

Transformative Encounters Epilogue

Welcome to Transformative Encounters, today I am sitting alone in the studio six months after I set out to unpack the term performative encounter through a series of performative encounters. I invited eight scholars and practitioners to the studio, the encounters with them have been simmered in my system, and I feel an urge to revisit them and create an overview of the knowledge I acquired.

First, I want to tell you about why I chose to process this term through these performative and potentially transformative encounters.

As a trained life coach and a person with a long experience of being in leadership I understand the value in thinking through dialogue with my collaborators, and in my research, I have been so lucky to have as my supervisor, philosopher Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir who has introduced me to embodied critical thinking, and a method called Thinking at the edge, a tool to develop ideas through dialogue. The method was developed by dr. Eugene Gendlin and is a method that taps into what he calls the felt sense, or embodied knowledge, and helps you put words to it. This has been a technique that we have used throughout my research to develop my ideas and expand my knowledge.

So, in this podcast series I am expanding my practice of thinking through dialogue to my peers and in the series, I have been tapping into their experiences and ideas and I have to say that these performative encounters have been a great thinking tool.

I already mentioned this in the first episode with Maaïke Bleeker, a scholar who has been looking at theatre as a thinking apparatus. Me too, I am exploring the instrument of theatre in my artistic research *How Little is Enough?* where I look at sustainable methods of performance for Transformative Encounters.

I have been asking how little we artists need to produce in order for something artistic and transformational to happen? So, I have been trying to scale down and peel off my method and here I am exploring the affordances of performative encounters as a way of understanding what is essential to the instrument of theatre.

I have been using this term in describing my performances for the simple reason that they are all built around actual encounters between different agents. At the core there is an encounter between a host and a guest, but there are multiple encounters happening as a consequence of this original encounter; with people, more-than-human entities, forces, and ideas.

I have gradually understood that performative encounters are not only different in nature, but they lie at the core of performative experience as I see it. A performance is always an encounter between agents. So, I set out to explore what other practitioners would make of the term and how it manifested in their works. In the series I have had encounters with people that have practices and theories that involve performative encounters, each have their unique and specific experience of what an encounter looks like, how it is felt and what it can do. As anticipated, I discovered an ocean of thoughts, experiences, and practices.

My guests were professor Maaïke Bleeker, a dramaturge and theorist, Gigi Argiropoulou, curator and a researcher, Charlotte Østergaard, costume designer and researcher, Sofie Lebech, performing artist and associate professor, Tanja Diers dramaturge and researcher, Liv Kristin Holmberg, performance artist and researcher, Erik Pold performance maker and teacher and Sima Wolgast a social psychologist and a researcher.

In this episode I want to gather the things that resonate with me at the current state in my artistic inquiry. Let me start from the last episode.

My last guest Sima Wolgast, the only guest that is not from the performing arts, describes the arts as an arena where people can be together and connect to each

other. It is a place where we can sort out our values, Sima says, resonating with Charlotte Østergaard when she talked about how certain performances bounced with her value system. Sima describes how in our western culture, therapy often tries to fix the individual but does not necessarily help the individual to make changes to the system that brought about their problems, but in her opinion the arts have the potential to bring about changes. Sima claims that the arts are doing psychology and I have to agree that an artwork affects people in psychological ways. As an artist interested in bringing about social change through the arts, it is an asset to understand psychological processes to be able to sharpen my method, not to become a better therapist, but to better understand the affect of my work on the participants. Because in my view the arts have another role to play than the medical field. I see myself as having an obligation to society with my art – my intention is not to heal individual guests. As Sima pointed out, the ethical implication is not the same and our contracts with our clients look different. Even though I do not mean to do harm, I never signed an oath, and my accountability is not questioned in the same way as the therapist will be.

But when Sima described therapy strategies and treatment processes it struck me how similar these are to creative processes. Most importantly, it is how you play with ideas and how you place them to be visible to your audience or clients but at the same time separate from them. So, a type of play is a tool in psychology as in performance.

Eric Pold, having worked for years with participatory performances, first with Gob Squad in Berlin and now with his own company, Liminal in Copenhagen, works with game structure as a way to bring together different elements and create a context for an encounter between strangers. Together with other practitioners working with participatory and interactive performances, a type of game dramaturgy has been a valuable tool, especially if the work has multiple possible narratives, or like in my work, where the guests render their own stories and experiences as content. These strategies can involve, creating clear rules, providing objectives for participants, give

participant roles that involve playing, not acting, and give a framework for interactions and group building.

Dramaturge Tanja Diers talks about how the notion of performative encounter is very close to the term performance, that what happens during any performance is some kind of an encounter. I understand what Tanja is referring to. A performative moment is always an encounter with something, and what became clear in the different encounters I had with these artists and scholars are the multiple encounters that are in fact happening in any given moment during a performance, where the participants are in the mode of heightened attention, like Tanja also highlighted in our talk. This state of heightened attention is in my understanding a magical place where you are able to tap into the deeper meaning of things, an opening to an existential dimension. Here I am inspired by the ideas of Timothy Morton that describes the wonder of things when you observe them closely and Erika Fischer Lichte that talks about the reenchantment of the world that happens during a theatre performance. The heightened attention can change your perception on things you thought you knew.

It is of course not a given that you reach such a place, but these heightened moments have the potential to open a portal to new insight.

In the podcast we have applied the word encounter to many different types of meetings and revelations, not only between sentient beings, but also between entities of different nature, forces, and ideas. We have touched upon different types of enlightenment, the type when you come to an understanding during a performance, when you meet yourself, or your haunted ideas and stories. But it is clear to me that a performative encounter is something that happens in between two or more agents and is brought about by bringing together different elements. Maaïke Bleeker and Gigi Argyropoulou both stressed the unpredictability of the performative encounter, and that transformation only can happen if the encounter lands personally with you as a guest or a participant in a performance.

Maaike mentioned Deleuze's theories on time and space in film, when attempting to unpack performative encounters, and pointed out that collage in film can be seen as a kind of performative encounter of ideas. By bringing together different things or ideas you create a new meaning.

This is an idea I relate to the strategies therapists use and Sima described. How she would bring out a destructive idea that a client is struggling with and puts it against an unrelated idea to change the perception and meaning of that idea. Like if a person thinks they are a failure, they say a sentence stating that they are a failure in a silly voice, so that the idea that they took seriously becomes funny and even ridiculous. We use this method frequently in dramaturgical composition, placing unrelated objects together to create new meaning, and like Maaike suggests, you can call that an encounter of ideas.

Maaike also brought in Roger Kneebone's inquiry into expertise where he invented the term reciprocal illumination - a situation where two experts from different fields encounter each others expertise and are simultaneously illuminated by the encounter from totally different perspectives. This mutual illumination is highly personal and lands differently with different persons according to their background and knowledge, like in the example Maaike mentioned, the encounter between a medical surgeon and an expert in broidery. An encounter where they will benefit from encountering each others technique even though their practices are miles apart.

For the conditions of performative encounters Gigi Argyropoulou stressed how the environment where an encounter is placed is of utter importance. Gigi talks there about different landscapes, natural, urban, or social landscapes that can give the encounter a context, something outside the human to relate to. She even talks about mixing reality and magic to enhance creativity and allow new ideas to emerge. Creating space for the unplanned.

Charlotte's project with connecting costumes where she would walk together with changing partners around Copenhagen's urban landscapes in one connected costume, is a wonderful example of circumstances that provide multiple encounters

with different elements. Charlotte mentioned the weather in particular as an important agent in that work, adding to the work's deeper meaning and putting things in perspective in addition to the random people passing by making remarks and engaging with the work in unpredicted ways. The work queers the space it travels through, makes it stand out. The urban landscape comes with ethical challenges that need to be addressed. Like in Erik's work in the public sphere, where a total stranger can accidentally become a performer in a work observed by the invited guests or when audience members unexpectedly become performers for accidental spectators that pass by a participatory performance situation in the public. How to tackle these unpredictable entities that interact and sometimes interfere with the work.? There is maybe no time to make an ethical agreement with the accidental participants. Erik claims that the public sphere is a performative space and if you are out there you should be prepared to engage in whatever might happen. You are already out for an adventure.

With Sofie Lebech, I spoke about dissonance, how guests can possibly resist to surrender to the work and start to rebel against the rules of the play. In my work, the rules are hard to break since I leave so much space for people to adjust to the work, but there are always some basic rules to follow and if a person needs to show resistance, there is always a way of bending the rules. According to Sofie, when the work is in the open it calls for a response, and as an artist, you can neither predict nor control the response. In a participatory work the response can immediately affect other participants and there is unfortunately always a risk that a response of one guest affects other guests in a negative manner.

We spent a lot of time discussing safety and how to create a safe space for a guest to open up for a transformative encounter. This is equally important for therapists as it is for the performing artist. For someone to be changed by a single event they either have to be taken by surprise with the possibility of ending up with a lasting trauma or they willingly surrender to a situation that is potentially transformational. This can be situations like education, therapy, or an artistic experience. In order to surrender

one needs to feel safe to a certain extent, you need to trust the situation not to go out of control. Given that a performance is a psychological experience that has transformational potential, one needs to create the right conditions and a relatively safe place for that to happen.

Most of my guests had worked with different elements to create safe spaces, but Liv Kristin, despite creating clarity and stability for the guests to her one-on-one performances, appreciates the vulnerability of the situation. Going to the theatre should not be like going to a spa, she said, so a certain degree of discomfort is welcomed. This is in tune with Donald Winnicott's holding environment. The term is used to describe the conditions for psychotherapy to take place, a psychological space that is both safe and uncomfortable. Holding environment is safe but still challenging, like a situation when a parent running beside the child while learning to ride a bike. The child is safe in that the parent will catch it if it falls, but the parent is not there to take away the risk, only to show support and confirm that they care. This challenging but still safe environment is something I try to create in my works and is a part of my method that I call embracing and porous dramaturgy. Where the 'embrace' represents the holding environment.

Sofie Lebech also talked about the instability of the pedagogical situation, that she states is a type of performative encounter. It is in that liminal space that transformation can start to take place, and what I am trying to do with my embracing and porous dramaturgy is to carefully hold the space for my guests, but still give them space to roam freely in a structure that gives them an opportunity to encounter different agents that might affect them profoundly. This structure is at risk to collapse if left too porous.

But what is at stake? What is the worst that can happen?

There are things we fear – but are those the things we want to avoid? Liv Kristin welcomes people's fears and invites them for an encounter with themselves and their deepest fears. In her works on death, she literally invites her guests to imagine how it is to be dead. The existential encounters she offers are designed to shake her guests.

This is and will be the most powerful encounter, that with yourself, your values, and beliefs. In Liv's work the encounter with yourself is brought about by many layers of encounters, ultimately leading you into the place where you find yourself. It is through the site, the vibrating music, the text, the embodiment of all these elements and the encounter with Liv as the master of ceremony; this series of performative encounters lead to an internal space where the guests encounter themselves. In my works it is also through a sensory and embodied journey through different landscapes with multiple simultaneous encounters that leads to the ultimate revelation. But not all will have the same journey, and not all will encounter themselves.

But in my case these performative encounters have truly been transformative and the scope of thinking I did during these meetings; I would never have achieved by reading or thinking on my own.

I set out to explore performative encounters as a dramaturgical tool to use in designing participatory performances, but instead I found a term that gives me an insight into what happens in a performative situation. Sure, I will be able to use the tool. To set up and pay attention to the actual meeting points between agents, pay attention to ethical aspects, understand my guests, the holding environment, the use of play and so on. But the notion of the aesthetic experience being a series of encounters between different elements is a thrilling discovery. A discovery that is in line with my wish to create relation specific performances that are designed to incorporate the many different realities that happen to come together during a performance.

Because we humans need to be in connection with other humans and the more-than-human, in the same way we need food and shelter, and for me making performances is about creating connections. The work I now create, I choose to call relation specific performances, highlighting the specificity of the relations that are being created or reinforced during the experience.

Because without relations we will die.

With these contemplations I will bid farewell for the last time in this series.
You have been listening to Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir in Malmö Sweden.