

Isabel Lewis: Unfolding Experience

[Isabel Lewis, Reece Cox](#)

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Transcript

Reece Cox: Isabel, your practice draws from multiple disciplines and often involves numerous collaborators from an even greater array of backgrounds – all of which we'll talk about at length here. In order to understand the practice you have today I feel it's first important to get a sense of where you began and what put you on the trajectory you are on now. I understand that your background was in dance but also philosophy and literary criticism. How did these things lead you to the work you're making today?

Isabel Lewis: My introduction to the arts comes through studying classical ballet in a strict school at the age of 11, which led me to seek other kinds of expression, interested, as I was, in notions of technique and discipline. The older I got, I became interested in the historical context where classical ballet arises (in 17th century France) and in putting it in context with enlightenment culture. At this time, I was also

reconnecting to growing up in a Dominican household. As a Dominican child, as soon as you can walk, you're dancing bachata and merengue, and dance is connected to music, which is connected to social ritual. As I started going deeper into classical ballet, I found the need to reconnect to dance as a social ritual. That leads me to many experiments with different contemporary techniques and a fascination with movement and dances from different parts of the world. This is when I start creating my own choreographies. By the time I reach university, I am studying choreography and thinking I would be a writing major [laughs] but I soon realised I still needed dance and notions of composition that were available to me through choreography. I still needed the integration of the bodily and the intellectual and so I chose to study literary criticism and choreography side by side. Philosophy was a bridge to make sense of the things that I was bringing together. Inside of an academic setting, however, these were separate worlds.

RC: In light of this background, a strong philosophical impulse starts to become apparent in how you've continuously sought to identify and unpack the modalities and norms of exhibition and performance as an artist. A good example of this is the development of what you've come to call *Occasions*, which is not quite theatre nor quite an exhibition; it's not quite a party nor a concert, but it does borrow elements from a number of different formats and disciplines at once. Can you talk a bit about what the *Occasion* is and how this particular development came into being?

IL: After university, I relocated to New York City. I was studying dance there as a teenager but decided to leave the track of a professional dancer to go to university, which I did in Virginia, and after which I moved back to New York. Rather than sticking on an academic track, which I went into college thinking that's what I would do, I started working inside of the

experimental dance community in New York, where I began presenting my choreographic work in theatres such as Dance Theatre Workshop, which is now called I think, New York Live Arts, PS122 which is now Performance Space New York, The Kitchen and many other venues. Although they were experimental theatres, they still maintain the Black Box idea, the traditional proscenium stage theatre with a singular placement for the public – that is the frontal orientation of the space and of the composition. It also maintains a sense of theatre as a neutral or as a non-space where you then build up your vision inside of. For several years, I was working as a dancer for other choreographers as well as creating my own choreographic works in these spaces.

When I was creating those stage works, I kept hitting my head against the unease I felt about the visual dominance of the presentation format. Dance is a fully sensorial, fully embodied thing! Yet, its presentation formats seem to rely so heavily on the distanced, objective points of view made available by the theatre. For many years, I was really slamming my head against that aspect of theatre, which I didn't quite know how to deal with. I tried out many different things, playing with the elements of the stage, with the lighting, and repositioning the public in different ways. That experimentation eventually leads me towards creating work in other kinds of spaces: what would it be to step out of the theatre and imagine performance in another place? This was, of course, highly disorienting because my upbringing and connection to dance and choreography was formed by these assumptions.

The first work called *Strange Action*, which is from 2009-10 was the name I gave to my understanding of what I was doing. Somehow it didn't feel like it was in a lineage of performance arts, with dance nor with theatre. Nor was it utilitarian or functional task based. I

needed to find a name for it, think about it, assess it, and criticise it. *Strange Action* is the first time that I activate a different understanding of my role inside of the theatre. It was the last work I made in a theatre until recently. It was also the first time I activated an understanding of myself as a host, and my audience, as guests. I was suddenly able to open up another perspective for myself by getting out of that adversarial relation of audience versus performer, performer versus audience. Suddenly, by thinking of myself as the host of a situation that invites guests, I created another dynamic and began thinking about composition in a new, expanded way: I'm sharing the same world rather than us being in separate worlds.

As a host, you prepare the conditions for something to take place and unfold. The guests also activate that situation, and inevitably become part of what happens. *Strange Action* in many ways is the precursor to what would later, by 2013-14, become the *Occasion*. Between 2010 and 2013, is also when I move to Berlin and leave behind a certain way of working I had built up in New York City. Starting from scratch felt liberating and lead me towards what would later become the *Occasions*. Of course, I didn't know it at the time. I was working on this performance format for a couple of years before I found the terminology to help me understand what I was wanting to achieve.

RC: I was curious about the transition from New York to Berlin, and what role, if any, had it played in the development of the work that you're making today? Specifically, the development of the *Occasion*?

IL: Yes, the process began towards the end of my time in New York City, but it took being in a new situation in Berlin and allowing myself to experiment in places like a friend's apartment or in the bar where I was working. On my nights off, I would ask if I could use the space to invite people and show what I was working

on. Those were the early beginnings of the *Occasions*: doing things in domestic spaces, bars, clubs and outdoors in Berlin.

RC: As you're describing this development, it brings to mind a number of other forums, which have emerged since the latter half of the last century, perhaps, specifically, Fluxus, then happenings, which were process-driven, socially oriented forms, and then relational aesthetics, which came about in the 1990s. Do you see the *Occasions* as a part of or in conversation with this lineage?

IL: Yes, absolutely. I would say the French Salons are definitely an influence, as well as the Ancient Greek symposium. In both formats there was philosophical discussion and conversation and, at the same time, the sensual pleasures of eating, there was flirtation, there was maybe sex, maybe dancing, there was entertainment. These formats were interesting to me because it's only in our more recent history that the senses become divided, and therefore our experience also becomes separated. I was interested in experiences that unify. Certainly, relational aesthetics was something I was looking at too. I do consider myself in dialogue with those works with one key difference: the works that fell under the name and category of relational aesthetics often felt like emptied set designs or a TV show scenario, where the actor is supposed to fulfill something. I was interested in something more engaging in terms of the relation with the visitor, as well as in the sense of responsibility and accountability that comes with being a host.

RC: I had not considered before that relational aesthetics are often hinged on a particular condition, event or circumstance, which is designed and decided before the piece happens, and once it's over, that often means the piece is over. Instead, the *Occasion* seems to account for a much broader range of not only experience, but also interaction and sensation.

And that ultimately strikes me as perhaps less prescriptive of an experience.

IL: In the *Occasions* the visitor could experience a range of attention: there would be moments of focused attention that I could create through choreography and the actions of performers and there could be other moments where one could drift away out of attention into sociality and socialising. That was an important part of this idea for me. I tried to prioritise that experience. I think what I have worked on for years is crafting live experiences. The skill sets I've chosen to develop have to do with dramaturgy, timing, vibe, image making and how to create bodily and sensorial impressions. I can think of composition in an almost painterly sense that happens in time, in moments that unfold. What are the different viewpoints in space that a visitor might be looking from? How do I place elements of furniture, so that the bodies of visitors are addressed in certain particular ways? The *Occasion* is also very inspired by the garden as a format for composition – the different levels, lawns or areas of a garden wherein the body is invited to place itself, the visitors making themselves comfortable and finding a view that they're interested in. I find it extremely beautiful the way that people's bodies inhabit space and create an image and composition of its own.

I'm interested in image making, but I suppose it has more to do with how images impact a person in time, as lived through their bodily sensations and experience. While I'm not specifically interested in how those images translate into other media, I do think it could be interesting to collaborate with someone who works with cinematography, or 360 degrees cinema, or virtual reality. So far, however, I found that video, like theatre, sets up a frame and a linear timeline, which is exactly what the *Occasion* tries to avoid. The *Occasion* is a nonlinear approach to composition that is open

to live input from the public and that may change the dramaturgy or a sequence as it unfolds.

RC: The metaphor that you used of the garden as a compositional influence seems particularly apt not only for the plants and non-human life forms that appear in your work, but also in that the garden is a dynamic environment. This brings us quite nicely to the first piece I would like to discuss entitled *Expanded Viewing I and II*, from 2019. It took place at Gropius Bau in Berlin as part of an exhibition called 'Garden of Earthly Delights', named after the triptych by Hieronymus Bosch. Notably, the show featured almost entirely contemporary artists except for the central panel of Bosch's triptych. I understand that painting became a score or a primary point of departure as you developed the work?

IL: Stephanie Rosenthal, the curator of the exhibition knew the *Occasions*, their proximity to the garden, and how I think about and work on composition. She told me about this idea she had to display the central panel of this famous work alone in a room with nothing around it. I found it to be a fantastic idea and said, 'can I see the space like how it would be when the work is installed with the empty space all around it?', so she walks me to an empty wing of Gropius Bau. I immediately started to think about my collaboration with Sissel Tolaas and Labour and started to design an experience that could lead you through two different ways of accessing the central panel of the painting.

In the *Occasions* you get everything all at once: you know it's the space, it's the smell, it's the composition, it's the music. I wanted to unfold a dramaturgy, which led you from space to space. I started to create scenes in the different rooms that would lead you to standing or sitting in front of this painting. The painting itself is incredibly evocative – there's so much detail to take in, so much action happening in every little

corner that you see it differently every time. It has an incredible quality of being a portal: you cannot tell where you are in time – it's science fiction, fantastical and imaginative. It is very inspiring to see a pre-enlightenment, creative mind-body exploding on this canvas. These notions of magic and fantasy were very compelling to me. How could I be inspired by its vibe and treat the painting as a portal into alternative worlds?

RC: You mentioned your work with Sissel Tolaas and Labour (Colin Hacklander and Farahnaz Hatam), the Berlin based duo and self-described sonic entity. Could you elaborate on the other collaborators you brought on to this project?

IL: In my conversations with Labour, with whom I was developing the structure of the piece, we focused on the missing panels that are typically on either side of the painting and tried to evoke their ghostly qualities and presence through exaggerating their absence. One of the sides is more brightly lit and brightly coloured, and the other is much darker seemingly inhabited by demonic presences. As the public moves through multiple spaces, their senses are addressed in an unfolding dramaturgy. If you entered on the left side of the course which leads to the painting, you would find daylight and certain kinds of sonic material activated by the performers Antonio Onio and Frida Giulia Franceschini, as well as Cesar Queruz, playing the theorbo. With the dancers, we created scenes that were about touch and the haptic experience of one body with another.

The sense of smell is not totally apparent yet. I appeared as a ghostly guide leading visitors into the second room where Sissel's first smell was. Visitors were invited to sit around the edges of the room and spend time smelling together. This smell is green, very earthy, almost like wet soil. The room was dark with not much light at all. From that scene, comes an

intervention by Labour with percussion and shakers, which when played in a certain way create a dense, totalising white noise. You were suddenly surrounded by sound, which then leads the public through yet another room where natural light was introduced. There were other scenes where we encounter the dancers and, ultimately, we encounter Cesar Queruz who was playing this beautiful medieval instrument after which we led the public to the painting.

If the visitor would have entered on the right side of the panel, they would encounter an ongoing scene with different shapes by performers Bráulio Bandeira and Kevin Bonono. There was another sonic quality to this scene – it was more electronic, heavier, with a single figure, performing and dancing wildly in this enormous room. The next room is a darkened space with cushions where visitors could lie down and experience another smell of Sissel's, which had an entirely other quality – almost like sweat. A darker muscular scent that goes along with the much darker kind of qualities and heavier electronic sounds by Labour.

RC: These elements that reflect the right panel of Bosch's triptych, the hellscape, evoke a fairly familiar scene for many people in Berlin, which is that of a club space. Thinking of the percussive sounds from Labour and the sweat smell designed in collaboration with Sissel Tolaas. Were you interested in bringing that kind of environment into the museum?

IL: Certainly, the club is deep inside of my lived experience in terms of spaces that inspire me, where I find my own space for experimentation with the self, presentation, physicality and embodiment. In many ways, the knowledge that comes to me through being a clubber or a DJ informs my way of thinking about the live experience for a public, particularly the waves of energy that unfold over the course of a club

night informs my sense of composition. In the case of this particular work, I wasn't specifically thinking about it, but then again, it is a contemporary space of ritual and bodily experimentation that runs through almost all of my work.

RC: What I'm appreciating about this now, is that you're introducing a kind of a ready-made through these cues, where you disrupt a specific precedent for behaviour within a museum by introducing or superimposing a familiar but ultimately different setting. Perhaps by bringing in cues from the club space, in this case, you introduce a different social code.

IL: Yes, it's the experimentation with format that I'm interested in, pushing on and trying to find new formats that rely on embodied knowledge and forms of socialising. I think of the codes of the club, of a dinner party, or of a house party, without having to speak about them or consciously register them. They are registered in our body and inform our bodily ways of being in space. Certainly, when I'm working inside of museums, I'm trying to introduce another form of bodily engagement than the typical museum visiting experience, where you're standing upright, spending time in front of things on a wall and carry on. The ready-made as a recognizable social format invites the visitor to cross a certain threshold in a way that doesn't feel forced or awkward.

RC: It seems quite fitting that these codes might be used naturally and fluidly, as you produce novel ways of experiencing in a museum. Museums typically prioritise a strictly visual or mono sensorial experience of art and always with the public positioned at a safe distance from artworks. A museum-going audience might be primed for this type of experience upon arrival but maybe by introducing contextual signifiers of another space you can unprime them a bit?

IL: Live performance can be an odd, strange,

and potentially alienating form to work with – some people don't relate to it at all. So I try to make it feel much more proximal. Along with social cues, some of the visual cues I use point us in a closer and more familiar direction. For ongoing collaboration I have with Marcelo Alcaide and Yolanda Zobel, who, at the time, were working with the fashion house, Courrèges in Paris, we work with styling or clothing that supports what the performers do. In *Extended Viewing I and II*, we worked together to emphasise the surfaces of the skin, with a lot of beige, rose and pink tones. We also used certain bright colours to bring out a sense of 'now'. For instance, there's a contrast in how contemporary I look wearing a bright blue jumpsuit while Cesar Queruz played a medieval instrument. These are cues inside of the work sculpted through the styling of the performers. I use the word styling because I find it that the work is closer to street style than costume, which maybe puts you in another theatrical space. If I would be in costume, I'd be in separate worlds from the visitor.

RC: I now would like to talk about a more recent piece for Kunsthalle Zürich, which was entitled *Skeletal, Scalable Escalator* (2020). I believe it was open for six weeks and during this time, you and the other performers were present throughout the duration of the piece. Do you consider this exhibition to be an *Occasion*? Can the *Occasion* be stretched over such a long period of time, and then further how do you see your role as a host over such a long period?

IL: As soon as the *Occasion* becomes something I can recognise, I start to find new challenges for what its composition can be. In this case, Daniel Bauman, the curator of the show, invited me to take up this exhibition length, which is something I'd been asked to do before but never found the right conditions to do. The Kunsthalle Zurich seems devoted to following the lead of the artist and open to

experimentation, so I felt like this was the right place to try out this longer duration. The way I approached the composition related it to the entire architecture of the Löwenbräu building which houses the Kunsthalle. Similar to *Expanded Viewing I and II*, it takes visitors on a journey through different levels guided by the movements of performers. But there's also a certain free floating, which visitors can do by defining their own pathways through three different levels of the exhibition. I worked with Labour again on this project – I love the way they think about space, and how they generate gestures of sound, which can feel and fulfil the scale of these architectures. Their music was playing on these incredible speakers that are a collaboration between themselves and Dirk Bell, a visual artist, and Mo Stern, who's an incredible sound arts designer. Those speakers have special visual and sonic qualities, and how they were placed in the room allowed for the movement of sound. One of the great things for me about our collaboration is that they think about sound as movement – for me, sound is choreographic, and for them, composition is also choreographic, not only in terms of how sound moves through space, but also how it moves through and affects the body of the visitor.

RC: Over the course of the six-week exhibition, *Scalable Skeletal Escalator* (2020) changed more or less constantly. I was fortunate to catch the first two days of the opening weekend where inside a large reverberant gallery, Isabel moved throughout the space along with a group of performers interacting with pieces of furniture and plastic curtains, all of which were on wheels and could be pushed across the concrete floor, and none of which seemed to stay in place for more than a few moments. It was clear that Isabel was the host, but it was not clear who or what, if anything in particular, was prompting the movements and actions occurring throughout the massive room at any one time. Sometimes performers are rushing

across the floor, piling up sofas and other elements in a frenzy at one end of the room. In another moment, someone would be reading a text into a microphone as performers melded with the audience by sitting on the floor or slowly walking around and looking at the space like visitors. Nothing stood still or was fixed in place, including the lights which remained mostly dark as the fluorescents turned on and off at unpredictable intervals, along with the periodically opening and closing curtains letting in or blocking out the sunlight. impressively, and despite the constant activity, the boundary between myself and the piece was comfortably clear. But interestingly, after sitting and watching the room for a long period of time, I began to notice that the behaviour of the performers was directly affected by the behaviour of the audience, and vice versa. At some point during the live exhibition, the speaker system that Isabelle described, made by Dirk Bell and Mo Stern, appeared in the centre of the gallery surrounded by massive unstretched painted canvases draped from the ceiling. The bulbous horns of the speaker pointed outward in all directions from the centre of the room playing sounds produced by her collaborators, Labour. Let's have a listen.

IL: I still see myself as the host, not only of all the multiple collaborators that are in that piece, but also as the host of that experience. That responsibility gets shared between the performers, the speakers as hosts of the sound, and the sounds hosting the paintings. Maybe I'm getting abstract, but in some ways, hosting has so thoroughly changed my approach to performance that it runs through all these different elements. What the exhibition also shares with an *Occasion* is the visitor is addressed directly by the performers. There are choreographies and scores that they perform, however, they make their choices about what they do, when and how dependent they are upon the visitors' presence. The entire show was based upon the visitors' engagement with

it. That's where I would say it is continuous with the logic of the *Occasions* - a live experience that has a non-linear timeline. There's no loop in that exhibition, it all unfolded live.

RC: Following the exhibition through images taken from beginning to end it's fascinating to watch just how much the space changes. For example, the mostly dark room scattered with furniture elements and performers that I experienced the first weekend had transformed into a bright space with massive draping paintings and speakers just a few weeks later. I also didn't realise it took place throughout all floors of the building.

IL: Yes, it was a processual exhibition, and one's experience at the beginning would be different than at six weeks later. For some that's too contingent and raises a fair question: how do you assure that each visitor has gotten everything? I try to make sure that the quality of the experience is always there, but it's certainly not always the same. If you come to one of my works, you'll see it's processual, it's live, and it's contingent. I try to embrace those qualities, while still caring for the quality of the experience. There's a lot of rehearsal, practice, care and technical details that go into it, even if it seems to unfold in some highly improvised way. Everything is in process, even if most art tries to suggest the artistic gesture is fixed.

RC: There's something to be said about authorship here in terms of the way that you're working, and the number of collaborators and variables within each one of these works. It seems that there is a real fluidity with any notion of authorship. Of course, at the end of the day, it is an Isabel Lewis work. Is authorship something that you're seeking to redefine or maybe challenge?

IL: I see myself as bringing together these elements, weaving them and taking care of their facilitation and organisation. What is the

conversation that you need to take up with the institution? And how do you build up a relation, which then allows for levels of experimentation that typically go against the protocols of institutions? It's a lot of conversation, communication, trust-building and education. I have a personal relation to each of the collaborators who I bring together into communion with a project, where then relations can form. I see myself as the one that holds the space for these experiences. While I feel the work is co-authored, I nonetheless see myself as the one who's accountable and responsible, the one taking the risk both financially and in terms of communication. I acknowledge we're not all equally responsible. We're not all equal collaborators in the situation. I acknowledge that there's a certain directorial position that I hold and take seriously as a form of responsibility and caretaking for all the people involved. Yes, I see the role of author as more of an initiator and caretaker of a project.

RC: I want to go from there to the next exhibition, 'State of the Arts' (2020) at Bundeskunsthalle, in Bonn, Germany, which I'd like to discuss because it's seemingly less oriented around bringing in large audiences while still dealing with experience and collaboration, like your earlier pieces. You worked quite closely with Dirk Bell. And I'm particularly interested to hear how you used architectural interventions and other various sensory elements within the exhibition space where you were not actually physically present as a host.

IL: Bonn was an interesting challenge in the sense that it was right at the beginning of the pandemic and it was the first work I did that had to explicitly deal with travel limitations. I work with Dirk Bell, on the sites and trying to intervene on a scale of the given space or architecture. So along with Bell, we conceived a structure inside of the Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, in a pre-existing enclosed space, or octagonal

room that was used for video screenings. I wanted to open up those big walls and open up views onto the rest of the exhibition. That gesture created a gazebo, which again, is a continuation of my thinking about garden architecture and from which you can observe different views of the garden. I wanted to continue thinking about the garden rather than enclosure and division, which often happens in group exhibitions. I wanted to do the opposite gesture – to use my space to open up views upon the works of others. This gesture is what I could imagine my work to be like if I couldn't be there in person to host: an architecture that hosts views for visitors who can sit and relax, and offer them something to listen to – songs and meditations on human-universe configurations and bodily worlds.

There's a platform inside of the gazebo that sinks down in a conversation with the actual architecture of the Bundeskunsthalle Bonn which was created, I believe, in the 1980s. The sinking platform distorts balance and harmony, which is Dirk's way of communicating. I put a reflective surface on the platform in order to maximise light, but also to offer an interior reflection to the visitor – a site for another kind of bodily configuration for themselves inside of the museum. Then there was a freestanding drawing by Bell, which served as a ghostly presence, a meditation on notions of our human relation to nature. It created a daily rhythm by being rolled into and out of the space. In some ways the figure on the drawing could be seen as me. I used this exhibition to experiment with other forms of presence that were not necessarily my real-life presence.

RC: I've been talking about this as an exhibition as if it excluded the usual live presence that appears in your works, but I understand that there was some programming which happened, including, for example, a DJ set from Lou Drago.

IL: I also imagined the gazebo as a space that could host other activities, and I helped to programme some of those. Lou Drago was one of my special guests to activate that space, with their ambience DJ sets, which are a reflection or meditation on structures of time. I also invited Dmitry Paranyushkin, with his practice called EightOS, to activate another bodily practice inside of that particular space. There were also dance classes for young people and other live interactions. The processual aspects of the practice were visible in the ways the space was activated and put into use throughout the exhibition.

RC: Lou has a show on Cashmere Radio too, which brings us quite nicely to the last piece I would like to briefly discuss before the end of our interview today. It is a piece for a radio format exhibition, which was hosted on Cashmere and was curated by Sarah Johanna Theurer and Plus X, called 'Passages' (2020). I'm quite curious how you approached this particular piece, considering you typically work in such dynamic environments and stride to address multiple sense at once. But on the radio, of course, you're dealing with a remote audience who is only listening.

IL: Yes, it was a challenge and whenever I sense a challenge, I'm all about just jumping in! For years, I've been working with sound as a DJ, producing music and also developing my own sounds for the *Occasions*. I've also been working with my voice and storytelling. I wondered, how could I focus on these elements to explore the bodily and the embodied in this format? What I arrived at was almost a guided score, as though you could listen to something that was a story, but it's addressing you using the second person address. I describe what's happening to your body, the way that is moving and push the use of language. I first worked on the text, then I recorded it, and used vocal passages as elements of sound that I mixed into a set.

RC: We've talked about a number of developments throughout your career and it's clear that you're an artist that appreciates a challenge and is dedicated to growing an ever-more generative and sensorial practice. And I can't help but wonder if by challenging and changing the exhibition and presentation models as you do, do you imagine a future where you outgrow the exhibition format? A future where your practice might take you beyond the walls of the museum?

IL: I suppose, you know, it always has. I think it developed beyond the walls of the exhibition and the institution. I feel that my work can be at home in a museum, in a club, in a theatre, but it doesn't belong to any one of these places. The way I tend to work is through learning and research, an interrogation of protocols and conventions. At the same time, I'm deeply interested in other non-modern forms of presentation and gathering. Let's say that there are moments that open up to the public in particular institutional situations, such as the museum or the exhibition, but you can find a history of what I'm doing and what I would continue to do elsewhere. I happen to be out in the countryside where I'm developing a project with collaborators around a garden and small-scale farming. I'm continuing my exploration of the garden out from the theoretical and into the practical and pragmatic. I see this also as a site of hosting, of sociality and of bodily experimentation and expression. So yes, my sites of activation will continue to be varied and certainly beyond the museum walls.

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