

**Digital Silence & Distant Thoughts – Reflective interview with M. – full transcribed interview**

*I wanted to ask you if you have anything you want to start with? Anything that comes to mind?*

Yes, is there one performance you would like to start with, or?

*No, not necessarily, we can just -*

So, uhm, I forget the names of the performances.

*It's Digital Silence and Distant Thoughts.*

Okay, so for Digital Silence, I don't know if you remember - I was like very sick, I thought I had corona. So my memory of it is pretty foggy. And I fell asleep during it, and I snored. Which was like a really weird experience to happen even though they were strangers but then there was also you guys [students from the same Master], who I knew but it was still kind of early so, that was weird. But one thing that I really took away from it was the digital sound and I have actually been bringing this into my practice a lot, when I'm teaching for example online. So making sure that everyone has their mics on and like actually like the soundscape really connects. I found that the sound was th most imporant part of connecting the spaces and the third space was made up of sounds for me. Yes, I actually want to talk about Distant Thoughts a little bit more, because I had a bad experience with it so I thought that would be beneficial for you guys. Okay so, I mean, of course there is always hiccups and technical errors but my person didn't call me and then I got a call 45 minutes late, so it was almost 10 pm, from someone else who didn't follow the script and I found it really - I was just like okay what am I supposed to do? Because I really thought this other person was supposed to hold the container but they weren't following the script. And I kept trying to bring it back to it, and then we kind of had a nice conversation a little bit but then she started saying some really whorephobic things - speaking badly about sex workers and basically saying - I mean it was here thoughts so it's like I let them happen. But she was just talking about how she met a guy and he addited to paying for services from sex workers and then she - yeah - didn't like that and had a lot to say about that and I was kind of like - eh. And I, I don't know if you know, I'm a former sex worker and so that was really shitty to hear. It kind of ruined my week honestly.

*And this person was the one who was supposed to call you and just called late or?*

No it was a different person. I think she called someone else before me. I think it was her second conversation. Maybe, I don't know. And after like half an hour I was like I don't want this to happen anymore because it is late and I need to get to bed and I cleared my night for

this and blah blah blah. And then, yeah, so I thought it wasn't going to happen actually, I thought maybe I didn't make it clear that - just don't let anyone call me but then I still got a call. So organizationally, it wasn't great. And I also didn't really know the position of who I was calling. I thought they had done workshops or something - I'm trying to remember, my memory is also a little foggy. I think I went into it expecting them to kind of be holding the space and the conversation and not the other way around. So yeah. And I really - they also really didn't listen to what I said. And like they would repeat things back to me as if they were listening, but then incorrectly. Like 'O, so this happened?' 'No no no, so this happened.' And then, I don't know, I almost felt that - maybe this is the point of this that they aren't supposed to be listening to what I am saying or something.

*That it was an actor or something?*

Yes and that the plan was to misinterpret things that they say and say things that may be problematic, I wasn't really sure. And it just - also I was trying to get off the call in the end but I wasn't the one who needed to initiate that ending script, so finally I was like I think we can wrap it up, because I felt really uncomfortable and then she didn't want to let me go. So eventually I was like okay I got to run and I don't think we did the script at the end.

*So what was the position of the script in this conversation?*

What do you mean?

*Well, did she follow the script or did you try to follow it or?*

I followed the script and I think she did at first, for like the first two lines and then I feel like she just wanted to chat. And then I was like, I think you are supposed to say this and I was trying to bring it back to the script but I just remember it being this weird tug of war where she didn't want to. And again, I thought maybe this is part of it, like maybe I am not supposed to follow the script. I don't know.

*It is a weird kind of ownership that you can take over this performance, because you can do what you are supposed to do or you can not. And it's - I did it recently, so not in September - and I had a really nice experience and I felt really like I know this person now on the other side and I was really nervous before hand, but the script was really nice for me that I something to fall back onto when I didn't know what to say. But now that you are telling me this, I realize it is really something that you do together. And you really cannot do it on your own.*

Yes, totally. You can both agree to go off script, there is also that negotiation - but I didn't really feel like there was place for that negotiation. Right? She decided. But I couldn't even tell if it was a conscious choice or if she just was not really sure what she was supposed to be doing.

*(Silence)*

Did you do Body of Knowledge? With Spring?

*No.*

I think that would be interesting.

*It is kind of the same right?*

Yes, but it is much more held. I would say. And there wasn't a script but there was much more structure, I think.

*And what was here - what gave it structure?*

The person on the other end of the phone was really the guiding person, you know, asking the questions and - but also you are on the phone and also on the Zoom call and the call was pretty graphic, like 'call 1', so you knew you were on the first of a few calls. And you also had a package and the person would tell you - like you would have a conversation and kind of guide you through it and then they would be like 'okay now open the first layer of the package' and then you would. And then they were like 'okay so I'm going to hang up in two minutes and when we are not talking please do this things and then you are going to get a call from this person in about to minutes. So I knew, I have two minutes and then I get a call. So, I think, for me as an audience member with a virtual situation I need to know what is expected and what is going to happen. And there were still lots of surprises, but I still, you know.

*Yes, you don't what is part of it and what is supposed to happen.*

And if you know - so a couple of these phonecalls I had yesterday [during Body of Knowledge] was from a teenager from Melbourne, and then another adult from Utrecht for example, a couple of the times it was around like this, so I knew -

*(Someone entering)*

I knew that one person on the call was like me and one person on the call was not. And so if they asked a question I could be like hey you can go first, you know I had [??] that relationship, but I knew that the other person was really guiding the relationship. So that felt like I could talk - like we got really deep really quickly and that is way.

*And where they all strangers or also part of the performance?*

The guiding person was part of the performance, yeah. But like a teenager who had done workshops around the topic or something, I guess.

*That is then of course the difference with Building Conversation, that they give you text on paper and then they leave you with it. And then you are - because of the script you really know what is supposed to happen and what you're supposed to say so it becomes really amplified when it is not going according to script and that can also be a little bit of a dangerous thing maybe. Because if you don't negotiate this between the two of you than it becomes really uncomfortable and weird.*

Yes.

*So what did this provoke for you?*

I felt like I couldn't even think about what I actually wanted to talk about because I was so preoccupied with - I don't know - like, where are we in the script and like, okay if this part is not going to happen then I'm going to just start telling my story but then I felt like my mind wasn't on my story and actually sharing, it was more like, is this going to be too much for this person, are they going to follow? And they didn't ask clarifying questions, right, which is part of the script, so I was like, oh then it was super clear, but then later when I was asking clarifying questions, they got all confused, because they weren't reading the script so they didn't know it was part of it or something. So it also didn't really make for a conversation because it was just like I tell my story, they tell their story.

*So you actually felt like this person didn't have the script at all?*

I think they had the script, I think they just stopped looking at it almost immediately.

*It sounds like a really unpleasant person.*

Yes! I was really - I mean also, in terms of like listening there was like a language barrier, so maybe that was an issue. But I feel like - I don't know, maybe they were tired because they had already done this conversation.

*Yes, but then it would be easier to just follow the script and just do it.*

Yes, exactly just do it. That's what I thought. It was very weird. Usually I am very down for this stuff is the things, so it kind of - I don't know why it went that way honestly.

*It is really interesting and also important that they also take care of a situation that can also be the complete opposite of what they mean and what they want - because they want of*

*course to have a really beautiful encounter with a stranger somewhere in the world and you don't know them and you have this open space to share something about yourself.*

Which is a beautiful idea.

*But they do leave you alone with a script and another person and anything can happen there.*

Yes. I like the encounters created, but actually I think it was just a fluke, that this person didn't - I don't know. Because you can't really do anything to make sure that that doesn't happen, right? You are not vetting the strangers, to make sure they're going to do - or, I don't know.

*I was also the one being called [I realized later that this is actually not true] and there actually is a lot of power - for the calling person. The person I was talking to also did not answer the phone with what was supposed to be said, so that really threw me off, like, o no we are not following the script immediately. Because she said am I A or B? And I was like, well yes you are B because you are calling me. And then we were like, okay now were going to start here I go, and then we followed the script really uncomfortably. And there is maybe a weird power that the person calling has.*

Yes totally. And I think I was also really giving her that power. To her, because she called me too. And I think in a normal situation I would just be like, hey do you not want to follow the script or? But I think I kind of thought that that was on her to hold the space a bit more and to guide the conversation because she was the one calling.

*So you also allowed her to have that?*

I wish I had just surrendered maybe, but I just - I don't know, I was really - I should have chosen one path or the other, like, hey do you want to follow the script? Because if not, that's fine but I just need to know. Or just totally let go of it, but I couldn't for some reason. I really - I was like this is the whole thing, that we have the script.

*It is also that you somewhere felt the possibility that she was part of it, that she had some sort of secret agenda.*

Yes, because I thought I read somewhere before the performance, in the email I think, that the people calling had been doing workshops with Building Conversation. In Prague or something.

*Oh, I think they were students from DAMU, the art school in Prague. And they were working with Building Conversation on some class on dialogical art or something, I think. And as part of getting to know Building Conversation, they did this performance.*

I think that I understood that as that they were part of the performance, as in building it maybe.

*I don't think they were, no. I think they were just participants.*

O, I think that's what gave me the impression. As if they were kind of in cahoots and more actually in the realm of Body of Knowledge, which would - that changes it completely actually. If I would have known it was just another person.

*Yes, I think it was just an art student having some conservative opinions about sex workers, I guess.*

Yes, I guess so.

*Which maybe - if this power struggle or hierarchy was not there, then you would have been able to perceive this as, this is your opinion and now we can have a conversation about it and I can also share my view.*

Exactly, yes.

*And that was not there.*

No, I think if I knew the actual power dynamic I think I would have been much more comfortable with calling the person out on what they were saying. But I didn't think that that was what our situation was I think that was the problem.

*And so did this experience leave a mark in some way about conversation or about encountering stranger, or?*

Well...

*Or did you feel like this was just a rotten apple?*

No, well.. I did find myself really hesitating for buying a ticket for Body of Knowledge, because of this experience. Because is was like, I don't want that again. And then, also, when I'm - because I am creating these encounters a lot, in my teaching work, right? So I think it changed how I do that, also, in terms of framing. It has really affected how I set up encounters between students that might not know each other yet. But in terms of interacting with strangers... I don't think so because I have hardly been interacting with strangers, because of

corona, so that is really hard to gage. But the thing is, I think in normal life I would have no problem telling someone what I think, if they were a stranger and they started talking shit about sex workers.

*Do you think the phone had something to do with that?*

The phone?

*Yes, that it was only the phone call and that maybe if you saw their face-*

No, I think I felt more comfortable speaking my mind on the phone than in person, or over video chat or something. Like, if I knew, this is an art student from Prague and has no relationship to the project, then I think the phone would have been good actually.

*And what do you do now with your students when you're teaching to frame the encounters?*

Well, I kind of make a very clear starting point. Almost like, you were talking about how she was like am I A or am I , I kind of give this moment of informality, to figure out who's is going to go first and - for example, I adapted -you know the derivé exercise we did at the very beginning of the year?

*Yes.*

I kind of adapted this to teach about a bunch of things. I have them both start with their back to their front door, for example. So they know physically where to be, they can discuss the roles and they know to say when they are starting. And I think that is helpful. Just because it gives both people a change to know that the other person knows what's going on. You know? For this phone call for example, if she didn't read the script then - like your person didn't read, or you are the one calling so you are supposed to be this person - and so just to make sure that there is none of that confusion and to let them know that they are in it together, I give a moment of figuring it out together first. And I also give a suggestion of if things go off course, you can either go with it or find a way to bring it back. Kind of giving permission for it all to happen, but that also sticking to it is also okay. And that there is a course that I have set and acknowledging that - it isn't just like a free for all conversation, there is a course that you can follow and if you go off, that is fine, there is no wrong way to do it. Like choosing to color outside of the lines, but the lines are still there actually.

*So you really frame the negotiation between the two people also, that they have a space for getting to know each other in a way and what they want to do.*

*Yes.*

*That is really important I think.*

Yes. And I think I also give a directive in a way. Sometimes when I do this activity I really do it for like imaging and imagination and visualization, because I get them to kind of describe and do a little tour through their house and describe what they're seeing and I'm like, use your senses blah blah blah - so in that way I am pushing imagination. But sometimes I'm trying to push generosity and I'm like, remember to be generous with your partner and don't give them nothing to visualize, really try to fill their imagination. So a little directive - they don't need to know the entire point, because obviously they're getting all of these plus listening, plus - all of these values. But if they have one thing that they know like, I can grab onto this, I know I should try to be generous, then that also keeps them grounding in what they should be doing.

*Yes.*

*(Silence)*

*I am just really amazed that I haven't thought about Distant Thought going in a completely different direction.*

Have you interviewed many people about it yet?

*No, I talked to Anastasia about it.*

And hers went well?

*Yes, it was also a nice experience. I just think that I had a really nice person on the other line and we shared similar experiences so we had this - she started with a really deep and personal experience so that made everything easy from the start. Even though she didn't follow the script in the beginning. But, I just haven't thought about the huge responsibility that they give to these two people that need to call each other and if one of them doesn't take that responsibility, that it is really a horrible experience.*

*Yes.*

*I hadn't thought about it that way. That that space is also there for really abusing someone's - someone is really vulnerable.*

Yes. Especially if you share first. I also kind of shared kind of like a deep thing first and afterwards I was kind of wishing I hadn't.

Yes.

Complicated.

*Yes, it really is.*

*(Silence)*

But honestly, for Digital Silence I really don't really remember a lot about it, other than what I already shared. But do you have any specific questions about it? Maybe that would help jog my memory.

*I didn't actually do Digital Silence, I only heard about it from Anastasia and I read about it of course, so I am familiar with the structure but I haven't actually experienced it myself. But you did say that you really experienced the soundscape as a third space, that that was really there. And that you fell asleep also, but that was because you were sick?*

Yes, because I was sick. I knew that it was going to happen too.

*What did you expect further? Because you know you were sick. Did you know beforehand that it was an hour of sitting in your room silently?*

No, no idea. I really - I don't know what I thought, but I didn't expect that. And I was actually really relieved I think because I thought like, thank god I can just lie on my bed. But I think it being late at night also did something, because I think that if I wasn't sick I would have really loved that it was late at night. Because it adds intimacy I feel, always when you do things at night time. And that maybe it was during the day I would have been able to stay awake. But I was awake for most of it, I think I only slept for like 15 minutes maybe.

*But there was also the space for it to just sleep.*

Yes. But apparently I was snoring.

*But that is really funny, because everyone would have heard that and - maybe it was really like atmospheric.*

Yes. But the thing is like, the only negative that I have been learning about the Zoom algorithms and I know that Zoom has an algorithm that filters sound that it thinks it doesn't want you to hear, or things you don't want to hear, right? So some background noises get completely filter out.

*Yes. Someone is broadcasted right? The loudest noise is broadcasted and the other sounds are kept silent?*

Yes. And I wish there was a way you could turn that off so you could really hear everything. But, I don't know, I really don't remember our conversation afterwards, I know that there was questions asked...

*And how do you know that you were snoring?*

Because they told me.

*And how would that know that it was you?*

Because at the beginning I was like, I am really sick, I think I have corona, I didn't want to bail on this performance, but like, I might fall asleep, I don't know what is going to happen.

*O, haha, you exposed yourself.*

Yes, because I was like - I already set it up on my bed so I could sit comfortably so I knew I was like, o no I'm in bed, so. And then they were like, we heard you snoring, we were so worried about you. Because - o yes, I was like coughing and sneezing constantly. So I was like, are you sure you don't want me to turn off my mic because I'm just going to be making gross sounds all the time, and they were like, no no no, so that is why I exposed myself actually, because I was worried about the sounds.

*Maybe this performance became about you then. For the other people it was about a sick girl.*

Haha, yes true.

*I also talked to Anastasia about this and she talked to Vicky about it, and Vicky was a little mad. Because Vicky thought, I paid 15 euros for this and I just have to sit here in silence. And I can do that on my own. And now it makes me think of that in Digital Silence there is also this responsibility for the participants to be really aware of what is happening and how it is a special occasion, and that the experience is really special in a way that there are people sitting in their rooms and making sounds, and what am I hearing - to be really aware of that, because if you loose that, it is just you sitting in a room with some background noise.*

Yes. I was also mad that I paid the money for it, even though I do think it is special and I love supporting artists but I was like, I'm a fucking starving artist and - I think that Vicky is on to something, that it is not even about the money actually but it is about spending that

money affects your experience during it. I remember telling Paul afterwards because I was also like, o my god I'm just going to sleep through this thing that I spend 15 euros on. And I remember telling Paul afterwards and he was like, you spend 15 euros and you fell asleep? And then I felt really guilty. And I do remember that thought coming up a lot, like, okay I'm spending money, what's going to happen, how do I get the most out of this - there was a lot of pressure actually.

*Yes. There is really a lot of responsibility for yourself to make the most of the performance, to be conscious about what is happening, because otherwise it is nothing, nothing is happening.*

Yes, and I remember at some points I was trying to kind of make it - not make it interesting but not just be off camera. But my group was remarkably boring. Most people checked out. I was talking to Liesbeth about this - about our experience in between, because we were in separate groups. She was telling me about the kind of stuff she was doing, what she was seeing and that just was not happening at all in my group. I really feel like most people were like - like this [moves to background] is all I saw. Just a bunch of screens of people sitting really far away.

*So you were still looking at your screen then? Or people were still in the picture? Because I thought you had to sit behind your camera?*

O no, they just start out of the camera and then you can enter whenever you want. And Liesbeth said that in some groups people were like getting really close to the camera and doing things. Even like making tea or something. And that was not what was happening at all.

*And do you think this was a start of - because I it was at the beginning of our program - that I was like a kick off start online school or?*

In some ways maybe. The thing is I was teaching acting online starting in March, so I was already in that zone. But I do think it was kind of like - this is going to sound offensive - but I do think it was the thing that made me stop paying for online performances. I had been trying to see stuff online and then I think after that I was like, I can't justify it anymore.

*And why was that?*

Because it was 15 euros and it didn't - I didn't take much from it honestly. It didn't feel like much of an experience - like it's - I really could have not been there and I don't think it would be any different. For me, not for other people obviously, but for me. And then I was like, I just can't - If that happens in person, I usually - I still went out of the house, it was still an experience, I was still around people. But I got nothing of what I really want from a

performance, which is to be in a space with other people. And it wasn't bad so I always didn't learn - you know when you see bad theatre, you learn so much.

*Yes, or it provokes like anger or anything.*

Yes, something. But it just didn't really do anything actually for me. To the point where I feel kind of indifferent about it. That may sound harsh, but it's just...

*No, I also - I don't know if it was a specific performance that we went to - or maybe because it was in September and there were also things happening in real life - but at that point I was also like, I don't want to go, I don't care about online performances anymore. I don't need them. I'd rather have no theatre than online theatre. It doesn't do anything for me, it doesn't give me anything.*

Yes.

*And it's maybe also really about the price, because you are not going anywhere, you're staying inside your house, there is no real physical experience that I am having and it is the same price as a real life theatre ticket. Which I understand the reasoning behind, because-*

Yes, you need to pay people the same.

*Yes and also, if you make it cheaper then you create this hierarchy and I think theatre companies don't want to say it is 'less' theatre but different theatre.*

Yes, I completely understand. I get it.

*So what did you - yes, the feeling of indifference is maybe the worst feeling you can get.*

Yes, I wish I could have been angry or - but there was nothing to be angry about. I feel like - I wish - I was even looking for a profound moment I think for myself, that I needed to get something out of this. I remember going outside afterwards, of course you are supposed to leave the room for five minutes I think. And I remember doing that and thinking, is this going to be a big moment, am I going to feel-? I don't know, this could have all been because I was sick, I don't know. I felt like I was going through the moments but actively trying to get something out of it because of the money, and still not.

*Did you feel like you had a role in it or that you were more of a pawn that was told to move somewhere or do something?*

Hm, that is a good question, what do I think my position was? I think, I just felt like a participant. I felt that it could have been like a workshop. In a course about online theatre, or

something. I felt like I was participating in something that I could learn from. I didn't feel like I was really part of a conversation or anything. I feel like I was just - okay do you know Rock Bottom Movement? They are a dance company from New York or Toronto. At the beginning of the pandemic they did a similar framing for a performance. So you could really see everyone's homes and it really looked like you were looking at a bunch of apartments. And they are a dance company that is really about postdramatic dance or just non-traditional, non typical dance that anyone can do. And so the framing was kind of similar. It felt like a rear window kind of situation. And there were dancing happening. So you could participate in the dancing, or just watch. But that was - really an excitement there that brought a lot of curiosity. And it made me want to look in everyone's rooms and look what everyone's houses looked like. But this didn't feel like that.

*It didn't feel like a conversation to you?*

No.

*That there was no connection between everyone, the participants?*

No. I don't remember anyone that was in my group. Well only Andreia was in my group, and I only remember that because she was, like me, trying to give something. And I remember at one point she was just spinning around in her chair or something. But yes, I don't remember anything that was discussed afterwards, I don't remember what the topics were in the discussion might have been. I know that there were question that you were supposed to think about, but I don't remember what those are. And usually these are all things I really remember.

*Yes. It is interesting. With this work it is really that people can have so many different experiences. Which also makes it really special.*

Of course.

*But also difficult. I can imagine that you can also feel like you have to do something or to make sounds or anything to enter in the conversation. But that is again also a shared responsibility of the group.*

Yes.

*And if that doesn't happen, than nothing happens. And then everyone is just sitting there in silence. And not a conscious silence, but just a silence.*

Yes, exactly.

*It makes me think of online silences in classes, that they are really active silences. Or anticipated silences, where everyone is waiting for something.*

Yes, and this wasn't charged with that because no one really expected anything to happen.

*But you did have the feeling that you needed to do something to get something?*

Yes, like, I want to see something interesting, so maybe if I do something interesting, someone else will do something interesting.

*And there was not.*

No, that was not the case.