

Interview with Janine Harrington

Janine speaks to Madalena Miles

[00:00:08]

Madalena Miles (Mady):

Hello. My name is Madalena Miles, or just Mady. I am half-British and half-Portuguese. I'm calling from West London. And I'm 22 years old. I'm currently studying my master's in Applied Theatre, which is really a lot about community work and trauma-informed theatre practices.

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And I'm also trying to be a freelance artist. So that's who I am.

Janine Harrington:

Hey, Mady. Thanks for being here and agreeing to interview me today. So my name is Janine Harrington. I am a white woman in my mid-thirties. I'm also in London. I'm in the south. Yeah. Shall we just -- we could just get into it couldn't we?

Mady:

Yeah. Cool. Well, thank you also for having me. I'm very excited.

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And, yeah. I'm just excited to sort get more of a sense of your artistry. We've only had one conversation before. So I feel like there's a lot to get to know. And in preparation for this, I read your essay that you wrote for *Make It in Brixton*. And I think it's titled "Contact Makes Each Other Possible". And I love that titling.

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It felt like a really genuine insight into your work and your fascination with the dynamics between people and relationships. And you also talk a lot about this idea of collectivity. And I think I just wanted to start there. What are your ideas, or your references around collectivity and what it means to be part of a whole.

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Janine:

It's such a big question. And it's funny that you mention that essay, because this morning I was thinking about what we might speak about. And I wrote down the title of that essay and underlined it as something to come back to. Yeah, for me, contact does, really does make us possible. Each of us. And by contact, I don't just mean like physical touch. I also mean like being spoken to or spoken with.

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All the different ways that, yeah, we come into -- I think I know that people come into being through being part of communities. And that changes, of course, over a lifetime, and what

that means for different people. But, yeah -- some of the thinking in that essay about collectivity is -- you're right.

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Exactly about this idea that it's through relationship that we get to show up. And I think that's really obvious. But I think in a time where so many of us are maybe channelling thinking through social media formats, and announcing things about ourselves or about our work, it can be easy to lose sight of the ways in which we show up, in what feels to me like a more three-dimensional way, or maybe even four-dimensional way in our communities.

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So all the kinds of contact that we have that give us a bounce back or reflection of who we are. So, whether that's -- and I'm sort of drifting a bit away from your question. But maybe in the times of coming now somewhat out of the pandemic, although, still being in the pandemic, and contact and what that has come to mean for people in general.

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And what that's always meant for people who are perhaps immuno-compromised in some way, or facing disablement because of certain kinds of structures. I think it can be very interesting to think around what it means to suddenly be without contact, and, yeah, what that means for across difference.

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So, what I'm thinking -- what I wrote this morning -- was a little bit around what I think of as the kinds of social relations that I have in my life with the shopkeeper or people, random people, that I see in my neighbourhood. And these sort of low-level encounters that also contribute to me being possible, the same way that people who have maybe a bigger place in my life also make me possible.

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It's just like a -- it's about a scale, I think. So there's loads more to say about that. But, I think that's kind of, it's a underpinning, in a way, of Satelliser and the sort of work that we're trying to do in that space, where you might enter the work and there might be something huge going on in a conversation. But it also might be something very light and very silly and that an audience could start to be in dialogue.

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And that is a way for that audience member and whoever is performing in the work at that time to become more possible in certain ways through that interaction. So I don't know if that answers you. Maybe because -- you could help me reorient that question, maybe. Maybe I've taken it a bit too far away.

Mady:

No. No. I think it's really interesting. And it always feels relevant at this point to talk about kind of the privileges that we have now, once again, of being in contact with each other.

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And I think we all, to a certain extent, experienced what it's like to be stripped of that presence. And almost like that visceral being with one another. And I think, in terms of that, I'm really interested in your rehearsal process that started back up again during the lockdown. Is that right?

[00:06:34]

Janine:

Exactly. So, this project began about seven years ago, actually, in London. And then it had a phase in Belgium in 2016 or 17. And then it began again in London in 2020 through a framework of Zoom meetings. So, to tell you something about how that worked practically, maybe.

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It's just useful to know. So, in the project, there are a number of collaborating artists who we call co-workers. I lose track of the number, because the number's always slightly shifting. But it was about 13 people last year and now it's bigger. It's about 18 or 19. And we met in smaller groups fairly regularly: so groups of five or six, sometimes seven, on Zoom.

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And it would never be the same configuration of people. And so the constant was me. I was always there. But people would come in and out and they would meet different co-workers -- sometimes the same people, sometimes a very different group. And we would be in conversation over those months. And that framework for meetings started to feel a bit like, not family.

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But it reminded me of the structures that we have where we keep showing up to something with people. And there might be someone missing, or there might be two people missing, or some other people are there. And that kind of regularity, or the sort of rhythm of that meeting, meant that we got to know each other in these different configurations: from different sides; from different angles. Because different conversations with different people would bring up different content.

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And then we could refer to that later. So, a whole other conversation, we could say, oh, but in last time, someone was saying this. Someone was saying that. And without those people being present, things kind of continue through remembering and misremembering. Not quite gossip, but something of the relations of gossip. And that's why I say this kind of familial vibe.

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Maybe like a big extended family or something structurally. Not in terms of how we relate to each other because we're not a family. And then, the other thing I would say about that kind of structure for meeting, is that it was also -- it didn't really matter who was there. It absolutely mattered what people brought. But we always managed to do a conversation.

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And it was about being in, and doing a conversation. And whether that was this four people, or this four people, that work of being in the conversation and continuing that was still possible. And it would be different, but it would happen. And that feels quite like shift patterning, in a way, which is maybe something we could speak about later. But, I know I'm answering your questions with lots and lots of information --

Mady:

-- Yes. Please do.

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Janine:

Yeah. I was kind of keen to, before we go further, maybe, into collectivity. I feel like maybe there's more to say about contact. And, yeah. I feel like there may be more to say there.

Mady:

Absolutely. I mean there's so much to say everywhere. Yeah. We can come back to contact, especially in terms of -- moving a little bit towards as well -- physical contact.

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And, not just staying there, but what the container of physical contact provides in Satelliser. You and your co-workers, you're in a shared space, a live space. And you're dancing. And you're moving. And you're in sync, and maybe out of it. So, I think my question would be, how Satelliser uses movement and contact and physical connection to hold space for collectivity.

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Janine:

Yes. You're right. I know that you haven't seen the live work yet, right? And maybe many people listen to this also haven't and won't see it. So, a brief introduction to that is that there are a group of people who all have differing relations to femme identities, who would, from the outside, probably be identified as a all-female group.

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An intergenerational group: some younger, some older, between about 20 and 70. And everybody is dancing a phrase of movement and sometimes speaking, holding conversation. The movement is happening in a unison: so everyone moving towards the same phrase.

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Trying to be in that. But, also, people can be resting: so, standing in the space, sitting, leaving, coming back, drinking water, etc, etc. So that's the kind of vibe of the space. There's an ongoing activity, but around that, there's also kind of the softness of a rest space. An informality, really. There isn't actually any physical touch in this work.

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It's a bit more like a corps de ballet type situation, although we're not dancing ballet. Yes. We don't touch each other and we don't touch the audience. So there'll be a familiarity around some of the distances that we maintain. Though we don't try to be two metres apart, we can

easily be two metres apart. So there's maybe something that is legible from the kinds of spatial organisation that we've had through the pandemic and keeping distance.

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The dance addresses the visitors in the sense that as visitors enter the gallery space, we as co-workers, we change the orientation of our dancing to face the people that are coming into the space. And, if they stay still, then gradually the movement will drift and surround those visitors.

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So, there's a kind of contact, or sort of contract, that happens through seeing, through seeing back the reciprocity of seeing as we're dancing. And, for me, that was really one of the beginnings in thinking about this project, was around -- and I prefer the French kind of phrase for the gaze which is the regard.

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So, I regard you, we regard. It feels more like a field of activity, rather than gaze. Which for me, I don't know about the definition exactly of gaze or the etymology, but it has a sense for me of a kind of emptiness or a light of gaze shining out from one person and not necessarily being bouncing back.

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Whereas the regard feels already like it has this -- I'm doing a movement with my hand, almost like a reflex or a bouncing back. It feels like it already suggests where that's landing. And so, in that sense, the seeing and the being accounted for in how the co-workers are seeing audiences, and seeing each other, as we're moving, is the beginnings of a kind of social contract that comes through the regard.

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I -- yes. I could go on and on and on.

Mady:

You can. It's so interesting. Yeah. I think, because, as you mentioned, there's this continuous movement, which is choreographed, but then you have these unrehearsed conversations. Of course, as you said, you mentioned in the rehearsal you guys, your performers are getting a sense of one another and maybe your interests or themes that come up.

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But it is a spontaneous conversation in your performance. And I think that's really interesting in terms of allowing for things to come up and then maybe to just dissipate. And for things to ebb and flow. And one of your co-workers, who's also my friend and my collaborator, Mia Quimpo Gourlay.

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She was talking about this -- yeah, her experience of being in the rehearsals without the movement. And how it really required her to get comfortable with silence and with reflection. And, of course, when then you're in the dancing space, that silence might be filled by movement.

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But I'm interested about what role does the ebb and flow of a conversation and the swelling of silence within the performance actually have?

Janine:

Yeah. It's nice that you talk about silence and this ebb and flow. For me, the dance phrase that is always going underneath the conversation is like a motor or it could also be a metabolism for the thinking.

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So it holds a space that allows -- maybe you wouldn't say silence, but the quietness. When processing it feels like it goes underground: like when it's happening in people's own systems that, actually, the dance and the ongoing nature of the dance is a tether for that thinking. So the dance is always happening.

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And it just struck me when you spoke about Mia's experience of conversation that, in order to be in conversation, we can't all be speaking at the same time. Structurally, conversation requires many things to happen and to be negotiated, which are how each of us learns and processes information, which is also different.

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Some of us speak, some of us need to be speaking to work out what we're saying. And that's my case. Others can process what they want to say and then do the speech act and put it out in the space to kind of land it. Others take a long time to process what they've received, work out where they are, and then speak. And many, many other kinds of ways of processing that oral information and then putting it out to space.

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But the conversation kind of falls flat when no one speaks -- nobody speaking -- or where everybody's speaking, or where one person is speaking all the time, holding the space, etc, etc. So, the rhythm of conversation in relation to the rhythm is quite important, and they're connected to each other as fields of activity. And they're kind of symbiotic in that way.

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So, on Zoom there can be a discomfort in, in silence and when we're gazing into screens and looking at each other. But, in the gallery space, we have these other practices of how we're seeing a person. And, of course, we're moving so we're not still. So we're seeing people from slightly different angles. And they're also shifting, which feels like it helps to mobilise thinking the way that going for a walk can kind of shift. Or swimming. Or whatever.

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I'm gesticulating now because that's also connecting space with my process of trying to understand what it is that I want to say. And, so, in the Zooms, what -- and in this isn't your question, but it's sort of related. Something that started to happen last year is that, as we were talking about what the dance might be, and for many people, the dance was kind of a

fantasy, because we hadn't done it before -- I encouraged people to find other things to do that would tether their attention.

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So some people were drawing, some people were -- one person was weaving baskets. Someone was embroidering, sort of doodling. And probably other things that I don't know about that people were doing with their hands. And that was quite helpful in order to get some relief from the social contract that the screen sort of asks for.

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Because I experience -- some of my better thinking happens when I'm not facing forward. Yeah. When I'm not facing the other, the other person. So, maybe, instead we're facing the same direction and we're going somewhere on a walk. I think that's quite a common experience. Or where I have the relief of looking away and there are other things in the room. Or there's the window. And other images become available because I'm connected to the content of the conversation.

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But I'm also able to be resourced by the spaces that I'm in or whatever I'm moving through. And that's something of the relationship between the conversation and the moving. And then the other thing I'd say about that is that some of the early ideas in this work were about the kinds of spaces that conversation can emerge from because people are being paid to do something else.

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So rather than like -- it's not about being in a parliament where you've risen through, or you have a certain kind of access to certain kinds of ways of certain rhetoric or discourse. And you're sat facing each other in exactly opposing sides. And it's more about coming together to do a kind of work, a kind of labour.

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And that as that labour becomes familiar, and we understand how to just get it done, which is the dance: keep getting it done. Keep doing it. There's a kind of a excess of energy, like social energy, perhaps, that allows us to be in conversation whilst doing that work. And, for me, the reference points were more things like my grandma having a story.

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She was a dock worker: at one point she did the books in the docks. And talking about talking to sailors or whoever whilst being able to do her work. Or people gathering to do washing or collective cooking. Or maybe looking after children, although that's a very taking-up of energy kind of activity, so maybe that's not a great example.

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Experiences I've had doing work in the service industries in cafés, or shelf stacking, or often things that involve manual labour in some way, whether it's lighter or heavier. And the kinds of conversations that are possible with other people engaged in that work that you wouldn't have if you weren't being paid to be somewhere to get this work done. So those are some of the dynamics. And I think it's important to mention that.

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Because, yeah. I think it's important because we're not joining together to perform or "re-perform" clever thinking. So, there are things that get said which are amazing; blow my mind and have kind of epiphanies where I've never thought of it that way. I've never thought of this this way. But that emerges from us being in conversation, rather than each of us coming with a researched perspective that we're then going to perform to outwit the other or convince someone of something.

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Mady:

Yeah. I really love that concept. You said, "Movement mobilises thinking". And I'm the same as you. I really speak with my hands, as I am now. And I process through speaking. And it offers a certain freedom, but as you also pointed to this idea of labour --

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I think it's really interesting how in Satelliser that seems to come through this idea of duration as well. And how duration gives this lens of work and of responsibility. And potentially also of exhaustion. I'm not a performer, so I don't know. But I can empathise with this feeling of dancing and dancing for hours.

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And then -- yeah. So, I suppose, I'd love to go into that a little bit more. About these themes of responsibility for keeping the conversation alive, for keeping on dancing. And how, also, as femme bodies in a space, there are certain, perhaps, connotations with that.

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Janine:

Yes. Absolutely. It does feel like a very gendered labour. Just what you said reminded me of when I was doing some thinking about the project a few years ago. A conversation I had with another artist called Shannon Stewart, and she filtered back to me, reflected back to me some things I was saying. And she came up with this formulation.

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Around how the labour of keeping the space oriented and the multi-tasking feels gendered. So I'm not a parent. I don't have caring responsibilities. But I can imagine that maybe someone who's a parent -- and maybe, particularly, female bodies. Or maybe that's not true.

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Maybe it's the people who are tasked with caring responsibilities and the bulk of reproductive labour may have something to say about multi-tasking and having to do many, many things at the same time. And hold all of those balls kind of in the air. So it certainly can feel a bit like that. But I guess I also want to come back to something you said -- something around duration and exhaustion.

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So, this work isn't for a stage: it's not for theatres. It's not for an audience that turn up and sit down and see the spectacle and then leave. It really does hold -- it holds gallery hours. So, you're right, it's durational, say from 10-6 or 10-5, whatever that is. And the co-workers and I have a shift schedule. And then within that shift schedule we navigate when we take breaks or rest.

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But yes, we do keep the work going. And, for me, this structure of working is way more like other work I've done in my life than it is like dance work, as I'd say, many people have experienced it. So, it's not entirely true because there are other durational -- there's many other durational dance performances.

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But in this one in particular, I'm interested in the connection between the kind of labour that we are doing and the kind of labour that many in the project haven't done, actually. So, thinking about class background and, yeah. I mentioned service industry work earlier. The kinds of work that is not, maybe not your vocation.

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So, yeah. What do I want to say about that? That I guess I'm thinking about exhaustion. So the point of the project is not to exhaust. And there's lots of agency for people to navigate the shift structure according to what they need and to take rest. And we're many people, actually, so we do take responsibility together for that. And we can practice a kind of equity in sharing labour.

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So, those who have more energy at that point, more capacity for the dancing or the conversation, can move towards that. And others can do a little less, but are still supporting and showing up for that space in a different way. And that's important too. How we think of being part of a -- so, it's not part of a collective, but being kind of in collective, or cooperation.

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Or any way of working together, I think, has to understand that different people at different times can bring different capacities. So there was a really nice article that we looked at at the very beginning of the process in 2016, by Kai Van Eikels. And he's a theatre maker. And he talks about collectivity, not as having to show up with his whole self, and put on a uniform and subscribe to being part of a club, or a fixed identity.

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But as parts of him, doing -- joining with parts of what other people are doing. So it's always this kind of partial joining. There's lots of agency to contribute what we can where we can. I feel like that's important in the nature of how we organise this work. But then the question of exhaustion is also interesting because it's a privilege to be doing dance work.

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And it's not often spoken about. Who in our field, or in my field -- because you're a bit more from theatre, right? Yeah. The kinds of backgrounds that people come from and the kinds of

work that people might have done, or not have done. And, so, for me, to make this work that draws on a sort of structural experience of tiring work: tiring work, which might not be well-paid.

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That you don't -- it's not glamorous. It's like getting through, but then what can come from that in terms of really getting to know people. Really getting to understand what another person needs to navigate this kind of labour. And there's loads more to say about this, about extraction and capitalism and many, many things.

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But my hope is that being in a structure which is suggesting some of that, is that then we can talk about those things, and that's what often the conversation can kind of lean into. I don't know if that made sense?

Mady:

No. Absolutely. No. You mention as well, earlier, this idea of kind of like a softness of a rest space, which I think is really wonderful.

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Because it feels like, to me, all of this commentary on gendered labour and the experience of it really comes through. But the way that you've created and allow or guide your co-workers -- you give them the liberty, the privileges, you called it, to also be able to navigate themselves and their own needs. Which I think is really, really important in this kind of work.

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Because they're having such a visceral experience. But it also feels like your audience members might also have to endure in some way. They also might have to work, or be in relation to work. And, as you said, you stage Satelliser in a non-theatrical space. It's in a gallery. It's in this more public sphere.

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So how does the gallery setting affect the way that the audiences interact with the performance and with the performers?

Janine:

The gallery space is everything. So the work was designed to address some questions that I had as a performer in the gallery space. So the gallery space is its native context.

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It's the space where the thought and thinking and interest in these questions around the regard, around labour, around the subject/object orientation in performance, where the idea of what happens in the work is also partially -- it's not the responsibility of the visitor, but they can be responsible for, I'm going to say the word vibes. The vibe.

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That there's a plasticity to what the work is able to be according to who shows up, both to do it in this team, and to who comes into the space as a visitor. How long they stay. What they say. How they pay attention etc. So, I used to think of it a bit like, kind of like a wind farm.

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Or like this ecological image for what we're doing and holding as a structure. And then what's kind of moving through that in terms of audiences and their energetics. So your ebb and flow watery image is quite nice from earlier as well. It's a work of relationship. And it's a work of many, many complex relationships. The relationships between the co-workers, which do show up in the work -- it's inevitable.

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We start to build histories with each other so we can refer back to when this person said this ten months ago. Or we can call on each other's knowledge in certain areas of lived experience. It's personal in that way. And we can intuit something of the lived experience that might be in the room from the visitors. But, of course, we have to be aware that a lot of that is projection because we don't actually know those people.

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There's the autobiographical, is there, as content. And this is something that Nancy May Roberts came and spoke to us about as a facilitator. It's just very helpful to think about the autobiographical content that's there. And then the relational content, and then the systemic: this overall systems that are operating. And I think in this work, we're kind of moving through those registers. So anecdotes can be there. We can talk about the time when this happened to me and this is how I felt about it.

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And then maybe there's a shift in register to talking about the relational. So we start to think about how it is to be in relation to -- I said the shopkeeper earlier. So people who we see regularly who we have a light-touch connection to. And then maybe we think about the systemic around, maybe, that shopkeeper is a black man and I'm a white woman, and the area that I live in.

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And what that means in terms of me moving through that area having these kinds of contact with all the kinds of people I do. And that's happening in the gallery too, of course, because visitors are coming and going. They're staying more or less time. Sometimes they're in groups, or pairs, or on their own. And people are having an engaged reaction with what we're saying, because -- not because, maybe because -- the materials are very close to what happens every day.

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So, if someone was nervous about performing this work, I would probably say, "Well, you know how to do it because you know how to have a conversation with the bus driver when your oyster card doesn't work, or something." We already know, actually, how to be in relation in different ways. And then we're practising, in a way, the best way that we can do that.

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And to really respond to them what someone might be bringing in order to go a bit further than maybe just saying hello. Yeah. So, the gallery as a space in which people are moving through, where people can come and go, people can take as much time as they want, is also about attention.

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And I'm not going to say it's a reward system, but of course, if you just pass through a space very quickly, what you might see in those few seconds are a group of people dancing. And you'll be like, cool: that's what that work is. And maybe you see, at one time, eight people, some of whom are older or younger. Different racial backgrounds. All of the things you might deduce from a first very quick impression of the work.

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And, if you came back, maybe there's one person dancing. Maybe it's an older woman. Or, you come back and there are three people of colour dancing. It's always going to be different. But, if you stay a bit longer, the duration invites more complexity in an unfolding and of an understanding. Also, as we move through conversation, from something like the Spice Girls to something else, can also modulate in lightness and humour.

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And, then, you realise, actually, you were talking about the Spice Girls, as we did recently. And our show at Baltic really gives way to interesting and quite difficult conversations.

Mady:

Yeah. Yeah, that's so fascinating how speaking about this kind of passing through and having one image, and then perhaps -- how rewarding it could be to really see how things oscillate.

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And how they layer. And how they build and are constantly changing.

You just performed at the Baltic. And you are performing at Margate on November the 20th and 21st. Just for you, just quickly before we wrap up -- what has your experience been to perform again after all this time? You first performed in 2015/2016. What's it been like?

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Janine:

It was huge. Yeah. It was really big because I had to sustain a confidence that what I intended for this work to do back all those years ago was still going to be something that could be wanted. And as an art worker, I'm not often responding to commissioning opportunities. Or this work wasn't really a commissioned work.

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So let's say no one asked me to do it. But, then once it was starting to happen, it got some resources and support. But there is a sense of real responsibility around.

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Is this thing, is this structure, is this invitation to all these many people -- and the relationships with the galleries and the touring network that the work's part of -- is it true? Is it real? What I say that this work is, and will, and can be, and do, and what it might mean. There's a real holding of my nerves.

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There was a holding my nerve in trusting and trying to stay soft with that. And trying to, yeah, really staying connected with the people in the group as we go into the many unknowns of coming into this moment in the pandemic. And the people are starting to come back. Some people are starting to be able to come back into gallery spaces and theatres and things.

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What is that for us in the group? How will this work be different? Looping back to your first question -- what does this kind of contact mean, or how might it mean differently. And I have felt over the year, year and a half that we were working online, that there was real value for people in this.

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And so I held that as we went into the gallery. But, of course, you just don't know how that's going to be, to be in a live space together with visitors. And, if some of the brave, complex, vulnerable conversations we've managed to have as a group would be possible in the gallery context, would we be up for it?

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Have I put enough in place in our group structure for people to feel able to do the difficult work of articulating experiences that they have, that are not shared with everybody in the group? All the different intersectional interplays that are there. The really -- I can't think of the word.

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The really sensitive relationship between what it is to have conversations not go well, especially around some of the much more sensitive topics where there's real potential for harm, where they're not held properly -- how is it to encourage that to happen.

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And know that we are doing the best we can. And we're not -- we don't know each other super well as a group, so there is the potential for all the kinds of, yeah, harm and hurt that happen in any space between people with very different lived experiences. And then the courage in our group to be in those conversations.

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And to understand that, perhaps, by having them and by them not always going well, that that's also modelling the endeavour to be in those conversations. And that that is part of a service that this work is trying to do, by having those conversations publicly. So then that's also complicated around equity.

[00:44:29]

And how the project might be moving towards justice, or what we might think of as social justice. And the small part that being in these conversations can play. So, yeah, those were some of the concerns, which were many. But then I have to remind myself too that I know how to -- I have to trust. I have to trust.

[00:44:59]

Now, I don't know what I'm going to say, but I'm saying something. And I'm saying it to you. And that you are having your own process with that. And I trust you to bring what you can bring to this conversation. And that that kind of contact between strangers is something that we're losing more and more, I think. We're losing intergenerational spaces. I'm a queer person: we're losing queer spaces, especially intergenerational queer spaces.

[00:45:28]

Yeah. So I had to hold all of that. And my intentionality for the project. Fortunately, it went well. It went well. It's not perfect, and it shouldn't be, because we're also just people. Yeah.

Mady:

Wow. Oh my gosh. Thank you for sharing all of that. It really -- the amount of intention and of compassion, it seems, that you're holding and that you as a collective are holding within these conversations is really amazing.

[00:46:07]

Amongst such this kind of collective experience of isolation as well. It is so important that we can feel like we exist and we make each other possible, as you said, through listening, and through repeating, and evolving, and being quiet, and then coming back to it. I think that's something that's really, really, important right now.

[00:46:37]

So, thank you so much for this conversation, and for this opportunity. And I'm really excited to see Satelliser at some point. But thank you so much Janine.

Janine:

Thank you. Thanks for holding space with me.

[00:46:53]

END