

Faraway, so close #1: Solitude with Yvette Coppersmith and Alexie Glass-Kantor

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ALEXIE GLASS-KANTOR [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]

It's actually a really fascinating experience in terms of how we think about connectivity, digital intimacy; how we think about the spaces that we live in physically, but also emotionally in terms of our connections and relationships to others, both at proximity and at a distance.

TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]

What does it mean to be in isolation, but in isolation together? This is 'Faraway, so close' a new podcast from Art Guide Australia with Tiarney Miekus. In this series we're taking a personal approach to consider both the experience and anxieties, as well as the moments of connection and promise that are emerging in the arts, in our new Covid-19 world. And for this episode, we have artist Yvette Coppersmith and arts director, Alexie Glass-Kantor.

Like many people at the moment I'm spending an inordinate amount of time on my phone. And I came across a series of Instagram stories from Yvette, where she discussed how, although isolation has its own stress and anxiety-inducing tendencies, it's actually a sense of isolation, or as she put it solitude, that has always been an intuitively necessary part of her life as an artist. And I wanted to know what she'd learned from years of solitude to keep herself level, especially amongst the high profile experience of having been a recent Archibald winner.

YVETTE COPPERMSITH

Well it's interesting, I mean, I feel like out of everyone, I know I'm probably the only one that's experienced both extremes of like intense isolation. I mean, I worked from home, and lived alone for the majority of my practice, and that was before social media. So that's like one extreme where, you know, if you don't leave the house that day, you literally feel disconnected from everyone and the art world. And if you haven't spoken to anyone, that's it. Like you're just painting. That was in my twenties. That was a very lonely time. So I think I've learned a lot of strategies and worked out. You don't have to be an island, but you've got to find the right balance and work out what, what you need to feel kind of an equilibrium. But having said that the other extreme was having the extent of public engagement that I had as the Archibald winner two years ago.

And I've never talked so much about anything in my entire life. And I was talking about myself. And that was for an introvert, not having time to recharge... yeah, I think that, that then I just craved being alone and listening to a podcast studio. Which is now what I have time to do. And it's like really lovely. Yeah. I'm always refining what I think feels energising. So it's kind of always a work in progress. I think it's also seasonal, but really what helps I think for my mental health is structure. I think, you know what, when things got really sort of full on and I was going to Sydney all the time and when there are deadlines, and you end up working all hours—the structure kind of goes because you can't do an all-nighter, and then sometimes it's possible to fall back into the routine, but it does throw it, your routine often. So ...

TM

With that idea of routine, what does a day look like for you at the moment?

YC

So, routine: I want to get up at the same time every morning. At the moment at 6:00 AM. I want to write in my journal and have a coffee and then start painting like at 7, 7:30 work for maybe three hours, take a break, go outside. And then maybe in the afternoon go for a run. The routine is great, but then you have to factor in you're going to have errands. You've got to do all those things. You've got to fit those in at some point. But I think the basics; sleep, really good diet, exercise. So taking care of your physical body actually is going to make a huge difference to your emotional state. And there's so much that has been written about the link between sugar and

mental health and gut health. And I mean, I had like not even a whole Easter egg and I thought it was trying to kill me.

And then I realised the only way I could recover from such a bad sugar low is if I started like having green smoothies to balance it. And then went you know what, I just need to detox from the whole pasta thing. I stocked up, I did what everyone did and I didn't even eat that much pasta. And I think that was also affecting my energy and making it harder to get up in the morning. And when you don't get that time in the morning to feel productive, I think you're trying to catch up for the rest of the day and feel like you just didn't get a satisfying day in the studio. And that leaves you feeling like you never got into a creative zone and then you don't recharge. And I think it's like, it can just deplete you further cause you're just going through the motions, but you haven't gone into a flow state.

TM

No. And when you are going into the studio, I mean, is there any kind of residual anxiety just from everything that's happening or do you find that you are able to work?

YC

Well, I think it was an awareness that first week where we went into lockdown, I think everyone was in that state of whoa, what are we, what's happening? What are we in for? It was so sudden, that I, my screen time went up. I was looking at everything on All the memes. So far, I don't think anyone has shaved their eyebrows off just to stay home.

TM

[Laughs] No.

YC

No. And by the end of that week, I just had a sick feeling in my stomach and I thought, "You know what, I'd be, I'd be, if I could just like switch off from the phone, I could actually stay in a bubble. I don't need to know everything that's going on. Cause I can't change it. I may as well just kind of look after what I can change and that way I can get back to my work and get to a better space and myself." So that's what I've done. I don't... I know some people really need to know everything and all the news updates, but I limit my diet. I want to know what's going on big picture and I listen to podcasts. Yeah. I think as well, like what I've learned from living in kind of solitude and I think the practice of doing self portraits, but something that that has taught me I think is sitting with myself and being very present with myself. And like even I'm creating an image and it's, it's not like a selfie where it's this moment in time snapshot.

It is actually like, it's, there's a huge time investment. So you have this opportunity to sit there and your thoughts will go in loops and it's like, whatever you're stressing about, will just be like going around in circles in your head while you're trying to work. And actually for me, whatever I'm feeling shows on my face. So if I'm not having a great day, the painting's probably gonna look pretty urgh. Like just intense. And you can see through the history of my self portraits, the ones that look super intense, I know what was going on. No one else really knows what that, what that day was, what that painting was about. But I kind of have a diary of the things that stress me, and usually the things that stress me, and I assume most artists, are factors like, are you going to have enough money to pay the bills? And can you meet that deadline? And are there any toxic relationships either personally or professionally that are draining your energy and how do you handle those situations? But if you can sort of learn how to sit with those feelings, the really uncomfortable ones and process them, I think you develop an emotional awareness and capability that you know you can get through those really painful, difficult times. But when I'm in the studio alone and I'm just like looking at myself, making eye contact, which also meets the needs of needing to be seen and making eye contact socially, I think it's like, I can't pretend I'm feeling better than I am. And so there were days where I would just have to sit in that. And then I'll have another day where I feel like a lighter energy, whatever; then I'll rework paintings. And maybe resolve a few things. But it's sitting in the process and just making work no matter how you feel and just allowing yourself that the days that you don't feel good are still important to be with in your studio. Just kind of going through the motions step-by-step. Just showing up, I think is really important.

Then things resolve. It just may take, you know, time. So, and I think artists are often really time poor because we're trying to do all these other things to support ourselves, to have a practice. But in a way I think we're well equipped for this kind of situation. And I don't know. I mean, everyone's in a different place financially now,

we're trying to kind of probably read the moment and learn how's the art world going to change. So how do we adapt? Well, creative thinkers are so good at lateral thinking, coming up with ideas, problem solving, and we often have this broad skill base already in place. So we, because not many artists in Australia are relying on the art as a widely, as you know, their only form of income. So I think it's kind of an opportunity to think, "All right, well, if that, if that avenue doesn't work out, how could I adapt my skills and do something else?"

Yeah. I think we're really resourceful creatures. And also like what the other thing about being home alone, I don't know any artists that ever get bored. It's like, but the biggest challenge I think now is like, we, we are sort of at risk just like everyone else of becoming too dependent on screen and device and our devices to stay connected. And I think as artists, what is important is to connect with ourselves with our intuitive voice. And unless we can unplug and create structure in the day where we just don't check and know what everyone else is doing and thinking—and how do you hear that? Because I think that's that kind of intuitive guidance is like your internal GPS. That's going to be what makes your work a unique voice. And we need all those unique voices to kind of give us that full spectrum of ideas and emotion.

TM

That understanding of reconnecting with yourself in a meaningful way made a lot of intuitive sense. But I also wondered about those who work in the arts with lives that have a large public interface. And so I got in touch with Alexie Glass-Cantor, the executive director of Artspace, to see what she was thinking and feeling about isolation.

AGK

How is isolation going? Isolation is a strangely busy time. It's an interesting thing, you know, the paradox of isolation and the language of the lockdowns. And, you know, social distancing, it's actually a really fascinating experience in terms of how we think about connectivity, digital intimacy, how we think about the spaces that we live in physically, but also emotionally in terms of our connections and relationships to others, both at proximity and at a distance. And I think isolation, to me, hasn't been so much about feeling isolated. It hasn't been about feeling shut off or disconnected the kinds of connotations and resonances, I can't think... And it's probably an interesting question to ask, which is what is the etymology of the word isolation. But if I think about the definition or ideas or connotations of isolation and it, this is not being what this experience has felt like, and I don't know how other people... I have a feeling about how other people have felt. But I think in some ways, you know, certainly the experience in Australia the past four weeks has been one of negotiating different spaces of intimacy and connection and expression and reflection in light of the way in which the rollercoaster of the virus and the implications and connotations of new impositions on our civil liberties, on our movement. You know, importantly as a consequence of, you know, a major health crisis and to prevent and protect the spread of the contamination throughout the community, and to make sure that we take responsibility for care for the most vulnerable. But in that way, it doesn't feel like we're being isolated. I think it feels in a sense that we are individually accountable in a way that we can be seen as a collective whole more visibly than ever before. Yeah. I don't, I don't think of society is in isolation right now. I think of it in terms of renegotiating a space of encounter: physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and digitally.

TM

Yeah. That's a really nice way of putting it, but it does make me wonder, you know, considering we are having to negotiate all of these things, and quite suddenly, does that make you feel anxious or stressed?

AGK

I think it's, you know, every day. When people say to me, how are you? You know, like people, when they ask you the question, how's your pandemic going? How's your apocalypse? And you know, it's funny, I just look at people and I'm like, it's the same as for you. It's like every, you know, every day, hour by hour as this situation escalated, as it changed our understanding, you know, what's that, you know, that common phrase that is with kind of, you know, large trucks on the highway objects may appear larger in the rear view. You know, at some days you wake up and I think that's really normal. I mean, I think theories... when we think about recent things movements in the art world, like the anxiety festival, when we think about well-being and care and mindfulness and, and the ways in which kinds of languages have evolved

over the last half a century around how we think about what kind of care looks like in terms of mental health, in terms of language, to express and understand states of consciousness in relationship to anxiety and stress and how they relate to ciphers through the communication of ideas through creative spheres—that perhaps my anxiety and stress is no more, no less than anybody else's, but it shifts you wake up some days and there's, you know, the albatross around your neck. And so whatever indecipherable reason you can't shake that, feeling, that things are just out of your control. And then there are other days I think, where it feels more manageable, but it's an alibi hour process. And yeah, I do think that my own relationship to this is like everybody else's, which is a rollercoaster of feelings that can change quite suddenly for no apparent reason, but as they shift, they kind of create a new understanding of the parameters and coordinates at the spaces we occupy. And the way in which we kind of understand our relationship to others.

TM

And I guess that relationship with others, I follow you on Instagram. And it seems like you're having zoom conversation after zoom conversation at the moment. Do you find that you're talking to people more than normal?

AGK

I guess for me, in my role as director of Artspace, and I'm on a number of boards, it was an interesting experience for us as an organization because we had to... Wanted to find a way to maintain our full-time staff and to be able to move them across to roles that would be viable in the organization. We weren't, we didn't have the capacity to work offline a month ago to the extent that we are now. And so that required and necessitated the building of architecture and capacity of a level of communication with one another. But at the same time, we were doing a lot of advocacy for the sector. Trying to, I was participating on a round table as the chair of AO with the federal minister organized by the Australia Council to talk about JobKeeper; to try and advocate for artists, part-time workers and casuals, to have more readily accessible ability to attain or obtain forms of support through this period. To explain that often in the arts that part-time and casual workers who are often artists or arts workers or educators, maybe working up to a dozen jobs inconsistently, and how could equity be provided in terms of allowing for access equitably.

And so a lot of, a lot of the first couple of weeks was peak zoom. Today, I've done five hours of zoom and I chaired a meeting for twenty-five organizations in every state and territory today with the national association for the visual arts with Esther Anatolitis talking about an upcoming royal inquiry that's being instigated to look into the government's response to Covid-19 and the measures that are put in place and how it has, or hasn't supported the most vulnerable. And also to speak with the Australia Council about how we can work with national organizations in the not-for-profit and non-collecting public institution space to create structures of collaboration and support to invest in artists, in art workers and audiences. So I don't, I mean, it's interesting, I've never looked at my own face so much.

I do think it's interesting. I was saying to somebody that I didn't realize pandemics were going to be so busy. But I feel that there is a deep sense of, I feel that, you know, those that can advocate have a responsibility at this time to be making sure that they are advocating for others. And that we are actually speaking to the unpaid and unseen labor that artists and creatives, producers, makers, writers pour into the economy in Australia and the capacity that that creates for innovation and for excellence and for inquiry and for developments in science and technology and other fields. And a lot of that is led through collaboration with creative fields. And we can't treat it as an auxiliary in a high functioning society that's going to be able to pull back together in the years to come after this particular situation.

It feels at the moment like we're in the eye of a tornado. I was saying to someone, I feel like we're in one of those tornado chasing films in American cinema, where you see the tornado on the hill and you don't know what direction it's going to go to. Then it hits you and you get into the eye of the storm and it's still. And I feel like we're in the eye of the storm right now and it's quite still. But it's when the tornado passes and we come out the other side that it's really going to be that we're going to need the best versions of ourselves and our leaders and our advocates.

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Yeah, absolutely. And I feel like part of what you're talking about is that climate of vulnerability that Covid brings, but then also just the fact that, you know, it takes a certain level of vulnerability for artists to even make art and to do what they do.

Are you finding that when you talk with artists, there is this overwhelming sense of vulnerability at the moment?

AGK

I think that when we're talking with artists and I'm working on projects, like I'm curating Marco Fusinato for the Venice Biennale in 2021 for the Australian pavilion and working with a number of other artists on other projects. And Marco is an interesting one because we're trying to understand obviously, a project at that scale representing Australia, how is it relevant still? Why is it ethical? What meaning does the work have, now that audience will change? Now, the scope and parameters of projects have shifted so radically and people's experience of the individual and collective has been so profoundly altered by this experience. And that institutions won't be able to function in the same way. And perhaps this was the correction that we needed in terms of the climate environment. Australia's just come through months of bush fires and floods on the back of several years of drought. And we have to be aware that there's been a series of successive accumulative traumas experienced in Australia over a critical period of time as a consequences of environmental damage and other things that... Yeah, there is a sense that I think that artists are trying to be most open. And I mean, many artists work in isolation anyway. I mean, this is for a lot of artists, this is not a new experience. And so I think artists are simultaneously moving inside and outside of this idea of an interiority and extemporaneous experience in space and time as it expands and contracts in this period. I think everyone's experience of time has changed. I don't know that it's, it's so much about vulnerability, but it's understanding how we're being shaped by time at different rates and accelerations.

TM

I think time is the thing that everyone's actually perhaps been struggling with in their lives the most, you know, like there, there is an instability to everything, but I think when you talk to people about 'how are you coping personally', people talk about what they do in their lives that mark time now.

AGK

Yeah, you do measure time differently in your space and things move. I was laughing today with a colleague with Leslie Enoch, who's the artistic director of the Sydney Festival. And we're saying that putting on your pants takes 20 minutes and that when you're unpacking the dishwasher, you have to remember not to stare into the middle distance for half an hour. But then other things accelerate quite quickly, as you're trying to piece together the mechanisms and structures that you need to support different communities, different artists, different producers, your family, the people who you're most connected to, your friends, your network. I think it's been a really interesting experience in terms of how we can think. I was working on an exhibition for later this year that we've had to postpone into 2021 called Ever-Widening Circles. And there's a line in the poetry of the poet Rilke, which says "I lived my life in ever-widening circles".

And that show was about drawing and how it was taking as its departure point, the idea of the most primordial forms of drawing of language and of mark making. And thinking about how those create forms of translation, of impression, of meaning, of connectivity. And 'Ever Widening Circles' was about how material forms of practice create ricochets and echoes that can lead out through forms of translation and connection. And coming into this phase and we've postponed 'Ever Widening Circles'. And I was thinking is the idea of living in ever-widening circles, still relevant in the current climate. And for myself, I have spoken previously and you refer to that about vulnerability as a political act, to being vulnerable, to admitting, to being wrong; being vulnerable, to admitting that things change through time; that our position and our perspective, that when we live in the kind of world in which we live, you're forced to take binaries and positions that mean that you sometimes end up fighting in a corner that you no longer believe in, but you can't concede defeat because the stakes are so high.

So how do we actually allow ourselves to correct or to change or to alter, or to be shifted by ideas? And I think for me that this experience has been that actually the ever widening circles are much wider than I ever conceived them to be. And that the ties that bind and create connectivity between ideas and individuals and collectives and communities are really... They're resilient and beautifully shape-shifting creatures. They will determine their own forces. The way in which we do create zoom gatherings or the phone calls we have with people we thought we'd

let go. Or the way that we return to books that we've loved. Or we read poetry, or we listen to podcasts, or we create food, or we nourish ourselves. Or if we're operating with reduced income or limited means or unemployment—my daughter who lives with me no longer has either of the jobs that she held before as a part-time worker, as a student, you know, so she has to create different ways of connecting with her community.

And I think we see that people have to use what's available to them in a sense to make those most intimate and primordial of marks, in order to create kind of enduring connectivity. So I think that there's real potential. And I think that, you know, artists, I was listening to a really great podcast about plagues and pandemics on the University of Melbourne podcast series, but with Justin Clemens a couple of days ago. And he was talking about how, you know, during the plagues, the 13th and 14th century, it was writers who were the first to respond because writers always cited the immediate moment. And when we think about how artists use writing and text as a form of practice in material form, and you know, all the way through to contemporaneous forms of immediate response to forms of transmission, of contagion, of crisis, I think that, you know, artists are really at the forefront of being able to translate and interpret and rethink and create ways that we can intuitively connect with how people experience, not just the eye of the storm right now, but the things that are yet to come, which even more wildly unpredictable.

TM

So how does that leave you feeling about the future overall?

AGK

I think about the future now, as I always think about the future, which is that we have to be really able to be present and responsive to the moment in which we live and think about how the moment, how being present and mindful and accountable in the moment in which we live and being able to be vulnerable, to be altered, to be shaped, to be changed, to be willing, to be reformed by the conditions that we find ourselves in. The ideas, objects, artworks individuals, or relationships, we form. The histories, the things that we read, the things we learn can challenge or undermine, provoke, or expand our understanding of ourselves in relationship to others. And the capacity that we have to do more and to do better is always something that, for me, feels like a work in progress. And by living in a way in which you have to be utterly present and accountable and shaped by the moment that you're in, you have to then understand how that shapes the way that you move forward into the future and how that can inform different kinds of futures.

I think in my professional life, you know, the future will be... The future is always... The institutions, the ways that artists are working, the way that audiences engage is always changing, nothing is ever static. There's this false idea of sustainability I think in cultural life. The idea that institutions should be sustainable or that individuals can somehow be buffered or protected; that there's an end game. That actually we have to build resilience and to be agile, to maintain curiosity, to be open to working differently at all times in order to create different opportunities, create space for different voices, for diversity, for accessibility, for engagement, for generosity. So I think the future is going to be a really complicated one, but it's not going to be less complicated than our past or our histories. And we're just going to have to be more accountable and more present and more determined to be open, to creating space for complexity, contradiction, and difference. And for supporting communities who are most effected and most vulnerable to the turbulences of the climate that we find ourselves in to create spaces in which agency and self determination and empathy and generosity and support and equity are paramount.

TM

And that sense of the future that Alexie talked about that even despite the unknowability of what might happen next, but still taking responsibility and finding promise—that was something that also came up with Yvette.

YC

Yeah. I have so many thoughts about it. And I think, I think right now we don't really know. I mean, it's like on the one hand, there's a growing awareness, we won't change. And a lot of people really waking up and being so much more conscious about how they want to live and what kind of world they want to envision and what kind of life they can, you know, and start changing the story. We have this time. And we know that while we might be going through a health crisis and economic crisis, which is going to be debilitating for at least two years, the biggest crisis is the

environmental crisis that we're facing. And I think right now we just, were like, hoping that enough people wake up to that and see the bigger picture and look at what are their values, really? How can they align how they live, what their work is, their level of engagement with aligning that with their values.

So I think in a way I have hope that there are going to be small networks of change. I don't know about the bigger picture. I am, like, there's going to be a tension between love and fear. And what we see happening in America, where, you know, there's going to be more dated societies. You know, people like not letting people in, you know, guns, and that's a fear thing. And that's probably because they don't have the leadership to reassure them that they're going to get through. So they feel like they have to kind of take on those, you know, protective roles themselves. I think we have a leadership problem in Australia. I mean I have thought that for a little while. And that was what my self-portrait was trying to convey that we, we didn't have role models at the top to inspire us. But I think we need to be leaders for each other.

It's like, that's what it's come down to. So I think artists have an amazing role to play. I think what we're lacking in our leadership is navigating between such a quick, such a sudden and traumatic shock of the bush fires, moving us through our collective grief. And then how do we move, you know, productively in a way that we can cope this shock, economically, and recover. And then get, be sort of energized by, you know, once we've processed the grief and the shock—how do you energize to kind of take action? And I think that's the role really that artists will provide. And we're going to need to see ourselves reflected in art. We're going to need to be able to access and connect with our emotional selves and then we need to experience a sense of love connection and dream.

TM [CONCLUSION]

And that's it for this first edition of Faraway, so close. We'll be regularly following up one aspect of COVID-19 in the arts over the coming weeks. And you can keep up to date with new episodes via iTunes and Spotify and through Art Guide Australia online.