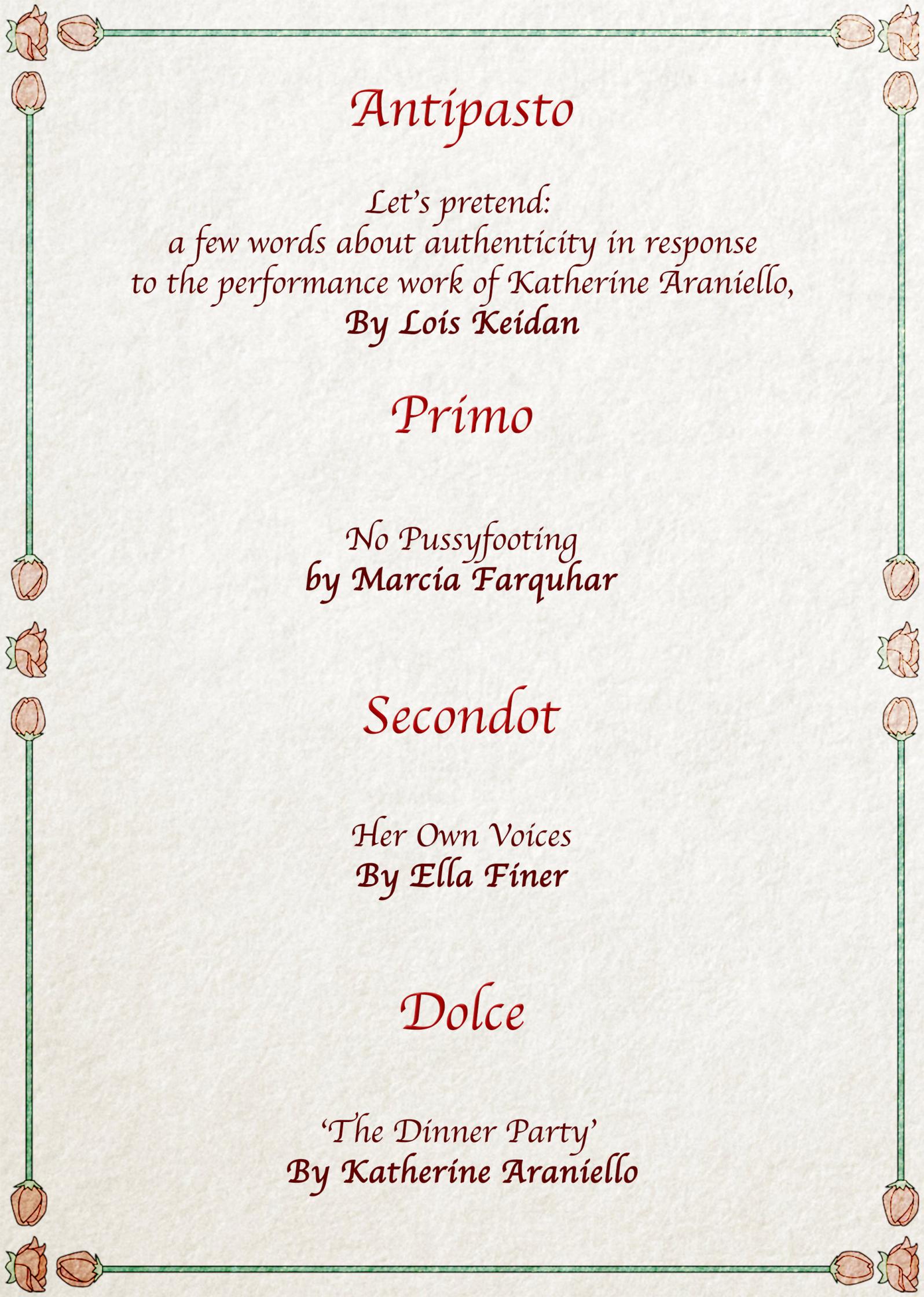


*The Dinner
Party*

The Dinner Party



*A selection of essays about Katherine Araniello's
2011 performance "The dinner party"*



Antipasto

*Let's pretend:
a few words about authenticity in response
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*Let's pretend:
a few words about authenticity in response
to the performance work of Katherine Araniello,*



*By
Lois Keidan*

What's the difference between performance art and theatre? Sadly, this isn't actually a joke, or, if it is, I don't know the punchline. No, the question about the difference between performance art and theatre is an old favourite in Live Art debates and one that put in a headline appearance this year when the great director of theatre Robert Wilson directed the great artist of performance Marina Abramovic in *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic* for Manchester International Festival.



In the many TV interviews Abramovic gave during this production she repeated her distain for the 'pretence' of theatre and her discomfort at having to 'fake' significant moments from her performance career for the stage – most notably the use of a fake block of ice. I had the pleasure of seeing an Abramovic performance with blocks of ice (and snakes) in the 1990s at Museum of Modern Art Oxford and have to agree with Abramovic that it was plain weird to see her sitting on what was clearly a Perspex cube pretending it was ice.

I mention this because the question about the difference between performance art and theatre – the distinction between pretence and authenticity -- also came up on several occasions this year in relation to the work of Katherine Araniello. Firstly at the Hunterian Museum where Katherine was one of four artists commissioned by SHAPE and Arts Catalyst to create a site specific performance within the Museum's displays of the history of medicine. Katherine's performance, *Bipap I (Living Experiment)*, saw her installed in one of the galleries in a pantomime guinea pig costume. It was a great piece, but I did comment to Katherine at the time

that I didn't think her guinea pig noises were right (I think guinea pigs chunder rather than squeak). I was of course being facetious and the point was that Katherine was not pretending to be, or acting as, a guinea pig, but was being the artist in a guinea pig costume making a point about scientific experimentation and how the medical profession sometimes treat patients as infantile especially if they have an obvious disability.

And so to *The Dinner Party*. This was another great Araniello piece and one of the many, many things that made it for me was again its authenticity – its lack of pretence – as beautifully illustrated in her collaboration with the artist Ernst Fisher in the role of the butler. Whilst theatre tends towards a tightly structured, heavily rehearsed rendition of a narrative or set of ideas that is often repeated verbatim night after night, Live Art/Performance Art is more of a concept or framework in which ideas are explored and possibilities can unfold. And within the concept and framework of *The Dinner Party* Ernst drank every drop of every drink he poured for Katherine's dinner guests (appearing on monitors)*. His descent into a drunken stupor throughout the performance was as authentic as it gets, and something that simply wouldn't have worked (for me at least) if there hadn't been real alcohol in the bottles and if he'd only 'acted' drunk. In fact the piece's intentional collapse of all kinds of rules and roles was extraordinary, particularly the moment when Marja Commandeur, Katherine's PA who was there simply to facilitate, started drinking along with Ernst, despite Katherine's protestations -- a sublime moment of controlled performance chaos.

So one of the answers to the question of the difference between performance art and theatre could be “go and have a look at the work of Katherine Araniello”.

* Katherine also genuinely drank every drop that came her way, but didn't knock them back as quickly as Ernst!

No Pussyfooting



*By
Marcia Farquhar*

Shannon Murray, the Debenham's model, is asked about her beauty, and whether or not she feels she is representative of disabled people. It is a strange question to wake up and hear. The interview on radio 4, broadcast on 29 August 2011, was articulate and bright. It was a polite awakening for me, and I listened with great concentration to the delightful voice tell of the diving accident which severed her spinal cord and put her in a wheelchair. We who are not disabled are only provisionally able-bodied – that is the implication and reminder here. The language around disability is rightly cautious, but this does not stop the brainy lawyer-turned-model and actress from citing her dark sense of humour as one of the greatest weapons in battling the forces of prejudice and fear.



Here I want to consider the great, resistant humour of Katherine Araniello. The GSOH has always been a particularly odd but often-cited desirable attribute. By the time I myself had become suspicious of the sense of humour as something entirely subjective and susceptible to power-play, I was already aware of semiotics, social constructions and that slippery entity of difference called the other. Before that, I remember an age when I was in the dark and hadn't a clue as to how I was being entertained.

I laughed at *The Party*, a Blake Edwards film with Peter Sellers playing an accident-prone Indian man, till I fell convulsing with mirth on the cinema floor. At the time of its release, I was 10 years old and it was 1968. When I saw the film again recently, while cringing at the crude brown

grease paint, I was surprised to find myself actually moved by a scene in which Sellers' character laughs at the punchline to a joke he hasn't heard. He makes a show of enjoying it because he can see that the invited guests are very amused. He has not been invited, but is keen to be a perfect guest – an ambition which is of course unfulfilled in one calamitous episode after another. But I can identify with him now, whoever and whatever this performed other was, or is, because his image, frozen in celluloid, has endured unchanged through all the changes of the intervening ages.

It was common for children of my age to laugh at funny accents, to collect golliwogs from jam jars, and to put money in the Spastic Society's collection box without a second thought. I remember the enameled boy with glossy dark hair, wearing blue shorts so you could see the caliper on his leg. He was a very good looking boy, making the caliper somehow attractive to me. In 1986, the society – now renamed SCOPE – began to withdraw these donation boxes and replace them with Care Bears or some such.

When Katherine Araniello discussed her Artsadmin bursary with Manick Govinda, there was mention of a mentor and Katherine was given a list of names. I was one of these. She later told me she chose me because I was older. We laughed. I think I could call this essay Oh We Larfed, because we seriously did. It's a serious business though to be a child left outside a shop, while your mother hurries in on an errand, only to find coins being dropped in your living lap by well--intentioned passers-- by. Maybe only someone who remembers putting money in 'the boy from the chemist', to partially quote from the title of Kerry Stewart's 1993 installation, would understand the particularities of some of Katherine's accounts.

It was in the stories that Katherine told me that I learned more and more about the inadvertent menace of the well--intentioned. There are those who want to hug her and then look hurt at her lack of enthusiasm. These are potentially very time consuming, because the unravelling of spurned do--gooders can be long--winded and painfully tedious. Then there are those who talk to her assistant, suggest a treat and slip a tenner into the hand of the carer. And of course there are those who ask compassionately

as to whether she was born 'like that'. Meeting Katherine was also an opportunity for me to meet her world and the people who populate it – the much--mocked ones along with the the much--loved. The absurd characters who offer coins and cold comfort, competition and contempt, are the ones who provided the artist with such a rich base of material for her characters.



When first we met, we told each other stories and swapped experiences. I loved not only her stories and her humour, but also her fierce independence. She is, as is well documented, a very serious opponent of assisted suicide and the line, or lie, that a life like hers is not worth living. It is challenging to be reminded that the idea of an approved or assisted suicide is predicated on the assumption that a totally dependent body is an unacceptable, and unwanted, body. This made me think again and again about what a life means. And yet I'm sure I argued on behalf of those who feared the loss of their minds.

Or did I? I remember saying that I thought people lost the right to suicide if they had children, but otherwise they... I was interrupted by the provocative mention of Lucy. Oh yes of course, and if they have children like Lucy. Lucy is Katherine's Chihuahua. She nips at my ankles and is taken to a room for time out. I am pleased that Katherine is not only doting but strict.

Katherine gets to the fallacies in arguments quickly. I think she is mento-

ring me. What is a mentor? A Greek guide of sorts from Homer's Ulysses – a shape-- and gender--shifting entity. I think of the milk woman at the beginning of Joyce's Ulysses, and I think of Jiminy Cricket, the dapper, umbrella--carrying insect who sings 'always let your conscience be your guide' to Disney's impressionable young Pinnochio. Maybe the mentor is simply the one who escorts the hero to greatness and triumph by offering some obvious tips. Or maybe they are the champions--of, the trainers, the pace--setters, piss--takers, dissenters, directors, editors and comrades... Neither Katherine nor I knew.

Katherine Araniello is an artist, and has a great brain, friends, a partner, an MA from Goldsmiths and more. She gives this list with some aplomb and I think she is used to giving it. It is worth giving again and again. Katherine's mind is a sharp instrument which she uses to expose hypocrisy and humbug. Without the humour, her accounts of some events would be so bleak as to be unbearable. And sometimes they are. She is no pussyfooter, and for this I call her punk.

Obviously, she has a great vantage point from which to view the games people play. She knows her value as an artist, for certain producers and curators, and understands with the greatest disrespect and humour the easy funding points she can attract. It is a bleak Beckettian irony that draws my attention to her otherness as a fabulous feature for funders, and yet, as she spits out with spirited venom, it is the very same alterity that is cited as a valid reason to abort. As ever, context is all.

In December, Katherine and I both appeared in the annual Cabaret Melancholique, each in our own solo acts. She is uncannily touching live, which might have something to do with the haunting beauty of her singing voice. Her confrontation is at once so direct and so subtle that many seem to miss it. My turn was a tragicomic tale of a pissed aunt at Christmas. I had been drinking for real and was possibly the only other female who showed the real with any such poignancy or pathos. Unsurprisingly, we complimented each other on our respective acts. I noted her tough fragility. I thought about frailty, which is a great strength of course, but wondered about the summer show towards which we were heading.

A few days later, I met Katherine at a concert at Brixton Academy. When I was horrified by the stares and the lack of respect her presence attracted, She and her girlfriend both assured me that this was normal. Normal. It was awful, and it enraged me. After Brixton, I felt even more protective. I didn't want Katherine to feel smothered by this, so kept it to myself.



Very early on in our first meeting, Katherine mentioned *Dinner For One*, an English short film that is perennially popular in Germany and Scandinavia, and said that she'd thought about remaking it. In the original skit, the butler sort of performs an array of invisible guests for the lady of the house, who is dining alone at her own 90th birthday party. But it was obvious to me that Katherine herself would have to devise, perform and film all the characters herself. These should be prepared and recorded well in advance of their appearance in what we were then calling her 'upcoming show'. I urged her to perform live alongside these pre-recorded performances, and I remember being insistent and persistent on the matter. It was not only a way for her to lessen the pressure of a live solo performance, but also a way to consign the acting or performing of personas to the screens. This left Katherine with the great freedom to be unscripted and to host the evening herself according to her mood in the moment. As a result of this, the one-time-onlyness of performance came across, and will always come across, in any iteration of *The Dinner Party*. Katherine's hostess will change tempo and temperament, but what will never change, alter or age are the guests. All those performances will endure, and, like

Peter Sellers' party guest, will outlive us all.

Katherine is no stranger to performing for camera. But this was to be her live show. We talked about Cindy Sherman, Jo Spence, Andrea Fraser, dressing up, masquerade and performance for camera. I reminded her that all the characters were already in her, that they had all been observed, mimicked and rehearsed in so many accounts of everyday life. She resisted my suggestion to include some thoughtful, kind characters. As a result, all her guests are drawn from the negative excesses of the everyday encounters she has endured.

I thought we should do a little at a time, but one thing after another kept coming up. At last our dreaming and drifting time was over and it was time to get to work on The Dinner Party. I arrived one morning ready to get going on it, only to find Katherine in preparations for another show, this one at the Hunterian, for which she had elected to dress as a human guinea pig. She had been out buying materials, and I soon found myself stitching fun--fur onto foam in the shape of a guinea pig's head. We discussed Katherine's assistant Marja wearing a white lab coat, and various other ways of completing the transformation. Every now and then I would think about The Dinner Party, but realized that as we were all discussing the Hunterian work as a team, we would probably be able to cope with the pressures of The Dinner Party's inevitable eleventh hour.

I knew that all the guests were there already. I had been introduced to them over the months. We made a list. I reminded her of a few of her tormenters, and made notes on their characteristics. Katherine gave them names. We sorted out the location and draped the chair and backdrop in hellish red. It all happened very quickly. We needed to get the sketches down so that panic didn't ensue. The characters were dressed in haste, and I was concerned that I'd hurt Katherine by ramming on wigs and hats, or by jabbing her with an eye pencil, making her a mustache for her competitive disabled activist guest, or outlining her lips violently red for her charitable narcissist guest. Thankfully, I did not.

The minute Katherine was in situ, dressed up, made up and ready to go,

the camera went on and so did the performer. It was amazing to watch her going from one character to the next with hardly a moment between. At breakneck speed the sketches were gathered, until all six guests had been captured. Marja and I marvelled at Katherine. It was electrifying. Each performance brought together a great range of spontaneous gestures, sounds and phrases, all of which brought the prepared material to life in such a way that each one of the ghastly guests seemed to be absolutely real. It was somehow difficult to remember these performances were in process, and that we were present not just to watch, but to assist. There was no need to reshoot. Katherine skillfully edited and adjusted the sound. When I watched the pre-recorded guests for the first time, the day before the actual performance, I felt an extraordinary pride at having been part of the process.

As an artist who is disabled, Katherine could easily be put in Shannon Murray's position. I can hear the question: 'You are obviously wittier than most people and certainly more perceptive, so do you think of yourself as a representative of disabled people?' But who represents who, and why? Is Kate Moss too beautiful to represent me? Is Shannon Murray? The fact is that Katherine Araniello is possessed of a provocative, political sense of humour and a riveting performance presence of which very few artists, abled or disabled, could boast.

Two weeks before the event, the great Ernst Fischer agreed to play the butler in the live performance. As in the original short, the butler gets progressively drunker as the dinner party wears on. When I first discussed the idea with him, he asked me about Katherine and I told him all about her. Later, he came back to me and said 'you didn't mention she was disabled'. I told Katherine the tale of this omission and the exchange with Ernst. Without missing a beat she asked 'Did you tell him I was gay?'. Oh, we larked.

Her Own Voices



*By
Ella Finer*

Katherine Araniello's talking heads are switched on. They not only animate the glass-- grey television screens, lined up for a dinner party whose butler is gradually drowning in drink, but also, over the course of an hour, bring to life the cannily observed and collected characters of Araniello's own experiences of being observed. In *The Dinner Party*, our observation shifts onto these various personae and their voices, and yet all the time it is Araniello we are primarily watching, both in person and in her screened performances of others. *The Dinner Party* problematizes the compulsion to categorize and define. By placing the perpetrators of such insistent categorization into boxes, doomed to repeat themselves with no possibility of escape, Araniello is restricting those who have restricted her. By performing characters based on real--life encounters, and by inviting them to dine with her as video broadcasts on television sets, Araniello effectively boxes the boxers.



Throughout *The Dinner Party* it is the voices in their volume – both in number and amplitude – that have the force to transcend the boxes. During the performance, the individual monologues move the body beyond the visible and actual restrictions of the screen or the chair. Together they sound the multitude of bodies in the piece, while all the time each is channeled through the authoring voice of Araniello. In Gina Bloom's 2007 book *Voice in Motion*, which discusses how the material force of the voice in Elizabethan theatre could challenge gender ideologies, Bloom argues that 'as a consequence of its mobility, and spatial indeterminacy, the voice

has the capacity for even greater “flux” than the body.’ The Dinner Party knowingly plays with this ability of the voice to move the body out of fixed circumstances and the control of others, as Araniello claims control herself over the audibility and visibility of the guests, determining who is seen and who speaks at any given time.

I am aware throughout that I am hearing the artist’s voice, and while she plays from the character of others’ bodies, she performs what is like an inside--out ventriloquist act, inhabiting the dummies herself. Araniello’s presence as party hostess and director is commanding and compelling. To watch her scrutinise her guests in succession is also to witness her in the act of listening to her own voices. When this curious act of listening to herself is brought to its eventual crescendo, the characters chorus together. Araniello directs, or more accurately composes this cacophony, asking her butler to drown out the refrains of the weepy well--wisher, and letting the operatic songstress sing on a while longer. Her live voice counterpoints the recorded voices playing out of the line of televisions. While listening to Araniello’s voices turning on, turning up, turning down, and eventually turning off, I turn a familiar phrase in my head: I love the sound of her own voice. Making characters appear in her own voice is what Araniello does so skilfully, for while she uses various accents and intonations, pushing her speaking into singing, those others’ voices are always sounded in her own tone, and they carry her own body in them. When she shuts a television screen off, she voices the instruction instead of pushing the button, and even though another’s hand completes the gesture, it is, in the end, her own voice in command of the action.

The Dinner Party



*By
Katherine Araniello*

The Dinner Party was a new piece that I made especially for the Artsadmin bursary. The work that I make independently is generally in the form of video. I also make performances in collaboration with Aaron Williamson who is the other half of The Disabled Avant-Garde and 15MM films (a disability arts collective).



I saw the Artsadmin bursary as an opportunity to produce work that merged performance art with video and to present a live piece for an audience.

Dinner for One was originally a comedy sketch written by a British author Laurie Wylie in the 1920's for theatre and in 1963 was recorded in one take by a German television company. It subsequently became the scheduled New Year's Eve viewing by several German TV stations and continues to be played to this day.

The appeal of the original was that it reminded me of slapstick comedy, whereas in my version I wanted to instil a sense of irony and satire. The structure of Dinner for One served as a template which I could see had potential to develop and integrate disability issues. I wanted to replace the invisible dinner guests from the original with a modern day take on disability personas that would be over-inflated, self-indulgent, displaying the worst dinner guests one would ever wish to encounter.

It was great to have Marcia Farquhar on board as my mentor, her encouragement spurred me on to bring the elements together and present a fresh take on disability with a contemporary edge. Marcia is an established performance artist, writer and lecturer and I felt that my knowledge and take on disability, combined with her experience of performance art, meant that I was able to develop this piece into an original unseen depiction of disability. She was refreshing to work with and, as an artist, gave me the ability to think outside of the disability box, placing my independent work on a three-dimensional plane.

The six talking head personalities in the Dinner Party were developed and performed to camera. These would become the guests for my piece and would represent charity, pity, a disability rights activist, a heroic wheelchair football player, an operatic singer and a voyeur. All of the characters were played by me and were representative of the worst clichéd models of disability.

Within some of the characters there were contradictions, for example the professional wheelchair football player was adamant that when her position was challenged, no longer at the top of her league and broke a nail, she would fly on the first plane to Dignitas to end her life. My thinking behind these characters was that I find the negativity and hypocrisy surrounding disability as rich material to play with and make work from.

I present work that is not willing to be PC or sympathetic. I do not want to direct an audience to view disability as heroic or for the work to be seen as reliant on empathy. I guess what I'm consciously working on is presenting disability in a way that it refuses and rejects all of the above and accelerates into edgy art that fucks up stereotypes and gives no choice but to view disability from an entirely fresh perspective.

Marcia introduced me to the performance artist Dr Ernst Fischer, whom she recommended to play the butler on the grounds that he was German and had previous butler experience.

Ernst brought another dimension to my performance which was his dis-

cipline and experience in live art practice. We met twice towards the end of the process when all the characters had been pre-recorded and would be sitting at the table as video talking heads on television monitors. Ernst would serve the guests and my role was to be the host to my own dinner party with my personal assistant assisting me in the way that she would normally do i.e. by handing me my champagne when instructed. Portraying myself in a live context provided a juxtaposition of clichéd stereotypes offset by me playing me, and responding to the context of the performance as if it were a party I was genuinely hosting.



There was no script apart from the loose parameters that I had set. I was not sure of the duration of the performance other than a rough idea that it would be under one hour. I saw the audience as voyeurs, invited to a party that they could observe but not join.

The delight of this performance was that it was in real time, it wasn't rehearsed, there was alcohol being served and the alcohol was consumed by all of us in front of a live audience. This gave ambiguity to the work of which no one could anticipate the outcome including the artists themselves.

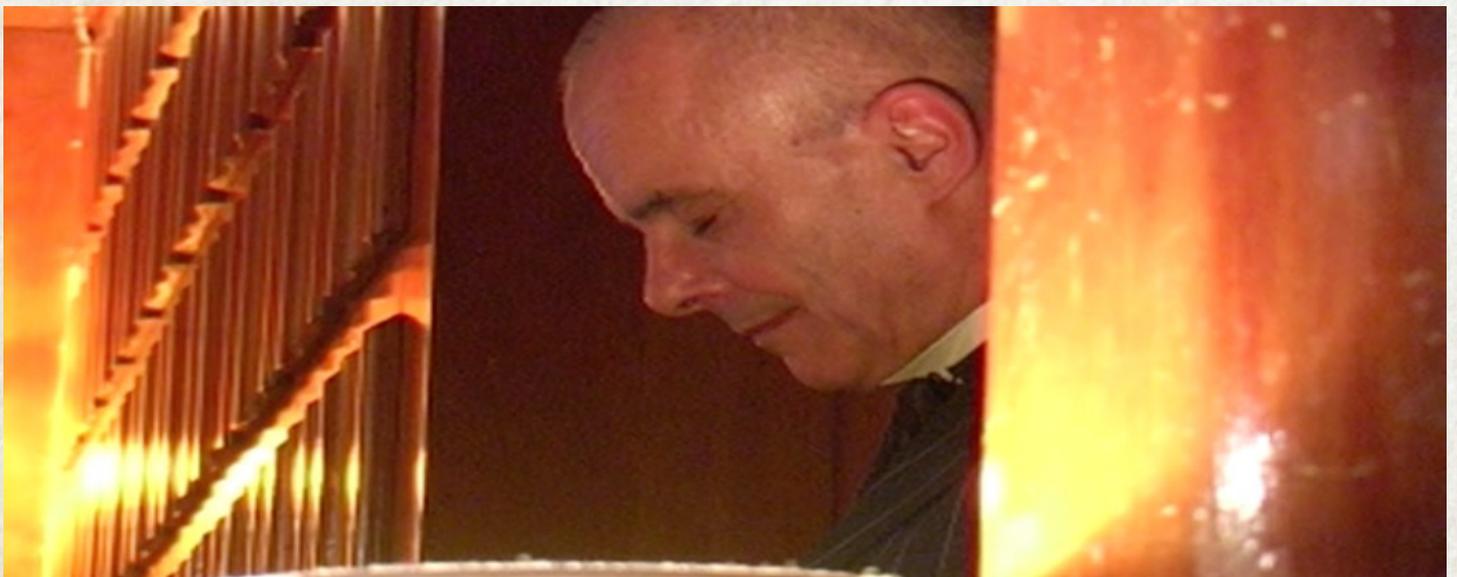
My work is about disability and giving a critical commentary on what I see as the abomination that is society's mindset towards disability.

This includes kitsch karaoke music video highlighting the absurdity of legalising assisted suicide in the UK so that disabled people can end their

lives prematurely without their friends or relatives facing prosecution; a lack of representation of disabled people on television and in film; charities that raise millions of pounds to eliminate disabled people from the world. I do this through research, looking for the faulty genes that create the many disabilities that people like me have – and if the scientists find the faulty genes the charities will instigate prenatal screening to suspected pregnant women who can then opt for termination of their pregnancy.

All of these areas I find difficult and frustrating to engage with on a bureaucratic level. In response to this the art I make is about exposing the reality and inequality disabled people face and replacing this with irony and satire, which an art audience can identify and engage with.

I'm not attempting to politicise an audience but merely present an alternative representation of disability in an art setting which people will not have experienced before – including me. I make work about disability in a style that is without compromise and without conforming to art aesthetics. The Dinner Party was a vehicle in which my experience and observations of disability could become performance art. As an independent artist who happens to be disabled I am able to confront potentially controversial subjects in a fashion that mainstream disability organisations cannot lest they jeopardise their funding support and upset their sponsors.



*The Dinner
Party*