Movements of Outsiders

Nomadic New Zealand Dance Artists during the Pandemic

by Alexa Wilson

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Interdisciplinary New Zealand artist Alexa Wilson talks with three of her contemporaries about the impact of Covid-19 on live performance, freedom of movement, and how they are adapting to a new normal.

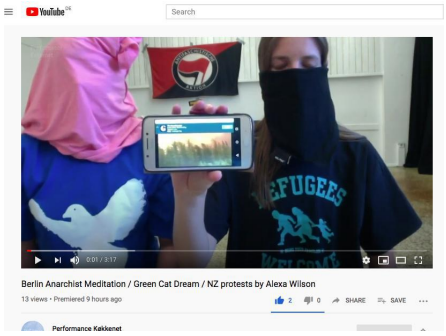
In the blink of an eye, the fold of a limb, the click of a link, in early 2020 the "critters", our "kin", changed the world. Donna J. Haraway refers to "kin" in her book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) as that which contributes to the demise of the Anthropocene—our extended "kin" pertaining to all that is within nature, the virus as "critters".[01] In the year of Covid-19, going in and out of lockdowns, the arts have struggled to stay alive. With their reliance on the physical presence of the body and social gatherings, performance arts have been particularly impacted. Philosopher Franco Berardi identifies Haraway as "the philosopher who best anticipated the ongoing viral apocalypse" (2020).[02] Of this time Berardi also commends "the return of death (at last) to the scene of philosophical discourse, after its long modern denial",[03] which seems symbolic. The death of social gathering, the death of social art making, the death of live performance.

Already marginalised mediums within cultural sectors, dance and performance art were forced in 2020 onto online platforms and have struggled to remain visible or relevant on screens that flattened them, removed their context, their physicality and the synergy of performance and audience.

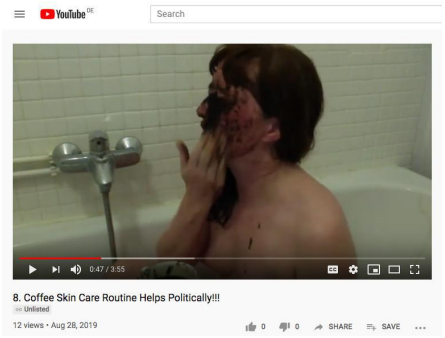
Compared with the rest of the world, particularly Europe where many New Zealand dance artists have lived and worked, New Zealand has been lucky. Due to effective leadership in Aotearoa we have had the fortune to contain Covid-19 quickly. However the climate for performance has still been unstable and extreme—all or nothing—because of the threat of sudden outbreaks and lockdowns at any moment. The internet keeps us in conversation however—it is a tool to connect, and despite being problematic in some ways, it opens a fertile space for re-understanding dance with cinematography. I spoke to dance and performance artists Forest (Vicky) Kapo, Josh Rutter, and Kyah Dove who like myself come from Aotearoa and have lived and worked internationally. Though we all have differing opinions about the impacts of Covid-19 on performance, there is agreement that we must *adapt*. Though traditional live performance seemingly dissolved overnight, this was a death that will be followed by a rebirth into new forms.



Alexa Wilson, *999 Alchemist Trauma Centre / Power Centre*, Berlin, 2018. Image courtesy the artist.



Alexa Wilson, *Anarchists,* from the artist's Youtube channel *The Politics of Dreaming*, 2020. Image courtesy the artist.



Alexa Wilson, *Coffee*, from the artist's Youtube channel *The Politics of Dreaming*, 2020. Image courtesy the artist.



Alexa Wilson, *The Politics of Dreaming* live project, 2020. Video still by Courtney Rodgers.



Alexa Wilson, *The Politics of Dreaming*, 2020. Image courtesy the artist.

Just prior to New Zealand's March 2020 lockdown I had arrived home in Aotearoa after a decade living and practicing in Berlin. Pre-Covid, I developed an online performative YouTube video channel merging different crises with a commentary on collective versus individualistic care under capitalism. I sat the oral exam of my Master of Philosophy with AUT, Art and Design during lockdown, where these themes became even more enlivened. My exam performance involved speaking to a series of more than thirty videos on my YouTube channel called *The Politics of Dreaming*, utilising, satirising and blending DIY online video conventions (e.g. talking heads, interviews, meditation/yoga instructions, dance/music videos, protest videos, tourist videos and journalism). In light of everything happening around us, this internet performance/video art project helped me to identify my performance art/dance/video practice as nomadic, hybrid and anarchist.

This hybrid or intertextual practice can move between the gallery, theatre, public spaces, film, online, or to spaces traditionally used to showcase music or poetry. This is what makes it inherently nomadic. It is never comfortable anywhere and no one is comfortable with it anywhere, because it doesn't fit in tidy (white/black) boxes. On more than one occasion, in both New Zealand and Berlin, I have been told that dance does not belong in galleries. And I have been called "anarchist" or "anti-dance" in many dance and institutional contexts where I am bringing political/philosophical attention to the body or choreography. Far from seeing this as prohibitive, I have embraced this displaced, migratory aspect of an interdisciplinary practice—working between public spaces, the internet, the studio, home, protests, private internal spaces, writing and the institution.

I also invite others to collaborate in these spaces. I invited Forest Kapo, who has been based in Melbourne for two decades, to participate in Experimental Dance Week Aotearoa, which I curated in December 2020. Kapo's practice includes "installations, sound, live and composed, biographically informed narratives stretched through a mythical, cosi-comic construction and of course movement."[04] They have presented more than fifteen works outside of New Zealand, as well as a large number of collaborations

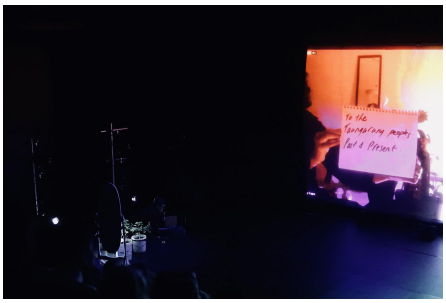
in New Zealand with Atamira, for Experimental Dance Week Aotearoa and Footnote NZ Dance.

Due to border restrictions, Kapo was unable to attend Experimental Dance Week Aotearoa in person, however, they did present a live performance via video chat with performance artist val smith. In the performance, titled *i'll grow back* (2020), the pair, who both identify as non-binary, engaged in a video chat on the stage with mirrors facing screens. This chat––where they shared their personal thoughts on performativity, the aging/non-gendered body and gender normativity, the Anthropocene in live performance, and the idea of plants as performers during a pandemic—was of course *a way to adapt.*

Kapo, whose deeply shamanistic practice weaves contemporary dance with performance art, poetry, installation, sound and text, says of the nomadic side of performance: "Adapt or die…lol. It's hard to speculate on the future climate of (air) travel, as a vaccine could change everything in a second, but I'm positive that locality will grow its own answers, and digital platforms although adding worlds and texture to our experience of art and performance, still has a way to go. Personally I tend to experience digital performances including my own works as less able (at this present time) to reach beyond the flatness of the screen, perhaps because online/digital out of necessity tends to be heavily manufactured. But we will, out of necessity, of course, adapt."[05]



Forest (Vicky) Kapo, *The Kitemaker*, Melbourne, 2018. Photo: Ankita Singh.



Forest (Vicky) Kapo collaboration with val smith, *Experimental Dance Week Aotearoa*, 2020. Photo: Courtney Rodgers.

As part of *In-process Open Source*, a collaborative platform by Indian performance and visual artists, I was invited to interview a

panel of artists (via video) about the body in performance during the pandemic. One of these artists was Josh Rutter, who has been based in Berlin since 2014 where he studied toward an MA in Solo/Dance/Authorship (SODA) at Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz, after having made work in New Zealand for ten years. He has performed in Berlin, Brussels, the US and UK. Like many European performance makers, Rutter's live practice has taken a back seat this year because of Covid-19 and the birth of his second child during the pandemic.

"I guess artists will just keep working however they can and the work will adapt, as it always does, to the conditions at hand,"[06] he says. "Maybe we'll see a period of intimate performances or a new definition of 'outrageous' actions, like a group of people coughing on each other for an hour. Maybe physical attendance at an event will become even more valued. Honestly if I was at home right now I wouldn't bother with travel. Maybe it's an opportunity to focus on improving conditions for artists in Aotearoa. Easy to say from a distance, but it's not super-fun in Europe at the moment, that's for sure."

Artist Kyah Dove expresses similar sentiments to Rutter. "I guess there will be a digitalisation of dance," she says, "but I also see and hope that there too will be a return to nature, to site specific locations and a reaching out to different spaces that exist outside of the mainstream theatres, galleries and venues here in New Zealand."[07]

Kyah Dove is known for her queer feminism, sexual empowerment and the importance of the body in live art. "My journey into performance art occurred as a result of feeling disillusioned and rejected by the contemporary dance scene in New Zealand," she says. "Or at least my experience of it as a young adult having graduated from The New Zealand School of Dance in 2010. I associated contemporary dance with feelings of unworthiness, body shame, psychological trauma and verbal abuse. I flourished in improv and choreo where I was able to have more control over my body and expression. My performance art journey really took off at Ponderosa Dance in Germany, located in the countryside on the edges of Berlin. I don't think I've ever fully come into my power as an artist here in Aotearoa."[08] Dove's experiences have been

shaped by interests in and responses to gender and sexuality (discrimination) and trauma, which are all related to politicising the body through arts—this makes her work very powerful.

Dove's work boldly connects aspects of contemporary dance, performance art, healing, and striptease and she has presented in India, Australia and Berlin, though is currently based in New Zealand.

In 2020 Dove created a video dance collaboration with artist and curator Sara Cowdell called *Green Witches Stare*. The three-minute video performance, recorded in both nature and traditional venues, saw the pair reclaiming sexual power within natural sites as "witches". With long black hair covering their naked bodies, they moved slowly or stood motionless in the forest at Karekare Beach. They also lap danced in pointy witch hats at Whammy Bar with the words "fuck patriarchy" drawn on their chests.

One of the positives of dance artists working within the film medium is that it pushes them outside the black box (theatre), so that lush external spaces and conceptual processes can be explored, such as in *Green Witches Stare*. Pop culture can also be more readily engaged with—something which has been embodied within screen and video dance as genres since the 1990s. However, as a video artist myself, I see the saturation of the digital of this century as being at odds with the live and with gathering. Despite the success of alternative formats that allow us to adapt to the situation, I think it's problematic to encourage artists into a medium they do not fully understand and which is already so dominated by film and television, forcing them into sound bites and postcard versions of live work. The most interesting online works I have seen in dance during this epoch are works that linger and take their time, diving deep into their subject. Though often these are highly cinematic, requiring significant funding and highly skilled technicians and performers.



Kyah Dove, *I'm a daughter of the wholly wild and my blood is perfect,* Ganges Rishikesh, India, 2017.



Kyah Dove, *death.birth.death.dance*, film still, 2019.



Kyah Dove, *To Cut a Mermaids Tongue*, Experimental Dance Week, 2020. Photo: Courtney Rodgers.

Each of these New Zealand artists, myself included, point to the local and the live rather than the digital or global as a way to respond to the current climate. *Nomadism* and *embodiment*, activated during a time of crisis and *transformation* and *community* are some of the traits that I believe make performance art/dance combinations so powerful, particularly in times of social crises and in a technological era. My Master of Philosophy considered performance artists as an inherently nomadic community, crossing international borders both online and in real life. Yet my Masters project was created pre-Covid when we had the choice between being online or being in the street, theatre or gallery. This is no longer the case globally.

Performance artists in a Covid-19 climate are displaced nomads, aligning with Rosi Braidotti's book *Nomadic Subjects* (1994) who both "destabilize and activate the center". Braidotti argues that nomads challenge the notion of nationhood and question associated power structures, while centralising diversity. Different stories and voices reconfigure the power structures or countries they enter into or engage with. One of the gifts of travelling to present work or do residencies and share work is that you get to learn from other cultures and experience how your ideas behave or are responded to in very different contexts. You learn a lot about

yourself and other cultures during that intimate process. In the context of Covid-19, however, that nomadic and collaborative culture can only remain global via the internet.

Kapo's experiences of living and presenting live internationally are similarly nomadic and displaced, but full of growth and culturally rich experiences. However, as a powerful, indigenous voice from Aotearoa their experiences are unique. Speaking about their performances they say, "They are always political. They are political, because, much of my identity has been that of the outsider—Queer/trans/indigenous, immigrant, female, working class, with learning and authority issues. I drift between contemporary dance and performance art because I never really understood and still don't really understand where the boundaries are."

I have seen Kapo in action across the world, moving audiences, their performances often engaging with natural objects, particularly large rocks, and always speaking cleverly to the weight of the rock, the Earth, the subject matter. In an especially powerful performance (Ponderosa Dance Residency, Germany, 2015), Kapo danced to unpack the story of their father's death, the piece ending with a rock crashing heavily to the floor. This was a stunning moment—it arrested the space. This kind of synergy, spatial proximity and emotional intimacy is incredibly difficult to convey in online video work due to not being in the room with the artist's physicality, intention and energy.

"I feel I might be an anomaly in the New Zealand arts world as I'm indigenous, but not local and don't speak Māori yet or completely experience the world via a complete Māori lens," Kapo says. "This puts me firmly in the area of contemporary art-making. Yet my work references in many ways my 'otherness' so it does bring a tension. I also primarily self-fund projects, so I get the leisure of not being part of the world market and production if I don't want to." [09]

Josh Rutter also often works with objects. His practice is philosophical in nature, as he rigorously explores the edges of existential questions through the body, and sometimes text. I was a performer in Rutter's 2015 MA SODA final project at Ufer

Studios, *Patterned Interference*, alongside another dance artist from Aotearoa Oliver Connew and Rutter himself. In this performance we improvised movement and text, "playing" concentratedly within a conceptual order, dancing in and around three large plastic bag installation structures, and using lapel mics to communicate. Rutter believes being an international artist has changed his practice. "I think that the worlds of dance and art have always been mixing and influencing each other, but more recently, where I live in Berlin, it has become absolutely standard for performance work to be hybrid," he says. "The labels dance, choreography, performance art, music, contemporary art, theatre, installation, etc. seem to be broadly interchangeable in relation to content. I think it's more context that gives work a label, i.e. where something is performed, how it's promoted and who experiences it."[10]



Josh Rutter, *Patterned Interference*, Ufer Studios, Berlin, 2015.



Josh Rutter, *Variations on Darkness*, EDWA 2019. Photo: Sara Cowdell.

A strength of live performance is its embodiment—the body doesn't lie. "I think body on body contact is the most required and the most lasting of imprints," Kapo says.[11] When change is occurring, the body feels it first—whether it knows it or not. For many of us, the shock and trauma the globe has weathered during the Covid-19 pandemic, was experienced in survival mode: fight, flight, fear. When my own live project was interrupted by a second Auckland Lockdown in August 2020—it was a very hectic time with a lot of anxiety. In response to this, once lockdown was lifted, myself, the production team and the artists aimed to produce a

festival in which emotional care, support and a non-judgmental environment was prioritised. We experienced how taking time created a very positive atmosphere.

Finally, performance art and dance have both thrived in the last decade alongside escalating and multiple crises. An entire movement of artists are exploring and mixing performance, theatre and dance—helping to connect people and reflect collectively in times of increased political turmoil and economic disparity. Other international dance artists are working this way like Keith Hennessy, Jeremy Wade, Eszter Salamon and Nora Chipaumire, to name a few.

What can we conclude about the future of live performance and dance during Covid-19, which is an activating crisis and time of transformation, yet brings so much uncertainty? Maybe being in conversation about this uncertainty is our best future. We know that with borders closing and opening, nomadism has been disrupted—made possible through the internet only. We have learned to be brave, generous with our time, and that to care and support one another as a community helps to change working conditions. We have learned that every moment counts, to celebrate the *live* as if it were *life* when and where we can, and that the internet shows us other spaces, processes, intimacies and connections across time and space that sometimes live modes cannot. Perhaps finding openings for closer conversation, reflection and collaboration is one way forward. "Staying with the Trouble" is Haraway's suggestion—not to try and force a different outcome other than what is unfolding. With performance being so embodied and present there is likely a great deal to learn from this practice of embracing death/rebirth and transformation—in order to breathe new life as we live the future, which is now.

Footnotes

01. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016.

02. Franco Berardi, Eflux, https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/beyond-the-breakdown-three-meditations-on-a-possible-aftermath-by-franco-bifo-berardi/9727, 2020.

03. Ibid.

04. Email interview with artist Forest (Vicky) Kapo, July 2020.

05. Email interview with artist Forest (Vicky) Kapo, July 2020.

06. Email interview with artist Josh Rutter, July 2020.

07. Email interview with artist Kyah Dove, July 2020.

08. Email interview with artist Kyah Dove, July 2020.

09. Email interview with artist Forest (Vicky) Kapo, July 2020.

10. Email interview with artist Josh Rutter, July 2020.

11. Email interview with artist Forest (Vicky) Kapo, July 2020.

Biographies



Forest (Vicky) Kapo has been based in Melbourne fifteen years since moving from Aotearoa. Some of their works include: *ShaWoman true prophets false gods*, Performance Art Week Aotearoa, 2018; *5 ways to make friends with a tree*, Mother Tongue exhibition Morni Hills Performance Biennale, Chandigarh India, 2017; Artifact, Footnote Company, Wellington, NZ, 2020; *Forever*, Dancehouse, Melbourne, Australia, 2019; *John Doe*. #Edwa# Basement Theatre, Auckland, NZ; *Inheritance*, Matariki Season, Basement Theatre, Auckland, NZ; A co-devised theatre performance with Jess Holly Bates, Karanga, Tempo Dance Festival, Basement Theatre, Auckland, NZ, 2019; *Human lives true illusions*, Wah Festival, San Francisco, USA; Collaborator dancer with Molly Katzman, Mori Walts, Morgan True in Stoneblind, Las Vegas, USA, 2016; *Rift*, Massachusetts Earthdance & Philadelphia @ the Latvian Society for real live people, with U.S artist Nicola Bullock, 2016. *Installation and movement* 2 week research in France, at PAF St Ermes France, 2016.



Joshua Rutter has been based in Berlin since 2014 and is from Aotearoa. Some of his works are: *Dance Like a Butterfly Dream Boy*, Auckland New Performance Festival (2014), Luleå, Stockholm & Malmö (SE), 2014; *Habitual Flux*, Berlin, 2015; *Patterned Interference*, Berlin, 2015; *The body is a system, yes I can*, Bucharest (RO), 2016; *Task / Force*, Berlin, 2017; *Close Up Magick*, Berlin, 2020 (Cancelled due to Covid-19).



Kyah Dove is based in Aotearoa. *I'm a daughter of the wholly wild and my blood is perfect* was performed at Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery as well as on the banks of the Ganga in Rishikesh India, 2017. Other works include: *A series of transformations in Victimhood/999 ritual*, collaboration with Alexa Wilson, Berlin, 2016; *F(Y)UCK.SEXY?* Melbourne Fringe Festival, Wellington, Auckland, 2016; *Death.birth.death.dance* live performance at PAWA, 2017, film version EDWA, 2019; *To Cut a Mermaid's Tongue*, Experimental Dance Week Aotearoa, 2020.



Alexa Wilson is an interdisciplinary NZ artist who has been based in Berlin ten years, and is now living back in Aotearoa. She has presented video and performance work across Europe, Asia, North America and NZ. She has won awards for different works, choreographed for dance companies including Footnote NZ Dance (2014, 2017) and Touch Compass (2006) and curated Morni Hills Performance Residency in India (2017). She is the artistic director and founder of Experimental Dance Week Aotearoa (2019/2020) and is publishing her first book, *Theatre of Ocean*, in 2021.

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