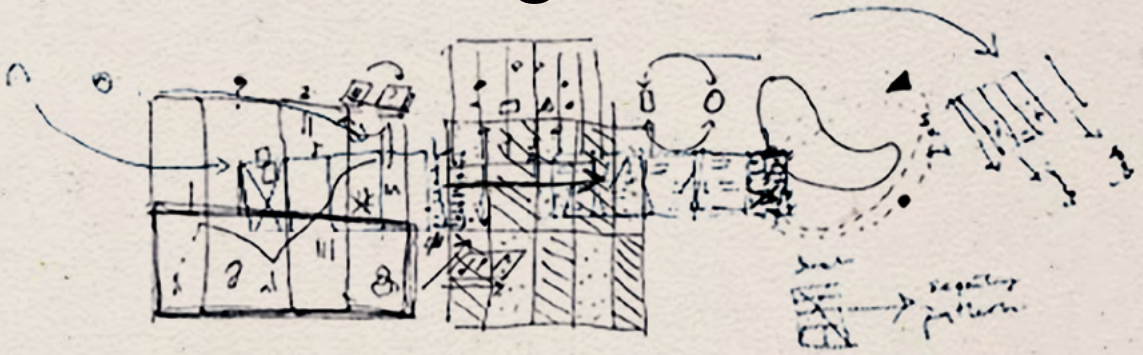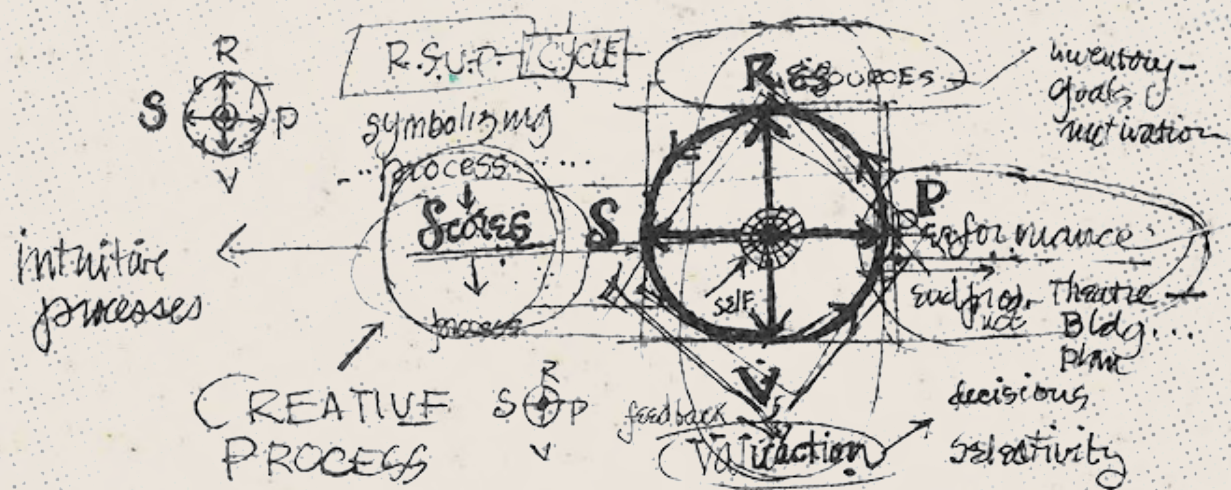# Unanswerable Questions and Diagrams

Developing a Score for Participation Thought & Exchange

Rakshita Arvind

The RSVP Cycles

Creative Processes in the Human Environment

Lawrence Halprin

This essay outlines a dialogue between my studio inquiry and a framework for creative processes called *scores* formulated by Lawrence Halprin in his book titled, 'RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes' in the Human Environment (1969).

I use this essay to highlight the convergences and tensions as I attempt to translate and analogise my practice under this framework.

The form of this document also mimicks the physical qualities of Halprin's book.

During the second half of this unit, I began to explore the metaphorical nature of diagrams. And their ability to give shape to complex and even inconceivable concepts. In doing this, I formulated a set of unanswerable questions that - when drawn in parallel with open-ended diagrammatic constructions - could prompt the act to resolve, think, respond and dialogue.

To test this hypothesis, I created two sets of cards (see fig. 4.1 & 4.2) where the objective is to pair an unanswerable question with a diagram that helps you formulate an open-ended response to the question. Or perhaps, the question gives you a framework within which you develop an understanding of a diagram. The objective here is to trigger a process of developing meaning. And exchanging the meanings you have inferred with another.

Initially, I thought of my studio work as a practice of developing a system that enables one to think critically about, give shape to and respond to complicated questions. However, the open-ended and ambiguous nature of my experiments made me hesitant to describe them as a system, which implies clarity, order and regularity.

I then came across Halprin's distinction between a system and a 'score.' This was an opening to start to create a congruous dialogue between my work and the process of scoring. 'A system is a closed and defined body with a beginning and an end... It is logical and sequential. There are systems to accomplish things... with everything functioning in a defined way. Scores are exploratory and not finite.

Scores are open not closed.' (1969, p. 195). Unlike a system, a score by its very design creates space for chance, negotiation and interaction. This gave me a more useful definition for the type of framework I was starting to create within my practice.

Halprin describes a score as 'a system of symbols which convey, guide or control (as you wish), the interaction between elements such as space, time, rhythm, people and their activities and the combinations which result from them,' (ibid., p. 7). Derived from the function of a musical score, a score is essentially a symbolic instruction or description; it triggers or gives shape to an open-ended process that reveals itself over time.

As a Landscape Architect and Designer, Halrpin utilises scores as a way to provide a framework for how interaction and movement may reveal itself within physical spaces and environments. I, however, am using Graphic Communication Design as a tool to develop an open-ended score that could trigger a pattern of thoughts, internal reflection, and knowledge exchange.

The prompt cards of diagrams and unanswerable questions are scores that give shape to each other; they are an open ended guide for a viewer to negotiate an understanding of each in context of the other.
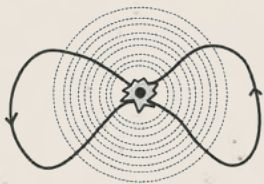
The diagrams I have created are constructions of symbols, shapes and arrows; I have co-opted a diagrammatic language from physics textbooks to create new abstract forms. The ambiguity, or lack of prescribed meaning, in the diagrams allows a viewer to develop their own understanding of its meaning. This is due to their dynamic and symbolic nature that provides gaps - where labels are left blank - to enable a viewer to formulate their own interpretations. As we are being prompted to look for meaning, the shapes, symbols, and directional constructions act as cues which guide the sense-making process.
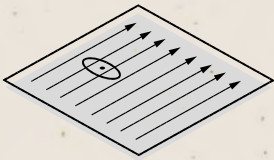
The set of diagrammatic and verbal instructions that illustrate how to use the two sets of cards triggers the process of resolution, thought and dialogue.

'Scores are process oriented, rather than result-oriented,' (ibid., p.7). And often, verbal instruction can pose limits; however, when it 'becomes a generator of feedback between people rather than an ordering mechanism,' it functions as an open score (ibid., p.10). The scores I have posed through my work, rather than specifying a direct path towards fixed answers, create space for a process of internal reflection in order to formulate a response that may lead to open-ended exchange. Thus it is an open score that symbolises and encourages an exploratory process. When drawn in parallel with some of

the scores developed and illustrated by Halprin, at first glance the verbal or textual elements along with drawings and diagrams can look similar to that of the instruction sheet and diagrams I have drafted for the exercise (see fig. 4.3 & 4.4). The main formal difference is the specificity of the textual and diagrammatic and graphic scores.

For instance, Halprin's diagrams are all labelled, and many of his scores are models, maps and graphic representations of the elements present within the environment he is working within (see fig. 4.5). Whereas my diagrams are abstract, unlabelled and are not symbolisations of physical movements or elements.

This comes down to the specificity of purpose in shaping a space and the movements of community within a space. As opposed to my work; where the interpretation, reflection and interaction that takes place is internal and open-ended. The questions posed are not yet rooted in triggering a conversation that serves a particular function; the unanswerable questions simple purpose is to encourage a process of thought and exchange in itself. I have also added a lot of verbal context to my instruction sheet: the function here is not in narrowing down the instruction, but to communicate the intention of the process.

While I have begun by defining my work - in its form and concept - as an interpretive and open ended score; the spectrum of characteristics that constitutes the construction of a score have also highlighted points of tension, consideration and redefinition.
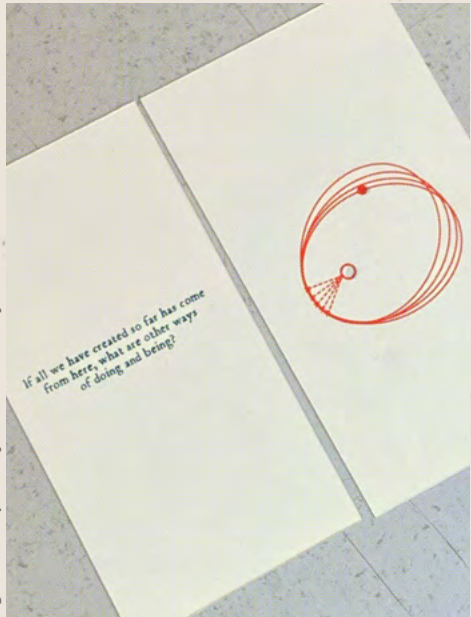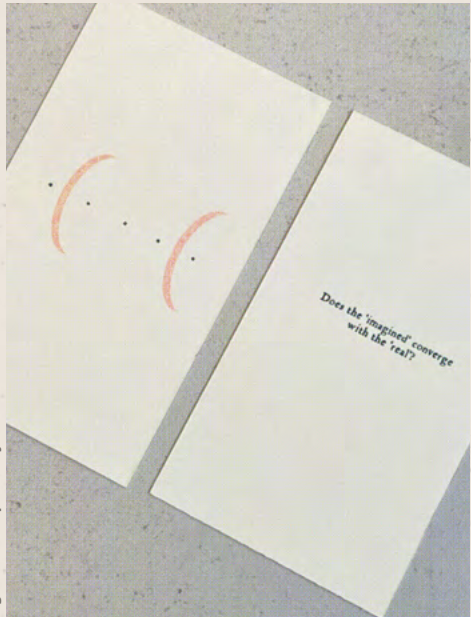
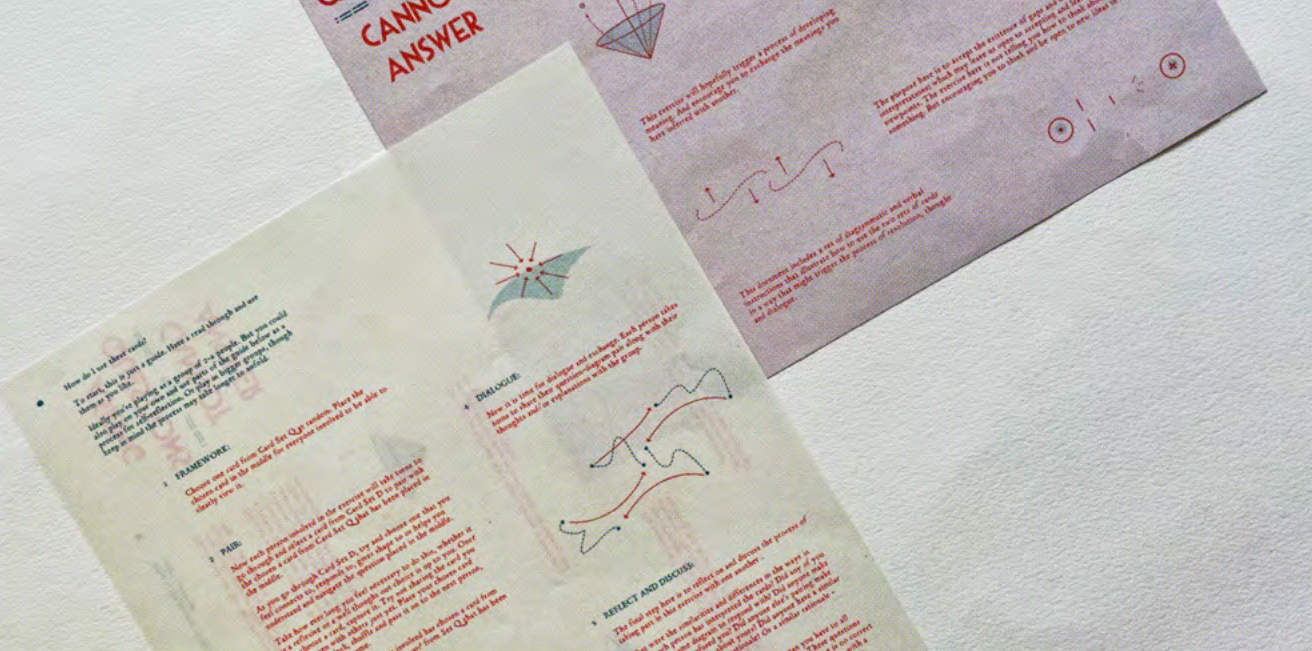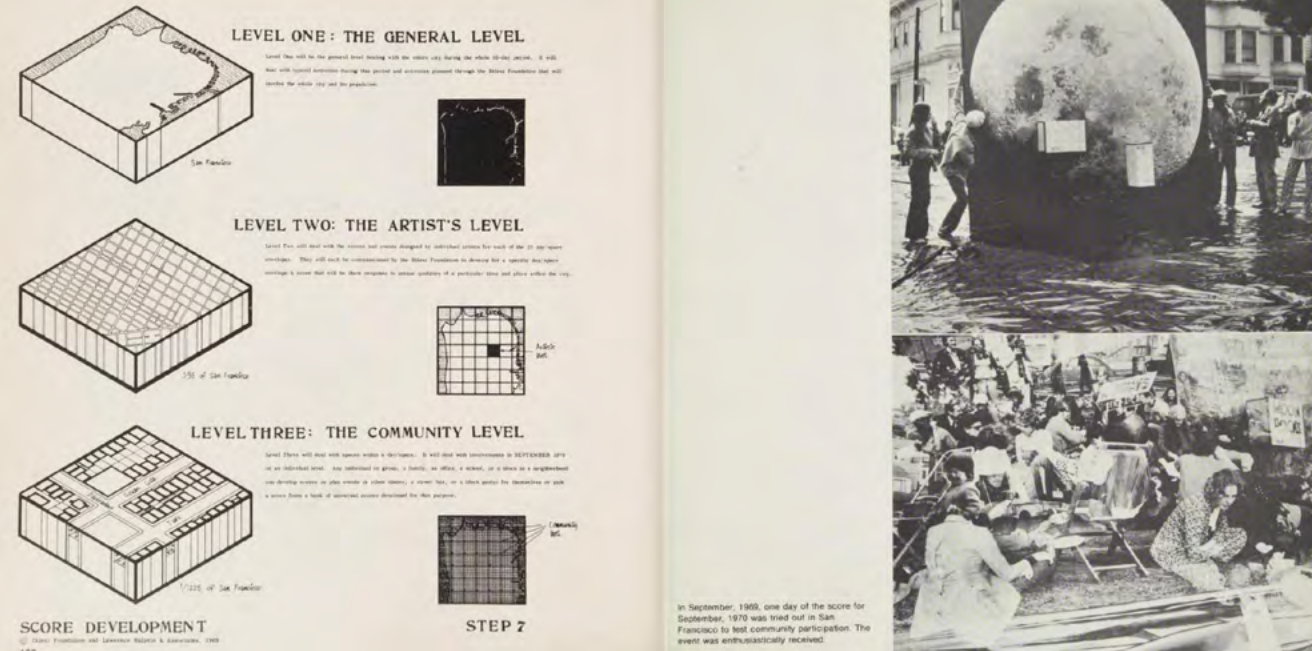Fig. 4.4: Score for community participation within an environment developed by Lawrence Halprin (Halprin, 1969: p. 180-181).

Fig. 4.3: Verbal and diagrammatic instructions that lay out the purpose of and guide to using the set of cards.

'In the planning of communities a score visible to all the people allows each to respond... before the performance is fixed. Before decisions are made,' (ibid., p. 4). While scores are process oriented they are often a device used to plan and negotiate before an outcome or end-point. In the case of Halprin's examples - a performance, and spatial or architectural construction is fixed or agreed upon once negotiated through a score.

Fig. 4.5: A score for community participation laying out instructions for movement and a sequence of activities by Lawrence Halprin (Halprin, 1969: p. 78-79).

In the case of my work, participants are prompted to resolve a gap between diagrams and unanswerable questions. In sharing their inferred meanings with one another, there is no need for the participants to come to an agreement at the end.

Rather than a process of negotiating with each other, the focus is on internal reflection. It is a way to see, give shape to an idea and share with another. Become more aware of how you understand things. And learn how it may differ from another. Rather than deciding on a fixed and correct way to respond to the questions, it is about developing a shared understanding that people can interpret things differently, and come to their own conclusions.

The prompts are not meant to replicate; no two instances of partaking in the card game are meant to be the same. The score here exerts very little control on the dialogue resulting from play. It doesn't prescribe a correct answer, and does not ask the participants to concern themselves with what is correct either.

In framing this as a critical thinking exercise, where meaning or knowledge is being exchanged, perhaps it is important to make clarifications around the concept of agreement.

Knowledge, I've learnt through this project, is a tricky term. Some may argue that agreement is necessary to codify something as knowledge. That knowledge must be proven fact, that everyone can agree upon. Within creative contexts it is not always necessary to introduce scientific conditions of fact and knowledge; which according to Halprin is not 'possible or even desirable in human affairs,' (ibid., p. 4). Such modes of thinking often leave no room for uncertainty, chance or the irrational. All of which are present - yet for some reason concealed - in some critical and creative processes.

While there exists truths that have been rigorously considered and have become part of our accepted objective realities. It is also true that our knowledges aren't made in isolation and are - as illustrated by Gayatri Spivak's 'The Rani of Sirmur' (1985) - totally embedded within our cultural contexts. 'The world appears different to observers moving at different speeds,' (Peat, 2002: p. 3) and no matter how objective we aim to be, our constructions of meaning will always be shaped by our individual positions. What I attempt with this project is to create a shared understanding of this multiplicity that makes up meaning and knowledge.

'To deal with complexity requires a more flexible and context-dependent way of thinking... We should be looking to systems that self-organise, that are organic and open in nature, that generate their own internal, context-dependent logics.' (Peat, 2002: p. 51)

Scores give us a method to design these types of open systems and interactions. And through my

work I am making a start towards developing open systems of thought and exchange.

My aim with this project was to enable myself, and those that engage with my work, to accept the existence of gaps in our knowledges - which may leave us open to accepting and learning other viewpoints. The score I have drafted is not telling you how to think about something. But encouraging you to think and be open to new ideas in return.

What I suppose is currently missing is a specific context of discussion the score is situated within. One that may introduce further frameworks of control that take into account this purpose. This will be necessary moving forward as the verbalisation of a thought, only in context, can be scrutinised, understood and validated.

'Some scores are used to control events with precision - some scores are simply communicative devices ... [they] can be left undetermined as part of the designer's choice,' (Halprin, 1969: p. 9). Scoring allows the scorer to choose the level to which they want to extend their control.

Halprin describes two types of scores: one that controls, and another that energises a process. In my work, I seem to be working more along the lines of the latter where the score 'communicates an idea and ... what emerges is something both more or less than what was intended,' (ibid., p.10).

The choice to develop an open-ended score through my work aligns with the aim of not prescribing or controlling the meanings, thoughts or dialogues that emerge among those that engage with the set of cards.

This brings up questions on the relationship between intent and interpretation. The negotiation between the hand of the designer and the response of the viewer.

The score I have created can be understood as a manifestation of my intent, which is to prompt the process of making meaning between abstract diagrams and unanswerable questions. In choosing inexactness I accept that the process that results while influenced by the score, is not solely shaped by me or the score.

'Interpretation presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers. It seeks to resolve that discrepancy. The interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it,' (Sontag, 1966: p. 97).

The qualities of the process resulting from the open-ended score are thus shaped and altered by the viewers interpretation of my intentions.

In the case of scores that place such a demand on the interpreter, Halprin states, 'for a score to function the participants in a score must exhibit a commitment to the idea of scoring and be willing to go with the specific score,' (1969: p.190).

The willingness of all those involved, needless to say, greatly impacts the nature of the results - of course, along with the context in which the score operates within.
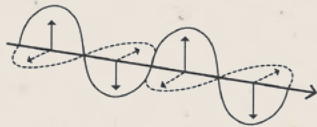
As a result of creating a dialogue between my work and the concept of scores, I have identified new questions through which I can begin to expand and evolve my practice in the next term.

I have been interested in developing open-ended frameworks that involves viewers, and guides them towards a path of discovery and critical reflection that reveals an awareness of their interpretations, experiences and knowledges in relation to one another.

How can I create a score that orchestrates open-ended community participation and generates a dialogue or a creative process with a multiplicity of outputs? How can these processes and their resultant outputs be documented and circulated? What purpose does the function of the score fulfill? Who makes up the community of participants and audiences?

While ambiguity remains essential in developing an open score - specificity of a context can help those involved in the process to generate more meaningful outputs. Can open ended questions, diagrams, interactions help people navigate a specific [complicated] subject or issue? How does this purpose influence the construction of a score? While I haven't yet specified a context I would like to work within in the future, the final section of this essay may provide a loose starting point for me to begin to define a purpose.

Fig. 4.6: Diagram and Unanswerable Question Cards.
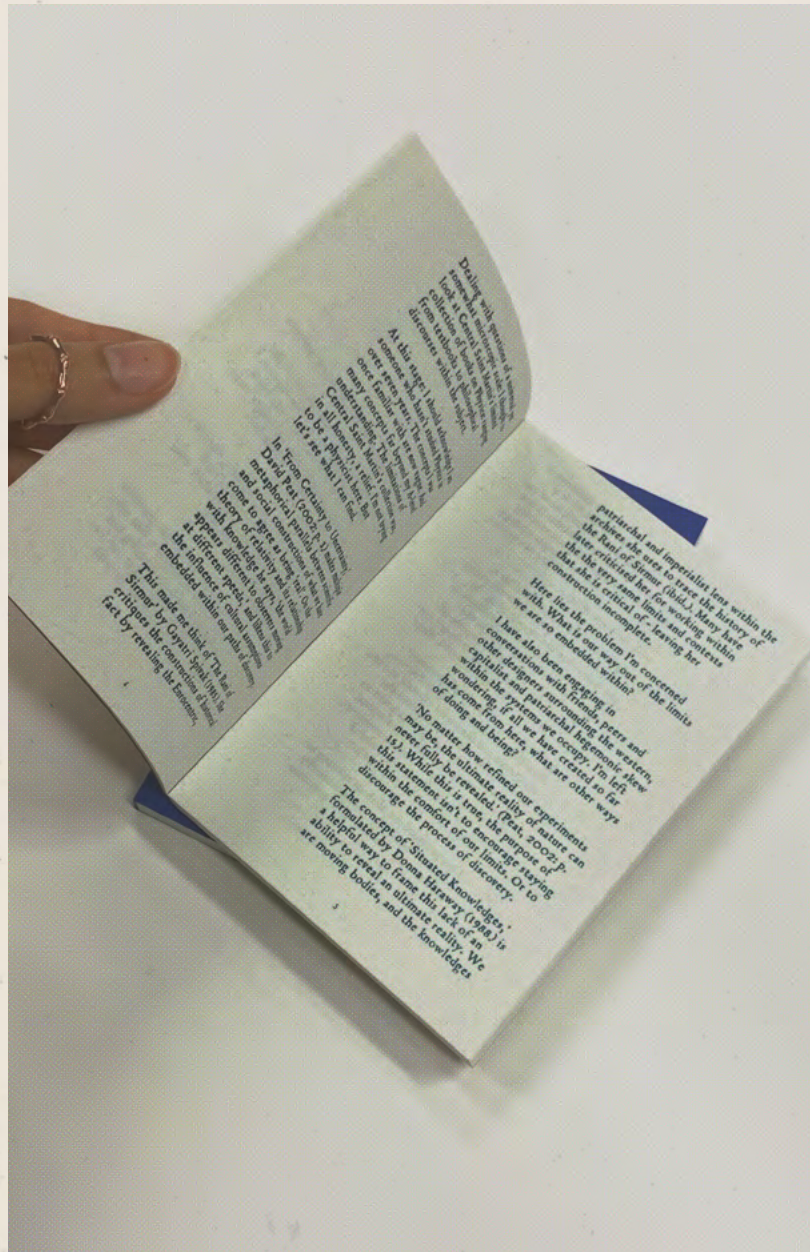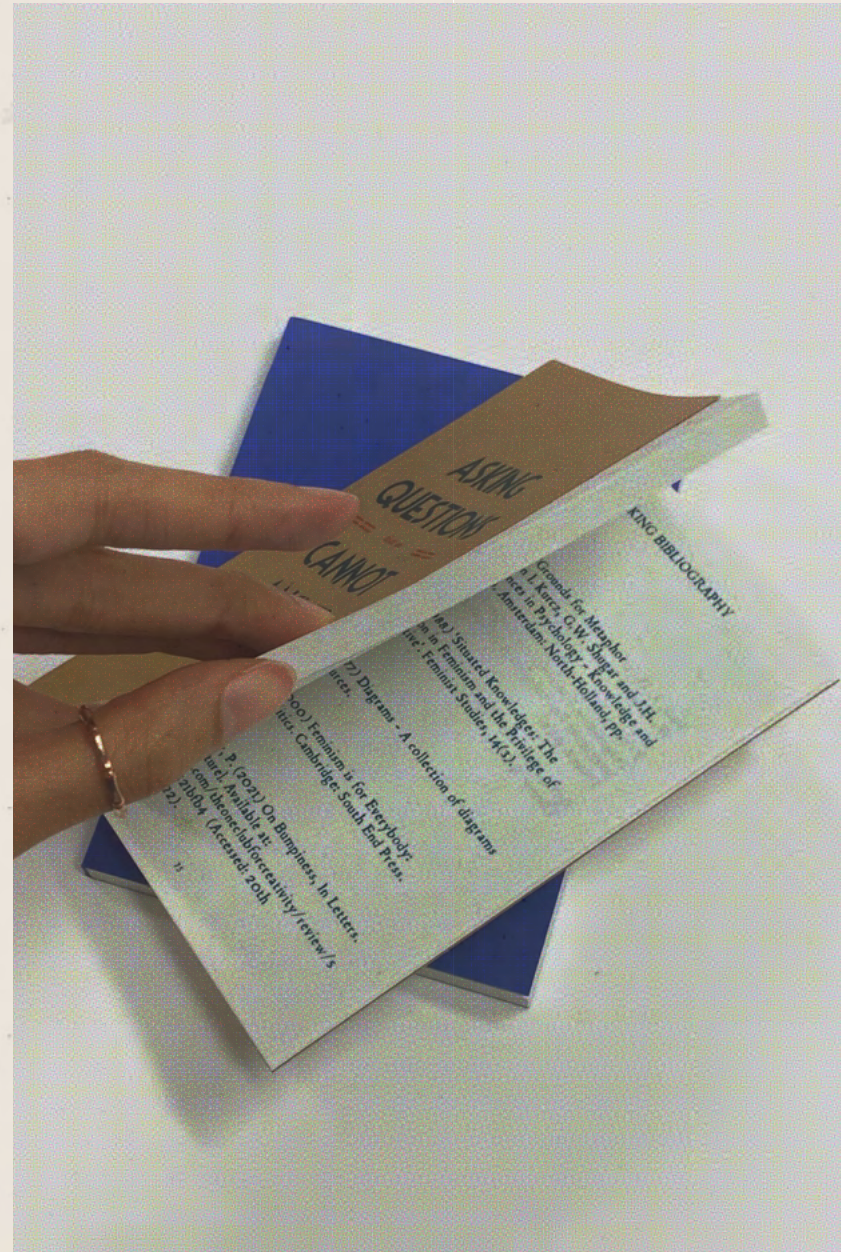
In the concluding text of his book - Halprin includes musings on the state of the world - he says, 'Just as severe as our eco-catastrophes are the other catastrophes latent within our society,' (p.197). He raises concerns over the state of our economic, social and psychological systems.

In doing so he draws his practice as a shaper of environments in relation to his wider position on the state of the world. 'We need Creative mechanisms for change... We need a score,' (ibid.) He extends his principles and frameworks as a designer into a method to cope with how we might understand and act to shape our futures.

With this in mind. I want to actively involve writing or monologuing as a way to reveal my position and principles beyond my practice. I've made a start at this through the essay and voice over that accompanied the diagrams and the game in my studio work. The aforementioned essay included questions and concerns of the systems I find myself stuck within: systems of capital, systems of knowledge and hegemonic systems of western patriarchy. I am aware I work within these contexts and limits. And looking for openings outside of these limits is a process I am still figuring out. And I want to make that known.

The concerns that make the contents of the monologue that accompany my work may not be explicitly present in the work being shown (in the case of the diagrams), or are perhaps ambiguously alluded to (in the case of the unanswerable questions). This may or may not provide context to the work. And perhaps it is not integral to understanding the work or process itself. The monologue reveals my inner motivations and contemplations; an awareness of where I am situated along with where I hope to be situated.

I suppose I see this monologue as being somewhat necessary to reveal my role and intent within work that is intentionally ambiguous (due to the nature of the work itself being a tool to encourage an inner cycle of thought for a viewer). And especially necessary as the work asks for a viewer to be involved - be a participant or performer in the process - in order for the function of the work to be complete.

Can the questions or concerns I am pondering provide a purpose for future work? Perhaps I can use scoring as a method to collect and structure external perspectives on some of these subjects - to create a document of multiple perspectives that accompany my own?

Fig. 4.7   Fig. 4.8

References

Halprin, L. (1969) *RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment.* New York: George Braziller.

Peat, F. D. (2002) *From Certainty to Uncertainty.* Washington D.C.: Joseph Henry Press.

Sontag, S. (1966). ' Against Interpretation' in *Against Interpretation, And Other Essays.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux,

Spivak, G. (1985) 'The Rani of Sirmur,' *History and Theory.* 24(3). pp. 247-272

Images

Fig. 4.1: A diagram-question card pairing by Dellana Nurmansyah. (2022) Photograph by Rakshita Arvind.

Fig. 4.2: A diagram-question card pairing by Jessica Sun. (2022) Photograph by Rakshita Arvind.

Fig. 4.3: Instruction sheet: How to use the set of cards. (2022) Photograph by Rakshita Arvind.

Fig. 4.4: Scanned pages from a book. The Development of a Score. Halprin, L. (1969) *RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment.* New York: George Braziller. pp 180-181.

Fig. 4.5: Scanned pages from a book. A Score for Community Participation in a City. Halprin, L. (1969) *RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment.* New York: George Braziller. pp 78-79.

Fig. 4. 6: Diagram and Question Cards. (2022) Photograph by Rakshita Arvind.

Fig. 4.7: Image of the essay in the risograph publication 'Asking Questions that we Cannot Answer.'(2022) Photograph and publication by Rakshita Arvind.

Fig. 4.8: Image of the essay in the risograph publication 'Asking Questions that we Cannot Answer.'(2022) Photograph and publication by Rakshita Arvind.