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Interview with Harshini Karunaratne, Berlin

Interview conducted by Cornelia Lund (CL) and Sara Luna Ruíz (SLR) in the framework of "AV Assemblies. Conversations on Sight and Sound," a project by Ana Carvalho, Cornelia Lund, and Sara Luna Ruíz.
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Hi, my name is Harshini. I'm a new media artist and curator currently based in Berlin. I'm the co-founder of MANIFEST:IO (<https://www.manifestio.art/>). It's a symposium for new media and electronic art that has been running since 2023. And I'm also the co-founder of Berlin New Media Week (BNMW), which launched in September 2025. What did I miss? Literally everything ...

- (CL) No, you didn't miss anything. The MANIFEST:IO festival is, not exclusively, but also involved in showing AV performances. Maybe you would like to tell us a little bit about that so people get to know the festival better.

MANIFEST:IO started in 2023 as a way to bring social and political discourses at the forefront of new media and electronic art. What we do is: We host an exhibition, we host audiovisual performances, interactive installations, and we really try to center new media as part of a discourse for social and political ideas. The way that the festival is structured is that we start with talks in the morning, then we have an exhibition and performances. And the idea is that all these different modes of engagement are also forms of discourse.

And so, it's really important for us that even a medium like audiovisual performance is treated as research, is treated as a form of knowledge acquisition. We frame all of it as part of the discourse.

- (CL) Which is very interesting, because, if I remember well, the first wave of AV festivals in the early 2000s sometimes included discourse, but it was not linked in that way to the performances. The festivals were mostly club-based and party-oriented, if you will. And then they slowly became more and more experimental.
So, that is where I see a certain difference.

Yes, I can say something about that as well. At least, my experience with attending festivals showing audiovisual performances has always been through the lens of AV performance as entertainment, or as eye candy even. And oftentimes we only encounter it in the context of club spaces. But the artists that we work with in MANIFEST:IO are really interesting, because they are not only artists, they are also creative technologists, they are programmers, they are constantly also pushing the boundaries of what's possible with the tools that they are using.

So, for us, it's really important to acknowledge that all of these forms of experimentation are also dialogue; they're also discourse. And, especially with our last iteration, where we were able to have access to a much larger space, we were able to have a less didactic approach in our schedule for the symposium. So rather than only having talks in the morning, and then keeping performances for the evening, we were able to interweave these two forms together, so that people could also engage in a talk, in a verbal discussion with a particular researcher, artist, whoever it may be, and then bring those ideas into their physical engagement with audiovisual performances.

- (CL) You have already partly answered that question. But do you have any guidelines or specific criteria when it comes to selecting artists for the AV performances?

It's really interesting to have co-founded MANIFEST:IO, and also, most recently, BNMW (<https://berlinnewmediaweek.com/en>). BNMW started last year, really, because I felt there was a gap in the art scene here in Berlin. There is, of course, Berlin Art Week, Fashion Week, Science Week, and sometimes the audiovisual mediums make their way, they're smuggled into all these different weeks, but there didn't seem to be a dedicated week for really celebrating new media or digital art.

And so, we embarked on this idea of hosting a BNMW, which on the one hand also celebrated the local organizers, the different venues, studios that were already active in the scene. We hosted 35 events, collaborating with 14 different venues, countless local organizers, to also host this week, these five days of activation. And I bring BNMW because we, my co-curator, Stav (Stavrianos Skalidis), and I decided to host it during the same timeline as Ars Electronica, which is notably one of the largest festivals for new media electronic art in the world, but it's also heavily research- and academia-based.

And by hosting it concurrently, it meant that the kind of universities that I would typically collaborate with, the researchers I would typically collaborate with, were unavailable, they

just weren't here. And so, BNMW became this really interesting and vibrant playground for the underground art scene in Berlin, and people that were also heavily engaged in research, but they are non-traditional or come from a non-academic background. Looking at especially queer artists, female artists that were experimenting with forms of audiovisual performance as research methods was really, really interesting. We sometimes only think about underground art spaces as existing solely in the context of entertainment, or they fulfill some sort of need, but these are also spaces where knowledge is created, knowledge is shared and disseminated. This was super interesting.

So, for BNMW, in terms of a curator, it was maybe much harder to decide the works, because it meant that I have to also unlearn a lot of things about how I select works, because maybe it's not the strongest writers who are applying, and their ideas are not so clearly communicated in a written form.

Being able to meet with them, talk to them, also give them opportunities, see the loose threads of what could be something special, compared to something like MANIFEST:IO, which we really frame as a symposium—this was super interesting.

When Basel Naouri and I started MANIFEST:IO, it was in close collaboration with five different universities in Berlin, so that we could also have a very strong research focus, tackling New Media as a form of research, making clear that all these different experimentations are forms of research, and giving spaces to artists to talk about their work, whereas usually, one might only encounter these artists in the context of being a performer. Here was the platform for them to actually say: Here are all the things that I've been working on.

And so, with MANIFEST:IO, it is a totally different curatorial approach. As applications come through, I immediately reject anything that can be perceived as being solely about entertainment. Also, if it's too abstract, if it's too unfocused – these are works that maybe don't have such a strong place at MANIFEST:IO. We really focus on specific themes. In particular, last year, we were able to focus on the theme of "Fragmenting Places, Imagined Spaces." This touched on issues relating to war, climate change, space, utopian spaces that need to be created, even language as a form of space.

This meant that we were looking for a greater specificity in our approach to these themes. Not only in the sense of what am I exploring aesthetically, but what is really the social political context in which I am operating. This is why it was much easier, in the sense of filtering, which works were thematically the strongest. Over time, so many people have started to apply to MANIFEST:IO, and it has been really interesting to see how this scene has grown.

- (SLR) Now that you mentioned the political perspective, can you talk about how you experience art and politics, and what you think about this topic?

Yes, I can. There are so many things to say about this. I think I really fundamentally believe that art is inseparable from politics.

And even if you choose to ignore that, that is also a political stance. It means that you are in a very nice position to be unaffected by this, by all the things that are going on in the world. But I think, also, as artists, we need to understand that every single aspect, not only in our art making process, but our tools that we use, the venues in which we are performing, how these spaces are funded, all of this involves some sort of political dynamic, whether you choose to see it or not.

In my own kind of artistic practice, it's an area where I think I initially was really unaware. You want to kind of live in the utopian ideal that you can just make anything, but I started to realize that everything that I was creating was informed by my cultural background, was informed by my upbringing, and sometimes it can take time to be able to see. But also, with my own history of migration, having migrated to Germany in 2021, I started to see that there were spaces which I didn't have immediate access to. Coming here was like reinventing myself from scratch, from the very beginning.

Concerning the spaces that I was navigating in the new media art scene, I think as an immigrant coming in, especially from the Global South, one sometimes sees Europe as such a pinnacle for these types of mediums to exist. And the reality was: I was going to big festivals that were world-renowned and I was incredibly disappointed by the lack of diversity, the fact that the same people were being represented over and over again. And for me, this also meant that Europe is actually way behind on all of these conversations, relating to even AI. It felt like inclusion was needed. I believe inclusion and diversity are key to conversations in innovation, they are key to a thriving creative economy.

It was totally surprising to be at these big festivals that market themselves as the places where you can see the next big thing or where the hot topic for AI was the thing everyone's talking about now. But incredibly behind, and incredibly short-sighted in their perspectives. And so, sometimes, I say that MANIFEST:IO started from a place of rage, because I was so angry that I didn't have access to these spaces, that my peers didn't have access to these spaces, and even coming here, you have to reinvent yourself, get to know people, and if you don't have that first foot in the door it can be incredibly limiting.

So, MANIFEST:IO really started from asking: how do we create a space where there's no barrier for entry to immigrant artists, but also how do we show that there's more towards new media than our conventional understanding of what technology is.

Here, I'm also continuously trying to learn and unlearn. I had a very American, a very international education, and this is for me also something where I am always in the process of continuously unlearning.

- (CL) I think you're absolutely right, because thinking about technology in an exclusively Western way is a very limited approach. And the question of access is also absolutely key. I was there for the first wave of real-time AV performances in the 2000s, and just looking at gender structures was disillusioning enough. Sometimes, there was another female identifying person in the room, sometimes I was alone. And then that came with all the stupid questions about the technical set-up. Does she know how to deal with the cables? All those topics that you think should have no place in the 2000s, they were still very much there.
And diversity was a whole other question ...

Yes, I would agree. It's also really interesting to be here and wear my entrepreneur hat. I'm really happy to be in this space, the Startup Incubator Berlin (SIB) (<https://www.startup-incubator.berlin/?lang=en>), because there is a lot of diversity in many respects, but I'm also the only non-binary founder.

- (SLR) Can I ask what the biggest challenges are for you in creating events such as MANIFEST:IO or Berlin New Media Week?

Let me try to say this with less desperation in my voice. I think the greatest challenge right now for creating events like these is definitely funding. And it's interesting, these two models of festivals that I've worked on developing.

So MANIFEST:IO is a highly political, a sociopolitical space. This means that we actually have less access to potential funding sources. With the current situation of censorship in Germany, we rather reject German state funding. We don't go through the process of applying for funding to the state, because there have just been too many instances, from our peers, from fellow curators, organizers, people hosting their own AV festivals where they have experienced censorship and immediate cuts in their budgets. One example is Tehran Contemporary Sounds, which, after a hiatus of one to two years, was able to come back at the end of last year, beginning of this year. So, funding is definitely an issue.

We are also limited in our knowledge of the best way to structure MANIFEST:IO legally in a way that allows us to benefit from funding sources that could benefit non-profits, for example. So, this is an area that we have just a lack of knowledge in. But also, something like BNMW—it sounds fancier, it sounds greater. We really frame it as celebrating Berlin as the capital of art, technology, and culture.

This approach has potentially more sponsorship opportunities, but funding is still very difficult. And, I think, in general, we can also complain about the fact that there are limited funding resources, but I think there are two larger problems. Firstly, when there is access to funding, the application process is so inaccessible. Especially for a neurodivergent person, this is an

incredibly inaccessible format. When we are applying for funding in Germany, there's also a language barrier for us, which limits our ability to permeate into this field and introduce something new.

And the second thing that I would also say is a challenge, is that I think there also needs to be a behavioral shift in the public of how they value art, because it's really interesting to be going to different design festivals, and these are 100, 200, 300 euros. There's also London Experience Festival happening in a few days, for example, and the tickets start at a thousand pounds. There are all these big festivals that are able to price quite highly, but our festivals are seen as art-based, and so there's a huge gap in how much the public is willing to pay when it is framed as art.

My hypothesis is that it's because of the fact that there has been public funding in the past that has been able to cover festivals of this nature. But there are these festivals now, where people have been used to the behavior where art must be free, because it was state-funded, and now you take that away and there's no behavioral shift in how people value the arts. We even had one exhibition where people were surprised by the entrance fee of 11 euros, asking why it was so expensive? And, at the end of the day, it almost didn't matter how much I priced the ticket, because it could even have been five euros, and the argument would be: why isn't it free?

Different demographics also have different psychologies towards the ticket pricing, but this has been an interesting barrier for us in terms of: how do we communicate our ticket pricing, and how do we also attract an audience that is outside of our immediate niche? Because we want to be accessible for the artistic community, but if we limited it to that, we're probably not accessing a wider audience that can also benefit from the knowledge that is being generated from these festivals, and contribute more towards the kind of monetary landscape or structure of the festival.

- (CL) Well, I think the topic of behavioral shift is a very thorny one in Germany, because you're in a country that is known for its culture, the 'country of philosophers,' and so on and so forth. But if you look at how much Germany really spends on culture and education, which goes hand in hand, I think, then it is not very well placed in the global ranking. You are in a country where art and culture are actually not highly valued in political discourse, for example.

So, there is no real support for a behavioral shift. On the one hand, you have cuts, which are a clear political statement: The whole sector is something we don't really want any longer, except if it does what we want it to do.

On the other hand, you have people who are used to low prices, because culture has always been very well funded. And now the funding has gone, although people don't pay less tax, and Germany is a country where the taxes are extremely high – and on top, there is an inflation.

So, this behavioral shift would have to come from the people. It's not supported by anything else. And I think that's really problematic.

Yes, incredibly problematic. And I also think about the fact that I am now wearing two hats, so to speak. I have many hats. I am starting my journey as a startup founder and entrepreneur. It's really interesting to be in spaces where they talk about how there's so much money in Germany. Berlin is kind of building itself up to be the startup capital of Europe. There are all these accelerators that provide funding, support and structure. And then at night, I go meet the artists, and it's the total reverse side of the ecosystem. So, it's very clear that especially Germany has diverted its resources towards military, but also technology.

And I think this is where a field like audiovisual performance is perfectly suited to demonstrate how artistic innovation is also at the forefront of technological innovation. We have artists that are pushing the boundaries of what's possible with technology, and with the tools that are being built by artists. These two things are so interlinked. And so, I'm on this journey now to smuggle in the resources from one ecosystem into the other.

- (CL) And how do you deal with the problem that, in one of these ecosystems, there's more money, more technological research, but also more research for weapons and war machines, if you want? How do you deal with the problem that this money could sneak in? I suppose that this is not what you really want.

No, it's not what we want at all. I don't have an answer for this. I think it's interesting that a lot of the startup ecosystem is also funded by the EU. So, there's also this big shift.

But we also talk about this in terms of MANIFEST:IO: Is it time to actually start to apply for state funding, and use it to our benefit, and try to find our way in? We have colleagues that are able to make use of this ecosystem as a funding resource, in order to push culturally relevant projects. But it's still a big unknown for us, because our values are so strong. But it's a big question how you sustain your social values in such a market.

But I don't have an answer yet. And I think there will also be big shifts. There is this shift towards learning about Indigenous knowledge, and its intersections with AI, for example. It makes you think: why didn't we start there? This is definitely how we should have started, but it will be interesting to see what happens.

- (CL) Speaking about learning: Are there any artists, theories, movements, whatever, personal experiences, books that have significantly influenced your work?

Maybe I can start with how I wandered into this field. I was studying at New York University Abu Dhabi, and the plan was that I would study film, and social research and public policy. I should have known sooner that such social research and public policy, in the didactic academic

form was probably not going to work for my neurodivergent brain. I was incredibly frustrated in that field. Then, a friend of mine dragged me to see a theater show, which was by a New York City-based theater company called Theater Mitu (<https://theatermitu.org/>).

They just happened to be residents on our university campus and putting on a show. And I went to see their performance, which was called Hamlet or Hamlet. It was inspired by texts that inspired Hamlet, or texts drawn from Hamlet. And it was my first immersive theater experience. I had been to performances before, but I had never been in an immersive theater show where an actor walks past me. There was a punk rock concert. Hamlet was a woman. There were installations everywhere around the space. There was no clear distinction between stage performers and audience. And I remember thinking, what is this world?

A friend of mine told me it was theater. And I thought, this is all the madness that exists in my head. So, I started studying theater; always through the lens of technology. Subsequently, I was introduced to node-based systems like Isadora (<https://troikatronix.com/>), to what it means to trigger sound and light cues, to work with the body and project onto the body. This was a totally transformative experience for me. My earlier experiences were, of course, Theater Mitu, on the experimental theater side, blending technology and dramaturgy and working with the body all together, but also *Mortal Engine* by Chunky Move (<https://cmarchive.net/list-of-works/mortal-engine>), which was one of the first performances to do live tracking of bodies and project visuals of the bodies.

And at the time, I was also doing research about 18th century, 19th century magic lantern phantasmagoria shows as a predecessor to contemporary live VJing. So, I had a lot of early VJ influences.

But of course, I came across the book *Audiovisual Breakthrough* which I was re-reading yesterday. As a publication, it not only broke down the terminologies and provided references. I could also see what a book could look like or how I could write my thesis in a way that was also interactive. It was a huge inspiration for me in terms of how I could treat print media and how I could translate my research of AV performance into print.¹

There's also a book, which I think is a bit underestimated, that is the huge anthology called *The Age of Data* by Christoph Grünberger (<https://www.theageofdata.net/>) which I think is just a visually striking book. The cover shows a piece by Refik Anadol. But in it, there are also screenshots from artists' work, showing how their TouchDesigner or their VVVV patches looked. You don't get to see the back end of these installations or performances oftentimes.

¹ The *Audiovisual Breakthrough* (Berlin, fluctuating images, 2015) is a collaborative book project kicked off at the sound:frame Festival in Vienna in 2014. The articles by Ana Carvalho, Eva Fischer, Cornelia Lund, Gabriel Menotti, and Adeena Mey explore the concepts of visual music, expanded cinema, live cinema, VJing and live audiovisual performance. Download the PDF here: <https://www.ephemeral-expanded.com/audiovisualbreakthrough/>.

New Media Dramaturgy (Peter Eckersall, Helena Grehan, Edward Scheer (eds.); London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) is an incredible book, too. It came out a few years ago and provides a comprehensive overview of audiovisual performance together with interactive installations, atmosphere. I think artists that inspire me today are of course many of the artists using TouchDesigner because it's really this blend between artist, programmer, technologist, performer, all at once. Artists that inspire me today are definitely Pauric Freeman, Ryoichi Kurokawa (<https://www.ryoichikurokawa.com/>). There is also the incredible Berlin-based artist Antonia Angel (@antonangel.zip) exploring what it means to work in a club space and to translate this into her own artistic practice. There is a long list that I could mention ...

- (SLR) So far, we have talked about your role as a curator and entrepreneur, but you also have your own artistic practice. Would you like to tell us something about this 'third hat' of yours?

My artistic practice is always based on combining research with an embodied practice. I'm such a nerd, so I'm always also looking at older texts and proto-cinematic technologies. The piece that I've been touring the past few years has been a piece called *Ophelia*, which is a lecture performance based on how Ophelia from Shakespeare's Hamlet is romanticized as a mermaid and portrayed as a mermaid in several classical paintings (<https://www.harshinijk.xyz/projects/ophelia>).

As you know, Ophelia ultimately drowns in a lake. She becomes the victim of the abuse and actions of men. And I take this idea of the mermaid and ask, in the form of a lecture performance: What if, in an afterlife, Ophelia wasn't a mermaid, but a grief stricken, angry siren? In this afterlife, how could she finally find peace? And I do this as kind of a lecture, which starts as a PowerPoint presentation, then the text changes into poetry at the same time that I start changing my slides into real-time content. I am using photos and videos that I've taken of bodies of water and also different natural landscapes and mixing them in TouchDesigner in real-time.

Towards the end, spoiler alert, there is a moment where I'm using a Kinect live camera capture as a way to capture my body and mesh it or integrate it into the visuals. So, it starts with flowing water that I'm controlling. I'm actually trying to treat my MIDI controller almost like a Ouija board, almost like in a techno-shamanic performance. And then I stand up from my performance and the particles on the screen from the visuals have become a kind of self-portrait of myself as a mermaid embodying or invoking the spirit of Ophelia.

Through the Kinect capturing my body, I'm also transforming the visuals of my body in real-time. I have this part of the text that I wrote where I was trying to really understand why it was important that I play this role or become the vessel for Ophelia. And I had written that I wanted to be flesh, bones, and pixels as a way to navigate my non-binary gender identity, as a way to exist in this gender fluid form using technology to do that.

And since then, it has expanded into the idea of queering the mermaid, the mermaid as a queer symbol. This is further research that I'm doing. It is as if Ophelia became the perfect blend between lecture performance, real-time capture, using tools like TouchDesigner together with my body as the input to create the performance.

- (SLR and CL) Thank you so much for the interview, and for all the insights into your different practices! We are looking forward to seeing your different 'hats' evolve!