

NO SHOW
EXPOSITION
PDF

LETTER OF INVITATION



To you dear colleague,

I have written five letters about the work *No Show* that was performed in Reykjavík in 2020 as a part of my artistic research project ***How little is enough?*** *Sustainable Methods of Performance for Transformative Encounters*. The letters address different aspects of my artistic practice and research such as motivation, method, affect and ethics.

No Show is a series of five immersive participatory performances, solitary experiences performed in five private homes in different neighbourhoods of Reykjavík in June – August 2020. In the letters I describe, reflect, confess, and contextualise my practice and mission. The letters come with numbers and a headline. The numbers point to a dramaturgy I have constructed and invite you to follow, but each letter is independent and can be read in any order. Feel free to read the letters in the order that makes sense to you. If you do not have a first-hand experience of the work, I suggest that you start by reading a manuscript for one or more editions of the piece and look at the photographs of the homes.

The form of the letters mimics the dramaturgy of *No Show*.

With each letter comes

A photograph

A description of a scene from my practice that I choose to call a Ritual.

A series of tasks that I invite you to solve, literally or through imagination.

The tasks are divided into three categories:

Contemplations.

Observations.

Actions.

I hope you enjoy the ride.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Steinn', with a stylized, flowing script.

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LETTER ONE - URGENCY



Dear friend,

in this letter I will explain what motivates me when I reach out to an audience with questions on quality of life and share with you my thoughts on how my artwork can contribute to the solution of the current global challenges through intimate performative encounters.

I am driven by an affection for a world in crisis, a world in transition, that still has a lot to give. Through the things I love; the people and the more-than-human environment, I become motivated to sustain the qualities that I enjoy, for my children and the generations to come. Love is a renewable energy-source and despite its precarious nature the energy it generates is powerful.

I have a genuine interest in creating a dialogue with my audience about quality of life, embedded and embodied in everyday actions and choices, bringing up questions about personal values. I am interested in how quality of life manifests in different ways in our daily lives. I take departure in the WHO's definition of Quality of Life being the "... individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns" (WHO 2012).

In my artistic practice I am occupied with the individual perceptions of what constitutes quality of life and how these perceptions are the basis for perspectives or even values that dictate the personal everyday choices of people in their private lives, in their homes and within their local community.

This practice serves as a point of departure for my artistic research project titled ***How Little Is Enough?*** *Sustainable Methods of Performance for Transformative Encounters*.

The project aims to develop sustainable methods of creating transformative encounters with an audience through participatory and site-specific performance, with a particular focus on how minimal and sustainable the framework for such an encounter can be. My leading

research question is: How to construct a transformative artistic encounter through the most minimal means?

The research strives to produce, through minimal means, transformative experiences that counteract consumerism and a society of hyper mediation. The project is concerned with values such as sustainability, personal responsibility and appreciation of personal experiences, vulnerability, tenderness, uncertainty, genuine exchange, and imperfection. The research aims to stimulate the important discourse on sustainability within performing arts practices and open new perspectives to the role the arts have in a possible solution to current global challenges. The research furthermore aims at bringing my artistic practice into conversation with the UN sustainability Goals with a particular focus on personal values and their effect on quality of life.

At the core of my practice lies a genuine exchange between a host and a guest. The host is an agent human or more-than-human, a person, a family, or a community that invites a guest to experience their everyday stories, actions, and rituals, through action, contemplation, and observations, in playful and poetic settings. The performances trigger a series of encounters in different temporalities and different dimensions that can affect the participants in a profound way as I unfold in my letter on affect.

The work asks its spectator what qualities they are looking for in their daily lives and what makes them belong and feel at ease with the world they live in. It is my belief that beauty exists in the lives of every being, but it needs to be revealed and cultivated. The performances are a platform for such illuminations. The work strives to create affective bond to the world and nurture love, recognising that the power of love is both existentially sustainable and ecological. In the next letter I want to talk to you about my methods and describe the work in more detail.

RITUAL I

You sit at your desk trying to find meaning in the words you have transferred from your inner being onto the screen. A flock of doves fly vigorously past your window surrounding you with an energetic sound of flapping wings. Then suddenly „PANG “a bird knocks into the windowpane. When you reach the window, you see that the bird has left a graphic imprint on the glass pane.

An impression of a dove.

You think of the invisible hindrances in your own life and the blind spots you carry with you.

You wonder if you would survive such a collision and what kind of impression you would leave behind.

TASKS

OBSERVATION

Notice the qualities of this moment.

ACTION

Write a list with your urgencies

...or draw a bird.

CONTEMPLATION

How do questions about quality of life relate to what you are occupied with in your work?

LETTER TWO - ENCOUNTERS



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.

RITUAL II

You are sunbathing.

The sunrays penetrate your body through your black fur making you steaming hot.

The door is open, and you decide to cool down inside.

You are startled to see a stranger on the sofa holding a small electric equipment in her hand.

She is about to push a red button when she stops to look at you.

Your wheeled friend smiles at you with a glimpse in her eyes telling you that everything is

OK.

You rub your self against your friend and tell her that you are going to rest.

The woman presses the red button, and they start to speak.

You let the human voices hum you to sleep.

TASKS

OBSERVATION

Pay attention to your body's reaction to the text you have been reading. Do these sensations belong to you or the text?

ACTION

Create a list of skills or tools that you would like to possess.

CONTEMPLATION

In your experience, what is the difference between skill and tool, between method and methodology, between art and life?

LETTER THREE - ETHICS



Dear colleague,

ethics are imbedded in every single aspect of my work as an artist and as a researcher.

In this letter I will start to address some of the ethical urgencies that inform and reform my artistic practice and research. I will share with you experiences and thoughts about co-creation and agency in the work *No Show*.

At the core of the project is the encounter. The moment of encounter is where ethics are relevant. Encounter means a meeting that happens unexpectedly, where you are confronted with something you did not anticipate. It is in this unexpected meeting that I situate my artistic research. In my performances I bring spectators to places where they are invited to witness real life conditions, situations, fragmented narratives of a host or hosts, private persons, or communities. For the spectator, the significant moment is not necessarily the actual encounter with the host but the encounter that is experienced through their host with themselves, their own ideas, choices, and personal values. It is in the very moment when someone accidentally bumps into something or someone and is profoundly touched, that the ethical stakes are high. Trying to construct those moments through art makes the ethical stakes even higher. In this letter, I will focus on the encounter with my co-creators and to address the ethical implications of co-creation and care as it manifested in *No Show*.

Working on *No Show*, I experienced an ethically demanding situation trying to negotiate responsibility with a less privileged and less able collaborator. This is a case of a young woman in a wheelchair with CP disorder (Cerebral palsy). She lives in a social housing for people with disabilities which became the site of the performance. In my encounter with this collaborator, I found myself in ethically challenging situations. At the onset of our collaboration, I immediately sensed the divide in privilege and ability between us. She had much respect for me, and I gradually understood how easy it would be to cross her boundaries. The power dynamic was inherent in our positions, embedded in the social fabric and was not specific to the circumstances. She was eager to meet my demands and was very positive about all aspects of the work and said yes to all my suggestions without hesitation

or reflection. I felt that I had to take extra care of pointing out possible negatives of participating in the project. We spoke about inviting strangers into her home and sharing her story with the public. She was adamant to participate and expressed an urgency to inform people about her situation. She suggested that the guest would navigate the performance in the wheelchair and put themselves in her place. The format of the work was already to invite the guest to re-enact everyday rituals and perform tasks in the home, observe and reflect on their own reactions to the fragmented narratives, life conditions and life principles of the host.

I felt a strong urge to take care of her and protect her beyond my role as a collaborator, being a mother of three, I identified my urges as "mothering". I had imagined that she could write the personal letters by hand but in fact she struggled just signing the letters that I had written on my computer and printed out. In the process I felt an urge to scrutinize how she was represented in the work. I worked hard creating a strong image of her in the letters by highlighting her abilities and positive attitude to life. I also took the responsibility for the state of her home by turning up an hour before each performance and do the dishes, clean surfaces, open windows and make sure everything looked tidy. This did not even enter my mind with the hosts I had previously worked with. Our collaboration was different because of our different abilities. This situation highlighted certain aspects of my role. It became clear to me that these factors had been at play with other hosts but were negotiated delicately in a nonverbal contract. Non-verbal negotiations were not an option in this situation. I needed to verbally articulate all my concerns, that I considered obvious details with the other collaborators, such as hygiene, risks, and personal boundaries. I asked for permission to do the dishes, clean up and open closets. It felt important for my work to present a positive and dignified image of her. One way of creating that image was by moving things that might stand in the way and blur the vision of an onlooker, like dirty laundry and narratives that evoke feelings of pity. I felt that I had her life in my hands, using theologian Eva Skærbæk's words.

By taking ontological interdependency as a point of departure the question is no longer whether to interfere or not. Interdependency means that every one of us holds some of the life of the other in our hand. Continuously confronted with each other's lives it is not possible not to be involved, to use another word than care.

(Skærbæk, 2011, p 44)

By embracing ontological interdependency as a guiding principle, the question shifted from whether to interfere to how to do so responsibly. Recognizing our mutual reliance, I understood that not only was her life partly in my hands, but my life was also partly in hers. We became each other's agents, and the work became our means of engaging with and intervening in each other's struggles. In this negotiation the balance is precarious, and trust becomes of essence.

The artwork I seek to produce does not come with strict definition of who the creator is and what is part of the creation or the artwork. The participants are divided into four categories: the artists, the hosts, the guests, and other artistic or local contributors.

Trust is the fuel that runs the engine of this work. Without mutual trust between the different agents that encounter each other through the work, the performance would be impossible or potentially dangerous. The encounters are precarious and bring out vulnerability in the participants and reveal power structures that exist in the processes of the work or in the social fabric of the site as the case above depicts. As the artist and initiator, I feel responsible for the wellbeing of people and other beings involved in the artistic process. Taking care does not mean taking the responsibility from the parties involved but rather to share the responsibility with the co-creators and participants through a delicate action of negotiation. With responsibility comes agency and with agency comes power. I work with non-professionals, drawing on their lived experiences in their private surroundings and by proposing a co-creative process with them I am in effect offering them to have agency in the work. But what does co-creation mean in this context? The power dynamic is still precarious since I set the frame and have the professional tools, experience, and overview. Co-creation

does not necessarily create equity. There is an ongoing negotiation on what narrative to present, but the perspectives in the actual creative process are different and the power is always tilting towards the one that has the clearest overview and the experience, namely the artist. These precarious situations are like what ethnographers experience in fieldwork. The question of agency and responsibility are of great importance in the work and need constant attention, especially in the final stages of the creative process.

Ethnographer D.S. Madisons shares this insight in her book on critical ethnography, about the need to evoke response-ability in others:

I bear witness, and in bearing witness, I do not have the singular "response-ability" for what I witness but the responsibility of invoking a response-ability in others to what was seen, heard, learned, felt, and done in the field and through performance.

(Madison, 2019, p. 101)

I share the perspective of critical ethnographers that one becomes an advocate for one's collaborators but at the same time one needs to be critical towards what is being witnessed in the field. You need to listen and pay attention with care and tenderness, aware of that you have entered another person's world and in dialogue with the interlocutors, to borrow a term from ethnography (Madison, 2019), you subtract a narrative from the data. In the end it is your call. You do not share the responsibility for the final outcome with your collaborators, you have become their advocate, and you are responsible for the narrative presented to the public. By situating my ethical practice in the context of critical ethnography I gain a new insight on my practice.

Apart from these obvious ethical challenges in connection to co-creation and agency that I have discussed above, my biggest ethical concern is to scrutinise my motivation to invite people to a transformative encounter and justify my urgency to change the world.

How ethical is it to invite an audience to a potentially life changing experience?

This question is still to be answered but until then I might need to apply a trigger warning to my performances.

BEWARE, THE AFFECT OF THIS WORK CAN BE LIFE CHANGING!

RITUAL III

You are blooming,

your colourful flowers spread out towards the light.

You send signals to other beings with your vivid colours and intoxicating scent.

Hoping that a special someone comes, that is ready to spread your message.

The message for the future.

TASKS

ACTION

Water a flower.

OBSERVATION

Look at your hands. Both sides.

CONTEMPLATION

What do you care about?

LETTER FOUR - AFFECT



Dear friend,

I am interested in how the artistic methods affect my spectators and how their experiences inform my practice and create knowledge and potentially new artistic methods. In this letter I address the concept of affect in relation to my practice, especially the work *No Show*. I will account for my understanding of the concept and how it manifests in my artistic practice. When I talk about affect, I mean the sensorial, emotional, and cognitive influences of an experience, that evoke physical sensations, feelings, and thoughts. My understanding of affect is shaped by the ideas of several influential thinkers who have left a profound impact on my perspective. Donna Haraway's concept of 'staying with the trouble' (2016) has resonated deeply with me, urging a commitment to engaging with the complexities and challenges that arise in the world. Eve K. Sedgwick's work on the senses (2003) has been instrumental in my exploration of how we perceive and interact with the world through our senses. Additionally, Deleuze and Guattari's insights into percept and affect (1994) have fundamentally shifted my understanding of the essence of artistic work. Their definitions have opened my eyes to the dynamic interplay between perception and affect, highlighting how the work itself is not just an object but a force that influences and is influenced by those who engage with it. The work I am striving to produce is in fact an affect. I can describe the composition, the route, or the elements in play in my performances but I will not be able to describe what each spectator defines as being the work. Art and non art are almost inseparable. The experience is sensorial with all the complexity that entails. The full body of the work does not have a pre-designed effect but works differently for each guest encountering the work. It is through being present, touching, feeling, sensing, meditating, acting, and reflecting that the guests generate the work, and it takes shape as an artwork inside them. The artwork is the bloc of sensations and reflections that emerge inside of the guest while struggling to travel through the performance and perform tasks such as dancing in a wheelchair. This was the case in the edition 105 of *No Show*, where the guest is invited to dance to the song, *I want to break free*, performed by Freddie Mercury wearing women's clothing in a video displayed on a laptop screen placed on a living room table within a stranger's home, with a black cat observing in bewilderment. The guest is invited to engage

in a complex physical action within an unfamiliar environment, triggering a multi-layered affect that encompasses the sensory, emotional, and cognitive realms. At any given moment, there are multiple stimuli present, each evoking diverse responses within the guest.

I have chosen to work with an immersive participatory art form where the experience itself is the artwork, not what I have produced as an artist, but rather the affect of the situation I have invited people into. I am staying with the trouble, and I am inviting the spectators to stay there too. The border between art and non-art is erased and I embrace my loss of control of what the work entails. What I am looking for in my performances are liminal experiences that are potentially revelatory and life changing.

Fischer-Lichte, a leading theorist on transformative powers and aesthetics in performance describes the transformative potential of staging like this:

Staging brings about situations in which even inconspicuous and ordinary elements become remarkable and appear transfigured. Moreover, the spectators become aware that they are affected and transformed by their experience of the movements, light, colours, sounds, odours, and so forth. The *mise en scène* can therefore be defined and described as a process that aims at the reenchantment of the world and the metamorphosis of the performance's participants.

(Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 189).

In the case of *No Show* the re-enchantment happens in the real world and the staging is an ephemeral frame that is put against real conditions, thus inviting different realities to cross borders. The performative encounter becomes a frontier or a threshold (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 203-204) instead of a border and paves way for the affect to take hold and transformation to happen.

To understand the affect of *No Show* and to find out how particular aspects of my artistic method and aesthetics work, I gathered data from both the participants and guests about

their experience. I decided that I would use different methods that would both give me an overview of the general affect of the performances and an insight into personal experiences. I created a post performance questionnaire that most of the guests of the performance filled in. I recorded audio interviews with the hosts before and after the performances and I also interviewed 17 guest that had gone through one or more editions of the performance. In my next letter I will give an account of how the interviews, together with data from the questionnaires, informed the process and created awareness, understanding and new knowledge to me. I will also give a brief insight into how this data informed the following artistic work, *Island*, and how I foresee my research method developing.

RITUAL IV

You walk into a home of a stranger; you open the door with a key that was given to you. An overwhelming smell of another person's life penetrates your nervous system sending signals of nostalgia and melancholy to your body and mind. You feel like an intruder or a thief even though you were welcomed by the houseowner. It is not the first time you feel like an imposter. The absence of the family makes you think of time and reminds you of the conditions of life, impermanence. What comes, goes. "The first moments of this experience are already the past", you say out loud into the empty entrance hall.

TASKS

OBSERVATION

Observe how time flows.

ACTION

Write a list of things that you would like to change.

CONTEMPLATION

What is occupying your nervous system?

What is occupying your brain?

Is your mind in agreement with your body?

LETTER FIVE - FINDINGS



Dear reader,

We are now entering the core of my research where I will unravel the affect and potentiality of my artistic methods. You will be exposed to graphs showing collected data and you will be hearing the voices of my spectators and collaborators. I will talk about how the artistic methods affect my spectators and how their experiences inform my practice and create knowledge and potentially new artistic methods. The letter contains many threads that will not all be tied together at this point since I am still at the point of creating openings.

I have collected both qualitative and quantitative data to explore the affect of my work. I am an artist researcher, and my readings of the testimonies are subjective, based on my intuition and previous experiences especially from performance making, and from being a spectator myself. I am grateful for the research tools social sciences have created and I am now using as a part of a situated artistic research method designed to develop my artistic method. Let me first introduce to you the quantitative data I collected through the post performance questionnaires and how I interpret the subtracted data.

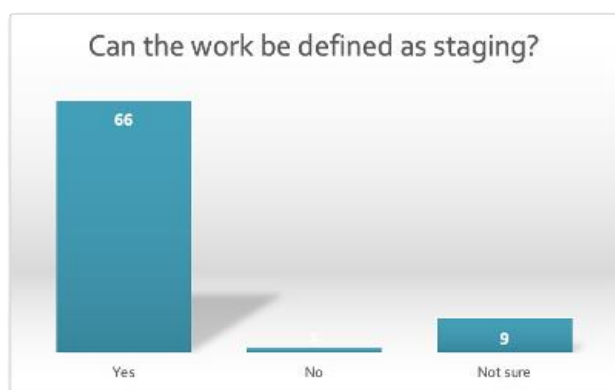
The questionnaires

I decided early to create a questionnaire to have feedback on the staging, the format. The guests of *No Show* were offered to answer a questionnaire on site straight after their experience. The guests had space to do this while the employee from the art festival was preparing the home for a new guest. Through the questionnaires I wanted to understand what the guests regarded as being the work, how the work affected them, what emotions they felt and what parts of the performances made the greatest impact. I wanted to understand if the guests regarded themselves as the subject. I wanted to learn how the guests understood their role as participants in the piece. Also, I wanted to collect some perspectives on the concept *How little is enough?* by asking if the guests regarded the piece as a performance or a theatrical experience and if not, what was missing. 76 guests filled out

the questionnaire that was anonymous. (See Questionnaire in appendix). I have created graphs from the results that I will interpret before we move to the more in-depth and qualitative perspectives of single voices. As a performing artist I thoroughly enjoy the performativity of these graphs, for me they are highly informative, but I also find them extremely playful.

The staging

To the question if the guests regarded the work as a performance or theatre, 66 of 76 answered yes and only one did not think this was staging, 9 were not sure. For my research these findings are affirmative since the question on how much production is needed to create a stage performance is central to my research and my artistic method. Together with supporting data from the qualitative interviews where I ask specifically about the staging, this information gives me knowledge about the theatrical affect of the artistic method that I



can use in future performances. The interviews entail more details of what the guests regard as being staging or theatrical, such as a story, a new world, dramaturgical structure, arrangements, or composition. The data suggests that what was produced in *No Show* was enough to

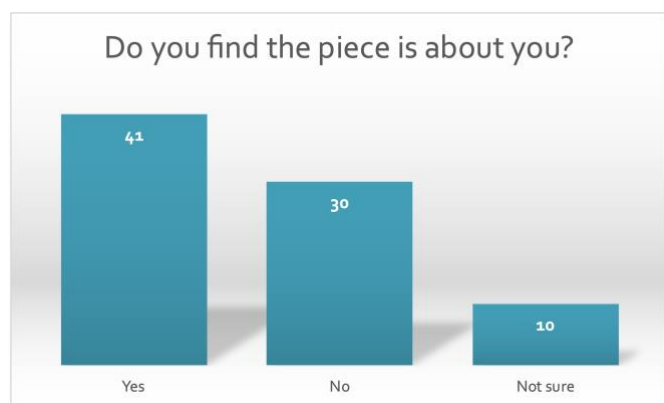
evoke a sense of performance. Here expressed with the words of one of the guests: "It was so incredibly casual and yet very impressive, just with little things, that do a lot."

The participation and the participant



There is a twofold question on participation and the role of the participant. Firstly, I asked the guests if they consider themselves to be participants were 69 out of 76 answered with a definite yes. There is no doubt that the work invites its guests to participate.

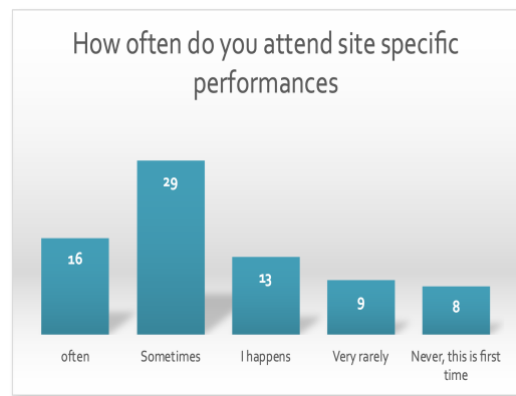
Secondly, I asked if they consider the piece to be about themselves. Here we see a distinctive divide. To this question some guests even gave two answers, both yes and no. 41 answered that the piece was about them, 30 did not think so, and 10 guests were not sure. This suggests that there is more to this point, something that cannot be expressed with a definite yes or no answer. In the interviews I asked people about how much of the piece was about the host and how much of the piece was about themselves and what they shared with the host. The answers to that question (see picture in the interview section) shows a mixed view. The answer seems to depend on how much you relate personally to the host and on what you consider as being the work. I guess that this last point, *what is the actual artwork*, will affect



how you perceive your role as participant and how relevant you regard your personal story to the artwork.

Who are the guests?

I wanted to know how familiar the guests were with participatory site-specific performances as I imagined it could affect how they navigate the work and what they consider being the work.

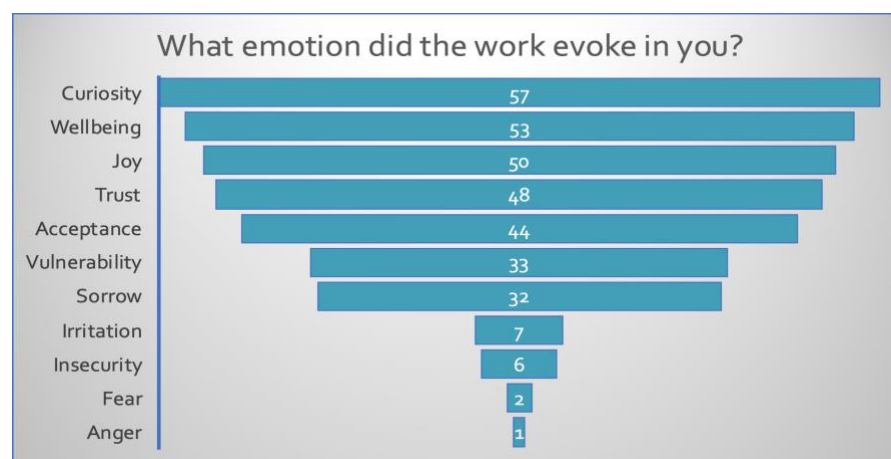


Majority of the guests were familiar with this type of performances, and I did not detect any significant differences in the answers from guests with different experiences of theatre and performance.

Emotions

One way of measuring affect is to ask about felt emotions, and this I did. I am interested in creating a positive affect, that re-enforces the guest's understanding of what they consider quality of life. Positive affect is not only created by positive emotional responses, but as I understand it, by affirming sentiments, appreciation, understanding, connection and belonging. Emotions are complex and can be double sided and can evoke memories and hidden

components. The guests had the option to mark one or more emotion from a list of 11 different emotions and they could add

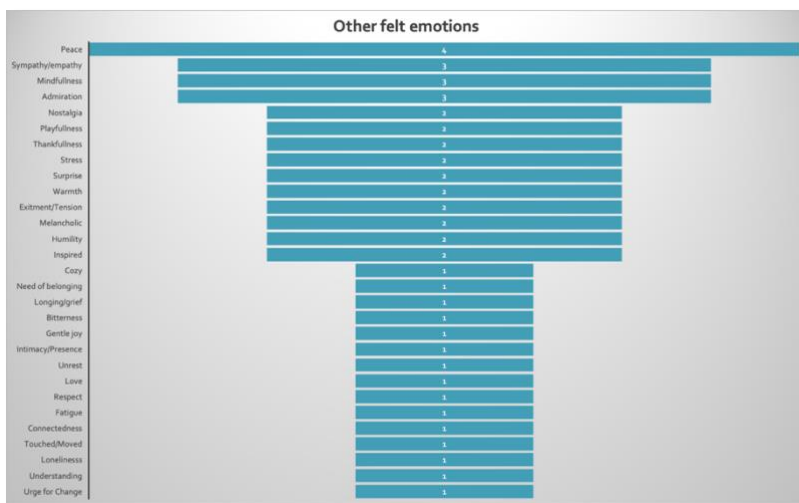


relevant emotions in an empty space. The selection of emotions is based on my special interest and does not reflect a system or a theory. I will not attempt to understand the full scope of what the answers might imply. For me as an artist, it is interesting to understand

which emotions are present in my work and try to make use of this information in my artistic methods. The interpretations are both subjective and speculative.

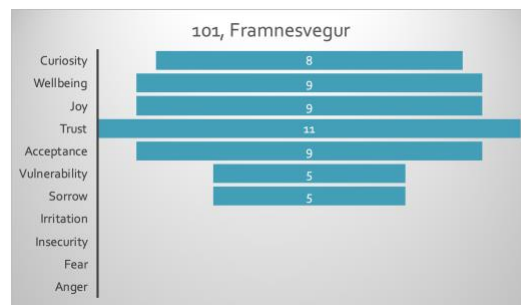
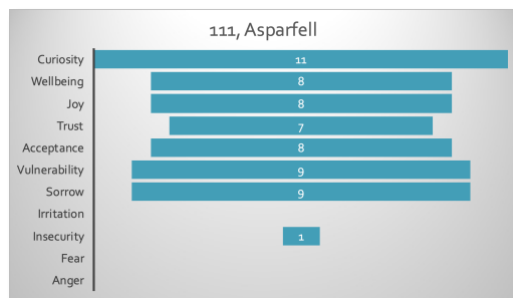
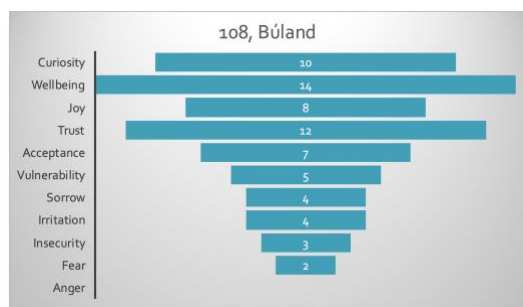
A general conclusion is that the work evoked mostly positive emotions. Curiosity, wellbeing, joy, trust, and acceptance had the highest scores of the 11 emotions presented in the questionnaire. The emotions that also scored somewhat high, although lower than the positive emotions, were sorrow and vulnerability.

Looking at the overall picture with the addition of the specific emotions that guests contributed to the list, the work seems, in general terms, to evoke emotions of wellbeing and joy.



It also seems to evoke positive emotions towards the host such as trust and curiosity, and even emotions that can belong to empathy such as sorrow, vulnerability, and acceptance. Written comments on the questionnaires suggest that the sensation of being trusted

with the home had a great impact on guests, this is also supported in the interviews. It seems like being trusted has an affirming affect that urges one to be worth the trust. Next to these affirming emotions are vulnerability and sorrow. These emotions can suggest that guests are touched beyond the surface and might imply a certain existential notion. The answers differ slightly from home to home, which might suggest that the type of home and information given evokes more or less sombre feelings since the sombre emotions appear more in the homes where the hosts share experiences of loss and struggle.



At this point I want to quote one of my interviewees, let's call her Sally, talking about the emotional affect of the piece in comparison to what she sees as a symptom of our times:

So much of arts just create any sensations [that is] why there are often so much of splatter and rape scenes and all sorts, just somehow to shock, just to create "any" emotion instead of nurturing the beautiful feelings and constructive feelings and the all-encompassing feelings and the warm feelings. (Sally)

I agree with Sally in her appreciation of these warm and encompassing feelings as a replacement for the invasive influence of violence and trauma. Looking at my data, it looks like I have succeeded to evoke these more affirmative emotions in *No Show*.

What made the most impact?

Through the questionnaires, I gathered over 80 written responses to the question 'Was there a part of the performance that had the most impact on you?' As expected, the answers varied widely, with each guest personally connecting to different aspects of the work. Many guests mentioned elements that evoked strong emotional responses, such as recognition or empathy. The most common comment was 'To be trusted with the home,' while others expressed strong emotional affects like love or sorrow, such as 'The bathroom - the thoughts about love' and 'The girl on the wall, the picture of Flateyri, the childhood.'

Additionally, numerous guests noted that having their name written on the dining table had a profound impact of acceptance and belonging, making them feel part of something bigger. One guest expressed, 'To enter the flat in the chair and to see my name on the table, it triggered a lot of emotions.' These comments serve as valuable insights for me to further develop my artistic methods, helping me better understand the impact of specific elements, situations, and arrangements.

One particularly affirming aspect was the mention of care in the work: 'The letters and the care that they presented.' This sentiment was echoed by many interviewees, who described a sense of warmth and tenderness experienced through the letters and the preparation of the home. This is something I deeply value and wish to explore further in my future works.

The questionnaire serves as a type of quality check, offering a quick indication of how the piece resonates with the guests.

The interviews

Given that my research focuses on affect and the transformative potential of my works, conducting interviews with my spectators became essential. Over time, I realized that this aspect became significant and powerful for those who participated. Through these interviews, my aim was to gain insight into the inner workings of individuals as they

experienced the work, both during and after. I was particularly interested in capturing the nuances of their personal experiences.

The 17 interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 69 and included both men and women who had volunteered by adding their names to a list after completing the questionnaire at the performance site. One individual was interviewed twice. Among the interviewees, 10 were artists or cultural workers. I selected these individuals from a long list of interested spectators, choosing 3 to 4 people from each edition of the performance, representing diverse backgrounds, genders, and ages. Some interviews were conducted immediately after the experience, while others took place later, with some up to six weeks after the performance.

The interviews were all around 30 minutes and were semi-structured. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher prepares a few open questions and lets the responses the interviewee gives inform what questions are asked next. The interviews were made in a quiet place of the interviewee's choice, in my home, their home or at a cafe or hotel lobby. I began with an open question; asking the interviewee to describe their experience in general terms. Based on their descriptions I then asked them directly about their reactions to different aspects of the piece, certain moments, or elements of my method. I then asked how likely they thought it was that the experience would affect their mindset and/or behaviour and we would discuss in more general terms about methods of theatre and performance and their general attitude towards different theatrical approaches. I asked each person what the piece was about and if they found the piece more about the host or the guest; themselves. I did not ask them if they liked the work and did not seek affirmative responses. As the author of the work conducting the interviews, I was aware of the risk of trying to influence the answers and tried my best to avoid judgement and stay with their own detailed descriptions of their experiences. Since the interviews were taken along the way while I was still making works, I had the opportunity to experiment with details in the work responding to the data I was collecting. The interviewees are all anonymous and appear in the text with pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted in Icelandic. I transcribed the interviews accurately and after

several readings, I selected texts that I translated to English and analysed further. I detected many recurrent themes that I am currently processing and will now present to you. First, I will introduce a theme that relates to the different aspects of solitude, then a theme that relates to the work being a catalyst of change. A larger theme is how the guests relate to the content, that I divide into four sub themes: the host as a role model, the guest as subject, guest identifying with the host, and abstract experience. I will present themes on sensations, care and connection and themes that relate to the subject of the work and what the guest brings to the piece.

THE GUESTS

The many sides of solitary experience

In the first interviews I conducted after the second edition of *No Show*, there were already important findings that would immediately affect how I proceeded with the work and influenced how I approached my later work *Island*, that I was creating concurrently. These first findings relate to the fact that the performance is a solitary experience and is unique to each guest. This solitary experience comes with specific aspects to it. One guest described the feeling like this:

When you are alone, you allow yourself other, stronger emotions, you allow yourself to surrender to it, you do not have exactly the same fences, the same restrictions around you. I am not talking about movements or anything like that, I am talking about emotions and what goes through you. You allow yourself to experience, exactly the same as if you are experiencing something in nature, something very beautiful in nature, then you are experiencing maybe, e.g., in this work some kind of nature too, yes this is nature. (Albert)

The experience has specific potentials as other guests also described to me: they had more influence over the situation, they could control the pace and they could choose to skip tasks and revisit scenes etc. and give themselves the permission to dwell.

It was also just privacy; you are alone with yourself, your thoughts and affects and that was also one of the things [...] that I was so grateful for, to have this privacy to allow the emotions and thoughts to go off like that.
(Gloria)

Another aspect to being alone is that you do not have another person to talk to about the experience.

"It's not often, that you're just alone, it's a completely different experience [...] I knew someone who was going two days later, well, I was pretty excited, and it was hard not to be able to talk about this. [...] I just had to figure out what I really felt without being influenced by someone else [...] so, there I had to work on this all by myself, somehow ..." (Anne)

The numerous comments I received about solitude and the insights I gained into the dynamics of sharing an experience with others prompted me to revise my dramaturgical approach for *Island*. In this work, guests enter as part of a small group, engaging in close contact and interaction with others throughout the experience.

Another important aspect of being able to share your experience has to do with dissemination of what happens and the awareness of the affect the work has on you and the potential transformation.

I'm sure this work has a much bigger impact on me right now because I've been talking to you so much about it. ...

...There is something about sharing an experience with others that makes the experience a little stronger or can do it. (Angela)

The work as a whole, stimulates me most here at this table in these afterthoughts and maybe you know, also, to say it out loud or understand what I mean. It stimulated me then and there but its like I am feeling the stimulus here and now. (Bella)

Many of my interviewees talked about the urge to discuss the experience with others, that they became more aware of the affect if they had the opportunity to discuss their experience with others. Talking about the experience made them aware of details in the work that they had not paid attention to while in it and also made them conscious about where the affect originated from. This provides me with valuable insight into how people process the work and what they perceive as impactful. For some, the questionnaire offered a chance to reflect on the experience and begin to process the affect it had on them. The recurring theme in the interviews led me to realize that for a work to truly resonate, it requires revisitation and processing through some form of communication. Another aspect of the solitude is the guest's lack of opportunity to communicate back to the host that has a voice through the letters. In the first two editions the guests did not have any opportunity to communicate with the hosts.

This is such a gift and I accept it and I can not directly thank her for it you know. I really feel that it is missing, it was so emotional. I felt like a bit rude somehow. (Bella)

The only way the guests had to show their gratitude was through the questionnaires. Many guests expressed a longing to communicate with the hosts or at least be able to do something in return for the hospitality. An element in the

first two editions was to invite the guests to write a list, a note to themselves, inside the work and take it home with them. I decided to change that to inviting the guest to write something for the host instead and leaving it behind. This I tried in two editions of the work.

I found this somehow beautiful, but I also found it incredibly difficult. But still it was good to write her a message [...] Hopefully she got something out of that. I hope so at least. (Ella)

To hear about the Word Box and to be able to contribute to that.

(Anonymous answer to *What made the most impact on you?*)

Catalyst of change

In retrospect, I think there is value in both leaving a note to the host and writing a note to yourself that you come back to after the experience. A note that you take with you makes you revisit the work and can act as an enabler for deeper affect or even drive to action.

My brother and his wife, they have been picking up their notes quite often since then and just think, hmm, "just here you see, what do you think about this, or I've been thinking about this. (Sally)

Here we could talk about how a physical object from the piece has become a catalyst for change, other objects can be less tangible but be still as effective. Sally shared with me how her family decided to go together to see *No Show*. They were 10 people that visited edition 101 City Centre, and they then organised a dinner party where they shared their experience. Later they went to see edition 101, West town.

Everyone who was at the dinner party talked about how they wanted to reorganize their home [...] everyone wanted to create more cosiness at home, everyone wanted to find more peace. I find it incredibly remarkable that you create a work so that people want to change their home, because they saw your work. (Sally)

Creating a sense of awareness or moving the spectator to action is the desired outcome. Here it seems to manifest in the way these spectators are inspired to rethink and redesign their living spaces to improve their quality of life. Since the works are performed in homes with a focus on daily rituals, everyday situations and the small details of daily life, most guests can easily reflect and relate to the content.

There was just somehow such great beauty in the little things. (Bill)

I have a hard time with everyday life somehow, I find it the hardest part of life and still it is such a big part, so, [...] I took it further with me, you know, everyday life is so crazy, especially if you are reading about someone else's everyday life, because then you can imagine and create, you can still somehow, change your own, or see your own. Often you just keep going without contemplating anything in what one is doing, one way or the other. So, I think most in this work, what I take with me [...] these little things are so very important. (Anne)

The hosts became role models or examples of how one can perform these daily rituals and the work also provides the context and puts things in perspective in relation to value systems and life situations. The values and behaviours of the hosts easily become contagious.

She was so inspiring. To just understand how she sees all the good in things and how she takes full advantage of what she has, yeah, this was just amazing, just unbelievably inspiring. (Johanna)

I was immediately inspired e.g., of one thing in this home [...it] was the dinnerware that was handmade, and handmade for this family. There was something there that I felt was so amazing. I thought, why I have not long ago started to make my own dishes for my [family]. You take the time to nurture these everyday things [...] make them precious. (Gloria)

I've been thinking for a long time about wanting to work with either elderly people or children or something, [...] be some volunteer, work with people who have a harder time living life, and this could just be something that, at least it was like something that helped me, maybe direct my thinking [...] I'm finally going to do something. (Bill)

Half a year later, this young man was indeed working with children and found it important and meaningful. Another guest described how she started playing the ukulele after writing it down when asked in the work to make a note listing things she wanted to learn and taking it with her. She expressed how the note pushed her into taking the first step.

Four ways of relating to the content

In the interviews people described how they related to and were affected by the content, the hosts, or the experience. I can divide these experiences into four categories; the host as a role model, the guest as the subject, the guest identifies with the host and abstract experience.

The host as a role model: For many guests the host became either a role model, or a relatable person that the guest could recognise themselves through:

I really connected with the fact that she's a former nurse or something, yeah, yeah, I'm there now, or something like that, we were like pals, and her values were so healthy. So just being here, creating a sanctuary for her children and grandchildren and that was enough for her, she felt like the big bedroom was too big, she needed less. If she manages to be a sanctuary, then she's satisfied, there's something like that that I found so beautiful. I [...] was a little spellbound, like, she was such a role model, a mentor, a lesson. What I needed so much. (David)

Here David both relates to the host and sees her as a mentor, a double hook that I think can amplify the affect.

The guest as subject: Many guests described how they were confronted with themselves, with their predetermined judgements, inner thoughts, values, and experiences:

I can be quite frank with the fact that I have been wondering [...], should we say that this way: I looked at my *Breiðholt prejudices* (Breiðholt is a notorious suburb of Reykjavík) through this work ... so I think that, if anything, my prejudices about Breiðholt diminished. (Michael)

It affected me (...) to sense that maybe people, people I see, just the guy who was helping, as soon as I met him again, I thought, yes, he's in a car like that, yes, I think he is of foreign origin. So, I immediately start thinking

about him, not only the first thought, but also, I expanded my ideas about people, I think, at least, first afterwards...

... more such acceptance of people. That things are, much bigger, much more complex, much bigger. I think so. It had that affect. (Albert)

What is described here is profound revelations about the other. Both Michael and Albert spoke about changing their views on people, they acknowledge how they confront their own ideas. Other guests expressed similar changes. But as Albert says, it affected him "at least first afterwards." This is a significant remark since I think that the longer the affect lasts determine the power of transformation.

The guest identifies with the host: The third category is learning something new through the story of another, like you are putting yourself in someone else's shoes, identifying with them.

When I looked out the window in the kitchen, I was supposed to notice some movement [...] it is hard to describe the feeling, but it was like looking into the future somehow [...] like me, like old looking out the window...

I experienced myself so old and it's so interesting [...] it kind of stayed with me because I'm just young, I'm just turning nineteen. I never think about when I get old [...] and also the feeling that I could possibly loose someone, my child or something like that [...] you never think about it when you're young. It's at least very rare so that, yes. Maybe this experience of being old, it's so insane, I have just never experienced this before. (Alice)

You're seeing someone's world, and this is not directly your world, but some other world you are seeing into, and it can let you feel some emotions whether it's sadness, happiness, I mostly just felt some kind of happiness...

...I went into her world but still I was not her but somehow, I ... I was not me, but I was some kind of version of me. (Bill)

Of course, [...] this was a real person who lived there, you are experiencing a certain story, it's like you are in a novel or a movie or something but it's really real. Right, it was really weird it felt like you were on a set or something, but it is not, it's just someone's reality, which was very interesting you know and also [...] it just underscores that everyone has their story. (Fanny)

Identifying with another person is the classical approach to theatre. Seeing a story unfold and imagining it was you. In this work the experience intensifies with the "reality" of the setting, like Fanny describes.

The abstract experience: The fourth category is where the experience is more abstract and has an affect like when experiencing nature.

It was simple, it was physical, and it was a description of "stairs" as a phenomenon. It was very strong somehow, and this intermediate state, liminal space to be there, out in the corridor, to be in a kind of nowhere, and this action to bend the knees, incredibly beautiful somehow, feel the weight of the body somehow and yes, it was a really cool opening somehow into the work and how you were a spectator as a body. [...] I somehow became part of the environment, somehow like that, it was just my consciousness, this witness, that you see in dreams or that is looking, looking at one's dreams, there was some kind of rupture. (Jimmy)

To walk into a piece like this is like walking up a mountain or some nature situation, a nature scene. It does not come to you unless you, unless you

surrender. You have to be here; you can not wait to be fed [...]. You must not have too many filters for the affect you are exposed to, it is completely true of being in nature, just like this, that you must come in with an open mind and in fact just accept what you think and experience [...] without filtering it too much. And that, of course, applies to everyone. Maybe this kind of performance, is maybe closer to the theatre to the point that [...] you must accept the magic, otherwise it's just a man with makeup on stage, a smoking mirror. You must go into the story and accept it [...] you must sit back in the chair in the living room up there in Asparfell and take it in, this is where it meets the experience of nature, you must come with open senses. (Michael)

I can completely see myself being affected by this experience like when I go out into nature. To see the vision directly, face to face, not on a screen but here, that too, moves me. (Eve)

For this abstract affect to function the person needs to allow the affect to take hold, like Michael describes, you need to “surrender” and “you have to accept the magic”.

The tactile, embodied, and immersive experience

These four different ways of relating to a content and being affected can co-exist in a multi layered experience. As mentioned above the affect is created through sensorial experience in combination with cognitive perception. Most of the guests that I interviewed talked about the strong impact of physical engagement, the doing, the sensing, and the entire interactive and immersive aspect of the experience.

You came closest in these homes when you touched the floor, barefoot in one of the homes, and in the wheelchair. There was some contact, there you somehow got in touch - but always in fact as an observer of another's life, the life of others. (Carl)

Now I remember all the actions somehow but like e.g., the contemplations and what was the other thing again.... (- observation) yes, exactly [...] now I do not remember what that was ...

...I find that one of the most interesting things about this work, how you as an active participant somehow feel more impact than if you were just seeing this [...] or you were just a passive spectator, yes. (Fanny)

Care, trust, and vulnerability

In conversations with many guests, a recurring theme emerges they describe a feeling of being genuinely seen and cared for, with everything meticulously prepared with attention to detail. A particular detail that nearly all guests mentioned was the simple yet impactful presence of their name tag on the dinner table. This small gesture of being acknowledged by name seems to hold great significance, fostering a sense of personal connection and enhancing their overall experience.

It's this personification, your name on tag at the table [...] it gives the feeling that you are, or I felt, I was part of the work. (Michael)

I felt welcome, because, you know, your name was there, somehow, not just a guest or something but completely, the name, my arrival had been prepared for. (Anne)

I thought it was nice to sit at the table [...] I chose a seat and then I first saw that my name was on a card exactly by the seat I had chosen, this was so funny and pleasant. It felt kind of beautiful to be one of the group, one of the family. This is such a magic, suddenly seeing the card with your name... (Charlotte)

...I felt welcomed, warmth, intimacy, affection it's like it was beautifully wrapped. I appreciated that and yes, no, no, I was just led into something, it was not staged, more like a gift, a present. (Charlotte)

I felt like this was you embracing us with your tenderness so we could be more ourselves. (Sally)

Another central theme was trust. Majority of the interviewees mentioned how being trusted had a powerful impact.

To be given a key instead of someone else opening a door for a you [...] there you become so aware of some decision [...] you are given both some kind of trust and responsibility and such, and you take it or... So, it is as kind of agreement on something. (Bella)

I just think like that, because you are so trusted in the house, you want to be trustworthy somehow. You do not want to betray anyone, you just want to be a decent citizen, this came so strong over me. (Anne)

I am trusted with the home as I am just a stranger visiting a home that is empty and this is where I enter. I immediately felt like this, it was immediately something that had such an affect [...] I was immediately [...] humble...

...One is somehow safe but at the same time vulnerable and perhaps precisely vulnerable because one feels safe [...] vulnerable and secure at the same time. I found it interesting to find it. (Gloria)

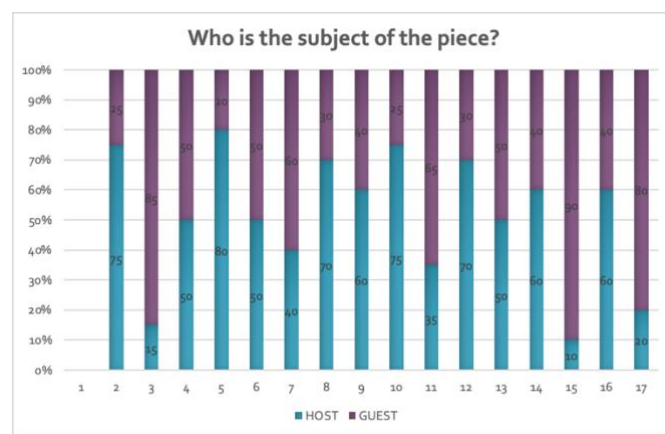
In this last comment Gloria mentions her vulnerability and safety as being two sides of the same coin. One could describe vulnerability as a kind of openness and here she relates that to being safe. Being safe allows you to be open and thus vulnerable. I am starting to believe that this sense of safety together with a sensation of belonging might be the precondition for the openness that is required for a transformation. When I asked Charlotte, who is a practising psychologist, what she thought was the key factor in helping her clients in transforming their life she answered:

I think that a kind of warmth and caring communication and to share [...] be truthful, do not hide anything, and no fireworks, I think it is effective. I also use it in my treatment, I share, it is not always beautiful what I share. We have all sorts of thoughts, they are not all noble, politically correct, beautiful or... I find it so liberating for the next person. To realize that everyone has all kinds, and everyone has their struggle. (Charlotte)

Here I have mentioned three significant features that I find important to my practice of creating potentially transformative experiences; firstly, to create a safe and caring environment that allows you to open up, secondly to create a personal relationship with the guest, see them and care for them with sincere affection, thirdly to share with them something personal, daring to be imperfect.

Who is the subject of the piece?

I have claimed that the essence of the work lies within each individual guest, encompassing both the experience itself and the unique contributions brought forth by the guest. This contribution may include elements drawn from the guest's past experiences, values, and perspectives, which are illuminated and integrated into the overall experience. In essence, the work is an interplay between the external experience and the internal reflections and contributions of the guest. To understand if the guest recognised themselves being a subject of the piece, I asked how much of the work was about the host and how much about the guest and the things they shared with the host. I asked them to divide the work in percentages between them



and the host. As you can see in the picture, the answers are very individual, and from the 17 interviewees, only two agree on the work being 50/50, which is the average outcome if the answers are merged. I have an interest to create a heightened awareness in spectators about themselves during the work and these findings suggest to me that the degree of awareness is very individual.

But all my interviewees agreed that they brought something to the work.

It is probably impossible not to bring your values and your worldview to any experience, like Jimmy says:

I'm fully aware that I see the world through me with all my prejudices and experiences and so to speak, my formatting. I see the world completely, the world is just me, I see it through my upbringing and all [...] It's a good question: Where does the work end and where do I start. Is the work reflexology, one presses some points in me that...? (Jimmy)

What David brought with him into the piece is more concrete:

I had the wrong time, so I came too early and then all of a sudden, I was in a stairwell and people were walking past, it was just all kinds of smells and people from all over the world [...] from Asia and obviously from the east bloc and Icelanders, and a bad smell and a good one, and an overpowering smell and I thought: this is a powerful intro. [...] So, this is my story, and the reason I connect with these smells, weird smells and something like that, is because I'm used to these smells from my childhood apartment block. That's my story. (David)

Where does the work start and where does it end?

The specific setting of each piece, the 'zip code,' if you will, is intentionally crafted as part of the work. However, the exact details of what this entails are determined by the guest's encounter with the work. For example, in the instance mentioned earlier, David perceives the smells as an integral part of the work. These scents evoke memories that are personal to him, shaping his identity and reflecting his background and values.

Many guests mentioned how the work 'turned on' something within them, altering their perception of their surroundings. Jimmy, for instance, describes this experience:

You surrender completely into this space, the theatre, or this side reality, or this portal that art is, when you just open it, there is so little really needed between life and death or here yes, life and art, [...] To go into this, this world, you just press the ON button just turn it on. This is what happened when I turned my car into Framnesvegur. (Jimmy)

Jimmy described in detail a long scene that for him was a part of the performance that he experienced sitting in his car waiting to be let into the home. Other guests also described similar experiences where they described people, situations, smells, and sights in proximity to the work, before or after the actual work took place. What I hear them describe is being fully present with their senses open, attentive to the surroundings in a magical mode. This relates to the point from before when Michael spoke about the necessity to surrender.

People bring all sorts of things into the piece, such as residues of a bad day at the office or the mood of a world situation that shifts the entire worldview, like Bella described to me:

I went into a mode like [...] in light of all sorts of things, you know world events, and current affairs and things like that. I felt like this huge privilege. What surprised me was that it provoked me so much [...] it has nothing to do with the people who live there.

Coming almost straight from Austurvöllur (parliament Square), from a protest march. But this, when I mention this mode, I think that it is because you only get a beautiful picture. I remember the experience. You are not presented with anyone's struggle story. (Bella)

This was in an atmosphere of *Black Lives Matters* and public protests that were held worldwide in connection to George Floyds murder. Here the outside world

situation invaded the whole experience and changed momentarily the perspectives of the guest. What Bella describes are important political events, but smaller issues can affect as easily. The guest can bring anything into the work and there is no control over what becomes a part of the work and what not, potentially everything can:

You were just alone in this and were just experiencing something completely alone while in the movies or in a theatre you can disconnect yourself, you can just go watch yourself, look down on you, "yes, I have some dirt on the pants" But here everything is connected, so you somehow, all of a sudden everything is part of the same, for some time, in these twenty to thirty minutes, somehow you are all in this. (Bill)

Filling the gaps

The guests not only come with their worldviews and perspective, stories, and value system, but they are also given the responsibility to create a whole image of the fragments of information that is given to them through the letters and by the surroundings.

The text is very limited, and you just "Take it away". Your mind just starts spinning. As I may have said more than once, you always start to wonder what is true and what is a lie. What is a staging and what is reality and where do we draw the line? It's so hard to set boundaries and define what's true and what's not true. Everything is partly a lie and partly true. (Carl)

You get a lot of information in a way, because we tend to draw our own conclusions. If someone tells you [...], here I live, I'm so old, I've been

doing this during my days, my family is made up of this and this: From relatively little information, you draw all sorts of conclusions about what has happened. (Michael)

This is of course a study; I'm researching this person. This is of course a study of her and a study of my reactions to her that I found exciting because I kind of control where it goes. (Albert)

The guests play an integral role in the creation of the work. It is their presence and interaction that bring together the various elements, forming a cohesive whole, a combination of observations and experiences that one individual can gather within just 30 minutes spent encountering a stranger's home.

I found it so amazing how one small letter can somehow open up a lot for a person. Just the connection between this letter and where you are, both the home, where you are in this home, and also where you are yourself as a guest. This home, a guest in this life that you are only getting to know and, in a way, somehow, where you are in your own life and this kind of volatility there between. My life, the life of these people in this house and this flickered there. (Gloria)

Through these interviews and listening to their testimonies, I came to realize the significance of providing these individuals with the opportunity to share their experiences in detail. I felt as though I was witnessing a transformation in progress, understanding that the revelatory moment did not necessarily occur during the performance but rather emerged during the reflection on their experiences afterward. The encounters sparked a desire to delve deeper into the experience by sharing it with others. This indicates that true transformation not only needs both body and mind (physical experience and reflection) but proximity and distance as well. The ultimate transformative encounter often occurred after the performance itself, as

the spectators left the space carrying the affect within them, ready to be further developed into something new. In my observation, the post-performance interviews acted as a catalyst in some cases or served as a recognition of the impact of their experience. Many of my interviewees expressed gratitude for the interviews, finding them helpful and revelatory. They recalled more details and gained deeper insights into how the experience had affected them, both consciously and unconsciously.

This discovery is among the most significant insights I gained throughout this process. These testimonies will continue to serve as a source of discovery, as there are still many threads waiting to be explored and integrated into my artistic practice.

THE HOSTS

The work did not only affect the guests, but also the hosts. I had chosen hosts from different layers of society, all women, a fact that dawned on me during the process. The hosts did not have particular expectations of the work and expressed curiosity and trust in me as an artist, and the fact that the work was programmed by the Reykjavik Art Festival contributed to the trust they had for the project. One explained her motivation for participating like this:

I like what art does, because it breaks up everyday life, and I not only find it enjoyable but necessary. I feel it is very necessary that things are not always as monotonous as life is. It's just a new perspective on what others are doing and what I'm doing, through the arts [...] and I feel it's necessary - not just a bonus to life but a part of life and necessary.

(Agnes)

Generally, they felt positive about the process and the outcome.

I had not formed any opinions beforehand, because I was just going to see how it developed before I formed any opinion. I did not have any expectations. But it all came out very well.

(Sofia)

I think I'm very grateful for the work, it was a bit of a mystery trip, I did not know where it was going and when you created the text from the interview, I got a really warm feeling. I found it incredibly beautiful how you could see my story and how you experienced it and put it into words. I often find it hard to share this story and it was like a maze to me but then you came up with this and it was just somehow beautiful and simple and clear [...] so there came kind of warmth with your text and security too. It was a very beautiful and enjoyable experience to get into this little adventure.

(Rose)

The process created more awareness of the host's values and life situation, and evoked sensations of gratitude and appreciation of privilege.

You know, you go through everyone's movements, everyone's rituals, [...] how we are and how we behave and here, yes, it has become more tangible - everything you do. [...] and now I'm just looking at these rituals, they are there, things become visible that were [...] unconscious before. (Agnes)

... I feel a real privilege and I am very aware of it because it certainly is not like that everywhere. So, to speak, quite yes, yes, it came back to me quite many times, wow, how lucky I am.

My husband got a lot out of it, he was all into it and could somehow dwell in the work, [...] what did he say again [that it was] just very clear, the form,

structure of everything and he felt the content had a great impact, he felt it had a great and strong effect on him. To see himself through me then also [...] to be able to be a spectator in his own home [...] he thought it was just amazing. (Agnes)

As the work focuses on quality of life and affirmative emotions the hosts saw their own homes and life stories in a new light that had a great impact on them:

You know, I must mention it, that I felt shame for many years to be an immigrant and ashamed to have this story - to come here, to look for work, to look for work for my family, and to try to save everyone, such an unease that came with all this. As I get older, this is diminishing, this immigrant shame I experienced. I thought, to get such positive attention, that it was dignifying, I got back a kind of security. (Maria)

What you write is very positive, positive about me and my home and family [...] it has given me a lot, because basically I am rather negative towards myself [...] it has given me a lot to get such a positive image.
(Maria)

The hosts describe a mostly positive experience of having people into their homes since they feel that the work is not only about them but is somehow important in a wider context. They expressed gratitude towards the guest and their notes left behind.

They are all very positive. I found it very funny. They do not know me personally but yes, good to read, because then you feel, the work gets more value, or worth. This is a valuable encouragement.

It is just quite unique to get such comments in the notes, rewarding and beautiful comments. (Sofia)

The overall conclusion regarding the work's impact on the hosts reveals a significant effect on both the hosts and the guests. The process as a whole heightened the hosts' awareness of their values and illuminated the important role of everyday rituals and routines in well-being and quality of life, mirroring the impact on the guests. Generally, the hosts gained new perspectives by viewing their lives through a positive yet profound lens, with some experiencing a healing effect. The duration of time spent by the hosts with the project, along with the ongoing personal sharing that took place in our collaboration, likely contributed to this. The work remained a constant presence for them throughout the entire creation process and beyond, as the artwork became intertwined with the fabric of their lives within their homes.

In contrast, the guests' experience was more ephemeral and potentially less enduring in terms of long-lasting impact.

These testimonies manifest to me the complexity of a single experience and how potent a porous dramaturgy can be, where you as an artist balance between control and loss of control in an artwork instigated by you and yet runs off on a course of its own, not only in one direction, but multiple directions, as many as the persons encountering it. Through these findings that I have encountered and my interpretations of them, I am able to further develop my artistic methods. One important finding is that the format I am developing and testing out that is based on the concept, *How little is enough?* does seem to work and allows for steps towards further reduction. There is ample space to reduce the production, giving the guests more space to generate the work. Based on my findings, I now have an urge to create an opportunity for the guest to revisit the work and to disseminate the affect in a proximity to the experience. I intend to develop new formats for having genuine communication in the work and I will also take seriously the

guests need for being safe and being seen. Toward these goals I have already taken some steps in the work *Island*, a site specific and human specific performance on belonging, performed in Hrísey an island north of Iceland in august and October of 2020.

In *Island*, I had the opportunity to develop the guest's possibilities to reflect as they went along within the performance experience. There the guests enter the work as a group and their experiences were affected by their co-travellers. In interviews with guests, I learned that the personal exchange is very affective. It is comforting to be both seen and trusted with personal information from the people you encounter, and you are more receptive to the work. The guests created a bond with their guides and hosts and also with their co-travellers and even the island itself.

Unlike *No Show*, many guests of *Island* express how they learned something about the other; the islanders, the island, or new people but less about how they were confronted with themselves. The sense of transformation that happened in *No Show* had another appearance in *Island*. The experience was less private and more communal, with discussions on quality of life becoming more prominent in the various dialogues that unfolded throughout the work.

The stimuli of the senses were strong, according to guests, and the constant moving around and paying attention to nature when contemplating profound themes of belonging seemed to stir people's thoughts and value systems. In my experience and through the interviews I saw evidence for a great impact on the co-creators. By co-creators, I mean the people on the island that contributed to the performance process, myself included. One reason could be that we were more people involved in *Island* than in *No Show* and that the co-creators were either children or people that are inexperienced in culture work and performance making. Another reason could be that the community on the island is in a state of transition and has a greater motivation for a positive outcome of a project like

this. The community has been categorised as a “vulnerable settlement”, where life and livelihood is precarious, together with a handful of villages and towns around Iceland. The inhabitants are already working on different strategies to attract visitors and new inhabitants to the island.

Not many of the inhabitants came as guests to the piece, but the few that did express feeling proud of their island and a sense of re-enchantment of their home settlement.

For now, I want to end this letter on affect with the words of Gloria that experienced *No Show*, edition 101, City Centre in June 2020:

I guess it touched me, just deep somehow to experience this, this vibration, often harmony of these feelings and thoughts that I connected with from my life, also some things that were maybe a little bit alien to me and I feel that are not maybe necessarily present in my life but like that yes, in fact still [...] I identified with and live in yes, [...] then in the end the doorbell rang and then I was so awake. (Gloria)

RITUAL V

You are meeting your co-creator for the first time; she cheerfully greets you and invites you to sit in the living room. Soon she appears out from the kitchen with home made cakes and coffee. You look into her eyes and it's like looking into an abyss, you sense an ocean of experience, emotions, hopes and dreams, sacrifices, loss, and disappointment.

When she starts to speak the sea bursts out of her like a force of nature.

You are immersed in her story.

Now it is a part of you.

TASKS

OBSERVATION

Pay attention to your energy level right now.

ACTION

Stand up from your chair and dance for a minute.

CONTEMPLATION

What activities are energising for you?

Questionnaire

Hi,

The piece is a part of an artistic research on sustainability and transformative power of the performing arts. The research project is called **How little is enough?** *Sustainable methods of performance for transformative encounters* and is a part of the PhD project of Steinunn at Theatre Academy of Theatre in Malmö (Lund University). It would be great if you could answer a few questions about your experience of the work. The answers will be used anonymously as a part of the research.

What emotion did the work evoke in you (make an x in front of the appropriate emotion)

Joy

Sorrow

Fear

Contentment/acceptance

Wellbeing

Curiosity

Anger

Irritation

Trust

Insecurity

Vulnerability

Other, what:

Non especially

Did any part of the work move you more than other? If yes, what part?

Do you consider yourself as a participant in the piece?

Yes

No

Not sure

Do find that the piece is about you?

Yes

No

Not sure

Do you think this work can be defined as staging/theatre?

Yes

Not sure

No

If No, what is missing?

How often do you attend site specific performances?

Often

Sometimes

It happens

Very rarely

Never, this is the first time

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

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