

Sarah Hopfinger - Transcript

Hello, my name's Sarah Hopfinger and I'm going to talk a little bit about, and reflect on, my most recent performance called *Pain and I*, which was originally going to be a live performance but then became, or was developed as, an audio piece just under a year after the pandemic and the lockdowns in the UK. The main thing about *Pain and I* is that I created it out of a necessity in my personal and professional life, which was that beforehand... I think I've always related to living with chronic pain--I have chronic back and nerve pain--I'd always related to it as just an issue, just a problem, just something that got in the way of my life, of my work. And about three years ago, I really felt that I needed to relate to my pain differently, I felt a necessity. And that is partly what *Pain and I* is exploring, or is an attempt at. You could call it a kind of love letter to my pain. It's my voice, it's autobiographical, poetic, some physical description, as well as quite a lot of reflective speaking about my chronic pain experience, but in quite a kind of open way, I would say. And I'm going to read some extracts from that in relation to just a few of the points that I wanted to make.

So, I'm thinking about these three things: connection, intimacy and assembly in relation to audio performance and, in particular, creating and sharing *Pain and I*. Another thing to say, actually, is that *Pain and I* of course came out of necessity in *my* life, but it also came out of a necessity in terms of the pandemic context and making an audio piece is not something I've ever done before, and I think the things that were bought out of developing *Pain and I* as an audio piece really speak to the pandemic context, in terms of the attempt at connection, when actually there's so much disconnection. And the attempt to really give space to pain, really to almost honour that experience and it's in our wider culture, I think it's really--in the West anyway, in the UK--we don't really have that many ways of acknowledging pain and of being comfortable with what's unwanted, with what's uncomfortable, with what we would rather not have. And obviously the pandemic is a big example of something we would rather not have but how do we relate to it? Anyway, so I suppose *Pain and I* started to have a wider meaning, even though I had started to make it before the pandemic happened.

So thinking about connection really makes me think about care. The reason for this is that *Pain and I* was a lot about me connecting to my pain in different ways and exploring my relationship to it, my connection to it. And what really kept coming out of that was the complexity of what caring for my pain is and means. So, a lot of the writing and the speaking in the audio is... I think it kind of speaks of care and care not just simply being one person cares for another: it contains a lot of... a lot of my experience of living with pain is actually about how do I make space for all the difficult feelings, how do I make space for... I could

think of it as richness, but sometimes it just feels difficult... of having a connection to my pain. And I cannot help but have a connection because it's there and how do I care for something that I would rather not have?

So, I suppose this emergence of care... I think I was really wanting in the creative process to find a way to care for my myself, my pain, in how I made the work, so it wasn't just about caring for it, but actually it completely shifted the structure of my creative day of, you know, I can't sit for longer than about an hour usually, sometimes less, sometimes more and I have to do certain things at certain times of day to manage my pain and how does that become part of the creative process?

I hope that this kind of implicit care within the process, and then within the content, translates to a connection and care with the audience member who's listening, hopefully. And this brings up the question of how do we care for audiences, specifically through audio performance? And I think one of the things that's really important is how do we invite agency, and an audience member to have agency, to do what is needed for them? Well, I suppose I'm inviting us to do what we need to do to take care of ourselves.

So, I wanted to read you the beginning of the audio performance to kind of go a bit more into what I'm talking about here in terms of connection and care.

You do not need to be a polite audience member.

You're invited to do what is most caring for your body and mind.

This space does not merely accept you but needs you to be you for it to be itself.

This space shakes its head at pressure and judgment, it wants another way.

It's a space to rest into your body, to acknowledge yourself however you are and to settle-in to the richness of listening to pain.

So, now thinking about intimacy and audio performance. With *Pain and I*, I think that I was attempting to embrace the intimacy of my relationship to pain--it's an unwanted relationship, but nonetheless it's intimate--and how to give that creative space. And similarly with connection, I think that hopefully this giving space to that intimacy between me and my pain can somehow implicitly bring an intimacy with the listener--especially since I'm speaking at the same time to my pain and to the audience member. There's a kind of direct address which isn't too much, hopefully, because the audience member can have some distance from it, because they can see that it's about me addressing my pain, but, at times, it might blur into me addressing them. And I was thinking that one way, one aspect of the audio that

gets at this intimacy--because I suppose there's something about the embodied experience of pain and how potentially disembodied an audio performances is, I was trying to get the embodiment through something that isn't necessarily very embodied... there were sections, the whole audio piece is divided into sections with a title and the beginning of each section has a brief physical description and I think that *brings* intimacy. So, I'm just going to share some of those.

1. The Turn Towards

I have brown blonde and grey hair that's short on the top and long at the back.

I'm standing facing away, seeing you with the back of my body.

3. The Times Unwind.

I am walking in haphazard directions, jumping, turning, stopping, retracing my steps, winding around. Now I'm spinning, leaping, running, stamping, skipping. I'm taking up a lot of space.

And I'll also share...

5. The Going On Returning.

I sit down. I'm close to you. A body breathing nearby.

The last thing I'm going to reflect on is the idea of assembly. My friend Raquel Meseguer, who makes work in response to her experience of chronic pain, she's a really amazing artist/choreographer and she has talked to me before about when she is in a flare up--and often needing just to rest in bed or just rest--that she can have a sense of really wanting to send a beacon up into the sky to connect with all the other people who are at *that* moment resting, who may have chronic pain and need to rest. And there's something about that real need for connection--I mean there's something also with chronic pain you need to, when it's bad for me, I need to just go and have my privacy, but I also really yearn for and *need* that connection, or that knowledge of connection, with others. And actually Raquel has made a whole amazing piece in response to this called *A Crash Course in Cloud Spotting* and part of that is about different people with chronic pain, when they're resting they go on this app and they click that they're resting and then in the actual installation--which is in a place and there's people who are lying down and looking up and hearing this sound installation--they can see a little light come on which signals that that person whose light it corresponds to is resting. And so, the lights are coming on and off throughout the time. So, it's really, I guess, an attempt to really elevate and give space to that experience of resting and connecting people, even when they're resting.

And so, this idea of assembly, I think, has particular resonance when thinking about live performance in a pandemic, as well as when thinking about living with chronic pain. And maybe something that I've more personally thought about is how do I be in assembly with the pain--and that's what *Pain and I* is about, as I've already shared--it's this kind of welcoming in of an experience which is not wanted, and for me it's not wanted, but it's actually more complex than that and being in assembly with it brings a different... brings a curiosity to what is within that experience, as opposed to simply just not wanting it. And I think this maybe points to what is needed in a kind of recuperation, or recovery, or repair process of--how do we assemble with those parts of ourselves, with those parts of painful things that we don't... that are difficult or unwanted? How do we acknowledge them or sit with them? Not to say that it's all okay that they exist, but in order to have some sort of process with it. In doing that, where do we get to then? Maybe there's some sort of movement through something, to something else.

And this really reminds me of Olivia Laing in the book *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency*, where Olivia Laing asks can art do anything, especially during periods of crisis? And she talks about art that's concerned with resistance and repair and talks about art that provides material with which to think: new registers, new spaces. In the pandemic it's become clearer, it's like, what is the role of art in all of this? And what does it... what can art do that other things can't do? or that art does in a particular way that is needed? And I think for me I'm learning, maybe, a lot about art being a space or invitation to sit with things. And at the moment I'm interested in how do we sit with pain? Not in order to be overwhelmed by it, but in order to learn from it, I suppose, or to be able to find the richness within that.

I thought I would share the last part of the audio performance from *Pain and I* that maybe gets at this kind of acknowledgement and processing of pain and its complexity.

Okay.

Even when you're not loud, not making yourself so known, I think about you every day.

You're never not here.

You are so committed to me.

You have a pattern that you don't stick to.

You're so present and so ungraspable.

You're too real and you're not always believed.

I know you too well and I don't know you at all.

You might never leave me.

You're my intimate companion.

You ask for gentleness and another kind of time.

You know about rage, shame, anxiety and panic.

You know about kindness, fragility and calm.

You contain power.

You contain love.

Because of you, I care more.

And thank you for listening.