

Claire Cunningham - Transcript

This is the voice of Claire Cunningham. I am a white, queer women. I'm just under five foot tall when I'm standing. I have kind of dark, very dark, brown short hair with lots of grey in it, at the moment. I'm – what am I? – 44 years old? I think, yeah, round about that. I don't even know what year it is anymore. I self-identify as a disabled person, a disabled artist and also as a crip, which is a more political identity related to disability.

I am often accompanied by my two grey elbow crutches which are very sort of bog-standard, old-fashioned NHS grey crutches, that I also sort of consider my companions, but also really are part of my queer quadruped body in the world. I'm sitting today in my little flat, which is out in the country, just outside Glasgow and I'm wearing a white and pink hooded top and some jeans and my slippers. I'm sitting on a swivelly office chair in my office room in my house, which is a totally square room with very, very bright vivid orange walls that I painted during this last year, during this lockdown time to sort of brighten things up. And it's actually pretty good at that, it has been pretty successful.

Part of the reason I do this, is my identity as a disabled artist—I am a performance maker and choreographer—and one of the priorities in my work when I make performance is to prioritize the presence and the experience of disabled or deaf or visually impaired or neurodivergent people within the spaces that I make and their experience of a performance. So, one aspect of my engagement with sound and with audio—things like recording voice and text—has been an engagement with audio description and of working with that a lot in my performances in different ways. And trying to also play with pushing that experience a bit for visually impaired audiences and with visually impaired colleagues and artists, and trying to work out what that can be and how that can support a really interesting experience for the visually impaired person. And how it can be not dominated by the hierarchy of sighted people dictating what they think is important, which is usually wrong. So that's why I partly start with this type of introduction.

So I apologize, I have not made any thing more interesting or involved, other than I'm simply sitting here with a little lapel mic plugged into my Iphone. I've just come out of making another audio project. So, during this last year—it is the beginning of July I'm recording this, July 2021—I've made two audio projects: one was a piece called *Quanimacy*, which was a 20-minute sound piece. It was myself in collaboration with an American academic that I work with, a disabled scholar and theologian, called Julia Watts Belser and we made an audio work based on conversations we were having remotely, from me here in Scotland and Julia in Washington. And then, in the last couple of weeks we've made a second project, which was called *We Run Like Rivers* for a festival in Hannover, similarly based on recording conversations that we were having and then sort of building soundscapes and provocations from that material.

Sound and particularly recorded voice have always been a really, really integral part of any live performance that I've made. There's only one piece I think I've ever made that didn't have recorded voice in it. All the other works I've made always have recorded voice. Initially it was always my own voice, it was me talking, so very sort of inner monologue, like you're having to listen to right now.

And then round about 2014 / 2013 my work shifted. I was trying to work out how to take it from being about myself to being much more in relation to other people and how I might open that out. And that started from a process of interviewing people and taking audio recordings. I was talking a lot with Davey Anderson at that time and that was something that he had experience of. It was the idea that video recording people would really change the energy and how they spoke in a room and so I went down the route of audio recording, just. And I've continued to do that in different forms in all of the works I've made since about 2014. They have often the recorded voices of other people that I've interviewed. And that's a really clear choice for me, something about the authenticity of people's voices, also the idea of bringing those people into the space with the audience, rather than it being about me paraphrasing or trying to channel those experiences through *my* voice or *my* narrative.

I think, with that the most important thing for me is the overwhelming sort of responsibility that brings: to be sharing people's experiences and voices. And how you bring them into a space in a respectful way and how they're treated with dignity and respect. And that you're not doing anything that humiliates those people, I think, is a really vital part of that for me.

I've struggled with... I mean it's been nice to make these audio works in this last year, but it's difficult. I realised that I have really, really dedicated my life to making live performance and to also the scrutiny of what it is to make live performance and again the responsibility of making live performance. What this last year has taught me I think or made me realise is live performance, for me, is about an act of mutual witnessing. And I think there's a degree of this is related to being a disabled person and having been a disabled child and the experience of being observed, like literally and visually observed, a lot of my life. Then going on to make performance has been a partly about proving that I exist in the world to people, but also about a sort of recognition that if I'm giving you permission to witness me, then I have to be able to witness you at the same time.

And so, I think I've enjoyed making the audio projects more because it created a very strong connection with Julia. And that *that* relationship and *those* conversations that made up the audio works have proved so sustaining and a source of creativity, through this last year, that has been almost impossible for me to really find in any other way. In creating the audio works, it feels very empty in a lot of ways, for me, because there is no engagement with an audience, with a listener. There's nothing, there's no reciprocity to it, there's no energy, it's just all energy out. In a live performance, there is really just constant engagement and witnessing and reading of people and working out what people need and what's happening in the room. And I miss that. I think that my creativity is really tied into that.

So, I think I struggle. While I've enjoyed making these works and it felt very important, or not important - it felt like that was the only way I was able to go in lieu of performing. The crafting of the sound world of my performance pieces is a very, very important part of a live performance, for me, they take a lot of time and energy. I did train originally as a musician, as a singer, so I think the sound world of a

performance is incredibly important to me. So, I think shifting into working in sound specifically made sense during this last year. Whereas working in video, doesn't work for me, it doesn't interest me at all. Sound felt closer to home.

I think the fact that there is no engagement, it's just sort of sent out into the world and I don't mean I need something back in terms of applause like, applause is always a quite uncomfortable part of a performance, it is more about really feeling what's happening as you share something.

And I miss that about the audio work. The audio works I've made have been pretty simplistic. Mostly edited conversation, and then working in collaboration with the composer that I've worked with for many years in my live performance, a guy called Matthias Herrmann. What it did provide was an opportunity to re-engage with a lot of the music that he's made over the years, particularly from past performances that I felt had just kind of disappeared into the ether, because those shows don't happen anymore. So, what I did love is that it gave me a chance to bring some of Matthias's sound back into the world again, some of the beautiful music that he's written for me. And to put it back out into the world in another way and that has another life. So, I mean, yeah, being able to keep working with collaborators has been the best part of that, but I think it feels very isolated in terms of... I don't really get to feel where it meets the world and that I find really hard.