

Unboxing Intelligence

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Today, I am going to share a new work in progress performance featuring Jana Weißman and Tobias Kulka. This is the first iteration, and really, a trial, of what I would like to think of as a “readymade performance.” The idea for this emerged out of my practice-based research on intelligence test kits, which constituted a variety of artistic projects, thus far, including the video on view here where artists and designers unboxed a selection of kits and talked to me about their designs and what they elicited in them. My PhD blended these projects with historical and theoretical research about the tests.

Very briefly, if you are not familiar with intelligence tests, I am referring to the types which were developed and are administered by psychologists and other licensed professionals. Specifically, I have studied the Wechsler and Stanford-Binet tests. These tests are used to assess both children and adults, across educational, therapeutic, legal, and occupational settings. These tests come in kits, briefcases, boxes, or bags, and include a manual and objects: often puzzles, booklets, blocks, and toys.

Developed over the course of the first half of the 20th century, they reached widespread international use from the 1950s forward. Though continuously disputed as racially and culturally biased, tied to eugenics, and labeled by some as “bad” science, they have also been defended as a useful “sorting” and diagnostic technology. Precedents to these tests were tried out, for example, at Ellis Island and for U.S. Military recruitment. Though they have arguably fallen out of favor, they are not only still in use, but they could be considered co-creators of the concept of I.Q., which now circulates freely in culture. Concepts of IQ are used as a dog whistle in far-right networks for white supremacy, gamified IQ tests populate the apple mac store, and high IQ is promised by private genetic screening companies.

The performance we will present today focuses on two aspects of the tests: what they are made up of and how they are administered.

The kits themselves are available for purchase from test publishers and arrive, once ordered, with the instruction manual and all of the necessary objects in tow. As such, I came to think of them as readymade performances of psy-science. What I want to try out here, today is a performance which collages intelligence tests with a couple of related objects and tasks. I made and shipped these test kits to Jana and Tobias. They had some time to review them, but I explicitly asked them not to memorize the instructions, as psychologists would also not memorize the tests. Instead, we practiced a little and they will perform them for you today, as instructed by the manuals, with only a little additional instruction from me.

I’ll talk a little bit about them after they perform, but only to introduce some questions and “teasers” for the conversation to follow. Without further ado, I introduce Jana Weißman and Tobias Kulka.

**** Performance ** (see pdf)**

The questions I would like to ask are: Were you able to observe the examiners or did you only experience being tested? If you could observe them, what did you observe about them?

I ask this, specifically, because one additional set of sources for this performance was studies of examiner attitudes conducted by psychologists who were critical of the lack of instruction for “rapport” in the test manuals. Some of these critics felt that there was no way to administer tests fairly across different groups, that factors like familiarity, race, encouragement, and sensitivity to neurodiversity, would impact how their test takers did. By integrating aspects of these studies, I am not exactly interested in how fair or unfair the tests are, but rather in how these concerns reveal the *constructedness* of the testing situation itself ... how the examiner’s presence, demeanour, and assumptions become part of the performance that the test is supposed to measure. In other words, I am using these studies less to evaluate the equity of the tests and more to illuminate the interpersonal, affective, and methodological conditions that shape what we end up calling “ability” or “intelligence” in the first place.