

**JJ:**

... Visibilising queerness or transness is simply just to say that "we exist". But also, I think the real work is about creating methodologies for people to see beyond the politics of recognition ... I mean, maybe that's answer to your previous question about, well, what do we do? What do we do about it?

*Introduction music*

**Janine Harrington:**

Welcome to Satelliser conversations; an audio series that seeds encounters and conversations between people coming at topics from different perspectives and orientations, many of whom have never met before.

The conversations are based on the lockdown online discursive rehearsal process of Satelliser: a dance for the gallery; a durational performance in which artists cooperate to maintain conversations whilst dancing over the course of a day as co-workers.

These conversations reflect intimacies across distances that many of us have experienced through the whole of the project.

I'm Janine Harrington, a UK- based artist and leader of the Satelliser project across live shows, the podcast series, and an online publication: [satellising.com](http://satellising.com).

You can find more information about me by following @inside.i on Instagram or at [www.janineharrington.com](http://www.janineharrington.com).

Satelliser conversations are recorded and edited by Rohanne Udall at Siobhan Davies Studios with music composed by Jamie Forth and graphics created by John Philip Sage. The Satelliser Project is produced by Zarina Rossheart and I.

*Music*

In this episode, Satelliser coworker elena rose light meets JJ Chan and June Lam. Their conversation dances through many ideas and experiences including: ambiguity and time, choreographies of law and protest, plurality and shift in identification across spaces, refusal, joy, and locating the role and positionality of the artist in relation to expectations, institutions, and codes.

JJ Chan is an artist who works across sculpture, moving image, and writing. Their work draws from lived experience and stories stolen from eavesdropped conversations to explore the edges of our everyday realities and the ways in which we construct our identities.

June Lam is a community organiser and multidisciplinary artist of Chinese and Vietnamese ancestry living in London.

He works across performance, dance, sculpture, and collage with practices that seek to challenge white colonial desirability optics and locate gender expansive possibilities for pleasure and joy as a queer East Asian femme trans man.

elena rose light is a white, trans/nonbinary choreographer and performer originally from Southern California (Micqanaqa'n), currently living in Berlin, Germany.

Their creative practice is rooted in the potential of antiracist, queer, and nonbinary somatics to reorganise systems of thought and social codes.

*Music*

**JJ Chan:**

So where do we begin?

**June Lam:**

Should we introduce ourselves? I feel like that might make sense.

**JJ:**

Yeah, we could do.

I wonder if maybe also we could talk because the invitation kind of came a certain way that -- so I imagine, elena, you invited June and then -- is that how it worked? And then, June, you invited me? And so it was this kind of process. Or was it not quite like that?

**elena rose light**

Sort of. I kind of came to Janine with a loose idea of an experience in Satelliser.

And was like, "I want to, yeah, have a conversation around trans identity." Or like, I don't know. Like, existing and holding multiple truths. And then Janine mentioned that she had met June in a workshop, I think?

**June:**

Very briefly. So I feel like, yeah -- I feel like my interactions with Janine until now have been quite fleeting, actually.

But she got enough of a sense of my interest, maybe, from following my work to invite me on to this. It's a really pleasant surprise.

**JJ:**

Because I had thought that maybe you had known each other for some time?

**elena:**

No. That's what's interesting. I think that -- well, to me, this feels -- and I'm realising I haven't -- covid limits this in a way -- but this kind of intimate conversation among strangers is, in a way, what we're doing, kind of.

And I think that's -- yeah. I've been surprised, actually, of how out of practice I feel at that.

**June:**

Yeah, same. Yeah. Well, we've not had any opportunity to practice this thing that is quite natural, actually. Going into spaces and there's someone you don't know, and you'd like to make a connection or talk about something that you maybe saw together.

**JJ:**

So maybe that leads us into our intro. So we're kind of meeting each other for the first time.

**June:**

Do you want to start JJ?

**JJ:**

I can start.

So let me tell you a bit about what I do then, I suppose. I'm an artist, or I do certain activities that means some people call me an artist, and other people don't. But I think of myself as an artist. I think about everything that I do as an artist. Other people might also think of me as a teacher, as an antagonist.

Also, perhaps, I am someone who maybe is known for withdrawing myself from exhibitions rather than having them. So the last two years have been a lot of that kind of forming of activities around what it is to be an artist. Some of those activities do not really -- are not usually part of an artist's resume.

So I still hold onto the title so that I can try to reshape what the definition is. And I think I also do that for other, let's say, "titles" that we might allocate for one another. So, yeah. That's maybe what I do. What other things that are kind of biographical things that I would tell you if I was meeting you for the first time?

I'm from Doncaster. I grew up there; I was born there. I moved out when I was 18. I went to art school. I've been one of those people who have never left art school. I spent my whole adult life either studying or working in art schools. And now I'm here. I'm based at Kingston School of Art. And I'd say what I do there is also part of my art practice.

I'm making something, trying to create something, trying to figure something out. That's been what I've been doing. So, yeah. Who's next?

**June:**

I can be next. But I just wanted to ask, whereabouts is Doncaster?

**JJ:**

Doncaster is in South Yorkshire, about halfway up the country, near Sheffield.

It's about a half an hour drive from Sheffield.

**June:**

OK. So it's pretty?

**JJ:**

It's quite pretty, yeah. It's an ex-mining town. There's lots of open space. I'm from a village called Carcroft, where my parents had a Chinese takeaway, and that's where I grew up. And it's largely very similar to how it was when I was growing up there.

**elena:**

My only reference for Yorkshire -- I went to Haworth to see the Brontë sisters' place. Is it near there or a similar landscape?

**JJ:**

It's nearish. I mean, things feel a lot closer there because you can drive across Yorkshire in an hour and a half. And it takes you about the same amount of time to from -- to get across town in London, so things feel a lot closer.

But, also, the landscape changes quite dramatically from village to village, and the community changes quite dramatically from village to village. And maybe it also does here in London from one area of town to another area of town. Yeah, I wouldn't say it was similar landscape. But maybe there is a certain kind of -- a certain kind of connection with the environment that people feel when they're born into a place, that it feels also a part of their identity, those more well-known aspects of a place.

And it's quite unusual, I think, because, also, Yorkshire is a very patriotic place, and I grew up feeling very much like it was part of my identity. And that that when I left Yorkshire, it was very difficult for people to recognise that this sense of Yorkshire-ness was there or maybe in my voice when I spoke, but it was a kind of quirk, I suppose.

**June:**

Shall I introduce myself? Yeah, OK. No, I was just thinking about what you were saying about being an artist. And even though I spent a lot of years in art school, I don't know if I still have that relationship to

the word because -- I mean, I could potentially try to define everything I do as art, but I don't know if that is something that feels productive for me or fulfilling.

I don't know what the purpose of that would be. But I would say some of what I do is art and occasionally act and run club nights and perform and write things and working night life as well.

So I think I'm struggling with having a very sort of linear or clear sense of self to present. I find these kinds of situations difficult because I think, in previous sort of versions of myself, I have found I've really tried to steer everything back to being an artist and I'm kind of resistant to that at the moment as well. I'm thinking I'm finding it difficult to clearly define one kind of things that I do that's more important than the other things or try and make it all make sense together in a way that feels concrete.

I don't know if all of the threads have to connect, even. I feel that I'm really motivated by whatever it is driving my attention in that moment, which is, I think, a very ADHD trait. But it does allow me to kind of not really think very much before taking on a new hyphen sometimes, which is nice.

Because I think there's a sort of element of like -- I'd probably doubt myself if I was thinking about it because of maybe not having enough experience or that's not my field of study or whatever. So, yeah. I feel like this year I've actually done more acting than art. But then, I don't really know what art is and what acting is. It's kind of hard to define things really. So that was quite rambly, but yeah.

I think I'm like someone that does creative projects a lot and works with people a lot. And I like to use my words and my body in most of the things that I do. And I like to work with different types of communities.

And I'm from Australia. But I feel like I've lived here enough that I don't feel like that's a big part of my identity anymore, but it definitely is.

**JJ:**

How long have you been in London?

**June:**

About six years.

**elena:**

And where were you in Australia before?

**June:**

Melbourne and Sydney.

**elena:**

Well, I can take the baton. I really relate to what you said, June, about trying to condense what I do into language in this introductory format.

I'm remembering how I used to get so much anxiety trying to explain what I do to my parents' friends in Southern California. And I used to say like -- I still do this sometimes, like, "I make dance." And they're like -- people always ask, "What kind of dance?" And then I'm like, "Oh, the kind that goes in museums."

Because, somehow, that was the easiest way to get across the element of experimentation or non-normativity in dance. So somehow, that feels like a way to describe what I do, even though I haven't actually really ever made a piece for a museum or a gallery because of my circumstances in New York in many ways. But I've performed in many of those. But, yeah.

I don't know. I think a lot of the ways I self-define are changing, actually, now and during the pandemic. I like to write. I love to perform. I love to dance. And I used to make a lot of solo work. And now I'm really figuring out how to work with others, how to share what I do.

I also -- for my money job, for many years, has been tutoring and helping highschoolers apply to college in the US. I love teaching, and I'm trying to figure out how to be both a student and a teacher. And maybe more practically like -- I grew up in Southern California, just north of Los Angeles.

I have an identical twin. I did classical ballet, and then I studied French Literature and Art History at university. And then now I've -- then I lived in New York for six years. Then I moved to do a master's degree in choreography and performance just north of Frankfurt. So that's my practical bio. But somehow, it doesn't actually -- that's how I used to also speak to what was important to me.

And I think more and more I'm like, that doesn't accurately reflect the meat of my bodily experience.

**JJ:**

I think it's interesting that this introduction feels so difficult and, perhaps, maybe it will show to be the most difficult part of the conversation. But I think, also, I really enjoyed that we started at first to talk about our kind of sense of jet lag from the last couple of years.

And I think it's worth us saying when we're thinking about language and how it doesn't sit quite neatly with our sense of reality, that it's really obvious that we don't share one time, that we exist in a kind of plurality of temporalities. And that they coexist with other temporalities that, sure, might be entangled, and they might be mutually implicating, but they're not uniform.

So they are, in fact, quite chaotic; they're disorganised. And so this unneatness then comes to meet a very neat kind of language; a language that has words or things like ways that we define ourselves or pronouns. And somehow, they try to coexist and they can't quite hold all of these realities together.

And so I think what might be important in what we've just said is actually these moments where we don't quite know. These ambiguous moments of our introduction are maybe the most valuable ones because that's where there can be these pluralities of the way that we speak. And, June, you were saying about the hyphen as this kind of method of enabling ambiguity.

And I think that starts to allow us also to think about an ambiguity of time between us, which is a kind of limited resource or, at least, we kind of think about that as a limited resource in the societies that we participate in. And maybe it's not. Maybe it's a perception that it is that.

And, instead, we could think about how we can reallocate this ambiguity towards other modes of thinking as well. So thinking about our work, our labour, things that we do, things that define us. And then we can -- and then maybe, if we think about in relationship to dance, that our dance maybe something that is in a present moment, something that may be responding to things that are immediate, but that are thinking in relation to dance happens much later in the future so we can think ahead into the future, but be dancing in the present, somehow.

And, somehow, this activation of the body is a future thinking, that it thinks beyond the restrictions of our language now or the restrictions with the way that we think about time. The whole concept of jet lag is that we are behind on something, that our body needs to catch up or our body needs to slow down because it somehow doesn't conform to the way that everybody else is living their lives.

And that this is also how the pandemic has made us feel. That, somehow, we are now not living our lives towards some kind of normative way of behaving because our sense of time has shifted. And, yeah. I don't really know what I was saying there, but I suppose I was trying to find a way to also understand why it felt quite difficult for all of us.

**June:**

Yeah. It felt validating. But I also like -- there was something about your introduction that, for me, was both very certain about the sort of artist as this title, but also the way in which you spoke about it was very much like, "Well, I'm going to find a way to relate everything back to this and it's almost like a philosophy."

Yeah, which feels maybe affirming for -- I don't know -- like all the ways in which we have self-doubt about withdrawing from exhibitions or not being in enough shows or the lack of doing that we do. Yeah.

**JJ:**

I think it's interesting, though, to think about that lack as actually something that is quite active, something that is certainly a gesture, and a gesture that may be quite visible, maybe more so than other kinds of gestures.

Sometimes a gesture of withdrawal or silence, sometimes, we recognise, actually, to be very loud. A very loud gesture of our bodies to withhold our speech because we think that that is something that is an act that people will acknowledge, to see.

And that speech is not always something that is heard.

**elena:**

That is making me think about how -- or just in terms of gender, I often have this desire if someone were to ask me -- one time someone came up to me randomly in the subway and asked me, "How do you identify?" And I was like, "Whoa."

But, in that moment, I kind of wanted to be like -- like I somehow wanted to -- I'm shrugging my shoulders and putting my hands up like "What?" because I wanted to make a gesture, or like deny -- I don't know. I often feel that way now too. I want to somehow reject the paradigm of language and reject -- yeah, not have to say something.

And I've been thinking about that lately as a kind of conscientious objection, as a kind of rejection of the terms themselves, which is somehow what's so challenging about language and kind of relates what you were saying about time, JJ. Because language emerges in time, it's really hard to access simultaneity.

And it's really hard to access -- I don't know -- the messiness that my body can actually inhabit. So lately I'm feeling really like wanting -- it's funny how much now I'm like, God, my body actually can't so much express, even in this conversation that's going to be an audio recording. And I feel like I want to spend most of my time expressing out of that place, while at the same time loving articulation.

And feeling like, "Oh, no, in order to counteract that, I need to speak and write all the time." So that every different contradictory thought can somehow be articulated and therefore -- I don't know -- work to do something towards that kind of contradiction.

**JJ:**

I suppose there's a kind of pressure.

And I say pressure because I want to make it clear that I don't mean any desire. Because there is a pressure to conform to a certain definition of these words, "artist", for example, that that somehow defines a set of activities that you do.

And my attempt to cling on to that title is to say actually that there is space for this to shift, that I'm not attempting to synchronise my activities with a pre-defined set of roles that somebody who is creative does. And I think this is why I hold onto the title artist so fiercely, despite the fact that a lot of the things that I do don't produce things that people might immediately think of as art works, that somehow their presence in the world happens in other ways.

Maybe they happen in -- through conversation or a joke or a protest, but these are things that are manifest through a creative way of thinking that I associate with this term artist. And, perhaps, that things that people might associate with what artists do, making drawings, photographs, sculptures, that those modes of art practice now have become so normalised that they lack a nobility to be creative in -- to a full extent.

And so I don't know if -- I certainly think that not everybody who makes sculptures, for example, thinks of themselves necessarily as an artist. They might think of themselves as a craftsperson or maybe even just somebody who -- maybe just somebody who makes lots of stuff. Things that they might not perceive to be in art galleries, maybe they should be elsewhere, but that they think of them as sculptures. So I think that there is this kind of rigidity of the way that we segregate disciplines.



But I also think that that is really something that has been occurring not in the way that we necessarily think about what we do, but throughout society in all different sectors. And I think in -- even now, as trans bodies become more visibilised in different areas of society, that there is a kind of falseness to that representation, that somehow that there is a shift in the word but not in the definition of what we come to think of as equality or collectivity.

I think certainly that my gender non-conformity, at least in the art school, throughout my whole time in the art school, I think is something that is permissible because the art school is open. It's generous. It's accepting of everyone. But it's not really acknowledged. And neither is my racialised body; it's not acknowledged. The knowledge that comes with being in this body is not acknowledged to the same extent as other kinds of knowledges, like industry knowledge or something.

So I think that representation or recognition in those spaces is not quite what we think it is if that makes sense.

**June:**

It's interesting that we've kind of spoken a bit about two types of silence; the kind of liberatory silence of elena not responding to this question and then the silence of race and transness and gender non-conforming not being voiced and that being a form of oppressiveness and violence.

I don't know. I just thought it would be an interesting question. How do we use silence? And how is it kind of wielded against us?

**JJ:**

Yeah. We can think about silence as a kind of message, right, of withdrawing of our labour or our ideas.

And that that can be acted upon us as well, that makes us visible or invisible. And both of those in different contexts are kinds of -- could be both an act of care but also can sometimes be an act of violence. So our movements within different contexts also have to be different. Our activities are changed depending on who we're interacting with and this is -- this should be the case for everybody.

This should be the case that we are adaptable, that our bodies have ways of moving that can offer different kinds of affection and different kinds of resistance in different situations. But that trying to articulate that means that it somehow flattens what we do. And this is why I'd think of the term artist as useful to me because I think there's still enough ambiguity within that term to hold all sorts of things.

And people tend to accept the fact that they don't have to understand what an artist does. You know, they can say, "Oh, I can -- yeah, sure, it's art, but I don't understand it. I don't get it. But I'm OK. It's art. I'll accept that at least." And so there's something, I think, still within the way that we can define something as art that allows it to be all sorts of different things.

And also, I think, perhaps, offers it -- it becomes a kind of invitation when you make something an art work because it -- an art work demands an audience. So, if you come to a protest and you think about that participation as an art work, you're asking for an audience, a public audience. It's not a directed

towards just a particular group of people, but that you're asking for that moment to be public, and that then you approach it differently because you don't know who's going to see it.

You don't know who's going to interact with it, and so your offering to the world is slightly different to if you had this frustration or anger towards a particular thing that you needed to direct.

**elena:**

That's interesting. This idea of the art work as implying the audience or implying the witness because I've been feeling a lot lately.

Or I'm now realising a lot of the ways that I become my wisest self or like the best version of myself, even interpersonally, even as I go through this messy breakup, I'm like, "Wow," it's when I consider myself as a creative being. It's like when I think about myself as an artist, when I'm thinking -- and I think actually I've been sometimes judging that in myself.

Like, why do I need to imagine a public witness to be acting according to my deepest value systems? Why do I need that? But, somehow, it also feels, for me, like a kind of spiritual practice. I'm actually being witnessed by something greater than myself. And so to imagine that there's a whole non-human human universe of witnesses who are paying attention to what I might do, even knowing that they might not, it doesn't actually matter.

It's somehow like that construct, imagining that I might one day write about this experience or I might one day incorporate it into my creative work, creates a level of self-accountability. It's actually a really -- somehow, I'm now realising that my own self-accountability structures are really linked to being an artist. And I'm like, yeah. It's in a hot moment.

**June:**

So what I'm kind of getting from this is that it's like a way of being in the world but also relating to not necessarily other people, but other stuff in the world. Because, I guess, when I was listening to elena talk about that I'm like, OK, that's kind of similar to me thinking about ancestor practice and thinking that it's something important.

A lot of the stuff I do for my own self-care or maybe think about at the moment is not revolving around people that are alive or in my life right now. So there must be this level of that also meaning people that in the future or people that are in the past and those being witnesses as well and that being part of the whole dynamic of having an audience. I don't know.

**June:**

I relate to that a lot, June. And I'm just realising -- I somehow -- when I think earlier you were talking, JJ, I wanted to share this. I just heard this talk with Elizabeth Povinelli, this anthropologist, and she shared this idea of the ancestral present, which she has gathered through living for 30 years with Northern Australian indigenous folks.

[00:36:26]

And this idea -- it was just, somehow, I hadn't really swallowed this feeling until this talk she gave. That the ancestral present is this way of really feeling the presence -- it's such a simple idea, but it has such profound impact, at least, in my body, that my ancestors are right here, and I'm accountable to them and being witnessed by them. And so the way I act -- and also, I am an ancestor and projecting forward into the future beings.

And so that creates -- she linked it to the climate crisis -- and that creates a real sense of accountability. How do we steward our land? How do we exist in the present acknowledging all of that past and that future? Somehow the way she language it made me be like, "Wow. This is like a really -- this is kind of what I've been doing in other terms." But the weight of that was also like, "Shit. I don't know."

There's something really big in that. But, somehow, that's what I feel like I'm hearing in what you're saying, June.

**June:**

It's also kind of like a Christopher Nolan film. My future self does not like what I'm doing right now so I'm not going to steal this orange.

**elena:**

Yeah. That's the micro version. Yes.

**JJ:**

I mean, that's really interesting I think as well, that somehow, we would act in ways that would preserve our intentions now for the future.

And maybe one of the scariest things that I think I've heard people say a lot recently is this term "future-proofing".

**June:**

What's that?

**elena:**

Yeah, I've never heard that.

**JJ:**

Future-proofing is like -- maybe it's like an industry term, like a business term. And we hear it in universities because future-proofing is about making sure that there is longevity to your business. So future-proofing is a set of activities and practices that make sure that the organisation lives long into the future.

And I find this really scary. Because to future-proof anything that is in the present, that is a part of this moment, is really to kind of -- the practice of future-proofing, I guess what I'm saying -- is a kind of attempt to incarcerate the body in the now.

And, in doing that, we are limiting our -- the possibility of thinking of other ways of being and we recognise this way of being, our participation in this kind of world, is already creating and continues to create inequalities. And so, to future-proof the things that exist now or our intentions, our desires, the things that we care about, is actually to future-proof also those practices that come along with those things that are knotted and entangled together.

And one of the things that I -- one of the quotes that always comes into my mind is one by Leigh-Ann Naidoo, who was one of the activists from the Rhodes Must Fall movement. And she said -- I'm probably going to completely misquote her now -- but she said something like, "The pain of the present was being forced back into the present moment after having a premonition of a different one."

And this is just something that I think haunts me quite often in my everyday activities, that the participation of the now is enforcing its stability. And we see that there are also other forces that are attempting to protect the stability of the now. And we can see that the proposal, for example, for the new Police, Crime, and Sentencing bill, is to limit our movements, the movements of our bodies, that would demand or create or imagine some other way or possibility of living.

And, instead, is securing people's movements as an attempt to secure what we currently have in place: the current way of being, a current way of being that we know to be very problematic, to be painful, actually.

**elena:**

I mean -- and now I'm thinking so many of our legislative structures are built -- I'm just thinking of the Supreme Court of the U.S.

It's literally premised on exactly this kind of future-proofing. You can install someone according to your views in a particular moment and then they get to, in some ways, follow that -- that mandate until they die. And then you have -- I mean, even the U.S. constitution operates that way. It's like, why are we still basing our -- so much of our legislation and ways of existing on this old-ass document which -- yeah.

I mean, I'm also thinking that that idea feels really similar to the way -- to what I hear coming out of TERFy rhetoric. Like, TERFs being like, "Oh, but we built a world so that you could inhabit our world." And it's like, "But we don't want that world anymore." I don't know. We're different now. And they're like, "No, but we -- we built a world." They somehow cannot accept that there would be a desire for different terms or different world-making that goes beyond what they were.

And that's why it's so personal. Because they're like in that present, in that past-present then, this was so immediately what so many of us needed. And it's somehow shocking that that could change so radically. And, yeah. I guess I'm -- the word you used, incarcerated, in the present, JJ, feels like it's such a trap, too, that mode of thinking.

Like, it's not -- I don't know. It's not fluid.

**JJ:**

I wonder if -- and this may be seen as a bit trivial and you can divert it if it's not somewhere you want to go -- but also, I think maybe it's -- it could be interesting to think about the law or our legal structures as a form of choreography.

Something very old, something that dictates our movements or the movements of bodies around society. The way that, perhaps, is also beyond conscious decision-making, something that we follow through, that we act in accordance to, that we react to, respond to. And that in this case, then, to improvise, to be creative, to respond to a moment, becomes criminal.

**June:**

That makes a lot of sense.

**elena:**

I just need to add that I was part of a project that literally did this where we -- a part of this collective called The Bureau for the Future of Choreography, where we staged a sitting of the U.S. Senate to kind of reveal exactly all of the choreographic structures at play in the U.S. legislative system.

I was not the lead on the project, but what I actually found in some ways so frustrating about the project, ultimately, was how confining the choreography of the Senate was. And as a collective, we couldn't agree on how much improvisation we wanted to allow the audience or how much we wanted to use our fictional space of performance to imbue it with greater improvisation than is allowed in real life.

Because we were literally inviting the audience to read roles like, "Oh, this senator from Iowa stands up and has an assigned script." It was a participatory performance in this way. And I wanted there to be -- I thought we should break all the rules, that should be the goal of the restaging. But some of my colleagues disagreed, and I was kind of outnumbered ultimately. So, yeah.

It was such a concrete experience of that, of how -- there's so little non-normativity in those structures. It's so impossible to do anything with the body or even -- I mean, I could go into this in the US. But, yeah. I just had such a concrete experience of that and how frustrating it was even in my fictional restaging with this collective. I was frustrated for still that same reason.

**JJ:**

So it's only really outside of -- if we can accept that is the norm -- I mean, that is the norm, right? I don't think we can claim that any of our being in the world is considered the norm. But we can consider that the legislative structure as generally accepted as the normal way to behave in these societies. And so, actually, to be then -- to recognise that creativity is really only possible outside of that norm -- and I think this really is what at least what I think of, as queerness.

Queerness is to seek a position that is beyond or not recognised as normativity. And the reason why you would seek that is because you are looking for something to -- for a space where you can create

something else, something that might feel appropriate to your reality because -- that doesn't exist in the normative structures.

And I think that, actually, I would go as far as to say that the majority of people would think that the normative way of living in our societies is not appropriate for their bodies.

**elena:**

I would hope that's the case.

**June:**

All people are in a fugue state. Yeah. But what I'm hearing from all of this is that queerness is improvisation, which I love. I think that's really beautiful.

Queerness is a form of improvising in response to restrictive structures where we have to do the same choreography until we die.

**JJ:**

Yeah. It's a refusal to synchronise. We were talking briefly about synchronisation and jet lag earlier: it's a refusal for that. It's to remain in the jet lag, in a way.

**elena:**

Which, I mean, if you carry that metaphor forward, I'm like -- because I was just thinking, "God, I wish that were more fun", you know?

When I don't recalibrate from the jet lag, I start to feel miserable. And in some ways, that's what it can be to be non-normative in a dominant world. But it can also -- then it can feel trippy and amazing, you know?

**June:**

There's that Sarah Schulman quote about families and how often the normative families feel their queer children are rejecting or pushing away.

We're standing still and they're pushing against us, actually. And I think that's quite -- I don't know. I think it relates a bit to what we're talking about now. There is this idea from the normative world or the non-queer world that queer people are charging against. But what if we're standing still, and everyone else is kind of moving in a different direction?

**elena:**

Yeah. I mean, as you say that, June, I just have such an acute experience of having an identical twin who is cis and straight and owns homes and is very -- living a more normative life. And then I have sometimes been positioned as that rebel: the person rebelling against or that she fits into my nuclear family structure and then I'm the weird one.

And lately, I have felt a certain release of that in my little family where -- I don't know -- because of the pandemic, I think, and because of some mental health crises and certain challenges, there's been this sense of like, "Oh, no. Actually, elena's just been acknowledging all the confusion of what it is to exist and we can too." And my mum got a therapist.

It was like somehow, I could feel a shift in that and I was like, "Oh my God. This is what I'd hoped for everyone." It was pretty magical to see that, that kind of release sense or this sense of not pushing towards the cruel optimism thing and just being with the challenge. I don't know. I felt it really play out among my family members. I'm feeling that change and it's nice.

**June:**

It comes back to the gesture of silence, I think. It comes back to the sort of -- you know, how it's a creative act to stand still while everyone is pushing towards cruel optimism in a time where there is a lot going on that's oppressive. And actually, sometimes, the best response is to reflect or to kind of take stock.

**JJ:**

Yeah. I mean, maybe we could all think about this along with Fred Moten's idea of brokenness, and that Moten asked us to accept or reconcile with this essential brokenness. And that is to say that we know things are broken. We're broken.

And that our intentions in the broken is not to find a fix, but is in fact to say that things don't need fixing. Because fixing implies that it's a resynchronisation to something that we don't agree with or that we think is troublesome. So, to fix something, or to renormalise something, is a problematic in itself.

And so, instead, it's about remaining in this space where we acknowledge one another's or our systems or things as broken and this is a space of creativity. This is a space of improvisation. This is a space where the rulers can't tell us what to do anymore because they don't work here. This is where we have to come up with some other way of being.

And to remain in that state or to remain in this space of need, of essential brokenness, is, in fact, to remain in a space of possibility.

**elena:**

This is making me -- what you're saying, JJ, is I've somehow been thinking how, June, you, at the beginning, were talking about -- or you brought in night life, how you do things in night life.

And somehow, night life spaces feel like often a space where that happens. If someone were to come in and be like, "Everyone needs to stop," and like -- I don't know. If someone were to come in and try to corral a group of people in a queer club, that would be impossible. Or if everyone asks like, "Use your library voices," it would be like, "No. Like, those rules don't apply here." I don't know.

Somehow, I feel like that -- you're allowed to be fucked up. You're allowed to be on psychedelics. You're allowed to be -- I don't know. The rules are entirely different, and there's almost like -- and especially in sex clubs or spaces that are really about, we're doing the "bad shit" as it's known in normative society.

So, yeah. I don't know. That's somehow so exciting to me, that we do actually, in some spaces -- some of that has long been happening. We've been creating those spaces.

**June:**

It's true. I'll go to a sex club where everyone asks my pronouns, and I'm like, "This is the opposite of the normal world." And there's nothing broken about it, but I do think there's something -- it's just a different vocabulary.

**JJ:**

It's not necessarily that it's broken, but there's a breakage in the norm that allows that space to occur. And I think that is a space where we're seeking those breakages in normativity.

**elena:**

I mean, I think that's also -- I'm reading right now Gloria Anzaldúa's -- what's it called -- yeah, *Light in the Dark*. And she's such a -- for me, she's such a helpful person to think through that exactly that space of breakage or what she sometimes calls wound is the space of imagination.

Literally, you have no need for imagination if you're conforming to the brightly lit up regular world. And that, actually, if -- when you aren't -- it's like when you're not able to conform to that, then you have to look for other things, and that's when she sees a serpent out of the corner of her eye and decides that that can be part of her reality and doesn't have to be -- she doesn't have to conform to the normative reality.

So somehow, I feel like what you've been bringing in, JJ, for me, feels like also this space -- like that that's imagination. That's how we get to an imaginative space. It's like why I sometimes need to feel upset or bored in order to access -- I don't know -- something that's not in -- yeah.

**June:**

But the thing is though, within the normative, being bored or upset, that's something that needs fixing. Just like when someone is usually fucked up in a space, that someone needs fixing: they need to be removed from the space. And so that's why sort of night life is relevant in the sense that this is a room full of people that would be regarded as people that need fixing or are broken in their current state, in their presentness, which is interesting that we have these spaces, actually.

**JJ:**

But I think it's also whilst we do have those spaces, it, perhaps, also worth thinking about how it can be very easy for normativity to develop in spaces that we create.

**June:**



Definitely.

**JJ:**

We might think of queer spaces or artistic spaces are these spaces of where we can be freer to create, but, in fact, they very quickly establish rules, expectations, pressures that we were talking about earlier.

And so, I think that in order for it to maintain its liveness or this ability to be a space of creativity, it has to constantly change. It has to still be ambiguous. It can't -- it has to still refuse to become an established idea, I suppose.

And so there is this -- it's not about constantly being on the move and constantly running away or being a nomad. It's, in fact, just a way of understanding that things grow and things -- that they change and that we, as humans, do the same. And we do it also with rest of the world. So it's not, I don't think, about saying that, "Why can't we have this space just for queer people? Or this space just for women?"

It's about saying that these spaces are only arbitrarily assigned and need to change, that they always have to hold the potential for having a different kind of space, a space that people who come to it need it to be.

**elena:**

Yeah.

**June:**

Well, that's what the TERFs can't deal with, philosophically.

**JJ:**

Exactly. Yeah.

**elena:**

I'm also thinking this plays out -- what you're describing -- plays out so acutely in improvisational dance contexts for me.

It's an improvisation and then suddenly you realise everyone's doing the same thing because the person who set up the improvisation is actually modelling a particular way of moving. And, if you're not moving in that particular way, then you're not doing the improvisation right, even though no one has said that. And somehow, I find that even in myself, when I'm in these group improvisational contexts, I start to feel like, "Oh, no, like, oh, clearly there's a norm here. I wasn't aware that there was a norm."

But I can feel this kind of contagion of "norm" happening, and then I find myself becoming less and less present and less and less improvisatory. And I have to always -- I mean, it's literally something I have to check in on every time I'm in any improvisational dance workshop. I'm like, "Am I being present to what is actually arising for me? Or am I seeking to be seen and understood by this social space?"

And I guess I'm really curious, how do you facilitate that kind of like -- how can we set up an environment where we can actually improvise and continuously disrupt norms and not accidentally create them?

**June:**

Yeah. Yeah. I'm just thinking about the club night that I've been doing and how people have been responding to it. And I had a conversation with a way more experienced sort of night-life-person who DJs.

And they were talking to me about, "Oh, you know, I've noticed your sound in the DJs you book are very eclectic." In that, I've got -- I might have someone playing GABA and then someone playing industrial and then someone playing Cantonese pop music and then someone playing a bit of screamy Darkcore after that. And they were a bit like, "Are you going to find a sound? Is that marketable?"

And I think I had a moment of self-doubt, but I was also just really happy with the way I'm doing things and I'm going to continue doing it this way. But I think it comes back to what JJ was saying about how so many -- within sort of queerness and within gay-queer spaces, conformity finds itself, just like conformity finds itself in the sort of improvisational dance.

Things kind of align themselves back into the way things are done. And so if someone within those spaces is doing something that is a bit out of line, people are going to pick up on it, even if they are a queer DJ or someone who's like -- be viewed as someone that's highly queer. It's just quite interesting, like, how easy it is to be spotted when you're not doing the "right" thing, even if that's just booking DJs.

**JJ:**

Yeah. I think it's not -- it doesn't feel natural for us to abide by rules, but it does feel natural for us to follow patterns. And so we do that quite naturally and they become these established ways of being, I think. And I think improvised dance is such a good example because even, I can imagine, turning up at a club and everyone's dancing in the same way. But, also, this is applicable to much larger situations.

If we think about what we refer to as the art world in general, there is a kind of a sense that everybody is improvising, everybody is doing their own thing, there isn't a individual uniqueness to everybody's practice, whether they're a curator or a director of a museum or an artist or an art worker or an art technician, and there is this sense that these individuals contribute in different ways.

But that, actually, what is recognised or is valued in this world, within the hierarchy of the art world, is a very particular kind of movement, a very particular kind of body. And it's very evident that there is not only been a kind of improvised choreography that nobody can quite identify who the choreographer is, but that also there is this kind of quasi-mystical casting director that is kind of divided between us.

And I feel kind of uncomfortable saying that because I recognise that I am part of that art world and that I actually have quite a loud voice in that. And perhaps that's because I've held onto that title artist, and maybe if I was doing all these other things and instead calling myself something else, that I wouldn't be able to do that in an art world context.

It's a kind of protest move to continually claim that what I do is art work, even if it's something that goes against every logic of art-making, which is to not make art.

**elena:**

I'm thinking, too, that no matter what we do, the institutions want to immediately glom on to even the thing that is truly radical in -- for like a microsecond, will immediately be glommed onto by an institution and made to be said like, "Oh, no, that's -- oh, that's cool. We see that now. That's part of the dominant art world institutional culture."

I see that happen over and over and over again where people are doing radical things, the institution wants to say like, "Hey, can we get in on the radical thing you're doing?" And in that moment, that's a really challenging negotiation because the person who's doing the radical thing has the challenging choice of probably saying yes or no to material resources.

And so, when I think about how to name things -- or like I guess, I'm trying to think a lot about that moment -- that moment when the institution wants to come and say like, "OK. You want to be with us or against us?" And I think it gets really challenging because then it's, again, this kind of like politics of negation challenge, where it's like I'm always existing in relation to the dominant thing or the institution or whatever it may be -- the gender binary.

And, yeah. I guess I'm just like, God, I really wish that it wasn't still dictated by that institutional power. And how can I escape that? And, of course, I find ways, but I still feel like over and over again -- I don't know. Lately I'm feeling like it's really not escapable, or the only way I do escape it is actually this practice of spirituality or accessing something that feels beyond this moment, which is also a kind of fiction.

Sometimes I feel like, "Oh, I'm doing that to make myself feel better about the challenging situation I'm constantly put in." And I'm put in this situation way less than other people are. So, yeah. I guess I'm just trying to name the -- I guess I'm confused about where -- when we ever actually have power. And I feel like the temporality of that power is really short-lived; it's like for a second and then it's taken.

**JJ:**

But I think that's also what is the problem with the kind of politics of representation is that they are perceived also as -- when that happens, your body is useful for a certain amount of time to the organisation, and then it's no longer useful anymore. So having a seat at the table is not an indication that you hold power.

But also, I think that, at least for me, and what I'd like to propose also to everybody is that we really should be moving on from this idea of asking for a seat at the table. Because people have had seats at the table and it doesn't amount to anything. And this is also my problem with the term inclusion, for that exact reason.

Because I don't feel like I want to participate in those hierarchies of power that already exist because I know that those hierarchies are the source of great inequality. So why should I want to participate in

this kind of structure? I think that I would much rather be part of something else, something that maybe doesn't exist yet, maybe that is still within our heads or maybe it's some kind of dream.

But that I would rather work to establish something that is other than what we have, than to spend my time participating in something that I don't -- that I fundamentally know that I don't agree with. And that might sound really idealistic, because I still, sometimes, need to participate or work with institutions in order to get things done, and maybe that's kind of a stealing of resources.

Moten would say it was a kind of stealing from the institution. But I really don't care for being in a system that only allows me to participate if I also desire to be superior than other people. Having a seat at the table is to also assert that you are better than some other people.

And I don't wish to participate in that structured way of thinking because really, it's a process, really, of - I don't know whether it's synchronising or whether it's, in fact, mimicking the very thing that you think is the problem.

And so my interactions with institutions is somehow, one that is very backhanded. And that they also know that backhandedness is quite important to them because they want to be perceived as forward-thinking. And so there is an exchange going on that we have very different intentions, but that we require each other.

I need their resources. They need my face to say that their department is more radical than other departments. But that my participation within an art gallery or a university is that I hope to be working towards a different kind of thing that might take over from what we currently think of as the art institution or that we currently think of as the university.

And this is really the way that I think we can all then allow ourselves to steal and allow ourselves still to do things, but that we also are in the process of doing that, creating opportunities for ourselves to invent something else.

Does that make sense?

**June:**

Yeah. I think it does. I think what you're saying is that we're finding ways to replace these structures while in the process of stealing from them, yeah?

**JJ:**

Exactly, yeah. Because I don't care to be -- my body doesn't want to be treated like a cis-gendered white man because it's not that. It's not that, and it never will be that. And to be that, to want that, is to want to be superior to your neighbours and to other beings in the world.

And that is not what my body desires or needs. And so I do not wish to participate in society as though I was a cis-gendered white man. And I think that there is some kind of weird idea in the world that that is what I want when I demand an equality in society. That people think that, "Oh, well, they just want to be -- they just want to have the same things as us."

**June:**

They definitely think that. I think cis-gendered people think that about trans people as well.

**JJ:**

Absolutely.

**June:**

I think that there's an idea that trans people want cis-gendered bodies, and that's why it is a very concrete idea of trans people being very concrete about gender and bodies and modifications. And that's something that they've made up about us, actually, because of all the trans people I've met, none of them actually fulfil that. There's this very strong idea of "They just want to be like us." You know? Bizarre.

**JJ:**

Absolutely. I think you're right. Yeah. Totally agree with that. They think that there is a desire to be -- to live a kind of normal gendered life: to get married, to have two children, and to live in this perfect nuclear family.

**June:**

Yeah. And to have, you know, genitals that look like their genitals and bodies that look like their bodies. It's not generally the case.

**elena:**

I mean, I do think the gay rights movement in the US is like a sad example where there were some loud voices who did want to live a regular -- I don't know, like a married, nuclear, family life. And then, somehow, everything we're talking about now has got erased a bit for a while. And I think it's coming back. But I'm just like -- y'all are totally right.

I feel like there's this sense that everyone wants the normative thing, which is like, actually, the opposite of the truth. But then I do think there are queer people -- or I don't even know if they should be called queer -- but people with divergent sexual or gendered practices who, somehow, do want that to become one with the norm. And then that's such an opportunity for the dominant culture to be like, "See? They do want what we have."

And we'll give them that." And then that sort of helps us forget rights are being denied, that people aren't actually able to live truly more divergent lives.

**JJ:**

But again I wonder whether that is a pressure or a desire?

**elena:**

Oh, it's a pressure. You're right. It's not fair to say that it's a desire, maybe. But I think witnessing that history, I just feel frustration too, where I'm like -- there's like a -- I don't know.

It feels really counter to exactly what I thought people would have done.

**June:**

It's counter to improvisation, for sure. There's no movement possible coming out of that choreography, going back to our metaphor.

**elena:**

Yeah.

**JJ:**

It is easier to live by the way that you are assumed to live.

There is now an image of transness that people have in their imaginations and that is a normalised vision of transness. And that to be trans and not be that creates things that become difficult.

It could mean that you are at risk of violence towards you. Or it could mean that you have to -- that your movements are restricted in other ways that you endanger yourself. I just think that, sometimes, when I walk down the street, I just look like a man and I don't get the same response from people.

I get a different response. And it is easier -- it's easier to walk down the street as that. It's easier when a stranger knocks on the door for me not to demand that they use my chosen pronouns because I don't know who that is. But to insist on it is to create a moment where people are like, "Oh, OK."

And they have to think about it. And then they respond on what comes into their head at that moment. So I think that the pressure of all of that is also what creates a sense, perhaps, that people would want to live that way or have a desire to live that way, but, in fact, they just want to be able to live.

They just want to be able to be. And that the current way that human imagination works and the patterns that human imagination follows does not yet have the logic for people to think outside the ways that they have learned the world should be.

And I think that is, at least, what we should be asking people to think about. Because I'm not sure of the work of visibilising queerness or transness is simply just to say that "we exist". But also, I think the real work is about creating methodologies for people to see beyond the politics of recognition, just to see beyond the way that they think that the world is structured.

And that opens lots of possibilities for other kinds of imagination too, not just gendered imagination, but also allows us to think beyond race, to acknowledge that each one of us carries with us the knowledges that we had before, that they are not the same, that we exist in different temporalities.

And I think that that is what, at least -- I mean, maybe that's answer to your previous question about, well, what do we do? What do we do about it? And that's something that we can do as people who have just asserted that we are creative practitioners, no matter what.

Because that's something that we just decided that we had to do. Now, I don't know how that works in practice, but...

**elena:**

I've been thinking as you're speaking that that, for me, comes back to this sense of silence or this sense of like -- I'm thinking, like, how do I do that? How have I done that? When have I felt that? Because I am someone who, I think, so easily can get swayed by the ease of conformity.

I feel this in my gender. I feel this in my sexual practices. I feel this in my relational practice, like, so much of that. And so, in practice, I've really -- the only way I can work against that ease or really insist on wait a minute, what do I want? Not what's easiest for me -- but what do I want is to sit in silence with my body away from the rhetoric and away from -- kind of recede, frankly, from public life, in a way.

Because so much of public life are where those decisions are made for me, where the ease becomes really present in my body. So to actually say like, "Actually, I need to be alone. I need to not speak. I need to not declare anything yet. I need to just be in a practice of sensing and sense -- being with my senses." Yeah. I don't know if that refusal to participate feels, for me, like one of the only ways I've been able to clarify what I actually want and how I actually want to be.

**June:**

It's like closing your eyes. I was just thinking about the improvisation.

**elena:**

Yeah. It's like I've got to be a little bit like, "I can't". And then, what gets hard is I figure something out, and then it's like, "OK. Now I'm going to go into the world and I have to fucking stay true to that." And that is the hard work of living for me.

**JJ:**

It's quite spiritual, I think, what you just described -- that process.

**elena:**

Certainly, yeah.

**June:**

Yeah. For me, it's like bringing everything back to the body and the senses. I think that's really valuable. I don't know. It makes complete sense to me as well, but I'm someone that's very embodied in what I do, so I think I definitely relate to what you're saying. I think it makes you tired though, like cumulatively, to be pushing back in so many parts of life.

**JJ:**

Yeah.

**June:**

It's like -- I'm just thinking of the Sarah Schulman quote again and it's like, if you're standing still and you're trying to regroup and there's a lot of motion in the opposite direction, that's going to wear you down. You can't continue to stay still, so -- yeah. I think, for me, it's really forming an image of someone who's really tired.

**elena:**

And that's why I feel like solidarity becomes so important.

Our kinship becomes so important. Because if there's other people standing still next to -- like, I take that image and I'm like, "Oh, if there's another person shoulder-to-shoulder with me, then we're a lot stronger against that." I mean, wow. It sounds like a protest and it is, in a way.

**JJ:**

Something we mentioned earlier was to think about that stillness also as a movement or to think about silence as also a kind of speech.

And I think that maybe that we can think about -- if we think about the stillness or as also a kind of choreographed gesture, that that also allows us to think about what we want that stillness to be. And that stillness can also exist in -- we don't need to think about is as solidified. We don't need to think about it as solid. We can think about it as one of the words you used earlier, elena, was fluid.

And that if I think about fluidity, it can sometimes be hot, sometimes be cold, sometimes be frozen, sometimes be steam. And there is this not only a possibility for modal transition, but that it then can take up different forms of resistance. Sometimes it's a form that can be moved through that just exists in the air. Sometimes it has to stand in a firm position that it can't be punctured, that it has to be an affront.

Other times it just kind of floods the atmosphere and that maybe this is the kind of responsive choreography that we can have. That it's not a physical stillness. In fact, it's very alive and moving, but it's just a material affirmation to say, "This is -- we are here materially embodied," and that, "We will move and shift and dance in ways that will occupy the space."

And I'm using words from protest here because I think there's something quite relevant about the idea of protest and thinking about this sense of everyday resistance. Think perhaps about that walk down the street when I dress and act and walk in a way that I want to as a protest. And that, some days, that protest is harder than others.

And so some days I give in and I walk down the street not in protest, but there is a -- I am in some kind of acceptable costume because it's easier. And I think that that is a kind of perpetual labour as well, that



we've got to know that it's the system that drains our bodies of labour so that we don't invent something new. Yeah.

**elena:**

I'm feeling that's a really nice place to end. Maybe that's just me.

**June:**

Yeah. No, I'm feeling that as well.

**JJ:**

OK.

*Music*

**Janine:**

The Satelliser project is realised using funds from The National Lottery through Arts Council England, Bonnie Bird Choreography Fund, and John Ellerman Foundation through CONTINUOUS Network.

CONTINUOUS is a partnership between Siobhan Davies Studios and Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. You can find out more by visiting [continuousdance.com](http://continuousdance.com).

*Music*

END