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How do we live in an endangered world? Katerina Kokkinos Kennedy and Triage Live Art Collective

Speaker: Katerina Kokkinos Kennedy

Chair: Noel Maloney

Abstract:

This is the edited transcript of Sessions 3 and 4 of the *Symposium on Creative Collaborations in Intercultural and Intermedial Spaces*, convened by Creative Arts and English, La Trobe University, 7-9 July 2020.

Biographical note:

Katerina Kokkinos Kennedy is an award-winning theatre director, writer, and curator. She is the artistic director of Triage Live Art Collective, which she founded in 2009. Since 2006, Katerina's artistic practice has focused on creating participatory, immersive, and site-specific projects. Her acclaimed performances have been commissioned by companies and festivals locally and internationally. From 2013 to 2016, Katerina directed *Hotel obscura*, which was funded by Creative Europe and presented in four countries (Australia, Greece, France, and Austria). In 2016, she was awarded a prestigious two-year Australia Council Theatre Fellowship in recognition of her highly innovative theatre works. Recent credits include: *The infirmary* (Arts House, 2018); *I can't believe we're still having this conversation* (Wonderland Festival Italy, 2019); and *Sea inside* (Hammerfest Festival Norway, 2019). Currently, Katerina is developing three new works: *Ghost light, Meta,* and *After the flood*.

Keywords:

Site-specific performance, live art, immersive theatre, participatory arts, international collaboration, intermediality

Introduction

Noel: I would like to acknowledge and pay respects to the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work and live, and meet today, via Zoom. It's my pleasure to introduce theatre maker, Katerina Kokkinos Kennedy.

Katerina Kokkinos Kennedy: Anyone who has spent any time in the performing arts will know that the vagaries of our sector are always threatening our survival. But this year something has happened that brings into question our capacity to keep going. The pandemic is variable and consistently shifting the goal posts. As soon as a decision is made, it's unmade and then another one must be made. We're in this very unstable terrain, even more unstable than art normally is. For the last few months, every organisation and artist I know has been on red alert and engaged in one contingency plan after another. Alternate festival modes, projects, appearing online, new programs springing up from everywhere and nowhere. That's given me a lot of pause in terms of how I work, what I do, how I think and talk about my work. That will probably filter through what I say today.

I've lost work in Melbourne due to the closures and more than four months of work in the European Union (EU). I've written 27 applications, only five of which have been successful so far. As an artist, I pride myself on being nimble, adaptable, and good at putting out fires. But at this moment, it's hard to know where the next fire or the next danger to my career and my work will come from. I've had to approach everything that I planned for 2020 in a very kind of Zen, relaxed, open, and innovative way. Everyone is stretched to breaking point. If you're an organisation, you may be lucky to qualify for a bail out. If you're an artist, you may be lucky to be on JobKeeper or JobSeeker.

There are many people who have fallen through the cracks, and so that makes a life in the arts more precarious than it has ever been. I also need to say or acknowledge the fact that as an independent artist, I work project to project. I have no continuous funding. It's very hard for me to make a living just by working in Australia. For the last 10 years, I would say 40 to 50 per cent of my work has been made in Europe. My grandparents were World War II refugees, so I'm just a heartbeat away from a European culture, which is a very big part of my Australian identity. My links to that region are very strong and as an adult, I've maintained them. This will be the first time in more than a decade that I haven't spent 30 per cent of my year in the EU, and that feels strange because it's a very important part of my life.

Banquet for Bees

That said, I've just had the good fortune to premiere a work in Denmark: *Banquet for bees*. This was possible because restrictions were eased in Denmark, which allowed for 50 people to meet outdoors. When I was unable to fly to Denmark in February, 2020, we decided that we were going to use Zoom to develop the script further and to work on the dramaturgy and to rehearse.

Banquet for bees is an international collaboration between my company, Triage, and Secret Hotel based in rural Denmark. It is part of a nature trilogy: three works that grapple with networks in the natural world and communities that are essential to the health of our planet. The work employs narrative storytelling. It is also participatory. It's very sensual and it includes experiential modes as well as a complex sound score delivered by headphones and speakers located in the environment. The soundscape was an amalgam of binaural sounds recorded in and around hives, and the work of a composer.

It was also a celebratory process full of errors, but we got around the major issues: the crew would place the iPad in various places in the room or in the landscape, and I would take notes and then we would debrief. It was a strange way to make a work but after many hours of working in this way, it started to feel normal. A lot of us have been living and working on Zoom and it's interesting how one's affinity to it can exponentially grow.

Sea Inside

Last year, I spent six weeks in the Arctic Circle making a work called *Sea inside*. This project was a collaboration with Dansearena Nord and my artistic collaborators, onestepatatimelikethis (sic). It was an amazing experience of living in a remote town in Northern Norway with a population of about 10,000. Hammerfest is a stone's throw from the actual North Pole. It's a glorious and fragile environment, and we were very privileged to meet and interview local people in the region. We made a work that reflected this fragile beauty and the sense of danger posed to the region by global warming and pollution. The work was created using a series of audio tracks that led the audience on a site-specific journey through the city, and what we call 'follow films'.

A 'follow film' appears on your phone or a device and is basically like a map. We had to make these films and overlay the audio to guide the audience through the spaces that we wanted them to experience. The work traversed everywhere, from the major shipping harbour of the town to the easily accessible wilder areas of the mountain behind the town and the sea. The combination of audio narration, performers on film, performers popping up in real life, and a live film experience in a very spooky abandoned cinema left audiences with an experience of passing through a world that no longer existed.

This is something that intermediality can achieve because of the way in which it moves between modalities and ties them together and creates affects and experiences for the audience that aren't so easily accessible with just a play, or a film. I am fascinated by the way these different art forms cross pollinate and create something different in the way the audience sees the world. This idea of being a ghost in a world that once existed but has now disappeared was made possible by the complexity of these different layered experiences. This was also the first time that I made a film for a cinema.

The stand-alone film in the cinema was projected on a red velvet curtain and it took the audience a while to realise whether the figures in the film were real or not. In fact, at some

point halfway through the film, real actors do appear on the stage. There is a double effect there. It was a very exciting way to experiment with film and live performance at the same time because the imagery allowed us to create a bizarre montage of imagery, and to convey this illusion of ghosts existing in the cinema.

The essence of what I do as an artist is to create poetic, alternate realities, in which audiences can dream and contemplate their own lives, and hopefully experience an embodied adventure that can lead them into meditative and even transformative experiences. I'm always thinking about how to create a site-specific journey that reverberates through several narratives, one that is focused on existential questions. I mean that literally: to astonish the audience into asking questions of themselves and their lives.

Texts, institutions, limitations

I trained as a classical text-based theatre director. I studied Shakespeare in my Honours year at La Trobe. As an artist, poetic language is my deepest and greatest love.

I studied at the VCA in the early 90s. At this time, many of you will know if you are over 30, that the theatrical landscape was made up mainly of major theatre companies that presented unreconstructed classical texts and well-made Australian plays in purpose-built venues. There was virtually no other scene in Melbourne. There were of course independent artists and collectives who were experimenting with devised theatre and site-specific events. But this was about as far from the 'real theatre' as you could get.

There were companies like Anthill and others doing really good theatre work, but it was a very narrow band of theatre and with few glimmers of hope for a young woman director. By the time I graduated in 1995, the entire independent sector had been defunded due to brutal funding cuts. The independent arts landscape had collapsed and resembled a desert. There was no sense that anyone could make a life or a career doing things like that. It was quite a stultifying and limiting period.

I continued to do my own experimental work and I also taught for more than seven years at the VCA as an acting teacher. At this point, I also want to mention the elephant in the room: the patriarchal claptrap of Australian theatre. For women, the door virtually gets slammed in your face. For me as a young female artist, it was not possible to open that door or to be taken seriously as a director, no matter how good my work was. Those of us who did eventually get a foot in that door, in either the MTC or the Malthouse (then known as the Playbox), and other institutions, were eviscerated by male directors who were twice our age. These men could only perceive other young male directors as their possible heirs. Whilst theatre was my first love, it was also a boyfriend that didn't treat me particularly well.

After a couple of years, I decided I was going to leave my lousy ex and go in search of creative freedom and experimentation. That creative freedom and experimentation was founded on the weirder things that I did while I was a student: the break-out experiments, and the task-based assessment projects that I was set by people who were training me at the VCA. And then there

were those great people like director and teacher, Richard Murphet, acting teacher David Latham, movement teacher Anne Thompson, Jenny Kemp, an amazing director, and the extraordinary Margaret Cameron who was a performer, a poet, and a playwright. An amazing cohort of educators and makers.

Although there were structural tyrannies in place, there were also very important figures in the landscape who were offering students and bright young things new ways of thinking and new ways of directing their energies. These experiments, for me, were almost always about direct encounters between performers and the audience. I remember when I was writing an essay in second year at VCA, I came across an article about a work that a director had made in the National Theatre in London, which was very simple.

This article described how one person at a time was taken through the incredible labyrinth of the National, and right up into the gods of the ceiling of the Olivier Theatre, and was asked to look through a peephole in a door. Inside the room there was a slow-motion party taking place. Then, if you looked long enough, you could see two people fucking on a table. I remember reading that article, and thinking, I want to be making that work. It was one of those seminal moments in my working life where I was spoken to in the same way that Shakespeare spoke to me in my late teens and early twenties.

I'm mentioning that story because in the flotsam and jetsam of trying to make a living as an artist, sometimes we can miss those things that really speak to us of our destiny or our genius or our very particular set of abilities. Of course, when I first read that story, I was only in second year and at the time, I didn't really think it was possible for me to do that sort of work. But somewhere in my mind, I think it shaped me as an artist and then it came back to me later, once I realised that I wasn't going to become Kenneth Branagh.

When I taught from 2001 to 2007, I was free to radically experiment with my students, as well as with an artists' collective. This was the start of the major shift away from theatre as I had known it. In 2006 I collaborated on the creation of an immersive work called Beast banquet, set within a wedding reception for an audience of 35. This was the start of my journey in immersive performance. Then in 2007, I applied to do a research masters and I got a scholarship. What I say to artists when I mentor them or teach them is that research is one of the best ways to understand who you are as an artist, and to know what your form really is. Not the form that you've been trained in or the form that you've come up through, but what your particular genre or milieu is, or your oeuvre as an artist. A period of research is just the most brilliant time in which to reinvent yourself and your practice. I think my MA was a bridge. I still maintained my obsession with text: in this case, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. But the gauntlet that I had thrown down for myself was how could I make Ibsen's play about this very, very difficult female protagonist without a single line of Ibsen? How could I reinvent the work as an immersive live art experience?

Founding Triage and seizing the means of production

That was 2007. During that time, I also founded my company, Triage, because I'd found a clarity in what I wanted to do. Fast forward 13 years, and I am now working locally and internationally. I've built a body of work that I feel proud of, that is really devoted to the experience of the audience. In the last two years, I've also focused my practice on making works that explore the climate crisis.

Live art and audience participation are all about affective choreographies and the psycho-physical journey of the audience. The last 13 years have also been about reconfiguring my practice to understand how dramaturgical knowledge can be used not for the actors and the text but for the progress of the audience through a series of what I call performative 'stations'. How each event along the journey is calibrated to connect with and expand into the next one.

The other thing about this kind of work is that as a director, as an agent, as a wild spirit, I realised I did not need permission. I say this to my students all the time. You do not need permission and you do not need to wait to be given a place at the art table. You seize that for yourself. Find your agency and limit the power of gatekeepers. Because they can't keep you out if you're not playing by their rules. It's much easier to create your own game and to work your practice in the direction that you find most interesting and stimulating. My research gave me the language, the ideas, and the courage to make my work happen in radical new ways that were unimaginable to me as a 16-year-old in a production of *Hamlet*.

And, my academic writing, as I mentioned before, improved my grant writing skills by about 1000 per cent. It meant that I could really articulate what I was doing and how I was going to do it. I had very strong methodological means that were obviously convincing to funding panels. After waiting to be given a turn as a woman in the theatre, I left that all behind and I opened my own doors. What I needed was exciting ideas, great collaborators, a pinch of audacity, and spades of hard work and determination. As my mentor at that time said to me, 'Don't be shy'.

Beyond theatre: The dramaturgy of participation

I started to experiment with installation and with video and sound as complementary narrative paths for the bigger story. Of all of these, I found audio to be a very powerful narrative tool, but also an intimate one. It is one of the quickest ways to enter an audience's consciousness and imagination. I also started to work with actors in much simpler and more direct ways.

Gone were the days of endless warm-ups and ridiculous questions about motivation. Everything became task-based and focused on creating symbolic, metaphorical, and actual meaning for the audience in the space. I started to think about the dramaturgy of participation. I started to think much less about the mise-en-scene and much more about how ideas and sensations move through an audience's mind and body and spirit, and create new ideas and terrains within them rather than in an external staging. I felt an enormous liberation from old structures, from virtuosity, and what I call the 'unacknowledged narcissism' of theatre.

I see my work as a service to audiences. My mantra to myself and to the actors that I work with is that this is not about us. This is about creating the conditions for an audience to have an immersive experience that can lead them to know more about themselves and more about how they are in the world. In short, I fell in love with audiences all over again, and I wanted to be much more involved with them and their journey. I still love my theatre boyfriend and I still go to the theatre, but I don't make theatre anymore in that sense.

Inspirations and tyrannies

Around the time that I was writing my master's thesis, I came across an article by Peter Greenaway, a filmmaker that I love. It was an article called *Towards a reinvention of cinema* (2003). It was published in *Variety* and in it, he argues against business-as-usual approaches to art and exhorts filmmakers to get beyond what he brilliantly terms the four tyrannies. When I read this article, I breathed a sigh of relief, and I so got it. I felt that his thoughts were completely applicable to theatre. Greenaway asks us to reconsider and to question the foundational elements of film and how they bind us and blind us to alternative approaches. How our fealty to these as sort of gods within our practice blocks new routes and blocks innovations.

He names them as follows. First, the tyranny of the text. Because as we know, there are many texts and texts are not just words. The second one is the tyranny of the frame. There are many ways to look and there are many places to look. The third one is the tyranny of the actor, and I would argue, as Greenaway does, that the actor is just one element in this space. The last one is the tyranny of the camera. This is perhaps slightly less to do with performance, although there is a way in which a director can oversteer the gaze of the looking subject. I think one of the things I was interested in with my work was how to enable the volition of the audience's gaze rather than always steering them towards what you wanted them to see.

The field of site-specific performance is much harder to control because there is a lot going on. When you do direct the gaze, that has a particular meaning. I found this argument that Greenaway was making very, very instructive in terms of making my early works. I also want to share with you a quote by Phil Smith, a site-specific artist who works and lives in the south of England and is a lecturer at Plymouth University: 'You can be your own film director. Just use your eyes as cameras. Film new stories. Jump cut from view to view for this is the ideal place for your film making or your theatre'.

Phil has written a lot about how the audience constructs their experiences and there's no way of knowing how that work is going to be absorbed and put together. I think of my works as kits of component parts carefully selected to enable the audience to progress through the performance.

Immersion

The Oxford Dictionary provides a definition of immersion that relates to the physical and emotional experience of being submerged in water. Historically, immersion is connected to the rite of baptism, to birth, as a bursting forth. Death is an elemental return to the water and the earth. In cinema, we are immersed; in intensive language courses, we are immersed; in video gaming or in a deep engagement with a novel. All of these are places of immersion. As audience members, being immersed is often quite revealing of who we are. Immersion can point to how brave, anxious, or adaptable we are to new or complex situations.

Immersive events can drop us in at the deep end into situations which are intellectually, physically, and emotionally charged or demanding in ways that we may or may not have expected. A skilful and sensitively dramaturged, immersive performance considers the transitions that audiences make, their wellbeing, and their ethical treatment. A well-planned immersive work also requires the creation of solid contingency planning. I call this Plan A, B, C, D. Even more dramatically, sometimes an exit plan, or, if things go wrong or an audience member just wants to be lifted out of the situation (because it's too much). These are some of the principles that I work with in creating my work.

Intermediality

In relation to intermediality, Klaus Bruhn Jensen, a Danish academic, gives a nice pithy definition of this when he talks about the interaction of modern digital media as a form of new communication. A means of change and exchange, in which different media refer to and depend on, and with which they interact explicitly and implicitly. These media are also the constituents of a wider social and cultural environment. We recognise them. They're not coming in above us or they're not things that we're unfamiliar with in an increasingly digital environment. In particular, the term denotes communication through several discourses at once or a combination of different sensory modalities such as text, sound, and the moving image.

Intermediality can also lead to forms of media interrelations that are new in the way they converge. The addition of the sensing body to intermediality adds an entirely new dimension to the experience insofar as looking and walking represent, for example, a very different dramaturgical proposition from listening and lying down or sitting in a theatre and watching a performance unfold on a stage.

I want to touch a little bit on the audience and how the audience is different for me in this context. In creating immersive works, I recombine and repurpose all the fundamental elements of theatre – and possibly of film as well. They activate sight; they activate text; they activate sound and live performance. But in this context, traditional acting doesn't tend to work so well. In the broadest sense because it's generally declamatory. What you find with immersive performance is that the performer must be much more subtle, much more within themselves, and must be open to intimate encounters with the audience. It's not so much about projecting and full body performance in the way that a great classical actor would engage with an

audience. It's more to do with how I am with you in this very small room, or as I pass by you in a corridor.

Audience as protagonist

The critical difference between traditional theatre and immersive or intermedial works is that the audience is in fact the protagonist: that means the actor needs to take a back step and let the audience be the centre of the performance event.

The audience is of course deeply engaged in a good play, in a play that's working, because the actors are enacting a drama for them, on their behalf. However, they're also seated, and their bodies are only available to them in certain ways. When you've got an audience that's moving, walking, looking, thinking, listening, processing, and participating in a broader time and space within an unfolding narrative or experience, then the performative presence of the audience is more available.

The audience becomes like a dance partner. They make moves and they also resist. The actor must be very clued into working with different kinds of audiences. In my projects, I test the work under different conditions: the compliant audience who is passive and gives very little. The bolshie audience. The audience who is deeply engaged. The timid audience.

My projects frame the world in a cinematic way: audiences feel that they are like a character in their own film. I blend live performance with site-specific landscapes and digital elements (sound, video) to create mixed reality. For me, audio and, to a lesser degree, video on a phone or video in a filmic setting, and phone messaging, are the elements that I probably use the most. For me, audio, is almost like pouring the work into the audience's ear. It feels like a path of less resistance than the eye.

I never use the word 'spectator'. I'm visual as an artist, but I feel like the passageway of the ear is somehow even more human than the eye. The visceral nature of audio recordings is a case in point. The narrative that comes through sound is also the companion or the guide of the audience through the work. It shapes their private thoughts and asks them questions that they only need to answer internally. This creates a buffer zone or platform from which to contemplate and be in dialogue with oneself and the work, and this can happen even with large audiences.

Working principles

I want to talk through five basic intermedial principles. There's 'the technology', which I have already spoken about. Another principle is something I call 'the tilt', which is about me as a director ensuring the audience is safe, physically and in relation to the material that I'm exploring. To put the audience off balance, I need to make them feel safe. I will take you somewhere in this work but to do so, I need to make you feel secure.

The third principle is 'the hijack'. I don't use venues. I haven't paid to use a venue in 15 years. I would rather pay my performers. This is an ethic that I developed before I did my MA. That was a founding principle of Triage. Instead, we hijack spaces. Works hidden in plain sight: in a library, on the street, at the pool. Invisible and autonomous. There is a part of me that utterly resists the power and control that the state, and organisations, want to exert over space. That is the glory of public spaces: no one owns them. It's critical to living in a democracy.

The fourth principle that is important for me is the concept of 'stations', which I mentioned earlier. For example, in *The infirmary*, there was a dramaturgical logic about participants meeting in a public foyer, being interviewed in a small room, before being taken downstairs to the hospital ward and their private cubicles. At each station, the participant's journey is aided by the architecture, the visuals, language, and the live performers mirroring the demeanour and actions of medical staff.

The last principle is that of 'real participation'. I've participated in works where I have no agency: I've just felt like I was being steered like a sheep. I have never enjoyed that kind of work. I always want to respect the audience. If they want to go off message or to follow something that is of interest to them in the space, then there should be scope for that. For instance, they can press 'pause', go off and do something else, and then return to the work. Or, if you do not want them to do that – you need to think about how to short-circuit that impulse. You need to make it less attractive than the route you've planned.

Performance, audience, and initiation

As an artist, myth and story have played a huge part in my life. I use them to shape a project. One of the things I'm fascinated by is the history of rites. I use the basic principles of initiation rites to shape my performances.

In all my works, I consider the three major steps of change: separation, liminality, and reincorporation. Separation is the stage where you depart from the group or from society. Liminality refers to being in a transitional place or occupying two places at once, which is often the centre of the work (life and death, knowing and not knowing, trust and fear). Reincorporation is when the audience is folded back into the social body, or back into their daily lives.

I'm now going to talk about several works in more detail.

The House Project

The house project was produced as part of my MA research degree at Monash. It reimagined Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* as an immersive live art performance that is part social gathering, part deconstruction of a 19th century modernist play, and part feminist history lesson. Audiences

arrived at a large Victorian house, and after meeting the actors in an intimate confession within the party context, they moved through various rooms to encounter different versions of Hedda.

In one room, there was a control freak businesswoman who wore only white. In another room, there was a sexually and intellectually free spirit in the tradition of Virginia Woolf's *A room of one's own*. Then there was a woman who was pregnant in a mental asylum, and suffering from psychosis. Through the bedroom door into a bathroom there was the suicidal Hedda, who was completely on the edge and naked, and talking to the audience through the mirror. In the kitchen, there was a Hedda making penises out of dough, baking them, and smashing them. There was a burnt book in the oven that was a reference to the precious manuscript that Hedda destroys. And young Hedda in her private school uniform having a fag out the front porch, waiting for her dad to come home.

Noel: The audience could interact with each of the Heddas.

Katerina: Yes, they could. I remember being in the bathroom where the suicidal Hedda was, talking to us through a mirror. A woman in the audience said to her, 'You don't have to do this'. It was such a powerful moment.

Finally, the actors in Edwardian costume gathered to read the final scene of the play and arguing about their interpretations, motivations, and various translations. The performance then morphed into a party where we all shared food and our experiences of the night. The finale was a confessional in which audiences were invited to confess bad behaviour in the style of *Hedda Gabler* – these were prompts directly from the text. A lot of the women in the audience talked about how it mirrored their experience, either as young women, women fleeing bad relationships, or struggling to understand who they were within a culture that had gendered expectations of them. It was a really satisfying end to the research process.

The Infirmary

The infirmary was made in 2018. It was commissioned by Arts House. The hijack for *The infirmary* was the hospital. We have all visited someone in hospital or been a patient ourselves. We know what they are, and we know what to do when we're in there. Here begins the hijack of a well-known context.

I often think of my work as a form of catastrophe practice. I had a near death experience in my early 30s and it really reshaped my relationship to life and to art. One of the things I'm most interested in is human vulnerability, because we're programmed to avoid it. My brush with death changed my life. It was frightening, but it was also deeply informing and shifting in terms of what was important about my life.

I always want to give audiences that kind of experience. I chose the hospital because it's full of drama. Intense things happen when you're confronted by being ill, or a loved one being ill. Also, we live in a culture that doesn't think about death very much. Often, it's on top of us

before we really have had any space to think about it. *The infirmary* gives people a chance to explore their feelings around illness, loneliness, vulnerability, and death.

The audience is greeted by nursing staff and interviewed in a small office. The admissions process occurs in a private cubicle where you undress and get into a bed. This is called the descent: here the eyes of the audience are bandaged, and their body is covered in a blanket, and they are left in the cubicle. Then they are moved to the ICU, where they experience a 30-minute-long audio track. In that time, their hands and face are washed. Lights of different colours wash over them, which are visible through the bandages. They experience different modes of touch, smells, and external sounds.

Towards the end of the work, the audience member experiences a simulated heart attack. They listen to a monitor which indicates a cardiac arrest. At this point, we cover their head with a sheet and the bed tilts backwards. The sound of solar wind fills their ears before the bed is finally raised, and they see their own face in a mirror.

It's risky material. In the process of presenting the work, we recommended to people who'd been recently ill or who had recently lost a loved one to think about whether this was the right time to attend. We left it up to them to decide. We don't make decisions for people. We just explain that it might be a bit confronting, or raw, so they may want to consider that. We also give people an out. With a work like this, it is very important. The audience only needed to raise their hand and we would briefly discuss what they wanted to do.

When the audience became fully conscious at the end, their faces were often incredibly open and vulnerable. It was very beautiful. They looked like they had either an epiphany or sex – or were in a very different place in the world. They received a cup of tea and a biscuit, as you would in a hospital, and were allowed a period of rest.

Probably the most critical thing about this work was to reassure the audiences that we knew what we were doing. One of my long-term collaborators, Victoria Morgan, is a highly skilled ICU nurse. She works at St Vincent's Hospital. She was part of the team and she trained us. We used proper medical beds and equipment. We had all the costumes, stethoscopes, thermometers, the hospital beds. We followed medical protocols. We loved doing it. I worked as a ward assistant while I was at uni in my late teens, and I rediscovered my love for being back on the ward. For a couple of weeks there, I wondered if I should retrain.

Noel: One of the things that surprised me in retrospect was the fact that I had been touched. The touching was woven seamlessly into the experience. It can be a really confronting thing for a performer to touch the audience and for the audience to be touched by a performer. What thinking went into structuring that experience of being touched so that it didn't feel invasive or too confronting?

Katerina: Vic Morgan trained us to touch in a particular way: with the flat of the hand. That is the most reassuring and neutral form of touching. There's no grabbing. It was amazing how people would trust us with their bag and their body. We knew that if we got anything majorly wrong, it could be trouble. Interestingly, no one asked to leave the work. The interview at the

beginning gave us an indication of who our patient was, and what their limits were. One person said to me, 'You can talk to me, but don't touch me'. We all took this information very seriously. It was why we conducted the interviews in the first place.

Hotel Obscura

Hotel obscura was funded by Creative Europe for three years. It happened in four countries and eight cities, with more than 11 organisations, 250 independent artists, and more than 1500 audiences. The performance invited participants to walk through the city listening to an audio track, and to then enter a high-end hotel, where they explored a series of rooms that offered 20-minute one-to-one performances that explored themes of voyeurism, love, sex work, travel, near death experience, the history of Grindr, secret fantasies, and the multiplicity of human identity.

I'd always wanted to make an ambitious, long-form immersive work, something which is very rare in Australia, and difficult to fund. The Creative Europe grant, which was something like €800,000 in total, enabled us to work across time and space to create a crazily ambitious work. At the heart of it was the desire to create an extended dream experience, a cinematic landscape, through which an audience member could flow as a protagonist, encountering different experiences, themes, and figures. It was inspired by the film work of David Lynch, and it had three major parts.

Part One involved walking through the city's laneways, checking into the hotel, experiencing three room-based performances, and a decompression cocktail in a presidential suite. We took over the 45th floor of a high-end hotel in Melbourne and we worked for 12 hours every day. Audiences flowed through. It was absolutely insane as a performer. We were on, on, on. But it was very enjoyable, and the team became a crazy hotel family by the end of this process. Audiences were spoilt and delighted. We also had this wonderful deal with a restaurant across the road, where you could go and have a special dining experience as an extra treat. We discovered all these amazing, secret places in the hotel. One of the performances was in a very posh toilet, which is a Grindr hook-up zone.

For *Hotel obscura* we created an audio work that began on Flinders Street and took audiences into alleyways and the lift lobby. The audience members were wrapped in fluffy white bathrobes, with secret notes in their pockets, and no one had the exact same experiences. In one section, an audience member stands in front of the bathroom mirror while listening to an audio segment inviting them to see their face as one in a long line of human faces and genetic material. In another work, a chocolate cake is made during an intimate conversation, a life is planned after the audience is carried (as a bride) over the hotel room threshold, or a non-binary artist discusses their femme clothing whilst watching a football match.

Felicity Collins (audience): Were the performers in *Hotel obscura* and *The infirmary* part of a local arts scene?

Katerina: Yes, mostly local with three EU artists for *Hotel obscura*. There was this period in Australia between 2005 and 2015 where a lot of new companies produced experimental works. Many artists were creating live art, in the mould of companies like Punchdrunk in London and Third Rail in New York. Also at that time, the Australia Council were going through quite a large internal shift, and they instigated an experimental fund. Suddenly, people who were outside of everything, were able to apply to do their works and were being commissioned and programmed by venues such as Arts House. There was a lot of excitement around this new form. After finishing my research Masters degree, I graduated into this incredibly fertile landscape. It was incredibly fortuitous. In 2009, I got a commission to make a work for a big EU-wide festival. Then it just kept going. Work begets work.

Noel: What role does writing play in your work?

Katerina: I don't think of myself as a writer. But I write for everything I make. In the writing, there is this titration process whereby if I start with 50 pages, it ends up being 10. Those 10 pages then become a springboard.

The AI Party

The AI party was a dare for me. How can we make a work for a very large-scale audience (around 1000) that was part political rally, part rave, and which dealt with all the vital issues of our time: climate change, over-population, extractionism, dying capitalism, dinosaur white male politics, neoliberalism, and basically every scourge of the twenty-first century?

The overarching question was: can people do politics, dance, and vote, at the same time? Thus far, there have been two major developments of this work, funded by Creative Victoria and the Australia Council, respectively. The last one, which was in 2019, was to test the script and elements of the party which included lasers, techno music, and a DJ.

We had two AI salespeople, the psychopomp-guides that introduce the audience to what an AI-led government could look like. We are so desperate and so scared about where contemporary politics is. So, our question was: how open would you be to an AI prime minister or president if they could guarantee the preservation of the earth, and the protection of indigenous people and everyone else on the frontline of extinction? I think the delicious and very attractive proposition was to combine thinking and dancing and voting, to explore this very dangerous moment in history.

Of course, with Covid-19, the project is pretty much dead in the water for now. We were talking to major festivals about the work, but we're now light years away from that. There is so much uncertainty around large audiences. It's going to remain on the backburner for now. And the question for me is: will it still be relevant in 3-5 years? Because projects have their time, and that time can pass.

Noel: Did the audience have an opportunity to reflect or express how they experienced that movement?

Katerina: Yes. We worked with a company called Sandpit. They make bots and apps. They initially used mobile technology to poll the audience on behalf of Frankie, the AI leader. Frankie would send questions to the audience via their phone and would garner responses. They processed audience responses immediately and fed them back via Frankie's speech or via a screen. For instance, we asked the audience to list the five most important issues in relation to our ailing world and to put those into their phone messages. Frankie absorbed those and then projected them via the LED screen. What people were thinking in the room could be shared quickly, such as concerns about over population or the industrial war complex. One of the most popular questions was, 'Frankie, do you love me?'

Training

Rob Conkie (audience): What is the process for training actors to work in this way?

Katerina: I'll give you a concrete example. In 2011, I made a work called *An appointment with J Dark* with Triage collaborator, Melanie Jame Wolf, who is a strong performer. She was skilled in gaining the audience's trust, but also at times she was too forceful, too much steering them towards a certain outcome. And frustrated when they eluded her. I rehearsed with her a lot and asked her not to focus on winning them over, but to be generous with them, and playful. I became a range of obnoxious characters to test her. It was just the two of us. It was a very intensive making period. I was asking her to respond to the given circumstances of the moment, not what she wanted to achieve. Over that period, she had a revelation. She understood how openness was much more effective in bonding with an audience, and that giving them room to move or say no, was vital.

An appointment with J Dark was structured as a 50-minute therapeutic session. J Dark appeared at the beginning of the show as a therapist. She took individual audience members into this very labyrinthine building, where they were asked questions, had to select objects, and to decide which doors to pass through. It was a crazy play space. At the very end of the show, she took audiences up into an attic where they laid down together on a bed and she sang them a lullaby. The show is in part about how the performer (we, as the audience) go from being in control at the start of the work, to being vulnerable and open together.

By the end the dialogue – and the transference can be strong – it was quite a moving and beautiful experience for many people. So, to answer your question, the training process is about testing and challenging the performer to be as real as they can be in the moment with audiences, even when the person seems to be giving them nothing. How to be present.

One of the things that is easy to overlook is the introverted audience member who is having a great time, but not necessarily signalling that. Performers have to attune with the person in the room (whoever they are), and to accept whatever happens with grace.

Concluding remarks

Atalanti Dionysus (audience): Where can we find out more about your work?

Katerina: My website is Triage Live Art Collective https://www.triageliveartcollective.com I'm also on Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter.

Noel: Unfortunately, we are nearing the end of our time. Thank you, Kat, for sharing your work with us in such a generous and insightful way, and for offering us your vision of how art can be integrated into our lives.

Katerina: Thanks for the invitation. It's been really lovely to be here.

Noel: And thank you to Nicole Pavich for organising the session and managing the audio visuals. And thank you to everyone for coming along.

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