DISASTER GIRL

How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Pandemic

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This paper situates the author's performance art practice, Disaster Girl, in the theoretical lens of ecomaterialism to analyse media art and praxis. Disaster Girl challenges audiences with remix, bricolage, and collaborative modes by confronting dystopia by juxtaposing political satire and environmental exigency. Three recent Disaster Girl projects, ranging from the written to the performative, are reviewed: A Camouflage Opera (2019), based on Kurtág: József Attila Fragments with soprano Judit Molnar; Bile for Bog Roll (2020), an audiovisual site-specific poetry performance; and Murphy's Law Or: (2020), a participatory archive and networked performance. These examples help examine authorship, agency, and control through Guattarian 'ecosophy', the cyclical nature of interrelated ecologies and anthropogenic degradation, and Anne Carson's 'circular reasoning', emotion and disorder becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus, Disaster Girl engages with relational, social, emotional, and material assemblages within the poetic realm.

Keywords: performance poetry; ecomaterialism; Capitalocene

Who or what is Disaster Girl?

During an artist residency in 2011 at Culture Factory Polymer in Tallinn, Estonia, I directed a telematic participatory performance deconstructing Plato's and Thomas More's notions of Atlantis. In the three-month development phase, which involved repurposing objects in the former Soviet toy factory for props, residents started calling me 'disaster girl.' During the *Stalker Festival* of Tallinn in 2011, I stepped into The Zone, which, in Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1967)*,* is a restricted site of a past disaster. In the Zone, the protagonists find the Room, a place that fulfils one's most profound desires. Reflecting on this experience and watching the film inspired me to establish Disaster Girl as a living protagonist in a dystopian speculative reality. My subsequent tour in Eastern Europe fractured my attraction to techno-utopianism to remedy political and environmental degradation. Consequently, Disaster Girl became an attempt to come to terms with utopian and dystopian ideologies, and a warning against the harmful influence of this thinking on promoting democracy.

The Disaster Girl aesthetic juxtaposes totalitarian industrialisation and disasters (intergalactic, earth-environmental, political, and personal). Like most cyberpunk and sci-fi narratives and concept art,

protagonists usually resist the dominant regime, which often involves antifascism, anarchy, and environmentalism. Without resorting to parody, Disaster Girl challenges the audience by confronting them with mutiny as a form of satire. While Disaster Girl does not use symbols of nationalism for rhetorical effect, this confrontation is like that of the Slovenian retro avant-garde music group, Laibach, which has been said to 'absorb the mannerisms of the enemy, adopting all the seductive trappings and symbols of state power, and then they exaggerate everything to the edge of parody' (Wolfson 2003: n.p.). Alexei Monroe (2005) writes that Laibach's methodology is based upon the 'amplification or rendering audible of the hidden codes and internal contradictions of a series of artistic, musical, political, linguistic, and historical regimes' (35). The retro avant-garde approach is still relevant today as decision-makers still view conflicts from the lens of the Cold War. The influences of the Cold War still exist in media culture today. The hierarchies, polarisation, and aesthetics seem to be something media art still tries to challenge by critically reflecting on the increasingly detrimental state of globalisation. However, today, climate change has replaced the anxieties of nuclear war as the primary international concern, which follows a continuing interest in globalisation and the battle for resources, as well as notions of the Anthropocene. Similarly to Laibach, the German musical group Rammstein pushes against the alt-right and critiques European colonialism and American racism and nationalism (Blaser 2019) through over-the-top confrontational performances often misinterpreted as romanticising fascism.

Disaster Girl is an embodiment, not an alter-ego or alias. As a result, rather than detaching my body from Disaster Girl, I experiment with Australian performance artist Stelarc's concept that the body is obsolete. When Stelarc speaks of the 'obsolete body,' he means that 'technology is what defines the meaning of being human, it's part of being human … the body is biologically inadequate' (Atzori & Woolford 1995: n.p.). Interestingly, the examples I have provided are predominantly masculine, and so I advocate a queer reinvention of the standards of science fiction, industrial music and technology-based art. Disaster Girl could also be a quintessential Cyborg. Donna Haraway (2013) mentions, 'the main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism'(176). Thus, Disaster Girl is not a hero or an archetype of an empowered woman by any means. She is a product of her environment, and this environment is not fiction, even if entering the speculative.

The speculative, dystopian narrative often represents the tipping point — dramatic literary styles to warn of eco-crises. The tipping point is often represented as the end of the world, owing to a desire to control nature. But these can generate feelings of despair in the public. While disasters can invoke the imagery of terror, the current situation in global health politics could be called disastrous, or at least use alarmist rhetoric based on a supposed, looming disaster. On the contrary, I propose that disaster can be liberating and can invoke community response. Nevertheless, I am constantly critiquing my approach with Disaster Girl with what Walter Benjamin (2008) says is an 'aestheticisation' of politics. Benjamin's proposed response is in framing everyday life as collectively and socially created art — praxis provides the necessary element to make this work — enacting values through my practice from conception through material processes to representation.

The Capitalocene

There is much debate on whether we should or should not be using the terminology of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, etc. I support the notion that each term has its place depending on the field of study and the audience. Jason W Moore (2016) questions how the complexities of planetary crisis and global accumulation can be reconciled and outlines that the 'Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organising nature — as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology' (6). For example, we have seen how the COVID-19 pandemic highlights how diseases become pandemics due to industrial reconfigurations of nature and ecological and socioeconomic injustices. Moore explains the Capitalocene is a system of power, profit, and reproduction in the web of life. Capital persists through the privatisation of commons, and then the common good is resold as private debt. The remainder is generated by the write-off of obsolete stock and waste disposal into the environment, which Sean Cubitt (2014) claims defers to another generation and market crisis. Waste is not an unintended consequence of consumerism since there would be no consumer capital without it — 'we live in the age of integral waste' (Cubitt 2014: 280). Since my artistic practice questions how capitalism and colonialism have destroyed ecosystems, I apply the Capitalocene as the source of injustice.

It takes a lot of material to realise the immaterial infrastructures around us. How media artefacts and materials affect the environment, where electronic components are made, their resources and use of energy, and the people producing our creative tools are considerably overlooked. The mining of the materials needed to produce technology artefacts is only increasing, and discarded consumer gadgets produce large amounts of electronic waste (e-waste). Up to 50 million tonnes of e-waste is made every year (Kumar, Holuszko and Espinosa 2017). Congruently, software processes and our digital products and labour run on physical hardware and energy consumption. They depend on this same natural resource extraction and manufacturing system, exposing how digital infrastructures are inherently material and exploitative of people and ecosystems. Rethinking media practices from an ecomaterialist perspective can challenge the institution of environmentalism. As proposed by Hunter Vaughan (2018), analysing media and praxis through the framework of ecomaterialism requires consideration that media practices have material impacts; material culture is the by-product of distribution and consumption; and the environment is the primary source of labour. Vaughan says ecomaterialism will refocus the various stages of 'cultural production, distribution, consumption and waste impact of our ecosystems and define our use of natural resources' (104) in the mode of ecological imperialism.

Ecomaterialism as a theoretical framework encourages media arts to produce more than environmentally-themed or representative work. Focusing on the collisions and intimacies between human and inhuman natures, ecomaterialism is also involved in ethical, social, and political predicaments of multiple becomings (Opperman 2018; Cohen & Duckertz 2015). Thus, while ecomedia art generates and probes critical discussions, it can lead to an applied aesthetic. Cox and Pezzullo (2015) differentiate 'aesthetics' as something to be enjoyed and judged by one's taste and 'applied aesthetics' as a by-product of technologies and materials used. Similarly, Vaughan (2018) argues that new media can express and represent ecological issues, yet the processes to make them have severe ecological repercussions. I would add that applied aesthetics goes beyond aesthetics, where media practitioners can strive for politically and ecologically informed reflexive practices — not just to position the use of technology into the role of art or media, but also the application of practice;

how the practitioner involved in the making of messages explicitly frames their practice and enacts their values.

A Camouflage Opera (2019-2020)

A Camouflage Opera Opera (https://kimberleybianca.com/camouflage-opera), performed by Soprano Judit Molnar and Disaster Girl in November 2019 in Australia, was an adaption of Kurtág — Attila József *Fragments*. The work was further developed at the start of the pandemic, but future performances were cancelled as I had returned to the US.

Judit Molnar is an internationally acclaimed opera artist who is completing her PhD on the vocal compositions of György Kurtág, specifically those set to Hungarian texts to make this repertoire more accessible to new audiences. I coded the lyrics and score to do the scenography, sound design, and animated and recorded video content (https://kimberleybianca.com/fragments). I performed as Disaster Girl during the live performance with the audiovisual elements. The venue, The Commissariat Store in Brisbane, Australia, was also influential, as it was built by convict and Aboriginal slave labour. To date, it critically promotes colonial history through exhibitions and displays, which remained in the space during the performance. The work therefore also explores themes of deterritorialisation, colonialism, and genocide beyond the context of the original work, making it site-specific.

Kurtág took fragments from poems written between WWI and WWII and the socialist-communist coalition. Kurtág was extremely isolated under the Soviet Union, and after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, he briefly went to Paris. When Kurtág was undergoing psychological treatment with Marianne Stein in Paris in 1957, he was encouraged to reduce his music to a fragment as a therapy to deal with his severe depression (Predota 2016). It wasn't until 1982 that Kurtág completed *Attila József Fragments*.

Attila József (1905-1937) was known as the 'proletariat poet' of Hungary, joining the illegal Communist Party of Hungary and writing works on socialism and democracy. However, Kurtág focused on József's more personal poetry and extracted lines from various poems of József's in this nature. József was mentally unstable, eventually committing suicide (although there are claims it was an accident) in 1937. József is speculated to have had various mental illnesses, such as bipolar disorder (Slipp 2014). The fragments compiled by Kurtág in *Attila József Fragments* suggest József's infatuation with organic matter and nature and his body decomposing and becoming part of the earth. With the concept of decay, I mapped Felix Guattari's 'ecosophy' — the cyclical nature of interrelated ecology and advanced human-caused ecological degradation to compose three aesthetic themes: environmental, political, and personal decay, with the idea that life and death are not linear.

Guattari (2008) proposes three types of ecological praxis that lead to reframing and recomposition of the goals of emancipatory struggles. This praxis is between the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity. In *The Three Ecologies*, Guattari writes, 'subjectivity is able to install itself simultaneously in the realms of the environment, in the major social and institutional assemblages, and symmetrically in the landscapes and fantasies of the most intimate spheres of the individual'

(45). Furthermore, the Deleuzoguattarian notion of deterritorialisation relates to the dissolution of the fundamental connection between cultural, social, and spatial or geographic areas. It represents a radical alteration of the interaction between our daily cultural experiences and our ideal arrangement as stable, local beings. From this perspective, insanity seems to come from an increase in deterritorialisation, and psychiatric institutions employ reterritorialisation tactics to address insanity. Interestingly, Horton (2018) suggests that Guattari's depression (Guattari committed suicide in 1992) drove him to develop ecosophy and that ecosophy was a solution for his own personal and social conflicts.

If we consider the fragments as points in a cyclical timeline, the media I video-projected on the walls are not breaks or intervals; they are the relations between the fragments. It was not a cohesion that I tried to deliver when making the sound design and visual content, but a mesh or webbing of the elements. I framed the approach with Guattari's ecosophical aesthetics and Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, suggesting judging artworks based on the inter-human relations they represent, produce or prompt (Bourriaud 2002: 12). To create an extension of the solo soprano, the audiovisual samples performed between the fragments were created from my recordings of Molnar, with which I distorted, manipulated, and rearranged her voice. The space design employed bricolage, minimising the use of materials. Thus, I tried to evaluate this project through its relational and social assemblages.

Bile for Bog Roll (2020)

Bile for Bog Roll (https://kimberleybianca.com/bog-roll) was an audiovisual site-specific poetry performance in Boulder, Colorado, US. I had moved into a stationary motorhome/recreational vehicle (RV) on a suburban ranch at the start of the pandemic, and this became a safe space and a creative space. I created the content, performed poetry and recorded the work in isolation. At the beginning of *Bile for Bog Roll* were vocal samples taken from Facebook Live Videos with 24/7 streaming Catholic prayers. A soothing feminine voice looped and layered while people chatted in the comment sections. Mesmerised by this phenomenon and how beautiful it sounded, I imagined viewers worldwide believing they were in a kind of purgatory during the pandemic, and these videos provided some solace in a virtual community space. In Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1958), the characters are in the process of purgatory. My position living in this RV reminded me of the setting of *Endgame*. The RV became not just a room to live in to face my feelings of hopelessness and lack of helpfulness during the pandemic but a site of creative practice and the performance site. *Endgame* is about hopelessness. The characters are not waiting for anything other than death. They fear being reincarnated after death as they think the worst thing that can happen to them is to be born, and the next best thing that can happen to us is to be dying. Just as beginnings and endings are the same in *Endgame*, disorder and order can be viewed as the same, 'the end is in the beginning, and yet you go on' (69), leading to a cognitive loop, a loop of individual existence, and the loop of bodily processes such as bile.

Loops are integral in *Bile for Bog Roll*, conceptually, technically, and semiotically. The quotidian toilet paper roll (bog roll is slang for toilet paper in the UK and Australia) has become a symbolic object of

mania during the COVID-19 pandemic. Toilet paper can be considered a loop. It is on a roll; when we run out, we replace it, and so on. The manufacturing process is also a loop. The frenzy and loop of toilet paper and other items we manufacture seemingly indefinitely are elements of our consistent and wasteful consumer culture. The performance technology applied algorithmic loops, which is a computational sequence that gets executed over and over. The graphics, bar the video of the toilet paper manufacturing, are 'seamless loops,' made unnoticed that they are looping. The beats are loops I made with both analogue and digital synthesisers.

Anne Carson (1995) discusses 'circular reasoning' as emotion becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this sense, my poetry could be considered a loop in my life. As a coping mechanism, I try to speculate the future of my life through my poetry. I write not only from experience but to psychologically determine and control my experiences. Hence, the pandemic provides an unexpected effect — it prompts Disaster Girl to get out of the loop, stop worrying, and form something new.

Allison Parrish's *Articulations* (2018) influenced me in writing and choosing the text for this work. While there was no overt computational process in the choice of my words, Parish puts words in disorder and erratic sequences. She uses Big Data sets and algorithms, sometimes intelligent ones, to compose poetry. Algorithms are a step-by-step solution to a given problem; they are determined, much like my attempt to determine my life through writing poetry. I also took guidance from Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* (1998) on free-verse, tone, and voice. However, I found that free verse was too much of a limiting rule that interrupted flow when translated to performance. Therefore, I improvised and extracted lines at a random glance while performing, not dissimilar to Parish's approach to algorithmic poetry. In performing the vocals, I was inspired by Carson's use of the term Aischrologia — obscenities and shouting for the vocals to challenge the gender norms of female voices. Therefore, I used distorted and pitch-changing effects on my live vocals. I did not want a soft, beautiful, or cute voice, and I was open to it being unintelligible.

Murphy's Law Or: How I Learned to Interrupt the Transition

Those with internet connections (approximately 40% of the global population do not) have rapidly merged into online activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, finding ways to navigate physical limitations and develop creative communities. With online networking platforms, computer-supported collaborative workspaces, and video conferencing, the industries, workplaces, institutions, communities, and individuals have been engaging with a broader public than could be reached in person. Especially on Facebook and Twitch, people have been live-streaming or uploading their creative hobbies and playing gigs, sometimes crowdfunding them for financial reconciliation of lost employment. These motions may be hosted on corporate platforms, yet they instil the ethos of street performance and underground art spaces. They also provide a platform for 'non-artists' (or those not recognised by the institution of art).

Taking advantage of these platforms, *Murphy's Law Or:* (https://padlet.com/circuitboard/murphyslaw) was a participatory archive and series of networked performances that ran in late 2020. The full

title, *Murphy's Law Or: How I Learned to Interrupt the Transition*, was collectively formed during the second performance. Participants uploaded media from their computer's trash bin to an online archive and joined by Zoom to project them onto the body of Disaster Girl.

The epigram, Murphy's Law, is a humorous but worthwhile speculation. Although the adage 'anything that can go wrong will go wrong' is negative, it conveys the practical impact of every situation. If there is more than one possible outcome of a situation, and one of those outcomes will result in disaster or an undesirable consequence, then somebody will do it that way.

Murphy's Law Or: was triggered by the Doomsday Clock announcement in January 2020 that shows us we are at the riskiest part of history, owing to anthropogenic climate change, multiple wars, and increasingly advanced missile programs. The Doomsday Clock is a poetic construct, even if it uses statistical data to 'display the time.' It is currently 100 seconds to midnight.

The aesthetic interpretation of disaster need not be so prescriptive as The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has promoted with the Doomsday Clock. However, I would argue that the Doomsday Clock is an important poetic symbol in the media landscape despite its flaws. Since poetics is an appreciation of how conceptual and poetic elements come together as an aesthetic rather than a literal interpretation of the historical background of the subject matter (Culler 2017), the Doomsday Clock can trigger public engagement in issues of war, natural disaster, and epidemics. However, what the Doomsday Clock misses is how social and ecological disruptions become disruptions in personal biographies. With their pessimistic approach, cataclysmic scenarios can become deactivating or psychologically disturbing for people (Hoffman 2015). Additionally, concerns about the environment are not universal. They are specific and grounded. However, apocalyptic narratives tend to make environmental concerns a universal exigency.

Murphy's Law Or: implicitly asked — is it material now? I took advantage of how video projections can optically materialise digital artefacts (and digital transmission of them and people) beyond the flat screen and onto various surfaces with different depths. We (the participant performers) found that while the transmission is interrupted regarding the technology, what is in between people, interactions and elements, are transitions, not transmissions. It is a concept that opposes fatalism and conservatism. Maybe it seems like everything is bound to collapse and go wrong, especially with pandemics and personal empowerment. Still, I wanted to encourage seeing these moments as interruptions in transitioning — changes.

In *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, Ada Smailbegović (2016) writes, 'What is the relationship between variability and change? Before change enters a field of observation, variability is compressed to a single point. Materiality is itinerant, and yet within it, one may discern the contours of the ideal' (n.p.). Performance theory often involves the performer's materiality and mortality to describe liveness. The appearance of liveness challenges the concept of liveness. There is the illusion that what is on the stage or in performance is live, especially when mediatised forms and artefacts are involved. In *Liveness*, Philip Auslander (2008) rejects the argument for ontological differences between live and mediatised forms. In other words, he challenges the assumption that the live event is real and the mediatised event is artificial, since the live event has always been a product of media technologies. A promising aspect I found was improvisation, which is accessible to

anyone who has something to show or share without the commitment of making an artefact or media work.

Chaos, Control, Cooperation

Deleuze and Guattari (1992: 118) say that 'chaos is defined not so much by its disorder as by the infinite speed with which every form taking shape in it vanishes. It is a void.' Chaos theory has drawn the focus back to things that we once believed we knew and has shown us that existence and nature are more complicated than we ever expected. This brings me to decay and randomness in the material universe.

Decay is the only truly random process in our universe (Drosg 2007: 33). At least at the atomic level and above, it is the only randomness that we can observe directly. We cannot observe quantum randomness since observation itself changes the outcome (Weizmann Institute of Science 1998). Ultimately, all naturally occurring decay is mostly random. It cannot be known which chemical bond, which membrane or which cell will break next. Of course, as the structures that we observe become more massive, it becomes more apparent how or where they will fail. They are still random but more easily predictable with a reasonable amount of time (from a human perspective).

While decay itself is random, researchers are measuring the anthropogenic causes of accelerating environmental degradation. Environmental degradation is any disturbance to the earth's natural ecosystem. Humans disturb the environment by over-extraction of resources, pollution, clearing of vegetation and habitat for agriculture and infrastructure, and more. It is extreme enough that tens of thousands of scientists claim that human impact is accelerating a sixth mass extinction event. The insistence on using chaos to describe our misunderstanding of the material universe and that the earth will eventually perish blocks progress. The corporate greenwashing with how quickly their materials decay is also misleading. Thus, there are calls across the domains of art, humanities, and sciences for creating alternative structures for environmental science communication, modes that are accessible, participatory, and collaborative.

Media arts requires more than environmentally-themed art to generate and probe critical discussions while also making progressive changes. Media scholar Jennifer Machiorlatti (2010) suggests that people caught in the cycle of consumerism can learn from commons-based rather than consumption-based forms of cooperation and suggests that people can learn from an indigenous, non-hierarchical worldview. This material realm includes diverse human cultural beliefs and artefacts while challenging the coloniser's worldview hierarchy. This posits a cultural accomplishment dynamically connected to the relationships, practices, values, goals, identities, and worldviews of individuals, families, and communities.

Despite my aims to release control, my involvement in the three projects mentioned was beyond a co-performer or co-participant; I was still in control of the technology, coordination and moderating. However, collaborative and cooperative modes, including their power dynamics, still provide an exciting stage for examining authorship and agency. It starts to question who is in control? Whom do

we want in control?

Conclusion

This paper documented a reflective process that drew on the interconnection of mind, society, and environment for three poetic performances leading into and during the COVID-19 pandemic. I attempted to embody digital infrastructures as material and respond to their environmental effects with these three projects. Through ecomaterial praxis, Disaster Girl attempts to scope out a relational, interactive, embodied intervention as a cultural response to environmental crises. The performances challenge the consumption of technological resources beyond environmental aesthetics and question the accountability of media and dominant creative industries within larger systemic contexts. Throughout the pandemic, I learned to be critical of environmental and health media communication and community response. To stop worrying and to instead be actionable and challenge my responses. Moreover, through that action, I have found a new positionality for Disaster Girl.

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