

It Comes *In Waves*

A Conversation Series

Katie

Welcome to 'It Comes in Waves' an intergenerational conversation series presented by the Women's Art Register and hosted by me, Katie Ryan. Developed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, this series will feature conversations between women and non-binary artists and arts professionals on themes of trauma, care, community and identity, among others. These conversations will facilitate knowledge sharing and support across generations by pairing emerging and early career artists and writers with some of the longest-standing members of the Women's Art Register.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that this conversation series has been produced on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri and Boonwuring people of the Kulin Nations. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I respectfully acknowledge that this land has been home to some of the oldest stories in human history, deep time stories that document the evolution of species and recall climatic shifts. These stories have been preserved and shared through Indigenous oral traditions that continue to this day. I extend this acknowledgment to the peoples of the lands you may be listening on and encourage you to reflect upon the stories of these lands.

Today I'll be speaking with Manisha Anjali and Meredith Rogers.

Manisha is a writer and artist working across text and performance. Her practice is rooted in the language of dreams and exile. Manisha is the author of *Electric Lotus* and has been, a Writer-in-Residence at Incendium Radical Library and a Hot Desk Fellow at The Wheeler Centre. Manisha is the producer of *Neptune*, an archive of dreams, hallucinations and visions by the People of the World.

Meredith makes theatre and performance on different scales in conventional and out-there spaces, most recently as a member of the award-winning queer performance collective, Gold Satino. She was a co-founder of both the Women's Art Register and the feminist theatre company, Home Cooking Theatre Co. She worked at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries from 1974 to 1979 and in the editorial collective of *Lip: A Feminist Arts Journal* from 1976 to 1984.

Thank you Meredith and Manisha for joining me for this digital conversation. To begin, I'd like to ask Meredith to tell us about the evolution of your art practice. You've worked with various galleries, collectives and journals, so perhaps you can also speak to the importance of collaboration within your work.

Meredith

I've been around for a while, so it's a long story. I'll try and not make it too boring. I always wanted to work in theatre, but there were very few training options when I was coming through and I was also very interested in art. And so, I did a degree at Melbourne in art history, with a lot of terrific people like Janine Burke and Ann Stephen and Gerard Vaughan and Susanne Davies. A lot of people whose names you've probably come across in the art world. But anyway, so really, I was a terrible undergraduate and I mostly did student theatre.

Then in 1974, Kiffy Rubo had applied for money to start a contemporary arts program for the Ewing gallery. I won't go into the history of the Ewing here, will I? No. Anyway, it was a part-time job and I thought, well, that's great. I've finished my incredibly desultory degree. Now I'm going to look for acting work but meanwhile, I can support myself by working in this gallery and the gallery became all-consuming. I still did some theatre work at the same time, but really the next five years, I was completely engrossed in a really exciting and dynamic moment in contemporary, forward-moving, non-object, conceptual but also painterly and sculptural work at the Ewing. So they're my sort of, twin beginnings, I suppose. And then let's just skip ahead [laughs], because you've mentioned collectives and journals. You read the article about arts Melbourne, but *Lip* magazine was the really important one for me, we started that in '75. Yes, that would be right after Lucy Lippard's visit.

Katie

So, what was *Lip Magazine*?

Meredith

Lip Magazine was a journal of the visual and performing arts, and it was edited and produced by a collective of Melbourne feminist artists, performers, budding academics, reviewers and so on. It kind of drew together a whole lot of strands of thinking for me because it was a place where you could think about performance and about the visual arts simultaneously.

Katie And was there much connection across those fields at that time, or were they quite separate?

Meredith They were pretty separate, in a lot of ways. I always find that one a little bit difficult to think about because I feel so kind of embedded in both. But I'm really aware of the difference in the approaches. You know, it seems to me that fine artists feel freer than most other disciplines and Manisha, you can argue with me on this, to go into what other people regard as their territory. Whereas, you know, theatre, we always regard ourselves... Well, Now we're kind of on our uppers totally. We've got no platform. I mean, the live act is in free fall, I think. But yes, primarily I work in theatre now because, yes, you're right about collaboration, but also because it is my primary mode of communication and my primary art practice. And I divide into theatre and performance because I think they're actually really different. There used to be, at one stage, people talked about contemporary performance as distinct from sort of fine art performance because it's sort of different again. But we might want to kind of chew that out later. And I think I've talked continuously quite long enough now.

Katie No, that's fine. That's great. Manisha, I believe that you initially studied literature and film and you've more recently been researching feminist practices of indentured Indo-Fijian women. Could you tell us a little bit about this research and discuss how it informs your work?

Manisha Yes, sure. I'd like to start by talking about indenture. It was basically a system that was birthed when slavery was abolished. So between 1879 and 1916, Indians were taken by dubious means to work on sugar colonies in Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago. The idea was that indentures were different from slavery in the sense that there was a contract, an agreement. So I'm a descendant of indentured labourers, Girmiteyas, who in Fiji worked for the Australian owned Colonial Sugar Refining Company. It was a period of time that was characterized by a lot of violence, suicide and dissolution of the human spirit, but also rebellion and the women occupy a space which Margaret Mishra and Indo-Fijian academic calls double colonization, where they were subject to imperialism being the white overseer, as well as the Indian patriarchy. So looking at the resistance practices of these women during these oppressive times. Their actions are actually key in helping abolish the system of indenture. As their stories of mistreatment sparked protests globally. They carried a rebellious spirit, refusing to work after giving birth, choosing to engage in sex work, and even forming a women's gang that sought physical retribution for their rapes and beatings. Doing this research, there was a mystical component to it as well. I was interested in the folk psyche, plantation poetry and songs from other

countries where indenture took place. And just ancient religious texts that shed light on belief, superstition and behaviour. So, these stories from the coolie lines and the plantations are what I call origin stories, that kind of form the basis of my practice and also my being. That's rooted in themes of actually being unrooted, unbelonging, historical displacement and unknown ancestries. The identity of Indo-Fijian people is a kind of non-identity, a fragmented community. And I think there is a sense of empowerment in that not subscribing to an existing place, idea or doctrine, which I think is evident in everything I do because it does seem to be kind of scattered and moving in between the now and the kind of ancient. And I do a lot of work in the dream realm, I guess and that's another thing which comes from Indo-Fijian women, particularly my mother. Growing up in the islands, it was understood that the language of dreams was synonymous with women's language. Which I think says a lot about gendered expression, like who is silenced and in which way.

Katie And where did you access these stories, like where are they held.

Manisha These stories I accessed while I was doing my Honours at Vic Uni about three years ago. A lot of these stories come directly from newspapers found in the archives that are located in Suva, Fiji. So whenever I do go back to Fiji, I'll spend a few hours, days in the archives just rummaging through. So, a lot of it was recorded and a lot of it wasn't. And yeah, as time goes on, there are academics who are putting together these, these stories and most of the stories are still in the archives. It takes a while to piece it all together.

Katie Yeah, it's amazing that they have been kept. I think that shows how important archives can be.

Manisha Yep, for sure.

Katie So, Meredith, I wanted to ask you about your involvement with another arts discourse publication. I know you were involved in setting up the Art Almanac in 1974, including typing a copy for the first editions on an electric typewriter. This really highlighted how much the way we access and produce arts discourse has changed in a relatively short space of time. Have you noticed any effects these changes have had on local arts communities?

Meredith Yes, I guess. Well, you know, yeah. I mean, historically, we had an exhibition of audio art in the Ewing in, would have been '77, I suppose. It was after I had gone to America on a reconnaissance trip. And video, we had the first videos, you know, around that time too. So video was new and experimental and exciting. And one of the funny things about that period now and technology is that often technology is most kind of, interesting when it's at its least

congealed, in a way. So the way that you could use video then was much more kind of, at the edges of visual ideas. And before everything became white balanced and, you know, perfect and easy. Sort of intuitive, but sort of controlling.

Katie Yeah, I suppose it would have been a lot more material as well.

Meredith And more material in a lot of ways, yes. Another thing that happened when I was in first in America in 1976, I discovered colour photocopying there and we didn't have it in Australia. Tim Burns had made this book which I'm so glad I bought because it's just extraordinary, It's called 'Why Are There No Crosswalks in Mildura', it was part of a Mildura sculpture triennial exhibition. (But crosswalks, of course, is the American word for pedestrian crossing.) But anyway, colour photocopies were exquisite in their materiality at that time. Then they became just ordinary. They didn't come to Australia for quite a long time. And somebody told me that was because we didn't have colour television here yet. So, I just I think that's interesting in terms of... So that is about how artists use it, use technology, I suppose more recent.

Katie I think kind of, the speed and extent to which discourse can be shared now is so different from then. It feels so natural for us to be able to post things digitally and share writing so easily. But to think about typing something out and having...

Meredith With tip-ex couldn't even autocorrect! It was a golf ball; it was a nightmare! Yeah, that's true.

Katie Do you think that that meant that there was more dialogue happening in person, between people? Because that was the more immediate way to talk about art?

Meredith Oh, that's interesting. I'm not sure, postal art was big. We had two exhibitions of postal at the Ewing and that was sort of, that was a way of communicating slowly. But directly and outside institutional control. Which is what we think we have now, but we don't but, you know, we sort of think we do, in a way. I mean, people live in their era, and when you've lived in a number of eras, it's difficult to know which one to be talking about at which moment. But you don't feel... it doesn't. [Sigh] No, look, I don't know the answer to your question.

Katie That's OK. It doesn't need a definite answer at all. I guess it's a good opportunity then to ask Manisha about the online dream journal that you have been making since 2019. Could you tell us a bit about that project?

- Manisha** Yes. So 'Neptune' started as an audio platform where I was interviewing artists and writers about their dreams. When the pandemic hit Australia, in the first lockdown here in Melbourne, I began documenting and publishing dreams and hallucinations by the People of the World. As a research project, to see what could be said about what happens to our psyche during our time of collective isolation. And just how pestilence is rendered in contemporary consciousness. We have so much literature and writings about when disease has stricken us in the past. And yeah, so it's just really interesting. I just feel like we're sharing this disease and we're sharing border closures and deaths and quarantines and distancing. It's like distance is what we have in common right now. And where are we travelling to in our sleep and in our dreams?
- Katie** Have you found any common themes that have come up like relating to the pandemic?
- Manisha** Yes, there's a lot of pandemic dreams that you would expect, like people dreaming that they're sick, that they're in hospital or contracting the disease from bodies of water. Just that feeling of being diseased, feeling out of control, which I think is expected. What I found most interesting, like some of the other symbols that were also really common, like eyes and dogs, snakes, cults and transformations like bodily transformations that weren't necessarily relating to illness, but more signifying a new world. Like people turning into nature or turning into leaves or turning into animals. And I found those transmutations really interesting.
- I also think dreams are the purest and oldest form of storytelling and the place where all mythology originates. That all of these symbols and narratives in the Dream Archive are what can constitute as the mythology of our time. What I love about this dream journal is that everyone is a storyteller, that everyone is an artist.
- Meredith** Do people report that they dream more or differently than they normally would?
- Manisha** I think, I'm not sure if they're dreaming more, but they're dreaming more vividly, I feel. And I think it's because, we just have less day to day distractions and perhaps easier access to our subconscious. I'm not sure.
- Katie** It's strange when things like keeping 1.5 metres apart from people start to enter your dreams, then you know that it's deeply part of your life. [laughter]
- Manisha** Yeah, it's crazy. It's funny what you can get used to in such a short period of time as well.
- Meredith** Yeah, that's... I think that's really true.

Katie I mean, it's like if you're, you know, bilingual or you learn a language to a point where it starts to be in your dreams or you start to think in it. That's when it's fully activated in your brain. And yeah, I think Covid restrictions are fully activated in my brain, [laughs] unfortunately. Meredith, I wanted to ask about a community project that you were involved with, the Mill Community Theatre. Could you tell us a bit about this project and the approach that it had to engaging the local community?

Meredith James McCaughey, who I had worked with previously in an Oresteian trilogy at The Pram Factory and various other projects. Was invited to teach at Deakin University, and he made it a condition of his taking up the appointment. This is so olden days, so not how universities are now. This is a real question, [laughs] rather than technology, what's happened to our universities!? But anyway, he made it a condition that he have a space suitable for teaching students, but also to run a theatre company. His aim was to make a theatre company that engaged with Geelong.

Community theatre was sort of beginning at that stage and there's several different strands to it, to how it was then. And every time I hear the word community, I think, what do they mean? And that's always a problem. But anyway, so a group of artists went to Geelong. We had the most beautiful space and we made a lot of really, I think, exciting theatre. With and about... sometimes, but also the most exciting... [sigh] I mean, I've written a book about it. So there's the local history plays, there's the classic plays, and there's the various kind of small engagements with particular groups within Geelong. Because, you know, I mean, Geelong, is Geelong a community? Well, yes and no, you know what I mean. Within it, there's lots of communities.

But the most exciting thing that we did and the thing that a lot of other people took away from it was this... every week, and it was an accident that it started in the first place. But we would put an invitation out, it was an open house, we would plan some events, you know, that we would make theatre - performance events - that we would make with whoever turned up... A surprisingly large number of people turned up.

Katie So this was just the general public?

Meredith Just the general public. Yeah, well, we discovered after a while that the chief psychiatrist at Cunningham, DAX, was sending along a group of his clients. And there were a couple of things like that, sometimes there'd be kind of odd groups of, teenagers that you kind of gradually worked out over the course of the evening, that they'd been kind of chivvied along by somebody you know, or that they were in some other program that this was helping. But mostly it

was just families, people who were interested, just a completely random collection of people would just turn up. And we'd have coffee and awkward chats. Then we'd do a group warm for, you know, up to 100 people, often enough.

And then we'd divide into smaller groups and we'd make pieces of performance. And then we'd come back together into the main space and show each other what we'd done. The really exciting thing we did sometimes was make the whole evening around a whole theme so that when we came back together, everybody was simultaneously audience and performer, within the making of this piece that moved through. We had one huge white space and one smaller white space. And then there was a cafeteria and various others, so we would move through the whole space. And I think in a way that was... the way I talked about it in the book that I wrote was in relation to Victor Turner and performance anthropology and ideas about ritual and the creation of 'communitas' through ritual. And I think that's what we did. There was a sort of a formal shape that people after their first time, they would know what the shape of the evening would be. And anyway, we'd tell everybody at the beginning what the overall shape would be. And then within that, you would make these things, with these people. Yes... so it was a form of performed ritual.

Katie And do you think that that openness to the public affected the way the organization was perceived or supported by local people?

Meredith Yeah, I think it was. I mean, the funny thing was... Geelong has changed a lot since then. But when we arrived, there was a very strong repertory theatre company. Who kind of ran theatre in town and who really, you know... there was a kind of an unspoken standoff between us. Because we were doing completely... making something that was completely not the sort of thing that they were doing. But we were being endorsed by the University, the *new* University. So it was a bit complicated in that way. Most of the people who came were not people who had any particular investment in theatre, they were invested in 'The Mill' and what they did with us.

Katie And was there anything that you learned from your time there that you think is useful now looking forward and the arts being in quite a precarious position?

Meredith Well, I think the things that I learned there are things that I've taken forward in every theatre, thing that I've done since, in lots of different ways. I don't know in terms of now. I mean, I don't know what, I mean... I really, really, really don't know if theatre is going to survive this.

Katie Yeah.

Meredith Not as live bodies in a space, breathing the same air. I mean when we talk about theatre phenomenologically, and just paused to notice that I said that in one take, [laughter] so I'm not going to say it again. That's what we talk about. We talk about breathing the same air. We talk about, you know, live bodies, feeling each other in the space, you know. Well, when's that going to happen again?

Katie Yeah, it's very scary. It's definitely very scary for performance.

Meredith Yes. And I mean, you know, the work that I've been doing most recently, not the piece that I think you want me to talk about later, but the work that I do with the company called Gold Satino. We make queer theatre performance work. The last show was really big for us. It was in three Honda Jazzes and the one before that was in a bus with ten people and one the before that was in one Honda Jazz. So, that's really intimate.

Katie Yeah. [Laughs]

Meredith I mean, the performance happened in and outside those, those vehicles, but that's where the audience was. So, I just don't know. I don't know because online is....

Katie Has your group Gold Satino, have they been looking at doing any stuff digitally or is that not something that they want to try and pursue.

Meredith No, 'Marvellous' We're thinking about digitally now. But, Gold Satino, we haven't come up to that bridge yet. We're still trying to get something on, we've got a gig in January, so who knows...?

Katie I mean, pandemics have happened before. I do like to think that life will return at a point. It's just a matter of time and what we want to do in the interim.

Meredith No, you're absolutely right. I was being unnecessarily apocalyptic.

Katie It's okay, it's definitely allowed to be apocalyptic right now. [laughter] I wanted to ask you, Manisha, because I think ritual is quite a big part of your practice. Your work often references religion, myth and symbols. And I was thinking about these things as foundational images or narratives which persevere through time. I was wondering if there is something comforting about working with these themes at a time of such great uncertainty.

Manisha I'm not sure if it's comforting but it's definitely exciting. Yeah, I'm deep in religious symbols and mythology, but as a means to contemplate meanings of life, death and consciousness and an avatar, an idol, an icon, a symbol. These are so loaded with meaning and the meanings change depending on the time, the dimension and the interpreter. And in our current time of global upheaval, mythology and folk stories become so much more potent. I think because they do tell us about these great events that have changed the world forever, like natural disasters, floods, fires, volcanoes, disease, creation, things that have consumed, destroyed, buried and reinvented humanity before.

I think we've been lucky in the West to live under an illusion of independence and free will, and now it seems like a force has appeared that is taking away our choices and freedoms. And I think there are lessons to be learnt. But, yes, as you said, pandemics have happened before. We've learned these lessons before. What I love about these stories is that everything is so harsh, there's nothing delicate about them. There's always a cause and effect or sometimes a kind of consequence that hasn't even been warranted. And looking at dreams and dream symbology, I feel like waking life at the moment is quite dreamlike. In the sense that all rules have been thrown out the window and the meanings of symbols are changing and shifting and you just don't know what's going to happen next. And yea again, not necessarily comforting, but exciting... keeps you on your toes.

Katie It's interesting, I think a lot of those myths and stories, they come back to quite embodied experiences or experiences around nature, like these natural disasters, life, death, birth. And so we're having this experience that is so situated around the body and its vulnerabilities. But the way that we are experiencing it and experiencing it as a community is often digital. So there's this strange interaction between these really ancient feelings and then their digital mediation.

Manisha Yeah, that is really interesting. And I do think about the role that the digital sphere or the realm, even because it is definitely a realm of its own. Yeah. The language and the stories that are being created or mediated, as you say, it's super interesting.

Katie Yeah, it's like a different mythology happening at the same time.

Manisha Yes, yeah, we are creating our own and we don't necessarily like it, but that's what's happening.

Katie Yeah, I think I had a big techno-optimism moment at the start. And then the very first, kind of, zoom hangout I did, I was like, this is so disappointing. It is

not a substitute. It works for some things, but it doesn't replace the subtleties of interacting with people in real life.

Manisha Yeah. And then we are alternating between these states of, as you said, Meredith apocalyptic thinking to nostalgia and then thoughts of the future and maybe a new world. And yeah, all of these realms we just go in and out of in isolation. It's wild.

Meredith It's true. I've got a slightly different take on well, not different, just somewhere else. What's happening for us with that project that you mentioned earlier, the one that was supposed to happen in October and isn't.

Katie So that's the one that you're preparing for, La Mama.

Meredith Yeah, we were. And we still will do a live version, I hope, next year. But the interesting thing is that in thinking about doing an online version or digital version because we don't know where it's going to go online. But because live theatre is so absolutely grounded in the body and in the place, using digital technology, you can blur the edges. You can go to other aural and visual states. We hope that might... What we're thinking is because we're thinking about... Manisha, this is a piece about, basically about dying. It's grounded in the relationships between very old, the oldest old, women and the old women who look after them. I'm the daughter. I mean, there's a couple of us...

So in trying to think about how our mothers are thinking about what's next. What psychological space they're in, what psychic space they're in now in relation to their body in completely different ways. And so it feels as if there might be things that we can do digitally that we couldn't necessarily do on stage, which is exciting... Sort of. [laughs]

Katie Do you mean like different effects?

Meredith Yeah, yeah. Basically, I'm talking about effects. You know, shadows and light on walls and all that stuff. But with the words.

Katie And that work seems really quite... I can never say this word, poignant, now because that's based on the relationship between you and your elderly mother?

Meredith Yeah.

Katie Because, compared to other countries, the death toll here has been very low. But it is this sense of the world losing a lot of elder people all at once.

- Meredith** Yes, yes. Yeah. And I wonder how that will feel. I mean, the figures in India are extraordinary. Well, you know, when I say extraordinary, they're competing with America now. But it is a very old generation, in Australia anyway. I mean, just anecdotally, my mother's mother died at 84 and mum is now 97. And I think that that's probably true for the generation, those generations, and God knows what it means for us? Apparently, the person's been born who lived to be 125 and I'm horribly afraid it might be me. [laughter]
- Katie** That could be great!
- Meredith** It'd be great...No!
- Katie** Yeah. To be honest, I wouldn't want to get to that age.
- Meredith** But you do feel in touch... especially with some I mean... It depends how people are towards the end. My mother keeps saying, 'I feel strange, I feel different. I don't know.' And so trying to press into what that 'strange' is and what that 'different' is, is quite curious. And one of my favourite lines is, there's a long sequence, where they're kind of, they're imagining well, it's a kind of it's a dream or it's an alternate reality or it's a fantasy about the daughter taking the mother out in a boat; because it's something they did when they were young. And then at one point that the mother is steering and the daughter suddenly says, 'we're drifting off mum, we're drifting off!' And it feels like that's what the play is, to me.
- Katie** So, Manisha I wanted to ask you about how repetition operates in your work, in your performance works, in particular, I was struck by the way a single word or phrase accumulates new meanings and associations as it travels through the piece. Is there a particular logic or intention behind your use of repetition?
- Manisha** There's no logic. It's all instinct, particularly in performance. The sounds that I repeat and the number of times I repeat them is usually entirely improvised. I think the repetition evokes a kind of pleasure and a kind of trance that is induced when those particular words and syllables and sounds are duplicated over and over and over. Performing repetition for me is, it's hypnotic, meditative and musical. But it's interesting how you said that the word accumulates new meaning as it *travels* through the piece. And I like the idea of the word travelling through the piece. I think another thing that happens or that can happen is that the word can lose its meaning and become devoid of its associations and attachments. At having been repeated so many times without context to uphold its significance. And it just becomes a sound and we just exist.

- Katie** Hmm. Yeah. I guess, I think to me it's sort of the idea that the words meanings and associations are infinite anyway. So like, as it repeats and picks up all of these new associations, the kind of inherent potential meaningless of words becomes more apparent. Like I think the first time I saw you perform was at Kings. And you did a piece that had 'tuna fish' in it over and over again.
- Manisha** Oh Yeah.
- Katie** Yeah. It's like the potential expansiveness of the meaning and association around one word kind of really came through for me in that.
- Manisha** Oh, I'm glad you saw that performance. That was really fun. Yeah. That piece is called 'Journey of Tuna Fish through 13 Dreams of Rain'. And I just tried to weave together the imaginings of the tuna fish and work some sound poetry in there, as well as a form of storytelling.
- Katie** Yeah, it was really beautiful.
- Manisha** Thank you.
- Katie** I wanted to ask you both because you both work across writing and performance. If there's a distinction for you between written and spoken word and what that might be? Do you want to go first, Meredith?
- Meredith** Sure. Well, yeah, there is. I mean, but sometimes words are written to be spoken. And so then they're a different thing as well. But then sometimes they're written to be read and they usually well, you know. I mean, I've done a lot of academic writing in my day. And I enjoyed it and found it quite performative in its fashion. But it's a different thing altogether from writing for performance. Yes. So sometimes the same words can be well, they're often written unless they're improvised. And I enjoy improvising too.
- Katie** Yeah, like if you writing a script for a performance, do you... Is there a different kind of voice that you take on for that? Obviously, academic writing is a very particular voice.
- Meredith** [laughs] Yea, Sometimes I got accused of writing like a journalist, which I thought was quite a compliment, really.
- Katie** Hmmm What does that mean?
- Meredith** Well, it means, you know, not impenetrable. A clear argument laid out. It's been interesting working on 'Marvellous' because we feel... It's me, Hester Joyce and Maude Davey. And Maude Davey has been directing and she's

instigated a number of, kind of, improvisations, that have led to a text. Which has been a fantastic process for us. And so then you really do get the voices of the people you're thinking about. I mean, I'm just in awe of novelists who can create characters and sustain them through a whole book and they're completely believable. It doesn't matter how close they are to the people who have written them, they still managed to make them independent. And I think that's extraordinary.

But our improvisatory construction methods have given us something towards creating characters, but also states of mind, I suppose, in that process. And the other writing process that I am involved in a lot is the one with Davina, she's the main writer of Gold Satino. And we write back and forth to each other, but we don't... That writing is much more kind of, it has its own voice, which I think is probably to do with being in a vehicle.

Katie These sound great, I really want to experience one. So I take it the audience are not in the vehicle?

Meredith Oh, yeah, the audience is in the vehicle. The actors aren't. Well Usually I mean, it depends. It's different. They're all different. But the last one we did, they came to a space... Oh, Docklands is amazing! We got this space, this huge ex-Lego warehouse. Empty, in this empty shopping mall. We rented it for a dollar and so we did some of the show in there. And then we took people out and down to a vacant lot just beside the bridge there, in cars and they saw things in that vacant lot. Then the cars drove off in convoy around and we popped up.

Katie So it's like a drive-in theatre?

Meredith I call it drive-in, drive-by. [laughter] Because you see things and then there's a soundtrack in the car.

Katie That's Great. Sounds really interesting.

Meredith Yeah, we have fun.

Katie Definitely sounds fun. Manisha, did you want to talk about the distinction for you between writing and spoken word.

Manisha Yeah. I guess in performance there's a physical embodiment of the spirit of the text and when speaking out loud... I go through a process where I listen to the piece and move the way that it wants to and it sort of takes on a life of its own. I just become this medium that has to deliver this message

to whoever is there. With the written word, the written word alone, I guess it's experienced by an audience and the writer doesn't see the audience experiencing it or control the way that it's being experienced. And there is so much beauty in that. Again, even in that context, like the text has a life of its own as well. And yeah, it's funny thinking about performance now, because obviously, I haven't done anything live since March. And just remembering, like usually in my performances, I'll try to make eye contact with everyone and be really present. And I've just adapted and I've started working on long-form writing and going deep. I'm also in awe of novelists, like so in awe. I'm trying to work myself up to being skilled in that way. I've got a plan and it's all happening, just living the Covid life and writing a lot.

Katie Yeah, that's great. If you can get started on a novel that's like the Covid lockdown dream! [laughter]

Manisha Yeah, I'm getting there. I've just been writing a bunch of existential texts, just three-page musings. It's a start, I've never really, I've always struggled with full sentences and narratives and character development. Poetry and the kind of performance that I do is just, it's just expression and moods and moments and colours, put together. But it's not a cohesive narrative, which has always been a challenge for me. I think something is going to work into my practice as time goes on.

Katie Do either of you have questions for each other?

Meredith Just. No, not really. I mean the pieces that you've been talking about sound fascinating and I wish I'd had more... opportunities, really.

Manisha Likewise, I'm so intrigued by the piece you're talking about with the mother and daughter. I think that vision of the boat, that's going to stay with me for a long time, it's incredible.

Meredith It really... you can load a lot into a boat. [laughs].

Manisha Yes. Yeah truly.

Katie I finally just wanted to ask you both if there are things that have been sustaining you personally during this time and if you have any suggestions of how we might sustain the arts community in the difficult years ahead? Big question...!

Meredith Go first, Manisha!

Manisha I guess I'm being sustained by idealism, just ideas of like new ways of living and restructuring the world and just letting my imagination run loose. Imagining a kind of utopia and trying not to get so down about things that we can't have because there's a lot that we can't control right now. But there seems to be an incision made in reality where there is the potential for change.

In terms of sustaining the arts community, I guess I've always felt confused about the arts as an industry or as a community. Because there's that bubble, like the arts community bubble, where artists are just making work for other artists. And I feel like that's one of the things that needs to change and that true sustenance of any community... I think we need to work on the bigger things like our collective spirits and our dreams and the land and the animals. And this particular time, I think artists are really important right now and imagination is really important right now. And instead of sort of keeping it within this little arts bubble that we're all in, thinking about how to facilitate imaginative thought for the world. And giving... Or Yeah, like the imaginative potential that we have to allow others to just open up little like portals in their brain as well because we do have this rare chance to reimagine and create a new future.

Katie Definitely, yeah. I think I had a lot more idealism, optimism, in the first wave of the lockdown. But I think it is really important to hang onto because it is definitely a time where things can change and they can change for the better.

Manisha Yes.

Meredith Yeah. Australia... well, the world politic at the moment seems really particularly unnerving. So I'm not sure it's going to change straight for the better. But these things, these catastrophes and we're facing a few of them, it's not just covid at the moment. They do tend to make huge change. And you two will be here to see more of it than I will. So there you go. Let me know how it goes!

Katie Yeah... hopefully it will go well...

Meredith Because when you go through that incision made in reality, Beautiful phrase, Manisha. I think you're right about being optimistic in the face of more or less impossible odds.

Manisha Yeah. Or just being imaginative and just getting back to that childlike space where, you know, you just have thoughts and not having reality obstruct you. Like, actually, if you could imagine a world, any kind of world, what would it

be? And I just find myself lost in those spaces quite a bit, just thinking without inhibitions or any kind of logic or rationality.

Katie And do you think things like the Dream Journal or like the way that The Mill operated in a kind of open-access way, those are ways that the arts community can be less inward-looking?

Manisha Absolutely. I think getting the public, getting the world involved, making everything accessible, like truly accessible. Making things that everyone can understand. I actually had a dream the other night that artists were being killed for being too intellectual and inaccessible in our ways and our thoughts. And I woke up and I was like, whoa... this is a thing!

Katie Yeah, there's a very clear meaning to intuit from that.

Meredith Yeah, well, that has happened repeatedly in history.

Manisha Yeah. Yeah. It was, it was terrifying.

Meredith Yeah. I mean I don't know, it's a complicated one. Because that's kind of speaking to a kind of populism that is not the same as an openness of thought.

Manisha Yes. Yes, exactly.

Meredith So it's... yeah...

Manisha Yeah, But I also think artists have kind of always been on the fringes of society and that's where the most radical, most imaginative ideas come from. And they do eventually enter the mainstream. But they are birthed from somewhere in the corner, where we are. But they will make their way through. It is just about doing it. And I definitely think these open-access ideas and platforms and just the dissolution of hierarchies is the way to go.

Katie And I think that's the optimism at play as well, where you are open and willing and expecting, that these ideas can be accepted outside of our bubbles. Because I think that's the other thing that happens, it's like they're occurring in this siloed way, but people are also unwilling...or not unwilling, but reluctant to share them because they don't expect that they will be well received so they don't give them the chance to be well received.

Meredith I also think that sometimes Art has the capacity to transform itself over time and to produce meanings other than the ones that the artist might have thought that they had intended. That's, you know, things that survive, things

that people go on being interested in over time can start to mean something completely other than what they meant in the decade in which they were first dreamed up. And I think that's pretty interesting in terms of evolution. I'm thinking about a John Berger article, which is really a bit of a touchstone for me. About him seeing an altarpiece when he was a young man and seeing it one way and then seeing it again as an old man and seeing it completely differently. And that's a painted altarpiece, not a piece of performance. There's a way in which we keep... We do evolve, but we spiral as well. And we come back to points as people and as civilizations and as communities, we come back to particular points and we see them slightly differently. And then we go... The spiral changes slightly... about where we go next, is that...?

Katie Yeah. Do you think that you've had interests in your practice that have really sustained through most of your career?

Meredith Yeah. They come back, they come back. I mean, this talk about community and so on. And also when Manisha was talking then, that's when I thought about the Berger thing and I was thinking about how, you know, I first went to university in a time of revolution. Everything was possible, it was all wide open and it was, everything was going to be different and sort of for me it was, you know, for a long time. But then, you know, things kind of... [grumbles] you know. And then I hear from you two, a kind of a sense of a different kind of revolution. And I think, well, you know, that's it's coming... [Sigh] Growth is not up...

Katie Yeah, it's not linear.

Meredith It's out and around.

Manisha Yeah, that is interesting. That reminds me of, I had another dream where I was told that John Lennon and Yoko Ono accessed a particular creative portal, that had been closed for some time. But it's open again now.

Meredith Oh beautiful Manisha.

Manisha So it's like, coming round.

Meredith Let's hope you're right! That's beautiful. [Laughter]

Katie Thank you so much for talking with me today. I really appreciate it. All right. Thank you so much for your time.

Manisha Thank you.

Meredith Thanks Katie, Thanks Manisha.

Katie Thank You. Bye.

This project has been supported by the City of Yarra. Thanks to Andrew Bennett for the music and sound production on these episodes. You can find a full pdf transcript and relevant links on the 'It Comes in Waves' page on the Women's Art Register website. Thank you for listening.

Links

manishaanjali.com

goldsatino.com

neptunearchive.org

'Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman': Revisiting Female Deviance in Colonial Fiji, Margaret Mishra

The Emergence of Feminism in Fiji, Margaret Mishra

The Mill: Experiments in Theatre and Community, Meredith Rogers (book)

At Home with the Mill: Democratic Theatre-Making in Geelong, 1978-1984, Meredith Rogers (article)

From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play, Victor Turner

The Lip Anthology: An Australian Feminist Arts Journal 1976-1984, Ed. Vivian Zihlerl

Article on Lip in Issue No. 2 of Discipline