

On Civicness and Participating in Public
Life Through Art Practice -
Artist Statements

HUM's panel discussion in Berlin -
Part One

by

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On Civicness and participating in public life through art practice panel discussion hosted by Contemporary HUM, 02 October 2021, Berlin. Photo: Stephanie O'Connor.

HUM's Special Project Coordinator Hannah Murray introduces the artists and panel discussion, 02 October 2021, Berlin. Photo: Stephanie O'Connor.

Daniel Malone, *On Civicness and participating in public life through art practice* panel discussion hosted by Contemporary HUM, 02 October 2021, Berlin. Photo: Stephanie O'Connor.



Cat Auburn, *On Civicness and participating in public life through art practice* panel discussion hosted by Contemporary HUM, 02 October 2021, Berlin. Photo: Stephanie O'Connor.

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Ruth Buchanan, *On Civicness and participating in public life through art practice* panel discussion hosted by Contemporary HUM, 02 October 2021, Berlin. Photo: Stephanie O'Connor.

Continuing its series of public events, Contemporary HUM hosted its third panel discussion on 2 October 2021 in Berlin. The conversation explored the idea of 'civicness' and how it is tied to social responsibility within a global community, taken from the perspective of three artists

from Aotearoa living in Europe. It asked questions such as: What does collective work or cooperation with others allow in contrast to an individual practice, and is authorship important in a collaborative project? What does a site-specific response look like when working in situ within vastly different contexts, from art institutions and public theatres to the NFT market? Is there a relation to be traced between civicness and social change and what tools can be used when attempting to rethink power relations?

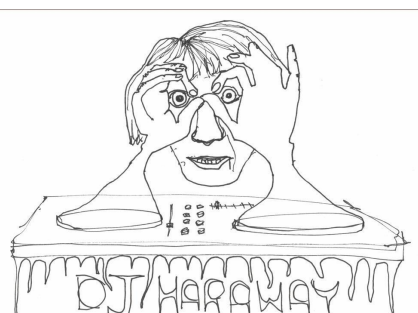
Guest speakers included Glasgow-based Cat Auburn; Berlin-based Ruth Buchanan; and Warsaw-based Daniel Malone. HUM's Editor Pauline Autet moderated the talk.

The event started with a short position statement from each guest artist who presented a recent or current project to feed the panel conversation which followed. See [Part Two](#) to read the edited transcript of the panel discussion.

Cat Auburn



Cat Auburn, *On Civicness and participating in public life through art practice* panel discussion hosted by Contemporary HUM, 02 October 2021, Berlin. Photo: Stephanie O'Connor.



Kyle Lewis, *DJ Haraway*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

I'm here to talk about my collaboration with Kyle Lewis—we work together under the name apple.slicers. This collaboration comes out of our decade-long friendship and is conducted entirely online, as Kyle lives in the United States and I live in Scotland.

This first slide is a drawing by Kyle of Donna Haraway – You might be familiar with her book, *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016).

We're big fans of her work, particularly the mantra of 'staying with the trouble' as a philosophical framework for thinking about how to work in difficult territories where there are a lot of conflicting stakes and complex ideas involved. Our projects often rub up against difficult ethical issues, such as the problematics of large systems of power. Every time that we start to feel uncomfortable, we try to remind ourselves to stay with the trouble because this is where the actual work and thinking needs to be done, and to also trust that through our art practice, these things will be dealt with appropriately.

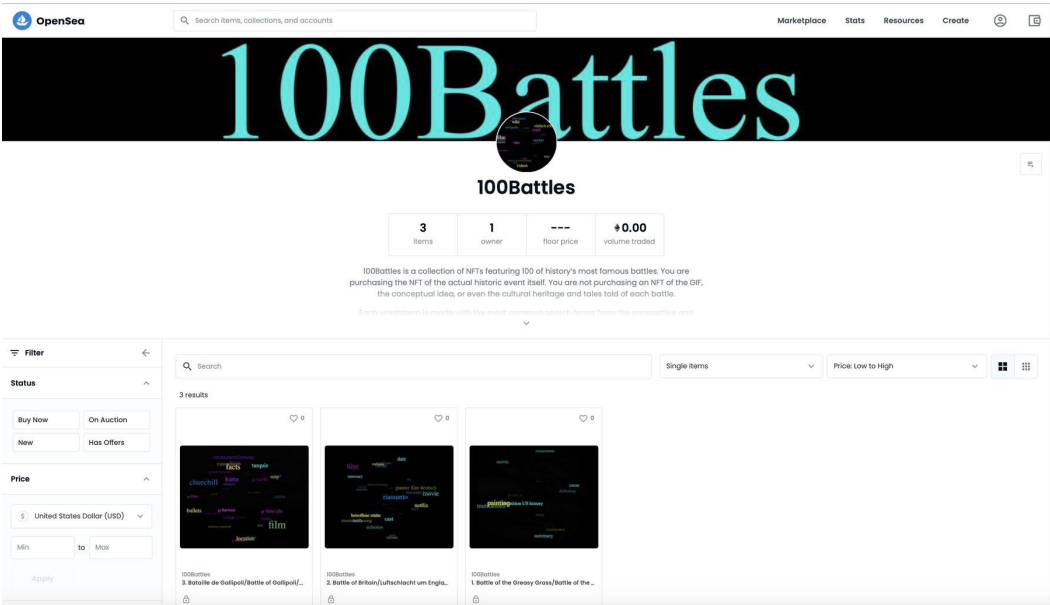
Rather than presenting something that's polished, I'm going to take you on a quick journey through a project about NFTs that's in its early phase, because we think that the questions this project is asking are really pertinent to the topic of civicness. Kyle and I were intrigued when we first heard about NFTs and decided to let our art practice ask the questions we have about them, rather than trying to understand them from the outside looking in. We're really open to first responses and see this as a genuine opportunity for feedback and discussion that will influence the project going forward.

An NFT is a non-fungible token. Which means that it is a way of marking a digital asset online as being unique. This has revolutionised the ability to own digital things, such as online images and memes. The technology that makes NFTs possible was developed with utopian beliefs about decentralising systems of power. One of the first uncomfortable things we rubbed up against was the discovery that curated NFT marketplaces online are spaces that mimic the current status quo and power systems of the art market—despite purporting to be open to everyone.

The first series of works that Kyle and I made focused on memory as a subject matter. Another kind of ethical conundrum that we quickly bumped into was the environmental impact of creating NFTs. It takes an inordinate amount of energy to run the NFT

system online and as a result, the commerce of buying and selling NFTs has a huge carbon footprint. Through the process of trying to reduce the environmental impact of our art practice, we are working with smaller file sizes. This file reduction started to have an aesthetic impact on the artwork, which began to mimic the imprecision of memory. Through this work, we became interested in NFTs as a container for memories. But is locking down memory - which is what an NFT does—at odds with the transient quality of memory?

In theory, once you’ve created an NFT, they are indestructible and the information stored in them lasts forever. From this, Kyle came to me with the idea of treating an NFT as a lockable safe—an NFT as a way to keep information safe in perpetuity. He was thinking about the destruction of the Library of Alexandria and the cultural losses there as an example of this. But I also got very concerned about the potential to abuse and misuse the lockable property of NFTs. Which led to more questions: can people create NFTs of things that they shouldn’t rightfully own? What can be turned into an NFT? We already know that paintings, memes and famous basketball slam-dunks can be turned into NFTs. But can a person? Can an event? To begin to ask these questions through our art practice, we came up with the idea of creating an NFT of an historical event. I suggested starting with the Battle of Gallipoli because of my PhD research on the Anzac legend.



This expanded to a project we are currently developing called *100Battles*, in which we are creating NFTs of history's 100 most famous battles. The third slide shows our collection page on Open Sea. This brought up many questions for us, such as: who owns history? The ethical implications of this given an NFTs lockable, durable qualities is immense. What happens to a narrative locked in an NFT that is undeletable? What is the potential to abuse this? You can't delete NFTs like you can delete tweets.

Here we have another instance of the importance of staying with this trouble: it's difficult to reconcile the need to transgress in order to make these processes visible, because no one is asking these particular questions, and the structure of the NFT system seems impervious to legislative processes that might create safety nets and guidelines. Whether we choose to engage with NFTs or not, you can't run away from them because they exist in our world now. So, we've chosen to lean into the trouble of the ethics of something like this rather than completely disengaging or facing the paralysis of not acting.

Now to the practicalities of the *100Battles* project. There is the issue of how you actually upload the NFT of an event rather than just a representation of the event. There is an aesthetic element to the creation of an NFT, such as a jpeg or a gif. We initially tried paintings—but would this mean we were creating an NFT of the painting and not the historical event itself? We also tried google images and various maps, but immediately we came up against conflicting opinions and facts around the events. We realised pretty quickly that we needed to confront the reduction of a huge historic event down into a very small, bite sized way of absorbing it, which to be honest, isn't far from how we are encouraged to experience historical events anyway.

Svetlana Boym has an interesting theory around restorative nostalgia, in which nostalgia is used to reduce a historical event down to a singular narrative in order to uphold existing power structures. We didn't want to replicate this kind of conceptual reduction, even though the process of making an NFT of an event forced us into a reductive process that makes very uncomfortably visible and explicit the cultural process of reducing history down to a singular narrative.

So we decided to go with popular search terms that crop up for each battle— as a way to represent conflicting narratives around these histories—which ties it back into the question of who owns history.

We created word storms—a layering of word clouds—that show the search terms from the perspective and language of the different participants in each battle. We tried to depersonalise this process by using automated online search tools so that we were not inserting our own biases, but then we ran into the harsh reality that these processes have built in biases that we couldn't automate around. We tried to address certain erasures in the data, and were confronted with so many decisions—such as what happens when the language of a participant no longer exists, and how do we represent that?

The next slide shows the GIF attached to the NFT of the event of the Battle of Gallipoli. The NFTs are created in small batches so that we can continue to tweak and modify the project so that it can be responsive to external feedback. The works aren't for sale yet, and this is the next ethical issue to address: should they even be for sale? Who should own them? Where should the proceeds of a sale go?

I'd like to finish up with a quote from Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*:

“First, promiscuously plucking out fibres in clotted and dense events and practices, I try to follow the threads where they lead in order to track them and find their tangles and patterns crucial for staying with the trouble in real and particular places and times.”

A woman in a red dress stands at a podium, presenting to an audience. Behind her is a large screen displaying architectural drawings, including a floor plan and a cross-section. The room has dark wood paneling and a patterned rug. The audience is seen from behind, seated in the foreground.

[illegible]

In the work of poet Anne Boyer, she calls for an end to the bifurcation of living, where for example, your being alive in one form or another puts you in one set of relations, and being the opposite of that kind of alive puts you in another. Boyer asks that we take responsibility for the complexity that is relating qua relating. And since much of this relating takes place through various forms of structures that encase power, then surely these same power structures that frame these processes of creating relations must be reassessed too, put into responsibility. The space of relation I'm identifying here is the cultural institution, and more specifically the collecting museum, and the ways in which such an institution interfaces with the multiple layers of relation into which it is woven: that means of course a public, but that also means how it relates to historical, cultural, and social economical contexts. These institutions are therefore a form—a shape that encases something. So if we can agree that it is a tradition to build buildings and put bodies inside them to produce relations, then who is doing the putting and sorting and how?

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buildings, put bodies inside them). Sara Ahmed has written “when history accumulates, certain things seem natural”. I could argue that much of the paradigm of critique of these so-called natural institutional behaviours has for the most part remained disembodied, despite these behaviours happening within a form. While there has been a lot of pointing, there has been less willingness, or capacity to grab. So what might it take for an institution to grab itself, reembody itself? How could a museum begin to articulate a sense for itself, and the manifold stakeholders and participants that shape it, that it exists in a context and has a community?



Over the last ten years I’ve developed an expanding approach of working with collecting institutions and the histories in which they are embedded or emerge from that I’ve thought of as an encroaching wavy line into the site, an echo of grab. I’ve focused primarily on collections that would be classically defined as post ‘68. The grabbing I’m interested in isn’t always easy, and sometimes only half welcome, and has involved a reimagining of my borders as an artist. I’ve looked for friction without the fragmentation so have worked across almost all aspects of exhibition-making from artistic and curatorial framing, to design

and routing, to mediation, through to examining artists contracts, invigilators job descriptions and uniforms, to acquisition policies and procedures. I always aim for this work to play out in an ongoing way within the institution.

Today I'll sketch the broad outlines of something I'm working on right now with Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart (gegenwart means contemporary), which will open as an exhibition in February next year. The exhibition is titled *heute nacht getraumt* (that translates as “last night i dreamt”), and posits the museum as a key location to imagine, and ultimately live out alternate forms of being in relation. The exhibition is developed as a deep-dive into their contemporary collection and the building that takes care of that collection, as well as much of the infrastructures that shape it.



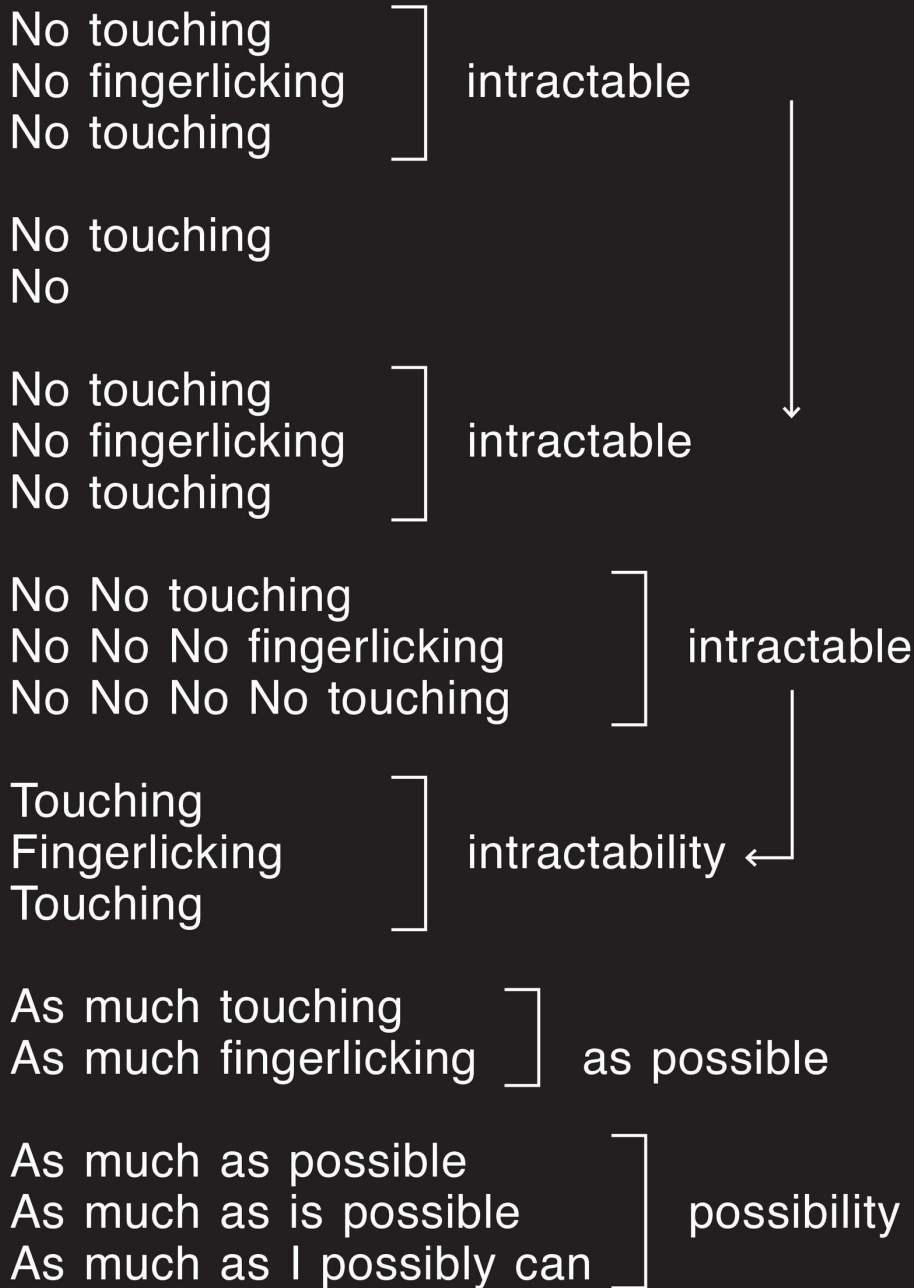
Archival image, Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart at the time of inauguration, circa 1982.. Courtesy of Ruth Buchanan.

Built on the river Rhine in Basel, Switzerland in 1982, part repurposed paper mill-part custom build, the Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart is a collecting and commissioning institution, envisioned to house the ever-expanding contemporary component of the state funded Kunstmuseums collection located in the city centre. At the time of inauguration it became the first institution dedicated to collecting contemporary art in Western Europe. This

institution became one part of the larger mechanism that makes up the Kunstmuseum and its 300,000 artwork strong collection spanning the middle ages to 2021.

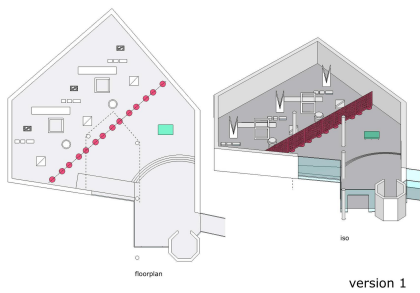
Since its opening, it has played a key role in its local setting, at the same time as having been deeply entwined with international discourse and the emergence of the kinds of standard-international-western museum practices we would know from this century, so it has played a role in setting a precedent. So to *reset* a precedent firstly requires taking stock and looking closely at the infrastructural codes and practices that have shaped the institution thus far. How, why, with whom, and which practices have become automated in this context? As I mentioned, when history accumulates, especially at the scale of “western internationalism,” much becomes “natural”. So what would taking stock of these practices require? Crucially, I suggest it means opening up to the friction that is fundamental to western museums and their collections as we have known them: their capacity to calcify and entrench, their capacity to model and enliven.

INTRACTABLE

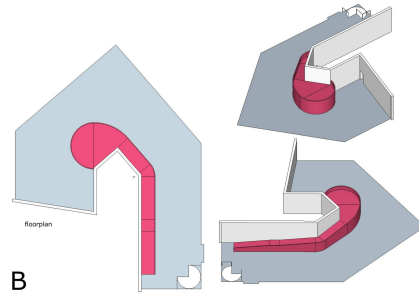


So, let's grab, touch, get physical with this form. By calling up the narrative potential of the building, the paper factory turned art-scape, and looking at the two collections—one public and one private—that have shaped its 40 year life-span, we begin to sketch out that friction through a set of artistic tools and frames that I have imported into the building. In building my weird collection exhibition we move away from thematic overviews or hits from the canon in order to examine the mechanisms that have driven it and play those mechanisms out in space, in form. The museum becomes

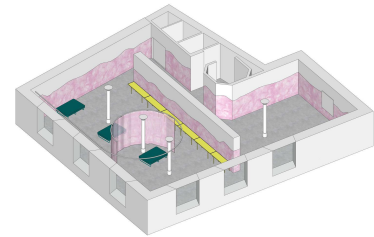
a temporal topography with each of the 4 floors assigned a time period from its 40 year life span, and then each floor has then been assigned a particular focus question and selection criteria that is applied to the collection, for example, the first and last acquisition made in that time period. These timeframes, questions, and selection criteria are then placed into dialogue with a unique spatial scenario.



Ruth Buchanan, *Heute Nacht geträumt*, Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart, spatial design, with Andreas Müller, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.



Ruth Buchanan, *Heute Nacht geträumt*, Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart, spatial design, with Andreas Müller, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.



Ruth Buchanan, *Heute Nacht geträumt*, Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart, spatial design, with Andreas Müller, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

The ground floor's focus question is *When does the contemporary begin?* This floor will offer an enclosed and interrupted version of temporality where works from the collection will be placed within this perforated-gated area, so you'll either view them through the screen or from the balcony upstairs.

The second floor's focus question is *Where does my body belong?* and highlights the physical experience of having a specific body placed in relation to a set of automated procedures; this ramp will be purpose-built to add this dimension of access and proximity to the collection which will be densely installed on the opposite side of the space.

The top floor's focus question is *Do I want to come back?* and sets a spiral loose into the future-thinking of this museum and its collecting habits.

These tools that I'm bringing in, like a museum, do not exist in a vacuum and are made wild by the artworks they come into contact with and a visitor's own personal experience. Sometimes the application of these tools may shrink in relation to the power of the

individual artworks presented, sometimes the very same tools may starkly show how our individual and communal experiences cannot be captured by museums as we have known them.

Seen as whole, as a model of a museum-body that is allowed to dream, this exhibition is both a reflection and a projection, that performs in *many* layers, as a highly articulated analysis of the contemporary collection, as seen in the large scale data analysis thrown up on the central walls of the building. But it is also, and just as importantly, an exploration of how your body feels as you move through a light-filled building with colour and texture applied to surface after surface.



Ultimately, the work of this and any museum must accept the paradoxes that have shaped its procedures and limits until today. Limits, however, are also a material, and therefore something that we can reshape. Starting here, allowing the dream to reflect on the pain and the hardness, we begin to dream into a future of joy and experimentation where we twist the 'museum' away from the reflex of standardisation and automation toward a dream-engine that enables, that texturises, that opens, that moves. This exhibition is one attempt to do this, to play out this grabbing and the echoes this

leaves on the systems on which the museums relies, the human beings who visit it, and the very walls that hold it up.

Daniel Malone



I suspect I was initially invited to take part in this discussion as a lot of my practice, particularly before 2010, was engaged quite explicitly in the kind of site specific, temporary and community engaging projects we've come to associate with residencies and biennales that characterise a certain kind of contemporary art production.

However I'm pleased that we quickly settled on the idea that it might be a better opportunity to talk about a different portion of my practice, one that I developed in more recent years while residing in Poland, working within a theatre ensemble.

Pleased partly because personally I'd grown quite fed up with the other mode of production, and specifically in regards to its purported relationship to things like social responsibility, community or a public, and indeed *civiness*.

So, some of the things that make it appealing to me to present this theatre work in this context today, are exactly the things that made me very happy about engaging in and developing it as a part of my practice in the first place.

One of these is the aspect of the *ensemble*. Essentially this was a loose team of people, that developed quite organically over a period of a few years and five or six projects that involved various combinations of a director, a writer and/or a dramaturge, a musical director, a choreographer, myself as scenography and costume designer, and of course a core group of actors.

The theatre would usually initially invite the director Weronika Szczawińska, who already had a very strong reputation as a director working innovatively with preexisting texts, but was increasingly questioning the function of theatre itself, and expanding methodologies of the process of developing a performance.

Usually we were all engaged from the very outset of the project, working closely over a period of months to develop an idea or a theme from its earliest conceptual parameters right up to its presentation. Developing not just the conceptual framework, but also the projects' priorities and bringing in personal research material and personal life experience to bear on the earliest discussions and the project itself.



Komuna Paryska, Teatr Polski Bydgoszcz.
Photo: Monika Stolarska. Courtesy the artist.



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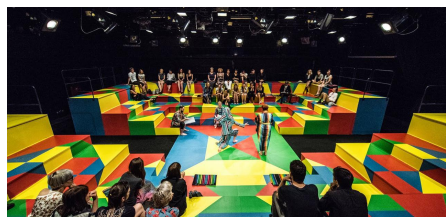
Komuna Paryska, Teatr Polski Bydgoszcz.
Photo: Monika Stolarska. Courtesy the artist.

In the case of our first production *Komuna Paryska*, based on a reimagining of the Paris Commune of 1871, we were initially drawn to quite strong political resonances with the then current moment, what Kristen Ross, in her wonderful book *Communal Luxury*, calls *the reinvention of social space and oppositional culture*.

However many of the actors felt less enthusiastic about how contemporary protest, not to mention historical revolution, had played out in their own lives, so in the end The Paris Commune became something more like a jaded rock band that never quite disbanded but gave up touring to squat in this traditional theatre in the formerly Prussian city of Bydgoszcz. We made use of the very bourgeois theatre and presented it as if it were dilapidated, being squatted in or occupied. The scenography I conceived was made up of a bricolage to look like old sets that had been left there and used for other productions.

Our quite intense and very discursive and horizontal process was developed by the ensemble as an alternative way of working within the more traditional rehearsal schedules over extended periods of

time, where everyone stays in the theatre accommodation meeting everyday over a period of a few months, but covering a lot of ground before stepping on stage and rehearsing in any traditional sense.



LAWRENCE z ARABII, Teatr Powszechny, Warsaw. Photo: Magda Hueckel. Courtesy of the artist.



Often apparently even taking place in the same spatial/architectural space, which one of the things that inspired this set design - *LAWRENCE z ARABII* seating/stage, Teatr Powszechny, Warsaw. Photo: Magda Hueckel. Courtesy of the artist.

The *relationship of the public to theatre* is another quality which I really enjoy engaging in, and which I think is of relevance for today's discussion.

Many historians, philosophers and other thinkers have posited that the very notion of the public that we understand today in relation to democracy, stems from the same tradition as theatre, simultaneously developed in the early Greek city-state alongside concepts of citizenship, civic responsibility and assembly.

While democracy doesn't feel super healthy in Poland right now, and truth be told this might be reflected in theatre too, alongside other cultural institutions, theatre has an extremely strong tradition, with some very experimental and influential trajectories, (Kantor, Grotowski).

It is also remarkably well attended and popular, anchored by a fairly fuzzy general notion of its status as *culture proper*—this is especially apparent to someone like me coming from Aotearoa/NZ where we don't have such a tradition and theatre has a pretty tiny audience.

So on the one hand it's a valued art, but on the other hand people go, they have opinions and expectations of it, which at least to my mind are considerably more broadly held and perhaps, deeply felt.



Protests outside the same theatre, Powszechny, over a performance directed by Oliver Frljić, based on *Klątwa* (*The Curse*) by Stanisław Wyspański. Photo: Bartłomiej Zborowski. Courtesy of the artist.

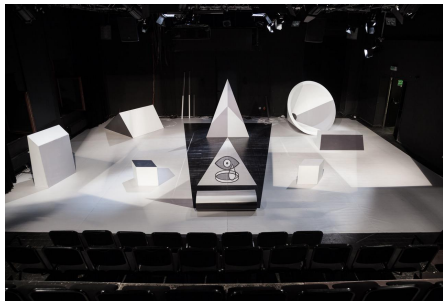


LAWRENCE z ARABII, Teatr Powszechny, Warsaw. Photo: Magda Hueckel. Courtesy of the artist.



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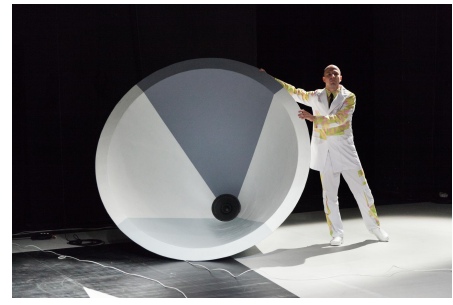
Our play *Lawrence of Arabia* was an EU Commission for a Europe-wide festival based on stories about immigration and the refugee crisis. We accepted it but thought it was ironic to say the least, as Poland is notorious for not taking immigrants in general. And in fact we found it so hard to engage in the small communities that are there, that we ultimately worked with just a handful of individuals to develop very personal stories that rather spoke of the dissonances between their perceptions of Poland and Polish people as much as the other way round.



Wojny, których nie przeżyłam [Wars Which I Have Not Been Through], Teatr Polski Bydgoszcz. Photo by and courtesy of the artist.



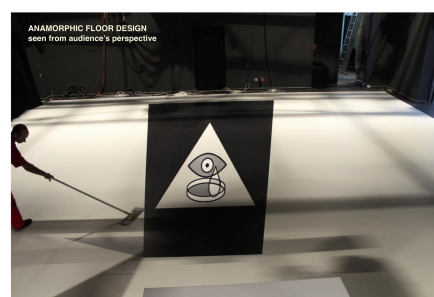
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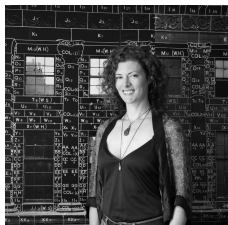
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This is Part One of a two-part series. [Click here to read Part Two](#), the edited transcript of the panel discussion which followed these artist presentations.

Biographies



Cat Auburn is based in Glasgow (UK). Her art practice investigates how culture is constructed, reinforced, and strategically employed. She is currently an AHRC Northern Bridge Consortium PhD candidate at Northumbria University (UK). Her doctoral research is a practice-based exploration of the inheritances of Anzac mythology from the First World War and its influence on contemporary identity. Cat's exhibition, *The Horses Stayed Behind* received the 2016 Award for Best Regional Art Exhibition at the New Zealand Museum Awards. This exhibition had a three-year national tour and was created during the 2014/2015 Tylee Cottage Artist Residency with the Sarjeant Gallery in Whanganui, (NZ). Other residencies include D6 Culture in Transit (UK, 2019); Tyneside Cinema (UK, 2016); Olivia Spencer Bower Fellowship (NZ, 2010). Exhibitions include the TRIO Biennial in Brazil, Tyneside Cinema (UK), Baltic 39 (UK), Sarjeant Gallery (NZ), Dowse Art Museum (NZ), Te Manawa Museum (NZ), Waikato Museum (NZ), Tauranga Art Gallery (NZ). Cat's 2018 short film, *Shaken* (commission by Northern Film and Media in collaboration with Channel 4) was broadcast on national UK television in August 2018 and was officially selected for the 2018 Aesthetica Short Film Festival (UK).



Daniel Malone (b. 1970, Māwhera/Greymouth, Aotearoa/New Zealand). Completed a Bachelor's degree in Art History and then a Fine Arts degree in Time Based Arts at Auckland University and later taught there for several years until he paid off his student debt and left the country in 2007. In the early 1990's he co-founded the artist-run gallery Teststrip and remained involved in such initiatives (LOG Illustrated, Cuckoo, Gambia Castle) while developing a contextually driven, site-specific performance/installation practice that saw him presenting temporary projects at numerous biennales and international group shows throughout the 2000s. Primarily basing himself in Warsaw, he has also lived for shorter periods in other European cities over the last ten years, developing a more material-based kitchen table practice more suited to this peripatetic situation. He has also had the opportunity to work in an ongoing capacity as part of a theatre ensemble, collaboratively conceptualising as well as designing costumes and scenography for performances in Poland, Germany and Sweden.



Ruth Buchanan is an artist of Taranaki, Te Ātiawa and Pākehā descent living in Tāmaki Makaurau. She works across exhibition making, writing, design and teaching. Her work draws out the contested and dynamic relationships between the body, power, language and the archive. This process of contesting often relates closely to the types of relationships that standardised infrastructures, such as archives, libraries and museums, create between our bodies and society at large, and actively asks how these relationships could be otherwise.

