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Compassionate Irritability:

Interdisciplinary collaboration as an act of kindness

In their book *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*, Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson and Katie Normington provide a useful overview of the histories and innovations of contemporary devised performance across Europe, USA and Australia, drawing on key writers and observers. In their introduction, they attempt a definition, noting that devising does not denote any particular style or methodology, but generally refers to "A process of generating a performative or theatrical event, often but not always in collaboration with others" (Govan, Nicholson and Normington 2007, 4-5). They go on to clarify that "the practice of generating, shaping and editing new material into an original performance remains a central dynamic" of a devised process. Importantly, they characterise devising as "alternative, oppositional and democratic" (Govan, Nicholson and Normington 2007, 5).

"Kindness" is rarely foregrounded as an important characteristic of collaborative devising practice. Often, theatre-makers speak to conflict or disquiet as necessary elements of the process. Tim Etchells focusses on discomfort and misalignment as touchstones of his methodology, describing collaborating as "a kind of perfect understanding of the other bloke, but a mis-seeing, a mis-hearing, a deliberate lack of unity" (Etchells 1999, 56). Frantic Assembly's Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett posit outcome as the driving motivator above all else, stating "the main point of creativity is about the end point, the public event" (Graham and Hoggett 2009, 6). Anne Bogart highlights the necessity of empathy in live performance, but with a particular focus on the relationship between the audience and the actor, rather than the devising process itself, as a generator of change through empathetic exchange (Bogart 2014, 102).

At its most reductive, "kindness" is a kind of fluffy word. It is far less dynamic than some of the terms we usually associate with devising in contemporary contexts such as "urgent" or "risky", involving "collisions" or "accidents", needing to be "rendered" or "wrought". These terms feel insistent - full of bluster and bravado and anxious impatience - reminiscent of a plastering-over process, a forceful wrangle, or a car-crash. We do not often talk of being kind to the work itself, to its processes and its material constituents. We do not value - or even acknowledge - the forces of kindness that foster a rigorous and fruitful collaboration. We do not articulate the way in

which the kindness that underpins deep friendships, long histories and tacit understandings can ground an unstable and deeply chaotic process. A consideration of kindness (defined as the quality of being friendly, generous and considerate) offers a lateral and generative approach to making work with others which makes space for novel, rich and exciting practices.

Devising, then – making work from nothing – is by definition a process which is uncertain and unwieldy. Bringing other disciplines to the collaborative mix can produce additional layers of complexity to the devising process. Competing agendas, unfamiliar vocabularies, conflicting intentions and different working processes can complicate the usual pressures, and be a challenge to manage. In this paper, I bring considerations of kindness to bear on two interdisciplinary performance projects that I led from 2017-2019. The first, *Earshot*, saw two performance seasons across this time, and the second, *Fugue State*, is in development at the time of writing. Both projects are inter-related, not least because the second work is predicated on the first, and the key creative personnel worked across the two projects. This paper foregrounds kindness as a starting place for interdisciplinary collaboration, drawing on the works themselves as well as interviews with the collaborating artists. It asks: How might collaborating artists challenge discipline-specific habits and open up a creative and generative space for change by attending to kindness in all things – people, objects, time, the work itself? Is this even possible?
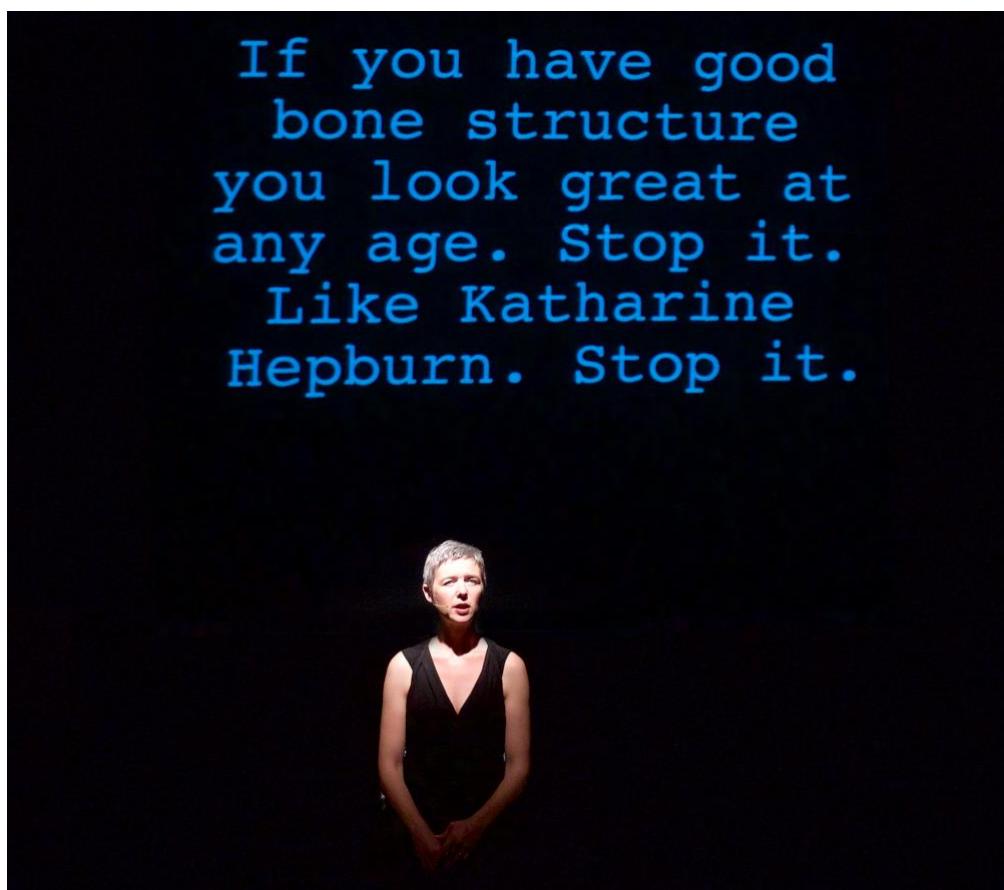

Fig.1. Josephine Lange in *Earshot*, fortyfivedownstairs, 2017. Photo by Leo Dale.
Originally commissioned by Melbourne's Festival of Live Art in Melbourne in 2016, *Earshot* was created under the banner of "Kate Hunter and collaborators", featuring myself and Josephine

Lange (performance), Jem Savage (sound design), and Glynis Angell (dramaturge). Billed as "part live performance, part undercover surveillance operation", *Earshot* was constructed entirely from overheard and eavesdropped conversations gathered from the general public. Ostensibly a two-hander with myself and Josephine on stage, sound featured crucially in the work, as an incidental element, or as subtext, or even at times as a disembodied third "actor". A key characteristic of this work was an experimental approach to the ways in which characters and vignettes faded in and out of being, adopting an "impression of presence" (Féral 2012, 30) that was enacted or manifested through sonic means. *Earshot* troubled the distinctions between theatre and poetry, recital and performance, music and spoken word, whilst experimenting with a vast array of analogue and digital technologies that spatialised, extruded, layered and otherwise embellished sound throughout the space. These sonic juxtapositions and superimpositions were manifested through a series of instrumentations created with a variety of objects and devices including tin cans, funnels, computer software, electric knives, digital delays, greywater hose, and plastic foot pumps.

The content for the work - distilled through a significant amount of research and development – often captured intimate instances of interaction in which people were not at all kind to each other. Sometimes these were hilarious interludes; at other times they were dark moments of petulance or arrogance. The work premiered at fortyfivedownstairs, Melbourne, in 2017, and was re-programmed for the Due West Festival in 2019. *Earshot* was critically and popularly acclaimed, lauded as much for its unique theatrical experimentation as its musical approach to text.

Fig. 2. Kate Hunter in *Fugue State*, creative development 2019. Photo by Leo Dale.

Inspired by life extension processes, cryogenics, transplantation and other advances in biomedical science, *Fugue State* used pitch-shifting technology, and computer-generated audio

sequencing to interrogate an urgent 21st century concern: the radical ways in which new technologies have shifted the line between living & dying. In music, "fugue" refers to the contrapuntal and interwoven relationship between voices that are harmoniously interdependent from one another but taken up and developed over time. In cognitive science, "fugue" implies a loss of awareness of one's identity, often coupled with flight from one's usual environment. *Fugue State* built on *Earshot's* experiments with verbatim, polyphony and the musicality of language in live performance, but there was a lot more going on, particularly in relationship to the dramaturgical intersection of physical, vocal, gestural and textual elements. It featured the same creative team as *Earshot*, with the addition of a choreographer (Sally Smith) and a concert harpsichordist (Diana Weston). These additions raised the stakes in terms of complexity – more people, new terminologies, and very different ways of generating, devising and refining material.

The work featured a diverse collection of lost, borrowed, stolen and copied texts which were sung, pitch-shifted, blended and performed. Disrupted by Jem's live digital manipulation and processing in counterpoint with the actors' voices, phrases were extracted, sequenced, played backwards, and otherwise subverted. The artists were keen to explore the ways in which notions of identity and self might be embodied and disembodied through this intersection of spoken, sung and digitally altered words. The development of *Fugue State* highlighted the exciting possibilities of experimenting musically with each other through vocal delivery.
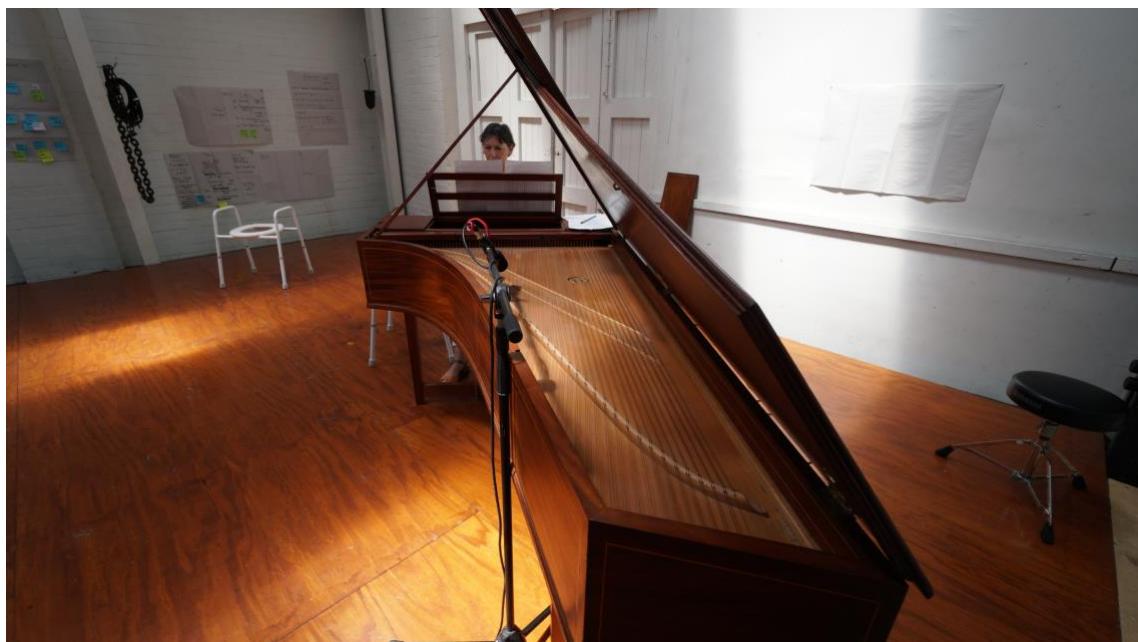
Fig. 3. Diana Weston in *Fugue State*, creative development 2019. Photo by Leo Dale.

There was a spectrum of collective experience across both *Earshot* and *Fugue State*, and the creative team was variously very familiar, a little familiar, or not at all familiar with my working process. All artists, although specialists in particular fields, had musical experience, and musical

forms and structures influenced both works greatly. I shared a history of practice with Glynis, Sally and Josephine (the core artistic team): we had all trained and/or made work together previously in improvisation and as physical theatre practitioners, and we drew on a devising vocabulary which used material and task-based approaches to space and time. Sound designer Jem Savage, also a musician and composer, had a practice in experimental and improvisatory music, digital processing, prepared instrumentation, musical contraptions and objects with the Australian Art Orchestra. Jem had a musician's working knowledge of the compositional terms that we used, and contributed significant nuance to the ways in which we talked about textures and qualities of sounds and moments, but he had not encountered the ways in which these terms might be applied to objects, bodies, words, or spaces. Diana, as harpsichordist in the second project, was an highly accomplished concert musician and accompanist. Although she was entirely new to experimental music and improvisation practices, she had an encyclopaedic understanding of baroque music, counterpoint and fugal structures, and this knowledge was crucial in expanding the vision for the work.

For the core artistic team, the conventional "how-tos" of collaborative devising practice applied: being respectful of and generous to ideas. We listened to each other, and were not precious about ownership of material. Our process was grounded in laughter and irreverence - sometimes crudity – but always respect. All artists shared a common curiosity about and passion for the thematic material of the works. This shared interest served as a useful grounding amidst the benevolent chaos that arose once we were on the floor.

It was during our very embodied rehearsal process that we encountered different discipline approaches and had to work to uncover vocabularies that enabled all of us to understand what we wanted to do and how we were going to do it. Sometimes these specific discipline approaches were about time or structure; sometimes they were about space and silence and absence; sometimes about the dramaturgical considerations of music and sound. For those of us practised in improvisation, there was a mutual understanding of how far to push things. For others, this was not so clear. To accommodate such differences, we cultivated a detailed, instructional, but empathetic kind of language in our dialogues with each other:

> You phrased your directions [to Diana] very particularly – your instructions about duration had a very different tone compared to the more improvisatory way we were working. I mean - no, that's not quite true. She was improvising but you were more direct. You said, "Do this. Stop at five seconds. Stop at ten seconds". It was more specific. Whereas, knowing that we three have that common ground in improv, we might have just felt our way into that. (Sally Smith, post-project interview, September 2020).

At other times we argued, gently, because we had different expectations of how long things should take, or didn't understand each other's descriptions of duration, or wanted to just get on when others needed to experiment and doodle around:

> As choreographer, I wasn't so patient with the technical, fiddly-diddly of knobs and stuff. I just wanted to get on with it because I wanted the actors to do that

> bit again. I knew in my mind that that was [Jem's] process, but emotionally I
> was like ants in my pants you know! sitting on my hands and sort of waiting.
> (Sally Smith, choreographer, post-project interview, September 2020).

This kind of interaction – let's call it "compassionate irritability" – was made possible because the core team was able to readily let go of ownership within a practice of non-attachment which acknowledged the material and non-hierarchical nature of theatrical composition. Once an idea was brought forward it was detached from its originator and became a material object to be manipulated, considered, re-constructed, experimented with, or thrown out. It was neither desirable or not-desirable. It was a generous approach to ideas as fodder.

> I kind of feel like there's a way of being vulnerable and stripped raw that is held
> by kindness, and that is much more productive and sustainable as a practice
> than just ripping yourself apart. And hating everything." (Kate Hunter, lead
> artist, post-project interview, September 2020).

> I think it's really important that if you are bringing your whole self into the work,
> or if it's a vulnerable place to say your truth - if you feel you are going to be
> bashed over the head although you want to be really brave and say that you're
> lost, or you think this is a pile of shit - there has to be a holding, a framework
> for that. And that is kindness. Kindness doesn't rule out bravery or risk or
> heroism. (Glynis Angell, dramaturge, post-project interview, September 2020).

In "Vibrant Matter", political theorist Jane Bennett re-frames Deleuze and Guatarri's notion of assemblages to reflect the co-existence of entities – "vibrant materials" within an event-space (Bennett 2010, 23). Clearly the ontological complexities of assemblage theory are not within the scope of this paper; however, Bennett's notion of "assemblage" is a useful metaphor to apply to interdisciplinary collaboration.

If I consider my own practice as an assemblage, for example, it might be understood as a blend of elements which are non-hierarchical and interdependent, including (but not limited to): anxiety, petrol, the internet, music, spreadsheets, flow, noticing, breath, egocentric delusions, electricity, memories, somatic practices, guilt, Robert Rauschenberg, yearning for recognition and awards, embarrassment, staples, post-it notes and other stationery items, doubt, laughter, hopelessness, wrinkles, secrets, curiosity, regret, images, lists, movement trousers, training, proprioception, choosing things, lunch, the particular kind of urgency that is underpinned by laziness, touch-typing, optimism, plastic, electronic signals, anger, systems, microphones, feet, fear of death, wooden surfaces, confusion, schlepping, diseases and pretence, just to name a few. I view and manage these overlapping elements materially: they are fundamental to the ecology of my work practice and process. They are traits and themes and cognitive processes and tools that are bound up fundamentally in the practice. I accept these elements as part of my self, kindly, even as at times they make me flustered, irritable or impatient, or overwhelmed by choice.

Fig. 4. (From left) Josephine Lange and Kate Hunter, Earshot rehearsal 2017. Photo by Leo Dale.

The interdisciplinary collaborative process, then, is a complex set of systems, interactions and interrelated occurrences, constructed of processes which are typically non-linear, fluid and responsive, and which often feel chaotic and tumultuous. Bennett argues that the order of things within such assemblages is not fixed and is constantly being shifted and re-worked in accordance with the moment itself. This generates a kind of freedom of choice enacted by the participants, (Bennett 2010, 97). If we acknowledge interdisciplinary collaboration as fluid, unstable and unknowable, then bringing kindness to the work and its constituents - acknowledging all elements as useful and necessary parts of the whole - effects agency, or the appearance of it, to this unwieldy process.

> When I think about kindness, it's not just my usual sort of pedestrian interpretation of how I might interact with it; that is, the "I am kind to you and you are kind to me" consideration. I want to understand kindness in a more abstracted, poetic, metaphorical way: for example, being kind to the work that arises, being kind to the theatrical elements that we play with. Those elements are space and light, and music and body, time and anxiety and so on. If we are kind to all of those things, we give equal space to all of them in the process. No one element is more important than another. (Kate Hunter, lead artist, post-project interview, September 2020).

The singular characteristic of interdisciplinarity is a synthesis of approaches to create something new. The novel sets of practices that were generated in *Earshot* and *Fugue State* – practices that evolved across musical, performative and sonic disciplines - required a new vocabulary to be

developed around artistic & creative language. The artistic team did not force the ideas; we did not push or create collision or violent juxtaposition. Our friendship, humour and deep compassion fostered a gentle devising culture which made space for ideas to arise on the floor. Despite – or perhaps because of - the deeply unstable process that defines devising, we allowed the work to show itself to us, aiming not to distinguish our disciplines, but rather to create a new, undefined thing.

The myriad descriptions of the kindnesses applied to practice in this article – accommodation of ideas, adaptation of language, compassionate irritability - are framed by the notion of interdisciplinarity as an assemblage. This consideration of art-making has important implications for theatre-makers and practitioners, because it generates new strategies for making work and imparts rigour to practice methodologies. Kindness brings space to collaborators when faced with a multiplicity of competing demands in a creative process (How are decisions made? What is important? Why?) Kindness is antithetical to the neoliberal free market-oriented narrative which reduces artists and art practice to economic metrics, key performance indicators and product-driven outcomes. In a world which is increasingly unkind, ungenerous and without compassion, kindness in these small but potent endeavours is a radical act of creative possibility.

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