

Dear friend and colleague,

In this letter, I will describe and reflect on my artistic methods, as they unfold in the work *No Show*. I have organized the letter as encounters with key components and agents in my practice.

Encounter with the method

From 2015 I have been making immersive and participatory performances, drawing on real life experiences. When starting the artistic inquiry in 2020, I brought with me an artistic method consisting of procedures and tools. The method comprises three core elements: the site- and human- specific content, the sustainable process of creation and the immersive and question driven mediation. It is this method that I am analysing and developing in my research.

Content: Quality of life

- Quality of life and sustainable values
- Real life experiences
- Site specificity
- Human specificity

Process: Sustainable creation

- Co-creation and guest participation
- Reduced production and sustainable practice

Mediation: Transformative encounters

- Host-guest situations
- Question making
- Embodied sensual and cognitive experience

For each performance the method produces a framework that invites guests to render their own stories, emotions, values, and experiences as the core content of the performance. The framework distinguishes between three types of guest participation: action, observation, and reflection. The work is site-specific and human-specific and engages individuals, local communities, more-than-humans, and other stakeholders into the creative process. The work is concerned with personal values and how they relate to quality of life. The method produces work that functions as a vessel for narratives that participants; guests and hosts, bring to the work. The practice is not occupied with representation as such but rather the singular presence of each participant that re-presents themselves by engaging with the work. The aesthetic and dramaturgical approach is porous, dependent on what the spectator brings to the performance and what she sees as part of it. The work provides the spectator with „a map to navigate “(the dramaturgy, the route) and a “backdrop” (the site) to bring out their stories and to test their own ideas and values. At the foreground for the artistic method is question making. The work strives to produce actual questions that are mediated through the performance and transcend the layers of the experience.

The method facilitates a series of encounters that happen in different temporalities, in different dimensions. I use the word encounter as an unexpected meeting between entities of same or different nature that holds the potential to impact both parties. The encounter cannot be fully planned, and the outcome of an encounter cannot be predicted either, therefor it will always be unexpected.

At the core of the method lies the encounter between the host and the guest that triggers the guest's encounter with other entities or elements like their own past, values, and worldviews. Prior to that encounter the artist has encountered the host and in turn she has encountered her own past and present life and values. The guest also encounters the artist through the aesthetics, dramaturgy, and the content. There are also additional encounters with and between more-than-human lifeforms, animals and plants that can be of significance, but they are not recorded and might not be detected by the participants. Through the experience and the specific site in *No Show*, the guest has the opportunity to

encounter insights and contemplations related to everyday choices, politics, personal wellbeing and even spirituality.

Since I regard the work to be an affect independent from the actual experience (I explain this better in my letter on affect), I believe that the work can manifest itself in different temporalities. Encounters may therefore occur later in time, like ripples from the performance, as moments of insight that partly belong to the work and manifest in different contexts. For now, I will only focus on the core human encounters.

Let me now turn to the actual creation process of *No Show* and trace how the method unfolds within that work. The idea was to invite guests to a home of a stranger where they would be introduced to the everyday routines, conditions, and values of the hosts. The hosts were absent, and the guests would experience the work in solitude. The hosts left letters that guided the guests through the home. Through the letters the hosts shared fragments of their stories, everyday rituals and values that relate to their homes and family. The guests would be invited to perform tasks that involved observation, action, and contemplation. As a guest you engaged in an intimate dialogue with a person who wasn't there. The title in Icelandic is FjarVera, which translates to 'absence' in English. This title is formed by combining two words: 'Fjar,' meaning distance or away, and 'Vera,' meaning being, both as a verb and a noun. The title is intentionally stylized with each word starting with a capital letter to emphasize the wordplay and multiple meanings.

The concept behind FjarVera was to have hosts from diverse backgrounds invite guests to walk through their homes, one at a time, encouraging them to reflect on what it means to be present in their own lives. The work poses the questions: What does being present entail, and what are the elements that both divide and connect us as human beings?

Encounter with the hosts

The objective of the work was to focus on quality moments in daily life and explore different strategies for creating a nurturing environment in what one calls a home. I wanted a diverse

group of hosts, different ages, abilities, family types, cultural background, and social status, living in different neighbourhoods. Early on I realised that I would need to invite guests into my own home for two reasons; to make sure I understood the perspective of the host-participants and by doing that, to minimize the temptation or risk of exploitation on my behalf. Thus, I needed to find four hosts willing to invite strangers to roam around their homes in solitude and to share with them personal details, daily routines, stories, and values. The performance was to run during the opening week of Reykjavík Art Festival that celebrated its 50th Anniversary on the theme *Universes*. Due to the pandemic that affected the entire programming of the festival, the works were separated and spread over a longer period with each house being open for one week. This unexpected change gave me more time to reflect in between the works, creating the opportunity to develop the method as I went along, adjusting the dramaturgical approach with each new edition of the work.

The five homes were as follows in a chronological order.

The first host was a 46-year-old choreographer married to an engineer/investor with three children aged from 11 to 20, and a family dog. They live in a higher middleclass neighbourhood. They have good means and live in a well kept two-storey house with a garden and a jacuzzi, the interior carefully picked by the host, an artistic woman of good taste.

The second host was me, a performing artist and an academic dean married to a Doctor of Philosophy, also an academic. Our home is in the city centre, on two floors on top of a barbershop, hosting a family of six persons, two cats and a visiting dog. The house is colourful, bohemian, and non-conventional. The children, including son in law, are aged 21 – 30 with different attachments to the home.

The third host was a retired nurse aged 66, a grandmother living with two goldfish in a socially challenged multicultural neighbourhood, with little means. Her two grown up

children and three grandchildren look at the flat as their home but don't live there. She is artistic and caring. She has health issues and has lived in socially deprived conditions for the most of her life. She has experienced loss and challenges of all sorts. She is very sufficient and has her own philosophy around consumption and aesthetics.

The fourth host was a single mom of 40 years with a teenage son. Polish immigrant, tourist guide, art theorist and a minimalist. She lives in less than 30 square meters with a single income. She has a heavy family story connected to a political corruption scandal in her hometown. She lives near the city centre in a cultural part of Reykjavík. She is well educated, speaks fluent Icelandic, and has lived in the country for 20 years.

The fifth host was a 28-year-old woman in a wheelchair with CP disorder (Cerebral palsy). She lives in social housing for people with diverse abilities. She does not have permanent employment but is active as a volunteer in different organisations related to sports and disability. She has a cat and a good friend that spends a lot of time in her home.

It was a challenge finding the right people to participate. I let the word out in my closest surroundings and the people at the festival put their heads together finding candidates. I only needed four people apart from myself. I would first contact the person by mail or phone where we would discuss the content and practicalities of the piece. To my surprise I only got a couple of rejections and ended up having to choose from families that wanted to participate. Two participants came through the festival, one from my close circle and one is a friend of a friend. After the initial contact we would meet at the premises where I would explain in detail the objectives of the work, what I was interested in and possible implications that come with inviting strangers into your home. We discussed which parts of the homes would be closed and what kind of things the hosts would share with the guests. I would take photographs and ask briefly about the activities of the family in the home. During a second visit I would interview the host in detail about their lives in the home, about objects, routines, and values. I invited them to share stories and ideas about quality of life and happy

moments connected to certain objects, people, or places in the home. I would audio-record the interviews.

In the interviews some hosts would address unhappy subjects and share their challenges, sorrows, and disappointments. I would not ask for information or details of anything that I thought would be difficult, heavy, or traumatic since that was not the subject matter of the piece, but when that happened, I would welcome it and listen with attention. I understood that some bitter facts needed to be a part of the piece because they stick to the everyday life and are a natural part of our existence. If there is light, there will be a shadow.

Disappointment, loss, and sorrow is a part of everyone's lives, and privileges are unevenly distributed. This was the fact of my interlocutors as well. So, there are shadows in the work, beyond the shadows guests might bring with them.

An example of how this would emerge in the process, was in the case of one of the hosts that had lost her daughter. She told me that she had passed away in her early twenties and showed me a drawing of her on the dining room wall. She talked about her loss and her grief that for me was impregnated in the fabric of this home. I never knew exactly how the daughter died but her absence was so strong that it had a place in the home. That tangible loss, the presence of the absence, became a part of the piece without the details being expressed, they belong only to the host.

After the long and deep interviews, I would return to my desk and listen to the material, look at the photographs and write the letters for the hosts on the basis of the interview. I would concurrently create the tasks, rituals, and route through the house. The dramaturgy of each piece was different depending on the size of the house, the number of people living there and the themes and atmospheres that I would sense on site with the hosts. Concrete elements that would return in every piece was an appreciation of what constitutes a family, an imagined dinner, washing of hands, focus on recreational activities, mindfulness practises (noticing sensations and awareness) and expressions of more-than-human perspectives.

When I had written a draft of the letters and the rituals, made tasks and created a route through the house, I would send the material to the hosts for them to rewrite or comment. We would then meet for the third session and go through the manuscript together, adding details and finalizing the texts and routes. The rituals needed most attention since they were written in a poetic prose and served the purpose of capturing the nature of an activity and at the same time to be truthful and concrete. Each host made sure that nothing in the letters was false and accepted the obvious act of staging that took place in the texts. Since the tasks and contemplations were a part of my method, I shared my vision with the hosts and asked each of them to contribute with questions or actions they found important. As a minimum there would be one specific question raised by the host in each piece and the gestures would almost all correspond to gestures made by the people in the home.

The dramaturgy allows the guest to bring her own narratives, and it asks of her to fill in the blanks; imagine, create, and perform her own version of the piece. Therefore, it was important to leave space in the structure for imagined narratives to unfold, for memories and ideas to emerge, for magic to happen or the sublime to enter like in a Japanese Zen Garden. For each guest the affect would be different, depending on their imagination and what they brought with them of ideas and experiences, basically depending on their ability to co-create. One important factor of the dramaturgy that is worth mentioning is the historical context of when the work took place. It was presented during a global pandemic where majority of the world's population had been confined to their homes for months. The pandemic added a new perspective to the very concept of what a home entails and means for people. Originally the piece was partly tailored to the theme of the Festival, *Universes*, referring to the home as a universe of its own, but during times where the outer world invaded the private worlds and peoples' entire lives unfolded within the parameters of the home, the work now evoked new and urgent perspectives.

One can argue that this is an aspect of what can be understood as the nature of porous dramaturgies, a term I am using to describe my approach. A porous dramaturgy is a

structure that gives space for reality to filter through and for guests to bring their own stories into the work. Here this concept refers to the world situation being a key factor of what the guests bring with them to the work and hence becomes the foundation for how it is decoded and understood. The affect of the work cannot be separated from the experience of living these times.

Coming back to the actual staging. I decided to enhance the staging effect by adding an additional aesthetic layer to the composition. This dramaturgical tie was presented through the title of each letter and would contain reference to something physically present in the proximity of the actual letter or as an idea or imagined component. I proposed to each of the hosts that they would pick a theme for the journey through their home connected to their interests. In the first home the host chose essential oils. With each letter the host picked a scent corresponding to the function of the particular space the letter would be in. The scent would be felt in the space through different sources, some involving interactivity. In my own home flowers came with each letter, collection of beautiful words in the third piece, postcards in the fifth and song titles in the last one. This extra layer reflected the character of the host and created a coherent theme for each home and an atmospheric effect to the journey.

In writing the letters for the hosts, I tried to stay true to their character using their own words from the interviews. When we had worked through all the details of the dramaturgy the idea was that the host would choose the stationary and write the letters by hand. It felt like I was handing over agency to the hosts, by giving them power to influence the aesthetic presentation of the text that we co-created, having their personal mark on the letters that otherwise I had edited. They did not all share this need, and of four participants apart from myself, only one was willing and able to choose and buy the stationary and write the letters. Two of the hosts were not physically able to write the letters and the third had in her own judgement, unreadable handwriting. Instead of writing the whole letters by hand, these hosts

would put their handwritten signature on the first and last letter that I had printed on a stationary I had chosen with their consent.

The collaboration with the hosts and their closest family and human and nonhuman friends were in my view a substantial part of the actual performance and has as much impact as the following encounters with the guests. These encounters are an important stage of the work that has its own performativity and dramaturgy to it, that in part has been described above. In my view, each phase of the creation process constitutes a performative part of the whole. Each moment of the process plays its part in a series of performative but still genuine encounters between different participants of the performance, culminating in the encounter with the guest where multiple agents are at play.

Performative encounter is a term I use to describe these multiple meetings that I am arranging with my work. The performativity starts already when I meet my collaborators and mount the zoom audio recorder between us and press the record button. The moment is highly staged, and the people present are performing their roles, but still exchanging experiences in a genuine manner. The performative encounters I can plan, between people or between people and the more-than-human, but the affect depends on ingredients that I am in no control of, such as the guests background, mood, prior experiences, and abilities. Therefore, in my method, I have shifted from 'transformative encounter' to 'performative encounter' to describe what I do, while still aiming for transformation.

Encounter with the guests

The guests arrive at the host's door and receive a key to enter the house with a few instructions on how to navigate the piece. The guest is then left alone in the house to perform the piece. Guided by a series of letters through the home, moving from room to room, between different situations, reading fragments of stories, rituals and thoughts about daily life and everyday choices of their hosts. They are invited to observe, perform physical tasks, and asked to reflect on their own lives, values, and situations. The experience was

solitary – except where the pets of the home would choose to participate. Two editions were open to international guests with optional letters in English.

One can say that the spectators are invited to different encounters during their stay in the home. They will certainly have an encounter with their hosts and their kin, their conditions, values, and situations. They also have an encounter with the artist through subject matter, the aesthetics, and the dramaturgy of the piece and last but not the least, they will encounter themselves, their own narratives, values, and rituals. During the experience, guests immerse themselves in the scents, colours, and sensations of the home, stepping into the shoes of their hosts. Within this unfamiliar universe, they are prompted to reflect upon themselves and their own perspectives.

There is of course no certainty that the guest will perform the work as suggested by the letters. In fact, the guests can do whatever they like after entering the house. The dramaturgy will always be subject to random elements that the guest brings with them of ideas, interests, moods, tastes, values, experiences, memories, imagination, and openness. The work is guaranteed to produce affect and invites the spectators in turn to affect (produce) their own affect. Therefore, it is crucial for the guest to be open and in an aesthetic mode, engaging with the experience on a sensory and emotional level, as this openness greatly influences the nature and depth of their encounter. This principle holds true not only for this work but for all artworks, emphasizing the importance of the viewer's active engagement and receptivity to fully appreciate and be moved by the artistic experience. The work is dependent on what and how each guest encounters the circumstances and is a singular experience that contains a complex combination of cognitive and sensorial associations related to that particular person.

In my next letter I will focus on my experience of co-creation and participation from the perspective of ethics.