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How Little is Enough? Porous & Embracing Dramaturgy for Transformative Encounters

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The article gives an insight into the dramaturgical tools that are applied in the site specific and participatory performance *Island*, that was performed in Hrísey, an island north off the coast of Iceland in 2020. The project is a part of the artistic PhD research *How Little is Enough? Sustainable Methods of Performance for Transformative Encounters*, at Malmö Theatre Academy, University of Lund, that explores sustainable methods of creating transformative encounters with an audience through participatory and site-specific artworks, with a particular focus on how minimal and sustainable the framework for the encounter can be. The article asks what dramaturgical tools can create condition and provide triggers for transformation through minimal means and introduces two dramaturgical tools, POROSITY and EMBRACE, that can be understood as enablers for transformative experiences. While Cathy Turner who coined the term porous dramaturgy, uses these two terms to describe the same tool, this article argues that porosity and embrace have separate functions. The video unpacks the distinction between these dramaturgical tools and disseminates how they appear and can be understood in the performance, *Island*.

Keywords: Sustainability; Artistic Research; Socially Engaged Art; Ecological Art; Site-Specific Performance; Human-Specific Performance; Participatory Performance; Eco-Dramaturgy; Porous Dramaturgy; Embracing Dramaturgy; Immersion; Transformation; Embodiment; Vulnerability; Affect



VIDEO ARTICLE

Available to view here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.8546>.

Available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.8546.mp4>.

STILLS FROM THE VIDEO ARTICLE





VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

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How Little is Enough?

Porous & Embracing Dramaturgy for Transformative Encounters

You are a bird of passage,

A migrating bird.

You are flying.

With others, many others

You are one of them.

You fly between continents, south and north, west and east. Over land and sea.

On your way from home, on your way home.

Now you are on your way to the island.

You are in a flock of birds.

You fly together.

On the island there is enough food, there is ample space and few threats.

It is good to raise your young on the island.

But the conditions are changing.

You do not know if you will be back next year.

You are a bird of passage.

In migration.

You fly.

You do not own a land.

No land owns you.

For you, the land is necessary.

For the land, you are necessary.

You fly
 You are a bird of passage
 Leaving
 Migrating
 Passing through
 In transit
 Arriving
 Immigrating

Where do you come from?
 Where are you going?
 What are you seeking here?

You fly
 To the place where the conditions are favourable
 But the conditions are changing...
 Rapidly.

[1:53]

The text you heard was the opening of a site specific and participatory performance, *Island*, that was performed in Hrísey, an island north of Iceland in the autumn of 2020. I am a theatre maker and an art researcher and, in my youth, I worked in a fish factory on the Island. Together with my colleague, Gréta Kristín Ómarsdóttir, a theatre maker from Hrísey, and in collaboration with the islanders, I created the work as a part of a research project where I am looking at the very instrument of performance, exploring its capacity to respond in a meaningful way to the current global crisis in a sustainable manner. I call the project:

How Little is Enough? Sustainable Methods of Performance for Transformative Encounters

How Little is Enough? Sustainable Methods of Performance for Transformative Encounters

The question “how little is enough?” refers to the level of production needed to create a performance in a sustainable manner — an approach that transcends all the layers of the performance making, bearing in mind environmental, social, economical, and existential concerns.

Ecological art

Participatory

Site Specific

Performance

I make ecological art through participatory and site-specific performances, where I invite persons and places, things and thoughts, to fill in the gaps of a structure designed to frame lived experiences. The body of work builds on a series of transformative encounters.

frame lived experiences

transformative encounters

I am with Theresa May, who coined the term Eco Dramaturgy when she says:

“Theatre practices the crucial climate-change skills of knowing ourselves as permeable, interconnected, mutable, and multiple.

As we map alternative ways of being and relating, theatre can move us from the terrifying facts through the necessary transformations of self...”

Theresa May 2016

Without the transformations of self, it is hard to imagine the necessary changes to behavioural patterns that are required to sustain human life on the planet. There is no doubt that the arts can provide insights and experiences that trigger transformation in individuals. But how?

What dramaturgical tools can create conditions for transformation through minimal performative means?

To answer this question, I will draw on Cathy Turner’s writings on porous dramaturgy.

Cathy Turner

“Porous Dramaturgy and the Pedestrian”

2014

POROSITY

EMBRACE

I will shed light on how porosity and embrace as dramaturgical tools manifest in my work *Island* and unpack some of their affordances.

[5:00]

“[the] notion of the ‘porous’ is, like the suggestion of an ‘embrace’, expressive of theatre/performance that creates a space, or spaces for what is beyond itself and is brought to it by an audience.”

Cathy Turner 2014 (p. 200)

While Turner describes encircling embrace as a part of porous performance structure, I suggest that the two terms form an interconnected pair with two distinct functions that can be separated.

I invite you to follow the path of the performance *Island* from where the guests embark a ferry, through the landscapes of Hrísey and back to the mainland again. You will have a glimpse of how it is to be inside the work, constantly moving and being stimulated by impressions on multiple levels.

Island deals with what it means to belong and invites the guests to contemplate, discuss and experience what belonging means to them.

On the ferry the guests were provided with keys and tools to navigate the journey. After embarking the ferry, the first dramaturgical gesture was to hand out passports to the guests that they had to fill in with their name and personal details. In this, the most profound questions of the piece are planted and the guests become citizens of the artwork. Holding a personal passport becomes the key to the work.

[7:23]

A voice from the intercom on the ferry drew the guests into the realm of migrating birds, a theme that was one of the dramaturgical pillars of the performance, and a term that the islanders use for seasonal villagers. The text transitioned into an eclectic list of words, poetic snapshots of life on the island, any island.

Lighthouse

Harbour

Passage

Journey

Floating

Swimming

Crawling

Lying

Life

Accident

Sorrow

Solidarity

Embrace

Empathy

Silence

Work

Value

Tick

Tock

Time

This porous text: a list of words, invites the guests to fill in the blanks and create images. The words trigger people in different ways, depending on what they see, how they feel, how their day started, on their imagination, their knowledge, their

experiences and concerns. The guests had already started entering the pores with their imagination.

[9:36]

The children of Hrísey were the local guides and waited at the harbour for their guests.

The first stamp in the passports, the guests got from a toll guard that also provided the guests with a map and a personal secret mission.

The secret mission would be a tool to sharpen the guest attention to the environment.

SECRET MISSION

Find a beautiful stone and show it to a fellow traveller.

Throw a stone in the sea and observe the ripples.

If you see litter on the ground, take it with you and throw it in the nearest bin.

Pay attention to everything that is red, remember at least three things.

Find a wildflower on the island and remember its scent.

Describe the scent to a fellow traveller.

In small groups, the guests had to visit four stations on the island guided by the children. The content was driven by questions drawn from a Quality Street tin jar placed at the stations. At each station different dimensions of life on the island were addressed through assignments and activities that the guests were invited to engage with.

On the route, the guests walked past the ruins of the fish factory of Hrísey, that had burned down only a few months prior to the performance — a traumatic event that shook the community and its livelihood.

Even though the place is not one of the stations and not mentioned in the script, it is still potentially significant for individual guests. The porosity of the structure, and the direct invitation to the guest to pay attention to the surroundings, brings about

an enchantment of the environment and makes everything on the journey super real and of special interest.

ENCHANTMENT

Thus, the ruins of the fish factory, the rusted anchor, or the combination of these two elements can for some guests be a dramatic highlight, depending on where they come from and how they read their environment.

Hrísey is a site of natural beauty, a place with a history and complex societal challenges. Some of these concerns and stories are known to the guests through the media or mediated to them within the performance in an organic dialogue with the local hosts. Other narratives are brought into the performance by individual guests and may only be significant to them.

Porosity is a term from geology to describe a void space in a rock. Its use in performance derives from site specific practices to describe what happens in an embodied dramaturgy where the guests are immersed and moving in found environments.

SITE SPECIFIC

EMBODIED DRAMATURGY

IMMERSED

Porosity in a dramaturgical sense, as used in *Island*, refers to the dramaturgical structure that is open to occupation and may be referred to both as a trigger and as a container.

TRIGGER

CONTAINER

I suggest that the embracing element is a quality that combines the embodied immersive aspect and a caring environment.

EMBODIMENT

IMMERSION

CARING

ENVIRONMENT

The embracing atmosphere infiltrates the porous structure and gives it certain attributes. An aspect of the embrace is the holding environment: that the guests feel that their needs are being cared for and at the same time leave it open for them to leave the structure at any time. Where porosity provides the space, the embrace creates the conditions.

Where porosity provides the space, the embrace creates the conditions

[13:37]

Here we are at the station called Sæborg where guests were invited to read the descriptions of four different bird species and asked to identify with one of the species.

“The bird idea helped you shift your perspective.”

This led to a discussion on the guests’ personalities, values, and their way of relating to the world while at the same time it created a bond between the guests.

“I got the opportunity to become a part of a community.”

“The Island is [...] the scenography, and the piece is about being an islander. You are guided from one scene to another. The scene is about what you walk through.”

Some guests expressed that they were embraced by the child’s energy, tempo, and way of engaging with the environment. The playful setting that the children intuitively created, made it easier for the guests to engage with the work.

Of course, there is always a possibility that a guest comes with bleak perspectives and resists the embracing aspect of the performance. Any dramaturgical structure is partly porous and open to personal interpretation and a guest’s expectations and state of mind will certainly affect the quality of the experience. Highly porous structure is more sensitive to interruptions or even sabotage from different directions.

Turner points to several qualities of porosity that need to be taken into consideration when working with porous structures.

Porosity in geology is a **spatial** structure.

Porosity does **not automatically imply interaction**.

A porous structure if left unoccupied is **fragile**.

A porous structure **risks being changed** by the thing occupying it.

A porous artwork **risks losing its identity** by creating space for occupation and interventions.

Cathy Turner 2014 p. 201–203

If an artist wants to work with porous structures, the primary action is to invent ways to invite the guests to occupy the structure — for without the participation, the structure risks to collapse. There is no work without the guests. As an artist you may be conscious about the site’s potential, but you have no idea of what the guests bring to the work and how the encounters between the different agents will unfold. There is no way of controlling what filters through the pores of a porous structure, beyond creating a stimulating and safe environment.

“It comes with a feeling of freedom.

You sense everything, you become like a receiver...

and an amplifier.

...you are also projecting...”

Individual guests move constantly between two tracks of the dramaturgy, the inner track, and the outer track.

Outer Dramaturgy

The outer track is the embodied journey through actual landscapes and encounters with humans and nonhumans — a linear path.

Inner Dramaturgy

The inner track is a sporadic journey through the mental landscapes, memories and ideas that are triggered by the questions, the discussions and the personal mirroring. These triggers may even go off long after the actual performance.

“You are performing,

but you are your self.

you are in your own personal space mentally.”

The porous dramaturgy can open dimensions of different temporalities to the guests, even timelessness.

TIME

At the station called Power Source, guests were invited to lie down and listen to the mountains. While listening to the mountains, the guest’s attention is pointed towards geological time. The work also triggers other dimensions and different temporalities: historical, political, societal, spiritual, and personal, depending on the synergy happening within the guest’s experience.

Local hosts invited the guests for a coffee in their kitchen or living room where the questions from a jar led to an open dialogue between the locals and the guests, often on societal and political aspects of belonging.

“There was a total stranger sitting in my kitchen and I asked
What has the island given you?
The man had to hold back his tears.”

Open but direct questions are central to the artistic method as a strategy to enable occupation. They invite the guests to bring their own perspectives into the work and, in the context of *Island*, lead to a dynamic dialogue between the guests and the hosts.

“It always became an intimate conversation.”

“The work came into being in the conversation with the co travellers...”

“It is this embodied experience. You had an influence on what happens. You are intimate; it is a personal relation.”

[19:07]

In the church, the guests wrote down their own questions and contemplations and shared them with each other in a silent ritual and left them in a tin jar inside the church.

“The project got me to think about how it is to live here.

There is more freedom.

I thought about that after the performance.”

A local guide/14 years old

By the end of the journey each guest had a personal settlement with the toll guard that would give them the last stamp if they had completed their secret mission.

If we understand dramaturgy as a tool to organise notion of time and space of a performance process, then porosity and embrace have different functions within the defined structure.

EMBRACE

Presence

Immanence

Interconnection

POROSITY

The embracing aspect of the dramaturgical strategies lies in the presence, the immanence, and the interconnection of the guest to the surroundings. While porosity invites multiple temporalities and multiple dimensions to filter through the building blocks of the script.

Temporalities

Dimensions

These dramaturgical tools build a foundation for a platform that intersects the different layers of the guest’s identity, the past, present and future, and the inner and the outer landscapes of a guest’s journey through the work. A journey that goes beyond the linear timeframe of the performance event.

In theory, I can create distinction between the function of porosity and embrace. But the artistic outcome is a messy, embodied, and entangled experience that does not make distinction between structure and content, between what belongs to the

work and what not. An experience that shifts organically between an outer and an inner dramaturgical track.

The consequence of my research question — How little is enough? — that points to the reduced artistic production seems to present a paradox. The method might even produce a new question that is on the opposite side of the spectrum, namely: How much is too much?

How much is too much?

The work generates layers of narratives and hosts limitless impressions and ideas. A site like Hrísey already is so rich in content, especially with the addition of what the script introduces and what the guests bring along.

The method implies that everything is potentially a part of the performance; there is nothing outside the work. When does an embrace become too firm or an immersion too overwhelming? The answer to that question is of course individual. But, as an answer to my original question —

What dramaturgical tools can create conditions for transformation through minimal performative means?

— I can say that porous and embracing dramaturgical strategies combined can create conditions for transformative experiences. A porous structure needs an encircling embrace to create safety and trust, the preconditions for voluntary transformation. The encircling embrace is firm, caring, and gives a sense of security to the guest. A safe environment allows the guest to surrender to the open and porous structure and invites them to render their personal values and stories into the performance and hopefully gain new insights.

[23:07]

Sources:

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Turner, C. (2014). *Porous Dramaturgy and the Pedestrian*. In K. Trencsényi and B. Cochrane (Ed), *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice* London: Bloomsbury, pp. 199–213.

Guest Questionnaires.

Interviews with collaborators, participants, and guests.

The work was created in collaboration with Gréta Kristín Ómarsdóttir and the inhabitants of Hrísey and produced by Akureyri Theatre Company 2020.

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Voice over: Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir and Halla Steinunn Stefánsdóttir

Photos and testimonies are used with the permission of the hosts and guests.

Many thanks to the inhabitants of Hrísey, and to the guests of the work, for giving me the permission to use testimonies and photos.

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By Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir

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of creating transformative encounters with an audience through participatory and site-specific artworks, with a particular focus on how minimal and sustainable the framework for the encounter can be. The article asks what dramaturgical tools can create condition and provide triggers for transformation through minimal means and introduces two dramaturgical tools, POROSITY and EMBRACE, that can be understood as enablers for transformative experiences. While Cathy Turner who coined the term porous dramaturgy, uses these two terms to describe the same tool, this article argues that porosity and embrace have separate functions. The video unpacks the distinction between these dramaturgical tools and disseminates how they appear and can be understood in the performance, *Island*.

“I was thinking about it some days after. You are in nature, and you turn inwards somehow. To have your inner reflections in this kind of community... is more important [...] than a bigger community. That is my feeling”

A local guest.

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May, T. (2016). *Radical Empathy, Embodied Pedagogy, and Climate Change Theatre*. Theatre in the Age of Climate Change. Online essay: Howlround Theatre commons, <https://howlround.com/radical-empathy-embodied-pedagogy-and-climate-change-theatre>

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