

Scene on Radio
Bonus: Michael Kliën and the Body Politic
Transcript

John Biewen: On second thought, maybe I shouldn't have suggested to Michael Kliën that we meet up in a recording studio for our main interview.

Sound: mic-handling noise

John Biewen: To test levels, I ask him what he had for breakfast.

Michael Kliën: I had toast with honey. It was really amazing. Uh, I probably – let me see. Let me get used to my little voice in here and how it sounds, but I'm probably going to talk a little louder. Yeah. It's about, that's probably about it. Wow. It feels strange because there's no echo. You know, it has a different quality to it, just talking in this room. You feel like your, your thoughts stop much sooner. (Both laugh)

John Biewen: The point of a studio is that there's no other sound, and, thanks to the sound-absorbing walls, no echo. It gives you that clean voice that's unobstructed but also, really, disembodied.

Michael Kliën: Just as one sits here, I feel the different quality of space and the different quality that that also generates in timing of my speech. You know, the light that hits my eyes, and everything is kind of like affecting the way I start thinking. And so, OK, how can I have the same quality of thought that I just had sitting outside?

Music

John Biewen: Being embodied is central for Michael, and for his work. He's a leading social choreographer – more on what that means in a minute. On Scene on Radio, we've talked for years about the need for transformative change – in people, our relationships with one another and with the rest of the living world. Cultural change. Change in the systems that shape our lives, like our so-called democracy and our so-called economy. Michael Kliën approaches these things from an unusual angle. His theory of change starts not with policies or politics, in the usual sense – not with ideas. It starts in the body.

Michael Kliën: I am an artist, a choreographer by training. I'm also a professor here of the practice in Dance and a senior fellow of ethics at the Kenan Institute for Ethics.

John Biewen: He adds that he's the father of two wonderful girls and partner to his wife Christina.

Michael Kliën: And so, there are many roles that one plays at the same time, and all of those are equally, you know, shaping who I am and what I do in life.

John Biewen: Take my word for it, Kliën does inhabit a body. A very tall one. He's a middle-aged guy with intense blue eyes, short, salt-and-pepper hair, and a trimmed beard that's mostly white. He grew up in Vienna. As a boy he tried being a dancer, then found he was a better painter but didn't like the solitude of painting.

Michael Kliën: And so I realized I needed to be a choreographer. Had no idea if I could become a choreographer, but eventually went to London and studied at a conservatoire, an undergrad degree in dance and in contemporary dance, and started my touring company in the second year and became reasonably successful in England...

Sound: Music from [video](#) of Duplex, Ballett Frankfurt, 2002

John Biewen: His early work was more-or-less conventional – involving trained dancers performing moves that he designed. He experimented with tech, having a computer algorithm decide the sequence of the dance moves.

Michael Kliën: But it looked like a ballet. It didn't look like not a ballet. (Laughs)
So...

John Biewen: Before long, he says, Michael lost interest in having any say over a dancer's movements – and he came to reject the notion that only some people are dancers.

Michael Kliën: Thirty years later – I started my career thirty years ago – I'm interested in everybody's movement. Everybody. Like, there's nobody I'm not interested in.

Music

John Biewen: He became a pioneer in social choreography. He's had work commissioned by the Irish Museum of Art, the Martha Graham Dance Company, Ballett Frankfurt and the Athens Festival. He came to Duke as a Dance professor in 2017. A couple years later he founded the Laboratory for Social Choreography.

Michael Kliën: ...a place where we're trying to bring together different minds, different thinkers, different doers, and experiment with new social forms. That might sound very kind of, uh, aspirational. But we try to do it, really almost like, as other people have petri dishes of bacteria growth and deciding, you know,

looking at how the cells kind of connect or how they kind of, what they do in a particular environment, that's what we're trying to do with humans. We're coming from an arts background, so we're coming from an inquiry that is maybe playful, nevertheless serious.

Sound: [Video](#) of *Parliament*, Duke University, 2018

John Biewen: The work, or experience, that Kliën is best known for is called Parliament. It involves putting a group of strangers in a room – ideally a cross-section of a community – for three hours, or six hours, with no devices and an agreement that they won't speak. That's about it.

Michael Kliën: You just turn up, you get a 15 minute introduction. It's very clear, actually. There's nothing expected of you. Nobody will touch you, nobody will do anything to you that you don't want to do. But you start negotiating your relations without language in the space.

John Biewen: Picture about twenty people in a large, empty, well-lit room – blank white walls, wooden floors. This is video of a Parliament at Duke's Nasher Museum of Art, in 2018. Some people are spread out, sitting or lying by themselves. One or two may be napping. One guy strolls in the background. A woman in jeans and red socks spins in circles, her arms out, then stops and sits down.

Michael Kliën: I've done this now with thousands of people, Parliament over the years, over the last ten, roughly ten years. And there's always something happening. There's a pattern there that is, yes, it's probably cultural specific, for sure. Like, different countries react differently, different people from different countries. But there is this overall thing that the first forty minutes are just hell, artificial hell. Even for me, if I take part in it, I hate it. I'm going, like, why did I do this again? Nothing's happening, it's awful, it's just the worst. I'm feeling like a total fool for setting this up. And then after an hour, suddenly time disappears. Suddenly everything goes. And this fear goes, the awkwardness goes, and before you know it, you're in a very sane environment – in a very strange and, to many people, very sane environment. It's also not, it's not for everybody. I mean, not everybody will – and that's also interesting. It doesn't want to be like a utopian thing. It wants to be a situation in which people can understand what our socialization does to us, and where we can understand war, what kind of politics we carry in our everyday body, and what politics we carry once we really get in touch with our bodies, with our feelings, with our senses vis-a-vis the other.

John Biewen: In that same video excerpt from the Duke Parliament, a cluster of people has formed in the foreground. A woman is lying on her back. Five people have decided to line up on one side of her, standing shoulder to shoulder. A man joins the cluster and extends his hand in invitation to other people sitting nearby. A few of them now join,

forming a complete, tight oval around the prone woman, holding hands. They stand like that for a minute, heads bowed. Then most of the people in the oval sit down, cross-legged. The woman lying in the middle begins to move, turning and resting her head on someone's knee. One of the women sitting in the oval raises her hands now, her fingers fluttering. Then everybody's doing that. They shout exuberantly. Some clap. (Sound of shouting.) They look delighted by what they've just conjured together. Then this organic little gathering, this brief experiment or ritual or whatever it was, that sprouted within the larger experiment, is over. The woman who'd been lying down stands, smiling, walks outside the circle and plops down on the floor a few feet away.

Music

John Biewen: The idea of Parliament came to Michael after he moved to Greece, in 2012, during that country's yearslong economic and political crisis.

Michael Kliën: Greece was at a junction, and you saw a democracy breaking apart, in a way. Like, a society breaking – you didn't see it breaking it apart, but you did see the kind of gaps appearing and the fabric ripping, and it's just not holding. People had their flat screen TV at home but they had no food in the fridge, and they just didn't know anymore what to do. And you saw these apocalyptic scenes of, everybody was in everybody's rubbish outside, and it was like a very different, it was very strange. And so, I moved there because my wife

is Greek and we just moved at that time. And so I decided to go to all these protests. There were these huge protests, which was, like, a real, almost a rehearsal of a civil war, it felt. Like, a lot of Molotov cocktails being thrown, a lot of tear gassing. And I just tried to figure out what's going on here, like, what is the solution, without speaking the language. I tried to kind of just get it by being there. And I marched with all kinds of people, and I tried to be on all different sides, just being there and feeling the place. And then I was thinking, OK, if I create a choreographic work, what would that be? What could that do? I decided that everybody's just blaming each other. Nobody has an idea of whatever is going on. Let's almost make a tabula rasa, like a, let's empty out. Let's get all kinds of people. I didn't do that directly, but metaphorically, the police and the governors or the people in power, and the anarchists and the worker unions. Let's get them all in one space together, and without words, shut the door, and then see what happens.

John Biewen: An Athens art museum commissioned Parliament and it ran for the several days, with 150 Athenians taking part for hours at a time. Notice the name, Parliament – a place where representatives of a society gather to negotiate rules and the social contract. But in Kliën's Parliament, it's just movement, no speaking allowed. Part of his inspiration in stripping language out of the equation, he says, came from the wild dogs that hang around Athens' main public plaza, Syntagma or Constitution Square.

Michael Kliën: And there were packs of dogs, and they used to sleep always. And they didn't care about all these thousands of people. Sometimes they barked at somebody or something, but they sort of did their own thing and had a different kind of life. And in some way, it became that, Parliament became that. Like, you can – and it makes you aware that we are all mammals, that there is a mammalian knowledge, a deep wisdom present in all, you know, we came through evolution as mammals, and we got here to that point. So, you know, we think we are so smart with rationality and all that. That didn't get us that much, that far. You know, that's relatively young in our development. So, what got us through was a kind of a wisdom that is already inherent in our unconscious, in our bodies. And that really brings it forth, and it makes you aware that you can, uh, all the feelings that you have towards others and all the kind of ways you position yourself, even – you're stripped of your social standings, you're stripped of, everybody is the same. There is no difference between anybody who's in there. It's real democracy. It's lived democracy. Well, it's not. Maybe ideally it could be, and we're gonna get there. We're still working on that. Uh, it's obviously not. I mean, you carry biases, you carry all these kind of things in it, but you negotiate them there in a completely different way.

John Biewen, in interview: Do you have favorite, um, reactions or things people have said to you about this experience?

Michael Kliën: I mean, it's interesting because, uh, there are people who, including myself, that really have revelatory moments in it, where you feel like you're turned inside out, upside down. And you start changing your behavior and you feel for, even for days, you go into the supermarket whistling, or you start, yourself, like shimmying around in the supermarket aisles. And you have a much softer, much less control of your social identity, I guess, or social role that you play. But that, it wears off, the effect. So, it's like a, you can feel it wearing off, you know, like you're on a high. And it does feel like a trip. It does feel like you're going someplace, often, for a lot of people. And you've been to some place that you've never experienced before, and you're now going back to the world, and what does that mean. So, I had people who really got depressed out of going out of it, into this world where suddenly you have to put on your armor again, you know, to just exist. And you go, like, why did we, how did we create this life for each other with the real cold winds of civilization, you know, like blowing right at us? When there is a way that has been felt, and you experienced it, that is, that holds you in your insanity, in a way, or holds you in your own, uh, without needing to be anybody or anything? That holds you just because you are, you know, a person – in your personhood? And that's an experience that is really important.

Music – fades out

[BREAK]

Sound: Electronic music, Constitution ([Video of Constitution](#))

John Biewen: Some of Michael's other social choreography experiments are variations on Parliament – including Constitution, another project at Duke, in 2023. He wanted to see if that effect, that thing that happens among a group of people moving wordlessly amongst each other, if others introduced into the space could absorb that shared vibe. He started with students in a class he was teaching.

Michael Kliën: Eighteen people, and we tried to create a situation where we get creative, creative contagiousness in the space, where eighteen people inhabit a reality that nobody else knows the rules to. But it's similar to Parliament, like they are very attuned to each other and they almost move as one organism. And what we tried to do is by adding another 100 people that have no clue, professors from all over, and students and undergrads from the Duke community, to this situation, and for one hour, let this contagion work, again without words. And at the end, everybody was in the same logic than this 18 people. And we got a hundred people to totally absorb it – even without wanting to.

Sound: Electronic music from [The Utopians](#)

John Biewen: That led to the next experiment, in 2024, back in Greece. He teamed up with a groundbreaking Greek theatre and arts collective, En Dymamei. The troupe is made up of people with and without disabilities.

Michael Kliën: ...and they have really revolutionized in Greece the way people with Down's down syndrome with autism and so on are perceived...

John Biewen: Kliën called the work *The Utopians*. About fifty people, with and without disabilities, gathered in an empty industrial space, bathed in colorful flood lights. They moved or didn't move however they liked, alone or together. After a time, a couple hundred more people were invited in. The video of *The Utopians* looks different from the others – *Parliament and Constitution*. Neurodivergent people often move differently, and with less inhibition, than the neurotypical. Remember when Michael said his social choreography experiments are playful but serious? He wasn't kidding. His ultimate aspiration for a work like *The Utopians* is to reach for something revolutionary.

Michael Kliën: Like, how would democracy look like that is not based around *parts* of us? Like, democracy is really governed by rationality. Like, where we make rational decisions, rational laws, and so on. It again cuts off the body. And

why does it do that? Because we haven't found any other way to do it. We are already pretty stretched just to get democracy on a very rational front going. But it really kind of neglects the revelations or the insights into the world, uh, neurodiversity brings to the table, or anybody in that fact brings to the table. And so we tried to create a situation of this creative contagion, where the space is really, where the internal logic of the space is people with Down syndrome and autism fully setting the tone, setting their relationality, and living out a certain kind of their internal lives in movement. And then having hundreds of people coming to this, with loud electronic noise and lights, and turning it into a situation that is almost like a futuristic nightclub. But 200 years from now, when we've certainly figured out how we all live in a neurodiverse society, fully as equals. That's how I felt. And that space created that for an hour. Like, I think it really did. I've never enjoyed a work of mine more. I felt like we were standing in a soul democratic dance floor.

Music from The Utopians

John Biewen: Part of what makes these experiences so powerful, Michael thinks, is the simple fact that everyone involved ... *is involved*.

Michael Kliën: You might not be active part of it, but even just being there will affect everybody else. And some people just don't care, they will come up and

hug you anyway. Because it's, it's somebody else's space. It's not your space, in a way. You are invited into it.

John Biewen: Yeah, there's no, uh, spectator's position to be in.

Michael Kliën: Yeah. No, zero. Everybody's in it. You know, it's democracy. It's like, everybody is in it. There is no away. And you have to engage. with this. I mean, this is, at the base of democracy, you have to engage with the stuff you don't like. You have to engage with the people you don't like, or that you think you don't like. You have to engage with the people that you don't understand. I mean, that's part of democracy, the base of democracy. And, go and do that now. Like that's, in a way, it's like almost an invitation or a slightly painful, you know, catastrophic boundary collapse. It's happening right there. You think it's going to be catastrophic to be in this situation with all these people that you don't understand, that you have never experienced, maybe even, you've never spent a day of your life with truly different kind of ways of perceptions. And that might also be people who are not traditionally seen as disabled but that have truly different ways of reading and encoding the world. And you notice that there's nothing catastrophic about it! Then, that's a huge kind of revelation. That's a huge kind of experience – that it's actually much better. Like, it feels much better and everybody knows it, that it's much, much better. Like, that there is something like better. But this is the kind of ethics that I'm interested in. Like, how can we

make this world better, in an ethical way? And trying to find other models of being, a different way of being in the world.

Music fading out

John Biewen: Dance, and certainly social choreography, is not the sort of thing that will make you *famous* famous – least of all in the United States. But in avant-garde dance circles, Michael Kliën has earned renown. You can find the Athens Festival, for example, calling him an “internationally acclaimed” choreographer. Is it recognition of that sort that drives him? Here’s a story that answers the question. Michael tells of visiting a major art museum in his home city, Vienna, and finding himself in front of a painting by the 17th century Flemish artist, Peter Paul Rubens.

Michael Kliën: And these Rubens paintings, they're huge. They're like, I don't know, they're enormous. And they have these big, elaborate golden frames, and they have all these, uh, pink ladies, you know, floating. And it's – and I realized that when I was sitting there and meditating, you know, sort of as you get into a meditative, daydreaming state, that I wasn't thinking about the Rubens at all. Like I couldn't care less about the Rubens. I was really concerned about taking this frame, because it was massive and big, and I was, in my mind, I was reconstructing it as a life raft. And thinking about, OK, would that life raft go all the way to the, you know, Turkish coast between Greece and Turkey? And I

guess it was that time of real refugee drama. And I realized that in my mind, I didn't even care, I was like, the Rubens was maybe a sail, at best. But I was really, deeply invested into that life raft building. And it sort of, it really hit me, this notion of, OK, are we really, do we have the luxury of tradition, in the same way that we thought we had? Where we can build these depositories of our great achievements, which is a relatively new affair, these museum kind of qualities, and just celebrate and pat each other on the back for our, you know, mainly exploitative kind of cultural endeavors as nations who have these big museums? And by no means I want to, you know, kind of, throw dirt at Rubens. Great painter! And I appreciate traditions deeply. But there is a question of, do we really have the luxury to fetishize them over doing things? Like, over, if that life raft could bring over a few people or save them from drowning, then I'm happy to forget about the painting.

John Biewen: Michael says it frustrates him that we use only one word, "art," for creative works with vastly different goals.

Michael Kliën: And I make a distinction between art that is really just propaganda for the system, and which I've done as well. Because propaganda is a negative, loaded term, but it doesn't have to be. It's like, you're part of a system and you propagate its ideals, and you amplify it. And artists really do that by beautifying the existential bargain. Like, we all are in this existential bargain by

being part of a society, we might hate it individually, we might be trapped in the machine, we don't know what to do. But then we can, you know, look at these beautiful people on stage, or we can listen to a piece of opera, and it sort of beautifies this bargain. It helps us to cope. It does not require you to do anything else but going to the opera – and give them some money, maybe. You don't have to become a better person. You don't have to do anything. You don't have to challenge yourself in any particular way. It might do that in some underlying slow dynamics, I don't know, but it's certainly not its primal aim, is not to actually figure something out about the world, and to do it together with the audience. (Music)

And so, the question is what is this room there for? What could it be used for, to meaningfully engage people, to really get to another place together, to figure out stuff, to develop new things and new thinking? And not in a linear way, not like, oh, you go out of the opera and everything will have changed. No, this is a slow process. This is like social movements. This takes generations, maybe, maybe it takes decades, maybe some things will be solved quicker. But to actually, collectively, come together to really challenge each other.

John Biewen: One of the machines we're trapped in is capitalism as we live with it now, with all its gross inequality, exploitation, and catastrophic damage to the planet we depend on. I knew from previous conversations over coffee that Michael sees it that way. So I asked him how he views his social choreography work in relation to capitalism.

Michael Kliën: (Deep breath, sighs loudly.)

John Biewen: He starts by saying that he, and any artist – anyone at all, really – has to recognize their place in the present reality.

Michael Kliën: You're a part of this. And I'm a capitalist in the way I've been baked. I'm a Christian, the way I've been baked. I might be a recovering Catholic, though I've been, you know, grown up. I might be an anti-capitalist – which I don't even know if I am fully because I haven't yet found a system that I would replace it with, of course. Our imagination is so stunted, famously – uh, reference to Jameson – is so stunted that we can't even imagine the end of capitalism. So, this is where I am, you know, and this is who I am. I'm part of this system. I'm part of this world that is at the forefront of propagating capitalism. Like, Duke University is at the forefront to some degree of – you know, it develops the leaders of the world that we have.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Michael Kliën: Of course it wants to, and I see there's a lot of will to develop the leaders of the world we want. But for that, we need to take more investment and time to figure out the world we want and figure out ways to get there. Because, at

the moment, that's simply not in the US education system is not integrated.

There's a lot of creating the leaders for the world we have. And so that makes me totally implicated in this situation.

John Biewen: So, Michael argues that if people are gonna build a much better world, it won't happen through technology, or simply by smart people imagining a better reality and convincing those with power to adopt the policies to get there. It'll come, he thinks, through cultural and ethical transformations that we'll arrive at collectively.

Michael Kliën: We don't need to imagine. That's the crazy thing. We will not need to imagine the end of capitalism, beyond capitalism, because it will just be there suddenly. It will just happen, if we change our ethical conditioning between each other, and our awareness and our positioning towards the planet, towards other species. So it's a, it's a slow transformation that will happen. And then this is, there is no longer an after. It will just be gone already. I believe that strongly, actually.

Sound: Background piano music, ambience at coffee shop

John Biewen: We met up one more time at a coffee shop in Durham, to get out of that disembodied studio. I wanted to know how Michael sees his social choreography work in relationship to other people working for social and political change.

Michael Kliën: The activism, if you want, and it took me many years to understand that I'm an activist, in many ways, is that I'm trying to get to the foundation of our perception, at the foundation of our awareness formation. And invite people into this process, to do this together – to get all together confused, if you want, to destabilize the entire situation.

John Biewen: He suggests that, clearly, something else is needed besides traditional political activism, journalism, and so on. I mean, just look around.

Michael Kliën: I think it's not so much to have the answers. We know many of the answers for many things. If you talk about climate change, uh, war – I mean, we have so many answers in a way, that we want peace, and how to do that we would also have answers. But we cannot *face* the answers. We cannot actually implement them. There is not enough willingness to change. I give this example: Recently I discussed with my students, first-year students: Who is for equity – for equitable chances across society? And everybody was very passionate about equity. And then I asked – and we're at Duke, so remember that – who wants to give up their inheritance? Who would be for a policy that basically stops inheritance? Which would be a big, you could say, a big tool, whether you like it or not, it would be a big tool for equality to come about. Not a single person was prepared to forego, or to support that law. So, it shows up that there's a lot of

work to be done on the personal level as well. Change is not always easy. It might be very painful. But it could also be pleasurable. So...

John Biewen: Michael's audacious bet, or his hope, is that work like his can create spaces where people might shake themselves out of the boxes we live in, our paradigms, priorities, assumptions and fears, and our impoverished imaginations about what's possible – enough to really want a different world and be willing to let go of what is, so we can bring something better into being. As for doing that work through these seemingly odd experiences, like his Parliament? He quotes Albert Camus: "All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning."

Michael Kliën: So, this notion that we need more ridiculous beginnings in all corners of society, at the moment. Where we can actually – some of them will just disappear into the sand or into history straightaway, and some of them will lead to new things.

Music

John Biewen: Thanks, Michael Kliën. This episode was made by me, John Biewen. Music by goodnight, Lucas and Blue Dot Sessions. Watch this space, we'll have some more goodies for you in the coming months as we work toward another full season of

Season on Radio. The show is distributed by our friends at PRX and comes to you from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.