

DISCOVERY Ep. 19 - English

[00:01:48] Hello and welcome to Discovery Knight Foundation program on the Arts. Thank you for joining us. I'm Priya Sicar. Right now, a lot of us are thinking back on the past year and reflecting on the trauma and growth that we've gone through today, where we'll explore the experience of creating art amid distress and amid a year of unprecedented challenges and the unexpected gifts and lessons that come with it and that we can take forward into the future. So we have two guests today who will be in conversation on this topic. Jennifer Harge is a choreographer and the founder and artistic director of Hardstand Stories in Detroit. She's a past winner of the Knight Arts Challenge and a Kreisky fellow. She'll be sharing her experience, developing the latest iteration of her performance piece, Fly Drone, over the past several months through a residency and artistic exchange called Trade School, established by our other guest, Sarah Bishop Stone. Sarah is founder of the Philadelphia Thing. She connects and supports artists, producers and curators helping them to advance their artistic practice. Jennifer and Sarah, welcome to the show and thank you so much for being here.

[00:03:20] Thank you for having us.

[00:03:23] So as you both know, I recently had the opportunity to tune in to an episode or an edition of Trades Trade School in which, Jennifer, you shared your latest evolution of fly drone. And I was really struck by how both of you in your artistic practice, Jennifer and also, Sara, in your evolution of the artist residency, that is trade school, had to adapt to what was happening and how you kind of worked through evolving, evolving your artwork or evolving the residency itself. And I think, Sara, we started talking about trade school, I think, along with your collaborator, Shereen Assab of a host of people, which is a Detroit theater organization before the pandemic, certainly maybe in fall of twenty nineteen. And so. Yeah, I know. Then we reconnected and it just kept the conversation going and I and our team at Knight Foundation were just really interested and impressed by how you kind of just started to think differently about what that exchange and residency could be for artists and what artists needed in in this time. And then of course, Jennifer, I was so struck by your sharing, your artistic process as you iterated on slide round and as you talked with your collaborators on that piece about just what that experience was like coming through this this process. And so really excited for our viewers to also hear you two in conversation about what you've learned and maybe what you discovered about yourselves and your work that you might take forward into the future. I just quickly want to let viewers know that we will have a brief Q&A toward the end after Jennifer and Sara have a conversation. I'll be back toward the end of the show to moderate that. So please put your questions for them into the chat function of whatever platform you're watching it on. And I think we'll also have we have some ways that you can switch to another platform if you're not seeing a chat function. So if you're watching from our website, you can head to Facebook or YouTube to ask questions in the comments or to submit your questions with hash tag night live on Twitter. And then our team will be able to submit those questions for Jennifer and Sarah. So to start the two of you off in your conversation, first, we'd like to give viewers a taste of fly drowm by sharing the trailer. Let's go to that.

[00:07:27] Sarah, Jennifer, I every time I see that work, it's I'm struck again, it's so beautiful. So thank you for sharing that. Thank you. Thank you.

[00:07:41] And for those watching a little context from that about that trailer, that is sorry. First of all, my name is Jennifer Hodge. Hello. Thank you for your insight for having us here today to talk through our current artistic practices and lives. I am based in what we

now know as Detroit on an issue not by land. And I am the artistic director of Movement Collective in Detroit called Hardan Stories. And the latest piece that I created with a team of Detroit based collaborators is called Fly Around, it's a it began as a performance installation, a social sculpture that took place at the Detroit artist market in twenty nineteen. And it was a piece thinking about black women in domesticity in the ways in which black women have used their homes as a site of refuge and the sight of self discovery. And so that took place in the fall of twenty nineteen.

[00:08:59] And since then has been.

[00:09:04] Branching into other worlds, film being one of those iterations, and so the film trailer you just saw is the beginning of our next area of research, thinking about what could be excavated through.

[00:09:23] Telling the story through film, and that's something that we have been thinking about pre pandemic, but when the opportunity to work with trade school came about, we were able to really, like, amplify what it would mean to think about the piece cinematically and not just in the live performance.

[00:09:50] So let's talk a little bit more about what we do through our trade school experience for me, so you could talk a little bit about the trade school program in that I can talk about our my own experience with with trade school.

[00:10:04] Perfect. Yeah. Thank you.

[00:10:07] And, yeah, let me echo Jennifer's gratitude for for the invitation from Brianna and from Knight.

[00:10:16] I, I am here in Philadelphia on Leonella Not Failand and the the the program trade school, which is the is the kind of signature program of my organization.

[00:10:33] The Philadelphia thing started as a way to connect artists between cities and and to connect artists to other artists and to connect them with resources that might advance their practice beyond just having to having to go through the kind of few and kind of rarefied presenting institutions in other cities, but instead connect artists to other artists and knowing that they all have the they they know best kind of the resources in each city and and how to how to make work there.

[00:11:11] So when we were first chatting with with night about trade school, it was obviously going to be a physical exchange.

[00:11:21] We were going to bring a Philly artist to Detroit. We were going to bring Detroit artists to Philly to share practice, to perform to and also to share meals and potluck and all of those good things that happen in pre pandemic times when when the pandemic hit, it became really clear that kind of the most urgent way that we could support artists was with direct, unrestricted funding. And really, I mean, what what has been like, both surprising and also not surprising at all is sort of we we felt like Cherine Assab and I, Cherine, as I mentioned, as my partner, curatorial and producing partner in Detroit. And we really thought we were kind of lowering the stakes, saying, like, just we'll give you a big bunch of money and like, you barely have to have any outcome. Just use it for whatever you need to use it for. Something like we understand this this time has completely decimated our industry and the opportunities for performing and for making money that artists normally

use to survive. And so if you need to use this to pay your rent, if you need to use this to, you know, like we have, all we want to do is check in with you at the end of the year and see what you did.

[00:12:46] And it turns out, actually, that, you know, the a couple of things happened. One is that our timeline really extended. And that's something that we have been hearing from artists, too, that the pace of everything has kind of shifted. And and by kind of extending that timeline, it really yeah.

[00:13:09] It offered some opportunities to explore explore unexpected places.

[00:13:15] And and yeah. So we were really delighted by to see what what folks had come up with at the end of this at the end of this time.

[00:13:30] Some something two things you just said that were really helpful for me as an artist in the trade school program, but unrestricted funds is like. Needs to be the way yeah, that's in that. So for us, I walked into a trade school with one idea and I was able, though, because of because of me unrestricted, to completely flip that idea halfway through the process without having to be like we we will, of course, you know what I mean? And I'm thinking, too, if if it were to have been a live performance and I decided two weeks prior to like flip the thing on its head beyond just I choreographically doing the can do that as a as a director. But just like the crew of folks in the in the piece.

[00:14:32] But that will really affect a lot of other people to have done that kind of flip halfway through like a production flip basically in a thematic flip. And so I think there's something about.

[00:14:50] It restricted funds to to use how we need to use them and then to also be able to listen to what the piece is trying to do and not have to fit into some particular kind of exhibition model that could work. But like, I'm now I'm trying to make it work. And so. I'm just thinking I'm just being I'm reminded of how important it was to put the stakes to be low enough to, like, make changes, play with that, come back to something. And they believe for us it was like, well, whatever we have by that first day is what we're trying to, you know what I mean? When we met collaborator's are just really brilliant artists who, you know, like serious about their craft, as we all are. And so they are like, we're not going to show anything, but still the way to be like, what did we have to start and stop doing the showing? Or if we have to do whatever, it could have been the case like there. I always felt like there was space to do that.

[00:16:03] Yeah, it's it's almost I mean, look, we kind of lowered the stakes to make it. Informal presentation, but also but also like just enough to give you a deadline, you know, something just just like just enough of a timeline so that I think, like timelines and deadlines can be so supportive for artists and trying to do that in a way.

[00:16:32] I heard somebody describe 20, 20 as like the year of the rough draft, like the way that we're just not expecting anything to be finished or polished or.

[00:16:43] Or complete. But in a way, that's also, you know, that was also the idea of the exchange where the you know, in instead of instead of being able to bring artists together in physical proximity and actual shared practice or or those kind of informal, like, alchemical conversations that happen, you know, I think sharing sharing these works between, you know, in these kind of almost arbitrary pairings, I have to say it ended up

kind of being like, who was it who who felt ready at what the time line and who was able to share on those nights. But it was all always like so, so interesting to identify where artists from Philly, from Detroit are grappling with similar questions or or asking. Yeah, similar similar modes.

[00:17:47] There was a lot of ritual.

[00:17:49] There was a lot you know, there were just these really, really rich themes that kept coming out and and and being able to like dip into all of these works at a point in the process was, I think, really rich for that.

[00:18:06] And it really.

[00:18:08] Let me help to see where we were going, where, like in 20, 20 in that rough draft space, like I wasn't even thinking about what was happening after, like, true.

[00:18:23] Like operating like a 10 percent feel back to me like I like to operate at a 10 percent for long periods of time, I need to operate on like a low frequency creatively like that for a long period of time just to know what needs to happen next. And so now but having that deadline, as you said then like it propelled something after having that kind of lull, like I got more clarity. What we could do with the possibilities where it would be?

[00:18:58] Well, yeah, yeah, I.

[00:19:03] I feel that, too. We really I mean, we had we had a few meetings of the kind of the whole cohort over Zoome obviously.

[00:19:12] And and definitely one of the common threads was really about, about peace and how, you know, sometimes we're used to like using adrenaline to finish our work and to and to get it out there and the kind of removal of that. And instead of making it a little more introspective or as has definitely been a common thread to.

[00:19:47] There are questions in the back.

[00:19:55] Thank you, guys, we do. We have some great questions from folks and and your your conversation has sparked some questions for me as well. So we'll weave in as much as we can. So one question is that's been shared by a viewer. And I might I might tie this a little bit to to Jennifer, to your comment that you made earlier about how drought has evolved from from this earlier iteration. So the question is, have the forced changes of covid-19 to performing arts changed the accessibility of the field for aspiring artists and for audiences? And I wonder this. I would love to hear from from each of you if you have thoughts on this. Jennifer, I also is just curious, as I thought back to something you shared about how you were thinking of of using of telling the story filmically. And so curious about that because your background originates in performance. But I also remember during the trade school sharing, you were talking about starting to think of it as almost like an installation piece and then, of course, weaving and film. And so, yeah. How how do you think about that as a performing artist?

[00:21:11] Yeah. Something I've been able to learn about my dream period. And I think the trade school experience has helped me to get even clearer on this particular learning is like how to see my work presumably. And so I feel like the last performance was like one side. But there's another there are other sides to the prisms. Right. And so I feel like the

film is like helping me to understand another side. And so I'm thinking about how. My own work can, like, have many lives under one umbrella so that I'm not tied to any rigidity around what I'm making or any fixed notion of what I do. But like, I felt like. I was able to like.

[00:22:13] What is that?

[00:22:16] Step into things, I wouldn't call myself a director, a film director, but as Devin and I are working, I'm clear I can clearly see how we need to be moving. All that is direction, though. I think as an aspiring artist, something I would say is that like we actually know how to do lots of things in the field, even if we haven't ever caught ourselves those things. I would never come to a visual artist prior to making the installation and making choices about the installation. Help me understand. Like that was tied into my practice to you. Wasn't just movement.

[00:23:03] Great, thanks. And Sarah, I mean, work as a curator to and even through whether within trade school or other work that you do, you're working with folks and a lot of different disciplines, including certainly different performing arts disciplines. How how what are you seeing in what the work you're doing or the folks that you're working with?

[00:23:24] I mean, it definitely has been a time of reskilling for everyone. When we first we had we had selected just the in terms of the timeline for this iteration of trade school. We had already selected the Philly participating artists like right before the pandemic hit last year. And at the beginning of it, you know, we we had kind of these Chaykin meetings with everybody and heard from from all of these artists, like I am a live artist.

[00:23:58] I don't make digital work. I don't like this is not who I am. This is not what I do. And I think as far as the emergency ness of it passed and the kind of like settling into a little bit of a new normal set in, I think obviously all of these folks still are primarily make make work that is about being physically present. But I shouldn't say all we get. We are working with some really, really cool intermediate artists as well.

[00:24:31] But but there has really been an opening in terms of what the affordance is of the digital space are and and what the and also and filmmaking and music videos and all of the other the other ways that it's possible to to approximate liveness in the digital space and and and and create sort of complementary and pieces that that as I think as Jennifer said, kind of like add to this three dimensional, multidimensional kind of body of work.

[00:25:12] Yeah. I'm curious from from both your perspectives, how much do you feel like this shift or just embracing of using different, you know, different skills, different sometimes digital means is driven, is being driven by having to create differently like that creative impulse and how much of it is driven by the just necessity of that's kind of one of the that's like the main way people are consuming right now or engaging with art. Obviously, I know those are not disconnected, but just as I think of like sort of practicing artist hat, like I'm curious for you personally or just what you're observing, where do you think that balance is? On what end of that spectrum or exchange is this like this momentum coming to use digital means?

[00:26:14] Well, I would say the move wasn't always digital. At one of the one of the participating artists, Emily Bate from Philadelphia, shifted. I mean, she she's a musician and composer who makes choral works.

[00:26:30] And that is kind of like the the last the last thing that we're expecting to come back is people singing together in a room.

[00:26:38] And she created a community supported art practice where she made kind of songs and tiny sculptures and poems and Zeins and offered a subscription service so that it was it was like the opposite of a digital experience where you got this really tactile, participatory piece of art from her that also I mean, that also included some links and some some audio tracks and things like that.

[00:27:12] But but moving in the direction of a kind of more more kind of bespoke boutique personal art making to.

[00:27:25] I think I am a person, an artist who is like, what do we have and then move from there. And so. So I think for the third round him, it was like, OK, so we know we also one thing that's important to say is that Devin, the filmmaker, has been documenting my process from Flandreau in the piece before, since like two thousand eighteen. And so we also had two years, three years worth of footage of an archive that we really hadn't had an opportunity to to really be with. Even in the fly around film, we haven't even touched on what is inside the archive. And so I think it was necessarily just like we have to go digital. But it was like, well, we have. One hundred gigs of video documentation, we should look at it where we are right now, it was it thankfully wasn't like this drastic accommodation we had to make with ourselves. But like we have we already have these things and now we have people watching, interacting to the arts in this digital way. And so it's like, how can we how can the two meet each other?

[00:29:00] So I'm going to I'm going to weave in. I feel like we're hearing threads of this answer to this question from the audience. But what changes in your creative process or your curation process will stay with you even after this pandemic is over?

[00:29:22] Well, I feel like I was.

[00:29:29] A slow fettling processor.

[00:29:34] My whole life and I I used to like try to push against that because the world was always moving so quickly, I feel like now that a lot of people have slowed down and joined a different pace. I feel like I can settle into what my actual pacing is and not feel. Look at what is the way my brain is doing a thing when I feel obligated to move it outside of what I what I do excuse me and how I move.

[00:30:15] And I will echo the sort of complimentary side of that as a as a curator and organizer of arts events, which is that it's really been fruitful to move at the pace of the work, letting the pace of the of the idea of the container kind of drive the drive those lines. And it's kind of opened up, I think, an opportunity to rethink the cycles of these of these programs, what we assume are annual or we assume are like every year. But it doesn't actually need to live inside that Gregorian calendar in a in as predictable away as we're kind of clinging to most of the time.

[00:31:06] Thank you. Those are great insights. I think I'll just ask each of you to share as sort of a closing question before we wrap up. What are you looking forward to this year? It can be artistic or not.

[00:31:23] Dinner parties.

[00:31:26] I mean, that's a little bit glib, but also I really one of the one of the pieces of this, the conceptual pieces of trade school that we're still kind of mourning is the idea of bringing everybody together to share a meal.

[00:31:41] And and I hope that we'll be able to do that in the future.

[00:31:46] Oh, I love a dinner party. So let me know.

[00:31:51] Let me know what I feel like.

[00:31:55] People, especially during the summer, there was really beautiful dreaming happening with artists in particular. And I am looking forward to that. Continue dreaming. And I'm curious to see how those dreams manifest for myself as I was listening to other artists from across the world really have space and time to do that. I'm just excited to see how those take off.

[00:32:33] There's an opportunity to rethink so many assumptions in our field and in the way that we work. And I'm excited to have artists lead that conversation.

[00:32:44] Absolutely. Well, thank both of you for being here and leading this conversation with us and with everyone watching for sharing of yourselves. And I think really inviting us all to think differently about what we are doing and how we might approach this year to do beautiful dreaming. I love that phrase. I'm totally going to start using it. And and I want to also thank everyone at home or wherever you're tuning in from for joining us today. Thank you for sharing your questions. I want to let you know that you can find more information about our other episodes of Discovery on its website, CFG. And please join us again next Thursday for an episode of The Future of Democracy.

[00:33:41] And we're going to take you out with some great music. Our intro music was composed by Chris Barr. Our exit music is by ACRON jazz artist Aaron Brown. And until next time, we wish you good health, safety and joy and art. Take care.