Arts Chats #3

Technology Before, During and After

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MODERATOR

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PANELIST

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ASL Interpreter

Marcia Adolphe

Claire Hopkinson 00:04

Good afternoon, I'd like to welcome you to the third edition of Arts Chats. I'm Claire Hopkinson, I'm the Director & CEO of Toronto Arts Council and Toronto Arts Foundation. I'm really delighted to have you join us in this new discussion series that centres the voices of artists and arts workers. As part of Toronto Arts Foundation's ongoing research into the importance of arts in a city and community building, these Arts Chats bring together a diverse array of speakers from a variety of disciplines throughout this month of March. Together, these artists are discussing timely and understudied issues that are affecting them, their practice, and the impact. And this impact will help guide the foundation's research strategy towards supporting advocacy, programming, and community building efforts across Toronto and throughout the art sector as a whole. And today, they've been fascinating discussions. Thank you. And I just wanted to say to everybody who's joined, I hope you're well and I hope you're able to take care of yourselves as we're in this final homestretch of COVID-19. Toronto Arts Foundation would like to acknowledge the diversity of the First Peoples of this area, recognize the territories of the Wendat, the Anishnabe Nation, the Haudenoshaunee Confederacy, and the Mississaugas of Credit First Nation. Today, Toronto is still the home to many Indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island and

around the world. And we are grateful to have this opportunity to work to live and to meet on this territory. Arts Chats have been made possible and available to you through the generosity of our donors at Toronto Arts Foundation. We're really, super grateful for their ongoing support of our work. And we invite you to join us as Toronto Arts Foundation (donors?) if you're able. After this session, you'll receive a follow up email with a link to our feedback survey, please fill it in. As well as information on how you can contribute to our ongoing community based work and our growing suite of Covid-19 Response effort initiatives, which includes Arts Chats. These initiatives are helping artists and arts organizations with mitigation, resilience and recovery during the pandemic. In today's discussion: Technology Before, During and After, our panelists will explore the ways that artists and communities have been engaging with arts through technology, and the hybridized forms of creative practice and delivery that are emerging and might continue to emerge as Toronto continues to move through this pandemic. Leading this discussion is Heidi Strauss, Artistic Director at adelheid. Heidi creates dance based experiences to examine human behavior from different perspectives, using relationships as a basis to consider our current social and environmental moment. She is interested in challenging how we see, experience performance by shifting the physical perspective of the audience creating immersive installation, ambulatory, sight sensitive and digital works for theatre and non-theatre environments. A multi Dora award winning choreographer, Heidi supports programs for other artists, including adelheid's research for emerging dance artists, and Cohort for performance makers integrating digital technologies into their practice. Heidi, we're so pleased to have you. She's also a recipient of the Cam Hunter award for dance. We're also supremely grateful to our other panelists today for their insights. Heidi, over to you.

Heidi Strauss 04:19
Thanks so much, Claire. Welcome, everybody. Thanks for taking the time out of grant season to be here virtually with us. I'm really excited and eager to open up this Zoom living room chat to you and this incredible group of artists and thinkers that have come together. It's going to be a conversation that runs really like a conversation. So there'll probably be moments of people thinking and pausing to think. The group is made public, it's a focus group really, made public and your ideas and questions and comments are welcomed in the chat. But because of the short window of time we have for this conversation that could go very far. We likely won't have time to respond to them directly but they are are important and they're important to the research that the foundation is doing. They will be recorded as part of this. I want to say how happy I am to have Marcia here doing ASL interpretation, and Jessica is doing captioning and there's a captioning function at the bottom of your screen if you're not familiar. In just a moment, I'm going to introduce the panelists for Technology Before, During and After, and then talk briefly about the framework that we've planned for today. So I want to introduce you first Debashis Sinha, who will appear magically in a moment. Deb! Deb goes by he/him pronouns. Driven by a deep commitment to the primacy of sound and creative expression, Debashis Sinha has created numerous audio and music-centered projects across Canada and internationally. Sound Design and

composition credits include numerous works for Peggy Baker Dance Projects and productions with Canada's premier theatre companies, including the Stratford Festival, Soulpepper, Why Not and many others. His live sound practice on concert stage has led to appearances at New Tech, the Guelph Jazz Festival, the Banff Center, the Music Gallery and other venues. Sinha is a committed educator and is currently researching sound production using machine learning and AI funded by the Canada Council for the Arts. Ian Garrett, welcome. Ian Garrett goes by he/him pronouns and Garrett is a designer, producer, educator and researcher in the field of sustainability in arts and culture. He's the director of the Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts, Associate Professor of Ecological Design for performance at York University and producer for Toaster Lab, a mixed reality performance production collective. He maintains a design practice focused on ecology technology and stenography Nick Green, welcome. Nick goes by he/they pronouns. Nick Green is a Dora and Sterling award winning playwright and the creator of the Social Distancing festival. As a playwright, favorite credits include Body Politic: Lemon Tree Creations, Buddies in Bad Times and a recipient of a Dora Award; Every Day She Rose: co-writer, Nightwood Theatre; Dinner with the Duchess: Next Stage; Living the Dream: CMTP, Theater, Sheridan; Fan Girl: Musical Stage Company; In Real Life: Theatre Sheridan and Musical Stage Company and The Fabulous Buddha Boy: Guys in Disguise, and winner of a Sterling award. Nick has been part of the Stratford Festival's Forster Bernstein New Play Development Program, the Factory Theatre's Natural Resources Unit, Nightwood Theatre's Write From the Hip and Sheridan College's Canadian Music Theater Project. Sagan Yi. Sagan goes by they/them pronouns, and as an artist working in indie and experimental animation and video games. From 2016 to 2020 they were the Executive Director of the Hand Eye Society, a nonprofit dedicated to the exploration of games and playful media as an art form. Currently, they're working on a hand drawn video game about gentrification, an animated short film about Prohibition era cats, a bunch of short stories, an artists commission on basic income and just staying afloat. The arts today. Over the last year, for many people, aspects of working life were able to continue in different ways through digital means. From rehearsing remotely to mobile banking, to connecting and conversations through formats like this. The first chat in this series was Shifting to Digital, Obscuring Equity. It was a great conversation and I want to begin by saying something that's completely obvious, but that there is a lot of work to be done around access, digital justice and equity. As technology continues a very fast paced run forward, that work becomes more urgent. In this chat, we're focusing on what has, is potentially, will be, made possible by technology, how it connects people and collaboration, creation and beyond, how space, sight, distance can be reimagined by it, how it is enabling hybrid forms of practice. When the word Pivoting started being used at the beginning of the pandemic, the performance festival Fusebox, which is held out of Austin, Texas, asked its artists to consider how they would translate their performance work to digital experience. It was April 2020, and I listened to the guest curator who is Australian based Jeff Khan on a podcast and he talked about recognizing that this pivot to digital sharing, exploring live-ness online while new, for many in the performing arts is not new. And that there have been artists working expertly in this way long before COVID made its appearance. So today, we're here with some experts, some Toronto experts. And so

we're going to talk about the potential offer to us as creative thinkers and makers by technology, by those who are working and thinking in this way, before March 2020. We're talking about what technology allows: the openings, experimentation, connection with people, and where ideas have a chance to grow in unexpected ways, with surprising results. With that come some issues and inherent challenges in working with technology and the arts today. So technology, a pretty broad term. Let's start by talking about: When we're talking about technology as it relates to your art practices and work. What are we talking about? And what if anything, has the last year changed or enabled in your work? Opening it up to you?

Debashis Sinha 11:10
I like this word technology. I remember a long time ago, I had an argument with some person, I don't know, I met them at a party. And this was before the internet. And computers became so ubiquitous. And they said, "Oh, I hate technology." I was like "You're wearing pants. I mean, you have a button on your shirt, what is your problem?" And so you know, when I think, when I hear the word technology, of course, we think about the digital and laptops and internet connections and stuff. But I find myself wanting to make a space for the idea of technology, making space for the technology that it took to make one of my gongs or the berimbau, which is like a hunter's bow that you play as a percussion instrument. So one of the things I've been kind of I don't know how useful this is, but one of the things I've been kind of navigating in my work, especially since the pandemic head, and everyone's talking about technology, is making space for the technologies that are already around us. And that are simple and rooted in time. Because... I think I know why I wanted to talk about this, I wanted to make space for those technologies, because they feed my work in a way that the current tools that I'm using are exploring, like machine learning and code and artificial intelligence. I mean, they're only useful to me insofar as I make space for that old technology to exist, the stories that it took that are carried by the process of making a gong, or exploring a reed, and making sounds out of it. So yeah, when we talk about technology, something I want to always make space for are those stories, because those are the stories I want to tell. And I feel like the technology we talk about when we say "technology," they're more like tools to mediate, or amplify those very old things. And I find it most interesting, I feel like I make work that's most interesting when I have a space for both of them. I suppose.

Ian Garrett 13:53
If I can jump off, jump off of that a little bit or jump off something. Thinking about technology as being, you know, ways of extending our sensorium of... I very accidentally read about Marshall McLuhan as a preteen because I just found it from my dad who did Media Studies, and it apparently had an effect on me. And there's other problematic issues within some of it, but, um, but the idea of ....

Marcia Adolphe 14:30
Sorry, Ian, I missed... this is Marcia the interpreter. I missed what it is that you picked up and read.

Ian Garrett 14:35

Oh, Marshall McLuhan. Yes. And this is before I lived in Canada, and I didn't hold him in the regard as a Canadian media theory thinker. But the idea that the use of technology to expand our ability to do work in more places than one, whether or not it's pants as you brought up or whether or not that's the telephone, which allows your voice and ear to go someplace else. And so a lot of the time now when it's technology or my work, that's tied into technology, one of those technologies - because the work that I'm most interested in and passionate about is focused on ecology. And climate change is about closing time and space gaps. And that it's the interest in being able to use these mediating things, digital things, which could be a lot of different things, which is why I'm not that much more specific, insofar as bridging or collapsing those experiences together. So they all become tools, all technology, I guess, is tools to achieving that sort of end. As: "I want to talk about a specific thing, and this tool is going to allow me to help transport somebody to a threatened Pacific Island that's going to be subsumed by water that is otherwise very hard to get to." And that's why it's like, Okay How can I share that experience in the most impactful way possible?

Sagan Yee 16:27

So this is the question about technology as it relates to our practice and work. So I think the difference for me is that I went from being about 80%, working from home to 100%, working from home, which hasn't been great for me, there's a joke about how when it comes to work, you log off the bad screen, and then you go home to the good screen, and now both the screens and merged into one screen. That's been an adjustment that I've had to make, because everything I do for a living, or even most of the stuff I do in my free time is online or on a computer anyway. So it's more just the volume of time I spend in front of a screen that's increased rather than the actual type of work that I do or how I do it. When I ran Hand Eye Society, the video game, a nonprofit that was mentioned, our original mandate was actually... back when it was founded in 2010, the original tagline was "From the Basements to the Streets," which meant taking video games out of the sort of preconceived notion that people had about them, which was very: indoors and dark rooms and people's basements and bedrooms and living rooms, and sort of bringing them into a different context, bringing them to the people who didn't normally have access to that technology, or just found it to be just an impenetrable culture surrounding it. But because most of the videogame community lives online anyway, they sort of live and breathe technology in a way that we kind of wanted to break out of. So I come from the opposite end of the spectrum, where so much of my time was spent online, so much of the community was already online. And just trying to take video games out of that context and have people look at it in a different way. And so now we've kind of had to circle around and weirdly replicate the feeling of our physical and analog events, but back into the digital space that we were already sort of familiar with in the beginning. So that's been kind of an odd challenge for us.

Nick Green 18:50

In terms of my work, I look at it on two different levels. On one hand, there's the work I've been doing with the Social Distancing Festival, which really is a response to a reflection on technology and the presentation of art. And so, that's really mired in how those two things intersect. As a playwright, a very different journey. As a playwright in Canada, I think there's been Theatre in a lot of places. It's something that's very mired in tradition. And it's something that I think technology has been seen as somewhat an affront to some of that tradition that makes something legitimately professional in some ways. There are gatekeepers, there are the people who run the company and decide what will be presented, then I think digital or even at times, site specific types of productions could be seen as less professionally legitimate if it's not done in a certain box. And that comes all the way down to the creation process. And this is really basic stuff. After quarantine started was the first time we would workshop scripts without printing the entire script and then printing every rewrite. It's the first time I was ever involved in a professional developmental process where we use Google Docs, and everyone would look at a device and see edits in real time, and not a piece of paper was printed. And how long has this technology actually been around? But yet we are killing a million trees. Because why? And now it's a necessity and something that makes me think, Well, I hope we don't go back, we absolutely shouldn't. But that right, there is such a simple example of how technology has become a part of a creation process. And I think it speaks to this has been a big wake up call to the world of theatre, and this relates to the Social Distancing Festival, and going: These technological explorations of theatre, of art are professionally legitimate. Those traditions aren't required, we don't need to all sit in a room together to professionally workshop a show. And what follows is a big question mark over the process of having professional productions put on. So in Social Distancing Festival and many other platforms, artists have a great ability to put their work out there and be seen by a large audience. And I'm excited about the notion that that can be seen as legitimate as an opening night at X Professional Theatre.

Heidi Strauss 21:48

Okay, jumping off this idea of what makes something legitimate? And considering that if we're talking about hybridized forms of performance, or of sharing work that is interactive in some way, or just plainly talking about the bridge between liveness and technology, in your eyes, what constitutes a live performance experience? And is liveness important within an experience of a translation of an art practice?

Debashis Sinha 22:23

I feel like there's been a lot of contention around this idea of liveness, and what is live? Is theatre live if it's pre recorded, or is it...? You know, there's just been a lot of conversation. And I think what has been for me a little bit frustrating about that conversation is how there has to be an answer, that this is live, this is not live. And so then one is better than the other. Like, I don't understand why there's, or at least maybe I'm not listening to the right conversations, but there hasn't been. I haven't heard or been

exposed to more of a celebration that the fact that, oh, now we have all this other stuff we can do as well, right? I mean, of course, there's uncertainty. And of course, we don't really know what's going to happen. And hopefully, we'll get back to theatres and be together in a physical space and which has import. But I've had very tremendously satisfying experiences sitting in my room, looking at my phone with headphones, and inputting text, and then having it spit back at me or whatever. So the question is good and it's important to investigate, I think, the spectrum, but I'm not seeing, or, I wish there was more celebration of the fact that now, because we had the imperative thrust upon us with the pandemic, we're able to investigate these questions so much more deeply, and with so much more urgency than we... I think we're investigating a lot of questions with urgency that we thought we were investigating with urgency and not just theater and art making. But we're talking about social justice and racial justice and all these kinds of things or institutions. The pandemic has enabled us to go: Okay, you know what, this is no joke. We have to do this now. And there's danger here, like we have danger around us and we have to find our way to safety. And finding our way to safety means different things in different contexts. I guess that's just my reaction when I hear that what is live or what is theater, it's like, it's a lot of things and let's let it be a lot of things and now we can do so many more things. And isn't that great?

Nick Green 24:51
I think that "live" has become synonymous with "simultaneous." Live, like you're saying means a ton of different things. And there's a way of having a live experience without doing it simultaneously with other people. So, this is such a nerdy example, but I'm just gonna go there. Who cares? I'm in musical theatre. See Stephen Sondheim's Birthday. Okay, this was the quarantine musical theatre event of the season. And, a bajillion people logged in to watch this thing. But every element of it was pre-recorded. But all of those pre-recorded elements were one shot and filmed live. And then the experience of these pre-recorded videos was live. In the comment, as Sagan told me, it's called Zoomies, the comments zooming through as people experience it. And then that is recorded. And then you can watch that later, and watch a live response to live performances. And I didn't do that, I logged in when it was live streaming. But I would guess that it's as exhilarating as connecting, as significant an event. And I'm sure there's much more pure forms of theatre out there that we could have given a way better example. But that's the one that comes to mind. "Live" doesn't have to mean "simultaneous."

Sagan Yee 26:23
Yeah, what you're describing: the recording of the chat window as part of the experience, as you might... when those recordings of a live concert, they include the applause and the cheering of the crowd. That's the same effect that you get when you record the chat. And that's a pretty common practice with Twitch streaming, which is big in the video game community. There's an automatic thing, they kind of expect you to want to preserve the chat along with the actual thing itself, because that's part of the culture, of course, you don't want to miss out what people were commenting on. And then

as for the simultaneous nature of what people think of when they think of real time, there's a term in video games called Asynchronous play. So that's, what is what you use for when people are interacting with each other at different times or against things that have been pre recorded that are left in the environment for later players to pick up. So, one of the most common examples is leaving notes for other players. You're walking around the environment, you can leave notes for people to pick up later at any time. And there's a big game that came out at the top of the pandemic called Death Stranding that uses this in a really interesting way. I find that limiting interactivity can be a really great way of sort of highlighting the real-time aspect. I went to one virtual music concert where you enter the virtual space, and you were like a little worm made of light and you left light trails behind you. But you couldn't chat really, or anything, that wasn't the main part of the experience, you're just kind of pulsating with everyone. And you can tell the other snakes, you can see where in the world that they're from, but not much else, everyone's just a glowing snake dancing to the music. And so, limiting aspects of the interactivity can be a really good way of making everyone feel more like they are in that space.

Ian Garrett 28:27
There's a couple of experiences that I've had. And there are both, actually, at this point relatively early pandemic that they occurred. One was a show that that we worked on, that had six live performers, we were using, what I think has become more commonplace now is definitely much easier to do now of having six dancers. Everybody was in a different city, one person was down in New Zealand, then figuring out how to do that without using Zoom, like breaking Zoom. This was June. So after a couple of months of work on it, they were just tired of seeing everything in boxes. And it never worked fully until the public presentation of it. And then we got to that, and then I was like, "Oh, that could have just been recorded." There's nothing that had benefited from it happening synchronously because it was just too polished at that point. There was nothing that felt like it needed... And since then I've been rolling around this idea… Well, that we share. Heidi, we've talked about this (undetectable name) who referred to this as the audience's ability to ruin something. There was no way to ruin that show, once it runs well and it doesn't become apparent and so those sort of social contracts where "I'm going to be quiet while you're speaking," go away. And at the same time, as we were investigating inspirations for that, and still one of the most satisfying experiences I had was the "(verify name) and The Get Down Stay Down" had a video that came up very early pandemic called "Phenomenon," which was all done in Zoom. And they had all of the crew and cast booked to do an actual one. So this had been weeks, if that.. into lockdowns, and they instead used the time that they had been shooting the music video they intended to, with everybody sort of choreographing things across how to use Zoom. And there's so many clever things with rearranging the way that body parts are that the feeling of the connection between those performers feel so, even though it is quite obviously a pre-recorded thing, how did they accomplish that and those sort of marvels, when I think of liveness, I think of, oh, it's a marvel that this was able to be pulled off without pre-recording it. And so, those ideas of what you can ruin, that looks like it shouldn't work, are the two things that we're chasing, with a lot of the projects that we're sort of

working on. And it's harder to do now, because the main change that we've actually had, in our project, we've continued to be actually busier because we work with a lot of media, people are interested in a lot of media.. is that I now do everything from this chair. I feel like the: in the Spy Movie, the "handler in the van," on the phone with somebody in some exotic location who has been in New Zealand and in Venice and in Philadelphia, and I've just been here. But the work has gotten there. And it seems to have gone well, I hear.

Sagan Yee 31:53
I think when you're designing an interactive experience, you're really looking for opportunities for interesting friction and emergence. When you're creating a video game, you know you're not necessarily going to be there in real time hovering over someone's shoulder while they play it. It is a pre-recorded thing that is interactive, that people didn't have to go in and interact with it in a way that you have the interesting collision of the interactivity and the mechanics. So you have the mechanics of the situation, the things that you hard code, but then you always want to leave room for things that maybe you anticipate might happen or hope that might happen but were not necessarily intentional or deliberately designed by you, down to the very last tee. So that's a very tricky, slippery thing. But really exciting opportunities can come out of it, when you leave that gap for people to fill in...and surprise you... you want to be surprised as much as your audience I feel, when the event rolls around, and that the opening curtain goes up on your thing. You want to be surprised as well.

Debashis Sinha 33:18
I like that idea of emergence that you mentioned, because yeah, it just sums it up so beautifully. There is an emergence that happens when you release your work to people. And it could be something like that feeling you get when a play is going really well. Even the audience is just watching. But there is an emergence of some kind of energy state that couldn't happen without them. And those emergences can happen in many different contexts. So maybe that's... I like that idea. I think I'm going to use that as a metric when I start thinking about my work and sharing it with people... is there a chance for that emergence to occur?

Sagan Yee 34:02
My successor to Hand Eye Society, ALENN PREDKO is very interested in the intersections between video games and performance and theatre. So I don't know I might give them all your names so they can have more in depth chats with you about this because I think there's a lot more interesting conversations to be had in that intersection. And people don't intuitively put two and two together. And I think it's on opposite sides of the spectrum like going to a theater and seeing something live versus playing a video game. I think they're very close together in some ways.

Heidi Strauss 34:41

I think this idea also of being able to be a part of something and not be there to be a part of it is a really important aspect of things. And we look at the transit of people out of or the commute or the move of people out of major centres in this period of time to live in a different city or a different community. If we look at income precarity that people are in because of the pandemic. And then we look at also the corollary to that if you're working in tech, what are the things that you need, the hardware you need to upgrade the software you need to update? What project is compatible with what and how they are working or not working? And there's a degree of learning that is necessary all the way through. And I think that when we talk about learning, like the research, Deb, that you're doing with machine learning and AI, you're doing that research, but you're, you're the one learning, it's the human behind the thing that is making the thing be the thing, in terms of creation in terms of, whatever the technical aspect of delivery is, or... I guess the thing that I'm interested in is, what is sustainability? What keeps all of this possible? Is it the capacity for us to still connect in different kinds of ways, through an online format? Is it possibilities of relationships with other sectors, commercial tech sectors? Is it looking favorably in a positive, ecological way at what technology allows us to be affecting in terms of bringing people closer together, bringing art closer to people in different kinds of ways without a massive carbon footprint? Maybe there's something in there.

Ian Garrett 36:42
I feel like I have to respond. The sustainability researcher. Pre pandemic, one of the thought experiments that we often put out there and why I find, asking this question within the arts is interesting, is that you can create an artwork, a performance, that is the most affecting thing that gets everybody to change all of their habits that ever sees it, that just hits them right there. But you could in not considering, the impact of the thing itself that you're creating, you could make it out of a pile of burning tires, which is objectively bad for the environment, you should not burn tires. If you take nothing else away from this session, please do not set tires on fire. But in an arts context, there is a question of whether or not the way that you're communicating, establishing what's happening, what are the trade offs there, it's complicated. Because you'd say that the performance was objectively good if it's getting everybody to change behaviors, and the burning of tires, objectively bad, generally for the environment. But once you start putting those things together, it gets complicated. We've done a couple of... we being the Center for Sustainable Practices in the Arts... I've been doing footprinting for a while, we did a project with the NAC, around the green rooms, presentation that happened in in June, around looking at comparing the carbon footprint between that event, which went all digital versus a hub to digital distributed model that was designed to not require people to fly around. And then a version where everybody would have been asked to go to the NAC in Ottawa, and found that the majority of it moving to the hub model, we were very excited about it because it can be a 78% estimated carbon reduction. But then it was a 99% reduction by moving it all online. Because then you're really just dealing with power, depending on where the people are. Quebec has very clean power. Canada averages out better than the average in the world, Ontario is pretty clean. So the power

impact of that actually ended up... the emissions for it ended up being relatively low. But what I hope for the sustainability of things is that, we're still interested in asking the questions that we have identified, that there is not all of the things that we want to do right now that we've been required to do in the performing arts over the last year, especially are how we want to perform, or the way that we want to engage with audiences. Before that were: thrust, proscenium site specific, name a number of conventions of the way of presenting work. And I think that this sustainability is continuing to ask those questions. Where I land with things is that if we accept that society itself as a performance, there's no natural law that requires us to organize the way that we do, then what draws me to working in these realms is that that it gives us the ability to perform how we want society to be. And I think that as we're dealing with technology or not, that continues to be something to interrogate. I'm just glad to have a lot more people who are invested in interrogating the technology question of where it does fit. And I hope that that continues to going on. And that we take the benefits that we have for going paperless for reducing energy costs. But that's not to say that, that is the solution, because I think there's something very intrinsically important to the other ways that we were working, and I'm never gonna see the answer to that question, but looking to ask.

Nick Green 40:46
In terms of what keeps this practice going, I think, those comments about sustainability mean, that's not my area of expertise, they sound very compelling. I'm interested in learning a lot more about that. What I can speak to is, I hope that it keeps going, in a sense, not because it needs to, because that means we can't enter buildings and congregate. But that there are things that have emerged in this time that are good, and that we can consciously continue and have the support to continue. So what my experience through this, as someone who puts up a lot of people's work in the Social Distancing Festival, and is now involved in producing new work with artists through it, is that I think that institutions of artistic institutions have suffered a lot through this. But artists have gained a lot through this. And creators have gained a lot through this in terms of innovative practice and collaboration, in terms of having their work shared on more global scales, and having a lot more agency over how it's shared in networking, and benefiting off of artistic practices that they otherwise maybe wouldn't have come across. So, for instance, in my current project, with the diplomatic missions for Canada, across the US, we're pairing up Canadian and American artists to collaborate over long distance to create new work. And there's this huge ripple, beyond the artistic impact of meeting a new artist, interdisciplinary creating new work. There's also this ripple, as I see people share their work, and they're sharing their work in networks that otherwise wouldn't have necessarily come across their practice in a way that is professional, that's compensated, and has some rigorous organization standing behind it. So in order for that to happen, there has to be a shift in funding and a shift in what is perceived, as I said before, a sort of a professional, legitimate presentation. And if that shift can occur, with less emphasis on the institutions deciding what's going to get that full funding in that full production. I think there are a lot

of practices that can continue beyond this. Like Stephen Sondheim's birthday. (laughs) I'm just kidding. That's not actually the best example I have but I'll leave it at that.

Heidi Strauss 43:30
Can you talk a little bit more about the Social Distancing Festival?

Nick Green 43:33
Sure. Yeah. So Social Distancing, Festival dot com. It's a website I created on March 13 2020. The day that a workshop production of a show of mine was cancelled. And it started as a Facebook post, just saying, this is a place where let's have deadlines, and let's keep having an outlet to share work that's in development. And it's now halted knowing that I cannot create if I don't have something, some way of sharing it. And very quickly, it picked up a lot of momentum, hundreds and hundreds of submissions in the first month of it being up. And so it remains an online festival that shows work in theater, musical theater, opera, visual arts, dance, and music. And take submissions from all around the world of work that otherwise wouldn't have had any sort of presentation. And now we're also engaged in long distance collaborations. So Connecting Perspectives, which is the one I'm doing with the diplomatic missions for Canada across the US premieres in about a month on the website. And those are the types of projects we're now more focused on.

Heidi Strauss 44:56
Jumping from there into the idea of community and communities that have been sustaining you, or that you found during this time, or that you already knew about. Can we talk a little bit about community? Community-building places that I think you were talking about before, when we spoke about Gather Town, Deb, just interested in the sort of happenstance that can also be in this kind of environment.

Debashis Sinha 45:33
That was one of the things when we first got together. For those of you listening, we had a little conversation about a week ago just to kind of set ourselves up and get to know each other. And one of the things that came out of that was, well, for me, anyway, was kind of sharing the realization that can, in the same way that I've been speaking about, kind of an array of practices an array of liveness, an array of technology, I kind of realized there's also an array of community and I had a lot of experiences over the last year that I hope I'll keep having, even as we get to be safer, and can gather inside, of discovering kind of a community mindedness or, or getting that experience of community online in places like Gather Town, or Discord, or on Twitch or even in YouTube, with the live chat and all that, I was not expecting to find it to the degree that I did. And that just might be because I'm crusty and old, I just think that a lot of the things that I saw, in considering this question of liveness, there's also that parallel to me, is the question of community, do I feel like I'm part of a community and the first time I

really felt that, I'm afraid I can't remember the show, but it was a company out of Vancouver. And it was mostly a sound piece. And I think... I'm so sorry, I can't remember it. But they just posed a bunch of questions to us. And there was a soundscape and we answered all these questions. And it was just like this thing that happened, and I kind of felt like, Oh, is this a, this is a, just a web page, I'm going to? But then you know, live music started happening. And then slowly, the whole thing kind of morphed. And I realized, everybody that was there in that room at that time, we were all there answering these questions. And at the end, there's this beautiful denouement that was... all our answers came back to us in this way. And it was very clear that it was not just a pre-recorded thing. People had input these thoughts and these feelings in real time, and they came back and fed you. And that was the first time I went, oh, there's actually something here. I felt like I was in a room with people, even though I was just in my bedroom with my headphones on. So that realization of, or that experience of community was something that I think maybe other people on this panel had already had the experience of, but it was very new to me and very exciting. And I hope I can keep that and add it to my repertoire of communal feeling.

Sagan Yee 48:22

I guess I can chime in as someone who can hardly remember a time before, I didn't have some kind of online community. So my birthday is actually tomorrow, I'm turning 33 and I grew up with a computer and online access. I can barely remember a time when we didn't have internet. And I grew up in suburban Saskatoon and didn't get my driver's license for that whole time. So I would just be indoors all the time, arguing with strangers on the internet, and making art. I would make pictures and art tutorials and put them out there. And sometimes I would get paid in virtual currency through Neopets or whatever weird 90s platform was attracting kids to play it in those days. It's very bizarre to talk about now. Because, now that I'm thinking about it, that sense of online community never really went away. I think I mentioned in our previous talk that I'm in about 50 Discord servers right now. Because it's kind of ballooned, after the pandemic, I have my my work servers, of course, but then I have my writers group servers, I have my video game servers, my activism servers, and it's just little worlds that you pop in and out of, and there's, people like "Oh, there's a server for that, can you get me an invite?" and you pass the link around and then they show up, and then you have a whole contingent of Toronto people that have temporarily taken over this one server that was mostly people from LA. I think I made the comparison that, I don't see the internet as a tool so much as an ocean, it's very much to me an environment with its own culture and its own ecology and cultures within cultures, a lot of sub- sub- sub- micro cultures, which is what really lights my brain on fire. It's trying to find these tiny corners of the internet where weird things are happening and nobody really knows about them. You know, like a hole in the wall restaurant or a club that you kind of discover for yourself and no one else really knows about it. That's kind of lost right now with lockdowns and everything, but you can always get that on the internet, I find. And so for me, it's unlike a hammer, which is a really obvious tool, you know, like each end has a specific purpose and you apply the tool to something with a deliberate end goal in

mind. For me, it's more something you kind of use intuitively, you can navigate it, you can try to channel it, there's lay lines and currents that you can observe and make those patterns work towards a certain end. I've had a few things go viral, I made a Twitter bot that now has 12, almost 13,000 followers now. And just like watching those things kind of blow up, I kind of know how to make that happen now, and I can see other people who are really, really good at it, and they have millions of followers or whatever. And again, that's something that you can hope for, and anticipate and work towards and make opportunities to have happen. But you can never really force it to happen. So, but just learning the ins and outs of how to do that sort of thing. It is kind of a skill that you can learn. But it's also a little bit magic intuitive too. And I think you can't really force people to use or to navigate this ocean in any other way other than the one that they're going to discover for themselves. So trying to meet people where they are, and not be like: "here's the space, and you're going to come here and have the exact experience that I plan for you to have." It almost never works that way. And I think all the hugely popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, I don't think that's always something that they hope will have happened that they sort of blow up and become the light and monopolize everyone's eyeballs. But I don't think they can control for that. And I don't think they know what to do with that power when they do have it and eventually they're not going to have that power anymore. And something new will come along to take its place. So it's a very strange and mutable landscape that I think if we are going to try and teach anyone how to thrive in it, it will have to be with that sort of holistic, flexible, mutable concept in mind.

Heidi Strauss 53:30
Like process based, everything now is process. We're all in a process of dealing with the situations that we're in and recognizing that there's aspects to what was before that is going to be a part of what will be later. And that we're sort of in the middle of the digestion process of figuring out what that will be. And so what do you think it will be? Like, what do you think is next? What do you want to be next? What are obstacles that you see? What are things that you want to see happen? What are your dreams?

Nick Green 54:09
A lot of one-person shows about quarantine, coming very soon. Maybe there'll be a whole festival of quarantine shows. I don't know I have a site that I've always had a hope of being able to stop running, which is a weird thing, because it means that the world has kind of returned to whatever normalcy we once knew. But I guess what I can say I hope is next is that geographic boundaries don't box in collaboration. That's kind of my favorite thing that's emerged through all this. And they'll say I said before artists have benefited from this. Let me be clear. artists have suffered enormously from this. I've lost a lot of work, we've seen huge precarity and fear about not being able to meet our basic needs. What I meant is I think artists have the potential to benefit from some of the innovation and, and I think on my end too, even kind of a basic relationship with technology that's emerged. And how we can

see and love and experience live or simultaneous or whatever art from a lot more places. And so that's my answer. I hope that's what's next.

Ian Garrett 55:41

We had a project that we were planning on doing before the pandemic. It was (in) early stages, which was called "At A Distance." It was meant to be distanced. It was at the festival - I agree with you, Nick - I have a long relationship with the Edinburgh Festival, and I feel like half of the catalogue, the next time it actually runs, is going to be solo shows about people's pandemic experiences. Because then at least they've got something to write about this time. But we were in development of a piece, we had been early adapters by Zoom because we had collaborators internationally. So (we said) "let's set up a Zoom meeting" before everybody (was saying) "never send me a Zoom link again." So (we asked): Can we do a performance where, because people don't want their carbon footprint or they don't wanna spend the money, they can't take the time away from family or from work, or for any other number of concedes that some(thing) like this system of us moving work around and touring and festival practice was not sustainable for people. I've been following the "No More 10 out of 12s" campaign. One of the things that they point out is that especially within an equity framework, that ask the way that we work, for people who have suffered from oppression and genocide prevents (them) from having families. So there are huge issues there. So already with all of that in mind, pre pandemic, all these technologies, they (decided), "Let's use Zoom. Let's use streaming VR. Let's use all of these different things. Let's just use SMS to get performed. Have one live performer and then a bunch of remote performers, I really want to do that project." I feel (that) we went too far. And now (that) everybody's familiar with the technology, it would just be that much easier to actually make that piece where we can actually talk about the invisible ethics exchange; that we've gone from two extremes with the way that we can communicate and have those. So my excitement about being able to get anybody into a live space together again, is to adapt all the things that we've learned over the last year with remote technologies into something that takes advantage of that to actually have meaning and to talk to the ethics that we want to talk about within work.

Heidi Strauss 58:05

We have to stop there. I just want to thank everybody so much. Nick, Sagan, Deb, Ian, thank you to Marcia and Jessica and to everyone who clicked on to be a part of this discussion. And to Toronto Arts Foundation for holding these chats. Next week is the last one: Established on Shifting Grounds. And it's moderated by Zainab Amadhy. This final chat will gather some of Toronto's most established practitioners to hear how they've been impacted by the pandemic's technological shift, and how they're navigating change, and more. Thank you very much for being here. I'm just gonna pass it over to Claire.

Claire Hopkinson 58:45

Well, I just want to say thank you. This was a fascinating conversation. I could listen to it all day. And so I hope we get the chance to talk again. Thank you so much for participating. Heidi, thank you for leading us through this. Have a great day.