DISCOVERY Ep. 10 - English

[00:02:23] Hi and welcome to Knight Foundation Discovery, our weekly conversation about the arts and its impact on society today. I'm really, really excited to have our guest, Catherine Yu, who is executive editor of No Proscenium, who started and co-founded a festival called Here Fast. And among other things, is pursuing an MFA in digital media at University of Southern California. Catherine, welcome to the program.

[00:03:00] Hi there. Thanks so much for having me today. Thank you. And for those who don't know, I'm Chris Barr.

[00:03:06] I'm director of Aadi Technology at Knight Foundation. And so Tiger, talk about Catherine because she's been tracking a lot of the recent trends that have been happening in immersive media and especially in sort of this pivot to digital that so many organizations are going through. But first, let's start with a little bit about the publication that you're part of and what. No, no proscenium is. And the work that you are doing there.

[00:03:36] Yes. So no Proscenium is a newsletter and a podcast and a Web site about the immersive arts and entertainment industry. What does that mean? So one of our primary focuses is about immersive theater, interactive theater and site specific theater. Essentially, it's about experiences where everywhere you look, it's kind of happening 360 degrees around you. But theater is not the only thing that we cover. We also are covering a 3D sound place which used by neural audio, which can trick your brain into thinking that someone is talking in front of you or that there's an insect behind you. You know, those location based kind of sound walks where you might start up a podcast in a specific place and follow directions as it sounds like there's maybe characters or effects happening around you as well. We also touch on augmented, virtual and mixed reality, in addition to escape rooms, themed entertainment or other kinds of location based entertainment, as well as alternate reality games, live action, role playing games, really anything that is immersive and embodied and often interactive.

[00:04:45] That's so interesting. You know, so much of this sort of is right on that dividing line between entertainment and art. And, you know, Knight Foundation, we work with a lot of traditional arts organizations and, you know, there can be some hesitancy to really experiment with this kind of interactive work and an immersive space that's you know, that's not what we do. Can you talk about what's so powerful about the trend in the work that's happening in this space? And what brought you to to become interested in that is something to write about and to study.

[00:05:29] Yeah. So I recently moved to Los Angeles from New York, and while I was in New York, I was lucky enough to see very early on two of the kind of most seminal productions in the current wave of immersive theater, those being sleep no more put on by punch drunk and immersive as well as then she fell by Third World projects. And what I really didn't expect it to resonate so strongly. I just thought, oh, you're some weird art. It's got some performance elements or I don't even know what this is, but I'm gonna take a chance. And what I found to be really compelling was it was combining this real life embodied exploration in a tactile environment. It felt like a world you could get lost in. But it also had these dance elements. These performance art elements and these storytelling elements that really resonated strongly with me. So that is kind of I how how I fell down the rabbit hole, so to speak. And if you look at the experience economy and what younger audiences are really striving for, like they want experiences over possessions. So they want to have these memories and mementos and souvenirs and to be able to share those

with other people. So for IVD, I probably have taken most so many newbies to sleep no more, didn't tell them what was happening, and then just kind of let them loose into the world. And I had a friend who was kind of scared. She didn't. She was hesitant. She didn't know what was going to happen. She thought maybe it'd be more like a haunted house, maybe more jump scares. And then once she realized that she could kind of approach it like a video game, I lost track of her in like ten minutes. And at the end of it, where were you? What did you see? What happened to you? Oh, that didn't happen to me. Or I saw that happen to someone else. Oh, there was this whole other room, this whole other floor. So there is a certain magic in the community that grows around these embodied experiences. And you do feel it viscerally because a lot of these will include walking around, touching things, smelling things. They use a lot of cinematic techniques in terms of audience focus with directing your attention through exquisite lighting or sound design. And it just feels like you can truly lose yourself in another world, whether you're in a virtual world, in a headset, or you're trying to, you know, prison break or escape the lab or something in an escape room, like a lot of these elements just. All come together in an immersive experience.

[00:08:03] Yeah. One of the things, you know, the type of immersive experiences that you're describing, what's so interesting to me is that in sort of an era where we talk about digital, sort of taking over everything. These are experiences that really prize being in a body. Right. And that say yes, when you look at screens all day. But for the next couple of hours, we're going to use all of our senses and get lost in what might be an escapist sort of activity, what might be a really story driven activity. We're in a very different moment right now going into these these physical spaces. It's not really possible. And so I'm curious, as you've been tracking this industry, what have you been seeing? What have you seen people experimenting with online now? But that's the primary mode of reaching audiences.

[00:09:06] Yes, some companies are changing their formats significantly. It could be they used to do plays indoors and now they're doing them outdoors. Socially distant parties are staggered with their quarantine bubble. It might be more of a processional play using audio. So you sanitize a bunch of headphones and you issue those to the audience members and they hear a live actor who might be really far away. But it is still performative. It is still happening live. So we're going to see. And I've started seeing driving shows on the tops of parking garages, shows happening in storefronts where there's that glass between the performer and the audience. But they can still see each other and acknowledge each other's presence, stuff on the sidewalk, stuff on in public parks, potentially using augmented reality technology. So, you know, incorporating the live physical human element with your smartphone. And then, you know, there's a lot of Lifestream Zoom theater happening right now. And to me, the most interesting ones are those that are interactive, often with game like elements.

[00:10:09] Maybe they might be supported by a website or an app or social media. And I've also been seeing this kind of resurgence of the telephone drama. So radio plays are back in plays. Their batteries aren't radio that are totally back or a story might unfold over the course of several phone calls or a single phone call. And it is really like a play for one person, which I find to be really interesting. And given that so many people are battling screen fatigue and zoom fatigue, it's just this other modality that, hey, we don't really call each other on the phone anymore. So it fuels a little bit more special, a little bit more like an event. And then way on the other side of the spectrum is stuff happening in VR. So you've got interactive plays happening in VR chat, INEOS and custom platforms where the actors are in the same virtual space as the participants and you can see each other and do things and communicate through body language or gesture or various sorts of actions. So I

think from an overall perspective, there's a bunch of stuff happening in that kind of X are mixed reality, cross reality space. And then people are also going back to and everything old is new again, transmedia. It's back with a vengeance. All of the different tools that people making alternate reality games in the nineties and two thousands. All of that stuff is coming back. And so I think there's there's this scrappiness that I love about indie theater makers where they say, OK, what are all of the possible tools? What can I leverage? And I'm going to experiment because I know I could be a dancer or an actor, and I'm so used to doing things in physical space. How can I use what I know about worldbuilding and narrative and apply it to something that has multiple platforms?

[00:12:01] You know, I'm thinking through that. You know, the dance perspective is so much about the body and so many of these platforms. You know, we're speaking through Zoom right now. And I don't think Zoom is thinking that much about my body except maybe how to make my face look a little bit better when I when I hit that button.

[00:12:27] Where are you seeing folks run up against those limitations and what sort of creative ways are they getting around the limitations of the technology that's available? Yeah, they're not they're not making the technology in most cases. They're adapting what they're doing to the available technology. And what are the acts that you're saying that's like, oh, that's a clever way to get around what you can do and zoom. Mm hmm.

[00:12:54] Yeah. So what we're finding is the design of a virtual space is just as important as the design of your physical space. And we can't just copy what we know from physical theater. So we really need to be thinking about how does the audience enter the world? How do they exit the world? What feels welcoming? And how are we meeting people where they are knowing that there's going to be tech frustrations, Zune fatigue, distractions, noisy environments. But on the flip side, from the performance I've spoken to, they say it feels really intimate because I'm at home talking to you at your home. And so there we're in we're inviting each other into these private spaces. Right. So you have to think about. All right. It's a private space. It's a domestic space. But as one theater maker said to me, just because it's a domestic space doesn't mean you have to use it domestically. And so you can do all sorts of little tricks to make your home environment feel a little bit different. And the folks that pop up three metrics who I spoke to talked a lot about moving the camera angle. So it's not so static. So one performance I attended of, there's the person I think was dialing in on their phone. And then it kind of created this very intimate connection. And he treated me like an old friend. And as he was moving around his apartment, I could see things in his environment. And he was talking to me and he would say, oh, hold on a second. He would put me up on his dresser or maybe they don't fit. So you really have to think of yourself almost as a cinematographer to certain aspects. How do you want to dress the set? What's the perspective of the camera? And then how do you keep things interesting? You really need to think about moving the camera angles, changing the lighting. Even a character getting up and turning off a light or turning on a light can drastically change what the audience is seeing and feeling. So how can we use all of these film like techniques to make the world to see more dynamic and interesting? Because Zoom. For all its flaws, has some benefits, right? Like, you can see people. You can hear their voices. You can know their names.

[00:15:02] You know, there's built-In tools to run polls or have people be very active in the chat. Almost as a backchannel. But you have to know that it's hard for more than one person to speak at a time. Yeah. So it's difficult for people to shout in unison like you can't have your Greek chorus. And you specifically can't control that tilles grid view. Even though every theater maker I know really, really wants to, because they would love to be

able to arrange their characters in a certain way. And then from a tech perspective, you know, some people don't have the best machines, so they can't see that many people on screen at once. Chrome books, I think, can only highlight one camera at a time. And as anyone who's experimented in zoom before, mixing audio is really difficult. So what can we do to get around those? One really interesting approach that I've seen. And it's actually from a site specific dance company out of New York City is like real people do. From Link Dance Theater, where they went and prerecorded a lot of the segments.

[00:16:03] And because their story world is dreamlike and has a there's kind of like leaning into the glutinous of it, leaning into things, being a little surreal. And so you would have interactions with characters and then they would be juxtaposed with prerecorded video. And then you would go back to the live interaction with characters. Then you might get an email from a character that might have a video message or just a text message. So they're grabbing from all of these different tools in their tool box. They're incorporating these transmedia elements and they're realizing like, OK, how can we make some of the stuff look more interesting on Zoom and let's mix the prerecorded and the life elements. And that actually helps build the story world and makes for a stronger piece because it makes sense for their specific narrative.

[00:16:53] And even that idea of getting an email during the performance and there's a back channel chat like this is how we actually experience these technologies right in front of me right now is a is a Google doc full of questions. And as I've got this slack channel where Raul is going to be pinging me in a second. This is this is how we live our life in this technology. And how can you take advantage of as many channels as possible? I'm curious if there are any. You know, for folks who want to experience these things, where should they start looking at for really rich sort of thought through pieces that are available now?

[00:17:39] Yeah. Yeah. So we review many, many of these pieces on our Web site. No proscenium. And we've recently launched a beta search engine where we're trying to categorized and tag and map all of these experiences. It's community driven. People are submitting their experiences all the time. And we're we do have on our homepage some of our favorites. So you'll see a rotating list of stack staff picks there. And if you really want to be on the up it up on the cutting edge of everything new that's happening every week, we send out a weekly newsletter of these interactive immersive events. And it's it's across the board. As I was mentioning, you might have something that relies on phone calls. You might have I that relies on text messages. You might have creators who are mailing things through the Postal Service. So all sorts of different creative, cutting edge, independent and scrappy experimental work is happening right now.

[00:18:34] And so I'm curious, you know, you're reviewing a lot of these productions. I'm not sure if you're tracking and thinking about the financial side of it. Are you seeing ticket prices and are people paying for these experiences? Because if you're running a traditional theater, you're thinking about those kinds of considerations as well. How much does it cost? And we charge people to experience it. And can we keep a connection with our audience in this very strange moment that we're in?

[00:19:10] Yeah, it's it's a conundrum. You've got a bit of a chicken and egg problem, right? Because you might be new to the virtual space. You're new to making Lifestream shows. So a lot of people have chosen to lower the stakes by making them pretty well cost or pay what you can or donating a significant portion to charity. But at the same time, it takes a lot of effort to put this stuff on. And from what I have heard from some friends at

outside the Merchant Canada, the back of house is even more important for a digital show. Yeah, compared to a physical one, because so much more can go wrong in terms of communicating with your audience, making sure they have the right software, making sure they've got the right settings. It's, you know, especially folks who might be a little bit older, they may not be as familiar with platforms like Zoom or Discord or Twitch or YouTube alive.

[00:20:01] Right. And so so on the life side, there's a whole different set of challenges now talking about sort of pod plays, podcasts and prerecorded material. Talk to us a little bit about what you're seeing there. And just to be selfish, I have a twelve hour car ride coming up tomorrow. What should I be putting into my pets feed?

[00:20:31] Oh, dear. Well, so I think a lot of these are not designed for a moving vehicle, so let's get them. But I'm seeing creativity in that. People are saying, all right, well, my audience of one is going to be at home. So what things do they have available to them that most people might have in their kitchen or their bathroom or their bedroom? And so they might be asking you to take an inventory of specific items in your house, or they might just be saying, sit at your table, close your eyes and then tune in at a specific time. And there's one company called a Darfield Field that's out of the U.K. and they have a custom app and tweet it. It really does feel like a radio play where you have to make an appointment. So you kind of sign in at a very specific time and you follow their very specific instructions to sit at the kitchen table. So there with your significant other if you can get a glass of water when the lady tells you to get a glass of water. Now, do this. Now do that. And that's how they slowly kind of get you into that story world. And because your eyes are closed the whole time, I mean it as many of us know, our own imaginations are much more vivid than what you might see on a screen in film or TV. So they're really playing on that like psychological, imaginative horror aspect of things. So that's what that's what I'm seeing a lot of is people are saying, all right, what can we do if someone's at home or what can we do if someone just walking in the neighborhood? What are the things that are likely to be in their environment? And how can we create a world out of that?

[00:22:11] And and I know you've also been watching a lot of VR work and we were talking before we started broadcasting just about what hardware is coming out, what folks are experimenting with it. It still feels like we haven't hit the moment where VR is taken off as a consumer product. But are you seeing more and more people in these experiences as you you've reviewed them? And I know the Venice Festival is one that you participated in. Burning Man just did a big thing. And I'm curious, how have those gone? And is there some promise there?

[00:22:56] Yeah. So I think it's really interesting that these communities have come together and said, well, we can't gather in person. What can we do virtually? And for a lot of people, really, the device that makes the most sense is the Oculus quest, because it doesn't require you to have a gaming P.C. It's an all in one solution, and that's your escape into new worlds or worlds that physically cannot exist or it's too dangerous for you to visit. So another thing I've been noticing is that there are some theater companies who are on the forefront of this. You probably saw that Punch Drunk is doing a collaboration with Niantic, the makers of hokey Mongo. And then just yesterday, the RNC, the Royal Shakespeare Company, said when they return to in-person performance, it's going to be hybrid. They're trying to move away from just physical. So everything's going to be hybrid. They're looking into VR. They're looking into air, and they're working with epic games who have created unreal engine. And so I think because people realize that connecting with a virtual audience actually brings a lot of people in that couldn't come anyway like it. It is in

the very early stages, but it holds so much promise. So there's a couple of things on Oculus Quest right now that if you do happen to have a headset, you can buy a ticket for. So there's Dr. Crum's School for Disobedient Pets, which is done by Adventure Lab, one of the former founders of Oculus Story Studio. And this is so everyone. So you gather your team of four people and you all have to have your individual headsets, its cross platform. So that works on most meter headsets. And you can be a bunny or a dog. And you're trying to, you know, subvert the plans of this mastermind. And it's got a lot of the escape from elements. But there's a live actor in there who's playing multiple characters, a similarly tender claws. Has it started doing live ticketed shows through Oculus Quests and Rift? So you buy a ticket to this hour long ish show, which is a retelling of The Tempest.

[00:25:06] And it's at the. Is at a virtual theater that they've dressed and the signage says it's the Decameron theater, so, you know, wink, wink to all of theater owners out there. But it's really cool because they have hired a bunch of immersive actors.

[00:25:19] And so you are improvising and interacting with someone who is really trained in these immersive theater techniques. But you're in a headset there and a headset and they can do magic. So they can transport you two different worlds. They can change the environment. They you know, it ends with a dance party. They can take you to other worlds. So it's really wonderful to be able to interact with these actors virtually in a time where we can't be in the same physical space. So even though there's only a couple of them out there right now, I think we're going to start to see more and more. And as I mentioned earlier, you know, when I talk to creators in the space, they're like, oh, I had someone in from Detroit. And then I had someone in from Singapore. And then I had someone in from Berlin. And then I had someone in from Seoul. So the ability to connect to audiences across the world is so powerful. Yeah. One of my favorite zoo shows is Eschaton, which is I would say about two dozen different zoom rooms that you can jump back and forth between. They've created this kind of labyrinth, the Web site where you're exploring. You're not really sure where you are. You click on something that lo