THE LISTENING THEATRE:
A METAMODERN POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE

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> I'm ageless / But I'm out of time,
> I'm thoughtless / But I got a lot on my mind…
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> L.A. Salami, 'Generation L(ost)' (2018)

There has been a notable trend in contemporary performance that engages politically and socially with participants and communities. Andy Lavender (2016) termed this trend the 'age of engagement', a theatre of 'nuanced and differential negotiations, participations and interventions' (21). During the last few years, I have observed an emerging development within the theatre of young performance-makers that engage the audience both performatively and politically, as per Lavender's term, but are also inherently critical of their own processes. Striving 'for utopias, despite their futile nature' (Turner 2015), they are optimistic in their engagement whilst also actively embracing an inherent ineffectuality.

I posit that this trend amongst millennial artists can be described through the idea of metamodernism, characterised by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010) as a 'tension […] of a modern desire for sense and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all' (6), or by James MacDowell (2011) as an oscillation between 'sincerity and irony, enthusiasm and detachment, naïveté and knowingness'. Vermeulen and van den Akker refer to Raymond Williams' structure of feeling in order to determine elements of 'embodied, related feelings' (Williams 1969, 18) that could 'no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 2). Williams suggested the concept of structure of feeling as an attempt to discern 'a form

and a meaning, a feeling and a rhythm' (1969, 18) as it is occurring in real time; in this article, I evaluate this idea of metamodernism as a particularly millennial structure of feeling, as well as how it might be seen to inform millennial approaches to socially-engaged theatre and performance. I will examine the inherent cultural modalities of oscillation between sincerity and irony, hope and hopelessness, and how two UK companies, Lung and Feat.Theatre, both integrate and respond to these contradictions. I will examine the work of both companies as responses to specific political and socio-economic crises that have affected the artists, including the economic recession and following austerity imposed on Britain, and the crises affecting the communities involved with their projects, that of the response to the refugee crisis in Britain and the housing crisis within London. Through this analysis, I aim to lay the foundations for further discussion and examination of the current trends within performance created by the millennial generation.

The first section of this article will offer a brief examination of the concept of the millennial in order to lay the foundations for an analysis of its inherent connection to metamodernism. Through an examination of the oscillatory systems inherent within metamodern thought, I will posit that the metamodern oscillation between sincerity and irony has led to a new performance trend that is at once both hopeful and hopeless. I have tentatively labelled this trend 'The Listening Theatre' in response to Hanzi Freinacht's political metamodernism, as detailed in *The Listening Society* (2017), that revolves around empathetic understanding as the catalyst of political change. This will lead into an analysis of the two case studies that exhibit this trend, exploring their hopeful yet self-critical theatre of engagement. If metamodernism is a reappraisal of affect and depth (van den Akker et al 2017), whilst simultaneously accepting the falsity, frailty and irony of such a reappraisal, then these productions by millennial companies are examples of metamodern theatre in response to contemporary crises affecting Britain. They are young artists' paradoxical reactions to a climate of chaos.

I will conclude this article by emphasising the evolving nature of both metamodernism and theatre created by the millennial generation, and how the work of these companies challenges the dominant cultural understanding of millennials as naïve and self-involved. This article aims to open further discussion around the performative trends that make up 'The Listening Theatre' as performance that both strives for actual political and social change through a theatre of engagement, whilst also being explicit in its limits and failings. It is a theatre of hope/lessness.

The Millennial and the Metamodern

I'm penniless / But I've sold my soul,
I'm restless / But I've nowhere to go

L.A. Salami, 'Generation L(ost)' (2018)

As a millennial, I have been accused of killing marmalade (Ormerod 2017), of destroying the housing market (Brown et al 2017, 42) and hating trees (Nicholas and Lewis 2008). I have been described, famously, as a lazy, self-obsessed narcissist (Stein 2013). But what, exactly, does the

term, coined by American historians Howe and Strauss (1991) to label the group of children who would start to come of age at the turn of the millennium, actually encapsulate? Is it a media-based diatribe? A pop-culture appellation? Or does the concept of the millennial describe an experiential understanding of a cultural epoch?

Generational research, by nature, is inherently generalising and based upon some degree of approximation. In his recent book on the subject, *The Myth of the Age of Entitlement* (2017), James Cairns is particularly sceptical of 'treating era-of-birth as the core determinant of ideas and behavior [as it] ignores inequalities running along lines of race, class and gender' (10). So, why would I insist on continued use of the term, and how can I relate new methods and modalities in performance work by millennials to a *shared generational experience* if generational research itself is inherently flawed? This stems from metamodernism's inherent connection to the concept of the millennial, as laid down by van den Akker and Vermuelen (2017), Freinacht (2017) and Turner (2011). Van den Akker and Vermeulen describe their concept of the metamodern, an attempt to define the current situation of post-postmodernity, as a description of the current structure of feeling. Here, Vermeulen and van den Akker refer to Raymond Williams' original term as a 'discourse that gives meaning to our experience' (van den Akker et al 2017, 11). As a theoretical framework, the structure of feeling is particularly useful in understanding how the sociological concepts of the metamodern and the millennial interact with the theatrical, stemming, as it does, from Williams' *Drama from Ibsen To Brecht* (1969). In a way reflexive of metamodernism's 'both, and' nature, Williams describes the concept of the structure of feeling as 'as firm and definite as "structure" suggests, yet [it] is based in the deepest and often least tangible elements of our experience' (18). In essence, structure of feeling refers to almost intangible, and yet experiential, modalities apparent within cultural and artistic practice existing within a particular timeframe that are 'essentially related, although in practice, and in detail, this is not always easy to see' (17).

I propose that the concept of the millennial can be examined within a similar framework. The 'structure' of the millennial refers to particular 'embodied, related feelings' (Williams 1969, 18) that a number of the generation experience, which, possibly in part due to the aforementioned media fixation and amplification through social media and online meme culture, becomes a pervasive appellation. The modality of a structure of feeling is useful in understanding this construct in that it is more conceivable than delineating specific generational epochs simply through era of birth. As James McDowell (2017) notes, such a term also takes into account that 'it is only one of many such localised "structures" at work in a particular time and place' (28), and a multiplicity of structures are in place at any historical moment, including the present one. Importantly, McDowell also raises Williams' admission that 'a structure of feeling will not be "possessed in the same way by many members of the community"' (28; citing Williams 1965, 65). So I would emphasise that the 'millennial' as a concept is not all-encompassing, nor relevant to every person born from the mid-1980s 'up to and (sometimes) after the millennium' (Brown et al 2017, 3)—and yet there is a certain 'experience of the present' (Williams 1977, 128) that can be expressed through Williams' term.

With these caveats, the metamodernist characterisation of the millennial 'psyche', for want of better terminology, oscillates between the 'optimism and idealism of their Boomer parents'

(Huntley 2006, 14) and the cynicism and ironic detachment that has arisen from both childhood exposure to Generation X culture and the economic and political crises of their formative adult years. It is this oscillation between (childhood) optimism and (early-adult) cynicism that defines the metamodern millennial. As Vermeulen puts it in an online video:

> We [millennials] are all, from the start, ironic. That's how we were raised. We were raised on *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, which is magnificent, but we *want* to be sincere. (Frieze 2014)

What has brought about this oscillation between sincerity and cynicism? At the turn of the millennium, Howe and Strauss (2000) noted that 'millennials have never, on the whole, witnessed economic trouble' (100). A few years later, Rebecca Huntley (2006) expanded on this trend by stating that they 'have only known a prosperous world, where […] people only get wealthier, […] where consumerism and capitalism are natural conditions and go largely unchallenged' (2).

At the dawn of the 2010s, however, millennials 'emerged into an adult world where only one rule exists—the certainty of uncertainty' (Huntley 2006, 15). A recent UK House of Commons report cites unique crises as 'having a major impact on millennial's socio-political outlook' (Brown et al. 2017, 5). The same report details 'long term "scarring"' (Brown et al 2017, 5) developing from such events, which include, but are not limited to: the financial crash and following recession; imposed neoliberal austerity; increased rent and the removal of housing benefit for the under-25s in 2014; the rise in zero-hour contracts and the so-called 'gig economy'; the impact of social media upon mental health; increased university intake and lack of graduate opportunities; the fourth wave of terrorism; and the global climate crisis. For a generation 'raised during the boom times and relative peace of the 1990s', our coming of age in a time of economic, political and social crises meant that ours 'is a story of innocence lost' (Williams 2015). I think 'political-metamodernist' Hanzi Freinacht, a figure we will return to later, describes this socio-political outlook best when he depicts a 'subtle but pervasive sadness that seems to lie in the background' of his adult life (Freinacht 2017, 6). For Freinacht, this is a sense that is 'shared by many people, […] a sense of the tragedy of the world, of the suffering of others, and perhaps even more, an awareness of beauty lost, of potentials that never materialize' (6).

So, hard done by neoliberalism and imposed austerity, anxious and depressed about their own mediocrity, the suffering of others and the global climate crisis, have millennials risen up and resorted to large scale political revolt? Until the recent increase in youth turnout in the 2017 UK General Election, in which 'turnout rose by an average of 3 percentage points' (Surridge 2017), and the impact of the youth-led Momentum campaign within the UK Labour Party, I would have suggested that Britain's answer was 'no'. Whilst the 2000s saw youth support furnish Obama's campaign, with 'nearly one third of the Millennial generation' entering the electorate, millennials in Greece 'protest[ing] against the government after the most dramatic economic downfall the world has seen', uprisings in Egypt 'chronicled via social media' and rallies in both Chile and Tel Aviv being 'led by Millennials' (Luttrell and McGrath 2015, 34), *statistically*, UK millennials expressed indifference and cynical disinterest, creating a 'degree of apathy about politically engaging' (White

et al. 2000, 34) as the system, it seemed, was set up against them. In a move exemplary of the hypocritical nature of our generation, millennials decree that we are victims of the gig economy but are also the most 'enthusiastic users of gig-economy apps and services' (Parkinson 2017); we use technology in nearly every aspect of our lives but 'feel that it is depriving [us] of deeper personal relationships' (Huntley 2006, 10). We occupy a contradictory position, one that oscillates between cynicism and hope, one that embraces hypocrisy, a conflicted movement between poles; we are a 'Paradoxical Generation' (Huntley 2006, 10).

Metamodernism's *metaxy* speaks of a movement between these poles, 'not a binary so much as a continuum that stretches from one to the other, not a balance but a pendulum swinging between the various extremes' (van den Akker et al 2017, 10–11). It reconciles an acceptance and utilisation of certain metanarratives, or a 'reintroduction of hope and progress' as Freinacht (2017) terms it, whilst also being inherently critical and aware of their frailties and falsehoods. The metamodern, as a theoretical framework of understanding, speaks to contemporary movements within arts and culture that 'oscillat[e] between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). The prefix, *meta*, stems from the Greek 'with', 'between' or 'beyond' in relation to both modernity and postmodernity. If modernism strove towards a singular 'truth', and postmodernism at once deconstructed, multiplied, and negated this 'truth', metamodernism operates within a 'both-neither dynamic' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010), a dialectical oscillation that 'identifies with and negates—and hence, overcomes and undermines—conflicting positions, while never being congruent to these positions' (van den Akker et al. 2017, 10). An effort to describe the cultural shift away from postmodernism's absence of meaning, metamodernism oscillates between postmodern irony and modern sincerity. Luke Turner expands on Vermeulen's previous quotation regarding millennial cynicism when he states that,

> Ours is a generation raised in the '80s and '90s, on a diet of *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, for whom postmodern irony and cynicism is a default setting, something ingrained in us. However, despite, or rather because of this, a yearning for meaning—for sincere and constructive progression and expression—has come to shape today's dominant cultural mode. (Turner 2015)

Metamodernism does not indicate a return to the trappings of modernist metanarratives. It is not ingenuous. Instead, it offers what has come to be termed 'informed naivety' or 'pragmatic idealism' (Turner 2015) that engages with a resurgence of the strive for authenticity, romanticism and affect, whilst not 'forfeiting all that we've learnt from postmodernism' (Turner 2015).

Although metamodernism itself is '*neither* a manifesto, *nor* a social movement' (van den Akker et al. 2017, 5), but rather encompasses wildly different movements across the political spectrum, certain political ideologies have arisen through metamodernist discourse. In *The Listening Society: A Metamodern Guide to Politics* (2017), Hanzi Freinacht—described elsewhere as a 'political philosopher, historian and sociologist' (Metamoderna 2016)—posits that metamodernism can be read as a 'developmental stage' that 'builds upon [the] understanding' of Vermeulen and van den Akker's concept of a 'cultural "phase"' (Freinacht 2017, 15), or structure of feeling. In terms similar to Vermeulen's (2017), he states that 'political metamodernism tries to bring about the society that

comes *after*, that goes *beyond*' (Freinacht 2017, 2), championing a political ideology where emotional needs and psychological growth of all citizens is a priority; where cross-party exchanges improve political discourse. (As it will become clear, this empathy, understanding, and co-development is central to the concept of what I am terming 'The Listening Theatre', as an allusion to Freinacht's proposition.)

Recent attention was drawn to Freinacht by an article in *The New Yorker* that describes a 'new political party' in Stockholm, 'The Initiative', which quotes Freinacht's 'Listening Society' as 'philosophical inspiration' (Gessen 2017). However, Freinacht himself doesn't exist. Despite the opening to *The Listening Society* declaring that it was written whilst living 'alone in a house in the French speaking parts of the Swiss Alps' (Freinacht 2017, 7), Gessen's *New Yorker* article revealed to the public that Hanzi Freinacht is in fact the pen name for Emil Ejner Friis and Daniel Görtz. Freinacht 'himself', however, still keeps an active presence on social media and is directly contactable via Facebook to answer questions regarding 'his' work. Freinacht's construction only serves to heighten the metamodern readings of Friis and Görtz's philosophy. Freinacht's politics are formulated around a call-to-arms style dialogue; 'we just have to find one another and work together', he states (Freinacht 2017, 360). But we can't find Freinacht—he is an illusion! Photos of Freinacht published by metamoderna.org are actually of model Paul Mason, more commonly known as 'Fashion Santa' (Chung 2015) due to his long white beard. Friis and Görtz make use of such signifiers associated with famous philosophers—a bearded man in mountainous solitude— as a cultural avatar of sorts for promoting their understanding of metamodernism. This shift is intended to transform metamodernism from a 'cute little obsession for academic conferences and art expositions' to a 'powerful, effective ideology that can save societies from collapse and dramatically improve the lives of millions' (Freinacht 2017, 376). The construction 'Freinacht' is a reclaiming of the metanarrative of the 'philosopher', put to use because of his inherent need to drive forward his own message. An older, learned philosopher thinking 'grand' thoughts in quiet solitude and imparting them down, god-like, to society might be listened to. Two unknown activists, however, probably will not. Freinacht is at once personable and inaccessible, truthful and false, calling for further connection between all members of society, and driving them away via a false persona. Even if you dismiss his politics, he is a wholly metamodern construct.

The Listening Theatre

They say that it's hopeless / But I'm still here

L.A. Salami, 'Generation L(ost)' (2018)

The idea of the Listening Theatre that I propose here is not a practical methodology, nor a call to arms, but an attempt to speak to a range of aesthetic, political, and philosophical methodologies employed by particular millennial theatre companies and performance makers. Though the specific modes of engagement and stylistic registers vary from company to company, and even performance to performance, my contention is that they are always built around the ethos that curating an empathetic understanding can lead to positive change whilst being simultaneously

critical and sceptical of their own methods of engagement. Just as Vermeulen et al. (2017) emphasise that their understanding of metamodernism is '*neither* a manifesto, *nor* a social movement, stylistic register, or philosophy' (5), I propose that the Listening Theatre, too, can be read as a nascent structure of feeling within portions of the theatrical landscape that is concurrent to, and part of, the emergence of the metamodern.

As a framework of understanding, the Listening Theatre attempts to encapsulate Freinacht's posited act of 'listening' to society to instrumentalise progress (Freinacht 2017, 81) through a state of *metaxis*. It concurrently implements a motion towards a utopian vision whilst importantly being aware of the frailties and falsehoods implicit in such an attempt— 'consciously commit[ing] itself to an impossible possibility' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). It is sincere in its attempts at human connection and progress through performance whilst embracing the ironies implicit within such endeavours. I appropriate Williams' structure of feeling in order to analyse the Listening Theatre in this respect, as it attempts to discern contemporary 'changes in experience—the responses and their communications; the "subjects" and the "forms"—which make the drama in itself and as a history important' (Williams 1969, 20). As Williams analysed the shift from naturalistic to expressionist structures of feeling, noting that the term encompasses more than that of a convention or stylistic register (17), I understand the Listening Theatre to build upon certain theatrical frameworks, its 'immediate and better recognized predecessors' (19), that could mask the analysis of it as a separate structure of feeling. I propose that this Listening Theatre both builds upon and sits congruently with other localised frameworks of understanding within contemporary theatre, but that its inherent structural connection to the metamodern justifies separate terminology and analysis.

Whilst I focus on the connections between this structure of feeling within performance and the millennial through the metamodern, the concept of the Listening Theatre is of course aware of particular ideas within other theoretical mappings of contemporary performance. Andy Lavender (2016), in particular, refers to the importance placed upon *authenticity* within art in the current cultural state of post-postmodernism: 'After the clarion calls of modernism, and the absences and ironies of postmodernism, came the nuanced and differential negotiations, participations and interventions of an age of engagement' (21). Although Lavender doesn't use the term, this is nearly a description of metamodernism, and Lavender observes traits within contemporary performance that sit firmly within the metamodern sphere. In particular, his appraisal of Janelle Reinelt's poetics of 'caring, engagement, and commitment' within theatre (Reinelt 2006, 83), leads him to observe a 'notably different lexicon from that employed during the height of postmodernism […] "actuality", "authenticity", "encounter", "engagement"—a set [of terms] that would have seemed naïve or faintly ridiculous if wheeled out a generation or so ago' (Lavender 2016, 25). This 'theatre of engagement', as Lavender terms it, is evident in the performative trends observed later within this article, and his repetition of the import placed upon authenticity in performance is particularly exemplary of the re-emergence of sincerity within the metamodern.

Lavender's theatre of engagement also takes cues from Grant Kester's earlier designation of what he terms dialogical art, in reference to Bahktin, as an attempt to categorise what Kester observed

as an 'emergence of a body of contemporary art practice concerned with collaborative, and potentially emancipatory, forms of dialogue and conversation' (Kester 2006, 2). Kester describes the emergence of this dialogical art as occurring within the mid-1990s, highlighting particular works that 'solicit participation and involvement so openly' (ibid.). Kester draws upon Habermas' concept of the public sphere and contends that dialogical art works to curate a discursive space free of the 'coercion and inequality that constrain human communication in normal daily life' (4). Mirroring Freinacht's statement regarding political metamodernism's focus on co-development—'even if we don't agree, we come closer to the truth if we create better dialogues' (Freinacht 2017, 4)—Kester encapsulates Habermas' communicative action in which the 'very act of participating in these exchanges makes us better able to engage in discursive encounters and decision-making processes in the future' (Kester 2006, 4). Similarly, Bruce Barber's operative littoral art formulates 'lifeworld affirming' projects that position themselves 'between the private realm and public sphere' (Barber 1998). Again, the terminology is interesting here in terms of its metamodern connotations: 'littoral' refers to the 'intermediate and shifting zone between the sea and the land' (ibid.), which is reminiscent of the 'betwixt' *meta* of Vermeulen and van den Akker. Lavender, Kester, and Barber all point to an emergence of dialogue-based work; work that centres on participation, collaboration and engagement as a reflexive, communicative and progressive force that is, as Barber clarifies, 'essentially political' (ibid.). As Lavender states, it is now 'possible to *re*claim a sense of theatre and performance doing a particular kind of work in the world […] with the ability to make us see things differently and maybe take action as consequence' (25; emphasis added). This act of *re*-claiming echoes the metamodernist tendency toward *re*-appraisal and *re*-use of metanarratives within a contemporary, critical context.

Finally, a comparison might be made with Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, in which the artwork functions as 'social interstice' (Bourriaud 2002, 45). For Bourriaud, this art 'constructs models of sociability suitable for producing human relations' (70). Bourriaud, however, argues that relational art is not 'concerned with seeking to represent utopias […] [but] permitting social relations' (46). In this case, can relational aesthetics comfortably fit within the sphere of metamodernism, if a 'yearning for utopias' has, as Turner (2015) states, 'come to the fore'? I would argue that the concept of the Listening Theatre, whilst drawing upon these concurrent and overlapping spheres of performance theory, speaks to a new form of dialogical performance. Whilst the millennial companies I describe in the next section generate differing examples of discursive public spheres and engage in forms analogous to both littoral and dialogical art, the Listening Theatre proffers a further metamodern interpretation in two important respects. It at once negotiates a discourse between the audience and the artist in order to strive towards a form of utopic vision through political interface, whilst also struggling with self-critique through an awareness of this form's failings, frailties and falsehoods. In this way, it oscillates between genuine human connection and engagement (built upon performance modalities engaging with the concepts of the littoral and dialogical) and an ironic self-awareness of its own limitations. It strives 'for utopias despite their futile nature' (Turner 2015).

Feat.Theatre

Feat.Theatre's *The Welcome Revolution* (2018) imagines 'a world where inviting strangers for cups of tea is no longer a radical act' (Theatre Royal Stratford East 2018). The production was created as a response to the increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric the two-woman company experienced upon returning to Britain from a period in Germany, as well as being directly inspired by the *Welcome is a Radical Act* conference at Goldsmiths University, London (2017), which engaged with the increase in nationalism and rise in hostility towards refugees and migrants.

The act of welcoming is key to the dialogical and littoral art described within the previous section and remains important for the Listening Theatre as I conceive it. In order for participants to engage within the public sphere fashioned by Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, they will have to be welcomed into, and feel welcome within, the artistic process, or risk feeling disempowered by the experience (Jackson 2012). If, however, the act of welcoming itself has become a radical, political act, how can artists best utilise this within performance built within the spheres of dialogical, littoral, and *listening* art? As an exploration of this question, Feat.Theatre utilised a quintessentially British thematic that both plays to and parodies the rise in nostalgic and nationalist discourse within Britain at the time—that of a tea party. If we are to see national identity as an 'imagined and convenient conception of nationhood adjusted to the current political and social circumstances' (Navarro Romero 2011, 244), we are able to view the current period of *re*-construction and *re*-appropriation of 'Britishness' (whatever that might be) in the rise of nationalist politics. Feat.Theatre's specific focus on nostalgia within Britain is particularly acute, with 'a significant part of the cultural economy [being] built around these feelings, ranging from preserved steam railways to historical TV serials about midwives and country policemen' (Jack 2017). Their utilisation of nostalgia appears as an ironic simulation of a nationalistic event; however, it is not purely cynical in its re-appropriation, but imbued with hope, and even utopic in vision. It is both ironic in utilising nostalgic, nationalist modalities, and sincere in its desire to provide a meaningful forum for participants. It is this metaxis between the two poles of irony and sincerity that epitomizes the metamodernist tendencies apparent within *The Welcome Revolution*.

The show itself is divided into two halves: a participatory tea party, in which local members of the community are invited to engage in discussions and practical workshops; and an interactive performance piece formed around the responses collected within the previous section. The first part relies heavily upon concepts covered within the above discussion on dialogical and littoral arts practice. Members of the local community are invited to a tea party at a theatre or arts centre, where they share tea, cake, and biscuits, participate in family-friendly arts and craft activities, and engage with discussions led by the company about how 'welcome' they feel and what community means to them (Theatre Royal Stratford East 2018). This section is purely based around the act of *listening*. The company are both welcoming the community into a public sphere in order to engage in a dialogue regarding their own thoughts on the issues surrounding the idea of 'being welcome', and they are gathering material from the participants in order to craft their show. The discussions in this section are led by questions the company have prepared but take free form between the participants involved.

The levels of engagement within this process are particularly noteworthy. At the stage I interviewed the company, the piece was being presented as part of the *Stronger Than Fear* festival at Theatre Royal Stratford East after a residency at artsdepot, North London. When developing the work at artsdepot, the company had access to a number of community groups already connected to the arts centre itself. The level of engagement, therefore, was relatively high, although the demographic was limited to people already engaging with the arts or artsdepot specifically. When the piece moved to Stratford, the company attempted to engage with the local community through social media, leaflets, and posters. This led to a lower level of engagement, but a different demographic of participants. Stratford's borough, Newham, is an area of extremely high deprivation (Newham Clinical Commissioning Group 2017), with the lowest level of adult arts engagement in the UK according to Arts Council England (ACE 2011). The company stated that a range of participants attended the tea party at Gerry's Café in Stratford and contributed to the performance, including migrants, a homeless participant, and a member of the local council. However, it is interesting to note that none of the tea party participants attended the performance a week later. This brings into question the effectiveness of the company's interpretation of the act of welcoming. If participants did not feel welcome enough to return to the café in order to experience the outcomes, was the company unsuccessful in providing a lasting public sphere? What is the efficacy of such dialogical processes if the dialogue between artist and participant ends prematurely? Feat.Theatre, however, do not shy away from such questions, and, in the spirit of the Listening Theatre, offer a critique of this practice within the second half of the project.

The second section of *The Welcome Revolution* sees the audience sat on sofas, sharing more tea and biscuits, a week or so after the tea party event. The performer, on a stage filled with bunting and origami sculptures created by the tea party participants, takes us through her own personal journey towards political engagement. Throughout this, we are invited to play particular characters, without having to leave the comfort of our sofa (or our cup of tea). One audience member becomes the performer's parent and pushes her on a 'swing'; another acts as her school friend, reading pre-prepared lines into a microphone. We are then taken through the creation of a 'Welcome Revolution' in an imagined land, with many of us donning hats, wigs, or fairy wings as various characters from children's literature. This use of children's stories to interrogate the act of a revolution is particularly interesting. Firstly, it deepens the nostalgic rhetoric employed within the production itself; not only do we return to the performer's own childhood experience of stories, but we also see quintessentially British figures *re-appropriated* for political purpose. Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan, and Harry Potter are particularly important British exports, heightened by their inclusion in the London 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony, arguably a list of Britishness's fundamental 'elements' as seen by the organisers (Lee and Joon 2017); within this imagined 'Welcome Revolution', all three become socialist revolutionaries. Secondly, this imagined staging of the 'Welcome Revolution' is the closest the company gets to the act of revolution within the piece. The remainder of the show edges slowly away from the idea of revolt and into a critique of the *Welcome Revolution* project itself. It is an affirmation of the oscillation between hope and hopelessness made evident within Feat.Theatre's production. The company strive to curate a public sphere as an effectual communicative forum between local communities, to perform the act of welcoming as a radical action of political defiance—and yet the only revolution the company

create occurs within a storybook-land amongst the joint imaginations of the audience and actor. It is at once both a call to arms and an admission of defeat.

As stated earlier, this shared feeling of comfort is deliberately challenged further when the company address responses to their previous tea party. As the production I experienced was performed in Newham, it was not surprising to hear stories of social isolation, inequality, poverty, and homelessness, stories that are antithetical to the collective and communal 'feel-good' experience curated through the first half of the production. Whilst some of these responses, read in a dead-pan manner into a microphone, explicitly address the fact that the participants enjoyed their time at the tea party itself, others offer insights into issues that the company admit they cannot address. One moment in particular concerns the story of one participant at the Stratford tea party who was currently homeless. The company speak to their shortcomings as artists in addressing such issues: 'I offer him a plate of cake and biscuits. I teach him how to make an origami frog [as they did with the other participants] because that's all I can think of at the time' (Feat.Theatre 2018). It is here that *The Welcome Revolution* shows a departure from both dialogical art and relational aesthetics. In projects under both former frameworks, the dialogical act itself may be the focal point of each artwork; the creation of participatory space being the performance itself. Some projects might go further and also offer a summation of the dialogical participation as a performance or artwork, as does *The Welcome Revolution*, too. However, Feat.Theatre are attempting something else with their further exploration and critique of such an encounter in that they are not only listening to participants and offering a summation of this listening but are also listening to the critiques of their listening itself. They address the shortcomings experienced within the participatory act, of being unable to affect change, of appropriating participants' stories, of the failure to create an extended relational platform between the tea party and the performance. Yes, their tea party was a welcoming and hopeful event, but their on-stage analysis conveys an awareness and acceptance of the critiques of such a process. Feat.Theatre aim to directly address issues of nationalism, anti-immigration, and community through long-form participatory engagement. However, as artists, they are also critical and questioning of this format, and of their place within such frameworks. In this way, *The Welcome Revolution* project is representative of a metamodern sensibility being apparent within theatre created by millennial artists. It strives for utopia, whether through participatory practice or through imagined literary amalgam, whilst overtly admitting that it expects to fail.

Lung

The work of Manchester-based Lung is particularly exemplary of another continual and progressive dialogical engagement with an audience and community participants, whilst also showing an integral awareness of the limitations and fallibility of such a process. Their 2015 piece, *E15*, illustrated the journey of the Focus E15 campaign in Newham (a borough in East London) in a way that aimed 'to provide a truthful re-telling of a national issue and how one group of women refused to be marginalised' (Lung 2017). The company worked with members of the Focus E15 campaign group in a series of interviews and workshops, as well as attending regular protest

events. The campaign itself is built around a group of young mothers who had been forcibly evicted from their homes after Newham Council cut its funding for the Focus E15 Hostel for young homeless people in 2013 (Focus E15 2014), and the council advised that the families 'would have to accept private rented accommodation as far away as Manchester, Hastings and Birmingham' (Monks and Woodhead 2016, vii). During the ongoing campaign, the group occupied a disused block of flats in a nearby estate, which were then 'opened to the public and ran as a social centre for two weeks, with an evolving program of daily events, including workshops, meetings, and music and comedy gigs' (Focus E15 2014).

Lung's work with the group formed a verbatim performance that continued to rally support for the group's cause over the next three years, gaining signatures and donations for the group from audience members post-performance, and offering a national platform of awareness for the Focus E15 campaign. When the show transferred to London's Battersea Arts Centre in 2017, the company opened the run by marching into the theatre from the local train station with the campaign group themselves. The performance then opened with banners, protestors, and even babies on the stage (Woodhead 2018), emphasising the reality of the situation—that real families' homes and lives are still at stake. The company's work with the campaign group also continues weekly, with the play's authors travelling to Stratford to protest with the group on the high street.

Lung describe their work as 'platforming political issues' (KCOM 2017), but their work extends further than this. In a recent interview with the company, Helen Monks described their struggle with the responsibility towards communities and audience's post-performance to me: 'You can't just give someone a piece of theatre that's incredibly triggering for lots of issues they might have in their life and then just leave. There becomes a responsibility around that play and what that play is trying to do' (Monks 2018). The dialogical processes employed by Lung exist in both the creation of the piece, the piece itself, and past the piece's immediate life. This is evident in their continued work with the Focus E15 campaign, and even more explicit in their 2017 production *Who Cares*, which aimed to identify young carers within schools and youth centres. This project was built around a two-year relationship with four young carers from around the UK, with playwright Matt Woodhead (2018) describing the process as becoming an 'holistic' experience, with the young carers 'feeding into casting the actors, the set, the props, the costume, the tracks that went in the show'. This dialogical engagement with their participants extends beyond listening, such that the participants themselves becoming integral to the aesthetics and theatrics of the performance itself. In their continued experiment with artists' responsibility, LUNG also provided access to support for young carers at each performance, with a number of young carers either identifying themselves or being identified by friends or teachers throughout the process.

In this way, Lung's work can be viewed as an attempt at engaging audiences within a socio-political dialogue, whilst also endeavouring to continue the performance's engagement *after* the theatrical event itself. *E15* is exemplary in its attempt at impassioned and empathetic understanding between community, artist, and audience through an amalgam of dialogical and littoral engagement that places emphasis on the act of listening. It differs aesthetically from Feat.Theatre's work, in that Lung's actual engagement with the community isn't performed until it has been filtered through

more traditional theatrical means whilst Feat.Theatre's tea parties are part of the performative event. However, both build upon previous forms in that they aim for engaged connectivity whilst offering an inherent and integral critique of their own process.

In *E15*, this critique comes from two jarringly explicit moments of criticism that disrupt both the performance and the audience's engagement. The first comes roughly three-quarters of the way into the piece when, in a moment reminiscent of Tim Crouch's *The Author* (2009), the production is interrupted by a member of the audience. A voice cuts in midway through a scene, disrupting the actors onstage who eventually ask for the house lights to be brought up. The audience member who caused the interruption continues to speak. He claims to be homeless and criticises the company's singular focus on the *Focus E15* campaign, stating that that audience members most likely would have walked passed homeless people on their way to the theatre without a second look (Monks and Woodhead 2016, 80). He holds up a bag that contains all he owns. 'That's my world', he states. (Monks and Woodhead 2016, 80). In the particular performance I attended, the audience didn't know how to react. Some shifted awkwardly, others tutted, some even told him to be quiet. 'You'd be surprised how much he got told to be quiet […] that it's not about him,' states co-author Helen Monks (2018). However, at the end of his speech that I observed, a number of audience members applauded his statement. The house lights came back on, the play awkwardly continued, and it wasn't until the actor joined the others onstage for the bows that many of the audience members realised it was staged. This criticism, in fact, is still part of the verbatim approach of the performance, with the words taken from a chance encounter at a conference about the housing crisis attended by Monks. Its insertion into the piece, and the intentionally disruptive staging, came from an understanding that the group's focus on the campaign ignored the wider issue of homelessness, and a desire to challenge an audience's complacency in watching the issue on stage whilst they 'could be sat next to someone' in a similar situation (Monks 2018).

The second piece of explicit criticism comes at the play's finale. During the climax, the audience are roused into a chant with the campaign group, rallying behind the small group's success. 'The future is ours', they are told, 'so make some noise!' (Monks and Woodhead 2016, 88). Cutting through the chant, one performer takes the microphone and offers a dramatically different update on the group's efforts. 'It's happening to me', she states. 'My tenancy's run out. My year's up. Right now it's like shit' (ibid.). The chanting stops and the audience stills, forced to accept that a rallying cry for change isn't enough. The performer repeats the fact that the families in the piece are real and are going through the situations presented on stage as she speaks. 'This isn't someone standing on a stage thinking what they're going to do, remembering their lines', she states ironically. 'This is the reality […] Look what's happening' (ibid.).

Despite the staging's sincere intentions at providing a platform for the campaign, Lung are aware of the complacency and disconnect afforded to an audience of a verbatim work. As a piece of theatre, *E15* is fundamentally and inescapably insincere in its staging; similarly to *The Welcome Revolution*, these are the voices of others, not the artists. As such, there is arguably an inherent falsity within its sincere efforts, with the theatrical devices utilised within its staging adding a layer of dramatics and possible distortion. However, it is their intentional disrupting of the piece, and of

the performative space itself in the interruption from within the audience, that imbues the work with a dual nature; one that oscillates between an attempt at sincere verbatim platforming, and a jarringly disconnected critique of this focus and its effects. Evidently, Lung's aim is to platform the voices of the Focus E15 campaign, but they also embrace the complexities and ironies that arise from this platforming. It is at once uplifting and devitalising; calling, even shouting, for change while also questioning the overall point of both the campaign and the performance project itself.

It is this oscillation between sincere, heartfelt engagement and platforming, and legitimate critique that places Lung's *E15* within a metamodern framework. It at once believes in the power of platforming the campaign and is simultaneously cynical of its own potential. Whilst it differs from the critiques evident within *The Welcome Revolution*, in that the company of the latter determine their scepticism of the project within the piece themselves, Lung's *E15* asks its *characters* to provide an extant critique of the audience's reception of the performance. Yes, Lung want change, but they are also inherently mindful of the limitations of theatre, working their own cynicism, that of the campaigners, and their pre-conceived criticism of the reception of the work, into the play's text.

Conclusion

The Listening Theatre is an attempt to understand an emerging structure of feeling observable within the works of certain millennial artists. This work is created on the interstices of socio-political issues and metamodern sensibilities affected by the artist's personal and artistic responses to particular crises experienced by their generation. I posit the Listening Theatre as new terminology in which to analyse current and ongoing developments within the millennial artist bracket. It both builds upon, and expands, certain aspects of dialogical, littoral, and relational artworks, and yet I believe that the metamodernist frameworks apparent within such work requires it to have a new delineation. The Listening Theatre is a theatre of oscillation. A theatre that listens to others, but also listens to critiques of its own act of listening. A theatre that is utopic in vision, but cynical of its own processes. A theatre of both progressive and sceptical theatrical engagement; of hope/lessness.

Other artists engaging with such frameworks include the Nottingham-based, female company, The Gramophones, whose 2014 *Playful Acts of Rebellion* theatricalised the story of the company's own political engagement and interpreted political issues collected from current and past audiences, 'involv[ing] the audience in a lively conversation, providing a safe, friendly environment to unpack these ethically stimulating issues' (Hart 2014). It is a framework built upon dialogical foundations, whilst extending into a metamodernist discourse of a fluctuation between hope and apathy. As a further example of this, Eager Spark, who rebranded themselves from Write By Numbers in March 2018, created a whole production that critiqued their previous engagement projects. *Regeneration* (2016) addressed issues that became apparent through the company's work with certain regeneration projects around London in both 2010 and 2012, explicitly referring to the fact that the company 'were accused of having socially cleansed the [local] market [with their involvement in gentrification projects], with someone pointing out on Facebook that no black locals went anymore' (Wyver 2016). *Regeneration* was a theatrical attempt at unpicking the ethically

complicated issues arising from such work; a whole performance built around a critique of their own process. I am reminded here of Jen Harvie's critique of immersive theatre's efficaciousness, in that it seems 'to offer social bonds which are, in fact, thin' (Harvie 2013, 59). This is the irony of such engaged performances; that theatre is inherently temporal and fleeting. The millennials' self-critique is important here in its oscillation between hope for betterment with simultaneous acceptance of inevitable hopelessness.

When I posited the concept of the Listening Theatre at New York University's *Performance as Activism* conference in early 2018, I was met with an interesting question regarding the role of Arts Council England (ACE) in the development of young companies' repertoires. Are these companies simply ticking 'community engagement' boxes to acquire funding? Is this increase in adapting dialogical and littoral processes actually affected by restricted financial structures? It is true that, to paraphrase Theatre Deli's co-artistic director Jessica Brewster (2018), the narrative of theatre and performance within the UK has been moulded by ACE's financial guidelines. ACE is financed both through the UK government and the National Lottery, meaning that outgoing funds have a responsibility to work for the public, with ACE commenting on the importance of funded companies becoming 'more focused on audiences [...] to give more people the chance to *take part* in the arts' (ACE 2018; my emphasis). It is also true that certain companies, in particular Lung and The Gramophones, have been in receipt of Arts Council funding for specific projects. However, upon talking to the companies directly, it is evident that the work is never set out with funding as a precedence. As Lung's Helen Monks explained to me,

> It's such a cliché, but [theatre] should be a mirror that reflects the world but also presents, maybe an alternative ideal world. And I think that what's cool about it being real people is that it offers to stage [...] a platform. [...] Part of the reason that we make our own work is so that we don't have to adhere to those people who are giving pots of money, or the people sat in buildings deciding what's going to offend their board members or their trustees. (Monks 2018)

I see this concept of the Listening Theatre as inherently connected to the emerging field of the metamodern, with an acknowledgement of the development of metamodernism's conceptual boundaries still being in developmental flux. This is due, in part, to the Listening Theatre's focus on self-critique through an oscillation between sincerity and irony, and its intrinsic connection to the concept of the millennial generation, emerging, as I see it, as a response to particular socio-economic, political, and philosophical crises affecting the artists in their formative adult years. Vermeulen et al. (2017), Turner (2015), and Freinacht (2017) all draw a connection between the emergence of the metamodern structure of feeling and the advent of millennial cultures or philosophies, with a desire for sincerity stemming from an upbringing based within the ironic.

The Listening Theatre draws aspects from Freinacht's posited political metamodernism—a utopic vision of the 'society that comes *after*, that goes *beyond*' (2017, 2)—in that these artists are engaging with a process that aims to understand, involve, and engage with audiences in an equal level of co-development. We can see how particular crises that have formulated this generation's experiences have led some millennial artists to strive for deeper, more sincere connections, dialogues, and

exchanges, whilst also being critical of these theatrical, political, and sociological forms. It may be that these millennial artists creating work within the Listening Theatre bracket are actively undermining what has come to be the dominant narrative concerning millennials. For a cohort described as 'Generation Me, Me, Me' (Stein 2013), these millennials are creating performance work that has empathy, sincerity, and connection at its heart. The popular media's characterisation of this generation does not hold up to these emerging artist's sensibilities. Yet, the impact of particular crises upon the generation means that this theatre is not naively hopeful or wholly sanguine. As Alex Williams (2015) states, the millennial's innocence has been lost. Instead, an awareness, critique and distrust of particular structures has imbued this theatre with oscillatory, metamodern sensibilities. It is simultaneously hopeful and cynical, utopic in vision and critical in application. It is work that wants to change the world—even though it knows it probably can't.

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Biography

Tom Drayton is a theatre director and researcher based in East London. He has written for and directed *Pregnant Fish Theatre* since 2010 and lectures at The University of Worcester and The University of East London, where he is also studying his doctorate focused on political theatre of the millennial generation. Tom is particularly interested in emerging companies, millennial theatre makers and work created on the interstices of youth politics and urban space. He is also an associate artist for *Project Phakama* and works with schools in East London to provide children with access to quality, interactive theatre.