

Reflection Text on the Artistic Research Project:

The Many and the Form

by Edit Kaldor

Norwegian Theatre Academy, Østfold University College

Norwegian Artistic Research Programme/DIKU

Primary supervisor: Karmenlara Ely

Secondary supervisors: Joe Kelleher, Bart Philipsen

Part 1: Introduction

This is a written account of and reflection on the research project *The Many and the Form*, which I have conducted as a research fellow at the Norwegian Theatre Academy in the context of the Norwegian Research Fellowship Programme between October 2017 and December 2022.¹ In this text I will describe the project and give an insight into its origins, ambitions, contexts, processes, outcomes, and possible afterlives. It is accompanied by

¹ During this period I had two breaks: 4 months break from April 2020 and 6 months break from February 2021. For the rest of the period between September 2018 and May 2022 I did the research on part-time 50% basis.

other reference material created during the research.² One set of additional reflective materials opens out to dialogic exchanges with an international range of artists and activists working with related topics and questions, while the other rehearses the archiving of material contributed to the participatory work which this research project builds upon, giving an example of how to archive some of the work that I'm doing and how to make the material available for others. The 300 stories included in the archive give credit to the raw material of lived experience that informed the conception of this research. An edited video of a digital workshop-series I led as part of the process of developing *Parallel Life* is also submitted as documentation material. It gives a sense of the group participation process and a glimpse of some of the workshop outcomes.

The proposal

My research questions at the start of the project were both particular and quite broad. They amount, in short, to the following: What working methods and tools can be developed which both artists and non-artists could use for creating theatrical situations based on subjective life experiences and desires towards sociality? What can these working methods and the work produced using them contribute to participatory, co-creative processes and to contemporary theatre and performance aesthetics?

² See Overview of the materials submitted as part of the reflection component of the research project *The Many and the Form* by research fellow Edit Kaldor

The point of departure for the research was my own artistic practice as theatre maker, creating performances for years together with people of various backgrounds and ages, many of whom were involved for the first time in the arts during these processes. Prompted by my own biography, my experiences and those of these participants, the people around me and close to me, I have been determined to use this research for finding new ways to bring into the theatre lived knowledges and desires which are rooted in concrete and often marginalized social positions and situations. By tapping into first-hand subjective knowledge, both my artistic work and the research project have been concerned with addressing the complexity of these experiences, especially when they seem to defy articulation. From the start, the research plan has been to focus on developing tools for formulating such experiences and desires through the conceptualizing and realising of performative situations.

In the years prior to starting this project I began occasionally to formulate elements of my working methods with the aim to share them with collaborators, participants and students in the various MA and BA theatre and performance programmes where I have been teaching and tutoring. With *The Many and the Form* I wanted to give space and time for developing sharable working methods and to advance this work in a structured, practice- and experiment-based manner. This included going beyond the working methods from my own practice and devising other ones suitable for performing arts student practitioners as well as for people without previous experiences in performance-making.

According to the working plan in the initial research proposal, a preparatory phase would be followed by three cycles of workshops, and after each cycle, based on the observations, the

set of working procedures would be reformulated, tweaked and expanded. These adjusted and extended working methods would then be tried in the next cycle of workshops, which would again be followed by adjustments, changes and the inclusion of new elements. It was important for this research process to be predominantly empirical. Working with people in this way I did not want to assume anything about their reactions or even unconsciously push for preconceived, 'desirable' results. Rather, I was interested to try out through the cycles of practice how each aspect of the proposed working procedures would actually work with the different participants. The workshops would take place in various contexts: MA and BA Performance Practice programmes in Norway, the Netherlands and Finland, as well as a longer-term workshop series in a local community theatre in a culturally diverse neighbourhood of Amsterdam.

The methodology for the workshops was thus to plan, propose, try out, observe, reflect, adjust, tweak, expand, propose the new version, try again, observe again, adjust again, etc.

As artist and as researcher I have always valued rule #8 of the *Ten Rules for Students and Teachers* by John Cage: 'Do not try to create and analyze at the same time. They are different processes.' This, I felt to be especially crucial in this research process as the experiment involved sharing and trying out working procedures with others whose ways of working with the tools which were offered could not and should not be predicted.

Furthermore, since the aim of the project was that the shared working methods would provide means and confidence to make work, as well as a sense of agency to the participants, any 'wishful thinking' by the researcher for a certain outcome, even in the slightest, would be in complete contradiction to the intentions and purpose of the investigation. Although thorough preparation and acting responsibly and ethically were

essential for the project, I was curious to explore also the aspects of the rather speculative proposal that I did not yet know and could not foresee.

I should say too that this research project has been from the start – and remains – situated in the context of continental European practices of postdramatic theatre. I took the notion of 'theatre as situation'³ from that tradition as one of the core concepts of this project. My research proposal hypothesized that since complex knowledge of social situations is accessible to people regardless of whether they have had an art education, working with this knowledge as material for the creation would make it possible for participants without prior artistic experience or training to be fully involved in the creative process already from the beginning, i.e. the conceptualizing phase. The research intended to develop practice-based exploration of the potentials and challenges that this form of co-creation could bring to the 'quality of participation', adapting an idea from Claire Bishop who refers to the 'tension between quality and equality' as a key issue in these types of participative practices.⁴

Relying on the concept of 'theatre as situation' and exploring participatory co-creation in theatre, the research had at the outset the ambition to interrogate in a broader sense what the function of theatre and live performance can be, both in terms of the process and the actual live event. In theatre, according to Hans-Thies Lehmann: *'an actually improbable encounter takes place between the social motives for participation and the genuine,*

³ "Current post-dramatic theatre in many of its variants is a theatre of the situation. What I mean by this is that the focus is less on the product of the art of staging (which doesn't simply disappear for this reason) and more on the reality jointly engendered in the performance by all participants. 'GET DOWN AND PARTY. TOGETHER. Participation in the arts since the 1990s' Oral statement given at Kölnischer Kunstverein by Hans-Thies Lehmann, 2011

⁴ Bishop, Claire, 'Artificial Hells', Verso, 2012, p.67

*theatrical-aesthetic interest in opening the theatre in order to regain its potentiality as a comprehensive, social and convivial, political and also aesthetic practice.*⁵ The desire to investigate the theatre aesthetic potential of participation through making and testing models of working which shift authorship to the participants was both a motor in the conception of this research project as well as its main theoretical frame. Through the empirical research of the cycles of workshops I would investigate what new perspectives these kinds of practices could bring to participation in the performing arts and what they could contribute to contemporary theatre-making and its aesthetics. The final artistic outcomes of the research project *The Many and the Form* were planned to be public presentations of the performative works developed by participants in the third cycle of workshops.

The process

The research process started out with a period of preparations for devising the working procedures for the first cycle of workshops. This included an exploration of returning to my most significant artistic experience prior to this research, working with non-professionals in a workshop setting on the articulation of precarious life experiences, albeit in words. The performance project *Inventory of Powerlessness* that I, together with my collaborators, made between 2013 and 2016 with the participation of several hundred people in five European cities: Amsterdam, Prague, Berlin, Poznan and Athens was a direct precursor and

⁵ Lehmann (n 3)

prompt for *The Many and the Form*, where, instead of verbally, the articulation would happen through the creation of performative encounters. Revisiting the *Inventory*, selecting and translating its collected material from the 5 original languages into English, and organizing it into an interactive digital archive was for me a way to delve into that material and to explore the ways of working towards the articulation of lived experiences in that project. The digital archive with the English version of these formulations of sometimes seemingly unspeakable experiences by the participants of the *Inventory* is included as part of this reflection material. This collection of experiences also serves as a reference of the kinds of lived knowledges I was interested to explore in the workshops of this current research.

I did the first workshops with MA Performance students, followed by workshops with BA students at Norwegian Theatre Academy (NTA), and MA students at DAS Theatre and MA dramaturgy students at the University of Amsterdam. I wanted to first work with performing arts students trying some of the working procedures I was devising, before starting in Spring 2019 a longer series of workshops at Pleintheater in Amsterdam with a mixed group of participants, some with prior artistic experience, while others without. These latter, weekly workshops in a community-based theatre in a diverse neighbourhood of the city ran throughout 2019 in two segments – one in the Spring and part of the Summer and the other in the Autumn. In the Fall season of the workshop series most of the participants made a performative presentation and these were shown to a public during a two-day long festival.

This first cycle of workshops was concluded with another week-long workshop this time with a different focus with the NTA MA students (January 2020), followed by workshops

with MA students at Theatre Work, Tampere University (February 2020), just weeks before Corona was acknowledged as a pandemic, and Europe started to close down.

At this point the trajectory of the research was interrupted. Because of the empirical and participative nature of the project in its original form and intentions, it was significantly impacted by the restrictions due to the Corona-19 Pandemic. As the consequence of the impossibility of live gathering and the closing of cultural institutions, the project was at first suspended and then had to be fundamentally re-thought. In the end the research project was modified in terms of form, content and methodology from the intentions and planned activities as these had been outlined in the original proposal and as they were carried out in the first part of research. However, although the artistic project at the centre of the investigation had to be replaced by a new one a little less than about half-way through the research, many of the core interests and topics of investigation stayed akin to the original ones. Ultimately, while this changed trajectory and artistic project yielded new areas of investigation, it also gave a chance to go deeper into questions that had been intrinsic – though perhaps less obvious – from the outset of the original research. To put it another way: through the filter of the second part of the research, some essential issues of the original plan had opened up in rather unexpected ways, revealing a more specific focus for the original investigation.

In the end, though, from the 3 cycles of workshops that I originally proposed in the research plan only one cycle was realized. After that, Covid-19 measures made it impossible to continue with the workshops.

At that point I took 4 months break from the research, hoping that things would swiftly return to 'normal'. They did not, but in the Autumn of 2020 I resumed the research at 50% part-time and I started to develop the performance *Parallel Life*, where I applied to my own working process some approaches and elements of the procedures created for participants in the first cycle of the workshops. During this period, I also led two online workshops. The first one was a one-off workshop at the ELIA Biennale, called *What Can Happen Here?* (November 2020)⁶ It was for students and staff in performing arts educations, and the aim was to explore how stretching the social imagination and urgencies specific to each person could clarify the stakes for their contribution to the workings of the institutions and bring about a shift in the sociality of the place. This workshop, although it was closely related to practices of fantasizing socially and bringing in personal imperative, which were explored in the first cycle of the workshops, did not bring new insights to the research, probably because of the online format, the short duration and the focus on the specific context of the institution.

The other online workshop I did at this time took place over 3 weeks in the context of *Virtual Workspaces* programme curated by the Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens together with Studio Theatre in Warsaw (December 2020)⁷. The participants were art practitioners, and there was also a group of online 'observers', people who applied but did not fit into the group. In this workshop I explored questions that were new to the research and pertained to the intimate social space between people and their mobile devices, part of the line of investigation for *Parallel Life*. Despite being online and having a different focus, these

⁶ See: <https://elia-artschools.org/page/ELIABiennialWorkshop>

⁷ See: https://openstudios.pl/project/edit-kaldor_studio

workshops bore similarities to and had relevance for the previous workshops during the research. There was the same practice-oriented methodology of 'continuous making' and a focus on breaking inhibitions in the artistic materialization of ideas and subjective experiences, in this case mostly related to the day-to-day coexistence with one's mobile phone and the mental and emotional repercussions and creating dialogues with chatbots, modelled on internal dialogues.

These workshops were connected to the new phase of the research project diverted by Covid restrictions. At that time, I did not realize yet the length of Covid and its consequences, or that within the context of this research I would not be able to go beyond the development of the first cycle of the workshops. At this point I was still hopeful that the pandemic would blow over soon, so I decided to take off 6 months from the research and try to 'wait it out' until I could resume my research activities as planned. When it became clear that this was not going to happen in the foreseeable future, I decided to refocus the research. Ultimately, instead of the second and third cycles of the workshops that had been planned, I returned 50% part-time for the second part of the research project and changed the artistic work at the centre of the project to the making of *Parallel Life*, a site specific 'Covid-safe' performance for the mobile phone and public space.

There were concrete aspects of the effects of Covid that I was interested to explore, especially in terms of spectatorship. Firstly, that it was a shared experience, creating a kind of common ground between people that I thought was unprecedented. Secondly, that most people experienced the kind of alienation stemming from isolation, which has been such a core part of my lived experience, and of my artistic sensibilities and interests. The severe

impact of Covid restrictions on social and public life opened up a new field of investigation, connected to the daily use of mobile devices. It also brought new insights for the original research and more clarity about what the core drive and focus of that part of the project could be. Furthermore, it provided new information about possible methodologies and points of departure for taking further the parts of the research that could not fully unfold during the fellowship, which I'm interested to pursue in the coming years.

The lecture performance *Strangers* – which I made together with Kobbe Koopman and Ruffino Henriquez, who took part both in the *Inventory* and the workshops – was another way to reflect on the research. It was an attempt to bring together and consider some of the less visible, yet elemental aspects of the research and how these connect to my artistic practice at large. It highlighted the continuity between the *Inventory* and the workshops and is included in the submission to provide insight into the aspirations of both. It was also a way to bring back the 'many' into the research through the *Inventory*; to go back, draw longer lines, see the consistence and the cohesion between the different phases and elements.

A final reflective component I completed towards the end of my research, which connected back both to my original research proposal as well as to my work before the fellowship, are the seven conversations between artists on how knowledges of powerlessness figure in their work. In my research proposal I wanted to have 3 other artists give input into the development of the workshops. With one of them the explicit focus was to be on the link between vulnerability and artistic work. Although this collaboration could not happen, I was still interested to explore the question of vulnerability and art. Therefore, I initiated and

realized these conversations on this subject with the support of Florian Malzacher; and include them here in order to share another line and manner of reflection I did during the research on the topics at the core of the project.

Contexts

The research, as with my practice, belongs primarily to the contemporary, postdramatic theatre and performance field. It adapts the ongoing quest that is part of that tradition about how the terrains and contexts where performance can 'do its work' could be rethought and expanded.

The Many and the Form stems concretely from – as a direct continuation of as well as an attempt to take further – my previous theatrical practice of working with non-artist participants,⁸ particularly in the trilogy titled *Inventory of Powerlessness* (including 3 projects: *One Hour*, *Woe*, *Inventory of Powerlessness*) between 2011 and 2016. This research was also strongly motivated by the subsequent failure of taking the experience of the *Inventory* trilogy into a theatre performance *Web of Trust* (2016). The necessity for making this research proposal came straight out of my work with non-artists in *Inventory of Powerlessness*: having worked with so many people, the process being more important than the performances, and seeing the openness, and the need, as well as observing that many

⁸ I have been continuously working with non-artists since *C'est du Chinois*, which was developed in 2009-2010 and toured until 2015. Both the process of development and the touring (during which period my practice is to take 2 hours before each performance for devising possible changes) of that and the following pieces informed both the motivation for and the content of this research.

of the participants valued in the process not only the expression of feelings or the sharing of experiences but also of developing particular ways of thinking in structures. In the case of the *Inventory* this was predominantly present in working on the connections between the testimonies – creating tags, posing questions, understanding the bigger picture and the more complex and subtle narratives produced by connecting their stories with others – and exploring how the dramaturgy and structures proposed in the performance could be applied to thinking about their own lives and the world. My desire was to do more with this need and people, but I realized during the making of *Web of Trust* that this can best happen outside of the context of the creation of a particular performance, where the openness and complexity of the process inevitably suffers by being submitted to the making of a product.

Postdramatic

Both parts of this research project – the workshops and *Parallel Life* – as well as my artistic practice and my artistic formation as theatre maker can best be situated – as noted already – in the post-dramatic tradition and field. I find it a useful identification and realm of belonging, both for my own work and for the works that could in the future come forth from using the methods developed in the research. My artistic and pedagogical practices have been strongly influenced by the approach of Hans-Thies Lehmann to observation and analysis of performance. The encounters that my practice and I have had with him have impacted my thinking about live performance, spectatorship, and the basic parameters of this research. Although the term ‘postdramatic’ is used to encompass practices with a broad range of aesthetics, it is still more specific than the term ‘contemporary theatre’,

which is for the most part still primarily representational. In this text, I use the terms ‘postdramatic theatre’, ‘contemporary theatre’ and ‘contemporary performance’ interchangeably, as these are the terms that my own work is mostly referred to. But I feel most affinity with the postdramatic tradition and with many of the artists who associate themselves with it.⁹

I also recognize my own interest in what lies ahead for current developments of theatre and where my research can possibly contribute in Lehmann’s thinking, as he ‘points to some aspects of the term postdramatic that should not be neglected’¹⁰ and writes:

I believe that the theatre and art in general are moving away from a once highly productive value, the autonomy of art, and moving toward a different idea: to see art and theatre as a ‘mixing’ [Legierung] of aesthetic praxis with other social forms of praxis that cannot be judged or even discussed in purely aesthetic terms.¹¹

This corresponds to my thinking about the theatrical situation comprising an essential element of sociality, which cannot be separated from the artistic aspects of the event.

I spent the first seven years of working in theatre as dramaturg with Peter Halasz, founder of Squat Theater¹² and Love Theater and thus the approach that the essence of theatre is the relationality with the spectators has been my primary frame of reference and ingrained

⁹ Obituary Hans-Thies Lehmann, Die Zeit, 8 September 2022 <https://e-cibs.org/hans-thies-lehmann-1944-2022/>

¹⁰ <http://intermsofperformance.site/keywords/postdramatic/hans-thies-lehmann>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² <http://squattheatre.com/about.html>

in me from early on. As Lehmann describes in the section on ‘the event’ in his *Postdramatic Theatre*:

*The Living Theatre, Performance Group, The Wooster Group, Squat Theatre and many others explored happening-like forms of theatre, in which presence and chances of communication were favoured over represented actions. We could think of the performances by Squat Theatre, in which the audience was placed in a shop with large shop windows, the performers combining their presentation of spoken text with all sorts of activities while another audience curiously observed actors and audience through the shop windows from the street. [...] theatrical communication not primarily as a confrontation with the audience but as the production of situations for the self-interrogation, self-exploration, self-awareness of all participants.*¹³

In my own practice, although I’ve made most of my work for the site of the black box the relationship to the audience and the basic situation of each particular performance are always central and decided early on in the making process. These aspects are the guiding parameters of the work from which the other elements – form, text, technology, dramaturgy – follow. The importance of and time given to the audience’s process of perceiving, interpreting, making associations of the performance material is central to my performances, which have been described as taking place in the minds of the audience¹⁴. As I often use dramaturgies of undecidability the overlay of ‘the reality of the situation’ within

¹³ Lehmann, Hans-Thies, ‘Postdramatic Theatre’, trans. Karen Jurs-Munby (Routledge, 2006) p. 105

¹⁴ Loek Sonneveld, ‘Narigheid’ in de Groene Amsterdammer (May 2013)

a semi-fictive setting and overlaying this with the performance situation is an important part of developing each work.

The notion of the theatre situation and its close entanglement with everyday life is described by Hans-Thies Lehman as a fundamental perspective of postdramatic theatre.

*Theatre is the site not only of 'heavy' bodies but also of a real gathering, a place where a unique intersection of aesthetically organized and everyday real life takes place.*¹⁵

Exploration of this notion of the real gathering, of the stakes for those who participated and the possible real consequences played an important role in the strand of the workshops in that research that focused on performance as social situation. *Theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing and the spectating take place. The emission and reception of signs and signals take place simultaneously.*¹⁶ Ambitions to work with this shared space and simultaneous processes within a performance frame are at the base of the research and its proposal of aligning the processes and working tools of making theatre with those of imagining and creating social situations.

References

Since the research project ended up consisting of and producing heterogeneous processes and materials, in this reflection I have decided to limit the number of external references, in

¹⁵ Lehmann (n 13) p. 17

¹⁶ Ibid

order to concentrate on the convergences between the various existing elements, and to keep the focus on how the different parts of the research can dialogue with one another. This way of limiting the main components at play to those that have sprung from the same source, letting them swirl around for a considerable amount of time so inherent connections and patterns and, ultimately, glimpses of its underlying structure can emerge – as opposed to being analytically anticipated and imposed upon it – is a key strategy in my way of working on artistic projects, and I want to try to apply it here as well. This means that I will concentrate, with some exceptions, on references from within the research and my practice, or reflections by others on the practice.

Personal

I have, however, chosen in this text to include repeated references to personal experiences and events from my own biography. Although it is perhaps unusual in such a reflection text, I have decided on this more subjective tone because it reflects the importance of the role that lived experience plays not only in my artistic practice but also in all of the phases of exploration that comprise this research. The connection between lived experience, knowledge formation and sharing within a performing arts context are fundamental themes of the research. A recurring question during the project has been the relationship between social knowledge and social desires, based on and stemming from lived experiences and directed towards the creation of performance situations. Similarly, imagining how artistic and pedagogical practices can integrate and be integrated into other areas and aspects of everyday living, has been an ongoing inquiry during the project.

Part 2: The Workshops

The sharable working methods that I started to develop in the context of this research project are grounded in various aspects specific to my practice and theatrical interests, such as creating modalities of performance that remain close to daily behaviour, or directly addressing the spectators and individualizing them within the collective setting of the theatre. Some of the exercises developed for the workshops stem from my approach of creating performance structures that consist of a series of mental and emotional prompts for the spectators and incorporating time for thinking in response. Other connections between the research and my previous artistic methods include drawing on lived experiences, as well as exploring and unfolding subjective states and moments connected to these within the spectatorial experience. Yet, some of the procedures I developed and tested during the workshops did not directly – at least not consciously – reflect working methods I have used in the past in my own creative processes.

Overview of the workshops

From 2018 until the beginning of 2020, I developed working procedures and tried them out through a series of workshops in different contexts, including a local community theatre in Amsterdam where I also worked with non-artist participants, as well as in a number of MA and BA Theatre programmes internationally. During the workshops I worked both in groups and individually with the participants and was in the theatre assisted on the

preparation and workshops by a young practitioner, Jurrien van Rheenen, as well as by another collaborator, Kobbe Koopman, who both helped with production and documentation tasks and participated in the workshops. Some workshop-series concluded with (semi-)public or internal sharing of the outcomes and sometimes also informal conversations with the audience.

The workshops in the theatre were documented mostly by audio-recordings, and when participants gave permission, the outcomes were also recorded by video. (Although in the end some of the video documentation was lost, due to a faulty digital camera.) Additionally, one participant in the workshops was asked to write an account and her impressions after each workshop. I will include some of this material in the text that follows.

Ethical approach towards working with participants

Throughout the years of working with participants in creative processes, I have navigated the ethics of this practice from project to project, from day to day. Just before starting the workshops, I decided to try to articulate the main aspects of the ethics in my practice of working with others. Below is a summary of the most important elements of this ethical approach, as deducted from co-creative work on performances, and also applied to the workshop situation. Most of the points are equally relevant to working with students and some refer specifically to working with people from outside of the arts, who may have less experience with artistic and educational contexts. The precarious positions of both students and non-artist participants need to be concretely acknowledged and taken into account. The

essential points of the ethical guidelines I have developed based on the practice of working with others and that my colleagues and I followed during the workshops are the following:

I try to provide and maintain complete transparency about what it is we are doing and what it can and cannot do. This is an ongoing dialogue, to be sure that it is understood well by the participants, and it is constantly updated as the project or workshop develops. Also, complete transparency about who I am and what I and the project can and cannot do (in terms of fame, aftercare, job opportunities, etc.) In the case of students, transparency about how much, if anything, of what they do in the workshop is being communicated to the school and how they are assessed.

In the case of non-artist participants, I have an initial one-on-one talk with each person and then repeat this periodically. The conversation is about their motivation for joining; how what we do relates to their current life; and if they want to work with lived experiences, to what extent that experience is already processed, what sort of distance they have to it, and whether dealing with it in this manner, i.e. through performance-making, is a useful way for them to process these experiences further. As a rule, if it seems in the initial meeting that the participant wishes to deal with relatively fresh and unprocessed traumatic experiences, or if the person is in a fragile mental state, I make the suggestion that instead of participating in the project they seek other forms and assistance for the processing of their experiences. When appropriate, with the help of the general practitioner, I refer them to a therapist. This is a sensitive process, so enough time has to be taken for it, sometimes several meetings, so they don't consider it to be a rejection. In the workshops these talks were not before starting but after the initial sessions.

During specific artistic projects and especially in the developmental stage, I prefer to work with people whose experiences are related to circumstances I or my collaborators are familiar with, preferably first-hand. For this reason, I often work with people who are or have been refugees, since I have also spent some time in a refugee camp as a young teenager. And although each experience is different, having common ground and common references facilitates communication on all levels. This means that the participant does not have to make so much effort and do a lot of labour to translate or teach us information regarding their circumstances, in order to communicate with us about her experiences. This could be alienating for her.

When having common references through lived experience is not possible, as in the workshops, I do other background research about the particular circumstances, practical and cultural aspects of the life of the participant that emerge during the work, in order to be an informed and respectful conversation partner in the process.

Also, for the collaborators I work with, an important part of the work is to overcome ignorance or innocence about particular circumstances, contexts and influences that inform each of the participants. If we don't know enough about their circumstances or influences, we try to do our research, so that in conversation they do not feel even subtly othered and thereby alienated from their own experiences. Understanding enough of their references is important to be able to have meaningful conversation. Otherwise, they are working for us, teaching us (which anyway will happen; but only if we do our research and the participants

are not over-burdened by having to convey even the basic terms to us, can this teaching exchange be interesting to them.)

It is important to stay conscious throughout the collaboration of avoiding any form of patronizing, or suggestion of particular values attached to the different roles in the process, besides the differences produced by the level of responsibility taken for the whole and the amount of work put in. Being transparent about this, speaking and acting openly about it throughout the process helps the participant to find and continue to negotiate for themselves agency and a position she feels comfortable with.

I am careful not to assume or imply, even subtly, that the work we do together is by any means more important, 'legitimate', or interesting than any other work they do elsewhere, or any other aspects of their lives. Though, hopefully it becomes interesting and important to them, and that's why they stay involved. But that is for each participant to negotiate and decide for themselves.

I and my collaborators try to avoid replicating aspects of hierarchical structures we are all part of in other areas of life (e.g. school, immigration services, social services). We are careful not to address the participants as a group, not to use bureaucratic language or have rules. We discourage all forms of competition or focus on 'achievement' and seeking approval. An important aspect of this is not to rush people. When working within institutional environments, my colleagues and I try to be as much as possible the buffer between the institution and the participants.

We work a lot with people one-on-one or in small groups. We try to make sure that people understand everything that's going on, not by simplifying, but by giving time for participants to make the process and the ideas their own. Aiming to create circumstances so they can experience the joy and the different ways of thinking structurally that are part of art making, and that are different from many other daily (hobby or work) activities.

Participants should not be bound to the project by any commitment except for the extent to which their peers (other participants and the project or workshop leaders) may depend on them and their contribution. In other words, they are free to terminate their participation whenever they want. And they are free to return at a later point, if it makes sense and is possible to facilitate in terms of the process they've missed.

We try to give a lot of space and time for each participant to continuously redefine their motivation for taking part in the project. Why do they want to do this? What is in it for them? What do they want to figure out through this? We return to these questions periodically, as things change along the way. Quite a lot of conversation during the working process revolves around these subjects, as the reflection is an essential part of the work that is being done and developed. Each participant is invited to think actively throughout the project about what is in it for them.

Working sessions and workshops are planned at a rhythm that participants have a week – and sometimes more – to 'process' what happened in the last session and can make an active decision if they want to join for the next session. This 'processing time' in my experience is crucial when working with people from outside of the arts. It is the only way

that the participants can 'digest' the work for themselves, make the process their own, integrate it in their thinking and relate it to other aspects of their lives, and have agency and choice about being there and taking part. Otherwise, there is too much input and a risk that it becomes overwhelming, and people resort to their habits of socialization: mostly either competition, resistance, or being 'good subjects', and none of these states are conducive to the work.

These are the basics we work with, besides the obvious care for the bodily and emotional well-being of the participants, respecting the other aspects of their lives, as well as their time, and assisting where doable to make it possible for them to be there (for instance providing activities for small children, or effectively assisting those who cannot travel with getting to and from the workshops).

Procedures, strands

The working procedures that I proposed, used and further developed during the workshops involved practices of socializing with strangers: identifying, exploring and articulating subjective experiences and states, even if complex or dealing with affliction, and therefore difficult to express. They also included exercises of tapping into the participants' desires and existing practices of daydreaming and expanding these into the creation of performative situations. In all the workshops, I looked for ways to stimulate participants to overcome inhibitions, self-censoring and eagerness to 'do well', whether to impress or meet their own or others' expectations when creating material; in other words, to allow playful, instinctive,

silly, and random elements and impulses to guide the work. Observation of one's subjective, thinking and emotional processes and of shared, social interactions were important elements in various workshops, as were 'people watching', 'reading' others and projecting on them.

In the coming section I elaborate on the workshops that were realised as part of this research, as well as some of the preparatory thinking and work that preceded them. The account is arranged according to main organizing concepts and strands in the workshop materials: situation, sociality, strangers, lived experiences, desire, daydreaming, relationality, triggers and prompts.

a. Situation

During the first workshops we focused primarily on exploring the idea of performance as situation. I started with a small group of MA Performance students at the Norwegian Theatre Academy, followed by workshops in other schools. I wanted to first try out some of my proposed procedures with Master's students, who are already quite experienced artists, before starting the workshops at the theatre with a mixed group that included non-professional participants. Each workshop was different but there were overlapping elements. In the various workshops we examined in concrete ways how to observe and identify elements and dynamics that are present in a given situation; how to work with them, influence, tweak or change them; and how to emphasize certain components and relations, while playing down the importance of some of the other parameters.

In preparing the workshops, I looked into some of the thinking about situations that felt relevant to the intentions of the research. I found the notion of shared definition of a situation from sociology especially generative and integrated it into some of the exercises focused on the observation and 'layering' of situations. Also, Goffman's distinction between situation and encounter – the latter being that with intentionality and focus¹⁷– gave some ideas during the preparation for the workshops. These sources informed the work on situations and intent in the workshops, looking at what elements and what desires are present and considering each situation as a process that unfolds. My readings on the Situationists most likely inspired what became a recurrent reference question when working with the participants: 'What can happen here?' (And in hindsight I recognize the role that these readings played in stirring my mind in the direction that later materialized in the performance *Parallel Life*.)

I used these sources for the preparation but did not bring them directly into the workshops or share them with the participants, since I was mostly interested in guiding them towards developing for themselves tangible ideas of what a situation is through their existing knowledge of sociality. I tried to encourage them throughout the work to continue to formulate their own angles towards the notion, as well as concrete working definitions of what comprises a situation in a performative context. It felt most productive to start practically, through drawing on existing situations, instead of approaching the subject more conceptually.

¹⁷ Goffman, Erving, 'The Neglected Situation' in *American Anthropologist* Vol. 66, No. 6, Part 2: The Ethnography of Communication (Wiley, Dec., 1964), p. 135

In the work with the performing arts students, we started by thinking and hearing about their own practices of making. During the opening session they tried to access, unpack, and share specific aspects of their creative processes. I asked them to explore these processes not in general terms but precisely and from inside of the practice. They were encouraged to use the occasion to discover new things about their own ways of working by tracing step by step concrete working processes and unfolding them through examples. Questions that guided their in-situ thinking and writing processes prior to the conversation with the group included: What was your starting point for a particular process? What was the timeframe? What was the sequence of development? In what order did the different elements 'arrive' into the work? How was the performative setup developed? How were ideas, images, textures formed? How did you, your collaborators, the material make decisions? How and when did you *know* what to do? Next to writing they could also visualize the unfolding of a certain process, in part to facilitate the sharing of the material.

It was important to ground the workshop in their own practices, and to convey from the beginning the understanding that the approaches to performance and creation that we were going to explore in the workshops did not represent a 'clearcut' methodology which they would have to learn, but rather devices that they could try out and then incorporate into certain phases of their own artistic processes, to the degree that they chose to. Though the manner of working in the workshop was specific, the elements we worked on were, in one way or another, part of most processes of making performance.

Although they were familiar – more so theoretically than practically – with the ideas used in the workshop, most of the students were accustomed to working processes in which ‘developing performance material’ came first, followed by finding a form for putting the material together. I was proposing another sequence, in which the ‘conceptualisation’ of the performance situation – thus coming up with the forms of relationality among those present (performers, spectators, site) and imagining the implications – precedes or happens parallel to the creation of performance material, thereby also largely determining what that material will be.

After the introduction of their own processes, we went on to examine practically their understanding of the connection between performance and situation. I introduced them to this suggestion by Hans-Thies Lehmann: *‘Theatre becomes a ‘social situation’ in which the spectator realizes that what s/he experiences depends not just on him/herself but also on others. Inasmuch as the spectator’s role comes into play, the basic model of theatre can virtually be turned around.’*¹⁸ Although not foreign to them, this still proved to be challenging to grasp in practice. This way of giving priority to the presence and experience of the audience required practical consideration of and curiosity about the spectators, which was rather new to most of the students. As it was revealed during the reflection discussions in the workshop, in their practices they were used to primarily focus on the development of the artistic material and most of them were not in fact thinking that much about the spectators during the creation process.

¹⁸ Lehmann (n 13) p. 106

Consequences

I realized that to work with the idea of theatre as situation in the ways that I was planning to, we first had to 'unlearn' with the students some of the subtle but deeply seeded notions of what could best be described as the nonconsequential nature of performance situations. Although in theory they had no troubles with the idea of performance as situation, in practice, as it turned out, they mostly had the perception that even if social encounter or interaction takes place during a performance, there is nothing or very little at stake beyond the scope of that specific performance. In other words, all that happens matters only within the performance. This habit of thinking, in turn, limited their imagination in the practice towards the question of 'What can happen here?' and 'tamed', 'compartmentalized' their social desires towards the performative social encounters that they were asked to evoke and work with during the workshops.

I have had similar experiences in this regard with every student group that I did the workshops with. Therefore, when working with students I decided to insert some exercises that focused on acknowledging the presence of layers of 'reality' in actual performance events and thinking further about their possible consequences beyond the scope of the performance. We worked through examples of existing performances the students had experienced or made, connecting these to real-life situations they had been part of or responsible for. I also asked them to concretely translate performances – their own or others' – into situations. Looking at a performance they had to identify: What is the situation? How does it transform? What happens? Where does it resonate? This often

brought us back to questions of representation and how, in the respective performance, it relates to the actual situation.

Case by case, we focused on curiosity, motivation, desire and the question of what could happen, what they wanted to happen in a certain performative situation, and where that would matter. Inevitably, we also ended up talking about and probing the motivations and aspirations of the students in studying and making art, and in particular live performance.

Another approach we practiced was putting the theatrical situation on the continuum of other social situations. A range of exercises focused on the students going out in the city observing and then describing situations with focus on detail, and then imagining how comparable situations would be possible to create in the theatre. Connected to these tasks they were asked to keep thinking about the questions: 'what can actually happen here?', 'what do I want or need to happen here?' and 'how and where would that matter?'

Thus, some of these initial workshops with theatre students became, in more or less subtle ways, about unlearning assumptions and habits of viewing theatre performances as inconsequential events. We also discussed works of performance art they were familiar with where there were consequences and stakes of the actions of the artists. To give space to this process I supplemented my original plan for the workshops with exercises that made situations tangible and focused on developing both imagination and desire for actual consequences. One strategy was to leave the theatre and watch or engage with real life situations, observe one's affinities, curiosities, attractions and fears. Tasks of close and durational watching of what happens in real-life situations cultivated slow, 'real-time'

attendance to the unfolding of situations as opposed to focusing on their possible meanings or the anticipated outcomes. These exercises were also connected to identifying and following different layers within a given situation, which was at the core of the approach to situations in the workshops.

Different frames of reference and motivation

Approaching the making of live performance through the social situation at its base, some workshops focused on observing elements that comprise a situation, and trying out procedures with which participants could combine existing aspects of their social knowledges and desires towards creating basic performative situations. The premise of the research was that the social situation in live performance is akin to other social situations, and therefore can be approached through lived knowledges of sociality, which, to varying degrees, everyone possesses, regardless of whether they have been educated as artists or not. In the workshops for performing arts students we worked with referencing real-life situations (to expand their thinking about the sociality and the possible resonances of a performance situation) and I encouraged them to incorporate their own lived experiences and social knowledges and into the processes. I was motivated and curious to try the ideas and procedures I was developing in the research also with more mixed groups of people from different backgrounds, ages, professions and experiences.

In Spring 2019 we started a workshop series in a small community theatre on the East side of Amsterdam, on Monday afternoons from 2 pm to 5.30 pm. The theatre had a new

director with a vision for engaging the local community and it hosted, next to our workshop, also workshops for dance (authentic movement) and writing, open to anyone, though participants in the writing workshop had to pay a fee. Prior to this the theatre did not have such workshops for adults. I had asked a close collaborator, theatre-maker Jurrien van Rheenen, to assist me with the workshops. We made an open call and people could sign up and show up to the free workshops without making any commitment. We also spread the open call among the Amsterdam participants of the *Inventory of Powerlessness*, and 4 of them ended up joining the workshop. The size of the group fluctuated (between 18 and 8), but we ended up with 12 people who followed all or a significant part of the workshop-series. The age of the participants ranged from early 20s to early 60s, and the group included MA university students (one in neurology and the other in Middle Eastern studies, who was also a local politician), a taxi chauffeur, a visual artist, people at the moment unemployed, a social worker, an anthropologist/yoga teacher, a musician, a Mandarin teacher and writer of language books, a singer, as well as people who had arrived to the Netherlands within the past few years and were at the moment doing odd-jobs, though they had been educated or working in different fields previously. Some people had prior experience with theatre. One person had just graduated from theatre pedagogy and another from the MA international dramaturgy department of the University of Amsterdam, but had not made performances before, while a couple of others had either participated in the *Inventory of Powerlessness*, or in a community art performance at a nearby community arts centre. Others had no previous experience. All participants were living in Amsterdam, and the group included people originally from Syria, the Netherlands (some with Surinamese or Indonesian roots), Iran, Poland, China, Greece, Colombia and England. The group sessions during the workshops were held in English and Dutch, and the individual

sessions as well as the resulting works were either in English or Dutch, depending on the preference of the participant.

As described above in my ethical guidelines for working with others, I tried to have complete transparency about expectations from the beginning. In my welcome talk to the workshop series, I outlined what kind of experimentation we will be doing, how we will work, and that we are not going to do 'plays' or representational theatre. I also explained that especially at the beginning we would mostly work in one or two groups, and in the latter part of the workshops they would be developing individual trajectories but with opportunities for collaboration and regular sharing moments in the group. In terms of attendance, the participants were asked that once present at a session, they would take part, and stay for the whole session, and that they would inform us in advance when they could not or did not want to attend. For the rest no prior commitment was asked for staying or continuing with the workshops. One participant asked if it would be possible for her to stay but not participate, as due to her fragile mental state, she experienced participation as too stressful, but was still curious and wanted to be there. The group together decided that it was fine for her to attend and watch. The participants were also asked about their willingness to participate in documentation and for their permission to use documentation material for the research. Most, though not all, agreed to be in the photos. Several people did not agree for the workshops to be videotaped, though all were okay with audio recordings to be used anonymously for the purposes of this research. Several of the final outcomes were also filmed.

This group was not only different from the students in terms of the experiences they brought to the workshops but also in their motivations for attending in the first place. For most of the student groups my workshops were part of their regular curriculum, while the participants in the theatre made an explicit choice to be part of this workshop series, and often had to arrange work-schedule or child-care in order to attend.¹⁹ Although different participants had different reasons for attending the workshops, many of them shared some sort of urge to supplement their daily life and work activities with another form of engagement, reflection and expression. Most of them were attracted to live performance, because of the physical presence and quality of being together with others.



(Workshop Pleintheater, Amsterdam, 2019)

Inside a room

During the workshops with students, the participants sometimes had to go out into the city to observe people and real-life situations. They were also encouraged to think of the situations they created or planned taking place outside of the studio, in order to keep it close to real situations with actual stakes. With the mixed group of participants in the

¹⁹ I do not mean to suggest that some of the students do not also make considerable sacrifices to be able to carry on with their studies.

theatre, I found it important to define and limit the parameters of the context in which the creation of situations would take place. The site of my research and my main interest is theatre, and I wanted to create a controlled environment so we could have a place without external distractions that would allow for close and detailed observation. Therefore, we would focus on situations that can happen inside a room. I chose to use with this group mostly the black box of the theatre as a space of concentration, where we had a basic setup with light options, sound amplification and a soft floor, though some workshop activities – especially the writing assignments – took place in the café of the theatre with daylight, and a few assignments involving talking, or doing a one-on-one assignment with another participant, took place on the square in front of the theatre or during walks in the neighbourhood. Most of the final work by the participants was made for the black box, while a couple of works were presented in the café, and one in a small dressing room.

What's in a situation

With this group I first introduced the idea of situation by using the concrete examples of the situations they found themselves in at that moment during the workshop. They were asked to observe what was already there in the room, and to imagine how they could affect what was there, what was already happening. From the start, even during the first round of very short introductions, participants were asked to pay attention to and imagine the different things that were going on in the room at the same time: the person introducing themselves talking, that person's and the others' body language, as well as everything else present or happening, e.g. someone taking a sip of water, checking their phone, the inanimate objects

in the room, the buzzing of the speakers, the temperature, the air quality, etc. They were asked to focus on what associations were evoked in their own heads by what they saw and heard, what thoughts and feelings they had, and at times to either question or try to guess what might be going on in one of the other participants' head, what feelings they might be experiencing.

Other exercises, which I also did with the student groups, focused on sharpening awareness of the different 'frequencies' of the subjectivities present at any given moment. During a range of situations (e.g. dancing to music with disco lights, waiting for the session to restart after a break, sharing some food, sitting together in complete darkness, etc.) participants were asked to 'narrate' second to second what was going on in the room, in their bodies and minds at that particular time. We would regularly return to this kind of awareness exercise later on in the workshop. The participants could be working on something unrelated, and we would just 'pause' the activity, so they could answer and describe from different points of view: 'What's the situation? What is going on now? What is happening on the different levels?' We practiced working with varying zoom levels of observation and scope: for instance, zooming in on almost imperceptible details, something that is only visible for a split second, a fleeting gesture, facial expression, etc. Or, on the other hand, zooming out to an 'aerial' view at that moment of the room, or even of the neighbourhood or the city.

In the next phase – and in the workshops with the students already from early on – participants were asked to create and try out very simple situations with the group. The proposals included a secret mission on the roof, a tarot reading, solving a puzzle together, a

polemic conversation about providing housing for refugees in the city, singing a song while others try to sabotage it by drowning it out, playing hint, dancing in a circle while holding onto each other. We did not discuss or evaluate these small situations but tried to recount collectively in chronological order how people experienced what happened from their different perspectives. Then the person who proposed the situation would consider how the way people perceived it coincided or differed from their intentions, and how they would want to tweak or change the setup of their situation, so it could be experienced by others closer to the original objectives.



(Workshop Pleintheater, Amsterdam, 2019)

Experiencing such a situation, participants would repeatedly be reminded to observe both the external, shared, more objective occurrences, but also what was happening inside of them, their thoughts, their physical and emotional states, as these aspects also form part of what is happening. Through these mental exercises of attending, we practiced fathoming the many components that any situation consists of, some more tangible – like the space, the people and objects present, or the duration – while others were more ephemeral: the atmosphere, the energy fluctuations, the subjective associations and interpretations by

each person about what is happening, the expectations, the memories of what came before, etc.



(Workshop Pleintheater, Amsterdam, 2019)

We also practiced visualizing the various elements that comprise a given situation: the observable outside reality and one's own subjective reality – thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, the things one knows, impressions, for instance – as forming a vast landscape. And then we tried to visualize the other subjective realities, the perceptions of the other people present – so many times the vast territory inside – intersecting with the commonly perceptible, collective parts of the situation. We tried to tune into the channels playing simultaneously, the layers of a situation running parallel and sometimes converging, and to develop an attention for things happening externally or internally, a sensibility to the varied perspectives of the situation by the different people who take part in it. Mostly the aim was to choose to direct one's attention to specific aspects, while not forgetting about the other layers. And sometimes we tried impossible tasks like: 'Take in all at once everything that is going on at this moment, in the space, between the people, and in everyone's heads.'

The participants also had 'homework' for training their perceptive devices between workshops. They were asked to practice in their daily lives switching between perspectives: their own, the 'objective' external one, the projected perspective of someone else there, or the perspectives of several people who are present. I suggested that they could practice while traveling on public transport, being at the supermarket or at a party, with their families, friends, etc.

Strangers

As opposed to the student groups where they knew each other well, most participants we worked with at the theatre met for the first time during the first workshop. I wanted to make use of having a room full of strangers – the basic premise for most theatrical situations – and incorporate it into our exploration of situations and sociality. For this reason, I did not, as one normally would at the beginning of a workshop, try to create cohesion and familiarity within the group. Instead, I allowed for the discomfort and awkwardness that resulted from people not knowing each other to play out, without trying to ease it. During the first two workshops we gave space and time to the situation of being with strangers, not resolving it, but using the experiences and possibilities that it yielded: first impressions, reading one another, projecting on each other, having imaginations about each other, misunderstanding, looking for one's place, looking for words, opening lines to conversations, observing one's own habits of dealing with such a situation, tendency to withdraw, strategies to try to break the ice, etc. In the sessions that followed we recalled and reflected on these (self-) observations of being with strangers and they were also

referenced during the last part of the workshop series, when the participants created performative situations which in the end were shared with a public of mostly strangers.



(Workshop Pleintheater, Amsterdam, 2019)

This is an excerpt from a written account of this after the first workshop by one of the participants:

I found it an interesting strategy to intentionally keep this first session socially awkward. No 'games' to get to know each other or thorough introductions. When we came in, we were strangers and when we left, we were strangers that had seen a glimpse of what moves the other in life. It was relatively easy that way for each participant to either speak up or stay on the sidelines and observe. And let this observation be one of the key aspects stressed in this workshop.

Second session will probably still be awkward. Hinting at a theatre space being just that, but people have agreed on ignoring that awkwardness. Ignoring that first instinct (which is probably 'easier' and widely spread) to immediately create a collective identity as a group, it keeps intact the individual needs of the participants.

What you want to learn and make and what your expectations are, has this first session not been hindered by processes like social pressure or collective responsibility.



(Workshop Pleintheater, Amsterdam, 2019)

And after the third workshop she wrote:

We had to write down for ourselves how we dealt with the awkwardness of the first workshop. We had to remember what it felt like, what we enjoyed/hated about it, which patterns we recognized in our coping mechanisms.

Goal: to make a slow transition into making our own material & to stress that this awkwardness is at the base of creating material (at least when making theatre that is aware of the people in the audience and relies on real contact). Take it as a starting point.

It was good to go back to this, I wrote down some of the things I already noted in my findings here and some new things. Glad to be 'documenting' our process a bit. And it was pleasant to see the group again; this third time around I felt more 'in place'.

Also, one of the participants (Igor) is back (he missed the second workshop) and has a

really positive vibe around him, funny to notice how an individual can have such an impact on the group dynamics (others also have that).

Some of the guiding questions for the reflection on the initial encounter with the group were: Try to recall first impressions. What and who do you remember? What were you paying most attention to? How did you deal with the discomfort? What habits did you notice in behaviour? Who of the other participants did you feel connection to? What kind of connection was it?



(Workshop Pleintheater, Amsterdam, 2019)

We also spoke in the third workshop about how we constantly negotiate our inner lives of impressions, thoughts and feelings with the outside world and our roles as ‘actors’ in that world: how we deal with others, with what we are doing, how we are seeing and what we understand of it, what other people understand of it, etc. And about how that also happens, within a limited, constructed frame, during a live performance situation. I have shared with them my own interest in awkwardness within situations, especially between strangers, where the barrier between one’s own perception and the perception of the others becomes

that thing which everyone there has in common. How I like to use this as the point of departure for a collective process, and why I think theatre is a good place to try this.

Peoplewatching

Realizing how important being with strangers and developing imagination towards them is for thinking about theatre as situation in the way I wanted to do in this research, I incorporated this element into the student workshops that followed. Since in the student groups everyone knew each other well – and since I worked at small schools, they also knew other people in their academies – I decided to give assignments where they had to go out into the city to watch strangers. This is an example of one of the assignment the students got:

Go out in town and find a place where you can watch people. You can think of hanging out at a train station, hotel lobby, playground, busy street corner, café, hospital emergency waiting room, public transport, nightclub, municipality the unemployment office, shopping mall, public library, swimming pool, the park, etc. Observe the people you see. Look at them as a group and look at them as individuals. What are they doing? How do they interact? What happens to them? How do they behave with each other, and when they are alone?

Try to put yourself in their shoes. Imagine what it's like to be them. Imagine what it is that makes them get out of bed in the morning, what their interests and desires could

be, imagine what their pleasures and their worries are. What do they have, what might they lack, miss, long for?

Also observe yourself: who of the people you see interest you the most? Why? Who of them would you like to be a spectator of a work you will make? Why them? Spend at least 20 minutes in one place just observing. When you're done, or at intervals quickly note down some of your observations in keywords, short sentences, drawings.

This proved to be a pivotal exercise in some workshops, which we could build upon, working towards exploring social desire for strangers, 'curating' one's audience, carrying on imaginary conversations with potential spectators while thinking about creating experiences for them that would differ from their daily experiences, etc. Some of the people the students ended up observing and working with as imaginary audiences included parents and children on a playground, a group of farmers in the pub, a couple in an argument, people sitting alone in public space for a longer period of time, teenagers bullying each other.

B. Own Experiences

In most of the workshops we worked with the experiences of the participants, even when it was not explicitly addressed in the exercises. The text I wrote for the open call to the workshops in the theatre in Amsterdam started with this question: *Do you have a lot of life experience?* Later on a next question was posed: *Do you feel that you have something to say but haven't found a form for expression yet?* And it ended with: *During the workshops you will be guided to develop theatrical encounters. Participation is free. Everyone is welcome.*

No theater experience required. I tried to put the emphasis in the open call on life experience instead of theatre, as I wanted to attract people to the workshop who were looking for communicative and process experiences, instead of signing up to ‘get experience’, as we often saw when we did open-call workshops for the *Inventory* project in venues that catered to mostly well-to-do, middle class audiences. I was also hoping to discourage ‘theatre buffs’ from applying who regularly take amateur theatre classes and would come with specific expectations towards the workshop, or looking for a certain kind of theatricality. For those who came to the first workshop with such expectations, it quickly became clear that we would be taking another path, and they did not join again.²⁰

In these early workshops the participants’ life experiences were mostly approached indirectly, through questions about the kinds of situations they wanted to create and how they would go about doing it. I wanted to take it slowly in terms of how much the participants would be prompted to reveal about and draw upon specific life experiences for the work they were doing. In observing and making simple situations for the group, they of course employed their social knowledge and skills. The impulses they had and the choices they made regarding the situations revealed what they cared about, what mattered to them and why, and how they saw and related to others. Glimpses of the concrete experiences that informed these processes also came through. As trust grew within the group, members’ personal stories were more and more often referenced. For the performative encounters they made in the last phase of the workshop series most participants took inspiration from

²⁰ In my own artistic projects where I collaborated with people from outside of the arts, I have always tried to avoid working with those who already had other amateur theatre experience, as I knew that the habits acquired in many of these contexts are for me impossible to work with and difficult to unlearn.

personal experiences, and in a few presentations, these were explicitly addressed. One participant made an immersive musical work, dealing with the loss of his first-born children, a pair of twins, and drawing on traditions of music and dance at funeral rituals in Suriname that he remembered from his childhood. A woman who has lived with cancer created a claustrophobic and somewhat stressful performative situation for a small group where spectators were 'rushed' through a pre-inscribed life-paths, yet through the constant pressure and noise also some lyrical moments of stillness emerged. Someone from the group, who spent years as a teenager in a refugee camp, created an interactive setup full of humour and provocation where the audience could be assessed through a digital polling system both about their knowledge and their attitudes towards immigrants.

My plan for the next two cycles of workshops was to gradually integrate and introduce more ways for participants to source concrete lived experiences for content and form of the work they create.

During this first cycle there was one main trajectory, both in the theatre and with the students, where participants were asked to work directly from subjective states they have experienced. The first assignment was text-based. Here is the description of it by the participant documenting the process:

We gathered around a table and had about 15 minutes to spend on this written assignment. We had to write down states or feelings that we know well: be really specific, make it particular (personal). It can also be a moment.

Goal: to prepare for the following exercise, to think of important states we are familiar with and do not usually experience or talk about in a social context.

I liked this assignment, because we already thought about this (as homework) and could now expand on it. I wrote down:

- Do you know that moment in life, being 23, and fantasizing about all the different paths in life you can still take? Like feeling that the choices you make right now are really important for the rest of your life?

- Do you recognize that state of being in which you imagine someone you love would pass away and you then you think of all the things you'd say at their funeral? And that you would imagine how you would act during those weeks? And think about who you will invite to the funeral? Or fantasize about how it would impact your life? Like, I will not be able to finish my thesis anymore, or: I will quit my job and do something I always wanted to do in life.

- Do you know that state in which you want to do everything 'in one go'? Like that moment you get off the couch and in your walk to the bathroom, you grab a piece of clothing off the floor, put your phone in the charger, prepare yourself a drink. So, you structure these things to be able to do it in one walk, with the least effort possible. And do you know the feeling of satisfaction you get out of it, when you make it work?

Participants then chose one of these states, feelings or moments and shared it with the rest of the group, addressing them in the suggested form that included questions such as: Do you know the state.....? Do you know that moment when ...? We worked with states,

moments and feelings instead of events so that the participants would look closely to their experiences, go into details, instead of reverting to more constructed and completed narratives. The question format and appealing to the recognition (or lack of recognition) of the listeners served to establish an immediate relationality to the spectators.

During this exercise someone described the state when, as an introvert, you get irritated because after you just spent a whole day with others you want to sit by yourself for a while, and people keep approaching you, asking for help or to join them. Someone else conveyed the joy in the moments of arriving home after a long and difficult day at work, and your tension melts as you acclimatize to the familiar smells and feels of homelife with the peaceful chaos of your partner and three kids. While another participant described feeling like a 'punch in the stomach' when repeatedly being asked to remind people of his Persian name, and another related the experience of trying mentally to solve a problem of logic and knowing that you are making a mistake or missing a step somewhere. Someone else spoke about a mood where hope and sadness are simultaneously present.



(Workshop Pleintheater, Amsterdam, 2019)

As a next step, participants were asked to think about how they would create a prompt or setup whereby others could experience or get a glimpse of one of the states or feelings from their lists. Here follows an account of this by one of the participants:

Edit asked us to think about recreating that feeling (without recreating or reenacting that same situation). Good tip: think of your state in more abstract ways.

Goal: to make the 'theory' applicable; to turn something important and specific that we keep to ourselves into something that engages and evokes others; to make a step in the process of theatre making (getting out of your own head and bringing it to a 'stage' of some sort).

My input: I would ask someone to write a funeral speech (for someone they love that passes away). What would you say? Goal: to let people think about that specific person who would no longer be there (and really imagine it, their own role), so there is a different story in the head of every individual. I felt good about this, it is a really specific task and something I am really interested in (and also: something I can/would not do in normal life but would be able to do in a 'theatre setting'. I think that this adds to a sense of urgency: to make something you can only make/try out/say in this strangely constructed theatre setting. I want to explore the state of mourning and the space for it.

Other participants suggested making simple prompts or situations for the others to elicit the feeling or state they wanted them to experience: for instance, having to solve a self-made

word puzzle or being inspected from very close. Coming out of this exercise a conversation with the group ensued, where we discussed how most of the 'unshared' states and feelings they had on their lists were negative, like alienation or being targeted by racism, and how they would not want to subject others to it. I had anticipated that this would come up, and we used the latter part of the talk for thinking further together about the kinds of activities that they felt urgency and desire for doing with other people.

With the students, since they already had tools to create more immersive performative setups and experiences for spectators, in one workshop we dedicated a couple of days to recreating difficult to communicate subjective states for an audience. As preparation we also started here with the list and the verbal exercise of 'Do you know the state or feeling...'. Then we continued with referencing instances where the students in their daily lives create certain states for themselves (getting tipsy, drunk, creating circumstances and atmosphere for complete relaxation, pepping oneself up for a task or challenge, etc.) We looked at tools that they would use in these instances and related them to tools available in a theatrical setting. We used these daily practices of creating states for oneself as case-studies and analysed them according to whether primarily the mind, body, or emotions are affected, whether it's for being alone or with others, and how they can be seen as processes, with a preparation phase, the state itself, and the resonances afterwards. I then asked them to think about these 3 phases also when creating the experiences for others.

One student made an installation inside a room where the setup modeled spatially the disconnectedness of signs in how she experienced being a heavy dyslexic. The preparatory phase for the spectators consisted of a period of low preceptory stimulation state of half-

darkness. Another student created an experience for one spectator at a time simulating what it's like to wake up with sleep paralysis and having abstract heads floating in your visual field, The preparation consisted of relaxation massage and darkness. Someone else created a participatory movement situation with continuous fluctuation between being physically very close to each other – feeling body heat, pulsation, breath of the other – and being at distance and alone. In this case the preparation of the spectators consisted of an extensive warmup that led to exhaustion and relaxation. Through the duration and repetition during this presentation a strange sensation developed for me of becoming 'addicted' to the physical proximity and feeling slight 'withdrawal' effects when being alone.

C. Desire and Daydreaming

Desires/needs

A main aspect of the workshops that participants were reminded of throughout, was to get in touch with and regularly reconsider their own desires and needs towards ways of being together with others, especially strangers. Next to their own wishes and needs, some assignments would prompt them to observe people in public spaces and consider what they might be wanting, lacking, desiring in terms of social interaction.

I often used the words desire and need together or interchangeably in the workshops, as I purposely tried to blur the difference between these two and merge them into one notion that refers to a kind of urgency which still had the 'pleasure' component from desire. In the

various exercises that focused on discovering one's urgencies towards social situations, participants were never asked to explicitly articulate the source of desire/need or explain the reasons for why they would want something to take place. We were more concerned about the possible expressions of these desires, the forms in which they would materialize, i.e., the situations or the prompts participants would propose. On the other hand, participants were asked to check in with themselves to make sure that their proposals were driven by what they wanted to see, be part of, or let others be part of, and not other motives, like wanting to impress by seeming smart, cool, interesting, compassionate, etc. During the exercises and development of presentations we spoke about 'letting the desire/need guide you'. For the next cycles of workshops, I was planning to take this idea further into exploring tools for the composition of situations. My premise is that if one manages to keep a focus on the desire/necessity for the situation, it will ground the process, and allow for working from that as core element, which then can determine other elements and allows them to emerge from and find their places in the structure. Through that many of the decisions about the material and structure during the process are suggested by the material itself, and at one point the work becomes almost 'self-organising'. In the past few years, I have developed and worked with aspects of this practice of emergent dramaturgy with students at DAS Theatre, with the intention of incorporating that work also into later workshops, and letting it further evolve into one of the working methods coming out of this research.

The desires that participants had towards performative situations they would imagine or create, often had to do with life experiences they had. As discussed above, there was at times an inverse relationship between the kind of sociality they wanted to create and their own

difficult experiences which had been seldom shared with others, meaning that people would want something that was markedly different or the opposite of their previous experiences. One participant – who struggled with isolation and experiencing judgement in daily life as a young person of colour, as well as being snubbed by his Caribbean community for being queer – wrote in his notes after a workshop on desire and need:

I'm tired of trying and settling for frustration, misunderstanding and constipation. I need to be honest and open to get likeminded people to gravitate in my life. What is my personal implementation and application of all that I've learned about imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy? What do I have to offer to counter it? Where do I want to start? How do I feel about it and how can I make it as fun, open and honest as possible? How can I feel free regardless of how my surroundings feel? ...

I was thinking about the idea of loneliness and the idea of wanting to be true to yourself while that (in my experience) leaves you lonely. At least in the beginning. The workshop focuses on experiences and states of minds that we want to share/create/experience. We've also focused on those that we are familiar with. The experience I want is to be in a place where everyone is being themselves and having lots of fun. I was talking to one of the other participants of the workshop who reminded me that when I get in that state it's a lot easier for others to join in as well.

Following the talk in the group about the resistance that they felt towards recreating unpleasant states that they have experienced for others, we did an exercise where the task

was to imagine situations of pleasure for the group. The chronicler participant described the conversation that developed:

We had to think of a situation that produced a feeling we would want to create for someone else, that is super/fantastic/made you feel extremely happy. So, a positive feeling instead of something difficult.

It was a fun talk, about drugs and really happy moments for everyone. It was funny that two of the participants in the end seemed to have similar thoughts on being attracted to the nature when on drugs. Good to mark this way into what our desire is to do with a group of people (create something wonderful instead of confront people with stuff).



(Workshop Pleintheater, Amsterdam, 2019)

It was the first time in the workshop where drug-induced states were discussed. It was an unexpected finding for me how useful this category of experiences proved as reference that I could use in communication with the group, as it broke the binary of ‘real-life’ and ‘theatrical’. It also gave some examples for tangible allusions I could resort to for exercises

dealing with the creation of an 'experience' for other people, and for the distinction between the 'trip' for the whole group and the simultaneous but different individual 'trips' that each spectator is on. Thus, the conversation on drug use yielded some useful shared vocabulary for the workshops.

Enacting desire

During this first cycle I did a workshop with the BA performers at NTA exploring wishes of sociality through primarily performative means, different from what we did in the other workshops. I wanted to work with the agility and performer skills of these young students, so I proposed them exercises in which they used immediate, spontaneous enactment together with the rest of the group simultaneously to verbally articulating situations they wanted to happen. I have used this kind of real-time demonstrative description (where you enact what you are saying at the same time of articulation, using the space and the people present as 'stand-in' actors) in a performance titled 'Work' (2011) and worked with it in rehearsals with performers and students later on. I find it an easy and generative way for creating ideas and scenes by 'thinking out loud' and right away materializing the thoughts that come up.

The assignments for the BAs focused on improvising and enacting the social fantasies of the participant together with their peers, who would follow and make the present tense verbal description 'happen' in space. The question posed to them was: 'If you could do anything with this group of people, your peers, what would you do?' They were asked to also

consider: 'If they could be anyone, who would you like them to be? What experience would you like to create and live with them?' In another improvisation exercise with a similar format, we also played around making moments happen for each participant where the wildest desires of that person would be fulfilled by the group. Then, on another occasion I spent a day with them working around how to recognize the social situations that theatre performances propose to their spectators.

This group was younger than the other groups I worked with. They were mostly in their early 20s and their relationship to fantasizing about others drew directly on the kind of immediacy and significance sociality and imagination have during the teenager years when many things are being tried and discovered for the first time. The situations they proposed and the wishes they wanted fulfilled were, with a few exceptions, also direct and recognizable desires associated with the age group. Being young performers, there was also quite some imagination around being seen, recognized, adored, celebrated. Somewhat different was the phantasy of a young Polish student who, coming from a homophobic, Catholic village, created the ritual of an imaginary bacchanalia in his hometown church, with his peers enacting members of the clergy and congregation.

It was interesting to work with this group because they were so open, free and playful, and had fun with the exercises. Based on this experience I started to plot ways how in future workshops, also with non-performers, I could adapt and build up to some aspects of the improvisatory play that I did with the BAs. In the second cycle of workshops, I planned to insert steps of approaching desire/needs for being with others through related, more specific parts as play and joy.



(BA workshop NTA, Fredrikstad, 2019)

At the same time, there were plans for late 2020 to continue with a workshop trajectory with this group of BA performers. I was interested in trying out some of the exercises I did in the other workshops with this spontaneous and younger group, also to see what the kind of focus on the spectators proposed in my approach could do for actors. I would have liked to do with this group a version of the exercises comprised of observing strangers in the city and scouting potential audiences, placing oneself in their daily lives, and speculating upon what their wants and needs might be in terms of a possible social encounter or event. This kind of 'field work' could also be useful also for actors to explore further their own curiosities connected to encountering strangers as preparation for encountering spectators during a performance.

The follow-up assignment to the MA students' people-watching tasks, which I also planned to do with the BAs, was to actively fantasize about specific people they saw in public spaces. To imagine actual encounters with these strangers. And besides tapping into their own wishes and needs, they should also imagine what these wishes and needs could be for the

strangers on the street. In these exercises of imagination participants didn't have to limit their fantasies to the social realities of contemporary life or to the physical constraints of tangible circumstances. The aim was to cultivate this kind of daydreaming applied to chosen strangers. For art school students whose primary audience during their studies are peers and teachers, these practices were also designed to bring their potential audiences into their thinking in concrete ways and make them the objects of desire in the work.

With another group of MA students, in Tampere, Finland²¹, a whole workshop-week was dedicated to observing and acting upon social imagination, first towards their peers and then towards strangers. In the workshop with them we used ongoing daydreaming as a motor for creating performative encounters and situations. We worked practically, cultivating a continuous flow of materializing and sharing ideas in a low-threshold context. A playful and shameless approach was encouraged, to allow for welcoming risk and pushing materials through failure into unexpected territories. It was laboratory style working where also the secondary, vague, far-out or 'stupid' ideas could be tested, inexplicable urges could be pursued, materials swapped or combined, and various constellations of collaborations tried out. In this workshop, which took place in February 2020, just as Covid-19 had been declared as a pandemic in Europe, I tried to bring together elements from previous workshops and experiment with a format of continuous making. The group knew each other well (for most it was already their fourth year studying together), which created trust and support; but I also felt some level of demotivation coming from that. The framing of quick and uncensored ways of working and continuous materialization of ideas during the week

²¹ This is a five-year actor's art education, comprising three-year BA studies and two-year MA studies.

resulted in an interesting array of performative situations, including that of a collective session of lucid dreaming, occupying a cafe, and an institutionally induced, fun event, like graduation. My take-away from testing this kind of 'pressure-cooker' version of the workshop was that it could work well with certain groups in the second and third cycles of workshops to include 2-3 days-long intensive 'brainstorming on the floor', especially in digging into desire/need. Based on this experience I wanted to adjust the planning of the workshop schedule for 2020 also in the theatre, to include some weekends for spurts of more concentrated work for developing several steps of an idea, going back and forth between individual and collective thinking and materialization.

Existing practices of daydreaming

Next to the exercises of fantasizing about other people and especially strangers, we also spent time in some of the workshops exploring participants' existing practices of daydreaming, both in the present and from the past. Through self-observation, one-on-one conversations asking each other about and comparing ways of fantasizing, as well as group talks, we tried to identify and map some of these internal, often abstract processes. Some participants went back to childhood or teenage years to rediscover some of their old habits. They also found that these practices were often connected to specific moments in the day: just after waking up, or before falling asleep, or while commuting; or to certain activities: cleaning, washing the dishes, riding a bike; or to specific places.

The aims of including this trajectory in the research were on the one hand to yield another access for the participants to discovering desire towards situations, and on the other hand, ultimately, to recognize and extract personal working methods or 'tools' for making performance based on each participant's specific ways of daydreaming. Often, in daydreams we create narratives, replay things that happened to us, try to 'correct' past encounters that we feel went wrong or rehearse upcoming ones. We also imagine ourselves in certain roles or situations, etc. For me some of these processes closely resemble aspects of creative processes in theatre making, and I wanted to explore during the research whether and how it is possible – especially for participants without an artistic education – to draw upon these daily practices for creating work. During this initial cycle of the workshops we only took the first few steps in this direction. Participants would observe how they daydream, and try to find language to describe these processes, share them with one another, and look for particular aspects in each person's methods of fantasizing. They also tried practicing these on purpose, and expanding and refreshing your own ways with what they heard from others. As 'homework', participants were asked to set time aside for daydreaming in their free time, reviving old 'techniques' from childhood, tweaking and developing their existing ways. I suggested that these are assets that need to be cultivated, as part of developing eventual artistic tools.

The participant documenting the workshops in the theatre, described it like this:

The group was divided into two groups (English/Dutch). We discussed how we imagine things, what the 'films in your head' look like. What kind of stories do you think of, but more importantly, what are they composed of? Are there overlaps in

that, a recognizable logic? We had to bring ourselves back to one of those moments: where were we, what was it like, and be really specific.

Goal: to help us understand how we imagine things, to learn (it has curiosity in it) about how others do so, to understand 'uit welke bron we putten' in order to create narratives.

This was the most fun to do this session and had the most interesting result. I remember thinking: let's take this conversation to a next level by really zooming in on our imagination and cut off the 'zijpaden (side issues) die we waren ingeslagen'. Sometimes people lingered on a specific side issue and then I lost my interest.

This assignment made me really curious (the most I have been since we started) into what people are thinking all day long. And what thoughts (because we talked about that) people do not wish to share or don't know how to. It was funny to notice that, even though we didn't get to a real thorough discussion on it, it had a certain 'sensational' element in it. Like the possibility of overstepping boundaries came into play fairly quickly.



(Workshop Pleintheater, Amsterdam, 2019)

In the workshops with the MA students at NTA we investigated through similar exercises their various habits of daydreaming, also outside of their artistic working processes. They were encouraged to get in touch with these practices, to nurture and further develop them, and to look at connections between these aspects of their imagination and making work. The students also devised and tried out new forms and prompts for fantasizing. They compiled a list of methods they tried to discover or revisit existing practices of daydreaming:

- *put myself to revisit my childhood self in my head*
- *object tracing, objects you remember from childhood, memories in relationship to them (spatially, and what happened to them (lost or got dirty). Mentally or physically.*
- *car rides to imagine yourself in the silences in the car, have someone drive you around in the area you grew up in*
- *driving/walking the same road you have done in childhood, visiting places*
- *sitting by window*
- *sitting down with eyes closed*
- *looking at pictures of yourself from other times and remembering your inner landscape/practices at that time*
- *speaking to family member*
- *rereading diaries and notebooks*
- *asking people about their practices*
- *research ways that other people do this, and also cultural practices (meditation, etc)*
- *NLP - neuro linguistic processes - working with timeline, going backwards into the past, want to get hold of resources that you want to connect with imaginary mind →*

do this exercise in order to go back in time and remember times that you have done this kind of (day)dreaming practices

And these were the practices and prompts for fantasizing they found or experimented with during the workshop:

- *talking to the stone*
- *arguing with the shower*
- *reading a book and drifting*
- *looking through a window*
- *perception of things you see going into distance and becoming small, over a long period and*
- *state of being between reality and dream, and checking if it's real or dream, where I am*
- *building up with my son something with blocks*
- *dancing*
- *get lost driving and find children's paradise*
- *mishearing, mis-seeing, misreading, misunderstanding*
- *repetitive tasks like planting seeds or reading*
- *being in the moment between day and night*
- *making a craft with your hands behind a closed door*
- *staring 10 minutes in the morning just after waking up*
- *walking in the woods with someone who I can be silent with*
- *washing dishes*

- *showering*
- *cleaning house*
- *walking around where there are houses and imagining about having those houses*
- *playing the lottery,*
- *mental games of 'if I don't step on the line, it will be fine', purchases, if it's on sale, if I don't look for them*
- *walking on intuition (when needed space - going to school), or stopping as a way of digesting and opening up in between space,*
- *following people or dogs to determine where to go,*
- *when people are talking and you cannot remember the word, and holding back giving suggestions, staying in the place where you are looking for the word*
- *not trying to fill up silences*
- *thinking of the wish before blowing out candles / losing eyelash and making wish*
- *imagining how I will get to a place before I go there, also the same with physical training, and then not actually doing it.*
- *meeting someone and already imagining what it would be like to be friends*
- *nightlife, going out, dressing up (performing the dream)*
- *having sex*
- *talking fake foreign accent*
- *communicating through animal sounds*
- *singing for a cat*
- *nightmares, sleep paralysis, waking up, trying to pull yourself out*
- *learning well choreography, putting your mind to automatic state*
- *automatic writing*

- *automatic impro of text*
- *when not want to get out of bed, creating a plan for the next 3 things I have to do*
- *tiredness induced delirium, jetlag*
- *drinking, drugs*

Some of the group discussions in this workshop centered around subjects such as guided daydreaming as performance frame, and ways of creating 'in-between spaces' within a creative process to allow for fantasizing. We also spoke about the possibilities of collective daydreaming coming out of specific modes of individual daydreaming. This topic, which stemmed from an exercise, was of special interest for me when thinking about the further development of the 'fantasizing' trajectory in the workshops. It was my intention to explore this, also in practice in the next cycles, and to build together ways in which proposals or drafts by participants could be collectively fantasized about by the group. I have tried this kind of collective fantasizing upon individual artistic materials in several series of practice sessions at DAS Theatre. Using 'what if' thinking, students would be able to together imagine further each other's performance materials. The suggestions based on these fantasies about the material could then immediately be tried out, and the outcome would then be the start of a new round of imagination about it. This is a liberating practice where other logics can enter the process and take the material into surprising directions. It can loosen up artistic 'knots' or 'cramps' especially at the beginning of a creative process, and I was planning to develop versions of this format to be used later in the workshops.

In another workshop I did with MA students as part of my research, participants noted recurring phantasies and ways of daydreaming:

Go home, sit on sofa, put some music and then just daydream.

Music (on Helsinki-Tampere train) do nothing and listen to music and let it lead to somewhere. Or decide to go back to something I was fantasizing about.

Concrete dialogue. Daydreaming of what to say, when to say, how to say in some situation. Examples: talking to 'power figures' or bureaucratic situations; romantic - saying things in a way that expresses me in my whole complexity so the other understands; talkshow dialogue; cooking show monologue; romantic - music is on and one becomes the song or the story, singing your own songs both in head and aloud - love songs - and other songs - become a kind of fiction that I put myself into, the stories are mine, → these are more narrative things, but more abstract things happen also

Mixing two channels; like movie and something personal superimposed, for example (the feeling of) a movie - (Anderson movie about dogs)

During doing qi-gong I just let my thoughts and imagination go - when movement is familiar one can daydream. The exercises are simple and this allows the mind to go somewhere else, though I'm also there at the moment. During qi-gong and also with meditation there is space for the thoughts to come.

In trains, trams people watching - starting to imagine what their lives are like, or that it's a film - and some director said you sit there and you there, etc - so it's like a performance. Watching people in the windows of blockhouses - what are their lives like, are they now going to sleep.

Daydreaming during cleaning or washing dishes - automatic movement gives room for thoughts.

Walking on street I see myself from above walking. During jogging in the morning - like meditation, and the jogging rhythm goes to songs and to some other reality. Being abroad, looking at people there - it's like looking at their lives, which is so other. Strangers abroad make daydreaming more sad; I don't know them. Tourists look at me like I'm living that other life. Imagining about people who daydream about you (tourists in Finland)

Alternative futures: what if I go there and not there. Parallel to what is happening what could be happening - other possibilities. 'I will remember this moment 20 years later'. Think at the moment to a moment twenty years from now - explaining to someone else in a documentary how it was. With friends - dream about how you will look twenty years later- especially at midsummer with the same friends. What kind of person I will be when 50. Placing markers in time. '3 weeks from now, I will think this moment and I will know much more'.

Rays of light, and you can see the dust, 'maybe I can be a fairy'. When the sunlight comes in a certain way and the dust you see in a certain light - already since I'm a child - it's a kind of magical space (lapland, snowland).

Magical places of childhood - the stone, the grass field - needs the hours that have been spent there/ one has had to daydream there for a long time so it can become so magical.

Oscars-speech, Jussi-speech - whom to thank within the short period. Forget all the movie stuff and say something really important now (then). What to say in fantasy; not realistic planning; for me it's not what I would really say, but for instance 'I love this color' or something irrelevant - or the host would say that to me.

Being on talkshow and finding out that somebody very famous is in love with me, and sometimes we become a thing and sometimes not, then I'm nonchalant about it.

Romantic stuff, people met in daily life, and imagining different scenarios of how life would go with this person or that person, romantic situations and fantasies; what would life be with someone else.

Melancholic fantasies, fear of death (since I'm a kid I feared I would die young) - so this is a way of dealing with it.

Moving apart from my own body; it's like I'm here but I go away from my body, I see myself but I know this is my body - it's a bit 'dead' because I don't feel so strongly the emotions I have. Sometimes hard to come back from that state. At the same time it's very safe space and at the same time very anxious - and it changes my whole perspective - (churches and big buildings and trees trigger that, when I feel small)

Thinking about death - I become greedy - have I said what I have to say. Thinking about my partner's death - it's not fearing it so much, but it comes in my mind.

Thinking about my own funeral - what would it be and who would be there. Thinking about what is after - the emptiness - imagining the nothing is impossible - and it's frustrating and scary, and you will only know it when it happens. Thinking about the moment of death - how long is that moment, how long does it last - how do you sense that time when you die.

I am including these lists at length because I saw each item as valuable inspiration and possible basis for developing more in-depth approaches and particular exercises for participants in future workshops to train and rehearse daydreaming. I also found the multiplicity and specificity of the items as concrete indications of what I'm thinking of with the potential for the workshops to guide participants in extracting concrete working methods from daydreaming practices, and in a sense to consider daydreaming as artistic activity. In the workshop with this Finnish group of students we discussed at length what the actions are in daily life that make time and space for imagination and daydreaming. We also talked about how the activities we do on the mobile phone relate to these spaces of

daydreaming, which – although I didn't know it yet at this point – became central to the investigation in the next part of my research.

D. Relationality

A distinct thread through the various strands of the workshops was developing awareness of response processes – mental, physical and emotional – of spectators to a situation. In the notions of situation I proposed, the intrapersonal events and processes of all those who are present were emphatically regarded as constituents, alongside the interpersonal processes of any given situation. Participants practiced reading – and when it was not possible to read, projecting – the subjective experience of the other people. We created a common vocabulary, like 'inner landscapes' or 'individual trips', in order to make it easier to refer to and consider the subjectivities present. We visualized things happening on the 'stage' inside each person as simultaneous with – even if different to – what was happening on the shared 'stage' of perception. Other exercises focused on observing people and speculating upon their desires and needs. The participants shared with each other in detail their own thinking and daydreaming processes, giving glimpses into how their minds and imaginations work, offering their peers an intimate look into their heads. These assignments helped them to get interested in and used to acknowledging what's happening in the minds of others. The aim was to develop relational thinking where participants become conscious of how other people perceive things, and where they could practice trying to be 'in the head' of the other.

They were encouraged to take the perspective of the spectator and to think of creating the work partly from that perspective. I introduced them to the beginning steps of a kind of speculative practice, where the maker tries to occupy the position of imagined spectators – not as a group but as individuals, trying to get into their minds in order to guide them in a process. I suggested that the headspace, associative space, and bodily sensations of the audience are spaces that we make the work for. This was one of the approaches in the workshops directly based upon my own artistic practice. In my performances there is practically no dialogue between performers. Instead, everything is addressed to the audience and meant to resonate within the subjective world of the spectator. Trying to see things from the point of view of the spectators, taking these positions during both the creation process and the performances are core aspects to my own thinking, artistic work and to some of the working methods developed during the research.

In this first cycle of workshops, I concentrated with the participants on establishing awareness of the others' inner worlds. We also worked, though only shortly, with how to develop performance material that functions as prompts for the perceptions of audience members, and how to approach making performance as creating a series of triggers to try and guide the subjective experiences of spectators. We started this with a communication exercise, where participants were asked to approach speaking by visualizing the utterance of a word or a sentence does not conclude when the words leave the mouth of the speaker, but rather when they arrive to the spectators' minds and bodies to create associations, interpretations, and sensations. They were asked while speaking to look at the 'bubbles' above the heads of the listeners, to see what unfolds in those bubbles in response to what they have just said, and then try to incorporate what they 'saw', projected into those

bubbles, into their decision of what to say next. This is, of course, difficult to do, and the point of the exercise was not to get it right, but to shift their attention to the role of the receiver in a communication situation.

Later, during the development of their individual performances, we spoke about creating triggers and looking at performance material not in terms of what it is or what it expresses, but in terms of what they want it to evoke, of course acknowledging all along that you cannot control how people react or what it conjures up in them. As these are complex procedures, in this first series of workshops it was more about playing around with such approaches; I did not expect the participants to work like that. This aspect was to be developed through the next cycle of the workshops.

The participant documenting the process reflected on a related exercise and the effect it had on the group's dynamic:

Edit recaps the 'seeing what is in people's heads' exercise from last time before starting this assignment. We practice this by standing in front of the group and asking them whether they recognize the state/feeling/moment you know well.

Goal: to practice the 'getting into people's heads' and at the same time to experiment with the state you identified for yourself.

There was an interesting group dynamic during this assignment, probably because it was the first time we had to do something so individual (and personal). Because we are a small group, it is noteworthy that people feel engaged with one another when asking questions like this. This brings along a tension field, that is always there in the

theatre but it's more clear with a small group of people. So all the things that usually only happen in people's heads (and are as a collective not always individually tangible) are now way more obvious (and truthful). For instance, one of the participants asked who recognized this state of coming home to your family, and you are welcomed with your favorite meal prepared. When he asked who knew this state, someone answered 'no, I don't', which said a lot on many different layers and mainly showed the impact you can make by really asking someone a question (about something that is important to you), it is a fragile thing and in its simplicity holds a lot of value (for you, the other and the others).

One participant decided to create at the end, in the workshops in the theatre, a participatory performance setup, a quiz, where he worked with prompts in a direct way, posing a series of questions to the audience. Blurring meaning through absurdity and incorporating speed into the setup, he played with expectations and with the jargon around immigration both in state bureaucracy and in daily discourse in Dutch society. The largely projected responses of the spectators and their analysis by the software programme exposed both individual and collective attitudes: good intentions, fallacies, and ignorance. Facing this projected 'portrait' of ourselves as a group evoked complex responses, from self-righteousness to shame, anger, amusement, etc. In this performance both the original questions, and the encounter with the group's responses (on the screen and in the space) functioned as prompts to the spectators' inner worlds, triggers that – due to the tight timing of the performance – flashed by and accumulated into collective unease. Here is an excerpt from the script:

Hello! I would like to ask you a few questions about your common knowledge on migration policies. It is a quiz and a poll to reflect the attitudes of local citizens.

Would you like to participate?

Take your mobile, log in to internet. Go to this page: ...

The first series of questions are about your common knowledge about the migration topics. Please do answer as fast as possible without trying to be politically correct.

The poll is anonymous.

1. Where are you from? [on you see the map of the world]

2. If you go from the Netherlands to Belgium, you are?

a. Refugee b. Immigrant c, Emigrant d. Expat e. Tourist f. Dutch person in Belgium

3. Because of war in Netherlands you must go to Belgium, then you are:

a. Immigrant b. Asylum-seeker c. Refugee d. A Dutch running from war

4. Because you have no work in NL you go to Belgium, then you are:

a. Immigrant b. Emigrant c, Expat d, Guest-worker f. Gelukzoeker (Fortune-seeker)

[Quick analysing their answers and ask what does this say about you that you go to Belgium for jobs but you don't like to be called immigrant but expat?]

5. If you go from NL to Iraq to work but Iraq doesn't give you ID card, then you are:

a, Stealing Iraqi's jobs b, Immigrant c. Dutch d. Colonialist e. Stateless f. Invader [...]

1. Is Europe getting older?

a. Yes b. No

[Slide show with UN World Population Prospect showing that EU is indeed getting older]

2. Should we bring young people to Europe?

a. Yes b. No

3. *Who should these young people be?*

a. Immigrants b. Expats c. Refugees

4. *How should they come here?*

a. Invite b. By themselves

And so, the performance goes on, getting into voting about how people should be selected, how they should be maintained, what financial sacrifices people in the audience are willing to make, etc., until the last question:

23. *Can I publish the results of the poll?*



(Workshop presentation Pleintheater, Amsterdam, 2019)

The participant who made this performance is an Iranian visual artist who joined the workshops to stir his practice in the direction of performance. In an email exchange I had with him years later he recalled the steps he took in the workshop:

I remember once I improvised a fictional story about the municipality of Amsterdam planing to build a container boxes refugee camp on the square in front of the theatre. I asked our group members what they thought about this idea and challenged them with questions like how many people could inhabit this camp, and why for how long? This developed into the migration quiz piece which I presented at the end of the workshop. The audience could answer the questions on their mobile phone and there would be a winner at the end. The piece was presented at the Balie later.²²

Another participant in that workshop developed as his final piece a collective meditation with music and text, where he used some things he tried earlier in the exercises to create prompts for the spectators. As in the case of the quiz, the participant worked with an already existing form, guided meditation. My hopes were that in the next cycles of the workshops, participants could go further in creating an array of ways of using the approach of prompts as performance material.

Final workshops

Cycle two of the workshops was planned to start in Spring 2020. The workshop-series at the theatre was going to be extended in time and with more frequent sessions. The festival in November for presenting the works made by the participants was to include structured moments of interaction with the audience. Most participants from the first year were

²² See: <https://debalie.nl/programma/a-case-for-more-migration-24-02-2020/>

planning on continuing with the workshops, some were planning to work further on the specific performative projects they had developed in the first cycle. And we would reach out to recruit also new participants, for whom we had planned for the first period another trajectory with adjusted material and working methods.

At NTA there was a new cohort of MA Performance students starting in Autumn 2020, with whom I wanted to try the next versions of exercises especially around desire and daydreaming and connect these to the visualization schemes for composition and structuring I had been doing with the Amsterdam students. I also had workshops planned in Amsterdam and Arnhem and was making plans for working with students at two academies in Germany.

As I already described, with the coming of Covid-19 and the lockdowns the workshops eventually had to be discontinued. Quarantining in my home in Amsterdam, where the closures that started in Spring 2020, and on and off extended until the Spring of 2022, and where for a while a curfew was imposed, I started to think about how to touch this new experience of the pandemic. What to do with the distance to others? What to do with the empty streets of my city that are – especially in the centre where I was living – usually packed with tourists? What to do with the disorientation about time, this continuous present that for once became so insistent? I thought to try and create a performative situation dealing with the real situation of the pandemic? That is how *Parallel Life* came into being. Going through the process of making that piece both indirectly and directly informed my thinking about the development of the sharable working methods in the workshops

trajectory. It made me see better what aspects of the working methods were most essential, or particular, and what I was most interested in developing further.

Part 3: Parallel Life



(Publicity photo *Parallel Life*, Diede van Ommen)

I couldn't continue with the workshops due to the closure of the theatre and the ceasing of in-person teaching in the performing arts programs. In Spring 2020 I took a break of 4 months from the research, at first thinking that this new reality, the pandemic, would only last some months, after which I would resume my research and the workshops. After a brief relief in the Summer, in the Autumn of 2020 the number of infections surged, the social distancing returned, the theatres remained closed, and in-person teaching at the academies remained limited. Workshops in groups, physical contact, and sharing space was still not allowed.

As a theatre maker I am very aware of and inspired by specific contexts. And so, the unfamiliarity of the situation of the pandemic fascinated me. My main takeaway from the first half year of the pandemic was the profound destabilization of familiar consequences, and a sense that the unthinkable had become possible. I was somewhat put off by the

lamentations of the theatre field in the Netherlands about how everyone missed theatre as we knew it and how they were hoping to go back to 'normal' as soon as possible. I also declined invitations from colleagues to contribute to projects that tried to predict what theatre would be like after the pandemic.

I didn't want to predict, to try or pretend to know, and I didn't want theatre to return to how things were. I wanted to stay in the present, live and see things unfold. Of course, I am aware that I was in an exceptionally privileged position, with a home, a family and for the moment enough security. My hopes for the theatre were that in the end we would be surprised by the significant repercussions that the Covid era would have for live performance; the shifts it would bring to our thinking, to the practices and to the field. I engaged in observing and trying to interact with this new reality and was interested in the changes it was causing in our habits of sociality. I was, more than anything, curious about how the lifestyle of social distancing would affect our subjective thinking about personal space, our relation to ourselves, to our environment, to other people. What influence it would have on social interaction and desire. I was fascinated by the scope of the event and by the changes it brought in me and in people around me. Changes that I felt were also relevant for theatre and live performance.

The original idea of what ended up becoming the performance *Parallel Life* was, I think, prompted by a sort of joy and excitement I felt approximately half a year into the pandemic at observing a new level of alienation experienced by people, even by those who didn't know this before. Many people in Amsterdam spent a lot more time physically alone or with

just a couple of others.²³ The effects of spending a lot of time alone have always fascinated me. Isolation was the topic of my first performance, and most of my other work has explored dynamics of estrangement both in content and formally.

Another aspect that interested me in the situation was that during Covid the already rapid technological development, and especially our daily use of digital mobile devices, increased even more. Family gatherings online, birthdays, graduations, etc. Being present at the birth of your grandkid through a digital device. Being present for the farewell of your parent through a camera on a phone. Digital encounters and exchange extended to new areas of intimacy. This – together with the time most people spent at home – resulted in sensory disorientation and social confusion. Borders between private and public spaces blurred, demarcations of different spheres of intimacy were being redefined. How we were alone, and how we needed others was profoundly transformed, both physically and socially.

I saw people's relationship to public space change as well. The streets became the place to be. With cultural and commercial institutions and venues closed, people living in cities took to the streets. Long walks, roaming the streets aimlessly, wandering around probably became the most common form of recreation in urban spaces. Often alone. And since others did the same, but the chance of 'meeting' someone in any meaningful way was slim, there was a lot of people-watching. Being on the streets became the only way to – if not encounter – at least see strangers.

²³ According to the cadaster approximately half of the population of Amsterdam lives alone.

During these times I thought a lot about the shared experience of the pandemic and how it would develop. Although people went through it in varying circumstances and had different experiences, everyone was aware of it, everyone was affected. Covid, with its reverberations, was a common reference. And especially at the beginning, in some instances a sense – or at least narrative – of solidarity stemmed from that, with encouraging slogans and graffiti, the movement of putting teddy bears in the windows to cheer up children on the street, kids' drawings of rainbows and words stuck to the glass from inside addressing passers-by. I wondered what this kind of communal sense and just the fact that there was something that – in one way or another – we all knew about and experienced, could mean for live performance, where you normally cannot assume any 'common ground' between spectators.

I was curious about how these two effects of the pandemic – the estrangement and the assumable common ground – would influence the way people related to strangers. Now, when you saw someone you didn't know on the street you could know one thing: they also know about and are living the pandemic. The behavior of people in public spaces changed also in this respect: there was more acknowledgment of others, maybe even some feeling of bond, even in a city like Amsterdam, where except for your immediate neighbours you normally don't say hello on the street. Now greeting each other, also strangers, from a distance became common and the gesture carried a degree of recognition, loaded with some assumption that the predicament of the other in this time is some version of one's own. People were learning and practicing together new social codes related to distancing, how to keep themselves safe from the threat of infections others posed and how to keep others safe (wearing a mask, sneezing into elbow, etc). This, at least in the urban spaces that

I could observe, created new forms of – often quite performative – sociality where, despite the distance, strangers paid more attention to one another, considered and communicated with each more and in new ways. I think it's safe to say that within a European, urban setting like my hometown Amsterdam, the daily habits that were a result of living with social distancing changed the relationship to oneself, to the environment of the city, and to sociality, including how people saw and related to strangers, even if the pandemic was experienced very differently by people within the same geographics, according to their social, economic situation, as well as their psychological and physical constitution.

These observations, and the curiosities and questions they brought, resulted in the concept for *Parallel Life*. The making of this performance presented a detour for the research. It was driven by circumstances and necessity, and it challenged me artistically to venture into an unknown territory, being the first performance I have ever made for public space, or even outside of the black box. The project in the end brought insights about my original research, about dramaturgy in my work previous to the research, and the relationship between these two.

Summary

Parallel Life is a live theatre performance that is played for and by individual spectators through their mobile phones at locations in the city. It was inspired by and made for the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, when public gatherings of people were prohibited for extended periods. It addresses and plays on the way people have experienced the

pandemic; how it influenced their daily activities, their relationship to other people, to the city, and their states of mind and dreams.

It is an interactive performance played for and by individual spectators using their mobile phones, on the streets of the city. It is a subjective journey for each spectator, guided by text messages and recorded audio text that they receive on their phones. It incorporates suggestions for observations, modes of perception, and actions for the spectator, partly in the fictive narrative frame based on the personality profile that each spectator is assigned to.

Basic premise

The basic premise of *Parallel Life* is communicated to the audience already in the announcement text for the performance, which starts with the questions:

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be someone else? To wake up in their skin, to see the world through their eyes? What it would be like to have lived their childhood, to have experienced sorrows and joys as they have, to dream as they do? Imagine being another person and accidentally running into yourself on the street.

The performance has a simple overall structure. In the first part of the performance the spectators answer questions and respond to prompts sent in text messages by what is

mostly likely a bot (but perhaps a human), providing personalized input. Based on this input a 'profile' is compiled for the participant. About halfway through the performance the spectator receives the message:

Your profile will now be matched with another person's profile from the database.

Someone who is quite different from you. It could be one of the people you can see

around you right now. Or someone you will pass on the street in 5 minutes. Or in 15.

In the next part of your trip, you will get to know more about this person. You will

find out what it's like to be in their skin.

The invitation and promise of *Parallel Life* for the spectator is thus for an experience in public space, embodying another person, possibly someone they could eventually come across on the street. The working title of the performance was *Trading Places*; it summed up the intention and referred to a popular narrative of two people switching lives for a while – used for instance in Mark Twain's novel *The Prince and the Pauper* – the performance being adapted in a specific way to a live performative situation where the spectator is directly involved in the imagination of being interchanged with another person.

Process of development

Regarding our relationships to the mobile devices we live with, my starting point was the wish to explore the phenomenon that we spend a large part of our waking hours on screens, especially when we're just alone with the device, without the involvement of another

human 'at the other end of the line'. I am fascinated by how our entanglement with our mobile devices continues to increase and how it feels like there is never a moment to stop and observe, to reflect on and evaluate the impact of this intensive and consuming relationship. I was curious about what this was actually producing. What emotions are involved? How is it changing us? How are our thinking, our skills and habits influenced by the formats, processes and algorithms that we are constantly encountering while engaging with the device? What is the nature of this intimacy? How strong is the attachment? These were some of my questions early on.

Coinciding with the beginning of the development process, I was invited by the Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens to do an online workshop series in the context of their 'Virtual Workspaces' programme. I decided to bring some of my questions around our relationship with our mobile devices to investigate together with the young artists in the workshop. I wanted to work with them and explore the blurry territory between us and the machines we are so closely entwined with in our daily lives. I proposed to them to mess around with and bend the intimate relationship we have with our mobile devices. We worked practically, experimenting with the performative potential in engaging with these machines, and through them with ourselves. In playful and serious ways, we tried to warp their existing features and use basic schemes to elicit new ones. In the last part of the workshop, we worked on trying to develop artificial dialogues with chatbots. The workshop was an enriching and inspiring experience. Participants created a spectrum of different works, often endowing their devices with personalities and perceptions.²⁴ The work with chatbot

²⁴ A video documentation summary of this workshop is included in the material I send along.

dialogues was most closely connected to the new piece and it gave initial impulses, for instance of prompting the AI in ways that allows absurd logic to emerge. I later decided to abandon this line in the development of *Parallel Life*, as the project took a turn towards a more naturalistic style, and it became important for me to have a level of undecidability for the spectators about whether it is a bot or a person on the other end of the communication.

I worked on the project together with Jurrien van Rheenen, Marion Traenkle, Kobbe Koopman and intern Rosa van Kollem, as well as with two technologists from Berlin, the Cyberraubers. After some technical research, and considering the limited funds, we decided to build upon the open source playframe for Telegram that German tech-performance group Machina Ex had developed in the previous year. The various features we use, like sound, image input, giving back their input materials to the spectator later and especially the mechanism of assigning the profile to the spectators based on their answers, etc. had to be developed, tested and tested again in a painstakingly detailed process

To test both content and techniques we did a large amount of test runs with different people over a period of two-three months. These proved to be invaluable for calibrating the timing, the type of questions, the order of events and general flow of the work. For these tests we tried to get people of different ages with a range of technical literacy.

It was interesting to see how both during the development and the performances at different moments of the pandemic, the work resonated differently. As time passed and we entered other phase of Covid after the lockdown, I also had to adjust the content of the piece. In that sense it became a kind of a seismograph of how, step by step, we got used to the conditions of the pandemic and adapted to them; and then, as time went on, how we

started to forget about them. By the last performance in October 2022 in Fredrikstad, as things were opening up after Covid, the piece felt somewhat 'dated'.

Pregame

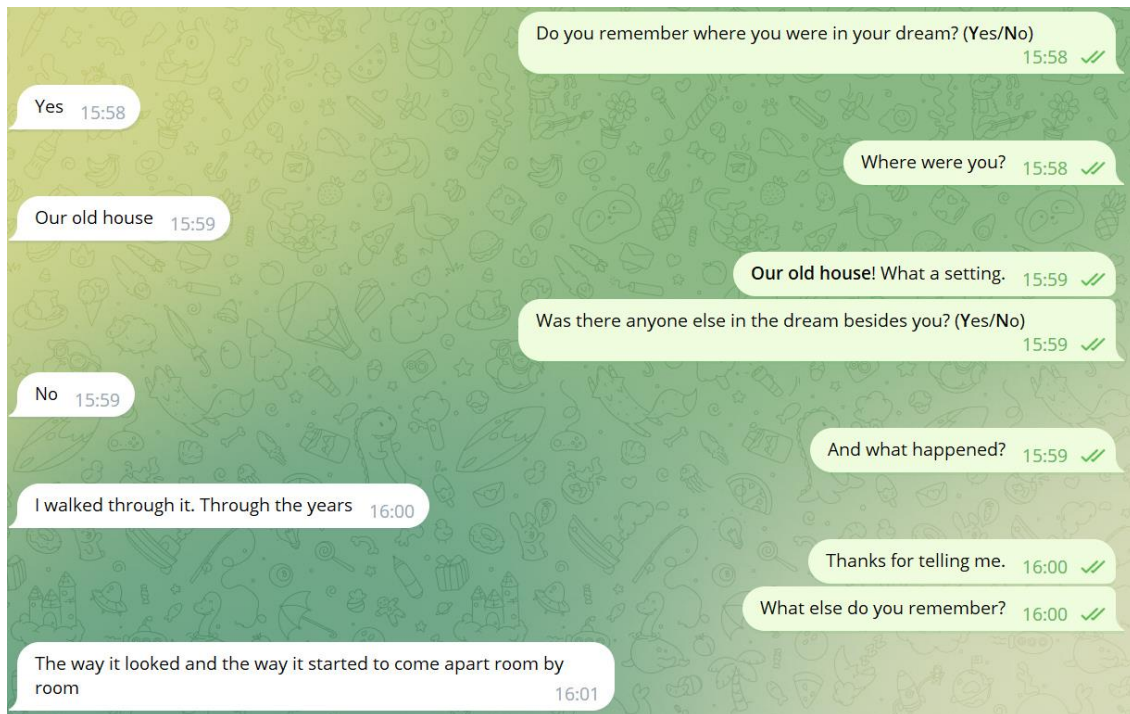
Parallel Life takes place on location using the Telegram app on the mobile phone of the spectator. After purchasing a ticket to the performance, prospective visitors receive an email with instructions for how to activate their session in the Telegram app; and, in case they don't have it yet, how to download and install the app on their phones. Depending on the time of buying their tickets, they get an initial message anywhere between 2 days to 2 hours before the start of the performance. This includes welcoming them and asking them to complete a preparatory part of about 20 minutes, consisting mostly of responding to questions. The viewer is given a choice whether to do this part in one stretch or in fragments; they are welcome to take breaks whenever they want. Most people usually complete this initial segment of the performance in their own homes or on the move, between their usual daily activities.

The function of this part is to build anticipation, but also to get some input from each spectator that then can be used to decide which version of the performance they will experience. From the start it is mentioned that the responses of the spectator will have an influence on the script they will go through in the performance. Once they agree to embark on answering the questions, they receive the confirmation message: *'Thanks for taking the time for this. Your answers in this part will help to build the framework for your specific*

version of the performance'. They are encouraged to be candid in their answers and are ensured that their responses will be treated anonymously.

The questions posed vary in kind. Some are more factual, pertaining to the type of phone they are using or to their age: *'How old were you approximately when you got your first smartphone? A. <25 / B. 25-35 / C >35 (Type A, B or C) with the follow-up question: And how long ago was that? If you don't remember or prefer not to say, just write 'X years'*. Other questions are more subjective, for instance whether they have ever felt discriminated against because of how they look or where they're from. While still others hit a more personal tone, inquiring about their current worries, their desires to learn, or whether they see themselves more as an extrovert or an introvert person.

There is also a difference in the kind of engagement that answering these questions requires. In the first sequence the spectator is asked to reply *'as quickly as possible, without thinking too much'*, whereas in the subsequent part they are encouraged to *'find a place where you can be really comfortable [...] For these questions you can take as long as you need to think about your answer and write as much as you want.'* This part concentrates on questions about major influences in the person's life and on how the spectator experienced the Corona period, its daily routine and habits. It also includes a part where audience members are guided to remember and describe a dream from during the pandemic.



(Screenshot *Parallel Life*)

Thus, the sort of standard questions we are used to responding to daily, when creating a profile for an app or online account, are mixed with more intimate ones and those that require reflection. This, in end – though tweaked and tongue-in-cheek – is what the input of the spectator amounts to: the creation of a specific personality profile. This is something that most of us have been doing with increasing regularity, especially in the past decade: making profiles, providing personal data, opening up to bots; even though we are, to varying degrees, aware that this is problematic and makes us vulnerable. Although the performance does not wish to make a statement in this regard, it refers to and tries to pervert – and to joke about – the all-too-usual activity of feeding the data mining that people are forced to take part in daily if they want to participate in society.

The preparatory section concludes with: *Thanks for the input! I will now process your answers and complete your personal profile for the performance.* The input of the spectator

influences the script in various ways. It leads, for instance, to various branchings out in the script of the responses. Some of the answers recur later in a different context. For instance, a recorded voice message to a 'younger self' returns as an advice to oneself for the future at the end of the performance. But the most significant way that spectators' different inputs influence the script they get, is in the persona they will be assigned in the second half of the piece.

The spectator is also given the choice that, if she prefers, she can opt for skipping some of the questions in the introductory part, going for a 'default' version of the performance.

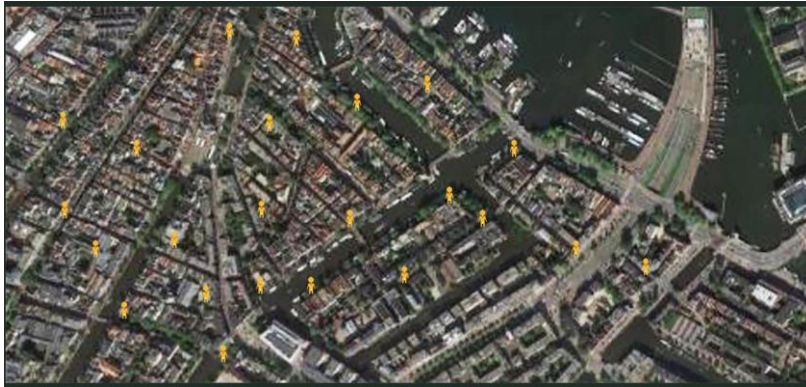
During the 33 performances that we have played *Parallel Life* it only happened a handful of times that visitors resorted to this option. And even in these cases the choice seemed to have been made due to practical, time-related issues.

The spectators receive a message with the starting time and date of the onsite performance, and an individual starting location in the city. Before they leave, they are reminded to bring their headphones and strongly encouraged to listen to one of their favourite songs on the way to their starting point.

The Site

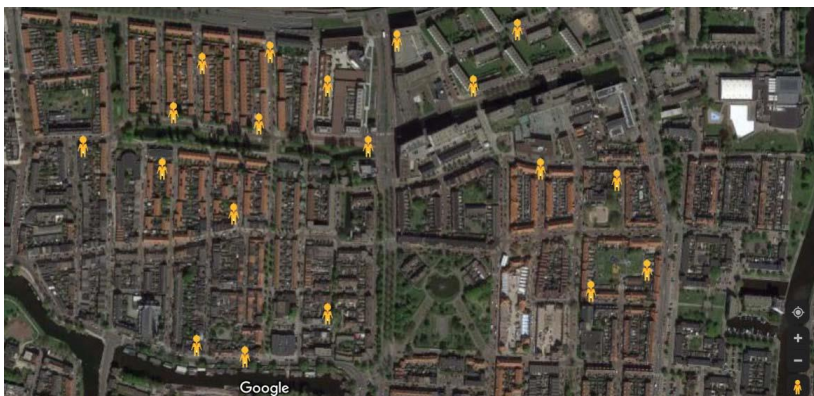
The starting location for each spectator is a relatively calm and quiet place in the city, in close vicinity to one or more busy urban spots, where many people pass through and some loiter. Amsterdam, the city I had in mind when making this piece, is characterized by

crowded places, with only a few meters or a streetcorner away a contrasting calm, almost provincial atmosphere. The geolocations where different spectators who participate in one performance begin, are not far from one another, although no two spectators should be visible to each other when starting. This is an example of the starting locations for individual spectators within one of the performances we played in the centre of Amsterdam:



(Screenshot *Parallel Life*)

And this is the map for the starting positions of spectators for the performances we played in the city of Leiden:

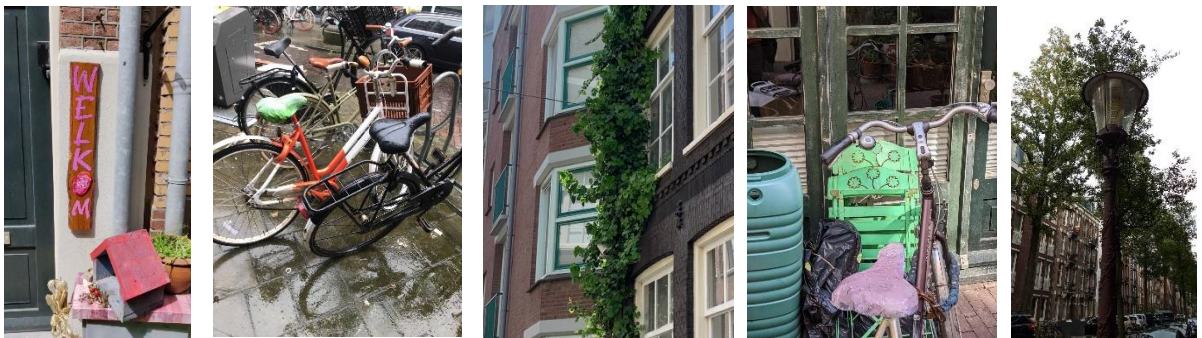


(Screenshot *Parallel Life*)

Once the spectator arrives to her starting location, she receives a welcome message and the following prompt: *'Look around and choose a sign, a particular characteristic of this spot. Something that makes this place recognisable for you. Please take a picture of it and send it*

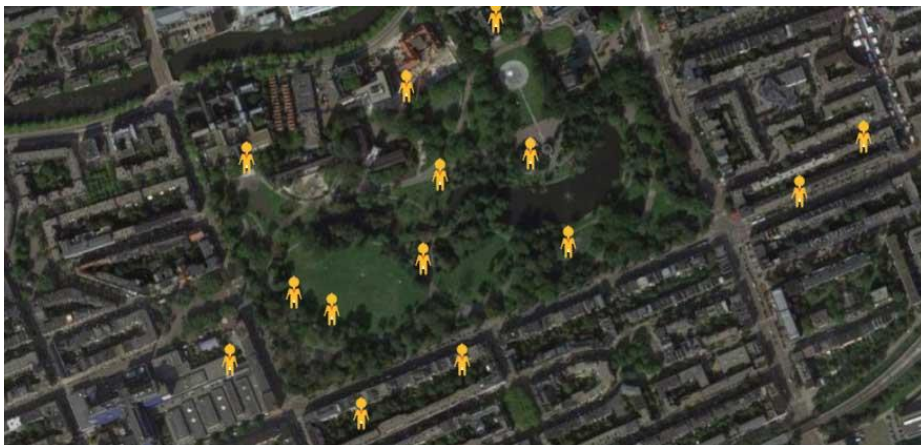
in the chat.' The task to take the photo aims to get the spectator to observe the place, and to set them on the track for the mode of observation that is especially important in the first part of the performance. The picture they send is later fed back onto the message thread of the spectator.

These are some images that were taken by spectators of their starting location during the testing phase of the performance:



(photos by participants in test-runs *Parallel Life*, 2021)

After leaving their starting location the spectators are free to choose the paths they take. They are repeatedly encouraged to do that. For instance, those who respond to the question: 'Do you like to be surrounded by a lot of people?' with 'No.' are told 'feel free to find quieter streets.' Only about halfway through the performance are they asked to go to a place where there are a lot of people, and then later on to a shop. In an earlier version of the performance the path of each spectator was more determined and less self-chosen. We have, for instance, tried to send them to a specific shop by giving them the geo coordinates, and have tried to make sure that they end the performance, even if at different times, quite close to each other, on one large square or in the same park.



(Screenshot *Parallel Life*)

Onsite performance

The performance on location starts once spectators signal their arrival at their starting points and send a photo of a self-chosen detail of the place. Then they can roam around, receiving suggestions for how to actively observe the environment, other people on the

street, themselves, as well as the separation between them and the surroundings, and how these elements reflect on each other. They are asked to observe *how* they observe, what attracts them, what catches their interest, what do they pay less attention to. Occasional, optional ‘tasks’, like sending a picture of something they see on the street that is as old as them, are intended to support observation:



(photos by participants in test-runs *Parallel Life*, 2021)

They are encouraged to observe other people and be self-conscious of what their own presence means in the surroundings, through questions such as: ‘*Do you feel like you stand out in this environment?*’ And then, if the response is ‘Yes’, they are asked: ‘*Why do you think that?*’ A series of prompts makes them reflect on how they are seen by others, by family, friends and strangers, and the ways in which these perceptions of them respond to their own perception of themselves. Other questions aim at discovering the spectators’ attitudes and feelings about the city, their thoughts on what they consider home, what makes them feel comfort or unease, and how they deal with it.

The situation of being on your phone while in a public space and surrounded by other people, while being in a personal conversation – in this case, mostly with yourself – is a specific kind of alienation that I was curious to explore with this performance. It is a state

that most people today are familiar with, but usually not while observing oneself and the surroundings like this, and not for the duration of this performance, at least not without some other 'in person' activity breaking the continuity. The performance brings together the 'weak signal' of text messaging with the potentially 'strong signal' of many impressions that accompany being in a busy part of town. This is negotiated differently by each spectator, depending on mood, age, interest, attention span, etc.

Later, in the second part of the onsite performance, the text messages give place to longer audio files, and visitors are guided by a voice through this part. This starts with a longer section focused on being in crowded public space and observing other people.

Wandering

Parallel Life has a loose time frame, where each spectator determines the rhythm, and therefore decides what kind of experience it will be: dreamy, loitering, or task-based and possibly interactive with others around them. During the performance the bot encourages visitors to take their time, but also to do it at a tempo that most suits them. Some people took 3-4 hours and met no one at the end. For some it took 50 minutes to go through the scripted part of the onsite performance and then they spent 3 hours talking to the person they met at the end.

The kind of experience that my colleagues and I intended to create for the spectator with this performance is probably closest to instances where visitors take at least an hour and a

half to go through the onsite part, which allows for an observant, even dreamy state. The impressions, atmospheres, events from the environment should be as present as the input received from the performance. The layer of what is happening around the person and the layer of the text of the performance should ideally sift through each other, with the spectator's impressions and thoughts at the centre.

Overlay of two profiles

The onsite performance has three distinct parts. In the first segment, mostly through texting, the spectator is asked for input. In the second part she embodies another person through an audio text. In the third part they encounter another spectator, first digitally, and then if they choose so, in person. Depending on their preferences, for some audience members the meeting at the end is with a random person on the street.

During the first part visitors compile their own profile by answering questions or carrying out (mental) tasks suggested by the bot. Some of the information that feeds into comprising this profile are things that the spectators already know about themselves, while others are based on close in-situ observations or more impulsive gestures of dealing with the mobile device. Some input, for instance the spectator's favourite song that she listens to on the way to the 'starting point', is not submitted. Similarly, only a small part of the thinking that goes into answering questions like 'What are the things you worry about these days?' is finally included in the text message that the visitor sends as response. But some of these 'extra', unsubmitted thoughts, personal preferences, and other aspects of their own

‘personality profiles’, are likely to still remain present in the minds of the spectators, even once they move to the part of the performance where they step into their assigned persona.

Spectators are told that a profile assigned to them based on their answers is picked by the algorithm, and that it is to be as different as possible from them, whether in age, socioeconomic status, cultural background or interests. The personality profile they get is based on an existing person within the 'database' of the performance. This database, in actuality due to technical reasons, in the present version of the performance is still very limited. We worked with six pre-created profiles, all based on interviews with real persons using the questions that are also posed to the spectators during the performances.²⁵

Everything that is revealed about the person whose place the spectator takes during the second part, is based on the same questions that the spectators have also answered about themselves.

In the audio part the character and circumstances of the assigned personality are established, and the spectator can ‘inhabit’ this personage. They start by recreating the physical and emotional perspective of their new profile, for instance of being tall and seeing things from a high perspective or being wary of the unwanted attention by strange men on the street and trying to remain unnoticeable. Spectators walk through the city listening to the favourite song of the person they embody, learning about the way this person perceives the environment, and finding out details about the person’s background and experience with Covid. They are encouraged through guided actions, like adapting aspects of the

²⁵ Together with the technologists I worked with on *Parallel Life*, we are looking for technical solutions to create these profiles real-time, based on the input of audience, for a next, very different version of the piece that I plan to make, this time for the theatre, and not with Covid thematic.

person's perception, or buying and eating the person's favourite snack, to embody their new profile. In the end spectators step into a dream of the person they're embodying, where the space and the actions partly correspond to the actual environment events on the street.

The script of the performance is constructed in a way that the information that you as spectator get about the person you embody, all the aspects that are revealed about them, are the same sort of aspects and details that you have previously revealed about yourself to the bot. So, when in the second part you are enacting your assigned profile, each new detail you learn about that person will probably bring to mind your own input, your own answers, and the thinking you have put into articulating your responses. For instance, when you listen to the favourite song of the person, you are likely to remember which of your favourite songs you listened to at the beginning, how you chose that song, and even which songs you considered but did not choose, and how you felt about your choice while listening, as well as the experience that hearing that song produced in that city on your way to the starting point of the performance. Or when you find out that the person is an extrovert, you remember whether you described yourself also as such, or as an introvert. When you are in their dream, you will also remember your own dream that you shared during the pregame or the fact that you don't remember your dreams or did not share a dream. So, while experiencing the subjective world of that other person, you are continuously reminded of your own experiences and thoughts.

The assigned persona and the subjective world of the spectator are in this way superimposed upon each other, creating for the spectator a simultaneous encounter with

both herself and the person whom she is embodying, merging and contrasting the two, experiencing the similarities and the differences. In this way, the main dynamic in the narrative structure of the performance reproduces the principles of relating to a stranger through difference.

Encounters

The central encounter for the spectator in *Parallel Life* is with the person she embodies, while constantly being reminded of her own responses, of her own self. But at the end of the journey spent alone, there is also another kind of meeting. Spectators are paired up, virtually in a private chatroom, for a short encounter, which starts with a 'icebreaker' game of finding affinities and a difference and is followed by a talk. After a few minutes into the talk the people in the chatroom are informed that the room will soon expire and if they want to continue with the conversation, they should arrange to get in touch directly.

Overall, about half of the visitors opted for meeting in person to continue the conversations live. In some cases that we learned about through feedback, people exchanged numbers and stayed in touch after the performance. In terms of the dramaturgy of the performance there was no preference for whether or not people should meet up. It was more important to have a chance encounter in the chat with a human stranger – with the awkwardness and the superficiality of meeting somebody for the first time - after having spent the whole performance communicating with a chatbot. A chatbot without personality, focused in the one-sided conversation solely on the spectator. (In some regards, an ideal conversation partner.)

Part 4: Connections and Conclusions

a. Dramaturgy of Difference

The creation process of *Parallel Life* brought new insights to the research, partly by providing a specific case-study – a kind of prototype – of participation and spectatorship for a performative setup that allows for relating intimately to another person, through approximation and a negotiation of affinities and differences. This had been explored in my previous artistic works as well as in the workshops of the research. I realized while reflecting on the research, that the way that the spectator is invited in *Parallel Life* to take on the identity of, or to embody, another person, while at the same time being constantly confronted with her own input and own self, is similar to how the relationship to spectators is set up in many of my previous performances. The overlay of the newly assigned profile with the profile of the spectator, the split identification, and how the spectator is stimulated to relate to this other person through the ‘gap’ – the difference – between them, is the same dynamic I have created in performances where each spectator, even when in a collective setting, is addressed separately and invited, throughout the performance, to draw on their own experiences and (mentally) provide their own input. Kai van Eikels describes this spectatorial experience after attending my performance, *One Hour* (2011):

Separation was what awaited me there, in the theatre space, and separation is what I take home. And it is by virtue of this very separation, thanks to the lateral performance, which never encourages direct identification but leaves me in a place

*where I must complete the story by drawing on my own life, that my imagination allows me to see the world from someone else's point of view.*²⁶

This invitation to the spectator to bring – if only in their thoughts – their own input and experiences to the performance is created by different means in each work. For instance, by the fact that the spectator can read faster than the performer can write and therefore finishes each sentence first.²⁷ Or through a specific construction of the text, working with questions and gaps, which elicits and empowers the spectator to provide their input. In other cases, it's by having the spectator be the protagonist of the performance and projecting certain experiences onto them. Like in the above-mentioned *One Hour*, where each audience member is guided through their own dying process while lying down in the darkness. Or in *Woe* (2013), where audience members' childhood memories are fused with experiences of emotional and physical abuse. In other performances, this dramaturgy of spectatorship is set up through the means of putting a 'weak' or 'porous' protagonist on stage. Someone who, because of their young age, their shyness and incompetence, or because they do not speak English, is less able to deal with the task that the performance proposes – be it to recognize rules, to make a choice, to articulate a thought, or to finish a sentence – than the spectator is. Therefore, during the performance, the spectator ends up 'stepping in' (mostly in their minds) to offer advice, to solve the task, to advance the performance further. Often, these protagonists are quite different from the people in the

²⁶ Van Eikels, Kai, 'Democratic Imagination', in Edit Kaldor and Joe Kelleher, eds. *Theatres of Powerlessness* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming)

²⁷ *The spectators, instead of being on the receiving end of the communication, are invited to come very close, to take part in the thinking process of the protagonist/performer. There is a concrete dynamic that allows for this: the fact that the spectator can read faster than the performer can write, which means that he, in his head, can finish the sentences quicker than the performer does on the screen.* Kaldor, Edit, 'Thinking at Work', In Blanga-Gubbay, Daniel, Kwakkenbos, Lars, 'The Time We Share' (Mercatorfonds, KunstenFestivaldesArts, 2015) p.77

audience and are either unwilling or unable to follow social codes, thereby making the encounter impossible. Again, it is the spectator who needs to step in, bringing their own knowledge and experience, in order to keep communication going and create the encounter. And inevitably, as in the other cases, that encounter, when it finally happens for the spectator, ends up being as much with herself as with that protagonist, text or idea from the performance. And that encounter with oneself, with one's own ideas and experiences through the filter of the performance, is the 'dramatic action' of the performance. *The self-evidence with which one readily and with good will turns to the other, to the stranger, to measure him or her according to one's own familiar forms of life is perverted in Kaldor's theatre performances. At the end one's own 'self' or one's own life feels as a bizarre and precarious contingency.*²⁸

The mechanisms of constantly reminding the spectator of her own input, of her own self, while encountering another person through that person's experiences and ideas, is a way of implicating the spectator while continuously urging her to acknowledge difference. The difference between how she finished the sentence, reading, and how the performer finished the sentence, writing. The difference between how she interpreted a social code correctly and how the protagonist misread it. The difference between her speaking English and the protagonists of the performance only speaking Mandarin. Or the difference of having experienced no less or other kinds of abuse during childhood than the protagonists in the performance. Audre Lorde wrote that "we have no patterns for relating across our human

²⁸ Philipsen, Bart, 'Theater für Experten des Nicht-Verstehens' in Bloch, N. (ed.), Heimböcke, D. (ed.) *Theater und Ethnologie: Beiträge zu einer produktiven Beziehung* (Forum Modernes Theater) Narr Francke Attempto, 2016

differences as equals.”²⁹ Much of the work in these performances that spectators and performers take upon themselves has to do with this: the attempt to relate across difference (if not as equals, then at least as people who are closely entangled.)

Inside the head of the other

The proposal to the spectator in the performative setup in *Parallel Life* is to get into the subjectivity of another person while keeping her own inner reality also in mind. This and related approaches were an important aspect of the working methods for the workshops of this research. Many assignments focused on participants attempting to put themselves ‘into the head’ of the spectator, while also paying attention to what is going on in their own heads. Performative material was approached as a series of prompts to influence the cognitive, physical, and emotional processes of the spectator. Communication models were practiced where the speaker stays conscious of the reception by the listener of what is being said.

Also, in the exercises aimed at observing the various layers of a situation, participants in the workshops ‘trained’ their abilities to perceive their own subjective processes as part of a situation, while staying aware that other subjective and objective processes were happening simultaneously, and that these elements together constitute the totality of a situation. This

²⁹ Lorde, Audre “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom CA: Crossing Press, 1984) pg. 115

kaleidoscopic mode of perception is also what some of my previous works propose in terms of spectatorship.

Another element present in the workshops that is closely related to the dramaturgy of spectatorship in *Parallel Life* and other previous work, is the cultivation of interest and curiosity towards strangers. There were various exercises of watching, fantasizing about, and carrying on imaginary conversations with, people the participants didn't know. For the students a whole trajectory of going out into the city to look for and observe strangers, considering them as potential public, and speculating on their needs and desires.

Code-switching

During the research and the reflection, I recognized that elements of the workshop and of *Parallel Life* – such as being 'in the head' of the other, or having a kaleidoscopic perception of a situation, as well as the dramaturgy of relating through difference – are all closely related to some of my own lived knowledges. These are interests and competences originating in particular circumstances of my life and the experiences and perceptions they brought. I immigrated from Hungary to the U.S. when I was 13 without knowing a word of English. I picked up the language and the local social customs by observing and absorbing. I eventually became a coordinate bilingual,³⁰ navigating two separate worlds of notions. And, for the next decade or so, I continued to move between various, greatly differing cultural

³⁰ A person who regularly uses two languages, the second language having been learned independently from the first and within a different contextual environment. The mental representation of knowledge about the two languages is thought to be relatively independent (American Psychological Association)

and social contexts. This necessitated continuous code-switching, taking the point of view of the other, focusing on the other, on the receiver in communication the spectator, and acute awareness of the gaps in understanding. The fact that I did not permanently settle down after the initial emigration (and I am currently planning the move to the fourth country I will call 'home'), also means that, practically, I have spent a lot of my time with – and have had to depend on – people I did not know, strangers. This has been in some periods of my life my main mode of sociality. These experiences brought about certain sensibilities and competences: lived knowledges, as well as certain desires and necessities, which, as I discovered during this research, have largely determined my approach to theatre, spectatorship and sociality.



(Bruno Catalano sculpture, source: Daily Art Magazine)

b. Lived knowledges

In most of the workshops we worked with lived knowledge of the participants, even when it was not explicitly addressed in the exercises. My own performative work has always drawn

from autobiographical sources. I've been mostly interested in the subjective side of complex experiences and the formal setup of my performances stem from negotiating the experiences I wanted to create for the audience stemming from aspects of my own, with the parameters and elements of theatre. My first work *Or Press Escape* was a clear example of this – it dealt with isolation and its effects on the mind – and posed the dilemma of how to 'stage' this in a theatre setting.



(*Point Blank*, 2007, photo: Lieven de Laet)

Or *Point Blank*, which was rooted in the aimless floating and being overwhelmed that especially young people feel when thinking of all the options in life, and the risks of making fatally bad choices. In the performance the overflow of possibilities is translated into the protagonist's spy-photo collection of tens of thousands of pictures of other people's lives, which she together with the audience navigates, tries to order and draw sense from. Equally autobiographically inspired were the pieces *C'est du Chinois* - informed by being culturally uprooted as a teenager, and *Woe*, which drew on experiences of chaos and abandonment at a young age.

The years I collaborated with Peter Halasz have influenced me in considering theatre as a space to work with and work through lived experiences. Although most of his later pieces were representational and based on scripts he wrote, he retained an approach of processing lived experiences into artistic material, which could be shared with others through theatre. In his last piece, where a few weeks before his death he staged his own funeral, the translation of experience into live performance was immediate and indescribably powerful. Even though we had stopped working together some years before this, I had the privilege of being part of both the preparations and the performance. It continues to be a core reference for me as also for many others.

The performance started like this: An open coffin stood elevated in the centre of the round aula of the Kunsthalle of Budapest. Peter entered, took the microphone, came close to the audience and said:

On October 13th, 2005, after a long rehearsal, I collapsed. I thought it was exhaustion. The ambulance took me to the hospital, where they determined that the situation was grim. Liver cancer. According to the diagnosis of eighteen doctors, my illness is fatal. In fact, there is a clear timetable, it is progressive, and you can see the end almost exactly by date.

I figured, if I'm going to have a disease like this, then let's do something with it. Not many people get to see their own funeral. I suppose this can be exciting for others as well, I see quite a lot of us gathered here this evening.³¹

³¹ Excerpt from Peter Halasz: *Mortuary*, Kunsthalle, Budapest, 2006



(Peter Halasz, *Final Performance*, Budapest Kunsthalle, 2006, photo: L. Najmanyi)

He then climbed into the coffin and listened from there to the necrologies of the different people he invited. Through a projection screen the audience could follow even his slightest reactions to what he was hearing. Sometimes he would sit up, drink some water, ask for a few minutes break with music, then he would lie back down again, and the speeches would continue. In the rest of the museum's rooms there was an exhibition of his life's work, and those who could not fit into the aula followed the performance through screens spread throughout the exhibition. After the performance he walked out of the venue and got into the ambulance which took him back to the hospital. 3 weeks later he died in New York.



(Peter Halasz, *Final Performance*, Budapest Kunsthalle, 2006, photo: L. Najmanyi)

Working with Knowledges

It wasn't until my later pieces: *C'est du Chinois* and then the trilogy of the *Inventory of Powerlessness*, that I consciously became interested in questions of the role of lived knowledges both by the 'amateur' performers I was working with and by the spectators. It was at that point that I started to regard how life experiences translate into theatrical encounters as central issues in my artistic investigation.



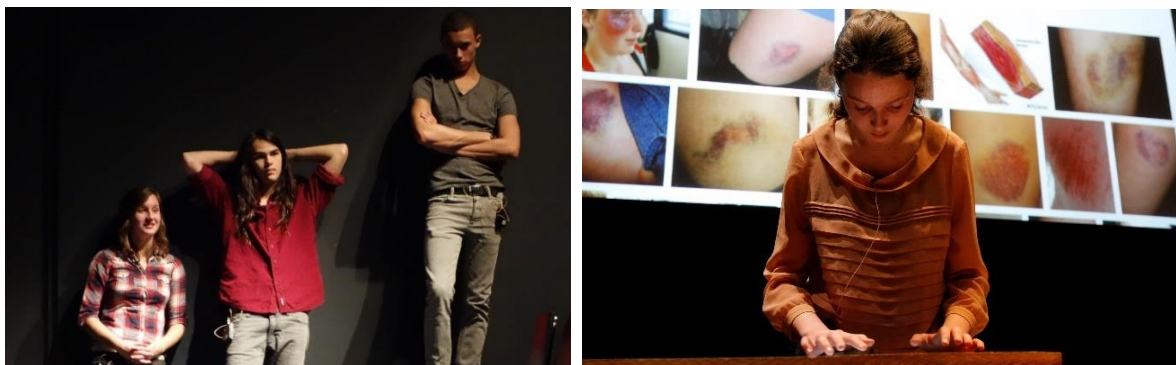
(*C'est du Chinois*, 2010, photo: Luc van Vleminckx)

C'est du Chinois on the most obvious level deals with language, specifically communication barriers between newly arrived immigrants (the performers) and the local population (most of the audience). The mostly non-professional performers, who took active part in the development of the performance, had a spectrum of related experiences: moving from Hong Kong to the Netherlands as a child and being fluent in Dutch, but having only child-level spoken Cantonese language skills; or moving from mainland China to the Netherlands as an adult, and after having lived for 30 odd years there and being a functional citizen, still

having an extremely limited vocabulary and understanding of Dutch; or having recently arrived from China after retirement, and living in Rotterdam, not knowing more than a handful of Dutch words.

Working in concrete ways during the rehearsal period with the performers' varied experiences of non-understanding, misunderstandings, attempts and failures of communication was the main tool for creating the performance material.

Similarly, in the first part of the Powerlessness trilogy, *One Hour*, a performance that deals with the experience of time during the dying process. I developed the work with input of the performers who had different types of lived experiences related to the subject of illness of losing a loved one. In the second part of the trilogy, *Woe*, that addresses the topic of child abuse, I worked together with someone who had experience with the subject, as did two of the performers. In order to protect the teenage performers, we developed the piece over a longer period, in different stages, working further also after the premiere and into the first year of touring.



(Woe, 2013, photo: Pepijn Lutgerink)

Both *C'est du Chinois* and *Woe* toured for about five years, and thus I witnessed and could observe how the experience of performing over a longer period had affected the performers' relationship to their original experience, accumulating as secondary, related knowledge.

I have worked in different ways with collaborators who contributed their lived experiences to the creation of a performance, depending on the person, the type of knowledge and the project. Usually we had conversations, interviews, writing sessions and sometimes improvisations. Mostly there was a focus on exploring subjective, difficult to formulate parts of the experience. When possible, we took a longer time with the process in order to go beyond the aspects that they had already articulated to themselves and to stay open to new discoveries. In developing different projects, I usually work with the performers over a longer period, at least a year, and sometimes with the same persons across projects, over several years. When I work with people from outside the arts, time is always an important factor. Not just the time we spend together but the time in-between that matters the most. Much of the work happens between two meetings, so, in designing processes, I always try to have a few days or a week between rehearsals. And to articulate questions with each person that they can then be processing and thinking it further, in their time off.

Although in most projects there was a lot of input by others, it was always me who came up with the form and setup for the performance, early in the process. In this research project I was interested to explore how using the idea of performance as situation tools could be developed that enable people – also those without an arts education – not only to create performance material based, but also to give form to performances informed by their lived

experiences. I am curious how in the long run, a broader spectrum of social knowledges and imaginations would bring about new forms and content to contemporary performing arts.

Knowledges of spectators

Much depends on where a performance is played and who the spectators are. The kids from *Woe* after the premiere at Frascati Theatre in Amsterdam where the audience consisted mostly of 'theatre people', asked me to let's try to avoid playing more in these kinds of venues where the audience is so 'clueless'. While they were excited for instance after playing to an audience at Sick Festival in Brighton, where they had the feeling that the spectators were interested, and 'got' what they were talking about (and were not disturbed that half of the first row entered with full pizza boxes, which they consumed during the evening.) In *Woe* the performers who come very close to the audience often reported after a performance, spectators who cried though the whole show. It was clear to them that these spectators recognized the experiences addressed in the performance., and this always had a strong effect on them.

With *One hour* we had an especially memorable performance with an after-talk in a provincial theatre in the Netherlands, where the average age of the spectators was around 80 and they were interested and invested in the subject of dying. In the case of *C'est du Chinois* there was a clear difference how spectators in NYC, Sao Paolo or Canada, who had different awareness and connection to immigration, reacted to the more subtle layers of the piece, which the usually more homogeneous 'local' audiences in continental Europe did not

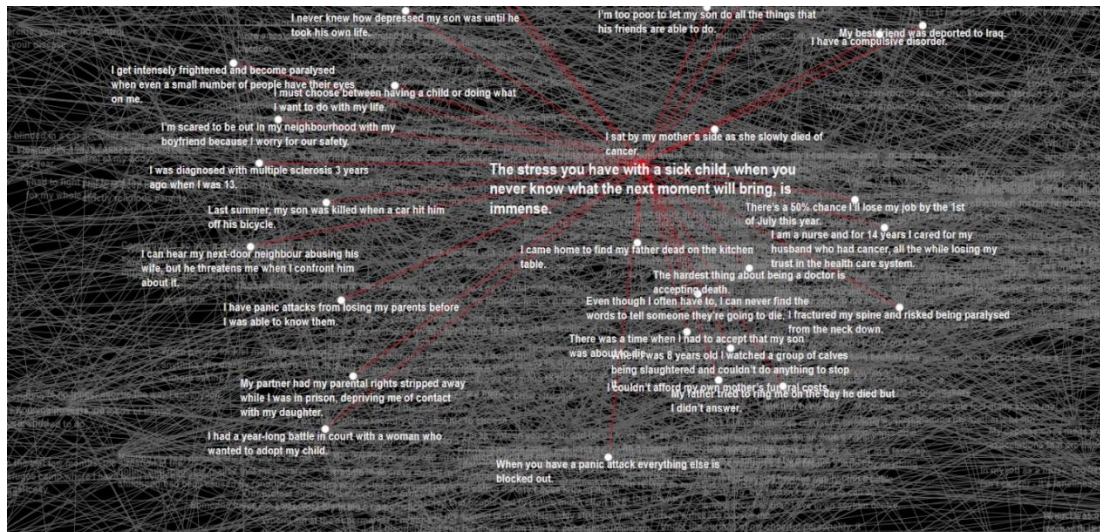
relate to. Touching moments of recognition and encounters between performers and spectators who share certain lived experiences which I have witnessed are for me meaningful and intriguing examples of 'what can happen' in theatre. I find the lack of certain lived experiences within the demographic of audiences in many venues for contemporary performance discouraging and alienating. It keeps me asking myself: Who do I want as audience for my work? But also: whose performances do I want to see? And: who do I want to be teaching performance-making to?

Knowledges of powerlessness

As mentioned earlier, part of the preparation for the workshops and a bridge between my previous work and the research, was the compilation of the digital archive that sourced the third part of the Powerlessness trilogy, the participatory project involving hundreds of people, *The Inventory of Powerlessness*. The archive includes experiences of powerlessness that were articulated by the participants: *At some point I will no longer recognise my wife because I have Alzheimer's disease. My best friend was deported to Iraq. When I have a psychotic episode, I'm convinced that I have been buried alive. During the war, I watched my friends and my neighbours being taken away. As a small child, I got used to the idea that I was going to be beaten to the point that I accepted it as normal. During an open day at the refugee centre, we were treated as though we were animals in a zoo. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis 3 years ago when I was 13. I try to accept my condition, but it is hard to face the future. Corruption is so rife in my home country that it seeps into all areas of life and makes it difficult to survive. After I told my wife that I wanted to have a divorce, she*

committed suicide. People visibly stiffen with fear when they see me walking through public places as, to them, I could be a terrorist. The person I trust the most lied to me over and over. I know I will never know the full truth from his mouth. My house burned down. I didn't have any insurance, so I've lost everything I owned. In my country, it is common to be sent to a priest to be fixed if you are gay. My parents did this to me. I can't leave my abusive husband because I would risk losing my children. I have nowhere to go.³²

And 285 other experiences of powerlessness. As in the live performance project, in the online archive these experiences are put into relation with each other. They are connected, can be clustered. In the performance these connections and groupings happened between real people. In the archive they happen between words.



(Screenshot, *Inventory of Powerlessness* digital archive)

During the live performances, participants and some spectators told their experiences mostly in the respective local language, and a summary of these was written up. Everyone

³² See: <http://inventoryofpowerlessness.org/>

could link their own 'item' to those of others, look for affinities through tags, and articulate questions that emerged from the connections to sometimes very different but still related experiences. These questions could then be discussed in small groups.



(*Inventory of Powerlessness*, Poznan, 2015, photo: Bartos Dzilamski)

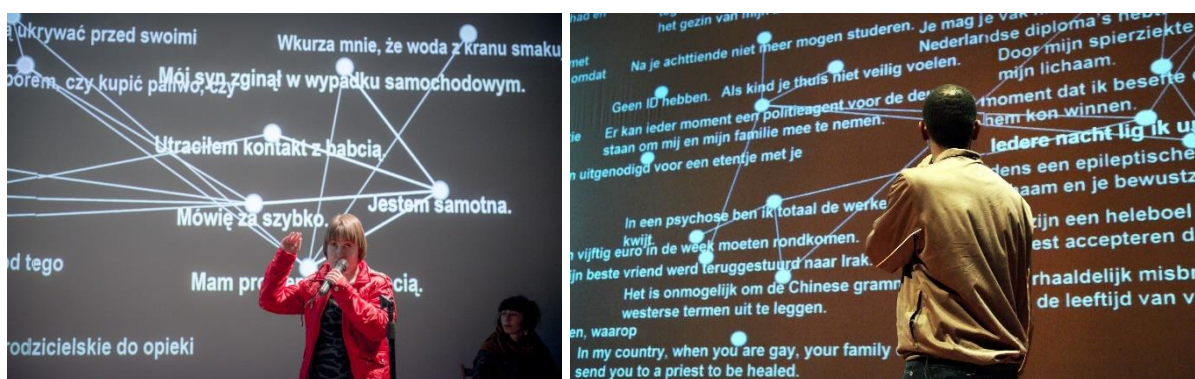
The working processes for the different versions of this project in the various countries – which spanned anywhere between 6 months and a year and a half – and the public performances were sites of collective study for each city:

*to look concretely, through tangible examples at the phenomenon (of powerlessness) and create a complex network of relations between different forms and aspects of powerlessness, a kind of kaleidoscopic take on the subject. What happens if you take powerlessness out of the dichotomy of its relation to power and examine it like that? How do different experiences of powerlessness relate to one another?*³³

The project brought people together who were not likely to otherwise meet, each with their own knowledges and questions about powerlessness, using the digital tool to visualize the

³³ From interview by Florian Malzacher, 2021

convergences and grouping. The *Inventory* gave a frame in which participants could take time to think their own experiences further by filtering them through other people's experiences. Through this project the idea of lived experience as knowledge became most tangible for me. The essence of the *Inventory* was how these different knowledges could interact, feed one other, challenge and support each other, and how new perspectives could emerge from the combinations and constellations of experiences.

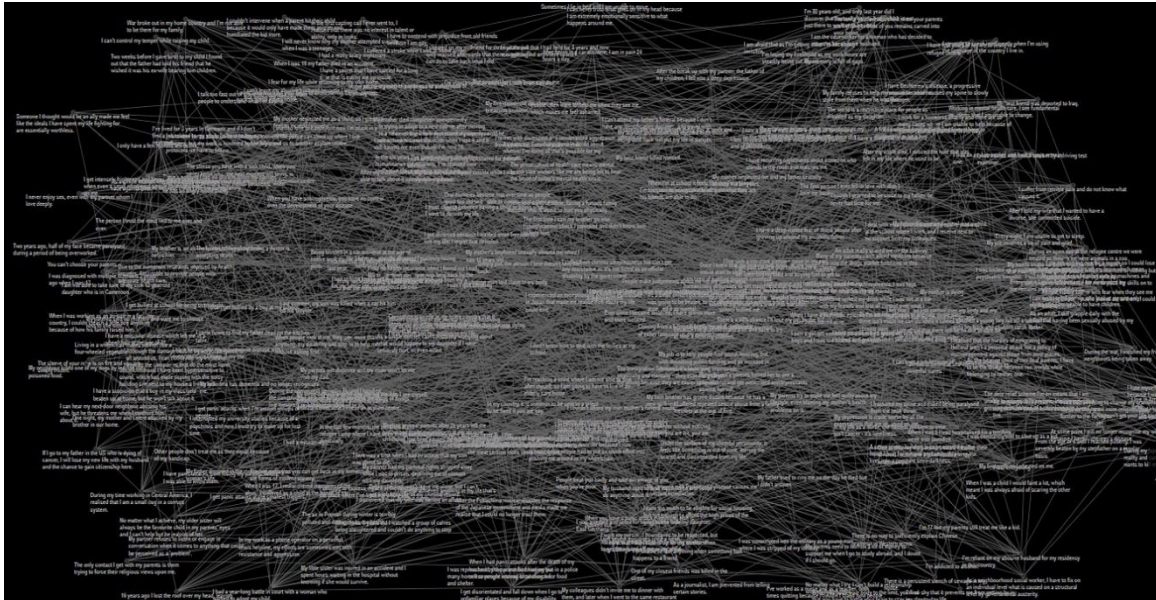


(Inventory of Powerlessness, Poznan, Amsterdam, 2015, photo: Bartos Dzilamski and J. van Lingen)

Making the digital archive gave me a chance to revisit the project, to understand better what these lived experiences were, what their articulation meant to the participants, to reflect the possibilities of such a format, and to think further about experiences of powerlessness. The research proposal for the fellowship, I believe, came from the wish to extend and think differently about possible modes of participation, as prompted mostly by this project.

The online archive now contains 300 experiences of powerlessness. This is a part of the experiences that were articulated in conversations, gatherings, rehearsals during the project. And I imagine, it's just a tiny fraction of experiences that people, many people -

each for their own reasons - are motivated to articulate, share, and re-see, from close, together.



(Screenshot, *Inventory of Powerlessness* digital archive)

Powerlessness and artmaking: seven conversations

It was my intention and part of the original proposal to initiate dialogues with other artists around issues that I was investigating in the research. These encounters were planned to take place during the second or the third cycles of the workshops. As the workshops had to be cancelled and meeting in person became difficult, I wanted to find another form for the exchange and initiated a series of talks that could be realized digitally. I asked Florian Malzacher to help with hosting several conversations between artists on the role of vulnerability, lack of control, powerlessness, failure and loss in their thinking and their work.

Through these informal conversations we wanted to open an array of perspectives and reflections around these subjects and see how different artists incorporate these experiences into their practices, processes, politics and ethics. In order to keep the exchanges intimate and spontaneous, we opted for inviting people who already knew each other and could start the conversations from a point of familiarity. Each of these dialogues have a different focus, arising from the specific interests and practices of the artists. These range from the implications of the development of AI to daily practices of activism, death, art in view of the ecological crisis, lived experience of revolutionary change in the artists' own countries, letting go of control as artistic method and artmaking as means of survival. The full texts of these conversations are included as reference material for the research. They represent in themselves a spectrum of reflections on the subject at the heart of the research: possible convergences between knowledges, powerlessness and artmaking.

Structures

As part of the reflection process, and to give the committee assessing this research project a feel for some aspects of the research that could not otherwise be shared with them in a material way, in the Autumn of 2022, I presented together with Kobbe Koopman and Rufino Henriquez a small lecture performance, called *Strangers*. Kobbe and Rufino took part both in the *Inventory* and the Amsterdam workshop series, and I have worked with them both on and off over the past 10 years. They, like me, exemplify the possibility of approaching performance making as a practice that you do at intervals, next to doing other things that

also interest you. The making of *Strangers* brought insights around possible benefits of the structural thinking that performance making offers – related to mental health and as means of survival. Some of these thoughts are expressed in the following excerpt from *Strangers*:

Kobbe: In this project we connected individual experiences to see what broader picture would emerge. To go from the actual experience and see what the connections revealed.

[Asks for video fragment of his own item from the Inventory]

So, I connected my experience with childhood (sexual) abuse with the experience of Giorgi who you just saw talk about the immigration police always targeting the young ones in the family during the long interrogations.

[Kobbe watches the video]

Kobbe in video: Langzaam.....

IRL Kobbe: Now I would tell it differently, I think. But actually, I still don't have the words.

With certain experiences that are destabilizing and connected to immense uncertainty...

there is sometimes an urge to find comfort in structures.

So you look for patterns.

It's because when the mind is unable to create a narrative for something....

When you're confronted with things your mind does not have the information or capability to bring together into a narrative, into a story – you hook onto other

things, things that already have pronounced structures. Like visual patterns you see on the street.

What I'm trying to say is: one way the mind deals with experiences that are closely connected to complete uncertainty is to bring about heightened awareness and desire for patterns, for structures.

Anything. Like the bricks of a firewall. The lines on the sidewalk. Anything with regularity, repeating textures, words, people passing by, their rhythm of movement, the threads in your clothes, bubble wrap, the lines on your hands, or when two planes leave trails in the sky exactly parallel. Bathroom tiles, wood grains in the floor.

It doesn't need to be visual, it also happens in the way you think about stuff. The pattern of your thoughts. Observing the pattern of your thoughts. Observing how they emerge. What the pattern is. Do you know what I mean?

Or you start creating such patterns. Like having a rhythm in your head.

And you start imposing structures on your impressions. On your experiences.

Creating these structures, whatever form they take, gives a sense of control, I guess.

And having some control over that particular, random thing brings relief. For a moment you can let go of the urge to have control over all the rest. Yes, that brings relief, even comfort, relaxation... Not sure what to call it.

*Well.... it gives something*³⁴

³⁴ Transcription from lecture performance Strangers, performed in Fredrikstad October, 2022.

I know these walls

During the making of the *Inventory of Powerlessness* in 2015, at the height the 'refugee crisis' in Europe, I came across a photograph while scrolling through my FB feed, which halted me. It depicted a room. When I saw it, I immediately had a deep flash of recognition: I know these walls, the texture of the gray-green oil paint, I know this floor, I know these bunkbed frames. I recognize the positions people are taking on the beds, I recognize the daytime slumber mode. I know how slowly time passes when you spend your days on one of these beds, what the texture of the day is, and of the next day and the next. I know what waiting is like here, waiting for food, waiting for news, waiting to hear your name be called, waiting for it to get night, waiting for the morning. I know the static of boredom, and I also know how to tell when something is about to erupt. I know how to tell when somebody is about to lose it. And I know why they lose it. This was the photo I saw.



(Refugee camp, Traiskirchen, Austria, 2015, source: Facebook)

It is of one of the rooms in the refugee camp in Traiskirchen, outside of Vienna. Like in 2015, it was also overcrowded in 1981, when I was there as a kid. People slept not only in the rooms, but along the walls of the long corridors that connected the rooms.

When I saw this photo pass by on the feed, what got to me was how well I knew these walls. I spent so much time looking at that wall, next to my bed- Looking at the wall accompanied my thinking – all the thinking I was doing, back then, having nothing else to do, but staying alert to listen to our names pronounced unrecognizably, to make sure not to miss it and run the risk of being ‘forgotten’ there. I spent so much time looking at that wall, projected so much onto that wall, and tried to read sense out of the texture of its surface, the hairline cracks, the bubbles.

Seeing the photo made me realise that I have never spoken to anyone about this wall, this room. There are many other things I learned, related to that experience that I have never spoken about. And I started to think about what kinds of knowledge are these? And, thinking of Halasz, what can I do with them? What are they? Can and should any of it be shared? To what is it relevant? What sort of knowledge comes from endless waiting and complete uncertainty of what might happen? From staring at a wall? From going to the toilet when it's most safe? From staying alert to recognize your name being called, no matter how it's pronounced? I mean concretely. What kinds of knowledge are these? And what are they good for? How are they useful for anything that I do now? How are they harmful?

I have wondered how these kinds of knowledges could be brought into and be fundamental to making performance. I started to observe what of this knowledge do I use in making my work, and how. And also came to some conclusions about this. The ability to take yourself completely out of the narrative, the suspicion towards all narratives and the ease with broken or non-narratives. The knowledge of waiting - the extensive experience with waiting is very useful. It gives a sensibility to grasp the very texture of performance, time and the sharing of time, without the impulse or need to fill it with stuff.

The participants who attended the workshop series at the theatre in Amsterdam brought with them a wide array of knowledge. And working with them questions like these occupied me: What kind of knowledge is it to have breast cancer, what does it do to your sense of time and how you want to share your time with strangers? What kind of knowledge is it to lose your mother to suicide as a teenager and not being asked a question about it for 10 years? What happens then when you start to talk? Or grasping for air at the crack of the bottom of the door of a crowded prison? What happens then when you start to breathe with a group of people in one space? Or being discriminated against for the way you look – what happens if you let all that judgment take place in a materialized way, in real time, in a frame that you set?

Why theatre?

In September 2020, just as I resumed the research after a Covid break of 4 months, Milo Rau asked me, along with 5 other theatre-makers to present together with him *The State of the*

Theatre, the annual statement that opens the Dutch theatre season. Each of us prepared a speech, responding to the question: Why theatre? Here follows a short excerpt from what I said. This text was also part of the lecture performance *Strangers* that was part of this research.

They say that what you've seen you cannot unsee. Even if you want to. Once you have seen something you cannot ever unsee it.

But maybe, you can re-see it. You can see it again. You can look at it again. Take time for it. Review it. Reflect on it.

Why theatre? Because live performance, theatre is a way to re-see what you cannot unsee. It's a way to bring it close. To make it concrete. To give it time, to give it attention. To look and look again. And look longer. And look better.

So yes, I have seen a lot. Also, since then. And I guess I'm no exception in that.

I guess that many of us have seen a lot. And that we continue to see - and also to live - a lot. Every day.

We see extreme precarity, we see mechanisms in place that thrive on exclusion and oppression, and we're confronted daily with the countless concrete manifestations of these mechanisms.

We see denial and refusal to reckon with the past and to come clean in the present.

We see pain, and we see anger, and we let our pain and anger be seen.

Time and again we see our collective inability and failure to own up to our roles in halting the destruction of our planet, thereby making it unlivable for our children.

And yes, especially now, we see illness, we see loss. And we see care and generosity and integrity.

But we also see fear, and a politics of fear and of division on pretty much all levels.

And double speech, and straight out lies, and misunderstandings and violence.

What we see we cannot unsee. But we can re-see it.

We can stay with it. We can give it attention; we can reflect it in ways that are tangible for us.

That's something that live performance is good at: making things tangible and experienceable.

It's an apparatus that enables us to re-see and to re-imagine what we cannot unsee.³⁵

I wrote this text, no doubt partly inspired by the workshops I did in the previous year in the theatre in the context of this research. The encounters with the participants and with their drive and curiosity to use theatre for articulating their worlds, experiences and aspirations, left a mark.

c. Conclusions

Doing this research I have come to understand that my notion of theatre – the focus on the gathering and encountering of strangers, the specific kind of relational dramaturgy that through *Parallel Life* I could identify also in my previous work; and most of the notions and competences that we trained in the workshops during this research – are closely related to

³⁵ See: <https://www.whytheatre.eu/from-events/108-re-see-what-we-see-we-cannot-unsee-edit-kaldor/>

an understanding of theatre that is informed by my own lived experiences with displacement, immigration and being a newcomer.

Newcomer

The experience of the workshops of this research yielded for me an interest in focus. I recognized that I was most excited to explore the specificity of the immigrant experience and how that translates into situational social knowledge, and how that in turn can be used as a reference, when thinking about and rethinking theatre. A major thing that emerged from the research is the figure of the newcomer. You find this echoed through some works by participants, and the people that the research has drawn me towards. Although the immigrant, newcomer experience is of course multiple, as many kinds as people, there are some collective aspects and common denominators. One is the high stakes of sociality in the new country, the new home. A need to understand, to be part of, and above all to make relations. And the social desire and imagination that starting a new life in a new place evokes. The outsider perspective, the ability to adapt or switch codes. These are things that interest me. I want to take my own advice which I gave to participants in the workshop: to always make the strongest desire/need the organizing principle; and it is the situation, the set of lived knowledges and social desires of newcomers in combination with live performance and theatre that interest me most.

Although it was a long time ago that, after staring at that wall with the olive-green oil paint in that camp, we arrived in a new country where we were to start a life, the impressions of

those first years of being a newcomer are still engraved in my mind. It's important to say that I am not assuming for a moment that all immigrant, exile experiences are the same or even similar. I know that the experience is completely different depending on your country of origin, the situation there, the circumstances of leaving, what the journey entailed, the time it took, the toll it took, where you are arriving to, the colour of your skin, your age, your health, your education, your personal social and economic circumstances, safety nets, the presence of family, community, and myriad other factors. I am not assuming anything; only curious what theatre can learn from the perspectives and experiences of newcomers. And what theatre – as a space for sociality and prefiguration – could do for newcomers.

Embedded

In the Autumn of 2021, I submitted a proposal at the University of the Arts in Amsterdam to the educational developmental funds for a pilot project. The proposal entailed 'embedding' a few 'status-holders' – newcomers who had been granted asylum in the Netherlands and just received their legal papers – for one year in DAS Theatre, an MA education for contemporary performance. Status-holders are supported for a period of time by the state if they find an education or internship at a Dutch institution. The essence of my proposal was, in short, to use this frame for hosting 2 or 3 such newcomers at DAS, where they would be embedded and involved in three trajectories: they would do an internship with the technicians, production or public relations, they would be incorporated into some of the curriculum activities with the students, and they would also follow a preparatory course on

performance making, partly derived from the workshops in my research, and partly by invited guests. For desired 'end results' I wrote:

We expect on the one hand to create connection between status holders and a MA education in Theatre, so that they can consider applying for the programme, or continue to a professional trajectory in the Dutch field. On the other hand, the aim is to give an impulse to the educational view and curriculum of DAS Theatre towards creating a more diverse educational environment and making the programme more inclusive towards potential students with immigrant backgrounds.³⁶

Due to the sudden departure of the programme director, the application was 'put on hold'. Half a year later I also stopped my association with the school, so the pilot project was not realised. The intention for the pilot was to create a context for interested newcomers to come into art education and performance making prepared, in this way among others, by a course building on aspects of this research and on the workshops by other artists with similar aims.

Looking ahead

I don't know yet in which form and where I will pursue the interest and determination that this current research leaves me with. I am attracted to the idea of a 'parasite' structure,

³⁶ Edit Kaldor, University of the Arts Amsterdam educational developmental fund proposal, 2021

starting small and concrete, embedding newcomers in performing arts schools. I'm also interested in working in collaborations, together with other artists and social scientists, using the performative formats as methodology for creating social imaginaries that can be inhabited. In any case, I would like to take some of the tools that were discovered through the workshops of this research and develop them further in a new context, with newcomers and other immigrants. I am interested in expanding and changing some of the exercises and procedures from the workshop, focusing less on the actual lived experience and more on the communication and observation skills, and on the knowledge of sociality and relationality, that this experience brings to a person. I would like to explore how these experiences translate to situational skills. Creating a whole trajectory based on the lists of existing practices of daydreaming compiled during the research is something I would like to pursue. I would try starting the workshops with an extensive period of working only with daydreaming practices, before embarking on the work on situations. It seems to be a generative point of entry into the work. I am also interested to go further with working with visual schemes to create scripts and structures for performances, as I did at DAS Theatre. To explore how participants can use these kinds of tools and the emergent structures they give rise to for giving shape to, developing, and communicating their ideas during the workshop process.

In this reflection document I have tried to give an overview of the different aspects, elements and phases of the research. Despite the somewhat fragmented research process, I believe that by bringing together, recounting and reflecting on the processes and outcomes of the project I was able to share some of the underlying connections between the different

parts and a specific and coherent approach to contemporary performance-making, participation and working with lived knowledges in the theatre.

Bibliography

Bishop, Claire, 'Artificial Hells' (Verso, 2012) p.67

Goffman, Erving, 'The Neglected Situation' in *American Anthropologist* Vol. 66, No. 6, Part 2: *The Ethnography of Communication* (Wiley, Dec., 1964), p. 135

Kaldor, Edit, 'Thinking at Work' In Blanga-Gubbay, Daniel, Kwakkenbos, Lars, 'The Time We Share' (Mercatorfonds, KunstenFestivaldesArts, 2015) p.77

Lehmann, Hans-Thies, 'Postdramatic Theatre', trans. Karen Jurs-Munby (Routledge, 2006) p.17, p.105

Lehmann, Hans-Thies 'GET DOWN AND PARTY. TOGETHER. Participation in the arts since the 1990s' Oral statement given at Kölnischer Kunstverein (2011)

Lorde, Audre 'Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference' in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom CA: Crossing Press, 1984) p. 115

Philipsen, Bart, 'Theater für Experten des Nicht-Verstehens' in Bloch, N. (ed.), Heimböcke, D. (ed.) *Theater und Ethnologie: Beiträge zu einer produktiven Beziehung* (Forum Modernes Theater, Narr Francke Attempto, 2016)

Van Eikels, Kai, 'Democratic Imagination', in Edit Kaldor and Joe Kelleher, eds. *Theatres of Powerlessness* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming)

Appendix 1.

Overview of materials submitted as part of the reflection component of the research project *The Many and the Form* by research fellow Edit Kaldor

Reflection material

Reflection text on research project *The Many and the Form*

An account and reflection of the various processes, phases and outcomes of the research project *The Many and the Form* including documentation material from the workshops and *Parallel Life*. The text brings together the various strands within the research and some of the underlying connections between the different parts. It aims to communicate about practices and provide insights that can be useful for those who are interested in contemporary theatre making, participation and social imaginaries, as well as for those who have or are curious about immigrant experiences and knowledges.

Reference materials created as part of the research:

1. Digital online archive *Inventory of Powerlessness*

To access, click on <http://inventoryofpowerlessness.org/>

Interactive digital online archive that was made as part of the research, processing the accounts of lived experiences of 300 participants in the long-term theatre work that preceded and prompted this research project. As part of the preparation for the workshops I wanted to gather and organize these stories in a sharable format which reflected the processes within the performance project. It was important for the current research because it gave me a chance to touch base with its core motivation for creating working methods that allow people to translate lived experiences into live performative situations. Revisiting and reworking the range of lived experiences that were articulated during the *Inventory* not only recalled the particular context and the sense of purpose that the research originated in, but also the kinds of procedures I was working with in the *Inventory*,

some of which served as basis for the working methods I have been developing during this research.

I collaborated on the archive with dramaturg intern Joseph Anderson, theatre maker Jurrien van Rheenen, and computer programmer Joris Favie. The work consisted of bringing together recorded materials, transcribing them, translating them from one of the five original languages (Dutch, German, Polish, Czech, Greek), making a single version that most closely reflected the different oral versions, and placing them into the digital archive with the connections and categories.

I'm including the online archive and the collection of 300 experiences as an important reference for the research project, as it situates the research in terms of the kinds of lived knowledges that it aims to bring into performance-making, and clarifies what 'The Many' in the title of the research may refer to.

2. Seven conversations between artists

This is a series of conversations between artists on the topic of how they incorporate into their artistic practices and processes experiences of and reflections on vulnerability, lack of control, powerlessness, failure and loss. This element in the research has come into being to replace the trajectory of collaborating with other artists on the workshops.

The seven conversations are between

- theatre maker Qondiswa James, choreograph Kamogelo Molobye and performance maker Nondumiso Msimanga
- curator, artist Hannah Hurtzig and Karin Harrasser, writer, professor of Cultural Studies
- artist and activist Tania Bruguera and artist, writer, and cartoonist Dan Perjovschi
- theatre makers Carolina Bianchi and Carolina Mendonça, and performer Blackyva
- theatre maker Annie Dorsen and curator Florian Malzacher
- artist, activist Jay Jordan and theatre maker, activist Kasia Wojcik
- writer Adania Shibli and theatre maker Edit Kaldor

The conversations were prepared and carried out in collaboration with curator Florian Malzacher between 2020 and 2022. The conversations were moderated by Florian, dramaturge Angelinah Maponya, or me. During the editing process, in which UK performance maker Ira Brand played a key role, we decided to edit out the questions and keep the conversations in a dialogue (or triologue) form. Except for two of the conversations the participating artists already checked and where they wanted to, made changes to the transcripts. In the remaining two talks this process is still ongoing. These conversations will be included in the forthcoming *Theatres of Powerlessness* book and therefore at this moment cannot be shared publicly.

I realise that it is too long for the committee to read all the conversations. It is meant as reference; to skim or read one or two of the conversations according to interest, as material developed in the research.

3. Edited video documentation of workshop *Ghost in the Machine* (30 min)

- Short video documentation of the workshop *Ghost in the Machine*, December 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAxdAD4kEv4&t=1429s>

I'm including this video because it gives an idea of the new strand of the research after Covid made physical presence workshops impossible and my interest shifted to mobile devices for the development of *Parallel Life*.

I believe although it's a short, edited version of a longer series of workshops, the video gives a glimpse of the practice-oriented working processes typical for my workshops. Since for the live workshops the public use of the video documentation was not consented to by all participants those videos cannot be included.

It is included as reference material to give an impression; it does not need to be viewed fully.