing it around the room. And none of that entered into the project as a fully formed section, or as actual performance material. But the idea, the thought process, was still evident in what we ended up with. So, the rubbish bits are about recognising that they will take you somewhere, regardless of whether you see it in the moment of playing.

Mole:
Are there any moments you can think of, in that first week, where you thought it was a waste of time?

Kevin:
I can't quite remember the initial task, but I remember doing something in the space and you getting Tim to copy me, and then Leentje. It was funny seeing them mimic my style of performance, my bad habits, but it didn't generate anything useful.

Mole:
Although Tim does mimic Rebecca in a short sequence when they are both sitting on chairs, and I then try to repeat the same thing towards the end of the performance.

Kevin:
We also did that thing where we took the letter from Schrödinger and created a movement sequence based on its structure, translating the re-occurring words into a strange dance routine.

Mole:
Oh man, that was terrible!

Kevin:
I suppose the rubbish bits are the ones that are pre-planned or pre-determined. Saying, 'can you turn the letter from Schrödinger into movement?' is far too concrete, the instruction is closed. But saying, 'how do we get into the space?', which we moved onto once we had the set in place, that's open.

Mole:
What was the turning point for you?

Kevin:
One of them was when the two of us went out to pick up some materials (probably from a DIY shop), where we started to understand the relationship between Negative Space and Schrödinger. And its distance, or difference. Where we started to think more broadly about its conceptual territory. But then also when we finally got some of the plasterboard up – and we started to bash it, saw it, knock it down. I felt like I could watch people doing things to this material for hours. I think that was a critical turning point. When we first bashed the plasterboard with hammers, our feet, our fists, to create the holes and then started to test its strength – can we climb up it? Is it strong enough? How does this material work? So, I got to understand the material, and got excited by its potential.

Mole:
I'd say it was when we started to see the set, that's when it all changed for me.

3. What is it like working with Reckless Sleepers?

Tim:
It's a real tonic for all of us; how our stomach muscles hurt from laughing so much. It feels like a holiday being together and working again as a group.

Mole:
Because it's so much fun. I like the idea of working with my friends, and it is important that we have a good laugh. It's a struggle enough as it is anyway. I could have a miserable time earning loads of money in a bank, but I'd rather have a good laugh and work with my mates, and I think that reflects in the company and in the projects that we make together.

Leentje:
There was this reviewer who said, 'I really hope one day that I would have friends who I would trust to give them a hammer and say, "now come at me and hit near my head"' and I think again, that it is really important, trust, that all of you are in good hands and that you won't be hurt.

Kevin:
What is the one thing about this process that will aways make you smile?

Leentje:
I think, unfortunately – sorry Kevin – the moment when you cried...

Mole:
And the moment he told us about his wife super-gluing her eye...

Leentje:
I think that situation was really telling about each of us. There was a moment in rehearsals where Leen wanted to try something, where three people at the same time would climb through the middle hatch in the floor, and she was very persistent that we try that. So, Kevin, Leen and Alex were going through the hole and at a certain moment Mole had said, 'if you feel like you want to make noise, make noise, but you don't have to'. So, Kevin, at a certain moment from under the stage, starts wailing very loud. And Alex thinks, 'do I have to join in? He's really going for it here'. So, he was asking questions about 'who am I?'. 'Am I a character, do I have to join in?'. But Kevin actually had really, really hurt his fingers, and Mole and Tim were both just laughing their heads off. And I just ran out and came back with a big bag of ice that was just way too much for Kevin's finger. And if you could see a bit of video footage that demonstrates how we operate as a company; I think that moment would be a really good example.

Tim:
And we look after each other.

Mole:
Yes, we look after each other inside the shows, but also outside. When we make a new piece of work, we always go out for a meal; it's a social thing. Making theatre is a social thing. The time we got together for this project, Leen wanted some of Kevin's pudding but Kevin wouldn't share it, so Leen in the middle of this restaurant shouted, 'but you said that you would share!'. So, we keep that; that's one of our little stories. But there are little things that come into projects, for instance I was a little obsessed with Sense and Sensibility. A behaviour in the film that I kind of wanted to seep into the show. I can't actually tag it, but I think that playing around with all that other stuff that exists in our lives does end up in the project.

Tim:
These things influence the work. They creep in without you being conscious of it.

4. When we pose a question do we get an answer?

Mole:
We ask questions of ourselves all the time in the making of projects but I don't think we ever get answers, just more questions.

Kevin:
Or suggestions; possibilities. We provide each other with potential models and scenarios but these are about starting conversations that offer alternative paths for consideration.

Mole:
Because I don't think we ever want to finish it.

Kevin:
But the questions, they're open enough not to have a solution. There isn't a right way or a right answer.

Mole:
Does that extend to the piece itself? In that the finished piece of work we present provides a lot of questions for the audience?

Kevin:
With a range of suggestions of what the performance might be about.

Mole:
Or could be about. Or even what it does. It would do a different thing, have a different response, ideally, from everyone in the room.

Kevin:
And any answers we do provide are just our own responses. It doesn't mean they are 'right' or 'accurate'. They are just possible answers.

Mole:
But at certain points in the project we make some decisions, don't we? About its logic.

Kevin:
But rarely about its meaning; about what we want an audience to know. We're thinking about how it offers a sense of coherence, but maybe not in terms of meaning. We realise that, 'we can't do this because X and Y is happening here'. This is what we get consumed by - the logic, the composition - not its meaning. We never say, 'we can't do that because it is going to mean this'. It has generally been about its organisation, its structural qualities.

Mole:
It's almost as if everything we make is about setting up a place to have another set of conversations about what to do next, or where we can go. So it's never conclusive. It's never finished. I'm still interested in the idea that we pose questions all the time in rehearsals and we never really come up with an answer, and someone might respond to that question with their own physicalisation.

Kevin:
I suppose that's why we pose it to everybody. That way we get more possibilities. All of which can exist in some form in the work.

Mole:
Some questions become more concrete and performative, and some questions end up being presented to other people. It's not an answer, but they end up in the show. But they're not interpretations are they? Because that's, 'here's a flower, interpret a flower'. It's not an interpretive form. It's, 'here's a task, here's a set of rules'. It's 'here are six people, what could we do with six people? What could we do with two people? What could we do with a series of actions?' But at some point we say, collectively, 'that's it, that's funny, that's interesting, that's open, that's got the right energy, the right feeling to be part of this sixty minutes of stuff that we show'. And I can't actually remember why we chose some of these things. We didn't keep the ball of string with Tim following the ball as it unravelled.

Kevin:
Well, we didn't keep the object but the idea is still there at the beginning with you coming out of the hatch and Tim chasing after you. There are traces that remain from those ideas and activities. Sometimes it gets so convoluted that we don't even remember where they came from.

Mole:
Yes. There are a myriad of different ideas and thoughts. Like there are millions of atoms in a litre of water, there are millions of different ideas about what it is that we are doing, and it's never fixed. This is one of our rules; we don't ever want a singular narrative or agenda. I think a lot of theatre is about an agenda; you have to come away with this thought..We did Negative Space in Leeds and someone said it made them think of Sarajevo. How is that possible?

Kevin:
Because of the objects and materials we choose? What we use in this project are strong visual images that inevitably reference that type of reading without us having to force it. It becomes a lot stronger because we're not trying to force that agenda.

Mole:
That singular idea.

Kevin:
The hammer is about force; aggression.

Mole:
But it's also constructive.

Kevin:
There's little point in us trying to drive this message home so we just concentrate on seeing what we can do with a hammer, because we know that the other reading is there.

Mole:
And what we do with a hammer is smash a hole. I suspect that the reading of that, from an audience perspective, is that they think I'm going to attack Tim with it. But in that moment I just present the hammer, walk towards Tim, and then walk away and touch the wall. Then he gets off the chair. But in that series of very simple actions we are suggesting that there is a main reading of that.

Kevin:
But it is also the introduction of the hammer – the first time it's seen. The more we play with it, and with the hammer getting replaced by the flower, it means that an audience gets to re-evaluate their reading of the object.

Mole:
It's the start of the show and an introduction to the performance, to the object of the hammer. and the rules of contacts. That's what's in my mind when I'm doing those actions. Its me and Tim on stage, and we have a particular way of being on stage together that is often funny. So we're alse setting the tone there. So there are lots of different reasons, even in the smallest of actions, in why we choose particular moments to keep. There is a reason why we stopped the moment of you, Alex and Rebecca crawling down one of the hatches. We stopped that because it felt like it was a trick.

Kevin:
It was too neat. It was a moment that was isolated from the rest of the action, and not a picture that was created as a consequence of moving from one place to another.

Mole:
Whereas if it was a consequence it would have been different. We try to open up our internal logic in the process of making a show but we are never going to achieve a full explanation of every single intention of doing something on stage.

Kevin:
It's too complex; it's part of a process that started over five years ago so we keep changing those intentions and multiplying them. It's also an 'in the moment' thing. Where the internal logic is constantly evolving, because it transforms as we go through it. I never feel it in the same way each time.

Mole:
Which is why we make theatre, because we want that flexibility, that openness.

Kevin:
Our internal logic is a logic for that particular moment in time, that particular place, that particular show that we've done, which responds to the particular attitude we have at any given moment.

Mole:
There was a difference between my first night in Luxembourg to the second because I lost my wallet. There was one moment when I picked a chair up, and the first night felt amazing but the second night I was just doing the action of picking up a chair. I just felt so overtaken by the damage that the loss of my wallet would have on the next three months of my life, and that comes out in the show, and that comes out when we have a bad day or if you have a less responsive audience. It affects what we do because we are human beings. An aesthetic choice about the company's work is about allowing an audience to see a real person on stage - a personality - and that personality isn't fixed. That's a major difference in the majority of theatre where a character is being presented; a person pretending to be another person. We're presenting ourselves within a structure of time and space and action and moments.

5. Can we identify any turning points in the making of Negative Space?

Mole:
Loads. And then you go to rehearsals the next day and it just crumbles. And then you'd have another idea on the drive back and we'd have a conversation and we'd make complete conceptual sense, and then try to articulate it to the rest of the group – and they'd go 'what are you talking about?' So, it is a constant flow of making sense, and the sense disappearing, and making new sense.

Kevin:
The introduction of flowers was a pivotal moment in the devising process; a significant shift in how we thought about the project. It was a simple discovery, but one that allowed us to break away from thinking about Schrödinger and to focus attention on a softer, more poetic, exploration of our relationships within Negative Space.

Mole:
It's very aggressive holding a hammer, and I wanted to introduce something a little more gentle. And the same gesture with the hammer and the flower has a completely different meaning, different reading. And I was interested in that and bringing something fragile and organic to this space.

Kevin:
For me, one of the defining moments was the hug. We play this game of contacts in one section of Schrödinger, but we play this game all the way through Negative Space to some extent. Again, this was one moment we wanted to explore and extend in more detail – that logic of contacts. Before, it had always been about contacts with objects – and suddenly, the hug resolved the whole issue – the hug became two contacts – and once we hugged the game of contacts was resolved.

Mole:
A lot of the turning points in the process are ideas about bringing something else into the room. Bringing a flower into the room just immediately felt right, and it immediately opened up a whole new world for us; about gesture and kindness and love and wanting. You know, all of these emotional qualities came out of using that flower. And then we just started playing with this bunch of weeds and it felt totally right and immediate as a gesture that we all recognise. What we're making is not abstract art, it's formed, it's very figurative; because it has figures in it, it has people in it. A lot of abstract art you are kind of looking for the figures in it, for a landscape, looking for something 'of this world'. And that's almost impossible to do in theatre because you've got people in it. You've always got people in a landscape, whether that be in a room, or on a mountain or something. And I'm not afraid of that figurativeness of theatre, and I think that's the strength of it.

Kevin:
I think the flowers felt right because it tempered the dynamic of the performance. We were bashing holes; circular, not uniform holes, not square, or rigid like Schrödinger. They were holes with imperfections, they didn't have those straight edges in the way that Schrödinger does. And as soon as we got the flower it made sense for me. It made sense of how that destruction, of making holes, worked with that archetype of the flower. We were destroying and mending, we were ruining relationships and building relationships, we were the architects of our own ruins. And then we try to deal with the aftermath; the consequences of our actions and how we might begin to rebuild. I think the flower highlights that vulnerability. It's a useful counterpoint to the hammer.

6. Why is exclusion from the project important to the creative process?

Kevin:
I think about the process we went through as one of wilful exclusion. Not of being forcefully removed or side-lined from the project, but about how we were all comfortable to step away, willing to remove ourselves if necessary. And it was, of course, a pragmatic response, sometimes it was just two of us, four of us, sometimes it was ten of us in a room together. But rarely was it all of us together as a company, the ensemble that an audience sees in the final project.

Mole:
It's also about us being economic with time, resources and people. And sometimes, in the process of putting this together, we know we are not going to get anything from anyone else. And so we actually frame the process in time, in people's availability and in their abilities. What it also does is enforce a responsibility without being forceful. It makes the three of us, or however many are there at the time, want to share something from what we've learnt together. What's weird is that often the presentation of what we've made together would be terrible and make little sense to the others; the world and the logic we've established in the smaller groups isn't completely available to them. But then that's brilliant because that would be the same for an audience. So in a way, being in and out, present and absent, is like having a dramaturg or an external director.

Kevin:
They see what we've done, they look at it differently, and some of the content, or context, we don't share (because they're not interested, they don't care, or because we don't want to taint their own reading of the material) and we all have these completely different ideas about what we are seeing and experiencing. We've had a number of discussions where we've said that we don't need everyone around – we can create a greater range of material because there's a different dynamic, a different energy, a different way of looking, between the varying groups of people at any one time. We say, it will just be us two now because we need to build the set for a few days, and the other people are ok with that. Yes, I'm not going to be involved here, I'm not going to be part of this moment, and it's great because I'm going to start to see things that you won't; I will have a different perspective on what you discuss and present. When Rebecca came into the process we had already worked for two weeks. She sat down and watched what we had, and we didn't spend time sharing why we were doing it, what it meant, what the concept was. She just watched it, accepted it and moved it forward in her own way. And that's what we all, I think, tend to do. We like to step away. And we do that in the process too, step away from what we've been working on; because we want to see what it looks like, we want to experience it from the outside, and to see what someone else might do with it. See how they respond to it or change it. At times we'd get tired or have too much stuff going on in our heads, so we'd welcome the opportunity to 'get out'.

Mole:
I remember saying at the beginning of the process that we are all going to work together but it doesn't necessarily mean that we are all in the show.

Kevin:
I remember you saying that it might be a duo or a trio, it might just be the women or just the men who end up performing in it.

Mole:
It's about the project. It's not about us all working together in the performance, even though it ended up like that. There was never that pressure, I didn't feel it was a problem to say 'I you might not be in the show'. It doesn't mean you are rubbish or you've not contributed enough; it is about making the best project that we can with this group of people. And it might mean we take out the walls, or it might mean we take out some of the people. But now we couldn't do this show without the six people. It would be another show with four or five of us, but it wouldn't be Negative Space. Actually, the strength of the show, that it turned into, is that it is a big show and involves a lot of people.

Kevin:
But it's also a show that involves a lot of people in twos and threes. Again, that was a symptom of the way it was constructed. There is a section with the four men, because in the process we had some time when the women weren't there. And Leentje and Tim, who spent a lot of time working together, have their own sections. And if we were all there throughout we wouldn't have reached this place; and I think the project is better for it.

Mole:
I talk a lot about economics in devising. You produce a lot of material, but what's important is that you try to be economic with the stuff that you produce or present. You produce lots and lots, but what you present isn't a soup, a mish-mash of everything you've done. But there are limitations on the types of material, the types of behaviour, the rules and logics in the piece.

Kevin:
And that's what's interesting about the company in this project. It's very much about taking things out than it is about putting things in; people as well as material. Even when we presented the show at Axis Arts Centre, we looked at it and said, 'that needs a bit more space'. That is, let's not complicate this, let's give it more time by removing other components or resisting the next set of actions for a little while, to allow this moment to gestate. We want to remove some of the complexity; be more economical with what we have.

Mole:
I often use the excuse of getting plasterboard, or hammers, or screws, as a way to escape from the room. It allows the process to continue, and it allows me the time and the space to think about what we've done and where to go next. I think taking yourself out is as valuable as being in the room all the time. And I don't think it's necessary, I don't think it's even possible to make a theatre show by spending all day in the rehearsal room. Then you are not taking anything from the world, and you end up in an internal bubble.

7. Is the ‘not-knowing’ a necessary element of our creative approach?

Kevin:
We were stumbling through this process, uncertain of what was going to come out of it. It wasn’t an issue or a problem for us, because we were just busy doing things, but do you think this is a common theme in Reckless Sleepers’ history of making work? Is the ‘not knowing’ important?

Mole:
I began to realise that the knowing wasn’t important, or even necessary; that it’s much more interesting to be unsure. To go into a rehearsal room with a blank page to start a new project. You know, to be more open. So let’s just accept that things change and not knowing is crucial to making something new. That happens a lot in the workshops I lead. I try to encourage people to understand that this uncertainty is OK, by saying that I don’t know what we’re going to do; we’re just going to find out. I suppose that’s a confidence thing; a confidence in my ability to make something. And when you’re working with six other people who share that confidence, then it just magnifies that opportunity, that potential to make something from nothing. But we didn’t come into the process with nothing, we came into it with about four years of conversations and ideas and moments and discoveries through touring, and conversations in bars, and all these other things that happened between us prior to sitting down and making a piece of work in a rehearsal space.

Kevin:
I think that the confidence to let go and to accept change is a learnt behaviour, and we’ve found a language and attitude in rehearsals that celebrates the process. And that has taken time.

Mole:
We have a vast amount of experience and a talented group of performers working on this project. And if you walk into a room with those kinds of people you are going to make something good. But it was a long process to find those kinds of people; it’s twenty years of finding the right people to work with, who understand that it is OK to not know. There are varying degrees of knowing and not-knowing in those individuals I work with, but I’d say that’s also part of the process of making, of finding the right people.

Kevin:
Do we end up being in quite a privileged position then? Having a group of people together who are aware of what they can and can’t control in a process, and who are comfortable with the unexpected?

Mole:
Something happens when those people come together and it just seems to work and it isn’t forced. We don’t try to force the collaborative process. I think enforcing that collaborative approach, for me, doesn’t work.

8. What do we think about when we are performing?

Tim:
Well, apart from, ‘what the hell am I going to do next?’. I really want to connect with someone in the performance and give them a flower.

Leentje:
I think, until just before we performed the first performance, I felt a little bit awkward about what I was doing. Because I felt slightly outside of the action. Everyone is running around and I seem to be much more static. And, I think, for a while in the devising process that was a bit of a frustration. Thinking why can I not get involved in that. But when we did the showing in Gent, I honestly felt like I was going to die, because it became very violent. So, I just ended up being in the corner, fearing for my life. And that made me realise that there is a place in the performance for serene behaviour, or calmness. So, I think, I’m conscious of that; of keeping safe and staying calm. You can’t do anything about it really, it doesn’t help if you join in with the battle, so I’m just going to stay here and hope no one notices me. And that was a relief, realising that there is a point in doing that.

Kevin:
I’m reminding myself to count, as I’m trying to deal with numbers and contacts, and I often get lost and distracted. I have to make sure I’m aware of the tension between the contacts in the space and adjust my route, my responses, accordingly. I’m self-policing it, regardless of whether anyone else is following the rules.

Mole:
I think there's a point where you take a hammer off someone, and do you do that because there are too many contacts?

Kevin:
Yes, it's before I pick you up for the battering ram moment.

Mole:
I'm quite the opposite. I use the contacts as a safety net. I know that I can get out of a situation, or force a situation, by touching someone.

Kevin:
Because when we were making the piece that was our reference point, our default position; 'there's too many contacts', 'you've got to drop that, you've got to let go of this'.
But I'm also thinking about images in the space. And as I'm conscious of contacts, and I'm observing everyone else – what they are doing, how they are moving – I try to locate myself in a position that compliments or undermines that passing moment. Like when Leentje has her hands up at the back moments later I repeat the same image in the same space that she once occupied. So, you also notice what other people are doing and seeing if it maps on to your own journey, seeing if there are moments that you can replicate or extend. Because there is a lot of repetition in what we do.

Mole:
Or duplication.

Kevin:
We have the mirroring sections with different pairs of performers.

Mole:
Why are we doing that mirroring? What is the reason? It's come out of something to do with the pairs and what the pairs mean...

Kevin:
But it's also that quality of uncertainty that it produces. When looking at two people replicating or reproducing the same set of images it's not so easy to distinguish who is the active or passive participant. And what you see are two people who are trying to negotiate a type of language between them. It feels like a conversation that is moving between two people. We're not sure who has control of the situation because it is a discussion rather than an order. It tends to remove, or maybe hide, the hierarchy between them.

Mole:
In dance it's quite acceptable to have duets where people are doing the same movement.
In music and orchestras, the string section will often be following the same score, in contemporary theatre it is quite unusual for things like duets, in that classical sense, it happens. In Negative Space as it is part of our language.

Kevin:
But it is an abstract language. And I do like the pairs, where each pair still takes on pretty much the same activity; crossing the legs, looking over the shoulder, leaning forwards. And it is the same conversation that happens over and over again, but it is a different set of pairs that have this same conversation; it just gets re-iterated according to their own dialect, their own accent or phraseology. So, actually, the conversation only changes because of the context it is situated in; it is the pairings that change the circumstances of that conversation. But they are still the same concerns, the same ideas that we all are grappling with, and that's quite nice.

Mole:
It's still not fixed, we've still not fixed it though, and I don't think we ever will.

Kevin:
There are more opportunities to keep changing what happens. The idea of us just copying each other means that we all have the potential to move it in a slightly different direction, and that means that all of us have to be conscious of what is set up in the first place. It sets up that kind of vocabulary at the outset but we can steer the conversation if we need to, or want to.

Kevin:
The idea of us just copying each other means that we all have the potential to move it in a slightly different direction, and that means that all of us have to be conscious of what is set up in the first place. It sets up that kind of vocabulary at the outset but we can steer the conversation if we need to, or want to.

Mole:
And we've never said what that conversation is. Why we set that particular sequence of movements; I mean, it could be anything. We made the decision to keep something and there are flexibilities within that, but for some reason I don't know why we set that specific sequence of events.

Kevin:
I don't think we've fixed it. We've agreed that these are the things we do, but the only real thing we've agreed is that we copy each other in some way.

Mole:
But do we copy each other? Or is it something else? I think it's subtler than that. It's not copying and it's not mirroring. There's something more expansive about what we are trying to achieve with those duets; with the duplication of actions.

Kevin:
But that's what we ended up calling it; our shorthand for those sections. For me it's a bit more like jazz, like a call and response, or an improvisation around a set of tightly organised, and shared, range of parameters.

Mole:
So, we're testing each other a little bit. I mean, I know I am, I'm trying to stick to the rules, and I know there is a certain series of actions.

Kevin:
But we also know that the other person is meant to be mirroring, or we are meant to be mirroring them, so we do things to see if they are 'on the ball'; are dealing with the situation in the moment.

Mole:
But if they get caught out, that's ok. I can imagine a situation where I'm totally fixed in my mind looking over to the right and Rebecca might have moved, and I should be conscious of that but I'm still fixed on the other thing. And then maybe I notice it; and the response to noticing it, and catching her, I think that's the interesting thing for an audience. That flicking between focus and actually realising you're in a show and you need to carry on. I think those are the moments of beauty in setting up something like this. And that's the difference in what we do; we set sequences in a duet, where there is room for a human being to exist. That's the important thing I wanted to say about mirroring. The compositional force. There is an understanding that you can operate as a human being on stage.

Kevin:
And these strategies expose something of the real.

Mole:
And that's an aesthetic choice for the company.

Kevin:
I do think about rhythm and shape; patterns that form and dissipate within a specific time-frame.

Mole:
I think in that compositional way in every show. I've always done it, I have the feeling of needing to pick it up in places, or slow it down, and within it, that trying to control the pace is really important. Trying to do it outside is almost impossible. I'm thinking about pace. And audience as well. Thinking about that relationship and whether they are with us.

Kevin:
But I'm also trying to differentiate my position with the others in the space. So sometimes when it's quite frantic, I like to slow down. There's enough of one particular energy, so I need a different energy as a counterpoint. And obviously this is different each time I do it.

Mole:
But that's because it's not set yet, unlike Schrödinger. Sometimes, in Schrödinger, Alex reads out the numbers for the drinking scene and it's totally off, and that rhythm isn't right. And sometimes you call out the numbers from Alex based on the contacts, and it's a different kind of rhythm and it doesn't feel right.

Kevin:
I suppose that's one of the differences between Schrödinger and Negative Space. You're not in control of that. The numbers I call out in Schrödinger, I'm not in control of. I have to 'say what I see'.

Mole:
But you do enforce a pattern on that, you say what you see but you add a musical pattern into that structure. Likewise, I do the same when I recall the numbers I've written down. But even in the writing down I'm actually conscious of slowing down the 2s and writing more 3s, and adding in some zeros.

Kevin:
I often think that I might be able to enforce the number of contacts, so that Alex can respond to my directions too. And it would be ok for there to be a more fluid call and response happening in that moment. There's a bit more of a tension then. But we're now thinking about how to develop Schrödinger here; our thinking on this project is informing the other. There's more of that playfulness in Negative Space, that kind of fluidity in who's taking the lead, and it's less clear, less regimented.

Mole:
So, it becomes a collective responsibility rather than a singular responsibility. The responsibility of contacts is Alex's responsibility in Schrödinger, but maybe we should try that next time. I think it's a valid point. And that's about Negative Space effecting the presentation of Schrödinger. We've always said that there is no room for change in Schrödinger, but actually there is, but we've only seen these possibilities by working on Negative Space. So, we can't put Schrödinger to bed either; we can't allow that to happen.

Mole:
OK, I have a question. When you're doing the 'Hammer of Doom', which is one of my favourite moments, do you psyche yourself up for that? Because there are a lot of times when we are waiting around on the wings.

Kevin:
No. I know I'm seen but I'm not trying to display something other than what it is. In my head I'm thinking 'this is my chance to have a bit of fun now'. Maybe an audience sees that waiting as a loaded thing, but I'm just waiting to do it, and wanting to do it.
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Mole:
And where did it come from?

Kevin:
It was when I did the exercise with 'the fly'. We took it in turns to imagine there was a fly in the room, using the brush or the hammer, and I was the crazy one who was really going for it – trying to catch the bastard with the hammer. The first time we did it I only went around once, and then we decided to extend it. But I don't think about the fly anymore.

Mole:
And then I joined you, and it became a bit more orchestral.

Kevin:
But now I join you.

Mole:
So, it's evolved somehow. But it came out of 'imagine there's a fly in the room'. It's actually something quite real - something that we know, something that we recognise. So, it's never complicated It's a task that we all deal with and interpret in different ways. But most of the questions about making this show never came from a basis of, 'imagine there's a war'. They are conceptual. We're not trying to represent war and destruction. But in playing with the task of 'imagine there's a fly in the room' it produces those thoughts. And we start from a simple task, a simple idea, which creates complexity I think our particular process of making is simple. It's simple, real tasks that we pose - that we all have an experience of. We've all been to a hairdresser where they've brushed the hair off your shoulders.

9. What is the language of Negative Space?

Mole:
There are snippets of, 'come on!', 'where do I go!', 'what am I doing now Kevin?!', 'you're supposed to be climbing over!'. But our language is an invented one we developed from Schrödinger, and we reclaimed it in Negative Space. And that language was one of mathematics, mostly, and of images and objects. The title of the piece is a visual art term - and the language of Negative Space refers to the gaps in languages; it's what you don't see, what you don't hear. It's the gaps in the sentences, it's the subtext, it's the ulterior motive. It's a developed, or regressed, language of what contacts is in Schrödinger. Or an early, or purer, version. And I think every time we make a show we invent a new language and we share that language together while making it, and what we mustn't forget is that we need to then share it with a whole load of other people who have come to listen and watch and understand, and to get a handle on that new language.

Kevin:
It's interesting that you talk about subtext. I think it's the emotions too; how we read the silent body.

Mole:
You can take any moment, for example, the gesture of passing the hammer, and you can change the emotional content of that very easily. And the same gesture with two people is very different to the gesture on its own. And I think that's what we're exploring; how the same gesture can mean different things. But also, it's inevitable. It's inevitable once the audience see the first hammer being bashed into the wall, you kind of feel it is inevitable that the whole thing is going to be destroyed. And I think there's a beauty in the acceptance and the knowledge that this is going to happen. But it's going to happen in ways that you might not ever have imagined.

Kevin:
Again, I also think that we are, conceptually, writing the language in Negative Space, whereas in Schrödinger that language is already written. In Negative Space the text is being understood and written in the moment, like we're searching for the right words; the right phrasing.

Mole:
Half of the company have children, at different levels of language development, and I think observing that has affected what we make.

Kevin:
You hear it, you hear the child trying to understand and grapple with a complicated language; the slips, the odd turns of phrase, the misunderstandings, the odd sentences they come out with.

Mole:
Putting a square peg in a round hole.

Kevin:
And we see that in Negative Space.

Mole:
We're trying to make sense of the world that we've created, or that we've landed in, or that we've been thrown in to. And we're still learning. But it's not over simplified for the audience, we're not teaching them how to speak the language. We let them in so they might have an impression or interpretation, but I think they may be going through a similar process. That they are learning the show, the rules of the world that we have and, I hope, enjoying learning these rules. And no, we're not using music, and we're not talking because...

Tim: ...
What could we say?

Mole:
I'm gonna hit you with a hammer'

Kevin:
'Oww!'

Kevin:
It's primarily about the set; the wooden frame and the plasterboard. It's both fragile and sturdy, and it all depends on where the pressure is located, if this thing is to crumble or stay resilient to these external factors. The hammer is an aggressive tool, an object that is very strong. And what we are bashing with those hammers is going to get destroyed. The flower is an object that is fragile, can fall apart at any moment. We pull these objects apart; we try to retain some of its structure but at the same time cause its decay. That's also about the destruction of ideas and relationships. And maybe about how we continue to survive in a world that is falling apart; crumbling. It's about the people, the fragility of the human who exists inside that space, and how beautiful that is. How our uncertainty, our inability to be fully formed, coherent, human beings, is impossible. And actually, there's a beauty in that kind of destruction. Even the disintegration of the plasterboard is beautiful. Seeing this white, clean space slowly take a different shape, a different form. The beauty of seeing these patterns of holes along the walls, despite it being a consequence of something extremely aggressive.

For me, it is beautiful because it reminds me of history, of the fallible human being, of violence and peace. I see it in the way we made the project, creating actions and scenarios with a different set of pairs (Alex and Tim, me and Leentje, you and Leen). These relationships that form. These partnerships that don't last. They are fleeting. And that's nice I think; that's life. We form these relationships, we enjoy them or resent them in that moment, but we know there is always going to be a pain that is attached to that. These partnerships become memories, and we either long to return to them or regret our decisions, our choices. The plasterboard might serve as a metaphor here; these memories are the holes we create, and we can't fix them, we can't change our mind if we put the hole in the wrong place, and how we treat it, how we choose to apply pressure will determine if we stand or if we fall. We talk about Negative Space feeling a bit more human, a bit more 'real' than Schrödinger. Our fragility as human beings residing in that space.

Kevin:
We work off images. We look at the construction of an image rather than how you might possibly read it. And then we have these discussions and hear what other people think. And that sometimes connects with us. I don't think we really talk about it in terms of meaning because it is just so convoluted; the history of each moment is too layered for us to unpick it all.

Mole:
And we're OK with that.

Kevin:
Yeah, but we can look at the work and say, 'bullet holes'; yes, it reminds us of...

Mole:
War zones...

Kevin:
So we do notice the potential of some of these images and what they might represent for other people.

Mole:
But there are little micro-scenes in it. My favourite thing in all of this was bringing in the flowers and that grew out of a need for something more organic in the space. But we didn't say, 'let's have a scene about the environment', you know?

Kevin:
All of these images, these actions, are a consequence of something else; they are a series of moving images that we have, that become representative of a number of things as we pass through the piece.

Mole:
But there are points of reference, There's a brilliant scene in Terminator, where the terminators meet and they're bashing each other against the corridor and the walls break. And I wanted that, and now we have that. And also a scene I remember of lights coming through holes in a ceiling. It's very over-used, as a filmic image...Loads of popular culture references...

Kevin:
Of a certain time...

Mole:
Yeah, from the 1970s and 80s.

Tim:
There's also a huge slapstick element.

Mole:
Yeah, we looked at Laurel and Hardy...

Kevin:
And Marx Brothers...

Tim:
Buster Keaton, Three Stooges... So yeah, there's loads in there really.

Mole:
Yeah, in the good bag.

Tim:
Scooby Doo

Mole:
Yeah Scooby Doo is in there.

Tim:
Always in there, we could go on.

Kevin:
But it is also about the alternating relationships that form and then disappear. I think why we have these repetitive images is because they start to get re-introduced between different groups of people; different twos and threes. And I think part of this is about the six of us in the company, and about those different pairs and relationships that inevitably exist. But what potentially stays the same, in the ever-changing mass of bodies, are those motifs. They become familiar.

Mole:
I don't know where the image of someone with their hands in the air came from.

Leentje:
That's an image from Schrödinger; it's the mountain.

Mole:
Oh, I do that! It's that image! It's a familiar gesture to us, but in this space, it means something completely different. It might still refer to the mountain in Schrödinger, but it's also 'oh, I want the chair'.

Audience member: I liked the squeals under the floor.

Kevin:
Well, that does have a history. That was from when I trapped my fingers in one of the hatches during rehearsals.

Mole:
It was the funniest thing...

Kevin:
So it's a little nod to the pain I went through. It's on a rehearsal video somewhere. But Mole spent the entire time on a chair at the back in stitches.

Alex:
But we are aware that there aren't massive lighting changes or sound.

Kevin:
Because we are constructing an environment, a physical, concrete environment for six human beings. And as soon as you put sound over the top of it, that kind of exists outside that world.

Leentje:
We did try at a certain point. I remember in Gent when Mole played some music...

Mole:
A disco track... No, Barbara Streisand's I am a Woman in Love.

Leentje:
Yeah, something random. But I think what we're saying about the kind of potential imagery or meaning behind it, in what an audience understands, is that music is kind of an indicator about what or how you are supposed to feel. And if you take that away there are more possibilities for interpretation. And anything we add, even lighting, creates an atmosphere...

Mole:
An emotional atmosphere...

Leentje:
Exactly, and this is it; it tells you how you should think. And we don't mean to mean anything...

Mole:
But everything...