



# Talking to Myself: A Dialogue Between Practice and Performance

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This playful, performative dialogue, a take on the self-interview format, brings together Julia, a practicing artist and mother, and her performative alter ego Julia Pond, founder and CEO of the fictional company BRED. Together, they navigate the blurred lines between professional and personal practice and performance. Departing from Schechner's definitions of practice as 'doing' and performance as 'showing-doing', the self-interview problematizes the idea that practice, more than performance, has the power to affect our real identities (Spatz 220). It proposes that, rather than 'performance' being fake and 'practice' being authentic, the two co-affect each other, influencing both artistic and personal spheres. What happens when we must show everything we do? Julia and Julia Pond discuss the performance of subjectivity, individuality or affect that is now integral to contemporary work culture but that might have once been considered the territory of the 'personal' or 'practice'. They consider how the roles we perform each day blur into personal identity, imprinting into the body and mind through daily repetitive labour. This phenomenon can include the performance of mothering as well as performing an artistic identity. Julia Pond and Julia also consider how these themes function in the fictional company BRED's participatory

performance installation, and its excerpt “The Manager-festo” which both embodies and critiques notions of ‘value’ and ‘productivity’ through the body, Powerpoint, and bread dough.

Keywords: practice-as-research, performance-as-research, creative practice, performance, dialogue, motherhood

*The following dialogue is a performative self-interview that explores tensions between performance and practice in artistic and personal life. I write as both **Julia**, an artist, researcher, and mother, who speaks from the point of view of practice (both artistic and as a mother) and **Julia Pond** who speaks from within the artistic performance of the role of CEO at the fictional company and performance installation BRED. (This character was developed out of a real experience in an senior role at [a global corporation]). Understanding performance<sup>1</sup> at a basic level as a ‘showing-doing’ that happens both artistically and in the sphere of personal and business life (Schechner 28), here it also has an element of fictionalising and exaggerating reality. Further, my CEO-self blends the personal and performative in a hyper-individualistic display (Van Assche and Schaffer 208), blurring the lines between Julia and Julia Pond, truth and fiction. Kunst’s notion of contemporary subjectivity turning outwards, away from an authentic core, and therefore opening to new gestures of speech and movement that are intended to be observed, is key (20). Practice, on the other hand, is understood as the daily, personal, activities outside the “pressure of production” (Schuh 80). In Schechner’s terms, this is the “doing” (Schechner 28), and, for me, is accompanied by a level of sincerity, privacy, or vulnerability. Bread dough – a domestic, tactile, almost fleshy substance, and the working object at BRED – references personal, repetitive, practice even as it is repurposed in service of corporate productivity and performativity. The ‘doing’ that relates to personal identities like motherhood is recognised as invisible labour, also experienced here as unproductive performance. The dialogue seeks to take play seriously, and to expose the theoretical aspects of the research within performative, sometimes humorous, dialogue, joining discourse and materiality of practice (Arlander 137).*

**JULIA:** It's been said that practice 'raises the stakes' over performance because it has the power to affect our identities (Spatz 220). In contemporary dance, practice – understood as personal activities that provide continuity and support – also, “brings about a subtle, gradual shift in style and in the aesthetics of dancing” (Schuh 90). This seems to make sense. The sincerity of practice makes a difference to who I really am, and underlies my performance capabilities. As an artistic performer I can inhabit a performative role, then cast it off without it affecting my personal identity. But through knowing you, Julia Pond, I have begun asking the question: what happens when what we practice *is* performance? And further, what parts of our lives remain today that are NOT performance? How does it work when I am always, at some level, showing what I am doing to someone? When I worked at [global company], I performed the role of an executive each day, creating Powerpoints, sending emails and attending meetings. I was performing a public, professional self: a part of my work was performing my own personality, being bubbly, creative, and even critical (Kunst 28). It mattered who saw it. None of it felt authentic – like my real identity – but this didn't matter in the end. As such, for Spatz it might have remained on the surface, but as I repeated my performance of my professional personality, it began to affect me at deeper levels, penetrating my muscle – and mind – memory, if you will. Over time, the performance inadvertently had the effects of a practice. Maybe something like water soaking slowly into sand – eventually, you end up saturated.

**JULIA POND:** Huh. For me, it's actually the practice that lies underneath the performance and supports it. One practice that really supports my performance at work is my morning routine, which I share openly about in my talk (some people call *that* a 'performance') “The Manager-festo”<sup>2</sup>. Having a practice like a morning routine is SO RELEVANT to being a top performer. What can seem like a simple combination of checking emails, applying face cream, and obliterating the soul gradually, day by day, is actually what can keep us performing at cadence, no matter the cost to our identities. It's so important to figure out YOUR UNIQUE practices for success. How did I develop these ideas? Well, I had to let go of my own self as the 'locus of truth' -- to perform my own subjectivity rather than feel it (Kunst 20). Only then was I able to really *perform* as a manager.

**JULIA:** Yes. Behind the performance of my role at [global company], I certainly developed my own ‘pseudo-activities’ to support constant meaningless productivity (Kunst 7): call them coping mechanisms or morning routines, they were, often, also effective methods for pissing away time and income while making me feel worthwhile and productive: lunchtime-organic-face-products-shop or appointments-with-the-expensive energy-healer, donating-to-the-Maasai and going-to-yoga: whatever it took to get back in there the next day and keep hitting my targets. Ultimately, I was developing my own self as a product (Schuh 81), while also maintaining the need for ever more income, what the Marxist thinker Postone called the ‘treadmill effect’.

Thanks for mentioning the ‘morning routine’ – this reminds me of a micro-performance in the office: something I call the calculated personal share. This is the performance of vulnerability and openness – without any actual vulnerability. For example, when you engage in small talk at the office, and a colleague drops some highly personal bomb without changing their facial expression, only to turn back to work as if it’s ultimately the more important issue: “Great weather today! ... How am I? Well my mom just died so that’s been hard but I’m totally coping. Let’s dive into these metrics!” It’s like a confession stripped of angst - but there’s something essential to the performance of the working-self about this revealing or disclosure of the personal, you know? (Kunst 29)

**JULIA POND:** I love the way you articulate that. I use the calculated personal share all the time – I find it really helps to build connection with my team.

**JULIA:** One thing that has been really interesting to reflect on is that through the process of creating you I realized that my time at [global company] was really accidental performance-as-research. The knowing-through-doing I accumulated in that time, combined with my artistic performance knowledge, was what made it possible for me to create you. So, when I *thought* I was performing a role which would remain on the surface of my authentic self, the performance was actually getting into my bones, my whole self and subjectivity was becoming performative... and that deep knowledge is what allowed me to ... spawn you.



Figure 1. Julia Pond in *The Manager-festo*, June 2022, © Julia Pond

However, through this act of creating you, I also freed myself of you. I created a separate space – the fictional company and performance project BRED – where I could perform you but disable your power over my felt identity. That space was no longer interwoven with my personal life. At that point, my professional identity was no longer impacted in the same way as when I was fully involved at [global company] and this in turn gave me space to reclaim a more authentic artistic identity.

**JULIA POND:** It's so interesting that you mention creativity and art – because at BRED we also see creativity as very, very important to our work. We're all about bringing our whole creative selves to the office: this helps us to be our most productive. It's not just about what you do at BRED – it's *how* you do it. In fact there is definitely a



Figure 2. Julia Pond screaming into bread dough, *Manager-festo* performance, Gallery Lock-In Brighton, UK © Julia Pond, July 2022.

virtuosic element to what we expect of ourselves. It's getting your dough to rise, yes, but it's also showing how much you care about the work – demonstrating your passion – choosing a beautiful position for your body while you work – developing an upbeat, yet authentic persona in the office. One of my top tips is to define what it is you are really *practising* when you are performing your work at BRED. When you lie down with the dough on your skin, are you practising 'waiting-with'? or 'waiting-for'? [the bread dough]. It's actually not enough to just '*perform*' – you've got to mean it.

**JULIA:** But what if you *don't* mean it? Sometimes I feel my best performance work is as a mother. And it's also my most fake performance. I wake up and I'm *on* – lights, camera, action: mom. What I perceive as my 'authentic' identity survives beneath the surface, surfacing in moments of quiet where my attention is turned to myself. Only sometimes, the two layers merge and I feel present ...

**JASPER:** Mom? Mom? Mommommommommommommom.

**JULIA:** Excuse me.

*(soft whispering sounds)*

**JULIA:** ... to the practice of this role. The next day, I read a bedtime story on autopilot again without having any idea of what it's about. I miss shows, professional opportunities, because they don't align with the schedule and needs of parenting. My work is largely invisible and definitely uncompensated. The blur between life and work, and art and life makes my head spin. I keep my voice modulated, pleasant, when I'm interrupted for the 17th or 27th time, even when what I want to do is to scream.

**JULIA POND:** And then I take that scream and put it – literally – into the bread dough!

**JULIA:** *(laughs)* Exactly. Obviously I also love my kid. But these are the complexities.

**JULIA POND:** Which brings us to one of BRED's recent, really disruptive ideas to empower working parents: the baguette. When I launched BRED, the dough was first and foremost a symbol of that messy, fertile territory where really iterative thinking can happen. It seemed to hold time in its folds, and to have layers of meaning (Baraitser 33) – it was both a restrictive object and an object of care. A lot of our early publicity shots showed me with the dough on my skin, partially obscured by a pile of Legos, so I was barely visible.

**JULIA:** Yes. Sometimes I wasn't sure what was dough, and what was flesh – but I could definitely see the Hoover behind you.





Figure 3. Doughflesh © Julia Pond, July 2021.

**JULIA POND:** Totally. But all that dough was creating a lot of waste. So, as part of our exponential growth trajectory, we have moved forward and upward, baking the dough into baguettes. In this form, it becomes a prosthesis – a dough dildo, if you will – that sets us free from preconceptions about the mothering body and its natural, doughy, shape – while remaining on-brand. Not only is the mom-at-work nurturing, soft, creative, and of course growth-oriented, she is also now penetratingly powerful. The baguette can attach to an arm, a leg, a waist, avoiding any performance of maleness (Hamming), yet it creates this aforementioned sense of power, penetration, and, hopefully, precarity - our acronym for this is PPP\*<sup>3</sup>, sometimes augmented to PPPP to include 'position'. It's allowed our working mothers to increase their performance ratings, in most cases smashing their goals. Blending the best of the domestic and professional they are really changing our field and challenging expectations of what a working parent looks like. Plus, the baguettes have a real day-into-night function, doubling as excellent sandwich material after work – my personal favourite is the French classic, the jambon-beurre.



Figure 4. Julia Pond and Mia Schmitt in a rehearsal of the 'meeting'. March 2023, © Julia Pond



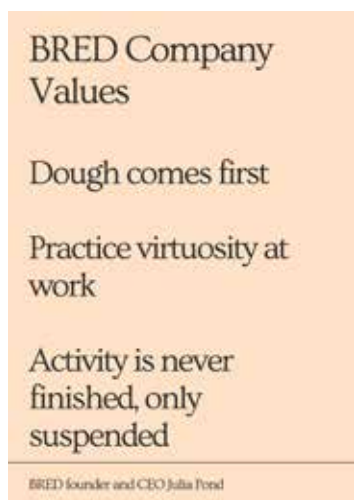
Figure 4.1. Julia Pond and Mia Schmitt in a rehearsal of the 'meeting'. March 2023, © Julia Pond



Figure 4.2. Julia Pond using a baguette to 'work from home'. May 2020

**JULIA:** That sounds amazing. It's so refreshing to see a company walking the talk when it comes to empowering its female team members. Now, if I can change the topic slightly, let's talk about performing practice. I like what Deborah Hay says when she talks about "allowing you to witness the performance of her practice ...". She's talking about allowing you to witness her practice, in a sense allowing you in to witness something personal. This makes me think about how I perform my identities: 'contemporary dancer' or 'quirky artist' or even 'cool mum'. I put on the costume of me, and this helps me become myself, to perform my practice. I think about what's invisible here, what's not part of the performance of my practices: stuff like nose-picking, the way my hips hurt. Yet, both the visible performance *and* this invisible stuff is what I bring to the studio. It's what I bring to the work of practising my art, the work of practising myself as a mother, as a person. Through repetition, it becomes more real. This is stuff that also exists "out of focus" (a term Simone Forti uses) (De Spain 56) in an official sense, while at the same time actually being constitutive of the reality of our artistic or personal selves because of what we're practising – and how this private space is, against our will perhaps, perceived. What's hidden and invisible are, sometimes, running things behind the scenes.

**JULIA POND:** Thanks for that. At BRED, we certainly want the performance of our practice to be evident. The practice that allows us to perform so well is clearly reflected in our company values:



Dough comes first.  
Practice virtuosity at work.  
Activity is never finished, only suspended.

Figure 5. BRED Values poster (installation decoration), © Julia Pond

The dough comes first – each team member at BRED is tasked with their own piece of dough. The care of this dough is that worker’s ultimate responsibility, to wait-with it, putting their own desires and needs aside, until this dough is ready for the oven ... I touched on this earlier, but for those of you who might be hearing about us for the first time, let’s elaborate a little: the main work for our employees at BRED is to allow dough to rise on their bare skin. There are three simple rules for this work: choose a beautiful position, try not to disturb the dough, and to place it skin-to-skin. Our team then practises waiting-with (not waiting-for!)<sup>4</sup> the dough, a simple, yet profound, act.

On practising virtuosity, well, we genuinely see our work as art. We see the act of working as a satisfaction in itself – we don’t think about actually producing anything. In the words of Italian theorist Paolo Virno, we are dedicated to the performance of “work without a finished product” (7). Finally, suspension of activity is key. If we

Figure 6. At work in BRED installation. Still from video by Gani Naylor, © Julia Pond



finish, we are finished. We pause, that we may be refreshed. Think of it like a big in-breath: you take a big inhalation when you leave work, and this remains suspended until you return.

**JULIA:** So you are actually practising what you are performing.

**JULIA POND:** Yes. Let's face it: there's a reason BRED has been so successful and it's that we practise what we perform. To support this, our training includes an innovative, body-based strategy where we really imagine our flesh *AS* the dough that we work with, and move this 'doughflesh' as it grows, allowing for a visceral experience of exponential growth. Sounds 'woo-woo' – but the basic idea comes from a dance technique called Skinner Releasing, which offers vivid images to work with imaginatively in the body, for example, imagining that your whole body's tissues become silk. It's well known for actually transforming how people experience their bodies by using their imaginations in movement. So building on this, at BRED, we are able to become what we envision. It's a revolutionary new way to think about – and do – branding. Involving their bodies as well as their minds has also really helped our team members to stay dedicated to the company.

**JULIA:** It shows how seriously you take the brand that you have used this artistic practice - Skinner Releasing Technique - which is very sincere, and used it to help internally activate your brand. It just speaks to your aesthetic of authenticity and deep work, and willingness to repurpose and even mess with established practices in service of your company. Let's not pretend we're too pure, right?

**JULIA POND:** Right. Fuck purity.

**JULIA:** Work is play, play is work! One of the tools that helped me to create you was infusing a sense of play into the creative process. In a way, undermining myself as a 'serious artist' and destabilising the ego. I was definitely inspired by Deborah Hay's writing here – especially when she talks about beginning a lecture by barking like a dog (12). At the same time, there's a letting-loose, there's also a remaining-attentive (Clarke 301). With a state of playful attentiveness, I was able to draw on a much wider range of movement, and language. I was also able to incorporate humour into my perfor-

mance work: while I've always been 'funny' in real life, I had been very 'serious' as a performer. Play became a way to toggle between performance and practice as well as playing between and through disciplines of moving, image making and writing, which were all involved in creating our fictional company.

**JULIA POND:** I'd say that's accurate – and playing between movement and speech as well! Humour is a great way to get your team to be a little more vulnerable, to open up, leaving space for you to throw in a real zinger to make them think again. It's okay to model a little absurdity, to make yourself larger than life. One way I love to express playfulness is through double-meanings: in my talk the Manager-festo, for example, I unpack the term "KPI": it's a key performance indicator – or, "how *YOU* know that I'm performing". I play in the territory between improvised and choreographed, all the time. Of course, the term 'play' is also a theatrical term.

**JULIA:** So perhaps we could say play is one possible bridge between practice and performance.

**JULIA POND:** 100%. To be honest, however, I would say that in some ways, I might even be the more authentic of us two. Your work is playful and mine is very serious. People say that you are the more authentic, the real one. But I'm not so sure: these days, how do we know what's real anymore? Even those of us who like to pretend we're real – like you – are always performing, working bodies. I often think of the Marxist theorist Nina Power who talks about the "choreography of the zero":

[...] we move our body to abstractions that are in turn, incarnated...we are always on display, at work and at play... we are performing all the time for...the market-other - we cannot express what we feel because we can no longer feel what we feel because our feelings have been simultaneously externalized and commodified. (52)

It is precisely my state of constant performance which speaks to this, and what allows me to fully inhabit the reality of our time. My main practice is, in fact, incarnating capitalist work processes – making them fleshy, fleshing them out.

**JULIA:** Mmm-hm.

**JULIA POND:** This feels like a great place to sum up: What would you say in conclusion about the relationship between performance and practice?

**JULIA:** Performance, ultimately, cannot work unless it's based in practice. But, performance, repeated, can transform identities, whether we want it to or not. Performance can also act as a kind of practical research, in this way: I come to know – and be – something by performing it. My performing self and practicing self co-exist and co-affect each other in layers. This tension feels like an interesting space in which I can expose what is hidden – where I can let what is hidden lead.

**JULIA POND:** Can I use that for my upcoming TEDx talk?

Figure 7. At work in BRED Installation, July 2021. Still from video by Gani Naylor, © Julia Pond







Figure 8. Participant and “The Manager-Festo” Powerpoint, BRED installation, July 2021. Still from video by Gani Naylor, © Julia Pond

Figure 9. Manuela Albrecht at work in BRED installation. Still from video by Gani Naylor, © Julia Pond





*This dialogue has tried to expose the tension between performance and practice, and personal and professional life, as well as points of tension between mothering and artistic and professional life. It is written from between layers of personal performance and practice, having grown out of my practice-as-research process in creating BRED. BRED itself was developed through engagement with theoretical texts on art, work, and capitalism by authors I cite in the dialogue such as Bojana Kunst and Paolo Virno, and pop-culture texts such as the column “My Morning Routine” on Gwyneth Paltrow’s lifestyle website Goop or Harvard Business Review thinkpieces on how to be a great manager, as well as somatic movement research (improvised movement led by the senses and internal instinct) with bread dough as artistic source material. BRED included Manuela Albrecht as a principal collaborator and received invaluable feedback and support from Kirsty Alexander and Florence Peake. The initial development was part of my MFA in Creative Practice: Dance Professional at Trinity Laban/Independent Dance. BRED and excerpts of it have been performed at festivals and galleries in London and Brighton. It is still not clear who is more real: Julia or Julia Pond. <https://juliapond.com/bred>*

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## Notes

1 Many readers may think of Judith Butler's famous theory on performativity; after all, I am talking about the way we perform identities, which could be seen as a parallel to how Butler theorises gender as performance, and the power of language to act as a constitutive force. While it's impossible to cover Butler in a footnote, I want to briefly note how this work sits in relation to her theory. In short, my main concern is how the *intentional actions* of

performance and practise *co-affect* identity and a sense of 'reality' of the self, rather than how external social languaging and conventions do this job. As such, I chose to focus on Schechner's notions of 'doing' and 'showing-doing'. Similarly to how Butler might consider the performance of gender according to pre-rehearsed social norms to have an effect on the person, I consider the repeated performance of 'mother' or 'executive' to affect the person: however, in BRED, by transposing the performance of CEO into an artistic / theatrical context, I also disable its power to affect my own identity, taking what was a performance of an identity into an artistic performance. Overall, play and humour, alongside artistic performance and its parallels in theories of work and labour, also take a more central role in my work.

2 Here I nod to the spirit of the Maska journal article (2016) "Become the Ideal Cultural Worker. A Handbook" by N. Arhar, P. Brezavšček, K. Čičigoj, S. Rakef and J. Založnik as well as popular thinkpieces on what makes a great manager such as What Great Managers Do from *Harvard Business Review*.

3 I would like to acknowledge artist / scholar Pirkko Husemann's essay on PPP (Project = Process = Product) here as well as the political economic term 'purchasing power parity (PPP)' which denotes prices of identical items across different currencies.

4 The act of 'waiting-with' was arose out of embodied research into 'waiting' and 'staying' drawing on Lisa Baraitser's words: "perhaps the maternal relation, and perhaps maternal time, suggests simply a willingness on the part of one to stay alongside another regardless of outcome" (91).