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# BACK AND FORTH



# APHIDS: EACH EPOCH DREAMS THE ONE TO FOLLOW JANA PERKOVIC

The year is 1994. It's the year of both *Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. *RealTime*, a street magazine dedicated to the emerging genres of live performance and media art, is launched in Sydney by a duo of performers looking for a stable income. A small group of creatives – composer David Young, fashion designer Kathleen Banger, writer-musician Cynthia Troup and visual artist Sarah Pirrie – organise an art event in Melbourne, something between a gallery opening, a concert and a party. The only surviving photos are from David's mother ("I was very anti-documentation at the time,") and they show: a string quartet, a human-sized paper vase.



Human-sized vase,  
1994, Melanie Young

Through some strange luck, this group manages to keep making work – unclassifiable, postmodern, bringing divergent art forms into contradictory combinations – through the approach known back then, as per the funding body definitions, as 'inter-arts'. They collaborate far and wide. In 2006, they bring Swiss percussionist Fritz Hauser and architect Boa Baumann to Melbourne and present artist (and Aphids general manager) Rosemary Joy's miniature drumming performances in the tunnels under Federation Square, taking the audiences underground in groups of three. One of the ushers to *Schallmaschine 06* is a wide-eyed young artist, Willoh S. Weiland.

"I had trained as a musician, I loved writing music. But I was always lonely. I wanted to create context for this weird music I was writing, which no one understood."

— David Young

By the time David is leaving, Aphids has a stable structure, a core audience, and reliable funding. It is known, in Australia and increasingly

overseas, as a small organisation producing experimental performance that bridges art forms – in unusual spaces, in unusual ways. Even though it has a number of artists in its orbit, Aphids is not quite an artist collective. It is an artist-run organisation, funding enough collaborations with other artists that it is, essentially, supporting an entire ecosystem. This organisation – which in 2009 gives 143 performances in over 20 cities from Shepparton to New York – is what David hands over to Willoh, one of the many artists that had been mentored by Aphids.

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“Exciting news from Melbourne: Willoh S. Weiland has been appointed as the new artistic director of Aphids. As we were putting this online edition together, Weiland was flying back to Australia. We look forward to catching up with her once she’s settled into the job of guiding one of the country’s most innovative outfits, renowned for its idiosyncratic hybrid creations and international collaborations.” — [RealTime](#)

“I needed a job. I was in my home town in Belize, Central America, asking my mum for money and not working – I did the interview over a dial-up connection [...] But the attraction was definitely the fact that the company had been created by artists. I couldn’t bear the hierarchies of the arts and I wanted to work collaboratively, with people who had different skills than me.” — Willoh S. Weiland

Everyone thought Willoh was an inspired choice. She was already a recognised voice in Australia’s small live performance community, working between Sydney and Melbourne and anywhere else where there was support for performance that engaged technology, science, and the audience. Her work was different to the introspective, often music-centred

Gesamtkunstwerke that David Young’s Aphids was producing. But Aphids had supported Willoh’s [Yelling at Stars](#), a live performance turned “Australia’s first interstellar message”, and anyway it seemed like a company game to be taken in new directions.

“I remember seeing Willoh’s first [Aphids show](#), and it was in the Spiegeltent, and it was Kamahl, and it was Valentine’s Day, and he was singing love songs. And I was thinking, ‘What have I done??’ But it was the best thing that could have happened to Aphids.”

— David Young

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Willoh continued the Aphids approach of supporting a plethora of artists, at various career stages, to create works with and around her. But the focus shifted towards what was then becoming widely known, again among the funding bodies, as ‘live art’.

“I think I, and all the artists we worked with, were trying to listen to the zeitgeist. We believed in our own voices and we valued relationships. People returned that with opportunities.” — Willoh S. Weiland

“And it was fun. What fun. You could hear it from blocks away. But what made this event so curiously subversive was the lack of cues that clued us in that it was Art. Countless passersby wondered what they were watching – a charity event? A corporate stunt? A sporting spectacle? It was all of these things, kind of, or parodies of each. It definitely involved the city in a truly remarkable way, and as the sun set and the runner entered the final leg of the race the atmosphere was electric among onlookers still none the wiser as to why they were even there.”

— John Bailey



Tristan Meecham in *Fun Run*,  
2010, Sheridan Mills

The year is 2000. Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, is toppled by Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard. Willoh invites artists [Lz Dunn](#), [Martyn Coutts](#), [Tristan Meecham](#) and Lara Thoms into Aphids as artistic associates. Tristan premieres [Fun Run](#), a mass public spectacle of a marathon run in place. *The Block* returns to Channel Nine in a brand new format, sowing the seeds of the housing crisis. The film of the year is *The Social Network*, which presents the thesis that social media is dangerous because its founders are attention-seeking stalkers. The following year, the first iPhone is released. Aphids opens [Thrashing Without Looking](#) at Arts House, in which half the audience wear video goggles and perform the show for the other half.

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“Just as Napoleon failed to understand the functional nature of the state as an instrument of domination by the bourgeois class, so the architects of his time failed to understand the functional nature of iron [...] These architects design supports resembling Pompeian columns, and factories that imitate residential houses, just as later the first railroad stations will be modelled on chalets.” — Walter Benjamin

The year is 1935, and Walter Benjamin is trying to figure out the emotional and spiritual transformation that occurred in the 19th century. There is an interesting notion he repeatedly returns to, across examples as diverse as the panorama, the locomotive and the shopping arcade: that the collective consciousness in a time of great transformation tries to make sense of the new by referring both to the old and to the ideal. The artefacts of a transitional time are hybrids, he notes: the first steam engine has horse legs; the first iron buildings are in Hellenic style; the first photography imitates painting. “These images

are wish images,” he writes, in the sense that the new technology is welded to elements of a primal utopia: classless society, milk and honey in free flow.

I return to this notion throughout the 2010s. As the slow creep of social media transforms our lives, later to culminate in the mental health crisis of Gen Z, relational art is flourishing. Live artists are giddily experimenting with technologies to achieve the old dream of community, stolen from us by the suburbs. A dramaturgy of touch, of the encounter, of a mass communion.



FLYWAY, 2014, Martje Strijbi

Unlike the many belligerent 20th-century-isms, the microstyles of live art – immersive performance, one-on-one performance, sound art, and hybrid, site-specific and site-responsive performance – collaborate with zest. Aphids somehow presides over it all, powering some of the best Australian live art, and giving it international exposure. *Thrashing Without Looking* tours Australia. *Fun Run* tours Australia, then South Korea and Finland. *Flyway*, Lz Dunn’s migratory bird-watching show, tours all over Europe, twice.

Amidst it all, Willoh continues to make her bolshy, almost impossibly ambitious work on an intergalactic scale. Following in the footsteps of the golden record sent into space by NASA in 1977, she sends another golden record into space in *Forever Now*, and then wins the [ANTI International Live Art Prize](#).

“Her body of work to date appears to know no limits – it inhabits the city, the suburb, the natural world, even outer space, no less, with the same sure-footedness, elegance, intelligence and verve. Her work has real scale, these are large, complex projects involving and implicating many people [...] This is thoroughly exciting work. Her projects are deeply serious and

deeply humorous in equal measure. They are also spectacular, epic and impossible to ignore.”

— Saastamoinen Foundation



*Artefact*, 2016, Peija Makinen

For ANTI Festival, Willoh makes a work that somehow encapsulates all these concerns: *Artefact*, a large-scale funeral for her Nokia phone. She works with composer [JR Brennan](#) and the citizens of the Finnish town of Kupio, aged 11–82. They bring together community groups and Finnish traditions into an epic performance, on-site in Kupio.

“James says it has been a dream of his to combine traditional choirs with death metal music [...] The starting point for the composition was the old Nokia ringtone, which he will be deconstructing across different voices. He describes the composition as ‘reflective mourning.’ All funerals are for the living, of course.” — Helsinki International Artist Programme

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And then funding cuts arrive. Under the Abbott government, Arts Minister George Brandis cordons off a large part of the Australia Council’s funding for the Minister’s discretionary fund, from then on referred to as ‘Brandis’s slush fund’. Chaos rolls through the arts sector, as funding programs are cut at short notice. *RealTime* ceases print publication. More than just ripping through the independent arts, Brandis ushers in a new culture war, with statements such as, “Frankly I’m more interested in funding arts companies that cater to the great audiences that want to see quality drama, than I am in subsidising individual artists responsible only to themselves.” And, memorably, “People have the right to be bigots.”

It is in this embattled context that Willoh, with collaborators that will eventually inherit Aphids, creates some of her finest work, including *Howl*, a parade of controversial art works. Paul Yore’s



*A Singular Phenomenon*, 2015, Bryony Jackson

*Everything is Fucked* and Casey Jenkins’s  *Casting Off My Womb*, works whose controversy is manufactured by an Australia afraid of so much, walk alongside Ai Weiwei’s sunflower seeds and *L’Origine du Monde* through art museums and town squares.

“Trying to explain something as basically being a Christmas pageant, only with people dressed as vaginas rather than Santas – that was as close as I got! But that didn’t even scratch the surface! [*Howl*] was a glorious success! [...] It managed to combine a self-conscious cheesiness with a genuinely informative and quite left-field take on the subject matter.” — David Sefton

And then Willoh leaves. In her last bold decision, she invites Mish Grigor, [Eugenia Lim](#) and [Lara Thoms](#) to turn her directorship into a triumvirate job share.

“They were nice to me – they are the original nepo-babies. Joking. I loved their work. It was a long, considered process with the board, ‘choosing’ rather than a public call-out for an artistic director. But we felt that that reflection was a powerful statement about what the company is. Being focused on female and non-binary artists’ voices was also an important factor.” — Willoh S. Weiland

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“Revolutionary thinkers have been declaring the age of vanguardism over for most of a century now. Outside a handful of tiny sectarian groups, it’s almost impossible to find radical intellectuals who seriously believe that their role should be to determine the correct historical analysis of the world situation, so as to lead the masses along in the one true revolutionary direction. But [...] it seems much easier to renounce the principle than to shake the accompanying habits of thought.” — David Graeber

The year is 1866. “One should open one’s eyes and take a new look at cruelty,” Friedrich Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, ushering in a century of men doing just that, across media as diverse as armed combat, children’s literature, politics, environmental exploitation, and avant-garde art. The guiding idea of the 20th century is progress as a violent insurrection of the new against the old. Art movements behave like small totalitarian dictatorships, often complete with a charismatic leader: mounting incursions into enemy territory, quashing dissent within their own ranks, show trials, and so on.

The year is 2009. The rhetoric of aggression has become so ubiquitous within art that Michael Haneke can say that with every film he “tries to rape the viewer into being reflective” and no one bats an eyelid. Maggie Nelson calls this proposal “the shock and awe cure to injustice and alienation”, the notion of art as a painful intervention. Grant Kester calls it, more amicably, “the orthopaedic aesthetic”.

“Of all his teachings, this had been the most important: you must live alone. If you wanted to preserve yourself, if you understood existence, if you wanted to attain wisdom, you had to live alone.”

— Bambi

Reader, even as I write these quotes, I am tempted to replace them with “bla bla bla”; I find them so unacceptable, and left unexamined for too long. I don’t want middle-aged men to brutalise people with their art. How is this progress? How did it come to this? How did the 20th century produce a body of art criticism that sometimes seems like nothing but apologia for a mass of terrible art that George Brandis wants to watch?

I personally feel this needs to end. So it is with great satisfaction that I watch Mish, Lara and Eugenia take over APHIDS (now in all caps) to foreground the principles of care, of deep listening, of softness. And to create art according to these principles – in the impossible circumstances of splitting one three-day-a-week job into three one-day-a-week positions.

“So how to save the world in one day?”

— Mish Grigor, Lara Thoms, Eugenia Lim

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*EASY RIDERS*, 2020,  
Bryony Jackson

It is 2019, and Prime Minister Scott Morrison wants to use \$7 million to fund an historical replica of Captain Cook’s ship to circumnavigate Australia – a re-enactment of an historical event that never happened. COVID-19 mercifully puts a stop to this plan. It also puts a stop to all art.

Eugenia Lim stays at APHIDS for three years. During this time, she completes an art project about digital platform-based services and the workers who fulfil them, perhaps the first real work of art about the COVID-19 pandemic.

“No one really gave a shit about the gig economy. People were using the gig economy in different ways, particularly Uber. But I remember people being like, ‘Why are you making work about this? Why is it interesting?’”

— Eugenia Lim

*EASY RIDERS* and *DESTINY*, together with Lim’s own pre-APHIDS work, *ON DEMAND*, comprise a suite of performance and video works, performed by four ‘independent contractors’ for on-demand service platforms. For their work, they are paid according to the Live Performance Award – the same as a ticket seller or an usher. In all cases, it is vastly more money than they make from their day jobs, which often amounts to \$6–8 an hour.

"My waters break, but I do two jobs on the way to hospital!"  
— *EASY RIDERS*

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*OH DEER!* development, 2022,  
Anna Nalpantidis

"How do you make death funny?"  
— [ABC journalist](#) to Lara Thoms

"Hi, I'm Batman. My parents were murdered outside of a theatre. So, yeah..." Someone mutters: "Triggering."  
— *OH DEER!*

Felix Salten's *Bambi* (1923) is a nasty, violent book. Written in the increasingly fascist interwar Europe, it uses animals to promote individualism and total emotional disconnect as natural and instinctive – indeed the only path to true, Schopenhauerian self-realisation. The titular, orphaned fawn is berated for seeking his mum and later encouraged to abandon his offspring. Meanwhile, the book depicts animals being maimed and killed in unnecessary, gruesome detail that could have only seemed appropriate to a children's writer between two world wars. It put me off ever seeing the Disney movie. In any case, it is ripe for ridicule.

I immensely enjoy watching Lara Thoms lampoon *Bambi* in her growing series of fawn-themed works about orphans and the experience of loss. In [FAWN](#) and [OH DEER!](#) people with a real experience of losing a parent don costumes of fictional orphans, abundant in children's entertainment: Nemo, Frodo, Elsa, Annie, Pippi, and the list goes on. Why does our culture have a strange orphan fetish? Why is what Jini Maxwell calls "the loss of a paradigm of care" so often presented like one big great adventure?

"*FAWN*, like so much of APHIDS' work, is fundamentally communal in nature. By refusing to

narrativise the experiences of grief it embodies, *FAWN* shies away from framing loss as the diametric opposite of intimacy. By contrast, these diverse, collective experiences of mourning offer a doorway into new intimacies, new paradigms of care – new forms of family."

— [Jini Maxwell](#)

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"If I tell anyone in Australia that I'm a composer, they say, 'Can you make a living from it?' Or, 'Do you have a day job?' In Berlin, I remember telling a taxi driver, and his question was, 'Oh, would I have heard any of your music? What kind of music do you make?' In Australia, we only value the arts for other things it does: create social cohesion, give people jobs... Whereas in Germany, the arts are just there."

— David Young

"I think that artists always have to make a decision about whether they want to monetise their practice or not."  
— Mish Grigor

The year is 2024. In front of the café where I come to write this text every day, there is an urban luxury – a large meadow. It is so large that I have never walked to the other end – it occupies about half a city block. The meadow is earmarked for some kind of construction, so on two sides it is fenced off. On the third it is delimited by the backs of the houses, and on the fourth by this café, some sort of temporary construction run as a not-very-much-profit. Every day, together with other parents, I bring my child here to run, explore, roll in the dirt.

I need to walk when I write, so this essay was finished while taking long walks on the meadow.

When I first came to Berlin, unpurposed fields were common, even in the city centre. You could



have a picnic there, make an art performance, you could live there. The year was 2010, the original indie sleaze era. Together with low rents and the strong Australian dollar, not to mention abundant German arts funding, we had the infrastructure of freedom. At any time, about half of Naarm's arts community was here; in any case, always one or two dozen friends and colleagues. David Young used to live nearby.

Now, open fields are rare, and the dollar is weak. Dancer [Sarah Aiken](#) said to me once, "Now you have to justify why you're here."

When I first arrived in Melbourne, one of the most disorienting features of the city was the absence of non-commercial spaces to meet in, to be in. The year was 2004. Other than tram stops and the occasional foyer, sitting down cost money. Every meeting with another person needed a justification. No wonder everyone was so afraid of intimacy.



Promotional image,  
*Exit Strategies*, 2019

"In *Exit Strategies* there is no epic journey. Unlike the heroes of Greek tragedy Grigor can not unmoor herself from the parochial, the personal, the autobiographical, the inconsequential. We soon realise there is no clear redemptive arc (or exit) for this Australian artist. Nor is there a redemptive arc for us in the audience – especially those of us who are white settlers." — [Sandra D'Urso](#)

When I was contemplating moving back to Berlin (the year was 2019), Mish Grigor premiered her first work with APHIDS, titled, with gloriously good timing, *Exit Strategies*. Maybe we were both influenced by the zeitgeist, which questioned why we were even there, settlers on stolen land, when maybe our job was to return to the origin, clean up the circumstances that had brought us there.

Mish often returns in her work to the same questions that plague my life: money, gender, power, and how much agency it affords us to really choose our destiny. See [Class Act](#), a critical take on *My Fair Lady*. It is somehow symptomatic of Australia that I have never managed to find or create space in the mainstream media to talk about Mish's work. We are silent about everything that matters: the more it matters, the more charged and aggressive the silence. The late David Graeber noted that accruing debt is the single best motivator for a worker: be it a factory worker, a colonial mercenary, or a precarious millennial. Money is political. Taxation is political. How we use public funds, what freedoms and what binds we choose to create, is of course a political question, and the answer, I suspect, sits too closely to the intentions of colonisation. I wouldn't be surprised if Mish beat me to it and created her own response to her work, in another work. After all, that's what Hannah Gadsby – another artist in the APHIDS orbit – has had to do.

And this goes some way to describing the role of art in Australia right now, in a society that limits public discourse to a degree unparalleled among contemporary democratic nations. The concept of freedom gets a bad rap from overuse by cis white straight men. But move closer to the paradigm of care, and we find free play, the developmental necessity for a healthy human being. A child rolls in the dirt on a meadow; an adult, walking on the same meadow, makes art. This mission of APHIDS, to open up a space of freedom to create, for themselves and others, a space where we don't pay rent to sit down and where we just encounter each other, is not only rightfully seen as part of their artistic practice. It is also a civic practice.



“At the core of APHIDS has always been this idea of artists coming together in a room to experiment. Simple as that.”  
— Mish Grigor

“At its best, it’s a company that dreams really big, and really goes there.”  
— Eugenia Lim

“[...] because we play ourselves, we don’t perform as anything else, and we are vulnerable on stage and we talk about political issues, the conversations that come to us afterwards are very compelling and very universal-feeling.”  
— Lara Thoms

“[APHIDS] made me confident that extremely strange ideas could be extremely popular.”  
— Willoh S. Weiland

“I always wanted to present work that was really weird and pretty impenetrable. But then I always tried to contextualise it in a way that would let people in. ‘Look, some of this will be really hard and you won’t understand it. But there will be this legible frame around it.’ And I think that’s how we built trust.”  
— David Young

Each epoch dreams up the one to come, notes Walter Benjamin. The sudden media abundance of the late 20th century created the postmodern collage, delirious and democratic. This visual glut produced the desire for live encounter, and aesthetic considerations of live encounter have led to ethical concerns, to relational aesthetics, to the dramaturgy of care. It is the role of the artist to take their training – formal and informal – and find new form, give new expression, to the ideas of their time. This is how art enters our life.

In some ways, the story of APHIDS is a story of generous successions. With each artistic director welcoming the new generation and their

concerns, APHIDS could progress in evolutionary leaps, rather than in bloody revolutions, and each time it could expand its vision, its aesthetic, its community. This could happen because at the core of APHIDS has always been the idea of artists coming together to experiment. A vision that privileges dialogue over conflict, and collaboration over competition. And we now know, from both anthropology and evolutionary biology, that, *pace* Bambi, it is collaboration that is at the heart of life, not the survival of the fittest.

# WHAT EVEN IS APHIDS? MISH GRIGOR

## WHAT WE KNOW

- APHIDS has been going for 30 years
- There has always been a cluster of artists driving the projects
- The work of APHIDS has always unsettled art form categorisation
- Things change all the time

## IN PRAISE OF PLASTICITY

Philosopher Catherine Malabou defines plasticity as the capacity to give and receive form. She uses principles of neuroplasticity and applies them to political and social concerns; she proposes that we could reshape our minds out of and away from capitalism. That we have agency over how we think and do things. That we can reinvent the world. It requires more than mere flexibility, she insists – flexible things bend but return, unchanged. To be plastic is to delicately leap between rigidity and collapse, to hold one shape while being open to radical transformation into another.

When I read Malabou, I thought about APHIDS. I thought about institutional plasticity, and what it might mean for an organisation, not just a brain, to reconfigure and reconstitute. What it means to eschew static positions on processes, definitions, aesthetics, and context.

From the moment I got the job at APHIDS in 2019, colleagues in foyers and galleries would smile, say something celebratory, and then a slow cloudiness would cross their eyes as they quietly ventured a question with an air of confession: “*What exactly is APHIDS?*” There would be a beat of silence before their voice tightened to a higher pitch: “Regardless, I’m super happy for you, and I can’t wait to see what you do!” After we parted, I would contemplate whether or not this was a strength – to be slightly beyond

definition. It is a strange thing to feel so supported despite existing behind a sometimes-impenetrable gauze of mystery.

When you get a J-O-B in the A-R-T-S (rare, unusual), you usually take your first few steps on certain foundational stones – institutional histories, organisational frameworks, handover documents. It's relatively unheard of that you'll be told, "Just make the job into the kind of job you want; make the organisation into the kind of organisation you think ought to exist". Like all artists and arts workers, a big part of what we do is advocating for our own existence to the gatekeepers of resources.

With APHIDS, that means we are fighting for the right to shift forms, to move around, and to experiment. For plasticity.



We Eat in Good, Winners,  
No Contest Art Prize, 2021

## APHIDS. WHAT WE DO

- Sometimes we make projects  
When one of us dreams something up, part of the joy is getting to work with artists we admire – we made [Class Act](#) with playwright Zoey Dawson, dancer Alice Dixon, and electronic musician and composer Nina Buchanan (on tour to the Sydney Opera House at the end of August, tell your Emerald City pals!).
- Sometimes we distribute funds  
In 2020, we offered the [No Contest Art Prize](#) to fund ten Victorian-based feminist artists to spend some time with an experimental idea. Everyone was feeling the lockdown pandemic bleakness, and the organisation got a boost from the state government, so we decided to play art fairy godmother. Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo, here's some cash.

- Sometimes we host artists  
[A Perfect Day](#) is an experimental performance lecture and guided listening tour through 'pop song schedules' – songs in which the singer lists everything they do in a day. We invited artist Catherine Ryan to make and perform the work at our Collingwood Yards home.
- Sometimes we build things slowly with lots of people  
[APHIDS Listens](#) is a ten-year archive that we're building where artists describe a work they've loved and a work they've made. It's an audio archive, hosted by podcast sites.

## HOW I CAME TO APHIDS

I'm from New South Wales and emerged from a scene that started in dingy warehouses, building our own stadiums from stolen milk crates, which was somehow scooped into shows at Sydney Theatre Company, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and Sydney Festival.

In 2011, when I was skulking around [Performance Space](#), fangirling every event, I met artist [Joshua Sofaer](#). He was from London and in Sydney to undertake a residency funded by a leadership training institute that normally worked to equip aspiring CEOs and executives of arts organisations and funding bodies. It was the first time they had included someone unwaged and untethered to any institutional framework. He was in Sydney to ask people, makers, and academics: *What does it mean for an artist to be a leader? How does leadership manifest in the things artists do? How can we rethink the role of an artist in the context of the need for leadership?*

In Sydney, there used to be a theatre lecture every year called the Philip Parsons Lecture. Often incendiary, occasionally inspiring, a theatre type would make a speech to the industry.

People came together, listened, talked about it, and responded in the media with articles that contested or cooed over the call to arms. In 2014, the lecture was given by Ralph Myers, who was artistic director of [Belvoir](#) (a theatre company started by a collective who built their own stadium out of recycled wood). He talked about what it was like to one day be an indie theatre maker and the next a leader of a major institution. About the implications of having businesspeople run boards when the core business is making art. About the radical notion that artistic directors might behave like artists.

These are a couple of public examples of the countless conversations, provocations, and presentations that got me thinking about how artists might lead, and how art might lead – how arts practice can be the centre of an organisation.

Every year at APHIDS we take a couple of days together to discuss the state of the union. We talk together, reflect on the past year, and discuss the kinds of projects we have brewing: the sorts of things we are seeing, what is happening in the world, and what is happening with art. And then sometimes we change things up.

Organisations talk a lot about ‘strategic planning’. You get together with your board; you talk about what is working and what needs to change. You make a document that lays it all out. It is the same thing artists do, but instead of long, dark reflections and tenacious mind maps in a Moleskin, you produce a 36-page document with at least two infographics. Artists list ideas peppered with doodles and dreams; organisations are encumbered by ‘vision’, ‘mission’, ‘priorities’.



Backstage at *Class Act*, 2022,  
Anna Nalpanitidis

At APHIDS, we often joke that we are the smallest organisation – we are held together with two full time wages, stretched across a handful of people. Because we’re small, APHIDS can be nimble. So one year we might decide to work together on a big project for screens, and get it touring to galleries across Australia. But another year we might decide that we are going to work separately, no longer collaborating with each other but instead existing ‘cheek by jowl’. Another year, we might design events around themes, hosting labs for people working around similar themes in different forms to share, connect, and think together.

Artists shift forms all the time. But organisations seem to talk about change, then carry on much as they were. This happens even if the people at the helm are desperately trying to turn the big ship: gripping the wheel, willing the rudders to curve, wanting beyond want to take the stowaways to another ocean. It’s like looking at a ‘spot the difference’ optical game; we end up with two versions of exactly the same thing, except now the cat on the ship is wearing a yellow hat. It’s not so much a change as a slight redecoration.

Malabou speaks of ‘destructive plasticity’ – the capacity for radical transformation that comes from breaking down existing forms. At APHIDS, we didn’t set out to be this way, but we are two artists forging our own paths, and it means that we shift and change, fall in and out of alignment with each other and our histories, and sometimes end up dismantling our previous ways of working.

I wish that big organisations could and would make big bold moves with what they do, and how they do it. Structural change means being responsive, reactive, porous. It means listening. It means allowing a diverse range of factors to affect the organisation. It means resources move

in different directions. It means not calcifying into a rigid, crusty lump. It means being plastic.

One of the effects of changing things up is that we still get that ‘what even is APHIDS?’ question, but I’ve come to embrace the glassy-eyed looks and confused head tilts. In a world of rigid institutions, APHIDS remains gloriously plastic, constantly giving and receiving new forms. In a world where artists are meant to be recognisable, searchable, sellable, and where organisations are meant to be safe, secure, trustworthy, this feels risky sometimes. Other times it feels like a lot of time and effort spent revising, remaking. It also feels like the only way forward.



Audience at *A Perfect Day*,  
2021, Takeshi Kondo

I want artists to always be at the centre of how things are done and for me, artistic leadership isn’t about having all the answers, but about asking the right questions of the world (and the art world), and then trying something. Sometimes ham-handedly, sometimes painstakingly, we attempt to build our practices anew. I feel honoured to be here, along for the ride, hoping to leave APHIDS in better (but different) shape than I found it.

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# FINGERS IN THE PIE

## LARA THOMS

Someone once told me about a circus where everyone took turns in all the roles – from selling popcorn to cleaning elephant shit, to performing in the sky. Maybe it was a myth, but I have always admired this shared can-do ethos. The people we work with through APHIDS are usually doing more than it is possible to credit them for, putting their hands up for tasks often as unexpected as the art itself.

## BUILDING MINIATURE INSTRUMENTS

In my early days at APHIDS our *joie de vivre* was Rosemary Joy, the APHIDS general manager who was simultaneously touring a work of miniature percussion – completely detailed, tiny sculptures that could be delicately played as instruments – while writing grant reports and organising us teaching work at Thornbury High to subsidise our income. So compelled were we by Rosemary’s commitment and life story (and her 90s feminist band The Wet Ones) that we developed a new work including a parade made entirely about her, complete with a banner of her headshot.

- Credit: Artist General Manager 1994–2017
- Invisible labour: Convincing regional motorcycle gangs to join performances



Lz Dunn in *Howl*, 2016,  
Bryony Jackson

## TAKING OFF CLOTHES

Lz Dunn was a calm queer artist from the country whose video camera we needed to borrow for a development. Next minute they were surprising us with a nude flash behind video goggles, then cracking a whip through the laneways of Adelaide topless, in a ski mask. Performance art without nudity is often disappointing, and three women being able to sprint nude throughout the Art Gallery of South Australia’s Mordant Wing, almost knocking over a Rodin sculpture, should be considered one of APHIDS’s finest moments, bravely led by a lesbian birdwatcher.

- Credit: Artistic Associate 2011–2017
- Invisible labour: Singing Rihanna three shows a night on a five week tour

## TALKING TO STRANGERS

The day I met funeral director Scott Turnbull he showed me his crematorium, nicknamed ‘The Big Scone Cooker’ and I knew I had to convince him to make a show about the death industry. During the development of *The Director* he told us we were a bunch of wankers, taught my kid how to walk (using a feather boa on the Arts House stage no less), and volunteered to vacuum the floor each day. Scott has a great knack for making juicy conversation with literally anyone. I’ve watched him cackle with sari sellers in Kerala, bond with funeral directors in Finland, and console me whilst we sat in tiny chairs as a won’t-be-named festival presented our death show in a children’s theatre and didn’t sell many tickets.

- Credit: Performer *The Director* 2017–
- Invisible labour: Convincing taxi drivers to come to shows

## PISS PUPPETRY

[Dani Reynolds](#) is one of those people who I trust with details. Coming into APHIDS as a [Supermassive](#) mentee several years ago, we talked through methods to get live dogs to dance on stage and how to crack the CRUFTS (World Dances with Dogs Competition Championships) community. Not much later they had the genius idea of lying under my legs, waving a yellow ribbon as a reference to the censored artwork *Piss Christ* for our art parade [Howl](#).

Now they run a tight ship as the APHIDS company co-ordinator, and have continued to work with haberdashery by designing our merch.

- Credit: Supermassive Mentee 2016;  
Company Coordinator 2024 –
- Invisible labour: Facebook Marketplace



Cher Tan in *EASY RIDERS/*  
*DESTINY*, 2020

## FINDING THE RIGHT OBJECT

Committing to an image is the *raison d'être* in many APHIDS works and the *Body Benefits Bubbling Hydro Teal Foot Spa* really took us by the horn in *EASY RIDERS*, our work with Uber Drivers and delivery workers. Eugenia Lim knew she wanted an absurd symbol to complement the drudgery placed on gig economy workers and we decided the aqua plastic could represent the service industry's power dynamics, bodies, rest and mass consumption. We bought 50 and then created a version so large it almost took a team member to hospital when it fell on its side. Sadly the foot washing in *EASY RIDERS* only made it to one pair of toes, as the lockdowns closed us down on the evening before premiere. That night was also Mish's birthday, and a profiterole cake grew mouldy backstage while the city shut – and the delivery workers became some of the few people the public were allowed to invite over.

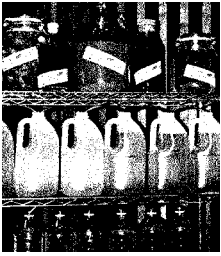
- Credit: Co-Artistic Director 2019–21
- Invisible labour: Shadowing an Uber delivery worker, first time on an electric bike, during a peak hour shift.

## GOOD GOSSIP

If art didn't intersect with friendship I'd have been done a long time ago. [Amrita Hepi](#) moved to Naarm in lockdown and then appeared in multiple projects everywhere I went. Our work day often begins with a sigh, followed by "What's goss?". Together we have cried about exes, dead parents and the No vote. We have belly laughed in freezing cold car parks and made bratty orphan choreography dressed as Rapunzel and Santa. I'll never forget when she made me a lemony broth when I was at my most hectic and vulnerable point of production week. Amrita immediately makes people feel at ease – whether she is taking the role of choreographer or cackling audience member.

- Credit: TRIAD member 2023 –
- Invisible labour: Karaoke warm ups





*Gutful: Bug In the System,*  
2023, Michael Pham

## CREATING A DRONE OUT OF MINCE MEAT

Food is a gateway drug for participatory art and APHIDS has had a long term co-dep relationship with snacks. From David Young's kitchen percussion in *MAPS* to Willoh S. Weiland's *Precipice* dinner parties, and Anna Nalpantidis getting us permission to eat crickets in the State Library of Victoria (but please, APHIDS, don't bring in a taxidermied cat), eating has been central to many projects. I met *Long Prawn* through reading their cookbook *Fat Brad*, a compendium of recipes they created of the food eaten by Brad Pitt's characters throughout his blockbuster films. Soon after, we were romancing robot waiters, deep frying spring rolls, and trying to make cocktails that looked like soap. Sometimes the idea of inter-disciplinarity can feel trite, but this long-term collaboration has connected politics, food and art with a specificity only passionate nerds can bring.

- Credit: Co-Creators *Gutful*, 2022 –
- Invisible labour: Sliding fruit jellies into tiny matchboxes, scrubbing kitchen floors

The list of APHIDS collaborators and their unique efforts to get a project going is endless – lighting designers who dramaturg, psychologists who perform, performers who support psychologists, budget writers who design, dancers who waiter, waiters who perform. I feel in awe of those teaching and learning, going above and beyond, open and up for it, knowing it takes a village.

# FURTHER APHIDS RECORDS

## *YOU BEAUTY*, 2024

A novella about a performance called *Class Act*, written by Mish Grigor with essays by Zoey Dawson and Sheila Ngoc Pham.

## *EASY RIDERS*, 2021

A fold-out publication recording research around work in the digital age, including essays from Cher Tan and curator Amelia Wallin.

## *HOWL*, 2020

This 48-page publication details the controversial artworks referenced throughout *Howl*, a performance at the intersection of parade and protest. Edited by Lara Thoms, Lz Dunn and Willoh S Weiland.

## *POST IMPOSSIBLE*, 2018

This web publication looks at a series of ambitious APHIDS artworks that never eventuated in their intended form. The site showcases the research and experimentation that went into each project, alongside a critical response. Edited by Willoh S. Weiland.

## *FLYWAY*, 2013

This publication documents the contributing artists' extensive field research and engagement with birders across Australia. It also records Lz Dunn's reflections on their making process along with documentation of the project.

## *SONORITIES OF SITE, APHIDS, ARCHITECTURE AND MUSIC*, 1998–2010

This limited edition book reflects the visionary collaborative ethos that made possible the founding of APHIDS in 1994 as an independent, artist-led organisation. Part catalogue, part chronicle, part re-consideration, the volume reflects on those site-specific performances created by APHIDS circa 1998–2010.

# APHIDS

RECORDS 2024

BACK AND FORTH: WAYS OF MAKING APHIDS

CO-ADS: LARA THOMS AND MISH GRIGOR

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[APHIDS.net](http://APHIDS.net)